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BY STEPHEN HAWORTH

Traders Tale

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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 acknowledged all copyrights.

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This novel began as a series of chapters published on the game forum in rough draft, and with the encouragement of the forum members continued into becoming the first, of potentially several, completed stories.

The Traders Tale is intended to bring a new perspective to the X-Universe through the story of the life of a young man, who at the very outset is in trouble with the Argon and how his fortunes are changed when he becomes involved with the Argon Secret Service.

This story precedes the third game in the X-Universe series and part two will continue to follow the fortunes of our hero as he tries to continue to be a Trader despite his manipulation by the Argon Secret Service.

Thanks to everyone on the Egosoft forum for encouraging me after the tentative first chapter to continue writing.

A big thanks to KiwiNZ for supplying the cover artwork.

Stephen Haworth

Prologue

LOCATION: Deep space
Recovery ship: Terran science vessel Blue Star
Recovered ship type: Unknown
Pilot: Unknown.
Condition: Unknown - stasis unit operational and occupied.

Last recovered data log entry

The universe, my universe will be as strange to those that think they know it as those that don't. Perhaps I have taken on one adventure too many, I don't know.

So you may be asking, 'where am I from?' The world Argon Prime the centre of the Argon civilisation a blue green M-three class world but that may not be the true origin of our race. There is a religious sect called the Gonar who believe that we came from a place called Earth in the Sol system. Until recently I was inclined to believe it was all hokum however my view on the subject may change but in all probability I will never find out. Although I have co-ordinates it isn't clear if they are current and correct taking into account the number of approximations used. So it is debatable whether I will arrive and if I do then it is by no means certain I'll get there alive. New technologies both alien and untested have been used to make this journey possible.

Trusting that the ship arrives at Sol but for some reason I do not let me give a brief but not too detailed overview of my home and its surrounding systems. The Argon Prime solar system is joined to many others by a network of gates. As a ship crosses the threshold of a gate a negative energy wave is created between the two adjoining gates creating a wormhole that allows a ship to move great distances in a heartbeat.

Did we build the gates? The answer is, 'No' and neither did any of the other races that share our loop. It is apparent to me now that those that created them are from many races collectively known as Ancients. We have no record of how long these devices have been in existence or for how long they will continue to exist. Some believe they are multi-dimensional in construction, which is why our scientists have yet to reach a level of understanding in order to construct our own and hence the gates are not subject to the same rules of time and space that we, as physical creatures, are.

Each solar system is configured differently with the gates in close proximity for commercial reasons. Like jewels in the blackness reflecting the unobstructed rays of many suns sit giant manufacturing plants. In the vastness of space they hang as small clusters of factories bounded by the gates in what we call a sector.

Why claim such a small area? The answer is simple, trade. Being able to transfer manufactured goods to market quickly and efficiently is the key to economic success. It also negates the need for vast carriers with interplanetary drives. The plants themselves are highly automated, yet also support a large population making them small cities in space.

I mentioned races, there are four others that live, trade and fight for survival and dominance around Argon Prime. The strangest, to air breathing creatures like myself, is the Boron. An aquatic race that dwell beneath the oceans of their own world, these are the most peaceful but scientifically adept of all the races having overcome many obstacles and challenges to reach the stars. It is well known that a Boron craft can be converted for human use without requiring significant change, but it is nearly impossible to convert an Argon ship to suit a Boron environment.

To interact with other races those that make the journey use environment suits filled with liquid, and in order to appear less 'strange' their suits are very humanoid in shape with two arms and legs. Not being used to having to stand upright the suits are fitted with small antigravity generators to keep them vertical.

The next race are air breathing, but some may say they would prefer to breathe credits. However if they could, they would only inhale. Rumour has it that if you cut a Teladi in two you would see the word 'profit' stamped onto every organ. They are considered to be the shrewdest of the races, a matriarchal society where the female of the species dominates in all sides of commerce. The males tend to take on labour intensive or military careers.

Their appearance, fittingly enough, is reptilian, their height and build is not so dissimilar to our own yet it would be unwise to challenge one to a competition of strength.

The third race is the Split and are often regarded as the most warlike. Generally smaller in stature than the Argon they are again humanoid in appearance. They are generally unwaveringly loyal to their family but the rivalries between families runs deep. They have a long standing dispute about territory with the Boron which has been the subject of many confrontations and wars.

First encounters with the Split are generally hostile in nature but win their trust and respect and you will find no better friend and ally. Even so they will always come across as rather abrupt and arrogant.

The Paranid makes up the last of the main races. Humanoid in stature they are physically broader and much stronger than us Argon, the three eyes is their most distinguishing feature. Their titles imply a culture based about belief and as I have found they look down on the other races as somewhat inferior, this gives them a certain arrogance not too dissimilar to the Split but it is possible to earn their friendship by showing reverence to their culture.

Including the Argon I have only really mentioned the main five races from my space, but there are others that menace the fringes of our universe. The oldest and most destructive in our time is the Xenon, a computer based life form that menaced and waged terrible war against us all with planet destroying weapons. They were defeated but still lurk in untold numbers out on the fringes of solar systems. Once it seemed that they had an overwhelming desire to eradicate all life. Whether that is still true I don't know as they have begun to exhibit more and more sentient behaviour. The texts of the Goner claim the Xenon are a newer incarnation of an ancient Terraformer fleet that went out of control and tried to destroy all humans.

There are other races which I have met albeit for a limited time, but time is running out and I need to keep this log short. Those encounters will need to be told by another.

Just one warning to whoever gets to read this. Beware of the Khaak! We still don't know what they want, other than war. We have seen them come in great numbers and they are still spreading. If they haven't already arrived then it is just a matter of time.

Log entry closed....

Chapter 1 - Who is Tor Grall?

Captain Tris Matayah stood looking out at the stars. She was lost in thought. Argon Prime shone blue and green in the blackness as it turned in the light of its Sun. The dark crescent of night shadowing the right side of the planet, whilst great white swirls of weather systems crossed the polar caps.

The reporter from the Glax News sat patiently waiting for an answer.

The briefing room had been given over just for the meeting. A large oval table resided in the middle of the room, with seating for twenty senior officers. Two of the walls were tastefully adorned with plaques presented to the ships' crew, and emblems of the various squadrons that were and had been based on the ship.

The end wall behind the captains' chair was a view screen currently displaying the insignia of the Argon Navy. Where Tris was standing was a series of long Plexiglas panels.

"Captain?"

"Where are you?" She muttered still lost in thought. Tris had not slept for five days relying on stims to keep her mind awake. It was beginning to show.

"Sorry captain?"

"Hmmm, sorry what was the question again?" She mentally shook her brain into focussing on the reporter and the questions he was asking.

"You were telling me about how you started in the fleet, remember."

She turned and paused a moment longer before speaking. The interview was turning into a history lesson about her rise to the office of Captain of the Argon ship Trinity Fame. An M-two battle cruiser, from the outer sectors, making a long scheduled return to Argon Prime for a refit.

A ship, which in itself had become a legend, that had survived a sustained Xenon attack and forced a Xenon capital ship to retreat whilst taking heavy fire from smaller attack fighters. Not without some cost however, two of the shield generators failed, four gun towers were destroyed, and the hull was now a patchwork quilt of welded repair panels. Fifty of the crew had died and only one sixth of the fighter compliment survived.

"A lot of what I have done is already well documented in the journals. I could tell you of the bravery of my crew, and all the things we have seen and done." She took another look out at the stars, her voice was clear and focused again, "But even that is well recorded."

Looking back at the reporter, "Five of my officers have the Spirit of Argon Medal for bravery." Again the subtle pause, and with a far away look in her eye and careful slowness in her tone, "But there is someone out there. Someone who has done more for Argon than.." She let the sentence hang, "Someone who has never been in the Argon Fleet, and never been acknowledged for his achievements with medals."

The reporter hesitated uncertain what to ask next. He knew that the public wanted stories about the heroes of the Argon Fleet. Not some anonymous person no one will ever have heard of.

Then again to get this close to the Captain of the Trinity Fame was a unique opportunity. Most reporters would have sold their children just to get the interview, so he played along. There was always the potential that the captain would reveal some new and exciting material he could use during the rest of the interview. If all else failed he could change the names to other better well-known people.

"Go on?" He inquired, and glanced at the screen, the words already displayed by the voice reteller pad.

"Unfortunately I can't tell you his real name to protect his identity! So I'll call him Mr. X," Tris continued and the reporter raised an eyebrow. "I met him at the academy for Astro studies on Argon Prime. That was before joining the Fleet. I think

he was studying Astro-navigation and Economics. Even so I only knew him by name and we were in the same Astro-navigation class." She purposely forgot to mention he got kicked out from the Navigation course after the first term. A brief pause, "Even now it strikes me as odd how far he's managed to come. I had to train him how to fly and he was the worst novice pilot I've ever met. If I remember rightly it took him six attempts to get a basic off world traders' license, and even then it was granted with restrictions," As more of a retrospective thought, commented out loud to herself rather than to the reporter, with a hint of a smile, "Back then he had really bad taste in clothes!"

"Restrictions?" Curiosity was beginning to creep in. There was the potential for a bit of a love story for the readers perhaps.

"Self taught pilot, I think at the sixth attempt the examiners got fed up. Ship limitations were restricted speed of thirty mps with cargo limited to five units, no passengers, no weapons fitted or transported, and 1 MW shielding. I guess they expected him to crash and were working on damage limitation." Tris stopped to gather more of her thoughts, then moving the gravity chair sat down. A slight nudge and the chair glided to the table.

"There are times when a captain has to make difficult decisions. A number of these are life and death. As an example the ordering of a tactical withdrawal in order to save a ship and the lives of its crew at the expense of several fighter pilots. That's what we are trained to do! However to order someone on a fools errand with little chance of survival, that life being the life of a civilian and a friend, is a much tougher decision to make. Protect the populace, is our motto." She paused glancing down towards the floor. "Sometimes we fail."

Tris needed to get a few things off her mind, but her thoughts were scattered again. The images in her minds eye of a fighter disappearing away with a few optimistic words over the com. She wanted to tell the whole story. Yet without news there was uncertainty, and this stopped her.

Taking a sip of steaming Garrow root cha, she resumed, "Six weeks ago I sent X out on a mission to discover the fate of the explorer ship Liberty Pride. As you know the Ancients have revealed more star gates into uncharted space. When we lost contact with the Liberty we know she had been detected in Khaak space but the Khaak have signal transmission jamming technology beyond anything we have and blocked all communications."

Tris took another sip of cha, "We needed a non-military affiliated pilot that we could trust to look for the Liberty and had a proven combat record. X had all the background and just happened to be in the right place at the right time..."

Six Argon solar years previous...

Station Commander Narl was faced with a problem. He had received, through a Split agent, top secret data sets on new military ship enhancements. Unfortunately the Split agent had been assassinated just after leaving the station.

Narl paced back and forth in front of his desk. His military mind playing with different ideas as if they were campaign orders. He had been one of the flight leaders that fought in the great Xenon war.

The medals and awards hung on the walls. Trophies were neatly organized on plexiglass shelves in hermetically sealed cabinets to keep the dust away.

Narl stood just less than six feet tall, his hair thinned back and gray. He had lost two fingers on his right hand, bitten off by a pet Barrak.

The problem he faced was information like this needed to be couriered. The secure channels were not to be trusted, no one really knew which ones had been cracked and by who.

The question remained who to trust in getting the data back to Argon Prime. If the information was deemed to be sensitive enough enemy agents had been known to take any risk and were usually successful. Even at the terrible cost of destroying the data by sacrificing their own lives and many of those around them.

Fleet ships and transports were easy to spot, he needed something else. Looking at the list of visiting traders he needed one no one would even think of, but generally most trading ship pilots never traveled far out of sector. Most point blank refused to take on board anything that could endanger their ship and more importantly themselves.

A name stood out on the list Pilot Tor Grall, Grade H with restrictions, arrested for breach of docking restrictions and flying in a manor dangerous to other shipping.

Commander Narl read down the list. Location cell six 'G', level fifteen. The ship was a restricted Discoverer, with only five units of cargo capacity, and a one-megawatt shield. The vessel was over eight years old and was formally an Argon Fleet training ship. The listing also showed a system analysis for possible defects.

Needless to say there was a fuel cell leakage on secondary thruster. The HUD and navigation systems were both listed as inoperative.

At the end of the list the recommended fine showed fifty thousand credits. Mostly due to five previous minor flying infringements on Tors' record.

A plan formed, he looked at the console in front of him and checked on the list of known couriers on board. Two names appeared on the list Croanau Tibo, a Boron pilot of a fully enhanced Piranha, and Tallow Gi an ex-Argon military pilot with a fully armed Buster.

Narl spoke "Matha?"

A female voice responded over the com, "Yes commander?"

"Contact Tallow Gi and get him to come to my office."

"Yes Sir!"

Returning to the console he requested, "Computer, get me the background to Tor Grall, and give me a check on all service personnel on station that might know him."

There was a momentary pause, "Search complete, one possible link, Private Tris Matayah, Academy for Astro-studies on Argon Prime."

"Locate Tris Matayah, and display current military record," He could see the pieces of his ideas coming together in his minds' eye.

"Private Tris Matayah is due to transfer to Argon Prime military school for advanced combat pilots." The computer responded.

"Matha!"

"Yes Sir?"

"Contact Private Tris Matayah and send her to my office!"

An hour passed Tallow Gi had been and left, Tris waited in the hallway just outside his office. Matha, an android assistant, offered her refreshment and played soothing water music to while away the time. The music simply made Tris want to go to the toilet, she was a little nervous at having been summoned to the Commanders office so near to being reassigned. She hoped this was just a brief formality rather than a change to her career path.

Narl signed the last of the days' papers and called her in.

Tris stood to attention before the desk, eyes straight ahead. Narl looked up from the console.

"At ease Private."

“Sir,” Tris had a slender build, was five feet ten, had dark brown hair and green eyes.

Narl checked the record, “I see you’re from Thorne Rock.”

“Yes Sir,” Tris responded with a hint of pride. The feeling of nervous dread crept through her even though she did not show it outwardly. A chat starting like this usually meant bad news was going to follow.

“It’s the green eyes, you can tell a lot about someone just by studying the eyes, did you know that?” Narl replied slowly. Mapping out how the conversation would run.

“No Sir,” Tris replied, wondering where this was leading, whilst keeping her composure.

Narl continued, “Well I’m sorry to say, as much as I’d like to exchange pleasantries but that’s not why you’re here!”

“Sir?” It was an abrupt reply with the hint of expectation. Tris kept looking straight ahead, believing the news was going to be bad she was already forming her responses.

“Your record shows that you’re a very skilled pilot heading out for some advanced pilot training, and that you’re transport ship leaves in six hours,” Narl relayed what he had read before.

“Yes Sir!” Tris was now acutely aware the Commander had news that negated the first statement, as her suspicions were becoming realised.

“Well fortunately, you won’t be leaving on it. I have a very important mission for you, one which will potentially test your skills,” Narl was very upbeat with the news, “Does the name Tor Grall mean anything to you?”

Tris hesitated in responding to the first part of the news, due to the mention of a mission. She then considered the question, “No Sir,” But there was a small seed of doubt, somewhere in the back of her mind.

“Perhaps the academy, Astro-navigation, does that bring back any memories?”

Tris thought a bit longer a mental image formed in her mind, “Stocky bloke, brown hair, bad taste in clothes and smelled of meatsteaks, Sir.”

“That’s our man, but I’ve not been close enough to know about the last bit.”

“Back then you could smell the meatsteaks at a hundred feet, Sir, got booted out after the first term, Sir,” Tris responded, now more curious than ever where this was going.

“Your mission ..”

Tor Grall sat in the cell feeling a little dejected, dangerous piloting seemed a little harsh, okay the transporter had swerved to avoid him and collided with an Elite fighter, but if they had hailed him over the com he would have known they were there. He reasoned the abuse the Elite pilot gave him was outside communication protocol and then turning out to be station police was just the final nail.

He had now been here for several hours and no official had been to see him, which meant he was in serious trouble this time. As the seventh hour passed two military personnel entered the holding cell area, one was a young woman the other a senior officer.

The officer approached the cell, “Tor Grall!” this was more of a statement than a question.

“Yes?”

The cell barrier flickered out, “Come with us!”

He stepped out of the cell, the officer turned, and marched down the corridor, and Tor followed. The Private carried a stun baton and followed in turn, and she looked as though she was eager to use it.

He was shown into a soundproof interview room, plain white walls, gray floor and harsh lighting, the table and chairs fixed to the floor.

“Sit down Tor!”

The door hissed closed as he sat down.

“There are a number of complaints and a very serious offence recorded against you. The Station Commander has levied a fifty thousand credit fine. However our records indicate that you do not have the required capital to pay.”

Tor looked down, “No sir.” At times like this he knew he needed to be polite and hope.

“Unlike me, the station commander is a generous man,” The officer leaned forward, “And believe me if I had my way you’d be shipped to the mining colonies and forced to do hard labour until the debt was paid,” Leaning back again, “He has decided that you will be an unofficial courier for the Argon military.”

The officer paused, to give this time to sink in, “Your first task is to transport some navigation system chip sets to the equipment dock in Argon Prime, now these items don’t like being bumped so try not to hit anything! For this small task, the commander will consider reducing the fine, or even postponing any payment until you have sufficient funds.”

“Yes Sir,” Tor humbly acknowledged.

“Private Matayah is one of our better pilots. The commander has instructed her to look over your ship and with the few credits we know you do have, ensure that it meets at least the minimum requirement for interstellar flight. Also to see if we can improve you’re current pilot rating which is the lowest I’ve ever seen,” The officer commented in a mocking tone.

Leaving another brief moment for Tor to reflect on this the officer continued, “Private Matayah has already been briefed by the station commander and will brief you on who to meet when you get to Argon Prime.”

The officer turned to Tris, “Private, I leave you with this worthless piece of scum, do what you need to, to ensure he completes his mission. If he tries anything, bring him in and we’ll send him out on the next prison ship!”

“Yes Sir!” Tris gave a clear affirmation of the order.

The door opened as the officer approached it and he left the room, it hissed shut again. There was a long silence.

Tor looked worried waiting until Tris eventually spoke, “On your feet! Show me this ship of yours and if you try anything I will hit you with this.” She waved the stun baton if Tors' face.

Tor looked at her, his eyes narrowed slightly, “Do I know you?”

Tris did not answer, “Get moving.” The door opened and he hastily left with the private following closely, and well within baton striking distance.

The shuttle lift took them into the station police lobby, where Tor signed the conditional release form and receipt for personal belongings not permitted in the holding cells.

A polished marble effect floor spanned out in front of them, it’s structure a crystal membrane heavily lacquered with a non-slip, self-cleaning surface. Every ten minutes the floor design changed and for half a minute between changes a large sign appeared on the floor, with the logo. ‘Welcome to the Cloudbase South West Trading Station Security Control Center.’ A sign was also emblazoned on the front desk.

The walls were hung with banners bearing the insignia of each of the Argon Navy squadrons based on the station as well as the security police emblem.

There were several reception desks, behind which androids sat. Security guards swaggered back and forth across the floor. The odd civilian was entering or leaving via the main reception onto the station gallery walkway.

Shuttle lift doors were scattered around the walls, each one signed with a name. Tris pointed to the one saying, "Impound Docking Bay." and without another word they crossed the lobby.

At the docking station entrance a security guard scanned them in. Additional security with stun batons patrolled the walkways. There were eight ships of varying types here, five trading ships, two of which were Teladi Vultures, two Lifters and a Pirate Ship.

The next two ships were Busters and then there was his Discoverer. He stopped to admire his ship and point it out to Tris, but she had been distracted by an argument between an irate pilot complaining loudly at damage caused to his impounded vessel. She took a step too close and the stun baton contacted Tors' right shoulder.

His body jerked forward and flew three feet forward with a cry of pain. The station security looked around and moved in with batons charged.

"It's okay!" Tris shouted, "Just an accident!"

Two of the quicker guards stood over Tor batons ready, and with a look of disappointment, reluctantly backed away.

Tris gave Tor a less than gentle nudge with her foot, "You okay?" It was hardly a sympathetic question.

"Gnurph" the answer was even less intelligible.

She waved to a couple of the guards, "Can you give me a hand, I need you to drag this guy over to that beaten up old wreck over there."

"No problem, miss."

The two guards grabbed an arm each then dragged the slowly regaining consciousness Tor across the docking bay floor. Tris opened the outer and inner airlock doors and the guards dragged Tor in dumping him on the floor.

"Anything else miss?"

"No that'll be fine. Thanks."

The guards nodded and left, the airlock doors closed behind them. The rear cabin of the Discoverer was small, enough space for a folding cabin bed, small table, a couple of cabin chairs and other basic amenities.

Tor moaned as he slowly came around.

Tris went into the forward cockpit and sat down. She pulled out her console pad which had the diagnostic data for the ship, "Computer, give me a level one rundown on system checks."

The computer relayed back a series of results, "Right main engine one hundred percent, left main engine ninety nine point five percent, front right reverse thruster one hundred percent.", Tris activated the main console and pressed the touch button that activated the HUD, nothing happened. She then pressed the button for the navigation display. Somewhere in the console there was a hiss, a small pop, and a small puff of quickly extinguished smoke.

There was movement from the main cabin as Tor staggered back to his feet, using the chairs and table for support, "Why did you stun me?"

"Sorry, it was an accident." Tris did not sound too sincere.

Tor rubbed his shoulder. His neck and back began to ache as well, so he complained under his breath.

“Look I said sorry, stop being such a baby,” Tris had deactivated the stun baton that now hung on her utility belt, “I still don’t believe you actual fly this heap of junk.”

“It was all I could afford, just to get me started. One day I’ll get a proper transporter and in a few years eventually own my own Wheat farm.”

“I suppose we all have to have ambitions,” Tris picked up the com headset, “Private Matayah to maintenance crew four, I’m downloading a list of maintenance parts for a Discoverer in impound dock eight. Can we get the team down here pronto.”

“Register that Private. Maintenance droids will be with you shortly.”

“How much will it cost?” Tor looked worried.

“About four thousand credits according to my inventory list. A small price to pay to be free,” Tris put no compassion into her tone.

“Don’t smile much do you?” Tor commented.

Tris put her hand on the baton, “Want me to hit you again? Look I didn’t ask for this job, I’m supposed to be on a transport back to Argon Prime, not sitting here baby sitting you!”

“Bad day for both of us then,” There was silence for a moment.

“We’ve got some pilot training arranged, eight hours intensive followed by a re-examination of your pilots’ license. If you piss me off you’ll be spending most of the time recovering from stun shots. Oh and it’s costing you another five hundred credits.”

“That’ll be nice, no gain, loads of pain,” Tor was flippant. It was his defense to being stressed and worried.

Tris shot him a warning glance, but she knew the danger here. The commander had briefed her on much of the detail. Although she did not know exactly what was being transported, she did know that it was not navigation system chip sets. In ten hours time the decoy courier would leave the station. Tor needed to be away fifteen minutes later. There was no time for idle chit chat. She had recognized him from the academy days. Even if his taste in clothes had not improved at least the smell of meatsteaks had gone, but as the Commander has said if she did not want to reveal the fact she did not have to.

Sore from the stun, Tors' legs still tingled as he lurched rather than walked out of the ship. “This is worse than getting drunk.”

“Keep moving, it’ll get the muscles working and the effect will wear off sooner,” She advised, but was somewhat amused by the spectacle.

They got back into the shuttle lift and returned to the lobby. By the time Tor was half way across, he would have said his legs were functioning at ninety percent.

“Residual stun effect,” Tris commented to an amused guard.

Out on the gallery they rested for a moment, Tor leant against the rail. His toes still tingled so he took the time to flex them.

The gallery was several open levels. Each level offering a selection of shops, bars, food halls and rest centres. There were the faint sounds of conversations hanging in the air, to be displaced by the whisper of shuttle lifts hovering and moving between the levels.

“Let’s get moving the training center is three floors down,” Tris ordered.

A short shuttle lift trip later they arrived at the simulator-training centre. Fresh faced trainee pilots, many of which were military cadets grouped together. Tris signed in on the reception console. "Training bay twelve has been reserved for you, enjoy your training day." A small flap opened and dispensed a card.

She signaled Tor to follow and like a sheep he did. The stun baton was still very much in his mind. The door to the training bay slid open and the lights flicked on to reveal the cockpit layout of a Discoverer.

"Welcome to basic Discoverer training simulation alpha," The computer announced as the door slid shut.

"Right then Tor, take the pilot seat," Tris sat in the trainers' seat behind the pilot. All the consoles in front of her came to life, she had detailed readouts of systems, a display of all the pilot inputs and she could see everything he was doing via several video feeds. The main screens came alive to show a perfect image of the stations docking bay.

Tor looked around he was familiar with the system having sat in the same seat for six tests before. The ships on the screen were mostly computer generated with the inclusion of all the other budding pilots in one huge multi-user interactive simulator.

"In your own time, get us out of the station," Tris commanded.

He sat back as this was the easy bit, "Computer request clearance for departure."

Tris pressed a button on her console, the computer responded, "Departure clearance denied."

Tor was stunned, "Computer, request clearance for departure."

Again the computer responded, "Departure denied!"

"What's going on?" Tor asked.

"You haven't done your basic checks and activated all systems," Tris replied, "It's no wonder your license is only grade H. According to my score sheet, failure to do the basic checks means the best you can get is a grade F."

There was a moments paused before Tris spoke, "Let's start again, one of the first things you need to do is a system check, then call up the HUD and navigation systems."

"HUD?"

"What?" She responded.

"What's a HUD?" Tor asked naively.

"Heads up display," Tris was momentarily stunned, "There's no way you can tell me you've never heard the term before!"

"Oh, one of those, do these things have them?" Realization that he had just made himself look a complete idiot washed over Tor.

"All ships have them," She wondered now if she was onto a losing battle.

"Mine doesn't," Tor threw this in as some type of excuse for the first question.

"That's because it's broken," She responded curtly.

"Oh," Tor wondered if the hole he had dug himself could get any deeper.

There was a moment silence. Tor thought he could hear Tris praying in the background.

"Everything okay back there?" Tor asked

“I think you’d be better off in the mining colony,” Came the response, “Did you ever take lessons before becoming a pilot?”

“No! I just turned up for the tests. Practiced my flying on an island hopper whilst on Argon Prime,” He was very matter of fact with the comment.

Tor thought he heard a whimper, and the soft thudding sound of something being beaten repeatedly against a console. He did not look back.

Tris stopped hitting her head gently on the desk pad, took hold of the stun baton and turned it thoughtfully over in her hand. She turned the setting down to sharp shock, “Hmmm, let’s give this another go.”

“Aarrgh! What the hell was that for?” He jerked forward in his seat.

“Just checking for lasting effect, look we’re going to go over this slowly and carefully. You are going to remember everything I tell you and then we’ll do it all again. If you get anything wrong, I’m going to hit you with this.” Tris smiled, it was a pretty smile, but the motivation behind it was anything but friendly.

“Okay,” It was the only thing Tor could say.

Five hours passed, Tor was learning the painful way but with the last two runs only got shocked twice, and the second time was because Tris felt he must have done something wrong but she hadn’t spotted it.

“You know, I think you’ve come on a long way, but next time try not to get too near the blue ships on the HUD, those are out on fighter combat training. The red ships on the HUD are unfriendly and attack anything in range. You did reasonably well though, dodged a couple of blasts, pity he’d launched the missile before you could get away,” Tris commented, “According to my latest log we’ve got you to a grade E pilot, with weapons restrictions, but you still have to pass the unsupervised test. For now I think we’ll move onto some combat training. You are flying a fighter, and one day may decide to put some weapons on board. So I think you need to learn some tactical maneuvers,” She pushed a few buttons on the console.

“Fighter training program delta, initiated.”

“Tor, use the HUD to keep an eye on how many ships are around and how close they are, I’ve put you up against two Mandalay ships and a Bayamon, all armed with missiles and the slowest Mandalay has drones on board. If you hit that one with lasers it’ll launch drones. Remember everything I taught you about leaving the station.”

Tor found his targets quickly after a successful departure, in other words one without sharp shocks involved. The Discoverer had been programmed to simulate half upgrade speed with half rudder control upgrade. The slightest twitch of the stick and the ship turned and dived. He wasn’t used to that but he was enjoying it. The artificial gravity of the ship always made you feel as if you were sitting still and the rest of space moved around you, and in that respect the simulator was perfect.

The impulse beam emitters of the Mandalays arced past the Discoverer, Tor identified the fastest one and tried to engage, the Bayamon was still four k’s away and out of range but closing.

The Mandalays turned faster than Tor had anticipated. The realism of the lag in the steering control thrusters as he over shot his target and tried to turn back bothered him.

The ship lurched, “Shields eighty percent” the computer warned, and the ship lurched again “Shields sixty two percent”

“Program halted.”

“Did I get killed?” Tor asked.

This time Tris did not hit him with the baton. “Nope but you’ve got a Mandalay on your tail, you need to control your speed better. This ship can slow almost as quickly as it accelerates. You’ve got the throttle jammed wide open all the time, which means if you’re faster than your opponent you’ll just keep flying past him. Also it increases you’re turning

circle, and that Mandalay is simply turning inside you. You can lose him by flying away but watch out for any missile launches. Get a safe distance away turn back quickly by reducing speed, not too much though. Open the throttle and make a strafing pass, or divert off to one side, slow, turn and try get on the tail of your opponent. Make full use of the speed to close the gap and then match speed. Once you're behind him blast away." Tris paused, "Now get ready to make a run for it, and remember what I told you."

The screen came to life once more and Tor managed to keep it together the shields returned to seventy five percent. Turning sharply he tried for a strafing pass and got a couple of good hits, but likewise took a hit, then snatched the trigger and accidentally hit the second Mandalay, four fighter drones filled the com.

"What the hell?"

His shields started to take a beating, he was turning the ship every which way in a mad frenzy and Tris held her head in her hands and sighed. After five minutes a trainee buster appeared on the scene, a few shots later and the two Mandalay were gone, the Bayamon quickly after.

"Hang in there pal," A voice came over the com.

The drones were lightening fast and difficult to hit. The shields on the Discoverer remarkably close to full strength, then Tor clipped one of the drones, "Danger, shields forty percent," But the drone was destroyed. He snatched the trigger as another drone whistled past the front of the ship. It exploded.

"Lucky shot," Tris commented from the console, "The Busters has just taken one out."

"Last one is yours," The pilot of the buster declared and the simulator ship flew off.

Tor gritted his teeth, the Drone was targeted, he twisted and turned to get it into his sights, the ship surged, slowed and surged forward again, knuckles white on the flight stick. Then every button on the console flashed red, "Danger! Shields critical! Five percent!"

The simulation ended, Tor sighed and slumped in his seat.

"It's not a good idea to ram your opponents, however as drones have no shields then it's a reasonable tactic. Obviously in a Discoverer you have limited shields yourself so be careful."

The next simulation was easier, but time was running out. After eight hours of simulation they stopped, found a local bar and had something to eat and drink.

Less than an hour later and Tor was on his retest. Tris had to wait outside and sipped a large cup of coffee. The test was forty-five minutes long, from the last evaluation he should have been able to get a grade D license, no restrictions.

Time ticked by, the decoy would be leaving within half an hour, the package was already on board Tors' ship and it had been security sealed. If it were removed from the ship whilst aboard any station other than at its destination then it would auto destruct. The last ten minutes of the test seemed the longest. She had never actually trained anyone how to fly before. She was still only a private. Although she knew how to operate the simulator, training was generally left to the veteran pilots. If Tor succeeded then it would be a major credit on her records.

The door slid open, and Tor stepped out smiling, new pilot license chip in hand.

"How did it go?"

"Not too bad."

"What does that mean?" She took the chip and looked at it, "Well it's an improvement at least." The chip read Grade F, no restrictions. Tris could not hide the disappointment in her voice, she had hoped for better. With a D license he could have migrated to a Buster class fighter, but that was her military training kicking in. Tor was only a civilian, at least he would now be able to fly large commercial freighters and get weapons for his Discoverer.

“Look, I get nervous doing tests,” Tor commented by way of explanation.

Tris nodded and handed him back the chip.

Chapter 2 – 1st Mission

They wandered back through the docking bay in near silence. Both stopped at the outer airlock of the Discoverer. The maintenance droids had cleaned the outside and inside of the ship, replacing panels and damaged consoles.

Tris commented, “Give it another ten minutes and then set off. By the way, don’t mention your name over the com! Or for that matter, say the name of anyone you know for the duration of the flight. The man you’ll meet when you reach the equipment dock is Caran Belign. He’s a big man. I don’t think you’ll have any problem recognizing him. Oh and best of luck.”

Tor replied with a smile, “And I never thought you cared.”

“Personally I think it’d be better for everyone if you were sent to the mining colonies.”

“I know you don’t mean that,” He continued the smile.

She unclipped the stun baton, “It’s not too late for me to use this, and remember if you don’t make it to the station. Then I’m going to hunt you down, and believe me you will learn all about pain.”

He opened the airlock doors and as he stepped inside muttered, “Your mum must be really proud of you.”

Tris heard him but was already heading for the military section of the docking bay where her own newer military issue Discoverer waited. She clenched and unclenched her hands. If this was as potentially dangerous as she was led to believe, then she had just sent a man, trapped by circumstances, to his death. Her job now was to shadow Tor close enough to help if in trouble, but far enough away to be discreet.

She reached her own ship and immediately ran the systems check and simultaneously requested clearance to leave.

The internal com was set to mask her voice during transmission. Standard security protocol when on a mission, say your name over the airways and everyone knows who to look for later, this included a temporary re-registration of the ship. She had not explained this part to Tor, and figured it was best not to get him too excited.

It was her opinion that sooner or later everyone would have a price on their head, how much depended on who you upset most. Then every mercenary and bounty hunter would take a chance at blowing you apart.

Although she had only been in the military a few years she had heard about the fatal price of heroism. One of her flight trainers was the victim of a revenge attack five years after he had been credited for the demise of the pirate leader Bloodheart.

Space was a hard unforgiving place and, in her mind, Tor had not realized it yet.

The station internal docking systems locked onto the ship, docking clamps released with a definite thump and the ship with engines in low power left the docking bay under station computer control to join a gentle melee of ships leaving and some arriving.

“Ship scanned.” The computer warned.

She looked around “Identify scanning ship!”

“Unable to locate, too much interference,” The computer replied.

“Damn,” She cursed and hoped it was due to a docked ship maintenance check, rather than something more sinister.

Tor was a couple of minutes late in setting off. He had spent much of the time finding out what had changed. Smiling to himself now in the knowledge that the engine restrictors had been removed, also he had the full use of the ten units of the cargo bay.

The new navigation system was lacking in information, but he could download the charts he had drawn up manually on his personal pad. Unfortunately the previous navigation chip had been removed prior to his purchasing the ship so he had no accurate transferable image for the new system.

“Ship scan detected.”

“Pardon?” Tor was surprised.

“Ship scan detected”

“Oh,” He shrugged and thought no more about it.

The ship arrived at the outer gateway, beyond which was the vast blackness of space. He reminded himself that he was no longer in the simulator, this was real. The station docking guidance system disengaged and the ship drifted forward on low engine power. Engaging the thrusters with a gradual twist of the throttle control, the ships engines hummed happily and the station rapidly reduced in the rear viewer.

Adjusting the angle of flight he aimed for the Red Light gate. “Computer, I think I should give you a name, I think I’ll call you Sweety.”

“Name acknowledged.”

“Sweetie, find me some music.”

Tor drifted back into the rear cabin and found some stim shots. It had proven to be a long day and he needed sleep, but not yet, this was too important to him to mess up. The ship filled with the sound of various rock music from the home world.

He could not sing but tried anyway by going along with as many words as he knew and humming the bits he did not. He loved being out in space.

Time rolled by, the home worlds of each sector shining like blue and green jewels in a sea of black. The shattered remains of planets, with the cores of many still glowing decades after the Xenon retreat. Gravity was slowly pulling the vast chunks of rock back together again.

He slowed the ship and joined the queue jumping into Red Light. Keeping his eyes on the HUD and occasionally pointing his finger at the ship in front and saying, “Pow, got you,” He drifted into the jump gate and the temporary wormhole opened up. There was a swirl of bright light, a while later the jump gate opened up in Red Light and the stars settled into place. Tor powered forward and in a nice gentle arc aimed for the jump gate to Light Home and thought to himself, ‘This is easy work.’

Behind him Tris also completed the jump, being in the faster ship she headed deeper into the sector before turning towards the Light Home jump gate.

Back in the trading station Commander Narl flicked through station inventory lists and manifests. There was a shortage of Nostrop oil, and Majaglit. Demand was on the increase, the Goners appeared to be purchasing much of the reserve stock.

“Receiving an incoming message from the courier Sword,” The system announced.

It was Tallow Gis' code name, “Where are you?” Narl asked.

“I’m at the missile factory in Red Moon. Sir they were waiting! Took out a couple of the pirates but there were too many of them, barely got to within com range of the station before I had to bail out. They ran before the station defense craft got too close Sir.”

Narl asked calmly, “Anything else?”

“Just before I bailed there was some message on the com that I wasn’t the one, Sir,” Tallow Gi replied looking haggard after his battle with the pirates.

“Get yourself rested, then report to the nearest trading station. I’ll get transport to you,” Narl responded quickly with an air of concern in his voice.

The com went quiet, “Computer get me in touch with the pilot of ship registration SSR15T in sector Red Light.”

Tris started the gentle turn towards the next jumpgate when the com came alive, “Private, this is Commander Narl, the courier ship has been attacked in Ringo Moon, the ship has unfortunately been destroyed. Attacking vessels operated by pirates. The pilot was picked and is safe but the pirates have jumped out of the sector. The decoy has failed, the package is hot. Repeat the package is hot.”

“Thanks Commander,” Tris answered quickly reflecting her own concerns.

“Do what you can Private. I’ll try to get you some help and best of luck,” Narl breathed a heavy sigh and ended the transmission.

She scanned the sector map, sure enough there were pirates, three Bayamons, two Mandalays and two Orinocos heading away from the Ringo Moon gate and heading on an intercept path. Even at the current separation it was doubtful with the speed of the Discoverers they would catch them before the next two jumps. At which point they would already be in Argon Prime. She pushed the ship to intercept at full speed.

Tor looked at the navigation chart.

“Systems data is incorrect. Extrapolating input data and adjusting station location parameters.”

On the display Sweety shifted the sketched data that Tor had created and overlaid it against the positional data it was picking up on scanners. The relative positions of the stations with respect to each other tied up even though the exact positions were wildly out.

