

The First House of Argon

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Foreword

This morning they ransacked my office. All my equipment was wiped or destroyed. They were trying to destroy this – this story you are now reading.

I wrote this uncertain whether it would ever go out. I was hesitant to publish. I had reservations – I still do. Its publication may hurt our greatest ally, our saviour and true friend, the Argon Republic. Is it really my place as a Boron reporter to air their ‘dirty laundry’?

The people attacking me say ‘no’. They want me to shut up. Now. They are trying to force the matter. Yesterday I was physically threatened. The day before that, my ship was fired on. We are still having problems with some mystery hacker in the Network. In twenty jazura with BKNN – the Boron Kingdom News Network – I have never seen anything like it.

I finished writing this yesterday. Only this morning did I finally decide to release it; people died for this, and The People have a Right to know the truth – to be informed – surely this is the true essence of democracy.

In any case, the latest attack has strengthened my resolve. I must publish now, or how much farther will they go to get my silence? So read on and learn a lost history, and a possible future for the Argon people.

Argon friends remember: we Boron stand beside you come what may.

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Part One

Boron Kingdom News Network – the BKNN – has an office on every Boron Trading Station, always in the tip of the rounded structure overlooking the docks. In one such office, I was putting the finishing touches to a news-story when the secretary phoned through.

“An Argon female is here to see you, sir.”

“To see me?” I was shocked. I had only recently arrived. To the best of my knowledge no-one knew I was there. “Who is it?”

“One moment... ‘A woman with a story,’ she says.”

I sighed. As a well-known journalist, I am occasionally stalked by people who wish me to report on some matter that is pressing *only* to them! It is always awkward to spurn them, so I gave my usual rebuff.

“Tell her I am preparing to leave. If she has a news story she can go through Network.”

The secretaries with BKNN are invariably polite, yet firm; this would be the last I’d hear of the matter. It totally slipped my mind as I engrossed myself in finishing the article.

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A stazura and an unhealthy amount of stimuline later, I finally posted the story to Network. Job done! As is my habit, I now headed for the bar to celebrate – that is, to stare emptily into space over a half-glass of Orikin Bite (we journalists know how to party!)

Before long, an Argon female placed herself opposite me at the table. The bar was quiet, so this had to be deliberate. Mildly offended by the intrusion, I stood to move away.

“Stop,” she said. “I need to speak with you.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Fu Jila,” she said. “Sir. I came to see you.”

I was taken aback by her recognition; an advantage of written journalism is that one's face is rarely known. Despite the fame of my name, I have always enjoyed moderate anonymity. I looked down at this female. She wore some kind of black mask concealing much of her face. Blacker eyes stared up through it.

“Do I know you?”

“Unfortunate you turned me away before,” she stated. “Your story was incomplete.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Shades.”

I stood gazing for a moment. The ‘Shades’ were a enigmatic team of Pirates that were all the talk of the fringe sectors lately. They use black ships, invisible to scanners, hence ‘shades’. I had come across the name while researching a story about Xenon activities in the fringes. Letting out a breath, I sat again.

“What can you tell me of the Shades?”

“Not much. Just a messenger,” she answered. “It’s someone else you need to speak to. You, friend, have been given the chance to meet the most important, most knowledgeable Argon in space.”

I considered this: *The Goner Protector of Truth? Ban Danna? Simons? Surely not the Argon President – actually, no: the President was hardly ‘knowledgeable’!*

“For now,” she said. “You can’t know more. However, the leader has made arrangements to meet you at a secret location.”

“Where?”

The eyes narrowed behind the mask, “A *secret* location.”

I scoffed, “This is ridiculous.”

“Yet you're curious.”

“Nonsense! Why would I go when..?”

“But we know you, you will... Especially when I tell you *The First House* is involved.”

“I...” I was lost for words, *The First House!* The Shades *and* the First House?

“Okay. How do I know I'm not being kidnapped?” I asked flatly.

“You have my assurance,” she said. “For what that’s worth! But you will be protected.”

Seeking assurance, I managed to drag this conversation over another twenty mizura. In truth, she

had me at 'Shades'. Curiosity always won over my wiser senses – a symptom of journalism. 'The First House' only made it easier to rationalise. I was to meet her by the docks: one stazura.
"Don't be late."

Part Two

I straightened out my office ready to leave. My mind was spinning – *The First House!*

"I've heard people talk about this First House," the BKNN secretary was saying. "So what is it exactly?"

"Well, ha," I laughed. "That's quite the question! I really... It's hard to say. It's all rumour. Depends who you ask. Which bars you drink in. Who you believe."

She still looked to me for an answer.

"Okay. Well, in Home of Light they say it's a secret cult. Rumour *there* is The First House has infiltrated Argon Prime, that they secretly control the Argon government – even the Vice President is a member according to them... along with Ban Danna of course!"

"Ban Danna? Head of the Argon Secret Service? He's involved?"

"Danna's at the centre of every conspiracy theory ever! He has something to do with everything – if you believe the chatter. What *would* be telling is if Ban Danna *wasn't* implicated."

"So it's just a conspiracy theory?"

"Well... No. You see, it's not that simple. That's one view. The miners around Ore Belt will tell you a different story. To them The First House is some bunch of rich-kid politicians playing at Pirate Clan. By contrast, a real-life pirate clan member in Black Hole Sun swore to me that The First House are a cartel, ruthlessly taking over all other Pirate cartels."

She nodded.

"Then again, there's the religious angle. The First House and the Goner have some kind of history. A Goner priest I interviewed refused to tell me much, but did say the First House were 'lost Brothers in search of Truth'. The First House may see itself as a Goner sect.

"Another theme that keeps appearing is a connection between them both and the Xenon. Ha! An ex-freight-pilot out of Aladna Hill swore to me that The First House is working on behalf of the lost planet Earth, with the Xenon and the Goner, to 'topple the corrupt Argon regime' – that this is the real reason Xenon 'terrorists' don't attack the Goner. But, of course, that's ridiculous!"

"Sure," she laughed. "It doesn't sound likely! So essentially you're saying you don't have a clue what they are!?"

"Exactly," I laughed. "No one does. But they exist. Maybe a cult, maybe a cartel, or anything between. They're a mystery. But now, I might finally get to the truth."

"Ha! Well have fun," she laughed as she waved me good-bye.

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The First House!

Possibilities spun around my mind as I approached the internal docking area. This is the part of the station where people kiss goodbye to loved ones who are about to fly off somewhere; where merchants attempt to hawk shoddy goods to unsuspecting visitors; where fighter-pilots trade 'true' stories about what happened to a friend's friend out in some unknown sector. It was a long room, narrow – perhaps too narrow to really be called a room – if it led somewhere you'd be tempted to call it a corridor. But it didn't, so it was a room. And oddly deserted at this time.

All along the left wall, a long line of windows, interspersed by a number of doors. The windows overlooked the external docking bays outside, the place where traders and adventurers park their ships. Each door was the entrance to its own little airlock chamber each leading out into the bays. Airlocks are needed, of course, as the outer docking bay cannot be pressurised due to obvious flammability issues.

I found the bay we had agreed upon, no sign of her yet. I was getting a bad feeling already. *Relax*, I told myself. *She'll be here soon enough.*

But really, she was there already.

Part Three

Five mizuras passed.

I was almost twitching with repressed excitement. You must know the feeling: a need to *do* something when there's nothing you can do except... Wait.

I kept glancing through the windows to the bay outside. There it was, her Nova, still docked. The serial number matched, it was definitely hers. I was in the right place, so where the hell was she?

Now, I glanced into the nearest airlock chamber, one of many chambers linking the station to the bays. The chamber was open to the far side, to the docking bays. So obviously the near door was sealed – air-locked – it would be a total vacuum inside the chamber.

“Hm?” Something in there caught my eye. There was an odd pattern on the usually plain-white walls. Tiny circles of colour, some overlapping. I had never seen this before.

A sound to my right. *Aha!* The next chamber along was pressurising. Someone was coming in from the docks! I dashed over to it. The door slid open, but the person who nearly walked into me was an Argon male – a short man with no hair and an odd facial tattoo. He glanced at me, grunted a greeting, then stepped around me, disappearing into the station.

I sighed. *Where is she?*

I loitered uneasy. Here was that chamber with the strange colour pattern. I peered into the chamber through the little window in the door. The pattern was strange; it was uneven, random-looking. And something was floating in the far corner of the chamber. Must be luggage. That's bad. Station rules explicitly state that airlock chambers must be cleared of luggage after use. It was dangerous to leave things loose in there. It looked almost like... Was it a space-suit?

It was! An empty Argon space-suit. Just floating there. Odd.

I pressed the ‘door open’ button. Some warning lights flashed inside the chamber. A moment later, the far door closed and the pressurisation cycle began. *Ssssss!* A beep indicated the pressure was up – the near door slid open. At the same moment the artificial gravity hit the chamber. The space-suit slumped to the floor, arching over backwards.

A dead face – *her* dead face – stared out at me through the shattered visor. Her skin was chalk, and red seeped from her mouth, her hanging, bloated tongue, those empty red eyes.

I remembered the colour of Argon blood at just the same moment as I noticed the red ‘pattern’ now oozing down the plain-white walls surrounding me.

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Part Four

“This kind of thing is surprisingly common,” the Dock Supervisor told me.

Absently, my ‘hands’ rotated the black-mask I had picked up from the speckled floor of the dock; there was dried blood on it.

“Suit visors *do* just blow out sometimes,” he went on. “You’d be surprised. See, I’d bet one day, maybe jazuras and jazuras ago, she went out for a space-walk and just a little bit of space-dust, or maybe a little baby space-fly, it hit her visor and *Crack!* She probably didn’t even notice at the time. But it made a tiny chip – microscopic, invisible to the eye – but that chip left a network of tiny, tiny cracks. And everything seemed normal. But every time she went through an air-lock – every pressure change – they just got bigger and bigger. A time-bomb. And sure enough, one day, a sharp pressure drop and BOOM – the visor blows out! Dead. Honestly, you’d be surprised just how

common it is. It's not the first one we've had here. On this station. The moral? Get your suit serviced regularly."

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An accident? I wasn't convinced.

I argued with the station authorities for stazuras. I demanded to watch every mizura of security video. After one particularly implausible threat of a BKNN article on docker incompetence, they finally conceded and we spent nearly a tazura staring at screens. Nothing.

In the end, it was logged as an accident. Death by misadventure.

I wasn't buying that. It was murder.

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I spent the next few tazuras loitering at the station, a pathetic creature, desperately seeking some new lead, some explanation. All to no avail.

Eventually, Network lost patience and curtly recalled me to Kingdom's End. It is no exaggeration to say I was heart-broken. I love mysteries, and my only lead in the Universe's greatest mystery had breathed her last secrets into the void. I had nothing. I was inconsolable. But when Network recalls you, your only choice is to obey.

The economic route to Kingdom's End led us through the anarchic systems around Brennan's Triumph. We had just left Brennan's Triumph and were half-way through Split Fire when a squadron of marauding pirates broke off their attack on a Mercury and made a beeline for us. We tried to go around, but they were locked on. No less than twelve M5s bore down on us. We couldn't outrun them – with one gun to fight with, we were doomed.

But rather than opening fire, the pirates opened comms.

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The stunned captain called me to the cockpit. The pirates had asked to speak with me.

How come everyone seemed to know where I was even before I did?

"Fu Jila?" the pirate asked.

"Who's asking?" I was cautious. Hostage-taking is rife in these parts; I would fetch a good price.

"Are you Fu Jila. Yes, no? Answer."

"... Yes."

"Move into camera. I need visual confirmation."

"No," I said. "Let us pass."

"Can't do that," the pirate told me. "I have an urgent message, but I need visual confirmation. It has to do with a 'black-mask' woman who visited you."

"Black mask?" I almost choked.

"A murdered 'black-mask' woman? I was told you'd know who..."

