

Year 772 - Argon Prime, Gardna Space Systems Headquarters.

I hate Mondays, technically it wouldn't be Monday today if i were living by Zuran time, but using the Goner way (which is far more simple) it's Monday.

As soon as I woke this morning I had info-droids scurrying about my room informing me of the weekends dealings with TerraCorp and Terdamis Yulsamar VII Enterprises and basically a thorough report of every Sezura I was away visiting my friend Van Huna on Sandwell. Aaagh, why oh why don't these droids come with a remote? I temporarily switched off my ears as I stepped into the Cleanser and had myself blasted with Antibacterial spray. I whistled to myself as the droids droned on, casually flicking the heat switch to 7 and enjoying the warm flow of spray wash me all over.

Then one of the droids said something that caught my breath.

"Gardna Space Systems M4 *Scorpion* has been reported missing."

I commanded the stupid can to repeat what it had said but all I got was a: "More information available at **GSS Archives** ###~29584 Rhy's Desire ~~~@##Scorpion Log/##"

Oh thanks, I thought to myself. I set the Cleanser to Auto-Dry and ordered the robot to access the file for me at my dining desk.

When I entered my would-be kitchen/dining room, the droid had placed a holodisk next to my desktop computer. I seated myself and inserted the disk into a free slot on the computer. The files lit up before me. I surveyed the fast blur of text and ordered the computer to halt at the file intro. The writing stopped speeding down and scrolled back up until the file header was visible. An image of Scorpion hovered before my eyes showing her pilot, last mission objectives and last known position. Scorpion was a Split Scorpion that I myself had captured on a mission to assassinate a Split Pirate when Gardna Space Systems was barely integrated into Argon Space let alone Universal. The pilot was one of the Split Pirates cronies and had bailed out at the last minute. I had a special place for that little M4 in my soul. I had spent many a Stazura sat in the cockpit, flying small errands for Kho, Gaining Universal Information. I was in Scorpion when we rescued my father from that dreadful Khaak M0 in Omicron Lyrae.

My eyes roved to the pilots details. Well disasters always come in twos. Chianna Danar, GSS's first ever employee, had become a good, trusted friend to me over the years. He usually Flew Mercury, GSS's most profitable Transporter, but he had taken Scorpion to get to Rhy's Desire in a hurry.

Strange, Scorpions last mission data was to transport some urgently needed Quantum Tubes to a factory in Red Light... which I had flow personally. Why Danar wanted to go to Rhy's Desire was beyond me. The file also said that Scorpion stopped at a Pirate base in Priest's Pity before heading to its last known location. Well this made my insides churn, Danar wouldn't associate himself with Pirates, i knew him. This was all getting stranger by the minute.

I was forced to scrap my glass of Argnu milk and pour myself a glass of Argon Whiskey. Great start to the week.

After my rare morning booze up, I made my way down the long length of the base to the Command Centre. GSS Headquarters was an old Equipment Dock I had revived and converted to suit my needs. Typically, my quarters were as far away as possible from the Command Deck, so I grudgingly made my way down there as fast as i could.

Upon entry to the Command Deck, I noticed that there was only one person sat at a console.

There were several droids buzzing around their business but they did not really count.

I pulled up the chair next to the lone man sat by the console. Ban Needar was more or less second-in-command of Gardna Space Systems. He was a cranky old man in his late seventies. I wondered just how he treated GSS personnel when I wasn't around. If it weren't for Ban's Universal position of Shipping Magnate and the fact that he was excellent at managing more or less EVERYTHING I would probably have sacked him a long time ago.

"Ban" I addressed him. He jumped, which didn't look too healthy for his age and I mentally praised myself. With a grin on my face I said "Do you know anything about this Scorpion incident?"

"Scorpion incident" he grumbled "Oh yes, erm, Rider's over on the Samarkand is taking care of that"

I sighed. Always the brief speaker. "Well *Ban* , can you organize a transport for me please?"

"Yeah yeah, I'll have an Express ready for you in hangar bay 2, Sir" Just a hint of sarcasm in that last word. Smart man, I thought to myself, You better watch it.

As I entered hangar bay 2, I saw the express connected up to a fuel line leading into the bowls of the maintenance deck. I activated the propellant unit of my Space Suit and jetted down to the Express. Whom I presumed to be the Expresses pilot hovered waiting for me in the Airlock's outer hatch.

"Good morning Mr. Gardna, I'm Hellen Rha, you pilot for this journey." the pilot, who had now shown to be an Argon female, possibly young. A new recruit. I chuckled to myself. "Save that kinda talk for the customers Miss Rha, just take me to the Samarkand and I'll be happy."

"Of course Sir" came the reply over the comm.

One I had sat myself down in one of the passenger chairs, I had to turn down my overly enthusiastic host when she offered me a drink and some videos for the ride. I don't know if she realized the journey would take less than ten Mizura's.

The Express left Headquarters and I felt the main thrusters kick in and propel us to our destination. Out of the view port I could see GSS HQ. The looted Argon Equipment Dock glinted in the light from Sonra. Moored in the M6 hangar was the GSS Xanatos, GSS's one and only Teladi Osprey. I could see tubes and connectors feeding into the Osprey's hull. Probably in for maintenance. Above GSS HQ I could make out the jagged outline of the GSS Razor through the harmless gasses of the Argon Prime Nebulae. There she sat derelict, waiting for the next call to arms. I had commanded Razor on many Khaak conflicts after the battle for Omicron Lyrae; each one had been a success. That all seemed so long ago now. As I looked up at the murky outline of the Python I got a shudder all the way down my spine. Even though the technology was familiar to me and I knew every little aspect about the Destroyer, the sheer alien-ness of it caught my breath. The Split were an interesting race with lots of culture and history behind them. As, I suppose, had the other three of our alien neighbors.

When the Express reached Samarkand, I thanked the driver for the lift and when she wasn't looking I accessed her files and raised her pay by 10%. She deserved it. According to her dossier, she had been a GSS employee for 5 Jazura's and hadn't been promoted or had a raise since the beginning. Well there was a little something to aid her.

I left the Express behind in the hangar and thrusted over to the bulkhead that lead on to the main concourse. Samarkand was GSS's first capital ship and, even though she wasn't under my personal control, I had appointed to be GSS's flagship. I knew the layout of the Colossus like the back of my hand and it didn't take long to remember the way to the bridge. As the spacious airlock cycled down and breathable air flooded into the chamber, I felt the Artgrav system gently deposit me on the decking. I wriggled out of my Space Suit and opened the inner bulkhead. I headed around the centre of the main concourse and stepped into the lift that would take me up to the bridge. However before I could activate the controls, I heard my name being called from across the large chamber.

"Jules, Jules. Come here quick" It was Jo Rider. Another one of GSS's earlier employees. Rider had once been in command of *Free Trader 2* A GSS Transport. Rider had made quite a profit for GSS in her time as a trader. Now she was the Skipper of Samarkand and a good friend of mine. My train of thought were shattered however as she caught my attention with one single sentence. "I think Danar discovered a Jump Gate!"...

Me and Jo sat in the Seminar room on board the GSS Samarkand. A stream of data was splayed out on the holo-pad in the centre of the round table in front of my eyes. The holo pad was showing the cross-sections of a Jump Gate. Big deal. No, this was a new Jump Gate, located in a dense particle field on the western fringe of Rhy's Desire. Chianna Danar had found it in Scorpion and as far as we can tell, gone through.

"Now" Jo was saying "The family Rhy's claimed it for their own, which is perfectly legal seeing as the damn thing is in Split space. Their armed forces in the area have converged on the gate and are not letting anything past. Not even Science research vessels."

I answered with "We need to get down there fast, If Chianna is still alive then we have rights to access the system to reclaim lost property, and well, technically speaking, Chianna is GSS property."

"Scorpion is GSS property, better take the contracts for the ship and Chianna's employment record."

At this point I felt a little sheepish. "Erm, Scorpion doesn't have a contract, I more or less, well, no she was given to me"

"By whom?"

"I don't know he ran away"

"That's not important now, I was going to contact you anyway, I'm taking the Samarkand down there Sir" Jo looked serious, as if she was expecting me to tell her she wasn't allowed to do that and I would sack her if she did.

"Of course" I replied "I'm coming with you. I want a full spec of the ships current status and landed ships."

"Right away, I will also have a suit made up for you. We'll probably be leaving pretty soon so you better get whatever you want to take with you"

I nodded and stood up. "Rhy's Desire it is then, wait, do you know why Chianna docked at the Pirate Base in Priest's Pity?"

"Not a clue, maybe it was a lead for him?"

"Just speculations" I said "Ok, prepare the ship Captain, I'm going to add two more ships to Samarkand's inventory"

"Ok sir" Rider replied with a grin "I think I know which two you mean"

Helios and *Prometheus* were my two prize positions. I didn't know fully how to fly them and I didn't really like too. It was different from flying a Teladi Falcon or a Boron Barracuda because both the later were mixed with familiar tech and the controls were easy to understand. It had taken me more than a Wozura to work out how to fly *Helios*, the older of the two. I had captured her first during the battle for Omicron Lyrae. A purple blur had shot from the ship as my AHEPTS burnt into her hull and from that moment on, she was mine. I named her *Helios* after an ancient meaning originated from Earth that means "God of the Sun". *Helios* and *Prometheus* were two of the Pyramid - like Khaak M3's. *Prometheus* I later picked up in Presidents End. As I pounded the hull, the same thing happened.

The two alien ships now sat in Samarkand's hangar bar, both integrated into the Colossus's onboard computer. I could fly either one of the two fighters, but they made excellent fighters themselves as, evidently, they knew how to fly and shoot with no help from me at all. Even though I couldn't understand them too well, it was good to know I had two loyal wingmen who knew what they were doing. Sometimes it was as if the ships were dedicated to me, as in one time we were engaging several Orinoco's an one of the Pirates came up behind me without warning, firing a Dragonfly missile. My shields were low and I knew that this projectile would end it for me. But *Prometheus* dived and took she shot, severely damaging the M3's outer hull.

Both ships have shown me loyalty unrivalled by any other automated computer. I think that their AI is just a little more than onboard computers.

Anyway there they sat, patiently waiting for anything that might arise.

I felt the ship shudder as the countdown reached 100%. We were now traveling through Hyperspace. Time to unravel the mystery of Scorpion and pilot Chianna Danar.

Year 722 – Rhy's Desire, GSS Samarkand.

I looked out of a view port at the seething Split community of system Rhy's Desire. I myself had never been to this system before, and it was, shall we say, an experience. I remember the first time I ever went into Split territory. As a matter of fact, I do believe I was in [i] Scorpion [/i]. I flew into Thuruks Beard on a freight mission. I remember that took my breath away as well. Just the way the Split go about their daily business and the way they communicate with each other is just all too alien for me. I find Split architecture to be intriguing. The stations and the ship designs are nothing close to Argon. Of course, they are similar due to the trade and share of technologies. But the Split prefer to keep their style and origin about them.

Rhy's Desire was an interesting system to look at. A large cluster of asteroids sat in the middle of the system with Ore Mines and Silicon Mines slowly munching away at them. The color of the system was mostly back with a dingy, orangey, rusty hint. Several of the asteroidial bodies were like nothing I had ever seen before. They were [i] humongous [/i]! I called the closest asteroid up on my palmcomp and looked at a translucent version of the huge lump of rock. My God! They

had a network of tunnels running through them. I wondered what secrets they hid deep within their catacombs.

I was snapped back to reality by Jo.

“Hollowed out by volcanic activity millions of years ago” I must have been looking at her blankly as she said “The asteroids, hollowed out by liquid hot magma at the birth of this system.”

“Oh, yes of course. I wonder how long ago that was.” I mused.

“Our Scientists believe that Rhy’s Desire is on its last legs.”

“Oh, and whys that?” I inquired.

“The sun is almost 9 billion years old. She’s getting a bit cranky in her old age” she grinned at me, a strange glint in her eye. “You would be, if you were that old”

“Shouldn’t you be on the bridge, [i] Captain [/i>?” I looked at her. Jo Rider had a slim figure, she wore dark blue coveralls with two yellow stripes across the shoulders: The GSS armed forces uniform. Her dark brown hair was pulled back neatly away from her face. Her eyes were a cold ice blue that could have replaced a mobile drilling system any day and she carried a faint sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her nose and her cheeks. She was an all together attractive woman. And I suddenly felt a little uncomfortable stood there with her looking at me like that. If my inner feelings had shown at all, they went unnoticed as the loudspeaker blared: CAPTAIN TO THE BRIDGE.

On the bridge, Jo sat in the command chair and I sat in the seat adjacent to hers.

“We are being hailed by the sector defense M1 ma’am, what should I do?”

“Open comm. frequency” Jo ordered.

There was a bleep and an image of a disgruntled Split Captain appeared on the main screen.

“Split says, what are you doing here?” The Split squeaked. He had a strange assortment of metal wiring wound around the top of his scalp and the skin on his face had more wrinkles in it than Ban Needar’s forehead.

Jo replied in a toneless voice. “This is Captain Rider of the GSS Samarkand. We are here on behalf of Gardna Space Systems about the newly discovered Jump Gate.”

“Split say, Jump Gate non of your concern, leave now”

“GSS property went through that gate Captain. We are just here to send a small salvage team through the gate to find the remains of our lost ship.”

“Lost ship Argon says. This would be Split ship flown by Argon man?”

“Our ship Scorpion was a Split Scorpion yes, but she’s been with GSS for many a Jazura’s now, we have only come to claim lost property.” Jo argued.

“Father of family Rhy says no ship is to pass through new gate until father of Rhy says!” The Split retorted.

“With respect to your Split father, all we want is to retrieve our ship, nothing more.” Jo sounded exasperated.

“Split say, take it up with father Rhy.” And with that, the Split cancelled the connection.

“Well, I sighed, time for a talk with daddy!”

Once again, I found myself sat in the seminar room. Alone except for the holo-link which was producing a grainy image of the Split elder and farther to the Rhy family, T’hal Rhy on the other end of the link. The Split was quite large about the waist and his skin was a pale yellow color. His large red eyes seemed to be burning holes in my retinas and it hurt to look at them so I kept glancing about the room. I continued pleading with him.

“Father of Rhy, all I ask is that we send a salvage team through the gate to find our lost ship.”

The great Split’s voice boomed, rather from the usual Split squeak. “Split father of Rhy say you cannot go through Jump Gate. Split say Gardna man’s property now belongs to family Rhy.”

His numerous chins wobbled as he spoke and tiny droplets of saliva shot from his mouth.

Suddenly a thought struck me. An old memory of a film I had watched on the Goner Temple that I had found it in the old Earth archives recovered from my father’s ship the X-perimental shuttle. Apparently, it was an old Earth classic, favored by a member of the shuttles crew. As I recall it was about a galaxy far away and I remember something about a planet being blockaded and then invaded.

But one of the characters, his name I can’t remember, strongly reminded me of this fat Split, or more like, This Split reminded me of that character. If I recall correctly, the character, Boss Nass,

that was it, was asked a favor of one of the other characters and when he said no, they tried a different approach: Flattery.

“Oh great Split father of Rhy, please may we have just 20 Stazuras to search for our ship?”

“Split say, flattery will get Argon nowhere. I have said no and no is my final word. Argons are now not welcome in Rhy’s space. Leave!” And with that, the link went dead.

“Oh Frak!!!” I cursed, kicking the seminar table and achieving nothing but a searing pain in my shin.

I glumly stepped back on to Samarkand’s bridge. A number of expectant faces fell when they saw my look of defeat, Jo one of them.

“Well? You’ve been in that room for an hour Joules” She said. “You must have done something”

“Yeah, I made us not welcome in Rhy space.” I grunted. I turned to the helm. “Set course for Argon Prime, no Jumpdrive.”

Jo intervened “Erm, [i] Mr. [i] Gardna, I am the Captain aboard this vessel and even though you are my boss, this ship is not going anywhere until we’ve got what we wanted! Understood?”

“Well what do you propose we do?” I asked her. She bit her lip, thinking. After what seemed like an age she looked up at me with a mischievous glint in her deep blue eyes.

“Helm” She said “Do as Mr. Gardna says, head through the East Gate, but hold and wait for further orders on the other side.”

“Aye Captain” the obedient helmsman started manipulating the controls.

“Mr. Gardna, there are several fighter wings in the hangar bay, and I do believe Nova Alpha wing is one of them!” Alpha wing was just a GSS fighter wing consisting of five Argon Novas.

However Alpha 1 was my first and favorite M3. She was my main source of protection during the early days when she was simply known as “Nova”.

Jo’s mischievous glint had turned into a full on grin as she headed for the door. “Gerard, you have the bridge. Are you coming Joules?” she said, beckoning to me with her right forefinger. I was out of the door and after her in no time at all.

I ran into the large air lock, closely following Jo as she sped through the corridors. The inner bulkhead began to close behind us. Time to suit up, I thought to myself as Jo sifted through the line of suits on the left hand side of the room, looking for her own. I remembered where I had hung mine and lifted it down from the rack. The cumbersome space suits were a bugger to get on. First one leg, then the other, then the torso over you head and into place, then you have to wriggle your arms into their rightful places. When I finally managed to get the torso up and over me and attached to my bottom half, Jo came up to me and selected a helmet from the shelf.