Nothing much was happening on the scanners as he reached the jump gate and slowed to enter. Less traffic was here than before. This time there were only three ships ahead of him. He saw the incoming transporter, as it moved away from the gate, what struck him as unusual was that it appeared to have weapons.

“Ship scanned and target lock detected,” Sweety said in the usual dispassionate voice of the computer.

Tor slammed open the thrusters, swerving to avoid the ship in front. The HUD went red as the attacking vessel launched drones.

“Go for the gate!” A voice shouted over the com.

Tor obeyed and at near full throttle snatched the jump slot. Momentarily the ship stopped and then became enveloped in the swirl of the stars. The HUD went blank, and Tor sighed, momentarily safe as his ship had one shield and no lasers. At best his survival chances may be to bail out and get picked up. Even so death was immeasurably preferable to slavery.

The jump gate opened up as he entered Light Home and he immediately powered up the thrusters. Two Mandalay were waiting but he had the jump on them while another Pirate transporter, also holding position, released drones.

Tris was on the com, shouting at the trading ships she was coming through. The pirate ship was picking up its drones and firing wildly to cut her off.

She was through the jump gate only moments behind Tor, and as she powered the thrusters noted he was already a good way in front. He was trying to dodge the drones. She hit the booster and with the extra speed caught up and closed in on

the first of the pirate Mandalays. At near point blank range she targeted and let loose a missile. The pirate with no time to detect the lock and avoid the missile exploded.

The second Mandalay turned to engage her. Tor was flying in his usual erratic fashion whilst all around him he had six drones firing in all directions. Without intervention the fight could only have one end.

Tris dove to the right and spiraled her ship away, then pulled up from the pirate ship.

“Time for you to die,” The pirates’ voice came over the com, but no image. A stream of energy pulses dissipated into space, wildly off target.

She didn’t respond. Precious seconds passed, but with a strafing pass she managed to score a direct hit slowing fast she turned and applied the boost, to drop neatly behind the enemy ship. Matching speed she fired the cannons in several controlled bursts making sure each one counted. The Mandalay debris bounced off the hull. Tris targeted the closest drone, and with her eye on the pirate transporter, blasted the drone in a blanket of fire.

At full throttle she aimed and shot past Tor who was spinning wildly, almost out of control, She guessed if he had his com on he would probably be screaming. His ship appeared to dance with death, as the drone’s energy pulses sparkled around it before streaming off into the void.

Tor wasn’t! His grip on the throttle control and flight stick was so hard he could not feel his fingers anymore. The engines seemed to be screaming at him, every second his steering thrusters were on full and the sound just shifted from one side of the ship to the other.

“Shields sixty percent,” Sweety commented.

“Shields fifty five percent,” Sweety announced with no change in tone.

“Danger shields forty percent!”

“Sweety, just tell me when I’m about to die, and turn off all those damn red flashing lights, I know I’m in trouble!”

A drone just coming into view suddenly exploded, another Discoverer shot past at speed, a long stream of energy pulses streaking away.

“Hang in there,” A voice came over the com.

“Get a move on, I can’t hold out much longer.”

Everything was a blur, one-second he had a drone bearing down on him the next he saw the other Discoverer streak past, which was subsequently followed by a third and fourth explosion. Seconds later and the pilot of the other ship transmitted another message, “Get out of here! Head for the Argon Prime gate! Do it now! The last of the Pirates are still closing in but you can out run them.”

Tor pulled out of the spin and pointed his ship into the sector. Quickly he consulted the navigational computer to determine which way up he was flying. Re-orientating himself he aimed for the Argon Prime gate. The other Discoverer was right behind him.

Both ships flew in silence. Tor, at maximum speed, could barely let go of the controls. Sweat ran down his face from the exhilaration of not being blown apart. This was a new life and he was not sure he was ready for it. Time passed without mishap, the two pirate transporters having given up the pursuit. As the gate loomed close neither ship slowed. Tris backed off at the last instant and the com was a wave of abuse from the other transport ships.

The jump into Argon Prime seemed to take seconds and as the stars settled he recognized the vast shape of the shipyard, the HUD picked up a large number of military craft and a large M-one class destroyer patrolling close to the gate. The navigation system once again corrected his manually generated map and he targeted the Equipment Dock.

The other Discoverer shot past him and headed for Argon Prime.

Tor commented, "Thanks for your help."

There was no reply. The voice he heard over the com had been muffled, he thought he recognized it but said nothing. Anonymity was the watchword here.

The last leg of the journey was trouble free, the presence of Argon One and its full squadrons of fighters eased his mind. It did not appear as though the battle cruiser was shadowing him, more like heading in the same direction.

Docking was a formality, the ship guided in by the station computer system, as laser towers tracked the ship. Unlike normal procedures, Tor was diverted from the main bay, past the military docking bay and through a second set of security doors. The ship docked, clamps engaged and the doors opened. He cautiously stepped out holding the security case.

Three sinister looking men met Tor. Each on inspection appeared to be Argon intelligence officials. The big man in the middle, and by appearance the most senior, was the only one to speak. He was tall, just over seven feet and broad with it. The right side of his face was damaged and down across the right eye was a livid purple scar. The right eye itself was artificial and milky white. A titanium plate covered the cheekbone and went across from the center of the eye to just beyond where his right ear should have been. His name was Caran Belign.

Caran was listed in the journals as an Argon Hero, albeit a ruthless one. In combat he took no prisoners. He fought when others fled, and had escaped captivity in a violently bloody escape.

He smiled at Tor and put out his hand. "The case!"

Tor handed it over like it had suddenly become a red-hot coal.

"Thank you," There was a pause.

"Um, what happens now?" Tor asked.

"You get back on your ship and it's guided back to the main dock," Caran replied.

"Okay," Tor said slowly and began to turn, then stopped, paused and turned back.

"Is there a problem?"

"What about me?"

"What about you?"

"Well the fine I have over me, and the damn run in with the pirates," Tor was beginning to feel annoyed, "The god damn pirates will have my ships registration number. By now they know my name and I'm a bloody dead man."

"Calm yourself!"

"What!" Tor's voice went up, "Why should I calm myself? The bloody pirates will now have me down as a marked man."

"No they won't. Listen!" Caran spoke firmly and with a directness that made Tor step back, "Your ship was temporarily re-registered for the duration of this mission. Now unless you gave, or someone mentioned you're name over the com there's no way anyone will know who you are! Your record has been scrubbed and there is a maintenance crew awaiting your arrival in the main docking area. A token of our appreciation for what you have achieved, we hope you will be pleasantly surprised. There is an automatic system in place that each time you jump sectors for the next three jumps your ship will change it's registration until the last jump when it will revert to your original one. You must understand we take every precaution to protect our independent couriers."

“Okay,” Tor spoke quietly, not completely pacified, and then stepped back into his ship under the watchful eye of the officials.

Caran was not the man to get on the wrong side of, people that did simply died. For this reason he did not have many enemies left.

“Be sure to know we will contact you again in future,” Caran smiled.

The ship departed from the security dock and then re-docked a minute later amongst the commercial freighters. Tor did not feel like celebrating but headed straight to the bar anyway.

Now he was tied in and like it or not they owned him.

He was not habitually a drinking man, but after his recent experience, he needed something strong. He looked over the optics and toyed with the idea of trying one of the three different blends of space fuel. Then he spotted a bottle of dark blue liquid.

“What can I get you?” the barman asked

“What’s the blue stuff?” Tor responded.

The barman looked at him and then the bottle, “That’s Cole’s Fire, as a rule we only serve it with a mixer. It’s a bit strong for the uninitiated.”

“Stronger than space fuel?” Tor asked hopefully.

“About twice the strength,” The barman responded casually.

“I’ll have a double and put a jug of water on the side. I’ll mix it myself.”

The barman poured the double, Tor downed it before the water arrived and slowly slid off the stool and down the side of the bar.

“Stupid kids, never listen,” The barman signaled his assistant android, which lifted Tor and dumped him on one of the benches in the gallery.

Chapter 3 – Credits!

He was shaken from sleep an hour later. A security guard, Tor thought to himself ‘not again.’

The security guard commented, “Can’t sleep here son.”

“Sorry officer. Just passed out,” Tor murmured still hazy from the drink, fortunately for him the benefit of drinking Cole’s Fire is the odourless after effects, unlike space fuel where the smell stayed on the breath, making it difficult for the security guard to detect.

The officer smiled, “Go easy on yourself and get a room to sleep in. There’s two rest centres on this level. Just don’t sleep on the benches.”

Tor swung his legs round and rubbed his eyes, the officer wandered off, gently whistling. He waited till the officer was a reasonable distance away, and then heaved himself to his feet. Staggering slightly, as his blood still was trying to process the infusion of alcohol.

He made it into Garners Rest Centre. The place was not designed to be pretty but purely functional. The lobby had no real size to speak of just a check-in console. From the lobby it led back into a series of corridors each lined with doors.

Tor managed to check-in and picked up the room token card from the drop tray. The rooms were charged by the hour. Fortunately the one he had was well within staggering distance. He did not take in the room itself but collapsed on the bed, immediately dropping into a deep sleep.

Twelve hours later he woke up. There was a distinct pain behind his eyes and as he came to his senses the previous days’ events began to flood back. He kept very still to ensure the lights stayed off. Every room had sensors able to detect and distinguish a sleeping person from someone that was awake. In the transition stage the lighting dimmed up or down.

Eventually, his need for the toilet forced him to get off the bed.

As the light level rose the room presented it self. It was not spacious containing mainly the large bed. Furthest away from the door, was the in-room combination shower and dryer unit, also a toilet and hand basin. A screen filled the wall in front of the bed itself, with an additional one set in the ceiling. A single shelf next to the door was all the storage for clothes.

After he’d showered and dressed. Tor studied himself in the mirror expecting to suddenly see gray hairs on his head. He sighed deeply, and thought, ‘check credits!’

Taking out the light pointer from the holder beside the head of the bed he activated the screen. It split down into four viewing windows, three showed the station channels, one news, and two entertainment. The news channel automatically set itself as the primary source for the sound. This was Tors’ first visit to this chain so the data control did not have an established visitor profile.

The fourth image was a welcome message and displayed other available services. Using the pointer he highlighted ‘bank services’.

The sound system switched over, “Identification required. Please scan palm!”

Holding the pointer a short distance from his left hand, he started at the wrist then waved it up to the end of his fingers and back down to the wrist.

The computer voice responded, “Thank you, connecting to your bank.”

A couple of seconds passed, “Welcome Mr. Grall to your personal banking service. You have three thousand five hundred and twenty two credits in your account. We have a range of new services...” Tor highlighted the disconnect icon, “Thank you for using this service.”

The sound system reverted back to the news channel. In an idle moment he switched to the Argon Prime information chart and highlighted the shipyard.

Scanning the list of new ships he read that a minimum specification trading ship was listed at just over one hundred thousand credits. If he was ever going to become a real independent trader he needed to make credits and fast.

Checking out was simply dropping the room token into a slot beside the door. Once the door closed the cleaning systems commenced work. Tor found himself wandering down to towards the docking bays, pondering what to do next. He stepped onto the shuttle lift and moments later he arrived.

As Tor wandered past the line of ships his attention was grabbed by the mention of credits. He stopped and listened.

"I'll pay you three thousand credits, if you'll give me a lift," The man was in his thirties, clean shaven and smartly dressed.

"And I told you. No, I'm not going that way. Go try someone else," The pilot was curt with his response.

"I've tried everyone else already," The man pleaded.

"The answer is still no! You'll just have to wait for the next passenger transport," The pilot was still adamant in his tone.

"That's not until tomorrow and I need to get home today!" The man was sounding more desperate.

The pilot, shook his head, shrugged his shoulders and stepped through the airlock of the Lifter, which shut promptly behind him.

The man threw his hands up and muttered under his breath.

"Where do you need to go?" Tor asked.

"What?" Suddenly the man realized Tor was speaking to him.

"Where do you need to go?" Tor repeated.

"Umm, the Trading Station in Herrons Nebula."

"For three thousand credits, I'll get you there."

The man paused, "Got a ship."

"I wouldn't offer if I didn't," Tor was flippant with his response.

The mans eyes narrowed slightly, then asked cautiously, "Let me see you're license chip."

Tor showed him.

Turning it over thoughtfully the man observed, "I see you've only just got this."

"It's an upgraded license," Tor smiled.

"Class F! An upgrade?" The man responded slightly more cautiously than before.

"Yes," Tor smiled in the most reassuring way he could.

The man paused and gave Tor an appraising look, "Okay, I need the lift," The man commented aloud, even though this was more to himself than to Tor, "When will you be ready to leave?"

"Now if you like?"

“Let’s go then,” The man seemed surprised, and more so at the sight of the Discoverer. The ship looked clean and in good condition. Tor noticed this and wondered if this was what Caran had meant, but soon found out there was more.

On board the Pirate Station in Brennan’s Triumph, Feran Bloodheart, younger brother to the late Torus Bloodheart and now the leader of the family, punched the console which exploded under his steel fist.

Feran was of Split descent, although the original family name was t’Gnht they had adopted the name ‘Bloodheart’ given them by the Argon traders they terrorized.

He had negotiated his position aboard the station by severing off the head of its former leader, and impaling the second in command to the wall outside the office.

His right arm had been lost in close quarter fighting shortly after his brother had died, due to a bitter rivalry between him and a cousin. Needless to say he still won the fight. In it’s place he had a fully articulated steel prosthetic arm grafted on. The addition of a twelve inch retractable blade was his own suggestion.

The twin white scar down his left cheek was from his right of passage to adult hood, a family born ritual.

“Clegan, get in here now!” Feran was angry and his body almost shook with rage.

“My Lord?” Clegan stepped into the room. An Argon by birth, he had chosen to rebel against the system and decided there was more money to be made in piracy. However he had the misfortune to get tangled up with the Bloodhearts. Shortly after joining the group he found out the only way to leave their employment was death.

“This has cost me five hundred thousand credits and four ships,” Clegan could see the veins in Ferans neck pulsing when he spoke, ”Someone will pay for this. Find me those pilots. Find them now! I want them here and I want them to feel pain.”

“My Lord, we know one is a civilian, the other a navy pilot. They should not be hard to track down.”

“Do not fail me and send me a slave and a restraint harness!” Feran ordered and there was the sound of sliding steel. Lifting his right arm, he stared at the cold blue blade, “I need to release my anger!”

Tor had made good time, the enhancements to his ship had included an extra shield, two gamma impulse ray emitters and a twenty percent increase to his engine speed plus rudder control.

However this just put him more in debt to the Argon secret service, his gut feel was not to expect something for nothing. He knew they would call on him again, and for the first time in his life he contemplated leaving the Argon sectors. Even so he had little experience with the other races.

Galay Tom, the man he had transported, was a trading agent from the Herron’s Nebula home world. He had an important reunion with his family to attend and had missed his transport ship by several hours due to meetings over running. To add to his problems the regular passenger transport had malfunctioned so the following flight had been cancelled. This meant he had been stuck on the station.

Tor reasoned that with one of the regular transports out of service, he should be able to find a return passenger willing to pay good money to be transported back to Argon Prime. Even so, after several hours loitering he contemplated visiting his own home in Cloudbase North West.

Just as he decided to give up a couple approached him, “We’re trying to get to Argon Prime.”

“I can get you there!”

“How much?” They asked together.

Tor started the negotiation but it quickly became apparent that, as station workers, they had limited credits.

He eventually took sympathy. His own parents worked as supervisors in a Cahoona Bakery and agreed to transport them for eight hundred credits. Later he regretted the trip and felt embarrassed being there. He stayed in the cockpit for the whole journey whilst the couple laughed and whispered behind him.

When they landed at the docking bay and he had received payment, he headed for the nearest food hall. With a cup of freshly squeezed bamma juice and a spicy meatsteak set on green kale he found an unoccupied table.

Tapping the console in front of him, he briefly flicked through the sports pages before switching to the trading updates.

Three businessmen sat on the adjacent table. "When do we leave?"

"Not for another six hours."

"And when can we get the tickets?"

"About an hour before departure"

"I can get you there sooner!" Tor commented, without looking up, and took a sip of juice.

"Sorry?" The senior member of the group replied. A solid man with a heavy frame looked across, how tall he was difficult to judge. He had a full head of hair, and a well trimmed, predominantly grey beard. The voice was deep and rich with an accent Tor did not recognize.

"I can get you home sooner. Tell me where you want to go and we can set a price now."

"Alpha bakery in The Wall."

"Not a problem. Ship will be a little bit cramped for three of you, and there's no in flight service, but it'll be quick."

"What ship do you fly?" This one Tor took to be the youngest member of the group, slightly more casual in his appearance with a sharp angular face.

Tor announced proudly, "An upgraded Discoverer."

The three whispered for a moment.

"How much?" The senior member asked.

"Three thousand credits each." The group looked at each other and it struck Tor that he had not been doing his research. He knew it cost a fortune to travel sector to sector but he did not know how much the cartels actually charged.

"Fifteen hundred each," The response came back.

Tor went back to eating his lunch and viewing the console.

"Eighteen hundred then?"

He looked up and chewed slowly on the meatsteak, it was the best way to savour the taste, but it gave him the look of someone considering the offer.

Swallowing the food he took another sip of juice.

A brief sigh, the three looked at him, "Tell you what, I'll meet you at two thousand," Tor replied.

The senior man nodded, "Where do we find you?"

Tor replied clearly, "Docking bay twenty three in half an hour."

The man nodded and the three picked up their bags and left.

Tor smiled, as the mental image of a new transporter filled his mind.

Caran was back on the home world, deep in the intelligence service underground facility. The data file had not produced anything that the Split should have been so determined to retrieve.

There were some structural details on all the main fighters to make them more rigid.

Including two new, as yet undesignated, hybrids of the Mamba and the Scorpion. However the Argon were already aware of these developments, having some of the detail in the data file would help them to understand the capabilities of these ships, nothing more.

A few weapons enhancements were listed to current stock, for improved reliability and cooling. The list showed a series of non-commercial grade weapons. The Argon were making similar developments to its own equipment.

Then there were the shield enhancements, commercial grades and non-commercial.

He looked away from the console to rest his eyes briefly, there was something here. He just couldn't see it yet.

"Give me a listing of items by heading."

The screen displayed a narrow list. Caran scanned down it. It wasn't in alphabetical order but by group.

He blinked just under 'Fighter Drone' the letters 'ASAPCS'.

"Display data relating to item A.S.A.P.C.S."

The console was capable of translation and deciphering encrypted data. It took a moment then the display came back.

"What are you?" The image span on the screen, the heading just read ASAPCS.

"Lab!"

A sub window appeared on the console, "Lab here."

"Frebb, I'm going to download something to you to look at. It's called A.S.A.P.C.S. I want to know what it is and what it does."

"Computer, send data to lab."

Frebb was still on the monitor, "Nice looking device, just let me step though the schematic. One thing I can tell you it's small, smaller than you would pick up on a HUD, magnetic with small drill claws. Not self-propelled and not a bomb. Any more than that, I can't say. It's going to take time I need to make an exact simulation. We may actually have to produce one to be certain."

"Do we have the parts?" Caran asked with interest.

"Checking, no we're missing a few items. I'll send you the list. Just at a glance, I'd say that most of the missing items are off world products. Looking at the detail, I'm certain these are only produced by the Split."

"Thanks Frebb."

The sub window closed, Caran leaned back and glanced up at the pale blue ceiling of his office, it was showing a sunny day perhaps in the last quarter of the year. The odd wispy cloud was passing by.

“Mr. Grall, you want to be a trader and we’ve got some trading for you,” He muttered to himself.

Clegan opened the com to his contact on the Cloudbase South West Trading Station, “Well?”

“The commander here is good. According to the docking logs I’ve hacked, everything checks out. Every Discoverer that arrived here also left, that’s seventeen ships, some were escorts, others beaten up old private ships. All the times and date stamps were recorded real time. The data’s not been tampered with.”

The contact paused briefly, “However there’s six on my list that match the profile of one shield, no weapons. Four of those had either an engine enhancement or restrictions.”

“That leaves two standard ships,” Clegan smiled.

“I have the details.”

“His lordship will be pleased, good work! Now the navy pilot?”

“Tough, I need more time to cross reference. Navy ships aren’t logged by the docking system.”

Clegan paused before speaking slowly as he gathered his thoughts, “Wait, this was a navy operation, neither of the phantom ships are going to be on the docking log.”

“I crossed checked with the transporter that was on the station. It scanned all the ships leaving over this time period,” The contact paused, “As I said I need to do some more hunting. Breaking into the Navy records will cost you.”

“You will be well paid.”

Tor was still ferrying passengers and he had made two more jumps. Even so he was now in uncharted territory for him. The HUD and the nav system had no detail of the stations in each sector. Fortunately the trips he had to make were between trading stations, which were instantly recognizable, even at a distance.

The latest passenger was called Daggen, a former soldier and retired personal protection advisor. He was returning home from an old reunion party in The Wall, but was running short on credits.

Tor had taken pity on the man, who was offering advice to people for a small fee in the food hall, just so he could get the fare home.

Daggen was amazed and horrified at how few precautions Tor had taken to protect himself.

“I can’t believe you’ve nothing to defend yourself with.” Daggen started, “If I were to hold a blaster to your head now and demand you fly me to the nearest pirate station, what would you do?”

“Hadn’t thought about it,” Tor responded truthfully.

Daggen snorted, “Too right you haven’t. First thing you should do is head for the Equipment Dock when we jump Antigone. Buy yourself a pocket stun stick, and a blaster!”

“Anything else?” Tor liked the idea of weapons but until now never perceived himself owning one.

“Let me see.” Daggen thought for a moment and studied the cabin. “Internal scanners, I know where you can get some.”

“Why?”

“Well if someone other than you steps on board and is carrying a weapon. The system will tell you.”

“Okay,” Tor was hanging on every word.

“Get a secure box fitted.” Daggen looked around, and kicked one of the floor lockers, “Here! Most people carry personal protection devices. As the passengers get on, insist they put them in the box for the trip. Of course you do have to give them back at the end. It’ll make them uneasy but you’re the pilot. If they refuse, kick them off!”

“Right,” Tor confirmed.

Daggen smiled, “I tell you, you’ve been lucky so far. There are plenty of mean people out there, and your ship is worth a few credits. You on the other hand may not fetch a good price on the slave market.”

The old soldier went in to story telling mode, “I remember, as a young pilot responding to a hijack distress call. A freighter carrying silicon wafers, the pilot had his wife and child on board, after the drop they were going down to the home world in Red Moon. On route they’d taken on board a passenger to get some extra credits. Just like you’ve been doing.”

“I remember flying around the ship, and calling the pilot. Didn’t get an answer! So I fired a couple of shot and called again. That worked but the hijacker cut the video feed,” Daggen paused.

“He told me everything was fine, must have been a mistake,” Daggen gave a brief shake of the head, “No one accidentally hits the distress call button, it has to be done deliberately. So I called again, told the pilot to dock at the trading station. He refused and aimed for the next jumpgate.”

“I opened up on him, but just before the shields gave out, stopped and called again.”

“This time he just gave me abuse and tried to weave his way out of trouble. As if he was ever going to get away. You’d be amazed at what people will do when they’re on the run.”

“Still kept his shields down, just to the point where a couple of quick blasts and he would have been spacefly fodder. That’s when he bailed out and left the ship with no pilot to control it.”

“Remember son when a pilot bails out and you’re next to the ship you get first rights to the salvage. These days though most ships have built in auto-destruct. The pilot bails out and when he’s far enough away remote detonates the ship. An old trick when the pilot doesn’t stand a chance of beating you in a fair fight turns his ship into a bomb and gets you that way.”

“Anyway it was easy to patch into the auto-pilot and send it to the trading station. I picked up the pirate but he shot himself in the cargo bay.”

“As for the family, they were all dead.” Daggen finished, “So lad, protect yourself! I’ve seen what happens to the ones that don’t.”

Tor said nothing.

As instructed he flew straight to the Antigone Memorial Equipment Dock. Daggen knew roughly where it was in relation to the other stations. Tor scanned several on his way through including the Trading Station which he always picked out.

He refused to accept any payment from the old man, and Daggen had shown him where the best personal protection devices could be found. At first he just scanned the shelves for the cheap products, but comments like:

“Don’t get that, not reliable enough. Nasty tendency to go off in your pocket when you sit down. Believe me you wouldn’t want to stun your balls,” Made him change his mind.

Tor spotted a couple of stun batons on the wall, identical to the one Tris had used on him. However the shopkeeper shook his head saying, “Those are just display items. I supply the military and security with them, but they’re not for sale to civilians.”

The cost added up to several hundred credits, and Tor walked out with a series six thousand Pocket Stun Stick, a shoulder harness and a small blaster that was held just above waist level. Tor had been in favour of a much larger weapon but Daggen advised against it.

“People looking for transport don’t want to be confronted by a youth carrying a large firearm. Tends to put them off! Go for discreet, and the shoulder harness means the weapon can be hidden under your jacket.”

Daggen had tried introducing Tor to Chowder Spray. Interestingly graphical pictures were displayed on the advertising console as to the effects. Tor was not certain having it on the ship was such a good idea. The requirement for the user to have an antitoxin to hand in case of accidental contamination definitely put him off.

They moved on to the Trading Ship Warehouse. This store was more a collection of toys and every other type of additional extra that long haul pilots would buy just to entertain themselves. Including the furry animal toys that you could stick on the cockpit screen, and the wide range of solar glasses for the ultra cool look, and as Tor found out, they looked good right to the point he tripped up because they were too dark for normal use.

“That’ll teach you not to mess around, lad.” Daggens’ tone was deeply sarcastic.

“Sorry.”

In the security box section, the assistant went through the details of each one.

“I’d say you can take no more than four people. That’s the one for you.”

“I’ll take that one.” Tor pointed to the box Daggen recommended.

“A wise choice, and may I recommend our fitting service.”

“I think I should be able to manage.”

Daggen scoffed, “If you do it you’ll just wreck the ship!”

“What you don’t think I can use a spanner?”

The old soldier looked him up and down, and answered honestly, “No!”

“Well I can.”

“Right you are then lad, try picking up that box.”

Tor tried. Then he tried again, he attempted to push the box, it moved a little. Red in the face, and puffing heavily, he sat on the case.

“He’d love to use the fitting service.” Daggen commented and wandered away whistling.

The additional internal scanner pods were cheap and surprisingly easy to fit as the interface card simply glided into one the upgrade slots. Unlike the security box, which left Tor wondering how many lockers would be left. The fitting android had almost gutted the side of the cabin, but after a couple of hours everything was back together.

Tor was impressed that the android had cleaned all the units when putting them back and they needed it. Daggen whiled away the time telling stories about the old days, and when the work was finished he gave it his nod of approval. He assisted Tor with configuring the sensors and security box lock mechanism.

Eventually they parted company. Tor liked the old man and promised to keep in touch. The number of stories he had been told were like pages from history, but brought to life in Daggen.

Tor had not bothered with finding another passenger here. This time he wanted to map the stations in the sector and outside he was in free space again. For the first time in days he had no-one sitting behind him.

It was not long before he requested docking permission at the Trading Station. Whilst under station control he was alarmed when his ship was diverted away. Once again the ship passed through a second set of gates.

Tor slumped down, regretting inside not trying to make the run out of Argon Space.

Once the ship was clamped in the intelligence service dock an official stepped inside the ship. "Will you follow me Mr. Grall."

Tor straightened himself and stepped out of the ship. Almost immediately sirens went off.

"Leave your weapons inside Mr. Grall." The officer did not sound concerned.

He did what he was asked, and when he stepped out the second time there was silence.

"Very good! Now follow me!"

Tor dragged his feet as he was shown to a nearby office. The official motioned for Tor to enter but stayed outside. The door slid shut.

"Mr. Grall! So nice to see you again!" Caran did not look up from the console.

Chapter 4 – The Teladi

“You wanted to see me?” Tor asked.

“Indeed I did. You’ve been doing reasonably well for yourself recently, congratulations.” Caran glanced up, his face pragmatic. Tor did not know if this was a compliment or an insult.

“I have a job for you!” Caran continued after a moments silence, “You’ll like it I’m sure, and it’ll give you the opportunity to meet some new races. Particularly the Teladi.”

“And?”

“In ninety eight hours time, from now,“ Caran checked his monitor, “you need to be in the sector Teladi Gain. A Split freighter will enter the sector, and will hail your ship. When you respond use the codeword ‘fish’ in your reply. The freighter will dump two sets of cargo. Simply pick them up, and make sure when you do, that you have four units of free cargo space. It is vital you collect both containers.”

“Fifty hours after the first drop, you need to be in the system Company Pride. The same thing will happen. Then all you have to do is get back here.”

“You make it sound so simple. It’s a bit like the last time someone told me ‘all you have to do is’. Nearly got me blown apart by pirates.”

“Well you can always say ‘no’.” Caran commented.

“Would that work?” Tor inquired hopefully.

“Not really.” Caran gave no hint of expression.

“And if I did say ‘No’?” Tor asked aloud just in case.

Caran smiled and said as a matter of fact, “You won’t. If you did I’d have to kill you.”

“Oh, so I have a choice then!” Tor commented sarcastically.

“If you want to call it a choice, then yes.” Caran kept his voice calm.

“I like your definition.”

“I’d hate to think you weren’t given options.”

Tor felt a war of wills was beginning. He seemed to have this effect on people. This time no one would be intervening and Caran was in the driving seat.

“Okay, I’ll do it!” He conceded, “But what do I get in return?”

“Good. You need to pick up all eight units of materials and we will pay you five thousand credits per ton.”

Tors' jaw dropped, that was more money than he had ever dreamed of for one trip. “If I miss one?”

“You get nothing!”

“Sounds like a good deal.” Again there was a sarcastic hint to Tors' voice.

“You want to be a trader. The Teladi are the people to learn from. Bit of advice, you’ve got a few credits so get some more cargo bay extensions. The more you have, the better you’ll get on with them.” Caran paused for a moment, “One of

the motto's they have is 'invest in yourself and in your ship'. It's a good saying. You need to do both. Now what is the codeword?" Caran looked at Tor.

"Umm." Tor responded quietly feeling as though he was now under a microscope.

"Fish! Make a note of it in your personal pad, and the names of the systems you need to get to and by when. Although you're going through Boron sectors, I recommend you don't stop. You need to get your navigation system familiar with Teladi controlled space. If you do that then after the first drops you know where to go to next."

Tor pulled the pad out of his jacket pocket and scribbled away.

"By the way, when I said, invest in yourself, I meant more fighter training. We know there's an active pirate base in Company Pride."

The scribe hesitated on the pad screen.

"They shouldn't give you any bother." Caran said reassuringly.

"Just like last time!" Tor exclaimed.

"That's why you've got weapons and shields." Caran countered quickly.

Tor muttered under his breath. Caran made out something along the lines of being stitched up.

"Oh and the Teladi love to pick up dumped cargo. When you respond to the cargo ships make sure you're in good close range, those Bat fighters are quick and they'll swoop in fast to steal it away from you."

"Anything else I should know?" Tor asked with a hint of resignation in his voice.

"The rest you'll find out for yourself!" Caran casually commented.

"Can I go now?"

"Door's right behind you!"

Tor did not say 'bye'. Once it slid shut Caran resumed reading the transcript of the pirate message on the screen. It had been relayed through the pirate satellites in Ore Belt but from there the trail went cold.

The encryption was new and it had taken a couple of days to break.

Caran tried to remember the code name of the intelligence agent in the Trading Station. "Contact Falcon."

A few minutes elapsed before the com responded.

"Falcon calling in."

"Are we secure?" It was the standard question Caran always asked.

"Yes!" The look on Falcon's face and the directness of the reply confirmed to Caran that the signal was clean.

"Any news on the hacker?"

"They managed to get into the Navy data logs a few hours ago. This time we found the entry point to the system."

"Do we have a name yet?" Caran expressed his concern in his voice.

"We think so. Also we've identified the ship that was scanning on the day." Falcon responded.

“Same person?”

“Yes!”

Caran wanted swift action and asked, “Where is this person now?”

“In hiding! We have a suspicion they may have managed to get aboard another ship. They know or suspect we’re after them.”

“I’ll be joining you on the station shortly, let me know when you catch them!”

Caran went to sign off, but paused for a second, “Another thing, sort out a relocation program for a pilot on the list. Level one priority.”

Although the pirates had the wrong two pilots targeted he could at least try to save the life of one pilot and possibly the other with a simple ruse. Make the pirates believe they have the right man on the list by moving one of the pilots and giving them a whole new identity and life somewhere else.

The only problem was he was already two days behind. It was plenty of time for the pirates to have taken their revenge.

Caran wanted to get back to see how the lab simulation was progressing. For now the hacker took priority.

Tor, slightly angry at being pushed around so easily, took the advice and opted for three hours basic combat training. The simulated Discoverer had all the same upgrades as his own. He had several serious dogfights but they mostly ended up with him being shot apart.

Yet he was improving, just before his time ended he had his first real success and managed to take out both Bayamons in a two on one simulation. He took a look at his performance rating before leaving, and was suitably impressed to see he had reached the equivalent of a D rating. However as he had not run the full routine of the test this did not entitle him to a license upgrade.

As he wandered back to the docking bay he wondered what it took to get an A rated license.

The training was intensive and taking its toll on Tris. The first few days had been simulator training and review to assess all the pilots skills not only in the license class of ship they currently held, but also in the ship class above.

Her own license allowed her to fly a Buster and she was pushing towards the standard to pilot an Elite. The equivalent of a civilian grade C.

The last few days pushed all the pilots to the limit. Although acknowledged that planetary invasions were unlikely they still had to train for them. The theory of angles of attack into an atmosphere and what happened when you got it wrong was only the start.

“The important lesson here ladies and gentlemen is to remember to switch off your onboard gravity generator.” The lecturer was reveling in the science of gravity, atmospheric resistance and density. Particularly it’s effect on free falling objects that had just re-entered the atmosphere at two hundred thousand feet. “It is not unusual to pull nine G’s at the bottom of the turn when you’re carrying out a troop deployment or recovery. If you leave the gravity generator on, this will have an effect of trebling the amount of G force acting on you’re body.”

He paused as the pilots made notes, “It’s unlikely that any of you will be conscious after eleven G let alone twenty seven. Numerous fatalities have occurred in the past because of this one fundamental mistake. The ground is extremely unforgiving especially at speed.”

Later they were exposed to the reality of the lecture in a powered descent. The experienced trainer switched off the internal gravity field as the ship started its run. Everyone got the floating sensation of weightlessness whilst being strapped into their seats.

Then the noise. Tris could see out of the main screen and it glowed. The pilot came over the com. "At this point we will lose fifty percent of our shields as we break through the upper atmosphere. Which is one reason the Discoverer cannot be used to perform this role. A trading ship, being sufficiently large, would have broken and burnt up about here."

The roaring sound intensified, "By now the ceramic tiles on an interplanetary shuttle will have reached one thousand degrees." The pilot commented.

They got through and went into a steep descent, the planet was now no longer a nice round sphere, it filled every part of the view. The ship was being buffeted and bounced around.

"What we are experiencing now is called turbulence. Up here the winds can be extremely fast, as we get closer to the surface the effect will lessen."

The surface was rapidly approaching and Tris was nervous.

"When we pull out of the dive. Breathe as if you're constipated."

The passengers laughed nervously. Then they heard the pilot doing the exercise. All of them passed out. The Buster leveled out and the pilot looked over his shoulder then at the android co-pilot.

He smiled, "Always gets them." And headed back into space. As they all came round again, the pilot commented, "Looks like you're ready for a second dive."

The passengers now understood why they had been given empty bags to carry, as three of them were promptly sick. "Maybe it's time for lunch instead."

Tor entered the system Atrous Clouds and looked on in wonder, there were lots of stations here. He recognized some of the designs from old texts and knew he was now in Boron controlled space. He flew his Discoverer past a number of stations logging them on the nav system.

He registered two other gates in the sector, but not really knowing which one led to the Teladi, he just guessed and engaged the thrusters.

An idea came to him, "Sweety pull up the nav system."

The HUD changed and a complete layout of the system presented itself. The stations he had not identified showed as simple blocks without a designator.

Looking closely at the flight paths of the trading ships it was apparent most them were heading in the opposite direction. Without slowing, Tor steered the ship around.

"Let's hope I'm right about this Sweety, and get me some music."

An unusual sound piped through the cabin.

"Sweety! What's that?"

"Channel identified as Boron Coplatic Music, broadcast source unidentified station."

"Umm, it's not quite what I had in mind." Tor said uncertainly.

"Do you want me to scan for another channel?"

"That's okay Sweety. Leave it on." He paused, "It's sort of growing on me. Call it a cultural experience."

The Discoverer sailed on through Rolk's Fate. Again Tor scanned the stations closest to his flight path mapping them onto the nav system.

The HUD picked up a small group of pirate ships, one Orinoco with two Bayamon escorts. They paid no interest to him whilst he discreetly tried to give them a wide berth.

"Sweetie, How long have we been travelling?"

"Twelve Argon hours. Ten Boron twils."

Tor remembered some mention of this at the academy during the Astro-Economics lecture. Each race had naturally developed their own methods for telling time based on the length of a day on their original home world.

As no two planets spin at exactly the same rate, and are exactly the same size or in exactly the same orbit around their respective suns every race had a unique clock.

When each race eventually migrated into other sectors they found the need for a common point of reference to know how long they had been away. So naturally they kept time relative to their original home world whilst in space. This was fine until they met with another race.

To add to the confusion the races also worked on a different total number of hours in each day. An Argon day is broken into twenty-four hours a Split day into twenty. After many years of debate the politically least offensive system of the Teladi had been adopted.

This worked well in terms of space-time but did not suit the colonized planets, which had problems translating it into their own solar days.

After decades of successful use, space-time fell victim to politics. After a dispute and small-scale military action the Split dropped the single time system and reverted back to their own.

When the Argon discovered that the Teladi were still supplying the Split with Argon arms and equipment, they too dropped the single time system in protest.

The Boron did the same.

Several years after this, the single space-time system has once again moved onto the political agenda. The Teladi time base has been creeping back into use as the standard between the races.

They crossed in to another new sector. Sweetie informed Tor as the stars settled down again, "Entering system Menelous Frontier!"

Once again the scale of the Boron presence awed Tor. The number of stations hung in space like jewels catching the light of the sun. Whilst the Argon territories had suffered severely during the Xenon conflict, it had still been slow in rebuilding its manufacturing base. Unlike the Boron, who showed all the signs of being major industrialists.

Tor had to make a guess as to which gate. Having clearing the one he had just jumped through, Tor positioned the ship outside of the obvious shipping route.

"Sweetie display the nav!"

He studied it for a few moments.

"Sweetie, can you identify any Teladi ships?"

