

DESTINY'S DAWN

An X-universe Novel by Graham Gilligan

Preface & Acknowledgments

This is an "unofficial novel" based within the X-Universe. The universe is a fantastic place populated by humans and aliens, heroes and villains. It first shot to our computers in the game X: Beyond the frontier. Since then Egosoft have moved on to develop not only X-tension but also the recent game of X2: The Threat.

Over the years a thriving community has sprung up with numerous brilliant fan authors writing several popular series. This is my humble attempt to be counted among them.

This novel takes up from where the latter game, X2 ends. It focuses on the experiences of an Argon pilot Rick Dentill as he tries to adjust to a life outside his beloved Fleet. In a fit of vanity one can hope that this book adds a little more depth to a wider whole.

Special thanks goes to all those people who contributed advice, proof reading and encouragement. Also Steve Mills and Stephen Haworth (AKA Mercenary) it was their novels, which have inspired me to write this.

Best wishes,

Graham Gilligan (a.k.a. Graf_Grau)

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Destiny's Dawn

Prologue

Tall candles guttered in deep alcoves throughout the chasm like chamber, scattering deep shadows in their dim light. A thick carpet of deep purple created a causeway along the ancient cold stone floor. The only warmth throughout the chamber came from large flat bronze braziers filled with burning coals. The slow streams of smoke causing a haze to permeate the still atmosphere giving it a thick, choking edge. Those races with less hardy constitutions than that of the current occupants might find it oppressive, if they were ever to get past the powerful centurions guarding the thick aged wood doors.

At the far end of the room where the carpet ceased, stood a wide pyramidal marble dais with a high backed throne firmly established at its summit. A dozen steps climbed up each of the four sides and at the base of each corner stood a large carven granite effigy of strange mythical creatures. The eyes of each beast were set with great cut rubies, which cut the light flickering from the candles giving them a menacing glare.

Along the walls of this throne room, tapestries hung depicting ancient battles fought by the ancestors of the current owner. On the distant wall behind the throne hung two great banners. The banner to the left of the throne was red emblazoned with a pictogram of a great mailed fist holding an exotic dagger. To the right of the throne the banner displayed in graphic detail a humanoid figure in plate armour, of the kind not used for countless Jazuras, crushing the skull of a man-sized octopus like creature.

The stillness of the chamber was suddenly broken as the doors were flung open by some unseen force. A chill wind blew out many of the candles whilst causing the smoke to swirl in patterns as the atmosphere struggled to adjust to the change in pressure.

"Damn them all." A grating voice called out.

Through the great arch of the doorway strode a tall creature, alien to the eyes of a human and yet still possessing many of the traits of what we call humanoid. Indeed the creature was tall, broad and muscular as far as could be told through the billowing robes reminiscent of ancient China on earth. Known to the Argon, the humans of this region of the galaxy as the Split. As is common to this race its features were twisted in a mask of extreme rage, its eyes piercing, the sides of its small mouth pointing towards its

broad shoulders.

"The family Jxu is ancient and noble we will not pander to the whims of these upstarts any longer." Continued the Split.

"My lord Jxu, it is ever so with the favourites of the family Rhonkar, I fear too many dealings with the Teladi is having a corrupting influence on our rivals." A deeper voice called from behind him.

A much older split followed his leader through the doors. His robes far less opulent and of more sombre tones chiefly varying shades of grey. Yet he boor himself with pride and grim determination which matched the deep scars crisscrossing craggy, ancient features.

Jxu strode slowly towards the throne his feet leaving deep impressions in the thick carpet as he approached the throne. His attendant nearly running to keep up with the wide stride of his master. Upon reaching the throne Jxu turned and slowly sat draping the edges of his robe over the sides of the throne giving and creating an even larger appearance to his already immense size. Reaching to the side of the throne he picked up a bronze gong over a foot in diameter. Pulling a small yet wicked looking hammer from within the sleeve of his robe he struck the gong. The peal resulting from this strike echoed around the hall giving it an even more immense and yet desolate feel.

A veritable hoard of Split began to fill the room as if they had been waiting for this signal. Minor nobles dressed in bright colours jockeyed for a position near to the throne as ragged slaves scurried about placing wooden chairs and low tables and hanging lanterns on iron hooks about the chamber. Soon the grand carpet was lined for half its length with long tables and jabbering Split.

Lord Jxu stood and as one the assembled split host followed him. A procession strode through the main doors to the chamber, two lines of twelve. Each Split dressed in red robes with a white cassock like covering. All but one, that is, in the centre of the column was a short thin split dressed in shining gold robes bedecked with bright jewels and a great purple hat perched upon its head. Most noticeable of all was the femininity of this Split. In fact all twenty-four of the other split in the procession were female, highly trained and devoted bodyguard to the obviously important Split under their charge

"Ah, my curb has arrived" declared Lord Jxu, "Come sit with me Mim'oria, I have need of your guidance"

Clapping his hands briskly together twice. Several servants dressed in brown robes of quite apparent poor quality rushed to place smaller seats either side of the huge throne at the top of the dais. As the procession reached the dais, Lord Jxu walked down to escort the female up to the seat at his left. Before the seat to his right stood the first attendant who had followed him through the doors, on his chest many medals could now be seen in the improved light, and strange symbol covered buttons adorned his epaulets, perhaps indicating military rank.

Lord Jxu eased himself into his throne struck the gong one final time. Servants rushed about placing trays of food on the tables. Platters of meat steamed in the chill air and mountains of coarse bread were arrayed amidst rows of pitchers filled with a thick dark wine. However very little evidence of vegetables were apparent, the Split are renowned for their carnivorous nature.

"You were speaking of Teladi corruption, General Dhjn," remarked Lord Jxu.

"Yes my Lord, consider, Njy are posted in the far reaches of the empire, bound by the Teladi, the Xenon and the Boron. The Xenon destroy all who cross their paths, and the Njy hatred of the Boron is legendary thus only the Teladi become their main source of trade and communication. The same is true for Family Rye. Tell me also, how else could the Family Rhonkar have overthrown the immense forces of the old Patriarch Chin, without outside support?" was the general's reply. "I fear desire for `profitsssss is obscuring their noble Split virtues. I know from my sources that diplomats will soon be attending a summit to demand new trading rights for the Split families".

A snigger came from Lord Jxu at Dhjn's deliberate mockery of the well-known Teladi lisp. "You speak eloquently general, I have long pondered Rhonkar's successes and you make a strong point. We must be arming for war not wasting resources on corporate expansion."

An encouraging nod came from the General, however from Jxu's left a slight cough interjected directing his attention to his Curb, Mim'oria.

"My lady Mim'oria, you have wisdom to share?" asked Jxu.

"Indeed my Lord, I feel I must point out, as is my duty, at the current time the Family Jxu is not in a position to cause serious threat to any of the other powers and our current standing with

other families is such that we do not have control of even one system in the Split Empire... However much we deserve to."

"These things I know, but our forces are still strong. We have built up many ships and have a strong fleet now in Thurok's Beard if we strike now with surprise we could take the system and fortify it against attack." Jxu replied.

Mim'oria gave a deep sigh, being a Curb was not an easy task. The responsibility of "curbing" the excesses of the Male Splits' naturally violent tendencies could be onerous.

"I merely wish to suggest that we think and plan carefully. Indeed perhaps as the Argon would say, 'we must fight fire with fire.' Subterfuge would be a powerful ally in assuring the ascendance of our family star."

"Go on" Jxu's interest was now piqued.

As time slowly passed Mim'oria laid out her ideas, whilst Jxu listened enraptured. Aided by the military strategies of Dhjn, a plan took shape, which would bring the X universe to the brink of all out war and perhaps beyond.

Chapter 1 Nightmares

The blackness of space was lit up by the flare of plasma fire streaming across the space in front of the view port of the pilot's Nova. Jinking to the left he angled for another attack run against the huge bulk of the enemy destroyer. Huge beams of coherent light pored from weapon turrets stabbing into the blackness searching for any object in space to connect with a rip apart into its constituent atoms. . As more ships began to engage the Khaak destroyer, its shields began to buckle under the strain of countless megawatts of energy being brought to bear upon it.

The comm. unit crackled to life. "Epsilon squadron this fighter control from fleet command upon the Argon One more swarms of enemy fighters are moving in against us from the North Gate. Disengage from the destroyer and move to intercept." The voice seemed fatigued yet confident, "we'll handle this one Commander Dentill."

"Roger that flight control, we are moving to intercept." the pilot replied back through the communicator. Switching to the squadron frequency. "All Epsilon flights this is Epsilon Leader, another wave of fighters is coming in, it looks like Gamma Squad are engaging but I don't think they will last long against them in those Busters."

"Aye sir, Those 'Busted' fighters should be nurse-maiding transports or mopping up pirates, this fights for real ships." This came from Epsilon Three one of the younger 'rookie' pilots who were beginning to pad out the fleet as losses against the Khaak started to mount.

"Cut the comm. chatter Epsilon Three, if the Khaak hadn't decided to start a war with us you'd be in one of those right now."

"Sorry sir"

The cowed tone in the pilots reply was distinct even through the comm. distortion.

"Ok then, All Epsilon flights form on me and go to maximum thrust we are going to need ever ounce of speed we can get to intercept those Khaak swarms."

The squadron accelerated to maximum velocity and headed to the incoming fighters. In the sudden lull Dentill had time to reflect as the adrenaline began to extinguish. The fight had been hard, nobody in the fleet new why the Khaak had decided to attack this

system, only that they must be stopped. Since the attack on President's End the Khaak had seemed only to launch minor strikes with small groups of Khaak ships dubbed Clusters in pilot parlance. There had been talk of small victories against the Khaak, some rumors about a base in the Ore Belt system in the Argon Home sectors but nothing much was known about them.

"Damn them," Dentill thought "why are they doing this, we did nothing to provoke it and yet still they come, swarming again and again."

A sudden beep from the Gravidar system on his HUD brought him out of his reverie, looking down he saw that they within eight clicks of the Khaak swarms. The system showed that there were at least three clusters judging by the three M3 class Khaak fighters. All attacks seemed to include one of these in a swarm. The Argon fleet scientists believing that they contained the jumpdrives and acted as a platform to bring in the smaller M5 scout class fighters.

Speaking to his onboard flight computer he asked, "Computer can you tell me how many of the smaller M5 ships are present?"

"Currently there are forty three... Now forty one." was the reply.

"Gamma squad must have taken those last two out then".

"Affirmative"

"Gamma Squad this is Epsilon Leader, we are on an intercept course to you position ETA thirty sezuras. Pull back and form on our wings, pick off any stragglers."

Switching back to the Epsilon frequency he called.

"Epsilons Two, Three and Four follow me, we are going to take out the M3s. The rest of you form up into your flights and engage the scouts, keep them off our backs."

The calls of confirmation came through from all the fighters. As the Nova Squadron dove towards the attack, the Khaak swarms were slow to react, however they did manage to take out three more busters from Gamma Squadron.

"Gamma Squad, this is Epsilon Lead get the hell out of there you cannot stand against those fighters."

The twelve Novas of Epsilon Squadron dove into the enemy picking

off any of the scout ships that presented itself as a target. Individually the Khaak scouts were fairly weak, their Kyon emitters were low powered and their hulls and shields no match for the Beta High Energy Plasma Throwers of the Novas. Unfortunately, they were fast and nimble fighters and attacking in groups, as was their common behaviour they could cause serious damage to slower heavier fighters.

As Epsilon Squadron struck the Khaak formation, the swarms began to collapse. Realising the new threat was far greater the Khaak heavy fighters reformed into a delta wing and turned to engage. One Khaak heavy fighter was dangerous three in formation were deadly. The Heavier Kyon emitters of the Khaak, bright lances of light swept almost lazily across space towards the Nova flight led by Dentill.

"Epsilon Four break now they'll rip you to shreds." too late the Khaak beam weapons caught the fighter stripping it of its shields and tearing through its hull. A bright flash rapidly lit up the view port and as quickly was gone.

"Epsilon two and three break and attack try to take one out them out together"

The two fighters broke off and started to pummel the lead Khaak ship with streams of plasma fire. Dentill swung his fighter neatly onto the rear of a second. His finger closed around the firing trigger on his flight stick and bolts of plasma began to eat away at the Khaak shields. As its shields began to collapse it started weaving frantically to shake him, but he carried on relentlessly.

Warning signals began to blare; his own shields were slowly failing as a group of scouts pummelled them with concentrated weapon's fire. Setting his rear turret to fire a random attack spread he hoped that that would keep them busy long enough to... yes, the heavy fighter's shields were down. Heavy plasma bolts started to shred the fighter's hull, slowly the power indicators in its engines began to fade as conduits were destroyed. In a raging fireball the Khaak ship exploded, peppering Dentill's remaining shields with hull fragments.

"Warning, shields at twenty five percent" Came a call from the computer.

Slamming his rudder to the port, he activate the afterburner to kick-start his speed to full. Taking a quick stock of the engagement he saw that three more of his squadron were destroyed, however all the heavy fighters were destroyed and over half the scouts were

now debris scattered across this small corner of the battlefield.

"Sir I have two more Khaak clusters coming in on a north easterly vector." This call came from Epsilon Two.

"Warning, critical engine failure, powerplant at forty percent." came the monotonous tone off the onboard computer.

Glancing down Dentill saw his speed was down to less than half of its normal capabilities.

"Ok Listen Epsilon squadron, I am not going to be able to keep up with you, so Epsilon Two will lead you against the next two clusters." Switching his comm. to transmit only on the frequency to Epsilon Two. "Listen Lieutenant Mitchell, try to engage only one swarm at a time and Kat good luck."

"Thank you sir" Was Mitchell's reply. "Alright listen up Epsilon Squad, there's only seven of us now so we'll..."

Dentill switched the comm. back to the Buster squadron's frequency. "Gamma squad this Epsilon Lead, my engines are shot so I'm going to stay here with you and help clean up the rest of these scout ships, form on my wing and then its back to base for a refit, I don't think any of us will be much use after this."

Ragged cheers came from the remaining five Gamma Squadron pilots. Dentill smiled grimly, several of the Busters were in worse shape than his, and they had lost many comrades already.

The fight was brief the heart seemed to go out of the Khaak for a few brief moments, leaving time for them to pick them off.

"OK Gamma's lets go home."

With that the battered ships headed for the relative safety of the Argon One. Again with time to reflect, Dentill pondered why the Khaak should have lost cohesion giving them the breathing space. Xenopsychology was way over his head he thought, perhaps the scientists or intelligence service might have an answer.

A sudden flash appeared above his fighter, craning his neck he looked up and saw a Khaak cluster jumping in right on top of him. In a sudden moment of clarity, he realised he was not going to survive.

"Gamma's head for the Argon One at flank speed, now! You might

just make it."

"But sir, we can't just leave you"

"Go that's an order, I'll hold them here for as long as I can."

Reluctantly the Buster pilots sped away.

Dentill snapped to action, combat strategists had analysed Khaak activities and discovered that clusters were most vulnerable just as they began to separate. Using this knowledge he banked to the rear of the ponderous formation and fired every watt of energy in a storm of plasma fire. Several of the light Khaak fighters exploded under the bombardment, however the formation quickly broke up and began to circle around him, the heavy fighter at the center span round and began to fire continuous beams of the deadly kyons into his shields. Dentill replied with constant streams of plasma fire, the shields on both ships began to fail.

The two fighters, closed, on kamikaze like vectors. Feeding all remaining energy into his engines, Dentill dove his ship into the sharp prow of the Khaak fighter, its hull buckled and minor explosions ripped through to its power source. A huge explosion blasted the shields of Dentill's Nova. Barreling through the explosion, Warning lights began to flicker and the computer began to drone.

"Engines Offline"

Dentill saw his speed rapidly dropping to zero.

"Shields damaged."

Computer parlance for destroyed.

"Life support critical"

Not a problem, his suit air supply should last a couple of stazuras anyway.

"Hull is compromised, enemy fighters are firing"

"Uh oh", thought Dentill, the Remaining scouts were cutting through his ship. He pulled the eject lever. As a brief controlled decompression of the cockpit launched him into the vacuum, his head ricocheting off the back of his helmet. Breathing heavily it seemed that all around him were swarms of fighters. An exit gate

formed a short distance away spewing another swarm of fighters. With adrenaline pumping thought him and the fear caused by being vulnerable in the center of two Khaak swarms he became nearly hysterical hurling abuse at the ships.

Suddenly as if hearing his silent curses one of the scouts seemed to notice him. Turning towards him, he could see its weapon charging to fire. A bright light flared at the moment he slipped into the blissful peace of unconsciousness.

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Deep in the outer rings of a gas giant in the argon system the Wall, hung the Argon secret service's Black Star listening post, buried within the core of an asteroid. Festooned with sensor jamming generators and advanced communication arrays, it was capable of sifting through the interspecies hypernet used by all the races for commerce and interstellar communication. Relay satellites transmitted live feeds throughout the network making it simple for those with the right codes, or the best hackers to listen into most of the long distance communications in the X universe.

In the command centre of the installation, one of the technicians sifting through the communiqués flagged by the advanced computers as suspicious came across a code red anomaly. The coding system was simple, initially all data was considered code green, the algorithms within the hacking software sifted through the floods of data, any communication containing specific key words were flagged as amber. The daily task of the technicians was to skim through these to determine if it contained more significant information. A Code Red meant the system could not break the encryption, the only occasions where this occurred was with advanced military codes.

The technician turned to the Senior Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Commander Daryl Schmidt.

"Sir, I've got a code red here."

"Can you fix the transmission point?" asked Schmidt.

"Working on it sir...Hang on, yes. Sir it appears to be coming from the system Thurok's Beard." The technician paused. "I can't be sure but I believe the signal may have been directed towards the system, Family Njy."

"What on Sonra are the Split up to, usually their encryptions are so poor that a child could break them."

"Sir its going to take a while for the hackers to break through this, should I contact the Intelligence head quarters, maybe they might have someone who can do it faster."

"Ok, Transmit the whole data file and ask them to keep me apprised, I don't like unanswered questions."

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The Bar on the Split Chelt Aquarium was bathed in smoke. Spaceweed was illegal but in the outer sectors, such laws were rarely enforced, life was hard enough without the few luxuries that could be brought in by smugglers and pirates. It was a dingy place with a few scattered tables with small obsolete cargo crates for seats. The few denizens looked up and glared menacingly at the young split who walked confidently though the door. Heading towards an occupied table in the darkest corner he pulled out a small data crystal from his voluminous sleeve. The few patrons quickly turned away, if he was headed to that particular occupant it was best to ignore him, in fact forget they had even seen him.

"You're gonna get killed behaving like that" a voice spoke out softly.

"Sorry, I don't follow"

"Its your outfit youngster and your walk, you look like a young noble whose out to mock those less fortunate than him."

"Oh," The confidence began to fade from the younger Split's voice. "I am Biskhas N'etesh of the fam..."

I know of the Family Jxu, what do you want?"

"I've brought a message for you, it contains an offer of employment. However I must inform you that you cannot read the contents until you accept the job, payment on completion."

"I know what the job is lad, you should really be more careful with your computer systems, I've been reading through your files for tazuras. How's your young female doing?"

The Split blushed a deep purple, but carried on undeterred.

"Will you take the mission?"

"I will that, anything to help out an old war buddy, but I'm gonna need a few hundred thousand credits up front for expenses."

"I can authorise three hundred thousand no more"

"That should do, consider the Mark eliminated."

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Commander Dentill woke up with a start; blearily he tried to take stock of his surroundings, where was he and what was he doing here? Looking down to his shoulder he saw a hand being removed from his shoulder. He turned towards the owner, a slim petite space liner hostess. Realisation dawned upon him; it had been the nightmare again, the one that invaded his dreams every night since being shot down four weeks ago at Omicron Lyrae. At least he no longer found himself bathed in sweat whenever he woke up.

"Sir, we are about to jump to the Light of Heart system, we will be docking with Riza Station in approximately twelve mizuras. Could you fasten your safety belt and raise your seat to an upright position."

"Of course, sorry I was fast asleep, uh... Serena." He replied, glancing at her name badge. The hostess smiled back and headed for her own seat. It was a rare thing for passengers to refer to her or her colleagues as anything but hostess, or the occasional Miss.

Dentill reflected upon his current circumstances. The nightmares had started soon after the battle as he was recuperating in the medical bay of the Argon One. It had been a night nurse on the medical staff who had noticed him thrashing about in his sleep. Soon after the psychologists, known as Psychodocs to veteran pilots had swept in, prodding and probing his mental faculties, with tazuras of MRI scans and psychobabble filled analysis sessions. It was quickly apparent that the Psychodocs considered him a potential risk, as even after his physical injuries were healed, his flight status remained inactive. After his final exam it had been decided, not by his mind that he was not safe to fly in extreme combat situations. The doctors feared that he could be a liability and potentially endanger any mission he might take command of, and perhaps get people killed.

Group Captain Dafidson, the commanding officer of the Argon One's fighter wing had called him into his office.

"Dentill, I am sorry, I have seen the report of the Psychologists and I fear the regulations mean I am not going to be able to keep you on the flight line."

"But sir..." Dentill replied, although it was clear he was resigned to the outcome of this meeting.

"Sorry Rick, but its got to be this way. There is lots I can pass on to keep you occupied and who knows this might all blow over. I really could use you in flight control, you have experience that few others can match, and tactically you could save a lot of lives."

"What about my squadron?"

"Epsilon Squadron has been handed over to Lieutenant Mitchell, well actually its Lieutenant Commander Mitchell now."

"At least they'll be in good hands." Mitchell had managed to keep all the other Epsilon pilots alive after Dentill had sent them off during the battle.

"Well son, what do you want to do?"

"I can't give up flying its been my life for most of my Jazuras. I belong behind a stick"

Dafidson smiled grimly, "I thought you would say that. We have arranged for an honourable discharge for you and a glowing letter of reference. I have a feeling it was prepared by someone in intelligence, they are always so eloquent when it comes to manipulating people."

A short chuckle and then he continued.

"Given the current situation with the Khaak, there is plenty of work out there for trained fighter pilots and I am sure any number of corporations would want you in one of their defence squadrons. They should be less stringent with the health rules."

"Oh great, wet nursing freight transporters not an auspicious end to my career"

"Its not that bad, the fleet is so stretched at the moment that the mega-corporations will pay you big credits to work for them. Of course you will also be held on the reserve list. I have two advertisements here, Terracorp are looking for pilots and so is Grau Defence Industries."

And so here he was, once the commander of one of the most elite fighter squadrons in the known galaxy, now heading to the strange and unknown world of corporations and economics.

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In the palace of Lord Njy, patriarch of the Split family Njy, a shadowy figure scurried through darkened corridors in the servant quarters. Flitting between shadows cast by the dim lighting, back pressed against the cold stonewalls the figure slowly reached its destination. Passing through a low doorway the brief flicker of a candle flame lit the face of the figure displaying the face of an assassin the same recently employed by Family Jxu. Known as the Vengeful Dagger, his true name was lost since his childhood; to his remaining friends and associates he was called Keltana after the ancient Split word for a ceremonial dagger.

As Keltana entered the small room he noted the bulk of a sleeping Split servant on a hard wood pallet. Fortunately the Split had removed its robe and so he could acquire it without causing damage. Drawing the blade of his namesake, he paused above the head of the servant, knife arm ready to strike.

"I wonder what your name is? Ah no matter, you won't be needing it now."

With those words the wickedly sharp knife slashed down and ripped threw the sleeping Split's throat causing a gush of blood. As the lifeblood slowly ebbed from the dying Split's body, Keltana wiped his blade clean on the bed sheets. Sheathing the knife he quickly downed the robe and hood of the now dead slave and headed for the door. He took one last look across the room to the corpse, and saluted ironically.

"Thanks for the loan of this outfit"

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The shuttle finally docked at Riza station. The hostess, Serena walked towards the main docking airlock and activated the pressurization switch for the umbilical connecting them to the station.

"This the Captain speaking, thank you for travelling by Delta Space lines, I hope you had a pleasant flight, please make sure you take all your belongings as you exit the shuttle." Piped over the

intercom.

There were not many people left on the shuttle when Dentill finally pulled himself out of his seat and opened his overhead locker to collect his small military flight bag. As the last remaining passengers exited through the airlock, he walked purposefully towards the door too. As he stooped to get through the low hatch a flash of gold from under his jacket caught the hostess's eye. She realised it was a medal and asked.

"Oh are you in the military?"

"I was, not any more I was discharged five tazuras ago" he replied.

"Were you at Omicron Lyrae? My cousin said it was a terrible battle." A look of concerned interest filled her face.

"It was tough, but I survived thank the cosmos, although many friends did not."

"I'm sorry to have pried sir, I won't keep you any longer."

"Its not a problem, maybe I'll be seeing you."

With a sad smile he moved off and headed to the main concourse of the station.

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The fleet command of the Family Jxu was situated deep within an asteroid field in the Split system, Thurok's Beard. The base consisted of defence installations and laser towers surrounding the sprawling bulk of a class-two space dock. This huge station was capable of constructing any of the variety of split fighter craft and corvettes, and with additional modules dedicated to the repair and refitting of the fast destroyers and assault carriers favoured by the combined Split Armada. It symbolised the growing power of the Jxu patriarchy. Guarded by flights of Split Jaguar scout fighters, the massive hull of a Raptor M1 class carrier was mated to the station dwarfing all the installations but the immense space dock. Pinpricks of light dotted the hull of the ship where windows opened out giving the crew an unrestricted view of the heavens.

High on the back of the carrier, the bridge gave a panoramic view of the ships hull. Seated in the command seat and attended by the ship's captain and first officer was General Dhjn gesticulating wildly in an obvious rage.

"I don't care about the cost, this ship must be ready in eight tazuras."

"We will do what we can sir, but it would be helpful to know what for." Replied the Captain.

"That is currently top secret Captain. However I can tell you that soon Family Jxu will rise again. So be prepared for all eventualities."

As the Captain and first officer preened with new self-confidence, Dhjn stalked off the bridge with little explanation. Heading to the quarters assigned to him he ran the plan through his mind. It was complex and included layers of scheming beyond and to a degree conflicting with his military training. As befitting his rank his quarters were only a few dozen strides away from the main bridge. Entering through the automated doors, he seated himself at the data terminal and started entering information requests and data commands. He hit the display key and sat back. Shimmering in front of him an advanced holographic projection displayed a map of the known galaxy. With his right hand he highlighted several of the systems, Family Njy, Family Ryk and Hatikvah's Faith. Instantly the computer searched for the most up-to-date sector information on each of these systems.

The two Split systems of Family Njy and Family Ryk were heavily defended sectors with destroyers and carriers supported by whole wings of fighters. Hatikvah's Faith however was one of the unclaimed systems. By common consent these sectors were demilitarised zones. None of the races could decide on the allocation of them between them and thus they had become dens for pirates, smugglers and those grey market companies who did not want questions asked. Each system was ripe for the plucking by those who did not hold service to any of the governments. Yet any who would try would find opposition from all the races, unless their attention could be diverted elsewhere.

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Dentill strolled along the wide thoroughfare of the main commercial district. Riza station was a converted version of the standard equipment dock space station, which was increasingly becoming more popular as commercial headquarters for the larger corporations throughout the five species' space. This station was the secondary headquarters and main base for the Grau Defence Industries outer sectors division. The Grau Defence Industries or GDI was a large galaxy-spanning corporation, which to coin a Goner

phrase "had its finger in many pies".

Dentill spotted a small group of sentients being shown around the station. Realising from the uniform of the Argon man leading the others he realised it must be a registered tour. Manoeuvring swiftly to join the small group he followed at the back half listening to the droning voice of the guide.

"As you can see, this is the main commercial district of the Riza station, there are numerous shops selling a variety of goods from pre-packaged food to entertainment systems. We also have numerous restaurants, bars and a casino for leisure and entertainment."

Dentill couldn't help yawning, he didn't really care about the station he just wanted to find the main corporate offices, and figured following the tour he would end up there eventually.

"The tour will now move on to the Grau Defence Industries main facilities. The GDI was founded over 30 Jazuras ago as a small security firm specialising in station defence squadrons and convoy escorting. The company was successful and was soon in a financial position to expand into military hardware production to help equip the growing number of ships in the GDI fleet. Today the GDI has numerous weapon and shield production facilities throughout the Argon territories and is licensed to produce many devices developed by several of the five races. As the corporation has expanded we have branched out into food and resource production to help improve the supply of materials to the main factories."

At least it looked like Dentill's new ship would be well equipped... if he got the job.

"To the right you will see a secure area, the station's laboratories are situated there, this is where much of the Research and Development on new technologies takes place."

Big surprise there, thought Dentill.

"Now if you follow me through these doors we will be able to get a look at the main hanger for the GDI defence squadrons for this sector."

The tour moved towards a large door marked "Gallery" in large bold type. Getting more restless Dentill scanned the surrounding area. Finally he spotted corridor, which appeared to lead back towards the main concourse decorated with the GDI colours of green

marked with bands of black and gold. He followed the corridor and found at the end it opened to a large foyer with plush seating dotted around with tropical plants and a large real wooden reception desk. Seated at the desk was the ubiquitously attractive Argon female, the cliché was evident right from her blond hair to the nails being carefully manicured. As Dentill walked up to the desk, the girl noticed him and looked up, whilst opening a drawer to secret away her manicure equipment.

"Can I help, you?" She asked.

"Yes, I am Rick Dentill, I have an appointment with a Mr Shacklock, only I seem to be a little lost."

"Actually Mr Dentill you aren't, we've been expecting you and you are even a little early. If you take the elevator tube over there." Indicating one of a pair of elevators on the wall behind and to the right of her desk. "Mr Shacklock will meet you at the top, the tube goes straight up, so don't worry about what level."

"Thanks for your help."

Dentill entered the elevator and pressed the activation button. As the lift began its ascent he wondered what his new potential employer would be like.

Chapter 2 – New Beginnings

The elevator doors opened to reveal another corridor bedecked with the green, black and gold of the GDI Corporation. The carpet here was even more luxurious than the one in the foyer. As Dentill stepped out, he saw a small man hurrying towards him. This must be Mr Shacklock, thought Dentill. He examined the man as he walked to meet him. Shacklock was below average height for an Argon male, and was clearly developing the paunch of a forty something businessman who spent most of his life behind a desk. As he approached his features came into better view, short mousy brown hair with a receding hairline, stress line creased his forehead and his eyes looked tired behind the wide framed glasses perched upon his crooked nose. Dentill noticed the cut of the man's suit, it appeared to be of a Berani design. He whistled internally Berani was one of the top fashion designers on Argon Prime, and this suit looked like it must have cost as much as the average Argon annual income. Shacklock was clearly a major player within the corporation.

"Mr Dentill I presume. Welcome to GDI Outer Sectors HQ. I am Petre Shacklock, Vice-President in charge of the Outer Sectors division, but Petre is fine." Said Shacklock warmly.

"Thanks." Replied Dentill. "Its an impressive facility, what I have seen of it. I managed to tag along behind one of the tours."

"Oh, well the tour's only show the tip of the iceberg, much of the station is off limits to the general public, corporate secrets and all that. Anyway we ought to get down to business, follow me and we can find somewhere more appropriate to talk."

The pair walked down the corridor, stopping occasionally as Shacklock turned to greet the occupants of various offices. The final door at the end of the corridor opened into a large open plan office. As they passed through many of the staff looked up and smiled welcomingly to Dentill.

"This is our typing pool," explained Shacklock. "As you probably guessed it takes a lot of paperwork to run an interstellar corporation."

They passed through more doors and followed a short corridor to a large room. A look of surprise crossed Dentill's face, he had expected an office or perhaps the dominating atmosphere of a boardroom. The room they had entered was more reminiscent of a

first class departure lounge. There were leather armchairs and sofas liberally arrayed around low coffee tables. A number of people were seated around the room in small groups a few glanced up but quickly returned to their conversations.

"This is the staff lounge," explained Shacklock. "We allow our people to take frequent breaks, I find it helps people to focus more on their jobs. If you want to take a seat, I'll go and rustle up something to drink."

Dentill took a seat in one of the armchairs looking near a view port. He could see through the reinforced plexiglass a flight of Discoverer scout fighters approaching a group of freighters with the obvious intent of scanning them for contraband. Distracted with wistful thoughts of his old life he failed to notice Shacklock returning.

"An excellent choice of seating, I like to look out into the vastness of space too. It reminds me of just how far from home I am," commented Shacklock.

"I was just thinking about my squadron," replied Dentill, "it's been a while since I saw any of them, I wonder how Kat Mitchell is doing."

"I'm sure things are fine, since the Navy bloodied the Khaak's noses at Omicron Lyrae, the fleet has had some respite." Shacklock gave a warm smile. "But we can't have you moping Mr Dentill, I think we need to sort you out with a job. With the increase in attacks on freighters we need to improve the coordination of our escort squadrons. I would like to offer you the position of Director of the Defence Department, Outer Sectors Division."

"You want to offer me a job?" exclaimed Dentill in surprise. "I was expecting an interview and competition."

"Ah well Mr Dentill, we do things a little differently at GDI, our little chat was the interview, I just needed to get a feel for you." Explained Shacklock, "you see we only invite people who we want to work for us to meet here and if we don't like them we don't offer a job. Besides your references come from the Navy, our best customer, our relationship is mutually beneficial so we can trust their word when it comes to recruiting discharged personnel."

"Well this is all great, I'd never expected things would be this easy." Dentill exclaimed. "Call me Rick. By the way, I have one condition though before I accept."

"Condition?" Shacklock's voice became a little guarded and Dentill

thought he detected a hint of disappointment.

"Yes, only a small one, can we change that title, it sounds absolutely awful."

Shacklock let out a booming laugh, which startled a number of the lounge's occupants. Still chuckling he replied. "Of course, I think Wing Commander would be more appropriate, as it's similar to what you are used too. At GDI we like to differentiate between our fighter squadrons and fleet ships."

"Well I guess I'm in when do I start?"

Just as Dentill finished his sentence a waitress came over carrying a tray with a pot of steaming Boron spiced tea, and a plate of Argnu beef sandwiches.

"We'll deal with the details later, but first lets have some lunch, it's been a long morning!"

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Lord Jxu slumped in his throne, surrounding him were a number of his aids and advisors. He listened intently to the words spoken by an Elderly split wearing the pale green robes of an administrator.

"And at present we can field a full flotilla of three destroyers, my Lord, however the carrier Bashar will require another wozura at least, until it is fully stocked for combat."

Lord Jxu smiled at the mention of the Bashar, it had been his personal warship in his military days before his father's death and his eventual elevation to patriarch of the Jzu family. He closed his eyes and pictured the many battles he had commanded her fighting against the Xenon during the last Great War, and the minor skirmishes against rival houses. Whilst caught in his revelry, the aid droned on.

"We are still weak in Dragon Class corvettes at present as we have only three full battle groups with four ships in each. In two Tazuras a fourth group will have been completed and equipped at the Thurok's Beard Space Dock." The aid began to suspect that Jxu was no longer listening but carried on. "We have thirty fighter squadrons available, however that will leave much of our holdings in the home systems severely under defended. Five squadrons will be of the new Jaguar class M5 scouts, there are also eight squadrons of Mamba M3 assault fighter, the remaining squadrons being Scorpions."

Jxu opened his eyes and stared at the aid. "Excellent! Have the fleet assemble at the Space dock, but have them do so carefully in small groups, we need to avoid undue attention until we are ready to strike." He glanced to the silent figure of Mim'oria his Curb who nodded with a supportive expression on her face. "And send transport to collect General Dhjn and bring him here." On the advice of Mim'oria nothing regarding their plans was being transmitted across normal communication channels.

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The shimmering field of a jumpgate faded as an Argon Mercury class freighter slowly manoeuvred into the sector bound navigation lane which led to the main stations in the Split sector of Ghinn's Escape. On board two Argon men were playing with a deck of cards on a table in the cramped rear cabin whilst leaving the ship's autopilot to slowly navigate them to the sector trading port.

"So why all the beef in the cargo hold, Jack?" asked the one of the men.

The other man, Jack replied "The Split love their meat Bill, and its a rare thing when the Split can get anything but Chelt out here, what with the Xenon blocking the route to the Black Hole Sun."

"I hadn't heard that they would buy off an Argon unless they asked first."

"Normally they don't Bill, but back when I was an escort pilot I helped out a couple of Split traders with pirate trouble and since then I've had a little bit of leeway with trading." Jack explained. "The Split respect a fighter you see."

"Oh I get it. So what will the station be like when we get there?"

"Dull and dingy, we'll just stop to drop off the freight and collect our fee and then its back home, the Split don't make good hosts even if they like you."

After half a stazura the ship warned them that it was on final approach. Jack activated the automatic docking request and a mechanised voice buzzed through the comm. unit speakers.

"Permission granted, please dock as soon as you get green position lights."

Jack deactivated the autopilot and slowed the ship to more easily manoeuvre it towards the docking bay. When he was lined up he locked the engines at the optimal docking velocity as indicated by a bar on his HUD. As the ship approached the station, the two men could see the station looming slowly towards them at this angle it looked almost like the top of a giant opened umbrella, however the heavy laser tower defences shattered any illusions of weakness the obscure shape might portray.

As the ship entered the docking bay it was caught in the field of the station's automatic docking system. The ship glided into an empty bay and as the station mating tube rapidly pressurised he prepared himself for the bartering ahead of him.

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Onboard the Argon Secret Service Black Star Station, Lt Commander Schmidt was preparing for a staff meeting with all his leading technicians. He was reading through the various transmission reports in his office, when a call came through on his personal comm. It was a corporal from one of the decryption teams.

"Sir, we have managed to get a partial decrypt of the Split intercept."

"Excellent what can you tell me?" he enquired.

"Much of it is garbled, they are using some sort of personal code as well as the data encryption however of the data we have managed to gather we have managed to get three words. 'Njy', 'Fleet' and 'Deploy'." There was concern now in the young man's voice. "Sir, do you think this means they are preparing for invasion?"

"We don't know that son, write up a report and prepare to send it to HQ with all the data you can. Good work corporal, see if you can clear up more of the transmission. Schmidt out."

He switched off the comm. Composing himself, he connected the external system with the nav satellites, which would allow him to speak with the Secret Service headquarters.

"This is Colonel Samuels speaking, Lieutenant Commander Schmidt isn't it." Said the speaker on the other end.

"Yes sir, I have information which may of great importance regarding the Split." Schmidt quickly outlined the information they had obtained from the communications intercept.

"Not much to go on, but we do know where to start looking, I'll send a team of agents to see if they can find out more. Anything else to report?"

"Not much sir, I've got a team trying to break the rest of the message now."

"Ok then carry on, Samuels out."

The screen went blank. Schmidt picked up his datapad and tried to focus on the upcoming meeting. The prospect of a war running through his brain made it difficult to concentrate. After a few mizuras he eventually gave up allowing his thoughts to wander with the information he now had, reports of minor trade infractions and pirate activity seemed trivial.

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Rick Dentill looked around his new quarters. They were far more spacious than any he had been allocated in the Fleet. Space was ever at a premium on a warship and so even an admiral's quarters did not have the feel of roominess that permeated the living space he would now call home. Perhaps there were some perks to working in private enterprise, he thought.

His day had turned out to be rather hectic after the leisurely lunch he had shared with Shacklock. He was shown down through the offices and laboratories of the corporation until they reached the main hanger levels of the station. Here the walls took on the standard military grey as seen in Argon warships and installations from Argon Prime in the core systems, to Interworlds far in the outer rim. Walking down the corridor it was clear they were entering pilot country. Scattered across the walls were recruiting posters for the Navy with moustaches and glasses crudely drawn on the faces staring out heroically in thick black pen. The rivalry between fleet and corporate squadrons was legendary. They passed a bar with a group of pilots in flight suits playing a raucous game of poker with more pilots looking on making comments about the hands each of the players held. Clearly someone was in for a big win there.

They approached an office, which Shacklock indicated would be Dentill's private space when at work. As they entered, Dentill saw three pilots seated in front of a wide desk. Two were Argons, a male and a female, and third was a Paranid. As they entered the pilots stood up and gave a variety of greetings.

"Wotcha old chap." Said the male.

"Hi" a nod and a slight smile from the female.

"By the Priest Emperor it is an honour to meet you Commander Dentill." The Paranid boomed in his deep voice. He gave a slight bow, which Dentill felt obliged to reciprocate.

"Pleased to meet you all" he replied, examining each of the faces in turn trying to write each one to memory.

Shacklock smiled. "Wing Commander Dentill let me introduce you to the squadron commanders you will command." Indicating each in turn he continued. "This is Marcus Gromwell, he commands a squadron of the new pattern Nova." Gromwell gave two-fingered salute. "This delightful young lady is Durena Fielding, she commands our Buster squadron." Fielding's face screwed up into a grimace at the words 'delightful' and 'young lady'. "Finally we have Loraminckstros he commands a squadron of Pericles fighters."

"You my call me Loral." Loraminckstros chuckled "I am used to the difficulties the unholy have with our names."

"Whatever you prefer Loraminckstros, May the Priest Emperor and the tri-dimensionality guide your way." Dentill grinned giving a traditional Paranid greeting.

The strange laugh continued "I see you have spent sometime among my people Commander."

"I was stationed on the Odysseus Destroyer Emperor's Glory on an exchange programme a few Jazuras ago."

"I think I will leave you all to get acquainted, I have some pressing matters to attend to. I will meet you again tomorrow Rick to go over things in more detail."

It had not taken long for the four of them to move to the pilot's bar. Dentill, Fielding and Loraminckstros took seats whilst Gromwell went to the bar to order them drinks. "Are you from the Fleet?" Asked Fielding.

"Yes, I was commander of Epsilon Squadron off the Argon One. Been in the service twenty years. I was discharged about a wozura ago."

"Wasn't the Argon One at Omicron Lyrae? How was it? I guess from your discharge you must have been injured or something."

"I was there, almost didn't make it back but I would rather not talk about that. What's your background?" he enquired quickly, to change the subject.

"She's one of those high flyers," interjected Gromwell as he shoved a foaming stein of beer in front of each of them. "She has only been flying for eight Jazuras and already a squadron commander, she's going to put us old men out of business."

Dentill smiled Gromwell was a good 10 Jazuras younger than his forty-two Jazuras and only about four older than Fielding.

"What about you Gromwell? Why are you here?"

"I was in fleet for a few years but kept getting into trouble." Noticing Dentill's frown he continued, "It was my scarf you see, they didn't want me to wear it." He pulled a white silk scarf usually seen as part of eveningwear worn by the more dandyish young men of the Argon social elite. "Defenders of the universe and all that and still not allowed to wear a few comforts."

Dentill laughed and asked Loraminckstros why he had moved from the Paranid fleet.

"It is quite simple, the GDI have been designing some new systems and improvements to Paranid fighters so I am here to help with testing. I had needed, I believe you call it a holiday; I have been in the fleet for over for forty Jazuras and needed a change."

As the afternoon faded into evening Dentill met many new faces of the pilots he would command. As more pilots came off shift the bar became more crowded and pleading tiredness he had made his escape to a quieter place.

As he switched off the light before he went to sleep he smiled as he remembered the grimace of an old grizzled veteran - apparently commander of one of the new corvette class ships - arguing with a group of fresh faced young pilots about the finer points of dog fighting tactics.

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Disguised in the dead servant's robes, the assassin Keltana made his way about the Njy palace, bowing subserviently at anyone he

met. He now knew most of the layout of the building and had managed to mentally map out all the main routes that the Njy guards used. He was currently trying to calculate the most efficient escape route for when his task was done. There was a drain access hole in a small closet near the kitchens, which he could just squeeze through, however where the drain met the main sewer systems were reinforced bars blocking his way. He had dumped the body wrapped in sheets down there, to avoid it being found, however he need to find a tool to cut through the bars. There was no point in striking down the mark until he had a means to get away to collect his fee.

He entered an area of the palace currently undergoing restructuring. To his surprise and delight he find a heavy cutting laser used to shape the stones that made up much of Split buildings. Hiding the laser under a large cloth his muscles bulged as he carried it down the drain and proceeded to work his way through the bars. It would probably take him all of this tazura to completely finish the task .So it would have to be during the next tazura that he made his strike.

As he worked his way through the bars, he thought he could hear voices coming towards him. He stopped to listen, but the voices if they existed had gone. "Probably nothing" He said to himself as he turned the laser torch back on. The first two bars were now free, only three more and the route would be clear. As he started on the next bar the voices came back stronger.

"Why'd we get sewer duty?" A young voice complained. "It smells and I can think of better things I could be doing."

"Its because of those 'better things' that we are down her you foolish young idiot." An older voice this time. "If you could control your drinking and perhaps not offend the guard captain then we wouldn't be up to our knees in this crap."

They were definitively getting closer, so Keltana stopped what he was doing and pressed himself into the shadows of the ridged walls of the sewage pipe.

The light came closer and soon he could make out the shape of two Split warriors, one very young and not quite full-grown. Keltana dubbed him Whiner. The other was much older, well passed his prime and clearly had suffered serious injury in battle as one leg dragged heavily as he walked. Keltana dubbed him Limper.

It was Whiner who first noticed the damaged bars. Moving towards

them he saw the bed sheet wrapped body of the dead servant. He called out to his comrade "there's a dead bod..." He never finished his sentence seemingly flying as fast as a blaster bolt, one of Keltana's knives tore into his windpipe throwing him down to the floor. As Whiner lay flapping on the floor his breathing coming in gurgles as blood filled his lungs, Limper drew his laser pistol. Keltana quietly drew another blade as Limper shone his torch down the pipe trying to locate him. Not seeing a target, Limper moved up to the bars. Leaping from his concealment Keltana grabbed the guard by the neck and ripped his knife through his guts. Doubled over in pain the guard slid to the floor. Keltana licked his knife clean and went back to work. His would have to pick up the pace, at some point the guards would be missed.

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Dentill had started early, being in a new job meant there were many things to learn as well as duties to perform. He was going through duty rosters and work assignments, as much to learn names as to look at improving them when Shacklock walked into his office.

"Hello Rick, nice to see you're an early bird." Said Shacklock as he took a seat. "I need to talk to you about an additional escort mission that needs to be done."

"Ok Sir" Dentill remembering he wasn't in the fleet anymore corrected himself, "...er Petre, can I have some details, what ships are in the convoy, the cargo, and where is it going?"

"There is only one ship so its not really a convoy, it's an Argon Express personnel transport, and the cargo is me!" Shacklock grinned.

"Where are you going? I would have thought you would have a jump capable ship for yourself."

"Unfortunately all our jumpdrives are installed on ships already on missions and this is important and rather short notice trip. I have been invited to help represent Argon interests in a cross species trade summit, oddly enough called by the Spilt. Unfortunately the meeting is to be held in the Home of Light sector. It does mean a long trip through pirate territory, which is why I need the escort."

"Well I have been going through the roster and it seems we are pretty busy with other convoys and patrols at the moment, but fortunately we recently recruited a new pilot so I should be able to

give a three ship escort.”

“A new pilot? I don’t remember a memo regarding recruiting any new ones for a while.” Replied Shacklock with a frown.

Dentill chuckled “I meant me, I haven’t lost the knack yet, and my license is good for the next few Jazuras at least.”

“Oh yes of course, well three ships will have to do if they are Novas, we should be able to out run most fights any way. I hear the pirates have taken a pounding by the Khaak in recent wozuras and are having trouble with fully tuning their ships.”

“When will we be leaving?” Dentill enquired. “I have to get these assignments distributed before we can go.”

“I have a few things that need preparation for, so I guess in three stazuras. Well I must be leaving now I have much to do. I will see you later” Shacklock stood up and left the room.

After Shacklock had shut the door, Dentill picked up his datapad and finished reviewing the assignments he made a few changes to free up the necessary ships. With the pilot assignments finished, he ordered the pager system to contact his squadron commanders and the ground crew chief to come to his office. As he waited for them to arrive he felt the excitement grow, it had only been around a mazura since he had last flown a ship but it felt like Jazuras.

A knock on the door brought him out of his daydream. “Enter,” he called out and saw that it was Fielding. “Leave the door open.” He ordered, “I am expecting more people.” As if on cue, in walked Loralamincstros, closely followed by Gromwell. A few scant sezuras later in came another man, far older than even Dentill this man had the air of a mechanic. His work suit had patches of grease and there was the unmistakable smell of engine fuel. Dentill was sure he recognized him from somewhere. Nodding to each of the newly arrived squadron commanders, he turned to the mechanic. “Mr Marna, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” He said in greeting. “Good to meet you to, Commander Dentill.” Offering them all a seat he waited for them to finish greeting each other before he began.

As he waited realisation dawned upon him, Turning to Marna, “ Bob Marna isn’t it, you were stationed on the old Reliant weren’t you?” Dentill asked, referring to one of the old Argon escort carriers, no longer in service with the fleet.

“Yes I was sir, all of twenty jazuras ago, I remember you, you were

a snout nosed rookie fresh out of boot. I hope you bring your ships back in better shape now; it was a tough enough task to fix them back then."

Dentill blushed slightly, cleared his throat and began "Right well I have the assignments for the next couple of days, most of it is babysitting transport convoys, however there has been a number of Khaak attacks in Aladna Hill over the past few tazuras, so Loralamincstros, I want you to lead two flights of your squadron to help bolster the station defence squadron we have on our solar power plant. Here is the briefing I have prepared review it, any questions you have I will be available for the next two stazuras."

"Very well, commander." Loralamincstros' replied.

Dentill Continued. "Fielding, your squadron will provide the convoy escorts, I'm assigning the third Pericles flight to assist." Fielding nodded her assent. "Gromwell, your squadron will provide general CAP for this sector and act as a reserve for either our stations in Aladna Hill, or Montelaar should the need arise."

"Very well sir." Gromwell accepted his orders.

"Finally, I'm going to need a couple of your pilots Gromwell as I am leading a mission to the Home sectors and need a couple of escorts. Whilst I'm gone, you will be temporarily in charge, so any changes are your decision when I am gone."

"Always a pleasure to be of service." Replied Gromwell with a hint of amusement in his voice.

Dentill turned to Marna. "Ok Bob it looks like I am taking a jaunt through the Pirate sectors so can you make sure the Novas are fully kitted out with HEPTs and as many dragonflies and silkworms you can scrounge because we may have to deal with attacks on the way."

"I will do, a shipment just came in so we are fairly well stocked. I'd rather you didn't use them though as I don't know when we'll get more with the current military build up throughout the sectors."

