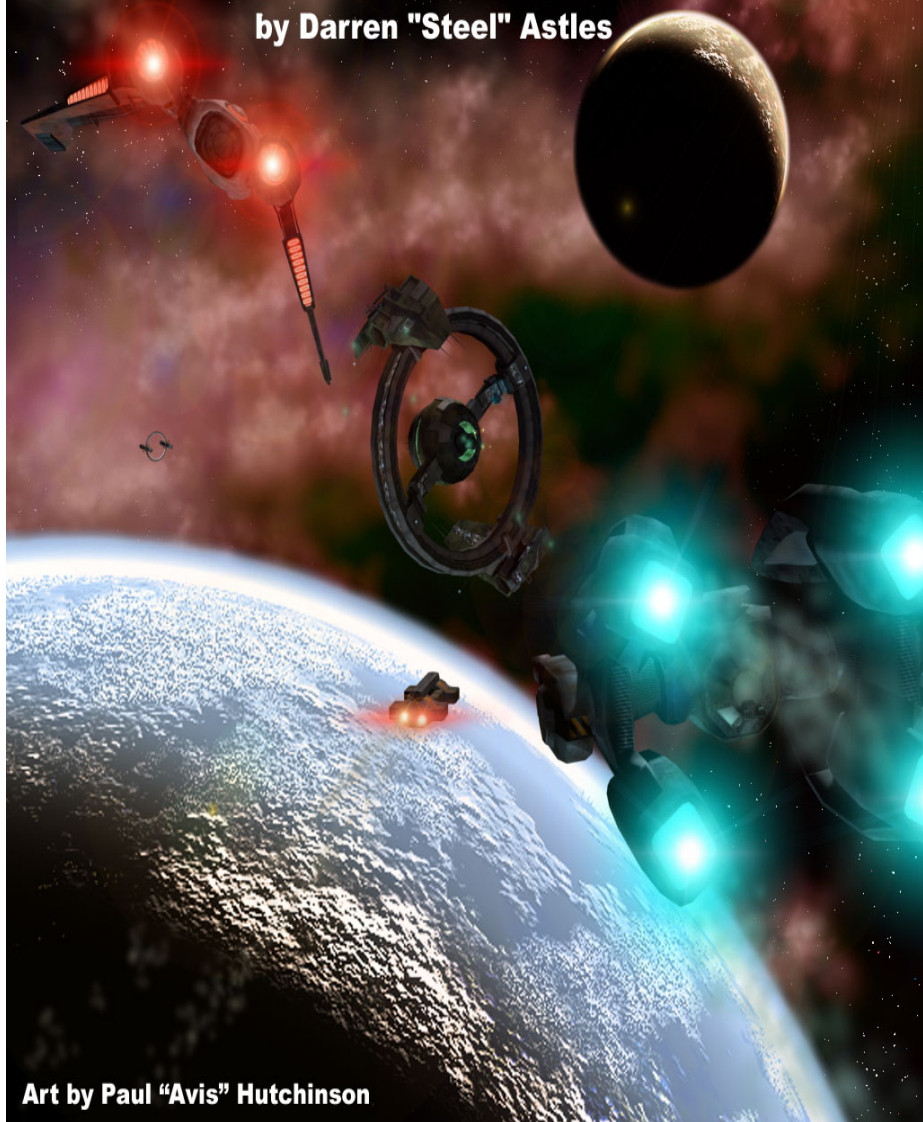


DOMINION

A NOVEL IN THE X-UNIVERSE

by Darren "Steel" Astles

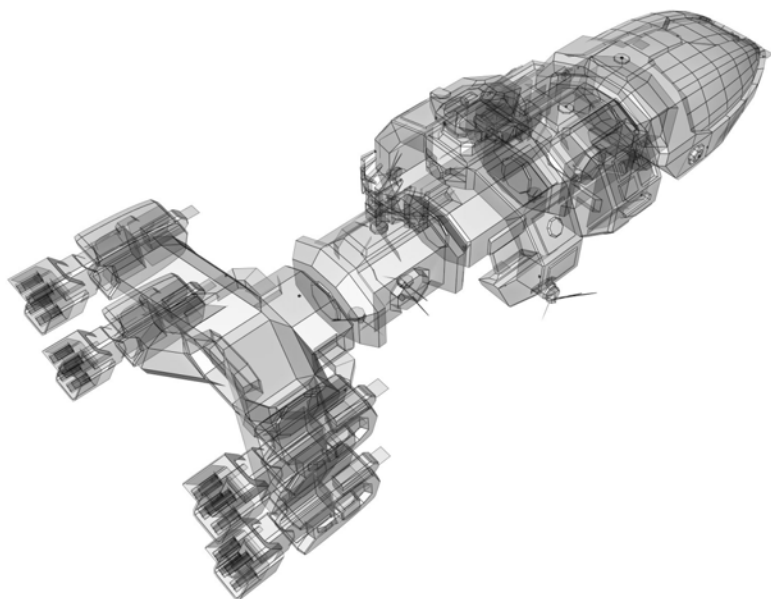


Art by Paul "Avis" Hutchinson

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Cover and artwork by Paul "Avis" Hutchinson and "Wire frame" ship graphics by Egosoft.

"The game is not the story, the story is not the game." Helge Kautz, author of Farnham's Legend.

The best bit of advice I was given.

Darren Astles (aka Steel)

Thanks also go to Bernd Lehahn for allowing me to write this story using references to items already established and to the individuals who proof read this story and gave me invaluable feedback.

Inspired by



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Prologue

Workers become oppressed. It doesn't seem to matter whether this is today, yesterday or as here, in some far distant future. The area of space this book refers to, known as the "X-Universe", is full of all the normal problems.

A large area connected by jump gates from what appears to be an ancient civilisation and the interaction of different races. Alliances and trade agreements allow the would-be trader to carve out a living in the hustle and bustle of the spaceports.

A Paranid, drunk on ambition creates a new technology. An advanced chip that allows the mind to operate and communicate with computer systems. The uses are far reaching and the customers will flock to his factory. It's time to announce this new breakthrough to the cosmos.

Just when the announcement is made and the new products detail and price is transmitted into the dealing systems, a fleet of organised pirate ships raid and take away the first batch of chips. Obliterating all the production facilities, plans and employees in one swift action.

Revenge is planned, but the pirates, too long subjugated and bound by the pricing thresholds of the inter-race guilds have finally become a larger unit. Throwing aside their differences and under the direct leadership of a ruthless Argon female, they set the wheels in motion for a plan, so audacious, it might just work and bring all of the space lanes under their control.

Out there in the distant blackness of space another race, untouched by intruders, suddenly have their very existence threatened by the carefree attitude of the Pirates and their plans.

Before they can enter the realm of the X-Universe though, this story must first be told. The battle for the trade lanes is about to begin.

Dominion.

Chapter 1 - Best laid plans

Twenty jazuras ago a sequence of events happened that would have a profound affect on the universe as it is today. The following are those events and what has transpired since that day.

He stood on the bridge of the ship. Feet firmly planted onto the floor of the room, kept in place by the artificial gravity. He could hear the faint hum of the gravity sphere; yes he could hear it *and* feel it. Down in the bowels of the ship, pulling everything towards it. They were temperamental at best, gravity spheres, but this one had been enhanced until it operated within 0.3% deviation from its settings.

He liked that, quality work done by quality engineers and he had some of the best in the universe. Yes, the best engineers and without doubt, some of the finest scientists to ever live. That's what made him so wealthy. He made products that his people and especially those of other races needed.

Computer components and microchips, electrical and organic, they made the most in the universe and demand was high. You couldn't fly a ship without his products. In fact you couldn't *build* a ship without them. Navigation systems, command consoles communication devices and targeting systems. Even the weapons themselves had the stamp of his company somewhere within them.

ENeT- Enhanced Nebulae Technologies, "Quality where it counts".

His name was LooManckStrat the Third, King of Pontifex Realm, Paranid sector ruler and fourth in line to the throne. He was aboard his cruise ship, called a "Spinny". A large space going yacht built solely for himself for the times he had to travel. He didn't like to travel in space, but business made it a necessity. So he had the ship built to his exact specifications. Fast, well protected and most importantly, luxurious.

This day was a special occasion though, that was why he was now standing aboard his ship and gazing out through the large space screen. Before him, only a few kilometres away sat his latest venture, the new microchips plant extension to his large component factory. A great building in space, designed and built by his company and at last having the final piece slotted into place.

The single star in this sector was behind his ship, but it was close enough to give plenty of light. This light reflected off the large structure on the right, casting a bright hue over the slightly bluish colour of the factory. A massive two kilometres high and the same distance wide made it a central point in the sector. There were other factories here too, producing many different items. His structure required some of the others to manufacture its own goods, but none of them had the size and sheer presence that this one had.



The "Spinny"

A sphere sat in the centre and protruding from five of the six possible directions were long cylindrical structures. Two of them span slowly, creating gravity for the crewmembers and factory workers who resided inside. One was the docking bay where all other ships had to dock, requesting landing rights and then guided in by the stations navigation control computer. It also housed the short and long stay bays where the ships would park. Almost nobody stayed in a station for more than a few stazura, it was too expensive and any time spent idle saw any profit from a trading trip begin to dwindle away.

But inside one of the housing sections was an area set-aside for pleasure. It enabled the weary travellers to meet and talk,

exchange views, information and stories. Also to rent a bunk for a short time should they need to. Some ships had excellent sleeping quarters for the long hauls, when the ship's navigation computer would fly the ship on automatic and the pilot could get some rest. But most ships were short haul, designed for the quick profit run and had sparse conditions, sometimes with only a flight area to sit in and navigate from.

The final two factory additions housed the actual manufacturing rigs, one making a series of computer components and the second, actual computer chips. The central sphere housed the massive stock bays with the raw materials and finished goods. Linked up to the automatic trading system, the onboard computers and factory robots would unload and load any visiting ship while the pilot waited, or slipped down to the pleasure area.

But nothing was situated on the left-hand side of the station. A round connection clamp, a hundred metres in diameter, waited expectantly. This was why LooManckStrat was venturing out into space, to actually witness the final part of his factory being attached.

He glanced farther to the left, his three eyes searching out the approaching part. A massive transporter ship was a few kilometres further away, its huge dark bulk visible against the star filled background. Warning and navigation lights blinking on and off, red and white respectively. He could see the glow from the two massive drive engines, hidden from his view as the ship was facing the station. It had just deployed the new part into space and small-automated tugs were now moving the large cylindrical object towards the waiting station.

Small ships darted back and too at speed, some overseeing the installation while others guarded it from any jealous competitors. That was the price of success. There was nothing like greed to drive a company forward. He had allowed the odd "removal" of a competing company himself in the early days of the business. But now he was the top of the tree, he was the target of many that were just like he was once. That's why you had to employ vast navies to protect your interests and having factories in many sectors, some of which were homes to other races, was expensive. But he had no choice, his ships numbered so many that they would be a match for a military fleet, if he brought them all together. But that couldn't be done, each station had its own small

detachment of protection ships and with the modern scanners that almost everybody carried, a potential enemy would spot such a weakness from afar if they were to leave for any length of time. No he kept them where they belonged, at the stations (he had ten now) where they did their job best.

Every one of his factories also employed various other protection devices. Laser weapons attached to the hull and others in a fixed orbital position a few kilometres out, menacing and a good deterrent. But these were no match for any small and nimble fighter craft that some companies employed, particularly the pirate clans, so the protection ships stayed.

The new addition was a complete, almost fully automated manufacturing plant for his latest venture. The new "Super Slave" enhanced control chip. A partly organic device, that could be inserted directly into the recipient's brain stem. It was an amazing device and had taken a great deal of time to get it to this position. The yields were worryingly low. Less than 1% of all chips made actually passed the quality tests. That was not good, but he had decided to wait no longer as the opportunity was now. It took many stazura to make a single chip, partly for the fact that the internal device had to be grown, not made and with only 1 out of every hundred produced actually being a saleable product, it didn't sound like a good business investment. But his was the only place in the whole universe where you could buy them, so he could set the price as high as he liked. He smiled at that, yes the *only* place you could buy them.

He was going to make a great deal of credits on this, he was sure.

The original Slave chip had been around for a long time. It was a remarkable device and gave any being whom had it fitted the ability to control nearby linked computer systems with the power of thought alone. It was a small device, only two millimetres in diameter, a perfect sphere, bright blue in colour. Fitted surgically and usually never removed once installed (installing the chip was a straightforward procedure, removing it was surgically dangerous), it enabled the subject to quickly navigate computer systems such as a navigation system while leaving the limbs free for other tasks (such as steering a ship). This gave them an advantage as they could issue commands to the weapons systems for example, while still manoeuvring the vessel.

Not all beings could use it though and they all had to undergo stringent tests before one could be installed. You also had to prove that your age was in excess of 25 jazuras as growing bodies and minds are excluded. Most Navy pilots would have one installed as would a great deal of the company freight pilots and the many single traders that ploughed the space lanes. Some could not handle the Slave though, they could not get used to the way that the image could be imposed into their sight, when in reality, their eyes never saw it. It was superimposed behind their vision. Still, the computer systems still offered voice and even key press back up devices. So almost anyone could still operate them and some chose this latter method.

However, the irony of it was that the Paranid believed the chip to be in direct contravention of the Bashra (the Holy book) and the chip was outlawed in Paranid space. You could make it and you could sell it, but you could not use it. Well that was no problem to LooManckStrat, he didn't have one fitted and didn't intend to. But that didn't stop him from selling them. And sell them he did, so many that he had trouble keeping up demand with the long production cycle.

There was a downside though (wasn't there always) in that the chip in its early days had quickly been used as a pleasure device. If an image (and feelings to an extent) could be piped directly into the mind, then for a fee, the user could go anywhere and be anything. These pleasure areas had become big business very quickly, but it was soon discovered that there was a side effect. The mind didn't like to be messed around with, didn't like being told what to do. When the brain decided that the senses were tired, which it did quite naturally, it would shut them down and put the host to sleep, so that the body could regenerate. But it had no control over the Slave chip and this was the problem. It would endure it for brief moments, which was fine for an occasional command given to the computer, but for someone to actively plug themselves in to a stream for a few stazura proved to be too much. The brain wanted to shut the senses down but the chip continued to let the feelings and images flow.

Different beings had different levels of exposure. The Split appeared to have the longest before any damage was done. But once the mind had started to reject the incoming data, to react to this other "sense", there was usually no way back. If the exposure continued, the host's brain would "burn" itself out, leaving them still

alive, but basically in a coma from which they would never recover. The problem was that the brain would actually begin to send antibodies to physically destroy the cells surrounding the Slave and these cells also contributed to the other senses.

The user became trapped in a world with none of the basic senses working, no touch, smell, sight, nothing. They couldn't move and they couldn't speak. They were not physically dead, but the damage had so far proven to be irreparable.

So the use of the chip as a pleasure device and any other unwanted use [its value as an interrogation device had proved to be amazing] was outlawed in all known space. That didn't mean that there were not places that you could go, there would always be an underground market for its use. Some of the greatest computer software developers had slipped into this dark world, creating dream worlds for people to play in, but except for pilots (of which there were thousands), its use was small, but profitable.

Its range was also small. You had to be within a few tens of metres of a suitable transmission device. These were usually fitted to ships as standard and some of the more expensive factories had them located around the walkways and sleeping chambers.

But the Super Slave changed all of that. Its range was over a kilometre, but the wonderful thing about the Super Slave was its in-built safety device. It monitored the brain output and after many trials and adaptations for different races, his scientists had managed to get the chip to shut itself down or begin to lessen the effect, so that a person's own consciousness would be brought to the surface.

Not many knew about the Super Slave, it was currently under tight security and a veil of secrecy. No one who was actually fitting the station at this moment knew what the new rig did. They assumed it simply made standard Slave chips, the manufacturing process looked familiar to the untrained eye and only the company scientists and a select few station commanders had been told. Now as he watched the new limb being brought closer and closer to its final resting-place, LooManckStrat began to get just a small twinge of excitement. A feeling quite alien to the Paranid, but it was there all the same, slowing moving its way upward through his torso.

So the yields were down, he could live with it, as they would improve upon it as time went by. His estimations were that the chip would be so successful that it didn't really matter. He was already planning on the next factory, probably in Argon space where there would be such a huge demand. More Argon had the chip fitted than any other race so he expected to make some large amounts of credits there.

He also knew that in the outer systems, where the pioneers and illegal companies did their business, he would have a handsome profit. He might even risk putting a factory out there at some point. He pondered the thought, yes it might be a shrewd move that, installing a Super Slave factory where they would want it most. Right on the doorstep of the customers. They'd pay a good price out there as well, he was certain. It would require some extra security though, more laser banks and protection ships. But with the credits he would surely make, it might be worth it. Yes, he'd have to look into that soon. He made a verbal note to his personal recording system. It would remind him later.

The Super Slave rig was now almost touching the main factory sphere. He picked up his zoom lenses and adjusted them so that he had a clear, close up view of the station. There were figures in the tough environment suits slowly jetting around the structure. He counted over ten in the company regulation orange colour, some with large welding devices ready to put the final, permanent seal between the two buildings. They must have slowly touched together as he saw the distinct flash of the lasers as they burnt the metal together. Other figures securing locks and tightening locking bolts. It wouldn't be long now, only a few mizuras before the umbilical cord, containing all the power lines and computer system hard wires, was connected. It was all built with precision so that the final installation would go as smooth as possible.

The small knot of excitement rose within him again, he would actually be able to connect to its systems shortly and see the figures with his own three eyes. Actually watch the resources that were already stored in the main sphere begin to move down the automated shafts and into the main manufacturing rig. Watch the numbers go up and down, he liked to do that, watching the numbers, it gave him a great sense of achievement. But above all it told him that credits were being made! And that was the real achievement.

His factory commander's face appeared on the communication cube, which jutted out of the wall to the right of the large space screen. The wall was a dirty white colour, but the cube that had automatically moved from being flat in the wall to a pyramid shaped protrusion, was the company orange. He made the few steps required to place him within range so he could press the required buttons. He understood for a moment what it must be like for the pilots to be able to achieve that without moving, using the Slave. The Super Slave was going to astound them!

"LooManckStrat here commander, are the systems online?" he asked the face in the screen.

"Correct your honour, they are in place and functioning. Automatic production cycle is about to begin," came the reply.

LooManckStrat didn't speak further and pressed the button to end the call. He then pressed a series of buttons to navigate through his sector property and selected the factory. He felt a huge sigh of relief as the new Super Slave plant appeared on the screen. He checked the stock levels. They were increasing nicely from the main sphere, the automated systems doing their jobs. He checked the product levels, one hundred Super Slaves in stock. Exactly the number that had been produced on the rig while it was in the shipyard, still being finished. Another four stazuras before another one would be completed was the systems estimation of the product run. It was a computer's guess though as it all depended upon the yield and this could vary slightly around the 1% mark as much as one half a percent either way. It should get better and better though as his scientists and engineers fine-tuned the process even further.

He jabbed the buttons on the cube again. The Super Slave rig commander came into view. LooManckStrat didn't ask if anything was the matter, didn't even attempt at any small talk, it was not the Paranid way. He simply said "Set the price at five hundred thousand credits. I repeat five hundred thousand and announce the product to the trading systems." Then he disconnected the call.

He watched the screen again to make sure his orders had been carried out to the full. The product came online at a stock of one hundred and he saw with some satisfaction the price appear at the instructed five hundred thousand. The trading systems all

across the universe would begin to pick this information up as it was passed onwards and outwards through the trading network. Within a single Tazura the information would be everywhere. Traders in the farthest systems would see the product on their screens, just as he was doing now.

Requests for information would come in from all over. "What was the new chip?" "What did it do?" It would create a request for data frenzy and the larger companies would send ships to buy stock anyway, regardless of the cost.

He glanced out of the space screen again and saw a ship exiting the station. Slowly moving away within regulation speed. It was a freighter, one of his company's own. The orange ENeT logo was unmistakable on the side of the hull. Orange lettering over a blue circle. It was a large ship, slow but perfectly built by the Paranid for the job it did. Hauling large quantities of resources or product across the vastness of space. A smooth thin nose expanding to a large bulbous body.

His new rig had probably ordered sufficient quantities of stock from the central sphere, that the factory commander had already seen a potential outage and had already ordered a ship out to replenish the goods.

The ship approached his yacht and then when it was half way between the station and the Spinny, it slowed to a stop. Then it turned, ever so slowly to his left so that he could see the whole side of the ship facing him, his logo staring back. Then with a slight increase in the intensity of light, that was coming from the rear of the ship were the engines were it accelerated away. He watched it until the rear of the ship was almost facing him and then he turned away, the glow from the engines causing a dull ache in his eyes. He checked the sector data screen and scanned the ship. Yes it was heading out to a local sector factory to obtain energy cells, the lifeblood of the universe.

Everything needed energy cells. They were large devices capable of retaining energy and everything ran on them. Produced by the solar power plants, huge factories in space that converted any local starlight into energy and stored it in the cells. They would then sell them to just about everybody for a small fee. The system worked well. Any ship on its way to a power plant would have in its cargo bay hundreds, if not thousands of depleted cells. The plant

simply handed over some charged ones, took the empty ones back and placed them in the charging area and so the cycle continued, as well of course as collecting a fee for the privilege.

There were others ways of making energy of course. Ships used reactors to produce energy that was used to power all onboard systems, including the engines. But these were small power requirements in comparison to a station and if a ship was destroyed, the resultant pollution of the immediate area could be dealt with. Not so a station. If a station was destroyed it made a big bang and if large reactors had powered it, could cause serious local problems. So large reactors in stations had been banned after the Ferryman incident in Argon space, which had killed thousands and left half of the sector unusable for hundreds of jazuras. All races recognised this, as any station with such a large reactor would become a suitable target in any conflict.

Five hundred thousand each! He knew that the price wouldn't sustain itself for long. But while demand was high, he would make as much profit as possible. The initial hundred would be bought quickly and then once the initial furore was over, he would have to drop the price considerably. But if all the stock went and he thought it would, he would have fifty million credits! That was enough to cover the development costs *and* the rig assembly costs. He would have to start building another rig as soon as possible. They took much too long to produce in the shipyards. The only problem with that at the moment was that the shipyards didn't know how to make them as all the data for the chips was safe and secure in the rig itself.

He was yet to negotiate that part of the business, as he didn't want the shipyards with which he had no direct control, selling the rigs to anyone else. No, that would be a big mistake and one he was not going to make. Not yet anyway, not until the bidders started to appear and then after he had established a few of the rigs on his other factories he might decide to sell the rights. Yes, just before the market was flooded and the price dropped. He felt perfectly happy with his business plan, he had worked hard at it, sometimes personally and he was going to get every available credit he could from it.

LooManckStrat had pushed the cube back into the wall of the ship and was now walking back to the position he started from, central to the space screen, so he could survey his factory when the cube

came back out of the wall again. Incoming message from his patrolling defence ships, it was the sector Captain on the screen.

"LooManckStrat your honour, you should be informed that a number of ships have just entered the system via the north gate." The Captain said very matter of fact.

LooManckStrat moved towards the cube again. "What ships, how many and *who's?*" he barked at the screen.

"I count twenty ships your honour, no local markings. Scan shows them to be giving out pirate signatures. They are headed this way your honour. Fifteen fighter class and five freighter size attack ships, they are obtaining an attack formation."

NO! Could it be him they were after, sat here in his private yacht. No it couldn't be, his yacht could outrun anything the pirates had and its shielding was first class. No, not him but the rig, they must be after the rig! Pirates never entered such sectors as this without good reason. They were only seen in the inner sectors when they were on a mission and pirate missions always ended in a fight. The pirates were disparate groups, clans that rarely worked together but had a single goal, to make money from illegal activities. They had pilots from every race amongst their ranks, failed traders and escaped criminals. They were powerful people who commanded large, if somewhat disorganised, forces. They even had their own bases where they manufactured and distributed illegal goods.

"Captain, set an intercept course. Launch all available ships immediately. You must stop those ships!" He shouted the final sentence. He glanced out of the space screen and could tell by the navigation lights on the docking rig that the station had already gone to battle stations, docking rights were suspended. A small fast fighter craft exited the docking bay, he watched it accelerate and head off in the direction of the north gate. Another and then another followed it.

He pressed buttons on the cube to get a scan of the sector. There they were, like a swarm of Actu flies in the heat of the planet's surface. Large ships in the middle with small escorts circling around and around. A classic pirate attack group, but this one was big. Twenty pirate ships was a lot to have in one group. They must

have travelled in smaller groups and then formed up in the northern sector.

There was now a red light that flashed from the tops of the walls on the bridge of the Spinny. Every few sezura it flashed bright and then slowly subsided until it was nearly gone, when it flashed bright again. There was no sound with the light, warning sounds interfered with actions, just the light to indicate that the yacht had now gone to battle stations.

LooManckStrat turned to his pilot who was seated across the other side of the bridge behind him. "Pilot, take us to the South Gate now! Do not enter the gate, proceed at full speed."

"Yes your honour." The pilot replied and quickly fed instructions into the console before him while grabbing hold of the manual control stick. The engines on the yacht fired and were put to full power immediately. LooManckStrat felt a slight sensation of movement as the ship began to move. Artificial gravity systems could never cope with quick movements correctly.

"You should take your seat, your honour." The pilot stated. LooManckStrat knew and moved towards his seat that was just in front of him now that he was facing the pilot and not the space screen. He seated himself and pressed the button to confirm he was ready. Safety straps appeared from under and behind the seat and he was quickly secured in place.

The ship hit maximum speed and sped off towards the South Gate. He accessed the cube in the seat and it rose up out of the arm. He pressed the buttons to access the sector scan so that he could watch the upcoming battle.

He could see from the sector scan that his other two stations were also launching fighters. His Ore Mine and his own Solar Power Plant, if you had to use them you may as well buy them off yourself he had said when he announced his plans to build it. Three ships from each station were racing to catch up with the eight that were already either patrolling, or had launched from the larger factory. Fourteen ships against twenty, not great odds. He thought about calling in more ships from the closest sectors where he also had factories, but dismissed the idea almost instantly. They'd never get here in time, this was going to be over quickly one way or another.

The Captain of ENeT's defence force steered his ship towards the incoming pirate vessels. His six medium fighters were at the head of the group with two heavy fighters trailing behind. The other stations light fighters were beginning to close, but it looked fairly clear to him that he was going to have to engage before the others caught up.

They were at full speed now, closing in on the pirates at an alarming rate. The pirate ships didn't alter from their course, heading directly for the large factory that had just had the new rig installed.

The Captain gave his orders to the other five medium ships. He had scanned all the pirate ships and found a collection of light, medium and heavy fighters. Ships from different races were amongst the ranks, but they all gave out the unmistakable signature of the pirate clans. He was also concerned about the five heavy attack ships, but they would have to wait. The fighters must be dealt with first. The two small fleets were now within five kilometres of each other and closing fast.

"Heavy fighters first, then medium, light, and finally the attack ships. Everyone got that?" He saw the affirmative lights flash up on his console. "Good, stick with your wingmen, battle control has selected your targets for you, commence attack!"

The Paranid ships split into three groups of two and dove into the incoming enemy. The Captain saw the lead pirate in his weapon sights and when he got within two kilometres, he opened fire. Laser bolts streaked out across the darkness of space, momentarily creating an artificial lightness that could be seen on the inside of the ship walls. Again and again he fired, leading the shots in front of the target so the pirate would run into them as he approached.

The pirate was just about to be smothered with the laser bolts when he suddenly pulled the ship into a vertical manoeuvre, spinning as he went and then turning again, this time to be speeding directly for the Captain. It opened fire.

The Captain had managed to keep the pirate in his sights and as it turned towards him he also opened fire. The laser bolts passed each other in space and the Captain felt the all too familiar feeling

of the ship bucking as the lasers from the pirate found their target. He glanced at his shields, 50% remaining. He checked the scanner to check the pirates, 30% remaining. Good, this could be over quickly if he could just get another salvo into its hull.

They passed each other with only metres to spare and immediately he turned the control stick to sweep his ship around in an attempt to get on the back of the pirate. Yes, got him, he was there right in front of him. He squeezed the trigger again, fighting to keep the ship on a steady line as it juddered every time his lasers fired.

He saw the signs of success as the lasers hit their mark and the shields around the pirate vessel glowed with tiny explosions. He kept on firing as the pirate was now trying to take evasive action. Frantically swinging its ship one way and then another. The Captain was too experienced to let such tactics get the better of him and he kept on firing, sometimes around the ship, not directly at it, so that any attempts to escape would be blocked.

The pirate ship suddenly came to an abrupt halt, its shields wasted and its power source exhausted. The Captain had to move quickly to avoid hitting it and he managed to veer to the left. The pirate exploded just as he was passing by, shooting fragments of ship at him. He saw them moving past his space screen and registered the impact on his shields. He quickly registered the positions of the other ships on the scanner and turned to intercept.

Meanwhile, the other Paranid ships had not been so lucky. Three were gone and two more were in serious trouble. However, they had managed to destroy another pirate, so that only left eighteen in total. He carried on regardless, aiming his lasers at the nearest one. It turned too quickly for him and his shots missed the mark. He grabbed the stick tight, selected missiles and quickly fired off three light attack missiles. Short range, highly manoeuvrable ship to ship missiles. He knew they might not all strike, in fact he was sure of it. But he also knew it would keep that pirate busy for the next few sezura while he found another target.

He found one, down and to his left. He turned to intercept, launched another two missiles but this time followed them towards the target. The pirate must have been informed of the incoming missiles as it veered to the right. The Captain was

expecting this though and went with it, firing lasers into the blackness in the hope that the enemy ship would run into the carefully aimed shots. It did, impact flashes appearing all over it as it tried to run. He kept it in his sight and fired until the weapons computer began to warn him of low power. The pirate tried frantically to avoid the laser fire, but just when it looked as though it might succeed, the two missiles streaked across the Captain's screen from the left and hit the pirate. He wasn't sure, but he actually thought the first missile had been the one. It was difficult to tell they had hit so close together. He again checked the scanner and found the initial ship still trying to avoid the first missiles. An ideal opportunity to catch it unawares, he selected it as a locked target and veered towards it.

The five pirate strike ships had ignored the incoming Paranid and had kept on their course towards the station. As they approached within range the factory's defences opened fire. Automated laser batteries attempting to lock on to the incoming threat. Laser towers spinning on their axis while also trying to achieve a successful lock.

As soon as the pirates had passed the point where the lasers from the factory could track them, they opened fire as well. Large "factory killer" missiles were being ejected by the forward most ship. It had targeted the laser towers and within a few Sezuras, they were all gone. Two of the ships began raining laser shots onto the station laser batteries, but the massive defence shields on the station rendered them ineffective. The two pirates continued their attack though, moving back and forth through space, zigzagging so that the laser batteries were unable to get many clean hits. That was part of the plan though, to keep the other three ships free for the next attack.

One of the large pirate assault ships approached the new rig. When it was adjacent to the newly welded connection point, it fired an extremely powerful beam laser at the station. It seemed to miss at first, the shot careering over the top, but then slowly it started to descend and it sliced it's way right through the join. Debris and small impact explosions littered the area. Massive vents of atmosphere that had been contained within the station were pouring out into space. The laser continued until it passed underneath the rig. Then after a pause that seemed to last forever, the newly installed rig began to slowly, very slowly move away from the main factory.

The station went into automatic recovery mode, shutting down sections that had been open to the gaping hole that had been ripped into it's side, too late to save anyone or anything that was the wrong side of the hatches. Bodies flew out into space, instantly freezing in the extreme coldness. Parts of the station followed. Cables and piping, cargo boxes and robotic lifters, all were sucked out into the vacuum that was space. It took the factory's defence computer a few sezuras to recalculate the shield parameters and bring the station back under it's protective cloak.

LooManckStrat almost dropped his zoom lenses from his face. He was now at the relatively safe position of the South Gate and had been observing the battle. He raised the lenses back to his eyes and he could see the unbelievable happening before him. A weak "No!" was all he could muster as he saw his credits disappearing before him. How had they managed to avoid the shields on the factory?

The Super Slave rig was using its back up powers to shutdown the gaps in the same way that the main factory had done moments before. Lights were flickering out in the many space screens along its hull. One of the pirate ships moved in closer, slowed to an almost halt and then slowly, side on began to approach the dying hulk.

When it was within twenty metres it stopped. It's side cargo bay opened and a stream of figures in armed environment suits jetted across to the now lifeless hull. Laser torches began to burn a hole in its side and LooManckStrat could only watch on in disbelief.

He barked orders into the cube, but nobody answered. Eleven of his defence ships were gone and the remaining three were frantically trying to avoid being killed by the ever-chasing pirate fighters. He glanced around the bridge, but his loyal crew could only stare back at him, the same look of despair on their faces too.

In only a few mizura the figures were clambering into the rig. They quickly navigated their way to the walkways and divided into two groups. Using the electronic internal schematics of the station, they quickly sought out their intended destinations. The maps and instructions being transmitted to their Slave chips from the stationary ship outside. The rig was in darkness with only the

occasional spark and flicker of light from the quickly emptying energy cells.

LooManckStrat had contacted the Paranid Navy and they were on their way but they would take a few stazuras to arrive. It was a hopeless position and he knew it, who had done this and why?

He couldn't take his eyes away from the proceedings and quicker than he expected the line of figures began to emerge from the hole they had made in the hull. One by one they came and returned to the waiting ship. He couldn't see them board as that was obscured by the pirate ship itself.

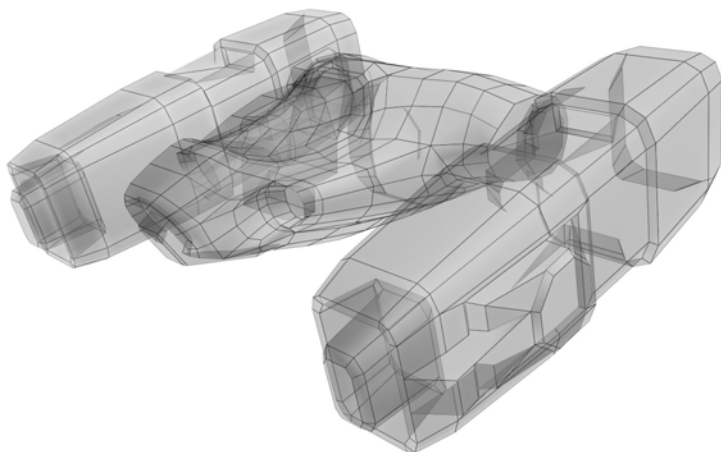
The pirate ship began to move away from the rig. The other four assault ships joining it in formation. They were about three kilometres away from the carnage when a number of large "Factory Killers" were launched.

