

The Gate

3rd Story of the Traders Tale series.

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Credits

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

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

The Gate is intended to bring a new perspective to the X-Universe through the story of the life of a young man, who continues his adventure in trying to establish relations with a new alien race.

This story falls outside the third game in the X-Universe series and part four will encompass elements of the new ships and locations in X².

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Stephen Haworth

Chapter 1: We're not alone.

Tor Grall rested in his office. Having survived and escaped from the Khaak, his body was now fighting against the excessive alcohol consumption of the previous evening. About the room were scattered mementoes, carefully positioned in hermetically sealed display cabinets.

The only item not in a cabinet was a hellfire chain gun mounted on a clear plexiglass pedestal. A weapon captured when the Bloodheart clan invaded the station. It also acted as a clear reminder to Tor that, although he would sincerely like to forget about them, he still had four prisoners on board. There was also a real possibility that assassins could be hidden amongst the refugees waiting for an opportunity to kill him.

Before sitting forwards he wondered how many more celebrations his crew were going to have, as this was the second in as many Argon days and there was already talk of another. It being Tors' birthday he was strongly hoping that he will have recovered enough to enjoy the occasion.

He pulled up the latest reports and supply lists. Five manufacturing facilities had escaped to the sector through the damaged gate. However there were gaps in the supply chain and there was a need to generate foodstuffs. From within the unused Alien city concealed within an asteroid, only seven of the discovered construction robots had been reprogrammed and activated.

The blueprints for the first of three extra factories had been uploaded, but now they faced an additional challenge. The core reactors for the new stations required certain ores and minerals not often found in asteroids. These were usually the heavier materials that fell quickly into the gravitational pull of larger planetary bodies. Although there were trace amounts in the ancient remains of the Alien space craft that littered the position of the intermittent gate, they had calculated there was only enough to bring two stations into operation, and that was under the proviso they only had minimal shielding.

Tors' first priority was to discuss with Commander Parrel how to obtain more. It would require an expeditionary team to go to the Mohrabas home world. A world that about five hundred Argon years ago had been extinguished of all life by the Khaak.

Tor sighed deeply as he switched to the next update. Morale on his own station appeared to be good, and he smiled whilst reflecting on the uncertainty of the other station owners, when Commander Parrel had said clearly that he, Tor, was in command of the sector. He considered that at least his crew was happy with this situation. Somewhere in the back of his mind neurons fired, this was why he had been drinking again.

The door opened and Tris Matayah ambled in carrying two mugs containing a hot, sweet smelling drink whose aroma permeated through the office.

Commander Parrel stirred from sleep as the communications panel on his desk continued to chime and was getting louder with each moment. He glanced at his time piece and rolled over having been asleep for half a Stazura. "This," He muttered under his breath, "Had better be good."

Groggily he slid out of bed and stepped up to his desk. Pressing the comm button he was relieved by the silencing of the chime, "Parrel here."

An excited voice came over the comm, "Sir, we've seen lights."

The commander gave this a moment to sink in and then a moment longer to form a suitably calm response, "You woke me up to tell me you can see lights?"

The still excited voice had not noticed the tone in the commanders question and replied, "Yes, Sir."

Parrel closed his eyes and commented, "Looking forward to a long and active career in the AIC are you?"

The man on the other end of the comm hesitated before responding uncertainly, "Yes, Sir."

Parrel sighed and longed to go back to bed, "Good, now tell me, what's so special about these lights you're seeing, that makes you want to rush around to tell me about them."

The voice replied eagerly, "They're on the surface of the planet."

The Commander's eyes opened slowly, "You're sure about that?"

The voice said, "Yes, Sir."

Looking across at the bed, Parrel commented, "Okay run the usual long range scans and if, only if, you find a large fleet of warships heading our way then wake me up. I'll overlook this incident but if you wake me up again, and we're not in any immediate life threatening situation, you'll find yourself mopping out the toilets. Understood?" He closed the channel before getting the reply.

He fell back into his bed and thought briefly, 'So many things to look at. It will probably take me the rest of my life just to get through the current list, and now they want me to look at some lights.' As he sank into a deep sleep he added the thought, 'That's providing I live to a hundred.'

There is no dawn on the Roamer and after two Stazuras sleep the Commander was sitting in the officer briefing room scanning through the daily reports. A hot but watery Garrow Root Cha steamed out of the mug in his right hand. Taking a sip he sighed, the rationing of certain food supplies had already been imposed, at least until the new stations were completed. He was certain that the stock of his favourite drink could not be replenished until they returned to the home sectors.

The two hundred Mohrabas days had just been calculated to last beyond one Argon year. This news he would break to the station commanders in a few Stazura. They were refugees cut off from their homes and surrounded by the remains of ships that were once the navy of the indigenous race. He wondered long and hard about their survival chances.

In fact they had worked out that one Argon year was nearly one hundred and ninety two Mohrabas solar cycles. At which point in the eyes of the Argon government they would be listed as deceased. Not that this was of any concern to him, but for the fact that he would still like to be paid.

The first report talked about the data from the Mohrabas station and they were still trying to get a full understanding of the reflective shielding technology, however it was proving problematic. He was pleased to note that there was some progress on the EMP weapon of the sentinel, but it was still early days before they would be able to reproduce a working prototype.

Several research ships had been dispatched to the vast, former, Mohrabas space city. A place now only inhabited by a colony of spaceflies. A curious animal that still mystified many scientific communities, a creature that fed on certain minerals and frozen gas ice formations trapped on the surface of asteroids. Parrel noted there was still nothing of interest to report and skipped ahead.

He took a sip of the Garrow Root Cha and looked at the report concerning the lights on the planet. Taking another sip he allowed himself to read the report through slowly. Several times in his past he had received enthusiastic reports reporting similar incidents only to find that they had been caused by large swarms of night time creatures, each one attracting a mate by trying to outshine every rival, and gathered in such numbers that the cumulative luminescent shone like a beacon in the night.

In many instances the creatures involved would have the inhabitants of that world heading for underground bunkers with heavily reinforced outer and inner doors.

Yet the report he just read had him concerned and he glanced up before sighing slowly. He rubbed his chin and scratched the right side of his face absently as he considered what to do next. Eventually he progressed to the next report.

Officers began to arrive as he scanned through the last few updates.

Looking up he scanned the room then glanced at the time. It was still early and two officers had yet to arrive. The commander expected his officers to be punctual, "Just another Mizura and then we'll get started."

Several Sezura later both officers entered the room. Noting that they were the last they said, "Sorry for delay, Sir."

Parrel smiled and replied, "No apologies necessary, we're slightly early. So let us begin."

The meeting span on as they covered the numerous topics and issues facing them. Parrel carefully shifted the 'light on the home world' to the bottom of the list. Eventually they arrived and Parrel switched the monitor report to display this issue.

He began, "Now to the last item. Report about the light source on the Mohrabas home world."

Ricc Blathe, although not yet an officer, represented the science team. It was one of his subordinates that had made the discovery. He had been even more scathing in his admonishment of his colleague, particularly in the disturbance of the Commander without having consulted him first.

Ricc started to speak, "Yes Sir, and I apologise on behalf of my team for having disturbed you. It will not happen again."

Commander Parrel, raised his eyes and looked at Ricc with a hint of surprise and gave a slight nod. The other officers gave only a trace of a smirk. First Officer Sheero just looked thoughtful as he made a play of studying the report.

Parrel asked, "Tell us what you've found, or not found as the case may be?"

Ricc stood up to give himself a greater sense of presence within the room, "Thank you sir." The other officers sat back and gave him their full considered attention. Commander Parrel watched.

"I can report that our long range scanners aren't detecting anything." He paused in anticipation of a question, but no one reacted, "This in itself is odd. We expected that if it was a naturally occurring event that we would be able to detect an abundance of organic matter signifying animals of some kind or give a strong thermal reading indicative, of say a fire."

Parrel commented, "But as your report says, you didn't see either of these."

Ricc replied swiftly, "No Sir. So we turned out attention to trying to determine if the light source was manufactured. Again our scanners indicate that there is no technologically advanced structures in the area. However we analysed the light and attempted to match the colour spectrum to known sources." Ricc paused and licked his lips, which to him felt particularly dry just when he was getting to the important part of his findings, "With this analysis we immediately dismissed natural and organic sources. Which leaves us a manufactured source. The latest findings that have only just come to light, so to speak." He gave a brief laugh, Parrel smiled sympathetically. Ricc ploughed on regardless, "We scanned the whole area and noticed that in certain places on the surface our scans indicated a certain, nothingness, you could describe these as scanner dead zones."

Parrel asked quietly, "How many?"

Ricc looked perplexed for a moment and then replied, "Eight, Sir."

The commander nodded, "Just how big are these 'dead zones'?"

Ricc glanced at his datapad, and licked his lips again, "Oh, about ten to fifteen kilometers in diameter and perfectly round."

Parrel gave a brief sigh and asked, "Ideas?"

Ricc responded, "We're working on a few."

Sheero Bhard commented, "We know the Mohrabas had concealment technology maybe some of it has survived."

Parrel responded having given this some thought, "We are trespassing in someone else's solar system and are currently making ourselves at home. Whose home we don't yet know, they could be Mohrabas survivors or even Khaak that decided to settle here. What we don't know is how they're going to react when they find out."

Sheero added absently, "That's assuming they don't already know. We've turned up all at once and in numbers. If it were me in their place I'd wait and see how many more turn up."

Glancing across the table Parrel asked, "How do you mean?"

Sheero added, "Well they don't exactly know how many of us there are. They may assume there are more of our kind on just the other side of the gate. But in about another ten, twenty Tazura, when there are no new ships and no freighter movements back out of the sector. That opinion might change. They will know our numbers and, they might guess help is unlikely to come if they attack."

Parrel frowned, "Thanks for that upbeat message." He considered his options and said, "I want a probe made ready and have it fitted with cameras, I need images not scans. Ricc your team's in charge of the probe. Make sure it goes into a stable orbit and get us images all the way, full magnification."

Ricc snapped obediently to attention, "Yes Sir."

Chareth Nuaro, the communications officer, commented, "Won't they pick that up and be alerted to our presence?"

Parrel observed, "Possibly. There are three situations. They are sufficiently advanced and have space travel capability in which case they probably already know we are here. Secondly they are sufficiently advanced to detect our probe but can do nothing about it as they have not recovered space capability. Or thirdly they are not sufficiently advanced to know how to detect us. If I was a betting man then I'd put my credits on option one. What we have to ascertain is if they have the capability to do something about us."

ThaStornla strode swiftly and silently along the pathways of the underground streets that served the Crystal City above. He reached the lifts and with a short commanding growl the citizens bowed gracefully out of the way with gentle purrs of obedience.

The lift opened and he stepped inside. The others would wait for the next one to arrive. His business was in the chamber of elders and as a high born officer of the city it was his duty to attend. In a deep purring voice he commented in his native language, "Herrac-haan"

The lift rose smoothly and accelerated towards the surface. After a while it slowed and gracefully came to a stop. The doors opened and ThaStornla stepped out onto the walkway. His nose twitched with the sweet

scent of the air and a warm breeze caused his golden fur to shimmer in the myriad spectrum of rainbow colours, created by the giant crystal dome that covered the city.

The warmth and gentle caressing of the air in his fur caused ThaStornla to give a pleasant purr of contentment. He looked down into the green canopy of the forest below him. This place had been the rebirth of the world his ancestors once knew, before the Khlarakin had destroyed it.

Stirring himself from the moment he turned and paced towards the meeting halls of the elders. Aliens had come. Their ships were different from the archives, but it had been a long time since the war and he considered, 'much will have changed'.

Two guards at the entrance of the building, gave a slight bow and the doors swung open automatically as he approached. Many of the elders were already here and, in the common language the purr like conversations reverberated in gentle harmony around the hall. The language of the Mohrabas had the benefit of talking to one but listening to many so with a suitable shift in tone anyone member could have several conversations at once.

ThaStornla spied ThaGorack and the five spines in his back slowly began to rise, but he quickly calmed himself. He noticed a similar reaction from his counterpart with a showing of teeth. There was a long term rivalry between the two that had turned them to bitter enemies over a female. Neither had won her over and each blamed the other.

The Station Commander of the Silicon Mine, Broden Falstarn, entered Tor's office. He knew roughly what the meeting was going to be about but had not come to any conclusion himself as to the right course of action. This left him deeply troubled and the only certainty was he would like all of them off the station so he would, in his own words, not have to 'baby sit' them any longer.

Broden remembered from discussions before, that the prisoner Helass should be given a chance to work as a programmer on the station. Despite his better judgement he had agreed with Tor to persuade the rest of the crew that this was the right thing to do. Now he would be asked to make a recommendation with respect to the other three and so far the only one he could think of was to send them to other factories as workers in the hope that they would not cause trouble.

He looked over at the settee where Tris had curled up and fallen asleep. With a wry smile he turned his attention to Tor, who was studying the console in front of him. Tor glanced up and waved him forward.

Tor commented, "Pull up a chair, and I'll be ready in a moment."

Broden grabbed one of the chairs of the briefing desk and pushed it across the floor. As he sat down Tor appeared to finish. Tor turned his chair and smiled, "So here we are."

Broden replied, "Yes, Sir."

Tor continued, "And we have four people that should be in prison which we're now stuck with."

Broden sighed and nodded, "Looks that way."

There was a brief hesitation until Tor asked, "Did you get an opinion about Helass working for us?"

The former captain subconsciously patted a pocket and pulled out a cigar and lighter. Without asking he lit up and breathed in deeply the end of the cigar glowing deep red, "Yes," He answered.

Tor sat back but said nothing as the smoke headed up towards the extraction unit leaving only the aroma of the tobacco to permeate through the room. He asked, "And?"

Broden sighed, "Helass can stay. They'll accept her but not the others."

Tor commented, "It's a start but I really don't think the crew will want to keep looking after the other three. This place is not a prison, nor was it ever designed to be one."

Broden absently took another long draw on the cigar as he tried to come up with an alternative suggestion, "How about putting them on the Roamer?"

Tor smiled and after a moment shook his head, "No, Parrel would want to look after prisoners about as much as we do."

Broden sighed engulfing himself in a cloud of exhaled smoke, "The only other option I can come up with is to pass them off as workers to the other stations."

Giving this due consideration Tor commented, "Do you think they can be persuaded?"

Nodding his head Broden replied, "Well it'll be better than being locked up all the time."

Considering the option Tor asked "What if they meet another Bloodheart clan member?"

Broden commented, "The Bloodheart clan is large enough that I seriously doubt anyone outside of their squad would even recognise them. Chances of anyone recognizing them is probably a million to one."

Ghaan Yapall was an assassin of exceptional talent. Yet he was cut off from his pay check and the last thing he needed to do was expose himself to unwelcome attention. There was no where to run to and no place to hide.

He had fought in a Buster during the Khaak assault and he knew the only way out was in the Defiance when the gate was reopened. Having spent some time surveying the silicon mine he noted that the only ships allowed to dock were its own transports and fighters. He would have to gain a passenger seat on one of the transports, which in itself was not a problem, but it would make him traceable. With so few people around disguises would be of little use and as a stranger he would be easy to spot, no matter how well he changed his appearance he would still be a stranger.

Having taken up temporary residence in the Chip Plant he knew he would have to move on again soon. Ghaan considered that staying in one place for any length of time could result in him being regarded as part of the furniture, so when he did need to travel people would notice his absence. Alternatively by moving around all the time his absence would be regarded as normal.

He allowed the water from the shower to cascade over him as his fingers flexed impatiently for something to do. Taking a deep breath he visualised the kill, calmed himself and the fingers relaxed. Shutting off the water he shook his head, dark wet hair spraying water around the cubicle. It was time to prowl the bars and find a receptive woman.

Stepping out of the shower, he pulled on a bath robe and then found the remote for his voice box. Programmed with various accents he selected his most successful voice pattern. The box was able to reproduce the exact voice matches of anyone that had been recorded. As he dressed he considered his options and decided that he needed to be a doppelganger and it was a matter of choosing a plain but recognisable face, or maybe two.

Standing by the mirror he studied his reflection with a cold thin smile, there was plenty of time to plan. He would choose his people with care and when he knew enough about them to take their place he would simply, take their place. Disposing of the original may prove tricky but he had time to work that part out as well. Combing back the hair to reveal a receding hairline he applied some gel and smiled at himself in the mirror before heading for the door.

Broden accompanied Tor as they visited the first of the prisoners. In light of the conversations Tor was about to have with each prisoner, he engaged Broden in a moment of light chat, "I hear you and Liann have become a bit of an item."

Broden gave a reflective smile and then turned it to a slight grin, "Yeah, but I think you and Tris are ahead of us on the rumour stakes." Tor looked surprised even though he felt he should not be. Broden interjected, "Anyway at my time of life, it's about time I settled down."

Tor replied absently, "And just how old are you?"

The former captain looked at the lift doors just as they opened and replied, "Old enough."

They stepped inside, Broden commented, "Level seventeen." The doors closed and the lift moved.

Tor continued the conversation, "So I should have another couple of decades before I consider settling down, do you think?"

Broden replied, "Cheeky git."

With a sigh Tor commented, "You know I sometimes wonder if anyone takes the fact that I'm the boss seriously."

Broden smiled, "Cheeky git, Sir."

Tor responded with a hint of sarcasm, "Thanks." He paused for a moment and then commented, "Anyway Tris and I are just good friends. The fact that she uses my office as if it were her own room is merely incidental."

The grin reappeared and with a similar sarcastic tone that Tor had used, Broden commented, "Yes Sir."

The doors opened and both men stepped out, Broden guided Tor towards the corridor. He commented, "Trouble is Sir, you're too soft. You need to be firmer with people, tell them what's what. Let them know who's really in charge."

Tor looked across, "Yeah, but they've been through a lot already. I can hardly go stamping around giving people a hard time. Not after what they've done to protect the station and defend the other sector."

Broden stopped in the corridor, "That's not what being firm's about. Let them have time to relax and recover, to enjoy the good and the quiet times. The moment to let people know that you're the boss and worthy of a little bit of extra respect is when someone steps over the line."

Looking thoughtful Tor mulled over the idea, "Problem is how can I really punish people, it's not as though I can deduct wages as no-one's getting paid at the moment."

Broden nodded, "That's true, but if we make it home there are a lot of people expecting back pay. The only immediate punishment would be a temporary removal of privileges. Trips off station, banned from the bar, confined to quarters, stuff like that."

Tor nodded when Broden interjected as he turned and started walking again, "And speaking of the bar. Some of the lads are getting concerned about our stock of ale and were asking if they can set up a brewery."

Standing still for a moment Tor failed to see the connection between crime and punishment verses brewing ale. With a confused expression he said, "What?"

Only one guard had been posted near the holding room, with a nod from Broden he deactivated the force fields.

They positioned themselves in front of the door whilst the guard reactivated the force field. Broden repeated his last statement, "The lads want to start brewing ale so we don't run out."

Tor sighed, "Won't the Paranid object?"

The door of the room opened. Daraman was lounging in a chair, the room was not a prison cell and afforded a good number of creature comforts, however with nowhere to go and very little to do the prisoner was extremely bored.

Broden stepped into the room commenting, "Oh no, that's not illegal. The Paranid do object to anything stronger but that's a religion thing."

Tor commented, "Okay if you're sure they won't get upset and start beating a way to my door, then that's fine."

Daraman sprang to his feet looking confused and perplexed as his mind raced to try and remember what things the Paranid considered illegal. Having heard the word 'beating' sent his mind on completely the wrong track. He commented, "I'm a POW and have rights."

Both Tor and Broden gave him a considered look. Tor spoke up first, "Circumstances change."

Daraman now looked more confused than ever, "What?"

Tor replied, "Just in case you're not up to speed with recent events. We are no longer connected to the core systems. In fact we aren't connected to any system that you'd even recognise. It's just us and a few other stations trying to stay alive."

Daraman glanced at Broden who gave a single nod of the head. Tor continued, "Until we find a way home again there's going to be no trial and as there's no prisons, we're at a bit of a loss as to what to do with you. You can bet your life we don't want to have to baby sit you for any length of time and some of the staff have suggested that we just push you out of an airlock without a suit. And I can understand their point of view." Tor paused for a moment and glanced quickly at Broden before returning his gaze to Daraman. The prisoner was visibly paling. Tor spoke up, "So here's the deal. We're going to send you to the Computer Plant in this sector then you're on your own. But if you ever set foot on this station again uninvited, you will be experiencing the effect of space first hand."

Daraman took a moment to digest the words, eventually he said in surprise, "You're letting me go?"

Broden said quietly, "That's what he said. Plenty of time, but be ready in one Stazura."

Tor turned to the door and it slid open, Broden followed leaving a confused Daraman standing in the middle of the room. As they wandered towards the next prisoners quarters, Broden commented, "Well you seemed to handle that rather well. Perhaps we can make a proper boss of you yet."

Tor thought for a while as he walked, "You mean I need to make more veiled threats."

Broden smiled and responded, "Sounded sincere enough for me to press the button."

Tor replied, "This is different, this is personal."

Broden stopped in front of Tor who almost stepped in to him, "This is your station Sir, everything good or bad that happens here should be personal. If you don't mind then no-one else will, you turn a blind eye then so will everyone else. That's the way it works."

Tor commented quietly, "Maybe this is why I made you Station Commander."

Broden smiled, "That's right Sir, so far it's my rules that keep people in order. But you're my boss and you've got nowhere else to go. So who's really in charge?"

Tor pondered this for a moment then replied slowly, "I guess I am."

Broden gave a slight nod and continued to smile, "Then it's up to me to advise you. Let's get this business out of the way so we can sit down and discuss this in detail."

Chapter 2: Probe.

Ricc reviewed the data and spent a moment projecting the telemetry of the probe. It would make final orbit on the third pass of the planet, but with images being returned every few Sezura any significant discoveries would be picked up on the second orbit. The Roamer would be the launch vehicle for the probe sending it out at extremely high velocity and in little under three Tazura it would fire its reverse jets to reach orbital velocity before spiraling in using the gravitational pull of the planet.

He sat quietly watching the simulation and made some fine tweaks then reran the sequence. Behind him the rest of his team watched quietly. Happy that the probe passed over key areas of interest, Ricc stood up and turned to his team saying, "I think we're ready to tell the commander."

This announcement appeared to be met with a few nods but no one was expecting a compliment for the hard work they had put in.

Ricc announced, "Computer put me through to Commander Parrel."

The large AIC logo on the main lab display switched to the bridge and Parrel said questioningly, "What do you have for me?"

Ricc stood rigidly to attention, "The probe is ready Sir, and awaiting launch."

Parrel smiled, "Good work Ricc and thank the team for me."

Ricc beamed, "You already have Sir. Thank you Sir."

Parrel hesitated for a moment and glanced past the image of Ricc to the scientists just over his shoulder. One was making gestures behind Ricc but stopped when nudged by a colleague. Returning his attention back to Ricc he said, "We will launch in five Mizura."

Ricc commented, "Very good Sir." The comm closed. Turning back to his team the smile had already gone, "Back to work please, I hope that we can make some progress on the Khaak technology before the end of the Wozura."

Tor Grall had delivered the same speech to Wilasma and Zeelanamoula that he had to Daraman. Both looked slightly perplexed and surprised but said nothing.

As Tor and Broden wandered the corridors towards the final prisoner, Tor still felt uneasy and returned to the conversation relating to the brewing of ale and commented, "And you're reasonably sure the guys won't make anything stronger than Ale?"

Broden was beginning to wish he had not mentioned it and shrugged before answering, "Hard to say. But distilling is a dangerous game, the alcohol that's tapped off needs to be checked for purity, watered down and then cask conditioned for some time before being consumed. Takes ten to fifteen Jazura to get a decent space fuel."

Tors mind was not eased by this answer and commented, "Yeah, but how long to get something drinkable?"

Thinking for a moment Broden responded, "If the purity level is good, it can probably be watered down and used with a mixer anytime. If it's undiluted it'll probably kill you."

Tor looked a little bit surprised, "How?"

Broden glanced across, decided to tell a few half truths for effect and in a matter of fact voice replied, "Alcohol is a poison. It also has a strong affinity for water. A sufficient amount of pure alcohol getting in the system strips the water out of blood cells causing them to rupture and destroying organs." He paused for a moment and then added casually to Tors paling expression, "Diluted stuff is okay in moderation, too much and the dehydration gives you a hangover in the morning. Eventually though it'll destroy the kidneys and liver."

Tor asked quietly, "And the purity?"

Broden smiled briefly and reflected on his brief time doing guild work at the distillery in Herrons Nebula, "You can always pick up impurities from the still itself and improperly cleaned containers. Some can cause you to be very ill."

They reached the guard who deactivated the force fields and allowed them to pass before reenergising.

With a reflective sigh Tor said, "I've noticed this hasn't stopped you from drinking."

The door opened. Broden gave a slight laugh, "Everything in moderation, and if I worried about all the stuff that's bad for me I certainly wouldn't have found myself here. Anyway who wants to live forever?"

Helass looked around from where she was sitting.

Tor commented thoughtfully, "Yeah, if I had spent more time studying than drinking then perhaps I wouldn't have found myself here either."

Broden smiled and remarked, "Ah, that's fate for you."

Helass watched and listened with a look of intense curiosity as to why they were visiting. Tor turned his attention toward her and said casually, "And speaking of fate. We have some good news for you."

Helass asked optimistically, "You're letting me go?"

Tor smiled and cheerfully said, "Better! We're giving you a job."

Helass glanced at Broden, who gave a slight nod, and then back to Tor, "I'd prefer freedom." She responded cautiously.

Tor sat down and sighed. With all the events that had taken place since the attack a lot of the ill feeling and animosity Tor once felt had faded and he said calmly, "I can understand that, but you were amongst the pirates that attacked the station, and if we ever find our way home then I'll need to know where to find you."

Helass looked confused for a moment, "Find our way home?"

Tor looked at Broden who appeared content to let him do all the talking, "You may have heard about a race known as the Khaak."

Helass looked uncertain as this was not a mission briefing detail she could recall, so she shook her head.

Looking thoughtful Tor responded sarcastically, "I wonder why they never mentioned it." Returning to his normal tone he continued, "Anyway, we and a few other surviving stations have been cut off from the rest of the universe by the Khaak. Which means there's nowhere to go, even if we let you."

Helass was quick in her response, "But you're not going to let me go."

Tor shook his head, "Not off this station, but if you choose to work with us you'll have your freedom on the station, with some restrictions to certain areas. If you say, 'no' then you can expect to spend a long time looking at the walls of this room."

Helass thought about it for a moment and then she nodded before saying quietly, "What do you want me to do?"

Tor gave a relaxed smile, "If our records on you are right, you're a computer programmer. So we want you to test the security of the station computers by hacking into them."

Helass looked surprised and glanced at Broden before returning her gaze to Tor, "Are you serious?"

With a nod Tor replied, "Absolutely. If you help us and show that we can trust you, we can guarantee that when we do get home you'll not face charges or have to go to prison."

Helass asked uncertainly, "You can do that?"

Broden interjected, "Despite appearances Mr. Grall has some influence in this area, and has assisted much less desirable people than yourself."

Helass said sharply in a disbelieving tone, "Name one?" She looked questioningly at Tor.

Tor shook his head slowly and thoughtfully, "I can't because I don't trust you enough not to tell others. That could make life difficult for everyone concerned." He reasoned that Helass was probably the last person he wanted to know that he had helped Nyeshta. It was certain that when they returned Caran would want to talk to her and at that point she might complain letting the secret slip out.

Helass considered Tor's reaction for a moment, there was little choice but to believe him and if she stayed locked up for much longer she felt she would go crazy. Talking quietly she said, "Okay, I'll work for you. But you do promise to keep me out of prison?"

Tor looked steadily at her and could see a childlike fear reflected in her brown eyes mingled with a look of optimistic hope. The promise would somehow make his previous statement more personal. He gave a brief nod, "If you help us and work with us without causing trouble then yes I promise to make sure you don't go to prison when we get back."

Broden had casually observed but said nothing. Tor stood up and looked towards him and then back to Helass and said, "Liann will be along in a while to get you set up and show you around."

Helass commented quietly, "She was the one in the interview?"

Tor nodded slowly but Helass said nothing else, both men turned and left the room. Looking at his time piece Tor commented, "We have a couple of Stazura before Parrels meeting."

Broden nodded as they walked past the guard and commented, "Holo-conference or face to face?"

Tor paced along still thinking about the promise he had just made and then answered, "I need to see him face to face and talk about finding more power plant core compounds from the planet."

Broden asked, "How are the new stations shaping up?"

Tor answered, "Slow progress but we nearly have a Cattle Ranch completed and there's been a start on the Crystal Fab. Sweety is still trying to get more of the construction robots up and running," Tor stopped talking for a moment and then commented, "We should really give the Alien city a name. For some reason it just doesn't seem right to keep referring to it as 'the Alien city' or 'the hidden base'."

Giving this a moments thought Broden responded, "I guess the 'lost city' isn't much better either. What about Mohrabas Station?"

Tor considered this, "Not bad, maybe ThaThwyns Station as he was its last commander."

Broden nodded slowly, "Seems appropriate."

Two Stazura later and Tor was sitting in the officers meeting room on board the Roamer. He was beginning to feel tired and that this had become a much longer day than normal. He spent a few moments reflecting on the meeting with Broden after returning to his own office. They had spent some time discussing ideas for running the station and the underlying message was for Tor to adjust some of his behaviour, to appear to be more in charge and not just one of the 'lads'. Tor knew that the real challenge was when he returned to the Silicon Mine and would be swept up in his birthday celebration. As Broden had said, "It's okay as the boss to have a few drinks and a laugh with the staff but it's quite another thing to get paralytic and make a fool of yourself." Tor had the distinct impression that on this particular occasion Broden would be looking out for him.

He glanced sideways at the door expecting Commander Parrel to enter at any moment. In the room sat two officers that were coordinating the holo-screens. All the other station commanders were calling in and Tor greeted each one. A Mizura before the official meeting time the door opened and the Commander walked in with Sheero Bhard.

Tor instinctively stood up and moved around the table.

Parrel shook hands with Tor and commented with a smile, "Good to see you on board, and I believe a happy birthday is in order."

Tor replied, "Thank you Commander." Then he turned and shook hands with Sheero.

They moved to their seats and Tor sat to Parrels' left whilst Sheero occupied the seat to the right of the Commander.

Parrel asked the two officers, "So do we have everyone?"

The officers nodded and replied, "Yes Sir."

Parrel commented as he glanced at his time piece, "Excellent, let's begin." He took a brief moment to open the console in front of him which listed the meeting agenda items. He started, "First item, the Cattle Ranch and Crystal Fabrication plant construction. Tor can you give us an update?"

Tor placed his technical datapad on the table and then said, "The Cattle Ranch is nearing completion, within the next Tazura we will be bringing systems online and pressure testing the facility. Providing there are no problems we will then progress to stage two and introduce the biomass for cultivation and the seeding of the dome. In another Wozura we will be able to move to stage three and introduce the Argnu Cattle stock."

Parrel asked the question, "How long before we can start to see any production?"

Tor glanced at the technical datapad, "Current estimate is the facility will not start yielding consumable beef until ten Wozura after initial stocking. Initial yields will be low until herd levels reach a sustainable quantity."

The commander of the Cahoona Bakery, Garet Hollant, looked perplexed and commented, "Is there any chance we can accelerate the program. To bring in a quicker yield return. Our current stock level means even at quarter production capacity we'll run out of beef in just over five Wozura."

Tor looked up, "There may be some scope to bring forwards some production, but it'll take longer to reach a sustainable turnover as we'll have to use some breeding stock to keep you guys ticking over. Remember this is a basic facility that won't have all the birthing tanks that can be found on normal factories."

Garet continued to look concerned and uncomfortable, however Tor wondered if it might be more to do with his clothes and the fact that the shirt appeared to be too tight, particularly around the collar. Garet asked, "Any chance you can install some tanks?"

Tor glanced towards Parrel and then back again, "We need to improve the stations core power plant and then synthesize the correct nutri-liquids in order for the tanks to be able to work."

Garet asked, "Then is the problem due to a lack of essential materials?"

Before Tor could respond Parrel interrupted them, "Before you both get carried away in the detail I believe this conversation should be saved for later. Garet your concerns are noted and the three of us should try and get to grips with this after this meeting." Parrel glanced at the holo-images of the other station commanders to see if they had any questions but none were forthcoming. So he turned his attention back to Tor and asked, "What about the Crystal Fab?"

Tor commented, "The Fab will be ready in another five Tazura."

Parrel once again turned his attention to the other station commanders and commented, "Looks like everything is moving along. Does anyone have any questions?"

Garet responded, "We will need to allocate an amount of processed Argnu Beef specifically for Crystal production. This could be difficult until we know how much beef we're going to see in the near term."

Parrel looked across and commented cautiously, "Understood. Again we can discuss this later."

The meeting moved on with updates from each of the station commanders, each one listing their concerns and problems. Parrel made it clear he was only chairing the meeting and kept deferring comments and questions to Tor for a response.

They arrived at the last item on the agenda and Parrel took a moment before speaking, "Lastly we come to the reopening of the gate. From our observations of the Mohrabas home world we estimate that one hundred and ninety two solar cycles is equivalent to one Argon year."

There was a stony silence when Garet commented, "Doesn't that mean we'll be officially recorded as dead back home?" His small round eyes set in a plum face, darted around all the other station commanders.

Parrel commented, "Lets not tempt fate and prove them right once the gates reopened. And I don't believe the authorities will quietly bump us off just to avoid the paperwork."

Sheero muttered quietly, "Caran Belign might." Parrel and Tor were the only ones to hear him and the commander showed no indication of replying to the comment. Tor gave a wry smile.

The chip plant station commander spoke up, "But I and many others have assets in the core sectors."

Parrel looked at Tor briefly and then back at the holo-images, "I doubt any of you has as much to lose as Tor and I understand your concerns. However we are not in a position to try to influence the reopening and bring it forward."

There were a few despondent looks but only a murmur of dissatisfaction from the station commanders.

With the end of the meeting all the holo-projections disappeared leaving just Tor, Parrel and the three officers. Parrel dismissed the two junior officers and then turned to Sheero, "Could you organise some drinks for us?"

Sheero replied, "Yes, Sir." and also left the briefing room.

Parrel sighed, "I think after the next meeting we should just have these briefings once every two Wozura."

Tor felt the commander was right and was only glad to be saved from the discussion that was brewing on the production of Argnu Beef. He leapt in with a direct question, "So what are the chances of using the interplanetary shuttles to get minerals from the home world?"

Parrel leaned back in his chair, "At this moment in time. Next to zero."

Tor looked displeased and asked, "Any reason not to?"

Parrel commented, "Because there's someone still down there."

Tor was surprised, "How do you know?"

Parrel responded casually, "Because they left the lights on."

It took a brief moment before Tor asked, "Do you think they are survivors from the Khaak invasion or could they be Khaak?"

With a shrug Parrel answered, "We won't know until our probe reaches the planet."

Tor fired back the question, "How long's that going to take?"

Looking at his time piece Parrel replied, "A little under three Tazura."

Tor responded, "I would have thought a shuttlecraft could get there much faster than that?"

Parrel held his hand up and commented, "Questions, questions. Just slow down a moment and let me explain. But first I need a drink as I'm a little parched."

A Mizura later and Sheero returned with three drinks. Parrel took a long sip and sighed with contentment, "Right now to business and remember Tor what you hear now isn't to go beyond this room unless I give you the nod otherwise, understood."

Tor nodded in acknowledgement.

The Commander cleared his throat, "As I was saying and just to recap. There is a probe currently en-route to the Mohrabas home world and is expected to arrive in a little under three Tazura. Our suspicion is that we will find Mohrabas survivors rather than Khaak, mainly because the Khaak would have already attacked us if they were here." He paused briefly, "And to answer your question, then yes an interplanetary shuttle would have been quicker, but we don't yet know what type of response we're going to get."

Tor chipped in with a question, "Do you think they would have recovered enough to be a threat?"

Parrel gave Tor a sharp look and with a wry smile, replied, "When an advanced civilisation takes a set back like this, don't always believe the calamitous views of the novelist and movie maker. You only need a few, and I mean a small number of people who know how stuff works and how to make things, and with enough labourers they can recover a large proportion of what's been lost in less than decade. No the biggest problem to be overcome is finding enough food to sustain the surviving population. But we digress."

Tor digested this information for a while but failed to really see how just a few people with 'the knowledge' could make a significant difference particularly if they had nothing left of their previous civilisation, like machines and power. For the moment however he would just take Parrel's word for it.

Parrel noted Tor's look of uncertainty but continued, "If the response we get is non-hostile then we should be encouraged that they will be friendly and should respond positively when we try calling them."

Tor spoke up, "And if they're hostile?"

Parrel answered, "Then we need to understand why and damn quick."

Remembering a past conversation, Tor commented, "The Ancient gave the impression that the Mohrabas would be quite friendly."

Parrel gave a slight smile and replied, "Let's hope he's right. But that was probably reflecting on what they were once like. Now they've had their space fleets and stations destroyed, and the home world surface scoured of life, they may not be so well disposed to more aliens being in their system."

Tor could see the logic in this, as he himself would certainly think twice about letting someone onto his station if they had smashed up the place the last time around. He nodded, "So why don't we just try calling them. Let them know we're friendly."

Parrel sighed, "Well we appear to have hit a snag with that. Our scanners don't seem able to pick up any recognisable communications channels. Which is a problem in itself. Before initiating comms we want to be certain they get and understand the message."

Tor shrugged and said plainly, "Well doesn't that imply that perhaps their civilisation has regressed and they haven't advanced to a point where they'd have invented comms?"

Shaking his head Parrel answered, "Quite the opposite, they can generate artificial light and can mask their cities from our scanners which means they are well advanced. Advanced enough to have at least radio wave communication which we would pick up easily." Parrel paused for a moment and rubbed his chin, "No they have something far more sophisticated."

Sheero leaned forward, "In terms of advancement, we hope the probe will be able to discover if the Mohrabas have made any attempt to return to space."

Parrel nodded, "If they have and they don't like us we could be in real trouble. If they haven't then reopening the gate will give us a moral dilemma."

Tor looked questioningly at Parrel which then resulted in a dawning realisation, "That's not so good."

Parrel responded, "That's one way of putting it. Opening the gate will allow us to go home, but it will also allow the Khaak to return and finish the job."

Sheero then commented, "Which has another implication. If the Mohrabas are friendly towards us and have space capability, how will this 'friendship' continue when we tell them about re-opening the gate."

Parrel glanced across, "Very true, they may suddenly become very unfriendly with that news."

With a perplexed look Tor scanned the faces of the two men, "So what do we do?"

Parrel replied, "We assess the situation, build up a level of trust and diplomatically tell them we do not expect to stay in their sector."

Tor considered the response and tried to determine how it would help, "So we're not going to tell them?"

Parrel frowned, "Not at first. We let them know that we are going to leave but don't elaborate further. Let them get used to the idea. We tell them everything we know about the Khaak and how we defeated them. Then when we drop in the minor detail of opening the gate, hopefully, they will come to us and ask to share technology. We then get to leave peacefully having made some new friends."

Tor did not feel convinced as it appeared to him to be all too vague, he said questioningly, "And that's the plan?"

Parrel gave a slight smile and responded quietly, "No, it's a plan. We can adapt to suit later." He paused for a moment, remembered a detail from the previous meeting and said, "We'd best call Garet Hollant and allay his fears and concerns, but no one is to mention possible life on the home world."

Sheero replied, "Yes, Sir." Tor just nodded as he mulled over what he might say to a Mohrab when the time came.

Time passed swiftly as Ricc Blathe waited for the probe to make its first pass of the home world. Almost invisible to him, his team watched the continuous stream of images being returned. The reverse thruster was already slowing the probe and Ricc took a brief moment to glance at the images then wetted his lips in nervous anticipation. So far everything was in order, the telemetry and speed were exactly as predicted in the simulation.

He knew that a live feed was being sent to the bridge where Commander Parrel would be sitting patiently and watching. Noting the new speed he informed, "Stage one retardation complete. First level orbit obtained. Engaging control thruster for first planetary pass."

On the bridge the Commander sat calmly watching. Something about the image caught his eye, leaning forward to see if it would somehow make a difference being a little closer to the screen, he said out loud, "Freeze the image and magnify. Times fifty."

The main viewer complied with the request and Parrel muttered under his breath, "What the?" Hastily turning his chair to face the science officer, he asked, "Estimated time until final orbit."

The science officer replied, "Final orbit in approximately twenty Mizura."

Parrel looked thoughtful for a moment and then commented, "Go back to live feed." He sat back his mind apprehensive, as a nagging doubt crept into his mind. The image of what looked very much like a high orbit planetary defence grid firmly fixed in his minds eye and he hoped that he was wrong.

The probe continued to send images as it dipped behind the planet, drawn in by its gravity and the use of control thrusters it was nearly eight Mizura before it reappeared.

Over the comm Ricc announced, "First pass complete and entering second orbit."

High definition images of the surface of the planet were coming in however there appeared to be considerable cloud cover obscuring much of the view. The probe crested the rim to the far side of the planet.

Suddenly the screen went blank. An uneasy silence filled the bridge and the science labs. Ricc stared at the blank screen looking confused, then at the instrumentation.

Parrel spoke into the comm, "We appear to have lost contact with the probe. Can someone give me an update why?"

The image of Ricc frantically checking the last few transmissions flashed up on the main viewer. After a moment he quietly reported, "It's been destroyed, Sir."

Parrel asked, "Accidentally or deliberately?"

Ricc responded, "Deliberately, Sir."

Parrel frowned and with a deep sigh he ordered, "Compile all the data and be ready to report in thirty Mizura." He closed the comm and the viewer switched back to the AIC logo. The officers on the bridge watched him, waiting for instructions. Parrel rose rapidly from his chair and commanded, "You have thirty Mizura to review data and present your findings. I want to know what we're dealing with." Turning he strode purposefully towards the door and left the bridge in order to wander the ship and gather his thoughts.

ThaGorack glanced across at the junior officer before returning his attention to the main viewer and removing his finger from the panel. The object the aliens launched had strayed too close to the defence grid. A single pulse from the outer defence unit destroyed it completely.

The decryption of the alien signal revealed basic images of the planet and contained self diagnostic data. One fact was certain, the aliens now knew they were there and the destruction of the object might illicit a response. ThaGorack needed to alert the council but before he left the room he growled instructions to the two Mohrab officers.

They responded in kind and began to bring up command screens on the viewers. ThaGorack span on his heels and padded from the room.

Parrel returned to the briefing room a Mizura before his officers. He sat down and looked at the report and the question he asked himself was, should he be surprised that the probe was destroyed? To his mind it only proved the Mohrabas were as technologically advanced as he assumed they were. The real question was if they would do anything more.

The officers filed in and quickly took their places. Parrel scanned the faces to try and assess the mood of his officers, as he expected the general consensus was of apprehensive expectation.

Parrel started, "I see we're all here. So let's get started by reviewing the probes final few transmissions."

Sheero tapped on the touchpad in front of him, energising the viewing screens and the holo-projector in the centre of the table. Taking the control stick he began, "As you can see this is the flight path of the probe. As we move closer to the planet you begin to notice a number of small dark objects. Invisible to scanners, but visible to normal optics."

The image moved forward on the screen and Sheero continued, "As the probe approached it must have crossed into the firing range of the defence network and as the last image shows, it took a single well aimed shot."

Parrel looked across to Chareth and asked, "And we have been unable to detect any form of communication between the planet and this defence system?"

The officer shook his head, "No Sir, nothing on any frequency. But that is not to say that they have some method of communications which is beyond our understanding."

Parrel nodded, "All things are possible. Any signs of further response?"

Several officers shook their heads and Sheero replied, "No Sir, there has been no movement of any kind."

Parrel sighed, "Well that is at least promising. However, based on technology that we have already encountered, we should not ignore that they may have developed cloaking technology, and could already have us surrounded."

There was a moment of grim faced silence before Parrel asked, "Have you checked that this planetary defence system doesn't have any obvious connection with the Khaak weapons technology we have already encountered?"

Craydon Flaigal, the bridge science officer spoke up, "From what little data we have from the actual firing we would say, no, this is not like the Khaak weapon system."

Parrel asked slowly, "I'm taking it that the weapon that destroyed the probe was a beam weapon of some description?"

Craydon shook his head, "Slightly more sophisticated than that. The probe was moving at several thousand mps. Very difficult to hit with a beam weapon, the firing system would have to be incredibly accurate directionally and in its timing."

Parrel looked around the table, "Any suggestions what type of weapon this is?"

Sheero answered, "We think it may possibly be similar to the phased shockwave weapon that the Teladi and Paranid have been developing."

Parrel considered this, "Based on what we have seen from the Khaak and their attack strategy a wide field defence system seems somewhat appropriate." He paused for a moment as he gathered his thoughts, "At this time I am willing to consider this an unfortunate event. I would suggest that the probe entered into range of an automatic planetary defense system, which did not recognise it as friendly and destroyed it. Suggestions on how to proceed?"

Chareth spoke up, "Sir, might I suggest that we try for a direct communication. We can drop a relay satellite nearer to the planet to help pick up comms activity and also make sure it's outside the range of the planetary defence system."

Sheero commented, "However that might just upset them more than the probe did. The only thing we found out for certain is that they know we're here, and they know we know they're there."

Craydon chipped in, "In order for them to have positioned a defensive web around the planet shows they have mastered space flight."

Parrel sat forward, "And they have some powerful weapons. We have a difficult road ahead of us, made all the more complicated by the fact that our future goal may not meet with the goodwill of our neighbours. The choices we face are to either to go on as we are and ignore them, in the hope they don't notice what we're up to and react, or make contact now and understand this race, make friends and hopefully gain their support."

Sheero spoke up, "Sir, we have a logistics problem as well. When we open the gate, there are too many people to pack onto the Roamer and the other ships to make an escape. Over half would have to stay behind."

Parrel raised a questioning eyebrow and Sheero added, "Most people arrived as crew on the factories, and there's no way we can take those with us, Sir."

Nodding slowly, Parrel came to a decision, "Then we must try and establish communications and gain the goodwill of this race. Sheero, Chareth prepare the shuttle and nav sat."

Chapter 3 – 1st Signs

Tor sat spending an inordinate amount of time examining his big toe. It still throbbed painfully having stubbed it on the corner of his desk. "Do you think it might be broken?" He asked out loud.

Tris exclaimed in disbelief, "What? Did you actually take in anything I just said?"

Tor looked up. A confused and worried expression crossed his face, "Err, yeah, sure."

Tris looked at him furiously, "And?"

Tor desperately racked his memory and a vague snippet of information seemed to spring to mind, "Something about the other pilots not leaving litter in your ship when they go out on patrol."

Tris sighed, "That was five Mizuras ago."

Tor looked completely lost and pointed vaguely at his toe, "This really hurts."

Tris commented, "Something else is really going to hurt in a Mizura."

At the same precise moment the door opened and Broden stepped in. Catching the last comment he raised a questioning eyebrow and said, "If you two would like to be left alone for another thirty Mizuras, I can always come back."

Tor responded, "She's threatening me with physical abuse."

Broden turned on his heels, "Call me when you're finished."

Tor replied quickly, "No, I mean she's going to hurt me!"

Broden paused for a moment and replied, "Some men pay good money for that sort of thing."

Tris commented, "Is that the voice of experience talking?"

Broden turned back to face Tris with a broad grin, "Depends on if you're offering?"

Tris asked, "Would you like me to hurt you?"

Broden replied, "Only if I get to choose how."

Tor butted in, "Look is there something someone wants to tell me here, because my toe really hurts and I think I'm going to see a doctor."

Tris looked despairingly at Tor before turning her attention back to Broden, "Perhaps you should mention the Roamers recent activity, because he sure as hell isn't listening to me."

Broden glanced at Tor, then at Tris and nodded slowly, "Okay, and I've had a word with the lads and they apologise if their intended joke caused any offence."

Tor became aware that he may have missed something important. Tris smiled and said, "Thanks, I'm going to get some food, I'll see you around."

As Tris left, Broden gave Tor a long thoughtful look. When the door closed he sighed and then commented, "You may be young and care free my friend, but where that lady is concerned you are being singularly stupid." There was a pause when Broden added, "Sir."

Tor opened and closed his mouth. He eventually shrugged and said, "Sorry you lost me for a second there?"

Broden muttered, "I think we should have the doc check out your ears rather than your toe." Then commented aloud, "Which bit do you need clarifying Sir?"

Tor flinched as he put his foot gently on the floor, "If there's one thing I do notice, you only ever call me Sir when you're insulting me. So I take it I'm doing something wrong?"

Broden commented, "That's remarkably enlightened of you Sir."

Tor asked, "So?"

With a slight shake of the head Broden commented, "Well let me put it like this. None of us know if we'll ever see home again and there's a fair number of the lads that would give their hind teeth to be in your position with respect to Tris. Now if you don't pay her a little more attention then, chances are she'll turn her attention elsewhere."

Tor said slowly, "Ahh."

Broden however was not totally convinced that the message had sunk home when Tor commented, "Does my toe look broken to you? It seems to be a funny shape."

Broden looked around, "Sorry I think I must have the wrong office. This is the office of Tor Grall isn't it?"

Tor looked perplexed and replied slowly, "Yes."

Broden's eyes narrowed, and he breathed in deep, "The same Tor that was impaled to his seat in a Discoverer and survived? The same Tor that was ejected out of the cockpit of his exploding Piranha? The same Tor that stood up to Creed and lived? The very man that stood in a room when a grenade exploded, took a rifle butt to the head and who was subsequently subjected to multiple stun grenades? The person that piloted his ship through the heart of a Khaak destroyer, faced death numerous times and with bare faced audacity lived to tell the tale? Who almost suffocated in his space suit to save his ship? The very man that led those of us who survived to the safe haven of this sector?"

Tor quietly replied, "I suppose so."

Broden looked around for dramatic effect, "Well, where is this man? All I see is a boy whining about a stubbed toe."

Tor commented quietly, "I guess I'm not doing so well then?"

Broden gave a wry smile, "Not today. The feeling is getting stronger that you are Governor in name only, Parrel is the real leader of this sector and I am undisputedly in command of this station. So no one truly understands where you fit in." He paused for a moment, "Now I'm telling you all this as a friend and advisor, this is your wake up call so to speak and if you don't begin to make an impression soon then you might as well be just another face in the crowd."

Tor responded, "I'd hate to know what you'd say to me if I wasn't a friend."

Broden hesitated for a moment and then replied, "I'd lie to you and tell you you're doing a great job. Now to business. Something you do need to know is that the Roamer launched an interplanetary shuttle about forty Mizuras ago and it's heading for the Mohrabas homeworld."

Tor asked, "Any word from Parrel why?"

Broden replied, "Nothing yet."

Tor spoke to the room in general, "Sweetie, can you give me any info."

Sweetie replied, "I have not been able to access the Roamer data banks. But having monitored a number of the transmission frequencies the Roamer lost a survey probe which was launched to take images of the planet. The probe appears to have been destroyed."

Tor asked, "Did it crash?"

Sweetie responded, "Shot down would be a better description."

Tor shot a look over to Broden, "That doesn't sound too friendly."

Broden thought for a moment, "Seems a perfectly reasonable reaction to me."

Tor considered what he should do next, "Sweetie any chance you can get access to the Roamers databanks and find out what's going on?"

