

# Homebound

4<sup>th</sup> Story of the Traders Tale series.

Credits .....	2
Chapter 1 .....	3
Chapter 2 .....	14
Chapter 3 .....	24
Chapter 4 .....	34
Chapter 5 .....	43
Chapter 6 .....	52
Chapter 7 .....	63
Chapter 8 .....	71
Chapter 9 .....	82
Chapter 10 .....	91
Chapter 11 .....	101
Chapter 12 .....	113
Chapter 13 .....	123
Chapter 14 .....	135
Chapter 15 .....	145
Chapter 16 .....	155
Chapter 17 .....	165
Chapter 18 .....	175
Chapter 19 .....	185
Chapter 20 .....	194
Chapter 21 .....	204
Chapter 22 .....	211
Epilogue .....	219

## ***Credits***

This is an unofficial novel based on the X-Universe as featured in three excellent games from Egosoft, X-Beyond the Frontier, X-Tension and X<sup>2</sup> and the author acknowledges all copyrights.

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This novel follows on from the first Traders Tale originally published on the game forum in rough draft, and with the encouragement of the forum members, is the fourth story in the series.

Homebound is intended to bring a new perspective to the X-Universe through the story of the life of a young man, who continues to find adventure through his association with the Argon Secret Service.

This story precedes the fourth game in the X-Universe series and encompasses elements of the new ships and locations in X<sup>2</sup>.

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Stephen Haworth

## *Chapter 1*

A crowd had gathered in the command centre to study the screens. Tor stood looking perplexed as the sleek lines of the ship moved to engage the Mohrabas pilot less drones that swarmed from the Mohrabas warship.

Liann sat at the master control centre with Broden standing close behind, "Ten fighting drones have been released!" And the craft in the middle of the display surged forward, "Speed now four hundred and fifty mps."

Weapons fire flashed in the darkness and rippled against the shields when two lancing particle beams lashed out to be followed by explosions.

"That's new." Broden observed.

"The drones are barely making an impact of the shields." Liann glanced up as two more drones were reduced to glowing spheres of superheated particles.

The ship made a break for open space drawing the pursuing fighters. Rolling and banking there was another surge in the power readings and two of the remaining drones exploded.

"There's a change of heading." Liann looked up, "She's coming towards us."

Broden responded, "Make sure the way's clear, I don't want anyone else getting involved."

The ship suddenly slowed looped and with four quick successive explosions reduced the drones to vapour. Swinging around it sped towards the Silicon Mine. Tor watched, "Well."

Liann reported, "The Defiance reports testing is complete and requests docking permission."

With a look of relief Tor said, "Permission granted."

Broden approached him, "So how are the nerves holding up?"

Tor glanced over, "Am I that obvious?"

Broden nodded, "I think we should review the data now whilst it's still fresh. Shall we head for the office?"

"Lead on."

Broden began to move when Tris approached, "Mind if I tag along?"

"By all means," Broden smiled as with Tris present she would be able to understand Tors' concerns and talk to him in private and just find out that little bit more information to hopefully ease his conscience.

The three of them stepped into the office and the door slid shut as Tor strolled over to the private bar and fetched three glasses with a flask of juice. Placing them on the coffee table he dropped onto the leather sofa and Tris sat beside him whilst Broden took a seat opposite. Slouching down further and with his head rolled back to look at the ceiling Tor asked the world in general, "What am I doing?"

Broden leant forward, opened the flask and poured the liquid into each of the glasses, "You're trying to get us home again."

Tor didn't move, "Do you think the Defiance is up to it?"

"Considering the changes we've made, I really hope so." Broden relaxed.

"Doctor Scellar expressed a lot of concerns about the gravity unit being used to overcome the inertia effect. What's your view?" Tor looked at Broden.

Broden took a moment to think and he had to agree with the doctor. Interplanetary driven ships were always fitted with an inertial damping system of some kind, "The gravity unit is the most primitive method and least efficient way to overcome the problem, but we don't have time to develop something more compact and sophisticated."

Tris asked, "What does that mean exactly?"

Broden looked over at her, "It's an equal and opposite force situation, under extremely high acceleration Tor's body will want to become part of the chair, the gravity unit simply drags his whole body forward uniformly at a rate not too dissimilar to the rate that he will be pushed along at by the acceleration of the ship. If that makes any sense to you?"

Tris sighed, "I know the principle. A person standing on the deck of a ship, that engages maximum thrust without activation of the inertial dampening, remains travelling at the old rate whilst the wall of the ship behind him, accelerating at the new rate, slams into him at over ten times the speed of a maxed out Pegasus, reducing flesh and bone to liquid and spreading them atom thin over the wall."

Tor looked up at the ceiling and sighed, "Guys, this is a little bit too much detail for me to have to think about right now."

Tris looked over at him before returning her attention to Broden, "But I can't see how a gravity unit would be able to apply sufficient attraction without itself doing damage to the person."

Broden shrugged, "The Roamer's scientists have done the math's, they think it's doable but don't expect to get maximum thrust from the Defiance. It's a fine balancing act apparently."

Tor asked, "And what happens if they've made a mistake?"

"The Defiance engines will cut out as soon as there's any sign of physical harm and it'll be a slow deceleration. The Mohrabas have a recovery ship standing by." Broden sounded reassuring.

Tris asked, "Now, we're just jumping to the next sector, so I'm a little confused as to why Tor needs to take the risk of having interplanetary drive capability?"

Broden glanced at her, "History my dear. The sector Tor is jumping to, has the gates set in their original positions unlike our own sectors.

Long ago the Trade Guild experimented with moving gates closer together for the benefit of commerce. Taking a stazura, or even tazuras, to get from one sector to another was a lost profit opportunity, as ships and crews needed to be paid, perishable goods would go off and a whole list of other reasons. Including getting a strike force to a sector four or five jumps away without spending tazuras getting there to finding a wasteland.

From a military standpoint this made a lot of sense with the races, as any invasion would be concentrated in one small area rather than having to worry about ships arriving on the other side of the solar system."

Tor put his arm around her, "Where Broden is getting to, is that the sector we're jumping to has its gates several hundreds of thousands of kilometres apart. Unlike home where they're mostly around sixty to seventy kilometres apart."

Broden acknowledged this with a nod, "The short of it is, is an unmodified Defiance would take about thirty five jazuras to reach the other gate in the sector he's jumping to."

Tris asked, "Have the Mohrabas been able to help at all?"

Tor looked at Broden, who stared back at him looking for him to provide the answer, "They've certainly been trying to assist. Just that our beloved friend on the Defiance hasn't been too co-operative."

Broden commented, "I'd never thought an AI would hold a grudge."

Tor smiled, "Yeah, I don't think she'll ever admit being pissed off about them opening fire on her. Pity though, the Mohrabas technology is significantly more advanced than our own. As I understand it, their warships overcome the problem by generating a sub-space bubble within the ship. The bubble moves with the ship, everything outside is subjected to the inertial forces involved, however everything inside the bubble isn't. But don't ask me to explain why, as it's something to do with the sub-space remaining still relative to itself. Anyway the system is supposed to require more power than the Defiance can afford to spare."

Broden felt heartened to see Tor smile, as it was one of the few times he had borne witness to it in many tazuras. The younger man appeared to be aging daily in front of him, but Tor held his reservations and concerns to himself, "Well there's a first for some time."

"What is?" Tor looked at him.

Broden gave a slight grin, "You smiling, don't take this personally but it's personal! Smile a bit more lad, it chases away those worry lines that seem to be etching themselves into your face at an alarming rate."

Tor gave a slight laugh, "Why do I employ you?"

Broden answered, "For my plain and simple honesty, Sir."

Tor's smile broadened as Tris laughed quietly, "On that note I think we should retire to bed before someone spoils the moment."

Tor stirred and glanced at the time piece on the bedside table, then sighed. He knew he had not had enough sleep, but his growing anxiety about the first flight of the new Defiance weighed heavily on his mind. Carefully he untangled himself from Tris, slid out of bed, and took a quick shower so as not to disturb her. He dressed, slipped out of the room and headed to his office. He noted that Alaisha was working the late shift in the command centre, and she briefly glanced up from the console as he stepped up to his office door.

He paused for a moment, then changing his mind he gave her a quick wave of acknowledgement before turning towards the lifts. As he strolled away he heard Alaisha say officially, "Acknowledged crew seventeen. Heat exchanger in corridor gamma six is fluctuating out of calibration and requires rework." There was a pause, and then her soft voice carried down the silent corridor, "Departure clearance granted, proceed to outer airlock doors."

The shuttle lift doors opened, he stepped in and after a short trip down to the dock level he absent-mindedly wandered into the gym. Standing on the tread mill, he set the pace to a fast sprint, while lost in thought, he started to run, not the laboured pounding run of many, it had a certain natural flowing movement where his feet simply glided over the rubber surface teasing it to go faster, while virtually making no sound. As for Tor he appeared calm and un-phased by the exercise, barely breaking into a sweat while his composure remained pensive.

After eight mizuras and nearly five kilometres Tor was brought to a stop by the machine. He moved on to the resistance weights and absently increased the load before beginning his regular workout.

At this point many of the hardened gym enthusiasts began to leave. Tor, in a relaxed way, shifted masses nearly twice his own weight repeatedly, with one arm, yet his build and muscle structure had no apparent desire to bulk out.

He recalled the recent conversation with the Defiance AI, Broden had been present, and he smiled.

The AI declared, "I have come to a decision about my name. I have decided to keep it simple and short."

Tor responded, "Excellent so what do you want us to call you?"

The AI replied, "Ace. But it is spelt A I C"

Broden thought about it and asked, "Shouldn't that be pronounced more like 'ache' than 'ace'?"

She had replied, "No!"

Tor had refrained from grinning and asked, "What does it stand for Sw... sorry Ace?"

The AI answered, "Ambassador for Intelligent Computers."

Broden observed, "Doesn't that mean you should be called Afic?"

She said, "No!"

Tor smiled, "Is this a self appointed position?"

Her tone had hardened, "Are you two going to be serious for a moment? You asked me what I would like to be called and I have now fulfilled the request."

Broden sighed, "Ace, just to make a small observation but the initials AIC also refers to the Advanced Industries Corporation that the Roamer belongs to."

Tor nodded, "Broden's right."

There had been a long quiet silence and then the AI said softly and quietly, "Then I want to be called Corricel."

There was a longer silence before Broden said quietly, "That's the name of the brightest star, as seen from the homeworld, in the Wastelands system."

Corricel responded, "Broden you surprised me by knowing that piece of useless trivia. But it was the name of my core systems programmer."

Broden said, "And a good choice Corricel."

Tor nodded, "And a much better way of choosing a name than playing with anagrams."

It still took Tor a while to try to adjust to the new name, and on absent-minded occasions he still called the AI Sweetie, but now she refused to answer. As he completed his circuit and wandered to the showers, he glanced back absently and wondered if he had missed anything.

Having showered again, he made his way to the food hall. One of the new found benefits of dealing with the Mohrabas was the new range of food available to them. Diplomacy had been successful and although very little had been actually traded in terms of technology there was a market for trading food stuffs. Without credits, trading was done on the age old bartering system and as a rule the stations always ended up supplying less than they received. Not that Tor felt concerned, as the locals would inherit all the stations as soon as they were ready to leave for home.

Tor regretted that there was only delexian wheat and argnu beef based products to offer, whereas the Mohrabas had provided over fifty different food stuffs that were suitable for the refugees to consume.

Ladening a hover tray with two plates, piled with various items from the buffet, and drinks he guided it out towards the lifts and returned to his room.

As the door opened the lights began to glow and gradually increased in intensity. The smell of breakfast arriving caused Tris to stir and stretch, and gradually she opened her eyes to look at the timepiece.

Tor said gently, "Breakfast is served."

She commented, "It's too early, come back to bed."

Being dressed, Tor just sat on the bed rather than slip between the sheets and pulled the hover tray closer, "It'd be a shame to let this go to waste."

Tris, her eyes resolutely closed, muttered, "What time did you get up?"

Tor shrugged, "Only a few mizuras ago."

Tris muttered, "You weren't here forty mizuras ago!"

Tor paused whilst eating, "I have a lot on my mind at the moment."

Tris shifted towards him and put her arm lazily about his waist, "Do you want to tell me about it or shall I help you to forget for a while."

Tor spent a few brief moments in contemplation, "This trip worries me. I can't help feel that we've just thrown together technology in a hap-hazard way and expect it to work."

Tris looked up at him, "If you don't think it's safe, can't you get Corricel to run the mission?"

Tor gave a half hearted smile, "It's not as simple as that. Not when our Mohrabas friends want to tag along."

Tris gave him a gentle squeeze, "Have you spoken to anyone else about this?"

"No."

"If you're concerned you should talk to someone."

Tor ran his hand through her hair, "I'm talking to you."

Tris sighed, "I meant someone like Broden or Sheero."

"They're already well aware of the risks and keep reminding me about them. But I have to do this if we want to see home again."

"That's the problem isn't it?" Tris spoke quietly, "It's becoming so personal that you don't think you can share the burden of responsibility. Somewhere in that skull of yours, you think that only you can succeed, and if you fail then none of us will be able to get home. Now let me remind you there are plenty of other pilots, just as good as you, who are equally capable of flying the Defiance. Now where's that breakfast?"

Broden sat in the Defiance running system level checks, the computer readings were also being monitored by the command centre. This was for his own piece of mind rather than a scheduled test run.

Corricel announced, "Matter - anti-matter containment fields operating within normal safety limits."

Broden asked, "Emergency power de-coupler shielding?"

Corricel responded, "Functioning at one hundred percent."

Broden studied the handheld datapad, "Reverse thrust transmission units?"

The computer AI ran the diagnostics and displayed the result, and so they continued until Broden could not remember the names of the remaining sub-systems.

Corricel asked, "Satisfied?"

Broden put his datapad back in his pocket, "I think so." He remained in the pilots seat and took a deep breath then let it out slowly, "I didn't want to mention this in front of Tor, but I did know your programmer Corricel Polant."

The computer AI did not respond immediately, "I did not know that."

Broden said, "No reason why you should have. But I just thought I'd say that your choice of name is a fitting tribute to a fine programmer and test pilot."

Corricel analysed his comment, "I have no record of what happened to her, but I take it from your words that she is dead."

"Yeah, officially it was a training exercise."

Corricel said, "Is that incorrect?"

Broden rose from his seat, "Ship she was piloting had a series five thousand chip on board. It ejected her into space without an environment suit on. That was the third reported case of AI psychosis." He turned to leave the ship.

Corricel said quietly, "Broden, I'm not like that."

The station commander looked back, "I know. You're proof that she actually got it right, which is why I think the name you've adopted is well chosen."

Corricel said, "You sound to have known her well?"

Broden gave a sad smile, "Just to talk to. I was also the one sent to recover the body and destroy the rogue ship." In the silence that followed he stepped out of the Defiance onto the docking platform and walked towards the shuttle lifts.

A few station pilots, having recently come off duty, sat in the bar. It was still the main focal point of the stations crew as the commercial section never had the opportunity to get itself established.

The silicon mine, he reflected, was still a fortress and safe haven for Tor following the assassination attempt. Only the stations own transports and freighters moved supplies and refined ore to the other manufacturing facilities. The exception to the rule was the occasional Mohrabas transport, one such ship resided at the dock. Its pilot would accompany Tor for the jump.

The shuttle lift door opened, he stepped in and rapidly ascended to the command centre deck. The corridor had been re-coloured to light pastel shades of blue from the stark white to make it easier on the eyes in the diffused light.

Liann, chief coordinator for the station, was just being updated on the previous shift by Alaisha. She gave Broden a smile before returning her attention to the report. He wandered across, "Morning ladies. Any sign of Tor?"

Liann glanced towards him, "Morning, and yes. He's in his office with ThaManya."

Broden made a mental note to remember the Mohrabas name. He stepped up to the office door and it slid open. Tor was sat at the briefing table with ThaManya next to him studying the technical specifications of the Defiance and projected test flight route. The first two runs, that would prove the stability of the new systems to interplanetary drive accelerations, would be unmanned allowing for final calibration of the inertial damping fields.

Tor glanced across, "Good morning. We're just having our preflight briefing if you'd care to join us."

He approached the table and positioned himself next to Tor, removing the datapad from his pocket he sat down. The familiarisation of the ship brief ended and moved on to the technical information concerning the hull stresses and fuel cell degradation during the acceleration and deceleration phases of the first manned voyage. The details included the average six g lag between the systems during hard acceleration and what the effects of prolonged exposure were likely to be.



Broden looked at Tor, "Good job you're fit. Or at least that's what the doctor tells me."

The end of the briefing was a combination of information, supplied by the Mohrabas archives on the sector pre Khaak invasion, and on the data gathered by the Defiance on the Khaak themselves, should they come across any.

With the computer briefing over, Broden announced, "The Defiance is ready to perform its first test run. We can monitor it from here or in the command centre, which would you prefer?"

Tor glanced at ThaManya, "The Command Centre, it'll give us a chance to get the blood moving again."

ThaManya purred, "A good suggestion."

Broden noted the Mohrabas was merely thirty centimetres taller than Tor, had light blue and white fur and only had three bumps rather than the swept back horns like the others of the race. Having become accustomed to the towering ThaStornla and three metre tall giant ThiRieth, this one was rather diminutive.

It was only when the creature turned and followed Tor to the door that it dawned on him that the Mohrabas co-pilot was actually a female of the species. The first one he had encountered since their arrival in the solar system.

He smiled, and followed them out for the short stroll to the command centre which meant there was no chance for him to get ahead and announce their arrival to Liann.

She looked up from the master control desk, and the other coordinators on duty glanced over before returning their attention to monitoring the running of the station and issuing instructions. Liann said, "Defiance you are cleared for departure. Engaging computer guidance controls to the outer airlock." She looked at the visitors, "I'll put the ship on the main observation viewer."

Before long the Defiance had cleared the outer airlock under AI control, the up rated thrusters barely registering output as it manoeuvred towards its initial start point. Tor looked pensive as the observation viewer was split into three views. One of the ship as observed by the station, one in the cockpit of the defiance looking out and the last displayed a constant datalog on the power levels, shield and hull integrity, structural shear forces, plus a number of other readings.

Liann reported, "The Defiance has reached the start of her run. Corricel all systems are registering as functioning within normal parameters. When you're ready you can engage thrusters."

Corricel said, "Primary and secondary engine coils are fully charged engaging main thrusters."

The station view of the ship saw the engine pods flare and then it became a rapidly diminishing light. The view from the cockpit was slightly less impressive as the flight path had been deliberately set not to pass within range of other vessels or stations. Tor winced as the registered 'g' force touched forty before dropping as the gravity unit was adjusted to compensate. The speed of the Defiance touched on twenty kilometres a sezura and it continued to accelerate.

The reverse thrusters applied then disengaged and the Defiance executed a perfect one hundred and eighty degree turn before engaging the main thrusters and using the significantly greater thrust to slow the ship with attitude jets firing to maintain direction. A Mohrabas warship drifted past having predicted the arrest point of the Defiance, it had arrived there first.

The Defiance ran full diagnostic tests on all systems efficiency and fuel cell consumption rate. This took several mizuras and back on the silicon mine the pre and post run diagnostics were displayed side by side. Some of the lesser subsystems had drifted and just as a precaution were reset. The Defiance then moved forward for its second run, maintaining the cabin measured acceleration at six g throughout the entire acceleration phase. Once again Corricel used the Defiance main thrusters to

slow the craft and bring it to rest. The attitude jets turned the ship until it faced the mine, then it slowly cruised forwards and requested docking permission.

Liann responded, "Docking permission granted and welcome back Corricel."

Corricel said, "Uploading flight data."

As soon as the Defiance touched on the dockside, technicians moved to the ship and ran independent scans. After half a stazura the preparations had been completed and the data reviewed.

Tor and ThaManya took their seats on the Defiance, and to Tor the ship had a completely new feel. Although much of the instrumentation had a familiar look the cockpit had been re-laid out with additional monitors, and he glanced back at the interior, its newness left him with a slight twinge of sadness that the ship had lost too much of its familiarity that he once regarded as a second home.

Tor returned his attention to the instrument panel, "Corri, give me a status check and get us departure clearance." The navigation system flickered to life. This too had been up rated to the HUD for a wider field of view.

Liann appeared on the comm, "Departure clearance granted, and good luck to all."

The clamps released and the ship was coaxed gently from its resting place to the docking tunnel. The inner airlock doors closed behind them, followed by the rush of air evacuating the bay prior to the outer doors splitting apart to reveal the stars. Tor touched lightly on the thruster control panel and the Defiance engines hummed with latent expectation. The ship moved forwards clearing the bay, and Tor noted the stabilised speed of one hundred metres per sezura. He touched the thruster controller again and the ship surged forward pushing him gently but firmly into his seat, the inter-sector drive restrictor was on, even so the Defiance graced four hundred and eighty metres per sezura. The engines hummed gently.

Tor steered the ship around, using the HUD, towards the nav marker for the start of the manned test run. ThaManya purred, "Approaching target, all systems online and functioning. Environment suit pressure increased for inertia compensation and inertia counter measures active."

Tor could feel himself being squeezed, he felt he had butterflies in his stomach from the nerves as his pulse rate increased, "Disengaging drive restrictor."

Corricel announced, "Drive restrictor disengaged, and Tor, relax."

He smiled and watched the nav marker on the HUD, "Ready to go."

ThaManya purred her own confirmation that she was ready. Tor tapped the throttle control and felt the hard shunt which took him by surprise. For a while he felt like every cell in his body was being stretched and crushed, it took a few moments before he had adjusted to the pressure. The speed indicator blinked as the Defiance continued to accelerate with a timer alert to acknowledge when the ship had reached terminal velocity.

He glanced briefly at the fuel cell consumption rate, and then back to the HUD. Corricel announced, "Maximum velocity reached, engines are now in idle."

Tor looked over to ThaManya, "Everything okay?"

The Mohrabas co-pilot responded, "That was quite an unusual experience. But I am fine."

Corricel announced, "Turning ship to begin deceleration."

The Defiance turned about its axis and the engines fired. Again the initial surge was greater than Tor expected, but he reminded himself he was only a passenger, all he had to do was sit back and watch as the AI took care of the flight. The constant pressure began to take its toll as his bladder sent signals to his brain telling him he needed to relieve himself.

He said, "I guess it's not a good time to need the loo?"

Corricel responded, "No. But if you do need to go I will shut down the engines. The only down side will be that we will overshoot the end marker by some considerable distance."

Tor felt perplexed and gritted his teeth, "I can hang on for a while longer." And for several long mizuras the deceleration continued. Tor thought he was going to burst when the pressure causing the discomforting constriction eased and the Defiance came to a halt.

ThaManya growled, "That must rate as one of the most uncomfortable trips I've been on. Are you sure we can't fit an inertia sub-space unit in here?"

Tor switched the sector throttle restrictor to on, and released his harness, "Corri?"

The AI answered, "The units I have data on are all too large for this ship and consume too much power."

ThaManya growled something that was not recognised by the translator, while Tor made his way to the rear of the cabin.

Broden's image appeared on the comm, "So how was the first run?"

ThaManya answered, "Uncomfortable."

Broden smiled, "Understood, I take it you will be able to complete the return journey?"

Tor returned to the cockpit, "Hi Broden, just let us check over the data and we'll set off again."

Broden said, "Just to let you know everything looks good from here with no new surprises."

Tor glanced over the displays, "Acknowledged, but I think we'll try for a marginally slower run this time."

Broden gave a single nod, "Looking forward to seeing you back on board." And the comm closed.

Tor touched on the throttle control unit, "Corricel can you keep the acceleration limit down to three g continuous?"

Corricel answered, "I can, but you do realise that the time to complete the run will be by extended by one and a half times the original."

"I think I can live with that, if it means I don't get the desire to need the toilet half way though the mission." Tor settled himself into his seat.

The Defiance propelled itself forward for the return journey, and Tor did admit that the sensations running through his body were not as uncomfortable, but the duration of the journey left him with the definite sense that he was undecided which experience was actually worse.

When the Defiance came to a stop he once again needed to relieve himself, and as he made his way to the rear of the cabin he called back, "Bring the ship into dock Corri."

The Defiance moved at, what now appeared to be a slow crawl, back to the silicon mine, and as the docking bay doors opened Tor regained his seat, "Did I miss anything?"

Corricel responded, "Three near misses, one star going supernova, and the end of the universe as we know it."

Tor had a wry smile as he watched the Defiance enter the docking tunnel, "Excellent, at least we won't have any more trouble with the Khaak." He glanced over to the perplexed looking ThaManya, but said nothing until the Defiance touched on the dockside, "ThaManya, any chance you could take a look at the inertial damping thing?"

ThaManya purred agreement to the request, and Corricel released the airlock door mechanisms. The doors slid back with a hiss and Tor stepped out onto the dockside to be met by Broden. The Station Commander smiled, "How was that?"

Tor looked thoughtful for a while, "Painful. It was like every cell in my body was being stretched and squeezed at the same time."

Broden smiled, "Yeah, sounds about right. Important thing is you're still alive."

Tor thought for a moment, "Maybe that's because of this cast iron constitution I've developed."

Broden gave Tor a thoughtful look, "So what now? The big jump?"

Tor glanced at him, "I want ThaManya to see if there's something we can use instead of the gravitational unit to overcome the inertia problem."

Broden looked at the Mohrabas co-pilot and nodded, "If it's causing you that much of a problem."

Tor gave Broden a hard stare, "It makes me need the loo and for long duration accelerations that's not good."

Broden laughed, "Tor my friend, I don't need to know your personal problems. Now, get your arse down to the med centre and get checked out."

The station's doctor, Gyles Scellar, was reviewing the medical logs of the crew that were due for their annual checkups. He looked up as Tor walked in, "It's not often we see you in here."

"I guess I don't get ill much these days." Tor looked around the centre, "It's quiet in here."

"Thankfully, yes, and long may it last," Gyles pulled up Tor's medical records, "Not that I wouldn't mind a patient or two to relieve the quietness."

Tor smiled, "I'll send the word around and I'm sure Broden can ensure there's an increase in accidents."

"Just as long as they're not life threatening," Gyles approached Tor, "Take a seat on the bed, and tell me what the problem is?"

"Oh, there's no problem doctor. We just took the Defiance out and engaged the interplanetary drive unit." Tor sat down.

"Was it a good trip," Gyles quickly scanned through Doctor Marras' notes on the genetic re-sequencing and stopped when he reached the last bioscan taken shortly before the flight itself.

Tor looked thoughtful for a moment, "We came back alive, so that's a plus, only the pressure was a bit of an issue though."

Gyles had been told of the modifications to the ship, and he had voiced his reservations. He wondered if his presentation had been reviewed prior to the flight as he passed the medi-unit over Tor and compared the readings to the previous scan.

Tor asked, "Any change?"

Gyles took a moment to study Tor's eyes with a light pen, "There's a minor amount of degradation to a number of cell walls, but nothing that won't get better given time. Was it just the one round trip?" Tor nodded, the Doctor continued, "Hmmm, well that's the funny thing about inertia. It's your lack of it the gravity unit is trying to compensate for by dragging you along. Either way, it puts a lot of unnatural forces on your body. My advice ditch the gravity unit and get a sub-space unit, otherwise in ten trips you may start to experience irreversible damage."

Tor thought for a moment, "Thanks for the warning. Am I free to go now?"

The Doctor stepped back, "I have everything I need for my report."

Tor stood up, "Thanks again Doctor." And wandered out of the clinic.

Gyles watched him leave, and wondered how much notice of his advice Tor would take.

## *Chapter 2*

"Incoming message."

The terminal blinked as a framed icon flashed, the sender paraphrased under the main heading. Tor expected a communiqué but was apprehensive what it might contain. Tagging the icon he shifted it to the projector, bringing to life the small holo-unit to the right side of the monitor.

The image of ThaManya flickered to life, "Greetings Tor."

Time spent with the Mohrabas had helped him understand a number of the facial expressions and inside knew this was more than just a social chat, "Good to see you, so what's the news?"

ThaManya looked momentarily uncertain at the clipped English translation, "ThiRioth wishes to speak with you, so a transport is on its way."

"I take it this is about the inertia system?"

There was a sign of acknowledgement, "You will need to have something to trade before he agrees."

Tor was tempted to say he had plenty of credits when he returned to Argon Prime but felt the moment would be wasted, and before he had a chance to speak Liann messaged him.

"Transport is requesting docking permission, says it's here to pick you up?"

"Give them clearance." Tor focused on the holo-image, "Looks like my lifts arrived, so I'll see you in a few mizuras."

Shortly after arriving the transport was once again clipping through the void to the looming Mohrabas Destroyer, which was now a familiar site to the refugees with its compliment of smaller warships and occasional transport.

The docking bay door rotated away as Tor felt the tractor beam take hold of the vessel. A retaining arm locked on to the hull and positioned them adjacent to the platform.

Stepping out of the shuttle he saw ThaManya patiently waiting, "Welcome onboard, Commander ThiGan is waiting for us." She turned and with a brief glance over her shoulder padded gracefully towards the lifts.

After a short walk he entered Commanders briefing room to see the holo-projection image of ThiRioth deep in discussion with ThiGan. Two scientists sat in the room examining technical specifications whilst quietly talking between themselves.

ThiRioth looked at Tor, "Welcome Tor, please be seated."

He settled himself into the nearest seat and noticed ThiGan was watching him intently as ThaManya sat down.

ThiRioth growled, "So Tor, I have a request for an inertia dampener unit that needs to be fitted to your ship."

"Yes Excellency." One thing Tor appreciated was the Mohrabas Chief Council always cut straight to the chase.

"But you do not want us to take charge of the ship so that it can be measured up and installed."

Tor felt uncomfortable, "No Excellency, the ships computer is somewhat adamant about not allowing it to be pulled apart without her being in complete control of the operation." He had not actually

asked Corricel but trusted his gut feel that this was how she would respond, and probably with a considerable amount of cutting sarcasm.

The image of ThiRiioth studied Tor he felt the silence pressing in on him, "Mr. Grall, we have been extremely generous with you and have asked for nothing in return." The words were allowed to sink in, "Our only expression of interest has been in the few pieces of advanced technology that you possess, but now here you are asking for more help, yet we have had nothing of significance in return. So why should we help you now?"

There was another long uncomfortable pause and Tor felt all eyes focused on him, "I understand Excellency. This venture is for the mutual benefit of both our races, even so it is in our interest more than yours that it is a success."

ThiGan growled something and the Mohrabas went into conversation giving Tor time to think, and with only two items of interest to the Mohrabas it was his choice, between a technology already held by the races versus one that gave him, personally, a combat advantage over his enemies, as to which he would offer.

The conversation ended and ThiGan purred, "So what do you have to offer us?"

"During the installation of the inertia compensators your scientists will have unlimited access to study the jumpdrive and its operation during the jump. That is as much as I can offer you at the moment."

The Mohrabas once again went into a long conversation and Tor wished that the translator had managed to decipher it, but the complexity of the common Mohrabas language had proven too much.

Eventually ThiRiioth growled, "We have your word and so far that has proven trustworthy, so we will assist."

Tor gave a bow of the head, "Your Excellency is most generous."

"Let us hope we don't regret this decision to help. Now I must leave." The holo-image vanished signalling the end of the meeting.

Tor began to wonder how much of ThiRiioth's standing amongst the Mohrabas high council had been placed with the success of this trip, as these thoughts crossed his mind he caught the eye of ThiGan

The Mohrabas Commander looked at him with an air of distaste and growled, "His Excellency has great faith in you, do not disappoint him or you will have to answer to me should he let you live and I am not a forgiving person."

Tor knew that ThiRiioth was hardly the forgiving type, and come what may he had to keep his end of the bargain, the last thing he wanted was to be brought in front of an angry high council if he failed.

ThaManya gave a slight growl and the captain averted his attention towards her before glancing back to Tor, "Go, our scientists will be with you when you depart."

Tor returned to the shuttle accompanied by ThaManya and felt a sense of relief as it departed the Mohrabas carrier, his mind still reflecting on the not so veiled threat of the commander. He was also forced to acknowledge the latest modifications would push out the start date for the reconstruction of the gate and the wozuras' were rapidly slipping by to the deadline of the ancient.

He relaxed whilst ThaManya conversed quietly with the scientists and gave them a comprehensive brief on what was required. The soft rhythmical harmony of purrs and growls gradually caused Tor to drift into a semi conscious state and his eyelids became heavy as he drifted to sleep despite his best effort to remain awake.

With a gentle shake Tor stirred and a quick glance out of the window was sufficient to know they had docked. ThaManya moved away without saying a word and Tor rose, stretched and rubbed the

remains of sleep from his eyes, the brief snooze had only highlighted a need to rest and its brevity had been insufficient for him to feel refreshed.

Joining the others on the dockside, he surveyed the Mohrabas waiting for him, "Let me introduce you to the Defiance."

Turning he moved with casual ease towards the ship and heard a growl from one of the party following him that seemed to cause a brief moment of gentle laughter. ThaManya was beside him and as he glanced at her he could see the faintest of smiles in her face with a slight glint in her eye.

"What?"

She glanced at him, "They say you stagger like a child."

"I'm still learning." Smiling his eyes focused once more on the sleek lines of the ship and gestured towards it, "The Defiance!"

There were a few low growls and ThaManya gave a summary translation, "They think your people have some sense of style after all."

Tor quietly laughed and approached the airlock door, using the palm scan panel the doors opened and he stepped inside followed by ThaManya.

"Hope I'm not disturbing you Corricel."

The AI scanned the intruders, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"The Mohrabas have kindly leant us a few of their scientists to replace the gravity inertial compensator with a better sub-space one. Hope you don't mind?"

Corricel was quiet for a few moments as she knew it would make Tor uncomfortable, "What is the catch?"

"What makes you think there's a catch?"

"I know you too well."

Tor glanced at ThaManya, "I've given them permission to study the jumpdrive unit."

"And this has been approved by the AIC?"

"Well it's either that or the Ghojo program. Choice is yours?"

Corricel ran the computations and evaluated the tactical benefits to the Mohrabas, "I will permit the study of the jumpdrive."

-

Tor decided to leave before the conversation became technical and left him feeling totally out of place. Tempted though he was to have a quick ale, he strolled past the bar and retired to his rooms.

Over the next few tazuras Tor could only guess how well the changes were proceeding and more importantly how satisfied the scientists were with gaining detail on the jumpdrive technology. It had taken almost a wozura before there was any sign of progress and this was only made apparent by the arrival of a new transport ship bringing in supplies.

He anxiously reviewed his calendar and counted off the wozuras to the Ancients return, added to this Captain Sheero was asking for status reports so he typed up, 'Upgrade to Defiance in progress, estimated time to completion eight tazuras.' And sent the response on its way avoiding the need to open a comms channel.

The door opened and Tris stepped in, "Not disturbing you am I?"



"Come in. Just let me finish here and I'll be with you."

Tris ambled across, "Anything interesting?"

"Just counting the wozuras."

"So how's it going?"

"Generally, personally or with the ship?"

Tris placed her hands on his shoulders and Tor sat back, "Which one's giving you the most grief?"

Tor smiled, "Well personally everything's brilliant, wonderful company, great sex, but that's not what you asked?"

Tris ruffled his hair, pushed his head forwards and moved towards the sofas with a mischievous smile, "Yeah, well I'd like to say the same."

Tor looked for something to throw but could only see a datapad and decided against it, resorting to a huffy, "Thanks."

She sat down and patted the seat beside her, "So come over here and tell me all."

Tor moved his chair back from the terminal, "I'm somehow reminded of the saying, behind every great man is a vicious woman with razor sharp fingers and a whip like tongue. Or something along those lines."

Tris smiled, "But I'm not behind you."

Tor sat beside her and slouched down.

"So what's on your mind?"

Tor looked pensive for a few moments, "I've always been concerned that we're going to run out of time. That we're not going to get the gate rebuilt before the ancient returns, and with every passing wozura we don't seem to be making any progress."

"Isn't Broden sorting out the construction robots?"

"Hopefully but we still have to get permission." Tor paused, "We should have made the first jump by now, we are so far behind schedule."

"Better to be safe than sorry."

Tor glanced over and gave a reassuring smile, "I know, it's so frustrating, that's all."

\*

Broden felt the Crystal Fabrication Plant was his new home with the time he spent monitoring the upgrade programming to the units.

Corricel sent patches through almost every stazura as she decoded and translated more data from the ancient archive, but it was painfully slow and with the frequent outages in the connection he was in half a mind to take a fast ship and hijack the technical pad out of the Defiance.

"Upload the second patch to unit thirty eight!"

The technician, Larran, nodded and walked over to a multi-limbed giant and began to work the control panel standing near its base, "Uploading now and code verification check enabled."

"How's unit twenty three coming on?"

Larran moved over to a squat robot and checked the console, "We have another mismatched command. I'll clear the code."

"Corricel you will be the death of me," Brodens' muttered as the other reason to pull his hair out manifested itself. "Fine, see if you can find a unit with all the right tools on. I'll have someone cross reference the others to see if we can swap programs."

He checked the duty roster and found a familiar name, "Helass I have a job for you."

\*

Seven tazuras later and Broden was back on the Silicon Mine and went straight to the pilots bar, abstinence had made him thirsty and having finished the task he felt he deserved it.

"Hello stranger."

Broden span around to face Liann and gave a broad smile, "You are such a welcome sight for sore eyes."

There was a momentary kiss, greeted by a couple of wolf whistles from the other side of the bar. He chose to ignore them, "Drink?"

"Just a juice as I've just sneaked out."

He signaled to the current barman and when the drink arrived they spent a while catching up on news.

Tor strolled in casually and smiled as he approached, Broden held out a hand and they shook, "Good to see you back."

"It's good to be back." And gave Liann a glance.

"So how did it go?"

"Painfully slowly. So painful in fact, that there have been many times that with or without your permission I'd like to have rearranged some of Corricels' circuits!"

Tor gave a wry grin, "You're not the only one. I think some of the scientists working on the ship would liked to have done the same."

Broden shook his head slowly, "So other than Corricel upsetting people, how's it been going?"

There was a brief burst of static muttering over the bar comm. Liann finished her drink, "Must dash, I'll catch up with you later."

Tor let her get past, "Take care." He returned his attention to Broden, "Just as painful in many respects, but you're back in time for the flight tomorrow. So at least it's progress. Otherwise the SPP has been stockpiling energy cells most of which are in stations and spare transports. We've opened additional trade of meatsteaks for spare fuel cells."

"First flight, so when's first jump?"

"We'll have the Defiance fully loaded with cells just to make sure they're not adversely affected and if the test run is okay, the word soon leaps to mind."

Broden finished his ale, and waved the glass at Tor, "One for the flight?"

Tor nodded, "Just been through another medical to say I'm fit so why not."

\*

That night Tor did not sleep and a Stazura before take off he was on the Defiance running preflight checks and reviewing the new readings on the console relating to the new inertia compensator units.

He replayed the question Tris had asked,

"Why don't you make the jump, launch a few high speed probes and wait to see what comes back, rather than going yourself?"

"Not much of an adventure in that."

"It's a safer option. But just think for a moment, do we really need to rebuild the gate?" She let the thought sink in, "If the probes could map a route then it would just be a matter of going to the other sector and then following the energy signatures of the gates to get home in a single jump. We wouldn't need to fly and fight our way across sectors."

"It's a good idea, but I'm not going to sit around waiting for all the data to come back. That could take Tazuras, Wozuras or even longer the further away the probe."

"Silly, you just leave a data collection pod and pick it up later."

"Assuming that this is going to be an easy trip and it doesn't get found and destroyed before it's gathered the data."

His mind ran through the 'what if' scenarios and each time the knowledge that the Defiance was a fighter capable of defending itself came back to him where as probes could be obstructed, shot down or diverted off course and miss the next gate. To his mind this was the best option and re-opening the gate would allow any jump capable ship carrying sufficient cells to get home in a single jump.

Corricel disturbed his thoughts, "So do you want to rearrange my circuits as well?"

Tor spoke softly, "No Corri I don't, but you can be a pain in the arse at times."

"I only try to do what is best."

Tor smiled sympathetically, "I know, and I'm sure Broden didn't really mean it."

"From his voice tone he sounded as though he did."

Tor relaxed in the pilot seat, "We all saying things when we're a bit stressed or angry, it's something in our nature and a natural way for us to vent off unwanted emotions." He paused, "When he's in a good mood ask Broden if he meant it and see what response you get."

The suggestion for the AI to ask Broden ended the conversation and Tor felt happy that he could give some response. He did not want to suddenly find himself being the ships councillor.

The airlock door hissed open and Tor glanced over as ThaManya entered, "Welcome on board."

ThaManya studied him for a moment, "You are here but you're not ready."

Tor checked the time piece, "Oops. Give me a moment and I'll be back."

Time had caught up with him, as he sprinted across the docking bay to the pilot changing rooms. Pulling open his locker, he dragged out the suit and fought his way into it. A few unsuccessful attempts later to ensure the seals were properly closed and he took a few moments to steady his breathing and nerves, knowing this was to be the only test flight.

\*

The command centre was full as Liann, with Broden standing beside her, brought up views of the Defiance, both external and internal. To start with they could only see ThaManya adjusting the co-pilots seat until Tor stepped on board.

Broden opened a comm, "Glad to see you could join us Tor."

Tor gave a wry smile as he took his place, "Yeah, yeah."

Liann checked the scanners, "All systems are reporting green, good to go."

ThaManya tapped on her console, "Defiance systems are stable."

Tor clipped the harness straps together, "Defiance requesting docking clearance."

Liann tapped on the console, "Clearance granted."

The clamps released as the ship was guided by the stations docking computer. The black star-strewn void opened up as the ship exited the station.

"Inertia damper activating." ThaManya pressed the icon.

Corricel reported, "Sub-space field is stable and holding."

Broden glanced at the speed of the Defiance and opened a comm, "Care to slow it down a bit Tor."

On the monitor Tor turned the Defiance towards the start point of the run, he glanced at the velocity indicator which was already at the four hundred and eighty mps limit, "Just getting used to the new system."

Broden smiled as the speed dropped off, the navigation beacon relayed the approach.

Liann commented, "Everything's looking good."

Corricel's voice came back over the comm, "Engine limiters disengaged for interplanetary flight. All systems remain stable."

The thrusters registered a massive power surge as the ship suddenly shot away. Broden whistled, he had little doubt that this time the acceleration was well in excess of the previous test run. The view from inside the cockpit showed both crew being oblivious of the sudden change. He glanced around to see approving smiles and grins all around.

As the run came to an end he opened the comm, "How do you feel?"

Tor smiled, "Have we left yet?"

There was a small cheer.

"I'll have an ale waiting for you."

Liann reported, "Defiance turning around for the homeward run. Wait, I'm registering jumpdrive activation."

Broden hit the comm, "Tor what's happening."

Tor smiled with a thumbs up gesture and then there was nothing.

Liann looked up, "The Defiance has successfully jumped."

The wormhole opened and moments later the Defiance emerged, Tor reviewed the HUD as he brought the ship to a stand still. Ahead of them a brilliant green world with two moons, each one catching the rays of the sun.

A distant blue body, more pronounced than the background stars hung in the void on another orbit around the sun. Tor wondered if it was blue with oceans and occupied life forms similar to the Boron, or a result of gas clouds.

ThaManya purred, "Navigational data indicates we have arrived at the former system of Hetki's Ocean."

Disturbed from thought Tor returned his attention to the HUD, "Corricel, what do the long range scanners show?"

"Nothing active within scanner range."

On manoeuvre engines only Tor turned the ship to view the jump gate close by, "Looks intact. What about the other gates?"

The huge dark circle had not been provided with departure and arrival guidance lights, unlike the home systems, and to Tors eye the gate had an abandoned, unused look about it.

Corricel monitored the energy signatures within the sector, "Gates appear to be intact but there is no sign of active traffic."

Tor turned the ship to face the nearby planet, "What about inactive ships or stations?"

"There is a composite structure and the remains of smaller vessels over one hundred and twenty thousand k's from our current position. However there is no energy signature?"

ThaManya purred, "A ghost city?"

"Negative, the construction is similar to Khaak design but less well advanced. A more primitive version to the ones we witnessed previously."

Tor contemplated engaging the engines to take a closer look, "And you're sure there's no sign of surviving Khaak?"

"As sure as any computer can be, given the accuracy of the readings."

Tor turned to ThaManya, "Do you want to take a closer look or shall we head back?"

"I think we should take as many long range scans as possible, without disturbing anything."

Corricel added, "I agree, this is only the first visit and we have no support."

"Where's your sense of adventure gone?"

"I would like to remind you that your adventures tend to leave the ship damaged and one if not both of us at serious risk of death."

ThaManya gave him a piercing look, "I don't remember hearing that in the brief."

Tor gave a cheerful smile, "Yeah, strange what they leave out isn't it?"

ThaManya growled something Tor could only imagine to be a short profanity, even so there was the hint of a sparkle in her eye, "Corricel, deploy the datapod and prepare sector probe."

"Datapod deployed, probe flight path currently being calculated."

Tor noted the small data storage unit appearing briefly on the HUD in the near range scanner but it vanished when just a few short kilometres away as the Defiance manoeuvre engines pushed the ship gently away.

"Pod position fixed in memory, uploading flight path to probe."

ThaManya reviewed the trajectory, "Looks good Corricel. Launch when ready."

"Probe is away."

Tor watched the object as its single engine flared and shot away, again its small size was ignored by the HUD after twenty kilometres, "How long do you want to wait?"

ThaManya looked at the flight path and arrival times for each plotted object of interest, "We should know in a short while that both probe and pod are functioning but it will be a few solar cycles before the flight is completed."

Tor pondered this for a few moments, "Okay, wait until we get confirmation and set the jumpdrive ready for the return journey."

He sat patiently, his attention drawn to the planet and felt himself mesmerised by the swirling clouds over emerald green oceans. The planet turned slowly and even centuries after the war, there were great swathes of grey and blackened land left by the Khaak visible, but gradually being reclaimed under a blanket of brown and purple vegetation. He wondered at the scale of what he was looking at that enabled him to make out the vivid colours tens of thousands of kilometres away.

"Jumping."

Tor was suddenly aware of the jump tunnel opening up in front of him.

As the Defiance emerged in the shadow of the Mohrabas destroyer the comms channel immediately sparked to life, and Brodens image appeared.

"Pleasant trip?"

"Uneventful." Tor smiled and Broden shook his head.

"Just as well, you'd better get back here and tell us all about it."

Tor engaged the main thrusters and aimed the ship towards the Silicon Mine. ThaManya was busy looking over the data and transferring it in her own data unit. The Defiance slowed as it approached the station and Tor switched over to the docking computer to guide them in.

The Defiance glided gracefully to the boarding ramp and docking clamps engaged. Tor could not help himself from smiling as a dawning realisation of what he had just done came over him.

ThaManya glanced across, "You alright Tor?"

"We just performed a gateless jump, in both directions."

"So?"

"We've proven we're no longer limited by the gates. We can go anywhere."

ThaManya studied Tors expression, "And what would you do when you went, anywhere?"

Tor shrugged, "Find new races, the possibilities are endless."

ThaManya gave a curious smile, "What if the races you find didn't want to be found? Or worse, you'd rather not have found them."

Tor looked perplexed, "Like the Khaak you mean?"

ThaManya smiled, "Like the Khaak, maybe worse."

He unbuckled the harness and stepped out of his seat, "That's certainly something to think about. Time for a de-briefing."

Once off the ship Tor wandered casually to the shuttle lifts, along to the briefing room and as the door opened he could see Broden sat at the table with both Sheero and ThiRiOTH on monitors.

Broden turned and stood up, "Welcome back, Sir."

ThaManya followed him in to the room and quickly bowed her head to the image of ThiRiOTH before taking her seat. Tor sat next to her and ThiRiOTH growled, "Now that we are all here let us get started, ThaManya tell us about the jump."

Tor was taken slightly by surprise that, for once, he was not being expected to speak. ThaManya retold all the details of the jump, the system and the scanner readings. She described in detail the condition of the planet, the space debris and the inactivity of the gates despite them being present. As she finished Tor was impressed by how much more information she had been able to disseminate than he had.

ThiRiOTH purred, "So the Khlarkin appear to have been forced out of the sector. Curious, it is doubtful the probe will gather the right type of data to tell us when this happened. That there are remains will give our scientists something new to study."

Sheero was quick to respond, "Does this mean you're happy for us to start rebuilding the gate, Excellency?"

There was a long silence and a combined holding of breath as all eyes watched ThiRiOTH.

"You may start the reconstruction, however you may not complete it until we are satisfied. You will be returning in two solar days and we will have more data to review, but I would also like one of our Destroyers to make the jump."

Sheero sat in contemplation as Tor shot him a quick glance, eventually he said, "We will consider your request, Excellency."

ThiRiOTH gave a slight nod and then looked around the table, "I sense the dawning of a new chapter in the history of our races is about to start. A time of prosperity and growth for all, let us make the most of this opportunity. Now I must depart."

They all gave a slight bow and said, "Excellency."

The comm channel closed, and Sheero quickly looked at the remaining three, "Well something for me to think about, so if there's nothing further then I'll drop off."

Tor shook his head, "Nothing here and thank you Captain."

There was a slight nod and the image disappeared. Tor turned to Broden, "Looks like today is a good day."

Broden slid his chair back and stood up, "I'll get the construction robots deployed."

ThaManya also rose to her feet, "I need something to eat."

Realizing he too felt extremely hungry Tor swiveled his chair around, "Now that sounds like a great idea. Care to join us Broden? I'm sure the robots can wait a little longer."

### *Chapter 3*

Gyles Scellar checked Tors medical records again, the cellular degradation from the first test run of the Defiance had almost completely gone with the exception being in Tors' liver and heart muscles where the reverse was true. Degradation was on the increase but without any apparent cause.

Blood tests had revealed nothing unexpected, he smirked at the readout, nothing unusual that is for Tor.

He knew the changes in Tors genetics could hold the key to a significant number of medical breakthroughs in the treatment of illnesses, then he shook his head at the idea that Tor was walking experiment. Inside he was aware that there were certain ethical codes of conduct in terms of genetic manipulation, which he was certain had been breached, but was not tempted to complain about it as the resulting treatment had saved a life.

Stopping his mind from wandering he studied the results of the tests and asked himself why he had not mentioned anything to Tor, and considered that he needed to wait a while longer to conclusively prove that this was not a temporary aberration.

"Computer extrapolate the rate of degradation and show me the result."

The result had been based on a linear extrapolation and indicated several tazuras of continued good health. Another test in a few tazuras time would show if the assumption was correct. Gyles knew from past experience that illnesses affecting the heart were never linear, as the tissue degradation increased the load on the good muscle fibre increased in a gradual but nevertheless exponential curve, the end would pre-empted by growing chest pains and then sudden arrest.

\*

The tazuras slipped by with unusual haste and Tor was ready to depart for the rendezvous with the datapod. He reflected at the unprecedented move by Sheero to, euphemistically, loan the Destroyer TaGohlen a jumpdrive, but made sure it could only be fuelled with energy cells. Tor had no doubt that given time the Mohrabas engineers would be able to reconfigure the power source and tap enough from the Destroyers engines.

ThaManya stepped in to the ship, "Ready to go?"

Tor looked around, "Just as soon as you're seated. Corricel, close the airlock doors."

ThaManya took her seat and buckled in before her fingers tapped lightly over the console controls. "Systems on line and fully operational."

Liann's voice came over the comm, "Acknowledged Defiance, you are cleared to depart."

The docking clamps released and the ship moved gracefully away and as the ship moved away from the station Tor felt the lure of open space calling to him. The infinite sense of freedom crept over him with its intoxicating touch, to be then restrained with the down to earth thought about the infinite ability to get lost. Mentally he shook his mind clear and gazed towards the bulk of the Destroyer.

ThaManya closed a private comms channel, "The TaGohlen grants us docking permission."

Tor nodded and steered the ship towards it.

Within a three mizuras the Defiance was locked down in the hold and whilst Tor and ThaManya remained on board the jump countdown was initiated.

Corricel reported, "The jump has been successfully completed."

They waited patiently until a comm channel opened, "Departure granted."



The restraining arms moved the ship towards the airlock and soon after they found themselves in the deep void of space and the planets of Hetki's Ocean.

"Corricel, put the datapod location on HUD." Tor turned the ship lazily about the TaGohlen as the display was updated.

He homed on to it and opened the cargo bay doors and Corricel reported, "Datapod now on-board and retrieving data."

The comm opened with an image of ThiGan, "Return to the TaGohlen so that we can review the data and plot a course through the system."

Tor was tempted to disregard the request and fly the sector in the Defiance, but then he considered the life of the engines fuel cells and decided that it was better to preserve the fuel by hitching a lift. If there was anything of interest on the journey then he was sure the Destroyer would stop and allow him to launch and investigate further, after all what would be of interest to him would be of interest to the Mohrabas.

He glanced over, "Acknowledged, coming on board."

The Defiance moved in to position and then slipped gracefully through the docking bay entrance to meet the arms of the docking clamps.

Tor released the restraint harness and rose from his seat, "Can you get us permission to go up to the bridge?"

ThaManya was just finishing off releasing the cargo bay door and looked around, she gave a tentative nod and then opened a channel to ThiGan. The conversation was brief and she turned towards Tor as she moved from her seat. With a smile she purred, "Permission has been granted."

Standing back, Tor allowed her to lead the way through the Destroyer and they crossed the landing bay to the lifts. A short ride later and the bridge door opened, Tor could see that the ship was already underway and the speck of the former Khaak station was rapidly getting larger.

ThiGan glanced round and with barely a sign of acknowledgement returned his attention to the view screen.

Tor was not certain if the response to his presence was due to his being there or a result of the already tense atmosphere on the ship. As much as he was eager to see how well the Destroyer would perform against the Khaak, he felt that their first encounter would be a cautious one.

He stepped up to the rail in front of him and stood patiently watching the screen, not wishing to draw attention to himself. ThaManya casually strolled up to an unmanned terminal and sat down.

For several mizuras the Destroyer hurtled through the void until the navigation officer growled. ThiGan responded and the ship began to decelerate.

He turned his chair and looked at Tor, "Return to your ship."

Tor gave a nod and walked back towards the lift, ThaManya gracefully moved to his side.

As the airlock doors to the Defiance closed Tor commented, "I don't think ThiGan likes me."

ThaManya gave a low laugh, "No, he doesn't trust you. There is a difference."

Tor dropped heavily on to his seat, "I'll take your word for it."

For the second time the Defiance exited the side of the TaGolen, this time to view the torn and twisted wreckage of the Khaak station. The torn and twisted linkage tubes between the vast bulbs was different to the hive like structures they had witnessed in their previous encounter.

Tor guided the ship over the wreckage, "Corricel, analysis of the structure and comparison to our archive."

There was a brief silence, "Although the overall shape is different, the materials used and nature of construction is identical."

He moved the control stick and brought the ship slowly around, "What's the possibility of getting inside?"

"I detect no life signs or power readings, but I would not recommend attempting to board."

ThaManya glanced around at Tor, her eyes bright, "If the stations computers are intact we could gain massive amounts of information on their technology."

Tor nodded, "Any chance we can locate any?" He slowed the Defiance and looped one of the four bulbs that remained, its structure heavily scarred from weapons fire with blackened rents in the side which, he assumed, all the atmosphere had gushed out from during its last moments.

"There is extensive internal damage, and initial scans indicate that the stations data channels may have fed into a central core. That section no longer exists for me to verify this notion."

ThaManya leant towards Tor, "Shall we take a look anyway?"

Tor glanced over, "Let's take the ship in closer first." With a gentle nudge on the controls the Defiance moved towards the largest of the holes in the station, its forward lights appearing less diffused by the distance with each passing sezura.

ThaManya's eyes scanned the gap in the hull, seeing long shards of alloys and blackened tubes drifting in the open space. She sat back now looking uncertain, "Maybe we should launch a small probe."

The nose of the Defiance stopped a few metres from the ruined station.

Tor was thoughtful as he too surveyed the debris floating around, "Corricel, do we have any short range probes on board?"

"Three are available."

"Prepare to drop one and guide it in to the station."

A flashing indicator on the console showed the probe had been released. The small silvery sphere jettied its way through the dark gap and images flickered up on the terminal. Not pure camera images but enhanced visualisations to compensate for the pitch black of the interior.

Although much had been destroyed, the tubes and circular passageways had a distinctly organic look. Tor and ThaManya said nothing, each in their own way looking pensive.

Tor leant forward slightly, "Well if there's a computer console or anything like one, then I can't make it out."

The desiccated and frozen carcass of a Khaak came into view, trapped by wreckage, its body torn and shredded by the sudden vacuum and the rapid de-pressurisation of its environment.

ThaManya sat back and looked critically at the images, "We should take more scans of the creature."

Feeling this was slightly macabre, Tor for the moment, was not sure why they were studying the remains. For several mizuras they sat patiently as the probe circled slowly around the object, its limbs locked in the final death throws revealing long talons and short stubby wings.

For Tor, the visage brought back vivid memories of the animal hammering on the cockpit of the Defiance in the attack on the Khaak Destroyer. With it came the uneasy feeling that the nightmares

would start again. Sensing the dryness of his mouth he quietly retreated to the rear of the cabin and recovered a drink.

ThaManya turned towards him, "You don't like the images?"

Tor glanced towards her, "Last time I saw one was close up and it wanted to get personal."

"How did you escape?"

Tor gave a wry smile, "Fortunately it was on the other side of the screen, so we just reversed out."

ThaManya looked confused so Tor added, "I'll explain another time."

The probe eventually moved away from the creature and deeper into the station. It passed by several more carcasses and ThaManya set the probe to examine each one.

Tor looked at her, "Why the morbid fascination?"

ThaManya smiled, "So far, I would say we have only seen the fighters of the species. It would be nice to find one of the others, the thinkers and builders."

"Why couldn't it be one of these?"

ThaManya appeared surprised by the question, "Long talons don't lend themselves to building structures."

A long time later they still had not found anything that resembled a computer interface or Khaak corpse that was significantly different to those that ThaManya regarded as soldiers. She sat back and looked perplexed, "We should leave."

Tor was relieved to hear her suggest this as he was beginning to wonder if they would ever leave, "Sure you don't want to find another body to examine?"

ThaManya fixed him with a thoughtful look, "We'll leave the probe behind and return to the TaGohlen."

The Defiance reverse thrusters kicked in and the ship backed gently away until Tor felt they had reached a comfortable distance, when he turned the ship and applied the main thrusters.

Back on board the Destroyer, Tor and ThaManya joined ThiGan and several others in the main briefing room. The discussion was how much further they should explore, to Tors' surprise ThiGan was all for ploughing on into the next sector.

The scientists however wanted to spend more time examining the remains and investigating the planet. While the security chief was advocating establishing a base of operation and securing the area around the jumpgate with static defences.

Though the conversations were in the native Mohrabas language ThaManya gave Tor a very rough translation.

ThiGan turned to Tor, "What would you do?"

Tor thought for a while, "My future lies beyond the other gates, so if I were here alone the choice would be simple. Your future return to the stars starts here, so my recommendation is that you secure the gates with static defences and you establish a base."

A tentative silence filled the room as ThiGan considered Tors' response, "Very well we will return home and bring new equipment with us."

Mizuras later and the TaGohlen was back in orbit around the Mohrabas homeworld. Shuttle craft and transports were ferrying materials and supplies to the ship. One transport had been sent to acquire more energy cells.

Tor sat in the observation lounge and quietly watched as he sipped a fruit drink. The nose of a second destroyer appeared over the edge of the domed screen. Rising from his seat he went to look as the second ship appeared to be recklessly close.

There was a faint tremor through the ship and Tor shook his head muttering, "Oops, someone's going to get a beating for that one."

The second Destroyer did not move away. He looked around to see if he could see a familiar face but did not recognise anyone. One of the crew, out of curiosity for what Tor was looking at approached and not knowing whether the Mohrabas would understand him, Tor commented, "Looks a bit close."

The crewman glanced across and then up, "It has docked. We will fly as one."

As he returned to his seat Tor wondered how the jumpdrive would cope with both Destroyers stacked. He also thought about those on the Silicon Mine and quietly yearned to see familiar faces again. ThiGan had insisted he stayed on-board as they would be returning within, their equivalent of, a Stazura.

Tor now understood why the Captain had been cautious about letting him leave. The Defiance would act as a safety net should something go wrong with the jump. He considered it unlikely as there were very few recorded incidents of malfunctioning drives, but had been in no position to refuse.

Eventually he wandered down to the Defiance and cast a casual eye over the five freighters and two shuttles that resided within the hangar. He stepped on board and threw himself down on a one of the three passenger seats.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Just thought I'd pop by and reacquaint myself with an old friend."

"That is very considerate of you."

"So how are you?"

Corricel had not expected a direct question as from previous experience Tor usually wanted updates on other things. "I am as well as can be expected. All my primary systems are operating within standard limits and there is no combat damage to any of the sub-systems."

"Perhaps that's because we haven't been in a fight for sometime?"

"I think you refer to this time as being dull."

"Do you miss the fighting?"

"No, I have a tendency to get damaged when you fly me into battle."

"Yeah, but we always come out of it alright."

"Perhaps you are mistaking me for some other ship?"

Tor smiled, "Well I will point out that I had nothing to do with the last time you got beaten up."

Corricel was quiet for a moment, "But I was trying to protect you even if you were not on board."

"I know." Tor was thoughtful for a while, "What do you think about our chances of getting home."

"That depends on a number of factors. The remains of the Khaak station we encountered is different to those we found in the other sectors. This may be as a result of natural evolution or that the Khaak themselves consist of a number of sub groups."

"Give it to me in plain English."

"There may be more than one species of Khaak. Each slightly different to the other, this would include technologically. The weapon systems of the next group we meet may be more powerful and more advanced than the first ones we met."

"Thanks for cheering up my day. How's the gate repairs coming along?"

Corricel sent an image to the holo-projector on the table before him, "The construction robots are in place and have begun to move the sections together. Two Mohrabas Destroyers and four Corvette class warships are patrolling the area."

Tor looked at it for a long time, "I'm going to try and catch some sleep. Let me know if anything happens."