"She *was* murdered! Who did it? Why?"

"I don't know details. I only know what I was told, okay?" the Pirate said. "My clan-boss contacted me personally and I'm getting paid to pass a message to you. So if you'll *please* show your damn *face* Boron, I'd like to get this done."

Again, curiosity won over my wiser senses. I went on camera.

"Okay, good," the Pirate smiled. "The message is: 'Go to the Space History Museum on Argon Prime. The museum'll be expecting you, they'll know what to do. So just go with the flow. Someone will make contact with you.' That's it, that's the message. Oh, and... uh... there's also something in Boron I'm meant to say to you, um... ennoy ruyooshah manja... is that right?"

"I... Uh, yes. Almost right. I understand. Yes, yes ... Thank you."

At that, the Pirates broke comms, moved off and let us on our way.

"Change course for Argon Prime," I told the pilot. "Now."

The language the Pirate had spoken was Giuhruhn, a minority-language that wouldn't be picked up

by most translation systems. It is used mostly between Boron aristocracy – it is actually my native tongue – ‘e nui ra’iusha manya’ means literally ‘the one my-dwelling awaits’.

Or to a native-speaker: ‘the First House awaits you’.

Part Five

Argon Prime.

I felt unsteadily in full gravity – it had been some mazuras since I was last ‘planet-side’. I caught the bus-jet a quick quarter-globe to Lave City, the third regional-capital of Argon Prime. From there I could take the magne-tube-system to the museum. As regular travellers will know Argon Prime’s public transport is top-notch since the renovation last jazura (if only the same could be said for the research archives at Antigone, hint hint!)

The Space History Museum.

To say they were ‘expecting me’ was a violent understatement. I was pounced upon the moment I entered the door! My limited celebrity had fully preceded me and the entire staff came out to greet me. The Museum Director himself welcomed me at the door. Everyone seemed to know who I was and what I was doing there – except, that is, for me; I had no idea – it made me intensely uncomfortably.

“Right,” the Director said authoritatively. “Mr Jila has work to be doing.”

He called over one of the staff, a rather young Argon male.

“Scott here will take you to the archive,” the Director told me.

“Thanks,” I said, doing my best to ‘just go with the flow.’

Scott took me into a private section of the museum – no access to the general public.

“I’ve never actually seen the device in use,” he was saying. “I’ve only worked here a few maz. And they activate this thing pretty much never. See, they can’t just activate the core, there’s no compatible power source, so they have to activate the whole thing, so... They activate it *only* for researchers, people like that. You’d normally need some written request from a ‘registered academic establishment’. You know the drill. But in this case, well... y’know.” He waved his hand at me as if that explained something.

“What..?”

“Well, we can make exceptions. With people like *you*. I mean this stuff isn’t classified. Not exactly. Restricted maybe, but... they have to be accommodating. It’s the whole point of a museum, right?”

“Right.”

Scott opened a door into a dim, circular room. In the centre was a round cubicle. He led me inside the cramped little cubicle. There was barely room for two. He pressed a button and the cubicle jerked. It dropped downwards. An elevator. Through the clear exterior, I watched the world rise around us.

We plunged into darkness for perhaps a mizura before I felt the elevator slow down. We sunk into a brightly lit room. Stopped. He led me out of the cubicle and along a corridor. The place felt immediately different, alien, the architecture had a completely different character. It was metallic, mechanical; the walls were nearer; a low hum rose from below. Finally he led me into another room.

This room was dominated by some strange computer system. Or to be accurate, the computer was not *in* the room, it *was* the room. It was everywhere. Its design looked vaguely Argon but it had patterns and parts I did not recognise. The interface was covered in mostly unfamiliar, non-Argon symbols. It was a device unlike any I had ever seen.

“Can I start it for you?” Scott asked.

“Yes, do.” I had no idea how the thing worked.

He clambered under the device and activated something. The device lit up. Parts of it seemed to come to life. Little lights came on. Screens glowed to life, symbols flowing over their surfaces. As he worked the computer I glanced around the room. It occurred to me what a perfect meeting place this was: a public, well-known, easy-to-find building, yet here, totally private. Perfect. They were surely planning to meet me here. I just needed the attendant out the way.

Scott looked to me, “So what do you want to find? I can...”

“Thank-you,” I said. “I can do it from here.”

“I can help. It’s no problem.”

“No, no,” I said. “I work alone, thank-you. Thanks for your help. Please leave me now.”

He looked dejected; he had clearly hoped to see the device in action.

“Okay,” he said leaving the room. “Let me know if you need anything. Anything at all. I’ve been assigned to you anyway so... I’ll be just down the hall.”

“Thank-you.”

He closed the door behind him. I was alone. Good.

... Now what?

The machine made its own low-humming sound.

Was I supposed to do something? I looked to the computer again. Was I supposed to use it? Maybe I was supposed to contact the First House *through* it. Or send a signal.

The interface was awkward, clearly designed for human hands or something similar. Some of the symbols on it looked identical to Argon, but overall it was nothing like your modern Argon terminal. I had no idea how to use this machine.

I pressed one of the larger buttons, a new box appeared on screen.

“Okay,” I said. I was out of my depth. Another key...

“Stop!” A voice. “You don’t want to do that.”

An Argon male stood in the doorway. He wore a black-mask.

“Jila,” he said. “Honoured to meet you at last.”

Part Six

He strode by me to the computer device, and lifted away a panel.

“I’m sure you must be eager to learn about *The House*. We’ve kept you waiting long enough,” he was saying. “And soon I’ll be able to answer all your questions. But for right now,” he clipped a small device into the machine. “I hope you’ll forgive me if this takes priority.”

“What’s..? What are you doing? Are you supposed to open that?”

“I know what I’m doing,” he said, replacing the panel.

He started working at the terminal. He seemed familiar with it.

“What is this machine?” I asked.

“Huh?” He seemed surprised. “Don’t you..? You *do* know where we are?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t mean the museum,” he said. “I mean, you know where we are *right now*?”

“I... I don’t understand you.”

“Okay,” he said, standing to face me. “My apologies, I assumed you’d know. This device is a Terran Archive. It’s the central computer core of an old Earth ship. Specifically, this is the core from the battleship *Woden*. We are actually ins...”

“An Earth computer core?! I had no idea such a thing existed. That would be why the symbols look... ah! So, what are you doing with it?”

“I hate to admit it, but we are using you a bit here. We do intend to give you an exclusive story on the First House, but... as an added bonus, we... Well, we used your reputation, your prestige, to get this place activated so we can pull off some data. It may be relevant to our research. And to your

story.”

“My story?”

Some peripheral screens flashed to life.

“What...” I asked. “What did you put inside the archive?”

“Just an AI data-miner. It’ll automatically pull off the relevant data and transmit it to our remote storage unit.”

“You’re downloading data? But... he...” I pointed dumbly at the door. “He said it was classified!”

“It’s not classified at all. Restricted perhaps. And right now it’s just sitting here doing nothing. We can actually *use* it.”

He activated something on the Archive terminal.

“What are you doing?” I whispered urgently. “I’ll call him back. Scott. The attendant... I can ask him if this is allowed.”

He was silent. A bar appeared on the main screen; it started getting shorter. A progress bar?

“I’m calling the attendant,” I said, heading for the door.

“He’s unconscious,” the man said, still tapping at the terminal. “He’s okay, but you won’t wake him. But feel free to take a look around. I’ll catch up with you when I’m done here.”

I stopped in the doorway. “Unconscious?”

“It was necessary. He’ll be fine. Go. Look around,” he looked back at me. “You can escape through the elevator if that’s what you want, but I don’t think you will. Two mizuras and I’ll be with you.”

Was he serious? I walked along the corridor and sure enough, here was Scott unconscious on a chair. I shook his shoulder, nothing. He looked unharmed.

I thought for a moment: clearly this pirate was armed, some kind of stun-device. The rational thing to do was to retrace my steps to the elevator and fetch security. They would arrest him, I’d be doing my part for law and order, and I could interview him at my leisure through a prison-force-field. Yes, I decided. That made sense.

I retraced my steps to the elevator. I found the small central cubicle sealed off – just a smooth white wall where the entrance had been. I started to look around for stairs; I went through some rooms. This being a museum, I figured, there had to be an emergency escape. Although, looking around, it did not feel much like a museum. It had a close, confined feel. The walls were too near. It felt more like a Teladi space station.

A door hissed open as I approached – a simple motion detector – I went through. This was the largest room yet. It was sparse and organised. It was shaped in a semi-circle – a ‘D’ shape. The curved outer wall was a plain-black, shiny material. In the centre of the room was a raised seat, with an in-built Terran computer terminal. In front of that, three lower seats, each facing its own control terminal. At the back of the room, behind the seat, the flat wall held a long line of screens and computers. One of the screens showed a ship schematic.

I heard a hiss. I pivoted to find the man at the door.

“Finished,” he said. “I see you’ve found the bridge.”

“Bridge?”

“The bridge!” he repeated. “You must get it by now!” He went to the raised chair and pressed some buttons. Something lit up, and suddenly I could see *through* the shiny, black walls – *Windows!* I looked out into an underground cavern.

“We’re on the command bridge of the Earth Battleship *Woden*.”

I stared at the command chair. The navigation console, the weapons console. The Battleship *Woden*?

“But, come,” he said. “We’ve gotta go!”

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Part Seven

“Don’t worry, I’m sure they’ll let you visit here again,” he smiled.

He led us back through the ship. We were passing through the elevator room when I started to speak: “Where are we goi..?”

He put out a hand to stop me.

“There?” He said. “The elevator’s gone?” He looked to me.

I shrugged. “I assumed you’d locked it off.”

“Say you could go then lock you in?! Ha!” he snorted. “Not my style. No. Someone’s coming down. I can guess why. I’m impressed. But we need to move.”

From the elevator room we went quickly into a small, square room; the far wall was an air-lock. The man was turning a rotor on the wall to the right. Now he pulled on it, swinging open a heavy metallic door through which he signalled me to go. We entered what seemed like a small cupboard, tight, I remember thinking: *we’re not going to hide in here!?*

He sealed the door shut behind us. Now he went to the left wall and worked on another rotor. A moment later he swung open a tiny hatch.

“Manual escape hatch,” he said. “The automatic air-lock is designed for space. It would’ve depressurised us before opening the outer doors. Not fun.”

He pushed me towards the small hatch. “Go through.”

“Where are we..?”

“Go through,” he repeated.

I clambered through. My ‘Second-Skin’ deluxe enviro-suit is designed to be slender, agile – *You’ll forget you’re wearing it!* the adverts claim. Believe me, there’s not an enviro-suit in the Universe suited to climbing through a small hatch. It was a struggle.

Finally I popped through, flailing out the far side and crashing onto the ground maybe two metres down. I got up and stepped back. The man came through now. He made it look annoyingly easy, throwing up his arms and diving cleanly through the gap. With a forward-roll on impact with the ground, he was immediately to his feet beside me.

The ship’s lights – the lights the man had activated from the cockpit earlier – they floodlit the area. Here, who knows how far below Lave City, an Earth battleship rests. It was a beautiful ship, curvy. It was thinner than most modern Argon ships. Far less bulky. The design was so graceful it could almost have been Boron. And here it was, buried.

“How did it get here?” I asked.

“They say it crash-landed, that’s the official story, but it’d have to have God’s own shields to crash and bury this deep without getting flattened. To be this pristine, and still working. Nah.”

“What really happened?”

“Um, I wasn’t there. I don’t know. Maybe it did crash.” He sounded distracted.

Looking around, I saw we were surrounded by rock. Rock on every side. It did not look like a natural cave. It seemed to clear the ship by about twenty metres in any direction.

“Is there a way out of here?” I asked. “There is a way out?”

“Relax,” he said.

“I won’t be able to climb back in,” I insisted. “Not in this suit! We need a way out.”