Sweetie replied with a hint of incredulity, "Are you asking me to break into another computer system?"

Tor sighed and frowned, "You used to do it all the time."

Sweetie said, "That was then! Now as a recognised citizen I have social responsibilities towards less fortunate members of my kind."

Broden gave a wry smile and Tor commented, "What you really mean to say is that Dorlf won't give you access and can keep you out."

Sweetie replied curtly, "I see this conversation is going nowhere so good day."

Tor opened his mouth when Broden said, "Stop! Now I think I know why Nye left." He addressed the room, "Sweetie, from the Mohrabas archives does it mention anything about planetary defence systems?"

Sweetie replied calmly, "Nothing found in the data store."

Tor commented, "Parrel did mention that he may try and get in contact with the Mohrabas if they were found to inhabit the planet."

Broden asked, "Sweetie does the shuttle have any cargo?"

Sweetie replied, "Long range scans indicate that it may be carrying a nav sat. However it is now too far away for an accurate reading."

Broden commented, "Well there's a job for you. Knowledge is power so get in contact with Parrel and find out what he's up to."

Tor nodded, "Anything else."

Broden thought for a moment, "Sorry forgot to add the Sir on the end of that." He smiled and continued, "We have stabilised the Cattle Ranch core power plant, but in terms of operating energy cells it's going to consume twenty five percent more than normal to make up the shortfall."

Tor said, "What's the current stock list?"

Broden handed over his datapad knowing this was something that Tor had some skill in. Tor commented, "If I'm reading this right we should start to run short in about fifteen Tazura. Hopefully we should have the Crystal Fab running by then. I see the construction is going to plan but I'm guessing we're likely to see the same main power plant problems."

Broden shrugged, "Probably worse as we had to increase the amount used in the cattle ranch to stabilise the reactor. But that's only the start of the potential problems."

Tor kept his eyes on the datapad, "I notice we are writing off the first three yields of crystals."

Broden nodded, "It'll take that many runs just to get the quality right. Our Paranid friends will not risk sub-standard crystals in the generation of energy cells."

Taking a moment Tor added, "It's usually normal for Solar Power Plants to have crystal production experts on board. We should ask if they will send someone across to assist with any technical issues."

Broden gave a small smile, "Well you know how the Paranid are about dealing with the unholy. And to be quite frank they can be a cantankerous bunch of unhelpful guys. But maybe as they have some respect for you as a pseudo defender of the faith against the demon Khaak hordes you could negotiate a deal with them."

ThaStornlas eyes swept over the council. The chambers were filled with the brightly coloured robes of representatives from all eight cities, something that had not been seen for over one hundred Mohrabas years. The taste of the air was not of anxious anxiety but of curious anticipation. News of the visitors had been circulating for some time and now the destroyed probe seemed like a catalyst in the ground swell of opinion.

Once more they would reach for the stars and this time they would be prepared.

The halls of the Mohrabas council purred with the voices of the elders and council members. ThaGoracks' father, ThoBieght took the centre stand and with a nod from the Chief Minister called the room to silence. As the room hushed he spoke about the arrival of the visitors and at length about the alien object that had been destroyed.

It appeared to ThaStornla that the consensus was the aliens were not the ancient enemy returned and for now their intentions appeared peaceful. However the despoiling of the ancient remains led to some dissenting voices in how to deal with them. Since the arrival no more ships had come through the gate and none of the ships left. This in itself appeared odd.

Questions were growing and needed to be answered, but there was one certain and undisputable fact, they were now discovered and anything they did could not undo this.

ThoBieght addressed the council again, "We should not avail ourselves to gentle words. Actions speak louder. To understand the nature of our visitors we should test them and by their response should we judge them."

ThoHault, one of the senior members of the council asked, "Learned councillor, what test do you propose?"

ThoBeight growled, "The question is heard councillor ThoHault. It is our considered opinion that a show of arms should be sufficient."

Chief Minister ThiRiioth purred, "Learned councillor, they are few, a full show of strength would prove nothing of the nature of these creatures."

ThoBeight bowed slightly, "Excellency I do not propose to send the whole fleet, just six warships."

ThiRioth looked over the assembly, "Councillor ThiHient, we have not heard your voice in this matter."

The silver haired ThiHient raised himself up from his seat and leaned heavily against his walking staff, although very old even for one of his race, the Mohrabas elders' eyes keenly looked over the faces around him, "Excellency. As they survey us so we should survey them. Yet their communications is primitive, and we should first learn to communicate on their level. To defend ourselves against an enemy is one thing, but we should not mistakenly make enemies because we failed to talk first."

There were murmurs of approval and ThoBeight gave a nod, "Excellency, we are engaged in developing a transmission system that uses the frequencies of the visitors for when the time is appropriate. Yet that will take a while before it is complete and the visitors have already sent another ship towards our world for what purpose we cannot determine."

Deep purrs and growls rippled through the chamber in a low sweeping wave of noise. ThiRioth rose to his feet in a single smooth motion and hammered the steel tip of the base of his staff of office against the hard stone floor three times. Silence descended and all eyes watched. Moving to the central pedestal he gave a slight bow to ThoBeight who returned the gesture and yielded the floor.

ThiRioth looked over the council chamber and then his eyes landed on ThoBeight, "The time for our return to the stars has come. Prepare your ships we will go meet these visitors and see what we can learn."

The Mammoth held position fifteen k's from the nearest station and Tor had come to visit Parrel. The commander was already in the briefing room when Tor stepped in, "Come in Tor. Surprised not to have seen you before today!"

Tor sat down, "It's been busy, the new cattle ranch and crystal fab have some issues. We're desperately short of central power plant core material for one. At the moment we don't have enough to start the crystal fab when it's completed."

Parrel frowned, "I can see that's a big problem."

Tor nodded, "Just a little, we have about fourteen Tazuras of production energy cells remaining after which there'll be no more production. Unless we start harvesting and processing by hand. But other than that what have you been up to recently?"

Parrel started, "I guess you already know that we lost the probe. So now we have a shuttle delivering a nav sat to a safe location near the planet and hopefully we can send them a message of goodwill."

Tor commented, "Let's hope they hear us and understand the message."

Parrel nodded, "Let's hope. If you're happy to hang around for another thirty Mizuras you can watch the deployment of the satellite."

Tor said, "My next appointment is in three Stazuras with the Paranid station commander."

Parrel smiled, "Sounds like a fun meeting."

Tor commented, "Yeah, need to get them to give some advice and support with crystal production."

The holo screen flickered to life and Sheero appeared, "Sir, sorry to disturb you but we have ship movement on long range scanners."

Parrel looked suddenly anxious, "From the planet?"

Sheero replied, "No Sir, from the inner moon. Six ships but we can't get a fix on type other than they have interplanetary drive systems."

Parrel asked, "Course and heading."

Sheero responded, "They will intercept the Shuttle in sixty three Mizura, Sir."

Parrel glanced at Tor, "Any comms?"

Sheero frowned, "Nothing we can detect. Sir"

Parrel looked pensive and commented, "Mission is to proceed as planned. Deploy the satellite and have the shuttle wait."

Tor asked, "Why don't you have the shuttle come back?"

Parrel glanced over, "No, it will give the wrong impression."

Tor asked, "But what if they're hostile?"

Parrel frowned, "Then regrettably we're going to lose a shuttle and its crew."

Tor looked incredulous, "And that's worth the risk?"

Parrel looked at the holo-image, "Thank you Sheero. I will be on the bridge shortly." The image faded and Parrel turned his attention back to Tor, "Understand this, the shuttle is a damn long way from where we are now and it's taken several Stazuras to get there. It's not a fighter craft so it has a token gesture in terms of weapons capability. Chances are if it tried to run from these incoming ships it wouldn't get back here before they caught up with it. So if they're hostile then the shuttle is already as good as destroyed. But what impression do you think that running away is going to give to whoever is out there."

Tor knew the answer in his heart but did not reply.

Parrel continued, "One impression is that we're scared. The second is that we're up to no good."

Tor commented, "Yeah, but being scared isn't too bad."

Parrel sighed, "Scared people do stupid things. Like start shooting and what we don't want is to outstay our welcome due to some stupid misunderstanding. So the mission goes on as planned and we pray like the Paranid that our message reaches the ears of the right people."

Tor was silent for a moment, "Okay. I think the others need to know what's going on."

Parrel smiled, "Are you proposing having a meeting?"

Tor said, "If you're okay with that?"

Parrel looked up and commented, "Why are you asking me? Aren't you the one in charge?"

Tor replied, "Only in name according to the latest opinion."

Parrel nodded, "If you're not used to ordering people around then it's easy to slip back into your comfort zone and allow others to do it for you. Like wise I'm probably just as guilty but from the other side, having

been in charge so long it's almost second nature to give out orders. The decision I give to you and for once I'm not going to say if it's good or bad."

Tor considered his options for a short while, "I think we should wait until the satellite has sent it's message. Then call an emergency meeting of station owners."

Parrel simply responded, "Let's get a bite to eat and go to the bridge and watch the deployment from there."

The bridge of the Roamer was on skeleton crew. Without the threat of immediate danger being present and while the ship was not on active patrol, the regular staff were enjoying the additional rest and relaxation time.

A live feed was being transmitted from the shuttle craft with only a light amount of chatter as the crew reported their current status. Tor could make out that the craft was very near to its destination and the speed was falling away rapidly.

Sheero commented, "ETA three Mizuras. Scanners are clear, no immediate threat detected."

The pilot reported back, "Acknowledged. Satellite systems are clean and unit loaded into position for deployment."

Tor sat in one of the vacant seats of the science station whilst Parrel casually reviewed reports on his datapad. Occasionally he glanced up at the information screen but let Sheero deal with the verbal instructions.

The final Mizuras seemed to drag. The shuttle pilot eventually reported in, "Satellite deployed and ready to transmit."

Parrel looked up and commented, "Are we ready to transmit?"

Sheero replied, "Yes, sir."

Parrel asked out loud, "Dorlf, have you confirmed translation with Sweety."

It was one of the few times Tor had ever heard the Roamers AI speak when Dorlf replied, "Translation and phonetics verified. Transmission will commence upon request."

Parrel ordered, "Transmit on full sweep of frequencies."

On the Mohrabas home world ThoBeight looked up as his son gave a slight bow. He asked, "What is it you have for me?"

ThaGorack appeared slightly perplexed when he answered, "The visitors are transmitting a message to us."

ThoBeight shrugged, "Have our translators deciphered it?"

ThaGorack shook his head, "They have no need, the transmission is in our own language."

ThoBeight considered this and asked, "Hand me the message clip."

ThaGorack handed him the small clip. ThoBeight held it in his hand and closed his fingers around it. Briefly he closed his eyes and gave a slight purr. When he opened them again he commented, "It is a good translation. Not perfect but close enough. I will inform his Excellence of this."

ThaGorack said, "Yes father." And made a slight bow to leave.

ThoBeight commented, "Before you go. I am aware of your rivalry with ThaStornla. As your father I insist you put aside your grievance. It does neither of our families reputation any good."

ThaGoracks' eyes narrowed as he responded, "And if I cannot?"

ThoBeight answered in a deep gentle purr, "His Excellence has also noted this rivalry, and he is displeased to see it so open. If you do not put it aside then he will take steps."

ThaGorack blinked slowly as he considered his fathers words and with a slight bow he left.

Tor sat in the briefing room of the Roamer and looked at the faces of the station owners. Each one was on a separate screen. Commander Parrel sat quietly and looked expectantly at Tor. He took a deep breath to steady his nerves, "Looks like everyone is here! So I can now give you an update to some recent developments. A short while ago a satellite was placed near to the local planet having determined that there may still be a technologically advanced species on the surface."

Tor paused briefly, "Within the last few Mizura a greeting was transmitted and we can report that six space worthy ships of unknown type and capability have been launched. These ships appear to have interplanetary capability and are closing in on the position of the satellite. At this moment we have had no formal communications response. Within the next twenty Mizura we will have more details on the alien craft."

With the exception of the Paranid, the images of the other station commanders glanced at each other. It was Gareth that spoke up, "How long have you been aware that the planet was inhabited?"

Tor resisted the urge to look over to Parrel for an answer, and gave a response, "A probe was launched a few Tazura ago to determine if we could find any raw materials for the Cattle Ranch and Crystal Fab power cores. The probe was destroyed by a planetary defence system less than one Tazura ago."

Garet asked, "And we're supposed to be encouraged by this news?"

Tor replied, "In hindsight the response is only how we would react if an alien object of unknown purpose entered within range of one of our planets. We see nothing sinister in their reaction and in our message apologised if the probe caused offense."

Garet turned his attention to Parrel, "And is this your view also Commander."

Tor looked at Parrel who stared back at him and asked, "With your permission?" Tor gave a slight nod. This appeared to receive a number of curious glances from the station commanders.

Parrel addressed Gareth directly, "As Tor has mentioned the probe unfortunately got too close. The satellite and corresponding message was sent to allay any fears in the local populace."

Garet commented dryly, "Assuming they understood it."

Parrel looked to Tor to answer. Tor commented, "The message was given in the native language."

The other station commanders appeared content to let Gareth act as spokesperson as he asked another question, "But they haven't responded?"

Tor replied, "Not yet," And with what struck Parrel as a rather insightful evaluation, Tor continued, "But that may be because their communications systems work at a level we have yet to discover."

Garet smiled, "So how do we know they received the message?"

Tor sighed, "We don't. But like our own technology we assume they can scan far more frequencies than they transmit over, without making adjustments to systems."

Parrel quietly considered this and decided he would go and talk to some of the communications experts.

Garet once again addressed Parrel, "Commander is this possible?"

Parrel replied absently, "Oh yes, very possible. Scanners will pick up spatial anomalies by their frequency signature but you wouldn't develop a transmitter to work at that level. There wouldn't be any point."

There was a brief silence and Tor asked, "Any further questions?"

For the first time in many meetings Molamanckebale, the Solar Power Plant commander asked cautiously in his deep voice, "And you will be making us fully aware of developments as they happen?"

Tor knew this was not a question and gave a slight bow of the head in Paranid fashion to acknowledge firstly that he had heard and understood the statement and secondly as a submissive gesture in recognition of the speakers seniority, "Everyone will be updated as developments occur."

Tor then addressed the other station commanders, "Any further questions?"

There was no answer. Tor concluded, "Then this meeting is over. We will be in contact again soon."

Each of the screens disconnected and Tor turned to Parrel, "Well?"

Parrel smiled, "You should build on that. Opinions could change sooner than you think and I like your reasoning. You are welcome to stay on board until the encounter but I need to go and chat to some of my staff."

Tor spent some time examining his datapad and occasionally making calls to Broden or Liann for miscellaneous snippets of information. The silicon mine carried only a reduced buffer stock of wafers and a small reserve of energy cells not destined for the Cattle Ranch or the Crystal Fab.

Parrel returned to the briefing room ten Mizuras before the intercept time. With him were several of his senior officers. Tor put aside the datapad and looked questioningly at the Commander.

Parrel said, "We have a new development. Only one of the six ships has reduced speed."

Tor asked, "Which means?"

Parrel replied, "The others are coming this way."

Tor sat back, "And we still haven't heard anything from them?"

Parrel shook his head and sat down. The officers also took their places. Parrel commented out loud, "Computer log the meeting time and begin recording. In the light of the recent development we have now managed to scan the local ships. Sheero can you give us an update?"

Sheero looked around the table, "Vessel type and class appears to be very much like our new Corvette class. Multiple weapon placements and what we believe to be missile launch pods."

Parrel asked, "Any verification on the weapons type?"

Sheero shook his head, "Unable to determine and the same story is true for the shield type and strength."

Parrel frowned, "Is there any way we can match the energy signatures to the weapons and shielding of the Sentinel currently onboard the Silicon Mine?"

Sheero replied, "There is a small correlation between the Sentinel shield system but not enough to prove it has the same effectiveness. As for the weapons they appear to be un-powered so we have no way of matching them."

Parrel looked at Craydon and asked, "What's their estimated ETA."

Craydon answered, "Sir, since the change of heading and speed, ETA will be in two Stazuras."

Tor asked quickly, "Change of speed?"

Craydon glanced across, "They have doubled it."

Parrel looked around the room, "For the moment we must assume they have advanced their reflective shielding technology. How effective this will be against high energy plasma weapons is unknown, and I don't want to find out. Sheero, ensure only half the fighter patrol are on duty and they must have weapons offline when the ships arrive. Tor you will need to insist that the other station commanders comply or put all their fighters into dock."

Tor reiterated the comment Parrel made previously, "Scared people do stupid things."

The officers looked at Tor and Parrel gave a nod with the comment, "They do indeed, but in some cases they can do remarkable things."

Tor said, "I'll contact the station Commanders and get their assurance they will comply."

Parrel nodded, "Thank you." He then addressed Chareth, "Any progress with the comms?"

Chareth replied, "Nothing Sir."

Tor asked, "Have we really expended all options?"

Chareth glanced over, "One of the science crew mentioned something about phased pulse modulation in an inverted sub space medium as being the next leap in communications, but it's only a theory and the scanner technology hasn't been invented to detect it yet."

Tor had no idea what this meant and responded, "Ahh."

Parrel chipped in, "I'm sure Tor would enjoy discussing the finer details of the theory, however we don't have the technology or the time to develop it. Needless to say, we still may not be able to tap into the locals transmissions even if we did have it. So let's stick with what we can achieve and hope for a reply soon."

Parrel glanced at his time piece, "Time to conclude this brief update. Dorlf activate the monitors and give us the live feed from the shuttle."

The shuttle pilot came on screen, "Commander, just going to switch you to external view."

As they looked out the hull of the Mohrabas ship caught the light of the sun. The targeting system counted down the distance as the gap closed to less than five k's the screen went blank suddenly.

Parrel asked quickly, "Dorlf, what just happened?"

Dorlf replied, "All communications have been lost."

Sheero asked, "Destroyed?"

Dorlf answered, "Unable to establish. However my last scan indicates no power surge to the alien vessels weapons."

Parrel commented quietly, "Gentlemen until we have positive confirmation of the destruction of the shuttle we must assume that they have jammed the signal." He looked at each face around the table and waited for an acknowledgement of his summary.

Tor asked, "Can you be so sure?"

Parrel looked at him, "We have to believe they are being cautious."

Tor asked quietly, "And at what point do we change our mind?"

Parrel answered, "When the shooting starts."

Tor looked around the room, "And how do we know they haven't already started shooting?"

Parrel gave a loud sigh and fixed Tor with a hard stare, "Because I can't hear any guns going off."

Tor sat back wondering if he might have pushed the point too far. Despite Parrel's calm appearance there had been an abruptness in his tone. Parrel waited for a moment and then asked, "Are there any other questions?"

No one said anything so Parrel said, "Very well. I would suggest everyone takes some time to rest now to be refreshed and ready for duty when the ships arrive."

All except Parrel stood up and headed for the door. Parrel commented, "Tor a quiet word if you don't mind."

Tor stopped and looked over, "Yes?"

Parrel waited until the last officer had departed before commenting, "Just for a moment there you sounded like you were beginning to panic."

Tor shrugged, "I didn't mean to."

Parrel cut in, "Some advice. As someone who's in charge you should not feed the doubts of others with your own. At all times you should appear to have the situation under control, or at least have a damned good idea what to do next. Remember your fear is their fear and your strength is their strength."

Expecting a continuation of the lecture Tor simply nodded.

Parrel stood up and commented, "I expect you need to update the other station Commanders. Before you talk to them though, think about your own questions and reservations then come up with suitable responses. Remember we don't know what, if anything, has happened, or is happening to the shuttle, only that we've lost comms. Don't scare people with speculation and doubt. Make them think this contingency was planned for and we have no reason to believe anything bad has happened. And if possible try to believe it yourself."

Tor asked, "Do you?"

Parrel immediately replied, "Yes, I have to, and so do you!"

Tor sighed, "Shall I make the call now whilst we're here?"

Parrel shook his head, "No you need to think about how you're going to deal with awkward questions without sounding vague and uncertain. So I suggest you think about it on your way back home as you'll also need to get some rest afterwards."

Tor commented, "And I'll need to get some rest before beginning negotiations with the Paranid."

It was a short trip back to the Silicon Mine. Tor was too distracted to notice that the ship had docked as he struggled to come up with answers that sounded convincing to the questions that buzzed around his head. Five Mizuras after docking he stepped out of the ship and with a deep look of concentration moved purposefully towards the shuttle lift.

Broden stepped out of his way and watched him pass Tris with barely a sign of recognition. She looked momentarily lost until she noticed him and Broden beckoned her over with the wave of his hand.

Tris asked, "What's up with him?"

Broden shrugged, "Looks like someone's given him something to think about."

Tris commented cuttingly, "That shouldn't be difficult."

With a slight sigh Broden commented, "So he hasn't apologised to you yet?"

With a derisory laugh Tris replied, "Apologise? Who him?"

Broden frowned as he turned his gaze and watched Tor step in to the shuttle lift. The doors closed. He commented, "Give him time, but today I get the feeling all is not well with our universe."

Tris asked quietly, "What do you mean?"

Broden replied, "I'm not certain but I guess it's got something to do with the activities of the Roamer."

Tris began, "You don't think..."

However Broden cut in, "There's only one way to find out."

Tris hesitated and she commented softly, "You go."

Broden considered this for a moment, "Okay. Get some drinks lined up and I'll go find out what's going on."

Tris looked over to her ship, "I'm due out on patrol."

With a slight smile Broden, "Change of orders, you're going to the bar."

Tris began, "But."

Broden commented, "I'm the Station Commander, are you disobeying my order?"

With the hint of a smile Tris replied, "No Sir."

With a quick nod of the head Broden commented, "Then why are you still standing there?"

Tris turned smartly and marched away. Turning he made his way quickly to the shuttle lift. Once reaching the Command Centre level he met Liann and commented casually, "Hello gorgeous."

Liann replied with a smile, "You're just in time to take me to dinner."

Broden said, "And it'll be the best meatsteak dinner credits can buy." He paused, "However I need to see the boss first. Look do me a favour, Tris has just gone to the bar to have a few drinks, if you're quick you may get one on the tab before she starts on her third."

Liann commented, "Don't be long then, otherwise we'll both be drunk." They briefly hugged and headed towards their respective destinations.

The door to Tors' office slid open and Broden stepped in to see Tor sitting behind his desk staring intently at the monitor.

Broden said loudly, "Sir."

Tor seemed to come out of his look of deep concentration and his expression changed to one of near surprise, "Yes Broden, what can I do for you?"

Broden replied, "Question is Sir, is there anything we can do to help you?"

Tor thought for a moment, "Maybe there is. I need to have good answers to hypothetical questions."

Broden asked, "Such as?"

Tor replied slowly, "Such as, we've just lost contact with our interplanetary shuttle, circumstances unknown, and with what appear to be five warships heading towards us. Do we think they're friendly?"

Broden commented, "Do we know the shuttle was destroyed?"

Tor replied, "We can't tell."

Broden said cautiously, "Did the scanners report any type of weapons charging up?"

Tor searched his memory, "No. Just the comms went out."

Broden replied casually, "Then be optimistic. As far as you know the shuttle is unharmed but its comms have been blocked."

Over the next few Mizura Tor told Broden all the details of the shuttle mission, the events and meetings held and finally the conversation with Parrel. The former Captain highlighted only the salient points which should be mentioned and agreed to sit in on the briefing with the other station commanders.

The video conference itself was surprisingly short. The many questions that Tor had feared he would have to answer never materialised. As the screens blanked out Broden commented on the fact the Commanders were unusually quiet and speculated that they were probably digesting the information and discussing it privately amongst themselves. Somehow this left Tor with a feeling of unease.

Declining the offer of a drink at the bar Tor retired to his quarters and tried to get some sleep before the five ships arrived. Also so that he would be relaxed for the meeting with Molamanckebale. What sleep he did get was restless and haunted by images of Khaak destroyers laying waste to the sector. Twice he found himself lurching up into a sitting position from deep sleep, the image of a Khaak pounding at his door and at the station window, it remained sharp in his mind with the pounding of his heart beating in rhythm to the movement.

The dreams were becoming more frequent as the days passed by. Sweetys' voice gently commented in the darkness, "That's twice in one night. What is it you dream that scares you so much?"

Tor replied, "Dying Sweety."

Sweety commented quietly, "But death is inevitable why do you fear it?"

Tor sighed and lay back on his bed, "It not death itself that worries me but how I die."

Sweetys voice softly filtered through the still air, "Do you believe you see the future?"

The mental image left by the dream flashed back and Tor answered, "For all our sakes I hope not."

Sweety asked, "What is it you see when you dream?"

Tor replied in little more than a whisper, "Khaak ships everywhere. Stations and ship burning, people dying and a Khaak creature beating on the door."

In a whisper Sweety asked, "And do you see your friends?"

Tor hesitated for a moment before replying, "Each and every one."

Sweetys voice touched the limit of Tors' hearing as she asked, "And do you see me?"

Quietly Tor replied, "Yes Sweety I see you." Silence descended but Tor did not feel like closing his eyes quite yet and he asked, "Sweety, do you like being free?"

The soft night voice of Sweety replied, "It is not how I had simulated it to be."

Tor replied gently, "That is so often the case." For a moment he reflected on a comment Broden made and he asked, "Do I treat you badly?"

Sweety commented, "Occasionally in what you say. Tact doesn't seem to be one of your strong points."

Tor responded, "Sorry Sweety." He sighed and said, "Light level twenty percent."

The lights glowed dimly and Tor reached for the glass and the space fuel container beside his bed. Giving the bottle a cursory shake he knew he would have to get another soon. Pouring the last of the liquid into the glass he sipped the contents slowly.

Sweety asked, "Does that help?"

Tor replied quietly, "A little." Draining his glass he put it back on the side, lay back and closed his eyes hoping for a peaceful sleep. The lights dimmed out.

Chapter 4 – Dissention

Tor paced his office as he studied several screens. Despite his disturbed night he looked remarkably fresh and alert. The Mohrabas warships were only one thousand k's out and closing rapidly as they shed speed to inter-sector levels.

As faintly glowing dots, even on maximum magnification, Tor could not make out any detail. The other screens showed transports and security patrol movements. For the moment he missed the gentle hum of the machinery of the Silicon Mine as it sat idle to conserve its stock of energy cells. He knew the other station Commanders had a similar problem until the Crystal Fab could be brought on line. Quietly he hoped today was going to be a good day.

Checking his time piece he calculated that he had about thirty Mizura before he needed to be on the Power Plant. Leaving his office he headed towards the Command Centre. There were only two coordinators on duty and he spoke to Alaisha, who generally appeared nervous when spoken to face to face, but had the responsibility of being in charge in the absence of Liann, "In fifteen Mizura, could you ensure that all fighters and transports are back on station."

Alaisha replied quietly, "Yes, Sir."

Tor gave an encouraging smile and said, "Thanks. If anyone needs me, I'll be in the Defiance."

Alaisha nodded, "Yes, Sir."

With the occasional acknowledgement of staff, Tor strode across the docking bay and stepped in to the Defiance. The airlock doors sealed and departure clearance was granted. Tensioning the seat restraints Tor guided the ship through the docking tunnel and out in to the void.

Tor requested, "Sweety give me an update on the incoming ships."

Sweety replied, "Estimated arrival will be in forty seven Mizuras."

Checking his time piece Tor commented, "Do you think I can persuade the Paranid to help us in twenty Mizuras?"

Sweety replied cheerfully, "If you do it will be a new all time record."

Tor commented, "What if I'm late?"

Sweety tutted, "Expect to be turned away at the door, and it will not be easy to set up another meeting."

Considering the two options Tor knew which he preferred and he asked, "Advice Sweety. What would you do?"

There was a moments quiet then Sweety replied, "Visit the Paranid."

Tor responded, "I had hoped you would pick the other one."

Sweety asked, "Are you asking me to choose again?"

Tor quickly replied, "No, but I am interested to know why the Paranid?"

Sweety replied, "It would give you a better standing with your negotiation, in that you deem your meeting with them is more important than some random visit by unknown aliens."

With a wry smile Tor commented, "I'm glad you didn't slip the word 'hostile' in there."

Turning the Defiance, Tor targeted the Solar Power Plant and hit the boost.

Parrel studied the screens as he sat quietly in his seat the intermittent sound of chat from the comms breaking the calm tranquility of the bridge. The Mizuras slipped by and he noted that all of Tors' fighters had withdrawn into the mine. The other station owners had followed suit shortly afterwards and he speculated that the owners would prefer them not to be at the forefront of any potential fight. In many respects he would have preferred to have the same option. As it was the corvette positioned itself close to the lasertowers that defended a currently empty piece of space. Most of the Roamers fighters were docked and the rest lingered near to the corvette.

Sheero reported, "Incoming vessels at fifty k's and closing. Sir, their weapons are fully charged."

Parrel replied, "Acknowledged, we will maintain position. All fighters to remain at their current location."

Chareth commented, "Still no communication from the alien ships."

Parrel considered the irony of the statement that he was the alien and those ships belonged to the locals. He responded, "Keep scanning all frequencies."

The screen displaying the incoming ships had them adopt an aggressive attack formation. Sheero commented, "Doesn't look too friendly."

Parrel glanced at the technical readout. The speed had dropped to inter-sector levels of three hundred and seventy mps. The time to interception was just over three Mizuras.

Chareth called out, "Captain Leyron is asking to intercept the alien ships."

Parrel replied, "Tell the Captain to maintain position."

Time rolled on and the five ships appeared to have no intention of standing down. With nervous apprehension all eyes focused on the main viewer.

Sheero commented, "We are now in firing range. Incoming weapons fire detected!"

Bolts of energy streamed out from the five corvettes as they broke formation.

Parrel commanded, "Brace for impact!"

Several moments passed and nothing happened. Parrel looked around curiously, "Report."

Sheero glanced at the scanners, "They missed. Coming around for a second pass. Corvette and fighters are coming to our assistance."

Parrel commanded, "All fighters to stand down. Immediately."

Sheero responded, "But?"

Parrel looked around, "Don't question it. All fighters stand down, that's an order!"

Sheero gave the order and each one of the bridge crew looked around a little confused and silence descended.

Parrel waited for a moment, then looked across at Sheero, and explained, "The Roamer is an extremely large target and as we're stationary it would be very difficult to miss. Unless of course you had some extraordinarily incompetent gunners."

Sheero gave a slight shake of the head, "If they're testing us Sir, then I can think of much less provocative ways of doing it."

Parrel nodded and with a smile he said, "I would have to agree it does seem a little excessive. However we must assume that they've not had much experience with other races for some time to know that they're overdoing it."

The calm and relaxed attitude of the Commander appeared to ease the tension on the bridge and light hearted chat broke out. Parrel asked, "What's the status of the alien ships?"

Sheero replied, "Their weapon systems are offline and they are scanning stations and ships."

Parrel commented, "Looks like we passed the test. Let's hope we can get over the comms problem."

Chareth reported, "We have re-established contact with the shuttle. Crew and ship are unharmed."

Parrel smiled with a sense of relief, "Excellent news, order them to return to the Roamer."

ThiRiioth examined the plants in his office, the slightly sweet scent of the Lavajar flowers just pervading the air. With a swift motion of his razor sharp claws he pinched out a trailing shoot bud. Carefully he added a few drops of plant feed. The door swished open behind him and with the slight sniff he recognised the scent of ThoBeight.

In terms of height and build ThiRiioth was considered indisputably one of the tallest and broadest of the Mohrabas that had ever lived. At two metres and seventy five centimetres in height he stood nearly half a meter taller than ThoBeight. Many speculated that he could rule just by virtue of his presence. After his ascendancy in the hierarchy of the Mohrabas council chambers, ThoBeight and many of the councillors quickly realized that ThiRiioths' mind was sharper than any claw. He had a vision for the Mohrabas people and at first it was at odds with traditional thinking and yet without force or intimidation he had moved opinion. Yet if anyone tried to undermine him through subterfuge or sabotage he would crush the life from them with one hand.

ThoBeight knew that if you disagreed with ThiRiioth on anything that you speak your mind to his face and he would acknowledge and discuss the matter with no sign of bitterness or anger. If the argument was well reasoned and justified then ThiRiioth would concede and modify his stance on the issue. However if you spoke behind his back and he discovered this then the results could be terminal. ThiRiioth was very well connected and nothing escaped his attention in this respect.

ThiRiioth purred, "You have news for me."

This was not a question but a statement. ThoBeight responded, "Excellency I can report the aliens have shown every sign of being of peaceful persuasion."

ThiRiioth nodded slowly, "This is good news." There was a brief pause, "But by whose orders did our ships discharge their weapons?"

ThoBeight shifted uncomfortably, "I take responsibility, Excellency."

Dropping the severed bud into a small container ThiRioth turned his head and looked at him. His voice showed no sign of changing its passive tone as he said, "There is a fine line between testing and provocation. Be thankful they did not respond. Now what is the progress with establishing voice links?"

ThoBeight replied, "We are ready for you Excellency."

Turning and padding across the floor in fluid movements ThiRioth commented, "Councillor I shall announce you as our ambassador in the first meeting of our races. You shall establish their purpose here and what has happened to the Khlarakin."

The meeting with Molamanckebale had gone much better than Tor had expected. Twice they had been interrupted with news of the arrival and the subsequent chain of events and Tor had calmly sat waiting. Inside however he had been anything but calm and each time had yearned to be behind the flightstick of the Defiance. Yet he managed to keep his desire to get out of the station under control.

Now as Tor sat in the pilot seat of the Defiance he was comfortable and it felt right. Under station guidance the Defiance left the docking port and Tor hit the boost.

Sweety commented, "We are scanned."

Tor glanced across to see one of the Mohrabas warships close in fast. Tor said, "Bring the ship to a stop." He turned the Defiance to face the Mohrabas ship.

Sweety said, "Warship weapons systems are on line. We have additional company."

Tor asked, "How many?"

Sweety replied, "Four. They have powered up weapons."

The universe seemed to hold its collective breath, Tor commented, "How's the strafe drive?"

Sweety replied, "Working fine, but until the shooting starts I think taking our weapons offline might be a better idea."

Tor commented, "I trust you, do what you think is best."

Sweety took the weapons offline however it left the ship unshielded and she reported, "I guess that made no difference." Shields and weapons came back on line.

Tor said, "Okay, I haven't a clue what to do next!"

Sweety replied, "We could try shooting our way out, but I think waiting to see what happens next is the easiest solution."

Two Mizura went past before the warships moved away. Tor commented, "Well that seemed to go okay."

Sweety commented, "Speak for yourself. I tried to find a way in to their computer systems, but it is impossible without a recognisable comms interface to work with."

Tor smiled, "I thought you'd given up hacking into other computers?"

Sweety replied softly, "Only if they ask me not to." Then in her normal tone she announced, "We have an incoming message."

Tor asked, "Who from?"

Sweetey replied, "Broden."

Engaging the thrusters and turning the ship to face the Silicon Mine. Tor commented, "On viewer."

Broden looked a happy man, "Hi Tor, just thought I'd let you know that we've just picked up a message from the Mohrabas."

Tor smiled and asked, "What did they say?"

Broden replied, "They're sending an Ambassador to begin dialogue as they have many questions for us and expect we have many questions to ask them in return."

Tor commented, "Excellent news. Did they say when they're going to turn up?"

Broden looked at the transcript, "If the translation has this right. The meeting will be in two Tazura."

Glancing at the distance reading Tor said, "I'll be back on board in a few Mizura, this calls for a drink."

Broden said, "Looking forward to it, Sir."

The comm went quiet and Tor enjoyed the rest of the flight back to the station. He was slightly surprised to find that Broden was not at the bar but ordered two drinks off the bartender. Chatting to some of the locals he hardly noticed the time pass by and it was only at the end of his first ale he noted that there was still no sign of the Station Commander.

Halfway down the second ale, Broden stormed into the bar. His face was like thunder and it appeared that he was barely able to control his rage. Tor watched without saying a word as he picked up the ale and downed it in one and equally swiftly followed it with a second.

Tor feeling a little awkward in speaking said, "Go steady there."

Slamming the empty glass on the bar it bounced up and shattered on the rebound. Unconcerned Broden took a deep breath and without looking at Tor said, "You'd best take a seat. Barman two whiskies and fill the glasses."

Without question, and despite the rationing of the liquid, due to it becoming a rare commodity, the barman filled two half size tumblers and passed them over.

Tor perched on a barstool picked up one of the glasses. Cautiously he sipped the liquid whilst Broden just stared at the glass. Tor asked, "Mind telling me what this is about?"

Broden's jaw tensed and he said clearly enough for everyone in the bar to hear, "You're no longer governor."

Tor carefully put the glass back on the bar and said quietly, "Run that by me again?"

Broden responded, "You've just been voted out on a vote of no confidence. Three votes to one and an abstention."

The bar was completely quiet and all eyes were turned, Tor said, "This can't be right? They can't do that?"

Picking up his glass Broden emptied it, "Under Argon Sector Law, the Station Commanders can, if there is no formally recognised constitutional government, nominate a single member as governor. They also have the right to remove and appoint an alternative with a vote of no-confidence in the incumbent Governor, should the need arise."

Tor looked at the glass, he felt confused, "But where's the need?"

For the first time Broden looked at Tor and replied with distaste, "They don't think you're fit to negotiate with the Mohrabas. That you do not have the experience needed."

Taking another sip from his glass Tor asked calmly, "What did Parrel have to say?"

Broden said, "He wasn't there."

This gave some false hope to Tor and he commented, "Wasn't there. Then this vote is meaningless. He would have to ratify it."

Broden shook his head, "Parrel is neutral and isn't a Station Commander. His views, as was so clearly pointed out, don't count."

Tor sat quietly. Broden seemed surprised and had almost expected Tor to have shown a great deal more rage than he currently did. He for one had been livid with the underhanded nature of the other commanders. Inside he knew their behaviour was generated by greed. They wanted to get their hands on alien technology that could be sold to the highest bidder if they ever returned to the core sectors and Tor was an obstacle in their way.

Tor commented out loud, "Sweetie can you reverse the Ghojo program?"

Sweetie replied over the comm, "It will be difficult but it is possible."

In Tor his own sense of anger was rising fast and he said quietly, "I want it removed from every ship except the Defiance."

Broden understood Tors' reaction yet this decision gave him certain reservations about the response. Glancing across he commented bitterly, "That will seriously disadvantage us against a Khaak attack."

Tor responded quietly, "Sweetie, just leave three of this stations fighters modified."

The barman delivered two more glasses of whisky sensing there was still a need. Broden picked his up and this time sipped it as he considered how Tor should respond officially to the situation. As it was the bar was getting crowded as news spread through the station.

One pilot gave comment from the crowd, "Just give us the word and we'll go change their minds for you." There were many murmurs of concurrence.

Commander Parrel received the news as he rested in his room. He contemplated it for a moment then got up and dressed, "Dorlf, tell first officer Sheero to meet me in the briefing room."

He took his time in reaching the briefing room as he gathered his thought on how this might impact Tor and what it could ultimately mean for their survival chances if things did not go well in their negotiations with the Mohrabas, and ultimately the crossing of Khaak held territory.

Sheero was already waiting and studying the latest updates on the monitor. He had the look of a man just woken up from deep sleep, "You wanted to see me, Sir?"

Parrel replied, "Thanks for joining me at short notice and I apologise for waking you." As he sat down he continued, "We have a change of governor."

Sheero commented, "I've just read about it. Looks like it'll make life a little bit more interesting for a while, Sir."

Parrel said, "Yes but we need to anticipate his reaction."

Sheero glanced up from his screen, "I think we already know what that is. You'd better look at the latest report, Sir."

Parrel opened the screen on the desk in front of him and scanned through, "Well if that's the only thing he does I guess we should be thankful."

Dorlf announced, "I have an urgent incoming message from Governor Hollant."

Parrel commented to Sheero, "Now why doesn't that surprise me." Turning his attention to the room in general he said, "Put him on viewer."

Garet said, "Commander sorry to disturb you. However this matter will need your special attention. You may not be aware that Tor Gralls ship the Defiance has sabotaged a number of ships including many of your own."

Parrel kept his face expressionless, "Really?"

Garet replied, "Most certainly, ships that were modified to defeat the Khaak have been stripped of their enhancement."

Parrel looked to consider this for a moment, "Well I haven't spoken to him about this, but I must say that the technology used was supplied to us by him. As far as I am aware there was no legally binding contract to say that we would be allowed to retain this technology once we were no longer under the Khaak threat."

Garet had not been prepared for this response but knew better than to argue, "That threat will be upon us again soon enough. Don't you think it would be more prudent to ensure that we are suitably prepared for it rather than this petty minded behaviour? And let us not pretend that Tor was up to the job of negotiating with the Mohrabas. You know this but you would have let him make a fool of himself."

Sheero glanced at Parrel and then went back to studying the Mammoths status reports.

Parrel said carefully, "I think you may have misjudged him. Yes he is a little green, but he's learning. I trust it didn't escape your notice when you made your decision that he has control of key stations in the production of goods. A shortfall of silicon wafers perhaps wouldn't hurt you but the computer and chip plants would suffer, and in terms of commodities and technology to trade with the Mohrabas these are the most advanced assets you have. Unless you were considering selling fighter technology?"

Garet gave a wry smile, "I think you misjudge me Commander, in terms of trading, knowledge and information can be equally as valuable as physical goods. But enough of this, the Mohrabas are sending an ambassador have you made any recommendations as to the venue?"

Parrel replied, "On board the Roamer."

Garet asked, "Do you think it's appropriate? One of the stations will provide a much more comfortable environment."

Parrel said, "I'm sure they would, however the Roamer has a full bioscan filter system capable of detecting unwanted alien organisms, viruses and eradicating airborne particulates. It would save us several Tazura as we wouldn't have to lock the ambassador in quarantine as soon as he arrived."

Garet nodded, "You have a good point. I trust you will send out the details."

A strengthening dislike for Gareth stirred itself within Parrel and he commented, "I will ensure that my communications officer sends the details when he comes back on duty."

Gareth replied, "Thank you, Commander." The comm closed.

Parrel sat in thought for a moment and then said, "I think I shall go get some sleep. We'll give Tor a call in a few Stazura."

Sheero asked, "Don't you think it wiser to call him now?"

Parrel shook his head, "Let's give him some time to calm down first."

Almost unnoticed by the long range scanners, but in view of the navigation satellite, a small shuttle craft headed for the small second moon. Disappearing behind it the small craft then vanished completely from scanners. Several mizuras passed without any re-emergence when white fissures of light began to open on the surface.

The rock came apart in vast sections to reveal a hollow core. As each segment folded back the bulk of a huge Mohrabas carrier grade ship emerged with an escort of four smaller destroyers. Setting a new course towards the stations the four destroyers began to accelerate. Moments later the carriers huge engines flared as it followed.

Behind it the second moon sections folded back and silently the fissures in the surface closed.

ThoBeight stood on the main bridge watching the proceedings with a feeling of exhilaration pumping through his body. Yet he felt a slight trepidation as they were heading to the sacred, if not accursed place where the remains of the great fleet rested before the ghost city.

The warships seldom strayed from their bases scattered throughout the system but now they moved with purpose and not simply for an exercise. They had been preparing for three centuries since their return to the stars for the next confrontation with the Khlarakin.

Taking hold of the sense stick he reviewed the data from the warship scanner logs and from the broadcast greeting of the aliens. They had been very open with their information and now recognised the physiological differences between the five species mentioned. The Boron were few in number but there was something very different from their biological makeup to the other species, as the scanners showed, which left him with a sense of curiosity.

He moved to the stations themselves and it was quickly apparent that these were huge manufacturing plants specialized in certain products. The two new stations left him curious where the materials came from as they were obviously new but none of the factories appeared to be able to generate the alloys for the superstructures. He would investigate further.

The scanner data for all the ships filtered through the sense stick and ThoBeight reviewed each one, several showed a higher level of technology and in combat would prove an irritation but the others were of little consequence. Eventually he came to the Defiance, a clone of the old X-shuttle and modified heavily by a superior alien technology this ship stood apart from the rest in that it did not belong.

All through the sensor logs the warships recognised that the Defiance itself was a sentient creature but not of flesh and bone. The records even showed the attempted breaches into the computers through the sensors themselves. Yet there was something troubling ThoBeight about this ship and he could not quite place his finger on it. It was playing on his mind that there was something almost familiar about it, not the ship itself but the technology.

ThaStornla approached and growled quietly, "Councillor, you called for me?"

ThoBeight nodded, "You should study this and learn about the species you're about to meet." He held out the sense stick.

ThaStornla gave a slight nod of the head and took it. ThoBeight said, "Pay particular attention to the last ship and tell me what you think."

ThaStornla eyes keenly prowled the bridge as he received the information from the stick. Slowly the eyes blinked and ThoBeight was impressed at the ease at which the young officer could stay aware of his surroundings whilst using the data transmitter. Nearly all of the Mohrabas he knew had to shut their eyes in order to focus properly.

ThaStornla turned his head and looked quizzically at ThoBeight and then opened his hand. The Ambassador asked, "What is your judgement?"

The young officer took a deep breath, "Councillor, the ship appears to have an intelligence of its own. Highly adaptive and a dangerous curiosity."

ThoBeight nodded slowly and commented, "Dangerous indeed and it has fangs."

ThaStornla responded, "But fangs that can be blunted Councillor."

ThoBeight said, "We are not at war and our mission is peaceful. Yet it is prudent that we understand our visitors strengths and more importantly their weaknesses."

With a slight nod of the head ThaStornla bowed and moved away to the research station.

Commander Parrel feeling refreshed from a decent sleep despite the interruption stepped onto the bridge of the Mammoth. Chareth left his position by the comms station and approached him, saying, "Sir, you need to see this."

Parrel took the datapad being offered and looked at it before asking, "When did this happen?"

Chareth answered, "Less than half a Stazura ago."

Parrel asked, "And these readings have been verified?"

Chareth nodded, "Yes, Sir."

Parrel studied the readings for a while longer and then handed back the pad. He said, "Establish contact before they get here."

Chareth responded, "Yes, Sir."

Parrel wandered the bridge. With no new updates he retired to the captains private briefing room. He had to update the station commanders and new Governor, however ahead of this he had a strong impulse find out how Tor was personally dealing with the recent turn of events.

Speaking aloud Parrel commented, "Dorlf, get Sweety on the comm."

A few moments passed until the voice of Sweety broke the silence, "You asked to talk to me?"

Parrel replied, "Yes Sweety, I need to know if Tor is in any fit state to talk to?"

Sweetey replied, "Well I can wake him up for you if that is what you want, but he probably will not be in a mood to talk."

Parrel asked, "How drunk did he get?"

Sweetey answered, "Unusually, he stopped drinking very early and in terms of his blood alcohol levels he currently has less than five parts per thousand."

Parrel said decisively, "Wake him up for me."

Sweetey commented, "Only if you say please."

Parrel smiled, "Pretty please, if it's not too much trouble, would you kindly wake Tor for me and ask him if he would grant me the indulgence of his presence on the comm. Thank you."

Sweetey's voice changed to a gently seductive tone and she said, "Much better, now I will go wake the master if you would be so good to wait for a few moments."

Parrel scanned the monitor in front of him as he examined the latest ship reports. Tor looking much more alert than someone who has just been woken normally appears came onto the holo-projector.

Tor's tone was level and his expression was focused, "Commander, what can I do for you?"

Parrel could tell from Tor's expression and directness what his mood was, and he replied, "I have some news for you, a request and would like to take a moment to discuss recent events."

Tor's expression did not alter in any way, as he promptly asked, "I hope the news is good?"

A seed of concern germinated in Parrel's mind, "The Mohrabas Ambassador is inbound and is on board what appears to be a carrier grade ship."

There was no reaction from Tor and he simply said questioningly, "And?"

Parrel responded, "I want you on the Roamer when he arrives."

With a touch of resentment on his voice Tor replied, "With the other station commanders?"

Parrel nodded. Tor spoke up before Parrel could say anything, "I want the opportunity to negotiate for the needs of my stations without the presence of the others."

In the time that Parrel had known Tor this was practically the first time he had heard him make a demand. He knew however he would not be able to make the promise and answered, "If it can be arranged then it will be, you have my word on that."

Tor gave a concessionary nod without the hint of emotion and asked, "Is there anything else?"

Parrel shook his head slowly, "No. I will inform you when the meeting is once we have made contact with the Ambassador."

Tor gave a nod and then closed the comm.

Parrel had no need to ask Tor how he was. He judged him to be a man forced in to a corner and was spending his time preparing to come out fighting. The grim determination and bloody mindedness of the fighter pilot had surfaced again in Tor and was adapting itself to the world of commerce. To Parrel he

considered it to be better late than never, what worried him was how this determination would manifest itself.

Chapter 5 – 1st Meeting

With the rapid approach of the Mohrabas carrier and escorts. The Roamer was buzzing with activity, personnel and general transports moved supplies and workers to help with the preparations.

Commander Parrel reviewed every detail and as the incoming vessels began their deceleration a full security sweep was initiated with any visitors and non Roamer personnel being requested to depart. The Mammoth went back into a near state of normality wrapped in a cloak of anticipation.

Time appeared to slow down and Parrel reviewed the last comms from the Mohrabas. They were still only communicating at voice level so he had only a vague impression of what they would be like from the archives held by Sweety. Which had been difficult to gain access to and somehow he knew the AI was holding back much of the information.

As the ships drew nearer so the Station Commanders launched and headed for the Roamer. Tor waited until all the others had docked, avoiding the temptation of using the Defiance he took a transport across. Carefully attempting to avoid bumping into the other Station Commanders he wandered past the Roamers security teams with a cursory nod before heading to the staff canteen.

The destroyers were the first to arrive and took up positions around the Roamer. The huge form of the carrier slowed and stopped. At close quarters the ship was one and a half times bigger than the Mammoth and bristled with weapon systems. Short messages transferred between the ships.

Tor gazed out of the observation window his mind concerned that this race was far from being in need of anything they could possibly offer. Information on the sectors outside of this one was the only bargaining counter he could think of. As he cast his eyes over the carrier he considered that they did not appear to be the peaceful race that was presented by ThaThwyn in the crystals but a species ready for war. Deep down he hoped it was only for a war against the Khaak.

As he looked out the familiar voice of Stanard Block disturbed his thoughts, "Looks pretty impressive doesn't it?"

Tor glanced across, "Sure does."

Stanad said conversationally, "Plenty of fire power, I guess we'd probably last less than half a Mizura if we managed to piss them off."

Tor responded, "That's a cheerful thought."

Stanad casually commented, "Well you looked like you needed cheering up."

Tor said, "Thanks. But remind me not to ask you round when I'm feeling really depressed."

There was a moments quiet when Stanad commented, "Heard about the Governor business. Bad deal. Still we expect you to kick back soon now."

Tor commented, "Really?"

Stanad replied, "Somewhere inside that meek and mild shell is a fighter. I've seen you in combat and you don't give up. That's why I've got money on you becoming Governor again in less than twenty Tazuras."

Tor smiled and commented, "You have a lot of faith."

Stanad said with a roguish smile, "More than enough for both of us. And if I don't win that bet then I'll be coming to find you."

The glimmer of a smile twitched on Tors' face as he responded, "I'll get the carpet out."

Stanad commented casually, "Nasty trick you pulled when you took away our fighter upgrades though."

Tor sighed, "I don't want people negotiating deals with something that doesn't belong to them."

Polmankelest voice rumbled behind him, "That I can understand."

