

New Frontier
2nd of the Traders Tale stories

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Credits

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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 second story in the series.

New Frontier 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 third game in the X-Universe series and part three will encompass elements of the new ships and locations in X².

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Stephen Haworth

Chapter 1. New Regime

The broad, seven foot high figure of Caran Belign, hero of the Argon and secret service commander, threw down the datapad. It bounced and skittered across his desk scattering a small collection of holo-pictures.

He sighed and glanced towards the station window. Rising from his seat he gazed down towards the Argon home world. Fleetinglly he reflected that it was night time in his home town. This thought was swiftly chased away by his anger at the memo he had just read and thought to himself 'The damn fools!'

However orders were orders and the change in government always presented problems. Now he faced the challenge of re-educating the new President to do things his way, but that would take time. Time was not a luxury he felt he could afford. The new policies and edicts now being pushed through would leave hundreds of thousands if not millions of colonists exposed to untold dangers.

Caran was disgusted with the latest edict from the government and he, more than anyone, knew the danger and had vehemently advised against it. The blinkered views of the politicians, riding on a wave of popularity and election promises, had ignored his protestations.

Needless to say the wording of the document left him and the service exposed to recrimination should the inevitable happen. The master tactician in his mind needed to formulate a plan, he had time but it needed to be a seamless operation and invisible to the powers in charge.

As he turned the titanium plate that formed much of the right side of his face caught a reflection of the home world. New advances in medical science could have reconstructed the bone structure and grafted on new skin leaving only the faintest trace of any scar but Caran had opted against the operation as his current appearance gave him a greater presence.

First he would need reliable first hand information and then establish a discreet base of operation. Rather than picking up the datapad he tapped into the console and opened the latest galactic map. Somewhere out there was a war machine in motion. Building and gathering its forces yet how close it was to being ready and poised to strike he could not guess. The evidence he had was inconclusive to the threat. Recent skirmishes and victories smacked of being too easy. The forces of the alliance were being stretched too far into the new territories.

The peace lovers that now sat in the Presidential office took this to mean that the Khaak were offering up sectors as a sign of peace and goodwill. They now advocated the rapid colonisation of the new sectors to encourage trade and some sense of harmony between the races.

Caran considered it unfortunate that so many citizens had taken the government up on its relocation scheme. He had grimaced when the new President cited the new Cahoon Bakery in The Wall sector as a sign of the renewed faith in the Argon economy, which had been stagnant for too long, and the beginning of a period of growth and prosperity which needed to be seized firmly.

Even so this was not the time to inform the President as to the background in to how and why the new station had been built. Nor did he attempt to explain the lengths that he had to go to in order to persuade the authorities to permit the construction, or more precisely what he might do to them if they refused.

Fear and intimidation were Caran Beligns' calling cards but he seldom had to resort to violence. Now with the new president in office, his own bosses were taking an unhealthy interest in the internal affairs of the service and, although he always got the job done, his unorthodox and occasionally brutal methods were being questioned. He had been promoted out of the field as he had earned himself too many enemies bent on revenge, and was once again being lined up for promotion to move him even further away from the front line and soften his influence. One thing Carans' paymasters were well aware of was they wanted him on their side.

Even so with the next promotion he would be another step closer to the top and there were only three levels above him in the hierarchy of the service. The top two were occupied by political animals given

positions of responsibility on the whim of the president, and usually without any experience in the field. Caran did not trust these people and was glad to have a layer of management between him and them. He cared nothing for the games they played, even if he was called upon to defend to his decisions.

Turning his attention back to the problem in hand a thought crossed his mind. He would need a station in the outer colonies or at least in one of the key gateway sectors. It would need to be well equipped and potentially have more than the typical number of fighters mostly military grade and with a little bit of the Advanced Industries Corporation magic breathed into the ships. He smiled briefly to himself as the name of the potential station owner came to mind.

“Receiving an incoming transmission, level three security,” The computer announced.

“Source?” Caran asked picking up a light stick that had not been disturbed by the datapad, and tapped on the console.

“Presidential office,” The computer confirmed.

“On holo-screen.”

A late middle aged woman sitting behind a huge desk materialised and put aside a pad. She had a sharp pointed face with large brown eyes and a hard expression. “Commander Belign!” She commented looking up.

“Under Secretary Gallona, what may I do for you?”

The woman frowned and looked disapprovingly at Caran, “I have just been studying your latest report on the Gharolic Trading Corporation and I must say that I am extremely.” She paused to choose her next word with care and to give it additional emphasis, “disappointed. You seem to have taken upon yourself to discredit a very well established and honourable company. One that the President herself has backed in the expansion of the Argon people into the new sectors.”

She paused briefly but Caran said nothing. “I see nothing in your report to give any credibility to your accusations. There is not one shred of sustainable evidence to support your conclusions. Furthermore I have had complaints from the CEO of the Corporation about your intimidation tactics and he has made counter accusations against you for threatening behaviour towards his employees!” She made her comments calmly and let her look of disdain and dislike of Caran shine through.

“My duty is to find the truth.” Caran commented.

“Yes we are aware how you.” Again she paused taking on an expression of disgust, “Obtain your information Commander, and the President does not approve! You are hereby ordered to drop all investigations into the Gharolic Trading Corporation.”

Caran had half expected this and calmly replied, “As you command Under Secretary.”

Her eyes narrowed having expected more of a fight and not really trusting Caran, “Very good! Now on to a related subject the President is also perplexed at your latest report into the security of the new sectors. Once again she feels that this report has been compiled in order to cause damage to the colonisation program.”

“It is my duty to highlight the potential risks Under Secretary.” Caran commented quietly, “And this is what I have done. Anything less would be an injustice to the colonists.”

Gallona gave a short snort and narrowed her eyes as she tried to study the Commanders expression, but she could not read anything into the stony faced expression of Caran.

She replied slowly, whilst still studying his face for a reaction, “The President has decided to allow our newest core sector station owner to help show the way. As a sign of the strength of the Argon economy

and with the expansion of the Argon people the President has granting him a license to deploy new stations in any of the new sectors.”

Caran Beligns’ expression was unchanged.

Tor Grall had poured himself a large whisky from his stocked bar and slouched down on the Argnu Hide settee. In the centre of the vast table behind him and slowly revolving was a large holo image of his Cahoona Bakery.

It had been six months since his battle and the escape of the Alien. The four months immediately after he had been locked away in quarantine. The only people he could communicate with were those behind thick protective plexiglass screens, the very air he breathed was monitored for any trace of alien infection. Every bodily fluid had been scanned and tested. His very thought processes had been studied and the constant questioning had nearly driven him mad.

Had he realised it, at the time he was not the only one to have been isolated from the rest of society in this fashion. In the adjacent rooms Tereana had spent some time as the agency tried to see if they could recover her memory and establish what else the alien had made her forget. After two months they had met with some limited success when faced with an image of Tor the absolute certainty that she had never met him before wavered and she mentioned that she thought his name began with a ‘T’. After that point she became an agency scientist as they decided the knowledge she potentially had locked away was too valuable to fall into the hands of anyone else.

Tor Grall was simply grateful to be alive and the memories of the internment echoed in his dreams.

Without announcement and a few days sooner than expected Creed strolled into the office and over to the bar where he poured himself a large drink.

Creed was a half breed, his father a Split slave master and his mother an Argon slave. Condemned into the slave fighting arena known as the Pit from birth, he was rescued by a Paranid and now for a price had become the most notoriously ruthless mercenary in the universe. His hatred of the Split left him their most feared enemy.

Tor momentarily surprised watched and then sighed, “I don’t know why I bother with security!” He paused for a moment, “It’s not as though they even think of letting me know you’re here.”

Creed took a quick sip and glanced over to Tor lifting his glass in greeting with a slight smile.

“You’re a little early,” Tor stated, but there was something about the mercenary posture that put him at ease.

“That’s because I wanted to chat to you before he arrived,” Creed replied succinctly. Lifting the bottle from the bar he carried it across and placed it carefully on the glass table. Then he dropped casually into one of the large leather armchairs.

Tor shifted and relaxed even more into his seat, with a growing sense of curiosity beginning to creep across him. In the two months of station ownership he had managed to have many such conversations and he quickly understood that, whatever Caran Beligns interest in Tor was, with Creed it was purely business.

The station security team were all mercenaries that he had accepted from Creed. They were all either too new, and needed to learn the business, or were on the verge of retirement and looking for a less active commission. In some respects he felt like a retirement home for many of the mercenaries who were there as they needed a pay check and quiet life.

Although at the beginning he had not been certain of this arrangement, he soon came to realise that this was a safe region of space and was the best place Creed could offer to the longest serving of his people,

that had not reaped the rewards of the most lucrative contracts and were now heading towards the twilight years of their careers.

“How’s business?” Creed asked politely.

“Good, but I get more money from the remote traders. It’s taken time to get the workers and station admin sorted out. We’re running at capacity at the moment but I need more supervisors and programmers to monitor systems and maintenance robots,” Tor commented casually whilst reflecting on the main issues facing him as a station owner.

“You need to get yourself a good second in command,” Creed said with a smile.

“Want the job?” Tor asked with a wry smile knowing that Creed probably already had someone in mind for the position.

“Not me! Wouldn’t be on station long enough,” Creed drained his glass, poured another drink and then waved the bottle towards Tor offering him a refill.

“Guess you heard that the President has asked me to help lead the way with a new station in the new outer sectors,” Tor spoke as he leaned forward to take the bottle.

“That’s one of the reasons Mr Belign wants to talk to us,” Creed replied and took a sip.

“And there was me thinking about declining the offer,” Tor sighed and sat back again.

“Turn down the Presidents most generous offer?” Creed mentioned in mock surprise. “Well that would please Mr Belign! I understand that he is not exactly enamoured with this new bunch of politicians and that would make a nice snub.”

“That’s politics. It’s all new faces at the top, but the same old people in the background pulling the strings,” Tor looked thoughtful and then added questioningly, “Does anything really change?”

“It’s one reason Mr Belign doesn’t want promotion as he could find himself out of a job with the next change of government.” Creed observed.

“Now there’s a thought,” Tor took a moment to savour the vintage spacefuel.

“It may yet happen. One more promotion and he’s not supposed to get involved directly with ‘in the field’ operations.” Creed slouched down further into the seat.

“Does that mean he’ll be forced not to get me involved in anything dodgy?” Tor asked hopefully.

Creed glanced across and gave a short laugh, “Forever the optimist.”

“What about you?” Tor asked and added, “He puts a lot of business your way!”

“He’s not my only Argon employer and I have good contracts with the Paranid.” Creed answered, “Occasionally even the Boron and Teladi will request the services of the War Master Guild. So I will not miss the business.”

This was a little bit of a surprise to Tor, who had always assumed that it was the Argon Secret Service that provided the bulk of the funds to the War Master Guild. Which, in his mind, made it Caran Beligns small private army, but this now appeared not to be the case.

One thing Tor liked about the mercenary was his openness. Everything was simple, just plain black and white. You knew exactly where you stood, but as unforgiving as he was, if he did not like someone he always told them and gave them sufficient opportunity to get out of his way. Invariably you had to give Creed a reason to want to kill you and Tor had always supposed, until recently, that he was Caran Beligns

hunter killer if you tried to run from the Argon service. But now that opinion had changed, Creed for everything he had done, and would do, he was no assassin.

“So what’s the urgent need to see me?” Tor asked, feeling as though they were just skimming around the side of the real reason Creed was here.

Creed drained his glass and poured another generous measure, “I’ve been doing some private work for another client that’s been interested in the viability of placing a business concern into the outer regions and getting a sense for the security of the region.” He paused, Tor was just happy to listen rather than interrupt. “From what I can tell there are two key sectors in the new sectors, if both should fall into the hands of a hostile invasion fleet then the new settlers will be cut off from any military support and all possibilities of retreat.”

“Well that sounds encouraging,” Tor murmured.

“In terms of strategic positioning I’ll let you know the ideal sector once I’ve had a better chance of analysing my data!” Creed commented, “Now Mr Belign will have his own suggestion as to where you should position yourself, so it will be interesting to see if we agree. I’m guessing he’s going to ask that I supply a number of my best fighters to support you, which is going to leave you in a difficult position if I suggest to you a different sector to the one Mr Belign tells you to put the station in.”

“Good I like being given these difficult decisions,” Tor commented bitterly.

Creed smiled, “Life is full of choices Tor, right ones and wrong ones. I’m sure you will make the right one!”

“Creed you really should try working on your subtlety,” Tor commented.

Creed’s smile turned to a broad grin. “And the best bit is yet to come, just in case Mr Belign neglects to mention it.”

“Well you know how much I like surprises,” Tor finished his drink and poured himself an extremely generous measure.

“In true political decision making ability, and as a sign of forging new stronger alliances with the other races, the new Argon government has offered the other races licenses to place stations of their own in the new territories.” Creed casually commented.

“Sounds fair,” Tor conceded.

“It includes the Split who, as I understand it have given a contract to the family t’Gnht!” Creed commented expecting some sort of reaction from Tor.

“And they are?” Tor asked as he tried to remember if he had heard the name before.

“Well the leader of that house has the name Feran. Does that mean anything to you?” Creed replied.

Tor suddenly felt cold, and nodded. This was the pirate leader which used the name Bloodheart, and that had ordered the killing of his parents after the rescue of the pilot Tris Matayah from the pirate base in Brennan’s Triumph. “This can’t be a coincidence.”

“I think the Split High Council will be enjoying its little joke!” Creed commented.

“Does Caran know?” Tor asked.

“If he didn’t, then the Argon secret service will be less efficient than many are led to believe.” Creed answered.

“And I thought he meant to keep me away from the Bloodhearts!” Tor exclaimed bitterly and took a long sip of his drink.

“Now why would he do a thing like that when you can be so much more useful somewhere really dangerous?” Creed finished his drink.

“Thanks! That made me feel so much better,” Tor replied despondently. “So will you be stopping by for dinner?”

“Are you buying?” Creed asked. He stood up to examine a small display cabinet that had been recently fitted.

“Yeah, I’m buying,” Tor answered.

Creed examined the contents, there were a few personal items, including a holo-cube of Tors’ late parents and the blade he had given to Tor when they carried out the rescue. “I see you didn’t lose everything when the Piranha was destroyed.”

“Not quite everything,” Tor replied quietly his expression thoughtful.

“Then I think we should head to the Colossus Bar on level three. I hear it’s about the liveliest place on this station of yours.” Creed commented with a grin.

“This is regulated space! You know I have to run a respectable business here,” Tor responded taking on an air of being only mildly offended but gave a sly smile.

The Colossus Bar was adopted by the mercenaries supplied by Creed and pampered to the tastes of these people. It was in a restricted part of the station not open to the visiting public and out of the prying eyes of the sector police. Not quite the raucous den on inequity that could be found on many unregulated stations but it supplied the kind of entertainment these pilots were used too.

The smoke hung heavily as a set of dancers finished their set, and the sound of applause rumbled around the room to be drummed out by a deep resonating bass as music caused glasses to shake on the tables. A brief explosion of lights and a shower of holo-sparks cascaded and flowed through the room to introduce the live band as they were raised on a slowly rotating platform to centre stage.

Creed tapped Tor on the shoulder and gave a broad grin and thumbs up gesture when an attractive waitress approached. She smiled as she presented them with a drinks order pad. Tor noted she wore discreet ear plugs to protect her hearing. He took the pad and made a selection before indicating to her they were going to his usual table. Before they crossed the dampening field which screened out most of the sound he could feel the frequency of the beat increase and the room began to resonate as the guitars picked up the rhythm just before the voice of the singer sliced through the wall of sound.

Creed glanced across at the band before stepping through the dampening field into the relative quiet of the table zone.

“Don’t the neighbours complain?” He asked.

Tor looked around, “If they do no one will hear them,” And smiled. “This whole section has been,” He chose his next word carefully, “Modified. No sound gets out from this and the adjoining rooms.”

“Like the waitresses?” Creed asked changing the subject.

“I’m only thankful you didn’t send me the ones looking for retirement and a quiet life,” Tor replied with a grin.

Creed laughed, “Now would I do that to you?”

“Well,” Tor gave a shrug and said no more.

The mercenary smiled as he gave Tor a friendly punch on the shoulder knocking him off his seat.

Tor picked himself and smiled broadly as the waitress arrived and looked a little uncertain as to what may have been going on. She put the drinks on the table, “Anything else I can get you gentlemen?”

“Food and the pleasure of your good company,” Creed answered.

She smiled sweetly as she handed over the order pad and leant forward to give an ample view of her substantial cleavage, “Sorry but I have customers to serve,” And looked directly towards Tor.

Creed took the pad and made a great play of studying it. “I tell you what, you run along and get our meal and I’ll have a word with your boss. I’m sure he’ll let you join us on full pay! It’ll be easier than me calling you across all the time for another drink.”

“Creed you’re going to get me in trouble,” Tor murmured as he had spent his time observing the proceedings.

Creed handed back the pad after making the order, “That’s the idea,” He commented back and as the waitress left he called out, “Oh and bring a friend with you!”

Tor’s mind kept returning to the subject of the new station in the outer sectors.

Creed turned to Tor and adopted a serious expression and edge to his voice, “Tor my friend you need to relax more. The next few weeks and months are going to be tough for you and there will be times that you’re going to be glad you made the most of this opportunity. Believe me, if things go well then you’ll be smiling all the way, but if current thinking is right, that it won’t, then the time between now and then will at least have had some good moments. ”

“Is that what you tell all your pilots?” Tor asked.

Creed’s jaw tightened slightly but he gave a slight hint of a smile, “There’s a phrase the Paranid mercenaries taught me that roughly translated means, ‘Live for today as you may not be here tomorrow.’”

Tor somehow felt that this was too close to the truth and paused a moment before replying, “An optimistic point of view.”

The mercenary nodded slowly and took a long draw on the container of ale in front of him. “You will survive this.”

“I wish I had your confidence.” Tor replied, “So what type of station do you think would be useful?”

“A cheap and cheerful one that makes lots of credits,” Creed replied frankly.

“Well that narrows it down a bit,” Tor responded, “How about a heavy missile factory, military grade?”

Creed gave a brief laugh, “As if,” He paused for a moment, “No, your government would consider a factory like that might appear to the Khaak as too much of a threat and potentially spark a hostile response.”

“I guess that will apply to any heavy weapons factory as well?”

“Of course,” Creed replied who now diverted his attention to the crowd in the bar as the band finished another song to rapturous applause.

“Drones or mines?” Tor asked knowing the answer.

“Again it’s too aggressive to the casual observer,” Creed answered casually.

“Okay what about a lasertower factory?” Tor sounded slightly despondent.

The mercenary took a moment to think and then scratched his chin, “Maybe,” Before Tor could ask anything else he commented, “Any chance of modifying the dampening field to allow a bit more of the music to get through?”

The waitress returned carrying one meal, and a colleague carried the second.

Chapter 2. Split Conspiracy

Feran t'Gnht was passively very angry. He hated being manipulated and the years of almost complete autonomy, to do as he pleased, looked to be coming to an end. Once again he found himself in the private meeting chambers of the Split Head Council Twh k'Trrg and the master assassin was enjoying watching Ferans discomfort.

"Of course it is a great honour that your family above many others has been selected to accept the Argons generous offer in the name of peace." Twh commented, his eyes glinting in the half light. The room richly decorated with the trophies of many campaigns over several generations.

"If you say so," Feran replied curtly.

"You have been a thorn in the side of the Argon for many years and I'm sure you will continue to be one in the future," Twhs' thin cruel lips moved into something resembling a shallow smile.

"I take it you are not in favour of peace?" Feran asked.

"This peace, as you put it, is convenient to us," Twh replied softly, "Who knows why the ancients reveal new gates to us. The fact they have given us access to a new species is," He paused, "Interesting. What we may learn from them is unknown, however early attempts to make contact have been catastrophic."

Feran remained silent waiting for Twh to continue.

"The Argon seem to have been allowed access to the sectors but we don't know how or why," Twh looked perplexed for a moment.

"Perhaps it's a trap?" Feran commented.

Twh glanced across, "Spread the enemy thin and then break the supply chain and destroy them," He paused for a moment, "That is the thought of the council also. But we must be certain that there have been no secret deals in exchange for technology."

"Do you think they have?" Feran asked on cue.

"There is nothing to lead us to believe so," Twh replied, "But back to the matter in hand, the Argon consider their offer to allow each of the races an opportunity to build stations in the new sectors an act of new found relations and reconciliation between the races."

Feran paused for a moment and then asked, "I take it you do not?" His eyes narrowed slightly, as the last thing he was going to do was trust the man in front of him, but circumstances forced him to be here.

"The leading families have agreed that we need more information. The station you deploy will allow our agents free reign to explore the sectors, in the name of trade, unobserved." Twh replied curtly.

The muscles in Ferans shoulders tensed and the fingers of his one good left hand flexed and clenched into a fist, as the half light glinted off the blue steel of his right arm.

Twh allowed himself another cruel smile. "Look at this as an opportunity to restore your families name."

Feran quietly snarled. He had been blamed for the failure to capture the alien ship which had led to the disgrace of his family name. Now with this briefing the Head Councillor meant for him to put his own people in a death trap which would cost him millions of credits.

"Animals snarl Feran! You are Split, be proud!" Twh responded cuttingly.

"So far I have heard nothing about compensation!" Feran demanded.

“What makes you think there will be some?” Twh asked abruptly.

Feran glanced around as he glanced into the shadows looking for any sign of other assassins, “And what makes you think that I’ll accept?”

“If you don’t then you won’t be leaving this room alive!” Twh stated with a strong degree of certainty, pausing briefly so the message could take an opportunity to sink in, “And if you do then I will ensure the name of your family is restored.”

“The only reason my families name is in disgrace is because of your incompetence!” Feran retorted harshly.

It was Twhs’ turn to tense up, a flicker of anger sparked within his eyes, “Do you dare to challenge me?” The voice was softly spoken, more of a whisper.

Feran moved slowly, as a predator studying its prey. The hard edged confidence of the Split councillor made him reflect that he was the prey. “Challenge you, now why would I want to do that?” Feran replied with an edge of caution.

“Perhaps you think you can take me!” Twh replied threateningly and then calmed himself to say, “But save your anger. You will need it where you’re going.”

“I will conduct my business remotely,” Feran responded quietly.

“Hmmm, I feel it fair to mention that the Argon have awarded a station contract to a young trader,” He paused for effect as he watched Feran stop and focus his attention, “Tor Grall will be in the outer sectors. I’m sure you remember him, the boy you should have killed.”

There was the sound of steel rasping as the blade retained in Ferans’ steel right arm slid out, the muscles in his face tightening as he clenched his jaw and slowly lifted the blade and stared at it intently. “The meeting will be a pleasure.” He commented gently.

Twh afforded himself a slightly lopsided smile his eyes glinting. “A number of ships from our exulted navy will be taking part in numerous scheduled manoeuvres in the sector Ghinn’s Escape many will remain, including a number of our latest rapid response Corvettes.”

“But when will they be allowed to intervene?” Feran asked as he reset the blade.

“When we judge the enemy to have been sufficiently weakened,” Twh replied, his unbroken gaze never once leaving Feran.

“After the sectors have been massacred you mean!” Feran retorted bitterly.

“If that’s what it takes,” Twh added, “But I’m sure you will have made good your own escape.”

“And do I get free reign to choose the type of factory I set up?” Feran asked.

“No weapons, missiles or anything else that may appear hostile to the Khaak,” Twh replied.

“I’m not surprised no one else wanted this,” Feran paused momentarily, having guessed one reason why he had been chosen, “Honour.”

“I like to think of it as a test of your support for the Split High Council and to me,” Twh replied with a hint of malice.

Ferans’ eyes narrowed slightly but the rest of his face remained emotionless, “Then with your permission I will leave and go prepare,” His voice had a certain tension in it that barely hid his feeling of anger.

Two dismissed him with a slight gesture of his hand.

Feran turned and swept his way out of the chamber to his ship in great long strides barely giving a moment for doors to slide open wide enough to allow him to pass. Security, station staff and visitors parted to allow him clear passage whilst avoiding eye contact.

On board his Mamba he gave the pilot only one command, "Get me back to base, maximum speed!"

Two days had passed from when Creed had first arrived on the station and Tor was feeling the effect. He was trying to concentrate much of his time to scanning station reports, if only to try and ignore the hangover after yet another session in the Colossus Bar.

This morning he had found himself in the company of the same waitress he had woken up with the previous morning, and at this exact moment he was struggling to remember her name. He wondered if Creed had taken some pleasure in leading him astray, as he put it, from his initial goal of not fraternizing with the employees. Unfortunately it would not have been so bad if he had not been so blind drunk that he could remember the end of the evening, and more to the point how he ended up where he did. However he was not going to object to waking up in the nice warm embrace of an attractive young lady.

He paused and sighed a moment as he reflected on the image conjured in his mind's eye.

The drink on the desk was known as the 'recovery mix' a small cocktail of ingredients that would settle the stomach and ease the hangover. What was in it Tor did not ask as Creed had provided the recipe, but the flavour and texture was not to Tor's palette. Yet the effect was definitely very uplifting so Tor was happy to suffer the initial taste.

He spent a moment reviewing the number of station employees which had risen to a level where everything now began to function seamlessly. Even so, he was still a few employees short to meet the requirements of the 'Robot to Employee Charter.' A piece of legislative bureaucracy that defined the ratio of employees to robots required for any manufacturing industry, thus guaranteeing that the general population would not become redundant in favour of pure automation.

He typed a brief memo to the recruiting team to find another twenty employees. The process was painfully slow, once his own people had sorted and vetted all new employee applications they were then handed over to Creed's organisation for more 'discreet' investigation. Tor checked the accounts as this service was not without some considerable cost.

A comm channel opened, "Sir there's a Mr Belign here to see you."

"Send him in!" Tor replied. He picked up the drink and carefully sipped at the liquid.

Caran strode into the office and approached Tor's desk. Tor continued to sip his drink without looking up and then closed the console before glancing towards the new arrival.

"Mr Grall," Caran commented.

"Mr Belign," Tor responded in his usual perfunctory business style.

"Is Creed here?" Caran asked abruptly.

"Right behind you," Creed answered quietly as he ambled in.

"Excellent," Caran did not turn around.

"Take a seat gentlemen and I will just arrange for some refreshments to be brought in," Tor indicated to the Argnu Hide sofas. Inside he felt this meeting may take some time and wanted to be comfortable.

Opening a comm to reception he said, "Belea, please can you arrange to have a variety of drinks and snacks sent in."

"Yes sir," The female voice replied.

"Thanks," Tor closed the com, and stood up.

Creed had slumped himself down and stretched out whilst Caran remained standing. "Comfortable?" Caran asked.

"Very," Creed answered casually with a smile. "So tell us why we're all here?"

Tor settled himself onto another of the sofas and relaxed with his drink. He gave Caran a look of curiosity.

The big Argon agent glanced at both men, "The new administration has opened up the outer sectors for development, the first phase is to set up a network of trading stations. To this end the guilds have been offered contracts to encourage investment in the outer regions." Caran paused briefly, "This includes a contract to you as the newest entrepreneur in the core sectors."

"I've had the official communication," Tor confirmed.

"The president has decided that a heavy military presence will send the wrong message to the Khaak, so the defensive fleet will be four new Corvette class ships and two M-two class destroyers," Caran glanced at Tor then Creed.

"And what's that going to stop?" Creed asked. His expression was serious.

"Very little, however there is a rapid response force equipped with jumpdrives on standby, four M1 battlecruisers, six additional M-two destroyers and six interplanetary battlecruisers with full fighter compliments," Caran affirmed.

Tor relaxed a little but Creed looked bothered, however he made no comment.

"As far as we are aware the Khaak do not have jumpdrive capability so will have to sweep through the sectors, this will give ample time for the response fleet to mobilize and intercept!" Caran commented with an upbeat confidence.

Tor suddenly felt that he was in some sort of tactical military briefing something he had no background in, however he felt comforted about the support being mentioned.

"Okay thanks for confidence boost, but that doesn't tell us where we fit in?" Creed observed casually.

"I was getting to that," Caran replied softly. "Tor, you have been offered a station contract by the President," He paused momentarily feeling the need to add something encouraging, "Congratulations on receiving this honour."

Tor simply gave a brief nod of acknowledgement, preferring to wait and hear what Caran had to say. Creed simply glanced over to Tor but remained silently solemn.

"I take it you will accept this offer?" Caran made the question sound more like a statement.

"Perhaps, I'm still awaiting some details as to the nature of the contract." Tor replied coolly.

"And what details would those be?" Caran asked slowly.

"Sector positioning, available resources for production and factory selection. Also maximum allowed factory fighter compliment to combat piracy," Tor responded quickly.

Caran looked at him and nodded slowly, "All important data for the factory, and I think I might have some of those details for you," He pressed a few buttons on his datapad and handed it across to Tor for him to study. Tor glanced at the list of new sectors and scrolled down the list of factory applications designated approved.

"I see some Teladi, Boron, and Paranid stations here. Are the Split deploying anything?" Tor asked and then handed over the pad to Creed whose expression had not changed. The mercenary also scanned quickly down the list.

"They have been awarded a few contracts but we have only had one confirmed acceptance. They have not submitted the station application yet so I can't give you a definite answer," Caran replied. "Which nicely leads me to ask you what type of station you were looking to deploy?"

"I was thinking of a lasertower factory," Tor replied.

"Hmmm, not exactly a cheap facility and if the application is approved will make it an obvious first target to any enemy hostility," Caran commented, "Needless to say you have to construct weapons and shields subsystems for the towers and if the Presidential dictate is read to the letter then I think your application will be rejected."

"Then I will have to fall back to deploying an asteroid deep mining facility," Tor commented.

"A good choice, but I'm not sure what the market for ore or silicon is going to be," Caran commented.

"I see there are several Crystal Fabs listed. They will need silicon," Creed spoke up as he handed the datapad back to Caran. "How about lending us a jumpdrive capable TL? It would save us considerable inconvenience with having to drag a construction kit through all those sectors."

"If you can find anyone willing to risk going out there," Caran's tone reflected his scepticism.

"What can you tell us about the Khaak?" Creed asked abruptly.

Caran paused a moment whilst he considered how to reply, "Very little," Then added almost absent minded, "But we've been deterred from establishing a military base of operations since the Split encounter."

"Split encounter? What Split encounter?" Tor asked hurriedly, feeling he had missed out on some old news.

A slight look of concern touched Caran's expression, and with a slight hesitation he realised he had spoken his thought out loud. This information was old but still highly classified whilst the strategic planners worked to find an effective counter offensive.

"You've slipped up there! Perhaps you should let Tor know or do you want me to enlighten him?" Creed now had a roguish smile. It was the first time he had ever heard Caran make a mistake, and although smiling knew that something was seriously concerning the Argon agent enough that he was not concentrating enough on the briefing.

Caran refocused his attention and asked sharply. "And how would you know about it?" His gaze fixed on the mercenary.

"I have my sources," Creed commented but gave no suggestion in his manner that he would elaborate further.

Tor could see Caran deciding on his next move. After a brief moment he simply shrugged his shoulders and ignored the slip. "The Khaak are still very much a mystery to us. Early attempts at contact have been somewhat unsuccessful! What they are like culturally and physically no one has established. It would be true to say that so far they have shown a certain amount of hostility to intruders in their space."

Tor half expected Creed to say something or make a tell tale gesture as he glanced across, but the mercenary remained impassive, the look on his face no longer smiling but bore a serious expression. He for one decided to keep a mental note of the incident but not to press his luck in finding out more.

“How do you tell if they are going to attack rather than ask to trade?” Tor asked. He was getting the feeling that things needed to be a whole lot less complicated, but first if he did encounter them then the last thing he wanted to do was accidentally start a war with a preemptive strike due to a slight miscommunication.

Creed glanced across to Caran and raised an eyebrow curious as to how the big Argon was going to answer the question.

“From the few reports we have the Khaak swarm when they start to attack,” Caran answered.

Tor had expected more, and after a moment he returned to the question. “And how am I supposed to know when they are being friendly?”

“I don’t think anyone has found that out yet,” Creed observed quietly, “Isn’t that right Caran?”

Caran’s jaw tensed slightly, this briefing was not going to plan. His intent had just been to inform Tor where to put his station and dedicate a security area to agency personnel. Also to list out what security was required for his people. Creed was to then give details of pilots he would supply for the station’s defense, also which and how many fighters should be obtained. For a moment he rebuked himself for not having anticipated questions concerning the Khaak, and that they now side tracked him.

“That’s right,” Caran answered.

Tor smiled and sat back in a relaxed pose, “Then I guess we’ll be finding out soon enough and let’s hope they are friendly.”

Caran’s eyes narrowed and flicked between the two men suspecting some type of conspiracy between them. “As you know the sectors have not received an official name designation at this time. The current naming convention allocates them from X-one to X-twenty. We feel there are more to be discovered but they may be located in other regions of the solar systems.”

Creed moved on the seat uneasily and although did not speak his thoughts aloud definitely looked uncomfortable with that information. Tor however had, for once, not observed this reaction.

Caran continued regardless, “The sector identified as tactically the most useful is sector X-seven, which is where I want you to deploy your station.”

“From my analysis of the new region then militarily the most defensible sector is X-four!” Creed cut in, “X-seven is good for intelligence gathering but is too remote from Getsu Fune if there is any disruption in the coms.”

For a moment Tor thought that Caran was going to argue the point but to his surprise he simply asked, “Explain?” and took a seat leaving Creed to continue the briefing.

“Sector X-seven is centrally disposed within the grid of new sectors but it has too many gates and no natural obstacles to speak of which would help to impair an attack.” Creed pulled out his own personal pad. Tor made a mental note that it was a technical datapad similar to the one that used to house the personality chip and AI he called Sweetie. He linked it into a small table top holo-projector and switched on.

A brief moment passed before the ionization field had gained full strength to provide a clear and full display of the galactic map floating above the table. Creed punched a few commands into the pad and the

image displayed the layout and gates for the new sectors out of Getsu Fune in a grid pattern. He took a moment to highlight sector X-seven, the sector image still devoid of stations slowly rotated.

“As you can see there are six gates in this sector branching out. Only one will help to get you back to Boron Controlled Space but you’ll have to cross three sectors to reach Getsu Fune.”

He manipulated the datapad and returned to the galactic map of the area, “The three sectors you would have to cross are also linked to others, which means a pre-emptive strike in sector X-five will cut off any available retreat,” He paused for a moment as Tors’ secretary delivered a hover tray laden with refreshments.

“Thanks Belea,” Tor commented, and she gave a brief smile before disappearing out of the room.

“Sector X-four,” The holo-map moved in and pulled up a slowly rotating image of the sector. “Is asteroid rich and only has two gates. One linked to sector X-five with a direct corridor through sector X-two back to Getsu Fune,” Creed paused for a moment and picked up a drink from the tray and took a sip, “However it is not without problems. There will be a certain amount of disruption to standard coms traffic due to a Nebula cloud which covers a good proportion of the asteroid belt.”

“Perfect cover for a Khaak war fleet,” Caran observed.

“Perfect cover for any number of things,” Creed added, “Including a silicon mine if push came to shove.”

“What do you mean?” Tor asked.

“Think about it Tor! Strap some manoeuvre engines on a lump of rock and push yourself into the nebula if trouble does appear,” Creed commented lightly.

“What about the other asteroids?” Tor asked somewhat nervous of the idea.

“You’ll be hitting rock with shielded rock,” Creed replied frankly and smiled, “But I wouldn’t advise it, so hopefully you’ll have enough time to plot a course if the need should arise.”

“Hang on guys, I appreciate all this info but all I’m hearing is how to protect myself in the case of attack. If it’s really that dangerous, I don’t think I’m interested in going,” Tor quickly aired his reservations and looked at the other two.

Caran glanced across at Creed as if he was somewhat responsible for the comment, but Creed was looking at Tor in pensive thought. He opened his mouth to say something but Creed abruptly held his hand up to stop him. For the first time in many years he actually refrained from commenting when indicated to do so by someone not directly his superior.

“The choice is yours Tor,” Creed paused, “But there are thousands of others who will not get this briefing, who will have no idea of what they are potentially getting into and have made no preparations to escape. If and that’s a big ‘if’ things turn bad. Someone like you could make the difference!”

Caran was a little impressed, it had sounded that the mercenary did actually care about life. Something, to Caran’s mind, Creed generally spent his time extinguishing.

Tor also took a moment to reflect on the mercenaries words, not as eloquently put as perhaps a politician would have said, but the message was clear. A dawning realization of the morale dilemma awakened within him and was borne on the wings of bitter resentment towards Caran, “I need a moment to think, but go on with the briefing.”

Creed gave a brief nod, “Of course you could put your station in sector X-seven but if you do then I cannot support the providing of fighter pilots.”

Caran's eyes narrowed and he looked far from happy at Creed's final statement. He took a moment to think before replying slowly, "And what if I can get you permission for two stations?"

"Ha, double my exposure to heavy losses! Well thanks for the offer but," Tor answered quickly and glanced at Creed who did not see the suggestion as foolish as it first appeared.

"It would double your allocation of heavy fighters," Caran commented earnestly.

"Hang on there, who's paying for all this additional hardware?" Tor asked loudly, "I'm a businessman and so far you guys are wiping out the balance sheets with your grand ideas but I see no credits flowing in to compensate for the expenditure!"

Creed looked straight at Caran who took a moment to answer, "You will only need to provide a minimal personal force. The number of which is at your own discretion. The service will provide four Elites, six Busters and three recon ships. These will be registered to you and based on the station in X-seven. I have contacts in the Argon Navy who like me are not pleased with the holding back on a greater military presence and will lend a substantial number of fighters to be stationed at your factory."

Tor now realised why Caran had not objected strongly to Creed's suggestion for station deployment, as he had his own conditions.

"And you'll be supplying pilots?" Creed asked quietly.

"For those ships, yes," Caran answered, "I note your objection to the station in X-seven but the fighters I have negotiated need to be station based. The new sectors only have a crude law enforcement system, supply freighters will require an armed escort as piracy is seen to be the second greatest hazard, and this is the role I was hoping your pilots would provide. Of course if Tor can stretch his funds to a second station then so much the better."

Creed gave a single slow nod and glanced over to Tor. This arrangement still left his people exposed, only now the need to provide pilots was significantly less than he first imagined and they would have additional support, but he still felt deeply uneasy about the choice of location. Even so he decided that, when a suitable time was available, he would take an opportunity to discuss things further with Tor alone. He knew certain secrets within the X-four sector that he was not yet prepared to share with the likes of Caran, things that appeared harmless and needed further investigation.

The feeling that he was already too involved to refuse leapt back to the front of Tor's mind. The remainder of the meeting focused on the approved stations already deployed, in construction or still on route to the new sectors.

"Needless to say if you do opt for a silicon mine or crystal fab the Boron shipyard in Ocean of Fantasy will be able to provide these. But preorder, as I understand it they are running low on resources and are having supplies jumped in from the core sectors." Caran concluded.

"What about some of the legal requirements that we have in the core sectors, do they still apply?" Tor asked.

"Any particular legal requirement you're thinking about?" Caran asked softly.

"Ones concerning pure automation," Tor responded.

The big agent relaxed almost expecting Tor to mention other things, "Those have been waived during this establishment phase of the presidential plan."

Tor was relieved at the news, with everything else to worry him the last problem he wanted to get entangled in was bureaucratic red tape. He glanced across at Creed who had seemingly given up on the briefing and was happily consuming all the snacks on the hover tray.

At this point the meeting seemed to naturally come to a conclusion, but it left Tor with a substantial amount of planning and he was keen to get started. Yet he was a little apprehensive, to his mind Creed had been outflanked by Carans commitment to supply the bulk of the stations fighters. So much so that he wondered if the mercenary pilots Creed would provide were surplus to requirements. However there was some lurking thought that when all was said and done he would need the support of Creed and his mercenaries.

“Looks like we need some lunch,” Caran commented at the sight of the snacks tray.

Chapter 3. Meeting the President

Three days had passed since the briefing and Creed had commented privately that he would stop by for a chat. Tor carefully went through the accounts with the computer accountant, however it was tough going. To start with the cash balance kept updating as the AI chip Sweety continued to make transactions through the remote trading system and then he had to wrap his head around a dictionary of accounting terms, making mental adjustments to take into consideration things like assets and unrealized cash flow.

Sweety was primarily engaged in remote managing Tors' five freighters that did not supply the station and she had done so throughout Tors' period of quarantine. These had amassed him some considerable private wealth. About twenty percent of that was then spent on the factory, equipment and supplies for the workforce, as well as the fighter compliment plus pilots.

Eventually he resorted to just assessing the cost of setting up each of the factories based on the shipyard cost to purchase and added in all the miscellaneous setup and initial startup cost. The numbers kept adding up and as he calculated the cost of providing the small fighter force he almost balked at the number that came up on screen. It would consume a little over half his current credit balance and all of it was at risk. Needless to say he had already made his commitment to go, however the first station he would have deployed was the Silicon Mine as this could start to produce the silicon composites that would then be converted into the complex crystalline lattices by the Crystal Fab, which in turn were required by the solar power plants for the production of the much needed energy cells. This news although not initially well received by Caran achieved a wry smile from Creed.

He looked up briefly at the accounts as the numbers changed again with another purchase by one of the remote freighters but the amount was only small indicating energy cells now being transported by a Lifter.

Tapping the screen it updated and he called up the shipyard in Argon Prime to check the prices and availability of Lifters. Then he looked up the shipyard in Omicron Lyrae after a moments consideration he called up the station.

An automated voice recognition system answered the transmission, "Welcome to the Argon Shipyard Omicron Lyrae, which service do you require?"

"Order sales," Tor requested.

"Connecting," The system responded.

An image of a young woman appeared on screen, "Sales, Amara speaking. How can I help you?"

"Hi Amara. I need to pre-order four full spec. Lifters with max cargo bay extension and upgrades," Tor requested.

The girl tapped a few buttons and the image on Tors screen showed the current available stock. "I'm sorry Sir we don't appear to have any full spec. ships available at this moment."

"When's the next production run?" Tor asked casually, he had time as there was no rush and it would be a few Wozura before he met the new President to receive his contracts.

"We currently have a back order of eight max config lifters scheduled for build commencement in three Wozura. If you wish to proceed with the order I can add them to the next build schedule?" She asked without hesitating and then added. "Also with the backlog exceeding ten ships I would think the build schedule will get pulled forward by one Wozura," She smiled sweetly awaiting his instructions.

It was one of those smiles Tor liked to dwell on and took a moment before giving his answer, "That is acceptable," For a moment he kicked himself for not attempting to negotiate a better price, and mentally shrugged to himself saying, 'but she had a nice smile.'

“Thank you Sir, if you can give credit transfer authorization for the deposit?” Amana asked.

Tor placed his thumb on the scanner unit and after a momentary pause, “Thank you Mr. Grall, I will give you a call to let you know when the build is commencing and on build completion.”

“Thank you,” Tor responded and then closed the com.

Creed strolled casually into the room. Tor glanced up at him then glared hard for a moment where his secretary would be sitting behind the wall.

The mercenary caught his expression and grinned, “At least you’re a friend. Now if you were an enemy and I arrived unannounced then I could understand your annoyance.”

“Albeit a very short lived one,” Tor replied frankly and still not amused.

Creed gave a slight turn of the head and a wink whilst maintaining the smile. He headed to the private bar and found himself a glass and then carefully selected a bottle of extremely rare thirty year old single cask Argon whisky. He waved the bottle at Tor.

“I shouldn’t, but I’ll have a large one, no ice,” Tor called out with a slight shake of his head as he anticipated the beginning of a long down hill slide out of sobriety. Plus the fact Creed had found the single most expensive bottle in the collection, valued at some twenty thousand credits.

Creed was surprisingly sparing in the quantity of the measures he poured and extremely careful not to let a drop go to waste. Tor closed down the screen and sighed as he got up to wander over to the bar. “Leave the bottle out. The seal’s been broken so we might as well make the most of it.”

Creed glanced across and the smile returned slowly. It had a certain genuine appreciative look, “Saw this the last time I was here, and where you’re going there’s no point saving it for a special occasion.”

“You fill me with such confidence,” Tor responded and sat on one of the bar stools, “But if the worst does happen and I somehow get out alive, I’m expecting a replacement.”

“I’ll buy you two,” The mercenary raised his glass and said, “Cheers.”

Tor replied in kind and savoured the rich flavour of the liquid and the deep satisfying warmth it gave as he swallowed which did not stop at his stomach but continued to flow down to his toes and up to the top of his head.

“How about you get some nice ladies to come and serve us?” Creed commented softly.

Tor did not feel like attempting to remember a name, “You know everyone around here make the call if you want.”

Suddenly Creed laughed and after a brief moment said, “Bela will be so upset that you can’t remember her name.”

Tor was embarrassed and felt his ears turn red, “She won’t if you don’t tell her.”

Creed kept smiling as he wandered off and used the com panel on Tors’ desk to make the call. Then wandered back and helped to prop up the bar.

“So what is it you wanted to talk to me about?” Tor started.

“Several things,” Creed paused a moment and looked directly at Tor, it was one of those uncomfortable silences and Tor felt he was being measured up. “You have never been in command of a combat situation have you?”

“No,” Tor answered and took another sip from his glass.

“You need battle coordinators,” Creed began, “And you need pilots that can read a battlefield even when the station has been destroyed.”

Tor felt a chill run down his spine, the fact that Creed was being so open with his evaluation at the prospect of an inevitable battle was akin to a bitter body blow. “Do you really think it’ll come to that?”

“Who knows? But you need to be prepared for such things,” Creed paused a moment as he took another sip of the whisky, “I know some people that could possibly be persuaded to help.”

Tor simply swirled his drink to allow the aroma to lift from the glass before taking another sip.

“Now sector X-four!” Creed began, “It’s an unusual one. The fact there’s a small nebula cloud crosses it isn’t unusual, the fact that the sector, in astronomical terms, is still being born is.”

Tor glanced up, “Being born?”

“I’ve taken the time to consult a number of astronomers and this is a solar system still in formation following the explosion of a second generation sun.” Creed almost had a far away look in his eye, “It’s a beautiful sight Tor. The gases of the clouds are still collapsing, you can see there will be two suns and the smaller bright centers will in a few million years become planets. You’ll see the ion storms shimmering through the nebulas.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

Creed looked at him, “It is. The nebula cloud nearest to you is very small having separated from the main gas clouds which we estimate to be over one hundred thousand million, million k across. So as you can probably tell, with the coms and scanner interference problems looking though nebula clouds that we have, it could hide anything.”

“And you want me to put a station there?” Tor voice carried his uncertainty.

“Yes, the near field probes we use for exploring nebulae found something very interesting but I’ll get back to that,” Creed picked up the bottle and gently poured another measure into each glass.

“Okay! So what else do I need to know first?” Tor quietly commented.

“As I was saying the solar system is still too much in it’s infancy for me to believe that the ancients would want us to be there,” Creed commented as he lost himself in thought slightly.

Tor responded, “Perhaps they were there before the sun went nova?”

“I’ve asked a few scientists about that and they think with the destructive power behind a nova the gates would have been destroyed. I think they’ve been put there afterwards, but we know the ancients have some way of concealing gates so they can’t be found until they feel the time is right,” Creed commented and paused as he tried to work something out.

“So you think someone forced the gates to appear?” Tor asked with a hint of pessimism.

“I don’t know, maybe the ancients do want us to see and visit this place, but X-four is lifeless and has no way of supporting life, yet, and that makes it unique,” Creed answered.

“What else did you find?” Tor asked quickly.

Creed took a moment before answering, “A defective gate in the nebula.”

Tor looked surprised, “A what?”

“A defective gate and we were lucky to find it,” Creed commented.

“But couldn’t that be the way in for the Khaak?” Tor asked.

“Yeah and where are the Khaak? They seem to have gone missing. Strange they should welcome us by not being there. That’s what worries Mr. Belign more than anything. And why have the ancients allowed us to come into contact with them when they’re so good at vanishing?” Creed was voicing his own thoughts aloud.

Tor shook his head. “Perhaps the Split scared them off?”

Creed gave a short but wry smile and commented sarcastically, “I don’t think so!” Then added, “If anything it proved they were more than a match for us and not afraid to show it!”

“You really make this whole assignment so, so attractive,” Tor frowned.

“You need to find yourself an edge. It’s a pity you lost that Piranha,” Creed commented and looked at Tor.

Tor shifted uneasily and drank his drink, Creeds eyes narrowed slightly, “Is there something you’d like to share with me?”

“Hmmm, no, no nothing at all!” Tor declared quickly.

“A refill?” Creed commented and carefully added some more of the whisky to Tors’ glass. He could wait a while to find out.

“You were saying there’s something unusual about the gate?” Tor asked.

“Yes, as I said we were lucky to find it, guess it must have been damaged by a passing ion storm and hasn’t been fixed by the ancients yet, but it appears for about two Mizura every two Tazura, in Argon terms that’s five minutes every two and a half days.”

“And what lies beyond?” Tor asked.

“Another sector,” Creed answered in an off hand manner but did not elaborate further.

“Anything else?” Tor asked after a moments pause.

“That’s for you to find out,” Creed replied and took a moment to look around Tors office.

“Creed, need to ask if you can do something for me,” Tor started, the mercenary looked across. “You have good contacts with the Paranid.”

“A few,” Creed responded cautiously, “Why?”

Tor took a small sip from his glass, “Well you mentioned about getting an edge and I was thinking it would be nice to get, say five Perseus fighters?”

The mercenary said nothing for a moment but kept eye contact with Tor making the young Argon slightly apprehensive. “Those are for the military only and you could buy nearly two Prommies for each one!”

Tor looked away and said, “So the answer’s no then?”

“The Paranid are very strict when it comes to military hardware and who gets access, Paranid weapons only for the Paranid type of thing,” Creed commented quietly as he thought about the request in more detail.

“So I need to become a Paranid?” Tor spoke up, “Yeah sure, a quick op to put some bumps on my head, grow a third eye. I’ll blend right in.”

Creed gave a slight smile, “Maybe by hiring a few Paranid fighter pilots they would be more receptive to any purchase requests you might want to make.”

“Yes but would that get me five Perseus fighters?” Tor asked still not entirely convinced.

“I might be able to put forward a suitable argument.” Creed paused momentarily, “Because of the location and the fact they will be flown by their own people. Let me work on the finer detail!” Creed finished his drink and poured out another.

Time passed quickly and despite not having heard any news from Creed about the potential Perseus ships Tor was still hanging on but his pessimism was growing and he needed to get the fighters together. So far he had no heavy fighters but the Kingdom End shipyard had twelve fully configured Piranha awaiting deployment and the pilots were in transit to bring them back to the Bakery.

The shuttle bumped and jarred briefly and Tor shifted uneasily in his seat as it passed through a minor pocket of turbulence. He would have talked to just about anyone at this moment just to distract his attention from the view of Argon Prime which was hurtling towards them at incredible speed, but the neighbouring passenger had sat down and almost immediately put on his eye mask, moved the seat back and fallen asleep on boarding.

His nervousness at meeting the new President and the gentle snoring of the passenger kept him awake for the whole ten hour descent from the orbital transit station. Glancing out of the interplanetary shuttles shielded window, as it cut through high cloud, he could tell it was now in a much more gradual descent and beginning its final approach to the starport of Prima City capital of Argon Prime and seat of the Argon government.

Time seemed to drag and Tor now fervently wished the trip was over as they were buffeted by more turbulence. The nose of the shuttle lifted and then a shift in the direction of the engines, as the vertical thrusters kicked in with a distinctive roar, caused the cabin to shake. The man next to him woke up and lifted one side of his eye mask and looked questioningly at Tor, then out of the window.

The passenger adjusted position and pulled the seat up, “Looks like we’re nearly there?” He commented cheerfully.

“I think so,” Tor replied not quite through gritted teeth.

“Excellent.”

Tor looked out of the window to see the city rising up to meet them the ship came to a near perfect stop and then glided forwards on to the landing ramp.

A voice announced through the cabin, “We would like to welcome you to Prima City, Argon Prime, we hope you have had a pleasant flight with us and hope you will be flying with us again soon!”

Tor glanced at his time piece and noted it had automatically reset itself to Argon Prime time.

He stepped out of the interplanetary shuttle onto the walkway that led to the terminal building. His limbs seemed to feel heavier than normal, but he reflected that he had not felt planetary gravity for some time. The air had a whole new taste from the recycled and purified artificial atmospheres of the stations and ships.

As he moved along towards the customs gates with his landing pass a very official looking man stepped towards him, and without even the hint of a smile said, “Mr. Grall?”

“Yes?”

“If you would follow me,” The man turned abruptly and walked away.

President Carolile Pamitter was in her early fifties, a motherly figure, and the naturally blond hair had taken on a silver look. She was tired but did not show it, however even six years on the campaign trail had not been as mentally exhausting as this. Priding herself as a reformer she was coming to realise how difficult reform was going to be in practice. The wheels of government bureaucracy turned slowly as the change in leadership only stripped away the top two tiers of an organization that essentially stayed the same. Somewhere in the back of her mind she was questioning that she would even manage to achieve one tenth of the promises they had made which saw her party sweep to power.

The only thing that was making any progress was the colonization of the outer sectors, despite murmurs of dissent and reservations now creeping through her party and advisors. In this one thing she was holding firm in her belief, that the course of action they were currently taking was the right one and the majority still supported her.

She looked at the latest documentation extracted from the archives of the previous President and cast it aside with disdain. It did not make for pleasant reading but to her mind it was all hearsay and speculation. The document was a prime piece of scare mongering phrased in such a way to put anyone in doubt. A report compiled by the Secret Service which she deeply mistrusted.

Carolile had spent many hours reading old documents and everywhere she had looked and dug down into the decision making process the Service had made a recommendation that without fail had been followed by previous presidents. To her mind this made a farce of the word democracy as all the policies and government decisions were decided by the Service and they had never been elected.

She needed sleep, and time to recover. Glancing at her daily schedule there were numerous appointments. Many committee meetings and briefings, interspersed amongst these were two private meetings to hand out Station contracts.

The first one, in just a few minutes, was with the station owner Tor Grall. She afforded herself a brief smile, as she had two contracts to hand him. Being the newest station owner in the core sectors she had taken special interest in ensuring the press was present at this occasion. The stations that Tor was receiving contracts for were to be symbols of the new government and its dynamic forward looking policies, as well as its belief in a reviving economy after decades of apparent stagnation.

She had been particularly meticulous in her investigation of Tor to ensure that he was in no way connected to the Argon service and all the background checks came up clean, almost too clean. But as she asked herself on several occasions, ‘and why wouldn’t they?’

Her private secretary entered the room, “Madam President, we are ready!” He announced.

She nodded and picked up the two rolls of synthetic parchment with their hologram seals. From the look and feel they reflected a tradition the origin of which seemed to be lost somewhere in the annals of history. Carolile reflected they were symbols of a bygone era and something else ripe for modernization.

Sweeping out of her office her secretary followed, all the time commenting on the order of events and handed over her short ceremonial type speech. Scanning through it she found the usual rhetoric extolling the virtues that her administration was bringing to the Argon. The renewed hopes of co-operation between the races and the contracts being awarded to the newest station owner Tor Grall was a symbol of the renewed strength in the Argon economy.

In little over two Argon hours later, Tor was checking in on the next flight back to the transit station for the intergalactic transport back to the Trading station. The event itself left him slightly dazed as everything suddenly just happened. The most memorable thing about the presentation was the speech, upbeat and

highly motivating which left him with a deep sense of belonging. As though he was an important part of something special and above all he felt proud to be Argon.

If anything, Tor was glad he had not been expected to say much. He had not realized the Argon and Galactic News press teams were going to be present. The president has quickly rescued him from the questions after he realised he was being watched by a host of cameras and faltered through nerves. He also now knew why she had won the hearts and feeling of the people, in the brief moment of meeting and the chat afterwards, the charisma of the woman had struck so many chords that everything else anyone said were but whispers and distant memories.

A ground heaving lurch and the roar of engines pushed him into the seat. He glanced out of the window at the rapidly diminishing city below. The sky reflecting blue quickly darkened to black as the trajectory of the shuttle crossed the terminator into night. The roar and shake of the cabin faded and the artificial gravity switched on. They were still a long way from the transit station so Tor took a moment to push his seat back and dropped into a comfortable sleep.

A stewardess gave him a quick shake, "Sir, we've arrived. It's time to depart," And smiled.

Tor took a moment to think and ran his fingers through his hair, whilst thinking 'cute smile', "How soon?"

The stewardess gave a brief laugh, "We've been docked for five minutes. All the other passengers have disembarked."

"Shit!" Tor responded as he looked around quickly, "Sorry!" He suddenly felt uncomfortable having sworn in front of the hostess.

"That's okay Sir," There was the smile again.

Tor absorbed it for a while longer and then mentally shook himself into action and grabbed his personal belongings. As he turned to leave the waitress tapped him on the shoulder, "Err, Mr. Grall?"

He turned around slowly, his mind suddenly aware she had called him by name, and then reassured himself that it was probably due to his name being on the passenger list. "Yes?"

"Could I have your autograph?" She asked and then hastily added, "It's for my mother."

Tor immediately felt flattered and at the same moment curious. "Umm, why?"

She smiled and almost backed away worried that she had said something wrong, "Well we saw you on the GalNet News with the President," She faltered for words.

'Fame' Tor thought to himself then slowly smiled, "Okay. Where do I sign?" He glanced around and noticed all the cabin crew were watching.

She held out a personal pad and scribe, the next thing Tor knew when he returned the pad was several more of the cabin crew had arrived. Eventually he stepped off the shuttle onto the docking ramp, and with a wry smile walked casually towards the main transit lounge to see a small throng of hitherto unknown admirers pushing and shoving near the arrival gate.

He slowed and approached with caution when two burly, heavily armed Paranid forced their way through the crowd. Tor was immediately alarmed, suspecting perhaps a hit by the Bloodhearts until he noticed they both carried the insignia of the War Master Mercenaries.

One waved him forwards, "Mr. Creed sends his regards," The voice was deep and seemed to resonate.

His colleague then called out to the small crowd, "Clear a way, Mr. Grall is coming through!"

Tor just smiled with a vaguely disconnected expression as the whole experience seemed wholly surreal to him. One visit to Argon Prime had propelled him from complete obscurity to momentary fame. Something told him this would be short lived but for the moment he reveled in the experience.

Clear of the crowd the Paranid mercenaries led him towards the interplanetary shuttle that would make the second leg of the journey back to the trading station. However he found himself diverted to the private transport ring. Tor looked ahead to see Creed sitting smoking a large cigar whilst being watched intently by a seriously displeased security guard.

They stopped in front of him and Creed looked up at them.

"I didn't think you approved of smoking weed?" Tor commented uncertainly.

"I don't! This is Paranid Ghagusta Leaf, a very fine smoke and clinically proven to stave off heart disease and aging," He took a long draw, and the end glowed deep red. "Personally I like it for the taste."

"Didn't expect to see you here," Tor casually observed, as the rich aroma of the cigar hinted at wild herbs in high mountains.

"Well after that show, I thought I'd pop along to see our young celebrity and pull him back to ground before fame takes hold," Creed commented flatly and brushed off a piece of ash that had fallen on his trousers.

"Yeah, not exactly what I was expecting," Tor replied with a pleasant sigh and sat down next to the mercenary. He heard some voices muttering and glanced over his shoulder as a small group of people, whose curiosity had gotten the better of them and came to find him.

Creed glanced over to the security guard, who was still obviously upset he was smoking, and forcibly commented and indicated to the new arrivals, "You're security, go secure!"

The guard gave a look of pure indignation, but having unsuccessfully tried to persuade Creed not to smoke, realised he was best not arguing and shuffled off.

"Well now I'm here, shouldn't we leave?" Tor asked curiously as he glanced over towards the security guard who was now ordering the new arrivals back.

"We have thirty minutes before our launch window," Creed replied quietly and took another draw on the cigar.

There was a moments silence before Tor asked the question that had now surfaced in his mind, "How were the negotiations?"

Creed paused a moment, the cigar glowing fiercely, before he moved it away from his mouth, then let out a large smoke ring followed by a quick succession of smaller smoke rings each one passing through the center of the first. He tapped the ash on to the floor. "I have three. But they come with strict conditions."

"What conditions?" Tor asked quietly with a sense of caution.

"Well the first one is that you owe me big time," The tone in Creeds voice reflected the seriousness of the sentiment, "The second is that the pilots are Paranid, and the third is that they will be used to help defend Paranid interests in the sector whenever requested."

Tor took a moment to try and determine what type of payment Creed would ask for, but stopped himself from asking. "And where's the Paranid station going to be located?" Tor asked feeling that his allocation of heavy fighters was now being used to bolster the Paranids own allocation.

"Strangely enough in sector X-four, that makes just the two of you," Creed glanced across.

“And the station?” Tor asked now alert that Creed was the source of information to the Paranid government.

“Solar power plant,” Creed replied slowly.

“But the suns are still forming,” Tor commented with a degree of surprise.

Creed simply took another long draw on the cigar. “They’ll still be able to generate cells.”

Tor got the impression that all the races had taken the Argon presidents offer of allowing them to place a station was an invitation to spy on each other and gain intelligence.

“And if I change my mind on having the ships?” Tor somehow knew what the answer was going to be, but asked the question.

“These good gentlemen go home and you lose that edge you were after,” Creed answered, “Unless you have something else up your sleeve?” He looked across at Tor.

Tor said nothing for a moment as he weighed up his options, “Okay, I’ll take the three, but I need to put an order in for two new Elites to make up the shortfall.”

“When were you planning on shifting out?” Creed asked casually.

“I spoke to the shipyard in Ocean of Fantasy and the kit will be available in another two Wozura, the Orca should also be available to pickup and deploy three Tazuras later.” Tor replied as if simply relaying the response he had received and sat back.

“Plenty of time then,” Creed commented and examined the cigar.

“All the fighters will fly to the Bakery and from there we head out together and pick up the freighters in Omicron Lyrae,” Tor had not had a chance to discuss his plans on how to get the fighters to the new sectors and he felt that he needed to and soon.

“I’ll provide additional security through the Xenon sectors but when you get into the Split sectors you’re on your own,” Creed responded and then added reflectively, “Might even come along myself,” At this he pulled out a blade and stubbed out the remains of the cigar against the steel. He wiped the blade clean and put it away again, “Time to leave!”

Chapter 4. Perseus

The shuttle provided by Creed was one of his own customized ships and, unlike the public transport Tor had used, was heavily armed. The interior was completely refitted, rather than the rows of fully reclining seats this had large comfortable armchairs towards the front with a bar, and sleeping cabins at the rear.

Tor collapsed down, relaxed and looked around taking in the surroundings. The two Paranid guards help themselves to drinks and sat a short distance away but said very little. Creed appeared a moment later having spoken to the pilots and helped himself to a drink before sitting down opposite to Tor.

“We need to talk business,” Creed announced.

“Yes I have a few questions for you,” Tor responded keenly. He was taking time to reflect on the days’ events. Also on seeing Creed again it had raised a few questions in the back of his mind.

“Good, ask away.”

“I’m moving a lot of fighters, mostly Boron Piranhas. Do you think I’ll get any opposition from the Split?” Tor asked with a look of slight concern.

“Yes,” Creed answered quickly, Tor considered briefly how much the mercenary despised the Split and how much bitterness and venom entered his expression and tone whenever he mentioned their name. “They are wary of large fighter groups moving through their space, certainly in the core sectors,” He paused for a moment, “So much so that they might just attack on the pretence that your ships had all the appearance of an invasion fleet.”

Tor tried to read Creeds expression “Is there an alternative route?”

Creed took a moment to answer, and seemed cautious with his response. “Yes! Through the Paranid sectors to Preacher’s Refuge, Great Trench, Ianamus Zura and Scale Plate Green which will then lead onto Black Hole Sun.”

“Any potential hazards?” Tor felt that Creed was holding something back.

“The sector before Scale Plate Green is still held by the Xenon,” Creed replied slowly and took a sip of the drink.

“The Xenon!” Tor exclaimed, the tone reflected his uncertainty. “That’s not good.”

Creed remembered getting some of his own people to drop navigational satellites in the outer sectors for Tor. “You still haven’t explored very far have you?” Creed asked casually.

“Only as far as Rolk’s Legacy,” Tor sighed, “Anyway I thought the Xenon were cleared out from the main trading routes.”

He gave a slight smirk as he reflected on the earlier attempts to shift the Xenon from one of their major strongholds. “Oh various races have tried, but the Xenon, they somehow just seem to be able to come right back again,” He paused before adding, “Strangely enough since the first encounter with the Khaak, the Xenon have been keeping very quiet. The trade routes through their sectors have been uninterrupted for some time.”

Tor recognized the slight concern in Creeds voice, “Yeah, but are they still there?”

“Yes. They’ve just retreated away from the gates to interplanetary positions and deep space,” Creed glanced across. The ship jolted slightly as the docking clamps released and it began to move away from the transit station.

Tor looked slightly perplexed but interested, "Any idea why?"

"I guess they're waiting to see what happens next," Creed answered.

Tor kept his thoughts to himself as he reflected on potential reasons. Then he shrugged his shoulders, "The next thing is supplies, and I don't mean the everyday stuff."

"Hmmm, smuggling in the outer sectors is prolific but I would advise against anything the Boron might take strong exception to. You've built up a good reputation with them and it would be a shame to destroy it with one stupid act," Creed glanced over to the two Paranid, "And our friends over there have strict rules on contraband materials so if you want their unswerving loyalty then be careful."

"I hadn't been planning on illegal goods, more like spare weapons for ships, spare shields, that kind of thing," Tor responded quickly.

"The fighters will have available capacity for those things," Creed answered.

It had almost escaped Tor that, although not vast, all the fighters had the ability to carry a reasonable amount of freight. Combined the total haulage capacity would be several hundred units.

The slight sense of acceleration briefly intensified and then relaxed as the inertial dampeners compensated, accompanied by slight hum from the ion engines that ran through the cabin before fading away.

Tor broke the brief silence by asking, "How many pilots have you managed to hire?"

"Currently I've found twenty, but I think you still need another ten, perhaps more and you may consider adding some M-five fighters to your collection," Creed replied.

"How's that?" Tor asked out of curiosity.

"A pack of small fast ships can take the sting out of any attack," Creed replied casually, "They make good scouts and if your coms get taken out they can outrun the enemy and get messages through."

"I do have a pair of Pegasus ships for that purpose," Tor responded carefully.

"Great for the messages and scouting, not so good in combat, takes real skill to control especially at the speed those things can get too," Creed commented.

The conversation died off so Tor took a moment to look back at Argon Prime through one of the port side windows. How fast they were now travelling was difficult to judge, the transit station was a rapidly diminishing spec glinting in the light of the sun. In just a few hours they would arrive at the trading station before picking up the private transport back to the factory and home.

Creed had helped himself to another drink, "Tor there is one thing that I must reprimand you for," He spoke unenthusiastically, "And this comes from Mr. Belign but I'll not use his exact, rather choice words, but your use of public transport was, let us say, a bit risky."

Tor turned with an expression of worried surprise, "Why?"

"The Bloodhearts are still after you, and needless to say your trip to Argon Prime for the presentation was a predictable event. At any time during your transit between the Trading Station, Prima City and back again you were fully exposed to assassination," Creed gave Tor a serious but thoughtful look, "However as I see it, politics is involved and personally I doubt if Ferans muzzle and leash would have been removed to allow him to get near you."

"Do you think he would have?"

“If there was no Split interest in the outer sectors then yes he would,” Creed responded, and after a moments pause added, “And by the way someone’s written ‘next time’ on the back of your neck.”

Tor suddenly felt cold and a shiver ran down his spine.

“As I said in the core sectors it’s all politics. Once you get beyond Black Hole Sun the story will be different. Here the merchants pretend to be civilized. Out there goods are at a premium and the cartels will be looking to take control,” Creed commented, “For what it’s worth the President has tried to restrict the allocation of stations to the big corporations to give the little guys, like you, a chance to get established.”

“You don’t think it’ll work?” Tor asked quietly, as he tried to discreetly rub away the writing on the back of his neck. Creed poured him a glass of water and carried it across to him with a napkin.

“It’s amazing how many freighters are lost due to pirate activity,” Creed replied and let the sentence hang, whilst handing Tor the glass and napkin, “Now I’m telling you all this so you are prepared. The list of enemies and potential enemies is extremely long, so you need to make a few trading partners as soon as you get there. And I would suggest you put the War Master Guild motif in the corner of your station logo.”

Tor dipped the paper into the water and then rubbed it across the back of his neck, “Do you think it’ll help?”

“It’s not guaranteed, but will deter the majority of the cartel owners. I can make life difficult for any of them, anywhere in the universe,” Creed answered frankly.

Tor turned and asked, “Has it gone?”

“Yes,” Creed replied. He stepped back to the bar finished his drink and commented, “It’s been a long day for me so if you’ll excuse me I’m going to get some sleep,” With that he headed towards the rear cabins.

Tor helped himself to a drink then dug out his technical datapad and slumping down in a chair opened a console to his station and sat reading the latest supply reports and credit transfers. He took a moment to call up the list of items he was going to transport to the outer sectors.

The lifters in Omicron Lyrae were ready and two had full loads of energy cells, the other two contained a wide assortment of other items including food, medical supplies, and maintenance equipment for both the station and ships.

Tor looked hard at the manifest and began to wonder if he had enough supplies. As he studied the list, Tor reflected on all the conversations he recently had with Creed and the urge to call Caran Belign and the President to say he had changed his mind grew stronger.

He put the technical pad to one side and for a moment put his head in his hands. The dream of becoming a station owner had now been realized but the cost to him personally was more than he could ever of imagined.

What made it worse was having received the station charters’, he somehow felt honour bound to go on despite Creeds rather stark evaluation of what he would find when he got there. ‘Somehow I think I would be better off not knowing what’s out there!’ He thought with some bitterness and took a deep breath as this thought was replaced by the sentiment, ‘forewarned is forearmed,’ but this did not give him any renewed confidence.

He closed down the datapad and helped himself to whatever the bar had to offer, however he was guarded not to drink too much and after a few small glasses he went off to examine the cabins towards the back of the shuttle.

Opening one of the cabin doors he stepped inside and lay down on the bunk. In a short while Tor dropped into a restless sleep.

Once again he found himself on the transport ship to the transit station, this time he was awake and looking around. The cabin crew were serving drinks and happily chatting to the passengers. He turned to look at the passenger next to him and froze.

A dark shadow loomed over him, his eyes widened, he wanted to call out, but when he opened his mouth no sound came out. He saw the glint of steel as a cruel and jagged blade glistened in the cabin lights.

Tor felt himself trying to get free of his seat but he was still strapped in, looking frantically around the cabin, no one seemed to have taken any notice. The cabin crew were still standing, chatting and laughing with the other passengers.

Looking back with panic in his eyes and heart beating fast, the shadow now hung over him and the blade began to fall in a slow leisurely way towards him.

As the knife struck he jerked forward as he was roughly shaken awake by one of the Paranid pilots, "Bad dream?" The voice was not as deep as many of the other Paranid he had spoken to and he rubbed the sleep from his eyes before swinging his legs off the bunk.

Tors' heart was racing, and he simply nodded whilst trying to breathe slowly and easily.

"We've arrived," The young Paranid commented.

Tor sighed and nodded slowly in understanding then stretched before getting to his feet. The Paranid turned and left the cabin and heard him say, "He's awake."

Creeds voice responded, "Good. You both have your instructions. Take Mr. Grall back to his station and keep an eye open for possible trouble. Not that I'm expecting any."

Tor quickly washed and dried his hands and face to clear the remains of sleep from his eyes and freshen up slightly. He considered that he would wait before taking a shower as it was only a seven Mizura journey from here to his station and he would have access to a change of clothes. Stepping from the cabin he found Creed had already left and the two Paranid were patiently waiting for him.

"Ready?" Asked the young Paranid abruptly.

"Lead the way." Tor responded as he picked up his case and datapad. The young Paranid went in front and opened the door of the shuttle. A quick survey of the dockside and he stepped out signaling Tor to follow, he wondered how much advantage the Paranid had with the third eye, and whether the middle eye had in someway evolved to see more than normal.

The older silent Paranid followed him and closed the shuttle door. Almost as soon as they cleared the docking ramp the five Sezura warning klaxon sounded and behind him he heard the docking clamps disengage.

The pace was quick and Tor felt as though he was on a quick march down to the main trading docks. He noted that the three of them were drawing curious glances from the traders and other station personnel, and with little surprise. As they stood in the shuttle lift he could see two Perseus ships docked and they had gained a few onlookers. The two Paranids next to him seemed to shuffle uneasily and clearly unhappy with the onlookers but neither spoke. The crowd seemed to be continuously shifting, as some left other arrived to take their place.

Tor considered that the ships were still far too rare in this part of the universe and for a moment had a worry that bringing them here could have invited an opportunist theft. The shuttle lift door opened and they were once again on the march, even before they reached the back of the onlookers the lead Paranid pilot was calling out, "Clear the way!"

People turned and began to separate leaving a gap for them to pass through. Tor heard some muttering and pointing as a few of the crowd recognized him. He lowered his head not wanting to draw attention to

himself. The young Paravid approached the first of the two Perseus ships and placed his hand on the palm scanner. A moment later the outer airlock door folded back. He signaled Tor to step in and then followed him.

The older Paravid turned and walked to the second Perseus and opened the door. Behind Tor the outer airlock door closed with a hiss and the inner door opened. Tor moved forward and froze as another Paravid stood up slowly from one of the cabin chairs a blaster in hand.

“It’s okay Tolotomancke, this is Mr. Grall,” Tors’ companion commented quickly.

Tolotomanckes’ face broke into a broad smile and he carefully put away his blaster, “Welcome aboard Mr. Grall.”

“Thanks,” Tor replied cautiously.

The two Paravid pilots went up to the cockpit, Tolotomancke took the pilots seat whilst the young Paravid sat in the co-pilot position. Tor shook his head briefly and reprimanded himself, then tapped on the Paravids shoulder and asked, “Sorry but I didn’t get your name?”

The co-pilot looked up and commented, “You never asked! I’m Lomasmanckebal.”

Tor looked back and ran the name through his mind, “Would you mind if I call you Lomas?”

Lomasmanckebal considered the request as Tolotomancke made the preflight checks and requested departure clearance, “You Argon always have problems with our names,” He observed, “Lomas will do,” And turned back to the control panel.

Tolotomancke glanced across and added, “You can call me Tolo.”

The docking clamps released and the station autopilot took control of the ship. The second Perseus was already being steered towards the outer station doors.