LooManckStrat actually sank to his knees in despair as he saw first, his newly built rig and all its secrets explode quickly followed by the whole factory itself. His three remaining ships had just met the same fate from the marauding pirate fighters and the whole despicable little fleet headed for the north gate at full speed.

ENeT Factory commander Faa t'Zrrk was relaxing in his office when the communication globe beeped and sped across the room to meet him. This was another of ENeT's chip plants, but this time it was in Split space. He turned his head and body slowly towards the globe and ordered it to pipe the message through.

He saw the face of the Split pirate he had met only two wozuras ago. The message was non-interactive having been transmitted over many gates. It simply said "Mission accomplished, we must meet."

He stared at the globe as if hoping it would say something else. It did not. "Globe, delete last message and remove from archive, confirm?" The globe beeped its confirmation and then sped away back to the middle of the ceiling. Faa t'Zrrk began to clench and unclench his fists involuntarily. They have done it. They have actually gone and done it. He began to pack his belongings.



Chapter 2 - As one light is extinguished another flickers to life

Out of the ashes rose the phoenix, its magnificent body greater than before. "I am mightier now than I ever have been, stronger and wiser." It said. "Let all those who stand as my enemies know that I have returned and the time for vengeance is upon them."

She stood by the window, staring out at the children playing outside in the park. Six small figures giggling as they ran around each other, holding their light toys above them. The blinking from the light on the end of the small sticks making a swirling display like a continuous moving line as they twirled them in the air. They were just having a last play before they were called in for a meal and sleep.

The sun (Sonra) was beginning to sink behind the horizon, leaving a reddish glow on the few clouds that were hanging in the sky. It had been a bright light filled day, slightly cold, but it had warmed as the day went on. The children were savouring the last of it. She smiled at their pleasure. How to see such innocence was enough to bring happiness to another.

At the edge of the park was a fence about twenty metres away. Lights blinking from the two metre tall towers that were spread out along its length. They generated the beams that stretched between them, creating energy that created a secure perimeter around the compound.

Beyond the fence rolled out the hills, covered in low vegetation. A variety of colours from greens to reds and yellows created a mosaic that slowly moved one way then the other as the low wind swept across the hilltops. The ever decreasing light still attempting to thread its way downwards as it dropped behind them.

This was the government controlled child growth centre in Alicka, an orphanage to you and I. Alicka was the third largest population centre on the planet and this planet was the home to the Argon, the biped humans. This was Argon Prime!

She had chosen this place from all the others as it was close to the navy installation at Morang and she could see the shuttle ships take off and land from the base there. In fact she could see

one now, a dark object lifting into the sky, a blinding light emitted from its end as the engines were fired to give the vehicle enough life to exit the atmosphere. Up and beyond to the orbiting stations and the fleets of ships that awaited any newly operational pilots.

She wished she could have stood here and watched these with her son, night after night so she could tell him the stories of the time she had spent in space, darting between systems and skimming the stars. But it was not to be. She moved to her right and heard the distinct sound of the motors as they moved the metallic bones that were in her legs. She sighed.

She had spent too long in space and had lost her mate. Her male companion was somewhere out there still in the cosmos. They had not been in touch for too long, but it didn't matter now. Extract, the bone and nerve wasting disease was nearing its completion. She had caught it working on the Chelt farms in Split space. It only affected Argon and didn't make its presence known until a long time after you had contracted it. Still it was rare and the pay was good, so you took your chance.

Then it struck and she quickly became incapable of moving herself without the aid of implants. Part of the right arm and both legs were now synthetic and the majority of her feelings were gone too. There was no point in staying in space, not for a weakened female, so they had parted. She didn't know where he was now anyway, probably still trading in the Teladi and Split sectors. Making a few credits here and a few there. Living from day to day.

No, she had decided that she wanted to leave something of herself here, on Argon Prime. She had signed up to the government adoption scheme. The government would look after her child after she was gone in return for all her belongings. It seemed a fair deal, she wouldn't need them where she was going and she may as well give her baby the best possible start. She had managed to save a little from her time in the Chelt farms and that would give her baby a better start. She could contribute nothing she knew, but the destination for her offspring wouldn't be as good as this one.

She involuntarily rubbed her hand over her stomach, the whirring motors noticeable in her arm. Not long now she mused. The baby moved and kicked hard, she felt it and smiled again. The disease couldn't make it into the womb, they didn't understand why and

she freely assisted in inconclusive tests. The father didn't even know it was his and he never would. They had mated their last night together on the orbiting space station above the planet and then she had taken the shuttle down to the surface and he had boarded his freighter and left the sector. Goodbye. So cold and unforgiving when done in space, but he wouldn't come down to the surface, not for her, not for anyone.

She had been told that she may live a while longer, but if she kept the baby, the chances of her surviving the birth were not good. She had opted for the baby, what was a little while longer to her when she could provide a lifetime to another? No she had her time sun skimming, drinking in the bars and fighting with the traders. It had been a fitting life, she had taken to it well and enjoyed it. Time to move over, time for another life to begin.

She didn't hear the door open behind her, but she could sense that it had. Maybe a slight change in the light as the glow from the corridor was higher than the room. She turned to greet her visitor.

"Its time." Was all the assistant said, a completely blank expression on her face.

"I know." She replied and began to move towards her. The motors were making the only noise in the room. She gave one last look backward towards the children in the park. They must have been called in, as they were moving towards the door that she knew was to the left, out of site from the window.

She started again across the floor and followed the assistant out and down the corridor. It didn't take long for them to reach the preparation room. She walked and was gestured to lie down on the cushioned table in the middle of the room. She followed her instructions and undressed and then slowly moved, the large bulge that was her belly making it difficult, but she finally managed to climb aboard the table.

She lay down on her back, closed her eyes and thought of what the baby would look like as she had done so many times since she discovered he was to be born. Would it have her eyes, his? What about the mouth, the ears, the hair?

The assistant was leaning over her as she opened her eyes.

"What's his name to be?" she quizzed, not because she was interested but because the recording systems had to record the name from the mother.

She looked the assistant in the eye. "Brett." She replied. "You will say hello to him for me won't you. His name is Brett."

The assistant smiled, the first time she could remember her doing that, the assistants didn't smile as a rule.

"Of course I will." Came the reply. "Goodbye Berny."

"Goodbye." Berny replied.

She didn't feel the drug as it was administered, but she quickly felt it work its magic. She was asleep almost instantly after and only a little later, Brett was born.

Berny didn't survive the surgery, she wasn't expected to, her body was ravaged from the disease. But Brett was a strong, perfectly formed baby boy. As one light is extinguished another flickers to life.

Brett lived at the orphanage until he was a grown boy. Not old enough to venture out on his own, no a long way from that, but old enough to understand. He became a respected member of the group and most of the other children looked up to him. One thing that was certain was that he was highly intelligent. He didn't like to show it and he sometimes had confrontations with the staff at the orphanage, but even they had to agree, Brett was special.

They would set tasks for the children to do, complex and sometimes-difficult scenarios, which they hoped, would keep the children busy for a while. Brett usually (if he could be bothered) answered the questions in an instant. They tried and tried to conjure up ideas for Brett to do, but every time he beat them.

So they obtained the complete history of the universe (as it was known) on data chip and organised for it to be available for Brett to use, to learn from, hopefully to keep him quiet.

Brett leapt at the chance for knowledge, something from outside of the institution. He read continually, accessing the graphic libraries and text scrolls. His appetite for the information was almost insatiable. He studied the data every chance he had.

He learnt about the races first, the Argon, the history books had been rewritten many times. They had originated from many different sources, according to the text, but the religious group known as the "Goners" insisted that they came from a distant star system and a planet called earth. This had captivated him and when he was still only a young boy a man named "Brennan" had been discovered in a strange space ship. Brennan was supposedly from earth. The Goners had risen after that time, becoming more accepted and their beliefs had spread.

The earth people had built a race of machines and created programs that gave true artificial intelligence. Earth had rejoiced at this new-found technology. They had sent these machines out into the cosmos to find new worlds and make them habitable for humans. They called these machines the terraformers (TF). They would later become known as the Xenon (alien). After many earth years it was decided that the terraformers were not required anymore and no more were built or sent out (mainly due to the Gate discovery - later). The earth government had decided to no longer fund this venture, as it was becoming too expensive. Messages were sent out to the terraformers to tell them to halt their missions. What earth did not know at the time is that not all of these messages got through and the machines continued to terraform and multiply, as per their original instructions. Earth almost forgot about them, but a software update was sent out to the few remaining ones to instruct them to destroy themselves. It was thought that only a few existed. However, unknown to earth, there were many still left and they had been continuing to multiply. The software update had flaws and the terraformers were instructed to remove everything else, not themselves! They distributed this flawed update between their own kind.

The earth people had discovered how to create jump gates that joined the universe together. Great objects lying in space. When you entered a gate you were transferred to another gate at the receiving end. The humans from earth had managed to create this remarkable machine and had built two and sent one on it's way to one of their closest stars, Alpha Centurari. It would take years to arrive.

One in earth space and the other on it's way to a distant star. When it did arrive they would have an almost instant journey between the two. But while the gate was on its way, the first gate (in earth space) had tried to obtain a lock and had found, to the great surprise of the scientists and engineers that they had locked onto another gate, not the one they had built.

They soon found that they were locking onto gates at random positions around the universe. These were other gates of alien origin! A ship was constructed (the *WinterBlossom*) to go in search of the gates carrying a twelve strong team of scientists, led by Captain Rene Farnham. Originally planned for a one-year journey, the *WinterBlossom* returned after two years. The information they obtained was amazing. There were gates everywhere, scattered around the universe. But despite extensive probing they had found no intelligent life in space itself. Some planets looked habitable and they were certain that they found intelligent life on some of the worlds, but the ship was not fitted with the equipment for any planet side excursions.

The earth government was concerned about the ease at which space was opening up and the way these vast distances could be travelled in such a short time span. They began to build defence ships that orbited the earth in the event of any alien incursions, not that any aliens had been found at all.

Over a hundred years later, a fleet of six TF ships suddenly entered the solar system through the gate and began to terraform the outer planets. They used all available resources as they were originally instructed to do and in their mission, began to destroy man made structures.

Nathan R Gunne, a brilliant strategist of the time, led a fleet of earth ships against the TF and in a brilliant tactical manoeuvre, tricked the TF ships into following him though the earth made gate. The gate was destroyed immediately after.

The creators of the gates (the Ancients) which no-one is aware of up until Brett's entry into the universe, oversee these events and decide to reconfigure the gates so that they create a closed loop where nothing can get out and nothing can get in. This loop cuts earth out. The old ones have plans to create a universe of races that can live together, including the terraformers. But the battles

that raged around earth space make them wary of humans, they do not want them to be included in the plans for a peaceful universe.

The Teladi who are another space fairing race fall foul of this reconfiguration and as such, their home world "lanamus Zura" is cut off forever. Only a few remote Teladi settlements remain in the loop. They have only basic equipment and space flight. It will be a long time before the Teladi roam the universe again.

Nathan R Gunne fought the Terraformers in the Alpha Centurai system where they followed him through the earth gate before its destruction.

Many of the humans died in the conflict, including many of the humans that were living in the system. Alpha Centurai had become Earth's largest outpost over the years, with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants. The Terraformers though had been defeated, although not eliminated. They retreated back into the cosmos. The humans knew that they could not get back to earth, the gates had been realigned, the earth gate destroyed. They decided to rewrite the history books and earth history was removed. However, there were still those that stood up for original history, who believed that it should be taught. But these were few compared to the many and the history books remained earth-less.

Many years later a new planet was discovered only twelve jumps away from Alpha Centurai. It seemed that this could sustain the human population and was a much better suited environment to live in. The majority of the humans moved to the new planet. It was called Four, after the star in the system, Sonra-4.

At the earth age of 93, Gunne a ruthless pirate who had so magnificently come to the humans aid, died and the planet that they now called home was renamed "Argon" in his memory. The humans now referred to themselves as Argon instead of human and the history books are rewritten once again.

The government of the humans finally agrees to move [from Alpha Centurai] to Argon and forever after the planet is known as Argon Prime.

The terraformers were beginning to launch incursions into Argon space. A band of Argon traders decides to seek out the old earth

gate that is still in existence [in the ship *AP Gunner*]. These were space fairing individuals who ferried goods between the ever expanding Argon territories. More and more worlds were being visited and the Argon Empire was continually expanding. Many years had passed and the history books had the existence of the second earth gate removed. They travel for three years and finally find the gate. It is intact, so they decide to disable it and destroy its electronics. A plaque is left on the gate explaining why it has been disabled. The "Gunners" as they have called themselves return to Argon space and begin to spread the word about the earth gate and history of the Argon. More and more people begin to gravitate towards this belief.

This information once compiled becomes known as the "Book of Truth" and is a strict religious belief of some of the Argon people. This group of believers becomes known as the Goners.

Soon after, the terraformers attacked an Argon reconnaissance ship, but the ship survived! It was able to communicate back the details of the attackers. The Argon named the attackers Xenon [alien] and it was found that these were the original terraformers who had mutated beyond belief.

The following [earth] year the Xenon finally entered central Argon space and attacked and destroyed the Argon space station "The Antigone". Thousands died in the attack and at last the Argon government decided to retaliate. This chapter in the Argon history became known as the Xenon war and lasted over forty earth years.

During this time the Argon had met and made friends with the Paranid. Agreements were made between the two races that in principle, they would co-operate.

Also, during the Xenon war years the Boron had finally managed space flight and had begun to colonise their local worlds and moons.

The Argon government turned to their newly found allies, the Paranid, for support and help during the conflict. The debates actually lasted many earth years, but in the end, the Paranid refused to be involved, as the Xenon did not directly threaten them.

The Xenon had become more aggressive and were continually attacking and destroying Argon outposts. Something had to be done and it had to be decisive.

The Argon had built up a considerable fleet during the years that were orbiting the homeworld of Argon Prime. The command was given and the whole Argon fleet ventured into space to engage the Xenon threat head on.

Many battles followed, but over time the Argon navy, together with their trader brethren, began to turn the tide. Lost territories were regained and the Xenon were repeatedly beaten and forced onto the defensive. Finally the Xenon retreated back to where they had come from and the attacks on the Argon ceased. The Argon had won the Xenon war!

During this time the Boron had begun to colonise space and their kingdom was stretching further out. Unfortunately they began to colonise a sector that belonged to the Split, a race of warlike creatures that didn't know the art of negotiation. The Split had been the last of these races to achieve space flight, but they had quickly caught up with the other races with their (rather crude) ships. The Split attacked the Boron without remorse, killing thousands, but instead of driving them out of their sector, the Split began a systematic destruction of everything Boron. This lasted ten years until the Boron were on the brink of extinction.

The Split moved ever outward, chasing the Boron back until they were only fighting in their own sector.

The Boron had met the Argon and after initial trading deals that had been initiated by the pioneering traders at that time, formerly approached the Argon government. The talks were under tight security and absolute secrecy, but the two races agreed to some basic trading rights and this would become known as the "Foundation Guild" later.

The Split were amassing a large fleet for a final attack on the Boron when they encountered the first Argon they had ever met. These were the pioneering traders, assorted ships built mainly for mining and exploration and the Split forward units attacked them. The traders fought the Split for years in many hit and run, disruptive type attacks. This slowed the Split's plans and it took them longer than planned to put the fleet into place. The Split had

also met and befriended the Paranid during this time, a fact that the Argon were unaware of.

Suddenly part of the Argon fleet was attacked by the aggressive Split navy. A detachment of Paranid ships was recognised in formation with the Split. The Argon government immediately gave orders to the massive navy and it set course for the Split advanced fleet. Just as the Split were about to launch their final and devastating attack on the Boron, the Argon navy arrived.

The battle was ferocious, but the joint forces of the Argon and the Boron defeated the Split over the skies of the Boron home planet and the following years saw the alliance forces reverse all the gains that the Split had made. The Boron are a technically advanced race, developing the finest shield and weapon systems. They shared these technologies with the Argon and over a period of one hundred years (from the first Split aggression towards the Boron), the war raged.

The Paranid and Split forces finally sued for peace, their respective fleets being in the same positions they had started out from at the outset of the war. This period of conflict was known as the "Boron campaign" to the Argon. The Split were so devastated at their defeat that they endured an internal revolt and the Split emperor was removed. The Split and Paranid begin to argue between themselves and various small-scale battles were fought between the two.

The Argon and Boron officially sign the "Foundation Guild" treaty and now have many goods being traded between the two races. The Paranid and Split who have finally put their disagreements behind them form the "Profit Guild" as a direct move against the Foundation Guild.

Over a hundred years later, the reptilian Teladi settlements rediscovered advanced space travel. Their colonies cut off from the homeworld after the gate reconfiguration. Untouched by the other races because of their lack of space involvement offered no real benefits to others. They begin to trade with the other races and show no aggressive signs at all, preferring to trade and make profit.

The Foundation Guild approaches the Teladi in an attempt to get them to join, but the Teladi refuse to enter into any agreement,

mainly because they prefer their own currency system. However, after years of negotiation, the Teladi join the Profit Guild instead.

Twenty-six years later, in an astonishing act of co-operation, both the Foundation Guild and the Profit Guild agree on a single universal currency to ease the trade levies. This currency is called "Credits" and from that point onwards, every space race uses them as a means of trade. This is referred to as the Great Currency Reform.

Over the next hundred years space becomes a safer place, traders and stations manufacturing goods appear everywhere and the Teladi become the strongest race in terms of financial stance. It is this position that enables them to influence the Guilds to adopt the Teladi time system based on Sezuras and Jazuras.

The Argon, like the other races still maintain their own time systems on their own worlds. Many of the races have millions of beings that never venture into space and are not interested in converting their fundamental time systems. But the basis is that the Teladi system, when compared to the Argon system is similar, but with longer units of time. For example, a Sezura is 1.7 seconds and a Mizura is 2.72 minutes. This carries on until it reaches a Jazura, which is 1.36 years.

Sezura	=	Second
Mizura	=	Minute
Stazura	=	Hour
Tazura	=	Day
Wozura	=	Week
Mazura	=	Month
Jazura	=	Year

The Xenon (TF) dispatch a ship using its own jumpdrive technology directly into earth space. The earth government is astonished at this new breakthrough in technology and begin a project to develop their own system using the captured remains of the TF ship.

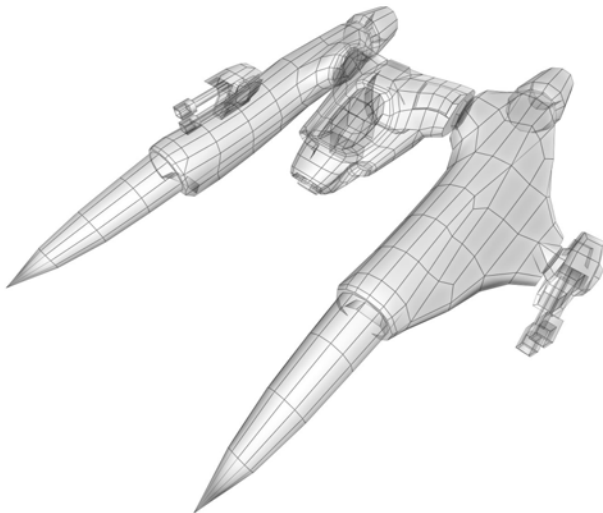
Seven years later they test their new technology, the X-Shuttle. Piloted by Captain Kyle William Brennan, it malfunctions and arrives in Teladi space. Brett is four Jazuras old (five years) when this happens. He remembers watching the news broadcasts at the time and especially the view of the Argon fleet as it moved out

of Argon Prime space and proceeded to intercept the newly risen Xenon threat.

Brennan is instrumental in the defeat of the Xenon; he actually flies the final attack on the Xenon mother ship himself. The Xenon are defeated once again and move further back into uncharted areas. The Argon rejoice and the Goners [Gunners] rise to prominence as it is now undeniably true that earth does exist if Brennan is to be believed, even though the Argon attempted to remove its existence from history.

The X-Shuttle is damaged but after many years of trying they finally manage, with the help of the Boron scientists, to make a workable jumpdrive. It takes another few years, but the drive becomes commercially available to the richest pilots.

Brett is seven Jazura when he decides that he will meet these other races, that he will travel the space lanes. Little does he know that he will go to places that he could never imagine at such a young age. He is ten when the Argon navy visits the orphanage and offers him (although he actually has little choice in the decision) the chance to go and live at Morang and train to be a pilot. He agrees before the navy officer has finished explaining the offer, he knows it is time.



Chapter 3 – The plot thickens

*For every push to the left, there is an equal push to the right.
Maybe not in the same place, but it will happen nonetheless.
Whenever something is established that some see as good, there
will always be the opposite view. That is as it always has been and
probably always will.*

Faa t'Zrrk had left the station that was his home and travelled two complete sectors further out into cosmos, away from the centre of Split. He had sold his company issued ship at one of the shipyards. No questions would be asked in these areas, it would be repainted, given a new electronic identity and resold, probably before he even left the shipyard.

So he had purchased an old freighter ship, slow and unforgiving. But it was the perfect vessel for the next part of his journey. It would blend in with the rest of the space traffic. A Split freighter in the outer sectors of Split space, he was just like all the others, ideal.

He wasted no time in fitting the ship with the necessary equipment and supplies for the journey ahead. The attendants on the shipyard didn't even give him a second glance, no checking of credentials, he had the credits and the transfer of them from his personal account had proceeded without a hitch. He was Split himself after all. Now it was a matter of navigating the space lanes and arriving on time.

He calculated the journey time and felt satisfied that everything was, so far, going to plan. He stood in the long stay holding dock walking around the large ship. It was definitely old, its paintwork tarnished from many journeys past harmful stars and radiation clouds. Scorch marks around the massive single engine at the rear and a few dents in the bodywork itself. He satisfied himself that it looked space-worthy and the data readout confirmed the same. He made a conscious effort to remove the readout from his image and the slave chip he had installed followed his wishes. The image slowly dissolved.

Accessing the flight system, he ordered the flight deck door to open and heard a slight hiss as it moved upwards and outwards away from the ship's hull. He walked towards it and made the

single large step to enter the ship, pressing the manual button on the inside of the hull to close the door.

It was only a short few steps to enter the flight deck. A small area with two seats, a console and the large space screen. He could see another similar shaped ship being towed slowly out to the launch area further down the bay. Behind him was a small compartment with a bunk and an area to get refreshed with a sonic shower. He was glad he had opted for such a large ship as these kind of small comforts were rare and this ship even had an artificial gravity system, comfort indeed.

He accessed the ship's scanning systems and checked the local sector. It was full of traffic, he counted over a hundred ships all going about their business. Ferrying goods from one factory to another or performing protection duties for other ships or factories. A busy sector this, he was five sectors away from his destination, that was a considerable distance and it would take him over two Tazura to get there. Then if everything went to plan, he would have to travel a further ten sectors, partly doubling back on himself for the final meeting.

It was a tense time, but with the plan now underway he didn't have time to feel it properly, he was too busy and that was good. If he thought about it too long he might just convince himself that it wasn't a good idea. But the ENeT security group had almost surely linked his mysterious departure with the destruction of the factory in Paranid space. If they hadn't yet, they would eventually. He had left no reason, no evidence as to why he had gone in the hope that it might throw them off his trail for a while. As soon as they knew, they would hunt him down and they wouldn't stop to ask questions. His actions had made him an outlaw within the company. Of that there was no doubt.

But if everything went to plan, he would take his credits and go to one of the pleasure planets, a place where beings went to relax. But he would stay there forever, never again venturing into the dark cold void that was space. He would live out his life in luxury, at least that was the idea. Just a few more loose ends to tie up and the small matter of delivering the goods and then freedom, he hoped.

He was beginning to feel slightly ill at the thought of it all. Time to get on with the job in hand. He mentally accessed the

communications system and asked the automated station traffic computer for clearance to launch. It came back with a positive reply and he waited for the small robot tug to move to the front of his ship and attach a tow belt. He could quite easily navigate his ship out of the dock and into space itself, but it was not allowed within the stations. No engines, no weapons and no shields allowed. You kept them all disabled while the automated systems moved your ship into a launch position. Then you could fire your engines and enter the void. The laser turrets that adorned the ceiling of the bays would fire on any ship that attempted to break these rules. The same regulations applied throughout known space. It was a time wasting exercise as far as Faa t'Zrrk was concerned, but there were many rookie pilots around, so it made sense.

He felt the slight “tug” on the ship as the robot pulled it forward down the bay. A hundred metres away stood the launch door, it was just closing as the ship he had witnessed being pulled away before had just launched. As they approached the door, he could see to his left two sleek attack craft. They were undergoing some form of maintenance, he couldn't tell what, he wasn't an engineer. But they looked fast and manoeuvrable. He half wished he was in one now, the journey time would be considerably less and any trouble could be dealt with in such a ship. But they were too obvious. Ships like that attracted attention, particularly in the outer sectors where he was going. The pirates and illegal companies ran most of these areas and any ship like that would attract immediate scans. If it didn't show up as a local ship, there was a good chance of being attacked. No, he didn't like it, but he was better off in his ship. Also, such a long journey in a small craft didn't bear thinking about, oh the discomfort!

The robot was now pulling his ship through the now fully opened door. It slued to the right and his ship followed it. After about twenty metres it came to a halt and the second tug that was at the rear of the ship, took the strain and negated the forward movement so that his ship came to a complete stop.

The two tugs disengaged and vanished through the door behind him. It slowly began to descend and came to halt as it entered the slit in the floor ready to accommodate it and create a secure, atmosphere and blast proof seal.

He could see the air being sucked out of the launch bay, slight white wafts appeared by the vents as the area became a vacuum ready for the outer door to be opened.

He saw the confirmation light flash on the console. Launch confirmed. He now had twenty seconds to abort the action and get pulled back into the bay or the outer doors would open and he could fire his engines.

He manually confirmed his request to launch so that he wouldn't have to wait any longer and the engine light turned from red to amber. When it went green he could fire his engines and be away.

The outer doors began to open. A split appeared horizontally across the middle as the top half went upwards and the bottom half downwards. He saw the indicator flash its confirm to tell him that the clamps on the portable "cot" that his ship was sat on top of, had been released. The ship floated in space and the engine light went to green.

He pressed the button to start the engine and set his speed to ten metres a second. The ship began to approach the waiting opening. He could see the darkness of space outside, a multitude of stars staring back at him, dim and distant. He made sure he was securely seated and the straps were fastened across his chest, then he switched off the artificial gravity. He felt a slight dizziness accompanied with a feeling of sickness. But that was the normal feeling when going from gravity to weightlessness.

He confirmed a speed of fifty, the fastest this ship could go and the opening suddenly disappeared and he was heading out into space. He let the ship fly on its original course for two kilometres and then turned thirty degrees to the left in the general direction of the jump gate, thirty-two kilometres away.

A quick scan of the surrounding ships and he felt happy that he was not being followed. He closed his eyes in an attempt to get a little rest, but it didn't help.

* * * * *

The pirate fleet that had carried out the attack in Paranid space had gone many different ways as soon as they had exited the gate after the battle. The Paranid navy would probably be on the lookout

and it was much easier to spot a large fleet of ships than it was to pick them out among all the others.

The assault ship carrying the Super Slaves was the prize and it was being flanked by two large fighter craft. They headed straight for the Split outer sectors and their intended rendezvous. The captain had sent out an encoded message drone as soon as they were underway. It had arrived back with a confirmation of receipt. The drones were very small, extremely fast devices that used the gates to traverse the systems and deliver messages. They took time however, even though they were fast and it made interactive communications between sectors troublesome.

Twenty three million credits was the price they had agreed for the Slave chips and the data banks. They were of no use to the pirates, they had been hired to do a job and they had done it. Eight million credits had already been paid, so they were aiming to collect the rest at the meeting.

The information regarding the shield grid on the station had proved to be correct. All shields generated a field where anything could go one way through, as if it was not there. But the other side created a strong energy field that protected against physical objects. That included missiles and lasers. But the shields had to reconfigure themselves at pre set intervals. If you knew the interval and you timed your shot at the right time, you could find a weakness. The information had given them the exact timings of the factory and the time it took for the reconfiguration to be implemented. It had proven to be correct. The new factory installation would force the shield system to immediately throw its protective cover over the new extension. But then exactly twenty-three Mizura later, it would run a complete system configuration and when it had finished four Sezura later, it would reconfigure the shield system. This took eight Sezura for the whole station and the new rig would be the last to benefit. That was how long it had taken to blow the join apart.

They had to destroy the whole station, as the investigation teams would find this information if anything was left to investigate. So with no station, the cunning plan would remain secret and the source of the information, Faa t'Zrrk would stay secret as well.

The three pirate vessels continued on their journey.

* * * * *

LooManckStrat was inconsolable after the attack, but he soon came around to the facts at hand. He had lost not only a large part of his business empire, but importantly he had lost the Super Slaves. What had been even worse was that all the data to make them and all the scientists and engineers who had played a part were gone. They had all been aboard the rig when it exploded, ready to celebrate the opening of the new production and the completion of their hard work.

His defence ships had proved worthless against such a strong and co-ordinated attack. He had already ordered further fighter craft and a training program to make them better. He did not want to see this happen again. Every station would be upgraded with more and better ships. He may have lost a large part of the business, but one thing he still had was a determination to succeed. Together with the fact that he had vast reserves of credits, he was ready to start again.

He knew that it would take many Jazura to recreate the chip. They would have to start from the beginning again. Do all the tests on the different races again, recruit the paid volunteers. It would take a long time.

He had already given the instruction for it to begin. Recruit the scientists and engineers, pay them whatever they required, but get them onto the ENeT Company list.

All these things were underway and he would attend to them when he needed to, but the most important thing now was to find out who had done it. He knew one of the pirate groups had actually staged the attack, but it was doubtful that they were behind it. No, someone else was behind this, another company perhaps or even another race. He wasn't sure at the moment. He was however, absolutely sure that he would find out.

His factory commander in Split space, Faa t'Zrrk, had vanished just after the attack. Faa t'Zrrk had been involved with the Super Slave, he knew about it and also had privileged information about the company. LooManckStrat didn't think Faa t'Zrrk could be a traitor, but he had gone somewhere and he intended to start there.

As soon as his defence ships were ready he was on his way to his factory in Split space. He had sent a message to the Split families who ruled the race, informing them of his intentions and asking them to begin their own inquiries. They had replied that they would investigate the disappearance of Faa t'Zrrk, but they didn't like the idea of a fleet of ships entering their domain.

LooManckStrat told them that his intentions were peaceful and that he would leave the majority of his ships in the outer sectors, but his company was an important employer for them and they should help him as much as possible.

The Split eventually agreed, but only after some pressure from the Paranid delegation at the Profit Guild, of which the Split were also members.

This process had taken two Wozura, but it enabled him to order his ships from the Paranid shipyards and organise the purchase of his new pride and joy, a fully armed, brand new Class Six, Paranid destroyer. So, someone had attacked him, destroyed his station and murdered his employees. He would call that debt in, make no mistake.

He ordered a second destroyer which would take longer to arrive and he left orders for it to be left in his home sector. The work to rebuild the factory and install the original rigs had already begun. He would leave that to his minions while he investigated the attack personally.

Yes, something was definitely happening and someone was definitely behind it. He made preparations to join "Deliverance", his new destroyer. It was time to become detective.

Chapter 4 - Yaki

You may find a hand that feeds more readily than the one you are used to. But never forget one push to the left causes a push to the right and it may come from a direction you didn't expect.

The station rotated slowly in space, creating gravity that made it almost like their home planet at the outer walls. This was where the living quarters were situated and the residents, all five thousand four hundred of them, had living space in the outer shell. Glorious rooms with water showers and space screens looking directly out into the cosmos.

The station was immense, full three kilometres in diameter with a globe like shape. At the top and bottom of the huge structure were the launch bays. Large one hundred metre protrusions that looked so small against their larger parent.

A thousand space screens scattered over its surface, light shining out from many, some others dark, the inhabitants either in their quarters of working deep in the centre of the station. Massive cargo bays and storage tanks situated off the main corridor that ran from the top to the bottom, from launch bay to launch bay.

A ship could actually fly all the way through the station if the seal doors were opened all the way along the corridor. Laser towers situated along the length of the corridor, ready to enforce the landing regulations, should they be broken. Robotic helpers were moving about their business, moving cargo back and to and stocking up on supplies.

The outside shell was littered with more defence systems. Station launched missile batteries together with laser towers and their dual cannons trained out into space. The telltale protrusions of the scanning systems could be seen strategically placed over the surface, some stationary, while others revolved continuously, feeding data into the weapon systems ever ready to react to any given threat.

The whole station was a deep, dark blue colour. No other colours at all were visible on its surface. Outside and a few kilometres away sat an Argon cruiser, motionless in space. Its colour the same as the station, no visible light emitting from it whatsoever. But its systems were online and scanning for any threats in the

same way the station was. Slightly further out from the cruiser lay a Paranid destroyer, the same colour again, some lights flickering and a slight glow from its engines as it had only just moved into its position to flank and protect the large cruiser ship.

Three large fighters were approaching the station from the opposite side to the large ships. Bright white ships, but with a jagged pattern covering their hulls. Thick lines and patterns creating a camouflage effect in the same blue colour as the station. The pattern was a signature. However, it held no value, as camouflage was completely useless in space, but it showed other ships the origin, let them know where these ships had come from and most importantly whom they belonged to.

The station was the only permanent fixture in the whole sector. Deep in space in the currently uninhabited sectors between the Split and the Teladi civilisation sectors. They would not be discovered here for a long time and any ships that came close would be dealt with. The station sold no goods, nor did it manufacture any. It was a base of operations.

Inside the station in a large room in the outer shell sat a group of beings, a collection of different races including Split, Paranid and Argon. They were seated around a large ornate table made from Cry wood, carved and polished from the forests on Sentuie in Paranid space. They sat on chairs made from the same wood, high backed examples with decoration carved into the tops.

They were the pirate leaders who had agreed to join together. At the head of the table sat Moo-kye, Argon female and self-elected leader of the group. She was dressed in a close fitting body suit of the same colour as the station. A weapons belt around her waist containing a laser hand gun. She stood and moved away from the table, the small crown built into the headpiece of the body suit glittering from the light that shone down from the ceiling.

"So." She began. "Do we have the goods? What is the position of the strike force?"



Moo-Kye

The six other figures in the room looked at each other as if willing one another to answer. One of the two Paranid members, still dressed in his environment suit without the helmet, spoke up.

"The goods are about to be delivered Moo-Kye. The strike force is in place and they have their orders. We can do nothing to alter the events now, they are too far away."

"Good!" She hissed. "It is time for the universe to be aware of us, the Yaki!" She clenched a fist as she spoke. "Ensure the goods arrive, or do not bother to speak to me again."

Faa t'Zrrk slowed his ship to a halt. He was, give or take a few hundred metres, in exactly the position he was supposed to be in. The sector was empty of installations apart from a single energy cell factory that was far away. Someone had obviously decided that this was a good place to start trading and had probably deployed the station in preparation for others to follow.