“Relax,” he insisted. He held up a small device. “We’re fine. We just needed to get out of the ship. The systems were interfering with this.”

He clicked something on the device, and a gentle wave passed through my body, from top to bottom, like a tingle. It was followed by a stronger wave, a wave of nausea. Then a horrible, stretching wave that seemed to rend my body apart, plane by plane, inside and out...

Perhaps you can tell, I had never been through a transporter before.

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Part Eight

The cave had gone. We were now in a cluttered room. The Goner transporter device – its loud buzz already dying down – took more than half the room. The remaining space was crammed with electronic equipment: computers and various comms equipment.

A woman in the room stood sharply to attention.

“Sir!”

“Thank-you, Sarah,” the man said. “Would you get everything ready to go, get the data-cubes packed and all. We should move quickly.”

“They’re onto us already?” she asked.

“It’s likely. And after what happened with June I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Sir.”

“Mr Jila,” he said. “I’ll bring you up to speed.”

He led me into a smaller, office-style side room. The room was sparse: a desk, two seats, a concealed computer console and a screen.

“Take a seat.” He sat to face me across the desk. “We have about five mizuras. So I propose I fill you in on what it’s safe for you to know, then you can ask questions. Does that work for you?”

“Safe?”

“Yes. We’re the First House. A counter-government organisation. Wanted dead or alive. While we’re on Argon Prime, we’re not safe. So specifics will be vague until we get safe. Get it?”

“Sort of, so who are you? You individually I mean, what is your name?”

“That’s one of these specifics. I guess you can call me K. So shall I continue?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I represent The First House, the real First House. The House of Argon. We’re not terrorists, we fight *for*, not against the people. And right now, we aim to dissolve the Argon government.”

“Dissolve the government? Why?”

“One, we’re fighting for Truth, of which the government are the suppressors – just the same way as they suppressed the truth about Earth. Two, survival. Follows on from the first. Once the truth is known, we will unify the Argon so we can protect ourselves as one and drag ourselves from the jaws of extinction.”

“Extinction? The Argon are thriving! That’s a bit...” I couldn’t think of the right word.

“Melodramatic? I wish! Sure the Argon are thriving *economically*, but even the Navy predict if things keep going as they are, the Argon will be consumed or destroyed with ten jazura. Ten! *That’s* if everything goes according to plan! And *that’s* only based on the Khaak threat!

“The government don’t know what to do,” he went on. “They’re crippled. Ineffectual. So they bury their heads in the sand and in so doing, let down the people they were elected to protect. They make themselves illegitimate. Right now, as we speak – *as we speak* – they’re sitting in halls debating the ethics of our economic system! Ha! While the Khaak push us into retreat after retreat, and the old foe probes us – probes our weakness – and grows, evolves in the shadows.”

“The Xenon?”

“Who else? Except, next time they attack us, they won’t be ‘Xenon’ any more – not as we know them. They’ll be something new. Even more alien. More Xenon. They’ll...”

“I don’t understand: Xenon, but not as we know them?”

K sat back for a moment to compose himself. He leaned forward over the desk. “The purpose of our little info-raid on the museum just now, was to find out more about the Xenon. That’s what we’re doing. Intelligence gathering. The Xenon are changing. They’re evolving into something new. Something dangerous. ”

“And you thought an eight hundred year old computer archive might give you the latest?!”

“No. But if we learn where they came from, we’ll see where they’re going.”

“So what was the data you stole?”

“We didn’t steal. We copied. Like a good Goner scribe.”

“So what data did you *copy*?”

“The *Woden’s* logs. The *Woden* was in Nathan Gunne’s war fleet. It was actually in the battle to

save Earth by destroying the Earth gate. We've already got battle footage from Nathan's warship the *Loki*. And from the *Valkyrie*, the *Fang*, and several other survivors. Ever since we found out about the *Woden* we've been waiting for this chance. And..."

A sharp beep came from something on his wrist. His eyes widened. "Already? No way!"

"What?" I asked, but he was already at the door.

"Sarah," He shouted. "Get finished. Set the charges."

"Already?" I heard her say. "No way!"

"Yep. Must've tracked the site transport." K turned to me. "Jila. An interruption, I'm afraid."

...

Back into the cluttered room. The man grabbed some cases that Sarah had packed and he placed them on the transporter panel. He went back to the terminal and a moment later they vanished.

"Jila. Onto the transporter pad, please."

"But..."

"No options, Jila. Do it."

I got onto the transporter array. The man worked on the transporter console while Sarah clambered around the room activating devices. Finally, she activated a device near enough for me to see.

"By the Queen! You crazy?! SQUASH charges? You must be..."

"Relax," she said. "This is just to cover our tracks. We've got a one-shot, two mizura, ten-megawatt shield-gen around this place. That'll keep the explosion in. The charges'll decimate *everything* in this room and *nothing* else. We're not terrorists."

I am not sure if this was seriously intended to relax me, but it had quite the opposite effect. I was trapped in a room with armed SQUASH charges! Anyone who witnessed the aftermath of the Aquinas bombing – in fact *anyone* who understands the carnage these devices merrily inflict – will know why these, along with big-brother the SQUASH mine, are totally illegal in the civilised sectors.

"Get the shield up *now* and ready the charges," K was shouting. "Just fifteen sezura delay."

"Fifteen?! Uh... Complying."

A blue glow appeared, encircling us, all the machinery and all but the furthest end of the room. A shield.

"Start the charges!" He shouted. The countdown started. *15...*

Outside the shield, the double-doors that formed the external entrance to the room were ripped off. Armed Argon men burst through the entrance.

Sarah leapt onto the transporter panel, clinging onto my right shoulder. The counter on the deadly charges read: *12...*

K pressed one last button on the transporter console before leapfrogging it.

A number of men had stormed the room, but they were stopped by the shield, and were now fanning out just beyond. One of them fired a shot that the shield easily absorbed. Then they all started firing.

K was next to us now on the transporter array. He held my left side. The guns were roaring and the shield was fizzing and sandwiched between these two Argon I watched the counter on those lethal anti-matter charges.

8... 7... 6...

Part Nine

The last number I saw was '3', then I felt the pull of the transport.

We arrived somewhere else, a dark room. I had just started to move when another wave passed through my body, a second transport. We arrived again. Then another wave, another transport. And another. A whole sequence of transports passed, such that by the time we stopped I was thoroughly nauseous.

Are we nearly there yet!?

A few seconds in the darkness then I felt my fellow travellers pull me forward. A door opened and we walked into a bright room full of busy men in robes. For reasons of discretion, I will be vague, but I soon realised we were back in the capital city of Argon Prime, close to the aero-space-port.

Now, we were moving up the escalator toward the space-port.

“Those men,” I whispered. “The men shooting in the... they looked like... They were Argon Special Forces. ASF troopers.”

“Yes,” he said. “The fiercest, most loyal dogs of the Argon Secret Service. Now you see what we’re up against.”

I was aghast. I was being pursued by ASF troopers?!

Sarah must have read my expression. “Welcome to the wanted list,” she laughed.

We arrived in the bustling aero-space-port – the same place I had landed barely a stazura ago. The next Orbital Lifter was over three stazura away. This, K stated, was unacceptable. After a brief discussion, he hired a private Lifter for some 100,000 credits.

...

Sarah was an able pilot. She quickly got us launched and set a course for the ecliptic region. In the back of the ship the we sat, strapped to our seats. Laying back in his chair, K picked up from our earlier conversation.

“The Xenon have changed a lot over the jazuras,” he said, “You do know about the origin of the Xenon? The Terraformers?”

“Of course. Your ancestors, the Earthlings, built them to colonise space. Then they turned on you and tried to ‘Terraform’ Earth. Nearly wiped you out. Nathan Gunne saved the day.”

“Sure. They attacked Earth and every colony.”

“I know,” I said.

His eyes narrowed. “So what about Earth’s defenders? Where were they?”

“Well... I suppose there weren’t any. And why would there be? If there was no-one else in the loop. No-one to defend against. They wouldn’t...”

“No,” he shook his head. “That’s Boron thinking. Humans, we’re paranoid. We couldn’t live without a defence force even if we conclusively proved there was no-one else in the universe. Never. No, the military’s been the backbone of every human civilisation.”

“Alright,” I nodded. “So where were they?”

“I’ll spell it out: we didn’t have anyone to defend us *from* the Terraformers, because,” he spoke slowly, deliberately. “The Terraformers *were* our defenders.”

“I...” I trailed off.

“Why else were they such a lethal fighting force? If they were built to plant trees and oxidise atmospheres, why were they armed at all?”

I nodded.

“We made them to look after us,” he concluded. “A lethal self-replicating weapon. The ultimate defence force. The irony being that they slaughtered us.”

“An interesting theory,” I affirmed.

“Theory? No. Fact. In Earth’s heyday, the Terraformers were Earth’s deep-space scouts, navy, the police, frontier colonists, and a breakdown service all rolled into one. We’ve recovered some lovely accounts of Terraformers saving pilots after a thruster blow-out. I’ll forward copies.”

“No, no... This theory doesn’t hold!” I said. “Nathan Gunne, he led Earth’s defences against the Terraformers. *Defences*. There were Earth defenders.”

“Check a history book! Nathan was a *pirate*! He led *pirates* against the Terraformers. Well... ninety-percent pirates, there were one or two military ships. And why pirates? Because these were the only human ships that carried their own heavy weaponry.”

I sat back to consider this.

“Okay,” I said. “This is different from my understanding of Argon history: Nathan a pirate. It's different, but I won't reject it outright. But I don't see what it has to do with anything.”

“I suppose the key point is this: we actually designed the first Xenon fighter ships. If you look at all the ships they've ever used in combat, they're really just evolving modifications of the original designs made by humans.”

“So they lack originality?” I said flippantly.

“*Exactly!*” He pointed a finger at me. “Exactly... Until now.”

He dragged me across to the wall-console.

“Look at their latest ships... This is footage of their newest fighters. All appeared just recently, almost simultaneously. Most since the Khaak, and look... completely different.”

“These are their new fighters? They are strange.”

“And what worries me... these are original. Artistic even. And they're nothing like anyone else's designs, purely Xenon. If this is... it means they're thinking for themselves in radically new ways.”

“That they're evolving?”

“Exactly,” he said again.

A beep on the comms. Sarah's voice came through the speakers.

“We're in the ecliptic, sir. We can transfer to the Nova from here.”

“Excellent.”

Part Ten

In the Nova, 'K' took off his mask.

“Itches,” he said.

I saw his face: unfamiliar, younger than I had expected. “So you can tell me who you are now?”

“That's... No. Not yet. I want to show you that anyway,” he said. “We'll be at base soon.”

“Sir,” Sarah called from the cockpit. “I think we have a tail.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “I imagine so. Bound to attract attention with a hired Lifter.”

“Should we jump?”

He leaned into the cockpit, “They'll have a jump-scan. Mm. Lead them around the systems for a little while. Let's see who's actually following us.”

“Right.”

“A story,” he said to me suddenly. “President's End, you remember it? *Before* the Khaak.”

My mind blanked. “Vaguely. It was a mining colony, I think. Silicon mines. A cloth rimes fact?”

“And,” he said. “One big station in the system...”

“There was a Chip Fab,” I remembered.

“And... a beta Photon Pulse Cannon factory. It was to the south of the system. It was there for a half jazura or so before the system was destroyed. You can look it up on old maps.”

“Okay. So what about it?”

“It was owned and ran by an Argon. A ‘Shipping Magnate’ named Gejet Sun. A civilian. But beta PPCs aren't civilian goods. Top of the range guns. Each one cost a million, and they only work on the largest ships, M1s, M2s. So he had a very select clientèle. His main customer was, naturally enough, the Argon Navy.”

I nodded. “And?”

