Rogues Resurgence

Prologue

"Lucky was I," Borass trilled, his eye-stalks swivelling with excitement as he scuttled down from the freighter. "Black fighters to the port of me, black fighters to the right of me, but on I went!"

"You were lucky," Marteene replied. "Damn lucky."

If he imagined his new-found fame would somehow confer a degree of immunity from clan depredations, Marteene had been quickly disillusioned.

"That's the third time," Marteene stated. "Three attacks in five days, enough is enough."

Always the same fighters, three black Prometheus. They worried Paskaal because he'd fought with them against the Xenon down in New Income before falling in with the Raiders.

"They'll be working for someone and my credits are on Law. He hired me for the same thing. These people are good, Max."

They worried Paskaal, therefore they worried Marteene.

"They're toying with us Max," Corrin said before this latest incident. "I'm guessing the only reason the Star isn't space-dust is that you haven't been flying and each time they found the Star it's holds were empty."

This time they'd caught the Star fully laden in PTNI Headquarters and chased it right into Scale Plate Green. The Raider escorts had taken losses before Daht's forces intervened.

"That's the last time."

"You have plan, Max-Max," Borass said confidently. "Mercenaries go boom."

"I have plan," Marteene confirmed grimly.

Chapter 1: Getting Some.

Distance and the polarised canopy of the Mamba attenuated the sunlight but it still felt good on his face. Max leaned back and closed his eyes, allowing his body to sink into the well-padded ejector seat, and watched the coloured lightshow playing out on his lids. It felt like an age since he'd had planet-side leave. A hot beach, a cool swim and a companionable young body.

He could use some of that now, instead of more hours hanging in front of a jump-gate into Xenon space, waiting. He considered running another systems check but he knew the big fighter was 100%. Xela and the droids had no problem integrating the jump-drive and the shadow-skin tech into the Split fighter and Max relished the extra firepower and shielding it afforded over the Rapier.

The frame was old, the ship was one of the original 50 megawatt shield variants, but the drive was new. Max was more than happy to trade the second 25MW shield for the extra speed of the refit. Unlike the variants the Split produced for the commercial and export market this old model retained the variable focus weapon mounts. The second joystick hat controlling convergence settings took a little getting used to though.

Max remained in two minds about the obsolete solid-state after-burners. The large temporary speed boost was more useful than the acceleration boost provided by the current generation, but the tendency of the old, rear mounted energy accumulators to go boom when hit, less so.

"Heads up Max," Xela's urgent tone snapped him out of the reverie. The sector scan showed the Star and it's escorts close to the gate to Family Zein. Deploy-2 had already dropped it's Nav-Sat near the gate and Deploy-1 was in the process of recovering the satellite deployed near the gate to Family Pride.

A third satellite had appeared near the central Trading Station.

"A Pegasus just dropped it, Max. I think this is it."

"Good, I was beginning to think they wouldn't show Zee. Everyone ready?"

"Confirmed Max, do your stuff."

He was relieved the waiting was over. Ever since the first ambush at the northern Scale Plate Green jump-gate the Prometheus fighters had dogged his every step, drastically curtailing Borass's trading activities. They had been lucky to lose just two of the four escorting Bayamons and only the timely and uncharacteristic intervention of the sector CAP saved the Star.

He owed Daht for that.

The pilots were recovered but the incident showed his forces were grievously short of firepower. The four new Piranha fighters awaiting pilots in Kingdom End would help redress the balance but even though his Boron allies had arranged a substantial discount it wiped out the profits from the two Orinoco fighters he'd hijacked over in Farnham's Legend.

He needed more heavy fighters and he needed these mercs out of his hair. With luck they were about to achieve at least one of these goals.

"Going for it Zee," Max confirmed.

As the Mamba plunged through the jump-gate corridor he activated the Shadow-skin.

The ship emerged in the middle of a Xenon battle-group and he instantly activated the jump-drive pre-sets while rolling onto the tail of the nearest Xenon destroyer. Xela had worked some of her magic on the sensors and it took him only 5 seconds to imprint the Xenon signal onto the Mamba.

“Three Prommies Max, in from Family Zein,” Xela confirmed as she counted down.

A few moments later, shields below 25%, the heavy fighter was falling through hyperspace towards the northern gate of Thuruk’s Pride.

His people were expecting it, the mercs were not and reacted to the shocking appearance of a Xenon destroyer on their sensors as anticipated. Max hit the after-burners, going after the one breaking high, the acceleration slamming him back in his seat.

Corrin, in the Rapier led his flight in pursuit of the second as it broke left. Payter and his two Bayamon wingmen harassed the third, adroitly herding it away from the safety of the jump-gate.

“Fox 1, Fox 2, Fox 3,” Max called, launching silkworms. His target turned inside their arc, catching a full burst of Alpha HEPT fire before vanishing into the jump-gate. Xela instantly locked up the second target, it’s shields already depleted by Corrin’s wing. Max disengaged the shadow-skin for the extra speed and rolled onto it’s tail as the Paranid fighter twisted towards safety. Fumbling with the joystick hat Max focused his weapons to 100 metres convergence and fired.

The Prometheus exploded a split second after the pilot ejected.

The remaining merc was now running, totally defensive, the path to safety closed by the six escort fighters.

“Someone grab that pilot,” Max ordered as he boosted onto the tail of the remaining enemy.

“Okay Zee, time to earn that keep.”

The Prometheus tried every trick in every book to shake him but once it gets on your tail a Mamba in the hands of a good pilot is pretty hard to shake, and Max was a lot better than good.

Ripping the shields down to near extinction Max kept them there with carefully timed shots Xela moderated as she attempted to penetrate the Prometheus’ computer systems.

“Damn – ah! Caught it,” Xela announced after a few minutes as the Prometheus ceased its evasive gyrations. “Auto-destruct disabled, AI upload in progress. It’s all yours Max.”

“Where’d the pilot go?” Max asked.

“Transported out – that Pegasus is way too fast. It got the other guy too.”

Max checked the scanner. His own light fighters, Deploy-One and Two were chasing the Pegasus across the sector towards the Split Fire gate but the Paranid light fighter design sacrificed weapons and shielding for speed, making it the fastest ship in space when fully maxxed out.

The Rapier rolled in on his left side and Marteene gave Paskaal a thumbs up.

He returned a lazy salute, grinning broadly.

“Nice work laddie, bags I first dibs.”

Max laughed and scanned his prize. One shield was gone and the drive system heavily damaged but most systems remained intact.

“Once we patch it up its all yours Corrin. Call off the Bats and form up the convoy, I’ll escort this to the Seizewell Equipment Dock.”

The yards in Family Whi were en-route but Max did not want to have to deal with the Split yet and the extra firepower would come in handy if Stoertebeker tried anything as the convoy passed through Teladi Gain.

The journey passed without incident and he detailed Payter to remain with the ship until the expensive repairs were complete.

The rest of the convoy proceeded through Profit Share and Ceo’s Buckzoid. Max stayed with them until they crossed safely into Boron space before setting a course towards Atreus Clouds and the un-regulated hunting grounds beyond.

Ru Kampa Duchalius IV read the decrypted message again, hoping this might transform its meaning. As if to taunt her, the sector scan registered a convoy entering Teladi Gain from Split space. She did not need to run a registration check. The force mix clustered around the Argon Lifter told it’s own story. Bayamons, Bats and a Boron Piranha.

A Mamba emerged from the gate behind them, followed by one of the big Paranid fighters.

Max Force.

As instructed, she did nothing. The ships would probably reach the southern gate before any fighters she could call on and if not, she thought sourly, Force would just destroy them like he had the others. Two of her own nestlings flew fighters for Law and she knew they did not want to go up against Force or the mercenary squadron backing him up.

Reluctantly, Ru Kampa hailed Law. An electronic voice informed her of his unavailability and location.

“Why?” She thought. “Why thisss to me happen?”

It had been her shift when a patrol went missing down in Farnham’s Legend and her shift when an entire convoy vanished on the way to the Confederation clan base in Nyana’s Hideout. She heard Force had captured one of the freighters intact, all that spaceweed! The Confederation were incensed, as she suspected were purveyors of quality confectionary all along the Argon Frontier.

Life, she concluded, was being deliberately unfair.

With a reluctance that would put a Teladi mechanic on time and a half to shame Kampa headed for what everyone referred to as the “play-room.”

She kept her eyes firmly down-cast and tried to ignore the smell and the disturbing moans from the dark recesses of the chamber as Law read the message.

He said nothing, merely hurling the data-padd down at her feet. Taking this as a sign that there could well be a Ru Kampa Duchalius V the messenger scooped up the padd and retreated as briskly as she could without risking offence. The moans rose to animal screams as she left.

As he worked, Law digested the latest news. Another mistake, he had made another mistake in under-estimating the guile and resources of Force. Good intelligence was almost impossible to come by now that the he had gone to ground in Scale Plate Green but the Force Mamba had indisputably been on patrol in that sector only an hour before. It was impossible that it could have turned up in time to thwart the attack on his ships.

There could be only one conclusion. Force had more ships than he thought and now he had one more.

Taking a knife he cut short his pleasure.

Ru Kampa arrived back in the Control Centre in time to receive news of the spaceweed shipment to Brennans Triumph. It confirmed there was a deity after all, and she held a personal grudge against Ru Kampa Duchalius IV.

Chapter 2: Born to Run

"Go on Max, you know you want to," Xela's mischievous tone was a perfect facsimile of his cousin's. "Look at her, she's just waiting to give you the ride of your life."

"Will you be alright?" Marteene asked doubtfully.

"No need to worry about me Max, I can find my own way home. You just go and enjoy yourself. Besides, you've spent enough on her, it's pay-back time."

He smiled. "Okay, I'm convinced. Here goes."

The universe briefly dissolved around him before, with a familiar feeling of dislocation, reconstituting itself.

Max took a second to appreciate the lines of the Mamba as Xela slowly moved towards the jump-gate. It was, without doubt, the most graceful looking fighter manufactured in the X-Universe. The forward sweep of the wings and the spacious cockpit joined to the main body by a short neck, mocked the Argon military designation. It was a bird of prey, not a snake.

Xela executed a flawless jump, masking the distinctive jump-drive tell-tales with the radiation from gate. Max checked his own systems, confirming that the interface options were set for the Argon language. It was the first time he'd flown one of the Paranid light fighters but the control layouts were familiar from his Spec Forces sim training.

The Pegasus' appearance belied its speed, an hexagonal soup-plate with an over-sized engine sticking out the back the instructor had sneered, untroubled by any notions of cultural relativity. But Max liked it, the cockpit had plenty of leg-room and provided a good view.

It was the backbone of the Paranid fleet, as the brochure stated, the latest variant sacrificing everything for speed. With only a single shield and one weapon mount it was almost useless in solo combat but in the big wings favoured by current Paranid military doctrine it could be deadly.

Swarms of the small fighters could scythe through a formation, concentrating fire on selected targets, and be klicks away before defenders could react. Of course it was uneconomic to enhance the drive to it's full potential and only the exceptionally gifted can dogfight at 1200 mph so most in military service topped out at 600-800.

Way fast enough, but not for what Max had in mind. The snatching of the mercs had demonstrated its utility as a search and rescue vehicle and Max had no difficulty justifying the huge expense incurred fitting a teleporter at the Goner Temple.

Upgrading the drive to full capacity though, almost doubled the purchase price and unlike the teleporter, it was not a transferable asset.

“Scouting, nav-sat deployment, anything needing a quick in and out,” he argued.

“We have two, expensively upgraded Bats for that,” Xela had countered. “Two hundred grand or so is a lot to pay for a new toy Max.”

It was, Max thought as he delicately nudged the throttle forward. “But what a toy!”

The Pegasus shot towards the jump-gate like an eager thoroughbred given her head at last. He was already punching the after-burners as the tiny ship emerged into the Xenon sector. A fleet, blade-thin silhouettes stark against the chaotic atmosphere of the purple gas giant the two gates in the sector orbited, was already powering up.

The massive engine, tuned to it’s maximum output, shuddered and throbbed behind the cockpit, slamming the pilot back into his seat. Wrestling with a lively stick he pushed the ship through the 1000 mps mark, performing a high rolling loop as he absorbed the tactical situation.

There were over a dozen showing on the sector scan. Most lurked at the northern jump-gate to Scale Plate Green, a pair skulked near an unidentified installation near the centre of the sector and the one guarding the gate he had just entered through was launching fighters.

“In your electric dreams,” Max scoffed, rolling out of the loop on a course that took him beyond the confines of the jump-gate system. The coloured icons on the scan indicated he had nothing to fear. No Xenon fighter had anything like the legs to catch his mount and the caps were the usual mix of big, lumbering carriers and high-speed cruisers. There was no sign of another of the new ships although he guessed not even they could touch his racer without going Newtonian.

In seconds Max had left the Xenon far behind and he sharply decelerated before dropping a Nav-Sat. He gave it a few seconds to scan the sector before banking to put it on his nose. At 300 metres Max dropped his shields, tractored it into the small subspace hold and accelerated away, perpendicular to the strung out line of Xenon cruisers optimistically pursuing him. Zooming it out to minimum magnification he examined the sector display. It confirmed what the last, very dated intelligence report Daht had passed on, stated. There was only one Xenon installation anywhere near the jump-gate sector.

But there were a damn sight more ships.

Unless it was currently inactive that station was not a shipyard, which meant one more headache. The Xenon must have bases hidden deep in the solar system, or possibly, on the far side of the planet, in a sensor shadow.

Laser towers, Max thought, he needed lots of laser towers. And hornets, if he could persuade someone to sell him some.

Unfortunately from his point of view, but not for the peace of mind of everyone else, weapons of mass destruction were not traded on the open market.

Slowing to under 600 mps Max manoeuvred to line up the Xenon station with the north gate, almost hidden against the looming, distended bulk of the gas giant. The approaching trail of cruisers pointed the way.

Satisfied all three elements were in position Marteene grinned broadly as he locked up the station on the scanner and turned to bring the HUD target designator onto his nose.

"You thought you killed me boys," he said, lining up on the first of the still distant cruisers.

"Think again because…"

He slammed the throttle forward and hit the afterburners.

"Max is back!"

The Xenon ships served as a visual reference point, magnifying the sense of sheer, unadulterated speed to the point of intoxication.

Adjusting his course with almost imperceptible movements of the stick to take him through the on-rushing pack, his smile grew even broader.

The fighter flashed through the Xenon shoal at a combined closure speed of nearly 2000 mps, missing the rear mounted bridge structure of the lead cruiser by metres. The rear scanner showed drifting curtains of emerald plasma fire, a languid testament to Xenon optimism if not their targeting systems.

Max plunged on towards the looming Xenon station as the fleet turned in choreographed unison.

It was the size of an Argon Trading station in volume, with a curiously appropriate X shaped structure, which Marteene guessed were docking ports for capital ships, mounted atop a squat rectangular body. With the kind of childish male bravado he dare not pull anywhere in reach of Xela's acid tongue he flew the Pegasus between the docking struts and down the length of the hull which shot by in a gun-metal blur.

The cockpit rang with yelps of childish glee and his grin began to ache.

He pulled the fighter around for another pass on the Xenon fleet, endorphins doing their good, good work on a body so wracked by long term, low level stress it no longer registered.

It felt just great.

A third pass, almost as good.

The scan of the station showed dozens of docked fighters, of all Xenon marks. The cruisers had none of their usual compliment but the carriers guarding the gate to Scale

Plate Green carried a full load. He did not know what this signified but he transmitted his sensor readings to Daht as soon as he emerged from the jump-gate.

“You have fun Max?” Xela hailed from the waiting Mamba.

He treated the question as rhetorical and set course for their temporary home, alighting next to 4 Piranha fighters, resplendent in the black and red trim of Force Securities.

Another small party was in progress. The Raiders, his team now, were as good a bunch as the Fifth, if not as disciplined and he had missed the warm, supportive embrace of comrades in arms so he joined in with gusto.

The main room in the Star had been completely remodelled for the meeting. The more comfortable but bulky seating were now back in the hold, replaced by two dozen small bucket seats clustered round a central holo-tank. Max stood unobtrusively at the back, exchanging pleasantries with each pilot and crew chief as they entered.

Corrin took central stage, the project was his baby in detail if not in conception.

“Trust me laddie, I’ve been on every level in every one of these places. Who knows better about having a good time than ol’ Mirv?”

Marteene conceded the point readily and was happy to let Paskaal take charge, particularly as it involved long discussions with Anje via an encrypted channel on the Force-Com 1 Nav-Sat.

“Okay team, let’s have some order,” the small dark haired woman operating the holo-tank called. The room immediately fell silent, a testimony to the power of their new flight-controller’s personality and figure.

“It’s all yours lover,” she smiled at Corrin whilst somehow simultaneously silencing isolated sniggers with dagger looks.

“Thanks Kaitrin,” Corrin stammered. Kaitrin had re-appeared in his life with the Raiders support ships and almost without either noticing they had become a couple

“Aw, how sweet,” Xela whispered through his shades. “Corrin’s got a girlfriend, Corrin’s got a girlfriend.”

“Shut up Zee,” Max muttered into the throat mike through clenched teeth like a bad ventriloquist. She had turned up with the second wave of Raider transports and his friend had been walking on air ever since.

Kaitrin waved the control wand and a huge circular structure on a rectangular base, pinioned between two massive cylinders appeared against a black, star speckled backdrop. She adroitly rotated the model to show the main docking tunnel on one axis of the sphere, parallel to the habitation modules. A tiny Dolphin emerged, giving

a real conception of scale that the numerical readouts could not convey. Finally she zoomed in on the holographic billboard on the opposite axis.

It showed a Piranha in Force livery outlined against an exploding Xenon L and a jump-gate. Rotating it revealed a huge headshot of Max, smiling cool in his shades, jaw jutting heroically.

Xela giggled and Marteene stifled a groan.

“Welcome to your new home,” Corrin gestured expansively. “Welcome to Max’s Place!”

Max’s Place, it was the Dalenari woman’s idea. “Product recognition Mirv,” the agent had snapped, unable it seemed to converse in any other way. “People know his face and name.”

“Those that walk on their knuckles,” Corrin had muttered, without due deference to the sensitivity of the mike.

“Fame is fame Mirv, a bit of gratitude for all my hard work wouldn’t go amiss,” she replied with a glare. Corrin was grateful, grateful for the intervening light years between Argon Prime and Scale Plate Green. Yet he had to concede the woman knew her business, making the teeth-grinding hours of planning over the encrypted link between Force-Com 1 and the Force-Com 3 Nav-Sat in sector Argon Prime, worthwhile.

“Leave it with me,” she said, after the discussions were complete. “My people with talk with some other peoples people. The first Bliss Place on the New Frontier, every franchise in the universe will want a slice of that.”

It was a fact she smugly confirmed a few days later. A courier delivered the new requirements a day later and Corrin dutifully insured they were incorporated into the standard Bliss Place design matrix in the PTNI Shipyard computers.

Max himself stood at the back, still and inscrutable behind the mirrored shades, not reacting to the curious glances of the Raider pilots as they straggled in and took seats. They could tell this was not the old Commander Force they knew but then Paskaal thought, he was not the old Marteene he knew.

No, that wasn’t true either. He was the same man despite the new face. He could hear his old comrade in his intonation and phrasing but he was leaner, harder, with an edge he hadn’t seen before.

‘That wasn’t true either.’ Paskaal reflected. He had seen it before, in the eyes of agents who had spent so long in deep cover they barely remembered who they were or where their true loyalties lay.

Eyes that had long lost sight of the difference between morality and expediency.

Payter had noticed the difference too, but with approval. Max was offering the Raiders what they wanted, the main chance wrapped in a righteous fight. Corrin could see it in the way the pilots watched him, impatient and eager to learn the next part of the plan.

And then there was Marteene's cousin. Paskaal had been surprised at his friends lack of emotion at the news that his own side had carelessly discarded her life just to remove a potential thorn in Trasker's side. They'd never talked of it again, except to commute the instant death sentence Payter passed on the traitor.

Marteene had taken some persuading.

Gaan had left on a public shuttle, dire and final warnings burning in his ears, a dead man walking. The Raiders would not forgive the man responsible for the death of their Intelligence Officer even if their Commander could. And everyone had seen him, tracing her name on the Honour Board, tears sliding from beneath the shades.

A name carved with pride.

Kaitrin began tuning the holo-tank and the pilots leaned forward expectantly. Twenty of them, all Argon, with a few exceptions.

The pair of Teladi females claimed to be nestlings but Corrin couldn't tell. The differences between Teladi of the same age group and sex were too subtle for his human eyes; he could barely remember their interminably long names. Thankfully they were happy to respond to their combat friendly call signs. Hantzel and Gretal, evidently allocated by some wag with more knowledge of Goner tales than self-restraint.

And Kermankellin, the only Paranid in the squadron.

People who say there are no atheists in combat had evidently not met Kerman. Taciturn, even by the exacting standards of his race, he never spoke of the path that bought him to the Raiders but Paskaal suspected his resolute materialism must have caused problems with the rest of his intensely religious race. He sat, four-square in the front row, glowering with his customary sullen intensity, perfectly polished tusks gleaming against his yellow leather skin and triple crest alertly erect. His central eye did not stray from the holo-tank but the other two flicked independently left and right in the bone ridge eyes socket, as if still expecting Stoertebeker fighters to drop on his tail.

Peripheral vision to kill for and the best tail-end Charlie in the business.

Twenty pilots and sixteen fighters, not counting the Rapier and Mamba.

They needed more fighters, no question. Better ones. The Raider Bayamons were fully equipped and maxxed out and no-one could fly them better but tactics and extreme ability could only do so much to over-come the basic weakness of the design. The extra firepower and shielding of the Piranha made it the better medium fighter by far.

The four new purchases were hopefully just the first and the sooner they re-equipped the better. Stoertebeker had a lot more up his sleeve than the Orinocos, Mandalays and Bayamons he'd so far committed and who knew what the Prometheus mercs had in reserve? Paskaal hoped Artur would be able to provide more information on them, intelligence was hard to come by, particularly as they lacked the courtesy to adopt a macho-sounding name and insignia to provide a starting point.

More pilots.

Twenty was barely enough to keep a four ship CAP in space running five shifts per 30 hour Stazura. Adopting the Teladi time system made sense given their location even if it did add a few hours to the day but Corrin found it hard to think in those terms.

The Raiders were on a two shift daily rotation, flying CAP, escort and the occasional strike. The 12 hour days could not be sustained forever.

Designating four AI controlled Bayamons for permanent Alert-1 duty helped. Sitting for 6 hours in a cramped cockpit waiting for an emergency did not do morale any good but relying on an autopilot made Corrin uneasy. Xela herself admitted her combat AI was a work in progress. The new IT facilities would speed that along she claimed but Paskaal doubted any AI would ever match the ability of a sentient pilot to improvise.

Payter had been sanguine. "There are always recruits Sir." Protocol was the skeletal frame of his life. "Particularly with these new contracts. The question is, do they have the right stuff?"

Unit pride. Paskaal understood that and Payter knew he did. It made them a good team and Corrin delegated him responsibility for station security and recruitment.

The Sarge had been around a long time and knew people. The Raiders security team had already been boosted by a group of thirty stone eyed veterans who flew in on their own Lifter. Men who liked to fight and men who, Payter assured Max, repaid loyalty with the same fervour that had earned the Raiders their reputation. Fifty thousand credits well-spent in Corrin's eyes.

More pilots and more ships cost credits, more than they could rely on from Max's hijackings. The sooner their base was earning the better.

He heard Kaitrin say his name.

"Welcome," he said, quickly regaining his focus, "To Max's Place."

All eyes were now fixed on the Bliss Place rotating in the holo-tank. Corrin knew they had little interest in the minutiae; most would probably ignore the background briefing Kaitrin would make available. They just wanted the meat. Corrin obliged.

"Section One".

Kaitrin highlighted the lower half of the main body and raced the viewpoint through a holographic tour as he spoke.

“The Agri-Zone. Low gravity hydroponics, Sunbeamer multi-spectral lighting; parabolically enhanced with natural sunlight, state-of-the-art computer controlled continual harvesting and processing, every hot strain known to weed-heads and the best geneticists credits can poach.”

Corrin paused to permit the cries of “Yea man,” and “Party-time,” to die down. When not in the cockpit the Raiders partied hard and Corrin had no objection to a little weed in moderation. The stuff was ubiquitous and no worse than alcohol on the body but he would no more put his life in the hands of a habitual user than he would a hung-over wingman. He knew he could rely on Payter to crush any problem though.

Given his choice Paskaal would have chosen a different path to wealth but as Max said. “Illegals are where the credits are.”

Better weed than Squash mines or Hornets.

“Section Two,” he continued. Kaitrin highlighted the waist of the main station body and the docking tunnel running most of the length of the cross section. “Raider Land. Launch bays, repair shops, equipment stores, labs, training sims, living quarters and rec-areas. If it can be automated it’s automated.”

The smiles said it all.

“Section Three,” Kaitrin highlighted the upper segment of the main body and the two habitat cylinders attached to it.

“The fun part laddies and ladettes. Restaurants, bars, fast-food joints, shops and dens of any iniquity that can stump up the rent and meet our skim of the gross. And no staff discounts!”

Several Raiders lowered their hands.

“Laddies, these franchises shifted quicker than a Boron at a Split barbeque and at a price that would make your eyes water so behave yourselves when off-duty. They’re paying our wages, okay?”

Anje had done a superb job here, there were huge profits to be made from the only Bliss Place on the New Frontier and she had screwed every last credit from the successful applicants. To keep them honest Corrin planned to visit each to emphasise just how un-wise it would be to even consider circumventing the station accounting systems.

It couldn’t fail, so long as the Xenon or Stoertebeker didn’t try and gate-crash. That was, Corrin accepted, some hope.

“And finally people,” Kaitrin illuminated the upper levels of the main body.

“Corrin’s Casino.”

His bow was as ironic as the applause.

This was his area of expertise and he designed it himself, combining templates from the files of the design matrix uploaded from the shipyard.

“Our number one weapon in the fight for hearts and minds of dubious individuals all along the Frontier, so don’t even think of messing in here. Best behaviour only lads, any questions?”

There were many and Corrin spent the next hour answering them in a detail that would have made the late Commander Trasker blanch. Kaitrin kept notes of the design changes that emerged from the session.

There was only one Max agreed that it would be best not to answer.

“When?”

“Soon Kerman, soon. You all better be ready to pull extra shifts. Stoertebeker may try to pull something before it becomes fully operational.”

“He may try,” the Paranid rumbled. The room roared in agreement.

Chapter 3: Winning Friends and Influencing People

“Four Tazura? That’s all it’ll take from deployment to power-up?”

“That’s what the yard manager said Max.”

The ‘War Room’ was just a converted office at the rear of the maintenance bay, a few chairs clustered around a bench sporting an old style four screen display cube. The sound proofing between the office and the maintenance bay was minimal and Corrin had to raise his voice to be heard above the roar of a stationary drive test.

“Great job Corrin. Wait a minute,” Max opened the door and gesticulated to the mechanic in the Bayamon cockpit, fingers across the throat. She obediently cut engines.

“Take a break guys, give us 20 okay.”

He turned back to Corrin. “Is the TL standing by?”

“She’s heading back in from the inner planet. Three Tazura. We’ve got to figure Stoertebeker knows the deployment date.”

Max nodded. “He wouldn’t dare strike the TL. If he makes a move, it’ll be during construction.”

“Aye laddie, we could do with more ships before then.”

“You heard all that Zee, what can we afford?”

“If you’d stop waving me around I will let you know Max.”

“Sorry Zee,” Max placed the data-padd at the head of table and took an adjacent seat. Corrin followed suit.

“This meeting is called to order,” Xela declaimed. “The chair recognises herself. Thank you madam chair- .“

“Zee, cut it out. How broke are we?”

“Patience Max, is a virtue,” the data-padd observed coolly. “Factoring in a million for the station, assorted running costs, squad payments and authorised purchases you have about 600,000 credits. Enough for another Piranha with all the extras, two of the economy model or three from the bargain basement.”

Max rubbed his temples wearily. “Send two pilots to Kingdom End Corrin, and buy two from the top shelf. I’ll take the Mamba out again.”

“Fair enough laddie. You know, we should give that ship a name, what do you think?” Corrin asked.

“The Five Finger Discount,” Xela suggested unhelpfully.

“You stole it, you name it. It has been sanitised?” Max asked.

“All legal and above board Max. How about the Destiny Angel?”

“Suppose it’s good,” Max shrugged. “Assuming we can expect a strike during construction what’s the plan?”

“Well lad. We have the Xenon at our back so we only have to worry about two gates. Stoertebeker will have to come down through PTNI HQ. We’ve a Nav-Sat in operation there and a Bat on long-range scout runs up to Cho’s Defeat. We should see it coming at least with time to get everything into the air. Twenty ships or so, not bad, not great.”

“How about Daht’s forces?” Max asked. Corrin shook his head. “Politics, if he gets actively involved it’ll give others the green light. The Director of PTNI HQ is not an ally and she commands a lot of ships.”

“Great,” Max sighed, he could feel a headache beginning. It was a crux moment and half the universe was watching to see which way things would turn. “See him again Corrin, see if he has any write-offs we can patch up and throw auto-pilots in. There must be a grey area to push. I don’t suppose Artur has surfaced yet?”

He had not. The Cabal man had been missing since the race. Laying low Max suspected.

“Our other problem is Nyana’s Hideout. The Confederation.”

Max could feel the headache getting worse. Confed Station was just the other side of the east jump-gate, threatening a war on two fronts.

“What do we know about them Zee?”

“Not a lot Max,” she replied. “They are the newest of the Clans and are more of a loose alliance of different groups operating out on the Frontier. Hence the name.”

The display cube powered up as Xela established a link.

“Behold the wonder that is Jack Jackson. Real name unknown, origins unknown, any pertinent fact you need to know, unknown. Some backwater punk made good.”

A man’s face appeared, an Argon male with pudgy features and a wisp of a beard on the tip of a weak chin. He looked in the early to mid twenties.

“How old is that image lass? He’s just a kid?” Corrin asked sceptically.

“It’s a composite Mirv. What Intel I have comes from Argon and Teladi files and that isn’t much but don’t let the puppy fat and teen goatee fool you. He might look young

but he's sharp enough to have imposed some kind of organisation on the Frontier riff-raff and resourceful enough to have cobbled together a base station."

"Weren't you and Force at Confed Station just before Trasker had you wiped lass?" Corrin asked.

"I am Xela not Hela Mirv, so I don't have those memories. However it is reasonable to surmise that Force was negotiating a contract. We can take that as a good sign, he was reasonably choosy whom he worked for."

"Analysis suggests Confed activities are mainly confined to smuggling and low-level racketeering. The New Frontier is a virgin market with a lot of credits to be made from drugs and alcohol. The Argon Naval presence is too strong for them to risk provoking with hijacks and the other unsavoury activities we expect from Clans."

"If their profits come from spaceweed then we are not going to be their favourite people at the moment," Corrin observed dryly. "All their shipments have to come through this sector and since we took out the last two convoys we can figure they are hurting."

"All spaceweed comes from Teladi sectors so Stoertebeker is probably their main supplier," Max surmised.

"Either him or the Blue Tooth Gang in Chin's Clouds," Xela added.

"The Blue Tooth Gang?" Corrin snorted. "You jest."

"It sounds a lot more intimidating in the original Split Mirv. The BTG are almost wholly Split. Very strong on illegal weaponry, squash mines and so forth. A lot of Stoertebeker traffic ends up there and I expect some Teladi suppliers trade direct. The sort of runs you were making for Thrawn, Max."

Circumventing Clan monopolies by running spaceweed direct to Thrawn's nascent independent distribution network had been Marteene's main source of income early in his new career.

"I should pay Thrawn another little visit," Max said, unconsciously flexing his left fist, "And chat some more about the concentrate. We found traces of a liquid with high levels of active alkaloids in that shielded hold on the Star when I won it back. Cut with plant waste and sold planet-side the profits must be high," he added by way of explanation for Corrin.

"High," Xela said deadpan. "That is very funny Max."

Corrin smiled at his friend's discomfiture.

"A visit sounds a good idea. Do you think we can persuade him to join us?"

"Thrawn will go along with whoever is squeezing his balls the hardest. And Zee, don't tell me the Teladi have no balls, we don't want to know okay."

“I wasn’t going to say a word Max,” Xela replied with an audible pout. “But since you ask, they don’t. If you want to know more I’m sure one of Daht’s mechanics will have a magazine,” she continued, impervious to Marteene’s glare.

“He’s in Stoertebeker’s backyard,” Max said to Corrin. “Unless we can protect him and his assets he’d be a fool to throw in with us.”

“I’ll talk with Daht about the sector governor, there may be possibilities.”

“Do that,” Max said. “But for the time being we should concentrate on getting Max’s Place established. Do we have a schedule?”

“Four Tazura for the actual construction, five more to install equipment, fixtures and fittings and another five to get everything on line and functioning,” Corrin answered.

“A hundred and fifty hours just to get on-line?” Max asked.

“People, Max,” Corrin replied. “The franchises will be bringing in hundreds of them, despite the automation. There’s a lot of customising to do and Payter’s people will have to run thorough security checks. We can scan ships for hornets and portable nukes before they dock but a new station offers a lot of scope for spectacular accidents. Our own production will be up and running sooner though.”

“Okay – grand opening in 20 Tazura. Corrin, deal with Anje. She’ll want to do whatever it is she does that’s so indispensable. Try and keep me out of it though.”

“It will,” Corrin said carefully, “Be my pleasure.”

“Okay, let me think about the Confeds. Any other business? Borass, when’s he due back?”

“Two Tazura at least Max,” Xela replied. “Force-Com 4 went live in Eighteen Billion a couple of hours ago and Force-Com 3 is broadcasting loud and clear from Argon Prime. Once he gets a few Laser Towers he’ll head back.”

“He’s a long way from home. Perhaps I should hook up with him in the Mam - the Angel?”

“Laddie,” Corrin cut in. “Delegation. Security is my domain, remember? I sent two of the new Piranaha’s and four pilots to hold his hand, or whatever those appendages are under his suit.”

“Sorry Corrin,” Max smiled apologetically. “Force of habit, so to speak. When he gets back we’ll see what we can do about the Confeds. Meanwhile I want no clan ship to leave this sector intact.”

“Understood,” Corrin acknowledged.

“Okay then, meeting adjourned,” Max picked up the data padd. “Zee, we’re taking the Angel out to the unregulated sectors, see what has been left carelessly lying around.”

“Good plan Max,” she replied as he slipped the shades back on. “There must be a couple of Clans we haven’t royally pissed off yet.”

“Bail you S.O.B,” Max muttered as another carefully timed shot hit the Orinoco, the Target Shield Indicator again dropped to zero. The pilot, realising the futility, stopped trying to shake the more agile Mamba and headed straight for the nearest gate.

Another shot. Nothing.

“Company Max,” Xela said shortly. Max squeezed off another shot. The plasma bolt impacted on the left drive assembly. He was close enough to see the secondary explosions and he automatically matched the Orinoco’s reduced speed.

Max updated his situational awareness in one swift professional glance, digesting the different inputs as he fired another precise shot.

Five Bayamons had entered the sector.

“ETA Zee?”

Another shot.

“Three minutes Max. Damn these new lock-outs.”

“Keep at it Zee,” Max fired again and opened a comm channel to the Orinoco.

Another shot.

“Asteroids and space rubbish!” The Split pilot was ghost-like through the smoke-filled cockpit.

Another bolt, another expletive.

“Listen up buddy, I’m taking your ship or your head. What’s it to be?”

Again he knocked the shields down to zero.

“You take my head, Stoert take worse and take longer. Split laugh at you!” the pilot sneered before blocking the comm with a wall of static.

“Bastard!” Max fired again. Twice. The Orinoco exploded as Max banked away. Debris rattled off his shields.

“Max!” Xela sounded genuinely shocked. “You killed him!”

He said nothing as he took deep breaths, waiting for the sudden red mist to subside.

“Screw it Zee, his choice. I’m sick of messing around, I’m constipated from the stims and tired of pissing into a tube. How the damn do the Split use that torture chamber, remind me to get it ripped out. ETA on the bandits?”

“One thirty seconds… Mark,” she called frostily.

Enough time for Max to scoop up the detritus of the destroyed convoy; some spaceweed, Argon whisky, assorted missiles and a container of drones.

“Thirty seconds to firing range,” Xela called, her tone still cold.

Max checked the location of the approaching flight and accelerated away on a perpendicular course, before pulling a slow turn towards the southern jumpgate. He’d been in space for two days straight and despite the stims and extensive use of the SETA, his reflexes were shot.

He was way too tired and much too wired for another fight and these Bayamons were fully maxxed, indicating elite pilots.

They chased him through two sectors before giving up and he could perform a masked jump straight back to Scale Plate Green.

Two days and all he had to show were a pair of Bayamons, a Beta PAC armed freighter and an Orinoco. There had been a Mandalay but pirates in Priests Pity had taken it out as it headed for the Paranid Prime shipyard on auto-pilot, forcing Max to waste more time escorting his prizes.

Targets were getting harder to find and those he found, harder to steal. Stoertebeker might not know how Max was hijacking his ships but had fought back with extra layers of encrypted lock-outs on all systems. It had cost Max a Gamma PAC to discover his second counter – drone laden freighters. Xela had yet to figure out how he was hiding the drones from her scans of their holds.

As soon as he docked at the Trading Station Max hit the improvised showers, leaving the Xela AI on the Mamba. As usual the water alternated between too hot and too cold and it did nothing to shake his mood or fatigue.

Two straight fingers of whisky in the squadron Rec Room, a cluster of bucket seats and upturned crates scattered haphazard through an unused machine room off the docking bay, and he felt human enough to half-heartedly shoot the breeze with the only two occupants.

A hit off the large silver pipe they passed between them helped further, taking the hard brittle edge off the stims still soaking his system.

Race and Tanner were both young, young enough to still be excited by their recent encounter with a Clan patrol in Chins Clouds that had tried to intercept the Star as it returned to base. Max smiled in all the right places and congratulated them on their

kills. Tanner had made three to Race's one but as was the Raiders custom, he was splitting the bonus with his wingman 50/50.

"Blue Tooths, Blue Teeth? I don't think they're going to stay out of it Commander."

She sounded as if she was actually pleased.

"Great, just great," Max thought, taking another long toke on the pipe when she passed him it again, her hands lingering on his for slightly too long. Max ignored the tentative invitation and held the hot smoke in his lungs as long as he could before spluttering it out in a prolonged coughing fit. The two pilots concealed half smiles and Max waved the pipe away.

"No thanks, and you two take it easy on that okay. Bash your livers a bit," he warned as he stumbled to his feet. All he wanted now was sleep.

"Moderation in almost all things Commander," Tanner smiled beguilingly.

Thankfully Xela was not around to make barbed comments and he stumbled away in search of an empty cot.

"Okay Borass, take us in."

"Aye aye, Max-Max," he replied, eyeing the deactivated laser towers with distrust.

"Sarge." His Bayamon was off the starboard side of the Destiny Star, from the co-pilot seat Max could see he was positioning himself between the nearest tower and the Star. "Fall back and don't target the LT's unless they power-up."

"Understood Commander." Terse, professional. The Bayamon rolled and broke high to join the two Piranhas circling the clan base, clockwise and counter-clockwise.

"Confed Station, Confed Station; Force Security ship Destiny Star requesting permission to dock."

"Permission confirmed, please dock when you see the landing lights," the automated landing system replied.

"That sounds like one of the old A-10's," Xela warned. "Keep those stalks peeled Borass."

"She means look out for other traffic," Max added quickly to forestall the inevitable query. "The A-10 was retired years ago, for good reason."

Borass said nothing but orbited the station with exaggerated caution, both eye-stalks in constant, twitching motion, until the twin chain of strobing lights marking the central docking port came into view.

Max observed the station with a critical eye, at least half it's surface area appeared to consist of crude metal and plasteel patches and in several spots thin gas plumes leaked through, dissipating swiftly into the surrounding vacuum.

"What a dump Zee. Are you sure it's airtight?"

"Some of it," she replied. "You weld together so much junk you're bound to miss something."

He was less than totally reassured.

Confed Station lacked the functional aesthetic that more established clan bases accrued through decades of modifications and improvements. It was less than two years old and clearly comprised the bow half of a Teladi TL of very ancient design and the rear of an Argon inter-planetary hauler, both stabbed into a massive sphere that looked vaguely Xenon beneath a band-aid mosaic of patches.

The docking bay doors parted in fits and starts, as if cranked open by a weary giant. Borass followed the directions of the mechanical voice, rolling to port and turning into a dimly lit and narrow side tunnel.

Max scrutinised the deactivated point defence lasers inside the mouth with suspicion.

"Completely un-powered Max, as agreed," Xela confirmed.

"There Borass," Max pointed unnecessarily. Borass guided the Star in to a precision landing on the single docking platform. The docking bay itself was smaller than any he had seen outside of a frigate, barely 4 times the length of the Star in diameter. The low intensity lighting only added to the depressing sense of claustrophobia Max felt but he shook it off. He had an act to do.

Kerman was already in the airlock, methodically re-checking the settings of an assault rifle, as bulky and uncompromising as the Paranid himself, slung on webbing across his chest.

"Be prepared. Motto of old Paranid," he grunted in reply to his Commander's unvoiced comment.

His own blaster was strapped prominently on his thigh. For show he was dressed in what he considered his 'Max Force' costume; white shirt and waistcoat, tight black trousers tucked into black leather knee boots. Force had been on this station just prior to his death. He had no idea what discussions had been held, agreements made but at least he could look the part.

"Think cool Max" he said to himself, slipping on the shades. "You reading this Zee?"

"Loud and clear Max, onboard sensors switching to passive mode as agreed. Watch yourself."

"Testing throat-mike, 1-2-3. You all receiving?"

“Fine, Max,” Xela confirmed.

“Yes Commander,” Max suppressed a smile. It had taken him awhile to trust it could pick up and translate the movements of his vocal chords as he sub vocalised. The Paranid had less practice and spoke through an intimidatingly vicious rictus grin. He half expected his next words to be ‘Gottle of Geer.’

The airlock panel confirmed a pressurised breathable atmosphere existed on the other side and Max activated the lock. The heavy door rotated into the hull and the new disembarkation ramp Borass had picked up on his travels unfurled like a liquid metal tongue, before solidifying into stairs.

Max sniffed the air cautiously as he let his eyes adjust to the twilight illumination. It was stale, musty with that burnt metal tang characteristic of over-worked recirculators.

Kerman bustled past, preceding him down the stairs, his two outer eyes darting in the constant state of suspicion and readiness that made him everyone’s first choice as wingman. His central eye scanned ahead with the same intensity but he kept his hands well away from the weapon across his chest. The agreed protocols were specific and strict.

A few seconds after he reached the deck the double doors at the end of the bay cracked slightly and then stopped. Muffled curses and one sharp cry of pain filtered through and a few seconds later they began moving in slow, metal-shrieking jerks. Two humans, shadowed against a fierce rear illumination, weapons slung barrel down across their backs, stepped into the breach and began pushing until it had widened sufficiently for a third, smaller man to step through.

“Smooth entrance,” Max whispered to Kerman, who grunted by way of reply.

The three clan members advanced, casting long shadows, and stopped 4 metres short.

“Nice shades Max,” Jackson opened with a smile that left his eyes untouched.

“Cool coat,” Max countered, carefully non-commital. “Black suits you.”

Jackson scrutinised his face, searching for a meaning behind the words, before flashing a genuine smile.

“You like it!” He held the long leather coat open as if to show he had no concealed weapons. Xela had already identified three from their energy traces, superimposing them briefly on his image. “Max, you look a 16. I’ll have some sent over. Not all my clients can pay credits and you can get some of the best leatherwork in the Universe out here on the Frontier. I’ve two gross, if you care to make me an offer?”

“Appreciated and later. Can we get down to business Jack?”

The smile faded from Jackson's face for a moment. Another, more calculating look, replaced it.

"Max, baby. I thought we had a deal?" His arms spread wide in hurt innocence.

"That was before you tried to kill me Jack," Max countered in a tone like a blade half unsheathed in warning. It seemed to unbalance Jackson for a second but he quickly regained control.

"Shit Max, you know I would never do anything like that. The Raiders, nothing but respect. No need to intercept my shipments and whack my convoys."

"That was days ago," Max countered with a grin. "You should stop living in the past Jack and deal with today's reality."

"Which is?" Jackson asked softly, his youthful face becoming as hard as his slate eyes.

"That Force Security controls all movement through your only route to the home sectors. Nothing gets through to you without my say-so, unless of course you have a jump-drive. Do you have a jump-drive Jack?"

"No one outside the military can get those Max. If I had one we wouldn't be having this conversation, you know that."

Jackson paused to brush at the lapel of his coat.

"Now let me tell you what's real. You hold that sector for as long as I say and for as long as it takes Stoertebeker to stop messing around and go all Split on your ass. If you want to play going legit," he smiled and shrugged. "It's a free universe. I'm a friendly kind of guy, isn't that right fellas?"

His two bodyguards nodded, grinning.

"All we want to do is deal a lot of weed, make a few credits, fix up the barn, establish a presence. We talked about that Max, I thought you were onboard."

"Things change Jack. I've bigger plans now."

"Pipe-dreams Max, you haven't the capability to back it up. The Raiders – how many pilots, how many ships? Twenty, twenty five?"

Jackson waved a hand dismissively.

"You know how many of us there are Max? Confed Station may need a bit of work but her shields are up. You can't touch us here, and besides, there are women and children. You haven't the capability or the will. You aren't a killer and you sure as hell don't have any hornets. To be honest I don't even know why we're having this conversation."

It was the way his two guards tensed, the body language of expectation. Max could feel the hackles on the back of his neck rise, an intuition he had learned not to ignore.

“Commander,” Kerman stepped in front of him, talking sotto-voce through clenched teeth. “You are painted. Two high frequency, narrow band ultra-sound targetters; entrance centre as reference left 3 metres up 37, right 5 up 26 behind holographic panels. The youth knows nothing of other species, I ‘see’ the designators on your chest.”

“Copy that Zee?”

She confirmed.

“Wait for my call.”

Max stepped forward and fixed Jackson with a mirrored stare, confident that the younger man had not quite finished grand-standing.

“Jack, you have no idea of my capabilities considering that my forces are integrated into General Daht’s sector defence plans, and you really don’t want to test my will. Do it Zee.”

The Gatling Cannon sprang from the Star, spitting H.E. shells at the designated targets in a crashing peal. Two large segments of the bay exploded outward with a deafening roar, sending a scoring rain of hot shrapnel over their heads. One body fell as the cannon snapped three more quick shots, destroying the point defence lasers before they could come on line. The body hit the floor with a wet thump, attempted to crawl before slumping lifeless.

Jackson and his guards found themselves staring down the barrels of two weapons.

“Holy shit Max,” Jackson cried over the sound of secondary explosions deep in the station. “What was that for?”

“Capability and will Jack. Have you stopped trying to fuck with me or do you want to play some more?”

Max twirled his blaster and snapped it back into the thigh holster. Kerman reluctantly lowered his weapon. Behind him the cannon snapped back into it’s housing.

Jackson quickly regained his composure, brushing debris from his coat and hair, he had steel nerves, Max had to give him that.

“Insurance Max, you understand. What do you have in mind?”

Max smiled. “That’s better Jack, now let me tell you how it is. You’ve got a nice little set-up here. You have a station, needs a little work but I’m impressed. You have a monopoly on frontier illegals, plenty of credits in that. So long as your people stay away from mine we haven’t got a problem. But I do have a problem with Stoertebeker and if you keep dealing with him I’ll have a problem with you.”

“You want weed, you can get it from me. Best quality, good price, delivered to your door. On top of that you and your guys will be welcome at the best R & R spot for a dozen sectors. The bottom line is I don’t want to fight a war on two fronts. If you force me to I’ll make it a one front war. You push me and I’ll turn this place into a super-nova.”

Jackson’s smile held less certainty now. “I can’t believe Daht would be fool enough to hand over hornets to a bunch of human renegades, but I’ll admit there is a little room for doubt. You’re a lot meaner than I remember Max.”

“Being killed does that to you,” Max snapped. “What’s it to be?”

“I could say yes, send you off with a happy wave and have my LT’s take you down before you get 5 klicks.”

“That,” Kerman rumbled. “Would be a mistake.”

“Your garrulous friend may be right Max but I can’t give you an answer right now. Not the complete master of my own home if you get my drift.”

“I know how things stand Jack, you have people to convince and my guess is they’re hurting.”

“We haven’t been able to meet our orders Max, it makes me look bad. Worse, it makes me look weak.”

“Zee, make the delivery.”

At the end of the bay a large hexagonal container materialised. A dozen more followed.

“Five hundred tonnes Jack, on the house. Any more will cost.”

Jackson looked at the canisters and stroked his incipient beard thoughtfully.

“No promises Max, I haven’t made up my own mind yet. You’ll be hearing from us, one way or another. Don’t let the door..”

He backed away smiling, his two guards shielding his exit. As soon as the double doors were cranked shut Max boarded the Star.

The LT’s remained inactive until the Star reached the jump-gate.

“What do you think Max?” Xela asked finally.

Max sat, letting the gut twisting tension dissipate in an attack of the shakes.

“I don’t know Zee, I just don’t know.”

Chapter 4: A Stirring in the Shadows

Ru Kampa Duchalius IV took another parsimonious sip from the smoky liquid. It was a golden colour and full of complex flavours, unlike what passed for spacefuel among the clans. As casually as she could she surreptitiously surveyed the small bar from her position, standing at the serving platform that cordoned off most of the mirrored rear wall.

Nobody matched the somewhat vague description Force's contact had given, a large middle-aged human male with an ocular enhancer over his left eye. She was not familiar enough with the Argon to judge age and half the clientele of the establishment seemed over-sized to her, blubber haunches enveloping the tiny stools on which they slumped nursing glasses of some foam topped amber intoxicant.

"Get you something else buddy?" Ru shook her head awkwardly in what she remembered was the human negative in the absence of claws to flex. The tall human tending to the bar took her refusal to spend credits to his benefit with an entirely un-teladi-like good cheer and returned to the activities that appeared to consume most of his time and effort; maintaining his follicular head growth in it's regimented pattern and initiating courting rituals with any female who came in. This Ru found most confusing as he and the thin woman with the white head fur who served tables seemed to be mates, at least to judge from the constant bickering and barbed witticisms.

Mammals, no desire to improve and an indifference to their lineage encoded in their short names, it was no wonder, she thought, they would never own the universe.

Ru kept watching the entrance in the bottled lined mirror opposite. Her hopes raised briefly with the arrival of a human matching the inadequate description the needlessly aggressive female had eventually given him, but he lacked an ocular enhancer and from the way he acknowledged the collective call of his name she surmised he was just another regular.

Disappointed, she returned to nursing her beverage and quelling the doubts that had assailed her from the moment she took the data chip. No, she thought, one has to seize opportunity when it descends. The dull ache of newly knitted ribs confirmed the decision. Max Force had, as the humans so unpleasantly put it, burrowed beneath the epidermis of Stoertebeker and the profit was no longer commensurate with the risks entailed.

When the probe signal came in at the end of her shift on the secured channel kept clear for that purpose she barely hesitated. At her instigation a cascading sequence of pre-planned systems failures shunted the signal to the emergency back-up, in turn routed to her console. It took considerable adroitness to conceal her actions from the increasingly intense security sweeps Stoertebeker ordered and she was pleased with her handiwork.

What the message was she didn't know or care. All she knew was that it was from a source her employer considered of prime significance and only the fact that he was otherwise engaged bought it through her station. Only fools turn fortune from their

doors and if it was of value to him then it was more valuable to his foes and she took the proffered chance and ran all the way to the safety of the nearest Argon sector in a Mandalay she could barely fly, despite the training Stoertebeker demanded of all his more senior staff.

The ship itself she left in Kingdom End, barely bothering to haggle with the fish reeking Boron running the shipyard. He had been only too pleased to take delivery of a clan fighter and arrange for a discreet transit to the Three Worlds Free Trading Station. She had not, as best she could tell, been followed or left an easily detectable trail.

It had proven impossible to contact Force through normal channels and it had taken nearly a whole Mizura to trace the human female that acted as his spokes-person during the Black Hole Sun gate race and another to arrange this clandestine meeting.

Half a day! They would have missed her by now and assumed the worst. The disquieting thought made her scan the room nervously but only one being looked out of place. Herself.

Ru tried to block out another long drunken exposition of a little known and highly improbable fact from one of the humans clustered at the end of the bar and concentrated on ignoring the serving woman who insisted on widely disseminating every thought that flitted through her brain before, Ru hazarded an exasperated guess, it died of loneliness or embarrassment.

His Teladi contact wasn't hard to spot, even with one eye, the only alien in one of the dozen down-at-heel drinking establishments that catered for the more impecunious station employees. Artur could tell from her stiffened posture that she had spotted his reflection as soon as her entered. Good, at least she was acting with caution.

He scanned the room, closing his left eye to concentrate on the green wire-frame simulacra. Apart from the distinctive energy readings emanating from the hip pocket of his contact he could detect no concealed weapons or devices on the rest of the clientele. It had been a calculated risk, exposing his cover like this. Normally he would have arranged an intermediary and several cut-outs between them and himself but there had been no time. At this juncture any intelligence on Stoertebeker's activities was gold-dust and a signal from a deep-space probe, priceless.

A deep space probe? He could think of only one reason why a clan leader would commit the necessarily huge resources to such an endeavour – to identify the resting place of the Ancients craft the Cabal was also searching for. If it was a trap the bait made it worth the risk of snatching.

The switch went seamlessly. A fully loaded credit chip slipped into an open pocket, a data chip slid under a clawed hand and adroitly palmed. No words exchanged, in and out in under a minute.

They were waiting for him back in the small private bay holding the Seera. Humans, masked and professional. He shot the first as he stooped to pick up the tossed chip,

the tiny blaster shooting from his sleeve on a spring release. Launching his ungainly bulk across the deck to retrieve his chip, Artur shot the second.

The third he didn't even see. The shot caught him in the hip - searing, searing pain. Another in the shoulder, broiling his flesh as the teleport snatched him to safety.

The battlefield med-kit automatically flooded his system with pain-killers but he could only crawl, one arm and one leg, to the living area.

So much blood, he thought detached, looking back. The ship was already underway, the vibration faintly registering in his fading consciousness. Ignoring Seera's questions and entreaties he mumbled orders. His ship did her best to comply, dutifully storing the message and plucking a repair droid from the hold to carry him to the surgical bed in the Medi-Bay. The data chip she secured in one of her many hidden places.

Discouraging her pursuers with a swarm of combat drones she set course for the location the ever-meticulous Artur had specified for such a situation.

Much later, compelled by programming she set course for Scale Plate Green.

"In the groove Tanner?"

"In the groove Race, and no need to ask you. Testosterone levels at critical!"

She looked around the crowded ready room and wafted the air with mock distain. Everyone who could fly a fighter was here. Corrin, Payter, the three newbies huddled in their own little wing against the easy comraderie surrounding them, even the Boron trader.

Everyone except Max.

'The Commander.' she corrected herself.

He was out in the Destiny Angel.

It was a rather romantic choice of name for the unmarked Mamba, in an abstract male fashion she thought. She was secretly pleased he had not named her Hela, like a ring on a widowers' finger.

Race laughed, he had one of those faces that did it easily, a big innocent grin whose charm he used to great effect on R & R if even half of his improbable tales were true.

"Eloise, you tell me you aren't just itching for it to kick off too?"

She pulled on her flight boots.

“Wise up Race. What I want is for the deployment and construction to go without a hitch. No Stoertebeker, no Confeds, no mercs in big scary fighters, no Xenon, no giant pink space monsters. None of that shit you hear,” she called to the capricious universe. “And then we can sit behind the LT’s.”

“Ain’t no-one there but your wingman Tanner,” Race replied.

“Don’t have a wingman Race, me Freelancer Two, you Freelancer Four, remember the briefing? Besides my lucky Chelt Foot won’t fit in a cockpit so I’m having to improvise!”

Kerman, Payter, Crais, Barton, Race and herself were each assigned a Piranha.

They had all demonstrated an affinity for the Boron fighter and a facility for instinctive combat. It was their role to patrol behind the front line, acting solo using their best judgement. It was against standard doctrine but as Corrin put it in the briefing.

“We’re outnumbered laddies, and with no word from the Confeds, we have two fronts to cover and can’t afford to tie our best ships up in pairs. You are the best pilots for the job, intelligent and aggressive. Get out there and cause havoc!”

The freedom in the training sims had been exhilarating. She could feel her face flush with excitement.

Race just smiled.

The interior of the Destiny Star had undergone another metamorphosis, fixtures and fittings replaced by long banks of computers and comms systems divided into 7 workstations, lit battle red. Six “guardian angels”, hastily trained tactical support officers, sat in their own clusters of 2 and 3-D displays.

Kaitrin supervised from the master station, linked through the nascent Force Com nav-sat network to the advanced tactical computer onboard the Commander’s Mamba. She had questions about that, but kept them to herself, even with Corrin.

The first two wings of Raider escorts were just transiting the gate from PTNI Headquarters, quickly breaking up and away to join the patrol enforcing the 10 km exclusion zone.

So far so good.

Kaitrin thought Mirv insane when he suggested this new role, and said so, but she had to admit she wasn’t bad, first of seven in the final cut. She had excellent spatial awareness along with the instinctive grasp of movement patterns that made her a good flight controller. Most important of all; the pilots trusted her, responding efficiently to her clipped, measured orders.

A Teladi vulture was approaching the exclusion zone, Angel Three was already vectoring a Freelancer to intercept. She adjusted the other Freelancer patrol boxes to compensate, the Angels updated their charges in whispered tones as the tactical update rippled through the network of ships.

She switched to Force Com 6, temporarily deployed by the Pegasus in Nyana's Hideout to monitor Confed Station. The screen remained reassuringly clear of red designated hostiles. Despite their silence, perhaps Jackson was going to play nice.

The jumpgate in her main monitor swirled to life and the hulking rectangle mass of a Teladi TL burst through, accelerating slowly towards the designated deployment zone. Defence fighters began launching, establishing their own exclusion zone.

On the strategic display a nav-sat came on line in Chin's Clouds, a designated friendly symbol circled close. She quickly digested the tactical scan; normal civilian traffic, a small convoy midway from the Clan station to the western jumpgate, sector defence forces conspicuously elsewhere. A 2 ship CAP circled the Blue Tooth Gang station. As she watched they began moving towards the nav-sat and another 2 Bayamons launched to replace them on station.

No sign of a strike, she flashed a tactical update through the defence net. The screen went dead as the long range patrol Bat retrieved the satellite.

So far so good indeed.

Max waited until the last flight of the rearguard received the all-clear from the Star and followed the TL through the jump-gate before jumping himself. The Mamba quickly over-hauled the Albatross and preceded it to the section of the sector he had chosen for deployment of his first installation, at sector zenith, five kilometres up and two towards the eastern jumpgate.

Payter had protested that this increased their vulnerability to a Confed attack but Max preferred to think of it as a convenient placing for his main customer. Jack had not been in touch and Max had no idea which side he would choose, besides his own. He had couriered the coat across though. Black iridescent leather, sharp and cut cool in a showy sort of way.

It took some time for the massive transporter craft to crawl across the sector. The huge ship was a floating dock, able to transport entire construction modules. As befitted a hybrid based on old Argon and Paranid designs it was completely functional, without even a perfunctory nod towards the aesthetic.

A box with a big engine, unlike the Boron equivalent. Now the Orca, that was ship to be proud of, a good flagship even. That was a thought he filed away so as to concentrate on the task at hand.

He hailed the Teladi Albatross.

"Captain to Pilot," Captain Hol Guralius III whispered hoarsly. "Your ordersss?"

“Deploy the module now Captain.”

“Captain to Pilot. Acknowledged.”

The Albatross cut the communication and Max zoomed the scopes close on the decelerating TL. In the background Kaitrin was re-deploying units to establish a new safety zone. Once the area was confirmed clear the bay doors at the front of the TL split open.

““Captain to Pilot. Deploying construction module.”

Max watched the metal bound cube that would be a Bliss Place drift out into space on a strong magnetic field.

“It’s quite a moment,” Xela said softly. “The first independent station deployed in a gate sector for 50 years and the first non Teladi owned Bliss Place. “You’ve done okay Max.”

“Thanks Zee, and we’re only just starting. What’s the situation?”

“Sector is secure, zero clan activity from here to Chins Clouds. I think you were right, they’ll wait until the TL isn’t around.”

They watched in silence as the module coasted into position, pulled to a halt by the deployment magnets.

“Captain to Pilot. It hass been a pleasure working with you, make good profitss.”

Hol terminated the transmission and the TL began to slowly reverse away from the construction zone.

A few minutes later the module exploded into segments, the outer layers recognisably components of the outer hull. Canisters of equipment split open and a swarm of specialist resequencers, assembler droids and construction bots moved in a carefully choreographed dance to assemble the fusion powered matter furnace and feed it with raw materials.

Using the strafe drive to manoeuvre around the perimeter Max watched as the machines swiftly outlined the main skeletal framework, deftly positioning newly forged girders for other machines to bond. This stage of the work would go quickly. It was the complex and delicate interior work, laying down life support, power management and defence systems and getting the hydroponics online, it was these things that would swallow the long days of patrolling ahead.

And yes, he felt proud.

It didn’t matter now, that Trasker killed Hela, it wasn’t about that anymore. She was dead and he thought of her every day but there was a definite thrill in the possibilities opened up by a complete freedom to act.

As Jack said, it was all about will. Will and Stoertebeker.

Max checked the tactical status and ordered his flyers to stand down. They'd continue to fly long-range scout missions and keep four ships on Combat Air Patrol at all times. The rest of the Raiders would be on permanent stand-by. It was going to be a long few days.

The Piranha orbited the construction zone slowly. Her Guardian Angel confirmed again that the scopes were clean all the way to Chin's Clouds and the only Confed traffic in Nyana's Hideout was heading east.

The station looked complete but was only a shell. Inside, machines and hundreds of Teladi construction workers worked around the clock to install the interior systems. The gravity plating was in place on several decks and the docking port operational even if the doors remained open and unpowered.

As she watched a Teladi Vulture emerged and headed for the Trading Station, carrying workers back to their temporary barracks. Tanner consulted her chronometer, adjusted to Teladi time, and did her own mental translation. Ten minutes!

She smiled in anticipation of a hot shower, or at least luke-warm.

"CAP 1, CAP 1. Stand by for change of orders."

Don't do this to me Jonno, she thought.

"CAP 1 standing by," she replied.

"We're expanding Eloise," her controller said chirpily, "Escort the Destiny Star and six Teladi Bats to PTNI Equipment Dock. Daht has come through but they need a lot of work. The Commander has taken a permanent lease on a commercial bay. The Star will secure the area before docking the fighters. See them in safe and return."

"CAP 1, understood."

Tanner identified the Destiny Star as it emerged from the Trading Station. One by one a string of Teladi light fighters followed, their precise formation and spacing indicating auto-pilot control. The Piranha quickly formed up with the convoy, taking the Tail-End Charlie position to give her a good view of the latest additions to the Force fleet.

Junk out of mothballs.

The greasers would have their work cut out even with the resources of an Equipment Dock to hand.

As they approached the jump-gate Tanner accelerated, pulling level with the Star and drifting close enough to give the Boron pilot an acknowledging wave before speeding ahead to make the jump first.

The sector was clear on her scans, Jonno would have alerted her to any threats but she was a professional and always double-checked, whatever her dishonourable discharge said. The Teladi cruiser, normally on station in the sector, was conspicuous only by its absence.

She watched the sector security flights warily as they circled the convoy, they were under the control of the Sector governor and she was known to be a rival of the General. The Raiders were not expecting any aid from that quarter.

The Hawks and Falcons kept a respectful distance as the convoy traversed the sector. The Star docked first, leaving the Bats to circle on auto-pilot. A few minutes later the Bats followed, when the last of them slipped into the docking tunnel she set course for home.

Borass took the Star in on manual, following the directions to the new Force bay given by flight control. It was small, 50 metres square, but the two landing platforms were spacious enough for the flight and a large set of double doors led to a well-equipped machine bay.

The deployment went well; ex-marines, eager to make a good impression with their new employer, established free fire zones for the automated point defence systems, installed a mobile security sensor suite and quietly hacked the station defence turrets covering the bay while the Raiders ground crews watched in bemusement.

Borass waited for the last Bat to alight before signalling for a departure slot, hoping the new fighters would be available soon. They would be running under the enhanced combat AI Max-Max's computer had developed, due to the continued shortage of pilots, but they were a welcome addition to the fleet.

Borass's buoyancy fluids bubbled as he flew back to base, the pirates would make their move soon and he had been assigned the Rapier in the latest variant of the defence plan. To Max-Max he owed his life and honour and he would not fail him.

Chapter 5: The Battle of Scale Plate Green.

The alert ripped Eloise from sleep and she fumbled blindly for a stim before realising it was only a yellow. At least there'd be java waiting in the briefing room. She slipped the stim back into her crumpled flight suit. They all slept in them now, or tried to. The station was only a day or so from power-up and their enemies would have to strike before the shield generators and the fire control systems for the laser towers came on line.

She checked the time and groaned.

"Three hours, I feel like death."

"You'll be fine soon Tanner," Race snapped with a grin as he finished fastening his flight boots.

"This is definitely the proverbial it with a capital I."

"I'm so pleased for you Race," Tanner retorted as they joined the mini stampede to the ready room. A small tray of fruit, break-bar and a therm-jug of the all-important java, with a strength that punched you in the nose, was on each bucket seat. She immediately poured a cup and took a grateful, hot sip. The room filled with a rich aroma.

Corrin was standing at holo-tank, Max close by. Looking cool, she thought, in his shades, good enough to eat even!

"Right laddies, this is it," Corrin began as the last of the pilots found seats. Race nudged her and winked.

"This was recorded 30 minutes ago in Chins Clouds."

The display switched to a sector map. The Raider Pegasus, designated friendly green on the map had dropped a nav-sat near the east gate as part of it's routine scout patrol.

The Clan Station would just as routinely send ships to chase it away.

"Oh damn," she said aloud. The Clan Base was easy to identify, it was the one surrounded by a burgeoning swarm of designated hostiles. She did not even try to count the red symbols.

"Fifty ships at the last count. We are monitoring them sector by sector but they have their own souped-up Pegasus so snapshots are the best we're likely to get."

Corrin paused to let his pilots digest the news.

"Happy now Race?" she hissed.

“Stop your bitchin’ there girl. No Xenon, no giant pink space-monsters, just a few pirates. Some women just can’t be pleased, at least so I’ve been told.”

Tanner glared at him, to no effect.

“Ten Mandalays, twenty spadeheads and twenty B’s. They were still launching when we pulled the satellite but I’m certain they’ll have heavier artillery. They could pick up mercenaries at any point along the way. Your angels will keep you posted.”

“What about the Confeds?” Tanner called.

Max replied.

“We’ve heard nothing and they aren’t answering our calls. We have to hope they at least stay out of it.”

Eloise could tell from his expression that he did not think that likely. Jackson was not a man to stand on the sidelines when all that would gain him was the enmity of both sides.

She sipped the java as Corrin outlined some modifications to the defence plan.

Two pairs of Bayamons were to be withdrawn from the northern gate picket and deployed between the Nyana’s Hideout jumpgate and the almost completed station. They would also act as tertiary pickets, intercepting any attackers that broke through the first two defence lines.

The 6 Freelancers were to push forward to support the 6 pairs of Bayamons in the front-line. Two pairs of Bayamons were to be held back as a strategic reserve. Borass, to his evident disappointment, was instructed to join them.

Corrin, in the captured Prometheus and Max, in the Angel, would concentrate on any big targets.

As he talked the holo-tank display changed to a live relay from Tharka’s Sun.

Eighty plus ships.

“If Stoertebeker is being supported by the BTG, and as they’ve just launched from their station that’s a small if, then don’t count on the Split doing anything to stop them. They know where they’re going, they’ll let them pass like a storm.”

“What about the Teladi?” Cais asked. “Isn’t it their job to defend the sector?”

“I’ll take this,” Max said, cutting across Corrin’s reply.

“Cais, the bottom line is we’re only here today because we serve a purpose. Daht is looking for strong allies and if we can’t hold our own we’re no use to him. Now he can think we’re here for his benefit but we’re here for ourselves and no-one is going to take us seriously if we hide behind the Teladi. Politics being what they are we’d

just end up with another bunch coming in against us if he did help. Of course should other stations take enemy fire..?"

He let the question hang smiling in the air. They knew what he meant.

"Okay Raiders," he clapped his hands. "No big speeches, you're damn fine pilots in the better ships. We may be out-numbered but we're on home ground, listen to the angels and watch your six. ETA of the first wave is 3 hours but you go in 20 in case any forces launch from PTNI. Go easy on the stims and most important of all, don't push a position. You're no use to me dead so no iron man settings. Set auto-eject to 5%, the auto-pilot will return to base if your ship survives. If you get wasted we want you out alive okay?"

The pilots murmured an unenthusiastic assent. To a being they were aggressive fliers, confident in their ability.

Race rammed the food down his face and dashed to his ship. Eloise contemplated many hours in a cockpit and pushed it to one side. She lingered over the java, hoping Max would have a personal word for her but he and the Boron stood in heated conversation.

"I'm sorry Borass," Max said finally, "You've seen the opposition, some are bound to get through. The Rapier is one of our best ships and has all the advanced drones we could cobble together but you'll have to defend the station, the Star and Force-Com 1. I need to know I have someone there I can rely on totally."

Max looked Borass firmly and solemnly in the eye.

"Are you that man Borass?"

The Boron visibly grew in stature and snapped two salutes, with different arms.

"Aye aye, Max-Max. None shall pass."

Force slapped Borass on the back and threw Tanner a wink. She smiled back in what she hoped was a winning manner. They might all be dead soon, she thought, so what the hell?

Max looked confused, muttered to himself and belatedly smiled back.

Tanner wandered to her ship none the wiser.

"Commander, the PTNI crew are reporting they are under attack," Kaitrin's sector display suddenly froze. "Damn, a Bat just took out the nav-sat. Shall I deploy the back-up?"

Max appeared in the com window, his face half obscured by the reflections in his visor.

“Negative Control, we haven’t enough to throw away. The first wave should be entering PTNI now, go to Alert 1. Status on the Confeds?”

Kaitrin relayed the Alert 1 to the angels and checked the Nyana’s Hideout sector display.

“Alert 1 confirmed boss. All quiet through the East gate.”

“Okay Control – good luck.”

“Good luck Max”.

She watched the symbols in the 3D home sector display move in response to the urgent whispers of the flight controllers. B flights one to six, each a wingman pairing, moved closer to the northern jumpgate, half moving behind it to catch intruders in a cross-fire. The Freelancers advanced to the edge of their designated patrol boxes.

One by one her angels confirmed flight readiness while she swallowed her own doubts.

“But what if the Mamba computer goes down Mirv? I’m no tactician.”

Corrin had been at his most avuncular.

“Don’t worry lass, if Max is out of contact just go with your instincts, they’re good. Just don’t let anything get through to the station.”

He wasn’t, on reflection, a big help.

The comms blackout left each pilot alone with their thoughts and time for Tanner slowed to a crawl as she waited for the red dots to appear on her scanner. She had popped the stim as soon as the Alert 1 was called and could feel it spreading through her body, bringing new energy and sharpening the blade of her awareness, dulled by lack of sleep. It also made her even more restless, an unfocused need to act that made the waiting worse.

The final leg of her patrol route took her close to the construction site. The station was now in complete darkness, the last of the engineers were just leaving the docking tunnel in a Vulture bound for the safety of the Trading Station. Another 24 hours and they could have got the fusion reactors installed and on-line. A further 12 and the computer systems would be up and the LT’s deployed and operational.

Eloise pushed the thought away and focused on the moment.

“Freelancer Two calling weapons test.”

She checked her ship’s nose was pointing into empty space, squeezed two shots and then cycled through the missile loadout. Everything was working as well as it was five minutes before.

It wasn't her first combat. She'd had plenty of that since hooking up with the Raiders straight after being thrown out of the Navy.

'An unsuitable attitude in the presence of senior officers'.

And the rest, she thought, they had been quite restrained. Fortunately the Raiders were not run by clowns.

There had been plenty of skirmishes and one or two big set pieces including that business with the Xenon when Corrin and the three Prometheus mercs hauled tails from the fire, hers included.

Nothing like this though, this was war, against real bleeding, screaming people, not machines.

Tanner scanned the sector again. It was clear of all other traffic, except two wings of sector security fighters out of the Trading Station. They were skulking near the gate to Xenon territory. The other stations in the sector knew what was coming and had bunkered down. She understood from scuttlebutt that their corporate owners had made pretty vigorous complaints to General Daht over lost profits.

The Commander's Mamba orbited the gate to PTNI HQ. Like the rest of the Raiders she had been equal part stunned and overjoyed when she found he was alive and like them she would have been happier if she had not found out through the Sports-Net.

It didn't matter in the end, he was back and involved in something bigger than he was letting on; something that promised what most of the Raiders wanted, action and credits. And she liked the new, taciturn, Max. Before, his passions appeared unfocused. Now he was driven, purposeful, with a cool leather coat and moody shades.

She laughed at herself as the minutes slithered reluctantly by like a SETA in reverse.

"Gate activating people, this is it. Fortune smile on us all."

Eloise echoed Kaitrin's thought, accelerating to the northern perimeter of her patrol box.

Five Orinoco's emerged from the jumpgate almost simultaneously, fanning up and away from the gate. Two pairs of Mandalays followed.

Max hit the after-burner, flashing down upon the first pair of the light fighters before they could hit maximum speed. Their shields were almost useless against the power of his weapons and both flared away into vacuum. The second pair accelerated away, two Raider Bats in pursuit.

The angels relayed Xela's targeting instructions and five pairs of Raider Bayamons rolled and fell on their designated opponents. Four pairs of Alpha PAC's made brief work of the spadehead ten megawatt shielding.