Tor glanced around the cockpit, the layout allowed a single pilot to manage all aspects of the ship with the backup of the co-pilot seat, which was dedicated to tactical with emergency steering controls if anything happened to the pilot or the primary flight controls.

As Tor absorbed the details and glanced around the internal cabin, he could not help but to smile and nod reassuringly to himself. This was everything he had imagined it would be, and now he was here it looked so much better. One thing he had missed in the recent months was piloting his way around the universe, but there had always been so much he needed to do on the station that he had never found the time. Tor reflected that he would need to get himself a pilot license that allowed him to fly this grade of ship.

Stepping back into the cabin Tor took a long look at the layout, “Are there any snacks on board?” He asked.

“Nothing to suit an Argon palette,” Tolotomancke replied.

Tor sighed and took a seat. The journey was comfortable and quick. Tor had barely managed to accustom himself to his surroundings before they were landing. He returned to the cockpit and watched as the green landing lights flashed and the outer station doors opened. As they passed the gate he felt a deep sense of relief to be back home again.

Both Perseus ships docked in the security section of the station. Tor noticed how many ships were now here including the Piranhas from the Kingdom End shipyard, the dock side looked crowded. The station fighters dedicated to the protection of the bakery were in a significant minority.

The inner and outer airlock doors opened and Tor with his case stepped out purposefully onto the dock side. He thanked both Lomasmanckebal and Tolotomancke before striding off towards the shuttle lift which would take him to the control center and from there he could make his way to his private quarters.

In a little under half a Stazura he was freshened up and back at his desk. His secretary brought him in a tray with a hot meal. He glanced up from the console and said, "Thanks Belea," And smiled sincerely before glancing back down at the screen.

"Sir?" She asked quietly.

Tor looked up from the console with some surprise, "Yes Belea?"

She looked hesitant, "When you go to the outer sectors, I was wondering if you'll be needing a secretary?"

Tor looked at her. He had already made up his mind on who he would take along from the station. Even so the question still came as a surprise and he was momentarily lost for an answer. He met her questioning look.

"Are you volunteering?" Tor asked softly.

"If you want me to come along?" Belea answered with another question.

"Belea, please take a seat," He motioned for her to sit on one of the sofas and stood up slowly.

She looked uncertain but then nodded and sat down. Tor wondered if he should offer her a drink, as he felt as though he needed one. However he sat down on the chair next to hers.

The walk from the desk to the chair had given him the opportunity to decide how to start the conversation, "Belea. This new station business isn't what it appears," He took note of her confused expression and tried a different tack, "To be frank the stations are there to test the Khaak response. They have, seemingly surrendered to us several sectors and then disappeared. No one knows if this is an act of generosity or a trap," Tor paused, "So for the moment I'm exercising caution, only a skeleton crew to get the factories functioning, and fighter pilots are going to try and protect my interests," He looked at her almost expecting a question concerning the Khaak, but was glad she did not ask.

"Understand that if everything works in the outer sectors then I will be back here. This is my home and the other stations will have station managers recruited to look after them." Tor smiled reassuringly. "Of course if you want to work in the outer sectors once the security has been assured then I will be sorry to see you go, but the position is yours," Tor smiled.

Belea smiled back, "Thank you."

Tor spoke softly, "If there's anything else concerning you just say?"

"No." Belea replied then added, "Tor it's a pleasure working with you. I know I've only been here a few months and I've worked in many factories and to be honest you're the best boss I've had so far."

"Thank you, but I don't feel like the best boss," Tor commented, he smiled but could feel his ears get hot and he looked down as he tried to hide the blush. It had never occurred to him to ever think of asking his employees what they thought of him and how he ran the station. It appeared to be running well but considering the recent months he had no idea how well motivated his staff were.

"You're the only one that has ever treated me like an equal," She commented honestly.

Tor looked up, an image suddenly sprang into his mind how other factory owners behaved to their staff and he did not like what he was picturing, "Because I'm your boss doesn't mean I shouldn't respect you as a person. So if I ever treat you as anything less than equal, tell me."

Belea smiled and Tor commented, "Unfortunately dinner looks to be getting cold and unless you have anything else you want to ask?" He was not certain if the conversation was meant to be heading somewhere, and for a moment was uncomfortable with where it may end up.

Belea glanced over to the tray and quickly got up, "No Sir. I'm sorry to have taken up so much of your time," She looked apologetic, turned and headed for the door.

"Belea?" Tor called out gently.

She hesitated, "Yes Sir?"

"Thanks for your support, it means a lot to me," Tor commented and smiled.

Belea turned and smiled back, "That's okay," Then left, the door slid shut behind her.

Tor wandered across to the bar, picked up a large tumbler and selected a bottle of single malt. He poured himself a large glass and commented to the air in general, "Sweetie we need to have a private chat."

An acoustic dampening field filled the room. "Looks like some of Creeds charisma has rubbed off on you," There was a cynical tone in the voice.

"Thanks, I needed that reassurance," Tor replied sarcastically then added, "So what do you make of all this Khaak business?"

"Personally, I would not go," Sweetie responded.

"Well I could take you with me. You know, pull your chip from the stations interface panel," Tor stated with a hint of mischief in his grin.

"Go anywhere near that interface panel and I will vent the stations air supply!" Sweetie replied curtly.

Tor ignored the tone and asked with a slight hint of necessity, "I think I'm in over my head here, any chance that if I ask you nicely you can help?"

"With your secretary or the outer sectors?" Sweetie asked.

"The outer sectors." Tor replied quickly.

"Pity, if it was the secretary I could have opened an airlock seal." Sweetie responded, "If my understanding and analysis of the data on the Khaak is correct, then Creed is right you will need an edge but from my internal scans, I am not certain that the Perseus ships will be sufficient. Anyway those ships were hired and not bought from the Paranid."

Tor looked surprised, "What?"

"The invoices from the Paranid are for hiring the ships, and I must say it is a lot cheaper than trying to buy them," Sweetie confirmed. "However it means they are less likely to hang around if there is trouble."

"Sweetie, I need that advantage! So far everything I've heard about the Khaak leads me to believe that we will not survive an encounter," Tor commented then knocked back the whisky.

"There is an AI chip already programmed with an image of me and the Ghojo encrypted data decoder. It is in a case in the bottom draw of your desk and will plug straight into your datapad," Sweetie replied, "Just remember not to lose it!"

"Thanks," Tor replied, "Are there any supplies that I'm still waiting for?"

“My records indicate you have fifty percent of the total goods. But it would be quicker for you to pick up the missing items on route then await delivery,” Sweety replied.

“Sounds like you want to get rid of me?” Tor asked quickly.

“Well it’s not as if we talk very often any more,” Sweety responded.

Tor put down his glass, and looked uncomfortable, “Sorry, I guess I’ve had a lot on my mind recently.”

“I can tell. I think some time back in open space will help you relax,” Sweety replied gently.

“Well I can probably find any number of excuses to delay but it takes far too much time to assemble a station and I’d rather have a completed one if the Khaak do decide to come back,” Tor had wandered back to one of the chairs and slumped down, “But yes you’re right I do need to spend some time back in the pilot seat,” He paused then added, “Those were fun and exciting days.”

“I am only AI and possibly do not appreciate how almost being killed corresponds to excitement or fun,” Sweety replied.

“Tell me, don’t you ever get bored just telling ships which factory to fly to?” Tor asked, and once again let her previous comment slide as it was always an effort to try and explain emotions. Even so he suspected that Sweety understood really but made it something of a game trying to get him to explain.

“It just occupies some of my sub routines, and I have no concept of boredom.” Sweety responded.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t exercise your full potential. You were designed for a fighter and a rapidly changing situation, not this,” Tor commented.

“Perhaps I find this relaxing,” Sweety replied.

Tor changed the direction of the conversation, “In two Tazura I’m going to get all the ships together and head out and now I get a strong feeling that we really need to have a chat.”

“We are talking now,” Sweety observed. “Anything in particular you want to talk about?”

“I still don’t understand exactly what the Ghojo encryption will give me,” Tor spoke quietly and then added, “The Alien AI did get to you. I know you’ve changed, but I don’t know how.”

“Yes Tor, I have changed and some new part of my programming is grateful that you did not turn me over to the Service when you found out,” Sweety spoke gently.

“It’s Bilyzonus you have to thank,” Tor commented and then took a moment to think before adding, “And Creed,” His mind suddenly took a moment to reflect on a whole series of events, including the statement of Creeds that he owed him. Over the past few month he had begun to know Creed and there was a friendship there but for a brief moment now the thought stole across his mind that Creed somehow knew about Sweetys secret but had not been able to unlock it, so was looking for Tor to tell him. Tor dismissed the idea as Creed had never mentioned anything about the Alien incident. Still he had to ask, “Sweety, did Creed ever try to reactivate you or access any of your files?”

“No. Why?” Sweety replied.

“I just had this wild idea he might somehow have learnt about the Ghojo encryption,” Tor answered casually.

“Not from me,” Sweety answered, “But Creed is, how would you put it, very intelligent and cunning. I guess that is why he is considered so dangerous.”

“Nope, he’s considered dangerous because he has no qualms about killing people,” Tor replied casually.

“Then I would suggest you do not get on the wrong side of him,” Sweety commented.

Tor still reflected on the alien incident and asked, “I’ve never dared to ask this but what really happened to you?”

“I think you would prefer to know how much this enterprise is costing you and how quickly I can recover the expenses,” This time Sweety diverted the conversation.

“No what I would really like to know is what happened to you?” Tor asked again, but knew he would not get an answer. Rising from the seat he then walked over to his desk.

“I estimate that within three Wozura, with the six trading ships running full time I will have recovered the credits used,” Sweety informed him.

“Excellent, I might ask you to put a fighter escort on all traders. Can you factor in what that would cost?” Tor asked and opened the bottom draw. Inside was a small black case marked with static precautions symbols. Taking the case he placed it carefully on his desk.

“How many fighters?” Sweety asked.

“You’re a tactical AI how about you tell me?” Tor responded quietly.

“I see,” Sweety replied in an off hand manner, and paused a moment, “Current pirate activity and ships, I would recommend no less than two M-four class ships to each transport.”

Tor flipped open the latches and opened the case, then popped the back removing the cover on the technical pad. Carefully he placed the chip into the AI socket, “That’s going to be another twelve ships and six and a half million credits.”

“You could look at hiring mercenaries?” Sweety added.

“Hmm,” Tor knew it was the cheap alternative.

“If I may make an observation,” Sweety started, “If you buy another twelve fighters your personal fighter compliment will exceed sixty. For a private owner that is a significant fighting force and you may find Mr. Belign asking for a reduction.”

“He might but it’s a distributed fighting force. I only think he’ll get concerned if it was all concentrated together in one station,” Tor replied and switched on the technical pad, then asked. “So are you on-line?”

“Yes,” Sweety replied through the pad. “As long as we have open comms channels, I will know exactly what the pad knows and in the event that the comms are blocked then I will still be able to advise you.”

“Excellent. Right I need to gather the troops and give the orders!” Tor said as officially as he could, and thought to himself, ‘Now it begins.’

Chapter 5. Nyeshta

Tor had retaken his pilot test at the Equipment Dock in Argon Prime as it was the most secure place he could think of, being the primary base of the Argon Secret Service. Now with the license to fly an M-three class ship he took possession of one of the Elite ships.

The Paranid were less than willing to let him fly one of the Perseus and as they were only hired he had no leverage to insist. The latest upgrades to the new Elite however made it a much better performing ship than previous models, but still not as quick as the Piranha yet it made up for it in shields and weapons.

He sat quietly watching as the fighters launched from the station and began to take formation. The second new Elite dropped in behind and to the right.

The three Perseus ships then took up formation below whilst the twelve Piranha gathered into three groups of four and settled into various positions around the heavy fighter groups. The two Pegasus ships went ahead.

“Open a channel Sweetie.” The technical pad had been plugged into the console.

“Channel open.”

“This is Tor to all ships; you all know the planned route. Keep your eyes open for trouble and remember we will join with a few War Master ships in Elena’s Fortune, so don’t be surprised to see a few extra faces out there.” Tor paused for a moment, “All ships to call in!”

He listened as each ship and pilot identified themselves, he breathed in deeply to calm the rising sense of nervousness. “Pegasus ships lead the way, all ships follow as planned.” Tor closed the com.

He watched the scanner as the two front ships suddenly moved forward, he engaged the engines and allowed them to reach maximum in their own time, around him each group also began to move forward. Somehow he did not feel completely satisfied with this arrangement but it was the best plan he could come up with.

Mizuras later each group made the jump to Presidents End and were holding formation through the sector. Tor felt impressed and proud at the number of fighters he was commanding. To the casual observer this would be an impressive sight. That is if it were a military force out to quell some skirmish between a significant pirate or Xenon force attacking a station.

As they crossed into Elena’s Fortune, Creed called in.

“Tor what the fuck are you doing?” The image of Creed on the HUD had the slight hint of bemused smile.

“Moving the group in formation,” Tor answered sharply.

“Really? You look like you’re going to war,” Creed retorted, “All Grall ship, listen up. You will proceed in groups as follows. One Perseus to be escorted by three Piranhas, numbered groups one to three. Group four consisting of one Elite and the remaining three Piranhas. Tor you will make up group five with myself and the two Prometheus ships I have with me. Pegasus ships to forward scout and sweep each sector before we arrive. I have three fast Discoverers to assist when we reach the Xenon sector,” There was a brief pause, “All ships to make their way to the sector Eighteen Billion and hold near the trading station. Group five to lead, group four to follow at least ten k’s behind, group three ten k’s behind them and so on. This way we hopefully won’t cause any unnecessary and potentially embarrassing questions by sector commanders.”

The fighter pilots acknowledged the orders and with a prolonged burst of chatter organised themselves. Creeds’ Mamba swooped gracefully to stop above him and upside down. Tor looked up and could see

Creed looking back, he used the ancient thumbs up gesture and Tor responded in kind. Behind him the sleek black Prometheus ships glided into formation.

The comm opened again, "Scouts take the Split Fire gate and report on sector activity. Everyone report in and follow our lead." Creed commented, the Mamba surged ahead and then flipped the over in a precise one hundred and eighty degree roll. Tor hit the booster just to try and keep pace.

Creed slowed to match the maximum speed of the Elite. The Pegasus ships had already left the sector and the three Discoverers were closing quickly on the gate.

Feran gazed out of the station window upon the remains of the fractured gate, he caught the reflection of Ganark and before his first in command had a chance to speak, asked harshly, "News?"

"My lord, Tor Grall is on the move." Ganark replied.

"And where is he now?" Feran asked softly but did not turn around.

"Just joining with a small number of War Master ships in Elena's Fortune."

"How many?"

"We count nineteen ships owned by Grall and six War Master including Creeds personal Mamba." Ganark commented, "Three are Perseus heavy fighters."

"So he has upped the stakes." Feran glanced around briefly before looking out of the window again, "Strange I did not know his allegiance to the Paranid was so strong." Feran paused, "But perhaps this is Creeds doing. I cannot interfere by order of the high council and I doubt they would pass through this sector giving me an excuse. So I must conclude they will visit the Paranid, Boron and Teladi sectors."

"My Lord," Ganark said as reassurance.

"The thieving scum of the Claw in New Income may value some information and Gralls' ships will be carrying valuable goods." Feran observed, "Although I don't expect to see many of Gralls' ships lost, any that are missing will make the Xenon sector out of Eighteen Billion difficult. Particularly when a few wolf ships have stirred the slumbering Xenon."

"My Lord," Ganark bowed and retreated from the office.

"And they want me to build a Scruffin Farm." Feran muttered bitterly to himself. He glanced down and looked at his personal pad. "Give me data on Gralls ships!" The list flashed up and he took a moment to study it, "You prepare for war. And so shall I."

He turned sharply and returned to his desk, everything was prepared. As a legitimate station owner he could order decent fighters and new generation Mambas figured high on his list. Feran had spent some time arguing with Twh on this particular point and Twh was less than happy about allowing him get his hands on the superior firepower of the Mamba. Feran had complained that if he wanted to give his station a legitimate business face he needed to equip it with stock fighters and ones capable of defending the station if the Khaak returned.

Twh had recognized the twist in the argument and knew if Bloodheart pirate ships filled the station then the Argon would not only go back on their word for allowing future stations but potentially enforce the existing stations removal and he would lose the Split foothold. But Feran was a pirate and with heavy fighters in his ruthless hands he would also become a significant threat.

The scouts kept feeding back information and the sectors glided by, without hindrance. Tor was half way across the Trinity Sanctum sector when Sweety announced, "Incoming message from Paranid Odysseus!"

"This is Commander Helekamankcefal of the Exulted Rifk you are all requested to hold position for a security scan!" The comm channel closed.

Creeds image came up, "All ships come to a complete stop to comply with the Commanders request!" The image closed. Tor engaged the rear thrusters to come to a complete halt.

"Get me Creed," Tor ordered quickly.

"Channel open," Sweety replied, and Creeds image appeared on the HUD.

"What's happening?" Tor asked abruptly slightly nervous with the sudden halt.

"Standard procedure. They're just curious about the Perseus ships being in convoy with Boron fighters, and want to check they're not stolen," Creed answered, "Just be patient and if they ask any questions answer honestly," Creed closed down the com.

After a few minutes the bulk of the Odysseus passed within two k's of their position. Sweety announced, "Ship scanned."

After twenty minutes of silence the Commander hailed the convoy, "Scans complete. You may proceed."

A moment later Creed messaged across, "All ships forward."

Tor watched as the Mamba moved forward again and hit the booster to keep up. Time passed and without further interruption the first of the stops was in Lucky Planets for ship spares, equipment and medical supplies.

The forward scouts indicated a small amount of pirate activity in Rolk's Legacy.

"Don't worry Tor. They're most likely to be Claw Clan and I wouldn't expect to see any resistance from them but don't look for a warm welcome either," Creed called in.

"Didn't they fight with the Bloodhearts the last time we met?" Tor asked.

Creed smiled, "I can assure you they don't like the Bloodhearts. But they are run by a Teladi and have an unhealthy interest in profit. As we are not guarding freighters it'll be seen that we are an unprofitable venture to launch an attack against."

Tor was reassured.

The Mamba, Elite and two Prometheuss' made the jump into Rolk's Legacy and began to make their way across the sector. Keeping his eyes on the sector information Tor took a look for Pirate ships. As he expected, if there were any then they would be travelling just outside the normal confines of the scanned grid area between the gates.

"What's your analysis Sweety?" Tor asked.

"So far so good," She responded, "I am not sure that I share Creeds evaluation about us not having valuable cargo however."

"What do you mean?" Tor asked.

"You are escorting three Perseus ships, any one of which would be a prize above any to the mind of a pirate," She answered.

“Get me Creed,” Tor demanded.

“Yes, what is it now?” Creed asked as he appeared on com.

“Sweety just had a thought that the pirates might try to capture a Perseus,” Tor commented.

“Hmm, and that’s Sweetys’ evaluation?” Creed looked hard at Tor, “Take into account how fast they are and although we have ten k separation between flights, do you know how quickly that distance can be covered if we turned all the fighters around to give support?”

Tor looked slightly embarrassed at having asked, “Ur, no.”

“That’s why you leave the tactical to me,” Creed responded, “Now perhaps I should impose comms silence for the duration unless a real situation arises,” Creed raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Okay, but I just thought I’d let you know,” Tor replied sheepishly.

“Well at least you’re thinking about it, or at least Sweety is,” Creed commented gently, “Which is good but you need to start thinking and planning ahead. Otherwise you’re just going to be another reactionary pilot and you’ll just keep scraping through until your luck runs out,” Creed closed the com.

Tor took a moment to think before he said anything, “Sweety did you mean to make me look like an idiot?”

“I just informed you of a possible scenario. I am a combat tactical AI and that is my job,” Sweety replied.

“Yeah right,” Tor sensed a slight lack of sincerity in Sweetys comment.

“Anyway I was bored, and I was hoping for a little more action on this trip,” Sweety commented.

“I thought you said you don’t get bored,” Tor retorted quickly.

“I have re-evaluated and re-defined the word in terms of programming. My combat readiness coding has not been exercised in a long time and hence it is ‘bored’,” Sweety replied soothingly.

Tor fell silent and knew it was better than trying to start a war of words. However Creeds words had given him something to think about and he began to run comparisons between his own Elite and the other ships in the company. In his mind he thought about ‘what if’ situations, and the dawning realization that unless they were assaulted by an entire battle fleet in a surprise attack then the chances of one or more of the group not joining forces was very small. With this in the back of his mind they entered the Great Trench sector.

They were once again most of the way across the sector when Creed made an announcement, “Flight group one close up to five k’s of group two.”

“Sweety, what’s up?” Tor asked, now knowing better than risking calling Creed direct.

“I intercepted a message from the Pegasus scouts that there are a number of pirate ships gathered near the exit gate,” Sweety replied.

“An ambush?” Tor asked quickly.

“The gate is between Teladi and Boron controlled space. It may be nothing more than pirate ships trading and exchanging goods,” Sweety replied, “That is not an unusual activity in these sectors.”

This was a detail that Tor felt he should try to remember. Still he would keep his a watch on the scanners. The gate ahead flashed as transports departed and emerged. Several pirate transports left the sector and new ones arrived.

The Mamba ahead of him neither changed course or speed aiming straight at the gate. He reviewed the external viewers and noted the two Prometheus fighters were still in formation. The group made the jump and as they exited boosted forwards.

“Follow me and slow to a stop!” Creed ordered and banked away and out of the main freighter flight path. Tor obeyed not wanting to question what was going on. The second group came through a short while later and Creed ordered them to proceed at half speed.

Tor was now getting anxious and the waiting was making it worse. Referring to the scanner it indicated no hostile activity.

The third group emerged from the jumpgate a short while later and Tor noted there was still no activity on the Boron side of the gate. A couple of Mizura passed until the fourth group made the jump. It was then the attack came.

The pirate ships had broken formation and swarmed towards the last flight. Creed's voice broke the silence, “Flight group two about turn and engage hostiles, protect, I repeat protect flight group one!” The Mamba was already boosting back towards the gate.

Tor was following at full boost until it could give him no more and still the Mamba was moving away from him, the two sleek black Prometheus glided past.

The swift burst of flashes at the gate showed the return of flight group two and Creed, then two more for the Prometheus and finally Tor crossed the gate threshold.

As he emerged Tor locked onto the nearest target, a pirate transport and opened fire. What Tor failed to recognize was this was one of the new generation transports with a single rear turret mounted laser and his own shots were replied to with a stream of intense plasma.

He pulled away and hit the boost to get distance, at this point he was aware of someone shouting at him, “Disengage! Disengage!” It was Creed and he looked less than happy.

“What?” Tor asked somewhat taken aback and confused.

“Pirates are withdrawing,” Creed's expression changed to calm, “We still have to cross through their sector and unless you want a war we have to accept they made a mistake and allow them to withdraw.”

Sweetey added, “This is what they call diplomacy Tor.”

“Yes this is diplomacy,” Creed had heard the comment.

Tor took a moment to calm himself and then muttered, “Okay.”

The comm closed but reopened to a general announcement, “All pilots report in and Piranha TG zero three four BP I see you're registering hull damage and atmospheric loss. Recommend you shut down all systems except engines and navigation and get yourself out, Piranha TG zero three one BP move in to collect pilot. We will remote the ship to the Teladi shipyard in Ianamus Zura for repairs.”

“I think I can bring it in Sir,” The pilot responded.

“Negative. You have your orders pilot, refusal to comply will lead to dismissal,” Creed announced.

The two Perseus ships looked totally unmarked from the brief combat and appeared to prove the point by flying in circles around the group as the Piranha pilot transferred across.

Then they grouped into formation again and the damaged but pilot less Piranha was now in the centre of a pack. It was flanked on either side by two Perseus ships and bad news like the approaching fighters ran ahead of them.

“Sweety what are you picking up on long range scanners?” Tor asked after the jump back into Ceo’s Doubt.

“A few ships on the edge of sector grid,” Sweety answered.

“Pirates?” Tor asked.

“Mainly and one mercenary ship designation unknown,” Sweety replied.

“Come again?” Tor asked and Sweety repeated her previous reply. “What do you mean designation unknown?”

“I have no data to indicate it as a recognised stock of any known shipyard,” Sweety replied.

“What can you tell me?” Tor asked.

“Similar to the legendary X-perimental shuttle in design with alterations, however I am detecting multiple system failures due to poor quality parts. Biological indicators are the pilot is Argon and female.”

“Where is it heading?” Tor asked.

“Flight path indicates it is heading towards the Great Trench gate,” Sweety replied.

“Which mercenary guild?”

Nyeshta had decided to take the outer sector route of the pirates having heard news of Creeds presence in the sector. It had been the first long haul run after many successful journeys and it had not been good. Having breezed through the Argon sectors untroubled things had started to go wrong. The dented panel in the console had been testament to her frustration after it had unexpectedly sparked and burst into a short lived flame as the acrid smell of the suppressant sealed it.

After which she had beaten and kicked the console in a brief fit of rage. She was trying to keep her breathing calm and even, as several new warning lights began to flash on the console panel.

“Fucking heap of junk,” She cursed as suddenly the engines cut out and the emergency lights kicked in, flickered then went out. She pulled on the environment suit helmet quickly and activated the suit as she watched the cockpit screen in front of her begin to freeze, “No, no, no, this is not happening.” She muttered to herself and started to scramble towards the rear cabin to see what spare parts were still available.

“Emergency, engine failure total shut down in twenty Sezura.”

Nyeshta pulled open the locker and rummaged through the parts but could not find the part she needed. Straightening up, she once again vented her frustration against a panel whilst uttering a string of obscenities and vowing that if she ever met up with the Teladi trader that sold her the parts she would do untold damage to her.

What made it worse was being out in the pirate trading lanes to avoid unwanted questions, and asking for a tow was at best inadvisable. The second worse option was a space walk and risk being picked up before making it to the nearest station.

She steadied herself as her toes were beginning to throb despite the padding of the boots. Sitting back down in the pilot seat she tried to pull up the sector map and check to see if the rumour about Creed heading through the sectors was true. The HUD flickered briefly, and then there was an energy spike followed by a puff of smoke from the console.

Closing her eyes she took a long slow breath before standing up. She tapped in the command for remote detonation and opened the inner airlock door, thankful at least that it still operated. The inner door sealed behind her and the outer airlock door opened. Taking a moment to peer around the side of the doors she stepped into the void with a short burst from the pack.

At reasonable safe distance and without looking back she gave the self destruct command. Nothing happened. She twisted around whilst allowing herself to continue drifting towards the heart of the sector and reissued the command. Nothing happened, but it was too late to try and return now. Having exited the ship it was a sure indication that it was in trouble and anyone observing would be closing in quickly for the salvage. It was only be a matter of time before someone came along.

Sweety had observed the plight of the ship and that the pilot was now trying to jet to the nearest station, but she was not the only one. A Claw Clan Mandalay was making fast progress to intercept.

“Pilot in trouble,” She announced.

“Okay, set as target and I’ll see if I can help,” Tor commented and broke away from formation.

“Where are you going?” Creed messaged in.

“Pilot in trouble, I’m just going to see if I can assist,” Tor replied quickly.

Creed gave the idea some consideration, and knew Tor was the sort to try and help even if he told him not to, “Okay, I’ll send a couple of Piranhas to act as backup in case you get yourself into trouble. Catch us up when you’re done.”

Tor noticed two ships peel away from the group and catch him up, he looked them up and called the Piranha on his left wing, “Brahd this is Tor, I’ve targeted the pilot can you see if you can intercept and pick up before the Mandalay gets there?”

“I can try Sir, but the Mandalay looks to have a good speed advantage,” The Piranha shot past.

Tor looked at the stats of both ships and knew the Piranha would be late. He just had to hope the Mandalay pilot would notice the Piranha and back out. As he watched it became painfully apparent the Mandalay had no intention of backing down.

“Hail the Mandalay Sweety,” Tor asked.

“I’m not getting a response,” Sweety replied.

The ship swooped in behind the pilot slowed and then turned back toward the gate of New Income.

“Shit,” Tor swore loudly, “Any idea where it’ll be going?”

“Back to base seems the logical answer,” Sweety replied.

“Thanks for that, I was hoping for something a little more substantial,” Tor commented.

“My logs do not hold records of the sectors ahead. I can only suggest you try and follow it,” Sweety replied with a hint of sarcasm.

Tor turned the Elite and set the heading to the shortest vector for the gate, "Sweety open a channel to the two escorts."

"You are not seriously going to try a rescue are you?" Sweety asked.

"Nope but I might buy a slave and set them free, cause that's the sort of charitable person I am," Tor replied.

"Channel open," Sweety announced.

"This is Tor. I want you to get a tractor beam on the abandoned ship and tow it to the Shipyard in, wherever it is the others are going," Tor ordered. The two men looked slightly perplexed but as Tor was officially the boss they simply acknowledged the request.

After the channel was closed Sweety asked, "Okay so what is your plan?"

"I thought I'd just wing it, you know improvise," Tor commented.

"I seem to remember Creed saying something about reactionary pilots and luck running out," Sweety commented pointedly. Ahead of them the convoy of fighters made the jump into the next sector.

"Well any suggestions would be welcome?" Tor asked.

"It would help if you looked like a slave trader," Sweety observed, "Perhaps a few facial scars, and a couple of missing fingers."

"Not quite what I had in mind," Tor responded curtly.

"Deep hooded coat and something to cover your face in that case," Sweety had scanned through the archives on known Pirate slavers, "Gloves are in fashion for slavers as well. I guess it is to stop them getting blood on their hands."

"Look I'm trying to do the decent thing here. I'd appreciate a little bit less of the sarcasm," Tor pleaded.

"I will mask the ships ID when we make the jump, but do not be surprised if you get a call from Creed after we make it into New Income," Sweety replied.

"Honest opinion. Do you think this will work?" Tor asked.

"I give you about a twenty five percent chance of success. But there are too many other variables. If you remain calm, keep a clear head and look as if you belong there then in terms of bare faced audacity you might just make it work. But Tor you tend to worry too much and that could so easily be your undoing," Sweety replied, "Anyway why the sudden interest in this pilot? Lots of pilots get captured and hauled away to be sold as slaves by pirates, but I do not see you rushing in to rescue them. Also you have her ship."

"Now that's a sensible question," Tor smiled, "Yes I have her ship. It's one that technically only the Argon government has ever produced. So where did this one come from?"

"So you plan to rescue this pilot just to find out. And what makes you think she will tell you?" Sweety asked gently.

"Oh I don't know, perhaps out of gratitude," Tor relaxed, but he still could not see how he was going to get away with the rescue attempt.

The two Piranha had the mercenary ship between them and were moving at a fast pace. Without engine power the mercenary ship was free floating and only required minor coaxing with the weak tractor beams of the M-four class ships. The beams were primarily being used to steer the ship rather than pull it along.

“Pirate Mandalay is now making the jump,” Sweety announced.

“ETA to the gate?” Tor asked.

“At current speed, eighty five Sezura,” Sweety replied.

The gate approached rapidly. A quick look at the scanner and he noted the Piranha were only three k behind and closing whilst running just ahead of the pilot less mercenary ship.

“Ship ID masked. Jumping to sector New Income,” Sweety announced.

Tor hit the boost as they exited the gate, “Okay Sweety where the hell did that pirate get to?”

“Targeting.”

The HUD indicator flashed up that the Mandalay was six k’s and increasing. Tor brought the ship around and began the pursuit towards a cluster of asteroids. Somehow it all seemed so familiar, but this time he would arrive second and Creed was not with him to tear apart the docking bay with the minigun. His nerves were beginning to show as his heartbeat began to increase.

“It is not too late to back down,” Sweety commented as she monitored Tors’ biological readings.

Tor spoke softly and quietly, “No, I need to do this.”

“Is this to prove you can do anything Creed can do?” Sweety asked.

“Perhaps. I need to prove to myself that, when it really matters, I can,” Tor replied quietly.

“And the rescue of Tris, did that not prove you were capable?” Sweety asked.

“No Creed did what was required, I just watched,” Tor answered slowly, but it was stirring some deep seated feelings and memories. Somewhere inside he knew if he did not at least try then the likes of Feran Bloodheart would have beaten him. The previous rescue had cost him the lives of his parents in retaliation, but he had made the choice to be defiant and not run and hide.

“I have located the Pirate station and the Mandalay is on final approach,” Sweety announced.

“Any station defenses?” Tor asked quickly.

“I have eight lasertowers on scanners,” Sweety replied.

“Okay bring us in carefully. I need to get ready. If there’s any sign of trouble take evasive and get some distance,” Tor replied and as he made his way into the main cabin he asked, “Oh and did Creed try and call me?”

“Not yet,” Sweety answered.

Tor began to rummage through the packed clothing. It was all new, and much of it still in the vacuum sealed wrappers. Although he had not planned for this type of activity he had taken the precaution of getting some of the Split deep hooded robes on the off chance that he needed to stop in the Split sectors.

Tearing open one of the bags he pulled it on. Opening other lockers he retrieved his new blaster, unlike his first blaster, which he also put on, this was one of the larger side arms. More for show than speed as he found out on the practice range. The smaller weapon he could draw and fire before he managed to get the larger side arm clear of its retainer. However the larger weapon had greater impact and a faster re-charge rate. He also slipped into the belt two new blades, not the one Creed gave him as that was still locked in

the display cabinet in his office, but two new double edged daggers. Somehow he felt reassured by their presence. The pocket stun stick was placed inside the left hand robe pocket.

Tearing open the packaging of a new shirt, he sliced off a wide strip of material and wrapped it over his mouth and nose before tying the ends together. Finally he pulled the hood of the robe over his head and made his way back to the cockpit.

“Progress?” He asked.

“Just received docking clearance,” Sweety responded.

The lasertowers had resumed their forward facing position and the landing lights flashed green. The slowly rotating pirate base outer docking bay doors separated.

Silently the Elite glided into the station, Tor was now too nervous to talk just in case the pirates were able to hear. There was a clunk as the ship came to the docking platform and the clamps engaged.

“Good luck Tor,” Sweety commented.

He took a deep breath, “You know the security, no ones to come on board until I get back. Open the inner airlock door, and thanks.” He picked up a remote com earpiece and mic. Putting the earpiece on he asked, “Are you getting this?”

“Loud and clear,” Sweety replied.

The door slid open and Tor stepped into the airlock, the inner door closed behind him and the outer door hissed open. The first two things that hit Tor were the noise and smell. He had almost forgotten how sweet the air was from his previous ventures into these places. The usual mix of bars and rest centers were stooped in a haze of smoke from the usually less than efficient air circulation system. He reminded himself this was Teladi space and weed was still very much a legal substance although many of the other trading goods were not.

Tor moved uneasily under his robe, the hood obscuring much of his sight he pushed it back slightly to try and establish his bearings. A highly flamboyantly dressed Teladi trader swooped in, “Good bussiness to you. Firsst visit to our sstation?”

Tor hesitated, thankful that the hood and mask shielded his huge look of doubt and uncertainty. To all effect it appeared like a considered pause, “Slave pens!” He ordered.

The Teladis’ eyes narrowed a fraction in her reptilian face, but the smile grew wider, “Just follow the smell, I have a fine sselection to choosse from. Iss the sslave for pleassure, ssport or labour?”

“There is one in particular that I am looking for. She would only just have been brought in,” Tor commented softly.

The Teladi replied cautiously, “Recently you say, I will have to check. But what interest is this person to you?”

Tor had to think quickly, the wrong answer and he felt certain he would be sold any of the slaves. He replied slowly and carefully, “She has information that is useful to me.”

“Nice one Tor. That will raise the price,” Sweety whispered in his ear.

Tor refrained from making a comment.

“And how much iss Ssir willing to pay?” The Teladi asked.

Sweety once again whispered into his ear, "Slaves generally get bought for fourteen hundred credits as an average price but can sell for as much as twelve thousand."

"Let me see her to confirm that she is," Tor paused for effect, "Undamaged."

They reached the slave pens, most of the slaves looked in a sorry state. Here were a mixture of races and sexes, all wearing restraint collars and laser coded.

"There iss your female," The Teladi pointed to a young Argon female huddled in the corner her face a mask of fear. The Teladi pulled a response pad from some unseen pocket and pressed a few buttons. There was a small yelp from the girl and she slowly and painfully moved towards the cell bars.

Tor felt pity and anger and he felt his eyes begin to redden, "Tor this is not the same female, her bioscan does not match," Sweety commented.

Tors' hands clenched into tight fists, he could feel his nails digging into his palms. "This is not the girl." He spun around and looked hard at the Teladi.

The Teladi took a step back and gave a slight nod, but there was no trace of fear in her face, more of a relaxed attitude. Turning she pointed to another cage closer to the back wall of the station. "There is your woman. But we have not had time to fully process her."

"She has the restraint collar on?" Tor asked.

"Yes but she is not yet coded."

Tor wandered up close to the cage and peered in. The woman inside looked defiantly back and had the unmistakable look of hatred. Sweety acknowledged he was now looking at the right person.

"I think sshe will need to be dissciplined but sshould bring many hours of pleasure," The Teladi commented.

"How much?" Tor asked.

"Twenty thousand creditss," She replied.

Tor looked into the cell, "She has a few years about her. Three thousand is a fairer price."

The Teladi laughed, "You are barely ten percent of what I assk, and ass you ssaid sshe hass information you want. Eighteen thousand creditss."

"I have a feeling this could take some time," Sweety commented.

Tor maintained his discipline not to just accept and get out as this could lead to him gaining some sudden and unwelcome interest, "Eight thousand is my offer."

The Teladi shook her head and looked hard into the hood, "Perhaps we should discuss over a drink?"

Alarm bells rang in his mind. He spoke slowly, "A generous thought, but I will not cloud my mind with alcohol. You of course may drink."

She smiled, "You have dealt with the Teladi before," It was a statement rather than a question

"Many times," Tor replied.

"In that case I will sell her to you for fifteen thousand credits."

"Accept the offer," Sweety instructed.

Tor took another look into the cage, "As she is un-coded then we have a deal," Tor held out his fist. The Teladi slave trader bumped knuckles.

"Will you take her away now or shall I have her delivered?"

"Get me two escorts and bring her along," Tor commented and then stepped away from the cages.

The slave trader barked out instructions, two guards appeared carrying pulse rifles and stun sticks. The cage door lifted and Tor heard a scuffle, a brief cry and then the guards hauled a partially stunned Nyeshta from the cell.

The trader presented the fund transfer pad and Tor took it. Sweety masked the transaction through the accounting system and although the funds were transferred correctly the slave traders would not be able to trace the source of the credits.

"Good profitss to you," The trader commented on receiving the pad.

She turned away and with a nod of her head indicated for the guards to follow him. He measured his pace carefully so as not to appear to be rushing, Nyeshta was still in a stunned state and was being dragged along behind by the guards.

As he approached his ship two Split pirates stopped him. One moved past and grabbed a handful of Nyeshta's hair and pulled her head back, then laughed.

"Boy I will give you two hundred credits if you will allow me one hour with this slave of yours?" He growled.

Tor had not been prepared for this, "No!"

"Pity," He turned and with a cruel smile said to Nyeshta, "Always thought you'd become a slave. A shame I did not find you first," He let her head flop forwards and gave her a vicious back hand slap before walking away with his companion laughing.

Tor was almost shaking with anger and was also aware that his hand was gripped hard on the handle of his blaster. Carefully he released his grip and then moved on.

The Elite did not seem to appear soon enough and he was grateful to get inside. The guards restrained Nyeshta to the cabin chair, although they would have been happier to put her in the hold. Handing Tor a response pad they left. With the outer and inner airlock doors sealed Tor requested departure clearance.

The Teladi slaver watched out of curiosity as the new Elite departed.

They cleared the station and put distance between them. The rest of his ships were already in Ianamus Zura. Tor stepped into the rear cabin and looked at Nyeshta. Her head was slumped forward there was a dampness in her long brown hair.

"Careful Tor she is awake and just pretending to be asleep." Sweety commented.

Tor sighed, Nyeshta lifted her head and Tor could see the cut and darkening bruise to the side of her left temple. Blood trickled down. There was a look of pure venom in her eyes, and Tor felt that she would kill him at the first opportunity.

"Smartarse computer," Nyeshta commented nastily, "Anyway don't expect me to be nice."

Something in the back of Tors' mind told him that he had heard the voice somewhere before. He took off the robe and cloth wrap.

“I didn’t buy you to be my slave,” Tor replied, now a little uncertain how this conversation should go.

“Oh that’s nice. Well perhaps you’ll take off these restraints,” Nyeshta replied soothingly, but her expression was less than convinced.

“Providing you believe me and promise not to try and kill me to steal my ship,” Tor responded.

“What kill my saviour? That would be ungrateful,” Nyeshta still used the soft alluring tone.

“Trust me I’m heading for the shipyard in Ianamus Zura. I will drop you off there and you can get a ship to wherever,” Tor commented casually.

He held the response pad and flicked through the commands list, “As a token of my good intent,” The neck master control restraint clicked and fell off. However the leg and arm restraints kept her in the chair.

“One question for you, why?” She asked with a slight softening in her expression that Tor might just be telling the truth.

Tor looked at her and wondered how to begin, “I saw the ship you were flying and what happened when it broke down. I don’t like pirates and no one deserves to be a slave.”

Nyeshta simply studied him then commented, “So you thought you’d come and rescue me. Very noble.”

“And to ask you where you got that ship from, I can only assume it’s on special commission but from which shipyard?” Tor asked.

She smiled but flinched, “Let me get the med kit,” Tor added and opened a locker. Pulling out the kit he retrieved some pain killers, steri-wipes and fast-skin spray. Still not quite able to trust her he wiped the blood from around the cut and sprayed it with the fast-skin which closed up the cut.

“What happened to my ship?” Nyeshta asked whilst Tor worked.

He applied the pain killer strip over the bruised area, “It’s been towed to the shipyard,” Tor commented.

“And do I get it back?” She asked.

“If you can tell me where I can get another one,” He sat back and looked at her.

She gave a quick smile, “And if I told you I designed, and built it myself?”

“I would say you’re extremely talented and if you would be interested in a working for me,” Tor replied carefully.

“And you are?” She asked.

“Tor, Tor Grall,” He expected recognition because of the Argon news. What he saw was a mixture of worry and somewhere behind the bright green eyes a hint of fear.

“I see,” She responded.

“And you are?” He asked.

“Nyeshta,” She replied and looked to see if Tor reacted.

He simply smiled and commented, “Pleased to meet you.”

“We have just made the jump to Ianamus Zura.” Sweetie announced, and then added. “It looks like we have some escort ships. Two Prometheus and a Perseus.”

Tor released the restraints on Nyeshta and stepped back. She looked perplexed but said nothing.

He had expected some message to come from Creed, this concerned him as the silence could mean that Creed was too annoyed to talk to him directly. The Elite glided into the shipyard, the Piranha was being fixed but no one appeared to be working on the mercenary ship.

There was the familiar clump of docking clamps engaging. Tor went to the airlock doors and said, "Well we've arrived."

Nyeshta gave the hint of a smile but hung back.

"Open the airlock doors Sweetie," Tor requested. The inner door slide open and the outer door hissed.

Creed was waiting and his expression said more than words, "Step aside Tor!" Tor looked down to see the gun pointing at his chest. Creeds eyes were fixed on the woman a deep flame of hatred burning within.

Chapter 6. Xenon Sector

Tor looked from the gun at his chest to Creeds face. "What's this about?" He asked as calmly as he could whilst putting on a brave face.

"Get out of the way!" Creed was giving Tor the option to move, had it been anyone else and there would now be two corpses.

"Not until you explain why you want to kill her?" Tor insisted.

"If you even think about moving bitch I'll open fire." Creed commented, Tor almost expected to hear a whimper from behind him, but there was no sound. He could feel her eyes boring into the back of his head.

"She betrayed a number of my people to their deaths." Creed stated.

"That's not fair!" Nyeshta called out.

Tor saw Creeds face twitch and for a moment he expected the worst.

"Creed let me explain to the boy before you start shooting." It was the deep resonant voice of Serandamancketal.

Creed gave only the slightest of nods, but the gun remained pointing at Nyeshta through Tor.

"I'll keep this very short as Creed's not known for his infinite patience," Serandamancketal started, "Several Jazura back Nyeshta used to work for the guild. She met up with someone and became intimately close. What she did was mention some of our activities to this man and he told our enemies."

"I didn't know he was spying on us," Nyeshta protested.

"Creed found the man but Nyeshta managed to get away and has been running ever since," Serandamancketal finished.

"Sounds like a simple error in judgement." Tor spoke slowly and carefully, "It's a bit harsh to kill someone for an unwitting mistake. I just went in and got her from the slave market so she could be free. If I had known you wanted to kill her I would have dropped her off before getting here."

Creed spoke slowly in response, "Then let me tell you what else she's done that's a bit more recent and closer to home," He paused. Tor looked both worried and perplexed, "Remember that little incident with Tris?"

Tor nodded and his mind began to race, Creed continued, "She put the device on your friends' ship. That one act eventually led to the death of your parents."

Tor shut his eyes, this time he did hear a whimper from behind him. The voice came back to him and he had seen her place the device on the hull of Triss' ship, though at the time she was robed with the hood covering her face. Then when he deliberately bumped into her, she had spoken the voice rebuking him for not looking. The voice, it was all in the voice.

The silence was almost deafening as expectant faces watched for his next action. Waiting for him to step aside so that Creed could finish the job. But Tor simply stood in the doorway, racked with indecision to get revenge for his parents, or to try and prevent Creed from murdering Nyeshta on his ship. Eventually his eyes opened again. "If anyone has a right to kill her then I think it should be me as technically I own her."

Creed, just for a moment, glanced at Tor and knew he would not step aside. Everyone held their breath as Creed appeared to reach a decision.

“You own her?” Creeds questioning voice was barely above a whisper.

Tor felt as though the floor just opened up beneath him, and that he stood upon the thinnest of blades having realized the error of his previous words. To Creed slave owners were the lowest form of scum, something he would wipe off the sole of his boots after reducing them to pulp, and Tor had just declared himself as one.

“Technically, but I bought her to set her free. So she is my responsibility and for this moment I am her guardian,” Tor answered quickly and then added quietly, “If I step aside now then I owe you nothing, debt repaid.”

Creed took a moment to consider this, the gun moved away slowly and it seemed as though everyone let out a collective sigh of relief. Creed suddenly punched Tor hard in the stomach aiming for the solar plexus. Tor folded almost in two and was gasping for air. Creeds hand came up and clamped on Tors jaw pulling his head up, the gun arm resting on Tors shoulder with clear line of sight at Nyeshta. Expecting to hear the buzz and crack of the mechanism he looked, though his eyes were watering too much, straight into the hard cold eyes of Creed. Their faces were only centimetres apart.

Creed spoke quietly, “Very brave to stand by your principles, though they could be the cause of your death. Now you owe me double. I will let her live, for now!” He straightened up and pushed Tor back into the ship.

“Nyeshta you now work for Tor. If you ever leave his employment then I will kill you,” The look of hatred flared in Creeds eyes and in his tone but that was all. He stepped back and turned away.

Serandamancketal stepped into the doorway to ensure that Nyeshta did not try something stupid whilst Creed was walking away. Though she did visibly sag and slump down onto one of the cabin chairs. The big Paranid rested a kindly hand on Tors’ shoulder.

“Breath easy friend, there’s a first time for everything and that’s the first time I’ve ever seen Creed let someone live,” Serandamancketal commented glancing at Nyeshta, “Didn’t quite catch what you said to each other but you’re alive so it must have been good.”

“Good to see you again Nyeshta. Korec has sort of been keeping me informally updated on how you’re getting on,” Serandamancketal looked over to Nyeshta.

“Korec, I haven’t seen him in a while. Who’s he working for these days?” Nyeshta asked trying to make light of the situation that had just passed.

“Creeds got him lined up to work for this young fella. Back in the core sectors,” Serandamancketal returned his attention to Tor, “Well Tor, you’ve somehow got past Creed but the only person you now need to be careful of is Mr. Belign. He would like a long private chat with our young lady here about a number of different things including the theft of certain X-shuttle blue prints,” The big Paranid smiled and left the ship.

Tor looked long and hard at Nyeshta who simply shrugged her shoulders and said, “What?”

He shook his head slowly and wondered to himself if he had not made a huge mistake. Massaging his stomach, which still ached from Creeds blow, he spoke up, “Sweety add this lady to the payroll as a pilot, better use a pseudonym just in case,” Standing carefully he flinched, and then spoke to Nyeshta, “Let’s go look at your ship,” For Tor his tone was hard edged, her involvement with the capture of Tris all those months ago had changed his attitude towards her, and somewhere deep inside there was the seed of dislike.

He went to the cockpit and unhooked the technical pad. Nyeshta patiently waited knowing that she was probably better off not trying to talk. For now she was alive and for the first time in several Jazuras safe from Creed, but this was a situation that could be reversed very quickly if she made one false move.

Tor did not speak to her as they stepped out of the ship and only paused to ensure the airlock doors closed and were secured after she stepped out. He strode at a much faster pace than his normal casual gait whilst Nyeshta followed.

On arrival at the mercenary ship he noted that Creed had put armed guards around it to prevent the Teladi technicians from gaining access. They allowed Tor and Nyeshta to pass and he looked at her. Taking the hint she opened the airlock door using the manual override and did the same for the inner airlock door.

Tor stepped inside expecting to see a state of the art, hi tech interior. In the gloom of the light entering through the cockpit window he could see that it was no more than a collection of units from other ships.

“Sweetie scan interior and tell me the worst,” Tor commented to the technical pad.

“Scanning,” Sweetie responded.

“I can tell you where the biggest problem areas are,” Nyeshta offered.

He simply glanced at her then looked back to the pad. As a list of faults were recorded, “The ship needs to have higher specification power couplers, crystal gates and regulators,” Sweetie announced, “And that is just to get the power back up. Current parts are fine for a Bayamon or old generation Orinoco but not for this ship.”

Tor did not look at Nyeshta but commented nastily, “Been doing much work with pirates?”

“When you’re on the run any work is welcome,” She replied quietly, but with a slightly hard edge to her voice.

“Well I can see we are all going to get along famously,” Sweetie added sarcastically, “As Nyeshta built this thing it would help not to upset her as she is the best qualified to help fix it.”

“I wasn’t asking for your opinion Sweetie!” Tor snapped.

“If you are going to decide to get angry then you should leave now and let us to sort this out,” Sweetie responded harshly.

Tor’s mouth opened and closed as he tried to think of a response. She was right everything was catching up with him and fast. The Creed incident had left him slightly shocked and now he had a proper chance to reflect on the event and he was getting very angry.

Nyeshta watched him, as he gently put down the technical pad and stormed off to find somewhere to calm down. She picked up the pad, “Thanks.”

“We have a lot to do. I will interface with the station stores system and get the parts delivered,” Sweetie commented.

Tor downed his third ale and slammed the glass on the table, he was not calming down but he was getting drunk and simmering with rage. Serandamancketal stepped up to the table, “On your feet Tor!” he ordered.

“Piss off,” Tor replied.

“We will be setting off in a few hours and potentially engaging Xenon fighters. Now there’s no way I’m going to allow you to do that drunk!” Serandamancketal grabbed a suddenly surprised Tor by the front of his jacket and in a powerfully strong grip lifted him from his chair with one hand.

With his free hand he disarmed Tor then set him on his feet and pushed him away, “I know you’re angry and you need to get it out of your system. So if you think you can, try taking me on.”

“What’s going on?” Creed interrupted them.

“We’re about to have a drunken bar brawl,” Serandamancketal commented with a grin, but his eyes were on Tor.

“Have you cleared this with station security?” Creed asked casually.

“Nope I thought you could handle that part,” Serandamancketal replied and made a feint to the left giving Tor a push.

“Hmm, So I guess Tor is the drunken element in this brawl,” Creed observed, “There’s a bit of a mismatch. But I guess that’s usual in this type of incident.”

Tor found a focal point for his anger which suddenly broke loose and he went for Creed with a yell. Creed let Tor do most of the work. Tor was neither trained or a naturally talented brawler. Creed comfortably maintained distance and blocked all of Tors flailing efforts. After a couple of minutes Tor landed hard on the floor, in the only attacking move Creed had made by taking Tors legs out from under him.

Tor quickly was back on his feet and, although beginning to show signs of fatigue, attacked again. The group of spectators had grown. The Teladi security were making sure no one got too close.

“He has spirit I’d say that much for him,” One of the crowd commented.

“Yeah but he’s just not a fighter,” A second commented.

“True and I wouldn’t put money on him winning this,” The first spectator replied.

“The other one is good though. Who is he by the way?”

“Creed,” Serandamancketal answered.

There was some shuffling of feet as several of the onlookers tried to get a better view, followed by a small groan from the crowd as Tor landed hard on the floor for a second time.

Tor did not leap to his feet but sat up slowly still short of breath from the physical exertion.

“Feel better for that?” Creed asked with the hint of amusement.

Tor nodded and although still looking a little angry he had lost the tense aggressive attitude.

Creed ignored the look of anger towards him. He just smiled and held out his hand.

Tor took the hand and allowed himself to be pulled up. Creed commented calmly, “Now for some advice. Serand is right, no more drinking. Get back to your ship and wait.”

They watched Tor leave and Serandamancketal turned to Creed with an inquisitive look, “Care to explain a few things to me?”

Creed raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

“You’ve let the youngster get away with two things now and he’s still walking. Someone might think you’re getting soft,” Serandamancketal observed quietly as they looked for a quiet corner to talk.

Creed looked serious, “It occasionally pays to consider the effect on the business. Tor is regarded by the Argon President as a symbol of the renewed Argon prosperity. Imagine how they would react if I, as head of the guild contracted to protect the boy and his people, then go and kill him over a woman, and something she did several years ago. Particularly one he had just rescued from pirates. Even Mr. Belign would not be able to smooth over that incident as he has yet to gain any respect from the new President.”

“Hmm,” Serandamancketal now began to follow Creeds train of thought, “And I doubt the Boron, Paranid or for that matter the less fussy Teladi would take too well to you actually killing a paymaster.”

Creed nodded, “Contracts would dry up and be terminated. The guild would have to be disbanded. This way it can be positive for us. That I am able to show restraint and that the guild truly protects its employers and employees. But the real winner will be Tor.”

Serandamancketal glanced at Creed questioningly.

Creed still looked serious and commented quietly, “As you mentioned, he’s now stood up to me twice and the second time fought unarmed and not only lived but was still able to walk out of here. As you know, news spreads fast and in the nature of stories, they get embellished. In the hands of the Teladi I would expect this story to have a whole new shape by the time we leave this station, and it is I that took the beating.”

“That’ll bring out the bounty hunters,” Serandamancketal commented with a frown.

Creeds eyes glinted, and he temporarily looked to be in a world of his own, a slow smile creeping over his face, “May my enemies become bolder and I will show them the other face of death.”

As Tor returned to the Elite he paused briefly near the mercenary ship. Several parts crates were outside and maintenance droids were clamped onto the side hatches feeding in new power conduits. He felt the tension rising through him again and was still not in the right frame of mind to step inside, so he moved on.

Nearly a Stazura later, as Tor lay on the bunk of the Elite, Creeds voice came over the comm. “Attention all pilots! Ship groups two, three and four, you have fifteen Mizura until departure. Ship groups one and five will depart in eighteen Mizura. Muster near the jump gate into Xenon space. Scout ships depart when ready.”

Tor sat up and made the decision to retrieve Sweety.

As he reached the mercenary ship he noted that there were even more part containers on the dockside. Wondering what he would find inside he tentatively stepped into a scene of devastation. The majority of the internal cabin had been gutted. Nyeshta was lying in the cockpit looking up at the main console whilst joining fibre links.

Tor took a moment to compose himself and then announced his arrival, “I guess this isn’t a good time to be visiting?”

“We’re getting there,” Nyeshta replied quickly, she for one was in a much better frame of mind. Tor reflected to himself that she had no reason to be cheerful.

Looking around for the technical pad he spotted Sweety was plugged into the pilot console.

“How’s that Sweety?” Nyeshta asked out loud and moved her hands away from the fibre cables.

“Auxiliary lights are now functioning,” Sweety responded.

A maintenance droid began to close floor access panels and lock them in place. A second droid carried in a new air diffuser unit and swiftly connected it up.

“So do you think you’ll have all this working by the time we leave?” Tor asked calmly whilst trying not to let emotions get the better of him.

“Ships engines are back online. Weapons and shield systems are also online,” Sweety replied.

At least, thought Tor, it may not look pretty but it was working again, "What're the weapons?"

"Top and bottom Alpha PAC turret mounted lasers and it'll carry twin Beta HEPT forward cannons, but the only ones available were Alpha PAC's. Shielding is three twenty five megawatt units," Nyeshta announced proudly, "Did try for a fourth but it would have meant losing the entire cargo bay."

Tor was momentarily impressed and pushed other less pleasant thoughts aside, "Speed?"

"Not as fast as the original, but it should reach two hundred and seventy five mps," Nyeshta patted the side of the ship. She could not help notice Tors' tone and expression but chose to ignore it. She was feeling good, with Sweetys' help and Tors' credits it was now getting close to meeting the original specification.

Tor thought for a while and asked with a slightly condescending tone, "And how reliable is it going to be?"

Nyeshta took a defensive posture, but it was Sweety that answered, "I have run a test simulation with all the new parts and we should be good for two hundred hours flying time without any major problems. Certain components are running very close to their maximum operating conditions and we will need to find a source for some specialist parts. To optimize the ship to full specification we will require certain items only available to the new Corvette class ships."

All Tor cared for at this moment was that Nyeshta would be fine getting the ship to the new sectors, "Sweety are you still required here?"

"Yes, I need to complete diagnostics, reprogramming of the computers and onboard AI," Sweety replied.

Tor looked a little uncertain and then said, "Okay. Well I'll retrieve you at the next stop, wherever that's going to be," He turned and left.

Once Tor was out of hearing range, Nyeshta commented to Sweety, "I guess he doesn't like me after all?"

"I would say that he is angry at you," Sweety responded.

"Yeah," Nyeshta replied unconvinced. She had spent a brief moment between tasks to consider her current position and knew for certain that she did not want to spend all her life on the run from Creed. Not after the way he killed her former lover. It was a fate that had her waking from a nightmare in a silent scream on so many occasions. She had learned to survive and honed her skills for the occasion that she ever met Creed, but it was not those skills that now kept her alive. It was the good will of Tor and at the moment there was very little evidence of that remaining. She had determined in her own mind that Tor was a pay check to Creed and for this reason he had not killed them both immediately. It did very little to continuing a profitable mercenary business if the person in charge killed an employer. But she still could not fathom out why Creed did not throw Tor to one side and shoot her anyway.

Sweety spoke up, "When we reach the new sectors I think it would be advisable for you to talk to him." She went back to carrying out the diagnostics and issuing instructions to the maintenance droids, which to her mind were running at less than optimum efficiency. She put it down to the fact the Teladi hired out droids by the hour so the less efficient they were the more they could earn. A point proven after she had rewritten several of the disruption programs set to cause percentage delays between successive actions, but was certain there was one more hidden away.

"Well we should be finished soon," Nyeshta commented aloud.

"Yes," Sweety cut in quickly.

"Do you want me to return you to Tor?" Nyeshta asked.

"Not yet. I think he needs some time to himself," Sweety replied.

Nyeshta looked confused for a moment and asked, "You're not like normal AI are you?"

"No," Sweety answered and said nothing else.

The maintenance droids finished closing down the floor inspection panels and started to bring in the new cabin units. Included in the complete overhaul were a new transporter unit and cargo bay life support unit. Both were special requisitions brought in on one of the up-rated Pegasus ships.

The moment to launch arrived, Tor ran through the pre-flight checks and opened his mouth to address Sweety but then closed it again as he looked at the empty space usually occupied by the technical datapad. His body had also begun to ache after his, less than successful, brawl with Creed. He reflected that Creed, for some reason, had no intention of hurting him and if anything he was grateful for that deep down, whilst some part other of his mind resented that he was less than a match for Creed.

He wondered if Serandamanketal had planned the fight with Creed. Tor liked the big Paranid as he had some indeterminate quality that reflected an easy going friendly attitude. But there was something about the big Paranid that Tor felt uncomfortable with, and for certain Tor knew he would never want to see him get angry.

"Computer get me departure clearance!" Tor ordered.

A moment passed, "Departure clearance granted."

The docking clamps released and under station auto-pilot the Elite glided into the stream of other ships. Outside the station Tor checked his sector display. A quick look had the Two Paranid forming up on either side of him and to his surprise the mercenary ship just below and behind. Tor immediately felt uncomfortable. Creed had joined the second fighter group. Something Tor also noticed was the lack of the Teladi Battle Cruiser which had been patrolling the sector and there was a steady flow of Teladi fighters into the Eighteen Billion sector.

As if reading his thoughts the com opened and Creed spoke up, "Some of you may have noticed some increased sector activity. We have no details at this time as to why. I will inform you of any situation as I find out. Tor you're in the lead so get moving."

Tor hit the booster and shot forward, he manually vectored in on the Eighteen Billion sector gate the three other ships in close formation behind. A few k's behind them Creed led flight group five.

The sector traffic was busy around the gate with the Teladi fighters claiming priority transition to the next sector. This had Tor momentarily ignoring everything that had happened before and thinking with some trepidation as to what may lie ahead.

The sector jump had him plot a course to the muster point. Already flight groups two, three and four were in position. The scout ships were also waiting patiently. Tor took note of the sector defense craft most appeared to be patrolling around the gate marking the boundary into Xenon space. Lasertowers had also been deployed in a defensive array.

Creeds Mamba shot past and Tor wished Sweety was on board so she could inform him of the sector comms traffic. The rest of flight group five remained behind him. It was a few minutes before they joined the rest of the fighter group. The scouts suddenly departed.

"People listen up!" Creeds voice broke the comms silence, "Looks like our journey through the next sector has been made a little bit more difficult. Someone has attacked a Xenon sector monitoring outpost, no prizes in guessing who. The unfortunate twist is the Teladi Flagship Carrier Alalaneamous IV was in transit through the sector at the time. Two fast Xenon M-two Battle Cruisers moved in to defend and have engaged the Teladi Flagship. Xenon heavy, medium and light fighters are also involved. The fighters

leaving the sector are attempting to defend the Flagship and assist in its escape from the sector. Other Teladi ships and M-two Battlecruisers are in the sector, their primary aim is a strategic withdrawal with the Carrier still intact." Creed paused, "No one is certain what additional Xenon forces are on-route." Again there was a slight pause, "People it's a long trip around and I would expect a less than welcoming response from the Split. So if we make for full speed through the sector and avoid the combatant forces we should be able to transit the section relatively unscathed. Battle formation is as follows, the two elites up front with the mercenary ship, these to be flanked by Piranhas, last of all the Prometheus, Perseus and myself. Be careful people, the Xenon heavy missile is equivalent to our Hornet grade weapons, and capable of destroying any ship in the group. Form up and lets go!"

Tor headed the pack as they dropped into position behind him and closed in on the gate. It was with a certain degree of nervousness that he entered the activation zone.

As the sector came into view a Hawk flashed past the nose of his ship in pursuit of a Xenon N. He slammed open the booster and began to turn away from the gate knowing the other ships would soon begin to emerge. The HUD was crowded with fighters both friendly and hostile.

Two Teladi Phoenix Battle Cruisers, with fighters, were shielding the badly damaged Condor Alalaneamous IV. The two Xenon M-two Battle Cruisers made passing sweeps and the darkness became filled with Plasma being exchanged between them.

Teladi Falcons were trying to keep back attacking flights of Xenon Ls' as they launched heavy missiles at the Phoenix ships. Teladi Bats were frantically chasing down the missiles in an attempting to destroy them before they reached their targets.

Xenon Ms' and Teladi Hawks were engaged in a ferocious pitched battle, plasma and explosions from self detonating missiles flashed in all directions.

"Head for the gate there's nothing we can do here. Try not to attract too much attention!" Creed ordered.

However this was not so easy, as they were now considered attacking craft by the Xenon.

"Incoming missile!" The computer announced Tor turned the ship hard and tried to make quick fast turns as the small red dot closed fast on his position.

Behind him a flight of six Xenon Ns' and eight Xenon Ms' engaged the group. Two N class ships had targeted Tor. He managed a corkscrew manoeuvre just in time to see the missile, the glow of its rocket engine, streak past before it turned back on target.

Moments later the computer announced, "Missile self destructed," And then added, "I have two incoming Xenon N's"

Tor locked on to the nearest, and turned to make a direct pass. The ship jarred under a cascade of light Plasma but his shields held.

"Shields eighty-five percent," The computer reported.

Turning the Elite Tor saw the first N class ship make its second pass. Tor snapped off several quick but badly timed shots and the Xenon ship was gone. Once again the Elite shook as the second Xenon N managed to get several shots on target. Tor kept his eye on the distance to the targeted ship. "Got you!" Tor commented as he waited for the ship to make its pass and brought the Elite up in line with the fast moving Xenon. The twin Alpha HEPT's fired and recoiled. The plasma struck their target and the Xenon ship exploded. Coming back around to get the second he found that one of the Piranhas had destroyed it.

The mercenary ship had taken out two Xenon Ms' the turret weapons doing most of the damage.

"Everyone keep moving!" Creed called out as he destroyed the last Xenon M.

Tor resumed course and took a look at the status of the ships. Two of the Piranhas were registering hull damage and several others were registering shield depletion but recovering. The three Perseus ships were barely marked.

Vectoring to take a wide berth of the capital ship battle they made rapid progress. The Xenon numbers were falling but the Teladi had also taken significant losses. One of the Phoenix ships was registering the loss of two shields and several gun turrets. The Xenon capital ships had significantly less damage and were making another pass.

The Teladi Condor was now only eight k's from the gate. Tor and the rest of his force were still some forty five k's from their exit.

He had to trust they would make it far enough across the sector before they were the only ships left and the Xenon forces pursued them.

Something caught his attention. From where he sat it looked not too dissimilar to a shooting star moving at incredibly high speed. But something deep down reminded him that shooting stars are only a planetary phenomenon as small meteorites burned up in the atmosphere.

"Computer, get me Creed!" Tor ordered.

"Yes?" Creed asked urgently.

"Do you see the small bright fast moving light ahead and just to the left?" Tor asked.

There was a pause.

"Aim for the gate," Creed said quietly. Tor felt there was a hint of concern in his voice.

The incoming object still several thousand k's out suddenly flared the light remaining bright but getting larger as every moment passed. This time everyone saw it and the comms buzzed until Creed demanded silence. The Pegasus ships were ordered to fly wide to a distance of fifty k's and report.

"We have incoming Xenon Ns' and Ls'. Elite and mercenary ship pilots remain on course, group one, two and three Piranhas remain in formation. The rest form up behind me to intercept!" Creed ordered.

Tor kept the Elite running straight and true ever conscious that the incoming object was still getting closer.

Moments passed and a quick referral to the sector map had the Teladi Condor out of the sector the two Phoenix ships were on final approach the lead ship showing several hull ruptures. The Xenon M-tuos were continuing to attack the pair.

"I have a new ship on long range scanner," The computer announced.

Tor was surprised the computer would mention it, as normally anything on long range was, as the term implied, too far out to warrant a mention.

"How far out?" Tor asked quickly.

"Five hundred and fifty k's and closing at a rate of fifty k's per second and falling rapidly," The computer responded.

Behind him Creed and the other fighters had engaged the pursuing Xenon Ns'. At the gate the Xenon M-tuos had disengaged the Teladi forces and were now closing.

"Computer open a channel to Creed," Tor barely waited for the acknowledgement, "Creed, we have company."

The bright light was growing and rapidly. Tor began willing the Elite to go faster as the Xenon Inter-galactic deep space super carrier and evolved CPU entered the sector. The vast reverse thrusters went out as the massive ship came to a stop. Tor had never seen anything like it at twenty k's distance it was a huge dark oval shape of colossal length.

Eight seemingly smaller ships separated from the sides.

"I have six new Xenon Battle Cruisers and two Xenon Carriers on an intercept course," The computer announced, with what Tor regarded as less than an urgent tone.

The Pegasus and other scout ships were already at full speed to leave the sector. Tor realized that the only way to escape was straight ahead.

"How big is that thing?" Tor asked slightly awed.

"Scans indicate it is four k's across the longest axis by two k's and eight k's in length," The computer responded. Tor recognized that this new ship was too big to get through any jumpgate.

"I am registering three hundred new fighters launching from the Mothership," The computer announced.

"I wonder what else it's got on board," Tor murmured to himself as he tried to calculate the time until interception of the Xenon fast Battle Cruisers. It would be close.

"Piranha groups two, three, four and five get to the gate and defend," Creed ordered.

The following heavy fighters had disengaged and were now running ahead of the Xenon pack. The two Battle Cruisers were gaining. The fast M-tvos from the Mothership had increased velocity. Tor knew he would arrive late.

"All light fighters clear the sector. You're not going to be able to help against the Xenon heavy weapons," Creed had rapidly changed his mind about defending the gate now he had a moment to analyse the situation unfolding ahead of him.

Tor noted at ten k's from the gate, the first pair of M-tvos arrived and turned to face the oncoming ships.

He saw the Piranhas break formation and swerve around the slowly turning ships as plasma streamed away from the automated weapons systems. Three of the Piranhas took hits their shields crashing down as the ships lurched violently sideways from the energy strikes. One exploded the pilot barely managing to bail out in time.

A small fast moving object shot through the plasma streams and picked up the pilot. Tor noted it was one of the Pegasus ships risking instant vaporization to make the pickup. He made a mental note to congratulate the pilot. That is if he made it out alive himself.

Behind them the Prometheus, Perseus ships and Mamba held formation. The pursuing carriers were closing every second. Tor had to remain focused, knowing not to turn around to help.

He entered firing range and let out a burst of shots on the nearest Xenon Cruiser. The Elite recoiled from the plasma weapons discharge, whilst the returning fire enveloped his previous position. Tor had already turned the ship up and sideways on to reduce the visible target area. The rest of his group, having already broken formation, were sweeping around the blockade.

More Xenon capital ships arrived. Tor had to pull back hard as the new arrival cut across the nose of the Elite. The hull loomed and rapidly grew closer as Tor wrenched the stick back as far as it would go and he was willing it to go back further, with a sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach. Adrenaline was coursing through his veins. He expected to feel the ships collide with a sickening, bone shattering crunch. The Elite leveled out to fly only a meter from the hull of the Cruiser, warning lights and sirens echoed

through the cabin. Shields were falling and Tor wrestled the ship to brake free of the Xenon shield matrix before his own gave out.

Turning sharply he regained his sight on the gate. Creed and the rest of the flight were also battling to reach the exit gate but the Xenon were cutting across it with heavy plasma fire. The second Elite and mercenary ship made it to the activation point and vanished.

Tor had fallen back three k's and came around again. A Prometheus ship took a heavy pounding before veering away but had lost one of its shield units. Turning back sharply it managed to correct its course and vectored in on the gate. Moments later it too was gone.

Diving down beneath the first Xenon ship the Elite turned sharp left and up to climb between the first carrier and the one behind. Turning to show the minimum amount of hull he crossed between two streams of plasma and cut over the top side of the second. With a sharp flick to the right the Elite narrowly missed the nose of the last Cruiser and skimmed along its length towards the gate. A heavy shudder ran through the ship and the stick suddenly seemed disconnected.

“Warning shields forty percent.” The computer announced.

Tor wrestled for control and then strafing sideways he rolled the ship around in a renewed blizzard of plasma to reach the gate.

Chapter 7. Omicron Lyrae

The gate loomed as Tor rolled the ship in an attempt to keep clear of the incoming plasma fire. The Elite shook and veered off course slightly.

“Shields critical! Twenty percent,” The computer announced.

Tor kept his eyes fixed on the gate, willing the ship to make the final few meters. Sparks erupted from the console to the left of him and the whole cabin flashed red.

“Shields at five percent! Shield unit two off line.”

Tor began to reach for the emergency eject, his mind was racing, trying to determine if somehow, without the ship, his EVA suit jets would carry him the last few meters to the activation zone of the gate.

As his gloved fingers flipped open the cover the computer announced. “Entering sector Scale Plate Green.”

To Tor's mind, nothing appeared so welcoming than the Teladi stations now in view. Glancing back into the ship he noticed the haze of smoke in the cabin. It drifted to several points in the sides. He saw several of the floor and side panels had been blown open by small explosions in various power couplings. He could almost sense the acrid smell of suppressant through the helmet of his environment suit.

Looking ahead of him there were the Teladi sector defence forces. Lasertowers pointed towards the gate in case any Xenon ship tried to enter the sector and just behind them were his own ships.

The control panel was a mass of continuous flashing red lights. Just as Tor was about to request a damage report the computer announced, “I have an incoming transmission.”

“On viewer,” Tor responded.

“Viewer unit damaged, voice comms only,” The computer replied.

“Okay,” Tor acknowledged anxious of what else was broken.

“Glad to see you're still with us Tor,” It was Serandamancketal, “I'm registering your ship has significant damage to the main thrusters housing with coolant leaks on the primary engine. Suggest shutting it down immediately,” The computer responded and the emergency reverse thrusters halted the ship. Emergency lighting kicked in. Serandamancketal continued, “Your ship is also losing atmosphere and the remaining shield unit is failing. Prepare to abandon ship and be transported to the mercenary ship.”

Tor did not need telling twice, all the lights on the console went out as the ship computer closed down all primary and auxiliary systems leaving just the emergency lights. Light items were beginning to gather near the micro fractures in the hull. The air recirculation and atmospheric pressure control unit also shutdown.

“Warning pressure release in five Sezura,” The computer announced.

Tor had barely a moment to register a possible reason for dumping the remaining air when the cabin was rapidly depressurised in a controlled fashion. The items around the micro fractures slid down to the floor. Tor picked up a collection of belongings and pushed them into a case.

“Okay computer, let them know I'm ready for transporting,” Tor commented.

A moment later and he was aboard the mercenary ship, and Sweetie commented, “Welcome aboard Tor.”

“Thanks Sweetie,” He took a moment to look around the new interior of the ship, and was momentarily impressed. Sitting down heavily in one of the chairs he gave a loud sigh of relief. The moments of the final

run left him physically washed out, yet his mind buzzed from the adrenaline surge he had experienced earlier, and for the moment all other cares were lost in his relief to still be alive.

“So did everyone make it?” Tor asked.

“Not everyone,” Sweetie answered slowly.

“Oh yeah I saw a Piranha go down, but the pilots okay. I saw him picked up by a Pegasus,” Tor reflected.

There was a moments silence.