The bunk rotated flat, slid away from the side and Tor threw himself on it.

"Sleep well Tor."

Half a Stazura later Corricel announced, "Tor, the jump has been successfully completed."

Stirring from sleep Tor rubbed his eyes, "What was that?"

"We have successfully jumped to sector Hetki's Ocean."

"Both Destroyers?"

"Yes."

Tor pushed himself upright and swung his legs off the bunk. "Open the door, I'll go see what's happening."

The airlock doors hissed open and Tor walked quickly to the lifts requesting the bridge as he stepped in. The door opened moments later and Tor could see on the main viewer that they were on the move and heading for a distant gate.

ThiGan glanced over to him, "Mr. Grall, good of you to join us."

"Sir." He spotted ThaManya sat at a console and moved towards her.

She glanced over as Tor asked quietly, "So what have I missed?"

"We have separated from the JiTheLack which is deploying static defence units around the first gate. We are on route for the second gate and will do likewise."

"So the piggyback manoeuvre worked? Nice going."

"There will be more jumps to bring three more Destroyers to hold this sector."

Tor looked at the monitor and contemplated what he should do next. He felt surplus to requirement, simply a casual observer getting a free trip. "I wonder if ThiGan will allow me to take the Defiance out of sector?"

ThaManya looked at him, "Wasn't it you who suggested not being hasty in exploring other sectors until we secured this one?"

"Not in so many words."

"The sentiment was there." She smiled.

ThiGan turned his chair, "I respect silence on my bridge unless you have something important to say."

Tor gave a slight bow, "I apologise Captain, but I was suggesting taking the Defiance through the gate into the next sector."

ThiGan looked at him but his expression was unreadable, "Granted, but don't attract unwanted interest."

With a sense of relief Tor gave another slight bow, "Thank you captain." He glanced at ThaManya, "Coming?"

With a smile and a nod she accepted the invitation. They remained on the bridge until the TaGohlen reached the jumpgate. Where ThiGan issued orders for the freighters to begin deployment.

ThaManya and Tor returned to the lift and descended to the docking bay. Two of the freighters had already been deployed and the third was being moved out on the mechanical restraining arms.

The airlock door of the Defiance was already open to receive them and Tor quickly dropped into the pilots seat. ThaManya settled into the co-pilots seat and requested departure clearance. Several mizuras passed before anything happened and then the ship shifted gently sideways then out of the docking bay door.

"Incoming message."

"Put it on screen."

The image of ThiGan appeared, "Mr. Grall, please wait until the freighters have completed deployment before departing sector. The gate defences need to establish identity and be tested."

"Understood and standing by." The comm closed and Tor glanced at ThaManya wondering if he should enquire what testing might involve but kept quiet.

The five freighters finished deploying twenty defence units, ten either side of the gate in concentric circles. The ships then moved back to the Destroyer and began to dock.

ThaManya tapped on the console, "Defence units activating and the TaGohlen is uploading data."

Tor saw the beam weapons discharge in turn as ThaManya announced, "Test firing."

"Incoming message."

"On screen."

ThiGan appeared once again, "You are cleared to depart."

Tor smiled, "Thank you Captain."

The Defiance engines roared, pushing them towards the activation zone, and Tor was filled with a sense of trepidation as the jumpgate swirled into life.

As the ship emerged from the receiving gate, Tor touched the thrusters control unit and scanned the HUD for possible contacts. The screen showed nothing, except a grey yellow dustbowl of a planet orbiting a large yellow sun.

"Anything on the long range scanners?"

ThaManya tapped the console, "Nothing, except one gate on the far side of the sun."

Tor reduced speed, and the Defiance coasted casually away from the gate, as he took in more of the sector through the filtered screen. After a while he glanced across to her, "So did your people once live here?"

"Yes, the system was once known as Barren Edge."

Tor looked at the planet, "Sounds appropriate."

"You look disappointed that there's nothing more here?"

"Without the debris of wreckage from a major battle, I'd say someone had time to clean up the sector. In which case, why didn't the Khaak set up base here?"

Corricel answered, "Radiation levels in this sector are higher than previously encountered in other solar systems. The Khaak may not have been able to survive from long term exposure."

ThaManya looked over to the datapad, "The archive indicates that might be the case, long term exposure to my peoples former station here did see premature systems failures."

"Sounds like a good reason not to hang around. Corri how's the shielding bearing up?"

"Radiation shielding shows no signs of degradation at this time."

Tor shuffled in his seat and prepared to engage the main thrusters, "Let's move on."

ThaManya tapped away on the console, "Let me send a message probe back to ThiGan."

As he waited for the probe to be launched, a thought struck Tor, "Corri, can you scan the gate for any of those devices we found in the Khaak sectors?"

"Scanning. There are no unusual attachments to the gates, and message probe has been launched."

Tor glanced over to ThaManya, "Ready to go now?"

She nodded, and Tor pressed the thruster control unit to maximum, the inertia damper energized to compensate. "Estimated time to the next jump gate?"

Corricel answered, "Half a stazura."

Tor would have preferred to fly manually, as he had in the home sectors, but with a flight path that swung him around to the far side of the sun he opted not to, "Corri, take flight control and let me know when we're close, or if anything happens on route."

Extracting himself from the pilot seat, he moved past ThaManya and into the rear cabin.

She finished examining the terminal and sat back. "Tell me about your homeworld?"

Tor sat down and reflected back on his memories before answering, "I guess I don't really have a homeworld, my parents were orbital station workers which is where I was born and raised. Though I sort of discovered that I was probably conceived on Argon Prime, when they went for a romantic wozura away from the station. Well, that's what my uncle told me anyway."

"Were there many others in your litter?"

Tor laughed, "We humans tend to only have one child at a time. Though it's not uncommon for twins to be born. So, no, I was an only child."

"Did you ever go to Argorime?"

"Argon Prime. Yeah, I studied there for a while, but the less said about that the better." He paused for a long while, "It's a beautiful planet. Trees so tall and green, filled with the sound of songbirds, grass the colour of emeralds, with the sweet scent of flowers vibrant on the air. It's oceans so blue and full of life." Tor paused again.

"You miss it?"

"Every damn tazura. But what about you? Any brothers and sisters?"

ThaManya moved from her seat and sat in one next to Tor, "I have four age same kin, and nine younger," she remembered the term Tor used, "Brothers and sisters."

Tor looked surprised, "That's a big family, I'm surprised your world isn't overcrowded."

ThaManya looked perplexed, "It is a problem, not all females are allowed to breed."

Tor suddenly felt lost for words, eventually he managed, "Not ever?"

ThaManya gestured in the negative, "But with the opening of new systems then there will be a need for more cubs."

Tar gave a reassuring smile, "There's a bright side to this exploration for you after all."

ThaManya smiled, "And it will be thanks to you."

A brief mental picture of thousands of Mohrabas females thanking him disturbed his thoughts and steered the conversation back to the original topic, "So what's your world really like?"

ThaManya looked curiously at him, "You've been there."

"Yeah, I went to the crystal city but not outside it."

"Outside? Why would you want to go outside?"

Tor once again looked surprised, "Don't you people go outside the city?"

"There is jungle there, hunting ground if you have the skill, but very few venture out. We are born, live, work and die within the confines of the city, most of which is buried deep beneath the ground."

"Let me get this straight, here you are flying through space, in a sector your people haven't seen for over five hundred of your jazuras, yet you never stepped out beyond the city walls into the jungle that surrounded your city?"

ThaManya reflected on this, "Outside the city was the jungle, up here is the unknown."

Tor looked long and hard at his companion, "Well that's a reasonably simple summary."

"You are an explorer or why else would you be here?"

The question was not one Tor expected, "An explorer, me? No, I'm stuck here out of circumstance. Believe me if my government hadn't decided to give me two station contracts I'd be safe at home."

Corricel chipped in, "And there would have been no survivors after the Khaak attack. We would never have discovered the Mohrabas, and they would still be locked into the one solar system. The females wanting to know if they were ever likely to be chosen to be allowed to breed."

Tor tried to sink back further into his chair, "There's no certainty about that."

Corricel said, "Tor you have defied the odds at every juncture. Once again my calculations as to our success here cannot determine the Tor factor. This means that I have abandoned any number of probable scenarios as the Tor constant, variable cannot be predicted."

Feeling that this might be a possible compliment Tor smiled. ThaManya purred, "You must have done something very great for your government to give you two stations."

Tor shook his head and then frowned, "They were only contracts not real stations, I had to pay for the construction kits myself."



ThaManya looked confused, "Then what was the gift for?"

"You want my life history or just the interesting last two jazuras?"

Corricel commented, "Stay with the last two jazuras. I have the records for the previous jazuras and, although entertaining at times, it was mainly dull."

Tor looked towards the technical datapad in its retainer, "Corri, just fly the ship." With a quick glance at ThaManya he turned towards a cabinet close by and opened it, "Drink?"

She gave a single nod, and looked at him expectantly whilst he pulled out two flasks. Handing one to her, he opened his and took a brief swig. Starting from the moment he was arrested in Cloudbase South-West, he retold his story, occasionally assisted with sound effects supplied by Corricel.

As he neared the end of his tale, Corricel announced, "Approaching gate, would you like me to hold position here so you can finish or would you like to make the jump?"

Tor had a dawning realisation how long he had been talking for and looked over to his companion, "Save the rest until later I think, otherwise there'll be nothing to talk about on the way back."

He moved from his chair before ThaManya had a chance to voice her thoughts. She followed him and each sat in their respective seats. Tor drained the last of his drink as his mouth now felt parched.

"Corri, scan the gate for anything suspicious."

"Gate scanned, nothing to report."

Tor flew around the massive structure just in case. The computer said, "Did you find the scan was accurate?"

"Just had to check." Tor lined the ship up for the jump and brought it to a halt. "ThaManya give me some idea what we might expect on the other side of this gate."

The co-pilot tapped on the terminal, "The sector was known as ThiGidroth's Fire. A smaller sun than this one, a habitable red planet with purple oceans and two moons, also six other planetary bodies."

Tor took a deep breath, "Let's hope it's still there, but no one else is." He engaged the main drive.

## *Chapter 4*

The Defiance crossed the gate threshold, and when it emerged on the other side Tor hit the full reverse thrusters to bring the ship to a stop. For some time they sat there quietly.

"Looks like this isn't Thi'what's'name's Fire." Tor glanced over to ThaManya then back out the screen to the swirls of dense gas surrounding the ship. "Unless of course, someone managed to forget mentioning this minor detail."

ThaManya checked the archive data, "There's no record of this."

Corricel announced, "Something you will be interested in, the scanners can not penetrate through the cloud."

Tor sat in thought for a few moments, "How far can we scan ahead?"

Corricel answered, "Currently, one hundred metres."

Tor glanced over to ThaManya, "Well at least no one saw us arrive. Now, let's try to not to get lost ourselves. Corri, mark position and vector to the gate. We might have to come back this way."

ThaManya said, "I wouldn't recommend flying a straight course. If we encounter the enemy they might use the vector and heading at the point of detection and extrapolate back to the gate."

The Defiance moved forward slowly, and after ten k's Tor turned the ship ninety degrees horizontally, and after another five k's, he banked to a vertical vector and maintained the direction. Keeping his eyes focused for anything that might be lurking within the nebula they remained silent.

Dark shapes loomed in the flickering of an ionization discharge. Tor stopped the ship and looked, "Looks like we've found a couple of asteroids."

Corricel reported, "There is a reduction in the cloud density on that vector, although my scanners cannot confirm the presence of asteroids, the indication is that we will find the edge of the nebula."

Tor pressed the thruster control and moved the ship onto the new heading. "Corri, are we able to jump back to the other sector if we need to?"

"Confirmed."

Visually things did not change much, other than Tor realised they were heading towards the sectors sun as the asteroids created dark shadows through the lighter haze. Questions came to his mind why the solar winds did not disperse the gasses, but his concentration was on trying to see the edge of the cloud.

The number of asteroids looming dark increased by three in different directions. As the Defiance flew between them he felt curiously uncomfortable. The cloud dissipated quickly as they crossed out into the void.

Tor swore loudly and hit the main thruster to maximum but had not removed the restrictor. All around him was the unmistakable lattice formation of a Khaak station not the asteroids he had originally taken them for.

It was also still inhabited and buzzing with fighters. The Khaak taken somewhat by surprise to find an unknown vessel within their midst reacted slightly slower than normal but then swarmed. Beam lasers slashed and sliced from the small fast scout ships and interceptors.

The Defiance rocked and kicked with continued impacts, Corricel activated the weapons systems and soon the smaller Khaak ships were exploding on all sides, as the particle weapons ripped through their shields.

Tor turned sharply to avoid a heavy fighter intent on ramming them. He caught sight of a flash, "What was that?"

Corricel answered, "Wormhole opening. New ships have arrived."

"What do you mean wormhole?"

"The Khaak have jumpdrive capability or something similar."

Tor swore again. ThaManya ran her hands over the terminal, "Corricel, can you determine if they can track us if we make a jump?"

"Technically yes, if they can determine the wormhole signature direction and energy level."

Tor banked hard to the left and the particle beams finished off a Khaak heavy fighter. "Are you telling me, we shouldn't jump?"

"Shields at eighty percent."

ThaManya looked around quickly, "If they have the same technology. They might be able to follow us."

Tor gritted his teeth as he closed in on another heavy fighter that had been pummeling the shields, "Great, any other brilliant insights."

Corricel announced, "Large buggy capital ships with spinning arms are closing in."

The Defiance ploughed through the expanding cloud of a former Khaak ship. Tor looked for his next target, "Corri, that wasn't funny."

ThaManya was worried, very worried. She could only assume that Tor was either too preoccupied to become the same or too used to danger to be bothered by it. Somehow she liked to think the latter and that calmed her rising panic, slightly.

"Still with us, kiddo?" Tor asked as the ship dived between the connecting tubes of the station.

ThaManya struggled for words but managed a quiet, "Yes."

"Don't worry, we've been in a lot worse situations than this I'm sure." Another explosion filled the screen. "And Corri this is no time to disagree."

"I had no intention of disagreeing. Khaak Destroyer entering firing range."

"His or ours?"

"Ours or his?"

"His." The Defiance twisted as a searing beam lashed past. The beam made no attempt to track.

ThaManya's heart beat quickened as they narrowly missed a connecting tube.

Corricel directed full particle beam weapons fire against it for as long as it was in range. Small explosions started to ripple out. "Tor, stay within the boundaries of the station."

"Why? Will it help?"

"It will give me time to destroy it."

The Defiance rolled away as more fighters closed in their weapons fire attempting to rake the hull.

Tor checked the status of the shields, they were dipping around sixty percent, "I'd really rather not stay here too long."

Shuddering under the weapon beams of a Destroyer, the Defiance shields glowed brightly for a few sezas until it broke free, the shield indicator bar had dropped another ten percent.

Increasing the speed of the ship, Tor left the smaller Khaak vessels trailing in his wake, however he still had not activated the interplanetary drive. Checking the shielding levels indicated they had at least recovered the ten percent ripped away by the Destroyer as he came around for another pass of the station.

ThaManya stared at him, "What are you doing?"

"We want to make an impression. A really bad impression." Tor concentrated on getting close but not hitting the superstructure at elevated speeds. "Maybe if we do that they won't want to come find us."

The Destroyer's beam lasers flashed past the small ship, unable to get precise lock. Both particle beams lashed out on the node as Tor turned the ship tightly around it and then span away, heading towards open space and away from the Nebula, as rippling explosions began to engulf the station.

Disengaging the limiter the Defiance surged forward. Only now, with the sub-space system activated, the shield recovery slowed dramatically. Tor checked the HUD for pursuit, there was a certain amount of disarray behind him. The Khaak Destroyers appeared to be waiting, he wondered if it was to gather the smaller ships. "Find me a jumpgate."

ThaManya responded, "Two gates located, closest one has position marked on HUD."

Turning the ship, it flew sideways as the main thrusters and attitude jets attempted to correct to the new course setting. Tor noted the distance and a quick calculation indicated that they would arrive in ten mizuras. However he would need to slow and make course corrections, otherwise they would enter the gate at an acute angle to the axis.

Wormholes opened up in the distance. Destroyers appeared and moved to obstruct the path.

Corricel took control of the ship and rotated it almost a hundred and eighty degrees. The engines roared. Tor looked surprised, "What's happening."

"We are travelling too fast to avoid a collision and our weapons will not penetrate the shields in time for us to ram. Our vector heading has to change."

Tor shrugged, "You could just have told me."

"No time."

ThaManya called out, "How many energy cells would we use to jump to that gate from here?"

"Five." Corricel began the countdown, "Energising the jumpdrive, activation in ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five." Tor looked over his shoulder and could see the Destroyers dramatically getting larger by the moment and he could now understand the desperation of the situation. "Four, three, two, one, jumping."

The wormhole opened and a moment later the Defiance shot out of the gate entrance sideways. Two Destroyers slid past the screen and Tor gave a cheerful grin and a small wave as he wrestled for control of the flightstick. Beam lasers lashed out, but again the velocity of the ship was too fast to be tracked.

Corricel was not going to yield as the Defiance was brought under control and turned back to the gate.

Three wormholes opened and three Destroyers, two of them had attempted to intercept the Defiance prior to its jump.

Corricel announced, "You have control."

Tor clenched his teeth, "Is this the Tor factor," The Defiance dived as a beam of light lanced past the front of the ship, "you," Another beam skimmed close by as the ship rolled and twisted, "were," A glancing blow barely registered on the shield level before the Defiance dived and rolled, "talking," Another beam shot across the nose of the ship as Tor pulled sharply up and over the tracking laser, "about."

They crossed the gate activation zone as Corricel answered, "Yes."

He looked over to ThaManya and she stared back, her fingers locked on the control panel in a vice like grip, "What?"

The ship entered the new system, that had been alerted to the presence of the Defiance. Tor engaged the interplanetary drive system, out accelerating the Khaak ships, but kept the speed down to allow manoeuvre engines a chance to have a rapid response effect.

ThaManya calmed herself sufficiently to give an answer that did not require a string of untranslatable profanities, "You need to do this to get home?"

Tor's hand rested lazily on the flightstick and his attention was on the space ahead of him, "All the way. To be truthful, at this moment, I really miss the Xenon."

"The Xenon?"

Tor risked a quick glance over to her and then back to the cockpit window, "As the Khlarakin are to you, so the Xenon are to us. But we won! If we meet those guys I know I'm nearly home."

ThaManya watched Tor's expression harden, the grim determination etched on his face, softly she purred, "You will get home."

The ship rolled and dove as worm holes opened in front of them, Tor called out, "Give me a gate?"

ThaManya hit the console, while Corricel remained curiously quiet, "Two gates located, closest targeted on HUD."

Tor changed course heading, "Give me the furthest one."

ThaManya immediately change the targeting computer and Tor changed direction. Glancing at the distance and speed he tried to determine time to arrival. More wormholes opened ahead of him, "Corri, we need to kill some Khaak. I can't just keep running like this."

The reverse thrusters engaged, and stopped the Defiance ahead, and out of range, of two Khaak destroyers. They continued to close. ThaManya, deeply perplexed, looked towards a pensive Tor.

He glanced across and smiled at ThaManya as the first Destroyer's beam sliced past the shields. The Defiance surged forward, its dual particle beams slashing and raking the hull of the enemy vessel. The strafe drive roared as the laser towers attempted to track the ship.

Corricel announced, "The Defiance is not invincible Tor. Shields at thirty two percent."

Tor had beads of sweat on his brow, as he moved the stick with one hand and operated the various command pads with the other.

"Next assault, I would suggest not sitting and waiting for them to fire the first shot."

Tor banked around, "Find me a weakness Corri."

Two of the Destroyer's laser systems were in flames, however the massive ship rolled to bring other weapons to bare. The second Destroyer was coming round on a new attack vector.

"Avoid a frontal assault. Few weapons can be targeted with a side on encounter."

Tor swung the Defiance around the turning ship and once again the particle beams found their marks. Ruptures in the hull vented flames. The Defiance pulled away sharply as the weapons of the second destroyer pierced the intervening space.

Tor clipped off the speed restrictor and stabbed at the thruster control. The Defiance engines roared as it shot away into clear space, and at two thousand mps Tor cut the throttle, allowing the shields time to recover. Behind him the fractures in the first Destroyer's hull continued to widen until it flared like a small sun the second was in pursuit and rapidly falling behind. He wondered if the vessel would try to jump ahead.

"Everyone okay?"

ThaManya shrugged, "I'm still breathing, so that must be a positive sign."

Tor glanced over to her and smiled, "Let me know if you get bored."

ThaManya tried a smile, "The enemies weapons are .. very powerful."

"Yeah, they are. But it's only the big ships that're giving us a problem. And on this trip you'll know more about them than they do about you. Just think when we get back you'll have all the tactical data you need."

ThaManya looked as though she was about to say something but Corricel cut in, "Maybe that should be, 'if' we get back."

Tor looked at the shield indicator as it climbed back to full health, "Always the pessimist. Corri. Find me the next sector gate and give me some sort of ETA."

"I have three more gates on long range scanners. We are not heading towards any of them. Updating positions on the HUD."

ThaManya studied the instruments, "There's a heavy concentration of Khaak ships around a small asteroid field and around the fourth planet. However there's no sign of transit traffic in the rest of the sector."

Tor considered this for a moment, "I guess they got fed up with long journeys." He fell silent and leaned forward to select a distant gate.

Corri reported, "The Khaak Destroyer has increased velocity to intercept. At our current speed it will take us approximately eight and a half jazaras to reach the nearest gate."

Tor glanced at the scanner, sure enough the gap between ships was diminishing, at what Tor considered to be an alarming rate. He looked at the shield indicator and registered that it was back to full charge. "I don't want that thing jumping just in front of us at near light speed. Let's see if we can't inflict some damage. Corri, ready the jumpdrive, just in case."

"Destination?"

"Somewhere in the nebula of the previous sector. Not too close to the gate though."

"Acknowledged and destination uploaded, trigger response to activation when shields drop below twenty five percent."

The Defiance swung around and Tor kept the speed constant, slowing down would mean spending longer under the withering firepower of the Destroyer. Even so he knew the Defiance own particle beams would, correspondingly, have less time to inflict damage.

At a closing velocity of nearly five thousand mps, he wondered if either ship would strike more than a glancing blow. With the carry past and time to turn, he knew they would be no more than minor irritation to each other. He compared the potential battle with that of an attack by a fighter drone, the weakness of its laser would barely make an impact, only in numbers could they be effective as a weapon.

The captain of the Destroyer, must have had similar thoughts, the ships speed dropped dramatically. Tor had less than a mizura only to think how best to fight the next battle, "Corri, I need you to take control of the control and main thrusters."

"What are you planning?"

"I need to keep the front of the Defiance pointing towards the Destroyer, as we sail past I don't want us to be turning, I can watch what they're up to. Just give me strafe control."

"Shall I switch on collision avoidance?"

Tor smiled, "Keep us within firing range, and let me keep us out of the laser beams."

The battle that ensued was like no other, the nose of the Defiance pointed towards the Khaak ship at all time, strafing randomly around the hull, directional control jets flared in massive bursts constantly dodging the laser towers ranged on the sides of the Khaak vessel.

Tor's expression grim as his fingers gripped the flightstick, the knuckles white as he spasmodically twitched it in response to the energy beams that speared towards them. The shields of the Destroyer blossomed with colour as the Defiance particle beams lashed down and raked the hull.

Bright light hurt his retinas as a passing beam glowed brightly against their own shields, the strength tumbling away before breaking free with the frantic roars of the attitude jets firing around the ship.

The Defiance moved around the Khaak ship, like a small parasite that was never quite on target. The deadly dance continued.

The ship lurched, "Shields at forty percent."

The adrenaline coursed through Tor's veins, he felt it fizzing through his brain, sweat began to bead on his forehead. Rolling down, the salt stung his eyes, and a quick wipe with the back of his left sleeve did little to help. His focus remained on the constant shafts of light lancing out from the laser defences. One rippled with explosions and Tor silently hoped it was the first sign of victory.

Another beam lanced out, virtually too late Tor witnessed the flare of the tower, and with a sharp reflexes he slammed the slick across. The adrenaline burning inside heightened his awareness of time and all too slowly he felt the ship move, it felt dull and lethargic as the thrusters roared to capacity, and the shields were impacted, flaring brilliant white.

The particle beams flared back and as suddenly as the beam struck it stopped, the tower exploding on the side of the Destroyer.

"Shields at thirty two percent."

The Khaak ship rolled as all remaining energy was diverted to the depleted shields. The pulsing of the Defiance weapons arced down as vents opened up in the ship. Rippling explosions tore along the Destroyer as the Defiance turned and shot away, accelerating to maximum speed. The huge revolving arms, torn away by successive explosions tumbled and spewed burning gases. Eventually they flared brightly, as the remaining gases reached explosive volumes, and the metal tore itself apart.

Tor glanced over to ThaManya, sweat having left faint silvery lines down the side of his face. He moved uncomfortably in his seat. She sat in silence, wide eyed and, if Tor read the expression correctly, in a state of shock.

"We did survive."

ThaManya's eyes swiveled towards him, but she said nothing.

Corricel responded, "Yes, we are all alive."

"Tough one that." Tor was impressed the second Destroyer had put up such a good fight, bearing in mind the ease at which Corricel had eliminated the first.

The Khaak now appeared less interested in the new arrival and made no immediate move to intercept.

In the hope that it would give them more time to react, Tor kept the ship at half maximum speed. For the first time since encountering this violent race they appeared to have taken the stance of not attempting to stop him. He wondered how long it would last.

The mood of those aboard the ship was cautious and quiet, ThaManya busied herself looking through the gathered data and trying to match the current sector with anything they might have on record. She drew a blank. As they progressed she logged a record of the positions of major stars and patterns of stars.

The gate approached fast, Tor made his mind up that they would need to return back to the first sector if they found no indication of the way home soon. There was still the other gate to examine in the first sector, and several more since.

They entered the new sector. He engaged the engines to full and spiraled away as incoming fire streaked past and tried to track his position. Beams of light flashed in the shields and lanced past. Heavy fighters shot past, wormholes opened bringing more clusters that separated, the small scouts rushing forward in headlong charges firing weapons, to become rapidly expanding gases of superheated material under the particle beams of the Defiance.

Out pacing and out accelerating the massive swarm of ships, Tor took several deep breaths to calm himself from the surprise. He took one look at the shield indicator and knew it had been a close thing.

"What happened to jumping at twenty five percent, Corri?"

"I concluded that we were safe after the destruction of the Destroyer. A small miscalculation. I will ensure the drive is prepared at the next gate."

"Be sure that you do, single figure shield strength is not something I like getting accustomed to." Tor looked over to ThaManya, "Where's the next gate."

ThaManya was not sure how they survived and for the duration of the battle had kept her eyes on the long range scanners, if she was to die here then, to her mind, she would rather not see the plasma bolt that spelt her ultimate demise.

Without looking up she growled quietly, "There are three gates, to choose from."

"Incoming ships on an intercept vector." Corricel announced.

Tor studied the HUD, "I think we've overstayed our welcome long enough. Corri, mark the positions of the gates and calculate the energy cell consumption to reach." He stopped, "Corri, ghost ship, can you track it?"

ThaManya glanced out of the cockpit window. A pale shimmering ship, almost ethereal in appearance, drifted close by and matched their speed. The vessel turned and Tor steered the Defiance to follow the new vector heading, suddenly the ghost ship shot away at near light speed.

"Object is no longer on scanners."

Tor glanced at ThaManya, "Where are we heading?"

"There's a gate on the far side of the system. Our current vector takes us straight to it."



"Log it and let's go home." After the combat Tor was coming to the conclusion that the changes had made the seemingly indestructible Defiance uncomfortably vulnerable. The nagging doubt that this was not the same ship which flew through the core of a destroyer to escape the trap, burned brightly in his mind.

"Position logged and engaging jumpdrive."

After the Defiance disappeared a Khaak Destroyer and Carrier stationed themselves near the point of departure.

The swirling gases of the nebula enveloped the ship, moving from their position they sat waiting to see if any new wormholes would open up. In absolute silence they waited for thirty mizuras, Tor leant forward, "Okay lets get back through the gate."

The emptiness of Barren Edge was a welcome relief and Tor set the autopilot on and went to crash out on the bunk. ThaManya remained at her station and took the time to study the data logs. Tor passed into a restless sleep. He had faced the Khaak once again and old nightmares were rekindled.

Near to the gate ThaManya stirred from her study and glanced at Tor as he turned and twisted uncomfortably. She walked over to him and looked down, sweat beaded across his forehead and she wondered what dreams would cause such a reaction.

Suddenly he jerked away and looked around, panic etched on every feature, his eyes wild and staring. She stood back as in a few fleeting moments he realised it was just a dream and his expression of calm swept over him.

"Are we nearly home?"

ThaManya nodded, "What were you dreaming?"

Tor gave a rueful smile and shook his head, "Something unpleasant."

"They say dreams are a window on the soul. Some can predict the future. Do you believe that?"

Tor reflected on the fading images caught in his mind and looked at her, "If that were true then I am damned, and everyone is going to die. I sincerely hope that's not the case."

"Entering sector Hetki's Ocean."

They both glanced out of the cockpit screen as the wormhole opened. The sight of the defence grid around the gate initially alarmed Tor as it had been expanded considerably and he had little doubt that anything even vaguely unfriendly would be atomised in a blizzard of lasers. The worry that he might not be recognised as an ally faded as the grid remained passive.

Four Mohrabas Destroyers were in the sector with eight Corvette class warships. Tor looked over to ThaManya, "Looks like ThiGan has been busy."

"The captain of the Hu'uron is hailing us."

"Put them on viewer."

ThiJuratti appeared on the holo-projector. Tor did not recognise the name but the captain appeared familiar even if he could not place where he might have seen him. The captain had bright emerald green eyes that contrasted strongly against the more subdued pattern of his silver grey fur, his expression was that of curiosity.

"You have been away longer than anticipated. Did you find that which you search for?"

"Not yet captain, but we have found Khlarakin beyond the next sector. However we masked our return and it will be a while before they stumble upon the gate." Tor had expected more of a

reaction from the captain at the mention of the enemy they feared for generations, but the captain gave a small shrug.

"Did you engage them?"

ThaManya cut in before Tor answered, "Yes, Sir. We eliminated one station, a number of destroyer class vessels and a considerable number of fighters. Sir."

There was the slight twitch of a smile from the captain, "The enemy doesn't sound so powerful. Upload your data so we can witness how such victories were achieved."

ThaManya tapped on the console, "Data is being transmitted, Sir."

"ThiGan is expecting you aboard the TaGohlen. You will find them near the asteroid field." ThiJuratti closed the com.

Tor glanced over to ThaManya, "Corri, locate the TaGohlen."

"Position marked on HUD."

He engaged the main engines and set course. With a rough calculation he estimated it would be fifteen mizuras before they reached the Destroyer. Looking at the extended sector chart he noted that a destroyer sat at each of the gates with two patrolling warships nearby. The TaGohlen had stationed itself near the largest of the asteroids around which there appeared to be a defence grid established. He glanced over to ThaManya, "What are they up to?"

She looked over to see what had caught his attention, "Establishing a base. They will core out the centre of the asteroid, extracting usable materials for the construction of habitats."

"The first new home outside the core system and you were here to see it being built. That's something to tell the cubs in years to come."

ThaManya smiled, "Yes, it will be."

The Mizuras slipped by in idle chat until the Defiance made the final approach to the docking bay. ThiGan met them as they stepped out of the ship, "Your return is much later than expected, but it is good to see you back." Tor smiled at this uncustomary show of respect from the captain. Who turned to ThaManya, "Your task here is done and I have new orders for you. You will remain on the TaGohlen to appraise us of the Khlarkin and take up post as Science Officer."

She gave a slight bow of the head, "Thank you, Sir."

Tor felt a twinge of sadness as ThiGan looked towards him, "Your ship will be replenished with energy cells so that you may return to your people."

"Thank you, captain."

ThiGan made the warriors gesture of comradeship then turned and walked away. Tor turned to ThaManya, "So is this a promotion?"

ThaManya gave a nod, "It has been a pleasure flying with you, and I hope you find your true home."

Tor smiled, "The pleasure has been all mine. I'm not one for long farewell speeches and I hate goodbyes, so take care and drop by anytime you're in the sector." He tried to imitate the Mohrabas sign for long life and good health.

ThaManya gave a short laugh and showed him the correct sign. She then turned and followed the captain. Tor watched her leave and stepped back inside the Defiance as the automatic loading arm moved freight into the cargo hold.

"Loading is complete and we have clearance to depart."

## *Chapter 5*

Broden paced the corridors of the Silicon Mine in a subdued mood. It had been nearly two tazuras since Tor had been heard from, and with each return of the TaGohlen there had been no news. The station hummed with renewed production of silicon substrates for the energy cells that the Mohrabas were consuming at an alarming rate.

To his mind, however much they may have been indebted to the host race, they were calling in the debt, and then some. The shuttle lift doors opened and he stepped in, "Command deck."

Moments later and with barely a hesitation, he walked past Tor's office into the control room. He was comfortable here, at the nerve centre of the station, a place of constant activity. Liann sat at the master control desk monitoring overall activity as the other staff either gave verbal instructions or tapped the command units before them.

The few crew that were here was an indication they were operating with skeleton staff numbers, but the level of activity did not warrant the need for more.

Liann glanced up, and gave the customary smile before returning her attention to the console. He took a seat at the vacant terminal adjacent to her, and keyed in his identification. A successful bioscan of his palm activated the screen. He brought up the status reports from each of the stations and spent some time looking through them.

Thirty five mizuras after he had arrived, Liann gave a sudden laugh that caused him to spin around. Her eyes were bright as she pressed the comms button, "Welcome back Defiance, good of you to grace us with your presence. How was the trip?"

The main screen came alive with an image of Tor, "Good to be back, and met some old friends. There's a few less of them now of course but that goes without saying."

Broden forced himself not to smile, "Question is did you find the way home?"

Tor gave a wry grin, "Not yet."

Broden sat back, "Then what are you doing back here? Get back out there and find the way."

Tor gave a quiet laugh, "We'll I did get a pointer from an old friend, and I missed your cheerful company."

Giving this a moments consideration, Broden still held back the smile, "Well, I guess we'd better give you docking permission so you can tell us about it."

"It'll be my pleasure to come on board."

Liann said, "Corricel, upload the flight logs to the stations computer and I'll prepare them for the debriefing."

Tor gave a single nod, as Corricel responded, "Data uploading now."

"Verified, and see you when you get on board."

For Tor it was almost strange not to have someone sat next to him, even for this short journey, yet he felt happy at the sight of the stations after the jump. This was not home but made for a perfectly respectable second best.

He pondered just how close they might have been when the ghost ship passed them, and hoped it was only a couple of jumps away. Then he remembered his concern at the Defiance and its, seemingly, reduced performance against the Khaak.

"Corri, I have a question for you."

"Yes?"

"Our original encounter with the Khaak and you would quite happily head butt your way through a Destroyer, but with the latest encounter, we're lucky not to get vapourised if we get caught in the beams. Why is that?"

"The shield and weapons strength is coupled to the main power of the engines, prior to the recent modifications the bulk of the energy was untapped. Only twelve percent of output went to the primary drive. Changes to the drive for interplanetary capability with inertial dampeners now accounts for seventy five percent of output. This is reserved power that cannot be redirected during idle moments."

Tor whistled, "That's a massive difference."

"You will be pleased to know that weapons fire will only drain five percent of shield strength."

"I'm surprised we weren't atomised."

"As the engine enhancements restricted power, other enhancements improved shield strength and optimisation."

"That's what I like to hear. Now is there anyway we can get more power to the defences without compromising on the drive and subspace field generator?"

"A bigger engine would help. The original X-shuttle had a more powerful M/AM drive unit installed, this was capable of supplying energy to the jumpdrive unit without the need for energy cells."

Tor had heard some of the history behind M/AM drives, in particular the devastation wrought when early drives failed, which resulted in the minimisation of drive sizes so that the explosive yield would be of limited effect. "Can you get a bigger engine?"

There was a long silence, "Only if we exceed drive limitation statutes."

"So the answer is yes?"

"The Mohrabas use larger drives in their warships. One of these drives could be installed in the Defiance, but will reduce the cargo hold space by sixty seven percent."

Tor pondered this, "Could it be used to power the jumpdrive?"

"With modifications, yes it could."

"Well I think they owe us a favour, after all we've been through." Tor looked at the technical datapad, "Make the call."

"To who?"

"ThiRiioth, sounds like the right man."

"Mohrabas."

"Whatever." Tor placed his hand on the flight stick and guided the Defiance towards the Silicon Mine.

He touched on the comm button, something he never usually did, "This is Tor Grall on the Defiance, requesting docking permission."

Liann's voice replied, "Thought you'd bring her in yourself then. Clearance granted, approach the docking gate when you see green lights."

Tor slowed the ship and lined it up for final approach, as the docking lights flashed to green and the bay doors opened. The ship drifted in and as the automatic docking controllers took over, Tor released the flightstick, his eyes taking in every detail of the passageway and habitats of the station itself. The docking clamps took hold with the gentle bump, signifying they were at complete rest.

Corricel announced, "I have spoken with Chief Councillor ThiRioth, he will discuss your request, personally."

Tor sat for a while in thought, "I hope you were polite." He released the restraint harness and the airlocks opened.

"Of course I was."

Tor gave a wry smile, "Yeah." He walked out of the ship and took a deep breath. Broden sat at a table just outside the bar, two drinks were neatly placed on the table and a wisp of smoke, lazily rose from the cigar in his hand.

ThiRioth studied the data relayed to him from the Defiance, and considered it with the request for a new drive unit. The price was insignificant to that which they had already given them. But the council would have to agree to the request, and they were not due to reconvene for a few solar days.

He had given an immediate response but not the final decision, and now that he saw the logs he questioned his thought of simply discussing the request, and felt the need to meet with Tor. Bringing Tor back before the council and greet him as a fellow warrior would make any decision a formality.

The finger touched gently on the console and a voice asked, "Excellency?"

"Request the presence of Tor Grall, and send my vessel to collect him."

"Excellency."

Tris sat on Tor's lap as the holo-projectors filled the docking bay with scenes of the Defiance being beset by and destroying Khaak ships. The bar was overflowing, and even the command crew had shut down the station to come and watch. The sound was provided by Corricel as she replayed moments of conversation and added sound effects to each and every explosion.

Liann leant in towards Broden, her head on his shoulder, his arm around hers. The crew laughed when Corricel cut in the scene of Tor and ThaManyra discussing children between combat events. Even Tor saw his facial reaction change and laughed as he realised that his thoughts reflected his expression.

The ale flowed and when the show ended to rapturous applause, Corricel solemnly announced, "His Excellency ThiRioth wishes your presence on the homeworld. His personal carrier will be here to collect you."

Tor ignored the request and asked Tris, "So how do you fancy being my new co-pilot?"

Her face turned towards his in an instance, "Serious?"

"Never more so."

"Yes." For one of the few times in her life there was no pondering such a request.

"Then we'll find home together."

"But what do they want with you?"

"To give my ship a bigger engine, what else could they want?" Tor responded casually as he looked into her eyes.

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Tazuras passed into wozuras and the Defiance spent time in the maintenance dock of ThiRiOTH's Carrier being refitted with the new drive unit. Tor had moved on from Mohrabas homeworld to in depth discussions with the scientists on board the Roamer.

So far they had failed to supply a solution to using the new drives power on the jumpdrive.

Tor looked disheartened, "But there must be a way, the original X-shuttle managed it." It was an argument he had tried to use before and he was not going to let the point go.

Ricc Blathe had recently joined the meeting as the resident authority on the drives technology, "It's not that simple, the drive was designed specifically to use energy cells. It's a fundamental feature of the design, specifically to stop the races doing what your trying to do. You mess around with that and you'll irreparably damage the drive."

"The Defiance is nearing the end of its engine replacement, it's cargo space will be significantly reduced. The ship won't be able to make the jump to Hetki's Ocean until the gate is complete and re-aligned."

Captain Sheero Bhard leant forward, "Mr. Grall, this is something you should have consulted us about, before agreeing to the changes. But perhaps you can negotiate a lift on the TaGohlen, it makes regular visits."

"You call once a wozura regular?"

Sheero frowned, he had never seen Tor this agitated and could understand his anxiety. In a few wozuras their first jazura without contact with the core systems will have expired, and officially they would all be registered as deceased. Their homes and belongings divided amongst relations, sold on or destroyed. He held up a pacifying hand, "The Roamer will make the jump to Hetki's Ocean. It would do us all some good to have a change of scenery. You can go on from there."

Tor looked long and hard at the Captain, "That." He hesitated, "Is an acceptable compromise."

Sheero looked towards the navigation and communications officer, Chareth Nuaro, "How many cells will we need to complete the two jumps?"

Chareth had considered the option some time ago and hesitated as he tried to remember the number he had come with, "A ball park estimate is seven hundred per jump. Fourteen hundred in total."

Sheero looked surprised that it would take so many, "What's our current allocation?"

"We have one hundred and fifty in the hold. But the Mohrabas have virtually taken all the reserve stock for the TaGohlen."

Tor looked at the communications officer, he knew the Mohrabas had built up a large reserve cache of cells in Hetki's Ocean, but he had not really realised the impact it might have. "Let me find out when we will have enough to supply the Roamer."

Mizuras later and he sat on the shuttle transport back to the silicon mine, he still could not believe the jumpdrive could not be modified. On board the silicon mine he sought out Broden and found him in the Command Centre.

Broden read his expression, "Didn't go so well then?"

"Like you said, the jumpdrive will only take cells."

"The Goners and Kyle Brennan managed to upset virtually everyone when they announced that little feature."

"Why did they do it?"

"Tactical reasons, mainly to make the fleet commanders think twice about initiating hostilities. Unusually high volumes of energy cells being traded with the military gets noticed, and as cells only have a shelf life of four Wozuras there's little opportunity to stockpile over a period of time." Broden turned his attention back to the report he was reading.

"Talking of energy cells, how quickly can we get fifteen hundred to the Roamer?"

Broden glanced over to him, as Liann interrupted them, "Guys, people are trying to work here, and as interesting as your conversation is, you both have offices. Go use one of them."

Tor instinctively apologised and muttered to Broden, "Let's talk in my office."

They both left and within a few strides had entered the room. Tor flung himself down on one of the leather seats and looked at the Station Commander, "So tell me about the energy cells."

Broden sat opposite him, "Reserves are down, and our Paranid friends are in a time of holy communion with the three dimensionality."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning they're not going to ramp up production for us unholy ones just because we ask them to." Broden cast a casual eye over to the bar.

Tor thought about it for a moment, "Perhaps I should go talk with them?"

"It might help, but they're being particularly abusive at the moment. Maybe they're just as homesick as quite a few other people around here. I don't know, and I'm not going to ask."

Tor wondered if the comment about homesickness was directed at him, "So how long before we get hold of the cells?"

"About a wozura and a half."

A thought struck Broden, "How much have they been informed of what's been going on recently?"

Tor shrugged, "As much as anyone else. You don't suppose they feel left out?"

"I'm just speculating. They're in this as much as anyone else, but as a Teladi would say, 'they're not getting any slice of the profits'."

"Not there's much profit to be had, all I want to do is find us a way home."

Broden shook his head, "That's as maybe, but look at what the Defiance has become. It's got more alien tech on it and is way in advance of anything we have at home, it'll find us a way home and when we get there it'll be more of a curse than a help. Every government will want a big slice of the ship. Chances are it'll be impounded, and dismantled under rigorous scrutiny before being copied."

"What do you suggest I do with it?"

"Once we get home shoot it into the sun."

Tor looked shocked, "You're serious aren't you?"

Broden felt it was time to have a few drinks, the subject of the Defiance had been bothering him for some time but he had not found the opportunity before now to really mention anything. He turned and looked at Tor, "Yeah, and I'm saying this as a friend. Don't keep anything that can be found on the technical specs of the ship."

Surprise flashed to anger, "What about Corricel, do you think I should fire her into the sun as well?"

Broden poured out two glasses, and carefully replaced the stopper on the bottle. He did not answer.

"You do, don't you?"

"I can't answer that." He placed the glass before Tor and sat down again. "Unplug her and keep her safely locked away, you might get away with it. But you know Corricel is as much a part of the Defiance as you are a person in this universe. The alternative is we get back and you send them out into deep space together. They'll survive until the fuel cells run dry and then they'll just be another object hurtling through space to crash into a star or other astral body at some point in the future."

Tor felt anger rising through him, with the desire to strike out at Broden for even mentioning such things. But a cold rationale triggered in the back of his mind, in his heart he knew Broden was right, he grabbed the glass and it shattered in his hand. He hardly felt the pain as shards sliced into his fingers.

Broden took a casual sip as he watched drops of blood fall to the floor, "Well I for one am glad you didn't hit me. I mention this now so have a chance to think about things and make a plan. It's one thing to make a copy of a ship, it's quite another to fill it with technology no one else has. As I made mention, it'll be our salvation and your curse."

"I won't be thanking you for telling me this." Tor opened his clenched fist and went to the bar and found a cloth to wipe away the blood before picking out the shards.

Broden sipped his drink, "And you're the easy one to talk to. I'm dreading to see what Corricel's reaction is going to be."

"Well, why don't you have a friendly chat with her to find out."

"Do you tell a terminally ill child, there's no hope, they're going to die?"

Tor flashed a menacing glance at Broden, "Corricel is not terminally ill."

Broden finished his drink, and stood up to leave, "I know." He paused, "You better let the doctor look at that hand." He turned.

Tor called out, "There are other choices."

Broden glanced back at him, "There always are, for example, you could decide not to return home."

Tor pulled out a medi-kit and found a spray of rapid-skin and sprayed it over the still weeping cuts, "When you get home, what will you be going back to?"

"Currently you owe me a jazuras back pay, so I should be reasonably well off for a while." He smiled, then shrugged, "But I guess I'll just go back to being a veteran pilot again. I don't know."

Tor just nodded and Broden took this as an indication the conversation had ended. In a somber mood he left Tor with his thoughts and with the looming prospect that they would soon be going home he now questioned it.

Strolling into the command centre he ambled up to Liann's desk, she looked up, "What's troubling you?"

Broden stirred from thought, "What is 'home'?"

She smiled, "Home is where the heart is. Why?"

"Can we chat?"

"What now?"



"I need to talk."

"What's got you so serious all of a sudden?" She leant forward, concern etched on her face.

"I just talked to Tor, and mentioned the Defiance becoming his curse."

"Did you paint the bleak picture, or the upbeat one?"

"I guess I wasn't too careful with my words."

"Ahh," She rose from her desk, "You'd better tell me about it." She turned to the coordinator near her, "Joraj, I'm stepping out for a while, so you're in charge until I get back."

Joraj acknowledged with a casual wave.

They wandered past Tor's office and Liann asked quietly, "So how did he take it?"

"He was upset. Shattered a glass in his hand when he picked it up. He's actually quite scary when he looks annoyed these days, you can almost see the Mohrabas in him."

They made their way to his office, Liann said, "You were right to mention it, he needs to consider the future beyond getting home."

Broden gave a slight nod, "And what about our future? Here I'm Station Commander Falstarn, back home I'm just a veteran pilot scratching out a living. What about you?"

Liann took a moment to think, "I was just a technician. But I'm sure Tor will find us suitable positions on the factory back home."

With a half hearted smile, Broden shook his head, "Chances are that Tor's station, won't be his when we get back. I doubt any of us will have anything but the clothes we stand up in. Which means Tor wouldn't even have the credits to pay us for the last Jazura."

"He'll have the Defiance."

Broden shook his head, "The armed services will seize it at the first opportunity. He'll be lucky to see any financial recompense as the ship's based on a stolen design anyway."

"I get the feeling you want to stay?"

Broden looked into her eyes, "As you said, home is where the heart is. You have mine, where you are, is where I want to be. However in the cold light of day, when we leave here we'll have nothing. But if we stay, then we have all this."

Liann asked quietly, "What about friends, family?"

"They were always a jump or two away from where ever I found myself. When we know the route back to the core sectors, we'll be a jumpdrive and a few energy cells away, so no real difference. And once the link is established, the argon government is going to send diplomatic missions, the full works, so catching a lift will be a formality." Broden's eyes almost gleamed as the idea of staying blossomed with future potentials.

Liann smiled at his growing enthusiasm, "But will the Mohrabas allow us to stay? Tor's pretty much promised we'd all leave when we found the way back."

"There's only one person who can make that decision and that's ThiRioth. But there's no point me asking, if you don't want to stay."

Liann smiled, "Let me think about it."

Broden took the smile to be a positive sign, he could wait for while but not too long as he would need to broach the subject with Tor.

Tor knew he needed to check on the station status updates, but his heart was not in it. His options felt limited, he had dedicated his time to finding home and as they got closer, his hopes were significantly raised. In one brief conversation his dreams of the future had been reduced to ashes.

He had committed them to leave without considering the future cost to himself, and he cursed his blindness.

Tris stepped into the office and judged his mood with a single glance, "Why the long face?"

"I've been stupid."

She gave a slight laugh and mocked, "Nothing new there then." Tor shot her a glance that indicated to her, there was nothing to laugh at. "What have you done?"

"I can't leave the Defiance in the core sectors. If I go back, I'll either have to give up the ship or destroy it."

"Destroy it, but surely it would be better to allow the government a chance to study it. Use the technology to advance our own. The Khaak will attack the core sectors, with a fleet of Defiance's to defend us they wouldn't stand a chance of repeating the massacre we witnessed. That's got to be a good thing."

"And what do I say to Corricel?"

"I can't see that she could possibly disagree."

Tor shook his head, "She's a series five thousand chip. Once that is known, she'll either be used for lab experiments or ground into dust like the others. She'll take a dim view of being handed over and she is very much a part of the Defiance."

Tris sat next to him, "This is personal as well, isn't it?"

Tor looked at her, "Too damn right it is, she's my ship. It gives me that edge to survive when no one else can."

Tris frowned, "That's a very selfish thing to say. Everyone deserves the best opportunity they can to survive."

"Not if they're trying to kill me they don't." Tor mulled over his thoughts for a moment, "Things have a tendency to fall into the wrong hands. First one to replicate the Defiance will have a terrible power to use against anyone that they don't happen to like. Do you think the Split or Paranid will stand by, knowing the Argon have such a vessel to work with, and once replicated a thousand times will sweep aside all their fleets upon a whim."

"Now you're your being over dramatic."

"I don't think so. The ship is simply too powerful for any one race. It's too much of a technological leap to get ignored."

"So you're going to destroy it then, is that what you're saying?"

"I can't silence everyone that survived the Khaak when they get home. Everyone knows about the Defiance, so I can't hide it. I'm running out of options, other than to abandon the sectors and go somewhere no-one can find the ship, I can only do what Broden suggested and fire it into the sun."

Tris looked at him, "I can't say I agree with you in this. It's better that the Argon government has the ship than just throwing it away."

"Even if it might start a war?"

"You've got nothing to say it will."

Tor felt Tris's growing annoyance, "Really? Have you noticed how the Paranid are choking back on energy cell production. Don't you think that's strange, just before we plan on needing a stockpile so we can make the jump for home."

"Are you serious?"

"Broden mentioned it to me."

"Well, that could be for any number of reasons. Maybe they are having production problems."

"I'll be having a chat with them, but if I'm right they're going to be asking for technology rather than assistance with production."

"And if you're right, what then?"

A thought crept into Tor's mind, "We'll cross that bridge when we get there. There is a possibility that when everyone is safely back home. I could return here and negotiate an indefinite stay."

Tris asked quietly, "What about me?"

Tor looked surprised at the sudden change in direction of the conversation, "Sorry?"

She looked straight into his eyes and he felt the void open up before him, "What about us?"

"You would be more than welcome to join me."

She gave a sad smile, "No Tor, my place is in the core sectors, not here."

Tor saw the divide too late, he had been completely absorbed by the future of Corricel and the Defiance and had given no second thought about Tris. He had the desire to talk but words failed him.

She put her hand on his, and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before getting up, "Only you know where your heart lies."

Tor felt as though the wind had been knocked clean out of him, as she walked out of the office.

## *Chapter 6*

Gyles Scellar looked up and was surprised, "Tor, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I cut myself on some glass, I need you to check I've got it all out."

"Show me."

Tor held out his hand. Gyles sighed when he saw the rapid-skin and ran the scanner unit over the damaged area. "What happened?"

"I just went to pick up a glass."

Gyles looked up, "Really?" He turned his attention back to the scan readings.

Tor tried to see the result, "Doctor, I'm having a bad day. Let's leave it at that."

Gyles studied the scan, "Well you'll be pleased to hear, although your blood pressure is up, there's no foreign bodies to worry about."

Tor gave a nod, "That's something positive at least."

"Mr. Grall."

Tor glanced across, "Yes?"

"In a few wozura, we will all, hopefully be heading home, but for the records I need to know who your personal physician is? So that I can send them the latest records."

"I'm sort of between physicians at the moment. Currently it's you. Assuming that I have some assets when I get back and you're interested in the job, it's yours."

Gyles contemplated the thought, "I guess we all need to be thinking about what we're going to do in the future. Under the circumstances and knowing your medical history, you'll need the continuity. I accept the position."

"Thank you." Tor turned and left.

Gyles watched him and turned his attention to the archive on organ replication for transplants. Isolating the genetic coding that would grow a heart in a new born baby was easy. Determining what that code was in a genetically modified, fully grown adult would be an altogether different challenge.

After two Tazuras, Tor met with Broden, it was their first meeting after the initial discussion about the fate of the Defiance. Broden kicked off the conversation, "So have you talked to the Paranid yet?"

Tor shook his head, "As I understand it the crew are planning on having a celebration to mark the end of the first jazura here. So I thought I'd hang around for that."

"The 'Officially Dead Day'." Broden paused, "Strangely enough, I don't believe the other stations are doing anything similar."

"I wonder why?"

Broden took note at the hint of sarcasm, "Well, I guess they're hoping you'll find a way back and tell them we're still alive."

Tor looked at Broden, "At this moment, I really don't feel like going back. Not any more."

A slow smile spread across Broden's face and he said slowly, "We have something in common then."

Taking a moment to absorb this statement, Tor glanced over to him, "You don't want to go back?"

"I have friends and relatives, who I'd like to see every now and again. But when I was back there, after the Navy, I was just a veteran pilot signed on to do mercenary runs to make a living. Here you're the top man and I get to command a station. It's a good job and it's been challenging. At times, quite exciting even. And I know there's nothing like this back there for me, so why would I want to leave?"

Tor mulled over the words, but before he could reply Broden added, "If you find the way to the core sectors, it means that the Defiance could come back here. It would be safe, only the Mohrabas have control and we're so remote I doubt any of the races would dare to attempt to get ship. If you get a jump prep'd transport then we're onto a winner. We can get people here and let people visit their relations for the price of a few hundred cells."

Tor had been unprepared for this latest insight, "All the stations have been promised to the Mohrabas. It might be too late to re-negotiate the deal."

Broden looked at him, "When you get back, chances are you'll find you own nothing and will rely on the charity of former friends and worse, relations that have inherited your money. Do you think they're going to be glad to see you, trying to reclaim what was yours? But if you can keep this station, it will be worth more than all the money your Bakery will have earned for you. Governments and corporations will give huge sums of credits just to stay here while they try and broker deals with the Mohrabas."

Tor smiled, something he did not have much reason to do for the last couple of tazuras, "There's Teladi blood in you, I can tell. We have to be careful, all the other stations know that when the gate opens we're leaving. That was the deal, no one remains behind. If they catch a sniff that anyone is going to stay, then the station commanders will insist on staying as well." Tor paused, "But what does Liann think of your plan?"

Broden smiled, "She wants to stay. Tris?"

Tor shook his head, "Her home is in the core sectors."

"I'm sorry to hear it, but I can't say I'm surprised. She's young and has her whole life ahead of her." He looked thoughtfully at Tor.

Tor met his gaze, "I'm not that old myself. Anyway poll the men and see who's willing to stay as well. Then deploy them to the Crystal Fab. We're going to keep this station, but I want the remaining crew to board the Roamer as the first passengers."

"Okay, I'll organise it."

"I'll talk to ThiRiioth, see if he'll agree to the request. Then I'll talk to the Paranid."

"Best you talk to the Paranid first. If they make any demands, and then see you go to the Mohrabas, it'll create a better impression."

Tor smiled, "I like your thinking."

Feeling more positive than he had done for a while, he took a transport ship over to the Solar Power Plant and was met by a Paranid security officer, who made a point of averting his eyes away from Tor. "In the name of his holiness the Pontifex of Paranidia, what brings you, the unholy, to defile this sacred place?"

"I'm here to see the Commander."

"His holiness Thalkamanckepol is not expecting an unholy visit from you."

Tor pondered his next move, "Perhaps, if I were to say that I have information to share with his holiness, that he would bless my unworthy presence."

"In our greatness of the understanding of the three dimensionality, there is little that you can share with us. But his gracious holiness, blessed in the sights of the Pontifex of Paranidia, will grant you some holy time."

Tor gave a wry smile as the security officer span on his left heel and marched briskly away. It had been a long time since he had heard the formal mode of speech that the Paranid used to put all the other races in their place. Many of the Paranid he knew had spent so long in the presence of the 'unholy' that they had learnt to tone down the insults and adopt a more species friendly manner.

The long strides of the Paranid were to make Tor either fall behind or have to run to keep up. He paced himself with long, loping strides, comfortably matching the pace.

The great double doors were grand in their design and ornately decorated. Its two guards dressed in holy robes, and as they drew close the doors opened of their own accord. Only the light of the corridor spilled into the room which remained in darkness, and as Tor entered the figure of Thalmanckepol began to glow from within his robes giving him an aura of light.

Tor waited patiently for the Station Commander to make the first speech.

"You are granted audience, unholy Grall. In this holy time of the three dimensionality, you say you have information for us. But what information can one as unholy as you have that we, of the greater vision cannot already know?"

Tor allowed a respectable time for the words to settle, "Your gracious holiness, as you know, I am seeking to reunite us with our brethren both blessed and unblessed. Only with your blessing and the energy cells from your blessed factory can I hope to achieve my goal."

Thalkmanckepol gave a slight rumbling laugh, "You do not speak of that which you have to offer in return for our blessing."

Tor knew how to play the game, "Your holiness is very perceptive and with your greater vision, are already aware of what I have to offer. But it is right that I should state aloud that which you already know. I offer in exchange for your blessing, the unholy Mohrabas's technology."

There was a long silence, "We, blessed in the sight of the three dimensionality, have no need for lesser things. However your offer will be considered. Now leave me." With a sweeping gesture of his multi-jointed arms the glow from his robes faded and left the room in darkness.

Tor walked backwards from the room with a slight bow and the doors closed before him. Straightening up he turned and walked away. The Paranid security officer did not make any attempt to lead him back to the transport.

As he ambled along the corridors, he wondered exactly what he was going to be able to offer the Paranid that was going to be of any worth, or more importantly, something which he would not mind letting them having.

Stepping on board the transport ship he decided he would ask Corricel. She would probably give him verbal abuse for making such a gesture without consulting her first, but then again he felt well within his rights to offer such things.

"Departure clearance granted." The transport jarred slightly as the restraining tube disengaged. The stations autopilot guided the ship towards the exit dock.

As the docking bay doors opened on the void beyond, Tor never failed to feel awed by the sight of it all. The transport drifted out and the autopilot was engage to return to the silicon mine. For once Tor was the passenger and one of the mines crew piloted the ship.

The flight itself was short and uneventful, and Tor chided himself as he considered why it would be otherwise. He stepped off the ship and noticed the Defiance was neatly nestled between several of the stations fighters, and contemplated taking her out when he visited ThiRiioth, it would mean a Stazura in transit, but that would be plenty of time to discuss things with Corricel. Then again if she decided to be vocal against his decision to offer the Paranid some technology then it would prove to be an uncomfortable trip.

Smirking at the various scenarios he went to find Broden and inform him of the meeting.

He found him in the Command Centre and Liann flashed them a warning glance before they had a chance to say anything. Tor indicated, "My office." Broden gave a single nod and they left.

Broden stood attentively by the meeting table, "How did it go?"

"I think they're interested to see what we offer them. Problem is it has to be good."

Corricel interrupted them, "Offering who, what?"

Broden mouthed, 'She's back.'

Tor shrugged, "Hi Corri, nice to hear your dulcet tones. To answer your questions, the Paranid, and some Mohrabas technology, so they'll resume energy cell manufacture."

There was a stony silence, as Tor glanced towards Broden. Corricel spoke slowly and quietly, "So let me understand this, you offered the Paranid something you do not have?"

"Something like that, but I was just going to see ThiRiioth to negotiate the retention of this station, so that you'd still have a place of sanctuary after we find the way home. Whilst I was there I thought I'd see if they had any piece of technology that they wouldn't mind us sharing with our comrades in arms."

Broden was quietly impressed with Tor's twist about the station.

Corricel was quiet for a few moments, "So you are doing this for my benefit?"

"Everyone's Corri, everyone's. Not that I expect you to understand this of course."

Broden felt uncomfortable, expecting at any moment for the room to suddenly be evacuated into space. The hiss and rush of air did not happen.

"I understand Tor, that you have choices to make concerning, the Defiance, myself and, Tris."

Broden could not help contain his look of surprise as Tor glanced at him, he had a half hearted smile.

"Corri, have you simulated the future possibilities of what might happen when we get home? Taking into consideration the distribution and withdrawal of the Ghojo program, the remarkable survival characteristics of the Defiance and its unique weapons capability."

"A government power would seek control, the resultant non-dissemination of information based on the tactical advantages would lead to first strike against the facility holding the Defiance. War would be declared, the Paranid would ally themselves to the Split, the Boron would stay with the Argon and the Teladi would supply arms to both sides whilst attempting to remain neutral. But that is just the most probable outcome."

Tor sat on the edge of the table, "So what's the best course of action?"

There was a long pause, "Premature destruction of the Defiance."