"Teladi ship found, distance thirty five k's."

"Highlight it for me!"

A white dot on the screen brightened up. It was heading in his direction.

“If you’re coming this way then you must have come from over there!” Tor reasoned and twisted open the thruster control. The ship surged forwards again and turned towards the next gate.

He hummed to the Coplatic music filling the cabin, and smiled to himself. Not really knowing where he was or where he was going.

Clegan answered the urgent com. “Yes?”

“Need to make this quick, they’re onto me. I managed to break into the records and I have ten possible names for you.”

“And?” Clegan responded quickly.

“I didn’t get time to investigate further. You should see ten names on your pad when you scan in. I need to leave here now. Transport ship has already been found. Need to find an alternative. Get the credits to my account, you know my fee!”

The com went dead, Clegan examined his pad and sure enough he had the names. Somehow he needed to find the right one. The Argon Navy would take exception against losing ten personnel, but Feran would see it differently.

He was now seriously concerned at how psychotic his master had become, and wanted desperately to get out. They had snatched one of the pilots on the list. The other had tried to run but an over enthusiastic pirate had blown the Discoverer apart.

Feran had practically skinned the man before he died and Clegan could still hear the screams in his head. This had calmed his master for now, but he was still demanding to know when the other pilot would be brought before him.

He felt that he could almost take any hapless creature to Feran, say they were the pilot and his master would be satisfied. However the risk of having the deception uncovered was not a price worth paying.

Tor passed through the jump gate. At the other side Sweety announced “Entering system Ceo’s Buckzoid.”

Here the stations were different again to the Argon and the Boron.

“Which race?”

“Sector owned by Teladi!”

“I’ve arrived.” He said this more to himself than to the ship.

“Yes!” Sweety replied.

Tor took his time and explored the system scanning all the stations into the nav system. Then he aimed for the trading station to make his first meeting with the new race. With deep intrepidation and faster than normal heartbeat, he put on the direct translator earpiece.

The docking clamps engaged with a resounding thump. Tor released the door locks and stepped out onto the docking bay.

Unlike the Argon trading stations before, the traders carried out most of their business at the dockside. Looking away from him, past the bustle of the crowd was the Teladi equivalent of the Argon gallery. This time the rest centers and food halls were directly ahead of the ships, with six levels of shops between the two docking levels. The transparent frontage enabled customers in the food halls to view the docking bay and watch the ships arrive and depart.

Then there were the Teladi, who were reptilian in appearance. They negotiating and bargaining amongst each other and with any other race that Tor could spot, but not immediately identify. There were less than a handful of Argon traders here.

Tor felt tired and had checked the flying time before getting off the ship. Thirty-two hours had passed, he directed himself towards the nearest rest center, just beyond the docking bay entrance security airlocks.

Tarraganos Tetormentis Bilyzonus the second had observed Tor leave his ship. She was a Teladi on hard times and making a living advising non-Teladi traders where to make the best profit, for a fee. She had been sacked, after her previous employer discovered she had been trading with a competitor for personal gain.

Now she was trying to build on her savings in order to get her own trading ship. She had tried hiring a ship but the shipyard fee was huge, and she was finding that advising visiting traders had little reward.

Still she wanted to get back to the shipyard in Seizewell to try again and hire a ship. Tor looked like someone she could help and also negotiate a lift from.

Tor slept well. He had been in the rest center ten hours and needed something to eat. Making his way to the food hall he bumped into Bilyzonus.

The translator put a slight slur on the 's'.

"Sso, ssorry. I've not sseen you before. You're a sstranger, I can help you. Give advicess."

Tor looked at her, "Ummm."

"You want to trade? Make profitss."

"Well yes." Tor thought that that was a good start.

"Then you lissten to me for ssmall fee. I'll find you the besst dealss."

"How much."

"Your sship is ssmall, sso fifty creditss."

Tor paused a moment, he had a couple of days to find the first of the drop off sectors. Someone with a lot of local sector knowledge would easily shorten his time searching.

"Okay!"

Bilyzonus smiled and held out her hand but it was bunched into a fist. Tor looked surprised.

"A ssign that we have a deal." She commented

Tor nodded and cautiously made the same gesture, Bilyzonus laughed and knocked fists gently together. "The deal iss now made. Good profitss."

"Good profitss." Tor repeated, "Look I need to get some food!" Tor commented, "Do you want to come?"

She declined, "I need to sspeak to friendss."

"Okay, I spotted a food hall a couple of levels up looking over the docking bay. Meet you in there in say, half an hour?"

Now it was Bilyzonus who looked confused.

Tor thought for a moment, "I mean, eight Mizuras."

“Eight Mizurass.” She confirmed.

He went to a third level food hall that looked out over the docking bays. The catering had a large number of local dishes, some of which appeared to still be moving. Tor managed to get a meatsteak but rather than on the traditional kale this came with shicoot pods. He gave them a try and the taste was, he had to admit, extremely pleasant. However the afterburn had him choking for air.

At the amusement of the customers around him Tor had turned from pasty white to deep crimson with a hint of blue. He tried to order jugs full of water but his vocal chords had given up and gone out.

After a moments concern on the part of serving staff, they recognized what he had ordered, laughed for a while, then presented him with a glass of white liquid.

Tor downed the drink, and almost immediately felt relief.

He pushed aside the shicoot and ate the rest of the meatsteak. He checked the time. Just over the half-hour had passed and no Bilyzonus. He went to look for her, as he stepped out of the food hall he heard voices one of which sounded like her.

Drifting away from the shuttle lifts to a side walkway Tor saw Bilyzonus held against the wall, someone wearing a hooded cloak had her by the throat.

Through the translator the language sounded broken, even though the natural language flowed.

“You said advice be good!”

“Your sship too sslow! Can’t blame me if you too sslow!” Bilyzonus replied sharply.

“I want money back. You lost me much money.” A blade appeared in the assailants’ hand.

Tor moved in quick and for the first time used his pocket stun stick.

The figure released the knife and Bilyzonus whilst trembling with the stun stick pressed against him. After five seconds the stun stopped to recharge and the figure dropped to the ground unconscious.

She gave it a good few kicks, swearing and spitting then composed herself. “We leavess now!”

Tor did not feel like disagreeing. En-route to the ship, Bilyzonus renegotiated the original deal.

“I’ll come with you, and we will make much profitss together.”

He thought about the assailant, “I think it would be safer for both of us.”

“Good! I can negotiate the price for you, but in return my fee is ten percent.”

He thought about it as they strode along and before they reached the docking bay he held out his clenched fist. She smiled and the deal was struck.

Having returned to the Discoverer they undocked. As soon as they hit open space Bilyzonus pointed Tor to the nearest Ore mine. She struck a deal on the dockside for ore at large freighter discount. The mine had reached maximum storage capacity and needed to shift stock or risk costly shutdown.

Then she directed him to a Teladianium foundry and again she negotiated a good price. Tor was impressed as he sat navigating and piloting, Bilyzonus was scanning the stations.

From Ceo’s Buckzoid she guided him into sector Profit Share after a few more trading runs the ship entered Seizewell. Tor had increased his cargo bay to twenty units and now carried silicon wafers under the advice of Bilyzonus.

She had commented that to help with trade he needed to drop a satellite and then pick it up again later.

They dropped off the silicon with a healthy profit. However Tor was now short on time. He had six hours left before the first drop.

As they set off he looked back, "Bilyzonus, I need to get to Teladi Gain which way?"

She looked at him, "Why there?"

"I've got to pick something up!"

"Big profit?" She asked.

Tor smiled, "Eventually and only if I get all of it!"

"I want to go to sshipyard."

Since the station, this was the first time Tor had heard her ask for anything. With her help she had earned him thousands of credits. It was enough to pay for the upgrades and more so he agreed.

At the shipyard, he insisted on staying with her when she chose her ship. The cheapest Vulture however was nearly twenty thousand credits more than she had saved. The ship itself had been stripped of everything but cargo bay enhancements.

They went for a bite to eat and a drink. Eventually Tor made a suggestion.

"Look, how would you feel about a partnership?"

She looked at him, "Go on?"

"I've got the credits you need to buy the Vulture. I want to be a trader just like you do, and just like you I don't have enough credits." Tor stated, "Besides I'm in some real shit too." He added quietly to himself.

"Hmmm."

"Look the way I see it is this, you buy sixty percent of the ship and I buy forty percent. As you're doing the work you get seventy five percent of the profit and I get twenty five."

She looked at Tor and tilted her head to one side in thought. The Argon man was honest, more so than most. She decided to trust him, as it would take years of effort to make the profit he was offering her now.

They touched fists. An hour later Tor knew exactly where to go for both pick ups' and Bilyzonus was heading out in the vulture.

Chapter 5 – The Pickup.

Caran sat impassively watching the monitor. The hacker had not revealed anything after several days of questioning.

“I haven’t time for this!” Caran knew the two pilots were dead and that the navy pilots lives were potentially at risk. He wanted to know what information the hacker had passed on.

“Sir, we’ve tried everything. Every truth drug and stimuli, if he knew anything he would have told us!”

Caran paused and looked at the intelligence agent, he was a young man and recently put on to active service. “Really?” without taking his eyes off the man he commented to the operator at the desk, “Cut the feed! I want a moment alone with the prisoner.” The young agent shrank back from the steely gaze.

Directing his voice back to the agent, “We have the right man. He just needs the right type of persuasion.” Caran turned and as he walked away commented, “Have a med team ready by the cell.”

After Caran had left the room and the door closed, the senior officer at the control desk spoke up, “Never question anything he does lad! The poor bastard in that cell had better know something and he’d better tell him. I’ve heard of people resisting the drugs before, but have told us everything as soon as he’s stepped through the door.”

“How?” The young agent asked alarmed.

“Fear! You looked into those eyes, the normal one and the other. How did you feel?”

“Uncomfortable. It’s like he’s looking inside.” The young agent paused, “Seeing my thoughts!”

“He probably was!” The senior officer replied quietly and softly.

Caran reached the cells. The agent code-named Falcon, stood outside sipping a cup of water. He looked up, “Nothing so far!”

Falcon looked around, “Med team?”

“Hopefully on its way, but make sure. We have some young idiot on duty.”

Caran stepped up to the door. It slid open, the intelligence agent inside looked round. Caran motioned with his head for the agent to leave. The hacker was off his chair and pressed himself against the far wall hoping it would swallow him. It was a choice of being questioned by Caran now, or being skinned alive by Feran later. The hacker preferred the latter but blind stupidity made him hope he could avoid both.

Ten minutes passed in the soundproof room when the door opened again. Caran stepped out signaling for the medics to go in.

Falcon stood impassively, still sipping on a cup of water, and looked at him raising an inquisitive eyebrow.

Caran nodded, “I need to see Commander Narl.”

Commander Narl asked, “Drink?”

“Usual!”

Narl smiled, taking a glass, and poured an extremely generous measure of Cole’s Fire. For himself the twenty-five year old Masker space fuel.

“How long has it been?” Narl asked as he turned around holding both drinks.

“Just over six years!” Caran replied.

“I guess this isn’t a social visit then?” Narl handed over the glass.

“Did you know if you add a little water to this it turns orange, and when you add more it goes yellow. All the colours of fire.” Caran commented in a quiet reflective tone.

“Yes I know!” Narl answered quietly.

“How’s the family?”

“They’re all well and I’ve three grand children now. I’m thinking it’s about time I retired! Spend more time at home with the wife.”

“I can’t think of anyone who deserves it more, Sir!”

“I haven’t been your commanding officer for fifteen years so drop the ‘Sir’.” Narl paused and then spoke slowly, “That thing you were doing four years ago. I’ve read the reports, but I’d like to hear your side of the story. What really happened?”

Caran swirled the blue liquid around the glass then took a sip, “First tell me the name of the navy pilot that helped the other day.”

Tor held position near the jump gate and was carefully watching the HUD and nav system. Almost to within the minute the split transport crossed into Teladi Space.

The ship cleared the gate and moved into the sector, Tor powered up his engines and followed at just over one kilometer separation.

After a couple of minutes Tor wondered if he had the right ship when he had a message over the com. “What you want?” The voice was guttural and broken up by the translator. Tor realized he recognized the accent from the assailant on the Teladi Trading Station.

“I need some fish! Do you know where I can get some?” Tor replied, having studied his personal data-pad for the code word, the com went quiet.

Tor followed for a brief time then the trader dropped the first cargo unit. A little further ahead the second container. Turning his ship in a wide arc, the Split trader headed back through the jump gate.

Tor’s HUD locked onto the first container and Sweetie commented, “Computer chips!”

He scooped them up and then quickly picked up the second container. Again Sweetie identified the second package. It contained “Split Crystals!”

A Bat fighter glided past Tor a few minutes later, whilst he was heading back to the Seizewell Gate.

“Ship scanned.” Sweetie commented.

Tor hailed the pilot over the com, “Hey, what’s the big idea?”

The pilot responded, “Checking you’re not a pirate! Sship acting ssuspiciously!” There was a momentary pause, “Sship sscan complete, you’re clean. Good profitss!”

The Bat disappeared off. Tor now felt at a complete disadvantage, he needed a cargo scanner.

Reaching the gate he slowed the ship and let things take their course. As the ship disappeared, the Bat turned around and followed.

In Seizewell, Tor caught up with Bilyzonus. She had been making good progress. Also she showed a great deal of the financial acumen the Teladi were famous for. Transferring across the data log she kept for all the transactions. Including the profit and the investment split. Tors' share of the profits paid for a quarter of everything.

The vulture now had a basic shield fitted and upgraded systems.

"Bilyzonus! How's it going?" Tor hailed with a genuine curiosity.

"Good profitss." She responded cheerfully.

"How much so far?" He asked quickly.

"You have fifteen thousand creditss." Bilyzonus had rounded the number, "I would like to buy you out!"

Tor did some quick arithmetic on his data-pad, and then spoke carefully, "Not yet! It'd be a great help to me if we can balance this fifty-fifty?"

This time Bilyzonus thought for a moment, "Agreed, I keep ten thousand of your creditss to balance my numbers." She reasoned that this way she would be halving her own financial risk and it made working out the accounts far simpler.

Tor breathed a sign of relief. At least now he was earning some real credits whilst running around the universe on the whim of Caran.

He turned the ship and headed into the next uncharted sector.

Caran was back in Argon Prime, this time at the trading station. He was briefing the Navy commanders and officers. At the mention of the Bloodheart clan things became serious.

"We have the list of pilots they're after."

"Can't we go in and take them out?" It was senior officer Tregin that asked the question.

"When we know exactly where they're operating from!" Caran paused briefly. "There are a number of potential bases. However we need to know for certain that they're not operating from within their home system. I don't want to be starting a war with the Split!"

"Couldn't we publish the name with a KIA?" This time Bragg, the chief training officer, spoke up.

"We've used that many times and it used to work, but no one believes the KIA reports anymore."

"Meaning?" Bragg asked calmly.

"There are new more sophisticated ways to track down a relocated person. Recent events lead us to believe the Split have the same techniques. If the Split military have the ability! Then so do the Bloodhearts!"

A momentary silence before officer Yolsi commented, "We need to talk to the pilots. These people have been training hard to be a part of the Argon Navy and now were just arbitrarily ending their careers!"

There was a murmur from the officers and the briefing ended shortly after. Caran wandered back to the Intelligence Office. He would monitor the meeting from the control room, more out of interest than involvement. He had passed on the information and allocated two agents to sort out any pilot requests. Otherwise his involvement had ended.

A rogue pirate Mandalay had scanned Tor. Now he was dodging energy pulses.

"Drop your cargo!"

“Get stuffed!” Tor replied. The Mandalay was quick but only marginally quicker than Tor, as he twisted the ship around. Trying desperately to get behind his opponent rather than in front, which is where he was now.

Unlike the simulator the pirate was more unpredictable and better controlled on his fire. Tor's shields dipped to seventy percent for the fourth time. His knuckles were white, as he gripped the controls, and sweat ran down his forehead.

The pirate made a small mistake, Tor dipped down and shut off the throttle then powered up. The quick hesitation had the pirate shoot past. Tor wished he had a booster, but managed to get off a quick couple of shots.

Both found their target, the com opened.

“You worthless space maggot, when I get you in my sights you’ll be nothing but scum, to be wiped off my hull.”

“As if I’m going to let you have the opportunity. You’re going to end up as spacefly dung, shit for brains!” Tor pulled the trigger a rapid burst of energy streaked away in front of him.

The shields of the pirate ship buckled but did not give out. The pirate was pulling away. Tor let out another burst, the shots ran wide as the pirate turned his ship to one side.

He sighted up as the Mandalay quickly flipped round for a strafing pass. Needing to make it count, he squeezed off a volley, with success. A double hit and a single, the shield indicator on the pirate craft dropped to zero and stayed there.

The pirate swore over the com. “Damn you and this useless piece of junk.”

As Tor turned back the Mandalay was stationary. The pilot had bailed out and was heading towards the nearest station.

He remembered the words of Daggen and headed towards the pilot, “Sweety see if you can patch into the Mandalay’s computer.”

“Access gained, system over-rides inoperative. I have re-registered the ship to you.”

Tor had slowed the ship. The pilot was now only meters away. “Open the cargo bay Sweety let’s pick up this piece of waste and hand him over to the authorities.”

“No cargo bay life support installed. Pilot will be killed!” Sweety responded.

Tor pulled up quickly and engaged the thrusters to full.

There was a brief scream over the com. The pirate was now a ball of rapidly disappearing flame in the rear scanner. He had been caught with the wash of the engines.

Tor stared in disbelief. He shut off the engines and staggered into the rear cabin, where he was violently sick. This was his first kill, unlike the simulators the harsh reality of what he had done sank home.

Sweety spoke, “Mandalay ship reports it has damage to both weapons systems, and one shield system. Second shield off line, surge breaker tripped. Freight scanner installed and operational! Missile guidance systems damaged! Awaiting further instruction!”

Tor did not respond immediately. He took a large drink of water to wash his mouth, and wished it were space fuel.

“Um, where’s the nearest equipment dock?”

“System Seizewell!” Sweety responded.

Tor spoke quietly and slowly, “Okay, let’s park it up in the trading station. See if we can get someone to fix it.”

Following the captured ship it appeared that the engine system had also been damaged. Now running at stock speed, rather than enhanced, it limped into the docking bay.

He opted to leave it there in the hands of the maintenance crew after transferring the freight scanner. Being uncomfortable with keeping the ship, especially having burnt up its' previous owner, Tor wanted to sell it. However in order to do so he needed to escort it to a shipyard and at this moment he did not have luxury of time.

The last jump into Company Pride was less eventful, now he only had eight hours before the next drop. Deciding to scan the stations in the sector was just a way of killing the time.

Detecting the pirate station, the Discoverer was carefully piloted away. He hung around the second gate in somber reflection of the events in the previous sector.

Even the encounter with the pirates did not compare with this. Then Tor was flying for his life and someone else did the killing. He wondered what Tris would have said, probably something along the lines of "Make it clean! Make it quick!" That was no comfort.

The split transport arrived on time, and moved away from the jump gate. Tor was slightly slow in reacting but still managed to tuck in nicely behind the freighter.

"What you want?" The freighter pilot hailed over the com.

"Fish." Tor couldn't think of anything more constructive to say.

A short while later the first of the containers was dropped. The split trader began his turn. As he finished the turn the trader dropped the second container.

Tor glided in slowly to pick up the first lot of cargo and as he adjusted his direction for the second a Bat swooped in fast and snatched it away.

"What the?" and Tor put full power to the thrusters. The Bat was faster and already disappearing.

The com came alive with laughter from the Split trader. "You in trouble now!"

"Shit, shit, shit." It was all Tor could say. "What was in the container?"

"You want know?" The pilot continued to laugh.

Tor was finding it less than funny, he turned around and reduced engine power, "Yes, I want to know!"

"You go computer plant Thuruks Pride, but they not know you. Not like you. You won't get in!" The trader laughed and continued his flight.

"Wait! Can you get me some more?"

"I risk much. You on your own." The com went quiet.

Tor swore again, the Bat was already too far ahead and heading for the jump gate.

A brief look at the ship data told him the Bat was nearly twice as fast. He flew around aimlessly for a moment. Tor thought today had been the worst day of his life, just about everything had turned bad on him.

He eventually ended up in the Teladi trading station and acquired a number of bottles of the local brew. Then he drank until he passed out in his rest centre room. He had wanted to be alone.

As he woke up, he was acutely aware that his body and brain were now regretting the previous drinking session. As he lay motionless on his bed, he tried to weigh up his options through the hangover that seemed to be bashing holes in his brain.

He could go back and tell Caran he had failed. Or he could try to make friends with the Split and get some replacement parts. Alternatively he could just put the blaster to his head and say “Goodbye universe.”

The last one, in his current state, sounded the most appealing. The thought of facing Caran and saying, “Sorry but a Teladi Bat got the last container,” was not something he relished. Caran scared Tor more than he would admit, and there was something very strange about his eyes.

Eventually he made a decision. He would try and buy some replacement parts, but he needed advice on making friends with the Split. The only person he dared to ask, and could be able to help, was Bilyzonus.

He returned to the Trading Station that held the Mandalay for repairs. The bill came to two thousand credits. With one shield and comparable speed to the Discoverer, the ship was fully functioning. Tor spent another nine hundred credits obtaining an android pilot.

The Mandalay acted as wingman following Tor back to Blue Profit where he found Bilyzonus en-route to a wheat farm carrying energy cells.

Back on the Trading Station in Argon Prime and Tris was worried. After the briefing each pilot was called away. Now she sat in a room with her training officer and an intelligence agent.

“I know you haven’t had long to think about this, but can you give me some idea of what you want to do?”

Tris looked around. “I want to see the person in charge!”

“You’re talking to me. I’m in charge and that’s all you need to know. So answer the question!”

“You? I don’t think so!”

“Private Tris, I don’t like your tone!” Training Officer Pallow responded with force.

“Sorry Sir.”

“Answer the question!” Pallow demanded.

“I want to remain a pilot Sir!”

“You realize that this will leave you in danger of reprisals?” The agent asked.

“Yes Sir!”

The agent nodded slightly. Tris could not tell if this was at her response or to some other unheard instruction.

Clegan entered the office and Feran looked up. “News?”

The office had been recently scrubbed and a smell of cleaner tainted the air. The lighting was subdued and several unidentified empty bottles of drink filled the waste unit. The pirate station was not used to the rule of the Bloodhearts.

“Not yet my lord, the intelligence service have captured my agent.”

Feran stayed calm in his voice, even though his body language was more hostile. “Did he find anything out?”

“Some names, but it’s not the complete list.”

“When will you have the right name?”

Feran was sounding back in control of himself, and this worried Clegan. He knew where he stood when Feran was ranting, about a couple of meters from having an intimate relationship with the blade. Now the Split was sounding reasonable, almost rational in his thirst to hurt someone. Like a sleeping volcano, building up the anger within, that could burst out unpredictably and in any direction.

“I need to do some checking myself. Maybe hire a new informer.”

“You have four Tazuras. After that, kill everyone on the list!”

“Yes my lord!” Clegan bowed slightly and retreated from the office. He had the break he now needed, although he would not be safe, he would be off the station.

Firing up the engines of his Bayamon, he signaled the ground crew to release the docking clamps.

As he exited the station, he held the booster open. Upon hitting maximum speed he headed off towards Argon space.

Less than an hour later he docked at the shield factory in Elena's Fortune.

Caran picked up the com.

“Sir, we have an incoming call from a man saying he has information concerning the Split data sets.”

“Put him through!”

The video link opened up. A hooded figure was on the other end. The face obscured.

“What is it you want to tell me?” Caran asked.

“Lots! Need to strike a deal first.” Clegan knew he needed to put down the conditions early.

“What did you have in mind?” This could be a lengthy negotiation Caran thought.

“You know we have a list of pilots! We will hunt down and kill everyone of them unless you give me the name of the pilot which dropped off the data sets.”

“And?”

“So if you tell me which is the right pilot then you'll be keeping the other nine alive!” Clegan anticipated Caran would remain listening.

“Is that your deal?”

“No! I know your reputation Caran, at the very least if you give me the pilots' name this makes protecting them easier for you. I'm sure there will be numerous dead pirates before anyone of us gets close enough.”

“I still haven't heard what you want out of all this?”

“I want out from the Bloodheart clan.” Clegan responded.

“That's easy all you have to do is die!” Caran was unconcerned in his voice.

“Well I was hoping to get out alive.”

“So I give you a pilots name and then get you out. What will you do for me?” Caran hated this part of the conversation. He disliked making deals with pirates. However occasionally they had their uses.

“Let you know where Feran is based and when he's going to be back on station.”

“And?” Caran knew what was coming next.

“You send in Victor wing and destroy the whole base and every pirate ship trying to leave.”

“And you’ll be?” A few quick questions as Caran considered options.

“No where near!”

Caran paused for thought.

Tor sat dejectedly in the Teladi bar. Smoke and the faintly sweet aroma of Spaceweed drifted over the clientele. The extractors were working at moderate efficiency as this was still early in the station day. The shift change had another hour before it started. Then trade would increase as those finishing for the day stopped by for drinks and other things. For now it was a courtesy wash down and cleaning session. Across the table was the now familiar Bilyzonus.

He looked up from his drink. “I need to get those parts.”

“Which partss? The Ssplit make four different typess.”

Tor shrugged his shoulders, “I don’t know, all I know is I need two units of which ever one is the right one.” He sighed, the conversation had come full circle and he was getting drunk again.

“You know you can’t get near a Ssplit Sstation. They won’t recognize you ass a friend.” Bilyzonus watched him with large reptilian looking eyes.

“Yes, I know, you’ve already told me. The Split only like warriors and people that kill their enemies. I’ve only just killed someone and I really don’t feel to great about it. Now I need to go kill some more people just so the Split will like me.” Tor paused with a look of disdain on his face, “You know this sucks. If not killing people means that I don’t have to be friends with a bunch of murdering barbarians then that’s fine with me. But I need those parts!”

“Then you’ll have to kill piratess. Ssplit resspect good fighters!”

“Excellent just what I need. More entanglements with pirates!” Tor was feeling stressed and sarcasm was creeping back into his tone.

Bilyzonus tilted her head over to one side and smiled. “You’ll alssso need a change of clothess!”

Tor paused a moment and looked down, “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“Much too bright! You will offend Ssplit.”

“Ah great. So after getting knee deep in the blood and intestines of the enemies of the Split, they won’t like my dress sense!”

She nodded and was beginning to enjoy the chat.

Tor took another large drink.

“Will you consider helping me?” He asked eventually, “Please? Look I’m on my knees asking you to help. My profit is your profit. Please?”

She laughed at him, “I will help you, but you must escort my ship.”

“Anything you say!” He conceded sullenly.

“Hmmm. In that casse, clothess.” She smiled and stood up abruptly signaling him to follow.

They left the bar, Tor was swaying slightly, and headed into one of the larger supply shops.

Bilyzonus found him several sets of clothes for space pilots mostly in the grey colours.

Tor walked out in a dark grey utility jacket with blue shoulder and arm panels, pale grey coveralls and dark blue pilot boots. Also he had purchased a deep hooded, dark cloak which many Split pilots favoured.

Tor had examined himself in the mirrors. He had taken pride in the fact he was a non-conformist, standing out from the crowd, now he just blended in.

She had said, "Much better. Now you look like a sserious pilot!"

Even he had to admit, "It's a lot more comfortable than I thought it would be."

"You think pilotss want to be uncomfortable?" Bilyzonus mocked.

"No!"

He spotted a music store and without hesitation headed straight for it. Bilyzonus had to chase after him. With a misty look in his eyes he found the stringed Guilard section. Picking up one of the instruments he turned it over in his hands.

"You can play?" Asked one of the assistants.

"Used to!" He responded, "May I?"

"Sorry, I think he'ss drunk!" Bilyzonus mentioned to the assistant, who gave her a knowing nod.

Tor played a few random notes, then fiddled with the tuners. "Had one of these back at home."

The strings sang as he played a simple melody then riffed into a well-known ballad. The assistant picked up an instrument and played accompaniment. For an hour they strummed and played, gathering an audience of many curious visitors, including an Argon visitor named Stanad Block. Applause rippled through the crowd when the duo finished.

Tor shook hands with the Teladi assistant, who placed a quick kiss on his right cheek. Tor blushed.

Stanad approached Tor, "Well played. What's your name?"

"Tor. Tor Grall."

The man smiled, "Take care of yourself Tor." And left.

Bilyzonus bought him the Guilard and asked, "Why did you want to become a trader?"

"Too many shite bands out there and no one knows the difference!" He smiled, "Thanks!" And picking up the case left the store.

She smiled and followed. They went to the food hall and grabbed a bit to eat.

"How many credits do we have?" He asked, the uncomfortable feeling that she really earned these and he had done nothing to help crept over him.

"One hundred and ssixty thousand." Bilyzonus replied then added, "Approximately"

"Okay, I need to spend a few credits to get the Mandalay up to spec."

"The vulture needss better sshildss."

“Hmmm, how much do you think we need to spend?”

She looked over her personal pad, “Eighty ssix thousand credits.”

“Wow, I can nearly buy a new trading ship for that!”

She took on a serious tone, the expression on Bilyzonus face and body language told Tor not to question. “There iss one condition under which I will trade with the Ssplit. You will let me buy you out when it iss finissed!”

Tor thought about it briefly and sipped on his bamma juice. “Okay.”

She put out her fist, and he gently bumped knuckles.

“I need to earn ssome more credits and I will meet you in the Equipment Dock in Sseizewell.”

“I need to get some sleep and sober up a little.” Tor commented and she nodded.

“I will ssee you later!”

Tor retired to the rest centre and grabbed nearly eight hours of sleep.

On waking he quickly showered, dressed and headed out to his ship. He checked the HUD for sector information, Bilyzonuss’ Vulture was not listed. At full speed with Mandalay close behind they headed to the Seizewell gate.

Once in the sector he checked the HUD again, this time he found her ship. According to the scanner she had just entered the sector from Profit Share. The cargo listed as full station yields of Silicon Wafers and Ore.

He signaled her ship, ”Bilyzonus, are you en-route for the Equipment Dock.”

“Hi Tor! No, I have to make a few deliveriess. Then pick up ssome goods to trade with the Ssplit. I will meet you in a few hours!”

“Can you transfer me some credits to upgrade the Mandalay?”

“Transferring twenty thousand credits.”

Tor smiled to himself. Bilyzonus hated to miss any opportunity for making profit. The inventory list of the vulture also showed she had recently acquired the much desired, ‘Best Buys’ and ‘Best sell’ locator modules for the ship computer.

Unknown to Tor, she had taken on a couple of extremely lucrative contracts delivering goods to stations that were on the verge of shutdown due to pirate activity or missed shipments. The account logs did show these transactions.

He docked up then set the maintenance crew to work on the Mandalay. Tor stopped by the simulator training centre. Still having a couple of hours to use up he opted to try out the full test simulation and see if he could upgrade his license.

Standing by the reception terminal, it presented a number of options. These included a variety of ships from all races. Restricted to trading ships, M-four and M-five fighters.

Recent tightening in weapons and fighter ship regulations between the races put a halt to what was considered a dangerous built up of major military hardware in the hands of civilians.

Only station owners were allowed to acquire M-three fighters, but in limited numbers for use as defense craft. In the outer sectors however stations were allowed to gain concessions for more than three top fighters. The military of each race recognizing the threat of attack by the Xenon or Khaak in these outlying regions.

Needless to say a black market in older M-three fighters was prolific and hijackings and thefts of these craft were common. Station owners that lost a ship in this way were refused replacements.

Only the Advanced Industries Corporation, with close ties to the Argon, Paranid and Boron military as well as the Goner religious group, had access to the latest military hardware. The company was a major supplier in upgrades and a developer of new technology.

Tor selected the Discoverer and full combat simulation with a final license test. The many hours of flying his ship gave him complete confidence through the moderate and experienced pilot simulations.

A subtle difference between the Argon and the Teladi simulations was the emphasis the Teladi put on making profits. Even though his ship had only a small cargo bay, he still had to trade within the confines of the simulated space.

The test simulation put several stations from alternative races into the arena. He was making a reasonable profit when the test threw in a distress call from a freighter under attack by unknown ships.

Identifying the targets on the HUD he targeted the first one, "Xenon N" the computer responded.

Swooping in behind he launched a missile at close range, the enemy ship vanished from the HUD. Next on the targeting system was a Xenon 'M'. Again at close range he launched a missile. Even though it struck the ship the Xenon craft survived, and turned to engage. Tor had a deep sinking feeling as green plasma traced its way past his ship. Gaining some distance he knew that if the simulated craft managed to get a couple of good hits it would all be over.

At safe range he took a glance at the state of the freighter, it's shields were dangerously low. The two ships still attacking were another Xenon 'N' and an 'M' class ship.

Targeting the second Xenon N he turned back avoiding his pursuer and fired a missile at range, quickly he locked onto the second Xenon 'M' and strafed the ship, his lasers making only a small impact on the shields. Enough though to have the Xenon craft divert attention from the freighter.

The missile hit its target and the enemy ship disappeared from the HUD. Just the two 'M' class fighters remained and both were locked onto him. Although Tor was tensed by the realism of the battle, deep down this was not the same. Here he knew that even if he lost the battle he would still walk away.

He spent a couple of minutes dodging multiple missile launches. The simulator had given both remaining ships different top speeds. Tor worked on getting distance between the two pursuing craft. Eventually he twisted back and with quick reflexes and throttle control he dropped in behind the nearest ship, before it had a chance to turn back.

The Xenon craft weaved as Tor with careful prolonged bursts drove down its shields. Fortunately the simulated ship kept its speed up and still headed away from the second 'M' ship.

Given a few minutes Tor sighed with relief when eventually the enemy ship disappeared. Turning sharply back he engaged the last of the Xenon ships. Again he managed to tuck in behind the enemy and this time without the worry of another ship to give him trouble pummeled the shields. He allowed his lasers to overheat on the principle they would recover faster than the Xenon shields. He launched a missile at close range, the Xenon ship took avoiding action and dodged the missile.

This caused Tor to lose his advantage temporarily as the enemy ship looped away. He cursed having to wait until the missile self destructed. After which the enemy ship settled down again and he could get in behind it. The lack of communication was eerie to Tor as the last ship eventually vapourized. He was used to the insults of the pirates, but that just made it all the more personal. He headed into the docking station.

The simulation ended, Tor took a deep sigh and a moment to reflect. The freighter had survived the simulation and he had made some profit. Still he reiterated the previous thought that this was not real combat. No one died here.

He stepped out the simulator and picked up his license chip and looked at it. Grade D commercial traders' license with no restrictions. Now he was entitled to fly any M-four class fighter. As Tor somberly reflected, he could now fly a better killing machine.

Chapter 6 - ASAPCS Revealed.

Tris was drinking with friends, the room hummed with the background noise of chatter. The tables were fitted with holo-projectors that patrons could switch on and watch the latest rolling news service. Or tune into any other station channel.

The air was fresh and lightly scented from the outlet vents at floor level as it cascaded gently into the room. With no discernable hum from the extractors above, which carried away the scent of alcohol and other aromatic beverages.

Tris had taken one of the last two remaining seats, which left her sitting with her back to the rest of the room. Deep in conversation with a compatriot, she failed to notice when the rest of the group had fallen silent as they looked past her.

Caran tapped her on her shoulder, she span around with a big smile expecting to see someone else. The smile froze.

"I'd like a word. In private!" Caran addressed the rest of the group, "If you would excuse us."

None of the pilots, even Tris, knew Caran Belign by sight. She recognized him only by description. To all the others everything about him screamed Secret Service.

Vanart Beck, Triss' official boyfriend, stepped up with drinks in hand. "What's going on?" He placed the drinks on the table.

"That man wants to talk to Tris!" One of the group replied.

Tris stood up and turned towards Caran.

"Hey, what's going on?" Vanart moved closer to Tris and put his hand on her waist. "What's going on babes?"

Caran looked into her eyes briefly. Then at Vanart, "We need to have a chat. Don't mind do you?"

"Yes I mind. If Tris is in trouble then I want to help," Vanart retorted.

"You help!" Caran was calm, his expression plain, "Vanart Beck, good you may be. I've read your file but when it counts you don't cut it." Caran was brutally honest in his evaluation and was not in the mood for diplomacy.

If Tris could give an imploring look for Vanart not to respond, then she gave it now.

"And who are you to judge me?" Vanart raised his voice. He was angered and offended by the remark.

"Tell him," Caran spoke softly and looked at Tris.

"He's Caran Belign," She said it slowly for all to hear.

The assembled group shuffled uneasily on their seats.

Vanart went pale, "I'm sorry Sir. I was out of order."

Caran simply nodded, then looking at Tris, "This way!"

They left the bar and made their way to the security hall.

"Will you give me a clue what this is about?" Tris asked as they walked along.

"You're a bright girl, I think you already know," He replied. There was a brief pause.

"Did you have to be so harsh on Vanart?" She asked and felt annoyed at Caran for what he said.

“I meant it. If you think I was out of order then tell me,” There was no hint of concern in Carans' voice.

“Yes, you were out of order,” A slight annoyance remained in her tone.

“We’ve never met before, but you know who I am. So should they.”

“Vanart is concerned for me,” She felt like arguing the point.

“And would he risk his life to protect you?” Caran was baiting her into a reaction.

“I think he would. Wouldn’t you risk you’re life to protect someone you cared about?” She pushed the point.

She saw Carans' face muscles tense briefly.

“No I guess you wouldn’t,” She commented quietly, but not quietly enough for Caran not to hear.

He stopped dead, there was a flame of anger in his eye and with a calm harshness in his voice, “Don’t you ever judge me!” Somehow he seemed taller, broader and ten times more threatening to Tris.

She had haphazardly hit a raw nerve, and stepped back, “Sorry,” Worry filled her voice suspecting, perhaps, that she had overstepped the mark by a considerable margin.

Caran seemingly shrank back, and with the usual calmness, “I’m here to help you and this is our first meeting. Now follow me!” Each pause was heavily punctuated.

They entered an interview room. The room like all other interview rooms was plain, a subtle cream colour to the walls and ceiling and a dark stone effect on the floor. The only furniture was a plain table projecting from the wall and two ordinary looking seats.

He signaled Tris over to a chair and she duly sat down. He pulled his personal pad from a pocket and pulled up the chair opposite.

“I’ve been looking over your records and you’ve shown a lot of promise,” Caran started.

“Thank you Sir,” It was the only response she felt able to give.

“You’re transport of documents from Cloudbase South West to Argon Prime is now listed on your record, with your successes against the pirates,” Caran continued.

Tris hesitated.