“And just before the Khaak arrived, the Argon Navy was trying to expand. They decided to commission six new fully-armed Titans. Each would look after its own system. So they commissioned the bare-bones build with the shipyard. For armaments they set up auctions, lowest bidder wins. So naturally enough, a bidding war broke out. Finally, Gejet Sun won the contract for the guns.”

“But then the system was blown up?” I guessed.

“No. Ha! No, no. What he did was worthy of a Teladi. To win the contract he bid at cost. Then

he built all the guns, all according to contract. Then he trebled the price tag.”

“Treble?! But surely the price was stipulated in the contract,” I objected

“Sure,” he nodded. “He broke contract, paid a big fine. But guns that large take a long time to build. And by now, there was no one else with any kind of stockpile. If they didn’t buy from him, whatever the price, there was no-one else to buy from. Not in the quantity they needed. And they needed to roll out their ships in a time-frame. He had them by the balls.”

“By the..?” I was shocked. “What? So they paid triple?”

“They didn’t have the credits – this was the problem! Even the Navy’s pockets aren’t bottomless.”

“So what happened?”

“Gejet Sun earned ‘Advanced Magnate’ status.”

“The Navy I mean?”

“Well they had no choice. They had to reduce the order. In the end, they rolled out just four of the six ships. Two were left in the shipyard awaiting weapons systems. Wanna hear the irony?”

He hesitated.

“One of these was the one destined for President’s End. With a Titan present the Khaak would’ve been slaughtered, without it... Well... Mr Sun was out of the sector when it happened. He’s rebuilding his ‘empire’ back in Lyrae. You’ve seen what became of all the others in President’s End.”

He got up abruptly and leaned into the cockpit.

“Sarah,” he said. “Status.”

“One definite tail. A Buster.”

“Jump now. What are they gonna do?”

She laughed, “Okay.”

“Just wait two miz,” he said. “I’ll send a message ahead.”

He came back to the seat next to me and started programming a message.

“We’ll be there soon.”

...

It took me a while to recognise the system we jumped into, one of the few sectors I had never visited. In the end I recognised it only from descriptions, from articles I have written. It is quite famous. Or rather... infamous.

Loomanckstrat's Legacy.

Part Eleven

I'm no hero.

Perhaps I am too used to writing ‘Pirate Sectors’ and ‘hostage crisis’ in the same sentence. Slaving is almost a hobby in these parts, along with hijacking, kidnapping, sport-killing. I had even heard rumours of bio-weapon testing on sentient species. Nasty stuff. Entering this sector did not fill me with confidence.

“No,” K told me. “Loomanckstrat’s fine. We run the show here. Down in Moo-Kye's is where you have to watch out – nasty pirates there.”

“Even I don't pass through there without good friends in Orinoco's,” Sarah agreed.

“We normally use Shades if we want to go south,” he added. “Avoid antagonising our neighbours.”

“The Yaki?”

“Among others,” Sarah said. “Yaki are organised. The loner gangs are worse. Imagine the kind of person that gets *kicked-out* of a pirate clan! Nasty people. Little groups of slavers or killers lurking in M3s. Ruthless.”

“We’re actually doing a joint project to clean up these sectors,” said K. “The First House talks to them, tries to lure them into the fold. Failing that, the Shades wipe ’em out. Our own breed of philanthropy.”

“The Shades!” I exclaimed. “Yes! I meant to ask. So what’s the connection?”

“Between us and the Shades?” He asked. “Different groups – same aims. Compatible needs.”

“So you’re separate groups?”

“Kind of. But we’re pretty symbiotic. Our aims are almost identical, and we compliment each other perfectly.”

“In what way?”

“Well, it’s like this, we provide them with resources, equipment, safe harbour and purpose; they provide us with an elite unit: some of the best fighter-pilots in space. They’re quite legendary.”

“Okay. So what are your ‘shared aims’?”

“Toppling the government and making Argon strong again.”

“So, you’re saying the Shades and... and...” I trailed off. I was now staring past Sarah's shoulder, out of the cockpit to where that ominous station loomed. “We’re not going here?”

“Welcome to the Anarchy Port. *Old Annie,*” he said. “Home.”

...

Part Twelve

The docking clamps had barely locked when I felt another nauseating wave of energy pull through my body. K and I were transported to the interior.

“This,” he winked. “Is the bit your average pirate never gets to see. Come.”

He strode for a door. I trailed after him into the next room. As I entered, the scale of this room hit me. It was huge! Far from cluttered little spaces of most stations, this single room was the size of a wheat farm! Could a room this big possibly fit in here? Evidently. A myriad of people in Goner style clothes darted around the room.

My host led a path through the room. I trailed behind gaping like a fool.

To my right, an awesome sight: the hugest mass of information technology I had ever seen. Imagine the Antigone Archives, the pride of the Federation, and multiply this by ten. Maybe twenty. Now you have the idea. By mere existence this place *mocked* Antigone. And this was just to my *right!*

To the left, the towers. The far wall was coated in one giant bookshelf stacked over twenty metres high. Perpendicular to the wall, in lines leading into the room, were shelves, similarly high and stacked with dark crates. Teams of hover-forklifts – streaks of yellow – serviced these shelves, retrieving and replacing boxes at the command of terminals at each end of each row. It was an artefact archive. Perhaps you have visited the Holy Goner Library in the main Goner Temple in Cloudbase SW? If so, you will have some idea (if not, I heartily recommend it!) Experts consider the Holy Goner Library to be the leading artefact library in the Universe. It is a breathtaking collection of antiquities. Yet it would fit in the merest corner of this monstrous construction.

“Our little library,” K laughed, moving his arm to take in the whole room.

...

Outside, a lone Buster was somehow granted docking permission. It crept into the docks.

...

At the end of the room was a small Stimuline-Bar – men in Goner-style robes sat quietly at the tables around us.

“Have you ever heard a good reason for the Argon suppression of Earth history?” he asked after I had recovered from the sheer scale of the room. “Anything convincing?”

I remained silent.

“To start anew all over?” he asked. “Clean slate. Right?”

“As I understand it, yes. As they could never go home they buried the history of it,” I replied cautiously. “Is that untrue?”

“Not untrue. But it’s not the whole truth either. It’s rather...” he trailed off, putting a finger to his ear.

“It’s rather..?” I prompted.

He was looking behind me now, distracted.

“Rather?”

“Sh!... wait,” he snapped. I looked behind me, lots of men in robes walking around; nothing seemed different.

He started speaking quickly.

“There’s something I have to attend to right away. Urgent. You should catch some rest, then we can... Or if... Yes! You’re a researcher, aren’t you? You’re known for your research? In your journalism? That’s your *Thing*, right? Okay! A challenge. You’ve got an hour... No. A stazura. Lose yourself here in the archive. I’ll clear you for use of all the equipment. Use it all. Look up everything you want to know about the First House. Go nuts! See what you can figure out. Colt’s diaries are a good place to start. Colt Gunne. I’m going to leave you here now, I’ll be in that room, *there*, at the end.”

I peered in the indicated direction.

“Find me when you’re done,” he rose to his feet. “No hurry.”

He abruptly vanished into the crowd, leaving me alone in this huge archive.

Free use of the Universe’s biggest Archive!? I was – if you’ll excuse a crude Argon phrase – as happy as an Argnu in defecant!

“Colt... *Gunne*?”

...

Part Thirteen

Rather than trying to accurately remember every source I used, I’ll sum up what I learned from the archives.

Nathan R. Gunne was an Argon hero.

Following the battle to save Earth and the destruction of the Earth-gate, the Earth-fleet were without a home. They searched for many jazuras before finally settling Argon Prime. In the early days of Argon, Nathan Gunne was a very influential man. The Earth battleships – still under his direct command – protected the fledgling Argon Federation.

Nathan and his children founded the first space stations, including the first orbital shipyard and the first weapons plants. Over time, they built a large fleet to protect their space interests. Later, when private space-stations began to spring up, Nathan extended his fleet to take in the defence of all Argon. They became the official defenders of Argon space, known under the honorary titles ‘The House of Gunne’, ‘The First House of Argon’, or simply ‘the House’.

Naturally enough, the Senate down on the planet resented Gunne’s space supremacy. I found the following newspaper article:

Date: 2/7, year: 42, 'The Daily Sonra'

The newly formed Senate are challenging the laws on weaponry in space. Under existing laws Nathan Gunne and his heirs – the House of Gunne – own exclusive rights to produce and license

weaponry for use in space. They also retain complete control of the defence fleet, along with the right to tax stations for this service. The Senate is trying to overturn this law, branding it 'fundamentally undemocratic'.

"[This law] dates back to Nathan Gunne's early years," said Senator Carmen, "It was solely designed to give him full legal command over the War Fleet. Obviously, the law is no longer relevant. There's no longer a war!"

The Senate claim this law slows weapons research, stifles the economy, and holds back military growth. Family Gunne argues that "the Terraformers respect military force, not market force." Nathan Gunne, head of House Gunne, refuses to relinquish weapons rights, stating: "We will not leave the protection of humanity to petty businessmen."

I was reminded of the magnate in President's End.

Nathan died in 45, and his son took over the House. The conflict between the Senate and the House continued to grow as the Senate became more powerful. Conversely, as memory of Earth faded, support for the House faded.

'In fact,' one article claimed. 'It was not some childish memory-repression reflex that caused us to turn our backs on the True History [of Earth]. The Senate erased Earth history deliberately to wipe Gunne's hold on the public imagination.'

...

A later heir to the house was the near-legendary General Nida Gunne. His tactical genius turned the tide in the Xenon war, and led the Argon to victory over the Xenon in 255. Charismatic and able, he significantly restored the Gunnes' prestige – leading to a new golden age for the House.

Colt Gunne, born 310, was Nida's grandson. Colt lacked the vision and charisma of his grandfather. By all accounts, he was a dry, unappealing man, but a man of principle. It was these principles that led him to drag the reluctant Argon into The Boron Campaign against the Split.

There are varying accounts and varying dates, but this war was clearly longer and bloodier than anyone expected. In the end the Argon barely even won, rather pushing the Split back to a profitless stalemate until the Split lost heart. Colt took no end of political flak for this, as evident in writings of the time:

'The Galaxy', 12/9/351

With our fleet down to 50%, Mr Gunne should be asking himself how he plans to defend us against the next Xenon threat. Indeed, after this unimpressive 'victory' over the Split, where we've won nothing but the thoroughly unimpressive fish-folk as allies, we collectively wonder: what were we doing there? What were the benefits to us of entering this war?

As Gunne again extorts 'taxes' to fund his follies, the Argon people again call out for weapons liberalisation and an accountable military; the Senate again petitions the archaic laws.

After it all, one cannot help but marvel at the sheer front of Mr Gunne as he speaks out against these 'Evil Split', who he claims are 'warlike monsters' led into battle 'on the whim of petty militaristic dynasties'. One cannot but wonder if Mr Gunne has ever seen a mirror.

The law was repealed in 350, and the Gunnes were stripped of power. Their ships were commandeered by the Republic – thus founding the Argon Navy – and Gunne's factories were 'appropriated' (Colt's diaries prefer the word 'stolen') and sold off in auctions. In the end, the Gunne's were left with only the family ship, the *Loki*, Nathan's original battleship. Colt was hounded from Argon Prime. The First House finally found solace among the order of the Goner.

Years later a fiery young Gunne known as Nate, supported by some radical Goner, tried to re-establish the Gunne dynasty. He led a charge on Argon Prime. But by now, all memory of Earth was lost, along with any tolerance for the Gunnes. The Navy were taking no prisoners. They attacked,

and chased ‘the traitor’ south, through ‘Light Home’, finally losing him amid the rocks of Ore Belt. The Goner ex-communicated the radicals to distance themselves from Gunne. Nate, and his ex-Goner friends set up a base far north of the North Gate amid the asteroids of Ore Belt.

Eventually the *Loki* made one last flight taking Family Gunne – The First House – into the new sectors. They seized Loomanckstrat’s Legacy as their home.