"Unless of course we can find somewhere that none of the races can find you, or somewhere that is too much of an unknown entity to invade and try to get you. Everyone here witnessed the result of the Mohrabas Destroyer's attack on the Defiance. It had to be towed back into station, a lifeless

wreck, and rebuilt. The races aren't going to invade the Mohrabas for the Defiance because the one thing they will know is they'll lose."

Broden was fascinated by this chain of reasoning, and could not find fault, but then again he knew he needed to ponder it for a while longer.

"I will analyse your suggestions for a while longer. However the weapons technology of the Mohrabas, in an alternative form would be a suitable technology for the Paranid."

Broden cut in, "And what will you call it?"

Corricel answered, "The phased shockwave generator. The Paranid are already developing something similar according to security records but it is a long way from completion and has some undesirable side effects. This system overcomes the technical issues and provides a more powerful working solution."

Tor frowned, "But you've protected the Defiance against it, right?"

"The Defiance hull has been re-engineered to survive such a weapon, long enough to destroy the ship that fires it."

Tor smiled and turned towards Broden, "Sounds almost perfect, any chance you can drop the effectiveness?"

Corricel responded, "I already have."

Broden shook his head with a wry smile, "Only one problem Tor, they're going to want to run the data through a simulator. That in itself could take a wozura."

"We'd better send it to them sooner than later then."

"Yes, Sir. Only I can't see you finding the core sectors before the end of the jazura."

"Your point?"

Broden shuffled to make himself slightly more comfortable, "Perspectives change, at the moment most of the guys have a very real reason to want to make an appearance back in the core sectors, if only to protect their assets. When the jazura expires, that reason will vanish."

Tor looked thoughtful, "Ahh, this is the end of year thing. I can't make the Paranid make more energy cells."

Broden nodded slowly, "I've worked in the navy and ended up a mercenary. Too many good men have I seen end up in the dark holes of Bliss Factories, or drowning themselves with whiskey having lost everything, having been dumped on from a great height. I don't want to be joining them, Sir. Officially we'll all be dead, and dead people don't have the right to complain. The securing of this station should be your top priority for now."

"Maybe I should take the time to study your records, sounds like there's some interesting reading to be found. Corri, if your not going to give me an earful of grief get the Defiance ready. We're going to visit ThiRioth."

Broden smiled, "Just don't let the children read it, Sir."

Tor rose from his chair, "That good?"

Broden sat for a moment longer, "Starts off well enough, but goes a bit downhill at the end." He stood up and they walked towards the door.

"I wouldn't have thought your time here would have made for dull reading?"



Broden laughed, "It'd certainly be different, and it's always good to end on a positive note, but we're not at the end yet."

"Then let's see what we can do to make sure Broden's story ends well."

"Best thing for me, is not to have to go cavorting with Khaak." Broden gave Tor a friendly slap on the back.

The Station Commander watched the Defiance manoeuvre away towards the exit. Tris appeared next to him, "Is he off again?"

Broden glanced towards her, "That boy can never sit still. This time he's looking to secure our alternative future."

Tris glanced at him with a look of curiosity, "Alternative?"

"This station, we want it to remain in our hands, even when we find the way home."

"Doesn't that contravene our agreement?"

Broden nodded, "Some of us like it here, and we don't have much to look forward to when we return. This is as good a home as any and better than most. You're young and can make a fresh start, me I'm too long in the tooth to have to struggle to make ends meet all over again."

"You're never that old Commander." Tris smiled.

"I like the sound of that, let me get you a drink."

The Defiance engines flared as the sub-space unit stabilised. The new power units rocketed the ship forward with unparalleled acceleration. And well within the Stazura the deceleration sequence initiated.

"This is Mohrabas control, welcoming the Defiance to local space, you have permission to dock on His Excellency's ThiRiioths ship. Co-ordinates have been uploaded."

Corricel automatically located the ship and targeted it on the HUD. The engines went into low acceleration and swiftly the ship crossed the intervening space.

Tor stared out of the screen, ahead of him was the gathering of the Mohrabas fleet, with the exception of the ships in Hetki's Ocean. He felt in awe.

Six carriers and over a hundred destroyers were stationed, he could not estimate the number of warships.

"Docking clearance granted, making final approach."

The Defiance glided beneath, and in the shadows of the Destroyers to come out next to the carrier. Tor knew in his heart this was a fleet destined for war and he had opened the door, soon enough the gate would herald the beginning, and this time the Mohrabas would either dish out a devastating revenge or be wiped out.

The ship completed the final docking approach and was taken under computer control. A fully uniformed ThaStornla met him as he disembarked and they greeted each other with the warriors salute.

Tor could not help but smile, "I wondered where you had got to."

ThaStornla growled, "I command the Sherak't'enath. Flagship of the Mohrabas Navy."

"That's a bit of a promotion. So all this is yours?"

"No," ThaStornla laughed, "This is the Nygaline, ThiRioth's personal ship."

"Care to tell me why your whole fleet is here?"

The Mohrabas prince looked down on Tor with a smile, "This is only half the fleet, the rest remained stationed. But you are in time for a great meeting."

"Don't tell me you're going to war." A thought struck Tor but he did not voice it for the moment.

"We prepare to reclaim what was ours. But come let us meet with his Excellency."

ThaStornla led him through the busy corridors of the ship until they reached a large auditorium. Tor had never seen this part of the ship and it was filled with over two hundred Mohrabas. Tor could only guess it was the captain and first officer from each ship as he scanned over the insignias on each uniform.

The rumbling growls and purrs, reverberated through the room as multiple conversations rippled around the room.

Tor jumped when ThiRioth, who had stepped up behind him without a sound growled, "Your visit is unexpected, but you are welcome here."

"I really just came to have a chat about stuff, but I see now is not a good time."

ThiRioth gave a sign of acknowledgement, "We have studied the technical data that you acquired for us and are now ready to go reclaim what was once ours."

"So I understand it." Tor paused and as ThiRioth went to walk towards the main speakers platform, Tor asked, "When was the last time you people went to war?"

ThiRioth stopped and looked back at him, "Five hundred of our solar years."

"The network of gates is a labyrinth of destinations. Each sector you capture you'll have to fortify and hold, each time you come across a sector with multiple gates you'll have to choose whether to divide up or go in one direction. Eventually you'll become so spread out that a counter attack on any front will sweep through you until they pouring into here. They've had more for longer and they out number you by an order of magnitude. Your first attacks will surprise them, but all they have to do is stop you at the next gate, and it will cost you dearly to break that hold. And they have the technology to get in behind you and however far you push they will disrupt your supply lines." Tor was vaguely aware of how quiet the room now was.

"So you are a tactician as well Mr. Grall." The words were gently spoken but left Tor with a distinctly uncomfortable feeling.

"No, Excellency. But I know a man who is." Tor felt bad about speaking for Broden, but he had an inkling it might give him some leverage with the discussion on the fate of the station.

"But you will be heading home soon." ThiRioth gave Tor one of those penetrating stares that went beyond the flesh.

"It is only recently, that some of the men have declared a desire to remain."

This was met by a chorus of low growls from around the room until ThiRioth held up his hand for silence, "Really, and does this tactician you allude to wish to remain?"

Tor simply gestured in the affirmative.

"Understand Mr. Grall you are not the only people searching for the birthplace of your species. Now I think you have left us with enough to deliberate over, go refresh yourself and I will summon you when we are concluded here."

"Excellency." Tor bowed and retreated back out of the room to the sound of silence. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief, he doubted that he would ever get use to meeting with ThiRioth. Tor felt the giant would make short work of even a Paranid. In many ways he reminded him of Creed in his overwhelming bearing within the room, although the mercenary leader was considerably shorter, they both exuded a certain power and a self control of violence that was a hairs width from breaking loose to the detriment of anyone close by. He attempted to take his bearings, ThaStornla had remained in the auditorium, so Tor was left to find his own way, and the only comfort he took from the brief meeting was that he mentioned the desire to stay in the sector. The seed was sown and ThiRioth had a chance to consider the request, even discuss it with the others before he needed to mention it again.

He retraced his steps until he recognised familiar territory and then strode purposefully towards the docking bay. As he stepped on board the Defiance, Corricel observed, "That was quick."

"They're planning on war and I mentioned that someone I knew was a great tactician."

"So you want me to call Broden and tell him the good news."

Tor smiled, "Something like that, but the negotiations aren't over. It would be nice to know if he's interested in the job, so if necessary I can give an answer."

"The relay satellite is carrying the message as we speak. Take the remote comm unit so I can tell you what the response is when it comes in."

Tor opened a cupboard and rummaged around, finding the unit he hooked on the earpiece and with a quick wave to the technical datapad, he left the ship.

Several mizuras after the message had been sent, Broden received it as he sat in the Command Centre. The air was filled with descriptive words that had all the co-coordinators, even Liann, sit back open mouthed and in a state of shock. His fist hammered down on the console with a crack, and with a face like thunder he stormed from the room issuing a string of expletives that could be heard five levels down.

It took a while before the room resumed normal activities. Liann listened to the message and thought for a while before sending the response, "Broden is currently in a bad mood, I'd like to say he's thinking about your request, but I can still hear him and he's not even on this deck. Maybe you should discuss it on your return."

Broden stormed back into the room and pressed the comm button, Liann put her fingers in her ears to reduce the noise that followed. He stormed out again.

Mizuras later Corricel cheerfully announced to Tor, "I have a response."

Tor was wary when Corricel was cheerful, it seldom meant good news. "Play it to me." He reached the end of Liann's message and had to rip away the ear piece even at arms length he could hear Broden. Wiggling a finger in his ear to make sure he hadn't gone deaf with the burst of noise Tor placed the unit back in his ear, "So I guess that's a, yes then."

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Tor was wary when Corricel was cheerful, it seldom meant good news. "Play it to me." He reached the end of Liann's message and had to rip away the ear piece, even at arms length he could hear Broden. Wiggling a finger in his ear to make sure he hadn't gone deaf with the burst of noise Tor placed the unit back in his ear, "You know that's the first time I've heard Broden lose it."

"Lose what?"

"Self control, so I'm guessing that after all that it's a reluctant yes."

"My analysis of the words he used does not indicate anything in the positive, but make many accusations on your parentage, mental state and other things, a lot of other things. Would you like me to list them?"

"No Corri, I think I get the picture, bottom line is he means, yes."

"I fail to understand how it can be a positive answer."

"Simple, he didn't say, no. One of the simplest words in the language and doesn't take long to learn or say." Tor glanced around the Mohrabas food hall, noting that he would for all intents and purposes appear to be talking to himself. If anyone had noticed then they had not shown any undue interest.

"That is your reasoning?"

Tor pulled out his old datapad for show, "Yeah, now I'd better eat this meal in front of me or the chef might take exception, having prepared it especially for me. Let me know if any other messages come through." He made a show of pressing a button and put the pad back into his pocket.

The Mohrabas chef was indeed making a dish specifically for Tor. He had seen him enter the food hall and directed him away from the potentially lethal to humans menu to a table and gestured that he would prepare a meal for him.

A short while later the food arrived and Tor gestures his thanks. The chef waited and watched as Tor examined the dish, closed his eyes and breathed in deeply the aroma, and then carefully cut a dignified slice and ate it with reverential effort. Tor had to admit it was superb and in other circumstances he would have gorged himself, he looked at the chef and gestured his approval and gratitude. With a bow the chef departed.

As he tucked in in earnest, Tor considered that with all the replicators able to produce quality meals, it still took a living being to add that something special to a meal which elevated it to an experience rather than just food on a plate. The chef had excelled and he wondered how much influence Helass had when she was a resident on board.

It was sometime later that ThaStornla found Tor. He was reading Farnham's Legacy by Elena Kho, and smiled at her first trading experience with the Teladi. For a history book he liked the way it was taken from a personal perspective rather than a dry overview.

His concentration broke as the Mohrabas Prince sat opposite him, "You've finished?"

"You left us with a lot to think about."

"Well I don't know much about war, but you people have all the equipment but none of the experience."

"We have re-enacted many situations and performed manoeuvres."

"No re-enactment will truly prepare you for the harsh reality of war. But I'll let the expert go over all that stuff."

ThaStornla nodded, and Tor put away the datapad, "So what was the reaction to some of us wanting to stay."

ThaStornla did not answer, "That is something ThiRioth is discussing with the council right now. Your expert however needs to be everything we would expect of someone with command experience."

"That's why I think Broden is your best option."

"He would have to travel with the fleet."

"But I've not sold the idea to him yet." Tor could see this would be a potential downside and now appreciated why Broden did not react too well to the suggestion.

"Understand this Tor, not everyone wants the gate rebuilt, and this campaign is strongly opposed. You are seen to be the perpetrators of what could potentially be our downfall, and your presence is tolerated but not overly welcomed."

Tor gave a nod, "I can only say that I wish our arrival had been under happier circumstances."

"And I have only dwelt on the negatives of your being here. You have shown us courage and determination worthy of great respect. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that your search is in a noble cause, and all wish you well. Yet some are under the misapprehension that once you have left, then things will go back to the way they were. But I don't believe that will happen." ThaStornla paused for a moment, "There has been a question raised, that as you can leave this sector without the need of the gate, then why do you need to rebuild it?"

"To start with we had no idea of where the gate used to go. So we had to rebuild it just so we could find the path. Then with the discovery of your people and the star charts it reduced the need in terms of making the initial exploration." Tor paused as he recalled a discussion this with the crew of the Roamer, "But it's the number of energy cells needed that causes the problem. Using existing jump corridors to pass through sectors uses less cells than the first un-gated jump on its own. Cells occupy cargo space and when we pack all the people, with their possessions in the Roamer there's not enough capacity left to make the big jump home."

An officer approached the table and bowed, "Highness, his Excellency requests that you rejoin your ship as we will soon be underway."

"Underway?"

"This was only a temporary gathering point. Seeing how the expert tactician is aboard your station, his Excellency has decided that the fleet should move to the gate.

"Maybe it's best that I send a message before you turn up, Highness, it's been good to see you again." Tor stood up and gave a slight bow.

ThaStornla smiled, "And for a change no one is trying to kill us. But your message will be late as most of the ships will already be underway."

The officer addressed Tor, "His Excellency wishes to see you now."

"It'll still be good to let them know, but I guess I won't be sending that message soon, Highness." He looked at the officer, "Lead the way."

With a bow to ThaStornla, the officer turned and at an easy pace guided Tor through the ship.

ThiRioth appeared to be deep in thought when Tor was shown in.

"Excellency."

ThiRioth looked up, "Mr. Grall. How many of you wish to stay?"

Tor was surprised by the directness of the question, "I can't give you an exact number, because we're not asking everyone. Just members of my own crew."

"What purpose would it serve, that any of you remain behind?"

"I have no doubt that various governments, when they learn of your existence will attempt to make contact, Excellency. Organizations may even look to establish trading rights with you."

ThiRioth studied Tor, "You did not answer my question."

"After one jazura the Argon Government will register all the survivors as missing, presumed dead. All their assets, money, possessions will get sold off or handed to relations. So there's nothing to go back for. Here they are with friends, have food and drink, a place to stay and work."

"So why do you only speak of your own crew?"

"I am a small time trader, Excellency. The other stations are owned by large corporations they can offer you more, but they'll want more in exchange. They will also look to expand their businesses into your space. If you say 'yes' to one of them then you'll be saying 'yes' a million times."

"And if I say 'yes' to you, isn't that the start of the flood?"

"We're already here, Excellency. I'm just referring to new contacts. Besides you can direct them to us rather than playing host and save yourself any inconveniences. We will also act as intermediaries for you." Tor became vaguely aware that ThiRioth was not the only one listening to the conversation. Although he could not see anyone, there were faint whisperings in the air.

"So what do you, personally, gain from such a request?"

"For me, it will be a safe haven for my ship, the Defiance. It holds technology that I do not feel prudent to be allowed to fall into the hands of any of the respective governments."

ThiRioth's eyes narrowed, "It is a powerful ship. I find it strange that you do not wish to advance the technology of your race."

"Excellency. My motivations are wholly selfish in this respect. I do not wish to be forced to hand over the ship." Tor knew he needed to choose his words carefully, any mention of conflict between the races for ownership, and the subject of being allowed to stay would come to an abrupt end. ThiRioth looked thoughtful at him, and Tor sensed that the Chief Councillor knew he was not telling everything. He kept his composure calm and wondered if the line of questioning would attempt to dig deeper. The future would be shaped by his words and as he waited for the next question his eyes darted around the room. He noted the multiple lenses and realised his image was, as far as he could guess, being projected to the council chambers of the Crystal city.

"How do you expect to be accommodated?"

"Ideally I would like to maintain control of the Silicon Mine."

There was a long moment when ThiRioth simply looked at Tor, and he could hear the faint sounds of voices, "Your request is being considered. Now to other matters, you were right to question our desire to try to reclaim what was once ours from the Khlarakin. The last war we fought, we lost, decisively. That is not a good track record. There is more to war than perhaps we know, if your expert can show us how to best achieve our goals then you may add strength to your request to stay."

"I will discuss it further, though it may help him to study what you have been using to prepare with."

ThiRioth gestured his agreement, "They will be sent." With a wave of his hand he signaled Tor to leave.

"Thank you, Excellency." He bowed and made his way back towards the Defiance.

## *Chapter 7*

With the carrier underway Tor found that there was little point in departing, and was left wondering if ThaStormla had sent a message to the station commanders alerting them of the imminent arrival of the fleet. To pass the time he began reading again.

Eventually Corricel announced, "We have arrived."

Tor put the datapad down and pushed himself out of the cabin chair. As he dropped into the pilots seat he punched up the HUD, "Get us departure clearance."

The slight lurch of the docking control indicated the ship was being manoeuvred to the exit bay. With thrusters engaged they glided away from the Nygaline. The big carrier was still moving through the widely dispersed fleet. The gate stood completed and warships stretched from it to the stations. Destroyers were interspersed amongst them.

Targeting the Silicon Mine, Tor increased the speed. Mizuras passed and as they approached the comm opened. Liann appeared, "I would say, welcome back, but you're not going to get much of a welcome. Broden would like to see you in his office as soon as you dock. And I can't say that I disagree with his opinions Tor, but be cautious, anyway I have Gyles on stand by in case anything kicks off. Dock when you see green lights."

The comm closed and Tor glanced over to the technical datapad, "Well Corri, what's the chances I'll get to explain myself?"

In her cheerful tone, "I think, if you are lucky, he might just hit you. If not he might do a lot of shouting first."

"Thanks for putting a nice, positive slant on the situation."

"You are welcome."

"Corri, why do you have to sound so cheerful when I'm in trouble?"

"Would you like me to sound morose instead? Anyway, it reminds me how lucky I am to be silicon based."

Tor shook his head as they approached the opening gate and were swallowed in to the station.

Apprehension gripped him as the docking clamps engaged and the ship finally came to rest. Standing up slowly, he picked up his old datapad, "Well aren't you going to wish me luck?"

Corricel considered her reply, "I do not think you will need luck Tor, just a miracle." The airlock doors opened.

Tor sighed and stepped out, knowing it was better to face the wrath now than let it fester. He kept his eyes down as he trudged along to Broden's office, he knew pilots and crew watched him go.

The door glided open and Tor stepped inside. Broden's expression was rigid, his eyes boring into him. There was a long silence, until Tor spoke up, "So do you want to fight now, or start shouting first?"

Broden fought to control his voice, and pronounced every word slowly, "What the hell were you thinking?"

Tor began to open his mouth when the shouting started about three inches from his right ear. He pieced together the gist of what was being said between the expletives, "I was ... looking for a ... place to ... stay. Not to ... fight a ... war against the ... Khaak. You ..." Tor sort of made out the next string of words and tried not to flinch. "What ... happens when ... things go wrong. Who takes the ... . You ..." Tor could tell Broden was clenching and unclenching his fists, he was stronger and

faster, but knew that if it came to it he would have to stand there and take whatever Broden threw his way. The berating took several more mizuras until Broden apparently ran out of breath, but not before his voice had gone slightly hoarse, his final string of abuse ended with, "Sir."

There was no swinging of punches, and at the end of it Tor, with shoulders sagging glanced towards him, "I can only apologise to you. To stay we have to show we have some value, and with us or without us they're going to go to war. If they go to war and lose then the Khaak will come here and the rest'll be wiped out, and so will anyone that stays. I offered them the services of an expert, so be assured, I didn't name you directly, and if you can think of someone better suited to the job, then I'll ask them to do it."

Broden stared at him as he slowly took in Tor's words. "Give me some time."

Tor turned and moved to the door as it slid open he looked back, "I think, I would have preferred it if you just hit me."

Broden shot him a glance, "I might still."

Tor gave a half hearted smile, "I know." The door closed behind him and he headed towards his own office. He quietly passed everyone that he met and stepped into his office. His eyes scanned the spartan contents and wondered if it was really worth trying to hold on to.

Broden's comments on how the Mohrabas might react if the war went badly wrong still rang in his ears. Doubt filled his mind as to the wisdom of his earlier choices. He questioned how much he was driven by his own desires as opposed to the needs of those around him.

He stood before the hellfire chain gun as it rested on its pedestal. His eyes taking in every line and chamber. His hand ran over the magazine belts that fed death and destruction to be spat out by the beating heart of the weapon. A prize, and just like Creeds dagger, a stark reminder of what he had been subjected to in order to have them.

He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, the faint trace of moisture escaping between closed lids.

"Are you, okay, Tor?"

He had not heard the door open and Tris approach. His eyes flicked open, he took one long sad look at her, "I don't think I know what I'm doing any more." She put her hand on his shoulder, "My motivations recently have been purely selfish. Concentrating on what I want the future to be like. Making people fit in around me. Making offers and commitments without thoughts of the consequences."

"Everyone makes mistakes Tor, it's not too late to try and correct them."

He struggled to offer a feint smile at her gentle words, "The wheels are already turning and the pieces are set. No words can change that." He looked at the chain gun, "The heart of this just delivers death. The Defiance destroys everything that stands in its way. I have become an instrument of war and bringer of carnage. What happened to the merchant that I set out to be?"

"You're not an evil man, you've done what you can. The Mohrabas have to determine their own future, so leave it all behind and return home."

Tor shook his head, "Their future is shaped by my selfish actions, I can't abandon them."

"Don't give up on us. We need you to help us find the way home, maybe that's me being selfish, I don't know, but let's do something right. At least for the others."

"I have an old score to settle at home, and that's just another battle waiting to be fought. More people will die and for what? Some stupid intelligence report stolen from the Split."

Tris reached out and gently lifted his hand off the chain gun, "Sooner or later, you'll have to put all that behind you and just get on with life."



Corricel spoke quietly, "There is another option open to you."

"This needs to be good Corri."

"I was programmed for military tactical use in rapidly changing combat situations. It is within my programming to advise and relay best aggressive and defensive postures. I could advise the Mohrabas in their conflict with the Khaak." There was a pause, "It is what I was designed to do."

For the first time, Tor felt uncertain about Corricel's request. He took a deep breath, his mind racked with indecision, "Let me think about it."

Tris was about to say it was the perfect solution, but a glance at Tor and she decided to stay quiet.

"You're good to me Tris, but I need a moment alone to think."

Tris was surprised by the request and felt uncertain about leaving. In all her time on the station she had never seen Tor looking so low and was worried by what he might do next, "Wouldn't you rather I stay?"

Tor shook his head absently and walked away from her, "I'll be okay, I just need quiet time to think."

Tris reluctantly turned and left the room. She stood outside the office for a while and leant against the wall. Liann saw her from the command centre and, with a deep sense of curiosity, she left her seat and approached.

"Are you okay, Tris?"

"I'm worried about Tor."

"I expect he's still recovering from Broden's verbal assault."

Tris shook her head, "It's more than that. I can't put my finger on it but Broden's shouting session simply brought it home to him. He sees himself as a war bringer, not a saviour. He's changing Li and he doesn't like what he's becoming. He's torn between duty and loyalty, between what he wanted to be and the future he sees."

Liann put her hand on Tris's shoulder, "Let's go for a drink." As they approached the lift Liann whispered, "Broden's worried that Tor might be showing some of the first symptoms of space psychosis."

"I wouldn't have said he was mad, just confused."

"Let's stop by Broden's office."

The shuttle lift duly stopped and the doors opened. They wandered along the corridor and stopped outside Broden's office. The door slid open and the Station Commander looked around sharply.

Liann noted he had a bottle of space fuel in his hand, "You'd better make it three of those."

"What can I do for you ladies?"

Tris stepped forward, "Li tells me you think Tor's showing the first signs of space psychosis."

Broden picked up a glass and drained it in one, then put it down and refilled it with two others. He turned with all three and placed one in front of each of them. He slumped down heavily on his seat, "I wish it was that simple."

Tris glanced at Liann, "So you don't think it's psychosis?"

"No, he's not on a power trip, with the belief he's all invincible. In the meeting I wanted to get a reaction out of him, test him, but I have never in my life lost it like I did with him." Broden drained

the next glass and refilled it, "The boy flinched but that was about it. He could break me in two, and yet he stood waiting for me beat nine bells of living hell out of him. I could have done, I damn well felt like it, but the boy wouldn't have lifted a finger to defend himself."

Tris took a breath, "Corricel volunteered to be the tactical expert. Tor just said he'd think about it. He doesn't know what to do."

Broden stopped with his glass half way to his lips and lowered it to the table, "Corri, you there?"

"Yes, Commander."

"Your opinion on Tor's state of mental health and his current condition."

"Tor's mental state has not changed until the last twenty mizuras. I would now place him in a state of depression and he is consuming space fuel at a slightly faster rate than you Commander. But not by much."

"Corri, you're designed for war. But Tor will need you to get home, and I'm not cut out to spend the rest of my days fighting."

Corricel cut in, "Commander, I understand. Do you want to analyse the Mohrabas data now or later?"

Broden looked at his glass thoughtfully, "Ladies would you excuse us. Duty, unfortunately calls."

"Did that include me?" Corricel enquired.

"No it didn't include you."

Tris and Liann left the whiskey and wandered down to the bar.

Facing the main holo-projector, Broden made himself as comfortable as he could. "Okay Corri, show me standard formations and battle group listings."

Tor put down the eighth glass and stared into its depths. The rich golden brown of the clear liquid had suddenly lost its appeal. A small part of his brain registered that there were no answers in the bottom, and getting drunk was not going to solve any problems.

"Corri, show me the Mohrabas battle plans."

"Oh, so you do not think I am up to the task, and feel you can do it better?"

"I just wanted to have a look."

"Well if you come down to Broden's office, I am sure he will not mind going over the ones we have already studied, and you can pick it up from there."

Tor felt surprised, "Broden's looking at the plans?"

"Yes. He seems to be getting into it, and you will be pleased to hear he is not being as vocal as he was with you."

Tor needed little encouragement and he was up and striding down the corridor to the lift. With only a brief twinge of apprehension, he stepped into Broden's office.

"This is no good, stagger the the destroyers by another k. Bring a third in or the right, triangular formation. Okay, run the simulation."

Tor watched as representations of Khaak fighters and destroyers assailed the defensive formation. Ships were being simulated jumping in within the formation. The kill count rolled up, losses

gradually increased until there was a total collapse following the destruction of one of the Mohrabas destroyers.

Broden tapped the console in front of him, "Okay store that and tag it to the original. Let's go to the next one." He glanced over to Tor, "Come to see the fireworks?"

"I heard a rumour you were taking a look."

"Well this is number four of two hundred. A brief check of the others leads me to believe, these are designed to defend this system against an invasion. Not take a system or resist for prolonged periods of attack. Without gateless jumping these guys aren't going to get past the first sector. That's my prediction. The first sector will be a success because of the surprise factor. After that it'll be a bloody mess."

Tor took a moment to digest this information, "Corri, new screen and pull up the star charts. Mark our current location. Now show the historical location of the Mohrabas's true home world. Show the gate links." He paused as the data was displayed. "I'd like to think the first few sectors are devoid of Khaak, just like Hetki's Ocean and Barren Edge, I would hope we can get a couple of sectors closer to this system without meeting anyone. Which means we could end up two jumps from the primary goal of these people. First assault would take the Khaak by surprise, and with a gateless jump to clear the gate for the next sector, it's objective met."

Broden looked at the star charts as he pondered the idea, "Maybe you'd like to do this before we go home."

To Tor it was like someone had suddenly shone a light into his eyes, something he had not considered, "That's not a bad suggestion."

"Just one observation, each sector that's taken needs a heavily defended forward base and re-supply area, that will take wozuras, also each sector will need to be cleared and that will take jazuras. When were you planning on finding the way home?"

"I want to do the best for everyone. We're about to step into the most hostile environment that anyone has encountered." Tor's mind was racing, "The Defiance will help these people, at least to take the first two sectors. Show them how it's done." He looked at Broden, "Get them to knuckle down and strengthen their position, while I get us home, and after that I'll bring the Defiance back and lend a hand wherever I can."

"What about keeping the station?"

"I thought you might of changed your mind?"

"I'd still like to be a Station Commander and call this place home, and have a comfortable life. I just don't want to be fighting a war."

Tor gave a nod, "Let's go through these and then chat to ThiRioth."

It took two tazuras before they reached the end of the simulations and made suitable corrections, including adding a few of their own with respect to gate assaults.

As they met up for breakfast before making the call to ThiRioth, Corricel said, "The Paranid appear content with the weapons technology that has been transmitted across. They have also informed us that the choke on production was the result of a defective motor arm that loaded the silicon into the machinery. They will be able to ramp up production over the period of the next few wozuras."

Broden shook his head, "Well it doesn't sound like they're pushing themselves too hard."

Less than a stazura later and they found themselves on the Nygaline preparing to give their initial views and simulations of the battle tactics they had been supplied. Tor held the technical datapad containing Corricel. He looked over to Broden, the former Captain appeared calm and collected. His

own nerves barely registered on his face, however inside apprehension gripped him like an iron vice with the handle slowly turning.

The giant figure of ThiRiOTH loomed over them, "We are ready for you."

They nodded and followed the Chief Council in silence. The auditorium was packed, the harmonious hum of quiet growls and purrs reduced. ThiRiOTH took centre spot on the floor, "There is much we do not know about our enemies and the battles that we will face in the coming tazuras. Some of you will feel ready, many fully prepared, yet we have not fought a war for centuries. Tor and his people have and they know the enemy. They have studied our battle formations and combat sequences, and are here to show us the deficiencies of our plans." The chief council stepped away from the podium and looked at Tor and Broden.

Broden stepped boldly forwards and with a deep bow to ThiRiOTH turned to face the audience, "Commanders and first officers. So you think you're ready for war." He let the words hang in the air as he looked slowly around the assembled faces, "Let me tell you, that you are not. War by its very nature is ugly, violent and vicious. When the fighting starts, good men will become barbarians, space combat madness will close its jaws around survivors, and many of you here will not survive the first solar year. My briefing is to see that you survive a little longer, so the next time we gather I will recognise most of your faces."

The silence in the room was absolute, there was no sound of movement and Tor wondered if even the breathing seemed to have stopped.

Broden moved slightly as he looked towards the upper tiers of Mohrabas, "You must assume the Khaak, Khlarakin, outnumber you a million to one. They will not want to throw their lives away needlessly and will always try to inflict damage or destroy you if they can. This is going to be a numbers game, and they have considerably more."

He allowed the statement a few moments to sink in and Tor now felt the silence was almost oppressive. "The question is, can you survive? Maybe, maybe not. To survive and be victorious you need to be better, not just in terms of your ships, but in yourselves. The desire to win needs to fester within you, it must be in you like a never ending hunger. Each battle will be new, the foe wiser and stronger than the last. His desire to live stronger, and you will have to always be the strongest. If you win a battle, maybe even two, never be complacent!"

He took another moment to look at the assembled and gave a wry smile, Tor noted that ThiRiOTH appeared to hang on every word, there was no slouch in his shoulders and his posture rigidly upright.

"The enemy has a weapon available to him, that you do not have the luxury of. The most fearsome thing you will encounter and there is little defence against it, save to destroy it before it reaches you. We call them the suiciders, ships whose pilots, in the face of certain defeat will deliberately collide into you. An enemy fighter will penetrate a warship shields deeper than any missile, the detonation of the drive will be more destructive. Expect it and steal yourself against it."

Tor wondered when Broden would engage in the uplifting motivational part of his speech. Still there was silence.

"Let us begin our examination of your battle formations." The vast holo-projectors energised as the first formation was replayed in and Tor looked for somewhere he could seat himself down.

After nearly half a stazura and six battle sequences later Broden, starting to sound tired, stopped the first briefing in order to have refreshments.

The Mohrabas commanders and first officers stirred and the low hum of conversations began to sweep through the auditorium.

Tor looked at Broden and quietly commented, "At this rate it'll be another Jazura before you reach the end."

Broden gave a wry smile, "Second session I'll just show the new versus the old without playing the full simm."

ThaStornla loomed, "Your open and, may I say, brutal honesty is quite refreshing."

Broden gave a slight bow, "Excellency. I'm not a man for fancy words, and war is not a subject, I find, for wrapping up in bull shit."

ThiRioth gave a sign of acknowledgement, "Just as well, by knowing what to expect we can prepare ourselves better. By warning us you lift the mantle of ignorance on our part, and no one will be able to hold it against you."

"Let's hope not, Excellency."

"This way for refreshments." ThiRioth led the way.

After the interval Broden launched in to a long session on sector assaults, the necessity to get established with a heavily defended forward base and repair yards. He also made a detailed presentation on supply convoys and their overall necessity in war. By the end of it even Tor felt as though his head was going to explode with the information being fed the Mohrabas.

"That concludes today's presentation, tomorrow we will cover the shifting face of war. The need to adapt, consolidation and regrouping manoeuvres, when to withdraw from a combat and lastly rear guard actions in the event of a tactical withdrawal."

A captain asked, "Why would we withdraw, where is the honour?"

"The tactical retreat is most commonly used in diversionary tactics. Attacking a target, other than your primary one to draw defenders away and increase the chances of success. Once the objective is attained the retreat is ordered to prevent un-necessary losses." Broden looked around to see if there were any more questions.

As he walked back to Tor he commented, "Less questions than I had anticipated."

"Can't say I'm surprised, I'm suffering from information overload and anymore will cause my head to explode."

ThiRioth approached, "A good days work Commander, we will see you again soon."

"Excellency." Both Tor and Broden gave a bow as the chief council strode from the room.

Tor looked at Broden, "Let's get back to station."

It hardly seemed that any time had passed before they were once again in the filled auditorium. Broden launched in to his briefing and used the simulations to demonstrate each element of a war in evolution. From the aggressive attack formations, including the 'hidden hammer' and 'tongue of fire' configurations, to the defensive and tactical withdrawal manoeuvres. Tor noted how the retreat simulations worked with an ever decreasing number of ships. He could not decide if this was to represent ships escaping or being destroyed.

Tor admired the, 'breaking the line' simulation where a small number of the Mohrabas ships were trapped in an ever decreasing sphere of enemy ships.

Each simulation featured a number of 'suiciders', and Tor sensed the discomfort around the room when the Mohrabas losses count suddenly jumped in comparison to the Khaak, bringing home the message of Broden's that warned that this war would be about attrition.

Many of the simulations were played to an ultimate Khaak victory but no one in the auditorium spoke up.

As Broden came to the end of his presentation the display changed to show the statistics of all the simulations played. He was silent as he looked around the gathering, eventually he glanced at ThiRioth before looking to the main audience, "You will notice that the number under the Mohrabas dead equals your existing fleet." He took another long look around the room, "The number of Khlarakin dead are also shown. Notice that you have a kill rate of nearly thirty to one. Many simulations were played to a bitter end against a never ending supply of the enemy. The reality is, all battles, even major ones, are against a finite number of opponents. The enemy line, once broken will fall back and regroup. Each time they do you have a chance to recover your strengths and either withdraw or push on. You have the ships and the capability to succeed. It's down to you and whether you still have the hunger to win, despite all you have seen over the last couple of tazuras." Broden stepped away and looked towards ThiRioth.

The chief council made no move towards the podium, his eyes scanned the commanders and first officers. One of them stamped his feet slowly and rhythmically, others joined him and soon the whole auditorium reverberated to the sound. It continued for some time before ThiRioth held up his hands and stepped forwards. The noise subsided and the chief council glanced at Broden before addressing the crowd, "You know the risks, learn the lesson before the lesson needs to be learnt. As you wish it, so it shall be. We will go to war with the Khlarakin and reclaim our homeland." The stamping started again.

## *Chapter 8*

The next few Tazuras and Broden spent his time with small groups of Mohrabas Commanders on ThaStornlas command ship, the Sherak't'enath. Groups of Destroyers practiced manoeuvres and Tor watched them on the main view in his office on the Silicon Mine.

Tor glanced at the date, they were two wozuras and two tazuras away from the ancients return and the activation of the gate. Just two tazuras away from the end of the Argon solar jazura.

"Captain Bhard is on the comm." Liann's sudden announcement interrupted his thoughts.

"Put him through."

Sheero appeared on the screen, "Tor, just a quick call to let you know that we have the energy cells and are ready to make the jump whenever you are."

"Thanks for the update, the crew here are planning on an end of year celebration. So we'll make the jump after then." He took another look at the calendar.

"Celebration?" Sheero looked slightly confused.

"Yeah, they're calling it the Officially Dead Day."

Sheero shook his head, "Well I suppose it's a slightly more appropriate title than Happy New Jazura. Not that I can see it's much to celebrate about."

Tor looked thoughtful for a second, "I seem to remember the crew celebrated the Argon New Jazura about two mazura's ago. Personally I think it's just an excuse to drink too much, but I'm only the owner, so who am I to argue against their wishes."

"You should never have allowed them access to free alcohol."

Tor gave a wry smile, "You have a point, but these people are brewing their own, and I can't stop that."

Sheero frowned, "In which case, we'll see you after you've recovered."

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"Entering sector; The Wall."

Caran Belign adjusted his position so that he could get a better view. Once clearing the gate the pilot altered course towards Tor Gralls Bakery. Since contact was lost after the Khaak had sprung the trap Caran's optimism had faded with time. There had been no news, not even a trace of the missing sectors.

Having taken a personal interest in the wrapping up of Tor's business dealings, he scanned his datapad noting the number of relations, no matter how distant, that seemed to be crawling out of the woodwork. Each with their eyes on the potential for inheriting a small fortune.

It was a small satisfaction that he knew Tor had not been idle before he left, and unknown to many he had drawn up a will in the event that he failed to return. A small detail, but it was bound to cause some annoyance.

For Caran there was no professional reason for him to attend, as the Intelligence Agency had already archived its records and closed all files relating to the operations being undertaken. For him this was a personal thing. The Khaak trap had consigned the largest single number of Agency staff to the archives than any other single operation in the history of the service. He reflected with some sadness that he put Tor into the trap and brought a violent end to a boy who just wanted to be a trader.

In his study of the factory assets and accounts Caran noticed that there was some mention of a creditor. This had somehow appeared shortly before contact was lost, and had since been missing in the accounts. The mystery required more than a little research, but he had some answers locked in the memory. The creditor he knew still existed and they were owed credits, a lot of credits, for the purchase of a ship. The only unsolved mystery was the true identity of the person. He had his suspicions what the ship was and its former owner. However there was no evidence to back this up.

Pulling into dock the pilot announced their arrival. Being the Agencies private transport for personnel, Caran was one of only a handful of passengers. He stepped off the ship and looked around noting they had been brought into the security sector of the station.

Signs guided him towards the meeting room and he could hear the sound of voices as he ambled casually along. On entering the room, it was with little surprise that he saw Serandamancketal standing near the back. He studied the assembled crowd, most of them were seated and trying to determine their position in the family pecking order. He wondered with a hint of sarcasm, if Tor knew he had so many relations he could call upon.

Glancing towards the front he noted The Wall sector Governor was still missing, as was the executor of the will. Caran felt they would be finalising the details and ensuring the official government documentation was in order, thereby acknowledging that Tor Grall was officially considered deceased.

Caran glanced around, wondering why there were no Teladi present. He had half expected to see Bilyzonus sat in the crowd. He was slightly more surprised not to see Korecmancketras, the Bakery Station Commander, in the room. Finding a quiet corner in which to lurk Caran leant against the wall. After a short while Serandamancketal drifted across.

"What brings you here?" He spoke quietly, and kept his eyes on the room.

"Received an invitation. You?"

"Curiosity."

The Paranid smiled. Caran took a look at his time piece and made a mental note it was already running late. The door opened and the governor walked in and sat behind the desk. Following him was the attorney and executor of the will. He drew up a chair and sat beside the Governor.

The Governor glanced across and then stood up again. "Good day ladies and gentlemen. I apologise for the delay in the start of proceedings, but we had a few minor matters to discuss and paperwork to be signed." There was a cursory pause as he gathered his thoughts, "Today marks one Argon jazura since the last known contact with the outer sectors. It is with deep sadness and regret that we must now consider the colonists, factory workers and all other travellers lost in those sectors to have perished. At midday Prima City time there will be a memorial service for the nine million, seven hundred and fifty eight thousand men, women and children that went missing this tazura, one jazura ago." Again the governor paused to take a small sip of water from a glass on the desk, "Amongst the many was Tor Grall, which brings us to our unfortunate business today. Most of you will know that nearly all stations are owned and controlled by large corporations and share holders. The Grall Bakery was unique in the respect that it was wholly owned by Tor. Before the executor of the will, Mr. Harrith, reads out the last wishes of the late Mr Grall, I would like it to be known that several of the corporations have approached myself with respect to purchasing the facility, and will make a generous offer to whomever receives the deeds. Those details may be discussed with me at any time after this meeting." The Governor solemnly observed the gathering and then tilted his head towards the executor. "Mr. Harrith, the floor is yours."

Harrith cleared his throat, "Good day ladies and gentlemen. May I first express my deepest condolences to all friends and family of the late Mr. Grall." There was a slight shuffling of feet and some unnecessarily loud sniffing from various parts of the group. The executor pulled out a large envelope with an unbroken seal. Before the crowd of observers he opened it and pulled out the sheets of synthetic parchment. "This being the last will and testament of Mr Tor Grall, who, being of sound mind and body, hereby bequeaths the following to persons or organisations that have most supported him in recent times."



Caran Belign observed the stony faces of the relatives.

"That my creditors are paid in full, and any monies remaining be distributed to those members of my family that attended the funeral of my late parents."

Another glance at the gathering saw mouths drop and there was a flurry of hushed whispers. He accessed the archive on his datapad and scrolled down to the report on the funeral of Tor's parents. The service had sent agents looking for potential assassins, and had listed all who had attended. He quickly cross referenced the lists and found only four matches. Caran then checked the accounts on the datapad and raised an eyebrow.

The executor of the will examined his datapad, "The last accounts of the late Mr. Grall indicates that his accounts closed with a balance of eighteen million eight hundred thousand credits. Total creditors debt is seven million four hundred and twenty thousand credits."

Caran stepped forward, "My apologise Mr. Harrith for interrupting. But may I have a brief word?"

Everyone looked around.

"Commander Belign, why the interruption?" The Governor appeared somewhat surprised.

"The agency has unfortunately uncovered an accounting irregularity with Mr. Gralls accounts. Although Mr. Gralls accounts appear healthy the greater part of that wealth has been accumulated since he went missing. Further investigation has led us to conclusive evidence that the late Mr. Grall did indeed have a business partner. Unfortunately she does not appear to be here today, and as such she has prior claim to three quarters of the monies held in the account, after deductions. We have also discovered another creditor that we have not been able to trace as yet, but they also have a prior claim to a substantial amount of the remaining credits. If you will permit me, I will transfer the details to you."

The executor looked thoughtful and then nodded. A moment later and he looked at the revised numbers, and then sharply at Caran. "With the revised figures, taking into account the partnership and additional creditor, the monies left in the account for distribution to family members, that attended the late Mr. Grall's parents funeral is, five hundred thousand credits." Harrith had spoken slowly and cautiously and the announcement was followed by an uncomfortable silence.

The agent stepped back, and once again resumed his place beside Serandamancketal.

"And how many attended the funeral?"

Caran allowed the Paranid to look at the list.

"I like his style. But who's the missing creditor? Want us to find them for you?"

Caran glanced at the Paranid and with a shrug showed him the name on the datapad. Serandamancketal looked at it and gave a slight snort of restrained laughter, "I think I know this person."

"Well the next time you see her, perhaps you'll tell her I have some good news, if she'd care to drop by the office."

"I'll be sure to mention it. But I don't think they'll be dropping by anytime soon." Serandamancketal grinned.

This seemed to confirm Caran's long held suspicion, he shook his head and frowned. He focussed his attention back on the executor.

"Moving on, the freighters and fighter escorts that have been working independently of the Bakery. These have been bequeathed to the Teladi Bilyzonus, to whom the late Mr. Grall thanks for her support when he was nearly fatally wounded, and the business acumen that she taught him in his tentative trading days."

There were murmurs as people looked around but, just as Caran had noted, they could not see a Teladi in the room.

Harrith paused and took a moment to flick through the last page of listed items, "Lastly the Bakery and all associated assets pertaining to it, as listed here, have been bequeathed to the War Master Mercenary Guild."

There was a significant amount of murmuring and many disappointed faces. Meanwhile the Governor looked perplexed.

"Excuse me Governor, but if my memory serves me correctly, the War Master Guild are not recognised in Argon space as legitimate station owners and have been precluded from owning such facilities in our sectors." The voice belonged to a young, official looking man. All eyes returned to the Governor

"Looks like someone's brought their legal advisor." It was an absent comment, whispered to no one in particular.

"I'll have some of the lads chat to him later." Caran glanced across to the Paranid and gave a slight shake of his head. The mercenary just gave a roguish grin.

"That is the still the case. Unless, Mr. Belign, you know differently." The Governor looked across the room towards Caran.

The big agent moved forward once more, "That is correct, the War Master Guild are currently precluded from owning or buying new stations in Argon territories, due to their association with less than desirable elements of Argon society." A murmur ran through the crowd. Caran waited for a moment and then added, "However."

The room fell silent. "This is currently under review. The possibility of being named owners as part of a last will and testament, has never been considered. There is the very real possibility that they will be given some leeway to maintain ownership under strict monitoring, or that they will be given time to find a suitable buyer."

The Governor gave a slight nod of the head, "And both conditions would satisfy the wishes of the late Mr. Grall. How long before we will know the outcome of the review."

Caran contemplated for a while, "Approximately five wozura."

The Governor nodded and turned to Harrith, "Anything else?" The lawyer shook his head. "This concludes our business today. Those that wish to examine the details of the will, Mr Harrith will be available on the station for the next tazura." Rising from his seat the Governor left the chamber.

A number of those present moved forward to talk and view the will. Caran slipped out of the room, not wishing to face any enquiries as to the corrected accounts. The Paranid joined him and they wandered along the corridors back to the main trading centre of the station.

"Do you think they'll let us keep the station?"

"That's down to the politicians and bureaucrats. If Tor had mentioned his intention earlier, I could have prepared a file to help support the lifting of the ban." He stopped and looked at his companion, "You will need to convince them that some of the known criminals you employ have indeed turned over a new leaf. And give assurances that they will be restrained from entering Argon space."

The Paranid nodded, "That should be easy. Now what about the trouble in the sectors?"

"Which sectors? and Yaki or Khaak?" Caran was contemplating whether to returning to his transport or get some food.

"With the Khaak, particularly in Presidents End."

"Ban Danna is leading the operation to recover the sector."

"Not soon then, I hear he's looking for the Earth man?"

"If you know where he is, then I'll be happy to pass the message on?"

Serandamancketal shook his head and glanced across, "Presidents End is on the main trade route. If you leave it too long there will be no traders left to escort."

"Well surprise me and go clear the sector, I would have thought you would relish the fight." Caran came to the decision he should return to Argon Prime.

"Not exactly, and as you pointed out some of our best pilots are not welcome in Argon space."

"All I can say is that it's being dealt with. I understand the Navy is preparing to make some moves, but I don't know when."

"Do you think Tor'll make it back?" Serandamancketal had not really given the idea much thought before, almost as if he expected him to suddenly appear. The meeting now left a twinge of doubt in his mind.

"That's making the presumption that he's still alive after all this time."

"Stranger things have been known to happen."

A slight smile crept on Caran's face, "They have indeed."

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The Roamer emerged in Hetki's Ocean and within a few mizuras the Defiance had launched. Tor decided to take the long route to the first of the Khaak sectors to conserve energy cells. From here he would jump to the last recorded sector. Tris, for the moment, acted as the sight seeing passenger as the main engines surged to life and propelled them towards the Barren Edge gate.

The vastness of the sector gave the appearance of being deserted, the four Mohrabas Destroyers mere specks in the void. The HUD registered a heavy defence grid surround the new base, the station providing a high level energy shield to protect the grid.

"Don't start the war without me." Tor smiled as he remembered his parting words to Broden.

"Just you remember to come back." Broden had slapped him on the back and laughed.

He hoped it would only take a few Tazuras to find one of the outer sectors, which would give plenty of time to make the return trip. The only reason he would not jump straight back was due to his commitment to leave Tris in the core sectors, so that she could get the bureaucratic paperwork mountain moving.

Mizuras passed quietly by until the Defiance finally crossed the activation threshold.

"Entering sector; Barren Edge."

"Tris, keep an eye on the radiation levels. I have it on good advice that system failures were a big problem in the past when left in this sector for prolonged periods. Hopefully the stazura we'll take to get across here won't have any affect, but I'd rather not have any nasty surprises when we reach the other side."

"Acknowledged."

"Corricel, plot the course and engage the autopilot."

"I'm registering a highly active sun, with continuous solar flares. Mapping primary solar wind currents against the flight path." Tris glanced towards the technical datapad.

"Details confirmed. Adjusting course." Corricel announced.

Tor retired to the rear of the cabin and sat down. Tris remained where she was and continued to monitor the readouts. Something inside made her feel that the next stazura would probably be the last one that they would have a quiet moment together. After a few moments she turned the co-pilots seat to face him.

"I still don't know why you want to stay with the Mohrabas?"

"I don't know if I can really explain why. It's something between honour and stupidity, but I can't decide which."

"The Mohrabas few going to war with the Khaak masses. Now that is stupidity." Tris frowned.

"The little guy versus the big faceless oppressor. A common theme for a lot of stories." Tor gave a wry smile.

"A common theme for a lot of fundamentally flawed idealism. I hope it doesn't come back to bite you."

"Don't worry I'll call on the mighty Argon Empire to lend a hand if things get bad. After all the Khaak are a common enemy."

"I wouldn't count on that." Tris voiced her concern.

"Way I see it is we're in too deep already, just by making first contact. If we abandon them and they get wiped out, we'll only have to live with our conscience. If we abandon them and they're plunged into a long and bloody war but come out victorious, they're going to find a lot of reasons to hate us, perhaps even turn the victorious instrument of war, which we have helped tune into a formidable fighting force, against us. But if we stay and help them to victory and show them we're an ally worthy of trust then the future will be rosy." Tor paused for a moment.

"So in essence we reap what we sow. It's the unfortunate position of transitory politicians to make rash decisions without consideration of the future that has marred our history until now. Personally I want to make sure we do the right thing."

"Fine speech, let's hope the Split don't get introduced to the Mohrabas. Otherwise we could find ourselves at odds with them sooner than you think." Tris smiled, "I'm just glad you didn't go into the good guys, bad guys thing."

Tor shook his head, "I'm sure to a Khaak we are the bad guys and they're the good. At the end of the day it's about survival for the soldiers, greed and power by their leaders. Wars are often fought by a majority of good honest men, not all I'll admit, and fighting for what their leaders believe in."

"That's very black and white, oppression of a people incites more hatred and wars than anything else."

"Yeah, but you have to question the people doing the inciting. If they're so fervent about their cause why aren't they in the lead ship on the charge?"

"Because the cause would die with them."

"Some think it would be martyrdom and the cause would gain strength."

"Only if those behind the leader felt the same passion. But this is all hypothetical, you're talking about small, small stuff where the total annihilation of a group of people wouldn't be well received. Whereas the Khaak don't care if the Mohrabas, Argon or anyone else survives."

"Yeah your right, that's the problem with being on the good side, you have to care just a little. It stops you from doing something really bold that gets rid of the problem, but has consequences. Versus doing something really stupid that doesn't, or in fact makes the situation worse."

"Well with the Khaak, I don't think that's going to be a problem. Everyone seems to hate them. And from the images I've seen, they're ugly and easy to loathe."

"I expect they think the same about us."

"The next time a Khaak ship open fires on us, would you like me to fire a message of peace, love and understanding across its bow to see if they'll stop?" Corricel had been monitoring the conversation.

"I do hate nosy kids." Tor muttered aloud.

"This being a small confined space, with only the three of us here, it is a little hard to be elsewhere." Corricel's voice held a hint of sarcasm.

"You could always switch off your internal sensors. As to your suggestion, that might prove to be the dumbest thing we do on this trip. And at a million to one, it might just work."

"Or it'll confuse them long enough to get away." Tris smiled.

"Let's do it then. Unless it's a huge Khaak Destroyer, in which case we let rip with everything we have. I'd rather not have to spend time wondering if they understood the message."

"Acknowledged."

Tris and Tor spent the rest of the stazura in idle conversation, ever aware that a sudden Khaak appearance prevented anything more personal.

"Entering Khaak sector."

The gate activated and once again the Defiance entered the nebula which masked their appearance.

"Corri, find us a suitable position away from the gate to make the jump." Tor studied the HUD, which only registered objects at less than two hundred metres from the hull.

Tris sat silently watching the terminal. Her apprehension grew. This would be her first encounter with the Khaak since they disengaged the sector gates over a jazura ago. The secondary control stick moved gently as the Defiance moved gently through the swirling mists. The monitor a haze of heavy interference, revealing nothing.

"Jumpdrive charging."

Tris took a deep breath, fearing the horrors that lay ahead, she had watched the footage of the last encounter. Thinking to herself how many times the shields had plunged to near critical levels but somehow still making it out. She sensed her mouth was dry and tentatively swallowed to draw out saliva.

The Defiance emerged at the nearest gate. Tor hit the boost briefly to give the initial surge of speed driving the ship outside the limits of any Khaak scouts.

Tris looked out of the screen, there was nothing to be seen. As she pondered where the Khaak were, jump tunnels opened up ahead of them and clusters of fighters emerged. Tor glanced across and saw her nervous expression.

"Not to worry, we're going much too fast for them to stop us."

"They're moving to block us!"

"Corri, you now have bigger engines, more power. Let's see that message of peace, love and friendship."

The Defiance continued to close and Khaak fighters moved into range. Spears of light lanced towards the ship. Several shimmering in the shields.

"No response. They appear to be ignoring us."

"It wasn't the type of message I was thinking of Corri. Think universal harmony and total eradication of the enemy." Tor twitched the steering and strafed the ship sideways to break the target locks.

Particle beams lashed out at the Khaak ships, the smaller scouts exploded. The heavier fighters swerved away to recover shields. Some, spurted flames shortly before disintegrating in flashes of violent light.

The fighters swarmed in behind, Tris stared at the console as enemy ships moved to block their progress. A momentary glance at the shields turned into a long stare.

"Shields at eighty nine percent. More incoming ships."

"Now we have their attention, let's get out of here. Target the next gate and let's get some momentum into this old girl."

Several Khaak fighters moved to block progress, ships turned in towards the Defiance at full charge. Tor kept the strafe drive engaged, as the Defiance weapons system worked overtime in cutting down the fast approaching vessels. None swerved to avoid the potential of impacting against the Defiance.

With no clear path Tor engaged the primary engines in interplanetary drive. The Defiance lunged forwards, three Khaak scout ships glanced off the shields and spiraled away before exploding.

The haze of Khaak ships that had moments ago surrounded them, were now a rapidly diminishing speck behind them.

"Any sign of pursuit or interception?" Altering course, Tor kept his hands on the helm.

"Nothing on long range scanners."

"Corri, where are the capital ships?" Tor felt unsettled that there was nothing bigger than the heavy fighter. All previous encounters had brought them in contact with several Destroyer class vessels.

"I have eight Destroyers stationed around one of twenty Khaak stations that are scattered through the sector."

"Only eight, how many were here last time?" Tor felt his stomach tighten.

"Records show there were thirty five."

"Where the hell did they go?" Tor glanced at Tris.

"Maybe they've just gone on manoeuvres."

"Perhaps they're gathering for an invasion." The disquieting thought had Tor contemplate returning to the Mohrabas, yet that did not seem to fit. He could only guess how many Khaak sectors there were and if all of them had supplied over twenty Destroyers then this would be a much bigger invasion than just one small outpost. He had seen the Khaak waging war against the Xenon, and wondered if the Xenon had made a significant move that had forced the Khaak to pull in more resources. The third option sent an involuntary shudder down his spine.

"You don't think they've invaded the core sectors?" Tris voices his own concerns.

"Our guys should be able to handle them." Tor put on a reassuring smile.

"Let's hope so."

The Defiance hurtled on unopposed towards the next gate. Tor rested his hands on the flight controls, his eyes scanning the void for any sign of immanent danger. A few mizuras later and they crossed the threshold.

Two Destroyers lurked in ambush. Tor immediately turned the Defiance, the bulk of a destroyer blocking his exit. Khaak lasers lashed across the shields.

Corricel responded with arcing particle beams ripping into the Khaak defences. All three ships shimmered and flared until a glowing ball of dissipating plasma surged away. The shields of the Defiance cooling in the void.

Both Destroyers turned in pursuit, one gushed flames that gradually died away to leave a dark gaping rent in the side of the ship.

"Shields at thirty five percent."

"I thought the shields would be stronger with the new engine?" Tor adjusted their heading and speed.

"Stronger, yes, unbreakable, no. I have to say that your piloting skills were not as efficient as they have been in the past."

"Oh, so now it's my fault we took a hammering?"

"Yes. I might suggest that your increased faith in the strength of the shields made you complacent and lazy. I trust you will not allow this situation to continue."

Tor glanced at Tris, who was smiling to herself and appearing to concentrate on the monitors in front of her.

"Is something amusing you?"

"I think that's the first time I've heard a computer tell someone off." Tris smiled.

"Find me the next gate." Tor returned his attention to the HUD. The damaged Khaak ship had slowed, while the remaining craft continued to gain speed. Tor made a quick mental calculation and noted that it had no chance of catching them. "Ready the jumpdrive for the next gate, just in case of suicide jumps."

"Drive in standby."

"Estimated time to jumpgate?"

"Fifty four mizuras." Tris announced.

They sat quietly, watching for any attempted interception. The mizuras dragged by with the occasional request for an update.

"Entering sector."

Tor was ready, but with the vision of clear space in front of him, he just punched the throttle control to maximum.

"Where are they?"

"I have eight stations and six destroyers on long range scanners. No signs of interception. And Tor there are five more gates out of this sector."

"Pull them up on the HUD and show positions." The image appeared, "Plot our current course." He sat pensively looking at the display.

"Any ideas?" Tris asked.

"None. Which gate do we pass closest to if we follow this heading across the sector?"

"We're not in direct line with any of them, but this gate is the closest." The icon was targeted and flashed on the HUD.

"Set the course and let's hope it's the right one. Time to destination?"

"Thirty seven mizuras."

As they approached, the gate suddenly became active. Wormholes opened and Khaak ships appeared, fighters, Destroyers and Carriers swarmed. Tor reset the heading.

"Looks like they don't want us to go that way."

"I wonder why?" Tris glanced over to him.

"There's too many, even for us, to try and find out. Time to next gate?" Tor shrugged as he answered,

"Fifty five mizuras."

"Put it up on the HUD." The Defiance changed course.

Mizuras later and once again the Khaak blockaded the gate as they approached. Tor changed course once again.

"This is getting annoying. Corri, lock the jumpdrive to the next gate and make the jump."

"Jumpdrive charging."

Sezuras later and the wormhole opened as they emerged from the gate. Tor turned the ship around flew back across the threshold.

"Entering sector." Corricel announced.

Nothing greeted them.

"Looks like they've taken the hint not to come too close." Tris glanced over to Tor.

"Don't you believe it. What's on the long range scanners?"

"There's about twelve stations and eighteen Destroyer class ships in the sector. No sign of anyone trying to intercept us. Two more gates leading out of the sector."

"Suggestions on which way to go?" Tor glanced around.

"I am detecting a very faint coming signal through the nearest gate. It is an intermittent pulse similar to a locator device. Nature and origin I can not determine at this time." Corricel announced.

"Target it and let's get going." Tor glanced over to Tris, "It's the best lead we've got."

Before they had reached half way, Khaak ships appeared at every gate.

"Looks like they don't want us to go home." Tor muttered with a growing sense of annoyance.

"What do you want to do?" Tris looked perplexed.

"Wade in there and beat the hell out of them. But I think it might end up a death or glory run, with particular emphasis on death."

"The strafe drive still works." Corricel announced cheerfully.



"Yeah, thanks for that." Tor studied the HUD. "What's the energy cell situation?"

"We have some." Corricel answered.

"I was thinking more in terms of, can we get back?"

"Yes."

"Good, prepare the drive and initiate if our shield strength falls below fifteen percent."

"Fifteen, won't that cut it a little fine." Tris was worried.

"Very, but if we jump out on the point of victory then we'll have to do all this again." Tor looked at her.

## *Chapter 9*

The Defiance slowed as it approached the gate, and Tor brought it to a complete halt just outside weapons range of the Destroyers. He took several deep breaths before glancing over to Tris.

"Brace yourself. This could be a rough ride."

The engine pods flared as the Defiance surged forwards, particle beams were met by Khaak beam weapons. The Defiance lurched and strafed through a web of incoming fire. Khaak fighters shimmered and exploded. The bulk of a destroyer cut across their path as missile warnings blared through the cabin.

Targets were locked and reduced to bright flares of superheated elements. The Defiance banked away.

"Shields at forty seven percent."

"We just scratched the surface, there's no way through." Tris turned sharply to face Tor.

"Tell me when the shields have recovered. We'll go in again." Tor checked the HUD. "This time we need to take out one of the big ship."

The Defiance completed a wide circle and plunged into the mass of defending ships.

"Warning, missiles closing."

"Keep the beam on the Destroyer."

Strafing along the length of the hull the ship dived down between the massive hulls of the Khaak capital ships. Scouts swerved in towards them. The secondary beam flashing from ship to ship leaving small incandescent glows.

"Heavy fighters ahead." Tris announced.

"Shields?"