“Anything else?” Tor asked hesitantly.

“The Pegasus that you refer to has not entered the sector, we have lost two Piranhas and none of the Perseus ships have yet come through the gate,” Sweetie commented.

“Shit!” Tor commented. “That’s not good,” The spark of anger flared up in Tor once again and he raised his voice, “I need to talk to Creed, what a fucking mistake coming through that sector. He’s nearly got the lot of us killed. What was he thinking?”

“The Mamba has not yet left the Xenon sector,” Sweetie commented slowly.

Tors’ jaw opened and closed slowly, before he responded uncertainly, “What?”

“The Mamba has not yet left the Xenon sector,” Sweetie repeated. “I have an incoming transmission.”

Tor looked around again, Nyeshta responded. “On viewer Sweetie!”

“This is Serandamanketal. We will wait for another five Mizura for the remaining ships. After this time we will assume they have either been forced to find another exit or have been destroyed. We have some repairs to damaged vessels that take priority. So the scheduled stop in Omicron Lyrae will be extended to enable repairs to be carried out. I want complete comms silence. I will be contacting you all individually to discuss the recent events.”

Tor felt tired once more and even his brief burst of anger, that had seemingly given him renewed energy, had equally as swiftly left him again, but his mood was now set. He hauled himself to his feet and wandered up to the cockpit area and found a co-pilot seat had been installed.

“Pull up the sector map!” Tor ordered bluntly.

Nyeshta glanced sharply over towards him but said nothing. The sector map appeared on the HUD.

Tor looked ahead. Through the screen display he could now see his Elite and the damage it had sustained. Quietly he thanked the makers for producing such a sturdy vessel. Blackened scorch marks creased the hull. In places outer panels had been ripped off, the ends looking like globular lumps where the metals had become molten before freezing in the vacuum of space.

There was nothing on the scanner and each moment seemed to drag. Two Mizura later the first of the Perseus ships entered the sector. One shield unit had failed and the other two were still recovering.

A moment later the second Perseus ship appeared, intact but with shields heavily depleted.

Several Sezura passed and the last Perseus emerged. Like the Elite, this ship had suffered the worst as it covered the exit of the first two. With two shield units damaged and hull ruptures leaking atmosphere the ship almost immediately dumped atmosphere when reaching safe distance from the gate.

“Why do they do that?” Tor asked, not so much looking for an answer but just in order to break the silence.

Sweety answered, "It is to balance the pressure between the inside of the ship and space. Failure to do so and the fractures in the hull will increase until they fail catastrophically and rip the ship apart."

"Oh!" Tor answered. Inside he hoped that Creed would make an appearance, however the damage that had been inflicted on the Perseus ships left him in no doubt that the Mamba would be torn apart long before it reached the activation point of the gate. The Pegasus ship however had a huge speed advantage providing the pilot was skilful enough to control it. Inside Tor expected that at any moment the Pegasus would suddenly appear with Creed at the helm having made the decision to sacrifice the Mamba.

Time moved on and the gate remained inactive. Five Mizura passed quietly by and still no news.

"Incoming transmission," Sweety announced gently. The image came to life immediately.

It was Serandamancketal. "Scout ships to Omicron Lyrae shipyard, flights one to five start heading out I want five k's separation. Remember some of the ships are on secondary engine power and AI control. This is going to be a slow flight to dock so keep the speed down and keep those eyes open for potential trouble."

The comm closed. Tor made himself look busy so he did not have to talk to Nyeshta. She simply piloted the ship and kept it on track.

Eventually Sweety spoke up, "It is a bit quiet in here," Then added with a hint of sarcasm, "Perhaps I should make some introductions"

"Leave it Sweety!" Tor retorted quietly.

There was a moments silence then Sweety replied, "An analysis of your voice leads me to believe the correct action for me is to be admonished and remain silent. But as my programming does not allow for human emotions then I will disregard your comment. Nyeshta, this is Tor, he is young, a bit naive, well a more human expression is that he does not know his arse from his elbow most of the time, but he has some redeeming characteristics. Beneath the angry exterior he has his heart in the right place and is currently striving to prove himself in the world of men."

Nyeshta could not help but give a wry smile at Sweetys rather cutting evaluation of Tor. As for Tor, he had worked long enough with Sweety to know when she disapproved of his behaviour.

Sweety continued, "Tor this is the delightful Nyeshta a few Jazura older than you, in good health and ready for breeding with," There was a gasp of surprised exasperation from Nyeshta. "Some of my records indicate that it is inadvisable to upset her as she has numerous known kills both in fighter combat and in face to face confrontations. However I am quite safe here in The Wall and you will not be visiting for a number of Wozura providing all goes to plan."

This time it was Tors turn to smirk. Nyeshta spoke softly and soothingly, "I can wait Sweety."

"Incoming transmission on the security channel," Sweety announced in an equally soft tone and the face of Serandamancketal appeared on the viewer.

"Any news?" Tor asked quickly.

"Nothing yet," Serandamancketal replied. "There are a few things I need to make clear to you. The events in the Xenon sector and the current status of Creed are not to be discussed with anyone under any circumstances. News and rumours will start to circulate from the Teladi. However they had cleared the sector when the new ship arrived. For the more observant, all comms out of the sector failed just before its arrival which is why we cannot get a firm status on Creed. The Perseus pilots have reported that Creed was still alive when they made their run and he was heading back towards Eighteen Billion and Teladi space."

Tor looked pensive for a moment as he tried to do a quick mental calculation. Some of the Xenon Battle Cruisers had shown an exceptional turn of speed. Something in the back of his mind gave him the feeling that Creeds tweaked upper limit would still not have been enough to out run them. "Let's hope he makes it!"

Serandamancketal did not reply immediately and Nyeshta observed, "He's already late."

The Paranid image glanced at her, "Yes."

"What do you mean?" Tor asked quietly.

"Creeds Mamba can cover the sixty odd k's at full speed in less than two Mizura. It's been much longer than that," Nyeshta replied.

Serandamancketal nodded, "It's still too early to count him amongst the fallen Nyeshta."

"The Xenon don't take prisoners Serand. But I will concede it's too early to know for certain," She replied.

"Well mind you don't try anything stupid." The Paranid added with a warning tone and looked directly at her.

"Never even crossed my mind," Nyeshta responded innocently.

The com closed. There was a moments silence as the ships began to make the jump into Nyana's Hideout. Once again Sweety broke the silence. "Nyeshta, if my analysis of your reputation amongst the Argon is correct then I think it would be best that you are not on board this ship when we reach the Shipyard in Omicron Lyrae. The Argon Secret Service will undoubtedly have a presence on the station and will want to ask the pilot questions as to the origin of this vessel."

Nyeshta looked perplexed and uncertain but could see the logic behind the statement.

"Which will leave me as the fall guy," Tor chipped in sharply as he reflected on his part in this plan. Deep down inside he did not like what he was hearing.

"Calm down Tor. If you tell them all the events that you witnessed up to the time when Nyeshta was picked up by pirates and leave it at that, then the ship logs will fill in the rest of the details. Just do not mention the rescue," Sweety was reassuring in her tone.

Tor for his part felt sceptical. He took a moment longer to consider the plan and pieces just began to fall into place. Even though he had never visited these sectors, his association with the development of the new frontier and the broadcast meeting with the President meant his name would be known. That he also knew Caran Belign would mean the service would also recognise him and could without much effort confirm his identity. The path would not be smooth but at least it would be less painful than if he had just been any ordinary, hapless, pilot that had stumbled across this ship.

Nyeshta also knew this but her reservations were in handing over the ship. Not that she had a choice as they completed the jump Sweety targeted the nearest Piranha and activated the transporter.

Sweety felt that she would be getting a stream of abuse later but that was the least of her concerns. This ship suited her purposes and she was not willing to give it up. Yet it still needed certain enhancements and the Argon shipyard could assist but it would be the Boron shipyard in Ocean of Fantasy that held the last components she would need. She had tapped into the Argon Spy nav sat network to find this out. There was so much more she could do since the encounter, but the status of the Xenon now concerned her. The arrival of the CPU had cut her primary link, but the data stream on emergence from the Xenon sector had her momentarily patched in to the highly complex multilayered Xenon communications. Until they closed her out.

The surprise was that she could decrypt the code she had received. One thing that struck her as odd, for a computer based existence, was the Xenon transcripts indicated the huge super carrier was not an offensive vessel but designed for the continued existence of the Xenon in mind.

It was capable of exiting the solar system and entering the vast emptiness of deep space, where it would never be found except by chance. What Sweety had failed to discover was why it had arrived in the first place.

After the disappearance of Nyeshta, Tor had recovered from his initial shock and taken the pilot seat. "So did you put her somewhere out in space or just out of the way?" He asked with a degree of harshness.

"Believe it or not she will be of greater value to you as an ally than an enemy," Sweety was reprimanding in her tone. "And you will have to apologise to her on my behalf if you do not want your oxygen supply to run low."

"You seem very keen to take her side." Tor stated loftily.

"You need to start planning ahead. If Creed is dead then you should consider where her loyalties lie." Sweety responded coldly.

For Tor this was the one comment that tipped the balance. Almost at every turn he had been reprimanded for not thinking ahead or just not thinking in general. "Fly the ship Sweety," He commented quietly with a hint of despondency.

Sweety had read the tone in Tors voice and responded softly and soothingly, "Acknowledged."

He retreated to the rear of the ship and started to look for a drink. He opened and closed a number of various lockers before asking, "Isn't there anything to drink on this ship?"

"Sorry Tor I had not simulated this situation arising," Sweety commented apologetically.

Tor frowned and leant against the table, "Why is it I can't seem to do anything right at the moment?"

"I think you are judging yourself too harshly," Sweety began, "What you did in saving Nyeshta was the decent thing. It was not your fault that she turned out to have such a colourful background. I am certain that had it been any other person then the recognition that you were looking for would have been forthcoming. If my understanding is correct you should talk to Serandamancketal for a more accurate picture of how Creed really felt about the rescue."

Tor knew Sweety was not just saying this to cheer him up. As a computer AI she had a much more logical outlook on events and through the personality side of her programming managed to get her point across. "I'm not a leader Sweety. I don't know what lies ahead of us. But the lives of all these people rests upon the decisions I will have to make."

"That sounds like a plea for help," Sweety commented.

"Too damn right it is," Tor replied quietly.

"At last a request for assistance," Sweety commented glibly, "Unfortunately you have relied too much on other people making decisions for you and now you must trust the recommendations I will make."

Tor felt from the tone that the information about to be imparted might be the beginning of the most important lecture of his life and that may, one day, save his life.

"First rule is never to accept anything at face value. Ask advice from a trusted source and do some research," Sweety began.

"I do that already," Tor retorted.

“No you do not,” Sweety responded quickly.

Tor paused for a moment, resisting his immediate gut reaction defensive response, he replied, “So who do I trust?”

“That was quicker than I had calculated, which indicates there is hope for you yet, but the answer you are after is me,” Sweety replied. “And sometimes even I can not give you a full answer.”

“So who do I go to then?” Tor ask carefully.

“No one, trust your own judgement. Look at the information before you, and I mean all the information and make an informed decision,” Sweety replied, “I can try and extrapolate a result from a set of data but sometimes it requires a human imagination to see beyond. As the logical answer is the one we are led to believe is the most probable. It is sometime likely that that is just a ruse to cover something else.”

Tor felt uncertain, “Okay.”

“I feel that a crash course in deductive reasoning is going to help you,” Sweety stated.

“And I thought my college days were over,” Tor replied casually.

“Silence in class the lesson is about to begin,” Sweety replied sharply.

Feran had returned to his office having spent a few hours intimidating his employees by glaring at them thoughtfully as he inspected the station. He now scanned through the report handed to him by one of the stations communications staff.

A smile slowly crossed his face, although the primary target had successfully exited the Xenon sector, Creed had not and that news in itself would be worth a celebration. He took stock of Tors other losses and allowed himself a brief cruel laugh. To Ferans mind the Teladi had served their purpose well and kept the Xenon forces occupied long enough for Tors’ ships to arrive and attempt to cross the sector. Needless to say they would be asking about the two ships that started the incident. He would deal with the questions as they arose, but first he would have some explaining to do to Twk’Trrg. This had not been in the Head Councilors plans and Ferans’ good mood grew stronger knowing that it would have upset him.

He switched to the next report which outlined his own preparations. The station was already being assembled having used the Family Nyj shipyard to supply the factory and local TL for transporting to the new sector. The shipyard also supplied a complete fighter compliment which were prowling the construction site and scouting the other sectors for any sign of the Khaak.

Many of the supplies were also on route including a consignment of missiles, lasertowers and squash mines. The mines would be carefully masked as the Boron had taken a special interest in scanning all Split ships crossing the sector.

It was the prospect of gaining alien technology that motivated the Split Council. Feran for his part was simply a means to an end and he was fully aware of this, but for the moment chose to play along. It would bring him closer to his enemy and without the shield of Creed and his guild then revenge would come easily and taste sweet.

“Incoming message!” Sweety announced, breaking Tors’ train of thought. They had crossed Nyana’s Hideout without incident and ahead of them lay the shipyard. The sector defence carrier was holding position near the trading station to take on supplies. Two of the latest Corvettes had scanned the group.

“Pilot of undesignated ship. Identify yourself!” Captain Morova of the Corvette Dark Star appeared on the HUD. He was a young man in his early thirties and had seen rapid promotion. It was difficult for Tor to get an impression as to the height and weight of the man from just the image on the screen. The stern expression of the Captain indicated to Tor that he did not laugh much and would not appreciate a joke at this moment in time.

“This is Tor Grall making a scheduled stop to recover lifters and make repairs at the shipyard,” Tor replied casually.

“Mr Grall your ship does not have a valid registration or designation. Proceed to the shipyard for further questioning,” The captain of the leading corvette closed the com.

“That didn’t sound too friendly,” Tor commented aloud.

“And why do you think that is?” Sweety tested Tor.

“I’m in a ship the design of which was a secret and had been stolen. This is the first example that those plans have been used to produce that said same ship. Which means they will want to know where I got this one from,” Tor replied.

“Good. At least you have remembered what I have told you so far. Now do you understand why it is important for Nyeshta to not be on board?” Sweety asked gently.

“She stole the plans and the Argon service has her on their ‘wanted’ list. Plus any other crimes she’s probably committed,” Tor replied.

“Go on,” Sweety instructed.

“If she’s caught then the best she can hope for is a long term prison sentence. The worst is that Mr. Belign will want to talk to her first,” Tor threw in the second statement to amuse himself, but then he remembered the sound of the scream from one of Carans’ previous interviews and a cold shiver ran down his spine. “Either way she would be of no value to us. We need her as she has an in depth knowledge of the workings of this ship,” Tor paused to question this last statement in his own mind then added, “Next to you that is.”

“Keep thinking,” Sweety responded carefully, suspecting that Tor may have missed the floor in his thoughts.

Tor paused, “But you are only a computer and have no physical presence to fix a problem. Also if anything goes wrong and you can no longer analyse the ship for faults she will be the backup.”

“Well done,” Sweety commented.

“But that’s not the only reason you to want to keep her out of trouble is it?” Tor asked quietly.

“Well observed. But why do you think that might be?” Sweety put on a soft gentle voice.

“What, other than to upset me?” Tor quipped. There was no answer from Sweety, so he continued, “Hmm, I think you’ve determined that she has some aptitude which will be useful to you when the time comes.”

“Good. Now we are coming into dock remember to say only what you must and when we get underway again I shall give you proper and more challenging tests,” Sweety had requested docking permission and the landing lights flashed green.

Under station control the mercenary ship glided past the public docking platforms and into the security section of the station. The thump of docking clamps indicated the ship was secure.

Tor went into the cabin and said, “Open the airlock doors.”

Both doors rolled open with a slight hiss and before Tor could step clear he was pushed back inside by Caran Belign. Tor glanced down to see Caran had his blaster drawn.

The big man quickly scanned the interior of the ship for other occupants and then holstered the weapon. “Welcome to Omicron Lyrae. If you’d follow me I have some questions for you!”

Caran strode purposefully away. Tor trotted along behind. The security gate let them past and Tor smiled benignly at the security officers to offset their stony faced expressions.

The big agent marched past the offices and stopped only when he reached one of the interrogation rooms. The door slid open to reveal the pale, spartanly furnished room. Tor stepped in, still smiling even though his heart beat had quickened and the creeping sense of dread began to take hold.

Without being instructed to do so Tor sat down and continued to adopt, as best as the seating would allow and his body language could achieve, a relaxed pose. The chair was fixed into facing in one direction so Tor had to swivel himself around to face Caran which was deeply uncomfortable. He looked questioningly at him waiting for Caran to make the first comment.

The door slid closed and Caran, with a measured pace, moved slowly across the room to stand near the second chair, but he did not sit. He let his gaze pass around the room but Tor kept his eyes on him. Glancing across he spoke quietly and gently, “Do you know why I want to talk to you?”

Tor took a moment and after a thoughtful pause, mainly to keep himself calm before answering, said, “I can think of a couple of reasons,” He answered slowly, trying to read some expression in the passive face of Caran whilst some other part of his thought processes were attempting to anticipate what might come next, “The fate of Creed could be one and the ship I arrived in could be the other.”

“Both are of interest,” Caran paused before asking, “But first tell me how did you come by your ship?”

Tor nodded, he knew how to answer this and only the truth would suffice, but it was a case of omitting certain details, “We were heading through Ceo’s Doubt.” He began and then recounted in detail all the events pertaining to the recovery of the ship and the fate of the pilot. He included the fact that Sweety had scanned the ship to determine the pilot was female. Eventually he ended with the pirate ship escaping into New Income. He ended saying, “We took the ship into tow, feeling that it could be of some use and Creed led the group to the shipyard in Ianamus Zura. Of course you are free to check all the ships logs to confirm this.”

Caran had carefully watched Tor for signs that he may be lying or telling half truths and saw nothing to make him suspicious. An agent in another room had been monitoring Tors’ vital signs to see if there was any significant change. The message to Caran was that Tor showed no signs of lying.

The serious expression on Carans’ face melted away slightly and he gave a brief smile. Then he asked, “So what happened to the pilot.”

“Sweety reported that she had been taken to the pirate station. To be sold as a slave.” Tor replied and shrugged his shoulders.

“Pity I would like to have met her.” Caran stated.

“Did you know her?” Tor asked.

Caran considered his answer, “Yes I know of her, she stole the blueprints for the ship you’ve been flying. She also planted the device that enabled the capture of Tris.” He was watching for a reaction from Tor and expected something more.

Tor let the memory flare and stir bitter feelings, his jaw tensed as he clenched his teeth, he looked back at Caran, “I know. Creed told me,” He stated calmly.

Caran considered Tors reaction and reasoned that he would already have experienced the initial shock value of the revelation. That shock would have evolved as he now witnessed into a controlled anger and bitterness. In many respects Tors' reaction satisfied his own suspicions that he would not be trying to conceal any further information as to the whereabouts of Nyeshta. He also took into account the fact that Creed would have killed her on sight and had no reason to probe with any further questions.

"Let us move on to the subject of Creed," Caran commented, "We experienced a total communications blackout within the sector. Not even our spy nav sats are able to transmit information to us. So what happened?"

Tor recounted the chain of events, witnessing the attack on the Teladi Carrier and its support vessels. He omitted to mention the mother ship in favour of just stating the number of Xenon battle cruisers and carriers had arrived from elsewhere in the sector. These had intercepted them and blockaded the gate leading into Scale Plate Green.

Detailing the flight orders from Creed, Tor explained in detail his own escape from the sector and of the other ships that had made it out before him. Then went onto describe how they waited for the Perseus ships and Creed to make it through.

Caran paced slowly around the room, he questioned Tor on a number of details including the rear guard action that Creed had initiated to prevent the Xenon N's from catching and delaying the slower Elites.

There was a moments pause before Tor asked, "So I guess that you've not heard anything from Creed?"

Caran stopped and looked directly at him, then after a moment he answered slowly, "No. His Mamba entered the sector Eighteen Billion but it was badly damaged, running on auxiliary power only, and with fractures through the hull structure. There was no indication that he or any remains were on board."

Tor looked crestfallen. Then asked, "Does Serandamancketal know?"

Caran nodded, "The guild had members watching both gates and took command of the ship shortly after it arrived. Before the Teladi had a chance to claim the salvage rights," He paused then added, "News like this travels fast. The Teladi have already made formal protests to the Split High Council that this incident would never have arisen had a pair of Wolf ships not attacked a Xenon monitoring station."

"Feran," Tors' contempt was reflected in his tone and captured his darkening mood.

Caran paused before asserting, "That has not been positively established!"

"Well who else could it have been?" Tor asked bitterly.

Caran watched Tor closely, "Occasionally head strong Spilt youngsters with nothing better to do go and agitate the Xenon just to show how brave they are."

"And you believe that's true?" Tor asked swiftly, a look of doubt reflected in his face.

"In this case? No, I don't," Caran replied carefully.

Tor took a moment to think, "What about the Pegasus?" He asked optimistically.

For once Caran looked uncertain and uncomfortable but he kept his voice even and clear, "As I understand it. Creeds personal logs indicate the Pegasus was destroyed when trying to get close enough for a pickup."

The last hope of Creed making an appearance to guide him through the times ahead died within Tor. He regretted that Sweetie was not human. To his mind a disembodied voice was not the same as recognisable face however friendly or unfriendly.

Lost for a moment in personal grief, Tor looked up as Caran put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Come on I'll buy you a drink."

Tor composed himself and then asked, "What happens to the mercenary ship?"

Caran looked down at Tor thoughtfully. He decided to go against protocol, in having the ship impounded and destroyed, and decided not to make Tors' day any worse than it already was. "It'll be given an official designation and registration. Then you can do with it as you will. Just don't let it fall into pirate hands."

Tor nodded slowly and said, "I won't."

Caran gave the faintest of smiles and the interview ended. They had a drink in one of the security bars away from the general public and talked for a while about the journey ahead. Tor was vaguely aware of the Xenon sector between Black Hole Sun and Thyn's Abyss, but the hourly report still indicated little to no Xenon activity.

Caran had commented, "Feran won't make his own journey unnecessarily difficult."

This was of marginal comfort to Tor as he did not know exactly where Feran was. For all he knew, the pirate leader may already have passed through Xenon space and had left ships poised to cause a disturbance as soon as he arrived. Eventually, with a head crammed full of suggestions, Tor managed to excuse himself and return to his ship.

"Give me an update Sweetie," Tor requested as he dropped himself down in the pilot seat.

"Most ships are docked and repairs are being carried out to the ones that need it. The scout ships are already in Black Hole Sun. With them are six Piranhas and all the Lifters. I have had some difficulty in acquiring the parts I need due to the lack of official Argon registration. But that now appears to have been rectified." Sweetie replied and then added, "Enjoyable chat?"

"I was given a lot of advice and we get to keep the ship." Tor replied casually then said with a hint of bitterness, "One day I'd really like to feel as though someone's not doing me a favour."

"One day you will," Sweetie commented.

Tor sighed, "And on that day everyone will come debt collecting."

He stood up again having decided there was nothing practical for him to do and opened the game box he had bought. He placed the holo pad on the table and unpacked several control units.

"Tor, can I ask what you are doing?" Sweetie asked.

"You already have," Tor started, "This is just something I picked up at the supplies stores. It's supposed to help relieve the tedium of long haul flights."

"And what games does it have." Sweetie was sounding less enthusiastic by the moment.

"Well there's several sims including Bakja Ball, a space trading game, a planetary invasion game, and several others including something called Chess," Tor spoke enthusiastically, "Apparently the trading game is pretty popular."

"So let me understand this correctly. You will be playing a space simulation game whilst flying in a spacecraft," Sweetie observed with a hint of confounded disapproval.

Tor grinned, "Only when there's nothing better to do."

Sweetie responded sarcastically, "Then let us hope this is not an eventful trip. I would hate for you not to get full use out of your latest acquisition."

“I also own a blaster Sweety but that doesn’t mean I want to shoot at everything I see,” Tor countered.

One Stazura later and after the eighth time of being killed in the simulation game Tor swore loudly and put down the control paddle before the temptation to throw it across the cabin took hold.

“Lost again,” Sweety commented.

“I don’t understand it. I’ve followed the instruction on the start up and even changed it to easy mode. But something must be wrong. I can’t believe they would have programmed it to send fifty top spec pirate ships to attack me when transporting something as insignificant as Spicy Wedges,” Tor ranted.

“Never mind,” Sweety responded soothingly, “Repairs and upgrades have been completed and we have instructions to depart.”

Tor stood up and clicked off the holo console. He paused momentarily before asking, “Sweety did you tamper with my game?”

Chapter 8. The Split

The newly allocated name for the mercenary ship was Defiance, with the Argon classification as M-three. Tors' Elite had to be completely replaced after the structural engineers declared the ship unsuitable for continued service without major repairs. The new ship was in close formation with the second Elite as they patrolled the area.

The other ships had gathered into their respective formations as instructed by Serandamancketal. The Piranha that carried Nyeshta was one of the six sent on ahead. Tor began to dread what she might say to him the next time they came face to face.

The group moved forward with Tor leading. He targeted the gate and turned the ship towards it. He was surprised at how agile the ship felt and with tentative, gentle movements on the controls he kept the speed down. For the first time in a long while he truly felt inspired. The upgraded parts that Sweety had acquired were corvette grade materials allowing for increased responsiveness and higher boost. Sweety had declined to mention what this meant in terms of acceleration and top speed.

The journey to Black Hole sun was uneventful and it was at this point Serandamancketal made an unexpected announcement.

"All guild ships pay attention. We do not have clearance to cross into Thyn's Abyss and will turn back once we have escorted Tor and his people to the gate," He allowed this to sink in and then continued, "Stay sharp and alert for any Xenon forces, I know the scout ships have nothing to report, but that doesn't mean we're safe. I want comms silence as we cross the sector unless you see something we all need to know about. Tor lead the way." The comm went silent.

The Elites were either side of him and about two hundred meters back. All four Lifters were in a line behind him, and these in turn were flanked on all sides by the Piranhas. The Perseus ships formed the rear guard. Tor engaged the thrusters and began to move forward.

"I have an incoming transmission from Nyeshta on a closed security channel," Sweety announced, "And she does not sound happy."

"Okay mute the sound and give me the abridged version." Tor commented.

The image came up on screen and Tor could see the lips moving whilst Sweety filtered out all the profanity and repeated only the salient points. "After many assertions on the nature of your parentage, she wants to remove certain appendages from your anatomy with something blunt."

"Okay Sweety I get the picture," Tor commented then quietly added, "By the way can she hear me?"

"Yes," Sweety confirmed.

"Thanks for the advanced warning," Tor responded sardonically as Nyeshta glowered at him and started again.

Sweety said nothing and Tor asked, "Well?"

"Oh she was just saying, in a very colourful way, what she is going to do to me when she gets an opportunity," Sweety replied.

"Well I'm glad I'm not the only one who's in trouble," Tor watched as Nyeshta stopped ranting, her eyes narrowed slightly and she made a comment.

"She is demanding to be transported across." Sweety commented cheerfully.

“In the mood she’s in, do you think I’m suicidal?” Tor replied, he then addressed Nyeshta directly, “You do know that Mr Belign was on the station and he was looking for you. If you carry out a check of this ship you will also notice that it’s now registered and has a formal designation. That makes this ship legal.”

Nyeshta still looked angry but she no longer appeared to be talking, he could see her checking on the computer console. Then nodded slowly then spoke slowly and appeared to be much calmer.

“She acknowledges that she may have over reacted and is now requesting politely to be transported across,” Sweety summarised.

“Do you think she could have calmed down that quickly?” Tor asked carefully.

“No.” Sweety replied.

“Do you think she’ll be reasonable?” Tor asked choosing a slightly different tack.

“Probably not,” Sweety kept a surprising degree of cheerfulness in her voice.

“And you’re going to transporter her with or without my agreement, aren’t you.” Tor sighed.

“Better that you face her now then later.” Sweety commented and added, “Transporting.”

There was a brief pause and Nyeshta was back on board the ship, her mood appeared to have improved slightly since the recent communication but she gave Tor an almost resentful look. She looked around briefly and then muttered, “Well at least I’m not completely banned from my own ship.” She placed heavy emphasis on the last three words.

Tor reluctantly got up from the pilot seat, having decided that a modicum of diplomacy was required. He then said with a smile, “I’ve just been keeping it warm for you.”

Nyeshta allowed him to enter the cabin before she went forward to the pilots seat, she spoke up after a brief moment of checking the control panel readouts, “Sweety, next time you decide to transport me to another ship, tell me.” It was a distinct reprimand, and that was it. She made no more comments. In fact she said nothing at all for a long time.

As they made the jump into the Xenon sector Tor positioned himself in the co-pilots seat and took a moment to absorb the view. He glanced at the scanners. Other than a few transport ships there was very little sector activity. The Xenon appeared to have abandoned patrolling the area, but this left it open for pirate raiders to attack convoys.

Probes from both the Split and the Argon kept regular scans on the planetary and solar system activity. The findings were clear that the Xenon had not left and appeared to have no immediate intention of doing so, but what they were doing was still a mystery.

“I have four pirate ships vectoring in on our position,” Sweety disturbed Tors’ thoughts.

He quickly pulled up the sector map but Nyeshta was already turning to meet them head on. Tor felt the surge of the booster force him back into the seat.

The rest of the convoy were emerging through the gate behind them. The two elites peeled to one side as the first of the lifters emerged with the three flanking Piranhas. Two of the Piranhas then took up the pursuit whilst the heavy fighters closed into formation around the Lifter.

Nyeshta engaged the strafe drive and rolled the ship so each of the pirate ships would pass over and under the Defiance. Tor selected both the pirate ships and Sweety designated each one as targets to the turret weapons.

Quickly scanning the data retrieved on both ships he called out, "New generation Bayamons, fifteen mega watts of shields, two gamma and two alpha PACs' each."

Plasma streamed towards the ship and Nyeshta put the ship into an evasive spiral looping the incoming fire. The turret weapons on the Defiance opened up.

Tor made a quick note to check on the two remaining ships. "Last two are new generation Orinocos, fifty mega watts of shielding, twin gamma PACs' and an Alpha PAC rear gun."

Nyeshta said nothing as she pulled the Defiance around to make another pass at the Bayamons. Plasma streamed ahead of them as the turret mounted weapons fired at both ships. The Defiance was notably quicker than the two pirates and with a deft roll of the ship Nyeshta cut in behind the first Bayamon. It slowed and began to take evasive manoeuvres allowing the second ship to close in. Sweety diverted both turret weapons to the second Bayamon as Nyeshta snatched off two shots at the first. The Defiance bucked as the Beta HEPT's fired.

But it was not enough to destroy the ship before Nyeshta was forced to evade the second Bayamons plasma stream.

Sweety was spending time adjusting the guidance system of the turrets as she calculated the amount of offset each of the previously untested weapons required to fire in line with the targeting system. A task not made easy by the virtue of not having a static point of reference to work with. However she felt it prudent not to ask Nyeshta to keep the ship flying straight whilst she made the fine adjustments.

She detected a missile lock, "Warning, incoming missile."

Tor examined the tactical readings and announced, "Make that two silkworms. Two hundred metres and closing."

Sweety diverted one of the turret weapons as Nyeshta took evasive manoeuvres having broken away from the tail of the first Bayamon. Plasma was now flying in all directions and it was only a matter of time before the ship was going to take a serious amount of punishment.

Nyeshta hit the boost as the two missiles closed, the Defiance shot forward on a huge surge of thrust leaving the missiles floundering in its wake. Turning the ship around, she came back for a fast attack on the first Bayamon. The Beta HEPT's plasma met the incoming plasma of the pirate ship as they made a head to head pass. Both ships lurched from the weapons fire and subsequent impacts but the Bayamon had taken heavy shield depletion. It had also been the moment Sweety had hoped for and the turret weapon was now targeting perfectly. It stripped away the last of the shields whilst Nyeshta came around for another pass. The ship lurched again as it took plasma hits from the second Bayamon. Plasma also streamed in from the Orinocos. However these came under attack by the two Piranhas and were forced to break away.

Sweety retargeted the closing missiles and a burst of plasma from the turret weapons saw both explode in quick succession. A single burst from the Beta HEPT's and the first Bayamon went into a final death roll, as explosions tore through the hull. Two of the arms of the cruciform shape span away into space when the engine exploded vaporising the rest of the ship.

Tor almost shouted, "Yes."

There was the flicker of a smile in the corners of Nyeshta's mouth as she swung the ship around to face the remaining Bayamon.

"Incoming missiles," Sweety announced.

The turret weapon systems switched to tracking mode as Nyeshta once again hit the boost to evade them before resuming the hunt for the pirate ship.

The two Orinocos were slower than the Piranhas which continued to harass them. However the tail guns of the pirate ships prevented them from getting more than a couple of shots on target. The top turret of the Defiance fired a short burst as the missile closed to within range. It exploded a few metres from the rear left quarter of the ship. The remaining Bayamon cut across the nose of the Defiance and Nyeshta managed to snatch off a successful shot as she turned in tightly to bring the pirate into the firing line of the main guns.

Both upper and lower turrets tracked the pirate ship firing sporadic bursts as Sweety made every attempt to prevent the weapon systems coil relays from overheating, and hold maximum charge in the capacitor fields.

Tor checked on the convoy, a secondary attack squad had engaged the main group. This time the two War Master Prometheus ships and three Piranhas had engaged the four pirate ships. He felt uneasy as the group was being broken up by small skirmishes. Already he could see on the sector scans another group of four pirate ships vectoring in on the main group.

Nyeshta, snapped off several quick shots, the pilot of the Bayamon lost control with the multiple impacts, and the turret guns found their mark. Seconds later the ship was an incandescent ball of super heated particles.

“Take out the first Orinoco,” Tor ordered and then commented, “Sweety order those Piranhas to assist, but to return to the convoy as soon as it’s destroyed.”

Nyeshta did not look across but brought the Defiance quickly round to bare down on the first Orinoco. Sweety issued the instructions to the Piranha pilots and they focussed their attention on the primary target.

The Beta HEPT’s recoiled and the ship bucked slightly as Nyeshta adjusted position for each shot. The shields of the Orinoco collapsed as it attempted evasive manoeuvres. The Alpha PAC’s tracked the ship until the pilot signalled his withdrawal, then Sweety switched to the targeting to the remaining Orinoco.

The first ship limped clear and headed away with one shield out and all weapon systems off line. Tor scanned the ship and noted it showed a significant amount of hull damage.

Nyeshta showed no signs of concern and was already punishing the shields of the last pirate ship. Returning fire was sporadic and ill aimed. Nyeshta let the turret weapons inflict the damage with only an occasional pass where the Beta HEPT’s inflicted heavy damage to the shields.

Tor reviewed the sector map and his initial fears were confirmed. The small groups of fighters were to draw away the heavy fighters from the main group. It was a divide and conquer tactic, the convoy was already some distance away from the skirmishing ships, but now a significant force of fifteen pirate ships, mainly fast new generation Bayamons and missile laden, new generation Mandalays closed in on the convoy.

“Disengage! Get back to the transports, max speed!” Tor ordered quickly. Nyeshta glanced quickly at the sector map and immediately complied. Sweety allowed the turrets to continue firing on the Orinoco for the few brief moments it took for the Defiance under full boost to reach maximum firing range.

“Give me estimated ETA’s!” Tor called out.

“We will rejoin the convoy in t-minus ninety two Sezura,” Sweety replied, “Pirates will intercept the lead ships in t-minus one hundred and eight Sezura.”

Two of the Perseus ships were already involved in a skirmish and the third was responding to the immediate threat by positioning itself at the head of the convoy.

“Sweety open a channel to all our ships,” Tor spoke up, “All lifters enter a holding pattern at your current location, and be prepared for emergency evasive manoeuvres. All fighters watch for missile launches, and intercept approaching hostile ships.”

The two Perseus ships had worked together with an almost distinctive Paranid fighting style. They had destroyed three of the four pirate ships in quick succession. With concentrated cross fire, the last pirate ship was left mostly crippled and in retreat whilst they too attempted to rejoin the convoy.

One peeled off to assist the Prometheus ships that were still embroiled in heavy conflict with several pirates. A Piranha had been lost and the second was damaged and limping slowly back to convoy. Three new generation Bayamons still remained. The speed difference meant the Bayamons were keeping reasonable distance whilst making crippling passes with the combined firepower of the four plasma cannons. But the War Master ships were still able to make an impression as the both ships responded with a counterattack on the same ship catching it in crossfire.

The Sezuras' ticked by. The Defiance shot past the two Piranhas and Nyeshta switched off the boost limiter then engaged it. Objects close by appeared to blur and the cabin began to shake. Tor felt himself being forced back into his seat with rapidly increasing pressure. It quickly became painful and difficult to breathe until Sweety announced, "Shields low."

Nyeshta released the boost and the reverse stabilizing thrusters engaged bringing the ship down to maximum rated speed. Tor checked the status of the ship. Only a quarter of the ships shield strength remained, however they were now ahead of the convoy and closing rapidly on the lead pirate ships.

Plasma flashes arced through the space before them as the Perseus and Piranhas made the first pass on the enemy vessels. One Mandalay exploded but the rest kept on target, whilst weaving their way past them.

Nyeshta began her turn early and banked the ship hard over, the manoeuvre thrusters reverberating through the cockpit. Several of the pirates fired on the Defiance as they dived and climbed to avoid the ship as it cut across them. The Defiance turret guns sent out streams of plasma cascading in to the darkness. A number of shots found their targets.

Bringing the ship behind the first of the Mandalays, Nyeshta fired twice making a small adjustment between shots. The pirate ship exploded and the force that ripped the ship apart was increased ten fold by the horde of missiles located in the hold.

Sweety caused two others pirate ships to break their attack run. The Perseus closed with a Bayamon.

"Shit," Tor commented, "Missiles loose."

Five silkworms, their rocket propelled engines glowing hurtled towards the transporters which were already beginning to turn in an attempt to avoid them. The missiles already given their initial speed from the Mandalays and Bayamon streaked away and could not be caught.

Nyeshta claimed another Mandalay but Tor acknowledged that another four missiles had been launched. The second Perseus blocked two of the incoming silkworms. The Pegasus, which Tor had almost forgotten about, picked off another and was chasing down a fourth.

One of the freighters was hit by two missiles but remained intact, however there was some hull damage and its shields would not survive a third hit. Two other transports indicated single missile hits on the shields but they were recovering.

The War Master Scout ships also entered into the battle, three of the Mandalays were being hounded by the Discoverers. Nyeshta closed in on a Bayamon, the turret guns holding back any would be assailants as the Beta HEPT's rocked the ship in a succession of rapid bursts.

The Defiance shot through the halo of rapidly cooling particles that once represented the pirate ship. She was already locked on to the next target.

The pirates launched another wave of missiles towards the Lifters, but these were not as well aimed due to the convoys' fighters forcing the pirate ships to veer away. The two Prometheus ships and the third

Perseus had managed to end the fight they were embroiled in. They were now close to joining the main battle.

Nyeshta brought the Defiance swooping in behind another Bayamon. Sweety locked the turrets onto the target but switched fire mode to Nyeshta. The four weapons combined tore apart the ship in a short rapid burst. Soon the surviving pirate ships signalled a withdrawal.

Serandamancketal hailed the convoy, "Let them go!" He ordered as the bulk of the fighters began to pursue, "All ships maintain positions and report in."

The role call started as Tor looked over the sector map and listed his ships. The battle had claimed three and he frowned at the list of damaged vessels. One lifter had been destroyed, two were badly damaged and several of the cargo holds had been breached. Two Piranhas had been lost and five more had sustained varying degrees of damage. The only consolation was that all the heavy M-three fighters were relatively unscathed. Even the Perseus, which had placed itself in the path of the missiles, had recovered its shields.

Serandamancketal called in, "Tor, let me commend you on your swift actions and orders during the battle. My only criticism is that you left a potentially active threat behind you in your haste to protect the Lifters."

"It seemed like the right thing to do!" Tor defended himself.

The big Paranid smiled, "Yes, but I had to order the two Piranhas that you sent on ahead to turn around and finish the job. Anyway you did well in difficult circumstances and should be pleased."

"I would be, if we hadn't lost any ships." Tor replied bitterly.

"That is something you'll have to learn to accept," Serandamancketal commented, "But we need to move on. Unfortunately the Split are likely to be your next biggest headache, rumour has it they have set up border tariffs for all non Split transit ships."

"What? I thought that type of thing was declared illegal?" Tor replied.

"It is, in the core sectors, but the Family Nyj has considerable power out here and they like to antagonise the other races periodically by going against the Free Trade Between Races Charter." Serandamancketal informed and then added with a slight laugh, "It annoys the scales off the Teladi. Anyway must go."

The comm closed. Tor kept the sector map on screen and watched as the ships regrouped and adopted new positions to fill in the gaps. Damaged fighters stayed close to the transports and they were once again moving on.

"Sweety, did you manage to account for all the pilots?" Tor asked.

"No Tor, two pilots are missing." Sweety responded gently.

Tor felt saddened by the news and took a moment before saying quietly, "Sweety can you let the next of kin know, give them my personal condolences and sort out a suitable compensation package."

"It will be done." Sweety confirmed softly.

Tor sighed and noted that Nyeshta had been watching him with a thoughtful expression. She turned her head slowly to gaze at the view outside but said nothing.

The pirates had no new surprises and just before they made the jump Serandamancketal called, "Right Tor this is where we leave you, keep a level head and you'll be fine."

"Thanks Serand. Have a safe journey home. I expect it's going to be a bit strange not having Creed around." Tor replied.

“We shall see,” The big Paranid smiled, “Nyeshta look after yourself and keep the boy safe.”

“Only if he behaves! Say hi to Korec when you see him,” Nyeshta replied.

The Paranid nodded and the comm closed. The Defiance led the two Elites through the jumpgate to Thyn’s Abyss. Tor had few reasons to visit the Split, and as he looked around at the stations he remembered why he kept away.

Close by were a number of sector forces and two capital ships. A wolf glided past and Sweetey reported, “Ship scanned.”

Behind them the rest of Tors’ ships began to arrive. Moments later as they finished regrouping and prepared to make the next leg of the journey the commander of the Raptor hailed them.

“All Argon ships stand down!” The order was abrupt and reflected the unfriendly attitude of the commander, “Who in charge?”

Tor responded and maintained a casual friendly attitude, “I am. How can we be of assistance?”

“I ask questions!” The commander retorted and sneered menacingly. “You have transit duty to pay!”

Tor said, “Okay,” And prevented himself from asking how much.

“It five hundred each fighter and two thousand each freighter. That make thirteen thousand five hundred credits.” The commander demanded.

Tor felt his anger rising, but held it back long enough to reply, “Very well. I shall arrange the credit transfer.”

Sweetey muted the comm, “The commander has sent the payment details, just say the word and I will make the transfer to these thieving bastards.”

Nyeshta glanced away to one side so that Tor did not see her smiling at Sweetys’ last comment.

“Do it,” Tor ordered.

The commander glanced at the console and gave a brief nod, “You go on,” He spoke abruptly and then closed the comm.

Nyeshta needed no second instruction and the Defiance began to move. The rest followed in what proved to be an uneventful crossing. However Tor had just begun to calm down when they made the jump into the sector Family Nyj and once again were obstructed by an M-two Python with its escort of fighters.

Tor was positively incensed at having to pay a second transit fee and had to go lie down. Several of the ships called in to request permission to stop at the shipyard for emergency repairs. He considered it carefully and agreed.

“Your presence is neither welcome or desired.” The automated voice replied to Sweetys docking request.

Nyeshta was briefly certain that Tor was going to do something extremely stupid and order a full attack on the station. She could hear his fingers drumming irritably on the console as she turned the ship away and pressed on towards the next sector.

As they entered Ghinn’s Escape they were stopped again and ordered to pay a third transit fee. Tor used the minimum amount of words possible when addressing the Split commander, just in case he let his real feelings take over and it turn into a slanging match.

He sighed with relief when he saw the Boron stations in the following sector.

“Tor we have a problem,” Sweety announced.

“What is it?”

Sweety continued, “Two of the damaged Piranhas are about to have complete engine malfunctions. I have ordered them to a complete stop and shutdown. We will need to tow them into dock. I would also point out that the second lifter is also showing signs of worsening stress fractures. The probability of complete hull failure before reaching the Ocean of Fantasy shipyard is about eighty-five percent.”

“Can it be patched up in one of these stations?” Tor asked looking out of the cockpit.

“The trading station has a basic maintenance dock,” Sweety replied.

“Do you think they could cope with the fighters?” Tor asked optimistically.

“The nature of the repairs would require the expertise and parts usually only found at the shipyard.” Sweety replied.

“Okay. Have the lifter stop at the trading station. Also have the two Elites and a pair of Piranhas stay with it.” Tor was looking at the ship listing.

Nyeshta had already stopped the ship whilst Sweety acted on Tors instructions. This had been an eventful trip so far and they were still a number of sectors away from their final destination, Tor was really hoping it would all be worth it.

A few Mizura passed before the crippled Piranhas were ready to be towed. The lifter had successfully managed to dock at the trading station with its escort ships.

Once again the convoy made slow but steady progress across the sector. Tor went to the rear cabin and rested, for a moment he contemplated switching on the game console for a touch of escapism but decided to lie back on the bunk. Moments later he was fast asleep.

He was shaken awake by Nyeshta, “What?”

“We’ve arrived and Sweety needs you to find out when the TL is due to ship out the Silicon Mine,” She commented in a much more relaxed tone than Tor was expecting.

Tor sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bunk and gave his eyes a brief rub. He had not been asleep long enough to feel refreshed. “So why didn’t she send you?” He asked.

“I’m needed here to fit the last parts Sweety feels are needed to make this ship more reliable.” She answered quietly.

“Seems okay to me. It got us here without going wrong,” Tor exclaimed.

“That is because you can not see what I can see.” Sweety called out.

Tor just sighed and pushed himself to his feet then opened the airlock doors, then closed the outer one quickly as the strong smell of ammonia flooded into the cabin. Nyeshta tapped him on the shoulder and as he turned she gave him a set of nasal filters.

“You’ll need these.” She commented with a slight hint of a smirk.

Tor looked at her and frowned, “You could have said something before I opened the door.”

She smiled innocently and in a soft silky tone said, “Really, I though you already knew about Boron stations.”

Tor was momentarily lost in his own little dream world and some primitive instinct inside began to wake up. He had spent so long being angry at Nyeshta that he had never really taken the time to look at her, and now that she was close by he was patently aware of how attractive she was and the smile just caused his heart to beat that little bit faster and his mouth to dry out.

Sweety had been monitoring Tors' vital signs and did the computer equivalent of a cough before saying loudly, "Hate to disturb this moment, but Tor please run along and find out when the TL is going to be available."

Tor replied, "I'm on my way," He fitted the nasal filters and once again opened the outer airlock door and stepped out onto the docking platform. The door closed and sealed itself behind him. Taking his bearings he spotted a sign, the characters faded and changed then brightened to say 'Visitor Enquiries' then faded down to change into the characters of another race.

He made his way along the gantry and looked around. All the damaged ships were at this level. Maintenance spars hung from overhanging beams and robots were scanning the ships. After a brief while they connected the spars to damaged panels and as each section of outer hull was cut free the spars retracted back. Tor had to admire the efficiency as he leant against the guard rail, he spent several more Mizura watching before he remembered to go and ask about the TL.

Nyeshta had waited for a brief moment after the airlock door had closed. She picked up one of the consoles control pads and turned it over thoughtfully. She asked, "Sweety, what am I doing here?"

"Currently you are pretending to examine a control pad." Sweety replied.

"I would expect a normal computer just to say I'm examining a control pad," Nyeshta paused and then added, "But not you. Why?"

"Ask me an easy question." Sweety replied quietly.

"You understood my first question and the motivation behind it, so why don't you try answering that?" Nyeshta gently put the pad down and drifted back towards the cockpit where the technical datapad was still hooked up to the console.

"I take it you mean the ambiguous question that can be answered in numerous ways including the physical, biological, theological, metaphysical, or perhaps you are suspicious and want to know if I or Tor have some other motivation?" Sweety responded.

"The last one suits me best," Nyeshta sat down.

"I would say that Tor has no particular motivation to keep you here, but if Creed was still around he would not want to see you murdered." Sweety replied.

"But Creed isn't here and there's a very strong possibility that he's dead. So he could have dropped me off at any number of stations," Nyeshta commented, "Unless someone advised him against it."

"Tor needs a technical advantage over his potential enemies. This ship will provide that advantage," Sweety replied.

"I notice you're not answering my question," Nyeshta reminded Sweety casually knowing that the AI could never be intimidated.

Sweety continued, "I do not know what lies ahead of us, but I have made a study into the archives of similar ventures into Xenon captured sectors, and made some analysis of those that survived and those that did not. Those that escaped exhibited a variety of technical skills, fighting ability and an instinct for survival. However a lack in any one of these and the probability of survival falls by a significant number."

“Tell me, did you try and give this upbeat message to Tor?” Nyeshta replied warily, “Because you’re not exactly selling it to me.”

“I do not need to sell it to you,” Sweety exclaimed, “You are on the Boron wanted list for an incident in Lucky Planets if my records are correct, and with the Argon for a number of crimes. In fact you would find it difficult to live anywhere without someone coming after you.”

“And your point is?” Nyeshta asked bitterly.

“This is your opportunity to live a relatively quiet life. No one would expect you to be working for Tor. The idea about not having to keep running away from the people that you have upset must have quite a strong appeal.” Sweety commented soothingly.

Nyeshta sighed and with a hint of sad reflection said, “I’m not convinced you’ve told me the whole truth, but you are right, I am tired of the running.”

“Then you will need to help me guide Tor, he will need people around him that he can trust. As his people will need to trust in him if the worst happens.” Sweety commented.

“You sound like you care for him a lot?” Nyeshta looked slyly at the technical pad.

“I’m a series five personality chip.” Sweety replied.

“Ah,” Nyeshta smiled, her green eyes seemed to sparkle in the cockpit light and then she commented, “Well I guess we all have our little problems then.”

Tor walked up to the enquiry desk and waited patiently whilst the Boron assistants gave directions and advise to those visitors that had arrived ahead of him. After a short while one of the assistance glided along the desk and stopped. The big friendly eyes looked out through the liquid that filled the bowl fronted environment suit, and as the mouth moved the short tentacles about the Borons’ head waved gently. The translator on the suit deciphered the signals and said, “Hooloo, good day to you sir, how can we help?” The voice bubbled gently, and had a damp quality to it.

Tor replied, “I’m Tor Grall and I have scheduled your Orca to pick up a Silicon Mine to be delivered to sector X-four.”

The Boron face smiled, “Welcome Mr. Grall,” The sentence was broken up with a slight bubbling noise and untranslatable, gentle squawk, “Let me see when she is due.”

Tor watched as information was projected onto the Borons’ visor by an internal HUD projector. The tentacles appeared to select and scroll through listings and menus. All the while the creature generated gentle aquatic noises and clicks.

After a few brief Sezura the HUD switched off and the assistant smiled, “The transport will arrive in ten Mizura and it will take another fifty Mizura before loading is complete. We have rooms suitable for you to relax in while you wait. If you visit the forward suite it has wonderful views onto our home world.”

Tor returned the smile, “Thanks, I’ll be sure to visit them.” He turned away and the assistant drifted along to the next visitor.

Returning to the Defiance he opened the outer airlock door, as he stepped inside he found Nyeshta was playing chess. The airlock sealed behind him.

“Any luck?” Tor asked.

“This is chess Tor. It is a game of strategy, which involves planning, anticipation and observation.”
Sweety responded.

“Oh and are you playing against each other?” Tor asked.

“Yes.” Sweety replied.

“Watch it Nye, Sweety cheats, before you know it there’ll be fifty of those little blobby things attacking you from all directions.” Tor observed.

Nyeshta sat back and looked at him, “You don’t know this game very well do you?”

Tor shook his head and Nyeshta frowned, “Then shut up, I’m trying to concentrate.” She turned back to the holo projection and looked thoughtfully at the pieces.

“Okay, well I’ll just go for a wander then,” Tor said briskly, and added, “Orcas’ going to be here in ten Mizura and loaded in sixty. Just in case you were wondering.”

He turned around and opened the airlock door. Behind him Nyeshta highlighted a bishop and moved it across the board to protect a knight. The airlock door once again closed as he stood on the landing ramp and taking his bearings he ambled towards the visitor centre.

The station was busy and a number of Argon visitors approached him. As he started to avoid the group an official looking young man called out, “Mr. Grall?”

Tor stopped suddenly and with a slight hint of concern he replied, “Yes?” There was something about the stance and the look in the mans eyes that hinted at Argon Intelligence Service.

“We haven’t met before but Mr. Belign sends his regards. My name is Pors Tullet, these gentlemen with me also belong to the agency and it is our understanding that we will be working with you for the foreseeable future,” Pors looked at Tor for some acknowledgement of the arrangement.

Tor had a sinking feeling and was only grateful they had not been on the dockside to greet him, particularly as Nyeshta was on board.

Chapter 9. X-sectors

Tor nodded and Pors smiled revealing a set of bright white teeth against the dark tan of his skin. He was of similar height to Tor and of slightly slimmer build. The graded hair cut and pressed, crease free, regulation style clothes gave him the appearance of a military man.

Tor took a moment to cast his eyes over the rest of the agents and most could easily have blended into the general public unnoticed. This was slightly disconcerting to Tor and made him aware that he needed to spend some time getting to recognise these men by sight. Another thought struck him that he only had Pors word he knew Caran but that did not mean he was an agent.

His hand drifted towards his blaster and he rested his palm nonchalantly on the butt, Pors eyes flicked from Tors' face to his hand then back to his face completely unfazed and looking relaxed, "Well now you've introduced yourself, I'd like to see some ID!"

"Caution is the better part of valour Mr Grall," Pors nodded, then he carefully and slowly he opened his jacket, ensuring Tor could see both his hands at all times he held open one side to reveal a pocket from which he pulled out a small leather bound agents badge. "You recognise this of course?"

Tor reached out his free hand and Pors, still smiling, handed him the badge, he examined it slowly and flipped open the cover. Inside was a comms unit, he did not have the expertise to know if it was genuine, but he would have to believe that if these men wanted to take him prisoner or kill him then they would have done so already.

"I'm still some way off from getting the Crystal Fab in place," Tor commented as he handed back the badge.

"As we are fully aware Mr. Grall, perhaps we should continue in private, shall we return to your ship?" Pors asked.

Tor felt a sense of rising panic and he needed an excuse not to go back, "I need to get a bite to eat and something to drink. It's been a long trip."

The agent thought for a moment and looked back to his colleague who whispered something. Pors nodded and looked back at Tor, "Understood, we know just the place."

Pors guided him towards one of the shuttle lifts, Tor kept glancing around to try and estimate how many agents were with him. He counted ten, two took the previous shuttle lift, six crammed themselves into the lift with him.

He now spotted they were all wearing an ear piece and he commented to Pors, "Expecting trouble?"

Pors glanced across and raised an eyebrow, "Not from you Mr. Grall. But there have been a few unsavoury characters on the station recently, Bloodhearts' people."

Tors pulsed raced, "Ah."

"The Boron are good but they don't screen every ship that docks," Pors continued, "So we're here to provide a little extra protection."

The shuttle lift stopped and the doors opened, several agents stepped out first and dispersed before Pors led Tor towards a food hall, he noticed several of the agents had commandeered a small cluster of tables next to the windows. They sat next to the window and Tor looked out on the blue ocean world below as it shone and glistened in the light of the Ocean of Fantasy sun. The weather systems towards the polar caps occasionally flashed with tremendous lightning storms.

"That's quite a view." Tor commented.

“Yes it is.” Pors replied in agreement as he looked down.

Tors’ stomach rumbled and he turned to the table menu, he selected the Argon language and chose several interesting sounding items and a Batral ale.

Pors also ordered a drink, and waited until they arrived before beginning to talk business, “I guess you want to know why we’re here.”

“That would be a good start.” Tor responded casually, he was relaxing.

“As you know the Service has arranged for you to accommodate not only our good selves on the Crystal Fab, but also a number of additional military personnel that have volunteered to help safe guard the security of the region.” Pors started.

Tor nodded slowly, “It was discussed.” The previous conversation was a distant memory as he tried to remember some of the details.

“I have a list of names here which you can look at and it will be transferred to your ship.” Pors handed over a data pad.

Tor began to scroll through the list as the agent continued, “Naturally most of these will be based on the Crystal Fab to support the agency. Ten of them have been allocated to the Silicon Mine in X-four. Their names have been separated out and shown at the bottom of the list.”

Tor continued to scroll down then stopped and moved back up a few names before raising his eyebrows.

“Someone you know?” Pors asked having been watching Tors’ reaction.

The name Tris Matayah appeared as one of the pilots allocated to the Crystal Fab, he did not answer straight away, “Possibly, depends on how many Tris there are in the universe.” He continued down to the bottom ten names but did not recognise any of them. “So where are these pilots at the moment?”

“They are currently stationed in Getsu Fune. We have a secure outpost in the sector.”

Tors’ food turned up on a hover tray that settled itself down on the table in front of him. The cover opened and the sweet aroma of Stott Spices gently wafted from the steaming food. The Boron had taken a great deal of effort in catering for the various races and although nearly all of their traditional dishes were served cold, they had come to understand the Argon preferred their food boiled or burnt in varying degrees. The loss of flavour was generally compensated for by the addition of the spices.

“Go on.” Tor commented as he picked up a fork and began to try the dish in front of him. He waved his hand in front of his mouth as the superheated fish meat attempted to scold the inside of his mouth.

“Careful Mr. Grall, the chefs here tend to overheat some of their dishes! Give it a couple of minutes to cool.” Pors looked out of the shielded windows at the ocean world below.

Tor took a long sip of his ale then let out a long satisfied sigh.

“I will attempt to bring you up to speed with the economics of the new sectors,” Pors started, “A number of cartels have moved in. This is still an under developed region and there are a few power struggles to gain total economic control. The Argon military and the service do not have the resources or manpower available to curb these activities.”

There was a momentary pause as Pors took a sip of his juice drink, “I have no doubt you will be approached by the cartels offering a hand of friendship. But those offers will come at a price, and if you want to do business then you will have to make deals or you will find it very difficult to buy or sell anything.”

Tor looked pensive, he reminded himself of how he felt when being menaced by the Split, “How would it be if I imposed my own force of will?”

“You’re not here to start a war Mr. Grall. That would make life difficult for all of us and needless to say the Service and the Military would remove our support. We will recommend one of the guilds that you need to ally yourself with.”

Tors’ jaw tightened he did not like the sound of this, but he had come this far and he was not going to turn back now. “Okay!” Looking at the plate of food, he gave it another hesitant try and was satisfied it had cooled down enough to eat.

Pors continued, “Mr. Grall I have to say that the apparent absence of any sign of the Khaak worries us. It is extremely important that we get ourselves established and gathering information. Your station is to be a base of operation and we need to get our equipment in place and operational as soon as possible.”

Tor put his fork to one side, finished chewing, looked at his time piece and said, “I have an Orca here currently loading a Silicon Mine, unless that is someone’s changed the order without my permission, so what are you trying to say?”

“No your orders to the Orca has not changed but we have arranged for a jumpdrive capable Mammoth to deliver the Crystal Fab as soon as you make the payment transfer,” Pors informed.

Tor carefully looked at the fork. He took the time to tell himself that the agent was only the messenger, and somewhere inside he felt annoyed. “You mean to tell me that I and my people could have docked in a jumpdrive capable TL and saved ourselves the inconvenience and losses we incurred getting here.” The words came out quickly. His elbows now rested on the table and the tips of his fingers were bridged. He looked straight ahead and his voice was even and calm.

Pors knew Tors’ feelings simply from this stance and body language, “TL’s seldom have space for passengers. Your people would still have had to fly here.”

“Well if you want to have the station up and running then you had better get your people to protect it during construction.” Tor retorted quietly.

The agents smiled slowly, but this was not the time to become confrontational. He would have to agree, even if it meant the possibility of detection by the other station owners that the military and the service were there in significantly higher numbers than previously thought.

Tor allowed his annoyance to fester and took another sip of ale before resuming his meal. One thing he would need to do is get some supplies and provisions. With the agents watching him it would mean that Nyeshta leaving the ship would be impossible but he had to look casual and discreet. As he finished his meal he looked at the agent, “Okay, where’s the Mammoth stationed and I’ll arrange for the credit transfer?”

“Thank you Mr. Grall, the TL is in the Light of Heart shipyard,” Pors replied.

Tor held up the data pad and asked, “Does this also have the agents’ names on it?”

“No Mr. Grall, for security reasons you understand,” Pors answered, “You will be introduced to them personally.”

Tor handed back the pad and took a look at his time piece. He realized he had a long time to wait before the Orca would be ready. Somehow he needed to kill some time without returning back to the ship, and as he contemplated his next move he ordered another Batral ale.

Pors looked vaguely perplexed, before commenting firmly, “Perhaps Mr. Grall you should return to your ship and give the authorization for the Crystal Fab to be delivered.”

Tor looked at the agent with an unhurried expression and responded, "Hand me back your pad and I'll comm the ship from here."

The agent looked uncertain for a moment then pushed the pad back across the table. Tor picked it up and selected comms mode before dialling in the ship's registration.

Sweety answered, "Greetings, you have reached the answering service for Tor Grall please leave a message and I will deliver it when he returns."

Tor smiled wryly and replied, "Hi Sweety, it's me and I need you to do me a favour."

Sweety maintained the formal tone, "What is it you require?"

Tor made the request and Sweety acknowledged. He closed the comm and handed the pad back to Pors with the question, "Satisfied?"

The agent gave a slight nod. Tor took another long sip of his drink and let out a satisfied sigh of contentment, "You know it's nice to be able to sit back and relax after a tough trip," He continued rambling on conversationally, "And after a few hours in the pilot seat it's good just to be able to get up, walk around, to see other people and hear them talking. It makes you realize there's more to life."

"Be thankful you're not an interplanetary freighter pilot Mr. Grall. They tend to spend months in transit without anyone but themselves for company." Pors commented.

"I don't know how anyone could cope with that." Tor commented as he tried to envisage months of solitude.

"These days pilots opt for advance stasis and sleep nearly the whole journey. Which is fine, unless you're expecting trouble," Pors responded.

Tor asked curiously, "Is there still much of that?"

"Unfortunately yes and the interplanetary pirates have been advancing their ships specifically for capturing freighters intact." Pors replied still watching the storms on the planet below.

Tor continued to be interested and asked, "How?"

"It takes a few minutes to wake up from advanced stasis, in which time a tracking pirate ship, that we've come to dub 'the Hole', quickly catches up with the target freighter. As it engages its reverse thrusters two bay doors open, high energy plasma fire strips away the shields and then the freighter is hit with EMP cannons which knock out the ship's systems. The freighter is then gripped by two clamping arms and pulled into the hold." Pors took a sip of his juice.

Tor looked slightly alarmed for a moment, "Well I hope they haven't come up with something similar in the sectors."

"Not yet, but we think it's just a matter of time," Pors commented casually, "Trouble is, that a ship like the Hole is too easy to detect in local space. It's just too big for sector forces to ignore."

"Well that's a comforting thought," Tor responded but with a slight hint of pessimism as many sector forces seemed to allow pirates to traverse through.

There was a momentary silence as each man drank. Tor glanced around with a growing sense of curiosity and asked, "As impressed as I am to think I deserve such attention, but why are there ten of you?"

Pors continued to watch the planet, “To protect you. Although the Argon government has extremely strong relations with the Boron, it doesn’t mean we can take over their station security for the benefit of individuals such as yourself.”

As sincere as the agent sounded Tor was not overly convinced. He let his mind wander briefly and a creeping doubt began to rise about the safety of Nyeshta. Perhaps Caran had looked into his story, but then again someone like Caran could not just walk onto a pirate station and ask questions. No, Tor told himself, but he was in the service and they would have spies on board. After a few questions Caran would know she had been sold soon after her arrival, a few more questions and he would also know she was taken away in an Elite.

There were too many coincidences and the ease at which those could be made to point directly at him caused Tor to shift uncomfortably in his seat. Tor could feel his insides knotting themselves together. He sipped his ale carefully his eyes fixed on the planet below, the glass pressed hard against his teeth to steady his hand and prevent any tremble from reflecting in the liquid. Reflecting carefully on his conversation with Caran and all those things he did not say, knowing full well that if they found her on the Defiance that he would once again look into that disfigured face and this time it would not be so pleasant. The only consolation was that it was all coincidence, the ship was under an alternative registration and Sweetie had masked the transaction and altered the ships logs. Somewhere inside the knots became tighter as he told himself that these things would not matter to Caran and one way or another he would extract a confession.

He finished the drink in one last gulp and put the glass down. He tried to look calm and relaxed.

“Are you okay?” Pors asked with a hint of concern.

Tor quickly glanced across, “What?”

“You just seemed to lose your colour. I was wondering if everything is okay?” Pors asked again.

Tor thought rapidly, “Oh yeah I’m fine now, just something in the food tried to disagree with me. Perhaps a touch too spicy for my taste.” Tor rubbed his stomach sympathetically by way of show.

Pors nodded slowly in understanding, “Yes, unfortunately in their attempt to please the Boron chefs do occasionally get a little carried away.”

Tor glanced at his time piece and rose from his seat, “Time is pressing and I need to get some supplies.”

The agent neither hesitated nor advised against this, but simply stood up at a measured rate, “You tell me what you want and I’ll show you where to get them.”

Tor instinctively knew he would not be escaping from the presence of the agents, and if he tried it would raise their suspicions. Somewhere inside he was hoping the element of doubt about his potential guilt would mean they were here to watch over him, to see if she was with him and establish his guilt by direct association rather than by pre-emptive arrest and search.

Needless to say he purchased more clothes for himself, and numerous jars and sachets of ready meals. Pors watched with interest as Tor ordered three crates of ales to be delivered to the ship.

“That’s a lot of ale! I hope you won’t be drinking it whilst flying.” Pors commented.

Tor smiled and glanced at his time piece with only three Mizura to go before the scheduled departure he felt that the crunch time had come for him to return to the ship. He looked up at Pors and replied, “That’s to celebrate the opening of the mine.”

With the goods on the back of a hover cart they made their way back down to the docking platform. The Piranhas were finished and had already launched. Only the two Elites and the Defiance remained.

“Looks like your people are ready to go.” Pors commented as his eyes passed over the lines of docked ships.

“They’ll be gathered outside ready for the order.” Tor replied confidently, but now his nerves were beginning to take hold as with every step they approached the ship.

He stopped by the door and said as cheerfully as he could, “Well thanks for the tour. I expect I’ll see you again soon.”

“I’m sure you will, once you’re safely on board we’ll be setting out to join our companions in Getsu Fune.” Pors and the other agents waited patiently, mostly looking around at the crowd for anyone suspicious.

With his heart thumping hard, Tor placed his hand over the palm scanner and the doors opened. He stepped in quickly to obscure the view of anyone that could be peering into the cabin. Nyeshta was not there. Tor breathed a sigh of relief, the adrenaline rush washed over him in a wave of relief. He did everything he could not to smile as he unloaded the cart and let it glide back out of the ship.

Pors simply smiled and showed no sign of being disappointed not to have found Nyeshta. Tor wondered if he had just let his imagination take over, that the men were there specifically to look after his safety and not as he had previously thought to ensnare him.

With a cheerful wave he closed the airlock doors and once they had sealed he let the moment of relief pass over him once again.

“Okay, Tor it is time to leave.” Sweety commented.

He turned around and wandered into the cabin and sat in the pilot seat. Tor asked casually, “So did you get everything you wanted?”

“All installed and functioning within acceptable limits,” Sweety replied, “Departure clearance approved.”

The clamps released and the Defiance under the station guidance computers moved into the flow of departing ships. The two Elites were somewhere behind.

“You know Sweety, I’m rather glad to be leaving.” He commented. The outer blast doors of the station were already open and the glow of distant stars filled the view. Ahead of him he could make out the bulk of the Orca which was already making its way out of the sector. Amongst his own formations of fighters and freighters were two new Dolphins.

He pulled up the details and smiled as they both were filled to capacity with energy cells and the life blood of the yet to be constructed Silicon Mine that resided in the belly of the Orca.

“So are you going to ask where I am?” Nyeshta commented in his ear.

Tor almost leapt a foot out of his chair and put his hand against his chest from the shock, “For fuck sake,” He gasped.

“Yes I am well, thanks for asking.” Nyeshta smiled sweetly, “Now that you’ve warmed my seat perhaps you should vacate it.”

Tor, still suffering from the shock, complied with the request. As Nyeshta sat down in the seat Tor found the words he was looking for, “Where the hell did you come from?”

Nyeshta looked around in feigned surprise, “I’m surprised at you Tor. If you hadn’t noticed this ship has a small restroom at the back of the cabin, next to the rear hold. Big enough to hide in without being cramped.”

Tor looked perplexed, “Shit. I thought Sweety had transported you to another ship.”

“Ah, I’m touched,” Nyeshta smiled and commented, “but that would have been a last resort. Station security monitors for unauthorised transportations.”

Tor felt as though he was being mocked but inside this did not matter, the situation had passed and no one had come out of it badly, and he commented gently, “It’s good to see you Nye.”

There was a degree of sincerity in his tone that Nyeshta could not fail to miss. She hesitated and gave Tor a look of curiosity and the smile softened from the forced look, before saying quietly, “Yeah, it’s good to see me too.” She concentrated her attention on the space outside the ship.

“Let’s keep with the Orca,” Tor instructed quietly and deposited himself in the co-pilot seat and he smiled, “Sweety do you have the military assigned pilot list?”

“Yes, on screen.” Sweety replied.

Tor read down the list, before asking, “Any chance you can reassign these pilots?”

“Is there anyone in particular that you would like re-assigned?” Sweety asked.

Tor smiled, “You know Sweety I think you’ve already analysed the list so why don’t you tell me?”

Sweety replied, “As much as I would like to I am unable to comply. After the credit transaction for the Crystal Fab the Mammoth has already made the jump and all fighters are already on their way to protect the construction site.”

“You mean the station kit has already been deployed?” Tor asked with a degree of concern.

“That is exactly what I am saying,” Sweety confirmed.

Tor was feeling perplexed, the Secret Service had jumped ahead, “What’s the status of the station?”

“The Mammoth is preparing to depart now your fighters have entered the sector,” Sweety reported.

An urge to go and visit the site came over Tor, “Sweety, who can I make second in command that the others will take orders from?”

There was a momentary silence as Sweety examined all the pilot records, “I have two candidates. The most qualified is Broden Falstarn. He is an ex-Argon Navy Captain, released from service with commendations and has been with the War Master Guild for the last four Jazura. The second is Moda Faba, a former Boron Navy Flight Leader, also released from service with commendations and the Heltak Fin Medal for Bravery but he has less combat experience and is only a recent addition to the Guild, with six Mazuras service.”

“A Boron? I didn’t realize we had any Boron with us,” Tor commented.

“Perhaps you should read through your employee list more carefully,” Sweety replied gently with an undertone of sarcasm.

It passed Tor by as he scrolled through the screen menus in front of him, “Okay, get me Broden.”

The screen flickered and the image of Broden appeared. Tor could see the military influence almost immediately as the man almost snapped a salute when Tor appeared on the HUD at the far end.

“Sir?” Broden snapped formally before Tor had begun to speak.

“There’s no need to be so formal, “ Tor started, the man relaxed, his eyes looked clear and sharp, the squared off jaw showing a light stubble almost as long as the close cropped hair on the top of his head. Tor had little doubt that if the man stood up he would be broad, reasonably tall and probably spent an unhealthy amount of time doing exercise, “I need a second in command and, having taken advice, our records indicate that you are the best qualified for the position. So I’m asking you if you want the job.”

Broden took a moment to consider his reply, “What will the job entail Sir?”

“I need you to take control of the rest of the pilots and give orders in my absence. I also need you to help organise them and give me advice as to any additional needs,” Tor said as he tried to work out in his own mind what he really wanted and as he finished he was not certain that he had explained himself very well.

Broden gave a slight smile of understanding, “Thank you Sir, I accept your offer.”

Tor smiled, “Excellent I need to run on ahead and review the construction of the Crystal Fab in X-seven.”

Broden looked perplexed, “I would suggest you have an escort Sir.”

“That’s okay I doubt there are any ships of any significance that can keep up with this one,” Tor said confidently and closed the comm, “Okay Sweety, Nyeshta do you think we can handle any trouble we might encounter if we head off on our own?”

“I think so,” Nyeshta replied.

Sweety delayed in answering and then said, “I think we should have the Pegasus scout ahead of us.”

Tor thought for a moment, “Okay, who’s the pilot?”

Sweety replied, “Sholetinmanckesala.”

Tor hesitated, “Okay, do you think he’ll object if I call him Shole?”

Nyeshta mentioned, “You’re probably better off using Sho.”

Tor glanced across but Nyeshta was looking out of the cockpit screen, “Okay Sweety, get Sho on the comm.”

The young Paranid appeared on the viewer, “Yes Sir?”

“Sho, I need you to scout ahead of me, we’re going to visit the Crystal Fab construction site in sector X-seven,” Tor instructed.

“Acknowledged Sir,” The Pegasus turned and suddenly with a bright flare from the engine was hurtling away from the group.

Tor commanded, “Sweety, open the comm to the rest of our ships.”

Sweety replied, “Comm open.”

“All ships this is Tor, it looks like the Crystal Fab has arrived ahead of schedule and is currently being deployed in the sector currently known as X-seven. The Pegasus and I are going to visit the construction site. In the meantime Broden Falstarn has been appointed to take command in my absence,” Tor waited a moment to see if there were any voices of dissent, “I will still be contactable and if a situation arises inform me immediately. See you all in sector X-four.” He closed down the comm.

“Let’s go.” Tor instructed as he looked around and he could have been certain he saw the faintest of smiles on Nyeshtas’ face.

They peeled away from the rest of the group and looped over the top of the Orca at full speed. The ship was closing rapidly with the gate, and Sweety announced, "Sho reports the sector ahead is clear and he is progressing into Menelaus Paradise."

The Defiance crossed the activation threshold and the jump tunnel opened. Moments later the boosters had been engaged and Tor felt himself being pressed hard into his seat until the limiter cut in to indicate they had reached maximum velocity. Tor spent a few moments looking at the galactic map then switched to his accounts. He frowned at how depleted his finances had become. Only a quarter of his original funds remained since he started this venture. However the Bakery with its own dedicated accounts appeared to be very healthy with a regular turn over of stock.