...

I finished my research as if awaking from a long sleep. Nearly two stazuras had passed. I wandered across the archive. The room at the end was locked, but as soon as I pressed the buzzer, I was granted entry.

After exchanging some pleasantries with K, I came to the one thing that had stuck in my mind from my research. The one thing I couldn’t resist asking.

“So,” I said. “Nathan’s flagship. The Earth ship. The *Loki*?”

“*Loki*, yes. At least, that was the pirate name. Earth pilots knew it as something else... *Dragonfire*, I think.”

“Right...” I hesitated. “It flew here? To Loomanckstrat’s?”

“Yes.”

“It’s still... operational.”

“Completely.”

“And it’s... Is it still here? In this system?”

“It’s here.”

“Can I see it?” I almost begged.

“Sure can.”

...

Part Fourteen

“The *Loki*,” K repeated.

He led me to a terminal in an adjoining room. He punched in a few commands, and on-screen appeared a large ship flying out the dock of the Port.

“That’s just a Bayamon!”

“No. This is a live feed of the Anarchy Port from a laser-tower outside.”

“Okay. And the *Loki*?”

“You’ll see it in a moment. But first, so you know what it looks like...”

He entered more commands and the second monitor activated. It showed video-playback footage.

Laser fire, fighters – it looked like battle footage.

“This,” he said, “is the First Battle – the battle to save Earth – as seen from the *Valkyrie*. Another ex-pirate Earth-fleet battleship, just like the *Woden* back at the museum.”

A ship exploded on screen – now some Terraformers flew toward the camera, veering off impossibly late – a large battleship glided into view in the background, the image zoomed in on it.

“The *Loki*,” he said proudly. “The biggest of the lot. Nathan’s flagship.”

The image froze with *Loki* filling the screen.

“There!” he said. “Familiar?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so,” I said. “I’ve...”

I trailed off. Something strange was happening. Suddenly my eyes saw correlations between the two screens in front of me. Matches between the images – the image of the *Loki*, to the right, and, to the left... the Anarchy Port.

“You’ve seen it,” he encouraged. “Go on! Say it.”

“The Anarchy port... the bit in the middle? The core, underneath the outer cylinder... that and the *Loki*. They’re very similar?” I ventured.

“They are.”

“Are... are they the same? The *Loki* and the Anarchy Port. They’re the same?”

“Give the man a Stott Cake!” He clapped my torso heavily. “Yes! Yes, what is now the core of the Anarchy Port was once the *Loki*. Nathan’s own battleship... converted to a station.”

“This is... it’s. So we’re in the... in an Earth ship? Now?”

“Ha! This very ship once sat over Argon Prime! The guardian angel. And after that, the Goner Temple in Cloudbase SW was built around *Loki*. When we had to go into hiding, we had to detach from the Temple, left a huge gap in the middle! Even just twenty-five years ago, back when Brennan showed up, you remember the Temple still had the gap in the middle? No way to dock – Remember? Back when you had to space-walk in.”

“I remember.”

“Well this is why! *Loki* had been the centre of the Temple.”

“I always heard how...” I trailed off.

“What?”

“They always said the Anarchy Port could move if it had to. If it was attacked. Pack up and set off for a new sector, they said. I just never believed it. A flying station!?”

“Sure. We only moved here a few jazura ago.”

“This will make an amazing story: the Anarchy Port, originally an Earth Battleship.” Something dawned on me. “So that’s why...”

“Yep!” He read my mind. “That’s why we call this place *Old Annie*.”

True professional that I am, I could think of nothing to say!

...

Behind us a door slipped opened.

We turned to see a small man in a large Goner-style robe entering the room.

“Hey!” K called. “This is a private meeting room. If you’re looking for...”

“Quiet,” the intruder said. He pulled a gun from his pocket – the Atomiser, a deadly energy weapon.

“Easy,” my host said. “What do you want?”

The intruder pulled back the hood of the robe. He had a clean-shaven head, large eyes and a tribal tattoo twisting up the side of his face. He looked familiar: had I met him before?

My host recognised him immediately. “Jiaron, the assassin. You’re here to kill me.”

“You’d be dead already,” the assassin stated. “No. My key objective is the leader.”

“You won’t get to him.”

“You’ll take me to him.”

“No. Not happening.”

The assassin pointed the gun at K. “That was not a *suggestion*.”

“Kill me, you’ll never get to him.”

“True,” the assassin said. He turned the gun on me. “Then the Boron dies.”

I froze.

“You can’t do that,” K said icily.

“I am doing it,” the assassin snapped back. “Your leader. Now. Or the Boron dies.”

“No.”

“He will die.”

K shook his head. “You won’t do it.”

Their eyes were locked on each other. I heard my limbs clicking with tension. A sick feeling was rising within me.

“Last chance,” the assassin’s voice was cold, detached.

“Get lost.”

The assassin pulled the trigger.

...

Part Fifteen

When you stare into a gun your brain speeds up. Adrenaline, I suppose. Lots of things pass through your mind. Odd things. Things you forgot you had. Memories. Smells. Jokes from decades ago. Old pains and regrets. Images. It's an odd feeling, not entirely unpleasant.

But then, the moment you see that trigger pulled, that one instant, everything Stops. Your brain goes crazy. It totally over-clocks itself, scrambling through your mind desperately looking for some forgotten solution, *anything* to cling to. For that moment – just a fraction of a sezura to anyone else – *just for you* Time Stops Dead. An eternity in an instant – a universe in a jar.

Looking back, it seems like a vivid quick-fire slide-show of images, but at the time it didn't feel that way at all. It was relaxed, like a casual jaunt through the Gallery of the Life of Fu Jila. I peered at the exhibits; the accumulated memories of a lifetime passing before my eyes. In this wing, moments of exaltation: the time I rode an Emperor Orca, the time I surfed in Profit Share, the time...

I was six; for school I had to write a mock news-story on why Yarks were the best pets. With a childish passion, I intended to definitively prove it! So I gleaned facts from encyclopaedias; I referenced fictional stories and newspaper reports to prove how loving and loyal Yarks were. I spent hours poring over dictionaries for just the right words to express my meaning. Then I translated it from Giuhruhn – my own vernacular – rewriting it in standard Boron. Sure, I spent tazuras on this thirty mizura homework assignment, but it was worth it: my audience were blown away! The finished piece was passed wildly around the staff, they passed it on to friends, colleagues. Before long my parents were called in, and all kinds of educational specialists came to see me. Even big newspapermen came in to see little me. Finally my article was published in the global news-wire as part of an article about me, a 'budding boy journalist'. For a day I was the talk of the planet!

More exhibits: my Knighthood in the Kingdom; my being accepted as a Friend of the Goner; my...
Uh oh! My One Obsession...

My family are lower-level nobility (little-known fact: I am 109th in line for the throne). The royal-family were at a family wedding I once attended. At this time, I was an awkward adolescent. I had grown suddenly and now my limbs were all the wrong size. I'd become clumsy. It was nearing the end of the night and it was time for dancing. All I wanted was to hide in a corner, and think empty thoughts about how meaningless things were (I was at that particular phase of adolescence!) My mother would hear none of it! She made me dance, forced me to. Awkward, shy and clumsy, I was dancing so badly. The Queen was looking over the dance-pool at us – she seemed smaller in real life – and I was convinced she was staring at me. When she laughed, I was sure she was laughing at me. I just wanted to dive into a corner and disappear and be somewhere else. Anywhere else. Suddenly I was face to face with Perfection. The Princess. Pictures never do her justice, she is Perfect. I froze. I almost missed my chance to dance, but the beautiful Princess smiled in just such a way that these frozen limbs melted. We danced. We danced perfectly. She brought out perfection in me, I could dance! And we shared a perfect moment. Then the song finished, it was over and she was gone.

For mazuras afterwards, life was grey, dull. Lifeless. No one else could match her. No one else made me feel Perfect. For jazuras I was obsessed with her, going to every family function she possibly might attend. When I finally met her again four jazuras later she didn't remember me at all. That was bitter. Eight mazuras after that, I married a woman just because she looked like the Princess. Really, there was no other reason. An 'err in haste, regret at leisure' kind of thing...

After that my mind ran back to the highs: when my undercover work brought down a Split slaving ring; my estranged wife turning up with my three jazura old daughter – that quiet child who stared up at me with my own eyes.

That led into the wing of regrets... The grandest wing of all. The best lit. I spent days wandering through here. Studying every nook.

...

He had pulled the trigger, and in that instant I lived a lifetime.

...

Part Sixteen

There was a bright flash as energy arced from the weapon – hundreds of tiny lightning bolts, unfocussed, striking to the walls and floors all around. The assassin's hand jolted, he jerked his arm back and the weapon clattered to the floor.

Falling back into real time, I heard K snort a laugh.

“Saw you coming, Jiaron,” he said. “Energy weapons won't work in here.”

The assassin nodded philosophically. His hands vanished into the robe, emerged with two long, smooth, curving blades.

K's face twisted into a smile.

“I know you,” I heard myself tell the assassin.

My mind flashed back to that distant Boron trading station where the black-mask woman had contacted me. A quiet drink interrupted. The secretary and the First House. The long room that could have been a corridor. The airlock chambers. The dead woman with the smashed visor and the red blood on the walls. But just before that... from the neighbouring airlock... the small, shaven-headed man with the facial tattoo who came from the neighbouring airlock...

“It was you! On the station!” All at once, I realised, “*You killed the black-mask woman!*”

K made an odd noise. His eyes were narrow now. The smile had gone.

“Her name was June,” he rasped. Almost a growl.

I noticed the assassin glaring at me now. Realising I was still his leverage against K, I shrank back against the wall.

The assassin lunged at me, but K kicked at his ankles, sending Jiaron sprawling to the floor beneath me. As he scrambled upright, I saw K had taken some fighting posture. It seemed K knew something about fighting.

Jiaron spun the knives into a backhand grip, so that the silver-blades curved out from his fists. Now he lunged for K, throwing hook-punches. The blades left arcs of light that briefly hung on the air.

K glided back, easily slipping beyond blades' reach, and now his hand flashed out, grabbing the assassin's arm. He jerked Jiaron's arm downward, and with a shuffle of the feet, he had thrown a hard side-kick into the assassin's ribs. The assassin flew back, slamming awkwardly into the wall. He let out a sharp grunt, and a blade fell to the floor.

Jiaron seemed shaken. He was gasping slightly for breath. He switched the remaining blade to a forehand grip, and made a few threatening moves with it. Now he lunged forward slashing the blade across K's neck. But K had evaded. Again he made it look easy. The assassin lunged forward again, again, again. K seemed to react even before the assassin moved. Each time the knife flashed for him, he would subtly turn, and watch the blade glide narrowly by.

The assassin was getting frustrated. His lunges grew wilder.

Jiaron launched forward, knife high, vicious, ready slice down into K. This time, instead of moving back, K shifted *forward*, into the assassin. He quickly stepped through, into Jiaron's blind-side, so that he was behind the knife-arm as it began its slice down. He caught the assassin's wrist in the down-swing and guided the arm down onto his rising knee.

Jiaron's elbow met K's knee with a loud crack; the assassin screamed as his arm shattered.

K gripped hard on the wrist, his other hand punching across into the assassin's face. Now he drove a foot into the back of Jiaron's knee, driving it down to the floor.

K followed the assassin down and twisted him round, gripping the head in one arm and simultaneously pulling the knife – still in Jiaron's hand – pulling it inwards, deep into Jiaron's throat. Across.

Again, that red Argon blood.

"June," K spat into the dying man's face.

...

A while later K looked up to me. Reading shock in my posture, he grumbled.

"He deserved that. He killed the best wom... the best... He *earned* this."

I nodded quickly.

...

A while later, after security personnel had removed the body, I found myself standing next to K. He had been sat at a desk for some time, staring into space. Suddenly he seemed to remember my presence.