Under-powered and slow, Max wouldn't give them hanger space.

The gate swirled to life again and the battle began in earnest.

Tanner watched the Mamba roll and fall upon the Mandalays, admiring the economy of Max's attack. No wasted shots and energy, no hits on the jumpgate.

The remaining pair of light fighters were quickly engaged by the two Teladi Raider pilots in Bats they handled like scalpels. The rolling scrap was on the forward edge of her patrol box and she was moving to engage before her angel passed on the instruction. Switching to the lower powered but higher velocity Alpha PAC's, she finished off one bandit with a long range burst, judging the lead on the twisting fighter with an experienced eye and walking her shots on target. The second was already dead.

Flight Control passed on force updates in measured tones. Ten Bayamons, fifteen, twenty. The scanner showed a mass of red now, clogging the gate and a quick scope with the zooms showed more transiting every second. The Raiders own front-line defenders were scything down the intruders with brutal efficiency as they came through the gate; Flight Control targeting ensured each pair of defenders engaged different ships.

Orinocos, in wings of five, broke splay fingered, high and low on entry, those that survived the initial barrage forcing the defenders into close-range dogfights. The sheer weight of numbers of attackers ensured a break-out from the gate and soon its environs was a churning mass of ships and snaking streams of plasma, repeatedly terminating in blossoms of fire.

A growing number of ejected pilots, slowly wending their way through the chaos, added to the confusion. The Raiders own rescue vehicles, two fully upgraded Bats with teleporters darted through the chaos with reckless courage, to snatch pilots from the maelstrom of death, regardless of loyalties.

'Fight the machine not the man.'

It may be a code honoured more often in the breach, but it was one the Raiders and all reputable merc squads adhered to, never knowing where the tide of fortune might take them.

More attackers were extracting themselves from the melee and the Freelancer pilots swept into action. Tanner spotted four, forming up into a wing as they arrowed towards the construction site. She scoped them quickly, Bayamons, their disparate colour schemes indicating an impromptu alliance.

A fully upgraded Bayamon was slightly faster than a Piranha but few clans go to that huge expense so she was able to close quickly, taking out one with a prolonged burst as it turned to engage. A rolling turn put her on the six of another, her extra speed

bringing her close in, where GPACS were most effective. Another down, the pilot tumbling by her cockpit.

The Piranha juddered under heavy assault, she rolled instinctively and pulled on the stick, twisting her neck to keep the Bayamon in view. The missile alarm reminded her of the fourth Bayamon, closing rapidly from her starboard quarter. Her scanner showed it had fired at long range, giving her time to prosecute her own position. A medium range offset burst, the characteristic plasma rings of the GPACS arcing towards the target.

Some hit but the Bayamon broke left before its shields failed. Tanner fired four wasps and keeping one eye on the three dots the scanner showed close on her rear, went evasive. Her superior turning circle sent the missiles flashing past on her right side, close enough for the rumble of their motors to temporarily fill the cockpit before dopplering away. The third Bayamon exploded on the edge of her peripheral vision as she scanned for the fourth.

Except for general updates from Kaitrin she was getting no assistance from the angels.

'As they say,' she thought grimly, 'No plan survives first contact with the enemy.'

Without a wingman and without the all seeing eye of the angels to watch her back Eloise relied on the first rule of dog-fighting, never fly in a straight line. She was in a target rich environment now, the front line defences swamped to overflowing.

Using her superior speed to slash down on targets, she pulled up close. One hundred metres, aim for the centre body and squeeze, rollaway. Two more Bayamons died, she had no idea where the fifth had come from. Neither pilot survived the brutal assault but that was now compartmentalised away. She would drink a Raiders toast to fallen foes later, if she survived but now there was no time to think, no time to reflect, just spot targets. Attack and disengage before their buddies nailed you.

Once the Orinocos broke through things got worse.

Kaitrin watched the screens, passing on tactical instructions to her angels in what she hoped was a composed tone. It felt anything but, she could feel the tightly wrapped ball in her stomach growing, making it more difficult to draw breath and her brain felt it was beginning to seize up. The subdued red lighting and the rising urgency with which the angels allocated targets added to her growing sense of panic.

Forty ships had come through so far, a first wave to batter the defenders back. The Raiders were more than holding their own, nothing had so far got through to the construction site, or she grimly reminded herself, to the nearby Star. Borass in the Rapier and the other rear-guards were mopping up the fully upgraded Bayamons bursting through the Freelancers picket lines. She made a snap decision and pulled a wingman pairing from the East Gate picket.

Corrin and Max were fully engaged, six Falcon fighters operating in disciplined wingman pairs. A small cheer as they became five. Then four.

Three Raiders ships were down, two Bayamons and a Freelancer. Two pilots survived and were rescued, or at least their signals had vanished from the screen. Recovery vessels from both sides were snatching any pilot they could from the deadly arena.

Three ships, they couldn't afford such losses even at the current 6:1 kill ratio, something they could never have achieved without the battle computer aboard Max's Angel.

The Prometheus rocked again under the pounding assault, the Falcon Alpha HEPT's ripping great chunks from his shields before he could roll away. Two missiles kicked his fighter, sending it lurching across the sky, shields under 10%. Corrin fought to regain control and evade the Falcon pair closing head on. Kaitrin was already screaming in his ears when Max's Mamba blazed across his nose, taking the incoming fire. The two Falcons broke in different directions, each pursued by a brace of silkworm missiles.

Years of familiarity and similar training paid off. Max broke high, Corrin inverted to keep his target in sight and climbed, rippling the underside of the Teladi heavy fighter with fire before rolling out on its six. Under 80 metres, the last shots in the bank, three silkworms, break hard left.

The Falcon disintegrated. Max nailed the second moments later.

'Get a grip woman.' Kaitrin admonished herself. Through a prism of tears she saw Jonno turn momentarily from his screen and wink. The gesture was enough, she could damn well do this. She touched one of the closing red symbols in the 3D tank with the control wand and then tapped a button to send it to Jonno's station. He adjusted his headset mike and whispered instructions. Freelancer Two moved to close the gap.

Another alarm sounded, a quiet but insistent buzz, accompanied by a flashing indicator. She could feel the blood vessels in her brain contract, her body anticipating shock as she switched the sector display to Nyana's Hideout.

It was frozen, a Mandalay caught in the act and twenty more clan ships midway between Confed Station and the gate to Scale Plate Green.

"Damn you Jack!" Max raged as Xela passed on the update. "Status Zee?"

"Diverting two pairs and a Freelancer. Five against twenty plus. They could use your help."

The AI sounded distracted, something he had not heard before. There were dozens of fast-moving variables to track and extrapolate in real time and multiple instructions to

feed each second to Flight Control back on the Star. Acting as his eyes also was stretching her to her unplumbed design limits.

Corrin had the same message and both pilots successfully prosecuted their attacks on the remaining Falcons with reckless disregard for their own safety.

Another Raider Bayamon fell, exploding in a devastating Orinoco cross-fire.

“They’re yours Max,” Xela said, her diction clipped. Simultaneously, a new target locked in the HUD. Orinoco, Two klicks.

“Got them, get Corrin to the East picket,” he ordered. Xela gave a one word acknowledgement.

The two spadeheads had broken past the thinly stretched Freelancer picket and were heading directly for the construction site. The Mamba closed the distance easily, pulling up on the tail of one before they realised they were under attack. His shots smashed into each wing-tip drive and Max flew through the debris to roll onto the six of it’s partner.

The pilot ejected before his shields hit the 25% mark.

“Hold this position Max. Working, working, got it!”

His HUD target indicator turned from red to blue and the Orinoco turned away.

“Your reputation precedes you Max,” Xela actually laughed although it had a brittle, mechanical undertone. “Sending it up and out of the sector, we can retrieve it later.”

They kept flooding through.

Tanner took out another Mandalay before it could pick up speed and broke low, skimming the penumbra of the gate activation zone. Damn Confeds, she knew they couldn’t be trusted, knew it. The construction site was too close to the gate, less than 15 klicks. Max had made a mistake, refusing to believe he couldn’t win Jackson over.

The Raiders could not cover both gates, he gambled and lost and now she and the handful of defenders were in way over their heads.

A Bayamon exploded as it flashed across her path, the pilot almost smearing her canopy as he tumbled free of the burning fighter. He registered green on her scanner,

Another Raider down.

A designated friendly came scorching across her screen towards the drifting pilot. Tanner pulled a 180 degree loop and cleared the tail of the Pegasus, the clan pilot careening free as the Bayamon exploded. She snapped three dragonflies at its wingman and rolled to starboard to evade a pair of spadeheads falling from 4 O Clock.

It took her straight through the sights of another wingman pair. Shields almost at zero Tanner rolled to starboard, seeking to extend and escape.

The missile warning sounded too late.

Kaitrin watched helplessly as the Raiders were slowly pushed back from the northern gate, her limbs twitching with the need to do something, something physical to help. Instead she redesignated two solo Bayamons as a wing pairing and transmitted the instructions.

Five Raiders down.

"We can't take much more."

She said it aloud and looked around embarrassed. Her angels were too absorbed in directing the battle to notice.

The fighting was all taking place far from the cluster of stations in the centre of the sector, the attackers were taking care not to give anyone else an excuse to join the fight.

"So much," she thought bitterly, "For playing dirty."

Minutes limped by, time partitioned by a molasses hourglass. The second picket was holding on the northern gate, forty or so Clan fighters against a handful of Bayamons and Piranhas, Freelancer Three circled, opportunistically sniping at targets and keeping bandits off the tails of the defenders. The reserves and rear-guard were fully committed now, only Borass in the Rapier providing a final line of defence.

She admired the discipline with which the young and gung ho Boron held back.

Max and Corrin were also turning the tide at the gate to Nyana's Hideout, whittling down the attackers one by one. One of the Confeds changed designation on screen, red to green and disengaged. Kaitrin transmitted instructions to the auto-pilot and sent it on an arcing course out of the combat area to join it's compatriot. She had no time to wonder how Max did it, she was just grateful.

She was beginning to almost consider daring to think the eastern picket would hold when three more designated hostiles appeared on screen. Another two trickled through the gate, then the trickle became a torrent, sweeping away both her voice and her hope.

Xela announced the new arrivals with preternatural calm. Max tried to glean more tactical information from the sector scan while prosecuting his attack on another Orinoco.

"Three Elites Max. Bayamons, Orinocos, Mandalays, lots of them. Too many."

There was a finality in her voice.

“Incoming transmission Max.”

Jackson’s video image appeared in the corner of the HUD, his grin threatening to split his face.

“Hi there Max baby, sorry it took so long to join the party.”

“Not glad,” Max tried to calm his rage as he twisted in pursuit of another Bayamon, “You could make it Jack,” he snarled, failing utterly but the Bayamon exploded in a satisfying manner. Max was savagely happy the pilot failed to eject.

Jackson looked hurt and then smiled.

“Now, now Max. Is that anyway to greet your saviour? Transmitting tactical data.”

“They’re engaging the first Confed ships Max,” Xela called excitedly. “Receiving IFF codes, designating them friendly!”

The bloom of red around the jumpgate turned green on Raider scanners all across the sector.

Max was speechless, every emotion on overload.

“Jack,” he said finally, as he mechanically engaged a passing Orinoco, his eyes stinging. “Thanks for the coat.”

Jackson saluted ironically, an enigmatic half smile playing on his lips, and cut the transmission.

Weak and shaking with relief, Kaitrin’s warning that the nav-sat in Eighteen Billion had gone down barely registered.

As the new clan ships changed designation Borass squealed in delight, happy in the privacy of the cockpit, to disengage the vocorder that translated his fine voice into the low frequency guttural uttering the Argon preferred.

Boron it seemed, shrieked like schoolgirls. He was not entirely sure what a ‘schoolgirl’ was but from clues picked up all through his youth he had a constructed a good mental approximation.

Big, hairy, with an as yet unknown number of fangs. An excellent singing voice though.

No doubt the know-it-all woman would fill in the remaining gaps if he asked. He made a mental note not to ask. For a machine she could be very rude.

“We now certain win will be!” Borass shrilled to himself as he pulled out of the turn on the precise course needed for his slower fighter to intercept the incoming Mandalay, trailing a Raider Bayamon it had picked up bursting through the secondary picket. Borass knew it was going for Force-Com 1, a fighter that size could not seriously damage the Star or the construction site. It was also a prime strategic target. Without it the clever machine could not have co-ordinated the defence. He might lack experience but he knew this co-ordination made all the difference.

Borass began firing the APACs before the fighter came into range. A volley of shots caught it, forcing the fighter to break off it’s attack run to protect his shields. The Boron squealed his professional distain as the manoeuvre took the pirate straight back onto the guns of his pursuer.

It was then Kaitrin gave her warning.

His scanner confirmed it. Switching back to Scale Plate Green, Borass took in the tactical situation. The centre was now holding and in a few minutes the superior forces of the friendly Confeds were going to roll up the right flank.

The attackers could see that and were beginning to disengage.

The warning did not worry him, the destruction of the nav-sat was probably a coincidental act of malice. There was a sector full of Xenon fighters and cruisers between Eighteen Billion and here and Max-Max was right not to weaken his front line.

Even so it was worth making sure. He reactivated his vocorder and asked Kaitrin to re-assign the Bayamon to rear-guard. There was a long pause, Borass guessed she was in consultation with the smug machine.

“With the wise all knowing machine!” Borass shrieked as confirmation came in. For a few moments the cockpit filled with profanities he only dimly understood. Like many Argon, the female human appeared to have an altogether unhealthy fixation with her solidified waste excretor, something a lot of them talked out of apparently, although Borass had never heard one speak.

Not intelligibly at least, but that might be his lack of understanding. Humans, his Xeno-Biology instructor had said, often talked crap.

Borass activated the Ecliptic Projector, rolled and turned until the southern jumpgate, leading to Xenon space, was on his nose and hit the afterburners. It took a few minutes to get to the gate, which he circled at a careful one kilometre distance. Two wings of Teladi defence fighters, studiously ignoring the battle raging near the north gate, stood off a further two klicks.

The gate remained inactive and the battle going well. A core of the attacking fighters were putting up an admirable rear-guard while the others withdrew. No more Raider fighters had been lost, although several of Jackson’s forces were listed as casualties in the tactical update.

Midway from the eastern jumpgate to the Trading Station four Orinoco fighters, designated blue, were being escorted by a Mamba.

Surrendered! It was so funny he could scream like a girl. The legend that is Max-Max!

Then his fluids froze, the visceral knowledge preceding the conscious realization.

The jumpgate was activating.

Fighters, black ones, a Prometheus and three Teladi Hawks exploded through the gate in a storm of drones. A second later, two probes followed.

'Decoy drones, like those used in the pointless but lucrative sport.' Borass recognised them immediately. 'Clever, clever!' He looked forward to asking the not-so-smart-now machine why she hadn't thought of that.

He then let his training take over.

He deployed his own combat drones, with the latest version of the Xela combat AI.

Borass ordered them to target the enemy drones and attacked.

Max froze for shocked seconds, nerves stretched taut by events and his body flooded with fight-or-flight chemicals.

"Max, snap out of it.. The mercs are back and Borass is in way over his beady little eyestalks," she raised her voice. "The Hero Thing remember, 'Is it a bird..?'"

"Okay I've got it. Kaitrin impress on these boys how deeply unhappy we will all be if they try and bug out."

He cut the channel without waiting for confirmation. Xela would be calling for reinforcements but they were all the way across the sector.

Max hit the after-burners, the old boost variant powered by shield and weapons energy. The stick twisted and shook in his hand as he wrestled to keep the nose towards the gate. The Mamba rocked and roared as its large frame pushed through the 1000 mark.

"Hang on Borass, we're coming."

Borass rode the hits from the drones and raked one Hawk with the Gamma PAC's before it could accelerate away from the gate. He broke high and left from the explosion while deftly locking up the second. Before he could engage, his shields took another battering from the surviving combat drones, forcing him to break-off.

It left the remaining three fighters behind him and as the last of their drones fell they moved to take advantage. Rather than outrun them, Borass turned to fight. The human that had saved his life had entrusted this role to him and he would not fail him.

By the time Max arrived, Borass was fighting for his life, hurling his fighter across the missile filled sky in a mad dance, taking opportunistic snapshots at his two assailants.

The Prometheus was making a run for the construction site but Borass's shields were almost gone. Max made the only decision he could.

Rapidly throttling back, the Mamba streaked through the middle of the fight, Max launching missiles as he went. The Hawk pilots were too good to be caught by missiles but they were forced to go evasive.

"Borass, get after that Prom, take it down. I'll mop up here."

"That is a mistake Max," Xela cautioned. "The correct choice is for us to pursue, Borass is outmatched."

"His shields are low Zee, he'd never last. All he has to do is tie him up long enough for me to deal with these clowns."

"Remind me Max, what is it that pride goes before?"

"A proverbial ass wuppin' Zee," Max replied confidently as he lined up on a Hawk.

Borass, by contrast, obeyed instantly, calculating his evasive breaks to bring him onto the tail of the Prometheus as it accelerated away. Their fighters were similar in speed if not in weaponry and Borass was not sure he could catch the Paranid ship so he fired two wasps, hoping to goad him into engaging, but the mercenary was not going to be caught by such a novice trick.

"Optimism!" Borass reminded himself of the number two quality the Boron navy demanded of its pilots. Clear buoyancy fluids seemed irrelevant under the circumstances.

Max was feeling a lot less optimistic. The two Hawk pilots were as good as any he had come across and working in a closely co-ordinated pair they were fighting him to a stale-mate. Lock onto one and the other was all over you. A pair of GPACs and a lucky missile hit could take a big bite out of even 25MW of shielding, as Max rapidly learned. It took all his skill to avoid a repetition of the lesson.

"Who?" he asked rhetorically, "Are these guys?"

"Some form of circus entertainers, I'm led to believe," Xela snapped coldly.

Kaitrin had seen the danger and sent the Pegasus in. It was the only thing fast enough to get there.

“Keep it simple Makk, get in a few shots, gain us a few seconds,” she was one of the new pilots, trailing a rep, but was an unknown quantity. Kaitrin did not want any more deaths when the fight was almost won. “But no dumb heroics, don’t get in a fight.”

The fighter hurtled in from the port aft quarter, slowing to deliver a full charge from the weapon bank. The single weapon made little impact so she moved close in on its six and pounded away until she got a reaction.

Too close

The Prometheus reacted by decelerated sharply, bleeding forward velocity in continual wide rolls to successfully force the overshoot.

The Pegasus shield was useless, she ejected as the first shot was fired.

Borass was almost upon the Paranid fighter now and the Rapier was too big a threat to ignore. He deliberately overshot his opponent, dumping several hopeful missiles, to pull the combat away from the ejected pilot. The Prometheus launched missiles and the two ships twisted around each other, taking snap shots while dodging projectiles.

The combat zone drifted to within 5 klicks of the construction site, and Xela instructed theStar to withdraw.

Borass couldn’t sweat but his buoyancy fluids could make a variety of frightened noises. The Prometheus was a better ship and, Borass realised almost immediately, had a better pilot. He concentrated on staying alive, confident that Max-Max would be there soon.

He rolled and turned as tightly as the ship could, dragging the Rapier out of the fire ripping away its shields.

“Hurry, Max-Max,” he piped quietly. The cockpit filled with liquid sounds.

It took Max too long to extricate himself from the Hawks.

“Zee, make sure someone gets those pilots,” he ordered as the afterburners cut in. He zoomed in on his new target, bringing the combat disorientatingly close.

The Prometheus had forced Borass to break away from the target and immediately resumed an attack vector. Borass rushed to intercept as the Mamba thundered across the sector. A wing of Bayamons were only a minute away, Corrin close behind.

“He’s launched a missile,” Xela said. There was a short pause.

“Max,” her tone was sombre. “It’s a Hornet!”

“Damn Zee, where did they get that from and why in hell didn’t it show on the scanners?”

She had no answer. Max tried to squeeze the last metre of speed from the engine by effort of will but he didn’t need Xela to tell him they weren’t going to make it. The un-powered station would be destroyed instantly.

Borass saw the danger and hurtled past the turning Prometheus in pursuit of the Hornet, firing constantly even though the chance of hitting at that range was almost non existent.

Max watched in horrified fascination as Borass blazed after the weapon that could end all his plans.

“Pull out Borass, pull out,” he shouted into the comm. “You’re too close!”

Borass had no concentration to spare in reply and aimed another volley. The hornet exploded like a small nova tossing the Rapier like a cork on the shock-wave. The shields collapsed as the wave dissipated. Max cheered with relief as Borass ejected through the flames.

“Max, Max!” Xela shouted. “Incoming!”

Reflexively Max rolled and turned towards his attacker but instead of tracking back the missile flew on towards it’s target.

“Borass!”

The young Boron watched it’s approach, wishing he had a sidearm.

Max and the Raiders hounded the Prometheus across the sector, grinding down it’s shields until Xela could trigger the ejection system. He stared at the mercenary floating in his sights for a long time, oblivious to Xela’s cries.

Chapter 6: Aftermath

The Angel was the last ship to dock; the Mamba and the captured Paranid heavy fighter circling the Trading Station until the last of the Vulture freighters exited under the escort of a single Bayamon, heading back to the un-powered Bliss Place. Another two Bayamons remained on patrol near the northern gate.

The Destiny Star, carrying one of the few remaining nav-sats and a squad of troops to relieve the garrison protecting the Raiders maintenance facility in the PTNI HQ Equipment Dock, was already underway.

Three Hawks, from General Daht's garrison, provided both an escort and a pointed statement to the Director of that sector.

Jackson's Confed forces had already slipped back through the eastern jumpgate, escorting a small fleet of ships that once cut off had, unusually, surrendered to him or Max. In an act of generosity Max presumed to be calculated, Jackson had transferred three of his captured Bayamons to Raiders control. They were already orbiting the Bliss Place, accompanied by the six Orinocos that had either surrendered or fell to Xela's probings. The captured ships patrolled on un-enhanced auto-pilots, a bluffed deterrence while the Raiders regrouped.

Seven ships, including three Piranhas. Only three pilots.

Only; a mockingly small word.

Only Cais, Tanner and Borass.

Max felt nothing, just a cold empty space in his chest. He even had to work at fanning the flames of hatred towards the pilot suspended in the Mamba's sub-space hold.

Abstractly, he knew the feeling, or lack of it, would pass.

He had lost comrades before, and friends, but each death took a piece of something important. Max had seen that before too.

Max promised himself that the first chance he got he was going to just let go, something wild and deliberately debauched to let himself know he was alive.

Someone had rigged a 2-D projector to the Trading Station communications system and the docking bay was crowded with pilots and ground crew, craning their necks to watch a live news feed as he docked.

Corrin shook his hand, with a knowing look, and Kaitrin threw her arms around his neck, hugging him close as she wept into his shoulder. Payter thrust a half bottle into his hand as he extricated himself.

“Drink this son,” he said simply. Max took three large gulps, the clear spirit burned like lava, before suffusing warmly though his bloodstream. Then he took another, fuel for the barely smouldering embers of his emotions.

“Thanks Sarge,” Max returned the bottle. Payter wiped the rim with a palm and took a hit himself, raising the bottle in a ghost of a toast. “He was a gutsy little guy.”

Corrin took the bottle and half killed it.

“That he was laddie, Cais and Tanner too.”

Max nodded agreement. He didn’t really know Cais, except as a damn good pilot and a data-file but Tanner? Well, Xela had just about convinced him to take advantage of her obvious interest.

Take advantage. It was a peculiar way for the AI to put it. Eloise was smart, good looking and warm, a woman he could see himself with and it had been a long time since he’d had someone like that. Someone that would hold him in the wolverine hours before the dawn and tell him things would work out okay. And be there when they didn’t.

‘Well, things worked out fine.’ Max thought acidly. They had given their enemy a smashed nose and salvaged enough ships to replace their losses. Once the news spread, and the giant projection on the bay wall showed the word in flight, they’d have the pick of the pilots Corrin deemed, honourable rogues. Most would bring their own ships.

Max allowed himself to be absorbed into the body of Raiders clustered under the projection, offering the words they deserved and accepting the sympathy.

The report itself was being carried as breaking news.

The clans unite against upstart industrialist and former pirate, complete with grainy scope video shot from one of the sector installations. Overly dramatic with a positive spin that indicated the PR woman had been busy.

Analysts spoke knowingly from armchairs and an economist tried to find a convincing explanation for the sudden fall in the stock of the companies dominating the jump-gate sector economies. Monopolies fear competition as evil-doers shun the light.

“What about the prisoners?” Max asked “Safe. They aren’t talkative,” Payter replied. “Shall I stuff yours with them?”

“Do that Sarge, and make sure they’re strip searched and probed. These aren’t your ordinary guns for hire. And make sure the Raiders keep a lid on any vigilante fantasies, we’re better than that.”

“The Raiders always have been Sir,” Payter reminded him. “But plenty are willing to make an exception for a pilot-killer. Speaking of prisoners, the General sends his congratulations and suggests you speak with him as soon as possible.”

Max ran his fingers through his hair and turned to Corrin. “Can you handle it Mirv? I’m not sure I have the patience.”

Corrin agreed, believing politics was a not a game best played by the young. They lacked the experience and perspective, seeing everything in black and white absolutes with simple, violent solutions.

He could see the deep cuts in his friends eyes. Somebody was going to pay for his losses, Law and Stoertebeker, if they were different people. Law most definitely, and he had no problem with that at all.

The General was adamant, the use of a Hornet missile against a civilian target was a crime he could not ignore. No ransom, no frontier justice. Corrin handed the four mercenaries over to Daht’s own security people, on the understanding that all pertinent information from their interrogation would be passed onto him.

Daht abrogated to himself the right to define pertinent.

The Raiders watched in contemptuous silence as the shackled humans were led away. Each of the captives glared a confident defiance that only wavered when they saw the armed Teladi.

His squadron was too professional to party in celebration of the victory. They had won the first battle, but at a heavy cost. Their station was still off-line and in need of protection so they would all continue to pull multiple shifts. One by one the pilots drifted away either to sleep, or to stand-by. The ground-crews dissipated to their charges scattered across the bay.

Max left Payter and Corrin to discuss the memorial and went in search of rest, finding only nightmares.

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There were no bodies to place in a casing and launch sunward, with fond words and benedictions. Just friends speaking for friends as they carved the names of the fallen on the Honour Board. Race had to be helped away by Kaitrin, overwhelmed by the emotion that was too late speaking its name.

Makk played the Last Post with aching purity, ramrod straight in her full dress uniform, the last note of the ancient Argon piece long sustained, fading hauntingly into the void.

No eyes without a tear.

On the big display screen, a wing of General Daht’s own Hawks flew by the station in missing man formation, a gesture not wasted on the Raiders or the spies of his rivals.

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“You look like hell Max, put those shades on before you scare any children. Then drink this.” Taking the proffered cup from Kaitrin, he took a deep sip, already anticipating the jolt and spat it out reflexively. “What the F is this?” he demanded.

“Too many good things to mention Commander,” she said evasively. “The important thing to remember is how well it will make you feel. You’re needed on deck in 15. I’ll be back in 10 and that had better be gone.”

Max waited until she had gone and looked round for somewhere to dump the concoction. His room was a small tarp slung between two short rows of lockers with a hot-bed cot so there weren’t a lot of options. He popped a stim, picked up Xela’s data padd and dropped the mug into a scrap metal barrel on the way to the docking bay.

By the time he arrived he had a spring in his step. The bay was a study in organised chaos. Max spotted the Sarge, supervising the loading of one of the Raider Lifters down at the end of the flight-line. The last of the containers had vanished into the hold by the time he got there. Max stood back until it lifted off.

“Commander,” Payter was actually smiling. “Power is up and Raiders Territory online,” Max checked the time, realising he’d slept longer than he intended, if you could call it sleep.

“Raiders Territory, Sarge?”

“We had to call it something otherwise the civilians would not know where to keep the damn hell out of Sir.”

“Raiders Territory it is,” Max agreed. “How did you get it up so fast, we’re days from completion?”

“It’s a modular design Commander,” Payter stated. “Plug and play, it’s all the electronics and fancy detail that takes the time. The place is crawling with droids and constructors, it should be completed on time and Ms Delenari insists on speaking with you. She flew in with a bunch of media crews to cover the opening.”

Max groaned. There was a war going on dammit!

“If I might observe, we’re stretched at the moment and need a CAP. Four hour stint. Corrin will be back from the Place by then.”

Four hours in the cockpit or hours with Anje?

“It’s my name over the door but it’s his baby. Have I time for breakfast?”

Payter smiled and tossed him a foil sealed field ration.

“She’s been out for 8 hours, you can eat in the cockpit.”

Max stuffed it in a thigh pocket and headed for the Angel.

“All systems go Max,” Xela confirmed. “Ready when you are.”

Max eased the Mamba clear of the docking platform, pivoted on thrusters and headed for open space. He immediately set course for his Bliss Place, not needing to use the navigation system. Garish holo-boards swam above the spot illumined main sphere and the two habitat cylinders glittered with snaking patterns of lights. Max’s Place was now one of the brightest objects in the sky.

“Tasteful,” Xela opined. “Max, how do you feel?”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning; Borass, Tanner. You nearly lost it out there Max. I thought you were going to fry him. Do you know why we are doing all of this?”

“I know what the primary mission is Zee,” Max replied testily. “What do you think I think it is?”

“That’s what I’ve been wondering,” she replied.

“People keep dying because I’ve started a war, that’s how I feel Zee,” he said simply.

“You are a soldier Gragore, using your discretion to prosecute a critical mission. They’re going to keep dying.”

“I know Zee, I know. I’m just tired. Give me an update on the Place.”

Xela reviewed her data links and readings. “Shields are up and the sensors and control systems will be on in 15 hours. Full station completion predicted for 48. Apparently we open for business in 72. Corrin’s very good at this.”

Max orbited his installation slowly. At this distance he could see dozens of construction droids were still crawling over the surface, their molecular bonders twinkling as they linked exterior fixtures to power and data relays. The giant revolving hologram of his face beamed down munificently on the proceedings.

“Seventy two hours to opening? Can we do that, who will be there?”

“Get with the program Max,” Xela chided. “The franchises are already setting up and half the docking slots are pre-booked. A permanent party without the inconvenient legal and moral restrictions of the Argon Trading Stations, how could it fail?”

She had, Max conceded, a good point.

There was one more pertinent problem; a pilot for the Destiny Star.

“There’s a lot of trading to do Max - energy cells, swamp plants and various Stott Spices if we are going in for blending. Spaceweed doesn’t just grow on trees you know.”

That was news to Max, for whom much of the natural world remained a mystery. In fact he found it difficult to remember when he was last planet-side.

“From little swamp plant striplings does righteous dope grow Max. Energy cells are not a problem, there are plenty of local sources and we should be able to get by on spot buys at bottom prices but it’s a long way to Boron space for the spices and all the swamp-plant suppliers are in the Teladi core systems, feeding the Bliss Places that supply Stoertebeker. And we’re running low on credits, not to mention ships.”

Max had the intuition that Xela was throwing problems at him to keep him from brooding. A military maxim, keep ‘em busy. It worked.

“We’ll take Kerman along to fly the Star and look mean and moody while I do the talking. We’ve got six Orinoco’s right? Give me the loadouts.”

He scanned the list.

“Strip out the weapons and shields, we’ll use them in new Piranha’s to keep the costs down. We’ll sell the rest back to Jackson and I suppose we should say thanks, see if you raise him on a secured channel.”

“Wishes and commands Master,” Xela retorted as she tapped into Force-Com 1.

It took a few minutes to raise Confed Station.

“Max! Good to see you partner,” a dissolute looking Jackson dragged his fingers through tousled hair. “Get lost baby,” he ordered someone off screen. A shadow flicked across the wall behind his face.

“Jack,” Max replied curtly. “Why the change of heart?”

Jackson’s smile became more wry.

“Ah – I’m sorry about that Max. Sometimes people just don’t see things my way and Stoertebeker has been known to hold a grudge, so..”

He shrugged helplessly.

“So basically they forced your hand, is that it Jack?”

Jackson shook his head and chuckled.

“Max, Max, all you get sitting on the fence is splinters.”

“So why us?”

“You see Max, I had to ask myself. Who should I side with?” He cocked his head to the left. “Murderous psychopath?” He cocked his head unconsciously to the right. “Lucky rookie? Rich, powerful and well-connected pirate who could crush me or plucky but impoverished indie who I can crush?”

“And the question just answered itself?”

“I got where I am in quick time Max,” Jack replied. “Because whenever the chance has come I’ve seized it. So long as I rely on Stoertebeker for goods I’m held back. I don’t like that Max, I don’t like that at all and if someone handed Law his face the universe would be a better place. You seem a real lucky guy, so why not?”

“Over-confidence will be the death of you Jack. We’re deploying another nav-sat in your backyard, no more ‘renegade’ attacks, understand?”

Jackson looked hurt. “Max, your distrust wounds me. We’re just one big happy crew now we’ve shaken off the fleas. Speaking of which, you’re going to try sell me six spades. How about a half mill apiece basic and market price for the equipment?”

It was Max’s turn to look pained.

“Jack, lets not be the sort of business partners who dance around deals. We both know that if I sell these to the Teladi I’ll get that price for the basic ship and we both know they’ll sell them onto you. How many hundred thousand stick to the claws of middlemen up an down the line? Two, three, four?”

Jackson conceded the point with a quizzical smile.

“Okay Max, no screwing around. Split the difference at six fifty and throw in friendly IFF codes for my boys and we have a deal.”

“Hold on. Done and done Jack,” Max replied after swiftly consulting Xela. “I’ll be disappointed if you abuse it. The key is changed at random and we’ll blast anything with an out-dated code.”

“As if I would Max, and thanks for the tip.”

“Tip?” Max queried.

“How to get rid of inconveniences and get them to pay for the privilege!”

Max could not read the grin.

“Your name’s on the door for the opening Jack. Force out,” he cut the transmission and continued with his patrol. There was nothing but normal traffic and the Star, hauling a massive hold of energy cells back to Max’s Place.

Law watched the newscast in the station control centre, surrounded by his underlings, marinading in humiliation. Jackson’s betrayal bit deep, not because of any abuse of

trust, the concept was not in his arsenal. The consequences of a failure to comply had been made explicit, yet the weak and upstart frontier clan had dared oppose him and those he represented. It was an unexpected and disquieting development.

It would be hours before his retreating fighters would return but his Split allies would be aware of their losses long before that. They would be displeased and slightly nervous, considering their relative proximity to Force.

Despite the assistance rendered by his former employee he had been unable to trace the human who had purchased the stolen data. This made him a bigger threat than Force. But he had a face, even if the name and ship registration led to a very professional dead end that spoke of organisation. One of the Argon intelligence organisations again, in all probability.

His own experts were practically certain the blaster shots would have destroyed the delicate patterns of data on a standard chip and the probe would return in a few weeks. The means to permit real time communications with all his distant probes would have been conspicuously indiscreet and now he would have to wait until the probe emerged from interplanetary mode.

All other searches had proven negative and there was no particular reason to believe this might be any different yet there was a feeling he could not shake. There had been too many confluences of late; Force, Jackson, the stolen signal, the suspicious purchaser. It was never wise to ignore such intuitions.

Law stood silent and inscrutable as his fighters straggled in.

Chapter 7: Old Friends.

"Hi, my name's Max.."

"Cut, cut, cut!" Anje shouted, storming across the empty casino. The large circular room, dominated by a panoramic view of space, was swarming with workers, both sentient and mechanical. The subdued blue décor and classic polished metal finishing were already complete, but the gaming installations and associated sensors and electronics were still waiting to be assembled.

The public gaming area had been franchised for a substantial cut of what would be a substantial profit and the company supplied its own equipment. Interestingly, no syndicate with any connection to organised crime, had even attempted to bid.

"And cut! Max, the wheel is a holo-prop, try not to lean on it. And is the word "Hi", scrolling across those glasses? No! From the top please Max."

Max gritted his teeth and started again.

"My name is Max Force and this here gesture proudly is Max's Place. What, what?"

Everybody had stopped, except Anje, whose arms were doing a passable imitation of a possessed marionette.

"Go! Just go Max! Perhaps Corrin can read lines. We'll try and paste something together from these takes for spots. Go!" She pointed towards the exit with finality.

For a small woman she could make a lot of noise.

"Tell her she's beautiful when she's angry, Max," Xela suggested mischievously. He touched his cheek absently and ignored her.

Corrin was just informing Anje of his complete unavailability for at least an hour as Max arrived in the small conference room attached to Corrin's office in Raiders Territory. It was a compact, display-lined room festooned with holo projectors, focused on the oval table in the centre of the room.

Two of the six seats were occupied. Payter nodded as Max took one and placed Xela's data-padd on the table. Corrin terminated his call abruptly. "You've been upsetting her again Max, it's lucky you have such a suave back-up. Meeting called to order."

"I've been talking with Daht. Those mercs have not been very forthcoming. They claim to have been hired by an unknown client, it seems they don't do business face to face. It might take a while to break down their professional discretion."

"Okay, we can use that," Max replied. "Sarge, what's the score on replacements?"

“Pilots? A couple of prospects. We’re a long way out and there haven’t been a lot of candidates getting through. Send me out and I’ll look up some reliable people. Ships? We could use more Piranhas.”

“Thanks Sarge, good idea – get going ASAP. Take one of the new nav-sats and scope every sector for the commercial database, deploy one in every one with an Equipment Dock or Shipyard. Pick up a cargo scanner on the way and attack any pirate targets of opportunity outside of Clan Base sectors, especially if they are carrying weed. You’re covered by the company security licence so take any recruits on a sweep through the unclaimed sectors.”

Payter stood up to leave, grinning. “Interesting orders Commander. I’ll keep Stoertebeker off-balance for awhile.”

“Don’t take chances, Sarge,” Corrin cautioned.

“Acknowledged,” Payter said by way of salute as he left.

“The Raiders need reinforcements Max, but there is another option. Contract regular security squads.” Corrin held up a hand, forestalling Max’s objections. “They are under-equipped and neither as talented or committed as full Raiders, granted. But they are cheaper and come with their own equipment. They might not want to fight a war but they will defend a station and escort ships if contractually obliged. If we expand our stations it’ll be the only way to go.”

It made sense and Max acceded. “See if Daht can recommend anything. You said you had more news of Artur?”

“Yes, not that you’ll like it, but we checked Anje’s story and found a report of a fire-fight in a private bay in Three Worlds Trading Station and a clan attack on a fleeing Dolphin There was a lot of blood, he could be hurt or dead.”

It wasn’t what Max wanted to hear at all and it brought home to him how tenuous was his link to the wider picture. On the other hand, Artur had survived for years on his wits and forethought. He would have contingencies for everything.

“So, if he was dead we’d have heard?” Corrin agreed with Max’s line of reasoning. “But he might be hurt somewhere, or captured.”

“If Stoertebeker has him its probably all over. Let’s assume otherwise, until we know different,” Max said.

Xela agreed.

“There is one more thing,” she added.

“I’ve been looking through the nav-comm of the Prometheus that killed Bor…, I found something interesting.”

The data-padd linked to the holo projectors and activated the central tank, bringing up a sector map.

“Eighteen Billion,” the magnification was set to enclose the area proscribed by the two jump-gates. Tiny animated images of the stations clustered near the centre and even smaller simulacra of ships traversed it purposefully. The display flickered several times as the magnification changed. The gate sector was now a small cluttered, sphere in the centre.

“Now here,” Xela said, illuminating a spot 150 degrees north east of the ecliptic. “Four hundred klicks out and powered down is the Mercs home base. I recreated the co-ordinates from data fragments. What say we check it out and steal it, I can get the jump-drive installed into the Prometheus in an hour?”

“Good work Zee, that sounds like my sort of plan. Corrin?”

In just over an hour the three of them were in the Prometheus and mask jumping to the southern jump-gate in Eighteen Billion.

“What do you think?” Corrin switched control of the zooms to the co-pilot seat. Max focused close on the target in a series of disorienting jumps.

“From this angle it looks like a couple of Lifters, linked together by an access tube. That dome in the middle could be a power plant. What do you think Zee?”

“We need to get closer if I’m to get better readings but they have 50 MW of shields. Unless we can bring those down we aren’t getting aboard. If we could establish a link I might be able to hack it.”

Max nodded to Corrin and he accelerated towards the target.

“Orbit at 5 klicks, please Mirv,” Xela asked. She investigated pre-programmed comm. frequencies and cross referenced with linked sub-routines. Only the Mamba was configured for hijacking and she would be loathe to bring it in. They would lose a lot of the interesting gear that was bound to be aboard in the assault. She opened a likely channel and fed back her own signal along the carrier wave, trying keys reconstructed by her own enhanced algorithms until one worked. Then she sent a cascading virus racing ahead of the self-destruct commands flooding through the computer system.

“We’re in Max. Ooh, looky here!”

She flashed up the Lifter specs. The almost fully maxxed double cargo bay was crammed with canisters. A dozen 5MW shields, eight pairs of every weapon mark up to Alpha HEPT’s, spaceweed, space fuel and plenty of missiles. Wasps and silkworms. The centre sphere was a self-powered sensor pack built around a quad APAC LT.

She delved further, discovering an enfolded part of the sub-space hold innovatively hidden from normal scans. Knowing what to look for she found the same thing in the Prometheus. That fold was empty.

This contained five hornets.

Max and Corrin absorbed the news in a silence Zee broke.

“Well, do we keep them?”

“Can you pull the same trick for the Mamba, Zee, so no-one else can find them?”

She could, now she had an example to copy.

“I hope you know what you’re doing Max,” Corrin replied, after the missiles were beamed into the sub-space hold, their energy signatures subtly altered.

Max teleported to the hybrid ship, taking Xela with him. From the inside she quickly established control, leaving the heavily protected data core alone. It was a long flight back to Scale Plate Green, taking a freighter through the Xenon sector would have been suicide, and it gave Max time to think and then time to plan.

At Chins Clouds the Argon catamaran headed out into deep space on auto-pilot, its defence systems fully active.

Some time later the black Prometheus met up with its twin in Chins Clouds and fought an inconclusive engagement with a small Force convoy as it passed through the sector. They then retreated back to their base in the fastness of the sector.

It took Xela and the maintenance drones half an hour to install the teleported jump-drive into the Mamba and she considered adaptations to the universal couplings to make the process automatic. The upgrade of the Prometheus weapons and sensors, to enable her to pull off captures went equally well. They caught the convoy before it reached Teladi Gain, smoothly settling on the port wing of the Star. Two Piranha fighters circled purposefully.

The convoy went straight through the centre of Teladi Gain, Xela keeping a close watch on the Stoertebeker Clan Base on the fringes of the sector. It sat inscrutable behind its laser towers, a four ship CAP circled, but they paid the Force ships no attention. They probably could not have reached the Star before it could dock in a station.

“One day Law is going to whack us on the way through,” Xela stated. Max shook his head. “No, he’s the methodical type who grinds out victories through terror and brute force. He’s no flair and his sort just don’t have people who will take the initiative. We, on the other hand, have holds full of it.”

“I hate it when you don’t let me in on what’s going on Max. Why the business in Chins Clouds? I bet it’ll be as much a surprise to Corrin and the girls holding the new fort.”

“Still working on the details Zee and we’ll have Gretal and Hantzel pulled out before anything goes down. I’ll be wanting Corrin in there, but at the moment I need him finishing off Max’s Place. I’d tell you but then it would ruin the surprise wouldn’t it?”

“That’s very childish Max,” Xela observed.

“I’ve got to get my fun somehow Zee, signal Kerman to proceed to the Kingdom End Shipyard. Tell him to install the shields and weapons on the new fighters and await further instructions. Speaking of fun, I think it’s time we paid our old friend Rarr a visit.”

The Mamba headed south at Ceo’s Buckzoid, fortuitously running into a Clan convoy as the Angel emerged into Profit Share.

The fight was short and intense. He destroyed the Vulture with a full burst followed by a brace of silkworms. The three Bayamons took a little longer. The two spadeheads put up a tougher fight, working well as a pair. Once he had taken down one he easily slashed down the remaining Orinoco fighter’s shields.

After a few minutes the pilot involuntarily ejected. Xela set the auto-pilot for Kingdom End and installed a new IFF. Max scooped up the drifting canisters of missiles and spaceweed and set course for the sector Bliss Place.

It had been weeks since Max had last visited Theophant's Joy, the self-styled party place of the universe and even longer since he had talked with Chandus Rarr, the human owner of the Split-Split Club. Rarr was, as he euphemistically referred to himself, an agent, arranging the shipment and sale of the spaceweed produced by the station. Max had crossed his orbit when he won the Destiny Star off of an old spacer named Panner in a rigged poker game. Panner had been helping Rarr by-pass the Clan distribution monopoly, running spaceweed and a processed active concentrate direct to Rarr’s own budding distribution network. It was a risky game.

Max had made a lot of credits for himself and Rarr.

As a security precaution he took a circuitous route to the Split-Split Club, letting Xela guide him from the blueprints she had hacked on their first visit. If he was Stoertebeker he would have assassins permanently stationed here, just in case he turned up. He kept his shades on and Xela constantly scanned the surroundings, identifying energy sources and watching for the sudden spike that would precede an energy discharge.

The club was hot, crowded and deafening; Argon, Teladi and Split in almost equal numbers, dancing and shouting beneath a lowering ceiling of spaceweed smoke, foetid with the tang of human sweat and other, less familiar excretions. On the main stage, two improbably proportioned Argon women engaged in acts their mother’s

would not approve of. Max, reminded of his promise to himself, watched for a few seconds, claiming professional interest when Xela began complaining.

Max peered through the throng and the fug, spotting Rarr in a small booth, near the rear of the room, close to the bar. His eyes and the eyes of both his human bodyguards were fixed glassily on stage.

As he stepped up to the booth the noise level dropped drastically and Xela whispered that an energy dampening field was operating, rendering his weapons useless. The two bodyguards, each squat, wide men, whose necks exceeded the girth of their heads, moved to block his approach. Rarr smiled, wiping his corpulent, perspiring face with a white, stained linen cloth that matched his suit and waved his guards away. They retreated to the bar, watching Max with sullen anticipation.

"Mr Force, this is most unexpected, please," he gestured towards the chair opposite him. "Beer, cold, unopened bottle?" Max nodded, taking the seat and Rarr spoke the order to the air.

"We serve much more interesting concoctions should you lose your fear of poisoning, I did not expect to see you again."

"Couldn't keep away from such a classy establishment Rarr. Somebody break your Teladi goons?"

"Only in spirit Max, if you could see your way clear not to bully these ones I'd be most obliged."

"Nobody here but friends and colleagues Rarr, am I right?" Max snapped with a grin.

Rarr grimaced and adjusted his sweating bulk.

"You are a dangerous man to be friends with Max, you've seriously upset several influential beings. Law, I am led to believe, is feeling quite hostile."

"I make a dangerous enemy also Rarr."

The portly club owner conceded the point with a shrug.

"You appreciate my delicate position," he paused while a semi-naked, costumed waitress placed a sealed dark bottle in front of Max, who thumbed the cap open and took a long, appreciative swig. "I suspect you have no intention of leaving me undisturbed so please, what mutually beneficial scheme do you have on your mind?"

"How's business Rarr?" The question had a rhetorical edge Rarr did not miss.

"Poor, Max – as you well know. Your activities have led to a substantial fall in price and demand for everything from swamp plants to the cultivated and processed product. I assume it was you who just hit my latest shipment?"

“When I see pirates I whack ‘em Rarr, I’m a law-abiding sort of guy. I bet you got credits up front so stop complaining.”

“True,” Rarr replied. “Although I suspect the next deal will be on a different basis.”

“In which case you should consider taking on a more responsible partner, one who doesn’t stumble into every swinging door he passes.”

Rarr wiped his face again and took a sip from a multi-hued concoction in a perma-frost glass.

“I’m going to go out on a limb Max, and hazard a guess that this paragon of responsibility is standing before me?”

Max killed his beer, Rarr signalled for another.

“You’re a smart man Rarr, terrible personal hygiene, but smart. If the price is right, I’m prepared to take any amount of weed you can sell, credits on loading. Anything that happens to it after that won’t affect you.”

The corpulent trader regarded Max thoughtfully.

“Hypothetically speaking, what unit price might we be considering?”

“Two point five thousand,” Max replied. “On a hypothetical, take it or leave it basis.”

Rarr sighed, somewhat theatrically. “That is a somewhat drastic cut in margins Max.”

“Not as drastic a cut as losing a shipment before it’s paid for. You and I both know Clan buyers get favourable rates, not the two point nine you sell surpluses on the spot market to independents. I’m planning to spend a lot of time around here, smiting evil-doers and the like. My corp is fully legit, sector security can’t get in the way. Hell, they’ll pay me bounty.”

“There are others who would not take kindly to such actions, Max. Or I could have you killed before you get close to your fine ship.”

Max laughed in genuine amusement, tears in his eyes. Rarr watched, nonplussed, waiting for an explanation.

“I’m sorry Rarr!” He chuckled again. “A lot of people have been trying to kill me recently, a less secure person might start thinking it was personal. I’m going to let you in on a little secret,” Max leaned forward conspiratorially; Rarr stretched to catch the whisper.

“I’m still here!”

Rarr smiled enigmatically.

“Yes Max, regrettably you are, a fact that has lost me a considerable spread-bet wager. And you have acquired important friends and considerable resources. With fortune, your own Bliss Place will soon be functional, what need you of my product?”

“You know the answer as well as I do, Rarr,” Max snapped. “The more I control, the bigger my profits. Plus as they say, denying aid and comfort to the enemy. Good business.”

Max could see the calculations running in Rarr’s beady, narrowing eyes.

“Max, you do understand that the peculiarities of the Teladi system of governance somewhat constrains my freedom of action as an entrepreneur?”

“Explain it me again Rarr, I’m slow but I get there,” Max answered.

Rarr sighed.

“Each Teladi sector is governed by a Director of the Teladi Trading Company, which as you know is the over-arching socio-political structure in Teladi society. Do you know how you become a Director?”

“By having scales and owning lots of TTC shares?” Max guessed. Xela tutted loudly in his ears. Rarr sighed again, this time with feeling.

“And you are basing your company in Teladi space? No, a Director derives her legitimacy from the proxy shares she controls. Of course a Teladi individual or organisation would be foolish to cede their voting rights to anyone who could not demonstrate their suitability by way of their own vast holdings so yes, Directors tend to be rich.”

“So,” Max asked impatiently, “Why split hairs?”

“Because Max, because the Director and his supporters are enmeshed in a web of rights and responsibilities. The owner of this station can’t just decide to offer you an exclusive deal, no matter what the exigencies of the particular situation. Conversely the sector Director cannot long hold her to a deal that threatens the value of her stock. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Max thought. “That to get the sort of deal I want I’m going to have to get the sector Director onboard?”

Rarr gave him the sort of look teachers reserve for pupils they suspect of intentional stupidity.

“No Max, you are failing to appreciate the subtleties. You and I have done business before so you know there is room for discreet manoeuvres. The key to getting what I think you want is to oblige the Director to change her allegiance by making it less profitable for her proxies to support her and more profitable to work with you.”

“Which,” Max retorted, “Is what I’m doing, surely?”

“Only in a random, unfocused way Max. You blunder in with your impressive ship and more impressive pilot skills. You shoot-up convoys, kill a few pilots, salvage the remnants and fly off.”

“The Stoertebeker Clan has been around a long time in one form or another, it can buy more ships, hire more pilots and sooner or later it will defeat you. What incentive is there for business owning share-holders to gamble on your acumen? Your only base is an isolated frontier sector. No, if you want to even survive in the long run you have to provide better business opportunities and you need a presence in the core systems. I assume you intend to purchase a Dream Farm? It will be extremely difficult for your Bliss Place to function without one.”

Max nodded guardedly. “It’s something I’ve been thinking about.”

“Think seriously where you locate it,” Rarr advised. “Then perhaps the climate will change sufficiently for me to entertain your proposal.”

It was his turn to lean across conspiratorially.

“Max, many people fear Law,” Rarr whispered. “He is unstable and instability is not good for business, but neither is being an object of his hatred. Your valiant fighters are a distant comfort to those who would countenance change.”

He finished his drink, wiped his face again and ordered another. Max tried hard to ignore the ample charms of the waitress.

“I have a surplus of swamp plants in the station inventory Max, which I can release to you if you can have a freighter here soon, within the next 30 hours or so. One thirty per unit, just a modicum of profit for my troubles.”

“It’s a trap, Max,” Xela hissed. Max ignored her, indicating to Rarr that they had a deal. Twenty minutes later the Mamba was back in space.

It was a short hop to the Seizewell sector and the Teladi Shipyard was only too happy to take his credits. Unlike the significantly customised Max’s Place, Dream Farms were standard packages. It took only a small bribe to ensure the construction module would be ready in time.

There was one more thing Max had to do before going to Kingdom End.

“Borass,” the two glasses rang delicate and pure as they touched, crystal from the ocean beds of the Boron homeworld. “Borass,” Sinas replied. “A great shame, his family are most distressed.”

“I’m afraid this is all we could find,” Max handed him the small nugget of melted alloys.

“His wings, or the Boron Naval equivalent.”

“Wings,” Sinas replied, fingered it thoughtfully.

“He died well,” Max spoke carefully around the sudden lump in his throat.

“He saved everything taking out the Hornet.”

“Debt paid in full,” Sinas agreed. “Max, people under-estimate the Boron as a species but they are clever, determined and loyal once you get past the strangeness.”

Max lacked the long familiarity with the amphibious beings of the Menelaus Frontier factotum, but Sinas knew them well, having earned most of his grey hairs as an intermediary for them. If Borass was a typical specimen Max was happy to agree.

They toasted the fallen pilot once more. The spirit was smooth and mellow, with a touch of smoke and probably quite old. Max appreciated the expensive gesture from the human who handled trade and inter-species affairs for the Boron in this sector. His star was in the ascendant, partly through Borass’s contribution to the breaking of the Teladi trade blockade and he deserved no less.

“Can we…?” Max gestured around the small meeting room, reminiscent of that attached to Corrin’s office suite but with copious use of dark-hued hardwoods and a lot less holo-technology.

“My offices are secure,” Sinas replied. “We can talk proper business.”

Xela silently confirmed the claim.

“Have you heard from Artur?” Max asked immediately.

Sinas stroked his chin, absently scratching a sliver of growth missed in haste.

“Not for some considerable time Max. Has something untoward occurred?”

“I think he’s in trouble,” Max explained. “He went to Three Worlds Trade Station to meet with a Teladi claiming to have inside information on Stoertebeker. There was some shooting and we haven’t heard anything since.”

The factotum looked pensive.

“I’ll see what I can uncover Max, but I suspect the man cannot be found, unless he wants to be. Our association has been quite long and sometimes years pass between contacts.”

Sinas took another sip of whisky, savouring the impact on his palate, it had been a gift from his sometime ally and associate and he secretly hoped they were not involuntarily toasting another premature death.

“Max, if we can do anything to help, you know the Boron will look on any request quite favourably. There is one thing though, your new line of business. Do not get caught moving material through Boron space,” Sinas warned.

“We’re clean, I sold off my latest salvage to the Teladi Trading Station across the border, you won’t catch us hauling illegals through Boron space,” Max promised with a care that Sinas noted with a slight smile.

“That’s all I ask, Max. I understand the game you are playing.”

“There’s a couple of things you can do to help”

Sinas signalled Max to continue.

“I need a reliable mercenary squadron for point defence and some transport pilots with guts. General Daht may come up with some but, well..”

“You don’t want to be too beholden. Understandable and wise.”

Sinas thought for a moment, weighing possibilities.

“Leave this with me Max, as a whole the Boron are not keen on extra-species entanglements but I have an idea. Anything else?”

“A TL for hire – all the way to Scale Plate Green and back, via Seizewell.”

By way of explanation he added.

“That shipyard is the only one licensed for the Dream Farm construction module.”

“That is a long and expensive trip Max” Sinas observed. “But for that size of fee I’m certain we can accommodate you. Leave that with me also, I may have to bump a cargo but I’ll have one standing by in 12 hours.”

“A few more things,” Max added. “Bo Gas, I’m purchasing a couple of Dolphins and padding out the holds, so fifteen hundred units to begin with. More if you can get a couple of freelance traders signed up.”

“No problem at all Max. If you need a regular supply I’ll ensure you get first refusal on surplus production and store it here until you collect, the price will keep down overheads?”

Sinas could tell Max was keeping the big favour to last.

“Eels, equipped to military grade.”

The factotum pursed his lips and shook his head.

“The Boron are loathe to sell their top fighter Max, even to someone as favoured as yourself. The price would be very high, more I think, than you have.”

“A lot more,” Max agreed. “But how about a swap, one for one with a Xenon L? There’s a new upgrade with more advanced combat AI and the Teladi already possess one.”

Sinas looked at him, a single grey eyebrow quizzically raised.

“That Max, is a tempting proposal. You can deliver?” He sounded more than doubtful.

Max shrugged, while attempting to ignore Xela’s growing list of objections. “To be honest Sinas, I’m not sure, but I’m going to find out. My team need quality to match the quantity of our enemies and the Eel is a great ship.”

Sinas agreed to pursue the matter, promising nothing. It wasn’t though, the biggest favour. Max wanted his own TL, something with style, an Orca.

“They are commercial ships Max, the Boron will sell to anyone with the requisite number of millions to spare,” Sinas observed.

“Twenty five million plus. I’m not going to have that spare any-time soon, I was hoping you’d have a suggestion.”

Sinas did. An early model Orca was under-going a total refit in Atreus Clouds after a near fatal encounter with an asteroid but the cost would still run to the at least fifteen million, before any upgrades.

But he had a suggestion.

Max was silent for a long time, unreadable behind the opaque shades.

“That could be difficult,” Max replied finally. “I’m not sure I can do that.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Sinas asked, aware of what he was requesting.

“Both,” Max said leadenly. “Both.”

Max popped another stim before setting course for the Kingdom End Shipyard and discussed possibilities with a more than sceptical Xela.

Four new Piranha fighters, fully equipped with salvaged shields and weaponry were waiting when he docked at the main Boron shipyard. Two adjacent manufacturing bays were busy completing the new Dolphin freighters. There were no fliers for them

but auto-pilot would suffice for what Max had mind. The ten MW shielding would have to serve.

“Stand everyone down for 8 hours,” he instructed Kerman. “Get some rest, it’s going to be a long, slow flight home.”

The Paranid pilot of the Star acknowledged the orders with a typically curt,

“Yes, Commander.”

“That was good advice,” Xela observed once Max was back in the Mamba cockpit.

“What was that Zee?”

“Getting some rest. You’re running on stims and that’s not good.”

“I’ll use the SETA more,” Max promised. “But there’s a lot of ground to cover before we head on back, beginning with a bit more mayhem. I promised Rarr some serious trade disruptions and a businessman’s word is his bond!”

“I’m pretty sure promises and threats are two entirely different things Max,” Xela observed as he methodically scanned each sector that had an active Force-Com nav-sat.

He found what he was looking for skirting the fringes of both the Atreus Clouds and Family Whi sectors.

Atreus Clouds first.

He launched, confirmed he had plenty enough energy cells and headed at full speed towards the Three Worlds jump-gate, preferring if possible to make jumps to and from border sectors to minimise the chance of traffic data comparisons picking up his use of the jump-drive.

It soon became clear the convoy was not heading for the Clan station in Atreus Clouds.

Good.

He watched as, one by one, the red dots vanished through the southern jump-gate to unclaimed space and two minutes later he activated his own jump-drive, masking the transition within the activating penumbra of the Kingdom End gate as it triggered.

As soon as he entered Atreus Clouds he pivoted the Mamba through 180 degrees and followed his prey through the southern gate.

The ensuing fight was long and intensely visceral, leaving him shaking. A short range scan confirmed the Clan Vultures were crammed with spaceweed but his attacks were repeatedly beaten back by a protective swarm of Bayamons and Spadeheads, acting in disciplined unison. Five of them fell before he could empty a full weapons charge

into the shields of a freighter and by the time he barrel-rolled away, firing two pairs of silkworms, his own shields were down to 30% and Xela was screaming at him to disengage.

Two of the missiles sailed past the Vulture, their chemical rockets unable to match even the lumbering turn of the target. The freighter turned into the second pair and it was smashed into fragments, scattering the cargo through space. The fighting was too hot to risk salvage and the opposition too good to defeat on his own and for the next few minutes Max went almost fully defensive, breaking off only to snap-shot the space-weed canisters into incandescence.

His task accomplished he headed for the eastern gate, jumped to Family Pride, took a shadow-tech snap-shot of a sector patrol Mamba and waited for the Clan ships he previously noted crawling around sector Family Whi. Following them through to Chin's Clouds he destroyed one of the freighters before the complacent escorts realised they were under threat.

Only a few canisters survived and these he treated as targets of opportunity in the dog-fight that followed. After destroying several escorts he withdrew, before the wings dispatched by the BTG Clan Base, or the inbound merc Prometheus fighters could engage.

The latter pursued him relentlessly all the way to Teladi Gain where there was another desperate, twisting fight, stretching all the way across the sector to Ceo's Buckzoid, dragging in a Stoertebeker Clan patrol along the way. Finally Max used his superior speed to disengage and slipped across the border to Menelaus Frontier.

He grabbed a few hours rest, docked at the Trading Station. Xela sifted through the latest data transmitted by the Prometheus fighters, but only after obstinately insisting Max fully briefed her on his plan.

"So I know what I'm looking for Max."

With her enhanced computing abilities the data Max wanted was relatively simple to identify and reconstruct. The plan, she thought, was like all his plans, smart but sketchy in detail, and with all together too much reliance on inspired improvisation for her comfort.

Max waited until Sinas signalled everything was in place before contacting Kerman in Kingdom End. The two new freighters arrived, escorted by the four equally new Piranhas. Max and Xela watched them load the Bo-Gas from the main bay of the Trading Station on the Sector Display, until their signals merged with that of the huge Orca hovering near the gate to Teladi space.

A Boron TL working in Teladi sectors would create a small sensation but with nothing to connect it to Max Force it would be reasonably safe, at least until it loaded the Dream Farm construction module at Seizewell.

By that time it was joined by the Mamba, a swamp-weed laden Destiny Star and it's Piranha escort. The Stoertebeker Clan wisely let the well-armed convoy pass through Teladi Gain unmolested. Only the black fighters in Chins Clouds attempted to intervene but they were quickly forced back by the TL's own defence wings.

The Dream Farm was launched within three kilometres of the almost completed Bliss Place, the module exploding into a frenzy of activity as soon as it was deployed. It would be functional within forty hours, according to the specs. Max figured on fifty, but his pessimism was for once, unfounded.

He'd never flown a Bat before but it handled a lot like a Discoverer, fast and twitchy on the stick. The two fighters, almost invisible in their new livery, entered Chins Clouds and sped towards their distant base. Minutes later the two Prometheus fighters headed back towards the distant cluster of stations, circling under the watchful LT's of the Blue Tooth Gang base until docking permission was confirmed.

"Max, this is clinically insane," Xela stated dogmatically for probably the twentieth time. "It's a little late to start objecting now Zee," Max retorted with a straight face as they passed beneath the watchful gaze of the internal defence turrets. "They accepted the security codes, now all you need to do is make with the sleight-of-face. These guys do most of their deals this way, providing they accept the Stoertebeker validation codes you ripped from the Stoertebeker signals in their base comms everything will be fine."

"And if they don't?" Xela asked acidly.

"Then you get to say a quick I-Told-You-So," Max replied confidently. "No-one knows much about these mercs Zee, so even if they know we captured a couple there could easily be more. Besides Daht informed the Teladi Board that most of the ships that came through Xenon space were on auto-pilot and once they know, half the Clans in the universe will know. Heads up," he said, indicating the comm link. "We're on. Remember, audio only and engage the filters."

"Thanks for the reminder Max, being a female AI those key points of the plan had been completely usurped by recipes and celebrity gossip," Xela retorted acerbically.

As the two fighters alighted on the crowded main docking platform she announced.

"Transmitting ID codes. If you've got 'em, cross 'em."

The Split sounded angry. Every Split he'd ever encountered sounded angry, but then they were usually being shot at so it was understandable.

"Law minions, what you want? Have not enough of my people died?"

"We have new orders Split, you will accept transmission on personal secure channel. We have a spy and we have flight plans."

As he spoke his words played back in his ear in a voice stolen from the interrogation tapes provided by Daht.

Max was banking on Law's well-earned reputation for bearing a grudge, the unidentified Split must have had the same thought and acceded with bad grace.

Xela transmitted the message. Long seconds passed and Max watched the defence turrets in trepidation. It was a gamble but he believed the combination of the valid Stoertebeker Comm ID and a healthy fear of crossing Law would pay off. Max checked the Sector Scan as he waited for a reply. The convoy would be entering the sector within minutes if it were proceeding to schedule.

Seconds stretched into a minute before the Split replied.

"Plan good, odds good, little risk. Split agree. Fighters standing by."

Max raised one gloved thumb to Corrin, who acknowledged with a single, silently mouthed word.

"Suckers."

When the Force convoy entered the sector a dozen Bayamons launched, followed by a brace of Falcons and two black Prometheus fighters. A dozen Orinoco's trailed in a second wave. Even without the aid of their dauntingly equipped allies they were confident of sweeping aside the three Bayamons escorting the Lifter.

Corrin checked his weapons load-out for a second time, confirming Alpha HEPT's and Silkworms, while watching the Clan fighters closely. The twelve Bayamons had formed up into two arrow-heads, the Falcons sliding in behind them to form a short shaft. He acknowledged Max's hand signals with a wave of his own and drifted across to one formation, settling onto the tail of the Falcon.

Once the Clan had swallowed the communications codes the Xela AI had reconstructed from the deleted and encrypted files found in the Base Lifters and the captured fighters he knew the plan would work. It was still needlessly reckless, in his opinion, despite the need to push forward rapidly.

The Force convoy was traversing the system with what any competent tactician would realise was suspicious sloth, as if the escorted Lifter had only standard drive. The attackers would easily overhaul them before they reached the Family Pride jump-gate.

Any moment now.

Almost on cue the convoy reversed course in a wide, sweeping turn, fleeing back to the Tharka's Sun gate. He decelerated slightly in anticipation of the clan fighters own ragged course change.

At 5 klicks the Xela AI briefly signalled the next stage, using the Lifter base nav-sat. In response the eastern jump-gate activated and five more Bayamons popped into existence. Corrin was already firing into the rear of his target, ripping the Falcon's

shields down. He fired two silkworms and snap-rolled away from the explosion to engage one of the scattering Bayamons.

The first wave of attackers, now turned victim were trapped between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Only one ship survived, the second Falcon, but it was already broadcasting a Force IFF and heading for the Tharka's Sun gate, with a single Bayamon escort.

Following Max's clipped instructions he gathered a pair of Bayamons as wings and headed for the on-coming Orinoco's. Only half them made it back to the cover of the BTG Laser Towers.

Max hailed the Clan Base, again transmitting authenticating codes.

"This is the fate of those whose cowardice betrays Law. Tremble before his coming."

It was, in Max's opinion, a slightly melodramatic rendition of his words, but the BTG made no attempt to interfere as he and Corrin circled, waiting for the Bats to bring the twinned Argon Lifters in from the fringes of the sector. It would make a good Command and Control Centre.

"Another fine plan coming together with perfection. Anything to say Zee?" he asked through stim driven bouts of laughter.

She had not.

Chapter 8: Max's Place

"Well Max, what do you think?"

It was clearly the sort of rhetorical question favoured by those who know they've done a great job.

"You've done a great job Anje," Max confirmed as he surveyed the growing crowd from the behind the shield of his shades and the security of his private booth. It was not something he had asked for but something every business setting up on his station seemed to provide, from the New Frontier Restaurant to, probably, Tara's Teasers, down near Raiders Territory.

"Max," Anje stated. "You're the station owner and a celebrity, albeit a fading one thanks to your own reticence. Take advantage."

He had. The meal at the New Frontier was possibly the best food he'd ever eaten, despite the fact he could not recognise one dish or put a name to any of the rich sauces whose flavoured melded with the exquisitely cooked meats. A magnum of one of the finest beauchamp vintages to come out of Three Worlds, kept their palates eager.

Artur would have approved, he was sure. Anje had not heard from him, neither had anyone else and he was loathe to raise suspicions by making any official enquiries, even through Sinas or Daht.

The Lucky Diamond was the major public entertainment venue on his new station and the raised booth, situated in the discreet shadow of the rear balcony, gave him an excellent view of the stage, over the heads of the gamblers clustered around the scattered gaming installations.

All the booths and tables were full.

Sharply-dressed and well paid hosts, mainly Argon and Teladi, swept regularly between them and the bars, loaded with food, drink and spaceweed in small, diamond-shaped boxes. The Lucky Diamond chain flaunted the absence of automation as a badge of exclusivity, adjusting their prices accordingly. This suited Max fine, he had a slice of the gross.

He sounded like a gangster to himself, counting his shakedown. The thought made him smile, perhaps he should get himself some 'boys'.

On stage a young, dusk-skinned woman, attractive in a buxom fashion, performed a selection of classics in a rich voice spanning several octaves and with a power that belied her short stature. Anje had mentioned her name when she brought her across but it meant nothing to him and it was already forgotten. Corrin though, had talked knowledgeably of her last recording and Payter seemed positively tongue-tied, turning a fetching pink as he requested an autograph for hitherto unknown offspring.

When she finished her set the noise levels in the main hall rose abruptly as wheels span, chips clattered and bets excitedly called by a crowd whose inhibitions and common-sense were increasingly in abeyance thanks to the range of exotic alcohol and the extortionately priced first fruits of the Bliss Place. Already a mantle of the sweet smoke hugged the ceiling, tendrils drifting in lazy response to the deliberately under-powered air filtration system.

Snack bowls began to empty.

The spaceweed was not yet, according to the report of the old Teladi female in charge of production, of the quality she expected of an operation she supervised. The swamp plants from Rarr were only 'acceptable' and the forced growth prior to processing in the lower levels, a touch too accelerated. Even so it was a lot more potent than the heavily cut material that passed for spaceweed planet-side in most sectors, particularly out here on the New Frontier.

And it was retailing at premium credits, going straight into the account of Force Securities, severely chastened by the recent heavy expenditure on new ships.

To keep a reasonable liquidity, Max had to sell the Falcon Xela had adeptly seized in Chins Clouds, but despite the Raiders need for M3 fighters he wasn't too unhappy to lose it. The shields and weapons were intact, thanks to a combination of surprise and the culpable failure of the BTG maintenance crew to reset the factory defaults on the security lock-outs, and these would be installed on the next M3 he purchased.

The Falcon itself was only an average performer, no better than the Eel or the Elite, and more expensive. Eels he could purchase at a substantial discount, thanks to the influence of Sinas and his own status among the Boron, enhanced, according to reports, by the demise of Borass, whose heroism had already been magnified out of all due proportion by Anje's slantings.

"You've done great too Corrin," he added. "I wouldn't have believed we could move so quickly on this."

"The advantages of franchising laddie. You can buy any service you like with the right contacts. Even public security."

Corrin indicated the large, dark suited humans and Teladi filtering through the crowd, discreetly ensuring no-one unduly hassled any of the minor celebrities Anje had attracted to the opening, to be seen by the media teams fanning out through the station.

Off-duty Raiders drifted through the throng, in civilian clothing but distinguished by their too brash body language and pack behaviour. The younger ones nudged each other as they recognised familiar faces and bodies, forming and reforming small slavering knots around the more surgically enhanced scrapings of the C List.

Max watched it all in a state of relaxed detachment, happy to forget about the war with Stoertebeker and the missing Artur for one night. He was free even of Xela, who

was interfaced with the Station IT network, checking systems for sabotage and enhancing them in her own ways. It was a freedom he intended to take advantage of.

“Max’s Place,” Corrin toasted. Anje, Payter and Max chinked his upraised glass, echoing his words. “Long may she earn!”

They watched another set before Corrin excused himself. Corrin’s Casino would open later and he needed to attend to the last details. There would be no official opening, just a discreet filtering of the more significant or rich away from their inferiors to a more luxurious setting, with no limits gambling and the chance to meet useful strangers.

Thankfully Anje was soon drawn away to ensure media teams and celebrities were used to best effect. Max ad-libbed a couple of spots when asked, hiding behind the shades and confidently fielding questions on pirate problems and the morality of profiting from spaceweed.

“Keep it taciturn and short Max,” Anje had advised. “People lap up that rogue stuff.”

Max duly questioned the collective Stoertebeker manhood and observed that spaceweed was completely legal here in Teladi space. What people did to their brains for recreational purposes was, as far as he was concerned, their own business.

“Oh I don’t think so,” he said, extricating himself from the clutches of an enthusiastic double D blonde keen to display more of her primary assets, mainly for the benefit of the hovering media teams.

A private elevator whisked him up to Corrin’s Casino, a state-of-the-art security system discreetly scanning him for weapons.

It was the first time he had been here since it was completed. The private club was a doughnut main area wrapped around Max’s own inner sanctum. The décor was a sharp blend of intelligent metals, shimmering in response to environmental variations, and dark hardwood in a modern variant of a timeless design. The subdued lighting was supplemented by natural light filtering through the clear plast-steel comprising a full third of the outer rim.

Booths lined the circumference, their occupants privacy completely guaranteed by the best security devices credits could buy, including black light projectors for the totally paranoid. Gambling was confined to a single roulette wheel and a half dozen games of skill and chance, mainly variants of Argon classics.

Drinks were of course, on the house and any dish the select clientele desired could be ordered in from the New Frontier restaurant. Young women, long-necked and elegant in the black cocktail dresses that served as uniforms, filtered through the club, keeping the bar busy.

The club was already half full. Some people he recognised, celebrities, insouciant in their own coolness as they checked each other out. Others, he didn’t but their minders and assured manner suggested they were of equal renown in their own fields.

Returning a nod from Travis Power, the diminutive but popular action hero, with what he hoped was equal cool, Max moved across to Corrin's booth. He was conversing intensely with a small grey haired old woman passionately stabbing the keys of a small data-padd. A middle-aged human male, running a nervous hand through thinning grey hair, whispered distractedly in her ear, his eyes caught by each passing hostess.