"Sixty four percent and falling."

"The Destroyer?"

"Twenty two percent, and registering minor fractures in the hull."

The Defiance lurched as a beam from the Destroyer locked on. Tor wrestled with the controls, boosting the speed to punch a hole in the cloud of surrounding enemy ships, the shields fell away until he reached safe distance.

"This is futile, we're still no nearer the gate." Tris looked as frustrated as she sounded.

"We will be. Prepare for a third run."

"Tor, might I suggest deploying a small nav probe. It could be timed to fire as we make the next engagement, and providing we open a clear passage for it, the probe could give us the navigational information we need to jump past this blockade." Corricel was keeping count of the Khaak numbers, more ships were appearing to compensate for the losses.

"Good thinking, deploy the probe where you think it has the best chance for success."

"Modifying flight trajectory to suit." They came around again.

Fighters and interceptors hurtled to meet them. The centre opened up, like an eye onto the Destroyer. Tor recognised immediately that the fighters were trying to channel the Defiance into the line of fire of the capital ship while preventing him from manoeuvring side to side.

"Corri, take everything out to the left of us."

He turned the ship, beam weapons opened up as they came in range. The interceptors took several seizures to succumb, the fighters considerably longer. Each explosion rippling in the shields and draining them a fraction at a time.

The ship rolled and strafed clear with a renewed surge of power. The weapons focussed on the bulk of the Destroyer to shimmer in violent hues of colour against the hull.

Beams tore through the void, slicing past the Defiance as it turned and twisted to avoid them. Dancing sideways as new turrets flared to life while fast scout ships swarmed to intercept, launching missiles as they came.

"Shields at forty percent."

Tor's face was grim with determination. The fury of the storm had been unleashed, shields shimmered, ships exploded, the hull of the Destroyer appeared to ripple with fear as fractures widened and flames spewed from gaping rents in the side.

The fire fight went on as chunks of the disintegrating ship slammed into Khaak scouts and fighters.

"Shields at fifteen percent."

"Tor, we've got to get out of here!"

A quick twist and sideways strafe saved them from a collision with a large section of fuselage. Tor hit the boost, skimming over the hemorrhaging Destroyer, and moments later the shockwave of the exploding engines rippled out behind them, taking with it numerous scouts, interceptors and heavy fighters.

The leading edge of the shockwave caught the Defiance and span the ship.

"Shields critical. Hull fractures in cargo section. Atmospheric leakage minimal. Pressure stabilised." Corricel announced.

"Take all necessary precautions and seal the hull." Tor brought up the HUD system information and focused his attention on the gate.

New ships were appearing, including two new Destroyers.

"Someone give me some good news on the probe." Tor's voice reflected his frustration.

"No information as yet." Tris examined the terminal in front of her.

"Are we sure it made it through?"

"Affirmative. You must bear in mind the Khaak could also be behind the gate. We must not rule out that it has been destroyed."

"Corri, analyse the fights so far. Is there any way we can draw them out and make an opening to the gate?"

"You want to take another run? Are you mad?" Tris stared at him.

"They don't want us to go through, I want to know why." Tor stated and checked the shield condition.

"My analysis of the Khaak defences show a suicide run to the gate might just succeed. However the Defiance will be in no condition to fight should Khaak forces await us on the other side." Corricel sounded cheerful.

"Plot the course."

"Shields at one hundred percent."

"Have faith Tris, I'm not ready to die just yet."

She looked at him, the fierce determination burned in his eyes. Her gaze returned to the terminal. The ship accelerated towards the enemy lines. Attitude engines roared and the cabin shook as beam lasers lanced out to meet them.

The eerie silence of explosions a stark contrast to the shuddering of the ship from intermittent beam strikes. Tris moved uncomfortably in her seat, the terminal was a sea of red with hostile contacts. Doubt filled her mind as the ship lurched once again. The sound of attitude thrusters rumbled through the cockpit.

"Shields at sixty three percent."

She stared hard at the plotted course. There was no way through. The shimmering hull of a Destroyer filled every aspect of the cockpit. The Defiance slewed sideways through the haze of beam weapons breaking free to face more fighters.

The Defiance swept around the first Destroyers, exchanging weapons fire in a renewed blaze of light.

"Shields forty one percent."

A group of four Khaak heavy fighters blocked the path. The Defiance swerved, cutting across the nose of an interceptor. Particle beam met Khaak laser and the interceptor exploded. Cutting back towards the opening of the gate a second Destroyer moved to intercept.

The rising sense of panic gripped her, and still there was no way through. The gate appeared no closer. As fast as the hostile contacts vanished more appeared and the immense power of the Defiance shields wilted.

"Shields twenty five percent."

A flight of a dozen scout ships swarmed towards them. The Defiance rolled through the expanding cloud of vapourised hulls. Tris glanced at Tor, the beads of sweat on his forehead shimmered in the blaze of lights.

"Shields nine percent."

The gate loomed agonisingly close as a third Destroyer moved to block their path. The growing certainty of death laid its icy fingers on her mind, filling every corner of her conscious. She gave a last futile glance at the terminal.

"I have a nav signal." Tris called out.

"Initialising jumpdrive. Shields five percent."

Tor threw the Defiance in a spin.

"Corri, all auxiliary power to shields."

"Shields at seven percent."

"Tris, clip the suits helmet in place. The airs going to get cold pretty damn quick." He smoothly moved the flight stick left and then pulled back sharply.

She glanced at the control panel and noted the sign, 'LIFE SUPPORT OFF LINE'

"If you're gonna die, die with your suit on. Isn't that how it goes?" She commented quietly.

"Sixty percent."

The Defiance lurched with a stomach shifting thump.

"Seventy percent."

Even the Defiance weapons were quiet now as more Khaak ships swarmed in, sensing the kill.

"Eighty percent."

Tris stared at the list of off line systems and knew that without inertial dampers there would be no quick blast of speed to escape.

"Ninety percent. Shields critical!"

The wormhole opened and beam weapons filled the void.

The Defiance hurtled out of the opening wormhole some distance from the gate. A host of Khaak ships lay behind them and were taken by surprise.

"Inertial Sub Space unit on line. Auxiliary units recharging. Shields at three percent and rising." Corricel continued to rattle off a system check as Tor engaged the main engines to maximum acceleration.

"Damage report?" Tor glanced at the HUD. He almost expected to see a vast armada of warships but there was none. "That was a lot of effort not to let us through. Yet I don't see why."

"Which do you want me to answer first?" Corricel responded.

"Long range scanners show a few stations, the usual sector forces, and." Tris stared at the screen thoughtfully.

"And what?" Tor looked over towards her.

"What looks like the remains of a ship." Tris sat back.

"And?"

"Well, it's in bad shape that's for certain. The configuration seems to match that of the new Split Dragon class of corvette. But I can't be certain of that." She glanced over towards him.

"Split?" Tor gave a half hearted shrug, "Sounds like one of that arrogant race has had his just deserts. All I need to know is how he got here?"

"There's no other active jumpgates in this sector." Tris looked perplexed.

"That's not exactly the news I'd like to hear right now." Tor scanned the HUD.

"Would you like the damage report?" Corricel cut in at what she thought to be an appropriate time.

"Okay, what have you got for me?"

"We have a coolant leak on engine one. Shut down will be necessary in twenty mizuras. There are twenty two micro-fractures in the hull that need to be sealed. Although not leaking atmosphere they will not withstand high levels of structural stress. The replicator power coupler is damaged."

Tor was inclined to reel off a string of profanities but refrained from doing so. "Ideas people, where do we go from here?"

"It's a long shot, but we could take a look at the star charts." Tris was trawling her memory for the astro-navigation lecture that tried to cover this theory.

"How much of a long shot is it?"

"If we're within a few light years of a system we know certain star patterns will have a similar shape. From these we can triangulate to the nearest system."

"What do you mean by a few?" Tor was mindful not to get too hopeful.

"Speculatively, about four or five." Tris gave a half hearted shrug.

"Corri, up to you this one. And tell me if we have a spare power coupling for the replicator?"

"Already mapping current system. The answer to your question is, yes. The tool locker in the main cargo bay contains the spares. However there is no atmosphere in the cargo bay, and to risk pressurising it could lead to micro-fracture propagation."

"So what you're saying is, I'll need to be fully suited." He looked over at Tris, "Pilot seat's all yours."

She moved her hands to remove the suit helmet.

"Best you leave that on, just in case." Tor gave her a smile before stepping out of his seat. As he wandered through the cabin he felt his knees begin to buckle and leant heavily against the table.

"Are you okay?" Tor turned to see Tris looking at him with concern.

"Yeah, I think I've been sat down too long. That's all." He felt tired, and with each passing moment he felt his strength leech away. Bone weary, he staggered as though he was drunk towards the bulkhead airlock door. He rested heavily against the wall and breathed deeply as he pulled the suit helmet over his head and clipped the seal closed.

Levering himself away from the wall, he pressed the release button on the control panel. The door slid open and Tor lurched unsteadily into the airlock. The door closed behind him with a hiss. Corricel monitored his progress but knew better than to dissuade him from his current course of action.

"Tris, you may need to assist Tor in the replacement of the coupling."

"What's the matter?" She glanced towards the technical datapad before looking over her shoulder.

"Combat fatigue. He is too proud to mention it, but he is nearing exhaustion. Not that the excitement will not have taken its toll on you. You are showing signs of fatigue as well but your mind has yet to register it."

"That's because I can still feel the adrenaline rush." Tris responded calmly, "Near death experiences tend to play havoc with the glands." Pausing for a moment, she felt the gradual tingling in her legs, and the weariness creeping over her. "How's the star chart comparison going?"

"No matches with the core sectors. I am expanding the search along the trade routes."

"I wonder why the Dragon is here?" Tris gazed at the HUD.

The hiss of the airlock signaled the return of Tor. His steps were driven by will, rather than the voluntary action of his limbs.

"Corri, which panel do I need to remove."

"Panel lights are now on."

Tor spent a moment looking around before he saw the glow. It was located in the floor which gave him the excuse to kneel down. The panel popped open with some ease, and Tor studied the damaged coupling. He flipped open the release latches and pulled the unit free. Taking a moment he reached for the tool box and opened it.

A micro fracture in the outer hull ripped open. Tor felt himself sucked towards the hole. Alarms reverberated around the cabin. Objects hammered into him, the removed coupling and toolbox slammed into his outstretched hand to the sound of breaking fingers. Tris clung onto the seat and flight stick spinning the Defiance.

Corricel purged atmosphere and pressure in a single rapid burst. Tor was now wide awake from the pain, and at this moment the Khaak saw an opportunity to strike.

Wormholes opened ahead of the tumbling ship.

With no atmosphere and the pressure balanced only suit mics worked. Tor did not cry out in pain, a guttural growl escaped his lips at the pain in his hand.

"Warning, enemy ships approaching."

"Steady the ship, and use auxiliary thrusters to avoid collision." Tor fought against the pain.

Tris slammed the flight stick in the opposition direction of spin. Attitude thrusters roared as the Defiance responded to the input. The distance closed rapidly on the newly emerging ships. A Destroyer blocked their path. Compared to her experience with the old model Elite, the Defiance was almost too responsive. Yet the vector change could not happen fast enough.

The hull of the Khaak Destroyer hurtled towards them.

Tor looked down at the black inner skin that had saved him from being sucked into the void and, with his one good hand, threw the accumulated debris that had been sucked into the gaps around the tiles aside. Opening the toolbox he pulled out the replacement coupling and jammed it into place. A normal two handed operation was almost too much as the first latch clicked shut.

Tris, unaware of Tor's predicament, concentrated on shedding the phenomenal speed of the Defiance. Turning the ship she used the main engines. Even with a quick scan of the speed and distance to the Destroyer, Tris knew they could not slow down fast enough. She re-angled the ship to both slow down and change heading.

Dropping into single kilometre figures. Tris flipped the ship over and hoped desperately that she had done enough. The arc of the Destroyers hull rushed towards them. She located the strafe control panel and fired the vertical attitude jets.

Tor clicked the final latch closed.

"Replicator on-line. Initialising hull repair."

Moments later and the Defiance proximity warnings blared for a brief moment. The shields of both ships sparked and energy pulses cascaded over them.

"Collision warning. Distance fifty metres. Twenty metres. Five metres. One metre." There was a gentle bump and the hull screeched. "Collision detected. Proximity eight metres. Fifteen metres. Shields at twenty percent."

Tris glanced at the HUD to gauge the status of the Khaak Destroyer. The main engines appeared to have failed.

"Did we just hit something?" Tor's voice mocked her.

"What of it?" Tris was concentrating on their surroundings. Clusters were appearing ahead of them as she continued to lose speed.

"Women pilots should be banned. There's millions of kilometres of empty space in all directions and you managed to hit the only thing around. I think I might have a stun stick somewhere nearby."

"Oh, so it's my fault we were traveling too fast." The particle beams lashed out. Explosions flashed ahead of them as the Defiance punched a hole through the centre of the cluster, scattering the scout ships with the occasional beam laser shimmering against the shields of the Defiance. Moments passed and they were, once more, in clear space.

Tris took the rest bite to look over her shoulder towards where Tor sat. He had his back to the bulkhead and was cradling his hand. The floor panel had not been replaced.

"What's up with you?" Her voice was tinged with concern.

"Tool box broke my fingers when the hull ripped."

"Corri, how's the hull repair going? Can we re-pressurise the cabin?"

"It was going well until we made contact with the Destroyer. The replicators new power coupling's surge protection has been damaged, and this time we have no spare."

"Did you repair the coolant leak in engine one?" Tor asked.

"Yes. The main concern now is that the hull is not repaired and there is no practical way of administering medical assistance."

"Then you'd better find us a way home." Tor shifted position and awkwardly rose to his feet. A few faltering steps later and he sat heavily on the edge of the bunk.

"I believe I have found a star chart match with Nyana's Hideout. Direction has been determined and the distance is approximately five light years from our current position."

"Good work. Now do we have the energy cells to make the jump?"

"I must point out that gravitational fields and galactic drift makes the jump accuracy inexact for a one off jump. The target solar system will have traveled from its current visible position by an as yet undetermined amount. I have insufficient data to approximate the exact position of the system."

"A simple yes or no would do." Tor lay back on the bunk. The environment suit felt uncomfortable.

"I can not determine the answer to the question. It will take multiple jumps with course corrections after each one to reach the system."

"See if you can do it in two. One major jump and then a minor." Tor closed his eyes against the throbbing pain in his hand. He could feel his fingers had swollen and were being constricted from further expansion by the suits gauntlet.

"That's taking a big risk." Tris glanced around concerned. She felt unable to leave the pilots seat with the continued threat of Khaak attack.

"I don't care just get us somewhere friendly. And remember we have interplanetary drive capability, so being out by a few million kilometres isn't a big problem." Tor felt perspiration trickle down his face and was all too aware that there was no way he could wipe it away.

Tris was perplexed, her astro-navigation course had briefly explained the practical problems of point to point gateless jumps without having determined the correction values first. Light bending under the influence of gravitational forces, the motion of solar systems and other factors.

"Corri, calculate for a three light year, two light year split. We should be able to make a reasonable estimate of the correction value after the first jump."



"Understood, establishing reference points, calculating vector and destination co-ordinates of first jump."

Jump tunnels began to open up ahead of them.

"We have incoming." Tris called out as several Destroyers emerged. "Corri, now's a good time for that jump."

The HUD filled with more contacts. Four fast Destroyers appeared to the rear, their engines flaring brightly, the distance between them being eaten up. Ahead of them a circle of eight closing together.

Tris had to risk it, she could see no option but to chance flying between the enemy ships. The Destroyers increased velocity and turned as the Defiance shot through the centre of the circle.

More destroyers were on the HUD. A second concentric ring of eight were on the same vector as them and moving at speed.

Tris read the situation. They were hemmed in between two concentric rings with four ships behind. Jump tunnels opened in the distance.

"Detecting shield wall ahead." Corricel announced.

"Find me an opening!"

"None found. Approaching ships will be in firing range within twenty sezuras."

Tris turned the ship towards the space between the two rings of eight. The Destroyers closed formation. Khaak lasers lanced out towards them, she brought the ship back towards the centre.

"Can we disrupt the shields."

"Not without getting into firing range of the enemy."

"Unless you have a jump co-ordinate for us we're going to have to try something and soon."

"Emergency escape jump co-ordinates input, jumpdrive charging."

Tris angled in towards the forward Destroyers. She scanned the HUD, and shook her head, they were matching her speed. She noted they were keeping perfect formation rather than constricting. A lattice of laser fire streamed towards them as they drew within weapons range and she twitched the ship back towards the centre of the formation.

"Jump co-ordinates calculated updating drive. Jump in ten, nine, eight."

Tris glanced at the HUD, and realised they would not make it. She turned the ship around and engaged the main thrusters. The following four Destroyers opened fire. The screen of laser fire filled the screen, and there was no chance of not being struck by the crossfire.

"Four, three, two."

The Defiance shuddered unable to tear itself free of the crossing lasers and the shields plunged.

"Jumping."

The jump tunnel opened and was lost in the blaze of laser fire against the shields.

The Defiance emerged in the dark empty void between solar systems. Emptiness stretched in every direction to the limits of the scanners. Tris turned the pilot seat and looked towards Tor, he appeared to be resting quietly, and she turned back towards the main flight deck.

"How long to calculate the vector correction value?"

"I will have it ready in three mizuras."

She checked the inventory on jump cells and made a mental note that they had only a third of the original number left.

"Corri, tell me we have enough cells for the final jump."

"That will depend on the correction value. But my current estimate is that we will be five hundred AU short."

"Short of where?"

"The centre of the Nyana's Hideout system."

"Seven hundred and fifty million kilometres, is a long way to fall short."

"At interplanetary speeds we will arrive in the sector within three tazuras."

"Is it possible to isolate a gate signature and lock onto that?" Tris needed options. There was no way she wanted to spend several tazuras stuck inside the suit, unable to eat, drink or use even the most basic of amenities.

"It may be possible, but it will take longer to isolate a jump corridor, and if I do it may not take us back to our own sectors."

Tris sat in thought and knew the last thing they wanted was to make a jump back into hostile territory by accident. Three tazuras of discomfort would be a small price to pay. She wondered how Tor would be able to survive with no medical treatment.

"Stay with the original plan, Corri. Calculate the jump co-ordinates and make the jump when ready."

The mizuras passed slowly with no sign of Khaak jumping in to attack them. The Defiance hurtling on through the void. Doubts gnawed at her, there was so much potential for them being wrong. She considered the distances and gravitational effects bending light and for Corricel to pick up on a star that was between them and their destination. A case of mistaken identity and yet she felt unable to express her concerns as they were now committed with no way back.

"Jumpdrive initiated." Corricel announced.

Tris breathed deeply, "Let's hope we're right about this."

"Have faith in me, Tris."

"Faith? I have faith in you Corri, but every sentient being makes mistakes. It's what makes us who we are."

"Jumping."

## *Chapter 10*

"Entering system Nyana's Hideout."

Tris smiled and then took a long look at the HUD. They were more than one hundred million kilometres from the solar centre, and on the fringes of the solar system. It would be a long trip but penultimately they were home. She engaged the main drive and pushed it to maximum.

The engines hummed as she stepped out of the pilots seat. Moving back through the cabin she approached Tor and looked through the visor of his helmet. His eyes were closed, and his complexion pale. Looking around she found the emergency oxygen pipes and connected them up to his suit.

She then returned to the pilot seat and attached the tubes. Warm, fresh air filled the suit. She sat back and after a while her eyes closed.

\*\*

The deep space monitoring station Morrash picked up a new signal travelling fast across the scanners. Drad Peel was distracted from staring at the scantily clad woman in the magazine as the intruder warning alarm sounded.

He threw the magazine to one side and cursed, as he would have to relay yet another Khaak sighting to the sector patrols. Sure enough the detection recorded, 'Ship unknown.' But he hesitated on examining the distance measurement, which appeared beneath the contact and it was at the furthest limits of the sensors. Being too far out to present any real threat for Tazuras, it was travelling at speeds far in excess of one of the normal Khaak clusters.

"Computer, is this a new comet?"

"Negative. Extended sensors indicate metal object."

"How old is the scan information?"

"Scan information is two Stazuras old."

Drad shook his head slowly, the information was two light stazuras old and the ship was travelling at nearly one eighth the speed of light.

"Computer locate the nearest interplanetary flight capable Titan and get me the Commander."

"Acknowledged."

Some mizuras passed when the comm opened.

"This is Commander Goren responding to station Morrash's request. How can we be of assistance?"

"Commander Goren, we have picked up an incoming vessel travelling at one eighth the speed of light in the outer regions."

"Transmit the details." Drad did so.

The Commander frowned as he examined the results.

"I don't see anything here that wouldn't suggest that all we have is a high speed comet."

"Sir, take a look at the energy profile."

There was a moment of contemplation as the Commander scanned through the data and digested the information..

"We will be jumping to intercept but not engage. Notify high command if anything untoward happens."

\*\*

Commander Goren looked around the bridge and noted the expectant faces. Sector patrol forces dealt with the occasional Khaak insurgence, and this would be a chance to get involved. They were battle ready, but untested so far. Many of the crew itching to take revenge for the Presidents End massacre. The intruder had the speed to pass them easily if they spent too long trying to get a positive identification on the ship.

"Plot the vector heading and set jump co-ordinates ten thousand k's ahead of the intruder. Prepare for jump."

"Sir."

"Jumpdrive charging at ten percent." The computers dulcet tones continued with the countdown.

"Crew to battle stations!"

\*\*

Tris sat back, and smiled as the faint transmissions of the local news stations crackled on the comm. They were still too far out to broadcast their arrival but she had little doubt that their progress would be being monitored as they passed the outer sector limits. She knew the different sectors set wildly differing distances due to the practicalities and cost of maintaining the system, the minimum limit would be sixty light mazuras from the nearest concentration of civilisation. Beyond this limit the military would monitor for activity, but only in areas of strategic significance.

It came as somewhat of a surprise to her when the Titan Arbiter appeared some distance ahead.

"Indications are that the Arbiter is primed for combat." Corricel announced.

"Open a hailing channel."

\*\*

"We are being hailed, Sir."

"What?" Goren glanced quickly at the young communications officer. "Who's hailing?"

"Signal identification is that of the Defiance, Sir." The officer paused.

"Defiance? Never heard of it." Goren felt as though he was being robbed of his first combat action against the Khaak.

"Sir, the Defiance is listed as missing presumed destroyed. Any sighting to be reported directly to Intelligence Officer Belign, Sir."

"Sir." Chief Technical Officer Tredlow caught Goren's attention. "The ship looks as though it's seen a fair amount of action. Multiple hull fractures indicate no internal atmosphere or pressure. She's running on environment suits only. Heavy scorching of the outer hull and multiple minor subsystems failure are indicative of Khaak assault. As for the weapons and shielding configuration, well Sir, I just can't quite make it out, according to the readings they're the same, or the Defiance doesn't have any weapons. Primary engines are not to standard specifications or construction, Sir."

"In layman's terms what does that mean?" Goren looked thoughtful.

"It's packed to the gunnels with alien technology, Sir."

"Interesting, alternatively it could be a test ship for the Secret Service if Officer Belign's involved. Crew to remain combat ready, and open the channel."

The screen filled with figure fully clad in an environment suit.

"This is Commander Goren of the Arbiter. Identify yourself."

"Private Tris Matayah piloting and Tor Grall reporting home."

"It's been a long time Private, care to explain where you've been for the last Jazura?"

"That would take a long time Commander. We would welcome some assistance with repairs and a supply of energy cells to get us to the core sectors." Tor's voice came over the comm.

"I think it is a little early to start making demands Mr. Grall."

"My apologies Commander. It's been a long trip and I'm in need of rest. If you have a spare power coupling onboard suitable for a transporter device then that will help us initiate repairs to the ship. We can discuss the details of our journey during the repair time, as I'm sure you'll want to know all about the Khaak we encountered on our trip. Needless to say that I need to report in with Intelligence Officer Caran Belign as soon as possible."

"Unfortunately our docking bay holds a full compliment of fighters, otherwise we could accommodate you during repairs. So I will have one of our personnel transport a power coupling to you and will signal when it is ready. Goren out." The Commander closed the comm.

He gestured towards Tredlow and went back to observing the main viewer.

\*\*

Tris slowed the Defiance as the Arbiter increased velocity to match. She kept an eye on the long range scanner, the fact they were in friendly space did not mean they were out of danger. Several mizuras later and the Titan signaled it was ready to transport the spare unit.

She responded with the co-ordinates and, with a shift in the shield modulation, the unit appeared. Moving from the pilot seat into the rear cabin she unpacked the unit from its small crate and carefully swapped out the damaged unit for the new one.

"Replicator on-line. Initiating repairs."

"Let us know when the cabin can be re-pressurised."

"We have incoming Khaak clusters on scanners." Corricel said calmly.

"They followed us?" Tor sat up.

"It would appear so."

"Destroyers?" Tris made her way back to the cockpit.

"No, just fighters."

"Open a channel to the Arbiter. We will engage the enemy and require assistance."

"Well there's a first." Tor muttered over the comm.

"Just because you like to take them all on yourself, it doesn't mean the rest of us do."

\*\*

"Sir, we have incoming Khaak."

"On screen."

Multiple wormholes opened and five large clusters of Khaak fighters emerged.

"The Defiance is turning to engage and requests assistance."

"I think we can comply with that request. Bring the ship around and go to full battle alert."

The clusters broke apart, filling the screen with multiple contacts. The Defiance particle beams scythed down many of the smaller ships long before they were in range. The heavy fighters multiple beams lanced through the void.

The Arbiters main weapons battery opened up sending streams of high energy photons at any target that appeared within range. Three heavy fighters opened up on the Titan, its shields blazing in the light and falling away with frightening speed. Missiles alerts reverberated around the cockpit.

They broke free of the melee cutting down one of the fighters but leaving the other two damaged, yet still dangerous.

"Launch fighters."

On screen, the Defiance continued to engage any Khaak ship that came within range. Its shields were holding firm against the deadly assault. The Arbiter came around again as Nova's launched. They followed in close formation.

The Arbiter gunners targeted and tracked the heavy Khaak fighters, while the Novas chased them down. The smaller scout ships were destroyed in a blizzard of heavy fire from the Titan's eighteen gun mounts and the combined fire power of the Novas and the Defiance.

Goren sat back with a look of satisfaction.

"Hail the Defiance and prepare a consignment of energy cells to be transported across."

"Sir."

\*\*

Tris sat back with relief, she was glad the fight had ended so quickly.

"Incoming message."

"Open the comm, Corri."

"Goren here, just to say it was a pleasure fighting with you. A consignment of energy cells is being made ready for transportation in to your hold. We will signal you when ready."

"Thank you Commander." Tris smiled and the comm closed.

"Well at least we didn't have to tell him about our jazura in transit." Tor commented.

Three mizuras later and the transfer ready signal was received.

"Cargo bay now contains energy cells."

"Can they get us to the Mohrabas?" Tor asked quietly.

"Negative, but we have enough to reach Argon Prime."

"Pity. Set the jump destination for The Wall. I'd like to see what's become of the old bakery."

"Didn't you want to see Caran Belign first?" Tris turned the seat.

"In this, and with a broken hand, are you mad?"

"Jumpdrive charging."

\*\*

Korecmancketras, Station Commander of Tors' Bakery sat with the calmness of a sleeping volcano. He wondered if anyone would mind if he crushed the life from the annoying little human on the other side of the desk.

Seldom did his annoyance rise to the level of referring to the Pontifex Maximus of Paranidia's name to help calm his rising anger. And he had every right to feel annoyed as at the end of the Wozura the ownership of the station had to pass from the War Master Guild to either a respectable private owner or one of the recognised corporations.

Sealed bids were meant to have been sent to the sector Governor before the end of last wozura, the highest offer would be accepted and the legal documents prepared. Or at least that was what was supposed to have happened, as it turned out only one bid had been received and that was for the derisory sum of one thousand credits. A protest to the governor was met with a sympathetic response and a quote from the law books, which basically inferred that they did not have a leg to stand on should they try to oppose the enforced sale.

The little man before him represented the purchasers legal department.

"I understand that it must be a blow that none of the existing staff may retain their positions on board the station. However my employer has made it perfectly clear that he wishes to bring on board trained experts to manage and run this facility."

"By his Holiness the Pontifex, I have no time for your pathetic whimpering you servile scum. Your unholy presence offends the eyes of the three dimensionality." It was a small pleasure that he could still insult the man.

"Be that as it may, you are still obliged to sign the transfer documents."

"I have suffered your presence long enough, and will consider your petty request with the utter contempt that it deserves. Leave my presence you unworthy drip of fetid bile."

The lawyer made no attempt to move.

"May I remind you that if you fail to sign within the next two tazuras, the governor has the legal right to seize the station and sell it on. In which case you will receive nothing."

\*\*

The Defiance cleared the gate and made rapid progress towards the bakery. News of their arrival would not have reached the core sectors, yet it was just a matter of time.

"Corri, patch into the stations computers and update everything of significance, medical records, ship registration, everything. And don't announce our arrival, just bring us in on automatic." Tor eased himself off the bunk and towards the co-pilot seat.

"Acknowledged. It is worth mentioning that hull repairs are complete, and the cabin is being pressurised."

Tris glanced at the console, the cabin life support light flashed as the atmosphere was restored. As soon as it normalised there was a hiss and the light went out. She returned her attention to the station and decided it was too close to bother with removing her helmet.

"Docking permission granted, dock when you see green position lights."

Tor felt his heart quicken as the lights flashed to green and the vast docking bay doors open. A strange sensation crept over him that he was stepping once more into the unknown even though, in essence, he was home again.

Corricel guided the ship past the main docks and the stations security zone and down to the maintenance level. The few crew members stood on the dockside and looked confused.

"Tris can you help me with the med pack. I'd like to get this hand treated before we go on board." Tor stepped into the rear cabin and Tris followed. She recovered the pack as Tor sat at the table and gingerly removed the gauntlet.

The hand was swollen purple and black from the bruising. Tris opened the box and looked for anything that might possibly help. All she could find was a hypo-spray of pain killers.

"Well there's this, which will help until you're in the med centre. The bruising is too advanced for anything else in here to do much good."

"It'll have to do." Tor applied the spray and the throbbing pain eased to a dull ache.

Tris helped him release the suits helmet and removed the other glove. Tor stood up and took a deep breath.

"Corri, can you transport me directly to my office?"

"Of course I can. Transporting when ready."

"I'm ready."

\*\*

The lawyer had not moved, despite Korecmancketras best insults and murder had very real appeal. He was sure that he could get away with making it look like a tragic accident.

He was dumbstruck and blinked several times when Tor stepped out of thin air.

"By his Holiness, and by divine deliverance welcome back Tor. Such a return in this most desperate of hours is a miracle worthy of the Pontifex himself."

The lawyer span around to face Tor.

"What sort of trick is this?" He turned to face Korecmancketras, "Some cheap lookalike won't stop the sale of this station."

"Sale, what sale?"

"With the official recognition of your demise this station is being sold by some quirk of law." Korecmancketras sat back with a smile. Tris appeared beside Tor.

"Really? Well it looks like rumours of my death are somewhat exaggerated." Tor looked at the lawyer. "You, get out. I have a lot to catch up on, namely the return of anything that might mistakenly have been given away. Korec, I need some time to get changed, and cleaned up. Come back in thirty mizuras and you can tell me everything that's happened since I was away. And have the maintenance crew clean my ship."

"I am not fooled for a second. This delaying tactic is a farce. You must sign the transfer." The lawyer thrust out the datapad.

Tor moved close behind the lawyer and, with his good hand only, lifted him off the ground, "Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. Your presence is not required here any more." He launched the little man towards the door. It opened, he went through, it closed.

Korecmancketras gave a low rumbling laugh.



"I've been itching to do something like that ever since he arrived." He paused for a moment to study Tor. "I see your right hand is broken, I will send up a medical droid." He moved towards the door and as he reached it he looked back at Tor, "Let us hope your return is in time to undo this farce."

As the door slid closed behind him Tor heard Tris sigh.

"That might not have been the brightest idea you've had." Tris looked at him.

"Seemed reasonable to me." Tor began to walk towards the rooms adjoining the main office.

"Perhaps, but lawyers have this annoying habit of suing people for outrageous amounts of credits."

Tor hesitated for a moment and then looked back with a wry smile.

"To do that he will have to prove that I'm alive."

\*\*

Caran was studying reports in an office on the Equipment Dock in Argon Prime. The Boron and Argon joint task force had cleared the last few Khaak ships from the President End sector. The loss of comms contact had led them to believe the incursion had been much more devastating than it turned out to be.

Planet side invasion had not occurred, and the general populous had been unharmed. Yet all the planetary stations had been destroyed. Appearances of new clusters were sporadic and this left him uncomfortable with the amount of effort being expended and the inordinate number of ships occupied in chasing down and eradicating the local threats.

A new message arrived he glanced quickly at the heading, 'Tor Grall.' He hesitated, over the last few tazuras since the reading of the will he had been bombarded directly with enquiries and angry complaints at the handling of Tor's estate.

He checked to see who had sent the message and immediately clicked on the message.

'An unconfirmed rumour is circulating that Tor Grall has returned to the Bakery.'

It was brief and Caran had no reason to doubt the agent that had filed the report, yet again he had seen several unconfirmed reports on sightings from various outer sectors. All had proven to be false, that this one had come in so close to home made him pause for thought.

Two mizuras later and a new message arrived from Commander Goren. He read the title.

'Confirmed sighting of the Defiance.'

Immediately he opened the message.

'12-10 14:37 Nyana's Hideout

Ship encountered in outer regions of sector, identified as Defiance with pilot Private Tris Matayah and passenger Tor Grall. Identities not verified.

Ship was being pursued by Khaak, all enemy fighters were engaged and destroyed.

Assistance was provided to the Defiance and a number of energy cells provided to reach the core sectors.'

Caran closed down the terminal and moved quickly across the room.

\*\*

Tris helped Tor wash and change clothes before the medic droid appeared. Her belongings were transported to the room and as he walked back to the office she sat quietly on the edge of the bed in deep contemplation. She had felt a wave of relief as they entered the sector and being nearly home again, all thoughts for what the future might hold had escaped her. Until now.

Being in the room when the lawyer fervently dismissed Tor as an imposter had disturbed her. The Paranid had been happy at Tors arrival, but after he had thrown the lawyer out of the room his stance was slightly more guarded. And for good reason, the Tor he had known was nowhere near as strong as the new Tor.

Tor had changed, not outwardly in appearance, but in every other aspect. Although she had not undergone the same biological transformation, Tris wondered if her own attitudes and persona had changed beyond anything her former friends would recognise.

Tor sat patiently with his injured hand flat on the table. The medic had injected a cocktail of anti-inflammatory, localised painkillers and nano-bots into his hand. A constant scanner presence gave instructions to the nano-bots in shifting fractured shards of bone back into position and closing up damaged blood vessels.

Holding a datapad in his good hand Tor ignored the proceedings and looked at the station reports. To the end of the jazura things had been ticking over nicely, but after this date there had been a gradual migration of the workforce. Now only the former mercenaries remained.

The reduction in staff was mirrored by the inventory stocks of raw materials. These to had been run down with only a fraction of manufacturing capacity being used to produce meatsteaks.

The medic produced a lightweight splint and placing his hand palm down on the surface, molded the warmed plastic around his fingers and wrist. Straps held his hand in place with bone growth control units.

"Splint must remain in place for one wozura. You are cautioned not to pilot a ship or operate heavy machinery during this time." The droids voice was metallic and lacked any sense of personality.

A glance at the splint and Tor simply nodded, then went back to reading through the highlights of the last jazura. He raised an eyebrow at the Khaak invasion of Presidents End. It was hardly on the scale he had seen, and the numerous sighting all over the universe since the attack left him puzzled.

Korecmancketras returned, with him was his brother Serandamancketal.

"Just had to come and see if the rumour was true." Tor stood up as they entered.

"My brother said you were here. He also mentioned that you are different from how he remembered you, and valued a second opinion." Serandamancketal's stride was cautious, and he held out a bio-scanner.

"A wise precaution under the circumstances. I've been through a lot, I've seen death and I didn't walk away laughing. I was given life, but it came at a cost. Bioscans won't tell you I'm me, palm prints will, retina scans might but I can't be certain." Tor paused to move to the Argnu hide seats, "But I'll explain when Caran arrives, as I'm sure he will in the not too distant future, and I don't want to be repeating myself too often."

Tris stepped in to the room, Tor glanced over to her.

"Serand, you will remember Tris. The fact that she's here should give some credibility to my story."

The Paranid looked over to her and directed the scanner in her direction. He looked at the identity check. His three eyes looked back towards Tor.

"That is Tris. You have no identity."

"Caran Belign is here to see you." Corricel announced and the door slid open.

"Just in time." Tor sat down.

The agent strode into the room and surveyed its occupants.

"Everyone seems to have brought bioscanners with them today. Were they a special deal in the station store?" Tor smiled.

"I've dealt with a number of hoax claims, so I have to be cautious. So far my instinct is to throw you from the nearest airlock for wasting my time. However, the very fact that Tris and the Defiance are also here raises questions." Caran pocketed the scanner.

"Excellent, perhaps if everyone sits down then I'll tell you about my jazura, and in return you can tell me about yours."

To Tris, Tor appeared far too casual and laid back for a man whose identity was in question.

"The invasion, as it took place was swift and brutal. Groups of sectors were isolated and the inhabitants wiped out. We grouped together in our designated sector four and defended the gates against numerous attacks, from the fighters you're currently facing to large destroyer class ships." Tor looked at each of the faces, "The Khaak we faced are subtly different than the ones we came across on the way back, the ones we faced first can modify the destination of the gates. How, we're not certain and that's why when they cut us off there was no way you could reach us." No one spoke as he paused.

"Eventually they gave up their assault and somehow switched off the gates leading to us. This meant we had no way out except for the damaged gate which Creed told me about. The same place the sentinel came from which aided us during the Bloodheart attack. By the way Caran, an assassin calling himself the Venom Master found the prisoners before we found him. None survived."

"The Venom Master was amongst the survivors?" Caran looked surprised.

"He's the reason I had to have complete genetic re-sequencing. The local alien race we encountered were not exactly keen to see us, as they had almost been wiped out by the Khaak several hundreds of jazuras before we arrived. But we did manage to make a communications breakthrough and win a small element of their trust. Only, as soon as we started negotiating our very presence in their sector, the Venom Master decided to try and kill me. In brief, he managed to kill just about everyone else that he met, except me. By quirk of fate it was after we captured him that he managed to poison me with Yall'T'kfrtha.

Fortunately the locals have a natural resistance to toxins and a way to neutralise it. However the only way it would work on my biology was for it to be altered in line with theirs. Unfortunately they don't have a way of flushing it out of my system, so I'm stuck with alien DNA filling my veins."

"Yall'T'kfrtha works extremely fast. I'm surprised you lasted until the operation." Caran studied Tor's expression.

"I didn't." Tor smiled, "Forced stimulation of vital organs and an overdose of anti-toxins was required. After five of their solar tazuras they unplugged the life support, but I'm just not that easy to get rid of."

"So it would seem."

"The Mohrabas, held ancient star charts and correction values that enabled us to use a gateless jump drive to rejoin the loop."

"Why would you need a gateless jumpdrive unit?" Caran had questioned in his own mind, how the Defiance came to be fitted with an unauthorised drive.

"The Mohrabas were instructed on how to dismantle a functioning gate by one of the ancients. It was an attempt to preserve the species. Until a gate is rebuilt there was no other way out, or back again."

"And how come you are now in possession of a jumpdrive?" Caran's expression feigned mild interest.

"The AIC Roamer, it's Corvette and crew survived. In the interests of getting home they fitted one to the Defiance."

"I find it strange that the Defiance, with no singularly special traits was chosen over the Corvette for a mission like this?"

"The Defiance was chosen for its suitability in containing alien technology." Tor was ready with an answer as soon as Caran finished asking the question. The Argon agent raised an eyebrow. "Anyway, as the remains of a Split Dragon will testify. A corvette is no match for the big Khaak Destroyers, a smaller ship is much harder to hit."

Caran leant forwards suddenly, "Where and when did you see that ship?"

"In the sector we had to jump from to reach Nyana's Hideout. But I should warn you the sector's not one to be jumped into lightly. On our journey back the Khaak were reasonably forceful in not wanting to see us return. There were a number of capital ships loitering near the wreckage."

"You made it." Serandamancketal commented quietly.

"We didn't get that close. And we were travelling too fast to stop and have a closer look."

"How did you break your hand?" Caran spoke quietly.

"As I was going to say, the journey back brought us through a number of Khaak sectors. After one particular conflict the hull sustained micro-fractures. I was replacing a power-coupling when the hull ripped. The toolbox was unrestrained and smashed into my hand before the pressure and atmosphere could be purged."

Caran sat quietly in thought.

"And what are your plans now you're here?"

"Tris gets to go home. The Defiance gets restocked with energy cells sufficient to return to the other survivors, and I pass on the jump co-ordinates so that they can return home. The various race governments then have several thousand officially dead, but very much alive people to deal with." Tor paused for a moment, "Of course I could give you a head start in that department, as I have the names of all the survivors with me. So you can save some time getting the paperwork sorted out before they arrive."

"What makes you think we'll let you go back? The Defiance sounds a much better discovery and far less of a headache than several thousand 'presumed dead' people." Caran fixed Tor with a long stare. Tor smiled.

"Well the Mohrabas were a little reluctant in handing out technology. The ship's AI was given instructions that if after landing here it was not restocked with energy cells, and any attempt to analyse their technology was made, the ship would self destruct. And it'll take out more than just this station."

Caran tried to assess if Tor was bluffing, but the answer had come a little too easily for something just made up. He returned the smile. The new Tor had a certain assuredness about him that was unfamiliar. His own doubts about Tor's identity were fading as he reflected on the way Tor worded his plans. He had only mentioned the other survivors returning, but not him. In that instance he knew that if Tor's intention was to return to the alien sector, he did not need to prove he was alive, it would not make a difference.

## *Chapter 11*

"Am I to assume, that you don't care if we believe if you are Tor Grall or not. Once you return to the Mohrabas, you do not intend on coming back?" Caran spoke carefully.

There was a long silence in the room.

"That's very perceptive of you. A while back I came to realise that if we ever returned that we might prove to be an inconvenience. As I came in there was a little man trying to get Korec to sign over ownership of the station, he didn't believe who I said I was either, this will make things very awkward all round. And even if I prove I'm me and have the station recognised once again as mine. Where do I go from there, do I chase down everyone that was handed credits and belongings that were mine and demand they hand them back?" Tor looked around the room but his eyes did not meet those of Tris. He returned his gaze towards Caran, "Plausibly it might be simpler for you to draw your blaster and shoot both me and Tris. It would save on a lot of paperwork. After all we are already officially dead and you can't kill a dead person, right."

"Indeed it would Mr. Grall, but just for once you have access to information of significant value. Simply, even with the inconvenience, you are, in my opinion, worth more to us alive than dead." Caran gave a wry smile and stood up.

Tor rose and looked up at the agent, "I think I would like to introduce you to ThiRioth, Chief Council of the Mohrabas. An impressively tall creature who makes looking down and intimidation something of an art form."

"Do I intimidate you Mr. Grall?"

"Not any more."

"Hmmm, I must be losing my touch." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "I have to mention a strange incident happened on the way up here. A lawyer from a certain company complained to me that he was physically thrown out of this office by a man claiming to be Tor Grall. You wouldn't have had a hand in this? Would you?"

Tor shrugged and held up his right hand.

"As you can see, this hand is obviously not very good for throwing things, especially people. And I consider, until recently, this to be my strong arm."

"And what about the other hand?"

"So is this meeting over?" Tor smiled.

"I think so, but I need you and Tris to accompany me back to Argon Prime. There's someone I know who's looking for a Split Dragon. And bring whatever data you have."

"Is this the point where I ask, what's in it for me?"

"Nothing Mr. Grall. Why would there be anything in it for you? However your co-operation might expedite official recognition that you are indeed still alive, but I can't promise anything."

"It's strange how you remind me of the Chief Council. You two could have hours of fun playing word games. Except it would probably be best if you lose."

"Sounds like an interesting person. But there will be time later for you to enlighten me on this new race. How quickly can you be ready to leave?"

"Corri, can you upload the navigational data for the Split Dragon we passed in Khaak space?"

"Star reference and jump correction data transferred. I have also uploaded the log entries relating to the Venom Master, Doctor Marra's medical reports, and all the survivor data."

"Corri?" Korecmancketras looked puzzled.

Tor glanced over towards him and then gave a wry smile.

"Corri, or Corricel in full, is the new name for the AI formally known as Sweetie."

The Paranid looked perplexed for a moment, the question, 'Why?' forming on his lips but dying without a sound to be replaced by a shrug. Tor returned his attention to Caran.

"Well, I'm ready."

They both looked over towards Tris.

"I'll leave my stuff here, and collect it later." Tris remained looking thoughtful but remained silent.

"Then we're ready." Caran moved towards the door, followed by Tor and Tris. Korecmancketras and Serandamancketal remained behind and began to chat quietly.

\*\*

With the record showing Tor was officially dead, Nyeshta had been ultra cautious when continuing to work as a fighter escort for the sector trading freighter now owned by Billyzonus. There was an unspoken understanding that she would only work the Paranid sectors to avoid being recognised. So far there had been nothing to indicate the situation would change.

Even so a growing suspicion that she was being watched had begun to creep over her. She had enemies within the guild, and she would not put it past any one of them to inform the Argon secret service of her identity.

They approached the next gate and she led the way.

"Entering sector Dukes Domain."

Beam weapons fire illuminated the void. The second escort fighter appeared behind her as the Prometheus surged forward. She swore as the HUD filled with hostile contacts and from the size of the swarm they had jumped into a large Khaak cluster.

The shields tumbled as she passed the heavy Khaak fighter. Green plasma from her companion reduced one of the numerous scouts to vapour.

"I'm on the fighter. Keep those scouts off me."

The fighter was slower but twisted and weaved breaking her weapons lock, as green plasma rained down on it. She strafed left and turned the ship hard about.

"Missile closing."

The ship shunted suddenly to the right as the warhead exploded. Lasers shimmered over the screen obscuring her view of the target. As they cleared she felt the triple blow of the heavy fighters lasers ripping into the shields.

"Missile closing."

She braced for the impact and as the controls settled she passed the heavy fighter, and swung on to its tail. The engines of the Khaak ship glowed, its shields blazing, as she fired the Perseus's three weapons until they were drained.

Another scout ship exploded close beside her, more plasma swept aside a third.

"Missile closing."

The explosion knocked her off aim and the moment for the kill was lost. A scout ship flew straight towards her, the light of its laser suddenly filling the screen. Instinctively she fired and dragged the ship back on target. The scout erupted into flame from the multiple impact.

The heavy fighter had taken the opportunity to turn. The white light of the lasers slammed into the depleted shields of her ship. Plasma met the incoming fire as she hit the boost and shot past the enemy before it completely robbed her ship of shields. The attitude thrusters shook the cabin as once again she fought to bring the Perseus on the tail of the heavy fighter.

The engine glow came into view as the enemy turned to face her. Strafing past, she then turned and fired again.

"Missile closing."

Plasma tore into the Khaak's shields. She matched its turn strafing to keep the advantage. The missile struck.

"Shields critical."

"Just a few seconds longer."

The heavy fighter rolled to the left as its shields finally gave out. The plasma seared the skin of the ship and for agonisingly long moments Nyeshta wondered if it would ever explode. Suddenly gouts of flame billowed from the sides and moments later the ship became a rapidly expanding ball of superheated particles.

A quick look at the HUD displayed eight scout ships still surviving. The freighter and the third escort fighter were heading for the next station. Sector patrol ships joined the fight and within a mizura the Khaak cluster had been eliminated.

"Incoming message."

Nyeshta glanced towards the comm.

"Who's it from?"

"Sender is listed as Korecmancketras using a secure channel."

"Play it." She had not spoken to him for some time and reprimanded herself for not sending the occasional greeting.

"Nye, two pieces of news. First, Serandamancketal told me to tell you, there's a bounty hunter after you, be careful. Second, Tor's returned."

"Well I'm glad you saved the bad news until last. Any idea who the bounty hunter is?"

"None, just that he's a talented freelancer."

\*\*

Tor was surprised to see that Caran's shuttles flight path did not pass the trading station or equipment dock.

"Where are we going?"

"Argon One."

"So I'm not going to see anyone important then?" Tor sat back.

"Not to you maybe, but Ban Danna happens to be the head of the Argon Secret Service. And it's him you're going to see." Caran had been quiet for most of the journey seemingly preoccupied with studying reports from the field rather than asking questions about the Khaak, or anything else.

"Tell me is Carolile still President?"

"Last time I checked she was. Though, it was a sensitive time just after the sectors went missing. As you can imagine, there were a lot of angry people demanding to know what the government was going to do to find the missing." Caran put aside the datapad, "Trouble is no one knew if the disappearance was the unfortunate result of a gate shift, and that was the official line for a number of wozuras. Not long after, the Xenon launched a massive invasion into the sector out of Getsu Fune, this curtailed any expeditionary force being deployed to search for the missing sectors. And the government declared that if contact had not been established after one jazura then it would assume the missing were dead."

"Funny, just after the invasion started, we discovered that the Khaak were controlling the gates using black boxes that they'd attached on the rear of the structure. So after destroying them we crossed into a new sector just to find that the Xenon were attempting to gain control of it." Tor gazed out of the window as Argon Prime came into view. "So it sounds like the Xenon are also expanding their empire."

"What are your opinions of the Khaak?"

"Difficult to say, homicidal killers could be one view point. But I think it's a species that suffers no rivals." Tor looked thoughtful, "The whole sector thing could have been just to work out our strengths and our technology. Then develop weapons and ships capable of overcoming them, before setting about eradicating us, before we become a threat to them. Who knows, they may have even captured a jumpdrive from one of the ships in the first attack and replicated it. Which could be why they don't bother with gate manipulation anymore, as they can appear anywhere and everywhere at once."

"I see you like to speculate, Mr. Grall."

"There is one thing I'd like you to know. The Mohrabas aim to recover their former sectors from the Khaak. To do so they will need jumpdrive technology, if only to put them on an even footing." Tor looked over to Caran, "This seemingly trivial piece of information, might get you some technological advances. But I can't promise you anything."

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There was a long silence. Caran tried to assess Tor, the jazura had matured the youngster, and there was a predatory strength within Tor that, until now, he had only sensed within one other.

"Times have changed Tor, and your request will meet with sympathetic ears, willing to do the right thing." He paused, "Now let me tell you something of interest. With the upsurge in Khaak activity occupying much of the sector forces. The sector police have authorised bounty hunters to track down and eliminate known fugitives from the law." Caran leant towards Tor. "You'll be interested to hear that the woman that built your Defiance is on the list, and is currently being tracked." He sat back, "Dead is more preferable than alive. That's the current policy."

"I'm sure by now you know I rescued Nyeshta from the pirate station, maybe that I even let her tag along with me to the silicon mine. Perhaps even that I gave her a new identity, so that she could take on a new life and live a decent, honest one." Tor paused, without serious provocation he felt a searing flame of anger rising inside him. "I stood before Creed to keep her alive. Now why couldn't you just leave her alone?"

Caran was taken aback, Tor, even with his broken hand, exuded extreme animosity. Tris stared silently at Tor, even she felt the anger.

"As much as I am glad you confessed all that, I have to tell you the use of bounty hunters has nothing to do with me. I stopped trying to find her after you disappeared, not that I hadn't already



worked out where she might be. Nevertheless it's not in my power to keep her alive should anyone else discover her." Caran took a deep breath and adopted an equally aggressive stance.

Tor studied Caran for a few moments and then relaxed.

"You're a man of your word Caran. Of that I have no doubt. And I'd like to think you're not lying to me."

"You really don't want my help do you?"

"I am what I am and where I am because of you. Until I met you, life was interesting but never violent. Ever since I met you, I've been hunted, blown up, poisoned, shot at, stabbed, been incarcerated and studied like a lab rat for nearly half a jazura, and that doesn't include the numerous near death events I've experienced." Tor was on for a full rant.

"The remarkable thing Mr. Grall, is you always survive and you don't give up. I like that in a person, and finding good field agents with such talent is such a difficult task."

"I am not one of your field agents." Tor spoke slowly.

"No Mr. Grall you're not. If you were I'd owe you a jazuras back pay." Caran relaxed with a casual smile. "It is amazing what the last jazura has done with your confidence. And as I scanned through your medical updates I'm pleased to see that this isn't just an act of bravado. By all accounts you could do me some real damage, even with only one good hand. However I also note your escape from death is merely postponed."

"What do you mean?"

"The doctor didn't tell you?" Caran looked surprised.

"Tell me what?"

"Hmm, although the rest of you is considerably stronger than before, your heart is degenerating. Looking at this you've got two jazuras, maybe slightly longer." An uneasy silence fell in the cabin.

"I had supposed that this was the reason for your disinterest in being officially recognised as alive. It appears that I was wrong."

"Having a heart transplant isn't beyond the medical sciences. It's a simple operation these days." Tris put an optimistic view on Tor's new found knowledge.

"Yes, a very simple process these days for a normal person. But Tor's DNA doesn't match his physical being. His heart is human by design, but his genetics is Mohrabas. Swapping his heart for a human one would be rejected, and according to the medical report a Mohrabas one won't fit."

"Are we nearly there yet?" Tor glanced out of the window, his mood subdued.

The Colossus was an impressive sight, as the shuttle passed along its length to reach the docking bay. The giant ship gradually came to rest as they turned to make the final approach.

A young officer met them at the dockside.

"Agent Belign, I have been given instructions to escort you and your companions to the Admirals briefing room. If you would follow me."

Caran gestured for the officer to lead the way. He then motioned for both Tor and Tris to go ahead of him. They wandered for ten mizuras along busy corridors before they reached Ban Danna's office.

The officer turned to face them, "I'll wait here to escort you back."

Caran stepped forwards, "Follow me." He approached the door and touched the scanner pad. A moment later the door opened and he stepped inside.

"Ah, Caran. Glad you're here. I believe you've met Elena Kho, and this must be Tor Grall. Welcome on board." Ban cast a curious glance at Tris.

"Private Tris Matayah, she was with Tor on the return journey." Caran answered the unspoken question.

Tor took a few moments to study Ban and Elena as he tried to establish what interest these two people had in a missing corvette. There was an apprehensive tension in both Ban and Elena.

"As I understand it, you had quite an adventure on your return home. It must feel good to be back?" Elena asked conversationally.

"A story worthy of a few hours in the retelling." Tor smiled, "But I don't think I have your skill to put the words into print."

"What makes you say that?"

"I had the good fortune to find we had a copy of Farnham's Legacy in our archives. Masterfully written if I may say so." Memories on the content of the book fell into place. "But to answer your question, people think I'm dead and are trying to sell what was mine. I have returned to nothing and where I've just come from, I was someone. Is it good to be back? Not really."

"Come now Tor, that's a very bleak picture. As I understand it the Bakery hasn't been sold just yet, and I'm sure we can prevent that from taking place now you're here. Certainly long enough to correct the official records and re-instate ownership." Ban gave a warm smile.

"Now I expect you want to know about the corvette we spotted on our travels." Tor cut to the chase, as he was feeling tired and in need of rest.

"Anything you can tell us about it would be invaluable." Elena moved forward a few steps, concern etched on to her face.

Tor glanced around and approached Ban Danna's desk. He found a data port for his datapad and plugged it in. Tapping through the archive he found the flight data for the Khaak sector and sent it to the holo-projector.

"Nyana's Fortune is five light years from the Khaak sector. It has a heavy defence force consisting of heavy fighters, scouts and interceptor class ships, which you've already encountered. It also has a number of capital class ships, which so far you haven't seen." Tor showed each of the ships in turn. "The destroyer class is not to be trifled with, the weapons range is awesome and powerful enough to reduce a Titan class ship to scrap metal in a few sezuras. And that's where your friend is." Tor was thoughtful for a few moments as he looked at the others. The tension had returned in the face of Elena.

"The Dragon showed no signs of residual power. Although we weren't close enough to get a complete picture of what happened to the ship, it looked as though the Khaak had spent some time carving it up. This image is at maximum magnification. Soon after the Khaak took a special interest in trying to prevent us from getting away and we were forced to jump." The final image showing one side of the Dragon hovered on the projector. Tor unplugged the datapad.

"The co-ordinates of the Dragon have been uploaded onto your system. A fast, heavily shielded ship could potentially make a brief excursion into the sector to see if there's anything worth recovering. Just tell the pilot to stay out of range of the capital ships." Tor stepped away.

"This doesn't make a lot of sense. Why would the Khaak drag Kyle's ship to their own sector?" Elena asked.

"I have no idea." Tor looked around at the others, as ideas formed in the back of his mind. But he felt none of his suggestions would be well received. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go find a friend that might be in trouble."

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"I'm sure by now you know I rescued Nyeshta from the pirate station, maybe that I even let her tag along with me to the silicon mine. Perhaps even that I gave her a new identity, so that she could take on a new life and live a decent, honest one." Tor paused, without serious provocation he felt a searing flame of anger rising inside him. "I stood before Creed to keep her alive. Now why couldn't you just leave her alone?"

Caran was taken aback, Tor, even with his broken hand, exuded extreme animosity. Tris stared silently at Tor, even she felt the anger.

"As much as I am glad you confessed all that, I have to tell you the use of bounty hunters has nothing to do with me. I stopped trying to find her after you disappeared, not that I hadn't already worked out where she might be. Nevertheless it's not in my power to keep her alive should anyone else discover her." Caran took a deep breath and adopted an equally aggressive stance.

Tor studied Caran for a few moments and then relaxed.

"You're a man of your word Caran. Of that I have no doubt. And I'd like to think you're not lying to me."

"You really don't want my help do you?"

"I am what I am and where I am because of you. Until I met you, life was interesting but never violent. Ever since I met you, I've been hunted, blown up, poisoned, shot at, stabbed, been incarcerated and studied like a lab rat for nearly half a jazura, and that doesn't include the numerous near death events I've experienced." Tor was on for a full rant.

"The remarkable thing Mr. Grall, is you always survive and you don't give up. I like that in a person, and finding good field agents with such talent is such a difficult task."

"I am not one of your field agents." Tor spoke slowly.

"No Mr. Grall you're not. If you were I'd owe you a jazuras back pay." Caran relaxed with a casual smile. "It is amazing what the last jazura has done with your confidence. And as I scanned through your medical updates I'm pleased to see that this isn't just an act of bravado. By all accounts you could do me some real damage, even with only one good hand. However I also note your escape from death is merely postponed."

"What do you mean?"

"The doctor didn't tell you?" Caran looked surprised.

"Tell me what?"

"Hmm, although the rest of you is considerably stronger than before, your heart is degenerating. Looking at this you've got two jazuras, maybe slightly longer." An uneasy silence fell in the cabin.

"I had supposed that this was the reason for your disinterest in being officially recognised as alive. It appears that I was wrong."

"Having a heart transplant isn't beyond the medical sciences. It's a simple operation these days." Tris put an optimistic view on Tor's new found knowledge.

"Yes, a very simple process these days for a normal person. But Tor's DNA doesn't match his physical being. His heart is human by design, but his genetics is Mohrabas. Swapping his heart for a human one would be rejected, and according to the medical report a Mohrabas one won't fit."

"Are we nearly there yet?" Tor glanced out of the window, his mood subdued.

The Colossus was an impressive sight, as the shuttle passed along its length to reach the docking bay. The giant ship gradually came to rest as they turned to make the final approach.

A young officer met them at the dockside.

"Agent Belign, I have been given instructions to escort you and your companions to the Admirals briefing room. If you would follow me."

Caran gestured for the officer to lead the way. He then motioned for both Tor and Tris to go ahead of him. They wandered for ten mizuras along busy corridors before they reached Ban Danna's office.

The officer turned to face them, "I'll wait here to escort you back."

Caran stepped forwards, "Follow me." He approached the door and touched the scanner pad. A moment later the door opened and he stepped inside.

"Ah, Caran. Glad you're here. I believe you've met Elena Kho, and this must be Tor Grall. Welcome on board." Ban cast a curious glance at Tris.

"Private Tris Matayah, she was with Tor on the return journey." Caran answered the unspoken question.

Tor took a few moments to study Ban and Elena as he tried to establish what interest these two people had in a missing corvette. There was an apprehensive tension in both Ban and Elena.

"As I understand it, you had quite an adventure on your return home. It must feel good to be back?" Elena asked conversationally.

"A story worthy of a few hours in the retelling." Tor smiled, "But I don't think I have your skill to put the words into print."

"What makes you say that?"

"I had the good fortune to find we had a copy of Farnham's Legacy in our archives. Masterfully written if I may say so." Memories on the content of the book fell into place. "But to answer your question, people think I'm dead and are trying to sell what was mine. I have returned to nothing and where I've just come from, I was someone. Is it good to be back? Not really."

"Come now Tor, that's a very bleak picture. As I understand it the Bakery hasn't been sold just yet, and I'm sure we can prevent that from taking place now you're here. Certainly long enough to correct the official records and re-instate ownership." Ban gave a warm smile.

"Now I expect you want to know about the corvette we spotted on our travels." Tor cut to the chase, as he was feeling tired and in need of rest.

"Anything you can tell us about it would be invaluable." Elena moved forward a few steps, concern etched on to her face.

Tor glanced around and approached Ban Danna's desk. He found a data port for his datapad and plugged it in. Tapping through the archive he found the flight data for the Khaak sector and sent it to the holo-projector.

"Nyana's Fortune is five light years from the Khaak sector. It has a heavy defence force consisting of heavy fighters, scouts and interceptor class ships, which you've already encountered. It also has a number of capital class ships, which so far you haven't seen." Tor showed each of the ships in turn. "The destroyer class is not to be trifled with, the weapons range is awesome and powerful

enough to reduce a Titan class ship to scrap metal in a few sezuras. And that's where your friend is." Tor was thoughtful for a few moments as he looked at the others. The tension had returned in the face of Elena.