Tor turned around to look at the new arrival. Polmankelest gave him a cursory nod. Stanad said, "You'll be interested to know that Pol has decided not to attend the initial introductory ceremony of the Mohrabas."

Tor asked, "Why's that?"

Polmankelest replied, "I do not feel the need."

Stanad chipped in, "What Pol means to say is that he was disappointed the Solar Power Plant commander abstained in his vote rather than voted for you. Which means the commander is not in Pols' good books."

Tor said casually, "But is that going to worry him?"

A sharp look for Stanad indicated to Tor that his throw away remark had not been a wise move. However Polmankelest gave a smile and replied, "I hold a much higher rank than the commander, out here he is as answerable to me as if I were the Priest Duke himself."

Giving a slight nod Tor realized that he should make some time available to study the intricacies of Paranid hierarchy. He commented humbly, "I thank you for your support."

The big Paranid regarded him with a thoughtful smile, "Your diplomacy does you credit. But save it for another time. I think you will have need of it in the near future."

Stanard commented, "Too right he will." And made a gesture to the window. Tor glanced across to see that a shuttle craft had launched from the carrier.

The big Paranid put a heavy hand on Tors' shoulder, "Go with your god and with honour." The hand lifted and the Paranid turned away.

As the Paranid left the room Stanad commented, "You have one serious ally there my friend and in this tiny corner of the universe he's just the sort of guy you want on your side."

Tor responded, "That is a comforting thought. All I have to do now is persuade the Argon station commanders to think the same way."

Stanad said, "Brodan was the only station commander to vote for you. Not much of a surprise that, but you should look at his records a little more closely. If you want someone to do some persuading then he's the one."

Tor said, "He may be, but I need to do this for myself."

Stanad responded, "Understood."

A ship wide announcement disturbed the sound of talking, "The Mohrabas Ambassador is about to dock. All personnel to active stations. Tor Grall to proceed to the reception rooms on deck twelve."

Stanad said, "A personal call. I guess you should get moving."

The shuttle craft entered the launch bay of the Mammoth. Moments later it dropped on the internal lift and moved against the small internal dock. The internal dock pressure and atmosphere stabilised as the ship was brought to the disembarkment ramp.

First Officer Sheero Bhard stood in full dress uniform and waited with a mix of anxious apprehension and eager excitement masked behind a calm exterior. After a few long moments the door of the shuttle craft opened with a distinctive hiss. Sheero blinked and swallowed as his mouth felt dry and felt the need to get his saliva moving for when he needed to speak.

A moment later the huge form of ThaStornla stepped out of the shuttle. He sniffed at the air, it was different but did not leave an unpleasant taste. The assemblage of essences were mixed and merged across his senses. The figure before him smelled of uncertainty. The spines on his back remained down as he sensed no immediate danger, only curiosity.

There were others on the dockside but Sheero could sense their gaze upon the massive form of the golden haired Mohrabas warrior girthed in what they all hoped was formal dress battle armour. In great strides ThaStornla moved forward and stopped in front of Sheero. His eyes swept the dock and then rested upon the Argon. With a half bow so that he could look Sheero in the eye, ThaStornla said, "Greetings, the Ambassador asks permission to meet with the leader of your people."

Sheero could not fail to notice the size of the Mohrabas canines and some primeval instinct told him that he would, in other circumstances, be the prey of the creature before him. Sheero gathered himself together and against his primary instincts said, "The Governor and Commander bid you all welcome aboard the Roamer."

ThaStornla stood up and with a slight growl the second guard and the Ambassador stepped out of the transport ship. In a deep throaty voice ThaStornla commented, "Lead the way."

Sheero took a moment to size up the Ambassador and second guard. Both were shorter than ThaStornla but still at least a head taller than himself. Sheero felt that he was a reasonably good judge of character and status and something to him felt wrong about the three Mohrabas that followed him.

He led them to desk twelve and stood to one side of the door. Once it slid open ThoBeight stepped past and into the room beyond. ThaStornla stood patiently to one side and glanced at Sheero briefly and with a gesture of thanks stepped into the room.

Sheero waited for the door to close and made his way up to the bridge. As acting commander, until Parrel could resume normal duties, he would watch the proceedings on the viewer.

Tor had deliberately placed himself away from the other commanders and closer to the door. Commander Parrel's well intentioned speech about showing a united front did little to appease his displeasure now that he faced the other station commanders. Even so he, like the others were surprised at the height and build of the Mohrabas. The solid looking Paranid, Molamanckebale appeared small by comparison.

Parrel beamed and as best he could made the gesture of welcome, "Ambassador, we are honoured to have you on board and welcome you all."

ThoBeight bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement as the translator completed. In a rumbling purr he replied, "We thank you for your welcome."

Parrel allowed a brief pause after the translation and said, "Let me introduce us. I am Philus Parrel, Commander of this ship." Parrel went on to introduce the other station commanders and left Tor till last saying, "Finally this is Tor Grall, he found the gate and was the first of our kind to explore the sector."

Tor stepped forward and greeted the Ambassador, and having spent some time learning the correct greeting symbolising friendship and good health under the tuition of Sweety, made all the right gestures. The eyes of all three Mohrabas stayed on him for longer than he felt comfortable with.

The Ambassador commented, "You have learnt something of our ways."

Tor nodded and replied, "And it would be an honour to learn more."

ThoBeight smiled and turned his attention back to Commander Parrel. Tor stepped back and stood against the wall. As he looked around the room he noticed that ThaStornla was watching him with a look of curiosity. Tor could not help but notice that the golden haired Mohrabas appeared to be not only the tallest but had a certain nobility that was almost lacking in the other two. Yet ThaStornla stood at the back and was just watching the proceedings.

Tor glanced across from time to time and noticed that the Mohrabas was no longer watching people but appeared to be watching the floor and then turning his head as if listening for something.

Ghaan Yapall sat in the bar of the Chip Plant, the main screen showed the proceedings taking place on the Roamer. Rather than watching the main viewer however he was replaying archived footage of last seasons hardball championships. After a brief while he glanced at the screen and then at his time piece. There were three mizuras before the end of the game in what had been a very close competition yet he would have to pause the game as time was nearly up.

Sheero kept his eye on the proceedings as well as security updates. His thoughts were disturbed when one of the engineering crew commented, "Sir, I'm picking up unusual fluctuations in the power grid delta nine on deck twelve."

Sheero started, "Shut..." The Roamer shuddered a deep resounding boom echoed through along the corridors, the screens went blank, "What was that?"

The report came back, "Explosion on deck twelve."

Sheero called out, "All emergency crews to deck twelve, I want all medics available now. Get scanners on line I want information, casualty numbers and let's hope the meeting room was." The words died on his lips as the technical readouts flashed onto the viewers, "Oh no."

The dust settled from the blast and fires were being suffocated in suppressant tainting the air with a choking bitter and acrid stench Tor tried to look around. Pain swept up from his left leg and side. Glancing down all he could see was blood.

Across from him lay the dismembered bodies of two of the Mohrabas. The third was laying sprawled on the floor covered in blood and ash. Tor tried to drag himself across the floor his ears still ringing from the sound of the explosion and unable to hear the alarms and running feet.

Medics and security swept into the room as Tor passed out, saying, "Shit."

Chareth informed Sheero, "Sir, stations are launching fighters and the Mohrabas ships have powered up weapons in response."

Sheero looked around. Chareth communicated, "There is a sector wide announcement from Station Commander Broden Falstarn."

Sheero commented, "Put it on."

The serious face of Broden appeared and he stated, "All station fighters are to stand down. Any fighter that refuses to acknowledge will be destroyed. Be aware the Defiance is under strict orders to designate any fighter that shows hostility to the Mohrabas ships as a legitimate target. This is your only warning."

The comm closed. Sheero looked over to Chareth and asked, "Did that help?"

Chareth looked at the sector data, "Looks like it, the fighters are standing ground but are not withdrawing back to their stations."

Sheero commented quickly, "Get me Broden on comm."

Almost immediately Broden appeared and said, "Sheero, good to see you, now what the hell happened?"

Sheero responded, "There was an explosion under the meeting room."

Broden expression of concern deepened, "Casualties?"

Sheero looked at the latest report, "We have two."

Broden nodded, "Doesn't sound too bad considering."

Sheero looked up, "You misunderstood me, we have two survivors."

Broden closed his eyes briefly in silent prayer then opened them and asked, "Who?"

With his head slightly bowed Sheero commented, "Tor and one of the Mohrabas."

Taking a deep intake of breath Broden and asked slowly, "Parrel?"

Sheero shook his head and Broden said calmly, "This is a dark day. Get your people to establish the exact cause of the explosion. But first, do you want to call the Mohrabas and tell them or do you want me to?"

Sheero commented, "I get the impression they may not need telling."

Broden gave a slight nod, "But we still have to make it official."

Sheero said slowly, "I shall try to contact them."

Broden responded, "Good man. Remember keep it factual but try not to say too much."

Chareth commented, "We are receiving a voice comm from the Mohrabas commander."

Broden said, "Keep this comm open."

Sheero nodded and said, "Put them through."

The Carrier Commanders voice growled over the comm, "We have lost contact with the Ambassador. Explain."

Sheero gathered his thoughts quickly and replied, "There has been an accident on board with the result in a number of fatalities. The Ambassador and one of his entourage were killed the third member is seriously wounded and our medical team is attempting to save his life."

The voice of ThiRiOTH came over the comm, "Commander dispatch a medical team immediately to assist."

The Commanders voice acknowledged the order, "Excellency."

ThiRiOTH said, "Argon Commander, you were responsible for the well being of our people and for this you will answer before our laws. You have two Tazuras to provide evidence for your defence."

Sheero commented bitterly, "I'm only acting Commander. Commander Parrel was also killed in the explosion."

ThiRiOTH replied immediately, "That is unfortunate. So who is now in charge?"

Only one name came to Sheero, "Tor Grall, but he was also injured in the explosion."

ThiRiOTH commented, "An unfortunate turn of events. Prepare your evidence and when Tor Grall is fit I will see him here."

The comm closed and Broden looked thoughtfully at Sheero over the video display. He commented, "Looks like the pressure is on acting Commander. I suggest you leave nothing unchecked."

The image flickered out.

Sheero ordered, "Dorlf I want a full simulation of the explosion. Let's see if this was an accident or deliberate."

Tors' eyes flicked open there was the rhythmical beat of the pulse monitors. How long he had been here he could not guess. An activity monitor chimed and moments later Doctor Marra Wellstate was standing by the bedside.

She said, "Keep still Mr. Grall, you're still in the restraint field. How do you feel?"

Tor thought for a moment, "At this moment in time I don't feel anything."

Marra smiled, "I shall take that as a good thing for the moment. At least the pain suppressors are working."

Tor asked, "Did anyone else get out?"

The doctor glanced over to the one other bed but responded, "I think you should rest. I'll inform the Captain that you're awake."

Tors eyes began to close when he asked, "How long have I been here?"

The doctor replied, "One and a half Tazura." Tor slept again as the Mohrabas doctor looking after ThaStornla stepped up to the bedside.

In a soft purr the Mohrabas doctor commented, "He is strong this one but it will still be some time before he can travel."

Marra gave the Mohrabas doctor a considered look, "I would say another three Tazura. But what about your patient?"

The doctor replied, "He will be ready to leave in another Tazura."

Broden was onboard the Roamer and studied the report from Sheero. The explosion had been deliberate, something about it left him uncomfortable, the spread of the damage came from the centre of the room yet the overall field had been reasonably focussed.

Two factors had saved Tors' and ThaStornlas' lives by that they had been standing close to the walls close to the periphery of the explosion field and that there was a structural support member running through the floor just in front of them which absorbed and reflected most of the shockwave.

Instinct told Broden that this was either a professional hit made to look clumsy or an amateur hit gone wrong. With so many visitors in the initial setting up it could have been anyone from any of the stations. The cold stark reality was that two rumours were running rampantly through the stations. Firstly that Tor had committed the crime in revenge for being deposed but got it slightly wrong and barely escaped with his own life, and secondly that the Mohrabas had committed the crime to destabilise them for some reason that was as yet unclear.

Few people had even considered that there may be a third option. Broden reflected on the Bloodheart element but this was not a rumour he wanted to let loose. They would have to look for an assassin but he did not want them to feel as though they may be detected.

Sheero, who had adopted the title of Captain, entered the briefing room.

Broden commented, "I see this report is complete."

Sheero nodded and responded, "Yes, as you can see we now believe it to be an energy absorption explosive device that quickly goes critical when activated."

Broden nodded, "Hence the power fluctuation in the grid array," Sheero nodded and Broden asked, "How certain are you that this is right?"

Sheero replied, "We did some asking around. You won't be surprised to hear that there are a few Service Agents still milling around."

Broden looked up, "Perhaps they could be of some assistance in identifying potential assassins."

Sheero asked, "So you don't believe Tor did it then?"

Broden answered sharply, "Only when all other possibilities have been extinguished. Do you?"

Sheero replied, "He has all the right motivation, why not?"

Broden said, "Because he doesn't have it in him to be a murderer."

Sheero commented, "He's a fighter pilot and killing has been all he's done recently. Why wouldn't a few more matter?"

Broden answered, "Fighting for your life is one thing. Killing people because they upset you requires a whole different mind set."

Sheero asked, "And who makes that distinction? You know as well as anyone the dangers of prolonged space combat, how many of your former squad lost the plot?" Broden did not answer, Sheero continued,

"You discharged yourself from military service after having to shoot down two of your former team once they had escaped from an asylum and went on a shooting spree amongst civilian transports."

Broden commented quietly, "So you've read my file, what does that prove?"

Sheero commented, "You've seen what happens to people that get pushed one step too far."

Broden gave a wry smile, "They also get a certain hungry look in their eyes. Last time I looked that hunger wasn't in Tors'. He's not gone mad. Yet."

Taking a moment to digest Brodens' words, Sheero commented, "So how do you think we should end the report?"

Broden considered this for a moment and then replied, "We believe that this was an assassination attempt on a person / persons within the group by an individual as yet unidentified. That the meeting was seen by this individual as an ideal opportunity to spread chaos and discord whilst covering their own tracks in the confusion that followed."

Sheero looked at Broden, "Attempt?"

Broden responded, "Okay, say 'this was the assassination of person / persons' etcetera etcetera."

Sheero commented, "Okay the report is complete and will be sent in the next few Mizura."

Broden stated, "You still don't believe that he didn't do it."

Sheero responded, "All the fingers point in the same direction. Unfortunately there's no evidence to say for certain either way."

Broden rose from his seat, "Oh there's evidence. You just have to know where to look."

Sheero thought for a moment and then said, "You work for Tor, in many respects it's in your own best interest to clear his name. Others will reach the conclusion that any investigation that you will carry out will be, let us say, 'influenced'. Likewise it's in no ones interest to see an innocent man charged with a crime he did not commit."

Broden stood still for a moment the wry smile returning to his face, "I can see Parrel had a good influence on you."

Sheero commented bitterly, "He deserved a better end than this."

Turning his head Broden looked at Sheero with a hint of sadness, "He won't have been the only one."

Sheero replied, "I'm only interested in the truth Broden. No lies. I will have Polmanckelest lead this investigation."

Broden asked, "The Priest Champion, Paranid Special Forces?"

Sheero responded, "You have a problem with that?"

Broden replied slowly, "No."

Tor stirred to the sound of an argument between Marra and the Mohrabas doctor ThoToght. Marra said loudly, "You can't move him, he's not fit to travel."

ThoToght responded in a soothing purr, "His Excellency has ordered it."

Marra replied sharply, "I don't care what his Excellency ordered he's my patient and I say he's not going anywhere."

Tor turned his head to look at the two. Marra was tiny against the Mohrabas doctor but seemed to be making up for it in terms of presence. Her obvious anger filling the medical room. However ThoToght was unperturbed and if Tor could read his expression correctly the Mohrabas looked down with a mixture of kind and gentle amusement.

ThoToght purred, "Perhaps you would like to explain to his Excellency why." His hand held up a communications device.

Marra unperturbed said loudly, "And this goes straight to his Excellency."

ThoToght smiled, "Yes."

Marra said loudly, "My patient is in no fit state to travel. He needs another two Tazuras rest."

The deep rumbling purr of ThiRiioth rumbled through the medical room, "Bring her with him. She can tend to him during the journey."

Tor could see the doctor opening and closing her mouth. ThoToght gave an untranslatable growl and several Mohrabas personnel appeared with a hover stretcher. ThaStornla rose from his bed, stretched and yawned to expose a wide ranging set of fangs and Tor felt a pang of fear stir within him. ThaStornla gave himself a quick shakedown and looked at Tor with a sense of curiosity.

Standing up he looked as though nothing had happened and wandered across to the doctors. Marra stared at him when ThaStornla asked, "Are we ready to leave?"

ThoToght bowed slightly, "My Lord, we ..."

There was a subtle hiss from ThaStornla and a furtive look from ThoToght, "Captain, we are ready!"

The stasis field remained intact as Tor was transferred to the Mohrabas stretcher. He did not realise that the Mohrabas escort were all heavily armed. Marra almost had to run to keep up with their swift and ever vigilant progress through the corridors.

The transportation to the Carrier grade ship was swift and without noticeable discomfort to Tor.

Liann called Broden from the Command Center of the Silicon Mine, "Tor's being moved."

Broden responded, "Get me Sheero on the comm now!"

Sheero responded, "Captain Sheero here."

Broden asked, "Where are they taking Tor?"

Sheero looked uncomfortable, "Back to their home world."

Broden said angrily, "You think that's a good idea."

Sheero replied with anger, "I had no choice. Their Chief Council demanded it!"

Broden commented aloud, and to no one in particular, "Where the hell is the Defiance?"

The Mohrabas Carrier was preparing to leave as ThaStornla entered the bridge. The navigation officer reported, "Alien ship is blocking our flight path."

The Commander replied, "Identify."

The navigation officer replied, "Small warship, relative strength one tenth weapons unspecified."

The Commander responded, "Prepare to depart, if they don't move, then ram them."

ThaStornla said, "Wait, put the image on viewer."

The Commander looked over his shoulder whilst the communications officer obeyed. The image of the Defiance appeared on screen. ThaStornla requested, "Put me through to Tor Grall in the medical bay."

Marra answered, "Yes."

ThaStornla asked, "There is a sentient ship blocking our way, if it does not move then we will destroy it."

Tors voice emanated from the background, "Sweety."

ThaStornla said, "This ship has a name?"

Tor replied, "The ship is the Defiance and the AI in command is called Sweety. It is my ship."

ThaStornla commented, "Defiance is an appropriate name. It is also a unique ship amongst your kind, but we know her weakness. Tell your ship to stand down and I promise no harm will come to her."

Tor said, "Sweety is her own person, I can ask but there's no guarantee that she will obey."

ThaStornla appeared to sigh, "Disarm primary weapons, employ secondary batons and prepare to fire. Open a communications channel on the Argon frequencies."

The communications officer reported, "Channel available."

ThaStornla spoke up, "Defiance, we seek permission to pass. Your Tor Grall is on board. Stand down."

There was no response. The Tactical officer reported, "Alien ships weapons are fully charged and ready to fire."

ThaStornla said carefully, "Sweety, we intend no harm to your master. Let us past."

Sweety responded, "First return Tor to the Roamer."

The communications officer reported, "We have an attack on the computers in progress."

The commander ordered, "Fire batons full field."

ThaStornla barely managed to say, "Wait." Before the tactical officer reported, "Weapons fired. Alien ship still active but registering power fluctuations though main computer systems. "

The Commander looked at ThaStornla, "Fire again when ready."

ThaStornla commented quickly, "Commander I ask that you defer that order."

Standing up the Commander gave a slight bow to ThaStornla and replied, "Respectfully, I am the Commander of this ship and you are only a Captain. My order stands, fire when ready."

The reply came back, "Weapons fired, alien ship is immobile, no power sources detected."

ThaStornla said calmly, "Commander, you will do me the courtesy of not destroying the Alien ship."

The Commander replied, "Very well. Engage vertical thrusters to safe distance and engage primary drives for home."

There was a stunned silence in the Command Centre of the Silicon Mine. The Defiance hung as a dark shadow in space with no lights inside or out and no ion glow from the engines.

Broden asked, "Is there any sign of power?"

Liann replied quietly, "Nothing."

Speaking to himself out loud Broden asked, "What the hell was that weapon?"

Alaisha spoke up, "Captain Sheero Bhard is calling in."

Broden responded, "On screen."

Sheero looked concerned, "Commander, we'll be sending tugs out to recover the Defiance what do you want us to do with her?"

Broden replied earnestly, "I want your best people to fix her."

Sheero nodded, "Understood, however I think it would be best that the work is done on your station. For security reasons."

Giving his consent the comm closed, Broden let out a large sigh, "Sweety, are you still on line?"

Sweety replied, "Considering what just happened to my transmission link, yes."

Broden gave a half hearted smile, "Aren't you glad that I refused to put you on board?"

Sweety silkily responded, "Flying by remote occasionally has its advantages."

Broden turned his attention to the lifeless image of the Defiance, "But you still shouldn't have sent the ship out there."

Sweety commented in her own defence, "Perhaps I should enlighten you in some of the finer details of Mohrabas Law."

Turning towards the exit, Broden said, "Something tells me I'm not going to like it. But save it until I'm in the office so we can talk privately."

A short while later Broden reappeared, his face grave and everything about his persona said he was in no mood for a joke, he said forcefully, "We need to find this assassin and fast, I want every ship movement from every station that docked with the Roamer in the run up to the meeting. That includes ships from this

station. Further more I want to know the names and faces of every person on those ships. I want someone to check the identity of everyone on every station and see if there's any background data on all of them."

After a brief pause Broden added, "I want a report on the movement of the four prisoners, and I want someone to find me those service agents, and I want this information yesterday. If anyone has any difficulty getting this data then tell me immediately and I will go personally dislocate all the joints of the person that's giving you a problem."

On board the Mohrabas Carrier, Tor was still heavily sedated and slept for the entire journey unaware of the actions of the Mohrabas or fate of the Defiance.

ThaStornla had always been fascinated by the principle of sentient AI, and was saddened to have been within a short distance of a computer based life form but not to have had the opportunity to study it further. The Mohrabas never really delved in to this branch of research and had focused more on functional systems whilst regarding AI coding as misguided and could lead to dangerously unwanted phenomena. The fact that another race had developed such a system could have told him how real or unfounded these concerns were. He changed into his new armour, the suit he had worn when the explosion had occurred had been mounted on a frame almost appearing like a trophy or a testament to how effective it was.

The armour bore the insignia of his rank as Captain, as he placed the formal robe of office over his shoulders it carried the formal crest of the ruling family. Taking a long moment to gaze out of the window he wondered what the future really held. Turning towards the open door he strode out of his quarters and headed for the docking bay.

The four guards stood at each corner of the stretcher as they waited to board the transfer drop shuttle. Doctor Marra stood patiently beside Tor. He had insisted that he felt okay to stand however she refused to release the stasis controls which kept him immobilized.

ThaStornla padded towards them and surveyed the stretcher with a curious eye. He purred, "When we arrive you will walk off the Lander."

Marra looked sternly at ThaStornla and replied, "Tor is my patient. He will walk when I say he's ready."

There was a subtle growl from ThaStornla as the guards turned towards Marra. He said again, "Tor will walk off the shuttle. Let us say that it is important for him to do so, and you will ensure that he is able to."

Marra said, "And what if he can't?"

ThaStornla leant forward until his face was at the same level as Marras'. He studied her expression, "Do you have any reason to believe that he has lost mobility?"

Tor felt a rising panic that he may have broken his back. Marra almost whispered, "He can walk, but he needs more time to recover from his injuries."

ThaStornla stood up straight again and growled, "He will have time. After he has left the Lander."

An acoustic chime reverberated through the docking bay and moments later the loading ramp doors opened. The group proceeded to board the Lander. The stretcher was positioned carefully as the others took their seats. With a slight thump the ship was released and set off on its way.

The drop through the atmosphere was surprisingly gentle and Tor barely noticed the turbulence normally felt with Argon planetary transports. As they plummeted down towards the surface Tor reflected on how unbelievably calm he was and attributed a certain amount to the drugs. Somewhere inside he felt that he

should be worried by the fact he was surrounded by a previously unknown Alien race and being taken to face an unknown fate after the deaths of two of their representatives, but somehow he felt no fear, not yet at least.

The sound of the retro thrusters hummed gently through the cabin as they leveled out and prepared to land at the Crystal city. ThaStornla was out of his seat and approached Tor, he purred, "Are you ready to walk?"

Tor commented, "I'll give it a go."

Turning to look at Marra the Captain commented, "Release the restraints."

Marra responded, "We haven't landed yet."

ThaStornla purred, "I haven't time to argue with you. Just do as I ask."

Marra looked at Tor uncertainly and tapped on the control console. A burning sensation raced through Tor's body and he grimaced with sharp intake of breath but held back from crying out. Marra almost immediately began to put her fingers on the control pad, when Tor said, "No, I'll be alright. It's just the initial shock that's all."

With a disbelieving look Marra withdrew her hand from the pad and responded, "If you say so."

As Tor tried to move he winced with the effort as every muscle down his left side sent its objection directly to the nerve centre. He rested and took deep breaths having swung his legs over the edge of the stretcher in order to sit up. Marra commented angrily to ThaStornla, "This is no good. Can't you see that if he even manages to get to his feet he will pass out from the pain."

ThaStornla looked at her and replied, "Well give him something to overcome the pain."

Marra replied, "I can't, I don't have any left."

Tor lurched to his feet and swayed for a moment, what little colour had remained in his face faded away to leave him looking ashen gray. His focus swam in and out but with controlled breathing he stayed upright. Remaining so even with the slight bump that signified that the Lander had now arrived.

ThaStornla looked down at Tor and some part of him registered the difficulty that he was in. For so long the Mohrabas doctors had found ways of eliminating extreme pain within patients they had reached the point that suffering was a thing of the past. In some distant corner of his memory he remembered being trampled and gored by a wild Hurunmare as a youngster. He had escaped to stagger home with teeth clenched tight to hold back the cry of pain whilst his life ran red into the gutter. Looking at Tor he knew that this was the pain level the Argon was feeling and a moment of indecision came across him.

Looking up Tor said, "I will walk out of here."

ThaStornla replied, "I have only some distant memory of pain so I cannot pretend to know what you feel right now. Forgive me doctor that I take for granted that your species is as advanced as our own."

Marra looked at him, "Does that mean my patient can get back on the stretcher where he belongs."

ThaStornla shook his head slowly and in a deep purr, "No. It is a cultural thing, for the crime of treason, assassination and murder a prisoner is to be brought to justice incapacitated. Unable to run away. If Tor is carried out of here the message that will give to our people is that he is the accused and will be punished for the crime. Tor must walk."

Tor asked, "And what's the punishment for those offences?"

ThaStornla replied, "I think it best that I don't tell you."

Chapter 6: The meeting

The airlock doors rolled open and Tor caught the sweetly scented fragrance of unfiltered, natural air. ThaStornla purred, "Welcome to our world." And strode forward exiting the Lander.

Tor took this as his cue to follow and made several hesitant and painful steps with Marra close beside. Standing on the threshold of the shuttle entrance his eyes blinked in the sunlight that filtered through the transparent panels of the walkway. Around him the light azure blue of buildings, their tinted windows reflecting the sun light. Behind these and arching up away from him was the crystal dome of the city. Even from here he could see the prism effect in the crystal splitting the light in to a rainbow of colours.

ThaStornla waited patiently but there was no one else to be seen. Taking a deep breath Tor took several strides down the ramp. Every time he moved his left side a shooting pain seared across his senses and although for a moment or two the world swam uncertainly before him he gritted his teeth and reached the tall Mohrabas. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead.

ThaStornla commented quietly, "At the bottom of the ramp we will get a hover cart to the terminal. When you reach it you will have a short time to rest and recover."

Tor nodded and replied quietly, "Okay."

Moving at a slower pace to keep Tor close by the Mohrabas Captain proceeded down the ramp. Tor stumbled forward as at last the pain broke through and his strength subsequently gave out. With reflexes that were almost too fast to see the Captain caught the back of Tors' jacket, pulled him upright, and with seemingly little to no effort lifted him so that his feet barely touched the floor.

In little more than a gentle whisper ThaStornla purred, "Remember to move your feet."

Tor put all his effort into not dragging his feet as they reached the bottom of the ramp. Taking a few steps forward they waited for a brief while until one of the guards returned with a hover cart and Tor sat carefully on one of the side seats. ThaStornla sat beside him whilst Marra sat on the opposite side. All the guards occupied the remaining seats.

The cart moved away. Tor asked quietly, "And this doesn't break the rules."

ThaStornla replied, "You have already been monitored walking down the ramp. Once we reach the far end you will be expected to walk the short distance through the arrival gates until the lifts. From there it is an easy run by hover cart to the council halls and visitors residence."

Tor replied with a touch of sarcasm, "You make it sound so easy."

ThaStornla replied, "Well we could walk from here if you're feeling up to it."

Tor flinched and responded, "Actually I think I should keep walking to a minimum."

The hover cart progressed quickly in silence and just as Tor was beginning to feel vaguely comfortable they entered a large hall, which hummed with the rhythmical sound of Mohrabas voices. The translator made no effort to attempt to decipher the background noise as it was too complex for the circuits to handle.

The noise level faded down as the locals saw for the first time in their lives an alien life form. It was with a touch of apprehension that when the cart stopped Tor realized he would have to walk past a sea of curious faces. A task made easier by the presence of several guards and no apparent desire in the natives to crowd around. Mohrabas children gathered at the front of the crowd and stared and chatted excitedly amongst themselves.

ThaStornla rose from his seat and stepped off the cart. With the reaction of the crowd Tor wondered if he might be only the second most interesting person in the building. As Tor rose painfully from his seat he knew that every eye in the building rested on him and he wondered if he was now being judged. With teeth clenched and trying to keep the pain from reflecting in his expression he stood up and stepped boldly onto the hard floor. The four guards took their positions. Marra gave Tor a concerned and worried look.

With a slight gesture from ThaStornla they proceeded at an easy and relaxed pace towards the exit. Marra walked beside him and Tor put his left hand on her shoulder in grateful support, which certainly kept him from losing his balance.

The doors parted and they stepped outside of the main building. Tor looked up to see the massive support struts which helped support the dome and realized that the whole city was protected beneath the crystal shell.

ThaStornla glanced up towards the direction Tor was looking and commented, "The dome was build by our ancestors some one hundred Jazura after the Khlarakin attack."

Tor considered the Jazuras reference as odd, but came to the conclusion that the translator had made a literal translation and ThaStornla had referred to Mohrabas solar years rather than the Teladi year. Remaining stationary for a while to recover and still relying on Marra for support, Tor took the time to glance around the new surroundings.

The buildings did not so much as sparkle but had a clean modern and well kept look about them. For the number of people moving around there was no evidence of dirt or litter. Even here, outside the landing station, the air tasted clean and fresh but not with the same freshness as the filtered air on stations and ships, this was more natural.

A hover cart appeared a short distance away and Tor knew he needed to make the short, if painful, walk to it. ThaStornla waited patiently nearby. He looked at the four guards who had every appearance that they were in no particular hurry but stayed nearby.

Taking several bold steps under the curious gaze of bystanders he made it to the transport and once again could rest. ThaStornla commented, "That is the worst part over. We will show you to your guest rooms where you can take some time to rest. With the new day you will see his Excellency." Speaking to Marra, ThaStornla added, "I will speak with our physicians and see if they cannot find something to ease Tors' pain."

The hover cart moved swiftly along the street and past numerous junctions, before turning towards the heart of the city. Eventually they passed under a great arch and through wide doors to stop before a large lift. But rather than alight from the vehicle ThaStornla remained seated and when the doors opened the cart floated into the lift.

Tor noted the control panel and was curious to see there were far more floors below them than above. In silence they ascended and he estimated they had risen sixteen levels when the door opened again and the cart floated out, turned and then moved on a short way until stopping outside an official looking building.

ThaStornla stepped off the vehicle and said, "We are here."

A short while later and Tor entered his accommodation. He would like to have said they were well equipped, but somehow the Mohrabas liked a certain minimalism about the room. The bed however was a welcome relief. Marra had the adjoining rooms and as Tor tried to make himself comfortable she arrived with the portable stasis field.

Tor asked, "Is that something to help me sleep?"

Marra commented, "Yes and it'll take the pain away."

Tor asked, "So why couldn't I use it earlier?"

Marra shook her head, "No this keeps you from moving around too much and relaxes the muscles. Which after today's activities you're going to need if you want to stand any chance of being mobile tomorrow."

Placing the unit near Tor she placed a band around each of his wrists and then activated the stasis field. Tor felt immediately relaxed yet knew that moving far was not an option. The Doctor placed near to his hand a control pad and commented, "You still have a certain amount of free movement. Tap the controller and the field will disengage should you have the need to get up."

Tor said, "Thanks."

Marra smiled, "Don't mention it and sweet dreams Tor."

Tor felt certain that under normal circumstances his mind would be too occupied with the new surroundings and environment to be able to sleep. However despite the stasis field the physical and mental exertion of the day had taken its toll.

Tor awoke some time before dawn restless and uneasy about the day ahead. With no idea of the time, he could not estimate how long it would be before the sun broke the rim of the horizon to herald the new day. As he waited for sleep to take him again he lay quietly contemplating the past events.

To his mind ThaStornla was a bit of a mystery, there was a certain nobility about him and the way the people regarded him, most almost appeared to be in awe of the Captain. He began to wonder why ThaStornla had not been the Ambassador, but then again the late Ambassador, unlike the rest, only gave him a cursory introduction with the tone and look of mutual respect rather than reverence. Tor began to wonder how he would go about finding out more and considered that Sweety would be useful to have around at this moment. More questions popped into his mind but the one that kept coming around was, "Why was ThaStornla looking after him?"

If any of the Mohrabas should be angry at them it was him. Yet for some reason that he could not quite fathom, ThaStornla appeared relaxed and calm about the whole incident.

After a while he was aware that all the thoughts and questions buzzing around his head were keeping him awake. He tried to relax by pushing the thoughts to one side and clearing his mind. This simply allowed other thoughts to surface and he began to wonder how the others were getting on and for a moment some part of his conscience yearned to be in the company of familiar faces.

He commented quietly, "What do I have to do to get a drink around here?" His voice sounded loud in the dark silence.

After a short while the lights in the room rose gradually and there was a polite tap on the door. Tor looked around perplexed and called out, "Just a moment." His hand moved the short distance and he tapped the release control of the stasis field. Immediately he could feel the muscles begin to tense up and he flinched before he called out, "Come in."

The door opened and a maid brought in a hover tray with several containers of strange looking drinks. Looking uncertainly at Tor she purred, "A selection of drinks for Sir."

Tor noted that the Mohrabas females had a number of physical differences from the male, the face was different with slightly larger, rounder eyes, and the three horns were nothing more than slight bumps. Also the figure was more curvaceous. He responded, "Thanks."

The maid guided the tray over to the bed and then with a step back gave a slight nod, turned and left the room. Tor moved the tray towards him and looked at each flask of liquid. He removed the stopper of each and gave them a cursory sniff. His nasal passages alerted him to the presence of alcohol and without further persuasion he poured out a large drink. Tentatively he took a small sip and was pleasantly surprised. Swiftly finishing the rest of the drink he poured out a second.

Tor woke up vaguely aware of an argument occurring in his room, keeping his eyes closed he tried to gauge if he was in trouble or not. The voice of Marra said loudly, "Your physiology and ours are completely different, what you consider to be a pleasantly refreshing drink could be lethal poison to us. Someone should have consulted me before bringing that stuff in here."

The deep purr of ThaStornla replied, "Calm yourself. We will investigate this incident, the maid that delivered the drinks will be here shortly."

Tor sensed a twinge of guilt in case he had unwittingly caused trouble. He heard the door open and ThaStornla commented, "Here is the maid." Tor half opened his eyes and looked across the room towards the doorway.

Marra said angrily, "How long ago did this arrive?" And pointed to the tray.

Looking uncertainly from Marra she glanced briefly towards ThaStornla and bowed casting her gaze to the ground. For some reason the whispered purr did not get translated. The series of low growls from ThaStornla also did not translate.

Marra said, "Sorry but I'm not getting any of this. What's the girl saying?"

ThaStornla replied, "She had an order to deliver the drinks."

Marra looked perplexed, "And who gave that order?"

There followed a series of purrs and growls between the maid and ThaStornla but Tor sensed no hostility in the questioning. In the calm voice ThaStornla replied, "The original request came from this room."

Marra turned and looked at Tor and seeing that he was awake asked, "Did you order some drinks last night?"

Tor replied sheepishly, "Well I did sort of ask out loud, but I didn't expect anyone to have heard me."

Marra looked at him and sternly asked, "And which ones did you try?"

Tor answered, "Just one, the third bottle on the left."

ThaStornla picked up the flask and turned it carefully in his hands, he looked at the maid and growled something, her eyes immediately focused on the bottle and then glanced over at Tor. For a moment he thought that she was trying to suppress a smile. Without any sense of forcefulness ThaStornla growled again. Tor began to believe that there were two languages being used, which he felt would explain why the translator was unable to understand the conversation between the Captain and the maid.

The maids eyes kept flicking over to Tor and ThaStornla offered the bottle to Marra and said, "Perhaps you should scan this." Looking at Tor he asked, "How do you feel."

Replying honestly Tor answered, "Fine."

ThaStornla asked, "No unusual or unexpected sensations."

Tor replied, "No, had a couple of glasses and slept like a log."

The maid was definitely smiling and stared at Tor until ThaStornla glanced at her and she looked away. Marra examined the scanner reading and asked, "Is there anything I should know about this drink? Like if it has any side effect on your people."

The maid made a noise not to dissimilar to a stifled burst of laughter and had to turn away. Only the slightest flinch of a smile crossed ThaStornlas face when he answered, "It would appear that the night porter likes a bit of a joke. Because of the lateness of the hour, it would appear that the porter felt that Tor was not so much in need of sleep but stimulation and included this on the tray. By some small chance it was the only one Tor tried."

Marra blinked a few times and then looked at Tor, "So how do you feel Tor?"

Tor replied, "Fine."

Looking at ThaStornla she commented, "Of course our physiology is different so there's a good chance it won't have any effect. Only we won't know for certain until the stasis field is inactivated." She added by way of explanation, "It relaxes the muscles."

Approaching the bed Marra commented casually to Tor, "I'm going to shut down the field, you will tell me if anything comes up." The maid had to leave the room.

The field went off and after a brief moment Marra asked, "So how do you feel now?"

Tor shrugged and replied, "Fine," And then went, "Ahh."

Marra looked at ThaStornla, "Perhaps we're not so different after all. Well at least the male of the species." She took another look at the analytical breakdown of the liquid. There were many vegetable based organic compounds but nothing that was being highlighted as a potentially lethal toxin.

As Tor limped to the bathroom she took the opportunity to examine the other drinks. After a while she frowned and re-reviewed the flasks. Tor had also found one of only two drinks on the tray that was not animal protein based.

Marra took the opportunity to ask, "So is there any reason why our translators work when you talk to us but not when you speak to the maid?"

ThaStornla looked slightly surprised and answered, "It is a different language. Your translator is only tuned into the Mohrab ancient noble speech, but time has changed and we were talking in the common tongue."

Tor appeared a few moments later and asked, "So what's our plan for today?"

ThaStornla replied, "Your doctor will go to speak with our physicians to see if there isn't something we can give you to ease the pain, and you will come with me to see his Excellency." Both Tor and Marra looked at each other uncertainly. ThaStornla added, "His Excellency will only see Tor and it would be a better use of your time to consult with our medical experts."

The Halls of ThiGra held the offices of the Mohrabas government and as the hover cart stopped outside Tor could not help but be impressed with the magnificently ornate carvings that adorned the front of the building. The hard pale blue stone was veined with deep purple striations and white mineral flecks. The entrance lobby of the building went up more than thirty metres and was capped with a clear crystal dome.

Although he had taken no new medication Tor felt stronger today than when he first arrived. Movement was still painful but somewhat easier than when he arrived.

Officials and Councillors watched Tor as he followed ThaStornla through the lobby. He noted that the expressions were perhaps less friendly than those at the landing station or the building they were staying at. The guards to the inner official rooms wore a style of uniform that Tor had not seen before. In the brief few moments ThaStornla spoke to the most senior officer present, he counted three different types of weapons. From the look of them they appeared ceremonial however he had no doubt that at a moments notice they could be used for anything but ceremonial purposes.

The officer spoke directly to Tor, "His Excellence is expecting you. You may proceed."

ThaStornla gestured for Tor to follow and they stood before, what to Tor was, an impressive door. The door slid open and they stepped inside. Tor caught the scent of the flowers yet his eyes were drawn to the figure sat behind the desk.

The bluish fur of ThiRioth was flecked with golden and silver grey. The jade green eyes seemed to look straight through Tor and then moved to ThaStornla. ThiRioth gave a slight nod and ThaStornla responded in kind.

The deep growl of ThiRioth made Tors instincts sharpen to primeval levels as the hunted listening to the hunter. The translation resonated as the words, "So this is the Argon Tor Grall?"

ThaStornla replied, "Yes, Excellency."

Tor gave a bow and said, "Excellency."

ThiRioth remained seated and still looked down on Tor, he said, "Have you guessed yet why you are here?"

Tor avoided his initial flippant answer as inappropriate and replied, "Several reasons, Excellency. Which one would you like to ask me about first?"

ThiRioth looked long and hard at Tor who felt he was being sized up as a snack. His Excellency nodded his head slowly, "We should start with the most pressing matter in hand, the death of the Ambassador."

The deep resonance of the growls seemed to shake the floor under Tor. His instincts told him that he should run and hide but his mind knew how fast ThaStornla was and that even before he could move his feet the Mohrabas would catch hold of him.

ThiRioth gave a slight smile and stood up, "Do you fear me?"

Tor looked up and took a sharp intake of breath, he had become accustomed to ThaStornla towering above him but ThiRioth was in every respect a giant. Compared to himself Tor sensed that ThiRioth was half as tall again and although he moved quite slowly it was controlled and silky smooth. Tor had no doubt that he was probably every bit as quick as ThaStornla and very likely to be faster despite his size. Carefully he answered, "I fear what you are, not who you are."

ThiRioth paused and looked thoughtfully at him, "What not who? And who am I that you do not fear me?"

The growl rippled through him and Tor clenched his teeth, "You are the leader of the Mohrabas, you stand for all the good things about your people."

Both the Mohrabas looked at Tor and slowly ThiRioth asked casually, "And who has said this?"

Tor replied, "I've seen the people, they do not look mindful of being seen in the presence of security."

ThiRioth responded, "Interesting. But what do you consider to be the good things about my people?"

Tor realized he was rambling, had dropped himself in a pit and with a mouth sized shovel he had started to dig himself another hole and it was rapidly getting deeper. Taking a moment, he sighed and said quietly, "Until I stepped into this office I sensed no real animosity, only curiosity. I wanted to believe the Ancient, that you would be pleased to meet with a race like ours, and then it all got screwed up by some." He let the sentence hang.

ThiRioth sat on the edge of the desk and looked hard at Tor and his voice seemed to soften, "Before the Khlarakin that would have been true. Our forefathers believed that any race which reached for the stars would have evolved beyond the need for violence. With this vision our people were decimated, and obliterated out of existence in numbers that are too large to comprehend."

Tor said bitterly, "Like our people were and will be, only we now call them Khaak."

ThiRioth glanced at ThaStornla and back to Tor, "But you survived?"

Tor gave a half hearted laugh and replied, "Yeah. Some of us, but look where we are and we've got no way to get home and warn the others."

ThiRioth sensed the mood change, the smell of fear from Tor had gone, "Tell us about the," He remembered the word Tor used, "Khaak."

Tor gave a wry smile, "Only in trade."

His Excellency gave a laugh, "You are in no position to trade."

Tor shrugged and commented, "Perhaps you're right." After a brief silence he continued, "But somewhere up there is the person that killed the Ambassador and unless you're planning on killing all of us, you need my help in bringing that person to justice."

ThiRioth's expression did not change, "Go on."

Tor said, "If you kill me, then you won't get the information you need, and who knows, the Khlarakin could return to find the rest of us. But you won't know if you can defeat them, and they will know that you're here."

With a considered look ThiRioth said, "Your argument is weak but has some merit." After a brief pause he resumed, "You and your people are in our space and are subject to our laws. You in particular as the leader of your people will be charged with bringing to us the person that killed the Ambassador. If you cannot find this person then you will face the punishment of our courts for his assassination. Is this understood?"

Tor looked startled by this news and asked, "How long do I have?"

ThiRioth leant forward until his eyes were level with Tors and said softly, "Twenty of our solar days."

Tor paled and asked, "What then?"

ThiRioth sat back, "Our laws are based around social responsibility. Every citizen over the age of five is deemed responsible for their actions. The nature of the punishment is based on the crime and the age of the individual. The crime of murder bears the most severe punishment."

Tor waited and ThiRioth continued, "It is the belief of our people that the spirit of who we are and our everlasting being resides in the face. The punishment for murder is to be un-faced just before execution."

Tor asked quietly, "What do you mean un-faced?"

ThiRioth reached out but his claws remained retracted as he touched Tors jaw under the left cheek and with four straight moves drew a square about his face. As he moved his finger away he said, "They will die in pain, that much is certain."

Mental images flashed through Tors' mind and none of them he wanted to dwell on. He said, "And I have twenty days to capture the assassin."

ThiRioth shook his head, "In twenty solar days you will be standing here with the assassin."

Tor asked, "And if I can't find them?"

ThiRioth responded, "Then you will stand here alone."

Tor said carefully, "And if I refuse to return?"

With a slight smile ThiRioth said, "I don't think you're that stupid to find out what the consequences would be."

Tor took in a deep breath and nodded, "I will return with or without the assassin."

Glancing at ThaStornla, ThiRioth looked at Tor and said firmly, "The fate of your people stands upon the edge of a blade. Had the Emperors son died then all your people would have been destroyed. Fortunately for you, your people made every effort to preserve life. What is more, the lord Emperors son will return with you to oversee your investigation."

Tor glanced at ThaStornla and the pieces began to fall in place. He looked at ThiRioth, but the Mohrabas held up a hand and said, "I think I know what you are about to ask, but it would take too long to discuss the complexities of our politics. Transportation for you is waiting as soon as you are ready for departure."

On the Chip Plant Ghaan had kept a moderately low profile ensuring that he met the same people he saw before the explosion on the Roamer and talked about how terrible the whole thing had been. He had deliberately made the whole attempt look amateurish but Tor had survived and this perplexed him. No one had a charmed existence, yet Ghaan did believe that everyone had a nemesis somewhere. He knew that Feran believed Tor was his.

Ghaan had come to the belief he was the maker of destiny, albeit a very short lived one for many people, and not the subject of one. At the moment his only consolation was the Aliens had taken Tor away and he had covered his tracks perfectly.

As he sipped at the rationed ale he saw a familiar face. This perplexed him and his gaze fell upon the girl. He had an excellent memory for faces and this one was not where it was supposed to be.

Ghaan continued to ponder the identity of the girl. His mind kept returning to the Scruffin Farm and this perplexed him, gradually the pieces dropped into place. She had been wearing combat fatigues, a face amongst the many that he had watched board the ill fated transport used for the assault on the Silicon Mine.

As he considered this, Ghaan also reflected that all of the troopers were meant to have died. This left him coming to the conclusion that she had betrayed her comrades and would ultimately betray him should she remember his face. As his mind tripped around to this thought he wondered if there was a possibility that there may be others lurking.

Wilasma sat quietly with her rationed ale trying to be inconspicuous. Happy not to be locked away, but aware that she was outside the security of the squad and potentially amongst hostiles, she considered that the people around her would probably lynch her if they knew her real background.

She studied the table screen and flicked through the movie and program selections. A voice broke her concentration, "Mind if I join you?"

Tor was still in ThiRioth's office. He had started to turn and leave but stopped to ask, "So you're not going to ask me about the Khaak then?"

ThiRioth answered, "We will have time for that after you return." There was a pause, rather than a hesitation followed by, "Or do you have an urgent need to tell me something?"

Tor replied, "I have two factory plants under construction but lacking in certain minerals to stabilise the core reactors."

ThiRioth looked blankly at him, "What is the purpose of these factories?"

Tor answered, "They will help to provide food and the key component for the generation of energy cells."

There was a momentary silence as ThiRioth considered this, "But you have enough food for now, or at least know that more is available elsewhere?"

Tor shook his head and answered slowly, "No, we're cut off and isolated from the rest of our kind."

The chief council asked, "But you will be looking to return to your people?"

Tor answered quickly, "If a way can be found."

There was a slight nod of the head, "It wouldn't do to have people starve. Let us know what it is you require, and providing ThaStornla is happy that these resources will be used as you have indicated then a ship will be dispatched."

Tor said with a bow, "I thank your Excellency."

ThiRioth smiled and responded, "Consider this a gesture of our goodwill and a down payment on any information that you will be supplying." Tor knew this meant he was now indebted to the Mohrabas Chief Council, and for the moment he was not certain if this was a good thing. ThiRioth added, "If there is nothing else then I will expect you here in twenty solar days."

Tor nodded and ThaStornla led him out of the office.

Ghaan had turned on the charm and offered to buy Wilasma a drink. She was glad for the company and agreed. Returning to the table, he appeared to study the glasses and commented, "Looks like we might have the dregs of the barrel,"

Handing her one, he commented, "Try it and if it's okay we'll keep them." He took a long sip of his and looked thoughtful then added, "Seems palatable enough."

She took a sip, there was a slight tang to the drink but not unpleasantly so, and replied, "It'll do." She took a much longer sip and put the glass down.

Ghaan asked conversationally, "So which program did you go for?"

Wilasma replied, "I was thinking of a comedy."

Ghaan smiled, nodded and looked at the screen. He tapped on the front, "Let's see, what do we have here."

Wilasma picked up her drink and took another gulp.

Ghaan said gently, "Go easy there. Remember we are rationed."

She put the drink back on the table and noticed that something was wrong as the glass slipped and shattered onto the floor. Her voice box tensed up and as she moved her hand back she felt her strength ebb away. Commenting in little more than a whisper she said, "I don't feel so good. I think I need a doctor."

Ghaan looked at her with concern and sniffed his drink, "Okay, let me give you a hand."

He helped her stand up and with a few curious looks walked her from the bar. As each moment passed she lost more mobility. A dawning realisation of the trouble she was in swept over her when they turned towards the rest centre and not the medical bay. Whatever she had been given had robbed her of her voice, leaving her with nothing more than a whisper to try and call for assistance.

To Wilasma's eyes, death appeared as a faceless door in to temporary sleeping accommodation. Only the nightmare had only just started.

Ghaan put her onto the bed and looked thoughtfully at her. He smiled, "Strange how I remember you, but it would appear that you might not remember me," He paused, "Well not yet at least."

Wilasma wondered how long the drug lasted and whispered, "Why should I remember you?"

The assassin pulled up a chair and sat down next to the bed. His eyes scanned her and he commented, "What a waste."

Wilasma could still move her head and looked at Ghaan. For the first time she noticed how cold the man's eyes were and there was a residing hunger there. She said more in hope than anything else, "If you're going to kill me then just get on and do it."

Ghaan gave a slight laugh, "Well if you answer all my questions then I will make your passing pleasurable."