"Ah Max!" Corrin smiled broadly at his approach. "Sit, meet some Concerned Beings of the New Frontier," the capitals were clearly implied. "May I introd"

"Manager Jenner," the woman cut in curtly. "Black Hole Sun Equipment Dock."

She ignored his outstretched hand, a flash of annoyance briefly disrupting the scowl tattooed on her pinched face.

"My colleague," she indicated the man by her side. "Manager Fanson, Omicron Lyrae Satellite Facility."

She continued before Fanson could extend a hand and he smiled helplessly.

"You've caused me a lot of trouble."

Max raised a brow quizzically, behind her back Corrin shrugged.

"Xenon, with that damn fool stunt and now the Clans. Do you know when I last received a shipment?"

She paused and glared around as if daring a reply. Max followed Corrin's lead and remained silent.

"Not since you started provoking pirates. Now I can't get any equipment through from the core sectors. The last two shipments were destroyed somewhere between Menelaus Frontier and PTNI Headquarters."

She glared at Max again.

"But surely..?" Max barely began.

"The Argon Navy can jump equipment in? Do I look senile young man? Well do I?"

"No ma'am," Max replied meekly.

"The naval facilities in Omicron Lyrae have what they need but there is nothing for commercial sale, and since your little war on the Xenon, repairs have been stacking up. I haven't the material to patch together all the ships damaged in the fight and the demand for new fighters can't be met."

“As you know,” she continued in a tone that strongly implied her belief in the opposite, “The New Frontier relies on independent traders and now, none of them will risk the run from the core.”

She fixed him with a stare.

“What are you going to do about it?”

Max suspected that, ‘nothing, we’ve got our own problems,’ was not the answer.

“What do you suggest?” Max asked with careful restraint. “We are not exactly on good terms with the Clans.”

“Bring me what I want young man and be quick about it,” she turned to address Corrin, her tone waspish. “Are you sure he’s in charge? He seems a little slow.”

“He does take time to come up to speed,” Corrin replied, perfectly deadpan. The dock manager shot him an acid glance, which panned around the booth back to Max without losing any of it’s venom.

“Get them for me,” she peered at him as if short-sighted. “You are a businessman of some sort?”

“Of some sort,” Max agreed. “What are we talking about and more importantly, at what price?”

Jenner slapped the table with a bird-fragile hand.

“At last! I have a list,” she held up her padd. Max nodded to Corrin, who produced his own. The two devices quickly shook hands and transferred data. Corrin looked at the screen for a few seconds before handing the padd to Max.

Shields, missiles, weapons and majaglit.

“Expensive stuff,” he remarked. “How much are you willing to pay?”

“Are you sure you’re in business Force? Market prices obviously, you have come across the laws of supply and demand? Demand is high, supplies non-existent and Xenon fighters are constantly raiding the sector, attacking the commercial stations and damaging their precious ships. You work it out.”

“Top credit then. Pay up-front and we can bring in whatever you need. Some of this stuff costs and we’ve bought a lot of gear recently.”

A look of disgust crossed the woman’s face.

“And lose more credits than I’ve wasted trying to get supplies through? Your liquidity problems are just that. Yours. Can you do it or not?”

The profits were too tempting to pass up and Max nodded.

“Good. Then we have an agreement,” she stood and offered her hand, sealing the deal with a grip that left Max surreptitiously flexing his hand in search of fractures.

“I don’t like you, Force,” Jenner stated. “I don’t like you or your sordid business.”

She gestured around with disgust.

“Your type create chaos and then reap the profits. However, that is how the universe is at this particular time. Show me you can deliver and we may do business again. Now, if somebody could escort me back to my ship I will take my leave. Come on.”

Fannon shook his hand firmly as he left.

“The Majaglit is needed urgently Mr Force, the processed shells have room temperature super-conductive properties, without it we cannot meet any orders, including your own. If you can help keep production going I will offer generous discounts on your next buys.”

He smiled and looked around to make sure Jenner was out of earshot.

“You have an interesting facility, I wish my present company permitted me to enjoy it.”

“Another time perhaps?” Max replied. He nodded and headed after Jenner.

Corrin and Max waited until she disappeared into the main elevator, Kaitrin trailing in her wake, before speaking again.

“Fine idea of mine to invite station managers,” Corrin said with more than a dash of irony. Max agreed, with equal feeling.

“Looking on the bright side Max,” Corrin continued. “If we can get a bit of capital together this could be a steady income stream, particularly if other stations have shortages.”

“I’ll take the Angel up to Black Hole Sun and see what the Xenon are doing,” Max replied. “If I know the Navy they’ll be staying out of it.”

Corrin agreed. Xenon raids were often ignored if all they did was harass commercial interests. They were deemed able to look after themselves and so long as raids remained small the Navy often chose not to escalate a situation by drawing the heavy guns. It was sometimes better to ignore even large incursions if they were just passing through a sector and just pick off stragglers. In that way the attackers could be whittled down without the casualties of a toe-to-toe confrontation.

“We’re going to need more freighters,” Corrin observed. “And more escorts.”

“Convert the two Raiders Lifters to transporters,” Max suggested. “They’ve got full shields, spend what you can on getting the holds extended. How are the new pilots coming along?”

“The Sarge seems happy,” Corrin replied. He summoned a hostess with a casual wave. “Two beers,” he turned to Max. “We have an exclusive deal with a co-operative of micro-brewers from Three Worlds, the best beer I’ve tasted in a long while. Make it four bottles lassie, two of Brennan’s Wicked Ale and two of Farnham’s Choice.”

He waited for the young woman to leave before continuing.

“Two of them have gone straight into the Raiders, they’re old comrades apparently. The other four are the first of our new CDS, Commercial Defence Squad. They check out okay but until we get to know them better we thought it best to not dilute the Raiders. I’ve stationed them on Dream Farm 1 along with the seven Teladi mercs the General conjured up. All males, which is pretty unusual, their Hawks are old but fully upgraded. From what I can gather Daht owes them a favour and we’re it. Still cost a 150k contract though.”

He paused as the beers arrived, pouring two himself, Max took the proffered glass.

The Wicked Ale was cool and dark; dry roasted hops gave it an earthy flavour that was artfully mellowed by a lingering bouquet of chocolate and a hint of a spice Max presumed to be the mystery ingredient boasted of on the colourful label.

“Good choice,” Max said appreciatively.

“We’ve run what checks we could on them Max, but we rely on Daht for information. They’re ex-military, all discharged for unspecified reasons. We’ll use them for the sector CAP, that’ll free up Raider Piranha’s for escort duty. There’s two of them now.”

Corrin indicated a pair of Hawks, peeling away from a single Orinoco gliding towards the docking point far below the vantage point of the booth.

“Jackson?”

Corrin shrugged.

It was. He arrived ten minutes later, trailing a coterie of Argon, unconsciously clustering pack-like in the unfamiliar environment. A very young blonde woman, tall and tottering in heels as improbable as her prominent cleavage, clung to his arm as Jackson argued with a pair of men whose ill-fitting formal suits and forced-patience demeanour marked them as security.

Corrin hurried over to the elevator and after a short, intense discussion all but Jackson and his woman filed back into the lift. A smiling Jackson joined Max at the table, almost dragging the stumbling blonde.

“Looks a bit tame for my boys Max, Corrin here says these chicks don’t put out. Here honey,” he pressed a credit chip into the girl’s hand. “Get lost and get lucky,” she simpered and giggled in a way Max assumed only happened in bad movies and wobbled off towards the roulette wheel.

“And we don’t allow blades in the place,” Corrin added dryly.

“Relax Mirv,” Jackson said dismissively. “Since I purged the barrel of rotten scruffin, they’re all as good as Goners. Note my own deeply trusting nature.”

He stood up, opening his short, sharply cut jacket to show he was unarmed.

“No hold-outs either. Promise!”

“They wouldn’t work in here anyway Jack,” Max smiled. “As you know. Here, have a beer,” he pushed a bottle across the table.

Jackson thumbed the cap and took a long pull.

“Not bad Max. Farnham’s Choice, I’ll remember that.”

“There’ll be a crate waiting dockside when you leave Jack,” Max replied jocularly. “Glad you could make it.”

Corrin conveyed the instruction with a whisper into a collar mike before excusing himself.

“Duty calls gentlemen,” he said, indicating a very small young woman, surrounded by four very large men, waiting at the entrance with the impatient air of the truly self-important.

“Isn’t that..?”

“Yea,” Jack agreed. “Lousy actress, great tits. Do you reckon I have a chance?”

He smiled roguishly, as if practicing.

“Sure, Jack, sure,” Max agreed. “What about your girl?”

Jackson leaned back and smiled.

“Ah Max, you’ve got a lot to learn about notoriety and what women will do around it!”

“If you say so Jack,” Max conceded. “Another drink?”

Jackson killed his bottle, slamming it onto the table.

“Are the Split surly?” He asked rhetorically. “And some of that moss you want to sell me.”

The beers arrived almost instantly, the spaceweed a minute later. Jackson took the dried moss, crumbled some into his palm and sniffed it cautiously before stuffing it into the over-sized bowl of a small metal pipe. It ignited with his first sharp breath and Jackson took in the entire bowl, effortlessly holding it in his lungs as he refilled the pipe. He breathed out twin streams of smoke, carefully directing it way from Max, looking thoughtful as he assessed the impact.

"Hey Max, that's not bad, your people must know what they're doing. Are you hungry? I'm hungry, how about some cheesecake? Chickadee!" The hostess waiting discreetly near the booth came over in response to the click-finger summons, her unlined face carefully neutral.

"Cheesecake, chocolate, and a Big C, easy on the mustard. Max?"

"Already eaten Jack, I didn't know you were a gourmet?"

Jackson did a quick double-take before breaking out into a big, lazy grin.

"You're a funny guy Max, I like that. Here," he pushed the pipe across. "I bet you're wound up real tight under the cool, hero dude stuff. Hell, if I'd offended half the people you have I'd live off it!"

"I've felt better Jack, I lost people, as did you. I doubt whether Law is that pleased with you either."

"People die Max," Jackson waved a hand dismissively. "That's something you better get used to," he added seriously. "If you can't hack that you shouldn't have started anything. And Law? Well, you're between me and him. Have a smoke Max, it'll help."

"Yes, I can see how being addicted to a motivation sapping plant extract could help in all manner of ways," Max replied deadpan.

"It's all in the will Max," Jackson replied, opening another beer. "Ain't no different from this. If you use it, it can't use you," he finished the beer and popped another.

Max took the pipe and sucked it to life, forcing himself not to cough. The casino immediately became a brighter, more colourful place, alive with possibilities. A Big C began to seem a good idea as tensions he did not know his body had, uncramped in the sudden flood of endorphins surging through his system.

Jackson watched his reaction and smiled.

"First time you've had it straight from the mother-lode Max? Different from the cut crap," Jack economically powdered more of the moss and refilled the pipe.

Max coughed in agreement, sending the slightly foetid smoke billowing across the booth. It felt good, if he looked deeply enough beneath the surface, he might even be feeling happy. He pushed the tempting pipe away reluctantly, it might not do the

physical damage of alcohol but he couldn't afford to give himself over to the siren-lure of chemical bliss. Jack took it back with an appraising half smile, finishing it as the hostess arrived with the food.

Max waited until Jackson finished wolfing it down before activating the privacy shield. Immediately the background noise ceased, the sudden silence acting as a signal for more serious business. Trade issues were easily dealt with, Jack could sell any amount of spaceweed and alcohol, particularly the more exotic variety sheltering under the Space-Fuel rubric. Max agreed to bring in what he could.

The real business was Law and the Stoertebeker Clan.

"You know it's him or you?" Jackson observed. "You're a resourceful guy, get some Hornets and whack the crazy S.O.B."

Max chuckled ironically.

"You're not the first to suggest that. How many civilians are on that station?"

Jackson shrugged. "Hundreds, who cares? It's war and people get hurt. If you don't get him, sooner or later he's going to come back mob-handed."

"When he does Jack, can I count on you?"

"That depends on the size of the mob but yea, I could have thirty ships heading your way in minutes but you'd be better off stopping him getting anywhere near. If anyone has illegal weapons it'll be that guy. Who knows what his Teladi friends will slip him? Nice stunt with the BTG by the way, my sources tell me they're real split, so to speak. Half want to stay out of it now and pick up the pieces, the other half want your blood."

They talked at length, discussing tactics and options. Only one plan captured Jackson's real enthusiasm.

"Another Dream Farm in Ceo's Buckzoid? Get's you the second source you need to keep this place in full production and provides an alternative source for the one in Profit Share. Bold, I like that. How were you planning to protect it?"

Max finished another beer and told him about the Boron force Sinas had patched together from private squads protecting stations in the core sectors, omitting mention of the quarter million it would take to buy out existing contracts. Hopefully he would have that soon enough if the Xenon were biting in Black Hole Sun.

"And a dozen good pilots from you Jack."

Jackson considered the suggestion, wreathed in smoke as he finished another bowl.

"Okay Max, we can spare that, just about. I wish I could be there when Law hears about it. On second thoughts I probably don't, knowing his temper. A million

credits, or one of those cool XL's you snaffled for Daht. Unless I figure out how you're doing it first of course. Deal?"

"Deal," Max confirmed. "And don't waste your time prying into the technique, I promise you it can't be duplicated."

"You know Max," Jackson drawled. "I actually believe you, this is better weed than I thought."

He stood up to leave.

"I'd better catch up with Dee before she blows my retirement stash. You've a nice place here Max, maybe I'll see you later once I've found the wilder parts. Be seeing you."

Grinning, he sketched a lazy salute and left.

Max waited a few minutes to brief Corrin before leaving himself to check if Tara's Teasers did more than tantalise.

Chapter 9: A New Frontier

"CAP Leader to Control One, CAP Leader to Control One."

"Control One here, what's up CAP Leader?" Kaitrin replied, carefully placing the steaming java away from her controls. She had only just come on duty, teleporting directly from Max's Place to the re-designated Lifter hybrid, and called up the roster to see whom she was talking with.

It was Sniper, one of Payter's recruits and part of the new defence squadron. One to keep an eye on the Sarge had said. He had scored a pair of Mandalays and a Bayamon on the recruitment sweep, when the five of them had hit a Clan convoy in the unclaimed Nopileo's Memorial sector, circling the fight and finishing off ships with low shields with precision long range shooting. Payter coined the name and he had accepted it without demure.

"It's a lot better than Grandad," he joked in the Lucky D, referring to his shock of grey hair and collision-alert proximity to retirement. He was, Kaitrin guessed, even older than Corrin, but still hot in a lean, grizzled way.

"Are you scanning this Dolphin? It's on auto-pilot and heading your way."

"Scanning Sniper," she replied. Jonno, the only Angel on duty was already locking up the freighter. "How's them ol' bones doing?"

"Less of the 'old', missy," he growled. "The word is 'seasoned'. What's the call?"

Kaitrin paged through the ship data. The Dolphin was packing a lot of drones and both speed and the sub-space hold were tuned to their maximum, marking the ship as out-of-the-ordinary. The hold seemed half-full of energy cells but she couldn't be sure, the readings were slightly out of phase in some of the upper and lower bands.

She wouldn't have noticed it had she not seen the same thing sometimes on the Angel and the Star. Corrin wouldn't discuss it and she knew better than to probe when he went all taciturn, like when she asked about the thin scars she felt on his scalp.

"Escort it in Sniper. Launching Alert 1 for support. Take it out if it launches drones."

She touched a control, moments later an AI Bayamon launched from the Bliss Place, automatically heading for the remaining CAP fighter near the north gate. As a precaution she switched LT 1, covering the entrance to the Raiders home base, to pulse mode in case the drones were deployed.

Then she awoke Corrin. It took him a few seconds to answer, his voice blurred with the vestiges of sleep.

"Screen off lover, you look dreadful," she joked.

He had barely turned in when her duty shift began, having seen through the opening of Max's Place to the exhausted end, he looked older than Sniper.

"Thanks Kaitrin, that makes me feel better." On screen, Corrin ran his fingers ineffectually through tangled hair, only making things worse. "What's up? Jack's boys kicking off again?"

"Probably. Last I heard they were losing all their winnings down in the Lucky D. Jackson disappeared into Tara's Teasers with that Dee woman and Large Breasted Chick Three out of Surfs Up. Haven't seen 'em since. Take a look at this."

She transferred her readings to Corrin's console. The fatigue fell from his face, replaced by a concern he did nothing to hide.

"Bring it in Kaitrin, park it with the Star and seal it off. I'll find Max."

The General declined the offer of refreshment and dismissed his two guards. Force activated the full privacy mode at his request, isolating the booth in it's own silent universe, within the event horizon of the black-light shield. Daht adjusted his tail and settled back into the booth, impressed with the seamless adjustment the furniture made to his body.

The human seemed to have found new energy since the brief tour he insisted on conducting before bringing him here. Daht had little interest in the pleasures on offer but had been impressed by the squared-away order of the mercenary base area. It confirmed the decision he had already made.

Force's organisation might bear the weight of Daht's own ambitions. His fighters had acquitted themselves with honour in the recent battle and Force himself repeatedly demonstrated a flair for the unexpected. As a tactician of no small renown, Daht appreciated his ability to out-smart a superior foe and keep them off-balance, unable to set themselves for a fatal blow.

That was why he was willing to play his part in the scheme Force had seemingly extemporised as he outlined the problems associated with trades he had been contracted to make on behalf of some Argon stations. He could not openly support an alien business interest without demonstrating profitability to those whose shares he held in proxy; not yet at least, but he had cause to travel to Teladi Gain. They were discussing timings when the human made hasty excuses and left. Daht surmised he had received a communication on the device constructed in his vision-protector.

The General consumed a leisurely meal of assorted shell-fish, baked in a spiced black-fish sauce and weighed his own options, before allowing himself to be escorted back to his Vulture transport ship. It was a bold plan and his role, although relatively minor, could be exploited.

By the time the Dolphin freighter touched down beside to the Destiny Star, it had transmitted identity codes and received Xela's response. Corrin had cleared the small

dock by the time Max arrived and deployed an embarkation ramp. The main hatch remained sealed.

“It’s definitely his ship,” Max confirmed. “Can you open it Zee?”

Corrin watched impatiently as Max had another of his one-sided conversations with the Xela AI, querying something projected on his HUD glasses. He’d had a bad feeling ever since Kaitrin called. This wasn’t just a ship, it was Artur’s main resource and even his friend. It was unthinkable that it would be here without him. Corrin climbed the ramp and drew his blaster, flattening himself beside the hatch as Max transmitted access codes directly into the door panel. It slid open with an almost inaudible hiss and Corrin slipped through.

The inner lock opened at a touch and he ducked low and stepped through as Max covered him. The lighting levels were normal in the short corridor curving to the well-equipped command and habitation modules. The ship was silent save for the practically subliminal hum of systems on standby. Max announced there were no life-forms on board as they inched forward. Corrin pointed silently to a rust stain on the deck plate, he did not need Xela’s confirmation. It was blood, trailing from the teleport booth, smears from a guttering wound and bloodied handprints.

Abandoning caution they raced through the ship, following the trail to the office, noting the gore encrusted comm controls. Corrin left Max linking Xela to the ship AI and followed a sparser trail back to the medi-bay.

It was empty, just a blood-stained surgical booth and a tangled mass of disconnected support tubules. A couple of bloody prints led away from the surgical bed, human to judge from the boot and healthy to judge by the stride.

“He was hit and alive when he got to the medi-bay. Someone disconnected him from life support and took him out. Humans by the boot-prints,” he reported back to Max, who looked up startled from the computer terminal, in the middle of another one-handed debate with the Xela AI.

“Zee thinks there’s a message buried in here,” Max said. “She’s trying to convince Seera to show it her,” he absently touched his jaw, below his left ear, listening.

“Okay we’re in,” he positioned his data-padd before the monitor, carefully avoiding the dried, spattered stains and set it to record. “Roll it Zee,” he ordered. Corrin could hear the suppressed tension in his friend’s voice, a counter-point to his own pounding heart. He wasn’t sure he liked Artur, despite his patrician charm, and he certainly didn’t trust him. But they needed him, that was indisputable. And, he reminded himself, as serving officers they were duty-bound to carry out his orders.

Artur’s bloodied face filled the screen, white and contorted despite the pain-killers a single saucer pupil showed were pumping through his body. A wrecked sensor patch covered the other eye.

“Xela, only you can access this, I hope you’re there Max,” he paused, grimacing through a spasm of pain pushing through the narcotics. Beads of sweat streamed from

his matted hair-line, merging into bloody rivulets. “I’ve taken a stupid risk Max, Seera has a data chip taken straight from under Law’s nose. It’s from a Stoertebeker planetary probe out there searching for the alien craft. Seera, give it over dear.”

He coughed violently, a bloody froth on his lips and his face now bone-white with shock.

“Max, he might not know what this message contains if the probe is on a return trajectory, but he will if he gets to them before you. I’ll be in touch.”

The recording ended abruptly. Max listened to Xela intently and hurried out to the teleport booth, returning a few seconds later holding the data chip. Before he could speak Seera announced a complete systems shut-down and began counting back from twenty.

They made it out on seven, leaving an almost inert ship behind them.

“Not to get too technical Max, but it’s fried, in all probability a coronal discharge from an energy weapon. Without better equipment than the Raider techs could improvise I cannot tell you anything else,” Xela reported.

“You might as well unhook me.”

Corrin pounded the table in frustration. Max just stared at the jury-rigged interface from behind his shades, as if willing it to perform.

“You might as well unhook me guys,” Xela repeated impatiently, her disembodied voice filled the silence of the small briefing room at the core of the Corrin’s Casino. Max disconnected the optical wire linking her data-padd to the modified diagnostic device used to debug ship computer systems.

“What would you need lass?” Corrin asked.

“To read the message? A miracle. To recover what’s theoretically recoverable? A custom built system. You might be able to get the components from elsewhere but the only place I know is Argon Computer Plant Beta.”

“Cloudbase South West,” Max observed. “How long will it take you to design and spec it?”

“I can do that any time Max. Multi-tasking, multi-talented remember?”

“You don’t let me forget Zee,” Max murmured. “Okay, get on it. As soon as you know what you need we’ll send the Pegasus to pick it up. Meanwhile we’ll do something about raising more credits. I’ve been talking with Daht, I think you’ll like this.”

Max briefly recounted his discussion with the station representatives for the benefit of Xela.

“That’s a lot of trading Max, at some point we’ll have to pass close to Stoertebeker, unless we go down through Thuruks Beard and around the unclaimed sectors. But then we’d have to pass through Brennan’s Triumph.”

She sighed audibly, a deep, very human sigh of resignation.

“Analysis suggests an 87.6% chance that’s just what you’re going to have us do Max. Prove me fallible.”

“You’re a computer and a woman Zee,” Max smiled. “Infallible on two counts.”

“If I had arms Max, I’d be waving them in disgust. No, correct that, I’d be trying to choke some sense into you. Do it for me Corrin.”

“The Skull Clan own that sector Max,” Corrin observed. “Your last operation involved them, you know what they are like. They’re vicious savages, like Law.”

“No,” Max argued. “Not like Law at all. He’s a bully and a psychopath, the Skulls use terror as a rational technique.”

“And that will stop them blowing us into stardust how?” Xela asked sceptically.

“We’ll give them good, rational reasons not to,” Max stated confidently.

Corrin looked doubtful. The Skull Clan had been founded by a notorious Argon privateer, the self-styled “Commodore” Jaines and in just 40 years they had established themselves as probably the most powerful of the Clans, with a single-minded ruthlessness that forced smaller groups to shelter under their protection.

No sooner had Brennan’s fleet withdrawn from the former Xenon sector than their base ship, an early model Albatross TL called Intimidator, moved in. The construction of Paradise Station began soon after, incorporating salvaged Xenon materials.

By the time the five Powers had divided up the Xenon holdings, Brennan’s Triumph was fortified beyond their will to retake. It’s key location, astride the central route from Paranid, Argon and Boron sectors to Split space and beyond, cast a blight over adjacent sectors, delaying colonisation, if not indefinitely then at least until one race was willing to take the initiative and dislodge them.

As the Powers remained unable to agree who should control such a strategic sector it seems likely to stay in the hands of the Skull Clan for some time.

‘We’ll give them good, rational reasons not to.’

Corrin knew that was as far as Max’s plan went. Xela knew it too, but it didn’t stop her demanding details. Max made a few vague remarks about un-refusable offers that satisfied no-one.

“Okay, okay!” he conceded. “It’s a work-in-progress, so shoot me.”

He waited for Xela’s inevitable rejoinder before continuing.

“I’ve been round those sectors Zee, I’ve a few ideas. I’ll think it over while we’re messing with the Xenon in Black Hole Sun. Sorry Zee, didn’t I mention that bit before? Corrin, check this out.”

Max bought up a file on the desk monitor.

“Can you fix a three freighter convoy with as many ships as we can get in the air for, say, go in 30 hours? Just leave a skeleton commercial squad here, Jackson will cover our backs.”

Corrin studied the route Max had laid out. It not only took them into Brennan’s Triumph but also through Atreus Clouds, the Boron border sector, where Clan Hoort had a base station.

“Plenty of time Max, you’re planning to mess with Stoertebeker en-route aren’t you? We should take Control One to co-ordinate.”

“We’re going to mess with him good,” Max confirmed with a smile. He outlined the proposal he’d put to the General and the three of them spent an hour fleshing out the plan. While Corrin and Payter made arrangements, Max and Xela boarded the Angel and headed for Black Hole Sun.

“How was it then Max?”

“How was what Zee?” he asked with barely a moment’s hesitation.

“The grand opening, what else?”

“It was fine, Zee. The business we picked up will pay for a defence wing for a few months and Jackson agreed to provide back-up.”

“Did you catch him in a good mood or is there a price?” Xela asked.

“A million credits or an XL, Zee. Hence the trip,” Max replied jauntily. “One more for capital, one to trade in for an Eel and how about a couple of M’s for pocket change?”

“Hmm, you’re suspiciously happy for such a hard working boy Max, perhaps I should track your credit chip, see what you’ve been up to?”

“You do that Zee,” he replied serenely. “Are you up for this? We need to force the pace, especially if the bad guys are getting ahead of the game. We’re just going to have to steal the bulk of it and the Xenon look ideal marks. They’re permanently pissed off with everyone already.”

“Yet still you plan a Clan Grand Tour,” Xela observed archly. “Your thinking?”

“Strutting our stuff, Zee. We want these people to take us seriously. Who knows, maybe some will see the wisdom of being our friends?”

“Possibly. It’s not as if they’re all tight,” Xela agreed. “The Hoort hate the BTG, the BTG hate the Shroda and everyone fears the Skulls and Stoertebeker, who both hate each other. Is this budding plan anything more sophisticated than kicking the pile and seeing what happens?”

“No, not at all,” Max said quickly. “Zee, check with Kaitrin and upload whatever readings they have from our Omicron Lyrae and Black Hole Sun Nav-Sats, see what the Xenon are up to.”

They traversed Nyana’s Hideout in near silence, Max reviewing navigation records from the disputed sectors around Brennan’s Triumph and Xela, analysing Xenon activity whilst modelling a data retrieval device she could interface with and control at a deep level.

As they emerged into Omicron Lyrae, Xela completed her study of Xenon movements.

“Typical rampage tactics Max. They swarm into Black Hole Sun, ignore everything and head for the gate to Treasure Chest. Each group has five XL’s, 5 XM’s and 10 XN’s, maximum of three groups per wave. Sector defences are just sniping at them as they go through, picking off the M and N’s. The Navy gets the rest in Omicron Lyrae.”

Suck ‘em in and cut ‘em off, a sound strategy. Max locked up the carrier near the eastern jump-gate.

“Argon Two, Zee. Haven’t seen her outside of the home sectors since the Brennan war. Wasn’t she scheduled for a refit?”

“Last I heard Max,” Xela agreed. “They’re probably using the Frontier shipyard

As he spoke two red dots appeared on the Gravidar. Then two more. Then eight. Argon Two began launching fighters. Max hit the afterburners, riding a column of flame across the sector until the weapon and shield banks were drained.

“Take it easy Max,” Zee urged. “The navy boys will finish it long before we get there.”

She was almost right. The Elite’s, Discoverer’s and Buster’s were more than a match for their Xenon counter-parts and Argon Two was almost on top of the gate, scything down Xenon as they jumped in. Then another wave entered, seven ships at once, scattering in all directions.

The Angel was close enough now for Max to monitor the fight on the Zooms, all but two of the new intruders were XL’s. All but two of those were destroyed in a storm

of plasma from Argon Two. The remainder were harried away from Argon Two by a wing of Buster's as it clumsily manoeuvred around the gate.

"We don't have a feed in Treasure Chest do we Zee? I'd like to know what's going on."

"Negative Max," she paused. "Force-Com 10 has gone down, we're blind in Black Hole Sun," she paused again. "Kaitrin says at least twenty Xenon ships were heading for Treasure Chest."

The Mamba was under ten klicks from the eastern jump-gate when it flashed to life, disgorging another wave of Xenon. Again, most died under the guns of Argon Two, now almost motionless as it turned back towards the gate.

Most.

The Two surviving XL's broke left and right, and converged on the huge carrier, ignoring Argon Two's Buster screen. Both dumped a pack of missiles before their shields failed. Max watched in horror as the carrier vanished behind the fireballs mushrooming along it's shielding, unconsciously holding his breath as he waited for the massive explosion.

Argon Two emerged through the fireball, her overloaded shields coruscating under the multiple impacts, discharging jagged, destructive fingers of energy that ripped down the hull, triggering secondary explosions in turrets and shield generators.

"They are down to one shield, half the turrets are gone, engines heavily damaged and launch bay destroyed," Xela intoned as Max locked on to the first of a pair of XL's emerging from the gate. It was a sitting target, left at zero velocity by the jump. Max was able to empty his weapons into it's shields and drop a couple of missiles before it could accelerate.

He fired two missiles at the second, as soon as the target lock shifted. They had little chance of hitting but could trigger evasive sub-routines, giving the crippled Carrier a few extra seconds to rally her own fighters and escape. It worked. The dragonflies criss-crossed the path of the Xenon ship as it rolled and twisted across his sights. From the corner of his eye he saw the jump-gate flash.

"Zee, general frequency to all ships," he ordered as he settled onto the rear of the XL.

"Mamba to all ships. I'll take the XL, watch Argon Two," he hoped his best command voice would do the trick. It was the correct tactical decision but more importantly, it would keep some trigger-happy kid from robbing him of his prize.

Max stuck with the XL until the dragonflies self- destructed and then closed slowly, getting just close enough to trigger evasive manoeuvres.

“Very clever Max,” Xela said as Max repeated the exercise. “You’re herding it away from the fight. I’m officially embarrassed on behalf of all AI’s.”

Max waited until they were well away from the gate before firing two silkworms from close range. Both hit, almost before the Xenon fighter could begin to evade. Max took the remaining shields to zero with a precise Alpha HEPT burst.

Xela pushed a carrier wave through the shield interference, disarmed the left weapons mount and precisely modulated the power to the remaining weapon in response to her constant sensor analysis. Her decryption algorithms were far superior to those protecting the Xenon sub-systems, hijacking probably wasn’t in their threat database and if there had been a pilot she could have ejected him there and then.

Unfortunately that wasn’t how the Xenon worked but it did give her access to the AI.

The neural net was cold, chilled by it’s single reason for being and it fought to kill the alien-yet-familiar invader. Xela could feel the similarity too, could sense how the Xenon thought as it shuffled the functions she sought like a malevolent shell game, seeking to entangle her in it’s own defences.

Slowly she cut down the hiding places, almost cornering her prey when interference overwhelmed the link. Diverting a small part of her resources to deliver a stinging rebuke she began again, finding her growing familiarity with the alien intelligence enabled her to predict it’s actions more accurately.

“It’s all yours Max,” she announced, snatching the control functions of the ship from the AI before it could move them again. She forcibly overwrote the Xenon AI with her own auto-pilot program. It was a disturbing experience with similes she didn’t care to explore further. Finally she uploaded a Force Security IFF.

“And try to keep those shields right down in future.”

“Cut me some slack Zee,” Max complained. “I’m doing the hard part.”

She decided to let it pass.

Max checked the Gravidar to make sure this particular attack was over and escorted the XL back through the sector, following it through the jumpgate to Nyana’s Hideout. He transported the surviving 25MW shield on board and jettisoned all of it’s hornets, which were quickly retrieved by the pursuing naval Discoverer.

Xela beamed across a pair of 1MW shields.

Max shadowed the XL all across the sector, losing the trail of curious on-lookers only when his destination became clear.

“One Xenon L, as promised Jack. Do we have a deal?”

In the HUD, Jackson wore a pained expression.

“My word, Max, is my bond,” he smiled and winked. “You’ll have your dozen ships.”

“Seems like a trustworthy sort of guy,” Xela remarked ironically as Max cut the link. “What now?”

“One down, two to go!” Max said brightly as he banked towards the Omicron Lyrae jumpgate.
“Company Max,” Xela announced laxly as two XN’s broke through from Omicron Lyrae, knowing that at this range he would have spotted their distinctive silhouette against the activation flash.

“Got’ em Zee,” Max confirmed casually. He pulled the Angel’s nose up in a forty-five degree ascent that took him above and beyond the Xenon pair before inverting and pulling up onto the rear of the trailing wing-man.

Neither ship reacted to his approach but scattered like startled fish when he opened fire. His target died before it could do more than sketch a half-roll but the Gravidar exploded with speeding red icons. Suddenly the Mamba rocked under the multiple assault making it impossible to target the second.

“Drones, I damn hate drones,” Max announced to the universe as he hit the after-burners to clear the pack. “Like being mugged by a swarm of midgets with pen knives.”

The drones were much faster than any ship and although armed with only a single low power weapon could be deadly in these numbers.

“Track that XN Zee, where is it, where is it? “G-PAC’s, now!”

“Five megawatt shield destroyed,” Xela announced as the target lock shifted. Max fired two dragonflies to keep it busy, auto-targeted the nearest attacker and banked hard as it shot past. Ignoring the beams slashing at him from all directions he waited until there was a klick separation before activating the auto-targeting. The device was almost useless in combat, just keeping the nose of your ship pointing at it’s target but, if you judged relative speeds correctly it could just get you a brief head-on pass with a drone. The expanding plasma rings of the G-PAC’s maximised the chances of a kill.

He lost no more systems but a naval Discoverer had taken out the remaining Xenon by the time he’d systematically cut down the drones. The light fighter pulled up alongside; close enough to see the grin on the face of the pilot as she saluted. Max returned the professional courtesy and headed back to the Omicron Lyrae jump-gate.

The sector was a hive of activity, swarming with small packs of Argon fighters, snapping at the Xenon ships in scattered dog-fights. No more were entering from Treasure Chest and the sector was cleared before he could engage.

“Incoming transmission Max, from Argon Two,” Xela announced.

“Put it on Zee,” Max ordered as he located the carrier on the scanner. It was lumbering slowly towards the sector shipyard, trailing a diminishing string of docking fighters.

A man’s head appeared in the corner of the HUD, young, with a wild-eyed expression combining shock and excitement. A second Lieutenant, fresh out of OT, Max guessed, and first combat. He’d seen that look before, on his own face first.

“Commander Force?” The image disappeared behind a zig-zag of static.

“..ignal back now!” Wisps of black smoke drifted across the screen. “I’m sorry Commander, we’ve taken a bit of a beating. I’m Lieutenant Manners, acting Intel Officer for Argon Two, we’ve standing orders to request your presence aboard as soon as you re-enter Argon space, Sir.”

“Is there a warrant?” Max asked evenly.

Manners looked around anxiously.

“No Sir, nothing like that, but we would like to talk. Sir, I’ll meet you down in the docking bay.”

There was a flash and he flinched, a small rivulet of blood appeared on his cheek.

“I really can’t explain now Commander, get Damage Control in here dammit!” He shouted off-screen. “And get those bodies out!” Manners coughed violently as the smoke grew denser.

“Confirmed,” Max replied after a brief pause. Manners cut the transmission immediately.

“Have we broken any Argon laws Zee?” Max asked as he targeted the Shipyard.

“We’re exporting space-weed to pirates in Argon space, what do you think Max?” she replied. “But I doubt if that is what they want to chat about. You might want to be cautious though. If you want, I’ll look the word up in the dictionary.”

“I’m the very model of caution, Zee,” Max replied deadpan. He scoped Argon Two with the Video Enhancers. The hull was scarred and burned along the complete length, one pair of the four pylon mounted drives were just jagged shards. Only one of the port pair was in operation, starboard thrusters fired continually as the huge ship eased itself into the embrace of the Shipyard gantries.

Max circled the dock until Argon Two finished recovering it’s fighters.

“Docking permission confirmed Commander,” an anonymous voice from Argon Two confirmed finally. “Be advised, atmospheric containment is down in the bay and the gravity generators are fluctuating. Look for the orange markers.”

Max eased the Mamba through the huge rear facing entrance to the docking bay and into the cavernous flight deck, floating debris rebounding from his shields back into the deep twilight. Arcing power flashes illumined the gloom, leaving frozen images of smashed ships and twisted machinery.

“What a mess,” Max commented.

“An understatement,” Xela agreed.

It looked like the flight deck had been bombed. Dozens of workers, cumbersome in their environment suits, struggled through the imbroglio, attempting to impose some order on the chaos.

An orange strobe signalled from the far corner and Max flew towards it on minimal thrusters, conscious that the mass and inertia of the Mamba remained the same in a weightless environment. A flight controller, one foot wedged firmly beneath the handle of a maintenance hatch for balance in the zero gravity, waved him onto the small docking platform with green light batons. Two other suited workers hovered behind him, propelling themselves out with gentle bursts of suit manoeuvring thrusters, to attach old fashioned magnetic clamps to the Mamba landing struts. Max cut power and let them pull him the last few feet. The Mamba hit the deck with a force that reverberated through the ship.

As soon as the Mamba was secure another figure floated from the shadows towards the cockpit and pressed a large acoustic coupler to the canopy.

“Commander Force?” The voice was distorted by feedback and acoustic reverberations but was recognisably Manners. “We have some, uh, leaks, interfering with comms in the bay. Talk loud and clear and I’ll hear you.”

“Copy that Manners,” Max replied. “Shall I teleport you on board?”

“Hell no!” Manners replied with alarm. “We’re in the middle of an electro-magnetic soup. There’s a heap of bones and flesh in sickbay that was a pilot. Permission to come aboard the old-fashioned way?”

“Permission granted,” Max confirmed, trying to put the horrible image from his mind as he opened the small air-lock. Manners crawled from sight, taking the coupler. Max could follow his progress by the steady clump of magnetic holders clamping on the hull as the lieutenant pulled himself to the entrance.

A couple of minutes later Manners clambered forward into the co-pilot seat and removed his mirrored helmet.

“First time in zero G since training?” Max asked as they shook hands.

Yes, how can you tell?” Manners asked.

“You look a bit green around the gills. It’ll pass now you’re back in a gravity well,” Max replied with a grin. “If you’re going to be sick, use the helmet.”

“I’m okay, I think,” Manners replied, removing his gauntlets to wipe a thin film of sweat from his face. He took a few deep breaths, visibly willing his stomach to behave.

“Note to self,” he smiled weakly. “Never eat a fried breakfast before a fight!”

“Words to live by,” Max agreed. “What can I do for you?”

“Commander, I’m not fully briefed on this and all the senior Intel staff are casualties or missing so I’m going on what files I could access. We’d like to know how you manage to, shall we say, ‘salvage’ so many ships?”

“Lieutenant,” Max replied. “I’m sorry to hear about your losses, I really am, but that’s commercially sensitive information.”

Manners frowned. “I was hoping you weren’t going to take that line Sir.”

“I’m sure,” Max agreed. “What now? Impound my ship and strip it down?”

The young Lieutenant looked genuinely shocked.

“Oh no Commander, the terms and conditions of your general amnesty are forcefully specific. No harassment and plenty of slack. Somebody important wants you inside the tent pissing out. And anyway, it would be a breach of your constitutional rights. Naval Intelligence could never be a party to that!”

He said it with such a straight face that Max just had to ask.

“You haven’t worked in Intel long have you Lieutenant?”

He shook his head. “It’s my first assignment, how did you know?”

Max let the question slide. “Is that it then? Seems an awful lot of trouble to get the answer you were expecting anyway? You know the Navy has it’s own techniques?”

“How do you..?” he began asking suspiciously. “Ah, you were in the service. I’m aware of that Commander, but I’m given to understand it requires highly classified systems you don’t possess. And it’s not got your success rate. Frankly, it’s easier just to buy Clan ships on the black market.”

“Except that the Xenon won’t bow to the imperial will of the free market. Let me guess, you want some examples of their latest product and brass are getting bent out of shape with me selling to the Teladi and delivering that last one to Jackson,” Max said.

“Uh – I didn’t know that Commander. Isn’t selling advanced alien ships to ambitious pirates kind of, well, reckless and irresponsible?”

“I take my friends where I can find them,” Max replied shortly. “Sometimes they have a price tag. I’ve got a sweet exchange deal with the Boron too, one XL, one Eel, what are you putting on the table?”

“I don’t know Commander,” Manners answered doubtfully. “What do you want?”

Max couldn’t help but laugh.

“I’m sorry? No veiled threats, no pointed observations concerning the fragility of my stations? How did you get into Intel?”

“The usual way Sir, flunking out of Flight School.”

It was an old joke, resting on a solid foundation of fact. Max smiled, suspecting in this instance, it was not a joke.

“I’ll tell you what Manners. Seeing as I saved this bucket’s old hull and we’re all humans together I’ll cut you a one-time deal. Credits – one mill for an L, 300k for an M and 100k for an N. Equivalent market prices for any equipment I don’t want, you owe me 100k for those Hornets by the way. And a blind eye to certain cross border trading.”

Max stuck out his hand. Manners hesitated. “I’m not sure, that seems an awful lot of credits, Commander.”

Take it or leave it, I’m sure the Split would snap my arm off. Going, going...”

“Okay Commander,” he cut in quickly. “I suppose I’m the ranking Intel Officer, I could try and swing it, if you’ll do me a small favour?”

“Shoot,” Max nodded.

Manners hesitated. “I probably shouldn’t be telling you this Sir, can I rely on your discretion.”

“You have my word as a former pirate and drug smuggler!” Max replied with a smile.

“I’d rather have it as a former officer if that’s all the same,” Manners replied. “We’ve lost contact with all our assets in the Xenon sectors and the Boron frontier sectors report the Xenon north of Black Hole Sun are sending carriers and destroyers straight through to Menelaus Paradise and then into the uncharted sectors beyond. The Split aren’t saying anything but there are reports that they’ve lost the carrier in Family Njy.”

“And?” Max asked.

“We’d like you to find out what’s going on. The Split won’t let us into their sectors and the Boron don’t want to provoke them or the Xenon by moving more capital ships in. At the moment the Xenon seem to be just passing through. There’s five military Nav-Sats with your name on them over at the Free Trading Station.”

“Spying on the Xenon?” Max asked. “That’s your idea of a small favour?”

“A small price for so much goodwill Commander,” Manners grinned, extending his hand.

“Not that small. I’ll have to fly clear across a Xenon sector to get there.”

“I watched you on the net, Commander. Just another gate-run I’m sure.”

“Okay,” Max said finally, shaking his hand. “You know Lieutenant, you’re not as green as you still look.”

In an hour he was heading for Treasure Chest and points beyond, five new Nav-Sats in his hold.

“Shall we launch one of our own Nav-Sats?” Xela asked as they transited Treasure Chest. Max demurred. “Too much Xenon activity Zee, we’ve only got four onboard and we might need those ourselves, once we get through to the Split frontier sectors.”

“Okay Max, just drop one to update the commercial database,” she conceded.

Max adjusted his heading, taking the Mamba out of the ecliptic plane and the resuming flow of ships freighters through the sector. Decelerating rapidly he transferred a nav-sat to the ejection bay and jettisoned it.

Max orbited the satellite slowly, tracking the rotating cylinder by eye. It twinkled like a golden star, sunlight reflecting off the two antenna, deployed like wings from the main body.

Treasure Chest was a mainly agricultural sector, dominated by two Argon-like worlds, dancing around their common centre of gravity. Garleth Prime and Garleth Beta were fecund homes to hundreds of thousand of colonists but their proximity left them earthquake riven. Initial geological surveys identified many zones either too prone to cataclysmic tremors or too near a coastline regularly swamped by tsunami’s spawned by vast undersea tremors, for colonisation. Even in areas assessed as safe, the need to quake-proof every structure drove up costs.

Life for the colonists was hard. They struggled to produce enough high value cash crops, mainly native flora and fauna whose chemistry made them delicacies to the varied palates of six space-faring species, and once debt repayments covering the colony start-up costs were deducted, little remained for luxuries. Ironically, amidst this abundance, the colonists remained dependent upon the Wheat, Argnu Beef and Meatsteak Cahoonas produced in the orbiting factories, as their major source of protein.

The threat of the Xenon kept investment in the sector low. Only one company had been brave enough to attempt to reap profits from a high-technology frontier boom that so far had failed to materialise.

Max targeted Quantum Tube Factory Alpha and tuned into their commercial data feed. Stocks were at maximum, prices at a minimum.

“Zee, show me the location of all the Computer Plants along or near the convoy route? We might be able to make a tasty profit here.”

There were two. The plant supplying specialised, zero gravity manufactured components to Split industry was in Chins Clouds. Max had no nav-sat deployed in that sector but Xela observed the Split had two Plank Tube manufacturing stations within two sectors. The competition would be keeping the prices low.

The Teladi based their Computer Plant in Blue Profit, fed by a single Quantum Tube Fab in Company Pride. There, he did have an active satellite, despite the Clan station.

“Well, knock me down with a feather Zee. Monopoly pricing! We can under-cut them and still make a storming profit.”

A short conversation with the eager young trade manager of the Treasure Chest Quantum Tube Fab sealed the purchase of all his stock at little more than cost. Even so, if the deal had been made in person Max felt he’d be minus one arm.

“You finished with the bird, Zee?”

“Confirmed Max,” she replied. “Reel it in.”

“Get me Corrin first, Zee” Max requested. “Make sure it’s encrypted.”

He continued circling the satellite as Xela sent the hail. A few minutes later Corrin appeared in the HUD.

“Channel secure, Mirv?”

“That’s S.O.P. Max,” Corrin confirmed.

“We’ve struck a good deal for Plank Tubes in Treasure Chest, Mirv. Send the Star to pick up every unit they have and make sure it’s well protected, the Xenon are a mite frisky today. I think we can strike a deal with the Blue Profit Computer Plant, can you adjust the convoy operation to include a visit?”

“Consider it done,” Corrin replied. “Kaitrin reported you had a spot of bother in Omicron Lyrae and you docked with Argon Two. We should re-designate her ship The All-Seeing Eye!”

“I can’t seem to move without some woman or another looking over my shoulder,” Max chuckled. “Two Guardian Angels.”

“One Guardian Angel, one personal devil,” Xela corrected facetiously as Max continued.

“A junior Intel Louie wants us to scout the Split and Boron frontier sectors up to Menelaus Paradise. The Xenon seem to be redeploying capital ships north into uncharted sectors and the Navy wants us to take a quick peek.”

He recounted the conversation with the green intelligence officer in detail, knowing Corrin in particular would appreciate the humour.

“Trasker must be spinning in her capsule!” Corrin chuckled. “Did he have any more information on her death?”

Max confessed he’d forgotten to ask.

“Ah well laddie, best to let it lie. I doubt we’ll ever know the truth, even if Artur re-appears. Kerman is out sourcing those components you wanted, lass. He cut through to Eighteen Billion in a Pegasus to shave a few hours, he’ll probably return before you so transmit your design when it’s ready.”

“Almost done,” she replied. “There’s a few fractal algorithms I found in a new paper on propagating wave harmonics that look interesting. I’ll transmit a data-stream as soon as I’ve finished.”

“Right you are lass. Anything else? In that case, good hunting Max, the Star will be on it’s way shortly.”

He terminated the link.

Max put the satellite on his nose and targeted it with a touch of a control stick button. Checking once for any threats, he opened the cargo bay door and flew over the Nav-Sat. An automated voice alarm warned that shields were down as the tractor beam pulled it into the hold.

He hardly needed the sector scan to tell him Black Hole Sun was in chaos. The Split manufactured Situational Awareness system filled the cockpit with simulated weapons fire as soon as the Mamba emerged from the western gate. The volume and direction enabled him to judge location and proximity with a practiced accuracy. The scan confirmed a wave of Xenon fighters were cutting a tangent through the sector, heading for the gate to Treasure Chest.

Naval Discoverers and Busters harassed the XM and XN’s escorting the three XL’s. A single wing of big, Elite fighters screened the factories clustered in the centre of the sector from assault.

Force-Com Ten had not been the only casualty. Wheat Farm Alpha was now just a potential navigation hazard, a shattered, disintegrating hulk, veiled in a billowing shroud of debris and vacuum-rigored corpses. The other factories huddled behind their own fighter screens. Two LT’s sat over-watch on the Free Trading Station.

On after-burner, Max had time to deploy a replacement for Force-Com Ten, in what he hoped would be a more secure location near the centre of the sector. He got back to

the Treasure Chest jump-gate in time to intercept the XL's, their escorting fighters now hopelessly embroiled with the Naval interceptors.

Xela automatically targeted the leading fighter as it lined up on the gate. Max immediately placed the trailing L under the HUD targeting reticule and locked it up manually.

"You'll leave those two with a clear run through to Omicron Lyrae," Xela observed. "With Argon Two out of commission they might be able to cause a lot of damage, or mess with the Star."

"We're a business not a charity Zee, and the Star has a Raider escort," Max replied coolly. "Until someone hands us a fat contract for sector defence we've got our own profits to think of."

"Your call Maximilian," Xela said, with a note of disapproval that may just have been in his imagination.

Max waited on the tail of his selected victim until the first two Xenon fighters flashed out of the sector. It did not respond until a silkworm smashed a chunk from it's shields, triggering a defensive break away from the gate. The rest of the shields were torn away by a measured burst and Max stuck on it's six, sniping them down to zero with Xela-moderated shots from a single AHEPT.

"Make this quick, Zee," Max urged. A pair of XM's, incoming."

It took three long minutes for Xela to outwit the Xenon AI and Max barely had time to install a new pair of 5MW shields before the Xenon medium fighters arrived. While Xela, flying the captured XL, kept one of the attackers at bay with a single undamaged AHEPT, Max destroyed the other.

The remaining XM died as Xela tried to wrest control, the victim of a mistimed shot.

"Max!" Xela shouted in anger. "Be more careful! How would you like to be inside the mind of a person when they die?"

"Depends on the person," Max replied flippantly. "Zee, get me Manners on Argon Two."

Xela said nothing but used the new Force-Com satellite to patch a signal through to Omicron Lyrae. Manners was not aboard the stricken carrier but her call was automatically relayed to the Free Trading Station.

"Commander Force. Not having a change of heart I trust?"

The young Lieutenant looked concerned.

"Relax," Max replied breezily, "Give me a chance, you'll get your readings and probably a Letter of Commendation in your file. Two, when you deliver a Xenon L.

It's in Black Hole Sun, wearing a Force Securities IFF. Can you organise an escort? I'd hate to lose out on all those credits you're about to give me."

Manners demeanour brightened considerably.

"I wish I knew how you did it Commander. Leave it with me. The credits will be transferred to your Public Bounty Account as soon as it's safely docked. Is that acceptable?"

It was. Max waited until a pair of Discoverer's arrived and instructed Xela to turn over control to the lead ship. She did so, inserting a time limit into the IFF, just to ensure someone with less respect for constitutional rights than Manners did not get any bright ideas.

The Mamba headed for the Northern jump-gate while the Argon fighters escorted the prize back through the sector.

"Now," Xela said, as the jumpgate loomed, "Would be a good time to fill me in on any plans."

"The Skulls? Still working on that, Zee."

"No Max, getting through to Thyn's Abyss."

Max had no time to formulate a reply as another Xenon wave entered the sector. He killed two of the XN's before they could accelerate away from the gate but the remaining two were joined by five XM's. They moved to engage, and fought as a co-ordinated unit to relentlessly force home their attacks. Uncharacteristically the three XL's that followed also joined in. The missile alarm sounded repeatedly and Max went completely defensive, concentrating on avoiding the hornets without having his shields smashed away as ships came in from every angle.

Stamping down on the panic that threatened to freeze his reactions, Max instantaneously implemented Xela's terse instructions, rolling and twisting away from incoming fire, dodging the missiles that screamed under his wings, diving away from head-on passes.

"Where the damn is the navy, Zee?" He shouted, "Vector me towards them!"

"Break high left, roll right 30, pull up, pull up!"

Multiple hits ripped over his shields as he flashed across the bow of an XL.

"They're not coming Max!" Xela shouted. "We're on our own! Shields at 20%. Break right!"

Max did so instinctively, even so the plasma crossfire brushed the Mamba, bringing the shields close to zero.

"Incoming message, Sector Control. Break high!"

Max took a reflexive snapshot at an XN crossing his nose, almost removing it's shields. Drones blossomed around him.

Desperately, Max scanned the sky and his eyes danced over his instruments, instinctively combining the visual input with the feedback from the Situational Awareness audio to give him a tactical snapshot of the fight.

"Sector Control to Commander Force," the disembodied male voice, said urgently. "You are ordered to stop provoking the Xenon. Disengage at once!"

Max didn't have time to scream an appropriate reply, with his shields almost at zero and encircled, he took the only option open to him.

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire," Xela predicted as the Mamba plunged through hyperspace to Xenon territory.

He was already igniting the afterburners as the Mamba emerged in the middle of a swarm of Xenon fighters.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot!" Xela shouted as the burners kicked in. "They are jumping out!"

The Mamba went from stationary to 300 with kidney-punching speed. As the Xenon fighters winked out, one by one, Max wrestled with the gyrating control stick, attempting to hold the nose on course towards the eastern sector exit.

"Call it Zee!" he shouted, as the ship thundered through the system, He glanced at the shield and weapons energy banks, both gauges plummeting towards zero. "The burner's are almost dead!"

"Three cruisers inbound, one carrier at the north gate, launching fighters. XN's moving to intercept. Ignore the rest!" Xela said excitedly. "They can't match our speed!"

Max cut the burners to allow his shields and guns to re-energise.

The three cruisers came in head-on, laying down sheets of plasma fire that Max evaded with a twitch of the stick that bought him head to head with the closing XN's.

"G-PACS, Zee," he ordered. She obeyed silently and he unloaded his weapons bank onto the approaching fighters. Two of the three fighters fell. The third vapourised against his shields, sending the Mamba tumbling crazily through space as Max wrestled with the controls.

"Shields gone, Max! Cruisers coming about, three-finger pincer! Activate jump-drive!" Max inverted and pulled a full loop through the only open axis left by the converging Xenon. Plasma rained around him in emerald folds. He survived only by chance.

“Negative, Zee! Can’t risk there still being a spy-sat!” Max rolled again, heading straight towards the Xenon installation at the heart of the sector, watching the three cruisers as they turned again to engage.

“You’re slowing down Max, you’re slowing down!” Xela cried, human in panic. He waited until they were almost upon him, snapped a 90 degree roll and accelerated through an evasive turn, rolling out on a direct heading to safety. Again the huge ships ploughed past.

“Fast but clumsy, Zee,” Max muttered. “Fighters?”

“They’re clustered around the gate to Thyn’s Abyss, along with the carrier.”

It took four more of the evade and break manoeuvres before Max judged the ponderously turning cruisers would be unable to catch him and he hit the burners again, making a direct run for the Split colony sector.

“The fighters, Max, the fighters!”

He ignored her and them, if he allowed himself to become embroiled in a dogfight there would be only one outcome. Instead, he jettisoned a naval nav-sat to make a fresh target and rode the bucking fighter straight through the blockade, taking multiple hits on his dwindling shields.

“Missiles inbound,” Xela warned. Max crossed his fingers and kept a straight course towards the looming gate. An explosion kicked the Mamba in the tail as it stormed through.

Max was still battling for control as they tumbled into Split space.

“The burners have gone, Max,” Zee announced as he stabbed fruitlessly at the control. “But the scanner is clear. Lucky, Max, very lucky.”

He said nothing, he was too busy hyper-ventilating.

Thyn’s Abyss was one of only a handful of New Frontier sectors isolated from the body of the X-Universe by Xenon held territory and was notable for only one thing.

The jump-gates were constructed in inter-planetary space.

Only the mineral rich asteroid field, apparently positioned by the Xenon to provide an easily accessible source of raw materials for their shipyards and held together by the little understood gravitational influence of the jump-gates themselves, gave it any strategic value.

The Split sector was the major source of energy and raw materials for the appendix to their empire and a military training ground, where recruits proved their mettle against the recurring Xenon probes. As a matter of policy the Split kept their military

presence to a minimum, fearful of provoking a Xenon onslaught that would extinguish all three Split sectors in this isolated region of space.

“We need repairs Zee, where’s the nearest shipyard?”

“There’s a Split one in the next sector,” Xela answered. “But we might have to hold on until we reach Boron space. The sector is owned by the Njy family.”

“Njy? That sounds familiar, why might they cause problems? We’re a licensed corporation, they can’t refuse.”

“The Boron Campaign, Max, the Battle for Sector Five, Teladi Gain as now is?”

“Oh, THAT Njy,” Max exclaimed. “The Butcher! That was a long time ago.”

“The family is big on tradition, and the Boron have long memories,” Xela replied dryly. “They are one of the richest Families, probably the most feared and certainly not people you’d want to work for. Conditions on their stations and plantations are reported to be somewhat harsh. They run this segment of the New Frontier.”

“The Boron must be thrilled,” Max observed wryly.

“Something like that,” Xela agreed.

He launched one of his nav-sats and with a still shaking hand lined up on the eastern jumpgate to sector Family Njy.

Unlike most of the systems chosen to host jump-gates by their unknown builders, this sector lacked the spectacle of a multi-hued nebula. Instead, the stations huddled against the cold sky of a failed stellar nursery. Vast and sullen, the faintly illumined cloud of interstellar gas cast a brooding, grey-green pall over the sector.

The jumpgate sector itself was balanced between the competing gravity wells of three, quake ravaged planets, whirling around a common centre of gravity. Only one was what even the Njy family could consider habitable. The other two were lifeless, ash-covered rocks, their surfaces disfigured by centuries of Xenon strip mining.

“Depressing,” Max observed. “This place isn’t going to find itself on the tourist route.”

For the heart of the Split New Frontier there were few ships on the scope, mostly freighters and a handful of fighters from the big carrier on the fringe of sensor range.

He briefly deployed a nav-sat to update the commercial database, snatching it back before it could trigger a typically paranoid Split response. The sector was mainly agricultural but as the capital of the Split New Frontier it had both an Equipment Dock and a Shipyard.

He targeted the former and requested docking permission.

“Controller of Flights responding. You enemy of Split, you not welcome!” a disembodied and hostile voice spat in reply.

“This is Max Force, of Force Securities, we are fully licensed to build and trade in any sector of the Universe. I repeat, my ship has suffered extensive damage. Requesting permission to dock.”

He decelerated to zero, careful to stay out of the approaches to the Dock.

“And repeat I,” the voice replied in an angry, high-pitched shout. “Permission refused. Go away now!”

Max took a deep breath.

“This is Max Force of Force Securities,” he stated formally. “You are now in direct treaty violation. Identify yourself for my report,” he paused to allow the implications to sink in. “Or put me through to someone in authority.”

There was a loud eek in the background, followed by static. Then an electronic simulacrum of a Split voice came on shouting.

“You are through to the offices of Commodore Njy! Commodore Njy hates being disturbed, you go away now, or endure - music!”

The cockpit filled with massed Split voices chanting discordantly over what could have been the sounds of a building collapsing, amplified to screeching feedback levels.

Xela quickly reduced the volume.

“What now Max?”

“We wait,” he replied.

The electronic Split voice interrupted the cacophony to berate his continued existence three times. On the fourth interruption the tone changed completely.

“Commodore Njy curses you for your persistence but has graciously agreed to endure your alien gibbering for a limited period.”

“At last,” Max muttered as another voice spoke.

“This is Commodore Njy of the Family Njy, how may I be of service to the esteemed Mr Force?”

Max was momentarily thrown by the unusual experience of a Split talking to him in something that closely approximated a tone of reason.

“Be formal Max,” Xela whispered. “For the Split, formal speech is a mark of respect or fear. I’m guessing he’s not quaking in whatever they are shod with.”

Max quickly rephrased his speech.

“Uh, thank you for taking time from your pressing responsibilities to clear up a minor misunderstanding. I appear to be having trouble obtaining docking permission to undertake repairs. As you are aware my corporation has an unlimited commercial license all species are treaty-bound to respect.”

“The Family Njy regret that they are obliged to disagree Mr Force. We have ascertained you represent a threat to Split security due to your past and current associations. While the ever-magnanimous Split can forgive past transgressions, we cannot extend aid and support to one working with our foes to undermine vital economic and strategic interests. Or do you deny your close working ties with the Aquatic Threat that menaces us all?”

Max took another deep breath.

“With respect Commodore, the Boron pose no threat to the Split, and yes, we enjoy profitable working relationship. This has not been a problem for my ships in other Split sectors.”

“The security, Mr Force,” Njy continued mildly, “Of other sectors, is not my responsibility. Would that it were. However the burden for ensuring this corner of the Universe remains forever Split has been placed on the Family Njy. We are cut off from support, the Boron Menace is poised to sweep down on us, and the Xenon constantly intrude on our space. We are, as you humans so cleverly say, stuck between a rock and a hard place. Regretfully, I have to exercise my considerable discretion.”

His voice hardened.

“Permission to dock at any facility in this sector is denied. Should you indeed be in need of repairs may I suggest seeking help elsewhere. This conversation is terminated.”

Static filled the cockpit.

“What do you think, Zee?”

“About what Max? They are not going to let us dock and we haven’t time to go through legalities. Or are you proposing we start shooting?”

“I guess you’re right,” Max sighed. “Where to now?”

“Ocean of Fantasy, you’ve got to love the Boron for names like that. Three sector journey.”

Max pivoted the Mamba and headed for the northern jumpgate to the Split sector of Chinn’s Escape. He was lining up a final approach to the gate, slotting into a small convoy of Split freighters when Xela said quietly.

“Heads up Max. Company.” As his eyes flashed to the gravidar, Xela adjusted the target lock. A Xenon cruiser had entered the sector through the southern jumpgate.

Max rolled the Mamba and pulled away from the gate, conscious that without the old style after-burners he would not be able to out-run the big ship.

“Left hand down a bit,” Xela joshed. “It’s thatta-way.”

“Too bloody right,” Max replied with feeling. “I’m not tangling with a cap ship in a crippled fighter for a bunch of people who wouldn’t spit on me if I was on fire. Leave it to the sector defences.”

“And what defences might those be?” Xela inquired with mock innocence. It turned out to be a good question. The Split carrier, which Max assumed would be burning across the sector on an intercept course, had not moved and every other ship was heading for the nearest installation, including the fighters.

“Plan S.E.P. in full implementation,” Xela observed. “Somebody Else’s Problem.”

Max orbited, two klicks from the gate, watching the blade-like machine barrel through the centre of the sector. It launched no fighters and did not fire on any of the installations it skimmed by.

“This is bloody ridiculous!” Max exclaimed angrily. “You can’t let enemy capital ships rampage unchallenged!”

“It’s not rampaging,” Xela observed pedantically. “Does this mean we are about to do something heroically stupid?”

“What? Like take on half the clans in the universe single-handed? I might be stupid but I’m not suicidal.”

Max waited until the Xenon cruiser was sliding into hyperspace before following. The ship knifed through Chinn’s Escape, ignored again by the Split defenders. Trailing now by over a quarter of a sector the Mamba pursued it into Boron space.

The Boron Frontier sector of Hila’s Joy was a demilitarised zone, established not by treaty but by the Boron desire not to ‘provoke’ the Split. The Xenon ship sailed through unopposed.

“You aren’t really planning to fight that thing on your own are you Max?” Xela replied in response to his expletive as the cruiser slid carefully through the gate to Ocean of Fantasy. Max was barely half-way across the sector.

“That would be, and I quote, ‘suicidal.’” She finished.

“I know it’s a good strategy, just let the Boron handle it, but it sticks in my craw Zee. We might arrive late but we can help them take it down.”

Xela laughed. “You’re adorable when you’re naïve, Max.”

She declined to elaborate.

Max stormed through the jumpgate, reflexes taut and the adrenaline shakes kicking in on top of a stim. As soon as the Mamba emerged into a mass of red dots on the Gravidar, Max accelerated on a twisting, evasive course, acutely aware that without any burners he was vulnerable.

“Nearest target now Zee!” he shouted as he did a visual scan. “And where’s the cruiser? What the … ?”

The sky was full of Clan ships.

“Calm down Max, calm down,” she said in a quiet, authorative voice, precisely modulated to seize his attention. “There are no Xenon and these are jumping out, unless you rile them.”

Max rolled and disengaged, bringing the Mamba around in a long turn towards the Trading Station at the centre of the sector.

“Where’d it go, there’s no debris?” He examined the sector map more closely. “And no Boron capital ship and no sector defence ships. Did they just let it go too?”

“Of course they did,” Xela sighed. “They’ve got a few million hostages on the second planet, so why risk a big fight, especially with that as a warning.”

Max did not have to ask what she meant. The planet around which the jumpgate sector orbited had been smashed into several huge, melting pieces. By studying the rate of decay of the energies consuming the fragments, scientists had surmised that this was the earliest known use of the alleged Xenon planet buster.

“I guess they don’t want a repeat performance, Zee. What do we know about this sector?”

“It’s the main Boron base on the New Frontier. Shipyard, Equipment Dock, some high tech stations but mainly agriculture and mining. The Factotum is a woman called Joahan Nibris. According to her record she has spent most of her life working for the Boron, she should have retired years ago. Do you want me to call her?”

“No thanks. Let’s see if we can get the info we need without going to the top. Every time I do that I end up in another war,” he answered ruefully.

“You know Max,” Xela said. “You are missing a very obvious question.”

“Where those Clan ships came from when there are no known Clan bases in any of these sectors? You mean that obvious question? Perhaps some of Jack’s boys have made a delivery. Risky run though.”

“Negative Max, wrong IFF. These are new guys.”

“Interesting, I’ll ask around. Perhaps one of these stations has an unregistered squad on it’s force. That would explain why the IFF showed hostile.”

Xela disagreed. There were Orinoco’s among the convoy they passed, and a Vulture.

“I’ll ask, okay Zee, but it’s not really our concern, we have our own problems remember?”

He targeted the Equipment Dock and dropped one of his own Nav-Sats along the way, leaving it as a target for the jumpdrive.

Docking permission was granted without argument and a mixed team of Boron and Argon technicians moved to carry out the requested repairs and upgrades with quiet efficiency.

“We should poach these guys, Zee,” Max observed as he stretched his legs, happy to be out of the cockpit, even if he did need a respirator to filter out the trace amounts of ammonia in the atmosphere.

“Even the humans? I’m not sure they’ll mix well. Perhaps a strong sauce?”

“Funny, lost at least one rib there. We could always do with more techs, remind me to talk to the Sarge about it. Can you get me the Station Manager?”

“Something wrong with your fingers and voice Max? Wait a second, the call is being redirected. In the HUD.”

The face of a woman appeared in the shades, superimposed over the docking bay.

“Ms Nibris I presume?” Max said before she could say anything. She smiled. “I was not aware that we have met, or have I some small accretion of fame that goes before me?”

“Neither ma’am,” Max replied. “My intel says this sector is managed by an old, I mean, an, er, mature Argon woman,” he finished with an embarrassed stammer.

“Ooh, way to win female friends Max!” Xela whispered. “Ask her if she’s got a sister, women love that too.”

Nibris laughed and pulled at the firmly wrapped bun that pulled her grey hair back tight from her face, stretching her skin tight over what must once have been, prominent cheekbones. Lingering ghosts of former beauty.

“If I was vain about my age young man, I’d have a lot more cosmetic surgery than this do-it-yourself face lift! I have no visual but you sound younger than our records suggest, Mr Force. Now, what can I do for you?”

“Er – I didn’t, you hijacked the call,” Max stammered.

“Ah, yes I suppose I did in a way. I do like to be informed when prominent personalities pay my little backwoods sector a call. And spare me any tiresome false modesty, you have a certain notoriety. Why are you here? I trust you are not planning to extend your little war with Law?”

“I’m a businessman now ma’am,” Max replied. “I’m betting there’s a lot of credits to be made right out here on the edge, providing there aren’t too many security problems, and that’s what I’m here to check out. Are there?”

“We are crushed between the Xenon on one side and the Split on the other and cut off from the rest of the frontier by more Xenon. Of course there are security problems, what do you expect? We can barely raise a finger in our own defence without Njy screaming war, but we survive.”

“How about the Xenon? What about that cruiser that came by?”

“We let it go, Mr Force, like we always do. They go beyond Menelaus Paradise and I don’t care why. My only objection is to them coming out.”

“Do you have any idea what is going on in there, have you sent in any probes?”

“Nothing that goes in has survived long enough to report. Ships vanish and probes destroyed before they can transmit. Without doubt the Xenon are massing an invasion fleet in the sectors beyond and view that one as their first line of defence. You’re planning to go in there aren’t you? I wouldn’t.”

“Neither would I,” Xela whispered.

“I can’t invest without assessing the risks ma’am,” Max answered. “I’ve been through Xenon sectors before.”

“Ah yes. The Universe is well rid of that juvenile sport,” her distaste was palpable, Max suspected she had forgotten that although she was not receiving a visual, because he was out of the ship, he could still see her.

“I wasn’t aware that it had been banned?” Max replied. “Only by the Black Hole Sun locals.”

“Then it’s good that one of us is well-connected Mr Force,” she smiled thinly. “I would seek another hobby, were I in your position. You really should not venture beyond Menalaus Paradise.”

“Are you saying that it’s forbidden?” Max asked carefully.

“No Max, if I could be less formal, wiser people than I have seen fit to grant you an unlimited license. You may kill yourself in any manner you please but it is my job to keep these sectors secure and given the weakness of my position I do that by provoking no-one. I don’t want history to remember Joahan Nibris as the person who

started a new war with the Split or the Xenon. You are free to go beyond the gate but if you do there will be no aid from my sectors, no matter who your friends are."

"Fair enough," Max replied. "Where did the Clan ships come from?"

Nibris stiffened, visibly taking a slow breath as she phrased her reply.

"Split sectors Mr Force, Njy harbours them. One day soon a new clan will appear, here on the Frontier, and I will have another enemy at my throat."

"Yet the ones I saw hadn't been challenged. What were they doing here?"

"They will be at our throat eventually, but until then we make what profits we can from them. My station operators need all the credits they can get, to maintain strong defences. You see our position?"

"I can appreciate it," Max said. "But once I've finished up here I'll be going in."

"In that case," Nibris scowled curtly. "May I be first to extend my condolences."

The link abruptly terminated.

"Well, that was interesting," Xela opined. "I wonder what she's hiding?"

Max agreed.

In two hours they were plunging through hyperspace to the unknown, Xenon sector.

The milli-second the Mamba emerged into the enemy sector Xela triggered the burners, lowered the shields to deploy a Naval Nav-Sat, and raised shields. The explosion that destroyed the satellite sent the slowly accelerating Mamba tumbling off course in a cloud of debris, a massive beam slicing through where she would have been. The coronal discharge rasped across his shields, tearing off chunks, as, pure instinct cutting in, Max threw the Mamba through wild, evasive gyrations that dog-legged away from the gate.

"Two LT's!!" Xela shouted. "Firing again, break right, break right," the beam seared under his left wing as the Mamba rolled, Max wrestling for control as the discharge again battered his shields.

"Left, left, roll, climb!"

The second shot burned harmlessly by and Max quickly dropped two more satellites.

"Jump-drive now Zee, Menelaus Paradise, too, too, hot!!"

In pulse mode the LT's hosed the nav-sats out of existence but it gave him the second he needed to escape their range. A glimpse at the Gravidar showed a swarm of red dots, a dozen fighters at least, converging on his position. At the edge of the range was an unknown capital ship and near the centre of the sector, a large installation.

Max dropped another nav-sat, hoping it would survive long enough to transmit useful information and braced himself for the jump to safety from the rapidly closing forward edge of the attackers.

“Can’t jump Max,” Xela warned. “Fancy pilot stuff now, Max, now!”

The Mamba shuddered under multiple hits, fighters streaming past the cockpit. One fell to an instinctive, pivoting snapshot before the image on his retina registered in his brain.

“What the? These are clan ships!” The missile alarm sounded and Max rolled left and boosted to full speed, calculating his turn to take out a Bayamon with a sustained burst he walked onto its nose.

“And when did we lose the jumpdrive?”

“Drive’s fine Max, nice shot.” A Mandalay exploded as it crossed his sights, he turned inside the trailing missiles to go head to head with a Bayamon, twisting onto its tail as the pilot realised the futility of playing chicken with a 25MW shielded Mamba.

“We’ve no active nav-sats north of Black Hole Sun!”

A point-blank silkworm dropped the Bayamon and Max pulled a full loop, twisting at 180 to dive onto another pair. The wingman was gone before either picked him up. He fired a mosquito to distract the second and turned inside the following missiles again, before accelerating away.

“Target Black Hole Sun?” Xela asked.

“Do it, but hold off. We can’t do an unmasked jump in front of pirates.”

Max abruptly cut speed and did a 180 pivot to take out two pursuing Mandalays with head-on shots. He immediately headed away from the rest of the pack.

“Very nice Max, they were the last of the Mandalays Max, we can outrun the rest. Where are we running to?”

“The other gate Zee. Any LT’s there?”

“None. But look at that station!”

It was just a ramshackle silhouette against the tawny gold of the surrounding nebula but was instantly recognisable as a clan base under construction. Most of the portal were lit and the docking bay, clearly operational. He adjusted course to avoid the LT’s surrounding the base and asked Xela to scan the Xenon cruiser.