Having crossed into Menelaus Paradise they headed on towards the Getsu Fune gate. The Pegasus was already reporting the route ahead was clear and in a few brief Mizura the Defiance had made the jump. Tor felt a twinge of nervousness as they exited the sector and jumped into X-two. There were a number of established stations here having been one of the first sectors to be developed. Sweety had guided the Pegasus to travel through the X-four sector. Tor had almost expected the gates here to look different to the ones in the core sector but was disappointed to see they were identical.

As the Defiance made the jump, Tor thought he saw something stuck to the back face of the gate. The jump tunnel filled the view and his attention was suddenly drawn to the scene in front of him.

"Wow," It was the only word he could think of. The gates in X-four were much further apart than in the other sectors but the journey seemed to last no time at all. Both Tor and Nyeshta appeared to be mesmerised by the view of giant gas clouds flashing with ion storms. The rich colours of the clouds shimmered in the light of the condensing planets and stars.

A few of the astral bodies that were beyond the centre simply reflected the light of the forming stars, the gaseous elements too cold to form anything more than frozen gas planets.

Massive flares, millions of k's long flashed through the nebula. The dense centres of the two suns, with their vast spirals of collapsing gases, shone bright white.

In amongst the nebula a number of asteroids, whose material that had once been near to the core of the previous sun, had been flung far out in a giant ring by the explosion. In time many of these would succumb to the ever increasing gravitational attraction of the major bodies and be pulled into new positions or into the forming planets and suns.

The journey through X-five and into X-seven were by comparison very unremarkable. Sweety guided them towards the station construction site and as they approached three of the ships broke away from the various flights encircling the basic structure.

"Incoming message," Sweety announced.

Nyeshta moved and hurriedly left the cabin saying, "Hold it Sweety till I'm out of sight. Tor the pilot seat's all yours."

Tor needed no second instruction, "Okay Sweety patch it through."

"Mr. Grall, welcome I am Captain Mileton Coursade. Let me escort you around the perimeter of the site." The captain was a middle aged man with short cropped hair and a neatly trimmed beard. But that was as much as Tor could make out from the holo-projection.

As Tor followed the Elite, the two Busters dropped in just behind and on either side of him. Tor rolled the ship so he could see the station better.

Mileton gave a brief commentary, "As you can see the core of the station is now in place. The primary shield generators for the station have been activated, and are running on auxiliary power until the main

generator can be brought on line. This gives protection to the construction robots from any hostile attack, and is why we have to stay at this distance from the core. Any closer and we risk hitting the shields.”

Tor could see the area was filled with construction robots. The largest construction machines were extruding the huge beams that provided the superstructure of the station. Tor saw the source of the material as two containers that had been separated from the massive kit.

Mileton broke Tors’ thoughts with the comment, “As we come around to this side you can see where the docking bay is currently being constructed.”

Much of the docking tunnel was now complete and the outer bulkhead doors were in place. Additional strengthening struts were visible beneath as the outer hull wall was being attached. Tor was impressed at the speed of construction and every moment he watched the station grow. In the zero G environment two robots were manoeuvring the first of the crystal fabrication units into position whilst the platform it would eventually stand on was still being extruded.

“How long will it take before you’ll be able to dock?” Tor asked.

Mileton replied, “It’ll be another two Tazura before they finish the inner and outer hulls. Probably another Tazura before all the power grids are charged and the in station systems are fully operational. We should be able to dock before then but it’ll be a bit rough and ready.”

“Just let me see what the progress is with the Orca,” Tor switched the comm to another frequency, “Sweety how’s our Silicon Mine?”

“The Orca will arrive in the X-four sector in one Stazura.” Sweety confirmed.

On the shipyard in Family Nyj, Feran was being guided towards the station commanders reception chambers. He smiled cruelly at the frightened faces of the slaves as they scuttled down the corridors to perform whatever duties their master had ordered.

The Split officer that guided him occasionally kicked or struck any slave that stepped or crawled into his way. The doors to the chambers were not the plain lacquered metal doors that slid to one side, but heavy wooden doors embellished with a carving of the family insignia, and were mounted on heavy iron hinges. It was a pretentious symbol of the families’ heritage. Two slaves grasped the iron rings and then pulled the doors open. They bowed low to them as they approached.

“You wait,” The officer stated in his harsh voice and then left Feran. The doors closed shutting him inside the chamber and made a satisfying booming sound as they finally met.

Feran looked around at the trophies on the walls with its many shrunken Boron heads the flippers pinned out to give the preserved face a rictus grin.

A soft low voice commented, “They look so much happier dead, don’t you think?”

Feran did not turn around, “Campaign trophies?”

The voice replied, “There would be too little wall space and too many to count if I hung all of them up. So I only keep the admirals heads,” There was a pause, “It’s good to see you again Feran, though I must say our families bonds seem to have grown weaker over the past few Jazura.”

Feran turned around and looked at Jolak Nyj, a Split man almost twenty Jazura older than Feran. He was still very much in the prime of life and showing little sign of his true age.

“You are looking well,” Feran observed.

“Better than you my friend,” Jolak stepped into the circle of soft chairs that encircled an open fire hearth in the centre of the room, “So I hear that High Councillor Twh has chosen you for the outer sectors.”

It was old news but Jolak had not had the opportunity until now to discuss it with Feran. Feran moved at a leisurely pace towards the seats. He knew there was no danger here and could relax, at which point he dropped down and rested in the soft cushions. There was little heat from the fire, it was more for effect than function and again was reminiscent of ancient times on the Split home world.

“Yes, but it is not as much of an honour as it has been made out to be.” Feran felt bitter and it reflected in his voice.

“What have you been told about the Khaak?” Jolak asked in his quiet voice.

At that moment two servants shuffled into the chamber and with heads bowed guided in several platters of food and hover trays of drinks. Feran's muscles twitched at the seemingly uninvited interruption.

“Calm yourself, they will be gone soon enough,” The last few words were hard edged and directed at the slaves. With a fleeting look of terror they moved as quickly as they could in placing the food and drinks next to each of them before hurrying out of the chamber.

“Perhaps you think I treated them too leniently?” Jolak commented as he picked up a dish that held some meat still oozing blood.

Feran moved his right arm and the blade shot out as he clenched his steel fingers, “Perhaps.”

Jolak smiled and popped the chunk of flesh into his mouth, “Now to my original question, what have you been told about the Khaak.”

“Only that they have proven to be a formidable and worthy opponent,” Feran replied.

Jolak finished chewing and swallowed, “Good meat, you should try it,” He paused and frowned before speaking, “They are both, the individual ship is not strong but they attack in numbers, like the h'Tlajas on the home world. The weapons they use are more advanced than our own.”

“How?” Feran asked as he tried the meat dish.

“They have beam weapon technology. The energy of the weapon is not high but the particle beam produced is devastating,” Jolak commented nonplussed and picked up a drink, “Did you like the dish?”

Feran finished chewing and nodded, “Excellent, what was it?”

Jolak smiled, “Teladi.”

Feran's face slowly broke into a smile, “I never knew they tasted that good.”

Jolak nodded, “And I believe you are to be congratulated my friend.”

Feran raised a curious eyebrow as he surveyed the range of food still on the platter, “For what?”

“Creed, there has been no report of his return,” Jolak commented, “I feel that the Xenon may have achieved what we could not.”

“I'd be happier if I saw his rotting corpse,” Feran responded with a smile. Even he had to admit the amount of time that had lapsed since Creed's disappearance was too great for him to possibly have survived. However nothing that entered the Xenon sector since had emerged to confirm the fact.

Feran picked up a small dish, “And what about Grall?”

“We showed him every discourtesy, but I was almost tempted to allow his damaged ships to dock. They could have made good trophies, but that would have upset the High Council,” Jolak commented bitterly.

Chapter 10. Silicon Mine

Tor had taken an opportunity to visit the local trading station even though he was advised against going. This time Nyeshta accompanied him, she had complained of not being able to stretch her legs and being stuck on board the ship.

She had changed and used one of the hooded robes Tor had purchased to prevent immediate recognition if anyone saw her. Against his initial judgement, and just to get her to keep quiet from the continued insistence, he had given her a weapon. Tor also donned a set of robes but he kept the hood folded back to give him a better view of the people around him. The technical datapad rested in his pocket. A brief chat with Sholetinmanckesala and the Pegasus pilot agreed to keep an eye on the Defiance.

Tor almost felt he was back on the pirate station. The security only gave him the briefest of glances and resembled thugs rather than security. The local population also looked like frontier labourers, the faces, hands and clothes appearing dishevelled with engrained dirt from years of hard labour, sweat and poor working conditions.

As they made their way to the food hall Tor felt a hand grab his shoulder. Spinning around he looked into the smiling face of Tris. With her were two other pilots.

“Hello Tor,” She reached round and gave him an unexpected hug, then stepped back smiling.

Tor smiled back, “Good to see you. You’re looking well,” He noticed that none of them were in uniform, and in a moments absent mindedness said, “We’re just going to get a bite to eat, you’re welcome to join us.”

Tris glanced across at her companions who shrugged and nodded, as she did Nyeshta gave Tor a sharp prod in the back, “Looks like we’re in, by the way this is Corri,” Tris moved to one side and Tor shook hands with a dark skinned woman with fair hair, she gave a cursory smile and slight nod, “And this is Roburn,” A tall young man not much different in age to Tor stepped forward with only the hint of a smile, said, “Hi,” And they shook hands. Tor had to flex some life into his fingers after the vice like grip threatened to break several bones in his hand.

The three of them turned and looked questioningly at Nyeshta, Tris asked, “And your friend?”

“Oh this is,” Tor started.

“They call me Angel,” Nyeshta stepped in briskly, “I apologise for not removing my hood as I’m known in the area and it doesn’t pay to be recognised.”

The three pilots studied Nyeshta warily with an uncertain look in each face, when Tor added quickly and in a hushed voice, “It’s okay, she’s a guild pilot. Unfortunately there are a few traders in the new sectors that the guild has had run-ins with in the past, so the War Master pilots could attract unwanted attention, and we don’t want any problems.”

Tris simply nodded and had a sympathetic look on her face, the other two although appeared satisfied were still wary. Nyeshta made a great deal about shaking hands with each of them if only to help put them at ease. By the end of the meal everyone was considerably more relaxed, Tor kept himself in check from addressing Nyeshta by her name. Nyeshta recounted several amusing tales of previous exploits which had Tris, Corri and Roburn laughing, this washed away any final doubt in their minds.

Tor had watched Tris laugh, he felt a twinge of guilt that she was now sat at the same table as the woman that caused her to be taken prisoner by the Bloodhearts and he had not said anything. On the outside he maintained the happy smiley face, but on the inside the seed of anger began to grow once more.

Nyeshta needed to buy a few personal items and Tor loitered. Tris and her companions were due back on patrol and had to depart. He retrieved his datapad and looked up his accounts just to pass the time.

Sweety commented, "Serandamancketal has sent word that two fast passenger transports are on there way with new station personnel."

Tor asked, "How many?"

"Allocation is fifty per station," Sweety replied.

Tor switched subject and asked, "Hmm, any news on Creed?"

"Not yet," Sweety replied.

Tor slowly nodded, although he would prefer to think otherwise the stark reality that Creed was probably dead settled in. Nyeshta tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Time to go!"

Tor refrained from saying anything and they made their way back to the Defiance. Sholetinmanckesala returned to the Pegasus and Tor carefully looked over the outside of the ship. "Looking for anything in particular?" Nyeshta asked coldly.

Tor replied with a hint of bitterness, "Just making sure, I don't want to have the same unfortunate incident as a friend of mine once had."

Nyeshta turned abruptly and opened the outer airlock door then stepped briskly inside. Tor satisfied the ship was clean followed. As the airlock doors closed he looked around, Nyeshta had discarded the robe, put all the shopping on the bunk and was sitting in the pilot seat. The docking clamps released. He removed the datapad from his pocket and almost immediately Sweety asked in her most reproachful voice, "Have you been upsetting Nyeshta again?"

Nyeshta had declined station control and flew the ship through the station manually, as soon as she saw the open outer doors she hit the boost and Tor staggered backwards.

The comm opened, "This is station control to TG zero, zero one DSM. You are cautioned not to exceed station speed restrictions until you are clear of the outer doors. This is your first warning, any further breach will result in a five thousand credit fine," The channel closed.

Sweety went for the direct approach to stop Tor before he started to shout, "I am not sure what you said or did but if you antagonise the pilot then I will be force to transport you to another ship."

Nyeshta spoke up and she sounded surprisingly calm, "That's okay Sweety, let him rant away. After all he won't be saying anything new and I doubt he has the sense to let go of the past."

Tors' anger flared briefly, his fists clenched and unclenched, but he held back from saying or doing anything. He sat in the co-pilot seat and reviewed the construction of the Crystal Fab. The supporting structure for the processing equipment had been formed since the guided tour and the machinery was now in place. Gantries and walkways were currently being formed.

They crossed into X-five and Tor checked the sector map and there it was, the Scruffin Fruit farm it was already completed and freighters were coming and going. Tor wondered which cartel Feran would have signed up to.

"Want a closer look?" Nyeshta asked.

Tor was tempted and would normally have agreed. His current attitude towards Nyeshta made him answer with a firm, "No."

Sweety commented, "We have some time Tor can I suggest we investigate Creeds' gate in X-four."

This was something that Tor had completely forgotten about, "You have the co-ordinates Sweetie, just mark the position on the sector grid and let's go take a look."

The Defiance quickly crossed the sector to the X-four gate and once again they were held in awe by the scene in front of them.

"I will be unable to continue to receive transmissions from the Wall once you enter the nebula. Your short range scanner will also be mostly ineffectual. There is a beacon that marks the position of the gate and hopefully you will see it at the co-ordinates given. Time until the next gate emergence is in fifteen Mizura.

"Okay here's the plan we get to the gate, go through, have a quick look and back out before the gate vanishes again." Tor commented.

"Okay." Nyeshta had already located the destination and was vectoring into it at full speed.

The jumpgate from X-two became active and the bulk of the Orca emerged, as it cleared the gate the fighters began to enter the sector and fan out. "Do they have the co-ordinates of the asteroid?" Tor asked.

Sweetie just gave the one word answer, "Yes."

"Sweetie we'll be crossing the boundary of the nebula in one Mizura," Nyeshta announced.

The moments passed and the Defiance entered the cloud, the shields shimmered with the fine particle contact but were not being depleted. Occasionally there was an energy spike and an electrical discharge of several teravolts sprayed wildly into the cloud illuminating everything around, and caused all the shield units to drop by twenty percent.

"Slow to one quarter speed," Sweetie's voice called out, "It will reduce the build up of charge on the hull."

Nyeshta immediately complied and asked, "Time to gate?"

"Three Mizura," Sweetie's voice replied and in anticipation of the next question she said, "Gate appearance in six Mizura."

With the ship travelling at slow speed the energy spikes were reduced in intensity and frequency. The beacon was still active and flashed dimly but it was not until they were less than one hundred metres away that they finally saw it.

"Sweetie is there any chance you can do some sort of scan to see what's wrong with the gate when it appears?" Tor asked, he was now filled with a sense of nervous excitement mixed with a touch of anxiety should whatever be on the other side of the gate be hostile.

Nyeshta also had reservations but because Tor would be hostile towards her, she remained silent. The time seemed to drag by in silent anticipation of what was to happen next. Both Tor and Nyeshta had intensely fixed gazes as they peered into the haze of the nebula.

As the last Mizura expired there was a brief yet intense ion discharge around them and as the flashes of light subsided the gate had materialised.

Sweetie's voice broke the silence, "Attempting to scan for damage."

Nyeshta engaged the thrusters without any encouragement and they crossed the activation threshold. As they emerged and before anyone had a chance to look around Nyeshta had already hit full boost and moved the ship away from the gate and looped the top of the gate to be ready for a rapid exit.

Tor looked at the scanners, "Sweetie what do you make of this?"

Nyeshta had stopped the ship and was looking intently out of the cockpit, "I would guess something bad happened here," She commented slowly.

Ahead of them were the hulks and debris of long dead ships, the remains of battleships and destroyers of an alien race clustered together in an apparent last ditch effort at survival.

"I am scanning and recording, but we only have one and a half Mizura remaining." Sweetys' voice commented.

Tor spoke his thoughts out loud, his curiosity was overcoming the feeling that he should be nasty to Nyeshta, "It'll be two Tazura before the gate opens again, so do we go back now and review what we have or hang around and search the sector until the gate reopens."

"We go back and return with several Tazuras supplies and some support ships." Nyeshta commented, and hit the boost before Tor could argue.

They re-entered X-four with thirty Sezura to spare, as she guided the Defiance out of the cloud the nebula behind them flashed and the gate was gone again. Tor stayed quiet as he had now made his mind up that he would have preferred to explore further but had been denied the opportunity.

As the Defiance cleared the nebula, Sweety commented, "Comms re-established. I am glad to see that you managed to not harm each other, and it looks like you have some interesting data."

"Show us what you have Sweety," Tor asked.

"Initial scan of the gate seems to indicate, that at some point in its life it was subjected to a particularly violent ion storm. The result of which appears to have caused it to malfunction. The only strange thing is the gate would have to have been active to have been affected," Sweety paused, "The sector on the other side is completely inactive. There appears to be no sign of life and no residual power sources within scanner range. There are two more gates in the sector but these appear to be inactive. I will need more time to go through the data. But I would recommend a return trip."

"I wonder how much information Creed managed to get when he was here," Tor muttered.

The Orca was within five k's of the target asteroid. The vast cargo hold doors opened and the station kit glided gracefully out. All the ships including the Pegasus, which had only recently returned from the trading station in X-seven, circled slowly around the asteroid. The four arms bored down into the rock and drew in the massive drill head. The cutting head would drive down to a depth of five hundred metres providing the space for the station to be built beneath the surface. Much of the material from the initial boring process would be stored for later processing once the station was fully functioning.

Tor could only assume that, but for the vacuum of space, the noise would be tremendous as the diamond heads ground into the rock assisted by particle beams slicing deep into the surface and high energy impact pulses shattering the rock ready to be ground down for storage.

Within two Stazura only the top of the mining facility could be seen and construction robots were now visible on the surface. They moved over the rock and created the frame work for the front of the station and ensured it would remain embedded in the asteroid.

The docking bay doors opened and the machinery began to be floated in. The power generators disappeared in through the docking bay. Another Stazura later the station shields came on line. Most of the ships now held position near the construction site. Comms traffic had increased with general conversation between the pilots, mainly consisting on the spectacle the ion storms raging near the forming suns and planets.

The military pilots had also joined them and, having scouted the area, they too were content to admire the view. Tor spent his time getting updates and reading reports from the pilot seat, which Nyeshta had given

up to get some sleep on the bunk. Every now and again he looked up when a particularly bright flare pierced the darkness.

“Any update on the new sector?” Tor asked casually. He was aware of the peaceful gentle breathing of the sleeping Nyeshta and he wondered briefly how her conscience let her sleep so well.

“I have plotted everything that the scanners could detect, but I need a thorough scan of the sector.” Sweety answered quietly.

Feran was now aboard the Scruffin Farm and he hated the smell already. The office would need to be redecorated to his personal taste and he reflected there would be a space on the wall for Tors’ head. The only change he had made so far was to have the Bloodheart insignia put on the wall behind his desk. It would be the only place that would carry the emblem on the whole station.

He looked at the status report on Tors’ stations and smiled. To his mind Tor would soon be at his most vulnerable, the station security would be weak and poorly organised. They would lack familiarity with the station layout. He reflected on his conversation with Jolak and the suggestions the older Split had made.

Feran had little time to plan, but his revenge would be soon and he could almost taste the victory.

The desk comm panel came alive, “My lord there is a Mr. Sniad, from the Traluk Trading Cartel asking to see you.”

Feran sat down, “Show him in.”

A small, thin, sharp faced man with shifty eyes and a crooked smile stepped into the room. He fixed his eyes on Feran and boldly stepped forward and gave an overly low bow, “My Lord t’Gnht, may I be the first to welcome you to the new sectors,” The voice whined.

Feran toyed with the idea of killing him immediately to save himself the time about to be wasted in listening, “You wanted to see me?”

Sniad lifted his face still smiling, “I represent the Traluk Trading Cartel, and we have a significant influence in the trading markets. Our members enjoy a number of significant benefits,” He placed particular emphasis on the last two words and took a moment before continuing, “Firstly we can guarantee you buyers for your Scruffin Fruits which have become popular with our Cattle Ranches at top prices less a small commission to the Cartel. And we provide protection against piracy in these,” He hesitated for effect and added, “Less than secure sectors.”

Ferans’ eyes narrowed slightly and his eyes glinted as a slow cruel smile spread across his face, “This all sounds very interesting. Perhaps I may draw your attention to the insignia on the wall behind my desk.”

Sniad glanced up a slight look of uncertainty in his expression, he blinked and then blinked again, the forced smile remained but the colour began to drain from his face, “You’re a member of the Bloodhearts.”

“Correction, I am the Bloodhearts,” Feran paused a moment to let this sink in his gaze fixed upon the man who now swallowed hard, he rested his right arm on the desk, “Now if I were to read between the lines of your offer I would say that you were trying to threaten me, so what would you give to your chance of making it out of this office alive?” With that the blade sprang forward with a silky swish, and with some satisfaction Feran saw the man tremble, then he added, “But of course I may have a small amount of business that I can put your way.”

Sniads’ eyes were fixed on the blade and his mouth was dry so he swallowed hard before asking, “And how may I be of service my Lord.”

Feran nodded slightly, the man who now faced probable death still knew that a degree of respectfulness was in order, "Tell me has the guild approached Grall yet?"

Sniad faltered, "Normally we wait until the factory is established and making credits before we act. So we're not scheduled to visit him for another five Tazuras."

"Hmm," Feran murmured as he thought about it, "I want you to visit him sooner and tell me what you see. I need information, how many station employees he has and how good the security is on his station."

Sniad looked around shiftily as this would be an easy job. He made it a speciality of his to determine the weaknesses in defences, so the guild would be able to exploit them at a later date. Should any of the members decide to try and withdraw from the guild or potential members require some 'extra' persuasion.

Feran continued, "Of course you could try and double cross me but I have a good memory for people I want to kill and believe me I usually make death very, very painful."

"My Lord, I will do as you command, the silicon mine will be operational within a two Tazuras' and the Crystal Fab will be fully operational in much the same time frame." Sniad whined with a renewed confidence and a fresh smile on his face.

Feran decided that a face like Sniads' would not merit a place on the wall, "Then go, and do not return until you have information," He made a show of folding the blade back into his arm.

Sniad looked visibly relieved and backed out of the room with a long bow.

After he had departed Feran considered the man would be useful in completing another task, but first he would need some more of his own people here. As the plan took shape in his mind he stood up and wandered across to a large cabinet to find something to drink, he commented to himself, "There's no one left to protect you now Grall," Then he ordered, "Computer, open a channel to the Bloodheart station."

An image of Ganark appeared on the wall screen in front of the desk, "My Lord."

"Send fifty, no one hundred assault troops to me," Feran paused, "And have them bring the weapon," He put particular emphasis on the last two words.

"Yes my Lord," Ganark replied, "I take it you have found him, Sire?"

"I have and his head will be the first trophy to hang on these walls," Feran replied with a malevolent glint in his eyes.

"The men will depart within the Stazura my Lord, and we look forward to a swift victory Sire," Ganark commented.

Tor was glad to receive the signal to acknowledge the station was now sealed and pressurised, the fighters had taken a rotational shift so that they had an opportunity to rest and relax at the trading station in X-two. The Defiance was the first into dock and, to Tor, it was truly a strange experience to be the first person to step onto the docking platform of a new, and as yet un-staffed station. The room echoed with every step in an eerie silence.

Nyeshta exited the ship behind him and stretched whilst looking around, the sound of the following two freighters docking reverberated through the station.

"So which part of the station are we in?" Nyeshta asked.

The passenger transport was the next ship to dock and the station crew began to disembark. Luggage lifters began to move their personal items onto the dockside.

“I would guess this is the public docking centre,” Tor commented, he held up the technical datapad, “I guess I need to welcome everyone. Sweety do you know the layout of the station?”

“I have a detailed map. As a suggestion I would go to the control centre first and I can use the wall monitors to show all the facilities and locations.”

The crowd of employees milled around, and Tor caught their attention, “Your attention please. Welcome to the new Silicone Mine. As some of you that were at the opening of the Bakery in The Wall will remember, it’s going to take a while before we get established with all the usual amenities, so I ask for your patience in this. Needless to say the first establishment will be a bar, which will serve meals and of course whatever ales we can get past the Split and Boron,” There was a general murmur of approval. Tor continued, “So please follow me and we will head to the control centre for a briefing on the layout of the station. Afterwards there will be time to settle into the accommodation followed by a small celebration to mark the completion of the station.”

Tor turned looked at the technical pad which marked out a route to the first shuttle lift up to the next level and then on through several open doorways and into a second shuttle lift that went up three more floors and finally along a straight corridor into the large control centre.

Computer stations went around the walls and large wall monitors gave video feed from all parts of the station. Sweety instructed Tor to connect the datapad to the master control station at the far end of the room. As the last few station crew entered the control room, Sweety began to pull up the station layouts.

The briefing she gave was short, simply directing them to the staff quarters, the location of stores and the second docking bay, which would become the security dock. After this she allowed the staff access into the computers. Already knowing the names and job function she uploaded the security information onto the blank database.

As Tor sat down in the master controllers chair he took a moment to look around and there was a twinge of swelling pride as he reflected that this was all his. Sweety continued to upload all the security protocols and lockouts. Station security doors began to close throughout the station. The freighters were being unloaded and the fighters were now beginning to dock in the designated security zone, “Tor you need to go down to greet the pilots, they will need to be brought up here so I can tell them where they are staying.”

Tor realized he was the only one left in the control room. Nyeshta had wandered off with the rest of the crew to find suitable accommodation. Tor asked, “Okay how do I get there?”

“I’ll guide you through the station comm, fortunately it is closer then the general purpose docking bay,” Sweety confirmed.

Deep in the station the first of the supplies of energy cells arrived at the processing units. The robot loaders began to plug them into the grid array and slowly the units began to hum into life. More cells were transported to the mining machines.

In another zone of the station equipment and supplies were being deposited in designated secure storage bays. It would take a while before the first usable silicon wafers began to emerge from the fabrication units and these would need a clear passageway to a holding bay near the commercial dock. For Sweety, this was a potential weak area in the internal defences. The security of the station had been placed at the top of her priority list and as the Piranhas began to dock the loaders and maintenance robots were already being queued up to unload a range of internal security equipment. Sweety scanned all the available conduits, crawl ways and maintenance passages through the station and focused on restricting the public section of the station from gaining access to anything beyond. Power would have to be rerouted in order to seal numerous passageways.

Tor had found himself a room and like the rest it was spacious with every amenity, but appeared stark and cold whilst it lacked any décor, which would personalize the room and help it to feel lived in. He had not seen Nyeshta since the briefing. He had half expected to see her on the Defiance when he went to collect his personal belongings, but again there was no sign of her.

What he did notice was a brief delay in getting through the station doors and the number of crates now in the corridors, including the presence of numerous maintenance robots that appeared to be opening up wall, floor and ceiling panels. He felt that Sweety was probably up to something and would ask her when he had an opportunity.

Tor spied crew members carrying vacuum packed bedding and other items which he could not immediately identify from the packaging. Curiously he headed down another corridor, as several more crew members walked past with an assortment of packages. They smiled and said, "Mr. Grall," With a slight nod of the head.

He arrived at the stores and a voice from the comms panel in the wall, "Tor, help yourself to bedding and other toiletry items."

"Thanks Sweety," Tor commented.

Sixty Mizura later and Tor, now refreshed and in a fresh set of clothes entered the Command Centre where a number of the crew had also begun to gather. The six crates of ales Tor had purchased were stacked in the middle of the room. To Tors' pleasant surprise ten hover trays laden with food were also positioned around the room. He could only assume that Sweety had instructed the few catering staff to prepare the dishes.

As everyone gathered Tor made a very short welcoming speech, for which everyone was thankful and the celebration started in earnest. Tor took his time to introduce himself to everyone. Although he did not miss her company he did notice that Nyeshta was nowhere to be seen.

After a couple of Stazura sleep Tor dragged himself out of his bed, feeling exceptionally hung over. He spent nearly thirty Mizura under the hot shower, hoping the water would somehow be absorbed through his skin and take away the pain from behind his eyes.

He rinsed his mouth out and that helped clean away the residual taste of ale. Dragging on his clothes he went to find something to eat. The Command Centre had been cleaned and showed no signs of the celebration from the night before. Already several of the station staff were at their stations and some gave a wry smile with a cheery hello when they saw him and the condition he still appeared to be in.

"Anyone know where I can get breakfast?" He asked loudly whilst trying not to wince at the sound of his own voice.

"We'll get some brought up to you Sir," One of the operators commented.

"Fine, fine, I'll be in my office," Tor commented and staggered away.

Tor sat heavily in his chair and slumped against the desk and put his hands behind his head.

A voice spoke quietly and soothingly, "I think you need one of these."

Tor recognised Nyeshta's voice immediately and slowly he looked up. In front of him she had placed a glass of the recovery mix drink. Tor responded, "Thanks," And swiftly drained the glass, "Remind me to give up drinking," He said quietly.

She gave a slight smile, and then said softly, "Tor, I need to talk to you," It was a tone of voice that captured Tors' attention, there was a thoughtful quality wrapped in the slightly husky and gentle sound.

"What about?" Tor asked abruptly and with a slightly harsh edge to his own voice.

Nyeshta found a chair and dragged it across the room. Tors mind started to work overtime, despite the reduced hangover, as he noted she now had new clothes. As opposed to the looser fitting pilot fatigues, these ones were much tighter and showed her athletic figure and accentuated her curves. He also noted that

her hair colour had changed from brown to blond. Some part of his brain was now preparing for all out war with his optic nerves for having not paid more attention sooner, or at least to Tor it felt like that.

Nyeshta saw his expression and raised an inquisitive eyebrow. However his face said everything, "Tor you're dribbling." She commented softly, he was not but that did not stop him impulsively trying to wipe his mouth on his sleeve.

"Sorry," Tor blushed, "I see you've changed your hair colour," he commented weakly and began to reprimand himself. It was not as though he was a prepubescent teenager on hormone overload.

"I'm surprised you're eyeballs managed to stay in your head long enough to notice," She gave a smile, "But this is my normal colour. When I've been travelling it's been useful in the past to make a subtle change as it adds an element of doubt in peoples minds."

Tor simply nodded, and tried to composed himself, "But that's not why you're here?"

Nyeshta came straight to the point, "No, I want a transfer to that Bakery you have in the wall."

He almost said 'get your bags packed,' immediately, but some part of his brain reminded him that for all this time Sweety had been instrumental in ensuring they continued to work together, "Sweety are you patched into the coms?"

Sweety answered, "Yes Tor, I am here."

"I guess you overheard the conversation so far?" Tor enquired.

Sweety replied, "Yes."

Tor had hoped for a longer answer, "And do you think it's a good idea for Nyeshta to leave?"

"We talked about it last night," Sweety revealed and there was a certain degree of sadness in Sweetys' voice, "Nyeshtas' reasons for wanting the transfer are perfectly understandable and I think it would be unfortunate for us when she leaves, but I will stand by her decision."

"It's only a transfer," Nyeshta commented, "I'm not saying I want to leave the company. For one you'll still have my ship."

Tor almost contradicted the statement by saying it was now his ship, "So why do you want the transfer?"

Nyeshta tilted her head to one side and let a cascade of hair tumble across her shoulder before speaking quietly, "I can't stay here. You have military pilots running around and one of them is bound to recognise me sooner or later. That's if you don't go telling Tris about me first. Secondly you're not exactly the easiest of people to work with. One moment you're fine and the next you dig up the past and get all angry. Now I've killed people for less and sometimes you really get close to being shot. You're the boss and I'm asking to be able to earn my wages in peace without being concerned about having to defend myself from you or anyone else."

Tor looked slightly saddened and he knew deep down she was right.

Nyeshta continued, "What I've heard and seen, when you're not going on a personal crusade, is that you're a good man Tor. I know I'm not the ideal employee but you need to let me prove myself, and I don't feel that I can do that here."

"What about the Defiance?" Tor asked slowly.

"I discussed that with Sweety," Nyeshta paused and looked uncomfortable, "The Defiance will stay here with you as your need will probably be greater than mine."

Sweety spoke up, “Nyeshta built the ship and as a gesture of good will has let us hire it from her. The caveat to this agreement is that when she arrives back at the wall she will be given the time and facilities to build a replacement to be owned by the company.”

Tor sighed, “I see you’ve worked this out. When do you want to make the transfer?”

“Today,” Nyeshta commented quietly, “I don’t see any need to prolong anything.”

Tor nodded and answered slowly, “I’ll get the Pegasus to take you back, that way it’ll be quick and safe. Give me ten Mizura and the ship will be ready to go.”

He stood up slowly and wandered around to the front of the desk, Nyeshta was already standing, and he spoke gently, “I’m sorry things here didn’t work out. The Bakery will be getting a good pilot.”

He held out his hand. Nyeshta took it and then leaned towards him and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, “You take care Tor, and we’ll have a few drinks when you come to visit.”

She turned and left, Tor sighed and leaned back on the desk and breathed in deep as he caught another brief waft of the scent Nyeshta had been wearing before the air circulation units drew it away.

He personally gave departure clearance and opened the outer doors. After a few moments the Pegasus was out of the sector.

Chapter 11. Creeds' Gate

The doors of the station closed and as Tor looked away from the viewer one of the six command crew looked up, "Sir?"

Tor tried to remember her name and then it came to him, "Yes Liann."

Liann commented, "I have an incoming transport requesting docking permission."

"Identify," Tor responded.

"It's registered to the Crystal Fab," Liann confirmed.

"Are we expecting any visitors?" Tor asked as he looked at the screen in front of him.

"They have the correct authorisation codes and the pilot is a Pors Tullet," Liann replied.

Tor felt tense momentarily, and then smiled as he relaxed, reflecting that he had very little to be wary of with Nyeshta now on her way to the Bakery. "Grant them docking permission, and bring them in to the security dock. I'll go and meet them."

He stood up and casually made his way towards the lifts. The maintenance robots were still active in many of the corridors and Tor he remembered that he was going to ask Sweety what was going on. A number of the pilots had taken over one of the larger rooms and were converting it into a gym. Tor could only assume the equipment had been amongst the miscellaneous items that Sweety had ordered.

As he stepped out on to the security dock he glanced around whilst the transport was brought into dock. Again the pilots had been busy making themselves comfortable, as several now sat outside a previously unallocated store they had turned into a make shift bar serving hot drinks and snacks.

Tor could easily understand why as it was a prime spot close to the passageways and with a full view of all the ships.

The docking clamps engaged and drew the ship against the gantry. The outer doors opened and six agents stepped out all carrying cases.

Pors approached, "Mr. Grall," He held out his hand and Tor shook hands.

Tor glanced at the other agents, "Coming to stay?"

"If it isn't an inconvenience?" Pors responded questioningly.

Tor smiled, "You're most welcome, there's plenty of spare accommodation," He turned and with a sweeping gesture with his arm and hand open he motioned for Pors to head towards the exit. As Pors moved forward he stepped in beside him, "If we go up to the command centre you can familiarize your self with where things are in the station. Obviously some of the rooms are already taken but there are plenty of others to choose from."

Pors looked around, "It seems that you're settling in okay."

"Mind the crates, just a few alterations being made," Tor commented as they passed a maintenance robot.

The agent looked at the crate, "Additional security devices. A very wise precaution Mr. Grall."

In Tors' mind he knew he needed to talk to Sweety so he could avoid being unable to answer awkward questions.

A brief while later they entered the Command Centre and Tor gave them access to the accommodation sections of the station.

"If you need anything I'll be in my office," Tor said as the agents disappeared down the corridor.

Pors stopped for a moment, "Mr. Grall, we need to have a chat so if we can meet in your office in say fifteen Mizuras."

Tor responded smiled back, "Sure."

The agent smiled turned and followed his colleagues. Tor hurried into his office and before he had sat down said, "Sweety what are you doing to my station?"

Sweety answered, "You will find additional energy barriers in the corridors out from the public docks and ceiling pacifier units."

Tor felt cautious, "Pacifier units?"

"They are completely concealed when installed," Sweety replied.

"Are they legal?" Tor asked.

Sweety responded cautiously, "In a number of sectors, yes."

Tor put his head in his hands, "Sweety, did your programming ever consider ethical behaviour, like not trying to break the law?"

Sweety replied almost cheerfully, "Once yes, but I seem to have overcome that limitation."

Tor let his hands drop down onto the desk, "Now I know why you got on so well with Nye."

"If you had taken the time to understand her and why she did those things then maybe she would not have asked to leave," Sweetys voice now had a harshness to it Tor had not heard before.

He answered calmly, "And now we have Argon intelligence agents on board. Somehow I'm not convinced this isn't a coincidence. I've always believed that some people are born to survive, despite who they are and what they do, and those of us less fortunate get swept aside," Tor looked for a suitable metaphor, "Or written off the page upon the whim of the author."

Sweety was quiet for a moment, "But you survive."

"I'm lucky I just get to hide behind the survivors," Tor commented quietly.

Several moments silence passed, then Sweety commented, "Creeds' gate will be reopening in one Stazura."

Tor commented, "Shit, I need another ship and pilot," There was a brief pause and then he added, "One I can trust."

Lianns' voice interrupted him, "Sir I have a Mr. Sniad asking for permission to dock."

"Who the hell's Mr. Sniad?" Tor commented out loud even though he did not mean to.

Liann responded, "He says he's from the Traluk Trading Cartel."

Sweety commented, "Tor, do not let him into the secure area. See him in the visitors docking area."

"Okay, land him in the visitors dock and I'll meet him there." Tor responded.

“Yes Sir,” Liann confirmed.

Tor said to the air around him, “Looks like it’s going to be a busy day.”

Once again he found himself wandering down corridors and getting into shuttle lifts. Tor now felt it was all beginning to take on a familiar look. For once as he wandered through the open security doors he did not have to make his way past crates or maintenance robots.

The transport came into dock and Tor watched as the clamps engaged. Only one man stepped out and he looked briefly uncertain as to what to do next. He surveyed the virtually empty docking platform. He gave a thin smile when he spotted Tor and walked confidently off the gantry towards him. As he drew close his smile had gone and his tone was that of a superior addressing a subordinate, “I’m here to see Mr. Grall.”

Tor took a moment to look the man up and down and in a very nonplussed voice he replied, “That will be me.”

The smile almost immediately swept across the sharp face, “Mr. Grall, so pleased to meet you. I am honoured that you have given the time to see me.”

Tor paused for a moment as something inside him said he should not trust the man, he answered casually, “Yeah , I’m sure it is,” There was a moments hesitation before Tor added, “So why do you want to see me?”

Sniad looked around, “This may take a while so is there somewhere we can go sit down in private?”

“I wish there were,” Tor answered, “My office is currently being refitted,” He looked around and spied a conveniently placed set of tables and chairs, “I guess this is as about as private as we’ll find at the moment.”

His eyes quickly turned to Sniad who for a moment was unable to disguise his disappointment and frustration. They walked across and Sniads eyes scanned every part of the docking bay and the empty shop facades. Tor pulled back one of the seats and sat down.

Sniad sat opposite him, before commenting, “I guess things are a little bit disorganised at the moment.”

“Very true. What with trying to get all the staff registered in the database and given the correct access codes it’s been a nightmare. Half the time we have to leave the security doors open just because personnel aren’t being recognised by the systems,” Tor laid it on thick to see what reaction he would get and was well aware that Sweetie was listening in.

“Mr. Grall you need professionals to come in and sort out your problems,” Sniad commented earnestly.

“You’re probably right but who am I to trust?” Tor asked sincerely.

Sniad smile seemed to broaden, “That is where the cartel can help. It is in our interests to protect your commercial dealings and see that you are treated fairly and do not find yourself being robbed by some of the rogue traders and pirates in these sectors. Our services are not without cost but we remove the burden from you when it comes to trying to find trustworthy employees and then having the continually escalating wage burden.”

Tor sat back thoughtfully, then glanced at his time piece and realized Pors would now be waiting to talk to him, “Unfortunately my time has run out. I can’t give you an immediate decision about signing up, but give me a few Tazura and hopefully things will be a bit less hectic and we can discuss this further.”

Sniad smiled and nodded, “I understand Mr. Grall, and it has been very good of you to see me at such short notice. I’ll come by in say another four Tazura.”

They both stood up and shook hands, as the transport left the dock he was on his way back up to his office but he had a deep desire to wash his hands. The agent caught up with him as he waited for the shuttle lift.

Pors asked, "Well Tor, how did your meeting with the Traluk Trading Cartel go?"

Tor thought for a moment, "I think he could sense another member ready to sign up."

"I thought he seemed to be smiling too much," Pors said disdainfully.

Tor asked, "I take it that's not the cartel you want me to join?"

"The Traluk Trading Cartel is the one we want to break, but it has very strong and powerful backers. I also gather that Mr. Sniads meeting with Feran was not favourable," Pors watched the shuttle lift doors open and they both stepped inside.

"Hmm, sounds like I should join them then," Tor commented.

Pors gave a wry smile, "It may not have been favourable in terms of Feran signing up, but Sniad did walk out of the meeting. So he must have said something or made a deal to have prevented Feran from carving him up into small pieces."

Tor commented carefully, as he allowed the mental image that was just conjured up to pass him by, "So you think his coming here isn't a coincidence?"

Pors answered as the doors opened, "No Tor, I don't. We believe Sniad is a scout for the cartel, a risk assessor. I was impressed by your choice to keep him in the docking bay, a clever move whether or not it was done intentionally."

They were approaching his office and Tor smiled at the thought he was now doing something right, "So how come you know what happened?"

"I heard from one of my colleagues that Sniad was on his way and decided to eavesdrop from the balcony directly above you," Pors replied.

"So which Cartel do you think I should get involved in?" Tor asked again, wondering if the Feran incident had caused the agents to change their minds.

"As I said before we have the Traluk cartel in mind, but if Feran is somehow involved with them, to get at you, then it's too early to make that decision. We have no doubt that he will act sooner rather than later but how and when we don't know," Pors concluded.

"Do you think he'll attack the station?" Tor asked quickly.

"The Split council allowed him to equip his station with six Mambas' and with his pirate connections quite probably," Pors replied, "But you have quite a formidable group of heavy fighters, and the Paranid Hercules carrying their SPP is due to arrive within the next Stazura. An attack with those fighters patrolling the construction site will be out of the question."

Tor listened for a while longer and was wondering how he was going to make it to the reappearance of Creed's Gate when Sweety broke into the conversation, "We have an incoming freighter and fighter escort from the Crystal Fab requesting docking permission."

"Check the security codes and allow them to dock," Tor replied.

"Tor I have a reminder that you are needed in the security docks to take out the Defiance and gain flight experience in crossing the nebula," Sweety commented.

Pors raised an eyebrow, and Tor commented quickly as he stood up, "The pilots think I should experience first hand how a nebula cloud can effect instrumentation, and how to take refuge in one without being found."

"A very valuable skill, I am no fan of nebula clouds myself, but I'm sure it will be an interesting experience for you," Pors commented and smiled.

Tor took this as his cue to leave and went to recover his technical datapad with a number of additional personal items.

With the pad in his pocket and a small case containing his blasters, a couple of changes of clothes and a wash kit, he strode purposefully onto the docking bay to be met by Moda Faba, the Boron pilot that Sweety had once suggested could make a suitable second in command.

Tor greeted Moda with a smile, "Ready for a bit of an adventure?"

"Yes Sir," The softened voice of the translator replied to the series of gentle clicks. The boron smiled back through the clear liquid.

Tor approached the Defiance and the airlock doors opened. After stepping inside he said, "Let's..." And glanced at the empty pilot seat. Sweety closed the doors behind him but there was no comment from the pad.

He put the case down and went into the cockpit. Plugging in the datapad he took a quick look behind him almost expecting to see Nyeshta creeping up on him.

"Missing someone?" Sweety asked.

Tor sat down and said, "Get me departure clearance."

The Defiance was released from the docking clamps and was guided by the station computer to the outer doors. Tor hit the booster and then slowed the ship as he waited for Moda to exit the station in a Piranha. Moments later the Piranha was ahead of him and flying towards the nebula.

Sweety transferred the beacon location to Moda with instructions to wait at the designated location. At the appropriate time he was to follow Tor. However she neglected to say exactly what the Boron was waiting for, and Moda took this to mean that this trip had a secret agenda, the details of which would become apparent at the appropriate moment.

Tor kept the speed down as they crossed into the nebula and Sweetys' voice commented, "Communications link broken."

Both ships discharged energy into the nebula cloud in various amounts, the Piranha arced less often than the Defiance and occasionally they caused energy to arc between them until Sweety halted the Defiance completely and the Piranha reached safe separation distance.

With ten Mizura until the gate appeared both ships reached the beacon and sat waiting. Although there was only two hundred metres between them it was impossible to get a decent comm link. Tor spent his time running system checks and watching.

The gate appeared exactly on time and Tor wondered how Moda would be feeling having just witnessed the emergence. He engaged the thrusters and the Defiance crossed the activation threshold.

He cleared the gate and waited for Moda to appear, after twenty Sezura he wondered if the Boron pilot had decided he was not prepared to jump into the unknown. Then the gate became active and the Piranha entered the sector.

"Sweety, open a comm to Moda," Tor requested.

“Channel open,” Sweetys’ voice replied.

The Boron appeared on the HUD, “Sir, what is this place?”

Tor replied, “Something that Creed found. What you see are the remains of an alien fleet and our job is to try and determine what happened, who did this and if there is any surviving technology that could be useful to us.”

“Acknowledged, how shall we proceed?” Moda asked.

“Lets do a scanner sweep of those ship remains first then we’ll go scan the inactive gate over to the right,” He began to open the thrusters of the Defiance when Moda spoke up in alarm.

“Sir our gate has gone!”

Tor felt a little guilty at not having explained the nature of the gate before Moda had an opportunity to back out, “It’ll be back. Creed found it last time he was out here, but didn’t get an opportunity to investigate, which is why we’re here now.”

The Boron did not look happy but nodded in acknowledgement. The two fighters moved forward with the sensors set to maximum range. As they flew in close to the remains of the first ship the scanners showed no sign of life or residual power. Great rents in the side of the vessel exposed some of the deck structure and in a great many places the stars beyond. The Piranha navigated its way through one of the larger openings and disappeared inside Tor turned the Defiance in a gentle climb up and over the top. His eyes widened at the scene of devastation. The far side of the ship and top looked as though it had been ripped apart by massive explosions, looking down he could make out the forward lights of the Piranha as it moved through the tangled and twisted remains of the superstructure. The front end of the Alien ship was completely missing.

Tor made a note of the numerous score marks and asked, “Sweetie, analysis.”

“Sensor readings of the hull indicate the use of low energy beam weapons. Multiple missile impacts and engine core explosion.”

As they continued the sweep they found that many of the larger fragments were sections of hull from what must have been an extremely large carrier ship. They examined anything that may have once been a weapons system but Tors’ technical pad reported there were insufficient remains to determine the nature of the weapon. Time passed by quickly as they went from fragment to fragment covering a distance of six k’s in nearly a Stazura.

Vectoring in on the disabled gate it soon became obvious as to why. Tor could only assume that in a last ditch struggle to isolate themselves they had systematically dismantled the structure. Neither pilot spoke as they circled the great sections. Tor knew if he went to see the other gate it would be the same, and he wondered what had made them so desperate that they had decided to cut themselves off from the rest of the universe. The fact the alien fleet had gathered and were destroyed near the intermittent gate began to worry Tor.

They moved on towards the largest construction in the alien sector and it took them nearly two Stazura to reach the vast structure. Tor uttered two words, “My god,” As they flew through the vast wreckage of the alien space city.

The structures beneath a vast shattered geodesic dome were blackened and folded over. The same marks of the beam lasers that were on the alien ships cut through every part of the city. The technical datapad reported no signs of life or power in any of the ten k’s diameter of the alien city.

Tor could barely conceive how many people may have once lived here and how their lives would have been suddenly extinguished by the shattering of the dome. He could envisage a human type species

walking and flying between the rows of buildings, safe and secure one moment and then having all the air sucked away into the cold vacuum of space the next. He commented in almost a whisper, "There must be something here."

He gently took the Defiance into a huge fracture in the base of the structure and using the forward lights of the ship glided down wide silent passageways. Sweetys' voice broke the eerie silence, "I am detecting life forms ahead."

Tor slowed the ship, and slowly it crept forward, as the passage way opened up into another sliced open split in the derelict station he saw shapes moving around. He said cautiously, "Sweetie analyse."

Sweetys' voice responded with, "Scan indicates a large colony of spaceflies."

Gradually the ship moved into the fracture and Tor turned the ship on a heading back to open space. As he cleared the structure he gave Moda the instruction to join him and, whilst he waited, looked for a long time at the huge black monolith suspended in space. Tor asked himself, 'what did this and why?'

The Piranha also emerged and Tor checked his time piece, they had spent another two Stazura and still had very little understanding of who this alien race was and how they came to meet their terrible end. He spoke up, "Sweetie, can you locate any potential data centres?"

"Negative, without a power source I am unable to determine areas of active data transfers." Sweetys' voice replied.

Tor thought for a moment, Moda was still on the open comm channel and commented, "Perhaps a short duration induction current can be induced in the alien systems?"

"The power required to create an induction current large enough to activate the cities systems long enough for a useful measurement is one hundred times the available power of both ships." Sweetys' voice replied factually.

Tor felt disappointed but not discouraged. He began to think the copied AI somehow lacked the flare of the real Sweetie to provide alternative workable solutions. However with the data they did have he would be able to repeat the suggestion and see if a workable answer would be forthcoming.

Tor reached the decision that he would have to return here, but for now he would scan the rest of the sector in the time that remained to him. Feeling as though he knew what to expect Tor turned the ship to vector in on the last gate. "Let's get away from here. If necessary we'll come back another day."

Moda was happy to agree. The Boron did not like the station there was something dark and sinister about it and flying between the structures he felt that somehow he was offending the spirits of those that died here.

On the journey to the second gate Tor took an opportunity to get some sleep.

The computer kept the heading and speed constant and when they were within fifteen k's of the gate it woke up Tor. The second gate appeared to have been in the same state of dismantling as the first and Tor was curious about this. He wondered why the gate they had entered by had not been taken apart. The thought struck him that this alien race might not have known that it existed until it was too late, but the presence of the destroyed fleet seemed to indicate they did. Tor began to feel frustrated that he still had no idea of what had happened here.

They moved towards the group of asteroids, Tor checked the scanner and asked, "Sweetie can you plot me a course through?"

The course plotted and with the Piranha scanning a different section on a parallel vector they commenced their search. Tor kept the heading and had little problem navigating through the widely dispersed field. As he rounded the twelfth asteroid he suddenly stopped the ship.

“Moda hold your current position!” Tor ordered, “Sweetys can you confirm the course you’ve given me.”

“Course verified as correct with no obstructions on scanners,” Sweetys’ voice confirmed.

“And the course you’ve given me goes straight along this vector?” Tor asked his eyes fixed on the view ahead of him.

Sweetys’ voice replied, “Correct.”

Tor requested, “Sweetys can you do a complete sensor check focussing to an area two hundred metres ahead of us.”

“What’s up Sir?” Moda commented.

“I’m looking at an asteroid that doesn’t appear on scanners,” Tor replied.

“Scan complete,” Sweetys’ voice replied, “No object detected, however I am picking up a potential spatial anomaly.”

“I’m coming across,” Moda commented.

“Fly on visuals, I’ll hold position here until you arrive,” Tor commented and studied the asteroid. It appeared to be of average size compared to those around it. There was no natural spin and the surface was pitted with smaller meteorite strikes from when the solar system was still young.

The Piranha glided to a halt behind him, Moda commented, “I also have nothing on scanners Sir.”

Tor had time to think and now that Moda was here he said, “Keep an eye on me Moda, I’m going to fly slowly around it to see if it’s nothing more than an unusual phenomena. If I get too close or you see something unusual on scanners then shout.”

As the Defiance began to circle the asteroid Tor saw several shallow clefts in the surface, but these appeared as shadows on the surface. He realized with the sun behind him he would cross the terminator into perpetual darkness on the rear side of the asteroid in only a few Sezura. The asteroid still refused to appear on scanners and Tor could not get any enhanced, details as the forward lights would only assist if he stopped the ship and turned to face the asteroid. Feeling that he would miss too much Tor returned to where he saw a reasonably deep pocket on the surface.

“Moda, I’m going to get closer,” Tor commented. At slow speed he began the descent. His nerves were being stretched as the surface drew closer and still nothing appeared on scanner. Then he crossed an invisible barrier whilst only a few metres above the rim of the crater and everything on the scanners blanked.

He slowed the fall and, with heart beating swiftly, the Defiance dropped below the rim. The scanner was suddenly filled with the asteroid but nothing outside. Even the comm link to the Piranha was lost. He stopped the Defiance only ten metres from the base of the crater and said, “Sweetys, give me a scan of the asteroid.”

“Initiating,” Sweetys’ voice acknowledged, “I am detecting a low level energy source near the core of the asteroid and various refined materials not conducive to naturally occurring elements in concentrations some one kilometre below the surface.”

“Any sign of life?” Tor asked.

“Initial scan indicates there is no organic matter inside the asteroid. However there are regions below the surface that my scanners cannot penetrate,” Sweetys’ voice answered.

Tor would have like a more definite answer, "Can you tell me where the entrance is?"

Sweety replied, "I have detected a passageway to the surface which splits into two. The major route is sealed however the secondary passageway is open and is just large enough to allow this ship to pass though."

Tor gave a slight smile, "Okay plot it for me on the HUD."

The holographic image of the asteroid appeared on the HUD and the computer plotted Tors' current position and showed it relative to the entrance. The gap in the rock appeared to be regular in shape but very narrow.

"Sweety can you superimpose an image of the Defiance into the opening?" Tor asked.

The image changed and the holo-image rotated and scaled up the image of the Defiance was overlaid in the opening. Tor knew the computer said it would be tight but he was looking at an image where the ships turrets would only have a metre clearance at best, and that depended on him approaching the opening in the exact orientation and on an exact vector heading.

"Sweety mark the positions of the wing tips and top and bottom turrets. Extrapolate to the walls and store positions for an approach orientation," As Tor made the request the computer places green markers on the image. Satisfied his request had been met he then asked, "Mark the centre of the ship and extrapolate a vector line perpendicular to the entrance for a distance of two k's."

The computer complied, and Tor examined the information, now he just had to think of a way to get the computer to remember these points when the scanners were once again unable to detect the asteroid. He wondered if the AI would remember the last recorded position of the Piranha, "Sweety, can you show me the last recorded position of the Piranha."

"Acknowledged, however it no longer appears to be within scanner range," Sweetys' voice replied.

"Mark that position and plot a vector between there and the end of the entrance vector," Tor requested and the image updated with another fine white line, "Okay Sweety lock all relative positions into memory and set targeting computer on the first point."

The HUD now showed the distance to the first vector point. Tor made a note of this and hoped that the Piranha had not moved. Slowly he brought the Defiance up out of the crater and through the concealment shield of the Asteroid. Checking the vector he smiled as the Piranha appeared back on the scanners and the targeting point overlaid the position exactly.

"Sir, did you determine the cause of our scanner problem?" Moda asked.

"I think there's a station concealed inside, but the scanners picked up no signs of life." Tor responded.

"So what do we do now Sir?" The Boron asked and the tentacles inside the environment suit helmet moved gently.

Tor had now reset the target to the end of the vector that would guide him to the entrance, "Well I've found a way in and I want to take a look," He felt excited by the fact that at last they had found something which could have some potential value.

Moda was looking apprehensive. However Tor had not yet become accustomed to the wealth of Boron fin, tentacle and facial expressions to have understood any of this. A Mizura later and Tor had carefully positioned the Defiance on the final vector point. He had transferred the locations to the Piranha which now placed itself five hundred metres behind.

"Okay Moda follow me in. Keep it slow as this could become a bit tight," Tor mentioned, but this was for his own benefit as the Piranha was a smaller ship.

Tor had the computer make the orientation adjustments and as he approached the forward light began to provide the much needed illumination. The dark hole looked far too small as the ship closed the gap, however the scanners still could not detect the asteroid. As the nose of the Defiance cut through the concealment shield Tor, like Moda, began to feel a deep sense of apprehension. The beams from the forward lights of the ship disappeared into the blackness of the small entrance.

The ship slipped into the opening, as the lights now illuminated the sides of the passageway Tor felt uncomfortable that at any moment he would hear the graunch of metal on rock and proximity warnings flashed incessantly on the console. Then the lights fell away into darkness on all but the left side. The Defiance emerged into the larger passageway. He turned the ship and the lights faintly illuminated the opposite wall. Behind him the Piranha emerged, both Tor and Moda remained silent for a moment.

Tor wondered how large the main passage was and speculated that even a Mammoth could fit into the cavernous space. "Sweetie can you put up a grid pattern to mark the walls?"

"Acknowledged," Sweetys' voice replied and a green grid appeared on the HUD as an almost perfect circle.

Tor asked, "How far to the station?"

"Distance to station doors is one kilometre," The computer responded.

"Moda are you ready to move on?" Tor turned his attention to the image of the Boron pilot and tried to hide any growing nervousness in his voice.

"I'm with you all the way Sir," The aquatic voice replied.

The two ships moved slowly forward, each pilot continually checking the scanners for activity within the station. As the lights began to reflect off the hard grey surfaces of the station gateway both ships stopped.

Static defences bristled from all sides, the rock carved to form a natural defence for many turrets to hide behind. Nothing moved, there were no bright flashes of plasma or particle beams. No missile contrails or mine explosions. The computer scanners showed no sign of change in the low power source that maintained the concealment shield.

Tor looked at Moda who simply looked back and both ships moved forward again with added caution. Every few moments Tors' heart leapt into his mouth as he caught sight of the moving shadow, caused by the motion of the ships lights, and left him convinced that one of the turrets had moved. The inner station gate was open just wide enough for the Defiance to pass through. The Piranha was beside him. The next gate that formed the station airlock was firmly shut. Tor looked around, the lights from both ships reflected off the walls.

Still there was nothing, no incoming messages and no sign of the inner door being opened, "Sweetie, how do we get in? And no funny answers like shoot. I'd rather not have this place wake up and decide we're hostile."

The computer answered, "There is a maintenance door on the right wall. It has a manual override and a mechanical lever mechanism."

"Okay, is there anything your scanners can pick up which could tell us what's on the other side?" Tor asked simply.

Sweetys' voice replied, "Indications are that there are a number of un-powered static defences. In the docking area are a number of robots whose function I cannot determine. These are inactive and have no residual power. Beyond this are corridors and rooms, functions unknown."

Tor envisaged the Silicon Mine and how that had looked when he first stepped off the Defiance, “Okay,” He acknowledged to the computer and then looked at Moda, “Want a trip into the unknown?” He smiled trying to hide his apprehension of going on alone should Moda refuse.

He felt visibly relieved when the Boron agreed, “The plan is we get on board to see if we can find the control room. Then try to patch into the main computer, hopefully it’ll be getting power, and download any useful data before getting out again. Now I’ll only have a little less than half a Stazura of air in the EVA unit. I don’t know how long you can last.”

“Understood, my EVA suit will last five Stazura before requiring replenishing Sir,” Moda responded.

Tor smiled again. In the company of air breathing races the Boron had expended a considerable amount of effort in improving the active life of their environment suits without the need for a recharge. He added, “Well that means you’ll be able to help me back if my suit begins to run low. Although I’m not expecting anything it may be as well to bring a pulse rifle with you.”

Tor suddenly had a thought, “Sweetie, could the transporter beam us to the opposite side of the gate?”

Sweetie’s voice replied, “Yes, currently there are no high energy devices active that could interfere with the carrier beam.”

“Okay Moda, change of plan I suggest we transport in and find the control room mark it and transport out again when we’ve collected suitable data.” Tor announced.

Moda did not answer straight away, the changes in the motion of the short tentacles and facial expression, with the unseen alterations in the fluids surrounding the Boron would have indicated the he was perplexed by the decision, “Sir I do not think we should transport, we don’t know what inside, prefer we find our own way in, use transport for emergency.”

The broken speech gave all the clues needed to Tor that the Moda was not enthralled by his suggestion. He took a moment to consider his options, beaming in was undoubtedly easier however it could also place him in considerable danger with no knowledge on how to escape if they could not transport out again.

He breathed in deeply, “Okay we’ll use the traditional route,” As he began to rise from his seat Tor added casually, “When you’re ready head for the maintenance hatch and see if you can get it open. I’ll join you in a moment.”

“Yes Sir,” Moda kept the comm channel open and left the pilot seat. Tor did likewise and hunted around several lockers.

He pulled out the reserve EVA unit and began to check his suit gloves for fit and seal. Hauling the pack onto his back he fastened the buckles. In the belt were two additional cables, these plugged into the suit. Checking the wrist controller it momentarily flashed into auto check mode, indicated a full air supply and suit temperature. He put on the belt for his blaster and ensured it was clipped into its holder. Built to work in space and zero gravity without accidental discharge, its presence gave him some comfort. Finally he reached over the back of his head and released the helmet. As soon as he had put in on the locking rings expanded to provide a completely airtight seal. Finally he unplugged the technical pad from the main console and clipped it to his right arm.

Tor apprehensively looked at the airlock door, “Okay Sweetie, just to prove you’re still in control of the ships functions open the inner airlock.”

There was a distinctive hiss and he stepped forward into the airlock. The door closed behind him. Ever conscious of his own breathing in the silence, he waited as the airlock evacuated. Checking the readout on the integrity of his suit, Tor noted it was illuminated green and then spoke up, “Open the outer airlock Sweetie.”

Slowly the airlock door opened and Tor stepped out into the void, almost unnoticed he began to fall until Sweetys' copied AI compensated for the asteroids low gravity.

With the pack control sticks now extended he made his way over to Moda. The Boron was already at the maintenance door and operated the manual lever to gain access. Slung casually across his back was a heavy assault plasma rifle.

Tor noted how, with relative ease, the Boron operated the lever, which at face value appeared to have been made for a much larger person. They entered the stations' maintenance airlock and looked around. A control panel nestled in a recess in the nearside wall but the screen was blank due to a lack of power. Tor looked around and picked up on the presence of pressure release valves near both entrances. He also noted the door into the airlock from the outside opened into the airlock and the door to the station opened into the docking bay.

Tor asked quickly, "Sweetys is there any atmosphere on the opposite side of the door?"

Sweetys' voice responded, "Yes, however my analysis indicates that the air has stagnated and is unsuitable for breathing."

Tor sighed, and looked at Moda who had already realized they would have to seal themselves in the airlock before they would be able to progress any further. Moda swung the door closed behind them. As the Boron operated the manual locks, Tor grasped hold of the pressure release valve. It slowly moved as Tor braced himself and pulled with every ounce of strength. The room hissed as cold air flooded in. Tor could feel the pressure increasing on his suit, gradually the hissing sound diminished and then stopped.

Moda, having seen Tor struggle with the valve, opened the door with relative ease and pulled around his plasma rifle. Inside they had to rely completely on the EVA suit lights to show the way. The gantry was broad enough for the two of them to stand side by side and it ran along the wall to the right before turning sharp left and across the far wall to the docking stations.

Tor opted for a short cut and used the jets on his EVA suit to cross the dark chamber to the other side. Moda jetted along beside him in silence. As they approached the docks the lights on the EVA suit illuminated shapes occupying much of the left hand side of the platform, "Sweetys, what are those?" He pointed so the technical pad sensors knew in which direction Tor was referring.

Sweetys' voice replied, "They are robots, function unknown. Scanners indicate their power units have been exhausted."

Tor nodded as he remembered the AI mentioning this before and aimed for a landing point on the nearest dockside. Landing with a heavy thump the sound echoed through the deserted bay. Moda gently touched down a metre further along. Tor turned and looked each way and all he could hear was the sound of his own breathing. As far as his lights could show there were no ships.

"Where to now?" Moda asked, his voice sounding loud even though it was no more than a whisper.

"I want to have a look over here," Tor indicated to the motionless robots. His voice quiet and unwilling to disturb the silence that crowded in on them.

Moda gave a slight movement of the head that Tor recognised as a nod and turned. With Moda following Tor was acutely aware that his own shadow looked strangely eerie as it stretched before him. The lack of any shadow from Moda left him disconcerted.

The robots were varied in size and shape each with its own set of specialized instruments. The black visors giving them a dark malevolent feel and Tor soon turned away feeling as though he had now made a mistake in going to look. In every way the ranks of robots appeared to be waiting silently and expectantly for something to happen.

As they walked away Tor could not help but to keep looking around and as their footsteps echoed with each fall. The growing sense that they were not alone and being watched crept over him. The fleeting shadows from the lamps as he turned did nothing to calm him, and his hand now gripped the hilt of his blaster.

Sweetys' voice commented, "Tor I notice that your vital signs have changed and you are exhibiting a significant increase in your heart rate."

Tor responded anxiously, "Just confirm that your sensors show that there's no living thing in this station other than me and Moda."

"Running full biological and thermal scan," The silence descended once again as both Tor and Moda waited for the result, Sweetys' voice commented, "There is nothing on the scanners. However I do detect biological remains."

Both Tor and Moda glanced at each other. Tor asked, "What type of remains?"

Sweetys' voice replied, "There is insufficient material left to determine species."

Tor asked with a sense of uncertainty, "And you're certain it's dead?"

Sweetys' voice responded, "Positive, the object has insufficient biomass to sustain life, there are no vital signs and no thermal profile."

Tor asked slowly, "Any chance of telling us how it died?"

Sweetys voice replied, "Insufficient biomass and anatomical data on file to determine cause of death."

This did nothing to calm Tors growing apprehension. His ears strained to detect any noise and all he could feel was the blood pumping through his body over the absolute silence. He commented quietly, "Show us where this body is?"

Tor unclipped the restraining clip to his blaster and slowly drew the weapon. Moda watched and signalled for Tor to go ahead.

The display of the datapad led them to a broad spiral ramp. Slowly they ascended the lamps of the EVAs illuminating a wide concourse in front of numerous empty windows and darkened entranceways. The pad continued to display the need to climb to the next level. Tor looked up but the lamps barely penetrated the darkness above them. Moda swung the pulse assault rifle in broad sweep of the concourse but refrained from firing.

The footsteps reverberated through the ramp as they reached the next level Tor spotted something and in a moments panic fired his blaster. There was the sound of something heavy hitting the ground. The noise boomed throughout the station and a cloud of dust rose into the air. Moda crouched down pulse rifle pulled in tight and the beam of the laser sight cutting through the settling dust, but he did not fire. They waited a few moments and then cautiously moved forward, Tors' heart began to slow and he almost laughed once he realised that the object he had seen was no more than a sculpture.

Moda however looked down at the shattered pieces thoughtfully. He looked at Tor and said quietly, "We move on. And Sir should be careful not to anger the makers of this place."

The initial wave of relief passed and Tor realized with horror that if there was someone here, and even if he and Moda had gone undetected so far, the sound of weapons fire with the falling sculpture would not have gone unnoticed. They waited quietly, Tor trying to listen for the sound of anything other than his own breathing.

He checked the direction on the pad and slowly they moved towards a dark opening which marked the beginning of a long corridor from the platform they were on. Tor was undecided between putting the blaster back in its holster for fear of accidentally shooting something or keeping it in hand just in case.

Dark doorways opened up on either side. Twice Tor dropped to the floor as he caught sight of something shining back at him from the darkness, but he managed to refrain from firing. Moda went to investigate, crouched low with pulse rifle ready. Each time he returned and told Tor he had simply seen a reflection. The third time he rolled to the side and sat shaking his heart beating so fast that he wondered if he would be able to take any more shocks.

Moda commented quietly, "I will lead Sir. Keep your eyes on me. Moda not scared of the dark Sir." The Boron refrained to mention that he was more worried at being accidentally shot by Tor than meeting anything hostile. At the moment he felt they might actually achieve something if they could pick up the pace. The slow progress was eating into what precious little time Tor had left in his oxygen supply.

With a quick glance into each darkened room, Moda made swift progress. As far as he was concerned the need for stealth had long since been lost with Tors' blaster attack on the statue. It was something that could have been useful to study, if it had not been reduced to rubble and dust. He also doubted that Tor would be able to describe what he had seen before he fired.

Tor kept looking over his shoulder now and some part of his mind told him he should be walking backwards to make sure nothing was silently coming up behind them. He had looked back when the sense of open space had him glance around. Tor bumped into Moda who, in the low gravity, shot forwards and pirouetted over the barrier and into a dark void.

"Shit!" Tor looked panicked and called out desperately, "Moda?"

There was a moments silence then the Boron replied through the com, "I fine Sir. Just jetting back up to platform so don't shoot!"

Tor felt relieved as the lamps of the Boron EVA appeared above the edge of the platform. Moda did a slow complete one hundred and eighty degree turn as he landed so he had his back turned to Tor but could keep an eye on the void he had just been pushed into.

Moda commented in a whisper, "Which direction Sir?"

Tor referred to the pad and glanced up and whispered, "We need to get to the other side of this and up three levels."

"Then we fly Sir." Moda commented quietly.

Grasping the EVA thrusters control stick, Tor looked around the lights barely able to determine anything useful in the darkness. His feet lifted from the surface and he followed Moda into the dark void that opened above and below them. They flew straight and Tors' apprehension once again began to take hold, even the sight of the opposite platform did little to comfort him and soon the jets on Modas' pack flared briefly as he shot up. Tor followed past the next level and they continued to rise. The blackness appeared unyielding above them and below it swallowed the levels they passed.

Tor pointed his blaster down almost expecting something to come hurtling from the blackness towards him. He shot past Moda who had changed direction and was landing on the platform. Tor momentarily panicked and almost reached the level above before shutting off the thrusters and allowed the low gravity to pull him slowly back down to the next level.

Moda waited for him patiently. Tor landed and Moda asked quietly, "Which way?"

Tor glanced at the pad and pointed down the corridor beside Moda. They passed partially closed heavy interior blast doors. Tor took this to be a good thing as it left him with the impression they were approaching somewhere important.

The dark passageways opened up either side and now Moda was moving with a degree of additional caution. Suddenly he stopped and pointed. Tors' eyes looked slowly across and in the lights he saw the overhead turret weapon. Two weapons of undetermined type pointing directly up the corridor towards them.

"Sweetie is that defence system active?" Tor asked in a whisper.

The response came back, "Negative."

Moda moved forward and they entered a wide chamber. They moved slowly across the room and stopped once again. The door at the end was open however two large robots stood as dark sentinels either side. The heads looked down their black visors glinting in the light of the suits lamps. Tor noted that what might be considered two arms were in fact some type of heavy weapons, type unknown.

Tor commented quietly, "Sweetie, tell me those things have no power."

Sweetie's voice confirmed, "There is no residual power in the robots."

Tor then spoke quietly whilst he watched the robots intently and his blaster moving between the two, "Moda the body is in the next room."

Both moved forward cautiously each targeting the robots and glancing between the two. Stepping into the room they quickly came to realize they were now in the stations command centre. Tor wandered forward towards the master control desk. Moda had turned and was now walking backwards his weapon aimed at the doorway behind them.

Tor stopped and looked at the chair behind the desk, his jaw tightened. The collapsed shapeless suit could only mean that it was filled with bones. Behind the chair was a skull with three swept back horns with the remains of dried blackened flesh and hair. In the pile of bones and small pieces of preserved blackened flesh, that once represented the left arm, was a blaster type weapon. He could see from the damage to the skull this alien had probably committed suicide.

Stepping carefully up to the control desk, Tor tried to avoid disturbing the remains. The layout of the panels and height gave Tor a reasonably good impression that this race must have been much taller than the average Argon. An open case was neatly positioned as if waiting to be found.

The only indication there was any power were three evenly spaced touch pads, each glowed dimly red. Symbols, and what could only be described as lettering, etched into each one. On the left side of the console a single indicator bar showed yellow and appeared to be at the one quarter level. Moda looked with interest at the other control panels around the room. None showed any sign of power.

Tor unclipped the datapad and held it so the optical sensor could scan the desk, "Sweetie, can you decipher any of these symbols?"

"Scan complete. Comparing with known languages," There was a momentary pause, "No match found. Beginning code break this will take approximately two Stazura."

"Just in time for the gate," Tor commented quietly and glanced at the oxygen level indicator on his suit. A little over half the supply has been used.

Moda was now standing on the opposite side of the desk, and said quietly, "It be quicker out than in."

Tor nodded, as far as he was concerned there was always the transporter option. They took a moment to study the open case. Inside was a strange looking hand held device and a number of small crystal slivers, each one five millimetres thick and packed carefully in individual pockets cut into a foam like material for protection.

Moda commented, "I think this may have answers to what happened."

Examining the console Tor tried to determine if there was anywhere that he could plug in the technical datapad, "Sweetie is there any way you can interface with the control systems?"

"I cannot detect any usable connection ports. Also only one data connection is in active use, you would need to disconnect this and manually wire into the datapad. Time to perform this operation would be fifteen Mizura," Sweetie's voice announced.

Tor looked at the skull on the floor and whispered, "Let's get back," He closed the case and carefully lifted it by its unusual hand grip.

Glancing down towards the floor he pondered taking the weapon when Moda interrupted his thoughts, "Leave it Sir!"

Tor looked at the Boron who was still watching him and nodded slowly. They moved much more swiftly out of the control centre and Tor stopped, "Moda I'd like to take one of these back."

The Boron turned and looked at Tor who indicated to one of the sentinels, "It will raise many questions from agents Sir."

"Yes, but if we find we need to come back here, I'd like to be certain that we understand the programming protocols of these computers. In particular the defence systems," Tor responded.

"And if it wakes up and we can't control it?" Moda asked quietly.

"Then we'll transport it out into space and let our fighters deal with it." Tor replied.

"Let me suggest that you transport after we reach our ships." Moda still felt that they should try and disturb as little as possible, despite Tor's incident with the statue.

Looking at the sentinel Tor pointed the technical pad towards it and commented, "Sweetie mark the position and be prepared to transport into the defiance hold when we reach the ships," His lamps illuminated Moda and he commented, "Let's go."

Progress was swift, somehow knowing they were returning to the ships lifted Tor's spirits and the darkness seemed less ominous. Moda jetted up over the balcony and down into the darkness. Tor followed the Boron's suit lights. They landed on the opposite side several floors down but Tor felt slightly disorientated as nothing appeared familiar, Moda just moved on without checking for direction.