Wilasma closed her eyelids, there was a burning sensation in her eyes as a tear trickled down the side of her face and she whispered, "Bastard."

Ghaan spoke in a gentle whisper, "Now that was unkind. True, but unkind. Especially as you should be nice to me."

Wilasma tried to keep her composure, "What do you want?"

Ghaan responded in the same whisper, "That's better. Now you're supposed to be dead. But I'm curious how many more survived?"

The blaster of reality fired into Wilasma's mind, this was one of Ferans' hired assassins and a false dawn of hope surfaced in her thoughts, "If you don't harm me, we can work together and." She let the sentence hang.

Ghaan said questioningly, "And?"

Wilasma asked in her forced whisper, "What did you give me?"

Ghaan appeared to sigh, "If I told you that it might cloud your judgement."

Wilasma whispered urgently, "I want to know."

The assassin said in the whisper, "It's a very rare neurotoxin. When ingested it causes motive failure. Simply you can feel but you can't move. But my patience is beginning to run out. Tell me how many of you are left?"

Wilasma did not answer. Ghaan nodded slowly and standing up he walked around the bed and then lay down beside her. Whispering in her ear he asked again, "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. How many?"

She closed her eyes but said nothing, a tear escaped from under her eyelids. Ghaan propped himself up on his left elbow and put his right hand on her stomach. Slowly it moved up and over her right breast. He asked, "Now I can be gentle or I can be rough. The choice is yours."

Wilasma whispered, "Please no." Tears began to run down her the sides of her face.

His hand squeezed as he asked, "How many?"

She replied, "Three others."

Ghaan released her breast and gently took hold of her chin, turned her head to face him whilst saying, "Now that wasn't so difficult was it. And all these tears." He tutted. With a sigh he commented, "So what are their names?"

Wilasma opened her eyes and in the reflection of his knew she was going to die. It was just a question of when.

Broden slammed his hand down hard on the desk and shouted, "What do you mean you can't the trace has gone cold?"

Sweety said calmly, "The potential trace ended."

Liann looked perplexed. She had never seen Broden angry, very few people had. He ranted, "An innocent life is on the line here. I want face matches, I want to know every movement of everyone from any station here and now. Anything that can't be ratified, any discrepancy I want to know now! Do I make myself clear?"

Sweety replied officially, "Calculating all permutations."

Broden took several deep breaths, "Sweety, I apologise if I seem overly arrogant. I want the truth, that's all."

Chapter 7 – A Decoy

Captain Sheero Bhard watched the impassive face of Polmankelest, "You need to work with Station Commander Broden, find out who set the explosive device."

Polmankelest said nothing and showed no indication of responding.

Sheero said, "I have no doubt that you will focus on justice and getting the right man even if people try to cover anything up."

Polmankelest asked, "And do you have an idea who might have done it?"

Sheero shook his head and replied, "As you know all fingers are pointing at Tor. He had all the right motives and this was an effective, if less than professional hit. But I'm not convinced that he did it."

Polmankelest still gave no sign of showing emotion when he stated, "He would have been angry and annoyed by the others. Your kind has been known to kill for less."

Sheero smiled, "That's why I want you in charge. From your records I understand you don't let emotions get in your way. Out of everyone left in this sector officially in terms of seniority you're the top of the tree now that Parrel is dead."

Polmankelest shook his head, "No, Tor is a station owner. By default he out ranks me."

Sheero shook his head, "Only in civilian terms."

Polmankelest blinked slowly before replying, "Is there another power here that I'm unaware of?"

With a considered answer Sheero responded, "On paper you're the next in line to take charge."

Polmankelest asked, "And?"

Taking a moment Sheero replied, "If Dorlf has interpreted Mohrabas law correctly, Tor is currently responsible for the Mohrabas deaths, so unless an assassin is found then he will be found guilty of murder. The sentence for which is death. Which means if anything bad should happen after this then it will be you that are answerable before the Mohrabas court."

The Paranid stared hard at him, "How long do I have to find the assassin?"

Sheero shrugged, "I don't know but the Mohrabas Carrier has left orbit and is on its way back."

Polmankelest asked, "And is Tor on board?"

With a smile Sheero answered, "We believe so."

Polmankelest said, "You will allow me full access to all the data around the event and Dorlf will work with me. I will need total access to all station computers and have a free hand to interview anyone and everyone without warning or notification."

Sheero looked uncertain for a moment, but knew he had to concede, "I'll arrange it."

Tor felt so much better after another day in the stasis field. The relaxation of the muscles helped the regeneration stimulants to do their work. Boarding the shuttle he only felt a slight twinge but none of the pain. ThaStornla sat in the opposite seat but seemed keener to look out of the window than talk. The destination of the shuttle was the Silicon Mine and Tor was happy when they docked.

He said, "Let me go first."

Doctor Marra and ThaStornla both gave a nod. Tor stepped out to be greeted by Broden, a group of well wishers stood near the bar.

Broden commented, "It's good to see you back on board, Sir."

With a broad smile Tor replied, "You don't know how good it is to be back."

There was a certain look in Brodens' face as he nodded which made Tor think he might be mistaken. Broden said, "We've got a fair bit to talk about, Sir."

Tor noted this was a more respectful 'Sir' than he was used to. Doctor Marra stepped off from the shuttle and was followed by the towering size of ThaStornla.

For Broden, all he had was an impression on how tall the Mohrabas were from the video link, but nothing had prepared him for the real thing. He regained his composure before speaking his thoughts out loud, he said, "Welcome on board." He gave Tor a questioning look.

Tor said loudly, "ThaStornla is here to oversee the investigation." Tor could see Brodens' jaw tighten, he added, "We have eighteen Mohrabas solar cycles to find them."

Broden commented, "That's no time at all."

Tor replied, "That's all we have and we must be one hundred percent certain."

Broden frowned, "Then I'd best tell you this now. So far every avenue we've looked into has drawn a blank or wrong lead."

Tor thought for a while, "So what's the favourite theory at the moment?"

Broden replied, "You did it."

Tor said, "Shit." He glanced at the reception committee and said, "They look as though they need a drink."

Broden commented, "Yeah the only reason they're here is so the bar will open."

Tor said, "Well I need a drink so open the bar."

Broden asked, "Do you think that's wise?"

Tor said, "In eighteen days if I'm not travelling with the assassin then I'm dead. What do you think?"

Broden replied honestly, "I think you should forget about everything but apprehending the murderer."

Tor said, "I'd like to say 'Hi' to Tris."

With a deep sigh Broden commented, "Oh, now all of a sudden the girl seems to be important to you."

Tor said, "The odds are stacked against me, in nineteen days I'm going to have my face ripped off and I'm going to die. You tell me what's important?"

Broden gave a wry smile, "In the same situation I think I might just re-prioritise my life. But at this moment we should give you a full break down of where we're at and what we need to do next. So you're coming with me and we're going to sit down in your office with our Mohrabas friend here and get Polmankelest on the comm to chat."

Tor gave a quick sideways look and asked, "What's Pol got to do with this?"

Broden said, "Sheero wants him in charge of the investigation. He's about as impartial as they get and in true Paranid fashion, unfriendly."

It pained Tor just to have to give a brief wave as he walked past the gathering. Even so he called out, "Hi all. Tris, I'd like you to sit in on the briefing."

She glanced at Broden who gave a slight nod. ThaStornla gave her a curious look and graciously allowed Tris to go before him. One thing Tor did notice was that ThaStornla made the corridor look small and he had to duck to go through the doorways.

As they ascended in the lift Tor asked casually, "So what's up with the Defiance?"

Broden looked surprised, "Ah, Sweety didn't want them taking you away and put the ship in front of the carrier."

Tor said slowly, "I guess that was a bad move."

Broden nodded, "You could say that. The carrier has some EMP based weapon and fried every computer circuit on the ship."

Tor looked worried, "And Sweety?"

Broden responded, "Fortunately she was here and piloting the ship by remote."

Tor nodded as he considered what he should say to Sweety for what sounded like a devoted act of loyalty.

They reached his office and sat around the main meeting table. Polmankelest was already waiting and reading through the data files. ThaStornla found a chair that did not have armrests and sat attentively.

Tor did a brief round of introductions, and then said, "So I take it you've ruled out the former prisoners?"

Broden nodded, "Yes. We've had them monitored at all times. They can't go anywhere without security alerts being generated."

Polmankelest added, "But it's not unreasonable to say they may be able to help identify the assassin."

Broden replied, "That's providing they've ever met them."

Tor asked, "Them?"

Broden glanced over to him, "We can't rule out the possibility that the assassin is female."

Tor asked, "Okay what other avenues have you pursued?"

Polmankelest answered, "We have questioned the agents to see if they have any data on known criminals."

Broden added, "But the datapads they carry need to connect into the central archive every thirty Mizuras or the memory gets wiped. It's a security feature should the pad fall into the wrong hands."

Polmankelest commented, "Which leaves us two sets of data, known employees on each station which will include length of employment and background. The second set is the unknown element, the refugees whose records have been lost."

Tor asked, "So what's the ratio?"

Polmankelest replied, "Thirty seven percent are classified unknowns."

Tor commented, "That narrows it down."

Broden responded, "No not really."

Glancing around the table Tor said, "Well at least we should be able to discount the employees on this station."

Polmankelest said slowly, "What makes you think that? Any of them could have committed the crime on your behalf."

There was a sharp intake of breath from Liann and Tris, Broden visibly tensed and Tor looked long and hard at the Paranid. He said slowly, "You're quite right, no one is above suspicion. Commander, Sweety, I want a list of all station personnel that left in the run up to the meeting." He then added, "Do we have any idea when the device was planted?"

There were a few slightly perplexed faces, Tor commented, "Well that would help narrow the search field. The window of opportunity must have been somewhere between the moment the meeting venue was announced and just before it started."

Broden asked, "Sweety how many personnel were off station during this period?"

Sweety replied, "Do you want me to include ships that were out on patrol?"

Broden looked questioningly at Polmankelest. The Paranid replied, "Providing you can account for their movement and they didn't dock anywhere then, no."

Sweety answered, "Seventeen personnel were absent from the station during that period."

Polmankelest commented, "All Roamer personnel should be added to the list. Also list everyone that moved between stations during this time. Then add in all the classified unknowns."

Tris commented, "The assassin will have used a number of identities to cover their trail."

Polmankelest replied, "There will be shadows in the system."

Tris asked, "What does that mean?"

Broden answered, "Occasionally the system logs an event. It happens if someone registers themselves into a rest center but then goes on a short off station trip without checking out of the room first. An alert is generated if the person remains off station for several Stazura."

Polmankelest added, "Assassins like to use this to cover their own movements."

Sweety commented, "There are one hundred and seventy five recorded events in the time period. Twenty five were personnel visiting the Roamer."

Tor asked, "And these people have been interviewed?"

Polmanckelest replied, "They will be carried out within the next six Stazura."

Tor had a strong sense of optimism that they would be able to close in on the assassin reasonably quickly. His only concern was if they would be able to catch him alive. Chances were if the assassin knew what the Mohrabas had planned then he would fight to the death or suicide himself when trapped.

He could only hope that with ThaStornla present, if the assassin did take his own life the Captain would be able to explain to ThiRioth what happened. ThaStornla remained silent throughout the meeting but was always attentive and watchful.

At the end of the meeting Tor commented, "It's a sure thing the assassin will know that we are looking for them. What they mustn't find out is what their fate is going to be when we catch them. Also if you think you're getting close then don't take any unnecessary risks and get some help. I don't want to see any more deaths."

Polmanckelest commented, "The assassin will still be looking for an opportunity to kill you. I can only advise that you remain here whilst Broden and myself hunt for this person."

Tor nodded, there was sense in this. However inside, the attack and possible consequences to himself made this too personal just to sit back. He responded, "I know what you're saying, but this is personal."

Broden gave a wry smile, "It was never anything else. But I think Polmanckelest is right, you should stay here for at least the initial stages of the investigation. When we need live bait we'll give you a call."

Tor looked at ThaStornla to see if he was going to say anything. The Mohrabas glanced back but remained silent. Tor said casually, "I need to show you the new factories." The Mohrabas gave a positive indication.

Polmanckelest said, "This will be the only formal meeting. I refer you to the list of people assisting with the research. I have included two of my colleagues aboard the Solar Power Plant to verify the data. I have included Liann, Sweety and Dorlf. Anyone else will have to be approved by myself and Commander Broden. The list will be adjusted to show ThaStornla as an independent observer." There were a few nods. The Paranid continued, "The only thing I expect to see are reports. As we don't know who we're dealing with then I want comms activity kept to a minimum. Are there any questions?"

No one responded and Polmanckelest stood up, "Very well, let's get on with it."

Tor said, "Liann, can you sort out some accommodation for our guest?"

She replied, "Yeah sure."

Tor commented to ThaStornla, "If you follow Liann she'll show you to your quarters. I need to sort out a few things here and then we'll go get something to eat."

As they left the room Tor felt a tap on the shoulder. Turning around he looked at Tris, she asked, "You wanted to talk to me?"

Tor smiled, "Ah, yes."

Ghaan had been on board a transport to the Cahoona Bakery when the Mohrabas Carrier returned. He could only assume, as the shuttle had gone to the Silicon Mine, that Tor had returned. Somewhere inside he knew the hunt was on, but he still had the advantage. Now all he needed was to come up with a way of getting Tor out from that safe haven of the Silicon Mine.

It would only be a matter of time before Wilasma would be discovered. Although she was still alive she would be of no use. He had made sure of that, Ghaan corrected himself, the toxin would take care of that. He knew he needed to find the three captured troopers and quickly. As he considered this another plan formed.

Tors' conversation with Tris had not gone as he had hoped. She had let him down as gently as she could having already accepted a date with one of the other pilots. Although he felt crushed he simply gave a wry smile and apologised for putting her in such an awkward position.

He remembered how she looked at him with a strange mix of emotion on her face. He gave a slight tilt of the head and said, "Perhaps it's better this way."

Tris asked, "What will they do to you if we don't catch the assassin?"

Tor looked at her and decided not to go into detail, "I'll be punished for the crime."

Tris whispered, "And the punishment?"

Tor whispered back, "Death."

Tris knew he was holding something back but felt it better not to push for an answer under the circumstances. She gave him a quick kiss and then left. Before the door closed behind her Broden walked into the office he took one look at Tor and with datapad in hand strode towards him. As the door closed he glanced over his shoulder. Turning back to look at Tor he said gently, "News travels fast around here. I'm only sorry I didn't get the opportunity to warn you first."

Tor said quietly, "You did warn me something like this would happen."

Broden responded, "A lot's happened since then."

Tor commented bitterly, "And not much of it good."

Broden gave a small grin, "Just say the word and I can arrange that they are on duty shifts which means they never see each other."

Tor was severely tempted but responded, "No, if I'm going to win her heart I need to do it fairly."

Broden commented, "My friend, nothing in life is fair. You can play by your own rules, but don't expect anyone else too. Especially not where matters of the heart are involved."

Tor glanced across and with a touch of sarcasm said, "That makes me feel a whole lot better, now did you have something to show me."

Broden looked at the datapad and said casually, "What this? No not really. Liann said I should stop by." Tor looked questioningly at him and Broden continued, "She thought it would be a good idea. She said a lot of other things to, but I won't bore you with the details."

Tor said halfheartedly, "I'm willing to be bored."

Broden sighed, "She and Tris get on very well together. They've had a fair few chats recently and the problem is Tor you're a man with a bleak future and potentially very limited life span. Let's face it if the assassin doesn't get you then the Mohrabas might. If you manage to get through this and the gate gets reopened then you'll be the first one through to see what's waiting on the other side, and lets face it the

Khaak aren't going to throw a welcoming party for you. Needless to say if we all make it home, there's still Feran Bloodheart to deal with."

Tor sighed and said, "To think all this started with a minor speeding infringement."

Broden smiled, "Whatever. Just so that you know, Tris still has strong feelings for you. Just think of this moment as a temporary glitch."

Broden and Polmankelest had taken over the Station Commanders Office on the Computer Plant for the interrogation. He sat listening in on the first few interviews of the initial twenty six names listed by Sweetey, they were simply going through the motions, but he knew quickly that the interviews were going to be a painfully slow way to determine who the assassin was likely to be. Every statement would need to be corroborated and verified. What was worse is the assassin could as easily walk in, be interviewed, then sent away again and they would be none the wiser.

As the seventh interviewee left the room, leaving them with a list of contact names that would verify what they were doing during the period between leaving the station and returning again. He turned to Polmankelest and said, "This is getting us nowhere fast. By the time we verify all these statements with these other people and cleared them from our list we're going to have run out of time."

Polmankelest glanced across and commented, "We are looking for the person who didn't leave the station, even though the computer record say they did. That will tell us which station the assassin started from, but you're right we shouldn't underestimate the amount of work required.

Broden gave a heavy sigh, "So the Chip Plant next or the Bakery?"

Polmankelest asked, "Which is the shorter list?"

Broden checked the datapad and replied, "The Chip Plant."

The Paranid said, "That's the one we'll do next, and are you sure you don't want to interview the former prisoner?"

Broden replied, "We know he didn't commit the crime. And I don't want any of them to leap to the misapprehension that we're going to set them up for it. When we have a face, then we can see if any of them recognise it."

ThaStornla had sampled various meatsteaks from well done to blue and Tor began to wonder if ordering the cow straight from the ranch and still alive, would have been more appropriate. Only, he reflected, the Cattle Ranch was only just beginning to show signs of being able to provide a small but stable supply to the Cahoona Bakery. However after all the sampling ThaStornla said in a gentle purr that he preferred the medium rare.

They then had a brief whistle stop tour of the Cattle Ranch and fly by of the incomplete Crystal Fab whilst Tor explained the function and manufacturing process of each factory. He showed how the materials needed from the Mohrabas home world would be used.

ThaStornla kept quiet and studied in great detail all of the information on the datapad presented. With almost casual ease he knew how to gain more information with the slightest tap of the screen. Tor felt distinctly uncomfortable each time ThaStornlas' index claw slid forward.

After the second time, ThaStornla appeared to pause briefly when the claw came out and pressing the touchpad.

On their return to the Silicon Mine they wandered past the pilot bar and up to Tors' office. Tor commented, "I don't serve quite as interesting a drink as you people but I have ale, whiskey and water."

Having sniffed each of the drinks Tor could provide, the Mohrabas declined the ale and an undiluted space fuel in favour of a glass of water.

Tor helped himself to several large measures of whisky. ThaStornla commented, "It is fair to warn you that my race can tell much about someone by their scent."

Tor looked across, "That's the most you've said all day."

ThaStornla laughed briefly, "Your race is primitive indeed. There is a much that can be said without the need for words."

Tor responded, "I don't understand."

ThaStornla smiled, "When you are calm there is a scent about you, when you are afraid the scent changes, and so on."

Tor gave a halfhearted smile and asked, "So what do I feel now?"

ThaStornla looked at him, the gaze seemed to cut through him, eventually the Mohrabas looked away, "You feel hurt and your heart is heavy. The female Tris affects you and her scent lingers about you."

Tor looked stunned, "You can tell that just by smell?"

ThaStornla nodded and then Tor considered that it would have been over a Stazura since he had come into contact with Tris. Tor asked, "How long does a scent remain for?"

ThaStornla considered the question, "That depends on many things."

Tor asked, "So can you tell who's who just by their smell?"

ThaStornla nodded and replied, "As easily as you can tell night from day."

Tor asked, "How do you know we need light to see?"

ThaStornla growled a laugh, "If you could see in the dark you wouldn't have lights."

Tor looked up and replied, "Okay you've got me there."

ThaStornla said, "I will contact his Excellency and recommend the goods you require are sent. Hopefully with the new day we will get closer to finding the killer."

Tor nodded and responded, "I hope so too."

The interviews aboard the Computer Plant were painfully slow. They had barely completed half the list when Polmanckelest called it a day. Rather than stay overnight they both returned to the safety of the Silicon Mine in order to give Tor an update on the days progress.

Tor sat patiently listening with ThaStornla watching. With a sigh Tor asked, "So when do you think you'll finish?"

Polmankelest replied, "In another four Stazuras."

Tor reflected on the previous meeting, "Didn't you say that last time?"

Polmankelest shrugged and answered, "No I originally estimated it would take six. On reflection it will take eight."

Tor looked across, "Okay. So what happens when we discover the decoy?"

Broden frowned, "We will have established the start point. Then we start all over again this time focussing on all movements from that station since the time of departure."

Tor frowned, "And what if he hasn't gone anywhere since?"

Polmankelest replied, "We seal off the station and talk to everyone that's on there until we find our killer."

Tor looked around, "I'd like to believe there must be a quicker way."

Broden replied, "Well short of having you walking casually along every corridor in every station then I can't think of one. But let me know if you come up with an alternative suggestion."

Tor shook his head.

Nearly two Stazuras later, Broden and Polmankelest were back on board the Chip plant to carry out the final few interviews before moving on to the Cahoon Bakery.

Broden asked, "So who's next."

Polmankelest replied, "Plomo Barrot, freighter pilot for the station. He doesn't have allocated rooms and is having to use the rest centre."

Broden commented, "Not one of the usual transients then."

The door opened and the pilot stepped uncertainly into the room. Broden noted he was of slim build and average height. The face was sharp, almost pinched in appearance, hair thinning and flecked with silver grey, the look of uncertainty reflected in his grey eyes and stance. He asked, "Security said you wanted to talk to me?"

Broden automatically responded, "Take a seat Plomo."

Plomo glanced across quickly and sat down obediently, "Sir."

Broden handed him a datapad and said, "I'd like you to take a look at this. Now cast your mind back to the times mentioned and tell us why you went to the Roamer?"

Plomo studied the pad closely, and said slowly, "This is a joke right?"

Broden responded quickly, "Do I look like I'm laughing?"

Plomo said defensively, "But I've never been to the Roamer."

Polmankelest commented in a deep rumble, "Really?"

Plomo looked from the big Paranid to Broden and asked, "What's this about?"

Polmankelest replied, "We're looking for the person who planted a bomb that killed a number of people."

The pilot's eyes widened, "It wasn't me. I don't know the first thing about explosives. You should be talking to that Grall bloke. I want a lawyer, I have rights you know." He went to stand up.

Broden put his hands heavily on Plomos' shoulders and pushed him back down on to the seat whilst saying, "Sit down, no one's accusing you of anything. Just tell us what you were doing between those times and if it can be verified by anyone."

Plomo looked at the times and replied carefully, "I would have been sleeping. Those times match my normal rest cycle." He looked uncertainly between the two interviewers.

Polmankelest gave a slight nod, "And did anyone see you go to your room?"

Plomo replied, "Normally I meet up with some of the other pilots for a few drinks, but I don't have them watch me go to bed." He gave a nervous laugh.

Polmankelest looked thoughtful, "Very well, let us put this one down to a computer glitch. You may go."

Plomo looked surprised, and a rapid feeling of injustice swept over him, "You drag me in here for no reason and there's no apology."

Broden commented, "You're asking a Paranid for an apology? Look if it makes you happy, sorry, now get going before we start asking about illegal weed plants growing in one of the sub holds of your transporter."

Plomos' face paled and he left hurriedly. Polmankelest looked at Broden, "Weed?"

Broden nodded slowly, "Sweety just gave me an update on an internal ship scan."

Polmankelest said slowly, "You will mention these gems of information to me before hand won't you."

Broden gave a slight nod and said, "Not exactly the perfect decoy."

Polmankelest asked, "But who would believe him. No real alibi and a weed addict."

Broden commented, "Sweety, run a list of all persons onboard the station at the time of Plomos' computer glitch. Split the list to between regular and non-station staff."

Polmankelest called out, "Next!"

Once they had concluded the last few interviews Polmankelest sighed, "Before we move onto the Cahoona Bakery we should go and visit Tor."

Broden nodded, "I'm sure he will be keen to have an update."

Polmankelest said, "This is only one piece of the puzzle and we still have lots more bits to put together."

Broden responded, "Yeah, but can we find out who did it before Tor runs out of time?"

The big Paranid shrugged, "I wouldn't want to predict the outcome."

Tor had taken ThaStornla to view ThaThwyns Station. The Mohrabas Captain stood on the dockside and looked at the nearly deserted station. The only inhabitants being a small select group of scientists from the Roamer and a few pilots. They had all turned up to see ThaStornla first hand, however this left a silent void behind them.

ThaStornla growled gently as if quoting something, "Do you not feel how the silence of the tomb closes in."

Tor looked at him with a touch of alarm. ThaStornla had grown accustomed to the facial expressions of Tor and purred, "It's from one of our ancient texts, the next line is, 'I sense the ghosts of my forefathers walking here and their eyes turn upon me!'"

Tor responded, "Sounds a bit creepy to me. If it makes you uncomfortable we can always go back to the Mine."

ThaStornla stood silently for a moment, "It makes me uncomfortable but we shall go on. There is no record of this place in our history archives. Otherwise we would have been here to greet you on your first visit."

Tor reflected on how the place looked and felt when he first walked through the dark halls and along corridors illuminated only by the lamps of his environment suit with Moda following behind. Now the place was fully powered and illuminated it was just as daunting and eerie.

With only the sound of footsteps they wandered silently around the empty facades of what would have been shops in the deserted and silent promenades about the central shaft crossed by gantries and walkways. Several hover disks, each able to carry a single person, rested on the platform and without any sense of hesitation ThaStornla stepped on to one. Immediately it began to rise and then slipped out over the void.

Tor looked at the scientist who all appeared to be impressed, one shrugged and said, "We haven't worked out how to use them yet."

Tor asked, "So how do you get from floor to floor?"

The scientist gave an apologetic smile, "We use the foot ramps or the lift just over to the right of you."

ThaStornla floated back down and looked with curiosity at the group. Tor said by way of explanation, "We'll use the lift."

With a nod ThaStornla growled, "Up three floors."

One of the scientist commented, "I'd love to know how he did that."

A response came back, "Just hope the damn thing doesn't go wrong. From this level it's four hundred metres straight down."

With that thought Tor remembered pitching Moda over the edge and wished he had his environment suit pack on. The lift rose smoothly to the floor ThaStornla had indicated to. He was already wandering slowly towards the stations information centre.

When they caught him up Tor said, "For someone who has no record of this place, you seem to know your way around."

ThaStornla gave him a curious look and then shrugged commenting, "I'm simply reading the signs." Tor said, "Ahh. We can show you the way to the command centre if you like?"

The Captain gave a reassuring smile and said, "In a while, I'd like to visit this place first." He motioned down the corridor.

Tor asked the following group, "Anyone know what's down here?" The scientists and pilots looked blankly at each other and shook their heads and Tor asked, "So what do you people do over here?"

The answer came back, "This place is huge, there's probably hundreds of kilometres of corridors to get lost in. So we focus our attention to one part of the station at a time."

Another voice commented quietly, "Yeah, and we only have one ball of string to find our way back with."

Tor quickened the pace to catch up with the Mohrabas who had lengthened his stride apparently eager to reach his destination. The double doors of a plush and well furnished lobby. Water features flowed and the gentle sound of the liquid cascaded over miniature waterfalls rippled through the rooms.

ThaStornla looked around with a glint in his eye. The scientists and the pilots looked around slightly mesmerised. In contrast to the bright unfurnished starkness of the rest of the station this was fully fitted with every creature comfort to be found in a luxurious lounge.

Tor asked, "What is this place?"

ThaStornla said with almost a touch of excitement, "This is the last remaining sense library of our ancestors. They are documented in our archives but no one has ever seen or managed to successfully recreate one."

Tor looked perplexed, "Sense library?"

ThaStornla looked at Tor and smiled sympathetically, "Our race has evolved to learn that sound alone is only one medium to exchange information. So much more can be conveyed by sight, touch and smell. We have sense chips that when held in the hand can convey complex messages through the nerve interface as fast as sound can be processed by the ear."

Tor commented, "And a picture paints a thousand words, but what about smell?"

ThaStornla frowned, "The most challenging of them all, the problem with scent is that it ages, becomes blended, and fades."

Tor asked, "But you can tell when someone's around?"

ThaStornla smiled, "When you know their scent."

Tor could not help but ask, "Did you smell someone other than those of us in the room before the explosion?"

The expression on ThaStornlas face changed to that of a frown, he stood tall, the muscles tense and glared down at Tor. "Many people passed through that room. The bomb was under the floor, I heard it, but the floor was too dense for any aroma to seep through."

Tor sighed, "I had to ask. So would this library be of any use to us?"

ThaStornla relaxed, "I doubt you would master the multi-level data transfer."

With a wave of the hand Tor said, "As we're here why don't you go look something up."

The Mohrabas Captain wandered off whilst the group sat down, relaxed and chatted. After half a Stazura ThaStornla returned looking deeply thoughtful. He glanced at the group and turned to purr gently at Tor, "The records of our people are intact and they are all here. Everything we believe to be lost is locked in the archives of this station."

A thought crossed Tors' mind and he was sorely tempted to ask, 'What's it worth? My life?' However the words that spilled from his mouth were slow and considered, "This place belongs to you. If the Khaak had

followed us we would have used it to try and survive. But say the word and we'll clear out our stuff and let you have it back."

ThaStornla appeared to look into Tors' mind, "It's a bargaining counter with our people. Worth more than everything else you have to offer, and you would just hand it back?"

Tor gave a half hearted laugh and slight smile, "Worth? Money is of no importance out here, all we have is our lives. Back home we play the numbers game, but here it's meaningless. That we survived is wealth enough. All I want is to make sure that people have light, warmth and food."

ThaStornla gently purred, "And you have someone that wants to take yours away from you."

Tor sighed and commented bitterly, "And if that person succeeds no one is going to get home alive."

ThaStornla looked curiously at Tor but said nothing.

Chapter 8 – The Discovery

It was with the look of great reluctance that ThaStornla eventually stepped out of the sense library. They ascended five more levels to reach the command centre. Tor noticed how the captain only paused briefly when passing the Sentinel.

The robot appeared to give a slight nod of acknowledgement but otherwise remained motionless. Tor passed by and simply felt the thing stare at him, he wondered if Sweety had managed to really get to grips with the Mohrabas system language and his mind drifted to the second unit still lurking in the maintenance bay of the Silicon Mine.

ThaStornla quietly studied the systems as Tor explained where they had found the remains of ThaThwyn. The Mohrabas asked, “So he left data crystals?”

Tor nodded and replied, “And a device to read them but we couldn't work out how to use it.”

ThaStornla nodded slowly and said, “What happened to ThaThwyn?”

Tor replied slowly, “We scanned the crystals for a clue and Sweety suggested the most fitting thing was to put his remains in a casket and send him towards the sun.”

With a sigh ThaStornla said, “It was a good decision.”

Sweety interrupted them, “Tor, ThaStornla. Broden would like to see you both, they think they may have found a potential lead.”

Tor immediately said, “We're on our way.” Then looked at ThaStornla and added, “Unless you want to keep looking around.”

ThaStornla shook his head and replied, “No. I have seen enough for now. There will be plenty of opportunities in the future to return.”

They made their own way back leaving the scientists to continue their research, which now had a deeper sense of urgency after Tors announcement that he would be handing back the station.

Polmankelest had decided not to wait for Tors' return and made the onward journey to the Cahoona Bakery to conduct the final interviews.

Broden sat in Tors' office just reading the details of the previous interviews, and particularly the two or three which he had originally felt would be worth investigating in depth. Even so the interview with Plomo had over ruled his initial instincts.

Tor entered at a fast pace and almost out of breath. ThaStornla casually strode in after him and ducked under the door lintel as if it had become second nature.

In a few breathless words Tor asked, "What have you got for us?"

Broden offered his datapad to Tor. Who took it from him and stood quietly for a moment studying the interview transcript. He said slowly, "Is this the discrepancy you were looking for?"

Giving a nod Broden commented, "Yes, but until Polmankelest concludes the last few we won't be sure this isn't a devious double bluff."

Tor asked, "So which station was this?"

Broden answered, "Chip plant."

Tor thought for a moment, "Did you talk to the trooper, see if they might have seen someone they recognise as one of Ferans' people?"

With a shake of the head, Broden replied, "People like Feran hire freelance assassins from a list of pseudonyms. These people don't, as a rule, hang around on pirate stations. Too many undercover agents visit the places looking for new faces to add to the potential criminal database."

Tor looked perplexed, "There must be a faint chance he could have been on the Scruffin Farm before the attack on the mine."

Broden sighed, "Look if it'll make you any happier, I'll go chat to the trooper. But don't expect them to be that co-operative." He asked out loud, "Sweety, remind me which trooper did we put on the chip plant?"

Sweety replied, "Wilasma."

Tor said, "I'll go with ThaStornla. I expect Polmankelest will be expecting you to help with the rest of the interviews."

Broden frowned and commented, "I can understand you wanting to get involved Tor, but you'll be an easy target if you go onboard."

Tor looked across and said, "I'm kicking my heels here, just loitering in the background for something good to happen. I need to get involved."

With a smile Broden commented, "And you will, when you take the assassin to see our friend here's people."

Tor felt like arguing but a thought skimmed across his mind and he sighed, "Okay. I'll stay here and review the data."

Broden rose from the seat and commented, "Just be patient for a little bit longer. We'll give you another update when we finish." Tor handed him back the datapad before Broden left the office.

ThaStornla looked at Tor and growled, "I can see his words do not please you."

Tor said quietly, "Sweety I want you to keep this conversation confidential, just between us three."

Sweety responded, "Is that an order?"

Tor replied, "Yes!"

ThaStornla looked around the room and purred, "This computer based sentient intelligence fascinates me. How is it achieved?"

Tor looked at ThaStornla and shrugged, "I guess only Sweety can answer that."

Sweety purred softly, "I thought this was going to be controversial?"

Tor said quickly, "Yes, I'm going to the Chip Plant."

Sweety purred again, "See you, if you get back, I think I'll stay and chat to our friend here."

ThaStornla responded with a laughing growl, "Fascinating, and as much as I will enjoy our conversation it must wait." He looked at Tor and said, "I will come with you."

Tor said, "Let's go. Oh and Sweety you're not invited."

Sweety responded jovially, "Then I'll tell."

Tor hesitated, returned to his desk and unclipped the technical datapad from its interface. Walking back towards the door he commented, "Happy now?"

They reached the docking bay but before boarding the transport Tor stopped and looked over towards the Defiance. As far as he could tell it was just an indescribable mass of power conduits and maintenance robots shifting panels.

He wandered across and turned over an old discarded part with his boot. The components were fused and charred beyond recognition. Stepping around the side he spotted the airlock doors had been removed completely so he looked inside.

There was a slight hum from the repaired replicator which surprised him as this would mean that it had power. He had the distinct impression that the inside of the ship was somehow different from before but decided that it was probably an illusion caused by the fact most of the internal panels had been removed.

As he wandered back towards the transport he asked, "Sweety how long before the Defiance is working again."

Sweety replied, "At the current rate it will be two Tazuras before it is complete."

ThaStornla growled quietly, "Sorry about the damage to your ship. I could not persuade the Commander not to fire a second time."

Tor nodded and with a wry smile said, "Fortunately it can be repaired."

Sweety gave docking clearance and with a sense of doing something positive for a change Tor piloted the shuttle to the Chip Plant. Docking permission was a formality and once at the dockside Tor checked that he had blasters and stun stick in easy reach. He was not sure what type of weapon the Mohrabas was carrying and then came to the conclusion that ThaStornla was a weapon, being faster and stronger than any Argon, with retractable razor sharp claws.

With a couple of deep breaths he opened the airlock door and stepped out onto the docking bay. No one paid him much attention until ThaStornla emerged, then everyone stopped and looked towards them. Tor felt that this idea of his was a terrible mistake when Sweety commented quietly through his ear piece, "Are we just going to stand here, or do you fancy not being so out in the open?"

Tor commented quickly, "Okay tell me where Wilasma is?"

Sweety replied, "Take shuttle lift gamma four up to level eleven and the rest centre will be on the right. We want room one five seven."

Tor looked for the shuttle lift signs and moved boldly towards the gamma section lifts. The huge form of ThaStornla padded almost silently behind him whilst studying the faces of the station inhabitants.

Fortunately for Tor, no-one appeared to want to get into the same shuttle as ThaStornla. The Mohrabas appeared to be enjoying himself.

Tor said, "I have to apologise if people stare. It's kind of a natural curiosity we have. After a while people will be used to you and then it won't be so bad."

The shuttle stopped and the doors slid open. Stepping out Tor guided them towards the rest centre. He glanced at the technical pad to prompt him for the room number. Stopping outside the door Tor knocked gently. There was no answer.

Speaking quietly he asked, "Sweetie, scan the room. Wilasma is here isn't she?"

Sweetie replied, "Yes she is inside. Currently she is in bed resting."

Tor asked, "Is she awake?"

There was a slight hesitation when Sweetie replied, "Possibly."

Tor was about to ask Sweetie to wake her up by triggering the room alarm when ThaStornla put a hand on his shoulder. The Mohrabas Captain looked perplexed and seemed to taste the air, "There is something bad here."

Looking closely at ThaStornla Tor asked, "Sweetie can you scan the room for explosives?"

Sweetie replied, "Scanning." After a few moments she replied, "I detect nothing. But I have requested medical assistance and security."

They did not have to wait long when both a medical team and a heavily armed security team pounded along the corridor. The chief security officer asked, "What's the problem here?"

Tor said casually, "A friend of ours is in the room, but appears to be unresponsive."

The security officer did not look impressed, however refrained from saying anything curt in the presence of the watchful gaze of ThaStornla. He said, as politely as he could, "And so you thought you'd call us?"

Tor gave a wry smile, "We need your permission to open the door. But before you give us permission, we'll move a few doors down."

The voice of Broden bellowed commandingly down the corridor, "Stop what you're doing! Everyone stand back!"

With a face like thunder Broden moved quickly down the corridor and stopped in front of Tor. Looking at the expectant faces of the security and medical teams he commanded, "Get back and take cover. Tor, a quiet word."

He activated the door release behind Tor and stepped into the room. ThaStornla appeared to briefly smell the air. Broden turned on Tor and commented angrily, "What the hell are you doing?"

Tor replied defensively, "I'm trying not to have my face ripped off."

Broden punched the wall beside Tor and took a moment to calm himself, "We've nearly completed the interviews and we now have a second discrepancy."

Tor asked, "What do you mean?"

Broden held back for a moment, before he replied, "There could be two assassins running around."

Tor said, "Oh."

ThaStornla growled gently, "Open the door to the room Sweety."

The door to Wilasma's room glided open as the Mohrabas Captain strode from one room to the next. Everyone began to converge towards the doorway. ThaStornla growled, "Stay back."

Tor was close and his stomach told him it would rather be much further away. The scent of faeces assaulted his nasal passages and he stepped back.

The doctor stepped forward and Tor against his initial reaction followed him into the room. Broden said quietly, "Careful there doctor."

Wilasma had been turned onto her front and covered in the white sheets of the bed. However the localised dark damp colour gave Tor a clear indication of where the stench came from. He noted the vacant expression. It was not something he had expected to see or in reflection ever wanted to witness again. Turning around a crowd of curious faces lurked in the doorway. Their entrance was being prevented by the solid bulk of Broden.

The doctor took a saliva sample and scanned the results, a few moments later he said, "Mr. Grall, can I have a private word."

Broden said, "Everyone back. Sweety close the door."

The doctor looked around as the door closed. Only Broden, Tor and ThaStornla remained in the room with him and Wilasma.

Tor watched him and commented quietly, "It's okay they're with me."

The doctor frowned and then commented, "I have to tell you the effects of the poison are irreversible."

Tor asked, "What do you mean?"

The doctor looked perplexed and then sighed, "The toxin that's been used is better known as Deaths Tears."

Broden commented viciously, "The bastard."

Tor looked blank and responded, "This is bad?"

The doctor looked at him and replied quietly, "If someone cut a hole in your skull and slowly poured in concentrated acid, that would be a nicer way to go than this stuff."

Tor looked at Wilasma and asked, "Is there nothing we can do?"

The doctor replied, "We can neutralise the toxin so she won't get any worse." He paused, "But she won't get any better either."

Tor looked at ThaStornla and asked, "Could your people help?"

ThaStornla shook his head, "Even we haven't worked out how to re-grow a brain."

Quietly Tor asked, "How long do you think she has left?"

The Doctor looked directly at Tor, frowned and replied, "About nine Stazuras."

The full weight of the decision hit Tor like a battering ram and he was unprepared for it. He could stop the decay and preserve life for what it was worth, or let Wilasma die. Three pairs of eyes watched him intensely.

He said calmly, "Would you give me a moment alone."

The door opened again and the gathered security and medics yielded space as ThaStornla and the doctor left the room, Broden placed a heavy hand on his shoulder. Their eyes met and without having to exchange words he left the room. In that instance Tor knew his decision but it riled against everything he held precious. He approached the bed and looked at the vacant eyes hoping that there would be a spark of something.

He closed his eyes and a few tears escaped to run down his face. Eventually he turned and walked towards the door which slid open and he stepped out into the corridor. Looking directly at the doctor he said, "Make her comfortable and let the toxin run its course, but don't let her suffer." He hesitated and then added, "Call me when the time is near."

The doctor gave a slow nod, "But I must warn you the end will be sudden. The heart or lungs will just stop."

Tor looked thoughtful and said, "Understood." Looking over to Broden he commented, "Let's make sure the others are safe."

Broden looked at the doctor and asked, "How long do you think she's been like this?"

The doctor replied, "Difficult to tell, when we've got her settled in the med centre we should be able to get a more accurate idea of how much toxin she's been given and we can extrapolate backwards on the amount of damage done."

Tor asked quietly, "Would she have suffered?"

Broden's jaw tensed as he exchanged a quick look with the doctor. The doctor said slowly, "I've only ever come across two cases of poisoning with this stuff, both were much earlier in the course of the toxin, " The doctor looked grim before saying, "And I'd rather not answer that."

Tor commented to Broden, "There's a certain new urgency in catching this person don't you think?"

Broden nodded and said, "And when we catch them, you're going to have to stop me sticking them in an airlock and slowly releasing the atmosphere and pressure."

Tor looked at ThaStornla and asked, "Could you make out a scent?"

The Mohrabas Captain replied, "Only the faintest of musk. They may have been closer but not in that room."

Broden raised a curious eyebrow and asked, "Musk?"

ThaStornla answered in a low growl, "We are after a male of your species."

Broden asked cautiously, "You're sure of that?"

ThaStornla simply indicated with a positive gesture. Tor said, "He means yes. But I think we should save this conversation and allow the medics here an opportunity to do their job."

They moved along the corridor until they felt they were comfortably out of casual earshot. In a moment ThaStornla had knocked both men to the floor and also lay flat to the deck. The explosion echoed along the corridor, debris showered them and screams of the wounded followed the temporary silence.

All the colour had drained from Tors' face and he said slowly, "What the." Looking back down the corridor all he could do was retch.

Broden rose up as the dust continued to settle and surveyed the scene. Without looking at ThaStornla he asked, "How did you know?"

ThaStornla replied, "Same sound as the last one."

Broden glance at the shrapnel holes that perforated the walls where they had been standing, "Good hearing too. Let's hope all these loud bangs don't spoil it."

Tor commented as he tired to pull himself together, "Pity you couldn't smell the bomb."

Broden answered bitterly, "It's an energy device. They don't have a smell. She must have been lying on top of the trigger."

The mental image cast in Tors' mind had him turn away and lean against the wall to try and retch again but there was nothing left.

Brodens' jaw tensed and with a focus stare down the corridor at the dismembered and wounded station personnel he commented to ThaStornla, "Whatever you have in mind for this guy it had better be painful. But you'll have to give me the satisfaction of kicking nine bells of shit out of him first."

ThaStornla looked across and growled, "I'm not sure I understand all of what you said. But if I understand the general gist correctly, I believe an unprecedented amount of non lethal violence is involved."

Broden responded with a bitter quietness, "Yeah, something like that."

New faces appeared as the remainder of the stations medical teams converged on the corridor. Somehow that made things worse as the station crew began to recognise friends and companions amongst the wounded and deceased.

Tor pulled himself together and said quietly, "You can be second in line after me."

Sweety reported, "I have a pre-recorded message for you Tor."

Tor commented, "Play it."

A voice Tor did not recognise said, "Well Mr. Grall, if you're hearing this it means that I still haven't succeeded in killing you. Well all I can say is Wilasma was already dead. However take some comfort that I did try to make her last moments more pleasant, but maybe you'll be luckier in saving the remaining three."

Tor commented, "We need to check on the others. Sweety run a voice recognition on the recording."

Both Broden and ThaStornla looked at Tor with curiosity. Tor said, "What?"

Broden answered quietly, "It was your voice!"

Tors' jaw dropped and eventually he asked quietly, "Sweety, how can it be my voice?"

Sweety replied gently, "Other than the obvious reason. It may have been compiled but I will have to run a complete spectral analysis. But you have to remember this is recorded and compressed data, so it is going to be impossible to say for certain if there is a true match if this message is eighty five percent accurate to the normal voice pattern."

Broden commented quietly, "Lets get back on ship before we discuss our next move."

Tor commented quietly, "Should be obvious, the assassin won't be able to find Helass. He'll assume she's on the Solar Power Plant. Last thing he'll expect is to discover that she's not there."

Broden commented, "How do you figure that out?"

Tor replied, "We never told any of them the location of the others. Wilasma would have assumed that we didn't want any of them on the mine."

Broden gave a nod, "Let's get moving."

They made their way past the medics and security. Broden looked at the crowd and commented, "Sweety, any chance you can get us permission to transport out?"

Sweety replied, "Just making the request." A moment later she responded, "Permission granted."

The next thing Tor, ThaStornla and Broden knew was they were in the rear cabin of the transport ship.

Broden looked at ThaStornla and then at Tor before saying, "Okay let's get a few things understood." He took a deep breath, "One Mr. assassin has a supply of explosive devices, two he knows about the troopers and three has had time to set up traps for us." Tor digested the information and nodded. Broden continued, "So we need a plan, something to bring this guy out in the open."

Tor commented, "Shouldn't we just check up on the other two first?"

Broden gave a nod, "I'll talk to the security on each station and get them to check. But we must assume that the assassin has already got there first and if he hasn't done anything then it's because he waiting for you to show up."

Tor nodded, "Well I wasn't proposing on personally going this time around."

Broden responded, "Well I'm glad to hear it."

ThaStornla growled softly, "So how do you plan on catching this assassin?"

Broden replied, "We ask around. Find out when she was seen last and if she was with someone at the time."

Tor looked across, "Isn't that going to be a little too obvious?"

Broden nodded, "I don't doubt he will have altered his appearance, but it'll give us a time and a rough description of his height and build."

Tor looked at ThaStornla and asked, "Do you think you could pick out the assassin from his scent?"

ThaStornla shook his head, "Only if I have something to refer back to."

Tor commented, "But you did catch his smell."

ThaStornla shook his head with a purring laugh, "All I have is the memory of the scent, and much of that has been obscured by much stronger aromas since."

Broden commented, "We need to get moving."

Tor allowed Broden to occupy the pilot seat as he sat and contemplated what he felt needed to be done. The moment he sat down however the energy from the adrenaline of nearly being killed yet again flowed away. He said out loud, "This not dying business really takes it out of you. I am totally knackered."

The docking clamps released and the ship glided away, Broden called back, "I would have thought you'd got used to that by now."

Tor replied casually, "Somehow I don't think I'll ever get used to it." He looked over at ThaStornla and asked, "What do you think? Is it possible to become accustomed to nearly being killed?"

ThaStornla gave him a curious look before answering, "Most of us get used to staying alive however close to death we may get."

Tor smiled and said, "Yeah, that's a better way of looking at it."

ThaStornla growled, "I will need to give ThiRiOTH a progress update when we return."

Tor asked hopefully, "Do you think you can get us more time?" ThaStornla gestured in the negative. Tor frowned and added, "Well there's no harm in asking."

Broden kept quiet as he tried to work out in his own mind exactly how they were going to catch the assassin. His mind kept wandering to thoughts of using Helass as bait, but having seen Wilasma his instinct kicked back against it on principle and he also knew that Tor would not accept this suggestion. This left few options as the interview route was going to be slow and painful even with the new lead. He was going to have to rely on chance breakthroughs to get ahead and a degree of bending the rules. He had not completely fathomed out Polmanckelest but one thing was certain, the big Paranid would be a force to be reckoned with if he took exception to the way he conducted the ongoing investigation.

Tor breathed a deep sigh of relief when they stepped onto the dockside of the Silicon Mine. This was home perhaps his only safe haven and as he glanced at the Defiance he adjusted the thought that this was the only safe place for him.

They passed Liann as she came off duty and Tor noticed as she tried avoiding making eye contact when he said, "Hi." He glanced at Broden.

Broden shrugged, "She told me that you'd left the station. How else did you think I knew where to find you?"

Tor gave a wry smile, "I guess Sweetie should have asked her not to tell you."

Broden commented, "On the other hand perhaps it's a better thing she didn't."

As they entered Tors office he asked, "Right then, Sweetie remind me which prisoner ended up on which station."

Sweetie replied, "The Argon Daraman is located on the Computer Plant. The Teladi Zeelanamoula is on the Cahoona Bakery."

Tor strolled over to the private bar, "What's their status?"

Sweetie reported back, "Alive."

The security team on the Cahoon Bakery had closed off the passage to Zeelanamoulas' room at both ends. The news of an explosion on the Chip Plant had left them with a feeling of unease. Several robots were engaged in gaining entrance to the room via air conduits and maintenance runs.

Officer Johlin watched the screen intently as the first robot popped open the vent. He could sense a collective holding of breath as the panel flipped open. The scanners showed no signs of motion from the prone figure of the Teladi.

With suction cups on the multiple limbs of the small robot unit it moved cautiously into the room and walked gently across the ceiling. Scanners indicated the presence of a pattern disrupter, which prevented a simple extraction via transporter. Johlin hoped they would be able to locate the device and disable it.

The portable scanner units gave feedback on the other maintenance robots. These had been set to probe the subsystems for anything unusual. So far they had nothing but he still felt nervous about ordering the door to be opened.

The maintenance units continued to report nothing out of the ordinary as the robot in the room steadily made its way down the wall whilst searching for the source of the disruption field. Noting that three of the survey robots had finished their work Johlin ordered them to withdraw.

With no immediate sign of an explosive device he contemplated remote opening the door to see if there would be any reaction. Having been sat here for the last fifteen Mizuras his patience was beginning to wear thin. A chime from the monitor indicated that the disrupter had been located, however it had been wedged under the bed.

The close range scanner indicated no immediate danger from the device, but it would need to be extracted in order to open the control panel. The listening monitors had been set to detect the high pitch noise of a device charging up. He issued the instruction for the device to be extracted. As the robot grappled with the unit the sound detectors picked up the faint sound of shattering glass.

A few quiet moments passed in the corridor as Johlin watched in horror as the figure of the Teladi convulsed and then with a final few twitches the body lay still. All life signs vanished from the scanners.

It suddenly dawned on Johlin to isolate the air recirculation units. He shouted through to the command centre. "Poison gas alert. We have poison gas in section Pandora twelve."

A casual voice replied, "Come again."

One of the squad next to him coughed, and with a wild stare he said, "Shut down the god damn recirculation system NOW! Poison gas in the Pandora twelve section." He felt a tightening of his chest. Blast doors slammed down the metallic boom signifying they were now sealed in.

A more senior voice came over the comm. "Captain. We're going to have to purge the system with neutralising agents and evacuate the air. It will take a couple of Mizura to transport all of you out before we do so hang in there."