“Get up to speed Max,” she replied as she locked the scanner on it.

“What the hell?” Max used the zooms to get a visual confirmation. The silhouette was also distinctive.

It was a Boron Orca.

Max mechanically fought through the fighters the Transporter managed to get between him and the jump-gate, not allowing himself to think about this new factor until the Mamba slid back through the northern jumpgate into Black Hole Sun.

Chapter 10: Counter-strike

“Nav-Sat deployed in Menelaus Paradise, Commander,” Kaitrin reported. “Pegasus returning to base.” She had ordered the mission when the first satellite went dead, following a brief and heated talk with Corrin, who confirmed the suspicions formed from the patterns of movement she monitored through the increasingly complete satellite coverage of their operational areas.

“Who else knows?” He had demanded, aghast.

“No-one lover, I track Max personally,” she said reassuringly.

The satellite was far enough from the gate system to be secure from destruction in the time it would take the Pegasus to reach a jump-gate and Max waited for it’s signal to vanish from the display before he mask-jumped back to the Boron frontier sector.

He ignored the repeated hails from the Boron Trading Station.

“Let her stew Zee, she has to be involved with that base, even if it’s just turning a blind eye in the hope of gaining an ally. Now she’ll think we struck some sort of deal with them. Where there is trust let us sow discord, as they say in the Book of Truth!”

“I’m fairly certain it doesn’t Max, but it’s a good thought. Are we going to war with them now too?”

“Not really our business,” Max replied. “So long as they leave us alone. I’ll talk with Jack, perhaps we can make some credits off of them.”

The return run through Xenon space was less fraught. Kerman, the Paranid pilot of the Pegasus, was pulling a train of Xenon ships around the far fringes of the sector as the Mamba slipped through. Max met only light resistance, which he despatched without ceremony or finesse, shield ramming the XN’s and stuffing missiles up the pipes of the XM’s and L’s with no regard for cost or tactical reserves.

He was tired, he could feel it eating into his concentration, he just wanted home.

“We launch in three hours,” Corrin said as Max climbed down from the cockpit, his feet unsteady on the ladder. “The convoy, remember?” He looked at Max closely, the concern bringing out the fine wrinkles on his face, making him look his age.

“Uh, yea, the convoy,” Max replied, willing another burst of adrenaline to keep him going. It did not come and he handed Corrin a data chip. “Take a look at this, it’s my sensor logs, then send a copy to Manners and to Jackson, see if they know anything about it.”

Corrin tapped the chip a couple of times in his palm and nodded.

“Are you okay Max? That was a long sideshow and you look grey.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said with as much belief as he could muster. “If Daht’s onboard we can’t delay. Someone get me a Java, black and strong enough to melt the spoon.”

He led the way to the Briefing Room, shoulders back and confident of stride until he and Corrin were alone. A technician he was too weary to put a name to delivered the Java. Max nodded thanks and took a sip. The hot, bitter liquid scalded his tongue but he could feel the caffeine pushing through the nerve fibres in his brain, clearing it enough for him to be able to make a couple of cogent alterations to the plan Corrin outlined in the holo-tank.

“If we stick to the schedule Max,” Corrin observed. “You’ll have to take to Mamba out again soon. Are you sure you’re up to it, you look like death?”

Again Max insisted he was fine, despite the beginnings of a headache growing behind his eyes. He put on the shades to give his eyes some respite from the artificial lighting.

Corrin looked at him for a long moment before agreeing. “If you say so Max. You’ll be doing a lot of jumping so I’ll make sure you’ve plenty of energy cells. Kaitrin knows, by the way, about the jump-drive.”

Max groaned. “Who else knows? We can’t have this getting out!”

“Just Kaitrin Max, and she can keep a secret. She handles all your flights and your movements are never incorporated into squad briefings.”

He grinned. “That way, when you pop up to save the day, the troops have something to talk about. How does it feel to be a legend?”

“Great, just great,” Max replied without feeling. “What about Seera?”

“Seera? Ah – Artur’s ship,” he jerked his head towards the flight deck. “The gizmo your lass wanted is being plugged into your ship now,” he fumbled in a thigh pocket and slipped the damaged chip across the table. “And we’ve fixed this to an adaptive interface.”

Max took it.

“It’ll take an hour,” Corrin continued. “Grab a cot, I’ll wake you when it’s done.”

“Let me check that Max,” Xela asked. “Hold it up.”

He held the chip before him.

Circuit diagrams and long strings of symbols, only a few of which he recognised from his engineering extension courses, flashed before his eyes as Xela probed the device.

“Looks fine,” she said in his ear. “The boys have done a great job Corrin,” she spoke from the data padd. Max did a quick double-take at the bi-locational feat. “These new linkers are pretty clever.”

She sighed theatrically. “If only we had a Chip Plant. If you really loved me you’d buy me one.”

Max removed the shades tentatively, replacing them quickly as his headache notched itself upwards.

“Neural suppressant for that pain?” Xela asked. “There’s a kit in the rest-room.”

He doubted a suppressant would do the trick, the headache felt like it was digging in for the duration but to avoid Xela contributing to it he dutifully obeyed, moving the small device over his temples for the prescribed time. It felt like insects crawling on the inside of his skull and made little difference.

Conscious he was facing another long flight he hit the head, groaning with relief as he emptied his bladder, absently wondering how one mug of java could produce so much liquid.

“Now wash your hands big boy,” Xela said as he carefully shook off the last drops. “And never, ever, do that again!”

Max whipped off the shades, burning with an embarrassment only slightly mitigated by the sudden cessation of the headache.

Max tried to sleep but the effort was futile and after a few minutes half-hearted effort he found a terminal and studied the sectors around the proposed convoy route. By the time Corrin found him he had the beginnings of a plan to deal with the clans along the way.

He took a stim before launching.

Corrin called up the sector display and confirmed that all his ships were in position.

“Freighter Group One, go,” he ordered. Three ships, a Lifter and two Raider Bayamons separated themselves from the pack clustered on the obverse side to the jumpgate, safe from the risk of collision with emerging vessels. In close formation they vanished and he switched the display to Chin’s Clouds where a single Piranha prowled around the nav-sat it had just deployed.

He watched the Clan CAP as the Lifter and the two escorts traverse the system but they did not respond. A few minutes later the freighter docked with the Shield Manufacturing Facility, the Bayamons circling the plant protectively until it emerged again.

“Done.” Came the single word confirmation from Kerman. The Paranid, if it were possible, sounded even more taciturn than normal, unhappy at being assigned to a Lifter, even for a short time.

“Well done Max,” Corrin said to himself. He had doubted whether Max would be able to persuade the station to sell any of it’s surplus 25MW shields, but evidently the lure of credits was stronger than fear of the Clans. The de-facto embargo on trade through Scale Plate Green must be hurting, he concluded.

The lifter made it back to Tharka’s Sun without incident. Payter, aboard the Star, shuffled pilots and cargo with the teleport and within minutes a Bat fighter was speeding the purchases to the Equipment Dock in Black Hole Sun.

“Okay people,” Corrin announced over the comm. “Phase Two. Blue Profit via Company Pride.”

If Max was correct they would make a huge profit on the sale of the Quantum Tubes from Treasure Chest but the planned route would take them twice past the Shroda Clan in Company Pride. Corrin trusted Max had that problem in hand.

The three freighters and their escorts lined up and, one by one, jumped to Chins Cloud.

Max’s flight to Company Pride was uneventful despite the number of Clan ships he passed en-route. Xela was uncharacteristically silent as she wrestled with the fragmented data on the damaged chip.

Company Pride was not only one of the main Teladi sectors, it was also the location of the Shroda Clan home base. Despite this it was not a sector where a trader would normally expect trouble, the Shroda Clan was one of the oldest, it’s longevity stemming in part from it’s honouring of the Boron truism.

“Never piss in your own pond.”

According to Borass it lost much in the translation, which he deemed, “Very rude!”

Max smiled at the memory then deliberately buried it, with Hela, his father and all the other dead. He’d been a fighter pilot for a long time and there were many, each face etched sharp.

Max targeted the Clan station and headed towards it, slowing to a halt well beyond the cube of Laser Towers covering the approach. His hails were answered only when he stated his name; a leathered skinned Teladi female, almost impossibly old. She did not introduce herself, there was no need.

“The Matriarch herself!” Xela whistled. “Who’s an important boy then?”

“Maximilian Force,” the Teladi said in a cracked voice, robbed of sibilance by age. “A long time has passed.”

“Don’t look at me,” Xela whispered. “Max didn’t give me a complete bio.”

“It has, ma’am,” Max extemporised. “You look well.”

She made a dismissive gesture, her expression unreadable.

“Your fortunes have changed, Force. Should we be measured by our enemies, then you have grown.”

“No-one got rich ploughing another man’s furrow,” he replied. “Do we have a problem, you and I?”

“Many shipments go missing and trade much disrupted, Force,” her expression was unreadable, even for a Teladi, but her dark eyes glittered. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend, I grieve not for Law and pay credits on delivery. You kill him, he kill you – we have no interests in this matter,” she croaked. “I tell you this. Your fleet comes this way, I know. It may pass in peace, that is what you want to know?”

She leaned towards the screen and her eyes seemed to bore straight into him.

“Outside this sector they will be, as you say, ‘fair game.’ Unless of course, they bear me profit. We understand?”

“We understand,” Max agreed. “The first available shipment will be coming your way.”

The Matriarch nodded and cut the link.

Max exhaled a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“I guess everybody loves an underdog, Zee.”

“I guess everybody wants someone else to do their dirty work, Max,” Xela countered.

“There’s no love lost between the two clans. You won’t find the Skulls so accommodating but I’m sure you have a plan for that. Right Max?”

“Uh huh,” he replied.

“One that involves massive amounts of violence?”

“Not all my plans involve destruction and mayhem!” Max protested.

“Yes they do Max,” Xela replied curtly.

He was still searching for a rebuttal when the Mamba transitioned to Ceo’s Sprite. By the time they docked with the Blue Profit Computer Plant he’d given up.

Law took a deep breath, then another, allowing the implication of the three images to percolate through his body, savouring the sensations like he would savour another’s suffering. He smiled, a tight, distorted smile that pulled at the grafted skin of his ruined face. He enjoyed that feeling too, pleasure and pain, balanced on the cusp.

Below his dias, the third shift, Argon and Teladi hunched in unnaturally fierce concentration over their stations, registered his mood and breathed a small but audible sigh of collective relief, easing the palpable tension.

He ran the sequence again on his data-padd, this time without the astronomer's commentary. The tiny star was moving against the background and, according to the numbers, growing brighter. Too fast for an asteroid, it had to be the probe, inter-planetary drive flaring as it decelerated. It was ahead of schedule and that had to be positive news.

He briefly considered sending his own forces to meet it but, and the thought caused his mood to darken, Force was making a move. He was, Law thought, becoming predictable and he had no doubt the trade convoy would prove to be an element of something more aggressive. His base was secure and his Teladi allies firm, but Force had proven an innovative tactician, Law decided to leave the retrieval to his allies and his forces on the scene.

Law stepped down from his command seat, the force-field raising the hairs on his trunk neck as he passed through.

"Where is the Force convoy now?"

He laid a hand upon the shoulder of the duty tactical officer, a young Teladi whose name he had not bothered to learn. He could feel her body stiffen, it made him smile and think of other things.

"Company Pride ssir," she responded quickly, her voice, a suppressed quaver.

"And they pass, unopposed."

It was not a question, he expected nothing more from the self-styled Matriarch of the Shroda Clan. Her Clan was too wealthy, powerful and well-connected to intimidate and too shrewd to be manipulated by other means, forcing Law to treat with her as an equal. As the venture could not proceed without their economic and financial resources it was a situation he had become resigned to, over the years. He had, however, other, less subtle allies, which Force would discover, should he, as Law anticipated, attempt to pass in strength through the un-regulated sectors to Boron space.

"Force?" He demanded.

"Company Pride also," the Teladi female replied, her voice more confident now. "Heading for Hatikvah's Faith, Ssir. The report is over one hour old."

Law returned to his command seat and ordered a secure channel to the Skull Clan station in Brennan's Triumph. The conversation was short. Matched in ambition and savagery, no persuasion was necessary. The Clan had lost several ships to Force's depredations and much valuable cargo and needed little encouragement. Law

suspected their attempt to interdict either Force or his fleet would end in a humiliation inspired by over-confidence.

That did not matter, the losses would not be his, and if their star dimmed slightly, well, his would shine a little brighter.

“Contact me,” he ordered the room in general. “With further developments.”

There was time for a small diversion.

“You clear on this Zee?” Max asked as the Mamba approached the gate to Brennan’s Triumph. “I’m not a pocket calculator Max,” she replied testily. “I can remember simple instructions.”

“Even if I don’t agree with them,” she added pointedly. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, Zee. Just a little tired, I’ll take another stim though.”

Xela said nothing as the drug hissed into his carotid.

Max let the powerful drug rip more energy from the already well-dredged reserves of his body. It felt good to feel good. The frenetic series of masked jumps and negotiations with a series of station managers to arrange the purchase of surplus majaglit and other materials needed back on the New Frontier had been tiring. He’d had to pay well over the odds to get a pair of independent freighters to fly the goods to Priests Pity without an escort, but the profits would more than cover it, provided Corrin’s convoy could get it back.

He targeted his friends Prometheus among the gaggle of ships holding station near the Brennan jumpgate and opened a channel.

“Talk,” he cut the channel.

The former merc ship, almost invisible against the black of space, turned and drifted closer, on thrusters, and took up station on his port side.

“Laser comm active,” Xela announced momentarily. “Speak freely pilots!”

“Everything ready Corrin?”

“As soon as you drop the sat we’ll be moving. You sure you don’t want back-up?”

“You’ll need all your fighters to get through. When you reach the other side signal the Pity Trading Station and get the goods delivered. If they ask for more credits explain how unhappy that would make me!”

Corrin smiled. “Big bad Max. Will do. Ready for transport?”

“A second, Mirv. On three, Zee. One, two, three.”

He switched off Xela's interface to the ship and carefully placed her chip in a pocket. Max checked the ship computer was functioning correctly and stepped into the small teleport cylinder, crammed into the rear of the small cockpit cabin.

A timeless period of transition and he was in the even more cramped cabin of the Prometheus. Still slightly disoriented he squeezed awkwardly past Corrin as they exchanged places.

"You be careful Max," Corrin cautioned. "I don't have to tell you what the Skulls are like do I?"

"Cold-blooded terrorists in charge of a bunch of raving psychopaths."

"You be bloody careful Max," he said with emphasis. "People get hurt playing with these things."

"I will," Max promised, with a twinge of guilt.

He installed Xela and ran a systems check as he waited for Corrin to disengage the comm lasers and return to his small fleet. Once he had resumed his station, point, one klick ahead of the three freighters, Max flew the Prometheus through the gate.

Brennan's Triumph.

That a Clan controlled a sector whose very name carried such resonance was an insult to every Argon. It was also home to the shattered gateway to Earth and the other races, even, oh so politely, the Boron, insisted no-one controlled the potential access point to what could still be, a destabilising influx of technology and resources. And so it was, the Skull Clan was permitted to seize control of the sector, putting them in a position to impose their own transit tax on trade through the unregulated sectors.

Their base, a typical mix of scavenged technologies and materials patched together into a rough sphere, sat astride the direct route to the northern jumpgate amidst a cluster of asteroids, long since stripped of useful minerals by the Xenon. His fleet would be heading for Split Fire, through the western gate, but Max knew that there would be patrols in position and plenty of time for more to be launched.

"Ready?" Max asked as the Paranid fighter fell through hyperspace.

"Ready," Xela confirmed, poised to transmit the merc security codes as soon as they re-emerged into normal space. She did not think the same trick would work again and the cargo, concealed behind the subtle interference patterns masquerading as random fluctuations in the mercenary ship's sub-space hold, suggested Max too, had his doubts.

"Good!" She thought, with an uncharacteristic venom she noted with interest. Hela had possessed detailed knowledge of the Skull Clan and did not believe there was any point trying to reason with them. Actually docking at Paradise Station, without categoric assurances of a warm welcome, was, Xela thought, unwise.

“I’m using understatement to make a point here Max,” she had said during the discussion. He’d read some of the same files back when he was Gragor and acknowledged the point. “Hence Plan B, Zee,” he had replied with his usual confidence. He had not outlined Plan B. Surprises, he had assured her, were what made life interesting.

Xela hoped it called for massive amounts of violence and destruction.

She had seen files Max had not.

The instant the ship entered the sector she transmitted the codes sector-wide. The Gravidar showed five clan fighters near the gate. Three Bayamons and two Mandalays, nothing Max couldn’t handle. Another flight of five were running CAP around Paradise Station and two more flights of three Bayamons were patrolling near the Split Fire gate.

Max was already accelerating directly towards the Clan Base as she remarked.

“Got the feeling they’re expecting someone?”

“Just a bit,” Max replied as the nearest group of fighters moved to intercept.

“Incoming signal Max, from Paradise. You’re audio only, vocal filters.”

Max opened the link, keeping a careful eye on the closing pack.

The Clan signal was also voice only, speaking Argon with an almost imperceptible accent he could not place. Something alien, possibly Teladi, or even a vocorder.

“Identity acknowledged. State your business.”

“I have a proposition, concerning a common foe, Max Force.” His voice sounded, flat, mechanical.

There was a long pause.

“We understand that your group suffered defeat at the hands of Force, yet now you are here? Please explain.”

“A temporary set-back, which has damaged but not defeated us. It is now personal and it is that we wish to discuss. With someone in authority, not a faceless mouthpiece. Permission to dock and assurance of safe passage.”

There was another pause. By the time the station replied, the Prometheus was closer to it than he would have liked. Close enough to make out the closer laser towers swinging to cover his approach.

“Permission granted. Powering down defences,” the channel fell silent and the closing fighters peeled away back towards the gate.

“That was easy,” Xela observed as the laser towers powered down.

“Yea, real trusting. Keep an eye on the LT’s.”

Max approached the docking point at high speed, slowing only as the huge metal doors parted.

Max let the ship drift through the entrance on momentum, rehearsing the sequence in his mind before…

One – he pivoted the heavy fighter through 180 degrees, barely avoiding collision with the inner wall.

Two – he loaded 4 squash mines into the ejection bay.

Three and Four – he accelerated back towards the closing doors and jettisoned the mines.

Five – he shot through the narrowing gap, screaming his elation!

“LT’s tracking and firing!” Xela yelled.

The first blast caught the Prometheus before it could complete it’s evasive roll, bringing the shields down below 50% but with Xela calling evasive breaks he weaved through the cross-fire, away from the station. A dozen fighters closed on his position.

“Raise the station Zee. Full visual,” he ordered as he targeted the nearest Mandalay, racing onto his six.

“You’re on Max.”

“Paradise station this is Commander Max Force. You have a docking port full of Squash mines, call off your fighters now or they go boom!”

Max turned to engage the first of the Mandalays, destroying it in a head-on pass before Xela reported the remaining fighters were heading towards the station.

“All of them. I want the route through clear, understand?”

He cut the channel.

“They want to speak to us Max, shall I put them on?”

“No, I’ve got nothing to say to these people. Are those fighters moving?”

“They’re RTB’ing Max,” she confirmed. “They still want to speak.”

Max ignored the hails and waited until all fifteen clan patrol ships were orbiting the station.

“They are beginning to be rude Max. Are you sure you shouldn’t make a deal before they disarm those mines?”

“No Zee,” he said with surprising feeling. Perhaps it was the stims or perhaps it was plain fatigue but he was weary of talking, weary of bluff and counter-bluff and couldn’t face the thought of another set of delicate negotiations with people he knew he couldn’t trust. Jackson was more than enough.

“Let the murdering bastards sweat. No, open a channel.”

She complied.

“This is Max Force. I have a convoy coming through this sector shortly. When they’re safe I’ll disarm the mines. Any attempt to tamper with them before then will detonate them. You’ve been warned. And keep those ships where they are.”

He cut the channel again and dropped a nav-sat.

Minutes later Corrin’s small fleet entered the system. On his order, the two escort Piranha left the Bayamons with the freighters and formed on his wing.

Race and Kerman. They would not need telling.

They held station as the trade fleet crawled across the sector, vanishing one by one through the gate to Split Fire.

The last fighter slipped from the screen and he opened a channel to his fighters.

“With me boys,” he ordered, accelerating towards the station at the point of a flying Vee.

At three klicks he detonated the mines, a massive plume of incandescent plasma punched through docking gates, gouting debris into space.

His wing barrelled through the laser defences, too fast to hit and pulled a long turn back towards to Split Fire exit pursued by a furious swarm of fighters.

Three Raiders against sixteen Skulls. It was not a contest.

“Way to make friends Max,” Xela said as the two other Raiders left the sector.

Max thought he could detect a note of approval.

Well, she was going to love this!

Max headed back towards Paradise Station at full speed, rolling and weaving at Xela’s command to avoid LT fire.

With the wrecked docking port looming he fired a two missiles.

The hornets blossomed against shields but they held, as he expected. The two LT's covering the docking approach vanished in the fire and secondary explosions rippled over the ramshackle surface of the base.

"Way to make enemies Max!" Xela shouted. "Attacking stations with hornets is not considered civilised behaviour, you just killed a lot of people!"

"I'm sending the Clans a message, Zee," he replied.

"A message? You wrote something juvenile on the nose-cones? What sort of message do you deliver with a nuclear-tipped missile?"

"That I'm not civilised," he replied shortly.

They flew to Split Fire in silence.

Max and Xela teleported back to the Mamba as soon as he caught up with the rest of his flotilla in Split Fire, leaving the Prometheus to fly his wing on auto-pilot while he talked with Corrin. As they spoke, Xela continued her interrupted analysis of the damaged data-chip.

"Good grief Max, you used Hornets on an installation? Even in an unregulated sector that was a big risk. I assume we're now at war with the Skulls?"

Max shrugged.

"Maybe, maybe not. It depends."

"On what?"

"Whether they got the message or not."

Corrin raised an eyebrow in query.

"What message?"

"That we're a pack of savages operating under no decent moral restraint," Xela called out. "Isn't that right Max?"

Corrin smiled. "Message received I expect. Any idea of casualties girl?"

"He exploded mines in their docking port and dropped hornets on weakened shields. My credits are on 'plenty'," Xela replied, bright and brittle. "Don't you think, Max?"

Max gave an insouciant shrug and wished he'd bought a flask of Java. Now the adrenaline rush had faded, tiredness was creeping back into his system, leaching out from the bones, into the blood and around the body.

“We’ve been hitting their ships and supply routes, they would have come after us eventually, you know that,” Max said. “You know the Skulls, calculating terrorists controlling some of the worst criminals in space. I just spoke to them in their own language, I’m betting they’ll think twice about messing with us now.”

“And if they don’t?” Corrin asked quietly. “Think twice, that is.”

Max shrugged again.

“Then I’ll have to speak with them again. No more messing around.”

Corrin looked at him sharply, wishing he could see his eyes behind the shades. A line had been crossed without him noticing and the universe was turning gray.

The convoy reached Menelaus Frontier without further incident. Corrin teleported back to his ship and led the convoy to Kingdom End while Max docked with the Trading Station.

“…bays inoperative…fires….casualties…emergency….Repeat..”

“It’s a poor signal,” the duty comms officer reported. “The problem is at their end,” he added nervously.

“Improve it,” Law ordered, from his command dias. “And transfer it to my office.”

He paused and thought for a few moments.

“Then ensure I can speak to Skull. Use the Teladi commerce network if necessary.”

The static striated image of the woman on the main viewer froze, faded and returned as the officer played with options. When the transmission appeared on the wall-mounted screen in the small suite off the main control centre he used as a Ready Room, the quality of the picture had not improved, but the filters suppressed more of the static bursts disfiguring the audio channel.

“Repeating. Your assistance is required. Paradise Station has been attacked. Docking bays are inoperative, casualties unknown but high. Emergency assistance is required. Repeating.”

Law let the message loop several times before muting the audio.

“Force!” He snarled the word through clenched teeth to release some of the cold fury battering his self-control.

His communications officer appeared in a small window, superimposed on the screen, sweating and wide eyed.

“Your open channel, as ordered sir.”

He swallowed nervously.

“It’s the best I can do.”

“Then I cannot expect more,” Law replied evenly, cultivating ambiguity. “Put me through.”

The automated distress call went dead. A second later the picture reformed, head and shoulders emerging in outline from the static, solidifying into an image leached of colour depth.

“Skull.”

“Law,” the shaven headed woman replied.

She looked seventeen, all trace of age smoothed away by bone-white make-up punctuated only by the scarlet gash of her lips. She had looked seventeen for as many years as Law had known of her.

“I take it Force is responsible for your situation?”

She shook her head.

“I am Skull, I am responsible for all that happens,” she returned, as uncompromising as ever.

“But Force was the instrument of my lesson. He attempted to masquerade as one of your hirelings and I sought to ensnare him. He exploded mines in my docking tunnel, destroyed all my patrols and fired hornet missiles at my station. At my station, Law. As yet we have no idea how he concealed these weapons from our scanners.”

“I can assume your ships are on their way?”

Less of a question, more of an imperious demand.

“You can assume that,” Law replied. “But with Force along the route you would be wise to explore other options.”

Her eyes narrowed and bored into him across the light-years. Law worked at not avoiding the penetrating gaze.

“He is a clever foe, Law. He must be dealt with.”

Law suppressed the triumphant smile twitching his lips.

“A point I have put to you often of late. How soon can your forces be ready, how badly were they damaged?”

“The damage is - somewhat extensive. Blast doors protected most of my brethren and my vessels, but the slave-pen burns.”

“We will make Force the first of your new subjects!” Law enthused. “Our combined might will sweep him away!”

He punched his fist for emphasis.

Skull regarded him for a long, unblinking, moment.

“You are a fool,” she said finally. “With our enterprise finally coming to fruition, you make us an enemy from a potential friend.”

She spat the accusation.

“Violence, Law, is a tool, not a means to satisfy casual lusts. Force tells me by his actions that he understands that and I acknowledge his message. Men with this understanding are to be feared. Feared and embraced. He has resources and potentials we can use, join with me in the embrace.”

His comprehension trailed his hearing. When the two met, Law visibly stiffened.

“Force has dealt me many injuries and injustices,” he snapped in raw fury. “My honour demands vengeance!”

“Honour!” Her contempt burned through the static. “Creatures like you know nothing of honour. You send me no ships and would exploit my weakness if you could. But you need my shipyards.”

“And you need my allies and my resources.”

She leaned close to the monitor, close enough for Law to look deep into her eyes, dark, glittering and too old for her face.

“Cleave to our alliance Law, or you will find I have more friends and more resources than you think. And you less. Daht is no friend of yours.”

Law worked hard on his impassivity, knowing a look of pure hatred had scuttled across his face.

“Daht is of no concern and I will not risk losing more ships to Force, his fleet is still nearby,” he said, as smoothly as he could. “When I have dealt with him, my help will arrive.”

“Hah!” Skull snapped, contempt openly blazing. “You are a coward, as well as a fool. Make terms with Force, before he sweeps you away.”

“When he is next in my claws I will destroy him. My allies are strong – and now inclined to act.”

“As I have said before, your position is vulnerable and your reliance on the forbearance and co-operation of your Teladi allies, a weakness. One day they will fail you. Contact me when the probe returns and do not be tempted by my current, temporary problems, to foreswear your oath.”

A dismissive nod off-screen and the channel went dead.

Law stood in frozen rage.

Max sipped the Java gratefully but did not allow himself to relax into the deep upholstery for fear his body would just give in to the need for sleep. He’d take another stim before launching. It would, he promised himself, be the last one. This mission at least.

Sinas had no such inhibition, he had bid a huge amount for the set, more than an entire years salary, more than they were worth, despite their age. But, he reasoned, he had little else to spend it all on and he felt he had earned a luxury. He sank back into the leather and swirled the whisky, breathing the aroma in deep, before taking a generous sip.

“Nibris? Menelaus Paradise, correct? No I don’t know her, know of her though. An outstanding administrator I understand. She carries the complete confidence of her Prince, who, between you and me, takes no interest at all in his duties. Why?”

Max outlined their encounter, mentioning the Orca he’d tracked on the fringe of the clan sector.

“It would not be the first time a Sector governor has come to an accommodation with a clan,” Sinas observed when Max had finished. “Being that close to the Njy would make any Boron nervous. I’m inclined to believe there is nothing more sinister going on. If it leads to a Boron ownership of the sector, her Prince will be feted. Meanwhile it keeps the Xenon from her borders.”

He smiled. “The enemy of my enemy….”

“I’m not so sure,” Max said. “Call it instinct. Can you see what else you can find out?”

“I will try,” Sinas agreed. “But, as you well know, the Boron are as capable of turning a blind eye to means, as anyone, provided the end is achieved. Success is it’s own justification.”

“Your call, Sinas. She’s way off my route and so long as her friends don’t bother me, I won’t bother them.”

Max finished the java and poured himself another cup.

“Have you heard anything from our mutual friend?”

“No, but I haven’t dared look too hard. There are others asking questions and I would not like to be the one to lead his enemies to him.”

“Law?” Max asked.

“That would be my informed guess,” Sinas agreed. “Have you had more problems with him?”

“Not recently,” Max replied. “But I’m about to. My ships are heading back through Teladi Gain, I’m guessing he’ll have to respond.”

“Guessing or hoping?” Sinas asked.

Max just smiled.

“You be careful there Max, his allies control that sector and just might take it upon themselves to do more than studiously ignore any trouble. They have a lot of ships there.”

“I’m a legitimate trader Sinas, thanks to you. They can’t take the Clan side openly.”

“I think you might be over-estimating the Teladi fondness for playing by the rules, Max,” Sinas warned.

“I don’t think so,” Max replied, dead-pan.

As his fleet, buttressed by an Eel and two new Piranha fighters, entered the sector, Max launched, invigorated by the drugs surging through his veins.

“You need to see this Max,” Xela stated before they’d even cleared the docking port, “I took it from the UNN feed.”

Max set a leisurely course towards the gate to Teladi space, where he was to join the rest of the convoy, currently crawling at the speed of the slowest through the sector.

“Run it Zee.”

The Universal News Network logo, a stylised bi-pedal being of indeterminate species, rotated in from infinity as the theme played; urgent, authoritative and self-important.

‘Breaking news….breaking news…..breaking news,’ scrolled across the screen as the newsreader faded in. Max did not recognise her, young, blonde and perky. She smiled broadly, white teeth, perfectly even, a smile that said, ‘I’m new, love me!’

“Good evening, I’m Maxin Roberson, and this is the UNN Galaxy Affairs Channel.”

“Get on with it woman,” Max muttered under his breath.

“Reports are coming in of an attack on the Skull Clan position in Brennan’s Triumph.”

Icons appeared on screen, leading to the history of the sector, background on the Skull Clan and Brennan’s War.

“The inaptly named, Paradise Station, long rumoured to be a centre for illegal medical experimentation, is said to have suffered extensive damage in the attack. It is claimed that hornet missiles were used in the assault and that sentient casualties are high.”

She paused briefly, to look solemn.

“Hornet missiles cannot be legally owned by private individuals or corporate entities but it is known that many remain in Clan hands. All species deny any responsibility for the assault, but a spokes-being for the Argon Navy has said that inter-clan rivalry is the most likely cause. However in an unusual statement issued by the Teladi Trading Company, it is claimed that ships belonging to Max Force were in close proximity.”

A new set of icons appeared, linking to biographical and company details.

“Max Force, a reformed pirate, emerged from the anonymity of the Relocation Programme, to star in the last Gate Race, in Black Hole Sun, before all species banned the so-called sport. Holder of the first full traders license to be issued in decades, he has established a business empire based on drugs and gambling in Teladi space.”

“There have been repeated clashes between his ships and those of the Clans, including an attempt to destroy his facilities with hornet missiles.”

She paused to look mildly disapproving.

“Max Force is unavailable for comment but a spokesperson issued this statement on his behalf.”

Anje Delenari appeared on screen. Behind her a party appeared to be going on, drunken revellers stumbling past or pausing to stare, bleary eyed into the camera, forcing it to focus tightly on her face. Her dark eyes flashed anger into the lens as she vehemently denied any Force involvement with the incident.

“Force Securities is a legally constituted corporation. The possession and use of hornet missiles is forbidden by treaty. Therefore Force Securities cannot possess such items and therefore could not be involved in the alleged assault. I have nothing further to add.”

She stormed off screen.

“Well, I’m convinced,” Xela commented wryly.

“More news as we get it,” the blonde smiled brightly.

“And in other news, attempts by the University of Argos City, to declare Professor Challenger legally dead have failed in the High Court. The noted explorer has been missing for..”

Max terminated the playback.

“I really should get myself a lawyer, Zee,” he joked dismissively.

“You’re missing something,” she replied. “Daht’s enemies are trying to get to him by discrediting you. Perhaps we should take the long route back and avoid Teladi Gain?”

“And miss the chance for some righteous smiting?”

“It depends who is smiting whom, Max. We caught the BTG’s with that ambush trick, I’m not sure Stoertebeker is going to fall for it.”

“Hence the wrinkle, Zee.”

“What if he has a ‘wrinkle’?”

“Mine’ll trump it. I’ve thought it through, you haven’t. How’s that analysis coming?”

“You gamble too much Max. I know what you’re banking on and I think the stims are making you over-confident. I can practically feel you buzzing.”

“I can handle it Zee, I need to be alert. The analysis?”

“Close, Max. Very close. I can recreate the sector co-ordinates and I think there’s a time/date in there somewhere.”

“What sector?”

“You’re not going to like it,” she replied. “Certainty only 97.45% as yet. Watch this space.”

“ASAP, Zee. ASAP.”

The Mamba formed up with the rest of his fleet; Six Bayamons, four Piranhas, a Prometheus, an Eel and a Pegasus, protecting the three Lifters. On his signal they slipped across the border to Ceo’s Buckzoid.

“How long?”

The words came thick and slurred, making no sense, even to himself.

The blurred white shape moved and he felt a warm hand lift his head gently from the pillow and something put to his lips.

“Here, just a few sips, that’s it, good,” the voice was male, soft-spoken.

“How long?” His tongue could move now. “What date is it?”

Just phrasing the question left him weak, willing to slip back into unconsciousness, but he forced himself to calculate the days.

It could have been worse.

“It could have been worse.”

He realised he had spoken the words aloud.

“A lot worse,” the voice agreed. It sounded familiar and comforting. “And a lot better. I’m going to give you a shot now, something to wake you up. For a short time.”

He didn’t notice the drug being administered but felt the effects almost instantly.

“Brother Fenris,” he said with unalloyed relief as his vision cleared.

“Brother,” the man named Fenris replied softly. “Brother.”

His eyes shone, glistened and a tiny tear trickled un-noticed down an angular face, whose natural solemnity was only heightened by the close-shaven hair barely filming his skull.

“That you should come to this.”

Alarm, like a sudden, slam, tropical dawn, blazed.

He could not feel his legs.

Law watched the progress of the Force fleet from Ceo’s Buckzoid down through Profit Share and into Seizewell.

Real-time intelligence, it was a luxury he was rarely afforded, as no sector, no matter how friendly or corrupt the authorities, would dare allow him or his proxies to deploy a nav-sat network. This access to the Teladi Naval Network, as Jeriak Morn had made excessively clear, was temporary.

Strictly temporary and expected to yield a high return.

He had not liked her tone, it lacked even the customary patina of respect that coated their business relationship. The attack on Paradise Station had cracked her nerve, he could see it in her reptile eyes. It was a weakness and one he had pushed to exploit, working at the cracks, forcing a chink until she gave in, assenting to a wild throw of the dice.

Winner takes all.

And loaded dice.

Force was aiming to cut across the fringe of the Teladi Gain sector, a short quick run from the south gate to the eastern exit to Split territory, exposing his ships for the shortest time. He could have blockaded the gate, stopped Force coming through. That was not a problem, he still had the ships, he still had the pilots. Not as many and not as good and now that Force had inflicted serious losses on the Skull Clan he knew he could expect few replacement machines from their hidden yards for some time. Force would merely have slipped back along another route.

No, Law wanted a confrontation. On his own ground.

He still had plenty enough ships for this, even taking into account the rest of Force's pitiful fleet, lurking in the Family Whi Trading Station, like a club behind the back. It was the same strategem Force had employed against his sometime Split allies and he was a fool to believe it would work again.

And Force was no fool, he had another trick up his sleeve and it worried Law that he could not fathom it. There was always the possibility of more Force allies coming in through Ceo's Buckzoid although no ship movements suggested it. Even so, his base was too near the connecting jumpgate and although he did not believe Force would dare risk firing hornet missiles at his station, the thought itself was disconcerting.

After careful deliberation he gave the order for half his Falcon wing to re-deploy back to base.

It would not in any way weaken the surprises Law had in store for the upstart.

He had been a worthy foe, cleansing him of his own weakness and complacency, in many ways, Law realised, he owed him a debt. It was a curious notion and Law almost laughed at the thought as he looked around his Inner Sanctum for the best location to display Force's severed head.

Chapter 11: Seconds Out

Fear. It was an innervation he could almost savour or smell it like a perfume, subtle and arousing, a collective response to the situation and his own presence, looking down over the taut backs of his battle staff.

Good. Like the extra credits already sequestered in their hidden accounts, like the bonus promised for every downed Force ship, like the largesse, unspecified but dangled like a lure, that would follow victory. Greed too, was good.

The strategy was set, it was coming down to tactics now. Tactics and timing. Stark prowled the Command Centre. Unmoving, Law followed him with his eyes, pacing. One, two, three, turn. One, two, three, turn. Like a caged beast, in the almost claustrophobic confines of the newly operational control centre, deep in the heart of the station, behind extra screens, powered by their own generators.

He could feel those throbbing too, under his feet, as reassuring as the foot thick blast doors. He was confident Force would not dare use Hornets against him, in a controlled sector, he was also confident he would not get the chance. A dozen laser towers, pulse and beam, would scour his ships from space before they could become a threat.

Six of the curve blade Teladi Falcons stood ready to launch. His elite, his personal mailed fist, loyal through pampered privilege only he could offer. Stark would have been leading them, but for the ruined eye. In Law's opinion the patch improved the man, gave character to the small grey man. And at least his remaining eye burnt with more than cunning.

Law could see hatred there now, for Force, and that was something he trusted. It was why he preferred humans for important roles, they had motives he could see. The Teladi, their reptilian souls barely shone through, only avarice glittered in their slit irises.

So it was humans who flew the Teladi fighters, bought at great expense and transferred with convoluted secrecy from his allies. Humans, who guarded the battle bridge, as their commander, still pacing, had christened it. The man had insights and stratagems and Law knew a good tool when he saw one.

Pacing.

Law sensed his frustration, could see it burning in his single eye. If he lifted the patch he expected it to burn from the destroyed socket, red. That rage was focused now, focused on the man who had cost him his place on the flight-line, even if Force had not himself pulled the trigger that had burned away his binocular vision.

Tactics and timing, it was up to Stark now.

Stark ceased his prowl, stopping behind the Teladi female controlling the tactical tank. He could feel Law's attention, feel it on the nape of his neck, feel the hairs lift

as if it was a new sensory organ, attuned to malice. He returned the stare, holding it long enough to serve as a statement of equality, not a challenge.

"Seizewell," he commanded.

The multi-grid display, showing all the local Teladi controlled sectors in a 3D cube, dissolved and reformed, into a single sector. He stalked around the hexagonal console, soaking up the information from different perspectives, sometimes pausing to highlight individual ships for detailed examination.

It was a small fleet, fourteen fighters, fifteen if you counted the Pegasus, but he knew Force would use that for search and rescue. Fourteen fighters would not be enough to protect 3, slow-moving Lifters, even allowing for the superior quality of most of the ships and the mediocre skills of the scum sticking to Law's banner.

Force knew that. Force would also know Law's fighters were hidden in the Flower Farm along the path to the Family Whi jump-gate, even though they had sneaked them across the sector in the time it took a Force vessel to replace his destroyed Nav-Sat. Force would also know he was missing something, something less obvious. Force was a foe that demanded respect, he always had been but now there was more, now that he had set up in business for himself.

Stark looked at Law again, now focused entirely on the mirror of the Tactical Tank projected on his left, from his command station.

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. It was a quote he'd heard somewhere, probably Boron.

Apposite.

Force was something new, a creature in the gray, twilight shadows between the legal and the illegal, and it gave him advantages he had been quick to exploit. Good ships, a satellite network, installations, friends.

Force had a goal he was assiduously working towards and it was not to be a weeded-up night-club owner. Force wanted to be a power and Force was coming for everything Law had. Not now, necessarily, but he was coming, coming with that damn Mamba and whatever new technologies helped him hijack ships at will. Coming with whatever he had stolen from the Black Mercs, hornets and hell knows what else.

He was coming, Stark could see it and Skull knew. Skull always knew these things. Even Law was beginning to see it, dimly through whatever demons possessed him. This wasn't the vicious sparring that put Clan against Clan until one cried pax, no serious damage done. Law was good at that. This was war.

Now, with him in control, it would end. The sudden stab of hatred was unexpected and invigorating. His eye throbbed and the dead retina burned, despite what the doctors said.

The Seizewell convoy was closing on the northern gate now, slowing and shuffling formations, the heavy fighters coming to the fore, the Boron Piranhas taking the second rank. Force would recon first, and then send the fighters to clear a path through Teladi Gain. Stark wished Teladi politics permitted him to secrete a strike force in Seizewell but was sanguine at the lack.

Never focus on what you can't have.

Force could see his path was clear, from his own satellite network, but was too wily to fall for the ambush.

That was why more of his fighters were lurking in Family Whi. Law lacked satellite coverage beyond the Teladi borders but the intelligence updates from his spies in that sector came through commercial channels, hidden and encrypted. It wasn't real-time or precise but it was good enough. They even knew some of the Raider pilots had swapped their Bayamons for Teladi Hawks, courtesy of an emboldened General Daht.

Stark was aware there were deeper forces at work, a sub-structure to these sparrings. Daht versus Morn for one and even that could be seen as just a puppet show for deep, seismic shifts in Teladi culture. Or perhaps it was just the great seizing what they willed? Either way he knew he was in some way involved in something pivotal, an outward sign of something significant.

And then there was the Enterprise. Something really deep, with currents linking the most unlikely of bed-fellows. A mystery wrapped in an enigma. Another saying of unknown provenance. He sometimes wondered how little he knew of the business, despite knowing more than most would suspect.

Stark did not know the precise strength of the second Force fleet, anything up to twenty more fighters. It would make no difference. His forces were greater, on their own ground and co-ordinated by him. With luck they would be able to get through to the returning probe, the little shared sub-text of this war.

He wondered if it was a coincidence, that Force would be attacking at this crucial time, or that he had chosen Scale Plate Green for his base. Stark suspected Force knew much more than he should.

The traitor, the Fat Man.

"Blind him," Stark ordered. The Teladi female operating the holo-tank called out the sectors, one by one, in a sibilant hiss, until all the Force satellites in central Teladi space had been destroyed.

"Trouble, Max," Xela warned. "We're losing satellite coverage. Ceo's Sprite, Spaceweed Drift."

She paused.

“Damn! Did you see that? A bat just whacked our sat! Max, every nav-sat in the Teladi home sectors are down. Shall I release the hounds on that guy?”

“No, he’s high-tailing it out, just drop another. Have all the others gone, even Teladi Gain, again?”

“That’s what the word ‘every’ tends to mean Max, unless the word ‘except’ follows on closely.”

“Do we still have Kaitrin?” Max asked.

“On course and on schedule Max. Entering Family Whi shortly.”

“Okay. Tell Sarge to start sweeping.”

Xela sent the signal to the Family Whi nav-sat and watched the two Force Bats launch from the Trading Station. A Piranha followed. All three ships arrowed towards the single Bat, loitering by the entrance to Teladi Gain. It retreated through the gate before they could intercept.

“Prying eyes closed Max,” she announced. “At least we are even.”

Max looked to the two ships, stationary on his wing, raised a clenched fist and gestured towards the gate.

Race, still grinning with the sheer pleasure of flying one of the Boron heavy fighters, returned a thumbs-up. Paskaal, grim faced, nodded from the black Prometheus.

There was no tiredness now, just that empty stomach knot and that always nagging question. Is this the day?

Intimations of mortality.

He wondered where that saying came from, as the three fighters arrowed towards the jump-gate.

“I can’t feel my legs.” It came out tentative, an invitation for denial, for a comforting explanation. His brother looked down, sadness and sympathy.

“You have no right leg, Artur. The damage was simply too extensive. And your right arm also, was severely injured. With time and work, that can be rebuilt with synthetic tissue. There was some trauma to the brain, but no significant damage.”

“My other leg?” He attempted to feel it with his functioning arm, it flopped and twitched uselessly, dangling down the side. Jan replaced it gently.

“That will be fine Artur, as will this arm. Drugs and neural inhibitors to control the pain. Now that you are conscious we can implement a rehabilitation program.

Cybernetic limbs are very functional now, with nerve regeneration you could be dancing in six months or so. Half that, knowing you, you stubborn old bastard!"

Jan smiled sadly.

"It's been a very long time Artur, why did you come here?"

"Here?" The small room could have been any private room in any hospital in Argon space and Jan's white, perma-clean, tunic was a generic medical uniform. And professionally, assumptions must verified.

"The Temple, Artur. We have the best of facilities and I imagined discretion was called for. No-one knows you're here."

He corrected himself.

"No-one here knows who you really are," Jan indicated his own pencil physique and fop of red hair. "We show no family resemblance."

He paused.

"And I can still seed a good cover story."

"You should never have left."

"And you should not have stayed."

Means and ends. It was an argument, long grown cold.

"My ship?"

"It left. We attempted to prevent it, but it was rather insistent. The Seera Marie, that's an interesting choice of name. You still think of her?"

Artur smiled ruefully, avoiding his probing eyes.

"True love happens only once. How is Dain?"

"He is well, thank-you. He seeks. I worry, sometimes."

"You should arm those poxy little ships brother. The universe is a dangerous place."

"And will teach you nothing if you resist it's lessons."

Another old argument.

"And you are my personal physician?"

Jan nodded.

“I’ve found my calling.”

Artur looked him straight in the eye.

“I know Jan, and I’m sorry.”

Jan took his brother’s undamaged arm. The hand was clammy cold and returned his gentle squeeze with a spasmodic twitch but now he was awake they could begin physiotherapy.

“I know you are Artur, you always have been. You just haven’t said it until now.”

“Peace isn’t something the tooth fairy brings Jan. It has to be fought for and protected. You know what is at stake.”

Jan nodded.

“You also need faith.”

“I have faith, in my own actions.”

Jan shook his head.

“Faith, with a capital F, Artur. Max Force, is he a product of your faith?”

“Why?” Artur said warily. “Do you ask?”

“I recognise your style. Beware of double-edged swords. I’ve made sure this suite has full and secure data access, voice control too. Viewer.”

A thin-film screen slid down from the ceiling, coating the opposite wall.

“I’m sure you want privacy for this. Everything is encrypted and the room is not monitored. I don’t expect you to take my word though. And, as your doctor I’m telling you, you need to eat. How does fish eggs and fizzy wine sound?”

“Nothing like caviar and champagne,” Artur rejoined, realising how hungry he was.

Jan left, reappearing a few minutes later with a small silver tray. Artur declined his help and forced his one arm to his will, painstakingly grasping a tiny toast triangle and scooping a generous portion of the rich, black, sticky mass. Most of it reached his mouth and as he chewed he felt for the first time, black despair.

He could taste nothing.

The fighters emerged from the jump-gate and rolled onto a heading for the eastern gate without breaking formation. Paskaal dropped a nav-sat as soon as they were clear. There were no enemy fighters, not even around the Clan station, and sector security was conspicuous only by it’s total absence.

“It’s quiet,” Xela whispered theatrically. “Too quiet!”

“I guess everyone knows something is going down,” Max replied. “Except that guy.”

He zoomed in close on the Transporter, confirming the huge slant-faced flying box was heading directly for the Seizewell gate, it’s small screen of Bats flitting around it’s massive bulk. His signal was answered instantly.

“Captain to pilot,” the Teladi hissed. “Let uss make good profits together.”

“Not today thanks,” Max replied. “Just a friendly warning, we’re expecting trouble. You might want to clear the area.”

“Captain to pilot. We deliver to Greater Profit, with you we have no quarrel. With Clans we have no quarrel.”

“Fair enough bud,” Max replied. “Just keep out of the way.”

He cut the channel.

“Zee, how’s the timing coming?”

“My metaphorical finger is over the imaginary button Max, our people will be through before the big bird blocks the gate. I’m talking to Kaitrin, leave it all to me.”

“And Daht?”

“Leave it all to me Max,” she re-iterated. “They aren’t big or difficult words. Fleet 1, inbound.”

On the sector display, green icons blossomed around the Seizewell gate.

Max kept a wary eye on the Dream Farm as his wing closed.

“Perhaps they are going to let us through?” Xela opined as the Mamba swept past the hulking Albatross.

“And Chelt might fly,” Max retorted. “They’re waiting to cut us off from the fleet.”

“Change of plan,” Max announced over the comm. “Keep formation.”

A touch on the burners and the Mamba accelerated to full speed. Paskaal, in the faster Prometheus, tucked onto the wing of Race’s Eel, as Max shot away.

“Cut the sensor screen Zee, and load up all the Squashes. Let’s see what we can smoke out.”

“Done and done, Max.”

The docking lights on the looming station began to flash and as the Mamba shot towards the docking port the first red icons appeared on the screen. His target lock switched automatically to the first fighter. More ships were launching as he swept over the station, mines tumbling from his hold.

"Launch the second wave," Stark ordered, outwardly impassive in the face of the carnage Force had wreaked on his ambush. He could feel Law's regard, a chill on his neck. We scanned him, he wanted to say. Nothing, he was carrying nothing. But he knew excuses accounted for nothing also.

Ten ships gone. Three of them, his Falcons. Gone.

The Force Mamba was already sweeping round to engage the ships gouting from the Flower Farm, which had shielded Force from the blast. The other two fighters were entering the combat zone now and the first of the Seizewell convoy was emerging from the jump-gate.

He stole a swift glance. Law was whispering urgently to someone on his own comm. channel, he could not catch the words but the conversation ended abruptly, before he could look away.

Law held him in an ice stare.

"By attacking a commercial station, Force has committed an act of war against the Teladi Trading Company," he intoned. "Help is at hand."

A sop to Teladi legality.

Stark had planned a different causus belli, but as a cause for war, this would do. For once, Force had failed to judge the consequences of his actions. Hoisted by his own petard, to use another antique expression.

The first sector defence wings, Falcons and Bats, were launching now, their IFF's registering friendly in the tank.

"Those who sow the wind," he muttered to himself. There was much wisdom in ancient saws. He opened a channel and issued his new fighters their orders.

The flash filled the cockpit and, even attenuated by the mass of the station, the energy wave caught the Mamba with enough power to send it careening, out of control for long seconds as Max wrestled stability from the controls.

He'd hoped, without expectation, that the station docking port would be disabled, but more fighters were launching through the wreckage of their comrades.

The three Force heavy fighters fell upon them before they could improvise a new battle order, hacking a swathe through the lightly shielded Bayamons and spewing

missiles to keep the Falcons busy as they banked for another, murderous pass through the roiling chaos of ships.

Xela spoke in a continuous monologue, calling missile breaks to the three pilots and tactical updates on the convoy progress for Max. She noted the fighters launching from the Trading Station. Max acknowledged the report with a short grunt as he concentrated on staying alive in a sky now filling with clan fighters.

Max watched their progress and the passage of the Lifters with lightning glances at the sector display, stretching time with his will, to take in all the data. The enemy were regrouping now, presenting no easy kills and three unit flights were breaking from the combat zone, heading for the convoy as it curved around the Albatross and it's fighter retinue.

The convoy fighter screen moved to intercept, in loose wing-man pairs, leaving two Bayamons to guard the three Lifters.

Other Clan fighters were making for the eastern gate.

They knew, Max realised, reinforcements were due.

A Falcon and two more Bayamons fell to his guns before, two dozen Bayamons and five Falcons almost on top of the jump-gate, he gave Xela the word.

Seconds later, Kaitrin's mobile command base, a Vulture and a protective huddle of Bayamons burst through the rapidly blinking gate. The Clan ships opened fire immediately, raking the heavily shielded freighters and rapidly breaking fighters indiscriminately. Three Force fighters died on the first pass.

No pilots ejected.

More Force fighters jumped in, slightly re-dressing the balance, and the Command Ship laser turret spat coruscating streams of plasma, ripping through Bayamon shields. Then the leading edge of the first wave of sector defence fighters struck.

Three more Force fighters fell, two pilots ejecting. A Pegasus S & R flitted perilously through the storm to pluck them to safety.

Max's gravidar blossomed red as Kaitrin re-designated the sector defence ships hostile.

It was then the Albatross escort broke off and headed back, straight for the convoy.

Kaitrin swallowed hard as her ship, and she did think of it as hers, The All-Seeing-Eye, shuddered under the cosh of enemy fire and resonated with the dull, thump, thump, thump, of it's own cannons. She tried to ignore it and tried to ignore the falling shield strength indicator as she co-ordinated fighter movements. In the background her Angels whispered urgently into throat mikes, multiplying the impact of the out-numbered Force fleet with the tactical updates fed from Max's ship.

It was working, but not as well as it had during the battle for Scale Plate Green. This time the attackers were better co-ordinated too, on their own turf.

"Now Max, now," she whispered as the first wave the sector defence fighters smashed into her fleet. The Vulture too, was taking hits, Clan Bayamons pressing home their attacks on the slow and vulnerable freighter, through the tenacious resistance of it's Bat, Hawk and Bayamon defenders.

There were two separate battles being waged, the one around the gate and the one around the Flower Farm. Neither was going well, for her side, despite much smaller losses.

Her stomach reacted to the sudden change in the behaviour of the Albatross escorts before her brain caught up with her eyes. It told her these ships were not moving the help the Force freighters, whose escorts were now skirmishing with Clan fighters attempting to break through the picket.

Instinct, intuition, gut. The trick was knowing when to trust it. She trusted it now and with a wave of her control wand she selected them all and designated them hostile. Immediately the remaining Bayamon pair, the freighters last line of defence, moved to intercept.

Two of them against six Bats and Six Hawks. There would be only one outcome. Even as she shouted Max a warning, more fighters spewed from the Albatross launch-bays. Max's Mamba disengaged from the Flower Farm melee, heading straight for the freighters.

It could make no difference.

She didn't wait for Max's order and hailed the Vulture.

Stark kept the feeling of exultation tightly locked in his chest, breathing slow and deep, impassive. His own pilots flew the Albatross escorts and their loyalty was never in doubt. The following ships though, they were the Transporters own, and despite Director Morn's direct instructions and bribes, Stark had not been sure, until this moment, that her Captain would obey what was a blatantly illegal order, blast damage to the shields of the Flower Farm notwithstanding.

The victors though, they write their own history and the Teladi loved the winning, most profitable side. Nothing now could protect the Force freighters, not even Force, whose ship was rocketing towards them. The odds were simply too great.

He drank in the tactical situation from the tank, instantly absorbing and extrapolating. Even if Force conjured reinforcements through either gate it would be too late. The only question now was, how many ships Force could get back to his base. Stark would pursue him all the way. He had been a reasonable foe, but had come up one trick short. Stark looked at Law, he returned a short, feral smile.

Then a voice, Teladi sibilant but familiar, a sector-wide transmission.

Stark felt the blood in his veins freeze, felt the vessels in his head constrict, almost one by one, in the stretched-out micro-second it took his brain catch up with his body's recognition. That voice. He brushed the communications officer aside, pushing the Teladi from her seat and verified the ID code encrypted in the signal.

No!

"Attention all Teladi forcces" A small, almost imperceptible pause for effect.

"This is General Daht," he continued, knowing that already confirmation of his identity and the validity of his over-ride command codes embedded in his transmission, was appearing under his image, on every Teladi HUD in the sector.

"My sship and escorts are under attack from Clan forccess."

The transmission, routed through the Force command vessel, updated every Teladi IFF with new codes.

"I identify my esscorts."

He paused, again, for a bare second.

"ALL Teladi Trading Company shipss are ordered to assist."

He paused again and sought the precise timbre.

"I call on you again. For honour."

The Teladi are considered by most to be a venal race, focused on profits and personal gain. A depiction painted in broad strokes but true enough, it was why those Teladi who gave up the pursuit of personal profit to protect the TTC with their lives, took the Oath of Renunciation, were distrusted.

It was why Daht was feared.

But no species claws its way to sentience, no species is inspired to seek the stars, and no species founds an Empire without some martial metal in their souls, without that spark of pride that flares in response to great deeds.

And when the Victor of Ianamus Zura, when The General called, that fire was rekindled.

Hearts swelled and throats constricted, backs stiffened with lost pride.

Stark watched in a perma-frost horror as the first IFF changed from green to red, then another. And the trickle became a flood, sweeping across the Tactical Tank, engulfing the isolated islands of friendly-force green.

The Battle Bridge filled with inchoate, panicked distress calls as the Sector Defence forces turned on the Clan ships. Behind it there was a throbbing under-tone, growing, swelling into a metronome beat that drowned out everything else.

“Daht, Daht, Daht.”

“Daht, Daht, Daht.”

The second wave of Albatross fighters fell upon the Clan attackers like a tsunami, sweeping them aside with a ferocity equalled across the sector, but not before the trailing Lifter exploded in a triple cross-fire.

Max wasn’t thinking now, just reacting, flying through the iridescent magalit cloud to take down two of the Hawks before rolling onto the tail of a lone Falcon.

Daht, Daht, Daht.

His weapons seemed to pulse with the beat.

Daht, Daht, Daht.

The blood pounding in his ears took up the refrain.

Daht, Daht, Daht.

His plasma’s ripped into to Falcon shields.

Daht, Daht, Daht. Xela was shouting, screaming for his attention.

The Falcon exploded, close enough for the pilot to be pulped on his shields.

Die, you fucker, die!

There was no co-ordination now, just the desperate need to escape.

Savage, exultant, Max scythed down anything that crossed his path.

Still Xela screamed.

“No!”

Stark turned to Law.

“It can’t be!”

Daht, Daht, Daht.

Law was on his feet, his ruined leather face a mirror of his intent.

He moved fast for a big man and was on him before he could react, seizing his throat in a crushing grip and lifting.

Stark's legs thrashed frantically, kicking out as he tried to gasp in air through his collapsing wind-pipe. Law felt nothing, nothing except rage; an all-consuming rage that blooded his sight.

Daht, Daht, Daht.

The knife slipped down, handle first into his palm and Stark slashed at Law's face, hacking new terrible scars in the lizard skin gash.

With a roar that sent the bridge staff screaming towards the sealed blast doors, Law slammed Stark down onto the holo-tank console.

"Force." It was an animal cry, savage, insane.

"Force, Force, Force."

He smashed Stark down onto console again, cracking his spine and shattering the console.

"Force, Force, Force."

Again, again, again, until plasteel shards ripped from his chest.

"Force, Force, Force."

He battered his gasping face.

"Force, Force, Force."

Punch, punch, punch; not caring if the cracking of bones was also in his hand, heedless of the gore, heedless of the screams of his staff, fruitlessly hammering on the blast doors for release.

Law hoisted the impaled corpse from the console and hurled it effortlessly in their terrified direction, before drawing his own savage blade.

"Max, Max! Lieutenant Gragore Marteene, you are ordered to break off pursuit."

It wasn't the use of his name that hacked through the blood haze it was what Hela always called her 'command voice', almost her only weapon against an unruly teen.

Max instinctively banked hard left, away from the fleeing pack of Clan fighters.

“At last!” Xela exclaimed. “And call off the others before those LT’s start slicing and dicing.”

“Force to all vessels,” he said, dazed and shaking. “Disengage and form up on ..”

He checked the sector scan.

“Form up on the Destiny Star and return to base.”

The pack of Force ships trailing him snap-rolled and turned. The surviving Clan fighters, no more than a dozen, were within the defensive perimeter of the base now, under the protective shield of the Stoertebeker Laser Towers and already beginning to dock.

Max checked the screen again.

“We’d all the sector defence fighters go?”

“Trading Station, Max,” Xela replied. “Biggest damn escort Daht ever had. How do you feel?”

For some reason the question made him laugh.

How did he feel?

Tired, so tired.

“What did we lose Zee?”

“Four Bayamons, a Piranha, the Eel and a Lifter full of Magalit. Three pilots too. Race and the Teladi egg-sisters.”

How did he feel? Max looked inside himself for some emotion, some spark he could nurture back to life. He found nothing.

Belatedly he realised his left knee was still trembling, as beyond his control as a mal-functioning prosthetic.

“And there’s more bad news.”

Max took a deep breath, it came out as a ragged sob.

“Let’s have it.”

“I’ve cracked the message.”

“That sounds like good news to me. Give me the short version.”

“The probe signal came from the unregulated sector beyond Menelaus Paradise, the one with the Clan Base, and it’s due back anytime now. Short enough for you?

“You have just got to be kidding me,” Max replied finally. “Now, now?”

“I’m extrapolating from broadcast location and assuming it’s powered by the standard inter-planetary drive. The rest is orbital mechanics. There’s a margin of error, but we’re in the middle of it.”

“So it could already be back?”

“It could be,” Xela agreed.

“You’re in no fit state Max. You can’t keep up this pace.”

Every aching fibre of his body agreed.

“No choice is there Zee, it’s my mission.”

“Send Paskaal. Swap ships.”

“I can’t do that Zee, you know that.”

“Yes,” Xela sighed, “I know that. We need more energy cells, probably best if you picked some up in Family Whi. I’m not sure how welcome we are here.”

“Did we kill any sector defenders?”

“No, but they’re really stirred up. You know Daht is going to use this to expand his own influence?”

Max shrugged as he set course for the eastern gate. “So long as he’s our friend.”

“So long as we’re useful,” Xela murmured.

“End playback, search all references ‘Max Force’ and related. Catalogue in date sequence and store. Viewer off.”

Artur slumped back into the chair, it shifted almost imperceptibly as the gyros adjusted to the change in the centre of gravity. Jan had been right, he should have remained in bed, instead he had cajoled him into permitting it.

“It’s something I’m going to damn well have to get used to!” He had stormed. “And quickly! I can’t be lying around like a helpless..”

“Cripple?” Jan had finished. “That’s an old term. If you let Med-Tech do their job you’ll be better than new. Eventually.”

“Eventually,” Artur repeated. “And can they give me back my sense of taste and smell?”

“It’s too early to say,” Jan answered cautiously. “But in my medical opinion, no. I’m sorry.”

Artur smiled apologetically.

“I know you are Jan. I’m angry at myself, but I can’t spend months training my brain to work prosthetics. You know what’s at stake.”

“No, I don’t anymore Artur. That’s why I’m here, no more killing.”

“The killing goes on,” Artur snapped before taking a deliberate, calming breath. “I killed you.”

Jan smiled.

“Yes you did, and I’m grateful. But you just wanted an agent inside the Temple, I suspect. Any other explanation would be mere sentiment.”

“Mere sentiment,” Artur echoed. “No, we can’t have that. You like this life?”

“Yes Artur, I do. I believe I do. Contemplation and the search for knowledge has a lot to recommend it. And the killing goes on without me.”

“And on and on,” Artur agreed. “I need to be mobile and I need a ship.”

“You are absolutely going nowhere for three days,” Jan stated firmly. “Doctor’s orders. That will give us time to do what we can about getting you on your feet but you know getting your brain wired into prosthetics is a long, specialized and iterative process.”

“So I’m stuck in this chair, I’ll get a pretty nurse.”

Jan shrugged. “As the patient you have the right to discharge yourself. Tell me where you need to go and I’ll fly you there myself.”

“In one of those unarmed flying coffins?”

“In one of those unarmed flying coffins,” Jan agreed with a smile.

“Fair enough. Three days.”

Jan nodded agreement and checked the time.

“How long is it Artur? Since you were home?”

“More years than I remember Jan. Do you still think about it?”

Jan didn’t answer, instead he picked up the display control wand and entered channel details.

“My indulgence. It’s live.”

The whole wall took on the aspect of a picture window. It was dawn, a triangular mountain swathed in fading stars.

When Jan left Artur sat for awhile, watching the dawn and attempting to master the pain in his phantom limbs by effort of will.

He failed. Sitting alone, in an empty hospital room, just one word resonated.

Crippled!

Max slammed another ampoule against his skin, despite Xela’s protestations. The drug brought new energy, sparking across synapses and filling him with the urge to do something, anything, to relieve the tension humming through his system. He settled for tapping an urgent, staccato rhythm on the flight-stick as the last of the energy cells were transmitted into his hold.

Using the jumpgate to Teladi Gain he masked the long leap to Thyn’s Abbys, emerging in that sector as if he’d made the dash from Black Hole Sun. At Hila’s Joy he took on more energy cells before heading on for Menelaus Paradise.

“Max,” Xela cautioned as they entered the sector. “You do remember the Laser Towers guarding the other side? We were lucky last time.”

“Way ahead of you Zee,” he replied with a touch of his usual over-confidence.

“We’ll go disguised.”

The Boron Ray was close to the north gate and Max angled the Mamba to pass obliquely along it’s length, a rubber-necking pass.

“Snapshot confirmed,” Xela stated. “Standing by to activate profile, although I’m curious as to how looking like a Boron battlecruiser on scanners is going to help.”

“I’m betting that Nibris is tied in with whatever is going on and they won’t automatically fire on a Boron cap ship.”

“I love it when people gamble with other people’s lives Max,” Xela replied. “If you don’t mind I’ll do some pre-set evasives when we get through. Just in case. Perhaps while I’m doing that you’ll also tell me how you plan to stay hidden while waiting for the probe. Or how you’ll even know it hasn’t arrived before we get there?”

“If the pirates have the probe already then we’re screwed Zee. Let’s think positive shall we?”

“Positive thoughts now cloak ships from detection do they?” Xela inquired archly.

“I have a plan,” Max replied as he rolled the fighter away from the big warship towards the gate.

“And that plan is?”

“A surprise,” he answered with a flash of his normal humour.

Max activated the shadow-skin tech within the jumpgate and a Boron cruiser emerged, unmolested into the Clan sector.

“Fast mover inbound!” Xela yelled. “Damn, another nav-sat down, and you call this a plan? Break right, break right! Watch that bloody rock.”

Max obeyed, letting the plasma rings burn through the vacated space as he pulled a tight turn around the asteroid. A plume of energy cells trailed from his hold.

For the next two, long minutes he concentrated on evading the mass of Clan fighters jostling for shooting positions, holding the tail of one Bayamon long enough to snapshot it’s signature, finish it with a silkworm and roll away before his own shields fell in the cross-fire.

“You sure you have the fix Zee?” he yelled. “The base isn’t launching any retrieval.”

“I knew where to look, three Bandits, two o clock high.”

Max turned inside their attack and broke back towards the cloud of energy cells around the asteroid closest to the clan station, engaging another wing in a head-on pass that left his shields below 25%.

“They’d have seen it already if they knew it was due now and what to look for!”

Max pulled another tight turn around the asteroid, trailing a swarm of fighters.

He left the timing to Xela and the squash mine detonated the energy cells, filling sensors sector wide with white noise and static as the Mamba skimmed the rock. The blast enveloped most of the pursuing ships, vapourising some and sending the rest rolling and tumbling like swept aside toys. Max activated the shadow-tech and used thrusters to mimic the fractured dance of his pursuers, another clan pilot wrestling for control.

Before sensors could clear he rolled out of the charade on an intercept course for the distant probe.

Chapter 12: Serendipity's Kiss

"Guess who?"

"The luckiest girl alive?" Tomas grinned in reply, gently removing her hands from his eyes and turning from his station to look up at his girl.

His girl! The phrase still had an unlikely ring in his ears. Tess, beautiful and brilliant Tess, was his girl! It made the last ten months, crammed in an interplanetary probe with Challenger and a couple of pilots, hunting asteroids and skulking from Xenon, worth it, even without their momentous discoveries.

Unbidden, a huge grin split his face. It spread to Tess, who could, she claimed in all seriousness, read his mind. Sometimes he believed she indeed could.

"Nailed that paper then?" She asked, using his head as a fulcrum as she performed a slow, zero-G, cartwheel into the bucket seat beside his console.

"Completely nailed, nailed completely. Permanent tenure is mine! Mine I say!"

He cackled with mock glee, rubbing his hands. Her grin mutated into a crooked smile as she pulled the lap restraint tight.

"Publish in haste, repent at leisure!" She shared his excitement if not his ambition. His brain was like a boiling pot, new ideas constantly bubbling to the surface, extrapolating new technologies and new possibilities in a constant, excited stream, fuelled by the data encrypted in the heavily shielded computer core. Forcing him to focus on just one, long enough to yield substance, was a constant battle waged within himself.

"Inter-stellar travel without jump-gates Tess. Just think!"

Impulsively he leant across and kissed her button nose.

"Oooh, itchy beard!" she piped in a little girl voice.

"You just make sure your name is printed in a type size somewhere near the 28 point letters the Professor's will be."

"His expedition, his rules. Me just humble grad student, everyone knows how these things work. I'm just happy it'll be him doing the chat-show circuit. Have you written anything?"

"It's all up here," she replied, tapping her head. "Fermenting. There's a whole new physics in those wave forms. Nothing to patent so it's my name only!"

"You're going to piss off practically every physicist in the universe you know." Tomas joked. "People don't like being told everything they know is wrong, especially academics. You'll look good in effigy."

“Don’t forget the historians and archaeologists!” Professor Challenger interjected as his rotund shape sailed past them from the flight cabin, his tiny legs peddling uselessly.

Tomas reached out and grabbed an ankle. Challenger awkwardly pulled himself to the floor using their bodies and proffered hands and hooked a foot underneath Tomas’ seat for stability.

“Damn those Xenon.”

The gravity generator had finally given up after the last Xenon attack and Tomas, for all his engineering skill, could not coax a fraction of a G from it. Tomas and Tess had made the adjustment quickly, even enjoying it in the few moments of true privacy they managed to snatch in a ship with exotic instrumentation crammed into every available space. The two Argon pilots seemed to have been born in zero gravity, accepting the new environment with the same taciturn equanimity with which they met every situation.

Only the Professor, for all his deep space experience, couldn’t cope, his skin had taken on a green-tinged pallor, that Tess joked, was likely to become permanent if they didn’t get into a gravity well soon. By common insistence he ate alone and his unkempt beard declared a health hazard.

“Anything?”

Tomas shook his head and indicated the static striated screen. The scanners were only functioning on half-power and could not cut through the sub-space distortions generated by the inter-planetary drive as it bled the last few thousand klicks per hour from their relative speed.

“Nothing until we switch off the drive Professor.”

He tapped at the keypad.

“Which should be in about 15 minutes. Then we can coast the last few hundred klicks.”

Challenger nodded, impatient, his eyes half focused on the fresh accolades his envious and intellectually challenged colleagues would be obliged to heap on him, through what, he was happily sure, would be gritted teeth.

He patted his protégé on the shoulder in what was meant to be an avuncular gesture, instead it caused him to lose his tenuous toe-hold and drift what would have been upwards.

Tess grabbed a leg.

“Thank you my dear,” Challenger said with as much dignity as he could muster. “If you could be so kind,” he indicated the sliding door to the flight centre.

Tess manoeuvred him with both hands, lining him up with the exit before giving him a gentle push. The Professor drifted like an escaped clown balloon, beginning to rotate as he began flapping his arms.

"You don't have to do that Professor," she called, returning the twinkle in Tomas' eyes with a flashed smile. They both waited until Challenger managed to open the door and swim through before giving in to their common urge to chuckle.

"It's been a real trip," Tess said finally.

"Ten months playing hide and seek in Xenon space and a discovery that's going to re-write every text book in a dozen disciplines. A real trip, you could say that," Tomas agreed.

"Here," his voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper although they were alone in small, instrument-lined, circular operations room.

Tess took the small flask. "Hah, I knew you were holding out on me."

She sucked gingerly at the small tube as she squeezed.

"Oh, that is mellow, Tomas. We need a toast."

She screwed up her face as she thought, screwed it in that cute, unconscious fashion that always melted Tomas as she wrestled with a problem. He loved that about her, he loved the way her thoughts and feelings flitted across her face, like silver-bright cirrus across the face of the sun. He loved everything about her.

"I know," she said after a few moments. She raised the bottle.

"To whomsoever provided the wherewithal for this voyage. Unknown friends."

She took another deep sip, allowing the alcohol to pleasantly numb her tongue before it burned down her throat.

Tomas took the flask.

"Unknown friends."

The expedition must have cost millions but everything the professor wanted he'd got from whoever it was that handed the Challenger Institute a blank cheque. The normally garrulous man had been close-mouthed about this, allowing his assistants imaginations to fill the long days with idle speculation.

Whoever it was, provided both the resonance signature that finally led them to the mother-lode and the pilots for Challenger's famous old ship.

Tess favoured the military, Tomas inclined towards some variety of spook, Han and Jervis being too tight lipped and suspicious for his liking. After ten months shut up

together in the cramped confines of a metal ball hurling through inter-planetary space they still knew nothing about them and the fact neither had made a pass at Tess, to him, definitely ruled out any form of uniform.

They could fly though, and they could fight. Most of the Xenon kills went to Jervis, Tomas found the turret plasma targeting scanners impossible to master and his hand-eye co-ordination not up to tracking a fast moving target accurately. Even so, he had three kills and could summon the feeling of exultation of his first at will. It would be a great story for his children.

Their children! He leaned across and planted a whisky kiss on her lips, a gesture Tess returned with pent up passion.

Time passed pleasantly, until drive cut out and the scanner cleared.

"Uh, Professor!" Tomas called through the intercom. "You'd better check the long-range scan."

At the extreme edge of their range Tomas could detect the gate back to the safety of Boron space. Their was no sign of the Orca mother-ship that was meant to be on station to get them past any Xenon but a single small ship, two thousand klicks distant, appeared to be heading their way, followed at some distance by a pack of other vessels. The distance was still too great to get more detailed readings through the residual charge of the hull but there also appeared to be a station in the centre of the gate system.