“Don’t be so surprised the Bloodhearts know you were the military pilot. It’s only fair to put the mission on your official record,” He looked up and watched her expression as he said the words.

“How do they know, Sir?” Tris asked quietly, she was trembling, this was not the news she wanted to hear.

He put down the pad and spoke softly looking straight into her eyes, “I told them.”

Tris was shocked to the point of breathlessness, “What!”

With the voice of commanding authority, “Listen to me! They have the names of ten pilots. By giving them your name, I save the lives of nine others.” Caran paused, then speaking softly, “We intend to keep you safe and alive. I for one hate to lose a very talented pilot unnecessarily. You’ll be transferred to the Dracus squadron aboard the Titan cruiser Baltock Victory in The Wall to finish your training.”

“When?” She asked.

“When your transport arrives,” Caran replied firmly.

“Won’t a transport ship be a little vulnerable?” Tris felt uneasy.

“I’ve made arrangements. Just so that you know, a man by the name Stanad Block will collect you. He’s a pilot for the Advanced Industries Corporation. The ship he’s in is a heavily modified, jumpdrive capable Prometheus. I’m led to believe the ship is only one of five that are capable of speeds in excess of a fully tuned Mamba. The other four are owned by the Paranid High Priest.” Caran paused briefly, “The only reason he’s not here now is that he’s checking on our mutual friend Tor.”

“Him? Why?” Tris felt that the ship being here now had priority.

“Don’t underestimate him. He’s showing a lot more talent and ability than many would have originally given him credit for. More than your friend Vanart,” Caran was testing her again to see how she reacted.

Tris opened her mouth to say something, but the image of Caran angry filled her mind, so she closed it again. Caran was pleased she was now coping with the taunts in a professional manor and not showing signs of losing her temper.

“When you’ve finished your training, you’ll be transferred to the outer regions. One of the reasons you’re training here is to find out which of you are ‘just good’, and which of you that are ‘better than good’,” Caran paused, “In the outer regions we need the ‘better than good’ pilots. Chances are you’ll see a lot of combat. If we sent the ‘just good’ pilots they wouldn’t last long. If it wasn’t for the dedicated pilots out there now, we’d probably have lost many of the outer regions.” This was more a statement of fact. It also meant that the rate of attrition for pilots was high and promotion could be rapid.

Tris was now uncertain if being taken prisoner by the Bloodhearts might not be the better option.

As if reading her thoughts Caran spoke, “Understand one thing. If you’re captured by the Bloodhearts there will be no rescue attempt. They’ll kill you,” Caran paused, “Eventually.”

“What about Tor?” She asked.

“He’s safe. They didn’t manage to trace him,” Caran omitted to tell her about the two dead civilian pilots.

On the equipment dock in Siezewell, Bilyzonus arrived just over an hour after Tor had completed his test. She had used her Teladi acumen, and knowledge of the Split, so the container bay of the vulture had over thirteen hundred units of Teladianium. Two full station yields.

“Why so much?” Tor asked.

They sat in a food hall. Teladi traders milled around and there was the general hubbub of chat. Bargains and deals were being made. Among the trading pilots were business people looking for passage to various different locations, and some just grabbing a bite to eat before retiring to the rest centres.

The hint of exotic flavours and mouth-watering meals lingered in the air, as the air circulation system was run at low flow rate.

“Always in big demand with the Ssplit. Large profitss to be made,” Bilyzonus presented it as a statement of fact.

“What about credits? Do you still have enough for the shield?”

She smiled and handed him the personal pad with the accounts shown, “Businesss hass been good. Some oppertunitiess presented themsselss and I made excellent profitss.”

Tor read the bottom line. She still had nearly two hundred thousand credits on the balance sheet, “Wow.”

Rather than the single shield the Vulture was fitted out with two five megawatt versions. With the enhancement completed they headed out. Bilyzonus in front with Tor and the Mandalay close behind. The journey was uneventful through Teladi Gain.

They crossed into the next sector and Tor went first. As he powered away from the receiving gate Sweetey commented, "Sector Family Whi," The stations here were different. Almost silhouettes against the stars, but he was still too far away to make out any real detail.

The vulture entered the sector followed by the Mandalay a few moments later.

"Welcome to Ssplit sspace," Bilyzonus commented cheerfully over the com, "And if you ssee any piratess. Sshoot them!"

"Yeah, thanks for the advice," Tor put a touch of sarcasm in his voice. He still resolved to sell the Mandalay but at the moment it was a useful backup.

Stanad Block was still on the Seizewell Equipment Dock having savoured some of the Teladi hospitality. He stepped up to the outer airlock door of the docked Prometheus. The ship had a distinctive white hull and emblazoned on the two wings were the motifs of the AIC, Advanced Industries Corporation. Prometheus from the Paranid shipyards were traditionally black.

Stanad was an Argon in his early thirties, dark hair, blue eyes, slim build, and just under two meters tall.

He paused for a moment then put his hand on the palm scanner. There was a hiss as the outer door opened. He stepped in and the door closed behind him.

"Bio scan initiated," The computer announced, "Bio scan complete, inner airlock door opening."

As he stepped in he looked around, "You could have opened the door Pol," He commented.

Polmankelest looked around from the pilot seat. He was a Paranid slightly shorter than Stanad with a much heavier build. He was officially on permanent loan by the Paranid Military to ensure their technology was not used in any way that could offend the High Priest.

As far as Stanad surmised, it must be very difficult to upset the High Priest. His companion must have broken every rule he could think of. Even so he had to admit the Paranid was one of, if not, the best pilot he had ever flown with.

Polmankelest was reading a news bulletin on the console. "You find him?" The voice was deep and rich even through the translator.

"About a couple of hours ago," Stanad sat down. His role was to monitor systems and navigation. This included finding targets when in combat and engaging the jumpdrive when required. Also to fly the ship if for any reason Polmankelest were to become incapacitated.

"And?" The Paranid asked glancing at Stanad with his three eyes.

"I'm just going to check his position now," Stanad switched between systems on the Galactic Map. Eventually he said, more to himself than his companion, "Good lad," There was a hint of approval in his voice.

"Where's he at?"

"In sector Family Whi and a short distance from crossing into the sector Family Zein. It looks like he's escorting a Vulture. Just going to check what's ahead of him," Stanad paused briefly, "Hmmm."

"What?" Polmankelest asked. He liked to keep his sentences short.

"There are pirates ahead of him. He should be okay but I'd like to be sure. I don't think the secret service would approve if we let him get killed," He looked over towards the pilot, and said cheerily, "And it'll give you more of an opportunity to play."

Polmankelest ignored the comment, "Computer, request departure clearance."

“Departure approved,” There was a slight thump as the clamps disengaged and under station control the ship glided its way to the outer doors. Powering up, the Prometheus hurtled forward.

“Targeting the gate for sector Teladi Gain,” Stanad called out. He monitored the galactic map and Tors’ progress. With a cargo bay full of energy cells they could jump at any moment, but he would only do that if he felt it necessary.

Tor used the advantage of speed to scan a few Split stations into his nav system, whilst keeping an eye on the HUD for unfriendly ships. When Bilyzonus was within fifteen clicks of the next gate, he re-grouped and led the way through.

Clearing the receiving gate Sweety called out, “Sector Family Zein.”

Bilyzonus arrived and then the Mandalay. They were only a few clicks into the sector when one of the stations hailed Bilyzonus.

“Teladi ship. You have Teladianium!” The voice was harsh and occasionally slightly shrill on the translator.

“What iss your offer?” Bilyzonus replied in her true Teladi way.

“One hundred and fifty thousand credits and one hundred sixty five credits per unit for six hundred, sixty five units,” The response came back abruptly.

“I can get more,” She responded. Tor stayed quiet.

“Two hundred thousand credits, same unit rate,” The Split station controlled replied moments later.

“Deal and good profitss,” Bilyzonuss’ voice stayed calm.

“Deliver immediately to Chelts Space Aquarium gamma!” The instruction came back

“Tor can you scan the stations onto your nav system and let me know which one I’m aiming for.”

“Sure,” He shot forward as he opened the thrusters to full.

On the HUD he had spotted three pirate ships but they appeared to be heading towards Family Whi. The Split sector defense ships appeared unconcerned by their presence. They were not attacking any Split freighters and so were of no concern.

He quickly began to scan the stations. After he found the right Aquarium he turned back towards the vulture.

“Hi there. I’ve got the location.”

“Download your nav data onto mine,” She instructed.

“Here goes.”

Bilyzonus docked without trouble, however Tor was refused. “Your presence is neither welcome or desired.” The automated message could not have been clearer on the point.

It was then he picked up the distress call, “I’m under attack, please help!”

He checked the HUD the pirates had started to attack a Teladi freighter. The ship was too slow to take avoiding action.

Tor responded and targeted the Bayamon, which posed the biggest threat to the trader. He intercepted the pirate as several missiles impacted the weakening shields of the vulture dropping them to a dangerous level.

He fired off a number of shots, the sleek Bayamon with its narrow fuselage and cross shape made it a tough target to hit. A few more shots aimed towards the bulkier centre made contact and grabbed the attention of the pilot.

“Scum. You’ll die for that!”

The Bayamon opened up his engines. Tor followed suit not allowing the pirate to get away, all the time he fired prolonged bursts and depleted the other ships’ shields.

However as the pirates’ shields hit critical, memories of the previous kill flooded back and stayed his finger from pulling the trigger.

He turned away and having a speed advantage comfortably made safe distance.

“Haha, haven’t the guts to kill,” The pirate laughed, more out of relief then pleasure and added, “When I’ve finished with the Teladi, I’ll be back for you boy!”

Tor checked the HUD and slowed down, he hung his head. Some distance away the Bayamon fired two missiles at the Vulture. Its shields plummeted to critical. The Teladi pilot bailed out and was scooped up by one of the Mandalays.

The next thing Tor witnessed was the Bayamon explode as a white Prometheus cut across at high speed. The two Mandalay realizing the danger made a run for it leaving the abandoned freighter.

The Prometheus comfortably tucked in behind the first of the Mandalay. A single pulse from the cannons vapourized the ship. Rolling across the pilot then tucked in behind the second.

“Drop your shields and surrender!” Stanad ordered.

“Screw you,” The response came back.

“I don’t think you’re my type,” There was a pause, “Look my friend who’s flying this ship has a very itchy trigger finger. One shot will tear through your ship and kill you. So go easy on yourself. Surrender and let the freighter pilot go,” Stanad was trying to sound sincere.

The Mandalay was trying every trick he could to shake the Prometheus but Polmanckelest kept with him.

“Look you’re not going to lose us, surrender! Watching the stars swirl around is beginning to make me feel sick. So I’ll give you another ten seconds before my friend here ends this stupid chase,” Stanad used the tone of someone that had already won and that trying to run was pointless.

Tor watched in fascination. He began to count, at eight seconds the Prometheus cannons fired the one shot. The Prometheus turned back and slowed. The comm opened with Stanad still ranting on board the other ship.

“Stupid Paranid, you were supposed to miss! And can’t you count! I said ten seconds not eight or nine. He was about to surrender I could feel it,” There was a pause, “Sorry about that! You okay kid? Guess you’re not used to fighting yet.”

“I couldn’t do it,” Tor replied.

“Listen kid. It’s not nice out here. The guy with the biggest weapons and strongest shields makes the law. You have to be prepared to defend what you have if you don’t then you’ll end up dead,” Stanad paused, “Look see that freighter, it’s now salvage, patch into its computers and register it before anyone else gets the chance.”

“You’re the one that shot down the pirates. Don’t you want it?” Tor was hesitant in his comment.

“Me? No I don’t have time to mess around getting rid of it,” Stanad was sounding more cheerful again, “Anyway must be going, perhaps we’ll bump into each other again soon.”

The Prometheus moved away and then with a few k’s between them there was a bright flash and the ship was gone. Tor had only ever heard about the jump drive and now he had seen one in action.

He engaged the thrusters and moved towards the abandoned freighter. The freight scanner indicated that although most of the cargo had been damaged some quantum tubes remained intact. The ships' shields were also undamaged however the power surge protector had tripped leaving one shield inactive.

"Sweetie patch into the system and re-register the ship to me."

"Vulture computer accessed, AI activated and auto pilot in standby. Computer systems register minor hull damage on rear containers and energy leaks in one main engine. Ship registration transferred to you."

Unaware that Bilyzonus had completed her trading, and had for the past few minutes had been monitoring the last stage of the battle, she called him over the com.

"What happened?" Her unblinking gaze was clear to see on the opti-viewer.

"Pirates, I went to help but," He let the sentence hang, not really knowing what to say.

"And?"

"The freighter pilot bailed out. Got picked up by the Mandalay. That's when the white ship turned up," He felt ashamed not having done more to help, and was struggling to find the right words

Tor heard her mutter something in remembrance to the Vultures previous pilot. He saw her bow her head slightly.

When she spoke again he could tell she was calm but there was a tension in her voice, "The sship is damaged. If you re-register it to me I can have it dock in the trading sstation where it can be repaired."

"Bilyzonus, when you're in the station, swap over one of the shields," She nodded at him, then the com closed.

Once again he found himself idling in space with the Mandalay a short distance behind. The repairs took some time, long enough for him to reflect that if it had been Bilyzonus on that freighter his hesitation would have killed her. It was a stark choice, to take a life or see a life lost.

However Tor had never been in a true battle situation. If he had been then he would have known many pilots bail out or are auto ejected just before the final destruction of the ship. One of the key reasons touted by the military for cutting back on civilians purchasing M-three fighters was the high power of the Alpha HEPT lasers. The fact that these weapons were massively destructive and small ships could be obliterated with a single shot. When both guns were fired together they would kill pilots after they had auto ejected because of the following shock wave.

He watched both freighters depart the station. A quick check on the scanner showed that both vultures now boasted thirty megawatts of shields, and Bilyzonus ensured both had maximum speed and rudder control.

"Time to make profits," She called out.

"Anything you say," Tor replied, and this was the last thing they said to each other until after they jumped into the next sector.

"Sector Thurucks Pride," Sweetie commented.

Tor checked the sector for pirates, nothing appeared on his scanner, "I'll just go scan the sector for you."

"See if you can find me some Chelts Aquariums," Bilyzonus acknowledged as she cleared the gate.

"Hopefully you should get the updates as I go round."

There were numerous stations here, but no one had called out for goods. Tor kept the com open and was whistling as he weaved his way around the sector. She checked on her nav system then on her 'best sell' list of stations.

She found a Chelts Aquarium that was completely out of stock. Bilyzonus smiled, the station was ripe for negotiating a deal with.

“I have a profit opportunity. Keep scanning the stations.”

“No problem,” Tor responded.

Tor found the computer plant and swooped past. In reasonable time he covered all the stations in the sector. Bilyzonus had left the Aquarium and was humming to herself. Business had been better than expected. She received the rest of the nav data from Tor and quickly checked on the stock levels of the Computer plant.

Then she put the ‘best buys’ display on the HUD.

“There’s plenty of trading to be done here. Much profit to be made. Hold your position until I’m finished.” He watched her expression on the opti-viewer, and guessed she had some sort of plan to work her way round to the computer plant.

“Okay,” He smiled and she smiled back.

He sat for a while studying the sector display and had positioned himself just above and to the left of the second vulture, the Mandalay was shadowing Bilyzonus.

He then went back to get the Guildard. Returning to the pilots seat strummed a few notes and adjusted it until he felt it was in tune then tried out a few riffs, “Sweety can you find me some music.”

“No discernable music source found.”

“No music!” Tor was incredulous, “Have these Split no imagination to fire the heart and spirit.”

“Insufficient information available,” Sweety responded.

“Don’t worry about it, I was only joking.”

“Joking?” Sweety asked.

“Sweety didn’t they give you a personality chip.”

“Personality chip upgrades discontinued. Pilots found to become too emotionally attached to their ships.”

“Yeah I heard something about it. How long ago was that?” Tor became curious.

“Seven Argon years and six months,” Sweety responded almost immediately.

“And how old are you?” He asked.

Sweety did not respond.

“Sweety?”

“Eight Argon years, two months and seven days.”

Caran met Stanad in the security dock of the Argon Prime Trading Station. “You must be Stanad!”

“Yes Sir,” Stanad smiled.

“Nice ship,” Caran commented.

“Completely new engines in her, giving us massive amounts more power. Shame they’re looking to use the extra for a third shield. At the moment she’s the quickest thing out there.”

“Polmanckelest?” Caran asked.

“Glad you can pronounce his name, I’ve just resorted to Pol. Anyway he’s on board, Sir,” Stanad was being his usual cheerful self.

Caran stayed straight-faced, “To business, you found Tor Grall?”

“Certainly did Sir,” Stanad paused briefly, “Had to help him out of a spot of bother, hope you don’t mind! Anyway he’s on his way to Thurucks Pride escorting a Teladi Trader, Sir.”

“Named Bilyzonus, I know.”

“If you know the answers, why ask me?” Stanad shrugged his shoulders then quickly added, “Sir,” And smiled. It was an infectious grin, but Caran was not the type to catch it, “Anyway, we checked his inventory list and it looks as though he’s shy on the computer parts. My guess is he’s using Bily’s what’s her’ face to get replacements, Sir.”

“Good. The boy’s using his head,” Caran commented more to himself than Stanad.

“Looks like it Sir.”

“Now to the other reason you’re here,” Caran started, “There’s a Pilot needs transporting to the Titan ship in The Wall. However the Bloodheart pirate clan want her dead,” He paused briefly, “The base here is being monitored, as soon as she leaves they will be trying to trace her. So all you need to do is activate your jump drive. Jump to the receiving gate from Presidents End where you will find the Titan ship and also the AIC Mammoth, Roamer,” Caran added, “I’m sure your people will want to hear all your stories.”

“Yep, and I’ve got a few recommendations for them too Sir.”

“Time is the important thing here. The sooner she is safely on the Titan then the harder it will be for the Bloodhearts to trace her,” Caran ignored the flippancy.

“So there’s not much time to get acquainted then Sir?” Stanad asked with a big smile.

Caran shook his head, “No there isn’t! Wait here. I’ll be back soon.” He turned away and strode off.

An agent approached Caran before he left the docking area and handed him a pad.

Turning on his left heel he strode back, “We have a problem, latest intelligence suggests all receiving gates out of this sector have a number of pirate ships lurking somewhere behind them. If you make the jump you’ll be spotted immediately. I suggest you create a diversion first.”

“Pol will like that Sir! I don’t think he’s happier than when he’s got some pirates to play with Sir,” Stanad was still smiling.

Caran turned away for the second time.

He reached his office door and stepped in. There was an urgent com to reply to.

“Frebb, you have some answers for me.”

“Hi Caran. Yes we’ve completed the simulation using the design given, and the source code that’s to be burnt onto the silicon.” Frebb paused there was a professorial, lecturer tone in his voice. “I’ve put all the details onto your system here, however in brief. The device is similar to a Ligon in the way it stick onto the surface of a ship. The drills are to ensure it does not become detached. When attached the Ligon device determines the shield frequency and modulation, it relays the

data back to the controlling ship. This in turn can, with the use of a transporter, remove any item from the ship. Cargo, shields, weapons, and of course the pilot.”

Frebb continued. “The guys here have played around with the acronym the best suggestion so far is Advanced Ship and Pilot Capturing System.”

“Sounds like they’ve cracked the problem,” Caran was concerned.

“If it works. Every ship, except the big destroyers and computer controlled ships like the Xenon, would be at risk.” Frebb spoke slowly and nodded.

“The Xenon because they don’t have humanoid or robotic pilots?” Caran knew the answer but asked the question anyway.

“Exactly. The real breakthrough here is the source code, not so much the device itself.” Frebb responded.

“So this is a weapon against everyone else,” Caran paused briefly and then added, “Let’s hope the pirates never get any.”

“True. But there are flaws in the Split design.”

“Go on?” Caran had a new thirst for knowledge. As long as the device was floored they could improve it, or find a useful countermeasure.

“It relies on a good magnetic grip, i.e. a sufficiently high ferritic substrate on which to hold. Or one that’s close enough to the surface of the ship to give a good attraction. If the bond is too weak the drills rather than bite into the surface will simply push the Ligon off.”

“Anything else?” Caran asked inquisitively.

“As the device is not self propelled, then it needs a low energy accelerator tube to fire it. And with no shield the target ship must have its own shields down to ten percent or less for the Ligon to pass through. Of course if the shot is slightly off target the device will miss and disappear into space.”

“Sounds like they still have a few problems to sort out,” Caran commented, slightly cheered up by the news.

“I believe so,” Frebb responded factually.

“But you have ideas on how to fix these?” Caran almost made this a statement.

“A few, but we’ll tell you after we rerun the simulation.”

“Will see you later then,” The com closed. Caran took a moment to think, then went to fetch Tris.

Chapter 7 – Parting Company.

It was now known to everyone in Triss' training squad that the Bloodhearts were after her. Also that she was transferring out of the sector. For some they were thankful their own careers were now safe. Many felt sorry for her and had expressed sympathy.

Vanart was taking it badly so Tris had told him, in a moment of tenderness, where she was going and for him to write.

She was exempt from all off station exercises and now sat in the flight divisions bar, sipping a hot spicy Garrow root cha. The bar only had a handful of clients some chatting together others watching the news or other program on the holo-projectors in the tables.

Spotting Caran approaching she looked up from her personal pad with an inquisitive expression.

“Time to leave young lady!” This was as close as Caran got to giving a greeting.

“Now! But there's no one around. Can't I at least wait to say goodbye?” She questioned.

“Not if you want to stay alive!” Caran paused, “But at least finish your drink.”
He sat down and relaxed.

Tris looked across, “Why don't you get yourself a drink?”

“Hmmm, good idea.” He signaled a waitress. She came over, “Can I have a double Karaj.”

“Yes Sir.” The waitress drifted back to the bar.

Tris looked up from her pad. She had read the same report twice over in an attempt to ignore Caran. However she started to make conversation.

“So what made you want to join the secret service?”

Caran looked at her and uncharacteristically smiled, his tone was soft and gentle, “I think the secret service found me. Started out a bit like you, in need of a challenge and adventure. Excelled and outperformed my trainers so they put me in the new outer sectors.” He paused in reflection. “Things were fine until the Xenon returned in strength. Our old mark three ships were hardly comparable. No sooner had we fought and lost one rear guard action then we were swept up in another.” The waitress returned and placed his drink on the table.

“The mark four Elite gave us an edge. However the true turning point was the Teladi, Paranid and Boron alliance becoming active. We prevented a total disaster, holding them at Black Hole Sun.” Caran took a sip of his drink, “Hmmm. The Split had hung back from the conflict, then at the first opportunity swept through the next few sectors claiming them for the empire. However even they were forced to hold position. Our Boron allies were the only ones that had the strength of arms left to take control of last few. It's always struck me as strange how the sectors that were recaptured, fell into the hands of the races that held them previously.”

“Not much good it has done us. The Xenon are the masters of deep space. Unlike our star charts which are designed to show sectors between jump gates. They know real space. It frightens me to think there's a Xenon fleet out there! Just beyond scanner range of the gates, for each and every sector we hold.”

“But we know how to defeat them!” Tris exclaimed.

“Then we did, but now I'm not so certain. Unfortunately it's something you'll find out about soon enough.” Caran sipped his drink, “Should have realized it sooner, but the Xenon were computer based entities. However they now appear to have greater adaptive learning skills.”

“Meaning?” She asked with only a slight disinterest.

“Actual consciousness!”

“Sorry I’m still not with you.” Something important was being said here and Tris felt she should be paying more attention.

“There have been unconfirmed reports about people obtaining Xenon technology and adapting it. Reports have indicated remarkable behavioral changes within the AI. Now the Xenon seem to have managed to reach this point on their own efforts.” Caran opened his mouth briefly as if to say something then closed it again to gather thought. “The Xenon reside within computers! They are controlled by a single core code system. Actually we believe there were several before the big conflict, how many survived we don’t know.”

He paused again, “However we have anticipated that if a single system has enough nodes, and is not restrained by other systems, then it will form the equivalent of a neural network. This would be as a result of the surviving AI attempting to try and fill the missing gaps, left by the loss of other systems. In simple terms a brain. Adaptively speaking this brain will then miniaturize itself and the technology around it. As it reduces its size it then has more space in which to grow back. More nodes equals greater learning ability and it’s a process that accelerates.”

“And I thought I had problems with the Bloodhearts.”

“Where you’re going the Bloodhearts will seem like a walk in the park! You have the added problem of the Khaak. But there is a speculation between our scientists that, as the Xenon gain the ability for true thought, it may become possible to communicate. Possibly even to negotiate a cease-fire.”

“Do you think there’ll ever be peace?”

Caran smiled briefly, and responded, “Nice thought, but no! There will always be enemies, those we find and the ones we make ourselves.”

He downed his drink, “Anyway Tris it’s time for you to leave.”

“You didn’t really answer my question!”

“Didn’t I? Must have been an oversight,” He stood up.

She finished the last few dregs of her drink. They returned to the military quarters. Her bags were already packed in anticipation. Caran helped load them on the floating luggage carrier, which followed them as they marched down to the security dock.

Stanad was loitering, but as he saw them approach. He straightened up he put on a big smile and walked to meet them.

Speaking to Caran whilst looking at Tris, Stanad asked, “So is this the lovely lady that needs our help!”

“This is your passenger! Private Tris Matayah.” Caran was firm in his tone.

“Tris such a delightful name. Enchanted and so pleased to meet you.”

“Is he always this friendly?” She asked suspiciously.

“Fortunately he’s not the pilot. Unfortunately you’ll have to put up with his noise for the duration of the journey.” Caran replied.

“Oh!” She commented.

“Think of me as you’re in-flight entertainment officer,” Stanad gave her a wink and was unperturbed by the previous comments, “Your ship awaits.” He motioned towards the outer airlock door.

They stood for a moment by the doors. Stanad looked back, “Sorry about this,” Then towards the cockpit and shouted, “Pol open the sodding doors will you!” He turned back to Tris, “You just can’t get decent staff these days.”

The outer and inner airlock doors opened with a hiss.

Caran turned and faced Tris, "If everything goes to plan then this should be the last time our paths will cross. So take care of yourself Private."

"Thank you Sir," She replied quietly then stepped onto the ship.

Stanad gave a smile to Caran, and an acknowledging nod, then stepped on-board. The door hissed shut and the internal locks clunked into place. Caran watched the sleek lines of the Prometheus move from the docking bay. Then the ship changed colour to dark blue.

He continued to oversee the departure from the security area, and as the bay doors shut he turned back towards his office, thinking, 'Colour changing ships. That's new. I'll need to check the latest AIC development reports.'

Clearing the station, Polmankelest gently engaged the engines to only a quarter of the ships potential.

"Targeting Ringo Moon gate," Stanad sat back and turned his chair to look at Tris with a smile.

She made out to be studying her pad. Polmankelest turned the ship in a gentle arc and then got up to stretch and entered the rear of the cabin.

"Woe there big fella. Remember we need you up front! There are pirates ships out there ready to sweep this lovely lady away from us."

"They can wait. I need a drink," The Paranid responded, "Excuse me miss."

Tris moved to one side, the cabin space was smaller than that of the Buster she had been flying, but much better laid out. She guessed a lot of the internals must have been modified from the stock ship. Including the multiple additional screens Stanad was sitting in front of. From her viewpoint she could see a system map and also ship data including power distribution, and sub-system status updates.

Polmankelest opened a locker door and pulled out a small flask, turning his head he asked Tris, "Drink?"

"Umm," But before she could respond. Stanad butted in.

"Hold on Pol! You're the pilot I'm the host, so get back to piloting," Addressing Tris, Stanad asked reassuringly, "Would you care for a refreshing beverage?"

"Careful miss. He's a womanizer," Polmankelest commented then, laughing quietly to himself, returned to the pilot seat.

"Ignore him. Drink?" Stanad asked again.

"No thanks!" She declined as gracefully as she could.

"Okay, don't say we didn't offer," Stanad put on an air of being hurt, but it did not last long, "Anyway, we have some time trapped in here, so tell me about yourself. Where are you from?"

"I thought this was going to be a quick flight?"

"Change of plan. There are pirates behind every gate out of the sector, apparently! So we need to set up a diversion."

"Are you telling the truth?"

"Upon my mothers life," Stanad replied sincerely.

"Is he?" She addressed the pilot.

“Yes miss. Don’t you worry, I will get you there.”

“‘We’ Pol ‘We’ will get you there,” Stanad emphasized.

“Stanad. Scan the sector Ringo Moon for pirates. We’re getting close to the gate,” Polmanckelest called back.

“Excuse me miss,” Stanad went to work, “Quick check we have what appears like ten ships waiting to welcome us. The sector patrol hasn’t reached that area yet. Scanning other gates.”

There was a pause, “Hmmm, gate to Herrons Nebula looks to be harbouring another ten ships, Light Home and The Wall just six each. Obviously don’t expect us to go in those directions!” He looked up, “Not too late to go for an easier route.”

“This one’s fine!”

“Hmmm, strange. I’ve picked up some unidentified ships just on the edge of scanner range,” Stanad reported.

“Where?” The pilot asked.

“This sector, on an shadowing vector!”

“What do you mean unidentified?” Tris asked.

“It can vary from ships without a known designation, like prototypes. To some which are deliberately blocking their identifiers. Trouble is when they’re on the edge of scanner range, like these ones, you can’t get a good visual identification either,” Stanad replied without looking away from the scanners, “Fifteen k’s to the gate Pol, take her in easy let’s see if we can bring those ships a little closer.”

The Prometheus held a steady approach course, and Tris sensed a mood change in the cabin. Stanad was now very much focused on the scanners.

“Pol as we clear the gate I’m going to engage the ESS. Be ready for the ten percent power drop on thrusters,” Stanad called out.

“Acknowledged!”

“What’s an ESS?” Tris asked.

“Something you shouldn’t know about yet. It stands for Enhanced Silhouette System. This ship is almost packed with the latest toys just coming into field test. Some good and some just bloody frightening,” Stanad replied. He figured she would discover what the ESS does soon enough anyway. “Pol, switching to single weapon mode and diverting power to shields. These guys don’t have the best ships, so it’s nice to give them some chance to bail out.”

The Prometheus glided to the jumpgate.

“Well either those ships are very fast or they’re just here to follow us. Either way they’re still on the edge of scanners.”

“Making the jump!” Polmanckelest announced.

The stars swirled, moments passed and the receiving gate opened.

The ship surged forward, but still to half enhanced speed, faster than the Orinocos and the Bayamons.

“Engaging ESS.” Stanad responded. “We have three incoming missiles Pol, suggest you do something!”

The ship banked and turned away. “Silhouette has the missiles.”

“What’s happening?” Tris was interested, she moved to look at the scanners. The ten Pirate ships appeared to be completely uncoordinated. There appeared to be two Prometheuss on the screen.

Stanad spoke quickly in case he needed to give more information to the pilot. “The system creates a phantom copy of the ship and when you make your first turn the ship appears to divide into two. The clever bit is that missiles guidance systems get locked onto the Silhouette, as does any other computer driven system. Drones, HUD targeting systems. So the only way a pilot can fight this ship is visually.”

“Can’t you just retarget?”

“The targeting system keeps switching to the silhouette. And that’s the one I’m looking after now.”

Polmankelest, dropped behind the first pair of Mandalay, the com was alive with confusing reports as to where he was. The single shot destroyed the first of the pair.

“Pilot got out.” Stanad commented quickly.

Polmankelest with a complex set of hand movements, which he made look completely natural, used the strafe drive and axis rotation control to sideways roll behind the second Mandalay.

“You’re really going to show me how you do that Pol.” Stanad commented. Tris was impressed.

The second ship went into a sharp barrel roll and turn.

“Identified the pickup ship, it’s a Mandalay. Missiles self-destructed disengaging ESS!” Stanad called out.

The ship suddenly picked up speed. They shot in quickly behind the Mandalay, the Alpha HEPT discharged a single shot and the Mandalay, disappearing from the cockpit view as Polmankelest pulled back on the stick, exploded.

“Pilot ejected.” Stanad called out.

“Bayamon closing. Missile launches times four, and two more wasp missiles from the Mandalays. Re-engaging ESS.”

The Prometheus slowed and turned leaving its Silhouette turning in the opposite direction on the HUD.

The Paranid dove down and looped around the first Bayamon. The weapon pulsed and the Bayamon was reduced to an incandescent sphere of expanding light. Fragments of the hull sparkled in the shields.

Polmankelest was already looping round for the second. Tris was in complete awe at how deftly he expunged the enemy craft. The Paranid was truly a master at his craft. The second Bayamon vapourized and for the fourth time, Stanad declared the pilot had ejected safely.

The recovery Mandalay now stood clear of the battle. The last active Mandalay and the third Bayamon exploded on the HUD. With Polmankelest never keeping a straight line for more than a moment to destroy an opponent. The value of the Silhouette craft was untold. The pirate ships could not get a lock and the HUD prevented them from getting a true direction in which to turn.

Polmankelest targeted the first of the Orinocos, this took more than one burst of the plasma thrower to destroy but the slower moving target was easier to find.

“We have two incoming unknowns.” Stanad called out.

“Where?” Polmankelest called back.

“Just entered the sector! Zooming in on visual!” There was a brief pause, “Shit!” To Tris and Polmankelest the expression in Stanads voice meant they were in trouble.

“Two Split Cabarats! Closing fast, carrying out energy diffusion scan.” Stanad spoke fast. “Disengaging Silhouette! Pol get us some distance! Max speed!”

Polmankelest needed no second request, even as Stanad finished the sentence the booster was bouncing off the limiter.

“Carabats are dropping back! Scan indicates each ship has fifty megawatts of shielding, two beta HEPT’s and hornet missiles.” Stanad paused, “I’m detecting a third low energy canon. Similar to those used to fire the short life, non-self propelled spy nav. Canon is energized, which leads me to believe we do not want to be in the way when it goes off!”

Tris looked at the readings and she was amazed how Stanad could even interpret the incoming data.

“The people that want you miss have some good connections.” Stanad commented.

“The Bloodheart clan!” She confirmed.

“You mean the family t’Gnht.” Stanad responded, “Bloodhearts is the Argon adopted name. A very well connected and influential Split family! These ships aren’t even in production yet! Saw one being tested. Very impressive! Let’s hope they haven’t fixed all the bugs.”

Polmankelest had slowed to allow the incoming ships to close the gap. The Prometheus banked to the left and down then twisted up with some activity on the strafe drive to side step an incoming volley of shots.

The Prometheus jarred as it took a couple of hits. Polmankelest still had the appearance of someone in complete control, even his movements seemed casual, and so the Prometheus dropped in behind the first Carabat.

“Both weapons on line!” Stanad called out.

The cannons sent off a double burst hitting the ship. However Polmankelest broke away as a stream of plasma tore through the dividing space.

“Prepare shield pulse!” Polmankelest ordered.

“Are you mad? We’ve not tested it yet!” Stanad replied.

The Paranid pulled back on target and closed the gap.

Stanad frantically hit the screen buttons, “On the record that if this works we both take the credit, and if it goes to shit, you take the flak!”

Polmankelest did not respond, at twenty meters he said, “Now!”

The Carabat went into a flat spin. Control thrusters fired briefly then stopped.

“Status?” The Paranid demanded.

“Secondary shields are off line! Surge isolation protector damaged.” Stanad scanned the Carabat ship. “Enemy ship, has all systems offline, still detecting internal power. Sorry Pol but she’s coming back online, all systems are re-initializing. It’ll take a moment for the shields to come back. I strongly suggest you finish it.”

Stanad also went into a quick flurry of activity. “Yes!” He raised a clenched fist. “Transporter has locked on and removed cannon device. And I have both shield units. Pilot has bailed out!”

The Carabat suddenly exploded as the pilot detonated the ship via remote. The Prometheus had swung around to make a finishing pass. Now Polmankelest was looking for the second Carabat.

“Got him for you Pol.” Stanad called out, “We have an incoming Hornet. Take evasive action now!” There was a brief pause, “ESS engaged! Private, open the maintenance kit locker to your left at floor level.”

Tris obliged, the locker had several replacement surge protection breakers and other tools. “Yes?” she asked.

“Need you to replace the secondary surge breaker! It’s located in the floor access panel to the right of the airlock door! Look for the one with the black screen! Anything that’s green leave!” Stanad barked out the instructions.

Tris acted with quick efficiency. Releasing the spare module, she quickly found the access panel. A quarter turn of the flip up latch handle and the panel released.

The shields took an impact from the Beta HEPT’s. “Hurry up Private, we won’t last long with one shield!” Stanad called out. “Pol, he’s got us on visual. Hornet locked onto Silhouette. I’ll try put the Silhouette over the Carabat!” Stanad pressed the touch screen controls.

Tris pulled open the maintenance hatch. Seeing the damaged module she quickly flipped open the catches. There was a small pop as the module released. Pulling the damaged unit free she quickly dropped the new unit into place and locked shut the catches. Two indicators either side moved towards the centre of the module and as they met the panel glowed green. She closed the hatch.

“Second shield is back on-line and increasing!” Stanad commented, “Private put the broken module in the maintenance locker and close it.”

Tris obeyed, and returned to watch the scanners. She looked on as Stanad coaxed the hornet missile closer to the unsuspecting Carabat.

The two ships were almost identical in speed whilst the ESS was active, but the Paranid was not trying to outmaneuver the Split. Just prevent him from getting a shot on target whilst Stanad brought the missile in. Several times plasma traced its way past without success.

“Missile about to self destruct!” Stanad called out, just as he over layed the Silhouette on the Carabat.

The shock wave jolted the ship but made little impression on the shields.

“Target ship destroyed. ESS offline.” Stanad breathed a heavy sigh, “Sector patrol ships closing. Pirate ships have left the area.” Was his final hasty report.

Stanad spun round on his chair, smiling and with a happy upbeat tone commented “Good flying there Pol. The Bloodhearts are going to be in big trouble with their people now! Can’t lose two prototype ships like that and not be!”

“Let’s hope so!” Tris responded with a sense of relief.

“Anyway as you were going to say, just before being interrupted by those thugs, where are you from?” Stanad leaned back in his chair as if nothing had happened.

“Careful miss! Next he’ll invite you back to his place and you’ll be trapped like other ladies! In his quarters with no clothes!” Polmanckelest called out from the pilot seat and laughed out loud.

Tris smirked but held back the laugh.

“Thanks Pol. Let me know when you want another favour done!” Stanad took the banter in good spirit and smiled, not the usual large beaming rouges grin, but with a softer more gentle expression.

“Time to get you home miss!” He said softly as the laughter of the Paranid receded away. “Pol, engaging jumpdrive!”