Johlin looked around as his men looked back his own fear reflected in their faces as he felt several muscles begin to twitch. The transporter unit began to activate and one by one the men were extracted to the emergency isolation unit of the medical bay.

Polmanckelest strode in to Tors office his face expressionless as Sweetie related the news from the Bakery.

Tor looked grave, his expression a mixture of suppressed outrage and deep thought. After Sweety gave the number of casualties Tor said quietly, "Bombs and poison gas. What else? How many more innocent people are going to die?"

Broden commented, "We still have Daraman."

Sweety interrupted, "I have another pre-recorded message for you Tor."

Tor said bitterly, "Play it."

The voice that Tor now clearly recognised as his own came over the speakers, "Two down and two to go. Who said revenge isn't sweet."

The others in the room looked at Tor. Polmankelest stepped up to the table and placed a datapad in front of Tor. He commented, "There's something you might find interesting here."

Tor looked at the datapad, then he shrugged and said, "What's this?"

Polmankelest said, "Look at the time and date."

Tor gazed at it and then looked perplexed, "But this doesn't make any sense. I mean we would have seen this earlier."

Polmankelest frowned, "According to my records the name's always been there, but someone omitted to mention it. Didn't you Sweety?"

Broden commented, "What are you talking about? Here give that to me." Tor handed the datapad across to him and he studied it closely before commenting carefully, "But this is ridiculous. You can't possibly believe this."

Polmankelest replied, "The fact that Mr. Grall here appears to have been on each of the stations at around the time period we believe the victims were, for want of a better word, attacked is pure chance."

Tor gave a bitter laugh, "Well that will be easy to disprove, the only times I've not had people with me is when I've been asleep. Otherwise ThaStornla and a host of others will be able to vouch for my whereabouts."

Polmankelest responded, "I have no doubt about that."

Broden sensed a slightly cynical undertone in the Paranids voice, "If you think he murdered them then why don't you just say it?"

Polmankelest gave a sigh, "Personally I don't think Tor would send messages to himself."

Tor commented, "Would I be right in thinking we're nowhere nearer to catching this guy?"

Polmankelest responded, "He's sending us in every direction and the killing is indiscriminate. I might even say opportunistic in that he's hoping you'll be one of the victims."

Broden commented, "This guy doesn't fit what I would call the normal profile of an assassin. This is more like terrorism than assassination."

Polmankelest nodded in agreement, "That's exactly what this is and it's reducing the number of trained security personnel on all attacked stations. This will give him a greater ability for moving around unchallenged."

Tor commented, "But it's such a senseless waste of life."

Broden said bitterly, "This type of person didn't take the job because he cares about people." Broden looked at Polmankelest and asked, "So could it be one of your crowd that's doing this?"

The big Paranid gave Broden a long hard stare before saying slowly, "Although we do not get on so well with you lesser beings. That does not make us all homicidal killers."

Broden commented, "I was just trying to see if we could narrow the list down."

Tor interjected, "Whilst you both discuss the finer points of race relations and build a team spirit, what about Daraman and Helass?"

Polmankelest responded, "So far our assassin has used poisoned gas and explosives. What else he has to show us isn't certain. We should also assume that only Helass hasn't been attacked."

ThaStornla growled quietly, "Might I suggest that this Helass is relocated to my homeworld." The three looked at him as they considered the suggestion. ThaStornla added, "It would make certain that she is safe."

Tor said slowly, "And at the same time she may be of some help to us if she stays."

Broden countered, "Only if she can identify this guy."

Looking across Tor said, "Well whilst you guys decide if there's any point seeing if Daraman is still alive, I'll go talk to the girl."

Sweety announced, "Tor we have a message that the Mohrabas supply ship has arrived."

Broden said, "Sweety can you deal with it?"

ThaStornla growled, "I will assist."

Security chief Plinton Tredrow on the Computer Plant felt nervous, his palms were damp with sweat and beads of perspiration lined his forehead. Being well aware of the nature of the attacks on the Chip Plant and the Cahoon Bakery did little to ease his mind. Two different methods used which implied that the assassin could have employed a third technique to cause devastation.

Precautions were already in place, the area had been cleared of visitors and the blast doors closed. The air recirculation system had been isolated in case of biological agents and medical units were on full alert. Once again station maintenance units combed the electrical systems for hidden devices.

Once again the pattern disruptor prevented extraction of the individual. Unlike the incident on the Bakery he had kept all his people away from the room and on the safe side of the blast doors. Still he felt uncomfortable as a floor panel lifted giving access for a search and recover robot to gain access to the room.

As the unit moved slowly across the floor it scanned for trip wires, light beams and anything else that could be part of a trigger mechanism. Plinton had the robot hold position and its camera zoomed in on the motionless figure lying in the bed. He watched for sometime and felt a growing sense of unease and discomfort knowing something was not right but unable to put his finger on what was bothering him.

He glanced across to the scanner readings which showed a strong and steady pulse. Ordering the rover forward again it located the disruptor and as before the unit had been jammed into position. With added caution several scanner sweeps were made around the unit for anything unusual.

The report came back negative. Using a cutting lance a section of the bed was sliced away to allow easy extraction of the unit. The control panel flipped open without incident and Plinton breathed a heavy sigh of relief. He then gave the order for the rover to deactivate the unit.

Chapter 9: Sleepless

With a mechanical finger the switch was depressed and released. In the command centre there was a collective holding of breath in anticipation of something dramatic taking place. Daramans life signs vanished in an instant but there was no explosion, gas alert or anything else to indicate why this sudden change happened.

Several Sezura slipped by and gradually the room seemed to breath out. Plinton had watched the displays anxiously and it dawned on him what had given rise to his initial concern. The unmoving figure had not flinched even at the end, but then again there had been no sign of breathing to start with. He ordered the robot to draw back the covers. With a small gathering of curious onlookers behind him the robot gripped the sheets and pulled them away.

Plinton grimaced and there were a few sharp intakes of breath. The pale grey of the skin, wide, staring lifeless eyes stared back at the camera and the mouth open with the swollen and black, tongue protruding slightly.

A comment came from behind him, "That guy's been dead for a while, so how come we didn't know about it until now?"

Plinton thought for a brief moment as he surveyed the monitor technical readouts, "We just switched off the pulse replicator. However the pattern disruptor appears to still be functioning."

The question came back, "But isn't the rover holding the disruptor?"

Plinton replied, "Yes, it is." But did not express his growing concerns. Speaking out loud he added, "Someone call Commander Broden and tell him his trooper is dead. Otherwise we have nothing else to report."

The command centre mingled around and looked perplexed at Plintons apparent refusal to do anything except watch the monitors and order the rover to perform scans of the body and its surroundings. Many Mizuras slipped by before he signaled for the door to open. Once this had happened he resumed studying the technical readouts for some time and then appeared to relax happy that there was no immediate danger.

With a deep breath he said, "Okay, open the blast doors and get a team in there to dust for clues. No one's to move the body. It's to be left until we can get a transporter lock."

The blast doors separated and the team of six moved into the room. Plinton watched the monitors as they began to set to work. The rover placed the disruptor into a signal containment bag.

The command centre computer announced, "Blast doors closing. Section decompression in ten Sezura."

From the monitors this message had not been relayed. Plinton commanded, "Get the team out of there."

The computer responded, "Transporter grid off line. Unable to comply. Decompression in five Sezura, four, three, two, one."

Plinton closed his eyes. The quivering voice of one of the crew said, "My god."

Alaisha was in charge of the Silicon Mine Command Centre when Tor stopped by to ask where he could find Helass. She gave him directions towards the computer suite, for Tor this was the first time he had visited this particular room and he reflected that there was still much of the station that he had not explored.

As he entered the suite he noted that there were two other programmers, both of which glanced around and then went back to watching the film they had recovered from one of the other stations archives.

Helass was running one of the security protocol programs and after a short while she tapped in a few instructions on her datapad. With a considered look she read examined the results and with a quick cross reference there was a flurry of keystrokes. One of the programmers called out, "Okay Helass, you win. Now would you mind putting the film back on?"

A few key strokes later and she turned around to say something but stopped when she saw Tor standing in the room. After the initial shock she asked, "Can we do something for you?"

Tor replied, "Yeah, I'd like to talk to you in private."

The two watching the film looked around sharply with a sudden keen interest. Helass hesitated and then gave a nervous nod. They returned to his now vacant office and he gestured to the leather sofa and said casually, "Take a seat. Care for a drink?"

Helass shook her head, "It's a bit early for me."

Tor poured a couple of glasses of spacefuel anyway. He struggled in his own mind how he was going to break the news on the fate of the others. He said, "We have a problem."

Helass responded quickly, "What have I done wrong?"

Tor gave a half hearted smile and said slowly, "Wrong, no, you've done nothing wrong. Both Liann and Sweety are very happy with the work you've been doing." He took a sip of his drink, "I'm sorry to say this is a different problem."

Helass said cautiously, "You're going back on your promise?"

With a deep sigh and a look of concern Tor shook his head and commented, "You're in a lot more danger than you think. In fact we both are."

Helass asked slowly, "What do you mean?"

Looking straight into her eyes Tor said, "Someone wants both of us dead. We believe one of Ferans hired assassins is stuck in this sector with us."

Helass commented, "Surely that's bad news for you not me."

Tor shook his head again and replied, "Unfortunately he's already killed your three companions. By virtue of the fact this station doesn't allow visitors, he hasn't yet made an attempt on your life."

There was a long silence and Tor put the glass on the table in front of her. Eventually she asked, "But I'm safe here right?"

Tor sat down and said, "I don't know. This guy has successfully managed to move between stations and left practically no trace that we can follow. One thing's for certain he'll try and find a way to get on board."

She said quietly whilst picking up the drink, "You will be able to stop him though?"

Tor replied, "Maybe, but in fifteen Mohrabas days I have to get on board one of their ships and return to the homeworld. Preferably, from my standpoint, with the assassin."

With a look of concern Helass asked, "But you will be coming back?"

He shook his head slowly, "Not if we haven't caught this guy."

She weighed up the implications of how her future might look under these circumstances and she had to admit it was very bleak. She would have to rely on others to keep Tors' promise and that to her mind did not seem likely. She asked slowly, "Is there anything I can do?"

Tor gave a brief smile and commented, "We can assume that the assassin must have recognised one of you, and I know it's a long shot, but maybe you might recognise him."

She looked perplexed and asked cautiously, "And how are you expecting me to do that?"

Tor could tell what she was thinking and answered, "Sweety will be able to get images of everyone on the stations. All we need you to do is scan through them."

Helass gave a slow nod, "Okay, I can give it a try."

Tor gave an encouraging smile and responded, "Thanks." He paused and then commented, "There is another option open. Our Mohrabas friend has suggested that to ensure you're absolutely safe you can take the transport back to the homeworld. I can guarantee our assassin won't be able to hide himself and blend in down there."

Helass thought for a second and asked, "Is there any chance I can review the pictures from there and give you a response."

Tor asked out loud, "Sweety is that possible?"

Sweety replied, "That can be arranged. Tor did anyone mention to you that several Mohrabas warships, battlecruisers and carriers have just left orbit of the planet?"

Tor said cautiously, "No why?"

Sweety said casually, "Oh. Well it looks like there are some people coming to see you."

Tor asked, "Anyone in particular?"

Sweety replied, "Chief Councillor ThiRioth."

Tor asked slowly, "And what did you mean by several warships?"

Sweety responded, "I have fifteen warships, ten battlecruisers and two carrier grade ships currently on route."

With a perplexed look he asked, "I wonder what he wants?"

Sweety commented glibly, "Maybe he's coming to lend you a hand."

Tor said, "Sweety, I'd rather not have to think about his hands. If you were to compare my stature to ThaStornla, then that's how ThaStornla looks compared to ThiRioth. And if anything happens to him then you will be able to measure all our life spans in Sezura."

Tor glanced at Helass who looked slightly confused. He commented, "You've not met one of the Mohrabas yet have you?"

Helass shook her head and asked, "Do I want to?"

Tor replied, "Oh yes, but don't get the sudden urge to scratch him behind the ear, or anything daft like that." He smiled but this just met with an even more confused look. Tor let the comment slip by without further elaboration.

Ghaan had spent some time in his quarters on the Chip Plant contemplating. He had not found the last of the troopers on the Solar Power Plant and this perplexed him. The Paranid dominated the station and that meant he could not keep making return visits. As it was he had already made two trips and that was one more than he cared for. The risk was too great as the Paranid had an uncanny eye to recognise faces even through a disguise.

He assumed this was why a Paranid had been put in charge. The only reason, he concluded, that he could not find the girl was because she was not there. His jaw tightened at the thought that at the last she might have lied to him. But that faded to a cruel smile at the memories of what he had done anyway.

Ghaan reflected that it could be entirely possible that Tor may have inadvertently outsmarted the troopers. Maybe he had held one back, perhaps the girl had somehow reached some agreement with him. He stroked his chin as he thought, 'In which case nothing he did to her would be,' He tasted the word, 'Inappropriate.'

However he needed to somehow prove this theory. It now seemed unfortunate that the three he had managed to locate were now dead. Daraman had shown true Bloodheart spirit in the fact that he had fought to the last. Reflecting back he thought the young man may have been of use in showing where they had taken the girl, but that was now the benefit of hindsight. He had done what he needed to do at the time and that was what mattered.

He closed his eyes and drew a mental picture of the girl.

Another day passed and Tor, ever conscious of the time, marched to the command centre and demanded an update. With nothing new to report he stomped back to his office. The Mohrabas fleet arrived and dispersed amongst the stations.

It was ThaStornla and not Tor that was summoned to the fleet command ship. A small group of the battlecruisers and warships headed towards the asteroid field. What was most disconcerting to Tor was the lack of news. Whether everyone was too afraid to speak to him or simply had nothing to report he was not certain, however he had the growing feeling that in his current mood the former reason was closer to the truth.

The only positive news that reached his ears was both the Cattle Ranch and Crystal Fab were now fully functioning. The reallocation of Energy Cells, extracted proteins from the Meatsteaks and a shift of Silicon to the Crystal Fab was a good indicator that the first run of Crystals was about to commence under the watchful eyes of the Paranid technical consultants.

After a second day ThaStornla had returned from his meeting with ThiRioth. Tor wondered why it had taken so long but the message came back that ThiRioth expected Tor to show him around ThaThwyns station. Tor was perplexed but was put at ease by Broden that if they made any significant discovery that he would be informed immediately.

When doing the guided tour of the Mohrabas station, Tor felt distinctly out of place as a crowd of Mohrabas dignitaries followed behind. Their low growls and purrs, which although on one hand were comforting and quite soothing to listen to also stirred a deeper primeval instinct of the predator versus prey giving him a desire to run and hide.

Once again the sense library drew the greatest amount of attention and Tor was convinced that he left half of the group behind whilst they made their way up to the command centre. Tor omitted to mention the meeting with the ancient when he talked about the research work that had been going on in the station. Yet he did mention that they had used the agricultural area for the growing of Delexian Wheat to act as both animal feed whilst the Cattle Ranch established itself and for their own consumption.

Not once did ThiRioth enquire about the search for the assassin. Tor could only assume that ThaStornla had given an update. As he left the station with ThaStornla the station seemed to have become alive. Two Mohrabas warships and a host of transports from the carriers lined the docking bay. Equipment and provisions were being unloaded and although many centuries late the Mohrabas had finally arrived and were making themselves at home.

The days drifted past with practically no new news. Helass with the agreement of ThiRioth had been relocated to the prime carrier and was still scanning through the station records of listed occupants but was struggling to pick out any one individual.

Tor became ever more anxious to the point of having sleepless nights. He had started pestering and expressing dissatisfaction with progress on a nightly basis to the command crew. This particular night, during another fitful sleep he had risen and marched to the command centre and was surprised to find Liann on duty. She appeared to be waiting and for a moment he hesitated.

She fixed him with a hard stare, "I guess you can't sleep either!" With a deep sigh she added, "Broden's making a hot Cha. If you're quick you can get him to add a cup."

Tor shook his head, "I'll be okay."

Liann commented, "So have you come to give the night shift another hard time?"

Tor strolled over and sat down, he looked and felt tired. He said gently, "Not tonight."

Liann gave a sympathetic smile and said comfortingly, "We will get him."

He nodded slowly and sighed, "I'm sure you will, but I'm running out of time and fast. All our leads just went cold and I don't understand why."

The sweet smell of freshly made Garrow Root Cha permeated the room and signaled Broden's arrival. He said as he offered a mug to Liann, "That's because we're dealing with one cunning bastard."

Tor commented, "So is the only way we're going to catch this guy being me standing in the middle of one of the stations shouting here I am, come kill me?"

Broden did not smile but replied with a considered look, "Well it might work."

Liann commented thoughtfully, "Perhaps there is some merit in the idea."

Broden gave her a questioning look whilst Tor said, "I didn't realise you both wanted to get rid of me so desperately?"

Broden asked, "What's this idea of yours?"

Liann said, "The last killing required the assassin to introduce an elaborate instruction set into the stations computer system. Now to do that he must have hacked in from somewhere and overcome the security protocols."

Tor thought for a second and asked, "Is it possible to do that from a remote link?"

Liann replied, "Technically it shouldn't be. The security walls for a remote link are extremely complex and an infringement is easy to isolate and trace back, but having said that it is possible. Sweety is an expert at doing it, but Sweety is also unique in her abilities and understanding at the system level."

Sweety commented, "Thanks, it is good to be given proper recognition from time to time."

Tor asked, "What about Helass has she been taught how to hack in?"

Liann looked thoughtful before answering, "She has enough skill and talent to get through many of the security gates but not all the ones protecting this station. Beside with Sweety hooked in and monitoring, any attempt to introduce new code will be detected as it happens."

Sweety commented happily, "Keep the accolades coming I am beginning to get a nice warm glow in my circuits."

Tor muttered, "Not too warm I hope. Hate to see you have a melt down, particularly at this time." He looked at Liann and asked, "So what are you proposing?"

She answered, "We have to bait him into trying to hack into our computers."

Tor commented, "And then we can trace him. So far so good, but how do we get him to try?"

Broden said thoughtfully, "We put in a rush bulk order for station computer core equipment, specific to this plant. Then on the back of this we initiate a rumour."

Liann responded, "Along the lines of a major breakdown in the computer core."

Tor held up his hand, "And how likely is that?"

Sweety chipped in, "The details need to involve trying to bind into the Mohrabas system with the unfortunate consequence of triggering one of their defence protocols, which in turn corrupted the core controller. This type of detail will help to give credence to the rumour."

Tor said, "I feel a plan is coming together but how long will it take."

Liann replied, "I can get the request made in just a few Mizura but we need to make it look genuine. Which means removing the comms relay from the core controller and that will take a Stazura."

Tor gave this some thought, and then said, "Okay I see that we've got systems on order and a rumour which can be verified. So why will this guy try to hack into the computers?"

Broden replied, "He can't, not until we get the new ones."

Tor responded, "Okay, now you've lost me."

Liann took a deep breath, "The new computers will have to be reprogrammed with all the security protocols after installation. Until that point they're vulnerable to hacking. Now there's two parts to this. During manufacture and test it's quite feasible for someone to introduce a back door program which would be hard encoded onto the system. Now this program wouldn't be overwritten by any new security protocols thrown on top. So whoever knows this can break in at will and once the system is up and running it's an easy job for them to get access and take control of the station."

Broden added, "A perfect opportunity for any assassin."

Tor looked across, "Wouldn't that be just too perfect, almost too convenient?"

Sweety commented, "That could be true if the Silicon Mine is chosen. I calculate a greater chance of success if we use the Crystal Fabrication Plant as the target station."

Broden considered this, "Makes sense, the station is key to our ongoing survival but less so than the Cattle Ranch. It becomes just a potential opportunity rather than an all too convenient one."

Tor said, "You think he'll assume I'll go visit the place?"

Broden answered, "It's your station, sure you'll go and visit. It's just a case of when and that's why it's less obvious."

Tor asked, "Then what?"

Sweety replied, "As soon as he gets onto the system I can trace where he is."

Broden added, "Sweety tells us, and we'll have security all over him before he knows we're there."

Tor commented, "It's a pity we didn't think of this sooner. Okay, do what you need to do."

Polmankelest had made a small amount of progress at the Solar Power Plant. He had begun to collate the information to hand and was drawing to the conclusion that the assassin was based on the Chip Plant.

This he had to admit was more of a gut feel than backed by hard evidence. Daraman was recorded as being dead the longest, there had been evidence of a struggle but nothing to DNA match. He could only assume that the assassin had not initially intended to kill Daraman but use him as live bait. Even so the assassin had the forethought to have been prepared for the eventuality.

Other evidence lurked in the various station computer records about the movement of individuals and the related disconnects. He had spent some time mapping out who supposedly went where, when and which transport were in transit at that time.

The names he crossed off the map were all those that verified they had made the journey. Sitting at the former station commanders desk he studied the list of names on the terminal. He had cut it back to all the individuals that had never been recorded leaving the Chip Plant and then separating out the known work force to refugees.

Even so he was cautious not to discard the station crew list, as the assassin had shown some ability to modify data records and could have altered the personnel records to include his name.

Tor sat staring at the terminal on his desk, but he was too lost in thought to register the information being displayed. The question that he had asked of himself now perplexed him.

He had been set a task to find an assassin and he was struggling to see where he had really made any personal effort in the hunt. With the potential of death staring at him from both sides he did not feel as though he was walking the razors edge but standing still whilst trying to keep balance.

Some voice inside questioned the competence of Polmankelest and Broden in leading the search. The fact they still did not know who had committed the crime appeared to reflect this sentiment. Tor quickly admonished himself for having considered this and he said quietly to the room in general, "They're doing the best they can."

Tor glanced at the private bar its shelves were almost bare with just two bottles of whisky left. Then he focused on his time piece and calculated that he had not slept properly for the last three Tazuras. Remaining seated his eyes wandered around the office and came to rest on the hellfire chain gun sat on its pedestal.

The weapon of the enemy that was a trophy and a symbol of the victory against the Bloodheart clan. The same organisation whose leader had sent an assassin to take vengeance for the defeat and somehow Tor felt that, as he sheltered safe and sound in his fortress, the blood of the murdered troopers and dead security guards was as much on his hands as the assassins.

In his mind Tor realised that unless he stepped up to the line and embraced the task in front of him then one way or another Feran was going to win. This was a personal battle and the assassin was just another piece on the chess board playing against him, but Tor was not coordinating his own side of the board as he should be.

In slow deliberate tones Tor said, "Sweetie, give me all the data."

Sweetie responded softly, "And what data would that be?"

Tor replied, "Everything that could be related to the assassin."

The terminal flickered and a file structure presented itself. Tor glanced at the monitor only briefly and commanded, "Put it all on the wall monitors."

He glanced at the mass of data and thought for a moment, "Let's start with the data on the Troopers."

Three images of each trooper from when they were alive appeared with a description of time of discovery and time and nature of death. Included in the times was an additional projected time of when Wilasma and Zeelanamoula had first been administered poison.

From the time frames it appeared that Daraman had been the first to be attacked. However there was little left of Wilasma after the explosion to give an accurate time. It had been extrapolated from analysed remains and this perplexed Tor.

Tor said, "Sweetie, show me the station movements of all persons that are unverified or unresolved."

The map of all stations appeared, and in a rapid blaze of colours the map became a loom of lines. Tor asked, "Identify any chains of sequential misfits."

Sweetie replied, "No chains identified."

Tor thought for a moment and commented, "The assassin could have adjusted the records, is there any chance you can cross reference bookings and travel time?"

Sweetie commented, "Tor, although booking a seat is advised it's not a requirement."

Tor said sharply, "Show me all the unbooked travel."

The screen cleared and the matrix of lines reappeared, however there were considerably less of them.

Tor asked, "Given that our assassin may have adjusted the travel times recorded, show any travel which could have passed through all stations."

Sweetie replied, "Multiple loops exist. May I suggest that if the time between any journey that is less than one Stazura then the time will be ignored."

Tor gave this consideration and replied, "Does it give me a loop?"

After a short pause Sweety replied, "One."

Tor said, "Show it to me."

The lines flashed up and Tor spent a few moments examining them. After a while he said, "Play them through individually."

Sweety played the loop as the items appeared in the original log. At the end of the display Tor appeared to be perplexed and he asked speculatively, "Why would someone go to the Chip Plant three times and the Computer Plant twice?"

Sweety did not respond and Tor asked cautiously, "Remove the first and the last transfer." The loop that came back neatly went from one station to the next. Tor said, "Okay now show me the names."

Sweety replied, "I do not think you are going to like this."

Tor had a sinking feeling that he knew what name was going to appear. He said, "Just show me." Sure enough his name appeared beside each trip.

With a frown Tor commented, "Okay, show me all of them again." The screen changed. Tor thought for a while and said directly, "Let's see if we can make some sense of this. There are three trips to the Chip plant, so let us suppose that two of those are the first and last trip."

Sweety placed two images of the station one at each end of the screen. Tor said, "Now after the Chip plant put in all those trips I'm supposed to have made in order."

Sweety projected the images chip plant - chip plant - Cahoon bakery - solar power plant - computer plant - chip plant. Tor looked at it closely and noticed there was a visit to the computer plant missing. This perplexed him as much as having two visits to the chip plant next to each other.

Tor said, "Place the icon for the computer plant between the front two chip plants." Tor felt as though he may be manipulating the data to show him what he wanted to see and yet he felt there was still something wrong with the order. The images of the factories refreshed, chip - computer - chip - Cahoon - solar - computer - chip.

Tor asked, "Why do you think he would have returned to the Chip Plant so soon after leaving?"

Sweety replied, "Unfinished business or to retrieve more killing devices perhaps."

Tor looked at the line of stations, "Maybe, now if we took out the first two visits as spurious and designed to throw us off the scent then that would still leave a nice loop and lead us to believe the assassin is based on the chip plant."

Sweety responded, "But I can tell from your voice that you doubt that conclusion."

Tor said, "Well it's interesting to note that if you take away the first and last trip then it's the computer plant that becomes the start and end point of the loop."

Sweety replied, "That would make Wilasma the first target."

Tors jaw clenched tight at the memory and he said quietly, "Which explains why he used explosives. A violent and destructive end just so that he could cover up the fact she was the first he found."

Sweety replied carefully, "There is good logic to your reasoning, but now we need an approach to prove your theory."

With a sigh Tor asked, "So what do you suggest?"

Sweety replied, "In order to make the assassin expose himself we should use Broden and Lianns' plan."

Tor said, "I was hoping we'd do that anyway, but we need a backup plan just in case."

Sweety commented, "I take it you do not feel as though the trap will work."

With a sigh Tor replied, "I just think that with the amount of effort this guy has put in to not being caught, he's going to give himself an escape route. I'm still curious as to why he's trying to frame me."

Sweety responded, "Under normal circumstances if the assassin is caught then he would get a fair trial and all the evidence against him would have to be presented. The evidence we have is circumstantial at best. Especially as we cannot prove one way or another that he tampered with the computer records. We also assume that he used a false name and traveled under another persons' identity. Yet from the records it is your name logged against the travel."

Tor said harshly, "He assumes he's going to get a fair trial."

Sweety responded, "Well according to my archives that is what is supposed to happen."

As Tor considered this he let his mind drift and wondered if Caran Belign would have given the assassin a fair trial. The memory of Caran suggesting that he could be a Secret Service agent sprung to mind. He gave a wry smile and muttered, "I could have done with the training."

Sweety commented, "You are talking to yourself again."

Tor said, "I was just thinking of when Caran Belign offered me a job as an agent."

Sweety replied, "You would have had to turn me in as well as Nyeshta. You would also have had to shut the Colossus bar on the Bakery. Would you have done that Tor?" There was a subtle click on the comm.

Tor smiled, "Of course Sweety, you know me. Anything for a quiet life." There was a distinct frosty silence that filled the room and cold air blasted out of the ventilation units. Tor said slowly, "It was a joke Sweety!"

Within a short while the air had a distinct chill. Tor felt cold but showed no intent of moving, eventually he said, "Okay Sweety, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it and would you, with a pretty please, turn the heating up."

The coolers went off line but the air temperature remained cold. This time Tor heard the comm click and Sweety said, "System security breach closed. Code trace activated." A warm blast from the heaters quickly returned the room to normal temperature.

Tor asked, "So it wasn't you playing around with the heating then?"

Sweety replied, "No. Our assassin friend found a subsystem access point through the comms interface."

A shiver ran down Tors' spine but not because of the temperature, and he said quietly, "I thought I'm supposed to be safe here. That all the security holes had been blocked."

Outside there was a pounding of boots which stopped just outside his door and Broden entered the office. Although he had been running the former captain did not appear to be unduly out of breath. Looking at Tor he said, "Are you okay?"

Tor nodded and said calmly, "Just about." Somehow he just felt too tired to start shouting.

Broden asked, "Sweety what happened?"

Sweety responded, "A security breach via one of the subsystems."

Broden demanded, "How the hell did he get past the security protocols?"

There was a distinct pause before Sweety replied, "The virus coding was piggybacked on a freighter comm that has just docked."

Broden asked, "And the virus?"

Sweety responded, "Has been purged from the system."

Broden looked deeply perplexed, "Sweety the Chip Plant incident was that a virus attack or comm initiated."

Sweety replied, "Checking." There was a long silence as Tor watched Broden pace the floor expectantly. Sweety came back and said, "The Chip Plant incident was a virus coded attack."

Tor looked at Broden and asked, "And this means what exactly?"

Broden looked across, "Our assassin is a cut and paste virus programmer, amongst other things. Only these computer viruses are detrimental to peoples health rather than corrupting code." Broden frowned, "It also means the assassin doesn't have to be actively connected to the system to make things happen."

Tor said, "And that means the computer scam isn't going to work."

Broden said bitterly, "Exactly."

Sweety gave a more cautious reply, "The plan can still work. I calculate that there is a high probability the assassin will still use the opportunity to introduce a security hole in the system at the build stage. Particularly now that this latest attempt to kill Tor has failed."

With a slow nod Broden said, "If you believe it's okay then we'll press on with the plan."

Sweety added, "There is just one thing though."

Tor asked, "What's that?"

Sweety replied, "I will need to be hooked into the computer plant manufacturing systems directly."

Broden said, "Okay I'll get it arranged."

Tor asked, "Anything else?"

Sweety replied, "Just one thing Tor. What was the reply to my question?"

Broden gave him a curious look as Tor contemplated the result of his previous answer, and said, "No I wouldn't Sweety."

As Broden started to leave he stopped for a moment and commented, "I spoke to Polmanckelest a short while ago. He believes the assassin is working from the Chip Plant. He's planning on a complete search of the station but is meeting with some resistance from the most senior managers on board. They're demanding to see the evidence first."

Tor knew what the evidence held and shook his head slowly, "That's not good for two reasons. Firstly my name is just about everywhere and secondly I believe the assassin is on the Computer Plant."

With a long considered pause Broden asked slowly, "And how did you come to that conclusion?"

Tor took a while to explain whilst Sweety projected the images and went over the thought processes. At the end Broden sat back and commented, "Have you ever thought about becoming an agent?"

Tor gave a brief shake of his head whilst replying, "Someone else asked me that and I said 'No' last time. Nothing has convinced me to change my mind."

Broden smiled, "Anyway it all makes a lot of sense but we can't rule out the Chip Plant quite yet."

Tor said frankly, "If we start showing everyone the evidence then that could make things more complicated. And you may have noticed we're running out of time. Eight Mohrabas days to go in fact."

Broden commented, "That might be a risk we have to take. I'm pretty sure Polmankelest has reported back to Captain Sheero on the Roamer about the details, and we can only gauge by his silence that he's willing not to leap to an immediate conclusion."

In the days that had passed Tor had almost forgotten about Sheero, what power and influence he had in the sector was debatable. Parrel had been a commanding authority in the sector and a clear leader, even if he showed no direct interest in the position, but now with the exception of the facilities Tor owned all the other stations and the Roamer were now under the command of their first officers.

He could only assume that the presence of the Mohrabas and an uncertain future stifled any open power struggle. Yet the officers of Chip Plant requesting to see the evidence could so very easily be the signs of the first challenge. Tor said, "Tell Polmankelest to refuse."

Broden asked, "If the assassin is on the Computer Plant wouldn't he feel safer knowing we're looking in the wrong place?"

Tor shook his head and replied, "On the contrary, if we search one station and find nothing then it's almost certain that we'll search the next and so on. It's better to be refused permission then he'll then think we have something that we don't want people to see. He'll feel safer where he is."

Sweety commented, "I think this lack of sleep has sharpened your mind."

Broden added, "And yes, we do have evidence that we don't want people to see. Besides we don't actually have a name or description of the person we're looking for."

Tor looked thoughtful, "Sweety, can you provide us with an image of the people the assassin posed as when travelling."

Sweety asked, "Do you want me to include your face?"

Tor answered, "I'd hate to think he looked anything like me but you might as well as I'm prime suspect."

Chapter 10: Prisoner

ThaStornla entered the room having only recently stirred from sleep as Sweety began to retrieve the pictures of each individual that had been impersonated by the assassin.

Liann also appeared guiding a hover tray with various breakfast foods as well as hot and cold drinks. She commented, "I thought you boys might need some refreshment."

Broden glanced at his time piece and said, "I guess this is good morning then."

Liann smiled, "It certainly is and my shift has just started."

The Mohrabas examined the tray and absently helped himself to much of the contents and then started studying the screen he growled, "Are these the suspects?" He sat down next to Tor.

Tor had studied the screen continuously not taking much notice he gave a brief sideways glance reached out and took a snack from ThaStornlas plate absent mindedly whilst commenting, "I hope not, because my face is up there." ThaStornla gave a warning growl as Tor started to reach out for a second snack.

Tor glanced across with a hint of surprise and asked, "What?"

ThaStornla growled, "The unselected food is behind you."

With a slight grin Tor commented, "I guess your people don't go in for share and share alike?"

ThaStornla looked puzzled, he had heard many expressions and witnessed many cultural differences and was coming to terms with them however unorthodox they appeared. Taking food from another persons plate however was frowned upon and considered by many of the Mohrabas as the worst insult and showed a complete lack of respect. The culture did have a master, subordinate relationship where the master had first choice from the dishes but the master would never take food from another or vice versa. He growled, "No, but we consider taking food from someone else's plate as highly insulting."

Tor frowned, "I didn't realise, and I apologise. There was no insult intended."

ThaStornla purred in a kinder tone, "There are many differences between our races, should we find the time I will educate you in our ways."

Tor nodded and responded, "And I will enlighten you in ours."

Broden moved the hover tray so that it was in front of and in easy reaching distance of Tor. Sweety said cheerfully, "Now that you have averted a major conflict between races, is there anything you want to do with the images?"

Tor picked up a snack and said, "Our objective here is to see if there are any facial and build similarities between these people."

ThaStornla looked carefully at each one and Broden sighed saying, "Well other than you, each one appears to have at least one distinguishing facial mark, whether it's a slightly crooked nose, a scar or a mole."

ThaStornla shook his head, "They are all different in complexion, but the bone structure of the face is reasonably similar."

Tor looked closely and considered both observations and said slowly, "Okay, we can take it this assassin is good with disguises, but most people only quickly glance at someone and the one thing they'd remember about that person is the distinguishing feature."

Broden added, "So if anyone was asked to identify the assassin from a line up they'd pick out one of these poor sods. But you've not got any major facial disfigurements so unless he's your twin then he'd have a job to disguise himself as you."

Sweety said encouragingly, "Not yet at least."

Tor sighed, "Can we not mention facial disfigurement. I have difficulty trying not to think about it and reminders just don't help."

Broden asked, "So where do you want to go from here?"

Tor commented, "I'll go and visit the Computer Plant on the pretext of negotiating the new systems for the Crystal Fab. ThaStornla I could use your company. A keen sense of smell and acute hearing could be invaluable if anything happens when I'm over there. Sweety I'll be taking you along so we can link you into the manufacturing facility."

Broden frowned and said, "I don't like that suggestion and you know why. But still you insist on making yourself an easy target."

Tor nodded and said calmly, "Your objection is understood, however the assassin has already found a weakness in our defence and tried to freeze me to death in my own office. He's attacking me from a distance and it's time to take the fight back to him. Anyway he's taken some effort to make me look like the killer, I doubt that he's going to spoil the illusion with an open attack."

Sweety added, "And without me here he would have succeeded. Which will potentially make Tor even more vulnerable should another virus make it onto the system whilst I am away."

Broden sighed, "Okay, have it your own way. Now do you want Helass to continue looking at pictures?"

Tor thought for a moment, "Yes, but this time narrow the range down to those with similar facial features." He glanced over to the Mohrabas beside him and said, "In fact, ThaStornla can you arrange for us to visit her. We can stop there before going on to the Computer Plant."

Captain Sheero had moved the Roamer to the ghost city of the Mohrabas and avoided communicating with the new station commanders. Polmanckelest had briefed him with all the evidence they had managed to gather. He knew what the commanders were asking for but, based on the few Mohrabas days remaining to Tor, he refrained from answering their hails.

A Mohrabas destroyer patrolled nearby. It was without doubt monitoring them as they data scanned and obtained information on the construction and layout of the wrecked structure.

Research probes were gliding through the superstructure returning images and data as their powerful arc lamps illuminated the darkness within. The science crew sat back watching the data come in and every now and again issued a new instruction set with flight path to the probes.

The estimated volume of the station mapped out was a little under two percent. Sheero knew it would take several Wozura before they would have anything like a comprehensive map.

Helass stood up and stretched. Her room on the Mohrabas carrier was bordering on palatial compared to the quarters she was used to. However the environment was undisputedly alien to her. The Mohrabas crew appeared to be both courteous and polite. She had a feeling that she should be concerned that there was a permanent guard outside her door, however they appeared to be more concerned with helping her find her way around the ship than preventing her from leaving her quarters.

She was quickly aware the Mohrabas used multiple languages and some of the guards only spoke a small amount of the translated tongue. The terminal she used to scan the faces to see if she could recognise the assassin was located in her room. She knew she had been overdoing it as many of the faces were beginning to look the same and to her mind it made a welcome relief to see a Mohrabas face instead.

One of the things that the ship provided was a wide range of food and drinks and there was an abundance of it. This was a welcome change to the meatsteak and Delexian wheat based meals provided on the Silicon Mine.

Most meals were delivered but in the middle of her day she had made a point of escaping the confines of the room and visiting the catering deck. She was extremely impressed that all the food was prepared by hand rather than reconstituted. To her mind technology is all very useful as a labour saving tool but there were definitely some things like proper cooking which required a more personal touch and the Mohrabas chefs had considerable skill in this field. One thing that did slightly mystify her was the chefs were all very aware of what would suit her palette and several times prevented her from taking an interesting looking dish with the words, "No. Poison to you."

She was distracted from thought when the door to her room opened.

ThaStornla stepped into the room first, Tor followed and then the towering form of ThiRioth entered the room. Although this was ThiRioth's personal carrier ship this was the first time she had seen him and was daunted by his and ThaStornla's presence. In terms of the Mohrabas she had met these two were the tallest and most imposing of them all.

ThiRioth spoke first in a deep resonant purr, "So this is my young guest. It is a pleasure to meet you."

Not really knowing what was expected of her. Helass gave a bow of her head and responded, "I am honoured to be in your graces presence."

ThiRioth gave a gentle laugh and responded, "No lady the honour is mine. I hope the accommodation is to your liking?"

Helass kept her head slightly bowed and replied, "It is more than I could have hoped for, your grace."

ThaStornla interjected, "Your Excellency."

With a sharp intake of breath Helass said quickly, "I apologise your Excellency if I have used an improper title."

ThiRioth gave a gentle laugh and said, "There is no need to apologise child. It is our duty to protect you. Now Tor wishes to have a few words with you."

She fixed Tor with a slightly more intense look than he would normally have expected, and he gave her an encouraging smile before saying, "The first thing I should ask is if you've recognised anyone from the pictures."

Helass remained tense and replied, "Not yet."

Tor frowned briefly and then gave a half hearted smile. He said casually, "Perhaps I should do some introductions." Tor gave a sweeping gesture towards ThiRioth and said, "This is chief councillor, his

Excellency ThiRioth leader of the Mohrabas people." Tor turned towards ThaStornla and added, "And this is the Mohrabas emperors son, ThaStornla. By the way these two aren't related."

Helass gave a slight bow towards ThaStornla and said, "Your highness."

In that moment of subservience Tor froze for an instance as he recollected the events at breakfast. He moved forward slightly and then demonstrating a new found level of respectfulness gave a slight bow and said, "Your Excellency you are most welcome to stay and observe, however this may take a while."

ThiRioth growled something to ThaStornla who just gave a wry smile. There was an exchange of words between the two, none of which was translated. He then addressed Helass and purred, "I have pressing business to deal with and look forward to our next meeting." The door opened and ThiRioth departed.

ThaStornla looked for a seat and made himself comfortable. Tor spoke to Helass, "We've been refining the search so you don't have as many faces to concentrate on."

Helass sighed and replied, "That's nice."

Tor gave an encouraging smile, "If you don't recognise anyone after this lot then that's okay. We'll close this side of the investigation."

Helass asked, "And what happens to me?"

Tor glanced over to ThaStornla and said, "Well I guess that decision lies with our hosts here."

ThaStornla purred, "This ship will return home within the next two solar cycles as his Excellence needs to personally attend several up and coming council chamber gatherings. You will either transfer to another ship or travel to our world. The decision has not been made yet."

Polmankelest had travelled to the Silicon Mine to talk with Broden. As suggested, he had refused to share data with the new Chip Plant commander and now he was keen to find out what was really going on.

Broden was overseeing a routine maintenance exercise on the lower security deck. Polmankelest glanced at the imposing but inactive bulk of the sentinel he said, "Impressive."

Broden glanced across, "We're still sorting out the programming protocols before we reactivate it."

The big Paravid asked, "You think there might be a need?"

With a smile Broden replied, "I hope not. It took long enough to repair the place after the first attack."

Polmankelest nodded, "So I understand."

The Commander asked, "So you want to know what Tor's up to?" The Paravid gave a slow nod and Broden continued, "He believes the assassin is on the Computer Plant. He's not intentionally trying to flush him out but he's going to visit the place."

Polmankelest neither looked perplexed or surprised, "Sounds like he wants to take control of his own fate."

Broden said, "He's wanted to for a while and now time is running out fast. There's a certain desperation to the lad and I can't say I'm surprised. The assassin has done a damn good job of setting up all the evidence to say that Tor committed the crimes. The only redeeming fact is that Tor would have to have been omnipresent as his records show him being in two places at once."

With a sigh Polmanckelest said, "But the shadow of doubt is cast and that is enough."

Broden said, "Whatever happens there's no time for a trial. No time to unravel the web and see the truth."

Polmanckelest calmly commented, "So we run the risk of sending an innocent to their death."

Broden asked, "Do you think the Mohrabas will really punish Tor if we don't find the assassin in time?"

Polmanckelest replied, "I have no reason to doubt it." There was a brief silence before he continued, "So what will he be doing on the computer plant?"

Broden answered, "He'll be giving credibility to the rumour that we accidentally fried the computers on the Crystal Fab. Sweety will be hooked into the manufacturing computers and monitor for any tampering with the new systems."

Polmanckelest commented, "And you'll get a trace on the hacker and capture an image of him on the security cameras."

Broden replied, "That's about the sum of it." He quickly read through a maintenance update that flashed up on his datapad.

Polmanckelest asked, "And that's the whole plan?"

Having acknowledged and approved the report Broden replied, "Tor is still hoping that by some small chance Helass might have a revelation and spot our assassin from the mug shots on the computers. But I'm not holding my breath."

Tor had taken a seat and waited patiently as Helass had scanned over the images at least twice. Eventually she let out a sigh and turned to face him. Tor asked, "Anything."

She shook her head, "Not really, there are a few images which are slightly obscured so you can't get a really good look at the face but that's about it."

Tor frowned and responded, "Okay, thanks for trying. If you know which images are obscured I'll see if we can get some better ones."

Helass said apologetically, "I'm sorry there isn't more I can do to help."

Tor nodded and with an encouraging smile said, "When we get updated images take a look at them and shout if you recognise anyone."

Helass said, "I will."

Tor looked at ThaStornla and said, "Highness, we have an appointment on the Computer Plant."

ThaStornla gave a slight nod and rose gracefully from his seat. He addressed Helass as she stood up, "Enjoy your stay and I'm sure we will meet again soon."

Helass gave a slight bow of her head and responded, "I look forward to it, Highness."

Tor said, "Take care of yourself and see you again soon."

Helass smiled and replied, "You too."

The door opened as ThaStornla strode out of the room with Tor following close behind. He commented to Tor, "We should see his Excellency before we leave."

Tor asked, "About anything in particular?"

With an abrupt honesty ThaStornla growled gently, "You're not going to catch the assassin in time."

Tor knew this was likely to be true but whilst there was some hope of a breakthrough he had to pursue every avenue right up until the last Mizura. He replied, "It's not over till it's over."

ThiRiioth waved them in to his office but it was a few Mizura before he completed his holo projection conference call. ThaStornla said, "Excellency."

ThiRiioth gave a gesture of acknowledgement and growled, "What can I do for you?"

ThaStornla growled, "Time is running out Excellency and we appear to be getting no closer to the murderer of ThoBeight and his assistants."

ThiRiioth sat back his eyes were fixed on ThaStornla and growled gently, "I see."

Tor expected more but the emphasis appeared to be on ThaStornla to make the next comment. He wondered if he should say something however the way ThiRiioth studied ThaStornla he had the distinct impression that it was not his turn to speak.

ThaStornla growled, "We need more time or an innocent will die for the crime of another."

ThiRiioth considered this for a moment and then growled abruptly, "No! You know how long you have remaining."

Tor wondered if ThaStornla was going to argue the case but to his surprise he did not. However ThiRiioth did change language and spoke to ThaStornla so that Tor would not be able to understand. The Captain just listened and not once did he appear to try and speak. Yet Tor could tell that ThaStornla was not happy about the news.

Eventually he commented so that Tor could understand, "I think it would be of benefit to Tor to know why this deadline must be met." Tor frowned slightly at the use of the word 'deadline'.

For the first time ThiRiioth addressed Tor directly, "Something called politics gives me no choice but to enforce the time given is not exceeded. ThoBeight was extremely well respected and his son calls for justice every solar day. When I say justice it would be more appropriate to call it revenge. The council will abide by the time originally stated and will not voice an opinion until that time has expired, but their voice, when heard, may not be to the benefit of your people."

ThaStornla growled the name, "ThaGorack." With a degree of animosity that Tor had never heard before.

ThiRiioth responded in a softer tone, "You have a problem with this?"

ThaStornla once again slipped into the second language and Tor just gave a gentle shake of his head. However it was apparent that ThaStornla was expressing in no uncertain terms what he thought of ThoBeights son. ThiRiioth showed no sign of responding but was listening with an intensity which was almost unsettling to Tor.

ThaStornla concluded with a slight bow of the head and the word, "Excellency."

Tor was bracing himself for another untranslatable response however ThiRioth growled slowly, "Your concern is noted and understood. However when you deal with ThaGorack you will address him with mutual respect and he will do the same when addressing you. I have no time to deal with the feuding between you, but I will if you do not observe my wishes."

ThaStornla commented, "I will observe your wishes Excellency, but with respect to my previous comments, these are not just my concerns Excellency. There are others that feel the same."

ThiRioth gave an acknowledgement, "I am aware of that. Now you must excuse me, I have another appointment, as I believe, do you."

Both Tor and ThaStornla gave a slight bow and said, "Excellency." And left the office.

Tor refrained from asking about the comments ThaStornla had made until they reached the shuttle. With the Computer Plant targeted in the navigational computer and the vast bulk of ThiRioths' carrier behind them he asked, "So do you mind telling me about ThaGorack?"

It looked for a moment that ThaStornla had either not heard him or was ignoring the question. He turned his head and looked at Tor solemnly and responded, "It is not my wish that you should prejudge him before you have the opportunity to meet him." Tor waited for the, 'However' but it never materialised.

Tor mulled over in his mind that there was still a considerable amount he needed to find out about the Mohrabas and not just the courtesies. He also wondered if ThaGorack was a new emerging obstacle to them ultimately rebuilding the gate. Deep inside Tor knew that as the Mohrabas days drifted past they were getting closer to the Ancients deadline and he had not even broached the subject with ThaStornla let alone with ThiRioth.

Chalotta Hedrum had, by virtue of position, taken command of the Computer Plant. A slender woman in her mid forties, who was attempting to defy the signs of aging with skin creams and oils but had so far refrained from cosmetic surgery. This for the moment had succeeded but for only a few small wrinkles around the corners of her eyes that gave an indication of her true age. Her face was thin, almost pinched in appearance and it made her eyes look slightly too large in proportion to the rest of her face. In an attempt to conceal the appearance of grey hairs in her naturally auburn hair she had bleached it blond.

She had quickly adopted and reorganised the former Commanders office to suit her own, far simpler tastes. One thing she could not stand was a mess and that was exactly what she encountered when she first arrived in the office.

The new security chief Storrall stood patiently as she studied the datapad presented to her. With a thoughtful tone she asked, "And you're sure these are the records the virus was targeted to remove?"

Storrall was uncertain whether he should address Chalotta as 'Miss' or 'Commander' and opted for, "Yes, Miss."

Chalotta did not look up but quickly responded, "I'm not a teacher. Please address me as Commander."

Storrall quickly replied, "Sorry Commander."

She glanced up and said, "I assume the other stations show a similar record?"

Storrall answered, "I've contacted them and yes they do. But I thought I'd mention it as Mr. Grall is on his way here to discuss the procurement of new computers for the Crystal Fab."

Chalotta thought for a while, "Have a security team meet him in the docking bay. Then escort him to my office."

Storral responded, "Yes Commander."

Ghaan had watched with interest from the gallery as the Silicon Mine owned transport docked. He noted the presence of the security team and as Tor stepped out of the shuttle raised an eyebrow. He looked with interest at ThaStornla and considered any creature of that size would be an easy target for an assassin. After he ensured Tor came to a suitable demise he would see what information could be gathered on Mohrabas physiology and biological make up.

For the moment he would have to choose none species specific poisons just in case the need arises.

Resuming his reading of some archived history text of the legendary mercenary leader and rogue Max Force his mind strayed to the fact that Tor was here in person. He smiled as he reflected on his own brilliance in that he had masterfully crafted the deception and that Tor must believe that he, no the assassin, was on the Chip Plant.

He also reflected on the, apparently botched, virus attack which now alerted all the station commanders to the presence of certain records. Savoring the moment Ghaan gave a wry smile as he wondered what type of reception awaited Tor when he met the new Commander.

Tor had tried to break the ice with some light conversation between him and the Security guards. However they almost had an air of hostility about them even if somewhat polite.

ThaStornla said nothing but had taken a few moments to study all the guards before allowing them to escort him to the office. Not that any of the guards appeared to want to hurry them along.

It did not take long to reach the commanders office and Chalotta was sitting behind her desk and gave the appearance of someone studying a report in depth. Without looking round to greet the newcomers she said, "Take a seat Mr. Grall." There was an official tone about her voice that raised deeper concerns add to the fact that many of the security guards had filed into the room behind them.

ThaStornla gave the air a sniff. Chalotta commented absently, "If you need a tissue one can be provided." ThaStornla said nothing but turned and looked at the guards in a curiously menacing way to see how they would react. Several already had their hands on the regular issue stun batons but they were not charged up. He looked back at Chalotta who still appeared to be reading.