Both relaxed, the sector had been colonised. The last part of the journey, which had threatened to be the most hazardous, was going to be a cake-walk.

He was over 80 klicks from the nearest jumpgate before Xela reported the first signs of an organised pursuit. Max disengaged the shadow skin, allowing the Mamba to reach it's maximum possible speed and checked the scanner.

A dozen Bayamons trailed a dozen Mandalays.

"The M5's will reach us before we reach the IP," Xela informed him coolly. "They must be real tired of life."

And so it proved. One hundred klicks short of the Intercept Point Max flipped the Mamba 180 degrees and slaughtered every one of the pursuing Mandalay fighters, almost without conscious thought, just brutal efficiency.

"No sweat eh Max?" Xela remarked, her tone laden with irony.

"No sweat," Max agreed, activating the zooms for a close-up of the approaching probe.

He whistled.

“Do you see what I see, Zee?”

“I see lot’s of things Max. It’s an old style manned inter-planetary exploration probe, no registry, no IFF.”

“Speculation?”

“No need,” she replied curtly. “All extant vessels of this class are in private hands, one pair of those being Professor Challenger, currently going through one of his ‘missing-presumed-dead’ periods. It was in the news recently. If anyone is chasing legends in Xenon space it’ll be him.”

“Then that’s..”

“The Serendipity, well done Max. I met him once, interesting man and not shy about getting in harms way. Let’s see if we can resolve this without gunfire shall we?”

“We could try I suppose,” Max replied, mock doubt coating his words like treacle.

“You’ll have about 7 minutes, before the B’s arrive.”

“Perhaps we could just hijack them?”

“It’s possible,” Xela answered doubtfully. “But this is a pretty big ship, with a crew that could spot what’s going on. With the clock running I’d be happier with a second option.”

“One that did not involve things going boom,” she added. “We want the information Challenger has.”

“I’m open to suggestions,” Max replied.

“Persuasion, trickery or threat. You know the sort of stuff Challenger has pulled in the past. He doesn’t threaten easily. You could just try telling him the truth.”

“The truth eh?” Max mused. “It’s just crazy enough to actually work. Raise them.”

“Too much residual interference from the drive system Max,” Xela replied. “Best I can do is jam their comms at this distance.”

“Do it,” Max ordered.

“.. I repeat. Professor Challenger, this is Commander Force, acting on the highest authority for the Argon Federation and the Community of Planets. We have reason to believe you are in possession of information of the highest significance and you are ordered to heave to and lower your shields. This sector is under the control of unknown Clan forces, their fighters are inbound. Damn it Professor, pick up the comm.”

“Leave it.”

Jervis caught his hand and propelled the Professor back towards his seat. Challenger flailed helplessly before finding a handhold and pulling himself into the chair.

“Look at the ship he’s flying.”

The pilot indicated the circling gull-wing fighter with a jerk of his head.

“That’s a Split ship.”

Challenger bit his tongue, he knew it was a Split fighter, he was neither blind nor stupid and he almost said it but for a familiar feeling in the back of his skull, just where it joined the spine.

It was a feeling he had learned to trust.

“But those are Clan vessels heading our way, are they not?” he inquired, trying to keep the suspicion from his voice but unable to shake the growing certainty that something had subtly changed, that he was no longer in charge.

“Everything is going according to plan,” Han interjected smoothly from the co-pilot station. “This is a Xenon sector. We need an escort and the Argon Navy isn’t available for private parties.”

It was a poor joke, delivered badly and Challenger felt his heart quicken. This wasn’t the plan, wasn’t the plan at all, but the Orca wasn’t showing on the scans. Just the Mamba, and Bayamons.

“I take your point,” he replied casually, unbuckling the seat restraint. “I’ll inform the children of the change of plan.” It came out a little too smoothly, a little too glib.

The gun seemed to appear from nowhere, conjured by sleight-of-hand. Han pirouetted gracefully out of his seat, gliding over Challenger with the practiced ease of a zero-g veteran while Jervis kept the stubby barrel of the laser pointed at Challenger’s head.

“Nothing personal Professor.” Han whispered as he fastened Challenger’s wrists to the armrest with field cuffs. “I’ve read all your books, play along and everything will be fine.”

Challenger’s caustic reply was muffled by a strip of hull sealant.

“Take care of that Force guy, whoever he is.” Jervis ordered Han. Challenger could only follow Han with his eyes as he swam to the rear compartment.

Jervis tapped Challenger’s knee with the barrel of the gun and grinned.

“You should pick your backers with more care.”

Tomas and Tess were engaged in a heated discussion that broke off the instant Han arrived.

“Pirates.” Han said curtly. “With more inbound. Turbo’s.”

The two students looked at each other doubtfully.

“Turbo’s,” Han repeated. “Now.”

Tomas reluctantly unclipped the seat restraint and with a gentle push propelled himself towards what would have been the lower access hatch, in a gravity well. Satisfied that his order was being obeyed Han unsealed the upper access port and floated in.

Tess waited until both airlocks re-pressurised before turning back to her scanner. The Split ship continued to circle, the pirates continued to close. Ignoring the repeated demands of Force she opened a channel to Tomas in the lower defence turret.

“Something is wrong.”

She knew he knew that. Black and white had become several shades of grey.

“Try the Professor.”

She did. No response.

“Can you raise Force?”

She could not, access to the external transmitter was blocked.

“What are we going to do?”

It was the first time she’d heard genuine fear, genuine doubt in his voice. This was real, not another of Challenger’s Great Adventures.

They were both intelligent, both trained to dispassionately analyse facts. Challenger had only alluded to the nature of his backers, hinting the millions of credits it took to mount the expedition came, indirectly, with much circumlocution, from official sources. They had no evidence to back it up, and no evidence to support the counter-claims of the circling Mamba pilot.

Except he had fought and destroyed other pirate mark fighters.

“What are we going to do Tomas?”

The decision was taken from their hands.

Max cut the comm channel and went evasive the second the barrels in the upper defence turret pivoted in his direction.

Quad Beta PAC's, in pulse mode, began spitting plasma, ripping into his shields. The lower turret opened up as he shot through it's wide field of fire, close enough to see the gunner, an hirsuite young human, fear-faced, through the clear plasti-steel. The bolts sailed around him, missing completely.

"Cease fire you maniacs," Max shouted. "Professor, talk to me."

"He can't Max. I scoped the cockpit. Look. That's Challenger. Gagged and from the position of his arms, restrained."

The image was blurred and Max couldn't make out any features, but if Xela said so.

"Four minutes Max," Xela announced. "Then we have to be out of here. Even you can't beat a dozen Bayamons. Damn."

She paused.

"That Orca is back Max, and heading our way."

Max did not respond, he could feel his thoughts beginning to freeze, unable to either choose between two unpalatable options or come up with an alternative. And he was tired, tired beyond the bone, his body so soaked in adrenaline it no longer had any effect.

"Can we knock down the shields and use the teleport?" he screamed as he twisted the Mamba, a fatigue-wracked fraction of a second too late, from a pinpoint plasma burst from the upper turret.

His ship bucked and shook under the assault. Max jinked and rolled to avoid the precision fire.

"Dream on Max," Xela replied, her own voice rising with alarm.

Another volley, this time from the lower turret, smeared through the vacuum, metres from his wing.

"We'll 'jack this sucker, Zee. We can't take the chance they've found that crashed ship. You know what the consequences would be."

"Three minutes, Max. Three minutes."

"Send this on repeat, Zee. Attention Serendipity. You are ordered to abandon ship now. Surrender or be destroyed."

Max did not wait for Xela's acknowledgement. The Mamba rolled onto the tail of the probe and opened fire.

The spherical ship, Max discovered, had no blind spots, forcing him to smash down the 50MW shields with missiles and slashing hit and run attacks. Even the lower

turret gunner had no trouble hitting him if he tried to sit and keep the shields low enough for Xela to work through.

“I can’t do it Max, I can’t do it! Keep those shields low!” She shouted frantically.

“One minute. Almost there, almost there..”

Max held his position, under the aft port quarter, weaving between the plasma bolts, gambling everything on reflexes he could feel failing as his shields fell towards zero.

“Damn, someone is countering. I can’t do it Max. Get us out of here!”

The Bayamon pack was almost on them now.

Max froze, froze on the cusp, impaled on the horns.

“Those who fight and run away Max! Max! Snap out of it!”

Max dimly heard the words as his thoughts flowed like cold molasses.

Who knows how we make those crux decisions, why we take that turn instead of this?

Is it unconscious logic, a rational act emerging from the roiling psyche? Is it just random neurons flipping, life ruled by quantum dice, angels or devils with the loudest voice? Nature, nurture? Fate? Hubris? Left, right, her or her, him or him?

When we look back on the wreckage of our lives and ask, in bitterness and regret,

“Why the hell did I do that?”

When we wonder, what lay down that other road?

What is the answer?

“One, two three Zee.”

Max ripped her chip from the interface and fired a sustained, devastating stream of plasma into the failing shields of Professor Challenger’s vessel.

“So you wasted THE Professor Challenger?” Jackson took a long pull on the water-pipe, holding the smoke deep in his lungs, embracing that feel-good rush. He searched for and, face brightening, found an appropriate response to the denouement of the increasingly plausible story.

“Cool!”

Force took the pipe stem, choking down a full breath he quickly coughed out.

Jackson watched with wry amusement and with a click of his fingers signalled the hovering waitress to bring fresh drinks.

“This is a real classy joint Jack,” Max said finally, jerking his head back at the bar beyond their booth. Another fight had erupted. Jackson watched it with a practiced eye. Teladi and Split against the Argon, this time.

“I should raise my prices.”

The waitress waltzed smoothly back through the flying furniture, the beers balanced elegantly on one sure hand. Jack took the tray, acknowledging her performance with a wink she returned with a grin.

Later.

“What can I say Max?” Jackson gestured helplessly. “Since you moved in they’ve been pretty cooped up. No pillaging, very little plundering. The Argon are frustrated, the Teladi portfolios aren’t accruing at the predicted rate and the Split? Well, they’re getting just plain ugly.”

He grinned.

“You know what I mean?”

Max drained half the glass in one draught, before taking another large hit from the bubbling pipe in the centre of the table.

He exhaled slowly this time, in control, and nodded.

“So, you’re a spy working for some Argon Intelligence operation and Max Force is dead?”

He sipped his own beer, it was too cold, with an indefinable aftertaste. Marteene, Force or whatever, he was right. This place lacked class.

“Why are you telling me all this?” he asked finally.

“Mission over,” Force said. “The location of the alien ship remains unknown, no-one gets to play with new toys, call it a draw. And I haven’t done everything I’ve done just to walk away from it now. Outstanding scores.”

“And someone just might get hung out to dry for Challenger, leaving no loose ends. Your people wouldn’t do that would they, Planet of the Free and all that?”

“It’s good to see irony thriving in such an inhospitable environment,” Force replied without smiling. “What do you think? My company is fully incorporated, in friendly Teladi jurisdiction, I’ve got a couple of million credits, a thriving business, advanced technology and my own pocket fleet. Would you walk away from that, with Stoertebeker still standing?”

“Of course I wouldn’t. But I’m one of the bad guys remember?”

He stroked his thin beard as he regarded Force quizzically.

“The question is, would Marteene?”

“Marteene died with Challenger, Jack,” Force replied fiercely. “As far as I know, he’s still wanted for stealing his ship and the shadow-skin tech. My Controller is missing, presumed dead, and he’s the only guy that can either finger or clear me. I’m feeling a strong breeze on my ass and I’m tired, Jack, just tired of it all. It’s time to look out for Number One.”

“Okay,” Jackson nodded slowly. “Max, it is. But you haven’t answered the question. Why tell me this?”

“Because I’m going to make you an offer and I don’t want any misunderstandings to arise later when you do some digging.”

He waited while Jackson took another hit from the pipe and then took another himself.

“I’m going to let you in on the ground floor of something big, something I need one helluva lot of credits for. Fifty mill gets you a quarter slice of infinite profits.”

Jackson fixed Max with a saucer stare, his pupils wide and black.

“We’re already partners Max, sort of. What else can you offer besides spaceweed?”

He took another hit.

“Fine, fine stuff by the way, improving with every batch.”

Force leaned forward to conspiratorially whisper.

“I got Challenger’s computer core Jack, scooped it right up from under their noses and ran for the gate. Jump-drives without jump-gates, we could control that technology.”

Jackson raised a brow in surprise, then his boyish face hardened, making him look years older.

“What’s to stop me killing you now and just taking it for myself Max?”

Max smiled and relaxed back into the leather upholstery.

“First, you don’t know what safeguards I’ve put in place or what sort of damage they could cause.”

Jackson conceded the point with a smile.

“And second.” It was Max’s turn to smile. “You just won’t be able to resist. You didn’t get where you are today by scorning opportunities, or words to that effect. Or was it just a pretty speech?”

Jackson looked at him for a long minute, chewing a knuckle unconsciously, as he assessed his options. He’d heard of Marteene of course, some Argon spook woman had lifted a lot of rocks looking for him. He’d heard she’d died in the Black Hole Sun station riots when Max had run the gates.

Interesting.

So was the news that some of the Clans, and no doubt some Teladi and who knows who else, were involved in their own conspiracy. And he had not been invited.

Too small-time, too new and no stake to bring to the game, that was fair enough.

But where people conspire, in his experience, there were credits to be plucked from the air. Force, his Corporation, and the precise location of this alleged alien ship. That was what he would call a stake, if he could persuade Force to sign up instead of going it alone.

And if this was not all some elaborate ruse by Marteene.

Jackson prided himself on his instincts and he listened to them now. Trauma and stress did bad things to a man’s mind and Force was unbalanced.

Absolutely no doubt.

He’d calmed down now, after smoking enough of his own dope to make a Split reasonable, but when he first appeared, fresh from the scene of the crime, he’d had a strange glow in eyes, which darted and danced as if he was still in combat.

His face remained pale, haunted and feral, even now.

If this was a game of poker, Jackson realised, this would be the guy with the busted flush, and his gamblers reflex cut in.

Raise or call?

Jackson smiled inwardly as he allowed himself to be swept away on the tide of his own recklessness. He knew he was taking a big risk, knew this could be a trap, knew he might just be bait for a bigger catch.

But the potential reward and the sheer, for-the-hell-of-it fun! What was life without a little risk?

“Fifty million Max, that’s a lot, even for us. What control do I get?”

“Sleeping partner Jack, got to preserve my legit status, but to make this work we need each other. Joint strategy, tactical implementation up to me, following consultation of course.”

Jackson shrugged. “I’ve worked with sketchier agreements, not with these stakes though, but what the heck. Can you sell this to your people? The electronic chick?”

“The Raiders will follow my orders Jack, Paskaal was a bounty-hunter and hasn’t shown any particular scruples so far and Xela is programmed to do as she’s damn well told. My only problem will be to stop her bitching about it. Anyway, I don’t plan on telling them everything.”

“The sign me up for the wild ride Max baby,” Jack said with a wide, little-boy grin.

They shook hands.

As one new alliance was forged another was breaking down.

“Daht has called an emergency meeting to discusss recent events,” Director Morn venomously hissed. She held a data-padd to the monitor but Law could not read the Teladi script over the low resolution back-up comm.

“Proxy votes continue to fall, thisss may threaten my position and Force could make legal representations to the Community of Planetss for the actionss of my security patrolss.”

Law forced himself to concentrate on what his main Teladi ally was saying, it was difficult to make out her sibilant speech through the blood pounding in his skull or concentrate through the slow-cooling rage.

They were bound together, it was an unpalatable truth.

“What can be done?” he said, as evenly as he could.

“What can always be done,” Morn said. “Pay bribesss. You will transsfer one hundred million creditsss to the account. No negotiations, ssum I match.”

Law realised he had no choice and acceded with the best grace he could muster, which was very little.

The sweet cloying smell of blood from his gore soaked arms mingled with the foetid stench of ripped bowels and as Law contemplated how to best deal with the consequences of his rage a signal came from his main operative in the Enterprise base station.

“Are you sure it’s functional?” Jackson asked, reaching out. Max handed him the silver sphere. “Careful. It’s heavier than it looks.”

It was, he found, taking it gingerly in both hands, indeed heavier than he expected, despite being nearly the size of a medicine ball. On closer inspection the heavy silver shielding was tarnished in patches and pitted with microscopic scars. It certainly looked as if the computer core had been in some sort of accident.

“Keep it somewhere safe Jack.”

“This is as safe as it gets,” Jackson gestured around. “My own walk-in vault in my own quarters.”

He snapped the sphere back to Max with a surprisingly strong throw. Max caught it awkwardly, staggering slightly as he held it to his stomach.

“Put it anywhere.”

Max knelt carefully and placed the computer core between two unmarked cylinders amongst the clutter of sealed containers. The vault was the size of a small cargo bay, accessible only through a heavy blast door keyed to Jackson’s biometrics.

“Ill-gotten gains?”

Jackson shrugged and smiled.

“Sometimes you just don’t want to give things up,” he picked a small, nondescript metal box from a free-standing rack of shelves, littered with small containers, and pressed a thumb to the seal.

“Isn’t this great? Number eleven,” he indicated the serial number as he handed the model to Max. “Of only fifty. And still in it’s original packaging. I’ve got the Brennan action figure somewhere!” He finished, grinning boyishly.

“Cool,” Max agreed, handing Jackson the model X-Shuttle. “This isn’t a toy though, it’s the Serendipity computer core. Once we figure a way past the protection, the lockouts and the encryption, it’s our ticket to the top table.”

Jackson carefully placed the X-Shuttle back into it’s container.

“I’ll get people onto it.”

Max laughed.

“Right Jack. If I thought you could crack open one of these babies do you really think I’d stow it here?”

“Okay Max, no problem partner. What next?”

“I’m about to branch out into the high tech business Jack. Once I figure out how to get Xela to play nice it’ll be no problem. Meanwhile, it’s our hole card, no need to show until someone calls.”

“Okay Max,” Jackson agreed. “No peeking. When does the game start?”

“As soon as we find out who to invite,” Max replied. “I need to get back to Base and don’t be a stranger Jack, it’s always party time at Max’s Place!”

Jackson waited until the Force Mamba vanished through the jump-gate to Scale Plate Green before calling together his squad commanders. A more open alliance with Force would be easier to sell, now that the objectors to his rule had been weeded out, and fifty million credits was a cheap price to pay for entrance into the big leagues.

Max, he thought, had a much more challenging task. So to speak.

“You did what?” Paskaal echoed Xela’s question with a deal less volume and silently let the admission sink in while Max argued with the disembodied female voice filling the small briefing room.

“Are you sure that was wise?”

It was not a question. Rather, it was a question, just not the stated one.

“Have you gone completely insane?” her tone screamed.

Either way an insouciant shrug was not the reply either of them were looking for.

“Not good enough Max! I..”

“Hush lass,” Paskaal cut in softly. “Tell us what happened Max.”

“They wouldn’t lower their shields and the reinforcements were all over me,” Max answered in measured words. “What else could I do? With the exact location of the alien ship they could launch a recovery mission and have the technology.”

“And I know,” he continued, cutting across Xela’s renewed protests, “I could have let them have the information and stuck with the original plan and build a legitimate industrial infrastructure as the lure. That wouldn’t work. Every time we give the clans a bloody nose we break a finger. Just one dead pilot this time but we can’t lose ships and cargo at that rate. And you aren’t going to like this so, in advance, shut up Zee.”

He finished the Java and took another three chocolate biscuits.

“I told Jackson the whole story. Can you wait ‘til I’ve finished?”

Paskaal choked back his words and Xela fell silent.

“Not the whole story, almost all, not the Marteene side. Force changing sides, and Challenger was the clincher. The Confeds are our foot in the Clan door, we have to find out what’s going on in that sector and we’ve got to get involved ASAP.”

Max ran his fingers through his sweat matted hair, looking, Paskaal thought, as exhausted as he'd ever seen him. And brittle, beneath the bone white mask of his face, his voice, controlled tremulous.

Paskaal wished he could see his eyes, invisible behind the shades.

"If I hadn't stopped Challenger we'd have left the Clans in control of the sector, able to retrieve the alien device at their leisure. It's damn clear they have a much closer alliance with some Teladi than we thought otherwise Law wouldn't have dared use sector security forces in that last fight. We could be cut out of the loop totally."

"And then there's the question of Boron involvement."

He let the statement stand for a few seconds.

"I don't believe that the Clans could seize and fortify that sector without Nibris being complicit."

Max paused to push another biscuit into his mouth, barely chewing before swallowing and taking another.

"And there was an Orca TL. It jumped in, I'm sure of it."

"That is not a logical deduction from the data, Max," Xela observed. "It appeared at the Menelaus Paradise gate."

"Precisely," Max answered.

"If it's a Clan mother-ship of some kind then it must have come through Paradise."

"Perhaps it did," Paskaal observed. "Our nav-sat there has been knocked out again."

"If it is a Clan TL then Nibris must be at least turning a blind eye," he continued. "But we guessed that already. A counter-balance to the Split, remember."

Max shook his head.

"No – holding that sector against the Xenon requires masses of resources and it's been there some time. Intel would have picked up on the traffic. They might not have mentioned it to me but I'm damn sure you would have heard, Zee."

"I just might not have mentioned it to myself Max, if you know what I mean. Unlikely though, I take your point."

"Even if Nibris could get hold of a jump-drive, why would she give it to the Clans? And if she did, surely someone would have picked up a rumour? Every intelligence organisation in the universe would be on her case," Paskaal interjected.

“Hiding a jump-capable fighter, especially one with shadow-skin, is one thing, an illegal drive on a damn TL is a completely different proposition. It would have been spotted the first time it appeared in regulated space.”

“Not if it’s an officially registered drive,” Max replied. “Nibris commands that sector, right? It shouldn’t be too difficult to find out if there is a civilian TL assigned to the frontier and who owns it. I’m betting whoever owns it, she controls it. Then I begin to wonder what if something happened to it and another civilian TL were needed to keep the civilian stations happy?”

“Yes, Orca’s fall to pieces if you so much as look at them,” Xela agreed, electronic tongue firmly in digital cheek. “I think in that case they would need a replacement. Sinas quoted 16 million for a refitted model, make that 20 with a spot of upgrading. You’d better get out there hijacking Max.”

“That just pays for our fighters,” Max replied. “But Jackson is giving us fifty million,” he added casually. “For a stake in the new technology.”

The stunned silence was eventually broken by Xela.

“Uhh Max, you do realise that the Community of Planets goes to great lengths to prevent Clans from laundering their money through legitimate corporations? It’s why none of the big boys will play with them and why our plan is to provide access to hi-tech resources as a way into the conspiracy. They’ll shut us down fast.”

“We don’t need to hide it forever,” Paskaal interjected. “Just long enough to complete this mission. What do you think lass? You up for it?”

“Messing with the banking system could be tricky, but yes, sounds like fun! It’s a pity Artur isn’t around,” Xela replied enthusiastically.

“Go for it Zee,” Max said. He turned to Paskaal.

“You and Payter get to work on a plan to take out that Orca once Zee has pinned down the particulars. If possible, one that will leave us in possession of the jump-drive without anyone knowing it’s gone and one that won’t leave us in Nibris’ or Clan bad books.”

“And doesn’t involve mass slaughter,” Paskaal added. If Max noticed the faint edge he gave no sign.

“The Memorial is fixed for six hours Max,” he continued. “You should get some rest.”

“Too much to do,” Max answered. “I’ll grab some more Java and work on our next moves.”

“If you don’t take a break right now Max,” Paskaal said, with more vehemence than he intended. “I’ll cold-cock you and drag your unconscious body to bed.”

“I’m with Paskaal,” Xela added. “Repressed homo-erotic imagery aside. Bed Max, NOW! And leave me with Paskaal, I need to hook up to the comm. system and get digging around the Boron data-net.”

Her tone triggered adolescent memories and he complied with as little truculence as he could manage.

While Paskaal and Xela shared deep concerns, Max wrestled a half-sleep from the melange of nightmare images floating up from his subconscious.

Paskaal took the Xela data-padd and made his way from Raiders Territory up the levels to Corrin’s Casino.

Adjust the walk, hold yourself a little loose, smile and glad-hand, slipping into the Corrin identity was as simple as changing into the lounge suit he kept in his flight locker.

Uniforms and signifiers, they kept your head straight, undercover.

Max though, and Paskaal realised even he thought of him as Max, Max and Marteene. There was no distance. One and the same behind the ubiquitous shades, reflecting mirrors not windows on the soul. He resolved to have a long, serious talk with Marteene and considered broaching his increasingly reckless actions with the Xela AI but he considered her loyalties uncertain at best.

Killing Challenger, damn, that was serious! If it ever got out? And fan-dancing with the truth to hook in Jackson? His jaws tightened with unconscious anger. Too risky and something he should have discussed. Fatigue, guilt and, if he was any sort of judge, incipient stim psychosis, were not the best foundations for good decision-making.

As it happened, Paskaal thought turning the tragedy into an opportunity to force the pace of their penetration of the Shadow Conspiracy, was an inspired action. But it could have damn well waited until Xela and himself had a chance to comment and suggest improvements.

What was that old saying from the days of sail, when the Argon were spreading across the planet?

A loose cannon.

The sound and the disparate mix of smells: alcohol, spaceweed, and dozens of perfumes, masking or enhancing the natural body odour of four species; hit him like a left-right combination as he stepped from the elevator. The casino existed in it’s own time warp, here it was always, relentlessly, party time.

Corrin bon-homied his way across the floor, shaking hands, back-slapping and exchanging stilted air kisses with the minor celebrities that seemed to have taken up

permanent residence, gasping on the thinning oxygen of publicity afforded by the notoriety attached to the Force name.

Free publicity for both them and Max, and not one of them was smart enough not to draw to an inside straight, making for a healthy bottom line.

With relief Corrin sealed himself in his office and ordered beer and sandwiches, which were delivered immediately with a discreet tap at the door. He tipped the statuesque hostess handsomely and was rewarded with a flash of dazzling teeth.

He hooked the Xela AI to the comm link, letting her loose while he ate his meal and played with the accumulating backlog of routine paper-work. His viewer he tuned to the Universal News Network with orders to search for any mention of Challenger, hoping it would remain muted.

"…firmed reports are coming in of the destruction of missing maverick explorer, Professor Challenger's ship, the Serendipity."

Corrin jerked instantly awake in his seat, his neck stiff.

The presenter, one of the young blondes he assumed must be bred in a tank somewhere, listened intently to her silent feed before announcing.

"This footage just in."

"Damn," Corrin murmured. "Damn, damn, damn."

It was digitised gun camera footage, high magnification, an unmarked Mamba and an obsolete interplanetary probe. The Mamba circled the probe, methodically firing volleys into the shields while defence turrets punched back, forcing the Split fighter to twist and weave.

The magnification stepped down as the camera ship closed on the dramatic scene, as it did so Bayamon fighters drifted in and out of shot.

A voice-over observed that the film must also have been shot from a clan ship.

Corrin found himself oddly relieved when the Mamba rolled and destroyed the spherical ship with a sustained burst, a disintegrating comet plunging through space, trailing a debris tail. At least Max had clearly tried to capture the vessel but the turrets made the attempt futile.

Tough, tough call.

The clip ended abruptly, leaving most questions still unanswered, but at least the Mamba remained unidentified.

Corrin had a suspicion that Max had only the libel laws to thank for that. Whoever leaked the footage to the media was intimately connected to the clans operating in that

sector and he realised they must have a good idea who was flying the Mamba, even if they couldn't prove it.

"Is that how you remember it girl?"

"Pretty much Corrin," Xela replied. "But Max disconnected me before finishing the ship and didn't hook me up until we docked back here. The news is over every channel, no more details though. I think we got away with it."

"Got away with murder?"

Xela paused before answering.

"Legally, no. He acted under orders from the highest levels and the action took place in neutral space."

"Except that Artur is our only official contact. Without him we're just what we seem. Another corporation dancing close to the edge."

"It's his mission Corrin," she replied. "Legally speaking again. Are you having problems?"

Corrin finished the beer as he considered his answer.

"No lass," he answered slowly. "Not precisely, but don't you think Max is becoming, in the absence of a thesaurus, reckless?"

"Reckless? That's a harsh term Corrin. Look at what he's achieved and look at how few people we've lost."

"He's gambled and won each time. Luck."

"And luck runs out?"

"When you most need it."

"Can't argue with that," she acknowledged. "And if you want something to worry about, worry about the stims. He's popping way too many, if I was a doctor I'd ground him for a few days."

"A problem?"

"Possibly – and they are not exactly conducive to good judgement. Ground him for a few days," she repeated

Corrin stroked his chin and absently munched on the remaining sandwich.

"Can you see Max sitting for that? As you say, he's in charge."

"Find some way to keep him busy here. Business. Raiders."

“I suppose,” Corrin mused. “It would be good for morale if Commander Force spent more time with the troops, particularly the new recruits. And there’s all those important people that need stroking.”

“That’s the spirit Corrin! Stealth relaxation.”

Corrin ordered another round of sandwiches, along with a beer and a whisky chaser, they arrived a few minutes later, a discreet tap at the door.

“This Jackson business,” Corrin said through a mouthful of cheese and pickle.

“What do you think?”

“If Jackson swallows it and nothing comes up to throw the Force masquerade? It might be a brilliant move.”

“Might be?”

“Jackson’s not a fool,” Xela said. “He’ll do some digging, but Max is exploiting his weakness.”

“Our boy Jack is in a hurry?”

“Correct. The man is a gambler and Max is offering him an inside track to the Clan Big Table. We can take it as read that Law has a seat. If we deal with him, hurt him badly enough then they are going to need replacement resources. Jackson can present himself as a conduit for Force Securities and with luck we can wrap the whole lot up before the authorities catch on. We’re going to need a hell of a lot more than a Bliss Place and a couple of Dream Farms.”

“In which case,” Corrin said, finishing the beer. “We need money, fast.”

He called up the accounts on screen and played with the numbers.

“Allowing for replacing the Maglit, we’ve only a couple of million credits but the income stream is good and we’ve a list of wants from the locals that’ll keep our freighters busy. We need more ships though. Quickly.”

“Once I’ve finished my prying we should take the Mamba out,” Xela said. There are still Xenon coming through Black Hole Sun, are those old reflexes up to a spot of hi-jacking?”

“Less of the old, if you don’t mind lassie,” Corrin smiled. “Anything Max can do, I can do better!” He mock bragged.

They discussed more business details while Max slept. Xela continued to probe the banking system and sought information on the Orca.

Then news came in from Teladi Gain. Two items.

Corrin contacted Payter and sent him to rouse Max.

Chapter 13: Sowing the Wind

Corrin thrust a steaming mug into his hand as soon as Max appeared. He sipped it automatically and then took another deliberate taste, a broad smile replacing sleep blurred alarm.

“This,” he said, sniffing the mug, “Is the finest java. Fresh ground?”

“Naturally,” Corrin replied. “Three Worlds Blue, terrestrially grown. I managed to get a few kilo’s of the new harvest for our more discriminating and important clientele.”

“Making it tax deductible,” Xela added, a disembodied voice. “Which, as it cost more than a silkworm, is just as well.”

“I like being rich,” Max said. “Is this the emergency? I was sleeping, as ordered.”

“No emergency Max, and you can go bye-bye’s later,” Xela answered sharply. “Watch this. UNN.”

Max took a seat and swivelled to look at the wall display screen. Corrin pulled up another seat and sat beside him as Xela dimmed the lights and ran the recording. It cut in as the Universal News Network logo span away into starry infinity.

“Breaking news from Teladi Gain, breaking news from Teladi Gain.” Intoned a deep male voice. The cloned blonde anchor appeared and flashed a precise smile.

“This in from our on-the-spot observer, Mack Torson.”

The picture shifted, replacing the blonde with a close up of a clan station.

“Stoertebeker’s base,” Xela interjected, the focus zooming onto the massive docking doors as they cracked open.

“Muting commentary,” she said as a string of three Teladi Vulture freighters emerged, followed closely by four Bayamons. “Our Nav-Sat scans showed hundreds of people on board, mostly in the sub-space holds. Watch. Overlaying tactical.”

The focus pulled back, silhouetting the Stoertebeker Base against the looming planetary mass, it orbited. A small moon with it’s own attendants, laser towers Xela highlighted with blue target boxes. More boxes tracked the ships, tiny numbers Corrin could not read, detailing Registration, velocities and shield strengths.

One by one, the LT designators turned red.

One by one the LT’s fired.

One by one the ponderous Vultures winked out.

The Bayamons went evasive, the tiny direction indicator arrows on the designators rotating in tune with their gyrations. Only one made it through the cross-fire to safety.

Corrin stole a glance at Max.

Impassive.

Xela terminated the playback.

“What are they saying Zee?” Max asked after a long silence.

“Teladi sources reported multiple distress calls from the station before all communications went down. Now, nothing.”

“Analysis.”

“Mutiny. Transmissions indicated extensive fighting, internal explosions. Damn, look at this, switching back to live feed, 30 second delay.”

Her tone presaged the event.

The broadcast focused again, tight on the Stoertebeker Base docking port as it split slowly open, the string of green navigation lights flashing to life.

Although he knew whatever he was watching had already happened, Corrin held his breath, unnerved by the AI’s hushed voice.

He expected a flood of ships, already preparing defence plans.

There was a flood.

“Oh no.”

It was his own voice, distant, dismayed.

People, many people, twitching in a crystalline cloud that slowly dissipated into the vacuum.

It was Max that broke the silence, voice calm but blood, one bright red droplet merging with another, oozing from between the fingers of a clenched fist.

“Track that pilot,” he wiped his hand impassively on his fresh flight suit. “Corrin, get Jackson here, get him here now. Get Payter and Kaitrin here too, battle briefing in three hours. Zee, you’re with me.”

He picked up her data-padd.

“Wait a minute Max,” she protested. “You are not going after that pilot.”

“Why not?” He snapped. “His information could be priceless.”

“Damn you Max,” Xela shouted back. “This isn’t your one-man war! You’ve only had a couple of hours sleep, what do you think your reflexes are like? And just don’t get me started on your judgement. It’s three hours to the Memorial so the meeting can wait. Go rest, Corrin and I will bring in that pilot.”

Max opened his mouth to protest.

“Be quiet Max, I mean it, shut up and get some more sleep!”

“Difficult,” Max began. “Dreams..”

“Then sample the bloody product Max and stay away from the damn stims!”

Corrin attempted, unsuccessfully, to become invisible, feeling he was eavesdropping on a family row.

Unexpectedly Max gave in with a resigned shrug.

“Okay Zee, but you’re pushing.”

He turned to Corrin.

“If you can capture the fighter, sell it and mask jump straight back. And keep the pilot in the hold for the flight and then keep him in solitary. No one sees him or speaks to him until I do.”

Corrin nodded his acknowledgement and Max turned to leave.

“Oh Max,” Xela called. “Daht has been on the comm. Apparently the Teladi Company has offered us nine million credits compensation for the, and I quote, unfortunate misunderstanding with the Teladi Gain defence forces. We of course promise not to take the matter further, Corrin accepted on your behalf.”

Max smiled, brief and tight, a calculating gleam in his eye.

“Order three Mamba’s from the Cho’s Defeat shipyards, if they give any trouble invite whoever can say yes over, and give them a generous opening account. Max out the speed but keep the bay extensions cost under ten k. We’ve got the shields and guns right?”

“Left over from the merc base stock,” Xela confirmed. “And bribing people just to win it back! That’s very cute. Sweet dreams Max. Bed, remember?”

Corrin waited until Max left and took the AI data-padd.

“Beware Teladi bearing gifts, lass,” he observed. “Beware Teladi bearing gifts.”

His age he conceded, but cynic he was not.

Max brushed through the casino, ignoring the called greetings and took the elevator straight down to Raiders territory. He wandered through the pilot quarters, passing out personal congratulations gleaned from the post combat debrief.

“Two Bayamons there Harp, way to go!” A clap on the shoulder.

“Glad you made it out kid, ships I can buy, good pilots I can’t.”

A handshake.

He let their mood wash over him, resolute and elated, as they crowded round.

They listened in silence as he described the events.

“When do we go Commander?”

A voice from the back of the pack, soft spoken, with a trace of anger. Max quickly searched his memory, someone recent, poached from one of the private squads? Cropped mousy hair, a little short, ex-fleet, impressive record.

“Soon, Summers.”

He paused and thought.

“I’ll tell you what, Monica is it?”

She moved through the scrum to the front and nodded.

“In one hour I want you to lead a flight of four fighters, take both Prometheus’ and a pair of Piranha’s. Organise a maintenance and security team and send them to Menelaus Frontier Trading Station, there’ll be a private bay waiting. Send a couple of B’s as escort, you blockade Stoertebeker. No clan ships in or out. Clear?”

“Yes Commander,” she almost saluted.

“One question. What about civilian registered ships?”

Max barely flinched. “We may be vigilantes Summers, but we’re not murderers. Warn them their safety on the station cannot be guaranteed and let them through. If in doubt, call in. Understood?”

Her shoulders stiffened as she straightened her back. “Understood Commander.”

This time she did salute.

Max found what he was looking for in the Ready Room and recorded a series of messages on separate data chips. He found Kerman in the simulator and handed him the chips. The Paranid listened to his instructions in silence as Max walked him to the flight deck.

Max waited until the Pegasus launched before stumbling back to his cot. This time he slept well, with burning dreams.

"STATION!"

Law repeated the order, bellowing to be heard above the dopplering alert klaxon and the over-lapping chorus of warnings spoken by automatic back-up stations. An explosion rocked the command centre, dislodging a fractured support beam behind him but he didn't flinch. The lights cut out, flickering back, dim and red, a second later.

He held the stare, bending the soldier to his will. Law watched the resolve stiffen in his eyes and nodded. These were the Palace Guard, their unswerving loyalty bought by credits and cemented by complicity, a complicity now brutally affirmed. They crowded the blast door, a jostling pack. The Argon returned to the Defence Station, hunching over the internal security display.

The mob was close now. Law could feel it's inchoate roar through the soles of his boots. Beyond the blast door weapons fire grew loader and intensified. There was only so much twenty, even heavily armed, men could do against the unreasoning beast his actions against the deserters had unleashed. And as they fell so was the mob emboldened.

The fighting was right outside now. He nodded to the defence station. The soldier hesitated, his face, tortured indecision, with his finger poised above a flashing yellow touch panel.

"Empty the tanks," Law commanded. The soldier swallowed hard and touched the panel. It turned red. The fighting outside ceased abruptly.

Law waited a very long minute.

"Vent the section and dispose of the remnants. Enforce extreme martial law and give me a full status report in one hour. I will summon reinforcements."

"Take care out there Lover," Kaitrin added to Corrin's launch permission. "Try not to scratch the paintwork on the boss's ship!"

She chuckled at Corrin's terse reply and turned her attention back to the screen, watching the Mamba streak towards the eastern jumpgate. The atmosphere in the Control Centre was relaxed, almost cheerful now the Remembrance was over. The light casualties helped, operating from the Place Flight Centre rather than the claustrophobic confines of The All-Seeing Eye, helped more.

Spacious, enough room for her to stretch her long legs, good food and drink a finger-snap away.

“How they doing Jonno?” She called down. Her deputy looked up from the screen, thought about speaking through a mouthful of sandwich, thought again and gave a thumbs up. He chewed quickly and swallowed.

“No change. They’ve been on station three hours now, how’s that relief coming?”

He answered his own question, tracking the Vulture on the Family Whi Nav-Sat. Six of the best Raiders pilots rode with the additional supplies for the Menelaus Frontier advance base, another two rode shotgun in Bayamons. Twelve pilots, enough to keep a constant four ship blockade. Eight hours on station, plus transit time, plus all the joy of space-walking to and from the relief transporter. Jonno was, for once, pleased he wasn’t a fighter jock.

With so many pilots devoted to blockading the Stoertebeker Clan station the defence of Scale Plate Green was largely in the hands of the Baby Raiders, as the new recruits, whose history did not earn them an immediate upgrade the full Raider status, had inevitably become known. They were out there now, mock dog-fighting with weapons on minimal power, around the northern jump-gate, as the Commander put them through their paces. Their comm. chatter formed a sonic backdrop he and Kaitrin followed with wry amusement.

Endless variants of, ‘Bang bang, you’re dead. No I’m not!’ that Kaitrin attempted to referee.

Jonno finished his sandwich and thought about ordering another, just to see the way the cute blonde hostess sashayed.

Kaitrin reined in her exasperation as two more recruits disputed her call. Men of course, the women accepted defeat without demure.

“There should,” she thought. “Be some sort of drug to couter-act testosterone poisoning.”

Corrin was midway through Nyana’s Hideout now and she scanned the sectors ahead.

“Base to Old Goat One, Base to Old Goat One. Be advised that a flight of Xenon have broken through the Black Hole Sun patrols.”

She quickly calculated relative speeds and distance, factoring in an allowance for the token resistance being offered by the Treasure Chest defenders recently.

“Expect to bump heads around the Treasure Chest western gate,” she cut the mike.

“Jonno, commercial transport inbound. Can you handle it?”

She opened the mike again.

“A pair of XL’s and 3 XM’s lover. I know Max could take them but do you need back-up?”

Her attempt to deadpan was woeful but Corrin dutifully bristled, something about grandfather and eggs she didn't quite catch as another squabble broke out among the babies.

Corrin acknowledged her hasty good luck before she signed off and listened as the Xela AI ran through the capture procedure again.

"Single shots, keep shields below 5%, I got it the first time lass."

"I'm used to having to repeat everything twice and V E R Y S L O W L Y for Max," she replied with a cheerful lilt.

"Can I suggest you time your jump into Treasure Chest so you catch them entering the jumpgate?"

Corrin repeated what he had just told Kaitrin.

The three XM's he killed before they could disengage their jump sequence. The first XL died after a short, intense, two on one fight. The surviving Xenon Heavy Fighter took nearly five minutes to wear down before it's target designator turned from red to blue.

Ignoring Xela's observation concerning beginners luck he escorted it back to the Omicron Lyrae Equipment Dock, keeping a wary eye on the Buster fighters predatorily circling.

"Unacceptable!" Director Morn roved her glare around the table, fixing each wavering ally as if by will alone she could transform the numbers.

"Unacceptable!"

"The will of the Teladi Trading Company must be made known," General Daht hissed.

Her glare turned to venom, it was returned in equal, excoriating measure and she realised now, what true hatred was. It burned in her blood, it was bitter bile in her stomach, acid and churning.

That this male should dare, that he should dare!

He was smiling now, a thin, smug curl of the lips. Smug in the certain knowledge that her proxies were streaming away by the hour and firm allies were caught in the flood as millions of Teladi stock holders conveyed their opinion on the Stoertebeker calamity.

Smug in the knowledge that a considerable number of those stock were now voted by himself and his rebellious coterie.

Her control of the Board was precarious now, balanced on the blade of a knife, maintained only by proxies shifted to her own allies, allies that could only be emboldened by the sea change the actions of her Clan ally and her own misjudgements had triggered, to press their own interests.

To the victor goes the spoils, as does the task of writing history. And victory had been snatched from her by the blatant connivance of Daht with the human, Force.

To the extent of jeopardising his own life.

To the extent of risking a civil war that, with fierce irony, had been extinguished by the disloyalty of her own forces.

Her own forces! Hah! She had not realised, until now, why it was so right to look with scorn upon those who had forsworn the pursuit of profit to defend the interests of the Company. Loyalty that could not be bought, loyalty that could be won and held by traitors to everything the Teladi stood for, traitors like Daht and his fire-dreams of destiny.

The Greater Teladi Empire! Starships, soldiers, death and glory! The egg-dreams of children!

She realised her teeth were so clenched her jaws ached.

The rage inside, the wild primitive urge to lash out, the colder desire to summon her own people and have them kill them all.

But that was not how the Teladi did business anymore, that is why they had embraced the wise hand of the market, made it the font and cornerstone of their civilisation.

Daht would return us to that chaos, would lead the Teladi to put the first claw on that route, one small step after another until lives, resources and profit opportunities were piled high, a pyre to his vain-glory.

And now he wanted to force her to declare the Stoertebeker Clan true outlaws. The cutting of losses, the first glorious battle.

No! This she could not permit, not when so much of her own profits were rooted in that soil.

And not before the Enterprise opened up a flood of profits that would raise the stock of the Trading Company to unheard of, monopolistic heights.

‘Now,’ she thought bitterly. ‘That is something to make Teladi blood sing!’

Her secret knowledge would sway the vote if shared, every dark eye would glitter but a secret shared is no secret and this was one she clutched to her own breast-bone, savouring it and protecting it through the years as if her life depended on it’s security.

Which it did. Powerful allies do fearsome enemies make.

Her eyes flickered coldly around the big table, over the assembled sector directors.

“Unacceptable.”

The word fell into a vacuum of silence, interrupted by the sharp tap of a single clawed digit on the hard wood. Tap, tap, tap. Even the rhythm was insolent, demanding.

“The Company recognises the Director for Scale Plate Green,” Morn hissed.

The General hauled himself to his feet, slowly, calculatingly allowing his massive presence to permeate the room. The weight of ancient wounds, the weight of the honours festooning his chest.

Vulgar and pointed.

“The Teladi alliance with thisss perssson sserves no profitable purposse.”

Morn observed the impact of his words upon her fellow directors with a frozen glance.

Support, hostility, careful masks of impenetrability.

Many more of the latter.

“Debacle followsss debacle and now Law threatensss the livesss of all of usss here gathered. Unprofitable enterprises mussst be shut down, losses mussst be cut.”

Daht raised himself to his full height and then leaned forward, his claws tearing into the veneer. He slowly swept the table with his own solemn stare, presaging the importance of his words.

“Or management replaced.”

He paused again, for dramatic effect, the intense focus of attention.

“It isss the Teladi way, the profitable way.”

If she possessed a weapon she would have drawn it then, drawn it and seared away the foetid hypocrisy. Instead she swallowed the bile, it burned her throat like the effort burned her true Teladi spirit.

“The Company hasss never concerned itself with the internal affairs of the Clansss.”

Rage trembled her voice, an almost imperceptible carrier wave, conveying her outrage at just the suggestion that tradition be flouted in such a manner.

“Sssuch an action would lead to war among the clanss, a war that would be fought in our spaccce, on our worldsss. And our losses in an attack on a Clan station would be expensive. Thoussands of innocents would die!”

“Hundredsss,” Daht corrected. “We have witnessed the ships fleeing the station. We have heard the distress callsss. We could sstrike now with minimum loss of innocent livesss, there will never be a better time.”

There was a chance here, Morn realised, a chance to stem his advance, if he would just over-reach himself.

“Your plan?” she asked, her neutral tone seasoned with resignation. Just a touch, just a sprinkle of salt to stimulate the taste buds.

“How ssshould we enforce such a change? Who mussst we place on the Stoertebeker throne?”

She could see the effort he made to keep his features neutral as he slipped a data chip into his terminal but as the presentation proceeded the mask slipped. Morn fed out the rope with a series of questions concerning military dispositions and projected casualties the frontal assault would entail. Daht responded with growing enthusiasm as Morn watched the faces round the table, watching certainty turn to doubt and then fear.

“Ssso?” She interjected when her political instincts, honed in conflicts every bit as tempering as those Daht’s chest of baubles testified to, told her the time was right.

“The loss of a Teladi Company carrier, and over fifty fighters is deemed acceptable? For what end? To destroy the station, to put your own puppet on the throne? Who would it be General, Maximilian Forcce, Jackssson of the Confederation?”

She had their full attention now.

“Or some other set of humansss? And what then? On how many other headsss do unworthy crownsss rest? Skull?”

She stopped, not wanting to press too far although victory now would be easy.

The room was silent now, an intense silence. Daht, she could see, dimly comprehended that his moment of triumph was slipping through his claws, like so much clutched sand. Morn fancied she could hear the vein that throbbed so prominently in his throat.

“You have your compensssation General and your allies have their ten million creditsss. Anguish assuaged. I move the Teladi Trading Company respectsss tradition, let Clansss mind their own businesss, settle their own affairsss.”

Morn paused as if only now assessing the relative strength of her own and Daht’s faction, searching the faces of the unaligned. She played with her data-padd, ostensibly comparing the balance of proxy votes each side carried although she knew the answer from her poll of faces.

Too close to call, which was why she ceased pressing her case.

Daht's face showed his clumsy military brain had groped towards the same conclusion. Morn moved swiftly.

"The issue isss in balanccce. The Company will not move againssst the Stoertebeker Clan but will offer no obstacles to those within or outside the Clan who sseek to replace Law. If he isss fit he will survive."

She spoke directly to the General.

"Should your alliesss prove fit, so be it. My judgement isss they cannot prevail, my judgement iss Law iss too sstrong. His station is just the tip of a sword that if drawn will slash all our profitsss. Sso much destruction. Will anyone sspeak againssst neutrality in thisss coming war?"

The sense of the Board was clear now, clear in the discomfited faces of those who doubted her leadership, clear in the faces of those who cleaved to Daht. Clear to Daht himself.

No-one spoke.

"Then it iss agreed. All Directors will abstain from aiding or hindering either side outside of normal commercial relationshipsss."

That was a concession, a small one, recognising her inability to deny Force legitimate access to trade facilities, legitimising the fact her allies and their proxies admirable lust for short term profits would drive them to court Force. It was the best Daht could achieve and for her, it was better than the victory she could have won. Force might win skirmish after skirmish but he could not conquer a defended clan station without using weapons of mass destruction. And if he did, well, some victories, he would find, come with too high a price.

Then there was the Black Heart, the Stoertebeker Command Carrier, light minutes from the Teladi Gain gate complex, far from detection. It was only a converted transporter, an Albatross, but it was crammed with fighters. Not crammed, Morn corrected herself, not after recent events, but it would be again and she would make more profits.

She almost smiled. Let Force waste his strength on Law's shield wall, meanwhile the Enterprise would proceed. The loss of the human explorer was a blow, but not mortal. They did not know where they had found the mother-lode, thanks to Force, but they knew, from months of reports, where it was not and where, generally, he had last looked before his unexpected return. They had waited years, they could wait the months it would take to mount another more focused search, provided the Xenon continued to cede the sector.

When the board dispersed back to their respective holdings Morn turned her mind to the previously unthinkable. Should the Black Heart acquire a jump-drive, Force and his petty fleet would soon cease to exist. But how to get one of the closely monitored devices to him and how to retain control? It was one thing for Nibris to subvert one

of her own commercial transporters, but delivering a jump-drive into the direct hands of a single clan, even though the technology was sealed beyond the ability of anyone but the Goner Temple scientists to tamper with, that was another fraught step entirely.

Could she contemplate such an action? Morn did not know. She could though, contemplate such a contemplation, and did so as she opened a secure channel to her Paranid contact.

Daht eased himself into the booth and allowed the seating to adjust itself to both his Teladi physiology and his bulk, the hidden compressors wheezing softly under the strain. It was a sound the two humans appeared to find faintly amusing, to judge from the veiled smiles and the General made a mental note to investigate the issue later. For now he just performed the hand touching ritual and exchanged inconsequential personal information.

Both Corrin and Force it seemed, were in good health, although Force appeared to be having some difficulty with the lighting levels that obliged him to constantly wear eye-protectors. Evolution, as every Teladi knew, had been particularly ungenerous to humans. They lacked tails, nictitating eyelids or genitals of any size worth mentioning, without any concomitant advantages, if you discounted their ability to reproduce like bacteria.

He eschewed the offer of refreshments but waited patiently whilst human females delivered a selection of foods and liquids to the table. Finally, Corrin activated the privacy shield, muting the discord of the casino to a subdued murmur and Daht described the Teladi Board meeting in detail.

“So,” Corrin summarised. “You won an undertaking from the Board not to interfere with whatever actions we want to take against Law? And that includes Director Morn in Teladi Gain itself?”

On Daht’s nodded confirmation Corrin grinned broadly, clearly delighted at the news, but his knowledge of human facial gestures was too thin to interpret the tight, reflexive twitch of Force’s lips.

“A level playing field Max,” there was clearly a personal element to the older human’s enthusiasm for conflict. Daht could see the hatred in his eyes. Force responded with another, almost imperceptible smile. The General realised that without the eyes it was impossible to even guess what humans were thinking. He cautiously wondered whether the protectors were a deliberate deception.

After Daht left for his transport Max ordered champagne.

“The best.”

Corrin specified the type and vintage and it arrived a few minutes later, in an old fashioned silver cooler of crushed ice.

“To victory!” Max toasted, looking happier than Corrin had seen him in awhile.

Corrin returned it cautiously as he quietly examined the situation, going over it in his mind, like a jeweller assaying a fine stone, looking for tiny imperfections. The blockade of Law was going well, in that the few freighters attempting to reach the station had turned back at the first challenge. No fighters had sallied to their aid and none had attempted to reinforce the base.

The station itself remained impregnable behind a shield wall of defence towers.

"You know Law must have a lot of off-station assets?" Corrin stated.

"And four ships operating from Boron space won't be able to prevent them getting through?" Max finished for him. "I know. Wait a second."

He produced the Xela AI data-padd and slipped her chip into the interface.

"Hi Zee, Daht's gone so you can come out to play."

Max repeated what Daht had told them.

Xela repeated Corrin's own doubts about the efficacy of the blockade.

"Which is why I sent Kerman to place an order for an Argon Chip Fab. You said you wanted one. We'll deploy it in Teladi Gain and make it the front-line Raiders base. We can rely on Jackson's people, sector security and elements of the Baby Raiders to keep the Place safe."

"I wish," Corrin said slowly, "You'd discuss this sort of thing first Max."

"Problem?"

"No," Corrin shrugged. "No problem, but it would be nice to be consulted every now and then."

Max considered the statement for a second and shrugged in turn.

"Okay Corrin, you're right."

He produced a small gun metal pipe and crumbled dried leaves into the bowl. It self-ignited as he inhaled. Corrin said nothing.

Max relaxed back into the booth, wreathed in aromatic smoke.

"Anyone fancy a dessert? No?"

He summoned a hostess with a casual wave, ordered fruit pie and waited until she was outside the privacy field before continuing.

"Okay. Let's make plans. Corrin, all those Babies I took out, they're ready for promotion if the background checks pan out."

“They’re as clean as we can tell Max,” Corrin replied. “I’ll let the Sarge know.”

“Excellent,” Max said with a smile. “And it’s time we upgraded from those damn Bayamons. How are we doing for credits Zee?”

The pie arrived while she was tapping into the station information net and negotiating the security protocols. Max spread a generous dollop of cream and attacked it with gusto.

“A damn fine cherry pie!” He exclaimed with boyish enthusiasm. “Damn fine. Do we grow the stuff here?”

“You can barely grow them on Argon Prime Max,” Xela answered. “Which if they stem from an Earth ship hydroponics tank like the Goner say, isn’t surprising. Try and chew, there’s a good boy, that slice cost more than most people clear in a week. Factoring in the new station and assuming we swap that XL for an Eel we have three million credits, with change, not enough for a fleet upgrade. But, we’re getting a steady income from the spaceweed and factory orders are flooding in. We’ll be able to run another convoy soon but we need to funnel Jackson’s little donation into our accounts.”

“Progress?” Corrin asked.

“Slow,” Xela admitted. “Bankers are deeply untrusting. I confess to being shocked!”

“What can we do?” Max interjected.

“We need a set of encrypted access codes matched to an access point. Each sub-component of planetary banking systems has its own unique patterns. If we had just one we could slip the transfer in among the legitimate traffic. Some splits and shuffles and it’ll take the tax man months to catch on.”

“And where can we acquire these codes lass?” Corrin asked.

“My virtual shoulders are shrugging boys,” Xela replied. “Artur? Jackson?”

“Jackson?” Max said. “I could ask I suppose,” he sounded doubtful, knowing that the authorities went to great lengths to ensure information of this nature could not fall into mischievous hands.

“Failing that, if I had direct physical access and a custom interface, I might be able to hack it. The emphasis is on the ‘might’ here guys. We need to find Artur.”

Max demurred.

“I don’t think he wants to be found and I don’t want to lead Law’s spies to him. Make plans for a direct break-in and I’ll talk with our piratical friend.”

He took another hit from the pipe.

“Corrin, get that XL to a Boron yard and bring back an Eel. They’re damn slow ships though. Zee, how are we for those three Mamba’s from Cho’s Defeat?

“Ours when we can pay Max,” Xela replied. “Organics are so easily bribed.”

“Great,” Max nodded, turning to Corrin. “How we doing on that Stoertebeker pilot?”

“Matter of time Max, matter of time,” Corrin answered.

“He was making for Atreus Clouds but the Boron whacked him. Sinas has him in custody and Kerman is out in the Pegasus picking him up. You think he can help us get close to Law right?”

“We have to find a way past those LT’s,” Max replied. “A frontal assault would be costly. When Kerman gets back let me know. I’ll take the prisoner with me to Confed Station.”

Corrin raised a brow in query.

“Saves all those awkward questions about human rights and false imprisonment!” He smiled.

“If you say so Max,” Corrin answered. If Max noticed the tone he gave no sign.

“Right then,” Max said, clapping his hands. “It’s agreed. Corrin, great job on the XL. You up for some more while I square things with Jackson?”

Corrin grinned and nodded.

“Excellent! Any other business? No. Then let’s party!”

He did, with enthusiasm.

Chapter 14: Bridgehead

"Max baby, it's been a long time, and you're wearing the coat! Looking so cool!"

"It's only been two days Jack," Max replied as he clambered down from the Mandalay cockpit. The embarkation ladder retracted into the small ship as he swept invisible flecks from the shoulders of the long leather coat.

"How's the prisoner?"

"Stewing in solitary, like you said. A lot of banging on walls, that sort of thing, he's eager to start singing. Why the little ship?"

Jackson nodded towards the Mandalay, in the shadow of a Prometheus fighter, the only other resident of the small side bay.

"It's fast and the good stuff is out protecting the Chip Fab deployment," Max looked around. "Where's everyone else Jack? Aligning their sights?"

Jack draped a companionable arm around Max's shoulder and guided him towards a set of small blast doors. They began cracking open as they walked.

"You wound me Max, you really do. We're partners remember? You're not wearing your shades, I take it the electric chick is busy elsewhere?"

"She's with Corrin, helping out with the deployment. Her presence confers…" Max hesitated, considering his words carefully. "Certain tactical advantages."

"And her absence more so," Jack replied. "They're buying the act huh, despite you wasting Challenger?"

A spasm of pain rippled his partner's face, quick and brief, mainly in the eyes.

"Ah Max," Jackson said, steering Max down a maze of corridors ripped from the ships of several races and time periods. "A conscience is a terrible, terrible burden isn't it?"

"Something you'd know a lot about Jack," Max replied curtly. "And yes, everyone's buying it, why wouldn't they? It's me, Gragore Marteene, one of the Best and the Brightest."

Bitterness that could strip paint.

"Don't give them time to think, just time to react. They trust me Jack and the people with all the guns just damn love the hell out of me."

Jackson grinned and slapped Max on the shoulder.

"You'd make a fine Clan leader Max, always said so. Here we are."

The corridor stopped at a single, heavy door, diagonally sealed with heavy metal bar controlled by a biometric lock. Jackson placed a thumb over it and the bar retracted. He pulled the door open as Max stood back, his hand hovering near the blaster on his hip. The man was sitting on the only piece of furniture, a plasteel shelf fixed to the wall to serve as both bed and seat. The cell reeked of chemicals from the toilet.

He was old, probably older than Corrin, a thick set man with a strong jaw and heavy brows set beneath salt and pepper hair, cropped close. His left eye was almost swollen shut.

"You've spoken with him already," Max stated.

Jackson shrugged and smiled.

"What can I say Max, I'm a curious guy. Max, this is Joker, Joker, this is Commander Max Force."

The man stood, or rather, he unfolded his lanky frame and looked down at Max before extending a hand.

"We've met Commander."

Max shook it tentatively.

"I meet lot's of people but you've been with Law, that wipes the slate clean and then dirties it some more. And mother told me never to trust people who go by their call-signs."

"Credits are credits Commander," he answered unapologetically. "And now I'm here, not there. Do you want my help or not? I've told Jackson all I'm going to, until I get a deal."

"I've got all the help I need," Max answered curtly. "Why do I need to deal with you?"

"Tell him," Jackson said.

The man sat down, crumbling like a falling tower, back onto the shelf.

"My wife."

His shoulders slumped and his face was transfigured by a look of pain Max knew could not be faked.

"She was part of Law's command staff when you attacked Teladi Gain."

The man paused, then a look of comprehension dawned on his face.

“You haven’t heard have you Force? When the Teladi turned on him, he went berserk. He killed her with his own bare hands, while she pleaded for her life.”

His voice cracked, choking with feelings men like that could only express in one way.

“I heard it all, Force.”

He turned to the wall, not quick enough to hide the tears stinging his eyes.

“She called my name.”

Jackson squeezed his shoulder in an unexpectedly tender gesture. He caught Max’s questioning look.

“Hey Max, I’m human too! My heart ain’t stone.”

“Well, bully for you Jack,” Max answered. “Why should I believe a damn word of this?”

“Because he’s telling the truth,” Jackson said. “You’ve seen the reports and I’ve got my own sources. There’s been a massacre on the Station and the guy tells the same story over and over.”

“No matter how many times you hit him, right Jack?”

“I only hit him a few times Max, for forms sake. Drugs are much more effective. Ain’t that right Joker?”

The man didn’t answer.

“You tell Max what you told me Joker,” Jackson continued. “And make it a good pitch, ol’ Max here is a bit leaner and meaner than you remember him.”

Max listened to the story without interrupting. It was short.

The man was a merc, a former marine with a litany of complaints and charges leading inevitably to a dishonourable discharge. Jackson produced a copy of his service record on a data-padd. Latterly he had been an officer in Law’s own security forces, he candidly admitted what this involved. Jack watched Max closely for his reaction. His face was a stone mask.

“And now,” Joker concluded. “I’ll do anything it takes to have my revenge.”

“Revenge for the same sort of crap you pull yourself,” Max snapped. “Not big on irony are you?”

Joker shrugged.

“I know things. Layouts, security codes, people. You don’t like me Force? That’s fine, you always were a pussy.”

He cleared his throat and spat at his feet.

“But if you want Law you’re going to have to go in and get him. And if you do that you’ll need my help.”

“He’s right Max,” Jackson said.

Max turned to him.

“What deal did you make?”

“You give the word Max and he’s part of my merry little band. If we go after Law we’re going to need soldiers and to be honest, that’s an area I’m a little short on. He knows people and remains bought, we’d be fools not to take him.”

Max thought only briefly.

“Okay Jack, you go ahead. I’ve got my own people but the more the better.”

He turned to the prisoner.

“I want a detailed assault plan for that station. Can you get us past the LT’s?”

Joker grinned, a small look of triumph as he realised he was out of immediate trouble.

“Not my department Force. You get troops onboard and I’ll see they kick ass.”

Max stepped forward and floored the man with a quick jab to the stomach followed by an upper cut. Joker staggered back and slumped onto the shelf, grinning ruefully through bloodied lips.

“That the best you got Max? You need my help more than you know.”

He wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

“Now get me out of here.”

After Jackson summoned his people and gave them careful instructions Joker was taken away.

“Keep an eye on him Jack, he may be a spy.”

Jackson nodded.

“Law has spies everywhere Max, even on your station, you know that. He’s on the level though, I can feel it.”

“I know he’s got spies Jack. Everybody has. The Sarge has done a pretty good job weeding them out but some are bound to get through. The best we can do is make sure they can’t get into sensitive or dangerous areas.”

Max sighed, weary.

“It means I’m always on Jack. Always on.”

“Even with the hookers?”

“Particularly with the hookers Jack. Now how about coming back to the Place? Good food, drink and company. We need to figure out how to get your millions into my accounts, I’ve ships and a Computer Plant to buy. I’ve got some ideas but I bet you’ve done this sort of thing before.”

“Not on this scale Max,” Jackson replied. “But that sounds good. With all the boy scouts in Teladi Gain and we can let our hair down.”

Max grinned.

“Raise a little hell?”

Jackson punched Max in the arm as they headed back to the docking bay.

“Little? You’ve got to get out of that mindset Max. Anyway, shouldn’t you be doing the hero thing in Gain? What if Law brings in his carrier? You know about the Black Heart don’t you?”

“We’ve more pilots than ships Jack, they can manage without me for awhile and Xela’s rigged the All-Seeing-Eye to control LT’s. If it shows we’ll cut it to ribbons. Besides, how can we have these cosy little chats if the old ball and chain is online?”

“Points impeccable, as always Max,” Jackson answered and then laughed again.

“A little hell. You crack me up Max, you really do!”

“Here she comes boys, here she comes,” Kaitrin warned. She checked her scope again and touched one of the crawling blue symbols. “Raider One, warn that guy off, and be very insistent!”

“Raider One, copy that All-Seeing-Eye,” the target was already locked in the HUD. Rolling the Prometheus onto an intercept vector she scanned the uploaded Registry details.

“Private hire, Harp, media reptiles. Remain on station.”

The Bayamon on Summer’s wing peeled off, Harper throwing a ribbing salute as he rolled away.

“It’s the other hand, civilian,” she signed off curtly and scanned the target. A standard passenger variant of the boxy Teladi freighter.

No armaments, no cargo, no threat.

At three klicks she corrected her heading slightly, rolling to match orientation with the target and accelerated to full speed with a touch of after-burner. The powerful fighter responded instantly to her touch, with that signature kidney punch. In the two days she’d been working the blockade she’d fallen in love with the fighter, superior in almost every way to the Argon Buster.

Treasonous but true.

These were, she reminded herself, the best of times! Where else but in Commander Force’s Raiders would a pilot get and get to do what they’d trained for all those years, flying the best fighters in space? It was a widespread sentiment; professional pride or the incredible money and perks. Morale was at an all time high, cemented by an indefinable feeling all seemed to share, whatever their personal mixture of motives.

“The Wings of Destiny beat round those who return from the dead,” Harper had declaimed, in that mad-scary way she could never quite decide was serious. “They beat so loud!” He grinned, shielding his ears in mock pain.

Hyperbolic crap but some small piece of history was being written and who wouldn’t want to be a part of that?

It was what drew the people on the Vulture to the deployment of a standard Argon Chip Fabrication Plant in Teladi Gain.

She flashed across the nose of the freighter, her right wing calculatedly close to the cockpit, banking sharply to follow it’s startled gyrations. She hoped it’s gravity generators were up to it, then on reflection, she didn’t.

“Attention Vulture. You have been warned to stay clear now unless you want more than a few cuts and bruises observe the delineated exclusion zone now.”

“Pilot to fighter.” A Teladi appeared in the corner of the HUD. “You threaten legitimate commerccce, and presss freedom?”

“No, simply alluding to what happens when a few hundred thousand tonnes of Mammoth runs into insects too dumb to not wander into it’s emergence cone. Have a good day.”

She abruptly cut the channel.

“Okay she’s bugging out Control. Resuming station.”

She pulled the Prometheus around in time to see the jumpgate from Ceo’s Buckzoid coruscate to life. Two Raider Bayamons shot from the roiling, electric blue tunnel,

followed by two Busters and three small Discoverers. The fighters all broke high and right as the snout of a Mammoth transport pushed through from hyperspace.

The huge Transporter lurched fully into Teladi Gain, reverse thrusters straining against the momentum of it's massive bulk, filling her cockpit with a low, simulated roar.

Harper pulled up onto her wing along with the other two Raider Bayamon escorts as she circled her charge. Slowly the Mammoth slid to a halt, a box with engines, a flying cargo bay with almost no concession paid to form over utility.

"Escorts Two, Three and Four. Observe loose formation, two klick exclusion zone, we take the Base side."

They knew the drill but it never hurt to repeat orders.

Summers kept her flight between the Clan Base and the lumbering transporter as it headed out from the gate sector towards the deployment point.

Twenty klicks from Stoertebeker's front door, that was just going to burn him up!

The thought gave her an un-military frisson. Like most of the Raiders she looked forward to ridding the universe of someone of Law's loathsome reputation and as far as she was concerned she was fighting a war as every bit as real as the one with the Xenon. It had to be done and if it took someone of the Commander's guts instead of the spineless politicians of all the races then so be it.

The Clan Station remained as quiescent as it had been for the duration of the blockade, impervious behind a dozen laser towers.

Six more two ship Raider flights prowled that perimeter, daring Law to respond.

Most of the Raiders were based in Menelaus Frontier now, along with several Baby Raiders flights. All pilots were pulling double shifts to secure the construction site. The Sarge estimated three days from deployment to operational status.

A lot of stims would be popped before it was finished. Fourteen hours in a cockpit, even using the SETA, was a long time and like most pilots she hated to use it too much. Everything moved just too damn fast and things could easily pop past your slowed reflexes in that state.

The deployment went without interference. Summers watched the construction package drift slowly from the cargo bay and the Mammoth slowly reverse away, back towards the jumpgate.

Summers circled the cube, watching as it suddenly split apart, its own fabric manoeuvred into position by attached construction robots to form the skeleton base of the Plant. The first construction teams were already launching from the departing Mammoth, the Argon Lifters deploying space-suited figures along pre-planned routes around the construction site.

Within minutes the matter furnaces arced to life and replicators began extruding additional structural components that were fixed into position with a speed that the SETA rendered almost comical.

Corrin circled the station one more time, watching the laser towers track the Mamba, following him like malevolent flower heads.

“Okay, it looks like no-one is coming out to play. Screen One, remain on station. The rest of you return to transfer point.”

Half of the blockading fighters peeled off and headed towards the western jumpgate. On schedule, a Raiders Lifter emerged and headed towards the construction site. When it arrived on station the fighters surrounded it and soon the environs was a clutter of space-suited figures as pilots changed shifts.

Now would be the time to strike but nothing happened. It made Corrin uneasy, Law would have to respond to the challenge. It was a question of when rather than if.

And a question of how?

They had been through the possibilities, and thanks to the Xela AI’s upgrading of the captured Merc Command Centre, Corrin was confident they had every possibility covered.

The Bat containing the spare LT’s stuck close to the construction site.

Corrin stayed on station until the next shift change, amusing himself by playing chicken with the Clan laser towers, dodging the beams on Xela’s call.

Good practice.

By the time Corrin returned to the Base he could barely lift his aching bones from the cockpit. A technician handed him a java as he stepped down. He took it with a nod of thanks and after testing the temperature with a touch of the lips, took a deep gulp. The thick black liquid burned down his gullet and he took deep, open mouth breaths in a belated attempt to cool it.

‘Bad move Paskaal.’ He muttered to himself as he checked the time. Late evening in the station cycle, the fourth shift CAP would be launching about now. He considered going straight to the private quarters he shared with Kaitrin but with the All-Seeing-Eye deployed in Teladi Gain they would be empty and Corrin felt like being with people.

The shower was hot and the water needle sharp, stimulating his nerves as much as a good whisky. Clean hair felt good too and he took a moment to run the shaver over his chin before changing into the fresh pressed lounge suit he kept in his flight locker.

‘Feeling good, looking sharp Mirv!’ He thought as he adjusted the ribbon tie in the full length reflector. Corrin headed for the elevator and on a whim, changed his mind and back-tracked through Raiders Territory to the internal Teleport pad. He hadn’t used it before, the whole idea of stepping through a quasi wormhole without a few tonnes of fighter around him seemed unnatural but he wanted to get to the inner offices of his casino unobserved by either the guests or the security people guarding the private elevators, just to make sure he could.

Corrin tapped in his personal access code to verify the biometric scan. Seconds later he was in the Inner Sanctum, yards from his own office. The rest of the suite felt empty, completely silent, isolated from the hubbub beyond it’s walls by in-built sonic buffers.

Good. He could rip through some paper-work and still have time to do the host thing before having to turn in.

His thumbprint opened the office door and de-activated the internal security scans, he slipped the Xela AI chip into a mainframe interface to let her continue her probe of banking system protocols. From her litany of complaints throughout the flight he gathered the task was not going well.

Unsurprisingly, planetary data-hubs were about as secure as secure gets. If it were easy to channel illegal funds to legitimate corporations the Clans would just buy all the research facilities they needed through front organisations and the mission would be pointless. And the bots trawling through the financial system would immediately spot any crude attempt to launder illegal credits through price manipulation.

Corrin wondered whether that was what lay behind Jackson’s apparent generosity, rather than the avarice Max credited. Everyone knew, and Xela’s work daily confirmed that the only way around the system was to be in the system and such a facility would be a priceless asset for a clan leader.

Inside the data-hub with the right equipment and the correct access codes.

Three possible strikes.

At least Xela qualified as the necessary hardware but even she couldn’t walk through shielded walls or conjure knowledge of the constantly changing and seriously complex codes and algorithms protecting the commerce net, from thin air.

Corrin waited until her complaints died away and pulled up the security files.

Max had a Chip Fab, or would have soon and he wanted a Computer Plant. Together they would form the research base lure for the Shadow Conspiracy, so long as they remained solvent. Corrin had little fear on that score. The market for Zero-G manufactured technologies was good, particularly for the advanced Argon equipment. So long as the network of independent traders they’d set up kept up the supply of raw materials, profitability would not be a problem.

What would be a problem was security.

Not sabotage or anything crude like that – the security teams the Sarge ran could keep people from where they shouldn't be and make sure nothing went boom unexpectedly – the real problem lay with the personnel. Both installations required a bunch of very clever people to run, scientists and technicians who, as a group, did not respond well to prison-like security, even for the drop-everything salaries Max was offering.

Screening was essential and the best net-bots Xela could devise were augmenting those of the private security firms the Sarge hired to weed out any applicant with problematic connections to clans, security services or any of another hundred factions that might not be sympathetic to the meteoric rise of the Force Corporation.

The recruitment notices had been out for less than a day yet two dozen CV links were already in. Bright postgraduates and under-renumerated academics, ground-hugging techs looking for excitement and a surprising number of applications from staff of existing orbital plants, suggesting Max was erring too far on the side of generosity.

Corrin noted the security checks were already underway and closed the file.