When the stars finally settled after the jump, the Prometheus, now back in white livery and bearing the insignia the AIC, gently glided into the sector. The pirate ships had departed into Argon Prime in hasty support of the ships battling in Ringo Moon leaving the sector clear.

Ahead of them was the Titan ship Baltock Victory several squadrons of fighters were in defensive formation. Others were out in flight maneuver training with markers to navigate and target drones to follow in mock dogfights.

Further in the sector again sat the massive bulk of the AIC Mammoth, Roamer. Three Elites dropped in behind the Prometheus.

“Commander! Please dock with the Baltock Victory.”

“Acknowledged!” Polmankelest replied.

“Well there’s your new home miss!” Stanad commented glancing out of the window.

A question burned in the back of Triss' mind, “When do you think we’ll see the ESS installed in ships.”

“You won’t miss, not for some time!” Stanad replied.

“Why? Its brilliant!” Tris stated.

“As I said some of the systems on this ship are very scary. The ESS is great if you’re the one using it. But, as you’ve seen, if you’re the opposition then your chances of winning drop dramatically.” Stanad paused briefly, “No you won’t see this active in the field until we have found a way to defeat it.”

“I see your point!” she commented then moved forward and looked out the cockpit screen.

Stanad added, “There have been quite a few systems that we’ve tested, which are still under wraps because we haven’t found a way to beat them. ESS makes even those look like childrens toys. It was the answer as a defense to all of these. But we’ve just proved it can be used as a weapon too!”

Tris looked back at Stanad as he spoke, even for a short while afterwards, then looked forward.

The Titan ship grew larger its gun towers bristled along the length of the ship. The Paranid gently banked the Prometheus over and swept around in two graceful arcs and lined up with the docking bay.

They watched silently as the Prometheus slipped by the clusters of fighters already clamped to the sides of the dock. The computer control placed the ship against a bulkhead door and engaged docking clamps.

“Well this is goodbye!” Stanad added. “We’re not allowed to step on board miss.”

She smiled, “Thank you. That’s to both of you!”

“Well if you’re ever in the outer sectors, look us up. That’s where we do most of our testing!” Stanad put on a big smile.

“I might do that!” She replied.

“Take care miss. It has been an honour!” Polmankelest called out. He had stepped out of the pilots seat.

“Open the airlock doors Pol.” Stanad spoke softly.

The Paranid tapped a few keys on the rear screens. The doors hissed open.

Tris stepped out, the luggage carrier followed. Once the doors closed Polmankelest sat down in one of the rear seats and reclined. “Take us home Stanad!”

“Yes Sir!” Stanad gave a snappy salute then sat in the pilots seat.

The docking clamps released and the Prometheus glided out under computer control.

“Nice lady. Pretty too!” Polmankelest commented.

“What? Pol that’s the first time I’ve heard you complement an Argon woman. Am I getting through to you?” Stanad jokingly mocked.

“For a human that is!” The Paranid replied.

“I’ve seen your women folk Pol. There is no comparison! She’s up there in the hot stuff!” Stanad commented in a serious tone, but received a thump on the shoulder from some object Polmankelest had thrown at him. “Look don’t distract the pilot, I could’ve crashed just then.” He mocked.

The Paranid laughed behind him and Stanad smiled.

Tor led the two Vultures and the Mandalay into the Teladi Equipment Dock in Seizewell they had come full circle. The eight units of Split computer parts, two of each type, were transferred on to the Discoverer.

He sat in the bar facing Bilyzonus, the credits had been split equally. It was busier than before, and a pall of smoke hung beneath the vents. The rich heady scent of smoldering weed curled up from the occasional table, where Teladi and other visitors enjoyed the still legal substance.

This was going to be tough, “As I see it the vulture you’re in now belongs to you as is the Mandalay. The second vulture and the Discoverer are mine. I’m not fussed about what the extras are and trying to balance out what they cost.” Tor commented.

“You are lossing much profitss.” Bilyzonus insisted. She wanted him to get a fair deal. The brief successful partnership was ending. Although she had earned the trading credits, the salvage of the Mandalay and the shield from the second vulture made a massive contribution in balancing out what each of them had provided.

“I don’t care!” Tor replied and took a sip from his Batral Ale. A dark and spicy beverage that left a warm sensation as the alcohol infused itself into the bloodstream.

Bilyzonus was drinking Sholt Tail, a much lighter drink that had a wonderful rich smell hiding the alcohol beneath. “You sshould!” She replied. They both knew that keeping the business partnership working was going to be impossible without suddenly acquiring a complete network of Satellites. Even so the deal had been made previously and this was the defining moment.

Tor tapped a pad on the table.

“Your previous order was one Batral Ale and a Ssholt Tail. If you wish to order again touch the green indicator. If you wish to change your order please speak when the green indicator sstartss to flassh.” The translator elongated all the ss’ of the Teladi automated voice. Tor touched the green indicator. “Your order will be with you sshortly.”

“You’ve taught me a lot Bilyzonus!” Tor stated, “I only wish I had more time to learn! But I’ve got to deliver these parts.” He rolled his eyes and looked up, muttering to himself, “Otherwise Caran Belign will be after me.”

Bilyzonus paused, drink half way to her mouth, then she took a large gulp. “I ssee your problem.”

“Hmmm. Not a nice bloke! Between you and me, he is top of my list of scary people.” Tor commented frankly, the alcohol permeating into his cranial cavity.

“Have you read hiss official sservice record?”

“Run that one by me again?” Tor asked.

“Hiss sservice record?” Bilyzonus repeated.

“No! Should I?”

Bilyzonus smiled and nodded.

“Won’t it be classified?” He asked warily.

“No! The Argon presses. Your recess presses tell everyone everything, and it iss recorded for everyone to ssee.” Bilyzonus replied.

“Can we get to it from here?”

“Yess, I think sso!” Bilyzonus tapped through the options, although the information would not display directly onto the holo-projector it could be transferred onto any personal pad.

She transferred it onto Tors. As he started to read she put her hand over the screen and said. “Not now. Read it later.”

It occurred to Tor that although they had traveled together, and in convoy, they had never sat down and talked properly or even socialized. So they still did not know a great deal about each other.

The evening passed as they exchanged stories of childhood and years gone by. Their dreams and hopes of what the future may hold. No business was discussed.

Tor mentioned why he was thrown off his Academy courses to which Bilyzonus spent several minutes laughing. Even with tears rolling down her cheeks, as her sides hurt too much, she managed to sustain the laughter.

It was many hours later as they sat, trying to recover from the hangover on a platform seat away from the rich aroma of the food halls, they talked business.

“Bilyzonus, I need to hire a pilot for the vulture. What do I do?”

She blinked as she tried to focus on the question. “You want an inexperienced pilot ass they won’t assk for much commission.”

“Can you help?” Tors head thumped.

“Ass a friend, yess! I will find you a ssuitable pilot.” She slid against him, her eyes closed.

“Did I really tell you why I was thrown out of the Academy?” Tor asked.

Bilyzonus started to laugh but this made the headache worse, “Don’t!” She murmured between clenched teeth.

Chapter 8 – Meetings.

Clegan was back in Brennans Triumph, overlooking the station. He had reported to the family the loss of the two prototypes rather than to Feran directly.

Feran was now on Setadize, a mood suppressant for the Split. The drug was also used to counter the effects of spaceweed addiction. The effect was holding, and the angry, violent, psychotic tendencies to maim, torture and kill were held in abeyance. The split was now able to reflect on his previous behaviour in the sane rational mind of a normal person. The drug had taken away the anger.

Clegan noticed that Feran appeared to be showing signs of regret. Something he could not accept as normal. Even with the medication he assumed, correctly, that this emotion had been somehow artificially induced.

Although Feran felt some anguish in regretful countenance for what he had done, his mind was showing signs of rejecting the induced emotion. Already he was questioning the whereabouts of Tris.

The Split specialist acting on behalf of the family felt that only a prolonged exposure to the Setadize would provide a permanent cure for the madness, but mentioned nothing about the other treatment.

As it was the family had put itself in serious trouble, with the loss of the two ships, over ten million credits had to be paid in compensation. With the added loss of the families' own ships, Ferans acts of revenge were unsustainable.

To regain face with the Split council, Feran had to be brought into line.

Clegan stood with his back to the door. Ferans' office had been scrubbed and the acrid smell of cleaner drifted up as the ventilation units fought to dispel the odour.

Even though the room had been cleaned, three empty containers of space fuel were jammed in the waste unit.

Feran studied the station supply details. He had taken a newly found interest in the running of the station and its trading deals with suppliers. He now had the additional motivation provided by the demands made on him to recover the losses he had incurred.

In his guttural voice Feran asked, "Why are we not shipping enough weed?"

"My lord our supplier is falling back in his production. The newly formed Onag Clan in Atreus Clouds are stemming the flow of weed through the sector." Clegan responded.

"Have you tried explaining to them our position?"

"My lord, with your recent obsession they have been able to disrupt our supply unchecked." Clegan replied.

"Hmmm!" Feran paused for thought. "I cannot afford to lose any more ships for the moment. I will give you the location of an old pirate base. They have a source of Antrodi Weed. Very high quality and very rare. We and I believe no one else has done business there for years. It's time to get re-aquainted!"

"Yes my lord."

Moving his finger down the list Feran asked, "Spaceflies?"

"We have three sources, the first is almost out, if we get another five units we'll be lucky. The other two we can get about eight units every fifty cycles, but for how long I don't know." Clegan replied.

"Okay, now space fuel?"

“Again, my lord, the Onag clan have reduced our shipment by striking a deal with the station in Herrons Nebula. Our shipping route has been altered, but it passes through Argon Prime to avoid contact with the Onag ships.” Clegan paused, “The clan base in Ore Belt tend not to interfere they have an alternative source. Who? I don’t know!”

“Hmmm. Sort out the weed problem first. I need time to think on the other problems.” Feran commented.

Under an hour later Clegan had reached the sector Feran told him to find, and the gates were already a great distance behind. They dropped out of scanner range. Clegan was nervous about being so far out, the ships were not equipped for deep space. Five minutes later having traveled on the specified vector the ancient pirate base popped onto the HUD.

Behind him two Orinocos followed their cargo bays had been expanded to maximum capacity. One held energy cells, the other carried station computer parts, maintenance parts and various utility robots.

Stretching away behind the base was a vast asteroid field. So vast the HUD, which could usually identify a single asteroid as a small blue square, had a solid blue band that thickened and blocked out the top edge of the HUD and moved down as he drew closer to the station.

Eventually they reached their destination. Clegan ordered the two Orinoco’s to hold position. He noted the station shields were running at minimum strength. A single hornet missile would be powerful enough to destroy the whole place.

He gained docking permission and flew between the outer blast doors. Stations like this one did not have computer guided control. Each bay was an individual airlock that the pilot needed to manually dock into. Clegan guessed the station must be over a hundred years old.

Once the airlock had pressurized Clegan stepped up to the docking bay exit door. Which grated open in fits. A few ancient ships lurked on other bays, artifacts from an early time, which had not moved in many years. Clegan did spot a few newer ships but nothing to give him cause for concern.

The lights on the station glowed red, indicating the station power reactors were critically low on energy cells or worse still about to fail catastrophically. The station sirens had been disconnected years earlier.

This station was now the last refuge for the dregs of society. The has beens' who destroyed themselves with spaceweed addiction and now needed a cheap fix. The drifters and bums with no place left to go. A few with bounties on their heads so large and by so many races that this was the last place they could call home.

Clegan wore nasal filters and he could still taste the stench.

The one bar still open was crowded. Clegan could not tell if many of the occupants were alive or dead. The heavy smoke obscured the room into a thick haze as the ventilation system asthmatically attempted to move the air. He stepped up to the bar.

An ancient android bartender of unknown origin, stained black from years of neglect, stumbled forward.

“What would you like to drink?” The metallic voice stuttered the words.

“I’m looking for Candronis Oalametanos Tredamonus!” Clegan choked the words out, his voice dried by the rancid air.

The android paused and, as if remembering what its arms were for, slowly and jerkily pointed towards a stairwell.

Clegan climbed up. At the top a short corridor led towards a single office. The door hissed open as he approached. Inside the air was clear, the room bathed in normal light rather than the red of the warning lights.

Tredamonas was a Teladi. Her age difficult to tell accurately, but her skin gave her an appearance in the age range of one hundred and twenty Teladi mazuras, to one hundred and fifty mazuras. She was reading something on her report screen. She waved Clegan to a seat.

The door had closed and the aroma that filled the rest of the station was quickly sucked away.

After a brief time Tredamonas looked up. "You're new here. What do you want?"

Clegan got straight to the point, "Antrodi Spaceweed. My lord knows where you can get some!"

"And who is your lord?" She asked disdainfully.

"Feran Bloodheart!"

She snorted, "From the Bloodheart clan! What do you have to trade?"

Clegan glanced around, "Everything you need!" Was his appraisal.

"You'll need more than those sshipss outside have on board." She responded.

"That is a token of our good faith!" Clegan responded, and emphasized, "If! We can strike a deal."

Her eyes narrowed, "What does your lord have in mind?"

"We will supply you with the goods you need, if you supply us with weed!"

"The goodss I need?"

"Station computers, energy cells, plenty of robots and space fuel. Plus animal and vegetable extracts to propagate weed growth." Clegan answered.

Tredamonas nodded her head, the station was not allied to any pirate clan, and both the bliss palace and Swamp Plant factory were on the verge of a complete shutdown. "Very well! For the moment if you supply the goods we will supply the weed, however we will take ten percent of production."

"You can have five percent!" Clegan responded curtly.

Her eyes narrowed, however having dealt with the Bloodheart Clan before, she knew this was probably all she could expect. Eventually she put out her fist. Clegan bumped knuckles, "We have a deal!" Tredamonus replied.

Both Orinocos docked and off loaded their cargo. A few of the more able bodied residents on the station shuffled out to watch. The first off the ships were four security androids. Each was heavily armed with stun lances and rapid-fire blasters.

Maintenance robots diffused into the station and new freight loaders started to shift energy cells towards the station reactors.

Clegan looked on as the maintenance robots began to pull up panels and patch the massive number of optical cables and power transfer conduits. Many dropped into the maintenance runs and were tracking down damaged systems. A number of large maintenance robots were already well on route to check the integrity of the power generators. The cleaning androids were the last to disembark.

Tredamonus watched on her security scanners from her office. The docking bay was already getting a complete overhaul and scrub down. The years of neglect were lifting away. Deeper inside the station the older run down maintenance machines shuffled aside as the newer units arrived.

This would be a long job but within three hours power was back on stream. The red lights around the station tripped back into standby. For the first time in many years the main lighting came on to reveal the inner state of the pirate station. Clegan looked around his face flinched and settled to a grim look, with tightened jaw muscles.

In the now revealed dark corners were lumps. Some no more than the white bones of creatures who had crawled into the darkness to die. Those that were alive squinted in the light, their clothes disheveled and looking no better than the walking dead.

Tredamonus had shut down the scanners when she saw the power levels rise. Not wanting to see the inside of the station as it became illuminated.

Clegan hoped the other stations would be more welcoming. He had also discovered the station here had once produced its own blend of space fuel in small quantities. However having run out of the key ingredients the stills sat empty.

Also the inventory showed forty-one containers of processed Antrodi Spaceweed.

One of which had been opened to feed the needs of the inhabitants. The containers had been on the station for a number of years but the freeze-dried weed scanned to be in good salable condition.

Already both Orinocos were heading back with thirty-eight of the containers. As per the agreement two unopened ones remained.

He watched as the cleaners, using high power jets, lifted great sheets of accumulated dirt from the station decks and walls. This dirt was then scooped and packed into containers for the station incinerators. As the scouring robots systematically moved across the docking bay, floor and wall maintenance machines resurfaced and patch welded any fractures in the deck. The new surfaces were baked dry with strong bursts of UV light.

All the bodies were bagged and sent to the incinerator. The only food on board the station was in Recon Packs and this was well beyond its recommended consumption stamp.

After four more hours of intense activity the Orinocos returned with four Bayamon escorts and six Mandalay. These were to act as the stations new defense craft. However Clegan ordered them to stay outside of the station whilst the Orinocos docked. He wanted certain checks done before he would allow the pilots to board.

Once again the two ships disgorged hundreds of units of supplies. The medical androids entered the station first and began to take readings and measurements. Within minutes of arriving they had the whole place listed as a biological disaster, unsuitable for habitation.

Scans had shown a deadly strain Blanmankcestranda Station Virus in a number of the inhabitants and also in several of the recently deceased. However as nearly all the corpses were destroyed in the furnace it was impossible to gauge how long the virus had been on the station.

A clean area was constructed as a number of the maintenance units were re-tasked with cleansing the ventilation and hydration systems.

Clegan was put through the bio-scanner several times and received hypo-spray inoculations against all the diseases discovered. He had to change his clothes, the old ones were bagged and sent away to be incinerated.

He had been careful to place an order for new ones to be shipped in with the latest supplies.

The same treatments were given to the residents, and a newly arrived unit of foodstuffs was carefully opened to feed them. Clegan was almost tempted to send all the inhabitants to the incinerator. He had no doubt that is what Feran would have done. However he reasoned some of the people may still have useful skills.

Tredamonus was persuaded by Clegan to show him where the source of the weed came from.

New ventilation units were being installed and the combined smell of the cleaning agents and the previous stench were managing to permeate through his nasal filters. He needed to get off the station.

Tredamonus piloted out an ancient shuttle craft. Clegan watched as she turned into the asteroid field. Using visual navigation only she could pick out the path. Clegan watched with some hope he would be able to remember the route, but he could not detect any obvious markers.

After ten minutes of meandering between the rocks they arrived at the Dream Farm. Again the station was running at low power. Clegans' heart sank at what he may find on-board.

Tor was on his way back to Argon Prime. The newly named TB Pride Vulture had a recently qualified pilot. A young Teladi male called Belegalas Drodronabas Fenagalas the third. The rate had been negotiated as a flat fee of fifty credits per trip. Even so Tor had given the young pilot five hundred credits as a single up-front payment, in order that he could buy some personal items.

He had equipped his Discoverer with a 'best buy' and 'best sell' locators. Bilyzonus recommended that he also buy a cargo bay life support unit when he had the opportunity. He had balked at the mention of needing to visit a pirate station to buy one.

"Don't worry!" she had commented, "The pirates will welcome anyone with credits to spend on weed, spacefuel, and other things."

The TB Pride now boasted an increased hold capacity of thirteen hundred units.

"Entering system Menelous Frontier" Sweety called out.

Tor was now back in Boron Space. Checking the system map he noted there were no pirates around. He waited for a few moments for Fenagalas to enter the sector then hailed him on the com.

"Fenagalas, how are you doing?"

"Fine thank you, Ssir!"

"Head for the gate into Rolk's Fate you'll find it listed on your nav system. I'm going to scan a few stations in this sector." Tor instructed.

"Yess Ssir."

Halfway into his sweep, Tor picked up the Trading Station, he popped up the 'best buys' register, and noted that a stock of fourteen Satellites were available. It was time for him to meet the Boron.

"Sweety, get me docking permission."

"Docking permission granted, dock when you have green light." Sweety responded.

He gently maneuvered the Discoverer towards the main entrance, as the guiding beacons changed to green, the doors opened. Tentatively the ship moved forward until the station computer locked onto the guidance control, drawing the ship in. An automated welcome piped through the cabin.

Tor had read about the Boron and their advanced technologies. He had also seen them displayed on the holo-projectors but this would be his first face to face meeting.

He looked in wonder as the ship was brought to the dockside. The docking clamps took hold with the usual thump against the hull. The majority of Boron ships were held on lower levels. He watched as a Dolphin was docked, once the clamps were engaged a tube extended around the ships' airlock door and sealed.

Energy fields prevented the liquid that filled the tube from spilling out. Eventually the Boron pilot exited the ship.

Tor eventually opened the door, into the station atmosphere. He coughed in the ammonia rich air. Already his eyes began to sting. It was then that he noticed the other non-Boron pilots were all wearing nasal filters.

A short figure in a complete environment suit drifted, which was the best way Tor could explain the gait of the Boron, up to him. "You time here first?" The translator indicated almost a soft twittering like voice.

Tor nodded, the Boron smiled reassuringly, "You these take!" And handed Tor a set of filters.

He took them gratefully and, once in place, breathed easily again.

“Thank you!” He responded, and smiled back.

“All mine pleasures!” The translator decoded. Tor was going to need to get used to the switching around of words.

“I’m Tor.”

“Bobo Loj, at service!” The Boron held out his hand in greeting.

Tor looked a little confused as to what he should do next so he imitated the action. Bobo laughed, and completed the greeting as Tor should have done by touching the back of his own suited hand against the back of Tors then repeating the action, this time being palm to palm.

Tor looked relieved.

“Want to goods buy?” Bobo asked.

“Yes, I’m after some Navigation Satellites.”

“Ooh, network building?” Bobo spoke with real enthusiasm.

“Just starting one.” Tor responded and smiled.

The cheerful Boron continued to smile, “Help I will! Follow.”

Tor did as instructed and was introduced to one of the station representatives, in only a few minutes Tors' Discoverer had five navigational satellites loaded into the cargo bay.

Bobo Loj waved a cheerful goodbye to Tor as he left. Then went to see if anyone else required assistance. Not all the visitors were friendly but he gained a great sense of satisfaction and well being when he found one that was.

Tor engaged the main thrusters as he cleared the station. Checking on the position of TB Pride.

“Sweetie call up Fenagalas!” Tor instructed.

“Contact made.” Sweetie responded.

“Fenagalas.”

“Yes Sir?” The young Teladi responded.

“Hold position, I have a change of plan.” Tor selected the ‘best buys’ listing. “Fly to Solar Power Plant Beta. The station is close to capacity. They’re currently asking eight credits a unit. See if you can beat them down to six.”

“Acknowledged Sir.”

“If you can! Take a full load. I’ll monitor and contact you when you dock.” Tor instructed. The Vulture was not the fastest trading ship of the races but it was quicker than the larger capacity Boron Dolphins in the sector.

Tor headed out to open space away from the freighter routes. He dropped a satellite. Smiling to himself, after checking that all the stations were identified in the nav system, he headed towards the Rolk’s Fate gate.

“Sweetie, monitor TB and let me know when she’s docked.” Tor requested.

“Confirmed Tor.”

“And Sweetie find me some of that Boron Coplatic Music.”

Music played through the cabin. The complex melodies, Tor realized, could not be played on the Guilard so he whistled accompaniment.

“Tor?” Sweety commented.

“Yes Sweety?”

“I’ve analyzed the noise you’re producing. It does not match the Coplatic music being played. Do you want me to change station?”

“No Sweety, I’m just adding my interpretation of what I’m listening to.” Tor replied.

“Perhaps if the noises you made were in tune I could interpret them better.” Sweety responded.

Tor laughed.

They crossed into Rolk’s Fate. Dropping a satellite, Tor swung the Discoverer around and scooped it back into the cargo bay. Checking that he had the sector details and also the satellite in Menelous Frontier was functioning correctly he headed on towards Atreus Clouds.

Knowing he was already late in making his delivery, and did not want to waste any more time, he set the thrusters to maximum.

Half way across the sector Sweety announced, “TB Pride now docking in Solar Power Plant Alpha.”

“Patch me through Sweety.”

“Connection made.” Sweety responded.

“Fenagalas.”

“Yes Sir?” The Teladi questioned.

“Keep your com open so I can authorize the credit transfer. Don’t forget to wear the ear piece.”

“Yes Sir.”

Tor could tell from the tone of the station representative that he had been having a slow day. It was relatively easy for Fenagalas to get the units at the reduced price. Tor authorized the credit transfer then looked at the ‘best sell’ listing of the sector.

He cross-referenced with the ‘best buy’ listing.

“Fenagalas, good work with the energy cells. Transport them to Ore Mine Delta. The station is not desperately low on cells but has a full yield of Ore. See what you can do in terms of a deal.”

“Yes Sir.” The response came back.

Tor was working on Bilyzonuss’ principle of ‘working the sector’. He did not truly understand the needs of the Boron stations but every species relied on energy cells for production.

He crossed into Atreus Clouds when Sweety signaled TB Pride was about to dock. Tor had a sudden feeling that this was going to become extremely repetitive.

Once Fenagalas had sold the energy cells and was fully loaded with ore. Tor instructed the young Teladi to go to the Trading Station and buy two navigation satellites.

Tor dropped a satellite and again swooped around to pick it up. Viewing the sector map he picked up the Pirate Base, remembering Bilyzonuss' words he steered the Discoverer towards it.

The pirate station had recently been constructed and was further out than before. The previous station had been obliterated by Boron Strike Command after it had become embroiled in a savage war on the slave trade through the sector.

As Tor approached he was painfully aware of the cluster of laser towers that surrounded the facility. They remained motionless and inactive as he called up the station.

The station itself a collection of old Lifters, Dolphins and Vultures welded together around the massive central docking bay of an ancient Orca. Construction robots were still in operation welding the latest delivery of panels to form the new outer hull. Making it into the distinctive sphere of the older generation Pirate bases.

Tor continued to be nervous, he dug out the cloak. It was the first time he had worn it. He left his jacket deliberately undone with the blaster in easy reach. Also the stun stick nestled in the cloaks pocket.

“Sweetie get us docking permission.”

“Docking permission granted.”

This was going to be a quick get in, buy the cargo bay life support and get out fast.

The computer guidance system put the Discoverer between several pirate freighters. Other battle-scarred ships were also here. Amongst them an old mark two Elite, and a couple of mark three Busters.

Tor casting the hood over his face stepped onto the docking bay. Glancing around he spotted the maintenance centre. All the species appeared to be here. Split mercenaries moved in small groups, heading into and away from the various bars. He could hear the clicking of the gambling tables and the sounds of tacky music associated with the more open-minded bars.

The faint spicy scent of weed permeated through the bay to lure pilots away from their ships.

Tor approached a battle scarred Paranid standing behind the maintenance desk. His left hand missing two digits.

He looked at Tor and growled rather than spoke, “What you want?”

“Life Support System,” Tor affirmed and tried not to sound hesitant.

“Ship?”

“Discoverer,” Tor turned and pointed.

“Two thousand credits, be finished in forty four Mizuras,” The Paranid growled.

Tor nodded, he quickly calculated he had to hang around for about two Argon hours. He authorized the payment chip and went looking for something to eat. The only places he could find were the five bars.

He put in the nasal filters to combat the sweet aroma of the weed, over the hot smell of people and drink.

The only tables were placed around the edge of the room. The centre was occupied by an extensive the bar, holding various shaped containers with exotic names of space fuels that stacked the shelves.

The smoke drifted in swirls and eddies disturbed by the ventilation system rather than extracted.

Tor found a seat. Using the table touch screen he ordered a meatsteak and what was described as a local brew. The console also authorized the payment.

A scantily clad waitress, who had seen better times, brought the food and drink across.

Tor nodded to her then dug out his personal pad whilst trying to ignore the hubbub of noise that filled the room. It was his way to occupy himself rather than try breaking into conversation with the pirates around him.

He opened the historical data on Caran. The list was long each heading having an imbedded report, which could be viewed when selected. Tor briefly read the first commendation. Typically it was a glowing accolade to the man and countersigned by two superior officers of the time.

He scanned down the list and randomly selected another again it was another glowing appraisal. With military honours being presented.

Tor scanned down the rest of the list to see what Caran had done most recently. The screen scrolled on for some time before he hit the end of the list. He checked the date stamp. Then looked at it again, it was over four years old.

He read the heading, and once more had a double take, 'Rescue of Captured Pilot in Chinns Clouds – Aborted!' Not resisting the opportunity he opened the official report. It had been heavily edited, most of the detail was missing and it was obvious great chunks of the text had been removed. Even so the little that remained gave the impression of a hard hitting and potentially damning report. Two names leapt out from the text 'Bloodheart' and the name of the deceased pilot 'Malasha Belign'. Tor reached the end, only one signature filled the obligatory two spaces. The signature was Carans'.

Tor flipped back to the index, questions lingering in his mind. Carefully he read the headings and scrolled down the whole list. By the time he reached the last entry it was painfully apparent that this one was the only failed mission, in an apparently gloriously successful career.

He put away his pad, quietly and reflectively he finished his drink.

Chapter 9 – Delivery

Tor checked the elapsed time since his arrival and realized that the upgrade would be completed.

He rose and wandered towards the docking bay. Before he reached the entrance a large Split intercepted him and grabbed him by the front of his jacket.

The Split bellowed, “Canrutakame?” Tor was scared and did not understand the challenge.

“What? I don’t understand?” He pleaded

“Canrutakame?” The Split bellowed again and then threw him backwards.

Tor back-stepped landing on his left foot and span around to stumble forwards onto his hands and knees. Wide-eyed he rose and turned around to see the Split had already drawn his blaster and was swinging it towards him. His heart beat so fast and hard he could feel his blood pulsing through his neck and into his head.

Tor did not quite know what happened next, it all happened too fast, he simply reacted. Needless to say his last image of the assailant was the sudden look of surprise when Tors' blaster placed a shot neatly between the Split's eyes. The body took a moment to react and crumpled to the ground.

Tor went pale and began to shake. Quickly he put the blaster back into his jacket and threw his hood over his face.

“Nice shot,” It was a distinctly Argon voice, and it was closer than Tor would have liked.

He looked sideways at Dert Tilite, a man slim in stature, with a sharp, sly looking face and a patch over the left eye.

The pirate leaned forward, and quietly commented, “But I think it was more good luck than judgement.”

Dert turned his head away and shouted at the two companions of the dead Split, “Drag that thing away.” They looked at him then gave Tor a hard stare before complying with the request.

The pirate addressed Tor again. “He made the challenge, drew first and lost. So you’re free to leave. Bit of advice though. Don’t hang around too long.” He paused briefly then commented, “The Split respect a good fighter, but there are some that will believe, and attempt to prove, that it was more luck than skill.”

The clients started to chat again, seeing that there was no further entertainment to be had. Dert swaggered away.

Tor needed no encouragement. With a determined stride he went straight to his ship and boarded. As the airlock doors closed behind him he could feel his stomach cramping up.

He had an attack of the shakes, rummaging through one of the lockers he pulled out a container of space fuel.

“Sweetie, has the upgrade been finished?” His voice faltered as he asked.

“Cargo Bay Life Support installed and fully operational,” Sweetie replied.

“Good now get us out of here.”

“Departure clearance granted.” The docking clamps released, and the ship glided out.

“Sweetie set a course to Argon Prime and just fly me there,” Opening the stopper he took a long drink.

“Is everything okay Tor?”

“Apart from being attacked for no reason and having to shoot a Split in the head. Everything’s fine,” Tor sounded more upset and stressed.

Sweety took a brief moment to analyze the voice pattern trend, "Is there anything I can do to help?" She responded.

Tor looked up in surprise and quietly responded, "Thanks Sweety, but I'll just have a few drinks." He took another drink, "Any news from Fenagalas."

"He's called in three times, I've analyzed the method you use for trading and have directed him to several 'opportunities'. My latest analysis is that he will need to change sector to improve the generation of credits," Sweety responded.

Tor took another drink, "You can do that?"

"My systems AI was designed to determine and provide options to my pilot during operational situations. Adapting to each situation as it arises." Sweety replied.

Sweety guided the Discoverer away from the Pirate station and targeted the jumpgate to The Hole.

"Fenagalas has made the delivery and is awaiting instructions," Sweety commented a few minutes later.

"Put him on com Sweety," Tor requested, "Fenagalas how's it going?"

"Very well Ssir, just delivered the energy cellss as ordered. Where would you like me to go next?" Fenagalas asked in his most official voice.

"There's a sector gate leading out of the one you're in which isn't identified on the nav system. I want you to deploy a nav sat in that sector. Sweety can then instruct you where to go next," Tor replied the space fuel was now beginning to do its work.

"Yes sir."

"Speak to you soon, Tor out."

Sweety killed the com then tuned into the music channel but kept the volume relaxingly low. Tor crashed out into a disturbed dream on the rear cabin bed.

He woke up, when Sweety crossed into Argon Prime, several hours later. He groggily pushed himself up and turned into a sitting position with his feet on the deck.

Wiping the sleep from his eyes he asked, "Where are we?"

"We have entered Argon Prime," Sweety replied.

"How long was I out?" He yawned and stretched.

"Four hours."

"Anything much happened?" He stood up and wandered up to the cockpit.

"We now have navigational data for the systems Queens Space and Rolk's Drift. The Vulture is now transporting energy cells between the two sectors." Sweety responded.

Tor sat in the pilot seat and pulled out his personal pad. He interfaced it with the onboard computer. Selecting through the menus he checked on his credit status.

"Looks like we need to give Fenagalas a salary rise," Tor commented out loud. His credits stood at nearly four hundred thousand.

"Do you want me to contact him?" Sweety asked.

“Let’s finish this job and get rid of our cargo first,” Tor responded, “Taking control Sweetie. Target the Trading Station for me.”

The HUD gave a heading and distance. It would help Tor to wake up by flying the ship. He adopted a leisurely approach lasting some time.

“Sweetie get me docking permission.”

“Docking permission granted. Dock when you see green lights.”

The large outer doors began to slide apart as the lights turned green. Tor kept the ship on slow approach speed until the station docking computer took control.

As he was beginning to expect, the ship was guided past the main docking bay and into the security section. The docking clamps engaged with the characteristic thump on the outer hull. Tor left his blaster and stun stick on the table and stepped onto the docking bay.

Caran and another security agent crossed over to him. Container lifting robots released the cargo bay hatches.

He addressed Tor, “So you’ve made it back.” There was little obvious emotion in his expression.

“Eventually,” Tor added.

“And you have some extra computer parts.” Caran checked his pad. It listed the Discoverers inventory log.

Tor sighed, “If only you knew what I had to do to get them.”

Caran replied, “I’m sure it’ll make an interesting story. But perhaps some other time.”

The robots extracted the containers and were already moving them to a second ship. Tor recognized it as a planetary lifter.

Caran presented to Tor his pad, “Credit transfer registration. Please review and authorize.”

He looked at it then placed his thumb on the screen. Checking that the transaction was now complete he handed the pad back to Caran.

“Excellent. It has been a pleasure Mr. Grall. Until the next time,” Tor turned away leaving Caran on the dockside and the agent watched him get back onto his ship. With the airlock doors closed the ship was returned to the normal docking station.

Finding a station representative he sold the remaining six units of computer parts and stocked up with four more satellites.

Taking his time, Tor studied the local shipyard and did some quick calculations. Eventually ordering a new lifter with ten megawatts of shields. Adding to this three hundred and fifty cargo unit upgrades, maximum steering enhancements and engine tuning.

He consulted his ship, “Sweetie I need a pilot for the new ship any ideas?”

“Data logs indicate the new trader series twelve android has proven to be the most effective and popular with station owners. Cost four thousand credits.” She replied.

“Sounds good to me.”

The new freighter left the shipyard, android pilot on board. Sweetie controlled the buying and selling transactions giving the android pilot stations to visit.

Tor spent more credits on the Discoverer taking the engine tuning and steering to their limits. After dropping a satellite in Argon Prime he headed out towards Ringo Moon. It was taking him time to get used to the massive increase in speed. Crossing the sector now took just over half the time it previously did.

“Tor, I’ve been checking the TB Prides inventory logs. According to my findings Fenagalas accounts would indicate he has not been trading to full capacity. However the inventory lists would show that he has been.” Sweety reported.

“Sounds like he’s shaping up to be a true Teladi. Call him up on the com,” Tor smiled.

“Yess Ssir.” Fenagalas responded.

“How’s it going?” Tor asked.

“Very well Ssir. Good profitss.”

“Excellent! Sweety tells me you’ve been doing some moonlighting,” Tor commented and watched the young Teladis' expression.

“No Sir.” The Teladi were familiar to all the races terms for undesirable behaviour. Mainly so they knew what they were being accused of in terms of trading practice.

“It’s okay. I was meaning to renegotiate your rate anyway,” Tor glanced at the HUD and reduced speed so he could finish the conversation prior to making the jump, “As well as your fifty credits per trip, you can use two percent of the cargo bay for your own profits, that’s thirty-two units. Also if you get the offer of a large profit opportunity let me know, and you’ll get ten percent of the reward.”

The young Teladi carried out a quick calculation in his head and smiled. “Yess Ssir.”

“Speak to you soon. Tor out.” He lined the ship up with the gate and gently engaged the thrusters.

Clegan was back on Tredamonuss’ Pirate Station. The station itself was now transformed and had a cleanliness associated with new stations. The medical units had lifted the quarantine lockdown.

The bar had its regulars, but Clegan had insisted on a restriction of access to the weed and spacefuel. The inhabitants were on rehabilitation stimuli infused into whatever drink they ordered.

One side effect was hunger and the malnourished were now putting on weight. Still they had some way to go before becoming, what Clegan termed, useful.

The Dream Farm and Bliss Place had left Clegan suspicious. Both were in exceptionally good condition. The Dream Farm was apparently maintained by eight aged Teladi swamp keepers, and had a significant amount of energy cells on inventory.

The farm only had eight small maintenance tanks growing the weed. The vast cultivation tanks were empty and had been cleaned, even scrubbed, out. Only two of the maintenance tanks were stocked with the Antrodi Weed, the others had various hybrids.

The old Teladi men had rambled on with how best to grow the weed. Sometimes, in painful detail about the specific requirements for growing each one. When questioned how long it would take to become fully operational again, the comment came back as two Wozura for some of the faster growing hybrids, and three Wozura for the Antrodi to reach a harvestable yield.

The rest of the station was clean, most maintenance robots stood idle as others cleaned and maintained the empty station.

The Bliss Place was the same, this time with ten Teladi maintenance crew. Here they occasionally received a few units of swamp plant from the Dream Farm to process. Then, with the majority of both stations' crews, would head into the sector to sell the weed and bring back any supplies required.

To Clegan it was all too neat, Tredamonas had control of the stations. She also had a transporter on her ship, which meant she could get to her office and leave again without having to walk between the two.

He entered her office, and felt the dampening field had been engaged. Clegan looked at Tredamonas inquisitively.

She looked back with her Teladi eyes unblinking. "We need to talk! Drink?" She asked.

Clegan nodded and asked, "About?"

"Why you're here," She poured a large space fuel then handed it to him before sitting behind her desk.

He sat down, "I'm here to buy weed."

"So you say, most people who come here to buy weed, leave quickly never to return," She paused, and took a sip of her drink, "They don't rebuild the station. No profits in doing that. Not something the Bloodhearts would do."

Clegan took a sip of his drink, "And the Bloodhearts wouldn't be best pleased if I told them you were lying and holding back on production."

Tredamonas allowed herself a brief smile, "You're playing a dangerous game Clegan."