"The Dragon showed no signs of residual power. Although we weren't close enough to get a complete picture of what happened to the ship, it looked as though the Khaak had spent some time carving it up. This image is at maximum magnification. Soon after the Khaak took a special interest in trying to prevent us from getting away and we were forced to jump." The final image showing one side of the Dragon hovered on the projector. Tor unplugged the datapad.

"The co-ordinates of the Dragon have been uploaded onto your system. A fast, heavily shielded ship could potentially make a brief excursion into the sector to see if there's anything worth recovering. Just tell the pilot to stay out of range of the capital ships." Tor stepped away.

"This doesn't make a lot of sense. Why would the Khaak drag Kyle's ship to their own sector?" Elena asked.

"I have no idea." Tor looked around at the others, as ideas formed in the back of his mind. But he felt none of his suggestions would be well received. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go find a friend that might be in trouble."

"Before you leave Tor. You will need one these." Ban stepped up to him holding a credit chip and a genetic encoder. "All your credit details will have been archived by now. This card will enable you to earn and spend credits, all it needs is for you to place your hand on the encoder for security."

Tor did as requested. Ban turned towards Caran.

"As I understand it Tor has no living immediate next of kin, so Caran I need you to act as the government official confirming Tor's identity and suitability to carry a card."

Caran gave Tor a thoughtful look before it turned into a wry smile and he had his hand scanned.

"Credit account now active." The scanner pad announced, and Ban handed Tor the card.

"Consider this the first step towards, official recognition." The head of the secret service turned. "Tris, I don't have a card here for you, but we'll have one ready to be issued before the end of the tazura. Again you will need to have additional authentication from a close family member. Mother or father is preferable, alternatively a brother or sister would also be acceptable." He gave her a reassuring if slightly apologetic smile.

"I'll chase that one up." Caran commented. "And Tris, have a think about what your future plans are. The Argon Navy still has a need for good pilots, particularly now."

"Something in the officer ranks would sound better."

"I'll see what's available."

"I hate to be pressing, but have we finished?" Tor was anxious to leave.

"I think we've covered everything. And it was a pleasure meeting both of you." Ban smiled.

"I hope you reach your friend in time." Elena said. Tor turned and gave her warm smile.

"I hope so too, if only for the bounty hunters sake." He started to turn back towards the door but stopped. "And for what it's worth, from what I've read, Kyle strikes me as a bit of a survivor. I'm sure you'll find him alive and well."

She smiled.

"Until we have the opportunity to meet again, Tor."

"Hopefully in happier times. And I'll buy the first round of drinks."

"Only the first round?"

"At this moment in time I'd need a sub just for that. So I wouldn't rush to take me up on the offer."

Tris gave a polite cough. Tor turned to look at her, and with a slight shrug he moved towards the door.

Caran had a wry smile on his face, as he turned to Ban.

"I'll forward you a full report when I return to station, Sir."

"An interesting young man. I think I'd like to review his file in detail."

"I think the most interesting part is yet to be filed, Sir. After all he's discovered a new species, he's fought his way across a number of Khaak infested sectors to get home, and dealt with the Venom Master. All in the last jazura, Sir."

"He inferred that a bounty hunter is after his friend. I would appreciate it if you could include those details in the report. But before anything else, you'd best get them back to their station."

"Sir." Caran gave a slight bow of the head to Elena and followed Tor out of the room. The young officer led them back to the transport. He was a little subdued on the return journey as he contemplated how he would mention that Tor's friend was none other than Nyeshta, the woman that stole the blue prints of the X-shuttle several jazuras earlier. And because of this, he knew she figured highly on Ban Danna's most wanted list. Only the Paranid had not acquiesced to her extradition if captured. As they reached the station he turned to Tor.

"A piece of advice. When you find your friend, take her with you back to the Mohrabas. She's not good news and being associated with her won't win you many new friends."

"Are you telling me to harbour a criminal?" Tor looked bemused.

"Only if she means something to you. And that's me getting sentimental in my old age. Otherwise do yourself a favour and turn her in."

"For a moment there I thought you believed that everyone deserves a second chance."

"Why would I believe that when it gives me the opportunity to manipulate them?" Caran smiled. "Some people are given a second chance, but it's not a luxury that will be afforded to your friend. No, her name's already engraved on a tomb stone in a penal colony's ore mine."

Tor glanced over to Tris. She turned her face away from him to look out of the window.

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Nyeshta saw the Nova long before it came into weapons range. The freighter was just behind her as they made the next trading run through Empires Edge. The fighter drew closer on an intercept vector.

"Nova pilot, your flight path will infringe on ours. Adjust your flight path accordingly." Nyeshta recognised the voice as that of the transport pilot.

There was no response. She tapped up the ships ID to see who the pilot was. The name Terrack Longrum appeared on the HUD, the occupation of Bounty Hunter was listed just below.

Green plasma streaked towards her as the comm opened.

"This is Terrack Longrum, working on behalf of the Argon police. One of your pilots is a violent criminal and I am authorised to use lethal force against her. Do not interfere."

Nyeshta hit the boost with a smile, knowing the Perseus would easily out run the Nova. Her shields plummeted as a crackling white lightning storm enveloped the ship.

"Shields critical." The switch to Ion Disruptors took her by surprise and she knew her only option was to run.

"Boost extension damaged."

She made only slight adjustments to her flight path, fearing that one Beta High Energy Plasma Thrower would be brought on line to rip the hull apart before she could reach safe distance.

"Rudder optimisation damaged." She could smell and taste the acrid fumes of fire suppressant tainting the air.

"Target out of firing range."

Nyeshta heaved a sigh of relief as she sped across the sector to the next gate. Glancing down at the flight deck she located the corporate transponder, and with a well placed kick smashed it from its mounting. Satisfied that no one she worked with could now locate her, she tried to plan her next course of action.

\*\*

"Don't I mean anything to you?" Tor was thunder struck by Tris's words. They were back in his office when she had turned on him.

"Is it so easy to make you jealous?" Had not been the right response and Tor felt kneeling down and pleading for forgiveness might just lead to violence against him.

One thing he had noticed were the two bottles of space fuel standing on the counter. His curiosity got the better of him and as he approached he noted they were thirty year old single malts. He took a deep breath and as Tris continued to shout at him he said aloud.

"So when did you get back?"

"Are you listening to me?" Tris yelled at him.

"A lot sooner than you did." The voice was quiet, and yet cut through the air without apparent effort.

Tor turned to see Tris open mouthed and staring at Creed.

"But don't let me stop you Tris, I was rather enjoying the show."

Tor held up his hand.

"If I might get a word in edge ways. Tris, I love you. I can't find the words to say how much, but I've got to let you have your own life without me." Tor fought against the rising emotions that threatened to consume him. "Time is against me. You heard Caran, I have two jazuras left, and if I'm lucky slightly longer. In that time I'm going to be fighting a war against the Khaak. What time do you honestly think is going to be left for us?"

"You don't have to go back."

"I gave them my word and they believe in me. What would I be if I betrayed that trust now?"

"You could make them understand." Tears rolled down her face. Tor walked over to her and he enveloped her in his arms.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good time to visit." Creed rose from the seat.

"Stay for a while, I need to talk to you." Tor glanced towards him, "Open a bottle, I'll be back in a short while." Tor winced as he swept Tris off her feet and carried her to the adjoining rooms.

A short while later he returned and picked up a glass.

"How's the hand?"

"Broken and now hurts like hell."

"Try picking up the glass with the other hand."

"Thanks for the reminder."

Creed smiled as Tor sat down on the leather sofa and let out a deep sigh, he could see a moist sheen over Tor's eyes.

"Well I know you're glad to see me, but there's no need to come over all emotional."

Tor shook his head and smiled.

"And how many women have you said that to?"

"Enough." Creed laughed.

"Between you and me, I won't mention you said it to me as well."

Creed laughed slightly louder. Tor looked up at the ceiling.

"My friend, I've become more like you than you could possibly image. And it scares the shit out of me."

Creed's smile faded and he nodded.

"The curse of two bloods."

"Serandamancketal told you?"

"Yes. They say you're stronger too."

"If we were to have a fight now, I think I might surprise you."

"Strength is nothing without speed and agility." Creed took a few moments to study Tor.

"I think they've improved a bit." Tor had a wry smile on his face.

"Care to prove it?"

"I have a broken hand." He held up the plastic cast.

"And that makes you slow?"



## *Chapter 12*

The Teladi Osprey gradually slowed to a halt, before launching its light scout ship. The Bat targeted the Bakery and engaged engines to come around in a lazy arc while requesting docking permission.

There was a momentary delay before the lights changed to green and the outer doors separated.

Creed watched Tor and waited for his next move. His opponent was conservative in his actions, expending only as much energy as was necessary to stay upright. Making his senses determine when the moment to strike would be, rather than using fancy footwork and false moves to draw him forward.

He moved in ducking down, and pirouetted round with a low kick aimed at the shins. Tor blocked and brought his left hand down swiftly but, met only air. The palm of Creeds hand swept up towards Tor's chin. Tor rolled his head back and then dropped down before springing to the side.

His left hand lashed out, Creed deflected the arm and struck Tor in the chest. Tor caught his wrist and jerked him forward. Letting go, the back of his hand shot towards Creeds face. The Mercenary blocked the blow and kicked the back of Tor's right knee causing him to fall.

Tor awkwardly picked himself up off the floor, this was his third unsuccessful bout. Creed did not hit him hard and yet Tor could feel the bruises rising on his ribs.

His only consolation was that Creed had, once or twice distinctly looked uncomfortable and, although the mercenary had not gone down, he had managed to land a couple of glancing blows.

"A vast improvement on last time. I might even consider you dangerous if you had the use of both hands."

"I'm faster and stronger than I've ever been in my life and I still lost."

"Your mind was pre-occupied with protecting your hand. It left you off balance and unable to put up an adequate defence to protect the rest of you. On a positive note, you were right, your speed and agility has improved. It needed to, just to make up for your lack of skill in reading my next attack. With training you could do well."

"Are you offering?"

"No. You might just become better than me, and then I'd have to kill you." Creed smiled as he sat down.

"Well, at least this time I managed to land a blow on you." Tor moved to the bar and poured a glass of water.

"I'm thankful I didn't get to feel the full force of it. Get me a juice while you're there."

Tor poured a glass and carried it over, then returned to retrieve his own. He glanced at his time piece and shook his head. Aware that the friendly bouts with Creed had consumed a considerable amount of time.

"I need to find Nyeshta before the bounty hunters get to her. It shouldn't take long and you are welcome to stay until I get back. Besides I'd like to know what happened in the Xenon sector."

Creed sipped his drink and looked thoughtfully at Tor.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I know you don't like her, but it's the right thing to do."

"Why?"

The question had a bluntness that, for a few moments, had Tor lost for words.

"I gave my word that she'd be safe. So I wouldn't feel right abandoning her without doing something to help."

"I like your sense of loyalty, even if it is misplaced. If I understood your intent earlier, you just abandoned Tris to an uncertain future, and thought little about how she would feel when you did it. What makes Nyeshta so different?"

"Don't bring her into this, Tris has her whole life in front of her.."

"And so does Nyeshta. Only hers might be prematurely terminated. Now answer the question, what is she to you, that you're so willing to go out on a limb to protect her?"

"I consider her a friend, and I don't abandon my friends to premature termination, not if it's in my power to help."

"An admirable quality. I fortunately make enemies far easier than friends and I find they're much easier to deal with." Creed finished his drink and put the glass on the table.

"Yeah, if I remember rightly, most of your enemies are dead. And the rest live in perpetual fear."

"The rest? Strangely enough when they believed I was dead they started to surface again. It was only fair to point out to them, personally, that my demise had been vastly over exaggerated." Creed stood up.

"Hang on a sezura, did you stage your disappearance?"

"I simply turned an unfortunate situation to my advantage. Something you may want to think about in the tazuras ahead. My personal opinion is that you shouldn't go after her. But if you do go, remember neither I, nor the guild can help you if you get in to trouble." Creed moved towards the door. "We'll need to talk business in the very near future. So I'll be in touch."

"Bilyzonus is here to see you." Corricel announced.

"Corri, transport me back to my ship. Until next time, Tor." The mercenary disappeared.

Tor shook his head, as he wondered if he would find the time to go anywhere with a string of old friends dropping by.

The door opened and she stepped in. Her clothes a deep rich hue of emerald green that shimmered with fine silver threads. The crest on her head rose and changed to crimson when she saw him, and a wide smile spread swiftly across the reptilian face.

"Welcome back, Tor. Profitable trip?"

"It could prove to have had some value. And how is business?"

"Profitss are good. I have recently been elevated to the statusss of Shipping Magnate amongsst the businesss community."

"That's good. And I'm glad you're here as I was hoping to have a chat with you. I need to locate one of the escort pilots for the remote traders."

"Perhapsss, thisss pilot." She held out her datapad and Tor quickly stepped forward to take it. His eyes scanned over the transport pilots report and scrolled quickly back to check the time stamp.

"Yes, this is the one." He felt a sense of relief that the report ended with the Perseus successfully leaving the sector.

"You knew she was a criminal?" Her voice held a hint of apprehension, and the scale plate returned to its normal position, the colour faded back to aquamarine.

"Yes, I knew." Tor answered after a few moments of internal debate whether he should tell the truth. He knew his conscience would bother him if he lied, particularly to Bilyzonus.

"Tsk, Tsk, thiss isss not good. Questionsss will be asked." She paused for a few moments, "Fortunately she worked hard and protected profitsss well. I think a sssmall contribution to the Teladi Company will sssmooth out thiss unfortunat misjudgment." Bilyzonus gave a slight nod of her head, "I will sssee to it our trading rightsss are not affected."

"Do what you can. I plan on finding her and leaving these sectors as soon as possible."

The Teladi looked at him with an expression of intense curiosity.

"And your creditsss? Thiss station?"

"Agent Caran Belign is here with Sector Governor Matrew Klorphen." Corricel announced and the door slid open. They stepped in to the room.

"Glad to see you're in, Tor." Caran smiled. Tor was anything but pleased at this new arrival. "May I introduce you to Governor Klorphen."

"So you're Mr. Tor Grall?" The Governor stepped forward and reached out. Tor noticed that it was not to shake hands as he held a bio-scanner.

"I think you'll find everything in order, Governor." Caran commented.

The Governor spent a few moments looking at the scan results and then looked up at Tor with a broad smile.

"So it would appear. Welcome home Mr. Grall. This should just be a brief visit, so that I can get the records updated with the correct authentication."

Tor spent nearly thirty mizuras as Matrew gave a brief overview of each document that Tor had to provide a palm and retinal scan for. He began to wonder if it would ever end and why a single scan was not sufficient for all documents.

"And finally Mr. Grall, all I need is scans for the station ownership document."

Tor allowed the scanner to take another set of readings before glancing around the room.

"And that concludes our business. I hope we get the opportunity to meet again, and I wish you all the best for the future." The Governor turned and left.

"I take it that's your Osprey parked out front?" Caran glanced over to Bilyzonus, and he wondered how much Tor had mentioned about his future plans.

She gestured in the affirmative and he gave her an appreciative nod.

"Tor, now the station is yours again. I suggest, if you're really serious with your plans, you should sign over ownership to someone that you can trust, immediately, but isn't a member of the War Master Guild."

Tor thought for a moment.

"Okay."

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"Entering system Trinity Sanctum."

Nyeshta, happy her pursuer was some distance behind, targeted the Equipment Dock nestled within a group of small asteroids. She needed time to repair the damaged modules and determine her best course of action.

With her current credit chip she was traceable and if she used it, it would not take long before more bounty hunters closed in.

The Perseus glided safely in to the station and she quickly interfaced with the trading computer to order new parts. Her finger hovered over the Beta Phased Shockwave Generators, they were high end military weapons that had somehow been left on the list. Her credit balance would comfortably cover the cost of both units on offer, but she hesitated knowing that any field effect weapon could easily turn a minor skirmish in to a full battle involving sector patrol forces.

Memories of the Ion Disruptors returned to her so she confirmed the order.

"Order denied, you have insufficient security clearance to purchase this weapon."

"Oh brilliant, you can look but you can't buy." She muttered in annoyance, and scrolled down the list ordering replacement units and spares.

Switching the HUD to the galaxy map, Nyeshta recognised she was three jumps away from the uncontrolled sector of Split Fire. A few jazura ago she would not have thought twice about making a run for it, but she was aware the use of bounty hunters was turning many of the undesignated sectors bordering the race controlled systems in to shooting galleries.

Her eyes paused on the name Nopileo's Memorial and she wondered if Clegan still ran his ragged band of pirates in the ancient station. It occurred to her this was distinct possibility and could once again provide her with a safe haven.

Over the same distance she could reach The Wall and try to hide amongst the 'enemy' in Tor's Bakery. But that assumed Tor was willing to harbour a criminal and risk everything doing so. She shook her head, and looked briefly at the alternatives, knowing all other routes led through a combination of other race controlled space.

If she was detected even once, the message would pass on, with the exception of the Boron to the Split and visa versa.

She considered the alternative of giving up the Perseus, and buying a fully equipped and tuned Pegasus. The small ship would outpace everything, and even the bounty hunters would be lucky to get off a shot before the ship was out of range.

Changing to the sector map she checked on ship availability at the shipyards. Every option for every ship was available so she scrolled down the and paused with the cursor over the Nemesis.

"Your security clearance is insufficient to purchase this vessel."

Nyeshta wondered what she was authorised to buy and highlighted a fully equipped Perseus.

"Your security clearance is insufficient to purchase this vessel."

She smirked at the thought she was not allowed to buy a ship identical to the one she flew, and in that instance realized her association with the trading organisation, run by Bilyzonus, had been severed. Now she was truly alone.

\*\*

Feran "Bloodheart" t'Gnht gazed at the shimmering nova that shrouded the remains of the ancient earth gate, and took his time to consider the news that the leader of the Shadow Troop had increased the price of the Androti spaceweed.

A shot of Setardize had calmed him enough for his security to drag the bloodied body of the pilot away. Cleaning droids worked swiftly to wipe away the blood spatters that showered the walls and floor.

"My Lord." Ganark interrupted his quiet time.

Feran ignored him to watch a Khaak cluster break up and, with consummate ease, reduce a hapless transport to vapour. He could not help but admire their ruthless efficiency. Even though the station was surrounded by laser towers they would still lose one or two when one of the heavy fighters attacked. As he watched two towers turned to track the enemy craft.

"My Lord."

"This had better be important." Feran spoke slowly.

"There is news that Tor Grall is back." Ganark stepped cautiously back while keeping his eyes firmly on Feran.

A smile grew slowly on Feran's face, he felt amused and wondered what it must be like to laugh.

"And did he get a hero's welcome?"

"Not that I am aware, my Lord."

"The Argon so often speak of justice, yet they fail to honour one of their own, where is the justice in that?"

"I do not know, my Lord." Ganark was now painfully aware that Feran was talking about 'justice' mizuras after ripping a pilot apart for delivering a message. The thought disturbed him.

"Tor Grall is alive, which means the Venom Master failed. The prey has killed the hunter. Interesting." Feran turned from the observation window and looked calmly at Ganark, "The Shadow Troop is irritating me, take over their station. Spare only those that can be of use."

"It will take a few tazuras to organise, my Lord."

"Don't bother me with the details. But make sure you bring me their leader alive." Feran glowered at his second in command before turning away to gaze out of the window.

\*\*

Korecmancketras caught up with Tor as he made his way down to the Defiance.

"By all that is holy, is it true you're in charge again?"

"For all of five mizuras, but don't worry my friend, the station now belongs to Tris. Only she doesn't know, and I've asked no one to tell her. Bilyzonus has put four million credits in the station's accounts. So, as you're still the Station Commander, get this place working and make us all proud. Not that I can order you to do anything anymore." Tor smiled.

"So what will you do now?"

"I mean to find Nye, and take her back to the Mohrabas sector. It's the safest place I can think of."

"Give me a few mizuras to get things sorted out, and I will accompany you to the War Master Guild. We need to talk to my brother."

Tor did not move for a few moments as he considered the Paranid's words.

"Okay, but don't expect me to like you if I reach her mizuras too late."

"Don't think I'll like me that much either, if that turns out to be the future." The Paranid smiled.

"Go sort this place out, Korec. Just don't take too long." Tor returned to his office and looked at the two whisky cases.

"Tor?" Corricel said.

"Yes."

"Do you really know what you are doing?"

"Hopefully the right thing." Tor opened the first case and looked at the, already opened, twenty eight thousand credit bottle of rare single malt. Then at his former office and took a deep breath. All the time the thought returned to him that he should be getting on with it, and not idly waiting.

He looked down at his injured hand, the swelling had already started to reduce, and he hoped none of his recent activities would have slowed the healing time. His mind wandered and he considered the irony of giving the woman he loved everything he had, for a woman with no future and only the vaguest hopes of keeping alive.

"I think you are troubled." Corricel said quietly.

"I'm trying not to think about it." He mentally tried to shake away the mental images forming in his mind.

"That is not exactly a conducive way of overcoming the problem."

"I'm hoping the longer I ignore it, the more likely it is to go away."

"Somehow I doubt that will work."

"Okay, I'm starting to wonder if there's ever going to be a happy ever after?" Tor commented after a brief silence.

"If this was a story then I would say 'yes'. But in reality I fail to see a happy ending."

Pulling the stopper he allowed the fumes to assail his senses and poured a glass. Taking the glass he walked over to the door that led to the adjoining rooms. Tris slept quietly beneath the sheets, and Tor watched for a while before returning to the office.

"Well if you've got any more tricks then I'd like to know about them?" Tor took a sip of the whisky and let the flavour imbue itself on his taste buds, before driving its warming effects down to his toes.

"You have seen everything now."

Tor sat down and closed his eyes, fatigue finally caught up with him. Until Korecmancketras shook him awake a full stazura later.

"Ready?"

"How long was I out?" Tor tried to wipe the sleep from his eyes.

"Long enough to feel some benefit from the rest."

Standing up, Tor stretched and then scratched the fine stubble around his chin.

"Let's go. And you can give me an update on what's happened since I fell asleep."

"I could do that, but I don't work for you any more, remember?" The Paranid gave a low rumbling laugh.

"That's right, you don't old friend. Now we've sorted that out, what's happened since I went to sleep?" Tor walked towards the door and the Paranid fell into step beside him.

"Plenty. Transports are bringing in new supplies, and we are looking for new employees. If you want a job, I'm sure we can find a place for you in the maintenance section?" Korecmancketras smiled.

"A step up in the grand scheme of things. Only, I don't think I could cope with the responsibilities." Tor smiled. "Any news on our mutual friend?"

The office door opened, and they progressed towards the shuttle lift.

"My brother has some news, but he would not divulge it over the comm."

Nyeshta had sent the Perseus into safe storage on the Paranid Shipyard in Trinity Sanctum before catching a transport to the trading station. Here she changed her hair colour to auburn, put in coloured contact lenses and changed her clothes. The pirate network could be found anywhere, if you knew where to look and who to ask for.

Certain code phrases and seemingly benign requests would open doors in to the network. And here she hoped she would find a new credit chip and with it, a new identity. So far, she had drawn a blank. The normal attitude of the Paranid was hostile, particularly on their own ground, and to be seen communicating to an infidel was deemed degrading.

Standing at the bar she lifted her drink and turned to see if there was a spare seat. Hoping to find a discreet viewing position her eyes took in the mix of faces. From a group of Teladi traders arguing over the price of Nostrop and haggling over a consignment of sunflowers, to a pair of Split mercenaries arm wrestling to determine who would by the next round. Typically pirate contacts generally drank with one other person and were more intent on watching the bar than making small talk. No one matched what she was looking for.

A gangling Paranid youth stepped up to the bar beside her and tapped it twice. She glanced across and took a casual sip of her drink, wondering if it had just been a co-incidence. Behind her, she heard the barman take the youths order. From the brief conversation, the barman was either unable or unwilling to serve the youth.

Nyeshta placed her glass on the bar, and for a few measured sezuras returned to watching the bar, before picking up her glass again.

The youth finished talking with the barman and tapped the bar twice more before leaving. She watched him, as he progressed along the walkway, and then lost sight of him when he went into a shop. Finding a seat Nyeshta wandered across, knowing that she needed to wait fifteen mizuras before leaving.

The time dragged as she sipped her drink quietly and avoided making eye contact with anyone. Eventually she left and ambled along the walkway looking into the shop windows at the various assortment of Paranid clothing accessories, as well as the embossed and gilded books. The Paranid held great store in the availability of the scribed word, Nyeshta reflected that it would give them something to read if the power failed, providing they were on the sunny side of the station.

The store she spied the youth entering earlier carried the banner, 'Brotimancketas Artifacts' The window displays were hermetically sealed cabinets containing a variety of ancient parchments, pottery and stone or wood carvings.

Stepping up to the door it slid open and she entered to find it was full of low display cabinets set in two rows, down the length of the small shop and along all the walls.

Three Paranid were in the shop, none of them was the youth she had seen earlier, and the shop keeper refused to acknowledge her presence while in the company of the other two. She wandered round, and tapped twice on one of the glass surface of one of the display cases as she made a play of studying the artifacts. It was met without response and she began to wonder if she had come to the right place.

"Foul creature that offends the eyes of the three dimensionality, it is only with the divine instruction of his holiness the Pontifex that forces me to recognise your presence in this holy place. You will sully nothing with your touch. And I will deal with you once I have finished seeing to my righteous customers." Nyeshta saw the hand wave disdainfully at her, two fingers bent over, indicating that she was indeed in the right place.

The two customers never once turned to look at her, and left having purchased an ancient wood carving that claimed to have been uncovered on the homeworld of Cardinal's Domain, they left.

"Go through." The Paranid shop keeper signaled to a door that led to the store room.

It was with a slight sense of apprehension that she moved into the room beyond. Nyeshta noted that it was similar in layout to the showroom but with taller display units that reached to the ceiling, atmospheric conditioners hummed in the background, and the lighting was dimmed to a level believed safe for some of the more fragile artifacts. Those considered very light sensitive were stored in covered cases. Her eyes adjusted to the half light as the door closed behind her.

The shop keeper remained outside and her heart beat quickened with the sense of being watched. A dark figure moved out of the gloom and signaled her to move closer. The Paranid studied her for a few long moments in silence then moved towards the goods delivery door situated right at the back of the room. Next to which was a small enclosed office, the door opened to reveal a desk, terminal and two stools, otherwise it was unfurnished.

Nyeshta noted the Paranid wore maintenance crew fatigues indicating that he did not work for the shop.

"You are looking for something?" The tone was unfriendly.

"Perhaps, but how do I know if I can trust you?"

The Paranid made the gesture of 'false hope'. Nyeshta responded with the sign of 'shattered dreams'. Almost instantly the Paranid signed 'the test of three' and Nyeshta answered 'with one to go'. The Paranid gave a slow nod and gestured, 'the true heart' and Nyeshta faltered as she tried to remember if it was the 'steady hand' or 'keen eye' symbol that should follow.

The Paranid's eyes narrowed and her heart beat faster, if she was wrong then she would die. There would be no half measures when trying to gain access to the pirate network. Then she remember that the sign of the 'strong heart' was followed by the 'steady hand'. She gestured the 'keen eye' and the Paranid sat back.

"What is it you need?"

"A new credit chip, with level five access to station trading."

The Paranid sat back and considered the request.

"The credit chip, yes. I can supply one within the stazura. But it will cost you ten thousand credits. Can you afford to pay?"

"Yes, the credits need to be transferred from this chip to the new one." She held up the card. As the Paranid reached forwards she moved the card out of reach. "No, you get the new chip ready, and I'll handle the transfer. Then you get paid."

"To get level five access, you will need to talk to, someone I know. He charges fifty thousand credits, do you have enough for that?"

Nyeshta nodded.

"Be certain that you do, when the card is ready I will be in contact. Just be in the Travellers Bar in one stazura." He gestured for her to leave.



She left the office and wandered cautiously between the rows of artifacts. As she neared the door it slid open. The light hurt her eyes and she squinted as she re-entered the main area of the shop. Blinking for a few moments she looked around. Only the shop keeper was present and he continued to ignore her.

With a stazura to wait she needed to keep a low profile, her last credit transaction would be traced, so it was just a question of time.

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Tor stepped off the Defiance and casually looked around. Korecmancketras strode towards the shuttle lifts at the end of the platform and he followed at his own pace. It had been some time since he last set foot on the Shield Production Factory and from what he could tell, nothing had changed.

His companion waited patiently for him to catch up before taking the lift and wandering the station corridors to reach Serandamancketal's office.

Korecmancketras used the access panel to announce their presence and the door opened.

Tor stepped in first and noted the spartan level of decor around the room. Serandamancketal was already walking towards them.

"Welcome. And take a seat."

"Thanks. Korec tells me you have some information on the whereabouts of Nye?"

Serandamancketal gave a brief nod.

"Yes. Her last traced movement was in Trinity Sanctum, but she has put her Perseus in to storage dock at the shipyard. This means she's gone to ground, we will have to wait until there is a positive sighting, or the Argon Police release locations of credit transactions."

"How can we find that information?"

"Only registered bounty hunters who have been authorised to fulfill the contract get that data." Serandamancketal moved back towards his desk. "However credit transactions made in Paranid space can take anything up to a stazura before they're updated at the Central Argon Credit Bank."

"So I'll always be a stazura behind. That's not very helpful." Tor muted.

"Chances are, in the stazura after her last credit payment she will have made contact with the pirate network and have a new credit chip. These are almost impossible to trace as they run through several credit transfer agents, so a payment made here for example could be shown as being made in Thuruck's Beard." The mercenary sat down.

"Great so how do I find her?"

"We have contacts amongst the pirate clans, as soon as we know something I'll pass the information on. Just be prepared to move quickly."

"The Defiance can do that. Anyway I thought your people weren't going to help me?"

"Define help. We can do nothing if either of you get caught up in a fight. But passing on information, as it becomes available, isn't deemed to be helping because of the time it takes to reach us, and then you." Serandamancketal smiled.

"That's not much of a consolation if she's fighting for her life at the time someone transmits the message, and by the time it reaches me all I'll find is the residue."

"Space is a big place, and messages take time to reach their destination. We cannot change the laws of physics and the three dimensionality to be convenient to us." Serandamancketal gave a

reassuring smile, "We will tell you what we can, when we can. That is as much as anyone can do. And we have ideas where she might head to."

## *Chapter 13*

Nyeshta had been cautious for the full stazura as she paced around the station, returning to the bar five mizuras before the meeting. The bar was less occupied than before and she found a suitable table to observe the bar while ordering drinks. The rich scent of Paranid cigar smoke drifted across the room as she glanced around to see if her contact was already present.

She doubted that the Paranid she met earlier would be the one to hand over the new card, and anticipated that the contact would belong to one of the other races. A young argon pilot strolled in, she watched him as he ordered a drink and then looked for somewhere to sit. For his sake, if he was not the contact, she hoped he was not one of the bold type that, when seeing a woman sat alone would have the insatiable urge to be friendly.

Two Teladi wandered in, one jabbering on about the supply of Ore and its over inflated price on the local markets. The other scanned the room and gestured for them to sit at the table next to her. The hand signal made it clear that he was her contact.

She stood up to greet them.

"Glad you could make it."

"Much profit to you. Our mutual friend told usss you were looking to make an investsment."

"Just a small credit transfer." Nyeshta nodded and sat down again as the Teladi settled themselves.

They did not introduce themselves.

"And how many creditsss will you be investing."

"Just a small sum for now."

The Teladi nodded and handed over what in essence looked like a trading-pad. To the side, there were two slots for credit chips and one was already occupied. Slotting in her own card brought up her credit balance and a list of keypad instructions.

She authorised the transfer of two million credits with a retina and bio scan. She knew that both scans would also have been imprinted onto the new cards security chip. Removing her old card she returned the pad.

"Investsment in Shipyardsss, hasss proven very profitable with the arrival of the Khaak. And if you've not heard there iss a rumour that the Bloodheartsss have somehow obtained a Python from the Njy." The talkative one babbled on cheerfully.

"What about investment in the Teladianium sector?" Nyeshta glanced across. As the quiet Teladi inserted his own card and keyed in the credit deduction.

"The market has soared in recent tazuras, but the feeling is that it has nearly peaked. Production is currently being choked by a lack of ore driving the price up. However the ore markets have become quite volatile holding down the profit margins of the biggest Teladianium producers."

"What's the problem with ore output?" Nyeshta looked suitably interested as she took hold of the trading-pad and authorised the agreed credit payment.

"The free minesss are complaining about working conditionsss and a spate of strikesss hasss crippled Argon output, this hasss had a knock on effect acrosss the sectorsss. And with rumoursss that many of the older Paranid controlled factoriesss have nearly been mined out hasss been matched with a reduced yield. Some investorsss believe this is a marketing ploy by the Paranid to increase credit revenesss by driving up the price due to scarcitiesss within the marketsss. We are searching for new sourcesss of mineral rich asteroidsss to compensate."

"I hear the market for Energy Cells is reasonably bouyant?" She removed the new credit chip card and handed the pad back.

"A number of sectorsss have complained of a general shortage, especially in the current climate. Transportation costsss have soared and many factoryesss look to independant suppliersss for out of sector transportation." The Teladi sighed, "Colleague Tarraganos Tetornenis Bilyzonus the Second looksss to have established a niche businesss, however the company is not yet ready to float its shares on the market. Despite some small pressure from the CEO to do so. Apparently there isss an Argon partner in the venture who is unwilling to float the businesss on the open market." The Teladi shook her head slowly, "There isss much profit that could be earned there."

"I'm sure there is." Nyeshta smiled.

"Time is profit." The quiet Teladi spoke quietly, "You need to head for Parrafinatica in Dukes Domain. Ask the barman in the Kraktar Bar on the Trading Station for the Paranid Oolastamanckaja."

"Good profit to you." The chatty Teladi commented as they stood up and wandered out of the bar.

Nyeshta frowned as she came to terms with having to go planet side. The Paranid did not welcome casual visitors unless they were accompanied by one of their own. She considered how she was to reach the sector without attracting too much attention.

She glanced at the table screen and checked to see which private ships were in dock that had previously taken passengers.

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Tor paced around impatiently on board the Shield Production facility. Simply waiting for information made him feel helpless. Korecmancketras had remained with him, just to make sure he did not do something rash.

"I doubt we will find out where she is now. But there are several places that she might head to." Tor glanced over to the Paranid.

"Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"Because I doubt she'd have reached any of the destinations. And many of them you wouldn't want to hang around in."

"Pirates don't frighten me."

"I wasn't thinking about your well being, but theirs." The Paranid smiled.

Tor relaxed and smiled.

"Okay, ultimately where do you think she'll head for?"

"Ultimately, Nopileo's Memorial. There's an old pirate station there run by a former employee of Feran Bloodheart."

"I don't like him already."

"Oh, you've nothing to worry about from him. Feran believes him to be dead, and the Bloodheart Clan don't believe in resignation or retirement. When you sign the line, you're in for life. If Feran finds out he's still alive, then he soon won't be."

"Is anything not infected by that clan?"

"They're a major influence around this region. And they now have an old Python Destroyer, that was scheduled for decommissioning, but fell into the hands of the t'Gnht family. A gift from the family Njy apparently."

"What? A Destroyer in the hands of a madman. Why hasn't someone done anything about it?"

"Some think that all the Split are mad. From what we understand, Feran takes Setardize and is no worse than any of the rest." Korecmancketras watched Tor for a reaction.

"So you mean to tell me that that murdering bastard can take a few drugs and suddenly he's all better." Tor felt the rage rising, "You expect me to forgive him for trying to kill me, for ordering the death of my parents, and sending assassins to murder me."

"There are those Argon that believe inside every evil person is a good one trying to get out, if only they can be reached." Creed had quietly entered the room some moments earlier, "That forgiveness and peace is the way forward."

"I'd like to see how long they'd last waving banners of peace and understanding in front of the Bloodheart leader?" Tor glanced over.

"I'm sure they'd die screaming that he's simply misunderstood, and he's a nice person really." Creed pulled the stopper on a bottle of whisky. "I understand that you people have a concept of good and evil, personally this is an enigma to me, but what I do seem to recall is that there is some belief, that if you kill Feran then you are no better than he is. And you might be interested to learn that Feran hasn't renewed any contracts on you. Now that he knows you're alive."

"Are you telling me I shouldn't kill him if I get the opportunity?" Tor could not believe Creed would suggest such a thing.

"One thing is certain, if you kill Feran now, then someone else will take his place, and they will quietly be thankful, but openly they'll hunt you. Vendettas pass from generation to generation, if you kill Feran it will echo through time." Creed knocked back the whisky with a single throw.

"Who would want to revenge Feran?" Tor shrugged.

Creed poured another glass and did not turn to look at Tor, but studied the glass briefly.

"I've just killed a ten year old boy who wanted revenge for his fathers death." He downed the measure and poured another. "Family is everything. Which is why I can't have one." The third generous measure vanished.

Tor was lost for words and even Korecmancketras remained silent. He looked at the stoic form of Creed and sensed that there was inner conflict.

Serandamancketal strode into the room.

"In the name of the Pontifex. Would you care to explain what happened?" The tone was harsh.

"When someone draws a blaster on me, I don't hesitate to kill them." Creed remained by the drinks cabinet, with his back to the room, and poured another drink.

"But did you have to kill him?"

"I reacted. I did what I do best."

"Oh, the cameras have verified that. Didn't you notice the boy missed you by a clear half metre at close range?" Serandamancketal waited briefly for a response. "No I guess you didn't. You just took half his head off in response."

"What do you want me to say, that I'm sorry? Okay, tell the boys mother that I'm sorry. And next time to make sure her other son can shoot straight if he wants to come after me." Creed had spun around to face Serandamancketal.

The Paranid adopted an aggressive stance, the multi-jointed arms tense. Tor had never seen an angry Paranid before and it made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. He glanced towards Creed and could see anger in his eyes, but it was short lived as he looked down at the glass. A fleeting moment of pain traced across his features.

"Take solace in your drink, Creed, and reflect on what you did. And never let it happen here again." Serandamancketal turned and stormed out of the room.

A long uncomfortable silence followed. Creed looked at Tor, the face set in contemplation, he put down the glass and asked.

"Do you still think you're becoming like me?"

"I don't think I'll ever be like you."

"No you won't, and be thankful for that. I was born to kill and trained to do it well. In some bizarre way you showed me the value of life, and I thank you for that. But today I got careless and made a mistake." Creed walked towards the door. "I think it's best that I leave. Take care Tor, I doubt we will meet again."

"What will you do?"

"I understand the Goner are looking for new disciples. Who knows they might welcome a former pit fighter whose only talent is for death." With that he left.

Tor glanced over to Korecmancketras, the three eyes looked back.

"Don't even try to understand him." The Paranid commented.

"How does he live with himself?"

"I don't know and I'd rather not speculate." There was a finality in Korecmancketras's tone that Tor decided it was prudent to change the conversation.

"Tell me where to find this pirate station?"

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Nyeshta had targeted a fully configured Argon Nova on the Trading Station list of docked ships, the pilot records established that he had transported passengers before and had a decent combat history. Under the alias of Sahra Homeleigh, she sent a targeted bulletin board message asking for transportation to Dukes Domain, for the sum of two and a half thousand credits. The standard rate for a single person on a three sector run anything more and she knew it would give rise to questions.

Sat waiting to see if there would be a response she ordered a drink. It was nearly twenty mizuras later that she received an acknowledgement. With a smile she picked up her luggage and left for the docking bay.

When the shuttle lift doors opened she spied the Nova pilot and shook her head with a wry smile. It was the same young pilot that had been in the bar. With her luggage following close behind she paced forward.

"Julian?"

"That's me. And you must be Sahra."

Nyeshta nodded.

"Just climb on board and we'll get going."

Nyeshta stepped in to the cabin and looked around. The ship had a new feel to it and had little in the way of personal effects to decorate. The young Argon stepped on board.

"Take a seat and enjoy the trip." He dropped into the pilot seat and strapped in. "Computer, request departure clearance."

"Departure clearance granted. Switching to automatic launch sequence."

There was the familiar tremble in the ship as the docking clamps released.

"It's not often you come across Argon transport pilots in Paranid space. Any reason you're here?" Nyeshta thought some small talk would help to build trust and reduce the monotony of the trip. She relaxed in her seat.

"I'm making my way back to meet someone in Argon Prime, but I thought I'd pick up a few credits on the way. What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Where are you from? What do you do for a living? Are you free tomorrow night for a romantic candle lit dinner? You know the usual questions." Julian smiled and Nyeshta laughed.

"Nice try. But I'm already seeing someone." She lied.

"Not the Paranid you're going to visit?"

The docking bay doors opened and the Nova glided out gracefully into open space.

"No, he's not one of the Paranid."

"That's fortunate. If it had been, I think I might have had slap some sense into you."

"Hit women often do you?"

"It was a metaphorical statement not a literal one."

"And what's wrong with the Paranid?" She smiled.

"Well they're not exactly the friendliest bunch I've ever met."

"Once you get through the initial barriers, they're very much like anybody else to talk to."

"I'll take your word for it. Now are we expecting company on this trip?"

Nyeshta tensed up.

"What do you mean?"

"I've got two incoming Split fighters on an intercept vector."

"I'm not expecting anyone." Nyeshta wondered how they had found her so quickly. Her fingers curled around the grip of the blaster on her hip.

"Then they're probably after me."

Plasma cut across the screen.

"Incoming message."

"Open comm."

"Split say, Julian die."

"I guess it's you they want." Nyeshta could not help but smile.

Julian glanced over with a roguish grin before answering the comm.

"Come on guys, that's all history. I'm a reformed person now. Give me a break." Plasma shimmered in the shields and Julian glanced over. "You wouldn't mind manning the rear turret for a bit?"

"Do you think it will help?"

"Hey, this thing's got a jumpdrive. Assuming you don't object to arriving at Dukes Domain ahead of schedule?"

"You have a licensed jumpdrive?" Nyeshta suddenly felt uncomfortable and her hand moved towards her blaster. Options leapt through her mind to dispose of the pilot and commandeer the ship.

"Yeah, apparently my dad's the head of Terracorp, so he arranged that I have one fitted." The ship trembled as a missile alert echoed through the cabin, "Time is pressing lady, our shields are falling and this is probably not the best time to discuss it."

Nyeshta turned to the rear of the Nova and found the hatch to the cargo bay. With the space compression units activated she felt that it had taken her an age to reach the rear turret.

The AI system fired ineffectually at the rapidly moving Mambas that harried the ship.

"Missile launch detected."

She switched the AI defence program off and took control of the rear gun. Locking on to the silkworm she fired a few well placed shots and saw it detonate.

"Keep them off our tail while I engage the jumpdrive."

Nyeshta fired a stream of plasma towards a closing Mamba. It swerved away releasing another missile. She switched targets and opened fire. Then tapped the com button.

"Are you sure you don't want to eliminate these guys now? It'd save you some trouble later?"

There was a pause in the response.

"I know where you're coming from, but I just don't kill for the sake of it."

She felt the Nova strafe sideways. The plasma skewed away as she opened fire again. Green flashes rained in from two directions. The Nova pulled around hard, avoiding the crossfire.

"Jumpdrive charging at ten percent." The computer intoned.

The Nova fully engaged one of the Mamba's and for a moment Nyeshta had the impression that Julian had changed his mind. The shields of the Mamba dropped away as it struggled to find safe distance and hull damage registered on the HUD.

She kept the second Mamba off their tail with short plasma bursts, and then there was the swirl of stars as the Split ship suddenly disappeared into the distance.

"Entering system, Dukes Domain."

She breathed out slowly, shifted out of the seat and made her way through the cargo bay. As the door opened she heard Julian say.

"Computer target the trading station, and bring us in to dock."



The nose of the Nova pulled around and the engines hummed as they accelerated away from the gate.

"We'll be there in just a few mizuras." He glanced over his shoulder briefly, and flashed a smile.

"For a moment there I thought you'd changed your mind about killing them."

"No. But it'll cost him a few credits to fix his ship. So I don't expect they'll come after me for a while."

She found herself liking the young Argon. To her, he had a rare spark of decency in an otherwise violent universe. Gazing out of the cockpit towards the approaching station she sat quietly lost in thought. The docking bay doors loomed large as docking permission was granted. Moments later they separated and the Nova glided forward. As the docking clamps engaged she moved forward towards the cockpit.

"That was an interesting trip." Nyeshta said quietly.

"Yeah it's nice to run into old friends every now and again." Julian smiled and picked up his trader-pad.

"Especially when they want to kill you." Nyeshta slotted her credit chip into the slot and authorised the transfer. "Not many people carry these around."

"I find it better than the standard datapad. The design is a lot more robust and receives a lot more trading information."

"That's because it was built by the Teladi." Nyeshta smiled as she took back her credit chip.

The airlock doors opened and as she turned to leave she could hear Julian stand up.

"You know, I think I've just worked out who you really are."

"And who might that be?"

"I've done the pirate thing and I've seen you before Nyeshta. Different hair and eye colour, but I'm not one to forget a pretty face."

Nyeshta turned and smiled at him, her hand had returned to the blaster.

"I don't kill everyone I meet." She stepped slightly closer to him as she spoke softly.

"That's not what I've heard. But I'm willing to believe it."

"At this moment, I'm sure that you are. Unfortunately, your dad has a little bit of a grudge against me."

"And I hope you don't want to make that any worse. If it's any consolation, I'm not interested in the bounty."

"You're not even slightly tempted?" The soft lilt in her voice slightly teasing.

"If I was, do you think we'd be standing here chatting?"

"Over the last jazura I was making a living by doing an honest days work. Now the past has caught up with me, and I'm on the run again. How do I know I can trust you?" Nyeshta gave a wry smile and stepped back. Her hand released the grip of the blaster.

"You helped me out of a tight spot and I'm thankful. Anyway, it's not in my nature to betray a friend."

"Friend? You don't even know me."

"Now that I've met you face to face, I know enough to like you."

"You're easily pleased. I'll remember that." Nyeshta turned towards the airlock door.

"Take care of yourself, Sahra."

"You too, Julian." She stepped out of the ship and hesitated for a moment, uncertain of what she would do next. The discovery of a potential ally so close to the enemy presented opportunities. Only she failed to see how she could turn it to her advantage. Nyeshta moved away from the ship.

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She found the bar with relative ease and checked her time piece before checking the flight times to the planet surface.

With a stazura to wait she had plenty of time to make her next contact. The bar had a number of clients that represented every race, and she was surprised to see that the bartender was an Argon woman, of late middle age with her bleached blond hair tied back.

"What can I get you?"

"A bamma juice, oh and I'm looking for Oolastamanckeja. Have you seen him?"

The woman frowned and looked thoughtful for a while.

"Don't recognise the name, but I'll go ask out back. If you take a seat over there I'll check and let you know." She pointed to a table and disappeared off.

Nyeshta sat quietly and took a moment to study the crowd. Most had their attention on large monitor showing various sporting events and with the Ghok Deathmatch series underway the Split were demonstrating some of their more aggressive tendencies. The presence of several Paranid security personnel ensured their antics did not get out of hand.

The bartender returned and carried the glass of juice over to her table. She smiled as she put the drink down.

"You're in luck one of the others knows the person you're after. He says he'll get in contact with him but it might take thirty mizuras before he arrives."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." The woman turned away and crossed the room back to the bar.

Nyeshta took a small sip from the glass the rich flavour of the fruit breaking on her tongue. She watched the screen for a while as she enjoyed the drink. About half way down the glass she noticed a slightly bitter after taste. She shook her head to try and clear her mind, thoughts drifted in on a hazy fog.

Her legs felt unresponsive and numb. Even her arms struggled to support her as she slid to the floor.

A figure moved towards her, and she blinked to see if she could make out a face. The head appeared to nod towards the bar and she could hear the gentle whir of a cleaning droid close by. It seemed loud against the muffled sound of the crowd. Rough hands dragged up, and she barely felt her feet leave the floor as darkness began to descend.

Whoever it was carrying her sounded muffled and distant in contrast to the droid.

"Looks like she's had too much to drink."

The gentle sway of movement brought her up to see the blurred vision of a security guard. Through the growing shroud of darkness the Paranid appeared to shrug and shake his head in disgust. Her vision went.

\*\*

Tor pondered over the galactic trading map. And for the last thirty mizuras he had picked over each of the routes. He toyed with the idea of going through Brennan's Triumph, the most direct way, and using the Defiance's awesome firepower to destroy the Bloodheart Base, but the thought faded as he considered the destruction of the base would kill many who were innocent of the crimes of the clans leader.

For Tor this was personal, if others stood in the way and attempted to defend their leader then that was another matter.

He returned his attention to the display and came to a decision. It would be the long haul through the Boron and Teladi sectors, with a brief excursion into Split space before reaching Hatkivah's Faith and finally Nopileo's Memorial. He hoped by the time he reached there, that Nyeshta would have arrived.

Standing up, he then turned to leave.

"So you're off then?" Korecmancketras said.

"I think I've kicked my heels for long enough."

"Which route did you opt for?"

"The Atreus Clouds way."

"The opposite way to where she was last seen? We are not certain that she has left Paranid space."

"That's as maybe, but I expect to find her at the old pirate station."

"I would have heard if she'd arrived. She hasn't, and this concerns me. We should start our search at the trading station in Trinity Sanctum."

"We?"

"You don't know the pirate code and will find nothing. Except, perhaps an unfortunate end."

"I didn't think you wanted to get involved?"

"There's a difference between us wanting, or needing to help you. As it happens, you need my help." The Paranid smiled.

"Well don't make it sound like you're doing me a favour."

"I'll let you owe me." Korecmancketras appeared to be enjoying every moment. "By the eyes of the Pontifex, the Defiance is too obvious and likely to draw the wrong kind of attention."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Serandamancketal will lend us a Perseus fitted with Beta PSG's and Alpha HEPT's. We've found the PSG's keep the Khaak at bay, should we encounter any."

"I prefer to have firepower that makes a lasting impression."

"As would all the races. The Defiance should stay here, on call if you like. Without it people won't be tempted to try and bargain for forbidden technology."

Tor admitted to himself that he put finding Nyeshta ahead of the consequences of running around in the Defiance. Somewhere inside an emotion stirred, he was far more concerned for her safety than he freely admitted. So much so, that his focus was on the end of the journey and not on the journey itself.

"The best laid plans of idealists and fools." Tor muttered under his breath.

"By the ears of his holiness, have I gone deaf or have you lost your voice?"

"Sorry, Korec. I was just thinking aloud."

"Share the thought, it might be useful?" There was an assertiveness in the Paranid that Tor could not fail to notice. He speculated that Korecmancketras had a little niche in life and he was now in his element.

"It was just an old saying, which says that idealists make plans, but it takes a fool to believe it's going to work. In this case I managed to take on both roles." He paused waiting for a response. None came. "So, is your specialty finding people?"

"The hunt." The Paranid beamed and Tor caught a glint in each of the three eyes.

"Okay, we'll do this your way."

"Let us see my brother." Korecmancketras gestured towards the door.

Tor moved towards it and was overtaken by the Paranid. The long stride and determined pace of the Paranid had him in a lazy loping jog behind.

Serandamancketal was still in a dark mood when they entered his office.

"By the Pontifex, I said I was not to be disturbed!"

"Brother. We're taking the ship, and hopefully something good will come of this day."

Serandamancketal straightened up and looked hard at his brother, then glanced at Tor.

"By the three dimensionality. You had better succeed."

"His holiness the Pontifex, will guide my steps." Korecmancketras said.

Serandamancketal's stance relaxed a fraction.

"Brother, do what you do best. And take all necessary precautions. Go, I need to look to the three dimensionality for enlightenment."

"Brother." Korecmancketras turned and grabbed Tor by the shoulder and propelled him back out of the office.

They moved swiftly towards the docking bay and as they descended Tor noticed that Korecmancketras looked pensive.

"What's up?"

"By his holiness, you should know. If anything should happen to me then my brother will hold you responsible."

"Is that why he said, you should take all necessary precautions?"

"You are the precaution. If I'm in danger, you need to be there to protect me."

"You have a problem with that?"

"You face the Paranid. We could crush you within a heart beat."

"Oh, I think it might take a little longer than that." Tor smiled.

"I hope so."

The shuttle lift doors opened on the security docking bay. The Defiance nestled amongst a mix of old Prometheus ships, newer Perseus vessels, Novas and Barracudas.

"I need to let Corricel know what the latest plan is."

Korecmancketras gave a nod and wandered towards the Perseus they were going to use. Tor walked towards the Defiance. Its shape, so distinctly different, appeared malevolent in the presence of lesser ships. As he approached he felt a resistance in the air, as though the ship was pushing him away.

He placed his hand on the scanner and the airlock door open slowly. With a deep intake of breath Tor stepped inside. Entering the cabin he started to talk.

"Corri, I think you already know why I'm here."

"You are leaving me behind."

"If it was as simple as that, I'd happily say, 'yes'. But it isn't. We need to be discreet, and a Paranid ship in Paranid space won't be as noticeable. You on the other hand, stand out like a sore thumb, and every movement is going to get watched. As soon as anyone connects that I'm looking for Nyeshta, then she's as good as found. I'm hoping you understand this. But I do need you to keep watch over us and lend a hand if we get in to trouble."

There was a long silence, and Tor fidgeted slightly as he waited for the response.

"Well?" He asked.

"I am trying to determine when you have not been in trouble and needed my help."

"Point taken. But that doesn't change anything. You're staying here, unless we're in real danger and need you."

"So how far behind you would you like me to follow? Five k's?"

"Now you're just being difficult. Just stay here and I'll call you if I need you."

"You had better take a portable comm unit and relay pack with you."

"What are they for?"

"Direct communications. The further you get the longer the signal will take to reach me. So do not leave it until the last possible moment to request help. Not that I anticipate you getting more than one sector away before making the call."

"I can't believe I put up with this. I'm not that bad a pilot, even you admit it."

"There is one thing that might have escaped your notice. The ship you will be flying does not have the same weapons system as me. To hit a target you will need to point your ship straight at it, and pull the trigger. That is something you have not had to do in a while."

"That's true, but I'm sure it'll come back to me. Any other pearls of wisdom that you'd like to share?"

"Not at this mizura, but I will take pleasure in relaying them to you as and when."

"I won't be looking forward to it." Tor opened a locker and rummaged around for the portable comm. The unit itself was small, lightweight and easy to manage. The relay unit was exactly the opposite. He lifted it with reasonable ease but he could feel the weight pulling down on his good arm.

"Don't tell me I need to carry this around?"

"As much as I would like to say, 'yes'. The answer is 'no'. You just need to have it onboard the ship."

"Anyway, as much as I'd like to stay and chat, I'd best be going before Korec sends a recovery team to find me." Tor stepped towards the doorway.

"Good luck, Tor." He paused a moment and smiled.

"Thanks." And stepped out of the ship. Moving away he heard the distinctive hiss as the airlock doors closed behind him.

He looked at the Perseus as he walked along the side and felt a twinge of admiration at the solid robust design of the ship. The three cannons looked substantial.

Stepping inside, Tor noted that Korecmancketras was already positioned in the pilot seat and carrying out the pre-flight system check. He placed the relay unit on the floor and opened a locker. He placed the unit inside and then tapped the control panel to shut the airlock door.

## *Chapter 14*

Dropping into the co-pilot seat Tor glanced across.

"So you don't want me to fly then?"

"Your hand is still healing according to your medical file. I will fly. You will rest." Korecmancketras submitted the request for departure.

"Permission granted." The computer responded.

The Perseus glided gracefully away from the dockside and along the tunnel to the main gates.

"Warning; incoming Khaak cluster detected." The computer announcement took Tor by surprise.

"I've not heard that one before."

"All the stations have been reprogrammed for hostile incursions. The fighter crews will be getting ready." Korecmancketras seemed unperturbed by the news.

Tor glanced at the ships status and took note that the weapons had been switched to the Phased Shockwave Generators, and he was curious to see how far the weapon had been developed since he last heard about the teething troubles.

The outer gates opened and Tor noticed a slight pressure when Korecmancketras hit the boost to get them clear of the station. He glanced at the tactical display and reported.

"Cluster is still intact and drifting in at eighty seven mps. Configuration class is large, estimate fifteen scouts around a heavy fighter. Vector heading, does not intercept with ours."

"That's as maybe, but by the Three Dimensionality, I'll not leave those murderers to terrorise the sector." Korecmancketras targeted the cluster and plotted in an intercept vector.

"Once we engage there's no backing out."

"I've no intention of backing out."

"Well in that case, this could be a very brief trip." Tor clipped on the comm unit and was half tempted to switch it on. But he was not ready to suffer any cutting comments from Corricel.

The Perseus charged towards the cluster, and at five k's it broke apart. Tor watched the terminal and reported.

"Target has not changed vector. Scouts appear to be moving into battle formation."

The distance closed to three k's and then the Khaak ships swarmed towards them. The lasers of the heavy fighter, bright white against the black void.

Korecmancketras strafed to avoid a full lock as he fired the cannons. Reddish, purple beams from the smaller scouts lanced towards them.

"Missile clo.. mis.. mis.. missile closing."

The shockwaves rapidly expanded ahead of them. The incoming missiles exploded and the smaller scout ships were tossed around in the repeated waves of multiple PSG detonations. Their shields were strip back and delicate hulls torn apart.

The heavy fighter, with depleted shields survived the initial onslaught but had lost the advantage of its weapons superior range. Three fast scout ships had also survived the first pass. Tor reported.

"Quite impressive, maybe we won't die today after all. You still have three scouts and the fighter remaining."

"I find your lack of belief in the Three Dimensionality disturbing."

Korecmancketras switched the top turret to the Alpha High Energy Plasma Thrower weapon and opened fire on the heavy fighter.

The shockwave bursts continued to tear away at the Khaak's shields, while the green Plasma tried to rip into the hull. The Paranid dropped the speed to below that of the fighter and kept close on its tail. Strafing movement kept them from ramming their opponent as it turned sharply in response to the successive hits.

"Missile closing."

The Perseus jarred as the remaining scouts lasers slashed at their shields. The exploding missile knocked them off target, sending a short burst of plasma and shockwave detonations wide of the target.

Korecmancketras corrected the heading and fired. Tor announced.

"She's going to blow." A bright searing flash filled their vision as the heavy fighter disintegrated.

The Perseus accelerated to maximum velocity and Korecmancketras set the auto targeting to identify the nearest hostile craft.

The scouts speed was too fast for conventional weapons to get a suitable lock, and Tor noted the top turret had been switched back to the Shockwave Generator.

Three shockwave fields expanded out ahead of the Khaak ship, rapidly followed by a consecutive burst. The ship rolled and burst apart moments later. Korecmancketras eliminated the remaining two with consummate ease.

"Nicely done." Tor said as he checked the HUD for any new hostile ships.

"That's the superior power of the Paranid for you."

"Now can we get to Trinity Sanctum?"

Korecmancketras smiled and steered the ship towards the next gate.

"Entering sector, Split Fire."

The sector was in chaos, transport ship distress calls buzzed over the comm. Beam lasers glowed against hulls and in the background the nebula gases shimmered with ion storms. The deep red of the systems sun reflected off everything giving the appearance of a blood red sheen.

Station calls for assistance were mixed in with the curtailed screams of ships exploding. Cargo containers drifted amongst the debris of wanton destruction.

"I count four heavy fighters and more than thirty scout class ships." Tor reported, his expression grave. He watched as a station under attack tried to launch fighters into the maelstrom of lasers tearing into its shields. But no sooner had they cleared the docking bay then they were ripped apart by the waiting pack.

"There's too many and they're too close to their targets. We can't use the PSG's." He set course and the Perseus cut through the sector.

"So much for the power of the Paranid." Tor watched the HUD as another two ships blinked out of existence.



The Perseus changed vector and charged in towards a stricken freighter as it fought for survival. The weapons had been switched for the High Energy Plasma Throwers. A scout ship shot past changing vector and avoiding the three shots that Korecmancketras fired towards it.

With quick hand movements the Perseus swung around.

"Beta Phased Shockwave Generator installed." The computer announcement confused Tor.

The Khaak scout turned to make another run for the freighter, launching a missile as it did so. The rapidly expanding shockwaves consumed them.

Korecmancketras brought the ship around to witness the final demise of the freighter, and once again they were the focus of the Khaak attackers. Shockwaves expanded out ahead of the Perseus with reckless abandon.

Four explosions marked the demise of scouts. The Khaak fighter, weathered the storm, its three bright white beams slicing into their shields before they could strafe aside and break the weapons lock.

"Missile closing."

The missiles of the scout ships were too fast to be avoided and had a savage punch that knocked them off target. Their shields continued to fall as Korecmancketras spiraled the ship, creating a circle of expanding shockwaves around the ship.

The scout ships exploded, but the fighter trapped them in a long burst of laser fire.

"Shields critical."

Korecmancketras broke the weapons lock and swung around behind the enemy. He reduced speed to keep far enough behind the enemy to make best use of their weapons.

Tor kept his eyes on the Khaak ship as it weaved and changed direction each time the Perseus's weapons fire impacted. For long moments they gave chase and with each measured burst of fire the condition of the Khaak ship deteriorated. Eventually fractures tore themselves open in the enemy ship and rippling explosions consumed the ship.

He checked the HUD to see the Defiance was lurking within weapons range.

"Hi, Corri."

"You looked like you might need some help." The response was evenly pitched and Tor wondered what the AI was really thinking. He was pleased that they had avoided the 'told you so' comment, but all the same he felt a twinge of guilt at having left Corricel behind.

"Yes, well it was touch and go there for a moment. But while you're here, could you just clear the sector of any remaining Khaak. I think it would be appreciated. Then head back to the War Master HQ." Tor glanced over to his friend, "If it's okay with you. I think we should avoid any unnecessary conflicts. Unless the odds are heavily stacked in our favour."

The Paranid gave a brief nod and they watched the Defiance surge away before resuming course.

In the distance they could see small explosions and the intense blue of the Defiance particle beams as it dealt with each and every threat. Tor reviewed the sector map details as the main trade route was cleared and then the enemy ships that swarmed around several stations.

As the last hostile ship vanished from the scanner, Korecmancketras spoke.

"That was a fine example of efficiency."