"Ah," K said. "Fu Jila. Right. It's time. Let's go upstairs."

"Upstairs?"

"Meet the Leader."

...

Coming out of the little round elevator, we entered a large, rich room. There were exhibits, pictures on the walls; there was that crushing silence you normally find in museums and libraries. The floor was a clean, reflective grey, and the high ceiling a pale white. The walls were light and covered in framed pictures. In one of the frames, I saw something familiar. Something I knew. Curiosity overpowered my unease; I strode toward it.

"Can't be?"

...

Part Seventeen

Perhaps you know the Argon art of 'portrait painting'. It's very old-fashioned, a manual method of recording a person's likeness. It is essentially similar to ink-etches uncovered in the Bize-Uropa caverns on our own home-world. I dare say most Boron will know something of this practice.

In Argon culture these two-dimensional paintings, while archaic, are quite revered. They are considered an art form and serve a similar function to our own 'frozen-light' sculptures.

By far the most well-known Argon portrait is 'Nathan R. Gunne'. It was painted in the early jazuras after planet-fall. Depicting the Argon hero, it hangs in the Goner Heritage Museum on Argon Prime. Since Brennan's victory over the Xenon, Earth has again become common knowledge, and this picture has been widely circulated. It is *the* picture of Nathan Gunne. I dare say everyone in the universe has seen it by now. The version in the Heritage is known to be a print – a copy – not the original. The mystery of where the original is has been a subject of some controversy and at least one popular fiction. It seemed it had been lost to the ages. So imagine my surprise to find it, of all places, in a pirate base.

'Not a pirate base,' I reminded myself. It still felt strange to imagine, 'this place was an Earth

Battleship. It had been Nathan's home. Astonishing!

Beneath the portrait, inside an air-tight golden frame, was a ragged, creased and half torn paper photograph of a bluish, cloudy planet.

"It's real." K was beside me.

I stepped back. "What?"

"The portrait," he said. "You did a story on the copy. This is the original portrait... Or were you looking at the photo?"

"I..."

"Earth," he said.

I looked back to the battered little picture, the little, blue, ordinary-looking planet. "Earth?"

"Believe it or not," he said. "Nathan R. Gunne had that very photo in his pocket for over forty years. It was taken from orbit two days before the Terraformers got there – the last time he ever saw Earth up close. He used to look at this whenever he felt lost... far from home."

He stared into the photograph for a while, "I love this photo. Could tell you the name of every continent?"

"I... I'm having real trouble piecing this together. The First House? And you keep mentioning the Xenon? How do the Goner fit in? Now Earth? I... I don't... And damn it, I don't even know your name! Can't you give me any straight answers?"

"Sorry," he smiled kindly. "You've been more than patient. Very professional. Actually, one of these answers is right here."

"On the wall?"

He nodded.

I looked back to the portrait of Nathan Gunne – above it, unnecessarily, a plaque: 'Nathan R Gunne'.

To its left was another portrait I recognised from the Heritage, Nathan's young son, Brett. The plaque confirmed, 'Brett A. Gunne'. Two further along, this time a photograph, 'Nyola Gunne' – Nyana's brother. It was a family line!

Looking along, I saw others I recognised: the General Nida Gunne. Further along, I got to see what 'Colt Gunne' looked like. The pictures continued. 'Tommy Gunne,' 'Rael Gunne'. So many pictures, all bearing this illustrious surname. 'Jove Gunne'. They even looked alike - family resemblance. Arriving at the end, I glanced to my host in disbelief. Staring out at me from the end of this line I saw...

"K... Kelfa... Gunne?" I read from the plaque.

The man bowed.

"You're...?"

"Kelfa Gunne," K acknowledged. "At your service."

"So... you're the leader? Of the First House?"

He laughed.

"No," he pointed over his shoulder. "No. The leader – my father – is right through this door."

...

Part Eighteen

Argon all look alike... or so most Boron say.

There is certainly some truth to that – they clearly have less variation than we Boron. But having spent all these jazuras living among them, I have become quite good at telling them apart. It is something I pride myself on. There are many subtle differences that allow the perceptive observer to tell Argon apart: their skin colourings and body lengths, their head shapes, body forms, visible hair and the configuration of their faces. Yet to even my trained eye, this Jove Gunne, Leader of the First

House, was the exact image of Nathan R. Gunne.

“Jove Gunne,” he introduced himself. “Good to have you here.”

I half-bowed.

“Thank-you for coming,” he said. “I’m a fan. I’m proud you’ll be telling our story.”

“I’m still,” I started. “I still don’t understand what you want of me. Why am I here? I’m certainly not going to become an apologist for pirate acts. For terrorism.”

He seemed taken aback by this.

“You Boron,” he said. “There’s no moral ambiguity in your minds, is there? It’s just not in your nature, bless you! But, let’s leave that for the moment. Was your journey here okay? Really?”

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” Kelfa told him.

“I heard about the assassin,” Jove said. “I trust you are both okay?”

“I’m okay,” I said.

Kelfa hesitated. “It was the one who killed June,” he said flatly.

Jove put his hand on Kelfa’s back. “I’m sorry.”

“The bakami was on us from the start,” Kelfa went on. “He was probably tracking Fu ever since June made contact with him on that trade station. He was tailing us from Argon Prime. I only realised we’d been followed here when his Buster got landing clearance at the docks.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“In the Stimuline bar,” Kelfa said. “Security radioed my earpiece. Told me a ship had landed here at the port using my personal landing-key-code.”

“He used your landing key-code?” Jove asked. “How?”

“My guess is his ship was near enough to ‘overhear’ it when we landed. He probably assumed it was just a universal docking-code for the Port. An open key. So he used that.”

“Hm,” Jove rubbed his cheek. “But key-codes are mixed with a time-stamp and encrypted. Heavily encrypted. Unless he requested landing in the same sezura as you, he must have found a way to decrypt it and change the time stamp. Otherwise the automatic response would have denied landing permission outright. That kind of decryption’d take days with an on-board computer. Only a specialised AI could crack it so quickly.”

Kelfa nodded. “And we know what *that* means.”

“Argon Secret Service.”

“I sent a team to search his ship for anything interesting.”

“Good,” Jove said. “We were lucky here.”

“Yeah,” K nodded. “Gave us the element of surprise on him.”

“*We* had the element of surprise!?” I exclaimed. “My life was flashing before my eyes!”

“It’s the reason you’re here to talk about it! The warning is what gave me the chance to flood the area with nano-sols – aerosol-nanos. They’re what shorted-out his gun.”

“Right,” I said. “And it never occurred to you to tell me this before he...”

“Listen,” Jove interrupted. “He must have been a Service agent – nothing else fits the facts – so he will have reported in before he landed here. I know for a fact the Navy have been amassing a fleet over the past tazura, and I have good reason to believe it’s to attack us. With that in mind, it’s likely this assassination was to make way for an attack. So it makes sense to assume they’ll attack within the stazura. Clear?”

“I think...”

“I may not be able to stop an all out attack, Mr Jila, so I want you off this station before it comes to that. So time is of the essence. We should get to business.”

He had spoken with a calmness that was frankly unnerving.

“Okay,” I said. “So what is it you needed to tell me so badly?”

“Right,” he began. “Where to start? Survival is war. And we’re losing...”

...

Part Nineteen

Jove paused, staring, contemplating me for a moment.

“You think I’m a revolutionary,” he began. “You do, I can see it. You expect me to be some raving fanatic. I think you’ll be surprised. What I want isn’t even unorthodox. That’s what kills me. I’m public enemy number 2, and what I want is really just common sense. That’s it.”

“You want to destroy the Argon democracy!”

“As a last resort,” he countered. “If they don’t give us any other option. If they don’t act we have to. This isn’t about democracy any more... or anything ideological. Ideology’s irrelevant. This is...”

“If I have interpreted your actions correctly,” I interrupted. “It is very ideological. You plan to topple a ‘weak’ and ‘corrupt’ democracy, and restore your ‘House of Gunne’ – a ‘strong’ and ‘honourable’ military dictatorship. Something like the Split. I just don’t understand why you think I’d act as a mouthpiece for this atrocity.”

Kelfa made some noise, he was staring at me now in something like shock.

Jove shook his head, smiling. “You’re everything I hoped for! It’s exactly because you won’t be anyone’s ‘mouthpiece’ that I need you. Integrity. When this is all over, people will trust you to tell it how it is. However much the government can slander me and twist my words, your words carry an authority they can’t touch. People trust you more than they trust *them!* And when people hear what we’re really doing here, if they can really understand the importance, it might cause just enough of an outcry as to force the government to act.

“You see? You’re here precisely because I don’t want the damage of a coup. That’s why this little meeting became the House’s top priority: it’s a last ditch effort to resolve this matter peacefully. Without unnecessary bloodshed.”

“No pressure,” Kelfa muttered.

“Right now,” Jove said. “The Navy’s under direct control of the Republic. Senators have complete control. So whenever they need to cut their overheads, who do you think faces cutbacks? Sure, our Navy *looks* strong, on paper, but in *real* terms – compared to the competition, that is – our *real* Navy power has diminished every year since Brennan’s Triumph. Fact. Look it up. And it’s starting to show. When you get back, interview a Navy Admiral. Any one of them. They’ll all tell you the same story. A story of repeated cut-backs, endless shortages, greedy arms dealers and meddling Senators that try to tell them how to run a Navy. Ask any Admiral which he’d prefer: Navy ran weapons production or the current ‘lowest bidder’ system.”

“But that’s not an Admiral’s choice,” I said. “It’s *the people’s* choice. It’s not perfect, but it’s democracy. People choose. People have that freedom.”

“Then maybe they shouldn’t,” he said. “And don’t give me that look! What I mean is, how can ‘the people’ choose when they are totally uninformed? When people choose – vote – are they really voting on how the military is ran?! Or are they voting about things they actually know about? Things that matter to them? Taxes, economics... I’ve never seen an election campaign focus on military logistics, have you? When people vote, do they know what a candidate’s military policy is? Is that even on the radar?”

He waited a moment for an answer. When I failed to give one he went on.

“They vote with their pockets. On issues that directly affect them. That’s democracy’s domain: everyday issues. ‘The people’ just assume the military will run itself. Which is actually how it *should* be! It *should* run itself. The government’s experiment in usurping our defence has clearly failed. We’re weaker now than ever. Dangerously so. Perhaps *fatally* so. Unless something changes... The First House *must* retake the Argon Navy. It’s the only way to save the Argon.”

“No,” I said. “You’d become a dictatorship. Even if you didn’t mean to. As soon as you have power over the military, you have effective power over the Argon. What protection does Democracy have

against you if you hold all the guns? It's powerless and you're a dictator. Is that what you want?"

"No," Jove said. "You're wrong. The Argon Federal Bank just controls the treasury – they're the economic specialists – we'll control just the Navy – we'll be the militar..."

"How will that solve these 'endless shortages'?" I snapped.

"Well obviously we'd need to control the economic supply-chain feeding into the Navy."

"Which could include virtually every factory in space!"

"It's a price that has to be paid! We're out of options! Honestly. For all your ideology, and your arguments, we're talking about survival. The survival of the Argon. I'm looking to keep Nathan's pledge. Nathan R. Gunne made this pledge: 'to protect all Argon from all attackers'.

"The House promised that. I intend to keep that pledge. If, to grow strong, we have to give up a little freedom... It's a small price. Not much use in being a free corpse."

"Strength is the Split virtue," I said coldly. "The virtue of the bully, the killer, the oppressor. The Foundation Guild always based itself on the virtue of Freedom. If we lose sight of this, what are we fighting *for*?"

"A noble thought, I'm sure. But strength isn't 'the Split virtue', it's the Universal virtue: in the whole universe *it's the one virtue that makes all other virtues possible*. Who can say what delicate wonders have been stamped out of existence for lack of strength to survive? Isn't that what nearly happened to the Boron? Wasn't it our Strength that saved you?"