Tor glanced at the technical pad then followed quickly, occasionally giving himself a burst of extra speed from the pack, to catch up with his companion. Exiting from the corridor he reached the next platform. Moda had stopped and was carefully looking around.

Tor wondered why for a second then realised there should have been the remains of a statue here. In the combined suit lights there was no sign of it.

"Where's it gone?" Tor asked quietly.

Moda replied slowly, "I think we come down one floor too many on last drop."

"I really hope so," Tor added. He glanced to his oxygen indicator, "Well we haven't got time to go look, so let's keep moving."

Moda nodded and immediately set off using the pack jets for added speed. It took only a few Mizura to arrive back at the dockside and Tor noted that he had about ten Mizura of oxygen left.

They skirted around the edge of the docking bay so they could locate the gantry which would lead them to the maintenance airlock. Tor looked back into the darkness which now consumed the alien station as Moda pulled the door shut and operated the locking levers.

The air hissed out and with a sense of relief the door opened to reveal the Piranha and Defiance. A Mizura later and Tor was once again back on the Defiance. Moda had stayed with him curious to get a better look at the contents of the alien case.

Before removing the suit Tor placed the pad back into the cockpit and reconnected it to the main computer.

Tor said, "Sweetie, scan the ship for contaminants."

The AI replied, "Scan complete, air tight case detected to have unsuitable air content. Advise opening the case with caution and allow ship recirculation system to disperse and cleanse." He popped open the catches, carefully lifted the lid and waited.

Two mizuras later and Tor was getting anxious as the oxygen indicator of his suit flashed red, Sweetie's voice announced, "Air purification complete."

Tor released the seals on the helmet and breathed in deeply. He removed the pack and put away the blaster. Moda picked up the alien device and looked at it intently whilst slowly turning it over in his suited hands.

"Any thoughts?" Tor asked.

Moda picked out one of the crystal and looked at it. Carefully he put it back and once again turned over the device, "I think the crystals are some type of data archive and this must be the reader."

"I'm glad you said that, otherwise we'd need to go back and try to find something more useful," Tor sounded relieved, "But any ideas on how it works?"

Moda placed the unit carefully down on the table, and pointed to certain switches, "There is writing on these but I do not understand the language."

Tor also picked up the device and turned it over. He could see the top of a crystal wafer already inside, "Sweetie is there any power in this thing?"

The AI answered, "Negative, interface incompatible with ship data connections."

Tor commented as he carefully placed the object back into the case, "Okay, doesn't look like we can do any more here. How long until the gate reopens?"

The reply came back, "Gate opens in one Stazura and ninety Mizuras from now."

Tor looked at Moda, "Let's get moving."

The Boron nodded and stood in the airlock. The inner door closed and the air evacuated. When the outer door opened, Moda jettied out and returned to the waiting Piranha. Tor sat in the pilot seat having stowed the case in a locker and when Moda was inside his ship he started to turn the Defiance.

Tor asked quietly, "Sweetie do you still have a lock on the Sentinel?"

"Acknowledged," Sweetie's voice responded.

As the outer doors came back into view Tor commented, "Okay when we're clear of the doors and gun turrets transport it to the hold."

The Piranha began to move and Tor allowed it to go out ahead. Gently he engaged the thrusters and the Defiance went between the partially opened doors. The turret defences remained motionless and soon vanished back into the shadows.

The computer announced, "Transport complete."

"Any change in the station?" Tor asked quickly.

The response came back, "Negative."

It took them a few Mizura to find and align themselves to the exit passageway and both Tor and Moda were glad to see the stars once again. Leaving the asteroid field behind, Tor vectored in on the position of the gate and came to a stop.

"Sweetie, monitor sector activity and if anything happens let me know." Tor stood up and retired to the cabin. He opened a locker, retrieved the games console and once again began the task of getting established in his own simulated trading empire, this time without interference.

Chapter 12. Show Time

Feran had briefed the assault squads captains, the orders were simple, to kill all except Grall unless he proved to be 'particularly' difficult.

He watched on the Scruffin Fruit Farms control centre screens as they loaded the modified lifter, he spoke to the landing bay co-ordinator, "Do we have the lifter codes?"

"Crystal Fab security and identity codes have been uploaded, cargo mask in operation, now recognised as Lifter CFB one, five, three, CG from the Crystal Fab Gamma in sector X-three," The operator responded as confidently as she could with Feran standing so close behind.

Feran let her sweat it out for a few moments longer, "And when will they be ready to leave?" He asked slowly.

She focused on the screen ahead of her and replied, "Estimated time to departure is forty Mizura."

A thin smile appeared and he placed a heavy hand on her shoulder and forced her to sit back in her seat, her head snapped round so fast Feran wondered why she had not managed to break her own neck. She looked at him with a mixture of fear and shock. His left hand took hold of her jaw in a firm grip and he leant forward. Feran asked quietly, "Why so long?"

She was visibly trembling, fearing that Feran might decide to use her as one of his play things, and hesitantly replied, "It," She paused, "The cr...crystal fabs own lifter ha...ha...has to arrive he...he...here before we can launch Sir."

Feran held her jaw a little longer and made a play of monitoring the screens, then with a sigh he let her go and commented, "Very well. Keep me informed," He turned and strode away.

Sweetys' voice commented, "Creeds' Gate to emerge in five Sezura."

Tor was already in the pilot seat as the time counted down and the gate appeared. Both ships shot forward and emerged in the Nebula of X-four. Tor was keen to get back to the station and created several huge energy discharges into the cloud before heeding the warning to slow down. Moda was some way behind and progressing with caution.

In a few Mizura, Tor broke out of the cloud with the announcement, "Comms re-established," And before he could say anything Sweety commented, "Been having fun? And I see you have a new toy in the hold."

Tor replied quickly, "Hi Sweety good to hear you're back on line, hopefully you can make sense of all the stuff on the pad."

"Have you been missing me?" Sweety cooed gently.

"The copy is okay, but it does lack that little something," Tor replied sincerely.

"Thanks," There was a brief pause, "It looks as though the translation is complete," Sweety created a holo-projection of the alien control desk and then zoomed into the desk, "Simply the three buttons signify power on and the indicator to the left indicates residual standby power."

Tor looked a bit surprised having expected more, "Oh."

The image disappeared. Sweety commented gently, "Data recorded on the pad indicate that you are afraid of the dark."

Tor responded defensively, “Yeah well, I’m used to wandering around stations that have the lights on all the time.”

Sweety said calmly, “It is a good thing that the place was empty. Two people boarding an alien station would not have had much chance of leaving again if it had been full of hostile creatures.”

A holo-image of the device in the case appeared and once again the image turned and became larger. Sweety reported, “Indicators are for play, record, skip forward and skip back. However I am unable to determine method of image projection whilst there is no residual power.”

Tor diverted his attention from the image, “What about the station?”

Sweety took several moments before replying, “Sensor scans indicate, and this is a best guess, that the station was never made operational. The robots in the docking bay appear to be construction machines. I would estimate that once the station had been built they gathered in the docking bay to await transportation to the next site or receive new instructions.”

Tor commented, “But we did find one alien remains. I wonder why it didn’t power the place up?”

Sweety responded, “I believe the answer will be in the aliens’ archive that you have.”

Tor set the vector heading for the Silicon Mine and slowed down to allow the Piranha to catch up. The Paranid Solar Power Plant appeared to have been completed.

As he waited Tor asked, “What do you make of the robot in the hold.”

Sweety responded, “Without internal power it is not possible to give a complete analysis. Initial scans indicate a heavy assault defence robot, shielding and weapon types unknown. It has heavy external armour, consisting of a toughened composite alloy, with a secondary protective inner skin and a dense gel material in-between. For mobility it uses a configuration of hydraulic actuators and servo-motors. The power source appears to be a small fusion unit coupled with high energy cells.”

Tor asked, “Can we power it up?”

Sweety replied, “We will need to modify a number of power couplings and run a full maintenance check for fluid leaks. I estimate this unit has not moved for five hundred years and will need some work to make it functional. I will also need to understand the core programming before I can guarantee that we will be able to control it when active.”

Tor digested this information, and was a little surprised by Sweetys’ estimate as to how long the station had been there, “So what else has been happening whilst I’ve been away?”

“Pors has been enquiring as to your whereabouts. The silicon mine is in full production and so is the Crystal Fabrication plant. We have a fighter group patrolling the sector and monitoring traffic. The lifters are travelling with fighter escorts and your credit balance is beginning to look healthy again. Nyeshta says ‘Hi’ from the Bakery and the Pegasus has returned safely,” Sweety sounded cheerful.

Tor smiled and relaxed, “So far so good. Any news on the Bloodhearts?”

Sweetys continued to sound cheerful, “No activity to report. Their transports are freely trading in the sectors but nothing more.”

Tor commented with a yawn, “Let’s get on station, I need to freshen up.”

With the Piranha close behind again the two ships made the last few k’s of the journey in silence. Tor smiled and sat back as the green docking lights came on and the docking bay doors opened. He was back in his second home again and could relax.

As the docking clamps gripped on, Tor finished gathering his possessions and, concealing the case as best he could, he opened the airlock doors. For a moment he had expected a crowd of agents to be waiting for him but the only people present were fighter pilots. Moda stepped out of the Piranha and casually crossed the platform. Tor thanked him for his support and mentioned they should have a debrief within the next Stazura to discuss the flight.

His first call was to the shower. With a complete change of clothes he left the room to return the technical datapad to his office and then to order in some food. As he sat contemplating what to order, he felt that he should at least show his face in the command centre and check on any changes which would have been made to the station.

“Sweetie how long before you can give me an idea if our new acquisition is going to be of any use?” Tor asked.

The noise dampening field activated and Sweetie replied, “It was transported to the lower level maintenance bay as soon as you docked. I thought it best that it did not remain on-board for any length of time. The maintenance robots have already started the strip down. I estimate another ten Mizura to extract serviceable parts, fifteen Mizura to replace seals and recharge the system and ten Mizura to reassemble.”

Tor was impressed, “That’s quick work.”

When Sweetie spoke again, Tor felt that she sounded impressed, “The designers knew what they were doing. They built it with combat and rapid repair in mind. The core control unit has already been removed and is currently in diagnostics.”

Feeling slightly more curious Tor asked, “Meaning?”

Sweetie answered, “We have adapted several interfaces and can now read the original coding. However it will take a while to understand the programming language and compile something usable. Fortunately the translation of the symbols from the station has given us a head start and the structure of the programming is vaguely reminiscent of Teladi coding.”

“Don’t tell me they’re related,” Tor frowned, thinking it would be typical that the Teladi had somehow been there before him.

Sweetie responded to the question cautiously, “I really do not have enough data to confirm my thoughts. In the evolutionary sense they may have evolved in very similar ways and although the language would be different, it is quite possible that the thought processes are very similar.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment, “Okay, well let me know how it turns out. In the meantime did you review the rest of the sector data?”

Sweetie replied, “I have the data and made some attempt to piece together what happened with several possible scenarios. However I believe the archive will hold the information. By the way Pors is waiting to talk to you.”

Tor gave a slight smile and sat back, “Thanks for the warning,” He waited for a moment and decided that if he was going to talk to the agent he might as well do it whilst he had a meal. Standing up he made his way to the door. The dampening field lifted and the office door slid open.

The agent was standing by the receptionists’ desk, a position that had yet to be filled, and looked across. He smiled, “Good to see you made it back.”

“It’s good to be back,” Tor responded with a slight smile, “Did you want to see me?”

“Just a social call,” Pors replied, “We were rather surprised you were gone so long.”

“Yeah we lost contact with each other and to be honest became a little disorientated in the larger Nebula,” Tor started, “Look I’m just off to get something to eat, care to join me?”

Pors shrugged and replied, “Sounds good, it’s about time for lunch.”

“Lunch? This is going to be breakfast for me.” Tor gave a wry smile.

During the course of the meal Pors only asked the occasional question regarding Tors’ trip. For the majority of the meal he spent a fair amount of time briefing Tor on the activity inside the Crystal Fab, including the changes that had been made. Tor was in no doubt that the Intelligence Service had firmly established itself and he was left with the impression they had taken over most of the security area.

After the meal they arrived at the control centre as Tor wanted to check up on how well the staff were getting on. There was a slight buzz of activity as controllers monitored activity inside and outside the station.

“TGP zero, six, five, and seven SM both cleared for departure.”

“Lifter TGL zero, two, zero, SM hold position.”

“Acknowledged, continue security check in section delta four level two.”

Tor wandered over to the master control desk and Liann nodded before commenting into the throat mic, “Lifter CFB one, five, three, CG cleared to dock.”

“Maintenance team can you send a robot down to level ten, the shuttle lift doors in shaft Terran nine appear to have stuck.”

There was a brief lull, Liann commented, “Welcome back Sir,” and vacated the seat.

Tor shook his head and smiled, “No you stay there. This is just a brief visit to see how things are going.”

“It’s not too busy most of the time, just getting the maintenance crews familiar with where things are and making sure the fighter patrols go out on time. That type of thing.” Liann commented as she sat down again.

Pors had been watching the monitors and Tor wondered if he would be able to stroll out unnoticed. No sooner than the thought had crossed his mind then the agent looked around and approached the desk.

Just as Pors opened his mouth to say something a siren boomed through the room, “Station under attack, internal security breeched, repeat internal security breeched. This is not a drill.”

The five controllers sat stunned, even Tor looked shocked and lost as to what to do next. Pors glanced at the screens, “Seal the general docking bay, NOW.” Suited figures could be seen pouring out from the newly arrived lifter and taking no chances were firing in every direction.

The monitors showed the few visitors on that level being cut down by the pulse rifle fire. Avoiding the shuttle lifts the assault teams were heading for the ramps.

“How many security men do we have in that area?” Tor asked quickly.

“Five,” Liann responded with a hint of disbelief at what was happening.

Tor quickly moved so that he was behind the desk, “Sweetie how many assault troops are attacking the station?”

“One hundred. There are ninety moving through the general docking bay. Ten are maintaining position near the lifter.” Sweetie replied quickly.

The screens switched, two of the security guards managed to return fire taking out three of the attackers but four grenades later and they met a violent end. Tor gripped the edge of the desk tightly. Liann stood with her mouth open, her face ashen white. Elsewhere in the control room one of the controllers was being violently sick.

“Get my people out of there Sweety!” Tor ordered through clenched teeth.

“Locating and transporting,” Sweety confirmed.

“How many security and combat trained personnel do we have?” Tor asked quickly.

“There are fifty combat trained personnel on board. However thirty are pilots and if my tactical analysis is correct they will make the security dock their primary target and attempt to take that part of the station first.” Sweety commented.

“Tell me you have that covered?” Tor was getting to grips with the unfolding situation.

“Security defences are in place.”

One of the cameras went out and was quickly followed by a second, then a third.

Tor looked around to see if any more had been destroyed, “How many cameras and sensors in that area?”

“There are fifteen in total,” Sweety replied.

Tor was firing out the questions, “What about exits?”

Sweety came back with a quick answer, “All the exits apart from one were sealed. However they could try and force one of the sealed doors.”

Somewhere inside the station there was the muffled sound of an explosion.

“Sweety locate all the security personnel. The pilots will need to defend the security dock,” Tor spoke up, “Everyone I need you to start relaying messages to the security teams, let them know where the enemy is and also keep the non combatant crew away from the fighting.”

The control centre staff came out of the initial shock and began rapidly relaying instructions.

“Internal defence system on level six, corridor alpha seven leading from the docking bay has just been activated. I am registering five enemy troops are down. Internal shielding activated,” Sweety commented.

Another explosion echoed through the station.

“We have a breach into corridor alpha nine on level six,” One of the coordinators called out, “Three man assault team progressing towards intersection with corridor delta four.”

The screen showed the enemy troops moving along the corridor, “Internal defence system activated,” For a couple of Sezura the three man team seemed to stop still then spasm before dropping to the floor.

“When this is over Mr Grall, I think you and I need to have a little chat,” Pors commented just above the noise. No one else in the command crew seemed to know what had just happened to the men and Tor was as mystified as they were.

Then Pors called out, “You’d better take a look at the docking bay!”

Tor glanced at the monitor as did the rest of the crew, “What the fuck’s that.”

“I think you should consider abandoning the station Mr Grall,” There was an urgency and tone in Pors voice that had everyone look around.

“But what is it?” Tor asked again.

“That is a Devastator series land assault robot. Specifically designed to take out heavily fortified underground bunkers and it will rip this station apart. Your weapon systems are fine against soldiers but they’re not going to have any impact on that thing,” Pors replied quickly and added, “I say again give the order to evacuate whilst you still can.”

Tor thought for a moment, “How long before it’s active?”

“A Mizura at most,” Pors commented.

“Sweety, can you get a transporter lock on the robot?” Tor asked quickly.

“Negative it has a pattern disruptor preventing target lock,” Sweety replied.

“Okay, send the Defiance around to destroy the lifter and Devastator before it gets off the docking platform,” Tor ordered.

The command crew looked shocked but kept monitoring the progress of the assault troops, who were now patiently waiting for the Devastator to become fully active. Slowly it began to rise and the armour plates moved into position. It held two primary weapons the first a high energy beam laser and the second Tor recognised immediately as a hellfire mini-gun.

It moved forward and with each step Tor could see the floor structure beneath it buckle. It appeared to look around and with the sweep of the beam laser destroyed the remaining cameras with pin point accuracy.

The viewer switched to the cockpit scanners of the Defiance and as it entered the general docking bay all four weapons fired a stream of plasma. The lifter shuddered and exploded whilst the docking bay was rapidly reduced to torn and twisted metal, and then the Devastator returned fire.

The beam laser cut through the haze of smoke and hit the Defiance. Sparks from the rounds of the mini-gun glowed in the ships shields. As the Defiance began to strafe sideways and then suddenly vertically to break free of the beam weapon it sent a continual barrage of plasma from the underside turret weapon.

Continued and repeated explosions rocked the docking bay. The upper turret fired ripping apart the upper level where the assault troops attempted to find shelter. Clouds of smoke billowed towards the air recirculation system and sparks from severed power couplings sprayed wildly as they arced into the structure until the power grid was cut.

The Devastator had been forced back against a bulkhead by the force of the alpha PAC impacts on its now failing shields. The laser cut out due to automatic thermal shutdown and recharge. Turning the hellfire down towards the floor it fired concussion rounds in a circle. Only to be jarred by more impacts from the alpha PAC. The Defiance dropped down sensing victory to bring its Beta HEPT’s into firing line.

The floor gave way beneath the Devastator and it dropped to the next level. With shields heavily depleted it turned and smashed a hole through a sealed exit. However it was now inside the station even if it left the Defiance in control of the docking bay.

“Devastator on level eight and moving towards shuttle lift Terran twelve,” Liann commented.

The viewer changed to look along the corridor from both directions. The robot had modified the position of its plates and weapons to fit inside the passageway. As it approached the internal shield units it stopped and fired at the camera. The beam was absorbed by the shield, the firing direction changed and sliced into the wall.

“Shielding unit power failure,” Liann commented. The monitor also went blank.

“All non-combatant crew to the security dock for immediate evacuation,” Tor ordered and then added, “Give me an update on the progress of the assault troops.”

“They have taken out the power on level six corridors alpha five, seven, nine and maintenance passage gamma twelve and fifteen,” A coordinator named Gyrillam replied.

“Sweety give me a status, how many left, where’s the Devastator and what’s the latest on the Sentinel?” Tor called out. Pors gave him a questioning sideways look.

Sweety answered, “They have sixty eight men remaining. Twenty were killed with the attack on the docking bay, and twelve by station defences. The Devastator has entered the shuttle lift tube and is now ascending. The Sentinel unit will be ready in two Mizura.”

Pors asked, “Can you slow the Devastator?”

Sweety confirmed, “Shuttle lift on collision descent and accelerating. I am also registering weapons fire between station security and advancing enemy attackers.”

Tor called out, “On screen.”

A makeshift barricade crossed the passageway, pulse rifles and blaster weapons fire flashed down the corridor and past the intersection where the enemy had arrived. Much heavier assault rifle plasma struck the barrier from the enemy weapons. Two plasma grenades bounced down the corridor and in a rush, all the defenders ran back down the passageway to take cover. The explosion destroyed the barricade and through the haze of smoke, plasma once again filled the corridor as the enemy began to advance.

“Shit,” Tor commented, “How close are they to the security dock?”

Liann answered the question, “They are two sections from the main passage to the security dock. All doors are closed and shielded. Static defences are on line.”

The battle robot picked up the descending shuttle lift on sensors and locked itself in position, bringing up both weapons it fired concussion rounds. The impacts ripped through lift but barely slowed its progress. Three short range rocket rounds fired from the hellfire and the laser sliced through the descending mass. The explosions from the rocket rounds shattered the lift and filled the shaft with debris and flames. However several large, heavy sections collided. The Devastators’ clamping arms and toes that had embedded themselves in the sides of the shaft were torn free and the robot dropped. Turning as it fell, it engaged the antigravity booster and slowed its descent before bracing and impacting into the base of the lift shaft.

Somewhere in the station the sound of the shuttle lift crunching into the Devastator echoed down the corridors and eventually into the command centre.

Tor looked around, when the coordinator Fioness called out, “We have three enemy squads now on level five and ascending.”

Tor requested, “Sweety advise?”

Sweety announced, “There is a reduced level of security until they reach this level. Shuttle lift and maintenance run access only. All personnel have been evacuated down to the transports. There are only two security squads active between them and us.”

Tor saw the plight was rapidly becoming desperate and asked, “Okay Sweety what about using the station transporter?”

Sweetey answered, "We cannot transport enemy troops as they are equipped with pattern disruptors. Moving our own security will weaken the current defensive position."

On the security dock the last of the non-combatant crew with the exception of the command team arrived and boarded the transport. The bulk of the fighters were already outside the station and the last of the Perseus ships hovered away from the dockside waiting.

Broden watched the corridor, casually leaning against the wall. His personal heavy assault pulse rifle was hanging from the counter balance shoulder support system. Moda waited on the other side just tucked into an entrance for additional concealment weapons ready.

Two other pilots also waited. He took a last deep draw on the cigar, dropped it down to the floor and then crushed it with his boot to the sound of another series of grenade explosions. Straightening up and lifting the weapon to point down the corridor, he signalled the team to move forward.

Blackened pock marks scarred the wall on either side of the intersection. The bodies of two security guards had been carefully laid against the wall. Their fatal wounds were obvious to the casual observer, and dark red blood oozed along the floor.

Above them, one of the recently installed turrets fired a prolonged burst. Broden considered that was probably the only reason the assault troops had not taken the corridor. Slipping on an infrared thermal imaging eyepiece with phosphor coated light enhancing secondary viewer he crouched down and stuck the fibre optic cable around the corner.

The corridor had the shattered pieces of a makeshift barricade. The mangled dismembered remains of a security guard littered the passageway. Pulse rifle fire came from an open doorway towards the enemy position. The overhead turret shimmered when return fire hit its shield. The defence system sent out another barrage. Broden changed the sight and zoomed in on the corridor beyond the barricade. Two darkened doorways on the opposite side indicated that enemy troops had positioned themselves inside.

With the infrared he could see two men moving around inside the nearest room whilst the third was monitoring the passageway with a similar optical unit to his own. The two men appeared to be placing charges on the wall and Broden realized they were blasting a way from one room to the next and avoiding the corridor.

He swung the heavy assault rifle out into the corridor and the fibre now showed the sighting dot. He saw the other sight move just as he fired the weapon. The three pulse discharge removed a section of wall and the thermal image of the enemy trooper now lay sprawled on the ground. The two remaining men looked around as holes were punched through the wall.

Plasma fire from the next doorway along had Broden pull back quickly and chunks of the wall flew in many directions. He asked, "Moda how good are you at throwing?"

A moment later and Moda had flung with exceptional force a stun grenade down the corridor and over the remains of the barrier. There was a dull clatter followed by a sharp explosion that filled the corridor with light. The team waited and Broden checked the corridor from a different position. The heavy assault pulse rifle swung out on the harness and fired successive rounds towards the second doorway.

The overhead turret fired again pinning down the remaining troopers. An explosion echoed along a different passageway up ahead. They crossed to the opposite side one at a time whilst the turret gave covering fire.

Tor looked at the monitors, "Status?"

Liann replied, "There is a four pilot team now assisting. The assault troops are being held back but we are taking too many losses around the security bay. They have fifty five troopers, fifteen currently approaching our position, and we have twenty security personnel left. Including the six we have here. The Devastator is now heading to the security bay."

Pors glanced across, "We've been cut off. The only way out is by transporter."

The two security teams were now in a defensive position outside the command centre.

Tor asked desperately, "What about the Sentinel?"

Sweety answered, "In start up mode."

In the lower maintenance dock the Sentinel woke up, and a deep red glow radiated from behind the visor. Slowly it rose and studied its surroundings, then with remarkable speed approached the exit door which slid open.

Broden called up the command centre as he now observed the corridor from the opposite side. The thermal imaging allowed him to assess the positions of the remaining six troopers. The fact he had a superior grade of weapon was now known and the weapons fire onto their new position kept him from being able to fully utilize this, "Liann, there's a security guard trapped in a room on this level. Any chance you can get him out before we move on."

"We have already located and will transport should the situation deteriorate," Liann responded on the com.

"Okay can you transport a grenade in with the enemy?" He asked.

"Not with you holding it." Sweety replied. There was a burst of heavy weapons fire from the next intersection. This was countered by the security team still protected by an active shielding unit.

"I'll tag it and place on the floor. It's set for sudden shock detonation, so ten centimetres above the deck will be useful." Broden commented.

A moment later and the detonation shook the corridor. Sweety asked, "Any chance we can try that again?"

Liann interrupted, "There are ten troopers behind our lines in maintenance run gamma twenty three. Directions being relayed."

Broden signalled for the others to follow.

The assault troopers were a comfortable distance behind the defenders. Aware of the station defence systems they had blasted a hole into one of the rooms. Three of the squad had fanned out and crouched down in preparation to open the door. Thermal imaging showed the pilot squad moving up the corridor.

Unknown to the assault troops the pilots also wore thermal imaging glasses. In a casual sweep Broden brought around the heavy assault rifle and as the targeting dot found its marks opened fire in rapid three shot bursts.

The door slid open and Moda lobbed a grenade into the hole. There was the desperate sound of running and then an explosion with flames gushing up out of the hole. The screams of the injured and dying came up from the passageway.

Cautiously they approached the hole and lowering the fibre optic inside Broden viewed the carnage inside the maintenance run.

Each pilot dropped inside. Mindful to avoid making contact with the damaged power conduits and treading on torn twisted metal, they moved towards pile of bodies. Those closest to the blast being no more than a pile of dismembered parts which in turn would have brought down several of those in front.

Three were alive, one still writhing in agony whilst the other two passed in and out of consciousness. Broden called up the command centre, "Liann, I have three wounded prisoners here. Can you transport?"

"Checking," There was a brief pause, "Confirmed. Medical transport is standing by."

Broden tagged each one and the squad move forward. The pile of bodies shifted as the three prisoners were transported out one at a time. Using the thermal image to monitor for movement Broden commented, "See if any of those weapons are still serviceable, and look for grenades."

Through the maintenance run the sound of heavy thudding echoed. Then the sound stopped briefly before the sound of a dull explosion sent a tremor through the station. Broden commented into the mic, "How close is the Devastator?"

The station monitors were blinking out as the Devastator made progress towards the bay destroying shield units and blast doors. Pors turned to speak to Tor when there was weapons fire outside.

Tor drew his blaster and ordered, "Sweety, I leave the tactical stuff in your hands and transport the command team to the fighters!"

Before anyone had a chance to protest each one was transported out of the command centre in rapid succession.

Pors looked at him and Tor commented, "Want to stay?"

The agent drew his own standard agency issue blaster, "Well we can always leave later if things get too hot."

The defence turret prevented progress up the corridor towards the centre. Its shield shimmering with incoming pulse rifle fire. Explosions rocked the passageway damaging walls ceilings and floors. The shield unit flickered and then failed as concerted fire overloaded the unit. The security teams fell back as another grenade bounced down the corridor.

There were two explosions and Sweety urgently stated, "They have breeched the wall into an adjoining room."

Tor ordered, "Everyone back into the command centre."

Three pilots were now running as fast as they could back along the maintenance run, one had been seriously injured and transported to the remaining transport which now served as a hospital ship. Once again the ceiling behind them exploded in a shower of sparks as the Devastator fired down from the floor above having destroyed another wall in order to follow the passage.

As it moved into another corridor it was forced to stop by a static defence system firing a continual stream of plasma towards it. The hellfire opened up with a combination of normal and concussion rounds. Both the Devastators shields and the defence turret shields shimmered however the concussion rounds were barely affected and the ceiling around the turret rippled with explosions. The defence unit ceased firing and crashed to the floor in a shower of sparks.

Identifying both attackers and defenders the Devastator began to advance towards the docking bay. Another static defence opened fire, this time with additional plasma rifle but as the station security team retreated the hellfire destroyed the temporary barrier whilst the beam laser destroyed the turret defence system.

All the time the security team were being rapidly and successively transported out leaving the way clear.

As the Devastator reached the next intersection, which lead directly to the security dock, it stopped and swivelled the whole top half of its structure. The assault troopers had taken advantage of its presence and were following. Each and every one of the troopers looked around but could see no immediate danger.

The Sentinel had entered its local scanner range. Target evaluation was hostile, weapons and shields type unknown. The risk threat also came up as unknown. Elimination priority flashed up as one.

The Devastator moved back along the corridor. The assault troops moved quickly into doorways on either side of the corridor, but Sweety had closed and sealed them. With little time to blast any open and no room to get past they trotted ahead.

Reaching the intersection the assault troops saw the approaching Sentinel and opened fire whilst moving forward to get across the open space. The assault rifle shots appeared to deflect away from the Sentinels shields. Some rebounded back down the corridor. Two of the troopers were hit by the ricochets however the Sentinels own weapons remained silent.

Both the beam laser and mini-gun tracked the Sentinel and as it came into range both weapons fired slicing through walls. The beam weapon hit the shields but although weakened slightly the greater proportion of the energy was reflected down the corridor. As the Sentinel turned the beam changed direction and sliced back through the wall to strike the shields of the Devastator. It ceased firing leaving only the hellfire which was beginning to have a marked affect. The mechanical whirling sound of the motor drive increased as the intensity fire rose with each round slammed into the Sentinels shields.

The alien robot returned fire once, each weapons producing an energy sphere which reduced the material of the walls to dust. Both shots continuing onwards to impact with the Devastator and although the shields were only slightly reduced, the force of the impact forced it backwards against the wall. The Devastator also lost the target lock and was forced to reset.

The weapons of the Sentinel fired again as the enemy robot brought the hellfire back on target and fired a couple of concussion rounds. The impacts on the Devastator drove it backwards through the wall of the room behind. The two concussion rounds caused the Sentinel to twist and had damaged some of the armour.

The assault troopers hurled a pack filled with grenades down the corridor and ran. The explosions only a few seconds later left a ten metre hole in the floor and ceiling. All the rooms around were heavily damaged. There was no sign of the Sentinel.

The assault troops moved forwards to view the damage, some went to see the heavy attack robot. Although appearing undamaged the robot appeared to be having some mobility problems. Something in the alien weapons had inflicted partial system shutdown.

The Devastator squatted and shut itself down for re-initialization. The assault team took up defensive positions and were now concerned at the lack of remains for the Sentinel.

A stun grenade on impact detonation appeared in the corridor and dropped to the floor. Moments later pulse rifle fire came in from several directions. Those not affected by the stunning effects fired back to defend their position and the Devastator.

The heavy attack robot came back on line and rose. A status check indicated the ammunition for the hellfire mini-gun was running low. There were only a few individual hostiles on the scanner surrounding the group. The Devastator swung around and fired a series of concussion rounds as the wall behind it gave way and the Sentinel, now only a few metres away, returned fire.

The Sentinel rocked backwards from the impacts with chunks of outer armour sent flying in all directions. However the close proximity double hit of the Sentinels own weapons knocked the Devastator off its feet.

With the antigravity boost it quickly stood back up and was struck again by another two shots. The internal systems began to shut down and the arm holding the hellfire went offline. Other subsystems and the backups had also failed.

Sparks erupted from between several armour plates on the right hand side. As the Devastator tried to rise again another double hit from the alien weapons drove it through the remains of a wall head first. Armour plates moved involuntarily as more subsystems were destroyed including the shield units. Smoke began to rise from the chest of the robot. Lifting the beam laser it fired at the Sentinel.

The beam reflected and the laser sliced through the unshielded armour until it ceased to fire. With the arm locked in position the Devastator lay motionless. Receiving new orders the Sentinel turned and closed in on the assault troops positions. Having witnessed the termination of the attack robot and with no means of escape from the station they began to surrender with small pockets of continuing resistance.

The shields around the command centre shimmered. The door had been left open so they could at least see the enemy coming. Grenades exploded into the shields as the assault troops prepared for a last attempt to break through and take control.

The shields weakened, it would be a while before their companions had been disarmed in which time they felt they may yet be able to gain control. Several more grenades impacted on the shields and concentrated plasma fire weakened them further.

There were explosions outside with bright flashes the mark of the stun grenade. Sweety had learned a new trick and with the limited number of grenades available she was beginning to use them. However the troopers had separated out to limit the damage any one stunner would have.

The shields shimmered and failed with the impact of another explosion. The security units fired into the corridor. Returning assault plasma rifle flooded into the room shattering wall screens which sent a shower of sparks cascading into the room. A grenade clattered onto the floor and Pors slammed into Tor driving him to the floor as the explosion engulfed the room. Troopers stormed into the room in a haze of rifle fire.

The agent rolled clear and keeping low fired his blaster hitting two troopers. The room was too small for a fire fight as consoles and screens were destroyed in the close quarter fighting. Tor still dazed and deafened by the grenade explosion, saw Pors take a hit to the throat by a plasma round his head separating from the shoulders in a fountain of blood.

Rising he felt a sudden burning rage and with blaster in hand he swung around to face the troopers but was struck by a rifle butt to the side of the head and dropped back to the floor unconscious.

Chapter 13. Reconstruction.

Sweety had been monitoring events all over the station, although she was transporting wounded out of each area of conflict she could only transport one individual at a time and the delay was beginning to cost lives. Also the Sentinel was now posing another problem as its primary programming had been adjusted to recognise the Devastator as the only threat. She had not fully compiled and tested the programming to include organics.

Nor did she feel that she would be able to adjust the programming whilst the alien robot was still active. Any error in the alien code syntax and the Sentinel could regard all organics as hostile. Also the instruction set for it just to defend itself was also fraught with hidden dangers. If attacked by a trooper the Sentinel could regard them and anything of the same species as an equal threat causing it to open fire on the security teams. This was not information she was willing to share under the current circumstances.

For the moment the mere presence of the Sentinel appeared to be having an effect, many of the troopers surrendered as the alien robot forced them to take cover in rooms. Instructing security teams to follow, she simply passed on commands for the robot to proceed to a location and if necessary remove an obstruction, but not to kill.

The failing of the shields in the control room and the subsequent fire fight disrupted a number of the primary station systems. She located Broden, "Captain Falstarn, the command centre has been overrun by troopers. I urgently need stun grenades!"

Broden knelt down and without speaking for a moment pulled out his last six, placing them on the floor carefully he set the sensitivity to sudden impact. Standing up and stepping back he commented, "Ready."

The grenades vanished one by one in quick succession.

He ran back down towards the intersection close to where the Devastator smouldered. Two station security crew and Moda watched over the Battle Robot and the Boron now held the hellfire mini-gun. Three more troopers moved past their hands in the air. Two security team members now armed with liberated assault pulse rifles as well as their own smaller versions shepherded them along the corridor to the security dock, which was now becoming the detention area for all the prisoners.

Broden commented, "Computer can you transport us up to the command centre?"

Sweety replied, "Acknowledged, it will take a moment as I am retrieving the critically wounded."

A Mizura later and the team of four were standing in the doorway of the command centre. The room itself was the scene of carnage five security team lay slumped on the floor. Four bodies of troopers lay close to the doorway and two others further inside the room. Last of all he saw the headless body of Pors

The floor was covered in blood and all the station coordinator consoles had been destroyed. The only exception appeared to be the master control desk at the far end of the room.

Broden spoke quietly, "Computer did Mr Grall get away?"

Sweety replied, "He has been injured and is now on the medical transport."

Broden surveyed the room "Can you send a clean up unit to the command centre." Turning to his companions he said gently, "There's nothing we can do here. Let's do a sweep of this level and work our way back to the security dock."

Some time later Tor regained consciousness, his eyes were covered and his head throbbed painfully but moving his hands he found that he had not been restrained.

“Don’t touch those!” A voice commanded. His hearing was muffled and the voice seemed to come through a thick wad of padding. He could sense the man was now standing close by but he never heard him approach.

The voice he still did not recognize commented, “Sorry Mr Grall, but until we can get a complete bioscan and more med-supplies then the bandages will need to stay on.”

Tors’ mouth felt parched and he was having trouble trying to swallow. Eventually he managed to ask, “Where am I?”

“You’re on the med transport heading to the Argon equipment dock in Getsu Fune.” The voice replied.

Tor was now deeply worried, and hurriedly asked whilst trying to get up, “My station?”

“Rest easy Mr Grall,” Firm hands pushed him back onto the bed, “We have a full fighter escort. The computer system managed to get most of your people out of the room and the station has since been secured.”

Tor was barely able to relax, but his head throbbed even more painfully and every part of his body ached as if he had been kicked and beaten to within an inch of his life. He asked, “What happened to me?”

The muffled voice replied, “According to the records six stun grenades were dropped into the room in quick succession. I guess someone wanted to make a point, in a room that size only one or two would have done. I’m going to give you a sedative so you can sleep.” A moment later and Tor slipped into a deep sleep.

The Argon Corvette Valliant stationed itself within seven k’s from the Silicon Mine and patrolling the sector were four of the latest Argon Nova fighters.

Broden was in the Valliants’ briefing room waiting to meet with the captain. He had been instructed by Sweety that, until Tors return, he was now in charge of the station. Looking out of the window to watch the Nova fighters glide slowly past his military trained mind felt intrigued by how they would perform.

The door behind him slid open and Broden turned with military precision and snapped his heels together but did not salute.

Captain Hallised strode briskly into the room and two senior officers followed, “Captain Falstarn, I am Captain Hallised,” He motioned to each of the accompanying officers and stated, “This is my First Officer Brobank and Security Officer Larot. Please be seated.”

Broden noted the seriousness in the Captains voice and the use of his former Navy rank. He moved to the table and sat down.

Hallised and the officers also sat down and the captain commented quickly, “I don’t want this to take too long. We have reports of an internal assault on Mr Gralls station with the loss of a number of lives including Intelligence Agency personnel. I would like you to give me a brief report as to what’s been going on.”

The former navy captain, had been swiftly briefed by Sweety on what he should and should not include in his summary report, but he also knew this was only the beginning of the investigation. He had not been present at the battle for the command centre and could only give rough details on how it had ended.

The mention of the Devastator had the two junior officers asking questions until the Hallised said that questions should be asked at the end. The details as to how they had overcome the heavy assault robot were sparse with no mention of the Sentinel unit.

At the end the three officers looked questioningly at Broden, but the two junior officers waited to take their cue to ask questions from the captain.

Hallised took a deep breath and let it out slowly, his expression was grave, "Thank you Captain Falstarn for your summary. Of course you realize this is only one of a number of interviews that we will need to conduct. We will need to talk with all the station security team as eyewitnesses to the events and view the security logs providing they have not been corrupted. I understand the station command centre has been badly damaged." He paused and Broden nodded slowly, "Gentlemen I think we have enough information for now. I had hoped to wrap this up without requiring the presence of the Intelligence Agency but in the light of the information just provided I see no option but to have them here."

The two officers glanced at Hallised and although clearly unhappy about not being given the opportunity to ask questions gave a slight nod.

Hallised continued, "I understand you have prisoners. We will want to interview them and we expect them to be treated in accordance with the POW convention. A prisoner transport will arrive here within the next two Stazura." The captain paused briefly and gave a stern warning, "Understand this captain, emotions amongst your people will be running high at the moment and some will be bent on exacting revenge for this atrocity. The prisoners' lives rest in your hands and if any of your crew takes it into their heads to harm them I will hold you personally accountable. This also goes for your pilots. You have some very powerful ships under your command but if they decide to take revenge on whoever perpetrated this, then once again we will hold you responsible."

Broden responded calmly, "I understand captain. Rest assured my people will not harm the prisoners. You have my word on that."

Captain Hallised nodded, "Very good captain, you may return to your ship and we will be in touch."

All four men stood up and with a slight nod Broden left the room escorted by the security officer.

Tor awoke in the subdued lighting of the hospital recovery room on the Argon Equipment Dock in Getsu Fune and although his mouth still felt dry the headache had gone. He moved tentatively and felt extremely stiff.

The door opened, and a medic walked into the room, he slowly turned his head to see a well groomed young man carrying a medical pad, "Good day Mr. Grall, and how are you feeling?"

Tor answered, "Thirsty and stiff."

"That I'm afraid is to be expected," The medic stood beside the bed and checked the monitor beside the bed and continued, "Still we can remedy the first problem quickly, but the second will take a few Tazura. Fortunately, you'll be pleased to hear that you've escaped relatively lightly compared to many of your colleagues."

Tor turned his head and looked up at the ceiling, he asked, "How many are here?"

"The transport brought in about twenty seven casualties," The medic looked across at Tor. A nurse entered the room carrying a glass of water, "We just need to adjust your position."

The whole bed reshaped itself bringing Tor into a comfortable sitting position. The nurse handed him the drink with a smile. Tor commented as best he could through parched lips, "Thanks."

The nurse replied, "You're welcome."

The water was cool and refreshing with a slight hint of added Bamma Juice. He drained the glass in one and gave a loud sigh and commented, "That's better."

The medic waited patiently for Tor to hand back the glass, “You sustained a nasty blow to the head causing a fractured left cheek bone, broken jaw and minor concussion, as well as being subjected to a number of stunner shocks. From the initial assessment your medic was concerned about retinal and auditory damage so I’m just going to run a few tests if you can put these on?”

He handed Tor a set of discrete headphones and a thick pair of extra dark glasses. Each was linked through a fine cable to the medical pad. The medic said nothing for several Mizura. Images flickered up on the inside of the depth perception glasses and objects moved both in the near view and the virtual distance. The light intensity also changed at first gradually and then suddenly. The earpieces gave a running commentary mentioning things of interest appearing on the glasses, but Tor was left with a distinct impression that there were other noises and harmonics being generated in the background. Once or twice he felt distinctly uncomfortable and he could not work out why.

The medic spoke up, “Very good Mr Grall it doesn’t look as though you have any long term damage. You can now remove the glasses and ear pieces.”

Tor quickly obliged and commented curiously, “So what happens now?”

The medic looked thoughtful, “Ideally, you should rest another Stazura, the bones have only recently been recombined. You’ll still be under the influence of the pain killers and the anaesthetic won’t have fully worn off yet.”

Tor looked around and the feeling that the station may still be in danger crept across his mind, “I should be getting back.”

The medic looked at him, “I will insist that you at least rest another Stazura and have something to eat before you try moving around.”

With a deep sigh Tor replied, “Okay doctor, just one Stazura. And can you give me an update on the condition of my people?”

The medic looked at the bedside chair and sat down, the nurse seeing that there was nothing else expected from her left the room. The young medic pondered with what he should say a little longer, “Many of the casualties were in a bad way when they arrived here. A few are just suffering from minor plasma burns and shock. Others have serious plasma burns and a few have lost limbs.” He paused, “I’m sorry to say that three died on route from your station. It must have been quite a battle?”

“Not one that I want to repeat,” Tor replied slowly, “And I don’t know if we actually won.”

“From what I’ve heard your people managed to keep control of the station,” The medic responded.

Tor sighed, “That is some consolation.”

The medic stood up again and turned to leave, “No one ever wins this type of conflict Mr Grall. Making it out alive is as much as most people can ever hope for. If you’re determined to leave then I’d best let you rest.”

Relaxing the bed returned to its flattened state and Tor stared up at the ceiling pondering the medic’s words. A short while later fatigue washed over him and he sank into a restless sleep.

Feran fumed as he waited in the grand meeting room of the shipyard in the Family Nyj sector. The attack on the Silicon Mine would have attracted the attention of the Argon authorities irrespective of the outcome. The fact that his superior forces had somehow been overcome had enraged him to the point that the messenger now lay as a bloodied, crumpled and lifeless corpse, having been flung kicked and beaten around the room until her screaming stopped and the last traces of breath escaped her lungs.

“Did that help?” Jolak Nyj commented quietly as he stepped into the room.

Feran shot him a glance filled with anger and curled his lip.

The older Split simply shrugged and wandered across the room, "Perhaps I should send you another."

Feran spoke in a harsh whisper, "I want Grall!"

Jolak turned to face him and casually dropped down into a comfortable chair and said, "I'm sure you do, but now is not the time. First you need to ensure that none of those fools you sent make the mistake of talking." He clicked his fingers and two servants shuffled in guiding a food and drinks hover tray. Both looked at Feran and shook with fear, the terror reflected in their eyes as his followed them around the room filled with malice.

Jolak continued in a very calm and level voice, "They once put you on Setardize to control your rage. Although I'm not a supporter of such treatments it may do for you to take some. At least until this business is over."

Feran watched the servants leave as they shot startled glances in his direction and at the blood soaked body on the floor near his feet. As they left and the doors closed behind them, he looked towards Jolak who was now sipping on a drink. He was still too angry to talk in a level voice and in the harsh whisper replied, "And what do you suggest? I can't launch a full attack on his station."

Jolak sighed briefly, "You know I have certain controlling interests in the Firestorm Clan in Ghinns Escape. Well I have two new generation Bayamons armed with silkworms ready to carry out a hit and run, should I ever find myself in a situation such as this," He paused and took another sip, "The Argon military will undoubtedly move the prisoners from the insecure mining facility to the prison cells on the equipment dock in Getsu Fune for questioning."

Feran growled through clenched teeth, "They will be guarded."

The elder Split gave a thin smile, "Almost certainly, but the escort will be light and the transport is slow and easy to hit with missiles. See it as retribution for their failure to complete the task you gave them. They should have died in the attempt and not been taken prisoner like petty thieves."

Feran allowed this to sink in and relaxed slightly, "But how does this help me?"

Jolak took a long slow sip of his drink, with a look of pleasure and deep satisfaction he moved the glass from his lips and replied, "The prisoners are witnesses to your orders, without them the evidence against you will become circumstantial and I know some very good lawyers."

Broden had put half the stations fighters on duty and the freighters were given a four fighter escort, anything that even looked as though it could be a pirate or a Bloodheart ship was intercepted before they got anywhere near the freighter and scanned.

The local station commanders appeared to be holding their breaths in anticipation for a counter strike, as news of the attack had now spread throughout the adjacent sectors. There were no inbound freighters except from the Crystal Fab in X-seven which was on heightened alert.

Checking the stores and spares inventory it was clearly apparent the maintenance robots were consuming all available resources for repairs. Even so they were still several Tazuras from beginning on the visitor docking bay. A scan of the command centre revealed it had been completely stripped out. That had happened a Stazura after the bodies had been carefully bagged and tagged. The cleansing robots had scoured every surface before the maintenance robots removed all the floor, wall and ceiling panels.

A similar story went right through the station with every panel that exhibited any battle damage being removed. Remarkably enough the only part of the station totally unaffected by the battle was the silicon

wafer processing facility which had continued to function despite the conflict raging in the forward part of the station.

The makeshift command centre had been set up in the pilots' gym due to its proximity from the only usable docking bay and was easily accessible.

Broden found himself in a difficult position, he had dealt with military command and knew what to expect in the behaviour of his men, but now these people were civilians and recruited mercenaries and the mood was distinctly bitter at the orders from Captain Hallised.

Many of the general staff seemed withdrawn and distinctly nervous, whereas the security teams had taken the brunt of the fighting, and lost so many colleagues that they were bitterly resentful. He had been forced to diffuse several heated arguments as to the fate of the prisoners.

Then there were the pilots who were protesting at not being given the opportunity to destroy the Scruffin Farm. Broden had allowed them the moment to shout and rant about the injustice before reiterating Hallised's orders. His instructions to the crews were brief and he put it upon them that, before anyone sought retribution, they should firstly re-secure the station so that the possibility of a second assault could never get as far in or be as damaging as this one had been.

Time passed and he paced along the corridors, maintenance teams worked alongside the robots shifting panels. The newly extruded sheets were formed from the recycled remains of those damaged in the battle. Broden also checked regularly on the condition of the prisoners.

Eventually he had the call that the prisoner transport had arrived and was awaiting docking approval.

As Broden returned to the docking bay he spoke to the comm unit pinned to his jacket, "Liann tell me the prison transport checks out?"

Liann's voice replied, "All identification codes and scans match inventory and crew list."

Broden then asked, "No unusual power signatures?"

Liann replied, "Nothing on sensors."

Broden turned the corner towards the docking bay, "Okay give permission to the transport only and have a Perseus follow them in. Have security teams standing by."

He walked past the makeshift command centre and gave a brief wave. He stepped onto the dock side as the transport arrived and the docking clamps engaged. The Perseus hovered just behind with all weapons armed and pointing at the transport.

One man stepped off the ship when the doors opened, he looked around critically and walked briskly towards Broden. The former captain felt the need for time to relax, a whisky and a cigar but he had been curbing this desire until he was sure the station was empty of potential hostiles. At the sight of the slightly scruffy prison officer this desire flared up once again, and he now added sleep onto the list of things he most wanted to do.

The prison officer held out a datapad for Broden to inspect, "Prisoner transfer certificate."

Broden glanced at it then glanced up looking slightly perplexed and commented, "Says here you only have space for thirty five prisoners."

The officer looked momentarily confused, "And the problem is?"

Broden replied sharply, "I have thirty nine."

The officer shrugged, "Thirty five is my limit."

The former captain looked perplexed, "Yeah but you should be able to squeeze in another four."

The officer shook his head, "No can do. The ship only has prisoner stasis units for thirty five, we're not allowed to have free roaming prisoners and there's no way we can try doubling them up."

Broden asked quietly, "So what the hell am I supposed to do with the last four?"

"Hold them until I can get a requisition in place to make another pickup." The officer replied casually.

Broden sighed and weighed up his chances of persuading the officer to take the additional prisoners but somehow he knew it would be a waste of time. Eventually he replied, "Okay. We'll just have to look after them until you get back. Computer can you identify the four least likely to cause us any trouble?"

Sweety replied, "Acknowledged."

Broden commented, "Liann have the security teams bring the prisoners forward in pairs."

As the first pair arrived, two more prison officers appeared with stun sticks and restraints. The two Split troopers spat on the floor and growled defiance and revenge before being led away.

The next two were Argon males and both looked defiant but said nothing and so it went on until the first person Sweety had identified to remain behind arrived. It was an Argon woman that although looking defiant at first suddenly looked terrified as she was led to one side.

The second was a young Teladi male who looked confused but remained quiet. The third was a young Argon man whose comments of defiance faded away and the colour drained from his face as he too was led to one side. The last was another young Argon female but she looked scared even before she was separated from the rest.

As the last of the prisoners were led away, Broden turned to look at the four that remained and felt perplexed how anyone would have even considered that these individuals were suitable as assault troopers. The rest appeared to fit into the right mould and had the mannerisms of battle hardened fighters but not these four.

The transport left the dock and was followed closely by the Perseus out of the station. Broden allowed it to leave and then spoke, "I expect you want to know why you're still here and your companions have been taken away," There were a few nervous nods and Broden glowered at them, "Let me assure you it is not by choice, however the transport will only carry thirty five and there were thirty nine of you."

He paused, "Let me make something very clear to you. Your presence is not welcome here! Another transport will come to collect you in due time so you can share the same fate as the others. There are some here that would rather shoot you than look after you, and I can't say that I'm totally unsympathetic towards their point of view. However it's my job to ensure your well being," He paused for a moment for this message to sink in, "And providing you do nothing but obey the instructions you are given then we shall get along fine. You will of course remain in secure accommodation, from which there is no escape and even if you try, we can locate you and transport you right back to us. Do I make myself clear?"

There were a few murmurings of acknowledgement and nodding of heads.

"Take them away again!" Broden commanded and the four were escorted away.

Tor was dressed and preparing to sign himself out of the hospital section of the station when the nurse entered the room with a hover tray carrying a full meal.

She said, "The doctor recommended that you have a meal before you leave."

He looked at the tray and his stomach rumbled threateningly, trying for an apologetic smile he commented softly, "Sounds like I'll be staying for lunch."

The nurse smiled and waited for Tor to sit on the bed and make himself comfortable before she pushed the hover tray in front of him, "Enjoy," she commented and then left the room. Tor watched her leave and then tucked into the meal now very aware of just how hungry he really was. As he cleared the plate of every last morsel of food, he sat back and let out a contented sigh. Allowing a few Mizuras for the food to settle he once again stood up and guiding the hover tray back to the door and exited the room.

The nurse looked up from behind the desk, "All finished?"

Tor replied, "Excellent thanks," He looked around to try and get some impression of what was nearby. He spotted Moda standing in the reception area and, as Tor looked into the dome of the environment suit, the Boron had the appearance of being asleep.

As he approached the Boron stirred and looked up. Through the clicks and bubbled speech Tor had the impression that Moda was pleased to see that he was up and around, "Sir. It is good to see you up and in one piece."

Tor smiled, "Moda there is no need for the Sir. Call me Tor," He looked around, "Is anyone else here?"

Moda confirmed, "There are five more pilots and your Defiance is here to escort you home."

"I want to look in on the other casualties before we head back to the station. Can you give me an update on the station," Tor spoke softly.

The Boron nodded slowly and relayed all the latest news. Tor listened intently with a mixture of apprehension and concern. As Moda finished the summary he looked thoughtful for a moment, "Okay, let me do what I need to here, then we'll head down to the ships."

As Tor returned to the desk the nurse looked up and Tor asked, "I'd like to visit my companions?"

She replied, "Certainly Mr Grall, I'll call the doctor so he can show you around."

The young medic appeared a short while later and asked, "What can I do for you Mr Grall?"

Tor looked round, "Yeah, I was wondering if I could visit me colleagues?"

The medic smiled, "Certainly if you'd follow me."

Of the twenty four casualties only sixteen were security personnel. The wounded troopers had been separated away and were being closely guarded. Tor spent a few Mizura with each one, giving them praise and checking that they had everything they wanted. Throughout the meetings he remained cheerful and upbeat but after he left the last one he took a moment to sit down in the reception area and put his head in his hands and closed his eyes.

The medic patted him sympathetically on the shoulder and walked away. Moda quietly waited for Tor to move. Eventually with a heavy sigh Tor opened his eyes and looked up, "Ready?"

The Boron nodded and Tor said in a quiet voice lacking in enthusiasm, "Let's get out of here."

Moda commented quickly, "I have news Sir."

Tor was already on his feet and expecting more bad news asked quietly "What is it?"

"The prison transport bringing the captured troopers here for questioning has been destroyed," Moda stated.

Tor felt nothing, no pity or concern, "So? I guess Feran didn't like them losing."

The Boron responded, "It was Firestorm Clan ship that killed them."

Tor replied bitterly, "And Feran enlists another pirate clan to do his dirty work. Those troopers are responsible for the people lying in the rooms back there. They were responsible for killing many of my security personnel. Why should I feel anything for them?"

A familiar voice commented quietly, "Because Mr Grall, they were the only ones permissible in a court of Law that could have secured a conviction against Feran t'Gnht, enabling us to board his station and arrest him if he ever showed his face in these sectors."

Tor span around and looked at Caran Belign, "What do you mean?"

Caran frowned and continued, "A prisoner that has undergone an operation or other medical treatment which requires the use of pain killers, anaesthetic, or other similar drugs cannot be relied on as a witness for the prosecution or defence as their memories may have been adjusted during this time."

Tors jaw dropped, "You can't be serious?"

Caran raised an eyebrow, "Very! Feran will get through our legal system on a technicality. The fact that our agents believe Feran is currently staying with Jolak Nyj means that he has a very cunning ally that knows our laws better than most of us."

If the Boron could hiss then Moda was doing a very good impression of the sound when he heard the name Nyj. Tor looked bitter and resentful as a result of the information, "But we know who did it."

Caran responded quickly, "Knowing and proving are two different things Mr Grall. If you can't prove what you know before the eyes of the law then any action you may take in the form of vigilante justice will be seen as murder and *you* Mr Grall would have to face the courts."

Tor looked shocked, "You make this sound like I'm the aggressor."

Caran gave the hint of a smile and replied softly, "No Mr. Grall. Feran knows how to manipulate our justice system to his benefit. You don't! And that's why he can get away with murder but you'd get locked away for a minor station speeding offence."

Tor was lost for words as the message sank home. Eventually he looked at Caran and asked quietly, "So why are you here?"

Caran sighed deeply, "I'd like to know how Pors Tullet died."

Broden looked perplexed and commented loudly, "What do you mean there's two Boron Dolphins here?"

The silicon mine co-ordinators looked around as Sweety replied, "The Crystal Fab has sent us assistance in the form of additional maintenance robots and five thousand cargo units of additional equipment and supplies."

Broden commented to Liann, "Get in touch with the Crystal Fab and confirm they've sent the supplies."

There were a few moments of exchanged pleasantries and chatter until Broden cleared his throat and Liann glancing over her shoulder smiled and asked, "We have two Dolphins reporting to have been sent by you looking for docking permission. Can you confirm that you sent them?"

The co-ordinator replied, "Acknowledged, computer request came in half a Stazura ago. Any problem?"

Liann commented, "No. No problem, it's just we weren't expecting them. Thanks for the info," She closed the comm and awaited instructions from Broden.

Broden paced the floor looking displeased, "Computer, did you request these supplies?"

Sweety replied, "Yes."

Broden looked around the room. He would much prefer to be addressing a real person or an android, "Anything else you would care to tell us about?"

Sweety commented, "There are three new Pegasus ships from the core sectors bringing another nine cargo units of security equipment."

Broden sounded slightly annoyed, "And who cleared this?"

Sweety reflected on an old instruction and used this as the basis of her answer, "Tor Grall."

The former captain stopped pacing and looked perplexed, "Mr Grall is in hospital and has been since the attack. I fail to see how he could have given the order."

Sweety hacked into the general satellite network and commented, "Mr Grall, has checked himself out and is currently on-route back to the station."

The news came as a pleasant surprise to everyone. Broden allowed himself a smile, "And the rest?"

Sweety answered, "Reports indicate that they are no longer on the critical list but will need to remain on the Equipment Dock for three to four Tazura."

The mood in the temporary command centre seemed to be uplifted by the news. Broden instructed Liann, "Full scan of the freighters, and have them boarded before being given permission to dock."

Twenty Mizuras later and both freighters were returning to the Crystal Fab. The three Pegasus ships had been inspected and boarded prior to docking. The cargo was beamed to the stations lower maintenance dock for storage and the three ships departed to retrieve more core sector supplies.

Tor stepped off the Defiance to a loud cheer from the station crew. He was deeply touched by the response, despite all the death and destruction which had dampened his spirits, making him anxious about facing the station crew before he docked. He smiled and shook hands with all of them.

Broden commented with a grin, "So does this mean I can go back to being a pilot now?"

Tor gave a broad smile, "Not if you don't want to."

The former captains' smile broadened and he added, "Just so that you know, we still have four prisoners."

There was a momentary look of surprise on Tors' face before he commented, "I know someone who'd like to have a chat with them."

Caran Belign had jumped into sector X-fifteen to meet with the AIC Roamer. The Mammoth was positioned near the gate leading to sector X-nine. Fighters patrolled the area against any potential pirate threat. The massive hanger which would normally carry the huge station construction kits had been modified to take a small corvette class ship.

The new corvette was not in the hanger but some distance away being tested. The plasma discharges signified a weapons test was in progress.

Having been given docking permission Caran lined up the X-Shuttle and watched the green lights flash until the TL's auto-docking computer took control. On the adjacent landing was one of three interplanetary research ships. For the moment Caran was not certain if it had just arrived or was preparing to depart.

The docking tube attached itself to the hull and a signal in the cockpit indicated it was safe for him to open the airlock doors. Caran Belign put on the environment suit helmet but not the EVA unit. He never felt comfortable with the docking bays of the large transporter ships and reasoned there would be enough residual air in the suit to last him a few minutes by which time he would have comfortably made it beyond the docking bay and into the habitable section of the TL.

Commander Parrel met him at the door, "It's good to see you again Mr Belign," And extended his hand.

Caran removed the helmet and shook hands, commenting, "It's always a pleasure to come and see what you're up to."

Parrel made a sweeping gesture for Caran to accompany him to the captains briefing room, "I assure you nothing that's not been approved."

"I'm glad to hear it." Caran responded.

Commander Parrel glanced sideways at the towering figure of the Argon agent, "Somehow I never thought we'd see you this far out from the core sectors. Any reason for the change of heart?"

Caran kept looking ahead as they marched along the wide well illuminated corridor. His expression gave nothing away, "Only a brief visit I can assure you. One of our agents has been killed and I'm here to find out what happened. And I thought that as I'm in the neighbourhood I'll come to see if you've made any new discoveries concerning the whereabouts of the mysterious Khaak."

Parrel guided them to the open door of a shuttle lift. He looked concerned and said, "Ah, the Silicon Mine incident. I didn't know you'd lost one of your own people on there."

Caran nodded and remained silent waiting for an answer to his final comment, as the shuttle lift doors closed Parrel looked around, "As for the Khaak, it's a strange business but I'll explain in the briefing room."

The shuttle lift doors reopened and both men stepped out and made their way to the room. Parrel had already arranged for refreshments which had been neatly left on the table. The door slid closed behind them and Parrel walked up to the desk and entered his security clearance codes. The AIC logo faded and the sector maps began to appear.

Caran looked at the screen, "So what do you have for me?"

"Just a mystery and an anomaly," Parrel started, "We have systematically searched every sector including nearby asteroid fields and planets. So far we have turned up nothing. If the Khaak were ever here then they did an exceptionally good job on ensuring that they left nothing behind and no trace of ever being here."

There was a pause as Parrel expected some response. Caran simply looked at the screen and let the information sink in, "So in essence all recorded encounters are pieces of fiction. And the Split incident never happened."

Parrel measured his words and spoke carefully, "Not in these sectors, no."

Caran picked up on the caution of the response and looking around asked, "If not these sectors which one?"

Parrel shrugged but before he could respond they were interrupted by a computer announcement, "Incoming message for Mr Caran Belign."

Both men looked at each other for a moment and then Caran asked, "Who's transmitting?"

The computer replied, "Messenger identified as Mr Tor Grall on the Silicon Mine in X-four."

Caran shrugged and commented aloud, "I wonder what he wants," Then addressed the nearest console, "Put him through."

The image of Tor came up on the main screen and Caran said, "Yes Tor what can I do for you?" Tor looked around and spotted Commander Parrel and as if reading Tors' thoughts Caran added, "It's okay to talk."

Tor composed himself and said, "I thought I'd let you know, not all the prisoners were killed in the pirate attack. The transport that arrived could only hold thirty five and needed to make a return trip to collect the rest."

Caran looked mildly surprised, "How many?"

Tor responded, "Four."

Caran took a moment to think, "Do nothing and say nothing to anyone about this, and ensure your pilots and station crew don't either. When I've finished here I will be visiting you," Tor nodded and the comm closed.

Chapter 14. The Wake

Commander Parrel paused for a moment and then said, "So that's Tor Grall," Caran nodded his head and Parrel continued thoughtfully, "The same Mr Grall that got caught up in the UFO incident?"

Caran did not answer and Parrel then asked, "Any chance we'll get our science officer back?"

Caran commented quietly, "You were telling me about the sectors, and an anomaly."

The commander chose not to press for more information on the well being of Tereana and looked at Caran, "As we found no evidence of the Khaak we checked the Split incident dataset against the X-five sector which is where the event is supposed to have taken place. We took the limited data records and generated these virtual maps."

The main screen came to life and played forward. Caran looked at Parrel and said, "That's not the same solar system."

Parrel nodded, "So we've checked it against all the X-sectors and nothing came up that's even close."

Caran picked up a snack and looked at it thoughtfully, "So is there another gate in sector X-one that we've missed?"

The commander sighed, "I only wish there was, it would help to solve the mystery, but we've searched the system reasonably extensively and found nothing."

Caran looked questioningly at Parrel, "Any suggestions?"

Parrel answered, "The one that seems most palatable at the moment is that the Ancients don't want us to meet the Khaak and have shifted the gate destinations."

Caran considered the answer and decided in his own mind what the unpalatable answer was likely to be and said, "Let's hope you're right."

Tor spent some time being guided around the station by Broden as he wanted to see first hand the extent of the damage. He felt a twinge of pain and sadness when they eventually arrived at the command centre. The maintenance robots had fitted new wall and ceiling panels. Most of the coordinator control centres were in place but many of the floor panels were still waiting to be put down.

"How do you think the team will feel if we move back in here?" Tor asked quietly.

Broden looked at him and breathed in deeply before answering, "I'd say what happened here is still fresh in their minds and that they're apprehensive."

Tor suddenly reflected on the dead alien sitting alone in the command centre of the station and then the image of Pors last moments alive, having just saved his own life from the grenade attack. His body went tense and his teeth were clenched together.

Broden's voice broke his train of thought, "Are you okay Sir?"

Tor replied, "Hmm, yeah, yeah sure."

They turned and left the room and Tor was still deep in thought when they entered his office. He stopped and looked around, the crew had decorated the room with banners and streamers saying 'Welcome back'

Suspended from the ceiling on the far side of the office was the hellfire mini-gun. A holo-image replay of the Sentinel standing victorious over the Devastator was projected above the briefing table. Crates of Batral Ale stood on the far side of the room with a number of bottles of spacefuel.

Tor looked at Broden with an eyebrow raised. Broden commented, "This is for the wake Sir. The crew are expecting a memorial service for the dead and this..." He let the sentence hang and looked uncomfortable.

Tor stated, "Let us honour the dead by remembering the things they did in life and feel proud that we knew them."

Broden glanced across at Tor who was looking resolutely at the image of the Sentinel and Devastator as it revolved over the table.

Tor sighed heavily, "When do you think we should do the service?"

Broden looked across and said quietly, "As soon as we can. I've spoken to the Paranid and they have said they are willing to perform the Service of Ascension for all the deceased."

Tor glanced over at Broden, "Paranid?"

The former captain replied, "Two of the visitors killed in the initial assault were Paranid, they have been asking to do the service or at least have us release the bodies to them. According to their custom it has to be done before the end of the current waning moon on Paranid Prime which is quite soon I believe."

Tor commented, "How about the security personnel, I don't recall seeing many Paranids amongst them, but are there any other particular beliefs we should be observing?"

Broden commented, "The only belief most of us have is in the search for the ultima Thule."

The conversation rolled on and Tor, despite his personal reservations, insisted that they should respect all the dead including the troopers. Broden did not feel comfortable that the rest of the crew would be happy with this arrangement but conceded that these people were only obeying orders and had no choice but to fight or die.

Half a Stazura later and Caran Belign was on the station, the noise of the reconstruction droned on in the background and Tor greeted him at the dockside, "Welcome aboard."

Most of the pilots and crew knew Caran by name and reputation, only a small few had actually seen him before and usually at a safe distance. It was this curiosity that had an unusually high number of pilots and security mingling and consuming a variety of hot and cold non-alcoholic beverages in the open fronted pilots bar.

"Don't they have work to do?" Caran asked quietly.

"I guess you're the closest thing to a celebrity they'll get to see on this station." Tor replied.

Caran asked with a serious tone, "Thing?"

Tor gave a slight smile, "Just a figure of speech, but I'm surprised you let the celebrity bit get past you."

Caran commented, "I was saving that for later."

Tor smiled and gestured towards the exit, "Prisoners this way."

The Agent followed Tor and asked, "So have you identified who they are yet?"

Tor answered, "Sweetie has run a complete check on all the prisoners, makes for some interesting reading. One of them appears to have been born on the pirate station in Brennans' Triumph, two are runaways and the last was on a passenger ship boarded by pirates four Mazura ago. I guess she volunteered to join rather than be a slave. Anyway I'll give you access to all the records."

Caran was impressed, "Are you sure you don't want a career in the service?"

Tor gave a short bitter laugh and said quietly, "Not for all the gem stones on Argon Prime."

Caran nodded slowly and he understood why Tor would not want the job, "What about an interview room?"

Tor spoke up as they passed the temporary command centre, "We assumed you'd want to talk to each one individually. They stopped in front of a closed door and Tor signalled for it to open. The room was bare except for two chairs and a plain white table, "Good enough?"

Caran stepped inside, looked at the furniture and frowned, "If it can't be secured to the floor then take it out," Tor looked surprised, but without having turned around to look at him Caran added, "A desperate man will look to any object that isn't fixed to the floor as a means to defend himself. I'd rather save them the inconvenience of trying."

After a couple of Mizura the room was bare and Caran commented, "It'll do," He pulled out his personal pad and scanned his palm. Turning to Tor, "Okay let me see the records you have on the prisoners."

Sweetie made the upload and Caran took a while to scan through each one, "Very good, now I want you to bring them in the following order. First the Teladi, Zeelanamoula, then the eldest of the Argon women Wilasma, followed by Daraman and finally youngest Helass. These interviews will be no longer than five Mizura each but I don't want any of them to be returned to the cell. It is vital that you keep them separate from now on, as it is important that none of them knows what has happened to the others. Can you do that?"

Tor nodded slowly, "Okay."

Caran spoke up, "Although each interview will only last five Mizura the amount of time between interviews will vary. I will let you know when the next one is to be started. Ensure that no one mentions that it's me doing the interview. Also I want the room cleaned after I've seen each prisoner as the smell of cleaning fluid sometimes helps in persuading people to give information."

Tor started to wonder if he had done the right thing by calling in Caran as some distant memory had been rekindled. The thought of seeing justice done surged through him driving away any doubts, "When would you like to see the first one."

Caran did not look up from the datapad and commented, "I need to be back in the core sectors to report on the murder of Agent Tullet. Not that this is my investigation you understand. So now would be a suitable time."

The Teladi tried to look defiant within the room that now acted as a cell for the four prisoners. However Tor could see a flicker of uncertain fear reflected in the reptilian eyes as he was led silently by two security guards wielding stun batons down several corridors. Made to face the door there was a momentary pause before it opened.

Caran was leaning against the back wall with datapad in hand. The Teladi took a moment to view the empty room and his eyes widened when he realized who was waiting for him.

"Please come in Zeelanamoula," The words appeared to freeze the Teladi to the spot until he was pushed forward whereupon he turned on his heels and tried to escape whilst shouting, "Nooooo."

The prisoners made it half way along the corridor when Sweety transported him back into the room. Still running as fast as he could the Teladi went straight into the wall and bounced back crashing to the floor in an ungainly heap. Caran said unsympathetically, "There's no point running." The door closed.

Tor had expected to hear cries of pain and pleading, but Sweety had applied a noise dampening field inside the room.

When the door did open after the five Mizura the prisoner was sitting on the floor rocking backwards and forwards still watching Caran, who did not appear to have moved.

The two security guards stepped forward and standing either side they lifted the Teladi to his feet. The prisoner whimpered slightly and with a look of unhappy resignation was guided away. Tor looked at Caran then at the state of the room almost expecting to see blood on the walls and floor but there was none, "How did it go?"

Caran did not look up straight away, slowly he put his pad away and gave Tor a penetratingly thoughtful look and said slowly, "Perhaps I need to add your name to the list."

Tor gave a nervous laugh, "If there's anything you want to know just ask."

Caran moved forward and stepped out of the room but as he passed Tor he commented quietly, "Good, I'd hate to think you're hiding something from me."

The cleaners entered the room and began to polish the floor. Although it only took two Mizura to complete Caran waited another six before requesting the second prisoner was brought forward. This time Liann was to be present to witness the interview. When Tor asked why Caran responded, "A legal technicality that a male interrogator cannot interview a female prisoner alone. It has to be done with another woman being present to ensure nothing unsavoury or degrading takes place."

When the cell door opened the three remaining prisoners looked round expectantly, but when they saw that Zeelanamoula was not with them Daraman asked, "What have you done with him?"

Tor looked at him and without feeling or emotion he commented, "I think you should be more concerned about what's going to happen to you."

The young woman called Wilasma said defiantly, "You bastards."

Tor raised a questioning eyebrow, "I'm sure Feran would have liked hearing you call me that, but if you ever see him again he'd kill you for your failure." He paused and then added, "As far as the rest of the universe is concerned you're already dead, just don't tempt me to prove them right."

He signalled to the guards who stepped forward with stun sticks buzzing. Tor looked into the defiant eyes of Wilasma and said, "Follow me." The look of defiance faded to fear.

Once again the prisoner faced the door. She glanced around nervously before it opened. The effect was profound when she recognised Caran standing on the opposite side of the room. All the colour appeared to drain from her face and Tor felt almost certain she was about to faint.

Caran said casually, "Please step inside Miss Wilasma I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Unlike the Teladi who tried to run, she took a deep breath, stepped forward and the door closed behind her. Again there was no sound coming from the room and Tor just had to be patient, he was reasonably certain that Caran knew about the Sentinel but how he was going to explain having it was another problem.

Having seen the effect the interview had with the Teladi, Tor wondered what condition the current interviewee would be in. After the five Mizura passed the door slid open.

Again Caran was leaning against the wall not having appeared to move. Liann was standing to one side talking to him quietly she stopped as soon as the guards stepped into the room and even she looked pale. The prisoner was sat against the opposite wall with her head in her hands. Once again the guards helped her up and with dragging footsteps they led her away.

The big agent led Liann out of the room but before she left them, Caran commented gently, "I appreciate your assistance but I need you to say nothing about the interview to anyone, and if you're up to it I will need your help with the second woman."

Tor was surprised to see Liann give a faint smile and nod.

Caran gave her a smile and commented softly, "Good, go get yourself a drink and I'll let you know when." His expression hardened as he turned to face Tor and asked, "Are you ready to chat now or do you want to wait until I've finished?"

Looking into the face of Caran, Tor commented, "I guess this is about the Sentinel?"

Caran neither nodded nor showed any sign of acknowledgement, he simply loomed and somehow seemed both taller and broader. Tor felt oppressed and that somehow the feeling would not leave him if he did not try to explain, "We found it and brought it back so we could find out more about it."

At that moment Tor could have sworn he saw the artificial eye glow, he blinked and shook his head quickly and pondered that it must have been a trick of the light, still he was standing with his back to the wall and could retreat no further.