"This station is the gateway to the Antrodi Weed. Until now, you've successfully deterred the pirate clans from moving in and taking over," Clegan paused for a moment then took another sip, "Based on what I've seen Feran would order me to overrun this base and take control."

"Haven't you already," She stated.

"Only on the surface."

"That's why your pilots are freelance mercenaries. Employed by you not the Bloodhearts," Tredamonus observed.

"Very good, you've been doing some research," Clegan replied, "All the equipment has been acquired through other channels. Once the weed flows into the station and I can get the additional credits. You'll see laser towers, new fighters, and fighter ship construction units arrive."

"Sound like you're expecting trouble?" Tredamonas questioned.

It was Clegan's turn to smile, "Hopefully not, but I'm keeping my options open! And I'd rather not get a blade in the back."

"So what's the deal?" The Teladi mind knew there was profit to be gained.

"Deal? I think you're richer than you claim to be. Those stations have been producing weed quietly and probably in volume for the past few Jazuras. I don't think money is what you want."

She smiled, "By my age I would normally be expected to step down to a younger CEO, preferably a family member. But not out here." Tredamonus paused to take a drink, "My family are well taken care of financially. I need someone I can trust, who can take over the business after me."

"And keep the other stations secret?"

"Not to go looking for the other stations." She responded with firmness in her voice. "I think you would make a good station commander for here. You can protect the passage into the asteroid field. I will hire new younger Teladi to learn

about weed production. You bring the energy cells and any other goods we need here, and we will pick them up in exchange for processed weed.”

Clegan had already made plans to become station commander when the time came. Tredamonus had preempted his move, which meant takeover would be by agreement rather than force. It also gave him free reign to improve the security within the station without running the risk of upsetting her and losing the supply of Spaceweed.

Tredamonus was already looking forward to leaving the sector and returning to her home system Blue Profit. Where she would run her business via the satellite located on the Bliss Place. Clegan was shrewd and calculating, having him run the Pirate station would help keep the pirate clans away, and from trying to find and take over the factories.

“Okay. When the time comes you hand over station control to me, and I will safe guard you’re stations. All the weed that’s produced comes here.” Clegan went through the points, then paused, “And your cut will be?”

“Forty percent.” She responded immediately.

“I need credits now to make this work. If you’re willing to invest some, then we have a deal.” He replied.

She put out her fist and they bumped knuckles, then finished their drinks.

Clegan strode down towards the bars. He spotted Korecmancketras, a Paranid mercenary with several years of military combat experience before being dishonourably discharged after breaking rank and disobeying orders during a heavy engagement with the Xenon.

“Korec.”

“Clegan?” The deep harsh voice of the Paranid responded.

“I need you to be my second in command here.” Clegan had worked with the Paranid before and knew he could be trusted. Korecmancketras did not take fools gladly and was thorough in his work.

“And?”

Clegan transferred data from his personal pad to the Paranids’ pad. “Need you to organize this lot.” Korecmancketras looked through the list as Clegan continued, “Most of it is internal scanners, dampening field projectors, security stuff. Check the layout of the station and decide where to install it. I need to have restricted access areas, and commercial zones. Keep the visitors in the bars, gambling halls and rest centres.”

The Paranid nodded, “When do I start.”

“Now! Have you seen Nyeshta?”

“She’s in the bar.” The Paranid replied before wandering off towards the maintenance robots.

Clegan went to find her, when he received an urgent com through his pad.

“Clegan, we have information concerning the whereabouts of the Navy Pilot.”

“Go on?”

“Monitored a personal communication between a Vanart Beck in Argon Prime and Tris Matayah on the Baltock Victory in The Wall.”

“Send me a copy of the transcript,” Clegan ordered.

He quickly scanned through the conversation and smiled. He popped the pad into his pocket and made his way into the bar.

Nyeshta was drinking a large Terras Foot Ale and reading through a technical update. She looked up and smiled at Clegan as he approached. She was an Argon in her early thirties, though she looked much younger, with short blond hair and an athletic figure. Her green eyes were bright and friendly. The left cheek had a thin pale scar from a console explosion during a particularly nasty encounter with Boron station forces in the system Lucky Planets.

As he already knew. Behind the friendly attractive exterior was a cold-hearted mercenary that would cut a persons' throat without hesitation if they got in her way.

Clegan not only employed her because she could fight, and looked good around the place, but her technical knowledge of ships and their construction was extensive.

“So what’s happening?” She asked, her voice was soft and slightly husky.

“Need you to look over the construction bays, tell me what you need in terms of equipment and supplies,” Clegan responded.

Nyeshta raised an eyebrow, “Are we going into production?”

He smiled, “The station is ours! Need to fortify it and get some more pilots.”

She smiled, “That’ll give me an opportunity to build the Chaos mark one.”

“What’s that?” He asked trying not to sound too suspicious.

She continued to smile, “Ship of my own design.”

“Got the details?”

“You’ll see it when it’s finished,” She teased.

“Hmmm. Well put together a few Bayamon mark threes first and a compliment of Mandalay mark fours.” Clegan ordered.

“Are you staying for a drink?” She changed the subject.

“Unfortunately not, there’s some business I need to attend to.” He replied.

Nyeshta looked disappointed then ordered another drink for herself. She watched Clegan walk away then resumed her attention to the data pad. He had glanced at the body slumped against the bar, a blaster shot to the chest. One of the locals had tried paying too much attention to her with unfortunate results.

Tris had been promoted from Private to Junior Pilot mainly due to the transfer onto the Baltock Victory. Privates were restricted to station duties and training academies. After training, elevation to the Junior Pilot rank was automatic, and transition to the carrier and battle cruisers was on recommendation.

Life on the Baltock Victory was very different from the station life she had grown used to. There were bars and recreational facilities on the ship, but life was very regimented and business like. Without any of the relaxed atmosphere associated with mingling amongst the civilian population out of hours.

She was now getting used to a whole new bunch of faces. The flight squad she had joined was six ships in total, two leaders each with a pair of wingmen. The Buster Tris was assigned was much slower than the Discoverer she was used to, and in many ways less maneuverable. It took considerable skill to make the best use of the ship.

Now several days after her conversation with Vanart she was on shore leave. They had agreed to meet up on the Trading Station in Herron’s Nebula. She kept checking the sector map for pirate activity and found remarkably few ships that had the potential of falling into that category. The Argon navy seldom bothered with ships unless they were caught smuggling known contraband.

Her skills as a pilot had improved considerably and in many respects were superior to many of her counterparts. However she would be the first to admit they were still woefully behind Polmanckelest. So she was taking extra care.

Tris relaxed as the Trading Station computer took control and guided the ship into dock. As a visitor the Buster was placed in the main docking bay.

Had she been a little less preoccupied with gathering her cases, Tris would have noticed a familiar looking Discoverer several bays along. She would also have noted the very unfamiliar shape of a Split Wolf in mercenary colours.

The docking bay clamps engaged and she quickly stepped out. She briefly looked around to find her bearings before heading off towards the shuttle lifts. There were numerous entry points and she picked the lifts to the right of the maintenance desk. The docking bay was busy with groups of traders and maintenance robots moving across the platform.

By chance Tor stepped out of a lift some fifty meters to her left as she walked away from her ship. He was about to shout out her name when he noticed a hooded figure stride purposefully towards the Buster. He drifted out towards the ships and walked slowly along, watching the figure.

Tor pulled out his personal pad just in case the person glanced around he could try making out that he had been reading something.

The figure on reaching Triss' ship crouched down and put something on the hull. He could not make out what it was, only that it was small. Immediately rising the person turned and strode towards him. He stared at the screen, and when the figure was close he deliberately bumped into them.

"Watch where you going fool," To Tors surprise the voice was not the harsh tones of a Split, but the soft slightly husky voice of a woman.

Tor apologized, "Sorry," But the woman was already striding away.

He glanced at the Buster but did not stop to examine the small lump on the hull in case the woman was watching him. Seeing Tris take the shuttle lift out of the docking bay, he resolved to follow.

It took him several minutes to find her. She was sitting at a table in the main food hall.

"Hi Tris."

She glanced around, "Tor," She sounded surprised, "Still alive then."

"Last time I looked." He responded. "Something you need..."

He was cut short when Tris suddenly got up and quickly moved across the food hall to greet Vanart.

Tor looked over at a complete loss and said to himself, "Perhaps now isn't a good time then." Triss' luggage carrier barged past as he watched the couple wander off.

Nyeshta departed the station and opened a com channel to the Pirate Base in Brennan's Triumph, "Clegan?"

"Yes?"

"The device is on the ship. I'm heading back to the station." She commented.

Clegan asked, "Any problems?"

"None so far, but the sooner I'm back in free space the happier I'll be." She replied with a touch of concern in her voice.

“See you back on the station. Out,” His plan was coming together. The Wheat Farm Alpha had three Bloodheart ships docked. Two Bayamons and a Mandalay, they were all quicker than the Buster. The Mandalay was also fitted out with a transporter and cargo bay life support.

He had managed to negotiate with the t’Gnht to get a single ASAPCS device from the Split research laboratory. He knew about the device from the Carabat fighters when they docked at the Pirate Station prior to their fateful mission.

Once the pilot was captured the Bayamons would destroy the Buster before heading back to base.

Tor returned to his ship, “Sweety, looks like we’ll be hanging around here for a while.”

“What’s up Tor?”

He thought for a moment, “Something strange is going on Sweety, can’t quite explain what yet.”

Over the next forty-eight hours he remained in dock remote managing the two freighters. Fenagalas had proven useful in dropping a satellite in Kingdoms End, Rolk’s Fate and Atreus Clouds, which neatly encompassed the Argon sectors adjoining the Boron controlled systems. Also Tor now had details on all the nearby Boron regions.

Fenagalas had also taken on and delivered two lucrative contracts boosting significantly Tors’ credits. He risked taking on another freighter this time a Boron Dolphin, mainly because of the potentially immense cargo capacity. He had invested in maximizing the speed and rudder control, however it was still woefully slow. The android pilot was another series twelve. This freighter he set to work in Queens Space hauling energy cells into Rolk’s Drift. With three freighters shifting cargo the credits began to quickly accumulate.

He ordered the Dolphin into the trading station and upgraded the cargo bay capacity on several occasions. It was reaching maximum hold size and on a good run generated nearly sixty thousand credits.

“Tor. I am detecting activity on the Buster,” Sweety announced

“What type of activity?” He asked though his personal pad. Tor had recently left one of the rest centre rooms having grabbed a few short hours of sleep and freshened up with a hot shower.

“Engines are on, departure permission has been granted. Clamps have just released.”

“I’m on my way,” Tor replied and ran down to the docking bay.

Chapter 10 - Captured.

Tor reached the Discoverer the airlock door opened on his command. "Get us out of here Sweetie."

The doors hissed shut and both inner and outer doors sealed. "Departure clearance granted." Sweetie responded.

The slight jerk as the docking clamps released and station control maneuvered the ship towards the entrance.

"Come on! Come on," Tor was impatient as he flung himself into the pilot seat. His fingers drummed on the console. Two freighters were ahead of him, but it seemed to take an age to be rid of the station control.

"Give me the sector map Sweetie." The HUD changed to a sector image, "Target Buster," He commanded with a touch of anxiety.

"Target acquired. Currently fifteen k's and increasing."

Tor swung the Discoverer around and opened the thrusters to full, "Any pirates?"

Sweetie replied, "Three identified pirate vessels closing on Buster, ten k's from target. Buster turning to engage."

The HUD showed the relative positions of all the ship. The closing speed of the Buster and pirates was marginally quicker than Tors' Discoverer in catching up with Tris.

"Sweetie, target the closest pirate," Tor ordered, this time his usual uncertainty about combat was replaced with grim resolve.

"Tor I'm detecting an unusual energy increase in the Mandalay ship."

He saw the pulse flashes of the Bayamons Alpha PACs' and a couple of responding Buster Gamma PACs' streak off into oblivion. The Mandalay had hung back, and then it turned and headed away.

The Buster slowed and the two Bayamon split to swing around and opened up on the motionless ship.

Tors' jaw dropped in disbelief as explosions ripped through the Buster. Its shields and hull were torn apart by intense crossfire. The red mist came down over Tors' eyes, he almost screamed, "Noooooo," The rapidly dissipating halo of Triss' former ship scattered into the void.

At full speed, he engaged the first pirate Bayamon with a passing strafe.

"Scum, you'll die for that!" The comment came over the com.

"Sweetie, make the ship as primary target," Tor called out.

"Acknowledged."

Tor pulled the ship hard round, his knuckles already white. The control thrusters echoing through the ship. He twisted it over to one side as he attempted a second pass but avoided the incoming white plasma.

Using throttle control he managed to drop in behind the pirate.

"Sweetie, go tactical tell me when the other one's got me sighted" Tor commented.

"Second Bayamon is closing, now in firing range. Warning missile closing."

Tor pulled up hard and fully opened the thrusters twisting the ship into a roll. "Where's the missile?"

"Missile five hundred meters and closing!"

“Great Sweety, tell me when it’s a hundred meters.”

“Second missile closing.”

“Shit.”

“Bayamons out of firing range.” Sweety commented

“Great,” Tor responded. His mind distracted as he watched and tried not to be hit by the missiles, represented by two red circling dots.

“Missile one hundred meters.”

He twisted the ship to the left,

“Missile ninety meters.”

Tor pulled back, putting the Discovered into a roll.

“Missile eighty meters.” Sweety reported.

Cutting the ship to the right and into a twisting roll Tor broke into a sweat.

“Missile one hundred meters.” Sweety commented.

Tor rapidly changed direction again.

“Missile self destructed.”

“One down one to go Sweety,” He spat the words out as quickly as he could.

“Missile one hundred meters.”

Tors fingers were becoming frozen to the control stick, with wrist and lower arm movement, he flicked into a right turn.

“Missile ninety meters.”

He grimaced as the stars flew past once again in the disorientating roll.

“Missile eighty meters.”

Slapping the stick forward and left, the Discoverer switched direction.

“Missile seventy meters.”

He held the stick there hoping the missiles guidance system would get confused.

“Missile sixty meters,” Sweety reported, “Missile fifty meters.”

Sweat dripped down Tors' face. He slapped the stick over to the right,

“Missile self destructed,” Sweety commented, the shock wave buffeted the ship but without sufficient energy to effect the shields, “Bayamon two k’s.”

Tor turned the ship breathing a sigh of relief, however he still resolved to avenge Tris.

White plasma streaked towards him in a cascade of destructive energy, as he sharply twisted the ship away.

The enhanced rudder control gave the ship lightening quick responsiveness. If the situation were different Tor would have questioned his own abilities to control her.

Careful thruster control and Tor tucked in behind the Bayamon. Repeated bursts stripping away the shields as the pirate attempted to out maneuver him.

“Second Bayamon in firing range.”

Tor pulled the ship up and round immediately as plasma shot past his left wing. A single pulse of the diamond shaped four clipping his shields.

“Shields eighty percent,” Sweety informed.

Tor lined up on the primary target and sent out a quick four shot volley. Then he opened the thrusters to gain distance from the second Bayamon.

Executing a high-speed turn he fired on the second ship forcing the pirate to turn away as he attempted to get behind his primary target. Plasma whipped across the nose of the ship.

“Shields seventy five percent,” The ship rocked as it took another single hit. The other three shot disappeared into space.

Quick thruster control, with a complex turn of the ship, and Tor found himself back on the tail of the primary target. It shields took a severe hammering and touched on critical then zero. Tor saw an explosion of sparks scatter into the void as the upper weapons system exploded. The engine of the Bayamon also took damage causing Tor to swerve past and avoid a collision as the ship lost speed.

“Secondary Bayamon now in firing range.”

He switched targets as he executed a full right twist and turn, “Sweety set second Bayamon as primary target.”

Once again plasma streaked past the left wing of the Discoverer as he opened the thrusters to full. Gaining some distance between the two ships he turned back to make a head to head pass.

“Shields forty percent,” Sweety informed.

The ship jarred from the multiple impacts. Tor felt a rising panic restrained only by the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

“Where’s the first Bayamon?” Tor called out.

“Pirate ship is leaving the area, heading for The Hole sector.”

“The Mandalay?”

“Is about to reach the jumpgate into The Hole,” Sweety responded

“Wonder why he’s bugging out so quick?” He thought out load.

“Scan of ships inventory log now indicates the presence of a passenger in the cargo hold,” Sweety responded.

“What do you mean ‘now’?” Tor dodged another wave of incoming shots from the remaining pirate ship. Turning in quickly behind he opened up on the target.

“Previous scan indicated no passengers on board.”

“Tris?” Tor questioned taking a sizable chunk out of the Bayamons shields.

Sweety recognized the tone meant it was a question, "I am too far away to make a proper cargo scan."

Tor was having difficulty as this pilot was significantly better than the previous one and far less predictable, varying the speed of the ship significantly so that Tor invariably over shot exposing himself to the full destructive power of the Bayamons superior weapons.

Fully engaging the thrusters and turning away, he avoided the incoming shots. Knowing full well he only had to get it wrong a couple of times and his own ship would be destroyed. He was now painfully aware that the space utility suit was still hanging up in its locker. Ejecting from the ship was not a survivable option.

The agility of the Discoverer over the slower ship was Tors saviour in reacquiring his target before its shield had sufficient time to recover. Repeated volleys stripped away the last of the pirate ships defenses as the following shot set a chain reaction of explosions that tore through the hull scattering chunks of the ship into space. Some of which burnt up in Tors' shields.

The pilot had successfully bailed out but Tor ignored the figure as it jet packed towards the nearest station. "Sweety where's the Mandalay?"

"The Mandalay has reached The Hole."

"Where the Bayamon?" He asked.

"Targeting. Bayamon shows one weapon system and engines damaged. Ship currently running on low speed."

Keeping the thrusters on full the Discoverer quickly caught up and past the limping pirate ship. He fired a volley of shots.

"Scum sucker!" The pirate abused over the com.

"Sweety, target the gate to The Hole." Tor thought for a second. "And get me Caran Belign on the com."

Caran picked up the prototype design and turned it over thoughtfully. He was back in his office on Argon Prime.

"Sir there's a Tor Grall asking to speak to you. Says it's urgent."

Caran looked up, "About?"

"He says he believes Tris has been captured by pirates."

"Put him through," Caran ordered.

"Yes Sir."

"Tor. Surprised to find you calling me," Caran commented.

"Tris has been captured by pirates." Tor started.

"So my colleague informs me. Tell me what happened?"

"I was about to leave the trading station in Herrons Nebula, when I saw Tris leaving her ship." Tor paused for breath, "I went to say 'Hi' when this woman dressed in a hooded cloak, like the one the Split wear, put something on the hull of Triss' ship."

"This woman what did she look like?" Caran liked detail. It gave him some clue as to who he might need to talk to next.

"She had the hood up. I couldn't see her face."

“So how do you know the person was a woman?” Caran was disappointed but not surprised by the information.

“Deliberately bumped into her and she gave me some verbal abuse.”

“Good thinking. Perhaps we might find you a career in the service,” Caran commented, “Anyway describe this object you saw?”

“Small about the size of my hand, domed with three lumps,” Tor was looking out of the cockpit but glanced occasionally at the pad display.

“Like this?” Caran held up the ASAPCS module he had been examining.

“Exactly, what is it?” Tor was surprised.

“Then what,” Caran had his suspicion confirmed that, despite an agreement between all the races not to supply Pirate clans with any covert technology, the Split were in direct violation of the treaty. ASAPCS technology in the hands of pirates could lead to a new level of chaos, no ship would be safe.

“Well she met up with this bloke. They spent a couple of days together before she left.”

“And you hung around all this time?”

“I wanted to tell her about that thing. Just never had a chance,” Tor went defensive.

“Go on?”

“I left the station shortly after and tried to intercept before the pirates got to her. But I didn’t get the chance. Her ship slowed shortly after she fired her first shot. Then a couple of pirate ships blew it apart,” Tor responded.

“I guess you’re after the pirate ship that has her on board?” Caran asked.

“Yes! Will be making the jump into The Hole in just a few moments.”

“When you catch it, do Tris a favour and destroy the ship,” Caran instructed.

“What?” Tor was incredulous.

“Destroy the ship don’t let her fall into the hands of the Bloodhearts.”

Tor paused a moment, “They’re the ones that killed Malasha Belign.”

Caran paused, the muscles in his face twitched, “I see you’ve been doing some research.”

“I’m sorry Caran but I can’t destroy that ship. There must be another way?” Tor pleaded.

“There is no other way. Officially we don’t do rescues. More agents get killed trying then people get rescued,” Caran was quoting this as an emotionless fact.

“I’m sure Malasha, whoever she was, wouldn’t agree that you should give up without a fight.” Tor was gambling. “You failed once. I would have thought someone like yourself would revel in proving history doesn’t repeat itself?”

“Are you trying to get a reaction from me?” Caran asked slowly and firmly.

“Yes,” Tor responded bluntly.

“Malasha was my better half. Now tell me, what is Tris to you?”

Tor was caught on the back foot, he firmly believed it was the right thing to do, but the response and the question had caught him off guard, "Caran, just jumping sector. I'll call you back in a minute."

Caran closed his eyes briefly and sat in thought, drumming his fingers on the desk. The ceiling above him showed a clear night sky, the reflection of the sun on the distant stations making them brighter than the background starlight.

He opened them again with a sense of resolve, "Computer open a com to Serandamancketal on the Shield Factory in Elena's Fortune."

"Connection made."

"Yes?" Serandamancketal asked, his Paranid face appearing on the holo-viewer. He looked as if he had just woken up. The deep voice growled the words.

"Serand, it's me Caran."

"What do you want?" The Paranid demanded.

"Your assistance," Caran replied curtly, "I'm going to direct a young pilot to you, he wants to rescue a young woman from the pirates."

"What's so important? He can just buy her," Serandamancketal observed.

"Not so easy! Feran wants to kill her."

"Hmmm, must have done something bad to upset him. Being alive probably," The Paranid laughed.

"Currently she's a prisoner on a Mandalay heading towards Brennan's Triumph," Caran did not smile.

"And what do you want me to do about it?"

"Find Creed, I'll need both of you to help us get onto the station before the girl arrives," Caran requested.

"We saved your life before, why do you think we'll want to do it again?"

"To prove you're still the best," It was the best Caran could think of for the moment. The two mercenaries had powerful and feared reputations amongst the races, and particularly amongst the pirates. He never really understood why they helped him on his last official mission, but amongst the other mercenaries and pirates their reputations increased in orders of magnitude due to the brazen audacity of their act. It was one they built on ever since having defied many recriminations.

Caran had repaid the debt by allowing them to deal directly with the AIC and gain a significant technical advantage over their enemies.

"That's pretty lame Caran. I will talk to Creed and give you a price," Serandamancketal closed the com.

He waited and a few moments later Tor called in, "Caran, still there?"

"Where did you expect me to be?" Caran observed.

"Thought you may have wandered off to find me some help?" There was optimism in Tors voice.

"You never answered my question?"

"Yeah, I was hoping to avoid that one," Tor paused, "I believe she saved my life on that first mission. So I guess I owe her."

Caran waited a moment to observe Tors' expression on the viewer, "So you have a debt of honour?"

“Put it like that, then yes.”

Caran gave an extended pause again and then looked as if he had come to a decision. “Two things you need to do. First attack the Mandalay and see if the pilot will surrender. If not, then fly to the Shield Factory in Elena’s Fortune. Get there as fast as you can.”

“I’ve never been to that sector?” Tor replied.

“I’ll send you the nav data.”

“Then what?” Tor asked.

“Myself and some friends will be there. I’ll explain what happens when you arrive,” Caran commented.

“Great you’re going to help,” Tor was relieved.

“Yes, but don’t thank me yet,” Caran continued, “I’ll see you in a short while.”

Tor closed the com, “Sweetie, show me the new nav data.”

The galaxy map appeared on the HUD. He determined two possible routes and both crossed the same number of sectors. The first route happened to be in the same direction the Mandalay was heading in. This was via Atreus Clouds and into the unclaimed sectors. The second route was via The Wall and Presidents End.

The Discoverer closed in fast on the Mandalay but he still had to cross nearly the entire sector to make the intercept. Sweeping in fast the reverse thrusters fired, lining up the pirate in his sights he fired a quick three shot volley that tore down the pirates’ shields.

“What you want?” The voice was Teladi.

“Surrender your ship. I want your passenger alive!” Tor demanded.

“Hah! You want my cargo alive? Then you’ll have to sstop sshooting.”

Tor cursed quietly to himself and opened the thrusters to full. He had foolishly declared his goal of getting Tris. The pirate realizing this now knew Tor probably would just buzz him rather than risk damaging the ship and potentially killing the girl.

Time was of the essence, even at twice the speed Tor still had to dock at the shield factory and find out if Caran had a plan. All of that meant the Mandalay, carrying Tris, would be getting closer to Brennan’s Triumph.

He jumped the queue of transport ships entering the Atreus Clouds gate on full thrusters. The size of the ship was small enough to be accepted at that speed. As soon as the receiving gate opened he put the thrusters to maximum again and ignoring the other traders as he rolled the ship between two Lifters leaving the sector.

There was a brief disturbance in the flight direction from the larger ships engine wash. Rapidly corrected as Tor concentrated on the next jump gate into the sector Farnham’s Legend.

Caran had jumped straight to the sector with the use of the jumpdrive fitted to his ship. The ship itself, was one of the five X-shuttles produced. It had also been extensively modified by the AIC who owned two of the remaining four.

Both Creed and Serandamancketal met him in the docking bay.

“Gentlemen, we have very little time. So here’s the briefing.” Caran started. “We have a young pilot who’s been captured by the Bloodheart Clan, and is currently being transported to Brennan’s Triumph. A young trader, Tor Grall, will be here soon to help. When he arrives, Creed I want you to take him, on your ship, to the Pirate Station and wait for the Mandalay to dock.” Caran paused, “Time is critical at this point, I want you and Tor to greet the pilot, but don’t let him get off his ship.” He put strong emphasis on the ‘don’t’.

“The Mandalay has a transporter fitted so I want you to transport back to your own ship. Signal us when you’ve completed the task and we’ll hit the station. In the scramble to get fighters launched you should get automatic clearance. Any questions?”

“Who’s the second in command on the station at the moment?” Creed asked, his voice was uncharacteristically soft. The son of an Argon slave girl and a Split master, he had the characteristic facial features of a Split but with human hands and very human mannerisms. As a half Split he had no rights under Split law, this included having a name, and life for a half-breed was usually brutal and short. At an early age he had seen his mother killed by his father whilst trying to protect him.

After this he was forced into the Split Pit fighting ring where others of his type were thrown as entertainment for the slavers. He survived where most did not.

This event was illegal and condemned by the Split high council, but in the outer regions it still continued. As one of the nameless, Creed picked up his nickname amongst the Pit fight organizers by way of attracting credits.

The Paranid had organized a mercenary raid against the slavers after pirates had captured several of their transport ships. In the confusion of the station battle Creed had killed his father, witnessed by Serandamancketal. Although the aim of the mission had been to just retrieve Paranid slaves, he had recognized Creed for a half-breed and helped him escape the station.

Of all the people Caran knew, including himself, he recognized Creed as the most dangerous and was grateful they were on the same side.

“An Argon by the name of Clegan,” He responded.

Serandamancketal frowned, “A good choice, knows his stuff. Chances are station security will be tight. Does your trader know how to fight?”

“No, that’s why I want Creed to go with him,” Caran responded.

“Our fee is ten thousand credits,” Creed commented.

Caran knew Creed would take the mission, as anything against the Bloodhearts was revenge, “Agreed.”

“Each,” Serandamancketal added.

Caran looked at the Paranid briefly then nodded.

“Now where is this trader of yours?” Serandamancketal asked.

Tor was just entering the jumpgate into Elena’s Fortune when Sweetie informed him the Mandalay had entered Farnham’s Legend.

As they cleared the receiving gate Tor requested, “Sweetie lock onto the Shield Factory.”

“Target locked.”

He turned the ship and watched as the HUD counted down the distance, muttering under his breath, “Come on, come on.”

Although it was a lot sooner than he could appreciate, it still seemed like an eternity to reach the station.

The Discoverer banked and turned as it slowed and flew by the station's massive superstructure. "Sweetie get me docking permission."

"Docking permission approved. Dock when you have green lights."

Tor slowed even further and rolled the ship over to face the station's outer doors, just as they opened and the navigation beacons turned green.

He had barely stepped off his ship when Caran met him.

"Tor this is Creed. He'll brief you. Now go we don't have much time." Caran immediately turned away and marched off to his ship.

"Better be quick lad. Follow me," Creed commented. Tor hesitated, he recognized that Creed was Split but in the back of his mind something was not right about him.

Creed quickly led Tor to a docked Mamba and palm scanned the access panel. The doors hissed open. "Take a seat, whilst I get us out of here," Commenting to the onboard computer, "Get me clearance for departure."

"Clearance acknowledged," The system responded. The docking clamps disengaged and the sleek lines of the Mamba glided away. Ahead of them were Serandamanketal in an AIC enhanced Prometheus, and Caran was in ahead of him in a ship Tor failed to recognize.

As they cleared the outer gates, Tor felt the massive surge from the Mambas' engines as Creed engaged the booster. This ship had been played with by the AIC and took on another fifteen-percent higher top speed than the stock ship.

Caran's X-shuttle outpaced all of them and was aiming for the jumpgate into Olmancketstat's Treaty.

Creed turned in his chair, "Down to business, what's the ship I'm looking for?"

"It's a Mandalay registration MDL022PBT last seen probably in Farnham's Legend."

Creed put the galaxy map on the HUD then switched to the local system map of the sector. Scanning through the ships the Mandalay was not there. Switching to Bala Gi's Joy he found it a short distance into the sector.

"Computer estimate our ETA to pirate station Brennan's Triumph," Creed called out.

The computer responded, "Time to arrival, twenty five minutes."

"Estimate ETA for Mandalay MDL022PBT in Farnham's Legend to pirate station at its current speed."

"Mandalay time to arrival, thirty five minutes."

Looking at Tor, "Right the plan is this. We board the station, get to the ship as it docks and stop the pilot from getting off or unloading. I return to my ship and signal Caran to attack the station." He paused and smiled, "The station defenses activate and allow all fighters to undock. You get departure clearance as soon as the sirens go and you'll be away hopefully before the others. Fly straight back to the shield factory. Don't hang around! There's going to be plenty of fighting to cover your escape."

"And that's the plan? What happens if we don't get onto the ship when it docks, or she's transported off when it arrives?" Tor asked a little concerned and worried.

"We wing it," Creed replied this time without the smile, "Ever been in a station fight?"

"Apart from shooting a Split between the eyes, no," Tor replied then felt as though he should not have mentioned Split.

“Best thing to do,” Creed continued, “First thing that normally happens is the dampening fields get switched on. That means blasters and most stun sticks become useless. It turns into knife fight or one with solid projectile weapons, if you’ve got one and not many people do. Either way it’s a lot more bloody as it’s all close quarter fighting.”

Tor had little doubt that Creed was talking from experience, and he would put plenty of credits on him having many of the solid projectile weapons.

“Something’s always bugged me about the person I shot.” Tor started, “You being a Split, why did he ..” He felt the temperature plunge to sub zero in the cabin as Creed fixed him with a hard gaze more full of malice than Tor had ever witnessed or would ever want to see again.

“Never call me a Split,” Creed spoke slowly, a terse edge in his voice, “I am one of the Nameless, and don’t you forget it.”

“Sorry,” Tor faltered.

Creed held the gaze and then relaxed, “As to why the Split attacked you, he probably didn’t like your face. That and you being an Argon.”

Chapter 11 - Rescue

As the Mamba approached the pirate station Tor watched over Creeds' shoulder, nervous of the array of inactive laser towers surrounding it.

Caran was loitering near the receiving gate from Olmancketstat's Treaty whilst Serandamancketal, back in the previous sector, now shadowed the rapidly approaching Mandalay.

"Docking permission granted. Dock on green lights," The ships' computer announced.

"Here we go," Creed commented quietly, and gently opened the thrusters.

As the docking computer guided the ship in Creed commented, "Keep an eye on where we dock and make sure we don't have a welcoming committee."

"Are we likely to get one?" Tor asked.

"Depends on who's doing the security checks," Creed smiled and opened lockers behind Tor. He glanced back to see his companion examining a long straight steel blade, double edged. Putting it back into the locker he took a double blade harness and strapped it on, the handles of both blades pointing down. Tor guessed magnets held these from sliding out. Creed then put on a heavy-duty utility belt with a couple of holstered guns, the design of which Tor was unfamiliar with, so he assumed these were solid projectile weapons. To finish it off a low slung blaster the grip being positioned in easy grabbing distance. Throwing on a heavy cloak common with the Split all weapons with the exception of the Blaster were hidden.

Finally Creed pulled out a heavy case and attached anti-gravity lifters to the sides. The docking clamps engaged, "Ready?" he asked.

"Well I'm not as well armed as you," Tor replied.

Creed took a long dagger off the shelf and closed the locker. "Have this just in case," And handed it to Tor, "Now keep your wits about you and stay close." He reached into a different locker and offered Tor a discreet receiver. "Here we'll use these ear pieces to keep in contact with each other. Caran and Serandamancketal will be listening in."

Tor slipped the earpiece into place and hid away the blade.

"Okay, now listen, talk only if you have to, and try not to make eye contact with anyone who doesn't talk to you first." Creed paused, "With any luck you'll get through this alive," He then smiled, "Ready?"

"No," Tor replied.

"Too late to go back," The half-breed opened the airlock and stepped out, the case followed. Tor wondered what was in it and taking a deep breath he stepped out onto the docking platform.

This station was very different to the Pirate base in Atreus Clouds. The large docking bay, which had originally belonged to an ancient Mammoth, had been taken apart and rebuilt many times in the history of the station. Successive station commanders had been determined to improve on the previous, usually recently deceased, commander. This all meant the layout was much better organized and contained. The station facilities were close by, and tight security prevented undesirables from drifting through the heart of the station.

Clustered a short distance away were several bars and gambling dens. The haze of weed and the aroma of many different drinks diffused through the docking bay. The whistles and catcalls of the clients in the more exotic strip bars rose above the general noise of a busy station.

They stood for a while near an empty docking platform, as people moved around them.

After a while Creed commented, "Slaves are usually unloaded at the far end! Keep your eyes open, security tends to be tighter over there than here."

Wandering across, at what Tor considered a painfully slow pace, they arrived at the slave market and several of the cages held unfortunate creatures, mostly Teladi, a couple of Argons and a half-breed.

Tor felt a pang of pity, but Creed appeared to be unmoved or at least unconcerned with what he saw.

Minutes passed, and then Creed gave a slight nod. "Our friends arrived." With a purposeful stride he marched towards the edge of the docking bay platforms and wandered along to the nearest empty bay closest to the Slave market. Glancing around Tor could see activity, robot slave loaders were moving towards them.

Security androids with long stun lances were also moving through the few slave owners.

"Move along there!" A security guard shouted.

Creed looked at him then gave a brief nod and took a few steps away. Tor also moved. "Damn reception committee." Creed murmured, "Suggest diversion on my signal." Tor had the feeling Creed was not speaking to him.

The Mandalay moved into position and the docking clamps grasped hold drawing the ship into the side of the dock.

"Go meet the pilot," Creed instructed.

Tor moved forward with a shove and walked up to the airlock door as it opened.

"Hey you!" The security guard shouted as the pilot stepped out.

What happened next was too quick for Tor to appreciate. He heard the silky swish of blades being drawn. The annoyed then shocked, surprised look on the pilots' face as a fountain of blood sprayed briefly from his neck and chest as Creed pushed past, driving both weapons into the body. With incredible strength he lifted the lifeless form and using the handles of the blades, tossed it at the security guard.

Tor stood open mouthed in shock, as multiple cracks echoed around the docking bay. Creed fired his blaster and solid projectiles into the security guards. The first was thrown back with a chest shot and the second twisted and fell with shots to the side and head. Blood ran across the docking bay floor. There were screams of terror, and shouting from security guards. Seconds later the heavy dampening field energized but the solid projectile weapon continued to fire repeatedly.

"Get out of here!" Creed shouted at the now pale and horrified figure of Tor. He jumped through the airlock door.

Sirens started in the station and an automated voice hailed, "Station emergency! Station under attack, all fighters to disembark immediately."

Tor stuck his head out of the door to tell Creed to get on board. Creed had other ideas, as Tor looked out he pressed the release switches on the case. The top third section and sides flipped open to reveal the highly illegal and outlawed by all races, hellfire mini-gun with anti-recoil multi-projectile capabilities.

Quickly taking the weapon with both hands he called out, "You still here? Get the fuck away!"

The rapidly pulsing roar and continuous flash of the barrels silenced the whine of the mechanics. Those that had not already flattened themselves against the floor did so now. Bar screens exploded in showers of Plexiglas. Anyone still standing jarred and span around to collapse lifeless as the shots tore through them. Panic rose like a wave, its fingers reaching the deepest primal survival instincts of everyone on the dock and in the bars. The cries of the wounded and the screams of the terrified echoed all around.

Heavily armoured robot security guards moved ponderously across the docking bay, as people tried to crawl surreptitiously towards their ships. The dampening field still prevented them from firing back.

Tor jumped into the pilots' seat and closed the airlock door, reminding himself now was not the time to be sick.

“Computer get me departure clearance.”

“Please identify yourself?”

“I’m your new owner.” Tor replied.

“Identification not accepted.”

Tor dove back to the airlock and opened the door. Shouting into the com. “Ship refuses to recognize me as pilot!”

Creed had moved forward, he had no intention of leaving his blades behind. “Hellfire switch to concussion rounds.” The mini-gun took on a much slower deeper sound, and as each projectile hit its target there was an explosion. He put his foot on the chest of the dead pilot and grabbing the hilt of the fist blade and pulled it free.

The robot security guards ground to a halt, as internal damage from the concussion rounds reduced them to scrap metal.

As he pulled free the second blade he caught Tors’ message and stepping to one side cut off the dead pilots hand. No one appeared to be moving and the mini-gun went silent. Keeping his eyes ahead, he picked up the severed hand and threw it back towards the airlock door. “Use the hand by the door as authorization.”

Tor quelled the rising nausea, as he picked up the warm blood drenched hand. “Computer, please authorize ownership transfer.” He put the hand on the scanner.

“Scan complete. New owner please place hand on scanner to complete transfer.”

Tor threw the hand out of the airlock door, it’s exit marked by a spray of blood on the floor and ceiling, and put his own hand on the smeared scanner.

“Scan complete.”

“Great now can we get out of here?”

“Departure clearance denied.”

“Creed we have a problem! They’re not giving us departure clearance,” Tor was now desperate.