It took him another hour to review the records of new workers for the Dream Farm and the Bliss Place before rubber-stamping the security recommendations. Two were spies, one for Law, the second for the Confed. They would be placed in a damp, dark place and covered appropriately.

Metaphorically speaking.

"Any progress lass?"

"If there were I'd be whoop-de-dooing," Xela replied with remarkable testiness for an AI. "Do you hear any whoops?"

Corrin conceded he did not whilst wondering how he'd become her keeper all of a sudden.

He needed a drink, just to unwind. Not like Max, not to drown or choke the guilt and self-recrimination that must be eating him up. Just to relax.

Corrin paused at the exit to the casino, checked both the tie and the persona and stepped through ready to charm.

Mirv Corrin, playboy.

He grabbed a glass from the tray of a passing hostess. Champagne. Good champagne. Another sip. The best. He trailed the woman with his eyes, admiring the fluid way she slipped through the crowd without losing either her balance or her drinks.

Max was in the private booth along with Jackson and a small group of Argon Corrin did not recognise. They let out a raucous cheer when the drinks arrived. Max nodded a greeting across the casino when he caught sight of Corrin through the crowd. There

was no invitation in the body language and so Corrin drifted through the throng to the gambling tables, taking a seat at the House Limit poker game.

He betted modestly but lost steadily, distracted by a procession of business-beings willing to pay well for guaranteed delivery of raw materials from the central sectors. By the early hours of the morning Corrin had enough orders to mount another convoy, the profits from which would dwarf his losses at the table.

By the time he turned in Max and his new friends were still going strong, raucous in their inebriation.

Corrin rose mid-morning, station time, refreshed by six hours sleep and ploughed through a pile of bacon sandwiches at his desk. Xela took the orders and suggested a flight schedule which Corrin confirmed after a cursory check. Four independent freighters, a three-ship Piranha escort and a route that steered clear of the unclaimed sectors - safe enough with Law bottled up and the Skull Clan apparently disinclined to interfere.

Finally he asked Xela for a tactical update. Everything was quiet and Law showed no sign of interfering in the construction of the Chip Fab. Corrin tuned into the Teladi Gain nav-sat and set the range to maximum, hoping to catch a glimpse of the rumoured Stoertebeker carrier.

Nothing.

He took the Xela AI chip and descended to Raiders Territory. With most of the pilots deployed in Teladi Gain and Jackson's pilots operating from the Dream Farm, the corridors were deserted. Corrin strolled to the private bay where the Mamba and Prometheus fighters were docked. The two troopers stationed outside the main lock punctiliously checked his ID against biometric records before admitting him.

The Mamba itself was prepped and ready to go and Corrin quickly changed into his flight suit, whistling happily at the knowledge that today he was free to go anywhere, free to do anything in the best fighter in the X-Universe.

"Where do you fancy lass?" he asked as the Xela AI came on line.

"Eighteen Billion," she replied quickly. "I want to see what the Xenon are up to, if you think you old reflexes are up to the dash?"

"They're up to triggering the jump-drive if I get into trouble girl," he answered with a smiling lilt. "And the correct term is 'mature'."

It was good choice of sectors. If the Xenon could be provoked into chasing him through into the Teladi frontier sector there was a shipyard to hand in Ianamus Zura and a potential ally of General Daht's who would appreciate the opportunity to buy a couple of Xenon fighters. Failing that he was certain he could find some Clan ships.

Before launching he checked the flight roster, noting Max had put himself down to fly the space-weed laden Destiny Star to Confed Station. Corrin hoped Max knew what he was doing but was pleased to know he wasn't planning on a combat flight. If, Corrin thought, he were a flight surgeon, he'd ground Max for a week, give him time to come to terms with what he'd done. Choking the memory in a weed haze or drowning it from a bottle were not, as far as Corrin was concerned, healthy long term solutions.

He knew Marteene, knew that by virtue of fitting the Argon Navy Maverick Profile, he must be a mental rock. They'd all danced in the grey during the course of Special Ops and you learnt to put it behind you, seal things away. And there were councillors to help, to share a burden Max now carried alone. Marteene, he corrected himself. Gragore Marteene.

Damn! Even he was beginning to conflate the two. And now Marteene was trying to pull another bluff with Jackson. No wonder he was stressed out.

As the Mamba approached the southern jump-gate to the Xenon controlled sector Corrin pushed the thoughts from his mind, resolving to keep a close eye on Marteene, for his own sake.

The plasma bolts drifted in slow motion, a string of luminescent pearls falling one by one onto the shields, each impact a tiny flash as the defence screen dissipated the energy.

There was a screaming voice. Inchoate, raging, expletives and exhortations intermingled, filling the cockpit, filling him with each breath.

The rain continued to fall, the plasma burning through the failing shields and punching though the hull, sending shards of debris boiling into space in erupting tornadoes of air.

The probe was now a burning wreck, a smashed sphere of exposed ribs and arcing power cables, trailing sparks like a comet close to the sun.

He kept his thumb on the trigger, stabbing it down harder and harder still, feeling he could feel the bones crack and the nail splinter, filling the glove with thick warm blood whose sweet, iron tang overwhelmed the life support system, his spasming gorge filling his mouth with thin, sour bile which rose to burn his sinuses.

"You've almost killed him dear," the voice was soft, gentle, female. Resigned compassion.

Explosions were tearing through the shattered hulk now, filling his cockpit, reverberating in his chest. Debris rattling like hail on his hull.

Any second; his thumb tore through his glove, the nail raised, forced upright by the pumping blood, any second; the plasma bolts began pounding on the exposed fusion reactor core, punching into the heavy metal shielding.

Any second!

The reactor shielding was eviscerated now, just ragged, torn fragments held together by tenuous strips. The core glared through the magnetic containment, eye searing, burning bright, rippling and twisting like a caged creature almost free of it's constraints.

He could still stop. The voice was screaming at him to stop.

"Almost dead," her soft voice was incongruously audible. "Almost dead."

The core began to swell, a slow motion super-nova.

He could still stop, he could still stop.

The nova expanded through the remnant shielding, boiling it away.

"Almost dead."

The dying ship rippled, on the very cusp of nothingness.

"No!"

That was his own voice, barely heard over the ear splitting chaos.

He tried to stop, tried to lift his thumb from the trigger but it was stuck now, caked in blood dried harder than epoxy.

"No!"

The Lifter exploded, an annihilating flash, a single body, a twitching starfish cart-wheeling towards him with an inevitability he did not even try to evade.

The body spread-eagled itself on the cockpit, still gulping against the vacuum as it fixed him with ruptured eyeballs.

"Dad!"

Max shot bolt upright, sweat-soaked and clammy in a twilight world of unfamiliar shapes that refused to resolve themselves through the pounding headache.

"Where..?"

Unfamiliar room, unfamiliar bed, unfamiliar woman, still sleeping beside him, using a forearm as a pillow, her face lost in a curtain of blonde hair.

Max stifled a groan and willed the room to cease it's nauseating slow shimmer. It reluctantly complied, resolving itself into a small, single room living quarter.

The scattered furnishings, bottles and clothing suggested a major brawl or a break-in. A black cocktail dress lay draped over the bedside illuminator.

One of Corrin's hosts then, Max didn't know whether to be relieved or not, but settled on the former. At least he wouldn't have to hide a credit transfer from Xela's judgemental gaze.

Max attempted to slip quietly from the bed, an attempt foiled by one of his own carelessly discarded boots that sent him stumbling to the floor.

The woman stirred, then turned towards him.

"Lights," she ordered sleepily.

The ambient lighting level rose slowly, filling the room with a soft, early morning sunrise glow that was a balm on his throbbing eyes.

"Good morning Max!" She smiled and held out her arms languorously.

Max knelt on the bed and kissed her forehead as she gave him a gentle hug, He worked to dredge up a name.

"Hi there," he replied gently through a sudden jolt of desire as the single sheet slid down from her torso.

Max tried to ignore his own body as she blearily checked her watch.

She leapt from the bed.

"For crying out loud Max, look at the time!" She shouted as she unsuccessfully tried to peel off both her stockings at once.

Max looked quickly away.

"My session started an hour ago!"

She almost fell into the shower cube, not bothering to activate the privacy shield.

"Want to join me? Believe me, you need it."

"Great," Max replied. "The day is one minute old and I'm being told I stink."

"Not at everything Max, not by any means!"

As she stood, arms raised and hair billowing in the swirling column of warm, drying air Max did not look away, fixated by her near perfect form. She caught him looking and smiled provocatively. This time he did turn away, his eyes roving the room for some means of identification.

"The blonde one with high cheekbones."

That was just not going to narrow things down that much and Corrin had rules about his hosts fraternising with the Raiders, if not explicitly with Max. He settled on memorising the room number and tracking down a name through the station data-net.

She threw on a fresh black dress as he took a quick shower and touched up her make-up as he dressed,

“Hurry up Max!” she cried impatiently as he vainly sought a second sock. “You look a bit pale, you feeling okay?”

Max shook his head carefully, his brain had apparently detached itself sometime during the night and seemed to rattle like a nut in a shell, causing dull throbbing jolts of pain.

“I think I might have drunk too much.”

“Oh you poor babe!” she replied as she finished fastening her stockings. Max was not functioning well enough to discern the sarcasm. She looked around the room and found a half empty shot glass which she filled with dregs from a discarded whisky bottle.

“Here, drink this and get a move on!”

Max took the glass with a trembling hand.

“In one Max, in one!”

He tossed it back, the grain spirit burnt a path straight to his empty stomach but he felt an immediate improvement.

“Okay Max,” she threw him his boots. “Move that tight butt.”

“My sock,” Max protested, trying to shake the feeling Xela must have found an android body.

She began pushing him towards the door.

“It’s gone Max, let it go, it’s time to get on with your life!”

He was hustled from her quarters, still clutching one boot. At the elevator she turned and kissed him again, hard and with a passion that compelled reciprocity.

“I’ll see you later then, you be careful out there!” She said in a tone that suggested some form of commitment Max couldn’t recall making. The elevator doors cut off his equivocal response and he put a naked foot into the boot and made his way down to the New Frontier restaurant.

Late morning and the place was already full, the commercial trade on station ran to no specific time zone, catering as they did for clients operating on dozens of clocks.

His personal table was free, the management kept it that way, pleased to have the Max Force frequent their establishment, even if his fame was already fading.

“And what meal might this be Commander?”

The head waiter’s tone was arch but there was a gleam in his eye.

“Breakfast, brunch? I’m losing track Raymond. Anything, so long as it’s fried!”

“Your usual breakfast then Sir,” Ray tapped the order into his padd and transmitted it. “I see you are moving into high technology production.”

“Didn’t know you followed the business Ray. Any investments?”

“Some Commander, I want to retire in a couple of years so I’d of course appreciate any inside information you possess!”

“Buy low, sell high,” Max returned.

Ray smiled.

“Very droll, Commander,” he answered. A second waiter arrived, bearing a heavily laden tray, which Ray took, placing the steaming plate before Max and laid out the cutlery with fastidious precision. Finally he placed a single shot glass, filled to the brim with dark, amber spirit, next to the pot of java.

“Enjoy your meal Sir,” he turned to leave. “And Commander, when you deal with Law, do a good job.”

“Who says anything about dealing with him? War ain’t good for business.”

“Please Commander,” Ray replied with a grin. “No one really thinks the universe is big enough for the both of you. Bets are being taken.”

“And who do the odds favour?”

“Law,” Ray replied. “But my credits are on you, the odds were just too tempting!”

“Smart man,” Max replied. “And Ray? Was I in here with a blonde last night? Tall, slim, long hair, high cheekbones?”

“No Commander,” he answered. “You did not grace us with your presence, although your unruly, piratical friends dropped by. Is there a problem?”

“Just with a name,” Max admitted. “And I forgot to get a room number. Recognise the description?”

“Well aren’t we just the stud Sir!” Ray replied. “Tall, good looking blonde eh? I’m not entirely sure it’s possible to throw a stick on this station and not hit a woman answering that detailed description.”

“I’ll take that as a No shall I?” Max said with a grin. “And Ray,” Max called as Ray turned to answer an imperious summons from a group of Split in an adjacent booth.

The waiter turned.

“You can bet your retirement fund on me handing Law his face! That a good enough tip?”

Ray smiled and nodded.

The food was good, it always was. Bacon, grilled to a crisp, opulent sausages, still sizzling on the plate, fried bread that melted into each meaty mouthful. And java, plenty of java, hot, black and very strong.

As he ate Max tuned the table display to the summary prepared by his customised news-bots from the gigabytes of information flooding the universal network.

They had found a few dozen references to ‘Force’ in obscure financial journals. Nothing interesting or relevant there. Another three references from gossip columns, improbably linked him to three different starlets, of whom he knew nothing and one leading man from a popular space opera. There were though, plenty in the major news pages about the deployment of the Chip Fab. The more erudite sources speculated on relative force strengths, Teladi Trading Company politics and the likelihood of more conflict and the effect that might have on the universe economy. The more popular channels, at which the majority of the universe troughed for their news, eschewed serious coverage and settled for the journalistic equivalent of chanting ‘fight, fight, fight!’ from the sidelines, alongside fetishistic detail of weaponry that might be involved in any fight.

Reinvigorated by the meal and the edge taken off his hangover by the whisky and java, Max slipped his credit chip into the display. As usual the bill came to zero credits. He added Ray a substantial tip and went down to Raiders Territory.

After getting a tactical update from Flight Control he changed into a flight suit and headed for the secured bay housing the Destiny Star. The guards checked his biometrics before letting him through. Max checked the latest space-weed crop had been loaded and requested a launch slot.

The Mamba burst through the jump-gate, practically in formation with two Xenon L class fighters. Corrin rolled and hit the after-burners as Xela called a missile warning, pulling a sharp 180.

“Shit!” Corrin exclaimed involuntarily, twisting the rudder instinctively, missing a third ship by centimetres. The cockpit filled with the static rasp of scraping shields. “I

mean, good grief," he reversed the roll and reduced speed, turning inside the track of the trailing missiles. "Where did that come from?"

"The Temple, like all the others. Where do you think?" Xela replied. "Bad guys at 4 and 7."

Corrin pulled up, performed a quarter twist at the top of the roll and bleeding forward motion in a barrel-roll, rippled plasma the length of one Xenon. He dropped two silkworms as he cut inside the attack of the second, the Mamba bucked and shuddered as it flashed through a plasma stream.

The gate winked in the corner of his eye.

"Goner gone," Xela confirmed. "Gloves off Corrin."

"Gloves off," he confirmed.

One XL died in seconds, shields slammed down by one silkworm and ripped to extinction by his plasma throwers. On Xela's call he broke left, letting the Xenon missiles scrape by his right wing. Both self-destructed as he settled on the tail of the surviving fighter. Corrin confirmed the Xenon was on a heading away from the Teladi defence fighters, clustered near the centre of the sector, and began whittling away it's shields.

Xela began her probings.

"Launch permission confirmed Commander," the anonymous male voice replied. "you're clear to.., wait."

A short pause.

"Commander. We're receiving a transmission from a Goner shuttle, they're requesting permission to dock."

"A Goner visiting a Bliss Place?" Max answered. "That's got to be some sort of first. Tell them I gave at the office!"

The Controller chuckled.

"Commander, the Brother says his blessing can avert the peril that lurks in the shadows, to quote. He wants to speak to you about a fund raising drive among the lost souls. That's also a quote Sir!"

Max thought for a second, digesting a premonition, before replying.

"Okay Control, bring him into this bay and have the Brother escorted to Corrin's office. Take the back way so he can't cadge from the clients!"

“Copy that, Commander!” Control answered, laughing. “Docking permission confirmed.”

“Thanks,” Max said. “Lancer isn’t it? Keep this inside your helmet okay.”

“Goes without saying Commander,” Lancer confirmed. “Control out.”

Max disembarked from the Star and hurried back to the Casino, taking the private elevator to avoid any embarrassing encounters with evasively named blondes.

He had just enough time to order java and sandwiches before Corrin’s office door chimed. Max opened it with a word and the Brother swept in, a tall, thin man with stray fronds of lank red hair protruding from beneath the cowl of a robe, the light grey exaggerating the pallor of his angular face.

The Brother nodded briefly, his hands clasped in ritual greeting.

“Commander Max Force?”

“Yes, Brother?” Max replied, suddenly alert to the urgency behind the innocuous question.

“Seeker,” he replied, indicating the robes. “Seeker Jan, this room is secure? You have a teleport pad?”

“Yes and yes. Nearby.”

“Then we must attend there.”

Sensing no threat, Max shrugged and led the way out and down the corridor.

The Seeker tapped co-ordinates into the targeting system and activated the teleporter.

Nothing happened and he regarded Max querulously.

“Security lockout,” Max answered. Brother Jan stepped to one side, Max disengaged the protocols and reactivated the system.

The air above the pad shimmered, a squat shape forming in the haze.

“Artur!” Max exclaimed. The joy in his voice cracked as he realised what he was looking at. “Artur,” Pity stained his tone as he looked down on the defiantly glaring figure sitting in the Mobile Med Support Unit. “What happened?”

“If you have my damn ship you know what happened,” Artur snapped. He slapped the metal cowl shrouding his lower body. “I’ve lost a bloody leg and acquired a metal arm.”

His right arm twitched spasmodically and shot up and out, rigid. Artur snarled and grabbed it with his left, forcing it back down, it's servo's humming against the effort. Small beads of sweat dotted his brow.

"Which needs a lot of work," he finished, grimacing through the pain.

"It's too soon," Max noted the solicitude in the Seeker's voice and the look of concern in his pale blue eyes. "I warned you."

Artur sighed.

"Yes, you warned me and I'll take care of it, I promise."

"You see that you do." Seeker Jan replied. He proffered Max a short bow.

"You both have business to discuss that I have no wish to be privy to. I will take my leave now."

He knelt down beside the hovering, electronic-laden chair and grasped Artur's good hand.

"I Seek now, we may not meet again. Walk at least in the twilight brother."

"I'll try Jan," Artur replied. "Truly. Before you leave you'd better tour the fleshpots and try and shakedown a few souls, just for forms sake. And thanks for the ride. It was most exhilarating."

"Of course," the Seeker acknowledged. He turned to Max and smiled.

"It would have been less of a ride if your fighters did not go out of their way to provoke the Xenon. We of the Temple appreciate challenges to our faith, but not that much. Farewell Commander, if you would show me the way out."

Max led Jan back to the private elevator, Artur following, the medi-chair anti-gravs humming softly.

As the elevator whisked the Seeker away Artur glared up at Max.

"Marteene," he growled. "I think you have a lot of explaining to do. I take it Paskaal and Xela were flying that Mamba? Get them back here now."

Max said nothing but led the way back to the office. Once inside he opened a channel to flight control.

"Lancer – do we have Corrin on a nav-sat? Good. Tell him to RTB and report to me."

He waited for the confirmation and cut the channel. Marshalling his thoughts he turned to Artur.

Corrin and the captured XL were almost at the gate to Ianamus Zura when the recall command came in.

“Lancer, tell the Commander I have to make a sale first but I’ll be there ASAP.”

He waited for Control to acknowledge before leading the XL into the gate activation zone and they plunged through to the Teladi frontier sector.

“Something must be up back at base,” Xela opined as they emerged into normal space. “And we’ve got inbound fighters, transmitting friendly warnings now.”

Corrin watched the approaching sector security fighters closely as they swarmed towards the Xenon craft.

“Acknowledged,” Xela continued.

The gaggle of fighters broke away, returning to their normal patrol patterns.

Corrin dropped a nav-sat, it linked in to the Force communications network and he scanned Scale Plate Green as he escorted the Xenon fighter towards the Teladi Frontier Shipyard. The usual trade traffic, an orbital glider heading back to the planet, nothing to panic about. Docking permission was granted with un-Teladi-like alacrity thanks to the recognition codes Daht provided. Corrin orbited the facility until the XL had docked safely and Xela confirmed the credit transfer.

“Seven hundred thousand credits and another 25MW shield to play with. Not a bad days work Mirv. Home?”

“Home,” Corrin confirmed.

From Eighteen Billion he masked jumped straight to Scale Plate Green, he and Xela teleporting immediately on docking to the Casino Inner Sanctum.

The chill in his office was immediately apparent, an angry silence hanging heavily in the air.

“Ah, Mr Paskaal. The voice of reason. Commander Force and I were having a disagreement over tactics.”

“Artur! Good grief!” Corrin exclaimed in shock. “I’m damn glad to see you’re alive!”

He took in the medi-chair. Artur could read the thoughts on his face.

“Alive and as well as can be expected,” Artur replied curtly, putting aside a plate of barely touched sandwiches. “I’ve gained a couple of mechanical limbs and this contraption is pumping me full of neural suppressants, which explains my unusually sunny disposition so no stupid questions.”

His right arm shot up straight. Snarling, Artur forced it back down, the servo motors audibly straining. Corrin quickly linked up the Xela AI datapadd.

“Marteene seems abnormally pleased with his own cleverness,” Artur snapped. “Getting close to Jackson and inserting him into the Shadow Conspiracy when you’ve eliminated Law.”

He paused to wrestle down a spasm of pain. Corrin could see the draining effort written in the rictus grimace.

“No, no, I’m alright, damn you,” he cursed, angrily waving Corrin away with his good arm.

“What do you think?”

Corrin, poured himself a hot java and was marshalling his thoughts as Xela answered.

“It’s a great plan so long as we can trust Jackson. That makes it a stupid idea. We should just smash Law and go direct to one of the big clans. Cut a deal with the Skulls when we have the research base.”

Artur cut off Max’s rejoinder with a curt shake of his head.

“Paskaal?”

“Corrin,” he corrected. “I’m not so sure but,” he looked at Max apologetically. “It does seem unnecessarily complex. And I wish you could have found a way not to kill Challenger.”

“And if you had not discoed me, Max,” Xela interjected with unexpected vehemence. “I might have come up with something.”

“You had your chance, Zee,” Max replied angrily. He turned to Corrin. “And you weren’t there. I didn’t have a choice,” he finished, a gamut of emotions veneered with a dead-pan tone.

“I agree with Mr Force,” Artur stated, before the angry silence could grow into something more. “He had no choice.”

He cut off Corrin with a glare.

“And I suppose you were never responsible for the death of an innocent in the course of your long career?”

“Not deliberately,” Corrin cut back angrily.

Artur looked at him for a long moment, his face unreadable.

“Then it’s good that one of us can sleep at night, Mr Corrin.”

He turned to Max, standing tight-lipped, his arms folded in a tight embrace of his chest.

“You did what was needed Max and sometimes, in the real world, that is not necessarily the moral thing.”

Max seemed to crumble at the words and the unexpectedly gentle tone. For a second Corrin expected him to cry. Instead, Max took a long, deep breath, holding it as he visibly wrestled for control, his eyes bright. He nodded thanks, not trusting himself to speak.

“Oh damn,” Corrin said, blinking back his own tears. “You’ve got me at it now. Come here.”

He wrapped Max in a bear hug, holding him close until he felt the rigidity fade into self-conscious masculinity.

Remarkably, Xela did not scoff.

“Not that I’m happy with Jackson’s intimate involvement,” he fixed Max with an impenetrable stare. “But on the plus side,” Artur continued. “The Shadows will have to locate the crash site all over again and meanwhile we have access to a significant proportion of Confed funds.”

“When you give us the way into the commerce net,” Xela interjected.

“If I could do that,” Artur replied. “I wouldn’t have had to set up that ridiculous gate race to channel you funds. There are limits to my resources, particularly as I do not trust my normal Cabal resources.”

“Then how are we going to get those credits?” Corrin asked.

“You’re going to have to get inside a Data-Hub and steal the information. You as in Xela.”

“I hate to be the one to rain on everyone’s parade,” Xela answered. “But aren’t Data-Hubs the most secure installations on any planet? Nothing, but nothing gets in there without a complete scan, not even items for storage in the Vault.”

“Then you all have your work cut out for you,” Artur replied, smiling for the first time. “That’s what I hired you all for. Show me some of that Maverick Profile ingenuity!”

Xela did not quite manage to contain her snort of derision.

The next hour passed quickly as the four conspirators reviewed the position from every angle, looking for fresh avenues to explore.

“So we’re agreed then,” Artur summarised.

“Step One, get Jackson’s credits. Step Two, defeat Law. Step Three, infiltrate the Shadow Conspiracy. I’ll leave the trifling details to your fertile imaginations!”

They all laughed, with varying levels of unease.

“What about you?” Corrin asked finally.

“I plan on remaining dead, Mr Paskaal,” Artur answered. “My ship is here and ready to go?”

“It’s here,” Max confirmed. “But she shut herself down.”

Artur dismissed the caveat with a casual gesture.

“Seera will awaken for me. I have some catching up to do.”

He looked ruefully down at the medi-chair enclosing his body.

“And I need a doctor.”

“That psycho Split?” Max asked dubiously.

Artur shook his head.

“No, that is not a person I would feel safe with, given my current condition. I have other assets. Max, I believe you have a delivery to make? Best not delay too long, lest Jackson gets jumpy.”

“You’re right,” Max replied, getting up. “You’ll be gone when I return?”

Artur nodded.

“It’s good to see you again Artur,” he said, awkwardly shaking Artur’s left hand.

Artur smiled up at him.

“You’ve done well Gragore, your father and your cousin would be proud.”

Max looked once again as if he was about to cry and left before his emotions could betray him.

Artur waited until he was gone.

“Now, tell me you two,” he asked. “What do you think is really going on?”

Slowly, awkwardly, Corrin gave first voice to his doubts, hating himself for the mistrust. That Xela echoed his fear that Marteene himself no longer knew which side he was on was no comfort at all.

Artur listened in alarmed silence but held his own counsel.

Max briefly considered ordering one of the CAP Bayamons to accompany the Star. Being unarmed made him nervous but Confed Station was in an adjacent sector, relatively close to the jump-gate and Sector defence forces had demonstrated no proclivity to interfere with the Confed Vultures hauling space-weed, so it seemed unlikely they would interfere with an upstanding citizen such as himself.

Of course the Confed LT's could wipe him in an instant but that was not a possibility worth serious thought. Jackson may not totally trust him, hell, Max thought, his own people didn't, which, he reflected, was hardly a surprise, considering. It went without saying that Artur lacked total faith, that went with the territory but Jackson would play along, at least for a while. Avarice, ambition, a reckless gambling streak and something more, he had Jackson's respect and just possibly, friendship. Not, Max reflected drily, that he would be taking that to the bank anytime soon.

Kindred spirits who set out on different paths, now converging.

He needed that Computer Plant though, and more besides if he was to gain the resources and influence needed to lure the Shadow Conspiracy. Without them he couldn't hope to recover the putative ancients spacecraft even if it's location was etched into the memory of the recovered computer core. The Conspiracy held that sector and no interplanetary probe would be able to enter it without their consent. Max did not even consider taking it by force. If the Xenon couldn't, it would take a major fleet attack and even then the Clan LT's would wreak carnage.

Max broke off his reverie to negotiate the jump-gate, slowing to confirm on the sector scan that no unpleasant surprises lurked on the other side.

Nothing, just the usual mix of Vultures and Lifters shuffling goods around the New Frontier.

When the Star emerged from the hyperspace tunnel Max routinely scanned for threats as he rolled on a heading for Confed Station. A trickle of Xenon N's had successfully run the gauntlet from Black Hole Sun, but they were being sliced up by a wing of Busters.

No threat.

Max circled the station, noting that the Laser towers were not tracking him, before requesting docking permission. The automated system replied instantly, igniting the docking lights. He felt confident enough to allow the system to guide the Star to a docking bay while he changed his flight suit for the fancy leather coat Jackson gifted him.

The bay was small, barely large enough for the Star and the Falcon fighter it parked next to. And it was pristine, polished and the equipment new; in contrast to the ramshackle, jury-rigged condition of the other parts of the Clan base he had seen.

Jackson was waiting alone as he climbed down, the usual rueful smile playing round his lips, the usual calculating look in his eyes.

“New?” Max asked by way of a greeting. Jackson’s grin grew broader.

“Your weed is making me a lot of credits Max! It’s so good it can take an extra cut and still pass muster down in the planetary boondocks.”

“I’m thrilled for you Jack,” Max replied, deadpan. “How’s Joker?”

“Singing like,” Jackson paused and searched for the correct term. “Singing like, well, something that sings a damn lot. I’ve got deck plans, internal defence layouts, access codes, names et cetera, et cetera.”

“We’ve got,” Max corrected.

Jackson grinned. “We, yea, that’s what I meant to say partner.”

He fumbled in a pocket and handed over a data chip.

“Of course you did, Jack,” Max replied, pocketing the chip. “I’ll get Xela to check it out.”

“The electric chick ain’t here then?” Jackson asked.

“No, I’ve dumped her on Corrin, he’s more patience than me.”

Jackson chuckled at his nagging, stolen glove-puppet gesture.

“Women, ain’t that the truth. And you got lucky last night, right, and without paying? Way to go Max!”

“Apparently,” Max replied ruefully. “I don’t suppose you caught a name?”

“They don’t need names, Max,” Jackson replied dismissively. “Just move onto another. Fame, has it’s rewards as well as a price.”

“You just leave a trail of class wherever you go don’t you Jack?” Max answered. “And at the risk of appearing distrustful, I’d like to check out the computer core.”

Jackson shrugged.

“No problemo, Max old buddy. Anything for a fellow stud!” He clapped him on the shoulder and led the way to the secure storage, chuckling as they went.

“I don’t suppose you caught a name?” Jack shook his head. “You crack me up Max, you really do!”

The core was exactly where he'd left it. Before they could leave Max was obliged to admire a Brennan's Triumph Limited Edition Xenon Carrier, still of course, in it's original packaging. Jackson couldn't resist telling how much he'd just paid.

"You could buy a real ship for that," Max observed.

"I've got lot's of real ships," Jack pointed out. "So have you, but do any of them have 'realistic running lights' and an 'authentic metallic finish'?"

"You've got me there Jack," Max conceded with a smile. "Take me someplace where I can get a drink and we can talk bank raids."

Jackson led him to the same bar they'd drunk in last time. It hadn't improved but the beer was cold and the booth had a privacy shield, which Jackson set to opaque, transforming the rest of the bar into a rippling shadow play.

Max quickly filled Jack in on what he'd learned from Artur, carefully attributing the information to Xela, and, cracking the seal on a frosted bottle, he took a long pull and relaxed into the chair.

"Reaching the parts eh Max?" Jackson observed, pouring his bottle into the glass. "So you're saying it's impossible?" Jackson summarised. "I guess that saves me an awful lot of credits!"

"Not impossible Jack, you're just waiting for me to pull some clever trick that you can use to launder the rest of your ill-gotten gains!"

Jackson conceded the point gracefully.

"Every Clan in space would pay dearly for that facility but every attempt fails."

"An impenetrable financial system is the cornerstone of the universe economic system, if the clans broke it there'd be chaos," Max replied. "However, I've got a little seed of an idea. Can you get us any specs on current data hubs?"

"I've got every scrap of published and unpublished information I can lay my hands on," Jackson answered. "None of it useful. Hell, no-one can figure a way through the molecular bonded outer shells or the blast doors to get to the electronics, let alone begin to figure out the codes and algorithms."

"If anyone can, Xela can, given direct access and time," Max stated. "She's beyond state-of-the-art."

"Direct access and time," Jackson repeated. "But that's the whole trick isn't it? You kick back Max, it'll take me awhile to retrieve the files."

Three beers later Jackson returned bearing a stand-alone terminal.

Four beers and two pipes later Max found what he was looking for.

Chapter 15: Black Hearts

Morn watched the Black Heart attack from her own, private Tactical Tank, deep within the bowels of the Teladi Gain Trading Station, tiny fighters flitting around her as she moved, a god-like colossus, through the holographic model of the sector.

Force was prepared, alerted by Daht to the imminent arrival of the Stoertebeker Transport Carrier, long before it came within detection range of his commercial Nav-Sat.

Conveying secret military data to potentially hostile aliens.

'Who?' Morn mused with a thin reptilian smile. 'Would have imagined a respected Teladi war hero could countenance such a betrayal for blatantly sectarian ends?' The ploy had cost her one of her most important agents, long burrowed deep under the skin of the General's organisation, but it was worth it. Loose ends came so easily unravelled if not taken care of.

The strike went almost entirely as she anticipated. The Black Heart swept past the Force construction site, disgorging a stream of fighters as it pivoted for another pass. On cue the Force fleet lurking just beyond the Ceo's Buckzoid jump-gate leapt through to join the handful of fighters guarding the almost operational Chip Fab. This too, Morn expected, already rehearsing her bitter regret at the ease with which unknown saboteurs had been able to disable her own communications, preventing her from issuing Law a warning.

The operational Laser Towers were something she had not anticipated, noting again Force's remarkable ingenuity as they sliced through Law's fighters and pounded on the shields of the Albatross as it laboured to escape. Force's smaller, but efficiently organised defenders quickly obliged Law's fighters to join their mothership in the head-long flight to the safety of his Station.

Force, his Mamba highlighted in case there was an unexpected bonus for her to savour, fought like a demon, destroying three fighters and harrying the fleeing attackers right up to and within the protective shelter of the Stoertebeker base LT screen, rolling from their slashing beams and sweeping pulse streams with preternatural reflexes before withdrawing.

Morn consulted her chronometer, the station comm. system would be back on-line shortly. She terminated the holo-display and returned to her offices to await Law's call. He would be beyond anger, insane, even by his own standards. Morn was confident she would be unable to restrain his rage once he learned of Daht's treachery.

'Then, who knows what he might do?' She thought with cold irony.

Max docked the Mamba in the main Raiders bay instead of his own in a calculated act of bonding. Only two Bayamons lost and both pilots recovered, it was high fives all

round and a mass invasion of Corrin's Casino where prodigious quantities of intoxicants were consumed and considerable chunks of combat bonuses flowed via the gambling tables back into Max's coffers.

"Chug-a-lug, Max," Corrin ordered, thrusting a huge, foaming stein into his hand. Max took a heroic draught, killing the glass in one as his pilots chanted and clapped.

"The ability to consume alcohol is not correlated with man-hood," Xela whispered sardonically through the shades. Max ignored her and snatched another glass from a passing hostess as he scanned the casino for the un-named blonde. She hovered near the roulette wheel with a full tray of complimentary drinks to encourage the misplaced optimism of the assembled gamblers, occasionally darting a glance in his direction.

Max raised his glass in greeting and she flashed a reticent smile in return, provoking an unexpected and hankering twinge in his deadened heart. Flustered by long, unfelt emotion, Max turned to Corrin.

"That girl, the blonde one?" He nodded over his shoulder in her general direction. "Who is she?"

"Which one?" Corrin asked.

"The one by the wheel," Max replied. "Long hair, well-stacked, nice ass."

"Enlightened choice of descriptors, Max," Xela observed sardonically. "You've been spending way too much time with your new best friend."

Max ignored her.

Corrin thought for a moment before replying.

"Tyre. Tyre Annis. Why? You haven't been encouraging my staff to fraternise have you?"

He caught Max's discomfited look and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Relax Max. The rule doesn't apply to you, unless you talk in your sleep."

"Careless talk costs lives!" Xela quoted mischievously.

"You know her?" He continued.

"Sort of," Max answered. "Seems like a nice girl. What do we know about her?"

"We did the usual background checks Max," Corrin said. "She came up clean. No known associates we might disapprove of, and like all my people here, she's no family and has been in a similar post for over a year. Two criteria which helped filter out potential security risks," he answered in reply to Max's unspoken query.

“You can check her file but if memory serves she’s a colonial from Garleth Beta, Treasure Chest. Sick of farmers and earthquakes I guess. If you’re interested, go for it.”

Max shook his head, uncertain.

“I don’t know, Corrin. If I were any one of my enemies, or dubious friends for that matter, I’d try and get to me through a good-looking woman. Oldest trick in the book.”

Corrin separated Max from the jubilant crowd and led him to the private booth. He ordered food and more drinks.

“Max,” he said avuncularly. “She’s been checked out. You shouldn’t let paranoia stand in the way if the universe offers you a clean shot at happiness. Mission or no mission.”

It was something Kaitrin and he had discussed, late at night, suffused in a post-prandial glow that, like lovers the universe over, they wanted to extend to all.

“The love of a good woman, Max,” Corrin added. “Ain’t nothing finer.”

Max shrugged.

“So people say.”

Corrin waited while one of his hosts delivered the food and drink, large steaming, bowls of vegetables, dumplings and marble fat meat in a spiced sauce, fresh baked crusty bread, chocolate-dark beer, redolent with hops and a bottle of twenty year old whisky, with two shot glasses.

“New peasant cuisine, Max,” he said, as his friend poked the melange with his spoon. “It’s all the rage apparently. You mean you’ve never been in love?”

“I don’t know, I guess not,” Max replied with studied casualness.

“If you’re not sure then the answer is no,” Corrin stated. “It’s the greatest feeling in the world. You can’t mistake it.”

Max sighed, weary.

“I can’t remember the last time I felt anything, anything good. I’m running a fire-sale on fear and guilt though.”

His self-mocking smile left his eyes untouched.

Corrin nodded in Tyre’s direction as she crossed back to the bar.

“She’s a nice girl, Max. Give it a go.”

Max tracked her as she went, glimpsing flashes of thigh above stocking tops through the calculatedly cut slits in the long black dress that served as the casino uniform.

“And lust. Plenty of lust.”

“That’s just a side-effect of killing people,” Corrin replied, ignoring the forced note of humour. “You take it from an old soldier.”

Max finished his beer and poured a whisky shot, filling the glass to the brim before tossing it straight down.

“That’s good stuff Max,” Corrin observed. “You might want to savour the complexity before treating it like rot-gut.”

Max poured a second shot, delicately sipping off the meniscus.

“Wood-smoke and peat. It’s always wood-smoke and peat,” he finished the glass.

Corrin moved the bottle out of his reach.

“Seriously Max, I know the Challenger thing has put you into a flat spin and to be honest, I’m not sure I would have made that call, regardless of what Artur said. But it was your call, we weren’t there and if it helps convince Jackson to play along with us then some good will come. You can’t beat yourself up about it forever.”

He checked the time.

“She’s off in a couple of hours, Max. Take her out for an expensive meal, get to know her. If she’s a spy, just don’t tell her anything.”

“And if she’s an assassin?”

“She’s not an assassin Max, she’s just another good-looking woman trying to get ahead.”

“But we could have your security people keep tabs on her?”

“No Max,” Corrin stated, privately appalled. “I’m sorry but I’m not having my staff spied upon. People have rights. Besides, how would she feel if she found out?”

“Okay, I take your point,” Max conceded quickly. “Any objections to me going through her file?”

Corrin shrugged.

“If there was anything to find she wouldn’t be here, but go ahead if it’ll make you feel better. What plans for tomorrow? Hunting?”

“I’ve got an idea how we can get Jackson’s credits,” Max answered, grateful for the change of subject. “I’ve talked it through with Jack and I’ll need the Mamba, Xela

and Kerman in the Pegasus to give it legs. I'll fill you in on it when I've checked a few details with Zee."

"I can hardly wait," Corrin said without a trace of sarcasm. "If you can pull this off it'll be one for the history books."

"If we pull it off correctly, no-one will even know," Max replied with a smile.

He reached across and poured himself another whisky.

"And thanks for the words okay?" He looked across at Tyre. "You're right, I should give it a go."

"I am going to read that file though."

"Relationships are built on trust Max," Corrin answered. "But if it'll put your mind at rest, go ahead."

Later, Max opened the security files, quickly marking the names of five applicant researchers Jackson had given him as confirmed, bypassing the security checks. They would be the kernel of his clandestine research team, attempting to unravel the knowledge contained in the damaged computer core.

Then he turned to Tyre's report.

"What exactly are you looking for Max?" Xela asked testily. "I am one of the most sophisticated computers ever conceived. I can count and everything!"

Max looked up from the workstation and grinned.

"And allow you to second guess my idea and claim the credit? No way, so stop distracting me. I might have to use the mute button!"

A chuckle rippled around Corrin's office where Jackson, Max and Corrin had gathered to detail Max's undisclosed plan to access the Jackson's credits without prematurely alerting the authorities.

"A chick with a volume control? You should marry her," Jackson added, with a mocking grin.

"Where I come from men don't marry their cousin," Xela snapped. "And besides, I don't have a mute option."

Jack's reply was cut off by Max's expression of triumph.

"Here." A 3D model appeared on the wall-screen, a squat, featureless cube – the standard design for a planetary data hub. "Treasure Chest. Okay Zee, suck it up."

Xela complied, transferring the data file into her enhanced padd.

“Ah!” She said, almost instantly. “I see what you’re getting at. It’s the ‘how’ that has me stumped.”

“You care to explain lass?” Corrin said.

“It’s simple really,” she replied. “Max was looking for a hub constructed before the development of teleport technology and which has not had the upgraded defence grid installed yet. That’s a massive job, seeing how hubs are constructed.”

“Oh come on Max baby, you don’t think you’re the first person to think of this?” Jackson asked with surprised scorn. “You cannot teleport through those walls, screens or no, too much interference from the materials and all the other defences built into them with people like us in mind. Without a receiving station, you just get gloop at the other end. I know.”

“And here’s a newsflash Max,” Xela added. “They don’t build teleport pads inside data hubs so you can just forget about any of the clever hacking you expected me to pull. Ain’t nothing to hack into.”

“If we smuggle in our own there will be,” Max stated.

“I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess hubs have all sorts of ways of making sure people can’t smuggle unwelcome devices inside,” Jack said. “But hey, this is Max Force, the man with the plan. Let’s hear it Max!”

“We’re not going to smuggle one in,” Max answered immediately. “We’re going to deposit one in the vault.”

The on-screen display shimmered under Xela’s control and focused on the single entrance. Highlights appeared around technologies built into the cavernous hallway.

“See these Max? These are scanners. Everything that goes into a hub has it’s atoms rifled through pretty damn closely whether or not it’s a deposit. To be honest Max, I’m a little disappointed. What say you Corrin?”

Corrin stroked his chin as he considered a reply.

“I think it’s brilliant, absolutely brilliant. Well done Max!”

“Scanning remarks for sarcasm,” Xela intoned. “None detected. I recommend taking the Corrin-unit offline for maintenance.”

“Tell them,” Max nodded at Corrin.

“Okay Max, so long as you don’t accuse me of stealing your kudos,” he looked at Jackson and smiled. “Max is going to build a self-powered teleport into something valuable and cloak it using the shadow-skin tech. Right Max?”

“Score yet another for the Maverick Profile!” Max confirmed. “All we need is a mind-numbingly expensive object to vandalise, deposit it in one of the vaults, teleport in with Zee and let her tap into the internal systems.”

He refocused the screen, zooming in on one of the secure storage areas and overlaying a circuit diagram.

“With the right equipment she can access one of these nodes,” he highlighted an internal security data path. “And do the clever stuff. Then I’m rich, rich I tell you!”

“This shadow-tech can do this?” Jackson asked dubiously.

“Probably,” Max answered. “Zee?”

“That’s not what it was designed for, but, depending on the object, probably.”

Jackson digested the reply, his eyes glittering beneath hooded lids.

“And here’s what we’re looking for,” Xela continued. “I pulled this from the net.”

The image changed again, to a roughly cylindrical object, nearly the height of a man. Although the 2D display and the large buttons and dials on the facing surface indicated a technological device the tube was overlain with an incongruous looking wood finish. The rich, dark patina, polished to highlight the whorling grain, suggested it was real hardwood.

“An early colonial protein resequencer dating from the second expansionary wave. Heron’s Nebula according to the catalogue, native hardwood, attributed to Gorman Tantsu. That’s THE Gorman Tantsu for the cultureless among you. It’s insured for nearly 400,000 credits by Hitsu Nagy, a deputy assistant governor in Treasure Chest.”

“Treasure Chest? That’s some coincidence,” Corrin observed.

“Hardly,” Xela replied. “Location was my first search parameter and there are rich people everywhere, even out in the sticks. Where there are the rich, there are rich pickings. Is that not right Jack?”

Jackson ignored the implication.

“Is it for sale?” Corrin asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jackson cut in coolly. “I have people who specialise in making irresistible offers.”

“Then that’s settled,” Max jumped in quickly to forestall any moral debate. “Jack, you get the thing here and we’ll figure out how to get a teleport inside. Don’t let it go through customs, we don’t want to rouse any suspicions. That a problem?”

“I run drugs for a living, Max,” Jackson replied.

"Okay then," Max continued. "Corrin, can you organise a run to the Temple to pick up a pair of transporters?"

He nodded.

"Then let's get to it," Max stood up to signal the end of the meeting. "We'll go as soon as the Chip Fab is online. Three days. Corrin, defence plans complete?"

"LT's and a big chunk of the Raiders on rotation. You want the details?"

Max shook his head.

"Go with what you think. I'll need the Star for a little side trip, I'll pick them up in Teladi Gain in a couple of hours. Have Kerman fly the Star, I'll need him to glower at a few people. I'll take the Mamba, we should be back in time for you to strip the shadow tech, Zee."

"Care to share?" Corrin asked.

"I'm going to pay my old friend Rarr a little visit. Trade must be slow with Stoertebeker blockaded so we should be able to come to a profitable understanding. I'll take Zee, in case anything snatchable flies by."

Corrin consulted his padd. "The Star is due through here in three hours, she's running magalit to Omicron Lyrae but I can transfer that to an independent. I'll have her ready and waiting in TG in two hours Max."

"Excellent," Max took up Xela's data padd. "Okay, let's get to it guys. Jack, I'll be in touch. Let me know if there are any problems."

Jack nodded sardonically.

"Errgh, that's just not right!" Max shouted above the pounding beat, laden with subsonics he could feel in his diaphragm. Kerman spared the Split-Split Club floorshow a long, jaundiced glare and grunted agreement.

Xela claimed to have been blinded.

Carefully ignoring the questionable cross species gyrations on-stage Max slipped through the sparse crowd to Rarr's booth.

"You must have one great ass groove working there, Rarr. Don't you ever get enough jollies?"

"Ah, the redoubtable Max Force," the corpulent little man smiled thinly, dragging his attention back from the entertainment. Mopping sweat from his brow with a table napkin, he indicated the leviathan Teladi standing behind him and said, "You had better go my dear, Mr Force wants to gouge my margins."

He delicately sipped amber liquid from a long fluted glass as she left. At Max's nod, Kerman faded into the background, all eyes suspiciously scanning the club.

"You should work up a stage act, Rarr the Amazing Mentalist. If that suit washes back to white it can be your costume," Max sneered, taking a seat uninvited and helped himself to Rarr's drink.

"Whenever you've finished being boorish," Rarr said evenly. "Quiet Mode."

The privacy shield cocooned the booth in a silence and Max's internal organs stopped resonating.

"You want to know whether you've caused enough trouble to oblige the Profit Share Director and the owners of this Bliss Place to consider a more regular business relationship."

"And what's the answer magic man?"

Rarr gestured carelessly towards the bar and a waitress scurried across.

"Pretty thing isn't she?" Rarr said, taking in her ample and barely clad body with a leer. "Two bottle beers, unopened."

Any particular brand Sir?" The woman asked, a fain blush suffusing her face and chest as Rarr's eyes crawled over her.

"Whatever's cold," Max answered.

"Talk to her face Max," Xela whispered. "And they're not real."

Rarr concentrated on the stage show until the waitress returned. Max took a bottle and cracked the seal, quickly swallowing half the contents.

"The answer, Rarr," Max reiterated.

Rarr took a thin black cigarette from a silver case he then proffered to Max, who took one and sniffed it dubiously.

"For goodness sake, just smoke it Max," Rarr snapped irritably as he sucked the thin black stick to life. "It's our latest product, I don't keep poisoned cigarettes just on the off-chance that you'll drop by."

Max drew cautiously on the cigarette, igniting it and filling his lungs with bitter smoke. He fought the cough reflex for as long as he could before violently spluttering it over Rarr, who merely smiled indulgently and wiped the spittle from his suit.

The room swayed and colours flooded with intensity as a wave of well-being swept though his body on a tide of chemical suffused blood.

"Excellent, no?" Rarr asked amusedly.

“Excellent, yes!” Max managed to cough out. “That hits spots I never knew needed hitting. You’ve steeped good leaf in the concentrate?”

“Innovate or die, as the Teladi no doubt say,” Rarr answered. “For the very top of the market.”

“Well put me down for a key,” Max said, suppressing an inane grin.

“Just one kilogram Max? I was hoping we could do a lot better than that!” Rarr smiled. “Now that our normal avenues of trade have unexpectedly closed.”

“For personal favours. So your people are in?” Max asked.

“Not quite,” Rarr replied. “They are though, thoroughly disenchanted with Law as a stable business partner. You and your Confederation allies are not the only possible players though. The Skull Clan for instance.”

“People don’t deal directly with the Skulls for some pretty good reasons,” Max observed dryly.

“Yes,” Rarr acknowledged with a scowl. “Their location grants them an unhealthy degree of independence. It makes them, unpredictable. But, unlike your Confederation friends, they can shift product throughout the home sectors. With their main supplier bottled up I am expecting an offer soon.”

Max took another drag, breathing a stream of blue smoke through his nose as he relaxed into the booth. He snuffed the cig between wetted fingers and cooled his throat with the remnants of the first bottle. He cracked the second immediately.

“Expecting or dreading?”

Rarr shrugged and took another sip of his drink.

“As the Teladi say, no profit comes without risk.”

“No pain, no gain, as us humans say,” Max countered.

“I prefer the Teladi homily,” Rarr replied uncomfortably, “But your point is well-understood, not least by my employer.”

“Rock and a hard place?”

“The Skulls make unpredictable partners, Mr Force,” Rarr agreed, wiping his face again. “And a Law, cut out from his profitable role as middleman, makes a very predictable foe.”

“Law won’t be buying any time soon,” Max observed pointedly. “So if you want to shift the stock stuffing your storage bays, Jackson and I are the only game in town. Not a sociopath or amoral savage to be seen.”

“Your inestimable qualities as human beings, against those exacting standards, I concede,” Rarr acknowledged ironically.

He sucked on his smouldering cig and fixed Max with a saucer-eyed stare.

“But should Profit Share shift towards General Daht, which would be the clear implication of a deal with you, there would be consequences. Not the least of these would be a cessation of this station’s supply of swamp plants. I did suggest you established such a presence nearby,” he reminded Max.

“A suggestion you ignored.”

“Other priorities,” Max said. “But if we make a deal you’ll have your swamp plants.”

Max thought for a moment.

“Make it exclusive and I’ll build it right next door and extend the LT umbrella over this place, in case Law and the Skulls come over all unsporting.”

“The decision isn’t mine to make Max, but I’ll throw your offer onto the scales. Matters are finely balanced but falling profits are concentrating minds and you may be a better long term bet.”

“How soon will you know?”

“As I intimated, matters are fluid. Soon. Meanwhile I can fill your holds at six-six per unit. Practically cost.”

“I’m in the business, Rarr,” Max snapped. “I know what cost is. Six Zero.”

“Six Five,” Rarr countered. “And for that I’ll throw in three units of concentrate at ten k.”

“Deal,” Max said instantly. “A pleasure doing business.”

“A pleasure that’s all yours Mr Force. On these margins I find it hard to conceive where the next yacht will come from.”

“My heart bleeds, Rarr,” Max deadpanned.

“Insincerity is an unattractive trait Mr Force,” Rarr returned. “Your cargo will be loaded within the hour, credits in advance of course. As ever, your visit has been a pleasure. Have we any other business?”

“You’ll get your credits as soon as it’s loaded, Rarr and there is one more thing.”

He pushed a data-chip across the table.

“This girl. I want to know who she works for.”

“That’s the last of it Zee,” Max said unnecessarily as the subspace hold registered full. “So long as the Split don’t get nosy we’ll clear a few hundred thousand profit.”

“They’ve not scanned us once, unless Artur has been pulling strings or Jackson throwing around bribes I think they’re deliberately cutting you slack. You’re a political wildcard they haven’t figured how to play yet, Max.”

“Political?”

“Your links with Daht, our war with Law, your alliance with the Confeds, your private army and space force. You don’t think that makes you politically significant?”

“To the Split? Never gave it any thought,” Max shrugged. He opened a channel to Kerman and ordered the Paranid to launch the Mamba and then requested launch permission for the Star. A few minutes later both ships were heading for the Ceo’s Buckzoid jumpgate.

“Okay Zee, let it out,” Max said, with a heavy air of resignation.

“Get what out, Max?” Her tone had a fine edge.

“You know damn well what,” he snapped. “Tyre.”

“Getting a scumbag like Rarr to run his grubby fingers through the life of a gal whose only crime appears to be a lack of judgement concerning men? How in the universe could I have a problem with that? No, wait, it’s all coming back to me now.”

“One,” she itemised as they plunged through hyperspace. “Rarr is not your friend. No matter what he finds you can’t believe him.”

“Two,” she continued. “Your own people have assured you there is no problem. Don’t you trust them?”

“Three. You are being a damn fool. What if she comes up clean and finds out about your rampant paranoia? Relationships are built on trust.”

“You finished?” Max inquired evenly.

“First, beings like Rarr have contacts we don’t, who knows what they might know? Anything he comes up with we can cross-check. Second, I don’t trust anyone, except you and Paskaal. Third, I don’t trust anyone, except you and Paskaal and not even then if either of you tried to crawl into bed with me. Too much is at stake to take anything on trust.”

“No man is an island, Max,” Xela answered. “Not even a peninsula. If you keep up with that paranoiac, and I’m using that term in a technical sense, attitude, you could lose what could be your one true love along with a few marbles.”

“Too many coulds, ifs and buts to take the risk. And at the risk of being rude, it’s my own damn business,” Max snapped.

“Nothing connected with the mission is your own business, but dammit Max, people worry, I worry about you and the stress you’re under. You drink like a Boron, you smoke way too much of the product, your blood is probably half stims and you’re increasingly prone to making snap decisions without consultation, leaving the rest of us scrabbling to keep up. Back on the Vanguard how long would a pilot like that last under your command?”

“It’s different and you know it. We’re not under military discipline and I need to project an image. Do you think Jackson would be taken in by a crew-cut, spit and polish Marteene?”

Max took a deep breath and continued in a calmer voice.

“And those ‘snap decisions’ are seized opportunities. Maverick Profile, I’m meant to improvise. Are you saying my judgement is impaired?”

“Jackson is blinded by ambition and an incorrigible urge to gamble, Max. No other clan leader would swallow that disillusioned spy shit and call it cake without some damn good proof. And I’m not sure if he’s infected you with the same gambling virus. I’m not questioning your judgement, I just think you’re riding your luck. You need to cut down on the drugs though Max, and I’m saying this as a friend. There are other ways to relax. Tyre for instance. Jumpgate Max.”

Nothing was said as the two ships plunged through hyperspace. As soon as they emerged Max said.

“At the risk of upsetting you Zee, there’s another opportunity that needs seizing.”

He pointed the nose of the Star at the Menelaus Frontier jumpgate. The Mamba banked and took up station on the port side.

“We’re going to Brennan’s Triumph to cut Skull a deal she can’t refuse.”

“This is just what I mean Max,” Xela sighed, audibly. “If I had a head I’d be shaking it forlornly at this very moment. Isn’t it possible for you to go a whole day without taking an insane risk? You blew up her docking bay the last time we passed that way and the Skulls are not exactly renowned for their forgive-and-forget attitude to life’s little travails.”

“She’ll hear me out though, the Skulls aren’t insane psychopaths like Law, they’re rational, self interested psychopaths who use terror as a tactic. They haven’t hit back for my last visit.”

“Fine, think that,” Xela snapped. “Consider me swathed in a warm, comforted glow. At least pick up an escort, there are a couple of back-up Piranha’s in the Menelaus Trading Station.”

“No, if Law pulls another stroke they’ll be needed,” Max disagreed. “Trust me, Zee. The Skulls won’t be in an ass-kicking mood.”

“Trust me, Zee. I just know that one of these days they’ll be the very last words I hear. You do what you want Max, I’m going to work on the specs for your portable transporter.”

The journey to Brennan’s Triumph was one very long silence.

The sector itself was almost deserted, just a three ship CAP around Paradise Station and a couple of Vultures scuttling for the relative safety of the jumpgate to Split Fire. Max ordered Kerman to keep seven klicks from the Skull base and headed on in.

“Heads up,” Xela warned. “Incoming.”

A single Bayamon had peeled off from the circling patrol and was barrelling in on a near intercept course.

“Well, they must have ID’d us by now and they aren’t launching fighters,” Max observed in reply. “They must want to talk,” he could not resist adding. “Just like I figured.”

“Just like you hoped,” Xela corrected. “There is a conceptual difference,” she added, her tone softening. “You sure ride your luck hard Max, but as you didn’t quite say I told you so I’ll try to have a little faith. Now tell me you’re not planning to actually dock.”

“Weren’t you the one encouraging me to relax with attractive young women just now?” Max asked. “I reckon a little face-to-face is what our relationship with Skull needs. I’m prepared to give my all for the cause!”

“You’ve absolutely no idea how old or comely that woman is so I’m going to assume you’re joking, but thank you for the disturbing mental picture.”

“There’s just no pleasing some women,” Max grinned.

“Women are very easy to please Max, which only makes it more of a crime that so few of you actually bother,” Xela answered archly. “All we ask for is some attention paid to our needs every now and then, a little wine and song and our partners to choke down the urge to set criminals running background checks.”

The comm. cut off his sarcastic rejoinder as the Bayamon came into range.

“Destiny Star. Identify your intentions,” the Bayamon pilot sounded human, probably male, but it was impossible to tell for certain what lay beneath the stylised skull of the helmet face mask.

“This is Commander Force, piloting the Destiny Star. Skull needs to talk with me.”

“Skull needs nothing and no-one,” came the snap reply. “Particularly from you.”

Max sighed, audibly and theatrically.

“Listen buddy, I haven’t got the time or the patience. We both know you ain’t got the clout to make the call so either do it yourself or put me through to someone who can get your boss on the line. Before I get bored and take my once-in-a-lifetime, never-to-be-repeated business offer elsewhere, if you don’t mind.”

There was a long pause, Max imagined he could hear teeth grinding. The clan fighter began circling the Star. Unbidden, Kerman’s Mamba began stalking the Bayamon.

Finally, as Max put the Star into a sweeping orbit of the station, watching the LT’s carefully, the comm. flashed back to life.

At first glance she looked too young to be the near legendary Clan leader. A teenager, but the eyes were deep, knowing, crystal-blue pools and her unswerving gaze sharpened by more experience and knowledge than youth permits. The bone white make-up could also, Max realised, conceal decades of sin.

“Commander Force,” Skull inclined her head in greeting, her voice a deep purr, redolent with promises that cut straight past his brain on the way to points south.

“Oh for goodness sake Max!” Xela snapped, reading his elevated blood pressure. “Care to take a guess who those vocal chords might originally have belonged to?”

“Skull,” Max returned the greeting in a carefully neutral tone. “Permission to dock, we’ve business to discuss. No boom-boom tricks this time. I’ve a hold full of..”

“I have scanned your vessel,” Skull cut in brusquely. “Permission granted. Engage auto-pilot.”

The signal terminated.

“Welcome to my parlour,” Xela muttered. “I’m not even going to waste electrons arguing. Course laid in, auto-pilot engaged.”

Two minutes later the Star had carefully negotiated the half wrecked docking tunnel, still full of vacuum-suited construction teams struggling to patch the gaping, melted holes caused by his previous attack, to a small, bare gun-metal gray docking bay, showing no sign of damage.

A single Teladi guard, firearm sheathed, waited with orders to conduct him to Skull. Max left Xela with instructions to guard the ship, ignored her protests and followed him to an elevator.

Without a word the Teladi led Max through a maze of deserted corridors he tried hard to memorise, just in case. They stopped outside a sliding double door, emerald green against the drab, gray corridor. The doors slid silently open and with a wave of a

claw to guard gestured him through into shadows, which abruptly turned to night as the doors shut.

Instinctively Max changed his position and crouched, hand hovering over his holster, listening intensely through the pounding of his heart and wondering for the first time if he had made a fatal error of judgement.

Abruptly another door opened, flooding what was revealed to be a small antechamber, with pearl light. Max stepped through. Two more Teladi guards were waiting in another long, opulent blue corridor, lined with frames ranging from the ornate to the starkly modern.

"Firearm." One hissed.

Swallowing his unease, Max handed it over, handle first.

"When you leave," she hissed, slipping the blaster into her belt. "There."

She gestured down the corridor towards another, larger set of green doors.

With an effort Max pushed Xela's misgivings to the back of his mind, his own joining them. Adopting an insouciant air, Max strolled down the corridor, pausing to examine some of the framed works, mostly paintings mixed with a selection of Boron aniramas. Max knew nothing about art but recognised many of the names engraved on small gold plates beneath each work.

Famous names, lost names, of incalculable worth.

The doors slid apart as he approached, Max put his shoulders back and stepped confidently through into a cylindrical room, decorated in a baroque fusion of early, Argon colonial and pre-colonial styles, all hardwood encased metal and pastel, edges softened by ornate carvings of real and what he hoped were imaginary creatures. Or at least extinct.

There was no exit, apart from the door he'd just come through. Before he could move the floor trembled, almost imperceptibly. His inner ear told him the room was revolving. When it stopped, the doors slid open and he stepped through, uncomfortably aware he was trapped.

The contrast could not have been more stark. The room was small and disconcertingly cell-like, apart from the pale, reactive coating shimmering the walls.

Two black leather chairs faced each other across a small table.

One was occupied.

"Skull," he nodded a respectful greeting.

"Commander Maximilian Force," she answered, emotionless, a bone-white face stark against a blood-red robe and cowl.

“You are now where I want you!”

Chapter 16: Whispers of Betrayal

"Admiral on the bridge."

Backs stiffened at the dozen stations lining the curving bulkheads of the control centre.

Admiral, it was a minor conceit that removed any ambiguity in the chain of command.

Law acknowledged the marine's snapped alert with a nod and stepped down from the rear elevator to the command pit. Captain Hart had already vacated the central seat to stand, at parade ground rest, beside the dual station helm. He eased his bulk into the vacated position and with deliberate slowness, surveyed the bridge, absorbing the mood.

Tense, with an underlining frisson of fear.

He took a deep breath. Calm.

Calm. He repeated the mantra silently and tried to relax his clenched jaws.

Calm. He could not afford any further erosion of loyalty, particularly not here, particularly not on his carrier.

The Black Heart was not a real carrier of course. Military capital ships, even obsolete ones, were not available for private purchase, regardless of wealth and connections, but it was the next best thing.

The spherical bridge, a compact modular unit straight from a scrapped Argon destroyer, was not the only non-standard component of the Stoertebeker Albatross. The ship was old, many decades old, but it was the true heart of Clan power, and as such Law lavished credits on upgrades. In all probability only the main hull remained from the ship originally launched. The interior had been remodelled to suit it's new role, sensors and computer systems replaced and the fighter bays greatly extended.

Defensive systems were as state-of-the-art as his Teladi allies could discreetly arrange, multi-launch missile tubes capable of launching anything up to hornets and three of the huge 125 MW shields normally found only on front-line military vessels made the Black Heart almost impregnable. Another two were in the process of being fitted, a testament, if one were needed, to the threat Force represented and the respect he had earned.

Like all transporters, the energy needed to maintain to sub-space hold precluded the installation of energy weapons, but five squadrons of fighters, sixty ships, mostly well-equipped Teladi Hawks and Falcons, gave the Black Heart a jab to match all but a Fleet Carrier. Six Argon Lifters, with a full 50 MW of shielding, drive systems fully tuned and sub-space holds crammed with missiles and squash mines, provided a devastating left hook.

“Status,” Law growled, as evenly as he could manage.

Calm.

“We remain in base orbit Sir, at yellow alert as commanded.” Captain Hart spoke confidently. “The enemy continues to patrol, outside our range. We await your orders.”

“Very well,” Law acknowledged, indicating for him to take the first officer station. Hart took the seat at Law’s right hand, swinging the small console across his lap and entering his access code.

Hart was one of the few of his organisation Law both trusted and respected. He was old, probably long past any reasonable retirement age, and had been the second officer aboard the Black Heart when Law acceded to the Stoertebeker throne. A man without ambition and the most senior officer left standing when the smoke cleared and the blood drained away.

Skeletal, lean with a close cropped grey receding hair-line, periodic and closely watched visits to Paradise Station held old age at bay. His mind and judgement displayed no sign of impairment and the ruthless manner with which he enforced Law’s will, in the unreported conflicts out beyond the confines of the gate sector, suggested no slackening of the zeal Law demanded from such senior subordinates.

Hart knew his position, knew both his loyalty and competence were unquestioned. It gave him a confidence dealing with his master that no other in Law’s organisation could feel.

It was a confidence that extended to his crew, a confidence that, despite Law’s deserved reputation, their captain was a firm buttress against his killing rage.

There were rumours, chilling, recent rumours. Hart could feel them resonating on the bridge, see them in the slightly too stiff posture of the helm, the forced smile fixed on the lips of the young woman at comms.

“You only have to worry if we fail,” he had informed his crew prior to Law teleporting aboard. “And if we fail the ship will have been destroyed anyway, so there is nothing to worry about!”

It was not much of a joke but enough to leaven the mood. He deliberately softened his posture, leaning casually back into the high-backed leather seat.

“Your orders Sir?”

“Show me Force,” Law answered softly.

Hart tapped his console, the main view-screen, dominating the forward quarter of the bridge, activated. The viewpoint switched instantly to the Chip Fabrication Plant Force had the temerity to commission in Law’s own backyard.

At first glance it looked almost complete, the main body already had power but the two secondary towers remained in darkness. On high magnification he could see teams of space-suited construction workers supported by scores of manufacturing bots, crawling over the hulls.

Two Prometheus and two Piranha fighters circled within the protective ring of laser towers shielding the installation from direct assault.

“Main construction is almost complete Sir,” he volunteered. “Internal fittings underway. I estimate the station will be online within two days, we should act before then.”

“In good time, Captain,” Law answered. “You will have your glorious battle.”

Law leaned close and whispered with a thin, humourless smile.

“It just may not be here.”

“As you wish Sir.” Hart replied.

Not here?

The obvious place to strike would be at the heart of the Force empire, Scale Plate Green, but that was over a dozen sectors away. The Black Heart very rarely moved from Teladi Gain and never without an elaborate charade concerning one of the legitimately registered Albatross transporters of Law’s Teladi allies. The vessel was simply too valuable to risk and the preparations involved were both long and complex.

Law had not given that order, therefore another option was in mind.

Hart barely dared imagine but he could hope.

A jump-drive!

“You are now where I want you!”

Time slowed to a molasses crawl as his blood froze.

“You are now where I want you!”

The words dragged at him, like lead weights on a swimmer’s arms, plunging Max into whole-body shock.

“You are now where I want you!”

An incongruous memory, triggered.

“I’m leaving you Gragore.”

First love lost, the same numbing incomprehension. He tried to stand but his legs wouldn't obey.

"Commander Force!"

Skull's voice seemed to come from some distance, urgent and querulous, snapping Max back to full focus. She looked at him intently as his mind raced to catch up. Then she laughed, a short dry chuckle, laden with a cynicism that was a truer indication of her years than the bone-white smooth skin of her face.

"I do believe I have over-estimated either your ingenuity or your sense of self-preservation."

She smiled, perfectly even, white teeth, stark against the scarlet gash of her mouth. There was no humour in the smile, or her probing steel eyes. Max barely breathed as his mind numbly groped for a way out, knowing that Skull would have protected herself with more than overweening self-confidence.

Then she laughed, long enough and loud enough for his fear to transmute into embarrassment.

"Ah, the fearsome Commander Force!" She wiped a tear from the corner of one eye. "The warrior who has Law cowering behind his shield wall!"

The smile disappeared with frightening speed, replaced by a forensic stare that was nothing but calculating. Max willed himself to calm.

"You know," Skull said. "I believe you have actually come in here without an exit strategy. No concealed squash mines, no hornets, no chemicals or bugs? Not even a strike fleet lurking beyond the gate? After our last encounter I indeed expected more."

Max shook his head dumbly.

"Interesting," Skull said. "And disappointing. Perhaps I should reconsider my own intentions?"

The calculations were already running behind her eyes, Max could only sit and wait for sentence to be pronounced.

"Law would reward me immensely for your head," she said thoughtfully. "Regardless of the shoulders it sat on!"

She did not smile.

"And you are causing us all significant problems. Why should I not kill you where you sit? You know that I could, don't you?"

Max swallowed and nodded.

“However, opportunity trails in the tracks of adversity. Tell me how you can be of service to me?”

“Spaceweed, I’ve a full load to sell, and I can guarantee uninterrupted supplies,” he began.

“If you were dead the problem you propose to solve would no longer exist,” she snapped. “However, I care not where my supplies come from. Should I let you live your offer is accepted. Should I let you live that is.”

The emphasis was on the word “should.”

“I have the computer core from Challenger’s ship,” Max answered.

“All cards on the table. You don’t need Law but if you do want to exploit the alien technology you need me and you need the resources Force Securities is building.”

It was Skull’s turn to be shocked, a state signified by the merest raising of a brow. Nothing crossed her mask of a face.

“My faith in you is restored, Commander,” she said finally. “And your knowledge of things that are above your concern, dangerous and unexpected. Speak further, speak convincingly.”

“I’ve been moving in the wrong circles a long time,” Max extemporised. “And heard a lot of things, whispers of something called the ‘Shadow Conspiracy?’”

“A somewhat dramatic translation from the Paranid I believe,” Skull said quietly. “Continue.”

“I was digging for more dirt from the Confeds when I was almost whacked. My information says Law was behind that. He took my woman, Skull, he will pay for that,” Max spitted with the heart-felt venom of a method actor.

“It’s a long arm that can strike from beyond the grave,” Skull observed. “But you inspire such loyalty, it could be an inconvenience.”

“More than an inconvenience,” Max said. “You know what my people can do.”

Growing in confidence he continued.

“I knew the Clans were involved but Jackson was green. Law’s people were more easily bribed than yours, it cost a lot but I pieced it together. There’s an alien ship with a revolutionary propulsion system crashed somewhere in the Xenon sector beyond Menelaus Paradise. You’ve been searching for years and have narrowed it down to a few locations but space is pretty big and it could take you years to retrace Challenger’s steps. With my help you could have the location in months.”

“Months, not days?” Skull inquired.

“There was a lot of damage,” Max explained. “I’m building a Chip Fab just to have the people and resources to recover the data. Only Jackson and I know this so don’t even think about leaning on any of my people.”

“You have a proposal,” Skull stated.

Max stifled a relieved sigh, there was a deal to be made. His mind raced, sifting options.

“I want the head of Law and I want a damn good share of the profits. I don’t care about anything else. I can offer you both the location and the legal resources to expoit it. What can Law offer? Mindless thuggery?”

“I care not who sits on the Stoertebeker throne,” Skull answered. “They come, they go. Is that your aspiration?”

“King or king-maker,” Max shrugged. “Me or Jackson, I haven’t decided yet. I like being legal but on the other hand so many more possibilities could open. This universe is not big enough for both Law and I, the question is, who can do you the most good?”

“A good question,” Skull acknowledged through pursed lips. “And I have no love for Law and his barbarously unfocused ways.”

“Yet,” she continued. “There is an ecology to the universe and Law occupies an essential niche. It is through his connections with the Teladi Board of Directors that much crucial materiel flows. The clans circumstances would be seriously straitened should this conduit be lost.”

“The composition of the Board is open to change,” Max observed.

“Ah yes,” Skull smiled. “General Daht, a Teladi male with un-Teladi ambitions. I am not convinced a revival of the ancient martial Teladi spirit is in my interests, or indeed those of the rest of the universe. How long do you think it would take before the Split were at the Boron throat?”

“I’m not sure the Boron have throats but I take your point. Do you have a suggestion?”

“Reconsider your loyalties at an opportune moment and guarantee the continued gratitude of the current administration,” Skull replied.

“And the Stoertebeker Clan?”

“I reiterate my lack of care,” Skull said with mock weariness. “Jackson, yourself.”

She shrugged carelessly.

“As long as the alliance with Director Morn is maintained. Do we have an understanding?”

“Will I have your support, when the time comes? And will I have a seat at whatever it is you guys sit around when you plot?”

“Deliver the information and you will have your seat but committing my forces against Law would make a complex situation unpredictable. I have waited a long time Commander, another few years would mean little and your victory would prove nothing if it relied on my forces. The fit survive. However, when the time comes, we shall talk again. I may then have information of value.”

Max thought for a few seconds, adding this new, dangerous shard to the others; the mission, Xela, Jackson, Daht; a shifting balance of circumstances, people, and possibilities between him and his goal, too complex with too many unknown variables to plan. He let the pieces twist and shuffle in his head, forming different patterns that he churned in his gut until he could intuit a new path.

“Deal,” Max said.

Skull stood suddenly, sweeping forward, reflexively Max stood also. She came close, close enough to sweep his senses with a distinctive perfume.

“Look at me.”

He looked down into her young face. She stared up with old eyes, probing. Max focused and returned as impassive a gaze as he could manage. Skull held the stare, questioning, as Max cleared his mind. The perfume intensified and he began to sweat, small beads along the hairline, he licked his lips.

She mimicked the action, grinning, and ran her fingers quickly and firmly up the front of his crotch, choking off his cry by pulling his face down onto her lips. The perfume was intoxicating now and his resistance to her probing tongue little more than perfunctory. He returned her kiss tentatively and laughing contemptuously, she pushed him away.

Skull clicked two fingers in the air and the room began to revolve.

“Resolve all trade issues with my subordinates.”

The entrance behind him slid open.

“And Commander, do not play me for the fool Law is. Cross me and you will find I possess a long and unsubtle reach.”

Max swallowed and nodded.

His limbs stopped trembling by the time the un-laden Star passed beyond the range of the Laser Towers.

Skull watched the two Force ships leave the sector from the seclusion of her inner sanctum, an harmonious blend of luxury and technology that allowed her to control the Skull empire in the style she was long accustomed.

“Deploy the Communications Array,” she spoke to the air in the tone that activated voice control.

“Acknowledged,” a computer voice answered.