"I'll try to keep that in mind. Ok team dismissed and I wish you good luck I hope you won't need."

As the squadron leaders and chief mechanic headed off to their separate duties, Dentill prepared himself for his own upcoming mission.

Chapter Three – Diplomacy

As the cold grey of dawn began to creep across the valley enclosing the Njy family palace, deep within the sewage system, Keltana's mission began to reach fruition. His escape route was now prepared. Having hidden the corpses of his victims in a more secure location he was carefully replacing the bars in their positions, he used a weak adhesive to keep them in place, in the darkness of the sewer it would be impossible to see that they had ever been removed.

Keltana knew that the best time to strike would be at night, there would be fewer guards to protect his target and the shadows longer and more frequent. As the morning drew on, he picked his way back to the servant quarters, avoiding the main passageways and guard patrols. On entering the servant quarters he looked for a place to clean himself and acquire new clothes, the stench of the sewers permeated right through him. There would be no stealthy movement that night if he reeked of dung and rotting waste, fortunately there were a number of showers. Having cleaned himself he sneaked into the laundry and stole a new robe of the same dull colours of the dead servant.

As Keltana was pulling on his new robe he heard a commotion outside the room. He sped up his dressing and carefully arrayed his throwing knives within the voluminous sleeves. He approached the door and began to shuffle his feet, as was the common behaviour of servants and slaves. Outside the chamber a crowd of servants were rushing to and fro in a frantic flurry of activity, he grabbed one by the arm and asked. "What's going on, why the hurry?"

"Have you been sleeping, Lord Njy has declared a feast for this evening. We have only the day to prepare for it." The servant replied in an agitated tone. "Let me go I must help prepare the great hall now or I will be flogged."

As the servant rushed off, Keltana gave a silent curse, a feast would mean hours of merrymaking and therefore a great deal of time before he could strike. On the other hand it occurred to him that most of the residents of the palace would be intoxicated by the time they finally went to bed and far less careful and alert. With any luck he could be several stazuras away before any alarm was sounded. Using the bustle of activity as cover he hatched a plan, which would leave him expertly placed to strike when the time was ripe. Unobtrusively he made his way to the noble's quarter, heading for the bedchambers of the family, skilfully avoiding the guards along the way.

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“Entering system, Danna’s Chance.” Piped the female voice of Dentill’s flight computer. Dentill immediately set his throttle to full power, and broke away from the ecliptic plane. The first few sezuras after jumping into the unclaimed sectors were always the most dangerous, there was no sense in tempting fate. Glancing only micro-sezuras later at his Gravidar, he saw there were no hostiles in the near vicinity of the gate.

Settling into a short patrol pattern across the gate Dentill waited for the rest of the convoy to jump through. As if on cue, the gate flashed four times spewing forth the remaining three Nova fighters of his wing followed by a heavily shielded personnel transport. He gazed at the lines and curves of the ship’s hull. The Argon Express might not be the best looking of the new TP class transports but since Argon Spaceways had bought rights to the designs it was certainly the most comfortable commercial way to travel throughout the known universe.

“Sundance Three and Four form up close to the transport,” Dentill ordered through his comm. unit. “Try not to stray too far from it and do not engage enemy targets unless there is a clear threat to yourselves or the transport.” He paused whilst the two pilots gave grudging acknowledgement to the orders. He smiled, there wasn’t a combat pilot in existence who happily gave up the chance to boost their kill scores. Switching his frequency to the last fighter, “Sundance Two, form on my wing we’ll make sure the way is kept clear.”

“Aye-aye Sir” Replied Paul Rzevski in Sundance Two.

“Ok all ships set speed to one-three-five mps and head for the North gate, keep on your toes people were are deep in pirate territory now.” Dentill warned his small squadron. He then decided to call Shacklock via the comm.

“Hello Commander Dentill, it seems the trip is going well.” Said Shacklock in measured tones, “We seem to be making excellent time.”

“Yes we are,” Replied Dentill, “However it concerns me slightly that things are going so smoothly, we haven’t seen the slightest amount of pirate activity and I don’t like it. We are far from regulated space and therefore far from aid if we are attacked.”

"I imagine they fear your Novas. I understand the pirates have received many a bloody nose since it entered the market." Shacklock tried to reassure Dentill.

"I hope so..." Dentill paused, "I am detecting a number of freighters, I count three. They seem to have strange energy signatures and are headed this way. They are making no overt gestures, but their flight paths will intercept ours in approximately four mizuras, I will have to call you back."

As Dentill's hands flew across his sensor panel he could still not manage to penetrate the strange dampening surrounding the cargo holds of the freighters.

"Sundance Two" Dentill called through his comm. "Do you recognise the markings on those freighters?"

"I'm not sure sir, but they are certainly not from any corporation, they could be Indies." Answered the younger pilot.

"I'm considering them bogies, until we can get a clearer ID check." Dentill continued, "We will move to do a close scan I am concerned that they are getting too near for comfort."

The two fighters accelerated with a flare from their plasma drives. As they drew closer it appeared the strange ships were Argon Mercuries however they seemed to be heavily converted in their cargo areas. Dentill raised an eyebrow and was about to comment when the freighters began ejecting cargo pods.

"Sir, what the hell are they up to? They seem to be dumping their cargo." Rzevski called over the comm.

"I'm not sure Two...Wait they aren't cargo containers they are pirate fighters. They must have converted the freighters as mobile ambush carriers. I'm counting six, no eight Bayamons." Dentill replied, with more than a small amount of trepidation in his voice.

"Four Mandalays are also on an attack vector straight towards the Express." Reported Rzevski. "I am moving to engage."

"Negative Two, it is imperative we stay together, we might outmatch the Bayamons in shields and firepower, but they'll shred us to pieces if we split up." Warned Dentill. "Sundance Four stay close to the Express, Three form up with us."

"Aye sir." Three replied.

"Ok Two and Three, we will form the battering ram, were going to bludgeon our way through and then let the transport make a run for the gate. Four will follow at top speed and try to keep any ships away from it. We three will swing back to hold the rest in place."

The engagement began to unfold. Sundance Three rapidly moved into position on Dentill's wing. As the gap closed between the groups, Dentill and his two wingmen launched a wall of Dragon fly missiles against their foes. As the combined speeds brought the ships closer the missiles began to take a toll on the pirates, two of the Mandalays exploded into balls of fire, as their representations on Dentill's gravidar winked out. The Mandalays looped over the three Novas and were seen engaged by the automated rear turrets. Purple bolts from the Gamma PACs lit up the inky blackness as the turrets tracked their targets. One stream of fire clipped a Mandalay causing its engines to explode, as it tumbled through space a second barrage turned it into a drifting cloud of debris and ionised gasses. One Mandalay was not going to be a serious threat to the transport. Sundance Four should be able to destroy it easily, thought Dentill in the lull between waves.

The pirate commander observed the quick destruction of his scouts and reassessed his strategy. He pulled three of his fighters back to join him, splitting the remaining four bayamon into two flight pairs on the flanks, hoping to encircle his enemies and possibly cause them to divide.

"Ok Sundancers, they're trying to box us in. We are going to spring the trap. Pick a target and keep firing, we need to punch a hole right through them and then keep going. Lets show them why these ships are called Novas"

The three novas hurtled towards the main pirate flight group as the distance shrank simultaneously on each ship the flight computers called "Target is now in firing range." Instantly the three pilots opened fire. A storm of plasma fire tore through the shields of three of the Bayamon. One after another three explosions like small suns flared in their visions.

The last Bayamon, piloted by the pirate commander, hurtled by to be tracked by the rear turrets of the Novas. As his shields began to fail, the pirate broke off, heading for the nearest station as fast as his failing engines would carry him. The remaining pirates, seeing the destruction of over half their numbers, and their leader fleeing the area decided discretion might be the better part of valour and broke off, heading for the nearby gate to Brennan's Triumph at top

speed.

Razevski let out a loud whoop. "Yeehaw, Beta Plasma throwers rock. That'll teach them."

Dentill smiled at Razevski's youthful enthusiasm. "Nice flying people, hopefully they'll pass on why it's a bad idea to play with us. All ships head for the gate."

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Dureena Fielding was in a very aggressive mood; she was annoyed that she was relegated to babysitting freighters. It was not her style and it didn't bring glory or advancement and if nothing else she was ambitious. What she really wanted was to be acting commander, the post Marcus Gromwell was filling whilst Dentill was away. Her brooding was interrupted by a trilling beep emanating from the left breast pocket of her flight suit. She pulled out the small in-station communicator.

"Squadron Leader, this is Ensign Greene of the station communications centre, we have an urgent flash transmission coming in for you, could you please take it in the nearest booth please."

Fielding acknowledged and headed towards the nearest privacy booth. She entered her security code and the screen began to display the pre-recorded message.

"Hi Dureena, this is Marcus here, I have a change of plan for your schedule. Corporation HQ in Heron's Nebula are sending the *Euripides*, a Mammoth Class TL to Hatikvah's Faith. You're to leave the convoy escort to your flight group from Loral's squadron and head for the West Gate in Aladna Hill. You will rendezvous with *Euripides* there and then head for HTs Fate Captain Tambla will brief you further upon arrival. Make sure you are there in three Stazuras, Gromwell out."

"Oh great," thought Fielding, an even bigger baby, at least they had started to outfit them with some half decent firepower. Her stomach growled as she headed for her ship, the one benefit of a TL was the canteen; at least she would be able to catch up on the meal she was going to miss.

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The journey through Brennan's Triumph and on towards Home of

light was fairly uneventful. When the small convoy reached President's End, A pair of GDI Corvettes had joined the formation to escort them through what was still looked like a war zone. Debris from the destroyed stations still littered the sector after the first major Khaak attack. Occasional swarms of Khaak ships jumped in at random intervals, keeping the patrol squadrons on constant alert, trying to protect the clean up crews, and keep the trading lanes open. As the convoy entered Home of Light, a squadron of Buster medium fighters escorted them the rest of the way to the Trading Station in the centre of the sector.

Once the Argon Express had docked Petre Shacklock saw that Dentill was coming to meet him.

"I say that was some excitement Rick." Shacklock called to Dentill, "I am highly impressed with your flying. Seven pirates, to no losses on our side, superb."

"I guess they'll think twice about attacking GDI convoy's from now on." Replied Dentill. "Unless they take it personally of course."

"I pray not... Oh look it seems that our greeting party has arrived." Shacklock indicated a group of security personnel led by a man dressed in the uniform of the Argon Diplomatic Corp.

"Mr Shacklock, Welcome to Home of Light sector." Said the diplomat. "I am Karl Fenri special aide to the honourable William Horace, Argon Ambassador to the trading guilds. I hear you had some trouble on the way here."

"Nothing major, fortunately I had an excellent escort." Shacklock nonchalantly replied. "May I present Wing Commander Rick Dentill, He is in charge of our outer sectors defence squadrons."

"Commander Dentill, it is an honour, I have never met a real hero before." Fenri's greeting was warm. Dentill however simply smiled weakly, he could not work out how getting his ship blown up underneath made him a hero. People like Brett Serra they were the real heroes. He was about to say so when Fenri continued. "What's it like in the private sector, different I imagine. I hear you are in command of eleven squadron's now, it must be some adjustment."

Dentill was about to point out he only commanded three, when Shacklock gave him a warning gesture with his hands. He gave a noncommittal shrug.

"Well I guess it must take some time to sink in. We must be off

now, the summit will be starting in a few mizuras you have just enough time to get to your rooms to refresh yourselves and change. I will send a porter to escort you to the conference room when you are done." With a parting nod, Fenri walked off with most of the guards.

Shacklock turned to Dentill, "I'm sorry Rick I guess I wasn't clear, I know you've only met the squadron leaders for the HQ station, but in fact all the outer sector squadrons are under your command. The other eight squadrons tend to run themselves but they are still your responsibility. At present they are spread out between fourteen stations. Which is why it is hard to get them all together to introduce you to them."

"I'm not angry Petre, I'm just surprised, it is a big jump. I used to lead another 11 ships not 131!" Dentill said a little awed. "This brings a whole new perspective to the job."

"Moving on to bigger and better things Rick." Shacklock's smile was broad. "I want you to sit in on the conference for a few sessions. Oh and wear the new dress uniform we have provided in your room, it will help add distinction to our party."

After the two men had separated to the respective quarters, Dentill showered quickly and shave the stubble from his face after the long flight to the summit. Once dressed in his new uniform he examined himself in the man high mirror on the wall. The uniform was something out of an historical holodrama. It was a black suit with a white shirt, the cuffs of the jacket displayed four thin rings of gold superimposed over slightly wider rings of dark green, these displayed his rank. One extra ring from that of his Navy uniform he noted with a smile. The whole ensemble was completed with a green tie and a stiff heavily starched pilots cap displaying a stylised version of the GDI shield Logo with sprouted wings on its brim. In a case on a cabinet he find a set of pilot wings made from pure gold ready for him to pin to his chest. As he brushed off imaginary specks of dust from his shoulders, he heard a knock at the door. As Dentill opened the door he saw a short woman in the uniform of the station crew. "Commander Dentill, I hope you are ready, will you follow me please."

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Keltana's honed reflexes brought him to full alertness in an instant. Distantly down the winding corridor he could hear all the way to the great hall. The celebration was still waxing strongly, the raucous laughter and loud music reverberating through the palace. In the

midst of all this noise his well-tuned ears could still pick out one prideful voice as it came closer down the corridor. Shortly the giggles of a split female could be heard. "Two females" Keltana corrected his thoughts out loud. "This may complicate things."

As the voices grew louder Keltana slipped back into the bedchamber and hid deep in the shadows behind a golden frieze depicting some long forgotten battle. He scanned the room with his eyes, mapping it out one last time. He would soon be ready to strike and did not want to suffer the ignominy of failure by stumbling over a loose piece of furniture. He pressed himself further into his hiding place and held his breath. The door creaked open and in came a young split noble, with a pleasure slave on each arm. The noble turned his head to the elder of the two females.

"My dear, wait outside I want to be alone with your companion." He spoke in a lustful voice. "I will call you when it is your turn."

"Mi Lord" with a short curtsey the slave was gone, leaving the noble alone with his other slave, or so he thought.

The noble shoved the girl roughly towards the bed, as she sat down, he began to smother her with wet wide lipped sloppy kisses as only the inebriated seem able to perfect. Keltana crept slowly and stealthily across the room, deep in their amorous liaison the noble and his concubine did not notice the slight sound of his knife unsheathing. As the noble lifted himself up to pause and catch his breath, a strong arm grasped him round the throat. The knife in Keltana's hand plunged once, twice, three times into the noble's torso. To this point the girl had looked on in increasing horror, she finally managed to snap her mouth open to scream. Keltana dropped the body of the noble letting his lifeblood gush out onto the richly embroidered sheets on the bed. In an instant he was upon her the knife forgotten on the bed as he cut off the scream with his broad hands clasped firmly around her throat. He watched as the concubine's eyes first looked into his eyes pleadingly until slowly they bulged and finally lost the glow of life.

With the slave asphyxiated and the unconscious noble slowly bleeding to death Keltana began the rest of his work. He laid the two side by side upon the bed. With trouble he was able to force the dead hand of the slave girl to hold the knife. Finally he placed the hands of the noble around the slave's neck. It might seem a ham job to a skilled Argon crime investigator, but in the field of forensics the Split were amateurs. To them it would look like the concubine had stabbed the noble, whilst he strangled her in revenge. The emblem on the knife would do the rest.

Keltana crept to the window of the chamber and opened it; he then slipped out onto the balcony. Poking his head back into the room he called out in a fair imitation of the scream of a split female. Closing the window he melted into a corner of the balcony peering through the window, between a gap in the curtains. He watched the events in the room unfold with a smile across his lips.

The second slave girl heard the scream of her fellow concubine. At first she thought it was simply due to the over rough antics of the young noble. Quickly though she realised it sounded more like a cry for help. In a quandary she considered what to do. The other girl was her friend and thus she wanted to help. At the same time the noble would not be happy at being disturbed during his entertainment. She resolved to sneak in and see what was happening, at least that way she could use the defence of wanting to share in the pleasure.

She pushed the door open and crept into the room. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light of the room, she make out the still forms lolled on the wide bed. She moved closer only to realise in horror that the stillness was not due to satiation of their passions. The dark stain on the sheets caused by the noble's blood drew her attention as she screamed. "MURDER, GUARDS, MURDER." She collapsed on the floor sobbing.

Shortly afterwards, a pair of guards rushed into the room. Scanning the room for clues as to the sudden disturbance, the leader of the two noticed the slave on the floor, her torso heaving for breath after her bout of uncontrolled weeping. The lead guard grabbed her.

"What goes on hear?" he asked tersely, "Why did you call out?" getting no sense from the slave he looked up and saw the two corpses upon the bed, the look of anguish and rage on his face was clear evidence he knew who the victim was. Turning to the other guard, "Run to the great hall and inform Lord Njy, his son has been murdered." As the second guard hurried off, the first went over to the bodies. He took in the scene in an instant. Clearly the prince had been murdered by his concubine and had exacted vengeance as his life ebbed from him. The guard was prepared to assume it was simply the retaliation of an untamed slave, and then he saw the knife. He picked it up staring at the crest upon the hilt. He let out a bloodcurdling cry "ASSASSIN, Family Ryk you will pay in blood for this affront."

Keltana stifled a snigger, the plan had worked, as the crisis here developed, all eyes would now be diverted to this corner of the

galaxy, leaving Jxu to focus on his plans. As the room filled with more commotion he nimbly lowered himself to the lower balcony and headed for the sewers to make his escape.

Chapter 4 – Trade Agreements

Dentill gave a wide yawn; he had given up any pretences of feigned interest hours ago. The constant bickering of the various delegations at the trade summit seemed to be going nowhere. So far he had gathered that the Split were demanding new trade rights, something about Split families being given the rights of corporations in trade deals. The Teladi however seemed particularly determined to undermine the proceedings. Their concern was simply for their own profits.

“It seems to me that it can only be of benefit to the Teladi, that the Split economy improves as it would ensure a boost in demand from tradable goods on both sides of your borders.” William Horace, senior ambassador of the Argon Federation replied to the latest rebuttal from the Teladi ambassador.

“Yes, Split tired of selling our guns and shields. We sell other things now. Split need trade deals with families. You take our goods when much cheap surplus. We want fair trade or No more shields.” The Split ambassador shrieked excitedly in broken Argon.

Dentill began to comprehend the situation. He had only limited understanding of economics but knew that most trade between sectors was by standing contracts between corporations. As the Split had no corporations, all stations being owned and run by the Families, it was clear that their main exports would consist of their ready supply and surplus of much sought after twenty-five megawatt shields, missiles and other military hardware. He knew that independent traders might choose to long haul the perishable Rastar Oil, Chelt and Scruffin fruit to Argon and Boron markets but only when the prices were cheap and demand was high. Trade deals between factory and the Argon market could become a boon to the Split economy. With a smile he thought it would also help improve the diet of the average argon spacer.

As the arguing between the Teladi, Split and Argon raged on, Dentill closed his eyes and let the noise of the debate wash over him. He wondered how his new colleagues were faring, probably just as well as before he joined the GDI. Still he couldn't see his contribution to the summit.

Shacklock turned to him. “Wake up Rick, we are recessing for lunch.”

Dentill's eyes opened. “I wasn't sleeping, although if this is how exciting diplomacy gets then I soon will be!” he replied with a grin.

The pair followed the small cluster of diplomats as they entered a large hall arrayed with a buffet table and filled with dignitaries and their aids. Dentill gave a sigh; he had never liked this kind of shallow social function.

"So how is the summit going?" Dentill asked Shacklock.

"Better than I had expected." Replied Shacklock. "The Split are trying to improve their trade deficit and I am inclined to support them in this."

"Why is that? Historically we have never been allies and they do not border us in any significant way so trade might not pick up all that much." Dentill countered.

"There is really more to it. If we can develop stronger trade relations between the five races, then there is a chance that we can begin working together much more overtly. We are looking at the big picture here, the only way we can win the Khaak war is to unite against them." Shacklock was growing more passionate. "At present the Split feel isolated and thus they are more prone to remember the past, their war with the Boron for example. What we need is to grow together, the foundation and profit guilds need to work closer together, and maybe one day a new guild can be created which spans the races, creating a united species council even."

As Shacklock's passion grew, his voice raised and other dignitaries became more blatant in their eavesdropping. Dentill was amazed at how fired up his normally quietly cheerful employer was.

"Wow, I've never even thought about that level of unity. Sure maybe on a small scale, but it seems that only the pirate clans are able to have cross species cooperation." Dentill replied in awe.

"Well if the pirates can do so outside the law, why cannot we within it." Shacklock answered. "Small steps though, right now we need to focus on equalising trade."

"So enters this conference?" Dentill enquired.

"Yes absolutely and I think we might achieve something. The Teladi are the only stumbling block. We the Argon support the Split motion and the Paranid will do so too due to their old alliance with them. The Boron maybe difficult but I think we can persuade them it might help close some of the old wounds and to mend the rift. They desire peace overall, in fact I see the Boron ambassador talking to William, I think we maybe able to twist his arm." Said Shacklock.

"You mean tentacle." Dentill replied full of mirth. "You'd better hurry then, I'll help myself to some lunch, it might give me the strength to get through this after all."

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The blue swirl of the hyperspace tunnel faded as the shipboard flight computer droned "Entering system Aladna Hill." Dureena Fielding breathed a sigh of relief, the trip had been uneventful and she hated the boredom of long flights. She checked her gravidar and noted that all of the three other ships in her flight group were also now in sector. Moments later one after another four more Buster fighters jumped into the sector.

"All ships," she called over the comm. "Form up and head for the *Euripides*. ETA is twenty mizuras."

The flight seemed to pass rapidly as Dureena made use of her ship's Singularity Drive to alter her time perception. As they closed with the Mammoth transport ship, she activated the comm. once again.

"*Euripides*, this is Squadron Leader Dureena Fielding of the GDI Lightning squadron. Is Captain Tambla available?" She enquired in an eager voice.

"Tambla here, good to see you are here Fielding, we are about to head out to Hatikvah's Faith, if you could form up with us we can be on our way." Tambla's voice was warm and inviting.

"What's the mission Captain?" Asked Fielding.

"We are heading out to set up a Computer Factory in the sector. We have recently opened up a silicon mine in Hatikvah's Faith and are looking to use the sector as an ideal place to develop new markets with both the Split and Teladi." Tambla replied.

"Sounds dangerous, using the unclaimed regions, we won't receive any support from the races and pirate attacks may be heavy." Fielding's tone suggested anything but concern. In fact she thought there might be a possibility of advancement through volunteering for command of the sector defence squadron.

"It could be a problem but it is an ideal sector for expansion and we have ordered a whole squadron of mambas for the sector patrol." Replied Tambla. "They should be able to deal with any potential pirate threats we might face. Speaking of which, we are

approaching the gate now, would you mind leading a patrol to ensure the coast is clear.”

“I’m on my way Captain. Fielding out.” Fielding switched off her comm. and headed for the West Gate. As she entered the event horizon of the wormhole, she was just beginning to reflect further on the new possibilities.

The passage of time through hyperspace is hard to understand or pin down. Some pilots say that they can tell that time has passed, others that they exit the wormhole with the same thought that they went in. In Fielding’s case it was the latter, she had barely considered the joys of commanding a powerful fast squadron of Mambas, when her ship exited wormhole and entered Hatikvah’s Faith sector. Scanning quickly through the list of ships she could see no pirate vessels in evidence. Over her long-range communications system, she transmitted the all-clear signal.

As her flight group patrolled the immediate area, a flicker appeared within the ring of the gate. A wormhole exit point began to spiral out from nowhere growing until it filled the entire gate. Through the event horizon, the nose of the massive transport began to emerge. Due to the confusing nature of wormhole physics the speed of exit is the same as that of entry, which is fine for fighters, but unfortunately the larger the object the slower it had to move to enter the wormhole in the first place. Fielding watched as the blocky hull slowly crept forwards, revealing the immense bulk of the super sized container capable of transporting the largest prefabricated station components. Finally the powerful engines emerged plasma exhaust blotting out the view of the gate temporarily with their glare as they strained with the acceleration of the ship to move it out of the way of the gate ensuring no collisions might occur with further existing craft. As the ship passed the blinking beacon lights along the hates expansive arms, four more buster fighters jumped in to form a rearguard for the small convoy.

“Ok Fielding, we are going to move to position 10 by 17 by 22.” Tambla indicated the location they would be deploying the station. “Roger we are setting autopilots now.” Fielding Replied.

The ships accelerated to the Busters’ top speed and headed to the rendezvous. As the ships approached, the eight fighter craft split into four pairs and began patrolling the vicinity of the *Euripides*.

The cavernous doors of the Mammoth’s cargo bay opened and a hoard of small construction drones spewed forth. Each drone followed set pre-programmed procedures. Several re-entered the

ship to return hauling bundles of giant girders. The remaining droids began welding these together and slowly the form of the station began to take shape. The structure resembled a wire frame model of a cuboid box with smaller boxes attached as supporting structures. Into the centre of the construction site a squadron of drones delivered a refuelled power plant, read to generate the energy necessary to power the huge banks of shields, defence systems and the life support of the large station. Within a couple of stazuras the framework was complete. As the drones began to start work on constructing the hull and inner corridors and chambers of the station, the four pairs of fighters took it in turns to take some rest aboard the *Euripides*.

Fielding sat in the officers' mess, discussing the defence of the new station. "It seems to me that given the importance of this sector especially if it is developed, a much stronger presence and a good commander is needed." Fielding said to Tambla.

"You don't need to tell me" Replied Tambla. "Still twelve heavy fighters should be able to hold their own against a pirate attack."

"Maybe but without a major race fleet presence there is a possibility of a Khaak build up which could play havoc with shipping and even with the stations." Continued Fielding.

"That's an interesting point of view I'd better bring it up with Petre Shacklock and Wing Commander Dentill when they return." Tambla could see Fielding flashed in irritation at the mention of those names. He wondered what issue there was there. Before he could ask, Fielding received an alert on her pager.

"Sorry Captain, it looks like a pirate squadron has entered the sector I am going to have to leave you now." Fielding look relieved as she rushed to her ship, though mostly for the chance of action.

As she entered her pre-flight checks, she examined the sector map in detail. Freighters were dashing for cover within the stations dotted around the sector. None of the stations were deploying any particular strength of defence ships. It looked like the GDI flight groups were on their own. As Fielding and her wingman exited the *Euripides*, the patrols from the rest of her squadron formed up on her wing.

Against the backdrop of the West Gate, Fielding could see that there were at least twenty pirate ships entering the sector. Most of them seemed to be Mandalays and Bayamons, however three seemed to be the heavy Orinoco fighters and there appeared to be four pirate

freighters. Hopefully they were just a large convoy carrying narcotics thought Fielding. She activated a wide band communication towards the pirates.

"This is Lightning Squadron leader to unidentified craft please state your intentions in this sector." Fielding asked.

"Our intentions Luv are this. You're in our sector and since you haven't bothered to pay yer taxes, we're 'ere to confiscate yer ships and stations." Replied the pirate commander in guttural tones. "We've 'ad enough of the GDI's tricks."

"You can try, but I warn you, you will pay dearly if you come any closer to our ships." Fielding warned before switching to her squadron frequency. "Lightnings, this is Lightning leader, all ships stay together and watch each others sixes. We'll try to take them out in waves. Go for the fastest ships first and we can make a fighting withdrawal, that should string them out so we can go for them piecemeal."

As she explained the plan, Lightning Two interrupted. "Excuse me ma'am but I'm reading powerful emissions from the freighters, they maybe carrying hornets."

"OK Two, thanks they're also still the slowest so hopefully we can worry about them last." Fielding felt less confident though than she sounded. She called Tambla. "Captain, We have a heavy pirate raid coming in from the West Gate, I don't suppose you can rustle up some support."

"I'm monitoring the situation Captain, I have called in the support fighters from our silicon mine, but they are pretty shredded from engagement's with the Khaak." Tambla reported, "They are sending a pair of Mako fighters and also three Discos to provide the *Euripides* with antimissile support."

"I still don't think that will be enough, I am counting a dozen Bayamons, three Orinocos five Mandalays and four pirate ships. That's two to one even discounting the M5s."Fielding replied.

"I've got people trying to negotiate assistance from the stations but things don't look promising. Do what you can." Tambla's voice was strained, things looked grim.

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The conference had continued for several sessions. The only

progress that Dentill could see was the lack of opposition from the Boron ambassador. He had lapsed into silence and Dentill could have sworn he was sulking, although reading alien emotions were not a strong point. The Teladi were still haranguing anyone who tried to reason with them, demanding trade concessions from all the other parties. Tiring of the constant circular conversations, William Horace, the Argon ambassador stood up.

"I believe that further debate will produce no noticeable development in the agreement. The case is simple. The Split wish to have their family clans recognised with corporate status and this is the central motion which I now call us to vote upon." Horace interrupted the Teladi ambassador, a grumble of assent from the Paranid party, cut short the rebuke of the Teladi.

"The Split people forward the motion." The Split ambassador screeched in his high-pitched accent.

"The Paranid support the motion." The Paranid ambassador stated regally.

"We of the Argon Federation are always ready to welcome the advancement of fair trade, we support the motion." Said Horace firmly.

"The Boron though having misgivings in this matter are prepared to offer the Split our wish for friendship, we support the motion." The Boron ambassador was formal though tried to appear friendly.

The Teladi ambassador stood and paused. The room was silent in anticipation. "The Teladi ssee where thiss isss going and therefore we choosse not to vote. It mattersss not which way we vote so I ssspoil the Teladi vote." She took a deep breath. "Know thiss we have long memoriesss and though we lossse here we will one day demand a price for our ssssupport."

"The motion is therefore passed, four votes to nil." Turning to the Split ambassador, Horace continued. "We will have the documentation finalised by the end of the Tazura, but since these events have been recorded, you may tell Lord Rhonkar that the agreement has been made."

As the Split ambassador stood to express his thanks to the assembly, an aid rushed into the room carrying a message for him. He scanned the message with a growing look of concern on his face. Addressing the assemblage he began. "Split offer small gratitude for agreeing to rightful demands of great Split Empire. You very wise to

support us. Small issues back home so Split now leaves you all.”

The Split delegation stood up and as one gave a slight bow, before imperiously marching out of the room. Shacklock gave a low sigh of relief. “Phew that went better than I hoped. We should be able to bring the Teladi on board if we give them some concessions.”

“Great, does this mean we can get back I am eager to check on how things have been going on in my absence.” Replied Dentill with enthusiasm.

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In the heart of the Hatikvah’s Faith sector, Fielding piloted her ship through the scattered debris of the battle. Half of her ships had been destroyed although all but one of the pilots had ejected and were safely aboard the *Euripides*. The pirates had taken a beating. The impetuous flight of Mandalay pilots had surged ahead of the main body to be quickly eliminated by her group of Busters and Makos. As the two wings approached they had fired volleys of missiles at each other. The pirates had taken the brunt of the fire, losing six of their Bayamons. Unfortunately the Orinocos seemed to have been loaded with an unending supply of the powerful silkworm missiles, which could destroy any of Fielding’s squadron with one hit. Four of her ten fighters had fallen leaving her outmatched by the remaining pirate fleet. She had formed her ships into a delta v formation in the hope that she could slam her way through and perhaps draw the pirates back through the gate, when a heavy Centaur class corvette jumped into the sector. The corvette was emblazoned in the colours of the bounty hunter guild. He had sent a tierce command to the GDI squadron, informing them to keep clear of the pirate ships. Fielding had been about to give a retort when the Corvette opened up on the pirate fighter escort destroying each of the Orinocos in rapid succession. Within moments the remaining Bayamons were colliding with each other in their attempt to escape. As the Corvette’s heavy plasma turrets turned menacingly to focus on the pirate transports, cries of surrender came across the intercoms on a broad bandwidth. There had been cheers across the sector at the retreat of the remaining pirates. Fielding had cursed the stations for their cowardice.

Now in the aftermath her remaining ships were scanning through the debris collecting any of the salvageable equipment before the scavengers flew in to steal it. She hailed the Corvette. A grizzled face appeared on the small video monitor on her HUD, it was strangely familiar.

"Thanks for your help, Captain...?" She paused not having been introduced.

"Call me Captain Graaf, it's as good a name as any." The Captain grimaced. "I wasn't helping you anyway, I was just here for the bounty. I made a lot of money here, so I guess we can call it even, you held them up for me else I might have lost them in Loomanckstrats Legacy."

"Can I offer you and your crew dinner at least?" She asked.

"No thank you I need to get this scum back to Argon space and collect my reward. Good hunting to you." Graaf's face disappeared. As the Corvette headed out of the sector with the transports in tow, Fielding scanned her memory trying to remember where she had seen him before. With no memory surfacing she restarted her patrol of the sector hoping the station would be completed soon.

Chapter 5 –Escalations

Darryl Schmidt paced tensely across the main deck of the command centre of the Black star outpost. Over the past few wozuras reports had been coming in that were disturbing some very important people. He walked back to his seat in the centre of the room and activated his console. He searched through all the red flagged data marked Split trying to find a pattern. Since the Splits' sudden departure from the trade summit in Home of Light, their outer sector colonies had been a hive of activity. He pulled up several reports. Soon after the conference, the Family Njy fleet had been brought rapidly to full combat status and their reserve fleet was being taken out of mothballs. It would be another wozura or two before these other ships were ready for service but the sudden activation of so much military hardware was unsettling. To create further concern it appeared that Family Ryk had placed their carrier battle groups at full alert. Some agents had suggested that it might be a resurgence of the conflict between these two Split houses, however there was evidence of increased activity and ongoing exercises in the sector of Ghinn's Escape. The Family Ghinn was not allied to either of the two rival houses so it seemed curious that they would be involved. All the evidence was pointing towards a possible invasion of the much-coveted Boron sectors at the far edge of known space. It was widely believed that the next shift of the space gates would open out sectors beyond this region.

"But why would they open trade negotiations with us?" Schmidt asked out loud.

"Sir?" one of the technicians queried.

"Nothing, just thinking it out loud," He replied.

His brain hit a mental block as he ran scenarios through his head. The only explanation was for concealment, a maskirova. Yet it made no sense to try to sue for peace yet show blatant military build up. At present Schmidt could only suggest that a limited countering force should be deployed. He prepared a short summary of the evidence with his suggestions and sent it to the secret service headquarters as priority mail. "Let them worry about it." He thought

"Sir," One of the technicians called. "We've got another red coming in from Njy's Deception."

"Let me see it" He ordered.

He scanned through the brief report. It appeared that the patriarch of Family Ryk had requested a meeting with Lord Njy. The outcome of the meeting might decide the fate of the galaxy.

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Excitement swept the great hall of the Family Jxu palace. Lord Jxu sat upon his dominating throne awaiting news from his spies throughout the Split Empire. He indicated General Dhjn to join him at the top of the dais.

"How goes the build up of our forces?" The Split Lord asked.

"The main fleet is ready, three destroyers and one carrier." Informed Dhjn. "We also now have fifteen corvettes and over 300 fighters ready. The fifth, sixth and eighteenth mobile assault battalions have been activated and their assault transports prepped for the station assaults."

"And what about Ghinn?"

"He has had his troops running exercises for several tazuras, it will appear to all that he fears or is preparing for attacks."

"Excellent, we are ready to strike. All we need now is news from the outer sectors. We need the diversion to be fully engaged before we can invade." Replied Lord Jzu.

As the Split Lord finished his sentence a messenger ran into the chamber. His chest was heaving with exhaustion, it was clear he had travelled a long distance at a high speed. The messenger staggered forwards and the crowd of attendants and minor nobles retracted to give him a clear path to the throne. With halting plodding steps he finally reached the dais and bowed low.

"My Lord...Have come... from spaceport... message from agents." Said the messenger haltingly, gasping for breath. Lord Jzu stalked down the steps and snatched the message scroll from his hands. "Its about time." He sneered.

The message was short it told of the deployment of large forces along the Split/Boron borders far out in the rim. A grim look of satisfaction drew across Jxu's face it appeared that the Boron were reacting to the build up by deploying several major fleet elements across the Hila's Joy and Oceans of Fantasy sectors, nothing overtly offensive and yet it was clear that they were preparing for the perceived impending attack. His agents also had evidence that the

Argon were preparing a carrier battle group to support the Boron in Hila's Joy. The plan was coming to fruition, if only things would escalate, to draw the focus away from the core systems.

"My Lord?" The messenger's voice was fearful, though he was regaining his strength. "I have another urgent message from our spy in the Ryk ranks."

"Where is it?" Demanded Jzu

"There was not time to prepare it, so I am here to pass it on." The Messenger replied

"Well speak up, what is it?"

"Lord Njy has apparently agreed to meet with Lord Ryk." The messenger paused; the Split had a tradition for execution in the event of bad news. "The spy believes they are going to discuss cessation of the gathering conflict before it begins."

"WHAT!" Jxu exclaimed. "This could ruin all our plans." He seethed with rage and began lashing out at his servants.

"My Lord," Dhjn interrupted. "I think there may be an alternative reason for this meeting."

"What?" Jxu said with deep anger.

"Njy or Ryk may well have noticed the build up in the Boron sectors. To one who knows about the assassination it might appear that others knew about the growing rift between Ryk and Njy."

"Go on." Jxu interrupted.

"If this is the case it might appear that the ancient enemy, the Boron are preparing to take advantage of the current crisis and try to expand their territory whilst the two houses are at war. Conversely the Boron will see the build up and negotiations as a step towards a war against their holdings."

"Excellent, then things are developing nicely, a united front will give greater voice in the great war council and thus assure the deployment of more forces on the border. I see now, thank you Dhjn you are wise, a worthy servant of your master."

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Commander Dentill was in his office with Marcus Gromwell and Loralamincstros. They were sat in silence glued to a newscast on the vidscreen. It had been a couple of wozuras since Dentill had returned from the home of Light Trade summit. In that time he had brought himself up to speed with his current command. A review of his resources had shown that the GDI had its presence through seven sectors and owned fifteen stations within the Outer Sectors Division. His task over the period had been to organise the defence squadrons to deal effectively with the Khaak hit and fade attacks. The dozen factories, which comprised the main construction capability of the GDI each, now had six medium fighters stationed aboard, either of Busters or Makos. Each of the sectors had also been assigned a flight group of Nova heavy fighters. A pair of Argon Discoverer scouts was also stationed aboard each station for reconnaissance and antimissile defence. The new computer plant in Hatikvah's Faith had come on line two tazuras after the summit. Dentill had been happy to assign Fielding as commander of the new Manta squadron assigned there for sector defence. He was growing tired of her constant glory seeking and thirst for advancement. Combining all the squadrons together he commanded a formidable force. There were four squadrons of Busters, three of Makos, three Nova squadrons, two Discoverer squadrons, the Manta squadron, and Loralamincstros had recently had his ships upgraded to the highly advanced Paranid Perseus. All told he now commanded a force of one hundred and seventy eight fighter craft, enough to take on even a carrier group, albeit the ships were scattered across several sectors.

As Dentill looked at the latest report of convoy escorts and minor brushes with pirates or the occasional maintenance issue the News reporter continued in measured tones.

"And the Argon government has released a warning of an impending crisis in the far sectors of the Boron Kingdom. In a recent statement, Senator Bronwe of Black Hole Sun has requested that nonessential traffic avoid the Boron Sectors of Hila's Joy and Ocean of Fantasy. Our sources have revealed that an alarming build up of forces has been taking place in the Split holdings of Families Njy and Ryk. It is feared that the Split maybe preparing for an invasion of these sectors, the justification for this is unknown.

The Argon government has made a unilateral declaration of condemnation of Split aggression. An undisclosed source within the Split government when invited to comment on the allegations replied that the Split government had no official stance on the current situation but that any action on behalf of the Split people could only be through the need to counter the Imperialist Threat

posed by the Boron menace.

ASN will bring further updates on this growing crisis as soon as more information becomes available. Now in other news..."

Dentill switched off the volume and turned to his squadron commanders. "Things aren't looking good guys. I can't believe that the Split would be so two faced, requesting free trade and peaceful competition and then behind our backs preparing for invasion of our allies."

"It does seem a little underhanded for the Split." Remarked Loraminckstros, "It would seem more likely that they would threaten their opponents long before being ready to strike in the hope of instilling fear."

"Maybe they've been learning a few things from the Teladi," suggested Gromwell.

"I hope not, they're a tough enough opponent without having them unpredictable. Still there must be more to this, it makes no sense to declare war given the Khaak's constant harassment of our forces." Dentill did not sound confident.

"I think we should place our squadrons on higher alert, it is possible that if this powder keg blows we are likely to face raids from the Split Jump fleet." Gromwell advised.

"Why the hell, did Terracorp have to be so free with their sales of jump drives?" He asked. "No don't answer that!" he added before Loraminckstros could reply. "I think I might talk to Shacklock about offering our support to the Navy. It might help free up some ships for the battlefield if we were to take on more of the sector defence role."

"Are you sure that's a good idea old boy?" Asked Gromwell fingering his scarf. "It seems to me we are already taking frequent losses from the Khaak and the occasional pirate."

"We have to do something damn it, we can't just sit about letting others do the dangerous work." Dentill was getting irate, not with his men, but with the situation, he felt impotent now he was no longer with the fleet. He had to do something.

As Dentill recovered his composure, Shacklock walked into the office. Dentill was about to make his suggestion when he was interrupted. "Good evening gentleman. I think I have found you a

mission you might enjoy.”

“Oh,” Replied Dentill, “I was just about to come and see you about something myself, but please fill us in.”

“We have recently completed the development and construction of a new class of warship, which we hope will help fill the gap in the navy between the small corvette and the heavy destroyers.” Shacklock began.

He walked to the nearby briefing wall and after a couple of sezas he had brought up to display a three-dimensional model of a warship. The ship had a large curved prow, similar to that of the Titan class destroyer and Colossus class carriers currently in the fleet. Whereas on the Titan an elongated body connected the prow to the engines, there was only a small compact habitation ring connecting it to the main engineering deck and its pair of massive engines. Atop the habitation ring sat the standard bridge configuration used on the large fleet vessels. The whole body of the ship seemed to rest above a large flat docking bay, reminiscent of the main bay of the older obsolete class of carriers.

“This is the *Ardent*, the first of a whole new frigate class of warship. As you can see it is somewhat smaller than a Titan, although we have included docking capabilities for two squadrons of fighters, which is a marked improvement over the destroyer class of ships. The ship has two roles, firstly as an escort carrier for sector defence, freeing up the larger fleet carriers for military operations. It also can be used in an offensive role to spearhead small-scale operations against less heavy opposition where destroyers would be overkill.

Shacklock paused to change the screen showing a wire frame model of the ship with the engine system highlighted in red.

“It is powered by an advance version of the current plasma fusion reactors used on all standard interstellar craft. Its engines can produce a similar level of thrust to that of the Titan class and as such produces a proportional increase in engine power. Current tests suggest it is capable of maintaining a speed in excess of two hundred and fifty mps, which finally gives us Argon, a capital ship capable of keeping up with the heavier ships of many of the other races.”

Leaving that information to sink in, he activated the screen again, this time the red highlighting slowly flicked through several areas of the digitally modelled ship.

"In terms of weaponry, it has a forward armament of 4 Gamma Photon Pulse Cannons, and uses a new advance loading design allowing it to launch six missiles simultaneously. The four protrusions extending from the main crew decks are topped with anti-fighter turrets, each turret contains two linked gamma particle accelerator cannons. These turrets have overlapping fields of fire giving the ship virtually seven twenty degrees of fire and thus eliminating blind spots which fighter craft might exploit."

Dentill let out a whistle of appreciation; it was a rare thing for a ship not to have blind spots. Most of the warships in the five races had areas where few if any turrets gave protection and thus allowed enterprising pilots the chance to cause serious damage.

"The ship has recently completed its standard shakedown trials, and all its systems seem to be working at full efficiency. What we want to do now is conduct fleet engagement trials. As such Commander Dentill, I want you to use your military knowledge to develop scenarios to test the ships capabilities against fighter attacks. As it is a carrier too, you may want to try some combined operations too."

"You weren't wrong when you said it would be fun Petre." Spoke up Dentill eagerly. Addressing the other two pilots he said, "Do you two want to join in, it would be great to have your input, especially you Loral. It would be good to test the ships capabilities against non-Argon fighters."

"Excellent, the *Ardent* will be testing its Jump drive in Aladna Hill. If you get the mission plans ready for three tazuras time, then you can join up with her there and conduct the exercises." Said Shacklock.

"We'll do that, thanks for passing this our way." Dentill replied.

As Shacklock walked out of the room he could hear Dentill enthusiastically begin planning. "Now Loral, you will play the OPFOR with your squadron of Perseii..."

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A voice called across the audience chamber. "My Lord, Lord Jxu." The sound of panting could be heard in the servant's voice. Lord Jxu turned to see what was so important as to disturb him from his game of Claznar. He was very fond of the Split game of strategy

and did not like to be interrupted.

"What is it now" He demanded with venom in his tone. "And be quick can you not see I am busy!"

"Forgive me my liege." The Split servant abased himself before his master. "The visitors you informed us would be coming have arrived. He is waiting in the foyer, should I let him in?"

"Indeed show the gentlemen in." Jxu waved the servant away. He indicated Dhjn his gaming opponent to join him at the throne. He had barely sat down when three Argon men stalked into the room, led by two of his honour guard.

"Ah Captain Styles, a pleasure to meet you." He examined each of the three men, dressed in attire, which even the most ignorant of observers would recognize as pirate gear. Each of the men wore a pseudo-uniform jacket, each decorated with unique regalia, medals and insignia, which would make the most pompous general blush. The looks of disdain and lack awe at Lord Jxu's presence further set them apart from the average Argon in the Split's eyes.

"Howdy, Jxu, whydya call us here?" Said Styles in broken Split. Dhjn bridled at his utter lack of respect.

Placing a calming hand on Dhjn's arm, Lord Jxu began to explain.

"I have requested your presence for our mutual benefit. It has come to my attention that you have recently found yourself cut off from your comrades in Loomanckstrats Legacy, thanks to the large bounties being placed on your heads in an attempt to curb pirate activities. I know that the borders through Argon and Boron space have been closed to you for some time."

"That's true," replied Styles, "But what's this to you?"

"It might surprise you to learn then that due to the current crisis in the outer reaches, the Argon and Boron Sectors from Aladna Hill, to Great Trench have been stripped of much of their Naval defences."

"It's good of you to let us know that, but since now you've given this information away, why shouldn't I just walk out on you?" Styles replied mockingly.

"You might, but things will soon be changing and it is in your best interests to work with me rather than against me. I know you were brought past my fleet on your way here, do you think you could

stand against it?" The obvious threat was left hanging.

"I didn't say I was going to cross you, Lord Jxu." Styles was slightly more respectful. "I just wanted to let you know I'm not some slave you can kick around. You don't need to use veiled threats"

"My dear Captain, I don't need to threaten. I simply want to work with you. There is one obstacle in your way. The Argon are maintaining a pair of heavy fighter squadrons in Aladna Hill, to maintain the embargo on your trade. What I am suggesting is that you use all your ships and try to break the blockade, it would suit both our purposes if the Argon are left on the defensive."

"You strike an interesting deal Lord J." A smile crept across Styles' face. "I think we might have a deal."

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Chapter Six - Invasion

On the edge of the gate sector in Aladna Hill, the frigate *Ardent* sat motionless against the backdrop of space.

A heated debate was taking place aboard the GDI frigate. Seated at a long conference table in the ship's briefing room were two groups of officers. Each group was spread across one of the long sides. Nearest the door sat Commander Dentill and his squadron leaders, Loralamincstros and Marcus Gromwell. On the opposite side of the table frowning at the pilots was a pair of GDI defence fleet officers.

"I'm sorry Captain Greene, but I must disagree." Said Dentill. "During an engagement it would be foolish for you to maintain a high speed with your ship."

"I don't see why," replied Richmond Greene. "This ship has been specifically designed with speed in mind."

"Perhaps so, but your maximum speed far outstrips the fighter craft you will be carrying." Gromwell interjected.

"What if we were to keep our speed down to the Novas max speed?" Asked Green's executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Edouard.

"That wouldn't be any help," replied Dentill. "If you are travelling at the Novas top speed you will find that if they have to break to engage enemy fighters they will get left behind leaving you vulnerable."

"Indeed," Loralamincstros began. "The main cause for your defeat in the combined operation exercise was due to you leaving your fighters behind."

"Thanks Loral. That's exactly the point Captain. I appreciate you are used to destroyers but you've got a light carrier now. Much of your offensive strength comes from your fighters." Dentill continued his point. "The high speed allows you to get to the action faster and keep up with enemy capital ships and corvettes, but in a major engagement against heavy fighters, you need back up to keep from having a swarm of hornets fired down your tail pipe."

"Of course you are right Commander." Greene replied. "I guess I am too used to not having the speed, the opportunity to go fast is too much to miss."

"Well you did pretty well in the station assault, and I was impressed with how quickly your crews were able to launch our fighter squadrons. You've got the drill down, I just think you need more practice on combined operations." Dentill tried to be encouraging. "Lets go over the replay again."

The group became engrossed again in planning strategies for the new ship. After a few mizuras the conversation was interrupted by a call over the intercom.

"Captain, this is Lieutenant Smith on the bridge calling."

"Yes Lieutenant, report." Greene ordered.

"We are detecting multiple pirate ships entering the sector through the West gate. So far there are at least thirty ships, mostly scout and medium fighters, but we count at least a dozen heavy Orinoco's. And there are more coming through the gate as we speak." The lieutenant replied.

"Hail the Fleet base on the Trading Station. Ask them if they require assistance."

There was a pause as the Lieutenant conferred with the commander of the Navy garrison.

"Sir, Lieutenant Smith again, the Navy has transmitted a request for assistance from any available ships. Apparently the fleet navsats in the unknown sectors are showing the pirates here are just the vanguard, a much larger force is headed this way."

"Plot a course for the West Gate then Lieutenant, raise all shields and charge the weapon batteries, it looks like we are in for a fight." Greene commanded. "Can you give me an indication of the Navy strength?"

"Sir, two squadrons have launched from the trading station, one of Busters and one of Novas."

"That's not going to be enough. Commander Dentill how soon can you get your squadrons prepped?" Greene enquired.