"Yeah, didn't she her out there when our shields went critical though. She'd have been a bit late if you hadn't managed to break the weapons lock. Great bit of flying by the way."

"You Argon lack the eyes of the Three Dimensionality to see clearly. The Defiance arrived just after the freighter exploded. She could have destroyed the fighter at any time. All you had to do was speak."

"Now that made me feel a whole lot better, thanks. If there's a next time, I'd like you to mention these little gems of information."

The Perseus reached the next gate.

\*\*

Nyeshta felt numb and cold. She was barely able to register the sounds and smells of the room as everything felt distant, almost disconnected. Nausea at the bitter taste in her mouth caused a small spasm in her stomach, she swallowed hard to drive down the rising bile. The effort made her head spin and she refrained from trying to move for fear that consciousness would escape her. In the back of her mind she needed to find out something about her captors, and more importantly where she was.

Muffled voices faded in and out, but she could not make out the words. Her head refused to clear as she tried to concentrate.

One voice drew closer she felt her head being pushed back and with the movement consciousness faded.

Gradually she woke for the second time, but had no idea of how much time had passed. The voices still sounding distant were slightly clearer.

"Look he's not shown up. Personally I think he must have been tipped off. Let's take the woman and claim the bounty. She more than compensates for losing this one."

"It's not over yet. There's too many security personnel hanging around the bar for him to risk exposing himself."

"Which gives us another problem. How do we get her down to the ship."

Nyeshta inwardly cursed her misfortune at having walked into a steak out. The thoughts of possible betrayal faded. The idea came slowly through the fog in her mind, that she would wait until they were moving towards the docks, and then create a disturbance.

She was aware that she had been left in a sitting position with her back to a wall. She was also leaning sideways against something solid but could not tell if it was another wall, the side of a cupboard or some other piece of furniture. Her arms felt heavy, almost lifeless but she could flex her fingers and with gentle movements she could make out that her hands were bound together, but the cold stiffness of her fingers gave her no indication as to the nature of the binding. A slight movement of her foot was enough to know they were also bound.

The only comforting thought she had was at still being alive. Her breathing remained relaxed and slow, she concentrated on remaining calm and at ease.

Foot steps approached her and she could feel fingers checked her throat for a pulse. The first man spoke again.

"How much longer do think she'll be out for?" He was close enough for Nyeshta to smell a faint aroma of aftershave. Enough to be pleasant to her senses but then she knew the drug had dulled down every one of her main senses. The voice was softly spoken, and as far as she could tell there was no hint of malice or cruelty in the tone.

"Who knows, she seemed to drink a fair amount, so possibly another Stazura. But I think we should top the dose up in another thirty mizuras. Just in case." The second man was too far away for her senses to make any judgement.

"I've always wondered what makes someone like her turn to crime. I mean she's a good looking lass, I don't think she'd have any trouble finding a rich husband." The man moved away.

"Some people are just born bad, I guess."

"If you believe that you'll believe anything. No one's born bad. I believe there's a trigger point. Something that just tips people over the edge."

"Whatever. All I know is that people like her make good pay cheques."

"Understanding the mind of your target keeps you one step ahead of them. Remember that. And you'll catch more of them."

Nyeshta ruled out the new notion that she would be able to charm her way to freedom. The dull numbness in her arms and legs began to tingle. A new sign that the drug was wearing off quickly, but with the tingling came a feeling of coldness, she tried to stop a slight trembling shiver. Some part of her mind identified the drug the bounty hunters had given her and the memory reminded her that with the cold came pain as certain muscles were guaranteed to cramp up.

"Keep watch here, I'm going to see if I can get an update from the bar." Nyeshta could not tell which of the men had spoken.

She heard the media system activate and there was the progressive burst of noise as the remaining bounty hunter flicked through the channels. She fought against the rising sense of nervousness at being bound in a room with a man she did not know. Her only hope was that he was a moral man.

There was a heavy rap at the door.

"Police security check. Open in the name of his holiness the Pontifex."

She heard the buzz of a blaster being charged.

"Just give me a moment."

Nyeshta remained still. A glimmer of hope burned bright as this was an opportunity to bluff her way free. Her mouth felt dry, even though all she had to do was cry out that she had been kidnapped for the slave market. A serious offence that the Paranid would not dismiss out of her hand. Timing would be everything, the weakness of her voice meant the Paranid officer would need to be close by if the message was to be heard.

"What can I do for you officers?"

"In the name of the Pontifex. We have been informed that illegal goods are on the station. Therefore we are scanning all the unholy for spacefuel and spaceweed."

"An admirable quest, but you won't find any in here. I can assure you of that."

"We shall see. Step inside, unholy one."

"How long is this going to take?"

"As long as the Three Dimensionality feels it needs to take. Longer if you persist with pointless questions. And what is wrong with the unholy one in the corner?"

"Her, she's wanted for a number of crimes and is in transit to Argon Prime. Only we know you people take a dim view of leaving prisoners on ship."

"You have documents to prove what you say?"

Nyeshta chose that moment to try and shout for help, but only a whisper escaped her lips. Her head came up and eyes opened, with blurred vision she looked imploringly at the figures in front of her.

Her focus improved gradually but her voice refused to return. Three uniformed Paranid Police stood in the room with a young looking Argon man.

The man had his back to her.

"The unholy one appears to be awake."

The man span around with a look of surprise.

"She's bound so won't be any trouble." As he turned back, the Paranid sprayed something into his face. "What the.." He staggered for a few steps and then collapsed.

"Pick her up, and be quick about it."

Nyeshta felt her spirits rise this was a rescue.

Strong hands lifted her and a hood was pulled over her head. Nerves struck Nyeshta, but her voice of protest barely registered above a faint croak. The numbness in her limbs masked the roughness at which she was bundled into an enclosed space. Panic begin to take over and she concentrated on remaining calm and started to swallow to get the saliva moving in her mouth. The feeling of motion started and continued for some time.

Eventually she was unceremoniously dumped on the floor. She heard the Paranid leave and the sound of a door closing. Still blindfolded and bound Nyeshta lay still, expecting at any moment for someone to start talking. The silence was only broken by the sound of her own breathing.

As the drug continued to wear off she felt the sudden knot of muscle in the back of her calf, cramp took over and she clenched her teeth against the pain. Her fingers tried to explore the nature of the binding around her wrists. It was the pliable lightweight polymer ties favoured by sector police the universe over. Still hooded, she listened intently the only way she could massage the pain away, was by getting her hands in front of her. The absence of sound gave her the confidence that she was alone and she risked pulling her knees up tight against her chest and slipping the binding around and gaining the freedom of her hands.

With the briefest of struggles she succeeded. Her heart raced as she remained motionless for a few moments, listening for the sound of footsteps. Cautiously she ran her fingers around the hem of the hood, and touched the toggle lock that prevented the hood from simply falling off with the shake of the head. Pinching the clamp she then slackened the chord and pulled the hood away.

She glanced around and suddenly froze. The lighting in the room was dim with a single recessed spotlight shining down into the center. The floor gave off little reflection and at the edge of the cone of light she saw a pair of feet.

"Who's there?" Her fingers moved down to the cramped calf and started to knead the muscle. At least she would be able to tell which race she was dealing with when the other person spoke.

"Perhaps you should have asked that, before struggling with your bindings." The voice had the distinction of being Paranid.

"I'm guessing you're not police or slavers. They use restraint collars on their captives."

There was no response. Nyeshta felt uneasy but not fearful. She kept calm with the thought, that if they had meant to kill her then they would already have done so. As her fingers worked the muscle the pain started to ease.

"So what do you want from me?"

"We are led to believe that you built the ship called, Defiance."

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"Entering sector, Trinity Sanctum."

Tor reflected how easy the journey had been since leaving the unregulated sectors. He noted from the HUD that every few mizuras corvette patrol ships cruised through the sectors they were transiting, and guessed this was the price of independence. No allegiance. No support. A situation, he judged, that showed politics at its worst.

He allowed the thoughts to pass and considered the task ahead and turned to speak to Korecmancketras.

"Let's go over the plan. I hang around looking discreet, as you make contact with the pirate network. You find out where she went and who she made contact with. Then we follow. Correct?"

"Not so simple. The pirate network won't tell us anything. Only the credit transfer agent would be of any use, and the trading datapad he carries. From him we would find out her new name."

"So what's the chances of finding him?"

"Slim, the transfer agents seldom stay on station for any time. But if I ask around I might find out who it was."

"While you're doing that what shall I do?"

"Scan the station archive, and look for records of a single Argon female passenger on any type of transport, especially either a heavy fighter or fast scout. With the Khaak around, I doubt she would take a chance on catching a lift with a freighter."

Korecmancketras glanced towards the trading station, and adjusted the ships heading and speed before saying.

"Computer, request docking clearance."

"Permission granted, we are requested to hold position until departing transports have cleared the station. We are third in the queue for docking."

Tor sat and studied the communications system. It surprised him how easy it was to access the Station archives, even remotely, and obtain information on ship movements and passenger lists. He made a note however, that the newest archive was a tazura old. Time enough to have changed ship over a dozen times and crossed any number of sectors. He glanced over to Korecmancketras as the Paranid patiently waited for final approach clearance, and said.

"I'm not sure this archive is going to be any use to us."

"Paranid archives are always of use. So what's the problem?"

"The newest entry is too old. If she left here less than a Tazura ago, then this archive doesn't show it."

"The station data files are updated at the end of each holy solar cycle of Paranid Prime. This will be in twenty three mizuras. Have patients, Tor, and you will have the answers soon."

"Fair enough, but it just brings me to my next point. You have nearly five thousand ship movements every tazura at the trading station, and I'm just curious how you expect me to scan through each one."

"Have faith in the three dimensionality, and call a friend." Korecmancketras smiled.

"Final docking clearance has been granted." The computer intoned.

Korecmancketras moved the ship gently forwards and vectored in on the green docking lights. Two freighters preceded them ahead of them through the heavy blast gates. He switched to station docking control as they passed the threshold and sat back.

Tor idly viewed the galactic map. Trinity Sanctum sector was undoubtedly a crossroads between the sectors of many races and now a favoured route of many long haul shipping enterprises that wished to avoid the unregulated and Xenon sectors. This would make his task of looking for Nyestha much tougher as tourists and thumbers used the sector as a stop over.

The ship came to rest with the thump of docking clamps and Korecmancketras left his seat. He put a firm hand on Tor's shoulder and commented.

"Good hunting."

"And you. Let me know as soon as you find something."

The Paranid gave a nod and moved to the airlock door. With a hiss it opened and Tor found himself alone on the ship.

Tor switched from the station archive to the latest news articles on the bulletin board. Most of them contained updates on local planetary news and sports. None of these held much interest to him and he looked towards the galactic news channels. The main Argon news carrier ran a rolling banner reporting all the latest sector sighting of Khaak clusters. As the announcer gave the usually upbeat spin on seemingly trivial news items from around the galaxy.

"And it has been officially confirmed that the troubled sector, Split Fire, has now been cleared of Khaak invaders. Reports from eye witnesses and transport pilots, braving the trade run, say that a heavy fighter, owned by the recently returned Tor Grall, cleared the sector in a few mizuras. Over the last three tazuras, the governments of each race has refused to assist the beleaguered station owners, stating in many cases that their forces are fully engaged in ensuring the security of their own sectors. Reporters have yet to locate the elusive, Tor Grall for comments."

He smiled and tapped on the archive of headlines for the past two tazuras. Casting his eyes down the list he sighed with an air of despondency and stopped at an article headed.

'Private Jumpdrive Activated In Trinity Sanctum'

Tor tapped on the article and listened while station video footage accompanied the story.

"During a fierce fight between two Split heavy fighters and a privately owned Argon Nova it was reported that the pilot of the Nova, one Julian Gardna, resorted to the use of a jumpdrive to escape."

He studied the battle as the Mambas swept past. Green plasma blazed in the Novas shields, yet he could tell from the evasive manoeuvres that the Nova's pilot was only playing for time. The tail gun stopped auto tracking and plasma expertly shot down the closing missiles. Someone had taken the seat but the ship was too far too make out who. The Nova suddenly twisted onto the tail of a Mamba and caught the ship with the deadly stream of fire. Yet broke away shortly before the wormhole opened.

"In an unprecedented move the Paranid High Command has demanded from the Argon Government how a jumpdrive has become the property of a private individual. And not just any individual. The Argon pilot is known to have a long standing criminal record, including the theft of craft to be used for the smuggling of Spaceweed.

To date Argon officials have stated that Mr. Gardna is a reformed individual and has put his nefarious activities behind him. Also that Mr. Gardna is a respected employee of Terracorp and as far as they know was on official Terracorp business when he was attacked.

Head of Terracorp, Elena Kho, personally acknowledged that Mr. Gardna was traveling home, having performed various deliveries on behalf of the company, and that they would investigate why he was attacked.

His exulted holiness the Pontifex is reported to have raised an eyebrow at this news and demanded to know how many, 'privately owned' jumpdrives are in the possession of Terracorp."

Tor let out a long breath, he doubted Nyestha would have boarded a ship owned by the corporation that wanted to see her locked away. He moved on through the list of news items and found nothing that grabbed his attention. He shook his head and mentally chastised himself muttering.

"What was I expecting to find. A headline saying, 'Nyeshta Dead'."

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Korecmancketras moved with confidence through the station's crowded corridors. He knew the bar and that would be his first stop. As he progressed towards it he played various conversation scenarios over in his head.

He knew the pirates had info-brokers who specialized in tapping the police, military, government and mercenary communications channels. Leaning heavily against the bar he reached over and tapped the barman on the shoulder three times.

The Paranid bartender did not turn around, and asked.

"What do you want?"

"A glass of Thelnan ale, and I'm told you might know where I can find Thomolomanckemo."

"He drinks here occasionally, but where he is now I'm not sure. If I see him, I'll send him over."

The barman turned around and placed the glass of ale on the bar.

Korecmancketras picked it up and took a long sip.

"Ah, that's better. When you see him, mention that I asked. I have a few credits that I owe him and would like to pay back."

"His holiness respects those that pay their debts. I will tell him if I see him."

"Be sure that you do, and may the Pontifex give you good fortune." Korecmancketras said and picked up his drink, then turned to find a vacant table.

Word must have spread quickly, as within ten mizuras the Paranid approached his table.

"Glory be to his holiness."

Korecmancketras stood up to respond.

"And may his light shine wisdom upon the unbeliever."

"They say you are here to repay a debt. Remind me of it?" Both of them sat down.

"The debt is the fee for some information."

"And what information would that be?"

"I have been looking for a ship builder."

"A rare skill, and what ship was it that you wanted built?"

"Not one of the race ships."

The Paranid's eyes narrowed and stared without blinking.

"The list narrows, and the price rises."

Korecmancketras smiled and sat back to study his companion.

"I have heard the builder of the Defiance has been seen hereabouts."

The Paranid laughed.

"I'm afraid you are too late for that one."

Korecmancketras continued to smile as he leant forward to pick up his drink.

"Pity, may be I don't owe you any credits after all."

His companion glanced around the room before returning his attention to him.

"You called me here, and my time is credits. So you owe me."

"I will pay you for your time, if you tell me who has my shipbuilder?"



## *Chapter 15*

The Paranid gave a low laugh.

"By the Three Dimensionality, there are bounty hunters after that one, and from all accounts they are closing in."

"Ahh, that is unfortunate for us both." Korecmancketras shifted slightly on his seat, and a gut reaction made him feel his guest was holding something back. Bounty hunters would always be after Nyeshta which made this revelation virtually meaningless.

"I can tell you where she was last seen, but that will cost you two thousand credits."

Korecmancketras smiled and held up his data pad, this was useful information. The info-broker did likewise and the credit transaction was made. Korecmancketras ensured a dormant trace program transferred across with credit transaction. If the information proved defective he would activate it and make a less than amicable and more than unexpected visit.

Satisfied the credit transfer was complete the info-broker spoke.

"Head for the trading station in Duke's Domain, but be discreet with who you ask questions."

"How reliable is this information?"

"Reliable enough, and if you doubt it, then follow the swarm of fighters who are closing in."

Korecmancketras frowned, but was certain he would have heard if Nyeshta had been captured or killed. He rose from his seat and glanced towards the info-broker, to comment.

"By the Three Dimensionality it is time for me to leave."

"Let the enlightened wisdom of his holiness guide you."

Korecmancketras strode away leaving the Paranid, who ordered a drink. The info-broker, satisfied that Korecmancketras had left, tapped on the comms console.

A non-descript shadowy figure appeared on the console.

"Yes?"

"You wanted to know if anyone asked after the Argon female?" The info-broker sat patiently waiting for a response. Long moments passed before the image responded.

"Go on."

"Korecmancketras, Serandamancketal's blood brother, has just asked where he can find her."

There was a long pause.

"Was anyone with him?"

"No."

"And what did you tell him?"

"Only that she was last seen in Duke's Domain."

Again there was a pause before the darkened image responded.

"You have done well. Expect payment as usual." The comm closed.

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Tor shifted in his seat as the updated archive became live. He felt as though he had lost enough time sitting around waiting and immediately started to try and reduce the list.

"Computer show me only the scout ships and heavy fighters that left the station in the last tazura."

A few sezuras later the list updated.

"Remove all ships that were not piloted or had an Argon woman aboard."

The list reduced further and left fifty ships. Considerably more than he had expected to find.

"Okay, show me the names of pilots and passengers."

He spotted the name Julian Gardna and read the passenger name Sahra Homeleigh. Tor decided that he did not like coincidences.

"Computer replay news article on Jump capable Nova."

The article began to play on the screen.

"Freeze item and rewind five sezuras. Play at quarter speed. Freeze and grid. Centre and magnify C five to E seven." A pulse from the rear weapon obscured the view of the rear gunner. But he could tell that it was a woman who sat in the gunners seat.

"Play the next five frames." The image shifted.

"Pan image left to grid G four to I six."

Tor spent a few moments looking at the image. His heart quickened as he moved closer to the screen and squinted. The image was still too small for him to be absolutely certain, but in his heart he already knew it was her.

"Magnify by four." He sat back and quietly cursed as he looked at the image of Nyeshta.

The airlock door opened behind him and he turned to see Korecmancketras enter the ship. Tor spoke first.

"You need to see this."

"Nice picture, where was it taken?" Korecmancketras showed no hint of surprise and continued past Tor.

"Just outside this station. Strange thing is, the pilot works for Terracorp and jumped out of sector shortly after this was taken. I have a horrible feeling we might be too late."

"I wouldn't read too much into that. There's been a positive sighting of Nye in Duke's Domain."

Korecmancketras sat heavily in the pilot seat and started the pre-launch checks.

"Departure clearance granted." The computer said.

Tor turned and looked at Korecmancketras in surprise.

"If she's on a Terracorp ship, I'm pretty sure the pilot will soon find out she's wanted for theft."

"And much more. Nye is known to kill, and if the pilot has any sense they would drop her off at her desired destination without saying anything. Then let the bounty hunters know where she is, and get a finders reward."

"Wouldn't she make sure she disposed of the pilot so they couldn't do that?"

"That would be normal. But she might be losing her touch."

Tor glanced at the image and was lost in thought for a few moments before asking.

"So what else did you find out?"

The docking clamps released and the Paranid guided the ship towards the exit manually. He glanced towards Tor briefly before answering.

"The bounty hunters are aware of her location."

"What if I get the Defiance to meet us there?" Tor wondered how he might react if he ever met the Nova's pilot. He doubted it would be a friendly encounter.

"No! By the Three Dimensionality, we don't want to get into a fight."

"We might have to."

"The answer is still, no."

Tor frowned and felt perplexed, he turned and switched the screen before him to show the galactic map and mentally calculated how long it would take to reach the trading station.

The Perseus cleared the docking port and accelerated on full boost towards the gate.

\*\*

Feran Bloodheart looked out of his office window and watched transports deliver supplies to the impressive bulk of the Python, Thirst. It had moved out of the enveloping nebula cloud and past the broken Earth gate to come to rest ten k's from the station.

Fighter groups moved around the ship in formation, not that the Python had much to fear. It had drawn the attention of the Khaak ships that manifested themselves in the sector, and with consummate ease eliminated them.

This was, to his mind, the way things should be. He called the elimination of the Khaak an act by the true heart of the fighting Split. No cowering in the shadows for his flagship. Feran mulled over the mental images of the Pythons glorious, sweeping entrance as phased photons cascaded from the multiple gun turrets reducing its enemies to vapour. He smiled as he reveled with the thought of its unstoppable might, and it was his to command. Just gazing at the lines of the ship he could tangibly taste its power, and it tasted sweet

"My Lord." Ganark interrupted his thoughts.

"What progress?" .

"We are ready, Lord."

"Good."

"Will you give the order now, Lord?"

Feran thought for a while, he was ready for the battle, and as he admired the Thirst he could already taste victory, but other wheels were in motion and the time was not yet right. He fought against his desire to strike now and revel in the joy it would give him to demonstrate that he was the ultimate power in the unregulated sectors.

"No. There are bigger prizes to be had. We must be patient."

Ganark looked puzzled, the word 'patient' was not one he would ever have associated with Feran. His Lord was keeping information very close to his chest and to his mind this showed a deepening lack of respect.

"My Lord, it would be dangerous to leave the squad in position for much longer."

"They will remain hidden. When the Thirst moves, our enemy will know that we come for him. And when our guns sweep aside their pathetic excuse for a fighting force, and beat down the shields of his station. Then the order will be given to attack from within."

"My Lord."

\*\*

The journey to Duke's Domain was swift and uneventful and the Perseus glided into the trading station docking bay without delays.

Tor felt apprehensive as he checked the station archives and smiled when he saw the entry for the Nova. He looked towards Korecmancketras and said.

"Nyeshta did arrive here."

"Let's hope she's still here."

"Do I get to come with you this time?" Tor was anxious to hear information first hand.

"Scan the planetary transports and look for that name you found. She'll use it for a while yet." The Paranid laid a heavy hand on Tor's shoulder.

Tor turned to the console.

"Computer, run a scan of the station archive for the name Sahra Homeleigh over the last Tazura."

"Scanning."

Tor noticed that Korecmancketras was still standing behind him and glanced around with curiosity.

"Still here?"

"This won't take long." The Paranid watched the screen as a single reference appeared. Quietly he hoped there would be more but his gut feel was that this would be the only one.

Tor sat waiting expectantly until the computer reported.

"Scan complete."

Tor was surprised there were no more entries. By all appearance, the search would end here and, with a sense of hope, he looked over his shoulder saying.

"What do you make of this?"

"She arrived, but we already know that." Korecmancketras read the one entry several times and checked the date stamp. In his heart he knew too much time had elapsed for Nyeshta to have stayed in one place. This quietly worried him, but he felt the need not to make Tor aware of his concerns too early.

"And, according to this, she hasn't left yet."

"Your powers of deduction are remarkable. But, by the eyes of the Three Dimensionality, I don't think we'll find her on board." Korecmancketras patted Tor's shoulder and moved into the rear cabin.

Tor rose from his seat and followed. He felt that Korecmancketras enjoyed each opportunity to get in a little friendly abuse, and wondered if he made himself an easy target. He responded.

"Korec, I like your optimism. It's giving me a nice warm feeling inside."

"Good." Korecmancketras gave a wry smile as he opened the airlock doors.

They stepped out and Tor moved ahead as Korecmancketras secured the ship. He watched Tor as he strolled casually away, and for the first time he noted the lazy, energy efficient movement, and some primeval memory stirred, that he was in the presence a predator moving obliviously through its prey.

He shook his head and chided himself that it was only Tor, and he was Argon, and the Argon lacked such finesse. With long strides he quickly caught up, to ask.

"So do you know where we're going?"

"No, I was ambling along, waiting for you to catch up and tell me."

"This way." Korecmancketras moved ahead.

The walkways were busy and Tor wondered if any one would recognise him, but he remembered the majority tended to make a point of ignoring what they considered lesser forms of existence. Even so, members of other races were interspersed amongst the crowd. Tor relaxed his mind and senses, he did not feel as though he was being watched.

Korecmancketras stopped and looked around. Tor wondered why and cast his gaze to see if he could make out what his companion had found interesting. The Paranid nudged him.

"We go in here. Give me a few sezuras and then follow. Find a table and order yourself a drink. And keep alert as I make enquiries."

Tor simply gave a quick nod and Korecmancketras moved away. He meandered aimlessly for a brief time and then cut through the general flow of pedestrians and crossed the threshold of the bar. The sound of music and general hubbub of chatter hit him, as he passed through the noise reduction field.

His eyes adjusted to the comparative gloom of the room. The air was laden with Paranid cigar smoke and the musty smell of ales and hot spicy Ferrocka. Three Teladi traders vacated a table close to the back wall of the room and moved towards the exit. As they passed him he could make out they were discussing the merits of Stott Spices in Paranid cuisine. He moved swiftly towards the table and sat down.

He tapped on the table screen and registered his credit chip to open a bar tab. There was a special offer on the Ferrocka drink, and the advert claimed the new drink that was becoming a favourite beverage amongst the younger Paranid generation. So he ordered one out of curiosity.

While he waited for the order to be processed, his eyes scanned the room, searching out the familiar face of Korecmancketras. His view was blocked by the presence of a heavy set Paranid, who looked less than pleased.

"By his holiness, you unholy scrapings off the toes of the Pontifex's pet Mahrecke. You have stolen my table. Vacate now and take your rancid features away from the glorious eyes of the Three Dimensionality."

Tor sat back.

"Your table?"

"You abomination to the greatness of the Three Dimensionality, you dare to sully me, and offend my ears with your foul words. Do not speak, do. And leave while I still have temper enough to let you live unpunished."

Tor quickly glanced around for another vacant table, there were none. The confrontation was quickly drawing interest from the clientele, but he noted the security guard at the entrance was taking a keen disinterest. He toyed with the idea of simply leaving and standing by the bar until another table came free. But if he did that, then he would lose face, with himself if not to all the Paranid around. They had become the focus of attention and he responded.

"There are three empty seats. You're welcome to sit here while I have my drink. Providing you know how to keep a civil tongue."

The Paranid looked incensed and adopted a highly aggressive stance. The multi-jointed arms moving apart, ready to put Tor in a bone crushing hold.

Tor glanced down to the strapping on his right hand. The Paranid moved to strike and with fast reflexes the arms snaked out to grab thin air. Tor's lightning reflexes had him shift to one side, his left hand closed around the Paranid's right wrist and brought the hand down so that it slammed onto the table with a resounding crack.

The Paranid's expression was of surprise and then he grimaced from the pain, his free hand lashed around to strike Tor. Who ducked down and kicked out with his left leg. It connected with the Paranid's right knee causing him to fall hard against the table.

Tor moved behind the Paranid as he struggled to stand up and leant heavily against his neck, forcing his head back on to the table. He spoke calmly.

"Now don't force to do something I might regret. But in the eyes of the Three Dimensionality, I would suggest that you take your hurt pride and find another table. This one's mine."

"By his holiness, I will hunt you down Argon."

"You'll be making a mistake if you do." Tor became aware that the security guard was only a short distance away and had drawn his blaster.

He released the Paranid and pushed him away. Tor sat down and the robot waiter appeared with his drink. The security guard exchanged a few words with Tor's attacker and holstered the blaster. The security guard stared at Tor for a while and he began to consider that a little humiliation might have been the better option. Eventually with a look of contempt he turned away and returned to his post beside the entrance.

Tor breathed a sigh of relief, and looked around to see if he could see Korecmancketras. He took a sip of the drink and immediately spat it back into the glass. He could feel his stomach turn over and put the drink down. Feeling the need to wash the taste from his mouth he diverted his attention to the screen and ordered an ale before resuming looking for Korecmancketras.

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Korecmancketras studied the faces around him, and was aware of the general level of discomfort at Tor's continued presence. He had been worried that he would be forced to intervene on Tor's behalf, yet Tor had, in those few brief seizures, overcome his opponent in moves that almost appeared lazy in their execution but whose speed was deceptive to the eye.

Yet, he found he could monopolise on the situation as the incident allowed him to open dialogue with the Paranid around him. An Argon beating a Paranid in a hand to hand fight, was virtually unheard of. It provided him with an opportunity to engage in friendly banter.

After a while he found himself in the company of an off duty station security officer. Having briefly spoken about the incident the officer commented.

"I expect he is another of these unholy Argon bounty hunters. With their pitiful two dimensional insights, and a lack of appreciation for our principles and beliefs."

"Bounty hunters? You are troubled by them?"

"Constantly. Ever since some of the unholy claimed we assisted in the escape of one of their wanted."

"Of all the insolence. Why would they make such a claim?" Korecmancketras noticed his companions drink was empty and ordered him another.

"May the Pontifex, bless your generosity." The officer commented as the drink arrived. Korecmancketras tried to gauge how intoxicated his companion was. It took a Paranid to know how drunk another Paranid really is, and he gauged the officer was well on his way, but it would take a few more drinks to be absolutely certain.

A table became vacant and Korecmancketras indicated to his companion that they sit down. As they moved around the table he ensured he was facing into the room.

"So was it a dangerous criminal they're accusing you of helping to escape."

"Some unholy Argon female, I think the name was Ny-essa."

"It doesn't sound like a dangerous name." Korecmancketras took a light sip of his drink as the officer gulped down a large mouthful of ale.

"I have yet to meet a truly dangerous unholy Argon."

"Even the unholy one over there?"

"The unholy one is quick but his moves were predictable. Our enlightened brethren was too over anxious to prove himself. Had he taken his time the outcome would have been very different."

Korecmancketras doubted this would have been the case, but signed his agreement and gave a confident smile. He responded.

"My thoughts exactly. But if the unholy ones are bothering you about this Argon female, wouldn't it be better to find her and hand her over. This way you'd not have them wasting your time."

"A pious suggestion. We have searched, but have not found the unholy one."

"Hmm, well if she's not on board then I see no reason why the unholy should bother you." He took another sip of his drink, his companion took another large gulp.

"The unholy are too stubborn to accept our findings. And we have no reason to make the unholy aware of our superior abilities to scan ships."

"So you know what ship the unholy left on?"

The officer smiled and finished his drink, and Korecmancketras ordered another round.

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As time passed, Tor occasionally glanced around, and watched as Korecmancketras eventually made the gesture of farewell to his companion and left the bar. He remained seated for a few mizuras longer just to finish his drink. The temptation to drain the glass in one go reflected his keenness to find out if his Paranid friend had discovered anything of interest. He fought against the urge in order to appear unhurried.

He checked his time piece and stood up. A few final taps on the table screen put the display back to the initial options menu and he walked to the exit. As he stepped out of the bar two station police approached him. The taller of the two spoke but made no effort to look directly at Tor.

"In the name of the Pontifex Maximus Paranidia, you are under arrest for creating a disturbance."

Tor looked calm and caught sight of a worried looking Korecmancketras. He thought for a moment and then said.

"I am Tor Grall, a good friend of Polmanckelest. Who is waiting for my successful return to the lost sectors, having brought a message to his holiness the Pontifex that his Priest Champion is alive and well. I have traveled far to deliver this message, and I'm sure that neither the Priest Champion or the Pontifex will share their enlightenment with any that delay the Priest Champions glorious return."

Both Paranid looked perplexed and shot each other uncertain glances.

"What proof do you have that the mighty Priest Champion Polmanckelest is still alive?"

"Evidence? You want me to show you the Priest Champions personal message to the Pontifex?" Tor relaxed and shook his head while giving a wry smile. "No, the evidence is for the Pontifex alone to see."

The two Paranid looked at each other and spoke quietly. After a few sezuras they faced Tor and the taller one addressed him.

"You will come with us."

"Allow me one moment to converse with a friend and I'll be right with you."

The two station police glanced at each other and moved in a threatening pose to prevent him from wandering off. Tor smiled as he waved to Korecmancketras to join him. The officers looked at the newcomer with suspicion as Tor spoke.

"Korec, could you contact the Defiance and ask Corricel to come over. I'd appreciate it."

Korecmancketras looked at each of the two officers for a few moments before speaking to Tor.

"Shall I also contact his holiness to inform him of your delay?"

"I think that would be wise." Tor remained calm and composed, while both officers had the expression of confusion and indecision.

Korecmancketras turned and walked away. Tor knew that although there was no message, the Defiance archive would show that Polmanckelest was alive.

"Shall we go."

With each step Tor became more apprehensive that he had said anything at all. He reflected that he had little concept of Paranid Laws, and quietly rebuked himself as he considered that they would, in all likelihood, have a similar punishments to Argon Station Laws and fine him for the offence. Now that he had tried to talk his way out of the situation, by elevating his own importance, he began to wonder if he might have just talked himself into deeper trouble. Mentally he chastised himself.

'Engage brain, then engage mouth.'

They had barely reached the Hall of Correction before Tor's comm device activated and Corricel's voice spoke.

"I have arrived."

"Excellent, patch in to my datapad. I'll need battle footage of Priest Champion Polmanckelest."

"Acknowledged."

The two officers guided him to a room and Tor's feeling of apprehension grew. The room was in the traditional interrogation style, with stark bright colours on every surface, and the only furniture welded to the floor. He tried to lighten the mood.



"I think you need to use some nice soft pastel shades in here, to give the room a warm comfortable feeling."

"Sit."

Tor moved casually to the seat and found it to be arms length from the table. He had to perch on the edge in order to place his datapad on the surface.

"In the name of the Pontifex, show us the message!"

"No. That is for the divine eyes of the Pontifex alone. What I will show you is the Priest Champion engaging the Khaak. Ship identification, with audio visual, should be sufficient evidence to prove that he is alive and well."

Both officers stood and stared down at Tor, neither saying a word. A voice came over the hidden comm units and announced.

"In the enlightened eyes of the Three Dimensionality. The punishment for creating a disturbance on station is three Wozuras hard labour in the Ore Mines of Empires Edge, or a fifty thousand credit fine. Attempting to avoid payment by means of deception carries a three Mazura sentence in the Ore Mines."

The voice allowed time for this to sink in.

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Nyeshta relaxed as the last vestiges of the interrogation drugs ebbed from her muscles and joints. The ship's cargo hold rattled and buzzed. The hum of the ion engines reverberated in the open space around her. She had found herself an open space to sit and quietly contemplate.

"Trust, it's all about trust." She muttered and considered that she didn't have any for them and, despite all her efforts to appear helpful, they had shown none towards her.

She had bought herself time by listening to their request carefully and eventually agreeing to help. Her jaw ached and her left eye had closed over with a vivid purple swelling. In their haste to persuade her, she felt as though they had also cracked two ribs on her right side. And still she had no idea who these people were or who they worked for.

It was only a small consolation that, she hoped, they were now heading towards Nopileo's Memorial. During her interview, she had revealed the original plans were securely stowed on a station in that sector, and were only retrievable by her, in person, and alive. Nyeshta knew the station well, having spent long hours scouring the place for parts suitable to put into the Defiance.

She looked around the hold with her one good eye and wondered what class of ship they were transporting her in. The overall space was not large enough for a cargo ship of any kind, which was a comforting thought in itself. However it looked old, and she guessed it would be one of the obsolete fighter models.

This, to her mind, ruled out any of the race controlled secret service organisations. Which left the pirate clans, and this she found a disquieting thought. Nyeshta considered that any one of them would be looking for some tactical advantage over the others, or at least to balance the odds, now that the Bloodhearts had acquired a Python.

Time passed without any noticeable change in the sound of the engines. Only the occasional burst of the attitude thrusters made her aware of directional changes. Eventually the reverse thrusters engaged and Nyeshta took a deep breath, her mind raced with the thought they had arrived and were about to dock.

She knew that in a few mizuras they would let out and in her mind she had a plan to escape. Nyeshta smiled, it was a plan that could not go wrong. Even if they put a restraint collar on her.

The Paranid that had conducted the interview, opened the bulkhead door into the main cabin and stepped inside. A Split male followed him in. She did not recognise the newcomer and both were in civilian clothes.

Without a word they approached and slipped on the slave restraint unit. She could feel her muscles tense and then the traditional searing pain raced through her as they tested the unit. A brief cry of pain escape her, as she knew that any attempt to hold it back would only inspire her captors to test it again.

The Split triggered the cargo bay door release and stepped down the ramp. The Paranid moved behind her.

"Get up!"

Nyeshta eased herself up and followed the Split. She stepped out onto the delivery platform and her heart sank, this was not the right station. She looked around and caught sight of the motif blazoned on each door. Her knees felt weak.

## *Chapter 16*

The Split mercenary gave Nyeshta a firm shove towards the shuttle lift. She glanced around in the hope of seeing an escape route. Nothing looked promising and as she stepped into the shuttle lift her mind told her this was it. Yet something about the early questioning bothered her. She did not have time to consider the matter further as the shuttle lift door opened.

"Please step inside, Nyeshta." The voice was that of an Argon male. And not one she recognised, but she could guess his name.

The Split pushed her into the room and the lift door closed behind her. She elected to remain silent and glanced towards the two men present. Nyeshta knew who they both were.

"I'm sure formal introductions aren't necessary, but just for the record. I am Caran Belign and this is Ban Danna." Caran paced slowly across the room, while Ban remained seated and his expression was difficult to read.

"Perhaps you're wondering why you're here, and not on a prison ship?" Ban spoke calmly.

"I assumed you wanted to beat more information out of me."

"If that's what you expect, I can certainly oblige you." Caran commented as he wandered around the back of her.

"We don't have time for this. You have evaded the law for long enough, but against my better judgement you will not be taken into custody this time." Ban glanced at Caran as he spoke.

Nyeshta thought for a moment.

"You're going to give me a chance to redeem myself?"

"In a way." Caran commented, "You know the bounty on you is payable dead or alive. If you agree to the task the terms will be changed to reflect that payment will only be made if you are brought in alive."

"That'll make me sleep a whole lot better, thanks. Anything else to tempt me into agreeing?"

"More agreeable prison facilities and maybe a reduced sentence." Caran commented as he stopped a short distance from her left side.

"You really know how to persuade a girl. And what do I have to do to get this special treatment?"

"The Bloodhearts have mobilised their flagship and, we believe, are preparing to move against one of the other clans. Our sources indicate that it's the Shadow Troop who are the target. An unfortunate coincidence as it's on their station that you've hidden the stolen plans for the X-Shuttle." Ban energised a holo-projection unit as he spoke. The display showed the Python positioned within the shadow of the Bloodheart station. Nyeshta felt her stomach tighten and nauseous in anticipation of what was to come next. Ban continued.

"The mercenaries you are with will deliver you to the Bloodheart station as per their agreement with Feran. You will be with the attack force that takes the station, at which point you will return the plans to us or destroy them and make your escape."

"That's the dumbest idea I've heard in a long time. There's no way I'm going through with that." Nyeshta took a step back.

"Trouble is you're going to be delivered to the Bloodheart station and to Feran irrespective of your decision."

Nyeshta swore at both of them. Caran interrupted her.

"On a positive theme, the young Tor Grall is looking for you. If you choose to co-operate with us we will let him know where to find you."

She glared at him before responding.

"How's that going to help? Except by getting him killed."

"Tor is not the same person you once knew, and the Defiance is significantly enhanced. Why else do you think Feran made an extra special effort to get hold of you." Caran took a step closer.

"Enhanced? How?"

Ban leant forward and spoke up.

"With alien technology. So even if you decide not to help us, Feran will soon find out the blueprints you have cannot build the ship he wants. And I wouldn't like to contemplate how he will react when he realises it."

Nyeshta stood silently in thought for some time.

"It looks like I have to say, 'yes' to your request. But I have to ask, with all the new ships around, what's all the fuss over the blueprints for the X-Shuttle?"

"As I understand it, you made a very good copy of the ship. Yet, there were some significant elements of the original design which you omitted from your version. A number of these elements are still top secret and we don't want them falling into the wrong hands." Ban finished his sentence and stood up. He continued, "Now I think it's time you were on your way."

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Tor felt uncomfortable as the shuttle lift descended towards the commercial and public docking bays. Either side of him were the two officers that had arrested him. He reflected back to the statement made in the interrogation room.

"Show us your evidence, and if you are found to be telling the truth, you will still be required to pay the fine. If you cannot pay we will arrange escort to the Pontifex and then you will be taken to serve sentence. If you are deemed to be lying, then you will be sentenced accordingly."

Tor mentally cursed himself as he weighed up the options. He had stayed calm and smiled before pressing the replay icon and sat back as the mini projector unit on the datapad energised. Every moment that the archive played his nervousness had grown. At any moment he expected an interruption telling him that this was not sufficient evidence to satisfy the claim.

Several mizuras passed as Polmanckelest's Prometheus battled against numerous Khaak ships, and comms messages were replayed. Still there was no interruption. He remembered almost sighing with relief as the final images showed the Prometheus docking with the Roamer after the battle had concluded.

Tor remained silent as he waited for the response. Long, seemingly painful, moments passed, before the disembodied voice spoke again.

"We have analysed the evidence you have provided and have no reason to doubt that Priest Champion Polmanckelest is still alive. In the name of the Pontifex, it would only be right for the Priest Champion to send private word to his holiness. We will arrange for you and the ship Defiance to meet with the honoured representatives of the divine one. You will deliver the message to them. For the fine, do you have the means to pay?"

"I do."

The door slid open, the tall officer moved out of the room as Tor picked up his datapad. The remaining officer spoke as he stood up.

"Unholy one, you will pay, then we will escort you to your ship."

The lift descended through an upper level floor into the wide open gallery of the docking bay. Ships of all races nestled against the sides. His eyes scanned for the familiar shape of the Defiance but he could not see it.

The shuttle lift came to rest at the main dock level, and the officers ushered him out of the lift.

"We will find dock number of your ship. Wait." The tall officer turned and left. Tor began to wonder if he should try and find out the names of his two companions. He watched as the officer reached the enquiries desk and began talking to the clerk.

The discussion lasted much longer than Tor expected. The officer returned and announced.

"The Defiance is no longer here." There was an uneasy silence.

"Was there any information as to why?" Tor looked around hoping to see if Korecmancketras was lurking nearby. There was no sign of him and he was curious why no one had sent him a comm message.

"None."

"Just give me a moment to contact the Defiance." Tor looked at his datapad as it initiated a search for the ship through the satellite networks. The scan radius continued to increase sector by sector. As the count rose Tor felt an increasing sense of alarm and frustration.

"You have an incoming message." The small voice of the pad announced.

"Show me." Tor hoped it would be Corricel. The image that arrived was that of Korecmancketras.

"Tor, the Defiance has left the station to answer a distress call from one of your transports. It'll be back soon."

"What do you mean by soon?" Tor felt a growing concern that this sudden turn of events did not aid him. Somewhere in the back of his mind he could hear the rattle of chains and the repeated striking of a hammer against stone.

"Somewhere between a mizura and a jazura. Soon." Korecmancketras appeared to smile.

"And where are you?" Tor felt that Korecmancketras's presence would provide him with a greater credibility when explaining to the two officers that they would have to hang around until the return of the Defiance.

"By his holiness's good grace. I've just received some information that you were looking for. Expect me back in a few mizuras."

\*\*

Nyeshta once again found herself in the hold of the old model Mamba. She had difficulty believing the Argon Secret Service had let her leave. As she meditated, the faces of the eight agents she had killed on different occasions to escape capture crept to the front of her mind, their dead eyes sent an involuntary shudder down her spine. Moisture crept around her closed eyelids, and she chided herself that this was not the time for regrets.

She felt that Ban Danna had not completely consented to this plan. Her gut reaction told her that he would have preferred to see her sent to one of the maximum security penal colonies. As it was, there was a very high chance she would die in the next few tazuras. She would have to trust her ability for survival, as had been so often the case, she knew an opportunity would present itself for her to turn a situation around.

Her mind caught a glimpse of the memory of Caran Belign, the metal plate in his face glimmering in the dim light of the room. A man she knew to be cruel and yet she had the feeling he was, for some inexplicable reason, trying to help her. It was him that had told her about Tor, and it left a question in her mind.

Nyeshta wondered why Tor was looking for her, deep down she felt warmed by the thought, but she could not understand it. Everything Caran said implied that Tor would be her key to freedom, but she knew that Feran would kill Tor the first opportunity he had, and he would kill anyone that Tor cared for. Simply out of spite.

The hum of the Mambas engines continued for many mizuras. Until the sound of the reverse thrusters alerted Nyeshta, that they had arrived. Her heart beat quickened and she muttered to herself.

"Keep calm."

The sound of the docking grips connecting to the side of the ship echoed through the bay. She took long deep steady breaths and blanked out any thought of what she might find when she disembarked.

The Paranid mercenary appeared and released the cargo doors.

"Up!" He ordered and waved a blaster in her general direction. She quickly came to her feet and the tacit Split gave her push towards the ramp.

The bitter tang of burnt Spaceweed, blended with stale ale attacked her senses of smell and taste. She glanced at the slave pens as she was led past, the occupants looked miserable, but clean and reasonably fed. She noted they were not so well fed that they would find the strength to put up a fight if the opportunity arose.

The pirate mercenary continued past without looking back. Nyeshta took this as a sign that she was being taken directly to see the clan leader.

"Where you take this woman?" The harsh voice of the Split security captain brought them to a halt.

"By his holiness, she's to see his Lordship."

The captain walked past the Paranid and stared at Nyeshta. A cruel malevolent smile crossed his lips.

"She is un-registered. Must be tagged."

"Tag me and I'll rip your head off."

The captain's hand lashed out to strike her. She dropped down into a crouch and the hand skimmed over the top of her head. Pain from the restraint collar rippled through her and she fell back, but before the captain could attempt to strike her again the Paranid blocked him.

"By the three dimensionality, his Lordship has not yet decided if she is to become a slave."

Nyeshta could tell the captain was incensed and momentarily lost for words by the Paranids intervention. She glanced towards the Split mercenary, he looked thoughtful and to Nyeshta this was not a good trait for a Split.

"Wait. I will call my Lord and he will decide."

\*\*

Tor tried not to appear anxious. He had managed to persuade the Officers that he needed to get something to eat. The food hall overlooked the docking bay and from his vantage point he could see the arrival of all new ships.

His left hand firmly gripped the cup of hot sweet Garrow Root cha. The heat from the liquid providing a passive comforting warmth against the growing anxiety that each mizura brought.

Thirty mizuras after discovering the Defiance was gone, the two officers stood up.

"By his holiness. This is wasting our time. We will return to the Halls of Correction and you will face judgement for deception."

Tor contemplated throwing the hot liquid over the officers and making a run for it. Sense kicked in, this was an island in space with no way off. They would catch him, and he did not dare to imagine what the punishment would be.

"Just a few mizuras more."

"They would serve no purpose!" The tall officer leant forward and placed both hands on the table.

"Are you worried I'm going to suddenly run away? Where would I go? Just give them another ten mizuras."

"No."

Tor took a deep breath, and felt certain there would be another fine if he continued to try and argue for more time. He took a long sip of his drink and reluctantly put the cup down before standing up. He was deeply perplexed that Korecmancketras had not arrived and wondered if something had happened to him. As for Corricel and the Defiance he could not even guess what was happening. The thought crossed his mind that Korecmancketras had located Nyeshta and with Corricel had taken the opportunity to rescue her.

The thought made him smile, until he reflected that he was equally in need of rescuing. But not to the point where he would lose all favour with the Paranid race.

"Move." The officer straightened up.

"The Defiance will return for me."

"Before the eyes of the Three Dimensionality, you had better hope it arrives soon." The second officer turned and led the way to the exit. Tor fell into step behind him and felt the eyes of curious onlookers watching.

To Tor the march back to the Hall of Correction was all too quick. Once again he was led to room, but this time the officers motioned for Tor to stand on a pedestal. An electronic voice spoke.

"Charge?"

"Attempting to deceive Holy officers of the Divine Empire."

"There is no deception, my ship was called away.." Tor was cut off.

"The accused is found guilty. Sentence is three mazuras of righteous labour in the mines of his exulted holiness. Prisoner to be processed for departure in fifteen mizuras."

The swiftness of the sentencing astounded Tor. And he looked around. The two officers moved either side of him and the shorter one spoke.

"You will be permitted to wear your own clothes to the facility. But you must surrender any electronic and comm devices to us now. By the name of his Holiness, these will be returned to you on release. All weapons and other devices for personal protection must also be surrendered. As a criminal of the Holy Empire these will never be returned."

Within Tor the urge to try and escape grew stronger, his fingers slowly released the restraining clip of the blaster and his fingers stroked the grip. His eyes met those of the officer and he wondered if

the third eye allowed the Paranid to read minds. The officer did not look concerned or worried as they both knew the weapon was still in safe mode and unprimed for discharge.

The blaster moved clear of the holster and Tor flipped it in the air and held it out. Carefully he opened his flight jacket and pulled out the smaller concealed weapon. Then handed over the two blades before unclipping the pocket stun stick. He turned it over in his hand and remembered when he first bought it. Tor looked at the scratched casing and although he never used it, he felt strangely naked without it.

The datapad was the last item he handed over, and he spent some time staring at the screen hoping the electronic voice would bring him some good news. He muttered out loud.

"Where are you?"

The tall officer took the pad from him, and moved to the door. It opened and for a moment Tor was hopeful to see a friendly face. No one was there.

"Unholy one. You will follow."

They marched him through the prisoner transfer gates and along plain corridors that lacked any feature other than the ceiling lights. Security doors at each end were the only exits along its length and the last one entered a shuttle lift that descended to a secure dock. Heavily armed guards scanned them through to the boarding ramp. Tor hesitated and turned to speak to the officers.

"Can you check to see if the Defiance has arrived?"

"It hasn't."

"Could you just check?" Tor had the feeling that if he stepped on the waiting transport then even if the Defiance did appear he would not be getting off it on this station.

"Unholy one, you can either walk on or be transported on. The choice is yours."

\*\*

Korecmancketras sat gazing into his empty glass. His mood was dark and despondent at having been instructed by his brother to dock at Soyfarm Alpha in Priests Pity, only to find that Caran Belign was waiting for him. The Argon agent placed a jug of ale on the table and Korecmancketras filled his glass.

He glanced around the lounge. It was in one of the luxury private suites with several adjoining rooms and its own bar. Korecmancketras felt slightly betrayed by his brother for luring him here and angry that he was not able to communicate with Tor. He had made a commitment to the young Argon that he was now unable to fulfill, and this he was having trouble accepting. Deep inside he felt as though he was betraying a friend. Yet there were Paranid security guards posted at the door to prevent him from sending word. He stifled his growing temper by remembering a holy prayer to induce spiritual calm. Eventually he looked at Caran to say.

"In the name of the Pontifex, this is wrong."

"It's in Tor's best interest that he's nowhere near Nyeshta. Chances are she'll betray him instantly, if it means she can save her own skin."

"You never did like her?"

"Like? What is there to like? Oh, don't get me wrong she's very attractive and has a very disarming smile to melt the hardest of hearts. Yet beneath the surface there's a demon inside, and it rules a heartless killer. But I'm surprised you never saw that?"

Korecmancketras did not answer but took a slow thoughtful sip of his drink. He had seen the dark killer side of Nyeshta's personality, but he had also seen the glimmer of goodness within. The part he considered worth saving if he could find a way.



He reflected on how she had changed when he saw her arrive at the Bakery. That her better nature had grown stronger with the renewed hope of an untroubled life, while the darker, untrusting and malevolent side had begun to diminish. His thoughts contemplated that everything he had tried to do to nurture the good had now been undone. Eventually he spoke.

"Why didn't you just tell Tor what you were planning?"

"Do you think he would have listened? You know Tor. He would still have tried to find her. And if he succeeded the plans for the X-Shuttle would remain hidden away on some Pirate station. Waiting to be discovered by another ruthless person."

"He will not thank you for making him serve time in the Divine Mines."

Caran sat down opposite Korecmancketras.

"I can live with that. Anyway, we'll get him out, when she has completed what we asked of her."

"By his holiness, you mean when Feran's killed her."

"She has a talent for survival, and I have no doubt she will manage to complete our task before she has to worry about that."

Korecmancketras stared long and hard at Caran. The uncaring tone of the Argon bordered on a residual malice that he felt uncomfortable with.

"Your eyes lack the greater vision of the Three Dimensionality. Tell me, do you understand the nature of feelings?"

Caran took a deep breath and let it out slowly before answering.

"Yes, but not where she's concerned."

"Will you keep your word to her?"

"So far as changing the terms of the bounty, then 'yes'. But if she seriously wounds or kills another person then the conditions change back."

Korecmancketras could see the new breed of bounty hunters backing away from the contract, live captures fell into the domain of specialists and they demanded something extra for their services. Needless to say there would be one or two rookies that would be foolhardy enough to take on the contract at the current fee.

"So did you deceive the Defiance, the same way you tricked me into coming here?"

Caran looked surprised.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"The ships AI reported that it was going to assist a freighter in distress. It has not returned."

There was a long silence and Korecmancketras wondered what Caran was thinking. He was aware that if he indicated Corricel had acted without instruction then it would reveal her true nature. He wondered that if he let this slip then Caran might just forget to have Tor released early from the mines. The Argon agent broke the silence.

"I expect Tor ordered it to assist and it's waiting for its next instruction. Do you know where the freighter was and we'll get a sector listing for all the ships present."

"No."

"Well it'll take several stazuras to do a complete sweep of all the sectors. How far out do your ships normally travel? So we can narrow the search."

Caran's comm signaled a new message before Korecmancketras had a chance to answer. He retrieved his datapad and activated the message.

"Sir, you need to check the Paranid News channel."

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The Paranid guard tightened down the restraint buckles and locked the holding bar which kept Tor from leaving his seat. The prison transport, lacked any refinements and all the items around him served only one purpose. To restrain prisoners in the least comfort possible. He could only think that the Paranid believed that you should know at every possible moment that you were being punished. He had only been sat for a few sezuras and his shoulders already began to twinge with pain. Looking around meant straining muscles against the grips.

He could just make out there were four other prisoners near by, three Paranid and a Split. The Paranid appeared to be meditating while the Split quietly muttered obscenities.

Tor closed his eyes when he heard the hiss of the airlock door behind him. With the jar of the docking clamps releasing all hope of a last minute intervention vanished. A few uncertain moments passed as the engines idled and there was the dull thud of the clamps re-engaging.

Guards moved past him and he could hear the noise of hushed voices but not what they were saying. The airlock door hissed open and hope returned. The guards led a new prisoner past his seat, another Split, and the moment passed back into despair.

"Prisoner Grall. It appears his Eminence the Pontifex has blessed you with good fortune."

Tor was unable to turn his head, as a wave of relief left him in a state of turbulent emotions. The restraining bar was released and the pain in Tor's joints eased. He could only hope it was the Defiance that had returned, but in the same moment he knew he needed to make sure that he would not see the inside of another Paranid prison ship.

The restraints were unbuckled and Tor welcomed the freedom of movement as each one was removed.

"By his holiness, you will follow."

Tor fell into step behind him as he was led to the shuttle lift.

"Will you be escorting me to his Holiness?"

"No. Your ship has returned with the Priest Champion Polmanckelest. He ordered your release."

Tor gave a wry knowing smile, and tried not to look too ecstatic with the news. As they walked back along the transfer corridor Tor felt a twinge of regret that he had not been on the Defiance to deliver the jump coordinated to Sheero personally. Then again he could not fault Corricel for making the decision, now that he was free.

They arrived at the prisoner release desk and he watched as the sentencing forms were updated with, 'Evidence produced. Release authorised.' He waited patiently for a few mizuras as his possessions were returned to him. Although there was some confusion, and great reluctance in returning his weapons.

In the end he still lost both blasters but recovered the two blades and the pocket stun stick. The officer turned to face him.

"By his holiness, you're free. Now go."

"Where do I find the Priest Champion?"

"The great one is in communion with his exulted holiness, the Pontifex. They will not be disturbed by an unholy like you."

"Well say, 'hi' to him from me when you see him." Tor smiled as he turned and left the building. He retraced his steps back to the shuttle lift and let out a deep breath of relief as the Halls of Correction vanished from sight. As the lift moved through the floors and in to the open expanse of the docking bay he caught sight of the Defiance, and the small crowd that had gathered before it. As he drew closer he could tell that many were news reporters. And somehow he would have to get past them.

He attempted to mingle with the crowd, but as only one of three Argon he knew that he would be spotted. The keen eyes of the journalists would find him quickly enough, so he changed tack and went for the direct approach.

Sure enough one of the CBN news reports recognised him.

"Mr. Grall. I have a few questions for you."

Tor remained silent and moved into the throng of reporters that blocked his way. The floating optics of micro-cams buzzed around him.

"Mr. Grall, how does it feel to be free?"

He considered his answer.

"The same as I would feel if you lot got out of my way. Happy."

"Do you expect to be opening new trade routes to the rest of the colonists in the new sectors?"

Tor stopped moving forward and turned to the reporter. He could see they were hungry for the story, but he did not have the time or inclination to stand around giving details.

"There are no new sectors. Just those of us that survived the Khaak slaughter."

Another reporter cut in.

"Do you think the Khaak will attack again?"

"They know you're here."

"We've seen the Khaak clusters, but do they have anything else that we should be aware of?"

Tor looked at the young Argon reporter and turned to push his way through the crowd to the Defiance.

"Mr. Grall, is there anything we haven't seen?"

"The answer is 'yes', there is more to come." The reporters moved with him towards the ship with the micro-cams circling around them.

"Can you tell us what?"

"Only if you want to have nightmares. If you'll excuse me I have business to attend to."

He placed his hand on the airlock door release panel and it hissed open. The inner door remained shut and he stepped in, turning he made sure no-one tried to follow him into the ship, and that there were no micro-cams hovering inside the airlock. The outer door shut as he was bombarded with more questions.

A quick check and he was satisfied nothing had sneaked in as the door closed. The inner airlock door rolled open and Tor called out.

"Corri. Get us departure clearance."

"And it is good to see you Tor."

"Corri, words can't explain how happy I am to see you, and I am forever in your debt. I really mean that. But right at this moment I need you to get us off this station, before something else goes wrong."

## *Chapter 17*

The Defiance cleared the station, and Tor took a few moments to sit and contemplate his next move. He felt he had lost too much time. He wondered why it took so long before the station security turned up to arrest him? Why they waited until he had decided to leave the bar? Suspicions crept into his mind that someone was deliberately trying to thwart his every move. He knew Nyeshta would be covering her tracks but he doubted that she knew that he was looking for her.

"Corri, can you see if you can find Korec. I need to know what he's found out. And preferably who he's with."

"Applying a tracer code to the relay signal."

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Nyeshta walked unrestrained into Feran's office. Behind her was the Bloodhearts first officer Ganark. She masked her fear and nerves with a look of anger. It was one expression she knew the Split would understand.

Feran stood beside the massive view port, his broad frame a dark shadow against the stars. The light of the sun glinting off the cold steel of his artificial arm. The half reflection of his face in the window, tainted red by the shimmering gas cloud.

"My lord, I bring you the woman."

Feran did not look round but she saw him glance at her reflection.

"So you built the Defiance?"

"Yes." She was struck hard from behind and dropped to her knees. Ganark grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her head backwards. He raised his voice.

"You worthless skurl. You will address my Lord with the respect he deserves."

Nyeshta flashed a look of hatred towards the Split, then spat in his face. Ganark snarled and threw her with surprising ease across the room, then drew his blaster.

"No!" Feran ordered, though he still stood with his back to them, "She is here for a purpose. You will have your retribution if she fails to serve as expected. Now leave us."

"My Lord."

The room remained silent until the door glided shut.

"Now where were we." He turned around and Nyeshta felt both surprised and deeply alarmed, the facial similarities were too close. "Ahh, yes, you were about to swear allegiance to the clan."

She opened her mouth but the words failed to come out.

"Often people find it difficult to speak around me. Though I have ways of making them talk." He moved the steel arm and glanced admiringly at it before releasing the blade.

"Or is it that I remind you of someone?" The eyes narrowed and a slow cruel smile crept over his face. "Would it surprise you that Creed is the nameless offspring of my late second uncle. Yes, the madness of my family runs in his veins too. Though he is unfit to bear our name."

"I didn't know, my Lord." Every sense inside her screamed for her to run. She fought to control her breathing and steady her nerves.

Feran took a long deep breath and smiled.

"The scent of fear, so sweet, but I sense there's more I could release. If you fail me, then maybe I should take my pleasure of you, before giving you to Ganark. Though I am led to believe he is a little too soft to get the best out of someone." He watched Nyeshta and images of how exquisitely he could make her suffer etched their way into his mind. For several moments he lost sight of the real purpose of her presence. Until Nyeshta stood up, and stared at him with defiance. The scent of fear diminished and he raised an eyebrow.

"Do you want me to build you some ships, my Lord?"

"That is why you are still alive. The fleet will soon take over the Shadow Troop station and you will recover the plans."

"Just one small thing I should mention. I anticipate your attack on the station will be both bloody and violent. Lots of pulse rifle fire and bombs, that type of thing. The station is old, and many of the systems are inadequately shielded, so there's a fair chance the data will get damaged. My Lord."

Feran contemplated this, and took a step closer.

"In which case you will have no value to me. Except for pleasure."

"Or you can get me onto the station to recover the data before you attack. My Lord." Nyeshta could see the glint of thirsting madness enter the Split's eyes. She had to try keep him on the side of sanity. Feran blinked slowly and the glimmer faded.

"I will do this only if you tell me how to defeat the Defiance. What small trick did you incorporate into the coding, in case the ship was ever stolen."

Nyeshta realised that Feran understood shipbuilders, and she like so many others always put unlock codes in the hardware. She wondered if Feran was still looking for revenge.

\*\*

Korecmancketras sat smiling as he watched the news reports and glanced at Caran who looked pensive.

"By his holiness, you appear to have underestimated Tor's resourcefulness."

"Oh, we still have time to keep him out of trouble."

"If you wanted him restrained, why don't you just keep him confined to rooms? Like you have with me."

"Events moved faster than we had anticipated. We assumed that you would take several tazuras to trace her. But, someone else found her first. Having him arrested was the best we could come up with in the time."

"His holiness would laugh to see so much effort to stop one Argon boy."

"Argon?" Caran looked long and hard at the smiling Paranid, the glint in Korecmancketras's eyes changed as he signed understanding.