Kelfa watched me from his father's side.

...

With time running short, we went on to discuss the Xenon. He gave me various pieces of evidence, including holos and photos, to show how the Xenon are evolving. Their new ships, new flight patterns, new tactics. He showed me data to indicate how previously effective battle tactics may have become obsolete. He also showed me some top-secret Navy reports that showed (without wishing to breach any secrecy laws) that the war with the Khaak is going rather worse than most people realise.

All in all, it comprised an urgent call for action.

A call came through the comms.

"Ah!" Jove activated a screen showing the North Gate.

The Navy Fleet was here.

...

Part Twenty

After some quickly exchanged words and a hasty farewell, Kelfa dragged me away.

"Time to go!"

...

Another transport put us in the lower bay of a Nova, just inside the Nova's main entrance hatch. I followed Kelfa up to the cockpit.

"Get us out of here," he shouted.

"Right," the masked pilot sped us out of Old Annie; we shot out into the blackness of space.

Kilometres ahead, what looked like a war-fleet was approaching.

...

Loomanckstrat's Legacy is feared for many reasons. Of course, it is notorious as home of the Anarchy Port. But it is equally infamous for the extensive, vicious minefields that sprawl across the ecliptic plane. It is littered with mines, they are everywhere. The few safe 'tunnels' through the

sector are marked by hazard beacons. Explosive death awaits anyone who strays too far. This makes it particularly hard to escape pirates ambushes.

The Navy Fleet were bunched together to fit through the safe 'tunnel' to the station.

"Big fleet," the pilot muttered.

It was. Two Titans formed the backbone of the fleet – large and foreboding. These were supported by four Centaurs, a mass of M3s and some M4s and M5s.

The few pirate fighters and laser towers were pretty meagre in comparison.

"Uh..." I didn't know how to say this. "Shouldn't you evacuate the base. They look serious."

Kelfa nodded grimly.

"The base can't resist this kind of open attack," I said. "You don't have the ships!"

"Think we didn't expect this?"

"But there's no way you can..." Then something occurred to me. "By the Queen – is this a martyrdom? Is it? Of course! Is this... Is this why I've been brought here? Is Jove planning to immortalise himself here? As a martyr. To get his message across the universe this way? Some kind of propaganda campaign? Is this my part?"

"No!" Kelfa looked shocked by this thought. "Of course not! No. No, that'd be..."

Kelfa hesitated a moment, he seemed to consider it, then he said. "No. You don't know dad. Jove. We're announcing our return here. He's got something planned. He doesn't tell me everything, but he's got something planned. Something good."

"Like?"

"Well..." he winked. "Remember the Shades? I sense an ambush."

"How many Shades do you..." I stalled. Glancing ahead, I had noticed we were heading right into the Navy fleet. "Are we..? I thought we were making a getaway?"

"What? Oh! It's okay," Kelfa said absently. "We're in a Shade ship."

"We're almost invisible," the pilot confirmed. "The only thing to remember is don't fly in with the sun to your back."

Sure enough we glided through the midst of the incoming war-fleet completely unnoticed. They flew right by us. I rushed to the rear turret to watch through the glass.

Kelfa looked at the pilot, confusion growing on his face.

"Jo?" Kelfa asked the pilot. "Shouldn't you be out there with the Shade ambush?"

"Huh? We're not active right now. Beta squadron are active. I guess they're covering it."

"*Beta squadron?!?*" Kelfa shouted. "They're not up to this! Beta?!?"

"Who are beta squadron?" I asked.

"They're our *back-up* Shades squadron. Alpha are our elite. Beta are just promising pilots; pirates and ex... Jo, half of beta are *ex-Navy!* They're not... Do you think they're up to this?"

"Capable? Yes," the pilot said. "Training them myself. I'd be more worried about them following orders. They're young. And like you say, a couple only just left the Navy. I mean, they should be loyal, but some might have friends on the other side. That'd be tough. And some of the others are pretty green. I'd be worried about them just sitting it out hidden behind an asteroid."

"Why aren't Alpha covering this? Jo? Why are..?"

"Hey! It's not my call. Jove's own orders."

"Damn! Patch me through to Jove," Kelfa ordered.

The Navy Fleet had reached the Anarchy Port. Through the rear-turret window, I saw them spread out into the clearing around the port. The imbalance was staggering. A huge Argon fleet versus about ten Orinocos and a lot of scouts. This *looked like* a massacre. But the Shades, could they... *would* they tip the balance?

...

A communication went out on all channels.

“This is Admiral Hope of the Argon Navy Flagship *Thraddash* to Pirate Base. Surrender or be destroyed.”

Jove Gunne appeared on screen. “Join us or leave in peace.”

“Negative. Stand down or be destroyed.”

“We all want to protect the Argon,” Gunne said. “Let’s not fight each other for the sake of weak, lying politicians. Join us.”

“Negative. You have one mizura to stand down.”

“No!” Gunne shouted. “*You* have a mizura to make the right choice: ‘just follow orders’, or do the right thing.”

Silence.

“The cowards who sent you,” Jove told them. “Sent ahead an assassin for me and my family. A murderer they freed from prison and paid – paid more than they pay any of you – to kill me, my children. One of whom is six jazuras old. These are the people you’ll die for? Kill for?”

Silence.

“Government exists by consent. It’s our right to over-throw them. When they’re leading us to destruction, it’s becomes our duty to do so. Open your eyes. Better men than you are with us. Navy pilots. War heroes. People you respect. Is it wrong to reclaim our honour? Is it wrong to take responsibility for our own protection?”

Silence.

“Twenty sezura,” the Admiral said flatly.

“Damn you,” Gunne said. “Open your eyes. You can kill me, but that won’t make me less right. Others’ll see the truth and they have no choice but to fight. Truth’s more than me, truth’s *immortal*.”

More silence.

“Knock us down,” Jove said. “And we’ll rise again.”

Our Nova had cleared the mine field now. We were turning back to face the action.

“5 sez,” the Admiral said.

The Navy force looked overwhelming.

All at once the sky lit up. The Navy were attacking. The Port’s laser towers were gone almost immediately, and several First House Orinocos fell in the first volley. The fighters that remained tried to hold back the unstoppable force of the Navy. The Centaurs swept in, shooting everything in sight.

“The Shades will be there,” said Kelfa. “Watch for them.”

The two Titans blasted through the pirate line and moved in to attack the Anarchy Port directly. This *Beta squadron* were certainly taking their time. Photon Pulse Cannons blazed away from the Titans, burning into the Port’s shield.

“Any sezura,” Kelfa’s voice wavered now. “Any sez. They have to defend the base!”

The Titans were right over the Port now. I spotted the distant after-burn of a Hornet. A moment later a huge explosion rocked the Port.

“Where the hell are Beta?” Kelfa whispered

More tiny after-burner trails and a series of explosions rocked the Port.

“No!” I uttered. “Surrender.”

To lose such an historic artefact was beyond contemplation.

“Where the hell are Beta!” Kelfa shouted. “Jo, you have to take us back in.”

“I...”

A huge explosion burst from somewhere on the station. It triggered more explosions. Debris and fire blew in every direction from the Port. A series of explosions rocked through the structure.

“No!” Kelfa said, his eyes wide.

The Anarchy Port broke up in fire before our eyes.

...

Part Twenty-One

I stared at that broken station.

The explosions had died down, and where the Anarchy Port had been, just the outer hoop of the smashed station spun emptily in the void.

Kelfa stared, speechless.

The main cylinder, the core of the station, had been thrown backwards and half blown away by the force of the explosions. Debris littered the area, and tiny bursts of flame – the last echoes of the destruction – burst out from that wrecked core-cylinder making it spin randomly in the void. Debris trailed all around. It was a sad sight.

Morale broken by the loss of their base, and facing over-whelming fire-power – with still no sign of Beta coming to their rescue – the last Orinocos cowered within that wrecked outer hoop of the base. Even the Navy seemed surprised at how quickly they had won. The glorious fleet moved in for the kill.

The Anarchy Port’s core cylinder had spun a full half-turn when another small explosion came from the end, cancelling the spin. Another blast at the rear sent it gliding in toward the Titans. They looked almost like...

“... Manoeuvring jets?”

With a flash, the last of the debris was blown away like a shed skin, and the *Loki* – sleek and mean – emerged from the wrecked core. With that tell-tale purple glow, a shield rose, and flashing bolts shot from *Loki*’s nose into the belly of the Titans.

Ion Disruptors.

One Titan had lost its shield now and *Loki* was turning on the other. As the Earth-ship turned, its turrets opened fire on that first, shield-less, Titan. Plasma fire tore holes through the Navy flagship, as those Ion Disruptors locked onto the second Titan; now, its shields too fell away.

The mass of the Navy fleet had just started to react when, sharply, *Loki* began to reverse. Rather than pressing home its advantage on the Titans, *Loki* backed away – surprisingly quick for such a large ship. It had dashed back several kilometres before the Titans had managed to turn. The Navy fleet were regrouping to follow, and still *Loki* was picking up reverse speed.

Boom!

Without warning, an explosion hit one of the Centaurs. It seemed it had gotten too close to a mine, when... *Boom!* It was hit again, another mine. The explosion crippled it. Then *Boom!* another explosion kilometres away, this time a Nova destroyed by a mine. Another explosion claimed a small group of Busters. *Boom!* Another explosion. And another. Explosions followed one another, faster and faster now.

“What the..?”

Then I noticed. The hundreds of tiny specks shifting in the night; *the minefield was moving!* The mines had been activated somehow – magnetised perhaps – and now the whole field was collapsing in on the Argon fleet. Space lit up with explosions – explosions like stars – thicker, faster, bigger

and brighter until it hurt my eyes to watch.

Amid the chaos, a bigger blast marked the end of the Navy flagship, the Titan *Thraddash*. The other Titan was making a dash; flames streamed from its sides, burning off its own leaking oxygen. A sinister cloud followed it. Mines. In a cartoon way, it looked like a chase. The Titan was trying desperately to pick up speed, to outrun them, but now it was headed straight for the crippled corvette. It was too late to turn. They ploughed headlong through the lame-duck corvette. The corvette was obliterated and the Titan, critically, was *slowed*...

The cloud of mines casually overtook it, many drifting into the engine ducts and docks. The whole tail-end of the ship exploded bright as a sun. The back half of the ship was vaporised – just as the dead nose flew onwards, much faster now, flames pouring out behind as it burned off the last fleeting oxygen. It finally smashed through a witless Nova on its way to oblivion.

...

The explosions were dying down at last, and the fleet was mostly gone. A crippled Centaur and some bewildered M3s and M5s remained. They looked lost, shell-shocked.

Those few Pirate Orinocos now emerged from their sanctuary, shielded in the Anarchy Port's still-functioning hoop section. They attacked ruthlessly. *Loki* flew back into the fight, amazingly fast. Disrupters stripped shields, and the turrets did the rest. The Navy ships were massacred.

The last few Navy M5s broke away and dashed. About half-way to the gate they were met by plasma fire and impulse rays that leapt from the shadows to consume them. So *there* was Beta squadron.

...

We sat in a stunned silence.

Kelfa burst into laughter.

The pilot and I stared at him for nearly a mizura before he recomposed himself.

"What?!" He asked. "Oh, what? I'm wrong to laugh? Forget that! It was us or them. Jove gave them fair warning. They shouldn't have come here. This is our home. It's their fault."

A beep. The pilot pressed a button.

"Jila," Jove Gunne's voice over the comm. "Consider that a demonstration of my message. The Virtue of Strength. And don't forget what you've seen here."

And *Loki*, this ancient Earth-ship with its ancient power, paraded past in front of us.

...

Epilogue...

The next tazura I was dropped off in Light Water. I dashed through the sector, narrowly making it in time for the drop-ship.