“Mind if you check me out?” she asked. For a moment I just stared at her, and then I realized what she meant.

“Er, yeah, sure, here, turn around” I checked the valves of her backpack and her vital systems: everything OK. “That’s a point actually; I’d better get my backpack on.”

I turned to look for my backpack on the wall but Jo grabbed hold of my shoulder and turned me back to face her. My eyes locked onto those ice blue Sapphires. The next thing that happened took me completely by surprise. Jo put her hands on my shoulders, reached up on her tiptoes and kissed me soundly on the lips. When she disengaged I felt myself swaying gently. I looked at her and she bit her lip again, the way she did so often and then smiled at me.

“For luck, Boss”

“Yeah, luck.” I couldn’t talk properly, I was still stunned.

“Now, get your backpack” she said clamping her helmet over her pretty face and securing it to her shoulder attachments.

I floated into Alpha 1’s cockpit and hit the systems check icon on the screen before me.

Adrenaline pumped through my veins as I checked weapon and shield systems. Everything was in green and I flicked a switch that closed the coolant valves to warm the engine up. I could see Jo was doing likewise in [i] Reaper [i], A Bayamon that I had captured a long time ago in Brennan’s Triumph and sold to her for a reasonable price. I activated my comm. uplink.

“Jo, I’m ready, all systems in the green”

“Ok Joules, I’m good to go, are you bringing your friends along for the ride?” she asked.

“But of course” I said “Helios, Prometheus, form up on me outside of Samarkand.” No reply came but the blinking icons I had added to my HUD that represented the two Khaak ships blinked

green in acknowledgement. Both Helios and Prometheus' AI was programmed to recognize my voice print and no one else's, unless I gave authority. It also saved time scrolling down the stupid list of commands that plagued everyone else.

Our ships, A Nova and a Bayamon, followed up by two Khaak M3s slipped out of the Samarkand's docking bay entrance, an unlikely group, probably going to arouse suspicions. Jo must have opened a direct frequency with the Samarkand's bridge because she began talking to Gerard. "Take the Samarkand through the East Gate and await further orders. Idle the ship but stay in the vicinity of the Gate, ok?"

"Read you loud and clear Captain, good luck to both of you" The Colossus' main engines flared and she trundled off towards the [i] Ministry of Finance [/i] Gate. We began to fly towards the system again.

"Alright Joules, what's the plan?" Jo asked as if this was my idea.

"Well as a matter of fact I do have an idea" I mused to myself more than answered Jo's question.

"What?" came the reply.

"Nothing, you'll see. Jo, follow me, were going to fly around the north quadrants of the system." I commanded.

"Yes Boss." She acknowledged.

"Helios, Prometheus, direct order. Fly [i] Under [/i] the Ecliptic Plane of the system, making for the Split Raptor. Once at the Raptor, engage and destroy any fighter's it launches. Oh, and stay alive in the process. No heroics Prometheus" Great, I was talking to a couple of A.I's as if they were actual wingmen. Oh well, force of habit I suppose. Then to Jo I said "This should give us time to slip through the gate with minimal resistance. Make sure your guns are warm though." I heard Jo giggle "I wonder how scared those split will be when they see two Khaak M3's tearing towards them!"

Helios and Prometheus peeled off to follow their designated trajectory whilst I and Jo flew around the northern section of Rhy's Desire.

On the open system frequency I heard a Teladi yell "Khaak!" The poor lizard must have jumped out of his skin. After a little bit of experienced hacking on my behalf, me and Jo were patched in to the Split Raptor's main comm. system. The Captain was squeaking orders at the rest of the bridge crew.

"Split say, Khaak ships incoming!"

"Launch all fighters. Missile tubes ready"

"Split say: Khaak fighters still long way away."

"Move Split warship to engage. Khaak ships will be in main civilian area in two mizuras"

And so on. It was quite amusing to hear.

Just a small part of my mind kept whispering "What If they destroy them Joules?" So what, I thought in return, they are just unmanned ships after all, but still...

Jo's voice interrupted my thoughts. "Boss, its working, the Split are all moving to engage your ships."

"Good" I replied and then a thought struck me. We had nagged and nagged to go through this Gate, and we had never bothered to search for it on the advanced sector scanner "Er, Jo, do you know where the gate actually is?"

"Ah, good question, well they said it's a West Gate, the Western side of the system might be a good place to start." Jo replied.

"Good idea" I switched off the auto pilot and obtained a firm grip on the control stick. "There are lots of large asteroids over to the West. The gate might be behind or in between them."

"Right"

"Or, it could be inside one of them, remember the volcanic tunnels?"

"Naa" Jo answered "The thing would be too big. It's got to be in between them. Let's split up."

"Right" I throttled my Nova up to maximum, which was painfully slow compared to Reaper or Scorpion, and headed for the western asteroid clusters. I saw Reaper fly away on a slightly different trajectory. Ok Jo, so you're faster than me, but I pack the firepower here! I listened to the ramblings of the panicked Split Captain as he finally intercepted Helios and Prometheus, whom by now had seven four kills in total on their readouts. I glanced at the Split myriad of factories to my left and saw the Raptor sat in the middle, a series of bangs and flashes spotting its

hull and the space around it. Sorry guys, but I have to get through that gate. I looked back at my HUD; Helios had another kill on her tally.

Finally, the SETA alarm sounded and Alpha 1 dropped out of the small personal time warp. Looming up in front of me was a gigantic asteroid, about twice the size of Samarkand and the Split Raptor put together. I maneuvered my craft to the nose pointed along the uneven surface of the asteroid and proceeded to scale the thing. I kept looking at the scanners, hoping for an energy spike or distortion, but nothing came. I scanned the asteroid, looking for any architectural structures and the scan showed nothing. However the asteroid had a silicon yield of 56 so I took a mental note of its general shape.

As I flew my Nova around the wide parameter of the asteroid, I activated two of the HUD's five monitors and switched them to cockpit views of Helios and Prometheus. Prometheus was tangled in a tense dogfight with two Split Mambas but still managing to keep it under control. Helios however, was in a large scrap with three, no four Mambas and her shield was at 29%. I shuddered; those two better hold on in there, it looked pretty tense. I watched the left screen and Helios's three lasers fired three long streams of energy. The sound was all too familiar. The buzz of the lasers that suddenly went high pitched when they found their mark. Helios penetrated a Mambas shields and I saw shards of metal tear from the port wing like burning paper would curl up and char. Helios spun away to bully another Mamba who seemed to have had enough and had turned to flee the combat. Helios's lasers punched through the shields and impacted on the Mambas starboard engine nozzle. They must have followed on through to the fuel converter because the whole Mamba suddenly spun off and did two perfect loops before tearing apart in a blue flash. I looked back to the other screen and saw that Prometheus had dispatched one of the Mambas and was homing in on the next. The three deadly lasers fired a long, constant beam of death at the Mamba, scoring a direct hit on the rear shielding over the cockpit section and depleting them in a matter of seconds. The Mamba's access hatch (located at the back of the cockpit like most other M3's, 4's and 5's) disintegrated in a shower of sparks and molten metal under the laser fire as it cut a swathe through the ship, probably vaporizing the poor pilot. The Mamba continued at its speed but began to spin lazily on its axis. It drifted like this for about three seconds before smashing into the hull of the Split Raptor and causing a blinding explosion that flared in the monitors and even brightened Alpha 1's cockpit. I shut down the monitors and continued with my search of the asteroid. Helios and Prometheus seemed to be handling their situation perfectly well.

The asteroids were proving to be annoying. Every one I checked, the gate was rebelliously absent. The west and northwest of Rhy's Desire was littered with these dumb lumps of rock. I had checked almost five now for nothing. On the bright side though, they all had rather juicy yields of either ore or silicon. As I flew around the large bulk of the fifth asteroid, I noticed something. Framed against the Split planet in the background, I could make out an orange nebula that pulsed with a strange light of its own. However as I guided Alpha 1 around the asteroid, another lump of rock crossed my path of vision and the nebula was hidden from view. I throttled up and headed for the intruding asteroid. I flew over the top of the slowly rotating stone and cut my engines. I wriggled into a more comfy position in my chair and activated the Video Enhancement Goggles. A small pair of electronic binoculars whirred to life and came down to rest in front of my eyes on a long, thin metal arm.

"Enhance, 20 times" I commanded the goggles. My vision zoomed in on the planet. I carefully moved my finger over a small touch sensitive pad on the control panel at the base of the metal arm until the nebula was in my sight. It was still smallish, but I could see something, something that glinted, something metallic.

"Enhance, 50 times" I ordered. This time my whole vision was filled with an orange hue. Lightening arced through the expanse of the nebula, causing the flashes that I had seen before. The nebula was large and it took me a while to pan around until I saw the metal object. Low and behold, it was the Jump Gate. My heart fluttered in excitement. My hand moved over to the comm. unit, but I stopped it because there was something else there, another glint next to the gate. "Enhance 60" I said. What I saw made me curse out loud. "Spast!" A Split Dragon sat guarding the gate with another five Mambas to back it up.

I twiddled my fingers as my mind raced to find a solution. A Dragon and five Mambas, lets see, A Dragon can carry four GHEPTs and an Alpha PPC. Ouch, but only one onetwofive megawatt

shield. I checked Alpha 1's inventory for Hornet missiles and discovered only two, then I remembered why: I had used the rest on that adventurous Xenon J that had invaded Scale Plate Green two Wozuras ago. Oh well, at least those hornets did their job, but would these two manage the shields of a Split Dragon?

I had parked Alpha 1 just above an asteroid and sat pondering on what to do. I could easily take the Mambas; I'm not an Admiral for nothing.

After a while, me and Jo finally came up with a plan. I fire the Hornets at the Dragon before we engage in combat and try to stick to her tail, avoiding aft fire as much as possible, pounding the remainder of the shields with my BHEPTs until they gave way. From then on the Dragon's hull should go pretty quickly.

"Well" I sighed through the comm. to Jo "I have the Hornets loaded in my tubes, and the Mambas shouldn't be too much of a problem. It's the Dragon's shields and Reaper not being able to take a battering that worries me"

"Don't you worry about me, Reaper and I have survived worse than this" Jo replied. "You just concentrate on that Dragon's shields"

I was still unsure, but it had to be done. Jo throttled up to 160 and I followed, caution and the element of surprise were crucial. We painstakingly approached the nebula; even with SETA activated it still seemed like an age.

We finally reached the outer fringes of the gas field and cut our engines. For a while we just hung there in space, an Argon Nova and a Pirate Bayamon, talking to each other via secure channel. It would be best to approach the Dragon from behind, but its behind was facing the gate, and I didn't want to jump straight through to an unknown system having a Split Dragon hot on my tail. If I failed then no one would be able to find me drifting through uncharted space. That is, if I survived by ship being torn apart. I had contemplated going straight through and engaging from the other side to avoid the Dragon contacting the Raptor for reinforcements but it would have been too risky and the element of surprise would have been wasted. Oh, we probably would have surprised them alright, but not to any useful manner. No, we were going in head on, guns ready and missile tubes loaded. My anxiousness and worries faded away as that all too familiar feeling surged through my veins and gave me goose pimples. This was going to be tough, but let me tell you, Julian Gardna has never once turned down the opportunity for a decent dogfight!

As we cautiously entered the nebula, the onboard computer bleeped a warning signal at me. I looked down and saw that the scanner range had diminished to almost a five kilometer radius of the antenna. Well, I thought, at least they won't see us on radar. I targeted the gate (I had to use the system map to select it because the close range scanners were offline) and the blue triangular targeting crosshair focused on a section of orange that I presumed to be the direction of the gate. I throttled up to 60 and headed for the Gate. My heart was pounding in my ribs and I could hear Jo's tense breathing over the secure channel.

"Take it easy Jo" I whispered, even though there was no way the Split could have heard me "Just try to hold off the Mambas whilst I handle the Dragon"

Jo's breathing didn't ease off "Thanks" she breathed "Be careful Joules."

"I will" I felt something for her, something growing inside me that I had never felt before, the urge to take her and hold her close to me and get her out of here, away from danger. She was scared, I could tell. I wasn't surprised though, Split pilots had a reputation for merciless, ruthless skill and precision. I swore to myself that nothing was going to happen to her, Even if this would be my last fight, she would not come to harm. I gripped the control stick tighter as we crawled toward the small gathering of Split warships.

A droplet of sweat dripped over my eye and trickled down one side of my nose. I had stepped up the suit's fans to maximum but I still felt like a baked soja bean. We had stopped just short of the gate, only just out of scanner range of the Split ships but within clear vision of them. I just hoped they did not see us before the right moment. The Dragon had made three circles of the gate and I had a faint idea of the route she was following. My thumb anxiously hovered above the launch missile key on the top of the control stick. Just a little further.....

"NOW!" I yelled down the comm. I hit the launch button once and a jet of flame flared out of my port tube as the first Hornet rocketed away. To my right I saw Reaper jet off into the cloud towards the gate. Her four Beta Particle Accelerator Cannons burst out purple globules of light at the nearest Mamba. I hit the fire button again and the second Hornet burst from my starboard

tube. I watched for a second at the two missiles receding into the distance. Come on, I urged them, come on! As I watched the missiles head for the Split M6, the subconscious part of my mind noticed the Dragon stir and a faint red glow flutter around the engines. My eyes burned out into the monitor that showed the first missile. The red blur raced at a tremendous speed toward the Dragon. Then I noticed that the Dragon was now facing the oncoming missile directly. My heart jumped up into my throat and I tried to swallow it back down again. The Hornet was so close. The Dragon began to fly toward me. So close, the Hornet was only Sezuraz away. The eerie orange glow glinted off the Dragon's carapace. The Missile only meters off impact. Suddenly, the Dragon took a steep nosedive and the top turrets opened fire. Green plasma from the dorsal GHEPTs ripped into the first Hornet missile and completely obliterated the warhead. A huge explosion rocked the nebula as the warhead exploded and gamma radiation spewed out in all directions. "NO" I yelled, taking my hands off the controls and banging my helmet with such a force it moved back an inch and my nose was painfully squashed against the faceplate. "Jo it's failed, the first missile didn't make impact, disengage and get the hell out of here, I said DISENGAGE!"

After a crackle of static, Jo replied. "I cant disengage, if I deviate one inch this guy will tear me to pieces!"

I looked on at the battle before me. Reaper was surrounded by all five Mambas and she didn't have much time. I hit the throttle and boosted Nova's engines up to maximum, I was so fixed on saving Jo that I completely forgot about the second Hornet. A huge flash momentarily blinded me. The Dragon had failed to avoid the second warhead and it had punched straight into her aft shields as she turned to home in on me...

The second Hornet missile had impacted in the small space in between the engines of the Dragon; the weakest point. I looked at the M6's schematics on my hostiles computer and saw that the Hornet had done the job, the Dragon's shields were gone, but for how long? I turned Alpha 1 around to face the oncoming Dragon. Careful to avoid the angry Alpha PPC fire that headed my way, I spun Alpha 1 in a barrel role, still flying toward the Dragon, and unleashed a barrage of High Energy Plasma straight at the Split vessel's nose. The Dragon turned hard to port to avoid my onslaught and I saw my plasma bolts strafe the side of the ship, leaving a neat set of black scars running up the length of the front end. I jolted the control stick to starboard to avoid a collision but I was too slow, My right gun casing grated along the length of the Split Dragon. I heard the rendering of the tortured metal as the casing was torn free, leaving the BHEPT exposed. I checked the vital systems for my port gun, all in the green, no system damage, just the whole protection casing ripped free. I spud Alpha 1 around and got in behind the Dragon. The twin GHEPTs of the rear battery pounded my shields relentlessly and I was forced to pull away before I could even get a shot in.

My comm. unit crackled to life, making me jump. "Joules, HELP!!" It was Jo. She was in mega trouble. I looked at the data stream coming in from Reaper. Damn, shields were down and her hull was at 78%. I took another look at the Dragon, now coasting by me not firing a single shot, I must have been in its blind spot. Still, it was a stalemate as I couldn't get a shot in from this angle either. If I left to help Jo, the Dragon's shields would surely reactivate, but if I stayed on the Dragon, Jo wouldn't last long. Damn, either way we were both toast. I disengaged the Dragon and spun over to Jo. Surprisingly, the skirmish between me and the Dragon had taken us into the combat with Jo and the Mambas. A Mamba fell into my view as it swept around for another attack on Reaper. I instinctively opened fire and saw my green bolts of Plasma melt the shields away and hit the starboard wing. The wing disintegrated in a flash of molten metal. The disabled Mamba drifted bizarrely with its starboard wing a melted stump. I opened fire once more and this time hit the cockpit. What was left of the Mamba exploded directly in front of me, causing me to swerve through the small cluster of debris it had left behind. Small scraps of metal bounced off my tinted screen as I flew through the wreck.

Then Reaper came into view. The Bayamon had suffered heavy damage to its lower arm and where there should have been a Beta PAC there was now a deformed stump.

"Joules, I can't hold on much longer, she's breaking up!" Jo screamed in terror.