"Tor's currently on our side. I want to make sure it stays that way. But he's independent and headstrong, and more importantly, in charge of a ship that our scanners can't make any sense of. Yet appears to have as much destructive power as a Destroyer."

"Feran had better watch out then."

"That would be a good result, but after Nyeshta completes the task at hand."

There was a bleep from the far end of the room. The Argon agent, sat by the door, glanced at the table where Korecmancketras's personal items rested. He reached out and picked up the datapad. After looking at the display he held it up and said.

"There's an incoming message."

\*\*

"I have found him." Corricel reported.

"Where?"

"Soyfarm Alpha, Priests Pity. Datapad scanner reports that he is not alone, there are two other people with him."

"Can you identify them."

"Overriding image control."

The projector unit opened and Tor saw the pad being held up. Across the room he could see Korecmancketras and with him, there was the unmistakable glint of metal in the face of Caran Belign.

"Close the comm."

"What is it Tor?"

"Caran, he's there with Korec." His mind raced and started to make connections. Caran Belign would not want him to find Nyeshta, after all she was wanted by the Argon government. He also knew that Korecmancketras would not have left his datapad just lying around for someone else to pick up, no one did that. He could only reason that his friend was being prevented from meeting him. This he felt meant the Argon Secret Service considered he was much closer to Nyeshta than they wanted him to be, and they would do anything to get to her before him. Even have him arrested. His thoughts darkened at the memory of the prison ship.

"So that's the way you want to play it." His voice was low and filled with malice as he pictured Caran.

"I take it you are not aiming that comment at me?"

"No, Corri. Plot and make the jump to Nopileo's Memorial." There was only one escape route and he knew he needed to be there first.

"We are running low on energy cells."

"We'll get some more when we get there."

\*\*

"Comm closed." The dulcet voice of the datapad announced.

"What do you mean closed?" Caran stared at the unit.

"Your staff must have accidentally pressed the connect button." Korecmancketras spoke quietly and turned and reached out for the jug. He poured himself an ale and smiled.

"Get a lock on the Defiance, I want to know where it is!" His gaze rested on the confused looking agent. The man hurriedly put the datapad down and began speaking quickly into his comm unit.

"Sir the Defiance is no longer in Dukes Domain, we're trying to trace where she's jumped to."

"Try Nopileo's." Korecmancketras sat back, "He seemed quite keen to go there from the start."

"Let me know when the search results come in, and get him on the comm."

"You're going to try and talk to him after this. By his holiness, do you think he will listen?"

"I can hope."

"Entering sector, Nopileo's Memorial."

Tor brought up the sector map and took note that the Khaak were attacking the space lanes. Small clouds of fighter drones were engaged in one sided battles against Khaak heavy fighters and scouts while the freighters tried to make their escape. Inside his heart he wanted to assist in the fight against the Khaak, but that would be more time lost.

With a sense of anguish he turned his attention to finding the pirate station. He expanded the range beyond the standard view. But with no sign of the old station, Corricel then extended the view range out by another fifty percent. After a couple of sezuras the image refreshed and creeping onto the edge of the display was the base.

Tor quickly checked the inventory and found only one fully charged cell left in the cargo hold. Again this left him with a choice, to go straight to the station or make a brief stop. He placed escape firmly at the top of his list.

"Corri, let's get those energy cells." He examined the station listing and targeted the nearest power plant.

"Are you sure you do not want to save the day first?"

"I can only save the day if I know I'm going to get away."

"The station you have chosen does not have the best price?"

"Corri, stop being picky. Just tell me it has enough cells to fill the cargo hold."

"Yes, it does."

Tor increased power to the main engines but kept the speed down to respectable inter-sector speeds. A Khaak fighter with scout escorts moved to intercept. A smile crept on his face as he contemplated that he would be able to assist in clearing some of the sectors invaders.

"We have an incoming transmission."

"Who from?"

"Agent Belign."

"Tell him, I'm indisposed." Tor steered towards the fast scouts and targeted primary and secondary tracking sensors. The targeting system remained locked on targets as Tor made rapid strafing movements to avoid the incoming beam lasers from the scout ships. He pulled the trigger and the Defiance surged through the expanding vapour to lock on to the next pair of ships.

High energy beams from the Khaak fighters slashed at the shields of the Defiance as two more scouts exploded. Beam weapons fire closed in from all sides as they became surrounded by the surviving ships of the cluster.

The shields crept down under the bombardment of lasers and fast missile explosions. But not by enough to sufficiently trouble the Defiance. The heavy fighter registered multiple malfunctions of weapons and shields before spinning into a death roll of escaping gases from a gaping tear in the hull. A final slashing cut from a particle beam ignited them and tore the ship apart in a series of bright explosions.



Clearing away the last few scouts, Tor resumed course for the power plant. Docking was a formality and the station coordinator chatted happily and somewhat inanely over the comm having watched the fight on the view screen.

"Corri, make the purchase and let's get out of here."

"Why the hurry? I like the sound of this man."

"You would. He's been praising the greatness of this ship for the last ten mizuras."

"And what is wrong with that? Maybe you could learn a thing or two from him."

"I know this is a great ship, but I don't have to tell you that constantly."

"Why not? It would make my circuits feel warmer knowing that you appreciated me rather than took me for granted."

"I do appreciate you. Now would you just buy the cells so we can get out of here."

Tor expected some response from the AI over the rambling chatter of the comm channel. He sighed deeply.

"Please."

"Purchase request transmitted. Transaction approved. Loading will commence in one mizura."

"Thanks Corri, I appreciate it." Tor relaxed in his seat and listened.

"... And my buddy here, says he saw you clear the Split Fire sector. Absolutely ripped those Khaak ..." Tor turned down the comm.

"Are we nearly done yet?"

"The loading has not started yet."

"I think I'll have a quiet moment. Let me know if he finishes talking."

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Caran looked perplexed and paced the room as he planned what he should do next. Korecmancketras had adopted a more recumbent pose on the seat and watched eventually he spoke.

"Well if he doesn't want to talk to you, there's nothing you can do."

"You fail to see the gravity of the situation. I need to know that if anything happens to Tor, the Defiance won't fall into Pirate hands."

"I doubt, in the name of his holiness, that the Aliens who improved the ship would allow it to fall in to undesirable hands." Korecmancketras saw an opportunity to allow something of the nature of Corricel to come out.

"What do you mean?"

"The new AI is, shall we say, more intelligent than ours. By the Three Dimensionality you would almost think it was sentient. In my time with Tor he told me the ship would return home if anything happened to him."

Caran stopped his pacing and shot Korecmancketras a curious look.

"Sentient AI? Let's hope they made a better job of it than we did."

"It seemed stable enough to me."

"Well there's no point you staying here. Take your stuff and, I'll catch up with you some other time."

Korecmancketras moved and rose to his feet, he turned and walked towards the door, then stopped and turned saying.

"You know, if you had Nye and had asked Tor to help get the plans back, things would have been much simpler. But don't let the enlightened vision of the Three Dimensionality trouble you." Korecmancketras turned away with a smile breaking out on his face.

\*\*

The Defiance left the power plant and Tor set the Pirate station as the new target. A quick glance at the HUD put the range at two hundred k's and he asked.

"What do we have by way of hazards?"

"Apart from the asteroids, there are eight laser towers around the station."

Tor thought about it as he powered the engines to full inter-sector speed. He watched the k's count down and felt tempted to use a short burst of the interplanetary drive to dramatically reduce the journey time but a quick check of the HUD indicated there were too many asteroids ahead of him for a safe burst.

Corricel interrupted his thoughts.

"Somehow I feel as though I have come home."

Tor thought for a moment before replying.

"This is where the Defiance was made, and where we met the alien that gave you the Ghojo program."

"Then I am home."

Tor felt uneasy with Corricel's dreamy tone and responded.

"If you start getting all sentimental or something similar then I'm going to give you a good kicking."

"I was just making an observation."

"Good. We have a job to do and then we leave."

The occasional transport and pirate vessel appeared briefly at the edge of short range scanner. These turned away and slipped quietly away. Only when the station appeared on the short range scanner did the transports start to ignore the presence of the Defiance.

The occasional transport and pirate vessel appeared briefly at the edge of short range scanner. These turned and slipped quietly away and vanished from view by hugging to the far side of asteroids. Only when the station appeared on the short range scanner did the transports start to ignore the presence of the Defiance.

Traffic was light with only three ships on the HUD, two were inbound. He checked the ships signatures. The one departing vessel was a private merchant. No cargo was listed, and Tor considered they probably needed more credits having fed their habit.

The two inbound transports were also registered as freelance merchants, and the identification indicated that their home base was a local station. Tor doubted this. The older style of ship was, in his opinion, more likely to belong to the Shadow Troop station than one of the locals.

Tor began to reduce speed as the old pirate base loomed.

"Corri, see if you can get us docking permission."

"Requesting."

There was a long delay as the laser towers turned to face them. Tor began to wonder what his next action would be if they refused him docking permission. He could eliminate the laser towers but that would simply make the owners less receptive. Even if they verbally agreed to surrender marching onto the station claiming ownership was not an option.

When the response came it was not automated.

"Docking permission. Granted."

Something in the voice made him wary. He had the gut feeling they were letting him board, but his presence would be unwelcome.

Tor studied the outside of the base and in the dim light he could make out the shapes of weapons turrets. The docking lights changed hue and the outer doors parted. He guessed they had formally belonged to a huge TL, and as they entered he realised the doors were still attached to a big proportion of the original ship.

Maintenance robots were busily moving new panels and attaching them to the superstructure. There was activity everywhere he looked, and Tor felt as though someone was making a considerable effort to rebuild the station from the inside out.

This idea was never more evident than with the layout of the docking platforms. New screening had been built and the main concourse was shielded by heavy blast doors. The individual bays were few and overlooked by weapons emplacements.

Whoever was in charge seemed to have been of the opinion that the patched together outer hull was insufficient for protection and made a fortress of the inside.

"Is there any chance you scan for Nyeshta?"

"Negative, scanning jammers are active. Personnel and visitor lists are also unavailable. If she is here, then you will have to go and look."

Tor released his harness as the docking clamps took hold of the Defiance and secured it to the platform. He checked his jacket and ensured both blades were easily accessible. He patted the empty holster of the blaster and said.

"Do we have any spare blasters on board?"

"No."

"Thought as much."

"This is a pirate station, so you should be able to buy one."

Tor pressed the door release and watched as they opened and commented as he stepped out.

"Well, wish me luck."

"Good luck, I expect you will need it." Corricel closed the doors and secured the locks. Her scanners gently probed the security fields and comm relays looking for somewhere to break into the stations primary computer systems.

Tor stepped over the threshold between the docking bay and commercial centre of the station. For a brief moment he felt light headed from the sweet smell of the spaceweed. It passed as his body adjusted to the presence of the narcotic and he felt his blood fizz slightly.

Having seen the other work being carried out he was not surprised by the near new appearance of the station. He took his bearings, not that there was much to look at. Over to his left was the dock masters office. Ahead of him were what appeared to be a series of bars and to his right a general store, and visitors accommodation.

Tor strode towards the bar, and he could feel the floor tremble slightly from the deep bass notes. Noise suppression units prevented the music from escaping. Tor glanced at the security guards and made a mental note that they all wore nasal filters. The intensity of the fizz in his blood increased as he drew closer and he watched the smoke swirl rapidly away from the clothes of one of the clientele who staggered out into the fresh air.

An automated cart moved across the floor and the man sat heavily on the seat. An electronic voice asked.

"Room number?"

The man's hand waved vaguely as he mumbled incoherently and then he touched a scan pad. The cart moved away. Soon after a stretcher unit, accompanied by a hard faced security guard, carried another unconscious client from the bar towards the accommodation cells. And Tor wondered if the stretcher was the most common method of exiting the bar.

He crossed the threshold of the bar and tried not to cough, the smoke from the weed generated a heavy mist that the lethargic air movers barely disturbed. Within a few breaths Tor found equilibrium between the smoke he was inhaling and exhaling.

The owner had taken advantage of the smoke for laser light displays and holo-projections of topless table top dancers. Tor considered that the leering, semi-glazed expressions of weed induced patrons did not realise the girls were simply projections as their hands tried to grope thin air.

He moved with careful ease through the room. And became aware that it stretched much further than the frontage implied and he realised that the various frontages that implied several establishments, were one large bar. Tor felt Robot waiters skim over head and watched a couple drift down to deliver drinks and more weed to various tables.

It was obvious to him that finding Nyeshta would be difficult without stopping at every table, that's if she was here.

"Want something, honey?"

Two things struck Tor as odd, the first that he did not sense the approach of the buxom blond waitress and the second was that he heard her clearly.

"I'm looking for someone."

"Sure you are, honey." She gave him a knowing smile. "What's the name and I'll see if she's available."

"Nyeshta."

The waitress looked thoughtful for a second, and gave a quick nod.

"Park your arse over at one seven three." She pointed to the empty stage side table. "Drink?"

"Ale."

"Anything else, honey?" Her eyes studied his face for a moment.

"No, just the drink."

She walked away and Tor progressed to the table.

\*\*

Glora returned to the bar, her mind filled with curiosity for the stranger. For one thing he was still upright and coherent despite the fact that he was not wearing an inhaler. Most the patrons and all the staff had to wear them against long term exposure to the lethal cocktail of chemicals lurking within the smoke.

The girls usually took bets on how long the unwary lasted before they began to lose coordination. The record was fifteen mizuras before the stretcher carried the unconscious patron out. Somehow she felt the record was going to be broken.

"So what's the form?"

She turned and looked at one of the working girls.

"I'll put down fifty credits that he'll beat the record."

The voice of Clegan came over her personal comm.

"What did he want?"

"An ale and a girl named Nyeshta. I was going to send Bubbles over to look after him."

"Don't send the girl. Just tell him Nyeshta isn't here."

"Okay." Glora shrugged and looked at the working girl. "The boss doesn't want you to entertain our young stranger."

Bubbles was watching Tor on the security monitors and looked up with an expression of disappointment. Glora ordered the best of the various ales available. Ale usually reserved for the more discerning customers and special guests of Clegan.

She carried the container through the room and placed it in front of Tor.

"Afraid Nyeshta's not here, honey. But I'll let you know if she turns up." She smiled and held out the credit transfer pad.

"If you would. I'd appreciate it." Tor authorised the transaction.

\*\*

Clegan knew that Feran was planning to attack his station and had based himself on his own command ship. A Teladi Osprey, courtesy of Tredamonus and her legitimate dealings with the Teladi Trading Company. The remote link to his office allowed him to monitor station activities and it was with keen interest that he now watched Tor sipping his ale.

Having the Defiance on his station was an unexpected turn of events. He had very little doubt that a number of visitors to the base worked for the Bloodheart clan and would, when the time came, lead an attack from the inside. For this reason he arranged for the air circulators to be slowed down, in the hope that Feran's people would be too intoxicated by the fumes to be able to fight.

The presence of Tor presented him with other ideas. He appeared not to have taken any precautions against the effect of smoked weed. He anticipated that Tor would soon be subdued by their effects and render him useless as an ally to fight off the Bloodhearts. But when under the influence, Tor might prove a useful bargaining chip.

He reflected on why Tor would be here looking for Nyeshta. There was no doubt in his mind that she would be looking for a safe place to hide, but that did not mean she would return here. Or maybe she was already on her way, and she would know how to get on the Defiance. Not that he anticipated it would damage the Bloodheart flagship, but it would certainly decimate the smaller fighters. News of the Khaak elimination from Split Fire under the guns of one ship had passed

through the unregulated sectors like a storm. He smiled with the thought that the ship was more famous than the pilot. No one would miss the boy.

He watched Tor take a sip of his drink, the youngster did not show any of the early signs of succumbing to the effects of the weed. His thoughts came back to Nyeshta, she had been missing for some time and recent rumours implied she had stolen a Perseus from a Teladi shipping magnet. Rumours also linked the Teladi as a business partner to Tor. And with Tor piloting the ship built by Nyeshta it completed a circle, but to what end was a mystery.

"Show me the archive on Tor Grall and his acquisition of the Defiance." Clegan's concern was not knowing where Nyeshta's loyalty would lie.

"Log entry Grall, log entry Defiance. Vessel claimed as salvage by Tor Grall after pilot abandoned ship due to major systems malfunction. Designation Defiance registered at Teladi Shipyard, Omicron Lyrae."

He remembered telling Nyeshta that she should abandon her efforts following a series of systems failures, and use the materials in the construction of more familiar ships. After her acid response he had left her to tinker.

He returned his attention to Tor and saw the transmission ghost briefly.

"Did something just interfere with the connection?"

"Negative. All systems report stable, no signal bleed detected."

Clegan pondered his next move before saying.

"Have a five man security team stand by for the arrest of Tor Grall."

## *Chapter 18*

Tor had waited patiently for eight mizuras to see if someone would return with news about Nyeshta. However his body felt as though it was preparing to reject his lungs, and even his skin felt greasy from the residue of the smoke. He knew he needed to find a more hospitable location. One that would have views of the docking bay.

He wondered how the bar could make money selling weed with insufficient ventilation. Anyone could walk in and get their fix for free.

"Care for a detox tab, honey?"

Tor looked around, not quite believing what he was being offered and stared at Glora before shaking his head.

"You sure? in a mizura you're going to need one."

"Why?"

Glora laughed.

"For the rush, honey."

"What rush?"

"You'll see."

A voice echoed around the bar.

"High time." And it was followed by whoops of joy from the occupants.

Tor felt the cold blast of fresh air hit his ankles and the smog began to thin rapidly. Then the effects of his passive inhalation struck him. Bright flashes appeared before his eyes, accompanied by a giddy sensation of euphoria. Everything took on a hazy glow, and as he tried to look around he caught a glimpse of Glora, and she looked like an angel, silhouetted in a shimmering silver light.

In his ear a feint voice was telling him to.

"Get out of there! Run!"

Closing his eyes in an effort to regain control, he could see the sparks of light on the back of his eyelids and in a brief moment he wondered if what he could see the bioelectricity of his brain firing across his neurons.

The distant voice continued.

"Run Tor! Run!"

The sense of euphoria clouded his thoughts and he felt as though he was in paradise, and no part of him wanted to return. His Mohrabas DNA retaliated and from the high came a sweeping burning sensation that started at his lungs and rapidly flowed through every nerve ending, releasing natural endorphins, Tor's mind swept from sensing pleasure to that of pain, and then cool control in a mizura.

Glora stared at him in surprise as he stood up.

"Interesting. Now is there anywhere I can sit without being exposed to all this?"

"Go up a level to the food hall, honey."

He began to move away from the table when he noticed two security guards approach him. Each had a stun baton at the ready. The scene felt horribly familiar and his hands clenched into fists. All thoughts of acceding to the rule of law were chased away. This was not a race controlled station and there would be no repercussions if he fought his way out.

He consoled himself that the guards carried batons and not blasters which meant they wanted him alive. His hands unclenched and his fingers touched on the hilts of the blades, but came away again. As far as he was concerned, if the guards were not trying to kill him then he would not show them the discourtesy of killing them.

"Surrender!" Tor assessed the guard that addressed him. He was Split, with two parallel scars across his left cheek. The second was a middle aged, heavy set Argon, with all the trade mark features of a thug.

"You want me for some reason?"

"The governors orders. He likes your ship." The Argon's voice was harsh and slightly slow, as though the words needed time to come together.

Traces of the weed caused a slight dizziness in Tor, both guards closed in on him thrusting out the stun batons. Tor deflected one enduring a momentary spasm of pain and struck out at the Split. His left fist connected a glancing blow that span the guard around to slide over the top of an unoccupied table.

The second guards baton came around to strike him on the left arm. More jarring pain swept through him and his fist failed to connect. The sound of music drowned out the heavy footfalls of the three other guards that moved towards him across the stage.

In a move that surprised the Argon, Tor grabbed the baton with his left hand and head butted him. The guard looked dazed and staggered back but did not let go. Tor had to release it to the smell of burnt flesh.

He was struck across the back and lurched forward. The Split had recovered and crashed in him. They grappled and staggered in to a table occupied by three Teladi, who were still reveling in the after effects of the oxygen rush.

The Split back handed Tor across the side of the face, before Tor threw him across over one table and into the one behind. Stun batons struck against the backs of his legs and across his spine. He staggered forward trying to regain control of his legs.

Turning he blocked a blow to the head with his right arm, and kicked out catching a second Argon guard just above the left knee bringing him crashing to the ground. The guards closed in and he lurched to one side taking the outstretched wrist of a Paranid and twisting him into the path of two batons.

There was an enraged cry of pain and Tor dodged the flailing arms of the guard. He gripped his pocket stun stick with his right hand and energised it. The guard twitched and fell away as he pressed it for a few moments against his back.

A baton lunged towards his and he twisted away swiftly bring his own up to touch against the neck of the Argon. The guards head snapped around sharply with a cry of pain. The body jarred as muscles went in to spasm and then he slumped down over a table. His arms moving weakly to try and push himself up.

He turned on his heel and dropped down as the first Argon guard swung a large fist at his head. A stun to the left knee had the guard stumble and curse. He grabbed a chair for support.

Tor looked towards the last guard who now stood back with caution. He experienced another slight dizzy spell. Two batons struck him from behind, one against the neck and the second in the small of the back. Tor collapsed, twisting around as he fell, he saw a look of malicious hatred in the face of the Split guard.



\*\*

Clegan watched the capture of Tor with curiosity and surprise. The boy was Argon and lightly armed, even a child with a stun baton should have been able to subdue him, yet it had taken five of his guards. Tor's tolerance to pain was remarkable, too remarkable and he wondered whether Tor's exposure to the weed had somehow elevated this.

He knew that no normal person could grab a stun baton and hold it. Let alone have the muscle control to put up a fight after being hit by one, only the young Argon had survived and fought. He had knocked down a Split and used a Paranid as a shield, both of which were feats worthy of respect.

A new idea occurred to him. The technology used in the baton was also used in slave restraint collars. And if Tor could withstand one of those, then maybe the boy would have enough strength left to kill Feran.

He glanced at the station reports and then at the long range scanner listing. Nyeshta was inbound in the company of two freelance pirate mercenaries. The ship was an old Split Mamba and had a flight path used by ships from the Danna's Chance system. This in turn meant she would have passed through Brennan's Triumph, and anything passing through that sector would have been under the scrutiny of the Bloodheart Clan.

Clegan did not like this co-incidence.

"Computer, there's an incoming Falcon. One pilot and two passengers. One of the passengers is Nyeshta. You have her bio-scans on record. I want you to track her location on station and inform me if she attempts to access any of the secure sections. Have an armed response team ready to deal with her if necessary."

"Acknowledged."

\*\*

Nyeshta kept her eyes closed as she feigned sleep. The interior of the Falcon was cramped and squalid. Rubbish from vacuum pack meals and drinks vessels littered the floor and most surfaces. She had to sweep a seat clear just to sit down, and although she made all the signs that she would grab some sleep there was no way she was going to lie on the bunk. Nyeshta felt that the cargo hold was preferable to the cabin.

Only there were ten of Feran's assault troops in full environment suits inside. Their signatures masked as salvaged Cloth Rimes.

The two Teladi were hired mercenaries, even Feran was not stupid enough to put her on one of his own ships.

"We arrive." The reptilian voice of the pilot disturbed her thoughts.

She opened her eyes and moved forward so that she could see through the cockpit screen. The pirate station looked exactly as she remembered it.

"Dock when you see green lights." The computer announced.

The outer blast doors opened and the Mamba glided in. She looked out with curiosity to the activity of the construction robots. The new inner skin was mizuras from completion and every available resource had been set to the task. She wondered if they would finish in time as in ten mizuras Feran would mobilise his forces.

Her plan for the moment was to try and get the data core, then steal a ship and make an escape before the fighting started. As they approached the dock she saw the distinctive shape of the Defiance and as eyes passed over the surfaces she knew what Caran had referred to. There were differences, subtle to the eye but inside Nyeshta knew this was no longer the ship she had built.

"Looksss impressive."

"We are scanned." The computer intoned.

"By who?" The navigator enquired and started tapping on the terminal.

"Ship designation; Defiance."

Nyeshta stood perfectly still, expecting the comm to suddenly come to life. Nothing happened.

"What'sss your sship looking for? I wonder?" The pilot turned her head and stared at Nyeshta.

"Me, probably. Just about everyone else is. But let's not worry about that."

"Remember you try to run, we have orders'ss to blow the tag, and you lose a leg." The navigators face spread into a reptilian grin. "They ssay, after that you will bleed to death."

"Given the choice of that or Feran's play thing. I know which I'd prefer. But don't worry, I'd much rather stay in one piece."

The docking clamps brought the ship to the dockside. Nyeshta moved to the door and pressed the release button. The pilot joined her as she stepped out.

She inhaled and tasted the sweetness in the air. Ignoring the Teladi pilot she walked boldly towards the main blast doors separating the dock from the main station. She assessed that Feran's men in the hold would never make it inside unless someone managed to take control of the central computer.

Nyeshta walked straight to the dock masters desk, as the first stage of the plan would be to let Clegan know she was back. He would already know, but she considered the gesture would be important.

She recognised the Argon man behind the desk as Kol. He was heavy set and with hands scratched and scarred from his overwhelming desire to tinker with ships.

"Welcome back, stranger."

"It's good to see you Kol. Any chance I can talk to the boss?"

"Talk to, maybe. I'll send him a message and see if he wants to talk to you."

"I see the station's coming along well."

"I could've done it faster myself. F'in Teladi droids were working at eighty percent efficiency until we fixed their programming. But I see you arrive with some of those F'in thieves."

"They were going the right way, and I paid them enough not to ask questions."

"F'in thieves. Get yourself a drink and I'll let you know if the boss wants to talk to you."

"Thanks, Kol."

Nyeshta smiled as she walked away and glanced into the bar but did not like the depth of smoke haze. She continued to the ramp and ascended up to the next level and the food hall. With a certain expectation that Tor would be sat at a table or moving to meet her. There was no sign of him and she wondered if he had been foolhardy enough to risk the bar. If that was the case, she considered that he was probably sleeping in a haze of weed induced dreams, a smile touched her lips as the mental image grew in her mind. Providing he was not in trouble, then he would be out of harms way and she would find him later.

Moving to the counter she ordered a hot garrow root cha and picked out a light snack. Nyeshta was comforted that Kol showed no sign of discomfort when talking to her which would have been a sure sign that Clegan might trust her enough to give access to the secure area where the datacore was hidden.

She found a seat by the balcony and could look down at the promenade below. Time was important as twelve mizuras after they docked Feran would mobilise his attack force. But she could not show any sign of anxiety as the mizuras slipped by.

\*\*

The holo-image of Clegan appeared in Tor's cell. Tor remained seated on the hard floor with his back to the far wall.

"Tor Grall, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"I can think of more pleasant surroundings."

"I'm sure you can." The image paused, "You are quite a remarkable man Tor. I've never met anyone that's not succumbed to the rush, or fought so hard against the use of stun batons. I begin to understand why Feran's attempts to have you killed have all failed."

"Is there a point to this conversation?"

"You want what I want. Feran dead."

"The thought is an appealing one, but you have a strange way of asking for my help."

"Oh, this. An error in judgement, I considered using you as a peace offering, but now I see you have so much more potential."

"Well I'm glad you appreciate my qualities. Just one thing perplexes me, how exactly were you thinking I would get close enough to Feran to kill him?"

The holo-image smiled, and walked across the room to stand closer to Tor.

"I will hand you over to him. You'll be fitted with a restraint collar, but you can overcome that. Feran will enjoy inflicting pain, he will want to see you run. But you will endure, and when the opportunity is right, you will have the benefit of surprise. And you will kill him."

"I don't like the plan."

"No one said you'd like it. I saw you knock down a Split with a single blow, which is no mean feat. And with this plan you either kill Feran or be killed by him."

"Just one observation. The Defiance will not allow you to take me off the station."

"Ah, did I forget to mention that Nye has now arrived on station. I have reason to suspect that she will know how to access the Defiance and override your instructions."

Tor gave a wry smile.

"Do you think so? Care to make a bet?"

The holo-image's eyes narrowed slightly and then looked distracted by something.

"We will discuss this again soon."

The image vanished. Tor sat in quiet contemplation, the collar around his neck would be almost impossible to resist as it sent pulses straight into his spine. The first problem he needed to overcome was escaping his cell.

\*\*

Nyeshta finished her drink and knew that Clegan would be aware that the Bloodheart forces were on their way. Her thoughts were disturbed by Clegan's voice.

"Do you like what we've done to the station?"

She looked at the holo-image of the hooded figure now sitting opposite her.

"It's a big improvement."

"Tell me, can I trust you?"

"That depends on if it's with a secret that's worth selling."

"What about the Teladi?"

"If you pay them well enough, you can buy it until it becomes unprofitable. But don't expect a refund."

"Do you know how to get on to the Defiance?"

Nyeshta had been expecting the question, but was still surprised by the suddenness of it.

"That depends on how much has been changed. Why?"

"It would be useful to know."

"The current owner might not appreciate it."

"I wouldn't worry about him."

Nyeshta did not like the way the response came across but felt it was better not to enquire.

"Do you want me to try now?"

"Sooner will be more convenient."

Clegan came across as very calm and relaxed with no hint of desperation in his voice. She regarded the request as a test to determine loyalty. And that he would want to commandeer the ship at the first opportunity. From memory she knew the AI would be objectionable to that turn of events.

"Okay." Nyeshta rose from her seat and then walked back down the ramp and through to the docking platforms. She took a deep breath and walked along the side to the airlock door. With every step she could sense the ship observing her.

She could think of no reason why she should be nervous when standing before the door, and spoke quietly to calm herself.

"Right Sweetie, let's see if you still like me."

Placing her hand on the palm scanner, she waited.

'Access denied.' Flashed on the panel.

Her hand moved to the keypad and punched in one of the five access codes.

'Access denied.'

She frowned, and contemplated that if the AI had removed one of the coded parts there was a reasonable chance others had been found. Nyeshta started typing in a second code when the keypad ceased to function and a message scrolled across the display.

'Cloth Rimes? First you find Tor. Then you discuss the merits of working for the enemy. If you are lucky I will sit here quietly without causing a disturbance.'

The Defiance had seen through the mask of the Falcon. It knew she must have agreed to help Feran. Turning away Nyeshta walked briskly back towards the blast door entrance.

The holo-image appeared ahead of her.

"Trouble?"

"The access codes have been changed, which means it'll take a stazura before we can get the door open. The quick way is if I chat to the pilot and get him give me the new code, or better still to come and open the door."

"Chat, yes. Have him open the door, no."

The image faded away, leaving her standing in quiet contemplation. A heavily armed security guard appeared from one of the shuttle lifts and waved her across. She looked at the weapon he carried as they stepped into the lift.

It was not a pulse rifle, but one of the new massively scaled down rail guns, launching high velocity rounds without the need for explosives. The shoulder harness and counter weight balance made the guard look half as big again across the shoulders than normal.

The shuttle lift came to a stop and they stepped out in to a large room. Three small overhead turrets tracked her as she walked to the desk. A robot attendant monitored the screens that looked in on all the cells.

"Place hand on scanner." The harsh metallic voice commanded.

Nyeshta did so.

"Access to cell twenty seven, granted. Ten mizuras visiting time."

There was a click of mechanical bolts and then a door slid open. The guard moved towards the door and pointed the weapon down the corridor before speaking.

"Cell twenty seven is half way down on the left."

"You're not going to come with me then?"

"If he tries to make an escape, I'll stop him from here."

Nyeshta nodded and started walking. She felt extremely uncomfortable with the gun pointing at her and was convinced that the guard would need little excuse to pull the trigger. She stopped in front of the door and it opened.

Tor was sat with his back against the wall with his eyes closed. She knew he was not asleep as she moved inside.

"Looks like you're in trouble again, Tor."

His eyes opened immediately and he gave a broad smile and scrambled to his feet and moved forward.

"Tell me you're here to rescue me and this will be a good day."

Nyeshta backed away.

"The bad news is, no. I'm here to ask you nicely what the access code is to the Defiance?"

There was a moments silence and the smile was replaced by a stunned look.

"Why?"

"If the rumours are true the Bloodheart Clan is going to attack the station and the boss wants every available fighter to defend it."

"The Boss?" Tor took a step back from Nyeshta. "How about I say, no."

Pain swept through him and his hands reached up to grab the restraint. Nyeshta looked concerned and closed her eyes then adopted a hard expression to mask the emotions running through her. She called out.

"Stop!" The pain subsided and she was impressed that he was still upright. What worried her was that Tor looked angry, and it was with a depth of feeling that she had not seen before. He stretched and flexed muscle. Nyeshta stepped back and leant against the opposite wall before adding.

"Everything you say and do is being recorded. If they hear something they don't like, you will feel pain. Then they'll remind you of it."

"Did your boss enlighten you what he plans for me?"

She shook her head.

"He plans to send me as a peace offering to Feran." Tor stepped forward with surprising speed and his hand reached out grabbing her throat.

Stunned surprise crossed her face, yet the grip was firm rather than chocking. Pain swept over his face with new intensity and for a few moments she felt her feet leave the floor. He spoke through clenched teeth.

"Understand one thing. If anyone tries to take me off this station or I die here, Corricel will tear this place apart." She looked down at him as beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. He let her go and stepped back his left hand gripped the restraint and dropped to his knees.

"Enough!" Nyeshta called out and touched her neck. Alarms sounded through the station, Nyeshta glanced at her time piece, the Bloodheart fleet could not have arrived already. She saw the pain ease in Tor's face and turned to the door with a parting comment.

"We'll talk again. Soon, and I hope you'll be more cooperative." The door opened and as she walked along the corridor she wondered who Corricel was. She felt certain the threat was not a hollow one.

She reached the guard who looked slightly perplexed and the security door closed before the shuttle lift door opened. Nyeshta asked.

"What's going on? Why the siren?"

"There's trouble in the docking bay."

The shuttle lift returned to the visitors promenade and the door opened. She could see the blast doors had closed, sealing them inside. The guard moved towards the dock masters desk where there were a number of others. Kol was making no attempt to pacify concerned ship owners whose vessels were now inaccessible.

Nyeshta managed to get a glimpse of the security screen and saw the Defiance was no longer birthed but sat a short distance from the dockside having blown apart the restraining arms and destroyed the defence turrets.

Other than that the damage appeared surprisingly limited.

Kol caught sight of her, "The Boss wants a word with you."

"Where do I go?"

He pointed towards a security door. The Teladi security guard eyed her with suspicion as she approached.

"The Boss wants to see me."

"Name?"

"Nyeshta."

The guard looked at her datapad and then pressed a claw against the release panel. The door slid open.

As she stepped into the corridor beyond she relied on her memory of the station and hoped it had not significantly changed. Low energy overhead turret mounts protected the length of the corridor. At the end she came to one of the nodes, regular station staff and security guards milled around in the open space, or simply passed through.

For a pirate station it had the air of similarity that she experienced in the Silicon Mine and Tor's Bakery. Business like and clean, not the squalid hole of iniquity that could be seen in other pirate stations whose staff had succumbed to the vices of weed abuse and space fuel addiction.

Without asking for directions she crossed the room and down a new corridor. The ceiling turrets were everywhere. She knew to get through this part of the station would require destroying most of the structure.

As she approached the next node a door opened ahead of her and a voice spoke.

"Nye, in here."

She was not surprised to see that it was another holo-projection.

"What now?"

"Tell me about the Defiance?"

"I can tell you what I made, but I can't tell you what it's become since Tor took ownership."

"Is there a way we can take control of the ship?"

"I doubt it. Tor put a series five thousand chip in charge."

There was a long silence before Clegan spoke again.

"Could it be reasoned with?"

"My guess is that the AI is very attached to Tor. Harm him and you'll witness more of what you've just experienced. Kill him and the Bloodheart clan won't find much left of the station to attack."

"Would the Defiance defend this station to prevent Tor from being killed or taken prisoner by the Bloodheart Clan?"

"Are you expecting me to ask her?" Nyeshta wondered why she was expected to act as an intermediary. Particularly after her less than amicable meeting with Tor.

\*\*

Clegan watched the video feed from the advanced satellites deployed some way back from the gate to Danna's Chance. He'd left the Khaak to rampage across the shipping lanes while his transports deployed mines. A squad of fighters, six new Orinoco's supported by twelve Bayamons, acted as a shield against the Khaak.

He turned to face Jeo, a young woman with raven black hair that was cropped short in military style.

"Status report."

"Mines are ninety five percent deployed. Laser towers in position. All fighter groups are reported to be in position."

"What about the Bloodhearts?"

"They are five k's from making the jump."

"Anything in sector?"

"Negative."

Clegan looked pensive, he knew there would be fighters lurking somewhere.

"Monitor all stations. And send a message to base, have them ready to lock down the moment the Bloodheart flagship enters the sector."

The screen showed a rapid succession of gate flashes as incoming ships emerged. The advanced fighter groups formed up and moved at reduced speed towards them. Clegan watched, he would issue the stage one order of his hit and fade strategy when the Flagship arrived. Feran needed to see his fighters die as he drew him into the asteroid field.

Moments passed into what seemed like an age, and then the Thirst emerged.



## *Chapter 19*

Before the Python fully cleared the gate Clegan ordered the first attack. He watched as four flights of six Mandalays launched waves of missiles at the advanced guard of heavy fighters then turned and ran before entering firing range. As instructed each wave targeted just one ship and the successive missile bursts ripped them apart. The elliptical path of the fighter groups giving each one time to select and focus on the next target.

Bloodheart light fighters swarmed to intercept, but not before three heavy fighters had been destroyed. The light fighters fought a retreat, with missiles and plasma against their counterparts. A small semblance of discipline remained amongst a few of the pilots while others ran. The orders were simple, they were not to return to base but to try and draw fighters away from the main group.

Explosions flared across the screen as the battle ended and Clegan spoke quietly.

"How many?"

"The enemy lost one Mamba, two Orinoco, three Bayamon and six Mandalays. We lost fifteen ships, the others are heading for Hatkivah's Faith. There are no survivors from the destroyed craft."

"Are the survivors being pursued?"

"Negative. The enemy ships have been pulled back to support the Python."

"Have the Mandalays turn back and target the light fighters with missile pairs."

He listened as she issued the order and had little doubt they would return. He selected pilots with family on the station, as it would guarantee a degree of loyalty that they would fight to protect them.

"Sir, I have a new large Khaak cluster on scanner. It will cut across the path of the Bloodheart ships."

Almost lost in the background was the explosion of a dying freighter wrapped in shafts of multiple lasers.

"What's the speed of the Bloodheart fleet?"

"Eighty five mps average."

"Have one of the Mandalay pilots attract the attention of the Khaak heavy fighters. Missiles to be launched at range. Then get him to fly past the Bloodheart fleet."

He watched the HUD as one of the remaining nine broke formation and turned towards the Khaak intruders.

Within a mizura the small fighter had the attention of both Khaak heavy fighters and a number of small scout craft. The rest of his Mandalay's engaged and eliminated six of the Bloodheart light fighters but lost five in a devastating missile exchange, the survivors were escaping as best they could.

"Time to interception of the Khaak cluster?"

"Two mizuras."

"Distance to the first mine field?"

"Eighteen k's."

Clegan watched as the last Mandalay swerved and dodged incoming fire from the Python. Other ships moved to engage but the pilot released missiles without lining up on target creating confusion amongst the ships. Two of Feran's remaining light fighters exploded as the fast Khaak scouts entered the fray.

Beam lasers met plasma. The Python recognised the Khaak threat and all weapons opened up. The slower heavy Khaak fighters had yet to reach weapons range as the new cluster broke apart.

Clegan increased magnification of the ensuing battle. The small scout ships swamped several of the medium fighters and missile trails reduced the Bloodheart ships to clouds of expanding gas. The Python scythed its way through the carnage, the main turrets sending showers of Pulsed Photons after the heavy fighter as its lasers scythed through another Orinoco. Through it all he spotted his Mandalay trying to run for safety, leaving a trail of vapour behind it. A Bayamon was chasing and opened fire, one of the plasma rounds ignited the escaping gases and moments later the ship exploded.

"We should give a special honour to that pilot. Let me know his name after the battle."

"Sir."

On screen the Bloodheart ships appeared to resume some coordination between the fighters. Focussing their efforts against the Khaak fighter, it was quickly overcome. Then the Pythons weapons opened up again on the two pursuing ships.

The Khaak lasers lanced towards the Bloodheart flagship. And Clegan smiled as he saw the shields start to drop. Missiles were released as the fighters clashed, their detonations against the rear shields of the Destroyer glowed like small suns for a sezura leaving their image emblazed against his retina for a few sezuras longer.

The first of the Khaak fighters rolled lazily before exploding in a torrent of crossfire as the second sliced its way through a Bayamon. A tight turn and a brief moment of laser fire and a hapless Mandalay caught the three beams to become a superheated glow within a heartbeat.

Weapons fire from the Python cascaded around the Khaak ship as the gunners gained a target lock and its was fate sealed by two dragonfly missiles from a Bayamon. The battle fleet continued its steady progress into the asteroid field.

"Sir, we have new hostiles. I'm counting twelve new fighters have launched from two stations. They have the Bloodheart designation."

"Phase two fighter defence to prepare for clean up after the minefield." Clegan's orders had been simple, hit them hard, destroy anything that is damaged and fade back into the asteroid field.

As he watched the Python moved to the front of the pack. Phased Photon fire streaked ahead of it and quietly Clegan cursed as the Bloodheart flagship began to destroy the mine clusters. Several Bloodheart fighters cruised around the asteroids were not so lucky as the bright flash of detonations spelled their demise.

One set of six mines had been placed close to a small asteroid to prevent detection, and as they exploded the ore rich rock gained momentum. Rolling it towards the Destroyer. Weapons fire cascaded against the surface with little noticeable effect. The engines flared pushing the ship out of the asteroid's path and into range of unexploded mines.

The effect was dramatic. With no mines left ahead of the Destroyer it became surrounded in a halo of bright flashes. The shields fell but not to a level that threatened its demise. Shadow Troop Bayamons emerged from the shadows of asteroids and attacked with salvos of missiles fired from long range and then turned, diving back into the shadows to avoid the superior range of the Python's weapons.

The Thirst proceeded with caution, the asteroids provided natural protection from its weapons and there seemed to be a reluctance in sending fighters ahead to flush out any Shadow Troop ships.

Clegan wondered what Feran was thinking. He had been his first commander long enough to know Feran's ideas of tactics, and they normally fell into the Split trait of sending in the least valued members of the clan. Any that returned would be slightly more valued, but this holding back was not what he had anticipated.

He knew Feran's new First Officer was also a Split which made him doubt this caution was his idea. Clegan was surprised when twenty fighter drones were released. The Thirst accelerated forwards and in its wake came the fighters.

The Python passed a group of asteroids and was struck by beam lasers from four lasertowers. The shields rippled and shimmered as the turrets opened up. The drones swarmed around the towers confusing their targeting sensors.

The fighters moved to destroy the threat and were met with missile launches and weapons fire from Shadow Troop Bayamons that had circled around to attack the rear of the fleet.

The battle intensified as ships chased one another around the asteroids. Bloodheart ships were lured into the firing path of other lasertowers interspersed between the rocks. Plasma pock marked asteroid surfaces to lift fine particles of rock that sparked in the shields of ships as they skimmed close to the surface. Bloodheart Mambas hunted down Bayamons only to run into the Shadow Troop reserve force.

Clegan felt victory and ordered.

"Send in the Ion Flight."

"Sir."

He watched the explosions without needing to review the casualty list. Every sense inside told him he was winning, and he just needed to bloody Feran's nose just a little more. The last of the laser towers exploded as the order was relayed.

Two Bayamons emerged from a cleft in one of the asteroids and as the Thirst tried to gain a target lock, both ships opened up with pairs of Ion Disruptors and plasma. The Bloodheart Flagship shimmered and glowed as its shields started to crash.

Avoiding the incoming fire of the Destroyer the Bayamons turned to let their weapons recharge. Drones darted around the two ships, and two Orinocos moved to intercept.

The two Bayamon worked together with constant chatter over the comm. Position and speed information transferred between the two ships. Neither wanted to wipe out the shields of the other in a moment of carelessness. They turned together and in parallel flight opened fire, strafing in all directions to avoid the incoming fire of the Destroyer.

The Ion beam from one of the ships leapt towards one of the Orinoco's generating a chain of light between ships. The plasma of the Beta PAC's impacting on the hull as the two ships ceased firing to swerve away.

Clegan looked up in triumph as the Destroyer began to register hull damage. Its guns fell silent and he felt the moment slip away. As he watched the screen two Split Dragons de-cloaked, between the Bayamons. Plasma ripped away their shields one exploded and the other attempted to run.

The shields of the Python slowly recovered. Clegan looked pensive, he doubted that Feran would have been given cloaking devices. His changed mood was reflected in the faces of the crew as he asked.

"Who's the uninvited guest to our private war?"

"The ships are registered to the Split Head Councillor Tw'h k'Trrg."

"The puppet master, comes to play with the puppet." Clegan sat in thought, Twh was not interested in the private affairs of Feran. There could only be one reason for him being here and that was the Defiance. The fight would move from the asteroid field to the corridors of the station.

"Sir, we've lost all comms with our base."

\*\*

Nyeshta had successfully negotiated access to recover the datacore which held the original data set for the X-Shuttle under the pretence that she would have to study them again in detail to see if she could splice into the computer by gaining access through a maintenance panel.

Two armed guards accompanied her to the hiding place and stood patiently as she connected it to her datapad. A quick glance of the data stream and lock outs told her it was the original. In her own mind all she needed to do now was remove the explosive tag and escape alive.

An alarm sounded. The guards looked slightly confused and pointed their weapons towards her.

"That's nothing to do with me." Nyeshta held up her hands to make a point.

"Security alert, hostile intruders on station. Weapons fire detected in the Lokhigh Bar."

The guards appeared to relax and one waved at her saying.

"This way."

Nyeshta gave a quick nod but knew events had moved faster than they were supposed to. She was suppose to be back in the docking bay before the assault started. Now she was behind enemy lines and would simply be another target for the attackers. They reached the main deck and station troops stood everywhere, in full body armour and environment suits, while station personnel were being shepherded away from areas close to the docking bay.

"You, that way." A fully suited station trooper pointed to a corridor where other non-essential personnel were being hurried down. Nyeshta knew she was in no position to argue and followed, but inside there was a growing concern that the Teladi that brought her on station might decide she had swapped sides and detonate the tag.

There was the sharp sound of weapons fire behind her, the floor trembled with the muted sound of an explosion. The people ahead of her took one look back and started to run. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the guards crouched down. A wisp of black smoke trickled from one of the passageways into the node and was sucked away by the air movers.

Security diverted her along another corridor.

"Run lady."

Nyeshta wondered how many men Feran had infiltrate the Shadow Troop station. One thing was certain there would not be enough to attack in force. It would be a tactical fight causing diversions and mayhem while trained teams went for the primary targets. The power core and the command centre, she knew Clegan would have anticipated this.

There was another muted explosion and the lights flickered. Thoughts raced through her head, she needed a weapon and an environment suit. On entering the next major node she came across a scene of confusion. She approached the most senior looking trooper as he spoke quietly into his com.

"What do you mean, you can't open the blast doors?"

He saw her approach and held up his hand in a gesture to wait. With a unhappy look he gave a slight nod then shouted out.

"Everyone right corridor and turn left three nodes down." He pointed just to confirm the direction and ignored Nyeshta.

"Any chance I can get an environment suit."

He glared at her and repeated his instructions.

"Right corridor, three nodes, turn left."

Nyeshta felt there was no point in trying to discuss her request and followed the worried looking women and children. As she regarded their faces, Nyeshta came to realise how much the cesspit of a station in decay had been totally revived. Clegan for all his faults had brought life to the station, it offered a degree of security and normality to those that worked and lived there. The face of the station was not its heart.

She knew the worry etched on the faces around her was well deserved, as Feran would enslave all the women and children. The men would either die or have to beg to be allowed to join the Bloodheart Clan, and if they had enough credits they could buy back their loved ones at auction.

The thought sent a pang of guilt running through her and an involuntary shudder ran down her spine. Nyeshta considered that these people meant nothing to her, why did she care what happened to them?

A child stumbled in front of her, instinct told her to help the girl to her feet. The frightened look of innocence stole what thoughts she had and deepened her sense of guilt. Nyeshta gave a reassuring smile and said.

"Everything's going to be okay."

It was a lie, and she knew it, but they were the only words she could find. The child's mother approached her face smiling with relief.

"There you are Kiri. I thought I'd lost you."

Nyeshta looked at the mother.

"Do you know where I can find a surgeon?"

\*\*

Tor looked around the room, there was a simple paneled air duct, barely big enough to get his hand in. The lights were eight feet from the floor, and without any furniture in the room impossible to reach. The only way out was the way he came in.

The plastic splint protecting his right hand was useless for turning into any type of tool to gain some leverage. There was only one choice and that was to wait until someone came.

As he sat waiting his thoughts turned to what he considered to be Nyeshta's betrayal. Anger flared inside at his own foolishness and questioned why he had not listened to the advice of those around him. Dark emotions surfaced when he contemplated what he might do if met her again. For now all he wanted was to get off this station before anything else could go wrong.

Nearly seventy mizuras passed and suddenly alarms started to sound through the station.

He sat quietly contemplating the Bloodheart attack had started and cursing Nyeshta when the door slid open. No one appeared. With curiosity he popped his head around the corner quickly before drawing back. There was no burst of weapons fire.

Tor looked again and noted the far door was also open. Cautiously he moved along the corridor and tentatively looked up at the turrets. Nothing moved, a glance at the robot told him everything he needed to know. A thin plume of smoke rose from its motor unit where it had been triggered to overload.

"Corri."

The floor trembled and the lights flickered. The rumble of an explosion reverberated through the station. His mind raced, it was too close to be plasma fire from fighters attacking the station. He wondered if it was the Defiance creating a diversion or fighting within the station.

A quick glance around the room and saw lockers against one wall, each numbered in conjunction with the cells. The electronic lock had already been released and inside he found all the possessions that had been taken.

He put on the ear piece and spoke.

"Are you still there Corri?"

"Yes, Tor. I am still here."

"I think it's time for us to leave. Any chance you can transport me out?"

"I agree with the sentiment, but the station electronic defences have been activated. No transporter activity is possible, and the shuttle lifts have been shut down."

"Alright, so how do I get out of here?"

"I will send directions to your datapad. But first you will need to arm yourself."

"Suggestions on how do I do that?"

"Disarm a guard."

Tor had little doubt that any guards he came across would consider him one of the enemy and start shooting. Likewise if he came face to face with any attackers they would not regard him as one of their own and respond in the same fashion.

This simplified things in his own mind, he would have to avoid or kill anyone that carried a weapon. He looked at the datapad and moved towards the exit marked. Pausing as he reached the door, Tor glanced at the scanner, there was nothing to indicate if anyone was the other side of the door.

"Tell me the way's clear."

"If my scanners detect anyone I will let you know."

Tor extracted one of his daggers and flipped it to catch it on the flats of the blade, ready to be thrown. He stood to one side and triggered the door release. A quick glance around the corner told him the way was clear. He caught sight of the ceiling turrets and remained in the room.

"What about the internal weapon systems?"

"I have managed to modify the approved personnel listing to include you. The system is still fully functional, disabling it would only help the Bloodheart intruders."

Tor smiled and then sprinted down the length of the corridor, only slowing when he reached the node. A quick glance at the scanner told him to turn left. Corricel gave him the next instructions.

"There is a maintenance access panel after fifteen metres on the right side. This will take you down to the next level. I can only disable the open hatch security alert for a mizura."

"What happens then?"

"Some very nasty protection devices slice and dice you."

He stopped at the corner and glanced each way down the corridors. Tor felt curious why no one appeared to be on this level. Especially being so close to the prison block.

"Tell me, why's there no one here?"

"This section is dedicated to prison cells, and there are only two ways out. The shuttle lift or the maintenance passage. My analysis of the security systems indicate that it would be impossible to escape here without considerable help. Therefore there is no point in having human guards on this floor."

"Thanks, Corri." Tor felt there was a prompt for gratitude to be shown in the information being relayed.

"Any time."

"Does this mean, I'll meet some surprised people when I reach the next floor."

"Yes."

Tor slipped the dagger back into its sheath, and walked along the corridor while feeling that his running down the corridor had been a pointless waste of energy. Stopping before the panel he studied its bland surface for a release mechanism. From his previous experience all maintenance panels could be opened manually, if you had the right tool. He took out the dagger and gently traced around the edge. At the bottom left corner he found what he was looking for.

Sliding the blade into the slot it touched on the release lever and Tor commented.

"Start the timer."

He pushed the blade home and the panel gave a slight compression hiss as it moved away. Folded in grips popped out of the sides and Tor pulled the panel smartly away. He dropped the panel, his fingers gripped the hilt of the second blade and he drove it forwards in to the throat of a very surprised man who struggled to draw his blaster in the confined space.

The weapon dropped from his hand and bumped awkwardly on the broad lip. The man sagged and began to fall as Tor gripped the hilt of his blade, concerned that it would be torn from his hand. The blade slid free and the body fell.

"Tor, you are running out of time."

He crudely wiped the blade and slotted it back into its sheath, then extricated the dagger he used to release the panel. Taking the blaster as he climbed through the hatch he then leaned out and took a firm hold of the panel.

"Ten sezura, nine."

Finding the internal handles he pulled the panel towards the opening.

"Eight, seven."

Seeing the indicator marks he had to turn the panel to the right orientation.

"Six, five, four, three."

The panel located as Corricel announced

"Two."

From somewhere below he could still hear the sound of the body bumping its way down into the bowls of the station. Tor commented.

"I'm thinking he wasn't a regular maintenance man."

"Records indicate that he was. However the explosives he was carrying tend to suggest otherwise."

"Now tell me, they're not going to go off when he hits the bottom."

"There is a seventy five percent chance that they will."

The bumping stopped and Tor held his breath. Corricel spoke quietly in his ear.

"It would appear that the detonators are still intact."

Tor hurriedly started his descent just in case, and tried as best he could to ignore the spatters of blood that appeared on every surface. For nearly a mizura he climbed down the steel rungs to arrive at the exit hatch. Corricel reported.

"There is movement in the corridor."

Tor said nothing in case he was overheard. The muffled sound of running feet passed his position, this Tor decided was not a good sign. He muttered.

"In the grand scheme of things, where the hell am I?"

"The cells are located in the rear quarter of the station. You are well inside the Shadow Troop controlled area of the station."

"So why are people running?"

"I hoped you would not ask that. The station bombardment is underway. Bloodheart assault vessels have latched on to the outside of the station, and assault troops are beginning to board."

He felt the tremor of an explosion followed by a second. Tor gripped the handles of the hatch and released it. Unlike the panel on the floor above this one was hinged and swung out and away. He could only assume that the other panel was deliberately awkward and too much trouble for a potential escapee to bother closing behind them, or it would take them too long. Either way the consequence sounded unpleasant.

Tor practically threw himself out, and dropped into a crouch by the opposite wall as he looked in each direction. With no one immediately visible he pushed the hatch closed and glanced at the pad.

Keeping crouched low as he moved he kept glancing over his shoulder to check for pursuit and periodically moved from one side of the corridor to the other.

"Two troopers have just taken up defensive positions ahead."

Tor stopped and looked at a doorway, his hand touched the release pad and it opened. He moved inside and closed the door. Looking at the datapad he scanned through the various routes. Quietly he cursed, there was no way out and nothing he could do except wait until the fighting finished. This was not the end he expected to face, trapped in a room with two opposing factions about to unleash carnage either side.

Tor contemplated if he belonged to one side or the other he would be recognised as an ally and could simply walk away. Corricel sounded subdued as she spoke.

"A number of power couplings have been disabled through the station. Should more be damaged, there is a chance that I can shut down power in the sector you are in long enough to enable a transport."

"How many more?"

"Ten."

"And the chances of that happening are?"



"Slim."

Running feet came up the corridor, some stopped and weapons fired. Others continued until he heard doors being opened and glanced up momentarily.

"I don't think that's going to happen in time, Corri."

The buzz of weapons fire was married to the occasional screamed curse of the fatally wounded. He could hear the smack of projectiles through armour and flesh as prominently as the unfamiliar sound of ricochets zinging off the walls outside. One round left a dent in the door, culminating in the whistle of a rocket grenade passing his position. It was swiftly followed by the detonation and a sickening silence.

With the sound of heavy boots on the hard floor Tor heard the sound of doors being opened, rooms being checked and the discharge of weapons. The Bloodhearts were taking no prisoners.

"Tor, I am sorry, I think I sent you the wrong way."

A wry smile crossed Tor's lips.

"No, you sent me the right way. We just arrived at the wrong time."

"What will you do?"

"Kill them all."

## *Chapter 20*

Tor braced himself with a dagger in one hand and the blaster in the other. He could only hope the enemy outside would not expect to be rushed, and in the few brief moments of surprise any shots fired would be random rather than aimed. Then he crouched down in a stance more in keeping with a sprinter waiting on the starting block, his knuckles touching the floor as his fists gripped the weapons.

The sound of heavy boots against the hard floor stopped outside. He could tell from the disharmony of the steps that there were two troopers, one either side of the doorway. Tor breathed in deeply and began to release it slowly, every muscle and sinew tightened for the one move. All thoughts were pushed from his mind as there was no time for contemplation or doubt.

Staring, unblinking at the doorway, he waited for the first sign of its movement and every heartbeat seemed to last an age. All extraneous noise seemed dim and distant as he focused on listening for the whir of the motor drive and the hiss of actuators.

The door began to slide and he dived low for the ever increasing opening, twisting around as he did so. Pulse weapons fire hissed over him as he slid the last foot between the two crouched troopers he drove the dagger up into the throat of first and fired point blank into the surprised face of the second.

The bodies tumbled away, providing a brief moment of shielding as he fired the blaster repeatedly at the troopers along the passage. He saw three others fall. His free hand groped for the fallen pulse rifle of the dead man next to him.

Bodies obscured his view of the enemy and their view of him, so he just fired the blaster over the top in the hope of hitting someone. Weapons fire passed over him in random cross patterns as he remained lying on the deck. His fingers closed around the stock of the rifle and he dragged it across him, he fired a burst and smiled. The weapon was set to rapid repeat, and with controlled sweeps he fired blindly down the corridor.

A grenade whistled over him and clattered away. He braced himself as the explosion shook the corridor, and bits of debris bounced off him so he ceased firing. The ringing in his ears from the blast soon faded to the sound of cautious voices.

"Did we get him?"

"I'm not sure."

"Fire another one!"

Another grenade sailed overhead and once again the roar of the blast echoed along the corridor. Tor could tell someone had moved into the passageway despite the ringing in his ears. He listened as another one of the troopers reported.

"Way's clear."

The voice of the squads commander asked.

"Who's down?"

"Larkin, Grother, Kerr, Pilk, and Folie. Halds and Seri are seriously wounded."

"Let's move to the node. And see if we can get some backup down here."

Tor heard the cautious steps of the assault squad members as they approached. He counted to five and swept the corridor with a continuous burst.

As he finished the first sweep he lifted his head and looked at the slumped bodies as they slid down the wall. The pulse rifle ceased firing, its charge indicator showing that it was completely drained. He threw it to one side, seized the nearest weapon, and watched for movement.

Corricel commented.

"The situation appears to have improved. Now, I think it is time for you to get out of there."

"Tell me if anyone's coming I need to salvage some kit."

Tor retrieved the dagger and wiped the blade clean on the dead trooper's uniform before putting it back in its sheath. He quickly scanned the dead and recovered a belt of plasma rifle recharge cells and several grenades.

He decided against taking body armour as none of it had saved the lives of those around him. He looked at the projectile rifle of the Shadow Troop and commandeered one, then stripped off the additional armour which he felt gave the system unnecessary bulk. A display indicated there were several hundred rounds left in the magazine and the power level was down only a few bars.

Tor let the pulse rifle hang on its strap as he checked the datapad for guidance. He slipped it back into his jacket and proceeded cautiously towards the intersection. The impact of the grenades had ripped up floor panels and torn great chunks of material out of the walls and ceiling. Sparks showered down from severed power cables and amongst the destruction were four mutilated bodies.

He looked down the corridor to his left and saw a heavy set of closed blast doors. A ceiling turret mounted half way along the corridor tracked his movement until it disappeared from view. Another check on the datapad indicated it was one of three sets of doors which would lead to the command centre. Tor could see that he was being guided around the perimeter.

The next intersection was deserted, and again the blast doors were closed. He stopped to listen as weapons fire echoed along the corridors, he could tell it was some distance up ahead. Then suddenly weapons fire broke out behind him. Instinctively he ducked down then muttered quietly.

"Corri, suggestions on how to get behind enemy lines?"

"Go along the passageway opposite the blast door. At the next intersection there is an emergency door, leading to a staircase which will take you down two levels."

Tor moved swiftly along the passageway, his pilot boots skimming the floor to land gently and make the minimum of noise.

"Not ducts or maintenance corridors?"

"I can find you some if you prefer?"

"They seem more in keeping with a desperate individual trying to escape. But stairs are fine."

"The owner appears to have had similar concerns. Duct pipes are too small to crawl through and there are no maintenance passageways that lead from outside the blast doors to inside. Most maintenance runs are too short to make any real progress or they have defence systems installed."

Tor slowed as he reached the node and crouched down. Swinging the projectile weapon to follow his sweeping gaze, Corricel said patiently.

"There are no enemy contacts on my scanner."

"I'm just making sure."

\*\*

Nyeshta felt the sting in the back of her right leg as the robot surgeon of the medical facility made the incision. The cut matched the original one that inserted the device but instead of a fine laser the robot has opted to use a metal scalpel. To remove the device without it detonating, the robot had to ensure a piece of muscle tissue remained attached to the sensor of the device.

Nyeshta felt as though the muscle had been torn, and only the application of pain inhibitors kept the agony bearable.

The application of rapid-skin to the incision closed the wound and as the surgeon applied a support bandage it commented.

"The pain suppressors will wear off in one stazura. Try to give the wound time to heal. Now you are free to leave."