"I'll get on it now." Dentill replied. "Marcus, Loral, are you coming. Let us know when we are in range Captain" The three pilots headed for the hanger bay.

The *Ardent* accelerated to maximum speed and headed for the pirate force. The pirate fighter craft cleared the immediate vicinity of the gate and began to head towards the centre of the sector. There was no real structure to the pirates' formation, so Dentill was certain the Navy could acquit themselves well against the force. With the enhanced speed of the frigate it took only a short time for them to reach the gate, just in time to meet the second wave of pirate craft jumping in.

"This is Commander Dentill to all GDI fighter groups," Dentill called over the comm. "Launch as soon as you can, it looks like we're going to earn our pay today."

The two GDI squadrons stationed aboard the *Ardent* launched rapidly and formed up into six four-ship flight groups. Dentill followed in his own *Nova*.

"Loral, this is Dentill, your *Perseii* are faster than the *Novas* so you head in first. Take out what you can as you pass but make sure you stay on course for the gate."

"Affirmative Commander." Loral replied.

"Gromwell, you take flights one and two to protect the *Ardent*, I'll take flight three and pick off anything that threatens Loral."

More pirates poured through the gate. So far since the second wave had produced over fifty fighters. Most of them were *Bayamons*, however a full squadron of *Orinocos* supported by flights of *Bayamon* were headed straight towards *Ardent*.

The twelve fighters in Loralaminckstros' squadron headed for the main *Bayamon* wing of thirty-six ships. As the two groups of fighters closed to firing range, several of the *Bayamons* began to shudder violently and collapse crushed by some unseen force. Dentill realised that Loral must have had his crews arm the ships with the *Paranids'* highly advanced *Shockwave* generators. As his group closed he could see the pale blue waves of energy expanding towards the pirate group. Each wave stripping layers of energy from the shields of several of the enemy group, some of the crafts' shields collapsed and the energy began playing across the hull of the fighters. More of the ships began to explode. As the ships closed the effect of the powerful weapons began to diminish due to the decrease in distance, the waves having less time to expand. Still Dentill saw that at least ten of the enemy ships were now just wreckage tumbling through space.

Loralaminckstros ordered his squadron to quickly switch to their plasma throwers. The pirates had begun to return fire, and several of his ships showed severe drain to their shields. Each of the Paranid pilots chose a target and fired continuous bursts of energy stripping through several Bayamon shields and tearing chunks from the hulls of others. By the time the two opposing groups had passed there were only ten pirates left. As per orders, Loralaminckstros directed his squadron towards the jump gate. Disorientated and unable to match the speed of the Perseus squadron, the pirate ships headed for Dentill's group.

Dentill had watched the engagement between the Paranid and pirate squadrons. He had been amazed at the effectiveness of the Shockwave weapons. Seeing the remnants of the group heading towards his own flight he ordered his ships to accelerate.

"Alright pilots, arm your dragonflies, lets see if we can't even the numbers before they get in range."

As the ships closed, Dentill gave the order and ten missiles flew from the Novas, hurtling towards the pirates at breakneck speed. Within moments the warheads were detonating around the pirate craft. Three of the Bayamon fell before the rest could evade the missiles. Before the temporary panic gave Dentill's elite pilots all the time they required to mop up the remaining ships.

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Captain Greene watched in silence as two squadrons of pirate fighters closed with his ship. The main view screen was divided between video feed of the pirate wing and a two-dimensional map showing the locations and strengths of all the ships and squadrons in the sector. He could see the Argon Navy squadrons battling in a ferocious dogfight with the pirates' first wave. Nearer the gate, he watched as the Perseus squadron blunted the Bayamon wing and headed to cut off entrance to the sector. He had deliberately held off from engaging in case it was necessary to intervene elsewhere.

"Lieutenant Smith, Set our velocity to match Gromwell's Novas and head towards the pirate group moving to intercept us." Greene ordered. Calling to Gromwell's ship he added "Marcus, I suggest you concern yourself with the Bayamon, we'll take the Orinocos. They can't carry hornets so they should pose little threat to us."

Gromwell acknowledged the suggestion and directed his two flight groups to engage the designated squadron. The fight was relatively one sided, Bayamons were no competition to well flown Novas. The

entire squadron were wiped out with only two of Gromwell's fighters destroyed. The Orinocos were suffering a similar fate at the hands of the *Ardent*. As the pirate squadron closed, the prow gunners opened fire with the huge photon cannons. Each cannon had the power the heaviest plasma thrower and yet a range which far extended any weapon developed to date. The pirate fighters shuddered amidst the storm of energy buffeting around them. The hail of blue bolts exploded against shields, and turned hull plating into flowing rivers. In brief moments four of the ships were destroyed. The pirate squadron split apart like a firework explosion, blossoming about the *Ardent*. The pirates launched waves of powerful silkworm missiles at the frigate, but the five hundred megawatts of shields installed shrugged off the explosions. The plasma throwers of the Orinocos' main armament nibbled at the shields, but as the fighters curved over the hull, the turrets around the *Ardent's* centre began to send out streams of particle fire. Three brief explosions lit up the shields around the *ardent*, signifying the deaths of more pirates. The remaining five decided enough and fled towards the gate hoping to avoid anymore GDI fighters on the way.

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Dureena Fielding knew something significant was occurring in Aladna Hill. She had watched with frustration as the huge pirate task force had passed through the sector. She had been forced to pull back her patrols; there was no way that her twelve fighters could have provided much resistance to the overwhelming fleet. Amidst the wings of pirate fighters, a large converted Split Elephant super transport ship had passed by. She was sure that this was the command ship of the taskforce. Within mizuras the entire taskforce headed through the gate, all except the transport. She had heard the calls for assistance and knew that she had to try something to help. Perhaps if the command ship was neutralised the pirates might end up in disarray. She immediately ordered her squadron to mobilise. All twelve Mambas were soon heading for the East Gate, the Elephant squarely in their sites. As her squadron closed with the enemy the main hanger doors opened on the ship. Out spewed dozens of Split military fighter craft. Over a multi-frequency transmission a Split voice spoke with menace.

"Lord Jxu of family Jxu demands all ships surrender. All stations lower shields, prepare to be boarded. Glory to Family Jxu and the Split Dynasty."

Fielding began to laugh, she appreciated that there were a lot of Split fighters, but her squadron alone might be able to take them on. As if in agreement with her, the other stations began launching

their own fighter squadrons. Soon a motley assortment of heavy, medium and light fighters from all of the races flanked her squadron. The Split force was heavily outnumbered. The Split phalanx began to slow and suddenly formed a defensive perimeter around the Elephant. It would be only a scant few mizuras before the two fleets engaged.

Fielding glanced at a flashing light on her console. It appeared that the Elephant had sent a hypercom signal to an unknown location. If it was a cry for help, she hoped it would not be answered soon. Unfortunately this was not to be. As if they had been waiting for just this signal a massive taskforce jumped into the system. From the North Gate wings of fighters poured out breaking and heading for the ragtag group of defence fighters. From the West gate, the monstrous shape of a twin hulled Python slowly appeared, flanked by several fast moving Dragon class corvettes.

It looked like the sector inhabitants were doomed. All three jump gates were blockaded leaving no escape route. The North Gate swirled with the exit point of a wormhole; slowly another capital ship eased itself out. Fielding saw it was the dagger hull of a Raptor class carrier. Several squadrons of fighters began exiting from the Raptor's hanger and began to form an offensive wedge around the carrier. Behind the fighter craft launched several Iguana transports, no doubt filled with assault troops. As Fielding tried to think of a solution another transmission came, this time from the carrier.

"This is General Dhjn, supreme commander, Jxu Family fleet. All residents return to your stations. If you do not comply we destroy you."

With no alternatives Fielding ordered her ships back to base. She only hoped they were not kept long as prisoners, or worse, the Split were still known for keeping slaves. Once back at the computer plant she tried contacting headquarters, fortunately the Split had not or could not deploy hypercom jamming so her communication got through.

"Control." A cheerful voice answered.

"Squadron leader Fielding, is Commander Dentill available, its urgent." Fielding tried to stay calm.

"I'm sorry Commander Dentill is not on the station at present." The voice answered unphased.

"Well is Petre Shacklock available?" She said. "And don't give me

any crap about meetings, this is too important.”

“Hold please”. The voice cut off to be replaced shortly afterwards by Shacklock’s deeper tones. “Dureena, what is the problem, I am told you have an urgent problem.”

“Petre, the Split have invaded the sector, all the gates are under blockade, we’re trapped.” Fielding replied.

“Ok, listen sit tight. I need you to transmit all the data you can on the Split forces. We may have a way to get you out, but make sure you are ready to leave. Get all personnel to the shuttles, don’t worry about any equipment there won’t be time.”

Shacklock cut her off and she could only wait. It took very few mizuras for the crew of the station to board the three transport ships in the main commercial hanger. Within a short time, only Fielding and the station commander were left in the command centre.

“Get the internal transporter ready.” She ordered. “We won’t have much time after we are done here.”

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Commander Dentill docked his ship back in the main bay on the *Ardent*. The battle had been an amazing success, the GDI and Navy had taken barely a dozen losses between them, whereas the pirates were now either destroyed or taken prisoner. The battle had been a complete success, in no small part thanks to the presence of the *Ardent*. As he headed for the Bridge, the intercom activated. “Commander Dentill please report to the Captain’s briefing room ASAP.”

“I’m on my way.” Dentill replied.

He was only a short distance away when the call came through so it did not take long before he was walking through the door. “Ah commander,” said Greene, “I’m getting a priority signal from headquarters and thought you ought to be present.” Momentarily the vidscreen was filled with a concerned looking Shacklock.

“Hello Captain and Commander we have a serious situation developing in the Hatikvah’s Faith system. It seems the Split have launched an invasion fleet and are even now about to capture all the stations in the sector. I fear they are taking advantage of the current crisis in the outer Boron colonies.” Said Shacklock.

"Damn, I knew they were up to no good." Replied Greene.

"Have you got any data from the sector." Asked Dentill. "Have our stations been overrun yet?"

"No I have just received a transmission from Dureena Fielding and if we are quick we may be able to open a corridor for at least some ships to escape." Shacklock sounded hopeful. I am transmitting Fielding's data now."

"I think we might be able to help out." Dentill replied. "We're don't have much time Petre so we'll let you know how it turns out."

Shacklock's protests were cut off as Dentill switched off the vidscreen.

"I think we might have a chance Captain." He said to Greene. "The East gate, to this sector is not very heavily guarded, chances are they thought the pirates would be more successful."

"Yes, I think you may be right. They will certainly not be expecting a capital ship so if your chaps can drive us a path through the fighters I think we can clear a way." Greene replied.

"We don't have time for a better plan, get the ship moving I'll get my pilots back to their ships."

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An emergency message came through on an encrypted wavelength. Fielding saw that it was a simple written message from Dentill, it said simply. "We are coming, be ready." With a spark of hope, she turned to the station commander and said. "Lets do it now and then get to the ship. The Split are spread out so we should be able to hold them off till help arrives." The two officers headed for the central command console. Opening a secured panel the station commander activated a small keypad. "Self destruct on standby" a computerised voice called. Together the pair swiped their security passes through readers either side of the pad. The warning lights began to flash. The commander typed in a number and a counter began to tick down, starting from thirty mizuras. Lets go she said, activating the transporter. The station commander was sent to the lead passenger carrier. Activating the transporter, she found herself in the spacious cockpit of her Mamba strike fighter.

In a roar of engine wash her ship launched from the main docking

port. In her wake the rest of her squadron and the three personnel ships followed. A group of Split fighters detected them and headed to intercept. Seeing their numbers were less the Split decided against attacking. Fielding led her small task group towards the gate to Aladna Hill. She hoped Dentill would be able to assist. Behind her several squadrons of fighters accelerated to catch up. In their midst, two Iguana assault transports headed for the station.

Dureena watched as Iguanas entered the bays of several of the stations. Only two stations were still unengaged. She transmitted a signal to both of them. "Squadron leader Fielding here, we may have a way out of this sector, any ships that can reach us can come with." As if waiting for just this signal several fighters and transports launched from the stations, within less than a mizura her group has swelled to twenty fighters and eleven transports.

Several of the transports were old and battered, their speed was delaying her small group and she watched as the gap with her pursuers began to shrink. "Come on Dentill, or there won't be any of us left." She said out loud, startling herself. The Elephant at the East gate sent half its fighters to intercept her squadron. It turned out to be a fatal mistake, the east gate swirled with bright light as the prow of a large ship jumped in. Having never seen the *Ardent*, both the Split and the fugitive fleet had no idea what it was and could only assume it was Argon due to the design. A shoal of fighters flew from the main hanger, accelerating to attack speed, aimed at the Elephant's escorts.

Fielding heard a cheer from her squadron as Dentill's face appeared on the comm. screens of the GDI ships. "All GDI ships, Commander Dentill here, head for the *Ardent*, we'll provide cover for you."

"What about the Elephant," Fielding asked, "Its right across our flight path."

It was Greene who interrupted. "Not a problem, we have a surprise in store for them."

The Elephant moved with its remaining fighter squadrons to engage the *Ardent*. From under the prow a ripple of flashes could be seen, as a volley of Hornet, shield busting missiles burst forth. Surprised by this the Split force was slow to react and five of the hornets smashed into the Elephant's shields. Within moments the missiles were followed by the long range fire of the *Ardent*'s photon pulse cannons. Blue balls of energy smashed into the shields on the Elephant. The heavy bombardment pummelled the ship, by the time it had reached the firing range of its own plasma throwers, its shields

were critical. A huge explosion ripped through the Elephant's cargo bay destroying several of its escorting fighters. A huge gaping hole was left in its prow and Greene ordered his gun crews to concentrate all their fire at this point. Photon pulses tore through hull plating ripping through unprotected walls within the corridors of the Elephant. Its captain desperately tried to manoeuvre away, but too late, several shots penetrated into the engine room piercing the reactor. A blazing light flashed across the sector, drowning out the sun temporarily. As eyes refocused it was clear that the Elephant was no more, several of its escorts were damaged and those which were still able, scattered away from the approaching GDI fighters.

"Fielding, can you move any faster, we have inbound squadrons." Dentill called.

"Sorry sir, but we are escorting some slow transports here." Fielding replied not disguising her annoyance.

"Ok make best speed, have your transports and those other fighters dock with the *Ardent*. Form your squadron up with my wing we'll have to provide cover until the frigate can pull out." Dentill ordered unphased.

The three squadrons of GDI fighters met between the *Ardent* and approaching split fighter wings. The first few Split fighters held back, waiting for reinforcements to arrive. Dentill's wing fleshed out with Fielding's Mambas, used the time to move closer to the gate, the Nova squadron acting as rearguard due to their rear turrets.

As more Split squadrons formed up the GDI wing was forced to turn to meet the threat. Missiles sped through space searching for targets, bright flashes lit up the sky signifying the destruction of a ship. The first Split wave was driven off with heavy casualties, but Dentill had lost a quarter of his force. The *Ardent* finished loading the transports and turned to head for the gate. With no opposition in range, Dentill led his remaining ships after the frigate. It was not long before they reached the gate. As the wormhole enveloped him he began to reflect on the cost of this victory.

Chapter 7 - Interludes

Warleader Intaru Ven'Iksto, commander of the renowned Eighth Assault Battalion watched as the GDI forces fled the sector. The iguana troop transport looped over the computer plant and swung round in a tight half circle to line up to dock with the station. Special assault torpedoes were launched which tore apart the heavy hangar doors whilst leaving the docking tube intact. Within a few scant sezuras the ship had come to a stop within the main bay of the station. Intaru had been given the honour of this assault, the high-tech station would make a prime sector defence headquarters until a more permanent fixture could be deployed. He was the first of the assault troops through the boarding tube and he led the first squad as they stormed into the main loading bay. No enemy troops seemed to be in opposition, but as he signalled for the rest of his company to disembark and deploy, automated heavy cannons began to fire from concealed positions in the wall and ceiling. Tracer shells from all four guns lit up the dim bay and he watched in momentary fascination as they disembowelled and tore apart two of his men. The remainder of his squad dived for cover amongst cargo crates and heavy lifting machinery.

With the squad now spread out they were better protected and could begin to return fire. Motioning to the warrior sheltering behind the same stack of crates Intaru indicated with gestures to use the pulse grenade launchers under slung beneath the assault rifles they carried. The roar of the cannons drowned out any possible verbal communication and so the warrior simply nodded his confirmation of the orders. Taking aim at the nearest cannons, the pair fired their grenades. The ammunition exploded on one of the cannons, peppering the bay with hot shards of molten metal. The second cannon seemed to jam, unable to continue its fire. Other split warriors seeing the example set by their warleader opened fire, some with grenades, others with the pulses from their plasma assault rifles. In a short space of time, the turrets fell silent.

With the bay clear, the rest of the company filed into the room. He divided the warriors into four platoons. One he would lead to take the control centre. The others would secure vital locations, the security offices, main generator bay and computer core. Intaru expected heavy opposition from any remaining GDI troopers, so warned his lieutenants to be on their guard.

As they passed through several deserted corridors, Intaru realised that the station must have been abandoned. Picking up the pace, his platoon was soon nearing the nerve centre of the station. They met very little resistance from the uncoordinated auto defence

weapons and were soon at the doors, which give them access to the central command room. A pair of warriors moved down a side corridor to engage a turret, the sounds of battle filling the otherwise quiet chamber giving him a warm glow. The feel of battle could only be improved with the screams of dying enemies. Charges were placed around the door. His men took shelter around corners as he activated the detonator. A loud crash signified the destruction of the door.

As he entered the bridge, Intaru could feel the acrid smoke from the explosives burning his lungs. A pair of computer specialist rushed to computer panels to deactivate security systems within the station to minimise casualties suffered by his other platoons. Amidst the countless warning lights flashing around the room none of the Split warriors noticed the small countdown on the commander's console flashing its way down. It now had reached only eight mizuras.

Intaru found the main communications station and activated it. He set the frequency to that of the command carrier.

"Honourable General Dhjn, Warleader Intaru Ven'Iksto reporting. The computer plant is now in our hands. We met only limited resistance from automated defences, there appears to be nobody else aboard."

"Excellent, is the security system disabled?" Dhjn replied.

"Yes Sir, my men are beginning the clean up as we speak."

"Very well, I will be sending a group of supply freighters to dock with the station. We should have it operable soon." The General paused. "In fact, I think I shall come aboard with them. Dhjn out."

Intaru had much to prepare for the General's arrival in such a short time. He gathered together a group of warriors and headed for the loading bay. At least here he could clean out before Dhjn's arrival. The team began to move the heavy crates to stack them against the wall giving clear access between the station proper and the docking bays.

On the Raptor flagship the *Bashar*, General Dhjn was preparing his own entourage. His honour guard preceded him as he marched with his aids towards his personal shuttle. The shuttle was a converted Iguana with an extra layer of shielding provided by cutting down on the troop bays. As he was only bringing a handful of men with him the lack of space would be negligible.

The shuttle was soon making its way towards the Computer plant. On either flank a flight of scorpions provided escort. Dhjn moved to the cockpit and looked out at his new headquarters. It did not look like a military installation, but it would serve. Far ahead of his ship in the distance he could just make out the hulls of half a dozen caiman transports, loaded with supplies for the new base. The convoy began to slow as it moved to line up with the docking lights when Dhjn noticed the station seemed to swell. Bulkheads began to buckle under the pressure of the station's exploding power core. In an immense flash which temporarily blinded Dhjn and his pilot the station blew up spectacularly. Debris from the station battered the shields as the shockwave forced itself ever further outwards. However as quickly as it occurred the cloud of vaporised matter began to dissipate into the vacuum. Nothing was left of the station, glancing down at the shield indicator, Dhjn was glad he had added the extra shield.

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In orbit around Argon Prime the Headquarters of the Argon Navy floated peacefully against the background of deep space and winking stars. On board things were not quite so calm. The conference room was filled with senior admirals and intelligence officers. The invasion of Hatikvah's Faith had caused a great stir within the upper echelons of the Argon military. Admiral Brenner, the chief of staff of the Navy was describing a recent meeting with the Split ambassador.

"I passed on our utter disgust at such a despicable act but the Split government are disavowing any knowledge of such events." His voice displayed evident disbelief of the Splits' position. "The ambassador even had the gall to suggest that we were lying in an attempt to disguise our own 'aggressive stance' in the outer rim."

Lieutenant Commander Schmidt though the most junior officer present, took a deep breath and interrupted. "I'm sorry may I speak." The Admiral nodded. "All the current data we have on recent Split activity suggests that their focus is centred around their deployment on the Boron - Split border, In the past few tazuras several additional battlegroups from various families have been stationed across this border." He paused for that information to sink in. "It is my belief that there is some other influence involved here."

"Do you have any idea what they might be commander," asked Vice-Admiral Yamishiru.

"I'm afraid not, the Split have tightened their border patrols and it

is getting increasingly hard to get information out of their space." Schmidt grimaced. "At present we are only getting the occasional encrypted transmission, but nothing of consequence."

Colonel Samuels continued. "The Split government is disavowing all knowledge of the event. Their main use of the unclaimed sectors is to connect with their southern sectors beyond Paranid space and it is rare that their pilots will make such a journey. I find it possible that they may not have clear knowledge of events, if Family Jxu is acting on its own, although that is a big if."

"Indeed" Schmidt added. "The Split are notoriously fractious in their government, it is possible that Family Jxu might decide to take advantage of the current crisis to improve its status in a way one of the other five races would not."

"Can we ascertain what caused this situation to occur?" Asked Brenner.

"What we know is that Split families along the border of Boron space began mobilizing their forces a couple of wozuras ago. We have no indication what precipitated such an aggressive mood." Replied Samuels.

"Perhaps Jxu has had something to do with it?" suggested Schmidt.

"We have no way of confirming such speculation," Samuels interrupted, "although we have indications that there was a great deal of turmoil within the upper echelons of Family Njy just prior to their mobilization. We assumed that was over impending war. Perhaps some other factor caused this; unfortunately we cannot easily get any information out of Split space at present."

"Well we need to tackle the larger issue first. We must try to calm things down between the Boron and the Split." Replied Brenner. "Only after there is some level of scale down can we deal with Jxu. Plus we need to get the Paranid and Teladi on side to be able to pressure the Split into forcing Jxu to give up his gains."

"So we are going to ignore Jxu's actions at the moment?" Asked Admiral Yamishiru.

"It's all we can do." Replied Brenner. " We must not provoke the Split in anyway."

As the meeting continued to other issues, Brenner dismissed Schmidt and Samuels; the rest of the conference did not require

their input. As they followed the corridor to the hanger and their waiting transport Schmidt sighed.

"I'm glad that's over, it was far to intense for me."

"You get used to it." Samuels replied. "Still I have something even more stressful for you. I have secured an agreement with Petre Shacklock of the Grau Defence Industries."

"Oh?" Replied Schmidt with interest.

"I agree with you on the Jxu issue, I have a feeling that transmission we cannot crack came from them. I want you to try with the assistance of the GDI to gather more information from Jxu, it might be the key."

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Far away from the turmoil he had created Lord Jxu was seated in his personal shuttle as it slowly began its decent towards the capital city of on the Split homeworld in Family Pride. He could see a single shaft of light piercing the clouds to beam down upon a monstrous fortress, which dominated the city. The fortress was carved from the rock of a single great mountain, which towered over the landscape. Minarets and turrets jutted out from its surface and great caverns cut from the living rock showed landing fields and hangers for the elite guard of the Grand Patriarch of All Split, Lord Rhonkar.

The shuttle slowed its decent as it came close to one of the main spaceports, its escorting fighters peeling off in formation to resume their patrols over the city. Jxu made use of the time to ensure that his robes were immaculate; he would soon be present before his own ruler.

A phalanx of guards was waiting at the field, waiting to escort him and his entourage to the council chambers, the seat of Split rule. The imperial guards remained silent as they marched. Jxu was pleased that a senior aide to the Patriarch was there to meet him. He was given a formal greeting and then led through the wide, airy corridors of the palace towards their destination.

Jxu looked at the doors to the council chambers. They were the height of most habitation blocks. He wondered at the number of slaves that were required to move them as they slowly creaked open. As they walked into the chamber, he saw that almost all the ruling members of the Split clans were present. The aide called out

in a loud voice announcing him.

"Lord Xin te'la Jxu, Patriarch of the Family Jxu."

"I greet Lord Jxu in the name of my ancestors and the great father, Thurok." Boomed a loud voice. Jxu could see on the golden throne, cloaked in the skin of some great predator sat the supreme ruler of all the Split.

"Oh great and gracious Lord, I humbly request an audience with you." Lord Jxu replied.

The patriarch waved his assent. "Yes I believe we have much to discuss, especially your recent actions in the disputed territories."

"All I have done is for the glory of the Split." Jxu answered. "Sometimes action is required when the flowery words of our rivals will not give what is rightfully ours."

The patriarch stared, showing no emotion. Jxu quickly continued. "I have seen how the actions of pirates and smugglers have damaged us, whilst the opposition from the other races have left us impotent to act. I am simply punishing those who have tried to destroy us." Jxu's voice was raised to fever pitch as his passion and rage grew. "In fact whilst they preach words of peace to us, did not the ancient foe and their allies begin to arm ready for a strike against our borders." He paused. "Many of us have learned of your recent loss Lord Njy who else would have committed such a heinous act but the insidious Boron, we know how much they hate you for your victories over them. They try to turn us against ourselves, but I Lord Jxu spit at them, I do not propose that we will go to war, but we will defend ourselves and punish those who try to injure us. My war against the pirates is fought to free our people from their oppression, and if we should gather slaves and resource to us along the way then I say this. It is the fault of those who would give succour to our enemies."

The whole chamber filled with the roars and cheers of the assembled crowds. Jxu could hear his impassioned words being drowned by the released emotions of his peers. He revelled in his successful subterfuge; he now had much of the Split Empire behind him.

"SILENCE!" Cried out the Patriarch, "I have heard your words Jxu, and though I hear much wisdom in them and yet I feel troubled. Though we the Split are mighty, we face many foes and I fear you may bring more if we are not careful."

"My Lord, I understand your concerns, and have seen a revelation to solve it. If our rivals or our allies should protest at the actions of my family, remind them of their treaties. Did they not agree to the Families protection under their trade laws, and does it not say that they're Corporations." Jxu spat that word. "Have the right to defend themselves against piracy and other such threats?"

The Patriarch nodded in realisation of the subtlety of Jxu's planning.

"Indeed Lord Jxu, we shall tell them of your noble campaign in defence of your holdings." The Patriarch began. "At the same time we shall demand full disclosure of the so called intelligence activities of the Argon and Boron, we shall have the truth behind the assassination of Njy's son. You may continue." The Patriarch waved Jxu away and then hauled himself on to his feet. With a billow of his cloak he strode out of the room, followed by a small army of attendants and nobles.

Jxu bowed low as the Patriarch left and then hurried back to his ship. Once he was safely sat on his own couch, he let go of his reserve and began to laugh. He had done it, he had gained the support of the Split people and thus his rise was assured with great swathes of territory soon to be under his thumb.

Chapter 8 – Into the fire

Dentill paced frustratedly across one of the high security landing bays in the GDI headquarters, deep in thought. The idleness of the last few tazuras was beginning to wear at him. Since the evacuation of Hatikvah's Faith, he had had very little to pass the time. There had been a general lull in the fighting within the unclaimed sectors, and given the random nature of Khaak attacks, he had spent little time in the cockpit. At first he had appreciated the time to rest but he would relish some action, especially against Family Jxu, he had lost several pilots in their recent engagements and he wanted vengeance. Realising his anger was building up to a rage, Dentill stopped. Revenge was a dangerous thing; it consumed a blinded people, which is not a good thing for a combat pilot. He reflected on Shacklock's orders. No action was to be taken; the diplomatic situation with the Split was worsening. No one wanted to provoke the Split into all out war. His train of thought was abruptly interrupted by a burst of static through the station's intercom.

"Commander Dentill, this is Petre, a transport is about to dock and I want you to greet the passenger and escort him to my office if you don't mind." Shacklock had a way of making an order sound like a request.

"Which bay will the Tepee dock at?" Dentill asked. "I'm in bay sixteen."

"I'll have the transport reroute to that berth, to save you the bother of trekking elsewhere." Shacklock shut down the comm. Dentil stopped his pacing and stood before the airlock doors. Shacklock had sounded tense and he wondered who or what might have caused this.

The airlock opened smoothly, releasing a slight rush of air as the chamber adjusted to the stations air pressure. Dentill watched as a tall man stepped out. He recognised the uniform as being that of the Argon Navy. The insignia on the man's jacket showed he was a Lieutenant Commander, and more importantly he appeared to be assigned to the intelligence division.

"Welcome aboard Lieutenant Commander...?" Dentil queried.

"Schmidt sir, Daryl Schmidt of the intelligence service." Schmidt replied. "May I say it is an honour to meet you? I know all about your recent engagements against the Split and pirates and the Argon Federation is fortunate to have the support of pilots such as yourself."

Dentill shrugged, "They weren't my ships so thanks is really owed to the corporations shareholders.""

Schmidt laughed. "Such modesty from a hero, I thought you pilots were all egotists!" Dentill frowned at that, which caused Schmidt to lapse into silence.

"Shall we go? I believe Petre Shacklock is waiting for us." Dentill's voice was stony and grim. Schmidt nodded, but kept a politic silence. He was surprised by Dentill's reaction. There was clearly something dark buried within Dentill's psyche, he wondered what. The ride in the elevator was short but uncomfortable as the two waited in silence. When they reached the executive level, the pair walked out, Dentill in the lead as they made their way to Shacklock's office.

Shacklock broke the silence when they arrived with a cheerful greeting. "A Commander Schmidt, I am glad you made it, please take a seat." He turned to Dentill. "Would you like to join us?"

"Unfortunately that isn't possible Petre, I have a prior appointment." Dentill replied shortly. Shacklock simply nodded.

"An interesting man," said Schmidt after Dentill had left.

"I can't quite understand him myself yet," replied Shacklock. "He often seems very grim for a reason I have yet to determine."

"Well we're all under strain given the current crisis." Schmidt offered. "In fact that's why I am here." He studied Shacklock's face trying to gain insight into his character. "I know your organisation as come up against the Jxu family already. We are trying to understand their meteoric rise to power and were hoping you might have some information which you might be able to share."

"I'm sorry to disappoint on that one, but our only contact has been at the end of a smoking gun." Replied Shacklock, "I can't see how we can be much help."

"We have some evidence, which points to possible Jxu involvement in the current situation along the Split Boron border across from Xenon sector four seven two." Schmidt explained. "Some of us in intelligence think it is possible that they may have precipitated the current build up of Split forces." He could see that Shacklock was showing some interest. "We intercepted a transmission from deep in the Thurok's Beard system, which preceded a period of turmoil

within the Njy's hierarchy just prior to their deployment."

"That seems kind of circumstantial" Shacklock countered.

"True, which is why we need your help." Schmidt began to smile; he had come up with the perfect solution. "We have two objectives, one is to diffuse the situation between the Split and Boron and the other is to halt and indeed drive back the Jxu forces."

"I'm not seeing where we come in." Shacklock replied. "Although I can see why you have a problem, peace negotiations will take months and any attempt to stop Jxu will cause an escalation in conflict."

"Exactly, neither we nor the Boron can do any direct actions against Jxu." Schmidt was now speaking quite animatedly the plan could work. "The GDI presents the best chance of stopping them."

"How?" Shacklock replied his tone now displaying how deeply his interest was piqued.

"The Split have attempted to legitimise Jxu's actions by declaring them the response of a private corporation acting against the threat posed by the pirate menace." Schmidt paused, seeing a mixture of confusion and concentrated cognition in Shacklock's furrowed brow. "If they can use the new treaty against us, we can reciprocate."

Shacklock still did not understand and said so.

"Under the terms of the current cross species trade treaty, a corporation who suffers an attack from a rival corporation may retaliate with the support of the law." Schmidt smiled. "Which means that since the Jxu fleet attacked your ships and factories in Hatikvah's Faith, you are well within your rights to start a limited yet aggressive conflict against them."

"You want our corporation to take on the military might of a well organised force?" Asked Shacklock. "All my defence units together could not take on the entire Jxu fleet. Even with the protection of the law."

"I realise that, however success in such an operation does not revolve around defeating them militarily." Schmidt replied. "We need to gather intelligence, and try to find some damning evidence against Jxu, if it exists."

"I don't know, it looks too risky, I can't afford to throw pilots away."

Shacklock evaded. "I also doubt that the board of directors will approve."

"They already have, pending your agreement. They are eager for the crisis to be over." Said Schmidt. "Plus all the support in terms of material supplies, ships and we may point a few retirees in your direction if we can."

"I see, so we will be a front for a military action." Asked Shacklock.

"Well effectively yes, although we really will have need of your pilots, much of the fleet is tied down defending against Khaak raids and supporting the Boron."

"I don't really have any choice, I have one condition, Wing Commander Dentill must be in charge of the operation if he is willing." Shacklock was determined to have someone he could trust in charge.

"That shouldn't be a problem, can you get him back up here so we can brief him? Schmidt asked he was pleased that Shacklock had made the request; it saved him doing the same.

Schmidt watched as Shacklock called to his secretary. "Yolanda, can you ask Commander Dentill to my office." A pause. "I see, right, well thanks anyway." Shacklock leaned back. "It looks like Rick has taken out a patrol. Lets get something to eat and we can talk some more while we wait."

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The old spacer called Jack was once again flying through Split space, headed for a lucrative deal in Thynn's Abyss. Jack smiled as he thought of the profit he would make. He knew it was rare for Argon factories to trade this far from the main routes. The system was only two jumps away from the Argon Black Hole Sun system however there was a Xenon sector in between. Few pilots dared to fly the gauntlet, even fewer survived it. Jack however was happy to take the long circular route through the Split and Teladi sectors to reach this isolated system.

He glanced at his navigation map, along with the hoards of Split craft he could see several Argon transports in the sector, and the occasional Boron freighter, despite the current tension it surprised Jack. Then it occurred to him that the Argon transport guilds would be more than happy to take up the slack left by the more timid Boron traders in this distant corner of the galaxy.

"Not too far now." He said to himself, running through the final stages of his flight path. Soon he would be able to stretch his legs for a while and freshen up. He could see his destination, the large round shape of the trading dock. A small fighter ship flew extremely close passed his window causing him to jerk wildly on his flight stick. "Idiot" He shouted out, breaking the stillness and quiet of the cabin. "Why didn't I bring Bill along, I could use the company." He said to himself.

There was a queue of freighters lining up to pass through the docking port, so Jack had to wait his turn. After half a stazura, it was his turn to dock. Gunning the engines, the ship began to accelerate. The docking lights were flashing green, and the freighter began to line up for the approach, when suddenly they began to flash a pearly white. A ship was leaving, Jack was forced to stop and wait as several Split medium fighters began to move clear of the station.

So many ships exited that he glanced back towards the navigation map, focusing on the east gate he sighed with relief. He had feared that the Xenon were about to launch one of their intermittent invasions. The lights returned to green, so he carefully piloted the ship through the gaping maw of the hangar, and eased it into one of the berths.

Stepping out into the dimly lit loading bay he looked for his contact amidst the bustling crowds of traders and dockyard workers. Scanning the crowd he saw him, a small squat Split in bright robes. As he walked over he could see that the Split seemed more agitated than usual.

"Quick, Quick Captain Jack, plenty busy I am." The Split said, torturing the Argon grammar.

"Calm down Biskhas N'etesh, I have your order, why don't you relax." Jack replied.

"My crews unloading ship now, here's fee for you." Replied Biskhas.

"When do you want the next delivery?" Jack enquired as he checked the credit chit to make sure he was not being cheated. You could never tell with the Split.

"As you Argon say, 'don't call Split, we call you'." Biskhas answered with a strange laugh. "Me think you not be back soon."

Jack was about to answer when the Split simply turned around and walked off. Given how uninviting Split stations were, Jack decided it better to return to his ship and head for home.

Once he was aboard he wondered what Biskhas had been implying. Jack had always found the Split confusing and erratic. "It must be their temperaments." He thought out loud as he activated the automatic departure sequence. Within seuras he was back in open space. From his position in the sector he could see the waves of fighters that had delayed him carrying out dangerous flybys and aggressive scans of various freighter around the sector. He felt a sudden pang of concern; it might be best to get out of the sector before he found out what they were up to.

A loud voice came through the speakers of his onboard communicator. "In the name of our great leader the Patriarch of Split, Rhonkar the first, listen all Argon and Boron pilots."

"That's impressive, so some of you can speak properly." Jack said to himself.

"Due to the aggression of the Boron and the offensive actions of the Argon government, pilots of these races are no longer welcome in Split space."

"Were we ever?" Jack said now speaking to the voice, knowing full well he wasn't transmitting.

"As if this moment all Argon and Boron ships must leave this sector and indeed Split space, you have ten mizuras to comply. Non-compliance will result in the destruction of all ships."

"Uh-oh, I don't like where this is heading." Jack thought. He quickly brought his throttle to full power and headed for the north gate, it was three jumps to the nearest Boron sector. With engines blazing he headed for the gate keeping an eye on the nearest Split fighters. In the distance he could see a pair of Scorpions hounding a Boron Dolphin freighter. He watched as they began to fire on it, with short bursts. As the Dolphin began to turn the fire lessened, it seemed that the Split were trying to drive it away from the north gate.

Distracted, he almost missed the fighter that was headed towards his own ship. The communicator crackled.

"Split says..."

"I know you want me to head for the east gate," adding silently,

"you bastards." It was as good as a death warrant, there was very little chance that he or the twenty or so transports would be able to survive the trip through the Xenon sector. Still there was some chance of getting through; here there was only death.

He grimly swung round and headed for the gate, trying to catch up with a group of freighters he could see looping round a nearby station. There might be some safety in numbers. He met them as the last station passed beneath him and in silent welcome they spread out around him.

A short distance from the gate a signal came through "Time is up, we open fire now." He watched through his rear camera as several Split pilots began to open fire on a pair of the slower Dolphin freighters. The Split were clearly relishing the opportunity to fight their most hated enemies as they taunted the helpless Boron pilots, swing away only to give way for another pilot to do the same. With his stomach lurching in disgust he saw a swift Mamba fire its plasma throwers causing the two transports to explode. Tears stung his eyes, "some way, some how, we will get you for this," he thought.

As a corvette began to take pot shots at his small convoy, Jack looped his ship over the stabilizer nacelle of the gate and plunged into the swirling vortex of the wormhole. In the brief moments in which the swirling vortex held him, he prayed that the Xenon would not be waiting for him on the other side.

The gate spewed the clutch of freighters into the dazzling beauty of the sector known as X four seven two. It was ironic that one of the most dangerous systems in the known universe could also be so transfixing. Jack however was too distracted to notice. The immediate gate area was clear but he could see the Xenon were launching squadrons of fighters to intercept the convoy. "Out of the frying pan..." Jack murmured, engaging full throttle, hoping that by some miracle he could reach the south gate in time.

The first wave of Xenon fighters was made up of the small, lightly armed but fast N class scouts. The blaze of their lasers danced off the shields of several of the transports. Jack could see that they were causing no more than a minor disturbance, their weak beams barely causing only minimal damage to the well-shielded ships. With little else he could do, Jack activated his rear turret's targeting computer and hoped that it would be able to keep any ships off his back. He could see that several of the Ns had already fallen to the turrets on other freighters. Eventually the Ns broke off, circling the convoy as if like vultures waiting to pick up the leavings after the heavier ships made the kill.

The squadron of Xenon M fighters, which followed, was far more deadly and several of the freighters exploded before the convoy began to react. He watched as they methodically tore apart the shields of an Argon Express passenger transport. A huge rent was torn into the side of the passenger compartment and Jack watched in horror as he saw flailing bodies spilling out into space.

Jack was certain that it was only a matter of time now; he ejected all his fighter drones hoping they might stave off the inevitable. The wing of drones began to use their low powered lasers to good effect. Jack watched as they cut through the shields of the nearest xenon fighter, halting its attack run and sending it reeling away for an easier kill. Jack gathered in the remaining drones, just as he noticed his rear turret beginning to fire. Another Xenon ship was approaching from his rear. The turret stitched fire in spread of death, yet it could not seem to score more than glancing blows. "At least whilst its moving it can't kill me," thought Jack.

On the HUD of his craft he could see that somehow they had managed to get three quarters of the way across the sector, unfortunately he could see a Xenon capital ship on full burn headed for the gate, it looked like all was lost. More fighters poured into the fray and Jack watched as all but two of the remaining freighters were each destroyed in explosions one after another. Still they had given a good account for themselves, Jack had registered that eleven Xenon fighters had been destroyed.

The comm. system began to bleep, surprising Jack, who could be calling him at a time like this. Checking the transmissions source he saw it was one of the freighter pilots.

"Hi, listen, one of us has to get out of here to let people know what has happened. I can see you've got a turbo charger on your ship, you are going to have to use it, we'll try and buy you some time." The pilot said.

"Wait I can't leave you." Jack called back.

"You must, the Split must not get away with this." The pilot replied. As Jack began to reply, he saw the two other freighters turn and began to launch drones and light missiles in a courageous attempt to stave off the attack.

"Thank you." Jack whispered as he hit the boost toggle on his flight panel. His ship lurched forwards, building up speed; he could see the levels on the special reserve energy cells dropping rapidly. A wall of Xenon fighters was between him and the gate. Their plasma

bombardment caused his shields to buckle but he headed for the gate, dumping his remaining drones as he passed. The brief respite allowed him to line up with the main circle. As he poured all his remaining energy reserves into his boosters, a massive Xenon destroyer cruised overhead, firing a barrage of fire, which lit up the whole sky. Jack knew he was hurtling towards his doom as he shot forwards past the withering fire. His shields collapsed as he passed between the gate's nacelles. And he felt his hull jarring from new blows. As the computer screamed "Hull critical" he was enveloped in the swirling light of a wormhole as the gate activated.

When Jack's ship was finally ejected from the gate, it began to spiral out of control. He looked at his system readouts. His last remaining shield was slowly recharging but his hull was down to seven percent. The engines pushed beyond their limits finally gave out leaving him drifting in space. With his last remaining energy, Jack pushed the emergency beacon, and then collapsed back into his seat. He could hear the comm. unit begin to chatter as he drifted into unconsciousness. He was safe.

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"I don't see how we can compete with the military might of a Split house." Dentill said in frustration. Why couldn't this intelligence agent grasp the concept?

"Commander I understand those concerns but we don't need you to fight Jxu in a pitched battle. We need you to harass and disrupt them, to get them to make mistakes." Replied Schmidt, seeming to be equally disgruntled.

"I don't see how you, the intelligence division cannot gather the data you need yourselves, you seem to love playing spies. Oh yeah I remember you prefer others to do your dirty work." Dentill was really riled up now.

"Oh please commander, I thought you better than this. This is our last option. We cannot allow anyone to gain control of the unclaimed regions, and you are the only people who can legally do anything about it." Schmidt was shaking his head.

"My concern is for my pilots, they aren't on the Navy payroll, they signed up to protect transports from pirates, not fight private wars." Dentill flung that in Schmidt's face.

"They can always quit commander." Schmidt retorted.

"Bloody hell, Schmidt you sound like a fascist. What kind of an option is that fight someone else's war or lose your job." It looked like Dentill was about to strike Schmidt.

"The decision has been made commander. Your superiors support this action and want you in charge. I never thought you would oppose this, I guess maybe you are just scared." Schmidt retorted.

Dentill's reaction to that was not what Schmidt had hoped. The pilot stood up, looming over him for a moment spoke two simple yet effective words and then stalked out of the room. Schmidt was going to have to reassess his techniques. The Argon needed Dentill on their side.

As he stalked down the corridor Dentill raged. The suggestion of cowardice had touched a nerve. He found it impossible to understand why those who sat behind desks all day were so ready to make that kind of suggestion. He would have been quite happy to fight, if it was only his life in danger, but he had responsibilities. Losses were a fact of life for combat pilots, but it didn't mean he had to stop caring. Lost in his internal turmoil he was not watching when he bumped into Marcus Gromwell.

"Watch where you are go... Oh sorry sir." Said Gromwell, seeing Dentill's look he continued. "I guess you've seen the new then?"

"No, what's up? I've been with that fool, Schmidt from Intelligence." Dentill replied sharply.

"You'd better come see we are all watching it on the vid." Gromwell said as he pulled on Dentill's sleeve. The pair walked towards the pilot's lounge. As they approached he could hear the newscaster.

"More on this story after these important messages."

As they walked into the room temporarily filled with chatter, one of the pilots made a space for Dentill on the couches, which had been dragged to face the vid screen. As Dentill sat down, Gromwell perched on the arm of the seat. Several pilots began to hush the others as the advertising ended.

"Welcome back to the ASN network. We now return to our breaking story. Reports have been coming in throughout the day of Split forces ejecting Argon and Boron ships from their space. In a statement from a Split official it was announced that due to as yet unspecified aggressive actions by the Boron and Argon interference, ships from the two races are no longer welcome in Split space.

Though some might say they are within their rights to refuse passage in their own sectors, their actions have been condemned by the Argon government and with good cause. Less than one hour ago we received the following footage showing events which happened recently in Thynn's Abyss."

Dentill watched in growing horror as the events unfolded. The image was of poor quality, most likely taken from a navigation camera, he thought, usually used for manoeuvring in tight spaces. It showed Split fighters rounding up Argon and Boron transports and herding them towards a space gate. He watched in fascination at the skill some of the fighter pilots displayed as they fired carefully placed shots to force the transports to turn. The camera began to focus on a group of transports, which were obviously forming around the ship carrying it.

As the ships neared the gate, they could see the Split fighters leap into action again, pouncing upon a pair of Boron freighters destroying them. The camera continued to roll as it followed events through a Xenon sector capturing the destruction of each of the freighters. Dentill heard a whimper from somewhere in the room at the sight of the passengers of the Express venting into space.

The lounge was in total silence as they watched two of the remaining transports turn away from the third, heading to intercept the pursuing fighters. The view cut out as amidst a hail of energy bolts filled the display. The silence was broken by the voice of the news reporter.

"It is believed that the pilot of the transport which recorded these images is alive and in a stable condition in a secure medical facility in Omicron Lyrae. Shortly after this footage was distributed to all networks, the Argon government issued a statement condemning the actions and demanding the Split hold a full enquiry into the tragedy. The Boron government has taken further steps and demanded that all Split ships not currently fulfilling contracts leave their space or risk impoundment.

ASN will keep you informed of this growing situation as more news becomes available. Until then we express our sincerest condolences to the families of those who have died and pray that justice will prevail."

Dentill looked around the room searching the faces of his pilots. Many of them had tears in their eyes and he could see horror, anger and disbelief written across all of them. Some were hugging each other for support, yet none would break the silence.

Eventually Gromwell spoke up. "Those bloody murdering bastards, someone really needs to take them down a peg or two. I wish there was some way we could teach them a lesson." There were several nods of agreement around the room.

"All those people, it was horrible." Said one of the younger pilots.

"Someone's got to hit them hard, is there anything we can do?" Asked Paul Razevski, one of the pilots who had flown with Dentill to the trade summit.

"Actually there may well be. Recently the Intelligence service asked for the GDI to enter a trade war with Jxu as a pretext for a plan to stop them from expanding further. I refused." He let that sink in. "However right now I'm all for taking the fight back to the enemy. It's up to you I won't force anyone to fight who doesn't want to."

"Count me in," offered Gromwell and Fielding together. "And me." Chimed in Razevski. One after another and then in floods all the pilots began to offer their support. Dentill was overwhelmed by the palpable rage, which flooded the room. The usual boasting and banter, which accompanied such a gathering, was forgotten amidst the resolve and unity of the pilots.

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Seated in his loaned quarters, Daryl Schmidt sat in contemplation. He had been unable to contact Commander Dentill since his abrupt departure. Petre Shacklock had also been extremely evasive when he had tried to discuss the situation. All the reports he had ever read about previous operations had never suggested that it would be so difficult to recruit support from pilots. They usually seemed ever ready for the challenge and the glory posed by combat operations. It looked to him like he was going to have to try and requisition some ships from the Navy and have them entered into the GDI books, but he had no idea how he could get that past his superiors.

A knock sounded on the door. When Schmidt opened it he could see the grim face of Dentill, behind him stood two other pilots, from their name badges he could see they were Gromwell and Fielding. The menacing looks on their faces caused him to panic for a moment; Dentill hadn't seemed the type for petty revenge and the insult wasn't that severe.

"He... Hello Commander. Can I help you?" Schmidt stuttered,

expecting a tirade at the very least.

Dentill replied, "We have just seen what the Split have been up to and we have elected to accept your proposals. We are ready to strike back hard."

Chapter 9 – Small victories

General Dhjn's face spread in the low smile of the Split. His fleet had finished securing the Nopilieos' Memorial with minimal casualties. He watched as groups of assault transports headed for each station ready for the occupation. So far he had conquered two systems with the loss of only thirty fighters. Most opposition simply fled when they saw the massive bulk of the *Bashar* his Raptor attack carrier. Any station, which tried to resist, would surrender quickly when one of his Python class heavy destroyers moved into firing range. After he had order the destruction of one of the hated Boron's solar power plants the stations here had fallen quickly. "General?" One of his bridge officers interrupted his reverie. "The last of the stations has been occupied by our troops. All resistance has now been crushed. A task force of supply ships is being moved in through Hatikvah's Faith within the next tazura or two."

"How I hate that name, once we have completed our task in these sectors I think we should change the name. Perhaps Jxu's Vision?" The Dhjn replied.

"Better yet Dhjn's Triumph, general, you have earned the honour after your victories." The officer replied.

"Perhaps, still we have much work to do before we turn to such things." Dhjn warned. "Right now I believe I should take a ship and meet with Lord Jxu to tell him of our victory."

"I shall prepare a ship for you immediately sir." The officer bowed and left to carry out his duty. Dhjn walked over to where the captain of the *Bashar* was busy coordinating fighter squadrons and transport flotillas.

"Captain, I am about to leave for Thurok's Beard, I want you to continue the subjugation of this system and prepare a task force for the invasion of Danna's Chance. I want it ready in time for my return in three tazuras." Dhjn saw the look of pride on the captain's face, it was clear the officer would relish the chance of fleet command even if for a short time. "Carry on captain." Dhjn turned and walked off the bridge heading for the shuttle bay.