"I thought you said you had been through worse" I said humorlessly as I dropped in behind the Mamba hugging onto Reapers tail. I opened fire and the Mamba was forced to dive as its shields died and white hot plasma raked the hull. I pulled hard on the control stick, performing a whole loop and found myself back behind the Dragon once again. Who had been hot on my tail as I flew

to assist Jo. To my horror, I saw that the shields were back up and climbing. If I didn't act soon, there would be no way to take down the shields again...

I fired off a volley at the Dragon, but the plasma simply rippled the Dragon's rapidly ascending shields. I gritted my teeth as I spun Alpha 1 away and brought her round for another attack run. The Dragon began to fly around in a wide arc to try and give her dorsal turrets a clear shot at me. I tugged the Strafe Drive lever and maneuvered Alpha 1 back into the Dragon's blind spot. I was thinking fast. What could I do to stop this thing? This was one of those moments where I wished I was sat in the command chair of the GSS Logos, my personal Centaur that I traveled in most of the time.

Alpha one's shields began to fluctuate; the Dragon's superior speed had moved it away and I was no longer safe from its batteries. A barrage of Gamma scale plasma rocked my Nova as they impacted on my Port shielding. The cockpit was momentarily filled with green flashes before I took a nosedive away from the stream of death. Alpha one's shields and weapon energy were low. I looked at my rear monitor to find out that the Dragon was diving after me. This is it, I thought as the Dragon leveled out and its forward Alpha PPC opened fire. I ground my teeth together, sweat dripping off the end of my nose. I took Alpha 1 into a spin, successfully avoiding most of the fire from the PPC but taking two or three shots. There was a fizz and a crackle from behind me and a shower of sparks cascaded over me onto the console in front. I twisted in my helmet to take a look at the damage. The rear turret was a smoldering wreck, the GIRE was gone and the view port cracked and charred jet black. The control unit must have overloaded inside the turret compartment, causing the shower of sparks as I could not see any breeches in the glass and when I turned back to the schematics screen, there was no pressure drop in the turret compartment. Even though the inside of the Nova was pressurized, I always flew with my space suit on because you never knew what to expect, and if the hull had been breached, I would have exploded in a messy shower of blood and gore. I silently praised the Argon Shipwrights in Omicron Lyrae for building damn good ships and Jo for sealing my suit correctly.

I pulled away from the Dragon's line of fire and headed back up to the gate. As I manipulated the controls, the elbow of my suit caught a switch to my left and the onboard computer chimed "WARNING, BETA HIGH ENERGY PLASMA THROWER, REMOVED." I cursed under my breath and turned to flick the switch to reinstall the gun. However a series of blinking icons caught my attention. They were the symbols for the other guns on board. The icon for the recently uninstalled BHEPT blinked next to an Ion Disrupter and a Mass Driver. It was the Mass Driver that caught my attention. I pulled up Alpha one's freight bay inventory. I had 42 rounds for the Driver stored in my cargo hold. I knew that the Mass Driver ignored shields, but given past experiences, they had only proved useful when engaging M5s or M4s. I thought about it for a while and then installed the Mass Driver into my Port gun placement. Hell, I thought, it was our best hope given the situation.

Reaper seemed to be pulling out of her near death situation now that one Mamba was down and another damaged. Her shields were back up to 25% and the hull was now at 71%. I opened the comm. unit and spoke to Jo.

"Jo, the Dragon's shields are back up, but I have an idea."

"Great, anything, just hurry" She sounded tired, drained of all her energy "Oh and I'm fine by the way!" I had to grin. The poor girl was probably frightened to death. It took a lot of guts to fly a suicidal mission against five M3s and an M6 in a Pirate Bayamon! I can't even remember the last time I was in a fight quite like this!

I flew Alpha 1 around in a wide semi-circle to face the Dragon once again. With renewed hope I throttled up to maximum and flew directly at the Split M6's starboard side. I opened fire with the Mass Driver and my other BHEPT. The plasma punched into the Dragon's shields, causing them to ripple once more. But I saw the tiny dots of the Mass Driver rounds on the surface of the Dragon's armor plating. Yes, the weapon penetrated the shields, but the damage it caused, well, merely scratched the paintwork. I narrowed my eyes and spun Alpha 1 away to the right, pulling back round to my left and halting behind the Dragon. I targeted the engines and opened fire. The weapons blazed away once more. After the two seizures it took for me to fire, the shots hit the Split ship once again, the plasma simply bouncing off the shields and the Driver rounds hitting the starboard engine covering. This time however, I saw a small burst of gas as some piping along the engine was hit and its contents spewed out into space. I turned slightly and targeted the aft turret control section. The rounds smashed the plasteel window and the pane shattered as the

bullets weakened the structure and the air inside the cabin escaped in a single rush of wind. I saw the Split occupant expand and blow up, making me heave inside my helmet. Fortunately, I managed to keep the contents of my stomach where they were and twisted the control stick to the left, sending Alpha 1 away from the rear of the ship. I looked once again at the inventory and saw that I only had 14 rounds left. The Picture of the expanding Split in my head gave me an idea. I throttled up and spun around to the port side of the Dragon. My Nova at full throttle was flying past the Dragon at twice the former speed. I must have damaged and a power conduit when I shot the starboard engine. I shot past the Dragon and flew ahead another few kilometers. I then turned the ship around and found myself looking at the face of the oncoming Dragon. The red U shaped screen at the front of the M6 leered as the damaged ship limped toward me. I took in a lungful of the sweaty air inside my helmet and powered up to full speed. The Dragon was now flying at the fastest speed her injured engines could manage. By now both ships were flying straight for each other, a Split Dragon and an Argon Nova in an insane game of chicken. My breath grew shorter, my heart pumped faster, sweat poured down my face, steaming up my visor. I squinted to see through the glass of my visor as we drew nearer. My finger tightened on the trigger, my other hand gripped the throttle control. We drew closer and closer. I took a final aim at the Dragon, shut my eyes tight and pulled the trigger...

I held my finger on the trigger until I heard the rattle of the Mass Driver cease and then yanked the control stick upward to avoid collision. I opened my eyes and saw nothing but the orange mists of the cloud swirling before me. I tugged back on the throttle control and twisted the control column hard to starboard to try and see the Dragon. There she was, continuing on her daring chicken run as if I were still there. I boosted up my engines and chased the Dragon, which by now had passed my former position and was plowing on through the mist. As I reached her, I expected a hail of fire lay into me from the dorsal battery, but it remained dormant. I slowed down enough to run parallel with the Dragon. I leaned forward in my seat and pressed my face against my damp helmet visor to try and catch a glimpse of the front of the Dragon. This was a huge strain even with the aid of the suits servo-motors. I managed a quick look at the front end of the Dragon and flopped back into my chair in relief. The U shaped window across the front was shattered. Only jagged sections of plasteel remained in the corners. The crew must have asphyxiated when their breathable air had been sucked through the open gash. My plan had worked; the Mass Driver had done its job of smashing the front window and killing the crew. An image of Jo suddenly popped into my head and I spun Alpha 1 away from the Dragon and headed back to the gate. Reaper was still hanging in there. Jo had managed to take down the damaged Split Mamba, but three M3's on an M4 did not sound like my idea of fun. I flicked the switch that uninstalled the now useless Mass Driver and reinstalled my Beta High Energy Plasma Thrower and targeted the nearest Mamba. Right, I thought to myself, time to end this.

The Mamba tore apart at the hands of my vengeful plasma throwers. The explosion flared bright in my cockpit, blinding me for a sezura. The debris flew in all directions. I swerved Alpha 1 to avoid any of the large chunks. I cut the engines and sent Alpha 1 into a barrel role, avoiding the fire from the second Mamba hot on my tail. Suddenly pulling up on the control stick, I pushed the throttle lever to maximum and pulled up, away from the Mamba. But the Split pilot anticipated my move and pulled up earlier. I heard the shields screech as Alpha plasma fire bore into them. I twisted the control stick to port and spun out of the way, putting Alpha 1 into yet another spin. The Mamba came up below me this time and I narrowly missed a Dragonfly missile as it thundered out of the Mamba's tube. Holy Frak, I thought to myself, these pilots must be desperate, firing missiles at point blank. If that missile had hit me, the Mamba would surely have gone up as well. I manipulated the control stick, skillfully weaving Alpha 1 in and out of the Mamba's fire. I dived down and circled around underneath the Mamba. This time it was not fast enough and as I came up behind it I opened fire. The volley of Plasma ripped into the back of the Mamba, draining the shields and obliterating the cockpit. The burnt remains of the starboard and port wings drifted idly mixed in with the smaller chunks of charred hull. I targeted the last Mamba, turned toward her, and saw her break apart under the fire from Jo's three remaining Beta PACs. Reaper spun through the debris and her engines slowed down until their red glow had died away completely. I flew toward Reaper and pulled up along side her. "Well" I said down the comm. link. "That was fun"

“If you call that fun then you truly are mad” Jo replied, sounding exhausted. “It might be ok for you mister company owner. Your loaded, what about me, how am I going to pay for the repairs on Reaper?”

“What? You’re a Captain for Fraks sake! That’s one of the highest payed jobs GSS offers! I see you kitting yourself out with a nice new Teladi Vulture complete with mining equipment and Ore collector and here you are saying you cant afford some repairs and a new PAC?!?!?”

Jo’s voice sounded a little sheepish “Erm, well yeah, I suppose I could...”

“Oh, I’m sure Gardna Space Systems could dig up some spare cash if that’s what you want!” I said with a stupid grin plastered across my face. Thankfully, no one could have seen me anyway. I fell silent. We both did. I don’t know what she was thinking at that moment but I was thanking whatever gods there were that she was alive and well. I had known Jo for a very long time; she was a good friend to me. But I had never before felt like this about her. Oh of course, I have always found her attractive. I remember my feelings toward Saya Kho, oh boy I do! But they were just male hormones, and that was about 8 Yazuras ago now, and nothing like what I was feeling for Jo Rider now. Images of her smiling, biting her lip, laughing, all sorts of stuff like that. Was Julian Gardna experiencing something more than sexual desire? I kidded myself for it. Don’t be so stupid, I thought to myself, now is hardly the time anyway.

“Look at your property in this sector.” Jo said, bringing me back to reality. I did as she said and saw [i] Alpha 1 [/i] next to Reaper. Thankfully, Helios and Prometheus were still kicking. Samarkand was not on the screen. Probably sat on the other side of the [i] Ministry of Finance [/i] gate. But there was another ship on the system map that was defiantly not there the last time I looked. Written in the friendly green of personally owned ships were the words: Dragon of Family Rhy [i] Rattlesnake [/i]

The Split Dragon had locked onto Alpha 1’s signature during the combat and transferred its information and legal electronic documents over to GSS. The M6’s onboard computer had acknowledged the deliration of capturing ships act and I now owned a battered, battle weary Split Dragon...

I throttled down as we reached the Dragon. Reaper stopped just off her port bow; I stopped just off her starboard. The fuel tanks must have been exhausted because she was now flying at about 20 kpm. I called up her command console and ordered the engines to stop. Opening a comm. channel to Jo I said: “I’m going over”

“I’ll come with you” she replied. “Might as well have someone watching your back in case there were any Split smart enough to get into their suits before you took out the screen.”

“Cant argue with you there, make sure your armed” I told her, no sense in getting blasted apart by a survivor.

I unclipped myself from the safety harness, which was stretched to its limit because of my bulky space suit. That familiar feeling of weightlessness came over me as I floated out of my chair. It made some men feel ill, but to me it just felt normal. I grabbed the aid rail next to the control chair and swung myself over the back of the seat. Well, I didn’t really swing over, more like coasted over. I grabbed the Blaster Carbine from its rack on the back wall that separated the cockpit from the turret compartment and tugged on the lever for the hatch. The double door hatch opened silently outwards. In any other M3, there would have been a circular hatch behind the cockpit, but because of the turret, the hatch was in the small floor space in between the control section and the turret section. The armored doors were as thick as the hull and they carried the coolant pipes and other necessary electric cables through them just like the rest of the hull. I pulled the small propellant attachment off its rack opposite from where I had taken the carbine and attached it to the connection points on my suits backpack. I hit the activate switch and the control arms turned on their hinges upward ninety degrees to they were comfortably where I could manipulate them. I flicked another switch and the small panels at the ends of the arms slid back, revealing a network of controls. A tiny control stick that was no taller than my thumb rose from the end of my right control arm. I took hold of it and rested the four fingers of my left hand on the control pad of the left extension arm. I took one step forward and kicked the bulkhead so I spun upside down. With another kick at the ceiling, I was floating out of the hatch and away from Alpha 1. I activated the controls on the left control arm and the propellant unit’s maneuvering thrusters burst to life. They automatically corrected my sudden movement and I hung in space for a moment, taking in the surroundings. Even though my visor was tinted like Alpha one’s screen, the nebula seemed more orange when actually outside. I operated the controls until I was looking

directly up at the underbelly of Alpha 1. The Nova was scarred and dented from the previous skirmish. Its starboard gun was exposed to open space, more worrying, to the nebula. I hadn't actually scanned the nebula for anything harmful, but so far the only things seemingly hostile in it were us. I thrust up to the gun to take a better look. The gun seemed to be ok, just a little blackened. But I could clearly see the damage done by the near miss. The casing used to go around the top, side and bottom of the gun. Now there was just a jagged piece of metal where the casing was once connected.

"Ahem" Jo's voice made me jump. She made me jump a second time when I spun around to find her floating just behind me. "How much damage did you take?" she asked, her black helmet visor looking past me at the Nova.

"Not too much" I replied. "Just a few scratches and this" I indicated the missing casing.

"Oh, no systems damage?"

"Only some minor damage to the boost extension nozzle. Nothing to worry about"

"Right, come on then" Jo's space suited form turned on its axis and flew toward the Dragon. The bulky suit was not very flattering. I tried to picture her underneath, but then though she was probably as hot and bothered as I was.

We reached the Dragon at last. Jo's suit was faster than mine and she continuously had to stop and wait. I asked her if it was her who had tinkered with it or if she had paid for it. All I got in response was a raspberry down the microphone. When we got to the airlock, there was a nasty gash that ran right the length of the outer hull. I remembered it from when I had strafed the side of the ship when her shields were down. Now that I was up close to the Dragon, I could see how much damage I had actually done to it, which was pretty bad. There were at least five scars like this one that ran down the length of the ship towards the prow, where they disappeared from view with the curve of the ship. The depth of the scars was also pretty worrying. As this ship was now mine, I had to take in the repairs costs. The scars ran deep into the hull and if I shone my helmet lamp down the gash I could see fried cabling and burst piping. Holy Earth, this was going to cost a bomb. I took my attention away from the scar and turned it to the laborious task of prizing the outer airlock open (my shot had fused the metal of the outer hull and the airlock door together, typical!). Jo had a laser cutter in her hands and was trying to free the door by cutting through the fused metal. So far it was working and coming along nicely. I floated ready, my carbine pointing at the door. Jo finally cut through the metal. I brought the gun up to my visor and aimed down the barrel. Jo swiftly swung the outer hatch open to reveal the inside of the airlock. A gust of air rushed out, missing Jo but hitting me head on. I didn't feel it, but I began to drift away from the Dragon quite quickly. I let go of the carbine and pushed it back towards the ship. I then thumbed the controls on my propulsion unit until I was back on track for the Dragon. I grabbed the carbine on my way back and safely planted my boots on the hull. The automated magnets activated and I stayed attached.

"Ok" Jo said "Ready?" I looked down the barrel of my carbine and said "Affirmative"

"Right, let's go inside, if the airlock was still cycled then maybe other parts of the ship are still pressurized"

"Ok, I'll keep my wits about me." We cautiously made our way into the airlock and began to manually open the inner hatch.

We were inside the Dragon now. There was no way of looking around me for hostiles inside my helmet so I kept my eyes on the heat sensors on my visor HUD. We had drifted through the airlock compartment and were now on the top floor's main corridor. A Split Dragon had two levels with the stairs accessing each level at the front. The top level consisted of the main airlocks, the crew's quarters and the bridge. The lower level held the cargo bay, the engine rooms and the weapon and shields generators. Also the M5 hangar bay which housed the tractor beams that suspended the M5 when docked was also on the lower level. I knew the entire layout because GSS already had a Dragon: The GSS Cobra.

As we floated down the main corridor, a body drifted out in front of us and nearly made me wet myself. I instinctively raise my weapon but Jo's gauntleted hand found mine and gently lowered it back down again.

"Their probably all dead Joules" her voice crackled over the comm. "All of the compartments we've gone by have been opened. Possibly by the depressurizing"

"True" I said, still fighting to control my racing heart.

We drifted, because the GravTech system was offline, up to the front of the ship. There the corridor continued along until a round hatch could be seen in the floor leading down to the lower level. To my immediate left and right were two small flights of metal stairs that led up to an open space: the bridge.

“Don’t we need to see if the equipment downstairs is ok?” I asked Jo as she pushed off the floor to get up to the bridge.