His scanner did show a small asteroid field, so maybe someone was going to begin mining them. A single slow moving freight ship

was visible on the scanner close to the station. Probably returning from picking up supplies, he thought. The only other ships in the whole sector were heading directly for him. A freighter sized attack ship flanked by two large fighter craft. They gave off the pirate signatures on the scanner. Faa t'Zrrk watched them approach, his apprehension beginning to increase the closer they got.

The communication console blinked to indicate an incoming message. He gestured to his slave chip and confirmed that it was being received over the secure channel that had been agreed. He brought the signal onto the main viewing screen.

"Ah!" The pirate spoke. "We meet again at last!"

Faa t'Zrrk saw the face of the Split pirate who he had met and divulged the information to when he was on the pleasure world, taking his permitted leave of absence from his position in the factory.

"So we do." Faa t'Zrrk replied. "You have the goods?" he inquired.

The pirate smiled and delayed his answer long enough to annoy Faa t'Zrrk. "Of course we have the goods, do you have the credits?"

"I have the credits." He confirmed. "Bring your ship alongside so that we can perform the transfer."

"Agreed."

The actual transfer of goods and credits would take place at the same time. It was a transaction that required systems on both ships to confirm that each of the parts of the transaction had taken place. If either system disagreed, they would automatically undo the transfers. Someone could modify one end of the system in an attempt to steal goods or not pay, but this would not affect the other side and the deal would be undone anyway.

This way of trading had been law throughout the universe for as long as anyone could remember. It worked and even the illegal groups would comply when they were trading. Anyone breaking the regulations that got reported was an outlaw by all members of both the foundation and profit guilds.

The only problem was that it had to be reported and Faa t'Zrrk was a little concerned that his life might be nearing its end. But he had thought it through many times. The pirates he was dealing with knew that he was working for someone else. They didn't know whom, but could guess by the amount of credits in the deal, that it was someone of considerable importance. If they made any attempts to renege on the deal, they could imagine the consequences. No, this deal would go ahead as planned.

The pirate vessel came along side. With no other way to transfer the cargo other than to drop it into space and allow the other ship to scoop it up, via its cargo handling system. The onboard trading system would automatically transfer the remaining credits as soon as it received confirmation from the cargo hold.

The cargo pod was jettisoned into space and the pirate ship moved a slight distance away to allow Faa t'Zrrk to approach it. He grabbed the control stick and manually adjusted the engine power and the ship gently moved forward. He made a slight adjustment to the stick and the ship turned towards the pod. It was a standard cargo pod, large in size, even though its contents were small. These pods were standard issue and all ships were equipped to carry the standard size, as were the stations. It was one more act of race co-operation that made trading that much easier.

He mentally told the system to open the cargo bay and immediately saw the visible warning on the instrument panel, shields down. This was the crucial part of the manoeuvre, nothing could be brought onto the ship while the shields were active, it would simply be repelled by the shields or more likely explode from the impact. So the shields were automatically taken off line when the cargo bay was opened, leaving the ship, and Faa t'Zrrk extremely vulnerable.

He steered the ship directly at the pod and, heart racing, scanned the instruments and visual aids for any indication that the pirate ships were doing anything that might alarm him. Thankfully they didn't and as he saw the pod visibly disappear below the space screen and below the ship, he was warned by the audible bleep that confirmed the cargo had been successfully loaded. He saw the credits on the screen negate the agreed amount and the

cargo inventory displayed the entry, "Slave Chips – Quantity One Hundred". Good, deal done, now time to vacate the area, quickly!

The pirate's face appeared on the communication screen one last time. "Thank you for the business Faa t'Zrrk. I hope we can trade again."

"Yes," he replied, "so do I."

With that the pirate ship and its two protectors turned and began to speed away. At last, he thought, I have the chips! Now I must deliver them.

He began to steer the ship in the opposite direction to the retreating pirate ships, increasing his speed to maximum, when he noticed a number of other ships appear on the scanner.

"Oh No!" He gasped. Not ENeT security forces here? They couldn't have found him this easily, this soon, could they?

He ignored his slave link and manually stabbed at the buttons on the console to scan the incoming ships. Combat pilots were trained to use the chip in situations like this. That was what sometimes made the difference between living and dying. But traders were not as well trained or disciplined as fighter pilots and Faa t'Zrrk was no fighter pilot. He began to frantically search the screen in the hope that it might give up its secrets, when the communication channel opened.

"Faa t'Zrrk?"

He was astonished, no one knew he was here, who was it?

"Yes?" he replied, his voice giving away his state of mind. "This is Faa t'Zrrk, what do you want?"

"Faa t'Zrrk, we are here to escort you to your destination. Hold your position and await further orders. Are those ships the pirates that you have traded with?"

"Understood." He eased down the engine power. "Confirmed, those are the pirates."

“Good, do not move from your position.” Came the reply, blank and expressionless.

His ship came to halt, the engines reversing the forward momentum until it stopped. He counted the ships on the scanner, twelve Argon heavy fighters, probably armed with powerful lasers and space attack missiles. Quite an escort for a single ship, he watched on the screen as they approached and then moved to glance out of the space screen to see if he could get a visual of them, he wanted to see this.

They approached at full speed, four ships abreast in three lines, one behind the other. The last line slowed as they neared and veered towards him. The others continued on and began to pass him. He could see them in fine detail now, white ships with deep blue jagged stripes. Lasers clearly visible on the outer tips of the wing shaped weapon mountings. He watched them as they went past and had to turn away as their engines came into view and the bright light nearly blinded him.

The pirate ships were now some distance away, but they must have read the situation well. The large attack ship, slow and cumbersome, was continuing on its course. But the two protection ships had turned towards their pursuers, sensing that they would not make it to the jump gate. It was a vain attempt to give their comrade a slim chance of escape.

Faa t’Zrrk reached for his zoom lenses that were attached to the wall next to the edge of the space screen and located the now advancing pirate ships. Two against eight, the pirates were going to die, or at least be forced to eject from their ships. Could they slow the attackers in time? He doubted it. Closer and closer they came. The eight ships held their position, two lines of four and when they were within eight kilometres, Faa t’Zrrk saw the telltale small intense glows of seeker missile engines. Firing as they left their launch ships, accelerating to a speed twice as fast as the ships themselves and heading for their targets the two pirate ships, and so many missiles he couldn’t count them all.

The pirates took immediate evasive action, one ship headed vertical, twisting and turning as it went. The other repeated the technique, but went down, causing the missiles to make a decision on which ship to go for. The missiles must have made their

choices as they parted into two groups, each one seeking out one of the pirates. The eight ships continued on their course.

The pirate assault ship was nearing the gate when the ships pounced. All four ships from the first line began firing their lasers. Faa t'Zrrk watched on as the flashes from the pirates' shields made a dazzling display. The pirate ship tried to zigzag to avoid the incoming fire, but it was to no avail.

The first line of ships simply speeded past the pirate and the second line took up the same offensive stance, all four firing their lasers into the fading shields of their prey. The pirate must have decided enough was enough and that if he was about to die, it may as well be in attack rather than defence.

The second row of ships was just passing over the pirate when Faa t'Zrrk saw the salvo of "Factory Killers" leave the pirate ship. The four attackers broke formation straight away, but the missiles were too close to evade and two of them made a direct hit on two of the ships. He watched as one exploded, quickly followed by a second. A large explosion, a quick bright light, followed by debris and fire that was quickly extinguished in the vacuum. It was an eerie sight, watching an explosion without any sound following it.

By now the first line of ships had turned and was approaching from the other side, head to head with the pirate. They unleashed a fresh wave of seeker missiles, something the large pirate had no chance of evading. He again saw the hits on the shield and then a third explosion filled his lenses as the pirate ship disintegrated, its shield energy spent.

The six remaining ships then formed into two groups of three and each group sought out one of the two pirate fighters that had just finished either evading the missiles until they ran out of fuel, or had succeeded in destroying them.

The pirates hit full speed and ran for the gate. They had greater speed than the Argon ships and would have to make, hopefully, just a single pass on their way out. They approached the attackers, lasers firing as they came. The six ships were taking some hits, but still they came, returning the fire as the two forces swept into each other. A blinding flash! Faa t'Zrrk checked his scanner, confirmed. One of the pirates and one of the escort ships

had collided head on, shields down from the laser battle they had both exploded on impact.

He put the lenses back to his eyes and saw the remaining pirate ship pass through the group and head for the gate. The attackers turned, seeker missiles launching as they did so, the gap between them already too great for effective laser fire to have any impact. He was going to make it!

On and on the pirate fled it's attackers. The distance between it and the other ships getting greater, while the distance from the group of seeker missiles was shortening. It was almost on the point of entering the jump gate when the missiles found their target. The familiar glow from the shields as the missiles impacted one by one. Five, six, seven missiles hit, still the pirate headed for the gate. Eight, nine, ten, bang! Its luck finally ran out and the pirate ship exploded on the verge of escape.

"Mission accomplished. Faa t'Zrrk? Accelerate to maximum speed and continue your journey." The message came through the visual link and Faa t'Zrrk saw it via his slave.

"Yes," he replied, seating the lenses back into their holding bracket and instructing the ship to full speed. He sat down in the pilot seat and simply stared out of the space screen. What have I got involved in? He pondered this as the escort ships swarmed around him.

* * * * *

It took several Tazuras of travelling through empty sectors before they reached the Yaki base. Faa t'Zrrk had thought the whole episode through again and again. It was possible that the pirate ships had managed to launch message drones before they were killed. If they had, what had they said? Faa t'Zrrk may now be a wanted Split by those pirates, they still had many ships left and they had lost a great deal, risked even more and had nothing to show for it.

He was worried, the pirates were a resourceful lot and they would find him and enact their revenge. Where could he go now? He would have to think about that later, as now, slowly growing in size in his space screen was the Yaki base, large ships motionless beside it. He realised for the first time in his life that he was doing

something that was completely out of his control. He had no say in the outcome of the upcoming meeting. He had started out on this venture full of enthusiasm that his cunning skills at trading and negotiation would see him through. But now he had watched the savagery of the Yaki attack, he felt powerless to alter the course of his destiny. He would have to play it out and see what became of him and he didn't like that. It was not in the Split nature to lose control of the situation and it bothered him greatly. His ship approached the base.

The escort ships slowed to a halt and let him proceed to the upper docking bay on his own. He requested landing permission from the docking computer and was immediately granted it. They were expecting him. He decided to navigate the ship into the dock manually, a strange feeling that it might be the last time he was able to do so.

He moved towards the top of the base, pointing his ship directly at the launch bay. Then just before he would have hit it, he veered away, heading away from the base. He slowed the ship and then turned it back on itself so the docking bay was directly in front of him.

The large doors were open, just the edges visible as they locked into position to allow him to proceed. He could see the navigation lights emitting from the station, blinking green to confirm that he had permission to advance. Faa t'Zrrk slowly eased the ship forward and into the mouth that was the docking bay. He watched through the screen as the door edges flashed past and then he slowed the ship to a stop as his console confirmed he had entered the station.

The doors closed behind him and when fully sealed, the area began to fill with atmosphere from the station. Red lights circling all around him and then suddenly they stopped, he was in.

The inner doors began to open this time side to side, instead of top to bottom and the familiar site of the robot tugs greeted him, as they came through the opening and attached themselves to his ship. He felt a slight movement as they began to propel his ship into the station itself and the docking bay beyond.

After the ship was securely docked and fixed into place, Faa t'Zrrk pressed the door button and the ship's door opened to the sound

of the dock. Metal clanking and bangs as items and cargo pods were moved around. He stepped from the ship.

“Diatri bu.” He heard the voice from the Argon male stood next to the ship. He held up his hand and moved back into the ship. He had forgotten to bring his translator with him. A small device that fitted into each ear (depending upon the race) and translated the other species’ language. Everyone in space had them inserted most of the time, but they became uncomfortable for long periods and he removed them on his long journey, as the ship systems would do the job for him.

He picked them up, inserted one into each ear and once again left the ship. The Argon male was still there, waiting.

“Follow me.” He said.

“I will.” Faa t’Zrrk replied and began to walk behind him as he quickly moved away. The Argon could always move quicker than the Split and he struggled to keep up.

They walked through many corridors, took rides in the quick deployment cubes and finally arrived at the door that was the destination. The Argon male gestured to Faa t’Zrrk. “In there.” It was all he said and then walked away.

Faa t’Zrrk stood for a moment, contemplating his position. Be strong, think straight he told himself. Beyond this door lies your future, your destiny! He pressed his hand on the door release and it opened without a sound, sliding to the left.

“Ah, at last! Faa t’Zrrk do come in, join us. It has been a long time waiting to meet you.”

The voice came from the Argon female dressed in dark blue. She must be Moo-Kye he thought as he entered the room. The door closed behind him and the other beings turned to survey him as he walked towards the large table in the middle of the room. He saw two Argon, two Split and two Paranid. He could tell from the dress that these were pirates. They must be the leaders of the pirate groups that Moo-Kye had forged together to create the Yaki.

"Come Faa t'Zrrk, sit down. You must be tired from your long journey. Rest. You have been very important to us recently."

He took the vacant chair at the nearest end of the table, away from Moo-Kye who was at the other end. He didn't much care for the Argon as a rule. Argon were a self-opinionated lot and he could quite happily live out his life without ever coming into contact with them again. But he could see that Moo-Kye was a stunning example of their female gender. She had the look and lines of the Argon females he had viewed in the news broadcasts. She would be considered very attractive by her own race, he was sure. Slightly darkened skin and eyes that were deep brown. They held you in their brilliance. He also guessed her hair was dark, but it was tucked away under the head dress she wore.

"We have verified the cargo Faa t'Zrrk, it is good. Exactly as we ordered, you have done well for us." She moved as she spoke, back and to across the floor, but never once letting her eyes leave his. Let this be over and then I can leave, he thought. He wanted to avert his eyes, to stare out of the large space screen to his side, but he couldn't will himself to do it. She smelt of power, of ambition, the will to succeed. She was the dominant one in the room, the weakest physically maybe, but the leader without a doubt.

"So," he began, "what happens now Moo-Kye?"

She smiled, slowly and it seemed deliberately. She moved towards the head of table and rested the flat of her hands on it's top, leaning slightly as she did so.

"We dominate Faa t'Zrrk. We take back what is ours. For too long the Foundation and Profit guilds have had their own way. Charging levies on the trading deals, forcing limits on the prices of goods. *Limiting* the right to free trade."

"Do you know how many died as a result of the Profit Guilds insistence that the price of food stuffs should have a minimum value? I can tell you, hundreds of thousands and all because they saw profit first and life second. We told them, the outer systems must have access to open and free trade, the market will pay what the demand is, either low or high. So let the market decide."

She didn't falter as she continued.

"Odysseus Five Faa t'Zrrk, a pioneering outpost with no natural planetary bodies that can sustain life. Thousands of workers all crammed into the silicon mines, trying to earn enough credits to survive. No food, little energy from its pitiful star, all resources required to survive brought in. So what does the Profit Guild do? Raises the price of the food and lowers the price of silicon. Creates higher and lower bands with which to work in. The mines start to operate at a loss, the freighter ships don't come any more because they can't afford to."

"We *tell* them that people are starving, dying in the mines and the factories. Disease spreads, we can't get the antidotes, we can't leave and we can't stay. They ignore our pleas, sitting in nice cosy stations making decisions that affect lives, but only really concerned about *their* profit, their welfare, not ours. The governments refuse to listen, they point the finger at the Guilds. They *discuss* the issue, can you believe that? They **discuss** it! So while they are having meetings and attending banquets, our comrades die in their thousands."

"Can you imagine what it is like Faa t'Zrrk? To hold your partner in your arms, the silicone disease eating away at their body, coughing and spluttering, barely able to talk. Can you imagine what it is like to hold them and watch them die in front of you when you are incapable of saving them?"

"No ships, no food, no medicine, no credits, no future! Well I saw them die Faa t'Zrrk, I watched as my friends perished in front of me in the darkened corridors and shafts on Odysseus Five. One ship arrived to collect silicone, one ship! They killed their own kind to get on that ship, fighting in the docking corridor hand to hand with whatever strength they had left. I got on that ship Faa t'Zrrk and I vowed as we left the station that I would right the wrong done that Tazura."

"We have talked and talked with the Guild, but to no avail. They still refuse to listen to us, so here around this table you see the leaders of the groups who have agreed to join our fight. These may look like pirates to you, but in every pirate is a trader. They may deal in illegal goods, but they also have genuine business concerns that are dealt the same blows as the rest. Look at the Paranid, look at ENeT. They make Slave chips that are illegal in their own space lanes. One rule for us and one for rule for them."

Well no more, the profiteering stops here and now. We will open up the trading lanes in the outer systems and then move inwards, until anything can be traded by anyone for anything."

Faa t'Zrrk was stunned, he didn't know this was in the plan. "Even illegal goods?"

"Especially illegal goods!" She replied.

"But there must be some control, some rules otherwise it will become chaos." He pleaded.

"We will control it. We will make the rules and change them as and when we see fit."

"But doesn't that make you the same as them?" he quizzed.

"NO!" She hissed. "They do not understand, we do, we have waited long enough and it is the time for action, not words. It will take many Jazura, but we will succeed, I know it!"

His mind was trying to take all of this in when he suddenly realised that she hadn't yet mentioned where he was to fit into all of this.

"So, what about me? What do you want me to do now?"

Moo-Kye looked down at the table, the first time she had broken eye contact during the whole outburst. Then she jerked her head back to stare at him once more.

"You are to be our messenger." She said.

"What! You want me to go back? They'll kill me!" He argued.

"Not Faa t'Zrrk, if you are already dead." She raised her arm from the table and the dart shot out from her bracelet, made a slight noise as it moved through the air and imbedded itself into Faa t'Zrrk's torso. He winced from the pain and felt a burning sensation deep inside his body. The dart had penetrated and then come to a stop, releasing a small explosive device that had moved deeper inside. Then it exploded, not enough to cause any outward damage, but enough to obliterate his internal organs. He died almost instantly, but not quite quick enough to escape the enormous pain that racked his body.

Moo-Kye looked around the table. "Did he really think I would let such a traitor live?"

"Ship his body back to the ENeT factory he came from and begin to distribute the Super Slaves as planned."

The six rose as one, two lifting the body from the chair where it had slumped over the table and they filed out of the room.

Chapter 5 – Searching for the truth

You can search far and wide for the truth. But sometimes it comes looking for you.

The gate flashed signifying that something was about to exit having made the trip across the cosmos. LooManckStrat sat in the bridge of “Deliverance” as the large ship moved away from the gate. His flotilla of ships following him and his smaller guard ships were ahead having already made the jump, scanning for any potential threat.

The message drone arrived just after they entered the sector, sent from deep within the Split sectors by the ruling families. He pressed the communication cube on the arm of his seat and the face of the Split family race relation's officer followed the familiar sight of the cube rising out of its home. He had spoken to this Split many times recently. But this message was the one he had been waiting for.

“We have Faa t’Zrrk. He is here, but I am sorry to inform you that he is dead. Please come immediately to the Split defence station adjacent to your factory. I can say no more, you must see this for yourself.”

LooManckStrat took his personal guard and boarded his upgraded Spinny. He had made sure that it had better shielding and speed than before and it was now one of the fastest medium sized ships in the universe. It carried no offensive weapons but did have a number of small-automated fighter drones that could be launched against an attacker and also a selection of ship-to-ship missiles.

The drones were small pilot-less craft that were simply launched with a command to attack. They had small lasers and minimal shields, but they were fast and at the very least could harass an enemy while they made good their escape.

He positioned himself in the comfortable seat and gave the order to launch. The ship moved slowly towards the exit doors on the busy flight deck of the destroyer. It was only a small flight deck capable of handling only three to four ships at a time, but it gave the destroyer extra flexibility.

Two medium sized fighter craft were further down the deck, engines glowing and in the start of their launch. These were heavily armed and well protected ships that would guard the Spinny on its journey. A single fast scout ship had already exited the ship and was holding position outside while the others launched.

He watched as the two fighters lifted from the deck and proceeded out of the destroyer side by side. Then he felt the movement of his own ship as it followed them. They would have to run at half power for the journey or the large fighters wouldn't be able to stay close by. The scout ship would continually move ahead and jump through the next gate, ensuring the route was clear.

They were now all in space, the destroyer behind them and holding station for their return. The two fighters took positions on either side of the Spinny and the scout ship at the lead. They moved off together and the scout immediately increased its power and approached the far gate, its single engine glowing brightly as it became smaller and smaller in the space screen.

LooManckStrat was intrigued with the Split message. So his factory commander was dead, he half expected it. But the fact that the Split wouldn't divulge any further information about the incident was what interested him. It was really not like the Split to ask him to come to them. They would normally have sent a minimal message and told him to stay away. He wouldn't have got the body, company employee or not. But to be asked to view it? That was an honour indeed. Yes, very intriguing.

They approached the jump gate. A large round metal structure that simply sat motionless in space. It had two large protruding arms that reached out from each side, straight ahead of the main gate. These arms went exactly the same distance behind the circle as they did in front of it and lights flashed up and down their length.

There was a great deal of debate about where the gates came from and who built them. Some said the Argon forefathers, others said the Xenon but the main consensus was that they had been built by another race and had been abandoned. No race really knew what the truth was and why they were here, but hundreds of gates had been found and they linked the sectors together. It was

as if something had put them here at some point in the past, with the expectation that they would be used in the future.

They had scanned them, nothing. No power source could be found. The navigation lights had been added by the races themselves and small starlight powered generators fixed to the arms that provided endless fuel for the lights.

They had tried to analyse the material they were made from, but nothing could penetrate the skin. It was a complete mystery that linked the races, together with the cosmos. He thought that someday the creators of these gates might return. Ships had certainly been identified travelling far out from the populated planets and passing through the sectors. Identified as ships yes, but whose ships, no. The different governments argued over these sightings, each blaming the other for building covert military designs. But no piece of evidence had come forward at all for either theory, so they remained a puzzle.

The scout ship exited the gate and came back into the sector.

“All clear your honour. Nothing found and I mean nothing your honour. The following sector is empty.”

“Good.” Replied LooManckStrat. “Proceed.” He instructed the other ships and his own pilot.

The four ships took their turns and each entered the gate with the Spinny going third, he didn't want to be left alone after all his ships had gone through. He could launch a message drone, but if there were to be any trouble that was violent, it would be over before they received the message and reacted. He had learnt one thing recently, be cautious and cover every possible angle you could. Think big, think detail, and think everywhere in-between. He wasn't about to get caught out again after losing his factory. At least not without putting up a serious fight.

The Spinny entered the gate. It was a surreal experience travelling through gates. You had to enter them very slowly or you simply passed through the circle and nothing happened. Then once you passed the event horizon you were greeted with a bright flash of light, followed by a tunnel of swirling colours. Every colour you could imagine seemed to make up the tunnel walls and through the sides of the tunnel you were certain you could see systems

flash past. Then as sudden as you started you exited the tunnel. Not through an end point, it wasn't as if you could see the end of the tunnel and you could judge your movement down it. No, it was just there, a never-ending tunnel that just disappeared with the same flash of light as when you entered.

Then you would be in the distant sector, travelling at the same slow speed you had as you entered the gate at the other end. Very strange indeed, sensor scans revealed no fixed position during the journey, but as soon as you exited you were greeted with scanners that picked up all the local objects again. Although in this particular case the scanner only showed the scout ship and one of the fighter ships as there was nothing else in the sector at all. Empty of anything except natural objects like planets, meteors, suns and so on.

The second fighter ship joined them through the gate and they pointed their ships at the next gate far across the sector and continued their long journey.

* * * * *

It took three Tazuras to reach the inner Split sectors where his factory was and LooManckStrat had to be woken from his rest time in his personal quarters. They had travelled through many sectors, most of them empty, but as they got close to the Split inner worlds the sectors began to have more and more artificial objects. Factories and mines attached to asteroids, traffic from the freight ships and as they entered the inner sector of Family Pride, homeworld of the Split, the military presence was massive. Large battleships and destroyers in stationary orbit around the planet and more adjacent to the truly gigantic ship building factory that was situated here. This was where most of the Split's ships were built and purchased. He could see no reason why he couldn't bring his whole fleet with him, they would be no match for the Split navy here. But regulations were to be obeyed. Especially with the Split, a diplomatic race they most certainly were not.

The Spinny had been contacted within sezuras of entering the sector and ordered to proceed directly to the military installation near his factory. That was when his pilot had woken him and he now entered the bridge of his ship, acknowledged the slight bows from his crew and took his seat. Time to find the truth.

The small group of four ships approached the station surrounded by small Split fighter craft. They moved back and forth on the scanner keeping a watchful eye over their visitors. One wrong move, any slight show of aggression and they would be attacked without warning, he knew.

He had given orders that no weapon systems were to be brought online at any time while in the inner sectors except from a direct command from him.

The communication cube indicated an incoming transmission. He pressed the button to accept.

“Dock the Spinny now. No other ships to dock, do you understand?” It was the Split station commander, a very powerful Split.

“Yes, I understand.” He replied. “Negotiating docking rights now.”

He glanced at his pilot who proceeded to press buttons on his console and then he could see the green navigation lights on the station start their little display of confirmation.

“Pilot, take us in.” He commanded. The ship moved towards the open doors of the docking bay.

After completing the docking and being greeted by the station commander himself he was led down various corridors until they finally entered a room that was obviously some form of medical centre. The commander gestured for LooManckStrat to sit. He declined, wanting to get to the point of this and not waste any more time, or credits.

“LooManckStrat, we found the body in a cargo container in one of the sparsely populated sectors, half way between here and the empty worlds. A long range patrol discovered it on a normal sweep of the sector and when they brought it on board and checked the cargo, they sent a message drone and it was brought here.”

“So, what’s all the fuss about? Why the secrecy?” he quizzed.

“Follow me, see for yourself.”

He followed the commander into the next room and lying naked on the table in the centre of the room was the body of Faa t'Zrrk.

LooManckStrat took a step backwards; the body was painted with thick jagged, dark blue lines. The face fixed in a contortion of pain.

"I don't understand." He said. "What does this mean? How did he die?"

"Internal explosion. He was shot through the chest with an explosive dart. He died in great pain." The commander responded.

"But come and look." He continued and moved towards the body with LooManckStrat behind. "There look." The commander pointed at his chest.

Written in the same deep blue colour across the dead Split's chest on an area not covered by the stripes were a number of words. They were written in Split.

"So what does it say?" LooManckStrat asked.

"It says," the Split commander started, "Traitor, long live the Yaki. Death to the Guild."

"Yaki? Who are they?" LooManckStrat was feeling worried.

"We do not know. We sent a small scout force into the outer sectors, they have not returned and they do not reply to our drones. We understand some pirate ships were engaged with these Yaki. I believe your attackers are already dead."

"I could not have told you this LooManckStrat over the communication systems, they are never secure and I felt you needed to see it for yourself. Your employee has been in contact with someone, or something that cost him his life. I suggest you take your fleet back to Paranid space and continue your work there."

"Do not go into the outer sectors. Return home LooManckStrat, there is nothing to be gained by you seeking out these, Yaki."

LooManckStrat looked directly at the Split commander. “But my fleet is in the outer sectors.” He gasped.

“No, wrong direction, well as far as we can tell, these Yaki are in the other direction. They are between Split and Argon space, not Paranid. Stay your side of the sectors and return home to the safety of Paranid space.”

“We will investigate this from here and if we need to talk to you again, we will.”

LooManckStrat was devastated. He was intent on bringing these pirates to justice and now it seemed they might be stronger than he thought. He must return and protect his investments in his own space lanes and then maybe at a later point in time, he could right the wrong that had been done to him. Yes, he would concentrate on building up his trading empire again and attempt to get the Super Slaves back on-line. That was what he was good at; not fighting and he didn't want to end up the same as this Split lying on the table before him.

He left and his four ships began the journey back to the destroyer and the other ships. He sent a message drone instructing them to go to full alert and to stay that way until he returned. Yes, trade not fight; let the Split deal with it or whoever. I'm not bothered as long as it isn't me. This travelling around the cosmos was making him ill.

It took seven Tazuras but his ships managed to return to his home sector without incident. His defence ships took up patrol around the sector and it would be a long time before they ventured out again.

Chapter 6 - Pisces

So you want to be a space fighter pilot do you? Well one day you might be, but you have a long way to go before you get your crystal star hot shot, a long way.

Pisces, the world of eternal light was in a system that contained three local suns. One large orb beginning its death throes with a smaller companion, which circled it. Another medium size star, much farther away but still not large enough to escape the pull of the sector master was also in orbit. The small desert world orbited between the larger two stars, it too caught in the system that would eventually destroy itself. But that was a distant future event, the world was currently a small, but nevertheless fruitful centre for many illegal activities.

Mainly, it provided a perfect atmosphere for growing Mitta, the plant that once taken into the orbiting factories and left to ferment in zero gravity with additives, became a strong and powerful narcotic. Used by many races, especially the Argon and Boron for recreational use. It was illegal in both races space lanes, but was sold anyway as the profits and demand was so high and there would always be a market for it.

Periodically it would cause an outrage when a batch of the drug was released too early before being fully ready and Argon or Boron would die as a result. This outrage usually occurred in Argon space when any major elections were due and such a time was now.

Over two hundred revellers had perished after the drug had been taken on the pleasure world of Ita and the Argon government had ordered another strike. It wouldn't stop the flow of the drug, but it would slow it down for a while and would make political noises that benefited the politicians.

This was to be a joint attack on two of the orbiting factories and also on the main harvesting area on the planet. The small fleet had assembled in full view of the Argon public, so the harvester's knew they were coming and would prepare a defence. Typical politicians, tell the enemy you were on your way and broadcast the fact around the cosmos. A surprise attack this wasn't. A foolhardy trip into oblivion it most certainly could be.

Brett sat in a “screamer”, a ship attached to the hull of the giant troop ship that had been deployed for the mission. The screamer’s job was to take the assault troops inside, directly into the action. It could fly in space, although slowly, but was designed for fast entry into systems with even the heaviest atmospheres. It entered at such speed that the ship would shake and the sound of the ship’s hull straining against the planet’s natural defence generated a high pitch squeal inside, hence the name.

He had begun his new life in the navy at the base, the lowest member of the whole establishment. Ten of them had started on that same Tazura, all destined for greatness as pilots in the navy, but first you had to earn the right. Two Jazuras spent cleaning and running errands for the higher ranks. Attending endless lessons on navy protocol and instruction in the basic forms of attack and defence. Not the ship kind though, no the physical kind. You had to become an assault troop first and do your time in the ranks before you could be eligible for fighter training.

So Brett had spent his time in the Marines, doing the dirty work for the Argon government. Go here and clean up this mess, then go there and create another one. He had visited many different places already and hadn’t been back to Morang for many Mazuras. He was worried about today though. They were to destroy one of the launch sites on the planet surface. Fighting in space with environment suits on and laser weapons was one thing, but fighting in atmosphere was quite another. The harvesters down on the surface would no doubt deploy tactical starbursts. These weapons only had one function, to disable any electrical systems in the vicinity. They would burn out all computer systems in a wide radius of the centre of the explosion. This meant that all advanced weaponry was useless and they had been instructed not to carry any. So here he was, sat with twenty-five other Marines in one of the ten screamers about to launch. Conventional assault rifle in his hand, explosive ammunition carried in his belt packs.

Because the defenders would deploy the starbursts, the attackers would also follow the same tactic and as the screamers swept down, they would fire their own. So, he was worried that they were going to have to fight a conventional battle. Lots of people got killed in battles like that, but he was also worried that the screamer

itself, if in the immediate area of a starburst detonation, would simply fall out of the air.

The first wave of attack was at that moment leaving the vacuum of space and landing on the planet far from the battle zone. It carried a number of surface attack aircraft that would fly in from afar and drop chemical bombs on the crop fields, destroying the plant and making the area useless. Then they would attempt to take out the launch sites and if they failed, the marines would get the order to attack.

They would not know how the battle was progressing until they were either stood down, or the ship dropped. Brett stared around the compartment, thirteen marines on each side. He was a detachment second in command and he sat by the third marine in from the far end. Across from him was a relative newcomer. He looked at Brett with a concern that Brett himself had felt before.

"Brett, you've done this before yeah? How many drops have you made?" he asked, anything to break the tension. It was the wrong question.

"Seven." Brett replied. "But this is only my third into a hot zone."

"So is the ride gonna hurt?" The new recruit inquired.

"The ride isn't the problem, it's getting off it at the other end." He smiled as if to reassure the other marine that he was making a joke. He wasn't really.

The command came through the communication unit in his helmet, standard issue, they all had them fitted so that they could keep in touch on the ground. Everybody heard everything one marine said in theory.

"We have an affirmative for go marines, that's a green. Prepare for launch." The pilot instructed.

Brett pressed the button to his left that tightened the straps supporting him. His companion followed suit, copying the more experienced one.

Then they felt the intense feeling of falling as the ship was released along with the others and they began to fall under the pull of the

planet. Very quickly the ship turned its nose downwards and headed into the outer atmosphere, turning at an angle as it scraped the surface, the glow from the impact lighting up the front of the ship and sending flames all over it.

Inside it was hard to keep your focus on anything. The ship was shaking violently and the troops were being shaken in their protective armour. Then the scream started, it was a high pitch wail that hurt the ears and together with the shaking, made the whole trip chaotic.

On and on it went which seemed to last forever, the noise and vibration. Brett gripped his assault rifle closer and tried to concentrate on what was to happen once they landed, if they landed.

Then suddenly it was over. The ship stopped shaking and a moment later the scream disappeared. The screamer sped on towards its destination, the pilot began firing his starbursts at the target area and the other ships did likewise.

The defenders began to prepare to return their own fire once the attackers were within range, guns shooting metal missiles, some heated so that the gunners could follow the line and see where they were going. The screamers were now about one hundred metres above the ground, coming in low and fast towards the launch site. They were about twenty kilometres away when the starbursts began to explode around them. Two screamers came under the influence of the weapons and crashed into the ground. The other eight continued on and were soon at the landing zone.

Brett felt the ship touch down with a bang and was sure they had partially crashed landed as the ship had continued to move after touch down. The dim red glow that was the light inside the compartment began to flash green.

“Out, out, out!” Shouted the pilot of the communication system.
“Out now!”

Brett didn't need a second prompting, you were a very large target sitting in a screamer on the ground and the two hatches swept open in the floor of the room, one at each end.

The marines began to disembark, taking up prone defensive positions around the craft as they did so. Brett hit the sandy ground and quickly gathered his composure and sense of direction. A small, half a metre high outcrop of rock was to his left.



Marines scan the horizon.

"Greens! This is Brett, follow me to the cover on the left, move it!" He shouted.