The ship the officer had prepared for him was a scorpion fighter. Fast enough to avoid most ships and with enough shielding to escape if he was engaged. Bucking into the cockpit he sped through the pre-flight checks and then activated the engines. With a low roar he manoeuvred the ship to opening bay doors and accelerated out into space. Plotting in a course to the Jxu palace he activated

the autopilot and allowed his thoughts to drift to the upcoming battles he would be facing.

The journey was not arduous but it was dull and he was pleased when his ship slowly docked upon the cold stone of the main landing field of the Jxu family palace. He jumped out of his ship and gave brief acknowledgement to the salutes of guards and junior officers as he passed them on his way to the great hall.

"General how goes the war?" Dhjn saw that his master was heading towards him.

"My lord, we march forward with your name as a battle cry. All are crushed before us." Dhjn replied.

"Excellent our war goes well, we have support from the Supreme Patriarch, things are going to plan." Jxu said exaltedly. "Rewards will soon await you."

"I live to serve." Replied Dhjn. "I believe it is now time for discussions of the long term occupation and planning to control each of the sectors. There are millions of people on these worlds, so we will need support and more troops to ensure we can hold them."

"Yes, join me at my table and we shall discuss the future." The pair walked to the large table in the rooms centre piled high with plates filled with a variety of delicacies. "Eat, eat." Jxu encouraged Dhjn. "Now tell me of your needs."

"It is as I said, we need more warriors to maintain order amongst the populations on the worlds within the systems we are now conquering. Similarly after each sector is captured, it is necessary to deploy several fighter squadrons in its defence. This leaves my attack force doubly weakened after each battle." Dhjn replied with concern in his voice.

"I see, since we now have a buffer zone between us and our foes, we can afford to strip forces from our bases here." Jxu replied.

"I will leave the elite guard here to protect the capital Sire." Dhjn offered.

"Yes, my personal squadrons and battalions will be able to protect me against any threat. Take the rest of our forces and have them occupy our new territories." Jxu ordered. "We shall soon be reaping the benefits of our new factories and can begin to recruit new warriors to our cause."

"Yes, most of the factories in Hatikvah's Faith have resumed production. Although we still need to finish converting the Boron stations to grow a more palatable food source." Said Dhjn with disgust.

"How soon can you resume the campaign?" Jxu enquired whilst chewing a Chelt steak.

"I am expecting a supply convoy to reach the front shortly to restock my ships. Then I can continue, though I will need to remain here a few tazuras to organise the reinforcements." Dhjn answered.

"Good, good, you are most welcome, I am very pleased with our progress." Jxu seemed to be in a jovial mood. "I think we will not even need to encourage other families to assist."

"The entire region will soon belong to Family Jxu." Dhjn returned the good humour. "Within a few short wozuras we will have reached the Split Fire sector and will border the Paranid. It seems nothing stands in our way."

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Rick Dentill strolled into the newly built war room. It had been his idea to convert one of the flight control centres into a place to coordinate the GDI's escalating conflict against the Split. Correction Dentill thought, the Family Jxu. Glancing around the room he could see it was a hive of activity. Along one wall several of the space traffic control remained. Each controller coordinating the actions of defence squadrons and trade fleets. On the far wall was a large flat screen, currently displaying the known regions of the galaxy. Around the room there were several workstations and chart tables with teams of personnel discussing everything from supplies to fleet engagements.

Dentill made his way to the central table, seated around it were his "council of war" as Marcus Gromwell called it. Petre Shacklock, Gromwell, Dureena Fielding, Captain Greene, Daryl Schmidt from intelligence, and suddenly from behind him came Loralamincstros. "I see we are all here." Dentill said to the group. "I guess we can all begin. Daryl, you can start."

"Thank you, Commander." Schmidt began. "We have recently observed a large convoy of transport ships being loaded within the Family Jxu dockyard in Thurok's Beard."

"Are we going to whack them?" Asked Fielding.

Schmidt smiled at her enthusiasm. "I'm getting to that part. We believe that it may be possible to intercept the convoy before they are able to reach the main Jxu forces. Loral if you would continue."

"To aid us in this endeavour I have managed to procure from my clan a Hercules heavy transport ship. It will allow us to bring large numbers of fighter craft into Thurok's Beard without detection." Loralaminckstros told the group.

"I thought the Paranid were remaining neutral in the current crisis." Interjected Gromwell.

"I am here am I not?" Chuckled Loralaminckstros. "Not all Paranid are impressed by the actions of the Split, particularly given the Khaak threat."

Dentill interrupted. "The mission will be to engage the convoy immediately after they enter Hatikvah's Faith. I will be stationing your squadron Dureena on board the TL. Hopefully the Split will not be quick enough to register your mambas as unfriendly."

"As the convoy jumps through the south gate." Schmidt added. "The mambas will launch and follow them through. The task will then be to eliminate all defensive fighters and try to capture if possible the convoy intact. All the captures and the fighters will then return to the Hercules and head back to base."

"Marcus, we have equipped four of your ships with jumpdrives so you can act as a tactical reserve." Dentill could see that Gromwell was pleased to be taking part. "Loral, Commander Schmidt and myself, will be aboard the Hercules. Any questions?"

"I have a comment." Shacklock spoke out. "I don't know much about combat, so I will assume the plan is good. However politically speaking I believe a declaration of war of sorts should be made before we begin firing."

"Sounds like a good plan. Do you want to record it and Dureena can transmit it when she enters the sector behind the convoy." Dentill nodded his thanks to Shacklock it was a good idea. "The TL will be here in half a stazura so all pilots will need to be ready. Dismissed people."

Gromwell, Fielding and Schmidt left the room leaving Dentill alone with Loralaminckstros and Shacklock. The latter began. "Rick, I had better get the message recorded, I hope I will be seeing you safe

and well once this is over.”

“Thanks Petre, I’m glad I’m not the one doing the speech, so good luck yourself.” Dentill replied.

Shacklock walked out of the room. Dentill turned to Loraminckstros, “Shall we go,” he gestured with his arm. “I have a shuttle prepped on the pad.”

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Bolaralanstrat, captain of the Paranid Hercules, *Duke’s Reward* personally manoeuvred the ship to a stationary position outside the GDI equipment dock headquarters. Turning to his communications officer he said. “Transmit to the station our arrival, and request they dock quickly.”

“Yes Sir.” The officer replied. “Transmitting now... we have received a reply, the ships are en-route. The ship carrying Commander Dentill and Loraminckstros is about to dock.”

“Excellent, they should arrive here shortly.” The captain said, “We’ll soon be underway.”

The bridge officers carried out their duties some hurrying about to help organise the docking of the ships and the storage of supplies being brought aboard. Bolaralanstrat was in discussion with his first officer when Dentill entered the bridge, followed by Schmidt and Loraminckstros.

“Bolaralanstrat, by the Emperor Xaar it is good to see you again.” Loraminckstros said to the captain cheerfully.

“By the three-dimensionality, as I live and breath, Loraminckstros, I am glad we are to serve again together.” Bolaralanstrat replied.

The two Paranid began to converse rapidly in a dialogue, which the translators carried by the two Argon could not keep up with. Dentill coughed. “Sorry to interrupt but I believe the last of the ships has docked. It is time for us to head out.” He tried to be as polite as possible; he was after all the guest.

“Of course Commander,” Bolaralanstrat replied apologetically. “We will activate our jumpdrive now.” From the forward view screen, the swirl of a jumpgate began to open. The ship slowly eased through and within moments they were entering the Thurok’s Beard system.

A sudden thought came to Dentill and full of concern he questioned the two Paranid. "It has just occurred to me, aren't the Split going to be suspicious of a large ship loitering in this system."

"That had also occurred to me when I asked for assistance." Loralamincstros replied.

"Indeed," continued Bolalaranstrat. "We are therefore here under the guise of a trade carrier. Several transport ships with trade goods are even now exiting the hanger for various stations within Split space. Several more will be docking here either to drop off goods or for transport back to Paranid Prime."

"With passage through the unclaimed regions so dangerous, it becomes necessary for these larger ships to maintain trade links. The war itself is providing us with our cover." Laughed Loralamincstros.

"Great, I just hope the convoy gets here before you run out trade deals." Replied Dentill, only half in jest.

There was a prolonged period with nothing for Dentill to do so he focused his time on encouraging his pilots stationed aboard the transport. "It should be a cakewalk chaps, the convoy will only be protected by scorpions, all the frontline squadrons are with the main fleet. Stay on your toes and don't get complacent, particularly around the Iguanas, they can pack quite a punch."

"What about sector defences?" Asked one of the newer pilots.

"The strike is being timed to take place near the gate so you should be able to achieve the objective before intervention." Dentill replied reassuringly. "We are also fairly certain that your mambas will cause some level of initial confusion, which should add to your time."

"Any back up?" This came from a veteran pilot.

Dentill turned his gaze to her. "You shouldn't need it, but we have a flight of jump capable Novas on standby, and Loralamincstros had brought his Perseus."

"If needs be the commander will also bring the Hercules into play," added Fielding. "If nothing else he can ram them." This brought a laugh from the assembled pilots.

The intercom crackled. "ATTENTION, Commander Dentill to the

bridge, convoy in sight.”

“Got to go pilots, get to your ships and good luck.” Dentill offered in parting as the pilots rushed to grab helmets and zip up flight suits. He ran to the bridge nearly being bowled over by a Paranid as he rushed round a corner. Giving his apologies he continued at a slightly diminished pace. As he entered with his breath slightly heaving he saw the main view screen zoomed on the convoy.

“What have we got Captain?” He enquired.

“We are detecting fourteen transports, three of which are assault ships, also eight fighter escorts.” Bolaralanstrat answered.

“Good it looks like they were not expecting trouble.” Dentill replied.

Along with the entire bridge crew, he watched as the convoy slowly headed for the gate. “Fielding, prepare your ships for launch.” Dentill signalled. The convoy finally lined up with the gate. A pair of scorpion fighters exited the system. Half of the transports followed. Impatiently, Dentill ordered Fielding’s Mamba squadron to launch in the Hercules’ shadow. The last of the convoy finally slipped through the gate, unaware of the squadron of heavy fighters, which suddenly swung round the heavy transport to follow them through.

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Fielding was extremely pleased that her squadron had been chosen for this mission. It had rankled her that she had been forced to abandon the computer plant in her last engagement. She felt it was a stain on her record and her honour. She knew that there had been nothing she could have done but the fact that she had been “rescued” by Dentill and the *Ardent* just made things worse. This mission would give her the chance to reclaim her self-respect. Putting her thoughts aside, she approached the gate. No hiding at the back for her, she went through first. The gate on the other side of the wormhole, spat her ship back out, and it was only moments before the rest of her squadron followed suit.

“I’m reading a squadron of Scorpions headed for the convoy.” Her second in command called over the comm.

“No matter,” She replied. “You take flight two and take down the transports. I’ll take the others and clear out the fighters.” She had barely given her orders, when a signal came in from the Split patrol. “Unidentified Mamba squadron, this is the commander of Sting squadron, identify yourselves and state your purpose.”

"Actually buddy, I have a package for you." Fielding replied, ejecting the special container that Shacklock had prepared. From out of her cargo hold floated an advanced satellite, which quickly unfolded itself and begin transmitting a live feed interstellar broadcast to the Hercules, back in Thurok's Beard. At the same time, across all the in system frequencies a massive signal was released. On every communication screen, video panel and monitor within the sector, the face of Petre Shacklock appeared.

"In response to various aggressive actions by the Split family Jxu, the Grau Defence Industries is announcing a declaration of limited warfare against the said family. This is in accordance with section ninety-seven, paragraph eight of the interstellar corporation treaty, signed by all races this year." There was a pause. "This war was precipitated by the illegal assault on corporate stations in Hatikvah's Faith. Until such time as the Family Jxu removes its forces from these sectors and ends its own attempt at imperial ambition the GDI will be forced to continue a campaign of military action. To all species held prisoner by the occupied forces, take heart we shall return to free you. To the Split forces, this convoy we take in partial recompense for the property you have seized from us."

As soon as the message had ended, the sector went into uproar; the Split fighter patrols began to request orders all at once. This gave Fielding the opportunity to close with convoy. She watched as her second officer led his flight of ships against the transports. She could see blue streams of plasma fire, light up all around the convoy. Several of the transports began to spiral out of control as missiles struck them, blowing them off course. Her distraction almost cost her dearly as a scorpion launched missiles at her ship. Brining herself back to the fray, she activated her combat computer, to help aid her accuracy and targeted the missiles. She eased her trigger, sending her own plasma fire to explode the missiles harmlessly before they could reach her. Slightly enraged by the pilot's temerity, she targeted the ship and boosted to follow its flight path.

The Split pilot was good but he could not shake the determined Fielding. Before he could think to accelerate and boost away, she began to open fire, her plasma weaponry ripping the lightly shielded craft to chaff. A quick glance at the gravidar showed that her two flights were rapidly eliminating the remains of the escort fighters. Ordering the ships to follow her she headed towards the second Scorpion squadron.

In the brief pause, she checked the sector map to see that most of

the transports were now either destroyed or surrendering. Only the Iguana assault craft were still fighting and it seemed they had managed to destroy one of her Mambas. "Just go for the kill." She ordered the second officer. It would be easier and the Iguanas posed no real benefit.

The "Sting" Scorpion squadron finally reached weapons range and began to launch missiles. None were targeting her so Fielding launched her own volley of dragonfly missiles in reply. In tight formation, three of the scorpions were destroyed before they could evade. Fielding was pleased; the numbers were almost even now. The rest of the engagement was swift and bloody; there was little the scorpion pilots could do against the massed firepower of the eight Mambas. Plasma weapons created blossom like explosions as each of the Split fighters was destroyed. The finally tally saw all but the squadron commander destroyed, to only one of Fielding's ships destroyed. This when five enemy missiles had targeted the Mamba at once, the multiple explosions causing the shields to implode and the hull to collapse under the titanic energy emissions released.

"All ships, let's head back home." Fielding ordered her squadron. The ten remaining mambas formed a defensive web around the eight captured freighters. She could see that the Split reinforcements would not be able to reach them in time. "Five mizuras to the gate people. Keep sharp." Who knew what support the Jxu forces could count on from the other Split families?

"Sir, I am reading a localised energy phenomenon forming about five thousand standard measures above the gate." One of her pilots called.

"Any indications of what it might be?" She asked.

"I'm not sure, hang on, I think, yes, Look sir it's the Khaak." The pilot replied. "Dozens of ships at least two of them Em Threes."

Dentill's voice suddenly interrupted. "Fielding, its Dentill here we have been monitoring your situation. I am sending Gromwell in to assist. Keep close to the transports, some of them seem pretty beaten up."

As if on cue, in the distance, the gate swirled, signalling the release of Gromwell and his Nova flight. "Hi Dureena, how's it going I see you've got a Khaak problem. It also looks like their going for the Navsat so keep heading for the gate, we should be able to give them the jump." Fielding gave a noncommittal grunt in reply. She'd rather be the one engaging the Khaak but orders were orders.

The Khaak were still in their standard cluster formation. Gromwell led his squadron to engage them. After receiving the first few plasma bolts from the Novas, the clusters fell apart. The wings of scouts began to circle around but for the first few sezuras it was a turkey shoot. The fire from the four heavy fighters tore through the ships. Several of them exploding before they could react. However after this initial success the coordination of the Khaak ships began to tell. Within moments the Novas were being hard pressed to keep up with the nimble scouts. Trying to divide attention between them and the heavy fighters would prove deadly, so Gromwell targeted one of these first. It had clearly taken a beating from the initial strike and it was not hard to strip its remaining shields. A silkworm missile ensured its demise. The respite was short lived. The shields on his flight group were severely weakened by the interlacing fire from so many of the Khaak beam lasers.

The second Khaak fighter's beams began to make their way towards Gromwell's wingman, Razevski, it looked like things were about to get worse. Desperately trying to divert the Khaak ship, he was caught between the beams of two scouts. With his shields collapsing he forced to pull away and he watched in horror as the powerful kyon burst sliced through Razevski's Nova, setting off several of the missiles stored within its cargo bay, causing a massive explosion. The backwash of the conflagration drained several layers of the Khaak ship's shields.

"Oh no, Razevski." Gromwell cried out, the shock of the sudden loss causing anger to surge through him. Suddenly unconcerned for his own safety he targeted the Khaak fighter, managing somehow to avoid the fire from his pursuing enemies. Single-mindedly he concentrated on his foe, his finger squeezed the trigger, causing a continuous stream of plasma bolts to pour into the Khaak ship's failing defences. Within moments the enemy craft began to fall apart. As his rage abated, Gromwell realised his shields were critical, fortunately his rear turret was keeping the Khaak scouts of his tail.

The destruction of the last Khaak heavy fighter caused the scouts to lose all cohesion and with the help of Fielding's squadron they were mopped up quickly. Still, it was a battered and scarred fleet, which eventually emerged through the gate to be picked up by the waiting Hercules.

Chapter 10 – Traitors

Petre Shacklock looked up and frowned at the raucous laughter coming from a group of employees in the executive lounge of the GDI headquarters. He had spent the last couple of stazuras reading through reports on the ongoing conflict with Family Jxu. Objectively speaking things seemed to be going well, the intelligence officer, Daryl Schmidt was extremely happy with current. Shacklock was not; he had been reviewing the casualty figures, for both sides. In the last wozura, the GDI had lost more pilots and ships than in the previous Jazura, despite the perils of interstellar commerce. Over a dozen pilots had been killed and countless more wounded to greater or lesser degrees. In total seventeen fighter craft had been destroyed during engagements with Jxu. Of course many more Split had been killed, but Petre could not see how that could rationalise the cost in friends and colleagues. The GDI tried to take a moral stance and be supportive of the government but he was having a hard time justifying this war.

As Shacklock was engrossed in his reading he failed to see Commander Rick Dentill entering the lounge. Dentill however noticed him immediately and seeing the downcast expression went over to greet him. "Hi Petre, you don't look to good." He said to Shacklock taking a seat opposite.

"Oh, sorry, is it that obvious? It's these figures, are we really doing the right thing." Shacklock asked rubbing kinks out of his neck.

"That's a tough question, which eventually we all have to answer. It also depends on your reason for concern. If it's about the material losses, then yes, we are getting plenty of funds being diverted to us by the Secret Service." Dentill replied with a frown.

"No, no, it's not that at all." Shacklock hurriedly answered, worried Dentill thought he was being insensitive. "I don't care for the cost, we can easily absorb that. It's the people."

"Well then, look at it this way. Every one of those pilots knew the risks and volunteered." Dentill was emphatic "I will not send unwilling pilots on missions. It is a sad loss for everyone who dies, but each one dies a hero for a cause they believe in."

"But is the cause just?" Shacklock was full of worry.

"Of course, do not doubt our resolve Petre. This fight is not purely about curbing ambition it is far deeper. We are fighting for freedom, though it sounds crass to say so." Dentill replied. His face took on a

hard look "These Split are enslaving millions of sentient life forms and seizing the property of thousands more."

"But we aren't even stopping them." Shacklock was insistent. "Since our first engagements, the family Jxu have advance through and occupied Danna's Chance. Despite the tenacity of the Pirate Clans, it looks like they will soon capture Brennan's Triumph too."

"That is due to their heavy use of capital ships, they can go on conquering all they want, but they have to hold the systems too and that takes fighter squadrons. So far we are causing a major drain on their resources." Dentill spoke confidently.

"Will that be enough?" Shacklock seemed unconvinced, wringing his hands.

"The thinner we strip their ranks, the more stretched they will be and eventually they will be unable to advance further for risk of leaving their sectors undefended. At that point we can strike harder where it counts, at their fleet assets." Dentill explained. He struck his fist into his palm with the word strike.

"I guess you are correct, but I wish this were all over, I am beginning to regret supporting it." Shacklock replied his shoulders slumped a little. The strain of responsibility over people's lives was clearly getting to him.

"Ironic really, you were for it at first and I was the one who didn't approve." Dentill tried to sound cheerful. "It will be over eventually, these things always are." He tried to sound certain.

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His hands drenched in blood, General Dhjn stormed into the control centre of the pirate base in Brennan's Triumph. The punishment he had exacted upon the remaining pirate leaders had been swift and deadly. The fight they had put up against his forces had been brutal. It had taken three tazuras to take control of the sector. The initial attack had been a light assault force; there were only a handful of stations in the sector after all. The first strike by a flotilla of corvettes and two squadrons of medium fighters had been murderously repulsed by a huge coalition of pirate clans. He was still riled at the thought of the damage to his fleet and the tarnishing of his personal honour. Still his revenge had been swift. The heavy guns of his destroyer group had massacred the fleet of over one hundred pirate craft of varying types. The waves of fighters from the *Bashar* had mopped up the rest. He smiled at the

memory. It had been him who had fired the final shots into the burning hulk of the Pirates Elephant command carrier. He could almost hear the screams of the dying.

"General, forgive my interruption but I have to report another attack by the GDI forces." One of his officers told him nervously.

"Damn them, what were our losses this time?" Dhjn asked angrily striking a panel with a fist. Blood smeared the surface and began to drip to the deck below.

"Reports are sketchy, but apparently a few freighters and a number of fighters." The officer replied, trying to sound unphased but nervously rocking on the balls of his feet.

"By Thurok's whiskers! They are trying to bleed us dry. We need more ships and heavier ones too." Dhjn spat through clenched teeth. "I am going to talk to Lord Jxu. Suspend all operations until my return. Make sure the fleet is ready and fully stocked."

Dhjn requisitioned a modified Paranid Pegasus light fighter. The incredibly fast ship brought him back to the Family's home base in a very short time. He stalked through the palace heading for Jxu chambers.

"Ah, General Dhjn, you come to report success?" Lord Jxu asked when Dhjn entered the room.

"Yes, Brennan's Triumph is now under our control. My arrival here however is to discuss another matter." Dhjn replied bowing low to his master.

"Go on." Jxu ordered with an imperious shake of his hand.

"Since their initial attack on our convoy after our victory in Nopilieos' Memorial, the GDI forces have launched numerous raids on our supply lines. These hit and run attacks are bleeding us dry." Dhjn said aggressively.

"What do you suggest general?" Jxu asked.

"We need time to rest and rearm our forces. We have lost dozens of ships and almost as many pilots. I need to bring the squadrons up strength." Dhjn replied. "The Argon appear to be supplying our foes with jumpdrives with impunity. We do not have the ability to rapidly respond to strikes."

"It is possible that we may be able to refit the *Bashar* with one. It will cost me great favours though to accomplish the task." Jxu offered.

"It will be for the best." Dhjn explained. "We cannot reciprocate the damage the GDI are causing. The Argon would never stand for us attacking into their territory."

"Perhaps not but I think there is a way we could divert the Argon's support from the GDI." Jxu began. "I think it is time we forced the issue in the outer regions before things begin to calm down. There is already talk of downgrading the defences."

"We could also encourage bounty hunters and assassins to attack GDI assets, if we offer large enough bounties, some damage will be caused, and in the current climate few will consider checking background information before they attack." Dhjn gave his strange grin, drawing a finger across his throat in the universal sign for execution.

"Excellent idea, if we can eliminate their leadership perhaps we can stop their forces in their tracks. Then you can continue our campaign." Replied Lord Jxu. "We must use all available resources to ensure our success." He stroked his pet Chelt with glee.

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"I cannot believe you, Schmidt," Dentill said scornfully, pacing around his office. "We are fighting your war and yet you have shown very little progress on your side. When are we going to see some of this evidence of Split duplicity were supposedly dying for?"

"Commander please, we are trying our best but we have little in the way of resources to operate with in Split space." Schmidt replied extremely cowed sinking into the back of his seat against Dentill's tirade.

"Damn you, we are dying out there and to be honest more than a few of my people and even Shacklock are beginning to question our continued involvement." Dentill countered angrily. "I don't see you risking overly much." He stabbed the air with a finger to emphasise his point.

"We believe that your constant strikes against them are beginning to have a telling effect on the enemy forces. Morale away from the main front line is flagging and recently through channels we have discovered a number of pilots who wish to defect they just need

help to get away." Schmidt sounded almost pleading as he lent forward. His brow creased with earnestness.

"So you want me to organise another incursion into Jxu space, risk more of my pilots lives for a few maybes?" Dentill asked sardonically, shaking his head.

"This could be the break through we need. The risks are minimal, the pilots simply need us to create some confusion for them to make their escape." Schmidt replied. "The information is reliable and has been confirmed by multiple sources."

"Alright I will take your word over this issue, but I am warning you I want to see results, or I might strap you into a cockpit for the next mission." Dentill said angrily the threat hanging ominously in the air. "I guess we have gone to far now and will have to see this through."

Dentill walked over to his desk communicator. "Squadron leaders Gromwell, Loralamincstros and Mu Rori to the war room." He looked over at Schmidt. "Are you coming?"

Schmidt ran to catch up with Dentill as he stalked down the corridor. Fortunately Dentill's office was only a short distance from the war room. The pair arrived just in time to almost collide with Gromwell as he came hurtling around the corner. "Sorry sirs didn't want to be late. I think Loral and Mu Rori are already inside." Gromwell said, chest heaving.

Dentill laughed, much of his foul mood dissipating at a glance at Gromwell's flustered face. "No blood, no report, its not the navy you know! Lets get down to business."

The trio moved over to join the other two officers already sitting at the conference table. Dentill nodded a greeting at Loralamincstros and smiled at the Boron Mu Rori "Welcome to the war council" he said warmly, but with a hint of amusement. "I have asked you to join us because you've got a good squadron and we could use your skills."

"Thank you for your confidence Commander, it is an honour to serve." Mu Rori replied. His tentacles formed the Boron equivalent of a smile.

"Here is the situation." Dentill began, his tone becoming serious. "Schmidt has informed me our attacks have begun to bear fruit. Apparently several Split pilots wish to defect to our side having

grown weary of our little visits." The last comment brought a smile from Gromwell and Loraminckstros. Our mission will be to launch a raid against Hatikvah's Faith through the east gate. This will mean that they will have some warning. That is why we are sending in three full squadrons." Dentill glanced over to Schmidt and nodded.

Schmidt continued the briefing. "We have copies of the IFF codes of the ships the pilots will be flying so during the mission your ships will display them in green, this will distinguish them from both hostiles and friendlies." He let that sink in. "Given the secret nature of our primary mission, you will need to make as much chaos around the sector to make it appear our goal is simply sabotage." The pilots would not be complaining this mission.

"We launch in two stazuras, so get some rest." Dentill said in parting. "Dismissed!" The squadron leaders left the room, leaving Schmidt alone with him.

"Why did you support me so readily Commander?" asked Schmidt, "I would have thought you would have been more negative."

"You clearly have a lot to learn about leading men, or indeed sentients." Dentill replied with snort. "I might not like you or agree with your activities, but if I am sending my pilots on a mission they need to see I support it one hundred percent." Turning away he walked out of the room accelerating to catch up with his pilots.

Schmidt looked on abashed; he was not deliberately trying to offend and tried hard to understand Dentill's view. He realised that he had spent far too long behind a desk reading intelligence reports and intercepts. He simply could not comprehend the mentality of frontline soldiers.

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Mu Rori eased his ship out of the large hanger into the docking tube of the station. He felt it was a great honour to be included in this attack alongside the two elite squadrons of Loraminckstros and Marcus Gromwell. His own squadron consisted of the fast and manoeuvrable Makos they should be able to hold their own against the defensive squadrons stationed within the Split sector.

The docking light changed to signal he was clear for departure. He eased his ship forwards past the main blast doors and headed for the north gate. His squadron spewed forth from the station and he watched in pleasure as they moved into formation with precision. The rendezvous point was outside the gate to Hatikvah's Faith and

so he had time to admire the stars and planets along the route. After the gate had deposited them in Aladna Hill, he could see that the other squadrons were already deployed, waiting for his arrival. He accelerated his ship to full speed, his squadron following suit. It was a pity he thought that they were headed westwards, to the east lay the gate to Akeela's beacon a sector renowned for its stellar bodies. It's multiple suns apparently giving off a warm blue. The sudden thought of the warm oceans of his home world invaded his cognitions, the homesickness that affected his race bit deep into his soul. After this mission perhaps he could get some leave to return to visit. He would relish the time from his bulky environment suit.

It took little more than four mizuras for Mu Rori's squadron to reach the assembled fighter wing. He saw Commander Dentil was trying to contact him, so activated his communicator. "You go in first Mu Rori, look for the nearest enemy target and go for the kill, try to avoid the stations though as they will be heavily guarded."

"I am on my way commander." Mu Rori replied eagerly. Leading his squadron he flew towards the gate. The swirl of the wormhole enveloped him and within moments he was in Hatikvah's Faith. Examining the sector he could see that there was only one scorpion squadron on patrol, none of which were indicated in green, where were the defectors? There were dozens of transports plying the trade routes between the newly conquered territories and the Split home sectors. Singling out a target he contacted his squadron. "In pairs engage at will." Immediately the tight formation of Makos divided into six groups, each headed for different targets close to the gate.

Mu Rori's target was a lumbering transport ship. As freighters go, the Caiman was a fast ship, but far too slow to evade the nimble Mako. The rear turret on target stitched the sky with bright balls of energy in a vain effort to ward off the pair of fighters gunning for it. Mu Rori laughed at the attempt, though his people were peace loving, the desire to prove themselves equal to the other races was deep in his makeup. With guns blazing he threw his ship into action. The pummeling the caiman received from his twin particle accelerator cannons caused a rapid collapse of its shields. A pair of silkworm missiles finished it off.

The patrol squadron was quick to react and headed to intercept Mu Rori's squadron. Given the dispersed formation of the Makos the Split group was forced to break apart to pursue them. Finally a worthy target was Mu Rori's initial thought. He steered towards the nearest of the fighters. Within moments space was filled with interlacing streams of energy weapons as the two squadrons tried

to gain the upper hand.

Mu Rori saw that his wingman was taking heavy fire from one of the Scorpion pilots. Accelerating to bring his weapons in range, he opened fire, hoping to divert his opponent. The poor shields of the Scorpion took several hits and the Split pilot veered away, attempting to avoid his fire. Mu Rori's wingman dipped his wings in thanks and headed off toward a new enemy. Mu Rori's target however was using its superior manoeuvrability to try and slip in behind him.

A deadly dance began to ensue as the two ships spiralled, each attempting to catch the other squarely in its sights. Mu Rori realised that trapped in this lethal game, he was unable to lead his squadron. He had to end the fight and quickly. The next time the Scorpion flew past his view, he rapidly launched two wasp missiles in succession. Though of low yield and easily avoidable, the Split pilot changed course to avoid the oncoming missiles. The few scant sezuras were all Mu Rori needed to lock on to the ship and tear it to pieces with controlled bursts of his weapons.

With the brief respite gained from the destruction of his target, Mu Rori could see that most of the rest of the enemy squadron had been eliminated. Four of the Scorpions were in full retreat, headed for a large wing of Split fighters bearing down on his squadron. Mu Rori order the remaining ships of his squadron to form on his wing. The losses had been light; only three of his squadron had been destroyed. However much of their ordnance had been expended during the dogfight and the attacks against the Split transports. Fearing defeat, he signalled the squadron to head for the gate picking up survivors along the way. He hoped they would meet the combined squadrons, which Dentill led, when they jumped in.

Mu Rori could see the Split fighter groups rapidly gaining as his squadron approached the gate. It seemed like every station had launched its fighters in a bid to swat his squadron aside. Several Jaguar scouts were already taking pot shots at the tail end of the formation when the gate began to light up with the glow of an exit wormhole.

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Commander Dentill was worried, he hoped that Mu Rori was faring alright. He had not intended to wait so long before jumping into Hatikvah's Faith. Unfortunately a particularly petty police patrol commander had decided it necessary to scan each of the twenty-four ships with him for contraband. His protests were ignored and

he was sure that the wing leader had deliberately lengthened the scans to slight him. When the scan was complete, Dentill was free to lead the taskforce through the gate. He just hoped he was not too late.

The journey via the gate seemed to take an eternity. On reaching the other side, Dentill could see that Mu Rori was still active, heading to rendezvous with the taskforce. In the midst of the stations deep within the sector, several green icons were blinking on the gravidar, it looked like the defectors were on their way. Dentill could see that a three of Mu Rori's squadron were missing, the mission already seemed like a failure.

"Loral, see if you and your boys can even the score a little." Dentill ordered. He watched as the twelve Perseus fighters boosted towards the massed Split fighter groups pursuing the Makos. As they close to weapons range they opened fire. The wave fronts formed by the phased shockwave generator pulses expanded like super novae, enveloping whole flight groups in coruscating energy fields. The shields on many of the ships began to fail as the energy was drained away. Several of the lighter craft exploded, unable to repel the force of the blasts. Other ships peeled away, to limp back home to lick their wounds. It was an impressive show of force.

The defecting pilots saw an opportunity to run and quickly accelerated, battering their way through the ships at the forefront of the Split formation. Dentill sent the bulk of his ships to pursue the scattered Split squadrons. He held back four of his Novas to ensure that the defectors had a clear run to the gate. Watching the developing dogfight, he saw it slowly spreading across the sector. The Split ships were faster than the GDI ships of Boron, Argon and Paranid manufacture. Though his squadrons still kept the upper hand, with the numerous, small engagements, the main strength brought by massed fire was being denied them. He watched as Split fighters pummelled GDI ships, only to retreat as his pilots reacted to the new threat. With the Split defectors almost at the gate, he decided to recall his squadrons before more losses were taken. The faster Boron and Paranid fighters headed for the gate, the Novas held back, their turrets keeping the Split at bay.

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General Dhjn cackled with glee, peering intently at the main view screen on the bridge of the *Bashar*. The ship was receiving real-time images from an advanced military satellite in Hatikvah's Faith. He watched as a squadron of GDI Makos flooded into the sector. He

could see them briefly head out to attack transports and then engage the sector patrol squadron, only to run from the reinforcements launched by the stations within the sector. When the Makos were almost at the gate he was concerned that they might escape, but no, in jumped two more GDI squadrons. "Ha, I've got you now Dentill," Dhjn exclaimed loudly, startling several of the bridge crew. "Captain, prepare the ship for jumping. Lock on to the East gate in Hatikvah's Faith."

"The ship is already prepared general, energy cells have already been transferred to the drive reactor." The captain replied. "We await your command to jump."

"Not yet." Dhjn ordered. "We need to time this perfectly." He focused back on the Navsat data. The GDI squadrons were now scattered across the sector, engaged in a battle to the death with the Jxu defence fleet. It was time to strike, the traitorous fools who were trying to betray him were almost at the gate. "It is time to spring the trap. Activate the jump drive." Dhjn commanded. He chuckled to himself no one could transmit out of the conquered territories without him knowing. At first he had thought to seize the defectors, but with the delivery of the new jump drive, the opportunity to end the conflict was too great. He leaned back into his command seat as the reactor hum intensified with the build up of the jump engine.

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The slow moving ships the defectors had commandeered finally, managed to reach the gate. Most of them seemed to be battle scarred ships, probably being used for spare parts Dentill thought. As they approached the event horizon, the gate light up with the usual swirling vortex, yet something bothered Dentill as he saw it. Of course he realised, the ships had not reached the activation zone, something was coming through. He watched in horror as the twin hull of a Split Raptor menacingly deployed into the sector blocking their escape route. The group of defectors already on a course for the wormhole were unable to move out of the way in time. Dentill stared as the ships smashed against the Raptor's shields, crumpling with the force of the collision.

"Damn it." Dentill cursed to himself. "The carrier is launching fighters, Gromwell hurry up, we have to get clear." The heavy guns of the carrier were already opening up on the fringe of the growing fighter wing surrounding his ship. He focused his attention back on the threat posed by the capital ship. The only option was to try and fight their way through. Leading the way, he flew his ship towards

the carrier. It was slowly moving away from the gate, and with luck his ships would be able to flow around it and through the gate.

The *Bashar* was still spewing forth more fighters, when the leading flight of GDI fighters reached it. The space around the gate was filled with plasma fire from the carrier, and dozens of Mamba heavy fighters began to pummel the small taskforce. Dentill could see several explosions around him. He could only hope that most of them were not his own pilots meeting a fiery death. On his gravidar he could see ship icons slowly winking out, many of them were red, denoting the Split fighters, but some were clearly the blue of friendlies.

Several of the Perseus pilots were risking friendly fire by using their shockwave generators at the carrier. Against the huge bulk of the capital ship, the expanding pulses wreaked a terrible vengeance. Taking advantage of the ship's waning shields, he launched a volley of hornet missiles. As each of the titanic warheads exploded in the *Bashar's* flanks the engines temporarily cut out. The ship began to move out of control away from the engagement area, leaving the gate open for their escape. A cheer came over the comm. unit as Dentill pointed the way.

"Everyone get the hell out of here." He called to his squadrons. As the nearest ships began to hurtle through the gate, Dentill waited just at the perimeter, determined to see all his remaining ships safely home. Beyond the carrier he could see the Split fighters reform into a wall blocking the escape of more than half a dozen GDI fighters. Dentill increased his speed heading towards the group, desperate to help. Several of the Split fighters peeled off to engage him.

Dentill targeted the nearest of the ships. The long-range plasma weapons on his ship rapidly ate through the shields of the lightly protected Mamba. Distracted with the kill, the others pounced, battering away at his shields, Dodging to avoid the incoming fire, he was being driven back toward the gate. He frantically tried to fight he was way clear, but even his impressive skills could not overcome the overwhelming odds against him. "Rick, just go there is nothing you can do. We'll have to surrender" Gromwell shouted over the comm.

"I'm not leaving any of you behind." Dentill cried, destroying another of his opponents with a sustained burst of his main guns.

"Rick, you've got to go, we need you to keep on the fight." Gromwell pleaded with him. "Besides someone has seriously

messed up here and you're the best one to find out who."

Dentill realised he had little choice. "Take care Marcus, keep the rest of them safe, I'll be back for you all." He boosted his way for the gate, remotely firing his rear turret, winging one of the Mambas with a parting shot. As he passed through the gate, he could see the weapons fire diminish as the few remaining ships surrendered.

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"General, several of the pilots have surrendered, shall we accept?" Asked the commander of the Split fighter wings.

"I think perhaps it would be appropriate to do so." The General replied. "We may be able to gather useful information from them."

The general moved to one of the windows in the side of the bridge. He looked out over the battle-scarred hull of his ship. Losses had been high amongst his pilots, but it seemed that the GDI were now a spent force. Much of their offensive arm had been eliminated. "Captain, what is the state of the damage sustained by the *Bashar*?" he requested from the ship's commander.

"We have received severe damage to the engines and the jump drive is offline. Several turrets are also ineffective and one of the shields is irreparably damaged." The captain replied cautiously.

"A pity, we will need to return to our shipyard in Thurok's Beard for repairs." The general stated. "Have the senior prisoner brought to my state rooms, I wish to question him." Turning around imperiously he left the bridge several guards marched after him.

Dhjn kept the lights in his room dim, but allowed several braziers to burn filling the room with dark menacing shadows. As the Argon pilot was brought into the room he was forced to his knees in obeisance to his authority. "Hello old boy, a bit rough these fellows of yours." The pilot said.

"Silence, you will speak only after I question you." Dhjn shouted enraged. "What is your name?"

"Marcus Gromwell, and there's no need to be rude." Gromwell replied cheerfully.

"So you are one of the much vaunted GDI pilots who have plagued my forces for so long." Dhjn continued despite Gromwell's lack of respect.

"That's what the badge says." Gromwell replied.

"You did not seem to fare so well today." Dhjn replied, "Still perhaps you will prove more effective as a slave in one of our mines. I believe one was appropriated from your own employers, it will be just like home." The general smirked.

"What and get my clothes dirty, I don't think so old chap." Gromwell retorted. "Why don't you save us all some bother and let us go home."

The general laughed. "I don't think so, a stretch in the mines ought to prove educational for you. Perhaps you will learn some respect. Take him away." He ordered to the guards.

As the guards picked him off the floor, Dhjn walked up to him. With a quick flick of his wrist, he cuffed Gromwell around the head. "Just a taste of what is to come." He whispered in Gromwell's ear. Through the closing door, Gromwell could hear the high-pitched laughter as he was dragged back to the cells.

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Once safe in Aladna Hill, Dentill gathered his tattered squadrons together. Of the thirty-six ships that had started the mission, only fifteen remained. Six others were captured, leaving another fifteen of his pilots either dead, onboard a rescue craft or unaccounted for. He hoped that at least some of them had managed to eject, though whether being held prisoner by the Split would be better than death, he was not at all sure.

The battered task force limped towards the GDI headquarters, several of the ships were leaking gases and all were scarred in some way by the battle. A patrolling corvette saw their critical state and offered assistance. Dentill politely refused, they would get back to base and then there would be a reckoning.

Fortunately despite the damaged state of his ships, the fleet arrived at the GDI headquarters with no incidents. Dentill had spent the trip beating himself up for not foreseeing the outcome of the mission. As the station loomed nearer he allowed the automatic docking sequence to guide him in he didn't have the will to fly the ship himself.

As he exited the airlock into the private hanger reserved for the squadron leaders he could see Shacklock and Schmidt waiting for

him. As the door closed behind him, he forced himself to walk across the room. Shacklock wore a look of concern, he could see the haggard look about Dentill and had had counted the ships that had docked at the station. Schmidt who had spent the previous stazuras in consultation with his superiors was eager to hear news. "How did it go Commander, did you manage to bring any of the defectors with you. I did not see any Split ships in the main hanger." Dentill filled with rage, perhaps unfairly he could not stand the presence of the intelligence officer. He locked his eyes with Schmidt's, anger smouldering behind them. In a move swifter than a fully tined Pegasus he struck Schmidt in the face with a fist, knocking him to the ground. Without looking back, Dentill stalked out of the bay, headed for his quarters just catching the sound of the airlock cycling as moved away.

Schmidt slowly pulled himself up from the floor. Opening his mouth to protest to Shacklock. The latter shook his head and hurried out, trying to catch up with Dentill. Schmidt stood in shock he was about to follow as well when Loralamincstros standing inside the airlock called over to him. "I would not if I were you, I don't think you would survive a second blow." The Paranid said, adding, "Especially from me."

Chapter 11 – Imprisoned

Ever so slowly, awareness slowly crept back into Marcus Gromwell's battered head. Perhaps it had not been such a good idea to antagonise his Split captors, but it was in his blood to fight back however he could. Peering through the gloom he could see he was in an ill lit cell. From the rough-hewn stone walls he assumed that General Dhjn had carried out his threat and transferred him to one of the mines. He wondered whether the other pilots had met a similar fate. Pulling himself off the floor, Gromwell began to examine the walls, trying to find some means of escape, or at least something, which might be used as a weapon. The search proved fruitless. The bare rock walls provided no exit and barring himself there was nothing else within the cell.

As Gromwell eased himself back to the floor, trying to rub life back to his aching limbs, the solid metal door screeched as it was opened. In hustled a trio of Split warriors, armed with stun batons and laser pistols. Two of them seized Gromwell, hauling him to his feet. The third began striking Gromwell with his baton, not bothering even to activate its power cell. Through the haze of pain, he could just make out the words of a fourth Split as it entered the room.

"ENOUGH, show some respect for our distinguished guest." Gromwell could just see a faint image of colourful robes, through his blackened eyes. "Welcome to our humble facility." The voice continued.

"Who the hell are you?" Asked Gromwell, spitting blood from a cut lip.

"Now, now, I am the warden of this mine and you are my guest, one who will be staying for the rest of his miserable life." The warden answered with a chuckle.

Gromwell spat more blood. "The universe preserve us from mixed together clichés! Not very original are you?"

The warden struck Gromwell across the cheek, the blow sending him sprawling across the floor. "Silence, I find your insolence tiresome. These guards will show you to your new duties." The warden paused to see Gromwell's reaction. "I'm afraid they are not quite as glamorous as you are used too, but rejoice in the knowledge that you will contribute to the greater good."

"I'm honoured." Gromwell groaned through the pain.

With a final smirk, the warden hurried from the room. The trio of guards picked Gromwell up from the floor again and dragged him out of the cell. Judging from the rock of the corridors walls, it appeared that he was deep in the asteroid core. The corridor seemed long, but by allowing the guards to do the hard work, his strength began to return. At least a little. In the distance, but growing louder came the harsh sounds of vibrohammers and pickaxes. They were clearly approaching one of the main ore seams.

After a few mizuras of being dragged along the dim lit corridors, Gromwell saw he was being brought to a large open grotto. The noise of mining filled his ears with a roar. He could see several hundred slave workers hammering and chiselling away at the craggy walls. Some pounding the raw ore into smaller scraps, ready to be loaded onto huge carts which would take it to the furnaces for smelting.

The guards threw him roughly to the floor. "Pick yourself off the floor." The oldest of the trio said, the one who had beaten him. "Here is axe, to work now." The Split thrust a rusty pickaxe into his hands and vaguely pointed towards an empty space on the wide glittering wall. When the guards had finally shoved him to the wall, they manacled his leg with a heavy chain to a small group of slaves. Gromwell began to hack the wall rapidly with the pickaxe, causing fractures in the rock surface. The guards seemed to become placated by this apparent show of compliance and so moved off.

Keeping a wary eye for guards, Gromwell began to lessen the pace of his hammering. He glanced at the downcast expressions of his fellow workers. He could see the sunken eye sockets and the emaciated limbs from overwork and malnutrition. Several appeared to have weeping sores. All the slaves around him seemed to be in a sorry sate. He briefly pondered planning a revolt, but given the poor state of his new companions, he did not see how it could succeed. He would have to hope for a rescue or that somehow the GDI would be successful.

"This is lots of fun." He said, smiling to the slaves about him. "Warm shelter and exercise, these Split are really spoiling us." The slaves did not react to the weak joke, they just continued to hack away numbly against the rock face. Gromwell was a little disheartened by the acceptance transmitted by the other workers, clearly their spirits had been crushed long ago.

He toiled for several stazuras, tearing huge chunks of the wall away

to reveal the veins of ore, vital for the construction of so many goods on the interstellar market. Eventually a great siren sounded, signalling the end of the shift. Gromwell looked down at his hands, they were raw with blisters, and cut where sharp rocks had lacerated them. He hoped things would resolve for the better soon, he had no idea how long he could keep this pace up.

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The asteroid strewn system of Shareholders' Fortune was the perfect setting for clandestine meetings. The huge rolling lumps of primordial rock span slowly through space in the slow dance they began when the solar system had been born. A ship sped silently, leaping from asteroid to asteroid, trying to appear unobtrusive as it headed for a large hollow rock. A second ship appeared slinking slowly from within the heart of a dust cloud. The two craft met outside the gaping maw of the hollow asteroid. A brief flurry of signal lights flickered between the ships and then they slowly manoeuvred into the asteroid.

Within the hollow core of the asteroid sat a small listening post, bored into the rocky crust. The pair of ships slowed to a crawl as they moved to dock, each heading for one of a pair of airlocks. The station was small. Not even large enough to fit a proper docking bay. Once the airlocks finished cycling, two Split garbed in warrior's robes stepped into the small bay. The elder of the pair was General Dhjn. "Ah, Biskhas N'etesh, it is a pleasure to finally meet, you have served the family well." The general said to the younger Split.

"You do me a great honour by meeting me General." Biskhas replied, beaming the strange upside-down Split smile. "How may I be of assistance?"

"Tell me of events in the outer sectors?" Dhjn asked eagerly. "Is Njy still posturing with the Boron and the Argon?"

"I fear there is grave news, although neither side will totally demilitarize, several units on both sides have been recalled. It looks like things are calming down." Biskhas sounded wary he did not want to be subjected to Dhjn's wrath.

"It is too soon for such actions." The General replied. "We must rekindle their ardour. You will return to Njy territory and continue to act as a military official. When the opportunity presents itself you will lead your squadron into Hila's Joy and cause as much havoc as possible."

"As you command, Lord General." Biskhas tried to sound confident, despite having just been ordered to his death and of course to set off an interstellar war.

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The main hanger of the GDI headquarters in the Light of Heart sector was filled with lines of people standing to attention. The crowd was a riot of colours, many were dressed in the full dress uniform of the GDI fleet, others in colourful flight suits or newly cleaned crew overalls. The one common feature was a single black armband worn on the right sleeve of every member of this audience. Standing at a podium before the main airlock to the docking bays stood Petre Shacklock his eyes sunken with fatigue and grief.

"We are gathered today to remember those who have perished in the cause of freedom." He began. "Many brave men and women of all races have lost their lives in the past few wozuras holding back the chaos and oppression, which looms over us all." The crowd stirred with emotion as he read through the list of pilots and crews who had died in the recent missions against the maverick Family Jxu. Every member of the audience knew someone who had died and the anger and grief was palpable as they met to mourn their passing.

Marching to the podium with Dureena Fielding, Commander Dentil placed a hand on Shacklock's shoulder in support. Shacklock's voice had begun to crack under the strain.

As the last name was read, Fielding leaned towards Shacklock's ear and whispered. "Let me continue." Shacklock nodded, relieved that he would have a chance to compose himself. As she stepped to the microphone on the podium, Dentill began to scan the crowd, trying to send waves of support through the eye contact. He was gratified to see the number of his colleagues who tried to return the support.

"Many of our comrades have fallen holding the line against the darkness." Fielding opened her speech. "A darkness against which, even the might of our parent civilisations have been impotent to stop. Each of our dead is a Hero; they have proven their worth in the eyes of posterity. We may have been hurt by our foes, yet despite their propaganda we are not broken we still stand strong. We stand now to honour the fallen as is proper but soon we will have buried our dead and will return with greater resolve. All of you have proved that with a just cause, miracles can be worked, we are proud of what you have accomplished."

Dentill could see that the massed ranks of pilots, ground crew and security personnel seemed to stand a little taller. He knew each of them had gone beyond that which even the Navy was often called upon to accomplish. He was impressed with the fervour of Fielding's speech.

"Yet even in the midst of our grief we must not forget the comrades who even now are being held by our enemy. Our fallen friends will not rest easy until they are freed. Let us unite once again to lend our aid and in so doing prove the strength of our brotherhood in arms."

"Hull yeah!" Shouted one of the newer pilots, punching the air with a fist.

"Let's stick it to them." Added another.