“Might as well check the bridge whilst were here” she replied. I tried to shrug inside my suit, failed and kicked off the floor to drift up next to Jo. The scene before me was utter carnage. Three Split bodies drifted around the bridge, there were bullet holes in the bulkhead behind us and as we found out whilst floated round inspecting the damage, in the command chair as well. I imagined it; the Split Captain sat in this chair, watching the main screen as an Argon Nova hurtled towards him, streaming out a payload of death. I squeezed my fists as I imagined the bullets shattering the glass and ripping into the Captains chest. I unclenched them and flexed my knuckles. It was kill or be killed I said to myself.

The fourth member of the bridge crew was nowhere to be seen, probably had been sucked out of the window when the plasteel shattered. Most of the systems on the bridge were working, but a lot of lights were in the red, especially the ones showing the engine’s systems. After a thorough check of all the consoles, we diagnosed that this ship was operable from here, but the damage to the engines probably needed seeing too. Jo flicked a switch on one of the helm consoles and weight returned to me. My heavy boots clumped back onto the decking and my arms suddenly felt very heavy in the bulky suit. Jo turned to me instantly jumped to her left yelling “Joules take cover!” I turned around in time to see the space suited form of a Split aiming its gun at me...

The Split growled something down the local channel in its native language and pulled the trigger. I dived just in time as the energy bolt fried one of the helm consoles. It took my by surprise when I hit the floor with a thud; I had expected to drift out of the line of fire and shoot back. Instead I found myself lying on my belly with the weight of the cumbersome suit and propulsion unit making it difficult to roll over. I heard the bang of Jo flachette gun and the detonation as the metal balls exploded on impact. But impact on what? I unclipped the propulsion unit and tossed it off my back. Now able to move freely with as much agility as the bulky suit could offer, I rolled over to my right and ended up on one knee, quite an impressive feat which made me feel quite proud. My celebrations were very short-lived however as the console behind me exploded in a shower of sparks that rained down, singing small black specks on my visor. I stood up and leveled my gun at Split. It was taking cover behind the command chair. Damn, I thought, no cover for us. I shot the chair a few times and small section of the soft, fabricated pads disintegrated into little showers of fluff.

“Quick, out the window!” I yelled over the comm. I thrust my finger at the shattered main screen and saw Jo nod her helmet in acknowledgement. I clomped as fast as I could towards the window and to a leap hoping that the lack of gravity on the other side caught me before I slit myself in two on a jagged piece of plasteel. I flew through the air and out into space. It was at that precise moment I remembered I had left my propulsion unit on the deck...

I stared in horror as the Dragon receded at a painfully slow pace. “Jo” I yelled down the comm. I saw her space suited form fly out of the window, thrusters flaring. Her bulbous helmet angled to see me drifting away. “Hang on Joules” She replied, firing a shot back through the window.

“To what” I muttered as turned and flew up to me. The Split was now at the window behind her, firing shots out into the mists. Then the Dragon faded from view as Jo reached me and we came to a stop in the swirling orange, guns raised in the direction we had come from.

“The cloud must be dense here; the Split won’t be able to see us either” Jo grabbed me by the arm

“Come on, let’s go.” She holstered her weapon and manipulated her control arm. We began to fly back to the Dragon. Jo aimed for just above the window and we came down onto the metal surface with a thud. Jo grunted. “Hard to control when you’re lugging dead weight”

Stung by her remark I replied “Hey, be careful what you say”

Turning to me so that I could see my visor in hers, she said “Jesus, cant you take a joke boss?”

“Didn’t sound like a joke to me” I said as Jo unslung her gun once more. The Split was nowhere to be seen, and neither was my propulsion unit.

“It’ll be coming around the hull” I warned Jo. “It’s got my propellant pack.”

“Ok” was all she said.

On instinct, I turned around fully to look behind me and saw a hatch on the top of the Dragon; a few metres away open out into space. I leveled my gun on the hatch and saw the Split fly out with my backpack attached to his. Its little surprise attack had failed however, as I shot it in the leg. It jerked and grabbed for its injured limb. I pulled the trigger two more times, scoring a hit on the chest unit and another to the faceplate. The chest unit exploded in a shower of sparks, sending the Split drifting away from us. There must have been a rush of air out of the melted visor because the split began to tumble in slow motion back flips.

“Good shooting” Jo praised. “I’ll go get you propulsion tank.” She jettied off, gun still raised, to the tumbling Split. When she arrived, I saw her detach the unit and fix it securely under one arm. She then thrust back down to the surface of the Dragon and handed it to me. I took it and strapped it to its connectors with a little bit of help from Jo.

“When this is all over, let me buy you a drink” I said to Jo as she checked all the connections were right.

“I don’t drink” She said mischievously “But you can take me out anyway.”

We went back inside through the window as soon as we were fully inside, the ArtGrav plonked us roughly on the floor. Jo managed to remain upright but I fell flat to the floor. Thank god the suit hid my rapidly reddening face. I heard Jo giggling down the comm.

“Come on” I huffed “Let’s go check downstairs.”

Downstairs was worse than upstairs. The fire from Alpha one’s BHEPTs has scored deep gashes in the hull, one deep enough to penetrate and kill the three Split in that compartment at once as the air rushed out. The three bodies lay sprawled on the floor from when Jo had activated the GravTech system. We stood in that compartment. At the head of the ship. This section held the sensor equipment, main radar computer bank and for some reason two long range telescopes. Why a Split Dragon was carrying long range telescopes I did not know. Jo was full of ideas however.

“Maybe they were planning to send this Dragon through the gate. These scopes could see a Boron swim 5 metres.”

“Perhaps they think there could be a planet through there” I replied

“Maybe there is! Maybe they’ve sent a probe through already and have spotted a planet”

“But what’s the point in sending a probe through if you’re going to investigate yourself?” I asked

“The probe would easily be able to take all the readings and take the measurements by its self”

“Perhaps it wasn’t a very sophisticated probe”

I thought about it for a while and then said “Enough of this, there are more important things to be done, let’s go check the engines”

We turned to the bulkhead that separated this compartment from the next. The door was already open so we stepped through and clomped off down the corridor towards the engine room.

The engines were piles of scrap metal. The Mass Driver rounds had punched through the one of the coolant valves, causing a massive overheating in the main tanks. Both tanks had blown up, killing the operator currently on station. There was frozen propellant scattered across the floor in random blue globules along with the ex Split operator who sat slumped where he had landed against the wall across the far side of the chamber.

Jo finished examining the wreckage and announced “We’ll need a hauler to get this out of here, that or new parts for the engines will have to be brought out here.”

“I don’t think our reputation with the Split is good enough to allow either of those transactions.”

“Maybe we could give her back to the Split in good faith” Jo mused

“What, one battered Split Dragon for about 30 Split lives, naw I don’t think so, Have you ever heard the term, ‘No ship is worth the loss of a Split life’?”

“I suppose...” Jo turned away from me to look at the ruined engines “Anyway, we have more important things to worry about than this: The Gate” She turned back to me. I could see a sly grin on her face through her helmet visor.

I returned the grin “We’ll be the second living beings through this gate apart from Chianna for a long time”

“Imagine what we’ll find!” Jo’s eyes were distant, deep in thought. She was anxious and excited about crossing a new frontier. So was I.

We left the engine room and clomped back down the corridor. The dull glow from the backup power glinted off our white space suits. When we reached the outer airlock again, I clamped my boots onto the hull and swung the outer hatch shut.

“Right, I’ll meet you on the other side!” Jo said down her microphone.

“Roger that” I replied. I stayed on the hull and watched her form thrust gently away to the distant silhouette of [i] Reaper [/i]. When she disappeared into the mists, I activated my population unit and scaled the top of the Dragon. There was Alpha 1, waiting for me where I had left her. It was strange, a part of me felt this dreadful feeling that she wouldn’t be there anymore, and I would be stranded far from civilization in nothing but my space suit. I sighed in relief and jetted over to the waiting Nova.

I hung my propellant unit on its rack and maneuvered myself back into Alpha one’s cockpit. My fat space suit squeezed into the seat. Any wider and I would probably be stuck. I activated the main power generator and watched as the systems monitor went from red, to amber, to reassuring green. The fuel indicators showed full power to all four engines and shields and weapons were outputting at maximum. I flicked a few switches and a holographic image of the system map appeared in front of the cockpit window. The two ships my eyes sought were no longer anywhere near the main ecliptic plain. They were now a few K above, locked in combat with three Split Mambas. At least they were both intact, even though their shielding had taken a battering. I opened their audio command console. “Helios, Prometheus, finish off local hostiles and move to position [i] Nova Alpha 1 [/i]”

I activated two of my monitors and tuned them in to Helios’ and Prometheus’ onboard cameras. Helios opened fire on a Mamba and I saw the unfortunate ship burst into blue flame as her miniature plasma reactors failed and overloaded. A quick look at the other monitor showed Prometheus was hot on the tail of another Mamba. Satisfied, I closed both monitors and opened a comm. with Jo.

“Jo, Helios and Prometheus will be joining us shortly, what is your status?”

“Sorry Joules, [i] Reaper’s [/i] having some problems with her fourth engine conduit, the one on the damaged arm. Seems to be a minute puncture in the metal”

Damn, I thought to myself, I didn’t want Jo to go through the gate with a damaged spaceship and she definitely couldn’t stay here. Split reinforcements were surely on the way.

“Try and override the conduit, the surge of plasma into the tubes might fuse the rupture shut.” I said. I switched one of the monitors back on and tuned it into Alpha one’s starboard camera and thumbed the zoom control until the black outline of [i] Reaper [/i] was visible through the mists.

“Right, I’ll give it a go” Jo replied. I watched the monitor intently as Jo flooded the damaged tube with white hot plasma.

A jet of gas erupted from the lower of [i] Reaper’s [/i] four arms and Jo’s triumphant call made me wince inside my helmet. “Yeehaa, it worked boss, you’re a genius. All workable systems in the green”

“Well let’s hope it holds until this is over” I said down the comm., suppressing the urge to take off my helmet and rub my sore ears. I rested my gloved right hand on the control stick and my left on the throttle control. They both felt reassuring under my grip. I called up the system map once again and gaped at what I saw. Two squadrons of Split Mambas were converging on the gate. What was worse though was that they were being followed by Rhy’s Desire’s Split Raptor. I swallowed my fears and radioed to Jo “Get in formation with me, we’ve got incoming!”

“Where?” came the reply “My navigation computer’s just failed on me!”

I gritted my teeth “Doesn’t matter Jo, just get in formation! Were going through!”

I opened the audio command for Helios and Prometheus once again and took in a deep breath.

“Helios, Prometheus, new commands. Fly through west gate and rendezvous with [i] Nova Alpha 1 [/i] and [i] Reaper [/i] on the other side.” The two icons flashed showing orders received and understood. I quickly checked that Jo was in formation and pushed the throttle lever as far forward as it could go.

Alpha 1 surged forward under the power of the thrusters. I was forced back into my chair as the momentary G forces were taken into effect. I targeted the West Gate and swung Alpha 1 around in its direction. The spinning crosshair on my visor circled around a misty form in the distance and the onboard computer chimed “Gate: Unknown Sector.” I raised my eyebrows as the immense form swirled into recognition through the nebula. I checked the system map; the

Mambas were only about 20k from our location, and Helios and Prometheus were even further away. Tensing my jaw muscles and narrowing my eyes, I focused on the view in front of me. The gate was looming up ominously, waiting to swallow our two fragile ships in one mighty gulp. I plotted a trajectory that would take us straight through the center of the swirling vortex.

“Aren’t we waiting for your two M3’s?” Jo asked over the comm.

“No time” I replied “Those Mambas will be on us in less than a mizura if we don’t get out of here”

“How many of them are there?”

I checked the map “twenty” I answered “Two squadrons”

“Christ” Jo muttered. “They’ll follow us through”

“No they wont, I took a quick look at the records on the Dragon, they haven’t even sent a probe through, Father of Rhy’s orders. Their scared of what might be on the other side.”

“Wont the Split Father order them to follow us?”

“I shouldn’t think so; they probably think we’re as good as dead on the other side of the gate anyway”

“We might well be...” Jo said quietly, but loud enough for me to hear. Always look on the bright side, eh? I thought as we approached the gate. The dark form before us took shape and I could suddenly see the textures and markings on its carapace. Jump gates were definitely alien. The metal seemed to gleam even after centuries of being exposed to radiation and micro meteors. They even looked newer than TerraCorp headquarters or any of my own stations, despite the fact they had been hung in space for such a long time. The gleaming metal ended at the dull grey coating of the twin nacelles. The strange tubular vortex generators thrummed with an alien frequency that always could be heard over your radios. It chilled me, anything alien did. But then again, that was probably human nature; to be afraid of anything different. I remember when I had to go out in my space suit up close to one of those nacelles; the humming in your earphones could drive you crazy.

I checked the system map once more, the two Mamba squadrons were at the fringe of the nebula and my two Khaak ships were still a long way away.

“Ready Jo?” I said into the comm.

“Ready as I’ll ever be” she said in return. I gripped the control stick tighter as we flew into the void. This was it, the reason we were here. We were about to cross an unknown boundary into uncharted territory, oblivious to what was on the other side. And I don’t know about Jo, but I was eager to go through, brimming with excitement. We were going to recover Chianna Danar and [i] Scorpion [/i] and see what had attracted them here in the first place. Or failing that, find out the cause of their demise...

The hyperspace vortex swirled around my little fighter as I was hurtled light-years across the galaxy away from Rhy’s Desire. The blue glow of the maelstrom cast an eerie light across the glowing dashboard. My knuckles were clasped together, so tightly I could hear the servomotors on the backs of the gloves straining to keep the fabric from ripping.

As soon as it had started, the warp closed up around us and we were dropped out in deep space. The cabin suddenly went dark. My helmet visor must have been tuned to the glare of the orange nebula and had glazed over to protect my eyes. Now we were in this unknown system, the visor had to attune itself to the surroundings. I waited a sezura for the visor to clear up and then gazed out into this new system. The view made me gasp. The system was a murky, dark navy blue in contrast to the glare of the orange nebula. In the distance I could see lots of dense particle clouds that covered most of the system. Two huge asteroids could be seen silhouetted against the dark blue background, I was eager to get closer to them to find out what secrets they held, stored deep within their rocky innards. They were definitely large enough to hold a network of volcanic tunnels to be sure! In the mists of one of the nebulas I could dimly make out a metal form glinting in the dim sunlight. A thought struck me, what if it was another gate? The system was clear of bases and stations so the east side was visible. What if Chianna had gone through? Maybe there were a whole network of undiscovered gates and Scorpion had flown into them and out beyond reach!

Well there was only one way to find out. I brought up my system map; luckily I had recently installed a Triplex scanner to Alpha one’s mainframe. I could see another two asteroids along with the two clearly visible leviathans. Out near the east edge of the ecliptic plane however, there

blinked a symbol consisting of four dots surrounded by the four corners of a square; the sign for a jump gate, but not an active one.

I called up the comm. to Jo.

“Reaper, testing comm. systems. Jo can your hear me?”

“I hear you loud and clear boss, what we got?”

I gave her a detailed description of what was on my scanner and told her that the best thing to do was search the nearest asteroid. Scorpion’s signature was not in open space; therefore the M4 should be around or inside one of the asteroids. I throttled up and headed forward. That’s when I saw the Rhy’s Desire gate in my rear monitor and remembered Helios and Prometheus.

“Jo, my Khaak ships!” I pulled back on the throttle to stop the ship.

“Oh yeah” Jo replied “Are they through?”

“No not yet, I want to wait for them, they should head through the gate and meet us here”

“Ok, but if any Split ships come through, were outta here.”

“Roger that”

I turned Alpha 1 away from the view before me and swung her round to face the gate. Beyond the mighty circle, I could see more of those gaseous nebulas. No, I thought, not more, this must be one BIG gas cloud. I must have whistled because Jo said “What?” over the comm.

“Oh, nothing, just whistling.”

“Right”

I turned my attention back to the gate. There was no sign of the Khaak ships. Maybe they had met their end back in Rhy’s Desire. I waited, my knuckles clenched once more. I stared hard into that vortex, willing the two M3’s to shoot out of its depths. The warp made my eyes blur. I shut them tight and tried to shake off the dizzy sensation that swam about my head. When I opened my eyes again my vision was just as blurred, but when I looked harder, I saw that it was in fact, the hyperspace vortex that was distorted. I gasped as the wide disc contracted and spat out a pyramidal object. I sighed in relief and checked the system map. Prometheus’s icon moved across the small space between Alpha 1 and the gate and spun gracefully into formation. I then realized that it was only Prometheus. I turned back to look at the gate, no Helios...

I stared at the gate, silently pleading the M3 to appear. For a few seconds there was nothing, just the huge disc slowly rotating in space. Then it began to slur, the huge circle contorted into a funnel and another pyramidal shape shot out to gracefully arc round and move into formation. I gave out a sigh of relief and looked a Helios’s stats. Shields at 11%! Phew, close shave or what?

“That was close!” Jo said over the comm.

“Yeah” I was still checking all of the systems on my two battle weary M3’s. Seeing that they were both ok, I opened the audio command channel “Right, um. Prometheus remain at the gate, if any hostiles come through you are to engage. Helios get in formation” Then to Jo I said “A little bit of life insurance for incase they do follow”

“Understood” came the reply “Now where too?”