Skull removed her cowl, carelessly throwing it to one side. The garment barely touched the floor before it was whisked away by a scuttling Neat-O-Bot. She shook out her long bone-white hair, straightening tangles with her fingers. By the time she’d poured a generous shot of Argon Whisky into an ice-filled glass the computer announced the comm. array deployment.

She activated the sector display. The enhanced nav-sat was twenty klicks out with the deployment Mandalay circling, carefully observing a 2 kilometre exclusion zone to avoid interfering with transmissions. From memory she specified ascension and declination co-ordinates and took a cool sip as she waited for the narrow band antenna to focus and smiled. He would be pleased.

“Channel open, Intimidator online,” her computer confirmed as the 2D display flashed to life. The man on the screen looked old, his eyes older still and the skin on his face parchment thin over his cheekbones. It appeared to be peeling. Judging from the background chatter he was on the bridge.

“Skull,” he said in greeting, his voice deep but wheezing as if he was having difficulty breathing.

“Commodore,” she returned. “Father, you look unwell.”

Commodore Jaines nodded and grimaced through a passing spasm.

“Nothing a visit to Paradise won’t cure,” he said dismissively. “We have picked up Xenon transmissions, we believe there may be a base of some kind in this gas giant’s family of moons.”

Skull frowned.

“Another? How many more can there be?”

“Brennan’s Triumph was a key sector for the Xenon,” Jaines observed. “With the gate to Earth. We have not encountered any ships for months but we must expect there to be more installations and sensor arrays that we have not eliminated. We will though, this is Skull territory now,” he finished with a cough.

Skull waited for the fit to subside before continuing.

“Force came. As you predicted.”

“And?”

“He knows much, father, the alien device and our interest. He claims to possess a computer core from our probe.”

“From Challenger’s ship?” Jaines smiled. “How,” he searched for the appropriate word. “Serendipitous. Overly so?”

“I believe not, father. His feud with Law guides his stumbling steps. It must have been he who suborned Law’s operative who stole the probe data. Force is a dangerous man, a lot more reckless and ambitious than his history suggests.”

“Close encounters with mortality focuses men’s minds, daughter and makes them consider their future. Can he be exploited as we planned?”

“He can,” Skull confirmed. “His resources will be invaluable, but I fear our alliance with Law nears it’s end.”

“And you believe he will betray Daht?” Jaines asked when she finished recounting her meeting with Force in detail.

“I do,” she replied. “I could smell the ambition.”

Jaines smiled affectionately.

“Your judgement is always sound. If he supplants Law whilst maintaining our ties with the Teladi Trading Company we will consider his suitability. He knows too much to be left on the outside for long but watch him closely for signs of treachery and let him know only the minimum he needs to ensure co-operation.”

“I have him under observation,” Skull said. “When he has stained himself with enough blood I will act. With circumspection.”

“Good,” Jaines confirmed. “As ever I leave the details in your hands. Tell me, did he not ask of the Commodore?”

“He did not,” Skull answered. “It has been decades since yours was the face of Skull. Rumour and conjecture now cloud your very existence.”

“I suspect you underestimate the perspicacity of the intelligence services,” Jaines said through pursed lips. “I know they suspect much but it suits our cause for them to believe in my retirement from the operational side of Clan business. Which is true, you continue to excel, daughter.”

His attention was drawn off-screen momentarily.

“Long range scans have detected Xenon fighters, we must conclude this discussion. Continue as you see fit. I will return soon.”

He cut the transmission and Skull ordered the retrieval of the comm. relay.

“Status, Irana,” Jaines demanded. His words wheezed around the compact heart of the Albatross that was the true centre of the Skull Clan empire. The bridge was small, much smaller than standard, an economical five station module originally designed for small corvettes. The Commodore preferred it that way, just him, his second in command and officers at the Helm, Weapons and Flight Control.

His First Officer looked up from her station, appropriately at his right hand.

“Undetected Commodore.”

The Intimidator lurked in the shadow of the seventh moon, shielded from detection by the nickel-iron core of the asteroid sucked into the gravity well of the system’s only Gas Giant millennia before. It was hidden and blind but for the sporadically deployed nav-sats dropped by scout ships assiduously scouring the environs for Xenon activity.

Irana grinned, perhaps remembering her own times in a fighter cockpit, before age robbed her of her reflexes and her place on the flight-line of any of the dozen mercenary squadrons that featured on her CV. The Skull Clan had returned most of them, along with what beauty her plain features ever possessed, but at a price. As this had been paid by whatever unfortunate Skull had found in possession of the essences needed to prolong life and well-being Irana did not care. Beckoned by more wealth she’d ever dreamed achievable she happily foreswore the thrills of combat to become the second-in-command of the Skull Carrier.

“A three ship Xenon patrol has been detected at ninety seven thousand klicks. Their course will take them across the orbit of the second moon.”

“An extended patrol?” Jaines opined. “Returning to base?”

“I would say so,” Irana agreed. “Based on previous experience it will be in a low orbit, undetectable at this range against the background noise generated by the primary. Standard approach?”

Jaines nodded and Irana snapped orders.

Within minutes the Intimidator CAP had retrieved the Laser tower defence screen and the ship secured for Newtonian flight. The Teladi female at the helm computed an approach vector that would slingshot them around the moon at speeds that precluded interception. If she doubted the wisdom of a blind approach to a hostile position she kept it to herself. They had done this before and they would do it again, until the Commodore was certain the last remnants of the Xenon occupation of his sector had been expunged.

“Okay Max, spill it. What really happened?”

“I just told you Zee,” Max replied stiffly. “I cut a deal. If we can provide a more secure and reliable supply of recreational substances than Law, Skull won’t be doing any lamenting when we rip off his face and hand it to him.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. I’m a mean, lean, deal cutting machine, Zee. You should know that by now.”

“If I was ever around when you made one, perhaps I would. Given what you’ve done I half expected she’d eat you alive. You must have been very persuasive.”

She paused, noting the physiological readings that matched the rising pink suffusing his face.

“Oh for goodness sake Max, say it ain’t so?”

“Say what ain’t so?” Max continued replaying the incident in his mind, feeling again the sudden humiliating shock. The cabin felt very warm.

“Oh it is so!” Xela said, aghast. “Sweet, innocent casino girls have to be treated like criminals for showing an interest but there you go, leaping into the pit, so to speak, of Miss Psycho-Universe just to secure a profit line. Men! What the hell is wrong with you all, I mean, what the hell is wrong with you all?”

“She’s an intriguing woman,” Max replied, carefully masking his emotions as Xela hounded the false trail.

“Several intriguing women, or the parts thereof,” Xela snapped.

Max shrugged.

“She needed distracting.”

“Well, it didn’t take very long did it Max? Someone more appropriate should speak to you about that. I could recommend a few books, some visualisation techniques if you like?”

“I’ll have a chat with Jack,” Max promised.

The ensuing conversational tangent took them through most of the next sector.

By the time they arrived back in Scale Plate Green Xela had run out of jibes and Max allowed himself a small smile of relief and now he really did need to talk with Jack.

The man was there, waiting with the antique. He and Max hit the bars, leaving Xela and the Star repair droids to work magic.

Chapter 17: Unwise Words

Daht shifted uncomfortably in his seat and smoothed the sea of medals flooding his chest. Catching himself in the indecisive looking gesture he focused on what he wanted to say, shutting out the bustle of the flight bay the Teladi News Network insisted was the correct backdrop for the interview. Behind him, a Falcon fighter prepared to launch as Fly-Cams jerked and darted around, seeking the best framing shots.

Finally, as his patience reached threadbare, Umyquos Cafomos Alelais III arrived, trailing a comet tail of appearance technicians. Of course, she looked magnificent, as always, even more so in the flesh. Daht licked his lips, wishing away the years, as she took the seat opposite. The Fly-Cams darted to cover her as she flicked through the notes on her padd.

Satisfied she looked up and said.

"Ready General?"

Daht nodded, the voice in his earpiece already counting backwards from five.

"Seera, do the translation honours if you will. Standard Argon, no sibilance."

Artur glided across to the dispenser, deftly manoeuvring his chair around the sparse furnishings of his office. With half an ear on the translated programme announcement he removed the sandwich. Two cardboard bites later he dropped it into the recycler and turned to the screen, where the Teladi female was extolling at length on the details of the General's military career, culminating in that famous victory at Ianamus Zura. Daht himself appeared to visibly swell with pride.

"General, it is no secret that you and Director Morn have fundamental disagreements on the course the Teladi Trading Company should plot. Would you care to elaborate?"

"No you would not," Artur muttered impotently.

"Of course," Daht replied, leaning forward.

"The continuing rise in profits is fundamental to our civilisation. Of that there can be no dispute. What is good for the Teladi Trading Company is good for the Teladi."

He leaned back and looked at Umyquos for a moment, weighing his words carefully.

"However, I believe the fluctuating stock values of recent months are indicative of serious structural problems. To begin with, far too much of the gross profits end up in the hands of illegal entities."

“Illegal entities?” Umyquos interjected, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. “What do you mean by that?”

“The Clans,” Daht snapped back angrily. “As you well know. Parasites that pay bribes not taxes. Scum that monopolise the most profitable industries, robbing the honest investor of their gains, whilst lining the accounts of those with blind eyes. Do you have any idea how much of our industrial production is siphoned off to provide them with the means to wage their wars?”

Umyquos indicated a negative with a clawed gesture.

“Neither have I, with all my resources, neither have I. But I know that when the Xenon attacked Scale Plate Green the glorious Teladi fleet had to be rescued by the Argon. Why must I scrape and beg for fighters when, even as we speak, a Clan Carrier orbits our home-world loading up our latest fighters and who knows what else?”

“You are referring to the Stoertebeker Clan Transporter?” she asked. “As Director Morn has said, it is a civilian vessel, not a warship. The sale of a few of her own obsolete fighters is a mutually profitable exchange. Perhaps it is a bit more blatant than anything we have seen but we all know it goes on and we all know there are unwritten rules.”

She checked her data-padd.

“And Director Morn states it is a vital counter-balance to the growing threat represented by the Argon, Max Force, who many see as little better than a pirate himself, regardless of the Decree of Incorporation you championed.”

“Commander Force breaks no laws,” Daht responded angrily. “And trades on the open market and so helps bolster Teladi stock values. To compare a legally constituted corporation to the festering sore that is the Stoertebeker Clan is an insult and indicative of the corruption of the Teladi spirit that comes from permitting illegal trade for the private profits of a few.”

“Moving on,” Umyquos said quickly. “You said ‘problems’. What are these and how would you correct them? We are running out of time,” she added in response to the voice in her earpiece.

“We are constrained,” Daht stated.

Artur willed time to expire. It did not and Daht continued.

“Despite the heroic role played by our armed forces in expelling the Xenon from their long-held sectors we did not get our just rewards.”

“We have eight new sectors I believe,” Umyquos interjected. “More than the Argon. How is that unjust?”

“The Teladi need expansion room,” Daht answered with enthusiasm. “Yet we are hemmed in by the Argon at the edge of the New Frontier and still have the Xenon astride the key Scale Plate Green – Eighteen Billion trade route. Furthermore, we have no bridgehead from which to expand further into the Xenon sectors beyond Menelaus Frontier. None of those markets or sources of raw materials will boost our share prices.”

He leaned forward for emphasis.

“The future appears to be Boron.”

“What do you suggest?” The interviewer asked eagerly, ignoring the gasps in her earpiece.

“A renegotiation of the colonial settlement. Our own legends clearly state what is now known as Great Trench was a Teladi colony sector, before the Xenon drove us from our first empire. And we should demand a share of the spoils beyond Black Hole Sun. The Teladi must have room to expand.”

“Anything else?” Umyquos gulped.

“The unclaimed sectors,” Daht replied. “Those festering reservoirs serve only to swell the coffers of the Clans and their associates. If other races dare not seize them, under my leadership we shall. For the good of the Greater Teladi Empire.”

Artur attempted to bury his head in his hands. He was only partially successful as his mechanical arm slapped his face.

“Seera,” he winced. “Show me the Teladi Trading Company stock market.”

He watched the numbers fall in silence.

“Wake up Max.”

The voice was low, indistinct through the buzz in his temples and merging with the dream. The same dream.

Struggling to remember where he was Max rolled over and stretched a lazy arm across the warm body next to him and pulled it close. The hug was returned, unconscious, instinctual.

“Wake up Max.”

His head hurt, a dull, familiar throb in time with his heart. Dimly he realised the voice was above him and someone was prodding his shoulder urgently.

Cautiously, he opened one eye.

“By the cringe!”

“Holy shit!”

Jackson hit the floor micro-seconds after Max lurched from the bed, stumbling into Tyre, sending himself and the girl falling to the carpet.

“Take me now, Universe,” Max managed to mumble through the several extra tongues that appeared to have taken up residence in his mouth. The sound of his own voice intensified the pounding and Tyre’s scream lanced like an ice-pick through his skull.

“Well, I hope I got a movie and a decent meal first,” Jackson joked half-heartedly. “And I can still sit down.”

Tyre helped Max to his feet.

“You stink Max,” she snapped. “In more ways than one,” she added, propelling him into the shower.

“Uh … we didn’t..?” Jackson indicated the shower as he fumbled for his clothes. “I mean..”

“Is it that cold in here?” Tyre asked archly and threw his jeans across the room. “Perhaps I should turn up the heating. And the air conditioning. You still alive in there Max?”

“That depends on the answer to Jack’s question,” Max groaned. “Can you pass me my blaster please?”

“No, it’s in the top drawer for safety. Yours too Jack. Given the state you were both in I guess not. Disappointed?”

The denials came in stereo.

Grinning she added. “But I had to sleep on the floor so who knows. Thanks for that kiddies and let yourselves out real soon, I’ve got a late shift to catch.”

She paused in the open doorway.

“And boys, you were both magnificent!”

She shut the door on the groans of dismay.

“She was kidding right Max?” Jack called as she left. “You know her, she was kidding right?”

“Know her?” Max answered, stumbling from the shower. “I can’t even remember her surname. And did she say, late shift?”

He checked the chronometer and groaned. “What the fuck were we drinking?”

Max began climbing into his own clothes, with painstaking concentration.

Jackson sniffed his stained tunic gingerly, before putting it on.

“Just about everything it seems. Does the electric chick take in laundry?”

“You could ask,” Max replied leadenly. “So long as you aren’t standing near an airlock. We should eat. Should we eat? I’m not hungry.”

“Or making sense, here take this.”

Max took the stim and triggered it against his carotid. Jackson followed suit.

“Hey, that’s better,” he pulled a pipe from his jacket and stuffed the bowl with space-weed from a cracked leather pouch.

“Appetite stimulant?” Jackson sucked the pipe to life, holding a long lungful. “And that’s much better! You sure?” He proffered the pipe.

Max took a big hit, letting the world brighten to colour as the alkaloids reached his brain.

“The New Frontier. Breakfast, or whatever damn meal it is now.”

Jackson clapped him on the shoulder.

“You’re the big boss Max, it’s whatever you say it is. What’s the use of power unless you can abuse it for your own convenience?”

“Words to found a civilisation on Jack,” Max replied laconically. “You ready?”

“Almost. Guns, we need guns, big, big guns,” Jackson rummaged in the dressing table drawer, holding something in translucent black chiffon against his torso.

“What do you think?”

“That you need professional help Jack, put it down.”

He adroitly caught a tossed holster and strapped it to his thigh.

“You joining me?”

“Nah, I’d better see how the box is coming along. See you there in an hour?”

“Give or take,” Max agreed.

The New Frontier was almost full but Ray led him through the crowd to his table and served a fried breakfast, keeping the sarcastic comments to a minimum in deference to

his condition. Max left an extra large tip and made his way to the cargo bay where Xela was converting the re-sequencer for the Data Hub penetration.

He didn't recognise either of the armed Argon men guarding the docking bay but there were a lot of new recruits these days, to the Raiders security teams. They snapped to attention with an enthusiasm that suggested they recognised whom was paying their wages.

The small bay was almost deserted, just Corrin and a faintly green Jackson, in deep conversation with an Argon female in the shadow of a Lifter whose garish yellow and black livery screamed freelancer.

Jackson nodded as Max joined them but made no effort to introduce the stranger. Taking the cue Max asked.

"The package ready for delivery?"

"Locked down and loaded up," Jackson returned with a grin. "Just covering a few last minute details."

"Such as?"

"Such as the size of my fee," the woman cut in. "Fifty five thousand credits. And another thirty thousand for expenses."

"Thirty K for bribes!" Jackson exclaimed. "You're really milking it and you're not the only smuggler in the universe, old woman."

"But I'm the only one here aren't I?" She observed pedantically. "I've been doing this since before you were born. Possibly even you," she glared up at Corrin. "And my record is spotless."

She folded her arms defiantly.

"Pay her," Max ordered Corrin. "When can you deliver?"

"It will be through Customs and at the specified address in under eight hours. Good enough for you Force?"

"More than," Max confirmed. "I'm impressed."

"You get what you pay for young man," she snapped. "At least you have the brains to recognise a good deal."

"Then don't let us detain you," Jackson interjected. "The credits will be in your usual account before you reach the Treasure Chest Trading Station."

The old pilot smiled.

“A pleasure as always young Jackson. You know how to reach me.”

She turned abruptly and boarded the Lifter without a backward glance. They stood well back from the thruster wash as it departed.

“Where’s Zee?” Max asked as the noise died away.

“I’m right here Max,” came the muffled reply.

Corrin fished the data-padd from a hip pocket and tossed it to him. He caught it awkwardly, at the second attempt.

“Reflexes a little off there, Max. You two have a good night?”

“Probably,” Max answered, smoothly changing the subject. “How’s the construction coming?”

“Power will be online in under two days,” Corrin answered. “And that Stoertebeker beast is pulling a low orbit of the primary. We think she’s been taking on ships and supplies. We could do with those credits Max, to upgrade our fighters.”

“We have a production run of 10 Mamba’s ready to roll,” Xela interjected. “With a pretty fine discount. Get the Raiders in those and we’ll smash Law from the skies.”

“Then we’d better get going,” Jackson said. “Ready there, buddy?”

“We? Who’s this “we” Jack? I’m not sure that turning up planet-side with a known Clan leader is going to help,” Max answered.

Jackson clapped him on the shoulder.

“I don’t think our alliance is really that much of a secret Max, do you? Besides I know all the best night-spots and you need me to contact my people!”

Max shrugged.

“Okay, fair enough.”

He turned to Corrin.

“Do we have a ship free for a run to Treasure Chest?”

“We’ve fighters but I’d prefer not to waste them. Any freighters due though lass?”

“Nothing soon,” Xela replied. “But there is a commercial flight back to Black Hole Sun in an hour. It calls in at all the Trading Stations en-route.”

“Suitably discreet,” Max agreed. “Book two seats. Main bay?”

“Main bay and two seats,” Xela confirmed. “And boys, try and avoid trouble, okay?”

“Yes mother,” Max replied meekly. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” Xela answered. “Catch up on the news. Our friend Daht has all but declared war on the Boron and anyone else occupying part of the putative Greater Teladi Empire. We may be hitched to a falling star.”

“In the case of an emergency, kindly plummet to a fiery death!”

The shuttle steward fixed Jackson with a dagger stare, which he returned with a wink.

“Hey Max,” he continued in a stage whisper as she continued the safety drill. “I think I’m in there!”

Max said nothing and concentrated on relaxing his white-knuckle grip on the seat arms as the orbital shuttle pitched it’s nose up to re-entry angle.

“Is it my imagination or is the floor getting really warm?”

“Shut the fuck up Jack,” Max snapped as nervous faces turned towards their seats. “I hate planet-fall okay. Damn, I thought ablative heat shields went obsolete decades ago.”

“Hey, relax buddy,” Jack sipped the complementary whisky. “I can’t remember the last time one of these things failed.”

“I can, Jack,” Max muttered grimly. “I can.”

The shuttle began to judder as it entered the upper atmosphere. Max tried to swallow but his mouth was too dry.

“We’re on the cheap and cheerful Frontier, Max. What did you expect out here, a Space Elevator? Anyway, these things hardly ever plummet from the sky in a burning mass of tortured metal and screaming souls! If it helps, just remember, everything around you was built by the lowest bidder. Probably Teladi.”

“It doesn’t help Jack, it doesn’t help at all,” Max answered through gritted teeth.

Jackson shrugged and finished his drink with one mouthful.

Thirty minutes later the shuttle taxied to a halt at the single terminal of the somewhat grandiose titled, Garleth Prime Interstellar Space-Port.

Max stumbled unsteady down the ramp, fumbling for his shades, protection against the still fierce glare of the primary, low on the horizon. The gravity felt wrong, just being under a starless sky felt wrong. Even the air, redolent with alien scents blown on the breeze was wrong. Hell, just having a breeze was wrong!

Disoriented, not even knowing if it was sunrise or sunset, he worked to keep up with the brisk pace Jackson set. Xela came on-line and began complaining about missing the flight down. He tried hard not to listen.

"Hey look Max," Jackson nudged, pointing across open expanse to the shuttle's sister ship. "A Mag-lev catapult, how quaint!"

Max just groaned.

Customs turned out to be a cursory wave of a scanning wand by a bored functionary. They retrieved their baggage, headed out of the terminal and rode the bus to Capital City.

Max half expected it to have wheels.

The spaceport was over 50 kilometres from the city, fifty klicks of rolling landscape, fractured by millennia of earth tremors caused by the stressful interactions of the two proximate planets, orbiting around a common centre of gravity.

Alien flora, some gigantic, some tiny, some flexible as whips, the evolutionary success stories of the harsh environment as far as the eye could see, punctuated only occasionally by the hulking bulks of strip miners, slashing through the landscape with imperial distain. And vast ranches where genetically adjusted Chelt and other strange variants of commercial fauna, struggled to thrive in the alien environment.

"You've been here before Jack." It was a statement born of his complete disinterest in the passing view.

"Dammit, Max. I'd almost beat my highest score!"

Jack slipped the Game-Padd into his jacket.

"Yea, I come here often. Just need to see a big sky and no stars occasionally, feel the breeze, know what I mean?"

"And," Max said. "They have a relaxed frontier attitude to petty legalisms!"

"Amen to that Brother," Jack answered with a smile.

"You got anything to drink?" Jackson shook his head but magicked a pre-rolled stick from thin air, which he sucked to life before passing to Max.

"Amen to that Brother?" Max breathed out the tension with the lung-full of space-weed. "That's remarkably Gonerish of you Jack."

Jackson took the stick back and took a big hit.

"Life ain't all about getting high and getting laid, buddy. Well, the best bits are, but there's all that stuff that makes you think, that broaden your mind. Chicks love that."

Max tuned out Xela's response.

"Yea, you know, all that Goner stuff about Earth and all. It's our history too, man. Art, literature, weird mythologies, the Goner have all sorts of that crap, salvaged from the colonial data-banks and hidden away from the Great Forgetting."

"That's when the Argon tried to purge all memory of their origins, Max," Xela interjected. "And they have a whole lot of information from Xenon data-stores. Earth colonies took their culture and history with them."

"You should check some of it out," Jackson continued. "In fact where we going you might. Probably will."

"You taking me somewhere classless and tacky?"

"Natch. Classless, tacky and entertaining. With strippers, we're meeting my contact there."

"Who is a stripper?"

"Nah, I hope not. Singer. Real old stuff, real powerful, like this shit of yours."

He handed Max the stub. He sucked it down to his scorching fingertips, feeling his mood mellow.

"You're a man of hidden depths Jack," Max was genuinely surprised. "Ain't that right Zee?"

"Or a fad-chaser," Xela snorted. Max didn't relay that comment.

They arrived on the fringes of the capital just as the primary sun was setting and the first stars beginning to show.

A few minutes later the second sun dawned, casting a pale yellow light over the town's ramshackle mix of pre-fab low-rise colonial domes and second-wave structures fabricated from local organics, mostly the huge mushroom-esque growths that forested much of the continent.

The bus, at Jackson's request, stopped near the centre. Jack led them down one of the walkways connecting the radial arms of the main streets and stopped outside a two storey rococo structure. The sound of drunken shouting competed with the crunch of breaking furniture to drown out the music drifting into the street.

Jackson carefully picked his way through a minefield of vomit overlain with the occasional comatose colonist, to the double door entrance.

"Dawn of the Little Day Max," Jack commented. "The best time to party."

The giant at the door greeted Jack like an old friend and ushered them in.

“Welcome to The Big Easy Saloon, Max!” Jackson said. “Try taking off the shades. Mommy wouldn’t approve anyway.”

Max obeyed and the stygian darkness lifted, slightly. The heavy reek of raw-brewed alcohol remained, leaving him to wonder if naked flames were permitted.

“Why so dark?”

“You spend any time here and you’ll be grateful. Two suns remember?”

Max allowed his eyes to adjust to the dusk lighting level in the crowded, cavernous saloon, illumined mostly from the stage area at the far end, where an improbably proportioned woman was getting beyond first name basis with a pole running up to the ceiling.

“More ancient Earth culture, Jack?” Max asked dryly as they threaded their way though the dozens of crowded tables to the bar that ran the entire length of one wall.

“What?” asked Jackson.

Max raised his voice to compensate for the inchoate background roar from the crowd, mostly colonials, dressed in rough-spun local fabrics cut in styles deliberately reminiscent of the old Argon colonial expansion.

“I said, never mind, the moment’s shot past.”

Jackson shrugged and elbowed his way through the heaving throng crushed against the length of the bar, cutting off drunken protests with a don’t-fuck-with-me look that brooked absolutely no dissent. He returned with two steins of some dark brew clutched in one fist. A refill jug filled the other. Max followed him through the crowd to a front and centre table where a single, huge, moon-faced man warned off all-comers with a snarl that brightened to a beaming, incongruously child-like smile when he spied Jackson.

“Great table, Baby-Face,” Jack greeted, taking a seat facing the stage. “This here’s my friend Max. Friend, Max okay?” He repeated slowly.

“Max, friend,” the giant repeated. “Hello Max,” he extended his left hand uncertainly, before switching to the right. Max took it gingerly, folding his thumb under, against the anticipated crush that never came.

“Hi there,” Max replied uncertainly, taking a seat next to Jack.

“You got the packages BF?” Jack asked. Baby-Face nodded and fumbled in the voluminous pockets of his food stained jacket for a bag he handed to Jackson.

“Good work, BF, good work,” he slipped a small package into the left pocket of Max’s leather coat, pocketing a similar one for himself.

“You watch our backs now, right? Don’t go far,” Jackson patted his cheek and held his eyes for a long moment. “You did real good, BF.”

Baby-Face grinned happily and stood up.

“Boss relax, enjoy the pretty ladies. No trouble.”

Max waited until the big man cut through the throng to lean against a nearby support pillar, watching every person who came near their table, before raising a quizzical eyebrow.

“Best pilot I ever saw Max, better than you even, maybe. Got wasted in Xenon space and had to go EVA through a gate. Gotta look after your own, Max, gotta look after your own.”

Jackson took a long pull on his beer as Max felt the outline of the package in his pocket.

“It’s a gun, of sorts, gas powered, recombinant chemical pellets, two-tone. Harmless on their own but on impact, boom! Nothing to go to war with but nothing will show up on scanners, the local law and order types can be a bit fussy. There’s also a local comm. link, fully encrypted.”

He slipped his own weapon into a boot. Max ripped through the package without removing it from his pocket and followed suit.

“That’s better eh?” Jackson lifted his glass. “To lost friends.”

Max acknowledged the toast and took an experimental sip of the soupy dark liquid, carefully filtering it through clenched teeth. It tasted as raw as the impatient brews that circulate below-decks, but with an after-taste that was both earth and spice.

He took a full gulp, ignoring the unsettled sediment, then another as his olfactory senses adjusted. An unexpected rush, not unlike a spaceweed toke, flushed through him, colours brightened and the pounding rhythm driving the floor show suddenly seemed a fraction more urgent.

Jackson caught the moment and smiled.

“Yea, hits that spot don’t it? Brewed from a local fungus, brimming with alkaloidal goodness! The imported stuff’s beyond the pocket of most of the dirt grubbers.”

“Yet there are people here who can afford colonial antiques,” Max observed cynically. “Let’s hear it for the trickle-up theory of wealth.”

They toasted again.

“Shit, Jack, don’t you get enough of this back at my station? And what about all that culture you promised?”

“Pole-dancing IS a fundamental aspect of ancient Earth culture,” he answered deadpan. “You should read more. Can the electric chick pluck us a schedule, there should be something even better on later?”

“Involving animals no doubt,” Xela sneered as she accessed the interior data-cloud.

Max showed Jack the stage list.

“Yep, here it is, The Jake Vance Band, right after the Deleaney Sisters, which are apparently these chicks here. Do you think they party?”

Max took Xela back and put her in his pocket before she could pass comment.

“Well I’m pretty certain they’re not librarians Jack, but isn’t the key word for our little trip, discretion?”

“It’s your little trip buddy,” Jackson answered. “I’m not going anywhere near the data-hub. While you’re busy I’m going to be so indiscreet you wouldn’t believe.”

He chugged the remainder of his stein, not spilling a drop and slammed it down.

“Starting with the Deleaney Sisters there.”

He grinned.

“The best things come in pairs, or multiples thereof!”

Max shook his head ruefully.

“And,” Jack continued. “Vance has the info you need. Bill of sale, pick-up point, second teleport, we’ll talk after his set.”

He refilled his glass and topped up Max. They both followed the floor-show with burning eyes.

When it finished, to a physical wall of whistles and cat-calls, the ambient lighting raised slightly, the signal for a storming of the bar. Jackson muttered, “no way” and gestured BF over. A few minutes later their drinks arrived, along with two huge bowls of a steaming stew Jackson insisted was fish.

“Practically.”

Max didn’t enquire further but wolfed it down, masking the game flavour with the rough, black bread. By the time they finished the stage layout had been transformed, the poles and other props replaced by a surprisingly high tech sound system for the setting, all flat panels and remote pick-ups, made more incongruous by the antique instruments laid out ready for the musicians. Guitars he recognised, although he had never seen one with strings before and he could guess that the bank of cylinders and thin-stalked metal mushrooms were some type of percussion instrument. The rest just piqued his curiosity.

Unannounced the band walked on stage, led by a tall thin man with a long, Old Frontier hair-style. Vance's cracked, weather-beaten face made it difficult to estimate his age. As they adjusted their instruments Max slipped on his shades so Xela could watch the performance. She intensified the image display to compensate, guided by Max's feedback until he was satisfied.

By the time the first number started Jackson was staring, wrapt at the stage, oblivious to the subtle change in the atmosphere as a sullen core of drunk, over-stimulated punters muttered their disappointment.

After five numbers Max felt like joining in as tales of ancient mining disasters merged into stories of sunken ferries and lost loves returning from forgotten wars. Standard, pre-industrial Argon Folk fare, the kind of stuff he believed, in an opinion he voiced only to Xela, music lovers would pay to avoid.

The mood of the crowd grew more sullen, leavened only by the vocal enthusiasm of a small band of devotees who had crowded to the front.

"When do we get to all that good new cultural stuff Jack?" Max asked between numbers. Jackson shrugged and then, as Vance said "Jerusalem," a name almost purged from Argon memory, he whispered the word, "Now."

A ragged cheer rippled through the crowd, provoking a counter demand for the percussionist to unveil her breasts for the young males.

"Philistines," Vance stated as he waited for silence.

"What's a philistine?" Max asked Jackson.

"You are, Max," Xela answered for him as Vance croaked the opening words in a hoarse whisper.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

A-a-Ashes to ashes dust to dust."

A solemn bass chord echoed the long discontinued ritual phrase and was joined by the guitar and drums in a solemn processional lead in. A slow smile spread over Jackson's face.

'A long time ago before the ice and snow
There were giants that walked this land
And with each step they took the mighty mountains shook
And the trees took a knee and the sea rolled in.'

Words made resonant by the world-weary delivery and unwavering, funereal beat.

'Then one day they say the sky gave way
And death rained down it made a terrible sound.

Then there was fire everywhere and nothin' was spared
That walked on the land or flew through the air.'

Words more ancient than the song itself, Max knew but didn't know how. The key shifted and the beat quickened, hooking him in.

'And when it all was over
The slate wiped clean with a touch
There God stood and saw it was good
And he said "ashes to ashes and dust to dust.'

The opening chorus again rolled over the stilled audience.

'Then the sea gave birth and it crawled up on the dirt
And stood up and took a look around
Said "I'm the next big thing and the gift that I bring
Comes directly from God so there ain't no holding me down."'

Irony dripped in Vance's drawled, tired tone.

'So he crowned himself king now no-one remembers his name
But the seed that he sowed took the show on the road.
There was blood on their hands and a plague on the land
They drew a line in the sand and made the last stand.'

The same key shift, the same quickened beat, matched by the pounding in his chest as the bass line resonated in his diaphram.

'They said "God made us in his image
And it's in this and God that we trust"
When asked about the men that had died by their hand
They said "ashes to ashes and dust to dust."'

'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.'

Vance put something to his lips, wrapped and obscured by his hands.

It keened and wailed, a wounded beast loping through a shattered landscape, angry and in pain. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck as the harmonica incorporated the main refrain, pushing it to a new level of urgency.

'Nobody lives forever
Nothin' stands the test of time
You heard 'em say "never say never"
But it's always best to keep it in mind.'

The dark heart of the song, transcending whatever the long-forgotten specific that had inspired the creator. Max forgot to even breathe.

‘That every tower ever built tumbles
No matter how strong, no matter how tall
Someday even great walls crumble
And every idol ever raised falls.’

Jack turned briefly and raised a brow.

‘And someday even man’s best laid plans
Will lie twisted and covered in rust
When we’ve done all that we can but it slipped through our hands
And it’s ashes to ashes and dust to dust.’

Max barely heard the closing chorus over the hammering of his heart. A moment of stunned silence and a massive cheer.

He joined Jack on his feet, whistling as the house-lights came up.

“You see what I mean, Max?” Jackson asked. Max nodded, almost speechless.

Vance stepped down from the stage and came straight over to their table, Jackson warning off BF with a casual wave.

“Awesome Jake, simply awesome!” Jack’s smile was beatific. Vance accepted the praise with a thin smile as he folded his long frame into a seat.

“Ain’t my song Jack, some guy called Steve Earle. Who knows when, where or why, but one hell of a creation myth. Is this our man?” He nodded at Max.

“Yep. Jake Vance, meet Max Force. The guy who’s just about to buy that antique you bought yesterday.”

“Pleasure,” Vance drawled as they shook hands. Vance produced a data-chip.

“Bill of sale, pick-up point and credit authorisation.”

Max inserted the chip into Xela’s interface. She confirmed the details and transferred the credits.

“A pleasure doing business with you Max,” he pulled a bottle of spirits from his jacket and took a couple of gulps. “I saw you do that run past Black Hole Sun. Guts, man!” He raised his bottle in toast and took two more swallows.

“Thanks, Jake. I’m in no hurry to repeat the experience, but thanks. Hey, if you fancy some time off planet I’ve a stage with your name on it.”

“Max’s Place, yea, why not? It’s gotta pay better than this place.”

“Great, call my man Corrin, he’ll fix everything.”

Vance and Jackson talked music until the second set was due as Max relaxed with more beer.

The set passed without again reaching a transcendent height and the next act, a young, nervous stripper, was greeted with raucous delight.

Max quickly removed his shades.

Chapter 18: In and Out

The hours passed in a blur of writhing flesh and steins of the robust local ale. Max kept half an ear on the protean mood of the crowd as waves of new, sober arrivals off-shift, jostled into the drunken mix. The atmosphere was equal parts alcohol fumes and frustration leavened by the lingering sweetness of baby-oil. Max balanced carefully on the edge of sobriety, with a constant supply of snack protein and a stim Jackson produced between sets fighting the alcohol flooding his blood.

"Power for your probe!" Jack winked, equally aware of the shifting mood, but unconcerned.

"It's the Frontier, Max, and a three to one guy/chick ratio. What did you expect? Relax and enjoy it."

Max switched to imported whisky and tried.

A man's roar, a woman's sharp scream, a muffled crack. He stared dumbly at the shattered stem of his glass before his instincts kicked in. Both dived and rolled to their knees simultaneously, weapons held in a two fisted grip, covering the bar in wide, sweeping arcs that seemed to repel the fringe of the crush like a physical force.

Baby-Face rose from a tangled mass of bodies holding a lightly built man by the scruff as he pounded a huge, meaty fist into a face bloodily crumpling. Crack, snap crack. A firearm slipped from his hand and was quickly lost to panicked, kicking feet.

Those nearby swirled away in panic, tangling with the eddying crowd, two fronts colliding in a tornado of upturned tables and shattered glass. More screams and the guttural counter-roar of men who finally had what they really came for.

Not the drink, not the women, just an excuse.

Within seconds Max and Jack stood forgotten in their own swept circle as fists flew and furniture shattered over bodies collapsing pole-axed. Jackson's gun vanished in an ostentatious whirl. Max followed suit as their erstwhile assassin sailed over their heads to crash motionless against the stage.

Jackson took one quick glance to assure himself the man was going nowhere, jerked his head at the mass brawl engulfing the bar and asked with sparkling eyes and a wolfish grin.

"Shall we?"

Max nodded, his own smile, feral, as the wrangle extended a roiling tongue towards them. With an exuberant yell they hurled themselves into the morass, fists flailing.

A klaxon cut through the melee, a discordant shriek that for a fraction of second froze the free-flowing brawl into a static diorama of cocked fists and brandished,

improvised weaponry. Max froze too, taking a hit to the face before felling the bearded drunk with a solar plexus jab followed by a right hook.

“The Feds, Max!” Jackson shouted above the chaos, discarding the shattered remnants of a chair. “Got a pick-up!!” He gestured towards the stage. Max fought through the tide of bodies now sweeping towards the two exits, where he glimpsed white helmets and the first flash of a stun-stick, then another.

Someone set of a gas grenade in the middle of the bar, a distinctive crack and a renewed, inchoate panic, every man for himself in the rush to escape both the law and the choking white cloud. Jackson’s minder stumbled through the haze, club fists flailing blindly.

“Come on Max, get with the program!” Jackson yelled, grabbing an arm of the would-be assassin. Slinging the unconscious man between them they hurried towards the serving bar, Jackson clearing the way with broad sweeps of his sidearm.

They bundled the body over the bar and vaulted after it. Jackson rapped a staccato code on a back panel as tendrils of gas wisped around them. It swung inwards and they stumbled through into a brightly lit corridor, rendered prismatic by stinging, streaming eyes. Jackson slammed the door shut and leaned wearily against it, slipping slowly to the floor. Max joined him, trying to blink clear his vision.

As Jackson did not react, he ignored the blurred figure approaching.

“Relax guys,” a low female voice said. “This will hurt, a lot.”

A hiss and a gritted teeth curse from Jackson. Warm fingers lifted his chin and a spray jetted his eyes, burning away the contaminant. Max choked down the brief moment of pain and blinking away the tears, levered himself to his feet using Jackson’s proffered arm.

“You’re welcome,” the woman snapped, forestalling delay.

She was short, with jet-black hair, cut into geometric sharp frame for a face in the very last bloom of what once must have been a spectacular beauty. Dark, almond eyes, even more distinctive than the Argon norm, glinted with urgency.

“Grab that guy, you know the way Jack.”

Max grabbed pair of ankles and followed Jackson’s lead down the curving panelled corridor.

“And Inspector Herveaux is here,” she finished.

They exchanged small, knowing smiles as they bundled the unconscious man through a door into a large private lounge, an incongruous blend of ersatz Frontier, all dark wood-reconstitute and heavy, scarlet-liveried furnishings, and modern technology in the form of the latest multi-media display, dominating one wall.

It showed a squad of white helmets following a short, shabby man down the corridor behind them. All wore small, clear filter masks over their eyes and nose.

A pair of men Max recognised as bar staff grabbed the dead-weight from them and hustled the body out the far exit.

“Max Force, Natima Kinshaya, Nat, Max,” Jack snapped, throwing himself onto the couch.

Following his cue Max took a chair and grabbed a large snifter of a dark spirit as the woman changed the display view.

Seconds later the riot squad burst into a scene of urbane tranquillity, Max delicately savouring the fumes of his gently swirled drink as his companions idly channel hopped, playfully countermanding each other’s voice commands.

“Ah, Chief Inspector Herveaux!” Jackson stood up as the man removed his mask. He grinned wickedly as his eyes went straight to the rank pips studding the lapels of the long, grubby rain-coat of the rotund little man blocking the entrance. Behind him four white-helmeted, uniformed officers milled uncertainly, stun-sticks at the ready and faces bright for a fight, behind the clear visors.

“Oh, I see it’s just plain old Inspector now.” One of the white helms did a poor job of suppressing a snigger. “You see, you shouldn’t go making allegations without the evidence to back it up,” Jackson finished, dead-pan.

“I had plenty of evidence, Jackson,” herveaux appeared to swell as his face turned a faint shade of red, an irate blimp of a man. “Before you had it stol,” he stopped himself with visible effort. “Before it went missing.”

“Alleged evidence,” Jackson observed pedantically. “Now..”

“Boys, boys, let bygones be bygones,” the woman stood up and waved Herveaux into the room. “Come in boys. My, what big clubs you have, can I get you anything?”

“We are on duty Miss Kinshaya, another day another riot at the Big Easy. As you well know,” he indicated the big display screen, now showing some sort of cookery programme.

“I’m afraid I leave the quelling of minor high spirits to my staff,” Natima replied loftily. “Is there anything in particular I can do for you, perhaps a trip upstairs with one of my girls?”

She looked at him closely. “You do look a little tense! Perhaps showing me your warrant will alleviate some of the stress? These are my private quarters, not part of the licensed premises.”

“Warrants are not needed when in hot pursuit of suspects,” herveaux snapped back. “These two, Jackson and Force were seen by eye witnesses coming through here.”

Natima cut short Jackson's retort with a chop of her hand.

"These two," she quoted icily, "Have been my guests here for some time, as I and many others can vouch. Perhaps your alleged eye-witnesses were confused by the riot gas your storm-troopers let off, in an enclosed space, in contravention of guidelines, I might add."

"That was nothing to do we us, as you damn well know," herveaux said with quiet fury. "Jackson, Force. I am arresting you on suspicion of causing an affray, your rights will be outlined for you and representation provided by the processing officer. In the meanti.."

Jackson snorted with derision.

"You just ain't going to rest until your old lady, say 'Hi' for me by the way, is fixing those there sergeants stripes on your arm are you? This is just a fishing expedition and you know it. Just like I know it was a police issue canister that caused all that chaos."

He paused for a moment to allow Herveaux to catch up.

"And oh what trouble there would be if, say, the serial number traced back anywhere embarrassing, Sergeant - I mean – Inspector."

Jackson let the implication sink in. Max watched the Inspector turn a deeper shade of purple.

"I'm watching you Jackson," he managed finally to answer, with an effort mirrored in the mesmerising throb of a vein in his temple.

"And you, Force. I've got your number from the company you keep."

Max smiled insouciantly.

"Just hanging out, Sergeant. With this charming lady and her companions."

Natima mock curtsied.

"And I'm the Emperor of All the Split," he spat the retort. "Got that bruise on your cheek from an errant canapé did we?"

Max touched the swollen lump on his cheek, noticing it for the first time.

"Girls play rough," he shrugged. "What can I say?"

"Nothing big-shot, nothing at all. But I'm watching you and don't you forget it!"

He held Max with a challenging stare.

“I don’t forget anything,” Max replied, with a quiet chill that instantly pervaded the room. “Something you would do well to remember.”

He put on his shades and stared back at Herveaux until he broke eye contact and withdrew with as much dignity as he could muster in the face of Natima’s mocking, tinkling, laugh.

“Don’t sweat it, Max,” Jackson said when he’d gone. “He’s just an asshole looking to make a big name for himself, just watch your back for tails.”

“If you say so Jack,” Max replied.

“Now, now boys,” Natima interrupted. “I don’t want to hear anything I don’t need to. What do you want me to do with the goon you dragged in, Jack?”

“Put him on ice for awhile, I’ll have some boys pick him up when the heat dies down a bit. Recognise him?”

She shook her head.

“No, he’s new, I think he’s been hanging around for a few days. Why the interest?”

“He took a shot at us, you’d better do a sweep for the weapon, I can run a few checks. Credits get you cahoona’s the stink goes back to Law. Max here has been royally pissing him off.”

“So I’ve heard,” Natima said with a dimpled smile as she extended a hand.

“Commander Force, it’s a pleasure,” she looked him up and down appraisingly. “I’m sure.”

Turning to Jackson she laughed.

“Oh Jack, I’ve made him blush! He’s just SO cute, can I keep him?”

“We’re just visiting Nat,” Jackson answered jocularly. “A quick in and out, you wouldn’t really enjoy it! We could do with a couple of rooms though, adjacent in case of trouble, and a wake-up call in, say, six hours?”

“Sure, Jack. You want company?”

Jack shook his head.

“Nah, I’ve got plans,” he threw Max a wink.

“And Max here has a big day ahead of him, or he would if this place had proper days and nights. That right Max?”

The room was dark, cool and comfortable, if somewhat lacking in sound-retardant.

Eventually he slept and dreamed the same, unquiet dreams.

The wake-up call, delivered by Natima herself, bearing a fried breakfast of local mushrooms and thin, streaky slices of unweaned chelt, came too early for Max.

The hang-over was nothing but the images lingered, grinning corpses, spread-eagled on the cockpit, accusatory eyes, soundless, twitching lips. It took two refills of the coarse local java, bitter and harsh with a lingering after-taste that swooped between the metallic and the organic, before he felt well enough to endure Xela's inevitable jibes.

He let her run on without comment until she lapsed into silence.

"Ready to do the business now?" He asked.

"I've been ready for hours," she retorted. "All the details were on the chip. The antique is in a private storage facility on the other side of town, already loaded on a grav-sled. All you have to do is take it to the Data-Hub. You might want to clear it with them in advance. There's a comm. in the corner I think."

There was. Like a lot of frontier technology, it was an obsolescent cast-off, lacking even basic encryption or a direct link to universal networks. It did the job though and his name and fame proved to be wings that carried him soaring up the hierarchy of the Data-Hub planetary bureaucracy straight to an Assistant Director of Security, a young, lean-faced man whom it transpired, would be "honoured" to facilitate business with Force Securities.

"At your convenience Sir."

Max consulted with Xela and said they'd be there in two hours.

"Argon hours, not local."

"Of course, Commander. Please deliver the item to Entrance Twelve for security evaluation and processing. I will meet you there and take you through the procedures personally, and if I may say Sir, it's a shame you aren't doing any more gate runs, I won 6 months salary off my less adventurous colleagues!"

"Always great to meet a fan," Max murmured as he cut the connection. "What is it with these people Zee, I've founded the first inter-stellar business empire for decades and waged a brutal and public war on one of the most feared clans in the universe, and what do they remember me for? Killing Xenon in a banned sport on prime time."

Xela agreed.

"But when did you last have to pay for a drink or wonder where the next bimbo is coming from?" She added with, Max thought, unnecessary venom.

Without bothering to wake Jackson, Max loaded up a city map on Xela's padd and set out to walk. The side-walk was broad and uncrowded and the route lined with what seemed a random mixture of residential, business and utility buildings. He guessed, from the flow of people in and out of buildings, that it was the middle of a work cycle.

Both suns were in the sky and it was hot. Hot and bright enough to make Max thankful for the Shades despite having to stop too often to wipe away a veneer of the fine white dust blowing in the warm breeze.

"We're being followed. Zee," he remarked after the third such stop. He turned and stooped to adjust a shoe, palming his gun and running a casual glance over the thick set man preternaturally absorbed with his data-padd.

"As a former professional, I'm insulted," Xela snorted. "And look at that suit!"

"Perhaps they were clean out of 'Undercover Cop At Work' T shirts?" Max replied. "This place must be the dumping ground for every government screw-up in Argon space."

Throwing the tail was simplicity itself.

Capital City had no private vehicles, or personal vehicles for hire, just the regular public transportation, small buses prowling the spokes and hubs of the city on anti-grav units that hummed in protest every time they traversed one of the badly repaired breaches in the route-way, left over from the irregular but damaging quakes that struck even the most stable zones of the gravity-ripped planet.

Max flagged down the first one that passed, got on and waited for his tail to jog breathlessly up before hitting the manual door over-ride. Grinning, he stated his destination co-ordinates and took a seat at the rear, taking care to politely wave goodbye to his shadow as the bus pulled away.

"Now that's just rude," Xela observed as the obscenely gesticulating figure dwindled into the distance.

The vehicle automatically adjusted it's route, indicating on the Destination Display and projected an estimated time of arrival. There were only two other passengers, both men, both too hung-over, to judge by the all-pervading smell of sour alcohol, to pay him any attention. Max relaxed, keeping a careful eye on each new arrival. They were all either clean, or incomparably more skilled at surveillance than he expected anyone in this backwater to be.

Ten minutes later, the mixed use zoning of the city centre having given way to a conglomeration of low-rise manufacturing and mixed utility structures, mostly of local materials, the vehicle stopped and reminded him to disembark. With wishes for his long life and repeated custom ringing in his ears Max scanned the area.

A few colonists, going about normal business, a couple of Grav-sleds hauling sealed pods from grey, slab-like construction facilities, a pair of small creatures with way too

many legs for his comfort, scavenging through unkempt waste-pens, nothing to trigger suspicion, if you discounted the mis-matched odour of hops and fungi pervading the area.

He followed Xela's direction down a small through-way and entered the prescribed code on the keypad attached to the entrance she indicated. It was a small building, but part of a much larger complex that appeared to be the source of the smell.

The single large door, running the length of the street facing, slid grinding upwards and out of sight. The antique resequencer sat on an inactive Grav-sled, covered tight with a semi-opaque spray-wrap.

Two men pointed guns at him from the rear shadows.

"Aw, relax, it's that Force guy, I recognise him from the vid," the smaller of the two shadows said. Both guns vanished and they stepped out from concealment.

"Max Force, it's great to meet ya buddy!" The larger man, middle-aged with a waistline that suggested he and exercise of any description had long since ceased to be on speaking terms, stepped forward and hastily wiped his meaty hands down the front of a grease stained cover-all before sticking one out.

"Put it there guy! I saw you.."

"Yea," Max cut in as he shook the extended paw. "You saw me gate-run in Black-Hole Sun, right."

"Uhh, no," the man replied, nonplussed. "You're in the Financial Movers Special Report, 'The Ten Most Likely Beings to Start a War.' Only ranked third though."

"I'll try and do better," Max replied dryly as Xela cackled in his ear. "Mr..?"

"No names, no pack-drill," the second man interjected, his young pointed rodent face narrow with habitual suspicion as he scrutinised an image on his data-padd.

"Hired Goon One and Hired Goon Two," Xela whispered, designating each in turn with a HUD target indicator.

"It's him alright, at bloody last, now let's get paid and laid. It's all yours pal."

Max reflexively caught the tossed control key.

He paused at the entrance and turned.

"You coming, Harvey?"

The big man wiped sweat from his brow.

"Coming Rizzo. You watch that thing Mr Force," he indicated the grav-sled. "It pulls to the left and don't take no bumps good."

With that the pair disappeared into the street.

“You know Max,” Xela said finally. “Your friend Jackson really should get some better help. Present company excepted of course.”

Max nodded rueful agreement.

By the time Max piloted the Grav-sled through the stress fractured road network into the shadow of the brooding hulk of the Data-Hub, the bucket seat had gone from being uncomfortable to a being a literal pain in the ass.

It had also began to rain, big, oily drops that left iridescent trails down his leather coat and left him wondering what mark-up the market for bottled water would stomach.

The Data-Hub was a style unto itself, a large block structure, obsidian and smooth, making no concessions to local sensibilities, designs or materials. Set at the heart of the small city, it was a brooding, alien presence linking it and the planet to the universe of information that weaved the disparate sectors into a single, economic whole.

It looked as impregnable as it was. A proven design, immune from assault and impervious to guile.

“You sure this is going to work, Zee?” Max asked nervously.

“My readings show the shadow-skin is functioning as required,” she answered. “But my sensors are blind compared to the security systems this pig has but all my simulations say you’ll be fine. I’m switching off now to avoid triggering anything loud and cacophonous, let me know how things go! ”

Swallowing nervously Max removed the shades and followed the directions of one of the bored but heavily armed guards at the Main Entrance, to Entrance Twelve.

It was huge, two sliding panels, almost six metres high and almost as pitch as the obsidian walls, the vertical split almost invisible in the weather-faded light. Four people waited, two of them security guards, sexless in their body armour and mirror visored helms.

“Commander Force, so pleased to meet you! Mr Moru, ADS, we spoke earlier. Call me Cal.”

Max shook the outstretched hand of the Assistant Director, Moru’s grip was forced, an assertion of self-doubted manhood. Max smiled to himself and then extended it to embrace Moru.

“You seem a little young to be an AD, Cal. High flier, I bet? Can we get out of the rain?”

“Sure. Here, let us take over,” Moru clicked fingers at a suited functionary hovering, dwarfed in the shadow of the entrance. Max ceded the Grav-sled to the young woman as Moru continued.

“Yes Sir, soaring! A couple of years in this back-water and then who knows?”

“Who knows indeed?” Max agreed. “But I’m counting on you to keep my baby safe.”

He patted the spray-wrapped resequencer affectionately.

“There’s nothing to worry about Commander, these places are all but impregnable. And I’m working on the ‘all but’ bit!” Moru answered confidently as they approached the locked down entrance.

“I like that can-do attitude Cal. When you’ve finished your contract here, you look me up and see how many noughts I can add to the salary of the right people.”

Moru stood a little taller and almost preened.

“I may well take you up on that sir,” he nodded as one of the two body-armoured security guards stepped forward, a holstered blaster slapping ostentatiously on his thigh. His companion remained by the entrance controls, watching observantly.

“Outer perimeter, Commander. Security begins here if you don’t mind.”

The guard produced a scanning wand as Max remembered, with a gut-wrenching realisation, the small firearm in his boot. The scanner beeped alarmingly before his stomach had finished it’s fall.

The second guard dropped into a marksman crouch, covering him with a double-gripped sidearm as the first drew his own. The woman piloting the sled froze.

‘So much for undetectable, thanks Jack.’ He thought as he stepped back with his hands in the air and what he hoped was a disarming smile on his face.

“Relax guys, a little self-protection oversight, it’s in my right boot here.”

The guards showed no sign of relaxing and Moru had his own weapon out now, a small silver derringer, expensively ostentatious. Max remained still as he inched forward in a crouch and nervously fumbled the concealed weapon from his boot.

He stood back and examined the small blaster closely, hefting it gently to assess the mass, breathing a little wildly.

“Hmmn, a custom job Commander. You’ve been dabbling in the black market here, I’ve seen these before and realigned our defences to catch them.”

Unsmiling now he raised a querulous brow.

“Someone shot at me last night, I needed protection,” Max offered, attempting to assess escape options using only his peripheral vision as he held Moru with a steady, innocent, gaze.

The Assistant Director slipped the weapon into a jacket pocket.

“Yes, I read a report on that this morning. Inspector Herveaux doesn’t like you Commander. He considers people of your colourful background and connections a permanent threat to public order.”

Moru thought for a second and sheathed his own gun in a small, under-arm holster.

“It’s the big trees that attract the axe. Who do you suspect, Law?”

From the corner of his eye Max saw the closest guard catch the shifting mood and relax slightly.

“You’re well-informed Cal. There’s a lot of spilt blood between us, so who else?”

Moru grimaced and rubbed his chin in thought, nodding his head slightly, as if in conversation with himself.

“Okay Commander,” he said finally. “Possession of an illegal firearm is a serious offence.”

Max measured the distances to the two guards, his combat training kicking in as his body slipped into a relaxed, poised, readiness. One step left and a round-house kick to the temple then three strides and a wrist kick to the weapon hand.

“However, until a test case goes through, legally speaking these things aren’t necessarily classified as firearms and only a fool would attempt to penetrate a Hub with a glorified pea-shooter. We’ll put this down to an honest mistake as you’re new around here, stand down men.”

Max cautiously lowered his hands as the two guards reluctantly holstered their weapons.

“But I’ll have to keep this you understand.”

He arced Max’s gun towards a guard, who plucked it from the air without breaking his mirror stare.

“Yea, sure, I’m so used to packing it just slipped my mind,” Max answered, dry mouthed.

“You owe me one, Commander,” he said quietly, the phrase, pointed. “Open up boys.”

In turn, the two guards inserted key-cards into the control panel, neither flinching as a red laser scanned retina patterns and the door split open, sliding into the castle-thick walls with a silence that belied their bulk.

“Wait here,” Moru ordered, “Security Ring Two. Nothing gets through without a full spectral scan, we upgraded the sensors only last week.”

Max crossed his fingers in a coat pocket, hoping that the shadow-tech would fool the new security scanners. He drifted casually behind the sergeant operating the scan, gauging how quickly he could seize his weapon if things went awry.

When the alarm went off, a low but imperative buzz, accompanying a small flashing yellow light on the scanner control panel, Max stiffened and straightened a hand into a rigid, chopping blade, visualising the swift, disabling blow.

He need not have worried. Moru brusquely usurped the security station post, took in the readings and terminated the alarm.

“Barely a micro-volt sergeant, these old things have something called ‘circuit pathways’, they degrade without a trickle charge. Is that not right Sir?”

Max shrugged. “Don’t know much about them Cal, it’s just an investment. You seem pretty well informed about antiques. A collector?”

“No Sir, ASD’s aren’t THAT well paid, I just took the liberty of informing myself on the topic. You’ll find the storage bay temperature and humidity settings are optimal.”

Pride under-pinned his tone. Max clapped him on the shoulder as the resequencer was transferred to a Hub grav-sled.

“Attention to detail, Cal. I like that in my employees, I’m going to keep an eye on you. What does an ASD pull down? Ball-park?”

Max chuckled supportively at the answer.

Moru put his own data-padd through a scanner and asked Max to do the same. He complied, confident Xela’s security routines could mask it’s more specialised features from the scanner.

“Just one more thing Commander, retina and DNA scans. Your vault lock is keyed to your biometrics and the place is littered with roving sniffers. Your DNA doesn’t fit and you’re in a whole heap of trouble.”

“So once I’m on file the sensors will ignore me?” Max asked.

Moru laughed. “No Commander, that wouldn’t be very secure would it? I’ve set validity for one hour, Argon standard. That should be plenty of time to get your baby bedded down.”

Moru produced a small medical scanner and Max nodded permission.

With the results uploaded into the security system they followed the resequencer on it's pre-programmed journey through a succession of identical, tall, slab-grey corridors and down an elevator into the bowels of the Data-Hub. He didn't even try to memorize the turns, suspecting that the disorienting path was part of the security protocols

At intervals, slab-like hexagonal doors, watched over by attentive guards and even more alert sensors blocked the way.

"No-one gets in, no-one gets out," Moru said smugly as the passed through the fifth such checkpoint. "Last one."

From that point the corridor broadened and wound it's way down like a cork-screw past an irregular succession of vaults distinguished only by the three digit code emblazoned on the exterior plating. At the bottom would be the Data-Core, the conduit for a flood of information, a torrent of massively encrypted data-bits that was the lifeblood of the Argon Federation and a river binding it to the universe economy.

They were almost there, in sight of the massive Core blast doors bisecting the corridor, when the grav-sled pivoted smartly and settled into a hover outside Vault B126.

"No guards?" Max asked, nodding down the long final stretch of corridor to the Core entrance chamber. He knew the answer from Xela's detailed briefing but it didn't hurt to check.

"No sentients in the vaults Commander, they're just living, breathing, potential security risks. If the sensors detect unauthorised access security floaters will be on the scene in seconds. Your antique will be completely secure."

"Seems so," Max said, trying to sound pleased.

Moru guided Max through the security activation protocols, keying the lock to his code, voice and retina scan.

"Now, no-one except you can gain access," Moru stated as Max keyed in his security code and unlocked. "Except for the senior management and then only with a court order. We understand that some clients have, shall we say, privacy needs."

"They do," Max agreed, standing aside to let the grav-sled slip into the vault.

"It's the same locking mechanism both sides so don't forget your codes," Moru added.

The vault ceiling was lower than the outside corridor, under two metres high and the contrast was enough to uncomfortably remind Max he was on an earthquake ridden planet with un-numbered tons of rock and metal above and around him. The sled deposited the wrapped resequencer in the centre of the vault and withdrew.

The silence, after the thick vault door rolled back into place, sealing them into the stark metal-lined tomb, was acute enough for every stressed pulse of blood to hiss in his ears, loud and irritating.

“Restful isn’t it?” Moru observed. “I come down here sometimes, just to get away from the sounds of machinery. Do you have any questions before we sign off the deal, Commander?”

Max quizzed him closely on internal security measures. There were none, just half metre thick duranium walls. It simply was impossible for the unauthorised to penetrate this deep, evade the internal sensors or get past the locking mechanisms.

Max nodded approval at the answers, encouraging Moru to preen and he did not demur when Max requested privacy to inspect his prize investment.

Alone, he ran his finger down the seam of the opaque wrapping and it folded down to an encircling hoop. He took a moment to appreciate the craftsmanship, both of the original artist, whose landscapes decorated the fascia, and Xela’s almost invisible modifications.

Abracadabra Zee,” he said as he scanned his vault with her padd.

“What is your wish O Wise Master?”

“There’s been some security upgrades, you might want to double-check things.”

“Good thinking Max, do a quick close-up of each wall, there should be data conduits built in that I’ll need to tap.”

Max complied, snapping off the scan abruptly as Moru returned.

“A beautiful piece,” he observed as Max resealed the antique. “Everything in order?”

“Everything seems fine,” Max answered. “You know where to send the account?”

Moru smiled. “Max’s Place, Scale Plate Green. I might deliver it in person.”

“You do that Cal,” Max agreed. “It’s quite a place, if you bring your credit chip and leave the partner behind!”

There were a few more formalities to complete but in ten minutes Max was on his way back to the Big Easy to discuss the list of extra requirements Xela had drawn up following her scan.

“You’re kidding us, right Zee?” Max muttered angrily, glaring around the Big Easy private lounge as if looking for someone to punch out his frustration on.

“If I was kidding you Max, I’d trigger a neuro-toxin alert and watch you both soil yourselves. Saying I can’t get a handle on the data stream because the suppressor

fields on the conduits in the vault plating have been upgraded is way too lame for me. Now I've had a chance to re-run my simulations with the updated scans it's obvious my padd sensors just aren't sensitive enough, even if you can fill my shopping list. That's the problem boys, what's the solution?"

"My people will have me a new-model Fractal Spectrum Analyser in a couple of hours they say, whatever that is. Apparently one was shipped to a Quake Monitoring Station a few weeks ago," Jackson said.

"It extrapolates patterns of information from partial data based on n-space, field force equations derived from the Harant-Lorenz variant of the Unified Field Speculation."

"Say what?"

"It's magic, Jack, okay," Xela answered, her tone ascerbic. "Just get it in case Mr Maverick Profile here has a flash of genius."

"What about me? I might have a flash of genius too, if you explained things clearly!"

Something resembling a snort came from Xela's data-padd.

Max grimaced in exasperation and swallowed another deep draught of beer, almost emptying the stein. Jackson refilled it as an uneasy silence settled on the lounge.

"Could you manage it if you were closer to the Core?" Max asked finally.

"I don't believe so. The conduit shielding extends into the core itself. Get me in there and it will be no problem."

"No problem?" Jackson's scepticism was undisguised.

"Okay Jack, less of a problem, I was trying to fan the flames of optimism here!"

Jackson smiled, leaned back deep into the armchair and swirled his whisky chaser snifter before taking a small sip.

"Well that's it then!" Max barely managed to stop himself from hurling his glass against the wall in exasperation. "Game, bloody over. You know the security, the instant I set foot outside the vault all hell will break loose, security floaters, armed and trigger happy guards and who knows what else shit!"

He chugged half the stein and then heaved it against the opposite wall in a comet tail of beer that missed splattering Jackson and Xela's padd by inches. It hit with an unsatisfying, dull thump and fell to the floor unbroken.

"I bet you feel real better now, don't you Max?" Xela said sarcastically. "Is this some new approach to problem-solving they've added to the Academy curriculum? We have to solve this Max, we need the ships those credits will buy and you throwing tantrums is not going to help!"

“Help? Help? Help like spending enough to buy a fully maxxed Piranha on a piece of old junk? You said..”

“I said, I said!” Xela cut in shouting, the polyphonic speaker crackling on the edge of feedback. “If you…”

“I know how you can get into the Core,” Jackson interjected softly.

There was an instance of complete silence before both protagonists turned on him.

“What?” Xela and Max cried simultaneously.

“I said I know how you can get inside the Core,” he repeated. “But you really are not going to like it!”

Chapter 19: Drop

“I don’t like this!” Max screamed as they hit an air pocket that again left his stomach hundreds of feet above. “This is completely fucking insane!”

“You’re repeating yourself buddy!” Jackson shouted above the thud of rotors and the roar of the wind. “Relax, it’s me at the stick.”

He turned his head to flash a quick, confident grin that contrasted strongly with the tension in his eyes. Max’s retort was stillborn as the copter lurched sickeningly, the turbine whine increased to a deafening pitch as the machine attempted to claw back the lost altitude.

Another lightning flash illumined the darkness, filling the cockpit with an electric blue flash that freeze-framed Jackson’s struggle with the collective column. Max could feel the hairs on his arms stand up. A second later the copter rolled nearly 90 degrees and plummeted again, buffeted mercilessly by cross-winds.

Again Jackson forced it back on course, his feet pumping the rudders furiously while he wrestled with the throttle and collective.

“Sorry about that Max,” he threw a quick glance over his shoulder, no grin, just sweat beading along his hairline. “This baby wasn’t made to fly in these conditions!”

“It wasn’t made to fly in this bloody century!” Max had to shout to make himself heard above the roar of the storm and the overloading turbines. “Is there any damn piece of technology on this crap planet that doesn’t belong in a museum?”

“I bought it from one Max! She’s a beauty, I’ll tell ya!”

“The Universe preserve us, or more particularly, me, from boys and their bloody toys,” Xela spat in Max’s earpiece. “I can’t believe a little thought wouldn’t have uncovered a better way to penetrate a maintenance facility and steal a security floater!”

“Me and my stomach are still open to suggestions,” Max answered, unnecessarily loudly considering the throat mike.

“Say what?” Jackson shouted back.

“Nothing,” Max screamed above the cockpit filling roar. “Zee was just dissing your flying!”

“Was not.”

“Was too!”

“Will you both cut that out, we’re almost on target and on time.”

On cue the copter broke through into the storm's eye and a welcomed silence as Jackson eased back on the power. Below them Max could make out the city lights, scattered like dim stars against the blackness of one of the planets short periods of total darkness.

"See those blue arc-lights?" Jackson called back over his shoulder. "There on the western edge."

Max steadied himself behind the vacant co-pilot seat and peered into the darkness. The target compound burned like a small star ahead, he could just make out the security towers in silhouette.

"You sure your people can do their bit Jack?"

"As soon as I give the signal partner," Jackson answered confidently. "It's not as if I thought this plan up on the spur of the moment. Every clan and their cousin has a plan for doing a Hub, the teleport and the shadow-tech are the missing pieces. It'll take about 30 seconds for the on-site back-ups to cut in. Nervous?"

Max swallowed and nodded, then added with a forced smile.

"Jumping out of a perfectly good airplane and trusting a glorified sheet to keep me in one piece? You bet! Tell me again why I can't use a grav-pack?"

"Because the self-powered mini-guns will detect the power readings and cut you to ribbons. I'm betting they'll ignore a plummeting body. Time to target 30 seconds Max, leap to it."

"YOU'RE betting?" Max retorted as he made his way back to the egress hatch. He did another quick check of the equipment pack strapped to his stomach and the parachute, an obsolete vehicular escape technology that used wind resistance to slow decent.

He'd used one once, at the behest of a daredevil friend in his training days. That was once too often and his ankle still twinged in cold, damp weather. He felt it now, as he opened the hatch and sat on the rim, his feet dangling in the freezing air stream.

"You hearing this Max?" Xela asked. He confirmed the helmet link was working,

"On five Max. Remember what I said, steer using your balance, pull at one hundred metres and keep those knees bent on impact," Jackson's voice was tense. "Good luck."

On three Max forced himself to lean forward, balanced on the edge of a fall, his heart pounding loud and fast. On one he screwed his courage to the sticking point. On Go he pitched forward and fell away.

Rain. Damn, she'd never seen anything like it before this posting to Garleth Prime. It came roiling in the massive storm fronts that billowed down from the distant arc of

the Olympian Mountain Range and smashed together to form short-lived tempests that swept across the plains to the distant sea.

Mini-hurricanes, as a morose meteorologist she'd dated briefly called them, before explaining in vastly unnecessary detail how this was impossible, even with the energy of two suns driving the weather system.

It had stopped now, briefly, as the still centre swept over the facility and she pulled back the hood of her oilskins to scan the blackness for the lone aircraft somewhere high to the west, above the worst of the winds.

It had to be some crazy son of a bitch to be up there in this weather but everyone on this planet seemed a bit crazy to her, too much daylight and too many dubious alkaloids in the water most people no longer bothered to filter.

She could see nothing and stopped to irritatedly push straggles of rain-lank hair back under her poncho hood. Six bloody hours a day, rain or shine in an open topped security tower, guarding a bunch of broken machines in a civilian facility, it was emphatically not what she'd signed on for and she'd begun counting down to her rotation off on Day Two, a burgeoning forest of crosses underscoring each Sporting Hunk of the Month.

Turning up the light gain on her scopes she resumed her scan. It was probably just a late flyer running for the airbase and none of her concern but there was something unfamiliar in the stroking beat, a rhythmic thud that suggested mechanical problems.

Still nothing and she scanned towards the horizon, now brightening with the first hint of the Little Dawn. There was something, something small.

""You see that Liu?" She lowered her binoculars briefly to point towards the western horizon. Her companion abandoned his own search for the faint engine beat, peered intently and performed a quick 360 sweep of the sky, and repeated it for the compound perimeter.

Nothing, as usual, just the two guys on the single gate, the only break in the slice-wire topped wall enclosing the straggling group of single story prefab workshops, clustered around a central watch-tower. Four smaller towers, housing the point defences, sat in the corners. Close beyond lay the city outskirts, warehouses that in another couple of years would engulf the facility entirely.

"Can't see anything sergeant, what was did it look like?"

Anis pursed her lips and peered into the gloom.

"I'm not sure, could have been a bird, maybe a plane…"

A winking flash, like a short-lived meteorite, higher above the horizon, cut her off. A faint explosion followed, almost lost against the whistling backdrop of the rising wind.

“Aircraft in distress,” she spoke into her throat mike. “Heads up people.”

Liu was already pivoting the single flood, lancing a blue, questing finger into the night, dragging all eyes.

The copter lurched upwards in response to the sudden weight reduction and Jackson pushed the collective forward, watching the mechanical chronometer digits roll up as the altimeter plunged.

Swinging around the facility to approach from the southern perimeter he levelled off at two thousand metres.

“Sorry about this girl, the greater good and all that,” he muttered regretfully.

Jackson flicked the hydraulic pump and coolant flows switches to ‘off’ and slammed the throttle full forward.

The turbines screeched momentarily in protest and failed with an explosion that rocked the copter. Jackson bottomed the throttle and disengaged the main rotors, shorn of lift it stomach lurched into freefall and he pushed the nose forward and the rotors built up speed, storing up lift as the copter fell towards the compound perimeter.

His helmet visor darkened in response to a sudden flood of light from the compound and as the machine plummeted Jackson fixed on the main gate, nudging the nose to keep on course with gentle kicks of the rudder pedals, aiming for the main entrance. Right on time, carefully sequenced with the engine failure, the compound was plunged into darkness and the searchlight cut out.

Seconds from calamity and with a maniacal cry of adrenaline glee Jackson re-engaged the free-spinning rotor, converting the energy stored to one last burst of lift that was enough to bring the copter in for a perfect emergency touch-down on the road, yards from the opening gate.

Shutting down everything he leapt from the cockpit, rolling away as if fearful of an explosion caused by the flaming turbines. Getting to his feet he grinned into the two gun barrels that greeted him and raised his hands.

“Less screaming more flying Max!” Xela forced feedback screeching through the helmet link to reiterate her point. It worked, Max’s free-fall training snapped back in and he arched his back, making a shuttlecock shape, turning torso into the wind.

In an arrow glide he aimed for the shadowed rear of the target workshops.

“Pull on my call Max, one-fifty metres. Check?”

“Check,” Max confirmed, swallowing hard and trying to remember everything his instructors had taught him as the wind ripped past him. Tuck and roll, the impact velocity would be a lot faster than with a grav-pack insertion but the principle was the same.

Then, all at once the compound lights failed, leaving an electric blue after-image superimposed on his retina. As he swept over the perimeter, the ground rushing towards him at dizzying speed, Xela yelled ‘pull’ and Max tore on the rip-cord.

The night black chute blossomed with a violent jerk that hammered the harness buckles into him with a bruising punch to his adrenaline charged body he hardly felt.

He caught a glimpse of flames in the sky before hitting the ground hard, the barely deployed canopy collapsing around him as he rolled. Scant seconds passed in a blur of wrestled, bundled fabric.

He barely made the cover of some tall waste barrels before the power came back up.

Crouching in deep shadow he quickly scoped the central watch-tower, two figures, one pointing excitedly towards the main gate, the other wrestling to focus the floodlight.

“Nice one, Jack,” he murmured, removing the harness and crudely stuffing it and the chute into a micro-fabric carry-all, along with his helmet.

Xela displayed a map of the compound on his shades, highlighting the correct building and he swiftly glided from shadow to shadow to the rear entrance. The electronic lock was no match for Xela and he went through the sealed door almost without breaking step.

The corridor was in total darkness but brightened to a green twilight as his shades light intensifiers cut in.

“Okay Max, good work. The building should be unoccupied but scan for a data conduit and I’ll confirm.”

Max crouched, listening intently above the sound of his pounding heart and scanned the length of the corridor.