The squad began to run, half crouching, towards the rock when the explosions began. Dull booms as shells hit the sand around them. The defenders had got the range right and they were lobbing explosive shells from their positions by the launch pad about five hundred metres beyond the rock.

Brett ran and ran beginning to breathe heavily as his equipment took its toll and weighed down on him. He reached the rock and flung himself to the ground. He could hear the screams through the intercom as some of his men were hit by the incoming fire. He looked to his left and along the rock line that spread for a few hundred metres, he could see the other screamers in different positions and the marines all running from them for the rock outcrop.

"Clear Red three, we are clear!" Shouted the commander to the screamer they had just left.

"Copy that, Green three. We are going offensive!"

The screamer lifted off, its huge engines creating a small sandstorm as it did so. As soon as it was in the air, it began to fire lasers into the enemy positions. Massive bolts of energy and Brett could see the damage they were doing, bodies and equipment being flung into the air as they hit. Just the tip of his head over the rock was all he could dare at the moment.

The other screamers were lifting off and began to approach the enemy when two blinding explosions filled the air. On no! Starbursts!

The screamers that were attacking dropped from the air, two exploding on impact while the other three smashed into the ground, saved by their low altitude. The data feed that was viewable on the small screens fixed to the helmet of every marine died as the starbursts did their damage. The communication systems met the same fate.

Then it went quiet, except for the odd moan from any injured marines lying on the ground. Brett looked around; lots of anxious faces stared back. All along the rock were marines from the other screamers, lying prone or hunched up to the ground for some form of protection.

Then the sound came, thump, thump, thump. A distant thud that could be felt in the ground itself. Brett peered over the rock, on no!

"Centaur's!" He screamed to the other troops.

Two, four metre high, mechanical beasts were slowly making their way across the flat desert between them and the base. Massive machines that resembled Argon in their shape with two legs and arms and a heavily armoured torso holding the head. The arms were killing machines; revolving guns began to spit out projectiles at the outcrop. Brett could see smoke billowing from the back, mechanical monsters with combustion engines and no electrical systems. They were not affected by the starbursts; this was Brett's worst fear.

He pulled his rifle into his shoulder and pulled the trigger, his shoulder jolting as the rounds left the muzzle and hit the rightmost Centaur. Others joined in the attack and many marines were now looking over the rock and firing at the two advancing beasts.

The right Centaur opened fire with both of its guns and Brett could see the impacts in the sand as the weapons moved their line of fire up towards the top of the rock. He could hear the projectiles as they flew through the air and knew that the sound was reaching him *after* the shots had as they were travelling much faster than sound.

The two Centaurs finally found their mark and the shots bounced off the rock face and then into the marines themselves. Bodies pushed backwards as the high velocity weapons ripped through the body armour worn by the marines. Brett saw his commander take a shot in the chest and then directly into the head, his body thrown into the air from the impact and it turned over in the air as it flew backwards and lay still on the ground.

Then shells began to land from the enemy positions again. Boom and then another, boom. They were all going to die if they stayed here. He looked left and right, half the force of over two hundred was either dead or injured and he realised that they couldn't call for backup, the communication systems were dead. They either took the fight to the enemy or waited in the hope that they ran out of ammunition. He didn't like either option, but waiting was always a bad choice.

"Greens!" He shouted. "We're going in!" He hoped enough of the surrounding troops could hear him over the noise.

"Fire covering smoke, now!"

Some of the troops got to their knees and pulled the small hand launched smoke missiles from their backs. He could hear the hollow thump as they were fired. Then smoke began to drift up out of the sand where the Centaurs stood, then more smoke until he couldn't see them. Good, they couldn't see him either then.

"Go, go, go!" He shouted and jumped off the top of the rock and began to run down the small incline. Others joined him and as he glanced to his sides he could see his companions racing down with him in a long line.

The enemy had realised that an attack was coming and they altered their shelling so that the explosions were now falling around them as they ran. He saw marines blown into the air, caught by the shock waves or dropping down dead from the Centaurs fire.

Brett continued to run, making a jagged line as he went, left then right then back again. He caught view of the right Centaur that he had previously fired at and headed behind it.

He stopped when he was just a few metres behind it. He could hear its mechanics moving and its weapons continuing to fire. But just as expected, high up its armoured back was the exhaust from the engine. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and reached into his belt for two explosives. He pressed the timed detonation buttons and hurled them upwards. One bounced off the armour, but the second disappeared into the opening.

He ran as fast as he could away from the Centaur and towards the base. Then at the last possible moment as he counted down in his head, he threw himself to the ground. The Centaur exploded, the top half going one way and the bottom half slowly toppling over in the opposite direction. The two people inside killed instantly.

Debris from the explosion rained down, hot shards of metal making hissing sounds as they stuck into the sand around him and metal on metal sounds as they bounced off his body armour. He was momentarily stunned from the explosion and had been slightly fortuitous to still be alive and uninjured. He could hear the thump, thump of the second machine as it approached. The sounds of automatic fire from the marines as they tried to stop its destruction.

He began to struggle to his feet. "Brett! Down, stay down!" came the shout from one of his fellow attackers. He dropped instantly to the sand again and heard the whoosh from the close quarter rockets as they left their launchers and then the two explosions as they hit the Centaur. Brett glanced around to see the Centaur topple over, the impact throwing it off balance and it fell onto its back, weapons still firing. It struggled to right itself and then with an ear-breaking bang, it exploded, throwing fragments everywhere.

He saw a few marines drop to the floor as the explosion occurred, some of them didn't get back up.

The pop, pop sound of the smoke missiles could be heard again and he leapt to his feet as other marines raced past him towards the base. Copious amounts of gunfire could be heard as they stormed the base, mixed with high explosive detonations.

He was sweating heavily and almost out of breath when he cleared the smoke and reached the outer limits of the base. There were trenches in the ground where the defenders had been, but these were filled with the dead or dying bodies of the harvesters. A large opening to his right, the main storage area where the tractors entered and left he thought. His men were flanking both sides of the opening. They had not yet ventured in and some were holding their weapons through the opening and firing blind while they kept themselves behind the protective wall.

Brett approached them. "Sit report!" He blurted to the troops around him as he took in large gasps of air. A man turned towards him. "Exterior secure Sir." He shouted above the background noise of the battle. "They have a firing line at the back of the storage depot behind a row of space cargo pods. Small automatic weapons and one large high fire rate gun. Another HFR in a small room at the top of the outer stairs. We go in that way, up the stairs, we are gonna get roasted."

Brett thought for a moment. No way we can go up the stairs, the trooper was right. A HFR firing down the stairs as his men went up in single file would be suicide. They would have to get through the depot and get the stair HFR from behind.

He looked at the faces around him. Staring at him, looking for guidance. "OK, how many greens left that can fight? Ammunition, I want to know now, how much, what type. Speak to me greens."

It took only a few moments. Forty-seven troops left in a position to fight. Six rockets, some smoke and assorted small arms. "Right, listen up. You," he pointed at a junior rank, "take six troops, keep the gun on the stairs busy. Just stick your weapons around the corner every now and again loose off some rounds. Understand?"

"Yes Sir!" Came the reply. He quickly pointed to six others and they ran off round the corner to where the stairs were. Almost

immediately the sound of rounds could be heard, short bursts as they obeyed their orders.

Brett addressed the others. "Listen, we're going in. Two teams of twenty, each team loose of your missiles. That'll take a few of 'em out and keep their heads down. Then follow with smoke straight away. Blind them, then we charge. Keep to the sides until you reach the barricade and then feel free to act on initiative." A few of the others smiled. Good, Brett thought, time to finish the job.

They moved into position and Brett shouted the order, "Go Greens, GO!" The missile carriers leaned out into the opening and fired. A whoosh as the missile left the weapon and a slight delay until the large explosion could be heard a hundred metres away at the back of the depot. All six missiles fired, the launchers stood aside and the smoke carrying troops repeated the procedure. Smoke began to billow out of the opening. There was still enemy fire coming out of the opening, but it had decreased somewhat. The marines attacked, running down the sides of the depot.

Brett was about half way down the right hand side when he caught sight of the harvesters. They were standing behind the pods, small hand held rifles spouting shots into the smoke. The HFR was in the middle firing continuously and sweeping back and to. Then it stopped, probably reloading he thought. Brett thundered across the concrete floor, ignoring the single shot rifles that were firing back. His troops went with him. They stormed the barricade, jumping onto the pods and firing bursts into the defenders below. The HFR was destroyed and the harvesters were taking serious casualties. Some of the marines had been killed but it only took one of the defenders to drop their weapon and throw up their arms in surrender and like a rehearsed play, the others all followed suit. Nearly there, just the other HFR. Brett jabbed his finger at a trooper. "Take them prisoner, you know the drill." He looked at three others. "You, you and you." He pointed at each one as he spoke. "Follow me."

He ran towards the door at the back wall, the three others followed. Dull silver metal covered the door. He tried the handle, damn, locked. He stepped back and aimed his gun at the lock. Three short bursts followed and the lock lay in ruins. Brett stepped to the side of the door and leaned on the wall. He gestured to the others with his head. Go on troops, through you go.

One of them kicked at the door while the other two took up a firing stance, guns trained on the door, one high, the other low. The door gave way and swung inwards. The troops ran through and Brett followed into a small area with a concrete staircase heading up into sunlight. The back way to the top, Brett mused. His companions were already starting up the stairs and when he got to the top he came side on to the room with the HFR in. It was firing down the stairs to his right and he could hear the distinct sound of his own troops firing back. Brett ran to the side of the room that had a similar metal door protecting its occupants. He stared at one of the troops and aimed his gun at the lock. The trooper understood, they didn't need to speak and he pulled a small explosive from his belt. He primed the device and nodded. Brett shot out the lock with the same three bursts as the other one and kicked the door open before standing to one side. The trooper tossed the explosive in. Almost instantly it exploded and the sound of the HFR ceased. Both he and the trooper held their weapons into the opening and opened fire while moving them around. Best to be sure. Satisfied that anyone (or anything) that was in the room was dead they entered and confirmed that was the case.

Brett shouted down the outside staircase "Greens, clear!" He saw one of the troopers look around the corner at the bottom and confirm that it was clear. Brett waved him on and he started up the stairs, his companions following.

He began to walk down the stairs, passing his troops as he went and then onto the sand. He suddenly felt exhausted, like he hadn't slept for days. There was still the noise of fires crackling and smoke was still bellowing across the landscape. White smoke that the marines had fired and black smoke from the two burning Centaurs.

He was leaning over trying to catch his breath when the new recruit he had spoken to in orbit walked over.

"Hey Brett, you were right. The journey down was easy compared to this."

"Yeah." He replied. "I hope we have made someone very happy."

* * * * *

Twelve Stazuras later he was standing on the loading bay of the troop ship. They had been debriefed and Brett was sorting through his equipment when the force Marine commander walked over.

"Good job you did down there Brett, saved a lot of lives. We'll miss you y'know. You just made company commander too." He said.

"Yeah thanks. What do you mean, you'll miss me?" Brett replied.

"Just got word, your times up Brett. Request has come through and your names on it. Your going back to Morang hot shot, space ships and slave chips. Good luck Brett." The commander slapped him on the back and walked away grinning to himself and shaking his head.

At last, Morang!

Chapter 7 - Helpers

Help a species to rise slightly and they might just learn to fly themselves.

Fifty thousand years ago.

"Do they have any offensive weapons, do they show any aggressive traits?"

"No, they are completely peaceful. Only killing for food, never pleasure. They waste nothing of their prey."

"They stand at the top of their food chain then. They are highly intelligent yet choose to live peacefully?"

"Correct. They are a prime candidate for inclusion, the closest match we have ever found."

"Good. Deploy the helpers, we will observe this one closely."

* * * * *

She moved towards the edge of the rock, sweeping vegetation out of her way as she went, her four long thin legs propelling her along the uneven seabed. Two more protrusions reached out and forwards, moving back and forth in front of her to move the highest parts of the plants out of her way. Three long thin digits protruded from the two *arms*, grabbing at the undulating branches when she needed more leverage.

Her skin was a mottled grey, thick, like rubber and appeared wet. However, it was dry and leathery to the touch. Her head sat atop a long thin neck and above that, two stalks with eyes moved independently of one another as she surveyed her path. She took in gasps of oxygen rich water through a small trunk on the front of her head. Heavily tainted with ammonia, her internal organs processed the fluid and extracted the oxygen required to breathe.

She was nearing the rock edge now, hoping to get there soon so that she could take in some of the deeper waters pleasant oxygen and refresh herself. Too long spent working in the underwater village in the forest where her family and the rest of the hive lived. She had been given time to play, to refresh before returning to her

chores after the sun went down and then came back again the following day.

She was propelling herself as fast as she could and her brother was trying his best to beat her to the outcrop. But she was older, stronger than he was and she wouldn't be beaten.

As she reached the rocks edge, she pushed off with all her might and flew into the open water. Pulling her legs and arms behind her so they swept away in the air as she flew. It looked so graceful, the one and half metre figure moving through the water while the yellow sea mists swirled alongside.

Then she plunged deeper into the water, just as her brother began his jump from the side. Heading downwards into the depths, she took in water through her snout. Large amounts, again and again she snorted. The water was cascading into her body when the richer droplets began to invade her ammonia-hardened lungs. The body automatically snapped shut the opening to her lungs and the water continued its journey through a newly opened tunnel. Then it splashed against the micromesh of her gills and they began the job of extracting the oxygen sealed within.

Then the remainder of the liquid, minus most, but not all of it's oxygen, was pushed deeper into her torso until it came to the opening between her four "legs". She felt the sweetness of the oxygen and the urge to push deep inside her. She relented, let her muscles take over and the water was pushed out at considerable force. She moved deeper into the water, away from the swamp edges, propelled by the small jet.

The dark rings on her legs and arms began to swell, to open like flower buds and her thin bones began to disconnect themselves all along her torso. It took only moments but she changed from a seabed running, insect like figure, into the soft pliable form most suited to the depths. The transformation complete, she flexed the suckers that ran the length of her six tentacles. It felt good. She threw all six tentacles forward and the negative force quickly slowed her down. One eye stalk peered upwards, the eye moving side to side, looking for the brother she knew was coming.

There he was, sweeping down towards her in the same form she had moments before. He completed the same stopping manoeuvre and came to rest at her side. She moved towards him

and touched her head against his. Loud sounds came from her snout, like someone clearing their throat to you and me. The sound travelled well in the water but the meaning could sometimes be lost and touching heads let them communicate better.

"Told you I'd win." She said to her smaller brother.

"You always do. But I am getting bigger all the time, I will win this race one day."

She turned her stalks towards each other, the sign of laughter. The greater the bend the happier the intent. Her brother's stalks also followed suit.

"Follow me," she said, "let's go over there this time. We have never been over there." She gestured with one of the tentacles.

Her brother grunted his approval and they jetted off getting deeper and deeper into the swamp.

It had been a long time and they were beginning to get tired. She knew they would have to go back soon. They had enjoyed the fun, chasing along at speed, sweeping in and out of one another. It was as they came to a stop and communicated that they noticed the light emanating from the rocks below.

There seemed to be a gap, a cave perhaps, but only a small one and a blue light was illuminating the inside. They jetted towards it.

The hole was only a few centimetres wide and seemed to be covered in smaller rocks as if something had deliberately put them there. But what for, to hide something perhaps?

She looked at her brother and didn't bother to touch heads. "Let's open it up." She said. Her brother didn't look convinced, his snout pushed flat against his face. He was concerned and a little worried.

She began to move the smaller rocks away with her tentacles, using the suckers to pick them up and toss them aside. Then she came to a large one, too big to move. She would have to move it by picking it up. Her brother was too young to have mastered the partial change. He could only allow his body to be connected, or

not. But she was older, more experienced. She stretched out two tentacles and began to click the bones back into place. The suckers began to recede back into her skin as she worked from the tip of the tentacles, where the three digits were, back to the top where they connected to her torso. The digits would be useless until she had worked her way all the way back and made the connection from joint to joint. Then she would be able to operate them again.

It took only moments to complete the task, her brother watched on in admiration, tempted to try it himself, but knowing full well it was dangerous until fully grown.

She flexed her digits. Job complete. They reached out and grabbed the rock on both sides. She used her other four tentacles to suck onto the rock below and give her some leverage. Up it came in her hands. She pulled it towards her and then propelled it away, turning back to the next one and next one.

Some time had passed, but she managed to clear enough of the hole so they could get their bodies through. She reversed the transformation and the two arms flapped gracefully in the water. She gave her brother a quick, follow me, glance and sped into the cave. He followed close behind.

She stopped astonished. At the bottom of the cave about five metres away was a large metal "dish". It was a bright metal, not like the dull type they used on the planters and harvesters in the vegetable fields. This was almost shiny, and big. It must be fifteen metres across. She thought it was at least ten times her length in diameter.

Blue lights flickered on the edges, not quite switching off, but flickering like stars in the night sky. Without thinking she swept down onto the dish and landed on it's top. Her brother watched from above. The metal felt slightly warm, she sucked on it with her tentacles, in and out in an attempt to feel what it was. But there was something else, very weak, but a definite vibration coming from the object. It was alive!

Her brother landed softly beside her and touched his head to hers.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know." She replied. She really had no idea.

The systems on board the ship had been monitoring the surrounding area for years. Listening to the sounds of the swamp, comparing any intelligent sounds it heard with its data banks. It had heard this one before, many times, but never so close. This time the creatures were actually sitting atop its hull. It was time then to make itself known, just as it had been programmed to.

The voice came through the hull, vibrating in the same language as the two that sat upon it.

"Do not be afraid. I am a helper." It said.

The two jetted away from the hull like launched missiles. They didn't stop until they were recounting their tale to their father and the hive lord himself.

* * * * *

Other ships were found over the years. They asked questions and they got answers. But they got answers to only the questions they asked. The "helpers" never gave anything away.

"What is two plus two?"

"Four."

"Who are you?"

"I am a helper."

"Where do you come from?"

"I am a helper."

"If I add tremalt to backu in the ratio four to one, heat it to boiling and then apply it to my broken skin, will it help to seal the wound?"

"Yes."

And so it went on and on. They couldn't just move forward technically in one great step. They had to nudge forward bit by bit. Learning new things as they went.

It would have taken over a hundred thousand years for the Boron to achieve space flight. In reality it took only fifty, the helpers had indeed helped.

Then when the decision had been made to construct weapons in an effort to fight the Split invasion, the first time the Boron had ever constructed weapons. The helpers lifted up from their cradles around the planet, launched themselves into space and sped away into the cosmos. They had not been seen or heard off since.

* * * * *

Fifteen Jazuras ago.

Mi Ton floated above the marked spot like someone about to be condemned. He was without doubt one of the highest regarded members of the Boron kingdom. He had worked in space, alongside the Argon, as a physician. He understood the biology of many species including the Split and Paranid and had helped run the Boron military hospitals.

But that was his job, not his love. His devotion was to the cosmos and it's secrets. He spent his own time deploying devices into space, listening and collecting data in an attempt to fathom out the mysteries that eluded them all.

But above all, he was outspoken, that very reason was why he was waiting here now in front of the government inquiry. The Boron enjoyed narcotics. Ever since they had met the Argon the trouble had escalated. They couldn't blank the whole of the other races, couldn't move away from the position they know found themselves in. They were part of the Foundation Guild and part of the family of races.

Spaceweed and spacefuel. The weed absorbed through the skin and the fuel consumed. Drugs and liquor as the Argon described them. The Boron loved the illegal items and Mi Ton had openly stood in the government assembly and launched a stinging attack on the tides of power. Indeed the Argon government routinely attacked the harvesters who made the drugs and the illicit space factories where the liquor was manufactured. But it was not enough for Mi Ton.

It had shaken the Boron so much, that not even his friend Queen Atreus could help him now.

His companion and fellow observer, the Argon Mitchell, had smiled through the communication link. He was at the observatory in orbit, preparing the final details for their trip to the outer sectors.

"Just smile and wave goodbye Mi," he said, "then we can get on with our work."

The translator blurted the message into the grunts that was the Boron language.

"I am Boron. I do not smile like you."

Mitchell laughed, "Well turn them stalks inwards till they touch." He laughed again, deeper and louder, his body shaking with the effort. "Just go through the motions Mi, get it over with and haul ass up here. We're ready to go. Stations packed, transporter ship is ready to roll."

The translator was having difficulty with the words. Either that or Mitchell was talking nonsense. It was easy to work with "Mitch" when they were doing scientific work, he spoke well, but when he was not he spoke in the slang of the Argon. That was very difficult for the Boron (and the translator) to understand.

"I hope to see you shortly," was the only reply Mi Ton could think of.

So he sat through the hearing. The panel of government officials disliked him anyway, not hatred, that was an alien feeling to a Boron. But they did not agree with his wish to put more credits into the cosmos research he craved. Mi Ton had stood and said his mind about the drug problem and all he had done was make himself a target for those that wished him gone.

"So," the head of the inquiry board said, "we think it would be wise if you were to continue your studies out of the public eye."

"We therefore rule that you should leave the planet immediately and make preparations for setting up your laboratory at least fifty sectors away."

Which is two sectors less than the place they already knew he was going to. Get on with it, Mi Ton thought.

"You should not return for ten Jazura's. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Mi Ton grunted.

All around him twitched their snouts in approval.

"Then this hearing is closed."

And that was it. He had left the planet and joined up with Mitch in orbit. The slow ponderous cargo ship that was carrying their station took almost a full Jazura before they reached their destination. It promptly dropped them off, deployed automated robots to help complete the installation of the station and left.

It was another Jazura before they actually began their studies. First they had to complete the station, install the small nuclear power generator and deploy the energy cell rig. This would capture energy from the nearby star and store it in the energy cells used throughout the station. The nuclear device was a backup, it didn't have enough power to operate the full station, only essential services.

Then the farms for the food, the water facility, the pool (Mi Ton insisted on a pool) and defence systems. Mitch had a background in trading and had always wanted to use his skills looking at the cosmos. He had spent most of his youth achieving the qualifications required but then life hadn't turned out that way at first. But if Mi Ton wanted a large pool, Mitch wanted laser batteries. Mi Ton reluctantly agreed and thought that Mitch was happy anyway with the larger pool idea. He had certainly spent enough time swimming around in it after they had finished installing it.

They were so far from any other colonised systems, Mi Ton couldn't even think of any threat they faced. They had three small ships, docked at the station. Unarmed craft they used for scouting missions or deploying observation equipment.

They had been there, all alone for Jazuras. The occasional message drone was sent through to them. The Boron wasn't that interested in the news, but Mitch liked to keep in touch with Argon

Prime. The biggest news was of the Yaki, depicted by the newsreader, as space bandits, who were growing ever bigger in the sectors between Split and Argon space.

Once they directly threatened the Guilds, Mitch thought, something would give and a war would ensue. Still, not my problem out here, let them sort it out, he had done his time in the trading lanes. If someone wanted to remove the minimum and maximum price boundaries that the guilds enforced, plus the taxes they took out of the profits, who was he to argue?

"We need to send out more observer satellites." Mitch was saying to his companion as they ate their dinner. They sat facing each other in the dining area of the station. The station could accommodate twenty beings, it only had two, so space was plentiful.

"You are right." The Boron grunted through the translator in his environment suit. "The data we have is good. I am getting positive readings from the simulations. But we can't pinpoint the time until we have more data."

"We've been here eight Jazuras Mi. You could go home in another two y'know. It'll take us a few more than that to complete the study." Mitch pointed out.

"Yes," came the reply, "it will take longer. I have no intention of returning until we have the answer." His stalks turned slightly inward. Mitch smiled and pushed the remains of his dinner into the recycle tube.

"OK, I'll go and prime the launchers." He said as he stood and began to walk away.

Chapter 8 – The frigate “Excel”

Who is the Slave, the Slave itself or the one that carries it?

“How do you feel?”

The technician was asking how he felt. How do you think I feel?

“My head hurts.” Brett replied.

“It will for a while. The drugs inside you will help with that. Stay lying down and rest.”

Brett did, for three whole Tazuras he slept. Then when he woke he just felt hungry, very hungry. They brought him food, hot tasty food. He ate it like a man possessed, taking large gulps of water in-between. Then the Navy officers arrived in his room.

“How do you feel?” one of them asked. Is that all anyone says around here?

“Fine, I feel fine.” Brett answered.

“You ready to start your training?” another inquired.

“Yes Sir!” Brett replied.

Brett sat up in the bed and propped the large pillows behind him. The insertion of the Slave chip had been a success, now he had to learn to use it.

“OK,” the man said, “we are going to send an image. Tell me what you see.”

Brett just stared at the man and then suddenly, unexpectedly an image of a fighter craft flew across his eyes. Wait, no not in front of his eyes, but *in* his eyes. Brett threw up his arms as the image went away.

“Wow! That was incredible!” He shouted.

The officer smiled. “Wait until you see this.”

The next few Tazuras saw the same thing happen. The navy officers would come and test him, send images that he had to identify. They then moved onto more complex images, data screens and graphics. Brett learned to look through his eyes at the things around him, but to also *see* the images at the same time. It was difficult at first, but the more he did it, the easier it got.

He could read data being relayed to him and scan the room at the same time. Then they placed him in the simulator. He flew the ship and got the data. He crashed. He tried again and again until he could fly the ship and pick out items of data from the images at the same time.

Then they moved onto the final phase. Now he had to *manipulate* the data. They gave him a simple menu, select the lowest option they said. He spoke the words in his mind, “down, down, select.” His head nodding each time he imagined the words.

Then he found that you didn’t need to speak the words, you simply willed it to happen. Imagine the lowest item being selected, don’t try and navigate to it, simply be there. It was strange, but he did it. Staring at the menu, he simply thought of the lowest item being selected and it was!

Now fly the ship and select the lowest item. Crash. Do it again. Crash. Again. It took time, but he got there eventually. Flying the ship around the simulated sectors and selecting items from the menu. He found he could select weapons from the cargo bay, change the shield configuration, *launch* missiles onto selected targets while still flying the ship through obstacles.

He spent the next six Mazuras training using the chip. Sometimes in the simulators and then eventually into orbit above Argon Prime where he could practice for real. Repeated missions in the home system itself. Using the chip was one thing, but you had to learn to use it as another sense. It had to be automatic, there was no time in combat for thinking about what to do. This came from experience and that was gained from the varied missions he was handed.

Simple “go here and do that” missions followed by complex destroy multiple targets and retrieve the pod ones. Brett trained hard. Just like when he had been a young boy, he attacked his quests with vigour. Spending his time in his bunk on the large rotating

space station reading up on theory and the mechanics of space flight. Engines, lasers, missiles, shields, navigation systems, satellites, he gorged on the data they fed him.

He studied the ships from the other races, memorised their capabilities, speed and offensive attributes. When he was attending the classroom lessons his knowledge became legendary. He knew so much that the navy lecturer sometimes asked *him* for the answer. His classmates chuckled, but they respected him. Brett had fought in the Marines, most of them had come through the easy planet side route to fighter command. Easy jobs in the Marine base, pushing paper and sweeping floors. Brett came from the orphanage they knew, but he had seen action, he had killed others. They respected Brett to a man and woman, every single one of them.

The completion of the training and back to Morang for the ceremony. Bands playing music, friends and relatives, cheering their brothers, sisters, sons and daughters. Brett simply collected his star from the commanding officer, saluted by holding his arm across his chest and looked to the sky.

“For you mother, for you.”

Brett also received the class honour, best cadet. His fellow officers congratulated him, pats on the back and smiles. He was given the rank of squad leader, in command of three other ships with pilots from his own class. Good, that was what he wanted.

Brett sat in the bar on the frigate “Excel”. Two of his flight sat with him, Shake and Bibby. Shake was a tall lean man, blond hair, blue eyes, a favourite with the ladies. Bibby was a small, petite red head. She had a temper to match her hair and Shake had given up in his attempts to conquer her.

The bar was dim, pilots and some marines were sat around. Dull red lights lit the room and colourful signs adorned the wall behind the bar where the automated bar dispenser was handing out drinks to the customers.

“So what do you think Bibby?” Shake was asking. “I reckon it’s the harvesters again.”

“No idea Shake.” She replied casting him a glance. “It’ll be some out of the way back yard though, as usual.”

“What do you think Brett, harvesters yeah?” Shake inquired.

Brett turned away from the screen on the wall that was showing the latest news reports. “Don’t know guys, but we only have a small force of fighters onboard this frigate, she ain’t no carrier y’know.”

“Yeah, but we’ll meet up with them yeah, somewhere, someplace a whole fleet.”

Brett didn’t answer, he had turned his attention back to the screen. “Hey, robo,” he shouted at the bar tender, “turn it up will ya.”

The automated bartender did as requested and to the grunts of some of the others in the room, the sound from the news cast increased.

Suddenly everyone went quiet and focused on the screen as the reporter continued.

“It is reported, but I must stress not confirmed, that a joint force from The Split and Teladi navies has engaged the Yaki fleet in the outer sectors.”

Brett glanced at the other two. They returned his gaze and then looked back at the wall.

“The Split and Teladi news agencies are refusing to give any details, but our sources imply that this force has been destroyed. I repeat that, *destroyed*, totally and utterly wiped out. We saw them go in and no ships returned, none.”

The screen suddenly went off and the room was filled with bright white light.

“All personnel, report to station immediately. All personnel report,” bellowed the ships announcement system.

Everyone in the room rose as one.



Split and Teladi fleets under Yaki attack.

Brett stood in the briefing room with the other eight pilots who were the strike force of the frigate. Two squads of ships were all she could carry. They had been stationed on her for the last three Jazuras, Brett really wanted to be on a carrier but you did what you were told. At least here there was a bit more freedom. They had flown over twenty missions now. Three pilots had been lost and replaced, the other five had been here from the time they had shipped out, just after obtaining their stars.

They had retrieved cargo pods, escorted politicians and accomplished the occasional assault. That was where they had lost pilots. But all the time Brett had run an organised and efficient squad. Bibby and Shake had been with him from the start. He had seventeen kills to his name now, pirates mostly and importantly, two Xenon. Rarely seen nowadays after the great Xenon war, but if they were discovered they were attacked on sight and Brett had taken two out.

The flight commander addressed them.

“Contrary to what you may have seen on the news casts, we are not about to launch any offensive strikes on the Yaki. Our intelligence states that the Yaki are in conflict with the Split and Teladi and although our leaders do not take kindly to their actions, we have no orders to act.”

“We pilots, are about to launch a strike against the mines in the Bevu sector. They have announced their intention to join the Yaki and leave the foundation guild. Our orders are to take out their defensive capability so the politicians have a stronger position to negotiate.”

The pilots glanced around at each other as this could be tricky. Mines typically had good defences and if these had decided to announce their intention to defect before actually carrying out the threat, they must have some confidence.

The two dimensional view of the sector appeared on the screen set in the wall at the back of the room. It was the same display that they received in their ships, so they were familiar with it.

The commander went through the intelligence reports. A dozen light fighter craft and two medium assault ships was the probable force. The mines that were situated on the three small moons close to the uninhabited planet also had fixed laser battery defences.

“We are not to engage the fixed defences,” the commander was explaining, “if we succeed in taking out the ships, then our government expects them to concede.”

“If they don’t, then I expect we will receive new orders. But for now, we engage the ships, understood?”

“Yes Commander!” They all replied together. This wasn’t looking like it was going to be easy. Brett knew that the mine defence ships would be inexperienced pilots, no match for his squad, but they had fourteen ships. The frigate only had eight. Numbers sometimes made up for lack of skill or even greater firepower. You may have the best lasers, but if the enemy had two ships, you could only fire on one of them at a time.

“Any questions?” the commander asked.

“Sir,” started Brett, “are we alone on this or do we have backup?”

“Alone, Brett. You have concerns?”

“Only that it seems a rather large force to be going against, Sir.” Brett replied.

“Correct Brett, it is a large force. Fourteen against eight, I expect that to be closer to even after the first pass and then all over in the second, don’t you?”

Brett felt all eyes upon him, he couldn’t challenge the Commander’s response, but he had said enough to voice a concern. If anything happened, it had been recorded. That was enough.

“Yes Sir, all over in the second pass Sir.” If we get a second pass, he thought. If these ships engage as one unit, we are going to be in a big laser fight. They were equipped with a dozen Argon Discoverers and two older Argon Elite’s. It was the Elite’s that worried him, large slow assault craft. They were nimble though and if fitted with the right shields and lasers, would prove difficult to take out.

The eight ships that the frigate carried where the relatively new Mako’s. An Argon and Boron joint venture, these craft were as fast as the Discoverer’s but had the shields and lasers of about seventy percent of that possibly carried by the Elite’s.

The pilots headed for their ships as the frigate turned towards the gate that would bring them into Bevu.

* * * * *

Brett sat in his Mako doing the pre-launch checks and studying the sector display. They had now entered Bevu and the miners would surely know they were about to be attacked. He scanned the sector display via his slave again and again, but even though the frigate was advancing on the mines, no defence ships had launched.

This worried him. There were only two reasons why they hadn’t launched. They didn’t have any ships or they had a strategy. Brett

opted for the second choice, they must have a strategy and that meant smart miners. He checked the systems again, lasers online, shields charged to maximum and functional. Ship to ship missiles loaded and ready, he checked the sector display again, nothing.

They were approaching the mines now, getting close and only twenty or so kilometres away. Still no ships had launched, would the captain of the frigate take them even closer? Brett knew that if they got within ten kilometres and the miners had missiles, they might just launch an offensive. Did the captain know that? He thought about contacting him, but quickly dispelled the idea. Of course he knew that, he was the captain of a frigate wasn't he?

Closer still, sixteen kilometres away from the nearest mine. Brett took a deep breath and made small fists with his hands. It didn't matter how many times you had been on a mission, you still felt tension. Fifteen kilometres, c'mon miners have a heart and act will ya!

The frigate only had a small landing bay, so the Makos were parked in eight fast launch tubes near the rear of the ship but facing outwards. Brett and his squad were on one side, Blue squad, Red squad was on the other side. They would be propelled by the ship up to 400 metres per second during launch, the engines on the Makos firing at the same time in an attempt to maintain the speed once they left the shielding and gravitational pull of the ship. Launching wasn't a problem once you had been through it many times, it was the fact that the command once given would be carried out within two Sezuras, unless you manually tapped the abort key. Brett kept his finger over it just in case, you never knew.

This ability to launch eight ships at once made the frigates a feared enemy. They were no match for any of the large cruisers and battleships that scoured the cosmos, but against a small force, they were deadly.

The frigate did carry missiles and also had a single beam laser on its bow. This was capable of delivering an enormous blow to a single stationary, or slow moving target. A number of laser batteries also adorned the ship for close-in defence against fighter attack, but these had proved only a token gesture when faced with large numbers of attackers in the simulators.