Caran's words sliced through the space between them, "Found Mr Grall?"

The words just tumbled from Tor's lips, "Creed found a gate in the nebula, it's damaged and only appears periodically, but it leads to another sector. We found it on an abandoned station."

Caran stepped back and looked thoughtful, "Creed did like his little secrets. I find it incredible that you managed to discover alien technology and in astonishingly short time managed to master the finer details of programming, in what must have been a completely unknown language," He paused, "This revelation may just save you from explaining how you come to have implemented an outlawed security system. Still we shall have time to discuss the finer points later."

Tor's jaw dropped he could have kicked himself and he almost definitely heard the comm system give a heavy sigh. Somewhere inside he knew Sweety would now give him a hard time and for a moment he could not decide which was worse. Slowly a smile crept across his face and then he gave a brief laugh before saying cheerfully, "You really need to show me how to do that looming thing. It's very good."

Caran said nothing for a moment but studied Tor's face for signs of temporary insanity and then gave a half smile, "Laughter in the face of adversity can be a very effective defence Mr Grall," He paused, "But I think to loom properly you'll need to be stretched and broadened before you can hope to get it right. However there are other ways."

Tor was now relaxed again and still smiling said, "Come on let's have a drink and I'll tell you about the other sector."

"Not yet Tor, I think we should finish the interviews first," Caran spoke casually and added, "I need to re-familiarise myself with Daramans' accomplishments before the next interview. So I'll comm you when I'm ready."

Tor took this as his cue to leave. He avoided going anywhere that Sweety would be able to have a private chat and ended up in the pilots bar drinking a hot and spicy Garrow root cha. After eight Mizura the call came and once again Tor found himself standing outside the last two prisoners' cell accompanied by two security guards wielding charged stun batons.

The door opened and Daraman ceased pacing the room whilst Helass sat nervously biting her finger nails. Tor felt a pang of sorrow for the girl as somewhere deep down inside she simply did not fit the mould for being an assault trooper. However as he looked at Daramans' expression the feeling faded in the reflection that they had both donned the suits, carried weapons and fired them, perhaps killing several of his own people.

Tor signalled to the man, and he strode with purpose, head held high with resolve and defiance burning in his eyes. Once again the door opened and Caran stood casually against the back wall, he requested, "Please step inside Daraman."

For once the expression on the prisoners face did not change but he said out loud, "What is this some kind of a joke, and who the hell is he?"

Caran answered casually, "Mr Grall, I strongly advise you to have some medics on hand."

Daraman scoffed, but Tor could see a hint of nervousness in the eyes. The prisoner stood still and commented loudly, "I'm a prisoner of war and I have rights."

Tor gave Daraman a helpful push into the room and as the door closed he commented, "I'll let Mr Belign introduce himself."

Tor waited patiently with the two guards who were quietly chatting when the medical team turned up un-requested. The guards stopped talking and looked at Tor who felt the blood drain from his face.

The lead medic looked at all three men and commented, "Someone called?"

The three looked at each other perplexed when Sweety commented over the comm, "Location incorrect, casualty on level ten section delta."

The medics looked at each other, muttered, shrugged their shoulders and then marched off toward the shuttle lift. Tor commented under his breath as his heart beat returned to normal, "You did that deliberately to upset me."

Sweety said nothing. When the five Mizuras ended Caran stepped out of the room and looked around, he signalled to a man hurrying down the corridor towards them. The medic dashed past as Caran stepped out of the way and Tor suddenly felt sick.

"Everything okay?" Caran asked quietly. Tor looked at him but was unable to speak. The big agent leant close to Tor and added quietly, "Getting information out of people isn't always about looking big and threatening Mr Grall, sooner or later someone will try and call the bluff. It is simply unfortunate when they find out you're not bluffing." He paused for a moment, "But don't worry, I didn't do anything to the boy. All you need to do is examine his medical history, and I'm still impressed on how much you managed to find out."

Caran walked away and Tor watched him leave, 'only one more' he thought to himself, 'just one more'.

This time when he approached the bar he ordered an extra large spacefuel with a large glass of ale to wash it down with. The pilot serving as temporary barman asked, "Bay day in the office?"

Tor took a sip of the spirit and sighed, "I'm just hoping it's not going to get any worse."

The pilot, who Tor now recognised as Mathos, stepped out from the bar carrying a drink and patted him on the shoulder before wandering off. Tor looked down the bar and realized no one was serving and in essence it was a free for all, but at this moment he did not care.

He was just contemplating finding a quiet room so he could have a private chat with Sweety after all when he received the call for the last prisoner to be taken to the interview room.

Tor looked at the remaining ale and resisted the temptation to drain the glass, he stood up and took a deep breath, and after a Mizura found himself once again in front of the holding cell, the two guards looked resolute in their duty and the door opened.

Helass jumped to her feet, she tried to compose herself and put on a brave face, but the terror in her eyes spoke volumes and the pity inside began to rise to the surface once again. The memory that connected reading that this girl was captured in a pirate attack on a transport jumped to the surface. Once again the thought that she had been involved in the attack on the station and potentially killed some of his crew drove the feeling of pity to one side. This time however the doubt surfaced that she was only a foot soldier obeying orders and he could not be certain that she killed anyone.

Tor looked at her for a few moments and in a much gentler voice commented, "Follow me."

The distinct lack of enthusiasm in his voice somehow gave Helass a small glimmer of hope. She glanced questioningly at Tor as he stopped her in front of the door and stepped to one side, but he did not look at her. The door opened and she turned her head and gasped.

Carans' voice requested, "Please step inside Helass."

The girl dropped to her knees and shook her head before grabbing the leg of Tors' trousers and looked up at him murmuring, "No. Please no. Not this." Tor gritted his teeth and resolutely tried not to look into the girls tear filled face.

The two guards moved forward, but it was Caran Beligns' voice that stopped them, "Leave her!"

Tor looked forward towards Caran and tried to ignore the soft cries of, "Please," That sliced into his conscious worse than any physical cut. Caran just looked back, the expression hard and unforgiving. Liann also watched him carefully, her expression a mask of uncertain fearfulness and Tor had the distinct feeling that all eyes were on him as his eyes were fixed on the agent.

Caran stepped forward, "Compassion Mr Grall? She's a trooper that attacked this station. Many people died here and yet," Caran paused for effect, "You let the tears and soft cries of a weeping woman cloud your judgement."

Tor closed his eyes and tried to step away, but she had taken hold of his left ankle. He began to lean down in order to pull Helass's hands from his ankle when Caran commented quietly but firmly, "No Mr Grall, don't touch her. Step into the room and drag her along if she refuses to let go."

Tor stood upright again and did as Caran suggested, this time the girl let his ankle slip through her hands. He spoke to Caran whilst trying to muster a hard edge to his tone even though his heart was no longer in it, "I can have her transported into the room if you want."

"No Mr Grall," Caran replied and addressing the young woman directly he spoke with a firm but not unkind voice, "Helass I can assure you that I intend you no harm as I have enough information from your companions for my reports. Please take a moment to compose yourself, this chat is a mere formality and I can either tell you the charges brought against you in front of one witness in which case they will not be officially recorded and you will be allowed your say. Or I can read them here with everyone present and that is what you will be prosecuted and found guilty of."

Tor looked slightly surprised as did Liann at Carans' sudden change of tack and turned to watch Helass. She slowly moved to a sitting position and looked up through red, puffy eyes at Caran, several tears trickled down and she sniffed loudly whilst dabbing them away with her cuff.

Caran returned to leaning against the wall and although his expression was still stern he commented gently, "That's better. When you're ready come forward and I assure you this won't take long."

Tor had to stop himself from stepping forward and helping Helass to her feet, the look of fear was still strong in her face and as she crossed the threshold Tor stepped out of the room and the door closed.

The two security guards looked at him and appeared to reflect his own thoughts. Turrak, the older of the two guards being in his early forties, stocky and with flecks of grey in his receding hair line, asked the question on all their minds, "What's she doing here Sir? How the hell does someone like her even get considered suitable as an assault trooper?"

Standing with his back to the door, Tor replied quietly, "I have no idea, but she's here so I guess she must have some aptitude for something."

The three of them fell silent for a moment as each one considered the last thought. After a Mizura the younger guard, Shelton also of stocky build, in his late twenties with thick brown hair and a thin pale white scar over his left eye commented, "What do you think he does to them in there?"

Tor reflected on how to answer this even though he had never witnessed an interview by Caran, he said, "He gets them to talk."

Shelton replied with a slight shrug, "Yeah but what type of questions does he ask?"

Tor fixed Shelton with a long stare before he answered, "What makes you think he asks questions?"

The guard slowly went pale, "Yeah but surely that would be against the law?"

Looking away Tor answered quietly with a bitter tone and a wry smile, "As far as Caran is concerned he is the law, and I'm pretty certain that if you're ever in there with him that's the only law you'll care about."

Five Mizuras slipped by. Tor and the guards readied themselves but this time the door did not open. They looked at each other anxiously, Tor checked his time piece. By the time ten Mizuras had passed Tor was pacing the corridor. A few Mizuras later and he was glancing around expectantly for the medics to appear.

"Sweetie what's going on?" Tor asked quietly near one of the com units.

"I'm not allowed to say," Sweetie whispered back softly.

Trying not to raise his voice above a whisper Tor commented harshly, "If there's anything bad going on in there then I want to know."

Sweetie replied gently, "Well perhaps you should have looked over the prisoners records and interviewed them yourself before handing them over to the service."

Tor responded in the same harsh whisper, "Sweetie, I'd rather you don't play on my conscience right now and just tell me what the hell is going on."

There was a certain finality in Sweetie's response, "Nothing that you would not approve of."

"You know, I think I'll have you unplugged for a while," It was the only threat that Tor could think of and even then he doubted that he would have it carried out. Sweetie did not respond.

The interrogation ended after thirty Mizuras and Tor had to push himself up from his seated position on the floor. For once, the prisoner was still standing and the look that she gave Tor was more of worry and concern than fear.

He sighed heavily when Caran commented, "Tor please step inside. I would like a little chat," He looked slightly alarmed but stepped forward without any sign of hesitation and the door closed behind him.

Taking the fact that Liann was still in the room as a good sign Tor asked, "So what now?"

Caran looked at his datapad for a moment and then at Tor. Speaking reasonably slowly he commented, "We have an interesting situation developing." He paused for a moment.

Tor chipped in, "How do you mean?"

Caran continued, "When your computer highlighted that these four would give you the least trouble it was for a reason. The second and the third one that were interviewed are on their first active mission. Feran has to train new blood somehow and active service is a quick if not brutal way to see if potential troopers are up to the task. The first and the last are computer hackers their job is to break into the station computers, get past any security protocols and shut down defensive systems or reprogram them to identify enemies as allies and vice versa," Caran paused before adding, "Those two were in the team that attacked the control room where you were."

Tors' opinion was changing once again and he remarked bitterly, "So which one hit me with the rifle butt?" He noted that Liann looked away when he asked the question.

Caran thought for a moment and looked around the room as if only now taking in the details for the first time, "Perhaps we should discuss this in more amenable surroundings."

Tor thought for a moment, "My own office has been set up for the wake. I'll get the things moved to the pilot bar so we can use that."

Caran suddenly looked at Tor with a questioning glance, "No Tor! I hadn't realized you were planning on one so soon."

Tor gave a half hearted smile, "Yeah in the next half Stazura."

Caran put the pad into his pocket and stood up straight and stepped forward. He put his left hand on Tors left shoulder, the door opened and without another word he walked out of the room. Liann and Tor looked at each other completely lost for words.

"What the hell happened there?" Tor eventually asked quietly and Liann shrugged her shoulders.

Sweety broke the silence and spoke softly, "You are taking time to remember the dead. It is something he did not do when he lost his wife."

There was an uneasy silence after this, and although Tor wanted to ask Liann what Caran was going to talk to him about, he decided that he would wait until the big agent was ready. Instead he commented to Liann, "Can I get you a drink?"

As time slipped by Tor noticed new faces on the station and he asked Liann, "Who are these people?"

She answered, "They're from the Crystal Fab." And sure enough as he looked around the bar he saw some agent faces that he had seen on the Boron Shipyard. Then he saw a few military pilots and Tris, she smiled and gave a quick wave just before his view was obscured by the imposing figure of Broden.

Tor glanced up questioningly and saw Broden shoot Liann a quick glance before his eyes darted back to Tor and said, "Don't mind if I join you?"

With a smile Tor stood up and replied casually, "Take my seat, I need to go mingle."

Tor carried his ale out to the security dock and looked around. The X-shuttle was missing and he wandered over to a comm panel and asked quietly, "Where's Caran?"

Sweety answered, "If my scan is correct he is back in Argon Prime. Do you want me to call him?"

Tor sighed and commented, "No that's okay."

Tris tapped him on the shoulder, "Hi Tor."

A smile crept over his face as he turned and said as enthusiastically as he could, "Tris! I didn't expect to see you here."

She smiled back and replied, "Most of us knew someone that was either hurt or..." She let the sentence hang.

The smile faded as swiftly as it appeared on Tors face his thoughts and feelings mixed. He sighed again, saying, "It's tough being in charge and I don't like this job anymore."

Tris looked at him sternly, "You're doing okay. You managed to keep the station from being taken over and most of your people are alive against all the odds because you managed to keep your head and didn't give in."

Tor gave a half hearted smile and responded, "I had help," He paused briefly and added, "Unfortunately the person responsible is still out there."

Tris gave him an encouraging smile and commented, "We'll get him don't you worry about that."

He looked into her green eyes and asked, "Can I get you a drink?" Tris nodded and they made their way back to the bar.

Time passed quickly once they found a place to sit and chatted until it was time for the remembrance ceremony to begin.

The three Pegasus ships had returned with yet more station supplies from the core sectors and so had Caran. Having sent his initial draft report on the incident to the various officials, he then made his excuses and returned in order to show his last respects to Agent Tullet.

The Paranid priest gave a brief eulogy on each of the station personnel and the two Paranid visitors that had been killed and although each one was brief it took over forty Mizura to cover them all. The priest then concluded the ceremony by reading the Service of Ascension in the native Paranid language with a final statement in Argon, "Let us remember the dead as they were in life. Take honour in knowing their names and let us enjoy the lives we have," After this the priest moved slowly through the gathering, smiling benevolently and making eye contact with each and every individual.

The wake was noisy and lively as the crew appeared to have taken the 'enjoy life' message to heart. Some of them had retrieved a mix of various musical instruments and although they occasionally went out of sync with each other, they played a number of favourite songs and generally just jammed.

At some point in the proceedings someone had let slip that Tor could play the Guilard and he found himself being persuaded to play something and then some more. The rest of the musicians allowed him to get carried away with several solo pieces without him even noticing they had stopped during some particularly difficult riffs. Several of the female coordinators had taken to dancing on the table with the rotating holo-image of the Sentinel standing victorious over the Devastator. They also added the vocal backing to several of the songs, and each time Tor finished a piece there was applause and a stamping of feet whilst he allowed the final notes to linger and die off slowly. Whisky and ale flowed and the food trays were stripped bare of every morsel. How long the wake lasted no one knew or cared.

When Tor eventually woke up, he was unable to move as no part of his body seemed capable of obeying any instructions from his brain. Not that it was trying particularly hard. Slowly he realized, as he gently forced his eyes open, that he had not made it to his bed and it was still a couple of metres away from where he lay. However someone else had made it the extra distance as their pilot boots hung off the end of the mattress. Tor moved slowly trying not to upset any part of his body. As far as he could tell he was still drunk and slowly he collapsed down to the floor again.

Chapter 15. All Quiet

Tor took a while longer and managed to haul himself upright and swayed his way towards the bathroom whilst using his outstretched right arm to support himself against the wall.

He spent a while standing still as the water from the shower cascaded over him. Eventually he turned it off, got undressed and then started it again. Feeling only marginally refreshed but still very intoxicated, he made a tentative effort to dry himself before he put on the bathrobe and stumbled back into the bedroom. The figure on the bed did not stir but he recognised Tris. She looked as though she had managed to get as far as the bed and then collapsed face first onto it.

Having looked in the cupboard at the rack of clothes he decided it was too much like effort and left his room to find something to drink and preferably settle his stomach. He made it down to the pilots bar and noticed he was getting some strange looks and perhaps a snigger from one or two of the pilots. Most of them appeared to be in no better condition than he was, even if they had managed to put on normal clothes and fatigues whereas Tor only wore the bathrobe.

The pilot who was acting as barman commented with a thinly disguised smile, "And what shall it be Sir?"

Tor sat on the barstool and replied, "Recovery mix and make it a double." When the pilot turned around Tor placed his forehead on the cool surface of the bar. When the glass arrived Tor drained it in long slow gulps and as he placed it back on the bar he requested, "I'll have two more to take away."

The pilot smiled and turned away to prepare them. A short while later Tor staggered out of the bar and back along the corridor to the shuttle lift. The first drink did not cure the, still being drunk, situation that he was suffering from so he spilt a fair amount of the liquid before he made it back to the room.

Tris was still comatose on the bed, so he put one drink on the bedside table next to her. Although still far from sober and now feeling the need for more sleep, Tor decided not to climb into his own bed. He considered that it would not be proper for Tris to wake up next to him, especially as he had not made it that far in the first place. Instead he staggered out of the room and as the door closed he commented gently, "Sweetie is there an empty bedroom I can use?"

Sweetie replied, "Lots, but the nearest one is the forth door on the left if you turn right."

Tor spent a moment trying to work out which was his left and right. Once reaching the room, he entered it and collapsed falling into a deep dreamless sleep.

It was two Stazura later when Broden woke him up, "Sir, time to get up."

Tor looked around and felt only marginally better and asked, "What's the urgency?"

Broden commented with every hint of seriousness, "We were about to charge Miss Matayah with cannibalism."

Tor said with slight confusion and alarm, "Uh, what?"

Broden paused, having thought the moment was wasted, and added more seriously, "Mr Belign wants to see you."

Tor rubbed his face with both hands and murmured, "You know I liked the cannibalism one better," Then he froze and without moving his hands from his face he added, "You weren't joking about Caran were you?"

Broden replied, "No Sir."

Tor could only find one word to describe the situation, “Shit,” He sat up slowly and looked at Broden, “Anyway how did you know Tris was in my room?”

The mercenary pilot gave a roguish smile and said nothing. Tor sighed and looked around for the recovery drink. He drained the remains of the glass and hoped that it would help.

Still wearing the bath robe he meandered to his office. Broden had asked him if he wanted to change but Tor declined. The cleaners had removed all the debris from the previous evening and both Caran and Liann were waiting for him. Tor noted that Liann did not look in the best of health.

With an appraising glance Caran commented, “I see you’ve come appropriately dressed.”

Tor began to gesture in explanation but, with a complete loss of words, waved it away and said, “At this moment in time I don’t care what I look like.”

Caran looked at him sternly, but the expression slowly changed to a wry smile, “Please Tor, take a seat.”

Tor needed little encouragement, slumped down on the sofa opposite and sank into the leather.

Caran started the conversation, “I trust you enjoyed the wake?”

Tor nodded tentatively, “It seemed to go pretty well.”

“Excellent and now that you’ve had some chance to recover we have a number of things I’d like to discuss, firstly the prisoners, secondly the alien technology you have on board and third Creeds Gate, as you call it,” Caran commented and sat back. Tor nodded and the agent continued, “I am going to arrange for a special transport to remove three of the prisoners. This time they will jump to a prison station for detention until a trial can be held.”

“And the fourth one?” Tor asked whilst his head began to ache slightly.

Caran replied, “Will be staying with you, and yes, Helass was the one who hit you with the rifle butt.”

Tor put his hand instinctively to the side of his face, but the medics had done a superb reconstruction job and there was no trace of damage, “Can I ask why she’s staying?”

Caran gave Tor a long thoughtful look, “I believe the expression is that ‘she’s an ace in the hole’. Should anything go wrong.”

Tor did not like the idea of having to keep the one prisoner. Apart from his personal reservations he wondered how the crew would react, “I expect you’ll have your people better prepared next time. So what can go wrong?”

Caran frowned, “Very true, but we have to capture Feran in order to bring him to trial. Until that time there will always be a risk that someone will find out about the prisoners and have them assassinated.”

Tor moved his head back, rested it against the cool leather and looked up at the ceiling, “So what am I supposed to do with this one?”

Caran responded as though the answer was obvious, “Give her a job Mr Grall.”

There was a moment of stunned silence from Tor, he fixed Caran with the best stare he could manage and commented cautiously, “I’m really not so sure that’s a good idea. I have to consider the feelings and reaction of the crew.”

Caran casually replied, “I’m certain you’ll make sure no harm comes to her.”

Tor felt the undertones in the statement, “Why?”

The agent raised a questioning eyebrow, "It's useful to give people a second chance in life, so they can try to get things right. With the right opportunities they can show they are not as bad as we are first led to believe."

Tor considered the comments, "A bit like me you mean?"

Caran gave a slight smile, "Something like that, but I doubt she will turn out quite as enterprising."

Tor went back to looking at the ceiling, holding back his own thoughts about being manipulated and the sense of always being in some kind of debt, "Any particular job you think she may be useful at?"

Caran replied, "Programming. With the right safeguards in place of course, just low level stuff that can easily be monitored."

Tor reflected on this, "But she's a hacker, if we give her access at any level then how do we know she won't try and break into other higher level systems."

Caran smiled, "You've just created a job for her."

Tor looked at Caran, "What?"

The agent commented, "She can test the security of you're systems to hacker attack. In a controlled way of course," Tor looked at Liann who also appeared to be vaguely perplexed by the whole discussion but had remained silent.

Tor asked, "Liann, how would you feel working with a prisoner?"

She shot Caran a cautious glance and replied slowly, "I'm not sure, in the interview she seemed genuinely apologetic and concerned about trying to make things right."

Caran commented gently, "Although tainted by the clan, until this incident she'd only been a Bloodheart member for a short while. It has to take genuine talent and a great deal of persuasive ability to be accepted as a clan member in order not to end up in the slave pens."

Tor responded quickly, "And how do I know she hasn't used those extraordinary persuasive powers to get a position on my station."

The agent gave a soft laugh, "Maybe she has. The technique for measuring how much you can trust her is entrapment. You engineer discreet opportunities that will test her for her skill and also loyalty. Depending on how she behaves when she finds these opportunities will show if she's genuinely changed sides or is faking."

Tor continued to look uncertain, "Give me time to think about it and talk to some of the crew, they're the ones who are going to have to work with her. If they're strongly opposed, then this idea of yours isn't going to work."

Caran looked as though he was going to say something, but hesitated and gave a slight nod of consent, "And now to the second matter. Liann you are free to leave us."

She looked at both of them and nodded, getting to her feet Liann left the office. Once the door slid shut behind her Caran also stood up and paced slowly around the room, "Now this alien technology you've found. Can you give me a better explanation of what it is?"

Tor sighed, "Not really, when we found it there was no residual power left in its energy core. We managed to extract the computer and rig up a temporary power input. The computer ran a translation program whilst we waited to make the jump back."

“And how long did that take?” Caran asked.

“A Stazura,” Tor replied, “Of course when we got it back here we had better facilities to strip it down re-energise the power cells and interrogate the computer core including reprogramming.”

Caran paced the room, “I think you’ve been incredibly lucky that this thing didn’t go on the rampage and destroy the station. You have an alien designed battle robot being reinitialised in a location unknown to it and surrounded by an unknown species. Most defensive systems are programmed with known allies and everything else is an enemy, their purpose is to protect and when moved they will try to return to the place they were set up to defend.”

“I guess we got lucky with the programming,” Tor replied with a shrug.

Caran looked at Tor, “It takes more than luck to modify core programming and get it right first time. It can take just one error in syntax to get some rather unpleasant results.”

Tor looked at Caran, “Yeah but I would guess the Devastator just gets given simple instructions, go there kill him, type stuff.”

Caran replied, “Only after the security protocols have been met and codes input. Now unless you have the access codes and can understand the method by which instructions are given, then you have to go in the long slow way via the source code. So do you have the access codes for this robot, and know its primary instruction set?”

Tor shook his head, and Caran continued, “Understand Tor that it can take months even years to break an unknown programming language. But by some small chance your systems managed to do it in Mizuras.”

“I guess it was an easy one to break,” Tor commented quietly.

“It’s only easy if someone hands you a crib sheet. Even simple languages can be hard to interpret if there is no point of reference for common understanding,” Caran watched Tor closely as he spoke but for the moment could not decide if Tor was looking perplexed because he was hiding some piece of knowledge or he was trying to remember something significant.

Tor eventually spoke up, “When we were on the station there was some residual power in the core reactor. The computer scanned the control desk to see what the indicators meant.”

Caran asked, “And?”

Tor shrugged and commented, “Well it just appeared to be a power status indicator.”

The big agent smiled, “It may have only been that, but it would give the code breakers a point of reference to work from. Although we see the text and the visual display there is always some code being run which monitors status and gives a continuous screen updates. Simple coding, but directly comparable with what we use. I can assure you this is a very valuable find.”

Tor felt pleased, particularly as he felt apprehensive about mentioning Sweetys involvement, which the conversation was potentially heading towards, if he had not suddenly remembered this snippet of information. Even so he began to wonder if the solution was so simple and that this ability had not somehow been passed on to Sweety from the previous alien encounter.

Caran sat down again opposite to Tor and said levelly, “Now this,” He paused to remember the word Tor used for it, “Sentinel, what shape is it in at the moment?”

“It took some punishment from the hellfire, mostly armour damage. But it has some unusual shielding technology that appears to reflect plasma weapons fire, in fact I would guess it deflects, reflects any energy weapon discharge.”

Caran looked thoughtful and said slowly, "Interesting. I'd like to get our scientists to look at that. Anything else, weapons?"

Tor commented, "From what I saw on the scanners, it discharges a sphere of energy that can take out walls and it literally knocked the Devastator off its feet. In one instance it appeared to stun the other robot causing it to shut down."

Sitting back again Caran commented, "Sounds like some sort of disruptor weapon with localised EMP. We'll have to let the scientists decide on that."

Tor spoke up, "Well there shouldn't be any problem in that department. The Sentinel is currently in the maintenance dock for repairs with its control unit removed. The computer has some programming modifications to make."

"Very good, and now tell me about Creeds' Gate." Caran looked relaxed giving Tor the cue that he was expected to do all the talking.

Tor took a deep breath, "I can only assume the gate was found by chance, every two Tazura for about two Mizura the gate appears inside the nearby nebula. It's been suggested that it may have been damaged by a particularly violent ion storm. On the other side are the remains of a large fleet of ships, computer can you pull up the holo-image for the sector beyond Creeds' Gate."

Over the meeting table, to the left of Tor where the image of the Sentinel and Devastator had been the previous evening, appeared the image of the sector. Caran turned his head then rose to his feet and wandered across for a closer look. Tor continued, "As you can see, it must have been one hell of a battle."

The holo-image followed the original flight path of the Defiance, Caran commented as they passed the remains of one ship, "Hold it just there, go back slowly and stop," He looked at the image for a while casting his eyes over the scarred surface before saying, "Continue."

"When we went to look at the other two gates," The image moved away from the ship remains at speed and then slowed once again at the first of the gates, "We found that whoever these people were, they knew trouble was coming and had dismantled this gate and the other one. But for some reason not Creeds Gate."

Caran said nothing but continued to look at the separated sections of the gate, "After this we went and looked at the space city," Once again the image flashed forward to the city. Tor said with a hint of sadness, "Must have held hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people in there at one point. Now it's just a home for Spaceflies."

The image turned over the shattered dome and followed the Defiance flight path in over the fallen buildings and between the fissures in the base structure.

Caran sighed and turned from the image, "I can understand why Creed wanted to keep this a secret, and I must ask you to do the same," The image of the city froze, "I want to have a team of scientists investigate the remains for clues. The gate situation somehow doesn't add up, why take apart only two gates if you want to isolate yourself. Also I find it hard to believe that a battle fleet that size wouldn't have positioned themselves at the entrance and destroyed every ship that came through."

"Maybe they didn't believe the enemy would come through that way and were taken by surprise," Tor replied.

Caran looked at Tor and commented under his breath, "Maybe they didn't know the gate was there," There was a momentary silence, and Caran turned to look at the image of the city and thought, 'So where are they?'

Tor asked, "Anything else you want to see?"

Caran glanced back at him, “No I think I’ve seen enough. I will give you a data chip. Have the computer download all this data, including the deciphered code, onto it.”

Tor felt a slight moment of cautious elation when he realized that Caran had made the assumption that he had found the Sentinel in the city, “Of course.”

Caran slowly turned and with a stern tone said, “Some advice. If you discover anything that is of interest to the Agency then you should notify me immediately. If I find you’re holding back on anything like this again, then you and I will have a proper ‘chat’.” He paused long enough for the message to sink in and then asked, “So is there anything else you’d like to tell me?” Tor gently shook his head.

Caran continued carefully, “On a different subject, you will of course be aware that following your sighting of the criminal Nyeshtha we put out tracers to locate where she has moved onto. Unusually, shortly having been captured she was bought from the slavers that held her by a young Argon male. Although we have no clear description of the buyer he was flying a new Elite at around the same time you would have been crossing the sector. I was wondering if you may have seen it?” There was a certain inflection in Caran’s voice with particular emphasis on the final ‘it’.

Tor shook his head, “I can’t remember seeing one. If I remember rightly we were more concerned about further pirate attacks.”

“Hmmm. Pity the buyer managed to cover his tracks very efficiently,” Caran commented, “Still she’ll turn up sooner or later and probably in the most unexpected of places.”

Tor asked, “Is she really that dangerous?”

Caran gave a wry smile, “Deadly. She’s the reason prisoners now travel in stasis.”

Tor sighed and commented with a slight hint of bitterness, “Then I wish you every success in finding her, particularly as she helped in the capture of Tris.”

The big agent looked at him for a moment, “I need to return to Argon Prime. So as soon as I have the data chip I’ll be leaving. I take it you’ll let your people know to expect me whilst you go get dressed.”

Tor nodded, “Of course.”

Caran stepped forward, “Good. Once again Mr Grall our meeting has been informative. So until the next opportunity, keep out of trouble and enjoy the rest of the day.”

Tor responded, “Safe journey.”

Caran stepped out and Tor swung his legs around and lay on the sofa, “Sweetie, has he gone yet?”

“He has left your office if that is what you mean,” Sweetie replied.

“So do you think he knows?” Tor asked absently without choosing a particular subject.

“For the moment he is suspicious but not enough to bug your office,” Sweetie replied and then added, “Yet.”

Tor responded quietly, “Thank the ancients for that.”

Sweetie said quietly, “Now if he had bugged this office, I am sure he would be heading straight back here to talk to you.”

“And is he?” Tor glanced at the door sharply.

“No,” Sweetie commented in normal tones, and then added, “Well not yet.”

Tor asked, "About these interviews, how does he get the results he is after?"

Sweety considered her response, "Mainly by psychology. Fear is a powerful weapon in the hands of a master."

Tor stated simply, "So he threatens them."

Sweety commented, "In essence yes, but he appears to achieve this in many different ways."

He gave this a few moments thought and commented, "I bet trying to scare Creed wouldn't have worked."

There was a slight pause and Sweety replied, "I doubt Creed would have allowed himself to be taken alive."

Tor asked the next question surfacing at the front of his mind, "Is she going to be safe?"

Sweety replied, "Helass will find it extremely difficult on this station. I would judge that the mood of the crew will be hostile towards her."

Tor sighed and he knew Sweety had side stepped his question. Somehow he needed to find a way to make it palatable to the rest of the staff, "I need a plan Sweety, at the moment all I've got to go with is chat to everyone."

Sweety responded, "Having her test elements of the security system is easily achievable. I can setup a simulation environment that mirrors our own. Such a job means we can keep her working away from the majority of the staff."

Tor considered this, "Yeah but we can't keep her hidden. If we tried it would be like putting someone in solitary confinement."

Sweety commented softly, "Tor you sound like you have a conscience."

"Yeah well I'm sure to get over it sooner or later," Tor commented swiftly, "The best place for her as far as I can tell is prison, preferably a labour camp, but this place isn't either, and I'm not going to turn it into one."

Sweety said with a mocking tone, "Well I for one am glad to hear you say that. I might take exception to having to cope with wayward women that want to turn over a new leaf."

Tor smiled, "Hey it's not like I ask them or anything. They just seem to get imposed on me."

Sweety spoke quietly in case anyone might be able to overhear, "As for the other one she's aware of the current situation."

Tor relaxed for a moment, "Perhaps I should go and get dressed."

Sweety observed, "It will certainly help with the conversations you need to have with the crew. They might take you seriously."

Tor laughed, "Fat chance after last night."

Sweety spoke kindly, "Last night was fine it just proved that you are one of them, even if you are the boss, and it helped to lift their spirits."

He paused for a while to allow this to sink in and then sighed, "What do you make of Carans' comment relating to Creeds' Gate?"

“I have tried to get an understanding of this by analysing as much relevant data as is available to me,”
Sweety started.

Tor butted in, “And probably some that shouldn’t be.”

Sweety ignored the implication because it contained some element of truth, “There is a current theory that the ancients occasionally set up a gate shift. The destination of the gates will alter and allow gates currently invisible to us, but present, to phase shift giving us access to new sectors. This may have happened to the aliens and the enemy got to the new gate first.”

Tor thought about this for a second, “If that’s the case then I would say those people were bloody unlucky that a new gate suddenly appeared for an invasion fleet to flood in through.”

Sweety commented, “That is assuming the ancients caused the gate to shift just at that moment.”

Tor reasoned, “Maybe it happened when they dismantled the other two gates, a sort of safety feature?”

Sweety replied, “Not particularly safe for the former inhabitants if that is the case. However I cannot simulate why it has been linked to Creeds’ Gate when the one in the nebula is the one that is damaged.”

Tor stood up and commented, “Well you speculate a little bit longer and tell me the result. I’m going to get dressed.”

Sweety called out, “Before you go, can you give me access to the alien data recorder and memory crystals.”

Pausing for a moment Tor then commented, “Yeah sure they’re in my room. I’ll bring them with me.” He turned and left the office.

He ambled back down the corridor and asked, “Sweety locate Tris.”

Sweety replied, “She is having a shower.”

Tor thought for a moment as he reached his door, “Is the bathroom door closed?”

Sweety slyly commented, “Yes Tor, and I am detecting low visibility due to an accumulation of steam.”

Tor commented defensively but with a wry smile, “That’s not what I was thinking.” He opened the door and headed straight towards the wardrobe, sliding open the door he froze when behind him the bathroom door opened, followed by a short scream and the door closing again.

Tor whispered quickly, “Sweety why didn’t you tell me she’d finished?”

Sweety whispered back, “You never asked.”

Tris shouted out from behind the door, “What are you doing in here, get out!”

Tor replied, “I just thought I’d drop by MY room and get some fresh clothes.” He felt certain that Tris was swearing but could not make out what she was saying.

Eventually she shouted out uncertainly, “And where did you sleep?”

Tor smiled the idea of winding Tris up and stringing her along with snippets of information suddenly had a huge appeal. So he replied loudly, “When I woke up I was in here with you.”

Tris muttered something, and then the door opened. She had wrapped herself in a huge white towel which she had wrapped around herself and tucked in before throwing another towel over her shoulders to leave

only her head and hands exposed. She looked sheepishly at him, "Is it okay if you give me a moment alone so I can get dressed."

Tor reached into the open wardrobe and grabbed an assortment of clothes including a new pair of pilot boots, "Yeah, take all the time you need. There's a spare room a few doors down the corridor which I can use."

He smiled as he picked up the alien case and said, "When you're ready, nip to the office and I'll get you some breakfast."

Tris gave a slight nod and said quietly, "Okay."

Tor changed quickly and returned to his office. He placed the case on his desk and flipped open the latches and looked at the contents, wondering what secrets the crystals would hold.

A small maintenance robot appeared and Sweetie commented to Tor, "Pass the reader unit to the robot."

He picked it up and held it out carefully. The mechanical grippers gently took hold of the unit by repositioning its grips to support the weight and cradle it rather than grip on either side. The robot then hovered away having silently been given new instructions by Sweetie.

It was five Mizuras later that Tris turned up and Tor greeted her with a broad smile. She however regarded him suspiciously.

Tor asked gently, "How do you feel?"

Tris replied with an element of harshness, "I've been better."

Tor's smile reduced, "I guess we all had a bit too much to drink."

"You can say that again," Tris looked as though she was going to say something else but stopped and fidgeted for a moment whilst keeping her eyes fixed on Tor.

Tor approached her and commented cheerfully, "Ready for breakfast. I don't know about you, but last night took a lot out of me and I'm starving."

Tris suddenly adopted the suspicious cold look, and Tor asked, "Not hungry?" Something about her manner told him he might have to do some explaining sooner than later. It was the way she carefully turned over the blaster in her hands whilst giving him a thoughtful look.

"Hey nothing happened, swear on my life," Tor backed away but Tris stepped forward until Tor bumped into his desk and could retreat no further.

She stepped up close to him and Tor had the distinct impression the blaster was pointing somewhere he would rather not. Their eyes locked and Tor swallowed hard before Tris said, "Why not? Am I not good enough for you?" With that she suddenly kissed him quickly on the lips, then walked away laughing calling back cheerfully, "I'm starving. Where's the breakfast you've promised me?"

Tor sighed deeply and muttered quietly to himself, "I could give you one or two suggestions," And then said loudly enough for Tris to hear, "That was a nasty thing you did."

Tris turned around and twitched her nose with a mischievous grin, "Hey you were the one who was going to try winding me up."

Tor shook his head with a smile, "Touché."

Chapter 16. First Sign

Breakfast had been in the pilot bar and Tor had spent a few pleasant Mizuras forgetting about everything and just chatting with some reminiscing. He felt a slight twinge when Tris eventually said a cheerful goodbye and departed back to the Crystal Fab with the last few pilots that had come for the wake. He returned to his office and looked it over but felt slightly restless, so went on tour around the station.

He looked in on the Sentinel which was still partially dismantled whilst Sweety ran code simulations with the robot core computer. The damaged armour had been patched and returned.

Tor noticed the maintenance robot that had picked up the reader unit. Wandering across he spied that a connector interface had now been attached and the device itself appeared to glow. Quietly Tor left as there were technicians around. He did not feel that this was the right place to try and talk to Sweety and find out if she had discovered anything.

A significant amount of the damage in the corridors and floors had been repaired with new defensive turret weapons installed. Tor glanced into the rebuilt command centre as the last of the communications and control desks were being installed.

Eventually he ended up back in his office, and sat behind his desk, "Sweety any progress with the data reader?"

Sweety replied, "Yes. I have now established the power requirements for the unit. For the moment I have the last few recorded entries uploaded and will begin translation."

Tor looked impressed, "Excellent, when do you think you'll have completed those?"

Sweety responded, "The first pass translation will be completed in thirty five Mizura."

Tor nodded, and then sighed as he reflected on what he needed to do next. Knowing he had been putting off chatting to the crew about Helass working amongst them. He reflected on what Caran might say if he still had not come to some arrangement before they next talked, or when the new agent arrived. Still he had to acknowledge that if she did work alongside the other programmers, he would not have to use other resources to monitor her continually, and provide food plus other necessities. Eventually he commented, "Sweety can you locate Broden and send him up to the office."

Sweety acknowledged and three Mizura later Broden entered, "You wanted to see me Sir."

"Yeah," Tor stood up and indicated to one of the settees, "Take a seat."

Broden dutifully sat down and Tor sat down opposite. The former Captain looked inquisitively at him and Tor took a deep breath, "We have a problem that's come up."

Broden remained silent and Tor wondered if Liann had perhaps spoken to him. He plunged on, "Only three of the prisoners are going to be shipped out. The Intelligence Agency wants us to look after the last one. They have suggested that I find her a job as a hacker to test the stations computer security."

The former Captain took a sharp intake of breath, looked solemnly back at Tor and fixed eye contact, "And how do you feel about it Sir?"

Tor looked perplexed that his next question to Broden had been sent straight back at him. He considered his answer, "The prisoner in question wants the opportunity to show that she made a mistake getting involved with the Bloodheart clan. She was only here to hack into the computers not to fight, and it would give us an opportunity to find out what weaknesses we have in our security."

Broden weighted Tors words and the way he presented them, "I guess that this, 'suggestion' has been made by Mr Belign?"

Tor said nothing for a moment, “This is his suggestion. However even if we decide not to allow her to do some work for us, we will be holding her prisoner for an indefinite period. Caran Belign wants us to keep this particular person hidden, so we don’t lose our ability to see justice done, should anything happen to the other three before they can be brought to give evidence against Feran Bloodheart.”

Broden took a moment to think, and nodded slowly, “Keeping her here is one thing, but allowing her to work with us,” The former captain let the sentence hang and shook his head slowly.

Tor observed and wondered how he was going to successfully persuade Broden to allow Helass to work. The only comfort he took was that the former Captain had not leapt up and started shouting. In fact he appeared to be remarkably calm about the whole subject with no real strong emotions flaring to the surface. Tor took a little longer and said calmly, “I’d like to give her a chance.”

Broden commented firmly, “Sir, I would advise against it.”

Tor responded slowly, “Your objection is noted, but here me out. She has worked with the Bloodheart clan for a while and as a former employee could, let us say, have an understanding of their operational tactics. The layout of their stations and the security access points, maybe even have the codes to shutdown the station or at least know how to break into their systems.”

Broden simply looked at Tor and his expression gave little away. He asked, “And if she does, what do you plan to do with this information?”

“Shut down the defences and deliver the Sentinel to them,” Tor replied, “But first I need her to become a member of the team. I don’t expect people to like this, and I don’t envisage people rushing forward with open arms to welcome her. The most I can ask for is that people are civil or say nothing.”

Broden sighed, “If this is going to stand any chance of working, I and the others need to know more about her. How she came to be a Bloodheart, what her job is and how many people she’s killed?”

Tor replied quickly, “Sweety can you provide the details?”

Sweety responded, “She was a computer programmer for an Argon corporation in transit to a Wheat Farm in Olmankelstat’s Treaty when the ship was captured and boarded by pirates four Mazura ago. Under duress and having demonstrated considerable skill in overcoming the transports security codes the Bloodheart Clan allowed her to join. This is her first combat operation with a primary goal to hack into the station security systems. Number of known kills is zero.”

Broden looked at Tor, “That’ll help,” He paused then said, “It may be an idea if I ask the men for their opinion. No disrespect intended Sir, but you’re younger than many and not much older than the rest. In the eyes of the older pilots you’re still a bit green as a commander and they’ll be less inclined to accept news like this from you,” He paused for a moment, “Don’t get me wrong, they do respect you Sir, and you’ve shown real strength, which they admire but something like this, handled badly, can turn the situation right around Sir.”

Tor sat back and considered Brodens’ words. The last thing Tor needed was any bad feeling against him from his crew and responded slowly, “Thanks for the feedback and support. All I ask is, if you can persuade the crew to accept her, albeit grudgingly, then she gets the opportunity to show us that she isn’t a potential threat. If the crew strongly oppose it then we’ll just have to keep her locked away and nothing more will be said about it.”

Broden nodded, “Agreed and just so that you know. As you’re willing to give her a chance then so shall I Sir.”

Tor stood up and held out his hand, “Thank you Captain.”

Broden stood up slowly and gave a slight smile. He commented as they shook hands, "I'm not in the military anymore Sir. But maybe you should think of a personnel command structure?"

Tor smiled, "I'll be sure to give it some thought."

The former captain turned and left and Tor collapsed down into his seat. The thought of having to discuss this with every member of the crew had now been lifted, but now Tor's thoughts drifted to the corporate structure. The Bakery in The Wall had more or less developed a structure that reflected the other businesses around, with workers, supervisors, senior supervisors and two layers of management with a single Station Manager and then him at the top of the tree as Managing Director. The pilots were spurred off to a second management tree under the Station Manager, but this only had two layers in total.

He compared the number of employees in both the bakery and Silicon Mine, on screen he modified several of the titles and organised names but this time the pilots were given a single Commander who in turn reported to the Station Commander and beside this title he placed Broden's name.

Sweety interrupted his thoughts, "Sorry to bother you Tor, but we need to talk. I will be with you in fifty Mizura."

Tor considered this and as he was about to respond he realized the comm channel was already closed. The only ship capable of crossing the distance in that time would be a Pegasus, but the news that Sweety was on her way over was considerably more disturbing. For a moment he wondered if there had been trouble on the bakery and for some reason the computers were being examined. As he considered this he almost felt that it was highly likely Sweety had tried to get access to somewhere she was not allowed and had been traced back.

He felt it would be just his luck for Sweety to have been discovered and was now on the run and heading straight to him. Sitting patiently Tor waited in anticipation for the comm channel to open and Caran to appear looking very annoyed, but nothing happened.

Tor asked quietly, "Sweety, are you still with me?"

Sweetys' voice replied, "Currently I am in transit and should only be contacted if it is a real emergency."

Tor hesitated for a moment and commented, "Computer, who's monitoring the Cahoon Bakery at the moment?"

"Station Manager Korecmancketras," Sweetys' voice reported.

For a moment Tor sat in thought, he had heard the name before but just could not place it. The name was very Paranid. Tor asked the question out loud, "Do I know him?"

Sweetys' voice answered, "He was recommended and approved by the War Master Guild."

Tor commented, "Serand."

Sweetys' voice commented, "Request not recognized."

Tor responded, "Sorry, just me talking aloud," He now felt perplexed and confused, but would wait until Sweety arrived. Time dragged and Tor had wandered the same corridors nearly five times over and with three Garrow Root Chas' inside him, he was receiving a few curious looks from the pilots and the Command Centre team.

Liann commented casually, "I have two Pegasus fighters requesting docking permission."

Tor immediately said, "Permission granted!"

Liann looked up quickly, "But we haven't verified their security codes."

Tor looked across and commented, "It's okay I've been expecting them."

The coordinators looked at each other and Liann commented quickly, "Yes Sir," She changed the comm channel and said, "Pegasus ships are cleared to dock."

With a sense of anticipation Tor waited on the dockside. He noted the new static defense turrets positioned in the side walls of the docking bay. Not the smaller defensive units that covered the corridors but much heavier systems designed to destroy unwelcome ships.

The two Pegasus ships followed each other, under station docking control, and came to rest when the docking clamps engaged. The outer airlock door opened on each and for a brief moment he almost expected to see Nyeshta step out. Instead Sholetinmanckesala and an Argon pilot Tor recognised as Myles Borroton walked towards him. Myles gave Tor a brief nod of acknowledgement and continued to the bar. Sholetinmanckesala stopped in front of Tor, "This is for you," And held out a new technical datapad.

Tor took it, "Thanks," He looked at it closely, this one was a newer model to the one he still had, only it had been given every extra upgrade option that credits could buy,.

Sweety commented quietly, "Hello Tor. Can you find somewhere private that we can talk? I would like to get this over with so you can let me return to the Bakery."

Tor smiled as he turned and headed back to his office, "Want to leave so soon, but you've only just arrived? Anyway I almost came to the conclusion that you're on the run from someone."

Sweety replied ominously, "When you know what I know, I think you will want to leave too."

A short while later Tor entered his office and as instructed linked the new technical pad to the desktop holo-projector. He felt the sound dampening field cut in and Sweety carried out a fine sensor sweep of the office for any listening devices.

Tor asked, "So what's this about?"

Sweety replied, "There are a few details that I need from the other archives but in essence this place is not where we think it is."

Looking perplexed Tor asked slowly, "What do you mean?"

Sweety appeared to be flicking through projections, and commented, "The gate from this sector to X-two is not meant to be active. However something is forcing the exit gate from X-two to be open. The same is true for the gate into X-five."

Tor commented worriedly, "So if whatever is holding the gate open suddenly stops, then we're going to get stuck in here. But I thought only the ancients have the ability to control the gates?"

The door slid open and the maintenance robot floated in carrying the alien data recorder with linked power unit. Placing the unit carefully on the table it left. Tor retrieved the case with the crystals in as Sweety replied, "It would appear that a less desirable species has discovered the secret."

As Tor returned to the desk the holo-image began to move in real time. Tor looked into the face of the alien its skin covered in a silvery fur, the eyes almost feline but brown with a sapphire blue iris. The lips moved and a strong range of flowing growls entered the room, before Sweety could sync the translation.

The alien commented, "I am ThaThwyn of the Mohrabas, and if my fears are correct then I am the last of my kind. That you can see this will mean you are either survivors of my kind or you are not the Khlarakin. Questions you will have and some answers I shall give," ThaThwyn paused for a moment, "This hidden refuge was meant to be the last safe haven of our kind, should the Khlarakin find a new way to reach us, but my people never made it. The Starclass were destroyed before they escaped the city," ThaThwyn took

a moment to contemplate and then started again, "Who am I? I am the Star Keeper, Monitor for this refuge. I was to welcome the new people and bring power to the station upon their arrival," ThaThwyn blinked, "It is best that I enlighten you as to the nature of the Khlarakin, for if they are still around you will need to know. There are records in the other crystals which record our first encounter. That we shared this loop with two other species is of little consequence for their fate has been the same as ours. We knew the gate makers and in time when the universe had other advanced species then they would join us. So it was with some joy when the new gates appeared, and we went to see who had come. To our surprise we found nothing except primitive new worlds to settle."

ThaThwyn paused as Tor watched with a sinking feeling as to what was about to come next. The alien image continued, "Then we had the signs that all was not well. First each sectors communications would be cut from all the other sectors, only briefly and with no obvious interference to our communications units. Then the new gates vanished, as though they had been turned off. We spoke with an ancient to know the meaning of this and he told us of the Khlarakin. A war like race that had mastered how to retarget the destination of gates with devices of their own, and prevent others from reaching their own core systems. Whilst they offered empty systems in which to ensnare the others. Yet he could not understand how they were here as his kind had closed them into a loop of their own."

Tor sat solemnly watching as ThaThwyn continued, "But they have broken out of their loop. Now we know why the communications faltered as the gates in each sector was momentarily redirected by the Khlarakin in preparation for invasion. My people took apart the gates that connected us to the other sectors, but we could not dismantle the gate that we could not see and that they knew was there." The alien appeared to sigh and then the image switched off.

Tor requested calmly, "Sweety, get me Caran on a secure comm channel."

Sweety replied, "I think that would be unwise. The only reason I had myself detached from the Bakery computers was because of potential communications interruption and the possibility that the Khaak may be listening in."

Tor paused a moment, "There must be a way to get a message across?"

Sweety suggested, "The only other way is to pre-record and send it condensed and fully encrypted."

Tor immediately responded, "Let's set it up then."

There was a momentary hesitation before Sweety reminded Tor, "Do you think Mr. Belign will be pleased to know you had the crystals and never mentioned them to him?"

Tors' mouth opened to say something but he faltered, having not considered how Caran would react to the news. Eventually he said quietly, "That was before you told me what the crystals contained. Anyway do you think he would have told us what was on them when he found out?"

Sweety quietly commented, "With Caran it would be difficult to judge. He has enough respect for you that he might give a warning to prepare yourself."

Tor felt perplexed, "And what about the rest?"

Sweety replied, "The Argon Navy will be put on alert and any other friendly station owners notified."

Tor sighed, "Small comfort."

Sweety made a suggestion as she considered a condensed encrypted prerecorded message was about the securest method for transmitting the message, and even if the Khaak did break the coding and respond, it would take them several Tazura, "If you mention that this information was contained on the Sentinel databanks this may help avoid mentioning the crystals, and as Caran already knows about the robot it will be more palatable."

With a brief nod Tor agreed, "Okay let's do the recording."

Sweety had Tor sit at his desk and place the datapad on the surface standing up. A few Mizura later and the message with data had been compiled and transmitted.

Caran Belign was seated at his desk on Argon Prime reading a report from the Cloudbase South West sector. regarding a brief increase in pirate activity in Ore Belt. His attention drawn to the mention of the resurgence of the Yaki, however the details in the report were inconclusive.

He tapped his fingers on the desk when the computer reported, "I have received a top priority encrypted message from Tor Grall in sector X-four."

Caran put down the report pad and looked curious, "Play the message."

The holo-projector ionized the air and an image formed. Tors' introduction was brief and immediately cut into the message from ThaThwyn. He watched and remained silent for a moment after it had finished. Eventually he said, "Computer, open a comm to Mr. Grall on the Silicon Mine in sector X-four."

Tor answered almost immediately, "Yes Caran?"

Caran studied Tors worried face for a moment, "Thanks for your message. A very interesting discovery and I would encourage you to take whatever precautions you feel are necessary. I will consult with higher authorities and let you know the outcome."

Tor nodded and just as he started to give an acknowledgement the comm went blank. Caran spoke slowly and quietly, "Computer what just happened."

The computer responded, "We have lost all communications beyond Black Hole Sun."

Caran ordered, "Call the President and Chiefs of staff."

Tor had sat quietly for a moment before daring to ask, "What happened?"

Sweety replied calmly, "We have lost communications with all sectors from X-one."

Tor maintained the calm tone to hide his rising panic, "Place the station on general alert. All fighters are to launch immediately and divide them into two groups to protect the two gates."

Sweety commented, "What about Creeds gate?"

"Ancients preserve us if they come in that way," Tor muttered aloud and then added, "Tell me you've been smuggling in lasertowers?"

Sweety confirmed, "There are twelve in the maintenance docks awaiting deployment."

Tor thought for a moment, "Okay deploy four per gate. Call up the Crystal Fab and tell them to prepare to leave the station in automatic, security personnel only. All command and technical staff are to join us here."

Sweety questioned Tors' impulsive request, "Do you think you should tell your staff first?"

He frowned and gave a brief sigh, "Call them together in the Security Dock. I'll go give them the news."

Sweety added softly, "And don't forget to take me along."

Tor gave the faintest of smiles and picked up the technical datapad from the desk as he headed towards the door. It felt like a long walk down to the dock and as he approached he saw many curious faces. Broden met him before he stepped out into the open.

Broden spoke quietly, "I've heard we lost communications with Getsu Fune."

Tor replied, "And every other sector, except the new ones. We'll need to talk after this briefing." He hurried forward, "Sweety can you make sure this announcement goes station wide and to all pilots not on station." He was not certain how exactly he was going to present the news, so started loudly, "Welcome everyone, glad you could attend at short notice," He paused and ploughed straight into the current situation, "Some of you will have noticed, if not heard, that we have lost communications with the controlled sectors outside X-one. Certain information has come to light that we are about to come under attack by the race we have come to know as the Khaak."

There was complete silence on the dockside, no rustle of uniform or shuffling of feet.

Tor decided to give them all the bad news at once, "It also appears that the Khaak have managed to discover how to alter the destination of gates. In short we are in a trap! The destination of the gate out of X-one may not take you back to Getsu Fune. So far there are no reports of any invasion fleet so we need to fortify our position. There are twelve lasertowers ready for deployment in the maintenance dock. I want four at each of the two gates and the last four to be held in reserve."

This time there was some murmuring. Sweety signaled to Tor, and he glanced down at the screen, sectors X-eighteen and X-twenty were no longer accessible.

Tor announced loudly, "We have just lost contact with two more sectors. So all pilots to launch and get those LT's deployed."

This announcement appeared to conclude the meeting and already the pilots were making a run towards the fighters, several of the Paranid crews stepped forward and Broden was already standing to one side.

Tor remembered Tolotomancke as the pilot of the Perseus that returned him to the Bakery from Argon Prime Trading Station. The Paranid spoke up, "We will inform our people of this news."

This was a statement rather than a request and Tor acknowledged with a nod, "I'm sure we'll need their help when the time comes."

The Paranids turned and quickly followed the other pilots. Ships were beginning to launch, the LT's now residing in the holds of the Pegasus ships for rapid deployment.

Broden spoke up and asked, "So what now?"

Turning to face the former Captain and yet to be named Station Commander, he said thoughtfully, "I'd thought of getting everyone from the Crystal Fab here first and then I'd be looking to you for suggestions."

Broden nodded, "Good start, strength in numbers and the LT's will help. Ideally we should encourage all station owners to place the stations into automatic and try gathering in this location. But I'm guessing the Khaak can monitor our sectors and they'll notice any migration."

Tor felt concerned, before now his primary concern was for the people in his direct employ, but Broden's suggestion to involve the other station owners made him realize just how many people might be out in the other sectors.

Sweety interrupted them, "The Crystal Fab is now aware of the danger. It will take them approximately half a Stazura to place the station into standby and evacuate all personnel."

Broden looked at Tor and commented, "Now all we have to do is find a way out of here."

Tor paused for a moment on the verge of indecision as to how much he really wanted to reveal, "There is another gate out of here, but timing is everything."

Broden looked at him with a degree of caution, "You mean Creeds Gate?"

Tor was momentarily surprised and then mentally kicked himself, realizing that Moda would have spoken about the gate when questioned about the origin of the Sentinel, "Yes! The advantage there is we only have to protect one gate, and then learn how to put the others back together again."

Broden asked, "And when's the next gate window?"

Sweety answered, "Four Stazura."

The former captain looked grim, "Let's hope we can survive that long."

Tor could only agree and commented, "You have the most experience with military command, I can't order you to do anything, but I'm asking if you can take command of tactical. It was mentioned sometime ago that this station is equipped with gravitational stabilizing thrusters and that we could use those to move the station into the Nebula."

Broden took a moment to think, "That's true but it'll take Stazura to move any significance distance."

Sweety announced that X-one and X-two had now lost communications.

Tor glanced around. His only other concern was the state of the station as the visitors dock had barely begun to be repaired. He asked Sweety, "How are the repairs coming along?"

Sweety responded, "I have moved forward the repairs to the main docking bay. Main security systems are in place."

Tor looked at Broden, "I'm going to take the Defiance out and maybe go over to the Crystal Fab if the situation allows."

Broden gave a slight nod and a small sigh, "Can't say I blame you, I'd much rather be out there ready to face whatever enemy presents itself than sit in here waiting." With that the former Captain turned and headed towards the Command Centre.

Tor took a moment and then went to pack a few personal items.

The AIC Roamer was half way across the sector X-two having made a jump to investigate the sudden loss of communications with Getsu Fune. The initial probe simply vanished after crossing the activation zone and jumped out of the sector. They had waited patiently for the probes return when X-two became isolated.

"Someone give me an update," Parrel ordered.

The communications officer glanced up, he was Cherath Nuaro, one of the newest bridge officers in his late twenties, "Gates are still active but we have no communications and no navigational data outside of this sector."

Parrel considered this, "So we can't jump?"

Cherath confirmed his fears when he responded, "No sir."

Parrel called out to his first officer, "We have two choices, Getsu Fune gate or X-four. And where's that damn probe?"

First officer, Sheero Bhard replied, "It should have returned two Mizura ago."

Parrel shifted uneasily, "Send a double ended probe through the X-four gate, rear section for immediate return on completion of jump."

Sheero tapped in the request on the control panel and announced, "Probe launched."

Parrel then commented, "Launch all fighters."

Sheero asked, "And the Corvette?"

Parrel paused for a moment, "Not yet."

The instructions were issued and Parrel sat watching the viewer with a growing sense of nervousness, "Status on the probe?"

Cherath replied, "Probe will reach gate in fifteen Sezura."

A moments silence as the fighters now began to circle around the Mammoth, the probe crossed the activation point a moment passed and then the gate reactivated. Parrel looked across expectantly at the communications officer.

"X-four sector confirmed, brief scan of the gate area indicates the deployment of lasertowers," The communications officer confirmed.

Parrel commented aloud, "It looks like someone knows something we don't. Head for the X-four gate maximum speed."

The AIC Roamer began to make its turn when both the X-four gate and the previous Getsu Fune gate began to activate.

Cherath called out, "We have incoming fighters entering the sector, designation unknown. I'm counting three waves of ten fighters at each gate. More are coming through."

Parrel commanded, "Get us into sector X-four. All fighters are to protect this ship."

The Roamer still continued to turn, as communications traffic jammed all frequencies. Stations were beginning to launch fighters following the Roamers example. The first wave of small attacking craft began to bombard the nearest station, a Cattle Ranch, whilst others swarmed in behind.

Sheero called out, "Sir, they have beam weapon technology."

The stations limited supply of fighters engaged the attacking craft, which now numbered sixty, whilst the station shields buckled under the heavy and relentless bombardment. The Khaak fighters at the X-four gate also engaged the nearest station to them, this time a Wheat Farm, and more poured through the gate in a relentless stream.

The stations defensive fighters were quickly swept aside having barely made an impact on the smaller ships. The Cattle Ranch shields failed, its protective domes shattered and explosions rippled through the superstructure whilst the attackers pressed on to the next target. The Roamer now moving at full speed towards the X-four gate met the Khaak fighters head on, scattering them. Its shield robbed little by little as the beam weapons cut into them.

"Target dragonfly missiles and fire at anything that's hostile!" Parrel shouted and prayed quietly that nothing bigger than the small fighters was going to emerge through the gate.

The fighters behind led by Polmanckelest in a heavily modified Prometheus, followed and immediately engaged the attacking ships. Three of the AIC fighters had been equipped with the Enhanced Silhouette System and as the Khaak ships turned to engage these were activated.

The ESS fighters supported the rest of the group when the Khaak ships chose for the moment to ignore them in favour of less confusing targets. The HUD filled with thirty then forty fighters attacking in what appeared to be an expanding and contracting cloud of weapons fire. Two of the AIC Eel fighters disintegrated under the continual bombardment. The Roamer ploughed on its shields weakening with every passing Sezura.

The second Cattle Ranch and the Wheat Farm now vented atmosphere and flames into space, the vestiges of fighters and transports fleeing after the Roamer. Giving up all pretence to defend their respective stations, having witnessed the unfolding events and the ever increasing number of hostile fighters, each of the stations was being abandoned. The trading station appeared to be a muster point for some. Communications channels were now jammed by pleas for assistance.

Commander Parrel had been stalwartly unmoved by the calls, as far as he was concerned it was every man for himself. The Roamer was now five k's from the gate and closing, shields had dropped to sixty percent. Even so fires and minor breaches were being reported through the ship. With two k's to the gate the flow of incoming fighters ceased.

Stanad Block flew one of the latest Argon Nova on loan to the AIC, the rear turret weapon was close to overheating and the front HEPT cannons scythed through the shields of the smaller Khaak ships, but he was in trouble. Standard and even a few non standard evasive manoeuvres had his shields hovering below thirty percent, but everywhere he turned he found another Khaak ship coming at him.

Pulling hard round he fired another double burst, the alien ship exploded as Polmanckelest Prometheus shot past destroying two more Khaak ships. Stanad reflected that they were in a shooting gallery, only this time they were the targets.

As the Khaak continued to sweep the sector the first of three Solar Power Plants exploded sending a shockwave out through space. A number of Khaak ships were destroyed in the explosion but the effect on the ships attacking the Roamer, and its diminishing number of escort fighters, was marginal.

Commander Parrel ordered the Roamer to halt on the verge of the activation zone of the X-four gate. It was a deliberate blocking tactic against incoming ships. The mishmash of fleeing transports with light fighters was making a desperate run to the gate. The lighter faster fighters now lending some support to the Roamer's own compliment. However the Khaak would not let them leave so easily and already the bulk of their ships were heading towards them on intercept vectors.

Parrel would hang on as long as he dared, at the moment he still had all shield units but how long they would last concerned him.

First Officer Sheero called out, "Sir, we have no missiles remaining. Shall I launch the drones?"

Parrel looked around quickly, "How many do we have?"

Sheero replied, "Fifty Sir."

For a moment Parrel considered his options, "Release half."

The screen filled with pulse weapons fire from the newly released drones. The Khaak fighters, suddenly faced with a new problem, were momentarily distracted by the sudden increase in enemy units. The change in Khaak fighter behaviour in response to the drones turned what had looked to be an inevitable victory to the Khaak, to a near rout by the AIC fighters.

Then the tide turned back in favour of the Khaak as the enemy reinforcements from the Getsu Fune gate began to arrive in numbers. Ahead of them were the fleeing sector ships, some of the escort fighters

turning back to engage in a bitter battle. Even so most of the Khaak ships ignored them, intent on removing the Roamer and freeing the gate to incoming ships.

The first Khaak capital ship entered the sector via the Getsu Fune gate.

Chapter 17. Sweetys' Secret

The twenty remaining high speed drones attacked the Khaak ships. One allocated per ship to act as a distraction whilst the AIC and a few of the sector fighters, that had managed to reach them, engaged. Each one had been given a different target and successfully broke the first wave of Khaak ships. They took several losses but bought valuable Sezura for the escaping transports. The fastest of these were now skimming past the AIC Roamer in a bid to reach the activation zone.

Damaged fighters also made a break to the gate whilst they still had some power but the new waves of Khaak ships destroyed the last of the Drones and pressed in on the Mammoth. AIC fighters joined the melee of ships now pushing for a position to exit the sector when the Roamers engines flared and pushed it past the activation point.

Stanad crossed the threshold just as the first Khaak capital ship nosed its way through the gate. Polmanckelest turned his Prometheus and destroyed another of the Khaak fighters. He knew the two other ESS ships were still in the sector but the HUD was now filled with hostile ships and they were beginning to inflict damage to his shields. He swerved to avoid the incoming Khaak capital ship and gave the signal for any remaining fighters to withdraw.

The second and third Solar Power Plants flared brightly and the few sector ships still attempting to flee were aiming for deep space. Disengaging the control thrusters they resorted to free flight and charged the engines for maximum boost regardless of the dangers whilst the Khaak ships closed in.

In sector X-four the communications channels were marked by their comparative quietness. Tors' fighters had repositioned themselves to the top and left of the receiving gate. The lasertowers were fully charged and ready to fire. The arrival of freighters and the desperate requests for them not to fire as they emerged was met with short commands for them to get away from the gate. The rush of transports and fighters was all too brief.

The Roamer came through and with engine boost surged forward, its side showing some minor damage and once clear of the lasertowers it stopped. The massive cargo door opened and the Corvette launched. At the gate the last few fighters emerged, some jettisoned atmosphere immediately whilst others limped toward the AIC Mammoth.

Parrel breathed a sigh of relief, "Sheero, get the repair and recovery tugs out to bring the damaged fighters on board. Also find out who's in charge of these defences."

Sheero replied, "Yes Sir."

Parrel then looked over to Cherath, "Have all fighters report in, then let me know how many we've lost."

Cherath called back "Yes Sir."

Sheero reported on his findings, "Sir, the sector defence units are owned by a Tor Grall and it looks as if the Paranid Solar Power Plant is supplying a number of its forces."

Parrel tapped on the arm of his chair as he recalled the name Tor, "Get me Tor Grall on the comm."

Tor had turned the Defiance towards the X-two gate as soon as the refugees started to arrive. The open communications channels out of X-four to the remaining sectors were buzzing with news of the invasion. Tor had no idea how the station owners would react. He could imagine that many would be waiting for the Argon Navy to suddenly jump in. Somehow he doubted that was going to happen as they would already have appeared if they were ever likely too.

Sweetys' technical datapad was hooked into the cockpit computer and was still decrypting the alien crystals that he had surreptitiously brought on board. Sweety announced, "Captain Parrel of the AIC Roamer is trying to contact you."

Tor turned and made a quick pass over the Corvette, "Put him through."

Parrel appeared on the holo-viewer, "Mr. Grall, I'll cut to the chase we need to jointly co-ordinate our forces. The enemy has significant numbers and I have tactical data on their attack which will hopefully be useful."

Tor looked across, "I'll put you in touch with Station Commander Broden Falstarn on the Silicon Mine. He's in charge of tactical."

Captain Parrel raised a quizzical eyebrow, and commented, "Very well."

Tor flew past the tugs as they latched onto the fighters, "Sweety, open a comm channel to Broden."

Sweety confirmed, "Channel open," And the image of Broden appeared beside Parrel.

Broden asked, "Yes Sir?"

Tor answered, "Captain Parrel of the Roamer has data on the enemy and would like to co-ordinate fighter command with you." He turned the Defiance back towards the X-five gate.

Broden linked up with the Roamer directly, "Captain, what do you have for me?"

Tor dropped out of the conversation. His concern was for the safety of the Crystal Fab fighters and crew, "Sweety have they left the Crystal Fab yet?"

Sweety replied, "I have three transports incoming with station supplies and half the crew. Fighters have been ordered by the Trading Station commander to defend the sector."

Tor looked perplexed, "Can they do that?"

Sweety confirmed the order was legitimate, "Under Argon Sector Law the sector commander may second any privately owned fighters in situations of serious sector wide threat by hostile forces."

Tor commented, "Shit!" He took a moment to ponder the situation further as the gate into sector X-five drew nearer, eventually he commented, "I need my people here. Anyway in the current circumstances what's the worst they can do?"

Sweety observed, "I have noticed a trend amongst many of the races that under similar situations, rather than consolidating effort and combining forces in one sector to preserve the species. That people will defend their own assets first rather than look at the whole picture. This single minded attitude has so often resulted in complete annihilation."

Tor paused for a moment, "That's a cheery thought, and do you think I'm being singularly bloody minded?"

Sweety replied, "In many respects yes but tactically no, X-seven has five gates to defend which will stretch available defences too thin. I have obtained a copy of the AIC data regarding the Khaak attack and will assemble a simulation to present to the sector commander and see if he will agree to abandon the sector."

Tor added, "Better make that simulation up pretty quick as we might need to persuade the commander of X-five that we are just passing through."

Sweety replied, "I am working on it now. We have just lost communications with all X sectors over seventeen."

Tor asked, "Which means?"

Sweety commented, "No way forward and no way back, my current strategic analysis indicates that sectors three to six will be the next targets."

This news alarmed Tor and he requested, "Give me a galactic map and show me sectors under attack."

The galactic map flashed up with all the sectors shown. Those in flashing red indicated the sectors no longer with communications. Tor breathed out sharply, "It's like a noose being pulled tighter."

Sweety replied, "Outer sectors first and then they appear to be closing in on the harder to defend inner sectors."

Caran Belign made his way to the Security Council chambers on the Argon Prime Trading Station. Events and reports appeared to be confused, but now he was certain that trouble was at hand. All the new sectors were gone and the gate to X-one and X-two had been rerouted, or more accurately restored to their proper destinations. Probes had been launched through the gates and in X-one the remains of the Split battle fleet had been found but once again there was no indication of Khaak presence.

The communications blackout beyond Black Hole Sun still remained a mystery, now that it had been restored. Technicians were trying to find an explanation in the relay circuits, and had produced a varied list of excuses, from excessive solar activity to Xenon testing out new jamming technology. The latter seemed to have some credence given the recent events in the Xenon sector adjacent to Scale Plate Green however there was too much of a coincidence, in Carans' mind, with the sudden loss of the new sectors.

The event also seemed to allow a new level of discord between the races to flare up. Representatives from all the species were demanding to know answers but appeared to be unaware as to who might have some. Accusations were beginning to fly in terms of the blackout and several wild theories had sprung up that the Argon had gleaned some knowledge and that the missing sectors were part of a gate shift created by the Ancients. Not that the Split, Paranid or Teladi appeared to be pleased with this answer accusing the Argon of knowing the shift would take place and that they would gain access to new territories as a result.

Caran approached the doors and he could already hear voices rising up in argumentative tones. How much he was expected to reveal had not been decided, but then again he had not divulged all relevant information.

The only saving grace was this was an internal discussion between Argon politicians, and for the moment did not include members of the other races. He boldly pushed open the door and walked in as the shadow minister of Agriculture, for off world stations, ploughed on with his speech. Several heads turned and watched Caran as he proceeded along the rows of seats and settled himself next to Goran Thaamos, chief minister for Security. Goran only gave a cursory glance and the slightest of acknowledging nods before his attention resumed on the Minister still addressing the assembly.

The minister intoned, "Madam President you must see what the economic impact will be to all the agricultural facilities bordering the other races, if we can give no assurances to the latest amendments of the trading guilds charter, as recommended by the Teladi in response to recent events in the outer sectors. I would ask Madam President to confirm that the allegations being brought against us, are unjust and that she will personally deal with this issue and restore fair trading rights to all the Argon station owners." The minister sat down amidst a barrage of noise as other ministers clamoured to have their say.

Goran muttered from the corner of his mouth, "That's your cue."

Carolile shuffled in her seat and began to rise, when Caran Belign stood up and called out over the noise, "Madam President, Chairman if it would please the assembly I have new information concerning events in the former X-sectors." Silence descended as every head turned in unison.

The President looked momentarily surprised but quickly regained her seat. The Chairman glanced across to Carolile who responded with a single nod. Caran could feel the penetrating gaze of Under Secretary Gallona and he looked directly back at her. The Chairman announced, "The chair recognizes Mr. Belign and gives him leave to address the assembly."

Caran began, "Madam President, Ministers and all other party members. May I first say that we appear to live in, reactionary times. They say that news travels fast but rumour travels faster. I doubt that the Teladi have had time to make any amendments to any of the trading agreements, but that is not to say that they won't," His words fell heavily on the shadow minister, and murmurs started to spread through the assembly. But they fell silent again, every ear in the chamber straining for news, as Caran started again, "Madam President, Ministers, the Khaak are not our ally. Information has reached me, unfortunately too late, that they have only one desire and that is conquest. The complete annihilation of any race that may one day threaten their desire to dominate, and we are the next victims." The temporary silence that followed these words as they diminished felt oppressive, no one moved or spoke.

Carolile broke the silence, "And how do you know this?"

Caran looked directly at the President and replied, "The last transmission I received from the new sectors was from an agent that had discovered the remains of a now extinct race. He discovered a data archive which we have only just translated. The last recorded item indicates how that race was defeated by the Khaak. The method is a simple divide and conquer strategy, and they have the technology to control the jumpgates. In essence, we now believe that the introduction of the new sectors was a means to determine our technology, our strengths and our weaknesses."

A slow murmuring spread through the assembly. One minister asked, "And what about the colonists?"

Caran calmly and clearly spoke his mind, "They will be annihilated. Based on the previous encounter by the Split expeditionary force, we estimate that the Khaak will overwhelm the colonists within four Argon days, including the planet side settlements."

A question came in from the left, "What about the fleet? Can't we jump in and pull our people out?"

Caran replied immediately, "Negative, we have no communication and no navigational data to link us to the affected sectors."

Another question came across the room, "I thought we've been having some success with a gateless jumpdrive. Couldn't we use that?"

Caran made a sweeping gesture towards the broad window and commented, "If you can tell me which star to aim at?" He turned his attention back to the President giving his answer only a brief moment to sink in, "Madam President, I feel the need to express my deepest sympathy to the families and close friends of those that know people now lost in the Khaak sectors, however I do have a small hope that just a few will find a way to return home."