Dentill began to become uneasy. He respected the grief of his pilots and support crews, but he did not want that to be turned into an uncontrollable thirst for vengeance. Any attack fought with such emotion would lead to many more deaths. It was time to bring a stabilising influence.

"Comrades and friends." He called. "I thank the squadron leader for her words, they are fitting reminders for those who have been killed. Still, in our grief we must not forget our goals."

A low murmur filled the room. Some pilots were in agreement, yet others were now passionately ready to thrust themselves upon the enemy.

"We will draw up a plan, which will save our friends, yet we must not lose our heads. Our colleagues in the clutches of the Split will not wish to be freed at the cost of more deaths." He tried to sound reassuring. "Hold your heads up high we have worked wonders together and I am impressed." The crowd began to cheer. He held up a hand for silence. "Parade dismissed."

As groups of pilots and support staff began to filter from the hangar deck, Dentill walked over to the group of senior officers clustered around Petre Shacklock. He could hear Captain Greene speaking to Fielding. "Nice speech, Dureena, but don't you think it was a bit heavy for the occasion?"

"I don't know what you mean." Fielding replied frowning.

"I think what the captain is saying is that it was quite strongly focused on striking back rather than on regaining our strength." Shacklock added trying to avoid a confrontation.

"Actually I meant it seemed more along the lines of banner waving and rhetoric. I half expected to hear a band kick in playing the national anthem!" Greene replied, a quirky smile on his face.

Before Fielding could turn her sudden blustering into a response, Dentill intervened. "Greene was correct, it was a powerful speech and I thank you for it I think the crew needed it. Right now we need to come up with a rescue plan, can you all head to the war room and I will follow in a mizura. I just need to speak to Petre."

Dentill and Shacklock waited for the hangar to clear of personnel. "It looks like the pressure is beginning to tell." Shacklock said, in measured tones.

"Understandable, we have been at this none stop now for several wozuras, I think we need a break. I feel we will need this rescue needs to be fast, and covert, no all guns blazes for this strike." Dentill replied.

"Well I will support you with whatever you decide." Shacklock offered.

"Thanks, lets get to the briefing, we need to be quick to catch the Split off guard." Dentill increased his pace towards the lift to the combat operations level. Shacklock scurried behind on his short legs. Once in the lift, the journey was swift.

As they walked into the war room, Dentill could see the determined faces of the headquarters staff. Several squadron commanders were seated at the conference table along with the starship captains, Greene and Tambla. At the far end of the table on his own, trying to look inconspicuous, sat Commander Schmidt of Argon Intelligence. For a moment Dentill simply glared at him, then took his seat, nodding greeting to the assembled leaders.

"Ok we all know why we are here. We have to come up with a plan to rescue the missing pilots from the Split." Dentill replied.

"Excuse me sir, but we don't know where they are being held. Or do you have more intelligence?" Asked one of the squadron commanders.

"That's one of the reasons we need to be cautious in our planning."

Dentill replied. "We have narrowed it down to a few possibilities." He nodded to Loraminckstros.

"It is common Split practice to put captured enemies to work in their mines as a means of proving their dominance." The Paranid explained. "There is no reason to consider this not the case here."

"This leaves us only two possibilities. One of the mines." Dentill added.

"It won't be the ex-GDI mine." Interrupted Schmidt.

"Oh pray enlighten us with your wisdom, commander." Dentill's disdain was barely concealed.

"Look, I know the previous mission failed badly, but it wasn't from incorrect intelligence. I have spent years trying to understand and predict Split behaviour." Schmidt was trying to be placatory. "The Split are not stupid and are unlikely to trust the security of a facility which we may still have the access codes to."

"He has a point commander." Said Greene. "We ought to give it a shot, if nothing else we may be able to gather some intelligence, and free whatever slaves are being held in the mine."

Nods of assent were made around the table. Dentill saw that his subordinates were determined to make the attempt.

"Ok, well it was my idea to organise this attack. However I don't want us sending in a massed fleet, it will quickly draw undue attention."

"Might I suggest infiltration?" Loraminckstros proposed. "One of our captured Iguanas with an altered IFF would make an effective means to transport an assault party."

"It has merit, but it is a terrible risk. There is no way we could provide it with support." Dentill countered.

"We have been modifying our jumpdrive on the *Euripides*, and I believe that we will be able to make a gateless jump." Said Captain Tambla, entering the debate. "So long as a hypercomm capable Navsat is deployed and transmitting for time enough for us to jump in." He added.

"That would help supply a speedy get away, but I am concerned about infiltration of the facility." Dentill replied.

"I speak fluent Split." Loraminckstros added. "Our races are after all still allies. Even if they detect my species, they may not be too suspicious."

"I guess we you all have answers to my objections, shall we run the plan once more to clarify?" Dentill sounded resigned.

Loraminckstros began to run through the briefing. "An assault team will be transported in a modified Iguana piloted by myself to the ore mine we believe the prisoners to be held in."

"The first priority is going to have to be jamming outgoing signals from the station, we don't want reinforcements coming too soon." Added Captain Greene.

"Indeed. Once the station is secured, any GDI pilots we find plus any slaves we will be loaded onto the Iguana." Loraminckstros continued.

"What if there is not enough space on the transport?" Dentill queried.

"In such circumstances we will have to commandeer additional ships from the station." Loral suggested. "Once the passengers are aboard, the ship or ships will exit the station and deploy an advanced Navsat, signalling the *Euripides* to jump in."

"At which point Loral with any other ships will dock and we will jump out." Tambla concluded.

"I would like to lead the assault party." Schmidt spoke up again.

"What?" Dentil exclaimed. "Or rather, why would you volunteer?"

"I guess it is because I know I have lost your respect after the recent debacle and want to prove myself." Schmidt replied. "I have combat training. I started in the militia."

Dentill was surprised he had not expected Schmidt to volunteer, let alone have formal military training. Perhaps he was not quite so bad after all. "Ok, I guess I have been a little hard on you, I don't like to lose people. Still it will be me leading the assault team, though you can come along, I know you are good with electronics."

"We will need about sixty security troops with combat armour and assault rifles." Loraminckstros calculated. "That will give us

enough flexibility to tackle most eventualities.”

“That may take a couple of tazuras, as I will have to draft in teams from other stations.” Shacklock spoke for the first time.

“Good then we will begin in three tazuras.” Dentill seemed to be content with the plan although he added. “Fielding, I want you to try and load your squadron onto the *Euripides*, we will need a few fighters in case the Split begin to react too early.”

“I’ll try to remember to leave you some space to dock” Fielding quipped with a wide grin.

“Excellent, it looks like we have a plan. Now we just have to hope that we can pull it off.” Dentill said, closing the meeting.

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Marcus Gromwell knew he had been imprisoned in the ore mine for tazuras. Yet with no access to a chronometer, he had no real concept of the passage of time. With all the labour he had been forced to do he felt like he had been incarcerated for wozuras.

Early on he had begun to try and encourage his fellow slaves, he offered them support and helped them with their heavy loads. As time passed he realised that their spirits were already crushed and it was unlikely that many still harboured the hope of freedom. He still tried to instil some desire for freedom, but he doubted that he was making much progress. Even his rowdy singing after work shifts had ended produced little more than a smile from a few of the slaves.

Oddly though, Gromwell had actually become quite popular with the overseers of the mine. He dug more ore, carried heavier loads and displayed few signs of fatigue, and thus his work crew would always have the highest productivity. Appreciative of the bonuses they were gaining thanks to his labours, they treated him with wary respect. He was provided with more food and limited freedom to roam about the quarters after shifts. Thanks to his superior diet, he was able to maintain his strength.

His most recent shift had finished perhaps a stazura ago. He was sat in the slave barracks, eating his meal with his work crew. The thick gruel, which was provided, was tasteless but it did provide much needed nourishment. He had managed to gather a fairly large crowd as he told tales to the circle of listening slaves.

A young man, barely out of his early teens asked. "So you really fought in the battle of Black Hole Sun? Those Xenon are terrible."

"Oh yes it was a tough fight. Waves of bombers and interceptors kept boiling from the gate. We were nearly overwhelmed until the *Terrible* jumped in and took out the pair of Xenon cruisers." Gromwell replied.

"Wow, I was living in Treasure Chest then. My parents let me watch as the defence squadrons launched from the trading station, it was quite a sight." The youth said.

"Boy, that was over ten Jazuras ago, you are making me feel old!" Gromwell laughed.

There were grins around the room as for a brief moment the slaves thought of better times. Gromwell began to tell more stories, about how he left the Navy and then moved to work for the GDI. As the groups sat enthralled, a slave from one of the other halls crept into the barrack chamber. The slave walked up and whispered into his ear.

"I have discovered that there are three more Argon prisoners with uniforms, like yours, spread around the work crews." The slave said.

"Any sign of a new Paranid or Boron?" Gromwell enquired.

"I have heard nothing about a Boron, however it is well known that the Split like to keep them for sport." The Slave replied. "The Split and Paranid are still allies, so it is likely that they are keeping him confined in better circumstances until they can transport him back to Paranid space."

"Lucky him!" Gromwell replied. "See if you can let my colleagues know I am safe and well. Don't take any risks though, I don't want you getting hurt."

The slave smiled and nodded and headed silently out of the room. Gromwell turned back to his audience. "Sorry about that, now where was I..."

Before he could continue his story, a klaxon sounded indicating it was time for them to sleep. The slaves found their sleeping pallets and many were promptly dozing before Gromwell was even at his own bed. He was still not used to the sounds of a room filled with sleeping individuals and found it very difficult to fall asleep himself.

He therefore spent much time running things through his head.

He wondered how the situation in the outer regions was faring, before he had been captured, tensions seemed to have been cooling. Surprised that his thoughts had wandered to such distant topic, his own incarceration suddenly was thrown full force back at him. It seemed so long since his capture, he felt sure that the GDI must have given up. Perhaps the defence squadrons had taken more losses than he had been able to register.

The dim lights dotted around the room began to flicker. This was nothing new; it was rare for the power supply to be consistent. The flickering intensified and Gromwell's eyes flashed open, something seemed to be going on. He was sitting himself up when the lights went out entirely. Several of the slaves still awake began to scream and shout with alarm. In space when the light goes out it usually meant no power, which in turn meant no life support. "Whoa, don't panic" Gromwell shouted, as other slaves woke up and began to add their voices to the cacophony.

With a sudden flash, red emergency lighting switched on. In the distance through walls and bulkheads, Gromwell could here the sound of explosions. Realisation dawned in him; it was the sound of explosive charges. The mining station was under attack. "It must be a rescue." He shouted into the din.

Chapter 12 – Rescue mission.

A jarring tremor surged through the ore mine, knocking everyone in the slave barracks off their feet. Marcus Gromwell saw that the lone warrior guarding the entrance had fallen heavily and appeared to be confused and disorientated. He could see blood pouring down the Split's face. Before the guard could react, Gromwell pounced on him beating his head against the wall. Eventually the guard succumbed into unconsciousness.

Gromwell grabbed the guard's weapons, a slug thrower and a riot stick. He shouted to the milling slaves in the room. "Come on, help is here, do you want to spend the rest of your lives as slaves?"

The expression on the faces of several slaves suggested that they were not that concerned at the prospect. Cheers and shouts from other slaves forced them grudgingly into participating. Gromwell threw the riot stick to the young argon who had shown such interest in his tales. "What's your name?" He asked the youth.

"Errol Bakra." The young man replied.

"Ok Errol follow me, and stay close, we need to find some weapons for this lot." Gromwell instructed Errol, with a reassuring smile.

Gromwell led the way down the hall. Fortunately for the band of ragged slaves the storage lockers for the mining tools was not far from the barracks. Soon each of them was equipped. The motley band was now armed with an assortment of weapons, pick axes, hammers and powered drills.

A pair of Split guards came around the corner, heading to reinforce the barrack guard. They were unprepared when they came face to face with Gromwell's band. Before they could react a dozen slaves had jumped on each of them hacking and smashing with their crude weapons. When the mob had finished it was barely possible to recognise the bodies as being of Split origin. Gromwell distributed the guards' weapons to some of the more levelheaded slaves. He did not want a fully armed fanatic pouring fire indiscriminately.

To keep the momentum of his small rebellion going, Gromwell led his companions towards the other barracks. The more support he could gain, the greater the chance of eventual escape.

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Commander Dentill had been surprised how easily they had

managed to gain access to the ore mining station. The Split seemed to have been completely taken in by Loraminckstros' grasp of their language. Following the flight plan prepared, they had entered the station through a side cargo docking port. As the Iguana had slowed to a stop, Daryl Schmidt had activated his newly acquired communications jammer. With communications blocked, reinforcements could not be sent to relieve the station guards.

The assault force was now standing inside the main cargo-loading bay. The chamber was very large, and it appeared that a shipment had just been transferred, as the bay was empty. The entire force had plenty of space to deploy as they waited for the assignments and objectives, soon to be allocated by the command staff.

Dentill stored before the assembled assault squads. "Here's how we going to play this." He began. "Commander Schmidt is going to lead delta squad towards the communications centre. We need to shut down their communications properly."

"Absolutely." Schmidt stated, turning to the squad he said. "This is a crucial task, right now our own communications are also being jammed. Once we seize the comm. station we can shut off the jammer and therefore coordinate our assault better."

"You had better get moving Schmidt." Dentill ordered, "Good hunting." He added in encouragement.

Schmidt gathered his squad about him and carefully led them towards the facilities upper levels.

"Loral, you will lead your teams and cause as much havoc as you can, try and take out the command centre, and disrupt the power supply. We need you to create a diversion. Hopefully they will not understand our plan until too late." Dentill explained to Loraminckstros.

"I believe this shall be entertaining, commander." Replied the Paranid, indicating his squad to follow him.

"The rest of you, we are headed for the bowels of this rock. We are off to free some slaves." Dentill said, trying to sound reassuring.

The sergeant of the security team nodded his approval. "Ready when you are sir."

"Great lets get going, I imagine we are in for a fight." Dentill replied.

The squad sergeant headed towards the nearest cargo lift to the main mine shaft. The lift had enough space to fit the twenty assault troops with room to spare. As the last trooper filed in, Dentill activated the control and the lift began to descend into the inky depths of the mine.

When the lift finally reached the bottom with a heavy thump, the doors creaked open with a high-pitched screech. Dentill groaned, there would be no stealth approach after that noise. As if on cue, a trio of Split guards came running down the corridor. "What goes on here?" one of them cried. Too late, more than a dozen assault rifles were raised in an instant, as triggers were pulled, pulses of energy converged on the guards, tearing them into shreds.

"Try to disable the enemy if you can men." Dentill ordered. "I'd rather them think they have a chance of survival, they are more likely to surrender that way."

A chorus of "yes sirs," and a few apologies came from the assault team. "Come on then lads." Dentill shouted, running down the corridor.

To the right of the main route he saw a guard station. He pulled out a stun grenade, lobbing it through the doorway. Scant seconds later, a brief bright light caused the reactive glass of his helmet to briefly opaque, protecting his eyes. One of the assault troopers peered into the room. "All clear." He said to Dentill.

Dentill nodded in thanks and carried on down the corridor. The metal plated walls began to give way to girder supported rock walls. They must have finally entered the main mining section. Ahead lay an opening into what appeared to be a large cavern; Dentill was about to enter, when one of the troopers pushed him aside. "Let me go first sir." The trooper said. Before Dentill could protest, the trooper had passed him. Hurrying to follow, he was suddenly aware of a number of shapes ducking to take cover amongst the rock debris and ore carts that littered the chamber. Before he could shout a warning, a chattering roar sounded as a heavy slug thrower burst into action catching the trooper in front in the chest. The trooper froze in place for a moment before collapsing to the ground.

The assault squad sergeant pushed Dentill roughly behind a crate. "Better take cover sir." The sergeant said. "It looks like we are in for a fire fight."

Dentill watched as the rest of his team, crouched as they rushed

into the room, diving for whatever cover was available. The staccato roar of the slug thrower was joined by the whine of laser pistols and the cough of riot shot guns from the Split defenders. The weight of fire was horrific and Dentill looked for better cover, the stack of crates did not seem quite adequate for his protection.

A strange crackling sound distracted him from his search. Trying to ascertain its source, he realised it was his communicator. Schmidt must have taken the comm. centre. "Commander Dentill, Schmidt here, I have disabled the long-range communicator, but I am currently locked in. A large force of guards is trying to burn through the door."

"I wish I could help, but we are pinned down in the mine." Dentill replied.

"I am monitoring the situation." Loraminckstros interrupted. "I shall move to support Commander Schmidt."

"Alright Loral, I will try to extricate us here, we have got to keep moving." Dentill closed off the comm.

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Daryl Schmidt sat before one of the communication consoles, he was hurriedly trying to access the main computer to see if he could seal some of the station sections. He needed to stop reinforcements from moving about freely. He finally succeeded in getting through the security codes. Fortunately Split programming was a great deal simpler than used by the other races.

"Sir, the door." One of his security team said. Schmidt looked towards the entrance. The heavy door was beginning to glow red. He could even hear the blast of energy bolts pattering against it. It would not be long now. His remaining eight troopers took positions around the room, trying to enfilade the doorway. They would not be giving up without taking a few of the Split with them.

A large crack began to form in the reinforced teladianium structure. With a final groan, it burst inwards. Shards of superheated metal peppered the team. Weapons were brought up, ready to face the onslaught. A pair of guards entered the room. It looked like they were in a panic, but before Schmidt's squad could react, the two Split were caught by fire from the corridor. A Paranid head peered around the door.

"You are not thinking of shooting me are you?" It was

Loralaminckstros.

"Loral, thank goodness. You don't half have timing!" Schmidt replied.

The Paranid chuckled. "Apologies, I had as you argon say, 'left something in the oven'."

Schmidt took a moment to realise that the Paranid was trying to make a joke. Relief flooded through him and he began to laugh too.

"Perhaps we should try to assist the Commander." Loralaminckstros suggested.

"Oh gosh, yes, what can we do?" Schmidt asked.

"Patch through to the slave guard commander's frequency." Loralaminckstros waited for Schmidt to indicate that he was through. In what seemed to the others like fluent Split, he began. "All slave guards, fall back to the central core, your position has been compromised."

"I hope that helps." Schmidt said, anxiously rubbing his cheek.

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Commander, it looks like the Split are bugging out." The squad sergeant informed Dentill.

"Thank goodness. It was looking pretty hairy." Dentill replied. "Can we get the team moving?"

"Yes Sir, we need to take the left hand passage to the slave barracks."

Dentill had seen several of the Split guards head down that way. It looked like would still face more fighting. "We had better get going then," he said to his squad.

The remaining fifteen troopers followed him down the passageway. Up ahead was an intersection and he could see several barricades. It looked like the Split were still trying to block their way. "Grenades," shouted the squad sergeant. Several round objects were hurled by troopers into the confined space ahead. A few brief muffled explosions could be heard and then the few remaining members of the Split group were running from the position. Several of Dentill's squad opened fire, dropping the guards before they

could escape.

The last stretch of the corridor was clear of enemies, but Dentill could hear the sounds of gunfire and the screams of the wounded up ahead. He waved his team forward. They were soon running full pace towards the barrack level, the sounds of the combat growing louder.

As the assault squad poured out of the corridor, they found themselves in a large hall, filled with a swirling melee. It appeared to Dentill that the slaves had decided to eliminate their masters. The guards were heavily outnumbered, but they wore armour and were armed with plentiful supplies of guns and riot sticks. The slaves were frantically fighting, but whilst the Split stayed in tight ranks, there was no way that they could use their numbers effectively.

Without thinking, Dentill switched his rifle to automatic fire, bursts of plasma fire, tore through the rear rank of the Split line. Several of the guards fell forward dead. The squad sergeant led his troopers into the flanks of the Split formation. With the butts of their rifles, and with frequent shots from side arms, the shock caused by the assault sent the Split reeling. The slaves seized the opportunity and fell upon any of the guards left isolated in the route. The room was filled with screams as the Split were butchered by the slaves crude weapons.

Dentill knew he needed to keep the attack moving. He clambered up a tall crate and lay across the top. From this vantage point, he could snipe at the enemy lines. As the flow of combat ebbed in portions of the line, he took shots at any of the exposed guards. His constant fire began to tell, and soon gaping holes were allowing slaves and assault troopers to surround some of the guards. The remaining Split realised it was futile to continue and headed for a tunnel and escape.

A sudden calm seemed to fall upon the hall. The slaves appeared to be in a daze as their bodies began to flush the adrenaline. Dentill eased himself down from his vantage point. One of the slaves offered him support as he clambered down the crate. "Thanks." He said noticing that the slave was less ragged than most of the others. "Marcus?" He asked in surprise.

"Rick? Thank the fates, I thought we were lost," Gromwell answered, recognition dawning on his face.

"Don't relax too quickly, we still have to get out of here." Dentill

replied. "Are there any more prisoners to be freed?"

"No we managed to get all the slaves out of the barracks, but were boxed in by the guards you helped chase away." Gromwell sounded distraught. "Dozens of us were cut down, we barely stood a chance against their firearms."

Dentill was not surprised; he looked around at the heaps of bodies. Several slaves had died to bring down even one of the guards. "We had better get moving. Have the more able bodied gather weapons, we may still face opposition on the way out."

The released slaves began to gather the guns and clubs dropped by the defeated guards. In amongst them he could see some of the other pilots who had been taken after their previous ill-fated engagement.

"Marcus, have you managed to locate Mu Rori." Dentill asked, hoping that the Boron was not amongst the dead.

"No, he and Traskamanklat from Loral's squadron were not brought down to the mines." Gromwell's voice did not sound confident. Dentill dreaded to think what fate the Split had designed for the poor Boron. The Split's bitter hatred of the aquatic species was legendary.

Dentill decided it would be best to hurry. He sent half his remaining troopers under their sergeant to go on ahead. Hopefully they would be able to clear away any light resistance along the way. He led the large group of slaves towards the main lift to the upper levels. As they travelled, he could hear the sharp sounds of rifle shots and occasionally they would pass by the corpse of a Split guard. It looked like the assault team sergeant was proving his worth.

It took a while for the crowd of nearly two hundred slaves to reach the top of the lift shaft. When the whole group was clear. Dentill instructed the assault squad to evacuate the freed slaves to the transport. "It looks like we are going to be crammed in but, we are only expecting a short hop to the *Euripides* when it arrives." The sergeant said before he headed off.

"We need to find Loral and Schmidt." Dentill said to Gromwell. "Bring your other pilots, I'm sure they'll want the chance for a little revenge."

The five pilots headed for the command deck. Schmidt had done his work well; they met no Split on the way. It looked like the security doors were keeping the main Split guards trapped in other parts of

the station. As Dentill led the way into the comm. centre, the teams of GDI troopers turned their weapons on them. "Whoa there boys, it's me!" said Dentill laughing. The troops lowered their rifles, but remained alert. Schmidt stood up from his console and walked over. "Have you managed to get the Slaves clear, commander?" he asked.

"Yep, my squad is bringing them out now. In fact the slaves are carrying our wounded." Dentill replied.

"What about Squadron leader Gromwell and his men?" asked Loraminckstros.

"We're right here." Gromwell shouted through the door. "You chaps took so long we had to rescue ourselves."

The group of officers laughed, their relief was evident. The mission seemed to be a success. All they had to do was get away.

"I've been searching for evidence of Mu Rori and Traskamanklat but there is nothing in the station computer." Schmidt reported, "Traskamanklat should be fine, but I am concerned about Mu Rori." "We are going to have to try the cells, there aren't any other places he is likely to be." Dentill replied. "Do I have any volunteers? It might be a little rough?"

Everyone in the room stepped forward. Dentill was pleased with the show of camaraderie. "We can't all go," He said. "Gromwell, you and your pilots have taken enough punishments, you get back to the ships. Loral, you can come and we'll take two of your squad" He pointed to two of the security troopers.

"Sir, I would like to go to." Schmidt asked, "You may need help with doors and other electronics."

"I'm not sure, we may need you up here to keep the Split bottled up." Dentill replied.

"No I have the access codes, I can do all that from my datapad, but some of the systems along the way may be set on a different grid, the Split rarely centralise their systems." Schmidt countered.

"Alright, you can come, but stay near the back, let me and the troopers do the fighting." Dentill told him. "The rest of you head back to the ship, but keep our escape route open."

Dentill's team waited as Schmidt's squad followed Gromwell and his

pilots. Once they were alone the five men set off for the cells, keeping to a fast pace. The corridors were eerily quiet, the absence of any Split guard teams left only the background hum of the power generators.

"How far to go?" Dentill enquired after a few mizuras.

"The cells are two levels down, but we are going to have to get through a section with several guard teams to get there." Schmidt replied.

"That could be difficult, but I guess we have no choice. How do we get there?"

"We well have to go down the corridor to our left, at the end is a set of sealed doors, that is the way we have to go, there is a lift about three hundred yards through there." Schmidt answered.

Dentill waved a move out order, and the small squad was heading off again. The doors to the next section were of solid manufacture, designed specifically to resist a breach during an emergency or invasion.

"Can you override your locks?" Dentill asked. "I doubt we will be able to cut through."

"Give me a mizura this may take some doing." Schmidt replied anxiously. It took considerably longer. Schmidt was frantically trying to disengage the security lock out, but the encryption was difficult. It had been far easier to shut them out of the system, depriving the Split guards of any chance of quickly escaping from their imprisonment. Unfortunately for Schmidt, he now had the same problem.

As time flowed by, the security personnel became restless, even Dentill began to seem irritable. The two troopers began searching for an alternative route. The corridor was bare of decoration, but this only helped access panels to stand out. Soon the corridor was lined with opened hatches. "Sir!" one of the guards exclaimed. "I think I have found an access tube it goes down so it might get us at least a little nearer our objective."

"Wait, a moment." Schmidt said. "I think I have got it." The doors began to shudder with a groan. Slowly a crack began to grow between the door and the wall panel where Schmidt stood. The groan turned to a squeal as the gap widened. "I think they ought to oil these more often." Schmidt said.

"Perhaps you would like to suggest it too them?" Asked Loraminckstros, speaking for the first time since they had left the comm. centre.

"Perhaps another ti..." The loud sharp retort of slug throwers cut off the rest of Schmidt's reply. He stared down at his chest, seeing a dark stain of blood begin to spread out across his tunic. He had been hit.

"No, Daryl." Dentill cried, diving to catch him as he slumped to the ground. Loraminckstros and the two security troopers jumped through the opening, their assault rifles blazing away, pouring energy pulses down the corridor. At the far end, several Split guards fell to the rapid onslaught.

Loraminckstros was taking aiming for a further target when the remaining Split warriors were ripped apart by a rapid stream of projectiles. "That fire came from behind them!" One of the troopers said.

"RUN, leave from this place." A deep voice bellowed down the corridor.

Through drifting smoke the stumbling figure of a large Paranid came into view. The GDI troopers stood awestruck seeing the towering figure. Over one shoulder was strapped a miniaturised mass driver used by both the Split and Argon militaries. Over the Paranid's other huge shoulder was slung a limp mass of tentacles.

"Traskamanklat, is that you?" Loraminckstros shouted down the corridor.

"What other Paranid would be foolish enough to spend time in this un-holy station." Traskamanklat shouted back at him.

Dentill laughed with relief. "Hurry up we have got to leave now, Schmidt is badly injured, we need to get him to safety." Loraminckstros hurried over, slinging his rifle onto his back, he gently picked up the injured intelligence officer.

"Lets go people." Dentill shouted, watching as the two Paranid ran off back towards the hanger bays. "Go on, I'll give covering fire." He urged the two security guards. He turned back to face down the corridor, sending streams of energy pulses down the corridor. Through the smoke, he occasionally heard a yelp as his bolts struck home. All about him, bullets were ricocheting at his feet and laser

beams were impacting on walls. It was time to leave before he was hit. He began retreating. Around the corner, he found his two security troopers guarding the corridor.

"Come on Sir, we've laid charges, that should hold them off." One of them said.

Dentill sprinted as fast as he could. AS he passed the pair of troopers, one of them grabbed him and flung him unceremoniously to the floor. The other held a detonator in his hand. The thumb went down pressing the activation switch. Suddenly the trio were deafened by a large boom as the charges exploded. A large dust cloud expanded down the corridor. The guards grabbed Dentill and hauled him down the corridor, trying to keep ahead of the dust.

In scant mizuras they were finally in the hanger bay. A cordon of security troopers had set up a line of defences in the main loading dock. Only sezuras after Dentill and his two troopers were across the hall, Split guards stormed in. There was a massed exchange of fire as the two sides began the final struggle with earnest.

In their prepared positions, the security troopers had perfect fields of fire. Several of the Split were cut down before they could react. The Split kept pouring into the room. They must have bypassed Schmidt's protocols, Dentill thought to himself. As more Split entered, the fight began to turn against the GDI. Although they suffered only the occasional glancing wound due to their defences, the weight of Split fire was pinning them down.

"Anyone who can, bug out now." Dentill shouted over the din. Several of the troopers nearest the airlock ran across keeping low. The rest were unable to escape. Dentill checked his ammunition status. He was down to only two magazines the end would be soon, one way or another. As his gun cycled empty, he grabbed his last few rounds. His hand never reached the magazine release. A bluish haze surrounded him; he was caught in the cylinder of a transporter device.

As the light faded he found himself standing in a glaringly white walled room. Across the room smiled a young woman in GDI overalls, standing behind a control desk. Around him were several security troopers, all with the same disorientated expression on their faces.

"Welcome aboard Commander." The woman said. Before Dentill could reply, the door to the room slid open. In walked Captain Tambla.

"Rick, welcome back, apologies for the surprise but we got tired of waiting for news so came to check up on you." The captain grinned.

"I'm glad you did, but how did you manage to jump in?" Dentill enquired.

"Commander Schmidt transmitted jump coordinates before he shut down the long-range communicator on the station." The captain replied.

"How is Daryl?" Dentill asked hurriedly, sounding concerned.

"He is critical, we have him on life support in the medical bay. We need to get him back to HQ immediately."

"Well do, get moving." Dentill's concern was evident.

"We just entered hyperspace as I walked in. Lets get your men to the medical bay." The Captain replied. Tambla led the way, several of the *Euripides* crew helped injured security personnel along.

Once the injured troops were safely sequestered with the medical team, Tambla took Dentill to his office. They sat down on easy chairs and Tambla activated a vid screen. It showed on a divided display several areas assigned to the many refugee slaves they had just freed.

"Are those Split? I didn't know you had taken prisoners, why aren't they more heavily guarded." The captain asked, highlighting a sullen looking group of a few dozen Split.

"No they were slaves in the mines, just like all the others." Dentill replied. "The Split don't seem to discriminate. These were probably born into slavery on some Spit world."

"Is it wise to have them onboard?" The Captain asked with concern hardening his voice.

"Maybe not, but they were slaves, we could not leave them behind." Dentill sounded horrified at Tambla's lack of charity.

"Sorry, you are right it's just difficult to see them as victims after the strife their race has caused." Tambla said quietly, clearly feeling cowed by Dentill's remonstrations.

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In the converted cargo hold, seething with free slaves and GDI crisis personnel, one of the Split sat silently staring at the security camera in the ceiling. The master assassin, Keltana smiled a drooping Split smile of glee. The foolish Argons were welcoming him into their midst. Little did they realise the price they would soon pay for their lack of mistrust. He pulled his slave rags about himself, he longed for some better robes, but for now he would have to play his part. A cheerful young ensign walked over to him. "Are you alright sir, you are shivering, here have a blanket." She said. Keltana shuddered but nodded his acquiescence. He stretched his arms and lay down. The young ensign smiled, pleased at the peaceful expression on his face. As she walked away, he grimaced, soon he could give up this charade, soon he could strike out against these pathetic Argons.

Chapter 13 – Recuperation

Biskhas N’etesh hurried to the fighter bay aboard the space born Satellite factory in Ghinn’s Escape. The station commander had been more than willing to hire Biskhas’ apparently lord less mercenary squadron. With the current tension between the Spilt Empire and the Argon/Boron Alliance defence squadrons were in high demand. The commander had barely believed his fortune in finding one so ready to agree favourable terms. Of course he had not known about Biskhas’ ulterior motives.

As he buckled himself into the cockpit of his Scorpion medium fighter he ran through the pre-flight checks. All systems seemed nominal. He needed everything to be ready, soon he and his wingmen would be fighting for their clan and taking the first step to destroying the hated Argon and Boron.

The hanger lights lit up to show that departure clearance had been given. Biskhas activated his engines and manoeuvred into the launch tube. His squadron lined up behind him. The main door opened and his ship shot out. As his pilots flew into formation, he led the way in a circuitous route. He targeted the east gate and flew the patrols in a slow spiralling pattern. No one would be suspicious of his motives as his squadron moved inexorably closer to the gate.

Far in the distance, a pair of ancient looking Mule transports hung lazily near the gate. The ships had been taken out of service jazuras ago, but many could still be seen in the hands of the occasional intra-system independent trader. On cue, the leader of the pair activated its distress beacon.

“This is flight leader Biskhas N’etesh to Sector Control.” He signalled to the military wing of the Split trading station. “I am heading to assist the stricken freighters.”

“Very well, I can’t see anyone else who would bother.” The snide reply came through from the station. The Split were not know for their compassion.

Biskhas led his fighters towards the freighters. As the distance rapidly closed between the ships, he slowly began to edge the squadron’s vector towards the gate. The ships hurtled past the twin nacelles, which flanked the ring, guiding his ships through. The wormhole enveloped them for a moment, and then spewed them out into the Boron sector of Hila’s Joy.

His squadron faced a glorious panoramic view of a sector prepared

for war. A dozen heavy capital ships were dotted around the various stations. Two commander carriers sat motionless alongside the spinning coil of the central trading station. Squadrons of scout fighters flew endless patrols around the two ships. Half a dozen Argon Titan class destroyers were flying an intricate circuit between the core stations. Finally patrolling the gates were two pairs of the fast Boron Rays, ready to pounce on attacking forces.

Biskhas scanned the sector rapidly, examining the layout of the enemy forces. The only immediate significant threat was a pair of the Rays, which were heading towards this gate from the south. There was one perfect target. The argon had set up a temporary supply position near to this west gate. There were only a handful of freighters, surrounded by a weak ring of laser towers. There was little hope that the slow argon fighters would catch his ships before they had succeeded in destroying the depot.

A transmission came over the communicator. "The Boron Kingdom politely requests you leave this sector now, we regret that Split are not welcome here at this time." Clearly they were used to frequent intelligence probes from Split fighters, as there was no serious attempt to intercept them.

"All Split pilots," Biskhas called to his squadron. "Our target is the re-supply depot let none stand in our way." As his squadron sped into action he activated a multiple frequency transmission. "FOR THE GLORY OF SPLIT." He cried, screaming defiance at his foes.

In the lead of the attack it was he who reached the depot first. Energy beams from the laser towers stabbed through space about him. One of the beams went close across his cockpit window, the searing light burning into his retina. For a moment he was transfixed and then he was through. As a hail of Dragonfly missiles shot by, the towers began to wink out one by one, the multiple shockwaves caused by the powerful missiles began to tell.

Biskhas gave a sigh of relief; he had never enjoyed this manoeuvre. He hated playing bait for the low AI systems of the laser towers. As squadron leader he could have made one of his wingmen take point, but he was already asking enough of them.

With their defences gone, the freighters began to fall rapidly. The mercury transport had very powerful shields, yet in their current stationary position they were easy targets. They three ships were dispatched rapidly.

Biskhas looked for a new target. Much of the defence fleet was still

trying to comprehend what was happening. How inept he thought, such basic mistakes were being made.

"All ships, it seems are foes have been caught off guard and much of the sector is ripe for devastation." He called to his pilots. "Find a target and kill it. Keep fighting until your ship is falling apart, then you can depart with honour."

Biskhas targeted a new transport, this one a slow moving Boron dolphin. It was limping its way from a staging post in the north of the system. He sped towards it, revelling in the speed of his fighter. No ship of comparable size could travel so fast. The slow moving transport tried vainly to dodge his shots, but with his high-powered particle accelerators he was soon flying through an expanding debris cloud.

Enemy fighters began to enter the engagement zone. The lumbering fighters of the Argon could not keep up with his fast moving squadron. He laughed with the glee of the thrill. The complete abandon of the Split attack was causing mass disarray. Through out recent history, Split craft had fared badly in most engagements because they had tried to mimic the tactics of their enemies. Now using the enhanced speed of his fighter he was running rings around the slower enemy ships.

The battle became tenser as the carriers launched several flights of Discoverer and Octopus scouts. Although less well powered than the heavier Scorpion fighters, they had an edge on speed and began slowly to drive his squadron onto the guns of the heavy fighters.

In a scant few mizuras, Biskhas watched as half his fellows were destroyed by this herding tactic. Perhaps he had been premature in his delight at his successes. "All ships, it is time for us to leave." He called to his squadron.

As the ships began to head towards him, he aimed for the gate, destroying a pair of Octopus scouts as they flew past. The remaining Scorpions formed on his wing as he headed for safety.

The strong formation formed by the six remaining Split fighters deterred any attacks by the scout fighters. The few who tried were destroyed or driven off by the fighters as they turned at bay pouring massed fire into the light fighters.

"I think we are going to make it." Cried one of his pilots with hope.

"Perhaps we shall," Biskhas agreed."

"No we will, look the pathetic craft of the Argon and Boron cannot hope to match our speed." The pilot added.

It was true, the enemy heavy fighters were slowly falling behind. The powerful Argon Novas and Busters were far too slow to keep up. Even the faster Boron fighters were unable to catch them. The gate loomed invitingly before them. The remaining scouts tried one last time to take out the Scorpions but were beaten back once again.

Biskhas has succeeded in his mission; he would soon be home to receive his reward. As he lined up to the gate, the swirl of an opening exit wormhole began to appear. Perhaps the Split had decided to capitalise on this attack and drive away the Argon.

As a ship slowly began to emerge, he could see that it filled much of the gateway, it must be a capital ship. Biskhas could see that it was not a Split destroyer, it did not have the glorious twin hulled shape of those mighty ships. It had the aquatic design of a Boron destroyer, it was one of the Rays from the Sector fleet, jumping to cut off their escape.

"We are trapped," cried one of his pilots.

"Do not fear, my brave warriors, we have served our clan well this day, let us rejoice in whatever fate the great Thurok serves unto us." Biskhas declared.

The six Split ships began to pour their fire into the destroyer as they tried to loop around it. The particle accelerators barely scratched the powerful shields of the Capital ship, whilst its return fire was murderous. Ion disruptor bursts danced over the shields of the Split ships, draining them of their energy. Plasma fire tore about them shredding the light hulls of the fighters. Within seconds there were only two left. Biskhas ordered his remaining wingman to escape whilst he flew a collision course for the bridge. Energy bursts buffeted him, he was going to make it, but before he made it, his ship finally gave way, the battered hull finally losing integrity as his ejection system launched him into space. As he fell into unconsciousness he thought he could see blue lights dancing around his visor.

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Marcus Gromwell rubbed his eyes blearily. What was that beeping noise? As his head cleared he realised that of course it was the chime on the door to his quarters. He dragged himself off his sofa

and quickly tidied up his clothes. The chime was insistent.

"Enter." He called through the door.

"Not disturbing you am I?" a woman in a glittering silver cocktail dress was standing in the doorway.

Gromwell was sure he knew her. "Dureena Fielding, is that you?" He whistled. "Wow your dressed up, what's the occasion?"

"We are having a little celebration of your rescue, Marcus." She replied, adding. "Although really its just a chance to unwind and do something fun for a change."

Fielding walked over to Marcus' wardrobe and began rummaging around. She started to throw items at Marcus. Black trousers, shirt, bowtie, and a dinner jacket.

"Black tie? Perfect. Though a little unexpected." Marcus said as he began to pull his boots off. "Oh a little privacy would be nice."

"What oh sorry!" Dureena replied turning to face a wall. Gromwell changed hurriedly, keeping an eye on her.

"So who is coming?" He asked.

"Most of the pilots and officers, Commander Dentill, I guess also that Petre will attend at some point." Dureena told him.

"You don't like Rick much do you?" Gromwell asked.

Fielding turned around, watching him skilfully do up the bowtie. "Oh it was a professional dislike, he has my job. Well the one I want. Now, I envy him, he is leading a combined force against a powerful enemy, it's the stuff of legends."

"Wow, I never thought you so deep." He said, then exclaimed in a shrill voice. "Oh No! Those damn Split have ruined my scarf." He held in his hands a torn scarf covered with several bloodstains and caked in ore dust.

"I thought you would eventually notice. Here I got you this." Fielding offered him a long thin blue box. As he bent to take it she gave him a brief kiss on the cheek.

Marcus began to blush as he opened the box. It was of course a brand new scarf, however this one was a perfect white and made

from the finest Paranid silks. "It's brilliant, thank you Dureena. This must have cost a fortune." He said to her. His tone could not help but betray his pleasure at the gift.

"It's a kind of welcome home gift. I'm glad you like it." She replied as she began to straighten it out around his neck. "Now come on we don't want to be late." She linked arms and dragged him towards the door.

The pilots had invaded one of the main function rooms in the executive area of the station. Dureena led Marcus into the room, He looked about along the walls were set round tables with various people sitting in groups around them. At the opposite wall was a stage with a large number of seats, although they were currently empty. Through the centre of the room was a large space, filled with even more chatting groups of pilots, ground crew and other GDI staff. Standing by the door was one of the junior pilots. Marcus nodded in greeting trying to remember his name.

"Mr and Mrs Marcus Gromwell." The pilot announced to the room like a servant at an ancient ball. Those nearest began to laugh loudly. The pilot had been doing this all night but the joke was not old. The laughter swelled once people saw the look on Gromwell's face.

"Don't look so grim Marcus dear." Dureena said, batting her eyelids playfully. "Its all in jest." She added as she placed a hand on each of his cheeks and kissed him on the lips. The room filled with cheers, whoops and catcalls. Dureena just smiled.

"Wow, what was that for?" Marcus asked.

"I think we are all beginning to realise what is important in life, that's all." Dureena replied, grabbing his hand. "Do you dance?"

On the stage at the other side of the room several GDI employees sat down in white jackets. They had a variety of instruments in their hands. It was clear that someone had decided to form a band. The musicians began to play a fast paced music. Several pilots paired up and began to dance together. Dureena forced Marcus to join her on the dance floor.

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Rick Dentill sat in a chair beside the bed where Daryl Schmidt lay attached to a variety of medical devices. The monitors showed that Schmidt was stable, yet he had not regained consciousness since

their return. Dentill felt responsible he had agreed to bring Schmidt along for his technical skills rather than for combat.

"Excuse me commander." One of the nurses said to him.

"Sorry I was light-jazuras away, can I help you?" He replied.

"I was just thinking you ought to take a break, you have been sat there for hours." The nurse answered.

"Everyone has gone to the party. Someone should sit with him." Dentill was adamant.

"There's plenty of us about, we will come an eye on him." The nurse assured him.

"I know. I just, well, I feel responsible." He replied.

"If I may say sir, it wasn't you who pulled the trigger."

"I wouldn't give him a break. He tried to be friendly but I treat him worse than I did the Split."

"Oh sir, don't say that." The nurse sounded concerned.

"Its true, I blamed him for our set backs. Especially our debacle against the carrier, but I think it was to hide my own failings." Dentill sounded morose.

"I'm not a military person myself but I understand you have been outnumbered from the start. You have all been fighting hard." The nurse replied. "You need to get some rest."

"I can't sleep knowing that it's my fault that Daryl is here because of me. He's a good man, and I let my prejudices cloud my judgement of him."

"We all make mistakes Commander," the nurse reassured him.

"He called me a hero when he first arrived. That's when I started to dislike him. The truth is he is the hero, not me. My men are free because of him. I should have taken the shot."

As they sat in momentary pause, the nurse could see pain his gaunt eyes. It was clear to her that the commander was tearing himself apart over the many losses that had occurred during the conflict. He was using Schmidt's condition as an outflow for the pent up

emotion. Dentill was clearly close to breakdown from the unaccustomed responsibility combined with lack of sleep and stressful hours.

A thin, weak and shaky voice suddenly interrupted the silence. "Great, then I don't suppose you would mind trading places right now. I think the Doc forgot to take out one of the bullets."

"Daryl" Dentill shouted. "You are awake. We thought we had lost you. You have been unconscious for Tazuras"

"Yeah I am. Now let me get some sleep I must have missed a few days worth. You get to the party and have some drinks for me. We heroes need to keep up appearances." Schmidt replied.

Dentill laughed aloud. Relief began to flood through him. He put his hand on the nurse's arm. "Thanks for your support I really needed it, sorry I was so pathetic."

"It's my job Commander." The nurse replied. "And it's nice to know that the CO has a heart after all.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Juliette Swift."

"Well Nurse Swift, when do you get off shift?"

"Not for another three stazuras." The nurse answered Dentill's question.

"Well I am making an executive decision, you are being transferred to special duties." Dentill said grinning. "It would be unseemly for the boss to be seen at a party unaccompanied."

Nurse Swift looked into his eyes and amused expression on her face. "I guess you have twisted my arm. I would not want people to think I failed in my duty."

"Will you two get going already? Schmidt grumbled. "You are making me queasy."

The pair laughed. "Its good to see that you are on the mend Daryl. Give me a shout if you need anything." Dentill said. For a moment their eyes locked, in the brief pause a bond of mutual respect was formed. Then the moment was over as Dentill led Juliette away.

Dentill dropped Juliette off at her small quarters and headed for his own. He stood under a hot shower for several mizuras

He thought it best to wear his dress uniform, as he knew most would be in evening wear. The CO must stand out, or so his old friend Group Captain Dafidson has told him jazuras ago. He pulled on the uniform and began to fasten his tie. As he fumbled over the knot he felt a pang of regret for all the times he had spent doing this before navy functions.

His door chimed and he went to open it. Standing framed by the bright lights of the corridor stood Juliette Swift. He had not realised until that moment how attractive she was. She was only about average height, but was perfectly formed, slim and yet shapely. She was dressed in a long black gown. "Put that tongue back in." She said laughing at his drop jawed expression. "Are we going to the party or not."

Dentill composed himself and replied with a wry smile. "Yes of course, I was just momentarily transfixed by your..." He meant to say beauty but felt suddenly self-conscious.

Juliette laughed and waved her arm slowly. "My watch perhaps. Come on this was your idea." She said as she stepped back into the corridor.

They made their way to the party. It was not far as Dentill's quarters were in the executive section of the station. The party was in full swing when they arrived. The Imported alcohol was being consumed at a prodigious rate and mountains of food had been consumed. The band had begun to play slower quieter music, so everyone in the room heard the self-appointed announcer, the young pilot shout out. "Ladies and Gentleman might I present our supreme worshipful leader, Commander Richard Dentill the First." This brought cheers from the assembled pilots and other personnel. "...And his lovely escort." The pilot bawled. This announcement was met by whistles, and even louder cheers.

"Thank you so much, Mr Simms." Dentill said embarrassed.

"Any time, Sir." The pilot said.

As Juliette led Dentill to the dance floor she whispered in his ear. "You are very attractive when you are embarrassed commander." He blushed an even deeper red as she kissed him on the cheek. Several of the pilots around him laughed and cheered. Dentill gracefully nodded in appreciation, he was glad that his pilots were

at least in full of spirits again.

The party went on for many stazuras. Staff came off shift and headed for the party, whilst others tired by all the revelry retired for the night. Eventually the band grew tired and so music was played through a synthesiser. Dentill was sat at one of the tables. Juliette sat next to him holding his hand on the tabletop. Marcus came over with his arm around Dureena's shoulder.

"Hello Rick, great party although I guess I did deserve it." Marcus said.

Dentill laughed. "Back from the clutches of hell and already suffering from delusions of grandeur. Maybe I threw it just for myself. It was after all me who rescued you."

"Modest aren't we Rick, single handily saving the world again. Seriously though, thanks for the save I thought I was a gonner."

"I did not suspect you had religious persuasions." Loraminckstros said sitting down.

Marcus jumped, none of them has seen him come over. Dureena explained "Not a Goner a gonner, means someone lost without hope."

"I know, I was trying to make humour, I fear I was unsuccessful." Loraminckstros replied.

"No matter Loral." Dentill interrupted. "Did you enjoy the party?"

"It was interesting." Loraminckstros said. "It was not like a Paranid function, our celebrations are far more sombre and reflective."

"Oh this was tame Loral, back home most of our parties involve the majority of people being carried out." Marcus replied. "Talking of which, I am going to crash out before you have to carry me to bed."

"Sleep well Marcus, make sure you are up early. As punishment for needing rescuing you get to clean up in here." Dentill chuckled.

Dureena dragged the blustering Marcus out of the room by his arm. Loraminckstros bowed his head as he said. "I fear I must depart too, I wish you well until I see you again Commander."

"Take care of yourself." Dentill replied as he watched

Loralaminckstros leave the room. He looked around the room, everyone had left, leaving he and Juliette alone. "I guess it's just us. Would you care to dance?" He asked bowing regally holding out his arm.

"I would be delighted to kind sir." Juliette replied with a beaming smile and exaggerated nod.

They danced to a slow ancient tune the music continued for several mizuras. They held each other close. Juliette looked into Dentill's eyes and could see that some of the pain had gone but he still seemed sad. She hugged him tighter trying to will comfort and support through the embrace.

The music drifted to an end but still they hold each other. Dentill looked down and said "I didn't say before but you transfix me with your beauty."

"I know, but it sounds like a poor chat up line." She laughed.

Dentill looked hurt. "I..."

"Shhh." Juliette placed a finger over his lips and then leant up to kiss him. "Your eyes tell me everything I need to know."

Dentill bent slightly to kiss her back when he heard his name being called out. He looked towards the sound it was Petre Shacklock hurrying towards him. Dentill could see that Petre was shaken and flustered. It looked like he must have run from the other side of the station.

"Rick." Shacklock gasped for breath. "We have a problem. The Split have invaded Hila's Joy."

Chapter 14 – Battle Plans

The Grau Defence Industries was in uproar. Since the announcement of increased hostilities between the Split and the Argon/Boron Alliance there had been many hit and fade attacks by both sides. Defence squadrons were on high alert as the jump capable fleets of both sides began to raid into the opposition sectors. Hila's Joy itself had already been the site for a major fleet engagement. Several Split destroyers had attacked alongside a carrier causing severe damage to the sector's stations before being driven off. Dentill's squadrons had been flying round the clock combat patrols to ensure that all the GDI stations were protected.