“Er, I reckon we should start with the asteroids, if Scorpion is still in this system then she should be near or inside them”

Jo chuckled “I see you’ll get to have a poke about inside one of those asteroids! Careful though, goodness knows what we might find.”

“Yeah” I agreed “if were lucky enough, we might find a hidden Khaak hive!”

“Now there’s a nasty thought!”

I grinned inside my helmet “What, I’m sure the Khaak would welcome us in open arms”

“Who says they have arms?”

“That’s true; no one has ever captured one alive”

“Oh well, there better off dead, that way they can’t go on planet obliterating rampages!” Me and Jo both knew that the battle for Omicron Lyrae was no joke, billions of people could have been ruthlessly murdered. But it had been prevented, at a cost. The whole crew of the Argon Navy’s M2 [i] A.P. Retribution [/i] had been lost in that skirmish as well as many good fighter pilots and friends. I took a little moment remembering Bret. He was just a space pirate, scum to many people; he had saved billions of lives by giving his own. I felt bitter hatred for those Khaak boiling inside me. It should have been me who flew into that generator, me who saved my father. Bret was too young to die. Jo must have guessed my train of thought as the comm. had gone silent. She had never known Bret; I had hired her after his passing.

I pushed the throttle lever all the way forward and we were soon under way, Alpha 1, Reaper and Helios, all flying into the unknown. I checked the system map and targeted the nearest asteroid. It was a small one, roughly the size of a Solar Power Plant. I could see it now, through the view screen: a black smudge in the murky blue soup of the nebula. We were still in open space, heading away from the Rhy's Desire gate. There must have been a small gap in the gas field where the gate was, how intriguing.

We came up on the fringe of the gas cloud and I felt a shudder pass down my spine as the misty swirls enveloped the cockpit. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and our little trio were fully smothered by the strange alien nebula. I looked at all my monitors; there was nothing but misty blue all around. I could clearly see Reaper in my port monitor and Helios in my right. The nebula swirled and danced in the gap in between our ships like some elegant Teladi female performing a native Teladi mating dance. Of course their old traditions were no longer used now and the thought of a female Teladi dancing and spinning was amusing to most, yet it was still a graceful, elegant activity.

I could no longer see the Rhy's Desire gate in my rear monitor. But I could however see the huge bulks of the two gargantuan asteroids in my forward monitors and even through my view screen. Our target asteroid however, could not be seen either through the view port or the monitors. But the crosshair was fixed on its location and the proximity sensors would tell me if I was in danger of collision. I sat back in my chair, satisfied, not knowing of the perilous dangers that lurked just outside the hull.

The asteroid was a skimpy little thing. Its outline gradually grew larger as we approached it through the mists. It was an unnerving place to be, surrounded by swirling blue fog with the vague silhouettes of those leviathan asteroids. I was eager to go and investigate but I concentrated my mind on the job at hand. The small asteroid slowly took form on my forward monitors. As it came in to range, I scanned it with Alpha one's mineral scanner. It had a silicon yield of 31, not bad considering its size.

We slowed down as we approached the rock. It slowly rotated around its centre point, making it relatively easy to quickly scan the surface for any traces of Scorpion or any human activity. The cameras searched and scoured the surface for anything, but they produced nothing, not even a boot print in the fine dirt.

"Well, that's a negative" I sighed over the channel.

"Don't get so down straight away!" Jo replied "It's only the first one"

"Yeah, ok, let's move on then" I throttled up and head around the asteroid. That's when the Triplex scanner picked something up right on the edge of the range, behind the nearest huge asteroid to our left. It was faint, a small blip on the scanner and barely staying a constant blip at that.

"Jo" I said, forgetting that her navigation computer was down "Can you see that?"

"See what?" she said sounding inquisitive.

"The blip on your ma... oh sorry, I forgot. There's a small signature on the edge of my range"

"Is it Scorpion?" She asked

"I don't know, the signal isn't giving off any data. No telemetry, no I.D. Its too small for a ship's signature, might be debris" I looked at the map once more and noticed that it wasn't far from the other artificial icon on the map. "It's near that other icon I told you about, the one that could be another gate."

"Well, we can do a sweep, scan the next asteroid, and check the two mysterious blips on your scanner in one foul swoop!" she sounded excited, eager to go.

"No" I said "The next closest thing to us is an asteroid, but its one of the big ones, we'll have to check the debris first and then go check it out."

"How many more asteroids are there on your scanner?"

"Four, two big, two little, well one little, I don't know about the other, those two big ones are blocking it out."

"Right" Jo said "and the big ones probably have tunnel networks in them?"

"Probably, I'm not close enough to use mineral scanner yet."

"Ok then, first the debris, then the fat 'roid"

I confirmed and pointed Alpha one's nose in the direction of the 'gate'. It took us a while to fly across space. Reaper seemed to be having engine trouble again and her speed was slowly dropping, even though Jo reported that all the coolant tubes were in the green. Alpha 1 wasn't

looking too great either, with her rear turret smashed and turret port screen badly scarred, there was a lot of red lights on the turret systems and every now and again another red light appeared, just for an electronics connector or a small sensor, it made me uneasy. Thankfully I didn't have the cabin pressurized so if the glass in the turret view port did crack, I would still be relatively safe inside my suit. There was also some trouble with the exposed plasma feeds on my starboard BHEPT. The cables were overheating, this was sure a strange occurrence but I had other things to think about so I let it slip to the back of my mind.

We flew quietly through endless blue for a few more mizuras until Jo broke the silence.

"I've got a problem here Julian, ah, what the..."

"What, what is it?"

"I don't know, the heat sensors on the starboard side of my cockpit are, oh no..."

"What?" I repeated, more urgently.

"Joules, I've got a hull breach!"

Silence. "Jo" I yelled into the comm. "JO!" I just gaped at my starboard monitor, watching Reaper advance on her set course. After a few painstaking sezuras Jo's voice crackled over the comm.

"It's ok Joules, I got into my suit."

"Are you Ok" I blurted "How bad is the breach?"

"It's only a small one, don't worry. I took a lot of hull damage while you were handling that Dragon"

"Still Jo, we'd best stop and take a look"

"Once we reach our destination. Then we don't have to make two stops. I've depressurized my cockpit so I'll be fine."

"Well, ok, but I want a look at that too!" I said, sounding a little too demanding I thought

"Nah, no need boss, it'll patch, I've got some epoxy in the repair canisters."

"Well I'll take a look from the outside, see how bad it is."

We flew on, Jo gave me a full description of [i] Reaper's [/i] status. The Bayamon was in a bad way. There some moderate damage to the hull and the lower engine duct as well as the out of order Navigation computer and the hull breach. Also, for some reason, the starboard BPAC was showing red and amber lights in the power conduits. Alpha 1 was getting a little weary too. I was startled when I looked at the ship's status report. More systems were in the amber than the green. This majority of system damage was only on the small things like the proximity sensors or the floodlights. My port camera was down as well, which annoyed me because now I couldn't see Helios. I ordered the M3 to change formation and fly behind me. I gave a satisfied click of my tongue as the Khaak ship idled into view on my rear monitor.

We ploughed on through the nebula, admiring the musty blue hue that swirled around us. Those huge, dark asteroids loomed ominously in my starboard and port quarter monitors. I wondered what secrets were concealed within the bellies of those beasts for the umpteenth time.

As we came within visual range with the object ahead of us, its dark form began to materialize through the mist. It was definitely a jump gate, but the thing was a ruin. The main circular disc had been separated into three smaller pieces, like three uneven sections of a scruffin pie. The two nacelles were drifting freely, detached from the main body. One was floating in the centre of what was left of the disc. The other had drifted quite far away. Smaller chunks of debris floated lazily through the wreckage. I gasped in awe, the only other gate I knew of like this was the one in [i] Brennan's Triumph [/i] and presumably it had led to Earth. Who knew where this one went?

Well, it definitely proved one thing, [i] Scorpion [/i] was still in the sector.

I throttled down, checked all around on my screens and raised an eyebrow; my starboard quarter monitor was down.

"Jo, my monitors seem to be being swatted like space flies over here, what about yours?"

"No, there probably about the only thing that is working Joules."

"Strange, hey what's that?" something weak, weaker than the other signal a few K away, had appeared on my local scanner. "Another signal"

"What is it?"

"This ones identifying itself, it's a distress pod, but it's not moving"

"Whereabouts?"

"It seems to be coming from that other nacelle, I'll identify it on your HUD, proceed with caution"

“Roger that”

We both turned toward the second, more distant nacelle. The cylindrical vortex generator was slowly rotating on its axis. I could make out bad scarring down the length of the body work; the suspicious remains of a volley of blaster fire. There were also several unusual brown patches all the way down the nacelle’s length. The patches were a strange rusty color and they slightly indented the metal of the areas which they covered. It was strange, but they stirred a memory, a vague picture of something I had seen. I screwed my eyes shut, trying to remember, but nothing came. I opened my eyes again and activated the Triplex scanner and adjusted it to structure scanning mode. A blue schematic of the battered nacelle replaced my system map and I searched it intently.

“Anything?” Jo said over the comm.

“No, not yet, oh, wait, there’s something lodged into the surface around one of the warp rings.”

“Can you see it?”

“Wait” I checked if it had any electronic signatures and, seeing that there were none, tried to zoom in on it with my forward camera “Ach, my cameras out!”

“What?”

“My forward camera, it’s not working!”

“There’s something going on here Joules and I don’t like it.”

“Yeah, I’m going to have to go out and check it myself.”

“Be careful Joules” She sounded truly concerned for my wellbeing “You don’t have to go out there”

“Well, like they say, curiosity killed the man, nice to know you care by the way”

I closed the comm. before she could protest any more and pushed the throttle lever forward a couple of centimeters. Alpha 1 nudged closer to the nacelle, close enough for me to be within suit range of it but not so close that it collided with my Nova. I checked all my seals, mentally slapped myself because I was in vacuum anyway and I would be dead if any of the seals weren’t tight enough and unstrapped myself from the chair. The lack of gravity propelled me slowly up and I kicked off from the view screen to the back of the cockpit. Taking my propulsion tank down from the wall once again I maneuvered it around me and strapped it into place. I then activated the hatch lever and the two metal bulkheads swung outwards into space. I took a deep breath and slowly descended down into those swirling blue mists.

Was it me or was it [i] really [i] warm out here? My suit fans were whining with the strain but I still felt sweat form on my upper lip. I had reached the nacelle and was thrusting around to the message pod. The surface of the nacelle had definitely suffered some form of onslaught, scars and craters dotted the shell, as if the gate had been relentlessly pounded by numerous different weapons until the alien architecture subsided. When I finally reached the pod, I noticed that it was wedged in to the metal, as if it had been fired from close range. I slowly moved up to the cylinder and began my inspection. It had been blackened by the impact with the nacelle and its thin metal coverage was dented and even torn in a few places. There were three antennae visible of what I could see and two of them were bent beyond repair.

“Seems to be wedged in good Jo” I said over the comm. unit.

“As if it’s collided with the nacelle?”

“No, fired at, I’d say.” I switched on my visor’s infra-red scanner and analyzed the pod. “Nothing radiating from it, wait a minute” I slowly drifted over and manually unfolded the closest undamaged antennae to me. “Is it broadcasting anything?”

“No, the signal just got stronger though”

I spun myself around to the other side of the pod for further inspection. There was a small hatch in the side of the pod that had come off its hinges. Unfortunately it was half in and half out of the nacelle, right at the point where the pod had stopped.

“Whoever fired this had to be awkward” I grumbled. I almost tore the thin layer of fabric on my gauntlets as I tried to prize the small hatch open. The heat was dreadful; sweat was now running freely out of my hairline and down my forehead. I managed to slide the hatch out from its space in between the pod and the nacelle and focused my visor in to the gap it left. There was a small grey box sat in the little alcove: The manual message tape in case the broadcasting system failed and the data hidden within the pod could not be retrieved. I carefully worked the tape out from its slot and kicked off from the pod with my booted feet. I activated my propulsion unit and sped back around the nacelle and up toward Alpha 1. It was boiling inside my suit when I reached the

Nova, the air inside my helmet was damp and humid. I re-entered Alpha 1 skillfully through the open hatch and performed a forward flip to land perfectly on the decking in my large boots. I pulled the hatch lever and unhooked the propellant unit from my back. After hanging the unit back up on the wall I sat back down in Alpha one's command chair and opened a video link with Jo. Her space suited helmet appeared on my main screen.

"What you got for me boss?"

"I...got...the...manual tape...from the wreckage." I managed to rasp out. "I'm...boiling up here!"

"Yeah, getting a little warm here too, play the tape, I wanna see what happened here"

I waited until the air inside my helmet had cooled down significantly and unfastened the tape's casing. Inside the casing sat a tiny silver disc. I picked it up and placed it into the correct terminal on Alpha one's console. Jo's bubble helmet instantly disappeared from view and was replaced by an attractive young brunette framed against a complex background of piping and electronics.

"To whom ever this may concern" The girl said "This is Captain Gunne of the A.P. Gunner, 23rd December, 2381 Earth time..."

2381. That was year 211 if I remembered right, the year Nyana Gunne and Martinus Sandas destroyed that other Earth gate. I looked back at the screen where Nyana Gunne was showing a system map of somewhere unfamiliar to me.

"The probe we sent out to ensure that the gate did lead to Sol proved our suspicions. Here is a map of Sol, and here is where the gate is currently" Of course currently was about 561 years ago now. A small light blinked on the map; just on the fringe of the solar system. "The gate orbited Sol about one hundred and fifty million miles further out from the orbit of the planetoid [i] Pluto [/i]" A circle drew itself around the outside of the solar system map and then an oval indicating Pluto's orbit did likewise. The orbits crossed once so that the gate fell in between Pluto and the gas giant Neptune. Nyana's tanned face reappeared on the screen. "We did what we had to to ensure that no Xenon can gain entry to earth. We heard rumors from an old space miner that a" a brief pause "Luke Garrard, found a jump gate to an unknown system in Rhy's Desire and following discovered the gate here leading to earth. Garrard and his ship were found on record leaving Solar Power Plant Alpha in Argon Prime but the ship was never heard from since. We have reason to believe that he went through the gate and was reunited with earth"

"Lucky bastard" someone mumbled in the background

"Martinus! Anyway, if you have discovered this gate and are listening to this message, I advise you to get out of the system quickly! Great dangers lurk in the..." static fuzzed on the view screen and the words [i] No more disc space available [/i] flashed across the bottom of the screen. I thought for a while on this. This gate led back to Earth. And they had destroyed it. It could have been preserved and held at top priority. No, I shook my head; they did what they had too. I managed to completely ignore the dire warning at the end of the message.

"Jo" I hailed Reaper. No answer. "Jo?" this time a crackle of static burst into my earphones.

"Sorry Joules, main radio antennae's not working"

"What? No. ah, we'll have to hurry up. I don't like it here one bit."

"Ok, you said there was another signal"

"Yes, here" I uploaded the coordinates to [i] Reapers [/i] onboard computer. I took one last look at the nacelle with the pod and turned Alpha 1 to face away from it. Then I thought, this message must stay here in case anyone else finds the gate. "Wait one minute Jo." I ejected the disc and put it back in its rightful place in the case. I then got out of my chair and drifted behind it. There were Alpha one's message capsules lined up neatly on the rack on the wall. I opened the tape compartment and replaced the blank tape with the Gunner's message and lifted the pod out of its place on the rack. No sense in firing it at the nacelle. Whoever finds it might have the same trouble as I did. So instead I opened the hatch in the floor and let the pod gently drop out into space. After it had cleared Alpha 1 entirely, I closed the hatch and resumed my position in the control chair.

"Okay Jo, lets go." We both flew off in the direction of the other weak signal. The huge form of the destroyed gate loomed up ahead and caused an eerie shadow to fall across me. Where was the light coming from anyway? Where ever it was, it made me shiver. I checked my rear monitor that was thankfully still operative. [i] Helios [/i] still flew faithfully in my wake, all systems in the green.

We past the gate and were once again surrounded by those swirling blue mists. Whatever was giving off that signal lay just ahead. I leaned back in my chair, as far as my bulky suit would allow, and closed my eyes. So Nyana Gunne had been here before me. Maybe that's what Chianna wanted to find out, if the Earth gate had been destroyed. Yet there was still no sign of [i] Scorpion [i].

We approached the strange object emitting the signal slowly, incase it was a dodgy minefield or something. We were only about one hundred meters away and whatever it was could still not be seen, not even in my surviving front monitor. As we crawled towards it, bits began to materialize through the mists. Firstly as small black objects, as we got closer they focused into scraps of hull and other debris. Whatever was giving off the signal was wreckage of some ancient ship. We finally stopped in the middle of what looked like a field of tiny asteroids. Whatever this ship once was, it had been thoroughly diced up into little fragments. I tracked the signal down to a disfigured lump of metal floating in space to our strange formation's left.

"I'm going out again Jo."

"No, I'll go this time."

"Ok, but be careful" I cautioned her.

"I will. Don't worry"

I looked out of the far left hand side of my view screen, as my monitor wasn't working, and saw the hatch in [i] Reaper's [i] cockpit slide open and a humanoid figure drift out. The figure was momentarily enveloped by a dense swirl of the mist and then reappeared on the other side flying through space toward the object. When Jo finally reached it I opened the suit communications unit.