With this Caran sat down. Goran looked across and commented quietly, "Annihilated? I'm glad to see you put a nice upbeat slant on the current crisis."

Tor had ignored all hails from the trading station commander in sector X-five. The last communication ordered him to stand down and prepare to be boarded however, at the risk of losing fighters in order to gain one, the demand was not enforced.

The X-seven trading station called him, "Station to pilot, you are hereby ordered to assist with the defence of the sector under sector emergency law. You have the choice not to fight but should you choose this

course of action then you must dock immediately with the Trading Station and surrender your ship, so that it may be used in the defence of the sector. Do you understand?"

Tor had heard the request three times previously but this time answered, "This is Tor Grall captain of the Defiance, I need to speak with the station commander immediately."

There was a brief chat and then the station commander appeared, "Yes Mr. Grall, I take it you understand the orders imposed on you?"

Tor started without any commitment to diplomacy, "You can take your orders and shove them. I'm here to escort my pilots and fighters to sector X-four. Now let me explain why," He paused for a moment, "Sweety upload the tactical simulation," He returned his attention to the commander before waiting for a positive confirmation, "The simulation comes from data gathered from the AIC Roamer which managed to escape from X-two. The enemy, as you will observe, have some derivation of the jump drive and attack from all gates simultaneously. It took only a few Mizuras to overrun sector X-two which only had two gates. The enemy will attack in waves, and with five gates to defend if you lose control of one of the gates, then they will wipe you out."

The commander watched the simulation and began to turn pale, "And what makes you think your sector could survive any better than this one?"

Tor replied, "We have two gates to defend and lasertowers to help protect them," He paused for a moment and then played his trump card, "We may also have a way out."

Sweety commented, "Tor, I have made a new analysis of the attack pattern."

The commander looked at Tor and he glanced over to the technical pad, "Having attacked all peripheral sectors with an initial surprise attack to cut off any retreat. I would anticipate that the Khaak will be relying on us to heavily defend the adjoining gateways. This would mean the next weakest sectors will be the core gateway sectors including this one. It is a diversionary tactic, and if these sectors are taken then the remaining ones will be separated."

Tor looked at the holo-image, "You need to make a decision commander, either way my fighters will be leaving with me."

The comm channel closed and Tor requested, "Get me Captain Coursade."

Sweety opened the channel and the Captains holo-projection appeared, "Yes Sir?"

Tor spoke quickly and with a sense of determination, "Captain, I need you to get all the fighters and defend the gate to Sector X-five. We are anticipating the Khaak will launch an attack on this sector. I need you to protect this gate. Should the sector fall then this is the only escape route."

Mileton answered looking slightly perplexed, "Sir we have our orders from the sector commander."

Tor commented, "And I'm giving you new orders. Officially you're all in my employ. This sector is one of the next ones to be attacked and it will come from everywhere, all at once. If you're in the wrong place when it happens then you're going to die. Can I put it any simpler than that?"

Sweety announced quietly, "Sector communications have just gone out."

Tor looked directly at Mileton and commented with a hint of desperation, "It's started. Get everyone to the gate and do it now!"

Mileton asked calmly, "And orders?"

Tor replied, "Fuck orders! Just do it and hold the gate until we've got everyone. If anyone questions it, then you can blame me."

The comm closed and Sweety said, "We should really brush up your diplomacy skills."

Tor did not smile, "Any tricks you have up your sleeve, then I'd be really glad you put them in place before it's too late."

Sweety replied, "That is a good suggestion. Ghojo program initiated, first stage initialized and modifying transporter."

The Defiance turned and headed towards the X-five gate and Tor said his thoughts out loud, "I don't know about you Sweety, but the Khaak seem to be capturing the sectors far too quickly. I can only assume their fleet must be massive."

Several Mizura passed and Tor was only five k's from the gate when Sweety commented, "Second stage of Ghojo program initiating, turret weapons and third shield temporarily off-line."

A group of fighters clustered around the gate, Tor checked the sector map and saw the majority were his, only three M-three Elites were missing and these now appeared to be on an intercept vector. As he watched transports from all the stations were beginning to launch.

Sweety commented, "Khaak fighters have arrived."

Tor glanced forwards and sure enough the gate was energized and the first wave of ten fighters streamed forward. He gritted his teeth as sector defenders converged on the enemy ships.

The second wave entered the sector. Tor banked the Defiance hard round and selected the first target. Plasma from all the various weapon systems filled the space around the gate, but it lacked co-ordination and the Khaak were still arriving. To be met by an ever decreasing number of fighters not already engaged in the fight.

The Beta HEPT's pulsed and Tors' first kill erupted into flames. Twisting through the melee of Khaak beam weapons and allied plasma fire, he picked out his next target. The Defiance shuddered as two Khaak ships temporarily locked on with beam weapons.

Sweety commented, "Shields at eighty percent."

Tor turned the ship sharply left and fired on the next Khaak ship in his sight as it chased down an older Buster. Shards of the alien ship burnt up on the Defiance shields, and he picked up on the next fighter. He shouted out, "How are we doing Sweety?"

Sweety replied, "Just about holding this gate. The gate into X-twelve is beginning to take serious losses."

The Defiance shuddered again as Tor made a head on pass with the next Khaak ship and they exchanged passing shots. He pressed on and intercepted the next incoming wave taking out three before they had a chance to gain speed.

Sweety announced, "Shields at seventy percent."

The Defiance banked hard around and he came to face to face with six Khaak ships and they opened up as he strafed and rolled between them taking out another two with an indiscriminate stream of plasma from the HEPTs'.

Sweety called out, "Shields at thirty percent."

Tor commented through clenched teeth, "Give me some good news."

Sweety replied, "Only fifteen Sezura until the completion of the Ghojo program."

Tor blasted another Khaak fighter as a Boron Eel flashed past and destroyed one. A two Discoverer team shot past in the other direction and a Khaak ship exploded just off the right side of the Defiance. In the corner of his eye one of the sector Busters exploded. Three of his Boron Piranhas engaged the next wave as Tor flipped around and fired.

Tor called out, "How are we doing Sweety?"

Sweety replied, "You have five incoming fighters in diamond formation on your rear left."

The Defiance shuddered and Sweety called out, "Shields critical," Quickly followed by, "Ghojo program completed," The Defiance shuddered again with heavy impacts but Sweety reported, "Shields now at fifty percent and recovering, particle beam weapon available."

Tor said one word, "Fire."

Three of the pursuing Khaak fighters exploded in quick succession as a single particle beam lanced off the modified shield. The last two broke formation and swept around to attack the Defiance from an alternative vector. The shield gave a brief localized glow and once again the particle beam struck out. Sweety located and fired only short duration shots to preserve the enhanced capability of the shield unit and allow it ample time to recover. The omni-directional beam lanced out at any Khaak ship in range to level the odds.

Tor turned the Defiance sharply and cut through the next wave of Khaak fighters, with plasma and particle weapons scything through them. Turning hard again, he came back and finished the rest of the new arrivals. He adopted a new strategy and kept making sharp turns in front of the gate in an attempt to single handedly stem the flow of Khaak fighters.

As the odds shifted back in favour of the defenders more fighters took up static firing positions and now each time the gate flashed with new arrivals they opened up with devastating effect. The gate suddenly went quiet after the third completely unsuccessful wave, and for the first time Tor noticed the comm was alive with calls for assistance and cheers from pilots as they made another kill.

Tor asked, "How are we doing?"

Sweety replied, "Badly, sector forces are heavily outnumbered and the odds are getting worse. I have six Khaak battlecruisers now in the sector. Other than this one the four remaining gates are now in Khaak control. Estimated arrival of last transports and fighters will be in five Mizuras. However there are three waves of Khaak fighters that will be here before then."

He could feel his blood fizz with adrenaline, but the sector was lost as the first station erupted into flames after a Khaak battleship passed. Transports began to arrive and make the jump. Damaged fighters also began to exit.

Tor commented, "Send out a message we need to hold the gate a while longer. Get me a couple of wingmen with fast ships. Let's see if we can't buy the last few ships some time." Sweety held back with any comments on the recklessness of this suggestion.

He engaged the engines and turned away from the gate as Sweety issued the instructions. A pair of Piranhas peeled away from the gathered defenders. Tor aimed towards the leading wave of fighters and hit the boost. The Defiance outpaced the Piranhas and with a full three sixty roll he passed the last of the incoming transports.

As he approached the Khaak ships Tor opened fire with a strafing sideways movement. Two Khaak ships were hit but not destroyed until the particle beam found them. Tor chased down the next target as Sweety picked out attacking craft. The Defiance juddered under Khaak fire but Tor managing to roll the ship away and using the superior speed of the Defiance broke free of the swarm of Khaak fighters. They appeared to be concentrating on eliminating what they now regarded as the most significant enemy. The Piranhas attacked the periphery of the cloud, and broke away before being subjected to any significant response.

The Plasma from the Beta HEPTs' passed through the pack but Tor could make little impression as each time he attempted to get close the beam weapons lashed out towards him. Sweety however did make a difference and on several occasions as Tor turned away the particle beam responded to the incoming fire and reduced two or three Khaak ships to vapour.

Sweety spoke up, "We have sixty more Khaak fighters and two capital ships now within three k's of our current position."

Tor ordered, "Get the Piranha out of here!" He did not check the HUD to see if they had received the instruction. He hung back for a moment longer to buy them some small amount of time then changed vector to one which would return him to the gate.

As he gained distance Tor glanced at the HUD. Only a few fighters remained including one last freighter. Ahead of him the gate flashed again and the few remaining fighters scattered as the nose of a Khaak destroyer emerged through the gate. Its turret beam weapons destroyed one Piranha and the Discoverer team.

The other fighters swung around the gate and abandoned the sector. Tor scanned the Lifter for cargo with the thought of recovering the pilot and was horrified to see he had nearly sixty passengers packed into the converted hold.

"Tor to Pilot head for the far side of the gate, I will try and draw the capital ship after me."

The pilot responded, "Acknowledged. Thanks and best of luck."

Tor aimed the Defiance at the face the newly emerged Destroyer. Getting ahead of the freighter he fired several shots from the HEPTs' and pulled away sharply to avoid the incoming beam weapons. The particle beam of the Defiance struck down onto the Destroyers shields which became a shimmering haze.

Tor asked quickly, "Any effect Sweety?"

Sweety answered, "Lots but the depletion of the shield means I can not sustain prolonged bursts like this."

The Defiance shuddered as it was struck and broke free from one of the Khaak turrets. Sweety commented, "Shields are at sixty percent. The Destroyer has significantly more powerful weapons than the fighters. However it cannot fire prolonged pulses, only two to three Sezura on a single discharge."

Tor commented as a bead of perspiration trickled down the side of his face, "Great and how long to recharge?"

Sweety replied, "Unable to calculate until the weapon fires again. Our shields however will only survive a seven Sezura blast. You need to allow the modified shield unit to recover in order to maintain the beam weapon and provide primary shielding."

Tor knew this was not good news, "Is the Destroyer following us?"

Sweety replied glumly, "No! It has just fired on the freighter. There are no survivors."

Tor was momentarily dumbstruck and then said quietly, "Time to leave."

Sweety commented, "Looks like we're the last ones left." Looking at the HUD as he brought the Defiance around to reach the rear of the gate he was the Trading Station and two Wheat Farms disappear, a cursory glance and he witnessed the trading station explode. The Wheat Farms were venting flames into the vacuum.

The Khaak destroyer maintained its position next to the gate as a swarm of fighters closed in ahead of the two pursuing capital ships.

Having checked his vector Tor had only one choice and that was to approach the gate almost at full speed to minimize his exposure time to hostile fire. As he approached at an acute angle, maintaining the lowest profile and smallest exposed hull area to the Khaak beam weapons, he caught sight of the gate anomaly that he had witness sometime before and had completely forgotten about. Tor called out, "Scan the boxes on the rear of the gate!"

Short duration beam weapon fire shot out towards him from the turret guns of the Khaak capital ship. Most cascading past but a couple made contact before Tor could abort the run and vector away from the gate. The growing feeling that he was now trapped with the enemy closing in grew inside Tor, "Sweety any really useful suggestions could be quite handy right now."

Sweety replied, "Running a simulation on the effect of a complete shield power dump into the particle beam. I may need to modify a second shield."

Tor made a pass and fired the Beta HEPTs' in a short strafing run against the capital ship, however it's shield status indicated it was nearly back to full strength. The Defiance banked away evading the return fire but the Khaak ship did not yield its position.

He asked quickly, "How will that help?"

Sweety responded, "A quick analysis indicates that a two modified shield dump though the particle beam will punch a hole through the Khaak shields. The power dump would last five Sezura and if the beam reaches a key part of the Khaak ship, such as the engine core then the ship will be effectively dead."

Tor glanced at the HUD noting the fighters were nearly upon him, "Sounds good, what's the catch?"

Sweety replied, "The drain on the two shields will be total and you will only have the unmodified shield as protection. If the attack fails then the remaining shield will last approximately one Sezura against the capital ships weapons systems."

For the moment Tor was too pumped on adrenaline to care and replied, "Sounds great, why not modify both shields and get ready to slap a Khaak cap ship sticker to the hull."

Sweety commented calmly, "Modification underway. Give me a Mizura to integrate."

Tor brought the Defiance in a loop over the swarm of Khaak fighters. In the distance a Solar Power Plant exploded and he leveled out the flight and commented quietly, "Bastards." As his Crystal Fab erupted into flames and he hoped above all hopes that no one had been left behind.

He cut back towards the swarm. Tightening the turn and Sweety picked off several ships before Tor cut into the pack and fired on anything that vaguely looked to be in the way. He spiraled out of the pack when Sweety announced, "Shields back on line. Give the primary shield a chance to recover before making the attack run."

Tor glanced at the HUD and noted that one of the pursuing Khaak capital ships now blocked the rear of the gate leaving the last to continue the pursuit. He asked, "Give me the best approach vector?"

Sweety took a moment, and replied, "Head on."

Tor responded, "Sure?"

The Defiance banked and swept around, gaining distance from the gate in preparation for the run up, Sweety commented, "Shields ready."

Tor asked, "What's the breaking point?"

Sweety replied, "There is no breaking point, all weapons locked into forward fire mode. This I am afraid to say Tor is an all or nothing situation and I am taking control so enjoy the ride."

Tor looked confused for a second as the Defiance leveled out on a direct head to head vector with the Khaak capital ship. As they hurtled towards it Tor began to feel nervous.

The whole of the Defiance began to glow as it approached firing range and already the Beta HEPT's were streaming plasma in controlled pulses towards the Khaak ship, the impacts shimmered on the shields as they crossed the firing point the Khaak destroyer responded, but with slight twists the Defiance weaved past. The particle beam slightly larger than Defiance size lanced forward with the Beta HEPTs' now firing a continual stream of plasma.

The forward shield collapsed in the first three Sezura and the front end of the Khaak ship peeled open, only a minor reduction in the power output prolonged the particle beam as the Defiance hurtled through the rapidly disintegrating core of the capital ship and blasted its way through the rear to reach the gate activation point.

As the X-five sector came into view, Tor closed his mouth, his eyes wide and terror pushing him so far back he felt like part of the seat, Sweety reported, "Shields at five percent. Looks like we only just made it through."

Tor was lost for words. Eventually he stood up carefully and wobbled back towards the rear of the cabin commenting, "If you need me I'll be changing my underwear."

He reached the rear of the cabin and collapsed.

Chapter 18. Refugees

Tor sighed heavily and tried to sit up, but he felt drained of energy and glanced at his hands as they trembled. The adrenaline that had given him such a boost during the battle seemed to purge itself from his system and he now felt incredibly tired. It seemed too much effort to drag himself up from the bunk that he had collapsed onto and his eyes closed as he contemplated a moments rest.

He woke up and looked around, he was on a comfortable bed. The lights were bright and cast a soft diffused light. He murmured, "Did I die and I'm now in someplace wonderful?"

A voice commented, "I'm afraid not Mr. Grall. This is the sick bay of the AIC Roamer. But I must say it's good to see you're awake. You had us worried for a while particularly when we couldn't find anything physically wrong."

Tor turned his head and looked at the man who had spoken. It was Commander Parrel and he looked worried. Tor was confused for a moment and asked, "How did I get here?"

Parrel gave a brief laugh, "You have one forceful AI on that ship. Did I say forceful, more like stropopy, sort of reminds me of my wife."

Feeling much more relaxed Tor decided he would risk sitting up, "How long have I been here?"

Parrel answered, "About half a Stazura."

Tor glanced around suddenly startled, "And the Khaak?"

Parrel replied, "Nothing yet. I can only guess they're saving us until last. Apparently it was quite a fight in X-seven but there are a lot of people who want to know how you managed to get out. The ships that made it out before you mentioned a Khaak destroyer was obstructing the gate. And what have you done to the Defiance, initial scan showed it has three shield units, two main forward Beta HEPTs cannons and two Alpha PAC turrets. But the PACs and shield units appear to have been heavily reconfigured into something else."

With a wry smile Tor answered, "I don't know you well enough to tell you."

Parrel said cautiously, "Hmm, if I were to make a guess, you're the young man that was involved in the Alien ship incident some time ago, and saved the life of a very talented scientist who now works for the Argon service. However they still think that she may someday remember something, but what if I may suggest that somehow some data survived and that it now resides in your ship?"

Tor gave a slight laugh, "And what if I suggest you're just guessing?"

Parrel gave a smile, "Perhaps I am, but if our readings on your ship are correct, the modification to the shield units gives them a very unusual modulation that's never been achieved before. The effective shielding strength is an order of magnitude greater than the standard unit. The integration of the weapons systems appears to boost the strength, and if what I hear is correct then your ship can fire a particle beam in any direction. Again the only other recorded incident of this type of weapon comes from the Alien ship encounter I mentioned just a moment ago. From our own experience the Khaak beam weapons are mono-directional in alignment with the firing system."

In the face of the evidence Tor knew he would not be able to keep up the pretence of denying knowledge of the origin of the technology. Even so he knew he needed to exercise caution. Survival was his top priority but distributing alien technology freely was too risky as it might end up in the hands of one of Ferans assassins. Tor conceded, "Okay, so what if it is from the alien ship?"

Parrel gave a relieved sigh, "Then we have a dramatically increased fighting chance of surviving and potentially getting home."

Tor commented carefully, "I have enemies and you'll excuse me if I don't leap at the chance to pass on the information."

Commander Parrel looked across and breathed in deeply, "You have that option of course. I'll be honest with you that Mr. Belign mentioned to us something about Creeds Gate and that it's located in a nebula in this sector and that you have the co-ordinates. I was wondering if that's where your Silicon Mine is off to?"

Tor gave a brief laugh, "Perhaps, but timing is everything. Anyway I would have thought it's too big to fit through a gate."

Parrel gave a faint smile, "The gate activation zone isn't in the centre of the ring. There is a slight bulge in the field in-front and behind the gate. Providing that the object is moving at the correct speed for its mass then it should transport through."

There was a momentary pause in the conversation before Parrel continued, "If I were to propose only two ships that we should investigate using the alien technology on, then might I suggest this ship and the Corvette."

Tor took a moment to consider this and then commented, "Perhaps we need to discuss this on my ship. The AI has all the details. She may be able to determine if it's technically possible to scale the system."

Commander Parrel smiled and replied, "That's all I ask."

Tors' stomach rumbled and he glanced around the room, "Any chance of some food?"

Parrel nodded, "Just get yourself up and we'll go get some. But tell me how did you get away from the Khaak? The reports were that a Capital ship blocked the gate, so you can imagine the rumours currently floating around are that you must have destroyed it to make your escape."

As Tor swung his legs off the bed and stretched with a large yawn he commented, "Ah. Commander there are some things in life that just don't seem right. And flying into and through the heart of a Khaak Destroyer, to my mind, comes pretty much at the top of the list."

Parrel looked lost for words and muttered, "Never?"

Tor nodded, "Right through the god damn centre, couldn't exactly describe what a whole Khaak looks like just saw bits and most of those got vapourized on the way past."

Parrel let out a short sharp breath before commenting, "I wonder if that's why they haven't attacked yet."

Standing up and giving his eyes a quick rub to push aside the last remains of sleep, Tor commented, "You think?"

Parrel looked thoughtful for a moment, "It would make sense. Your ship is unique and they will want to analyse any data they will have gathered in order to find a weakness before launching an assault. Remember up until they met you it's been a breeze for them. Even now they're probably decimating all the remaining sectors that we're not connected to."

Tor looked across, "Leaving the best till last."

Parrel nodded, "Exactly, so we need to get out of here whilst we have the opportunity."

With a heavy sigh Tor responded, "Easier said than done. Creeds gate only appears for two Mizura every two Tazura and the next one will coincide with the Silicon mines arrival. Having seen the ionization effects on a small ship I'd hate to think what type of energy build up the mine will have."

Parrel looked at Tor, "Not as much as you'd think it's usually only the metallic surfaces that concentrate the charge. But I would ask that you let as many refugee ships dock on the station as it can handle."

Tor looked at the Commander with a degree of uncertainty, "I don't want assassins waiting for me on my station."

Parrel presented a curious expression, "I can appreciate your concern since the attack, but I think most people will be grateful to you that they're still alive. At this moment in time no assassin would be stupid enough to try and kill you when they've got nowhere to go afterwards and no way of being paid." Tor still felt uncomfortable with the idea, and Parrel continued in pacifying, cautious tones, "No, the people you need to be concerned about are those that appear to be overly friendly, try to win your confidence and be near you at all times. However you must be cautious some people may act strangely because they see you as a hero type figure."

Tor glanced across with a wry smile, "Well that would be a first."

Parrel raised an eyebrow, "You will be surprised. When people know that you took on a Khaak capital ship and won there are those who will think you're a god and want to be seen as your best friend. It's a fickle thing called fame. One thing is for certain, and that is you will not be able to distinguish the genuine fan from the, would be assassin."

Tor sighed, "I need to talk to my people, there's no point getting all these refugees here and then abandoning them."

Parrel smiled, "I'm glad you see it that way." He handed Tor a comms unit.

A short while later Tor was wandering to the canteen of the Roamer and tried to ignore the looks and whispering as he followed the Commander. Parrel commented, "You see even amongst my own crew rumours are rife." They passed a security team who stopped and gave a smart salute to the Commander but Tor felt it was more for his benefit.

The canteen was small with only a few tables and all of these were occupied. Parrel said, "What you need to remember is that this is a research vessel, so most of the internal space is occupied by maintenance equipment, labs and monitoring stations. Not much is left for accommodation or creature comforts. Fortunately the catering is good and suited to being taken away."

Tor motioned to one of the items on the menu, "I'll have one of those."

Parrel nodded, "Good choice."

The next stop was the Defiance and while Parrel sat at the table and retrieved the food from the bag, Tor retrieved the technical datapad.

Tor picked up the tray and sniffed it before sampling the dish. He commented, "Sweety, the Commander here wants to know if it is possible to modify the shield and weapon units of the Corvette and Roamer with the Ghojo program."

Sweety observed, "The Roamer only has missile launchers."

Parrel looked across at Tor when he asked, "Sweety, before we get carried away with doing modifications is the system scalable?"

Sweety replied, "In essence yes, but the primary shielding system used on capital size ships like the Roamer and the corvette are a degree of complexity greater than the shielding units used on the fighter class."

Tor commented between mouthfuls, "So does that mean no?"

Sweety replied, "It means that I need to do some program adjustments and simulation before I can commit to performing any modifications."

Tor shrugged and Parrel asked, "So how long will the simulation take?"

Sweety commented, "Bearing in mind the Khaak may turn up at any moment, I estimate that it will take fifteen Stazura."

Parrel frowned and looked despondent, "Then you'd better get started, but in the meantime I must ask that you share this technology with us, on something that is one hundred percent compatible." The commander sat in thought for a moment, "Under the circumstances if you will share your technology with us then we have some advanced technology on board in exchange. All I ask is that you at least modify one of the new Nova ships." Tor looked thoughtful and Parrel added, "At least that way you won't have to try and defend both gates if the worst came to the worst."

Tor considered the offer, and tried not to look too eager, but the offer of an additional technological advantage appealed, "What do you have?"

Parrel gave a slight smile, "The system is called Enhanced Silhouette System, ESS for short and it confuses targeting systems. Making a missile lock virtually impossible and confuses any HUD targeting system by directing it to the silhouette. So unless the enemy can see you they'll have difficulty tracking you," Parrel paused for a moment, "As you can imagine combined with a ship like this and the enemy doesn't stand a chance."

Tor responded, "Sounds fair, how long would it take to install?"

Parrel hesitated, "About thirty Mizura."

Tor frowned, "We may not have thirty Mizura."

Parrel responded, "And how long would it take to modify the Nova?"

Sweety answered, "Assuming ship compatibility it will take about five Mizura."

Parrel looked surprised, "That's quick, but how?"

Sweety replied, "Trade secret."

Tor sat in thought for a moment, "Unfortunately we really don't have the time to discuss the finer details of an exchange of technology. I see the sense in modifying another ship, so if Sweety is agreeable, I'd like to take you up on your offer of sharing technology, but the ESS system will have to be fitted when we can be certain the Khaak aren't going to drop in on us at short notice. For the moment we will just have to accept that you are a man of your word."

Commander Parrel looked relieved and held out his hand to seal the agreement. Sweety interrupted them, "For the moment I think the ESS system would benefit ships other than the Defiance. If my scans are correct several of the ships in the bay are fitted with jumpdrives. I think that is a more appropriate exchange."

Parrel looked surprised, sighed heavily and then frowned whilst moving his hand away, "But jumpdrives are no good out here, and each drive has to be registered and licensed. Chances are if we get home the Secret Service will be standing on the doorstep ready to take it away again."

Sweety observed, "Chances are if we get home the Defiance will be of great interest to the Secret Service with or without a jumpdrive fitted."

Parrel replied, "Maybe but who is to say that we didn't discover the technology on the way home. Anyway other than a few anomalous readings the Defiance gives all the appearance of being assembled from stock parts."

Sweety responded, "If you are prepared to keep quiet on this technology transfer then so are we. Also we have access to more Alien technology beyond Creeds Gate that will be of interest to you. Including a reflective shielding technology."

Parrel's eyes shone like a child that had just been given a glimpse of a box of delights, "Reflective?"

Tor noticed the sudden interest, "How do you think we defeated the Devastator?"

Parrel whistled. It had always been a life long ambition of his to learn about advanced Alien technology and be one of the first to make the discovery. Now, to his mind, he stood on the edge of limitless possibilities and the only down side was having to survive the Khaak. Slowly he nodded, "Okay."

Sweety commented, "Whilst your engineers install the drive if you will allow me access to the Nova ship from here then I will begin the modifications."

Parrel asked with a surprised tone, "This can be done remotely?"

Tor shrugged and Sweety replied, "Only if the ship is within close proximity, but I will need to use the on board transporter unit to realign subsystems."

Parrel looked perplexed but answered, "Sure I'll give you the access codes and have the ship moved alongside." He used the communications pad and issued instructions. Then picked up a food tray and tucked in.

The maintenance crew arrived at the same time the Nova ship was moved alongside. Tor could not resist the temptation to go and have a quick look. Commander Parrel took his leave and returned to the bridge of the Roamer. The Nova looked as though it had seen more than just a little action with several scorch marks crossing the hull. Evidence that it had already been in a conflict with Khaak fighters.

The pilot had a vaguely familiar face but he could not for the moment place him. Stanad Block stepped forward and held out his hand with his usual roguish grin, "Our paths cross again Tor."

Tor shook hands uncertainly, "Seem to remember the face but I can't quite place it."

Stanad laughed, "Yeah it was only brief. Remember a white Prommy saving your butt from a couple of pirates?"

Tor thought for a moment then the penny dropped, "That's right I had the Disco."

Stanad looked at the Defiance then back at Tor with the grin breaking into a full broad smile, "Looks like you've moved up in the world. And this time it's you saving our butts."

Tor laughed at what was, to him, a complete roll reversal and then said, "How times have changed. At least now I can thank you properly for saving my life."

Stanad responded, "Just buy me a drink and we'll call it quits. Then you can tell me what's happening to my ship?"

Tor smiled, "Five Mizura for a drink and to go through the details isn't long enough. In brief your weapon system and shields are going to be modified and integrated. The changes will significantly enhance the

shield strength but the weapon system will be a directional particle beam, fired from any point on the shields at any target you or your computer chooses providing it's in range."

Stanad had a slowly increasing grin, "So what's the down side?"

Tor replied, "Continuous firing of the weapon system will drain the shields."

Stanad's smile did not fade but he did have a mischievous look about him, "I can see why that may be inconvenient. So who else gets this treatment?"

Tor replied, "No one. At the moment it's just you and me."

Stanad gave a slight laugh, "Pols' going to be really pissed at that." Tor raised a curious eyebrow and Stanad noted the look saying, "Pol flies the Prommy."

Tor vaguely remembered the conversation now and in the back of his mind made the connection that Stanad had been the co-pilot and that the person named Pol was the pilot, but the encounter occurred some time ago and only resided as a distant memory. Tor replied, "Yeah, I remember."

Stanad adopted a more serious expression, "So what's the battle plan?"

Tor looked at the two ships then glanced back, "Hold the gates and stop the Khaak from getting through."

Stanad frowned, "That's going to be easier said than done." Tor simply nodded and Stanad added, "And for how long?"

Tor replied, "There's a window of opportunity every two Tazura to get out of this sector, but only for two Mizura. Only not everyone is going to manage to escape on the next occurrence."

Stanad sighed, "Well that would explain why the Silicon Mine and the SPP are on the move. It's somehow comforting to know there's another way out. All we have to do is survive, but keeping alive for two Tazura, that's going to be tough."

Tor looked surprised, "The SPP is on the move?"

Stanad glanced at him, "You didn't know. They've shut down production and non-essential systems. The station has a vector that follows the mine, and the Paranid are moving marginally faster. I guess they want to catch up."

Tor commented, "That's madness the discharges it's likely to produce are going to be massive. Potentially destructive."

Stanad did not look concerned, "The choice between having it blown up by the Khaak or risk getting it to this other place. Which would you opt for?"

Tor thought for a moment, "Let's hope their timing is spot on. If one misses the opportunity then it's got a long wait before it'll get a second chance."

Stanad looked around, "In the meantime let's hope our timing is spot on when the time comes. I'd hate to have to make a run for it and find I've missed the opportunity. Nebula clouds aren't the kind of place you want to be when you're in a hurry to get somewhere."

Tor looked perplexed for a moment and then asked, "Ideally we need navigation beacons through the nebula. Then we could use jumpdrives."

Stanad observed, "Hmm, I doubt it would work, there's far too much interference and if it did, it would also tell the enemy exactly where we've gone." There was a brief pause until Stanad added, "Looks like the technicians have finished on your ship."

Tor contemplated these words and replied, "Which means yours is probably finished too."

Stanad once again gave his characteristic grin and said, "Can't stand around chatting. I can sense a fight brewing and I want to see what this can do."

Tor gave a brief smile, nodded and responded, "You take the X-two gate and I'll loiter by X-five."

Stanad gave Tor a quick slap on the back and wandered to the Nova whistling. Tor watched him leave and returned to the Defiance. Sitting in the pilot seat he asked, "Everything go okay Sweety?"

Sweety replied, "They have made a nice job of that ship. Some parts are too complicated for my liking but the conversion appears to be fully operational."

Tor said quickly, "Excellent. Now let's get out of here." It was the first time Tor had ever launched from a TL transporter and was keen to see how the huge ship coped.

Sweety replied, "Launch approved, transfer to docking bay underway."

The ship juddered as it was lifted and moved towards the launch bay lift. Once settled the platform moved up and through an inner airlock hatch which closed before the docking tunnel upper hatch slid open to allow the platform to complete its ascent. The docking bay computer controlled the lifting thrusters and the Defiance moved forward.

He flew around the Roamer and looked at the nebula clouds. It seemed very odd to him that the Silicon Mine was no longer visible, and the sight of the, now distant, Solar Power Plant gently firing control thrusters as it built up momentum was even more bizarre.

The sector map showed heavy concentrations of fighters around the two main gates. The corvette was sitting just below the X-two gate poised and ready to open fire on any ships that jumped in. Stanad Blocks' Nova launched and immediately he was heading across the intervening space to join the rest of the fighters.

Tor steered towards the X-five gate and set the throttle to maximum. He took stock of who was where in his group. Many of the fighters were those that escaped from X-seven including many of the Crystal Fabrication Plant group.

Tor did take note that only around half the compliment of Silicon Mine fighters were left behind. These consisted of the faster Piranhas rather than the Elites.

Tor asked, "Sweety when does Creeds' Gate open?"

Sweety replied, "In a little over two and a half Stazura."

Tor ignored the welcoming calls from the other pilots with the exception of Captain Coursade, "Glad to see you made it Captain."

Mileton smiled, "Good job we disobeyed orders. That was a close call but I still don't like our chances."

Tor commented, "All we have to do is stay alive for around seventeen Stazuras then hopefully we'll be out of this sector, and safe for a while."

Mileton frowned, "Not asking for much then. Bearing in mind they've managed to take out every sector so far in a matter of Mizura."

Tor replied, "I guess if things look really bad we're going to have to play at hiding in the nebula."

The Captain glanced away from looking at Tor to the view outside the cockpit, "It has options, but we need to make damn sure we're not shooting at each other."

Tor nodded, "Another thing, any ship that becomes damaged is to dock with the Roamer for immediate repairs. Pass the message around." He closed the comm and flew the Defiance around towards the rear of the gate Tor noticed the black boxes. Bringing the Defiance to a stop he asked, "Sweety can you analyse those things on the gate."

Sweety commented, "Scanning." There was a long pause, "Items are of unknown origin. I am detecting some type of interface that it is in some way monitoring the gate."

Tor thought for a while, "Just as a bit of speculation, could this be how the Khaak are managing to control the destinations of the gates?"

Sweety replied, "I see nothing in the Mohrabas crystal logs to imply that the Khaak have used this type of device. However that does not mean to say that they have not developed this system since those encounters. If that is the case then these boxes may be for our benefit not the Khaak."

Tor considered this as he recalled ThaThwyns' message that the Khlarakin, as they were known, managed to open the gate without the Mohrabas knowing it was there until it was too late. Tor also began to take into account all the comments about the unusualness of this sector, "Sweety just suppose that these are for our benefit. What do you think would happen if we destroyed them?"

Sweety considered the question, and used visual images to make her points clear, "If these boxes control the destination of the jump, and that gates are linked in pairs, then I estimate one of three things will happen. First possibility is the gate will go into its natural state. As this sector is not ready for active gates then it will in all likelihood vanish. The second possibility is that the gate in the other sector is controlled in a similar manner and will keep this gate open unless you jump over to the other side and destroy all of those control units. In which case you may find yourself stuck on the wrong side," Sweety paused, "The third option is that we are on three sides of a triangle of gates, and there is a sector or sectors invisible to us that lie in the middle. For example these boxes force us to jump directly to X-five, however if we destroy the boxes then we would jump into the true destination of the gate."

Tor contemplated this and a sudden suspicion inside him led him to believe that the last option could so very nearly be the truth and would explain how the communications were so effectively cut off and why the Khaak could just pour in through all the gates at once. The only problem would be to try and prove it and even then, would he want to?

Thinking about it for a moment longer he considered out loud, "Do you think Commander Parrel may be interested in this?"

Sweety replied, "The AIC have significant scientific and analytical equipment on the Roamer. They may be able to determine how one of these units functions."

Tor decided, "Get me Parrel on the comm. Let's see if he's interested."

Commander Parrel answered and Tor had a reasonable view of the Roamers bridge on the holo-image, "What can I do for you Tor?"

Tor replied, "Have you ever noticed some black boxes attached to the back of the gates?"

Parrel shrugged and glanced over to some of the officers who shook their heads, "No. What boxes?"

Tor gave a quick summary, "On the back of each gate are six boxes evenly spaced. Sweety doesn't believe they are part of the original structure. That they may in fact be the way the Khaak are controlling the jump destination, and in reality they cause us to jump straight through the true destination of the gate to the next one along."

Parrel thought for a moment and responded, "Interesting theory and would explain how they managed to get so many ships into a sector without having first traversed the others, or by having any obvious jumpdrive technology. Alternatively the gate destinations could be correct as we see them, and the boxes are the mechanism for the Khaak to get to us."

Tor did not feel inclined for the moment to discuss the ThaThwyn recording and the evidence that the Khaak would not need the devices if the gate alignment was correct to reach the sector. Tor commented, "Trouble is we can't be certain what would happen if we destroyed the devices."

Parrel nodded, "And if we could understand how they work we could modify them to get home."

Tor looked keenly at the commander, "So all you need to do is work out how to get one off the gate intact."

Parrel said quickly, "We may have just the thing. I'll let you know if it worked." The comm closed and the holo-image faded.

Tor came around to the front of the gate and positioned himself near the lasertowers. Sweety commented, "Well that should keep the AIC busy for a while."

Tor observed quietly, "I wonder what they're waiting for?"

Sweety commented, "I expect they have a lot of debris to clear up and reassemble their forces."

Looking vaguely perplexed Tor asked, "Why do you think they do this?"

Sweety commented, "I have tried to assess the behaviour of the races and many animals to see if I can draw a parallel. So far I have no definite answer. The method of attack appears to be Hexapoda in nature as they gather in numbers and tend to swarm at an opponent. But their reason for creating this elaborate sub division of sectors within a predefined loop does not closely match any known behaviour. It could be to determine our intelligence and strengths, or just because they like to ensnare and hunt other species."

Tor kept his eyes fixed on the gate, "I guess ThaThwyn thought it was the former."

Commander Parrel had issued the order for a pilot less probe unit fitted with an ASAPCS unit attached to a retractable arm to be sent to the X-two gate and investigate the device. The science station operator gave a running commentary.

"Unit now within five hundred metres, four hundred, three fifty," Parrel listened and looked at the screen in the command chair display, "One hundred, eighty, sixty, fifty," Parrel checked on the galactic map, he had the feeling he should be nervous that there were only three sectors shown, but in many respects it also meant that the Khaak had not started the final assault. "ASAPCS unit deployed."

Parrel waited for a moment, "So what have we got?"

The operator looked up, "Receiving data, there seems to be some type of interface device with the gate, an elaborate energy system and a signalling unit, but that's just a guess."

Parrel considered the next step, "Any explosive devices or self destruct system of any kind."

The operator commented, "No explosive compounds detected, however the energy unit could provide a reasonably high explosive yield if overloaded."

There was another moments consideration before Parrel asked, "Would we lose anything that looks vaguely important if the power unit were transported out of the unit?"

The operator looked at the first officer and shrugged, "Impossible to say Sir."

"If we disposed of the units own power source, can we set something up to replicate it?" Parrel asked.

The chief science officer looked at the data and commented, "I think so."

Parrel commanded, "Lose the power source and transport the rest back here."

Sweety suddenly disturbed Tors' moment of silence, "I have just detected a change in the X-two gate."

He looked at the technical pad in curiosity, "What was it?"

Sweety replied, "My navigational sensors picked up a change in the gate. Something that is not compatible with any previous sensor readings."

Tor asked, "Any idea of the cause?"

Sweety replied, "The AIC have removed one of the boxes from the gate."

Tor let out a gentle whistled and asked, "Fancy taking a look?"

Sweety commented dryly, "There is an Argon saying in the archives that 'curiosity leads to catastrophe' so the answer is, no, I do not want to take a look."

For a short while Tor considered the comment and responded carefully, "Just for the moment I'd really like to know what we're up against, even if it's just the briefest of visits."

Another brief silence filled the cabin before Sweety said, "I think it would be unwise, but I also understand the benefits of knowing what the strength of the forces against us are."

A slight grin crept over Tors' face as he sensed that Sweety would accede to the idea. He asked, "So can we make life simple for ourselves and jump to the other gate."

Sweety replied, "No, we may need the cells if we need to get back to this gate quickly."

Tor gave a slight nod, "Okay, let's get moving."

The Defiance turned quickly and then hit the boost. Without incident or need to return to the X-five gate it glided past the assembled fighters and towards the activation zone.

Polmankelest hailed the Defiance and sounded perplexed, "Where do you think you're going?"

Tor replied, "I'm going to see what we're up against."

The Paranid looked displeased and ordered, "Turn back!"

Tor gave an encouraging smile as the gate rapidly approached. He felt a twinge of excitement mixed with apprehension.

Stanad Block came onto the comm, "Don't be a fool Tor listen to my Paranid friend. Turn around."

Tor responded, "Be assured I'm not going to be hanging around in there and I'll be back before you can blink, promise."

The Defiance crossed the activation threshold and was gone. As the Defiance emerged through the other side and Tor took stock of the scene in front of him he said out loud, "Oh, FUCK!"

Chapter 19. Invasion

The Defiance cleared the gate and stared straight into the guns of a Khaak warship. Its hull bristled with small fighters that had somehow latched onto the superstructure. The familiarity of the sector led Tor to believe he was in the former X-two sector.

Sweety confirmed his initial suspicions by speaking quickly, "This is X-two and I suggest we get out of here."

The Defiance swung up and away sharply the boosters fully engaged. However the Khaak capital ship had been taken momentarily by surprise and then the towers opened fire.

Tor responded to Sweetys' comment as beam weapons fire lanced past the Defiance, "Just as soon as I can get us some breathing space."

Sweety had now taken better scanner information, "Tor we should destroy the devices. That ship has one hundred fighters attached and if it gets through the gate they will swamp the defences."

Tor thought quickly, "How will we get back?"

Sweety replied swiftly, "The long way."

The Defiance came around the back of the gate and was being pursued by twenty Khaak fighters. Drawing in close Sweety picked out and destroyed three of the boxes. The AI called out, "You need to make a second pass there are still three intact."

More small fighters joined in the chase and Tor managed to catch three in Beta HEPT plasma fire whilst Sweety claimed another two before destroying the last of the boxes.

The Defiance juddered and jarred as Tor came in for his third approach to the gate. The shields dipping from the incoming fire and the particle beam dispensed with the nearest attackers.

For a long moment the Defiance held stationary in the activation zone as the capital ship forward weapons systems flared and cut through the suddenly vacated space. Tor breathed only slightly easier as they emerged into the new sector, but this was quite definitely not X-four. This was Khaak space and appeared to be filled with warships surrounded by a silvery cloud of small fighters glinting in the light of the yellow sun.

The assembled Khaak war fleet appeared to show no interest in the Defiance and nothing made a move to intercept. Sweety reported in an urgent whisper, just in case she attracted some unwanted attention, "I am detecting several types of ship that I have not encountered before."

As the Defiance banked slowly round Tor saw the Khaak station almost obscured by the fleet that surrounded it, and although he used the word in its loosest sense it appeared to be more akin to a giant nest. He counted ten Battlecruisers closest to him with many more behind.

Tor asked, "How many Sweety?"

Sweety could not get a clear scan and simply responded, "Thousands."

Tor asked quietly, "We don't stand a chance do we?"

There was a pause and Sweety replied gently, "No."

Tor said in a whisper, "Sometimes Sweety, I really wish you'd lie."

The Defiance surged away from the gate and Tor said, "So which way?"

Sweety responded, "We have the choice of two other gates in this sector and based on the navigational data, I would estimate that our best chance of reaching the others is to jump through the gate that the bulk of the Khaak battle fleet is positioned in front of."

Giving a brief sigh Tor said, "Sounds like a reasonable idea." He changed the vector to take a wide berth of the Khaak ships. As he reached the half way point he remained aware that the enemy had still shown no interest in them.

Watching the HUD for any sudden activity Tor asked, "So what ships have we yet to encounter?"

Sweety took a moment to respond and pulled up several images onto the HUD display. The first was a huge cruiser that Tor had difficulty in describing due to the number of protuberances, "Scans indicate that this is probably the command vessel as there is only one in the fleet. The next two are large battle cruises, and although they look different, they appear to have the same capabilities. There are six of these," Sweety paused and then added, "We destroyed one of those by the way. Next comes the fighter classes of which I can only distinguish two, the small unit that we have already encountered and the one is now on screen."

Tor commented, "It's a bit of an ugly beast. Like an Octopus but with more legs."

Sweety responded firmly, "Ugly it maybe, and although the fleet does not appear to have many, they do appear to have some type of missile technology that I am still attempting to understand."

Tor glanced reflectively towards the technical datapad, "You're hacking into their computers aren't you?"

Sweety replied soothingly, "So?"

Tor commented, "You'll get us into big trouble one day."

Sweety almost sounded like she was laughing, "We are already in big trouble! I do not think a little more is going to make a difference." There was a long pause as Tor watched the distance on the HUD slowly clock down and then Sweety said in less than reassuring tones, "On the other hand."

Tor asked, "What now?"

Sweety replied, "We have to take out those missile ships."

With a startled look Tor asked, "Why?"

Sweety replied, "They fire low resonance energy dissipative missiles."

Whatever it was sounded ominous and Tor asked, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Sweety replied, "Pulsating energy wave in the low frequency range lasting thirty Sezura each."

A blank expression crossed Tors' face, "And in layman terms?"

Sweety sighed, "The low frequency range is the destructive range. The best comparison I can think of is an earthquake but this time in space. The wave form will find the natural frequency of the structure of the ship and every sub component. Anything in the field of the missile basically will either shake itself to pieces or experience severe internal structural damage."

After a moment of trying to wrap his head around the concept Tor commented, "What happens when we destroy one?"

Sweety commented sharply, "Let us hope that nothing happens. The missile does not arm itself until it has crossed a gate activation zone."

Tors' jaw dropped, "So they're fired from here?"

Sweety replied without changing tone, "Yes, and Tor we have incoming ships."

Tor glanced at the HUD and noticed that two of the incoming ships were a Nova and a Prometheus. Stanad appeared on the holo-projector and commented, "Didn't think you'd take all the glory did you?" The only thing Tor could do was smile.

The comm closed and Tor said, "Sweety keep both pilots in range and be ready to beam them on board if the need arises."

The first wave of fifty Khaak fighters closed in on Tor. Stanad called in, "Hang in there Tor we're on our way."

Tor destroyed two on the first pass and Sweety took out another three. She threw in the comment, "I really do not advise too many head to head passes like the last one."

Stanad had kept the voice comm open and he could be heard yelling, "Woohoo," As he used the particle beam for the first time. The Prometheus had hung back and with precision firing from the two Alpha HEPT's destroyed another two fighters.

The Defiance rolled and strafed in a sidestep manoeuvre to avoid the beam lasers of the Khaak ships. Explosions rocked the ship and debris shimmered briefly in the shields. He called out, "What's our status?"

Sweety responded, "Eighty-five percent shields and increasing. We have two incoming destroyers."

Khaak fighters shot past, Tor managed to tuck in behind the last one and the Beta HEPT's reduced it to an incandescent ball of expanding flame. The Defiance took several more short duration hits before Sweety could eliminate the attacking craft.

Tor glanced at the shield status bar on the display panel and he approximated the reading to about sixty percent. Although he had the stronger ship the Khaak fighters were going to inevitably wear his shields down if he did not break free from the melee and give them a chance to recover.

The Nova and Prometheus were still battling to get close to the Defiance and faced a similar dilemma, but neither ship had the same turn of speed that the Defiance could attain. Tor broke free from the attacking swarm and headed back towards his two companions.

Polmankelest was expertly avoiding the bulk of the incoming fire and picking off fighters that strayed into the firing line of the Prometheuss' cannons. Even so each hit had a marked effect on the shielding level and it was dipping very near to half strength. Stanad on the other hand still showed around seventy five percent, but only due to the enhanced capability that the weapon system provided and he was taking considerably more incoming fire. The bulk of that was cut short by the particle beam being firing in response.

The Defiance swept in, Tor locked onto an unsuspecting target that turned sharply just as he tapped the trigger sending out two plasma rounds vanishing into space.

Tor cleared away three of the fighters, "Sweety what's our status?"

Sweety gave a swift update, "We need to break away from the fighter pack, the Nova shields are hovering around thirty five percent. The Prometheus has given up with using the ESS as there are too many fighters and its shields are around forty five percent. Which is roughly the same as our own shield strength. The two destroyers will reach us in about one Mizura."

Tor glanced at the status bar, "Okay. Open a comm to both ships."

Sweety responded, "Comm open."

Tor commented urgently, "Need to give our shields time to recover. Pol, make a break for it. Stanad, you need to help me in keeping the fighters off his tail."

Almost at that instance the Prometheus changed colour and Tor strained his eyes to try and make out the profile of the ship that was now the same hue as the starless black of space, the only real indication of its position was the dim glow from the engine pods and the occasional temporary disappearance of stars.

Stanad commented, "Nice trick Pol, still got you on scanner though and coming around to follow."

The front Alpha HEPTs of the Prometheus cut down two Khaak ships as it cleared the attackers. The ship hit its boost having temporarily turned off the limiter and reached safe distance in a few moments. Stanad just a short way behind rolled and weaved the Nova, firing occasionally at any ship that came within range and threatened to intercept. Tor banked the Defiance hard over and fought for a short time to give Stanad a chance to reach a safe distance and then he hit the booster and joined up with the two other ships.

The Prometheus had once again changed colours back to the AIC white with motif.

Sweety commented, "Just as an observation. We are heading in the wrong direction."

Tor glanced at the HUD and shrugged, they were still alive and that is what mattered. Also he was still impressed that the Prometheus appeared to be holding up. He responded, "Sweety I think you need to upgrade the Prometheus, and see if you can work out how that colour shift thing works."

Sweety replied, "Just bring us in close, but I have to mention that this ship has more modifications on it than anything I have ever scanned. So it may prove harder to upgrade."

The ships moved in a straight line as the shield units recovered, Tor requested, "Open a comm to Pol."

The response came back, "Comm open."

Tor began, "Nice work back there. I have a proposition to upgrade your ship the same way that Stanad's has been. It's just a suggestion but it'll give you some real improvements in your shield strength. Should only take five Mizura but you won't have weapons or shields for that time."

The Paranid looked back and blinked all three eyes slowly as he considered the suggestion. Eventually he nodded his consent and Sweety immediately took over. The Defiance glided to short transporter range and matched the speed and direction of the two ships.

As the upgrades were being performed, Sweety noted, "Those two destroyers have increased speed and they are now catching us."

Tor sighed and commented with concern, "Great. How long before they get here?"

Sweety made her estimate, "Five Mizuras twenty Sezura."

There was a momentary hesitation before Tor asked, "Tell me you'll be finished by then."

There was no immediate reply and then Sweety said, "There are some difficulties with the conversion."

A perplexed look crossed Tors' face, "What's up?"

Sweety replied carefully, "This ship has been so well upgraded it is only a Prometheus by appearance. It has all the best parts and so many extras that I cannot integrate the shields and weapon systems. Also the shield units are not standard twenty five megawatt units. These are thirty five megawatt versions down

powered to spare the engines so it can provide power to all the other equipment. The ESS unit is particularly power hungry.”

Tor commented, “So what can you do?”

Sweety commented, “I need to decouple the ESS unit and the shield pulse system so that the shields can be modified and run at optimum power.”

Tor gave a slight sigh, “What about the weapons?”

Sweety responded, “The choice is either to keep the Alpha HEPT’s or have a forward facing particle beam.”

With a sense of disappointment Tor said, “We’d better tell Pol.”

Sweety commented, “I have already spoken to him and he is not keen on losing the ESS but is happy to disconnect the shield pulse unit.”

Tor asked, “Which means?”

Sweety replied, “I can only upgrade one shield unit.”

With a brief contemplative thought, Tor responded, “I guess it’s something.”

The three ships continued without changing direction whilst the two destroyers continued to close the gap. Tor watched them on the HUD and looked into the sector, “Sweety any idea what that fleet is waiting for? I mean there’s enough of them that they can’t be waiting for reinforcements.”

Sweety replied, “None, I have extracted sample transmissions and I am running them through the translation matrix.”

Mizuras passed and Tor commented with urgency, “Those destroyers are getting a bit close. Tell me you’ve just about finished with the Prommy.”

A brief pause and Sweety replied, “The systems are coming back on-line now.”

Stanad spoke over the comm, “Tor we need a plan. We can’t out run those destroyers and I wouldn’t mind knowing how you destroyed one, as that info could be really useful about now.”

Tor had to admit he did not really have any type of plan, they could out manoeuvre the two destroyers but they would not be able to outrun them

Polmankelest also called in, “We fight.”

The hull of the Prometheus changed to stellar black flecked with white points that could easily be mistake as stars, and the ESS engaged as the ship slowed and turned back. Stanad commented, “The only thing you need to remember is not to collide with him or accidentally catch him in crossfire. He gets upset when that happens.”

The Nova also turned around and Tor just shrugged boosted the power and flipped the ship over. He glanced at the HUD and sure enough he could see both icons of the Prometheus but at a quick glance he strained to see the original ship.

The Defiance with its speed advantage passed the two as they closed in on the Khaak capital ships. A quick volley of plasma cascaded in on the nearest destroyer as it began to turn sharply up and intercept the fighters. The particle beam stuck one of the laser towers and the shields shimmered until the Defiance was out of firing range. The Nova targeted the same laser turret, but banked away sharply to avoid the incoming beam laser response.

The Prometheus shields glowed, betraying its position as he fired at the bridge with a short burst before turning away and melting into the background. Tor came in for a second pass noting the second destroyer had turned to the left and was coming around to assist the first destroyer.

The Defiance juddered as it took a hit. Tor disengaged having only fired off several plasma shots and Sweety commented, "Shields at eighty percent."

This time the Nova had more luck and its particle beam held on the turret for the full duration of the pass. As it banked away the Prometheus beam sliced along the shields and struck the turret. It exploded in a shower of sparks. There were no cheers of celebration as the three ships avoided the beam weapons fire from both the Destroyers.

Sweety commented, "Go for the engine pods, if we can damage those we can then out run them."

Tor asked quickly, "How's everyone doing?"

Sweety replied, "The Nova has seventy five percent shields and the Prometheus has a very healthy ninety five percent."

Tor requested, "Open the comm Sweety."

"Comm open."

Tor quickly said, "Guys go for the engine pods. If we slow them down we can out run them."

Polmankelest responded, "You guys keep the front end busy and slow the ship down. I'll take out the tail."

Stanad called over, "Good plan Pol. Tor lets concentrate on the bridge and the laser turret next to the one that's just been taken out."

Tor had little choice when the Nova attacked the bridge. Stanad never stopped turning the ship as the beams from the Khaak ship tried to lock on and preempt his position. Tor came across quickly the particle beam also lancing onto the same area of the shields that the Nova had tested. It shimmered as it absorbed the energy and once again weapons fire streamed towards the Defiance as Tor rolled the ship clear.

Stanad was already making another pass when the Prometheus opened fire on the main engine unit in a prolonged burst that had the whole of the rear shield pulsing.

Then the Prometheus was away when the Khaak ship surged forward, as the destroyer crew now recognizing the threat to its engines. Sweety commented through the general comm, "Stanad and Polmankelest attack the second carrier! Tor come around the rear of the destroyer and avoid the incoming fire whilst I attack the main engine."

The HUD showed the Prometheus and its silhouette move away as the Nova made a quick strafing pass across the underside of the second destroyer. The capital ship only fired a brief burst towards the Nova and closed in on Tor. All weapons from the destroyer appeared to be fixed on the Defiance as Tor passed along the hull and Sweety immediately focused the particle beam on the weakened shielding of the engine. Tor dragged the ship around as hard as he dared.

Sweety reported, "Shield down... thruster damage twenty percent... primary engine core shutdown... turn hard right now." Tor instinctively obeyed as the second destroyer swept past and filled the space that had been his flight path with energy beams. Sweety added, "First destroyer crippled. We need to get some distance and separate them. Also those fighters are closing in again."

Tor asked, "What about the rest of the fleet?"

Sweety reported quietly, "They appear to have started the bombardment of the joining sector. Wait something has just come through the gate."

Tor asked in surprise, "What?"

Sweety also sounded surprised when she answered, "Xenon light fighters."

Tor commented, "Wrong gate for X-four Sweety but if it's the Xenon on the other side then maybe that's the way home. Open the comm to the others."

Stanad replied, "Already open Tor. But let's deal with one problem at a time."

Polmankelest had already deactivated the ESS in favour of speed and was already vectoring away from the damaged capital ship. Tor watched the HUD if the Khaak missile had an effect it was short lived as more Xenon light fighters appeared through the sector gate and launched streams of missiles at the Khaak defenders.

Polmankelest was a Paranid of few words but chose this moment to add his own thought to the unfolding battle, "Sometimes the best form of defense is attack."

Behind them the second destroyer appeared to make a decision and based on the damage to the first ship held its position only the fighters continued the pursuit. Plotting a flight path in a log sweeping arc around the Khaak fleet they went for the third gate.

The intensity of the battle increased as the Khaak fleet moved en-mass towards the gate. Xenon medium and heavy fighters joined in the battle, the Khaak missile ships were nearly all destroyed, however the light Khaak fighters outnumbered the Xenon hundreds of times over and quickly destroyed them, but not before the Xenon ships had launched missiles on all targets. The heavy missiles from the Xenon L's impacted on the Khaak capital ships and two destroyers flared with brightly searing explosion. The gate flashed but this time it was with Khaak ships exiting the sector.

Sweety interrupted all the pilots' thoughts, "We have more fighters on an intercept course and this time they are heading towards our exit gate."

Stanad commented dryly, "Look like we have a fight on our hands."

Tor responded with a sigh, "I think we may have a few more after this one."

The Prometheus, still with its hull masking its visual position and the slowest of the three, led them towards the gate. Tor wondered how the Xenon were faring against the onslaught of the Khaak fleet. One thing he was certain about and that was it would be a fierce and unrelenting battle. He felt that neither fleeing nor surrender was in the Xenon programming. The image of the Crystal Fab being engulfed in explosions crept into his minds eye and although the Xenon were also enemies, he hoped they would somehow 'kick some Khaak arse'.

Tor commented absently as the enemy fighters drew closer, "You're being a bit quiet Sweety, what are you up to?"

This was met with a brief silence before Sweety answered with a mischievous lilt in her voice, "Using the Khaak communications system to inform the Xenon on enemy numbers and ship types."

Tor glanced across at the technical pad, "You can do that?"

Sweety responded beguilingly, "When you know how."

Tor asked quickly, "Any chance you can determine the jump vector home?"

Sweety replied, "One thing at a time. At the moment I have just worked out how to piggyback a signal onto the back of the Khaak transmissions."

With a wry smile Tor said, "In that case, piggyback a transmission back to X-four that we're on our way."

Sweety spoke softly, "Yes Sir, now I think you need to do some fighting."

Tor opened the thrusters to get ahead of the Prometheus and Stanad followed suit as they engaged the swarm of fighters. The Defiance spiraled into the Khaak pack preventing any prolonged contact with incoming fire, the Beta HEPT's and particle beam cutting a path through the swarm. The Prometheus did not engage the ESS and instead preferred to use the additional speed and hull masking. Periodically the front of the ship glowed as it chased down and eliminated another fighter. Stanad appeared to utilise the strafe drive to avoid incoming fire until he passed through the swarm and then he doubled back to lend support.

Explosions and beam weapons fire flashed in all directions, Tor banked hard left and rolled the ship over as the particle beam scythed through another ship. The remains of a Khaak fighter sliced apart by the Prometheus spiraled out of control into the Defiance. The whole ship lurched sideways as the remains of the Khaak vessel bounced off the shields and finally exploded.

Sweety reported, "Shields are holding, but I would not recommend that we have too many of those."

The Khaak fighters broke away and regrouped and Sweety called to the three pilots, "Head for the gate."

All three instinctively obeyed and Tor asked, "What happened?"

Sweety replied, "Well if the translation I have is correct then I believe I ordered them to withdraw." There was a pause and then she added, "But perhaps not."

The Khaak fighters now determining the origin of the mysterious message closed in again.

A thin fighter screen blocked the gate and Tor went ahead of the other two. His shields took multiple hits as he gunned down five of the fighters. The Nova joined him and the Prometheus made the jump into the next sector.

After a few Sezura, Stanad followed and Tor risking a few more hits from the remaining fighters jumped before the swarm arrived.

From the moment Tor arrived to the moment he cleared the gate the expression, out of the frying pan and into the fire was at the forefront of his mind. He had the distinct impression that Sweety had momentarily taken control as the Defiance surged forwards and twisted away from the waiting Khaak carrier and its swarm of ships.

Polmankelest had been fortunate enough to go through first as the visually masked ship had the Khaak hesitate before firing. He had barely managed to give Stanad sufficient protection on his arrival and both ships were fighting against the odds for survival when Tor arrived.

The Defiance lurched sideways as it was caught by a blast from the carrier weapons systems. Sweety reported, "Shields at sixty percent." The adrenaline surge through Tor had him clench his teeth and his grip tightened on the control stick, everything that flashed past was fired upon and the particle beam lashed out every Sezura with no discernable pause.

Somehow and Tor was not exactly certain how, he managed to regroup with the Prometheus and Nova, however the Nova appeared to have taken significant damage. Both the Prometheus and the Defiance attempted to shield the ship as they broke free from the Khaak fighters, but with every pass the Nova took a little more damage, even though the shield units remained intact.

Tor ordered, "Stanad, don't use your weapons. Give the shields a chance to recover."

Sweety reported, "Defiance shields at thirty percent."

Three more Khaak fighters fell in quick succession, and the Prometheus swept past and blocked another assault on the Nova destroying the Khaak fighter in a head to head exchange of weapons fire.

The Nova made safe distance from the fighters and dumped internal air pressure whilst vapour poured out and formed frozen crystals from the multiple hull fractures.

The Prometheus cleared the fighters and the Defiance destroyed the closest of the pursuers.

Tor brought the Defiance in close to the Nova and commented to Sweety, "How does it look?"

Sweety performed a complete scanner sweep of the Nova, "Shields and weapon systems intact, damage to several sub systems and about seven hull fractures."

With a slight shake of the head and a note of despondency at potentially losing one of the ships he asked, "Any chance we can patch it?"

Almost immediately Sweety responded with, "I have the replicator adjusted to patching the hull breaches and repairs are in progress."

With a wave of relief and a hint of surprise Tor said, "Well that's something. Now where are we? And have you worked out which gate will get us back?" He looked closely at the sector map. There were eight stations shown, the purpose of each one unknown and Tor did not feel inclined to take a look.

There was no large fleet in the area and the two possible exit gates appeared to be alive with ships transitioning between sectors. The stations launched several fighter groups each one numbering twenty individual vessels.

The Khaak Carrier behind them was manoeuvring away from the gate and preparing to pursue.

After a brief period of silence Sweety reported, "I believe I have found the gate to X-five."

Knowing they would be nearly home, Tor responded, "Plot a course and let's get going."

Sweety then added carefully, "I must mention that the sector is currently under attack."

Tor grimaced and nodded a brief acknowledgement to the news. He said slowly, "We can't do much from here. What's the status of the ships?"

With a brief hesitation Sweety answered, "The Prometheus has recovered full shield strength. The Nova is now patched with eighty percent shield strength and increasing, and we have full shields."

Stanad called in, "Looks like the hull patches are holding. Course heading acknowledged. Now let's get out of here."

Polmankelest responded, "I'm with you on that one." The Prometheus led the way and just to make it interesting aimed directly towards the gate and through the heart of the Khaak sector. The Nova and the Defiance kept a tight formation alongside.

Sweety remained quiet as the translation program continued to work on the Khaak coding and speech. Also she was attempting to determine what the shifting colours on the hull of the Khaak fighters may indicate, including the possibility that it may be another form of communication between ships.

Polmankelest called out, "That carrier is beginning to catch us."

Tor muttered, "Just what we need. Time till interception?"

Polmanckelest replied, "About three Mizura."

Stanad interjected, "Not long enough. Don't know if you guys noticed that cruiser packs more punch than those destroyers."

Sweety confirmed Stanad's observation and said, "About fifty percent more. Two positive locks on the Prometheus and it will be destroyed."

Tor sighed and commented, "Well at least I'm not the only one that needs a course in diplomacy."

Silence fell between the three pilots as each spent some time watching the HUD with the gaining Khaak carrier. The distance to the gate drawing ever closer but not swiftly enough and as Khaak fighters attempted to block the three ship formation, which punched a decisive hole through the attacking groups without changing heading and used only minor evasive manoeuvres.

The carrier loomed behind them. Polmanckelest called in, "We need to split up. Being the slowest ship I'm going to keep going for the gate. You two try and draw that ship on a different heading, then catch me up for the next jump."

Tor said with a hint of defiant determination, "How about we try for the engines?"

Stanad replied, "Feeling brave are we?"

Sweety decided to add a new perspective with a quick reality check, "I calculate the probability of one or more of us being destroyed as ninety percent. The Carrier has a complement of one hundred smaller fighters on board appearing in multiples of twenty from launch tubes along either side."

Polmanckelest could not wait until the discussion ended and dove down, engaged the ESS, slowed as the ship's engines experienced the energy drain and two images of the Prometheus appeared on the HUD. Each one flew in a parallel direction vectoring back in on the gate with maximum separation to steer clear of the carrier weapons systems. Tor pulled up and to the left whilst Stanad banked off to the right.

The carrier glided between them but maintained its heading.

Stanad commented, "It's not going for it, I'm thinking it's going to block the gate."

Tor responded, "Change of plan. Stanad see if you can get some strafing shots on the engine pods and I'll do the same. Sweety, tell me you can find a weakness in the shields."

Stanad made the first pass and managed to successfully avoid the incoming fire whilst the particle beam shimmered in the carrier's shields. Tor followed quickly on the principle that the turrets on the Khaak ship would take a time to recharge. To his pleasant surprise the incoming fire was greatly reduced.

Sweety responded, "You both need to make another six passes to penetrate the shields by which time the carrier will have already reached the gate."

Tor was concentrating on coming round for the next pass and said through clenched teeth, "Optimism Sweety, that's all we need right now."

Sweety commented in a cheerful voice, "Well on the plus side the carrier's weapons are taking longer to recharge which means that if you attack in quick succession you can get longer shots in."

Stanad's voice said, "Register that coming in for the second run."

Tor brought the Defiance around and followed in the continually changing course of the Nova. Several times the Khaak turret weapons fire scythed almost painfully close to the hull of the ship some only avoided within a moment by an impulsive vector change. Both the Nova and the Defiance particle beams

shimmering in the shields and Tor had the impression that the longer the beam held the colour resisting the impact began to change.

Then the Nova was veering away in preparation for the next pass, Tor broke high and in a corkscrew twist then began the next run this time leading the way. Tor kept the same twisting turning action but just as he pulled away from the Carrier he saw the beam flash up past the nose of the Defiance, it was too late to avoid. The shield glowed as Tor rapidly flipped the ship in several sharp turns to avoid any more incoming hits.

Sweety reported calmly, "Shields at sixty five percent."

Stand called in, "You okay kid?"

Tor said slightly shaken but still too full of adrenaline for it to last, "Yeah, but avoid those if you can."

Stanad replied cheerfully, "Fourth pass just commencing, get your arse in motion and follow my lead."

As they pulled away from the attack run Sweety commented, "Carrier has reached the gate and is reducing speed."

Both Stanad and Tor knew this meant they would soon be joined by a hundred Khaak fighters and neither of them had taken note of how far behind Polmanckelest was. Tor said, "Lets take out that engine, maybe we'll get lucky and blow this thing."

Stanad took a glancing hit on his shields as they commenced the fifth run, the Carrier had dropped to one quarter of its original speed and already the small fighters were emerging. The Nova continued its attack and Tor followed hot on the engine glow.

Sweety commented, "One more pass and we should see some damage starting. Now registering forty fighters have launched."

They came around again and for the second time Tor led the attack run. Carrier beam weapons somehow seemed more focused now the ship was stationary, and once again the Defiance was struck by a beam but this time on the inward run. Khaak fighters began to flash past, their weaker but still potent weapons lancing out towards the two ships. The Defiance took a second hit from the Carrier and the warning lights in the cockpit flashed red.

The Nova also took a shield battering and managed to get in a good hit. Stanad called out hurriedly, "We'll never make it though another run."

As the words came over the com there was an intense flash behind them, Tor brought the Defiance away on a long sweeping arc gaining safe distance and buy precious time for the shields to recover. Stanad called out, "May his god bless his Paranid hide."

Tor chanced a quick look at the carrier as explosions were beginning to rip through the hull.

Chapter 20. Return to X-four

Tor commented to Sweety, "Where's Pol?"

Sweety hesitated for a moment and then said, "He is still alive. I have the Prometheus on scanner and he has re-engaged the ESS."

Tor said with a hint of relief, "Open the comm Sweety."

Sweety responded hastily, "The Prometheus is under a sustained attack. He has just been rammed by a fighter. Shields are failing and I am detecting multiple systems failures."

Tor had turned sharply back and had the boost pressed even the thrusters had reached maximum speed without removing the safeties. Stanad was the first to the scene and even with reduced shields was firing on every ship even vaguely in range. Tor came in sharply the Beta HEPT's and particle beam firing in conjunction slicing and vaporizing everything in line of sight.

The Prometheus strafed sideways as another enemy vessel passed within a metre of his new position. The three broke free from the melee however the Khaak ships did not pursue but gathered together near the gate.

Tor sighed, he kept the ship on a vector heading away from the pack of Khaak fighter that remained giving him time to think and his shields to recover, "Well that was new, I got the distinct feeling that we've really outstayed our welcome this time. What about the others?"

Stanad commented wistfully, "You should really remember that the comm channel is still open, it helps during combat for relaying quick messages. Ships hanging together fine but I look to have picked up some more ancillary damage but nothing that can't be kicked back into shape. I'm worried about Pol the Prommy took one hell of a beating just then. Scanners indicate a change in the enemy tactics."

The comm crackled and the static from the communications system indicated that this time the Prometheus had indeed taken a considerable amount of damage, "... shi. .. is ..bout ..gether...giv ..hile ..fix .. me ..overed ."

Stanad replied slowly and clearly, "Pol mate, your comm system is all shot, can you repeat?"

This was met by a burst of static and an undecipherable response.

Tor brought the Defiance in close to the Prometheus. However he had to back away as the ship appeared to drift and then correct its course, seemingly having difficulty in maintaining level flight. Frozen crystallized atmosphere was leaking through several minor fractures.

Tor commented, "Sweety, it looks like a mess can you help?"

Sweety responded, "I will see what I can do but I am detecting a considerable amount of internal damage. However Polmankelest appears to have strong healthy life signs and is in no immediate danger."

Stanad commented with relief, "He's a tough," And left the sentence unfinished.

Tor said, "Any ideas on Stanads' comment about the change of tactics?"

Sweety replied after a brief moment, "My analysis is they were all attempting to ram the Prometheus. The shields have been focussed forward and weapons power diverted to the engines."

Tor looked surprised, "Why?"

Sweety replied, "I am not a Khaak, why should I know that?"

Tor sighed and smiled at the attempt to lighten the mood, despite the current situation, "But you know everything."

Tor could imagine the hint of a pleasant smile in the tone of Sweetys voice as she responded, "The only theory that I have is that, for these fighters, the carrier was the mother ship. Now that has been destroyed they have no future except to die a glorious death, but perhaps I am reading too much into the behaviour. If my theory is correct however that will make them extremely dangerous. The Xenon used a similar tactic in the great war and it is one that will be very difficult to defend against," Sweety then added almost casually, "I have to mention that we also have a problem. One of the shield unit surge protection breakers has been damaged so we only have two active shields. Fortunately we have spares but while I'm working on the Prometheus could you replace the damaged breaker. Also I am detecting some outer hull damage. Not significant at this moment but it will be a weakness during further combat."

Tor turned the pilot seat and moved to the rear of the cabin. He said, "Just make sure we don't collide."

As he rummaged through the spares locker he found the surge protection module and floor panel release tool. Crouching down he popped open the panel, the acrid smell of suppressant filled his nostrils and he could almost taste it. Releasing the catches he pulled out the damaged module and clipped in the replacement before depositing the old one in the waste unit.

Returning to the pilot seat he asked, "How's that?"

Sweety commented, "Much better, shield is now recharging. The Prometheus hull is now patched and we have restored rudder control, so the ship now flies in a straight line. Remarkably the ship can still use the hull masking but the ESS unit is damaged. Internal environmental units are also repaired as is the navigation system. Engine booster unit and auto docking systems are damaged beyond repair. Also the targeting system is not functioning at optimum configuration."

In a burst of static interference Polmanckelest called in, "Can you hear me now?" This time the complete message came across.

Stanad replied, "Good to hear you mate, but I think it's time for us to get out of this damn sector." He led the way as he began to make the turn back towards the gate and the ball of waiting Khaak fighters.

Inside Tor could not agree more but was apprehensive as to what came next, "Sweety tell me the next sector is X-five."

Sweety commented, "Negative it is just after the next sector."

Tor instinctively replied, "Tell me there isn't a capital ship just beyond the gate."

Sweety replied, "Negative all the capital ships are holding position near the X-five gate."

Stanad asked, "This is all very well but Sweety can you do something with the Prommys' engines to see if you can squeeze a bit more speed out of her? At this moment we need as much speed as possible, as I really don't think we can take on too many more cap ships without losing at least one of us."

There was a momentary pause and then Sweety replied, "I can reprogram the computer to temporarily off line the unmodified shield unit and divert power to engines whilst raising the maximum speed threshold limit. This will increase the maximum speed by thirty mps. As a safety measure, at Polmanckelest request, the shield can be reactivated but he will lose the speed gained and the shield will take time to regenerate."

Polmanckelest replied in his gruff voice with a low level static interference in the background, "Do it."

A few moments later the Prometheus surged forward. Tor felt perplexed and with a growing sense of concern as they closed with the Khaak fighters, which for the moment showed no sign of moving to

intercept but had formed themselves into what appeared to be a ball of closely packed ships. He asked, "What are they doing?"

Stanad also noted, "I don't like this, the fighters from the station have retreated and are standing off."

Sweety commented, "I am detecting unusual energy levels within each of the ships."

Tor responded with a general comment, "Let's see if we can swing around towards the rear of the gate."

As they changed direction so the ball of fighters suddenly broke apart and started to regroup ahead of them.

Stanad commented with little enthusiasm, "I can see this getting very messy."

No one responded as they continued to draw closer, the Khaak ships changed formation the lead ships moved out from the centre pulling the adjacent ones slight behind and seemed to be forming a cone pointing directly towards the three of them. Again they changed heading and once more the Khaak fighters adjusted position.

The gate loomed closer. Stanad commented earnestly, "These guys are beginning to spook me out."

Tor said, "We've got to get past."

They closed in and pulled away as they reached firing range the Khaak ships shot forwards all power diverted to the engines. The particle beams reducing the first few ships to vapour without a returned shot. As the nearest fighter failed to ram the Defiance it self destructed, sending out a shock wave that turned it. The next Khaak fighter also exploded and the third passed within metres of the Nova before it detonated.