Thirteen kilometres. Brett's heart rate had increased, he could feel it, almost hear it in his suit. One way or another this was going to start soon because if they got within four kilometres the frigates beam laser would be within range and the Captain might decide to bombard the mines themselves. They would need to get within two clicks for the mine lasers to be in range.

Eleven. He tensed in his suit, waiting for the order to launch. What are you doing Captain? He thought, if we get too close and you launch, we're gonna launch straight into the moon itself. Fighters don't have brakes y'know.

Ten, he took a deep, deep breath. Letting it out slowly, calming himself. Nine. Eight. He looked to his left in a vain attempt to see his companions, but all he saw was the launch tube wall.

Seven. The miners had waited until the frigate could not escape their missiles and seven kilometres away was the range. Brett saw the dots appear on his scanner. He selected one, zoomed in, selected data. Oh no, factory killers! You damn fool Captain, get us out of here!

The Captain of the frigate had not expected the miners to possess such weapons as these. His intelligence reports did not indicate it, why should they have them?

He barked the order to his launch controller. “Launch fighters, now!”

What good fighters were going to do against 400 metres per second missiles was anyone's guess at this range. But he gave the order nevertheless.

“Launch confirmed!” The message came through the ship communicator. Here we go.

Bang! Brett's ship shot down the launch tube, gathering speed as it went. He saw the lights dotted along the tube flash past him faster and faster. He was pushed back hard into his seat and he tilted his head slightly to the side, grimacing at the force exerted on him.

Then space, the pressure disappeared instantly and he was aware that he now had control. He looked left and right through the space screen, confirming that the two on his left and one on his right had launched. Now we are free, he thought.

He heard the communication from Red squad and couldn't believe it.

“Too close, go verti.....”

“What the f.....”

He scanned the sector screen. Red squad was nowhere to be seen. The idiot *had* launched too close and they had been catapulted into the moon. Red squad was gone.

He saw the missiles hit through the rear display. Bang, bang into the shields of the frigate. Then another salvo, bang, bang, bang. The frigate was turning away from the moon.

“All ships, this is the Captain of Excel. We are taking damage and are evacuating the area. Cover our departure.”

You have got to be kidding! Brett thought. If I could land at this moment I would pull you throat out, you stupid idiot.

“All offensive capability lost.” It was the Captain again. “We have shields down and are accelerating away.”

On the open channel? You say *that* on the open channel. Are you mad?

The other three ships from his squad were now in formation alongside him. The frigate was moving away and he was running options through his mind when the scanner bleeped at more contacts.

Oh no! The mines were launching their fighters. He saw them come out of the docking bays from each mine and counted them off, eighteen fighters and six Elites. Intel got that wrong as well then.

“OK, Blue squad. You see the targets as well as I do, maintain formation until we clear the missile range of the mines. Then await further orders. Check your systems people, your gonna need ‘em!”

The enemy fighters were forming up into an attack stance. Not the inexperienced pilots they had thought then. Brett was beginning to wonder whether some of these ships were mercenaries, maybe Yaki ships brought in to protect the mines. The communication channel opened again.

“Blue One, this is your Commander, you read?” It was the squad commander.

“Gotcha Commander, go ahead.” Brett replied.

“I have taken control of the frigate, the Captain has been relieved of command. We are in no state to fight. Performing jump sequence in twenty Sezuras. Your only chance is to lock the spot, you understand Blue One?”

Lock the spot? This was going to be fun. That meant that the frigate was going to jump and for a few Sezuras after, probably only two or three, the jump tunnel would remain open after the frigate had gone. The commander was telling Brett to aim for that point in space and follow them through before the tunnel closed. The Mako’s didn’t have jump drives. If they didn’t make it, they were on their own against the miners.

This was tricky as your speed had to be slow to jump, but you had to be in the right place at the right time, which meant full speed to be there.

Brett was already turning towards the frigate, the rest of Blue squad staying in formation. They had heard the message and blinked confirmations. He didn’t need to speak with them.

They raced at the frigate, closing in together so all four Makos were only metres apart.

“Incoming!” It was Shake. “Seeker missiles launched, impact ten Sezuras.”

Seeker missiles were launched and forgotten about. Fire and forget. They locked onto the closest enemy target and would

change their target if the internal scanning device thought it a better target. They were aimed at Blue Squad.

C'mon Commander, jump!

“Five Sezuras!” The Commander confirmed.

They were almost on the rear of the frigate now, it was slowing for the jump. Then brilliant flashes of blue swirling light. The jump tunnel!

Brett set the speed of the ship to 40 m/s. He was currently showing a speed of 380. The engines groaned as they went into reverse thrust, Brett felt the change in force and it pushed him forward in his seat. Blue Squad followed their leader, all slowing for the tunnel.

“Their gonna get us Brett!” It was Bibby.

The frigate was gone. The tunnel had already started to shrink. One last look at the sector scanner, missiles about to strike, speed at 42, 41, 40. Then the tunnel and silence, no movement in the ship, only the swirling tunnel. Brett couldn't move, frozen in time, yet his senses were still alive. He could *see* the tunnel rotating around him, but he couldn't move his head or eyes.

Then space, out of the tunnel and all senses taking in data. The frigate ahead, close by and turning to it's left. Brett flicked the control stick to veer right, Shake went vertical, Bibby turned down. Blue four, the newest recruit wasn't so lucky. Two seekers had also made the tunnel and as they exited they locked onto Blue Four, the closest target and the one not moving away.

Crack! Boom! They all heard the explosion through the communication channel before it was abruptly cut off.

“Blue Four's bought it, Blue One” It was Bibby again.

“Confirmed squad,” replied Brett, “Shake, go evasive, the second missiles locked onto you.”

It had, the first missile had destroyed Blue Four and the second one realising that its intended target was now obliterated, turned

its attention to another one. It took a fraction of a Sezura to make the decision, Shake’s ship won.

Brett looped over and flew after Shake, he was heading upwards while darting from side to side, accelerating as he went. Brett came at him at an angle and sure enough the seeker was below him, closing in on Shake.

Brett aimed at the missile, no chance of a lock on such a small object. Then it veered towards him. On no, the seeker had changed its path again, Blue One offered a better target now!

Brett opened fire, laser bolts streaking out from the four weapons, one on each weapon mount (small wings on the side of the craft) and two in the nose. He felt the judder of the ship as the lasers screamed out. No chances of a good hit just rely on instinct, spray the area with fire and hope you get it. The lasers on the nose were a smaller weapon than the wing mounts, but this gave them a higher rate of fire.

Finger on the trigger, starting to hurt he was pulling so hard. Hand feeling wet, slippery. Sweat beginning to pour down his face, high pitched wail of the lasers. Bang! The explosion so close he wasn’t sure for a Sezura whether he had been hit or not. No, the missile had exploded only metres away from his ship.

“Hey, way to go Blue Leader!” Shake screamed.

Brett slumped onto the console, taking in deep breaths in an attempt to calm his nerves. That was close.

He looked at the sector map while still spread across the console, his slave piping the data in. Argon Prime! By the book of truth, we’re home!

They landed on the frigate, one after another on the small landing bay. Brett jumped out of his Mako and made for the bridge, anger boiling inside him. He burst into the command deck, spotted the Captain and ran across the room shouting obscenities as he went.

“You killed ‘em, you fool. You launched them into the moon!”

It took three marines to hold Brett back. They had been guarding the Captain. Bibby and Shake ran into the bridge and stopped just inside.

The squad commander put his hand on the struggling pilot. “Brett, calm down. It was a malfunction, not his fault.”

Brett stared into the commander’s eyes, anger and fury still burning inside.

“What do you mean, malfunction?” he screamed.

“The data the Captain was getting was out of date, delayed somehow, I don’t know how yet. He thought we were still approaching the first moon, not the second. It shows up in the logs Brett.”

Brett looked from the commander to the Captain. The Captain simply shrugged, he was a broken man. Brett relaxed slightly, but the marines holding him did not.

* * * * *

They sat in the bar on Argon Four, Brett, Bibby and Shake. It had been three Tazuras since the Bevu fiasco and they had been transferred to the large cruiser. It sat in stationary orbit around Argon Prime. They had nothing to do, no orders, no missions, so they sat in the bar and drank and talked.

It was a larger bar than the one they had become so accustomed to on the frigate and was full of pilots, ships crew and maintenance staff. They were still arguing over the near miss they had experienced. The Captain was down on the planet undergoing a debriefing, otherwise known as an interrogation. No information had been fed back to them about the incident and they were quite confident none would be.

What they had discovered though through the news and official briefings was that the Split and Teladi navies had indeed suffered a heavy defeat at the hands of the Yaki. Not much detail was known, but they had confirmed reports of the size of fleets that had set out and as stated, they had not returned.

Brett was feeling just slightly light headed, the drink in the navy bars was weakened from the illegal stuff sold in the space stations. But it still gave the same feeling if enough was consumed. Shake didn't drink, but Bibby was following Brett drink for drink.

“It's not your fault Brett,” she was saying, “he should have veered left, he knew his position like the rest of us.”

“I know, I know. But you can't help wondering what could have been eh?”

They were talking about Blue Four, which had been destroyed by the seeker, after they exited the jump. Four ships in a squad, when you jump together you turn into you pre-assigned direction. The other three had followed this rule, Blue Four had not and paid the price.

“Hey you two,” it was Shake, “if the kid *had* turned, then it would've been one of us. The missiles could have chosen us instead and you know yourself, you can't outrun a pair.”

Brett looked at him, not convinced that he was right, but so what? It didn't matter now. He was gone. Just another pilot lost to the cause.

He heard shouting from the door of the bar, it was one of the laser battery operators from the look of his uniform.

“The news!” He was shouting. “Listen to the news, the President is speaking!”

Someone must have instructed the bar robot as the large screen that filled half the back wall sprang into life. The face of the Argon President filled the screen, speaking from his usual podium, planet side.

“....that we have confirmed reports, the listening outposts of Echo Seven and Echo Twelve have been destroyed. The space station and energy plants in the vicinity of Echo Nine have also been destroyed. We confirmed this just before Echo Nine itself went down.”

Shake looked at Brett, Brett looked at Bibby. Bibby looked at both of them and then back to the screen. The Echo stations were military stations designed to scan the sectors. They contained dozens of fighter ships and thousands of personnel.

“An aggressive force is currently moving against the food farms and processing plants in the area of Echo Three.” The President paused. “People of Argon, I have instructed our Admiral not more than five Mizuras ago, to use whatever means at her disposal to stop these barbaric and mindless acts of destruction.”

“Rest assured, we will be successful. Please spare your thoughts for the men and woman of our navy. My people, as of this moment, a state of war exists between the Argon and the Yaki.”

Brett looked at Bibby and Shake again, suddenly he felt none of the effects of the drink. They just sat with their mouths open, speechless.

* * * * *

It was sometime later before she saw the President’s speech. It took time for the message drones that had automatically been sent out to all the Echo stations to be intercepted.

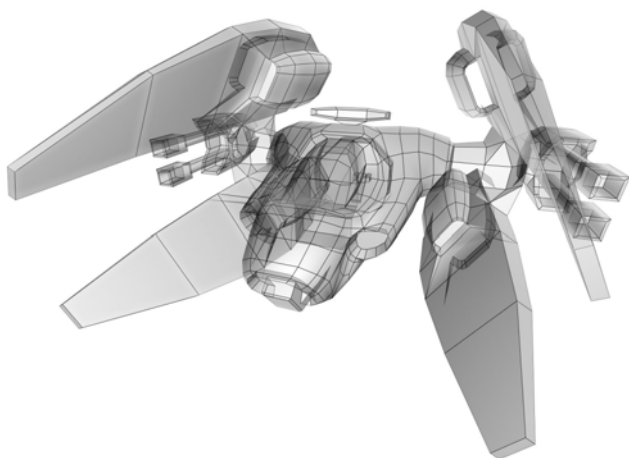
She smiled. Fool President, does he think his Argon navy can save him now?

She turned to her aide. “Everything is ready?”

“Yes Moo-Kye, we will be in strike position of the Echo Three sector in four Tazuras.”

“Good.” Came the reply. “Let it begin.”

Dominion: Chapter 8 – The frigate “Excel”



Chapter 9 – Gates and re-alignment

Trying to explain the truth to the masses. Was it an impossible task? Should you not try and explain it, but simply tell them what is so?

Mitch and Mi Ton sat in the small transport ship. Trouble was afoot, but they had been summoned to the Argon government anyway after their results had been received. They hadn't finished, still more to do, but they were so close they had decided to inform the Argon and Boron governments of their find.

So a Boron war ship had been dispatched to collect them, as they had no jump devices of their own. The large ship had appeared at the gate and hailed them to depart. They had finalised their plans and set the computer systems running so they could continue to extract data while they were gone.

"How important is that base?" the Boron Captain had inquired when they were safely onboard.

"Very important." Mi Ton had remarked, almost flippantly, his suit moving slowly to and fro as it hovered over the floor.

"Well if you leave it like that, on it's own in this current situation, it might not be there when you get back." The Captain replied.

"So what do you suggest?" Mitch asked.

"We can protect it, but it'll have to shutdown."

"Never!" Mi Ton flashed, "we cannot shut it down. The work is too valuable."

"Better shutdown and still there, than not to be there at all." The Captain stated.

"He has a point Mi," Mitch said, "what do you have in mind Captain?"

The Captains stalks moved briefly inwards.

"New protection systems my friends. We have a Sentinel onboard. We can use that."

Both Mi Ton and Mitch looked intrigued, they had heard nothing about this. Mitch felt a slight twinge at being away for so long. You lost touch that was the problem.

“Explain.” Mi Ton suggested.

“This device generates a massive shield for your station. So big it is virtually indestructible. However, it will use all available power from your nuclear power plant and everything within its protective screen will be doused with energy. They will not work while the Sentinel is armed.”

“But what of the reactor’s systems?” Mitch asked.

“They are within the reactor’s protective screen, yes?” replied the Captain.

“Yes.” Mitch replied.

“Then they will work, all others will not.” He said, bending slightly on his four legs.

“So why can’t we put all the systems within the screen?” Mi Ton asked, he was becoming very interested in this new development.

“The screen protects, yes? Your scanners will not work inside it? You cannot fire lasers from within a screen and so on. Your station will be dormant while the Sentinel is activated, it can only be deactivated by the owner of the station who has the codes. Or if it runs out of life.” He added.

“Runs out of life?” Mitch again.

“Yes, the one we have with us will operate for ten Tazuras, after that it will deactivate. A Sentinel can only be used once, if you deactivate it before the end of it’s life span, it is useless.” The Captain floated backwards in his suit and took his position in his command straps.

Mitch nodded. Mi Ton raised his snout. They agreed.

“Deploy it!” They both said in their native languages.

After the Sentinel was installed and activated the Boron ship entered a jump tunnel. It wasn't very long before they were sat in the meeting chamber on the main trading station in Argon Prime. They were awaiting their visitors, the Argon and Boron government representatives who would listen to their find and take the information back for perusal.

They had agreed that Mitch would start the briefing and Mi Ton would answer any questions from the floor. Then they would just see how it went.

The four representatives from each government filed into the room and took their seats. Mitch stood, greeted them and took his place at the podium, the screen he would be using to explain their findings behind him on the wall.

He started by describing the laws of physics, Protons and Neutrons, Quarks, Gravitons and the relationships between them.

"These things, we here in this room either already understand or have no wish to understand, please skip this section and carry on." Stated the Boron head of science.

Mitch was a little agitated, he fumbled with the display controller and moved the presentation further on. A picture filled the screen. Ten boxes in a row numbered one to ten in both Argon and Boron.

"Ok," he said, "imagine you are at number one and looking at number two. Number two is a single light Jazura away, so what you are looking at when you are at number one is what happened at number two a whole Jazura ago, yes?"

They all nodded their approval. This was more like it for the politicians in the room.

"Well, if you are then at number two, you can see what is happening now at number two and what happened a Jazura ago at number one and number three and so on." He looked for signs of puzzlement, he didn't see any. Good.

"Our surveyors are installed across the entire known universe in most sectors, except of course the current areas of conflict. So what you see is really just a picture in time, physically see I mean,

the background stars and nebulae are just pictures hanging on the wall, so to speak.”

“If you can *be* at number two, you are looking at what you *will* see at number one in a Jazura. The gates give us this capability. Now the gates don’t span the whole universe, that much we know, but they cover a wide area.” He pressed a button on the controller and the graphic on the screen span into a three dimensional image and then began to multiply to show the known gate systems of which there were thousands, many still undiscovered or mapped they were sure.

“But,” he went on, “*we* are not looking at pictures, we are looking at data, specifically data of positive and negative energy. We can see what it was and what it will be.”

“For example, every time an object enters a gate a great amount of negative energy is produced by the gate. Why, we are not sure yet. However, this is countered by the positive energy of the object, for example the ship.”

The audience was beginning to become enthralled, he could tell.

“But not all the negative energy is countered. It can be mapped and some of the military systems use this for tracking purposes already.”

“What we have found is this. The amount of negative energy left over by gate activities is nowhere near what we are finding. There are two answers for this.”

The audience leaned forward as one.

“Firstly, we are tracking gate usage in areas where we don’t know there are gates. Somebody, or something is using gates elsewhere.” Mitch paused to make sure he had the required impact.

“Secondly, the background negative energy can be mapped. It came from somewhere and although we do not yet have definite proof, we will have soon.”

“For what?” an Argon politician asked like a young boy.

"We have checked the history banks and there was a large, what can I say, usage of negative energy approximately six hundred Jazuras ago. Exactly around the time the Teladi state they lost contact with their home planet."

"This is accurate at present to the Mazura, but we expect to map it to the Sezura soon."

"So we have a history lesson Mitchell, excellent I am sure you will receive the Argon Broker prize for science." The Argon politician jibed.

"I haven't finished." Mitch stated. The Argon sat back in his chair, slightly embarrassed.

"Not only can we map that this happened, we can tell where the gates were that somehow changed their configuration. The energy levels are clear on this."

"And," Mitch checked his words and licked his lips, they were becoming dry, "the levels are increasing in certain areas as well."

He let it sink in, would they be able to grasp what he was saying?

"Which means what?" grunted one of the Boron.

"Which means, the gates are going to be reconfigured again." The room gasped, the Boron snorted.

"When?" Three voices at once.

"We have not calculated the timings exactly yet, we are still working on it. However, our initial findings state that it will happen in the next ten Jazuras."

"Ten?" exclaimed the Argon science officer. "Are you sure? Ten?" He was shaking his head, the others in the room were talking to each other and the noise in the room was increasing.

Mi Ton joined Mitch on the podium and Mitch held out an arm to steady the floating Boron in his suit. "Please everybody, calm down, quiet please." He pleaded. It took a few more attempts but he finally got the others in the room to be silent and sit and face the front again.

“Let me say finally,” Mi Ton gestured, “that we have also discovered the general location of the Argon home planet, Earth.” The room erupted again.

“Please, PLEASE!” Mi Ton commanded. “We cannot see it, it is too far away and would take over a thousand Jazuras to travel there at the speed of light.”

“So how do you know where it is?” someone asked.

“We do not know for certain, we only know it’s direction. This we have discovered by the energy levels given off in certain areas. We know by studying the local gates which way they are pointing, so to speak, by analysing the energy levels and the direction they face. It is simple really. A gate gives off negative energy in the opposite direction to the way it is pointing. Just like we can track ships today, or at least know the size and destination from the energy readings, we can track what *did* happen many Jazuras ago.”

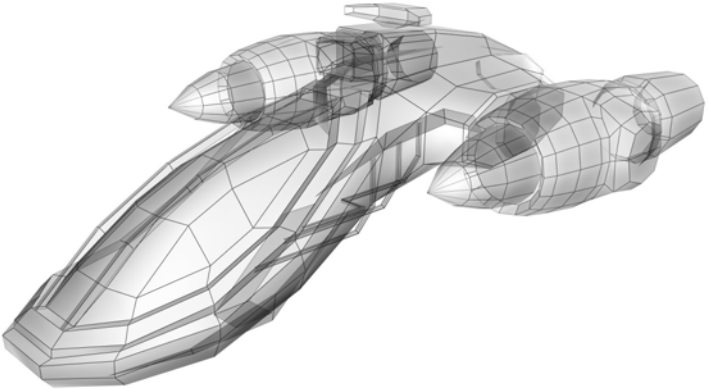
“We have found that one of fifty or so gates could have been the source at the time. There is no current destination pointing in that direction. We should know soon, which particular gate it is.”

“My friends and colleagues, if we are right and if such a gate also exists at the other side, we could be open to Earth within ten Jazuras.”

They had overdone it slightly, they knew. Mentioning Earth was enough to get them extra funding, they weren’t quite sure if it was Earth. They were right that the gates *did* point somewhere else in the past and which one was still a mystery for now. But they did know that all data pointed to there being a gate link in that direction at that time. Only that direction had such overwhelming readings. The Teladi homeworld must be inside the current configuration, so it was harder to find a pointer to that. But they would, they were sure.

They had only spent two Tazuras at the station in Argon Prime when they were sworn to secrecy and shipped back to the laboratory. It was still there just as the Boron had said it would be, in perfect condition. They deactivated the Sentinel and continued

with their work. This time the Boron warship stayed to patrol the sector and other smaller military vessels began to arrive



Chapter 10 – The battle for Echo Three

Conflict. There are never winners in any conflict, only degrees of losing. The trick is to lose with the lowest degree.

The battle for Echo Three.

The small nimble fighter turned to its right, the pilot seeking out the small object that was far from his base. He and his squad had destroyed fourteen so far. This one, if he could locate it visually, would be the last one.

It showed up on the scanner, he had locked onto it as soon as he had destroyed the last one. But finding it, that was a different matter. He would need a visual and you couldn't do that flying at this speed. He was getting closer, the image inside his head showed 3.6 kilometres. Time to slow this crate down, he thought. He commanded the ship to slow to fifty m/s and felt the push forwards as the engines obeyed the computer commands.

Now where is it? The scanner was indicating that it was upwards. He pulled back gently on the control stick and actually leaned forward in his seat, squinting outside of the space screen in an attempt to help his quest. No, can't see it. Quick check on the scanner again, one kilometre and closing.

There! He saw it, energy wings stretching outwards for power. The local sun had just reflected off its surface, as the angle was right. It was gone again now, but it didn't matter. The pilot had mentally plotted its position and he steered straight for it.

Quick check on the laser energy banks. Fine, full power available. He squeezed the trigger and the laser bolts shot out before him. Four quick bursts from the twin lasers and then an explosion. Got it!

"Echo Three, this is Gold One. Do you read?"

"Confirmed Gold One. Go ahead." Replied the space station.

"Mission accomplished Echo Three. All navigation satellites destroyed." The pilot stated.

"Confirmed Gold One. Return to base, Echo Three out."

The pilot smiled. Mission accomplished. A good start to what was looking like being a very bad few Tazuras.

* * * * *

The communication officer turned to the station commander. "All accounted for Sir. We have destroyed every Nav Sat in this and the surrounding sectors as ordered. Nobody can surprise us now. They'll have to pound it the old way." He smiled.

"That they will," the station commander agreed, "but once our fleet is underway, so will we." He pointed out.

"Ah yes, commander, so will we." He repeated.

* * * * *

The Orion.

Admiral Stacey sat in the officers briefing room aboard the Argon navy's flagship, the "Orion". They had quickly put together a force and had been on their way now for three Tazuras. She had ordered all Nav Sats in the Echo Three area to be destroyed right away. It had taken a day to organise the fleet and she didn't want the enemy jumping in using the Nav Sats before they could. The satellites enabled ships to jump from one point to a gate further away, thereby skipping the normal route and arriving much sooner. No point in arriving to find the battle already finished.

The Orion was the latest ship to enter service and was the pride of the Argon fleet. They had done away with the blocky flat designs of the older ships and created a somewhat improved design. It was constructed of four, almost separate bulbous parts. Big sections that appeared connected part of the way down each of their ends so that you couldn't see where they ended. It appeared as one long construction, even though it was indeed individual parts.

Part of the navy's intention, they could build smaller ships using the same methods. Plans were already being laid for further ships, small ones made up of two of the constructions and medium size ships made up of three. Attached to the sides of the ship were two large launch bays, one on each side. These allowed the ship to launch and receive large numbers of ships. Although each side

could accomplish both tasks, they used one for launching and one for landing and then would switch when ships were reloaded.

It sounded complicated and potentially dangerous, but each bay had hazard lights surrounding the whole oblong entrance. These shone green or red depending upon the bay's current stance. On the front of the ship, at the top of the forward structure was the bridge, a small square shaped protrusion that had space screens on every side. Light shone from the bridge where the crew was busy at work.

Officially described as a carrier for the "deployment of massed forces to battle", the Orion was actually also capable of delivering a blow in her own right having beam lasers and missile launchers installed.

She was heading directly for the gate that led to Echo Three. A massive armada of ships surrounded her. Frigates, Destroyers and the older carriers were all present along with many small fighter craft that patrolled the sector and stayed on station, ready for any attack.

This was the force hastily constructed to meet the threat posed by the Yaki who were themselves currently heading for Echo Three from the opposite direction. It wasn't the whole fleet by any means. Much of the Argon navy was scattered around the sectors protecting other important installations and there would always be a battleship and carrier in orbit around Argon Prime, always.

In fact, none of the three serviceable battleships that the navy possessed were in this force. They couldn't be brought to station fast enough, so the force had left without them.

Admiral Stacey felt confident without them though. This force was strong enough to tackle a race in itself. Then again, she shuddered, the Yaki were *becoming* a race, weren't they?

She looked around the table at the other force commanders, all main ship captains were on board for the final strategy meeting before they entered the sector. Six other officers, plus herself. Seven large ships plus a multitude of fighters of different size were in the fleet.

“So ladies and gentlemen,” she began, “can I assume that all orders have been given and every person in this force knows their place?”

All six around the table pressed buttons on their consoles to record their agreement as well as visibly with the nod of the head.

“Well let’s hope for a speedy victory then and back home to our loved ones. I don’t expect these,” she searched for the word, “bandits, to give us much trouble.”

One of the frigate captains spoke up. “They did manage to destroy four large destroyers and fifty ships of the joint Teladi/Split force Ma’am,” he stated.

“That is true,” she replied resting her elbows on the table and grasping her left hand in her right. “But as we know, they will have fought a disjointed campaign with outdated ships. We are much stronger than that.”

He nodded his agreement, no sense in arguing this close to the actual battle. But deep inside all seven of them each had their doubts. What losses had the Yaki taken during that brief strike? How big was their fleet anyway? Intelligence was scarce since the hostilities began. Every attempt at sending drones and scout ships had been a failure. None of them had returned, even message drones from the scout ships. It had an ominous feeling to it.

The fleet continued on its course towards the gate.

* * * * *

Echo Three.

The woman sat at her console, scanning again and again across the sector. She could see everything in the sector from her screen, but she continually selected objects individually and checked their status. She sighed and rubbed her hand across her forehead. She felt tired. They had been running double shifts ever since war was declared, so the station had maximum staff at the ready at all times. She was nearing the end of her second shift and she was feeling the pressure and tension of the situation.

The station sat almost exactly half way between the two gates. The gates where the two opposing forces would soon come. There were a few other large objects in the sector, an energy plant, two food processing plants and a single mine on one of the slow moving asteroids that had been caught in the planets gravitational pull and now orbited as a small moon.

But all personnel from those had left. Fleeing back to the safety of the inner sectors. Probably seeking out assurance from the Argon government that they would be able to claim some form of compensation in the event their properties were destroyed. Some chance of that, she mused. The government might ask the enemy to pay up when it was all over, if there was an enemy left. But there was no chance the Argon government would start bankrolling traders. Especially those out on the frontier where the profits were high. You chose to set up there, they would say, you take the risks.

That's why she had joined the navy. Nice steady income, you do what you are told and you pay so much of your credits into the navy scheme. Then when your time is up, you leave and go back planet side with a reduced income. Or you stay in space and take your chances with the traders. Well it seemed like a good idea at the time, sign up, basic training and pick a career. What would madam like to be? A technician perhaps, quantum mechanics maybe? Yeah right. Three quarters of the time spent staring at this stupid screen and the rest trying to sleep in quarters you could barely turn around in. If you did manage to get any time awake, then you had to blow off steam. Some went to the exercise centres where you could stretch your muscles and keep in shape, but the majority hit the relaxation zone and drank themselves to oblivion. She was just contemplating whether her tired body could handle another night of the zone when her console beeped. A ship had just exited the gate. Oh no! Wrong gate.

"Sir! We have an incident here." She shouted across the room and into the communication system at the same time. Ships were pouring through the gate like Argon ants from a nest.

"Yes scan, report." The station commander replied into his communication device attached to his lapel. He was moving towards her as he spoke.

"Contact sir, multiple contacts. Exiting gate now."

“Ours?”

“Negative Sir. Unidentified signatures” she replied.

“Strength?”

“Sixty four and counting sir. They are still coming through.”

“Type?”

“All fighter class so far sir. Medium and small.”

The station commander thought for a moment. This is it then. A whole career behind me and they actually come here.

“Shall we launch Sir?” It was fighter command.

“No!” He snapped. “Let them get closer. Station batteries, come to alert. Missile batteries, start to track. Do not fire until I give the order, understand? Do not fire.”

A number of confirmations could be heard through the communication channel that was now switched onto the main system so that everyone in the room could hear it.

He swept his gaze around the room. Men and women in their uniforms seated at consoles. Red, green, blue and white lights flickering from their screens. He took in a deep breath and then realised some of his staff were watching him. He consciously let it out slowly. What can I do? We can't run, and against the size of force that was bearing down on them, fighting wasn't much of an option either.

What else? Surrender? Not likely, that was one thing he couldn't contemplate. You had to have a certain character to surrender and he didn't have that type. No way, they'll kill you anyway, murdering pirates. Better to go down fighting than to give in. Yeah good, he felt better now, a shot of adrenaline does wonders for your self esteem. He smiled. C'mon then Yaki, let's see what you've got. This ain't no little lookout post like the other Echo stations you've been shooting out. This is Echo Three, best in its class. You won't roll us over that easy.

“Sir.” It was the girl on scan again.

“Yes scan, what you got?”

“Large ships are entering the sector sir. A battleship, three destroyers and two squads of assault ships sir.”

“Direction?”

“On us Sir. They are heading straight for us.” Came the reply.

“OK, scan thank you.” He turned to communications. “Comms, wrap that data up and launch message drones to the fleet.”

“Confirmed Commander. Drones launching now.”

“OK people. Don’t go worrying now, the fleet is coming.” He sounded convincing even though he knew himself that they didn’t know where the fleet was exactly. They had received a drone when the fleet had entered the adjacent sector so they could only be Mizuras away. Still, where were they?

He moved so that he was directly behind the scanner. “Scan, put that view on the main screen.”

The large screen at the back of the command room switched from the many screens that normally showed the stations status to the single display that was the sector map. He studied the data. Eight assault ships approaching the station. These would surely have heavy weapons, maybe beam lasers and certainly factory killer missiles. In front of them was a force of about thirty small and medium fighters. It was obvious what was about to happen. The smaller fighters would try and draw his force of twenty out, so the assault ships could launch directly on the station. They were going to try and draw his teeth. Well, he wasn’t going to fall for that one. He would let the station’s laser batteries fire at the fighters and launch his force against the assault ships.

“Scan, zoom in on those assault ships if you will.”

The screen zoomed into the large ships and he noticed now that the view was clearer and each ship could be seen individually, that fighters flanked them. Two for every assault ship. He wiped his

hand from his forehead to his chin and left it there, rubbing at the unshaven skin.

"They're coming in!" It was fighter command.

"OK scan, give me a close up view around the station." The screen moved around and then zoomed in to the station. Ships were getting close. "Keep an eye on those capital ships scan. They get within fifteen clicks, you yell. Understood?"

"Yes Sir!" Good keep them busy. People don't panic when they're busy.

"Laser Batteries, you have control. Commence firing, fire at will."

"Aye sir!" Battery replied.

All laser batteries that were facing the incoming fighters opened fire. Shhh...thump. Shhh...thump. Laser bolts streaking across the vacuum. The fighters at the front of the force showing flashes as the lasers struck their shields. The second fighter must have taken control damage as it didn't swerve away like the others but continued on and crashed into the station shields, exploding on impact.

The commander glanced at the large shield strength indicator that was set into the wall to the right of the main screen. It read ninety three percent in large blue letters.

The Yaki fighters swarmed over Echo Three. Moving in towards the station, lasers blaring and then quickly spinning away to avoid the laser batteries. They wouldn't make much of an impact on their own. But the small lasers were almost continually hitting the station shields and there was no time for them to regenerate. They were dropping, slowly but surely the shields were coming down. He glanced at the wall again, eighty two percent.

A flash of light on one of the external camera views. "That's three Sir, we got another one."

"Keep at it battery, keep at it." Another look at the scanner, assault ships ten kilometres and closing.

“Fighter command, launch against those assault ships, everything you’ve got.”

“Aye Sir!” He watched as the first of his fighters left the station dodging fire as it went. The Yaki fighters must have been waiting for it to happen and they broke off their attack on the station and headed for the Argon ships that were exiting one by one.

The shields began to rise.

“Sir, assault ships at six clicks and closing.” It was scan.

“Missile batteries. Target the front two assault ships with a 150% damage salvo.”

“Tracked sir.”

“Fire!” The commander shouted.

The six missiles left the station, accelerating as they went, weaving around as they tracked their pre-determined targets. The Yaki assault ships scattered in all directions and he watched the screen agonisingly as the missiles closed.

They hit. Large flashes on the tracking camera as the assault ship’s shields took the first missile hits and then two explosions, one just after the other as the two ships exploded in silence.

A small cheer in the command room. “Quiet!” He snapped. “This ain’t over yet.”

He felt the shudder and the station shook, just like a land quake shook the buildings back home. He staggered and grabbed the side of the desk next to him with his hand. Beam lasers. The assault ships were attacking with beam lasers. Another shudder rocked the station. Shields fifty eight percent.

Outside the station, ships spun around attempting to get good locks on their foes. The station ships were following their orders and attacking the assault ships. They were so close to the station now the laser batteries were targeting them as well. Another blinding flash, another assault ship destroyed.

“Fighter command, situation report.” The commander ordered.

“Five lost sir, we are outnumbered.” Came the answer.

“I know that.” A low rumble, short, followed by another and another. Missiles, does this never end?

Another two assault ships destroyed by his fighters, only three to go. They were too close really for missile locks, but he had no choice.

“Missile batteries, attack those assault ships again.” They turned from their consoles to look at him, knowing the same, as he did, that not all missiles would succeed. “Do it!” He shouted.

They obeyed and a dozen missiles launched from the station trying to track their foes. One turned too quickly in its attempt to follow its target that was running for the back of the station and it glanced off the side of the station shields, exploding on impact. He’d expected that, calculated risk. Either they die first or we die first, who has the best shields? He glanced at the wall, twenty seven percent, it was going to be close.