In the war room, Dentill was having a heated discussion with Petre Shacklock. "We have to continue our attacks on the Jxu's usurped holdings." Dentill said adamantly.

"I think it is too dangerous." Shacklock replied.

"They have already captured Split Fire and Olmancketslat's treaty. Given the Split hierarchy's acceptance of their actions, the Split High command will soon have borders with both the Argon and Boron Home sectors." Dentill countered.

"What do you think we can do? We already suffered terrible losses at the hand of their carrier."

"The we have to take out the carrier. Last time we faced it with three squadrons and gave it a pounding. With a little bit of coaxing we may be able to trap it, the same way they did us."

"How will we do that?" Shacklock asked. "They have a jump drive don't they?"

"We will have to catch them off guard and then draw them in. Make them think they have trapped us." Dentill explained.

"That sounds risky. What do you suggest?"

"Simple, Petre. All we need to do is to have a jump capable reserve waiting when they pounce on one of our raids."

"What will that accomplish?" Shacklock was confused, he could not think militarily.

Dentill grabbed a large sheet of chart paper and began to draw with a marker pen. Slowly a rather stylised two-dimensional image of a

sector appeared on the page. The gates were represented by letters, and vague scribbles represented stations and defence ships.

"What we do is send in a strike force to stir up trouble." He drew some dots on the page near one of the gates.

"I take it that's the bait?" Shacklock asked.

"Exactly, if the force is large enough, the carrier will jump in behind, confidently moving to attack position." Dentill drew on more dots, this time with "Ss" over them.

"No I see then you send in the second force to catch them in the rear." Shacklock nodded.

"Both forces will have to be strong, one to be a big enough lure, the other to be able to take out the carrier before they can launch all its fighters or jump out." Dentill continued.

"What will you need?"

"The Strike force will need to consist of a heavy ship. I say we use the *Euripides* and try and cram in a pair of fighter squadrons."

"And for the reserve?"

"I think we will need the *Ardent*, it has a powerful forward armament and can launch several missiles at once. We will need to overwhelm the carrier's shields quickly."

"This is going to be risky we will be using all our major fleet assets in one battle." Shacklock sounded concern.

"We will achieve a shift in the balance of power if we do, the carrier is their main weapon for both defence and offence. Especially since they got the jump drive." Dentill tried to reassure Shacklock.

"Which squadrons will you use?"

"I will need mostly heavy fighters. I will assign Captain Tambla the new Barracuda and a Mako squadron. The added incentive of Boron fighters should be a greater lure. On the *Ardent*, I'll take Gromwell's Novas, and Loral's Perseii."

"Most of our elite fighter squadrons too, oh well it looks like you are determined I guess I have no choice."

"Not really, you agreed to the war now it is up to me to end it in my own way." Dentill said firmly.

As he left Shacklock to ponder his words, Dentill went to one of the deck officers. He arranged for the squadron leaders and Captains to be summoned to the war room. A few mizuras later they began to file in. Dentill nodded greetings to them in turn. Loraminckstros, Gromwell, Fielding, Captains Tambla and Greene and finally Mu Rori.

"Welcome all of you. Commander Dentill has developed a plan which may bring us eventual victory of the Family Jxu." Shacklock began.

"We are going to go after their carrier." Dentill said eagerly.

"How do you propose we do that? It spends all its time jumping about." Gromwell asked.

"We are going to provide it with bait." Dentill smiled. "I know you are barely recovered from your injuries Mu, but I would like you to command the fighter escort for the *Euripides*."

"I am always ready to fight in the service of my people and its allies." Mu Rori replied.

"Excellent. Captain Tambla, you will jump in and act as carrier support to the Boron fighters. You will cause the usual damage, but stay near the gate. This should draw in the carrier." Dentill explained.

"Once the carrier prepares its attack. Commander Dentill will lead the Ardent in an attack against it, supported by Loral and Marcus' squadrons." Shacklock finished for Dentill.

"Once the carrier is eliminated we can go home safe in the knowledge that the Jxu will have to further divide their strength between their sectors. We may even be able take steps to free them from the Split." Dentill added.

Fielding was troubled by the plan. She was concerned that they would be using much of the main assets of the GDI. On the other hand her doubts might simply be from her discomfort at being left behind again or worse still her growing feelings for Marcus.

"Commander an audacious plan to be sure, but once again you haven't included me, have I done something to lose your confidence?" She asked.

"Never think that Dureena, I want you to stay behind because I need you to command the rest of the squadrons in my absence." Dentill replied.

Fielding still could not help feeling rejected.

"If that's it, I will just add that our plan is to strike in Nopilieos' Memorial it is far enough from the main front to avoid destroyers, but it is not too near to base for them to worry about a counter strike." Dentill added.

Shacklock closed the meeting. "All of you get some rest, the mission will take place in two tazuras and we have much to prepare before then."

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Dentill was flushed with excitement. One more battle and perhaps it would all be over. As he hurried down the corridor he realised he was headed for the medical wing. He had not even thought to go there. What were his reasons, to see Daryl or to see her? He had barely had a chance to speak to Juliette since the pilot's ball. He was still confused about his feelings for her. It had been an incredible evening but he had never been designed for whirlwind romance and was not sure what the whole thing meant.

As he entered the main ward, he found Daryl Schmidt sitting up in his bed talking and laughing with Juliette.

"Rick please come over." Schmidt called to him.

"How are you feeling Daryl? Its good to see you off your back." Dentill grinned. "Hello Juliette how are you?"

"I'm fine thank you commander." She said. Dentill could not help but notice the coolness in her tone. "I had better leave you both in peace."

The two men watched as she headed off to one of the other patients. "I guess things didn't go so well with your date." Daryl said trying to sound cheerful. He caught the anguish in Dentill's eye and tried to sound reassuring. "I never understood woman myself, very fickle."

"I don't understand it I thought we had a good night, I guess I was wrong." Dentill mumbled, embarrassed talking about his personal

life.

"So what's new upstairs?" Schmidt asked changing the subject.

Perked up by the conversation's sudden divergence he was happy to explain. "We are going after that damned carrier."

Schmidt searched Dentill's face for any malice, but found none, he guessed he was forgiven for his mistake. "Good, I think they deserve a little payback. Anything I can do?"

"You've got to rest yourself Daryl, I think we are all going to need your intelligence skills before long. Have you seen the news?" He asked.

"No I have been told to avoid stress." Schmidt chuckled, although it caused his chest to seize with pain. "It's more stressful being kept in the dark."

"A shooting war has started off in the outer regions. The Split have even tried invading Hila's Joy, apparently there were heavy casualties before they were driven out." Dentill described the swinging state of the conflict and the increasing raids between the two opponents.

"It doesn't look good. I know the Split and they may be aggressive but they don't pick a fight, which will end up in a war of attrition like this one." Schmidt sounded troubled. "There has to be more at work here, it must have something to do with the Jxu. Their rise to prominence is too coincidental, if only we could find the key."

"I think the doctors are right Daryl. You are frothing at the mouth now you know what is going on. I'd better leave you to rest." Dentill shook Schmidt's hand and then left the ward. He paused at the door and stared wistfully at Juliette for a moment and then he was gone.

Daryl caught the surreptitious glance and thought he ought to try to help out. Dentill had given him a second chance and now he felt beholden to aid his new friend. When the Juliette came over to check how he was he asked her.

"You are both being very closed mouthed, how was your date with the Commander."

"I don't think it really any of your business Commander Schmidt." Juliette said harshly.

"Come on, I know you both like each other, I can see it in your eyes. I work for intelligence remember!" Schmidt said trying to sound brotherly, it was part of his interrogation training.

"What's to tell we had a pleasant time, it was a fantastic ball and just when it seemed to be ending perfectly he goes and ruins it." She explained, with a hint of anger as her eyes began to look more watery.

"What went wrong it sounds like it was the ideal evening from what I am hearing?" Schmidt asked.

"Of course you would think that. How would you like it if the last moments of the evening were broken by this damned war of yours."

"I don't understand I have been down here in bed for tazuras."

"That's the point, every mission sees a few people not returning, and more of you end up in here and there seems to be no end to it." Tears were now flowing down her cheeks. "We were holding each other when Petre runs in spouting more tales of wars and skirmishes and in that moment I saw Rick change. His eyes hardened and he was a soldier again, not a man."

"No he is still a man. He came here to see you not me. He needs you more than you might understand. He needs someone who will keep remind him of his humanity and why peace and freedom is worth fighting for."

"There you go you are thinking about war too." She said. "Are all men so macho."

"Sometimes we have to be." Schmidt replied. "Anyway, Rick is preparing for a fight, which might end this war so I think he might need a little support from someone he really cares about. Can't you give at least that?"

"I don't know, I have a lot to think about." She wiped her eyes. "I had better go now."

Schmidt nodded. He hoped he had helped. Rick was not able to hide his troubles completely and he needed someone to share them.

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The Split refugees had been assigned to one of the less glamorous residences on the space station. Compared to the squalor of the

mine it was luxurious. They were provided with food and all had their own rooms. After being given new clothing and ID cards, which allowed them limited access to the station, they had been rapidly forgotten. It was not that people lacked caring for their plight it was simply that the GDI had far more immediate concerns.

Keltana was quite happy with this arrangement. He was happy to be left to his own devices. Once even the token security personnel had been reassigned he was free to wander about with impunity. There was more than one way to get access to the interior private sections of the station, so he was quite happy to limit himself to the unrestricted sections.

A few moments in a branch of the Royal Bank of Boron had given him access to one of his numbered accounts. It amused him to use the services of his race's greatest rival. Money from the account had paid for the services of an unscrupulous Teladi clerk who was happy to provide him a higher access level on his ID, for a price.

The uproar, which had ensued in recent tazuras, meant that a lone Split wearing the green robes provided by the GDI to the refugees was barely noticed. He just had to identify which of his numerous potential targets he was going to eliminate. It seemed that the station forces were preparing for combat. Military supplies were being loaded on outgoing freighters and fighter craft seemed to be using up most of the available maintenance crews.

If the GDI were about to launch an attack, then many of his targets would not be accessible. That narrowed down his list of objectives. Keltana considered trying to contact the Family Jxu to warn them of the impending attack, but why risk his cover for people he had no loyalty to? A decrease in the numbers of troops could only aid his efforts against the main target.

He would need many things before he could accomplish the mission. He headed towards the station's shopping district. As he scurried along the main concourse he passed many people but only one caught his eye. He was sure he recognised the argon male. The individual had been nondescript, no different from the countless numbers of independent pilots. The man had worn a regular flight suit of dark grey, with no insignia. He had seemed hardened, but unmemorable. Keltana wondered where he had seen him before; he had a fine memory for faces, even those of the ugly Argon.

The man had not made eye contact, so Keltana felt certain that he had not been noticed. Sneaking a surreptitious glance after they had passed, he saw no evidence that the man had done the same.

Perhaps he had been mistaken. Across the boulevard was the shop he required so he strolled over. As he passed through the doorway he noticed the sign hanging over the shop. "Jed's Antiques."

The interior of the shop was a riot of colour and shapes from all the different wares from five separate races, which cluttered the room. There were sculptures from the third Boron renaissance and dozens of obscure Argon artefacts.

"Hello good sir." Said the excited shopkeeper. "It has been a while since a Split has visited my shop."

"Quite difficult with the war." Keltana replied.

"War, what... oh yes, I don't pay attention to the news all that much, I guess I have my head in the past you might say." The shopkeeper rambled on.

"Somebody has to keep history alive." Keltana added, knowing he would fare better if he encouraged the shopkeeper. Antique dealers like history lovers of all types could be touchy about their field.

"Oh, I am pleased that you agree. Now how can I help you?" The shopkeeper enquired.

"I was wondering if you had any Split items, especially ceremonial weapons from the second period of Space Colonisation." He suggested.

"Excellent, a connoisseur. It is rare for me to get a request like that. Hmmm." The shopkeeper paused to consider the request. "I think you may be in luck." He went to a cabinet and began to root through it. After a few mizuras he pulled out a large thin wooden box. He brought it to the counter and opened it. Inside were several knives of varying lengths. All of them seemed to be intricately decorated with strange designs.

Keltana pretended to be interested, examining each of them. He knew exactly which one he wanted but he had to appear to be searching. He selected one of the less decorative pieces. "Here this is the one, it is perfect."

"Ah an excellent choice, a Keltana blade, the Vengeful Dagger. I have it on good authority it was produced by the legendary artisan Chi Hr'ak. A master piece." The excited shopkeeper explained. Keltana agreed Chi Hr'ak was one of the first Split to produce nividium steel, one of the strongest metal alloys known. It would be

the perfect weapon, guaranteed not to fail or break.

"I will take it, how much do you wish for it?" Keltana asked.

"Given its age and the auspicious creator I would ask for sixty thousand credits. However since you have made my day with your knowledge, I will offer it for fifty five." The shopkeeper offered with a nod of respect.

Inwardly Keltana whistled in surprise, the cost of this blade would buy a scout fighter. "I would not dream of cheating you my friend. I will pay the full sixty thousand. Perhaps I will have an opportunity to examine more of your artefacts sometime." Keltana proffered a credit chit to the shopkeeper for the money transfer. The man carefully encased the dagger and then wrapped it for his customer.

"Thank you for your custom." The shopkeeper said as Keltana headed for the door.

"Oh no thank you for your service and for the conversation, it was most enlightening." Keltana bowed as the shopkeeper beamed with appreciation.

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The tazura had arrived. The two GDI warships were fully stocked with the supplies necessary for the mission. The *Ardent* was crammed with missiles, including dozens of the destructive Hornet class missiles. The *Euripides* had been retrofitted with special gun turrets each mounting a pair of gamma particle accelerators. Although slow it would have some strong anti-fighter protection.

Standing in an observation lounge, Commander Dentill watched as his fighter squadrons flew flybys, dipping their wings in salute before lining up to dock at their respective carriers. It seemed everyone knew the importance of the mission. To Dentill they also seemed to be optimistic, they all seemed sure of their success. He wished he could be so confident. The plan seemed simple, but it was still possible they might fail. It would take only mild caution in the enemy commanders mind to immediately withdraw. If the enemy launched all their fighters too early, the GDI might be overwhelmed.

Over his personal communicator a message came through. "All fighters have docked commander." It was from Captain Greene.

"Alright I will be there shortly, my shuttle is being prepped right

now." He replied.

"Don't be late Commander." Greene chuckled.

"Keep the candles burning I might get lost trying to find you." Dentill laughed back as he switched off his transmission. He placed a hand on the large window and gave a silent prayer for success. He hoped someone somewhere was listening.

The swish of a door opening and closing sounded behind Dentill, but he chose not to look back. He wanted to look out at the lines of the two warships a few more seuras before he departed. A hand linked through his arm. "Its beautiful out there isn't it." He looked down and saw Juliette. "Yes it is, although it might not seem so soon."

"Don't go then." She begged.

"I have to."

"Why, do you think that only you can save the universe? That your presence will make that much difference."

"No, but I cannot send people to fight and not be there running the same risks."

"I know, but I had to try, I don't want to lose you."

"I'll be back. I will see you then."

"No, finish your war and then come and find me." Juliette kissed him on the cheek and then left him.

Dentill vigorously shook his head trying to clear it. It was for the best that the relationship was put on hold. He could not afford the distraction. Filled with a newfound determination he headed for the flight deck. He had a shuttle to catch.

Chapter 15. Sacrifices

When the *Euripides* jumped into the sector, Captain Tambla watched as the gate patrol squadron scattered to avoid his firepower. They were flying oddly erratic courses as they headed away from his ship.

"Lieutenant, scan the area. There is something not right here." He ordered one of his officers.

"Sir, I am detecting a number of anomalies dotted around the gate." The lieutenant called across the bridge.

"Can you get a lock? What are they?" Tambla replied.

"Hold on..." The lieutenant swore. "They have mined the area. We are surrounded by Squash mines."

"Damn it this will slow us down. They still have to trade, there must be a safe path, extrapolate a course and patch it through to the helm." The captain ordered.

There was a tense few mizuras as the navigation team tried to plot a course through the mines. Every sezura gave the Split defenders a chance to rally and might even bring the carrier into the sector. The ship's nav computer displayed its attempts on the main view screen. The bridge crew stared spellbound as the display flicked between routes each one ending with a flash as the icon for the *Euripides* collided with a mine. Finally a course was located, it was circuitous and would delay them further but it would get them free from the fixed position.

"Helm, ahead best speed. Flight control get all fighters ready for launch." Tambla commanded.

The *Euripides* began to move slowly through the minefield. The view screen was displaying the effective range of the mines' proximity sensors. One of the mines loomed into view and the crew sat with bated breath. At the last possible moment the ships swung round and headed for a new gap. The helm officer was sweating from exertion and the pressure.

"We are clear Captain." The helm officer said letting out a long sigh.

"Excellent work lieutenant. Let me know when we are six clicks away." The captain said genuinely impressed. TL class freighters were big ships and had poor manoeuvrability; it was a wonder they

had survived. "Flight control, Launch all squadrons and target the nearest concentration of enemy shipping." He added.

After a few moments "All fighters have been launched and are headed for the shipping lanes" The flight officer reported.

"Captain, we are over six clicks outside the minefield." The Helm officer interrupted.

"Good, arm a few mosquitoes and launch them at the mines." Tambla said.

From the rear of the huge ship, a small opening emerged. In sequence, six missiles launched from the ship's magazine. They headed towards the minefield, each targeting a different point. As each missile closed with its target it made minor course corrections before ploughing right into one of the mines. Six small explosions occurred as the tiny warheads set off their target mines. The closely packed field meant that the mines overlapped. Each of the six initial explosions set off a chain reaction. Within seconds the entire area around the gate was filled with devastating explosion. It looked like a sun had gone supernova in the glaring light of the expanding devastation.

As quickly as they had started, the blasts subsided. Battered and scarred but still intact, the gate sat serenely, the workmanship of the old ones far surpassing the destructive power of even the most mighty of weapons.

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Mu Rori led his squadrons towards the heart of the enemy sector. The enemy defence fighters were scrambling to intercept his ships, but were still too far away. He ordered his Mako squadron to engage the freighters. The lumbering ships should be easy prey for the nimble but well armed medium fighters.

With a keening cry he launched his Barracuda into an attack vector against the gathering Split opposition. His squadron of heavy fighters followed him. The Split were taken by surprise by the audacity of the attack and scattered.

The Barracuda squadron split up into wing pairs and began to hound the Split fighters. Mu Rori laughed with glee the Split defence was in shambles.

He switched his guns to system destroying ion disrupters. The lightening like beams tore apart the shields on the nearest ship.

Small tendrils expanded from his target, striking other ships in the cluster about him. Several of the Split fighters turned away, trying to avoid the draining effect. His current target was suffering from the effects of disruptors as electricity danced across its hull damaging many of its systems. Within moments its guns were disabled.

Mu Rori switched back to his plasma guns and pummelled his opponent into shreds. As its hull collapsed the pilot ejected, leaving Mu to select a new target. The nearest enemy was an Iguana assault transport. It seemed to be armed with three particle accelerators and was driving off any of his comrades who tried to approach.

With the far superior manoeuvrability of his Barracuda, Mu Rori slipped onto the tail of the Iguana. His ion disrupters shredded through the assault ship's shields. The Split ship banked away rapidly, desperate to withdraw and recharge the shields. Mu Rori launched a pair of silkworm missiles at the ship and then headed after a pair of scorpions.

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On board the *Euripides*, Captain Tambla watched the battle unfold. The Boron fighters were taking a heavy toll of the Split defenders, but as more fighters were launched from the stations, he knew that eventually they would be overwhelmed.

"Mu Rori, have your fighters withdraw toward the *Euripides* and form a cordon. We need to buy more time." Tambla ordered to the Boron commander.

As the two Boron squadrons carried out a fighting withdrawal, Tambla ordered his ship into the fray. "Helm move us toward the main engagement area, we need to support our fighters."

The Helm officer complied, and the *Euripides* picked up speed as it made its way toward the rolling turmoil of the massed engagement.

A group of Split Mambas came bearing down on the ship. "All turrets engage at will" Tambla commanded from the bridge. He activated several screens around his command seat. They displayed images from the gun cameras on his turret.

Tambla could feel the ship shudder under the bombardment of the Mambas' plasma throwers. One of the small status panels indicated that the shields were taking a pounding but were still holding.

As enemy fighters flew around the ship, Tambla watched as each turret opened fire, trying to track the fast moving vessels. One of the Mambas went spiralling out of control as a turret found its target.

"Mu where are you we need assistance ASAP." Tambla shouted into his comm. unit as a panel overhead exploded.

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Mu Rori was not sure what ASAP meant, but he could see the beleaguered *Euripides* surrounded by heavy Split fighters. "Mako squadron." He called. "You must move to top speed and save the *Euripides*, we will hold off the reinforcements." He hoped that the medium fighters would help tip the balance.

As the Makos sped off, the Barracudas turned to face the onrushing hoard. Mu could see that the Split fighters had formed a trail, which stretched back towards the stations as more ships were launched. It would give them a small reprieve if they could face the enemy piece meal.

His thoughts were interrupted by an incoming flight of Scout fighters.

"The Jaguars are launching missiles, watch yourselves." He shouted as he fired a spiral of plasma fire, hoping to detonate any missiles headed towards him. His squadron followed suit and opened fire too. Most of the light missiles were destroyed. A few slipped through the wall of plasma fire, but the low power of the wasp missiles the Jaguars carried barely dented the shields of the few ships they impacted upon.

"Pick a target and destroy it before they have a chance to get past" He ordered.

He watched as the scout fighters were torn apart. The enemy squadron commander had misjudged his approach. It was foolish to try a head to head run against heavy ships.

Mu could see that the next Split wave was a few mizuras away. "All ships, we must try to get nearer the *Euripides*." He called. "We will use this lull to our advantage. We must not get drawn away."

He led the heavy fighters in a mad dash for the large transport. The pursuing scorpions strained their engines, slowly gaining ground due to their faster speed. The *Euripides* was still a couple of mizuras

away when the Barracudas were forced to turn to face the second wave.

Despite the heavy firepower of the Boron ships, they were slowly being worn down by the lightning attacks of the faster Split scorpions. The Split medium fighters could outrun any of the missiles the squadron tried to launch and when one fell to plasma fire another took its place.

Mu was desperate, he had lost three ships to the Split's darting attacks, and a new wave of enemies was fast approaching. He forced his ship into the centre of a large group of any fighters and fired his ion disrupters. The dancing bolts of lightning drained shields and damaged systems, causing several of the Split fighters to withdraw for repairs.

The brief respite caused by the breach in the Split web, allowed his own squadron to limp towards the *Euripides*. As the enemy wings rallied for another assault the Mako squadron returned tearing into the disordered Split ranks. Enough time was bought for his squadron to take up positions around the powerful ship.

The Split squadrons were unwilling to engage, whilst they were so overstretched, and held back waiting for their comrades to form up with them. The GDI taskforce limped towards the gate.

Mu pondered why the Split would not engage; perhaps their ruse had been successful. The task force were still several mizuras were from the gate when it lit up with an approaching wormhole. He stared enthralled as a Split carrier slowly made its way through the gate. "Success," He transmitted to his wingmen.

"Sir, the gate is activating again," one of his pilots called.

Mu Rori stared in horror as a flotilla of corvettes followed in the carrier's wake.

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The station had become a lot quieter since the task force had departed, Keltana noticed as he continued his exploration of the GDI headquarters. He had found that the Argon designed their stations well when it came to security. The public areas of the station were entirely separate from the corporate zones. The only access between the two areas was via doors guarded by security staff. He could not even find a maintenance access tube, which might connect the two sections.

He doubted that there was any way that a Split would be allowed passage beyond the public zone, regardless of the security clearance given by his identification. There was only one way he could proceed, that would be in disguise. Unfortunately right now he could not find suitable attire, which would hide his Split origin.

He went back to find his Teladi contact, perhaps she could find a way into the secure area. Keltana knew that the female liked to spend much of her time in one of the many bars in the commercial district. He headed off to find her he had an idea where she would be.

Although the GDI tried to limit illegal activity and deter the more undesirable elements of the galactic society, there were always places, which drew the denizens of the underworld. Keltana walked into the Jade Dragon bar. It was filled with a scattered array of tables and chairs. The bar was barely a quarter full. Most of the occupants were small time traders who could not afford the prices of more comfortable establishments.

Keltana walked towards the bar and signalled the barman. "A glass of Trelba juice, on the rocks." He ordered, placing a small currency credit chit on the counter. After his drink was supplied he added. "Keep the change." The barman muddled his thanks and stepped back to a stack of glasses he was ineffectively polishing.

Sipping his drink, Keltana scanned the room, he noted that illicit deals were being made at, at least six of the tables. He noted that only one Teladi was in the room, rapidly talking with a pair of Argon pilots in grubby flight suits. It was his contact. One of the Argon stood up and began to gesticulate wildly with his arms. It seemed the discussion was getting heated. He decided to walk over and find out what was wrong.

"Twenty thousand credits are too much." The first man said.

"That iss the priccce I mussst assk for. The tasssk is very difficult." The Teladi replied with the usual lisp of her people.

"You don't seem to comprehend the situation. You'll do it for ten, or else you won't be doing anything every again." The second added maliciously.

Keltana could see the fear in the Teladi's eyes as she answered back. "No I refussse to continue thiss conversation, you mussst leave." It was time to intervene. Even if he had not got a use for

her, he liked to see defiance, particularly against unsubtle petty thugs.

"Why you little..." the first male shouted as he swung his arm to strike the Teladi. The blow never reached her. It was held in Keltana's vice-like grip.

"I think the lady asked you to leave." Keltana said wryly.

"Mind your own business." The second man warned aggressively.

Keltana laughed. "Actually this is my business, now leave before I break your friend's arm."

The two men could see the menace behind his eyes and decided it best to quit. "We'll be back." Said the first, rubbing his arm.

"I doubt it." Keltana called after them.

"Thank you for you assisstanccce." The Teladi said, cocking her head in appreciation.

"It was hardly worth the bother, those thugs were pathetic." He replied.

"Sstill I must be able to help you." The Teladi offered. "I will give you a dissscount."

Keltana laughed she must be grateful; the Teladi did not give up profit willingly. "I need to find a way into the secure part of the station, this ID you gave me will not get my past security."

"Thatsss eassy, I can smuggle you in on a sssupply ssship, but you will need to make the ressst of the way yourssself." The Teladi replied.

"When and how?" He asked.

"You will need to get to the Cahoona Bakery, there isss a sssupply sssshipment moving from there in two sstazuras. The organic material will hide you from bio sssensssors."

"Excellent, I will head over there now." He replied. With a flourish he produced a large credit chit. "This should cover your costs with a bonus."

The Teladi's eyes lit up. For Keltana the cost was insignificant with

the reward once he succeeded.

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Commander Dentill was stood on the bridge of the *Ardent* when the signal came through, The Jxu carrier had been seen entering Nopillieos' Memorial. The crew began to quickly check their systems one last time before Captain Greene gave the order. "Activate the jump drive."

The ship launched itself into the artificial wormhole as it crossed the dimensional barrier. As it emerged on the other side, they could see too late the danger that waited for them.

On the sector map, Dentill could see the cluster of ships, which comprised Captain Tambla's taskforce fleeing from the growing sector defence forces. He could also see that their escape route was blocked by the large Split carrier taskforce.

"Captain Greene, have all fighters launched and direct all available guns on the carriers launch bays." Dentill hastily ordered.

"I'm on it Commander." Greene replied.

As the bridge crew rushed to carry out the launch commands, across the bow of the *Ardent* the heavy photon pulse cannons began to open fire. The massive blue balls of energy were hurled into the void between the two ships. Shields began to flare on the carrier as the bombardment began to eat away at the ships defences.

"Commander, the corvettes are turning to engage us." Cried one of the sensor officers. "They are headed for our fighters."

"They must be trying to eliminate our defence screen before it has a chance to deploy." Dentill guessed.

"Have the photon cannons divide their fire between the corvettes, perhaps we can drive them off." Greene ordered his voice betraying a hint of nervousness. This would be the first major test of his ship.

"It should buy us a little time." Dentill replied.

"At least they have given us a clear path to the carrier." Greene grimaced. It was true; the corvettes had manoeuvred to loop around the *Ardent's* flanks, leaving an open corridor between the two capital ships. It was a ripe opportunity to exploit." Missile deck,

fire two volleys into the carrier's aft." The Captain added.

The bridge crew watched in anticipation as a dozen hornet missiles hurtled towards the Split flagship. Flights of Split fighters continued to launch from the carrier's hangar bay as a pack of Jaguar scouts sped to intercept the missiles. The Jaguars opened fire on the hornets with their light guns. The missiles were small and fast, making them very difficult to target. Still several of them were destroyed. As they closed with the carrier, it opened a desperate barrage from its rear guns. The space around the carrier was filled with energy explosions as the many weapon emplacements tried frantically to protect the ship.

Buffeted by explosions around them, the Jaguar pilots veered away from their targets, they did not want to be hit by their own mothership. The carrier would have to defend itself. If the Jaguar pilots had had trouble with the missiles, the carrier had more. Its heavy gun turrets, so useful in defending it against other warships could not easily track the small missiles. Still the weight of fire was so great that one after another missiles began to explode. It looked like the carrier might succeed after all as the hornets' number dwindled. When the remaining warheads reached the ship, there were only three left. The shields on the Raptor were designed to absorb such damage.

"Damn! It looks like they have failed." Dentill exclaimed, regret tingeing his tone.

"No wait sir." An officer called across the bridge.

"What?"

"It looks, like... Yes! One of the missiles struck within the launch tube of the carrier. It seems that it has been knocked out of commission." The officer said with noticeable glee. The bridge crew cheered in relief.

How many enemy fighters launched before it was knocked out?" Dentill enquired.

"Er... six squadrons." The sensor officer replied, some of his confidence gone.

"Better than all twelve." Green offered encouragingly.

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General Dhjn raged at his crew, hurling abuse at any warrior who crossed his path. "What incompetence has led to this?" he screamed, standing over the corpse of the *Bashar's* erstwhile captain. There was a thin haze of smoke throughout the bridge from several computer panels, which had exploded in the energy surge caused by the hornet volley. "I want a damage assessment now." He demanded.

A small voice spoke up from the cluster of officers cowering in the crew pit below him. "Our shields are holding at seventy percent power, and are slowly rising." The officer said. "Unfortunately the hanger has been put out of action, although we do have six fighter squadrons already launched."

"Excellent, I see at least one of you has the courage to speak. What is your name?" Dhjn asked the quaking Split, the hint of a smile creeping into his tierce lips.

"Hes'pan R'tika, Lord General, tactical officer." The Split replied.

"Well, it is Capitan R'tika now." Dhjn gestured. "Now we must salvage this battle. Have our Mamba squadrons move to support the corvettes. The rest of the fleet will move to eliminate the force trying to escape."

"As you command, General." The newly promoted captain whispered.

"Get repair crew working on the launch tube, we must overwhelm our foes." Dhjn ordered. "We will crush them in the name of Lord Jxu."

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"I am reading over twenty enemy fighters moving to intercept us." The *Ardent's* sensor officer reported. "It looks like they are all Mamba class."

"Damn, we cannot get bogged down in an engagement here." Dentill replied angrily.

"Send the *Perseii* to engage the incoming fighters." Captain Greene ordered to the fight controllers. "Have the *Novas* split up and drive the *Dragons* onto our guns."

A brief flurry of acknowledgements followed as the GDI fleet began to follow the orders. The squadron of *Paranid* fighters circled around

the *Ardent* to avoid the streams of fire pouring from her turrets and headed for the Split wing closing on the task group. The Nova squadron divided into threes and began to open fire on the circling corvettes.

"I should be out there with them." Dentill said through gritted teeth.

"No, we need you here Commander. " Greene replied. "I need your experience, more than we need pilots."

The two senior officers stood over the tactical display, watching as the engagement unfolded. The Paranid fighters had formed into a wall blocking the incoming Mambas. The Novas had begun concentrating fire on the four corvettes, using their superior manoeuvrability to keep away from the powerful turrets.

"What is the status of the enemy carrier?" Dentill enquired.

Greene zoomed the display outwards and focused on the Raptor. It was clear from the array of information surrounding the carrier icon that it was accelerating. The squadrons surrounding the carrier began to form a wedge around it, ready to punch through the *Euripides* small screen.

"The Carrier is heading towards Tambla's group, it does not look good." Greene thought out loud.

"We have got to finish here in the next few mizuras or else it will be too late." Dentill said.

The pair watched as the icon for one of the corvettes winked out. In space, one of the Dragons succumbed to the withering fire of the photon cannons. A pair of Novas flew through the debris and headed for the next corvette.

"Loral." Dentill called through a communicator. "Concentrate your fire upon the split squadrons as soon as you can, we need to clear a path for the *Ardent*."

"Acknowledged commander." Came the Paranid's reply.

"Set our velocity to maximum." Dentill ordered the helm officer.
"We are going after the carrier."

The frigate burst into motion as it headed deeper into the system. Ahead of the ship, the Paranid squadron began to engage the incoming Mambas. The telltale ripples of shockwave weaponry

expanded from the *Perseii*, engaging the Split squadron's head on. Shields buckled on the enemy fighters and several exploding, leaving gaping holes in the Split formation.

"Take us through that gap." Green ordered as the hurtled towards the enemy.

"Loral, finish up against the fighters, then help out the Novas with the corvettes." Dentill commanded as the *Ardent* slipped past. The Split Mambas blossomed outwards trying to avoid the huge ship's bulk. As they passed, the turrets on board the *Ardent* made brief parting shots, before the Split were out of range.

"We are slowly gaining on the Raptor. ETA three mizuras." The sensor officer reported.

"That's not going to be soon enough." Dentill shook his head. He stared as the Carrier began to engage Captain Tambla's task force. The two squadrons of Boron fighters launched a hail of missiles against the closing Split wing. The target rich environment ensured that several of the missiles struck, causing explosions throughout the poorly shielded fighter force.

After the initial success the sheer weight of numbers began to tell. The already exhausted Boron pilots were slowly overwhelmed by the Split attacks. Every sezura saw the Line shrink as ships were destroyed or forced back towards the *Euripides*. The Carrier's heavy guns began to open fire on the heavy transport, nibbling at the shields, trying to find a weak spot.

"We are in range now Sirs." One of the gunners called to the two officers.

"Open fire!" Dentill and Greene ordered simultaneously.

The blue bolts from the *Ardent's* turrets began to envelope the Raptor's rear shields but the barrage was not enough to stop it. The ship simply shrugged off the blasts. Dentill and Greene stared in horror as the shields began to collapse on the *Euripides*.

"They are not going to make it. Get out of there!" Greene shouted to the screen. All thoughts of communicators and radios lost in the sickening moment.

Over the comm. unit a voice slowly began to speak through burst of static. "Am abandoning... crew heading for... boats... reactor...tical... engines to maxi... m... going to... the carrier." It was Tambla.

"What is he doing?" Greene cried as the transport accelerated, escape pods launching from its sides.

"He is going to ram the carrier." Dentill shouted back.

The entire bridge crew watched in complete silence as the two massive ships approached each other. At the last moment the carrier realised its peril and began to turn away. It was too late. The huge bulk of the *Euripides* slammed into the flank of the carrier, caving in one of the large wings. Half the lights blinked out along the ship.

"Enemy shields are down to ten percent." One of the officers reported, breaking the silence.

"Open up with all weapons." Dentill ordered. "Let's not waste Captain Tambla's sacrifice."

The guns on the *Ardent* began to fire on the stricken carrier. With much of its power lost in the collision, the *Raptor* was helpless against the bombardment. The shields collapsed and energy blasts began to chew through the hull. A gaping hole opened in the carrier's side and bolts began to seemingly pass right through the ship. As the integrity of the ship failed, life pods began to jettison. From the blasted maw of the hanger, a large troop transport sped out, heading for the sector's centre.

The final death of the carrier was spectacular. Its plasma engine exploded scattering fighters and debris around the vicinity. The *Ardent* was rocked by the blast and its shields fell alarmingly.

"It seems our mission has been accomplished just barely." Dentill said to the crew, "it is time to go. Pick up our remaining fighters and the escape pods and let's head home before the *Split* have a chance to regroup."

As the scattered GDI ships headed for the *Ardent*, the frigate began to limp towards the jump gate and the ongoing melee between the GDI squadrons and Corvettes. When the *Split* leader saw the large bulk of the frigate headed for his remaining ships, he panicked, leading the last two corvettes and scattered knots of *Mambas* through the gate to *Hatikvah's Faith*.

As the remaining *Novas* and *Perseii* docked with the *Ardent*, Greene gave the order. "Charge the jump drive, its time to leave."

Chapter 16 – Assassins

Dureena Fielding had given up on any crisis occurring that would take her mind off waiting for news from the battle. Despairing of ever clearing her head she went to the pilots' bar in frustration, hoping a few drinks would calm her down.

The bar seemed busy with many of the off duty pilots clearly having had them same idea as her. Ordering a delaxian beer, she went to search for a seat. A group of new rookie pilots quickly vacated a small table, to allow her to be alone. As she sat down, one of them turned and asked. "Have you had any news sir?" About what was in no doubt.

"Sorry, pilot, nothing yet, we will have to wait and see." Fielding replied, quaffing her drink, taking a deep draft.

As the young pilot headed off, she sat back stretching her tight muscles. The background noise of the bar buzzed around her. Eagerly chatting pilots, music from the old-fashioned jukebox and the occasional clink of colliding glasses. She closed her eyes and let their hubbub permeate her senses. She was so enwrapped in her meditations, she did not notice, the quiet approach of a scarred pilot.

"Hello squadron leader... Fielding isn't it." The man said.

Startled out of her reverie, Fielding's eyes shot open. "Yes, who are you?" she asked the stranger.

"I can't believe you have already forgotten." The man chuckled passing a fresh drink across the table. "I am Captain Graaf."

"Oh yes, now I remember, forgive me. And thanks once again for your help." She said. "It seems such a long time ago."

"A lot of things have happened since then." Graaf replied.

"Hmm, indeed. Now what brings you here, and how did you get so far into the secure part of the station?" Fielding asked

"That's simple enough, I do a lot of contract work, direct for Petre Shacklock and since this is the best bar on the station, it's where you will find me in my occasional downtime." Graaf smiled reassuringly.

"Yeah, you were here back when Commander Dentill first joined."

Fielding regretted that comment immediately as her thoughts rushed back to the departed fleet.

"Yup, how is he, actually don't bother, I know he's off on some mission." Graaf responded. "Actually I came here to warn you."

"Warn me? About what?" Fielding's interest was piqued.

"I think you have an agent provocateur on board the station." Graaf answered.

"A what?" She asked confused.

"Sorry, a saboteur or more likely an assassin." Graaf replied.

"Assassin? How do you know?" She sounded concerned.

"I saw him on the main concourse, dressed as one of your Split refugees, only he was no ex-slave. I have run into him before. I don't know his real name but the Split refer to him by the name of some sort of dagger." Graaf explained.

"Could you recognise him again?" Fielding asked.

"Maybe, but we probably don't have much time." Graaf replied.

"We had better start searching right away, but first, I need you to look through a list of holos of all the refugees, maybe you can pick the right one out so we can send out search teams." Fielding suggested.

"OK but we will have to be quick if we are going to catch him." Graaf answered.

Fielding stood up, leaving her drink behind and headed for the door with Captain Graaf close behind. Fielding waved her hands to try and get the attention of the pilots. With no success she shouted. "QUIET." The room slowly fell to a hush. "People, it seems we have been infiltrated by an enemy agent, I need you all to sober up and be in the briefing room as soon as possible. I will join you all shortly." Pointing to one of the security team who was visiting the bar she added. "I need you to get the security leaders to attend too." Seeing nods from around the room, she headed for the door.

The pair headed toward the nearest private computer room. Fortunately there were many in pilot country so it was not long before Fielding had hooked into the security network and Graaf was

sat scanning through images. With dozens of pictures to go through it was taking a while, but eventually Graaf spoke. "There it is that one." Fielding peered at the image. "Are you sure, most of them look alike to me." She said.

Graaf chuckled. "They do take some getting used to. I have been around them for Jazuras so I've picked up the knack."

"Fair enough, I will just download the image and we can get going." There was a brief pause as Fielding's hands flew over the console, hitting the required keys to transfer the image. Once the transfer was complete, she removed the data crystal from the access port. "Right time to get going."

As they entered the briefing room, she could see it was crammed with pilots and security personnel. The pilots all stood as she entered and saluted. She waved them down. "Right people you all know why we are here, there is an enemy agent loose aboard the station. There have been no security breaches so this Split spy must be somewhere in the civilian section of the station."

"This guy is very skilled so all teams will have to be small and not in uniform or else he will be scared off." Graaf added.

"You heard the Captain people. Pilots will split into their wing pairs. Security teams will also be paired up, however three security squads will stay back as a rapid response team." Fielding stated. "Any questions?"

"What do we do if we locate the agent?" One of the pilots asked.

"Call for back up." Graaf replied. "Also we are transmitting the Split's image to your datapads, try to remember the image, comparing faces to mug shots tends to make people suspicious."

"OK people lets move out." Fielding ordered, her eagerness barely hidden.

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The cargo bay of the Teladi Vulture was damp and nearly airless. The assassin Keltana was hunched in a cramped space beneath two large packing crates. Any normal sentient would have given up stazuras ago, seeking comfort and security. Keltana was anything but normal, for him it was the prize that counted. A bit of discomfort was acceptable to achieve his goal. As he sat meditating

to conserve oxygen he could hear the whine of the engines change pitch. The ship was slowing down. Sezuras later there was a soft clang as the ship connected with its docking berth. He had arrived.

He could here a muffle conversation from the cockpit through an open access panel. It seemed like a discussion between the transport pilot and the station customs agent. The sound began to recede. They were obviously heading away, perhaps to arrange documents. It was time for him to make his departure. Using his great strength Keltana pushed the crates above him aside and pulled himself out of the small compartment he lay in. He ran softly across the bay to the cargo hatch. As he slapped the open button, the motors began to screech slightly as the hatch slid upwards. He looked around but no one was nearby to hear. He closed the hatch behind him and crept stealthily across the hangar.

Voices began to float across the open space so he ducked behind some crates. It was the Teladi pilot and the customs official. He watched as they entered the cargo ship and then ran towards an open doorway into the main station. So far so good, he thought as he made his way along a silent corridor. Looking for a place to hide out whilst he planned his next move.

An open maintenance closet seemed the only viable option so he ducked inside, closing the door to behind him. As he pressed himself against the wall he caught his reflection in the metallic side of a storage bin. His Split features would work against him in this station. There were no Split in the GDI so he would stick out like an enraged Chelt. He needed a disguise, but simply donning a corporation uniform would not do.

As he stood pondering his options, he heard the shuffling of feet outside the door in the corridor. He forced himself even deeper into the shadows and prepared to pounce if the person should enter his hiding place. Through a gap in the doorway he could see that a tall Argon was approaching dressed in a long hooded robe. It was a Goner, an ideal disguise. Keltana did not understand the nuances of the strange religion but he did know that the strange monk like fanatics were not considered a threat by anyone. Deepening his voice, he called out "A little help in here please." He hoped his phrasing was effective.

"Yes my son, how can I be of assistance?" The goner asked through the door.

"Can you help me some heavy equipment?" Keltana asked, keeping his voice as deep as he could.

The Goner opened the door and entered the small room. "I would be glad to help." He said. Too late the Goner saw through the corner of his eye the hand arcing towards his neck. With a loud crack Keltana's hand hit home, stunning the unfortunate man.

Keltana quickly stripped the Goner of his robe and put it on himself. The large hood easily hid his features, casting his face into shadow. The disguise was perfect no one would suspect a peace-loving monk of aggressive intentions. Now he needed to find his way to the executive level. Before he set up he tied up the unfortunate monk and gagged him with a strip of cloth. It would not be good to have the man raise a hubbub after he awoke.

The Hangar deck was near the base of the station so Keltana was going to have to find his way through many possibly crowded areas to reach his destination. He quickly ruled out taking the main elevators, as they would likely be guarded or near security stations. He would have to find an alternate route.

As he travelled deeper into the bowels of the station he came across a maintenance worker half protruding from an open hatch. "Excuse me mate." The worker said. Keltana quickly tried to remember what the Goner had said to him. Ah yes. "Yes my son can I help you?" he asked the worker.

"Please, I need to get deeper into this hatch can you keep hold of my waist so I don't go plummeting down this shaft." The worker replied.

"Of course." Keltana did as he was asked. His successes had frequently come from playing the role well. If helping with mundane tasks helped gain his own objective and maintain his cover then so be it.

As the maintenance worker continued to carry out his repairs, Keltana could feel something square and hard at the man's waist. He realised that it was the worker's ID card. It ought to give him access to the freight elevators and the higher levels. When they worker eventually signalled to be pulled up, Keltana nimbly secreted the pass away into one of his voluminous sleeves.

"Thanks mate." The worker said. "I didn't know you Goners came so strong."

"I am new." Keltana replied. "But now I must go."

"Of course. Sorry to have kept you." The man replied.

Keltana hurried away. Once he had rounded a corner he took out the ID pass. As long as no one tried to compare faces he should be able to use it with impunity.

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The search of the commercial district was proving fruitless. All but one of the Split refugees were now accounted for, but despite their best efforts neither Fielding's pilots, nor the security officers had found even a trace of the Split agent. It was as though he had left the station.

Captain Graaf heard a high-pitched beep and looked down at his pager. It was Fielding; she was probably still sat on the stylised veranda of one of the more fashionable restaurants on the concourse. She had been concentrating her efforts on coordinating the teams, rather than searching herself. That way she could keep a clear overview of the search's progress. He picked up his communicator and activated it.

"Graaf here." He said.

"Its Fielding, any lead yet?" Fielding asked

"Sorry no luck yet, I have one more place I am going to check." Graaf replied.

"Keep me informed." She said switching off the comm.

The chances were if this agent - Graaf still could not remember his name - was going to strike he would need weapons and help with infiltration, from the social underworld. One thing he did remember was that this assassin had an affinity for ancient ceremonial weapons. Graaf scanned through the station's trade database for recent sales. There were few sales for weapons and none, which suggested a purchase by the Split. The search needed to be widened. An idea came to him. He quickly changed his query to look for antiques. There was one high priced sale registered by a "Jed's Antiques". At sixty thousand credits it could not have been a trinket that had changed hands. Graaf decided to investigate.

The journey to the shop took only a few mizuras and the cheerful shopkeeper was soon greeting Graaf. "Hello there are you looking for something in particular."

"Not exactly a friend of mine suggested I try here. Apparently you have an excellent supply of Split ceremonial weaponry." Graaf replied with a beaming smile.

"Yes, yes, many I sold a rather fine specimen just today."

"Really, I wonder if you have anymore?" Graaf made his voice sound interested.

"Actually I do, let me just bring them out."

Graaf waited whilst the shopkeeper dragged out a large wooden box. As he opened it, Graaf could see a wide variety of bladed weapons, many intricately carved and decorated.

"As you can see I have many varieties, from execution knives and ceremonial blades. I even have a number of assassins' blades. See here I have two Keltanas, very rare. I sold the other one today."

That was it, the assassin's name, Graaf thought. Keltana, one of the most despicable members of that shadowy community. The shopkeeper had been far more useful than he suspected.

Graaf pretended to ponder of the different weapons for a while. "Hmm they are both exquisite but I think that I would quite like this one." He said pointing to the more expensive one. "Can you keep it for me, I will make a down payment now and pick it up with the balance later, I have some other things I need to do."

The Shopkeeper's eyes bulged, two excellent sales in the same day, it was a record for him. He loved his collection but the proceeds of the day would help him buy a number of Boron art pieces for his personal collection.

"As you wish sir, I will wrap it for you and have it ready for your return. Thank you for your custom."

"Oh no, thank you for your assistance here, you have been most informative."

A quizzical expression came over the antique dealer's face as Graaf left the shop. He could not remember telling his customer much about his wares.

Graaf knew that having the assassin's name was not enough, he needed to find out what he was up to, and there was only one place to find that out. Those who acted outside of the law tended to

spend most of their time in the company of those with similar lifestyles. He knew only one place on the station, which fit that description, the Jade Dragon.

As he entered the seedy bar Graaf could barely see through the haze of smoke drifting around the room. He strode purposefully towards the barman ignoring the stares and suspicious glances from the other customers seated at the scattered tables.

The barman looked him up and down with a poorly disguised sneer, evidently viewing Graaf's tidy apparel as a sign he was a rich wastrel looking for some excitement. The bitter expression slowly morphed into an eager smile when he saw the credit chit that Graaf deposited on the counter. The smile shrank as Graaf's large hand enveloped the chit, hiding it from view.

"Welcome to m' bar, what can I git you?" The barman asked. "A drink? A girl? Some weed?"

"Why don't we forget the diversions and have a little chat about your customers, shall we?" Graaf asked, his mouth slowly forming a menacing smile.

"I doubt I can help you there, I see a lot of people come through here." The barman replied his business relied on the confidentiality of his clientele.

"Maybe, however this one is special, he is a Split." Graaf looked into the man's eyes, seeing the deceit within them.

"I can't say as I remember such a person." The barman shook his head looking away.

"I don't think I have made myself quite clear." Graaf frowned his eyes glaring. He pulled out his customised plasma pistol, placing it besides the credit chit on the counter. "Now do we speak the same language?"

"You wouldn't use that in here, this is a respectable bar on a GDI station." The barman replied.

Graaf laughed, "Who do you think is paying me?" Behind him he heard the sound of a chair crashing to the ground. In one smooth motion he had grabbed his pistol and spun around. There was a loud crack as his pistol sounded, superheating the air between the gun and a large Paranid. There was a loud crash as an arm dropped to the floor, still tightly gripping a laser pistol. The Paranid stared

dumbly at its severed limb for a moment and then fell to the floor unconscious. Graaf kept his weapon trained on the other denizens as he slowly pulled out a small communicator. "Bounty claimed on Brelaminstrat the unholy. Pick up at the Jade Dragon. Hunter Code 95678." He eyed the others, willing them to protest.

"Now where were we?" Graaf asked, turning back to the barman.

"Ah ye...yes, you were asking me about a Split?" The barman answered.

"Right, I believe one may have come here sometime in the last few stazuras. Am I right?" It was a more of a statement than a question.