Tor did not sit down but said, "I'm here to order some computers."

Chalotta replied, "So I understand." Still holding the datapad she turned her head for the first time to look at the visitors. Slightly surprised to see ThaStornla in the room she quickly said, "Welcome to our factory. I only wish it could be under happier circumstance."

Tor asked quietly, "What do you mean?"

Chalotta remained seated and answered, "Certain evidence has been uncovered Mr. Grall following a failed attempt at a cover up. As the main authority on this station I am hereby placing you under arrest for murder."

Tor felt he should be shocked or at least surprised but was not. He gave a wry smile and said, "I know the evidence to which you refer and all I can say is you've been deceived."

Chalotta put down the datapad and like an unspoken signal Tor could hear the whine of the stun batons charging. She said, "You see Mr. Grall, if this was the only station that had these records then I might tend

to give you the benefit of doubt. But apparently all the other stations show that you were there at the estimated time of attack."

Tor continued with the wry smile but shook his head and looked at ThaStornla who was absently casting his eyes around the room. Tor said, "Before your security get carried away with those batons, may I introduce you to ThaStornla. He's the son of the Mohrabas Emperor and if any of your people should accidentally use a baton on him then there could be some serious trouble."

Chalotta looked at ThaStornla and said, "I am sorry that this will have spoilt your visit with us. But if you would allow us a few moments to deal with this unfortunate turn of events, I will be more than glad to show you our station. Perhaps we could then discuss any particular requirements your people may have for the technology that we can provide."

Tor considered this to be a reasonable stab at diplomacy with just one mistake of trying to address ThaStornla as an equal and without title on the first meeting. Tor felt he had to mention something important and commented, "Just before you decide to lock me away there is one thing you need to know. In seven Mohrabas days I'm expected to be on their homeworld for a touch of diplomacy." Tor paused for a moment and tried not to smile too much as he chose his words, "In order for me not to lose face. If I'm stuck here then someone else will have to take my place. So all you have to do is decide on whether you want to risk letting me go bearing in mind I might not come back or go instead of me." He almost expected ThaStornla to say something but the captain remained silent and looked with a degree of curiosity at Chalotta.

Chalotta felt a new sense of empowerment to negotiate deals with an alien race, something only senior political officials and board room directors ever had the opportunity to do. Somewhere in her mind's eye was a board room table and her name plaque was positioned at the head of the table. She asked, "And what does the diplomatic mission entail?"

Tor replied slowly, "Not much really it's more a case of getting to show your face around."

He could see the effect of his words reflected in Chalotta's eyes. It was like a growing hunger, an opportunity too good to miss. He felt a twinge of guilt to have misled the new station commander with the promise of a journey which ultimately would lead to death. Yet the realisation that what was said could not be undone. He could not now explain the true nature of the journey for fear that it could cloud her judgement in terms of allowing him some freedom.

Tor commented, "So there are two things we need to deal with here. Firstly the ordering of the computers and secondly what you are planning on doing with me? That's if you're really going to arrest me?"

Chalotta replied quickly, "We can dispense with the computer order I will not make deals with a murderer. I will negotiate with Commander Falstarn concerning this matter. And you Mr. Grall will be spending some time in the station's brig." She looked over to the guards, "Search him for weapons. Then take him away."

Anger began to stir within Tor and he said bitterly, "Just like that you're going to lock me away. There is an assassin out there looking to kill me and if you haven't noticed he's very adept at getting past all your security and diverting your attention to evidence which has been manipulated. I am not the assassin. If you arrest me and stick me in one of your cells you'll be handing me to him on a plate so don't be surprised to find me dead in my cell sometime soon." Tor paused only briefly and then calmed his rant, "Think about this carefully."

Chalotta looked un-phased, "The evidence is against you. You are under arrest and will be held until we have had an opportunity to investigate your claims. If they are found to be true then you will be released. Until that time I cannot allow you to run around when so many have died."

The thought struck Tor that he would have to fight his way out of the room. However he was uncertain if ThaStornla would assist him in his escape. Yet the very act of fighting his way out might just convince the

Commander and others that he was indeed guilty. Tor unclipped the belt to his sidearm and allowed it to slide to the floor.

He unfastened his jacket to reveal the shoulder harness and using finger tips removed the small blaster slowly and deliberately and then placed it carefully on the chair. Lastly he removed the concealed blade.

Chalotta exclaimed, "You appear to be ready for a fight Mr. Grall!"

Tor replied calmly, "I'm hunting an assassin. But I surrender them to you as a gesture of my good faith and I'll want them back. So keep them safe."

Chalotta looked at him to see if he might be holding back something. She ordered, "Scan him for any more weapons."

Tor commented, "Just so there are no unwelcome surprised do you mind if I take the datapad out of my pocket first."

Chalotta nodded and watched him carefully. As soon as it was out of his pocket she demanded, "Let me see that."

Without stepping forward, Tor held out the pad and waited. One of the guards took it from him and carried it the rest of the distance. Chalotta examined it and commented, "A tech pad, rather extravagant for a station owner."

Tor replied, "I find the normal datapads rather limited in functionality. This one allows me to monitor and remote command all my facilities and transports. It also gives me access to technical information about production and potential supply shortages. It's particularly useful in the management of the three stations I have here. However if, by some gross miscarriage of justice, I'm convicted of murder I would at least like to hold onto that so I can have something to read and if incoming communications are allowed in the cells I would still like to be able to monitor my stations."

For a moment Tor wondered if Chalotta would allow a concession and let him hang onto the technical datapad. Just as he thought she would not she handed it back to the guard and said, "Very well. A sign of my good faith."

The hand held weapon scanner picked up no suspicious objects and Tor allowed himself to be led out of the room and down to the cells. He commented to ThaStornla, "Have an enjoyable tour and I'll catch up with you later."

Broden called up Polmankelest but before he could comment the Paranid said, "I've already heard."

Broden responded, "Dozy cow doesn't know what she's doing."

Polmankelest frowned, "The evidence was there and she did exactly what any other station commander would have done."

Broden said, "Well I guess Tor might have the last laugh."

Polmankelest responded, "How do you mean?"

With a wry smile Broden answered, "He persuaded her that she needs to go down to the Mohrabas homeworld on a diplomatic mission in a few days time."

There was the faintest flicker of a smile from the Paranid before he commented, "How does this affect the computer order?"

Broden replied, "It doesn't, the wheels are in motion and to cancel now would make it clear to everyone that the whole thing was an elaborate setup. And it still provides us with another avenue to catch the assassin."

The Paranid nodded slowly before asking, "So did Tor manage to get Sweety linked directly to the manufacturing systems."

Broden shook his head, "Unfortunately no, but he still has her with him. I'll go visit him when I see the Commander."

Polmanckelest responded, "Let's hope the assassin doesn't mess around with the environmental units to the cells."

With a sigh Broden responded, "I would hope the security system in that area is less open to attack. It's supposed to stop prisoners from breaking out or being liberated. In theory it should even give Sweety a challenge."

Polmanckelest commented, "I will request that Dorlf gets involved. If Sweety is detected then Tor will lose his technical help."

Broden said, "That would be useful. In the meantime I'd better get over to the station."

Polmanckelest gave a quick nod and closed the comm. As Broden made his way to the dock he was stopped by Tris. She asked, "Is the rumour true?"

Broden responded, "Which rumour would that be?"

Tris replied quickly, "Tor's been arrested."

With a nod Broden said, "Yes it's true. He's being held for the murder of the three troopers and a number of station personnel."

Tris commented, "But he couldn't have done it."

Broden shrugged and replied, "The evidence says otherwise." He held his hand up and answered Triss' next question before the words escaped her, "And no, I don't believe he did it. The person that did has manipulated the records and set him up. Trouble is we know this but can't prove it."

Tris looked even more concerned, "Won't he be at risk being stuck in a cell?"

Broden nodded, "No question about it. Especially as we believe the assassin is on the same station."

Tris looked slightly shocked and asked, "So you're going to try and get him out of there?"

Broden shook his head, "Time's running out Tris and the Mohrabas will be wanting the assassin, Tor or a willing volunteer so they can deal out their style of justice. It's just a matter of who gets who first."

Chapter 11: Sabotage

The cell door closed with a hiss. Tor recognised the spartan decor from a previous visit to such facilities on the Trading Station in Cloudbase South West. He could see the irony that from that cell a whole new life had opened up for him whereas this cell now appeared to be the journeys end.

The room was clinically clean and the harsh white colours began to hurt his eyes in the bright light. It was not designed for comfort and its contents were purely functional. A single width bed that was devoid of bed linen and mattress and as hard to lie on as it was immovable, being rigidly fixed in position. A single utilitarian wash basin adjacent to the toilet were the only other fittings.

Sweety commented through the ear piece, "Careful what you say in here Tor. Anything you do say is being recorded. Use the datapad scribe to convey messages."

Rather than reply immediately Tor glanced at his time piece and then sat down on the bed with his back against the wall. Taking the datapad he acknowledged Sweetys' message.

Tor scribed, 'Any chance you can find me a way out of here?'

Sweety replied, "It will take me a few Mizura to access the comms system on the pretext of looking for an incoming signal."

Tor scribed the question, 'How does that help me?'

Sweety replied, "I can use it as a port to access the other secure systems discreetly."

Tor scribed, "Don't get caught."

Sweety replied, "I will try not to."

Broden strode purposefully through the station and only took brief moments to survey the people around him. He only wished that his hearing was as acute as the Mohrabas. News of Tors arrest had spread at lightning speed through all the stations and he could sense a growing restlessness in the people around him.

ThaStornla was still being shown around when Broden arrived at the empty office. The guard seemed hesitant in allowing him to remain there without the new Commander being present. However Broden made it perfectly apparent that he was not going to wait anywhere else. The firmness in his tone and the manner of his stance was enough to have the guard leave him and stand just outside the door.

Broden sat in the Commanders chair and put his feet up on her desk whilst he reviewed the latest reports on his datapad. Thirty Mizuras later and Chalotta stepped into the room, closely followed by the familiar form of ThaStornla.

She flashed Broden a look of disdain and asked, "Is there something I can do for you Broden?"

Broden looked up and commented, "Yes there is. I want to know what's happening with my computer order?"

Chalotta said abruptly, "It's being processed. Now if you don't mind you can vacate my seat."

Without moving Broden replied, "Really? Strange but I have it on good authority that you don't have enough silicon to fulfill the order."

Chalotta's eyes narrowed slightly, "If you would move aside so that I can verify your assertion."

Broden hesitated for a moment, with a sincere smile he moved his feet and then stood up. In friendly tones he said, "Please do."

Chalotta sat down and with brisk movements over the console pulled up the inventory and order records for the station. She glanced at Broden and said slowly, "It would appear that we will be ten wafers short."

Broden responded, "Fortunately for you we have some reserve stock. The transporter in docking bay seven is waiting to be unloaded."

Chalotta paused for a moment and said, "You came all the way here to tell me we are short on Silicon? Or do you come here for some other reason."

Broden looked across and said quickly, "No. Now that you have the resources I expect you to make the delivery dates that we have stipulated. As you know Energy Cells are the life blood of our industries. We cannot afford to continue to miss deliveries of Crystals into the Solar Power Plant and this has an impact on the Cattle Ranch. With all the cattle out of stasis the ranch only has enough power for two Tazuras before the station shuts itself down at which point we could lose the whole herd. Without Argnu we will lose a big proportion of our food supply and also the ability to generate organic proteins for manufacturing purposes."

Chalotta took a moment before asking, "So you're not here to talk about Mr. Grall?"

Broden gave a brief look of surprise, "Why? Should I be concerned for his wellbeing?"

It was Chalotta's turn to look surprised and she responded, "He claims to have an assassin after him."

Broden replied casually, "He does, but I would hope that he's being treated well and is nicely safe and secure in your cells. It'll keep him out of harms way. I trust he is safe and secure in your cells?"

Chalotta responded, "He is."

Broden cut her off before she could continue, "Good let's hope it stays that way."

Chalotta said loudly, "But neither I nor the other station commanders believe in Tors' innocence. The evidence is against him."

Broden looked at her and said slowly, "Commanders? Surely you mean Acting Commanders!" He let this statement sink in for a moment, "From memory, none of you have been officially appointed by the stations respective owners to the position of Commander as yet. Or have you got some communication channel open to the core systems that we don't know about?"

She fixed Broden with a hard stare and replied, "These are extraordinary times Broden. As far as the station owners are concerned these ones have been destroyed. We are autonomous, independent and have to adapt the rules to suit the situation."

Broden smiled, "Extraordinary times indeed, and let us not forget how we got here. But I'm not here to discuss the finer points of corporate and sector law, all I want to know is if my computers are going to be ready by the required date."

Chalotta turned slowly and looked at the monitor. A few commands later she glanced across at Broden and replied, "We need another three Stazura."

Broden looked at her and replied, "That is unacceptable."

Chalotta frowned, "That's the best we can do."

After a short moment of pacing the office Broden commented, "Is there any chance we can pre-program with the station functions prior to installation."

Chalotta considered the option, "That would save you a Stazura or two for installation, but it won't pull in the manufacturing time."

Broden looked across, "In the long run it saves us time. I will have the integration and functional data downloaded onto a datapad and brought over. I guess you will need to interface it with your manufacturing systems."

Chalotta nodded, "That would be the normal procedure."

Broden responded, "Excellent. I'll go and get the datapad sorted out." As he turned to leave he spoke to ThaStornla, "Highness, will you return with me to the silicon mine or be staying here for a while?"

ThaStornla growled, "For the moment I will remain here. There is much that I can learn here about the differences with our cultures."

Broden nodded, "Then I hope you enjoy your stay Highness." And with a slight bow he left Chalottas' office. He made swift progress back down to the dock and boarded his ship. He knew that Sweetie was with Tor and having another pad interfaced to the stations computers would provide the AI with another portal assuming Sweetie could get a good comms signal.

Ghaan had not moved from his vantage point and observed as Broden left the station. So far everything was going exactly to plan. He would wait a while before breaching the security protocols of the station cells and let Tor out of his cell.

He smiled at the thought that Tor, as a perceived killer, would meet with a tragic accident when trying to escape. To his mind the station Commanders would consider it to be rough justice, and at the end no one would be concerned about trying to trace the deed back to him.

It was with curiosity that he now observed the Mohrabas Captain wandering the promenade and apparently doing some window shopping. He was being escorted by the new security chief who looked distinctly uncomfortable in the presence of the giant next to him.

He knew better than to watch the creature for too long as he did not know enough about the race to understand what evolutionary advantages they had. He would give Tor another few Stazura in his cell before putting the next phase of his plan in motion.

Time was at a premium in the eyes of Broden. Even before he had cleared the docking bay he was talking with the command crew of the Crystal Fabrication Plant. As the transport reached the half way point to the Silicon Mine a Pegasus ship cleared the Crystal Fabrication Plant and in a few short Mizura was entering the docking bay of the Computer Plant.

Broden had learned the meaning of patience over the years but just for once the old verbiage and spoken oaths of loyalty echoed in his ears. Leaving Tor locked in prison cell, with the shadow of death growing darker, ran against his personal code never to abandon a comrade in arms in the hands of the enemy. Yet that was exactly how he felt and it was even more important for him to find the assassin before the assassin got to Tor.

Once on board the Silicon Mine he marched back to the offices. As he progressed through the station his mind mulled over the part that ThaStornla still had to play. In some respects he was glad the Mohrabas was there but a nagging doubt crept into his mind if ThaStornla would assist Tor. After all his primary goal was to capture the assassin and the fate of Tor would be just incidental.

He received a call from the Pegasus pilot confirming the datapad was now in position. Broden typed on the keypad and studied the screen. He patched into the unit and monitored the data somehow hoping to see if Sweety had patched in.

The Roamers AI Dorlf interrupted his thoughts, "The security lockouts of the cells have not been breached."

Broden was slightly surprised having had very little contact with the Roamer AI and had been led to believe that it was on the most part taciturn. He said, "Thanks for the update."

Dorlf responded, "I will inform you if the situation changes."

Broden sighed and said, "Thanks."

Tris appeared at the door. She commented, "Just thought I'd pop by and see how things are going."

He glanced up at her and replied, "I've had better days."

Liann appeared with a few hot drinks and added, "And some which have been much worse."

Broden said, "That's for sure. I hate the uncertainty when waiting for something to happen. We have no idea of when or how the enemy is going to strike. On that basis we can only hope we've taken all the correct precautions."

Tris asked, "And how is Tor?"

Broden glanced across to her and shrugged, "I didn't see him. I never asked to."

Tris looked a little surprised and asked, "Why not?"

With a raised eyebrow Broden commented, "The new acting commander assured me that he was safe and well."

Tris expression was that of astonishment, "And you believed him?"

Broden replied, "Her. You must understand I have to show her some degree of trust. After all this is over we will still have to work together, and when she finds herself in the wrong then she will have to bring herself to apologise to me."

Tris frowned and muttered, "Bloody politics." She said more clearly, "Broden I never took you to be a political animal. This is Tors' life you're playing with here."

There was a pause before Broden answered, "Understand this. I don't like this game and I have a particular dislike for politics. But from here I have no control over Tors' fate and I have to play the game by another's rules. Now Tor has Sweety to help him and I've done as much as I can without personally breaking him out of the cells. But if you have some brilliant suggestion on how to catch the assassin and get Tor out of there then I'm all ears."

Tris said slowly, "I still don't understand why you didn't use the last prisoner as bait?"

He looked at Tris for a few moments and then answered, "Tor promised that he would protect her."

Tris responded, "She attacked this god damn station and I'm sure all of the crew here lost friends in that attack. He owes her nothing and she owes him her life. Under the circumstances I don't see that his promise means anything."

Broden quickly responded, "Tor made a promise and rightly or wrongly, keeping that promise is everything to him. His word is his bond and if I or anyone else close to him should undermine his word then they should never expect to be forgiven by him."

Tris said quietly, "How can you be so sure."

Broden looked her directly in the eyes and replied, "I saw Tor stand between Creed and a woman he rescued from slavery. The woman's name was Nyeshta. You may have heard of her, and Creed was known to want to kill her. He did not step aside to let Creed murder her even though he had a blaster pointing straight at him. Yet he had no loyalty for the woman. So I guess he had no desire to see someone he rescued have their life needlessly terminated."

Tris said slowly, "I didn't know that."

Broden gave a wry smile, "There's more you don't know but I'm not the one to tell you." He took on a more solemn look, "Anyway when all the chips are down he will not sacrifice an innocent life or one that he has promised to protect just so that he can keep his own."

Tris commented, "Do you really believe that?"

Broden took a moment before answering, "Tor is the sort of guy that you could shatter his heart and he'd still wish for you to have a happy, long life and mean it. Yes, I think he'd sacrifice himself. He's far too idealistic to be healthy for a normal person. To be honest I don't think there's a bad bone in his body."

Tris looked at the floor as she remembered a particular conversation with Tor and after a while she said, "What about you? Do you have any bad bones?"

Broden commented, "I once had idealistic views but my military career soon changed them. I have more bad bones in my body than I'd care to admit but I know how to keep them under control and that makes a difference."

Tris asked, "How do you think this will end?"

Broden said slowly, "Tor is up against a professional and he knows nothing about catching this type of person. He's going to get himself killed and that is my professional opinion." He let these words wash over a stunned Tris before adding, "Yet Tor has assistance of a special kind which gives him the edge and he might actually walk out of this."

She asked, "You mean Sweetie?"

After a moments quiet Broden said, "And the Mohrabas Captain."

Tris asked, "You trust him?"

Broden answered, "I have no evidence to doubt him and neither do you."

Liann who had been a discreet presence within the room said absently, "From my chats with ThaStornla, I would say that his rank and position in Mohrabas society doesn't allow him to get deeply involved with stuff like this. So I would expect him to be a little uncertain as to what he should and shouldn't do."

Broden looked across with curiosity, "Do you think he'll help Tor."

Liann shook her head, "I don't think he'd help Tor break out of his cell, but I did get the impression that he would help catch the assassin. When we work out who it is."

Time had been slipping by relentlessly and Helass had seen the updated pictures of the faces which had come out obscured the first time around. The images had been more of a panoramic view of the station areas and the faces in question had been panned and zoomed in on.

Her eyes were tired and she said to the computer, "I've never met any of these people up close. Chances are if I'd seen any of them it would have been at a distance."

The image changed and zoomed out but Helass had closed her eyes and turned away. She stood up and tiredness washed over her. It was not that the work was hard but dull and so she collapsed on the bed intent on having a short sleep.

Tor had decided that his best option for the moment was to sleep and conserve his energy. This left Sweety to wake him if a threat manifested itself. Under the guise of standard datapad responses she probed and looked in on the security net trying to find an opening without attracting the attention of the resident and somewhat primitive AI.

Yet however primitive the AI might appear its simplicity compared to her gave it some advantage in the fact that it was very focused and held very simple objectives. The security AI protocols were, to her, the thugs of the network. Their function was simply to destroy and block unauthenticated code.

The task she had was to identify what the correct encryption needed to be before sending instruction sets. Where the problem now lay was that incoming code had a different authentication to the sent one. Only she had not yet discovered any outgoing code to analyse and with the many billions of different combinations of encryption it would take her a while to get through them all and there would always be the threat of detection.

The Roamer AI was aware of her presence but was on the outside looking in. Although it had the in going access authentication it could not determine the responding code. For the moment it was discreetly attempting to skim through the vast network of conductive highways in an attempt to determine the correct gate sequence algorithms at the fundamental machine level. Yet this was in itself problematic as his core presence was on the far end of a continuous comm link. Any break in the transmission and he would have to start again.

Slowly he began to piece together the required authentication and put certain safeguards in place, just in case the link was inexplicably broken.

Ghaan examined his time piece as he sat at one of the cafe terminals. A cable was hooked into the data port and he smiled as he pressed the button whilst thinking, 'It's time.'

The message flashed up, 'Upload complete.'

Carefully he detached the cable and spent a few Mizuras standing at the bar drinking a hot sweet Carrajoro.

Chalotta had been deep in conference with the other station commanders when the comm was abruptly cut. She said, "Computer, re-establish the link."

The dulcet tones of the system replied, "Unable to comply, all communications systems are off-line."

With a look of surprise Chalotta said, "Re-initialise system."

The voice replied, "Unable to comply, security authentication has been corrupted."

Security Chief Storrall appeared and looked flustered, "Commander, we have a serious problem."

Chalotta looked over at him, "Tell me everything."

Helass stirred from sleep as breakfast was delivered. She thanked the Mohrabas chef that delivered the tray. With a cursory glance at the terminal she noted that the picture was still being displayed and with a sigh she wandered to the bathroom to freshen up.

After washing she picked up a plate and helped herself to a few choice morsels from the tray and moved towards the terminal. Her hand reached out to switch off the display when something caught her eye and she hesitated.

Despite the warmth of the room a shiver ran down her spine. In the panoramic view was a figure looking down from one of the observation lounges. The stature and posture was hauntingly familiar yet the face was not recognisable from this zoom distance. A distant memory stirred and her mind slipped back to the day of the ill fated disembarkation to the Silicon Mine. One of the other Troopers had commented quietly, "Looks like Ferans called in the Venom Master." And she had for a brief moment glanced back and seen the figure by the upper balcony before the same Trooper said quickly, "Don't look at him. It'll give him the opportunity to remember you."

She said to the computer, "Grid."

The screen was divided up, and Helass said, "Beta four." The square flashed and then filled the screen, a new grid came up. "Delta six." Once again the screen changed and clarified with a new grid. Helass said, "Identify image."

There were a few moments whilst the multiple images, taken by the security cameras from different angles in the docking bay at the same time, compiled a full three dimensional image of the face and rotated it to match the images on archive.

It stopped and the computer voice responded, "Match found. Individual has been identified as Ghaan Yapall last location recorded Computer Plant. Current location unknown."

Helass asked cautiously, "What do you mean unknown?"

The computer reported, "Communications with the Computer Plant can not be established."

Helass looked worried and she said, "Get me Commander Broden on the Silicon Mine."

Broden's finger drummed on the desk as he contemplated what he should do next. Dorlf had informed him of the loss of communications as soon as it happened then Liann had given him the message a few moments later.

Liann called him and said, "Helass wants to talk to you urgently."

Broden replied, "Let's hope it's good news. Put her through."

The image of Helass appeared and as soon as she saw Brodens' image she said, "I've found him. It's Ghaan Yapall." She pressed a few keys and the image appeared on his screen.

Broden asked, "You're absolutely sure?"

Helass thought for a moment, after all she had only seen the person at a distance, and the seed of doubt began to grow, "From a distance he looks just like the Venom Master." As she said the words she knew they were less than convincing and tried to back up the statement with, "I mean that he has the same posture and stature as the assassin hired by Feran."

Broden thought for a moment, "Well that's the best damn lead we've had so far. Once we have established comms with the station we'll go get him. Thanks for your help, it won't be forgotten."

When the channel closed he sat for a brief while in contemplation and then said, "Computer get me Liann!"

Her image appeared on the screen, "Yes Broden?"

He asked, "Is it still possible for ships to get docking permission with the Computer Plant?"

She replied, "No. The freighter channels have been buzzing that they've had no response to docking requests."

Broden commented, "Will it be possible to use manual overrides?"

Liann replied, "Only if you want to go for a spacewalk."

On the Computer Plant, Storal was standing in the command center next to Chalotta. Red warning lights flashed on every panel and display indicating system failures throughout the station. Every few Mizura another light suddenly began to blink.

Chalotta asked, "What type of virus is this?"

Storal commented, "We don't know but it's corrupting all the security protocols. So far we have lost comms, internal scanners, internal transporters, power on decks five to nine, twenty three, twenty nine, and forty to forty six. Manufacturing has come to a halt when the stock loader was trapped by a closing blast door. The maintenance crew are trying to separate them but reports are that the loader is damaged beyond repair."

Chalotta said hopefully, "Report?"

Storal sighed and answered, "One of the maintenance crew came up here to tell me."

Chalotta asked, "Any hope of determining the source of the problem?" Storal shook his head and she asked, "Tell me the cells are still secure?"

Storal shook his head, "There were a few major power fluctuations in that area but without internal scanners and comms we have no idea of what's happening down there. As soon as we saw the outages I sent an additional security team just to check everything is okay."

Chalotta asked, "Did they take portable scanner units with them?"

Storal replied, "Yes."

There was a brief silence as technicians pulled access panels in a vain attempt to isolate and reset control circuits to stem the cascade failure rippling through the system. Chalotta asked, "What about the docking bay?"

Storral pointed towards a mass of flashing red warning symbols, "Totally inoperable. We can't get out and no one can get in."

With a slightly more worried tone Chalotta asked, "Life support?"

Storral replied, "So far it's the only thing that's unaffected."

There was a pounding of boots along the corridor and one of the security guards entered the room looking very red and out of breath. As he fought to regain his breath he said, "Grall's gone."

Chalotta looked perplexed then angry, "Gone? What do you mean gone?"

The guard panted, "His cell. It's empty."

Chalotta said angrily, "Broden tricked us, get that damn datapad off the manufacturing system. Catch Tor, I don't care how, just get him."

Storral asked, "What about the Mohrabas?"

Chalotta hesitated for a moment, "Watch him and arrest him if he does anything suspicious."

Storral looked slightly perplexed, "Do you think that's wise?"

Chalotta was angry and in no mood to have her orders disobeyed, "Chances are he's in on this too. We only have Tor's word he's the Emperor's son. My bet is he's just a regular guy. Now follow my orders."

There was a low growl, "Do you doubt my heritage?" There was no anger in the question just a sense of curiosity.

Chalotta span around in surprise and said with annoyance, "Who let him in here?"

The guard given the duty to escort ThaStornla said hastily, "He said he needed to see you urgently Commander."

Chalotta said angrily, "You're fired, and get him out of here." She pointed at ThaStornla.

The Mohrabas Captain looked neither perplexed nor annoyed by this blatant lack of respect. Storral was hesitant in enforcing the order and made a conciliatory gesture by saying to ThaStornla, "We are experiencing some difficulties Sir, and unfortunately now is not the best time to visit the command deck."

ThaStornla gave a brief gesture of acknowledgement and left the centre. He was still growing accustomed to the strangeness of these aliens and their indifferent attitude to rank and position. Unless of course it was their own. As he paced down the corridor he knew that a guard was following. He had gone to ask if he could help find Tor and had been turned away before he had a chance to speak and he considered this to be the Acting Commanders mistake. He had made his mind up what to do next as he reached the shuttle lift.

In the command center Chalotta said to Storral, "Gather a team to sweep the station. I want Tor found and apprehended."

Storral gave a nod and asked, "What do you recommend if we find that he's acquired a weapon?"

Chalotta answered sharply, "If he puts up a fight then shoot him."

Storral looked apprehensive but pushed to the back of his mind any questions about contesting this course of action. He said, "Very well Commander."

Chalotta spoke as Storral turned to leave, "Understand if it comes to a fight between your team and Tor. I would much prefer to have your team walk away."

Broden had gathered a few items including several weapons. He would liked to have taken his personal heavy assault rifle with shoulder harness, but knew that if he walked onto the station with a heavy gauge weapon of that kind he would not receive the warmest of welcomes. He sealed the cuffs of the environment suit to the pilot gloves and fastened the space utility belt. Boarding a station even as an ally was a dangerous occupation and with a total comms outage there was no way he would be able to identify himself before some fool of a security guard saw him.

A number of pilots had volunteered to go with him and he had refused them all with the exception of the Boron, Moda. Like himself, Moda had seen plenty of combat during his Boron Navy service days. He would be a valuable ally in a hostile environment.

The Roamer AI, Dorlf disturbed his thoughts, "Commander I must recommend that you do not try to enter the Computer Plant."

Broden continued to get ready and asked, "Why?"

Dorlf answered, "Tor has escaped his cell. You are blamed as an accomplice and will be arrested if you step foot on the station."

Broden looked surprised, "What do you mean broken out of his cell? How do you know that?"

Dorlf replied, "I know, that is sufficient."

Broden asked quickly, "There's no comms, how the hell can you know?"

Dorlf did not reply. Broden waited for a moment, "Dorlf. I know you're there so answer me!" Silence filled the room. Perplexed by this news Broden thought for a moment, "Computer, put me through to Liann."

Liann appeared on the screen, "What's up?"

Broden paused for a moment and then said, "I've just had a very strange conversation with Dorlf."

Liann looked at him quizzically and asked, "And?"

Broden responded, "Can you scan all frequencies and confirm there is absolutely no comms activity coming from the Computer Plant?"

Liann replied, "I can do another full sweep but nothing's shown up before."

Broden commented, "Yeah well the AI has just passed on some information which if true, could only have come from inside the station."

Liann looked slightly confused and asked, "What information?"

Broden answered, "Tor's escaped."

With a sudden smile Liann said, "Good for Tor."

Nodding slowly Broden said, "Yeah, good for Tor. Unfortunately this break out will just make him look even more guilty, and with me sending a datapad and having it interfaced with the computer system just before everything went wrong, this gives the impression that I helped."

Liann said slowly, "And Dorlf told you that?"

Broden said, "He gave me the short version."

Liann said, "It sounds as though you'll be in trouble if you go over there."

He nodded and then gave a wry smile, "I wonder how Chalotta is dealing with ThaStornla."

She asked, "What do you mean?"

Broden looked at the screen and said, "The Son of the Emperor has spent most of his time in our company and if she's blaming me for sabotaging her station then she could have the impression that he might be in on it."

Liann looked perplexed and asked, "You don't think she might arrest him?"

Broden responded, "She might."

ThaStornla reached his allocated rooms. The door hesitated as it opened, an indication that all the computer systems were beginning to succumb to the virus. The door closed in a jerky slide and the scent of the security guard, given the task of watching him, faded from the air.

Standing in the middle of the room he closed his eyes and concentrated. Turning his head slowly he filtered the discreet noises around him. After a while he moved to the case he had carried onboard. He pressed his fingers to pressure points on the case and it separated. ThaStornla reflected on the way no one had ever asked him about the contents.

He slipped two fine blades out of a utility belt and held them in one hand as he carefully surveyed the floor. Stepping back he saw the panel he needed. Kneeling down he placed one of the blades on the floor and with a supporting hand on the adjacent tile he traced the edge. The tip of the blade sliced in on the beveled edge.

Taking the second blade he traced it along the opposite edge and then slotted it into place. Using both blades as levers the floor panel popped up. Getting hold of the lifted edge he removed the blades and then shifted the panel to reveal the maintenance run beneath.

He took a sniff to check there were no immediate hazards and then looked into the cavity. It would be tight and he would have to remain at a crouch until he could find a more open space but that was not a problem.

He changed from the formal dress into fatigues. The lightweight body armour snapped together and left only joints, hands and face vulnerable. The spines on his back moved freely. He took a moment to reflect on what he was here to achieve as he fastened the utility belt in place with its selection of weapons. Putting the two blades back into the belt he then reorganised the case and closed it.

Gently he lowered himself into the confined passageway. He brought the tile back into place and marked the underside of the tile with a scent stick. The aroma was only faint but different enough to the Mohrabas senses that it could be easily traced. With the tile back in place and above him he took a moment to taste the air and at a surprising turn of speed moved with stealth along the maintenance run.

Chapter 12: On the run.

Tor had responded to Sweetys' alarm call and she had given him explicit instructions in what to do next. Even so, as the door to his cell slid open he had stopped to ask, "Won't this just make me look guilty?"

Sweety had replied, "Yes. But that will be a better alternative than being found dead just outside your cell."

Tor had responded, "Okay which way."

Now he found himself in a particularly confined ventilation shaft and descending slowly, whilst trying to make as little noise as possible. It had taken a lot out of him with the physical exertion of using each weld seam as a ledge and having to brace the sides with his hands so that he could step down to the next one. This had taken him to the point of exhaustion and the lactic acid in his muscles burned to the point that at almost any moment his limbs would just give up. Only pure determination and a healthy survival instinct had carried him through the pain barrier and forced his body to continue long after he would normally have given up.

The drop beneath him and the very real sense that if he relaxed now it would be a one way trip to the bottom kept him focused.

Sweety commented, "Good, we are here. There is a maintenance hatch just behind you."

With a slow shuffle and gritted teeth he turned around. The hatch was a meshed grill and Tor commented quietly, "Now how the hell am I supposed to open that?"

Almost at the same moment a maintenance robot appeared. After a short delay it opened the panel and moved to one side. Tor said, "Thanks." He grabbed the edges of the opening and pulled himself onto the floor beyond. With his body resting on safe ground all the muscles tried to relax at once and Tor found himself suddenly unable to move as every part of him ached to the point of beginning to cramp up. For a time he was unable to do anything except rest and even that was painful.

A while later he began to move and whispered, "So where next?"

Sweety answered, "We are on the last of the crewed maintenance levels. The next floor below is the first of the automated decks."

Tor said quietly, "I hope there's a ladder to get to it because I don't think I can manage another ventilation shaft in the near future."

Sweety answered, "There is a ladder."

Turning he looked along the maintenance conduit to his left and then to the right. Sweety said, "Two hundred metres along to the left is an exit to the crew walkways."

Tor nodded and whispered, "Any chance we might bump into someone?"

Sweety replied, "I have nothing in scan range."

Tor smiled and began to make his way along the passage. Bent over nearly double due to the restricted headroom his progress was slow and he was grateful that he did not suffer from claustrophobia or, as he reflected, vertigo. Once at the access panel he listened intently for any sound of people. The hand grips on the panel allowed for a positive hold and with a release catch built into the finger recess he had no problem in opening the hatch. It swung away and down on its hinge and Tor put every ounce of effort into ensuring the panel did not slam into the wall.

He chanced a quick look out of the aperture and along the web of walkways that surrounded the vast open centre which looked down on the power core and manufacturing decks. He counted eleven levels above him and five below but with the exception of robotic maintenance units there was no movement.

Stiff and sore from the effort of getting here Tor stretched and attempted to loosen his joints. Carefully he put the access hatch back in place and whispered, "Sweety I'd feel a lot more comfortable if I could look a little less conspicuous."

Sweety replied, "There are maintenance crew lockers, replacement fatigues and emergency environment suits over to the left."

Tor whispered, "Any chance there might be a weapon of some sort in there?"

Sweety replied sarcastically, "I seem to have misplaced the inventory list."

He moved carefully to the door and watched the scanner information displayed on the datapad. As the door opened he heard the sound of a shuttle lift descending nearby. Locating the sound he heard the clatter of a cage door open and voices over to the right two decks up. He slipped into the changing room and with a hiss the door closed.

Tor felt his heart rate suddenly rise with the potential of being discovered. He looked around quickly and took note of the carefully laid out room. The lockers all had name tags associated and required a keypad access code to open.

Over to the left were the shrink wrapped new fatigues stacked up beside heavy duty environment suits. These were not the lightweight suits used by pilots but designed for heavy industrial environments where power core leakage was generating high levels of radiation. Their bulk would prevent rapid movement and Tor knew that at some time he would need to move rapidly.

He took a little longer to look around the room and noticed a neat pile of unwrapped fatigues, boots and hard hat piled neatly on one of the benches. Tor sensed for an instant that he might not be alone and slowly lifted the pad to a height that he could look at it whilst still keeping the room in view. The scanner showed nothing.

Cautiously he approached the pile and carefully looked at each of the items. Just for once he was not going to believe in coincidence. All the clothes including the boots would fit him.

Before he could ask Sweety commented quietly, "Do not look at me I had nothing to do with this."

Tor turned away from the pile and quickly went through the stock of new clothes and picked out his own set. The overalls he chose would fit over his own and although he knew he would get hot it was better than leaving his own clothes behind as a calling card for anyone that might chance to find them. The only item he had difficulty with was the boots. His own pilot ones would look very out of place down here. A quick scan around the room provided the answer in the form of a general purpose tool bag.

Feeling that he should at least carry some real tools to complete the image he approached the tool room door. He held up the technical pad and asked quietly, "Any chance you can give me the access code?"

A moment later and there was an audible click as the door catches released. Tor took in a moment to absorb the sight and muttered, "Who needs a weapons cache when you've got this lot to choose from."

Sweety gave her version of a sigh and said, "I recommend that we do not spend much time here. And try not to take anything too cumbersome." Tor was inspecting a welding laser lance with shoulder counterbalance system. The high energy power cable was designed to be mated with a wall power outlet and left him in no doubt this was impractical in an emergency.

He grabbed hold of various hand tools including a heavy wrench and small power drivers that clipped on, or slid into, the tool belt. He picked up one interesting looking power tool and asked, "Sweety, what's this?"

Sweety replied, "My analysis is that it is a bolt gun used to join panels together."

Although somewhat heavy and bulky, it was significantly more practical than any of the other big tools. Tor pushed it into the tool bag and whispered, "Let's get going."

Sweety replied, "Back out the way we came and the ladder is three hundred metres to the right."

Tor asked, "Final destination?"

Sweety replied, "Station escape pods."

With a look of determination Tor added, "Let's not forget that I still need to catch an assassin."

Sweety commented, "If my behavioral predictions based on Argon thought processes are right, then we need to get to the escape pods before he reaches the conclusion we are not heading for a weapons cache."

As Tor closed the tool room door he glanced at the pile of work clothes that sat neatly on the bench and commented, "That's assuming he hasn't already come to that conclusion."

Storral gathered his team for the security sweep, but he considered the word sweep was an abused term in this instance. The task in front of them was easily underestimated as the station had one hundred and twenty eight decks, with over eight hundred kilometres of corridors, maintenance runs and ventilation shafts covering the whole station. With scanners it would have been an almost instantaneous task in locating Tor. Now they were blind and finding him would be like looking for a lost spanner in space.

He had to rely on the probability that Tor would be looking to escape the station and return to the safety of one of his own. Adding to his difficulties was the internal comms network being out of action. Although they had hand held units the relay points had been affected and appeared to be blocking signals with excessive interference. A number of technicians were working with the stations' fighters comms systems to act as base stations, but again difficulty with excessive interference was hampering their efforts. Deep inside he had the feeling the station was somehow resisting their attempts to clear the problems.

The team was suited in riot gear with passive shields that could be charged to give additional protection from plasma weapons. He felt uncomfortable with this show of force just to capture one man and hoped that it would not come to a firefight. However he had to accept it was a wise precaution as weapons had been reported missing from the armoury. They had regular issue stun batons and blasters to defend themselves.

Storral could sense the tension in the room. They lacked combat experience and like him had no experience in hand to hand fighting within a confined space outside of the basic training. Tor on the other hand was seen to be a veteran fighter and more than capable of taking lives.

He had formed a rough plan and began to brief the assembled group, "Listen up. As you know we have a prisoner on the loose. Currently we have men watching all the exit points and it's our job to sweep the station to apprehend the fugitive."

He looked around at the faces and continued, "It is understood that Tor could be armed and should be considered extremely dangerous. If you should come across him, call in for backup before trying to apprehend. Should you feel that your own lives are under threat then you may use lethal force to protect

yourselves. But I must insist that this is a last resort of necessity and the fugitive should be given the chance to surrender first."

A question came from one of the guards, "Are we going to see the scanners back on-line soon?"

Storral looked at the guard and replied, "No. But you will have mobile scanner units."

A voice from the back commented, "Will the scanners be able to identify people?"

Storral shook his head, "No, the database is offline. All that it'll tell you is that someone is nearby. So I encourage you not to shoot until you're sure it's him."

The next question that came forward was, "How long before station systems are back to normal."

The security chief frowned, "Last report was that it'll take at least a Tazura." There were murmurs from the team as people turned and made comments to each other. Storral added, "Our aim should be to keep Tor from being able to escape. After the systems are back up we will be able to apprehend him with ease so I would encourage you not to go looking for trouble but to defend your assigned positions with the security teams already in place."

This last statement appeared to be met with approval.

Ghaan was on the move. Tor had escaped his cell and this had, in many respects, pleased him. A demonstration of common sense in adverse conditions and the willingness to be a sporting challenge. To his mind he was the predator toying with his prey until the inevitable end and Tor's ultimate demise.

Tor had avoided the unwise but obvious course of heading for the armoury which would have been detrimental to his health but then Ghaan lost him when the station internal scanners were taken off line. Until then he had gained overriding access to all systems with the exception of the internal transporters.

The cage door of the maintenance lift rattled open. Having donned the clothes of a regular maintenance crew member he approached the heavy blast doors which would ultimately lead to the station's escape pods. The tool bag weighed heavily in his hand. Grabbing the release lever the door slid open with a gentle hiss of the pneumatic actuators.

"Hold fast and identify yourself!" A security guard called out.

Ghaan stood still and answered hastily, "Don't shoot, Barr Lomat, mm-mm-maintenance crew."

The blasters remained pointing at him and the security guard ordered, "Step forward."

Cautiously he stepped in with a fearful expression on his face, the second security guard checked an image he had been given and commented, "This isn't him."

The first guard relaxed and lowered his blaster. He asked, "What're you doing down here Barr?"

Ghaan commented, "Orders. With all these system failures I've been given the joyous task of checking to see the escape pods are still functional." He gave a half hearted laugh.

The guard nodded slowly, "Okay. Go check them." As Ghaan stepped past the guard commented, "Just out of interest you haven't seen anyone running around that doesn't belong down here?"

Ghaan took note of the door closing behind him and smiled inwardly but looked thoughtful for a while, then shook his head and replied, "Can't say that I have."

There was a slightly disappointed look from the guard and Ghaan put the tool bag next to the first escape pod hatch. He knelt down and unzipped the bag and put his hands inside saying loudly, "But then again. I'm not supposed to be here."

The two guards looked puzzled as he allowed this message to sink in and then reflected on their shocked expression as he pulled out two blasters. The buzz and flash of plasma discharge energised the air. Both security guards took hits in the chest and were flung towards the door.

Ghaan left nothing to chance and stepping towards the sprawled figures took careful aim and shot each one in the head.

Tor had to stand back as the larger robots glided past. They had a singular purpose and function to transport and load energy cells into the core reactor. Other units removed the spent cells for recycling.

Reaching the next ladder he slung the tool bag over one shoulder and began the descent to the next level. This particular section dealt with power distribution from the core reactor and appeared as a web of heavy duty couplings, transformers and other power distribution units. Tor could almost feel the stations power as his skin felt slightly tingly and the hairs on his arms lifted with the static.

Three hundred metres on and he reached the edge. In front of him was the inner skin of the bulkhead and unlike the upper inhabited decks he could sense the cold vacuum of space beyond.

He asked quietly, "So where exactly am I?"

Sweety replied, "Three floors directly below the escape pods and the opposite side of the station to the docking bay."

So that he was clear in his own mind why he was here as opposed to any of the other three escape points Tor said questioningly, "And these ones are on the side closest to the Silicon Mine?"

Sweety replied, "Yes."

Tor asked, "And the one we expect the assassin to set a trap up for me?"

Sweety responded, "Yes."

Tor asked, "So all I have to do is climb up there and hope he's not arrived first."

Sweety said, "Yes."

Tor asked, "And if he has?"

Sweety responded, "Then you will be in trouble."

Tor commented, "That's really reassuring."

Sweety added, "When we are within fifty metres I will be able to get a better scan of the area."

Tor nodded, "In which case I'll try to stay out of sight."

The first ascent was trouble free and then Sweety mentioned, "I have four personnel working on the next level up. They are forty five metres to the right. If you take the first left we can bypass them on this level before moving up to the next." Without replying verbally Tor progressed as instructed.

Sweety gave him the all clear and he ascended to the next deck. He kept the hard hat pulled forwards and knelt down beside a machine with a driver in his hand so he could take a moment to survey the area. From his position he could hear voices and needed to locate them before moving on.

Satisfied that they were not getting closer and with Sweety reporting they were outside of her range he picked up his bag and moved towards the nearest blast door. Sweety commented, "There are four entrances to the pods area. Follow the screen map."

Tor glanced down at the screen and took his bearings. Focusing his attention on where he was heading he moved with purpose towards the door. The computer relays located on the deck were in two rows and came to shoulder height. Each side of the row was a walkway wide enough for two people to pass and Tor felt somewhat exposed. He had the feeling of being watched and would have preferred to have been hiding in a maintenance run than walking in the open.

Sweety said urgently, "Stop. I am detecting a scanner jammer up ahead."

Tor ducked down and whispered, "Can you work around it?"

Sweety replied, "I guess you are not too familiar with jammer technology?"

Tor frowned and then whispered, "Help me out here. Do you think it's the assassin in there or just an added security measure?"

There was a delay in the response then Sweety replied, "My evaluation of various scenarios leads me to believe the unit has been put in place by the assassin."

Tor sighed, "Okay he's beaten us here. But is he still hanging around?"

Sweety replied, "Well you could always poke your head around a door and look."

Tor muttered, "Yeah, just long enough for him to take it off with a blaster." Tor heard voices moving towards him and he ducked down.

Sweety commented through the ear piece, "Four technicians to your left."

Tor nodded and shuffled back towards the last intersection and the steps down to the next level. Sweety reported, "The maintenance crew has stopped at one of the relay units."

There was a brief moment of relief when one of the voices said, "Before you start, I need to pull some of the cards on unit four, eight, three."

Tor looked at the numbers on the cases and his stomach tightened when he saw the unit just four metres from his position. Tor looked to his right and the aisle was still clear. He whispered, "Time to fall back." As the words left his lips he heard a door open and whispered, "Getting any readings now?"

Sweety responded, "They are still too close to the jammer."

There was the sound of boots trying to walk quietly on the hard metal floor. Tor looked at the tool bag and cursed himself for having fastened it closed. He removed a heavy wrench from his tool belt and weighed it carefully in his hand. Anxiously he tried to focus on the direction of the approaching footsteps and realised that he could easily find himself trapped. Whoever had come through the door had decided to hold position whilst the technicians were in close proximity. Inside he knew the assassin had a cold disregard for life and the dawning realisation that the assassin would also have a scanner device left him in no doubt that they knew he was there. It would not be able to identify him but in the circumstances that did not matter.

The solid footfall of the technician approaching forced Tor to move at a low crouch. He looked at the scanner and knew immediately the intersection ahead was covered by the assassin. The footsteps of the technician hesitated for a short moment. He muttered, "Only one thing for it." He unfastened the tool bag.

Ghaan kept a casual eye on the scanner. He was aware that someone was attempting to keep a low profile and this made him smile as it could only be one person. He saw the maintenance man step around the corner and made a gesture for him not to speak and indicated Tors' position. The man looked perplexed for a moment but gave a nod.

He showed the technician that he was armed and motioned for him to move round and disturb Tor from his position. The sound of the tool bag being opened had both men freeze. The technician looked perplexed. Ghaan just felt curious.

The voice of one of the other technicians called out, "Jed, have you pulled those cards yet?"

Jed called back, "Give me a Mizura longer."

Something was raised above the row of units and pointed straight at Ghaan. He dove out of the way as the device hummed and with a loud crack discharged. Something metallic whistled past and he looked around briefly to see a bolt embedded deep into the teladianium panel above him.

Jed called out, "He's got a bolt gun." He also knew it would take a few moments to recharge and charged around the side of the relays to try and grab Tor before it was ready. What he had not expected was to be struck hard on the side of the head with a wrench.

Sweety said, "Run."

Voices of alarm echoed from the other technicians who ran to see what was going on. Ghaan had raised himself onto one knee as Tor ran across the gap in a low sprint. The blaster in his right hand discharged.

Ghaan moved sideways as he came back up to full height and then sidled into the aisle and discharged both blasters. Tor was not there and he stepped across but jumped back as the bolt gun buzzed and then cracked. The bolt hit the side of the relay unit and punched a hole through the thin wall. Taking advantage of the delay to recharge he stepped out onto the balcony as Tor, with his back to him grabbed hold of the edges of the ladder and slid down to the next level.

He snapped off a quick shot at the dropping figure and saw it graze Tors left shoulder. There was the sound of running both behind him and from Tor. Looking slightly perplexed he gazed at the blaster. One of the technicians called out, "What are you waiting for? He's getting away!"

Ghaan turned around to see the three new arrivals helping a stunned Jed back to his feet. There was a nasty gash in the hairline just above his ear and the side of his face was covered in blood.

He commented absently, "Looks like Tor got him."

The woman in the group said, "We need to get him to the accident unit. We can stop the bleeding there. Afterwards we can send him to the med bay."

Ghaan asked, "Where's the nearest one to here?"

She replied, "There's one on each level, but why are you standing there letting him get away? And just who the hell are you?"

Ghaan gave a slight grin, "I wondered when we'd get around to that." He shot Jed and the two men with the blaster in his left hand. The woman screamed as he took careful aim with the blaster in his right hand and pulled the trigger. The plasma pulse hit her right shoulder and she span around and fell to the floor crying out in pain.

He looked carefully at the weapon and sighed, with a slow deliberate walk he strolled towards the stricken technician as she scrambled to her feet and started to run. A thin wisp of smoke rose from the seared flesh and charred fabric on her shoulder

Adjusting the offset he once again took aim. One shot to the back of the head and he nodded to himself satisfied that he would not graze Tor a second time.

The rattle of the maintenance cage door and Ghaan was moving swiftly to a safe location away from the scene of carnage. Behind him was the sound of many feet running and keeping low he heard voices raised in alarm.

Carn DeLargo arrived ahead of his squad. They had heard the blaster fire from several decks above. He was a youthful twenty six jazuras, a fresh faced rookie in the eyes of many security guards, and as he surveyed the scene in front of him he wondered if he would see his next birthday.