"What is it Jo?" I asked.

"Looks like the remains of the ships black box though it's hardly a box anymore. Just a lump of tangled wires attached to some scraps of metal. Strange, the metals got a dull rusty tint around the edged."

"Any signs of weapon damage?"

"No, looks like the metal's just been melted into little bits."

"Well, take the box back inside and see if you can get anything out of it." I waited patiently as Jo flew back to Reaper. I activated Alpha one's floodlight and scanned the wreckage in front of me. I narrowed my eyes to look at one certain piece of the debris. A sheet of metal, quite thick, probably hull material, bore markings on the sides. I cursed that my front monitors were out and I hadn't thought to bring any video enhancement goggles. I spun Alpha 1 around so the rear monitor was facing the hull segment and zoomed in on the markings. They weren't markings; it was this ancient ships identification tag. The [i] A.P. Hunter [i], a ship I had never heard of but maybe the black box would reveal its secrets.

"Joules?" Jo's voice cracked over the suit radio. "I'm back on board"

"What you got?"

"Here, I'll play what I can" There was a crackle as my view screen resolved into a grainy image of a heavily bearded man.

".....ke Garra.....P Hunter....e...ate.....earth.....ebula...hull....." That was it. But from what the man had said, I gathered that this was the wreckage of the A.P Hunter, Luke Garrard's ship. He obviously had not reunited himself with Earth and had perished due to unknown circumstances. He had said something about the nebula and his ships hull...

"Joules, that's all I can get from this piece of junk" Jo snapped me from my train of thoughts.

Bringing me back to the current situation and forgetting anything about the misty nebula and the ships hull.

"We'd best get on with the plan then. Keep the box, we can see if we can do anything else to it when we return to the [i] Samarkand [i]"

"Right, big asteroids then?"

"Big asteroids" I confirmed. We turned and flew from the wreckage of the A.P. Hunter. It gave me the chills. That ship had been there long since before the Gunner came here and that was more than half a millennium ago! It was best left disturbed no more than we had already done so. We flew through the nebula, heading toward the large black shape ahead of us. I didn't have to target it. It was obvious where the large thing was and the proximity sensors on the outside of the hull would say if I were in danger of collision...

The black wall in front of me loomed up out of the mists. I checked the distance readout to see how far we still had to go. We were quite a long way off from the asteroid. The dark rock now fully filled my view screen, slowly getting darker and darker through the blue hue of the nebula. Even the gas field seemed to be getting denser. Strange glowing specks flew by the window and the misty swirls were forever getting darker. There seemed to be an air of foreboding around the humongous asteroid. I checked my remaining monitors to see if Reaper and Helios were still in formation. I could see the black triangle of Helios in my rear monitor silhouetted against the blue of the system. Reaper wasn't visible however, and I had to roll Alpha 1 upside down to get my port camera on her. The murky outline of the battered Bayamon spun into view as I focused the camera. I looked at the dark image on the screen for a few seuras.

A sudden alarm dragged me out of my idle gazing. It was the proximity warning and it was beeping wildly. Small red letters were flashing on the screen: [i] Warning, large object detected, collision imminent [/i]. I checked the distance readout again and saw that the asteroid was still a long way off. The same distance in fact. I pulled back on the throttle hard, almost tearing it free from its rightful place on the dashboard.

"Jo, pull up!" I yelled. I pulled up hard on the control stick, seeing that slowing down would not have made much difference. The huge black wall suddenly appeared from the depths of the mists, its huge, pockmarked surface leering at me. I dragged Alpha 1 up, narrowly missing an outcropping on the 'roid's surface. Helios pulled up directly behind me and escaped the narrow miss but Jo wasn't so fast and sent Reaper tumbling in an insane forward roll as the tip of the lower arm caught on the outcropping. The Bayamon thudded into the rocky, uneven surface and kicked up what must have been all the dust on GSS Headquarters! It would have been amusing if the circumstances weren't so tense. The Bayamon came to rest right at the bottom of a crater; the outcropping she had stuck being the lip of the huge indentation.

"Jo, Jo, you all right?" I spluttered down the comm., just controlling my nerves from my narrow encounter.

"Yeah, just a little bruised that's all, just what exactly happened there?" she was blaming me. I suppressed a laugh.

"Seems you fell into a crater my dear" I focused my ventral camera on the dusty form of [i] Reaper [/i] in the crater. "I think my proximity antennae's down"

"You think? What's with this system? It must be something to do with the nebula"

"No, I checked on the way here" I replied "Its just a dense particle cloud, it seems to be all the outside systems that are failing, we have to be quick or else we'll lose all our sensors and we won't be able to find the gate to get back!"

Reaper emerged from the dusty crater as Jo manipulated the controls. I called up my mineral scanner, thankfully it was still operating. I quickly scanned the asteroid and brought it up on my main screen.

"Right Jo, this rock does have quite a few tunnels entwined into its structure, but their pretty narrow."

"Yeah, we'll have to be careful then"

"There's an entrance a couple of hundred meters or so above us. I'll take the lead. You follow."

I angled Alpha 1 to point upward and gently pushed the throttle forward. Jo did likewise with Reaper and soon we were crawling over the barren surface of the huge asteroid. The surface was a dull grey color, with the occasional glint of raw minerals. It was battered and scarred, the effects of time and impacts. The crater Reaper had fallen into was quite large in comparison to the others we saw. And judging by the amount of the others, this side of the asteroid must have been hit by a large meteor shower on this side. I looked out of the view port at the asteroid laid out before the ship. The same uneven ground stared back up at me. But just up ahead about 100 meters away, a large pit opened up in the surface. The yawning black circle in the ground gave me the shivers.

"There it is Jo, the opening"

"Holy Earth..."

The mouth of the tunnel was huge, bigger than both Alpha 1 and Reaper. It was as if the ground suddenly fell away in front of us.

"You said it was narrow" Jo said.

"Probably gets narrower as you go further in. Right, me first" I angled Alpha one's nose down into the pit and move forward ever so slowly. I was about to enter history, these tunnels had been carved by white hot magma at the dawn of time. These walls were as ancient as time itself. I activated the floodlights built into the front of the Nova just below the view screen. The powerful

10 megawatt lamps flooded into the black space in front. The cave was illuminated by the glow and I saw every little detail on the walls. I half expected to see tribal paintings and hieroglyphics of some sort, but of course that was absurd. I throttled up and advanced into the tunnel. I opened Helios' audio command channel.

"Helios, remain here by the entrance on standby and await further orders"

Helios's little icon winked in acknowledgement and the Khaak M3 spiraled off to one side of the wide opening. My rear monitor showed that Jo was following closely behind, [i] Reaper's [/i] floodlights shining down the tunnel also.

For what seemed like stazuras we flew down that long tunnel deep into the heart of the asteroid. The walls were forever smooth, as if they were polished everyday without fail. I presumed the smoothness was due to the magma that once flowed through these catacombs. I tried to picture the scene, at the dawn of time, this large fiery rock, one of many hurtling around the new born star, spewing molten rock in all directions. The tunnels were ablaze with white hot lava, melting its way through the solid rock. Where I sat now, was once filled with white hot molten rock capable of melting this tiny insignificant ship out of existence in one sezura.

We finally reached a fork in the tunnel. By now we must have been at least five kilometers into the large rock. However with my proximity and distance reading equipment out of action, I could only guess. The corridor split off in two directions. We came to a halt at the fork, typical I thought, right or left?

"Which way?" Jo said over the comm.

"I say left" I stated

"Why?"

"Because left is good, everyone goes right, let's go left for a change"

"Maybe we should split up" Jo suggested.

"No, too dangerous, we can't communicate with each other through these thick walls"

"Suppose, left it is then"

We went down the left tunnel. After a while the tunnel became wider, so I didn't have to keep my eyes on the surviving sensor readouts as much. The path we now flew down was a different texture to the wall of the other, the surface of the walls was more uneven and even spiky in some places. There were stalagmites and stalactites as well as their wall based counterparts sticking out of the tunnel walls dangerously. I winced as Alpha one's hull scraped along one of the spikes jutting out from the wall. The rock silently gave way as the hull of Alpha 1 knocked it free from its ancient home. "Oops" I muttered quietly. "Sorry"

The tunnel split off in several directions at irregular intervals. I looked down each tunnel, wondering what secrets lay at the end of each. Probably more rock. I sat in the command chair, pondering in what was down each of the tunnels. I remembered once watching a film about huge dragon-like creatures that lived in the tunnels of a huge planetoid in uncharted space. Then my scanner brought me back to reality.

"Jo I'm picking something up, its faint but its there"

"What is it?"

"Just a reading, a distress signal by the looks of it" There was also a faint signal coming in on the passive sensors readout. "Seems to be some radiation left by a fusion drive around here as well"

"Scorpion has a fusion engine"

"All Split ships do"

"I think we might have it Joules"

"Well, lets not get our hopes up, down want to be disappointed if its not there do we?"

"Suppose not"

We continued down the tunnel, following the signal. The gaseous swirls of the mist danced around in between our ships, even this far into the asteroid.

I glanced at my systems readout, my ventral and dorsal cameras were out now and my heat sensors were going wild. It must be hot out there, I thought to myself as we flew deeper into the asteroid. I had often thought about the possibility of there being something in the nebula that was damaging the outer equipment. However every scan of the surrounding conditions showed that it was just a regular particle field. I had checked and double checked for any match on similar hull eating fields in other systems but the closest match was the particle cloud in Ore Belt that accompanied most of the Asteroid field. Still, whatever it was that was making the systems fail

was keeping me alert and sharp. I didn't like it one bit and the sooner we found the [i] Scorpion [i] the better.

The signal was getting stronger as we flew deeper into the labyrinth of magma-carved tunnels. It was definitely a recent signal, as it continued to get stronger or weaker the closer or further away we got, unlike the signal from the black box of the [i] Hunter [i] that was permanently weak because of its age. I was on edge all the way through the myriad of tunnels and joints. We must have come across over ten forks in the confusing corridors and on instinct I had said to go left on all of them. When Jo had enough of going in circles she made us turn right for once and the signal's strength shot through the roof. I sat tense in my seat, gripping the controls tight. The wall ahead of us glinted with raw metal. A mineral buried in the rock I presumed. The signal was now as strong as it could get, something just around the next bend was beaming out this signal at a healthy, steady pace. The tunnel suddenly got very narrow, only enough room for one ship.

"I think you should go first Joules" Jo said quietly over the comm. "This could be it"

"Thanks, I appreciate that"

I slowly moved Alpha 1 up to the bend and maneuvered her around the corner. Her port wing scraped the wall and chunks of rock came loose and banged on the hull, causing an echo around the empty cargo bay. I took a deep breath and brought the floodlights to bear on the tunnel leading away from the bend. It stretched out fairly wide with more of those spikes jutting out from the wall. But the thing that immediately grabbed my attention was the Split Scorpion parked squarely in the centre of the tunnel. Or, to be more precise, the remains of the Split Scorpion...

It was definitely [i] Scorpion [i]. Her starboard wing had detached from the main body and was nestled into the wall on the far side of the widening tunnel. Her floodlights were pointing at the tunnel wall and there were those strange rusty marks dotted about the bodywork. I tried to bring up the systems data stream but achieved nothing. The once proud Split Scorpion that had been my loyal, trustworthy M4 now lay in ruin inside this dark alien asteroid. I felt sad, as if I had lost a friend. I recalled capturing the little M4 back in my poorer days. I had been so surprised when the navmap showed a ship named 'Your Split Scorpion'. I looked at the battered ship. Maybe we could collect her on a salvage mission. But I knew that would not be today.

I took a deep breath and said to Jo. "It's [i] Scorpion [i] alright"

"How bad is it?" she replied. Then I remembered that the passage was too narrow for [i] Reaper [i] to fit in along side me.

"She's heavily damaged. In any normal case she would be written off"

"Normal case, you plan on bringing her back?"

"Perhaps, but not today"

"Is there any sign of Danar?" She asked

I scanned the ship for life signs and found none. "No, he's not there" I said quietly

"Perhaps he had to bail out and is in his suit somewhere" Jo said as cheerily as she could manage

"I doubt it, his suit wouldn't have lasted this long. Oxygen supply I mean"

"But those suits can't keep you alive for months!" Jo exclaimed

"I checked [i] Scorpion's [i] inventory before we left. Chianna didn't have many oxygen canisters on board."

"Wouldn't the suit's backpack have renewed the air?"

"His suit was an older model with no built in atmosphere regenerator, he had to survive on the oxygen tanks on his back. At most he would have survived thirty six hours..."

"...And it's been thirty eight since we got the message" Jo finished for me

"I'm afraid Jo, that we must expect the worst for our old friend" I felt awful. Danar had been more than just an employee over the years. He had become a well trusted friend.

I throttled forward a little to allow [i] Reaper [i] some space and cut the engine thoroughly.

Several warning lights remained on however. I eyed them over for several seuras. Mostly outer minor equipment but now all of my monitors had packed in. I cursed to myself, hoping that the heat sensors would be able to pick up our engine signatures and guide us back out of the asteroid. We should have laid navigational beacons.

[i] Reaper [i] pulled up on the port side of Alpha 1. I could see the front of her skull shaped cockpit through my view screen.

"I'm going out to have a look at [i] Scorpion [i] Jo. You stay in your ship." I said, trying to sound business like.

"No, I'm coming with you" She replied.

“Right, but stay close” For the third time, I got out of my chair and moved to the back of the cabin. Removing my propulsion unit from the wall, I clipped it onto my back and levered the hatch open. Taking a breath of stale air, I dropped out into the interior of the asteroid. It was pitch black everywhere except the shadowy form of [i] Scorpion [/i] illuminated by the floodlights of Alpha 1. I made my way over to the M4, keeping my wits about me. The ship's hull gave no inclination of being attacked by another ship; just the former white metal was covered with those rusty patches that, I noticed, were highly concentrated around the stump where the starboard wing used to be. I went around the back of the cockpit to find the circular hatch wide open. Inside it was pitch black. I fiddled my propulsion unit's control pad and a lamp slid from its deactivated position to rise up above the top of my helmet. The lamp flickered to life and illuminated the inside of [i] Scorpion's [/i] cockpit. The control panel had suffered the same mysterious rusting that the outside of the ship had. None of the lights were active on the console; either not working at all or they had been deactivated. I went into the small M4's cabin and pulled the seat back. There was no space suited form slumped in the chair as I had hoped and the propulsion unit, as well as the blaster carbine on the wall, was missing...

There was however, something on the console. A small grey box that looked like a packet of Ilo sticks. It was a handheld computer. I leaned over the chair and picked it up, flicking the ON switch as I did so. A picture of Chianna appeared on the screen and began to mouth something. I remembered that no matter how hard you tried, you can't hear anything in the deep void of space and plugged the computer into one of the sockets on my suits belt. Chianna's voice flooded my earphones. I switched the computer back to play the message again and listened to it from the start, as I couldn't see the screen now thanks to my bulky suit. I made sure that Jo could hear what was being said through the comm. and flicked the play switch. Jo drifted into view next to me as Chianna began to speak.

“This message is for the ears of my employer and trusted friend Julian Gardna. If whoever has found this recording, please make sure it gets to him.” There was a secret password that I presumed was intended for me. It wasn't hard to guess.

“Spaceweed is medicinal, honest!” I stated, stressing each syllable. Sensing Jo's air of amusement I said “Private joke”

The recording beeped, the confirmation sound of [i] Access approved [/i] and Chianna continued “Ahem, well Joules, for one thing, sorry about taking off in [i] Scorpion [/i] like I did its just she was the fastest ship on GSS HQ at the time and I was in somewhat of a hurry.” Chianna cleared his throat as if there were something lodged in there “I don't know if you already know of the status of the nebula in this system. It is highly dangerous and it is what has caused [i] Scorpion [/i] to break up.” I gasped

“But I checked on the....” I began to protest but the recording cut across me

“If you have checked the nebula for hull damaging ions or something, you've been looking in the wrong field entirely. I took in a sample of the nebula whilst I was here and discovered that there are tiny, single celled organisms living in the gas cloud. The cloud itself is harmless but these creatures feed on metal elements and metallic compounds.” He sounded so calm about it “If you are still in the system then I suggest you leave now and listen to what I have to say in safety. You will need to return here however, as I have made a great discovery.” I shook my head in amazement. So there [i] was [/i] a danger in the clouds; tiny organisms feasting on the metal compounds of the hull of [i] Alpha 1 [/i] and [i] Reaper [/i]. That explained all the outer systems failing first; it would only be a matter of time before we had a hull breach. We had to get out of here, and fast. Chianna continued. “I heard a rumor of a secret gate to an unknown system from a friend. He said he had heard it from a Pirate in Priest's Rings” That explained the illegal stop “I was given coordinates, by this guy who... ah that's irrelevant, what's important now is that you get back safely and bring back a salvage team. Joules when you hear this I will probably be dead, [i] Scorpion [/i] is in no fit condition to get be out of here and the bugs in the nebula wont take long to eat through the seals on my suit. Listen, there's a ship, an Earth ship, in this asteroid. I haven't got a clue how it's got here, but its here, the LFL device on [i] Scorpion [/i] traced it to this spot. You must continue my quest Joules, I ask you as a friend now. This ship may hold information on how to return to Earth, hell there might even be Sol's coordinates on board. Get this ship, make sure no one else does, and find out Joules, find out for me.” The recording crackled off in a bout of static and faded, leaving a stunned silence. My head was spinning, bugs in the nebula, an [i] Earth [/i] ship, The gate destroyed by the Gunners, how stupid I had been not

checking the cloud for organics...the list went on. I finally resolved to get out of here A.S.A.P. There was something I wanted to do first though. I maneuvered myself over the seat and above the console. From a rather awkward angle, I booted up [i] Scorpion's [/i] systems and activated the LFL device. The low frequency locator confirmed that there definitely was another ship in the area, using an old, somewhat primitive, signal. It was however, a strong primitive signal and I wondered how it was so strong after such an awful long time exposed to this nebula. I targeted the predicted source of the signal and angled the ship to follow the directional arrow. There was nothing but pitch black ahead of me. I flicked on the floodlights and all of a sudden the wall in front of us was illuminated with the dull glow of the M4's weakened floodlights. There the usual, spiky, rough surface of the side of the tunnel. But there was a gap, large enough to fit a Boron Octopus through easily with all its unnecessary spikes. I thought of maneuvering Alpha 1 through, but couldn't see the point. I heard Jo's heavy breathing over the comm., was this too much for her? After all she was used to regular system patrols, not delving into the unknown. Yet I had learnt so much about her over the past thirty eight hours. Much more than our old mutual friendship had provided.