“Incoming message commander,” it was comms, “It’s the Orion!”

“On screen!”

The admirals face appeared on the screen, she looked out of place sat in her seat, all perfectly dressed while around him the commander was witnessing carnage.

“Commander, your situation if you please.” Admiral Stacey inquired like she was asking the time.

“Under heavy attack Admiral,” boom, another missile strike. The commander steadied himself again, “on our knees but still punching Ma’am.” He glanced at the main screen that was now showing the position the station found itself. “Eight fighters lost, almost out of missiles, shields at..” boom, “shields at eighteen percent Ma’am.”

“Acknowledged Echo Three, we are in sector, obtaining strike vectors now.” She glanced to something, or someone at her side then returned to the screen. “Hang in there commander.” The screen went blank, everyone in the room cheered, even the

commander. They could still die, he knew that all too well, but the relief that the fleet was actually here was almost overwhelming.

Boom, boom. More missile strikes on the station, shields at fifteen percent.

“Prepare all non-combat personnel for immediate evacuation. This is Commander O'Donnell of Echo Three, confirm.”

The loud, slow female voice of the station computer boomed over the channel, “Confirmed commander. Evacuation sequence activated.”

All over the station people were running for the escape chutes. A vast network of tunnels that you could literally jump into, then be transported down into the escape bay. Four large slow transport ships awaited, their cargo holds fitted out with life support systems. Fifteen hundred people were all making their way to the ships while the five hundred or so combat staff stayed at their stations. There was no room for them on the ships anyway, he just hoped that once launched they would get away and not be attacked by the Yaki.

* * * * *

Blue Squad.

Brett sat in the pilot seat of his Mako, Bibby and Shake to his left and the latest recruit on his right. Blue Four, which was his name. Not interested what his real name is unless we get back from this one. Then I'll get to know him, but for now he goes by his call sign.

They were lucky, each ship had its own squad colours and Argon Four didn't have a blue squad when they arrived, so they kept their name. Good omen, he liked that. They were in a row behind Green squad and others were behind them. There was enough room on the carrier for a squad to take off together.

They had mounted their ships just before entering the gate, so they were ready for immediate launch, if required, when they entered Echo Three sector. Sitting on the launch bay in your ship while traversing the tunnel had felt kind of strange, he'd never done that before, looking backwards.

He checked the sector scan, it was a fight the likes of which he had never witnessed. There were ships everywhere and it would be impossible to make any medium range tactical decisions. Everything in this fight would be done at close quarters. That suited him, he preferred a stand up fight.

The fleet was advancing at full speed towards the battle around the station. Brett noticed that the large ships of the Yaki and their protective fighter escort were heading for them. He stared at the scanner, heard his own breathing, no other sounds in the ship. It was almost like being underwater, silence, peacefulness. He regulated his breathing and closed his eyes, got to clear his mind and focus.

Blackness, just the lovely soothing blackness inside my head. No external inputs, senses going to sleep, resting.

The beep from the channel made him snap his eyes open and he was immediately back to alert. He saw the ships in front moving up and away from the floor. Exiting the docking bay, engines firing brighter as they accelerated away.

“Blue squad, you are cleared for launch. Good luck and good hunting.”

“Confirmed control.” He pressed the engine button manually (he preferred that) and mentally increased the power to the engines. His ship moved forward and he lifted back on the control stick slightly. His Mako began to leave the floor and the ship.

Just as he passed the outer mouth of the bay he stabbed the engines to full power and he began to speed away, his three-squad members alongside.

“OK, Blue Squad, everybody fine?” Three confirmation lights. “Good, head out to the incoming fighters, keep it tight.”

They turned upwards as they left the carrier and then rolled over as they completed the vertical turn. Green squad was a couple of kilometres further on and the next squad was leaving the ship behind them.

“This is Argon Four control, engage enemy fighters around that battleship.”

Brett pressed the confirm button in his mind. He could see the large ships approaching, large menacing ships, dark in colour. Was it black? No blue, dark blue all over. Laser fire coming in! Sheesh, these are fast fighters. "Blue squad, engage."

The Yaki fighters had come in so quickly he had missed them, there was so much confusion on the sector screen that he couldn't tell what was going on anyway. He ignored it, time for looking at that later. He pulled his ship vertical as the Yaki craft zoomed overhead and performed the same manoeuvre that he had done when exiting the ship. The Yaki ships split up, like an explosion, all going different ways. He locked his mind and tracking system on the centre one and steered for an attack.

He had closed on the pirate in the turn, but was still over a kilometre away. Out of range according to the manual. Well not according to Brett. He lined the craft up in his sights and squeezed the trigger, four laser bolts leaving his ship at a time, two slightly redder in colour than the others.

He kept firing, hoping to get a hit. Success! He could see the flashes as some of his shots hit. Bang, bang, bang. The lasers bounced off his shields, but it shook his ship and his aim on the enemy was lost. The ship had turned towards him now. Lasers streaking at him, he pointed his ship straight at it and returned the fire. He who has the biggest shields wins a head to head, he knew and as the Yaki ship flew past he noticed it was a Split fighter, looked like a modified Mamba, he wasn't sure. But it was painted with jagged stripes all over the ship. These Yaki are lunatics, he thought.

He turned to follow it, his ship jolting again as another Yaki locked onto him. An explosion behind, close enough for the shields to pick it up and the light to flash his console white.

"Got him Blue One!" It was Blue Four. Brett ignored it, no time for chatter.

He continued the turn and the Yaki was going low, so Brett adjusted and aimed in front of him so he could close the distance as they went. He pulled the trigger again, but this time kept it firmly pressed. The lasers kept firing and the Yaki was running right into his line. Multiple strikes, keep it there, c'mon you pirate,

keep turning. It did, and the lasers kept finding their target. A flash as it exploded and debris peppered his ship. A check on the shields, plenty enough to fight with. He told the combat system to lock the closest threat. It did, instantly, one hundred metres away.

Brett's ship shook like it was going to break up. He swerved left, right, up and down. Multiple lasers flashing past him. Dozens of shots, there's more than one he thought.

He plunged his ship downwards and kept the stick to its limit. The lasers went away, and he completed the loop. The Two Yaki fighters hadn't turned as quickly as he had. He opened fire. The rightmost enemy veered away, Brett selected it as his ship's locked target and mentally released two ship to ship missiles. They streaked away from his ship and he focused his full attention on the remaining Yaki.

It was taking evasive action, Brett had to stop firing while his missiles launched or he may have caught them by mistake, but now they were on their way, he pulled the trigger again and hits began to register on the Yaki ship. Flash, an instance of smoke, quickly dispelled in the vacuum and the Yaki was dead.

He checked his scanner for his comrades and more targets.

* * * * *

Argon Four.

The captain sat on the bridge. He had launched his full complement of fighters, forty in all and they were now engaging the Yaki. The battle appeared to be going well, but there was more to do yet.

He didn't need to check the readouts, he could see the Yaki battleship through the large space screen on the bridge. They were heading straight for one another. The Orion was to their side, about three kilometres to the right. If they could play this right, the Yaki ship was going to pass between them. They'd be able to bring all guns to bear from the sides of two ships at once.

"Helm, I have control." He ordered.

"Aye Sir." Helm replied.

He took control of the large carrier with the control stick built into his seat. Don't trust helm to respond fast enough to commands, it would be better to fly this ship himself.

He steered her slightly away from the battleship and then came back on the same line, as before, the Yaki hadn't altered course. It began firing.

The twin beam lasers from the front of the Yaki ship hit Argon Four at the front. She shook violently while the lasers deposited their energy. The shields were low, but they held. The battleship was beginning to move between them now and he saw that the Orion had opened fire as expected. Good, the Yaki were getting some of their own medicine.

"Open fire!" He commanded.

All laser batteries and missile launchers on the right side began firing. The Yaki ship was now passing directly between them and the rate of fire was immense. He checked the readouts, if she kept taking damage like this, she was going to blow.

Then she was gone!

"What the.." The battleship had vanished, where to? No explosion or debris. He checked the scanner, she wasn't on the scanner.

"Orion, what happened?" he asked.

"Stand by Argon Four." Came the reply.

Where had the battleship gone?

Then it was there, in front of him. It seemed like only two hundred metres away. He veered his carrier to the left.

"Captain!" Shouted Helm, "what are you doing?"

He kept pulling the ship to the left. Suddenly the battleship was gone and right before him, large as could be in the space screen, was one of the frigates.

"Captain!" Helm shouted as he ran over.

Too late, the carrier collided with the frigate. A loud rumbling noise and then the sound of metal scraping. He heard the explosion as the frigate gave up its fight and then a brief moment later, with its shields depleted, the carrier followed suit.

* * * * *

The Orion.

The admiral couldn't believe what she had just witnessed, the carrier had veered for no reason and ran into the smaller frigate. The result was that both ships were gone. The Yaki battleship had also gone, but it hadn't been destroyed, it had vanished. No jump tunnel had been seen. It had simply disappeared.

She saw that two of the Yaki destroyers were heading for the gate, retreating. The third seemed to be lumbering, possibly damaged from the fighter attacks. They were winning, she was certain of it. The Yaki battleship gone and the majority of their fighter ships were destroyed.

They had taken heavy losses too, Argon Four and a frigate lost. Over thirty ships destroyed in total. A good Tazura for the Argon people, but a bad one for the navy.

"Helm, take us within strike distance of that closest destroyer."

"Aye Ma'am." Helm replied as he jabbed the controls.

The Orion moved towards the Yaki ship. A few of its protective fighters were still moving around, trying to keep the marauding Argon fighters at bay. As soon as they were within range, the Orion launched missiles.

The Admiral watched them speed across the scanner. The destroyer feebly tried to turn away from them. One by one they hit, she could see the impacts through the space screen and saw her fighters begin to move away. They knew the fate that awaited the Yaki ship as well as she did and they didn't have long to wait.

It exploded in a massive ball of fire, which disappeared as quickly as it had started. The Yaki ship was gone.

“All fighters, this is Admiral Stacey.” She was just about to give the order to engage the retreating destroyers when she saw them both enter jump tunnels.

“Engage any remaining enemy ships.”

The pilot on one of the transport ships heading away from Echo Three station couldn't believe it when an Argon fighter began firing on them. Even less so when it launched missiles. He was still shouting obscenities through the communication channel when the transport ship exploded, killing the three hundred passengers on board.

Chapter 11 - Kotu

Time to make your own way in life my friend, time to walk alone.

Brett sat on the chair looking out of the space screen at the planet below. Argon Prime was such a marvellous spectacle especially when the sun glinted off the oceans.

Admiral Stacey stood to the side of the screen. She wasn't looking at him. Two marine guards were behind him either side of the door he knew, but he couldn't see them from where he was sitting.

He heard the door as it swished open. Somebody entered the room. No, not somebody, a Paranid, he could smell it. The admiral turned to greet the new arrival and Brett felt it move past him.

"Thank you for coming at such short notice LooManckStrat, it is very kind."

"Not at all," the Paranid replied through the translator, "the pleasure is mine."

The admiral gestured to Brett.

"This is the one?" the Paranid asked.

"Yes." She replied flatly.

The Paranid came close and looked Brett in the eyes, he tried to stare back, but he couldn't fix on the three eyes that gazed at him. LooManckStrat opened a container he had been carrying and pulled out what looked like three shiny metal balls. He threw them into the air and they took on a life of their own, hesitated for a moment as if in suspended animation and then shot across the room to Brett.

He was startled and tried to move backwards in the chair. He couldn't, the restraining bolts held him firmly. The metal balls moved around his head and neck, silent, probing. Moving in and out and around.

Then the Paranid reached out his hand and they shot across the room and lay in his palm. He placed them back into the container and turned to the admiral.

"Confirmed, he is one." LooManckStrat said.

The admiral nodded. She turned to the guards at the door. "Release him." She ordered. Brett sensed someone behind him and then a click as the bolts were released. His hands and feet free again.

He stood. "Just what is going on?" he asked.

Brett had destroyed seven Yaki fighters and was closing in on another when Argon Four blew. He lost that one, but Shake had got it anyway. They were hunting out more ships when they got the broadcast from the admiral.

"Engage any remaining enemy ships."

He'd looked at the scanner and there, coming at him were four Yaki assault ships. He'd engaged the front one with lasers and missiles and watched it explode. After he had dived through the explosion and taken evasive action he had come back around and they were gone.

No ships close by except three transports from Echo Three and Blue Squad.

His channel was full of people shouting at him and then he had received the command to land on the Orion. Well he couldn't land on Argon Four because it was gone so followed orders. None of Blue Squad spoke to him on the way in.

After landing, he was met with a group of stern looking marines who promptly took him prisoner and he spent the whole of the journey back to Argon Prime in the security area. Nobody spoke to him, nobody charged him with anything. Food appeared at the dispenser in the wall, right on time every time and then when they had reached orbit, he had been brought here to this room.

He wasn't happy.

The admiral addressed him. "You my fine pilot, gave a display just short of an Argon Star, then promptly blew up an unarmed transport ship carrying three hundred personnel from Echo Three."

Brett wasn't quite sure he had heard her right. "What? I shot up a bunch of Yaki fighters and then took out one of their assault ships before it jumped. Transport ship, what transport ship?"

"Sit down Brett, you need to see this." She gestured with her hand for him to sit back down. One of the marines placed a hand on his shoulder to convince him further.

The screen on the wall burst into life. He saw the view from one of the other transport ships as his Mako turned towards them. He saw himself firing into the transport ship, saw the missiles leave his ship and hit the transport. It exploded before his eyes.

"Nooooo!" He cried. "I didn't do that!" he pleaded. What was this, some kind of set up. Someone else had messed up and they had picked him out as a scapegoat. Oh yeah, that was it, poor orphan boy, no family to cry over him. Pick on someone who can be dealt with quietly.

"This," the admiral was saying, "is the view from your pilot log."

She played it back on the screen. They saw the confirmation on Brett's ship screen as he received the message from the admiral. Saw his systems show the assault ships and his successful attack. Then she played the sequence from the onboard (not the pilot's) view and this time the unarmed transport ship was there again.

She threw a brown coloured object on the table that was against the wall under the screen. The object was about ten centimetres long and two in diameter. It tapered away at the ends.

"That was found on your ship Brett. Hidden so well it was never picked before. It was installed during manufacture. Into the frame of the ship itself."

Brett just stared at her.

"We had suspicions for a while. After the incident with the Excel, we took that ship apart and found this on the bridge."

She threw another of the devices onto the table.

"I suspect we would have found one on Argon Four had she survived the collision with the frigate. We're still searching other ships, stations and so on to see if there are any more."

"So it's not my fault?" Brett asked, perplexed.

The admiral turned to the Paranid. "Would you like to explain?" she offered.

He moved to the screen, he wasn't going to use it. He just wanted to be at the focal point of the room.

"I am LooManckStrat, Paranid and head of ENeT. We manufacture many things, mostly technological. We are the prime makers of Slave chips for example, you are aware of those I understand."

Brett nodded, of course I am, I've got one.

"Many Jazuras ago, my company invented a new Slave chip, better, more powerful than the old one. The Super Slave had greater range, greater perception, almost perfect in design. Longer term use was assured, it was a revelation." Whether it was the translator or the Paranid himself Brett wasn't sure but he seemed like he was trying to sell something and was delivering his closure.

"When we were just about to bring this to the races, after we had just switched our new rig into production and announced its sale on the trading systems, we were attacked."

"Pirates stole my chips, all one hundred of the first batch. Then they murdered my technicians, my scientists, my friends and they destroyed my station as they left. Taking with it all the secrets of the Super Slave."

Brett stared at him. Where was this going? "So what has this got to do with me?" he asked.

"Because Brett," the translator made it sound like bread, "you have a Super Slave installed."

Hang on there just a Sezura, Brett thought. He rose up in his seat. The guards became alert.

"I've got two?"

"No, no, no. You do not have a Slave chip Brett you have a Super Slave *instead*. You are a walking experiment, along with any others who are the same. The captain from the Excel I have already met, any others are either still hidden or dead." The Paranid seemed to have finished his part as he moved away from the screen.

The admiral looked at Brett. "Look Brett, this is a lot to take in. You did kill those people but it wasn't your fault. The Yaki have infiltrated us, had these Super Slaves installed in some of our best pilots and staff and then put those transmitting devices close by. They fed you data through the Slave. The Super Slave is so good, you can't tell the difference. Until you know you have one."

Brett said nothing.

"Let me show you. You know how to deactivate your sixth sense, your Slave and turn it off, yes?"

Brett nodded in agreement.

"But you only do that when you want to, the problem here is that you didn't think you needed to because you thought it was real, the images and sound are so realistic. Watch." She gestured to the Paranid.

He reached inside what Brett was beginning to think was a little bag of tricks and pulled out a flat device. Brett couldn't see clearly but it looked to have some buttons along its face.

He pressed a few buttons.

He heard the door swish open and the pirate came from behind him and ran towards the admiral. He stopped, black suit and coat swaying as he turned. In his hand he had a laser pistol, he raised his arm and pulled the trigger. The laser zipped past his face, he felt the heat and heard it thud against the wall behind him. Brett was already diving for cover, he looked at the guards for help, but they didn't move.

"Off Brett, deactivate it!" The admiral was saying.

Brett told his Slave to switch off. The pirate vanished.

He lay on the floor, panting, resting on one elbow and stared at the admiral.

"So what now?"

She smiled. "You have become a very important person Brett, LooManckStrat here is going to train you how to use the Super Slave offensively."

"Are you serious?" Brett inquired and he was genuine in his question.

"Deadly," she continued, "then you are going to join the swarming ranks of the traders, merge, disappear into the ether. You are going to work directly for me Brett. The Yaki are beaten, but not defeated. They'll be back, but we are going to take the fight to them and you my secret weapon, are going to help me."

* * * * *

Moo-Kye sat on the bridge of her battleship. Her plans for domination lay in ruins, but it wasn't over yet. She had watched as the Argon fleet finished off hers. She sent the command to activate the Super Slaves and she actually giggled and jumped around the bridge as she watched the carrier turn into the frigate and the little fighter ship destroy its comrades.

But then she had to wait. The Argon navy didn't leave for a Tazura and then there were large ships still patrolling. Her ship was being repaired while they sat motionless in shroud. Oh what wonderful technology credits can buy she laughed. Those poor navy ships had searched for her to no avail and all the time she was sitting in exactly the same spot she had been when they had first activated the "Shroud" device. It was good fortune that nothing had ventured near. They will still there, still physically lying in the same spot in time and space, just shrouded, concealed. The energy shield taking all particles from every angle around the ship and moving them, close to the speed of light, to the other side. To an observer they were not there.

It was time to go now though, time to get back to her station and plan the next phase of her plan. The ship would only be visible for a few Sezuras and then the jump tunnel and they would be gone. The observers on that station probably wouldn't even register it. They'd think it was a blip and ignore it.

She gave the command and the massive bulk of the battleship came out of the shroud, a jump tunnel opened up in front of it and it was gone.

* * * * *

Brett sat in one of the bars on the revolving space station. He was dressed in civilian clothes. The unmistakable twin silver bars on the left shoulder of his brown, faded jacket showed him to be a pilot. Others in the room wore the same insignia, although dressed in a variety of attire.

Smoke filled the air, the bar was tended by two Argon females. Attractive, sparsely clothed, they were an added incentive for the customers to part with their credits. There were many other races in the room besides Argon. Two Boron pilots were enjoying the opportunity to sample the illegal Spaceweed. Its aroma was thick in the air, it made Brett feel nauseous, a sweet sickly smell. Teladi, those reptile like creatures, stood in a group by the bar. Talking in animated style, clawed hands making patterns in the air. Probably discussing tactics of space travel. There were eight of them, all in the same uniforms. Must be a company convoy, Brett mused, they're a long way from home out here.

Paranid and Split sat together. The Split with their ever cautious backs against the wall as they chatted to their allies. Still, no enemies in this place to be overly concerned about. Oh yes, you could make them all right. Drop a load of freight because the police forces snooped to close and the next trip you would make would be to your death. But you took your chances in this underworld of deals and whispers. The highest profits brought the greatest risks.

Brett had spent a long time with LooManckStrat and his technicians. They were as interested in Brett as they were with the training they had given him. He had power now that he never imagined before. He smiled, oh yes, power to make things happen.

He looked at the bar area, large white, globe shaped lights high on the walls illuminated the area. One of them flickered and went out. One of the girls behind the bar turned to inspect it. As she approached it her head turned upwards trying to get a better view. Brett couldn't help but smile again as it flickered back into life and she stepped back, startled. Dumb computer systems. The Paranids had trained him well.

He knew there were others like him, but he didn't know who they were or indeed, where they were. They had been kept completely separate in the training area on the Paranids station. But they had to be of special talent, he was sure of that. If the Yaki plan had succeeded, the universe would be a different place today. But after the war they had pulled back their frontiers. They still operated in the outer sectors and traders still went there for the cheaper products, but they seemed to have abandoned their plans for driving a division in the Foundation and Profit guilds. At least for now anyway.

It was ironic really. They had delved so deep into the Argon infrastructure and used the Super Slaves as a means to disrupt. It had nearly worked. Two of the Argon navy's battleship captains had been confirmed with Super Slaves. He wasn't certain, but they had both given up their commands as soon as the war was over. If they had taken those powerful ships with them into Echo Three the outcome could have been different. But no it hadn't succeeded. What they had done though was create a group of Argon individuals, already the best amongst their comrades and made them even more powerful with the Super Slaves.

The admiral had been right. Become a part of the universe, don't hide, but don't make yourself known. Blend in with the normal background workings of the cosmos. Build yourself a life, take some credits and trade like the others or take a job somewhere discreet. But always have an eye trained on the Yaki. Brett didn't know what would happen, but he was sure that some time in the future he and his fellow warriors would be called to arms. The Paranid called them "Kotu" the "gifted ones" and the name had stuck.

Brett finished his drink, gathered up his heavy equipment belt from the table and headed for the door. It was time to spend some of those credits the navy had given him. He had studied the economics of the local systems in-depth while he had stayed at the

station. Now it was time to put his ideas to work, to integrate with the cosmos. No one gave him a second look as he left the room.

Chapter 12 - Spirit

You may be "Kotu", but that doesn't make you a trader. It makes you a warrior. There are other skills to learn than killing and making enough credits to survive is one of them.

Brett banged the screen for the third time in succession. It wasn't going to make the situation any better, but it made him feel better nevertheless. He had foolishly taken the easy option and invested some of his credits in the Space Investment Guilds, the SIG. This was a universe wide system that held all current prices for the shares available in the companies that spanned the sectors. No planet side companies were involved in this, only the dedicated space corporations. He had studied the figures for what seemed too long, then made his purchases.

The investments he had made were stable for a while. They went up slightly, they went down slightly, but they never moved too far from the price he had bought them at. Now he was watching the screen after coming back from the exercise dome and they had dropped thirty percent. If he sold them back now, he would make a loss. What to do? Wait again to see if they would rise? Sell now and cut his losses? He still had enough wealth stored away to buy a ship, albeit an old one.

It was turning out to be much harder than he thought. He hadn't realised it as first, joyous in the freedom that he now had. His whole life spent in institutions of one type or another. The orphanages, Morang, the marine bases and space carriers, then the fleet ships where he had commanded Blue squadron. All geared up to make you work to a routine. Then suddenly there wasn't a routine, nobody telling you what to do. It felt strange, alien, he had installed a routine on himself just to be, as he thought, normal.

But these companies and traders, they were a new challenge for him and he was finding it difficult to adjust. So, even though he could have stepped out immediately into the space lanes and become one of them, he subconsciously, no maybe even consciously, steered himself away from it. He saw the easiest route to make credits was in the SIG, but now that was beginning to look like a futile quest.

Then there was the question of the transport ship from Echo Three. He had played it over in his mind a thousand times. Sometimes waking in the middle of his sleep, sweating, breathless and nauseous. Why did they have to die? It wasn't my fault, he was sure of that. The admiral's screen had shown it to be so. Then the realisation would set in. The Yaki had done this, manipulated him and used him as a weapon. Making him kill his own comrades, using his own skill against him. Well he knew that the time would come for retribution. Blend in, the admiral had said. You work for me now. I will contact you when the time is right. Very well, he would continue to do that, but it didn't take away the hatred and it didn't stop the sudden awakenings.

He stared at the screen again. The price had dropped again. He didn't like this game anymore. It was stupid. It wasn't tangible, he wanted to see something that he could do and be paid for it. Not sit and watch screens take his livelihood away.

Right, decision made, he instructed the computer to sell his interests and watched his credits rise. Not back to what they had been, far from it, but it was time to do something constructive. He had spent too much time on this station wallowing in the easy life and it just didn't fit.

He instructed the system to cancel his long-term boarding and began to gather up his sparse belongings. He felt better already.

* * * * *

The Argon female was beautiful. He had come across many in his life, but this one was special. Jet black hair, a figure that was small, but somehow showed strength. She eyed him in much the same way that he must have eyed her. Blue eyes, the colour of the oceans on Argon Prime. Her crimson body suit clung like it was made for her alone. Brett pulled his gaze away and attempted to concentrate on the display screen to her left that was showing the ships on offer.

Recycled ship sales. It was a gamble he knew, but he didn't have enough credits to buy a new one from the shipyards. He continually paged through the offerings, the computer generated images of the ships displayed on the screen with their technical specifications below them.

He had gone through them multiple times when the sales assistant interrupted.

"Having difficulty choosing?" she asked, a wry smile on her pretty face.

"Kind of." He replied without looking at her.

"So what you looking for?" she asked, her eyes seeking out his. He felt them staring and concentrated his gaze on the screen.

"Something fast." Brett stated. "Armed and with a cargo bay, for carrying goods."

"You a trader then?" The girl inquired.

"Yes." Came the answer.

She didn't look convinced and moved away to look at a screen on her side of the long desk. She pressed some buttons, Brett tried to ignore her, as she made many "ah" and "um" sounds.

It took a while, it seemed too long to Brett. He was looking at the ships on the display again and again. He didn't know what to say, so he just kept flicking from one ship to the next. The urge to just do it without touching the keys was overwhelming, but he fought the sensation and continued to cycle the display.

"Ah hah!" The girl exclaimed. "Got one, perfect for you." She stabbed a few commands into her console and the ship appeared on Brett's display.

His heart skipped a beat, or so it felt. On the screen before him was a Mako. Modified with a cargo bay and a reduced turn of speed. But a Mako nonetheless.

He checked the technical readout, fair shields and speed better than most and importantly, the four laser mountings were still fitted. Part of the cargo space was given up for life support. This ship had the ability to take the long haul jobs as well. It looked perfect. Why wasn't it on the main screen? He asked the question.

"Oh we have lots of ships that we don't, err, advertise. I thought this one would suit you?"

Yes she was right. The cargo bay was small in comparison to a freighter ship, but it looked as if you could live in it for long periods of time. That was important to Brett, he longed for the cosmos and this ship might be his saviour.

"I want to check it out." He said.

She looked down then up again, straight into his eyes. "You want to take it out?"

"Yes."

"OK, but you'll have to wait until my assistant arrives. Rules state that no ships can be..."

He cut her short. "Fine, just tell me when."

The time was agreed and Brett went to the communication centre where he could use the shared data terminals. He scanned the local systems and looked for local jobs.

There were many jobs available listed on the screen. Mostly cargo runs for the large corporations. He couldn't really get involved with those, not unless he changed his mind and bought a real freight ship and not the converted fighter he had set his sights on. He was going with his gut feeling again instead of his mind. The Mako looked like it was a fighter at the front, but the large cargo area that had been attached to the bottom of the ship stretched out behind it, making the Mako three times longer than its original length. Slower performance than a real fighter ship and only a token cargo hold, despite the modifications. Still, he had gone with his instincts for most of his life and he was still here wasn't he?

The thing that he really liked about the Mako was the living quarters that took up part of the hold. That made him independent, the way he liked it. He could stock the ship with stores and live on it for long periods if need be. Yeah, if she felt all right when he took her out later for a test, he'd buy her he was sure.

He scanned the long list of jobs again, instructing the display to keep updating with a fresh list. The stations were such dynamic places that the jobs on offer would change before your very eyes, if you looked at them long enough. There were other pilots milling around in the room, talking and viewing the other screens just as he was. He gazed around the room, wondering if any of these fellow traders were Kotu the same as he was. How could you tell? He didn't know, the only thing he was sure of was that they would be Argon only. He hadn't been given any information about any other races being involved and the Paranid had been firm in their belief that there were only one hundred Super Slaves out there. Some of those were already dead anyway, so the number was less already.

Hah, got one. This looked interesting, a shuttle mission. Someone wanted to be taken to the atmospheric manufacturing plant in Echo Seven-Two. A vast journey, around fifty sectors or so. That would take forever without a jump drive and he couldn't afford one of those luxuries. But maybe if they weren't in a hurry he could do some trading on the way. He tapped his personal identification code into the console and requested a direct link to the client. The system responded almost instantly with a text only link. They don't want to make themselves known then, not yet anyway.

Brett asked his questions. When did they need to arrive? Could he take slight diversions en-route for profit runs? Yes, it wasn't a problem. The client was happy to be out in the cosmos for a while, but the price would be lower. They were going to Echo Seven-Two to start a new life, it was the farthest populated sector, a frontier. So it didn't matter how long it took to get there. He did the calculations in his head. He could stock the ship with the necessary supplies for the journey, fit a pair of ship to ship missiles and still have some operating credits available to do the odd bit of trading on the way. If he bought the Mako that was.

He confirmed his acceptance of the deal. No going back now, if he didn't get himself a ship, he would be in big trouble. Acceptance of a job was fixed, the only way you could back out of it was either to buy your way out, which would almost certainly cost more than the profit in the deal anyway, or you could run. He didn't know who the client was, he only had their ID code from the console, so it could be an individual or someone from a larger organisation. Still, departure time had been agreed for the following Tazura, more than enough time to get everything together. He rose out of the

seat and arched his back, raising his hands in the air as he did so. He felt it crack as he stretched. That felt better, time to head back down to the long term docking bay and have a look at the ship.

The girl wasn't there when he returned to the desk, he was greeted by an older man. He introduced himself as the owner of the business and explained how they bought ships from the larger corporations and the military. Ships that were no longer required by them because they maintained such up to date equipment. But there was nothing wrong with them and his company gave them overhauls, fitted extra equipment that traders required and made unique modifications, just like the Mako he was interested in.

Brett was sure that some of the talk was sales inspired, but the man seemed genuine and explained that his son was in charge of the work area where the modifications were done. It was a family led business. It actually made Brett feel a little easier about the deal, even though the story could still have been made up.

"Oh, the girl then," Brett inquired, "she is your daughter?"

The salesman smiled. "No my friend, she just helps out now and again. She hasn't been here long. I pay her to watch the desk when we are busy back there." He gestured with his hand and pointed his thumb over his shoulder towards the docking area.

"Ah, here she is." The salesman said. "We were just discussing you."

The girl approached from behind and Brett turned as she got near. "Oh you were, were you?" She smiled at the salesman and then looked at Brett. "Only good things I hope?"

Brett stammered a reply and felt his cheeks begin to burn. His stomach began to churn and he realised he felt slightly light headed. He turned away, embarrassed. He didn't know what else to say and felt slightly foolish. Thankfully the girl broke the moment.

"C'mon then pilot. Let's see what you think of the ship." She said moving past him and towards a gap in the long desk. He caught a faint smell of her as she passed and his stomach jumped again. He suddenly realised he was going to have trouble piloting the ship if this carried on. He started to follow her when the salesman stopped him.

"Credits?" he inquired.

Brett had forgotten to hand over his credits. He realised that the girl was having an effect greater than he had imagined. He took a deep breath and regained some of his composure.

"Of course, sorry." He said to the salesman. You had to pay for the ship in full if you wanted a test run. If you decided you didn't like it, you would be refunded. No underhand dealing here. The transaction was held on the stations transfer system so he was confident he would get his credits back if he changed his mind. But it was to protect the seller more than the buyer. Once you were clear of the station, there was nothing stopping you from simply leaving. The station police would probably be launched against you, but that didn't help the seller if his ship got torched. There was also the issue of pilots taking ships out with no intention to purchase. Joy riders, testing the ships out, especially the high performance ones and then simply giving them back. If you didn't have the credits, you couldn't test the ship.

Brett held his hand over the identifier and entered his identification code into the pad attached to it. Then he entered the price agreed and the salesman did likewise on an identical device his side of the desk.

"Transaction confirmed." The electronic voice from the device said. They both removed their hands.

"Good luck." The salesman said. "I'm sure you'll like her."

"Thanks." Brett replied as he moved through the gap and hurried to catch up with the girl who was moving into the docking area. He had to walk quickly, but he soon drew level and matched his pace with hers.

"So what's your name?" Brett asked. He tried to make it sound as if he was making conversation, but in reality he just had to know.

"Spirit." She replied without looking at him. "Yours?"

"Brett."

She stopped and turned to face him, Brett did the same to her. "Pleased to meet you Brett." She held out her hand. He reached out his and grasped hers. It was like electricity moving up his hand as they touched. She felt soft but warm, gentle but with firmness behind it that she seemed to be holding back. He didn't want to pull away.

He looked into her eyes and thought he was about to either fall over, or start to float into the air. She's like a magnet, he thought, pulling me towards her.

"If you don't let go, we'll never get to try her out Brett." She said, smiling.

Brett released her hand, "err, sorry" he mumbled. She began to walk again and he joined her once more.

The docking area was massive. Ships were lifted from the floor, suspended in the bay by large lifting devices. Some were being worked on, he saw the flashes of laser torches as the technicians worked away on them. The whole of one side wall of the bay was covered with ships. Some small scout craft, the odd fighter and then in no particular order, the large freight ships with these large engines and bulbous bodies.

"Are these all yours?" Brett asked.

"No," she replied, "none of them are mine. I just work here remember. But some of the ships are in for maintenance work or long term storage. Some traders have multiple ships and they take the right one for the job, small fast or large and slow with immense cargo bays. The old man runs a good business."

A man atop one of the freight ships lifted his protective visor and stopped his laser work. "Hey Spirit!" He shouted as he waved.

She waved back and smiled. "That's the son." She said to Brett. So, the old man wasn't lying then. Good, I didn't think he had been. I wonder if Spirit has some kind of relationship with the son, or maybe another of the workers. Stop it Brett! It's nothing to do with you if she has, he told himself. Still he couldn't help wondering as they continued to walk.

Then they came upon it. Brett saw the unmistakable lines of the Mako as they approached. A large Boron freight ship had hidden it, but now they were almost adjacent to it and he could see all it's detail. It was very similar to the graphic he had viewed on the screen. It didn't look quite right with the large, grey coloured cargo module attached to the bottom. But looks didn't mean a thing in space. It was performance and capability that mattered. He was beginning to wonder now that they were walking around the ship, exactly how two people were going to fit into a single seat fighter craft.