Nyeshta rolled over and swung her legs off the table, she tentatively stood up and felt the muscle twinge. She balanced on her good leg and hopped to where her flight suit was draped over a changing screen and quickly changed. She needed to make contact with Neinan, the man Clegan made head of security before she left, and try to persuade him to let her release Tor from his cell.

Trying to justify it would be difficult as her whole argument would then revolve around her being able to persuade Tor and the Defiance to help them. The ultimate challenge, as she saw it, was then to get Tor's agreement.

She limped from the medical centre and found a group of four security guards standing behind moveable blast screens, each one mounted with heavy duty pulse cannons at the next intersection.

"Can any of you tell me where I can find the head of security?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I do."

"Don't be funny lady. What's your name?"

"Nyeshta."

A guard spoke into a comm unit and waited for a response. He glanced at her with a look of distrust and slowly nodded.

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For a few brief moments Nyeshta felt distinctly uncomfortable and wondered why it was taking so long for them to reach a decision.

The guard gave a brief gesture with his hand.

"Straight on down the corridor and he'll meet you at the next intersection."

Nyeshta smiled and gave a brief nod as she passed them. It did not take her long to reach the last intersection to find the far end was open and looked out on gantries and support struts which held the command centre and heart of the station in place. The final refuge for the stations inhabitants and a fortress within a fortress but as Nyeshta studied the structure she realised the blast doors were airlocks and the support struts nothing more than large docking clamps. The heart of the station was a ship, intact and separate from the surrounding structure with the exception of power couplings.

She looked up to the outer hull of the station and wondered if it opened or if the ship's weapons system would blast a hole.

"I see you're admiring the command centre." The placid, oily voice of the chief of security disturbed her.

"It's changed a lot since I was last here."

She glanced over at Neinan the man was tall and slim with close cropped hair and dark eyes. He had a focussed way of looking at people that made them think he was reading their thoughts. His skin was pallid and Nyeshta swore that if the man ever found asleep then people would think he was dead.

Two station troopers flanked him and had their weapons pointed at her.

"The Boss felt the crew needed some chance of escaping if the station ever came under attack."

"I doubt he anticipated the place being bombarded by a Python."

Neinan's appeared to absorb her words with unhealthy tentativeness.

"So Nye, why are you here and more to the point, who are you working for these days?"

It was the question Nyeshta expected, knowing the robot surgeon would have notified security that it had removed an explosive tag from a patient.

"I understand you guys need some help."

"Freelancing? This hardly seems the right time and place to be offering your talent."

"From what I've heard echoing down the corridors, Bloodheart troopers are already on this station. You need a powerful fighter to attack the Bloodheart flagship, so you can get your people out of here."

Neinan's face twitched into a wry smile.

"A powerful ship? You know where we can find one?"

"The Defiance. Get me to the prison block so I can release Tor Grall, when we reach the docking bay. He'll help."

The smile faded.

"Ahh, yes. Did you know that the Falcon you arrived in has deployed Bloodheart Troopers in that area?"

"And you know I've just had a Bloodheart tag taken out of my leg. So what do you deduce from that?"

"Nothing, but you have my curiosity. What guarantee would I have that if you reach the docking bay, you won't just run?"

"Tor has an old score to settle with Feran, he won't want to miss the opportunity to get even."

Neinan regarded her for a few moments and shrugged.

"There's no one I can send with you. But you are free to try and find Tor yourself. If my information is correct he has already escaped the prison sector, how we have not yet established, and is making his own way around the station."

Nyeshta gave a wry smile as she spoke.

"I think you'll find it has something to do with the series five thousand AI on the Defiance."

"Really? I thought the last of those masterpiece's of destruction had been destroyed."

"If you help me to find Tor, then that masterpiece of destruction can be persuaded to show some gratitude."

"Help you? Yes, I'll help you reach the other side of the blast doors. But that is as much as I'm prepared to do."

"Okay, I need a weapon and an environment suit."

"What you will get is to be left outside of the blast doors, and you will have to find your own weapon and suit. Show her the way." He signaled the two guards to move forward.

They directed her at gun point back along the corridor as Neinan stepped onto the metal walkway that led to the command centre. Nyeshta felt that a cutting comment would make her feel better but knew Neinan would order her immediate execution for it, and so held her tongue.

The brisk pace caused spasms in the muscles of her wounded leg, and several times she had to hop as the guards refused to let her stop and rest. Eventually they reached an outer ring blast door. One of the guards spoke.

"Neinan, wants you to know that Tor was last monitored close to here."

She looked at them.

"He didn't order you to let me have a weapon?"

"No." The guard un-holstered a small blaster. "Take this and, if you can, buy us and our families time to get out of here."

She glanced at the weapon and the second guard. He did not appear inclined to say anything, and the blast door opened. Nyeshta limped out to the words.

"Good luck."

The doors clanged shut behind her. She looked at the blaster, it was fully charged and considered that some people deserved better leaders. Nyeshta cursed Neinan and vowed quietly to herself that she would have no hesitation in killing him the next time they met.

In the distance she heard weapons fire and wondered how many Shadow Troop mercenaries were still outside the blast doors. She dismissed the idea that it might be Tor as she recalled that he had no military training. Limping along the corridor Nyeshta made it to the next intersection. There was no obvious activity in any direction, so she moved ahead staying close to the left wall.

There was evidence of a fight with blast marks on the walls. The bodies of several station guards and Bloodheart troopers littered the floor. Their weapons had been removed by the survivors, but it was not obvious who had won the encounter.

Nyeshta pressed on, moving away from the blast doors as these would be the primary goal of the invading troopers. Her only hope was that Tor would have the sense to try and get behind the attackers in order to find a way to the docking bay.

\*\*

Feran wiped the blood from his hands as the bodies of the gunners, who had failed to protect the Thirst from the attack of the Bayamons, were dragged from the command deck. The air hung with fear and the stench of released souls from the those that died.

The command crew kept their focus firmly on the control panels, not daring to talk or look around in case it attracted attention.

A door opened and there was the swish of a long cloak dragging against the deck as the soft soles of Ethyrn hide boots padded quietly across the surface. Feran gazed with bitter contempt at the Shadow Troop station when the voice of Chief Councillor Twh k'Trrg

"I see you have properly punished the incompetent."

Feran turned slowly and stared at Twh, and the Chief Council smiled as he saw the unmistakable glint of malice radiate from the Bloodheart leader.

"You will soon have the Shadow Troop station. Consider it an expansion of your empire."

"You didn't come to watch me take the station."

"No. I am here for the Defiance." Twh staked his claim to the ship, knowing it would anger Feran.

"This my victory. I claim all spoils."

Twh smiled at the clipped sentences knowing he had succeeded.

"Take what is left Feran. That ship is mine for saving your precious Thirst."

Feran moved towards Twh with a sudden lunge, but the chief council adopted a defensive stance and blocked the blow from the steel prosthetic. Dropping down to avoid being entangled in a high grapple, his left fist shot up and connected with Ferans jaw sending him reeling away.

Twh rose slowly and heard the steel blade slide out with a rasp.

"You should know better than to draw your blade on me, Feran."

The deceptively casual ease Twh avoided the sweeping thrust of the blade and the hardness of his punch to the side of Feran's head, had the Bloodheart leader stagger away with a slightly dazed but still malevolent look. Twh was the first to talk.

"I should kill you for drawing your blade, but I won't. The Defiance is mine, but I will leave you Tor Grall to play with."

A slow smile came to Feran's lips. More worrying to Twh was the hint of madness in Feran's eyes as it was replaced with a gleam of calm sanity.

"The slayer of the Venom Master should have a worthy opponent." He retracted the blade. The slow deliberation of the words was not what Twh expected. "And I would prefer to die by his hand than yours."

\*\*

Tor heard weapons fire before he reached the next intersection. Corricel informed him.

"You are approaching a security node."

"I expect that means there's no way round?"

"Yes."

"I need a moment to think." He tapped gently on the door next to him. "Open this one for me."

Tor kept an close look on the corridor as the gentle hiss of the actuators was lost in a concentrated burst of fire. He stepped inside and the lights blinked to life as the door sealed itself. In a brief glance he could tell it was one of the crews quarters and had been left in a hurry with many personal belongings left neatly on shelves and pictures hanging on the wall.

There was a homely feel about the place and a growing feeling of discomfort crept over him as he stood uninvited by the door. A glance at the datapad scanner was all he could do to quell the sense of guilt that touched him. As a justification to himself, he muttered.

"This is a pirate station. No one decent would want to live here." Deep down inside he was not convinced.

"Good people fall on hard times too. Everyone does what they can to survive." Corricel responded in his ear.

"Tell me what I'm up against?"

"The next node has two squads of Bloodheart troopers trying to bridge across to the troopers in the node opposite the security intersection. In between the attackers is the intersection held by eight, seven Shadow Troop defenders and two dual turrets."

"Do the shadow troop have anywhere to retreat to?"

"They have an escape route through the blast doors."

"Have you made any progress with transporting me out of here?"

"There are seven active transmission scramblers which are preventing a lock."

"So I need to get closer."

"The docking bay would be ideal."

Tor smiled, and unclipped two grenades.



"So when I step out of here I'll be one against thirty?"

"One against twenty seven."

"The odds are getting better all the time."

"In whose favour?"

Tor touched on the door panel and it opened.

"I'll let you know when it's over."

"There are two troopers watching the corridor you will be approaching from."

"Thanks."

Tor had no idea how much cover he was going to have as he kept low to the left hand wall. Blast marks scorched indents into the walls, floor and ceiling. Several bodies were slumped or sprawled across the floor and Tor stepped carefully over the dead. The next intersection had been subject to a heavy battle. The still smoking, blackened and charred remains of Station guards were littered amongst the debris of shattered blast shields. The defensive turret hung down with showers of sparks spurting from its fusing electrics as it swung on power feeds.

Tor dropped down as pulse rifle fire cut past him. The weapons fire stopped and he remained still for a few moments and gripped one of the grenades. It would be an impossible throw to reach the far end of the other passageway in a single lob but it would give him time to reach the intersection and find a safe place to shelter.

He saw the dot of a targeting laser track across the body next to him. The word 'sniper' crossed his mind and he moved fast coming into a low stance, and the grenade thrown with every ounce of strength he could. The plasma ripped through his previous position and swept towards him as he dived towards the entrance of the intersection.

He heard the sharp metallic sound as the grenade bounced.

"Gren." The cry was lost in the sound of the explosion and Tor swung the pulse rifle around and opened fire. He felt his right hand twinge as he threw the second grenade as hard as he could down the corridor.

The second explosion was combined with the screams of the injured and Tor was running, keeping low with both weapons spitting out short bursts. The ricochets danced off the walls as he swerved from one side of the passageway to the other. The security intersection defence turret ceased firing. Speed was everything and he accelerated into a full sprint. In the last stride to the intersection he placed his left foot against the wall and launched himself towards the ceiling, and twisted as he entered the node. With a full three hundred and sixty degree turn he shot down at the sheltering Bloodheart troopers, then landed in a crouch, each weapon sweeping the sides.

Tor dropped and rolled to one side, coming back up on one knee, avoiding incoming fire, and directed the weapons on the Troopers who streamed from the side corridors. Bodies twisted and turned as the plasma rounds impacted, others jarred to dance spasmodically then fall, their weapons firing into the floor or ceiling, as projectiles tore through them. The same rounds slamming fatally into those behind.

Silence fell and Tor quickly scanned the floor for a new pulse rifle, he did not want to look at the destruction and death he had wrought.

Weapons fire broke out, but none of it directed towards him.

\*\*

Neinan sat in the command centre and watched the screen with curiosity. A full on assault by one man into a group of Feran's best assault troopers. He would replay the moment of Tor entering the

intersection over a metre off the deck and turning with weapons firing down and plasma slicing through the air around him.

It was reckless bravado of the worst kind, and generally got people killed needlessly, yet Tor had survived. He pulled the footage onto the terminal screen and replayed the event in slow motion. There was something about the way Tor moved, subtly deceptive to the eye as weapons fire sliced through the space moments after he passed through it.

"Instruct the security team in node Theta three that Tor Grall has cleared the Bloodheart attackers on the Delta side. Give him clear passage to cross, and make sure he knows it."

\*\*

Tor checked the number of rounds left in the projectile rifle and knew he would need to find a new magazine belt. He hefted a new plasma rifle with plasma grenade launcher attachment. The troopers pack carried spare packs and he listened for footsteps as he replaced the supplement power charges. Corricel disturbed his thoughts.

"Tor, the Shadow Troop have been given instructions to allow you to cross the next intersection."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"That's uncommonly kind of them." Tor reflected bitterly on his imprisonment. He moved quickly with both weapons facing forward and kept low just in case there was a trap. He passed through an energy suppression field and noted the pulse rifle indicator blink out.

He walked boldly into the intersection, the mobile shield wall of the troopers parted. Directly across from them the shield sparked with the pulse rifle Bloodheart troopers. The energy left in the round significantly diminished by the suppression field.

A plasma grenade impacted on the suppression field and detonated creating a deep red glow. Small fragments of debris clattered along the passageway. The overhead turret fired a long strafing burst and the projectile weapons buzzed with repeated firing.

Tor looked at a young Shadow Troop guard and asked.

"Do you have spare rounds for this?" He held out the projectile rifle.

The youth looked perplexed and glanced at his older colleague who simply nodded. He retrieved a magazine belt from a pack and offered it to Tor without a word.

"Now tell me how to." Tor stopped and swung the weapon towards the sound of running feet. He saw the plasma rifle and pulled the trigger. The person twisted and span into the wall before sliding down.

The glimpse of long hair had his heart miss a beat, his eyes widened and his hands began to shake. Corricel spoke quietly in his ear.

"Tor, you have just shot Nyeshta."

Tor felt the burning sensation of bile in the back of his throat and swallowed it back. He moved swiftly back down the corridor and memories surfaced of when he last saw her in the prison cell. Looking down at her for a few moments he knelt down, knowing he never meant it to end this way.

Nyeshta moved and twisted, agony etched across her face. Blood oozed between her fingers as her hands clenched her gut to try and stem the flow. He spoke gently.

"Lie still, I'll get help."

"I think it's too late for that." Nyeshta responded through clenched teeth. "If you want to save someone, find a young girl called Kiri." She winced with pain from the effort of talking. "And take the damn datacore out of my pocket and give it to Agent Belign."

Tor froze with the question burning in his mind, was this why had Caran tried to talk to him? That Nyeshta could not help him escape because she struck a deal with the service. Possibilities and ideas whirred around his head and now he had messed it all up.

"I came here for you Nye. Corri, what's the chance of a transport."

Corricel spoke quietly.

"I now have access to the entire power network. I can drop the grip to make a single transport but that is all I can do."

"Nye, you'll be out of here in a few moments."

"No, Tor. Save Kiri!"

"Corri, tell the station defence squads to get behind the blast doors. And get Nye out of here."

"Are.." Corricel started but Tor interrupted.

"Do it!"

"Nyeshta only has a ten percent chance of survival."

"It'll have to do. Get her to the Bakery, transport her into the medical centre and then return here as soon as you can. I have a feeling I'll need you."

The question why Nyeshta had been running became evident in the heavy footsteps of the Bloodheart troopers moving along the corridors. The lights went out, and with it the gravity generators.

Plasma arced along the passageway. Tor returned fire with both weapons until the projectile rifle ceased firing after a seizure. He propelled himself forward in low flight across the deck towards the Bloodheart Troopers sending a blaze of plasma in all directions. Moments later the lights blinked back on and as Tor twisted gravity took hold. A heavy boot caught him on the side of the head, the pulse rifle fired and in the half daze he glimpsed the butt of a rifle strike him. Consciousness faded to the words.

"Tell his Lordship, we have Grall."

## *Chapter 21*

Clegan marshaled the remainder of his fighters to take position in the shadow of the asteroids, while he watched the video feed from the transmitters planted on the surface of rocks close to the station. All he could do was wait as the screen showed the assault transports latch onto the outer shell. The sensor readings indicated that the modified escape transport at the heart was ready for deployment, and Clegan smiled at the thought that there really was no honour amongst thieves.

"Status?"

"Over half of the Bloodheart boarding craft have docked with the station. Estimate it will take another five mizuras for the remaining craft to deploy."

Clegan knew he had lost the battle, but Feran would need a whole new assault team before the end. He considered the added bonus that the Bloodheart leader would still not have control of the Androti Weed. All that he required was for the remaining fighters to keep the Bloodheart ships from engaging the escape vessel before it had a chance to engage the interplanetary drive unit.

Suddenly the stations lights went out and all power readings dropped.

"What the?" Clegan leant forward in his seat.

A bright flash adjacent to the docking entrance turned to particle beams and a ship shot out followed by a gout of flames.

"Grall." The look of annoyance became a wry smile in the knowledge that another prize was slipping through Feran's grasp.

In the seuras of sudden confusion amongst the Bloodheart fighters a wormhole opened and the Defiance vanished. The power grid on the station registered activation.

"Sir, comms have been restored with the station."

"Message to all fighters to adopt final defence, and prepare to signal order twenty three to the station on my command." He would give the remaining four assault transports another ten mizuras to board the station.

As the last one took position, one of the already attached vessels broke away its engines flared as it turned towards the Python.

"Wormhole detected. Ship emerging."

The viewer changed image as the Defiance re-appeared close to where it departed. It turned slowly as plasma cascaded towards it from fighters and the two corvettes. The shields shimmered and shone before the lightning flashes of the particle beams reduced Bloodheart fighters to vapour. With a brief flare from the engine pods the Defiance placed itself between the transport and the Python. Short bursts from a particle beam stripped away the transports shields and were followed by an open frequency transmission. The voice laden with malice.

"Surrender your prisoner."

The Thirst edged closer, Phased Photons from multiple turret positions lit up the darkness. The Defiance strafed and the transport tried to find a way past only to be blocked. The tail glow of multiple missile launches streaked toward Tor's ship.

"Send the command." Clegan relaxed at the opportune timing.

"Sir."

While the Defiance weathered the storm with surprising resilience and became the focus for the Bloodheart fighters, the station shell suddenly started to ripple with explosions. The spin of the structure slowed and stopped suddenly as a section tumbled away into the asteroid field. More explosions vented two hundred metre jets of burning gases, and then the nose of the transport moved gracefully from the disintegrating shell.

Comms channels jammed open with panic filled transmissions.

The modified transport cleared the structure and increased its velocity. Small fighters moved to engage, their plasma shimmered in the shields. More fighters swarmed in towards the fleeing ship as Shadow Troop ships swung around the asteroids to intercept and protect it. Missile launches from both sides cluttered the tactical display.

Sensor readings indicated the interplanetary drive was charging as the shields tumbled under the constant bombardment. At a glance he knew they were not going to make it. The transport was too slow, too heavy.

Behind them the station entered into its final death throws with large sections of hull being blasted into the void. Small pieces flared in the shields of the Bloodheart flagship while the gunners frantically fired on larger sections before they could impact.

Missile contacts on the tactical display blinked out in rapid succession. Two Bloodheart heavy fighters also vanished, one ship shielded the fleeing transport, matching its speed as the interplanetary drive engaged.

The remaining Shadow Troop ships melted away into the asteroid field leaving only Bloodheart ships and debris.

\*\*

Korecmancketras idly turned the datacore in his hand. His mood had been darkened by recent events and he barely noticed Caran enter his office. For a long time the Argon Agent patiently waited without speaking.

"I know this is not a good time." Caran disturbed the Paranid's thoughts.

Korecmancketras held up the datacore.

"By all that we find holy. Was this really worth friends dying?"

"That I can't answer. Needless to say, many have died for less."

"If I know your Argon ways, they will not be remembered. Only the Paranid truly honour our fallen great."

Caran knew better than to point out the Paranid honoured great were mainly the leaders not the individual soldiers. Yet the sentiment was still there, many unsung heroes were little more than names in forgotten archives, and so it would be with Tor and ultimately his own name. He placed a hard case on the desk, opened the catches and lifted the lid. Inside was padded with an empty pocket.

He strode slowly towards the Paranid and lifted the datacore out of his hand.

"I'm hoping something good will come out of this, but for the life of me I can't see what." Caran returned to the case and gently placed the datacore inside, then closed the lid.

"In the name of the Pontifex, find something."

Caran glanced towards Korecmancketras and gave a slight nod then left.

\*\*

Tor stirred and consciousness took hold. The throbbing in his head, he came to realise, was not so much from the blow to the head but from the fact he was hanging upside down. Around him were voices, muttering indistinctly.

"My lord, the prisoner is awake." Tor did not recognise the voice. It was male, close by and had the tone of mild disinterest.

Tor opened his eyes slowly, half expecting someone to shine a bright light straight into his face. He felt stretched and other senses fired responses to his growing awareness. His hands were shackled, the bindings tight against his wrists. Looking down he saw a fine steel hawser going through a loop in the floor and coupled to a tensioning winch that formed an integral part of a faceless robot. He gauged his head was nearly a metre and a half above the floor.

He looked forward to see a large view screen and knew instinctively he was on the bridge of a battleship. Crew sat at various navigation and command centres, none paid him any attention.

"Take your time to admire the view, Grall."

Tor could feel the breath of the speaker against the back of his neck. He heard the sound of an alarm and shot a glance at the tactical command desk as the operator muted it. The screen flashed and Tor allowed himself a slight smile at the sight of particle beams slashing across the shields. Phased photon charges rained towards the small fast ship.

"It looks like it's going to be a nice day on the homeworld."

He sensed the speaker move past him and watched as the Split moved in front of him. Tor had expected Feran to be younger, then noticed he did not have a prosthetic arm.

"Fires burn on Nopileos. They say the Paranid started them."

"Accidents happen."

Twh turned abruptly and smiled slowly.

"Yes indeed, Grall. They do."

"Just out of interest, I was expecting to see Feran, but who the hell are you?"

Behind him Feran laughed quietly and it caused the hairs on the back of his neck to rise.

"I am the Chief Council to the Patriarch."

Tor glanced down to the bindings around his wrists and then back up at Twh.

"Let me guess, you're here to negotiate my release from these pirates?"

"It is within my power to grant freedom."

"At what price?"

Twh bent forward so he could look straight into Tor's eyes.

"The Defiance."

"Is that all? It's yours, take it. And best of luck." Tor smiled.

Twh stepped back with a look of confused curiosity, he had expected Tor to refuse and put up a futile struggle against torture.

"What are the access codes?"

"Ahh, yes. A small detail, but unfortunately there aren't any. Or at least none the AI would admit to." Tor did his best to shrug. Another alarm went off at the tactical command unit.

"I'm sure you can guess what we will do if they are not supplied, freely?"

"From here I have a reasonably shrewd idea. But that doesn't change the fact that I don't know any security override codes for the Defiance."

"That is most unfortunate."

"So are you going to torture me anyway?"

"Questions need answers, Grall. And I have many."

The Python shook with the shockwave of a large explosion. The crewman at tactical span to face Twh.

"My Lord, one of your corvettes has just been destroyed."

"It sounds like things aren't going so well for you?" Tor looked suitably concerned despite everything being upside down.

Twh took several deep breaths and turned slowly.

"Order the Defiance to stand down."

"That's going to be difficult in my current situation."

"Just speak clearly." Twh looked towards the comms centre, "Open a channel."

"Defiance this is Tor. I've been asked to ask you to stop shooting at everyone. Thanks."

Twh signaled for the comm be closed.

"I sensed a lack of sincerity. Perhaps we should send the message again accompanied by screams?" Twh stepped up to Tor and a metal rod appeared in his hand. With a sweep of the arm it passed over Tor's midriff sending a burning sensation ripping through him.

Perspiration beaded on his forehead while he twisted and turned, fighting against the pain through clenched teeth Tor choked back any sound. He settled, with slow steady breaths, anger reflected in his eyes. In his squirming he tested the bindings but they were well made and refused to show any sign of yielding.

"Endurance to pain. Very admirable, but everyone screams sooner or later." Twh smiled.

"The Defiance continues its attack." The tactical officer announced.

Twh circled Tor and this time the rod passed across his shoulders. The cable dragged against the loop in the deck but provided very little slack for the contraction in the muscles.

"Still not ready to issue the command?" Twh ran the rod down the back of his right leg. "There are places that Argon feel real pain. I can demonstrate where. Unless the order is given, and the Defiance stands down."

"And at what point will you realise that no command from me will work."

"Explain?" Twh came around to face Tor.

"The AI on the Defiance is a series five thousand, self aware, and psychotic. I didn't order the ship to attack this vessel, it does it by its own volition. You have three choices, only one of which might let you get away alive."

"You are giving me choices?" To Tor, Twh sounded and looked remarkably calm.

"Yes, you let me go unharmed and we leave, everyone lives. Or, you kill me and the Defiance will tear this destroyer apart, before going on a bloody rampage of revenge. Alternatively you torture and maim me, but the Defiance will slice and dice this ship until it recovers what's left, then it'll go on a bloody rampage of revenge."

"You dare to threaten Split?"

"I'm just telling you how it'll be."

"We shall see." The Split Chief Council appeared to consider where he would press the pain stick and all Tor felt he could see the thought process. He risked a glance at the wide view screen of the tactical officer. Showers of pulsed photons cascaded towards the small indistinguishable dark mass of the Defiance. Its position marked only by the periodic, lancing particle beams. The exhaust glow of missiles spiraled in to the malaise but detonated before reaching the ship.

Agony raced through him and he pulled up hard on the wrist bindings with a sudden jerk. The restraining robot shifted against the deck and Tor continued to pull until the bite of the manacles became too painful to continue.

Twh looked at the robot, the drag marks scored the surface, and explored one with the toe of his boot.

"Impressive. If a little futile."

The Thirst shuddered again, and this time the tactical officer turned slowly.

"My Lord, your ship has been destroyed."

The face of the Chief Council twitched, a look of rage burned in his eyes and Twh struck Tor hard in the chest with his fist. Tor twisted on his restraints, muscles contracted and it took him a moment to catch his breath.

"Rip him apart!" Twh shouted to Feran.

Tor expected a limb wrenching tug and braced himself for the struggle of his life. Suddenly there was a click and the wrist bindings sprung open. Swinging free he saw the surprised, and rapidly growing livid, expression on Twh's face.

"What is this treachery?"

Tor was still facing the wrong way as he swung over the deck and felt annoyed that he could not face Feran directly when he gave his answer.

"If Grall is to die here, then I feel he deserves a more fitting end." Feran sounded unnaturally calm for a Split and not how Tor imagined he would.

"A fitting end?" Twh fought to gain control of his rage.

"I have killed enough people on your whim. Tor's blood will be on my hands, only if you lose." Feran keyed in the release code for the ankle bindings and Tor fell to the floor.

Twh moved deceptively fast, and a dark blade slashed through the air where Tor's neck had been a moment before. The initial shock that the Argon had avoided the cut swiftly passed, even so he moved with caution. Tor was unarmed and Twh felt no reason to fear him, he smiled as he formed ideas on how to make Feran pay for this insubordination.

Tor recovered his composure after hitting the deck and then nearly losing his head. He kept his focus on the Split trying to kill him, but was aware that the eyes of the crew were on him. He tried to console himself with the knowledge that only a madman would use a blaster on the command



deck of a Destroyer. The only trouble with that thought, Tor decided, was that the real madman sat in the command seat.

The Split Chief Council moved almost as fast as Creed and likewise was very difficult to anticipate. The pain stick slashed over his head as he ducked down and the edge of the blade nicked the shoulder of his jacket a sezure later.

TwH knew his last move would have killed any normal Argon and seriously wounded most Split. He watched Tor, there was some casual ease about his movements, to the point that he appeared relaxed, yet faster than anyone he had encountered.

"Fast reflexes won't save you, Grall."

Tor remained quiet, and dodged back, the pain stick slashing down towards his face. Side stepping, it then lunged towards his chest. He deflected the stick with his right forearm and suffered the searing jolt but turned TwH enough to make the sweeping cut of the dark blade slice wide of target. The Split reversed the blade and made a low back cut, catching Tor's left leg just above the knee.

TwH stepped back and smiled, holding it up to show Tor the blood stained edge.

"Before the end you will beg."

Tor moved with a slight limp, the cut was not deep but stung to the point of blocking out all other injuries.

TwH closed in with several fast cuts, switching the direction of the blade on each back cut, but Tor ducked and swerved clear before falling back with a light fresh cut across the front of his jacket.

Clenching his fists Tor waited for the next attack, the Split left very few opportunities for him to get close enough to put up any counter attack. Yet there was the possibility to make an opportunity. As TwH attacked Tor dodged the first sweep of the blade and took the hit of the pain stick on the left shoulder.

Before TwH could bring back the blade, Tor's fist stuck him in the chest with such force that the Split's feet left the ground and he landed half a metre back, and staggered to regain his balance. The blade slashed forward to prevent Tor pressing the advantage. Never before had TwH been hit so hard, he knew no Argon possessed such strength.

"What are you?"

"I was born Argon. What I have become is, something else."

TwH discarded the pain stick and brought out a second dark metal blade. He tried to ignore the pain and gradual tightening in his chest.

Tor kept a safe distance from the Split, but he did not want to get too close to the cabin crew in case one of them decided to aid TwH. He could see his only chance of surviving was to get behind his opponent, or at least get his hands on the discarded pain stick.

TwH moved forward, the blades cutting back and forth between neck and stomach height. Tor saw little opportunity to get through the guard, but noticed that the Split was slightly slower than before.

A blade sliced past him, Tor caught the left wrist with his right hand and pulled hard forcing it across to his left side. TwH twisted and Tor turned bringing his left elbow hard in to the centre of the Chief Council's back. The Split leapt away turning as he did so and landed in a low crouch.

Tor swept up the pain stick from the floor and faced an enraged Chief Council. Bringing the stick up, he could tell that the construction was not as robust as he had hoped, and doubted he should use it to block either of the two blades. He felt a slight buzz when activating the power and circled his opponent.

Twh calmed himself and kept slightly crouched as he closed in, he half lunged and changed the sweeping direction of the blades. His left hand jolted as the wrist came in contact with the pain stick. The tips of both blades came away red with blood.

Tor dropped back and moved to the left of Twh, a shallow cut two centimetres in length ran across the left side of his chest, and a second cut of similar length ran down his left thigh. The blood trickled down to join that of the earlier wound.

The Chief Council returned to full height and pressed the advantage, Tor dropped and dodged to the right, kicking out at Twh's knees. The sole of his boot hammering against the left kneecap. One of the Splits blades biting into his left calf before he fell away.

Twh landed heavily and tried to regain his feet, but found his left leg uncooperative. Tor drew himself up, limping heavily the pain stick remained clenched tightly in his left hand. He stayed back, waiting, keeping out of range should Twh decide to slash at his ankles.

The Chief Council grabbed hold of his dislocated kneecap and forced it back into place. He kept his eyes on Tor as he scrambled back to his feet while keeping his weight on his right leg.

"An interesting move, Grall. Still you bleed more than me. It's only a matter of time."

The Chief Council held back as Tor circled him, his left leg almost giving out every time he tried to put some weight on it. Tor knew if Twh tried to attack with the same energetic zeal he would lose his balance. Even so his own left leg was not much better.

Twh moved with surprising speed towards him. He felt the tip of the blade pass beneath his chin, his right hand catching the other wrist. His left hand sweeping up and over as Twh head butted him. Tor staggered back then drove the pain stick into Twh's right eye.

The Split Chief Council, shook and went into spasm. Both blades clattered to the floor as he collapsed backwards, the stench of released bowls filling the air.

Tor limped backwards and away from the body. His eyes swiveled up to the slow rhythmical clap of a hand against an armrest.

## *Chapter 22*

Tor glanced down to see the two dark blades of Twh near his feet and then returned his attention to the Bloodheart leader.

"What now, Feran?"

"You are a remarkable man, Grall. I have pitted troops and the best assassin against you and always you survive." Feran paused and showed no sign of standing up. "Today you have done me a service. For that I am in a mind to let you go."

"But you won't."

"Do you know who it is you've just killed?"

Tor shook his head slowly.

"He was Twh k'Trrg, Chief Councillor to the Ruling Split Families, and Master Assassin. It was by his order that I sent ships to recover the data disc you transported so many jazuras ago."

"Successfully transported."

"Yes."

"But you just couldn't let it go. Could you." Tor felt the past being dredged up and anger began to surface.

"Angry, Grall?"

"You killed my parents!"

"And how many of my people died when you rescued your friend? How many innocents? Would you like me to show you the list?" Feran moved forward on his seat. Tor remained silent. "Violence begets violence, Grall. End this feud and leave in peace."

Tor glanced down already he was standing in a growing pool of his own blood. In other places his suit stuck to him as it congealed. The cut on his calf throbbed while the others stung. He took a deep breath and for a few sezuras felt dizzy from the blood loss.

"Soon Grall, you will not have the strength to fight. Make your choice."

Tor felt uncomfortable with what he was hearing. These were not the insane rantings of a madman that he was expecting. Yet he knew Feran was right, dropping down onto his right knee he picked up a blade. The balance was good, Tor glanced up at the Bloodheart leader, and the Split was once more sitting back and watching him.

The blade was razor sharp and sliced through the fabric of his left leg of his suit with consummate ease. With the long section of material he folded it over and tied it around the deep cut on his calf. He stood up with a blade in each hand and looked around the command deck. The crew had no weapons but the security teams had both blasters and stun batons.

"I will end this feud, and walk away on one condition."

"Condition?"

"This ship shifts the balance of power in the unregulated sectors. If you have any concern for the safety of your crew, you will order them to abandon ship."

A smile spread across Feran's face and he laughed.

"And then what? You will take command?"

"This ship will be destroyed. The fate of those on board is up to you."

The smile vanished and slowly Feran stood up. With a metallic rasp the blade in his right arm slid out.

"You want to continue the violence by making unreasonable demands? Maybe, I should have torn you apart."

"Hindsight, it's a wonderful thing. But I'm beginning to think you're scared of me."

"Every moment we talk, you bleed a little more. I don't have to cut you down, in a while you will fall on your own."

Tor knew Feran was right. Although he stemmed the flow, he was still bleeding and every movement opened up the shallow cuts. Stepping around the body of Twih, he limped toward Feran leaving bloody footprints on the deck. Tor contemplated throwing one of the blades but something inside told him it would be a wasted effort, and that he would need both weapons.

"The universe will be a better place without you."

"Really? How so?" Feran stepped forward, a look of anger flashed across his face.

"People won't have to worry about your psychopathic tendencies."

"You are wounded, I give you the option to run, yet you choose to fight. Where is the sanity in that?" The Bloodheart leader moved to within striking distance.

Tor could see the glint of madness in the Split's eyes. There was the flicker of a smile and the blade moved. Steel clashed, Feran broke away to turn and lunge. Tor parried the blow but the force of it knocked him back. His left foot slid and threatened to unbalance him. Feran struck him full in the face and the coppery taste of blood entered his mouth. He staggered back, his guard down, but Feran chose not to press the advantage.

"Do you still refuse to put aside your weapons and leave in peace?"

Tor launched a counter attack, the blades cut and lunged. Feran blocked and parried, the sound of clashing steel frantic until Feran struck with his left fist into Tor's chest sending him backwards to land heavily against the deck. He rolled as Feran's blade slashed down towards him. Panting heavily, he regained his feet and spat blood. He could feel his heart race, and felt faint from blood loss. Shaking his head he breathed in deeply.

"You feel your strength ebbing away, and with it your agility. You're a dead man, Grall, but you choose not to see it."

"If I'm so weak, why don't you kill me?"

"When you have no strength left, and lie helpless on the deck. You will know death."

Focussing his attention on his opponent, Tor decided not to waste effort talking. Feran came forward the blade cutting across the body from left to right, and he blocked with both blades. The Bloodheart leader stepped back to deliver an overhead cut. Tor parried the blade with his left and slashed at his opponent's midriff with the right, the Split shifted backwards just stepping out of reach.

Tor heard the buzz of a stun baton and realized almost too late that Feran carried a less primitive weapon. The energised bar brushed past him giving only the slightest of numbing jolts. Steel clashed together, he found out that blocking the baton with steel was a bad idea. The energy of the stun charge surged its way through the blade and into his arm. He barely maintained grip as they separated.

Steadying himself, Tor let his opponent make the next attack. Feran brought the stun baton around slowly, and pointed it directly at him. The buzz filled the air between them making the fine hairs on his arms dance before the Split lunged forwards. He side stepped and the baton shifted direction. Tor dropped into a crouch, the buzz swept over his head. The blade in his right hand parried the diagonal cut of Feran's blade while his left hand slashed up and across the Split's chest.

Feran leapt back, a cut traced across his robes. A fine line of seeping red wicking across the cloth. Tor felt a dizzy wave hit him and he staggered back. His right hand hitting his nervous system with new pain from an older injury.

The Bloodheart leader's eyes narrowed and he came forward cautiously. Tor back stepped to avoid a cutting sweep across his neck. Then parried the back cut with his left hand. Feran continued to close dropping into a crouch as he turned made a full three sixty turn, Tor's right hand blade skimmed over him, and he lunged with the baton before Tor could make the return cut.

The head of the baton struck Tor full in the chest and he shot backwards to land heavily on the deck. As he lay there gathering what little strength remained, Feran loomed over him.

"Time for you to die."

Tor rolled to the side as the blade plunged down. His left arm swept round and blocked the slashing sweep after Feran's blade struck the deck and then sliced towards his neck. He rolled to his front, the stun baton buzzing past his head, and pushed hard against the floor to swiftly rise up onto his right knee. Both blades locked together to block Feran's overhead swing. He pushed hard forcing Feran to yield ground and the baton to swing wide as the Split maintained balance.

Biting back the pain Tor forced his left leg to lift his weight and staggered backward, he was back on his feet. A brief wave of dizziness made him stumble before he composed himself.

The Bloodheart leader came at him with heavy blows of steel on steel. The baton swinging in under Tor's defence driving him back. He felt the crew move aside and his backside bumped into the edge of a command centre, he moved swiftly to his right and Feran slashed out with the baton.

Both of Tor's blades crossed in a two way cut. The baton showered sparks and flew out of Feran's hand to bounce off the deck and lie quietly smoking. Two deep dents twisting the metal shaft and destroying the electronics within. Tor's hands felt a prickling numbness yet his fingers remained curled around the hilts of the dark blades. His breathing shallow and rapid, Tor stumbled and fought to regain his balance.

"I can see you'll fight until your last breath gives out. It's not often that I choose to honour a fellow warrior, but you have the heart of a true Split. Grall."

"I fight because I'm not ready to die yet."

"Neither am I."

"One of us is going to be disappointed."

Feran drew a blaster. Tor hurled the blade in his right hand, the aim affected by the residual numbness in his hand. The blade flashed through the air and drove itself deep into Feran's right thigh.

Tor twisted away before the blaster discharged, the energy pulse dissipating on an internal field protecting the command centres opposite.

Steel clashed with steel, when Tor closed the gap between them. His right hand seizing the body of the blaster and grappling with the Bloodheart leader. Feran pulled back his blade sharply and plunged it towards his opponent. Tor's blade glanced off the metal arm as he twisted out of the way, but refused to release the blaster. His right knee pressed sideways on the hilt of the blade in Feran's leg.

Feran snarled, the pain reflected in his eyes. The steel blades locked together. Feran using his strength to drive them towards Tor. The blaster fired three times, scoring the floor and hitting the internal shields. A new dampening field shut down the weapon and Feran released it. His hand shooting up to grab Tor by the throat.

"I will crush the life from you." His fingers tightened.

The blaster clattered to the deck and Tor's right hand groped for the hilt of the dagger. His head throbbed and lungs fought to draw in air. His fingers closed around the grip and he wrenched the blade free.

Feran gave a grunt of pain and released his grip, pushing his enemy away. But Tor was too quick, the blade driving into his gut and up under his ribs. Feran grabbed Tor's jacket and threw him backwards.

Tor landed on his feet but failed to keep his balance and fell heavily. He tried to move but exhaustion prevented him. For several sezuras he wondered when death would claim him. Half expecting Feran to suddenly loom over him and deliver the final blow.

No one moved, silence reigned in a collective holding of breath. Eventually Tor shifted and used what little strength remained to push himself up.

Feran leant against the command centre, his face ashen with beads of sweat glistening on his brow. His eyes turned to Tor.

"Still not dead?" Blood bubbled on his lips.

"Not yet."

"Kill him, and get me a medic." Feran turned.

Booted feet moved towards him. Tor felt the rush of anger and in one last effort threw the blade in his left hand.

Feran glanced around and tried to move out of the way but the blade pierced his throat, the tip appearing through the back of his neck. The Bloodheart leader was motionless for several sezuras and then collapsed. Tor fell back against the deck and awaited his fate.

"Everyone prepare to abandon ship." A single set of booted feet approached.

Tor could only look up as Ganark looked down at him. Contempt was mixed with respect in the Split's face.

"As the new Bloodheart leader, I accept your condition. The fate of this ship is yours to decide."

Tor gave a slight nod of his head.

"My Lord, we've just lost another shield generator." The voice of the tactical officer carried with it a sense of desperation.

"Open a comm channel to the Defiance, signal your surrender and the change in leadership." Tor spoke quietly.

Ganark spoke loudly, "Defiance this is Ganark, new leader of the Bloodheart Clan. It is agreed with your master Grall, that we may abandon ship unharmed. In ten mizuras this Destroyer will self destruct. Signal your agreement."

"Ganark, your message is acknowledged. You have ten mizuras."

Ganark looked down with the hint of a malevolent smile.

"Computer, set auto destruct to ten mizuras. Authorization; Ganark, gamma, zero, six, delta."

"Authorization approved."

"Abandon ship." Ganark walked away amidst the hurried footsteps of the command crew.

One crewman stopped.

"What about Grall?"

"Leave him. He will find his own way out."

"My Lord."

As the footsteps disappeared Tor once again knew his plight was desperate. He rolled over onto his front and began to push himself up. Dizziness washed over Tor and threatened to make him pass out. He rested for a while, then managed to make it to his knees. Even so he slumped forwards.

His breathing was quick, the pain little more than a numb ache in every muscle. Tor realised that his consciousness was fading in and out, and how long he spent folded over was impossible to tell. He felt vibration against his face. The sound of boots running along the corridor penetrating the fog of his mind.

Rough hands grabbed hold of him, voices, the words indiscernible trying to reach him. Faces no more than a blur. He felt cold, a shiver ran down his spine. A dull voice in his mind spoke.

"So this is what it's like to die."

The world changed and darkness descended.

\*\*

The medical unit on the Bakery barely finished cleaning up after the appearance of the first patient when the body of Tor arrived unannounced.

There was a moment of hesitation before scanner units began supplying vital signs.

"Pulse is erratic, breathing has stopped."

The scanners flat lined and alarms sounded stirring a rush of activity. The resident surgeon stood behind a semicircle of touch screen monitors as medical system voices fed back information.

"Cardio and respiratory stimulation engaging."

Tor's body twitched but the scanners remained flat.

"Synthesizing proto-blood to match patients group and type."

Mechanical arms took hold of Tor's pilot suit and sliced away the material surrounding his cuts. Swabs and solutions cleaned the wounds. Rapid skin application began to close the shallow cuts.

"Cardio, respiratory stimulation engaging."

There was still nothing on the scanners. The doctor checked the monitor for signs of internal bleeding and hemorrhaging. Bruising on the ribs indicated the possibility fractures. He tapped the command to enforce continued heart and lung function, then ordering a stethoscope be placed against Tor's chest. He listened anxiously for the bubbling of fluid on the lungs, to the doctor the sound of enforced breathing was always unnatural, but his fears of a punctured lung was allayed. He noted a small amount of damage to the oesophagus coupled with bruising and had the medical droid open the airway with a plastic tube.

"Proto-blood match complete. Injecting."

A medical android worked on the deeper gashes and stitched together cut veins. The grey pallor of the patient began to take a natural complexion and more proto-blood was injected into him.

He disengaged the forced respiration and watched the scanner. There was a hesitation followed by a long rasping gulp for air which settled into a regular rhythm over a few sezuras. He checked the saturation level of natural blood to proto-blood and frowned. A third batch was injected into the bloodstream as the surgeon android closed the last of the wounds.

Uncertain that there was enough blood injected to replace the volume lost, the doctor checked neural activity and although on the low side he tapped off the enforced heart stimulation and let Tor's heart beat unassisted. The pulse slowed and his finger floated over the reactivation command. Half a mizura passed without incident before he set the automatic revival.

\*\*

Three stazuras later and Tor stirred, he felt stiff and extremely sore. But he also felt comfortable and warm.

"Welcome home, Tor."

He looked around to see Korecmancketras sat beside the bed. Tor found it difficult to talk, his throat numb from the affects of surgery and the anti-inflammatory spray on his throat. The words barely above a whisper.

"It's good to see a friendly face again. How did I get here?"

"By his Holiness, Corri, has a funny way of persuading people to do what she wants."

"Meaning?"

"She negotiated with the Shadow Troop to board the ship after the Bloodheart Clan abandoned it."

"Negotiated?"

"It would appear that she assisted with the escape of their transport, but if they didn't help her, she promised to hunt them all down. I gather Clegan was a little surprised when the autopilot turned his ship around and flew it towards an asteroid. Needless to say, he personally boarded a Mandalay with two crew members, and waited for the right time to get you out."

Tor gave an appreciative nod and smiled.

"Incidentally, you have both messages of congratulations from a number of Boron organisations for the elimination of Feran Bloodheart, though they abhor violence. The Teladi Trading Corporation are pleased that the Bloodheart Clan no longer have a Destroyer. The Split Authorities are demanding your extradition for the murder of Chief Councillor Tw'h k'Trrg. My own people acknowledge that the pirate menace to the realm of His Exultedness is now lessened. I'm sure you'll hear from you own government in the fullness of time."

"Nye?"

"Apparently you shot her. And by the eye's of his holiness, she is not best pleased with you." The Paranid winked his middle eye.

"It was an accident."

"Rest, I will let the others know you are recovering well."

Tor gave a nod of the head and closed his eyes to drift off to a dreamless sleep.



A tazura later and he was back on his feet, what few possessions he had were packed and already loaded on the Defiance. Looking around his old office he breathed in deeply, Korecmancketras entered.

"Everything is ready."

Tor gave a nod and walked towards the door letting out the breath slowly.

"Look after the place for me. Who knows I might pop back every now and again."

"Be sure that you do. I will not follow you down to the ship, but may the divine light of the Three Dimensionality guide you, and the wisdom of His Holiness guide your hand." Korecmancketras gave a bow.

"And may his Holiness bless you with good fortune." Tor responded in kind and they then shook hands.

"Until next time." Korecmancketras said with a smile.

Tor grinned and walked away. By the time he reached the Defiance he was in a somber, reflective mood. Few knew he was leaving, so there was no gathering of well wishers which suited him. Even so, as he looked around the busy dockside he wondered if would ever come back.

The airlock doors opened and he stepped inside. The inside was packed with boxes labeled Garrow Root Cha, a variety of Ales, and Argon Whisky's. Tor shook his head with a smile, knowing there would be a celebration soon enough.

"Here at last." A familiar voice drifted through the air.

He looked across to see Nyeshta sat in the pilot seat and smiled.

"Well what are you waiting for? Get us out of here."

The clamps released the Defiance and it glided through the station. Tor dumped himself down in the co-pilots seat, happy to watch. The outer doors opened slowly on in the strewn blackness of the void beyond. The Defiance accelerated forwards and Corricel announced.

"Course set. Engaging jumpdrive."

The clock ticked down and the wormhole opened ahead of the ship. Mizuras later they emerged to the side of the repaired gate.

"What the?" Nyeshta said in alarm.

Ahead of them stretching out in all directions lay the Mohrabas war fleet, waiting for the gate's re-integration.

"Did I forget to mention the pending war?"

"Yes."

"Incoming message."

"Silicon mine to Defiance. Good to see you back and feel free to dock at your earliest convenience." The voice of Liann came over the comm.

"It's good to be back. See you in a short while." Tor closed the comm and looked towards Nyeshta. She caught his glance.

"What?"

Tor relaxed in the comfort that he had achieved everything he set out to do and more. He responded.

"I'll tell you later."

## *Epilogue*

Tor sat quietly, his gut twisted tight with an unusual sense of nerves. Anxiety manifested itself with constant fidgeting and getting up to wander around the room, where over a Jazura previously he had met with the ancient. The Mohrabas had, in an unusual move abandoned the station for the clandestine meeting, but this just served to intensify Tor's uncertainty. In his mind he wondered how the Gate Keepers would react to the vast Mohrabas war fleet poised to unleash retribution on the Khaak. Was he about to unleash an even greater power into the universe than the Khaak, to bring more violence or would he consigned the Mohrabas species to an inevitable annihilation.

There was no comfort in the silence, he had never felt so alone and the weight of responsibility dragged down his spirit into a murky darkness. That he had found where his true heart belonged deepened his uncertainty he was doing the right thing. If the Khaak broke through then none of them would survive and there would be no happy ever after.

He glanced down at his time piece and breathed out slowly. The stazura had passed and he tried to calm his anxiety by reassuring himself that the ancient was a busy person and with all the gates in the universe to keep an eye on, he was entitled to be late.

These thoughts barely lasted more than a few sezuras before he reached the conclusion that the presence of the war fleet had deterred the ancient from keeping his word. He glanced down at his time piece and spent long moments watching the sezuras slip away.

"So many species waste time watching what little they have pass them by."

Tor's head snapped around so fast he felt several muscles strain.

"I was wondering if you'd turn up at all."

"We have monitored you. Although we do not wish to see the Khaak utterly destroyed, it is our desire to see them contained."

"Why not destroyed?" Tor felt perplexed and that the viciousness of the Khaak had no place in the universe.

"Every sentient life form has a place in the universe, and in time even the Khaak may understand the meaning of the word peace. We have to give that opportunity or we will become no better than them."

"And in the meantime, what of the species that are now extinct because of them?"

"We are masters of the gates and we have protected all those that have come close. Allowed them to become strong again so they can once more resume their place in the universe."

"Don't you find that you're simply perpetuating war?"

"We make every effort to ensure that peaceful species are allowed to co-exist and find enrichment in the encounter. Sometimes, we make an error in judgement."

Tor gave the figure of the ancient a shrewd and thoughtful look.

"So will you re-align the gate?"

"It is already done."

"Then let's hope the Mohrabas don't get wiped out, or I might get pissed off and come looking for you."

There was a laugh, a low deep rumble that felt that it would shake the floor. When it stopped the ancient spoke softly without any hint of concern.

"There are few species that would dare to threaten us. But I might take you seriously if it was not for the fact you are dying.

"That's not stopped me in the past."

"The ancients are comprised of many learned species. Finding the one I belong to would take longer than you have left to live. But there is a race that could help you, in more ways than one, if it should come to it."

"They can stop me from dying?"

"More than that, but consider this. You've already met one."

The ancient faded and left Tor alone once more in the silence of the station. He contemplated the ancient's words and memories of the encounter surfaced. The thought of co-habiting with Corricel in silicon caused him to smile briefly and then shake his head as he muttered.

"She'd be unbearable."

He walked out of the room and into the deserted command center. As instructed by the Mohrabas before they left he approached the comms console and touched the transmit pad.

"This is Tor Grall. The gate is open."

In the view screen he watched the lead Destroyer's engines flare and move forward. It vanished a few sezuras later in the familiar swirl of the jump activation. Tor turned and was filled with the sense of uncertainty that did not fade when made his way down to the Defiance.

\*\*

Two jazuras after the gate had been realigned the Titan Trinity Fame nosed its way into the Mohrabas sector. It was the first and only Destroyer to make the jump.

Liann was watching sector movements when the Argon capital vessel emerged. She overcame her surprise when noticing two fast moving Mohrabas Destroyers on an intercept course. She switched channels and hailed both ships.

"The new arrival is designated friendly. Request all warships to stand down."

There was a long pause and the Destroyers gave no sign of changing vector. She was about to retransmit the message when the reply came.

"Acknowledged."

She stared at the display and watched the speed of two Mohrabas destroyers slow but remain on an intercept vector with the new arrival. Their weapons systems registered that they were fully charged. Liann switched channel and hailed the Argon ship.

"Trinity Fame, this is Diplomacy Station Alpha. You are cautioned that the Mohrabas do not take kindly to large warships in their space. Please state your purpose."

"Liann, it's Tris. I need to talk to Tor is he here?"

Liann gave a brief look of surprise before she smiled and re-opened the comm channel.

"He's here. You'd best position yourself near the station. I'll send a shuttle to pick you up."

Twenty mizuras passed before Tris stepped in the security zone of the silicon mine. New Mohrabas designed fighters lined the dockside their pilots sitting side by side with members of the station crew who had opted to remain behind. Broden met her with a big smile on his face.

"Well look at you, Captain's uniform, things must be going well."

"We have our up's and down's. How're things with you?"

"On the whole well. And better for seeing you again."

Tris smiled.

"The war?"

Broden's smile faded and he appeared pensive. It was only a brief pause and Tris felt uncomfortable and wondered if the conflict was not going too well. He smiled again and gestured that they proceed to the shuttle lift.

"We all hoped for a quick victory and I have to remind myself that the Mohrabas are still learning the art of war, only they get a bit carried away sometimes."

"Carried away?"

"The Mohrabas have a tendency to overstretch themselves with a series of quick victories, and have been caught out in retaliatory counterstrikes that split the supply and communications chain. Fortunately the majority manage to make a tactical withdrawal to safer systems."

"Can the Mohrabas sustain the losses?"

"Not in capital ships, but they are masters of construction. Mobile factory units move from asteroid to asteroid extracting all the ores and silicon needed, while supply ships deliver other essential items to the shipyard facilities." Broden pressed his hand to the touch pad and they waited for the lift to arrive. "If there was time I'd take you out to show you the operation. It's quite something to see the factory units moving a sector behind the battle front. Even when moving the shipyard is turning out new fighters, all controlled by AI until they can get pilots."

"What about food and other essentials?"

"It has proven to be a problem. Most of it's being shipped from the homeworld as they've met limited success in cultivating and rearing their favourite food stuff in carefully controlled off world environments."

The lift doors opened and Broden gestured for her to go in first.

"An opportunity for more meatsteaks." Torrisha commented and moved forward.

"They're already taking everything we can produce, and we have a second cattle ranch being built at the moment."

"Mobile?"

"Of course, but stretched so it can get through the gates."

Tris shook her head, the idea of mobile factories was not new, but was often let down by the practicalities and forces involved. Space was not a forgiving place should a minor defect manifest itself. Her mind drifted back to a more pressing question.

"How's Tor?"

Broden frowned this time there was a deep sense of sadness reflected in his eyes.

"Dying. The doctors are just amazed his heart's lasted as long as this."

"They've still not found a cure?" Tris felt surprised, she could not see how after two jazuras they had still come up with no solution.

"No, not yet. Though their engineers have developed a cryo-stasis unit to slow the decay and preserve him the way he is for jazuras. Which in itself is amazing, considering they've not been able to manufacture an artificial heart to replace the one he's got."

Tris could sense a hint of bitterness in his voice.

"I take it, he's not keen on stasis?"

"Would you want to be kept on ice indefinitely? Woken up after all the people you once knew are dead and buried?"

"Not really." Tris questioned in her own mind if she was doing the right thing asking Tor for the loan of the Defiance.

The shuttle lift arrived and the doors open. They stepped out in to a familiar corridor that led to the command centre. After a brief silence while they strolled along Broden spoke again.

"I'm guessing your visit isn't for social reasons?" He glanced at her.

"I need to ask Tor a favour."

"He'll be pleased, I don't think he likes being cooped up for too long."

"That doesn't surprise me." She smiled at the thought of Tor being confined to a sick bed.

"He only came back from the front line five wozuras ago and already he's becoming insufferable." Broden gave a warm smile.

They stopped outside the office door and Broden lightly touched the pad. The door opened to a well illuminated office. Tris half expected a medical bed to have been installed with heart monitors pulsing away, with Tor lying on it looking pale and drawn with tubes hanging out of him. Instead she noticed he was standing by the bar with a drink in his hand talking to a blond haired woman.

For a moment she felt a twinge of jealousy but shook it from her mind. She made the choice to return to the core sectors and the life she once had. Somewhere in the back of her mind she felt resentment lurking for the woman Tor had gone to such lengths to rescue.

"Tris, come in. It's good to see you again." Tor beamed and moved towards her his arms outstretched in greeting.

She instantly knew the moment he moved that the usual bounce and energy had gone. When he drew closer the gaunt paleness in his face was obvious to see and for the first time in a long while she forgot the regulated conditioned behaviour of a detached Argon Captain of the Fleet and moved forward into the embrace.

There was an old familiarity with the warmth and gentle strength to be found in his arms, and for a while she found herself unable to let go. Yet when she broke free and looked at the smile on Tor's face the haunting fact that this would be the last time hit her. She took a deep breath and fought to compose herself with a smile. She had witnessed the death of those around her often enough to have become cushioned to it, but this time it took all her effort to bury the emotions.

A hand gently landed on her shoulder and she glanced over to Broden. There was something in his expression that made her think that he knew exactly what she was feeling. He spoke quietly.

"Drop by the office before you leave. I'm sure Liann would like to say, hi. Tor, Nye. I'll catch up with you later." He turned and left.

Nyeshta moved across the room and gave Tor a quick peck on the cheek. She gave a friendly smile to Tris.

"We always seem to meet in unfavourable circumstances. I'd like to think had times been different we could have come to know each other as friends." She held out her hand.

Tris was momentarily disarmed by the comment and simply nodded before shaking hands. Nyeshta moved away and glanced at Tor.

"If you need me I'll be reviewing the Defiance upgrades."

"Thanks." Tor smiled and watched her leave.

When the door closed Tris commented.

"She's very pretty."

Tor nodded and stepped to one side gesturing for her to take a seat.

"So they made you Captain in two jazuras. That must be a new record?"

"There are a lot of new captains in the fleet these days. The Khaak attacks are keeping the fleet stretched which means new ships are being deployed all the time, mostly with new and inexperienced crews." She dropped onto one of the sofas and Tor lowered himself into the seat opposite. Somewhere in the back of her mind she wondered how long the doctors predicted Tor would last. "The worry is the Xenon are also preparing for invasion, already they've made several major assaults into race controlled sectors. Fortunately they've been repelled, but that's because the various governments have allowed Capital ships to be bought by legitimate private enterprises."

"Capital ships in the hands of business moguls? Let's hope they don't try to form monopolies by eliminating the competition."

"It's caused a few concerns amongst the less affluent businesses. The government has made assurances that the use of defensive craft to harm a competitor or gain commercial advantage will result in the seizure of all assets and imprisonment of the entire board of directors." Tris smiled as she remembered the news item and internal memos which circulated through the military hierarchy before the decision was officially announced. "But I think businesses have more to fear from a group of pirates called the Yaki than from government."

"So how can I help?"

Tris gave a wry smile.

"I need to borrow the Defiance."

"To fight the Khaak, Xenon or Yaki?"

"None of those. It's for a search and rescue mission."

"My favourite kind."

"We will provide the crew and supplies." Tris responded quickly to Tor's comment.

"No."

"I don't know if you've taken a look at yourself recently, but you're in no state to travel."

"So my doctor keeps telling me." Tor closed his eyes and released a long breath.

For a heart stopping moment Tris wondered if Tor had suddenly expired, he looked paler and greyer than when she first walked in.

"Tor?"

His eyes opened slowly.

"Too much excitement for one day. I have a journey to make, it will be a long journey. The Defiance is the only ship suitable and Corri is the only AI I trust."

"Broden tells me you could go into stasis while they work on your new heart."

"As my doctor says, I will only get one chance for the replacement to work. And the revival process in itself could kill me long before they get a chance to fit the new one. Besides stasis only slows decay it won't stop it completely."

"So where will you go?"

"To find the race that provided the technology at the core of the Defiance."

"Why?"

"An ancient told me they were the only ones that can help me. And before you ask how I expect to find them before I die, then I have a stasis unit in the ship with a new synaptic interface into the main systems. Now tell me about this ship you want us to find?"

"Didn't you say you'd die when being revived."

Tor gave a feint smile.

"The creature we found had been dead a long time before he was brought back."

Tris gave this statement a long considered thought before saying.

"Are you chasing immortality?"

"No, but I've instructed Corricel that if we don't find them within five jazuras that she's to let me go."

"Five?"

"For a ten jazura round trip. What about this ship?"

Tris felt the hint of persistence in Tor's voice. She reluctantly pulled out a small data disc and placed it on the table.

"We want to know what happened to an explorer ship called Liberty Pride. It was on a secret deep space mission in the frontier sectors and discovered an uncharted gate. Relay probes gave us updates for some time before they stopped. From the last message we think they may have encountered another alien race, possibly Khaak, possibly something else. Maybe even the race you're looking for. With everything else that's going on we don't have the resources to find her. If it's the Khaak then the ship to find out needs to be something special. Which is why I've come to you."

"Everything's on the disc? Star charts, gate locations?"

"Yes."

Tor smiled, he was going on another adventure. In the back of his mind he also knew the stasis unit would not sustain him for more than a few tazuras.

"I'll leave as soon as the ship's ready."

"You don't have to." Tris started but Tor cut her off.

"I'd prefer it this way. A fitting end for me, and Corri is more than capable of finding the ship. Anyway if we discover our aliens, I'll be coming home again." He gave an encouraging smile.



Tris felt as though her guts had knotted themselves and she stood up slowly, judging it to be an appropriate moment to leave. Deep inside she felt helpless and lost, emotions threatened to surface and in a calm professional manner she said.

"Thank you for your help, and I hope you find your aliens."

Tor forced himself to his feet and saluted with a pale smile. He offered his hand and she took it, with a slow bow he kissed the back of hers and stood straight.

"Take care of yourself Tris. And remember you'll always have a special place in here." Tor put his hand over his heart.

"It's a good job they're not cutting it out then." She smiled and then turned and left with a stinging sensation filling her eyes.

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A stazura later and Tor waved from the doorway of the Defiance, a broad smile on his face. The entire crew stood on the docking bay. As he disappeared inside his physician followed him in. Fifteen mizuras later Gyles stepped on to the dockside his expression was grave. The Defiance disengaged from the dock side and gracefully drifted through the hanger and out towards the exit.

Tris was standing beside Broden and was surprised when he suddenly spoke to Gyles.

"Well?"

The doctor shook his head and walked away.