"Ye...yes, one came through a few stazuras, he met with someone and then left quite quickly." The barman replied.

"Who did he meet?" Graaf asked. The barman indicated a Teladi sitting at a table in the far corner. "Well it seems you have been quite helpful." Graaf added, passing the credit chit over to the barman. "I think I will take that drink." The barman sighed with relief as he poured Graaf a large pitcher of the local beer.

Graaf took his beer with a nod of thanks and began to thread his way through the room. The occupants of the bar looked down into their drinks as he walked past their tables. "I'm expecting sssomeone." The Teladi said as he sat down in front of her.

"Not anymore. I think we need to talk."

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The search was proving fruitless. Dureena Fielding's security teams had now examined over ninety percent of the commercial and public areas of the station and found no trace of the assassin. It looked like he had left, or was completely hidden. Fielding was preparing to order half the teams off duty when she received a signal over communicator, could this be it?

Sir, central control reporting in." The voice said.

"What is up?" Fielding replied.

"We have a couple of anomalies." The controller continued. "A visiting Goner has been found unconscious and stripped in a storage locker."

"Hell's teeth, he has penetrated our security." Fielding let out a string of curses, all that time wasted.

"Worse than that sir, it seems a maintenance worker reported his identification missing about ten mizuras ago, only it has been used since then about two mizuras ago."

"Where and what for?"

"It was used in one of the goods elevators, unfortunately three floors were visited before the next card was used, and he could be on any of them." The controller sounded nervous.

"Ok have all available teams and personnel converge on those levels." Fielding ordered. She was going to need everyone available to try and surround the Split.

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Crouched inside a ventilation shaft on the executive level, Keltana chuckled. He had watched as several security teams had run past headed towards the elevators to the lower levels. It did not seem too vain to consider his plan a stroke of genius. He had not only disguised his tracks by setting the elevator to stop at several levels, but had used the maintenance hatch to crawl to the level above and thus gain access to the small ventilation tunnels which coursed throughout each floor.

When there appeared to be no more personnel passing by, Keltana quietly opened the grating a head of him and slipped quietly to the floor. His feet moved stealthily across the floor. At any moment someone might step out of one of the offices and notice him despite his disguise. Given the level of disturbance within the station, they knew he was there, and chances were they knew of his disguise.

He checked the map on his datapad provided by his Teladi friend, there were only a couple more corridors to traverse. He could hear people coming towards him from an office so he was forced to delay as he hid in an empty room. As the voices began to fade, he resumed his journey. As he finally turned into his destination corridor, he could see it was very busy. He ducked back out of sight. He had to get to the other end, despite there being several people moving up and down the corridor. There was no way he was going to avoid them all.

Eventually Keltana realised that unlike in a Split facility, these Argon

would be no threat, so he determined to hurry down the corridor, simply ignoring all of the people. He pulled his cowl further over his head and made his way to his destination.

Half way down the corridor, one of the Argon officials grabbed his arm, saying. "Excuse me what are you doing here?"

"Leave me alone." Keltana said, shrugging the man off. The force from his strong arm threw the man to the floor.

"Hey." Shouted another of the employees.

Keltana ignored them all as he sprinted the last few paces to the end office door. Many of the employees were scattered in his wake. He burst into the office. In front of him sat a startled Petre Shacklock.

"Who are you?" Shacklock asked nervously.

"Your doom." Keltana said casting off his Goner robe.

"No, you are the Split that my people are looking for."

"Yes, though you will not be worrying about your people much longer." Keltana grabbed hold of Shacklock and slammed him onto the desk between them. With a flick of his wrist, his knife was in his hand. Slowly he raised his arm above his head. Shacklock struggled, forcing Keltana to hold more tightly with his other arm.

"For the glory of the Split."

"I think not." A voice said behind him. He could feel the cold steel of a gun barrel pressed against his neck. "Hello, Kel, remember me?" He tried to turn to turn but the voice continued. "Oh no, Kel, eyes front." The gun fired and the assassin was enveloped in the glow of a stun blast. Keltana slumped to the floor unconscious.

Shacklock slowly opened his eyes to see a hand being proffered towards him. He took it and was hauled to his feet. He looked into the eyes of his rescuer.

"Hello Petre, long time no see."

"Captain Graaf, Thank the maker." Shacklock said, before his eyes rolled upwards and he fainted next to the body of his would be murderer.

Chapter 17. A Pact with the Devil

Keltana awoke to find himself locked in a cell by himself. The walls were painted the pale grey found in all Argon prisons and the few facilities provided only basic comfort. He lay on a steel pallet with only a thin mattress to provide some comfort. He got up and tested the force field, which blocked the entrance to the cell. The moment his hand touched the field it was reflexively thrown back. There was a sudden tinge of ozone in the air. It was worth a try. Looking back into the room he saw that there was no items he might use for his escape, he was trapped.

With nothing to do Keltana lay down on the pallet and waited. It was not long before the door to the cellblock opened revealing three people. One was a security guard, one was an Argon female and the other was the man who had captured him, that damned Captain Graaf.

"Hello, Kel." Graaf said. "Allow me to introduce Dureena Fielding, your host for your stay here."

"Damn you Graaf I was so close to success." Keltana spat back at him, why did the Argon always have to be so smug.

"Well I could not exactly let you murder one of my best clients." Graaf retorted. It was evident to Keltana that Graaf was amused by the situation.

"Tell me who you are working for." Fielding interrupted their banter.

"Family Jxu of course." Keltana replied. He caught Fielding glancing at Graaf, why did she appear confused, it seemed fairly obvious to him.

"Surprised he came straight out with it Dureena?" Graaf asked. "Want to tell her why you are so free to confess."

"I am an assassin, I have no loyalty to any of the families, better prospects that way. Since you foiled my last task, it looks like I will not be getting paid, so why bother." Keltana replied grinning with little passion, he had lost a great deal of money.

"Since you are being so open. Tell me, how long did you work for the Jxu Family?" Fielding asked.

"About two Mazuras."

"So tell me some of your other kills for them, I know you don't stay without work." Graaf queried, hoping to dig a little deeper.

"Oh only one, I have been paid a retainer, I felt like a break." Keltana chuckled, though stopped when he saw the others were not amused. "I was paid a great deal to assassinate the son of Lord Njy, and leave evidence to implicate family Ryk. A simple job compared to this one."

"What, no wonder there was a build up of Split forces in the outer region. The two families were about to go to war with each other not us." Fielding's voice was filled with awe at the audacious plan.

"Yes and then joined forces to face off the Boron reaction, which brought the Argon into the situation too." Graaf completed the speculation. "Kel do you have any proof of this?"

"Not here no, but I do in my property aboard the Anarchy Port in Loomanckstrats Legacy." Keltana replied he finally had away to get away. Maybe the pathetic Boron were right, sometimes honesty was its own reward.

"Looks like maybe we will let you go sometime, after all." Graaf replied, ignoring the look of protest on Fielding's face.

"What?" Fielding declared loudly.

Keltana was concerned, it seemed that the woman was in charge. "Of course I will help you if it will get me out of here."

"I doubt we can trust you." Fielding answered.

"To stop this war, you are going to have to." Keltana replied.

"Besides," Graaf added. "Kel knows he isn't going to get away from me."

"I guess that will be up to Petre. He will have to approve the mission." Fielding said, moving towards the door. The security officer followed.

"See you later Kel." Graaf laughed as he left the room.

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The emergency jump the *Ardent* made to escape the Split fleet had left propelled them to the Boron sector of Light Water. The

navigator had selected the nearest safe system on the interstellar map, unfortunately it was actually several jump gates away from the GDI headquarters.

Commander Rick Dentill was in the main repair bay of the hanger deck assisting the technicians in repairing the damaged fighter craft. Over a dozen ships had been destroyed and several of those, which had survived, were in a critical state of disrepair. Lying on a low gurney beneath a Nova, he was busy replacing some sensor equipment oblivious to the outside world.

An insistent tapping on one of his feet broke his concentration. He closed up the panel he was working on and activated the motor of the gurney to propel him from underneath the fighter.

"Oh hello Marcus." Dentill said, when he saw Marcus Gromwell standing over him. "What's up?"

I just thought I would let you know we are almost back to headquarters. We are about to jump to Light of Heart now." Gromwell replied.

"Good, that was a long few stazuras. Next time we need to have an escape jump pre-programmed." Dentill suggested wiping his hands on a cloth.

"Petre wants to talk to you." Gromwell informed him.

"Well he can wait till we get to the station, I do not feel like talking much now." Dentill replied. "Let me know when we are there and a shuttle is prepped."

Dentill lay back down on the gurney and moved back under the Nova, reopening the panel and began working on the ship's sensors again. He had a few mizuras before the ship would arrive at the GDI headquarters and he needed to work out some of his frustrations. The loss of the *Euripides* had hit him hard despite it saving the rest of the fleet. He had begun to feel the loss of friends and colleagues far more keenly since his responsibility for their lives had grown.

The engineering work helped focus Dentill's mind away from the wider world and he was soon laughing and cursing along with the technicians over shoddy parts and power fluctuations. It was sad when he was finally interrupted by a bridge officer informing him of their arrival.

"Well lads got to go." He said to the tech team.

"Thanks for your help sir, nice to see at least one flyboys knows what an electro spanner is" The crew chief said.

Dentill laughed. "Get these baby's up and running again, I doubt we have seen the last of the fighting."

"Too true I imagine sir." The chief replied sombrely.

Dentill made his way through the hanger deck to the shuttle bay. The transport was ready and he stepped aboard.

"Next stop home." Said the pilot as Dentill walked into the cockpit and sat in the spare seat. Dentill smiled slightly.

"It will be good to have a rest." Dentill nodded in agreement.

The pilot activated the engines when Dentill was strapped and nosed the ship out of the bay. There were many ships moving back and forth between the *Ardent* and the HQ station. Some were transporting the wounded, others bringing supplies and spare parts to help repair the damaged fighter craft. The volume of traffic meant that the pilot was forced to take a circuitous route giving Dentill time to compose himself for the imminent debriefing session with Petre Shacklock. How was one supposed to admit the loss of a heavy transport?

When the shuttle finally docked with the station Dentill was already standing at the airlock as the universal docking tunnel moved to connect with the ship. The door cycled open and he walked through.

The hangar was a hive of activity. Technicians and bay crews were moving carrying equipment and standing around in groups looking at damaged items. It seemed the whole workforce was being drafted in to refit the *Ardent* and its fighter squadrons.

"RICK!" a voice shouted. It was Petre Shacklock. Dentill hurried over. "You look a mess," Shacklock said looking down at his oil smeared clothes. Dentill smiled weakly.

"I guess you have heard about the battle then." Dentill asked.

"Yes an unfortunate business, thank goodness you managed to save most of the crew from the *Euripides*." Shacklock replied.

"We have taken a big hit with the loss of Tambla." Dentill was

waiting for the tirade. It never came.

"True he was a brave man and we all feel his loss. However it looks like it may not have been in vain." Shacklock smiled with glee.

"You've lost me Petre."

"Simple, we may have discovered a way to end this entire conflict. Both here and in the outer regions." Shacklock explained to Dentill about the assassination attempt and the resulting defection of Keltana.

"Can you trust him?" Dentill asked after Shacklock had finished.

"I doubt it, but I do trust Captain Graaf and he says he can keep Keltana in check."

"I hope so."

"Well I think you need some rest. We can talk later. Hopefully we will soon have news from Ms Fielding, Captain Graaf and Commander Schmidt." Shacklock said hopefully.

"What? Dureena went with them." Dentill asked shocked. Were any of the senior officers he left behind still there?

"Jealous are we." A voice said from behind him.

Dentill span around to see whom it was. "Juliette." He cried, grabbing her in a tight bear hug. She pushed him back slightly but still held him.

"I have missed you." She said simply. "Did you miss me?"

"You were ever in my thoughts." He replied

"OH I'm sure." She teased. "I can see you there on the bridge starry eyed letting everyone else do the work."

As Dentill began to sputter in mild indignation, Shacklock added quickly. "Well I will leave you to get reacquainted. Juliette make sure he gets some rest." Then he left the two together.

Together a pillar of tranquillity and peace against the noisy bustle of the hangar, the two walked hand in hand towards the nearest exit. They headed towards Dentill's quarters to have some food. As a senior corporate officer, he was provided with living space, which

would make a full Admiral in the Argon Fleet envious. When they arrived, Juliette pushed Dentill onto one of the plush sofas. "You sit here, I will get the food ready."

"Ok" he replied.

Getting the food ready involved placing an order with one of the station's restaurants and waiting for it to be teleported through the station transportation network. When the meal was delivered, Juliette served it on plates and carried it back to the lounge where Dentill was sat with the news on the vidscreen. His feet were kicked up on a low coffee table. He seemed far more relaxed already.

"I see so you are back five mizuras and already watching the vid." Juliette scolded him in good humour.

"Sorry, just keeping up to date." Dentill replied sheepishly. He turned down off the volume but left the screen on.

They sat in relative silence eating their meal, both deep in their own thoughts, but happy of each other's company.

A picture flashed up on the vidscreen showing scattered debris and the hulks of destroyed vessels. Dentill reached for the remote control and turned up the volume. "Sorry Juliette but I need to watch this." He said. The news reporter had just begun to speak.

"... You can see the Split conflict has intensified on all fronts. A Grau Defence Industries task force led by the former Navy Commander, Rick Dentill has struck at the heart of the Family Jxu Empire in the unclaimed regions. Casualties are estimated as very high on both sides, and we believe the destroyed ships include a converted Mammoth Heavy Transport and Split Raptor class carrier.

In a similar spate of attacks, the Split jump capable fleet has attacked many freighters and other isolated ships across Argon space. As these attacks continue interstellar trade can only suffer. The office of the President has issued a new bill to the Senate to propose a convoy system to be introduced to help the overstretched fleet forces.

In retaliation for these recent losses a combined Argon and Boron taskforce struck against a Python squadron headed for the new frontier. Several of the destroyers were abandoned after heavy fighting.

It seems that this current crisis is spiralling out of control and we

still have no information on what has started it. Fears have been growing within some official circles that a full-scale invasion is imminent.

We will have more on this story later, but for now over to Teda Glena for the sport update."

Dentill switched the vidscreen off. "Well you made the evening news." Juliette said smiling giving him a brief hug.

"Yes, but it looks like everything we have done may soon be for nothing if things get any worse." Dentill replied. Juliette gripped him tighter, resting her head on his shoulder. "I only hope that Fielding and the others can find something."

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"Watch where you are going." A fat ugly Argon man said to Daryl Schmidt gruffly.

"Sorry." Schmidt replied mildly despite his discomfort.

"Sorry doesn't cut it boy." The man said as he signalled a pair of bodyguards, one Teladi, the other Argon, to join him. All three were dressed in black ill fitting and patched flight suits. The Teladi also sported a patch over its left eye. The leers on all their faces suggested trouble.

"Actually, he's not really sorry at all you Chelt-lover." Fielding said from Schmidt's shoulder. "In fact we were wondering how such an uncoordinated slob like you could manage to walk at all."

"Dureena, do you think it wise to antagonise him?" Schmidt asked under his breath. This was the third time since they had entered this bar that someone had collided with Schmidt and blamed him for it. Each time before the other had accepted his apology, but it looked like this time the man was looking for a fight.

Fielding whispered back to him. "Wise? No. Fun? Yes." With her last word, her fist shot out and struck the Teladi on the nose sending him reeling. The Argon bodyguard rounded on her, blocking the path to the fat male. Before she could attack him, Schmidt had leaped on the man and knocked him to the floor, landing on top. She grabbed the pirate, kneeling him in the groin and then slamming him face down into a nearby table as he doubled over in pain.

There were three Argon men, obviously pirates, at the table who jumped up as it shattered to the floor under the man's bulk.

"Oi, look what you did to our drinks." Said one of them drunkenly.

"You'll pay for that," added another just as inebriated.

The three men began swinging punches ineffectively. Given the quantity of alcohol they had consumed it was a wonder they could stand let alone fight. Deftly avoiding the strikes, Fielding began to hit back. The Alcohol seemed to be acting as an anaesthetic as the three men seemed immune to pain. It was the force of her punches that began to send them sprawling in different directions.

It was not long before more of the bar's customers began to join in. The fighting spread and soon there seemed to be a full riot in swing. Station security did not come to intervene so Fielding assumed they were used to this sort of thing and did not care. She made her way through the press, giving and occasionally receiving hits and kicks from the brawling mob. She found Schmidt stood in a corner, his chest heaving and his hand clutching the wound he had received during the rescue those few tazuras ago.

"Are you all right?" She asked concerned, hoping the wound had not reopened.

"I am fine, just winded and took a nasty hit to the scar, it is still a little tender, but not any worse." Schmidt replied, breathing heavily. "This is almost fun."

"Yes exhilarating." She started to laugh. "Look at us, are we mad? Finding fun in a riot."

"Looks like we are stuck here though, I don't feel like forcing my way through that lot." Schmidt nodded towards the combat.

The whole bar was in uproar; dozens of the occupants were fighting in a massive sprawled fistfight. Several were already lying unconscious on the floor. Fuelled by all the alcohol and weed, it did not look like there would be an end soon.

"Oh well, maybe Captain Graaf and that damned Split will be back soon." Fielding said hopefully.

"Me too, it won't be long till someone here notices us and we are back at it again." Schmidt agreed.

A loud pistol shot barked over the din of the combat. Most of the fighters dove for cover. Schmidt and Fielding hid behind a table lying on its side. With the room suddenly devoid of background noise the voice, which followed seemed overly loud.

"Come, come children play nicely with each other." It was the sarcastic tones of Captain Graaf. He walked over to them. "Is this your handiwork?"

"Sort of." Fielding replied.

"I might have guessed you would get into trouble, I should have left you back in Argon space." Graaf said.

Ignoring the jibe, Schmidt asked the Captain. "Where is Keltana, have you had success with finding the data."

"I have locked him in his quarters, he says he has the datacard, but I need you to come and read it to confirm it is genuine." Graaf replied.

"We had better follow you then" Schmidt said, eager to get away from the bar.

"Are you coming Dureena? Or do you want to clean up here?" Graaf said laughing, then walked off.

The two others hurried after Graaf as he made his way through the pirate port. The hallways and corridors of the station were dark and dingy, much of the lighting seemed to have failed. With no apparent cleaning service, the trio were often walking through piles of discarded garbage. As they travelled deeper the conditions seemed to be getting worse.

"How can anyone live in this filth?" Schmidt said to no one in particular. Fielding nodded her agreement whilst Graaf just ignored him.

"Here we are." Graaf said, standing at a nondescript door. There was the faint sound of banging coming through the steel panelling. Graaf stepped aside and opened the door. A large shape came hurtling through the door, sprawling on the floor.

"Sorry Kel, but you should have remained patient." Graaf said as he hauled the Split up, muscles straining and dragged him bodily through the door. "Now where is the datapad? Give it to my friend here." Graaf passed the pad to Schmidt who then perched on a

stool to read.

Whilst Graaf dealt with the angry Split, Fielding was left with little to do. A glance around the room showed them to be just as unhygienic as the rest of the station. There was clothing scattered all across the floor and on the thin pallet a mass of rags which might be taken for bedclothes festered in a pile. In one corner a basic food preparation area was stacked with crockery and waste. That would explain the smell. It was no wonder the Split spent most of his time away on missions. If this was the way all Split lived, it was no wonder they always seemed to be angry. Absentmindedly she flicked a dirty robe of a chair and sat down.

"This is it!" Declared Schmidt excitedly.

"What is what?" Fielding asked.

"This is the full transcript of a message we intercepted in Intelligence wozuras ago. We were not able to translate much of it, but it virtually spells out everything we have assumed so far." Schmidt was grinning with triumph.

Graaf took the datapad and glanced at it. "Its no wonder you took the job on. Even I might have accepted it at that reward." He said to Keltana.

"You would never have succeeded." Keltana said sullenly.

Graaf opened a pocket on his jump suit and put the datapad into it. "Time to go then kiddies." He said cheerfully and pushed Keltana out of the door. Schmidt and Fielding followed quickly behind. The journey back through the habitat of the station was just as disgusting as the trip through it to Keltana's quarters. It was with some relief when they reached the smoke filled concourse with its bars and shops.

"We had better head straight for the ship." Fielding said as they crossed the main square towards the docking bays. Half way across they heard a loud shout.

"Hey aren't you that GDI woman?" It was a grim looking pilot. He was covered in scars and was suffering from a prominent limp in his right leg.

Fielding turned. "I beg your pardon?" She asked.

"Yeah you are the one who whacked my squadron in Hatikvah's

Faith, before the Split invaded." The pirate cupped his hands and shouted to the surrounding pirates. "Get them, they are cops." It was not really true, but it got the crowd moving.

"Oh hell." Said Graaf. "You know what mate, it was me in the corvette." The pirate growled with rage.

Several of the other pirates had drawn their weapons and had begun to shoot at them. Graff pulled out his own pistol and shouted, "Run." Before opening fire, several of the leading pirates fell under the accurate fire, whilst others were stumbling over their inert bodies.

Graaf turned and ran after the Fielding and the others. He paused to shoot at a control panel, which caused a bulkhead door to close. He dived under it just before it clanged shut.

"Right we need to get out of here fast." He said, heading for their ship. It was an Argon Discoverer, both fast and manoeuvrable but not well armed or armoured. Fielding and Schmidt jumped into the Pilot and co-pilot seats, whilst Graaf forced Keltana into the cramped passenger bay before buckling himself in.

"Looks like they've broken through that door." Said Schmidt as a hail of small arms fire pattered against the hull.

"You don't say." Said Fielding through gritted teeth as she reached over to activate the shields.

The ship hurtled towards the exit. Fielding launched a pair of missiles at the closed hanger doors, which burst open, giving them an easy run to safety.

"Weeeyow," cried Schmidt in delight as they shot through the gaping rent in the launch tunnel.

"I wouldn't celebrate just yet," Graaf said pointing to three approaching blips on the gravidar as they hurtled through the asteroid strewn system of Loomanckstrats legacy. Schmidt gave an audible gulp as he saw more ships pouring from the station. As the pursuing ships reached the asteroid field they slowed and began to fall behind. Fielding an excellent pilot could navigate the field happily at near full speed with ease.

"I think we are going to make it!" Fielding thought out loud.

"What is that?" Schmidt asked pointing at a large triangular object

as they approached it.

"Oh Heron's teeth!" swore Fielding, "Squash mines, why did this have to happen to me."

"There should be a safe path." Said Graaf. "Follow the Nav beacons."

Fielding followed his advice and headed for the nearest beacon. The pirates put on a spurt of speed when they saw the discoverer move to the open route. The mixture of Jaguars and Boron Octopus scouts in the lead of the pirate formation had a slight edge on speed and slowly began to gain.

"They are going to reach us before we get to the gate." Fielding started cursing again.

Graaf ducked his head back into the passenger quarters and began working on the comm. system there.

"What's the distance between us?" he asked Schmidt he was sat at the targeting array controls.

"About fourteen Ks." Schmidt replied.

"Right well listen, Dureena on my mark, kill the engines."

"What? Are you mad Captain?" Fielding shouted back at him accusingly.

"You have got to trust me, now do as I say... Mark." Graaf called back.

Fielding hit the engine kill switch and the ship slowly glided to a halt. The range counter began to dip rapidly. 13k... 12k... 11k... 10k... 9k... 8k ...

Suddenly above the cockpit a jump portal opened and out burst a corvette, its weapons already charged.

"Docking granted." Said a mechanical voice through the comm. system.

The Discoverer was drawn to the small docking port of the corvette. Graaf kicked open the main hatch to the fighter and climbed out stretching his arms after the cramped conditions of the passenger compartment. He stuck his head back into the ship. "Make

yourselves at home, I have a few things to be doing.”

Graf hurried up an access tube to the corvettes small bridge. “Hello people” he said to the three crew members seated at the various control panels. He sat himself down in his comfortable command chair and activated the communicator.

“This is Captain Graaf of the *Antigone’s Revenge*, is there some kind of problem here?”

“Captain Graaf... Antigone’s Revenge...” said the lead pirate. “Oh hull!”

The pirate formation began to break apart as the ships registered the threat posed and turned back towards the Anarchy Port.

Graaf broke out into loud laughter and rested his head on the back of his seat. “The name always does it!” he said to the crew.

“Where did they all go?” Asked Fielding as she walked onto the bridge.

“Oh they suddenly lost their appetites.” Said one of the crew. “It usually happens when they learn who it is in the Captain’s chair.

Chapter 18 – “Out of time”

“Docking permission granted.” The station computer transmitted to the *Antigone’s Revenge*. The corvette slowly eased into the “Dry dock” on the Headquarters station. These bays were specially designed to hold such larger vessels.

“Ok people I have brought you home.” Captain Graaf told Dureena Fielding and Daryl Schmidt as the ship came to a stop. He slapped the release to the bridge door and pushed it open. “We had better get this information to the command team.”

The trio hurried through the corvette, to the main docking port. The hatch was already open when they arrived so they quickly made their way into the station. At the main airlock into the station they were forced to wait as the small pressure chamber cycled and the bioscanners did their work. Who knew what dangerous diseases were floating around the pirate station?

Eventually they were allowed to continue. Fielding headed toward a communication unit on the wall. “Code Alpha Blue. All senior officers report to the war room.” She transmitted across a secure channel. Alpha Blue was the most important flagging signal in the corporation. Given the information she was now carrying it was necessary to add some urgency.

“Right, lets get to the war room, Graaf are you coming?” Fielding asked.

“Nothing better on at the moment.” Graaf replied. “Plus I think you still need my help.”

The nearest elevator was not far from their location so it was not long before the trio were walking into the war room. Petre Shacklock, Commander Dentill and Marcus Gromwell were already seated at the conference table.

“Hello, Dureena, Daryl, and Captain Graaf, what is the hurry. Have you been successful?” Shacklock enquired.

“It looks like we may have found some information which might end this crisis.” Schmidt replied. “If we can get it to the right people that is.”

“Is Loralamincstros going to be here?” Asked Graaf. “I think we will need him for the upcoming mission.”

"What mission?" Dentill countered in surprise.

"You know the current situation in the outer region." Graaf answered. "We need to get this information to the right people and one of those is going to have to be the Split Patriarch."

"What? How are we going to approach him?" Dentill asked even more shocked.

"That's where Loralamincstros comes in. We are going to need a Paranid representative to get through the border, just like you used previously."

"Sorry to interrupt, but can you briefly go over what information you have gathered." Shacklock asked.

"I think it best if I do that. There is much background that this information will integrate with which you will not know about." Schmidt said. Dentill gave him a nod of approval. "Several wozuras ago now, I was working for the intelligence service in one of our secret listening posts. We intercepted a transmission from across Split space. It was from Thurok's Beard to Family Njy space. The transmission was flagged as code red and it's meaning is similar to your alpha blue. "

Dentill whistled. He had heard of this status. Usually conflicts or catastrophes ensued after one was received.

"Unfortunately we were unable to decode most of the message. What we did get was garbled, but suggested a fleet build up in Njy territory for deployment and possibly an attack. Hence our own build up there and then the limited yet widespread warfare we have seen so far. It was only the invasion of the unclaimed space, which gave us pause to consider that there maybe more to this than straight development of the Boron/Split rivalry."

"So you knew before the war developed that something was going?" Asked Fielding.

"No, all we had was seemingly orders for a deployment of Njy forces. It was not until the situation developed did we know that something untoward was happening." Schmidt had begun to fall back into what he called his 'briefing mode.'

"Can we get back to the data pad please?" Asked Dentill, glaring at Fielding for a moment. She smiled sheepishly back at him.

"It seems that the Split Assassin intercepted the transmission too at some point, before the Family Jxu recruited him. It was this copy that we went to retrieve. It clearly sets out the Jxu plan to their agents in Njy space. It spells out how they intended to assassinate a high-ranking member of the Njy family, implicating the Ryk family. This would lead to a build up between these two families, which to outside observers, would appear to be a preparation to attack the Boron. With direction focused on the far regions and all forces deployed in the escalations there, it would be impossible to stop Family Jxu's own invasion of the unclaimed space."

"So let me get this straight. The Family Jxu have been acting on their own and have started an intergalactic war for territorial gains?" This came from a shocked Marcus Gromwell.

"Essentially, yes." Schmidt replied.

"Well we are going to have to get this information distributed then." Shacklock recommended to the council team.

"Well I am still attached to intelligence." Schmidt said. "So I can gain access to the Argon fleet Admiral in the outer region."

"I will be able to pass this data onto some of the main news organisations." Shacklock offered. "Which just leaves the Split."

"I can do this, but I will need the assistance of Loralamincstros." Graaf replied.

"Then you will have it Captain." Loralamincstros said. Striding over to the table.

"How long have you been there?" Asked Schmidt.

"The whole conference. I have been sitting at the console over there." The Paranid replied.

"Oh well, at least we don't have to explain all that again." Schmidt added.

"Since we are all here. We need to proceed with arranging things." Dentill interrupted the banter. "Schmidt you will need to take one of the jump capable transports. To get to the fleet. What ship will you need?" Dentill asked Graaf.

"We can take my Prometheus. I have fitted it with a jumpdrive." Graaf said.

"Ah an antique how quaint." Chuckled Loralamincstros.

"Watch it, I reckon I could still run rings around your Perseus." Graaf countered, laughing too.

"Right well you all have assignments. Get to it." Dentill ordered.

The various members of the council made their exit, leaving Shacklock, Dentill and the two squadron commanders on their own.

"You did some good work there Dureena." Dentill said to Fielding.
"But I think we need to start flying regular assignments and patrols to get the new rookies some more flight time. You and Marcus will be in charge of that."

"Ok commander, something quiet for a change." Gromwell replied.
Fielding simply nodded, she was beginning to get used to being left out of the action.

"I guess we had better go and work out some assignments then." Fielding said after a short pause. "Come on Marcus."

The two stood up and walked out of the briefing. As they headed for the main lift to the pilot areas, Gromwell tried to start a conversation. "Why so glum Dureena?"

"Just tired of never seeing any excitement." She replied.

"What? You just got back from infiltrating the central Pirate station in the known galaxy. Wasn't that exciting enough?"

Fielding smiled weakly. "I guess, but I am a pilot and haven't pulled my trigger in wozuras."

"Wish I could get away from it. I haven't had a time to breath since this war started." Gromwell replied. "In fact why don't you take them into space, that way there is a chance of some Khaak swatting and I will do the simulator training."

"Thanks that's something at least." Fielding said.

"Lets get something to eat first." Gromwell suggested. "It's been ages since we had to time together."

"Sounds like a date." Fielding replied, linking her arm through his as they headed [for the pilots' canteen](#).

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Rick Dentill had decided he needed some rest. He had barely slept in wozuras. Trying to arrange and coordinate missions and bear the responsibility of the mounting losses was turning him into an insomniac. He forced himself to return to his quarters, have a fresh meal and empty his mind of the events.

He chose a pre-prepared meal selection from the kitchens and it arrived via the transporter instantaneously. He sat down and turned the vidscreen onto the entertainment channel. There was a popular Boron soap opera on called " Jubilee Sector". A few stazuras of mindless drivel should help clear his head.

After several mizuras a bleeping came from the door. A gaping yawn crossed his face as he made his way to the keypad. He pushed the comm. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Juliette of course." Came the amused tones from the young nurse.

Dentill activated the door and it swished open. Juliette ran forwards and grabbed him tightly around the neck. Dentill caught her round the waist and swung her around.

"Why all the excitement?" He asked.

"Just glad to see you not working for a change. Is that Jubilee Sector?" she asked changing the subject. "Great!"

Dentill watched as she hurried to the sofa and sat enraptured staring at the vidscreen. He moved to sit next to her and began to ask a question.

"SHHH, I am trying to watch." Juliette snapped. Dentill decided to keep a politic silence.

It seemed that this was an omnibus edition of the show because to Dentill it seemed to go on for stazuras. His eyes began to close and he dozed. When the show finally ended, Juliette clapped her hands, startling him and brought him out his daydream.

"Wow that was fun. I can't believe that Fu Rauthi was Te Loria's father." She said.

"What you actually understood all that, I got lost ages ago." Dentill replied slightly teasingly.

"That's probably because nobody got killed." Juliette said hurt by Dentill's jibe.

"Whoa, lets not get into a row over the vid." Dentill tried to sound placatory. "Actually, the truth is I prefer to watch films, where people end up bettering themselves. Though don't tell anyone it might ruin my hardliner reputation."

Juliette laughed. "So you are a romantic. Next you'll be telling me you like to watch Goner Productions."

"Hey don't knock them, some of them are great!"

"Well Mr Romantic, I have just the film. I have been dying to watch it. It's all about three sisters trying to find husbands. I am sure you will love it."

Dentill groaned. "Ok if you really want to. I need something to distract me."

"Great." Juliette said with glee. "I knew I could persuade you."

She flicked through the vid channels until she found the film and then nestled herself against Dentill's chest. He put his arm around her and then the room went silent except for the vidscreen as the film played.

The film was indeed all about romance. Again Dentill lost the plot as the sisters' infatuations moved from one potential suitor to the next. He had trouble thinking anyone could come up with these kinds of stories. After only a few mizuras he found it easier to close his eyes and daydream again.

His thoughts were disturbed again when the screen flickered to white, noticeable even through his closed eyelids. "We interrupt this broadcast, to bring you breaking news." He was brought wide-awake.

"What now?" Juliette exclaimed.

"Who knows, lets find out?" Dentill replied.

"In the last few mizuras the Argon News Network has uncovered disturbing reports of a massive Split task force being formed in the system of Ghinn's Escape. This may be a prelude to a full invasion of the outer sectors. Whilst the purpose is unknown, this would appear to be the most sensible possibility. The Argon and Boron

navies are slowly moving additional forces into Hila's Joy to prepare for the likely invasion.

The question that is on everyone's lips now is when will this apocalypse break? As more information becomes available we will keep you up to date. We pray to whichever Gods exist that somehow this crisis will be averted.

This was ANN, now returning you to the scheduled broadcast."

"Oh no. This must be it." Juliette said.

"I guess so, I hope that Graaf, Schmidt and the others will succeed." Dentill replied.

"I suppose this means you are going to have to go off again to try and save the day?" She asked, more with sadness than bitterness in her voice.

"No I do not think so. There is little that I can contribute now, but to wait and see." Dentill answered. Juliette brightened slightly and held him tighter. He kissed her on the forehead. "One way or another things will be over soon."

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A lone Prometheus exited the west gate into the Split sector of Family Pride. As it cruised through the system, headed for the main trading station, a squadron of Split fighters scrambled to intercept it. The ship was only mizuras away from the station by the time the squadron finally met them.

"Identify." A harsh Split voice transmitted over the comm.

"This is Loraminckstros, 3rd Commander of the Ninth Fleet." The Paranid said in reply.

"Where are you going?" The Split officer demanded.

"I bring urgent information for the Supreme Patriarch. I must be brought to him at once." Loraminckstros commanded in reply.

The Split officer was becoming angry. He was not happy that his authority was being tested.

"You will turn back now, or we shoot you." The officer countered.

"Really, I am on a diplomatic mission and bear the Authority of the Priest Emperor himself. Do you foolishly think that you could win a war against the might of the Paranid, whilst still holding off the Argon and Boron? Come be sensible now." Loraminckstros offered this with placation.

There was a pause whilst the Split officer was torn with indecision. "Very well you may pass but we will escort you directly to the planet. Do not deviate from the route."

"Thank you, I believe you may have just saved your race." The Paranid smiled, leaving the officer in confusion.

Sat besides Loraminckstros, was Captain Graaf piloting. He slipped the ship into a tight formation with escorts, pirouetting over the officer's ship to take the lead.

"Well this is fun, I feel all important being escorted to a Royal Palace! Everything all right back there Keltana?" Graaf asked. He was enjoying himself.

The Split prisoner gave a noncommittal response. He was still smarting from being used by the GDI and not released.

The Split fighters were much faster than the Prometheus so Graaf accelerated to full speed, they would keep up. The journey still took several stazuras as they were forced to dock with an interplanetary shuttle to get from the gate system to the Split home world.

When they finally arrived in the Capital city, the ship was escorted slowly around the populated areas and led to a secluded landing strip near the palace. Dozens of warriors quickly surrounded the ship and waited for a small party of courtiers to approach.

"I guess we had better be going then." Captain Graaf said.

"Indeed. I will exit first." Loraminckstros replied.

The Paranid stepped lightly out of the ship and headed for the group.

"Welcome, Welcome, we are blessed by your presence." The chief of the courtiers bowed low.

"I thank you, Oh unclean one, it is acceptable with the three dimensions to receive the welcome of the unholy this day." Loraminckstros spoke in the official language of his people. He

rarely made use of such words as it tended to offend the Argon's he worked with.

The Split leader gave a hiss of anger. "What is this, you bring an Argon into our midst, we are betrayed." At a signal, the warrior guards brought their pistols to bear on the GDI group.

Loralaminckstros looked around and gestured at Graaf. "This Argon is my personal pilot and has been vetted by the Paranid fleet, his loyalties are to me not to his own people."

"Still his people are our enemies." The dignitary said, spitting in Graaf's direction.

"Be silent, do you question my word?" Loralaminckstros shouted angrily. "If this continues then I shall leave you to your self destruction."

"Please wait, we will just have to search him for weapons and provide additional guards." The Split replied.

"You may do that, also I have a prisoner of your race who is to be treat like the traitor that he is."

"Very well, we shall accept your word. Though strange they are."

The official motioned to several guards who walked over and began to search Graaf for weapons, removing his pistol and several blades hidden in his sleeves. At the same time a pair also entered the Prometheus and dragged the struggling Keltana out onto the landing strip.

"If we are all ready, perhaps we should make haste to the Patriarch." Loralaminckstros suggested. "Bring the traitor, he is vital to my message."

The party made their way to the palace and then on towards the throne room at its heart. There were hushed whispers from many of the Split as they watched the strange procession. There was much wonder at the sight of an Argon leading a bound Split. As the party approached the audience chamber a hoard of uniformed warriors lined the walls, providing the procession with a sense of pomp and splendour, not out of place in an ancient royal court.

The huge edifice, which was the gateway to the audience chamber, loomed over the small party. A dozen slaves bedecked in finery, yet still chained forced the two doors wide open. The chamber was filled

with hundreds of warriors, courtiers and advisors all staring at the approaching party. A tall Split beckoned them in. It was the patriarch's chamberlain. The Split took a deep breath and bellowed.

"Presenting the party of Loraminckstros, 3rd Commander of the Ninth Paranid fleet and envoy to the Paranid Empire."

Loraminckstros was happy that he could use that title when necessary though in truth it was merely honorary.

"Enter." The voice of the patriarch carried across the aisle to the throne. As the party proceeded onwards there was chattering among the gathered Split, which turned into hisses and grew to a low roar at the sight of Captain Graaf. When they reached the base of the throne. The patriarch, Rhonkar leader of all Split looked down.

"What is this insult? You bring an Argon into our presence!" Rhonkar declared imperiously.

Loraminckstros began to explain when Graaf interrupted. "Hello Rhonnie, I see you have moved up in the world."

There was a gasp from the assemble Split and then silence in anticipation of the summary execution at the Graaf's disrespect.

"Graaf, is that you?" The Patriarch asked. "Only you could be so rude to one so elevated in position. It has been a long time."

"Hull yes, too long. Last time you were a wet nosed lieutenant who needed help during the final stages of the Xenon war." Graaf replied cheerfully.

"Ha, I believe I repaid that debt." The Patriarch chuckled. There was a sigh of relief and confusion around the chamber. Who could this Argon be who spoke so informally to their great leader. "What brings you here to my palace and with a Paranid envoy."

"Only way I could get through to see you. As for why we are here, Loral had best explain." Graaf answered, finally giving an ironic bow.

"Forgive my bluntness Lord Rhonkar, but time is against us." Loraminckstros interrupted. The patriarch waved his approval. "We know that you are preparing to launch an invasion into Boron space, but you must desist. They are not your true enemy."

"The Boron have always been our enemies." The Patriarch replied.

"No! We have all been betrayed and manipulated by the machinations of one person. Lord Jxu!"

"What!" Lord Rhonkar was incensed. "Explain yourself."

Loralaminckstros pointed to the Njy representative. "You believed that it was Ryk who executed the son of the Lord Njy." The Split nodded. "False, it was an agent of Lord Jxu."

"Precisely." The Ryk ambassador said. "We told you it was not us."

"Shut up and let him finish." Said Graaf and Rhonkar together. The pair looked at each other then laughed.

"It may be better for you to read the copy of a transmission we received, which spells out the entire plan." Loral replied, handing the data crystal to the Patriarch. Lord Rhonkar sat and began to examine the information stored on the crystal. When he finished he spoke once again.

"Is this all true?"

"I would stake my life on it my Lord." Replied Loralaminckstros.

"Well we must verify it, but who is this?" he pointed at the cowering Keltana.

"This is the assassin, Keltana, who struck down the son of Lord Njy."

"Ah" Cried the Njy representative and jumped on the bound Split. Several guards were forced to drag him off.

"It seems we may have some questions for you Keltana." Lord Rhonkar said, with a grim expression on his face. "Perhaps if we like your answers we may even let you live."

Keltana cringed even more. The tone of Lord Rhonkar's voice suggested he was going to have to be very persuasive.

"Loralaminckstros, Captain Graaf. I thank you for your assistance here, you have provided a great service to the Split people it will not be forgotten." The patriarch bowed his head in thanks.

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Commander Daryl Schmidt had chewed off the tips of the nails on

all his fingers. He had to get to the fleet on time. Unfortunately the jump drive on the transport was limited to short hops. The ship was currently speeding through the Omicron Lyrae sector. The jump drive would not be ready until they reached the next gate. He cursed the bad luck. Out of the main viewing window in the passenger compartment, he could see the huge hulk of an Argon destroyer, only this one had no lights on, nor displayed any signs of occupation. It had been destroyed in the battle of Omicron Lyrae by the Khaak and now hung forlorn against the backdrop of space. Schmidt hoped that he would make it in time to stop any future losses of such proud ships.

"Damn it pilot, try the drive again!" He called to the cockpit.

"Listen, Commander it is better to be late than not at all. Besides hopefully the Split mission will be having more luck." The pilot shouted back, his voice tinged with annoyance this was the fourth time the commander had made the demand.

"I am not sure we can count on them." Schmidt said softly, too quietly for the pilot to hear.

"OK brace yourself, the drive will activate in ten sezuras." The pilot suddenly called back to Schmidt.

"Its about time."

The ship was enveloped in blue light as the jump engines generated the artificial wormhole. The Ship began to shake and hum with the slowly released energies. To an observer outside the ship would appear to be vanishing from existence, like a holo losing power. On board everything froze in place, as time stopped through the cross dimensional rift.

The personnel transport was thrown out of the wormhole with shattering force. Schmidt was thrown to the floor.

"That was bumpy." He called to the pilot.

"Yeah, sorry, it was a bit of a long one for the drive. Hopefully everything is still in one piece." The pilot replied. "Hang on sir, we have a rather demanding transmission coming through, you had better take it."

"... I repeat this is Argon Fleet command operations. This is a restricted area, please shut down your engines and await a fleet ship to dock for inspection and impoundment." Came the bored

tones of a fleet officer

"Argon Fleet command, this is Lieutenant Commander Daryl Schmidt of the Argon Intelligence Service. I am transmitting an authorisation code now. Indigo, Alpha, Merlin, Zero, Kilo. Password Cleaver."

"Verifying hold please..." The fleet officer replied.

After a short delay a new transmission came through. "Daryl, is that you? Colonel Samuels here. What are you doing in this neck of the woods?"

"Hello Sir." Schmidt replied. "I have really vital information that the Admiral needs to see."

"Really, I will get you docking clearance, head for the carrier Freedom. Samuels out."

"That was quick and painless." The transport pilot said to Schmidt.

"We are not so fussed with unnecessary protocol in the intelligence service." Schmidt replied. "Besides the Colonel is my CO and has been waiting for this news for wozuras."

The pilot shrugged and nosed the personnel transport towards the waiting fleet carrier. As they approached they were given a spectacular view of the mammoth warship. With the standard design of the new generation of Argon capital ships, it had a curved bow; housing most of the command and control systems, barrack space and the forward weapon emplacements. Behind this was the enormous hanger and launch bay capable of holding over ten squadrons of fighters. Either side of the docking bay were the main propulsion drives. It might not be the most aesthetically pleasing vessel in the five races, but it certainly was one of the most awesome with its clean military lines.

"Loop us over the hull, I want to see a top view before we dock." Schmidt said awe tinged in his voice.

"I was going too. Haven't seen one of these babies up close yet." The pilot replied, amused at Schmidt's evident wonder.

The pilot swung his ship over the bulk of the Freedom. To the rear of the ship the docking lights came into view, flashing their dragged back the throttle and swung the ship laboriously around its axis to point towards the open docking tube. A slight touch of acceleration

saw the ship slowly enter the bay. Schmidt jumped as the doors clanged shut behind them.

Schmidt hurried off the transport once it had finally come to rest in its berth. Colonel Samuels stood waiting for him accompanied by a pair of technicians.

"Daryl, welcome aboard. Do you have the data?" Samuels asked.

"Here it is, I think it is a transcript of that message we intercepted several wozuras ago, before all this started." Schmidt handed the colonel the datapad.

"Well, we need to go over this, these techs will check the veracity of the data." He said, his sweeping gesture indicating to the two technicians.

"Hull, we might not have time for that!" Schmidt exclaimed with frustration.

"What can we do? Even if the data is true, it is the Split who have to make the move on it. We can only request negotiation."

"Damn, I knew that, just hoped that Captain Graaf and the others might be successful." Schmidt replied.

Samuels had started to read the data and barely registered Schmidt's comment. "What oh yes absolutely, as I said the plaza ball is in their court." The colonel's brow began to furrow as he read more. "Hang on, the recipient for this transmission was a Biskhas N'etesh."

"Yeah so?" Schmidt asked almost shaking with nervous frustration at the delays.

"Well, we have this pilot aboard the ship. We took him prisoner several tazuras ago. Perhaps we might persuade him to confirm all this."

"How, the message suggests that he is an agent, not a combat pilot." Schmidt asked.

"He led the first raid into this sector. That's all we have got out of him so far." Samuels replied.

"Jxu must have sent him to antagonise things here, to gain more support and escalate the situation."

"Maybe, lets go and ask him shall we?" The colonel asked, a smile breaking his stern expression for the first time.

The cell that held Biskhas N'etesh was a standard as the entire brig on the Freedom. There was an air of discipline and rigidity pervading the whole area of the ship. Biskhas was sat staring straight through the security field when the two intelligence officers arrived.

"Not you, I know nothing." The Split said.

"Of course you don't, but tell me how long have you worked for family Jxu." Samuels asked.

"Jxu, who they?" the Split shrugged, trying to project a poor command of the Argon language

"Alright Biskhas we can do this the hard way if you like." Samuels pulled out a small hypodermic needle and an electro stun pistol. Schmidt switched off the security field, allowing Samuels to fire. The blue pulse from the weapon struck the Split in the chest. Every nerve in the unfortunate creature's body was set off together. For a moment the Split convulsed violently and then lay still, temporarily paralysed by the gun's effect. Samuels knelt down and injected the Split with a potent truth serum.

As he began to regain control of his limbs Biskhas started to speak. "What happened to the vaunted Argon morals? And sentient's rights"

"No point in having high morals, if you are not around to be superior about them." Samuels replied, his quiet laughter far from friendly. "Now tell us who do you work for?"

Biskhas struggled but finally gave way. "Lord Jxu of the Jxu family."

"Was it him who precipitated this war?" Samuels asked. The Split gave a slight nod.

"So this was all about territory for his house?" Schmidt interrupted.

"Yes, for the glory of the Family Jxu." Biskhas replied. The Split then spat in the colonel's face. Before he could reply a loud claxon began to sound. "I think you are too late."

The two officers glanced at each other and then ran for the exit,

headed for the fleet command centre near the bridge. The security field snapped back on behind them. Biskhas chuckled to himself. He may have been forced to betray his Lord, but at least he was unlikely to survive to face the shame.

Chapter 19. The beginning of the end...

"General, we seemed to have lost contact with the home base." Captain R'tika spoke from a communication console. After the destruction of the *Bashar*, they had just managed to escape and were now using the Python destroyer *Pas'ne he'nar*, as the new command ship.

"Is it a system malfunction?" The general asked.

"No sir, it is as though the entire interstellar communication network is collapsing. We are receiving no signal from any route to the core systems or any of the outer sectors."

"Well either we are being jammed or an interstellar war has started." Dhjn replied.

"Wait, we are receiving a garbled message. It seems it is being transmitted on all Split frequencies and from multiple transmitters. I think it may be the cause of the blackout." The captain suggested.

"I don't care about that play the message." Dhjn ordered angrily.

There was a burst of static and then a voice wrapped with crackling interference began to speak.

"This is... Rhonkar, Patriarch of all Sp...I bring grave ... The Empire has ... betrayed by the actions of ... Jxu... Split must assist in bringing ... traitorous ... to justice. The Royal fleet is ... for the Jxu planet... all available ships to... this armada."

There was silence among the bridge crew. Dhjn was the first to speak. "By Thurok's beard, it seems we have been betrayed. Not a word of this is to leave the bridge." The general's gaze bored into R'tika's eyes. "Can you signal Lord Jxu in the palace?"

"No sir, all signals into Thurok's Beard have been cut off." The captain replied.

"Can we signal our forces in our conquered territories?" Dhjn asked. The captain nodded. "Then we must assume that Lord Jxu is lost to us. Signal all ships to form up in Hatikvah's Faith. We may have been defeated but we will wipe the stain of the GDI from the galaxy before we go down."

"Yes sir, it would be a pleasure." The captain replied. There were

cheers from the surrounding crew. Dhjn smiled. It seemed morale was still high despite the current circumstances. Still true Split lived to destroy their enemies

"Make best speed to Hatikvah's Faith. It is time to show the galaxy how true warriors fight!" He called amidst the cheers.

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Daryl Schmidt and Colonel Samuels sprinted into the main fleet command centre on the carrier *Freedom*. The large compartment was full of commotion. In the centre of the room was a large plotting table surrounded by several officers.