"Are we going in there?" she asked shakily. I noticed that it wasn't fear she was shaking with, but anticipation.

"Yes, I want to see this ship, and bring back Chianna's remains. That's where he'll be"

"Right, lets hurry" Jo turned and thrust out of [i] Scorpion's [/i] cockpit. I followed closely, my suits frail lamp shining off her backpack.

"Activate your lamp" I said. Jo did as was bidden and soon our pair of tiny streams of light were angled at the hole in the wall. We flew forward, two small space suits inside a vast leviathan of an asteroid, into the gap...

The space behind the hole in the wall was pure vacuum. There was nothing on the other side, not even the deadly nebula with its metal – munching organisms, according to Jo's data computer she had attached to her belt before leaving [i] Reaper [/i]. This was somewhat of a relief as we entered through the wide gap. It was also pitch black. I have never known anywhere as dark and foreboding as this place. Our lamps made hardly any indentation on the sheer blackness. For about five minutes we just flew through the void, lamps trained forwards, hoping we found the wall before it found us, and all the time following the LFL readout. I had presumed by now that this was no other tunnel, to not allow even the particles of the gas field in there must be literally [i] nothing [/i] in here. So that explained the healthiness of the LFL signal. Whatever this thing was, it will be immaculately preserved with the huge nothing to gnaw away at its hull for all eternity. Whatever was on the Low Frequency Locator was just a few meters ahead now. I could feel the sweat running down my forehead and into the collar of my helmet. When this was over I would welcome a stazura in the [i] Samarkand's [/i] hygiene pods. The thing appeared, briefly, caught in the dim light of either mine or Jo's lamp. A white glint startled us; the ship was just a little to our right. We would have flown straight past it if the light hadn't reflected; it was so dark in here.

We both turned to get a good look at the ship. We were at the front end of whatever this ancient ship was. The gleaming white surface arched away gracefully to plume out into a wide wing that started just behind the nose and ended about four meters out from the main body at the tail. The body itself, if looked at straight on, was flat underneath, probably to aid as a heat shield with the wings on re entry to a planet. The underbelly was also jet black, so black it looked as if it wasn't there because of the dark cavern. The body continued up and around in what effectively was a long cylinder with a cone end. The cylinder's flat underside made it, head on, look like a circle with one segment below the chord removed. The cone, or what I presumed, the flight deck end of the ship had a black area, right at the tip of the nose, which came up and circled round before going back down to link to the black underside. There were a neat row of small rectangular windows across the front of the cone; the main view ports and an emblem was encrusted on the side of the command deck along with some writing in bold italics. I jetted over cautiously to the markings and angled myself so my lamp directly over them.

"NASA, [i] Pathfinder [/i]" I repeated...

The ship had been preserved because the nebula was not inside the cave. I made my way down the length of the hull. There were no view ports in the wall that I could look through, so I carried on jetting gently down the ship, looking for an airlock or something. Then I saw one, the outer

hatch was swung wide open. I came up on the airlock and looked inside, my dim light only illuminated as far as the other side of the airlock chamber, the door on the other side was sealed, but there was a space suited form floating next to a console. I Drifted into the chamber and looked at the suit. Something dragged me away however; several lights on the console behind the suit were blinking green! Impossible, I thought, the ship can't be pressurized; the air would be almost a millennium old!

"Jo come and look at this" I said down the comm.

"On my way" Jo's voice crackled in reply. I checked and rechecked the airlock readout. I couldn't believe my eyes. It said the inner compartments were sealed and airtight.

"Oh my..." Jo had entered the cramped airlock "The ships pressurized!"

"Yeah" I replied, suddenly snapping out of my gaping trance, I straightened up as best I could in a non gravitational atmosphere. "Come on, those bugs are eating away at [i] Alpha 1 [/i] and [i] Reaper [/i] every second we waste stood here. We can come back for this." I turned to leave but Jo stopped me.

"Wait Joules, look" she pointed at the suit. Come to think of it, I had thought the markings were familiar. The suit was an old Argon space suit marked with the dark green shoulder lines of the GSS uniform. The name stitched into the breast made my heart stop; Senior Paymaster [i] Chianna Danar [/i]. I looked at the suit, not able to believe my eyes. Here he was, my old friend, the man we had set off to find thirty nine hours ago. He was here and his suit was intact. It didn't take a genius to work out he was dead, but I checked the oxygen tanks anyway, only to reveal they were empty.

"I'm sorry Joules" Jo said sympathetically, placing a servo-motored glove on my shoulder. I tried to squash down the depression inside me. Jo suddenly stooped; using me as a pole she squirmed her way around my bulky form and brought something back up with her when she returned.

"Looks like he's left us another message Joules" she held out her hand, another palmcomp nestled into the bloated fabric of her glove. I looked at the palmcomp through my visor for a sezura and then took it from her hand. I clipped the palmcomp to my belt and grabbed Jo by the arm.

"Come on, were leaving" all of a sudden I had gone ice cold. I wanted to be away from this ancient ship as soon as possible. We exited the airlock and I gently closed the outer hatch. Silently whispering "I'll be back for you Chianna" Then I turned back to the homely beacon of Alpha 1 and jetted across into the blackness as fast as my suit could go. My lamp lit up the space before me, but it was hardly helpful in this pitch black cavern. I still had Jo's arm held tightly in the grasp of my gauntlet and let go for fear of ripping the fabric. Jo yelped in surprise and I quickly found her wrist again, but this time I held her hand, as much as the space suits would allow, rather than gripping her forearm. We reached the cavern edge and felt nothing but solid wall. A sudden wave of icy panic washed over me; what if we couldn't find the gap? I tried not to scream as the darkness flooded in around me, swallowing up me, Jo and our puny little lamps. I frantically jetted across to another point in the black wall, still solid rock. I turned around and looked out away from the wall. Jo clamped herself onto my suit and I held both arms around her tightly, nothing but the color black everywhere, surrounding us. I felt the pressure building, the claustrophobic sense of being trapped miles inside a humongous asteroid in a system where no one could find you, surrounded by nothing but endless black. I held on tighter to Jo, my head spinning. I was so wrapped up in my own fears I didn't even hear her sobbing her heart out into the comm.

I clenched my fists, there was no sense in losing it after we had come this far. My mind raced, thinking of all the possible solutions to our plight. Jo was still sobbing uncontrollably, probably due to my brief lapse of concentration. I held her tightly around the waist, hoping that the pressure would feel comforting through the bulky suit and not painful.

"Come on Jo, we can't lose our heads now" I tried to sound reassuring "We have to think"

She didn't reply but at least the sobbing ceased a little.

"Shush, listen, maybe I can get Alpha 1 on remote control." I loosened my grip on Jo and she drifted away slightly, but stayed within an arms length. I unclipped my own palmcomp from my belt and activated it. The reassuring blue glow added a little more light to our tiny circle. I skimmed through the list of commands until it reached remote ship control. I activated the little icon and two ships came up as in range; [i] Alpha 1 [/i] and [i] Scorpion [/i]. I thumbed the controls until I had direct control of [i] Alpha 1 [/i]. My heart sank as the image that blurred to life on the miniature screen showed nothing but a cloud of static. There was probably interference in

the rock wall; some minerals affecting the signal. I moved the palmcomp closer to the wall and was rewarded with a very grainy image of Alpha one's interior, looking out at the wreckage of Scorpion. I gently manipulated the controls until Alpha 1 was almost touching the wrecked M4. I then, as gently as I could, maneuvered the Nova around the Scorpion and angled her nose at the gap in the wall. The cavern was suddenly filled with a powerful corridor of light that cut through the darkness bringing hope to me and Jo. I looked across the cavern to discover its true size. The beam from Alpha one's floodlights cut across the length of the cavern, illuminating the other side which was quite some distance away. Also the creamy hull of [i] Pathfinder [/i] lit up like a beacon in the middle of the cavern. The Earth ship looked more like a bizarre pencil rather than a millennia old Starship.

I turned my helmet to face Jo. At least she had stopped sobbing now.

"Are you okay?" I said as tenderly as I could.

"Yeah, I just got...I just got a bit scared that's all"

"Ok, I understand, no worries." I smiled at her space suited form through my visor even though I knew full well that she couldn't see me. I put the palmcomp back on my belt and took Jo by the hand. For a mizura we just floated, looking into each others tinted visors. I could make out the shape of her pretty face behind the artificial screen.

"Come on" I ushered "Let's get out of here"

We rocketed across the expanse of the cavern toward the gap as fast as our suit thrusters could manage. When we reached the gap, I took one quick look back at [i] Pathfinder [/i] as Jo got on board [i] Alpha 1 [/i] and followed her in. I didn't bother to shut the hatch; I simply went over to the controls and sat in my seat. [i] Alpha 1 [/i] whined with some unknown stress as I turned her through 180* and flew carefully past [i] Scorpion [/i]. I took one final look at the shadowy form of the M4 as she drifted by out of view and then slowed down so Jo could disembark. I turned round to face her.

"You go first Jo, [i] Reaper's [/i] heat sensors are still working, follow our engine trail back out to the surface, I'm going to deploy Navigational beacons to help us get back to [i] Pathfinder [/i]"

"Right, good luck Jules"

"I'll be with you every step of the way" I replied as she dropped out of the hatch. As soon as she was out of view, I unclipped another distress pod from the wall and activated its homing beacon manually. Alpha 1 had no proper Navigational Relay Satellites on board so distress pods would have to do. I dropped the pod from the hatch and floated back over to my seat. I checked on the scanner that the beacon was transmitting and rested my hand ready on the throttle control. I saw [i] Reaper's [/i] onboard lights flicker to life and the battered Bayamon turned on her axis and flew back around the corner. I throttled up and followed...

We flew through the winding tunnels a lot faster than we had on coming in. I occasionally stopped to drop off a navigation beacon for the return journey. [i] Reaper [/i] spun and twisted around corners ahead of me, Jo was quite a good pilot, I thought as we sped through the catacombs. I was frequently catching Alpha one's protruding parts on the walls, knocking off rock and scratching paintwork. I just hoped I didn't do any damage to the exposed GHEPT. Then I thought what the heck, its power cables have probably been chewed through by now by those bugs. I spun [i] Alpha 1 [/i] around a bend and suddenly got a familiar feeling. The inside of the tunnel, illuminated by the floodlights of [i] Alpha 1 [/i] and [i] Reaper [/i] was smooth, as if some one had polished it. We were in the first tunnel we had come through, the one that led back out into space. I throttled up as [i] Reaper [/i] began to pull away. Jo was eager to get out of this hellish place, and I wasn't one to disagree with her. I was almost flying at full speed now, which was about 50kpm. [i] Alpha 1's [/i] engines must have been dessert for the bugs. [i] Reaper [/i] was going a bit quicker than me at about 60kpm and was slowly pulling away. I edged in my seat as a tiny speck appeared beyond [i] Reaper [/i] at the end of the tunnel. I gripped the control stick and the throttle lever tighter as we sped as fast as we could down the long thin corridor. It WAS getting thinner; the sides seemed to be getting narrower by the sezura. If I wasn't careful, I would end up snagging either of [i] Alpha 1's [/i] guns on the walls and swinging the ship inward towards the wall. At this speed, that would be a pretty nasty crash. I gritted my teeth, concentrating on the tunnel before me. I was staring so intently at the width of the passage that I didn't notice [i] Reaper's [/i] right arm snag on an outcropping, dragging the ship inward towards the wall. When I noticed something was amiss, the M4 was already turning towards the wall. [i] Reaper [/i] smashed into the wall at full speed, I didn't see what damage that did but I could

pretty much guess. The starboard arm was pulled free and flew back into the path of [i] Alpha 1 [i]. The arm missed my ship by inches but the detached Particle Accelerator Cannon bounced off the nose and up over the cockpit with a loud clang. I pulled the throttle back hard, jarring [i] Alpha 1 [i] into a crazy spin. I tried to control the ship as sheets of metal and other debris bounced and pinged off the view screen. I stared in horror as [i] Reaper [i] was spun through 180*, the shattered cockpit facing me. I yelled as [i] Alpha 1 [i] hurtled towards the rapidly disintegrating Bayamon. All that filled the comm. was Jo's scream of terror as she saw the nose of an Argon Nova descending on her fast. With a nasty crunch, [i] Alpha 1 [i] plowed into [i] Reaper [i], full on in the cockpit...

I shut my eyes tight as my Nova tore through the remains of the stricken M4 and emerged through the centre of where the three remaining arms were connected. [i] Alpha 1 [i] continued on through the wreckage and finally stopped a couple of hundred meters away from the awful accident. Not a sound escaped my chest, even though I wanted to scream all the way back to Argon Prime. I scrambled out of my chair, colliding with the wall due to the lack of gravity and dived for the hatch. After levering the doors open and scrabbling with my propellant unit, I jetted out of [i] Alpha 1 [i] and pushed the propulsion unit to max to get back across to the wreckage. Chunks of debris floated everywhere, silently spinning through the tunnel. I inwardly screamed, praying to whatever gods there were that Jo had somehow escaped unharmed. I pushed aside a large chunk of hull and searched the scattered remains frantically. I jetted down to the 'floor' of the tunnel and heaved aside one of [i] Reaper's [i] ex-arms. There was nothing, not a sight of Jo's space suited form. For a horrible seizure I imagined her impaled on one of [i] Alpha 1's [i] guns but then I saw the prone form drifting through space, the Space suited body gently spinning head over heel in an eternal cartwheel.

"JO!" I screamed, too blind with fear to check the life signs readings. Her body was still in one piece, fortunately but there seemed to be no sign of movement on the other side of the visor. I felt myself sicken as I noticed the dark splodge on the inside of the visor. It wasn't the blood that made me queasy, but the thought of Jo's head splattered on the inside of the helmet. I suddenly thought to scan for life. The small belt attachment vibrated in my hand, which was unusual as it never made any sound or movements normally. A great heave of relief went through me as the readout showed Jo's vital organs were undamaged and she was still breathing normally. She must have taken a blow to the head however, as no matter how much I shook her, I got no response. I checked the suit all over for obvious ruptures and, seeing none, did a quick scan of her suits schematics. There was a hole. I felt my blood freeze as a sense of dread washed over me. I grabbed Jo's body and powered my suit up to full, heading back over to [i] Alpha 1 [i]. I hurled her body up into the cabin and followed swiftly, closing the hatch behind me. Jo's body, after bouncing off the ceiling, came back down to rest in my open arms. I thought frantically, she had miraculously survived the collision but her suit was ruptured. Of course! The bugs! They must have chewed through a joint seal or something. That worried me. I had spend long enough out exposed to the awful nebula. Was my suit punctured too? A quick analysis showed otherwise and that eased the tension slightly. But what was I to do with Jo? Should I pressurize the cabin, swap suits and then depressurize again? No that would be insane, the sudden pressure on the inside might burst the already weakened hull and if I donned her suit, I would not live long enough to get her back to safety. Then she would be left a victim of the bugs as they slowly ate the ship and then my suit on her. There was only one thing I could do, pressurize the cabin and keep it pressurized. Of course that ran the risk of blowing out the ship completely but it was a risk I would have to take in order to keep Jo alive. Decided, I manipulated the control console from an angle, scanning the hull of [i] Alpha 1 [i] for breeches and then activating the pressurizing sequence. The sudden rush of air pressed on the outside of my suit as the air particles rushed through the vents and a familiar hiss reached my ears through the helmet as the particles began to vibrate. The hull began to creak and groan. This is it, I thought, she can't take the strain. But the tough little Nova held together and the pressurization monitor chimed in the green. I yanked off my helmet and breathed in the somewhat fresh air. It was like drinking a cup of water after a long time in a desert, breathing in that air. It filled my lungs with freshness and a renewed hope. I unclipped Jo's helmet, pausing, thinking about the state of her face. As it turned out she had hit her head and had had a mega nosebleed. Her eyes were closed and her head lolled gently to one side. I gently raised her up, already drifting as she was, until her head was parallel with mine. The right half of her face was wet with red blood, her hair was messy and much of it had come out of

the neat bun she had previously tied it into and her pale skin was covered with a thin layer of perspiration. But my mind put all of these facts aside and I stared into that peaceful face for the first time since we left [i] Samarkand [/i]. I stroked her cheek with my thumb and kissed her softly on the lips.