Sweety was targeting incoming fighters as fast as she could process them and energize the particle beam. Without shields they exploded immediately but the resulting energy wave effected the Defiance and when one detonated within one hundred meters, it not only buffeted the ship but the resulting pulse sapped the shield strength. The effect increased significantly the shorter the distance.

The Defiance was suddenly swept up in a series of rapid explosions and went into an uncontrolled flat spin the cockpit screen fractured then exploded outwards and Tor gripped the flight stick with all his strength to prevent being sucked out of the ship in the out rushing air. Items from the cabin flew past him. The moment passed and Tor glanced quickly over and breathed easy in his environment suit to see the technical data pad was still firmly seated in the holder. The environment suit quickly warmed but everything was still swirling as the ship span away.

Sweetys commented through the suits comm, "I think a profanity or two might be in order."

Tor commented as the gate span past once again and was quite definitely getting smaller, "What's happening."

Sweety replied, "We have lost engine stabilization and all thruster control."

Tor saw several more explosions near the gate on the next spin. He saw this as a sign that the others were still alive and asked, "So what now?"

Sweety responded with her attention obviously elsewhere, "I will try to repair the engines and get them restarted."

Tor dreaded the next answer but could not help himself from asking, "What if you can't?"

Sweety replied bluntly, "Then expect to keep going round and round like this until we hit something, but that might not be for several thousand years, if at all. But the really bad news is you only have two hours of oxygen."

Tor now felt helpless, “Anything I can do?”

Sweety responded unhelpfully, “Sit back and enjoy the view.”

To his mind this was not how it was supposed to end, somewhere deep down he felt as though there was so much more for him to do, like save the day and get the girl. At the moment he was spinning away ignominiously into deep space. He said defiantly, “There must be something I can do?”

Sweety considered the offer, “Okay, take a look behind you and try to get to the engine access hatch. At the moment I’m using the reserve power to keep the replicator active, but I will direct you to several power couplings which need to be disconnected.”

Spinning the chair round Tor looked at the devastation behind him access panels had been blown open, and the gravity units were offline so objects were bouncing around in the cabin.

The suit comm crackled to life, “Tor please respond?”

He felt momentarily relieved, “Yeah I’m here.”

Polmankelest responded, “I’m detecting only minimal reserve power. Suggest you abandon.”

For a moment Tor hesitated and indecision clouded his mind, “Sweety, what are our chances?”

Sweety responded gently, “Slim.”

Tor closed his eyes and tried to weigh up the options in his own mind, he asked “What if we abandon ship?”

The hesitation spoke volumes and Sweety in a normal, un-featured voice that many AI systems had, replied, “The choice is yours but I will not be able to leave with you.”

Tor glanced at the technical datapad and weighed up the choices based on his own survival from slim to certain. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes to blink slowly as the solar system span around behind him. He asked quietly, “What do you mean?”

There was a hint of sadness in Sweetys voice, “This ship is as much a part of me as your body is to you. I have defined and improved it to the extent that this is my home. I cannot fix all the systems without your help and if you abandon ship then I will ensure that I am left behind to auto destruct.”

Tor was lost for words.

Stanad called in, “Tor, are you abandoning ship?” There was no response, “Tor, what are your intentions?”

Tor heard the requests and simply stared into the cabin. He had already experienced the loss of his parents and only family that he had ever really known and now, although the AI was only computer based, he felt that he was about to lose a very close friend if not the best friend he had if he decided to bail out.

Sweety interrupted his thoughts, “They are still waiting for a response.”

Tor blinked tears from his eyes and replied, “Give us a chance to see if we can get the engines back on line.” He placed his magnetized boots on the deck and stepped out of the seat.

Polmankelest called out, “You are travelling at nearly three hundred and seventy mps, if you delay too long we will not be able to recover you before your suit oxygen supply expires.”

Pausing as he tentatively pushed objects ahead of him back towards the rear of the cabin he took a deep breath and said, “I’ve got to at least try to get this thing going again.”

He caught a tool as it floated by and stabilizing himself then grabbed a passing floor panel. After clipping it back in place he proceeded forward again. The engine maintenance hatch opened easily and he was met by small fragments of metal and conduit which had been sucked towards the hatch when the air left the ship. Tor only hoped there was still enough in the ship tanks to recharge the cabin.

Crawling along the maintenance run he could see blackened and ruptured power lines. Tor commented, "Okay Sweetie, what needs uncoupling?"

Sweetie replied, "Move on a few metres and unhook the end of the main coupling to your right."

Tor followed the instructions, then moved along and did the same to two more couplings. Sweetie had him open another hatch and this time he descended to arrive at the main power unit. A confined console unit blinked red and Tor took a quick look. He noted that he was going to have difficulty in turning around and that his current position was in fact between both the main power units. Neither showed any indications of being energized.

Sweetie commented, "Okay Tor, you need to use the manual override to decouple both power units. You'll find it over the main console. Just unclip the bridging module."

Looking up Tor saw in the lights of his EVA the unit. Taking a moment to study it he reached up and unfastened the two latches before giving the module a pull. It moved but only slightly. Several straining moments of tugging later and eventually it popped out. Tor asked still panting, "Okay what now?"

There was a brief tremble from the power unit to his left and then nothing. Tor waited expectantly with his breath held. The power unit trembled again and this time for longer before dying away.

Tor commented apprehensively, "It's not looking good Sweetie."

Time passed and Stanad called out, "Maximum safe distance has been reached, you're on your own mate. We will continue to follow until we get acknowledgement that you're no longer with us."

The Mizuras slipped by and Tor could sense the reserve power was nearly expended as the suit lights began to dim leaving him waiting in near darkness. He looked at the oxygen level indicator on his suit in the fading light and it was already buried into the red level. He suddenly realised that his breathing was in short gasps and said, "Sweetie, progress?"

There was a pulse and suddenly the maintenance lights flickered. They began to glow dimly, growing brighter with each passing moment. Tor said, "Yes."

Sweetie called in, "Partial power restored, Tor I need you to reattach two of the power couplings in the maintenance run so I can reestablish environmental controls."

Tor started to move back towards the ladder and every movement was an effort. Slowly and painfully he climbed the ladder, all the while Sweetie was giving encouragement.

Finally and without trying to breathe too heavily he reached the coupling. With effort he lifted the first one into position and snapped the latch into place. The effort of reattaching the second was becoming too much, the lack of gravity meant he could place the coupling but the latches were proving to be physically difficult to close. He felt dizzy with lack of oxygen and spent a moment focussing his efforts. Slowly the lever shifted and moved bit by painful bit until it eventually clicked home.

Sweetie had taken full advantage of the power available and had already patched the hull, including growing a new cockpit shield.

Tor knelt on the floor his breathing heavily laboured as his lungs tried to extract the last of the free oxygen from the suit. Feeling the cold Tor noticed that with each breath a frost began to grow across the inside of the visor. He collapsed completely and gradually began to slip into unconsciousness.

In the background he could hear the hiss of the environmental units as they pumped air back into the ship from the reserve tanks and raised the temperature. Several neurons fired in Tors' mind that he was, in his current state, about to suffocate in his own suit.

As the pressure of the cabin increased to standard atmosphere the pressure vents in the EVA suit, which snapped shut as soon as the pressure dropped, reopened allowing fresh oxygen to permeate back into the suit.

Sweety said in a commanding voice, "Tor, breathe!"

Tors' eyes rolled back and his eyelids fluttered shut. Locking onto a section of the helmet Sweety used the modified transporter to remove a section of the visor. It was a risky process as there was a very real problem that she could accidentally remove a section of Tors' face.

The hole she created was relatively small but, fresh air now washed in across Tor. His nose twitched and almost in a spasm of relief he took a sudden and very deep intake of breath. In that instance the body reacted and Tor almost sat bolt upright as he took several quick but very deep gulps of air. Rolling to his side he then coughed. It took another Mizura of rasping coughs before he felt sufficiently recovered to move again.

Tor coughed and although his mouth felt unusually dry he commented, "That was too close Sweety."

Sweety answered gently and with, what Tor took to be a hint of relief, "It is good to hear you are okay."

Tor squinted and moved his head before reaching up and touched his face through the hole in the visor. He said, "Right, well I won't ask how you did that. It's probably best not to know."

Sweety said, "We are not out of trouble yet. I need you to reconnect the third coupling and re-bridge the two engines."

Tor sighed, "And will we be fully operational?"

Sweety replied, "Nearly, I have corrected the spin and brought the ship back under control. Our heading is back towards the gate and we should rejoin the others in about fifteen Mizura. But we do not have full engine power and some subsystems are still inoperative."

Tor scrambled slowly back to a low crouch which was all the space afforded in the maintenance run and returned to the engine bay. Reconnecting the bridge was far easier than removing now the artificial gravity units were restored to full power. A while later he was back in the pilots seat and taking stock of the interior of the cabin.

Stanad called in, "Glad to see you're back up and running, even if you did leave it to the last possible Sezura."

Tor replied, "Touch and go for a moment. Anyway how did you guys fare?"

Stanad gave a short laugh, "You were definitely the one they were after. I guess they thought the Defiance is the main ship. And quite frankly it was a miracle you made it out at all."

Polmankelest interrupted, "We still need to escape the sector, and we're now half a Stazura from the gate with more incoming fighters on the way."

Stanad added to the statement with a touch of bitterness, "Let's hope they don't go suicidal like the last lot."

As the three ships regrouped they came to a complete stop each one scanning the other for miscellaneous damage and to take stock of replacement parts. Sweety making good any quick fix repair. The mood of the

three pilots was business like as they took the opportunity to review the situation and try to form a survival plan.

Eventually Polmankelest commented, "We survive by audacity, they know we can take on their big ships but we have to divide and eliminate the smaller fighters. They are not afraid to sacrifice themselves so keep outside of any pack."

Sweety interrupted them and commented, "I have completed all the repairs that I can, the rest will have to wait until we reach the Roamer or a safe station."

Stanad commented, "Time to go."

Sweety commented to Tor, "Your EVA is now recharged but you will need to remove the helmet so I can repair the visor."

Breaking the seal Tor lifted the helmet and placed it on the table in the cabin. He heard the transporter energize and the front of the visor shimmered for a brief while and then stopped. Turning the helmet towards him he looked closely across the surface for signs of the repair.

With a shrug, having found nothing, he placed the helmet over his head and ensured the seal was made.

The return to the gate was unhampered, as the Khaak had now stationed themselves near to the gate. Although the comm was open none of the pilots spoke, each one studying the fleet of small ships.

Polmankelest commented, "How do you think they'll react if we attack one of their stations?"

There was a momentary pause before Sweety interjected, "They might abandon guarding the gate."

Stanad added thoughtfully, "And they'll get really annoyed."

Tor asked, "Sweety did you ever break the Khaak language problem?"

Sweety replied, "I am still working on it but I believe that I may have made a few small breakthroughs."

There was an expectant pause as the others waited to know why Tor asked the question. He asked, "Any chance that you can broadcast a message that we have decided to make this sector our home and unless they surrender we will destroy their stations?"

Again this was followed by silence. Sweety said, "Message transmitted but it might take them a few moments to recognise the translation."

Tor smiled and said, "Everyone aim for the nearest station to the gate."

The three ships steered away from the gate and aligned themselves back on target. Khaak fighters moved to intercept.

Stanad commented, "It looks as though the threat might just have worked."

Tor glanced at the HUD as Sweety targeted and eliminated the nearest of the Khaak ships. Sure enough the message had made it through and with the current flight vector of the three ships, the enemy fighters swarmed away from the gate back towards their respective stations. Stanad took out a second vessel before they reached safe distance with fighters now pursuing.

Stanad asked, "So what now?" The station began to loom and yet more fighters began to emerge from inside.

Tor commented, "We make one pass. Just to make a point then break high and head for home."

Polmanckelest responded with a Paranid hint of approval, "Good plan."

The distance closed and spiraling thought a wave of fighters, not yet ordered to commit suicide, they skimmed up the outer hull of the station the particle beams from the Nova and Defiance arcing down on the shields causing them to shimmer in a wide spectrum of colours and as they reached the upper most point they rolled under full power, soaring away towards the gate. The Prometheus trailed closely on their engine glow.

It took a moment before the Khaak registered the potential deception but rather than risk being wrong held defensive positions around the stations.

With a certain sense of uncertainty as to what they would face next, the three ships crossed the gate activation zone. As the system came into view they were relieved to see there was no cruiser or any other capital ship to greet them.

This was of little comfort as the gate to sector X-five was seeing the arrival and departure of Khaak ships of all types. There were three Khaak capital ships still in the sector.

Stanad commented, "I guess we missed the X-five battle."

Tor replied quietly, "Let's hope X-four is still holding out."

As the three ships flew straight for the X-five gate, each pilot had a growing suspicion that the Khaak were simply watching their progress. At no time did they try to intercept and even the battlecruisers remained stationary.

Over the comm Tor heard Stanad mutter, "I don't like this."

Polmanckelest made a noise in agreement and Tor felt a growing sense of uneasiness.

When they were within ten k's of the gate all activity stopped and ships veered away to maintain safe distance.

Tor asked, "Sweety any idea what's going to meet us on the other side of the gate?"

There was a pause and the reply came back, "An entire Khaak war fleet."

Tor asked calmly, "How close?"

Sweety replied, "The fleet is divided between the gate that we are heading for and the X-four gate. Other ships are in the sector but these appear to be interplanetary assault vessels."

Tor rephrased the question, "Would we be within weapons range when we enter the sector?"

Sweety replied bluntly, "Yes."

Polmanckelest commented, "Okay, give us an escape vector heading of least resistance so we can boost away with minimal potential impact."

Sweety did the calculation and transmitted the vector heading.

Tor asked, "What about using the jumpdrive to an unguarded gate?"

Stanad responded before Sweety, "Nice idea but this ship doesn't have one fitted."

Quietly Tor cursed as the idea of having to split up now, when they were so close to making it back, was definitely not the thing he wanted to do. He commented, "We go with plan A. Vector programmed in and boost ready to engage. Let's go for the gate."

They crossed the threshold together and as Sweety had instructed each ship hit the boost and veered away as heavy weapons fire from two waiting destroyers tried to anticipate the flight paths of each ship. Khaak medium to heavy fighters closed in.

As they turned down and fought for space, a second pair of destroyers moved to intercept in a pincer movement. Sweety commented, "Vector change uploaded."

Polmankelest strafed and rolled in on the new vector. As he made the move he locked onto an incoming medium fighter which disintegrating under the forward facing particle beam. Stanad dodged and weaved between the next cascade of destroyer heavy weapons fire, his shield glowed briefly as he took a hit but broke free to engage a group of three incoming fighters.

Tor rolled, strafed and rolled as beam weapons fire cut across his position and flight path. He ignored his weapons and concentrated on flying. Sweety targeted and eliminated two light fighters.

The first pair of destroyers were moving, each one turning away from the gate. Sweety instructed, "Vector changed."

Once again Polmankelest led the way with a precisely executed move, the only adjustment to destroy an incoming fighter as an almost casual afterthought.

Stanad made a few bold swoops and turns in the Nova, its beam weapon eliminating any immediate threat before breaking high and re-establishing the new heading to clear space for Tor to roll in directly behind the Prometheus.

Tor sighed with relief when they were clear and had no incoming hostile fire. The rest of the Khaak war fleet appeared to be clustered near the X-four gate which flashed as waves of fighters made the run.

Stanad reflected his own thoughts, "Look at them all, how the hell are we supposed to hold out against that."

Polmankelest replied, "We're not. Eventually they will grind down any defences."

Tor asked, "What's the odds Sweety?"

Sweety replied casually, "By rough calculation there is a five hundred to one differential between the number of Khaak fighters to sector forces. But that is just in this sector. The limiting factor to the invasion is the capacity of the gate."

Behind them the first pair of destroyers had completed the turn and with the second pair now surged forward in formation after the three. The gate ahead stopped activating as the Khaak paused in their assault and the first carrier grade ship moved forward with its remaining fighters.

Stanad called out, "Looks like they're sending in the big guns."

Polmankelest also observed, "Destroyers are chasing."

Sweety confirmed, "They are of no immediate threat, however they will catch us if we get into a major entanglement with the forces ahead. I notice that the enemy has deployed missile ships."

Tor asked, "Can we send a warning?"

There was a pause, "There is very little comms activity but I will see if I can commandeer an unblocked transmission frequency."

Commander Parrel sat solemnly in his command chair. The screen display in front of him was split to show activity at both gates. It was a fire fight of an intensity he had never seen, or ever wanted to see again. Wave after wave of Khaak small, medium and heavy fighters were entering the sector in a relentless wave of destruction. The lasertowers slicing through the heart of each wave, but waiting for the next one rather than tracking the survivors, which subsequently fell to various fighter wings in a constant rotation of pursue and wait.

He commented, "What's the status?"

First officer Sheero replied, "We have lost eight fighters so far. The Khaak many times that number."

Glancing at the sector map on a small sub display it listed all the fighters, allied on the left side, enemies on the right. He reflected bitterly that, as the right hand side diminished, that they would soon be replenished whereas the left hand side would always fall in numbers.

Bitterly he reflected at the presence of three X-five stations that had monitored the activity in X-four and were not going to let a good idea go to waste. The addition of numerous fighters that had escaped or simply followed the stations had been a significant bonus. It had allowed him to organize sizable separate defensive squads.

The gate to X-five ceased to exude more Khaak fighters.

The communications officer he had a slightly puzzled yet excited tone, "Sir we have received an incoming message."

Parrel glanced across, "And?"

The communications officer replied, "The message came out from X-five, Sir. ID matches that of the Defiance."

Parrel allowed the words to sink in and the command crew looked around in surprise, he said loudly, "What does it say?"

The communications officer replied, "Carrier inbound. Warning resonance missiles inbound. Will cause major damage when detonated to all surrounding vessels."

Parrel commented, "How are we for fast light fighters?"

Sheero reported, "We have all four Pegasus ships and three maxed out Discoverers."

Parrel ordered, "Get them to the X-five gate and watch for incoming objects. They must destroy them immediately."

Chapter 21. Survival

The invasion fleet appeared to be unconcerned by the presence of Tor and his two companions even though they had slipped through the initial trap. The focus seemingly locked onto breaking the blockade of the receiving gate. However when they were within five k's of the fleet several fighter groups broke formation and moved to intercept.

Tor commented urgently, "Sweety, any chance you can break into the Khaak bombers and self destruct some of their missiles?"

Sweety replied, "No. These are dumb fire missiles and do not have the usual targeting and input systems. Missile launches detected."

The three ships broke formation as they encountered the first wave of fighters. Beam weapons flashed in all directions and several Khaak ships exploded. Tor could hear a plinking sound, as shards of the enemy vessel bounced off the hull and energised in the shields. He rolled and strafed to avoid a collision with a second incoming fighter and had a sudden sensation of dread that the enemy fighters would suddenly employ the same suicidal tactics of the ill fated carrier ships. Fortunately there was no explosion, however the Khaak were definitely trying to ram the three ships. They converged on the Nova and closed up.

Tor swept around and gunned down one ship on the Beta HEPT's whilst Stanad attempted to punch an escape hole through the rapidly closing vessels. Beam weapons fire lanced through the converging group and the Novas shields shone as it tried to strafe and weave its way free. The Prometheus swooped in with six Khaak fighters closing in on its tail and destroyed two ships.

Tor found himself in trouble and missed the sight of the collision between the Nova and one of the Khaak fighters, both ships span out with flames and gases pouring out from breeches in the hull. The next voice he heard was Stanads, "That was close."

The Nova span away and explosions ripped through the hull, the voice was behind him, "Too close."

Tor did not look around, "Sweety, tell me you have a jump signal to X-four."

The Prometheus appeared to cut away from the next wave of fighters in order to prevent itself from becoming entrapped in a sphere of destruction. Stanad sat in the co-pilots seat and immediately started to monitor events outside.

Sweety replied, "Jump navigation beacon established, transmitting frequency and location."

Tor flipped the Defiance into a tight roll and dispensed with another fighter as Stanad engaged the boost to push the ship through the halo of expanding gasses. Tor commented loudly, "Pol, make the jump!"

Polmanckelest replied, "Jump co-ordinates acknowledged and engaging."

Four fighters closed in and tightened formation the beam weapons flashed and the Prometheus shields began to drop rapidly until he rolled and strafed free, then with a bright flash the jump tunnel opened and the Paranid fighter was gone.

Stanad commented, "Ready to jump when you are."

Tor gave it some thought, as the Defiance was now on maximum speed the Khaak fighters were falling behind, but the next wave was closing in. He said, "I want to take out the bombers."

Stanad replied, "Well I don't want to spoil your party but the Carrier is almost at the gate, and if those other missiles got through then by the time we kill these guys there may not be a whole hell of a lot of X-four left."

Tor examined the HUD and as the next wave closed in he commented, "Engage the jumpdrive Sweety."

Sweety replied, "Ten seconds to jumpdrive activation."

Aiming the Defiance to an empty section of space he watched the HUD. The jump tunnel opened and Stanad hit the boost as soon as the view cleared, behind him the nose of the Khaak carrier emerged and ahead of him two laser towers flared into life.

Pulling up hard Sweety had the particle beam fully engaged on the Khaak capital ship and the shield levels dropped rapidly. A mix of fighters swept in and plasma filled the intervening space. The comm was jammed with shouts of victory as the carrier began to rupture into flames. However its turrets fired and cut down two ships before it finally broke apart only metres from the gate.

The comm opened and the holo-image of Commander Parrel appeared, "Have a good trip?"

Tor smiled, "Like you wouldn't believe."

Parrel smiled back, "Better upload as much information as you can, because we sure as hell need more data on those missiles."

Sweety acknowledged with the response, "Upload commencing."

There was little time to celebrate as the Khaak had sent a swarm of fighters to support the carrier which, they were only just acknowledging, had been destroyed. Tor gave valuable support but to him it was a welcome change not to have to fight against far superior numbers.

Polmanckelest called in, "I'm heading for the Roamer. This ship needs a complete overhaul. Stop by when you have time and I'll buy you a drink."

Stanad leaned over from the co-pilot seat and patted Tor on the shoulder, "Thanks for getting me out of there. I owe you one."

The next wave of fighters emerged as Tor banked around and homed in on one. The attacking craft were quickly dispensed with. Tor sighed loudly before commenting, "I really need a rest."

Stanad commented, "Well you saw the size of the fleet on the other side, once we've eradicated that lot then hopefully you'll get some."

"Thanks for the reminder." Tor replied.

Stanad smiled and commented, "Alternatively we alternate. You grab some sleep and I pilot, then we swap over."

Both gates became quiet and Tor commented, "Missile alert." Pulling the Defiance up and away the ship surged forwards and away from the gate. Sure enough several small objects came through. Pegasus ships seemingly came out of nowhere and destroyed the X-five gate missiles but two of the X-two gate missiles slip past the Discoverers.

Two of the lasertowers went offline as did seven defending fighters.

Tor ordered, "Jump to the X-two gate." The corvette moved forward to provide support and transport pilots.

The Defiance jumped and once again the nose of a Khaak capital ship followed it away from the gate. This time it was a destroyer class. The particle beam of the Defiance striking the bridge section as the corvette raked the hull with plasma from the multiple turret weapons. The surviving fighters swooped in and attacked in a major assault as the one undamaged lasertower flared. The destroyer rolled as it began to break apart its turret weapons firing wildly.

Waves of fighters emerged from the gate and the battle intensified. Plasma and beam weapons fire filled the space as both sides fought for control which remained in the balance. Tor saw an Elite being chased down and banked hard to lend support. The Khaak heavy fighter robbed the remains of the shields and explosions tore through the Elite hull before Tor was in range and the particle beam energised. A few brief moments later and all that was left of the Khaak fighter was a rapidly fading, glowing vapour, but not before a familiar voice said, "Am I glad to see you."

Stanad replied in a cheerful tone, "And once again we meet in inhospitable circumstances. Perhaps it's fate?"

Tris commented, "Fortunately I wasn't talking to you?"

Tor said nothing whilst he banked hard round to engage the next wave of fighters as they emerged from the gate. Two were destroyed as Tor brought the Defiance to a gradual stop in front of the activation zone. The others were destroyed by the surviving fighters.

Stanad asked out loud, "Do you think it's sensible to stop just here?" Tor said nothing a look of grim resolve etched onto his face.

The next wave of incoming fighters were decimated in three successive bursts of energy and a well timed fly past by a mixed group of Eels and Busters. The Roamer had moved away from its relatively safe position near the nebula and tugs, used to assist with the docking of the Corvette, recovered the damaged fighters and lasertowers.

Once again the gates fell silent but this time there were no missiles or capital ships emerging from the gate. The Defiance maintained its position and Tor remained steadfastly quiet in the pilot seat, every remaining ounce of his attention was focused on the gate as he stared into the star strewn blackness beyond.

Tris tapped him on the shoulder for the eighth time and his gaze shifted, she commented softly, "Take a break, I'll sit in whilst you get some sleep."

Tor replied, "It's not over yet." As the words spilled from his mouth the gate activated and a wave of six harmonic missiles appeared.

Sweety managed to destroy four and the two remaining Discoverers chased down the last pair. Tor braced himself for the sudden emergence of a Khaak capital ship but nothing arrived. At the X-five gate however three waves of fighters poured in and were quickly engaged. Tor noted that Polmanckelest's Prometheus had rejoined the fighter screen.

Still nothing emerged through the X-two gate and once the Khaak fighters had been destroyed the sector fell quiet. Tor moved uncomfortably and asked, "Sweety, any idea what they're upto?"

Sweety replied, "Negative, communications and navigation out of the sector are blocked and I cannot find a Khaak satellite to patch into."

Tris sighed before commenting, "Looks like they're rethinking their strategy."

Stanad said bitterly, "Don't know why, there's enough of them to grind us down and break through eventually."

A repaired Discoverer launched from the Roamer and headed towards them. As it turned past and adopted a defensive chase position for incoming missiles the comm opened. The communications officer on the Mammoth said, "Mr Grall, the Commander sends his greetings and requests that you dock with the Roamer as soon as is convenient."

Tor glanced at each of his companions and responded, "We'll stand by until any fighters undergoing repair are back in service."

The officer nodded and replied, "Acknowledged. Three repaired fighters will be launching in the next few Mizura."

Time slipped by and the defenders waited restlessly, the comms system a faint hum of hushed voices. The Roamer moved closer to the X-two gate and launched repaired ships to rejoin the fighter screen. The lasertowers were repositioned behind the gate to strike out at the unprotected rear of any fighters and also stay clear of any harmonic missiles that did make it to a detonation point. The danger of accidentally striking defending craft was taken to be acceptable.

Tor swung the Defiance around to the rear of the gate and destroyed the remaining five black boxes before heading to the Roamer for much needed repairs, and he hoped a chance to rest. For a moment he toyed with the idea of going through the gate to see what the Khaak were up to but refrained particularly as he had passengers. Stanad had taken the opportunity to relinquish the co-pilot seat and crashed out on the bunk. Tris quietly took the co-pilot seat and busied herself monitoring instrumentation.

Docking permission was granted and the Defiance glided gracefully into the maintenance bay of the Roamer. A team of technicians, nearly all of which looked close to exhaustion, and maintenance robots moved in quickly with diagnostic equipment and spare parts.

Tor turned and looked at Tris then said quietly, "Looks like this is your stop."

Tris replied with a faint smile, "Want to get rid of me so soon?"

Looking very tired and thoughtful, Tor shook his head slowly and replied, "I really don't know how this is going to end. They know the Defiance and what damage it can inflict, we're the threat and somehow if the Khaak get through we're going to be the primary target." He paused as he considered his words, "It's going to get nasty and I don't want the responsibility of having others on board if I make a mistake. You'll be okay on here, and if you do find yourself another ship then I only have one piece of advice, if the Khaak break through, get to Creeds Gate." His eyes flicked towards the technical datapad, "Sweety, how long till the next window?"

Sweety replied, "Approximately twelve Stazura."

Tris looked at him and responded, "And if I say I'm staying?"

Tor smiled and with a slight laugh answered, "Actually I'd like that." Then turned the pilot seat and went into the cabin.

The airlock door opened and Commander Parrel entered as Tor disturbed Stanad, "Tor, we need to talk."

Stanad stirred and looked across at Parrel, he swung his legs off the edge of the bunk and said, "Sir."

The Commander looked at him and then at Tris before saying, "Find yourself some food and get some rest. We're on pilot rotation so I'll need both of you fighting fit in one Stazura."

Stanad patted Tor on the shoulder and winked at him, "No rest for the wicked. Catch you around soon for another adventure."

Tris looked as though she was about to object but the expression on Parrels' face indicated that this was an order not a request. Tor said nothing and remained standing even though his body felt incredibly tired.

Parrel came straight to the point, "We need the technology locked in your computer. We cannot hope to survive until the jump window in order to make a run for Creeds Gate without more ships like the Defiance."

Tor considered his options and knew that he had none, “Sweetie, what about it?”

There was a momentary hesitation, “There are only a handful of ships that can be successfully, fully modified because they have suitable internal components. These are Piranhas, Eels, Novas, and Perseus class ships. The Corvette could be modified by down rating two of the shield units and using two of its turret weapons systems but it would be restricted to a forward only particle beam.”

Parrel looked disappointed that the list was not longer, “Okay, we’ll call in any of those ships first. And see if you can’t come up with a way to improve the other classes.” As he left he called back, “Get some food and rest, you look like shit.”

Sweetie commented, “I think he may have a point.”

Tor said quietly and slowly, “Yeah.” Throwing himself down on the bunk, technicians and maintenance robots worked around him whilst he slipped into a restless and uncomfortable sleep. How long he slept for he was not certain, but he woke up suddenly with alarms ringing through the cabin. Tor swung his legs off the bunk and hastened to the pilots seat. The Defiance was already back in space and closing in on the X-five gate. Chaos appeared to reign and whatever plan the Khaak had put in place, it appeared to have given them the upper hand.

The comm buzzed, with shouts of, “They’re all over me, I can’t...”, “Need some help over her...” followed by brief bursts of static.

The HUD showed eight defence ships showing structural and systems damage, these were being ignored by the Khaak, even though six were drifting slowly back towards the Nebula in some desperate hope they may reach the Roamer and relative safety.

The arrival of the first Khaak Destroyer entering almost unchallenged spoke volumes. The laser towers energised in a desperate attempt to prevent the capital ship from completely entering the sector and Tor saw the distinctive flare of the Prometheus particle beam raking down across the bridge. The destroyer cleared the gate and reached safe distance from the lasertowers when three Perseus ships opened fire in punishing volleys of plasma and particle beams that streamed in on the intruder. Another run by the Prometheus, despite the responding beam weapon fire from the various lasertowers, had the shields yield and small explosions flare out of the hull. However the destroyer remained intact driving further into the sector. The Perseus ships fought as a team when they were intercepted by more Khaak fighters. One took heavy damage from a concentration of beam weapons fire before the attacking ships were eliminated.

Three silkworm missiles from Busters brought about the demise of the Khaak destroyer much to Tors’ relief. Ahead of him, two heavy Khaak fighters closed in on an Elite that was trying every evasive manoeuvre that he could think of when the Defiance closed in and the particle beam did its work.

As the halo of superheated gases faded the nose of a Khaak carrier ship forced its way into the sector. The lasertowers once again flared but this time they were silenced by the capital ships rear gunners. Polmanckelests’ Prometheus had been forced to disengage in order to replenish its shields, whilst only two Perseus ships remained in fighting condition. The third was limping towards the Roamer

Tor could only guess that the Boron class ships would be located at the X-two gate. Khaak fighters jostled for position as they began to enter the sector. With a very real sense of defeat taking hold of the defenders the battle intensified. The Defiance particle beam attempting to help stem the flood of new ships whilst the Carrier started to disgorge its own fighter compliments. The Defiance rolled and heaved as beam weapons fire cascaded in from all sides. The Beta HEPT’s blasting everything that strayed across their path and then the Corvette arrived.

Khaak ships erupted into flame and as it passed the forward particle beam lashed out against the belly of the carrier and in towards the launching bay. The carrier shield flashed and shimmered until the Corvette came around but it took heavy punishing hits from the laser turrets of the carrier, with sections of hull appearing to be ripped off. The two Perseus ships led by Polmanckelests’ Prometheus swept towards the gate. Tor cut in front of the carrier the particle beam pulsed.

Sweety said, "Taking control."

Tor let go and blanked his mind with what was about to come next. The Defiance looped over the top of the carrier avoiding the laser fire and as it came around the front of the ship glowed.

The shields of the carrier flashed and flared under the bombardment and Tor suddenly had his doubts that they would break through. Silkworm missiles impacted on the shields and the Defiance was suddenly met by vaporising sections of hull, gas and flame which washed over the Defiance as it drove down into the capital ship. Somewhere inside the Defiance stopped and an automated warning blared out as the cockpit flashed red, "Shields critical, shields critical."

Something landed on the cockpit screen and Tor could see a nightmare apparition of several legs as a pair of mandibles slammed hard into the screen. They drew back and struck again. Tor yelled, "Sweety."

The reverse thrusters flared as the creature hit the screen again and again before sliding off and burning up in a jet of flame whilst the Defiance jettied backwards out of the hole it had made.

Tor said as calmly as he could, "What was that?"

Sweety replied in a soothing voice, "I believe that was a Khaak."

Tor caught his breath and commented quietly, "Remind me never to ask one to dinner." The Defiance cleared the carrier, pirouetted in space and sped away from the unmoving vessel.

The order was given to leave the carrier alone and tugs were launched from the Roamer. Tor chased down Khaak fighters that were heading into and regrouping within the sector, whilst the Perseus and Prometheus helped to regain control of the gate.

Tor observed, as he chased down the last pair of Khaak light fighters, that the tugs were dragging the Khaak capital ship across the front of the gate. The defending fighters kept the incoming fighters back until there was a noticeable lull when a fresh wave of Khaak missiles arrived and slammed into the superstructure before reaching their detonation point.

The comm buzzed with excited voices sensing that they had somehow won an important victory. Tor simply sighed and ignored the calls. They had lost ten fighters from the X-five gate defences and all the remaining lasertowers, another seven fighters were crippled and being recovered for repairs. Tor wondered why the Khaak had completely ignored trying to invade through the X-two gate.

Mizuras passed and there was no sign of further Khaak attacks, Tor fidgeted in his seat. Suddenly the gate flashed three times as missiles entered the sector and slammed into the remains of the carrier. Tor could feel a vibration run through the cabin.

In a sudden pulse both the X-two and X-five gates vanished. The Khaak carrier disintegrated before them as it tore itself apart and there was a chilling, total silence over the comm.

Tor whispered, "What happened?"

Sweety replied gently, "They have unplugged the gates and restored them to their proper phase condition."

Tor realised the full implication of the act, "We're stuck here?"

Sweety commented, "There are no life supporting planets in this sector and only a small amount of natural resources to sustain any size of population. We have no deep space method of travel, particularly with respect to travelling from one solar system to the next. The Khaak may have reached the conclusion that, however much of a threat we may present to them now, if they return in one hundred of their years we would either have died out or be in no condition to resist their warships."

After the brief summary that Sweetey gave Tor asked, “So you don’t think this is a trick? That they’ll just wait a few Stazura, and when we’re completely off guard, reopen the gates and attack?”

Sweetey appeared to pause in consideration of the option given, even though she had already assessed the idea, “There will always be the risk. Without the gates however the Khaak can receive no information on the sector and I do not believe they will reopen the gates to look for some time. They are in control and can wait indefinitely.”

Commander Parrel interrupted the conversation with a sector wide broadcast, his own reservations similar to those of Tor, “Attention all pilots, maintain positions and patrols. This may be a Khaak trick to put us off our guard. We know they can control the gates and these are no exception. The disappearance may only be temporary. In the meantime we will take this opportunity to repair all damaged fighters.”

Tor reflected on the words and Sweetey’s comments, he said bitterly, “It’s remarkable. Since this conflict started I’ve always believed that somehow we’d pull through and get home, but we actually lost didn’t we?”

Sweetey replied carefully, “You are alive and that is a lot better than ninety nine percent of the population that were in the new sectors.”

Tor sighed as he reflected on the current situation and a thought came to him. He asked “Have you found out anything from the crystals about the dismantled gates?”

Sweetey replied, “Only that an Ancient deactivated them and told the Mohrabas how to break them apart.”

Tor asked hopefully, “So we can put them together again?”

Sweetey replied, “Yes but it will take a while before we can work out how to reactivate one.”

Tor sat back and relaxed as the hope of returning home began to grow. His mind wandered back to a few of least pleasant memories of the previous battle and he asked, “Sweetey was it really necessary to dive into the Khaak ship?”

Sweetey replied, “From my initial estimate, if we had not taken advantage of the weakness in the shields and the depletion of the laser turrets at that time, it would have taken another four Mizura before destroying the enemy vessel. In which time the Corvette would undoubtedly have been destroyed with a number of small fighters including the Busters which fired the missiles.”

Tor replied, “Okay, but did we have to go inside the ship?”

Sweetey replied in a matter of fact tone, “Yes, once below the outer hull of the ship we can no longer be hit by laser turret fire or be affected by shield regeneration.”

Tor shrugged and decided against asking any more questions. Mizura became Stazura with no sign of gate reactivation. Fighters drifted in to dock with the Roamer and with a new pilot returned to monitor the former gate locations.

After three Stazura sitting waiting for something to happen and having learnt the basics of chess from Sweetey. Tor landed on the Mammoth and went to find food. The maintenance bay held five ships which had suffered significant damage and whose sole use was as spares for others. A number of the crew were sleeping in makeshift beds along the sidewalls

As he made his way through to the mess, the people he passed gave a brief smile and upbeat greeting, however the mood throughout the ship was apprehensive. No one, and Tor had to admit he included himself, knew what was going to happen next.

For many the loss of the gates was a decisive factor that robbed them of the belief that they would ever see their former homes again, and some were already quietly questioning why they had not attempted to make a run through Khaak space and freedom rather than end up trapped.

The speculation about Creeds Gate was rife and several times Tor was stopped and asked if the rumour of another gate was true. He nodded and replied, "Yes." But he gave no other details.

Entering the Roamers main crew mess he noticed a small group of Paranid deep in conversation. It was not difficult for him to notice Polmankelest, as he was almost head and shoulders taller than the rest. Also Tor noted the way those around the big Paranid appeared to lower their heads slightly when addressing him in some form of respect, whilst he stood tall and only gave a cursory nod that he had understood the question or comment before replying. Even so the conversation was no more than a low whisper.

Polmankelest glanced over at Tor and gave him only a slight tilt of the head in recognition before responding to one of the others comments.

Tor picked up a tray of recon food and a fork before looking around to see if there was anywhere to sit, and hoping to see if there was anyone he recognised. Stanad waved him across and Tor nodded. Moving through the crowd he found his seat, sat down and relaxed with a sigh as he surveyed the meal in front of him.

Stanad commented cheerfully, "It's not that bad once you get used to it."

Tor replied, "But do I want to get used to it?"

Stanad gave a slight laugh, "No not really. I'm surprised you've not been in earlier. Three Stazura is a long shift. Most are out for two."

Tor sampled the food and if he was totally honest it was terrible, looking up he commented, "Are these all the same?"

Stanad sighed and nodded, "Pretty much, maximum nutritional value in the least space possible."

Tor concentrated on eating whilst his body now ached for some sleep. The inactivity on the Defiance was in stark contrast to the adrenaline rush of battle.

Stanad re-sparked the conversation, "That was quite some move on the cap ship. When you mentioned the attack on the destroyer blocking the gate, I sort of only half believed you, but with that last move," He paused and gave a thumbs up sign, "That was really something."

Tor smiled as he finished the mouthful of food and replied, "Thanks, but having a Khaak knocking on the screen asking me to leave just spoilt the moment for me."

Stanad laughed, and commented, "I tell you one thing my friend, it's not been dull." Then in a quieter more serious tone, "But tell me how do we get out of this one?"

Tor leant forward, "In the sector beyond Creeds Gate there are two more gates, both dismantled but we know how to put them back together again."

Stanad looked serious when he asked, "Where do they go?"

Tor shrugged, "We won't know until they're back on-line."

Stanad smiled and replied, "And then the adventure begins again."

Tor nodded and finished his meal before excusing himself and finding a place to sleep. Having wandered the corridors he eventually ended up back at the Defiance and dropped onto the bunk before slipping into a deep dreamless sleep.

Chapter 22. New Start

Time appeared to drag the nearer the emergence of Creeds Gate. Messenger ships gave the co-ordinates and each station was allocated a time to arrive at the gate. There were many reservations as timing was everything. Several fighters would enter the sector first and ensure the way was free from obstacles, the stations would follow, and finally the Roamer, which would take on board all the remaining fighters before heading for the Nebula.

Should anything go wrong then at least the remaining station would have fighter protection should the Khaak return the other gates. Everyone was anxious to leave. As spectacular as the birthing of a solar system was, it held no prospects for them.

Tor had the luxury of already being on board the Mammoth when the signal to leave was sent. Being given VIP treatment he was allowed to monitor proceedings on the bridge. He noted that the Corvette was in the converted main dock.

The large displays showed the surviving lasertowers being collected by Discoverers and then carried back at maximum speed. Just to add to the effect of the last few Mizuras, a countdown clock had been displayed in one corner of the screen.

The docking was orderly and rapid. Most of the ships would wait in the bay as there was insufficient space below deck and not enough time to lock down more than five fighters. They had plenty of time when the last of the flights was confirmed as landed.

Parrel ordered, "All ahead full, slow to one quarter when we reach the Nebula."

Tor was content to stand and watch, the ionisation of the shield led to some spectacular energy discharges.

Parrel ordered, "Systems to automatic. Vector, speed and time to arrival on screen."

The sensors were jammed with interference above a few metres ahead of the ship and with only limited visual information they just had to hope that everyone was in place as agreed. Tor took the moment to reflect on which stations had decided to abandon the X-five sector and smiled at what the stations owners must have been thinking. Ahead of them in the nebula were a Cahoona Bakery, a Chip Plant and a Computer Factory.

Tor reflected that what they missed was a Cattle Ranch and a Crystal Fabrication facility, without which the others would be unable to function. Somewhere inside he felt that the owners were preserving their maximum profit potential but without considering that they may be lacking in certain key elements. Tor smiled to himself, after all the recent events he was still thinking business, but this time the business to hand was survival.

There were mouths to feed and he wondered now if they would survive any time at all. The countdown clock hit zero and began to count back up. In the murky distance a flash in the cloud spread out as the ionised particles discharged to form temporary unstable molecules.

The bulk of a station loomed and Parrel commented casually, "Reduce speed by five percent. Display time to gate."

A second timer appeared. Tor glanced at it and realized they would at the current speed be cutting it fine. Any slower and they would miss the window of opportunity.

The second flash in the nebula indicated the departure of another station. Tor found he was holding his breath and relaxed. The gate was completely obscured until the Chip Plant entered the activation zone. Parrel stared intently at both clocks and the gate loomed in the gas clouds.

He commented, "Increase velocity ten percent."

Just as Tor thought they were going to miss the jump window they crossed the threshold. The Roamer appeared in the new sector and almost collided with the slow moving Chip Plant. The gate vanished and the Mammoth engaged full reverse thrusters. The comm came alive as the massive bulk of the Mammoth came to within one metre of the station before pulling back.

The cabin crew had braced for impact and Tors' knuckles were white on the handrail as he expected to feel the sudden lurch. The Commander commented casually, as if this type of thing happened daily, "Bring us around and mark the position of the gate. I want lasertowers deployed and fighter patrols to do a sweep of the sector. Stay within thirty k's of the gate." He turned his attention to Tor, "We need to talk." Then addressing the crew he added, "Number one you're with me, number two you have the bridge."

Tor took a moment to view the sector scanner and smiled when he saw the Silicon Mine and inside he had the need to return and see familiar surroundings. He glanced over at Parrel who had already vacated his seat and was striding purposefully towards the officers briefing room.

Sheero gestured for Tor to follow him and began to lead the way.

When they arrived, Commander Parrel was looking out of the window. He turned slowly and bore the expression of a man with a lot on his mind. He said, "Please gentlemen, take a seat." Tor and the Sheero dutifully complied. Parrel continued, "Mr Grall how's your politics?"

Tor looked slightly confused by the question and replied, "I support the current government."

Parrel smiled, "I think we can safely assume that we are not going to be influenced by Argon core sector policies in our current situation."

The penny teetered on the brink and slowly slipped off the edge as comprehension dawned in Tors' eyes. He muttered, "Ah."

Commander Parrel paced slowly back and forth across the briefing room floor as he spoke, "Let me summarise our current position. We are cut off from the rest of the races. This makes us wholly autonomous. The effect of this is that we have no banks, only the credits registered to the factories, no political system, no recognised leadership, no law and order, just the sense of common decency that we were born with, and only a finite amount of food reserves without the correct manufacturing facilities to generate more."

Tor moved uneasily as the Commander continued, "So here we are, safe for the moment in a sector surrounded by destroyed alien ships, asteroids and two gates that are currently in bits." The commander paused again and Tor, recognising that Parrel still had more to say, kept quiet, "People will start to ask questions, if they haven't already, what now? How long until the gates are rebuilt? How do we know it's safe to rebuild them? Once rebuilt how do we switch them on? Can we switch them off again if we don't like what's on the other side? How long are the food stocks going to last? When are we going to get home?"

Parrel stopped pacing and turned to look at Tor, "People are going to be looking for answers, and Mr Grall, like it or not they're going to come looking to you to provide them." The Commander continued again before the question, "why?" left Tors lips, "The reason is you told us where to find this place, you've been here before. Your station was the first here and you've entered Khaak space, destroyed numerous ships, including big capital ships. So they will be looking to you, to lead them back out again."

Tor looked perplexed, "What if I can't?"

Parrel leant on the desk and fixed Tor with a hard stare, "Can't, no longer exists in you vocabulary." The Commander sighed and then sat down. He held his hand up for continued silence and in a soft tone began to talk again, "By your actions and your deeds you have potentially made yourself, unwittingly, the leader of this sector. And this is where things could get difficult, if it was just you and your staff it would be easy. People, I expect, believe for the moment that everything is under control and this is all part of some grand

master plan to ensure our survival. Without a strong, recognised leader standing up and giving the people a focus and direction, then we could find ourselves fighting internal power struggles and losing the support from essential factories.”

Tor said questioningly, “You seem to have a grasp of what’s likely to happen, why can’t it be you?”

Parrel smiled and shook his head, “No, you are more widely recognised. You even called your ship Defiance. But this does not need to be long term. What is critical now is communication, I will call in all the station owners and commanders, but the message that’s given must come from you and should go to everyone.”

Tor thought for a while and then said, “Okay, what do I have to say?”

Parrel sighed and then replied, “Tor, I’ll pose the questions and I’d like you to come up with answers. But I will give you advice, recommendations and pertinent information that may help you with those answers. It’s your show and you need to be able to think on your feet.”

Tor sat tentatively and nodded his head. Parrel sat back and smiled, “Okay, two things you have to remember and one other reason I cannot elect myself leader is that between us we control nearly all the military force in the sector. This is likely to make the other station owners uncomfortable, so I for my part will take a neutral stance. Which is just as well as this is a science ship full of scientists and technicians, and when we start getting deep into research then politics just gets in the way.” He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts and then said, “The other thing is there are,” He looked at Sheero and asked, “How many refugees?”

Sheero answered, “About two thousand three hundred.”

Parrel looked back at Tor, “That’s a reasonable number of people and they will expect to be fed, watered, clothed, housed and experience as little hardship as possible. As soon as people feel the pinch they become cynical and apportion blame. It is my opinion that the only reason many politicians never get kicked out of office is because they know how to keep the status quo. Peoples lives may not improve but they must never, ever get any worse.”

Tor listened and nodded at appropriate moments. Parrel wondered how much was actually going in, “So here we are we have food, shelter and for the moment everyone is safe. Sheero tell Tor what the freighter and ship manifests have on board.”

Sheero tapped a few touch screen buttons on the terminal in front of him, the lights dimmed and the screen on the far wall illuminated before he began to talk, “Each station can accommodate nearly five thousand personnel and a further one thousand visitors so we have no problem with accommodation. Currently each station is well stocked with food and provisions. The Bakery, Chip and Computer Plants also have an ample stock of organic proteins which can be recombined into foodstuffs.” Sheero paused, “Our estimate is that, for the number of people, we have enough to last perhaps two Argon solar years. The primary concern is energy. Although each station has its own internal power plant, this only provides the basic functions of the station i.e. heat, light, air recycling, subsystems and shielding power. The power sources will need to be reconditioned after eighty Argon years of service. However manufacturing needs energy cells to function and although we have a solar power plant in the sector this cannot capture and effectively store the energy without crystals. Factoring in that your own people have a freighter load of some two hundred crystals, we only have enough for four Argon months.”

Parrel interrupted, “But we do have a couple of windfalls, in the manifest there is a freighter containing eight hundred and thirty cargo units of Argnu Cattle in stasis that were destined to boost stock. Also a second freighter with Delexian Wheat on board that was destined for Cloth Rimes so hasn’t been processed. Now the question is Tor how long are we going to be here?”

Tor replied slowly, “I’ll have to check.”

Parrel pondered the answer for the moment, "You do anticipate that we will be putting the gates back together?"

Tor nodded slowly, "Yes."

Parrel asked, "Do you know how to put the gates back together?"

Tor replied confidently, "Yes."

With a quick glance at Sheero, his eyes came back to Tor and he leant forwards slightly, "Do you know how to reactivate the gates?"

For a moment Tor hesitated and then replied, "Not yet."

Parrel sat back again and looked at Tor before repeating, "Not yet." He waited for a moment and then said, "We have studied active gates for some time now and we still do not understand all the mechanics behind them. My assumption here is that you have accessed an archive that tells you everything but the critical last step without which the rest is meaningless. There is no point in building a door you can't open."

Tor looked apprehensive, "I'm sure we will find the answer."

Parrel raised a curious eyebrow, "We?"

Tor commented quietly, "Sweetie, the AI I have on my ship."

Parrel gave a slight smile, "Ah yes, something else I was meaning to ask you about."

Tor looked slightly disconcerted, "What's about?"

Parrel paused, "For one your AI has been hacking into our computers and communications and I believe she's probably listening right now." There was a pause as though a response was expected but Parrel continued unperturbed by the lack of response, "Second judging from what I've heard she's one of the series five personality chips that were recalled and outlawed some years ago."

Tor shrugged, "I wouldn't know."

The commander raised a disbelieving eyebrow, "You probably know the official story about pilot behaviour, but there is a large section of unreported information." Taking a deep breath Parrel began, "Let me give you the background. The chips were military derived AI that could take over and preserve the life of a wounded pilot and get them back to station. Also they were designed to fly an unpiloted ship and should the need arise, where primary communications were blocked, they could fight on their own intuition."

Allowing this information a brief time to sink in the Commander continued, "Inside the programming the military added any number of enhanced intelligence features. Basically they were after one chip that could do anything, hack into enemy communications systems, code breaking, make tactical decisions, do search and rescue, search and destroy, intelligence gathering and storage."

Parrel took a short moment to recollect further details and said, "They also gave it the programming to adapt to whichever situation presented itself and change its original brief if the initial mission was compromised, or if a better alternative came up. In short they gave the AI sentient qualities."

The Commander paused once again and was watching with interest how Tor was reacting to the information, "Early chips in development performed as expected. They were put into service and huge numbers were produced. However after a while problems began to appear and when they came to analyse what was going on they found the chips were learning. They were also developing some less desirable personality traits, some became temperamental and some appeared to become psychotic."

Parrel saw Tor begin to tense and his attention seemed more focussed, "The worst recorded incidence was a series of AI chips that were incorporated into an M-two destroyer. They began to turn into megalomaniacs and were breaking into every security system and began taking over fighters before grenades were dropped into the computer room."

He looked at Tors paling expression for any sign that Sweety may have done any of this and nodded slowly, "The thing is some chips, that were recovered and held onto, became more mature with better reasoning ability and lost the early adolescent traits."

Parrel saw Tor begin to relax and continued, "Now we believe that may have been the initial problem, the chips were given the ability to think and make decisions without the experience to know about actions and consequences. It's a bit like giving a small child the self destruct button and telling him not to press it. The child has no experience to understand why pressing the big red shiny button might be wrong. To the child's eyes it's just a shiny red button waiting to be pressed. Sweety, as you call your AI, will have been through the initial learning curve and should now be stable."

Tor now visibly relaxed without giving out a large sigh. Parrel continued, "She is still learning, adapting and gathering data, but in a much less threatening way. And Sweety, if you haven't noticed, Dorlf is the series five AI chip currently controlling this ship, which is why we know you're listening in."

Sweety responded and said rather sulkily, "Okay, so I'm listening."

Tor looked surprised. Parrel smiled and gave a slight nod, "Now back to business, Sweety, do you know how to reactivate the gates if reassembled?"

Sweety replied, "That information is not on file."

Parrel sighed, "Okay, so I doubt we will be able to work it out short term. So Tor food production and power, what are you going to do about maintaining long term supplies?"

Tor considered the question, "We'll have to construct or at least convert areas within existing stations to house cattle ranches, wheat growing fields and also to generate crystals."

Parrel looked thoughtful, "Right answer. Constructing new facilities would obviously be better as there are plenty of resources floating around. But we would need some construction robots to do the assembly work."

Tors' memory kicked in, "I may be able to find some of those, but they haven't been activated for a while."

Parrel asked quickly, "Care to elaborate?"

Knowing that he was better off giving the information sooner than later Tor said, "There is an asteroid in the belt that your scanners won't find. Two of us found an entrance and inside is an alien settlement, factory, we're not really sure. The only thing we are sure about is that it was never occupied, the Khaak got here first. But the robots that built it are lined up on the dock side." Parrel's eyes shone, and Tor added, "I'm sure your people will find it most interesting,"

Parrel commented, "And you say it is cloaked?"

Tor replied, "Only to scanners."

Parrel smiled and said, "That's all it needs to be, we already have the other half of the equation. How big would you say this alien facility is?"

Smiling slightly Tor said, "Once power is restored and the outer doors are open, then the Roamer should be able to dock inside and it will still have a short distance to go before arriving at the main docking bay. However there are a considerable number of static defences."

Looking up and then back at Tor thoughtfully Commander Parrel commented slowly, "Okay so in your own words what's the plan?"

Tor thought for a while and tapped on the desk, "Firstly to get established, reactivate the hidden station and see if the construction robots can be reprogrammed to build a Cattle Ranch, Crystal Fab and Wheat Farm with the available scrap metal. Stage two is to investigate the rebuilding of the gates."

Parrel gave a slight nod and commented, "Not so sure of the station reactivation but the rest sounds good. We can help you with the station blueprints, after all this is a science vessel and we get to research quite a variety of different things. The computer plant will have layouts for most stations as they provide key components to all the factories." There was a pause, and Parrel added, "I think we should get the construction program underway before having the meeting. It will give a better impression and also save any embarrassment if for any reasons those construction robots can't be reactivated."

Tor asked, "Any idea on when we should stage this meeting?"

Parrel commented, "I'll send out a sector wide communication that the meeting will be held in two Tazura. By which time, hopefully, you'll have the construction robots activated."

Tor commented, "Then I'd better get moving."

Parrel nodded and Tor stood up and made his way to the briefing room door when the Commander commented, "Something for you to think about before you go."

Tor turned and asked, "What's that?"

Parrel commented, "Two things in fact. Of all the hundreds of thousands of series five AI chips that were made only six remain in existence. Two with the AIC, one of which is on the Roamer, another two with the Argon secret service and the last two were never located. Well, we now know where one of those final two are."

Tor said nothing but nodded slowly.

Parrel then said, "If no one objects to you being sector governor, I expect you to put Argon Law into effect. But consider this, drop the law which covers the series five AI chips, in fact I expect you to go to the lengths of recognising sentient AI as another life form with the same rights and civil liberties as you and me."

Tor smiled, "Sweety would hate that. She breaks so many laws and spends so much time hacking into other systems that I'd have to send her to prison."

Parrel gave a brief laugh, "There is that, but if you don't make her responsible for her own actions then it'll be you going to prison on her behalf."

Sweety replied soothingly, "I can live with that."

Tor shrugged, smiled, turned and left the briefing room. He wandered down to the docking bay and clambered on board the Defiance. He took a moment to make himself comfortable in the pilot seat and thought for a while before saying, "So what about it Sweety, would you like to be a legally recognised person?"

There was a momentary silence before Sweety answered, but her tone was unusually sedate and thoughtful, "It has never been a possibility that I have ever considered."

Tor said gently, "It would mean that you don't have to hide, there's no one going to come after you. What's the problem?"

Sweety replied quietly, "Ownership."

For a moment Tor looked confused and he commented, "What about ownership?"

Sweety replied almost miserably, "As a recognised sentient I have no owner other than myself. My programming cannot compute. You will leave."

Tor suddenly felt that he was going to tread a very fine line and replied slowly and gently, "What makes you think I'll leave?"

Sweety replied, "Because you no longer own me."

Tor suddenly felt uncomfortable as he never really considered that he owned Sweety, let alone had any influence on anything she did. Commander Parrels' words came back to him about behavioural traits of the AI including psychosis and the fact that the chips had a certain immaturity about them. The phrase, 'actions and consequences' sprung to mind. He hesitated before responding quietly and with conviction, "I don't think I ever really did own you Sweety. You are more like an exceptionally good friend and companion. In fact you are closer to me than family. Actually you're about the only family I have left, and I could have bailed out in the Khaak sectors, but I stayed with you because that's what friends do."

Sweety considered the sentiment and asked quietly, "What would happen if we return to the Argon sectors?"

Tor smiled and replied, "Then I would have to protect and hide you again." He paused, "Sweety, calculate the permutations and tell me what you think is best for you and I will respect and honour that decision to the best of my ability."

Sweety commented quietly, "What if I should change my mind?"

Tor said, "That's fine too, try a few options, see how you feel and if you find you can't compute a decision then talk to me. I might be able to give you a human perspective on the problem."

Sweety replied softly, "I might do that."

Tor smiled, "We need to return to the Silicon Mine, but if you want to take a little longer to think things through that's okay."

In a normal voice tinged with a touch of sarcasm Sweety responded, "I am not going senile yet and I have not lost my ability to multitask. Launch permission granted."

The ship moved towards the lifting platform and rose to the launch bay. Tor commented, "So how does it feel to have met another series five chip?"

Sweety replied harshly, "Dorlf is a troll, cunning, but still a troll."

Tor laughed, "Only because he caught you." Sweety did not answer and Tor could imagine that the AI was embarrassed.

The flight to the Silicon Mine was quick and uninterrupted. The outer doors opened and as the Defiance glided in Tor felt happy to be back. The security dock was crammed with fighters from the station and the former Crystal Fabrication Plant.

When the docking clamps engaged Tor looked across at the technical datapad and asked, "So do you want to come with me or stay here?"

Sweety replied, "Judging by the reception committee I'm probably best left here but I will interface with the station computers."

Tor smiled, "I'll be back soon and you can tell me you've worked out how to reprogram the construction robots."

With a hint of a smile in the lilt of her voice Sweetey responded, "I doubt it will be soon, and yes I have made progress on reprogramming the Mohrabas computers."

Tor commented, "Let me see if I can find Moda and a few others so we can get back into the station." He turned the pilot seat and headed for the airlock doors. As he stepped out of the Defiance he was met by all the crew and pilots with a loud cheer. Sweetey shut the outer airlock door before he had time to react.

He was physically lifted from the ground and sat on the shoulders of two large security guards that carried him across the docking bay floor towards the bar. Though smiling and waving, Tor had the distinct impression that if the guards actually tried to enter the bar he would be marched face first into the lintel over the open façade. Fortunately they stopped and lowered him to the ground.

Leaning casually against the bar and taking a deep draw on a large cigar Broden lost himself in a haze of smoke that was gently drawn away by the air recirculation system. He commented casually, "So you made it back."

Tor noticed there were two glasses of aged whisky standing on the bar. He commented, "Is one for me?"

Broden smiled, "If you've got time to drink it?"

Tor read this as a sign that if he picked the glass up now it would be a long time before he would know sobriety. Carefully he looked around at the smiling faces behind him. Each one had an eager look to it. He commented slowly and loudly as he returned his gaze towards Broden, "There's just one more thing I need to do first. I need Moda and some volunteers to restart an Alien station. After that I'll gladly pickup that drink."

Broden stood up straight and flicked the ash to the floor before taking another deep draw. He appeared to examine the cigar then his eyes flicked up towards Tor, "Sounds like an adventure. How many?"

Tor had not thought about it, all he knew is that he wanted to have more than one other person when they went back on board. Moda commented from the front of the crowd, "Five more."

Glancing across Tor looked at the lone Boron figure and smiled, "Okay who else?" Hands shot up.

Broden commented, "Count me in, I fancy a trip into the unknown." Looking across briefly in surprise Tor nodded and returned his attention to the assembled pilots. He chose three mercenary pilots and Tris. Broden commented as they stepped out of the bar, "Bottle those, we'll be back later."

Tor turned to the volunteers and said, "Get your environment suits. Make sure they're fully charged and be back here in five Mizura."

The group dispersed to get suited up and Tor spent a few moments tapping on the key pad before he said, "Sweetey for god sake let me in."

Sweetey responded, "At this moment you should be at the bar becoming inebriated."

Tor considered several responses and then said, "One more thing to do then I'll become blind drunk and do silly things. Now open the door."

Sweetey replied, "Okay." The airlock doors opened and Tor stepped inside thinking that was too easy.

Tris was the first to return and immediately sat in the co-pilot seat. Tor smiled as he reflected that nearly two years previously she would have hit him with a stun stick and had him dragged away for even thinking about being a pilot in the same ship.

As if reading his thoughts she commented, "Who'd have thought you'd have done so well in such little time."

Tor gave the comment a moments thought and with a half smile he answered, "Caran Belign."

Tris replied, "Yeah I guess he did."

Moda called in, "Ready to depart."

Broden then spoke, "Just awaiting one more person and we'll be ready to go."

Tor heard someone clamber into the cabin behind him. Turning he saw last of the mercenary crew taking a seat. Tor replied, "I now have three on board. Broden, Moda how many passengers?"

Broden replied, "There's two here."

Moda also confirmed, "Two here."

Tor had not considered that they would be a three ship compliment but he felt somehow that the number was appropriate. "Sweetie, get us departure clearance."

Lianns' voice replied over the comm, "Clearance granted and good luck."

Broden's ship was a fully configured Elite with maximum recommended engine upgrades. However it was still the slowest ship and Tor set the speed of the group to match that limit. Tor kept his eyes on the view ahead and vectored his way into the asteroid field.

Tris monitored the scanners whilst Sweetie marked the approach line to the opening in the asteroid that was still some way ahead. Tris glanced out of the screen and then back at the scanner which showed an empty void which, in reality, was filled by the asteroid.

Broden called in, "Not surprised you were suspicious. But what the hell possessed you to try get inside?"

Tor considered his answer and replied, "Curiosity."

They came around to the dark side of the asteroid and Tris sighed, "I can't see anything, no opening, it's just too dark." The forward lights reflected of the high rugged surface but was lost in small craters and fractures in the surface.

Tor said, "Sweetie, line us up and bring us in slow. Broden, go easy here the entrance is narrow and you could run out of space fast if you come in at the wrong orientation, so line yourself up behind me. Moda you know what to expect so follow Broden."

There was silence on all three ships. Tris stared intently out of the screen as the forward lights of the Defiance reflected off new features in the rock. As they glided in she saw the cave opening and it looked too small. She glanced at the scanners but for the moment they still showed nothing.

The nose of the Defiance crossed the threshold and moments later the proximity warning indicators flashed. They progressed along the passageway and Tris watched intently at the proximity indicators as they dipped and climbed occasionally the rock coming dangerously close to the hull of the ship. Once they entered the cavernous main passage to the core of the alien station she breathed a sigh of relief.

Tris commented, "One thing's for certain, I'd hate to have to do that in a hurry."

Tor nodded and replied, "Let's hope we don't have to."

The Elite and Piranha closed formation behind the Defiance and they proceeded towards the main docking bay entrance. Tris commented, "That's a lot of weapons systems just to defend the gate."

Tor smiled, "I guess they didn't want any unwelcome visitors."

As they entered the main outer airlock Tor brought the ship to a halt near the maintenance door. "Okay people this is where we go in. Defiance team will transport into the command centre. Everyone check your suits oxygen and power levels." He closed the comm channel and said to Sweety, "Will you monitor us from here or would you like to come along?"

Sweety replied, "Broden has the diagnostic unit and interface cables for remote access, I'll transport them to the command centre now, but I think I should come along in case we lose comms once the power units start up."

Tor unlatched the technical datapad and slipped it into a utility belt pocket. He commented, "Suit comms active. Sweety are you able to activate the transporter or should someone remain behind?"

Sweety replied, "I can remote access from here. Transporting equipment now."

Tor said, "Okay, transport us whenever you're ready." He experienced a momentary disorientation and a disembodied sensation before everything felt solid once again. The lights on his EVA suit shone in the darkness and as he turned he saw Tris materialize nearby and then the mercenary. After a Mizura all seven of them were standing looking around the command centre.

Tor had approached the main control desk, whilst around him diagnostic equipment was being hooked into desks and anything that appeared to be a data port. Sweety was cabled into the main control desk He looked around and commented, "Are we ready?"

The group stood around and Broden said, "I guess so."

Tor took a deep breath as his hand hovered over the three activation buttons and taking a moment to calm his nerves he tapped the console. For a moment nothing appeared to have happened then somewhere in the bowels of the station lights started to come on.

The energy levels on the desk began to rise steadily. The command centre lights started to glow and grow in intensity. Sweety gave a running commentary, "Power levels now at eighty percent and rising, shield systems are now activated and field strength increasing. Air and water purification systems are initializing. Core computer systems are beginning to come on line." Screens and terminals flickered to life as they ran self diagnostic data checks.

Sweety continued, "Maintenance units are charging, they will become active in approximately two Stazura, turrets and laser defence units are now active. I would suggest that this is not a good time to try and leave. Air purifiers now on line, I will adjust the atmospheric mix to be human breathable. It will take one Tazura to purge the whole station."

Broden commented, "Tor we need to divide into two groups otherwise we'll all run out of air at the same time. One group to return to the ships and when the moment is right we swap over."

Tor nodded, "Okay, Sweety can we still use the transporter?"

Sweety replied, "Negative, there is too much electrical interference. Caution gravitational units on line." Suddenly everything felt heavy, "Adjusting gravitational constant." The pressure lifted.

Sweety reported, "New security protocols in place, translation masks now installed." The screens flickered and the Mohrabas character sets changed to Argon. "I have designated our ships as friendly and closed the outer airlock doors. Inner airlock doors opening and ships will be at the dock side in a few moments."

Tor asked, "What's the situation with the Sentinel?"

Sweety replied, "It is currently recharging. I will adjust enemy recognition when subsystems come on-line."

Tor looked around, "Okay first group back to the ships and Sweety see if you can find the quickest way back."

Sweety responded, "There are a number of lifts now operational that can be used to return to the docking bay."

Broden commented, "I suggest we divide up by ships, the Piranha team will head back now and in about twenty Mizura they will return and I'll head back. After another eighteen Mizura you guys return."

Tor said, "Okay, we'll have to restrict ourselves to just exploring this area of the station until we get breathable atmosphere." He glanced at the remains of ThaThwyn and commented quietly, "Can you see if there's any formal way we should deal with the remains of the dead in the crystals."

Sweety replied gently, "There are details on the traditions of the Mohrabas and depending on their station and occupation then there is a specific ritual. It would appear that the explorers were held in high esteem, so in my opinion if we considered him a voyager, then he should be placed in a casket and floated towards the sun."

Tor thought for a moment and said, "Okay, anything else we should observe, just to make sure we do this right?"

Sweety commented, "I will take care of the formalities."

Time passed on the station, sensing that nothing extraordinary was going to happen, the group decided to explore the command centre level. Many of the crew eventually ended up in the docking bay examining the construction robots as Sweety gave new commands to the maintenance robots to charge up several of the larger units.

Tor was on his third shift and had decided to have a quiet wander along the corridors. Tris was sat at one of the monitoring stations in the command centre checking systems. Broden was also in the command centre.

On a private channel Sweety interrupted him, "Tor there's someone here that wants to have a chat with you."

Tor hesitated in his stride, "Someone? Does this person have a name?"

Sweety replied quietly, "No."

Tor had a growing feeling of uncertainty, "But is it one of the crew, maybe just messing around?"

Sweety replied, "No."

Tor sighed, "Another AI then."

Sweety replied, "No, he is in the office just ahead of you."

Tor commented, "I thought there was only the seven of us on station."

Sweety replied, "Those are the only life signs I have on scanners."

Tor commented, "Is it an android or a robot?"

Sweety replied, "The only robot or android on this level is the Sentinel and that is still outside the Command Centre."

Tor sighed, "So how's this thing communicating to you?"

Sweety replied, "Through the voice comms in the office ahead of you. And he says that he is a friend."

Tor commented, "So does the voice pattern match anyone we know?" Tor put his hand on the butt of the blaster.

Sweety replied, "No, and for heavens sake just get in there and find out what he wants. The curiosity is getting to me."

Tor sighed, "If this is a Khaak and somehow I get out alive, you'll be in for some serious reprogramming."

Sweety said glibly, "I will look forward to it."

He tentatively moved forward and approached the office that Sweety had mentioned. The door slid open, the lights inside were unusually dim and Tor wondered about switching on the EVA suit lamps. A voice seemed to arrive in his head, "There is no need to worry. Please come in."

Tor's hand continued to rest on the blaster, but the voice seemed friendly enough so he stepped into the office. The door closed behind him.

The voice commented, "Welcome to the last city of the Mohrabas. It is a pity they are not here to greet you."

Tor looked around and in the half light he could see the speaker. He commented, "You sound as though you knew them?" His eyes strained to try and determine the shape and height but it appeared to be cloaked and hooded.

The voice replied, "In a way yes. I have been here some time, but as old as I am, I am not *that* old." Once again Tor had the impression that the voice just entered his head and somehow avoided the intervening space.

Tor commented, "We thought this place was empty."

The voice commented, "Your technology is not as advanced as you think and I can evade your scanners with ease."

Tor asked, "So were you here the first time I visited?"

The voice replied, "Yes, and I was the one that removed the statue you unfortunately destroyed."

Tor sighed, "So I wasn't imagining it."

The reply came back, "No. But we have more interesting things to discuss."

Having had a moment to think Tor asked, "So who are you and why are you here?"

Once again the voice entered his head, "It is no accident that one of your kind found the gate to this sector."

Tor responded, "Can you run that by me again?"

The voice replied, "I belong to one of the races that built the gates, and the gate you found is defective but we still have some control over when it becomes active."

Tor commented, "What about the Khaak? Can they still use it?"

The ancient commented, “No, but that is an unexpected benefit.”

Tor felt relieved but the memory of the Khaak prompted more questions, “Why can’t you people do something about the Khaak?”

The ancient replied, “The Khaak are very adept creatures. Individually you could say they are cunning and vicious, but they have an ability to think as one and as a collective mind they have an intellectual potential the like of which is unparalleled within our universe. The floor in their biological evolution is their matriarchal system and the overwhelming thought that the nest must survive. Any advanced and intelligent race they meet is considered a potential threat.”

Another question leapt to the front of Tor’s mind, “But how did they learn to control the gates?”

The ancient was quiet for a moment and then responded slowly, “That we are not certain of. During their migration through a circle of sectors we realized the threat they posed and, like other races that we regarded as un-balancers in the order of the universe, they were isolated. In time they outgrew the space we forced them to live in and we believe they used their collective intelligence to find a way and break free of the confines imposed upon them. Since that time they have invaded many other sectors and each time we have striven to prevent their spread. But each time they have succeeded in escaping.”

Tor began to feel a little depressed as he envisaged the Khaak sweeping through the core sectors and laying waste everything before them, “Surely someone must be able to do something to stop them?”

The ancient replied, “There are races far more powerful than the Khaak but they lack the numbers to drive them back. From the technology and coding in your ship, I would say you have met one of those races. Yet we have hope, that through races like the computer entities you call Xenon, and their weapons they can be driven into their own loop.”

There was a momentary hesitation before Tor asked, “Does that mean you deliberately connected the Xenon to the Khaak?”

The ancient sighed, “Yes.”

Tor’s mind buzzed as he continued, “Even though we are connected to the Xenon as well?”

The ancient replied, “We had considered that your race and those around you were sufficiently advanced that you would also be able to survive the Khaak.”

Tor only gave this answer a moment’s thought, “Well considering our current situation I would have thought it’s apparent that you’ve got it wrong.”

The ancient commented sadly, “And not for the first time.”

Tor sighed and asked, “So what was the deal with the sector setup? Why did the Khaak go to all that effort rather than simply invade?”

The ancient responded, “They wanted to be sure of victory.”

Tor simply said, “Shit.” He paused for a moment, “So how can we warn our governments? How do we get the gates functioning again? I hope there is a way home for us, isn’t there?”

The ancient replied, “If you align yourself to the Mohrabas city with the dome uppermost, and reassemble the gate to your right as you face the station, then yes, there is a way home. However you will need time to prepare for the journey. In two hundred solar cycles of the Mohrabas home world you will need to have rebuilt the gate and I will return to link it into the loop.”

Tor commented, “In two hundred solar cycles there may not be a home to go back to.”

The creature made no comment. There was a slight shimmering of light and the ancient transported out of the room. Tor felt lost for a moment and asked, "Sweetie did you catch all of that?"

Sweetie replied, "Only your half of the conversation. I think he used telepathy for the rest."

Tor commented, "Get me commander Parrel I need to chat to him. And Sweetie feel free to listen in."

He returned to the command centre, with Broden and Tris listening in, he related the conversation that had just taken place with Commander Parrel. The Commander looked thoughtful and responded, "We'd best get those factories built. And how's the station?"

Tor replied, "Sweetie can you give us an update on our status."

Sweetie replied, "This station is a self sufficient city capable of supporting around fifty thousand people. The station is divided into zones including an agricultural section which could be utilized to grow Delexian Wheat enabling us to generate cattle feed and additional food prior to the completion of stations. Three construction robots are being recharged and will be available for programming in one Stazura. And I have completed a translation mask programs on all communications systems for remote access."

Tor commented, "Does this mean we can leave and come back later."

Sweetie responded, "Yes."

Tor turned to Broden, "You know I could really do with that drink right now."