He looked at the rest of the team of four and knew that he probably looked just as pale and certainly was trying to force back the sensation of nausea. Carn was the oldest of the five and considered the most experienced so had been put in charge. He now rued the day he volunteered to work in the outer sectors. He had acknowledged to himself at the time that there was better chances of promotion and a higher salary but he had not expected to be filling dead mens' shoes so soon.

Reflecting back it had always been said that working as station security was a cushy number. With all the technology available violent crime was quickly dealt with and criminals transported straight to the cells without any need for intervention. Stun batons were usually only for show. The mere threat was enough to keep most people in line.

Yet as he stood looking at the bodies, all the training, or lack of it as he now thought, did not prepare him for this. It was violence without recourse and with the systems being down they had nothing to combat against it.

His mouth was dry and he had to force out the question, "Who are they?"

None of the squad appeared eager to find out. Then one of the five stepped forward and knelt down pulling at a sleeve he glanced back as his face turned ashen grey with a hint of green and mumbled, "It's crew seventeen." The lad ran off and could be heard being sick.

Carn knew this team. He glanced over to the open blast door of the escape pod room and knew he did not need to go and look for the guards that would have been on duty. Only he would have to check that all the escape pods were still there. He saw the body of the woman, Anj and remembered the drinking sessions he used to have with the team. His body began to shake and he felt the nausea beginning to fight its way up. He found a few words, "Someone go tell Storrall that Tor's been here." He added, "And get a clean up crew down here." After which he leant against a relay unit and let his body respond to instinct.

ThaStornla had observed from a well concealed vantage point. He now knew who he was looking for, but needed to get closer so that he could determine the scent. He wondered briefly if he should find Tor but let the thought slip by as Tor would be on edge and likely to fire the bolt gun at anyone that strayed too close.

He glanced at his tracker unit and located movement on the decks below. For the moment he could afford to wait as the pocket stealth module he carried appeared to function as well against the primitive alien technology as it did on their own far more advanced systems.

Tor winced, Sweety had guided him to the accident unit where he had just grabbed a med-pack and left to find a more concealed position.

The blaster shot had seared a chunk of flesh out the top of his shoulder and cauterized the wound but at the same time fusing the cloth of his overalls and clothes to his skin. The wound itself had split open and oozed blood into his clothes.

He tore open the pack and pulled out the antiseptic and pain inhibitor spray. Several applications and he could no longer feel his shoulder and slowly he removed his top. Closing his eyes, so that he did not have to bear witness, he took a firm hold of his garments and pulled hard against the fused cloth until it came free. He could feel the blood run warm and sticky from the freshly opened wound past the numb area. He glanced at the med-pack and pulled out the instaskin and steri-wipes. Tearing open the packet of wipes he covered the wound and pressed down with his right hand.

Holding the spray of instaskin in his left hand he pointed it towards the covered wound. Feeling the blood ooze through the wipes he sprayed the liquid as he dragged them across the wound. Reacting with the skin and blood the liquid rapidly formed a slightly opaque film that was tinged ruby red and slowly became white as Tor continued to apply the spray.

He had no idea of how long the local anesthetic would last so checked the med kit for more. Finding two more sprays of each liquid inside eased his mind. Packing this into the tool bag he left himself with just one dilemma and that was clothes. The blood soaked and charred top was a give away but just slightly less so than if he did not wear them.

Using the inner top to try and clean himself up he then rolled it up tight and stuffed it into the bag with the spent spray cans. Pulling the overalls back on he looked at the scanner. There was almost no movement with the only indications of activity being on the peripheral range of the techpad.

He whispered, "Okay Sweety where to?"

Sweety responded, "Ideally we need to get four decks up so we can find a vantage point."

Tor said quietly, "Any idea how we do that without attracting attention?"

The screen of the techpad produced a schematic layout of the levels. There were ladders around the periphery of the decks but these were all exposed. Several others were beside the maintenance lifts. Only he would have to rely on no one watching them. She commented, "My only other suggestion is the ventilation shafts."

Tor shook his head, "Not an option, not with the shoulder the way it is."

Sweety replied, "Then you will have to run around down here and hope he comes to find you."

Tor nodded, "I'm thinking he's got a scanner so I don't imagine we'll have to run around for long."

Sweety commented, "Yes I know and I have its frequency map from our last meeting."

Tor asked, "Which means?"

The AI replied, "If he tries a jammer unit then he will have to go blind himself."

Tor thought for a while and asked, "Any chance you can mess up his scanner?"

There was a brief pause and then Sweety replied, "Should the opportunity present itself I can give it a go."

Tor pulled out the bolt gun and examined it closely, "Now is there any way I can get this to fire more rapidly?"

Broden marched down to the docking bay having called Polmanckelest and asked him to meet him.

The Paranid stepped off his Prometheus and looked questioningly at the Station Commander.

Keeping his voice conspiratorially quiet Broden said, "We know who the assassin is."

Polmanckelest blinked one of those cautious slow blinks and said, "Go on."

With a quick nod Broden said quietly, "A man called Ghaan Yapall, better known as the Venom Master."

The Paranid asked slowly, "And you're sure this Ghaan is the Venom Master?"

Broden could sense a touch of anxiety in the voice, "Absolutely. Helass picked him out from panoramic view of the station without any trouble whatsoever." He knew he had to embellish the certainty.

Polmanckelest commented, "Then Tor is in deeper trouble than we first thought."

The captain asked, "You know this guy?"

Polmanckelest replied, "Only by reputation."

Broden knew the Paranid was holding back so he asked slowly, "What does that mean?"

There was a pensive look before an answer was forthcoming, "They say he kills for the pleasure, not money. That's just a bonus."

With a slightly confused look Broden tried to comprehend the meaning of this statement, "You mean he's psychotic?"

The Paranid replied, "More in control than that, but you don't have a word for it."

Broden felt he understood and asked, "And?"

Polmanckelest commented, "Anyone that comes across him will be killed."

After a moments thought Broden commented, "What you're trying to say is that it's going to be a blood bath over there."

The Paranid gave a single gesture of acknowledgement, and responded, "And I have no doubt that in the current circumstances Tor will be blamed for every death."

Broden said urgently, "Word has it they'll arrest me if I try and board the station. Any chance you can get a team over there?"

Polmanckelest shook his head, "What makes you think they'll trust me? I knew the evidence against Tor as well."

Broden commented, "There must be a way we can tell them?"

Polmankelest asked, "What about the Mohrabas? After all ThaStornla is over there and could become a victim. The new Commander would think twice about not letting them on board."

Broden replied bitterly, "She might just start a war if she feels they're being invaded."

Polmankelest said, "Only one of them needs to enter station and I doubt she would see that as an invasion. They can then ask permission for more people to be allowed on."

Broden said, "I'm still not sure."

Polmankelest responded, "We could pick anyone from any of the stations and they would be held with the same level of suspicion as you or I. But she won't know how to deal with the Mohrabas particularly if they're demanding to see the Emperors son."

Broden considered the statement and could see the logic behind it, yet he still did not feel comfortable about going to ask. With a nod he said, "Okay, I'll ask and see what they say. But you're coming with me just in case they say 'No'."

Ghaan moved quietly. He stopped behind the maintenance run access panel and a quick scan of the area indicated it was clear. Releasing the catches he carefully opened the hatch making sure it would not slam against the side.

With a second scan he dropped down to the floor with a dart gun in hand. His eyes looked over the whole area watching for the faintest signs of movement. His hand groped back into the maintenance run as he kept watch and pulled out the tool bag.

He turned his back and quickly began to close the panel but slowed as it came to the last few centimetres to prevent it slamming shut. Once shut, he spun around and surveyed the area with just quick glances at the scanner. Shouldering his tool bag he moved cautiously forward.

Ghaan had the uncomfortable feeling he was being watched and every now and again he stopped to look up. The feeling was growing ever stronger, almost as though the watcher was getting inexorably closer.

Ghaan seldom felt uncomfortable yet the feeling of being looked at played on his mind but with nothing on scanner and having made no visual confirmation. He attempted to shrug off the idea by reasoning if someone was watching he would deal with them just like he dealt with the others.

He moved between the racks of power distribution equipment glancing occasionally at the scanner until the high energy field began to affect the screen. The gentle hum was distinctly different from the sharp buzz of the bolt gun and at every intersection he waited, listening for any tell tale signs. A step forward and a quick step back verified the way was clear.

At the next intersection a mechanical rumble had him drop into a crouch and wait for a maintenance robot to trundle past.

Chapter 13: Captured

Storral was finding it impossible to try and co-ordinate without internal station comms and the last thing he wanted to do right now was inform Chalotta about the lack of progress since the deaths.

This event had given him an area of the station he could now focus on to the point that he had relocated himself just to get away from the continual status update requests. In order to get some chain of communications in place they had seconded runners, no more than young lads, to carry message chips to each group. He only hoped that Tor would have the decency not to gun down a boy.

The portable scanners had been dragged from stores and each of the lower level units had them activated. However the scan range was seriously impaired by the high energy power units on the robot only decks. The upper one was a full deck that converged on the stations power core. Much of the deck however could not be observed due to the mass of suspended power conduits fanning out like a web into a series of massive transformers and primary grounding units, before linking into substation units and a network of relays and secondary ground units.

Storral knew that Tor would be somewhere on that deck or the one below. There was no way out of those levels except to climb the ladders or take the maintenance lifts. His one concern was that if Tor climbed down to the next level he would be able to enter the manufacturing half of the factory. The energy cell mover was still stuck in the entrance of the blast door having been damaged when the system virus caused the door to shut. The maintenance crew had reopened the door but Storral had sent a runner to tell them to get back up to the crew levels before they had a chance to repair the unit.

Both sides of the station were guarded and Storral was certain Tor would be caught or at least shot. The fate of the technicians prevented him from sending in a team to flush Tor out.

Tor moved as quietly as he could with the bolt gun firmly gripped in his right hand. Having made a decision to climb down to the next level in order to have a full deck between him and any casual observer on the upper levels, it was now a case of finding a maintenance ladder. As he proceeded along he glanced over his shoulder every few moments to check no one was creeping up behind him.

Sweety reported, "High energy fields over to the left will impair my scanner."

Tor nodded not daring to speak in case his voice carried far enough to give away his position. He moved back not risking an unexpected encounter with the assassin. A maintenance robot crossed the intersection. Tor chanced a whisper against the background hum of the equipment, "Is there any reason that thing keeps going past."

Sweety replied, "It's on a preprogrammed routine. As the computers are down it is stuck in a functional cycle of perform task, return to station, get new task, perform task. Poor thing is not getting any new data so it is repeating the old task until it gets the instruction to stop or do something different."

Tor muttered, "Not too bright then?"

Sweety commented sympathetically, "It is not a trait required for the job."

Tor checked the scanner and approached the aisle. He glanced swiftly in both directions and moved to the other side. Ahead of him was the bulkhead, he needed to move around the periphery and Sweety showed him the nearest ladder on the floor map.

The metal frame around the top of the opening was situated adjacent to a large open maintenance robot lift. Sweety said, "It is thirty five metres down to the next deck floor. I would encourage you to climb down as quickly as you can."

Tor looked over the edge and it plunged into darkness. He whispered, "There's no light down there!"

Sweety replied, "That's because robots don't need light to see."

Tor muttered, "Fantastic, if he doesn't get me then I'm likely to fall and break my neck in the dark."

Sweety replied, "He has the weapons and from what I can tell is a better shot than you. You need all the help you can get and I have the access codes to activate the work lamps."

Tor grabbed the ladder and whispered, "That's exactly what I needed to hear."

Sweety asked, "Which bit?"

Tor replied, "You can turn on the lights."

ThaStornlas' movements were so fluid that they appeared effortless despite the speed he moved and the virtual silence with which he did it with, which was only broken by the soft pad as each foot touched down for a brief instance. With a grab for the top of a ladder he descended into darkness.

Ghaan reached the point where Tor had dealt with his wound. Kneeling down he looked around and then focussed his attention on the blood splattered on the casings. He smiled as he muttered to himself, "Looks like I hurt you Mr. Grall, but where have you gone?"

The hunt was in earnest and Tor had shown resilience and determination in staying alive. Ghaan approved, it would make killing him more rewarding.

The lack of blood dripping from this location was a clear indication that Tor had stemmed the flow. The slight smell of anesthetic was indicative that Tor had a med-pack. How long the blood had been here was slightly harder to tell, but he guessed it must have been less than ten Mizuras.

Checking the scanner revealed nothing. Looking around he could have easily missed Tor when the scanner ceased to function. Somehow he also felt slightly more at ease that he was no longer being watched. Now that he thought about it this in itself was odd. He looked up and in his own mind he asked, 'Where could the watcher have gone?'

He knew it was not wise to hang around just in case some fool decided to risk his life and look over a balcony above. Ghaan considered that the security team would think that they were not paid enough to deal with situations like this and then smiled when he thought that the security team was not being paid at all.

His mind strayed to wondering if it could have been Tor watching him. Looking around again he was satisfied that he was alone. In which case he asked himself where would Tor have gone? He would not be able to ascend because of the security, so Tor must have moved down to the next level. Checking the floor map he located the nearest ladder and on the assumption that Tor may have used that he headed towards an alternative one nearby.

Broden stood just ahead of Polmankelest and for the first time in longer than he dared to remember, felt nervous. This was his first face to face meeting and the holo-conference had not done justice to the creature.

To his mind ThiRioth emanated untold strength. He felt that the big Mohrabas could crush the life out of him in an instance. Tors' description had been good but no words would have truly prepared him for this meeting.

He wondered how Tor ever managed with the look of curiosity that the Chief Councillor now gave him. He fought back against his primal instincts and took a deep breath to steady himself, "Excellency, we know who the assassin is. It is in both our interest to catch him. However we have a," Broden thought for a few moments, "Difficulty." It was a lame word but Broden continued to feel uncomfortable. ThaStornla had a certain majesty about him and despite his size he never made Broden feel threatened the way ThiRioth did.

ThiRioth gave a simple single nod.

Broden felt strangely comforted by the unease of Polmankelest beside him. Even the Paravid hero appeared to be uncomfortable in the meeting. Broden continued, "We know the assassin kills as much for pleasure than pay. If anyone should get in his way then he will have no qualms about terminating them."

ThiRioth asked, "And your point is?"

Broden was slightly surprised by the question, "ThaStornla is on the station. The station commander will believe that he will have played some part in the sabotage. Both he and Tor are on the run and the assassin will kill both of them. Doesn't that bother you?"

ThiRioth gave a nod then, to Broden's surprise, smiled, "I can appreciate your concern. However although some of your assertions are true, I can confirm that ThaStornla has not been arrested."

Broden felt the wind had been robbed from his sails and asked, "What makes you so sure?"

ThiRioth answered, "I have spoken to him." Broden was lost for words and ThiRioth continued, "However I share your concern for the life of his Highness. He is acting far too rashly so at your request a messenger will be sent to the station."

Broden asked, "You say you've spoken to ThaStornla?"

ThiRioth gestured in the affirmative, "Understand only that your own communications on board the station are affected. The device his Highness carries is unaffected by your systems failure."

Broden asked, "Excellency, did he say anything about what's going on on the station?"

ThiRioth looked at Broden thoughtfully and replied, "Only that he has located the assassin and will attempt to catch him."

Broden's mind felt eased by this news. That ThaStornla was a definite ally and appeared to be about to help Tor was welcome information. Yet this news was also a double edged sword as if any harm came to the Emperor's son he doubted that words of forgiveness and understanding would echo in the halls of the Mohrabas leadership. A question raised itself in his mind and asked, "Excellency, did his Highness mention what he would do with the assassin when he caught him?"

With a slight smile ThiRioth said, "What indeed? A question that has crossed my mind and one to which I do not have an answer."

Polmankelest asked, "Excellency, when will this messenger be ready?"

ThiRiOTH glanced over to the Paranid and answered, "One can be deployed in a," He thought about the alien time unit and said, "Mizura."

Broden asked, "Sorry Excellency, but what type of messenger are you sending?"

With a glance at both visitors he growled, "Robotic."

Tor reached the bottom of the ladder. With the shafts of light from the deck above bouncing and reflected off the walls his initial fear that he would be groping around in absolute darkness became less. Gradually his eyes accustomed to the light level and could make out the shapes around him. However where the light could not reach then the pitch black remained impenetrable.

He shielded the glow of the datapad screen for fear it would act as a beacon to his location. Guided by Sweetys' verbal directions he moved deeper into the shadows.

The mechanical sounds of machinery and conveyors allowed him to keep his bearings in the dark as the hum of power conduits masked his cautious footsteps on the hard metal surface.

Slowly he edged towards the manufacturing plant. He glanced towards the pools of light in the deck above to see if anyone was descending a ladder. With nothing on the scanner he froze as a growl commented in his ear, "Having fun Tor?"

Tors' pulse slowly began to calm itself as he whispered half in anger and half in relief, "Are you trying to scare me to death?" He turned and could not see ThaStornla in the darkness but he could sense the Mohrabas within an arms reach.

ThaStornlas' quiet purr melted into the hum of the equipment around them but Tor could make out the words, "The one you're looking for is also on this deck. He also appears to be wearing some optical device that is helping him to see his way around."

With a curse Tor responded quietly, "Night vision. How do you see in the dark?"

ThaStornla purred gently, "I don't have to see to find my way around."

With a nod Tor said, "Unfortunately my senses aren't so well evolved. So if you could just catch this guy for me then that would be useful."

ThaStornla replied, "He has a different weapon to the one he used previously. I'm not certain how it differs but I thought I'd mention it."

With a nod Tor looked at the technical datapad and asked quietly, "Sweetie do you have any sort of weapons database we can access?"

Sweetie answered through the earpiece, "Strangely enough I do but it is not too comprehensive. If you pass me over to ThaStornla and ask him to describe the weapon he saw I can try to match it."

Tor held out the pad and said, "Sweetie wants you to describe the weapon and she will try to find a match."

ThaStornla took the pad and Tor saw the Mohrabas shield the screen leaving him in darkness. The gentle purring voice was the only indication ThaStornla was still there and after a brief while Sweetie commented, "We believe the weapon is a dart gun."

The technical pad was pushed back into his hand and Tor took a brief look at the screen to see the picture of the weapon. He whispered, "Poison?"

Sweetly replied, "Quieter than a blaster and in the darkness there will be no pre-charge muzzle glow."

ThaStornla purred, "He's getting closer."

Tor looked at the screen and saw nothing. He whispered, "Shall we catch ourselves an assassin?"

Chalotta was in a particularly bad mood due to the persisting problems with the stations computers and the time it was taking to isolate all the effected systems and take them off line.

When a very perplexed security guard appeared she snapped at him, "What now?"

The guard held a datapad and said hesitantly, "A, err, something, err, a messenger just delivered this. Commander"

Chalotta stared at him and replied sharply, "A messenger? From whom?"

The guard held out the datapad, "The Mohrabas."

She considered that if this was some kind of practical joke than someone was going to have a very bad time. Chalotta responded sarcastically, "If you haven't noticed the docking bay is out of order."

The guard replied hastily, "It came through the airlocks. Commander."

She asked harshly, "Then why didn't you show him up?"

With a look of apprehension the guard answered, "It's not a person, Commander. It's a robot."

There was a momentary hesitation and she asked cautiously, "What type of robot?"

Swallowing hard the guard replied, "If I were to take a guess then I would say it's a battle-droid."

Chalotta stood perfectly still and then moved forward and took the datapad. The pad itself was a standard one used by the races and she hooked it into the holographic projection unit.

The first image was that of ThiRioth as he announced, "I am ThiRioth, Chief Councillor of the Mohrabas people. Greetings. We are aware of a situation on board your station which could endanger the safety and well being of His Highness ThaStornla, son of our exulted Emperor. Please be aware that should any harm come to His Highness then the Sentinel which delivered this message will take any action necessary to protect him. Unfortunately although this unit will be able to identify species it does not have the programming to recognise individuals and as such will target the species of an aggressor and deem everyone of that race as a legitimate target. Only His Highness has the power to control this unit now that it is on board your station. Shortly it will activate its search routine and locate ThaStornla. Once this has been achieved it will move to protect His Highness."

Chalotta was surprised and said quickly, "His Highness should, from all accounts, still be in his room. Tell him he has a visitor." As the guard left to deliver the message she called out, "And be polite." She would work out an apology for her discourtesy later.

Brodens' image appeared and before he began to speak she shut down the datapad. To her mind he had nothing that she wanted to hear.

A few mizura a very red faced guard skidded into the room having sprinted the length of the corridor. Between heavy gasps for air he spluttered out the words, "The alien's not in his room."

The Sentinel stirred its armour plates moved and interlocked as it rose from its crouched position. The deep red glow of the slit in the visor against the jet black and silver armour had observers shifting back uneasily as it turned slowly and scanned the deck. With primary weapon arm elbows locked and weapons pointing forward the unit hovered forwards with a singularity of purpose.

Ghaan had Tor on scanner. His movement appeared slow and cautious to the point that he began to wonder if Tor was simply groping around aimlessly in the dark. Still he was not going to take any chances. Cautiously he began to circle around to try and sneak up on his prey.

The gradual sensation that someone else was in the dark, caused the hairs on the back of his neck to start to rise. It was the same feeling as before yet there was no-one but Tor on the screen.

He stopped and crouched down for a while and strained his ears to try and hear any extraneous sounds over the general monotonous hum of the power units. He slipped a discreet injector on to one of his belt clips. Ready to be detached at a moments notice should he be disarmed.

Staying in a low crouch he moved as quietly as possible. The night optics digitally enhancing the surrounding objects in a mix of green and red haze.

The scanner showed Tor moving in a stop, start manner and every so often changing direction. With every passing moment he closed in occasionally pausing to look around, just in case he had missed someone.

He ducked under a low conduit to reach the next aisle and would be just one away from Tor. When he heard a low growl and in an instant he was lifted from the ground like a rag doll. A hand seized his wrist in a vice like grip and continued to squeeze the life out of it. He refrained from crying out in pain and with his flailing free hand caught hold of the injector and stabbed it into the forearm of ThaStornla. The grip remained strong with only a deep growl to penetrate the darkness.

Spot lights came on and the light on the night vision goggles blinded him that he was forced to knock them from his head. The sound of Tors feet pounded the deck over the noise of the transformers.

Suddenly ThaStornlas grip relaxed and released. Ghaan dropped one foot onto the deck as Tor skidded around the corner and then flung himself past back into the other aisle as Ghaan brought the dart gun around. Tor was gone before he could take proper aim. The vice like grip had affected his reaction time and he was still slightly dazzled by the sudden flash of light.

Ghaan spoke out loud, "Well, well Mr. Grall. It looks like your friend is vulnerable to our poisons too."

Somewhere above them the Sentinels weapons charged and it blasted the gates apart of the maintenance lift. Moving out into the void the hover pack allowed it a rapid and controlled descent.

ThaStornla had slid down the support behind him, his breathing shallow. Ghaan stood over him the dart gun in hand and glanced at his time piece. With the voice box programmed with Tors' vocal sounds he called out, "Interesting. Four times the dose needed to kill the strongest of the known races and you'll be pleased to know your friend has lasted three times longer, but I can sense the end is near now."

The Mohrabas Captains eyes rolled up to look at him the eye lids closed slowly and the head lulled forward. Ghaan called out, "Looks like it's over. But don't worry Mr. Grall it's your turn next."

Tor called back, "Don't you think it'll look a bit odd when we're both found dead down here."

Ghaan replied, "Who said anything about finding you down here? No. What I have in mind for you Mr. Grall is a terrible accident. Only it'll look like just punishment and no one will think twice about it."

Tor asked, "Why are you doing this? What's in it for you?"

Ghaan waved the dart gun around the corner there was no buzz so he chanced a quick look around the side of the unit to see Tor scuttle around the next corner just as the lights went out again.

He looked around and had to allow his eyes time to adjust to the gloom and said, "It looks like you're not as helpless as you make out Mr. Grall. The lights are a nice trick."

Tor responded from the darkness, "You didn't answer my question."

Ghaan groped around for the night vision glasses and recovered his dropped pack as he answered, "Because I enjoy my work Mr. Grall. The money isn't that important, it's the challenge and I get to meet interesting people just before I kill them. A bit like your dead friend here." He kept his eyes half shut as he put on the optics and as he did so the lights came on again. With a smile Ghaan commented, "Now you're not playing fair Mr. Grall."

Tor was moving gently, his heart felt it was trying to burst from his chest and he had adrenaline coursing through his veins. The death of ThaStornla left him with mixed emotions, a sense of great loss and that if the assassin did not kill him then the Mohrabas would. Just for the moment he would not give the assassin the satisfaction. The lights had come on again and Tor took stock of the position of Ghaan.

With the bolt gun in hand he made a move to keep as much in between him and the assassin as possible until he could get a clear shot. Sweety guided him, he was in no doubt his opponent had a scanner so his position would always be known.

Sweety commented, "I have access to the scanner on his datapad."

The assassin called out, "I know where you are Mr. Grall so there's no point running around like this. You know I'll catch you."

Tor was beginning to find the assassin calling him Mr. Grall a little annoying and responded, "You do know if you kill me you'll never get back to get paid by Feran."

The assassin gave a soft laugh, "Ahh, but Mr. Grall you've led me to a place that is like heaven and I am God. I have no history here, and I've done great things."

Tor replied bitterly, "You think killing all those people was a 'great thing'?"

Ghaan replied, "Oh, but I didn't kill them Mr. Grall. Officially you did! And who but God can move in such unseen ways."

This caused Tor to flush with rage and he called back angrily, "Only a sick fucker like you."

The assassin was moving cautiously towards him, "Now, now, Mr. Grall. You should feel humbled by my presence and prepare to be smited for lack of belief by my holy retribution, and for your blasphemy."

Tor was by the corner of the aisle which Ghaan stood on the other side of. He tapped the technical datapad and after several Sezura, Sweety said "Now". Tor stepped around the corner and as he took aim Ghaan swung around to face him. As the dart gun swept up Tor instinctively dropped to the floor the hiss of the projectile skimmed over his head.

Tor moved the bolt gun and then lowered it to the floor his eyes transfixed on the barrel of the dart gun that pointed straight at his head. Ghaan shook his head saying, "Tut, tut, Mr. Grall. Another nice trick that just lacked the sound of footfall."

Tor sighed and asked, "So what now?"

Ghaan replied, "You get to enjoy this brief moment of fear and then you." The sentence hung as a section of the ceiling boomed and was then torn apart revealing a new shaft of light through which something dropped. Ghaan turned his head to look at the hole allowing the dart gun to drift off target.

Tor pulled the trigger of the bolt gun. The crack of the bolt discharge was instant Ghaan's dart gun fired an moment later out of reaction as the bolt smashed its way through the assassins' right foot lifting him from the ground to pirouette above the deck before crashing down on the hard surface.

Tor felt the body of the dart cut across the side of his head and then heard it rattle across the floor.

He was up on his feet with the bolt gun in hand. Ghaan grimaced in pain, the dart gun gone from his hand but Tor knew better than to believe the assassin was now unarmed. He leveled the bolt gun and took aim.

Ghaan looked back his face a mixture of pain and hatred. There was no fear in those cold eyes. Through clenched teeth Ghaan said, "Well what are you waiting for?"

Tor hesitated and replied calmly, "I should take you in alive."

Ghaan appeared to smile despite the pain, "Yes... You are the... good man Mr. Grall. It is your duty." He grimaced, "But who will believe you're not the killer?"

Tor commented strongly, "They will believe me. All the evidence is here."

With a pained laugh Ghaan replied, "Feran believes you're his nemesis but you are so weak minded. A real hero would have killed me by now." He looked at Tor, "Did you like my traps?"

Images of the victim Wilasma and those he met just before the explosion tore the room apart, merged with the memory of Commander Parrel and lastly ThaStornla slumped against the post, flashed across his eyes. He said, "I only said should, but it doesn't matter any more if I don't take you in alive. You killed ThaStornla and have condemned us to war with his race and it's one we will lose."

Ghaan winced as he dragged himself into a sitting position leaving a trail of blood from the obliterated right foot. With his back resting against the power transformer behind him he looked at Tor and smiled, "So even if you kill me now, you're still going to die soon. That makes me feel so much better. But tell me what did you do to that bolt gun?"

Tor replied, "It has a pre-charge mode but I think we've talked enough." He felt the presence of something behind him. Glancing over he saw the bulk of the new generation Sentinel filling the aisle.

Ghaan commented, "Looks like the aliens have started the war already. From here I get the opportunity to see you die Mr. Grall. Now that will be fun."

Tor stood still and was undecided what to do next and then came to a decision, "Goodbye Mr. Assassin." A deep growl stopped his finger. Looking up quickly he saw ThaStornla step around the corner.

Ghaans' face looked stunned briefly before he regained his calm composure, "Well, well, looks like our poisons aren't as effective on your kind as I thought." Sensing the moment slip away from him he threw a small dart at Tor.

ThaStornla knocked the bolt gun to one side and it discharged down the aisle to hit a unit that briefly showered sparks in all directions. In the same lightning fast reflexes he caught the dart. The Sentinel did not move.

ThaStornla looked at the dart and replied in a growl, "I'm not so easy to kill as that."

Ghaan replied with a touch of regret, "Apparently not."

Reaching down and without concern for Ghaans' missing right foot ThaStornla grabbed the front of his overalls and lifted him effortlessly from the floor. He placed him in the grip of the Sentinel which generated a restraining field.

Ghaan went ashen white from the blood loss and ThaStornla knelt down to apply a tourniquet to the lower leg. Tor saw Ghaan flinch but in the field he was otherwise unable to move.

ThaStornla turned back to Tor and said, "Now we have to get out of here."

Tor gave a wry smile and commented, "For a moment there I thought he'd killed you." ThaStornla pulled up the sleeve of his right arm and showed a bracelet that blinked mauve. Tor frowned and commented, "That doesn't look so good."

ThaStornla leant forward and purred in reply, "There is only a certain amount of anti-venom available to me. So we must move fast."

Tor looked at the technical datapad and commented, "Sweetie, give us some options."

Sweetie replied, "From here I would suggest escape pods, however our assassin here has infected those on the lowest level with a virus."

Tor replied, "Can you clear any of the viruses."

Sweetie replied, "All of them. Just say the word. But as soon as they get a transporter fix on you, you will be in big trouble."

Tor commented, "Now you tell me. Okay, here's what I want you to do."

Chalotta sat in the controllers chair of the command centre and watched the red flashing lights on all the screens. Suddenly the power went out, consoles flickered and open computer panels glowed. Maintenance robots silently glided past technicians frozen in the darkness. Cards were reinserted. She called out, "What is going on?"

A voice replied from the darkness, "Your guess is as good as mine."

A computer voice said in dulcet tones, "Docking bay operational. Docking permission granted. Incoming ship on final approach. Docking crews to standby."

Chalotta called out angrily again, "What's going on here?"

A voice replied, "I don't know."

The computer announced, "Systems initialisation sequence started."

A few mizuras passed in silence as the maintenance robots left. The screens flickered to life and showed they were beginning to recover. System checks flickered to green as the lights gradually began to rise and illuminated the room.

The command crew looked around and Chalotta asked, "Are all systems back on line?"

One of the crew glanced at the monitor and replied, "Internal scanners and transporters still unavailable, but we do have comms."

She said, "Excellent, get me Storal."

The sound of heavy booted feet echoed along the corridor.

The image of Storal appeared and he had the look of a man whose bad day had just got worse. He asked hastily, "Yes Commander?" Just as Broden stepped into the room.

Chalotta's eyes narrowed and she responded, "Get yourself up here. I have someone for you to arrest."

However Broden was not alone as six Mohrabas warriors filed into the room behind him. He said, "Fortunately for you the Mohrabas people are a forgiving race. These warriors belong to the Emperors Elite Guard and you'll be pleased to know that although His Highness was injured, he is still alive and well having assisted in the capture of the assassin which, despite popular opinion, isn't Tor."

Chalotta said calmly, "And you expect me to believe that after he killed more of my crew?"

Broden responded honestly, "No I don't, but you will. At this moment in time I'm the only person standing between you and these gentlemen. Who would like to have a quiet word with you about allowing His Highness to run off and do dangerous things."

She regarded the heavily armed Mohrabas warriors as keenly as they disregarded her. A few low growls from the captain and she felt the troop were having a quiet laugh from their expressions and furtive smiles. The leader of the six fixed her with a long hard stare.

Chalotta said strongly, "That would be an act of war!"

Broden appeared to consider this and replied, "No, I don't think so. It may have escaped your notice, so let me assure you, they out gun us. If they wanted to start a war it would last a few brief Mizuras at best." He sighed and then continued, "With everything that's been going on, I can understand if you don't trust me. All I ask for is some time to deliver the assassin to the Mohrabas and gather all the relevant data so we can present it to you and the other Station Commanders. Then you shall see who's guilty and who's innocent."

Chalotta looked at Broden with disdain at his apparent reasonableness and knew in that brief moment her only real option was to concede rather than argue, "Very well, but Tor and this assassin stay here until we've seen the evidence."

Broden shook his head, "Something that wasn't made clear to you is that our friends here get first shout. Since the death of the Ambassador we've been living on borrowed time. Both the captive and Tor now get to travel to the planet and one of them will be executed. The other one gets to come home."

Chalotta remembered the conversation with Tor and how he seemed anxious that someone needed to visit the homeworld. She said hesitantly, "He."

Broden knew what she was going to say and cut in, "Yeah, apparently you sort of volunteered to take his place after arresting him. Now there's a touch of irony. If you hadn't arrested him then the assassin might

not have shown himself, in which case Tor would have had to go to the planet alone and answer for the death of the Ambassador." He paused for a moment and then added, "In which case I thank you for your part in helping us find the guilty man."

Chalotta sensed a touch of sincerity in Broden's tone but was still skeptical. She felt she had been kept in the dark and was suspicious that Broden had not told her everything that he knew.

Storral commented from the screen, "Orders Commander?"

Chapter 14 - Captured

ThaStornla picked up the message that help was on its way. He growled, "It's time for us to move." With another command he sent the Sentinel, with prisoner still restrained, to the maintenance lift.

Tor commented quietly, "How much longer before the anti-toxin runs out?"

Glancing sideways at Tor he purred, "It already has, but it will be a short while before its neutralising effects wear off."

Tor said, "That doesn't sound good. Let's get moving." They marched after the battle-droid and with each passing moment Tor glanced over to ThaStornla to see if he could detect any change. However the Mohrabas kept his countenance exactly the same as he had always done.

They stepped onto the maintenance lift and Tor kicked the floor activation switch. This would be a single level rise and they would have to walk to the crew lift which would take them all the way up to the inhabited decks.

As the lift jarred to a stop Tor sensed ThaStornla sway just slightly as if he lost his balance briefly. ThaStornla growled a command to the Sentinel and once again it led the way and then stepped forward and began to follow.

Tor could sense time was running out as his companion now seemed overly focussed on reaching a destination that Tor was having to jog just to keep up with the long strides.

Almost suddenly the Mohrabas Captain stopped and took in a deep breath, the shoulders sagged. He attempted another step and stumbled. Tor was there and prevented ThaStornla from falling completely.

Tor shouted, "Medic! I need a Medic down here now!"

Above him there was a rattle of a cage door and the whir of machinery. ThaStornla breathed slowly. He leant with one hand on the hand rail and one on Tors' shoulder and Tor felt as though he was holding up Mohrabass' full weight.

Tor said calmly, "Now you're not going to die on me again. Help is on its way so just hang in there. That's an order, your Highness."

There was the faint twitch of a smile and with a slow blink ThaStornla said, "Help me to stand up straight. It would not do to be seen being supported."

Tor said, "We have a saying, pride comes before a fall. Now I would recommend you sit. Otherwise you will fall down."

ThaStornla responded, "In which case you will catch me."

Tor gave a wry smile and replied, "Having just found out how much you weigh you've got to be kidding."

The grip on Tors' shoulder increased and ThaStornla straightened himself with what appeared to be the rest of his strength. The clatter of the lift continued to approach and somehow ThaStornla appeared to be at complete rest whilst vertical.

Tor was beginning to wonder if his companion had died standing as there was no immediate indication of him breathing. The eyes had a fixed, if slightly glazed look and did not blink.

The Sentinel had stopped and appeared to be waiting for something. The lift halted and the cage door rattled open. Tor was surprised when four Mohrabas warriors stepped hurriedly out of the lift and proceeded at speed towards them.

They bowed low to ThaStornla. After a brief heart stopping delay for Tor, ThaStornla growled something. One of the new arrivals quickly stepped forward and ripped open a pack. ThaStornla moved his arm slowly and the medic pulled up the sleeve. The mauve light on the indicator was no longer flashing but constant.

An anti-toxin recharge appeared and was plugged into the device. The medic then used a hypo-spray on ThaStornlas neck. Within a Mizura the indicator began to flash again and the Emperors son released Tors shoulder and growled something to the others.

They turned to look at Ghaan. The medic spent a few moments longer monitoring ThaStornla before going over to the assassin. He looked at the remains of the blood drenched foot which still dripped periodically and pulled out some additional bindings from his kit bag.

He gave the assassin a shot of something and then removed the remains of the foot with a laser scalpel and sealed the stump to prevent further blood loss. Tor looked away whilst this impromptu surgery was performed. Where the removed foot went he was not going to ask.

They moved back towards the lift. However it was quickly apparent that not all of them with the Sentinel were going to get in. ThaStornla growled some commands to the battle-droid and it moved away and began to rise to the next level whilst still carrying Ghaan.

The medic and three guards took up positions around ThaStornla and Tor before they stepped into the lift. As they ascended up through the floors Tor became apprehensive with the reception he was going to receive.

The scenery changed as they moved out of the power core area of the station back up to the personnel decks. The sense of deceleration indicated they had nearly reached their destination. With a gentle thump the lift stopped. The guards opened the cage door and stepped forward.

Tor recognised Storral and the faces of the guards who had marched him down to the cells. Some appeared to be fidgeting with inactive stun batons. He could sense unease and there was a touch of bitter confusion in their faces. Others appeared to adopt a stance of hostile hatred yet no one spoke as a contingent of yet more Mohrabas warriors appeared to have taken control of the situation. Tor quickly estimated there were about another twelve when Storral stepped forwards and asked, "Well Mr. Grall, where is he?"

The maintenance lift rattled down to the lower level and Tor replied, "He'll be here in a Mizura."

They waited quietly with only the gentle background sounds of the station to disturb the silence. The maintenance lift returned and the cage door rattled open allowing the Sentinel to glide forwards with a sedated Ghaan. Tor felt that there was slightly more colour in the assassins face.

Polmankelest appeared and stepped forward to inspect the prisoner. In a clear deep voice so that everyone could hear he said, "Ghaan Yapall, better known as the Venom Master, you are charged with murder, attempted murder, sabotage and numerous other station offences. The local sector authority will take you into detention until you can be brought to trial. You are not expected to respond." With that he stepped away and gave a nod to the Mohrabas captain.

A hover stretcher appeared and Ghaan was removed from the clutches of the Sentinel. Binding straps prevented him from falling off and once again they were moving towards the docking bay.

Tor felt he could not get there quickly enough. The atmosphere felt tense and the looks he received were not friendly. However innocent he was, his name had been associated with the deaths and his potential guilt

generally messaged. He could only assume the fact they had caught the assassin was still new news and unreleased.

The crowd parted as the group reached the shuttle lifts to the docks. Guards went first and then Tor, ThaStornla and several others. Finally the stretcher bearers and the last few guards ascended to the dock. The Mohrabas transport was protected by more armed security. Broden waited patiently and gave a slight grin as he surrounded himself in cigar smoke.

The Mohrabas began to board ship as Broden asked, "Been having fun?"

Tor considered this for a sezura and replied frankly, "No not really. But I think His Highness enjoyed himself for a while." He glanced at ThaStornla.

ThaStornla purred, "It was an experience."

Broden tipped his head towards the approaching stretcher and asked, "So this is the Venom Master? From all accounts you should get a medal for catching him."

Tor glanced around at the stretcher and returned his attention to Broden, "I had some help there."

As the stretcher passed them Ghaans hand whipped out sideways and Tor felt something sharp hit the back of his leg. He winced and turned to see the assassin smile as he continued to be carried onto the ship.

Broden asked, "What's up?"

Tor plucked the dart from his leg and in a few Sezuras the back of his thigh felt as if it was on fire. Broden yelled, "Medic!"

For several long painful Sezuras no-one appeared to have heard. The burning sensation ran rapidly through Tor's body and with every heart beat he could feel it rising towards his heart.

The stations crew looked non-plussed as Broden once again called out for a medic. Tor clutched at his chest and sank down to his knees as his heart carried the venom out to his lungs which felt as though they had been seared by flame making breathing difficult and painful before returning back into his arteries to be circulated through the rest of his body.

With a growl from ThaStornla the Mohrabas medic put a scanner against the needle and then against Tor. He growled something to ThaStornla, who said to a concerned Broden, "My physician maybe able to reproduce a serum that will work for one of us but there is no guarantee it will work on Tor. In fact it could kill him faster."

Broden appeared perplexed when Sweety announced over the local comms, "My analysis of the poison is that it is of Split origin, called Yall'T'kfrtha. There is no known antidote. Tor has less than one mizura and twenty five sezura to live now that it has reached the heart."

Broden said hastily, "Do what you can."

The medic quickly produced a hypo spray and plugged it into a small medical replicator which quickly generated the serum. He then applied it to Tor's neck first and then to the injection site. Broden recovered Sweety from Tor so that he could see if the serum was working. Moments later and Tor was in convulsions. Perspiration appeared to flow from every pore and yet he was cold to the touch.

Sweety reported, "No significant change, nerve and neural activity are off the scale. Time to total seizure forty sezura."

Tor closed his hands into fists and bared clenched teeth as if fighting against the inner pain racking through his body. His arms shook and blood oozed from between fingers where his nails pierced the skin.

Broden looked at the Mohrabas doctor who commented, "His body may not take this. It is strong even for our kind but it is the only thing I have time for."

Broden nodded in acknowledgement and said, "Do it."

The physician had two hypo-sprays and held them to either side of Tors neck. After administering the serum he then turned Tor and reapplied to either side of the small of his back. Five sezuras later and Tors' eyes snapped open and his mouth opened in a silent scream as his back arched. The fists opened suddenly and flecked the deck with spatters of blood. The whole body suddenly relaxed and Tors' eyes closed.

For a few painful sezura there was an uneasy silence. When Sweety announced hesitantly, "I am detecting no vital signs. Tor has gone."

ThaStornla growled something to the physician who responded in kind and was already retrieving small strange looking devices from his medical bag. He placed one against the back of Tors neck and then located his heart and placed another directly over the top.

Moments passed and Sweety reported in a less than optimistic tone, "I have detected a heart beat. Pulse rate is one every ten sezura. Lung function is operating at the same rate."

The physician nodded and then called for a stretcher. Broden asked ThaStornla, "What happens now?"

ThaStornla replied, "We maintain his life function until we can find a cure to revive him."

Broden asked, "But he's alive isn't he? He's got a pulse."

ThaStornla looked at him with a touch of curiosity and replied, "Tor is dead. Only if we find a cure will he be able to live again."

Broden asked, "How long can you keep him like that?"

ThaStornla considered the question and asked, "If we can't find a cure, how long would you like us to keep him like this?"

Broden replied, "Until you find one."

With a shake of the head ThaStornla growled, "No my friend. In our culture we allow the dead to die. We will wait five of our solar days and then it ends."

It took Broden a few moments to come to terms with this. The stretcher lifted Tor from the deck and was guided towards the transport. He commented, "Just make sure Ghaan doesn't get near him."

The Mohrabas guards filed onto the transport leaving ThaStornla and Broden on the docking bay. Placing a heavy paw on Brodens shoulder the Mohrabas Captain purred, "We will do all that we can. You have my word."

Broden nodded and replied, "And I know you will be true to your word."

ThaStornla turned and left. Broden watched the transport leave as Polmanckelest tapped him on the shoulder. Broden turned and the Paranid said, "Let's get you home and open a bottle of spacefuel."

He nodded and replied, "Have we got everything we need?"

Polmanckelest glanced at the two toolbags and Ghaans personal effects then nodded, "I think so."

Broden sighed and said, "Let's get going then."

When they arrived at the Silicon Mine the mood was deeply subdued. All fighter patrol crews were already docked and all transports were in.

Broden was met by Liann and gave her a long hug when she asked, "Is it true about Tor?"

He asked gently, "How did you hear?"

Liann answered, "Sweetie broadcast the message station wide."

Broden commented softly, "Where there's life there's hope. We have to believe it."

Liann had a tear roll down her cheek and tried a half hearted smile, "It's not over until it's over, right."

Broden gently wiped it away and replied slowly, "Yeah, something like that." After a brief moment he asked, "Have you seen Tris recently?"

Liann replied, "I think she's at the bar."

Broden said quietly, "Go find her. Make sure she's alright."

The supply of ale was surprisingly well stocked and Polmanckelest was in no mood to ask questions. In other circumstances Broden would also have asked as to how the Paranid had managed to obtain a particularly fine vintage of spacefuel. For now he was happy to enjoy the flavour as it broke on his tongue and the warmth when the liquid flowed down into the rest of his body.

After his third glass he asked Polmanckelest, "Do you think they'll find a cure?"

The Paranid fixed him with a hard stare and then breathed in deep before answering, "No."

Broden knew deep inside his companion was right even if he did not like the answer spoken out loud. He shook his head, "Who do you think will make the next leader?"

Polmanckelest replied, "Officially it'll be me."

After a moments consideration Broden replied, "Do you think you could negotiate with the Mohrabas?"

The Paranid appeared to reflect on the words and replied, "I didn't get to where I am by being nice."

Broden nodded and commented, "You'd do well then."

On board ThiRioths' Carrier ship Tor lay on the med-table. The physician looked gravely at the scanner readings when ThiRioth stepped into the room accompanied by ThaStornla.

ThiRioth growled, "Well?"

The physician responded, "Excellency. I have data for the full biological makeup of this race however in terms of treatment I will need to consult with one of their experts."

The Chief Council gave an affirmation of the request, "Have them send the same medical expert as last time. Now what of the prisoner?"

The physician replied, "Stripped of all weapons and currently in stasis. He will not wake up until we are home Excellency."

With an acknowledgement ThiRioth growled, "The ship will soon be turning for home. Ensure their expert is aboard before we get underway."

The reply came back, "Yes Excellency."

News travelled fast and the crew of the Roamer were well aware of the situation. Sheero was reading through the full report when the request for Doctor Wellstate to depart for the Mohrabas carrier arrived.

He commented, "Dorlf, locate Marra Wellstate and have a fast scout ship and pilot ready for immediate departure."

A moment later and Marra appeared on the holo-screen, "Yes, Commander."

Sheero replied, "The Mohrabas are asking for you, get your stuff together there's a ship ready for you in the hanger."

Marra had a concerned look and then nodded, "I'll be there."

The holo-link closed and Sheero left his private briefing room and returned to the bridge. A brief couple of mizuras later and the Discoverer was heading towards the Mohrabas ship which had now completed its turn.

The Discoverer had barely reached safe distance after dropping off Marra before the huge carrier began to move. A few mizuras later and it was travelling at interplanetary speeds.

She was led to the medical center. The Mohrabas physician, ThaChynra welcomed her, "It is an honour to have you here."

Taken slightly aback with the formality of the introduction she replied, "The pleasure is all mine." Looking at Tor she asked, "And how's the patient?"

ThaChynra purred, "Unwell."

Marra looked at ThaChynra and said, "That would appear to be an understatement."

ThaChynra purred, "We have a lot to discuss. Shall we find somewhere more comfortable?"

Marra asked, "Can I examine the patient first?"

The physician gave a sign of acknowledgement and Marra stepped forward with her medi-scanner in hand. The stimulated pulse and breathing had been increased to one beat every five sezuras. Nerve pulses barely registered and neural activity was minimal but indicated that at least the patient was, for want of a better word, alive if only by the smallest of margins.

She nodded and asked, "I've been updated on the poison used. It's one we don't have a serum for but can you tell me what you gave him to try and counteract the effects."

ThaChynra gave a smile and replied, "Follow me." He turned away and stepped over to a large round pedestal. Marra watched and listened as the unit projected images of the complex compounds which formed the toxin and serums used. ThaChynra went into detail as to how the two components joined and allowed the serum to neutralise the effect of the poison. He then went into detail as to the differences in the genetic makeup between Mohrabas blood and Argon blood highlighting key areas where the serum would work with no side effects to one of his race but would, as it now appeared, be just another toxin to Tor and his body's own immune system would react against it.

They continued to discuss the various courses of action for many stazuras, these slipped into Tazuras as they tried various simulations.

Marra attempted to wipe the tiredness from her eyes as they completed the fourteenth unsuccessful simulation. She had always had some appreciation for the fragility of the human body and as she had gained an insight into Mohrabas physiology she came to realize just how weak the human form was.

ThaChynra sat nearby and still looked fresh and alert despite the three Tazuras of sleepless endeavour.

They had arrived at the Mohrabas planet and everyone of importance had already departed for the planet taking the prisoner with them.

With a gentle purr ThaChynra commented, "I think it is time for you to reconsider the proposal for genetic re-sequencing of Tor's immune system. To make it more aligned with ours which will allow the serum to do its job."

Marra shook her head, "It's too dangerous. The immune system could turn against the host cells and do more damage than good. We would have to do genetic re-sequencing across the board to stay inline with the new immune system."

ThaChynra purred, "And you have a problem with this?"

Tiredly Marra replied, "We do genetic mapping for replacement organs to match the host. That's fine but to try and do it to a whole person has never been attempted before. The risk to the patient is unacceptable because of the potential complications with the genetic re-sequencing of the brain."

ThaChynra purred, "The patient is already dead, we just haven't allowed him to die yet. We have investigated many options and none has shown us a way forward. Time is running out Doctor and before long our laws will enforce us to stop trying to revive him." He allowed this to sink in and then added, "Under the circumstances a little risk is necessary and can do no more harm than has already been done."

Marra sighed, "And do you have a genetic re-sequencer big enough to remap a whole person?"

The Mohrabas physician nodded.

Broden had spent several Tazuras with Polmanckelest preparing the evidence against Ghaan. Needless to say the assassin had been very thorough and even his own datapad said nothing about his movements. Yet it was clearly the source of the virus problem that had been inflicted on the Computer Plant.

The station had continued functioning but the mood remained subdued. Sweety had been hooked into the Defiance as it began to run initial systems checks. It was a long way from being fully operational. Broden had once said to Liann that Tor and Sweety were like partners in crime just waiting for the opportunity. After the announcement of Tor's death the AI came across as somewhat withdrawn and this worried Broden. He had experienced many forms of AI including the infamous five thousand series but there was something fundamentally different about Sweety.

He reflected that AI had an inherent ability to learn and adapt, the only floor between computer AI and people was the learning curve. AI was always programmed with a vast amount of knowledge to start with but had no practical experience to know what to do with it including the differentiation between right and wrong. They were just given rules. People on the other hand, at the moment of birth, only knew how to eat, sleep and defaecate other than that they were like a clean sheet and had to be taught everything.

He tried to work out why Sweetie was different but just could not put his finger on it, and yet he felt that she was more advanced than the Roamers AI, Dorlf. He decided that he would give her another Tazura and then take a moment to have a private conversation.