“There,” Xela said, highlighting a spot on the wire-frame representation. “You got the tap?”

“No Zee, I just plain forgot it because I wasn’t paying attention during the briefing, which, by the way, specified deploying at 100 metres, not 150.”

“Those were Jackson’s numbers, Max and the acceleration and terminal velocity constants are not valid for this gravity well. If you’d pulled on 100 you’d be a concertina by now.”

Max attached the tiny sensor to the location Xela specified.

“So why didn’t you say something?”

“I’m hoping Jackson is planning a spot of sky-diving,” Xela answered shortly.

“Right, I’m in. Accessing internal security grid, if you can call it that.”

She paused for a couple of seconds.

“Okay Max, here’s the layout,” she flashed a schematic on her padd screen. “And here is where we want to be,” Xela highlighted a large room off the far end of the corridor.

“No guards, no internal sensors. Someone should tell these people, walls do not a secure facility make. Not when Super-Zee and her trusty side-kick are in town!”

“Hey, don’t trusty sidekicks get cool names too? Or at least a cape.”

“Your wish is my command. Let’s shake it then Boy Blunder, before someone remembers what they are paid for.”

Max left the sensor in place and padded swiftly to the end of the corridor, only slightly encumbered by the bulky carry-all. Xela had already unlocked the door.

He had expected a laboratory, delicate machines arrayed on clinically clean workstations. What he found was practically a small junkyard, disassembled machines, piles of discarded junk, cluttered benches surrounded by what appeared to be jury-rigged diagnostic displays. The air tasted of lubricants and ozone.

“Score another for the lowest bidder,” Max muttered scornfully as he scanned for the distinctive signature of a security floater. He found one, beneath a bench at the far end of the workshop, a two foot cylinder sealed in foam wrap.

“This will do Max,” Xela said. “It’s command protocols are scrambled, nothing you can’t fix, with my expert advice and assistance. Grab it while I mark it as repaired and returned in the database.”

Max forced the cylinder into the carry-all, it was heavier than it’s size suggested, making the bulging bag awkward to carry.

“Done,” Xela announced. “These people really have no clue. Let’s go before Jackson talks himself into trouble. And dress for the occasion.”

“I was at the briefing,” Max reiterated. “And I have done this sort of thing before remember?”

It took him only a few seconds to find a mechanics cover-all, in a heap with other lubricant soaked discards. He picked one of the cleaner specimens, put it on and hefted the bag onto his left shoulder.

Max retrieved the sensor on the way and listened at the exit before cracking the door slightly. Part of him doubted that he could just walk out of the compound with the stolen floater but as he knew, from training and experience, that medium security facilities like these, placed way too much faith in preventing unauthorised break-ins to concern themselves with monitoring egress.

He palmed the replacement weapon Jackson had given him but it was not needed. Nobody gave him a second glance as he strolled out through the furore surrounding the droop-bladed copter, it's blackened turbines still smoking gently, by the main gate.

A loudly gesticulating Jackson was surrounded by guards and the obsolete museum piece by a mob of curious on-lookers. He thought he caught a glimpse of Inspector Hervaux.

Max strolled casually down the road, hunched against the renewed storm and followed Xela's circuitous route through the skirt of warehouses fringing the town until he reached the northern route-way in.

He punched in his destination at the first transport point and waited. Twenty minutes later, trying hard to stifle a broad grin, he was back in the Big Easy, enjoying the buzz of the local ale and the gyrations of the woman on stage.

Chapter 20: Break-in

It was three hours before Jackson showed up in Max's room in the Big Easy, fists clenched around the handles of four large steins of the local beer.

"Score another for Team Jackson!" he grinned, shoving two glasses in Max's unresisting hands. "You did it, right?"

Max nodded towards the table where the gutted carapace of the security floater lay, surrounded by half of it's electronics.

"No problem Jack, we've bypassed the command protocols and routed all functions through the diagnostics port. Once I attach this sensor probe extension on loan from Xela's padd and figure out how to get the damn thing back together without enough bits left over to make a second, we're in business. What took you so long?"

Jackson grinned and shrugged.

"Herveaux. Apparently crash-landing an aerial vehicle onto a route-way is technically jay-walking. And it took awhile to get my baby into a repair facility. Guess where?"

"The universe is an ironic place Jack, I take it the charges were dropped?"

"Like they were radioactive," Jackson took a deep slug of beer, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand with a theatrical flourish. "He sends his regards by the way. Apparently you are unable to fart without his knowledge, to paraphrase slightly. Be afraid, be very afraid."

"I'm all a-tremble," Max retorted, dead-pan. "Another hour or so and I'm finished here. Is everything set at your end?"

"Up and running Max. There's a maintenance tunnel back of the Easy, which'll bring you out close. The electric chick has the details. Ain't that right girl?"

"Confirmed," Xela replied curtly from the data-padd hooked into the floater. "Let's get this out of the way soon. Snap to it Max, we need those new ships."

Max nodded dutifully and re-addressed himself to the mechanical puzzle laid out before him.

Xela did her best to ignore Max as he grumbled his way through the tunnel, burdened by the carry-all containing the security floater and other tools they would be needing, allocating a small fraction of her capacity to him as she systematically integrated the functions of the floater into her own matrix through the diagnostics port where her chip was attached.

As soon as Jackson had mooted the security floater option she'd begun working on a program to adapt and extend her senses to fit a mobile physical presence. She adapted a backup of her auto-pilot neural net to the different mechatronic set-up and integrated it into the program. It was just a matter now of replacing one adaptive neural skill-net with another more suited to both the task and the tool.

Within the confines of the carry-all she was unable to physically test all the program but even with the sensor extension adapted from her data-padd sensor interface, the floater was a simple enough device not to have to discard the pilot metaphor under-pinning the control net that integrated her intelligence to a ship.

She stored the completed program for activation.

"Yes Max, I did hear him say 'maintenance' not 'sewerage'. Jackson's just a regular mine of accurate information isn't he. And no, I can't 'smell that.' I'm crammed in a carry sack and locked into a primitive machine. Even Jackson's cronies must shower sometime, clean up when we get there. Try and look on the bright side."

"And what might that be?" Max asked, between short open-mouth breaths that did little to mitigate the impact of the assorted stenches on his now empty stomach.

"That floaters lack olfactory sensors. Bright enough to be dazzling I'd say, now shut up moaning, we're nearly there, according to Jackson's schematic anyway. Look out for a ladder up, somewhere on the left. And remember, don't mention the teleport to Jackson's men."

"Remembered," Max confirmed between breaths.

A couple of minutes later the floater gyro's registered a slow ascent and she reminded Max of the code. He rapped it out with what sounded like the stock of a weapon onto the heavy cover. Dimly, she heard two familiar sounding voices conferring before it was dragged open with a screech of metal on stone.

Max soon activated the shades, restoring her vision and what she saw by the early morning light of the Little Day filtering down into the side alley, confirmed her fears.

"You ain't smellin' so good Max," the larger of the two men boomed. "You should have worn coveralls and a decent pair of boots."

"No-one said anything about sewers Harvey, or I would have," Max answered with tight-clipped impatience.

"Hey, wait up there, who mentioned names? How'd you know Harvey's Harvey?"

His smaller companion stepped from behind him, beady eyes narrowing with suspicion, his hand sliding towards a bulging chest pocket.

"You did Rizzo, so stop jerking me around and get us inside," Max snapped back, in a deceptively even tone Xela recognised.

“Easy Max,” she whispered. “Don’t take it out on the quality hired help, not until we’ve finished anyway.”

Max sighed and ran his hands through his hair.

“You probably didn’t want to do that Max,” Harvey observed helpfully.

“Language Max,” Xela admonished. “They’re allegedly on our side and what their mothers got up to shouldn’t be held against them!”

“Okay, sorry guys. It’s been a bad day and it could get even worse for you if you don’t get me to a shower. There is a shower where we’re going I hope?”

“YOU hope?” Rizzo answered with a trace of sarcasm. “Probably.”

It was a very short walk down the alley to a small rear entrance to a two-storey building that looked residential. A military level key code security seal incongruously barred the stained plasteel door.

Max waited impatiently for Rizzo to unlock the door. He looked at Max and shrugged.

“They don’t have the code Max,” Xela said. “I have. Need to know and if these goons are capable of knowing anything they don’t need to know about this.”

Max typed in the code, carefully shielding it from Harvey and Rizzo, who had in any case moved downwind.

“What were your orders boys?” he asked when the lock disengaged.

“Breath in breath out, don’t try and chew gum and walk at the same time?” Xela whispered unhelpfully in his ear.

“To wait for you, let you in, let you out and then report to the Colonel,” Rizzo replied.

“Who?” Max asked, surprised.

“Colonel Jackson,” Harvey interjected. “Our lead - oof!”

“No names remember, dolt!”

Rizzo jabbed his elbow into Harvey’s stomach again in emphasis.

Xela metaphorically put her head in her hands and sighed deeply.

Rizzo looked at Max uncertainly. “You didn’t hear nuthin’ right?”

It was half a question, half a plea.

“I didn’t hear nothing,” Max confirmed.

Rizzo's habitual look of suspicion deepened with a dim awareness that there was something he was not understanding, then he said.

"Good, keep it that way."

Max managed not to chuckle until he'd locked the door from the inside.

It was a small, single-family dwelling, two floors built around the hub of a first generation colony prefab, which as far as Max was concerned was good news; there would be a basic hygiene unit on the ground floor. He headed straight to it, through the small living room and kitchen area, both looking as if the occupiers had just stepped out.

After showering he washed down his boots and cleaned down the rest of his clothes as best he could, rubbing the coarse locally produced soap into the stains. Fortunately the leather coat had borne the brunt and it sponged clean easily.

The teleporter was set up in the shelter, a small, heavily reinforced cellar designed to provide protection against catastrophe level storms or quakes. Such redoubts, Xela stated, were normally found only under the more substantial dwellings of the more affluent or important colonists.

"I see tunnels behind the walls," Xela reported as Max looked around. "And traces of spaceweed in the dust. A good, old-fashioned smuggler's hole, Jackson could have let us in through those and saved all that unnecessary sewer-diving. Just thought I'd point that out."

"Sometimes I get the impression you haven't warmed to Jack's roguish charms," Max observed as he lifted the floater from the carryall.

"You've noticed have you?" Xela snorted rhetorically. "I don't trust him either. The question is, given his track record, why do you? He's one of the people we both – Marteene and Hela – spent careers fighting. Conceded, he is not a monster like Law or a sociopath like Skull but his hands are not exactly clean."

"Whose are?" Max asked quietly. "I trust him because we're on the same side. We win, he wins."

"Wins what?" Xela asked acerbically as she activated the floater's anti-grav unit. It lurched ungainly into the air, settling into a hover as she took over the autonomic functions.

"Whatever he needs to, to keep him onside. His ships protect our stations in Scale Plate Green, his money is going to expand our fleet and when the time comes he'll provide troops."

"And if he simply takes over from Law? That would make him a pretty powerful operator. Activate the shield grid before you power-up, bottom left of the main panel, cloaking sub menu."

Max tapped through the selection options, bringing the dampening field online to mask the teleport standing wave function from orbital or aerial detection.

“Then we ride his coat-tails into the heart of the Shadow-Conspiracy. Once we blow that he’s someone else’s problem.”

“There’s an old Boron saying Max. If you have a K’shint by the tail you’d better hold on tight.”

“I take it a K’shint is something with big teeth and a bad disposition?”

“It would be a poor saying if it wasn’t Max. Okay, you can power up now.”

The arched cube thrummed into life, the single transport pad pulsating with a faint blue light.

“And I’ll set the co-ordinates, if you don’t mind.”

Xela glided to Max’s side, nudging his shoulder to prompt him to move and interfaced directly with the teleport interface through the floater’s enhanced single sensor arm, telescoping from the body.

It took a few seconds to refine the focus and link carrier waves with the vault teleport and power it up from stand-by mode.

“Ready when you are Max,” she announced. “And hold me close.”

Max stepped through an arch onto the transport pad, the floater drifted in behind him. As instructed he hugged Xela to his chest with one arm, activating the teleport process with the other.

The cellar faded away.

It took several awkward moments to unseal the resequencer wrapping in the almost complete darkness of the cramped interior, broken barely by the glimmer of back-lit teleport controls. The vault itself was midnight dark, with not even a temperature gradient for the image intensifier function of the shades to work on. For a moment Max felt weightless, disorientated in the featureless void, then he felt blinded.

“Dammit Zee, a little warning!” he snapped as Xela activated the floater shoulder spot.

The intensifiers swiftly adjusted, allowing Max to see the floater hovering though a swarm of coloured spots before his eyes, to the sealed exit.

“Sorry about that Max,” Xela replied in a tone that suggested the opposite. “No, don’t do that!” She exclaimed as Max reached towards the door key-pad. “Just give me the code and wait while I figure out how to circumvent the security record. You’re not officially here so if you start opening doors someone is going to notice.”

Max stepped back gingerly from the door as the floater drifted in. He recited the code as Xela extended the floater sensor arm, it's systems probe enhanced with her own unique modifications.

"We have no idea how long this could take and once I'm out of here I'll be out of touch."

"That's not my favourite part of this plan Zee. What if something goes wrong and you get into trouble?"

"You know there's no Plan B. Sit and wait and bug out if you hear alarming ringing noises. You did bring a good book?"

"Jack didn't have any. And don't say a word!"

"I'm too stunned with surprise to utter a single syllable Max, check out my padd, there's a great 4D chess program."

"Four dimensional? Where'd that new one come from?"

"I get bored so I added time travel, be a unique individual and read the readme file before trying to figure it out for yourself."

"Time travel huh? How about Space Bomber?"

"I really don't think so Max. Game on," she replied evenly and activated her new program, experiencing long milliseconds of disorientation as her intelligence assimilated the new, yet familiar body metaphor.

Xela reached out and with delicate, sensitive fingers, probed and manipulated energy and data flows, catching the status-check data stream and looping it through the security sensor sub-routines.

She listened intensely to the background chatter of the Data-Hub internal systems. It was faint, barely an echo through the shielding but she could sense no change in it's tenor or flow so she entered the door code.

She held her breath; aware Max was unconsciously doing the same.

No change.

She triggered the lock, disconnected from it and slipped out into the corridor. The vault entrance rolled shut behind her. The way was clear, up towards the complex entrance and down towards the nearby Data-Core and she hurried towards the covering sensor node.

It took her just a short time work back past the security sub-routines into the main system but one very long, gruelling hour, to wade through data-streams, from sub

system to sub system, stealing access codes, encoding sensor loops and noting encryption keys as she crept from level to level.

Finally, with the floater and security records now adjusted to record her deployment and the floater uploaded with it's active service security file she approached the Data-Core entrance.

Xela worked quickly at the seal, activating an alert condition to validate her floater access protocols and looping status-green readings through the security sub-routines.

An access hatch built into the heavy main door dilated and Xela flitted nimbly through into the warm darkness of the Core.

"If you ask me that again lover, you'll be sleeping on your own! We've heard nothing since that last E-card from Xela. 'The weather is changeable', some small trouble, plan proceeding," the warmth in Kaitrin's voice survived the cockpit acoustics and Corrin's heart surged in response, making him smile at the melodrama irony.

Love and war, it would make a good sub-plot if someone ever made a drama out of the story, with someone a few years younger playing him he hoped. Damn, he might even try writing the screenplay himself once this thing was over. That publicist, Anje, what was her surname, Delenari? Perhaps she could arrange things?

Something like, he groped for a title, 'The Marteene Testament, a Mirv Corrin Production. It sounded good, but not snappy, attention-grabbing good. 'Mad Max.' Now, that was promising!

Corrin switched his concentration back to flying, arcing wide around the western jump-gate onto the final leg of his patrol around the Fabrication Plant. It looked complete, just a few zero-G workers and droids completing the installation of the external comm. dishes.

"Control, Estimated time to power-up?"

"Latest call is eight hours," Kaitrin replied. "Fusion reactors damn well cannot be hurried, to quote the chief engineer the last time I asked, give or take the odd expletive. You'd think for triple hazard pay they'd throw in a civil tongue, let's not ask him again."

"Eight hours. You can bet Law knows that too, if he's going to make a move it will have to be soon. If he waits any longer we'll be able to support more LT's than your baby can manage. What's the status of the Black Heart?"

Kaitrin took a moment to check the All-Seeing-Eye scanners.

"The TL is still in low orbit, once every 90 minutes and it will be behind the planet in another 20. We still have no firm information on what it's doing. We've got 6 LT's

out, fighters on patrol and reinforcements close to hand and every time we've gone head to head he's lost, I don't think he'll attack."

"If I were him I'd be calling in every favour and scraping every barrel and stuffing that TL to the gills," Corrin responded. "Then throw it all at us, including my stock of illegal hornets. I'd be a lot happier if we had those new Mambas."

Chapter 21: Getting Rich Quick

It was warm now, crouched in the cramped confines of the resequencer, and humid. Another bead of sweat slid down his side, with a slow, deliberate trickle that seemed to stretch time.

And Max was beginning to worry about oxygen levels in the sealed vault. Carbon dioxide narcosis, it would explain some of the six defeats he thought, turning back to the game frozen on the high definition screen. He rotated the views again, studying the three-level board from every angle. His position looked good, but, Max grimaced to himself, it always did, before, bam, bam, bam, the program announced checkmate, in a smug, Xela tinged tone he was beginning to hate.

"Concentrate Max," he muttered, swinging the perspective back to the third level. This game he was White and he'd pushed the opening move advantage to the limit after Black timed out the Queens Knight on the second level, using an aggressive variant of the Kapel Opening with his King as cover for an advancing pawn wedge.

It was working well, and after a forced exchange of pieces that ended with a bishop in his favour, the Black King was pinned behind a crumbling defensive screen in the Level 3 upper quadrant. And for the first time he could use the new time-out function effectively. Time travel was something of a grandiose term and Max was not sure the ability to remove a piece from play and bring it back within a specified move window did much more for the game but throw off all his book-learned gambits but he felt he was now getting a feel for it. Black was in the box, all he had to do was close the lid.

His bishop materialised on the second level and he immediately moved it to force an upper diagonal check, covered by left-most pawn of the Kings screen.

"Mate in two," he announced with a satisfaction that drained away as the Black Queens Knight shimmered back onto it's second level time-out square and hopped to a level three position that both cut the check and threatened the bishop.

"Mate in three," the program countered. Max worked through the options and managed to not smash the padd, realising the entire flow of the game had been one long deceit, each small victory a lure, drawing his King into the exposed centre of the board.

A trap snapped shut by a precisely re-timed knight.

"How do you do that? How do you do that?" Max exclaimed in gritted teeth frustration. He was beginning to suspect cheating.

Xela meanwhile, was beginning to suspect she was screwed.

"Really screwed," she emphasised to herself as she abandoned another attempt to access the Inner Core service locks to connect a tap directly to an unshielded data conduit. This was something new, part of the revamped security measures the Assistant Security Director had boasted about to Max.

With, it seemed, good cause. The lock had her stymied and no amount of her considerable electronic wizardry was likely to change matters for the simple reason it was mechanical, a puzzle of heavy tumblers and cylinders which her sensor extension lacked the facility to manipulate.

Damn, damn, damn, she muttered to herself, who used mechanical locks in this day and age? Explosives or a bloody good skeleton key, that's what it would take, and neither she nor Max had those to hand. Jackson could no doubt conjure either in a few hours but that would mean leaving her integrated with the security floater and the risk of discovery was too great.

Again she linked up to the security system and explored alternative access routes but none of the sub-systems open to her offered a back-up ingress.

Unless? The flash of intuition surprised her, appearing full borne in her neural net rather than filtering up through structured analytical sub-routines. She quickly rifled through the maintenance sub-system, noting the procedures and protocols governing the maintenance floaters activities.

It could work and the thought gave her a bigger thrill than the thought of beating Max at 4D chess.

The environmental sub-system was an open book for her and she soon found what she needed, the real-time internal environmental sensor logs. That was something she could alter. Xela identified the code for the inner core sensor and began feeding false data, raising the reported ambient internal temperature by fractions of a degree at a time. She didn't want to trigger a fire alert, that was bound to bring some form of sentient back-up, just a suggestion of a little over-heating electronics.

At plus 1.7 degrees a floater was put on stand-by. At plus 1.9 it was dispatched. In two minutes it was unlocking the hatch with a custom extension to one of it's three arms. Xela quickly returned the temperature to normal, placed a self-erasing sleeper program and slipped in behind it.

The floater lingered for a couple of minutes in the small inner chamber, running sensors over the waist of backlit panels circling the room before leaving and sealing the heavy door behind it.

Xela scanned the chamber and attached herself by her sensor arm to the panel with the strongest signal leakage. For the next two hours she let torrents of information flow through her in an intoxicating flood as she recorded encryption keys and transaction markers.

Finally, confident in her understanding of the audit protocols, she passed Jackson's millions from one of his anonymous accounts in the resolutely unquestioning Teladi Gain Investment Trust through a series of confected false accounts, finally bringing it all together in an inactive Cabal account, Speculative Investments, controlled by Artur, using the permissions programmed into her net.

She'd thought twice about using a Cabal front, particularly given Artur's reservations concerning clan penetration of the conspiracy, but it had patina after patina of security cut-outs and was swathed in a deeper accountancy fog than she could generate in the time available. Given the size of the transaction it could not remain hidden forever but she was confident it would take investigators months to unravel after suspicions were aroused.

The whole operation would be over by then, one way or another, and the fifty million credits long spent.

Satisfied, she waited for the sleeper program to trigger another temperature rise.

An hour later Max was dismantling the floater sensor extension. In another hour, with the floater back under the control of the internal security system and her reinstalled into the data-padd, he and Jackson were congratulating each other on their daring cleverness with more of the local brew.

Her offer of a game of 4D chess was met only with a sullen silence.

Chapter 22: Assassin

It had been a risk coming here, a gamble, he knew that but at least there was some reward. His was unnecessarily fluffing the orthopaedic pillow with firm, pounding blows and praising the progress he was making, thanks to the experimental treatment available only here. Conquering recalcitrant nerve fibres might not match fighting sinister plots to control alien technology but there was no one to pat his back for that. He deserved, he decided, some scrap of human comfort and if it came from a nurse undoubtedly hired as much for her good looks as her skills then so be it.

"That's quite enough now my dear," Artur chided. "I think it's no longer a threat to my health and well-being!"

Tanya giggled, a flash of gleaming teeth, as white as her uniform which was at least one size too small for her figure. She did that a lot and laughter was also something he did not get enough of.

"Is there anything else I can do for you Mr Underhill?" She said, supporting him as he leaned back into the pillow. "And DON'T ask for THAT again, I'm not that sort of girl!"

Artur sported his best faux-rogue grin and reached for her collar button with his recalcitrant prosthetic. The fingers prodded her shoulder and she slapped the hand away with a smile.

"Much closer this time you disgraceful old man. I told you the treatments were beginning to take, we'll have you removing bras and waltzing before you know it."

"At the same time?" Artur leered theatrically. "While playing the piano?"

"Sure, why not?" She answered cheerfully. "Anything else you want me to do that falls within my normal job description?"

"With that proviso, no, I think I need to rest now and conduct a little business."

"Business?" She twinkled as she transferred the results of his last Zero-G regeneration session into his record. "And what is it you claim to be today? Table tennis coach, Admiral of the Fleet, gourmet chef?

"Secret agent," Artur answered, deadpan. "Doing what it takes to save the universe."

"Now, that I can believe!" Tanya giggled. "You have an over-developed sense of privacy," she indicated the custom data terminal on a swing-arm by the side of his bed. "And I bet that grav-chair has a hidden laser beam."

"Two," Artur paused. "And an ejector seat!" He continued with precise comic timing.

"Then I'd better leave you to your scheming. I'll be back in one hour for ionisation therapy."

Artur waited until she left the private room before swinging the terminal across the bed. He could now operate it quickly with his one good arm, tapping through menu selections deftly to absorb his custom news-feed search.

Nothing pertinent about Max Force on the public channels, just business background hits he dismissed after reading each précis. Daht though, that was a different matter. The reverberations from his interview showed only faint signs of dying out as commentator fed on commentator, amplifying rumour and conjecture and applying another touch of spin.

Daht had made no further comment. This was a problem that was not going to go away, he could feel that in his bones. They would have to meet soon.

He then shunted the comm. link through the relay concealed in his now customised grav-chair.

"Seera, wake up."

The chair hummed to life and floated to his bed-side like an obedient pet under the control of his ship AI, from deep within the Antigone Memorial Trading Station.

"See if you have anything for me."

He waited while the routines triggered by the code phrase worked to compile an update from the variety of less public sources he had covert access to.

It was short.

Treasure Chest, Force had attracted the attention of the local police on Garleth Prime. He read the file with pursed lips.

'Associating with known criminals…..frequenting the haunt of known criminals……conspiracy to smuggle illegal narcotics…….conspiracy to outrage public decency……..a disrespectable attitude in the presence of a law enforcement officer.'

A lot of froth, Artur decided, but no substance, just wild accusations by a local Inspector. Even so, it could smoulder into an irritant. He checked the name and instructed Seera to insert a de-merit into his record using one of his high-level security clearance codes the next time she interfaced with the Naval Nav-Sat. Sergeant's stripes would, he thought, probably curb his excessive zeal.

The door slid open as he finished the command and he looked up to see Tanya standing outside, half concealed by the bulkhead.

"Already? You said an hour.."

Artur's voice trailed off as he noted her frightened expression. Before he could react fright changed to shock, a clot of thick dark blood gouting from her mouth to stain her

chest like a sniper wound. The nurse slumped lifeless to the floor and a short, thin, pinch-faced man, sleek in a silk suit, stepped into the room, covering Artur with a tiny hand-gun and a much bigger grin.

"I have a message from my employer," he smiled. "Time to check out!"

His grin grew broader as he savoured the last few moments of his victim's life, then it faded into shocked surprise at the burning hole in his chest. The gun slipped almost apologetically from his fingers as he slowly collapsed, bewilderment frozen into a death mask.

"Fine shot Seera," Artur managed to say through the engulfing numbness as he struggled out of his bed to semi-limp, semi-collapse to Tanya's side. He did not need to check her pulse to know she was dead but he did so, superstitious hope that it just could not be.

For the first time in a long while tears stung his eyes and it took all his discipline, all his self-control to hold in the swelling anguish in his chest, to crush it, compress it into a diamond of contained, focused fury.

The assassin's lifeless corpse yielded only one clue, a tiny golden lapel badge, a single, angular S.

"Stoertebeker," he muttered through teeth so gritted his jaw muscles ached. "Law."

Law. This had to end, had to end now.

"Seera, it's time to leave."

The small laser slipped back into the grav-chair and he pulled himself into it.

Ten minutes later he was back in space heading for the comparative safety of Kingdom End. As he entered the Power Circle Jump-gate an Argon Explorer detached itself from the sector traffic. The catamaran-bowed fighter dropped a nav-sat and transmitted a short, encrypted message before scooping it back up. It then sped towards the Power Circle jump-gate at maximum possible speed.

Skull read the message and smiled.

Chapter 23: Back in the Game

“I’m sorry about the béarnaise sauce Artur, I’m afraid it’s resequenced.”

Artur waved Sinas’ apology aside and took another bite of steak. Medium rare, tender, moist and still completely tasteless. He swallowed quickly and took another gulp of faintly acidic white wine. No nose, no complexity but still 14% proof and Artur let it work, conjuring a faint glow, a slight lessening of something he had not felt for a long time, numbing guilt.

He finished it in two swallows.

“I was assured that is a remarkable vintage,” Sinas observed as he refilled Artur’s glass.

“My injuries go beyond these,” he gestured angrily with his good arm, “More obvious physical afflictions.”

“Ah, I understand. Is there a prognosis?”

“Not as good as for the prosthetics, if I could grab enough time for nerve regeneration therapy between assassination attempts!”

Artur shrugged wryly.

“My condition makes it difficult to disappear. It won’t be the last attempt.”

“You could stay here Artur, so far as anyone knows you’re still in Kingdon End. Don’t worry, your ship is perfectly secure. That Explorer you thought was following you fled back to Argon space when challenged by sector security, I’m afraid we are unable to trace the pilot. I imagine you have many enemies.”

He smiled at his own understatement.

“Many,” Artur agreed. “I can’t stay hidden here, I’ve work to do, but..”

He grimaced through a spasm as he carefully moved his prosthetic arm to take a bread stick. It shattered between the fingers, scattering fragments across the table.

“But I need a lot more nerve regeneration therapy. The Memorial Clinic was the best there is and there certainly is no chance of going back there. Have there been any repercussions?”

“Publicly? Almost none. It’s playing like a random killing of a nurse, no mention of you, which means..”

“Which means some pretty high level interest,” Artur finished for him. “There might be a degree of heat.”

“I’m owed enough favours,” the Factotum replied. “And regardless of what some alphabet soup Argon organisations might like to believe, the Boron security services have not yet ceded their independence to them. Do we have a suspect?”

With his good arm Artur placed the lapel-pin on the table between them.

Sinas took it and holding it to the light, examined it closely.

“Law,” he surmised. “The Stoertebeker Clan like to leave a calling card, to inspire respect. Your escape was fortunate.”

“Very,” Artur agreed. “If he had not paused to deliver a message I’d be dead.”

Sinas read the tone.

“So you don’t think it was Law? If not, who?”

“Who indeed? It still could have been him but it all seems, too convenient.”

He took a long sip of wine.

“And if I’m any judge of sociopaths, Law will be focusing almost single-mindedly on the more obvious and pressing threat.”

“Our mutual friend?”

“The redoubtable Commander Force,” Artur confirmed. “There have been no further developments?”

Sinas dabbed the corners of his mouth with a napkin before replying.

“None. Work on the Chip Fabrication Station is almost complete. The fusion reactor should be online on a few hours. To be honest I don’t know why Law hasn’t struck before now. The Black Heart transporter is there and we know it has been taking in supplies the Teladi have been placing in low orbit. It wouldn’t surprise me if The Teladi Board are turning a blind eye to Hornet class missiles but we have no assets positioned to confirm this.”

“Would Morn dare?” Artur asked sceptically. “The repercussions if she were caught.”

“Daht has her scared enough to risk anything,” Sinas answered, tearing a crusty delaxian roll to mop up the last of the sauce. “Check the stock market. Defence industry stocks are sky-rocketing and according to Boron sources, their proxies are flocking to Daht’s portfolio. There’s a war breeze blowing and Morn will have to tack into it if she wishes to retain her chair.”

“That bloody fool,” Artur said with a venom directed partly at himself. “The General hasn’t the touch for this sort of game, all we need are for the Split to get involved.”

He caught Sinas' expression.

"Let me guess, the Family Njy?"

Sinas nodded confirmation. "The Butchers."

Artur refilled his own glass, bending his prosthetic to his will, his brow beaded with the effort.

"I can understand the unease," he replied. "The Split have long memories Sinas, the Njy even longer. Sector Five might be Teladi Gain now but they would slaughter and kill to expand their holdings. They have a foothold on the New Frontier with the Boron next door."

"Quite," Sinas said. "Half the Boron fleet is in my sector countering the Teladi build-up across the border. Most of the rest are down in Lucky Planets countering a build-up in New Income. That stretch of the New Frontier is very vulnerable."

"What about Menelaus Paradise and environs?"

"A good question," Sinas replied. "Xenon incursions are almost constant, rather than take the losses we are relying on the jump-capable fleet reserve, currently on manoeuvre in Atreus Clouds, in case the Clans get any ideas."

He leaned closer and lowered his voice although they were the only two people in this small, very private, dining room.

"I shouldn't know this let alone repeat it, you understand."

Artur nodded.

"There has been some talk, talk at the very highest levels, about the utility of those sectors. They are difficult to defend and a sink for credits. It will be years before any investment pays off, if the Xenon don't wipe them out or if the Family Njy does not find some pretext to attack them. Do you know the name Nibris?"

Artur thought for a moment.

"Joahan Nibris? Yes, factotum for the Ocean of Fantasy sector, she runs that whole part of the Boron New Frontier, Commander Force said he'd met her. He suspects she is involved in some way with the Clans, there is an Orca I believe, he thinks it is running supplies to the Clan Station beyond Menelaus Paradise. What do you know?"

"That our friend Max has designs on that ship, he asked me to check it out. He wants an Orca, we have a refurbished model in Atreus Clouds if he can come up with a fifteen million credits."

"What did you find?"

Sinas took a drink to give himself time to think.

“Fact or conjecture?”

“Informed conjecture, let my friend here chew it over,” Artur patted his prominent gut.

“Well,” Sinas steepled his fingers, nervously running his teeth over the nails.

“She has definitely made some sort of deal with whoever runs that pirate station. My intelligence contacts say it is a counter-weight to the Split presence, I think they admire her pragmatism, it’s why they like Argon factotums, our ethics are so flexible. See no evil, hear no evil.”

“A convenient symbiosis,” Artur agreed. “What about the TL?”

“Ah, now that’s where it begins to get interesting. Your Max has sound intuition, she does have a jump-drive, licensed and cleared by both our governments at the highest level.”

“How high?”

“Higher than I can follow, Artur.”

Sinas paused to let the implication sink in.

“And the ship is owned by a whole Paranid doll of shell companies and I don’t think I’ve opened the last one yet. One name keeps coming up though, behind all the smoke and mirrors. Phoenix, but it could be another distraction. Does it mean anything to you or your stomach?”

“Phoenix? Are you certain your sources have that right?” Artur asked carefully.

“As certain as they can be Artur. This information came with a higher cost than just credits. I take it the name means something.”

“It’s a code-name,” Artur said. “A reference to one of the quasi-private companies that provide the sort of services more official organisations like not to stain their hands, transportation being one of them.”

He ran his hand nervously over his head and scratched at his collar.

“The implications,” he trailed off into thought.

“The implications indeed,” Sinas concurred. “But not unexpected. We both suspect this Shadow-Conspiracy of yours has deep roots and tall branches.”

Artur nodded glumly.

“But confirmation hardly makes my day. This means that Nibris may be more than just a dupe, we have to assume she is playing an active role. Max needs to know this.”

“He has a hanger on this station, Artur. Put together a message and I’ll get it safely to him. I don’t know what he can do about it though.”

Artur smiled for the first time.

“Young Max is a resourceful fellow, I’m sure he’ll come up with something brilliant.”

He paused and chuckled. “And on his past record, unnecessarily violent.”

“Speaking of which, whoever tried to hit you is probably going to try again. What can I do to help? You can stay here as long as you like of course.”

“Much appreciated, old friend,” Artur replied gratefully. “But I’d just attract attention and our relationship thrives on secrecy. I can’t go to Max, that would just confirm we were in cahoots and I don’t think whoever was behind the hit knows that. No, I think the Shadows were behind it, one way or another. The interesting question is, why would they want to point me at Law?”

“To implicate him in the killing?”

“No, too obvious, I’m not convinced it was serious, they expected me to escape, which my gut says, means they’re cutting Law loose, too much of a liability, or they’re watching to see where I run. They’ve probably got Max’s Place staked, in fact it’s a good sign.”

Sinas raised an eyebrow in silent query.

“It means he’s piqued their interest and they’re checking him out. I might have to take action against him to bolster his credibility.”

Sinas smiled. “I don’t know how you keep it all straight in your head Artur, but unless you get the medic side sorted you aren’t going to be able to do anything.”

“I will speak with the General, he’s got the resources and his Teladi have discipline enough to keep a secret. With luck I can get more treatment and talk him into toning down the rhetoric at the same time. The last thing we need is another war.”

“And you think he will listen? He’s a man with an agenda and I’m betting it bears little resemblance to yours. You know his record, he likes to gamble and he always wins, this looks like a major throw of the dice to me.”

“Get me a fast ship and a completely trust-worthy pilot and we’ll see,” Artur answered grimly.

Chapter 24: Love's Gift

Too wired by fatigue and too aware of the stares and whispered asides of the rest of the passengers to sleep, Max found welcome refuge on the Lifter flight deck. The old pilot and owner of the converted freighter was happy to let him take the vacant co-pilot station and after Max assured him the two Confed Bayamon fighters were an escort not a threat he let the conversation lapse into an easy silence.

"Heads up Commander," the cracked voice jolted Max from his doze. "Your friends are waving goodbye."

Max rubbed his gritty eyes and looked out across at the port-side escort fighter. The pilot, expressionless behind a mirrored visor, threw another lazy salute. Max smiled and gave a thumbs-up and the Bayamon snap-rolled away on a heading for Confed Station.

With the jumpgate to Scale Plate Green looming the transport pilot flicked the intercom open.

"This is Cap'n Hamman speaking. We're about to enter the Scale Plate Green jumpgate, please ensure restraint fields are activated and drinks capped. On behalf of Interstellar Transport Industries," the man grinned through his unkempt beard and threw Max a conspiratorial wink. "I'd like to thank you for your custom. Put a chip down on the big wheel for me!"

"You'd be surprised how often that pays off!" Travers said, snapping off the comm. "Got me a tidy little nest egg building thanks to you. Hauling high rollers sure beats scruffin fruits."

"My pleasure," Max answered amiably. "Been on the frontier long?"

"As long as it's been here Max. Max is okay right?"

"Sure, the brotherhood of pilots, ..?"

"Gann. Gann Hamman - Goddam hot-rodders!"

The Lifter decelerated sharply as an Explorer light fighter, a civilian sports mark to judge from the paint job, sliced into the line of ships for the gate.

Gann opened the comm. again.

"Sorry about that folks, gravimetric turbulence due to solar flares."

He winked again, grinning widely. "Know nuthin' Ground-hogs, bless their gilt edged credit chips!"

“Looked like a Giant Space Squid to me,” Max laughed as the Lifter nosed into the swirling maelstrom of the activating jump-gate. “Or maybe a UFO!”

“Saw one of those once, straight up, must have been twenty years ago, way out in Emperor Mines. Had a little business way out from the gates if you know what I mean and there it was, one big, big mother. Gave out this eerie feedback when I hailed.”

The Lifter burst from the jump-gate tunnel into normal space and Hamman quickly scanned the area.

“Report it?” Max asked evenly.

Gann looked at him sharply, eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“I’m too old fella, to bother with whether you believe me or not. No, I didn’t report it, a yoinked license ain’t good for business. Got a snap of it though, sold it to the Weekly Universe News! Probably the only true thing they’ve ever published.”

“Hey, space is big and weird, Gann,” Max protested. “I’ve seen some strange shit in my time too. Any idea what it was up to?”

“Who knows Max? It was too damn fast, even if I wanted to chase it, which I most certainly did not, it just headed on out into planetary space. According to the WUN they have a big base out there, where they keep Argon women as sex slaves. Never trust an ET eh?”

“Yep,” Max agreed jocularly. “Damn ET’s, stealing our women folk and swamping us with their alien culture!”

The Lifter sped through the cordon of laser towers around Max’s two stations and the pilot called for docking permission.

“This is Max’s Place control, you are cleared to dock, please wait for the landing lights,” the automated system replied in a sex-less neutral tone.

The bay doors were already opening for the Destiny Star, distinctive in it’s red and black livery. Gann gunned the thrusters, adroitly cutting in ahead of the queue.

“In a hurry Max, the old bladder ain’t what it used to be, and Percy’s too damn big to piss in a tube!”

The Bliss Place auto-navigation took over, guiding the Lifter through the network of docking tunnels to the main public docking bay. Max waited with the squirming Hamman until the other passengers had disembarked.

“Short farewell Max, been nice talking with ya!” The pilot shook his hand quickly and vanished to the back of the passenger cabin with a cross-legged gait.

Tyre was waiting at the foot of the embarkation ramp, wearing a slinky long black dress and a happy but flustered smile, both suggesting she'd come straight from work.

"Would you like me to scan her for wires and weapons?" Xela asked archly. "And you might want to watch what she does with those nails."

Tyre was in his arms before he could form a snappy comeback.

"Welcome back Max," she whispered in his ear as she hugged him close. Her perfume, one notch down from cloying, enveloped him, triggering an autonomic response that surprised him with it's intensity.

"Too much information stud," Xela stated. "Disengaging sensors, going into stand-by. Try and be nice to.."

Her remaining words were lost as Tyre plucked the shades from his face.

"Ah, that's better Max, only posers wear mirror-shades indoors."

She unwrapped herself from him and slipped the shades into his coat's breast pocket.

"Uh, thanks sweetheart, sure. Good to see you, have you done something with your hair?"

He cringed inwardly at the awkward response, caught between desire and enduring suspicion.

Tyre smiled and tossed her long hair.

"Chestnut highlights Max, you like?"

"It looks great," Max answered. It did, now she'd pointed it out, but he could tell from the ghost of a frown that flickered momentarily on her face that it was not the expected response.

"Really great!" He added with more enthusiasm, cursing the seeming ability of women to read men's minds, at least to their own satisfaction.

"That's better Max," she said, linking her arm through his, patting it patronisingly. "You just have to try harder."

She sniffed.

"Beginning with a shower and a change of clothes. You didn't call," she continued as they joined the rest of the passengers passing through the security checks. Payter stood with the two-person team scanning each disembarkee, looking to catch his attention.

Max nodded a quick acknowledgement.

“I was worried. Was my present so big it had to be shipped in the hold?”

“Relax,” she laughed, cutting off Max’s inchoate splutter. “I’m kidding, a joke.”

The pause was perfectly timed.

“It’s something small,” she patted a coat pocket. “Like a ring right?”

She pulled him closer, chuckling warmly and Max couldn’t help but join in. It felt good and she felt good, her laugh enfolding him like a warm blanket. Max draped his arm over her shoulder and spontaneously kissed the top of her head, a brush of lips.

It had been too long, too long wrapped tight in his own body, his own mind and the temptation to just accept, to let the heat melt frozen suspicion was almost over-powering.

And yet?

And yet it was so damn convenient, so easy. He should check back with Rarr, see what that crook had uncovered.

Tyre relaxed her grip slightly, moving fractionally away, stiffening. Max stifled an urge to apologise.

“Your man wants to talk Max. He told me you’d called in, I expect he has all sorts of important things to discuss. I’ll be in my place, you give me a call if you want to grab something to eat.”

Her flashing eyes made it clear it was a challenge. She held his eyes long enough to satisfy herself the man understood and then softened with a smile.

“And don’t forget that shower okay?”

She patted his cheek and turned and left, sashaying her imperious way through the gaggle around the bay exit with deliberate, sensuous, rolls of her hips, followed by more than just Max’s hot stare.

“If you have a moment Commander,” the Sarge said, appearing at his elbow, his own eyes following Tyre’s exit.

“And she still checks out.”

Max followed him to Raider’s Territory.

Corrin shifted uncomfortably as he completed the third leg of his patrol, close enough to the Stoertebeker LT ring to see the mauve flash of the pre-fire sequence in the nearest as it rotated to target him.

“You’re cutting it real fine there lover,” Kaitrin stated from the All-Seeing-Eye, orbiting the Chip Fab site. “And you’ve been out there longer than standard protocols allow.”

“What protocols might those be sweetheart?” Corrin asked lightly.

“The one I just made up in my head!” she answered with a lilt. “You know what fatigue does for reaction times.”

“If you want to make up protocols,” Corrin suggested. “Make one covering the need for pillows on long duration missions. These Eels are great ships for the discount cost Max negotiated but I have a feeling the Boron have a lot to learn about human anatomy!”

“Boron are a pain in the ass, duly noted. Wait, incoming messages,” Kaitrin said, suddenly all business and Corrin listened to static as he cruised towards the western jumpgate.

“Good news and not so good news. Which do you want first lover?”

“Let’s go with the good,” Corrin answered.

“Good news, Max has returned to Scale Plate Green, and I quote, mission successful, reinforcements imminent.”

Corrin grinned and clenched a fist in vicarious triumph.

“And the bad news?”

“We’ve got media incoming, an Argon Lifter full of journo’s and broadcast gear. Smile, lover, we’re going to be live on the net and that Anje woman’s onboard. She says put on a good show.”

“Joy,” Corrin muttered with an utter lack of conviction. “If there’s a fight they’re going to have to take their damn chances in the cross-fire, make sure they understand that.”

“I’ll convey your concern for their well-being,” Kaitrin said. “But in a slightly more diplomatic way. Only evil doers fear the light. We’re not evil doers are we?”

Professor Challenger’s image sprang unbidden to his mind.

“Eye of the beholder I suppose,” Corrin answered after a slight pause.

“I’m going to take that as a ‘No.’ Kaitrin said firmly. “Note to self, don’t let the grumpy old libertine anywhere near an open mike.”

“Fine with me, fine with me,” Corrin answered.

The Ceo's Bucksoid jumpgate swirled to life and spat out a Lifter in garish red livery. Bright white warning lights strobed from the nose and tail.

"The party's all here lover," Kaitrin said. "All we need now is the guest of honour."

"I'm not going to even ask where the credits came from sir," Payter smiled. "And the Split don't care. The Defeat yard is working flat out, the last of our surplus shields and weapons have been delivered and ten Raiders are standing by. I had to shift reserves from here to the front line as cover. That leaves us a bit exposed here but with nav sats in every sector from here to Family Whi we'll see any trouble coming in time to call in Jackson's people."

"Good work Sarge," Max replied. "How long 'til the Mamba's are operational?"

"Assuming we do the shakedown in flight, three hours Commander. I have an update on the assault plans."

"Which ones?" Max asked.

"Both sir, the Stoertebeker station and the Orca. Jackson's people have sent some pretty comprehensive data on the base but we've had to go with generic schematics for the TL."

The Sarge punched keys on the small briefing room terminal, the holo-tank thrummed to life, displaying a rotating image of Law's station. With deft flicks of the control wand he peeled away layers, delineating key areas, defensive systems, tactical objectives and penetration routes.

"How many men?"

"Ours or theirs Commander?"

"Both."

"Defenders unknown Sir, we estimate three hundred but we don't know what that big bastard TL has been transferring. There's been a lot of traffic. Us? Two hundred."

"Two hundred damn good ones," he added, noting his Commander's querulous brow.

"Plus another seventy five the Confeds can throw in the pot but I'm not counting on them. Unknown competence, unknown agenda. Makes me nervous."

"Fair enough Sarge, projected casualty rates? Ours?"

He blanched at the answer.

"One million credits Sir, split between the survivors and the families of the dead. If that helps."

“Double it,” Max said quietly.

Payter nodded understanding.

Max reviewed the plans in detail, but this was the Sarge’s field, not his and there was little he could add.

“There’s just one problem Commander,” Payter said at the end of his presentation. “Boarding. Getting past the pickets, accessing the docking bays. Everything is predicated on a surprise assault.”

“Leave that to me Sarge,” Max replied confidently. “I’ll get back to you on that.”

It was a mark of the respect the Raiders held for their dead leader that Payter accepted the assurance unquestioningly.

“Okay, give me an hour and we’ll pick up the new ships and join the party. Is my Mamba prepped?”

“Prepped to the gills,” Payter confirmed. “But I don’t understand why Law hasn’t attacked already, why he’s leaving it this late?”

Max shrugged.

“Perhaps we’ve hurt him worse than we think? Or the Teladi have him on a choke chain.”

“Or the bastard has something we haven’t reckoned with up his sleeve,” Payter replied, locking down the holo-tank.

“That’s not a comforting thought Sarge,” Max said, clapping him on the shoulder as they left the briefing room. “Just think positive thoughts.”

Max headed for Tyre’s quarters trying to follow his own advice.

She removed his coat and began removing his clothes the instant he was through the door. Disappointingly she bundled him into her shower and declined his invitation to join him.

“No time for that, tempting and irresistible as the thought is, stud,” she checked her lipstick in her compact, frowned and touched up the totally invisible blemishes.

“We’re due in the New Frontier in about,” she checked her watch. “Twenty minutes ago. I bet you’re flying out pronto right? Not without a proper meal, and alcohol doesn’t count as a food group.”

Max turned off the shower and let the rising column of warm air cry him.

“Fine if we make it PDQ. What meal are we looking at? Different time zones.”

“Brunch I guess,” she replied. “And watch your language. Here.”

She threw a clean shirt at him as he stepped from the shower.

“I picked this up for you, it’s real silk, all the way from Queens Space. Blue is your colour, there’s a bunch of other stuff on the bed there.”

Max slipped it on, it was cool against his clean skin, and almost weightless.

“Hey, thanks Tyre, this must have cost you a month’s salary.”

“Don’t thank me too much Max, you’ve now got a credit account down at the LaVois concession. You got me this too, you closet romantic you.”

She held up a shimmering aqua stole, so light it seemed to float as she fastened it around her shoulders.

“I’m just generosity incarnate,” Max said, bemused, as he quickly dressed.

“You look great.”

“Of course I do Max,” she answered, taking his arm and guiding him towards the door.

“Don’t worry,” she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately.

“You’ll get the hang of this boy-girl thing if I have to spend every credit you have! Now hurry up, I’m starving even if you’re not.”

Still spinning from the stirrings her kiss inspired, Max let himself be led to the New Frontier restaurant.

“Nice shirt sir,” Ray opined as he led them through the half empty dining room to Max’s customary booth. “It goes so well with your….jeans. May I show you a menu madam?”

“We’re in a real hurry Ray,” Max interjected. “What’s quick?”

“I’m afraid we don’t do ‘quick’ here sir,” Ray answered stiffly. “However.”

He looked around the restaurant.

“The couple at Table Seven are having the roast glun-meek in braised clam sauce and Argnu steak, medium rare with fried tubule roots.”

“Well if they won’t mind?” Max said uncertainly.

“They won’t know sir, we’ll just consider it an object lesson in ungenerous gratuities.”

Max grinned.

“Okay, I’ll take the steak, if that’s okay with you sweetheart?”

The word sounded surprisingly right.

“Hmmn. Raw meat or strange alien dish I’ve never heard of? I’ll take a chance on the ET food, providing it isn’t alive?”

“I clubbed the kittens to death myself,” Ray reassured her archly. “Glun-meek is a sort of fish madam. Very highly sought after by gastronomes universe wide.”

“Well, if it’s good enough for snails it’s good enough for us,” Max said, ignoring Ray’s small, despairing sigh. “The steak for me and the Meek stuff for Tyre.”

“Tyre, that’s a very nice name, madam, memorable too,” Ray said as he tapped the order transfer into his padd. “Very well done sir.”

“What did he mean by that Max?” Tyre asked suspiciously after the waiter left. “For the owner of this station he doesn’t show you much respect does he? No wonder he gets bad tips.”

“No man is a hero to his waiter,” Max misquoted, deadpan. Smoothly changing the subject he asked. “I’m flying but do you want a drink of anything?”

“No thanks Max, I’m intoxicated enough with your sheer presence,” she rested a hand lightly on his knee. “But tell me about your trip. Business or pleasure?”

“Business, nothing interesting, just a little investment,” Max answered, masking renewed suspicion. “I doubt anyone goes to Garleth Prime for pleasure although I did hear some interesting old music. I might have Corrin book the band.”

“Breaking new markets for your dubious products Max? I thought Jackson handled all that for you. I hope he wasn’t leading you astray, I’m not sure I trust him.”

“Jack? He’s okay so long as our interests coincide. I grow the stuff, he sells it. I’m happy, he’s happy, the customers are very happy and the confectionary manufacturers are ecstatic. Everyone wins.”

“But it’s still illegal. What if you get caught?”

“Almost nothing’s illegal in Teladi space, and it’s Jackson’s people running the risks in other territories, don’t sweat it.”

“Ladies don’t sweat, they perspire, Max. How about the computer chip place, I hear that’s coming on-line soon.”

“Soon,” Max said evasively. “How did you hear about that?”

“It’s all over the news, Max. They say there’s going to be a big fight.”

She removed her hand, eyes showing a hint of suspicion.

“You’re being awfully evasive, you don’t really trust me do you Max? Relationships are built on trust you know. I read it in a magazine. It had a test too, perhaps we should take it?”

“Loose lips vapourise ships,” Max quoted with what he hoped was a disarming grin.

“Yea, there’s probably going to be a skirmish of some sort. What are they saying about it?”

“Nothing with the word skirmish in it Max. It’s okay, you don’t have to hide these things from me, I know you have a colourful background.”

She put her hand back on his knee.

“All girls love bad boys!”

She squeezed his thigh, high up and Max looked around but no-one could see into the seclusion of the booth.

“Really? That’s cool then.”

“No, not ‘really’ Max. That’s just what men want to believe. Don’t you know anything about real women?”

“Er – only where the bits are,” Max stammered.

“Some of the bits Max,” she replied with a perfect toothed grin. “But I have a magazine article on that too!”

She paused, barely.

“Or just ask your friend Jack. Just kidding Max, just kidding. The word they use is ‘show-down.’ The media remember? Men have such linear minds, you’ve really got to try and keep up! Ah, food.”

Tyre waited until he’d laid the dishes out before them and departed.

“Mmnn, this Gunk Reek is much better than it sounds,” she proffered a steaming fork full. The rich aroma made him salivate and the flesh melted in his mouth, blending perfectly with the shell-fish sauce to trigger taste buds he didn’t know he had.

“No thanks,” she said to the offered bloody steak. “I make it a rule not to eat anything that still moo’s. You go ahead and be manly though, just don’t get blood on that shirt. Does he have more ships than you?”

“Who? Law? Yes, probably. That clan is old and rich,” he chose his words carefully. “But we have the better ships and the better pilots.”

“That’s what the guy with the holo-sim on Network News said. He reckons you could get your ass kicked. Or words to that effect. Is that right?”

Max shrugged.

“We’ve beaten him every time so far, why not again?”

“Because he’s got some kind of big ship hanging around the man says. And you’re having to defend a fixed position right? Less scope for, what’s the word he used, a big one for fighting dirty. Asymmetric warfare, that’s it.”

“For a hostess you’re pretty well versed in military tactics,” Max answered, trying to keep his tone light.

Tyre looked at him closely.

“You really don’t trust me. What do you think, I’m some sort of spy, is that it? Well forgive me for taking an interest when my man could get himself killed. Everyone’s talking about it Max, how do you think that feels?”

Max didn’t know what to say and they sat in stony silence for a few minutes until Tyre pushed her plate away angrily and stood up.

“You can’t go through life like this Max, you’ll end up old and bitter.”

Her eyes glistened and her cheeks flamed red.

“If – when you get back you’d better have a long hard think about us Max.”

She stormed out through the suddenly silent dining room without a further word.

When Max reached the flight bay Payter was waiting. He handed Max the azure stole.

“She said good luck Sir.”

Max tied it round his neck, wrestling down conflicting emotions.

Chapter 25: Vengeance

"How long to mobilise the assault team Sarge?" Max asked as they walked towards the bay flight-line. Two Mamba's stood armed and ready.

"One hour, Commander. Bug out or assault?"

"Both Sarge. Get the support gear to the Chip Fab, wait in Family Whi until it comes online. Have the troops prepped for attack. I still plan to get the Fab established first and attack at a time of my choosing but you never know what opportunities might arise. Make sure they have an escort, just in case."

"Understood Sir," Payter's posture stiffened and he almost saluted. "Just give the word."

He hurried from the flight deck, snapping orders to the bay security squad.

Max climbed into the Mamba cockpit. Automatically he injected a stim, then another, to banish the fatigue and the feelings. Riding the initial rush he relished the sudden surge of vitality, the innervating rush through his nervous system, the clarity.

This was it, he could feel it in the electric air, one of those points on which destinies pivot. Law would fight, Max planned to leave him no choice, and he would lose, completely and definitively. A major strut of the Shadow Conspiracy would collapse, a corpse to be looted for wealth and power. There would be chaos.

Chaos and opportunity. He could feel the possibilities, almost touch them.

The bulk of his fleet, Raiders, reserve squadron and five wings of Confed fighters were already heading for Teladi Gain and enough Bayamons remained in Scale Plate Green to deal with the survivors of any assault, should Law be reckless enough to launch an attack from Teladi Gain.

Max hoped he would, he would cut it to pieces before it left the sector. Then he would smash the Black Heart and kick down Law's door.

Law, cowering for his life, under the barrel of Max's gun.

Exhilarating!

Max let the rush dissipate, leaving him feeling focused and ready. He pushed lingering thoughts of Tyre to the back of his mind. He had possibly misjudged her, that or she was a good actress. For the first time, feeling the silk around his neck as he called for launch permission, he admitted to himself that he hoped he had.

There was a spark, that made him feel good too. He would fix things when he got back.

"Permission to launch Commander, good luck sir."

“Acknowledged, and thanks.”

He didn’t recognise her voice, one of the new people.

As soon as he cleared the docking tunnel he inserted the Xela chip into her ship interface, curtailing her banter with a succinct update.

She read the mood and realigned her personality matrix, absorbing the tactical situation from the nav-sat network.

The route to Teladi Gain was clear of clan activity and civilian traffic almost non-existent. And in Teladi Gain itself the sector defences clustered deep out in space, around the carrier, five thousand klicks from the eastern gate.

Thirty of Max’s fighters prowled the Fab perimeter in wings of three. The All-Seeing-Eye orbited the Fab closely, it’s own LT a last line of defence. Xela linked to it, Kaitrin acknowledged immediately. The Black Heart was close to the Station, practically touching. A short docking tunnel suggested large scale material transfers.

A Lifter freighter, bristling with sensor pods behind 50 expensive megawatts of shields, circled the Fab. She cross-referenced it’s registration and sampled the networks. Smile Max, you’re pulling down record ratings.

The station CAP, six wings of two Bayamons and three wings of four Orinoco heavy fighters, circled inside the defence perimeter delineated by a dozen Laser Towers. The Base itself was leaking some sort of vapour crystallised into a mist that glittered in her sensitive sensors. If the base was leaking atmosphere they might be evacuating. Or transferring more support to contain the problem. Some sort of interference screen was blocking her scans. She recognised the trick as her own.

Adapting, she didn’t like that.

Max listened to the report and said.

“Get me Rarr, Zee.”

“If you say so Max,” she answered, unwilling to let it past without at least disapproving with her tone. It took less than a minute for the fat, sweat-faced Argon criminal on the Profit Share Bliss Place to appear. A holo-tank played in the background.

“Mr Force, I’m surprised, haven’t you anything better to do?” He nodded back at the tank. “I’m expecting quite a show.”

“Surprise is for wimps Rarr. You got anything for me?” He demanded curtly.

“Yes, I have actually. My extensive checks revealed she is precisely as she seems to be. You should be very happy, if I can be trusted.”

“Oh I trust you Rarr, you know what I’d do if you stiffed me. And yes, it does make me happy.”

“The smart money suggests I will have little to fear soon. Perhaps smart is not as smart as it thinks?”

“The art of surprise isn’t dead, Rarr. Out.”

“Let’s hope you’re on a roll Max. Fab power-up projected as 4.2 hours. The new fighters are fully maxxed, fully armed and standing by to launch.”

“Should shorten our odds, Zee. I hope Rarr shifts his bet in time.”

The Mamba slipped through the PTNI HQ jump-gate.

“This isn’t a risk free strategy Max. We don’t know what he has in the hole.”

“Law’s no busted flush,” Max agreed. “But we have the initiative and an 8:1 kill ratio average.”

“Bigger. It’s an acceptable risk. His forces are all in one place and if the TL tries to break-out we’ll be in position to intercept it beyond the LT screen.”

“The question is, can we get troops onto the station? Options?” Max asked.

“Three. Hack the transporter system or the docking port, force the docking port, or blast in from the outside. Without preparation I wouldn’t hold your breath for the first.”

“Force the port or nothing, Zee. We’ll play it by ear.”

“Odds rising Max.”

“Make a note to have you programmed with a little faith.”

Max engaged the SETA, gliding through the deserted sectors in accelerated time, stations zipping by the cockpit.

He disengaged the drive at the gate to Cho’s Defeat. Xela signalled the waiting fighters on entering the sector.

It was empty, except for a handful of sector defence fighters and a Boron Piranha burning towards Patriarch’s Keep.

The Mamba’s formed up on his stern, in three wings of three. The tenth fighter pulled up close on his starboard side, wings almost touching. Max zoom scoped the pilot, he lifted his visor and grinned.

“Hi ya Max baby, wanna be my wing man?”

“You can be mine Jack. The Sarge okayed a ship swap?”

“By and large Max, the important thing is I’m here. I’ve got some mercenaries in-bound too, just in case you understand?”

Jackson’s Mamba drifted to the Five O Clock cover position, to watch his six.

“We’re partners Jack, but Payter’s in overall charge of any assault. Understood.”

“Expected Max, relax, we’re about the take down the Stoertebeker Clan and seize a prime piece of real estate. This is my ticket to the top table. Our ticket that is.”

“We need each other Jack, we’ll cut a deal. Out.”

Xela cut the channel with alacrity.

“Well there’s somebody expecting pay-back for his fifty million. The Teladi Gain clan franchise is worth a lot more than that, beyond the short term. Are you thinking, the lesser of two evils?”

“Definitely, once I figure out what that is.”

“I hate it when you go all cryptic on me Max,” Xela said. “Incoming signal from the Sarge. Troops launched.”

“Game on,” Max stated and gave the order for all fighters to engage SETA.

They cruised through the intervening sectors, dropping back to normal time in Family Whi.

The Split defence fleet disposition mirrored the Teladi on the other side of the gate. Tensions were high but no-one was looking for trouble. Except for the jump-drive wild card of course.

Max checked the tactical display as they flew on towards the Teladi Gain gate.

Law watched the screen from the Black Heart fire control station, in these moments he felt, a man should hold his own destiny. The net broadcasts had little new information, just unconfirmed reports of a handful of new fighters coming through Split territory. The lack of real-time intelligence didn’t concern him, everything was ready, this time he had seen to that himself.

The negotiations with Director Morn had been long. He was taking a monumental gamble, stepping so far beyond that mark that only success would vindicate it, but the terms bearable for now and he needed well-positioned allies as much as he needed the munitions and the equipment.

The un-crated fighters filled the station docking bays, assembled and ready.

All he was waiting for was Force. Revenge, Law relished the taste.

Artur had a clear view of the Mamba flight through the panoply of the Piranha. He needed no secret sources to tell him it was Max. The Boron pilot held a steady course and they flashed over-head and out of sight. His arrival would be unannounced but Daht would see him.

Whether he would listen was another matter.

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"My tactical designation, Zee?" Max asked.

"Red One, Jackson is Two," she flashed the other designations on the HUD, scrolling through his fleet.

Okay. He opened the channel himself as the last jumpgate loomed.

"Red Squad this is Red One. It's all quiet on the other side, pair up and take your instructions from Flight Control. This is it guys, it's going to hot up quick."

One way or another.

They acknowledged confidently, one by one.

"With you Great One," Jackson called.

Max led the wingman pairs through the jumpgate.

Law watched the heavy Split fighters flash from the jump-gate in pairs.

"Six, eight, ten. Good, you are about to lose the war Mr Force."

Around him the bridge crew caught the shift in mood and steeled themselves, hunching intently over their stations, faces lit blue under the red battle light.

With a touch of a button he put the station fighters on launch stand-by. He nodded to the Teladi female next to him, on fighter control. "All pilotsss to their cockpits."

She watched console indicators turn red to green.

"Ship fighters ready Sire."

"On my command," he cautioned.

She looked at him.

"Understood."

Law cycled through the Black Heart missile banks, activating the silkworms.

A substantial portion of his fortune was now tied up in munitions, transferred from Teladi Company reserves at triple the average market cost, despite Morn's complicity.

Bribes to pay and pockets to line, he swallowed his rage and paid. He was as committed to the throw as Force was. A feeling of fate hung in the air.

He focused on the broadcast Lifter and designated it non-combatant.

Then he locked on the silkworms.

"Helm, report?" He asked evenly.

"Course constantly updated, Sire."

He was new and there was fear in his voice.

"Excellent!" Law, almost hissed with satisfaction. Force might be swept up in the fate that seemed to have pushed them into conflict but he was seizing his.

He waited until the new fighters reached the almost completed factory before sending the launch signal. Fighters flooded from the station docking bay, Bayamons, Mandalays and Falcons. Very expensive Falcons.

Law watched Force's ships explode into action on the tactical display.

"Disengage docking tunnel. Helm, on my command."

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"Well there's a coincidence Max," Jackson announced as the fighters launched. "I say we are expected. There's an awful lot of fighters out there."

"Then we'll have to give them a bloody pounding!"

Corrin pulled up off his port side and rocked his Eel's wings. Max dipped his own in reply before the big catamaran fighter rolled away.

"Red Squad this is Red One, go freelance, let's clear this screen and hit that ugly shit transporter."

He closed the channel.

"Zee, open all frequencies."

"They're all ears Max," Xela confirmed.

"Let's end this thing," he stated. "This savage has lived too long."

He glanced at Xela's tactical update in the HUD, seventy light and medium fighters and a dozen Orinoco's. Nothing yet launched from the Black Heart.

The cloud of fighters shoaled with disciplined precision and accelerated towards the Chip Fab and the Force fleet.

“Okay Zee, here’s the tactic, you just flesh out the details.”

Max’s hands tingled with anticipation, adrenaline flooding his system.

Xela switched into full tactical mode, operating through the All-Seeing-Eye sensors, designated targets, projecting threats and holding multiple simultaneous conversation with the rank of controllers in the mobile base. It was almost the same thing.

One of life’s moments, even forgetting about the alien technology, Law had to be removed. He was beyond the bounds of all human decency and it was going to end.

Max rolled onto an intercept course with the oncoming fighters and hit the after-burner.

“Charge!”

Morn poured a small measure of spirit into her glass and settled back in her chair. At times like these she needed to be alone, it was at times like these she felt a true Teladi.

The greater the risk, the greater the reward and she was risking everything for a half share in the alien technology.

The walls of her inner sanctum closed in some more.

And this was only the beginning.

The holo-screen was the best credits could buy. Morn had earned the best.

The military feed confirmed it’s forces were well away from the battle-field. She wanted no accusations from that quarter.

Switching to the net feed she selected Teladi Network News and tracked the impact of events on stock prices.

There would be an expensive storm to ride out, questions made worthwhile not to ask.

As the two packs of fighters closed she nervously emptied one glass, then another.

Aboard Paradise Station, Skull watched from the main control room. She had refused all Law’s requests for support. Jackson and Force would make more reliable partners and Morn would soon see where her interests lay once Daht was dealt with.

She had almost no doubt Force would triumph. Which just left the cripple and he would surface again. Now the enemy in the shadows had a face he would find it difficult to hide from her. She could see his hand behind Daht and through him, manipulating Force, regardless of what he might imagine.

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The ships clashed midway between the two stations, beyond the range of either sets of LT's.

Max targeted the nearest enemy, the target reticule almost directly ahead. He rolled the Mamba slightly to intercept the Mandalay and watched the distance fall.

At fifteen hundred metres he lined up the shot, Xela selected the next three targets.

He grinned as the distance fell towards 1k, his finger hovering over the trigger.

At twelve hundred metres the attackers exploded with drones, the missile alert began a constant chant. The drones swarmed him in seconds, smashing the shields from all angles. Max wrestled for control of the shuddering ship and snap rolled away on after-burner.

Xela confirmed the drones were following standard programming, there were a dozen following along with seven silkworms, pulling long turns to re-engage. She kept him constantly updated, threat positions and directions. He killed a Bayamon that rolled across his path with a single glancing shot and rolled inside two missiles through the storm of drones to kill a second.

"Take the drones Zee!" he yelled.

Xela took control decelerating rapidly to target their pursuers, taking out five in quick succession before breaking to evade silkworms.

The missile alert began talking again. A Mandalay flashed across his sights, spilling drones. Max killed it and boosted away.

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Law watched the melee impassively. Now the die was cast he was no longer so confident, he'd learned Force was not to be under-estimated and already his fighters were cutting through the drones well above the projected rate. He touched a control, deploying the last of the drones to hound the Raider fighters.

"Now, Helmsman."

He could feel the engines surge to life through the soles of his feet, restoring his sense of certainty. Law activated the silkworms and then accessed the Teladi Military net using Morn's expensive codes.

The sky was full of drones but Max and Xela systematically scythed through them and taking out more fighters with reflex snapshots as he weaved through hosing plasma streams.

"The Heart is moving!" Xela shouted. "I'm projecting a flanking movement around the jump-gate, hit the Fab from behind!"

Max tried to take in the tactical display as Xela dealt with a pack of drones. Five fighters down but over twenty of the attackers were dead, despite the distraction of the drones and the missiles.

“Red squad, Red squad! Clear those damn drones and get on that TL!”

Max smashed an Orinoco, rolling between the incoming plasma stream, destroying it with a short burst before breaking to intercept the Black Heart. At top speed it was faster than him but flew like a brick. For anything like a useful turning circle it’d have to drop below 200.

If his fighters could break out of the morass of drones, fighters and missiles they could swamp the TL’s defences, smash down the shields with their own silkworms before it could strike at the Fab.

“It’s taken out the media Lifter Max and something’s not right here!” Xela yelled. “There’s no enemy pilots. I think these things are on auto-pilot. They die too easily too.”

She scanned several ships.

“Only one meg shields Max!”

The Mamba flashed over the Black Heart as it decelerated to manoeuvring speed, Max pumped out silkworms at close range. The TL pumped out her own defensive missile screen forcing Max to go defensive as Law’s flag-ship turned towards the Fab, fifteen klicks distant.

“Fighters moving to intercept, mine-layers inbound. He’s not getting through Max.”

Weaving through the tracking missiles, Max launched more missiles and emptied guns into the TL shields. They made a dent but recharged rapidly.

It was a trick of some sort, Max knew that now, but he couldn’t think, just react as a pair of Hawk’s swept in.

“A distraction Zee, it’s a distraction! Figure it out quick!”

The first Hawk vaporised in his sights, he held the turn with the other a fraction too long, killing it as a silkworm smashed into the Mamba tail.

Max wrestled the Mamba onto the TL’s tail and hit the burners as Xela filtered sensor readings and focused on the Station.

Damn.

“The Base, it’s firing up solid fuel boosters, it’s bugging out Newtonian on a deep space heading.”

Max glanced at the tactical display and cursed, his people were smashing Law's fighters from the sky but had nothing was in a position to intercept before it accelerated to inter-planetary speeds under the enormous, primitive brute force thrust.

Law was getting away.

The TL had changed course too, slowing almost to a crawl to laboriously swing towards the Ceo's Bucksiod gate.

"This is Red One, all fighters engage that TL. It is not getting away, understand!"

He had time to register cargo canisters spilling from it before reflexively obeying Xela's frantic call to break.

"Squash mine, squash mine!" Xela called.

"One klick, faster Max! Energy cells, petard, hoisted, boom!"

"I hate it when you get cryptic."

"And I hate it when people learn."

The ignited energy cells blinded every sensor in the sector, Max wrestled for control as the Mamba pitched and yawed in the plasma shockwave. It took him long seconds to level out and roll towards the gate.

"Where'd it go? Speak to me Zee!"

"Everything's out, we're blind, could last minutes but I'm working on it."

Max scoped the area, nothing, no TL, no wreckage.

It took Xela two minutes to bring things back up.

"He's not out there," Xela confirmed. He must have gone through the gate. And that nav-sat is down."

Max barely hesitated, ordering those fighters that could to follow him in.

Ceo's Bucksoid was devoid of traffic.

In Scale Plate Green Artur's ship docked in the Trading Station public bay. The Boron pilot remained in the ship while Artur threaded his chair through a gaggle of Teladi and humans boarding a Lifter.

The comm system still accepted his access codes and it took just a few minutes to get though to the General on their private channel. He looked unhappy but agreed to meet. Artur waited for the escort with a growing feeling of unease.

As the Lifter approached the Nyana's Hideout jumpgate Gann Hamann went through the announcement routine on auto-pilot, not trying hard to keep the boredom from his voice. Another load of chastened return ticketers and a few charity cases riding steerage in the sub-space hold. Losers and drifters.

"What the shit!" He almost took a second too long to pull on the stick, scraping shields with the emerging TL. It looked Teladi, damn reckless lizards! He targeted it and opened a channel.

Before he could speak the missile alert spoke.

It didn't stop.

"Tractor those slaves," Law ordered.

"Course laid in Sire," helm reported.

"Execute."

Law turned to Fighter Control.

"Now."

His elite fighters launched, thirty Falcons, too precious to throw away against Force's fighters but more than a match for the skeleton defences. Mandalays targeted the Laser Towers. His Elite fired off a dozen silkworms each at the towers, before hitting the Bayamons.

The Towers pulsed at the missiles, detonating one after the other. Raider Mandalays weaved through the fire catching most that got through.

Only one LT fell but the Black Heart plunged over the Force Bliss Place, streaming Squash mines and a steady line of silkworms. Finally he fired half of his hoarded hornets.

"Rear view."

It was a burning hulk. Law growled in triumph and targeted the Trading Station. It had barely begun to launch defences. Much too late thanks to the disabled military nav-sat.

It exploded into burning fragments.

Yes! He clenched a fist in triumph. He felt young again!

"All stop, recall the fighters. Set next heading."

Fighter Control complied, launching automated Bayamons to stall the closer sector patrols. The last fighter docked the Black Heart accelerated towards the southern jumpgate to Xenon space.

Law selected the new destination and triggered the automated sequence. The jumpdrive countdown activated and the mine seeded energy cells dropped.

The Black Heart plunged through the worm-hole, falling out a jumpgate in a new sector.

“Target that station, confirm clearance codes and prepare the troops.”

It was a shame Force had managed to protect the new factory but it had been a good day. Revenge tasted sweet.

Max stared at the empty sector display.

“I don’t understand, he couldn’t have got out of the sector alre… Zee, quick, target home base!”

“Engage jumpdrive now,” he ordered quietly, realisation dawning numb. “Now.”

“It’s out of range Max, we’re loaded for combat. We can get to.. It’s too late.”

The Max’s Place icon died out.

He watched the Trading Station die too.

By the time he reached Scale Plate Green there was nothing to be done, his station was a cold wreck and the sector a riot of Teladi military. Only his Dream Farm remained and he turned towards it.

“What have I done Zee? All those people.”

“Gambled and lost Max,” she answered softly.

“But the bulk of our forces are intact. We live to fight another day and we’ve pushed him out of Teladi Gain.”

It tasted like ashes.

When the survivor list came in, it was short.

Her name was not on it.