Spirit must have read his mind, how could she do that?

"Specially fitted and adapted Brett. There is a second seat behind the first one. The electronics have been moved into the cargo area to make the room. The second seat has the same controls as the front one. You can fly the ship from either seat, or," she added, "one person can pilot, the other can fight. If that's what you need to do."

Brett nodded and started to climb the metal ladder that was attached to the side of the ship. He reached the top and peered inside. She was right, it was actually a lot more spacious than the Mako he had piloted in the navy. She pressed a button on a small device she held in her hand. Brett hadn't noticed her take it out of her pocket. The door on the side of the craft began to open upwards and he had to duck slightly as it moved up and over him. He looked down the ladder to see Spirit smiling, a little chuckle developing.

He turned back to the ship and began to clamber in. Spirit was coming up the ladder now and she followed him into the ship. There was just enough room to stand up straight and walk around the two seats. Brett surveyed the cabin, prodding at bits of equipment or inspecting any loose fittings. He noticed that the rear of the cabin had a door, a sandy coloured metal. The same colour as the walls of the cabin. Well the small parts you could see behind the equipment and padding.

Spirit noticed his gaze. "Yeah, go on. Go have a look at the living quarters Brett."

He walked to the door and waved his hand over the lock. The door gave a slight hissing sound as it swept to the left and disappeared

into the hull. Lights began to flicker and then burst into life in the corridor beyond. It wasn't very big. The corridor swept down almost immediately in a flat descent that turned slightly to the left. The floor was grey carpet with the obligatory red lines pointing the way to the escape hatch. In this case, the only way out of this ship was from the seats in the cabin. The walls were the same sandy colour, but they were padded. Well it looked nice and comfortable. He headed down into the corridor and came to another door, which was not visible from the top.

Inside was a dream. He had never seen anything like this in the fleet ships he had piloted. There was a table in the middle of the room with an open kitchen to the rear. Small but functional, it had heating cabinets and dispensers that probably got the food packs directly from the cargo bays below. As he stepped around the room, he noticed the data screens on the walls. It even had a sonic shower room and the sleeping quarters, there were two, were slightly larger than he had expected. It was almost perfect.

"You like?" Spirit asked.

"Looks good to me." Brett answered. "But let's see how she handles eh?"

"OK," she replied, "you go take the front seat, I'll get in behind."

Once seated and strapped in, Brett requested clearance and the automated tugs began to move them out to the launch bay. It wasn't long before they were blasting away from the station and heading out into the sector.

"What do you think?" It was Spirit's voice coming through the small communication tab that Brett had in his ear. It sounded tinny and distant even though she was so close.

"She feels good, tight. I want to head out into the sector, find some clear space. We got drones on board?"

"Yep, six. You launch 'em, you pay for 'em." She replied.

"OK, when we get to thirty clicks out, you launch them and set them to attack us." He said.

"You sure?"

"Yep, I just requested clearance from the station. They've granted us permission for a test fire." He replied. He was back in his element now, training taking over. He felt good about this, it felt right to be back in a ship. Especially, he thought, with Spirit so close behind him.

He accelerated to full speed, she was a bit sluggish compared to the Makos he had been used to, but it wasn't too bad. "Ready?"

"Yes."

"Launch!"

The small nimble drones sped away from the cargo bay and then began to track their target. Laser fire began to hit the shields. Brett turned the ship to the right and down, selecting one of the drones as a target as he went. They were incredibly difficult to hit, being only a couple of metres across and very fast. His selected target fired at them and then sped away. Brett steered after it and pointed the front of the Mako directly at the drone. It had stopped momentarily and was probably about to come in for another attack. He pulled the trigger and the lasers began to pour out their shots.

A small silent explosion and he selected a second and completed the same manoeuvre. Two gone, then a third and fourth. The remaining two were behind him and he moved the ship into a downward loop as they came in for another attack. No lasers from the drones made contact and as they swept overhead, he completed the loop and brought the Mako up behind them. A near perfect move, a slight adjustment and he dispatched both drones in a single salvo.

"Hey, way to go hot shot!" Spirit shouted into the communication channel.

Brett smiled. Good she's impressed. "I'll take it." He replied and turned the ship back towards the station.

Brett was disappointed when he got back to the station. He had asked Spirit if she would join him for something to eat as he was

going to leave soon. But she had declined saying that she had things to do. He felt foolish with himself for asking and kept thinking about her. Oh well, maybe we'll meet again sometime, he thought. I might be able to leave a message for her when I leave.

He spent the time keeping busy, buying the food, water other sundries for the journey. He watched the missiles being loaded himself, partly because of his military background, but also in the hope that he might see Spirit on the loading bay. But she hadn't been there.

He had a restless sleep, but rose early and collected up his final belongings to transfer them to the ship. He was finished with the ship preparations and was stood outside, taking yet another look around the Mako. His client was late, very late and he was beginning to become slightly concerned.

"Hey Brett!" It was Spirit.

Brett spun around; glad to hear her voice again as he thought he might never get the chance.

"Hello Spirit." He said. "My clients late, I was just about to make contact with the station to see if they could locate them."

Spirit laughed and stood aside to reveal two bags and a large metal case. "No need to contact the station, Brett. Your client's here."

Brett looked around, "Where?"

She laughed even louder. "Me, you fool." Brett was speechless. "C'mon help me get this lot loaded then we can say goodbye to this place."

He didn't move a muscle until she walked up to him and threw one of her bags at him. A short time later they launched and set course for the first gate of many that would take them to Echo Seven-Two.

Chapter 13 – Call to arms

Building an empire, or just building a home, much easier to do when you are not alone.

They never reached Echo Seven-Two. Brett and Spirit spent long periods of time sat around the table in the ship, discussing issues, probing into each other's backgrounds. They were both guarded about their respective pasts, but it seemed that Spirit has also been in the military, in the intelligence section.

Brett told most of his true history, but left out the Kotu and the blowing up of the transport ship in the war. He didn't deny being in the war and even relived the battle, well parts of it. It had taken time, but he had eventually begun to open up about his time at the orphanage. His parents, he said were dead. His mother had died during childbirth and his father was unknown, dead as far as he was concerned.

She had held him as he retold the story. He had wept, the first time in his life he had let those emotions out. It was a tangle of emotions that had been buried for so long. He fought against it sometimes, but bit by bit it all came out and he began to rely upon Spirit. It was if she was carrying the pain with him, taking bits of it away and keeping him protected from it.

She first became his friend, then not long after they became a couple. It was inevitable. Brett realised that when he looked back, he had wanted it from the first time he had set eyes on her at the sales desk.

Her feelings seemed the same. They joked now about how she had wanted to catch his eye that first meeting, how she was preparing to leave the station anyway and it just all fell into place. Her family, she said, were planet side. Her parents retired and her brother worked for an agency firm not far from them. He had a family, children and a completely different life from the one she had decided upon.

But she was happy for them all. She rarely made contact with them but did send messages back when she got the chance, or remembered to.

They were both trained pilots. Brett was the better, but she also could handle a ship. Standard training in the intelligence corp. She also understood the trading environment much better than Brett did and before long they were making profitable trading runs. They had to take low quantity, high profit goods, as the cargo space of the ship was still too small for the large runs the big freight ships made. But they made steady progress and they were beginning to collect a small fortune in credits.

Spirit had pooled her resources with Brett's and this had helped both of them move forward faster. It was Brett's ship, but her credits enabled them to buy more expensive goods to trade in. Therefore the profits were higher and they collected more credits even quicker than they would have done individually.

So they set about establishing their trade company. After a while, making credits on the trading runs was becoming straightforward so they wanted to invest some of the wealth into something more permanent. The ship was becoming too cramped to live in long term. They spent the odd time at one of the stations and basked in short term luxury, but they wanted a place to call home.

So they looked into the purchase of a factory itself, nothing grand, just something to get started with. It was all a bit too much for Brett. The large shipyard corporations manufactured space stations. You could buy different sizes, but they were mostly of a similar structure. The basic station that you purchased had various attachment modules where you could fit additional rigs. The larger and more expensive the basic station, the more rigs you could attach.

But then you had to buy power plants, either the small and potentially dangerous nuclear devices (large ones were still outlawed) or self sustaining energy converters that took their power from any local heat source. Or you could fit both if you had the space and the credits, or maybe none and rely upon the energy cells, if you could find them at a reasonable price.

Then the atmospheric rig that generated air and the water purifiers, followed by the communication rig, shield rig and living quarters for the employees you would need for the station to function.

After all this had been planned, discussed and ordered, it had to be delivered by the shipyard cargo ships. It all took credits. Everything took credits. So Brett had continued to make trading runs while Spirit began the task of putting the station together. No matter how many times he went out, they never seemed to have enough to complete their plan. There was no point in starting until they had enough to finish the job. A half-finished station wasn't much use to anyone.

They had toyed with the idea of purchasing another ship so that Spirit could also help out. But Brett was adamant that she was not to go out alone for long distance trips. She had argued, saying he was just being protective and she could look after herself, but Brett rightly pointed out that he was the fighter pilot, not she, and she relented.

They did buy the second ship though. A large Boron freighter and Brett used this alone to increase their earnings potential.

Time flew by. They grew closer and closer together. A perfect team. Then finally the time had come to buy the station and they had to decide on what it was going to produce and more importantly, where to build it.

They spent the time huddled together in the rented quarters aboard the sector station, pouring over the data that Spirit had acquired about the goods and adjacent sectors. They decided on a sector that was about a third of the way to Echo Seven-Two. It was close enough to the inner sectors to be fairly well protected and far enough away so that the profits, while not fantastic, would be good.

It was also the home to a dense forest planet named "Aden". The sector was beginning to house various factories and because it was on the edge of the inner sectors, they decided to buy a communication-manufacturing rig. This made the rigs that other stations would require and they would be the only one in the area, so profit potential was high.

While it was on its way, the purchase having been made by Brett who was taking a long, profitable route back, Spirit began the mundane job of finding the staff to run the station. Initially it was difficult because there were not many people in the area and the other stations already employed those that were there.

But after advertising (which also dipped into their credits) on a number of inner sector stations, they gradually began to put together the right staff. Then more ships had to be purchased and pilots hired. They would have to go and get the raw materials that the station required, not just to build the rigs, but to keep it functioning.

At first they bought a single ship while Brett used the Boron ship and did the trade runs as well. Then they could afford another as the station went online and they sold their first rig. It only brought in enough credits to keep them going for a while, but before they ran out of resources again, they had managed to manufacture a further two and these sold instantly. It was beginning to look good. They invested in a pleasure rig. The employees were overjoyed as they now had somewhere on their own station they could go and relax. Bars and re-creation areas, fitness centres and a small medical facility. It was so good that people from the other sector stations would come and spend time at their station. Ideal as the profits from the pleasure rig were being made from the credits that they paid their own employees with.

Brett and Spirit spent much of their time in the large habitat area that they had built for themselves. The station was, for the most part, running itself and they spent less time managing it and more time with each other. Time went by and Brett began to push the thoughts of the Yaki and the war into the back of his mind.

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Moo-Kye sat on the bridge of her battleship once again. Her fleet, or what was left of it, accompanied the large ship on its journey. After the war she had returned to her station deep inside the outer sectors. She was protected here, the station had formidable defences and even the Argon navy wouldn't attempt an attack here. Not yet anyway, they may have won the war, but she had bloodied the nose of the largest fleet in the universe and as long as she stayed out of the way, she was confident they would do the same.

It was a smaller operation now though than the one it had been at it's peak during what was now being called the trade war. Three of her companions had died during the war, one against the Teladi/Split force and two against the Argon. Another had left

after the defeat at Echo Three. Coward, she had hunted him down and slit his Argon throat herself, laughing as she watched him die.

The only two remaining Yaki leaders were in the two destroyers that now flanked her ship as they made their way on a new journey.

She had spent four Jazuras recovering from the battle. She had to piece her fleet back together. Ships were expensive, particularly attack ships and she had only managed to put a few together. Profits from the protection schemes she ran over the traders in the Yaki sectors were less than they had been. Traders had left after the war, going back to the Foundation and Profit guilds.

She had thought that her devious plan with the Super Slave chips would have worked. It would have done if the stupid Argon navy had brought the battleships along. All three captains were under her control. Instead they left them behind, along with a number of other ships where she had people aboard. Out of all the Super Slaves chips she had sent out all that time ago, only two people with them installed had actually turned up for the battle.

Still, it had worked perfectly. But now that surprise was gone. She would never be able to take on the Argon navies in a head to head fight and she was concerned that the Split and Teladi were gathering forces for their own retribution.

So what could she do? It was then that the news of the gates began to filter through. There was going to be a re-alignment of the gates? You're kidding me? When, how, who knows?

Nobody knew when, nobody knew how, sorry. However, the people that do know are two scientists, a Boron named Mi Ton and an Argon, Mitchell. They were in the outer sectors, far from the Yaki and actually, far from anybody. The sector had a station and some factories had been deployed, but all the surrounding sectors were empty.

And the gate alignment was going to open up other sectors, possibly other races. She had made her mind up almost instantly. A possibility of escape, to get away from these retched guilds and either go elsewhere and start alone or maybe even be the first to trade with a new race. Whatever, it didn't matter as long as she could get away.

Can we jump into the sector and just take everything out and then abduct these scientists? No. The sector had all Nav Sat's disabled and there were only two gates into it. They were so heavily defended that any ship, even one the size of the battleship would not be able to escape the gate defences before it lost its shields.

"What can we do then?" she had asked her advisors. They had no immediate answers, but eventually they came up with a solution. It wasn't a good one and it had its own dangers, but Moo-Kye loved it even before it had been fully explained to her.

They could jump into a sector next to the scientists. One of them was actually only a Wozura away at light speed, it was a different sector but actually a companion star. They couldn't travel that fast, but they could travel the distance conventionally. It would take two Jazuras to make the journey and being out that long in space, with few resources and spare parts was a concern. But it was risk she was prepared to take. Once they got into deep space between the two star systems, they would be out of range of any scanners and the sector wouldn't know they were coming until they were almost upon them. She could take the scientists and their knowledge hostage and then find out when and where she had to be for the gate re-alignment. Perfect, if anybody tried to attack them they would have the sector defences at their disposal.

Moo-Kye stared out of the space screen on the bridge as the bright glare of the star got brighter by each passing Tazura.

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Mi ton checked the data again, the simulation on the screen in front of him showing a recreation of the original gate alignment followed by the expected one that would happen soon. He turned to Mitch beside him.

"We will know soon Mitch. Not long now before we have the answer." He said.

"I know, Mi Ton. Should I send a signal to the station so they can send a faster drone back to our governments?" Mitch replied.

"Yes, do that. It is best they know of our progress again."

Mitch punched a few buttons on his console and sent a message to the small relay station that was in the sector. Its name was Echo Seven-Two.

* * * * *

Brett was in the command centre of their station when the encrypted message arrived for his attention. He knew right away whom it was from before he read it. He moved to a secluded console where nobody could see and fitted a local sound plug from the console into his ear.

The admiral's face appeared on the screen.

"It is time for the Kotu to act. You must make all available speed to Echo Seven-Two. The Yaki are planning to invade and take control of that sector. This must not be allowed to happen. Good luck. Message ends."

Brett knew as he ran through the corridors of the station back to where Spirit was working in their private quarters that he had to tell her. As he ran through the door and it swished shut behind him, he could tell by the look on her face that she already knew.

"By the book of truth!" He muttered. "Kotu!"

She smiled at him, moved towards him and held him tight in her arms.

"Yes my love, we are Kotu. We go to our destiny together Brett, as one."

Brett was speechless again. Only Spirit could have this effect on him, he was sure.

Chapter 14 – Echo Seven-Two

It was the way it had to be. It had been heading this way without their knowledge from the time Brett was born. No one can say why, but soon only one would be alive. It was their destiny to meet, but the outcome was not yet decided.

Echo Seven-Two. That was the official name of the sector that the Argon and Boron governments had agreed to. It was named, as were many others, after the military station that was installed there.

But Mi Ton called it the “Gateway Sector” and Mitch was inclined to agree. It might not *be* a gateway to somewhere, but it was certain to *find* a gateway to somewhere.

Admiral Stacey didn’t even know that the Yaki were taking the long, conventional route to the sector. That was until the Split navy had taken some Yaki prisoner after yet another small skirmish had taken place. They had used the usual interrogation techniques against the pilot’s Slave chip and he had started to confess. He had been left behind he said, he got back from his leisure time too late and the fleet was gone. But he was supposed to fly one of the assault ships against the Echo station. The Split authorities had contacted Admiral Stacey at once and relayed the data. The admiral had reacted and mobilised whatever available forces she had within striking distance of the sector.

She also contacted her Kotu. She hadn’t been surprised when Brett and Spirit had got together. The placing of Spirit on the station and actually, the building of the modified Mako, was her doing. Their analysis readouts showed them to be so compatible, she almost felt it her duty to put them close to each other.

Kotu were going to die, she knew, maybe Brett and Spirit. But at least they had enjoyed some time together. At least Brett, whom she felt for, had found happiness at last. Maybe this final chapter would work out for the good of everyone involved. Maybe it wouldn’t, there was a lot at stake. They had all the data so far created by Mi Ton and Mitch, but it wasn’t finished. Their own government scientists were working on the data right now, but they didn’t have the devices spread all over the universe. They could take control of them and get the data sent elsewhere, but it

all took time. They might miss something during the transition and the re-alignment could be closer than they thought. No, they had to have the station and the scientists intact and nothing could stand in the way of that conclusion. The president had told her as much.

The Admiral simply stared at the consoles that gave her so much information. So much power over so many people, but now, it was out of her hands. She had set the wheels in motion and only fate could play its hand now. The future of the universe as they knew it lay with the sector Echo Seven-Two. She slumped back in her chair and viewed the data, staring blindly at it. Time will tell, she thought, time will tell.

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Echo Seven-Two.

"Commander, we have an incoming message. Commander's eyes open, where do you want it sir?" said comms.

The commander stayed at his station, sat in his chair and plugged a sound tab into his ear. "Pipe it through to my station comms."

He saw the green light flashing to signify the message had arrived and he confirmed his identity to the system once again. The admiral's face appeared on screen.

"Commander, there is no time to waste. You are about to be attacked by a Yaki strike force, it is approaching from the direction of the twin star, by conventional means. You must identify this threat and take all possible steps to destroy it and most importantly," she paused, "most importantly, you must secure the lives and data of the scientists Mi Ton and Mitchell aboard the laboratory station."

The commander sank back in his chair. Some of his staff were staring his way.

"I have dispatched every available resource to assist you in this task, but do not rely upon it. It may never reach you in time."

The admiral moved closer to the screen. "Save the scientists commander, it is imperative that you save the scientists and their data. Message ends."

He thought for a moment, still staring at the now blank screen and then rose to his feet. "Scan, can you point something towards the twin star and tell me if you see anything, well, out of the ordinary?"

Scan turned to face him and looked at him, a quizzical look on his face. "Would you like to define, out of the ordinary sir?"

"OK, something that's looks like ships scan, big ships," he answered.

Scan returned to his console and began to jab buttons that would make one of his infrared telescopes turn towards the star. "Be right with you commander, give me some time to tune the tube and scan the area."

"Ok scan, take your time. Just make it a good one." The commander replied.

It wasn't until the commander actually came back on station for his next shift that the scan team had anything for him to look at. But when they showed him the images, he was convinced.

"It could be anything sir," scan was saying, "a collection of heated meteorites or, well anything natural."

"How long have you been tracking it?" the commander inquired.

"Since just after you left your last shift sir."

"Has it moved course, has it done anything unnatural?" he asked.

"Well no sir." Scan replied.

"Heading? You have calculated the heading haven't you?"

"Yes sir, it's on a direct collision with the laboratory station, give or take a few metres."

"How long?" the commander asked.

“Well if it stays the same as it is, in the same direction and heading, it’ll be here in three Tazuras.” Scan answered.

The commander began to tap his fingers on the desk in front of him. It had to be the Yaki force, too far away for a visual on the optical systems yet, but all local meteorites and asteroids were mapped. It was standard procedure. This had to be them. Three Tazuras, that wasn’t a lot of time. He had to know more about them so he could organise a defence. He didn’t want to risk any other type of scan, only passive. If they lit up the ship with anything, they would know they had been discovered and he wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or a bad thing yet.

“Keep tracking scan, you get anything on visual that I should see, you bring it to my attention, understood?”

“Aye Sir,” came the reply. He didn’t have a great deal to fight with, the sector had been organised to let nothing come through the gates. But to come the conventional way, that was unexpected. These Yaki were clever indeed and he was going to have to be even smarter if he was to outwit them.

* * * * *

The captain of the Boron cruiser that was on patrol duty around the sector of Echo Seven-Two had also received a similar message from the Boron government. “Strength not known”, “Resist at all costs”, “Sector must not fall into Yaki control”. Well that didn’t give him a lot to go on, prepare to fight an enemy when you didn’t know it’s composure, it’s strengths and therefore it’s weaknesses.

He was analysing the images sent over from the Echo station, blurred dark dots against the background of space, slightly lighter than the dots due to the light from the close star. It looked like a large ship and possibly two others, not quite so big. If there were any other ships around, then they couldn’t be seen yet.

He had extracted the trade war data from the ship data banks and was going through the tactics used, the ships that had been destroyed and the ships that hadn’t. Well, if it was the battleship that was heading this way, they were in for a fight. His cruiser was not armed like the Orion or even the Argon Four carrier that had both fired a broadside at the battleship and even then, it was

believed the battleship had survived. Vanishing in some kind of stealth technology.

His cruiser had missiles and a large number of laser turrets. But that was it, it was an older ship, built before the carriers became the lords of the cosmos. But then too, was the battleship. Neither of them carried fighters, they had to bring any protection with them. Ah, that was if the battleship hadn't been modified in any way and he didn't have that information.

His support force of fighters was five. It wouldn't last long against the Yaki. He moved one eyestalk towards the adjacent screen as it showed the latest images from the Argon. His second one followed the first when he realised what he could see. It was indeed the battleship, it was clear now and on each side of it where destroyers with their smart missiles, he supposed. It was evident that a number of smaller ships were also in support and the whole force was getting closer. He looked at the data that was attached to the image. Estimated time of arrival was a single Tazura, a Teladi day.

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Ships were heading for the sector like night flies homing onto a beacon of light. There were only two ways into the sector, either from the outer sectors, where there were currently no population areas, or from the inner Argon sectors. It was from this direction that the ships raced. All attempting to get there in time.

The only Argon ship capable of the required jumps and in a position to leave on schedule was the Excel. She was back in service after being stripped down and rebuilt. She headed for the sector at full speed, making the jumps where possible to lessen the journey.

Brett and Spirit had left the station in the capable hands of the workforce. They had donned their black body suits, collected the lightweight body armour and selected weapons from the large metal box that Spirit had brought with her. Brett had wondered what was in it and now he knew. They had quickly stocked the Mako with supplies, loaded missiles and set course. Kotu just like them were making the same arrangements and heading in the same direction in a variety of ships.

The Yaki force was now identified. The Echo station had sent out its data in a message drone. The station commander sat and watched the visual display, the Yaki ships so close now that they could zoom in and observe the detail. Smaller fighters accompanied the dark ships and assault craft, all in the telltale jagged stripes of the Yaki. They simply grew larger in the screen as he watched.

Chapter 15 - Revenge

The Yaki take revenge.

The commander of Echo Seven-Two was restless. It was probably due to the draining mix of sleep deprivation and stress. He had difficulty getting to sleep and had spent most of the time in the command centre, grabbing the odd bit of light sleep whenever it was quiet.

The room was littered with the casually disposed of drink packs and the fluid energy food that the automated dispensers provided. Silver or white packs scattered on the floor and desktops. People were in the room, too many people. Attempting to get some information that they could not obtain elsewhere on the station.

He grabbed one of the half-consumed packs and put the tube into his mouth, squeezing the shiny pack and sucking at the same time. The cold taste of what should have been warm food greeted him. He threw it to the floor in disgust. "Out!" he shouted. "Will none command staff please vacate the area."

Some of his staff turned to stare at him and the others began to move slowly out of the room. He suddenly wished to be somewhere else, back home or at least back in the home sectors. He stood up and cracked his knee joints, grimacing at the slight discomfort it gave him. But then they felt better, you needed to stretch after so long in these chairs. When would they attack? They were almost upon the station, he was beginning to show his nervousness as a slight twitch started above his eye. He rubbed at it subconsciously and it briefly stopped, but started again as he dropped his hand.

"Scan? That Boron cruiser in position yet?" he had asked the Boron ship to come as close as possible to the station, on the blind side to the Yaki. "Aye, Sir." Came the reply, "she's ready."

They may as well put all their firepower in the same place instead of being picked off individually around the sector. Hey, the Yaki might even call it quits and give up. Well, he could wish for a miracle couldn't he?

"Sir, incoming message from the Yaki." Wishes don't come true then.

"On main screen."

She appeared on the screen, the small crown on her head perfectly placed. She was stunning, it was the first thing he noticed, absolutely stunning. Then she spoke.

"My name is Moo-Kye, leader of the Yaki. I grant you one chance to save the lives of your people. Lay down your weapons and turn your ships and station over to me and you will be spared." Two Teladi years of waiting for this moment, she wasn't going to blow it now.

The commander stared at her attempting to keep his composure. "I must consult...", he started to say before she cut him off.

"You need consult *nobody* commander. You cannot talk to your government in any meaningful way at this distance and the Boron ships are under your command are they not?"

She knew her facts all right.

"The decision is yours commander and I want a decision now!" The last word was spoken at a higher decibel.

The commander knew that every eye in the room was upon him and every Argon and Boron in their ships were listening.

"A great force is due to arrive shortly.." He started to say and she cut him short again.

"I take that as a no, commander. Excellent!" She smiled and the communication link went dead. He just stood in the same position, staring at the screen. What had he done?

"Should I try and get her back commander?" It was comms again.

The commander shook his head and sighed. "No comms." He turned his back on them all and clasped his hands together behind his back, bowing his head in thought. He just stood there rolling slowly back and forth on the heels of his feet. Then he turned and noticed that everyone was still looking at him.

"Anything scan?"

"The whole force is heading our way sir, assault ships included with fighter support. The two destroyers are at the head of the formation sir."

The realisation that they were about to be attacked for real finally hit him. "Right everybody, sound battle stations, everyone to station. This is it."

* * * * *

The Yaki pilot was flying his ship at almost full speed. He was the lead ship and was only a few kilometres ahead of the destroyers. His comrades were alongside and behind him as they headed for the station. His orders were to take out the station defences and also attack the Boron cruiser "Prince Heed" which was stationary on the far side. He flipped the communication channel open, "OK wing, we're going in, stay sharp and keep it tight. Targets are of opportunity, make this a quick one. Out."

They were just above the station coming in at a slight angle and he saw the laser towers on the construction begin to open fire. His ship began to jolt as the lasers found their mark. They were coming straight at him now and he moved the craft from side to side to lessen the damage to his shields. Less of the lasers hit as a result.

Then push down, hit full power, the station coming up fast in his space screen. Lasers flashing past, dozens of shots as the towers tried in vain to track such a close target. Nearly upon the station now, instinct in full flow, push right. Was he too close? The station filled his left screen and he glanced at it momentarily. That was close, but the edge was approaching now, nearly at the corner and then the front of the station will be there. C'mon, push the stick up and down, only slightly you don't want to go too far off track. Just keep those lasers at bay for a moment longer and then I'll be on it.

Slight push to the left and then the right. Wow, ship bucking as the laser struck. A quick glance at the shield strength, plenty left. This is it. The station vanished from his left screen as he passed all the way down its side. He turned the ship to go across the front of the station. There it was before him, the cruiser. Open fire! He pulled

the trigger and his own lasers opened up, multiple shots coming from his nose mounted guns. But wait, the ships firing back, incoming shots from everywhere. Oh no! They're all aimed at me! Large flash of white, followed by a searing feeling of heat and then icy coldness as his lungs met the vacuum of space. He was dead and his ship exploded around him.

The other Yaki in the same wing turned the station corner and were met with the same overwhelming firepower from the Boron ship. She was targeting each ship individually and destroying it before moving on to the next, but such was the firepower that the ship under attack didn't last long. The Boron captain knew he had to make the most of his assets and he was going to go down fighting.

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The commander of Echo Seven-Two was now attempting to command his forces while watching the battle unfold on the large screen that was showing visual displays from different parts of the station. He had seen the first wing of Yaki get slaughtered as they turned towards the "Prince Heed". Very smart use of his weapons that was. He made a mental note to congratulate the Boron captain, if he was ever going to get the chance that was.

He gave the order to launch his five fighters into the battle and they could soon be seen on the screens, twisting and turning as they left the docking bay. A shudder! He felt the station shake. He looked at the screens trying to discover the source of the attack. There it was, coming over the top of the station, a destroyer and it was launching missiles at them.

"Missile battery!" The commander shouted as the station juddered and creaked.

"Aye Sir!" Sparks from two of the other consoles, the operators jumped out of their seats and one fell over.

"Put a salvo into that destroyer." There was no answer. He looked around quickly and realised the station internal communications were out. He yanked the device from his ear and ran over to the missile battery console, jumping over one of the metal handrails that protruded from the floor as he went.

He stopped himself by grabbing the man on the shoulder. "Open fire on the destroyer man, now fire!"

The operator only turned around long enough to confirm who it was and then proceeded to jab at his controls. The missiles left the station, locked onto the destroyer.

The Boron cruiser and Yaki destroyer were now simply playing the shield game. All enemy facing batteries were firing and the space between the two large ships was just a torrent of laser fire going both ways. The missile salvo from the station hit home. One explosion after the other hit the large ship. Blow will you? Blow!

It didn't, but it began to move away. The commander checked the data readout. The Yaki destroyer was losing shields badly and she was venting into space. Large squirts of liquid, probably oxygen was pouring out of her side. She was running. Yes, she was turning and trying to get away. The Boron captain decided he was not going to allow it and the Prince Heed began to move.

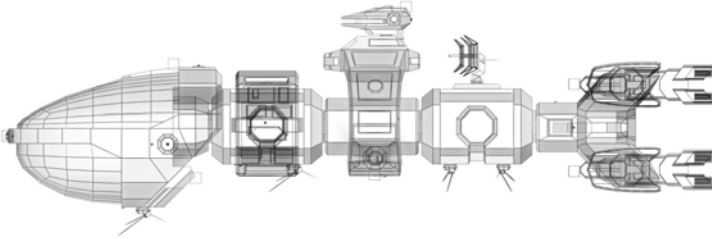
Faster and faster she went, chasing the Yaki ship down. Lasers firing as she moved. The people in the command room could see it happening and they began to shout. "C'mon Heed, C'mon!" They clambered over to the screens to see the fight unfold. A huddle of men and women holding each other, shouting and cheering as they watched her valiant fight.

The Heed moved at a greater speed now and she rose above the destroyer and flipped over on her side. The captain was bringing his other guns to bear on the Yaki ship and as he completed his turn, they erupted just as the others had. Streaks of fire flashing off the Yaki shields. Then a large, bright flash! The explosion made everyone in the room jump backwards, but out of the burning fire that was the destroyer came the Prince Heed. They cheered! The Boron captain kept coming, pushing to full speed and headed for the second destroyer that was coming from underneath the station. Yes Heed, c'mon, do it again. We can win!

They passed each other at full power, the Yaki destroyer and the Prince Heed, again firing into each other as they went. But this time the Heed's lasers were on low power and she was struggling to match the Yaki ship for fire. Then a thick, steady bolt of laser fire shot from behind the station and the Heed seemed to quiver,

almost to shake gently and then she exploded into a million fragments.

The noise in the room stopped. They just stared at the quickly dispersing cloud as the dark shadow of the battleship passed over the station.



Then the sound of something attracted the commander's attention. What was it? It was like water dripping onto a hot metal plate. Fizzing away as it touched. Laser fire!

"We've been breached!" He shouted. The noises got louder and louder as the Yaki assault force troopers moved towards the command centre at speed. They overwhelmed the small detachment of marines on the station and then burst into the room, fanning out and taking up attacking positions around the door.

The commander put his arms in the air and gestured with his head for the others to do the same. It was pointless now. They had been defeated. No need for more bloodshed.

Chapter 16 - Destiny

Destiny is waiting.

The collection of ships waited around the gate. A rag tag bunch of trading ships and a few military fighters all sat motionless in space, their noses pointing at the gate, all ready to strike should the need arise.

Brett was standing by the side of his seat, sipping a hot drink from a cup. The joys of such a good ship. The bitter aroma of the drink filled the cabin and he took another sip and cursed silently as it burnt his lips. Spirit was still seated in the rear seat just behind him, one booted foot perched high on the console. She was keeping her eyes on the data screens.

"Anything?" Brett asked without moving.

"No. Nothing as of yet." She replied.

A Boron scout ship had gone through the gate a while ago now. It was the fastest ship known. They had convened a meeting over the communication channel and the Boron pilot had agreed to go into Echo Seven-Two and do what he was supposed to do, scout.

If the sector was lost to the Yaki, then the gate defences would also be theirs. The Echo station controlled them and that could and probably had been breached. So they had decided to scout the sector and see what the situation was. The Boron ship was probably the best suited for outrunning the laser towers and mines that ringed the gate on the other side. He had been gone for a while though and Brett was beginning to be concerned. What if he had been destroyed? What would they do then, send someone else?

The Yaki could have all their ships, as well as the gate defences, sat just the other side, waiting for anyone who dared to enter. He took another sip of the drink and this time sucked it through his teeth to combat the heat from it. Then he felt it hit the back of his throat and he gulped it down. He didn't like waiting. But that was what the military was all about. Long periods of boring waiting, watching followed by intense fear. He had learnt that in the marines, you had to be patient and he wasn't the patient type. He had hated it then and he hated it just the same now.

"Oh Hello." Spirit said, sarcasm in her voice.

"What?" Brett asked. He squinted his eyes, there was nothing coming through the gate.

"A frigate had just entered the sector, Brett. Wait, got it, Argon navy. It's showing its signature as the Excel".

Brett's eyebrows raised a fraction. Spirit noticed his reaction but didn't comment. "Looks like we have some extra friends along for the show."

Brett didn't look impressed. He shrugged, "Fat lot of use they'll be trying to outrun the gate defences. They'll get torched."

"Don't they have fighters?" she asked.

"Yeah, eight. But only if the captain will launch them to help us." He replied.

Spirit then remembered that Brett had been stationed aboard the Excel when he first got his commission. He had lost some pilots there, she was sure. "I'm sure they will do what they need to do to help us Brett," she said, hoping to brighten him slightly. It didn't work, he turned back to the space screen and peered out at the gate that sat only five kilometres away. He's worried, she guessed. It wasn't like Brett to be this worried. He was a good pilot, probably better than most of the ones that sat motionless in this sector now. What troubled him so much?