Out on the docking bay, Creed was aware things were about to get a whole lot more interesting. Controlled five to ten shot bursts kept security from jumping up. He now had the uneasy feeling they had sufficient time to pull out of stores suitable weapons.

“Keep the airlock door open Tor, I’m coming with you,” Creed then ordered his own ship to depart. Station security was too busy monitoring events outside the station and the activity around the Mandalay to worry checking on the request. As far as they were concerned it was a fighter going out to deal with the attackers.

Glancing down at the docking clamps, “Hellfire, implosion rounds.” Swinging the mini-gun round he fired shots into the clamps power conduit which showered sparks. The clamps opened in fail safe mode, leaving the ship to float free.

As he brought the weapon around, he heard the sudden rattle of returning fire, almost throwing himself backwards, he heard the clatter of projectiles and the sharp twangs of rebounding shots off ships hulls. “Hellfire standard rounds, max fire.” He responded with a full sweep as the mini-gun screamed, disgorging a wall of destruction tearing into everything, as Creed stepped back to the ship.

Stun orbs were fired out from various positions. Shielding his face Creed dove into the ship, the case and mini-gun followed. The airlock door closed as the bright flashes and energy discharges sprayed out.

Creed grabbed Tor, “Sorry mate, just need to get us out of here,” And jumped into the pilots’ chair. Using side thrusters he manually maneuvered the ship away from the dockside.

“Departure clearance denied, station computer taking control,” The ship responded.

“Block station access, taking ship out manually,” Creed replied.

“Require owner authorization to complete request.”

They felt the ship change direction.

“Tell it Tor!”

Tor repeated Creeds command.

“Station auto docking blocked!”

Creed had control again and fired up the engines. Shooting ahead of the other fighters as they began to disembark.

“How are we going to get past the station doors?” Tor asked hurriedly.

“Let me worry about that!”

As it happened Creed knew the timing almost to the second. The doors were just beginning to close after the Mamba when the Mandalay shot out into space. Particle beams lanced in several directions and the fourth laser tower exploded as a hornet missile impacted. The X-shuttle shot past below them drawing with it the beams of the remaining towers.

The Mamba fell in behind the Mandalay as it put some distance between it and the station.

The Prometheus fired a volley of shots at the station before the slowly rotating laser towers could change target.

“Take over I’m going to transport to my ship.” Creed commented. “Serandamanketal will escort you. Caran and myself will keep your back safe.” If there was any hint of emotion in Creeds voice Tor was not able to discern it.

Then after a quick few console commands Creed transported out.

“Computer target gate to Olmancketstat’s Treaty!” Tor requested then buckled. This had been too much for him. Behind the departing Mandalay, the Prometheus had disengaged and now closely shadowed Tor.

With the docking bay now clear, the station was launching dozens of fighters. Caran and Creed had flown to a safe distance from the remaining lasertowers. They turned to exact a deadly punishment on their pursuers.

Creed twisted his ship through a three Bayamon cross fire, which tore great chunks out of his shields, as he closed in to finish off a fourth.

Caran fired a controlled burst on a new up-rated Orinoco before having to divert in crossfire from a pair of mark two Falcons. He cursed the station had more M3 class ships than he had expected. The newer Orinocos had better shields, speed and maneuverability, and now posed a real threat to the Elite. The others were working in pairs or small groups keeping Caran and Creed apart. The X-shuttle however had speed and was still the fastest M3 class ship when fully optimized.

Creeds Mamba turned in and diving down he picked off a Mandalay. As he flew through the expanding halo of burning debris the computer reported. “Shields forty percent!”

He flipped the ship around having let the shields take a missile hit, then opened up on a passing Bayamon that rocked then exploded as the ship span past.

Taking a chance he targeted one of Carans’ attackers, barreling through the maelstrom of plasma, he locked onto the trailing Falcon as it made a straight run towards the turning X-shuttle. A long burst of plasma streamed forward dropping

the Falcons shields. It tried to turn but Creed had slowed in anticipation, and another close range double shot had the pirate vessel erupt into flames as a succession of explosions enveloped the ship.

Surging forward on the booster, Creed dodged away from another two missile launches not risking his shields to another hammering.

Caran had been updated as to the fate of the second Falcon, and switched tactics leading the attacking craft away from the Mamba and its assailants. At reasonable distance and full speed the ship shot past the oncoming wave of ships buffeted by several plasma strikes pulling his shields down to seventy five percent.

Picking out an older slow Orinoco, as it pursued Creed, he opened fire at maximum range with some allowance for distance and speed. He saw the ship jar, turn slowly and explode, the pilot bailing out as the fireball consumed the cockpit, to leave a halo of superheated particles starved of oxygen in which to burn.

He locked onto a second ship an old Scorpion fighter. The ship was too under powered and lacked maneuverability to avoid the Beta HEPT plasma that robbed it of shields in only a few hits. Caran heard the faint plinking of debris burning off his shields as he went past. The other ships were now fully aware of the danger as com messages were yelled between the pirate ships. He broke free of the engagement and diverted away as Creed turned back to make his pass.

The pirate ships tightened formation and regrouped having been strung out, realizing they lacked the speed to keep with the enemy. Their main hope was to draw the two fighters into a barrage of intense crossfire. The Mamba took out another Mandalay before being forced to withdraw. Caran also claimed a mark one Orinoco but again was forced to back as his shields took a severe beating.

The pirates rather than trying to keep the two ships apart were trying to turn them back towards the station and the laser towers. Large groups of fighters and modified transports were heading out towards the jumpgates.

Tor and Serandamancketal had made it through a gate already.

Caran called Creed, "Time to go, we've overstayed our welcome long enough!"

"My thoughts too. Shields still recovering after the last pass."

They swung away from the pirate swarm, and the X-Shuttle matching speed with the Mamba headed towards the Split Fire gate. Ahead of them a convoy of pirate transports and fighters. The fighters turned to intercept when Creed called over the com.

"Sensors picking up squash mines being released and drones."

"Received and understood!" Caran responded. Both ships broke and headed in opposite directions to circle over and under the ships ahead.

The drones swarmed to intercept. Both pilots endured the discomfort as the small weapons being fired buffeted their ships, but the effect on the ships' shields was negligible. It was only when the pirates were a safe distance behind that Caran targeted and engaged the zipper. Taking a few moments to clear away many of the drones he then resumed course towards the gate.

Creed eliminated all the drones that were targeting him. This however had the pirate ships uncomfortably close and was then forced to avoid missiles, before he continued towards the gate. Caran had circled around destroying the remainder of the drones before flying in beside the Mamba on the final run to the jumpgate.

The Mamba made the first jump and moments later the X-Shuttle followed. The pirate ships referred to the station asking if they should pursue but were recalled.

Not bothering to hold position at the receiving gate to see and dispatch incoming fighters, the two ships headed for the Shield Factory in Elena's Fortune. Caran hailed Tor and told him not to let Tris out of the cargo bay until after they had returned. She would have to endure being held captive a while longer until Caran had a chance to point out the mistakes she had made.

It was Serandamancketal and Creed that led a worried and frightened Tris away from the dockside. Tor with hood up, hiding his face followed discreetly behind.

Tris stopped, "Where are you taking me?"

"To see the boss!" Serandamancketal growled.

She turned and pleaded. "Look I think there's been a big mistake. I'm not the one your boss wants to see."

Creed and Serandamancketal glanced at each other, and then stepping forward one either side put a hand on each arm and lifted Tris up carrying her towards the office. The door hissed shut in front of her when her feet touched the ground again.

She visibly sagged and dropped to her knees not wanting to look round.

"Junior Pilot Matayah. As humbling as it may be to be in my presence there's no need to kneel!" Caran commented.

Tris looked around in astonishment. This was not the voice she expected to hear. Caran was sitting behind a desk reading from his personal pad.

"I see you've met the two gentlemen that helped to save your life!" He continued, "let me introduce you, the Paravid to your left is Serandamancketal and the Nameless to your right is Creed. Maybe you've heard of them!"

She nodded humbly. Knowing from the tone this was just the start of a serious reprimand.

"Before your capture we went to great lengths to protect you. A lot of deals were struck and rules bent to get you a position on the Baltock Victory. All you had to do was keep quiet!" Caran's tone was harsh and uncompromising, but reasonably moderated. "And then on an unsecured channel your friend Vanart sent a message directly to you giving away your location. After this you discuss meeting in an insecure place giving details of times and dates. How do I know? The same way the pirates knew, by tapping in and acquiring an exact transcript of the message." Caran took a moment for Tris to reflect. "I'm not even going to ask how foolish and stupid you now feel! They were looking for you Tris and you handed yourself over."

"Sorry Sir!" She knew there was more to come.

"I expect you're wondering how they got you off your ship without you having to bail out?" Caran continued and his tone had softened down. The expression on Tris's face told him there was little need to be overly hard on her. She had made a mistake and inside he was glad she had survived to learn from it.

"Sir?"

"Someone put a device on your ship's hull, something your scanners wouldn't pick up. Allowed them to tune into your shield frequency modulation and transport you out."

"And my ship?" She asked.

"That was destroyed to cover up your leaving the ship!" Caran looked straight at Tris, "So how do we know all this?" He paused, "Because someone saw them! The same person tried to warn you! But you were too preoccupied to stop and listen. They attacked and destroyed one of the Bayamon that blew up your ship. Same person that called me when he felt something wasn't right and alerted me to your predicament. That person then went onto the pirate station to get you back and flew the ship all the way here. Why you ask?" He paused with a raised eyebrow, "Same question I asked! The response, 'a debt of honour'."

Glancing at Creed, "Show the lad in!"

The door slid open, Tor had heard every word, "Hi, Tris."

She smiled sheepishly having already guessed who Caran was referring to, "Thanks for saving me!" She replied quietly.

"You once saved my life, it was the least I could do!" Tor replied then paused briefly in thought before adding. "Actually Creed here did most of the work, I was just in the background."

Creed smiled and gave Tor a friendly pat on the shoulder. "You played your part in making the mission a success, and it takes guts to go into the enemy's stronghold. You will have increased the power of your name by doing it."

Tor smiled, and thought to himself 'so much for the quiet traders life.'

"I think a few drinks are in order." Caran suggested.

"In the names of the priests, I never thought you were going to get to that bit." Serandamancketal commented enthusiastically.

Creed laughed, "My friend you're right give me a bar and a good woman, hmmm, make that two bad ones. It's been a good days work and we deserve to celebrate success!"

The door opened as they walked out, looking back Creed called back, "Join us my friends!"

Tris looked at Caran still nervous that he had more to say.

"What's up Tris?" Caran asked as he stood up and prepared to follow the two mercenaries.

"I just thought you were going to hand out some punishment for the mistakes I've made."

"Do you want me to?" Caran asked softly.

Tris looked as though she was about to say something then replied quietly, "No Sir!"

Standing beside her, facing the open doorway but only looking ahead, Caran stated, "We all make mistakes Pilot. It's not often that we can try to make those mistakes right!" He glanced briefly at Tor before looking out of the door, "Even so, however hard we try there will always be mistakes we can never correct." The final statement was more of a reflective thought, Tor glanced at Caran with a sense of understanding, and Tris looked at Tor in puzzlement.

Ferans' fingers drummed on the surface of the desk, he felt that cutting the head off the person in front of him would really appease his anger, but a stronger mental barrier stopped him. Instead he gained some pleasure in watching the station controller, in Clegans' absence, squirm and shake in fear beneath his gaze.

"And where is Clegan now?"

"My lord. Reports indicate he was killed in the skirmish defending the station." Ganark t'Thhf felt the hard unyielding gaze of Feran fixed on his neck. He now preferred to be anywhere, even an Argon prison camp, than here.

"Hmmm. Then you will have to take over where he failed! Find the girl and now find out who helped her escape!" Feran leaned forward. "I want them alive and in front of me!"

"Yes my lord!" Ganark bowed and retreated from the office.

Feran watched him leave and breathed deeply, scratching his chin with his good hand, in thought. Ganark was a Split, and he needed someone else to intimidate, as it did not do to upset another family without good reason. Also with the loss of Clegan he would need someone he could trust to maintain the supply of weed. Glancing at the manifests the incoming supply was now regular and of the highest quality, this was quickly being forwarded on at great profit. The Claw clan near the borders of the outer regions were eager to buy stock as demand was high, but they were duplicitous, as per the nature of the Teladi, and he knew they had agents trying to locate the source.

Then again he was in no position to challenge the Onag clan for spacefuel from the Herron's Nebula distillery. This was not the time for a clan war, perhaps an alliance or more appropriately a common understanding. He studied his prosthetic arm looking at the blade that had not been brandished in anger for some time, but diplomacy was not at the forefront of his mind. Rising he wandered out of his office to survey the damage in the docking bay.

Chapter 12 – New Challenges.

Less than an hour had passed when Ganark approached Feran as he impassively surveyed the damage in the docking bay.

“My lord I have made some progress, we have identified one of the two mercenaries on the station and both the pilots outside the station!”

Feran raised his hand to silence him, “Let me guess,” and paused for effect, “Creed inside, Serandamancketal and Caran Belign outside!”

“Yes my lord, how...”

Feran interrupted, “No one else is brave enough to carry out this type of stunt. No one else causes this much damage and gets away!”

Ganark was expecting more rage in Feran's voice but it was distinctly controlled and hinted at respect. If any other person had done this, the anger would have manifested itself with swift lethal retribution towards anyone that had failed to do his or her duty. As Feran knew, Creed was a law outside of the normal rules of engagement. His cold disregard for anything that stood in his way even made the Split think twice. He was a product of the Pit and had no fear or compassion. All Split knew this and those that tried to terminate him by fair means or foul were now hiding in fear or worse still, frozen corpses floating through space. One thing was certain, Creed never forgot an enemy and would one day find them all. It made him a worthy adversary and his killer would have considerable stature amongst the Split and the pirate clans.

To Feran, Caran was less significant, but his use of military controlled hornets in the destruction of the laser towers could not be overlooked. This did not mean he considered Caran less dangerous, as the Argon agent had significant power and influence in the Argon military, but this also made him more predictable in his behaviour and reaction to events.

“Find me the name of the fourth one!” Feran ordered then walked away.

The station had a private function room and adjoining quarters, used by Creed only to entertain trusted friends, with luxuriant seating and an expansive bar holding beverages from nearly all parts of the universe. The serving girls were smart and tastefully dressed. This somewhat surprised Tor as he had expected scantily clad waitresses after listening to the way Creed and Serandamancketal had talked.

It was apparent that Creed had some deep sense of honour and a strong personal code of conduct when aboard the station. The girls were not slaves and were paid to provide refreshments and food. Anything else they may want to offer was of their own accord, but the simple rule was they were not part of the entertainment and were to dress accordingly. Even so they had been carefully selected and were, as Tor had to admit, very attractive leaving his imagination to run in overtime.

What gave Creed such influence on the station, Tor discovered, was his unofficial half ownership with the recognized station owner. It gave him a place he could call home and was secure from pirate and Split bounty hunters. The station's docking bay held a high number of M-three class fighters, many times more than the three allowed by the races, and several squadrons of M-four fighters as added defences.

Tor crawled out of his room many hours after the celebration had ended. The evening had proven to be very entertaining.

The drinking and eating had gone on for many hours. Tris passed out on the sofa, and as far as Tor knew she was probably still there. How the others managed to drink so much he could not guess, but he did become acquainted with the Parand rule of full glass. Whereby once the glass was drained to about half full or less it was refilled, and to indicate to the host that you had drunk enough the drinker needed to drain the glass in one go. If the glass were left full then the host would assume that the drink was not to the taste of the drinker and provided an alternative. Tor couldn't remember how many times his particular glass had been filled or replaced but he never managed to empty it. At some point, shortly after singing the Teladi Growler song, much to the laughter of the serving staff, his memory failed.

A security guard met him and guided Tor back to the private function room where Caran and Creed were already having breakfast.

Creed looked around, "So our young entertainer is still alive I see. Come have some breakfast!"

"Think I'll pass on that!" Tor felt queasy from the smell of food.

Creed clicked his fingers, "Get my friend here a recover mix."

One of the waitresses disappeared off to return with a glass of strange looking liquid. She handed it to Tor with a friendly sympathetic smile.

"Thanks, but I don't..."

"Drink it lad!" Creed ordered in a strict authoritative voice.

Tor took the glass, looked at it briefly and feeling the stare of Creed drank it.

"Wasn't so bad now was it?"

Tor's body was sending mixed messages to his brain and the room went in and out of focus several times, but the nausea disappeared even though the hangover remained.

"I think I may be able to manage some food." He commented quietly.

"Good lad!" Creed commented then turned back to Caran, "There's three pilots I know that might be in that area, but I'll need to check. You just want planetary scans?"

"For now, though we may need some of the big asteroids checked out."

Creed spoke quickly, "Doesn't sound too tricky. What happens if we find what you're looking for?"

"I'm hoping your people don't for obvious reasons! And that's why I want to use mercs, no recognized alliance."

Tor felt he should not show too much curiosity and began to tuck into the meal placed before him.

"So then Tor you'll be back to the trading again after all this excitement?" Creed asked.

Tor nodded trying not to talk with his mouth full.

Creed glanced across to him then Caran, "Some advice then, get a better fighter! The one you've got is quick, but if the Bloodhearts attack by surprise your shields won't last long enough to open up the thrusters and get away."

Tor finished chewing and swallowed the food, "Which one would you suggest?"

"Guess you're stuck with the M-four class, so the choices are between the Boron Piranha and the latest version of the Paranid Poseidon. I forget its latest Argon designation, have you re-designated it yet?" Creed had turned his gaze on Caran.

Caran shook his head as he took a mouthful of food.

Creed looked back at Tor, "Hmmm, both agile with good shields and weapons."

"Do you really think they'll come after me?" Tor had a rapidly sinking feeling.

Creed laughed, "They have your face on surveillance, it's only a matter of time before they add a name!"

Caran nodded and added in a matter of fact way, "He's right! You were there helping in the rescue. The report I have to file will not include your name only that a civilian assisted."

Serandamancketal staggered in looking worse for wear, he grunted a greeting then shuffled over to a seat and collapsed. Eventually he looked up and grunted, "Caran message for you on the secure channel, code blue."

Caran looked up and pulled out his pad, interfacing it with the console he punched up a code, unconcerned by the presence of the others, "Caran here!"

"Sir we have just started to pick up a report from the deep space surveillance pod in Danna's Chance, several minutes ago it picked up an unidentified object two hundred million k's out. Could be a Xenon deep space probe travelling at two thousand k's per second."

"Have you plotted its flight path?"

"Early indications are that it will pass through the Brennan's Triumph gate then out into deep space." The agent responded.

"And we have nothing to stop it?"

"Short of putting something like an asteroid or planet in its path, no. It'll just punch a hole through any spaceship even with full shields."

"The AIC have a set of dampening rings currently under development to slow down fast moving objects. Get in touch with them. See if they're ready for field test and can get some deployed." Caran ordered.

"Yes Sir. Anything else Sir?" The agent acknowledged.

"Just keep me informed!" Caran closed the com.

"Sounds serious?" Creed commented.

"Maybe nothing. If it's a deep space probe, could have been launched a couple of Wozuras ago or hundreds of Jazuras."

"And it's the former that's worrying you!" Creed spoke impassively.

"What's concerning is the last Xenon probes to pass through these sectors was twenty Jazuras ago after the end of the Great War. We see probes in the outer sectors but not travelling at this speed and usually only across the one sector." Caran paused gathering his thoughts. "Even more disturbing is we've picked this one up at great distance. We don't have resolution to determine what it really is or its size, but to be picked up at two hundred million k's it must have a large energy signature."

"So it might not be a probe!" Creed commented slowly and carefully.

"If it's a probe it won't slow down!" Caran commented.

"So we have about a Tazura until it passes your deep space pod." Serandamancketal murmured.

"Then we'll know what's in such a big hurry!" Creed added.

"There's a relationship between energy, mass and speed. The object will have plenty of energy in it due to its speed, so the mass may be relatively small, making it possibly a probe. But I don't have the pod data here so it's pointless me speculating." Caran responded.

"We know the basics, but do we want to be hanging around to find out the result?" Serandamancketal commented.

"I'll let you know." Caran replied.

Tris strayed in to the room, moving slowly and without enthusiasm, looking pale and definitely having trouble keeping upright.

“Recover mix.” Both Creed and Serandamancketal called out.

The group was silent for a moment then Tor piped up, “What happens now?”

Caran answered, “I’ll take Tris back to the Baltock Victory and hope she doesn’t tell the universe what’s she’s up to. You return to your trading.”

“What about the Bloodhearts?” Tor asked, bringing the subject back to where it mattered most to him.

“They’ll be after revenge.” Serandamancketal replied.

“Which is why you want a better ship,” Creed added, “Or buy yourself a station.”

Caran picked up a glass of juice, “Need permission to put up new stations these days.”

Creed glanced over, “So I hear. If my information is correct it’s about fifty thousand credits just to apply, but you know the lad so you’ll give him a reference?”

Caran did not answer but nodded his head briefly.

“There you go then. A factory put it in The Wall and you’ll have a battle cruiser to help look after your interests.” Creed enthused.

Tor glanced up at the ceiling, pre-empting that Caran would highlight the pitfalls.

“Unfortunately buying the station is the easy bit. Having somewhere to put it is harder and will take credits and negotiation. Then you have to have freighters to supply it and fighters to defend it. Assuming someone doesn’t object to the competition and slips a few mercenaries or pirate some credits to destroy it during construction.” Caran commented. “Of course you’ll want to hire the best fighter pilots! As a station owner you’ll also need to attract people to come and work for you, making sure they want to stay with a variety of well stocked shops and other things.”

Tris sat at the table and finished the drink but avoided the food.

“Eat up little lady, it’ll help you recover,” Serandamancketal commented quietly.

“Don’t think I can manage it,” Tris replied in a whisper.

Serandamancketal glanced across and nodded briefly.

Creed responding to Caran, “Don’t put the lad off. I could see him warming to the idea of owning a station.”

“I expect you’ll help him find the right pilots?” Caran looked up inquisitively with a raised right eyebrow.

“If he asks and the price is right,” Creed replied with a grin.

“In short Tor, when you’ve got ten million credits, think about building a station,” Serandamancketal concluded.

After a further hour of general talking it was time for the group to split, Caran and Tris left first. The remaining three watched from a safe point high up behind security screens. Tor turned and looked at Creed, “Well time for me to go. Thanks for helping.”

Creed nodded, Serandamancketal said, “That’s why were here, If you need anything call me not Creed.”

“You know you didn’t have to take part,” Creed had a serious look on his face.

“Probably not the same for you, but if I say ‘No’ to Caran then I might as well cut my own throat,” Tor replied.

Creed looked out of the window and spoke quietly, “If you’d said ‘No’, Caran would not have forced you to go! Not on a mission like that. Anyway as I understand it he never asked you to go, he just assumed you would.”

Tor stood in reflective thought, the hangover had faded and the previous days events were becoming clear again.

“He mentioned you did it to repay a debt of honour,” Creed continued.

Tor simply nodded and Creed saw this in the reflection of the window.

“You’ve taken the first steps to choosing a side on which to fight and one day Tor you will become a dangerous man, like Caran. I have a strange feeling we’ll be meeting again, whether we will be on the same side who knows. For now good luck,” Creed commented.

Tor glanced across. Creed continued to gaze out of the window then turned and walked away leaving him with Serandamancketal.

A while later and Tor was back on his Discoverer, the transporter device had been transferred from the Mandalay, which he left sat in the dock. Serandamancketal had agreed to store it until needed. The talk of buying a station had him doing a few reference checks, out of curiosity, on the shipyards in Argon Prime and Kingdom End where his satellites were positioned.

Sweety had maintained and monitored all the freighters. Fenagalas had managed to pick up several contracts. At the moment the young Teladi was docked in the Solar Power Plant E.T.A. in Queens Space catching up on some much-needed rest.

Although there had been no shield upgrades the Lifters cargo hold had also been expanded to maximum capacity. Both this and the Dolphin with their android pilots had continued tirelessly for the many hours Tor had been away from the ship. The number of credits in his account nearly touched a million, more than he had ever dreamed of. Normally he would have been excited but other things played on his mind.

He sat in quiet reflection the gentle hum of the internal systems droning away in the background. Having spent most of his life wanting to be a trader, to see the universe and get enough credits together to be a station owner, the recent events made these things begin to seem trivial. The universe was far more exciting and a whole lot more dangerous than he had first appreciated. His experiences told him he was now in harms way, through the Bloodheart encounter, and from here on in life could only get more difficult. The idea of a base from which he could operate had great appeal. He chewed over Creeds remarks, as he could not see himself as another Caran Belign.

“Sweety get me clearance to depart, and plot a course to Kingdom End!”

His ownership of trading ships doing business in Boron space was helping his credibility as a peaceful trader, even though he had only briefly flown through the sectors. Flying to Kingdoms End would give him more credit earning time and get him as far away from the Bloodheart base as he wanted to get. He could then look at a Piranha, which Creed had praised.

It was a short trip into Presidents End and out of the unclaimed sectors. Tor sat back and watched as the stations drew near and then disappeared. Sweety kept him updated on the other trading ships. Fenagalas was still on station.

He crossed into Light Home and was still sitting back admiring the view when Sweety announced, “I’m picking up a distress signal. Argon Lifter under attack, Ore Belt gate.”

“Target the vessel.” Tor ordered.

As the directional finder appeared on the HUD Tor swung the Discoverer around, already at full speed he headed towards the stricken freighter, beset by two Mandalay and a larger Orinoco.

“Coming to assist.” Tor hailed the freighter pilot.

“Acknowledged, don’t know how much longer I can hold out.” The freighter pilot’s fear was reflected in his voice.

Another voice cut into the channel, “This is sector patrol, heading in! Discoverer Pilot do what you can till we arrive!”

“Sweety target the nearest pirate!”

“Mandalay targeted!” Sweety confirmed and the HUD highlighted the attacking craft in red.

He closed in, a few passing shots clipped the Mandalay, there was a flurry of communication, and Tor swung around trying to get in behind the ship only to exchange plasma, which headed off into the void.

Tor caught a hit from the second Mandalay, which jarred his ship, opening the thrusters he shot away. He needed to distract the Orinoco before it could destroy the freighter. Flipping around he ordered Sweety to target the ship.

Diving and twisting between the two Mandalay, he fired a strafing pass over the pirate ship. Tor watched as it jarred from the impact as its own weapons opened up, sending a volley of green plasma disappearing into space. Now he had the attention of all three pirates.

“Sweety, target the nearest Mandalay.” He barked the order.

“Target set!” Sweety informed.

Carefully Tor judged his moment and then opened up on the ship, it shook under heavy fire and the shields dropping to near critical, then Tor’s own ship jarred then jumped caught in the cross fire from the second Mandalay and Orinoco. Two consoles near him burst apart a brief shower of sparks.

“Sweety!” He shouted.

There was no answer.

The ship felt sluggish, red lights and alarms flashed and echoed through the cabin.

“Sweety!” Tor shouted again, and pulled the ship around hard on the stick, the HUD was blank, and the computer still did not answer. Suddenly aware of a sharp stinging pain in his right shoulder Tor concentrated on evasive maneuvers.

“This is sector patrol! Hang in there pilot we are engaging pirate craft.”

Moment passed the freighter pilot was the first to call in. “Thank you pilot, the Pirates have gone.”

Tor relaxed, then looked down to see his shirt was now red. Pain and shock washed over him. His focus went in and out, his breathing went shallow but quick. He began to slip into unconsciousness but was still aware of the comm channel as his eyesight blanked out.

“This is sector patrol leader Qanak, thanks for your help pilot.”

There was a pause, “Pilot if you’re okay, please respond!”

Another pause, “Pilot please respond!”

A further pause followed by a loud, sharp shout. “Pilot!”

Quickly followed by, “Looks like we have an emergency guys, ship loose, pilot unable to respond. Estimate impact with Quantum Tube Factory in less than five minutes.”

Caran had dropped Tris off, and she would have to explain to her commanding officer the loss of her ship. For now Caran had other things on his mind. The incoming object was now on the top of his agenda so he opened a com back to headquarters.

“Menhald, give me an update on the alien object?”

“Sir. No change in heading or speed!”

Caran focused on the gate looming ahead of him. “What do we have in the way of Titan ships in the Aladna Hill, Light of Heart or Montalaar sectors?”

“Checking.” There was a brief pause. “The Gallators Fate is currently in the Light of Heart sector for some minor repairs.”

“Excellent, who’s in charge?” Caran fired the reverse control thrusters to bring the X-shuttle to a stop.

“Admiral Ottal. Sir I have an update from the AIC, they have the dampening rings ready to be loaded on to the Roamer. They’ve just field tested them and will bring as many operational ones as they can. What do you want me to tell them.”

“Tell them they will be jumping into the Danna’s Chance sector. But to wait until instructed. We need to secure the area before we can deploy.” Caran glanced at the senior officer on the holo-screen.

“Danna’s Chance! The Split won’t like us sending a Titan through the unclaimed sectors. In fact even the Paranid Priests may object to a military incursion.” Menhald showed some concern in his voice. “Shouldn’t we send the Baltock Victory through Presidents End it would be more discreet, Sir?”

“No it would have to pass through Brennans Triumph and the Pirates are agitated enough without stirring them up even more. I really don’t want them harrying our ships.” Caran paused briefly, “I don’t expect anyone to like what we’re doing, especially the Pirate Clans! The Paranid I can negotiate with. The Split may be a little bit trickier. Have a fast transport waiting for me, I’ll be leaving the shuttle on station.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to jump to the sector, Sir.”

“Yes but the shuttle needs a maintenance check. It’s seen some battle action and I don’t want to risk something breaking on me!”

“Very well, I’ll have a pilot and ship standing by when you arrive Sir.”

Caran closed the com and opened the thrusters to dive through the gate to Argon Prime. It was a short run to the equipment dock. A fully enhanced Discoverer Two with pilot were waiting in the security dock.

“Ready?” Caran commented as he marched away from the X-Shuttle.

“Yes Sir.”

“Good, then get us to Light of Heart as soon as we can!”

The internals of the ship were cramped, but better laid out than the previous version. Enhanced speed capability meant that very little cargo space was left, as most of the ship was now engine and it’s sub systems.

Leaving the Equipment Dock the engine surged into life with a deep hum. Heading back the same way Caran had come took less than half the time. They risked crossing Brennans Triumph, the Pirates had settled back on board the station with little activity outside.

In less than two hours the ship arrived at the shipyard in the Light of Heart sector.

The bulk of the Gallators Fate nestled in the superstructure of the yard. Supply vessels formed a stream of ships entering and departing the ship. Maintenance rigs hung on the sides attached to great beams hanging down from the shipyard structure.

“Hailing Gallators Fate, this is Discoverer SST zero five D two requesting docking permission.” The pilot announced.

“Docking permission granted. Priority landing granted. Welcome aboard!”

The pilot called in, “Acknowledged. Proceeding to dock.”

The ship was led in and found position amongst the carriers’ fighters all neatly stacked against the narrow docking bay levels. The airlock doors opened and they were greeted by a junior officer.

Saluting the office exclaimed, “Welcome aboard Sir. The Admiral is waiting for you in the conference room, Sir!”

Turning to the discoverer pilot Caran commented, “Pilot go get yourself some food and rest. I’ll let you know when you’ll be needed!”

“Yes Sir!”

Turning back to the young officer, “Lead the way!”

“Yes, Sir!”

As they strode into the station Caran began to speak to the young officer, “Officer Henka isn’t it!”

“Yes Sir! How did you...”

“I remember you from your file on the hornet missile reclaim mission two years ago.” Caran interjected, “Nice piece of solo flying by all accounts.”

“Thank you Sir.” Henka responded.

Caran asked, “Must make a change serving as a deck officer?”

“Yes Sir, must admit the solo pilot days were very exhilarating, but life on the bridge can be as exciting. The challenges are different but rewarding especially when we engage Xenon forces, Sir.”

“Don’t get too comfortable with that thought. The Xenon heavy missile is as destructive as the Hornet. Even these shields are vulnerable to that explosive force. The Titan has speed but lacks the maneuverability of smaller ships.”

“Yes Sir.”

They wandered to the shuttle lift and ascended several levels until they reached the command deck. A short distance further along the straight corridor they stopped and the door to the conference room. The door slid open. The Admiral and several of the senior officers were already seated and waiting, their conversation halted as Caran walked in. Henka remained outside and wandered off after the doors had shut.

“Welcome, I’m Admiral Ottal. Please be seated.” The Admiral was a heavyset man, grey with years of active service. A full neatly trimmed, beard and dark grey eyes holding in a wealth of experience.

Also at the table sat the first and second officers, as well as the security chief.

Caran sat down, “Gentlemen we don’t have too much time, the first part of this briefing needs to include the Commander of the AIC Roamer, so unless there are any objections I would like to conference them in.”

There was an uneasy shuffling but Admiral Ottal nodded his head for approval.

“Computer can you connect us to the AIC Roamer currently in the Black Hole Sun sector!”

Chapter 13 – Recovery

The view screen on the wall sparked to life and the briefing room on the Roamer came into view, the commander sat with several of his officers.

“Commander Parrel, AIC Roamer, what can we do for you Mr. Belign?”

“Commander glad you could join us!” Caran began. “We have a situation in Danna’s Chance. One of our deep space monitoring pods has picked up an incoming alien object travelling at high speed. Approximately two thousand k’s per second. Our intent is to determine what it is and try to capture it!”

“You say alien, any ideas?” Ottal asked.

“Most probably Xenon, as no other race appears to have the same understanding of deep space travel,” Caran replied.

“So it’s likely to be hostile?” Ottal interjected.

“Possibly, I’ve had an update on the latest energy reading, the pods data appears to be consistent and when interpolating the data, the object is something in the region of one hundred and fifty to three hundred units in mass. Not large enough to be a destroyer class ship. Typically the weight of our M-three or M-four ships,” Caran answered, “Our feeling is it’s a deep space probe. If we can capture it then we can extract its data and hopefully learn more about what’s out there.”

“How do you intend to do that? We can’t exactly fly up behind it and ask it to slow down,” Ottal asked quietly.

“That’s where the AIC can help,” Caran looked at the screen, “Commander Parrel, what’s the status of the dampening rings.”

Parrel, who had been quietly listening in, paused for a moment, “The field tests have been successful to date, we have stopped a unarmed hornet class missile, and numerous armed wasps in trials. Within a few rings we’ve successfully stopped a whole range of fighters including a Pegasus travelling at full speed. However we did experience some problems. I’ll let my technical officer Tereana explain.”

A young Argon woman looked up, “Mr. Belign. Objects travelling at high speed like the Pegasus endure massive stress buildup in the hull dynamics as it passes through the rings. Our first test was to try and stop an unmanned Pegasus at fully enhanced speed within three rings, after the second the ship exploded. The second trial was more gradual and by the seventh ring we had the ship. Extrapolating back the minimum number for trapping a ship travelling at fifteen hundred mps is five rings,” She paused, “If I understand you correctly you want us to stop an object travelling at two million mps. That well over a thousand times faster.”

“Are you telling me it can’t be done?” Caran looked at her questioningly.

“The rings work on absorbing energy, the rate of deceleration increases sharply. In essence the ship may lose forty percent of speed after the first ring, eighty percent of what’s left on the second and come to a complete stop at the third. How fast it can be stopped is down to the structural integrity of the ship. One weakness and it’ll destroy itself in seconds. I take it we have no data to understand the probes design.”

“None.”

She tapped the table, “Then we’ll have to guess, the first ring could destroy the ship, but we’ll tune them to try and stop it.”

“That’s not the only concern though,” Parrel looked at Tereana.

“No! We don’t know how much energy any one ring can dissipate. Chances are we’ll overload some if not all the rings in which case the probe, if it doesn’t destroy itself, will just keep on going. But I need to do the sums,” Tereana added.

“I suggest you look at the numbers. We will be heading for the sector within the hour. Once we have established a secure area we will be calling for you to join us. Any questions before we close the com?” Caran concluded.

Parrel looked around, and there was a brief shaking of heads, “No questions here, will talk to you again in a short while.”

The com went off.

“What are the chances of success?” Ottal calmly asked.

Caran knew where the questions were going to lead, “The worst we can do is destroy the probe,” He added, “At least we will be safe in the knowledge the Xenon aren’t going to learn anything new from it.”

The inevitable question came, “And has our incursion into the uncontrolled sectors been approved by the other races?”

Caran looked straight into the Admirals eyes, “No.”

There was a murmur from the other officers.

“And this has been cleared through the presidential office?”

Caran did not blink, “No. There’s a limited window of opportunity in which we can act. By the time our bureaucratic friends make up their minds, the probe will have been heading into deep space for several Jazuras.”

“So under what authority are you asking me to enter the uncontrolled sectors?” Ottal questioned leaning forward.

“As your superior officer and under section nineteen of the Armed Forces Regulations to comply with Secret Service authorization, to commandeer any Military vessel, where there is urgent need to ensure the safety of the Argon people,” Caran replied.

This took all the officers, with the exception of the Admiral, by surprise, “Then that’s how it’ll be logged in the official records,” Ottal sat back again. Then spoke to his officers, “Under the instructions of the Secret Service we will disembark the station within the hour. Our destination is Danna’s Chance. All non essential personnel to remain on station, and all ships crew and fighter pilots to be reported in and on board within the next half hour. See to it gentlemen.”

The officers rose and left, talking quietly between themselves as they hurried from the room. The Admiral went ahead of Caran but as he reached the door he turned and looked back, “I really hope you know what you’re doing Caran.”

Caran looked at him and gave a slight nod.

Activity on the cruiser increased and the anxiety of the crew, still not certain of their fate, also weighed heavily in the atmosphere. To some the fact that it was Caran Belign leading the operation made them feel comforted. To most he was simply a Secret Service agent leading them on a fools errand that could get them all killed.

Caran knew the threats. The pirates posed very little, more of an irritation, fighting as they tended to as an unruly mob rather than an organized force. The pirate ships also had inferior weapon systems mainly due to the hard clamp down on military grade weapons, like the hornet, preventing their open use without massive retaliation. The biggest fear was going to be the Split reaction to an Argon military presence in the unclaimed sectors.

On board the Roamer, Tereana sat with her colleagues they had been trying several quick simulations. She shook her head. Parrel entered the room.

“You wanted to see me?”

Tereana looked across from the holo-image simulation, as did several of the technicians. “Yes Sir. We have a problem, well more than one. The object is travelling way too fast for us. The rings create a dampening sphere two k’s in diameter each. Now the probe is travelling at two thousand k’s per second which means it’ll enter the first rings dampening field

and be out the other side in zero point zero, zero, one seconds. In which time we have to rob it of five percent of its speed.” She shook her head, “Can’t be done! Even if we stretch the field we only buy ourselves tiny fractions of a second.”