"Try and boost scanner performance I need to know exact numbers." Admiral Brenner demanded. Catching the hurried movements two intelligence officers he looked up. "It appears your friends have failed to make an impression on the Split commander. I have a massive enemy fleet entering the system."

"Sorry Sir, we tried."

"Not your fault, one man against an Empire gone mad is not good odds." The admiral said reassuringly. "Now come on how many enemies are there?" this remark was to the sensor officers.

"Admiral, so far we have counted two carriers and over fifteen destroyers. Around five hundred fighters have also entered the system, either via the carriers or directly through the gates." One of the officers stated.

"Several squadrons have come through the south gate supported by corvettes, it looks like they are trying to out flank us." A second officer added.

"Damn, we only have three carriers and twelve destroyers. Jam all their transmissions, I do not want them calling for reinforcements."

"I'm on it admiral." Another officer replied.

"Have the Boron carrier *Aries* and the destroyer *Oceana* power up their drives and jump into the rear of the southern strike group."

Another officer hurried to comply with the order. The admiral watched as the main Split fleet divided into waves. A mass of light

fighters formed a screen in front of the advancing destroyers. Squadrons of bombers began to join escorting wings of medium fighters.

"Have the Fleet destroyers form into line and prepare a counter-strike group of Novas deploy in their shadow. I want all available Boron heavy and medium fighters to form the main defensive screen." Brenner continued to direct the combined fleets reaction to the Split advance.

Schmidt and Samuels were now superfluous and moved to a quiet terminal in the room. Within moments Schmidt had accessed the same data, which was being transmitted to the Admiral's plotting table.

The two officers watched the battle unfold in troubled silence. The outnumbered allied fleet had formed a defensive line a short distance from the cluster of stations in the sector centre. Whole wings of Boron interceptors formed a barrier in front of the main destroyer force and a dozen corvettes held each of the flanks. It appeared the Admiral had ordered his squadrons of light fighters to engage the Split defensive screen, as they were hurtling towards the oncoming Split armada.

"What are those?" Samuels asked, pointing at a number of red dots appearing on the near the symbol for the west jump gate.

"Let me just check." Schmidt replied as he selected the group and requested an analysis from the ship's computer. "It appears to be another carrier and a pair of destroyers."

"That does not look good. It is not "

"Actually the computer is registering the carrier as the *Conqueror of Chin* the real Split name is unpronounceable." Schmidt explained. "It is Lord Rhonkar, the patriarch's flagship."

"That's great" Samuels replied bitterly. "Just what we need the elite guard too."

"I agree this could get ugly." Schmidt agreed.

Schmidt slowly changed the display to show both fleets again. The two screens of light fighters were rapidly approaching each other, when the Split wing suddenly slowed, turned and headed back to their main fleet.

"What is going on?" Samuels asked rhetorically.

The two were not the only ones to notice. One of the sensor officers cried out in amazement. "Admiral, the enemy vanguard has broken off. The entire enemy fleet has stopped and all their fighters are pulling back."

"What? This is a strange tactic. Have the *Aries* and *Oceana* hold on until we can get a better picture of what is happening." Brenner ordered. "Also call back our fighters, but maintain alert status. I want to be ready for anything."

"Admiral we are receiving a communiqué from the enemies new carrier." The communications officer reported.

"Probably to demand our surrender. Put it on the main screen. We might as well all hear what they have to say." Brenner commanded still defiant.

A large screen along one of the main bulkhead walls flickered into life. To the surprise of the assembled fleet officers a Paranid face appeared on the screen.

"Oh hull, don't tell me the Paranid have taken sides too." Brenner muttered grimly.

"Greetings Argon warriors." The Paranid began. "I am pleased to be talking to you under these circumstances."

"LORAL!" Schmidt shouted, breaking out into relieved laughter.

"You know this Paranid?" Brenner asked.

"Yes, this is Loralamincstros, one of the party sent with the data to the Split homeworld."

"Well speak to him then, find out what he wants." Brenner ordered.

"Hey Loral, its good to see you again." Schmidt said to the Paranid, his face lit with a beaming smile.

"And you Commander Schmidt, I thank the three dimensions that you are well." The Paranid replied.

"Yeah, though I am surprised to see you aboard that ship." Schmidt said, his inflection suggesting he was questioning for information.

Loralaminckstros began to chuckle in his deep manner. "Yes it seems I have a new rank to add to my own. I hold a temporary commission as a Grand Admiral in the Split fleet."

"If that is so then would you mind pulling the fleet back?" Admiral Brenner interjected. "I am afraid your forces are starting to make me a little nervous."

The Paranid chuckled again. "Indeed Admiral, the fleet will soon begin its withdrawal, but first there is someone who wishes to speak to you."

"Who?"

The projection of Loralaminckstros zoomed out to encompass the entire bridge of the Carrier. Seated on a large throne sat Lord Rhonkar, dressed in military uniform. Standing to his right stood a grinning Captain Graaf.

"Hello kids, let me introduce you to my pal, Lord Rhonkar, Patriarch of all Split." Graaf said his eyes glittering with mirth. "Your on Rhonnie." He made a sweeping gesture, which must have encompassed them on the view screen on the Split Carrier.

"Greetings noble Argon warriors. I have seen the bravery you have shown in defending your allies. Though it pains me to admit, a wayward traitor within my own ranks has created this conflict. I ask that we now set aside our differences." Lord Rhonkar spoke with a rich tone of reconciliation.

"Lord Rhonkar, I thank you for your kind words, but it seems we have both been duped so I can't hold this against you." Brenner replied, giving a stiff formal bow.

"Still once the traitor Jxu is brought to justice, his holdings will be divided up as reparations for the losses on both sides."

That is a noble gesture Lord Rhonkar." Brenner agreed, "I thank you."

"Well I fear I must depart now, but my ambassadors will fly over to arrange a more formal peace agreement." With a nod the Patriarch vanished from the screen.

"Sir" an officer said excitedly. "It seems the Split fleet is withdrawing." The plotter table confirmed this. Fighter squadrons were headed back to their carriers. A number of destroyers fitted

with jump drives had already vanished as they jumped back to their bases.

The admiral sighed with relief. "Stand down alert stations, recall all fighters. Its over."

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Marcus Gromwell was sitting in the flight control centre of the GDI headquarters. He was laughing quietly to himself at the banter of the Buster training squadron. It seemed that Dureena Fielding was getting really riled at the rookie pilots.

Fielding's voice came over the communicator "Trainee Three, for the last time form up with the squadron. You are drifting too far to starboard."

"I am trying ma'am my controls are sluggish." The rookie pilot, Trainee Three called back.

"DON'T you EVER call me ma'am again, it is sir to you rookie. And I tested those controls myself. If you want to pass this course, you are going to have to learn to fly, not make up excuses."

"Sorry *Sir*." Trainee Three replied his sarcasm barely hidden.

"Watch your tongue Trainee Three." Gromwell transmitted, trying to diffuse the situation.

Fielding replied over a secure channel. "Marcus keep out of this I will handle him."

"Is this better, *Sir*?" Trainee three asked.

"Yes slightly. See there is nothing wrong with your controls." Fielding replied.

"When are we going to do some dog fighting all this formation flying is a waste of time." Muttered Trainee Five.

"When you learn to do it right Five, until then stop complaining." Fielding said acidly.

In the flight control centre, Gromwell chuckled softly. This was one of the toughest groups of trainees he had ever seen. He flicked a switch to pipe the comm. chatter through speakers and discarded his headphones. He was now free to put his feet up on the console

and lean back in his chair.

"Having fun?" Dentill asked from behind him.

Gromwell jumped and his chair fell backwards. His head would have cracked on the floor if Dentill had not caught him before he hit the floor. Dentill gave a peal of laughter. Which caused Gromwell's cheeks to blush.

"Most people learn not to lean back on their chair at school." Dentill said his voice still filled with mirth as he sat down at the station next to Gromwell. It was not long until his feet were also on the console..

"I was never one for doing as I was told back then." Gromwell retorted. "Have you heard anything from Loral or the others."

"Not much, Loral sent a vague message about having seen the Patriarch and he sounded hopeful, but there seems to be some major blackout on communications between the powers." Dentill replied.

"Damn, so we don't even know if a full scale war has started?" Gromwell replied uneasily.

"I imagine we would have heard some news by now. Jump capable ships are a back up to interstellar communications."

"True, just getting concerned, I am so used to things cropping up, I have forgotten what it is like for things to be quiet."

"Doesn't sound so quiet out there." Dentill replied.

Over the communicator Fielding's voice could be hear shouting down another of the trainee pilots. "... That's it, Trainee seven return to base!"

"I missed that what did the kid do?" Gromwell asked.

"I am not sure, I only caught the curses." Dentill laughed.

The two sat listening to the comm. chatter for a while, broad grins on their faces. Through the corner of his eye, Dentill could see a technician hurrying towards him.

"Sir, Sir." The technician shouted breathlessly. "I have an urgent message for you."

Dentill took the message, his face turned grim as he read. "What does it say?" Gromwell asked.

"Is this all there is?" Dentill asked the technician.

"Yes sir, the message cut half way through the transmission."

"Come on tell me what's up." Gromwell insisted.

"Sorry, A transmission from the GDI station in Aladna Hill. A large Split task force was spotted entering that sector. Before they could pass on any other information it seems jamming was put in place."

"I knew I should not have complained about it being quiet." Gromwell replied humourlessly.

"We had better scramble everything we have available." He said to Gromwell. He then turned to a controller, "Recall the trainee squadron, they are too new to join in this one."

"Aye sir." The controller replied.

"Come on Marcus, the Jxu were bound to strike back eventually."

The two pilots hurried through the exit. They had no idea how long they had. When they reached the hanger deck, many of the GDI fighters had already launched. In the bay they entered there were only two left.

"Marcus you take the Nova, I have been dying to try out a Perseus."

Gromwell made a grunt of acknowledgement and the pair headed for their respective fighters. When he was sat in the cockpit, the ground crew closed and sealed the hatch behind them. The crew chief flicked a switch on his belt and said over the comm. "Good hunting commander, send them packing." Dentill gave a casual salute and a nod and then began examining the ship systems.

All modern ships were beginning to use standard controls but the set up often varied. He was pleased to see that it was not too different in the Paranid ship. One peculiarity was having three forward firing weapons. A thing unknown on Argon ships. Each of the weapon systems currently held a beta phased shockwave generator, a weapon Dentill had only seen in action, not used. Fortunately there was the option of switching to alpha plasma throwers, a weapon he far preferred.

He activated his engines and shot forwards, the ship was at least twenty percent faster than a Nova and it was exhilarating travelling at such speed.

"All ships form into your squadrons and then head for the gate." Dentill ordered on multiple frequencies. He switched to the *Ardent's* frequency and called Captain Greene. "Greene, how soon can you move out?"

"We are bringing the ship to full power, we should be joining you in about seven mizuras." Green replied.

"Any faster would be appreciated." Dentill said.

"We'll do our best commander," Greene shut off the connection.

Dentill led the massed squadrons toward the gate. He had Gromwell's Nova squadron, Fielding's Mambas and he now led Loralamincstros' Perseii squadron. Along with his heavy fighters, there were two medium squadrons, one of Boron Makos and the other of Busters. He hoped that sixty ships would be enough.

A buster pulled up on its wing. He could see it carried a stylised snake below the cockpit window. It was the symbol for Fielding's Mamba squadron.

"Dureena is that you?" Dentill asked angrily. "Damn it I told you to RTB."

"Must have been cross wires sir, the message I got was for the trainees to head back, not me, besides you might need me." Fielding replied her voice sounding accusing. "Were you going to leave me behind again?"

"Alright, take command of the wing of medium fighters. You can provide support to us heavies." Dentill replied.

The massed fighter wing approached the gate. They were only mizuras away. Another call came through on a non-GDI frequency.

"Commander Dentill, this is Captain Moaf of the Argon fleet, we are monitoring the situation. We know the Split are on their way. We will not let them enter the sector unchallenged and I am sending every available ship to assist."

On the gravidar, Dentill could see a pair of corvettes from the Argon

patrol fleet joining up with two squadrons of medium fighters. Any help was good help Dentill thought.

"Thanks Captain, the more the merrier."

The gate to the North began to show the telltale sign of an incoming wormhole. The blue swirl of the exit point burst open and a veritable hoard of Split ships burst through.

"All heavies fire a volley of silkworms towards the enemy wing." Dentill ordered.

Dozens of missiles streaked from the GDI formation, headed towards the gate. Still disorientated by the jump the Split pilots were slow to react. Several ships burst apart in dazzling explosions.

"Wahoo," One of the pilots called responding to the devastation they had just wreaked. "Eat that Split scum"

"Pipe down pilot." Dentill ordered irritably. "Fire another volley."

The second wave caused as much devastation as the first, but shortly afterwards, a second wing of Split craft winked into existence through the gate.

"Oh hull they are multiplying." Gromwell called.

"It seems so." Dentill said. "All squadrons break by pairs and send them packing."

The GDI squadrons broke up into the wingman pairs and began to target the Split fighters. It was not long before a massive dogfight was taking place around the gate in every direction. At first it seemed that the GDI had the upper hand as they tore through the Split ranks.

More Split fighters jumped, in, followed by a flotilla of corvettes. The additional firepower of the new ships began to drive the GDI further back, deeper into the system. The intervention of the *Ardent* helped to stem the tide for a while and avoid a rout, but it soon became apparent that Dentill's forces were outnumbered by at least two to one.

The *Ardent* moved to block the path of the pursuing Split wings. The massive photon pulse guns in the prow picked out one of the corvettes. For a moment time seemed to stand still as the two ships appeared attached by the stream of energy fire between them. The

moment finally ended with a catastrophic explosion as the Split ship succumbed.

A ragged cheer broke out across the comm. channels from the GDI squadrons. The Split fleet seemed to have paused. The strung out pursuit force began to coalesce back into their squadron and wing formations.

Dentill took the time to reorganize his own lines, forming his fighter groups into one task force around the *Ardent*. The Argon Naval squadrons and corvette patrol added a welcome addition to the badly outnumbered defenders.

"I can see more ships coming through the gate, Commander." Captain Moaf said from the bridge of the lead corvette.

"It looks bad." Dentill confirmed.

"I think it its time to call in the reserves." Moaf suggested.

From every station within the sector, a ragtag group of fighters began to make their way towards the defensive lines. Two corporate corvettes from one of the larger factories made their way forward, blocking a hole between the GDI and station fighters. Within scant mizuras their ranks had swelled to over one hundred fighters.

"It seems the enemy might be thinking twice after all." Moaf breathed a sigh of relief when the Split failed to react.

"Either that or they are expecting reinforcements." Gromwell interrupted.

"I hope you are wrong Marcus." Dentill replied. "Because there are already more than enough ships there to overwhelm us."

"You know me always look on the bright..."

The gate suddenly flashed once again. The massive twin hull of a ship began to speed through.

"Marcus, I think you are banned from ever speaking again." Dentill said as he watched the deadly Python knife its way through to the forefront of the Split fleet. Moments later a second and then a third Python jumped into the Sector. "In fact, remind me to shoot you if we survive this."

"Looks like a big if." Moaf added. There was no way even with the

Ardent that they could take on one of the massive destroyers, but three were certain doom.

The comm. system on every ship and station suddenly crackled into life.

"This is General Dhjn of the Family Jxu to the pathetic GDI forces here in this sector."

"This is Captain Moaf of the Argon fleet I must ask you to leave this sector at once General." Moaf replied trying to sound unphased by the massed Split forces.

"This is not your fight Captain, we will leave once our business is completed." Dhjn replied.

Before Moaf could argue, Dentill cut in. "Look, general if you are asking for our surrender..."

"There will be no quarter here Commander Dentill, you misunderstand. Your meddling has cost us too much, I have come for your blood."

Chapter 20 – Acts of Vengeance

After their departure from Hila's Joy, the patriarch had ordered the Split fleet to make best speed towards Thurok's Beard. Much of the jump capable ships were already on station around one of the many moons, which orbited the same planet that hid the Jxu base. There was only one small jump of only a few light sezuras before the fleet would be in position to strike.

Lord Rhonkar as leader of the Split had many spies throughout the Empire. He had been informed of Jxu's escape from his palace to this secret base.

"So finally the end draws near Captain Graaf." Rhonkar said.

"Aye, I think we are close. About time too," Graaf replied wearily. "One last battle and then it will be over."

"A glorious victory that will prove my worthiness to rule, once again." The patriarch's eyes gleamed with self-pride.

"Just don't forget those who helped you get there." Graaf laughed.

"I am Split, we never forget and never forgive." He said, his features twisting with malice. He twitched his hand at his flag captain. "Transmit the orders and then activate the jump drive."

From the data displays and numerous vidscreens, the bridge crew watched as the many ships became enveloped in the blue of artificial wormholes and vanish from both vision and scans. Moments later the flagship also entered its own rift and reappeared just outside the Jxu base.

"My lord, we are detecting a few squadrons of fighters and a pair of corvettes on an intercept course." The Flag captain reported.

"Very well. Where are the enemy destroyers?" The patriarch enquired.

"Unknown my lord, they do not appear to be anywhere on sensors." The captain replied uneasily, fearing the patriarch's wrath.

"Hmm. This is odd, have two of the destroyers protect our rear, whilst the conqueror moves to the vanguard." Rhonkar ordered. "Oh, and transmit a warning to the Argon fleet. Tell them there maybe a group of destroyers on the loose."

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No quarter, an odd concept thought Dentill. He had faced more battles than he could remember and never before had surrender been on the minds of either side. It was always do or die. Seeing the might of his enemy's fleet caused him to pause. He had never faced such long odds before. It looked like die might be fate's objective here.

"You must realise we can't allow that Dhjn." Dentill finally answered the Split general.

"A bold reply commander, I must admit you have been a worthy adversary. Your defeat will bring me much honour." Dhjn replied.

"Are we going to sit here all day chatting?" It was Dureena Fielding. "I have never enjoyed listening to pompous idiots."

"To true Dureena." Dentill acceded. "All wings break and attack. Lets send these Split back to hell."

It might not have been the grandest or awe-inspiring speech but the adrenaline charged pilots cheered until they were hoarse. Dentill smiled with gratitude. Half of these pilots had served him faithfully and the others were offering their lives for a cause not even their own. It was only right that he should take the lead and risk the fire first.

"All Perseii craft form up on me." He ordered. "We will use our PSGs to clear a hole for the rest of the heavy fighters."

The whole squadron, mostly made up of Paranid gave their acknowledgements.

"Anyone with a hornet missile target the destroyers, we might even take a couple of them with us."

The massed wings of Dentill's coalition boosted towards the now oncoming Split. In the forefront of the huge wave, Dentill's Perseii began to stream shockwave blasts into the packed ranks of the Split armada. Many of the lighter ships were destroyed in the expanding waves of destruction. Countless ships were left only slightly damaged or unscathed and they blossomed outwards to leave an open corridor to the destroyers.

"There is our path people, fire every missiles you have at the

destroyers. If we can take them down, we might just win.”

On Dentill’s command, over a hundred fighter craft launched a volley of assorted missiles. Some were the slow moving ship busting Hornet missiles, but many held much lighter warheads, silkworms, fast dragonflies, nimble wasps and even a few mosquitoes. Volley after volley was launched. Many split fighters were caught by the edges of the swarm and were destroyed or sent spinning away, their systems fried by the explosives.

The first waves of missiles began to home in on the three destroyers. It seemed the ships might be overwhelmed by the sheer weight of ordnance launched. Such thoughts were soon crushed. It was no mere amateur onboard the Split flagship. It took extraordinary experience and skill to become the commander of a family’s forces and Dhjn was a master. The two flanking ships began to open fire with Particle accelerators.

“PACs. Commander, oh hull.” Cried Captain Moaf. “This is not good.”

“I think you are right,” Dentill replied.

Dhjn had anticipated such a manoeuvre and had fitted his supporting ships with rapid firing, medium range guns, perfect for both anti-fighter combat and for cutting down hoards of missiles. The combined weight of fire began to tell on the missile waves. For every missile that broke through the storm, three or four were destroyed. The destroyers took many hits and explosions blossomed all around them but their shields held.

“What do we do?” Asked Gromwell.

“Get the hull out of here. All GDI forces will cover the withdrawal from the sector of all the others. This is our fight. Petre will need to arrange an evacuation of all personnel from the station. It is us they are after.”

A brief flurry of orders was passed throughout the fleet. Dozens of fighters broke away from the allied formation and made their way towards the south gate. In moments the only ships left were from the GDI and the Navy.

“Captain Moaf, get the hell out of here.” Dentill shouted.

“Sorry Commander but I don’t follow your orders and these Split are trespassing on my turf.” Moaf replied sternly

"The situation is hopeless." Dentill pleaded

"So why aren't you fleeing?" Moaf asked rhetorically. "I know. Duty. So please don't tell me mine."

"Captain thank you, you are as big a fool as me." Dentill replied gratefully. He then switched to the fleet frequency " Now shall we take some of them with us?"

"YES!" shouted every one of the remaining pilots in unison.

The remaining squadrons turned once again and headed back into the fray. With so many ships both enemy and friendly, Dentill leading the Perseii fighters could not use his PSGs and was forced to switch to plasma throwers. It was not a serious hindrance.

A fast moving Mamba shot past emblazoned with the Jxu colours. Dentill quickly targeted it and swung about to follow, sniping with short bursts from his plasma guns. The third gun was often disorientating but gave him an extra punch that combined with his skill soon sent the Split pilot fleeing with his hull falling apart. A second and then a third Split fighter was destroyed under his bombardments, but there were just so many. He could see the countless explosions around him as the deadly death dance continued. The initial savagery of the Allied assault had torn the heart out of the Split formation. As the fight began to bog down, it was soon clear that the superior numbers of the Split fleet was beginning to show.

"We cannot continue this." The commander of the second corvette screamed. "Shields critical, weapon capacitor is drained...."

There was a brief scream and then the corvette exploded sending burning debris in all directions, pummeling the victorious Split fighters surrounding it. With poetic justice, several of them were caught and destroyed.

Dentill could see the tiny sparks as ejected pilots from both sides began to jet away from the fight in their space suits. He could see at least a dozen headed towards the stations. How many ships had he lost? How many pilots had not escaped from the burning wrecks? It seemed that those fighters, which were left were being driven towards the guns of the destroyers.

"Everyone make a break now, there is nothing more we can do here but die." Dentill ordered. The remaining GDI and Navy ships began

to scatter, splitting up their Split aggressors. The *Ardent* with failing shields, once again took up a blocking position, all its weapons pouring continuous energy streams into their enemies. Split fighters began to explode all around it, giving many of the remaining allied fighters time to escape. Moaf's corvette limped past, most of its primary engine systems ruined.

"Everyone is making their way to the south gate," Greene called to Moaf. "You are the last."

"Are you sure, Commander Dentill was deep within the Split formation, I thought he was behind me."

"If he was I doubt it now, sensors are being heavily jammed but I am not picking up his IFF."

"Oh no."

The corvette and frigate began to limp away. The Split squadrons swarmed back and forth but did not pursue.

Dentill's ship was indeed badly damaged but was not destroyed. Most of his electronic systems had overloaded but his guns still worked and he could still fly. Barely. He could see that dozens of Split fighters blocked his way to freedom. His heart fell; it looked like this was it. As a final gesture he decided to ram the Split flagship. It was futile but it would be in silent tribute to Captain Tambla's sacrifice.

He dodged past the few remaining escort pilots, jinking through streams of turret fire. The bridge of the enemy carrier was right ahead. The *Perseus* began to shake violently around him. Warning signals were blaring from speakers within his flight helmet. His shields were at barely twenty five percent strength and his hull was on the verge of collapse. He just needed a few more sezuras. A winking light showed the life support was almost devoid of oxygen and the cabin was filling with smoke. His eyes began to sting and his vision blurred. As he blinked to clear his view, white splotches began to form in his vision, or were they flashes outside? He could not tell. All his focus was now on the wide view port of the Destroyer's bridge.

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There was silence on Rhonkar's bridge for a few mizuras as the flagship carrier moved to the forward point of the fleet's wedge.

Elite Squadrons of fighters were launched surrounding the carrier as the fleet moved forwards.

The Jxu task force reached the massed Split fleet and a firefight ensued. The combat was brief. The two corvettes were torn apart by the heavy turrets of the carrier and surrounding destroyers. The few Jxu fighters were simply swept aside, left to be mopped up by the swarms of loyalist fighters, which followed in the wake of the heavier warships.

"It seems that our erstwhile subject has been deserted by his allies." Rhonkar chuckled. "I fear we will not have much of a fight but we shall see, justice must be served."

"A bloodless victory is far sweeter." Graaf said fervently

"What funny notions you Argon have." Rhonkar replied. "I expected more from you Graaf."

"Sorry to disappoint, Rhonnie, I may be good at killing but it doesn't mean I want to." Graaf retorted annoyed.

"Perhaps we might learn from you, then maybe pointless conflicts would not happen."

"Yeah, this Khaak threat seems to be a far better focus for our attention." Graaf agreed.

The captain came over and coughed an interruption. "My lord, the fleet has reached the base and all of the defence turrets have been eliminated. The assault troops are ready for departure."

"Launch them then we may as well get things over with."

"Need any help on the ground?" Graaf asked.

"No, our forces can handle it and I have a little surprise for Lord Jxu." Rhonkar replied.

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"Damn that Dhjn." Lord Jxu cried to his attendants. "He should be here defending me. Where could he have gone?" He grabbed one of the slaves and through him across the command centre. The loud cracking of bones helped to ease Jxu's rage.

A guard officer ran towards him. "Enemy troops have breached the

station walls and are storming through.”

“Well have all the guard companies form a cordon. In fact I will join one of the main guard posts. We will drive Rhonkar’s forces back.” Jxu raved manically.

“Is that wise my Lord?” The officer asked. Jxu grabbed a pistol from an aide and shot the unfortunate Split.

“Any more doubters among you?” Jxu asked icily.

The crowd of Split about him shook their heads. “Then to the front we go. We shall defend the central corridor.”

A dozen warriors followed him as he headed towards one of the key posts in the defensive ring around the command post. A roaring firefight was already in effect. The addition of Jxu’s bodyguards swung the engagement temporarily against the Rhonkar troops clustered at the far end.

Jxu stood erect amidst the flimsy barricade and began to fire down the hall with his pistol. When the ammunition was spent he grabbed a pulse rifle from a fallen warrior and began to hose the Rhonkar position with plasma fire. Every time it appeared an enemy was aiming for him, one of his bodyguards would dive in front, taking the blast.

“I am invincible,” cried Jxu oblivious to the sacrifices of his men. “None shall slay me.”

The fight continued casualties mounted on both sides. It seemed that this fight would decide the fate of the entire battle. Jxu was fast running out of men, but his madness only grew as the roar of battle permeated him to his very core.

“I am not just a Split, I am Thurok reborn.” His eyes burned with insanity. “Stand up men, this is no time to rest, fight for your master.” He was shouting at corpses.

The defenders were down to a handful of men. It seemed that Rhonkar had an unlimited supply of men to pour into this fight. The commander of the Rhonkar troops led a final suicidal charge to eliminate Jxu’s last remaining defences. The handful of guards grabbed their Lord, and dragged him kicking and screaming to the command centre.

+++

Rick Dentill could feel his ship breaking apart beneath him. Despite his best efforts, he could not avoid the overwhelming fire brought against him. Over the communicator Dhjn's voice was transmitted.

"Time to die Commander Dentill."

NO, Dentill thought I will take you with me. Fate seemed to be against him. The hull groaned once and then he saw huge rents appear, the integrity field no longer able to hold it together.

"NO!" he cried, his last act was turning to ignominy.

Through the shattering glass of the cockpit he could see the lead destroyer being to swell, its shields seemed to be flickering as though absorbing energy. There was a bright flash and Dentill murmured, "Is this death?" And then blacked out.

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"I am your God, I cannot die let me go." Jxu cursed and screamed, but the guard's loyalty went far beyond obeying orders. They knew their lord had snapped but could not let him die.

"Release me, I will save us all" Jxu cried. The guards hung tightly as they entered the command centre. One slapped the doors closed and began to seal them, tearing out wires to stop the Rhonkar's forces from gaining access. They would have to cut through.

Most of Jxu's attendants and advisors appeared to have fled. The room was empty except for three guards. All that remained off his once proud military. Jxu began to rage at them once more.

"Open these doors we must return to the fight."

He turned to the door and began pounding with his fists. A strange grunt caused him to pause. When he also heard a loud gurgling he span around. Two of the guards lay on the floor. One lay still a dagger piercing his heart. The second was flapping about trying to draw breath into a torn windpipe.

"What has happened here?" Jxu demanded.

"Lord Jxu, I stand here as executor of justice for your crimes against the patriarch." The guard said, pulling back his hood.

"You, but you work for me! You were captured, I thought you were dead."

"I was a prisoner." Keltana replied. "Now I work for someone else."

Jxu leapt at his assassin his hands clutching for Keltana's throat. Fast as lightning an arm came up. Moments later Jxu staggered back a dagger sticking out from his chest.

"But I was..."

Jxu collapsed his final words lost as his body smashed to the floor.

"Nothing personal." Keltana said. "Just business."

+++

"Do we have him?" Admiral Brenner asked to the transporter technician over the intercom.

"Just barely sir, but yes we got him."

"Get him to the medical centre immediately. I will be down there shortly."

The admiral was standing on the bridge of the Argon carrier *Freedom*. The crew were all at action stations. When the call came through from the Split government about the rogue elements of the Jxu fleet there was only one place they might be headed. The blackout in comm. channels to Aladna Hill only confirmed it. The lights Dentill had seen had been his taskforce jumping in.

"Have the *Orion* and *Delis* concentrate their fire on the enemy flagship." Brenner ordered. "Their shields are about to collapse."

The intervention of the Argon fleet had turned the battle around. The three pythons had little hope of trading blows with so many capital ships.

On one large monitor a two dimensional map showed the Split fighter squadrons frantically trying to keep the waves of bombers from launching their ordnance against the ailing destroyers.

"Send the *Liberty's* interceptor wing to sweep aside those fighters around the enemy capital ships." Brenner said as he gestured to the flimsy screen of fighters.

This was true combat, Brenner thought, a righteous fight against an oppressive foe. Not a slugging match between two massed fleets or

a hopeless fight to save the universe.

The first of the Split destroyers burst apart under the bombardment of three Titan destroyers. The second began to drift away from the combat, fires raging along its flanks. The armaments the Split commander had deployed were fine against swarms of fighters, but just could not compete in a fight against heavy warships. Only Dhjn's flagship was still fighting but the constant battering was taking its toll.

"Contact the enemy commander and demand his surrender."
Brenner ordered the communications officer.

"Aye aye sir." The officer replied. "I am getting no response."

Brenner sighed. "Very well order all destroyers to concentrate their fire on that ship. Lets end this fight now."

The *Freedom's* captain hurried towards Brenner. "Admiral, many of the enemy squadrons are retreating from the field they are heading out to deep space."

"I imagine they are hoping we will ignore them." Brenner replied. "Lets do that unless they show signs of aggression, hopefully they will double back and return to Split space."

The main view port suddenly lit up with a bright flash.

"The last destroyer has been destroyed Admiral." The sensor officer reported.

"Very well have all squadrons accept surrenders from enemy fighters and deploy recovery craft to pick up survivors."

It was over.

Chapter 21. Destiny's Dawn

Rick Dentill woke up to find himself in strange, yet oddly familiar surroundings. He was clearly in a medical bay, but it was not the one on the GDI headquarters station. He wondered who had won the battle. The bay was clearly not of Split origin. Did they even have doctors? He wondered. Realisation dawned on him finally. It was a fleet infirmary so perhaps they had won. If so why was he not on board the GDI station? Had it been destroyed? He was sure he would remember. So many questions.

Mizuras later a Doctor in fleet uniform walked in. "Ah I see you are awake, that is a surprise, you took quite a lungful of toxic smoke from your ship. You pilots never learn."

"Who won the battle? Is the station ok? How many made it out alive?" Dentill asked frantically amidst fits of coughing, desperate for news.

"Hold on there commander, you need to rest. I am afraid any information might cause set backs, you have been quite ill." The doctor replied.

"Damn it doc, how do you think worrying about it is going to help?" Dentill was nearly shouting his throat sounded raw from the effort.

"Calm down commander. I will tell you what I know. The Split force was destroyed. A sad waste of sentient life. However as far as I know no stations were even damaged. Many pilots have been brought here so I imagine casualties were high. However I do not know how many other injured were taken to the other ships."

"Other ships? What happened?" Dentill demanded.

"Sh, Commander rest now. I am sure the Admiral will explain soon enough. He has been as insistent for new as you." The doctor hid a needle by his side as he walked over.

"Admiral?" Dentill asked as the doctor injected him with a sedative.

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As the doctor walked into the executive's lounge aboard the GDI headquarters station he saw three men seated, deep in conversation. The first wore the dazzling white of a fleet admiral's uniform; the small nameplate read "Brenner." The second was the small unassuming figure of Petre Shacklock. The last the doctor did

not know.

"Now Mr Shacklock, are you in agreement with us?" the third man asked.

"Yes, though I will be sad to lose him," acknowledged Shacklock, his voice full of regret.

"I am not so sure I want him with you." The admiral said to the third man. "I think he has a dazzling career ahead of him back in the navy."

"I think we can compromise here Brenner." The illusive third man replied. "It seems the Leviathan is in need of a new commander."

"Yes that might make some sense, then we both win." Brenner added, then noticed the doctor hovering near the door. "Ah doctor, please take a seat. How is our hero doing?"

"He was awake for a short time, though I was forced to sedate him. I do not want him to strain himself for a few stazuras." The doctor replied.

"Well, I think we need him up and about soon, there will be a ceremony to reward him and others for their hard work and sacrifices." The Admiral said.

"More importantly, will he make a full recovery?" The third man asked.

"He should do if he gets enough rest." The doctor replied accusingly. "By the way I am afraid I do not know your name."

"I doubt you would." The man replied. "I am Ban Danna."

The doctor sucked in a deep breath and released it slowly. This man was a living legend, shrouded in mystery. He was a key figure in the secret service and if rumours were true, the man who recruited and aided Kyle Brennan into saving the X universe from the Xenon.

"I... I am honoured sir." The doctor stuttered in awe. "Well I must be going now, but I will let you know when he is awake again."

"Thank you doctor." Ban replied, offering a warm smile. The doctor nodded his appreciation and scurried away excitedly.

"So you were saying the Leviathan, Ban?" Brenner asked, restarting

the conversation.

"Yes," Ban Danna nodded. "That way you will get a fine commander for a ship, and I will have access to him and a fleet carrier for my investigations into the Khaak."

"Seems to be a fair exchange." Brenner acknowledged. "Though it will be up to him whether he will come back to the navy."

"He will, he is a man of integrity and responsibility." Ban Danna replied. Then his voice changed and his face darkened slightly. "If not then we will have to be persuasive. He is needed and I fear some coercion would not be out of the question."

"I don't think that will be necessary." Shacklock interrupted, his voice nervous. Despite knowing Ban for some Jazuras, he had never seen him less than jovial.

"I hope not." Replied Ban Danna.

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Under the influence of the drugs, Dentill slept for many stazuras. When he finally awoke, Dentill saw there were several figures sitting around his bed, talking softly. He blearily opened his eyes further, dazzled by the lights in the room. As he groggily forced himself to a sitting position he was wracked by a coughing fit.

"Oh hull Rick you look bloody awful." Marcus Gromwell said loudly from across the room. "Mind you the doc said you would be awake soon."

"Hush, Marcus, leave him alone." It was Juliette, as her nurse's training kicked in. "And you Mr Dentill should not be getting up." She activated a switch, which adjusted the bed, creating a support for his head and back.

"Marcus is right." Said Dureena Fielding her arms around Gromwell's neck. "You do look awful!"

Dentill began to chuckle, only to burst out coughing again.

"I have heard that it is prudent for humans to breath O2 and not CO2." Said Loraminckstros as he strolled into the room chuckling.

There were laughs and a few groans around the room, it was a poor joke. Dentill laughed until he coughed again. "I see the gang is all

here and as usual against me. Don't I get some dispensation for being injured?"

"Fraid not sir, It is punishment for worrying us." Gromwell said. "When your IFF cut out we thought you were KIA."

"Sorry to disappoint." Dentill replied smiling. "Now I don't suppose you could leave me alone with my nurse here." His hand grabbed Juliette's wrist and pulled her to the bed.

A chorus of unintelligible mumbles ensued followed by broad grins

"Oh and thanks for being here." He said gratefully.

When they had left, Juliette began to cry with relief. "I thought I had lost you." She sobbed quietly. "It took stazuras for the navy to let us know you were all right."

"Its all right I'm safe." Dentill replied hugging her tightly. "This isn't the first time I've lost a ship."

"That is not really encouraging." Juliette said.

"Oh, sorry." His face twisted up. "What I meant was it takes more than that to get rid of me."

"Well fortunately you won't be anywhere near a ship for a while. Not just because you are in here. Everything seems to have calmed down. No wars for you to go off and fight."

"That's good, I guess it means I can get a decent nights sleep." Dentill said lightly.

"I think we will all sleep sounder now this is all over." She replied sagely.

"That was supposed to be a hint." Dentill jibed softly.

"Oh right well move over then." Juliette pushed him to the side of the bed and then lay down next to him, her arm over his chest. With her free hand she stroked his hair whilst he closed his eyes to dose.

The moment was short lived. "Where is he? I think I have waited long enough!" Said a gruff voice. Dentill's eyes shot open.

"What now?" he asked

Through the door walked a small party of Naval officers. The one in front, presumably the person who had spoken had admiral's stripes on his uniform, One appeared to be a lieutenant, Dentill assumed him to be the Admiral's aide, the way the man hovered about was a clear giveaway. The other man seemed of late middle age and nondescript, even uninteresting and Dentill paid him only a passing glance. Juliette slid quickly off the bed and stood beside Dentill holding his hand.

"Hello, commander. I am Admiral Brenner, it is a pleasure to meet you." The Admiral began.

"You too sir," Dentill replied guardedly

"It seems you have been playing the hero again." Brenner beamed.

"Just had a job to do."

"Ah a hero's modesty, well I have another job for you." The admiral became serious again.

"What! I am in hospital for goodness sake." Dentill was becoming confused. Where was this leading?

"Well actually it is more of a career move. It seems the medics might have been too hasty in their recommendation for your discharge after Omicron Lyrae. I would like you to come back to us." The Admiral opened his arms wide as if inviting an embrace.

"Nice of you to say so Admiral, but I have a career and it seems that it will be nice and quiet from now on, which will be good for me." He smiled at Juliette, who beamed back.

Dentill saw the quiet third man give a brief nod to the Admiral's aide. The lieutenant began. "Unfortunately that will not be possible. It would appear that the Khaak destroyed your discharge papers in a courier ship. There would not appear to be a record of you leaving the Navy."

"What the hell are you talking about? And who is that guy?" Dentill replied his voice angry. He knew when he was being manipulated.

"Commander Dentill may I introduce you to Ban Danna." The admiral said. That statement caused Dentill to pause, he knew Ban Danna was head of The Argon Secret Service. Not a man he wanted to cross.

"Hello Commander, I am sorry that this news came to you under these circumstances." Ban Danna added smiling warmly.

"Rick what's going on? What's wrong?" Juliette asked worried.

"It would seem everything."

"Under the circumstances, we have decided not to press charges over you being AWOL." The Admiral's aide said, it was meant to be a joke. Dentill did not see the humour and glared so intensely that the aide's soft chuckling cut off abruptly.

"I think Admiral that the commander has had a rough time, some shocking news and needs some time to recover." Ban Danna said to Brenner

Brenner nodded. "I will see you later Commander, take care until then."

After the others had left Ban Danna paused at the door.

"Tell me sir, were those papers really lost?" Dentill asked.

Ban Danna smiled. "Get some rest commander, we will talk later. After the ceremony."

"What ceremony?" Dentill asked.

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The concourse of the GDI headquarters had seemed the perfect place for giving out awards. Banners, flags and bunting lined the wide thoroughfares and hung from the high ceiling. Hundreds of people were crowded behind makeshift barricades as a military band marched past. In the central square were rows of naval personnel at attention and a less formal array of GDI personnel. Dentill hated it. The one area of naval life he detested was pomp and ceremony. He fidgeted with the stiff collar of his dress uniform until Juliette slapped his hand down.

"Stop it, it looks fine." She said.

Dentill's hand shot back down to his side. The band finally stopped and faced the main podium where a hoard of dignitaries sat. Admirals, senators from the outer colonies, GDI officials and even a few diplomats from the other races, were all seated together. As the

band finally finished their piece, Admiral Brenner marched stiffly to a microphone positioned behind a small lectern. With a nod, the band began to play the Argon national anthem. The first low mournful tones, which bespoke of loss and fear, harked back to a time when a few battered survivors had sought to rebuild their civilisation. The sadness soon developed into a resounding triumphal peal of horns and trumpets, the joy and pride pervaded the room.

When the piece ended after a few mizuras, Brenner began to speak. "Ladies, gentleman and fellow sentients. Welcome to you all for coming to honour these brave people who have served all of us beyond the call of duty."

The admiral was forced to pause as a thunderous round of applause ensued. Many of the GDI personnel began to cheer. Brenner gestured wildly for silence and eventually the noise subdued.

"The actions of these brave souls have saved our galaxy from a war which should never have happened. One, which would we could not afford with the far greater threat posed by the Khaak menace."

There was again applause, though less loud or ecstatic. The memories of Khaak attacks and atrocities were still too fresh in peoples' minds.

"Commander Dentill would you step forward please." Dentill marched stiffly forwards. "The Argon people owe you a debt of gratitude and are pleased that you are returning to the navy to help ensure our eventual victory."

Dentill gave a polite nod, he still felt he was being coerced. "Thank you admiral," he said formally.

"Oh no, all thanks and honour are due to you. Now as a token of this thanks." Brenner raised his voice again as he pulled a piece of paper from a pocket. "By order of the Commander in Chief, I hereby bestow upon you the rank of Captain in the Argon Navy."

Dentill was shocked. Captain was a massive promotion from his old rank of squadron commander. "I don't know what to say." He said.

"You have proven here that you are more than capable of such a command, Captain." Brenner beamed broadly. He began to applaud, the crowd joined him with a roar. Dentill could only stand and blush under the waves of appreciation. Two officers marched forwards and placed additional stripes on his new uniform, causing

even louder cheers, particularly from his comrades in the GDI ranks. Brenner gestured slightly to one of the senators, who then walked up to him.

After the applause again died down, Brenner began again. "I would like to introduce Senator Yorla." The admiral stepped back allowing Yorla to stand at the microphone.

"I bring some good and bad news." The crowd looked at him quizzically. "The bad news is, unfortunately the President was unable to attend in person today. The good news is of course that I get to honour these people." The crowd gave a polite laugh. "Marcus Gromwell, Dureena Fielding, Loralamincstros, Captain Greene and Commander Schmidt please step forwards."

The five made their way to the podium. Standing uneasily besides Dentill and the Admiral.

"It was with the help of these five individuals that Commander, apologies Captain Dentill, was able to resolve this crisis. On behalf of the Argon people I offer our thanks." The room again burst into applause. "In our appreciation, I have here a few items for you." An aide walked forwards holding a wooden box. "On behalf of the Argon I present you each with one of these medals. I salute you all as heroes of the Argon Federation."

Admiral Brenner assisted the senator in giving each of them one of the medals, hanging them around their necks. "Let us all offer them one last time a round of applause." The room again erupted into cheers. A large group of the GDI ground crew rushed forwards and picked the six heroes up from the floor and carried them around the square on their shoulders.

There was a sudden bustle of commotion at the opening of one of the corridors out of the main square. The crowd was forced to give way to a large group of Split. Many of them warriors dressed in bright robes. "What is going on here?" asked Yorla angrily at the interruption. The Split procession stopped when they reached the group carrying Dentill and the others. The six leaders, were lowered to the floor. Dentill made his way to the front of the group. Juliette came and stood beside him taking his arm.

The Split ranks broke apart, allowing one space to walk forwards. The new Split was tall and dressed in opulent robes. "You are Dentill?" asked the newcomer imperiously.

"I am." Dentill replied.

"You do your people great justice. I am Lord Rhonkar, Patriarch of all Split." The patriarch gave a bow. "I come to do honour to the man who has aided my people."

"Thanks, I think." Dentill said confused. "I was forced to kill a few."

"Traitors all of them." Rhonkar replied. "However you have proven true loyalty to all of us. I would like to offer you my hand in friendship."

Dentill took the proffered hand and bowed "I am honoured."

"No, no," Rhonkar replied. "I have come to reward you."

Dentill looked quizzical. He was not sure what this reward might be.

"As you have served the Split people, I would like to make you an honorary patriarch. A new house is founded today. The Family Dentill." This remark brought a few sniggers from around those closest to them.

"It would also appear that the family is about to grow." The patriarch chuckled indicating Juliette. He took her hands in his own. "You are a most attractive example of your species, my lady, I think you have both made excellent choices in mates." Dentill and Juliette both blushed. When those around saw, they burst into laughter and cheers once again.

The two lovers were saved from further embarrassment when Brenner and Yorla came down from the podium to greet the Patriarch.

"Let's make our exit now." Dentill whispered into Juliette's ear. He gestured with his thumb to Gromwell who nodded. Moments later a crowd of GDI personnel surrounded Dentill and Juliette allowing them leave unseen.

Dentill sighed with relief. "Well I am glad that is over. There is only so much gratitude a man can take."

Juliette placed her arms around his neck and kissed him fully on the lips. "I don't suppose you have enough patience for one last person's thanks do you?"

Dentill saw the glint in her eyes. "Hmm, I think I could just about allow that."

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A few stazuras after the ceremony, Shacklock threw a massive party in celebration. Most of the GDI staff, many of the senators and navy personnel were invited. An entire level of the station normally used for conferences was made set aside for the large numbers of revellers.

Rather late into the evening, Dentill in his dress uniform and Juliette in long navy blue gown made their way into the main hall being used. "Rick over here." Shacklock called to them. Around a wide round table sat most of what had been the GDI war council. Loraminckstros was there, dressed in the nearest the Paranid could find to a tuxedo. Gromwell and Fielding were sat arm in arm as was most common these tazuras. Captain Greene was also there deep in discussion with Schmidt and Captain Graaf.

"Hello there Captain or should I say Patriarch." Graaf said cheerfully.

"Rick is fine Captain." Dentill replied then retorted. "I see you managed to get here just in time for the free drinks."

"Aye well I hitched a ride with Rhonnie." When Dentill looked puzzled Graaf added. "That's Lord Rhonkar to you."

"I hear you will be leaving us." Gromwell said interrupting.

"It looks that way, the Navy wants me back." Dentill replied, they could tell he was not entirely eager.

"Come on Rick, you must want to go back." Fielding replied.

"I am not sure my wants are issues here, what about loyalty to you guys."

"Hull don't be silly, we got by without you before." Gromwell said.

"Yes, and you are such a tyrant we will be glad to be rid of you." Loraminckstros added, chuckling.

"Huh?" Dentill was puzzled then realised that the Paranid was joking. It was still odd to know a Paranid with a sense of humour. However twisted it might be. The table erupted into laughter.

"We'll miss you Rick but I'll come up with someone." Shacklock replied. "Now I believe I should go and be a good host. These senators can get grouchy if ignored for long."

"I suddenly feel the need to dance." Gromwell said, dragging Fielding away with him. The others around the table began to make excuses, leaving a bemused Dentill alone with Juliette.

"That's odd." Dentill said, "I took a shower before we came."

Juliette giggled quietly, than became serious. "Maybe that's why." She pointed towards a figure coming towards them. It was Ban Danna.

"Er hello Sir." Dentill said.

"Captain glad you could make it." Ban Danna replied.

"Should I leave?" Juliette asked.

"No, no, please stay. What I have to say will not take long."

"What is up sir?" Dentill enquired.

"I am just here to tell you about your new posting." Ban Danna replied.

"Great, not too far away I hope."

"What has been agreed is that along with the promotion, we will be putting you in command of the *Leviathan*. She is a Colossus class carrier." Ban Danna explained

"You are giving me a ship?" Dentill replied in surprise.

"Yes, she is special as she is seconded to the secret service, so you will be working directly for me." Ban Danna sounded pleased.

"Not black ops." Dentill sounded disappointed.

"Hmm perhaps sometimes but for the most part you will remain part of the navy, unless we need you for something more secret." Ban Danna informed him. "Well I will leave you to the party, I am sure we will meet again soon."

"You are not leaving so soon?" Asked Juliette, when the secret agent had left.

"Not for a while if I can swing it. I figure they owe me at least a little." Dentill replied.

"Oh, but once you are gone, I will hardly ever see you." Juliette said concerned.

"Not if you marry me." Dentill proposed, staring into her eyes. He saw a sudden look of shock.

"What?" Juliette asked.

"OH hull I have put my foot in it haven't I?" he said.

"No I was just surprised." She peered back at him as if searching for something. "Yes, yes I will marry you." She said as she grabbed him tightly around the neck.

Epilogue

Captain Dentill stood in the observation room of his new ship the *Leviathan*. It had been a busy two wozuras. In the aftermath of the conflict Dentill had been seized upon by both the government and the media and had suffered a whirlwind of social engagements. After a hectic time, he and Juliette had finally been given enough respite to have a simple marriage ceremony. Even then they had not been left alone. For a few tazuras society magazines had them pictured on the front page as the new "in" couple, the hero and his beautiful bride. They were offered a suite at one of the most prestigious resorts in the three worlds system for their honeymoon. Dentill had jumped at the opportunity to escape from the media hoard. When their brief stay had ended, the frenzy had died down as public attention moved on to other things. He had to admit he was relieved.

The break had been a happy one but brief. Dentill had been just as quickly whisked off to the fleet base at Omicron Lyrae to take command of the *Leviathan*. He stared out towards the stars pondering what the future might bring. He played absentmindedly with the ring on his left hand. He and Juliette had been apart only a few tazuras and yet he could not wait to see her back aboard the fleet station in the Interworlds sector. He had never been happier and yet felt more alone without her.

His new orders from Ban Danna had sent his ship to a new outpost in a system recently discovered east of the system known as Wastelands. What a strange concept he thought, my ship. It would take some getting used to. His hand caressed the cold steel of the bulkhead. It would appear his life was still intertwined with the needs of the naval service. It was his fate. His destiny.