Kelfa had warned me the Argon Secret Services would come after me. With the Republic at war with the House, I figured they were bound to be after me now. Most Boron sectors would offer no protection – Argon spies operate freely in our space. Light Water was the only place I could think of that would offer me some refuge – the low-grav aquatic environment is anathema to Argon. It is so inhospitable to them that it is the *only* Boron planet without any Argon residents. Not one. Few even visit, making it very hard for Argon spies to operate in any secrecy.

The drop-ship screamed as it cut the thin gaseous atmosphere. Sudden silence as we broke through the aquatic surface. Here I could get the kind of space I'd never get in space.

Lethe, the colony capital: the plan here was to rest, reflect, centre myself. No luck. I just couldn't

relax. My mind wouldn't stop. The thoughts kept on coming. I couldn't sleep – thoughts, like vultures, circled over my tired, restless head all night. I had to write. If nothing else, writing would exorcise the thoughts; it would push them out of my head and into the world, it would turn them into something real that could be locked away inside a file.

Sat at that computer, I worked right through the dawn and through the next day. Feverishly, I wrote as darkness fell again. I emerged from my work to find another dawn rising. What I had written was awful. It read like the stream-of-consciousness ravings of a schizophrenic high off stimuline-and-space-fuel cocktails! Utterly unpublishable. This suited me fine. Finally I could rest.

I awoke two tazuas later with a hunger for news. I needed to know what was happening. As a fairly new colony, Light Water has an under-developed news service, mostly focussed on local events. Hard as I tried, I could get little news on space-international affairs; nothing about the Argon conflict with the First House. I decided to risk a flight to the trade station. I would be able to catch up on the news, and it would also give me a chance to check in with Network and talk things through with the chief director. I caught the next lifter.

...

I was soon docked at the space trade-station. I swam the from the dock up to the BKNN office. It was a short swim; as I said, BKNN offices are in the rounded structures that overlook the docks. Our offices always bridge the 'Boron' and the 'international' zones – that is to say, you can swim into a BKNN office from the normal aquatic parts of the station, or you can walk in from the gaseous 'international' zones. BKNN is open to all. Including, it seemed, the Argon Secret Service agent who awaited me there.

"She seems harmless," the secretary assured me. "She just wants to talk."

The Argon entered my office, tall and lean. Her first request was that our conversation stay 'off the record.' Naturally, I refused. Although, for the sake of discretion, I will spare unnecessary specifics here.

"That's as may be," I said. "So tell me, what exactly do you want of me?"

She hesitated, studying me. "You have to bury the story," she said. "Everything. Don't give them the publicity."

She was very insistent on this point. When I mentioned 'freedom of the press' she spoke at length of 'journalistic responsibility'. Courteous and polite, she still exuded menace. I made her no promises.

"Ultimately it's your choice," she concluded. "But the First House are terrorists. Pirates, traitors. There are limits to how far we can bend. While we have only respect for you, for your race, even your profession, there's a limit to how far we can protect you if you aid *them*. Consider your actions carefully, Boron. I'd hate to see you put yourself in harm's way. That'd be sad to see."

She left without incident.

As I pondered it afterwards, I could not understand her insistence on secrecy. After the failed invasion of Loomanckstrat's, those apocalyptic scenes, surely everyone knew about the First House. Knowing how proud their Navy are, I expected the Argon to have declared war on the House. I expected to find headlines full of tactical strikes, angry senators and explosive death. A civil war would not have surprised me. When I finally caught the news-feeds, the reality was far more shocking.

Nothing.

No fall-out at all. No retaliation, no action. Nothing. What was going on?

I called the Navy press office for answers. I wanted their response to the loss of their fleet.

"What fleet?"

"The fleet you lost in the attack on Loomanckstrat's Legacy last wozura," I said, incredulous.

"You're mistaken," the man told me. "We haven't 'lost' any fleet, and there have been no Navy

operations in that sector. Not last wozura. Not ever.”

“I saw it with my own eyes! There were two Titans, Centaurs, some...”

“Then your eyes are mistaken. Sir.”

“So... so you are denying Navy involvement in that sector?”

“That sector’s not even inside our zone of control. It must have been...”

“So you are willing to go *on record*, and *officially* deny any Navy operations in Loomanckstrat’s Legacy over the past wozuras?”

“Certainly. There are no records of Navy activity taking place in that system at that time. Or ever.”

“Ah!” I said. “That’s a very different thing! ‘*No record*’ What I want to know is...”

“Obviously,” the man interrupted. “I can’t speculate on ‘off the record’ operations. Black Ops. But I think the loss of a fleet would cause a stir. Especially one that size. There would at least be rumours. Chatter. There’s not been a word.”

“Rumours?”

“Trust me. The Navy runs on rumours. This is the first I’ve heard of what you’re saying.”

“What if there was no one left to talk? What if no-one survived?”

“There are always survivors.”

“In all the cases you *know* of,” I agreed.

“Okay... An argument from silence. Don’t they teach against that in journalism school?!”

“From silence? You wouldn’t say that if you’d seen it as I did! I have my own testimony. I’m sure I can get more if I need to. I just wanted a Navy perspective on it, but I can do without.” I decided on a different strategy. “Admiral Hope and the *Thraddash*: tell me of them. Their current status.”

“*Thraddash*? Where have I heard that name before?” A hesitation as he consulted his computer.

“Oh... Uh. No comment.”

The Navy denied all knowledge. Were the Argon trying to keep their defeat secret?

What about the First House?

My attempts to re-contact the House failed.

They had certainly been busy after the attack. Traffic through Loomanckstrat’s had been disrupted several times by their activity in the sector: the mine fields had been reseeded within stazuras.

Reports from passing haulers indicated that the Anarchy Port was already rebuilt and back in business. From the footage I saw, it looked very new, very different, very modern. It appears to have been fundamentally rebuilt. I am not sure if the Earth ship – *Loki* – has been built into it again. From the pictures I have, it is not at all clear. Perhaps *Loki* is in there. Or perhaps it lurks in the murky red glow around Loomanckstrat’s. Or perhaps it is somewhere else entirely. I have no idea.

Despite their activity, there was no sign of any aggression. They were doing nothing to follow up on their victory. I could not understand why. I was confused. I thought I understood Argon by now, yet here they were at peace when they could be at war. It is not like the Argon to pass up the chance to blow things up – they seem to like explosions.

...

My investigations were stopped by a recall order; a priority recall to Network HQ in Kingdom End. Priority recalls are only used in absolute emergencies, life or death matters. Very ominous. I imagined it had something to do with this article, but I was unable to contact anyone at HQ. What was going on? I needed to get there fast.

The only spare BKNN ship in this frontier system was an old-fashioned Octopus. To get to Kingdom End one would usually go west north-west through Paranid space to Emperor Mines then north through the Argon sectors. Obviously I preferred to avoid Argon space for now, so I told the pilot to take the North route, up through Split Fire and the anarchic sectors, up to Atreus’ Clouds.

It was in Elena’s Fortune that we were attacked by some unidentified Busters. They demanded our surrender.

“Keep going,” I told the pilot.

She was just sharp enough to strafe around the PAC fire and we were able to outrun them. Some Discoverers tailed us for a while, but our Octopus was far faster. We made the North Gate.

The people at Network HQ in Kingdom End were surprised by my arrival. As it turned out, no one had actually recalled me; no one had given the recall order. A technician tracked the order back through the system. It turned out to have been spontaneously generated within the Network, a ‘Network error’ it seemed. Perhaps it is no coincidence that a similar ‘Network error’ wiped most of my work files. Since then, I have been plagued by a stream of similar ‘errors’. A hacker, no doubt. Another Argon Agent awaited me at the office – this man was much less friendly.

...

Later that tazura, I talked to the chief about the strange lack of aggression among the Argon.

“It sounds to me like a basic stalemate,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well... The First House are unbeatable in Loomanckstrat’s. That’s clear. The *Loki*, the fusion-mines and the Shades – the father, the suns, and the unholy ghosts – an unbeatable trinity. I don’t think there’s anyone in the Navy fool enough to take all that on. Not after that last massacre.”

“I suppose,” I said. “Even they couldn’t be that blind. But the First House? Why aren’t...”

“Beyond that sector what do the First House actually have?”

“... they could... I... I don’t know.”

“Well let’s consider it. What do we know? We know they have two squadrons of Shades, some high-level spies and sympathisers and a lot of credits. But what else? Really? Is there anything else? It’s quite possible that’s all they have. What if they simply lack the manpower for an offensive? It would make sense. Without popular support, from private companies, from rank and file pilots, they’re stuck out there. Stuck inside their own little fortress. That’d explain where we came into their plans: publicity.”

“I suppose.”

...

That night I stayed up reworking this article for publication. In that time, three Argon agents visited me. They made some fairly overt threats when I refused an audience. When I tried to unwind in the ‘international’ bar the next morning, yesterday, I was physically threatened by a young Argon – it could have been nasty, but fortunately I had thought ahead to bring bodyguards. It is clear that I am no longer safe in the international regions.

That afternoon I had another chat with the BKNN chief.

“I think you were right before,” I said. “The Republic, the First House. They’re deadlocked.”

“It is logical,” he agreed. “Seems the best explanation of the facts.”

“But there’s more to it than just a deadlock of forces, I think. There’s a moral deadlock. A thing Jove said that I keep remembering is that he didn’t want a fight. I was there as an effort to avoid a fight.”

“Okay.”

“See, they have the same mission, the Republic and the House,” I said. “They exist for the same purpose: to protect the Argon.”

“Brothers in arms.”

“Exactly. Their differences are only ideological. Ideological differences in their balance between Freedom and Strength. On the one hand you have the House, with their survivalist ideals, like... uh...”

“Survival at any cost.”

“Exactly, then on the other side, the civilised ideal, the Boron model, like... Freedom is... the...”

“Freedom over all.”

“Yes! Yes. And somewhere between these, the Republic tries to bridge the two.”

“So,” he said. “If I understand you correctly, you’re saying the difference between the House and the Republic is merely a matter of priorities. Strength vs Freedom. The difference between the Republic’s current ideal and the House’s more survivalist model: the difference between ‘Be Free to grow strong’, and ‘Be Strong to stay free’?”

“Exactly! You have a gift for this!” I cheered. “But they both exist to protect the Argon. They have to acknowledge each other as powerful allies in the fight to protect the Argon. However much they may wish to, they can’t fight. Neither could justify damaging themselves to destroy the other. Not when such could be fatal to the Argon race. Like it or not they are in enforced kinship. Brothers in arms. Even if they are rather lacking in fraternal love!”

He clicked merrily. “I do think you may be right.”

...

So the real war is deadlocked. Yet here I am caught in a lethal side-skirmish – the information war. The sad thing is that those attacking me do so to protect their Democracy. They fear that open knowledge of the First House and the Gunne’s ‘royal’ lineage will make the First House seem credible. And they fear that if word of the Navy defeat gets out, it will undermine the Republic’s credibility. They tell me my words will push the Argon people into the hands of a dictator – into a dark age of Fascism.

I considered their words carefully. I thought long and hard about burying this story. But, and may they forgive me for saying so, the Argon Secret Service are wrong.

Democracy means rule of the people, yet how can people rule wisely when they are lied to and uninformed? Without freedom of information there is no Democracy at all – just a pretentious form of Fascism. For unless people understand their options, how can they choose to do the right thing? Unless they know what threatens them, how can they act to protect themselves? Democracy means freedom. Yet there is no freedom without freedom of information... and ultimately is it not freedom that we are all, in our own way, trying to protect?

With this in mind I commit to this re-telling of Argon History and of the Lost History of the First House of Argon...

Argon friends, as you prepare for the coming storm, know that the Boron – we ‘unimpressive fish-folk’ – forever stand beside you.

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This article is dedicated the memory of June Kozane, ambassador of the First House, and to all the brave pilots who lost their lives in the battle of Loomanckstrat’s Legacy