“It’s going to be alright” I whispered. “I’ll save you, I promise”

I nestled her into a gap between an empty crate and a tool box behind the command seat so she wouldn’t drift around freely and floated over and down into the chair itself. With nothing on my mind but the hardened resolve to get Jo out alive, I throttled up to full an left the remains of the valiant Bayamon [i] Reaper [/i] behind in the dark depths of the asteroid...

[i] Alpha 1 [/i] crawled through the dense nebula, the microscopic bugs eating away at her hull constantly. The cooler had failed almost 10 mizurae ago now and we were slowly cooking inside the cockpit. The ship was on autopilot, headed for the Rhy’s Desire gate at full speed, SETA and all. This however, was not fast enough and the bugs were chewing on the outside of the hull, forever getting nearer to a breach. I floated above Jo, gently mopping her brow with a damp towel. I had cleaned her face of all the dried blood and checked for broken bones. She had miraculously escaped with two broken ribs and a bruised kidney, or so the medical computer said. I wasn’t too sure whether to trust it as it was only a medical computer for a fighter and it might have had several parts eaten. Jo’s face had gone pale, if she had been knocked out or simply past out because of the pain she was in I simply could not tell.

How long was this going to take? I had sent my single remaining distress pod through the gate, hoping that [i] Samarkand [/i] had for some reason come to the gate but I feared the worst for the little pod. Maybe the Split were waiting for us on the other side. If so then we were doomed, Alpha 1 was in no condition for combat. The moment I thought that, the system integrity icon on the console blared to life, warning me of a shield failure, typical. The bugs had munched on the shield generator, leaving me defenseless with no operable guns, no shields and half a hull that could burst any minute.

[i] Alpha 1 [/i] was crawling at an immensely slow pace, her engines on the verge of expiring. I had no idea how far off the borderline of the nebula we were and how long it would take for us to reach the gate. I let my arms float free, letting go of Jo, who simply floated there like a corpse. All of my strength was falling rapidly away from me. The blistering heat from the lack of coolant made me dizzy. I slowly drifted to the back of the cabin and bumped into the wall. My head was swimming about me, I couldn’t see straight. I tried to will my arms to push me towards the console but my tired muscles had finally given up. Ah, I thought, who cared if the hull was breached now? Jo’s unconscious and I soon will be, we’ll both pass away soundly. My only thought was one of dismay as I couldn’t fulfill Chianna’s legacy. My mind swam with images of what I had seen today, the ruined gate, the debris field that was once the [i] A.P. Hunter [/i], the huge labyrinth of tunnels inside the asteroid, [i] Scorpion [/i], [i] Pathfinder [/i], the list went on. It all seemed so long ago, even though I knew we hadn’t been here less than a mazura. My view of Jo’s floating body slurred and ran away from my eyes as they drooped into unconsciousness. [i] Alpha 1 [/i] ploughed on rebelliously through the nebula. Heading toward the gate, the bugs forever gnawing at her hull.

I must have been unconscious for quite a while because when I woke up the cabin was dark and most of the lights on the dashboard were winking and blinking quite normally. I looked over to Jo where she drifted in the air. I tried to move but my body wasn’t quite up to it yet and I ended up floating to the ceiling of the cabin and painfully banging my head on a protruding piece of hardware. For a moment I just let myself float, slowly regaining my senses. At least it wasn’t blistering hot anymore. In fact, it was quite cold, very cold actually. I had goose pimples running all the way down my arms. I shivered, I thought the cooler was down, I mused to myself as I gently maneuvered myself around and over to the console. Hull was down to 45% and we were scrawling along at a new record for slow paces. The engines were outputting at about 30kpm now. I did a quick scan of the ship’s integrity. All of the outside heat sensors and cameras were down, chewed up by the bugs. Both the BHEPTs were out of action and the shield generator was kaput. I sighed and eased myself into the chair. I rested my head on the rest built into my seat and closed my eyes. I had a killer headache and wanted to take a painkiller tablet badly. I opened my eyes again to stare out into space. Space! I sat bolt upright in the chair to look further out of the window. We were surrounded by tiny specks and clusters of stars. That’s why it was cold; we

were out of the nebula! I almost whooped for joy but my headache said otherwise. I couldn't believe it, we were out of the nebula and into deep space. I wondered how far we were but just at that moment the autopilot pivoted [i] Alpha 1 [/i] around and I saw the beautiful circle of the Rhy's Desire jump gate looming up ahead.

"Jo, JO" I turned around and shook her, no movement. I turned back to the gate, excitement written all across my face. We were going home. A small pyramidal object spiraled idly around the gate, seemingly practicing spins and dives. Prometheus! I clumsily fiddled with the communications console and opened the Khaak M3 audio channel.

"Prometheus, form up" I said and then to my horror remembered that Helios was still waiting patiently by the asteroid. I had forgotten to order her into formation. Will a eerie sense of dread looming in the background, I checked the system map for Helios. There was the gate, and the wreckage of [i] Hunter [/i]. And there, by the large asteroid sat the small green square indicating Helios. I quickly accessed her data bank and checked all systems. I sat back in my chair and gasped. Helios was 100% in the green. Not a scratch on her bodywork. Her hull must be impervious to the bugs, I thought, and then they are alien ships, perhaps the material their made from isn't metal, or at least, not digested by the bugs. I cursed to myself; we could have changed to Helios and set the autopilot. Oh well, what was done was done.

"Helios, move to location, east gate, and await further orders."

The icon blinked once and I averted my gaze to the swirling vortex that would slingshot us halfway across the galaxy in a matter of seconds. The jump gate loomed ahead, swamping [i] Alpha 1 [/i] as she gradually closed the distance between her and the gate at a snails pace. I got out of my seat and drifted back to where Jo floated. I pulled her down from the air and rested her head against my chest. "It's going to be okay Jo" I said to her "Were getting out of here" I rested my chin on her head and waited for the vortex to swallow us.

The swirling vortex faded away and the familiar orange glow illuminated [i] Alpha one's [/i] cockpit. The orange mists immediately engulfed the little Nova. I switched to manual control and moved the ship around a bit to get the feel of her. She seemed to be responding well, although her pitch was a little off. As I turned [i] Alpha 1 [/i] testing her controls, I saw a huge form cutting a swathe through the orange swirls toward us. It was just a silhouette but the shape was unmistakable. I swallowed hard as the Split Python came to a halt about 7k off [i] Alpha one's [/i] nose, just within communications range. This was it, I shut my eyes tight, we're doomed...

[i] Samarkand [/i] was nowhere to be seen and it seemed we were surrounded as more ships materialized from the clouds. I opened my eyes again as the comm. console chirped.

"Mr. Gardna? Mr. Gardna? This is Captain Sherwin of the [i] Razor [/i], can you hear me?" a woman's voice crackled over the loudspeaker.

"Sherwin? Of course! The Python is [i] Razor [/i]! And [i] Razors [/i] one of our ships! There was a pause. And then,

"Indeed sir, listen, the situation is hot here, dock with the [i] Razor [/i] and we'll give you the details."

My head was spinning. This Python in front of me was an ally, and one I was very grateful for too. I checked the map to see that the other ships were GSS's three Centaurs, the [i] Logos [/i], the [i] Hammer [/i] and the [i] Trinity [/i] and GSS's single Osprey, the [i] Xanatos [/i]. I maneuvered the battered [i] Alpha 1 [/i] sp she faced the Python and initiated the automatic docking procedures. The battered ship moved toward the tiny docking bay situated between the Python's two main bodies. I saw the docking doors open and a stream of blue light lit up the area like a beacon. [i] Alpha 1 [/i] slowed down, which was about 2kpm slower than she had been going and angled herself in line with the open hangar. She then moved forward and soon the blue light enveloped us and took us inside. [i] Alpha 1 [/i] came to rest in the centre of the hangar. I heard the mighty twin bulkheads slide shut behind her and for the first time in nearly two days, I felt safe and secure.

I stepped from the hatch of [i] Alpha 1 [/i] and onto the deck of the [i] Razor's [/i] hangar bay, the ArtGrav holding me down at the usual Argon Prime 1.2g. I walked a little way away from the Nova to inspect the damage. What I saw made me take in a deep breath of air, God were we lucky! I was stood at the front of the ship, looking straight at the blackened view port. The Plasteel window looked as if it had been set alight and the ship was covered all over with those rusty colored patches.

The starboard gun casing was missing where I had skimmed the Split Dragon and there were rents and tares all over the amour, probably where I had collided with the inside of the asteroid. A thought struck me, what if we had brought some of the bugs on board with us? They would contaminate this ship and eat it from the inside out!

I hurried over to the nearest technician, a burly Paranid with a funny hat. He rotated his wide bulk around when he heard my footsteps.

“Mr. Gardna, Paranid pleased to meet you, being as you are so intelligent for an inferior species.”

“Yes, yes, listen. You have to scan the ship for microscopic organisms. If there are any you need to get that ship out of here now!” I pointed vigorously at [i] Alpha 1 [/i]

“It’s all right Nanoskratt, I’ll handle this, return to your duty”

I turned, dumbfounded, to the short middle aged woman stood before me. My eyebrows must have gone up a couple of centimeters. I guessed by the look on Captain Sherwin’s face.

“Captain” I said icily.

“Good to see you again Julian” The Captain had short brown hair that ended at her shoulders and emerald green eyes that glinted in the light.

“That’s mister Gardna to you, I’m not in the mood to be called Julian. Listed Gillian, you’ve got to...”

“It’s all right [i] mister [/i] Gardna. We scanned your ship for anything out of the ordinary, any organisms on [i] Alpha 1’s [/i] hull will have been killed inside the warp”

“Yes, of course” I said, thinking for a second. “Jo” I walked over to the battered Nova and climbed back up through the hatch. Scooping Jo up in my arms, I swung my legs out of the hatch again and dropped neatly to the floor. Ducking under the hull, I walked back over to Sherwin and indicated she should follow. We walked though the bulkhead to the port side of the Python and made our way to the sick bay.

Sherwin pressed her thumb up to the recognition plate and the electronic voice said “Access granted, Captain Sherwin, please enter” We walked into the sick bay, me still carrying the limp form of Jo in my arms. To my immediate left there was a desk and a row of computer banks. Each screen hummed, giving a background sound to the room. In front of me there was a light blue partition that led from halfway into the room up to the wall with the computer banks. Its purpose was to separate the main entrance from the main ward. We turned right and came out into the main ward. There were ten beds, neatly lined up five a side along the walls. Only one was occupied, by a pale looking Teladi.

“Banged his head in his work shift.” A bass voice called from behind me. I turned to see Noah Smith, the ships doctor. His black skin shined in the artificial light from the overhead lamps as if it were lined with a faint sheet of water. Probably perspiration, I guessed. He nodded to the Teladi. “On deck three doing pressure chamber maintenance; one of the piping struts came loose and took him out. He’s not woken up yet.

“Will he be okay?” I asked

“Yes, I should think so; he’s just unconscious that’s all. When he does though, he’ll have one hell of a nasty headache. So, what have we here?” He indicated to the prone figure in my arms.

“Josephine Danielle Rider, Senior Paymaster and Commander of GSS [i] Samarkand [/i]. She took a nasty blow to the head, like our Teladi friend over there, and she’s been unconscious for about three hours. I passed out too on our way here but I think it was due to dehydration.” I said all this rather fast, taking my breath away ever so slightly.

“Okay, put Miss Rider down on a bed and get yourself seated, once I’ve checked her over I’ll take a look at you”

I complied and walked over to the nearest bed to deposit Jo. I laid her down gently and moved a rogue strand of hair out of her eyes. She looked so peaceful, just lying there with her eyes closed. I kissed her on the forehead and walked back over to Sherwin, who was looking at me with mock horror.

“No remarks please Captain” I said, giving her an evil eye.

“Well Joules, I never knew you had it in you!”

“Your dismissed Captain” I said, waving a hand at her and turning back to Dr Smith.

She just laughed and turned on her heel. After Sherwin had gone, I pulled up a chair next to Jo’s bed. Dr Smith told me he wouldn’t be long and had gone over through to a small room that led

off from the main ward. I looked at Jo's face, feeling something utterly new to me. I found her hand a squeezed it tight.

I stared out of the window of the sick bay. The deep blue of space lay out before me. We had left the orange nebula about four mizuras ago, leaving the [i] Xanatos [/i] to keep the Split from taking the new system. The [i] Razor [/i] was now headed towards the [i] Ministry of Finance [/i] gate, but we were probably likely to encounter heavy Split resistance. Captain Sherwin had said that all of GSS was now considered an enemy of the Split Dynasty and we now found ourselves stuck in a Split system with an angry family waiting to avenge their lost sons and daughters at the gate. I looked out at the pinprick stars and graceful constellations. I wondered if any of them that I could see were Earth. I suppose it was wishful thinking. I thought back to the broken gate and the message left by the Gunners. There had now proved to be three Earth gates, with the Brennan's Triumph gate, the electronically destroyed gate and now this one. Maybe Sol had been a system of importance to the aliens who made the gates, or maybe it was just chance that they all locked onto the Earth gates. After a conversation with Smith, I had found out that the [i] Samarkand [/i] had radioed for help when the Split military arrived. Sherwin responded straight away with the majority of GSS's M6s for backup. They had jumped in and immediately encountered resistance. The [i] Samarkand [/i] was waiting on the other side of the east gate, but as the Split had blockaded the gate, coming through would be suicide. After a little skirmish with the local Split Raptor, now identified as the [i] Vermillion [/i], Sherwin radioed for help yet again, and was rewarded by the [i] Agamemnon [/i] jumping in via the south gate and taking up position in between the east and west gates, blocking the Split from the rescue mission. Then the [i] Razor proceeded to the new gate and attempted to contact us. After no response, they were planning on taking the [i] Razor [/i] through but we showed up just as they completed system jump procedures. I in turn had told Smith about the wrecked gate and the asteroidal tunnels and [i] Scorpion [/i]. I avoided all the parts about Earth; he could learn later when we had assessed the situation. He was intrigued by all of it and responded with an awed "You're lucky to be alive". He was now stooping over Jo, checking her brain was functioning properly after being rattled about. As I looked out of the window, an Argon Nova sped past, probably taking up formation. This was it, we were going in. There was a cough from behind as Smith cleared his throat. "Mr. Gardna, someone wants to see you." I stood up and walked across to Jo's bed. Smith quietly went back into his office and shut the door. I pulled up a chair and sat next to Jo's bed. She looked up at me weakly and smiled. I returned her gesture and put my hand on hers. "We got out okay?" she croaked, her voice hoarse. "Yeah, we got out fine" I said back "Just as I promised" She tried to sit up, thought better of it, and gently set herself back onto the pillow. Instead she clasped her hands around mine and looked directly into my eyes. Her blue eyes shone with a tiny bit of their old mischievous glint. "Thank you so much Joules. You saved my life, and I don't know how I can ever thank you for that" "Oh, please, don't think anything of it, it's what any decent bloke would have done" I said, trying to sound casual, but ending up exploding into a silly grin. She grinned back at me, slowly resting her head on the pillow and closing her eyes once more. "My head hurts!" she complained "And I bet my hairs a mess" "Oh, not at all! You look simply gorgeous." I teased. She looked at me and smiled again. Not a mischievous grin or a sarcastic 'hardy har har' smile, but an understanding smile, a smile that said I trust you. And I looked deeply into those ice blue eyes and that feeling washed over me again. I slowly stood and bent over her, taking care not to catch any of the feeds going into her arms. I kissed her soundly on the lips, and this time, she returned it with just as much enthusiasm.

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On the bridge of the GSS [i] Razor [/i], Captain Gillian Sherwin looked at the holographic image of the system map. Two Split Pythons and the Split Raptor [i] Vermillion [/i] sat in between them and the gate to [i] Ministry of Finance [/i]. The GSS [i] Agamemnon [/i], a Paranid Odysseus, sat half way between the orange nebula and the Split warships, forcing a stalemate between the two formidable fleets. It was going to be tough getting out of here.

“Helm, power up to one hundred kpm and advance on the [i] Agamemnon [/i], communications, signal Nova Gamma squadron to form up aft and tell the Centaurs to take arrowhead formation.” After a series of ‘yes ma’ams’ and ‘roger that’s’, Gillian Sherwin sat down in the command chair, chewing on the thumbnail and looking out of the main view screen and the small specks of stations in the distance. She called up a magnified image of one speck and put it on the chair’s miniscreen. The image showed a Split Python, rotating on its axis to face the distant [i] Razor [/i]. “So it begins.” She whispered silently.