Brett still stared at the gate, moving his gaze across the other ships he could see that were closer than they were. It hadn't felt balanced since they had arrived in the sector and joined up with the other ships. Something wasn't right, it was like the feeling he had felt when he first met Spirit. But this time it wasn't a good one. It was similar, but it felt bad. A foreboding, something was about to happen that wasn't good, something terrible. He had tried to search his mind for the answer, but it wouldn't come. Was it he or Spirit? Maybe it was the scientists on the other side of the gate? He concentrated on each possibility, but none of them seemed to make the feeling any worse or better. He would find out soon enough though, he was sure of that at least.

A flash of light from the gate and Brett dropped the cup, spilling its contents as he jumped back into his seat. Spirit leaned forward and dropped her leg from the console. She felt the hum of the engines as Brett switched them online.

It was the Boron scout! Thank the book of truth, the scout was back again. Every ship in the sector listened on the communication channel for his message.

The scout ship accelerated away from the gate and then came to a stop some distance away, further than the other ships were.

"Bad news." The pilot said. "You ready for this?" He wasn't expecting an answer, he was just enjoying his moment of popularity and he sounded uplift, his voice excited. He must have had a close ride in the sector. The Yaki must be there then.

"Ok, they have got a battleship right in the middle of the sector. I'm sending this data I'm telling you on the back of this channel. Have a look at it. The ship is stationary, it didn't even move when I zipped around it. But there is a destroyer patrolling around menacingly and a collection of ships. Not many though, looks like there has been a fight, 'cos there isn't any of our guys in there. The Prince Heed is gone, I expect blown up."

Brett took a deep breath. This wasn't sounding very good.

"Echo Seven-Two station is showing a Yaki signature. I think they made sure I got that, which means the gate defences are under their control. I can vouch for that. The ride in from the gate was pretty hairy. Four rings of laser towers guard the gate, they move and track you, but they weren't quick enough for me. Also, there is a large minefield to the south of both gates. Whatever you do when you exit the gate, don't turn downwards."

"So, what we gonna do? Go kick some pirate butt?"

Nobody said anything, they were all aware that the captain of the Excel was now the ranking commander in the sector. The scout pilot had probably realised the same as he had finished his debrief and probably checked the sector scanner next.

Brett pressed his communication button to open the channel. "Any sign of the scientists, scout?" he asked.

"Oh yeah, forgot about that, sorry. The lab station was also under Yaki control. I don't know if the scientists are on board though. Nobody would talk to me, rude or what? Anyway, they did try and shoot me up, but their slow stuff is no match for me," the scout pilot answered.

The captain of the Excel opened his channel. "This is the captain of the Excel pilots. You are under my command now, I have authorisation from the admiral herself. We should convene a meeting on-board the Excel to discuss our plans."

Brett thought for a moment. There was no way he was going to go aboard the frigate. He might get recognised and he didn't know what to expect after his transport ship fiasco.

"Captain, I recommend sir, that we conduct this meeting here and now. It may endanger us to leave our ships. What if the Yaki attack?" Brett said.

There was a brief pause before the captain replied. "Of course pilot, you are right. Has anyone anything to input before I make a decision?"

Yeah, Brett thought, you go first! But he didn't say anything so flippanant. He was studying the data that the scout had beamed through. The other pilots began to talk on the channel.

"I say we go for the lab, you've got marines on board the frigate, we can load them into my ship and take the lab back," said one.

"Fastest ships go through first, draw the fire from the laser towers so the slower ships have a chance to evade them," said another.

"Yeah, then regroup and attack the destroyer. If we take that out we can engage the remainder of their fighters. If we take the lab and the destroyer we can worry about the battleship later," added a third.

The conversations carried on, ideas going back and forth. Brett was studying the data, but his concentration kept coming back to the battleship. That was it, the battleship, the feeling he had experienced since they had arrived here. It got stronger when he

concentrated on the large ship. That was it then, but what did he have to do?

The captain issued the orders to each ship that outlined their task. They were to take the lab station and then engage the destroyer. Brett and Spirit were to be fifth to go through the gate, being fifth fastest. Attack the base defences and engage any enemy ships of opportunity. What that meant was that intelligence was next to nothing and they didn't know what to expect. He'd learnt that in the marines as well.

The ships began to position themselves in a staggered line in front of the gate. Getting into the jump sequence that had been assigned to them. Brett steered the Mako into position and pointed it at the gate. He turned around in his seat, undid his harness and propped himself up on his knees so he could peer around the back of his seat and see Spirit.

"Good luck Spirit." He said. She rose from her seat and leaned over so that she could kiss him on the lips. "For us and for luck." She said. Brett smiled and returned to his seat, fixing the straps in place that would secure him and also keep him central should he activate the ejection switch. He squirmed around slightly to get a better position in the seat, or was he just anxious?

The lead ship, the Boron scout, began to move towards the gate. Brett instructed the ship to put the engines to full power and they began to follow the others. The gate blinked as it accepted the first ship into its tunnel and then it blinked again, a large flash that spanned the whole gate, as the second ship followed. Brett kept the Mako on course and they were soon suspended in time as they raced down the tunnel.

Another flash and they were in the sector. Brett immediately took a visual look outside the screen and also at the sector map. He jabbed the engines back to full power and pulled the control stick backwards. The Mako rose out of the laser tower defence and streaks of incoming fire began to envelop them.

The small force was pouring through the gate and the towers were having difficulty selecting targets as the ships dispersed in all directions (except down) as they advanced.

An explosion down below them, he hoped it wasn't the ship carrying the marines, a quick look at the scanner, it wasn't. But someone had bought it. He carried on vertical until the laser fire stopped and then he pushed the stick hard down and levelled her off, seeking out the lab station as he moved.

The gate defences were confused, they couldn't lock onto so many targets and the fast scout ships were moving in and out of the laser towers. The defences always tried to lock on the nearest target and the scouts were making them recalculate their decisions continually. Meanwhile the large ships were engaging the towers as they came through and steadily destroying them. The Kotu pilots were exceptional, they knew exactly what to do and it wasn't long before the gate defences were not effective. The Excel exited the gate.

Brett was sure he had seen the battleship on the scanner as he had evaded the laser towers. But now he couldn't see it, it was gone. Thoughts of the stealth device came back to him. Had it hidden itself again?

One thing the scanner did tell him however was that the Yaki fighter ships and destroyer were moving towards them. They had to protect the marine force so that it could take back the lab station. He turned his ship towards the incoming Yaki and some of his fellow pilots did the same. He could see out of the side screen that the lab station was firing at their ships. The ship with the marines on board was stationary beside the lab now, so close that the laser batteries couldn't manoeuvre for a shot. The marines were probably space walking to one of the outer hull doors. For a brief moment he wished he were with them.

Then the Mako began to jolt. Incoming fire from the destroyer was seeking them out. The small force wrapped itself around the destroyer like a wet towel thrown at a ball. They kept twisting and turning, firing shots into the destroyer's hull and then pulling away. Slowly they began to bring its shields down as they also defended themselves against the small force of Yaki fighters. Then the Excel approached the destroyer, guns ablaze. As she swept down its side, she turned so that her underneath was facing the destroyer and launched her fighters. Eight Makos swept out and began to rain fire down on the larger ship.

The Yaki destroyer launched its missiles. The total remaining stock in one final salvo. Had they been normal missiles they would have sought out their target and destroyed it. Instead, these were smart missiles, designed to seek out the greatest or nearest threat. They were no good in such a confused battle, they darted around the many ships that spun and fired, pulled away, spun and fired and they kept changing their computer minds until they ran out of fuel. The Excel had by now righted itself and was pouring fire into the Yaki ship.

Brett was coming around for his seventh run at the large destroyer. He saw the multiple flashes from her shields as his comrades pressed home their attack. The extra eight ships from the Excel were making the difference and almost all the Yaki fighters had been destroyed.

He was coming in at a right angle to the ship, side on, firing his lasers until they began to give out from lack of recharge when the Yaki ship seemed to falter, stop and then it exploded, blinding him briefly and he carried on into the flying debris.

It was gone, only the battleship remained, wherever it was. The Yaki fighters that were left began to issue surrender transmissions. The fighters from the Excel began to round them up. It was difficult to tell from the chatter on the channel, but he was sure he heard the marines declaring the lab having been taken. Yes, he concentrated on it now, looking for those words only through the babble. "Lab station is secure, I repeat again, lab station is secure. The scientists are not aboard. Will someone confirm receipt of this, scientists are not onboard."

He heard the Excel confirm a message to the marines on the lab station and suddenly, everything went quiet. No noise on the communication channel, the ships were slowing down, moving in circles as they scanned the sector. Nothing, no Yaki left (it seemed). Only the Echo station still showing its Yaki signature. Brett waited for the captain of the Excel to speak. He didn't have to wait long.

"Yaki controlling the station Echo Seven-Two. You have no means of defence against our overwhelming force. Please surrender your position, or I will be forced to take aggressive action against you."

That was a bit bold, Brett thought. They could have a fleet of fighters in there and they still had the station laser batteries intact. Also, it was possible that the station still had missiles available. This wasn't over yet.

Brett brought the ship to a standstill. He unhooked his harness and jumped out of the seat. Spirit simply looked at him from her own seat. She was still keeping an eye on the sector scanner in case the station launched fighters.

"They're on the battleship Spirit," Brett said, "we have to find them and get them off."

She looked at him. "What battleship Brett? I don't see one, I think they are dead."

"No, they are not dead. I can feel it. Its there, that battleship, its hidden just like it was in the trade war. We have to get onboard it and find the scientists." He said.

"Get onboard it!" She shouted. "How do you propose we do that? We can't even see it."

"They're hidden. I suspect, no I believe that while they are using this hidden system, they cannot use their scanners. If they could, in direct mode, we'd pick them up. They might be hidden, but I also think they are partially blind and I think I know where they are."

"Where?" she said, intrigued now that there was a way forward.

"I think they are in exactly the same place they were when the scout ship saw them. We have the co-ordinates, let's go and find out."

"But if we hit them, we'll die Brett, isn't this too dangerous?" Spirit asked.

"No, no. We'll fly up close, near where they are and go and have a look." He replied.

"You mean space walk?" She sounded exasperated, "go walking into a shield technology we don't understand?"

"No my love, get close enough to communicate! Remember who you are, I just want to get close enough to tickle their systems. Have a look, see what we can do."

It clicked. Now she understood. "OK, I'll feed the data into the navigation system. You go and get suited. I'll follow you when I'm done."

"Ok." Brett replied as he moved past her back into the main quarters to don his environment suit.

They couldn't risk telling their plan to anyone over the channel. He wasn't sure if the Yaki could hear them or not, but his instincts told him that they could. But could they see him? That was a risk he was prepared to take.

They put all the information they had into a message drone and fired it directly to the Excel. "Attempting location of battleship. Must find scientists. Prepare a boarding party and keep alert. Message ends."

Brett could hear his own breathing inside the cumbersome suit. He never liked space walks, they were too close to the death that awaited you. The suit didn't feel safe like a ship did, it felt open to the hazards of space, or laser fire and suits didn't carry shields.

He pushed off from the cargo bay, its wide doors open and used the small jets on the suit to spin himself around. He released the control handle that was fixed to his suit, just below the hand and gestured to Spirit to follow him. They would have to use hand signals to communicate or risk the Yaki discovering them. Brett was sure that they were close to the ship and if they got near enough, the battleship's lasers wouldn't be able to locate them for a clear shot. Spirit jetted towards him and he spun himself around again and moved towards the location that was projected on the scanner in his mind.

They had moved almost a kilometre when Brett slowed down and instructed Spirit to do the same. It must be here, we're so close to the location the scout had provided. He instructed his Slave to remove the map from his vision. It vanished and his Slave was now doing nothing, simply waiting for his next command. He controlled

his breathing, deep breaths and then a long release. His heart rate began to drop and he began to relax. It took a few moments for him to reach the point he was aiming for, but then he closed his eyes, concentrated on the Slave and slowly, very slowly began to reach out with it. Metre by metre across the vacuum of space he searched, waiting for the telltale sign of a transmission system. He knew that the battleship would have many installed, just like all other ships. He just had to lock onto it.

Ten metres now, then eleven, what was that? A slight tingle in his head, like static but with a higher pitch. Got it! That was a Slave communication device alright, no doubt about it. But even though he tried, he couldn't get it to focus. It was like it was not clear, garbled even. He would have to get closer.

The two suited figures moved slowly across the cosmos and then Brett stopped suddenly, Spirit was right alongside him. It was so close now the static sound was higher, but still garbled. He reached out his hand and moved it towards the noise. He had almost got it to full stretch when his glove made the area in front of it ripple. Brett stopped, but left his hand in the same position while Spirit looked on in disbelief.

The ripple died away. Brett retracted his arm and then pushed it back in again, this time all the way and the ripple came back stronger. It was like looking at the reflection on a still pool of water and then pushing your hand in. Although he wasn't seeing a reflection here, he was making ripples in the picture of space itself.

He turned his head in his helmet and peered at his partner through the smaller side screen. Spirit looked back at him, her eyes wide and staring. She was beginning to say no, shaking her head when Brett pushed the forward button with his other hand and his whole body moved into the ripple.

He gasped, startled and surprised as he passed through the field. There in front of him not two metres away was the dark blue hull of the battleship. Found ya, you sneaky Yaki pirates. The hiss from the Slave had also disappeared to be replaced with the spinning Yaki emblem. By the book of truth, I'm in! Brett thought. But he wasn't. He tried to access the menu system and found himself staring into the walls of a maze. Damn, it's got a security system. I need Spirit to help me with this. He turned around and the inner

wall of the shield greeted him, swirls of greens and blues moving around at speed. The reflections on his helmet screens making it difficult to concentrate.

Spirit had watched him go through the wall of water that seemed to be in front of them is space. He had been gone a few moments and she was beginning to get concerned. Should she chance using the communication channel? She was still debating the question with herself when the suited figure of Brett began to appear through the wall. Strangely, it made no ripples as it came through. He was trying to tell her something with his hands, making hand signals to construct a sentence. How the boring lessons in the early days of the navy were paying dividends now.

It took Brett over three Mizuras to tell her what he wanted her to do. He had connected to the ship's system, but it was security protected. The system placed him in a maze. Every time he moved, one space at a time, forward, back, left or right in an attempt to find the key, the key was moved at the same time to a different location in the maze. The chance of him moving to the same place as the key in a maze with over ten thousand squares on the same move was massive. He wanted Spirit to connect and watch the code keepers. She could view a different screen, the maintenance information screen and every time Brett moved through the maze, she would see the code blocks light up on the screen. She simply had to check them, one by one as Brett moved until she found the one that held the calculation. This wouldn't in itself hold the code, but it would give them the calculation used to place the key in the maze. She would then have to feed the numbers into her suit computer and compute where it would be placing the key at a point in time.

Once they discovered where it would be and when, it would be another calculation to give Brett the path he needed to take through the maze to be at that place at that time. Brett had turned around and Spirit jetted forward to follow him.

As she came through the ripple and calmed herself from the shock of the hull being so close by, she connected to the system and began to search the maintenance screens. It was like looking at a thousand blocks on the display in her head. But every time Brett moved a space in the maze, he tapped her on the helmet and she watched the lights flash. All the ship systems would be using these code blocks, but if she watched long enough, tapping

data into her wrist pad as she did, she would soon find a pattern and one of them would show up as being lit every time Brett made a movement.

If felt like an eternity, their concentration at its fullest, but in reality it only took a few Mizuras for Spirit to find the correct block. Inside was the code for the random generator, but nothing was truly random, it had logic behind it and she soon worked out three different possibilities that Brett could reach from the position he was in inside the maze.

She gave him the instructions through another set of hand signals and Brett watched them through the superimposed view of the maze. Spirit gave him a long stretch of commands telling him how to move through the maze. He followed them exactly, the computer generated maze walls moving as he went. Four commands remained, turn the corner and walk straight ahead, turn left, one more step, got it! The code appeared before him, hanging in the generated air of the maze. Five, three, three, two he read back to himself in his mind. He immediately exited the maze and selected the menu system again. It put him back into the maze, but this time instead of moving he simply entered the sequence of numbers and the menu system of the ship appeared before him.

He gasped and let out the air in a quick blow. We've done it. We've actually done it! He turned to Spirit and indicated the numbers so that she too could enter the system. Brett navigated through the menu until he came upon an option called "Shroud". Its status was set to on. He told it to go to off. It complied straight away. Spirit altered the access code to the menu.

The captain of the Excel had received the message drone from Brett and Spirit, then organised a boarding party from the marines on the lab station. He didn't have any idea what they going to do, but the admiral had been quite clear when she had given him his orders. "The Kotu can do things we cannot imagine captain. Follow their advice, they are our greatest warriors," she had said.

Well he wasn't all that impressed with them himself, sure they had flown around the sector in an impressive manner, but his own

pilots had stood their own as well. He was talking over options with his staff about what to do with the Yaki station when the large bulk of the battleship appeared in the space screen before him. He blinked, looked at it again and then actually got up from his seat and walked towards the large screen as if to confirm it was real. Then he turned on the heel of his foot and looked directly at his scan station.

"Scan, what exactly is the status of that battleship?" he asked.

Scan hadn't been looking at the sector display; he was too concerned with the station and had been probing that for information. He tapped a few buttons and the large blob of the battleship appeared before him. Where had that come from? He selected it and cast his eyes over the data his active scanners were now giving him.

"Fully operational sir," scan replied.

The captain dipped his head for a moment in thought and then jerked it back up quickly. "Launch the boarding force and direct all fighters to direct fire on that battleship comms. We must take out its laser defences before the boarding party can attempt an attack."

"Aye sir. Commands issued sir," comm. replied, as he finished speaking into his lapel.

The eight fighter ships from the frigate turned towards the now visible battleship and hit full power.

Moo-Kye moved away from the crumpled form of Mitch on the floor, his broken body lay at an odd angle and blood stained his overalls. She walked towards the shivering mass that was the Boron who had just watched his companion refuse to answer her questions and suffer the consequence. He was certain that if he didn't tell this mad woman what she wanted to know, he would soon follow his friend to his death.

She stood a few metres away, rage and fury burning in her eyes. "So, my Boron scientist, I will ask you this time instead. What are the co-ordinates for the jump gates that will take me to earth?"

she spat the words at him. "Be quick, my temper, as you have just witnessed, has a very short fuse."

Mi Ton was about to grunt a reply when the communication cube in the wall of the room juttet out and a voice spoke out. "Moo-Kye, urgent situation. I must speak with you now." It was the ship captain.

She seemed extremely agitated at the interruption and paused for a moment before turning and walking towards the cube on the wall. "What is it?" she hissed.

"We have lost the shroud your highness, its down and we can't access the system. We are visible and enemy ships are approaching. They are moving into an attack formation your highness." The captain didn't seem agitated, but in reality he was shaking as he spoke. Being the messenger to Moo-Kye of bad news was not something he relished. He was just glad, that because of her instruction not to be disturbed, he could do it through the channel and not in person.

"What?" she screamed. "Deal with it captain, kill them. You have a battleship under your command. Kill them all!" Then she pushed the cube back into the wall to end the conversation. She didn't have time for this. She was so close to getting the information from the Boron, she would have to continue with her interrogation. She was sure the weak Boron wouldn't be too hard to break now that he had just seen his friend cut to pieces before him. She stormed across the room to where Mi Ton still sat in the restraining seat. "Well?" she asked via the translator.

Brett and Spirit both stared at the lights in the air lock, waiting for the red one to turn to green. They had found one of the outer hull doors and entered the ship. As Spirit had closed the round metal door behind them she had seen their Mako explode in a torrent of fire from the battleship. No going back now then, she mused. She'd miss that ship, memories of her and Brett together, talking and getting to know each other, then becoming lovers. Stop it! She told herself, no time for thoughts like those now. It's just a ship and it's gone. We've got work to do.

They had been fortunate, as the large ship had begun to move as soon as their ship had met its fate. The background of the stars and nebulae moving slightly to the left had been the only indication they were underway, there was no feeling of movement stood in the air lock now. If they had still been outside, or even worse, if only one of them was still outside, they would have been left stranded alone hoping that the Yaki didn't shoot at them. The light went green and Brett began to remove his helmet and suit. Spirit followed his lead and at last they could talk.

"Where will they be?" Brett was asking as he unclasped the large boots.

"I'm looking now," Spirit replied, her mind searching out the ship schematics as she spoke. Then the dull sound of impacts as the battleship came under attack. Excellent, the navy had got the message drone and was beginning its attack. Brett waved his hand over the door lock and the large oblong door hissed open. He stuck his head out of the opening and peered both ways. Good it was all clear. "C'mon Spirit, we can search while we move."

They had just turned the corner when a number of blasts from laser rifles flew past them. Brett skidded to a halt, returning the fire from his small hand held weapon. Spirit also began to fire as they quickly moved back around the corner. The ceiling mounted laser turret that was positioned half way down the corridor, span around and its twin guns began to fire just as they made it around the corner, its shots making indents in the wall. The air smelt of heated metal and it made its way into their mouths, it tasted somewhat like blood.

Brett was already accessing the maze to the internal defence menu, firing with just his hand around the corner, while Spirit again scanned the code blocks. "Got it!" he said, ordering the laser turret to turn the other way and fire on the security guards that were at the far end. In only moments it was over and they ran down the corridor, putting the turret into sleep mode as they passed and applying another new security code to the internal defence system.

The pilot of the large ship carrying the marines had been keeping his distance from the battleship while the smaller fighters encircled it, attacking its defences to give the marines a clear approach. It wasn't going very well, when to his astonishment the laser batteries stopped firing and the shields on the battleship read zero percent. He turned for the dark ship and when he reached it, simply slowed, but didn't stop as he deployed the marines into space beside it. They started straight away to attach to its hull and begin the task of opening some of the outer hull doors. The smaller vessel moved away again, back out of range. The lasers and shields may be gone, but they could come back on again at any time. The fighters did likewise. It was up to the marines now.

The two of them had accessed most of the battleships systems and switched off the lasers, missiles and shields, resetting the codes as they went. But then as they were preparing to disable the flight systems, the security codes changed and the code blocks were replaced with new, improved code. It was going to take a lot longer to gain access to these systems and they didn't appear to have the time. The scientists could be dead already, but they knew that they couldn't stop to concentrate on the ship's computer systems. They had to try and save the scientists.

They couldn't find the captives anywhere on the ship and the only place that they couldn't get access to was the leader's quarters. Spirit guessed that they must be in there with the Yaki commander. They had no choice and headed for the room, avoiding the security guards where possible, killing them when they couldn't. It was obvious that the boarding party had landed because there was a great deal of communication going through the ships systems. Spirit had accessed a number of the ship cameras and sure enough, there was a battle raging between the marines and the Yaki.

The crew seemed to be beginning to panic. Personnel were running down the corridors now, probably going for the escape pods, Paranid, Argon and Split all running past them and not even giving them a second glance. They continued towards the room, ignoring the sirens and red flashing lights that now appeared to spread throughout the ship.

They reached the door without further incident. The words "Queen of the Yaki" were written on the door in Argon. They'd found the right place then. No guards on the door, they must have ran like the rest were doing, confused and scared when the evacuation warnings had started.

They stopped. One of them each side of the door. Brett was bending over, his hands on his knees, catching his breath. "You got the code?" he asked between deep gasps of air. Spirit stared at him, directly into his eyes before replying, "yes, eight, seven, two, five," she answered.

Brett gave her a quick smile before standing upright and tapping the keypad next to the door manually. The door opened with a swish and they both raced inside, passing each other diagonally as they did so and taking up attack positions on the floor. Brett saw the Argon male on the floor and quickly spotted the athletic figure of the woman standing next to the crumpled body of a Boron strapped to a seat. He had been in such a seat himself. Was the Boron alive? Yes, he saw a twitch of a tentacle. The Boron had gone into aquatic mode, probably in an attempt to lessen the pain he had surely received. The women turned, a look of surprise was followed by a wry smile.

"Oh, we have guests Mi Ton, what a surprise," she said.

Brett was just raising his gun when the woman raised her hand and seemed to flick her wrist twice. Before he could even fire off a shot, his weapon and he noticed that of his partners, were lying useless on the floor before him. Smouldering from the impact of the explosive darts.

Spirit must have read his mind because suddenly the lights in the room went out and they both dived to avoid the second volley of darts from the woman. It went quiet, total blackness. They couldn't see anything and Brett was trying to adjust his senses to the gloom.

Then he heard a cry, a startled shout. It wasn't Spirit. It must be the Yaki leader. He could tell Spirit's voice, regardless of the pitch. Then a thud and a scuffle, someone was fighting by the sound of it, he could hear the impacts as bone and flesh met each other.

"Brett!" Came the cry, "IR cameras, Brett! Check them!" it was Spirit.

Brett accessed the computer and after a few agonising moments he was able to view the infra red cameras in the room. It was difficult to tell what was going on, heated blobs were moving around, swinging wildly at each other. But one of them seemed to getting more shots off than the other. Clever girl, Brett thought, she was fighting the other woman and using the cameras as her guide from a third perspective. Brett couldn't even begin to think how she could be so advanced to do such a thing. He was having trouble trying to work out where they were, never mind engage in a fight.

On and on the fight raged. He felt them come close and he wanted to intervene, but he wasn't sure which one was which and if he hurt Spirit, the Yaki leader might gain the advantage. He just had to watch from the cameras as they moved around the room lunging and parrying. They were both highly trained in the physical arts, it seemed.

Brett felt for the metal blade attached to his boot and pulled it free. If he didn't act soon, his partner might be dead and he wasn't going to allow that to happen. He felt the cold metal in his hand as he gripped the blade and waited for them to come close.

As they passed him again, he shouted to Spirit, "Down!" and in that same moment he briefly closed his eyes while he switched on the main lights in the room again via his Slave. He snapped them open, the delay was enough as the others were blinded for a moment. Brett leapt up and Moo-Kye saw him for just an instant as he plunged the blade deep into her neck.

She staggered back, trying to talk, blood was beginning to spurt from her mouth and the wound. All thoughts of offence gone, Moo-Kye was in pure survival mode and her body was trying to react to the sudden wound. Her hands reached for her throat, but then she fell backwards onto the floor. Her body twitched a few times, but then she lay still.

Brett quickly checked her pulse with his hand and then turned to Spirit, "she's dead," he said.

He began to move towards her, getting to his feet. The Boron was muttering something about sectors when they were frozen in time, eyes staring at each other.

The captain of the Excel watched as the escape pods were jettisoned from the battleship. It seemed as if the whole crew was trying to get off board. The large ship was still moving, but slowly as if it had no direction. He was about to order his ships to move in closer when a jump tunnel opened in front of the dark ship and it was gone. He stood at the space screen staring at the place where the battleship had been, his jaw open.

"Can we stop it?"

"No, the energy levels are too high now. The re-alignment will take place regardless of what we do."

"But we don't want this dangerous race to be a part of us. They are destructive, war like."

"We have no choice in the matter now. It is fixed until the next time. We will have to endure their kind until we can raise the energy levels again."

"I understand, it is not what I hoped. But they prove themselves to be resourceful. I will view the events from this point forward with intrigue."

"So will I." A pause, "so will I."

Chapter 17 – The Khaak awaken

Have I Died?

Swirling images. Were they figures, ghosts maybe? Can't quite make them out. Coming towards me, woven around each other. Long streaks of colour are touching me. No, going around me not touching. Around my back, I can't seem to move to see them. Move? What is that? Movement yes, I can move can't I? The images have returned to my front. Stroking my face and body. Moving away into the darkness, the light beginning to fade. No! Don't go away. Come back.

Ha, a sense of relief as they appear to stop and then move towards me. Wait, they haven't turned around. That's it, got it. Understand now, I am moving towards them. I am MOVING!

Oh! Tingle in my fingers as the nerve ends awake. My head feels light, almost sickly, dizzy. Like the first inhale of Spaceweed. A burning in my throat, my chest. My whole body feels light as I leave the ground, flying, moving towards the light. Oh please go away. This doesn't feel right. I don't feel well. Let me sleep. I feel so tired, so very tired. Stomach seems to somersault like I'm leaving gravity, pulling multiple G's. Oh, I gasp, my mouth open. Pressure on my chest, harder and harder it gets. Pushing in, constricting my breath. Fluid! I can feel fluid! Oh NO! In my mouth, my throat, my LUNGS!

I fight, struggling against the increasing pressure as my body begins to fill, to grow heavier. I try to choke, but I can't. There is no air to choke on. Only a greater intensity of fluid as it cascades into my trapped torso. I'm going to die, to drown. I clasp my eyes tighter even though they remain shut and mentally shake my head in an attempt to clear it. I feel like I am sinking, dropping down into the abyss, the pressure increasing on my body. My mind seems to grow dark. A soft blackness begins to move inwards on the light that is my mind. Growing smaller and smaller as the darkness completes its journey. I relent and my body appears detached, relaxed. Then such a sense of peace begins to flow out from me. From my heart to my shoulders and down through my stomach, then out to my limbs with a warm peaceful flow just like the Spaceweed again. Caressing me, enveloping me with its kindness, allowing me to float free. As if I am lying in the sand unable to move and the tide moves the water across me, first pushing my

body and then pulling it. I cannot attempt to intervene. I have never felt such absolute contentment.

Have I died? But my senses seem awake now, a flicker of life and a brief moment of clarity. My mind begins to focus, slowly, each signal coming back online like someone is pressing buttons to reactivate me, touching the broken wires together to produce a spark. Like someone hitting me on the knee gently to test my reflexes and yes, I am responding. A feeling of strength, of power, absolute power begins to move through me following the same route the as the peaceful ebb did moments before. Sound, yes I can hear something. Strange and muted like faint, far away knocks on a thick glass window. But muffled.

Then the ship, I remember now. The ship! Everybody abandoning the ship. The fighters coming in and firing. The noise, explosions and the ship vibrating under attack. Yes, I had to get to the bridge and stop the jump drive. But I didn't make it, didn't even get out of the room. Oh! A feeling of dread. The room, bodies, blood, people dead. A male Argon lying in a pool of blood, the women lying on her back. Who was she? Badness, yes she was bad, evil. Was she dead? Cannot tell, blood in a pool around her head, maybe. The Boron in his environment suit restrained in the chair speaking to me. What was he saying? His snout moved, but I can't hear the words. Concentrate, c'mon what is he saying?

Wait, something more important than the Boron. Something close to me. No, not something but someone close to me, not physically but emotionally. My stomach is turning again, hands feel like they're shaking. I think I am frowning as I search for her picture, her name.

My eyes snap open and I realise I am floating in fluid. All manner of wires and tubes attached to my body. But they aren't wires, their alive! Some kind of organic tendrils. Oh! My body quivers at the thought and they move holding me tighter. But I can breathe! The fluid, I am breathing the fluid! Through the darkness, dull green and blue lights seem to be outside of my prison, peering in. The colours moving through the fluid as it slowly moves from my body's actions. A figure. I can see someone else across the other side of the tank. The colours from the lights are sparkling from behind her as if they are a star flickering behind her moon.

I peer closer allowing my eyes to become accustomed to the gloom. Her head is bowed, hanging as if lifeless. Is it her? Yes, the images come flooding back as if a sun has erupted in my head. Spirit, my friend, my partner, I can remember staring into her eyes as the ship entered the jump tunnel and then nothing more, until now.

Something flashes past my face, too quick for me to register what it is. Then back again but further away. A Boron! In the water with me, his jet is pushing him around the tank. I can see the density of water change behind him as his body pushes the water outwards and he speeds off into the gloom.

He approaches me and I feel a swell of water push against me as his tentacles move outwards like a star, slowing him in the water. He stops a metre away from my face his snout moving left to right and back again as if swinging from his face. His eye stalks turn inwards. A smile, then they turn back to face me looking me up and down. Can he see something I cannot? I can hear the clicks as he speaks but the meaning escapes me. Then with another gush of water he is gone.

I feel the tiredness creeping back. It is trying to take me again and I cannot fight it any longer. I close my eyes and drift into a long deep sleep.

The time between sleep and awakening. That slow drift from the place of darkness to the one of light. Pulling one-way and then pushing back the other. He suddenly felt his senses coming back online. Like someone flicking switches on a console. One after the other they stood up and righted themselves. Then it hit him. The smell, oh the terrible smell! Reaching inside his body as he breathed in the acrid air, burning his throat and leaving a warm heat in his lungs. He opened his eyes slowly and took in the scene around him.

People from the ship were trapped on the floor. Held by living, moving tentacles that seemed to grip tighter to their captives if any movement was detected. He could hear their moans and cries of anguish.

But one man had appeared to wriggle free of his living chains and he was struggling to his feet. He wore the uniform of a gunner. All

torn and bloodied with dirt matted into the cloth. He moved forward and kicked out at the tentacle that attempted to grab him.

Then came the noise. A crackling at first, like the sound of a fire or maybe rain beginning to strike a window. Then more strikes and it began to get louder as if it was approaching. Then he saw them. Bodies moving down the large tunnel before them, on the floor, the walls and even on the roof they came. A large seething mass of beings the like he had never seen before. Like insects with small leathery wings on their backs and large bulbous eyes. But it was the hands and feet that dropped down from the bodies that contained the claws. Some with more than others, but each had knife like endings and these were clicking against each other. It was this that created the noise.

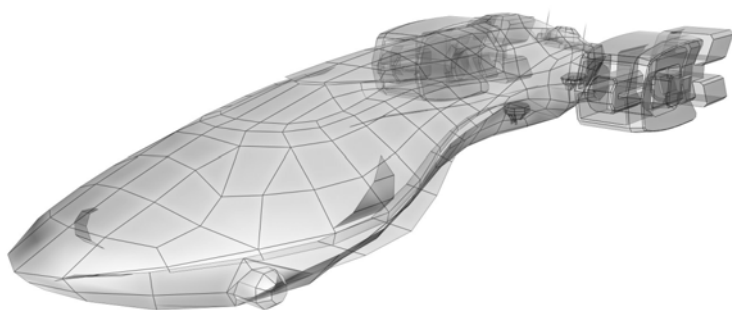
The man who had struggled free seemed to stop dead in his tracks and just stared at the mass before him. All seemed to be looking at him and as he turned to run away, they struck. So fast he could hardly see the movement as they flew from the walls and floor and enveloped the man. Each one less than half his size but the twenty or so that descended on the man tore him to pieces in seconds.

Brett's mind could take no more and his body finally gave in to the shock and he passed out.



In the surrounding area outside the vessel, the ships moved as one. Swirling around a central ship and the whole swarm began to move towards the gate from where the intruder had come.

The End.



The Riddle of Steel