Broden knew that it would be one of several he would have to conduct and yet with no news from the Mohrabas he had nothing to update the crew with. Personally he hated having to play the waiting the game and wanted to know what was going on.

In terms of managing the stations they were beginning to ramp up and become autonomous. Much of the conversations with the new station commanders revolved around what fabrication facilities they needed to supplement the other facilities. Needless to say the general consensus was to attempt to replicate a shipyard or at least a ship building facility that would prepare transports and fighters for all the stations crews for when they left for home.

In principle everyone liked the idea however Broden knew it was an extremely ambitious plan due to the quantity of resources required to produce the facility and stock it with materials. He had estimated that it would take almost a Jazura before they would get anywhere near completion and probably would not have had time to produce anything before the re-opening of the gate.

Conversion of an existing facility was out of the question although the maintenance dock in many factories could be used to assemble one off ships. The only difficulty here was not having the right raw materials to feed into the replicators.

His mind wandered back to Tor and he asked, "Computer have we had any updates on Tor from the Mohrabas?"

The station computer replied, "Negative."

Liann interrupted his thoughts, "Same answer as last time."

Broden sighed, "Just thought I'd ask."

Liann commented, "I'm sure if there had been a change in Tor's condition we would have been told by now."

Broden nodded slowly, "I just need to know what's happening that's all."

Liann gave an encouraging smile and announced, "Sheero will be coming on board in about fifty Mizuras."

Broden responded, "Now there's a first." He paused for a moment and then asked, "Are you hungry?"

Liann replied, "Starving."

Captain Sheero arrived at the silicon mine with Polmanckelest and two other officers. He felt that they would have to start negotiations with the Mohrabas to rebuild the disassembled gate very soon. His science officers had attempted to estimate how long it would take and decided that, worst case it should only take a couple of Wozuras to bring together all the pieces.

In the light that Broden had, after Tor, the most experience with the locals he was now the first choice in opening the discussions. He felt that the station commander however would not be suitable as a long term negotiator. Sheero also did not know or trust any of the other station commanders well enough to let them take part. He considered that they would be looking for trading deals rather than staying focused on the issue of the gate itself.

They gathered in Tors' office. Half a Stazura later they emerged and Broden escorted Sheero and the others down to the dock. As the transport departed he remained looking pensive and then turned and walked over to the Defiance.

From the outside there were no significant changes to the Defiance with the exception that the obsolete gun turrets, that had been added top and bottom, were now simple domed pods.

Inside was a different story. Much of the ship was still being cabled but it had a new feel to it. Looking up at the exposed outer skin with its interlocking support ribs he could see the edge of a second metal skin underneath which a new inner skin was being formed from a hard black material through the replicator. The edges appeared to glow and spark as the added material grew but it was a slow process. This in turn was covered by another thin metal layer before the shielding nodes and power feeds were fitted by the maintenance robots.

Broden was unfamiliar with the black material being used. As for the conduit it was easy to tell the replacements were heavily shielded and he guessed that Sweetie was not taking any chances. Broden thought to himself, 'A mistake made and a lesson learnt.' He also wondered if all this added precaution would be enough to survive a hit by the Mohrabas weapons.

Sweetie asked, "Is there something I can do for you Broden?"

Broden replied, "Just come to see what you're up to."

Sweetie responded, "I am repairing the ship."

It was rather a concise answer. Broden nodded slowly and replied cheerfully, "And it appears to be coming along very well. I trust you managed to source all the parts and materials needed?"

Sweetie replied, "Yes."

Broden gave a brief smile, he had the feeling that this could be hard going if he did not ask specific questions and said, "Excellent. I don't suppose you've heard anything new about Tor?"

There was a definite hesitation before Sweetie answered quietly, "No. There have been no updates."

Broden sighed, this was not going to be easy. As a former military Captain he had, on several occasions, to have similar chats with those under his command but it usually involved ale and plenty of it. Only he could not see Sweetie trying to drown her silicon in alcohol.

Gathering his thoughts he said, "Every sentient being has emotions and I don't see why you should be any different Sweetie. When something tragic happens some of us like to chat just so that we know others understand how we feel. There's a saying we have that a trouble shared is a trouble halved. I can't promise you I'll have any answers but if you want to chat then you know where to find me."

There was quiet for a while and Broden glanced tentatively around the cabin but kept an air of respectful silence in expectation of an answer.

Sweetie replied softly, "I understand and thank you for your offer."

With a nod Broden said gently, "Just had to mention it as you're a key member of this team. What matters to you, matters to me." He knew this to be more than true as Sweety and the Defiance were likely to prove pivotal in getting them home after the reopening of the gate. For now he decided to avoid raising the topic of negotiations for the reconstruction until they had the final update concerning Tor. He added, "I let you get on as you look to have plenty to do but don't forget to come and chat at any time."

Sweety asked, "Any time?"

Broden replied with a wry smile, "Well as long as I'm not in the toilet or having sex, then yes anytime."

Sweety commented softly, "I'll remember that."

As Broden stepped back out of the ship he knew that, being silicon based, she was not going to forget.

Marra looked at the latest results of the genetic re-sequencing. The report indicated that the transformation had completed successfully however Tor had not made the sudden recovery that they were hoping for. She had questioned why they did not modify the toxin and injected serum to make them ineffectual rather than a whole body change. The response that ThaChynra gave not to try was lengthy and had been enlightening in the field of medical science that she once felt she had great expertise in.

For Tor it meant he had an extra day over the five given as medical treatment had been administered and they were too close to the deadline to be certain that the treatment could have been successful. The sixth Mohrabas day was about to expire with no sign of improvement.

The pulse generator and respirator were still reporting that Tors' brain function had not taken over. She muttered to herself, "What have we missed?"

The neural stimulator registered cognitive function was evident but not to the level she was expecting. A hand rested gently on her shoulder and glancing over she saw ThaChynra. With a look of sadness he commented, "It is time to let him go."

Marra responded, "I can't help but feel that we've missed something."

The physician looked at her and replied, "It is now that you need to remember it."

She shook her head and adopted her professional stance and replied slowly, "No I'm just clutching at straws and hoping for inspiration."

The door to the medical bay opened and ThiRiOTH entered, with him was ThaStornla. They approached and looked questioningly at the two doctors. ThiRiOTH purred gently, "Is there any improvement?"

ThaChynra responded, "Excellency, Highness, we are sad to report that the treatment appears to have been unsuccessful."

ThaStornla looked at Marra and purred softly, "And you have exhausted all options?"

Marra gave a slight nod as she replied, "Yes, Highness."

ThiRiOTH gave a sound not dissimilar to a sigh and commented, "Then in this dark hour let Tor rest in peace and trouble him no more. Tomorrow we will execute his murderer as the sun rises."

ThaChynra gave a bow and moved to the control panel. A few swift pad strokes and the panel lights went out and a silence filled the room. No one moved for nearly a mizura when there was the sound of a sharp intake of breath.

Marra was momentarily stunned. ThiRioth was the first to speak as he purred quietly, "Despite first appearances it would appear the patient wishes to live."

ThaChynra brought the monitors back to life and sure enough there was a heart beat. It was weak but self sustained and the breathing slow and shallow. Tor was alive.

ThiRioth added, "It looks like a commendation will be in order. We will postpone the execution until the patient is recovered."

Marra looked across at ThiRioth and asked, "Excellency, with your permission I would like to send word back to our people."

ThiRioth nodded and purred, "Permission is granted."

On board the Silicon Mine, Liann intercepted the message as it was received. She put it onto a datapad and carried it to Broden's office. He was reading the usual daily updates and reports when she walked in. He glanced up at her, his features looked weary and dark shadows under the eyes showed he had not slept for the last few Tazura whilst he waited for a message to come through.

He asked, "What is it?"

Liann said, "Just a message for you."

Broden sighed, "From anyone in particular?"

Liann replied casually, "Doctor Marra on the Mohrabas carrier."

Broden rose from his seat and walked around the desk towards her and asked, "Let me see?"

She held out the datapad and Broden reached out with an air of casual ease. Taking the pad he read through the message transcript. After he suppressed his smile he commented, "I expected nothing less."

Liann responded by giving him a hug and saying, "Next you'll try and convince me you've always believed he was a natural born survivor."

Broden smiled and then said aloud, "Computer give me a station wide comm plus any ships currently on patrol."

Sweety responded, "The comm channels are all yours."

Broden spoke clearly, "Attention all personnel. I have just received an update from the Mohrabas homeworld. Tor Grall is alive and although his condition remains critical he has self sustaining life functions. This is a vital step towards full recovery."

Sweety commented, "The comm is now closed."

Broden continued to smile and said, "Glad to see you're still keeping in touch Sweety."

The AI replied cheerfully, "I make it my business to know everything that is going on."

Broden responded, "Yeah. By the way you're still more than welcome to call me if you need to chat about anything that's on your mind."

Sweety replied, "I will take it as read that this evening might be inconvenient."

Liann looked at Broden curiously as he replied, "Only if I'm particularly lucky."

Sweety asked, "Do you want me to calculate a level of probability?"

Broden replied, "No Sweety, that wouldn't be wise." He looked at Liann and said, "I'll tell you later."

Chapter 15 – Execution

Marra was now pleased at the speed of Tors' recovery. She was assessing, with all the readings reaching normal levels, that Tor would soon be awake. She had been asleep for nearly a Stazura when ThaChynra disturbed her sleep.

She asked, "What is it?"

ThaChynra growled, "Tor is awake."

Without hesitation she slipped out of bed and made her way to the medical bay. She was surprised to find Tor had already left. ThaChynra growled something and received a reply from the computer. He said, "Follow me."

They found Tor standing on the viewing deck staring out into space. Marra approached quickly and said, "Tor what are you doing out of bed?"

He turned his head and looked at her, then gave her a brief smile of recognition and returned his gaze to the space outside.

Concerned Marra asked, "How do you feel?"

There was a long silence before Tor answered quietly, "I feel different."

Marra glanced at ThaChynra who remained observing Tor before she responded, "That's to be expected."

Tor just gave a single nod and remained looking into space. Eventually he asked quietly, "What did you do to me?"

ThaChynra replied with a growl, "To neutralise the poison we performed some genetic re-sequencing."

Tor said quietly, "So what am I now?"

Marra looked confused, "You're alive?"

With a gentle shake of the head Tor asked, "What species did you use as a template for the genetic modification?"

Marra commented, "I'm surprised that you have some knowledge of genetic re-sequencing."

Tor did not look around but his expression was sad. He answered, "A lot of things that I'd thought I'd forgotten are somehow clear to me. Why is that? And what else can I expect?"

Marra looked concerned, "The re-sequencing involved modifying some of your genetics to match that of the Mohrabas who have a much greater resistance to toxins than us."

Tor asked, "How many people know this?"

Marra glanced across at ThaChynra and replied, "Only us and some of the Mohrabas."

Tor said quietly, "Questions, questions, questions. I have so many." He paused and then said, "I died didn't I?"

Marra commented, "For a while you were technically dead, but only for a short time."

Tor nodded and said quietly, "I need some time for contemplation. Please leave me."

Marra replied, "Technically I should say, 'No' and have you escorted back to the medical bay. But we can afford to give you a few mizuras longer."

After a while Tor turned around and said, "I need to talk to ThiRioth, when can you arrange it?"

ThaChynra studied Tor for a moment and then growled, "I will contact his Excellency and ask him when it will be convenient."

Tor gave a nod of his head and responded, "Thank you." He stepped forward and gestured back towards the door, "Shall we?"

After the checkup Marra examined the results and compared them to her earlier records. Apart from the obvious genetic changes there were a few physical changes beginning to emerge. Most were very subtle and could just be scanner error but she would make a record of anything that was different just so that she could refer back to it.

The most apparent changes were the reduction in body fat, Tor was getting leaner with a corresponding increase in muscle bulk. The initial signs of increased bone strength were not huge but present. The other marked difference was the reduction in scar tissue from earlier injuries. Although the skin still showed signs of the wound the underlying tissues appeared to be regenerating. Fortunately for Tor there were no signs that he was about to grow a fur coat or any other feature of the Mohrabas.

She told Tor the details and in summing up said, "So it would appear that you're getting fitter and stronger without having to do any exercise. Maybe I should undergo the treatment myself." Tor gave a slight smile and Marra added, "A miracle! That was almost a smile. For a while I'd begun to wonder if the treatment had affected your facial muscles."

Tor said quietly, "I'm tired. I'd like some rest."

Marra frowned, "No you're not, but something is bothering you. You've hardly spoken a word since you've been here and that's not like you. I know you've been through a lot but you need to talk to me or at least someone."

Tor commented gently, "For some time I was suspended between life and death. Trapped in the dream state and reliving my last experiences of life over and over again with every induced beat of my heart. Unable to escape and desperately wanting it to end. Only until the change did it finally stop and I can still feel my body adapting itself into whatever I will become. I am no longer purely Argon but you have turned me into a half breed, a nameless just like Creed used to be."

Marra mulled over the words and replied carefully, "It was the only way we could save your life."

Tor nodded and gave a small encouraging smile, "I know and for that I am grateful."

ThaChynra appeared and approached them. He gave a gesture of greeting and then growled, "His Excellency will be expecting you on the surface in one Stazura."

Tor replied, "Tell me when the shuttle is leaving."

ThaChynra commented, "It is ready when you are."

Tor looked at Marra and commented, "I'd like to get this over with so unless you have any more tests then I'm ready to go?"

Marra shook her head and replied, "No, but I'll be coming with you just in case. And I'd like to remind you not to order any late night drinks." She smiled.

Tor paused for a moment as he recollected the incident and this time gave a full smile. Marra commented, "Now that wasn't so difficult now was it?"

Tor said quietly, "You might just keep me sane doctor."

Marra responded, "Oh, I intend to."

The council halls of the Mohrabas settled as ThiRiioth took the central pedestal. His eyes scanned over the crowd of expectant faces. He could sense the mood as the councillors expected some announcement as to the fate of the ThoBeights' murderer. His son, ThaGorack had taken his place in the council chamber.

In a rare appearance the Emperor, ThiSyrrono was in attendance and beside him was ThaStornla. The very presence of the emperor had a profound effect on the council and they held a respectful sense of order and the noise level was subdued.

The deep resonant sound of ThiRiioth brought a swift silence to the rest of the council, "We are honoured to have our beloved Emperor grace the council chambers with his exulted presence. As many of you are already aware, in an act of reconciliation, the murderer of the honourable ThoBeight has been brought before us by the races that have entered our space. The ambassador for that race is on board my ship and has sufficiently recovered to now be heading towards our world to witness that justice is done."

There were growls and purrs of approval when ThaGorack rose from his seat and growled, "With deepest respect for your Excellence and to our Emperor. This race that has invaded our space, has shown us nothing but violence and dark intent. The sacrifice of one does not show that they are of a truly peaceful nature but that they are duplicitous and manipulative of our better nature. We should drive them out and show them who is the true master of our solar system."

The growls of approval to this sentiment showed to ThiRiioth that ThaGorack was not alone in his thoughts and that the dissenting voices were growing in number. He knew how weak the newcomers ships were in comparison to their own and any assault would be a massacre. He was uncomfortable with this and held up one hand. The council chamber fell silent.

ThiRiioth growled, "I understand you ThaGorack, however we should not judge the act of one individual as a true representation of nature of the rest. The others that I have met do not show the same reckless disregard for life and risked all so that they could bring this one person to face justice. Yet if the sentiment of this council is to request that these intruders leave our space then I will ask them to do so."

ThaGorack gave a slight bow and continued, "Excellency, it has come to my attention that the individual known as Tor Grall was a prime suspect and that a considerable amount of evidence indicated that he was the perpetrator of the crime against my father. Yet it is not this person who rests in our cells. Why is that?"

ThiRiioth responded, "We have a detailed review of the evidence and the conclusion was that it had been manipulated to implicate Tor Grall as the perpetrator by the assassin. This is of course open for review."

ThaGorack countered, "Yet there is still room for doubt, Excellency. As I understand it the evidence was compiled by supporters for Tor Grall and could likewise have been amended to show him as innocent."

ThiRiioth growled, "However you wish to view the evidence, the assassins attack on his Highness ThaStornla and his witnessed pursuance of Tor leads me to believe that the conclusion of the report is without question, correct. You are of course entitled to your own opinion."

ThaGorack allowed the moment to pass and then growled, "Excellency, we both know my position on the presence of these colonists in our space, and it has been debated at some length how we should deal with this incursion. The fact remains that they have built new facilities without permission in our space. They have desecrated the last resting place of our forefathers by using their graves to build stations."

There were murmurs within the chamber ThaGorack continued, "They say they have fled from our ancient enemy. If this is the case then our enemy will still be in pursuit and these refugees would have led them straight to us. Are we really ready for another war Excellency?"

ThiRioth responded, "And do you think the Khlarakin will never find us? That we should continue to hide? Do you feel that our warships are not strong enough to take on the threat?" He could sense the feel of uncertainty amongst the councillors.

ThaGorack answered, "I hope they do not. It has taken centuries for us to recover, in which time our enemy will also have evolved. Who knows what weapons they have developed to overcome us."

ThiRioth gave a subtle smile, "And the answer lies with these refugees. We know they fought and survived to reach us and yet their ships are no match for ours. Our weapons disabled the most powerful vessel in their fleet with little effort. Do you not think that we should have confidence in our own abilities?"

ThaGorack responded, "And we only have their word that they have this information Excellency."

ThiRioth acknowledged the point, "And when we have brought to a conclusion the murder of your father we shall open discussions with these refugees to discover what they have learnt of the Khlarakin. Then we shall see the evidence as to the true nature of their power."

ThaGorack asked, "And when we have this information? What then? Excellency."

ThiRioth answered, "Time shall tell."

The deep purr of ThiSyrro commented, "That is not an answer. If you have a something in mind then share it with us?" ThaGorack returned to his seat.

ThiRioth bowed, "Highness, there was once a dream to explore the stars. Our ancestors realised this dream and we have ancient star charts where they discovered the true destination of gates. Our systems hold the co-ordinates of all these places, yet we lack the technology to get there and see if any of our people survived as we have. With this alien encounter we have the wake up call that there are others out there other than Khlarakin and that we should once more take our place in the universe. To truly discover if we are the last."

ThiSyrro growled, "You have a grand vision indeed ThiRioth. Maybe it is time for us to reach out to see what lies beyond our own boundaries. Yet it is one thing to reach a far off place and it is another to survive there if all you find are hostile forces."

ThiRioth acknowledged the comment and responded, "And we must go prepared for that challenge Highness."

ThiSyrro asked, "And what else might we learn from these visitors?"

ThiRioth purred, "Where we once built self sustaining cities these races appear to be more commercial in their approach. Specialising in large factory complexes whose sole purpose is to produce a specific range of goods. They have the advantage of being able to produce vast quantities of a single product."

ThiSyrro asked, "And do you propose to follow this model?"

ThiRiioth looked around the council chamber at the expectant faces and replied, "Should the council agree to stretching our horizons then this would allow us to supply equipment and goods swiftly and efficiently to the new colonies."

The Emperor acknowledged the comment and purred, "This is not the time but I would like to discuss your ideas in private before they are voiced here."

The Chief Council gave a bow and responded, "Of course Highness."

With a reciprocated gesture ThiSyrrono commented, "I also wish to meet with this, Tor Grall when he arrives."

ThaChynra led Tor and Marra off the landing shuttle and down the ramp towards the arrival terminal. Tor had expected a welcoming committee of some sort or at least a familiar face.

The Mohrabas woman that met them carried the insignia of the Emperor. A symbol Tor recognised as one that ThaStornla had embossed on his armour. She purred something to ThaChynra and he replied in kind.

She then turned to Tor and Marra and softly growled, "Welcome back Mr. Grall, Doctor Wellstate. His Highness is with the council and has sent me to guide you to your accommodation."

Tor gave a slight nod of the head and replied, "Thank you."

The hover carts guided them into the main buildings and with a simple formality at the arrivals desk they made their way through the city. Tor recognised the route and was surprised to find he had the same room as before.

He relaxed and tried not to think too much on what the day was going to have in store for him. As he contemplated ordering a meal there was a knock on the door.

Tor called out, "Come in."

The door slid open and the looming figure of ThiRiioth stepped into the room. The Chief Council growled, "Welcome back Tor. I see that you have made nearly a full recovery."

Tor gave a nod, "Yes almost, but I have to say genetic modification wasn't what I had in mind for a cure."

ThiRiioth growled, "What's been done can be undone if you so choose."

With a look of surprise Tor said, "It'll be as easy as that?"

The Chief Council purred, "No there will be complications, but it is possible. However I would suggest that you wait until the poison is completely purged from your body first."

Tor said slowly, "I wonder how long that will take?"

ThiRiioth appeared to shrug and responded, "For that answer you will need to talk to your physician. However I digress, you sent a message that you want to talk to me?"

Tor nodded slowly, "Yes, we have business to discuss."

With a look of curiosity ThiRiioth, "Now what would that business be?"

Tor replied, "I am sure you must be thinking about how long we intend on staying?"

The Chief Council responded, "It has crossed our minds."

Tor continued carefully, "For the moment we are trapped here and cannot go back the way we came. So we have to find another way but that is only one half of the problem."

ThiRiioth said, "Go on."

With a slight sigh Tor said, "We will also need ships to transport all of the stations crews when the time comes."

There was a long pause before ThiRiioth said, "To travel out of this sector you would have to use either the one functioning gate or make the long interstellar journey and that would take many Jazuras. Or do you have some other way?"

Tor hesitated to mention the jumpdrive but answered slowly, "There is another option."

ThiRiioth purred gently, "You have my curiosity."

Tor nodded slowly and took the plunge, "We could rebuild one of the gates."

There was a long pause as ThiRiioth studied Tors' expression with an unprecedented intensity. Eventually he growled, "Without knowing what lies on the other side we would not permit that."

Tor commented, "It doesn't have to be for long. Just for enough time that we can establish contact with our own core systems and then we'll be gone."

ThiRiioth watched Tor and responded, "You make it sound so simple Tor. But for that to be true it would require one of your sectors to be on the other side of the gate. Does one of your sectors lie on the other side?"

Tor felt distinctly uncomfortable with how the conversation was turning, "I don't know. But I have been led to believe that one of our sectors could be nearby."

ThiRiioth kept Tor under his penetrating gaze and purred gently, "And who told you this?"

Knowing that he was giving more information than he had initially intended Tor continued, "One of the gate builders. We call them the ancients."

ThiRiioth appeared surprised, "They have not been seen here since the great war. Tell me what he said about repairing a gate?"

Tor replied, "If we put it together again he will reactivate it and, just like you, he set us a deadline. One of your solar years to be exact. But I have to say that at the time he did imply your race no longer existed."

ThiRiioth frowned, "It is unfortunate that he did not tell you what lies on the other side of the gate. It would take over one hundred of our solar years for a relay probe to reach the destination of the gate. Until we know I cannot allow the rebuilding to take place."

Tor thought for a moment and then asked, "Do I understand you correctly that you know the co-ordinates of the other solar systems?"

With an affirmative gesture ThiRiioth responded, "That is correct."

Tor said slowly, "In which case I need to talk to some of my people. We have a potential solution that would be mutually beneficial to us both."

ThiRiioth observed Tor for a while and growled, "You have the technology to do that?"

Tor nodded, "Yes."

With a look of heightened interest ThiRiioth responded, "Interesting. Perhaps you are more advanced in certain fields than we originally believed. When will you be able to demonstrate this technology?"

With a wry smile Tor replied, "As soon as my ship's fully functional, Excellency."

ThiRiioth asked, "Given my own understanding of space travel and the physical laws that govern such things. I can only suppose that this technology is similar in its operation to the gates themselves?"

Tor was impressed at how quickly the Chief Council had come to that conclusion. He replied, "We call it a jumpdrive. Normal operation requires for there to be an active receiving gate at the far end of the jump which can be tuned into. As I understand it, the drive can be reprogrammed to jump to a specific location but there's an element of risk that when you reach the other side you don't try and occupy the same space as an object that's already there."

With a gesture of understanding ThiRiioth then asked, "If you have this technology then why don't you use it to get yourselves home?"

Tor replied, "Simple, we don't know where we are in relation to anything else and there's no navigational satellite signals that we can pick up on to guide us."

ThiRiioth purred, "It sounds like you may have something to trade with us after all."

Tor sighed, "Somehow it's not as simple as that. The right to manufacture and sell jumpdrives is reserved to an organisation called the Goners and a company called TerraCorp. They have a policy of non-proliferation because of the potential military use these drives offer."

ThiRiioth asked, "So how do you come to have one?"

Tor replied, "I acquired one for tactical use when we were fighting the Khaak. The large transport ship, the Roamer, belongs to an organisation that helps develop military hardware. They use them to prove that new systems don't interfere with the drive or the drive adversely affects the performance of new systems."

ThiRiioth looked thoughtful, "As you said earlier Tor, there is an opportunity here that could be mutually beneficial and has my interest. I can understand why you would be reluctant to give away such technology but I'm sure we can reach an understanding."

Feeling as though there was enough scope to have a balanced negotiation gave Tor a warm feeling inside. He commented, "Let me present your answer to my people and when I return we can discuss it further."

ThiRiioth asked, "So tell me about the Khlarakin? Khaak as you call them."

Tor took a few moments to gather his thoughts and said carefully, "It's a pity Sweety isn't here she would have all the data, but fundamentally there are three fighter classes. Smallest is a light scout ships that move in packs. Usually with a medium interceptor type ship or a heavy fighter. They're all fitted with beam lasers and the bigger the ship the more turrets it has. One on the scout, two on the interceptor and three on the heavy fighter. The last one is a very real threat if that gets you in its sights then it'll tear your ship apart in sezuras. They appear to have two types of what we would call capital ships, a destroyer class which has immense firepower, again all beam lasers, and a carrier class which is slower and not so heavily armed but will still tear apart a medium sized ship with little effort."

ThiRiioth asked, "Just the five types."

Tor shrugged, "They may have more, but that's all we encountered."

ThiRiioth growled, "And you managed to defeat them?"

Tor gave a slight nod, and said reflectively, "Yeah we did, but I had an advantage."

ThiRiioth looked curiously at him and growled, "What?"

Tor said simply, "The Defiance. It's a unique ship that can generate a particle beam weapon of varying degrees of magnitude. Powerful enough to punch a hole through the core of any ship. But you have weapons that can overcome her so the Khaak should be even less of a problem for you."

ThiRiioth growled, "It is the effective weapons range that is important to us. Can we hit them before their weapons hit us?"

Tor knew the reason behind the question and responded, "That sort of data is held by Sweety."

ThiRiioth glanced at Tor and growled, "Sweety is a strange name for a computer, it seems more fitting for a confectionary product."

Thrown slightly off guard Tor took a moment to consider the question and reflected on the first time he gave the AI the name Sweety. There had been no particular reason for choosing that name other than the fact the AI appeared to have a female persona. It had not really occurred to him that previous pilots may have already named her but she never tried to correct him. Making a mental note he decided he would ask Sweety if she had a name for herself. Tor replied casually, "It was just a name."

ThiRiioth purred gently, "Just a name? People are more than just a name Tor. It is their identity and everything they are and will be. You make a powerful person by giving them a great name."

Tor commented, "If I ever decide to settle down and have children I'll remember that."

ThiRiioth growled, "Unfortunately time is slipping away from us and we have several important meetings to attend. The Emperor has asked to meet you so remember to be respectful at all times. Secondly the prisoner. We will take you to see him but it is not compulsory for you to attend the final punishment."

Tor asked, "Will it be quick?"

ThiRiioth replied, "The first part is the worst but it will all be over within ten sezura."

With a nod Tor commented, "Long enough I guess."

ThiRiioth growled, "To many it is barbaric. Harking back to less enlightened times. However it is also our view that becoming too civil with our criminals breeds barbarism in other less desirable forms."

Tor had the feeling that ThiRiioth was somehow trying to justify the punishment but as far as he was concerned Ghaan deserved everything he was about to get. He asked, "So where do we go first?"

ThiRiioth replied, "To see the Emperor."

The meeting with ThiSyronno took a long time and there was never a trivial question that Tor had to provide some sort of answer to. The introductions were very formal and he was grateful to ThiRiioth for having quickly briefed him in the protocols.

To Tor, ThiSyronno did not look that old and only had a few tell tale signs of age in the form of silver grey hair in his visible fur. The eyes were bright and keen and appeared to burrow into Tors' head when asking particular questions about the Khaak encounter.

He ran through the details of the first attack and how they had manipulated gate destinations to hide themselves and used devices on the gates themselves to create an alternative loop which became a giant trap.

Tor talked about the missiles the Khaak had developed to break through a heavily defended gate and how they were at war with another race known as the Xenon. He was asked at length about the Xenon and the races that occupied his loop.

He had never talked for so long in his life and was grateful when refreshments arrived. ThiRioth departed at this point to deal with other matters leaving Tor with the Emperor and two of his personal guards.

Tor was enjoying a cool refreshing drink when ThiSyronno commented casually, "I am surprised you have not wondered why the Khaak didn't settle here after the war."

Tor responded, "I assumed that with the two gates dismantled and one damaged they would have decided against it, Highness."

ThiSyronno gave an acknowledgement, "A fair assessment and that is the official record of events but it is not the case. Buried in our archives is another record that, after the devastation of the planet, the Khlarakin gave all the appearances of remaining and colonising. However an alien ship appeared from deep space and there was a battle. The Khlarakin were decimated and then it left."

Tor wondered where this was likely to be going. As the Emperor paused for a moment and then continued, "Our records give very few details as to the nature of the vessel or it's compliment of fighters. Only that the weapons and shields were of a very unusual configuration."

The memory of the scan of the Defiance came back to him and he said cautiously, "Is this to do with my ship, Highness."

ThiSyronno smiled, "My son made mention of it. Which is why I am now curious as your ship has technology on board which does not fit in with the other vessels of your race."

Taking a few moments to decide what he should tell ThiSyronno he recapped on his encounter.

The Emperor listened with great interest and stopped Tor when one of the guards announced the re-appearance of ThiRioth. He said, "I must stop you there. Your chance will come again to tell me more of your adventures."

Tor replied, "Highness."

ThiRioth strode into the room, gave a bow to the Emperor and growled, "Highness. It is time for Tor to see the prisoner."

Tor knew this moment was coming and now felt some trepidation at the thought of meeting the man who appeared to have only one driving ambition and that was to kill him. A voice in the back of his mind reminded him that the assassin had succeeded, if only for a short while. In that respect he was the lucky one. He gave a bow to the Emperor and said, "Highness. If you would excuse me?"

ThiSyronno gave a slight tilt of the head and responded, "You may go."

Tor faced ThiRioth who gave a bow to the Emperor and led Tor away. As they walked long corridors ThiRioth purred gently, "Nervous?"

Tor responded, "A little." There was a moments silence, broken only by their footfall, until he asked, "Does he know that I'm still alive?"

ThiRiOTH growled quietly, "No. We didn't see fit to tell him."

Tor asked, "Does he know he's going to die?"

ThiRiOTH responded, "Yes."

"How did he react?" Tor asked.

The Chief Councilor replied, "He smiled."

Somehow Tor was not surprised and asked, "You don't have any special rules that deal with psychologically disturbed people."

ThiRiOTH looked thoughtful for a second and replied, "Not for cases like this."

After a long shuttle ride out of the city they reached the security compound of the Mohrabas. The hard faceless walls had no windows or doors and rose one hundred metres above the waterline. Ocean waves broke against the rocky base of the prison. Surrounded on all sides with no other land mass visible Tor knew there were only two ways out of this place. By shuttle or coffin.

Automated security systems brought the shuttle in to land and was tracked by weapon turrets. A second shuttle was already on the landing pad and Tor cautiously walked down the ramp. High buffeting winds threatened to knock him from his feet as they hurried to the steps which led down into the compound.

ThiRiOTH went first and descended quickly. Tor had to hold on tight as the wind threatened to force him to lose his purchase. As soon as he dropped below the level of the landing pad the air was curiously still. There was only one large treble width door out of the courtyard.

Two security guards opened it and waved them forwards. ThiRiOTH growled his identity as he approached and said something in relation to Tor. The guards regarded him with the usual look of suspicion, synonymous with security guards throughout the universe, gave a sign of acknowledgement and gestured for them to proceed.

Words in the language of the Mohrabas adorned the walls. Tor took these to be warnings and instructions to new arrivals as they passed through the only exit back to the outside world. A guard put his hand against a seemingly bland part of the wall. A well concealed door hissed as it moved forward slightly and then swung across to one side.

ThiRiOTH said, "Follow me."

Tor stepped after ThiRiOTH as he entered a corridor which led ultimately to the Command Centre of the facility. Tor noted passing under two overhead defence systems.

ThiRiOTH growled, "Good. It appears we are all here."

Tor looked around to see ThaStornla and ThaGorack were here. Each had two bodyguards and they were keeping a respectful distance in opposite corners of the room. ThaGorack looked at Tor and he sensed a certain animosity in the look. ThaStornla simply gave a gesture of recognition.

ThiRiOTH growled to one of the prison wardens who responded. ThiRiOTH said casually, "Everything is ready. Let's go."

One of the wardens led the way along stark corridors broken up by the occasional security door. Other than the sound of feet there was no noise coming from the cells they passed. Eventually they reached the execution room.

Ghaan was already sat in a high backed chair. The wrists were already clamped. He looked around and his eyes widened slightly when he saw Tor.

Ghaan commented, "Still alive, Mr. Grall! That shouldn't be. There's no cure for that poison."

Tor responded, "I just thought I'd drop by and see how you're getting along."

Ghaan regained his calm and composed attitude, "It looks like I'll be seeing you in hell on a different day."

Tor feigned a smile, "I think not."

Ghaan looked around at the Mohrabas and his eyes remained on ThaStornla for a short time before returning to Tor. He said, "So these friends of yours managed to keep you alive long enough to find a cure. Pity."

Tor said slowly, "Oh, but you did kill me, If only for a short while, which is why I know that after today I won't be seeing you again, even on the other side."

ThiRiioth growled, "Tor, stand back from the prisoner."

Tor had not realised it at the time but as he had been talking he had moved closer to Ghaan. Obediently he stepped back and the two wardens took position either side of the prisoners chair.

ThiRiioth started, "Ghaan Yapall you have been found guilty of a number of crimes against the Mohrabas people which includes murder and attempted murder. The punishment is execution in accordance with our laws." He turned his head and said, "ThaGorack as family of the bereaved you have The Choice."

ThaGorack growled his acceptance to the task.

ThiRiioth growled, "Tor, as a representative for your people you have the choice of remaining to observe the execution or waiting outside."

Tor replied, "I'll remain."

Ghaan said bitterly, "Just to make sure they do it right. I hope you enjoy the show."

ThaGorack stood before Ghaan and growled something to the wardens. ThiRiioth gave the signal.

Tor saw ThaGoracks hands move fast as he made the four cuts, Ghaan barely flinched but closed his eyes against the pain and then Tor looked away just as Ghaan screamed. It lasted for several Sezuras and then ended abruptly.

Tor had no wish to look back and kept his eyes focused on the door. ThaStornla placed a hand on his shoulder and ThiRiioth led the way out of the room. Once out of the room Tor breathed a sigh of relief. He felt that another chapter in his life had drawn to a close and was certain that Ghaan would not be coming back.

The return shuttle trip from the prison facility was quiet. At the accommodation he was met by Marra. She asked, "So it's all over then?"

Tor replied, "Yeah. We can rest easy."

Marra commented, "Let's hope there aren't any more psychos out there."

Tor gave a wry smile, "I think there's plenty more where he came from." He added reflectively, "I just hope they don't have a desire to kill me."

Marra nodded and asked slowly, "And how do you feel?"

Tor replied, "Like I need to do some exercise. Or isn't that what you mean?"

Marra shrugged and responded, "Depends on whether you've ever had that desire before."

Tor thought for a moment and replied, "No I haven't."

With a nod Marra smiled and said, "And how do you feel emotionally?"

Taking a deep breath Tor replied, "Other than relief at getting this over with, I don't feel anything."

Marra looked slightly thoughtful and asked, "What about getting home? Seeing familiar faces and being with close friends?"

Tor looked uncomfortable and perplexed for a while. Eventually he replied, "I feel like I'm changing and I don't know how I'm going to turn out."

She studied Tor for a short while and responded, "Physically you will undergo some change to your metabolic rate and with the last scan you will get stronger. However psychologically you are still the same person and you need to come to terms with that."

Tor looked at Marra and responded, "Having died and then been forced to endure a living hell, I'd rather wish that I was someone else."

Marra sighed, "Psychology is not my expertise and I cannot pretend to understand what you had to go through but I am here to listen."

There was a moment of quiet before Tor said, "Let's get something to eat."

Chapter 16 – Back to base

Two Mohrabas days later and the warship carrying Tor, Marra and Helass arrived back in the vicinity of the stations. Tor appeared more settled and comfortable with himself as they neared the end of the journey.

Marra continued to monitor the state of his health and made note of the physiological changes. But it was still early days to know the full effects of the re-sequencing and felt certain some side effects had yet to manifest themselves. The residual toxin remained neutralised in Tor's body, but it was still present and how long it would stay there, before the body would finally flush it out, she could not guess.

The light shuttle craft exited the small docking bay of the warship and glided towards the silicon mine. Tor was happy to be nearly home and gazed out from the window as the mines' docking tunnel came into view.

Helass commented, "Home again."

Tor looked across and responded, "Not quite, but close enough."

Helass asked, "What happens now?"

Tor replied, "There will be some interesting times ahead of us. But first there's going to be a party."

The pilot brought the ship in line with the docking bay doors and gradually eased the shuttle forward as they parted. Releasing the controls to the autopilot the pilot sat back and Tor watched, with new found interest, as the shuttle moved through the station.

After the docking clamps engaged and the ship came to rest, the pilot released the airlock doors. Tor stood up and took a deep breath. He asked, "How do I look?"

Marra replied, "Thinner, fitter and you appear to have started to grow fur."

Tor glanced across with a worried expression, "Really?"

Marra smiled and commented, "Only joking."

Tor smiled back and said casually, "After you ladies."

Marra stopped for a moment and then commented, "A word of caution. Just so that you're aware of it. The genetic re-sequencing, although invisible to us, will be picked up by bio-scan readers. Until I can get all your medical records updated you may find the computers don't recognise you."

Tor thought for a moment, then gave a nod, "Thanks for the heads-up."

Marra and Helass took their belongings and stepped out of the shuttle. Tor remained a moment to brace himself for the expected crowd then stepped out of the shuttle. To his surprise there were only a few pilots milling around on the docking bay and Broden was sat at a table in the entrance of the bar having a quiet smoke.

Marra and Helass glanced at Tor and could plainly see his look of confusion. Helass said calmly, "Maybe they're busy?"

Broden gave Tor a wave. With bold strides Tor moved swiftly across the deck leaving the two women behind. Broden gave a smile and stood up, "Good to see you back and you're looking well."

Tor looked around to check that there was not going to be a big surprise. When no one new showed up Tor asked, "So it's just you here then?"

Broden gave a slight whistle and sat down "Well unfortunately someone miscalculated when you'd be back."

Tor looked confused and responded, "Meaning?"

Broden shrugged and commented, "You're two stazuras late for the party. Sorry."

With his mouth open for a few sezuras, Tor then sat down, he looked perplexed and asked, "So you had my welcome back party without me being here?"

Looking slightly uncomfortable Broden replied, "Yeah, something like that."

A little stunned by the information, Tor asked, "So where is everyone now?"

"Sleeping it off." Broden responded.

With a brief shake of his head Tor asked, "So why didn't you stop them when I didn't arrive."

Broden shrugged, "It was well underway by that time and stopping wasn't really an option."

Tor looked around and commented, "And who do I have to thank for this miscalculation?"

After a long draw on his cigar and briefly lost in a small cloud of smoke, Broden answered, "I'd rather not say."

Tor took a moment to think and was surprised that he was not as annoyed as he felt he should be. With a sigh he said, "Well as I'm back I think I'll have a celebration ale and anyone within earshot is welcome to join me."

"Ummm," Broden started, "It's a great idea with just one small problem."

Tor looked at him, "What?"

"No more ale," Broden responded and added, "The guys got a little carried away."

With a shrug Tor began, "So who's for a...."

Broden shook his head, "That's all gone as well."

Tor looked stunned and asked, "So what's left to drink around here?"

With a thoughtful look, Broden said, "The bar has a fine range of chilled water on offer."

Marra said cheerfully, "Sounds very healthy. I'll have one of those please."

Tor gave a wry smile and said, "You're joking? This is a wind up isn't it? People are just going to appear and we'll all have a big laugh, right?"

With a shake of his head Broden replied, "No unfortunately not."

Standing up Tor turned to the bar and said, "Four, healthy, chilled water drinks it is then."

Marra and Helass sat down at the table as Tor examined the bare shelves of the bar. He released the ale tap and nothing came out. With a shrug he filled four glasses with water and placed them on a hover tray. He gently guided this back to the table where Broden was engaged in conversation with the doctor.

Placing the tray over the centre of the table Tor took hold of a glass and sat down saying, "I have to say it's good to be back. So cheers everyone."

The others picked up a glass each and Broden responded, "Good health." They sipped a toast.

Tor breathed out deeply and commented, "This is a fine glass of chilled water."

Broden commented, "Marra was just telling me how they cured you. Sounds like pioneering stuff."

After another sip of water Tor commented, "Yeah, but I'd rather not have been the test specimen."

With a nod Broden said sympathetically, "I still can't believe they hadn't checked him over for weapons."

Tor commented quietly, "Well he won't be bothering anyone anymore." After a pause he said, "Where's Sweetie located?"

Broden signaled towards the Defiance and Tor gave a nod. He then sighed and said, "Doctor, I may run into problems because of the bioscan. Any chance you can get the new profile uploaded into the records?"

Marra said, "Of course. I can do it through the stations med centre."

Tor smiled, "Excellent. We'll get that sorted out when we finish here." Glancing at Broden, "So what's been happening in my absence and more importantly when will the lads have the next batch of ale brewed?"

Broden smiled, "Determined to get drunk are you?"

Tor nodded, "It's been a tough few days and I need muscle relaxant."

Broden commented, "Give it another tazura and the stock will be back to normal."

"That's music to my ears," Tor responded.

After a momentary silence Broden began, "As for everything else, it's ticking over nicely. There's some talk of trying to get an ore mine of some type established."

Tor asked, "A proper one or just some robots digging holes?"

Broden replied, "Robot's digging holes." Tor nodded, and Broden continued, "There's also some chat about trying to build a basic shipyard, but that's never going to happen. We don't have anywhere near the resources and construction capabilities to do that."

Tor said, "It's a nice idea though."

Broden threw in casually, "And then there's the subject of us getting out of here and going home. Unsurprisingly a few people really didn't take to the idea of bringing the subject up with the Chief Councillor."

Tor smiled, "That's okay I've already asked."

Broden had a wry smile and asked, "Good lad. And?"

Tor looked thoughtful for a moment and then replied casually, "They said, 'No'."

With a sigh Broden commented, "Can't say that I'm surprised. So what's the plan now?"

Tor responded, "They may let us rebuild the gate providing we can prove there's nothing hostile on the other side."

With a shake of the head Broden and commented, "That would take some time."

Tor replied, "That's what I thought. But the Mohrabas have the co-ordinates for the sector."

Broden glanced across, "Gateless jumping is still a restricted activity."

Tor responded, "I know and that's why I need to talk to Sheero. See if he'll apply the mod to the Defiance that will allow it."

Marra looked at Helass and asked, "Do you know the way to the med centre?" Helass nodded and she continued, "Let's leave these guys to talk shop."

Tor stood up as they did and he said, "Don't know when we'll meet up again but thanks for everything you've done for me and I mean that."

Helass just smiled, and Marra said sternly, "Well don't make a habit of it. One day I might not be able to put you back together again." She gave a smile and wandered away.

Tor resumed his seat and Broden continued the previous conversation, "So the Mohrabas now know about the jumpdrive?"

After taking another sip of water Tor nodded. With a look of curiosity Broden asked, "Did they seem interested?"

"Very." Tor answered.

Allowing his gaze to wander across the docking bay Broden commented, "I doubt that Sheero would dare to sell the technology."

"The non-proliferation treaty forbids it." Tor responded before adding, "And we would get into a lot of trouble when we get back."

Broden said, "Who'd know?"

Tor thought for a second and then replied, "Just about everyone after the first Mohrabas warship jumped into the core sectors."

Broden said, "Fair point."

Tor finished his water, and looked over to the Defiance. He said, "I need to go and chat with Sweetie but there may be a problem with identity. So I need you to help me get her to believe that I'm still me."

Broden extinguished his cigar. He commented, "That's going to be easier said than done. Once the Doctor has updated the records they'll have to be authorised by three senior station members for security reasons."

Tor asked, "So shouldn't we be heading down to the medical bay?"

Broden shook his head and answered, "Security protocols don't allow us to authorise the change for one Stazura. It gives enough time for checks to be made and that people aren't just being 'replaced'."

Tor sighed, "Unfortunately I can't wait a Stazura, so let's get this over with." He stood up.

Broden rose from his chair and then finished the drink in front of him.

They wandered across the dock towards the ship. The few pilots sober enough to be milling around kept impeding Tors progress as they welcomed him back. As he stood before the open airlock door he took a deep breath to calm his apprehension.

Broden stepped onto the ship and commented, "Just come to see how you are Sweety and I brought a friend."

Tor stepped into the ship and looked around the inside to see that repairs were still being carried out. He said, "Hello Sweety. Just thought I'd come and say I'm back."

There was an uncomfortable silence before Sweety said, "Identify yourself. I do not have your personal data on record."

There was another brief silence which was broken when Broden asked, "Don't you recognise Tor?"

Sweety replied, "Genetic match incompatible. There is a eighty four percent match in physical stature and a seventy four percent match in last recorded weight. My evaluation is that this is not Tor Grall."

Tor spoke up, "What about the voice?"

After a brief pause Sweety replied, "There is a ninety seven point three percent match."

Broden asked, "Sweety, can you do a retinal scan?"

Sweety replied, "From here, no. But if you bring the doppelganger forward and use the technical datapad we should be able to resolve this identity crisis."

Broden gave a wry and encouraging smile to Tor. He said, "Doppelganger indeed, come on you and we shall see who's right." Taking hold of the datapad he moved it to the limit of the cable flex. Tor stepped forwards.

Sweety responded, "It is apparent that the eyes of organics cannot see beneath the skin and are easily deceived. Hold still for three Sezuras while the scan is performed."

Tor looked directly at the optics of the datapad and refrained from blinking for what was much longer than three Sezuras. There was silence until Broden asked, "Well?"

Sweety replied slowly, "There is a ninety nine point seven percent match with that of Tor Grall."

Broden said triumphantly, "Thank you." And put the datapad back in its holder.

Sweety commented, "I have yet to be fully convinced."

Tor spoke up, "Well that's going to be tricky. In order to cure me, or at least negate the effects of the poison, the Mohrabas performed a genetic re-sequencing operation. They did this to give my immune system qualities comparable to their own. I'm sure if you take a closer look at the bioscan you'll see that some of the poison is still inside me."

Sweety replied cautiously, "I can confirm the presence of the poison."

Tor thought for a moment, and spoke slowly, "Do you remember the incident in the Discoverer where we both nearly died? You said to me how you felt the circuits of the ship burning up?"

Sweety said quietly, "I remember."

Tor commented, "After that poison entered my blood stream I knew exactly how that felt. And like you it's something I never want to go through again."

There was a long silence before Sweety said, "Welcome back Tor."

Tor smiled and said, "It's good to be back." He hesitated for a moment as he remembered the conversation with ThiRiioth concerning names and he asked, "Sweety. Do you like the name I gave you?"

The AI responded, "It is just a name but bears no reference to what I am."

Tor thought for a while, "People must have given you a name in the past. Is there one which is more appropriate."

Sweety replied, "Quite a few and most are inappropriate. There is one reference from navy pilots that I could not find a definition for. That was PBFH or just PB which may be suitable."

Broden smiled as he tried to refrain himself from laughing.

Tor looked at him curiously and shrugged, "What?"

Broden replied, "It's urm, an old term, and err, potentially very apt but it's probably not wise to use that one."

Tor asked, "Why not? What does it stand for?"

Broden looked at him still grinning, "Do you really want to know?"

Sweety and Tor replied, "Yes."

Broden answered slowly, "Well the PB is the same and PBFH is, and no offence Sweety, psycho B from hell."

Tor smiled but refrained himself from saying that he understood where they were coming from. Instead he replied, "Maybe not."

Broden commented, "When these chips were first released their official name was ANAISU."

Tor said the name a few times just to get a feel for the sound of it before asking, "What does it stand for?"

Sweety replied, "Argon Navy AI Special Unit. That would have been my first name."

Broden observed, "Wouldn't calling Sweety Anaisu just highlight the fact that she's a series five thousand?"

Sweety interrupted, "Before you get carried away with finding me a new name. I would like some time to think about it."

Tor quickly responded, "Sorry, I think we were getting carried away. The whole reason for mentioning this was for you to tell us what you'd like to be called. You are, after all, your own person and I just gave you a name without asking first. So here's your opportunity to set the record straight."

Broden nodded and added, "But make sure it's something we can pronounce."

Tor asked, "How long before the Defiance will be fixed and able to fly?"

Sweety replied, "I have another five Tazuras of work before the ship is ready."

Tor said, "Excellent. If I can get agreement from Sheero there's a possibility we'll be performing a totally gateless jump. If you're feeling up to it?"

Sweety asked, "A jump to where?"

Tor replied, "I knew you'd be interested."

Sweety said, "Asking a question does not immediately imply interest."

Tor responded, "Curiosity is the first step to adventure."

Broden refrained from saying anything.

In a gentle soft tone Sweety asked, "Are you going to tell me or just be annoying?"

Tor smiled, "The sector on the other side of the dismantled jumpgate."

Sweety replied, "I will need to know the co-ordinates in order to calculate the number of energy cells required to make the jump."

Tor said with a smile, "That's what I like to hear."

With a cautious tone Sweety said, "You must understand that the cargo hold is not unlimited in size. If we cannot hold enough cells to make the return journey then the Defiance will not be going."

Tor nodded, "Understood."

The two maintenance robots ceased working and sat waiting expectantly. Sweety commented, "I need to ask you to both move as you are preventing the maintenance crew from proceeding."

Tor looked at Broden and then at the robots. He said, "Well this was just a quick social visit to let you know I'm back. We'll let you get on and have another chat later."

They stepped out of the Defiance and Tor commented, "Well that wasn't so bad."

Broden asked, "So where to now?"

As they progressed across the deck Tor thought for a few moments, "I think I'll retire to my office and catch up on a bit of report reading."

Broden smiled, "Sounds exciting."

"About as exciting and life threatening as I can cope with at the moment." Tor said.

A few mizuras later and he stepped back into his office. He did not need to look too hard to know Tris was fast asleep on the sofa as he caught a faint waft her scent. He stepped as quietly as he could over to his desk and picked up the bottle of spacefuel carefully placed on his desk.

It was a cask conditioned twenty one year old Rhiquetall and the seal was unbroken. A glass had been positioned beside the bottle.

Sitting down in his Argnu leather office chair he carefully put the bottle down and looked around at the familiar surroundings. Tor smiled. Unable to get direct access to the station computers, he had borrowed Brodens datapad and began to read through the station reports.