“Do we have any alternatives?”

“Not unless we can hyper accelerate a ship so that it can clamp onto the object,” She responded.

“Are we ready to make a call to Caran and tell him that it can’t be done?” Parrel asked.

Tereana glanced across at the technicians, then briefly down at the floor with the expression of someone with worse news yet to come.

“What is it?”

“Well when Caran mentioned it would pass through the Brennan’s Triumph Gate, we plotted the exact course so we know where to put the rings taking into account any gravitational deviation. And it does pass through the gate, quite literally.”

“Then it’ll vanish into Brennan’s Triumph and will be lost,” Parrel commented.

“Not quite Sir. If it went through the centre of the gate it has too much mass combined with its speed for the gate to open. So it would stay in this sector and head back into deep space,” Tereana looked directly at Parrel, “But it’s not going to pass through the centre Sir. It’s going to pass through the superstructure of the gate itself.”

“Ancients preserve us, what’ll happen?”

“The gates shield won’t be enough to protect it. Chances are both objects will be destroyed. Worse still the gate will be destroyed and the object will keep going,” Tereana concluded.

“We only have hours to come up with an answer people.”

“There may be something,” Ricc, a senior technician piped up.

“What?” Parrel asked, Tereana gave a disapproving look knowing what was coming next.

“An artificial gravity well, Sir,” Ricc suggested.

Parrel looked across at Tereana, “That could change the direction of the object?”

“Sir, those things are bloody unstable, it was a miracle when we first tested one we didn’t end up sucked into a black hole of our own making,” Tereana snapped with a touch of anger.

“Yes, but it did shut itself down,” Ricc argued.

“Sir, fortunately we don’t have any on board,” Tereana ignored Ricc and looked at the commander.

“No, but I know where we hid the only other prototypes,” Parrel thought out loud.

“You can’t seriously believe Caran would allow us to use them? Anyway if it does go wrong there won’t be a sector left let alone a Xenon probe,” Tereana was becoming perplexed.

Parrel raised his hand to silence her objections, “Ricc, you understand the mechanism behind the gravity well, can its effects be controlled for a specific duration?”

“Yes Sir. The problem we experienced before was the creation of too much super-dense material before it degraded to something less harmful,” Ricc felt he now had the upper hand.

“Can we use the gravitational affect to slow down the object as well as change its direction?” Parrel was now thinking at a different level. He glanced at Tereana.

She calmed down and understood where Parrel was coming from.

“One gravity well on it’s own will draw the object towards it making it accelerate, the object trapped briefly by the gravitational pull reaches a velocity that breaks it away from the attracting object with a directional change,” She replied, “Unless the gravity well opens just ahead of the object as it passes, then you get a slight directional change but the object gets pulled back by gravity.”

“The effect of the pull will be more gradual but the effect lasts longer than the rings,” Ricc commented.

“I suggest we use four wells to give a balanced pull on the object. Used in pairs one either side of its flight path,” Parrel concluded, “Do the simulation get the spacing right as I don’t want these thing to collapse in on each other and give us a real problem.”

“Sir,” The group commented.

He turned and left as the group went back to work, knowing Caran would go mad if he knew they still had the devices. Also Parrel had to act quickly and retrieve the objects before the Gallators Fate reached and secured the sector.

The Gallators Fate entered the gate to Hatikvah’s Faith unannounced. The sector coms buzzed briefly then went quiet as the Argon Titan sped through the sector.

Admiral Ottal glanced at he communications officer, “Anything?”

“Nopileo’s Memorial is buzzing with our anticipated arrival. Some communication in Thurucks Beard but no activity as yet.”

‘Yet’ Ottal thought such a small phrase but a portent of something far more significant, “Keep monitoring all frequencies.”

Caran was also on the bridge. He looked relaxed and stood casually by. Ottal thought the man should be pacing the bridge in anxiety, as sooner or later the Split would be hailing them for an explanation as to the incursion.

They reached the Nopileo’s Memorial gate with no activity when the communications officer called out, “Spy sats have picked up Split Navy movement, we have a Raptor and two Pythons inbound to Thurucks Beard!”

The Gallators Fate made the jump.

On reaching the sector the sector coms went quiet. Caran called out, “Get me Head Council Twh k’Trrg in Family Pride on the com!”

There was a momentary pause and then an elder Split appeared on the view screen. “Yes?”

“Greetings and salutations Councilor k’Trrg.”

The elder Split looked at the readings then raised his eyes to examine the holo-picture in front of him, “Mr. Belign! I see your ship has entered the neutral sectors, please explain!”

“Sir, we have a problem. Our deep space research probe has detected an astral body that’s due to collide and destroy the Brennan’s Triumph gate in Danna’s Chance. We are on our way to intercept and try and prevent the collision,” Caran responded.

Twh looked at Caran for a brief time, “Mr. Belign, as you are probably already aware we have mobilized forces to Thurucks Beard. Our forces will hold position there. No doubt you will appreciate our sending a wolf pack to observe this astral body.”

Caran showed no emotion and nodded with a slight bow of respect, "They will be most welcome Sir."

"Be sure that they are!" The com closed.

Caran stood in thought Admiral Ottal looked across but said nothing. Caran eventually turned and left the bridge, he had things to do and people to talk to. He had to make sure there would be no nasty surprises. Ottal breathed easy, with Caran off the bridge, he felt in control again. "Keep monitoring all frequencies. Have all fighter pilots standing by and someone get me a hot Garrow Root Cha, no sweetener." The gate to Danna's Chance was still a few brief minutes away and he could take a moment to relax.

One of the junior deck officers appeared with a large mug, steam rose in curling wisps off the top of the dark liquid. He would take his time and enjoy this.

The jump into the sector was uneventful. Again the sector communications went quiet.

"Move us clear of the gate and come to a stop. Open a sector wide com."

"Com open, Sir."

"This is Admiral Ottal of the Argon Titan Gallators Fate. Do not be alarmed by our presence, we have detected an Astral body on collision course with one of the gates. We will be endeavoring to prevent this from happening. Our stay will be approximately twenty Argon hours, or four and a half Stazuras. Any attempt to interfere in our operation will be met with force, Admiral Ottal out."

He waited until the ship stopped, "Have all fighters launch to secure and patrol the area. Notify Mr. Belign that we have arrived."

It was nearly half an hour later when the Roamer emerged through the Nopileo's Memorial gate. A squad of nine wolf fighters was already prowling the sector. The communications had resumed in the sector with messages about the incursion being the main topic of conversation. Nav News teams were also making their presence felt. In the Argon home systems the diplomatic arm of the Secret Service and the Presidential Office were calling in for updates and releasing statements.

It was attention that Caran could well have done without.

The Roamer on arrival immediately headed out into space dropping occasional markers along the anticipated path of the alien ship. It deployed modified freighters with one either side. Each freighter had a large linear accelerator device bolted to the top. These extended along the entire length of the hull.

Caran, Admiral Ottal and several of the senior officers were in conversation with Commander Parrel and his technical team.

"How long to set up?" Admiral Ottal wanted to be out of the sector, as he was becoming uncomfortable with the attention being focussed on him.

"We'll need about three hours, plus another hour to test," Parrel was responding to all questions.

Caran looked up, "I've read your analysis reports, there seems to be some detail missing. I don't see where the hyper accelerators come into all this. Also your speed on approach for the rings to operate is considerably slower than the incoming probes current velocity."

On the sub viewer screen, monitoring the activity of the Roamer, both freighters pulsed hurling objects either side of the path of the incoming object at incredible speeds.

"And what did they just launch?" Ottal asked.

Parrel looked edgy, “We ran the simulation and the rings on their own will barely slow the object. We have launched gravity well pods to subtly alter the direction of the probe and to assist in slowing it down.”

Caran said nothing, his solemn look masking the sudden anger flaring inside. Admiral Ottals’ jaw dropped.

“If our calculations are correct with the four pods launched we will slow the object by nearly three quarters of its current speed,” Parrel continued.

“Are you people mad? Don’t you ever learn?” Ottal was not hiding his anger and was already on his feet. “Caran you can’t tell me you’re going along with this?”

Caran looked up, and calmly responded, “Can the pods be stopped and deactivated?”

Parrel looked around the room and the technicians shook their heads, “No Sir, the timers are set.”

“I’m sincerely hoping you people have managed to work out the correct material yield of these devices so we don’t have any nasty surprises?” Caran looked straight at Parrel. The previous testing was well documented having nearly gone catastrophically wrong. The device, having been activated within a thousand k’s of a sector, had led to the previous AIC mammoth to burn out it’s engines trying to maintain position within the sector, four factory units suffered major structural damage and shifted fifty kilometers even the jump gates drifted out of position. The nearby planet was shaken with violent earth tremors and tidal waves for years after. Fortunately the breakdown of the material ended ten minutes after it was supposed to. If the yield had been slightly higher the reaction would have gone critical with no breakdown and led to the generation of a “black hole”.

Parrel looked across, “The yield of all four of the pods combined is less than half of what would be required to go critical.” There was some nodding going on.

“And no one else knows we’re using these pods?” Ottal was pacing.

“Commander Parrel, I hold you responsible for the safe being of all the inhabitants in this sector. If anything untoward happens and people get killed due to the use of these devices, then you will feel the full weight of Argon law falling against you,” Caran commented. “People of the Roamer, when all this is over there will be an investigation carried out by my good self. I want to know what else you’ve been hiding away, that should have been dismantled or destroyed.”

Commander Parrel knew he was in deep trouble. Politically the AIC received large amounts of Argon funding and it was his remit to ensure they supported and found solutions to any problem given them. Failure to succeed was a career-limiting event. The pods provided a solution, he had been careful to ensure the previous mistakes were not made. The duration of each device is less than twenty seconds before degradation of the material. Enough time to have a significant effect but not long enough to have a widespread influence. Unfortunately he now knew he would not be given the opportunity to explain the detail and defend his decision until after the event.

Tor woke up the lighting was soft and gentle. He almost thought he was in a rest room and the battle had been a bad dream. However all he could move was his head, the rest of his body refused to function, glancing down he counted his body parts.

He breathed a deep sign of relief they all appeared to be there under the sheets. Somewhere in another room he detected the sound of a buzzer. He rested his head back, now he knew he was in a medical unit. Above him on the wall were monitors but from where he lay he could only guess what they were measuring. One he could make out was an outline of the body, which sent out pulsing red waves from the chest outwards. He could not see the numbers.

The door hissed open. He turned and looked at the medic.

“Mr. Grall, awake at last. Don’t try to move just yet, I need to release the restraining field. How do you feel?”

Tors’ mouth was dry and made it difficult to talk, “Need a drink.”

“Everyone does after surgery. Just hold for a moment! Now remember you’ve taken a lot of damage to your right shoulder and it’s still healing, so try using your left arm to pick up the drink!” The medic pressed a few buttons on his pad the bed moved putting Tor into a better sitting position and the restraining field suddenly gave him movement. The glass was thoughtfully already on the left side of the bed. Tor drank it down quickly and sighed.

“Better, much better!” He exclaimed.

The medic examined the readings behind him.

“What happened to me?”

The medic looked across at him, “You’re lucky to be alive that’s for sure.” He paused, “A piece of the console went through you, just under your collar bone, shattered your shoulder blade and pinned you into your seat. Fortunately it missed your lung, but not by much.”

“Shit!” Tor glanced down.

“But if what the sector patrol leader said is true, that was only half the trouble! Not only were you suffering massive blood loss, your ship had lost all computer control.” The medic sighed himself, “They managed to patch in and fire the reverse thrusters when you had about thirty seconds until collision with the Tube factory.”

“So am I on the Tube Factory now?”

The medic nodded, “Yes! And what’s left of your ship is on board too”

“How do you mean?” Tor asked quietly.

“I’ll have the chief technician come and talk to you, I’m just the medic. The only thing I can say is they pumped you full of proto-blood as soon as you docked and cut off the back of your seat just to get you out!”

Tor put his head back on his pillow

“There’s a message chip and your personal pad on the cabinet to your left. Also there’s a Teladi here to see you. Been here a few hours.”

“Fenagalas!” Tor commented more to himself than to the medic with a smile, then asked. “How long have I been out?”

“No I think she said her name was Bilyzonus.” The medic replied and wandered off saying, “Anyway you’ve been asleep for about twelve hours. My recommendation is that you rest for another two before you get up just to let your body adjust itself.”

He reached over to pick up the pad and chip. There was a sharp twinge in his right shoulder as the bruised tissue reacted. He plugged the chip eager to find out who was sending him a message and was pleasantly surprised to see it was from Tris.

“Quick message to see if you’re okay. Caught the news on the sector patrol coms. We get to see what’s going on in all the sectors, just in case we need to mobilize. Caused quite a stir around the place and it looks like you’ll make it into the patrol manuals for ‘how to stop a runaway ship in less than five minutes’. Anyway said this would be quick, take care and send a message to let us know you’re well!”

The message ended with a return address for correspondence. Tor smiled and put the pad to one side. Bilyzonus wandered into the room, she smiled and handed him a box of sweets, the box felt light.

She shrugged, “What? I’ve been here hours waiting for you to wake up.”

“It’s good to see you again, and totally unexpected!”

She sat on the edge of the bed. "Fenagalass called me when your shipss com went ssilent."

"Guess he must have felt a little bit out on a limb."

"Yess, but he'ss sstill working. Making profitss," She looked at him, "And how are you?"

"Alive is the expression I'd use for the moment." He smiled. "Don't suppose you've seen the ship?"

Bilyzonus nodded slowly. "It'ss in a bad way. You may be able to ssalvage ssome of the added equipment, but the cargo bay iss completely desstroyed."

They talked for a while longer before Lotch Wottag the chief technician arrived.

"Mr. Grall, good to see you're awake and looking a whole lot healthier then when we last met. But you probably wouldn't remember that."

Tor shook his head.

"Down to business, your ship or what's left of it!" Lotch continued at a pace, he picked up a controller and activated one of the view screens opposite the bed. Using his thumbprint he accessed the in station monitors and showed the Discoverer sitting on the dockside. "As you can see it's not a pretty sight."

A large section from the front right wing was missing. There were huge black scorches crossing the cabin, the secondary engine thruster module was a blackened lump no longer recognizable.

"What about inside?" Tor asked.

"Main systems fused or burnt away. Teladi designed best buys and best sell modules survived, obviously." Lotch looked at Bilyzonus and smiled, "Transporter survived and that's about it. One of the shield modules was still operating which is why you're not dead! But you'll never get it out of the ship."

"So were all the system boards destroyed?" Tor had a touch of concern in his voice.

"All the ones we checked! Is there one in particular you want me to look for?"

"Yes, there's one with a personality AI chip on it."

"Know the board, haven't got that one listed. I'll get it checked out. But here's the crux of the problem. Your ship is, for want of a better word, dead. We can look after it for a short while but ideally you need to arrange for it to be taken away and disposed of." Lotch had the look of a man keen to get rid of a problem, and to him the Discoverer was just that.

"If you can look for the personality chip. Strip out all the functioning upgrade cards for storage, I'll get the ship towed away." Tor took a long painful look at the ship that had become his home. It had become a part of him and seeing the wreckage felt that he had somehow killed a friend. Now he understood why the personality chips were discontinued.

Bilyzonus could see the pain in Tors' eyes as Lotch switched off the viewer, "Very good Mr. Grall, and I hope to see you up and around in no time," The technician left the room.

"I'll go ssee he checkss everything," Bilyzonus gave a wink and a brief smile before leaving. Tor lay back and closed his eyes the image of the ship burning away behind his eyelids.

Eventually he picked up his personal pad and opened a com to Fenagalas.

"Yess?" The young Teladi appeared on the viewer.

He took a moment to clear his throat. "It's me Tor!"

"Ssir, it'ss good to ssee you," Fenagalas had a relieved tone in his voice, "You're looking well."

“Thank you. Need you to do me a favour, can you get over to Kingdom End and buy me a Piranha. I’ll send you my license number so they can cross check. I need it fully equipped with engine and rudder control upgrades,” Tor paused for a moment before adding, “And Fenagalas whilst your there I think you should learn to fly a fighter.”

The Teladis’ expression changed, “Are we expecting trouble?”

“Let’s say, I’ve potentially made a bad enemy. Who may try to get even!” Tor spoke slowly whilst trying to choosing his words carefully, and then wondered if he should have said anything just in case Fenagalas decided to quit there and then, but the youngster simply nodded.

Chapter 14 - UFO

Tor watched the news channels, the events in Danna's Chance were generating some excitement. That and the news flash that the president's pet Garcho had defecated on a gardener. Tor smiled at the irony that the incursion into uncontrolled space and potential impending war with the Split, as hyped up by the press, was pushed into second place by the Garcho incident.

The galactic map being shown on the latest bulletin attracted Tor's attention. It showed the relative location of Danna's Chance with respect to the Argon sectors, with the inevitable mention of Brennans' Triumph. Some reporter had managed to get an interview with a clan representative. The news looked bad for the Titan ship, with the pirates supposedly deploying squash mines and laser towers at all the gates to the sector in case this was an act to oust the clan from power.

He fidgeted anxious to see what if anything was happening with the remains of his ship. A medic brought him food and drink, which would take care of a few more minutes. An hour had passed since talking to Fenagalas when a Boron pilot in full environment suit glided into the room.

"Mr. Grall?" The voice seemed to bubble through the translator.

"Yes!"

"One Piranha delivered as ordered! Please sign!" The Boron handed him an authorization pad.

"That was quick?" Tor took the pad and scanned through it having checked the price, nearly six hundred thousand credits. Fenagalas had gone to town with the upgrades, including ecliptic projector, vision enhancement goggles, trading extension, plus others. He palm authorized the transaction.

There was appreciative squawk and gurgle sound from the pilot. "Ship's engine fully tuned! Get here very fast. Till we next do business Mr. Grall."

"Thank you!" Tor felt he should have gone to examine the new acquisition having parted with so many credits. However of all the races the Boron were the least likely to rip him off and he took some comfort in that.

He waited a minute before calling up Bilyzonus.

"Hi Tor."

"How are you getting on down there?"

She smiled, "Better than first hoped. We have managed to salvage your freight scanner. And we found the personality chip. The board had additional protection, which looks to have saved the chip. But the rest of the interface card is broken."

Tor closed his eyes briefly and sighed with relief, "Excellent news! The new ship's just been delivered. Boron Piranha registration, TGT zero one BP at docking bay seven. Can you get Lotch to install the recovered parts?"

Bilyzonus nodded then looked away to issue the instructions before closing the com.

Tor lay around for a few minutes longer trying desperately to adhere to the medic's instructions but frustration at not being at the docks to oversee progress got the better of him. He concluded that another half an hour would make no difference. Swinging his legs out from under the sheet he grimaced with the pain in his right shoulder. The bruising restricted his movement as he tried to dress making it both awkward and painful.

Resting for a moment he walked to the door.

"Mr. Grall, I see you're up. How do you feel?" The medic watched him as he stepped out of the room.

"Stiff and sore but otherwise fine."

“Excellent, I have some anti-inflammatory shots and pain killers for you. If you’ll just wait there a moment I’ll administer them. Then you’re free to leave!”

“Thanks!” Tor waited a moment. The hypo-spray to the shoulder gave a huge sense of relief, but it did not ease the movement of his arm.

As Tor headed through the visitor area of the station he noted how clean and high tech everything was. Rogue airborne particulates and dust were the station commanders and chief-manufacturing engineers’ worst problem and could wreck a batch of tubes. The bars and food halls were well ventilated with all the smoke and steam drawn quickly away into the filters.

He took the shuttle lift down to the docking bay level and wandered along the dock. The airlock door to the Piranha was open. Bilyzonus was watching the android technician fitting the transporter module.

“How she looking?” Tor asked quietly.

She quickly looked round and smiled, “Nearly there. Ssweety is back on line, but I think sshe’s a little bit uppsset with you!”

Tor nodded and took a moment to look around the ship. He was surprised to see the secure box had been extracted from the Discoverer but the rest of the internal scanners had been destroyed.

The cabin had been refitted for Argon living conditions, and was far more spacious then the Discoverer.

“All your perssonal stuff is already here!” She commented.

Tor nodded, “How long till we’re finished?”

“Another hour.” Bilyzonus replied, “I’ve arranged for a transsport to remove the remainss of your sship.”

He turned his head to look at her and asked quietly, “When’s it due?”

“Thirty mizuras!”

Tor nodded slowly, “Think I’ll go take one last look. Say goodbye.”

She smiled briefly as Tor turned and slowly stepped out of the ship and back onto the dockside.

Aboard the Roamer, Commander Parrel studied the monitors along side the technicians. There was little else for him to do then wait.

He checked the time, less than an hour before the first pods detonated. The number of times he had reviewed the calculations on the pod yield simply added to his impatience for the whole episode to be over.

News that the pirates had fortified the Brennans’ Triumph gate was only a sign that things could get very much worse. Although the Roamer could jump drive out of the sector to safety, the Gallators Fate could not and he knew what Carans reaction would be if they suddenly departed.

He looked over to his second officer, “Rachat how many fighters do we have on board?”

Rachat looked up, the anxiety in the commanders’ voice obvious. “We have six Elites, four modified Busters, two modified Eels, eight Piranhas, a modified Prometheus, two unmodified Prometheus and two Pegasus reconnaissance ships.”

“Have all fighter crews standing by!” This gave him some comfort, the eleven M3 class fighters, and twelve M4 ships would give them a fighting chance to make it to the Aladna Hill gate. News had filtered through that a second Argon Titan ship supported by a Boron Moray from the Lucky Planets sector were already on route to match the Split Python presence in Thurucks Beard.

Admiral Ottal was simply monitoring events, only a handful of fighters were now patrolling the area ensuring nothing approached the AIC ships and equipment. The others were recalled and ordered to rest, he wanted all the pilots to be sharp and alert when on patrol. The waiting was for him all part of the process, and his air of casual calmness had a positive effect on the bridge crew, which in turn reflected in their orders down through the ship.

He slowly sipped on his fifth, though he could not be sure, hot Garrow Root Cha. He scanned the messages on his control panel. The Paranid were offering to break the pirate blockade of Brennans’ Triumph to allow an alternative route from the sector should the need arise. The offer as far as he could tell was seriously being considered back in the home sectors but no formal acceptance had been issued.

Watching the rolling news he smiled and reflected that ten kilos of Garcho dung landing on you would certainly be enough to take your mind off other events in the universe.

The counter for phase one of the operation rolled by.

Caran had rested having filed several reports. He had also outlined a plan in his own mind should the operation be successful in capturing the probe. It would be certain that the wolf pack would report information back to their command base and the Split battle cruisers could try to take the prize. The Raptor on its own would be too much for the Gallators Fate to take on. The two Pythons would also prevent assistance from Aladna Hill.

The ace up his sleeve came in the form of the AIC, with some of the advanced technology on board they could vindicate themselves by assisting in any ensuing skirmish. He chose the word carefully. Neither force represented an imposing invasion fleet mobilizing for war. All combat would be in the uncontrolled sectors and not for control, a mere show of strength to affirm which race was dominant. The outer sectors with the Xenon and the Khaak kept the races to an uneasy but united truce against common enemies. It was a case of who would walk away with the bloodiest nose. Caran had to make sure it was not the Argon.

He stretched as he got up. It was almost time for things to start and he needed to be on the bridge.

Tereana sat in front of the three main viewers in the tech section and the other technicians were either at their own monitoring stations or working elsewhere on the ship. She was not happy with the quality of the long-range scans. The first two pods were over a million k’s out the second pair now nine hundred thousand k’s.

The incoming object was closing fast, with two thousand k’s before the cross over point the first pods detonated. Long range gravitational readings jumped and in less than a second touched on the upper boundary level and continued to climb. The probe passed between the two, still clearly defined, gravity wells. As the gravitational wave raced away from them the speed measurements of the probe was already dropping rapidly.

She looked at the two counters, one now counting up for the duration of the first detonation the second counting down until the second. All events were being recorded including the communications channels for disturbance effects.

Parrel was also closely watching the counter, almost holding his breath, waiting for the material degradation to start. The twenty seconds had long passed, but he knew that was simply an estimate. The distortion of time in extreme gravitational fields, particularly manufactured ones, made this less of an exact science than he would have liked. The two pods had also been closer than he had hoped at the time of detonation and their combined effects in the localized space effected the results. However material degradation would occur, it was just a case of when?

“Sir we are experiencing minor gravitational pull on the rings. Stabilizing thrusters are in operation.” One of the crew called out.

Parrel did not look across, "Acknowledged! Keep me informed."

Tereana watched as the two primary gravity wells came together. The gravitational field reading jumped, and then the secondary timer hit zero, again both pods detonated. The speed of the incoming probe was now dropping at a massively increased rate as a secondary gravitational wave spread out.

"Increased gravity pull on all sector objects." The crewman called out again.

"The stations?" Parrel questioned.

The answer came back, "Maintaining position with orbital control thrusters."

Tereana was saying nothing. She had seen the gravitational field range move out by a considerable distance but this is not what caught her attention.

"Com messages coming in fast. Wolf Pack leader hailing Gallators Fate demanding to know what's happening," The communications officer reported.

She was studying the incoming stream of data. The primary wells had not started to collapse, but again this was not she was focused on.

Between the three gravity nodes, something else was happening and appeared to be holding the gravity wells apart. From the readings in front of her, it had all the appearances of a hole in space, but not a hole. Two minutes passed after it appeared when the primary nodes began to degrade. The phenomenon shrank and disappeared.

As the second set of nodes degraded there were cheers through the room, and on the bridge. Tereana quickly began to pull together the data. She immediately began to play back the recordings applying filters to remove known background noise, making sure she had her earpiece in to monitor the findings privately.

Listening to the coms frequencies, she used the long-range scan information to build together a simulated map of the area. Rather than minutes, the new velocity of the probe meant it would take a number of hours before it reached the dampening rings.

Already there were technicians plotting the new course so the rings could be repositioned.

The initial nervousness Admiral Ottal felt now passed into relief at the news the gravity wells had degraded. However this relief was short lived when he was informed he would have to remain in sector for another two and a half stazuras. They had used only minor thruster control to maintain position, but this was enough to set tensions high on the ship.

"Sir I'm detecting a lot of communication activity between the Split craft and their base!"

"Any idea what they're saying?" Ottal turned to look at the communications officer.

"They'll be reporting the gravitational disturbance!" Caran responded.

The Admiral looked at Caran then glanced over to the communications officer. "Any activity in Thurucks' Beard?"

"Nothing to report, Sir!"

"Give them time Admiral, they'll want to review the information they're getting first!"

"Caran you're not filling me with confidence here!" Ottal looked back at the main viewer, "People stay alert and inform me if anything develops. I'll be in my quarters!" He stood up, then taking his leave wandered casually off the bridge.

It was only a matter of time before more questions would be coming in. The gravitational effect would have been picked up by any of the races that had probes located in the sector, which meant all of them. Caran accessed a science console and began to review the acquired data. Particularly the incoming probe's new speed. His first reaction was relief to see it still intact and although moving at high speed was now less than one hundredth of its original.

He accessed the deep space monitoring pod to try and get an image of the incoming object. The pod had moved towards the gravity wells and was still drifting. Caran issued it instructions to stabilize its position. With careful instructions the pod tracked the object and on long range scanner zoomed in on the probe.

Caran drummed his fingers on the surface of the control panel. The image was a snap shot, frozen then magnified and enhanced. "Computer show me known Xenon probe designs!"

The monitor displayed all the images.

"Computer show me all known probes!" For once Caran looked perplexed. "Computer can we get a thermal and spectral analysis of the incoming object?"

"Negative, outside scanning range."

Caran cleared the screen and turned to the senior officer, "If anyone wants me I'll be on the Roamer!"

Parrel was waiting in the captain's private briefing room. Caran entered.

"I know what you're going to say. But although the timing was incorrect the end result was."

"And fortunately for you no one got hurt, but the local planet will endure a number of high tides over the next few days!" Caran responded. "Actually I'm here for another reason!"

"Oh! How can we be of service?"

"The incoming Xenon probe. It isn't Xenon as you will no doubt learn when it gets close enough to scan!"

Parrel paused, "Khaak?"

Caran answered, "Again not that we know about!"

"Ancient?"

"This isn't a guessing game!" Caran responded harshly, "Neither I nor anyone else will be able to give you an answer. It's alien, like nothing we've seen or encountered before!"

"Okay. So we'll stop the alien ship and find out!"

"That's the problem!" Caran spoke carefully as he gathered his thoughts. "Once we stop the thing we have to get out of here. Quickly! Any alien artifact of unknown origin contains potential leaps in technology, which will be seen by other races as a prize worth fighting for."

"You mean the Split?"

Caran nodded, "And the only way out of here is through Hatikvah's Faith."

"Do you want me to take the object and jump out of here?" Parrel asked carefully.

"No! Perhaps I've read too many books, seen too many motion pictures, so call me a pessimist in this respect." Caran paused for a moment. "This is an alien object, we don't know what it is, or where it's come from. It could be a technological breakthrough to deep space travel. Tell us the location of an infinite number of other worlds. Or it could be

a bomb. It may contain biological waste lethal to our species. It may contain parasitic alien life that invade and feed off our bodies. Who knows? But one thing is for certain we'll not have time to examine it carefully enough to find out before we have to leave."

"Then we'll have to tow it," Parrel responded.

"We have to disguise it. I know you people have hollow shells of older larger fighters that you use to disguise new small ships when shifting them from one test site to the next. I want you to use one of those. Ensure it has the corresponding energy signature. Get it android controlled and strap on some temporary thrusters. You have the technology to hide the object." Caran paused. "And if all else fails there's an extensive asteroid field running through Nopileo's Memorial leading to the Jakjolak belt several hundred k's out. Send the ship into the belt and have it hide inside an asteroid!"

Tor was on the move again. He had spent several hours talking to Bilyzonus catching up on news and discussing how they planned to expand their respective trading empires. Both still in a very infantile state of existence. She explained how few new trading groups survived long, most being closed out before they gained any size. Alarm bells in the established trading world began to ring as soon as new factory applications were submitted which often led to shady deals being struck and the potential new owner going missing or finding their ships targeted by the pirate clans.

Bilyzonus had moved from the Vulture to a Hawk, and as often as not she flew as defense pilot for her own trading ships. She had been building her cash reserves and had increased her fleet to three vultures each guarded by two bats as an active deterrent. She knew she was on the edge of the sweet spot, where profits were easy and no one much minded the minor competition. Another freighter and things would start to get interesting in Teladi space. However she saw a great deal of potential for Teladi goods in the Split sectors where she was beginning to make some tentative trading deals.

He encouraged her to be careful, she laughed and reminded him she was Teladi and, unlike him, not seen as an enemy by the Split.

Shortly after parting company Tor sent a message chip back to Tris.

Tor executed a neat turn in the Piranha. It was not as fast as the Discoverer, however he remained impressed at the maneuverability and responsiveness of the craft. Sweety had been quiet, only giving brief updates when requested. He placed the ship outside the transport lanes and stopped the craft.

"Okay Sweety, we need to talk!"

"Any particular topic?" Sweety responded.

"How about, do personality AI chips have feelings?" Tor responded.

There was no answer.

"Sweety?"

"In your terms no!"

"And in your own terms?"

"Tor, my internal sensor system indicated all the sub-systems going off line. Resistance levels rise and burn out circuits. The surge of energy that flowed through the power couplings destroying system boards. My own interface card fuses break down and then nothing as the last residual power in my circuits imprinted onto my memory the previous events. I think that is what it must be like to die! But I did not and here I am waiting for you to make your next mistake!"

Tor was a little taken aback and stunned at the response. "I am really, really sorry Sweety!"

Even though he was talking to the computer AI there was still an air of uncomfortable silence.

Eventually Sweety responded, "Apology accepted! But do not do it again!"

Tor engaged the engine and moved away again, "I promise!" He was trying to think of other ways to allow Sweety to control the ship but not be integrated into the systems. It was inevitable he would see combat again, but this time he was in a better ship to meet the challenge.

For now he would busy himself in expanding his network of Satellites.

Fenagalas was trading and dropping them through Teladi space, whilst his android controlled freighters were now busy increasing his wealth.

Within a few brief hours he eventually entered the sector Emperors Mines, his first visit into the Paranid Sectors. Although the two races were allies new traders were regarded with suspicion. Having decided to see what a Paranid station looked like from the inside he was surprised to find he was refused access to dock.

"What do you mean refused permission?" Tor was incredulous at the news.

"The message was quite clear, our presence is neither welcome or desired!" Sweety responded.

Tor turned his ship away from the station and headed for the next uncharted sector, "So what do I need to do to get recognized?"

"From my records of the Paranid culture and records of early encounters. You will need to prove that you are not an enemy of the Priests!" Sweety replied.

"And how do I do that? No don't tell me. Shoot a few pirates!" Tor frowned, as it was beginning to sound like a familiar story.

It was in Empires Edge that the call came in.

"Trading ship SOA two six EE requesting urgent assistance!" The deep Paranid growl edged with panic.

"Target the ship Sweety! This time no mistakes."

Sweety reported, "Paranid Ganymede twenty k's. Shields eighty percent. Attacking craft two Bayamon!"

"Where are the sector forces?" Tor enquired.

"If my analysis of current events is correct, all sector forces have been summoned to sector Priests Pity!"

The pilot of the Ganymede, knowing he could not outrun the attacking pirates was making some attempt to outmaneuver them. This did buy him a little, but valuable, time. Several impacts tore a hole in one of the container units, its destroyed contents spilling out into space.

The first Bayamon shuddered and exploded under multiple impacts. The piranha shooting through the halo of expanding debris. Tor amazed at how much more powerful the Gamma Plasma Accelerator Cannons were to his old Gamma Impulse Ray Emitters. The ejected pilot was already heading off towards the nearest station.

The second Bayamon turned to attack. The diamond shape of the Alpha PAC's plasma cutting through space.

"Shields eighty five percent!" Sweety reported.

Tor banked the ship around realizing he did not need to be so vigorous with the thruster control due to closely matching top speed of both ships. Each one trying to get in behind the other. The Bayamon pilot disadvantaged with having to get multiple shots on target and having the weaker shields.

Tor snatched off a shot, as the Bayamon dove across the nose of the ship. He saw it jar from the impacts its shields were driven down to half strength. The pirate briefly fought with the controls before bringing it under control and turning it around to get a decent shot.

“Shields seventy seven percent!” Sweety commented.

The two ships made a head to head pass and Tor succeeded in getting another single hit before veering away. The indicator bar displaying the Bayamons shields at a third.

Bringing the Piranha about to make another pass Tor felt the twinge and ache in his right shoulder. The medication was wearing off and fast. Several beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, in his mind the instruction, ‘one good shot and it will be over’ had him grind his teeth whilst mentally blocking out the pain. “Sweety switch controls for left handed operation!” He rested his right arm across his lap.

“Acknowledged!” The ship briefly went into automatic evasive maneuvers as the stick moved across.

Sweety announced, “I’m picking up several new ships entering the sector. Designation hostile!”

Tor came about to see the Bayamon in front of him, trying to get some distance. The Gamma PACs’ pulsed and streaked away. The rippling explosions starting from the centre of the Bayamon migrated to the tips of the wings. The pilot failed to bail out.

“What’s next?” Tor commanded. Through the pain in his shoulder, and the memory of the shattered hull of the Discoverer, the red mist of battle had descended. It was now personal!

Admiral Ottal was now back on the bridge and the few hours of sleep had sharpened his mind.

“Status update?” He requested.

“Probe now within long distance scanner range. Will enter the first of the dampening rings in ten minutes!”

“Have all pilots report in. I want defense craft in position to protect the vessel when it stops!”

“Yes Sir!”

“Give me an image of the probe on viewer!” Ottal ordered.

“Sir!”

The image appeared, and magnified.

“That’s not a probe!” Ottal muttered out loud.

“No that’s not a probe!” Caran had arrived back on the bridge.

“Explain?”

Caran looked at the Admiral then at the viewer. “I can’t! All I can tell you it’s not on record. It’s an alien vessel and has traveled a long way to be with us.”

“Sir remote scan of the ship indicates there are no life forms aboard! There is low-level power to some shielding device, exact type unknown. Construction appears to be ceramic materials, complex alloys and a large quantity of carbon isotope.” The science officer reported.

“Which type of isotope?” Caran requested.

“Scan indicates, C sixty, spherical!”

Chapter 15 – Back to base.

“Get Commander Parrel on secondary viewer!” Caran ordered.

“Parrel here.”

“Have you done a structural scan of the ship?” Caran ordered.

Parrel responded, “Yes! It looks to be much stronger than any ship we have. We’re a little bit uncertain of the shield configuration and what effect it will have.”

“Can we stop it?” Admiral Ottal asked the question.

“Yes we have high confidence that we can!” Parrel answered with a definite assurance in his voice.

“We’ll keep the com open in case there are any developments.” Ottal instructed. Turning his attention to the tactical officer, he added, “Have all fighters in position. Try to keep that wolf pack away from the back end of the rings.”

Caran thought for a moment, “Commander Parrel, do you have an estimate as to which ring the ship will stop in.”

“We’re looking at ring twelve or thirteen! Why?”

“Can you offline ring fourteen?” Caran asked,

Ottal glanced up and Parrel asked, “Any reason?”

“To catch a pack of wolves,” Ottal responded.

Caran gave a brief nod, and Ottal smiled. Parrel also gave a wry smile, “We’ll put it in maintenance mode, just in case any of the other rings fail.”

The tactical officer reported, “All fighters now in position. AIC ships just completing maneuvers.”

“Bring the Gallators Fate to the left side of the final ring. Distance four k’s.”

The viewer scaled back as the ship came closer. The minutes of waiting seemed to drag. Each ring had a different dampening density to prevent massive shock loading on the ship. In the brief time the ship was in each field the dampening effect rose to match the next ring and prevent any transitory shock from one ring to the next. The energy lost by the ship was absorbed and recycled back into the field. The first ring was the most important as at high velocity the initial boundary was the equivalent of running through mist or slamming into solid rock. Once in the field the dampening effect would be uniform across the whole ship.

“Ship entering first field,” Even as the science officer said the words the ship was already to the third ring. “Ship stopped, thirteenth ring, dead centre.” The ceramic outer hull of the alien vessel glowed for several minutes as it cooled

There was a sigh of relief.

“All ships report in. Where are those Split?” Ottal requested.

The tactical officer responded, “They’re closing in on the ship.”

“Are they in the field of the fourteenth gate?” Caran asked.

“Last one entering now.”

Caran looked at Parrel on the secondary viewer. “Commander Parrel, activate the fourteenth ring, we have some unwelcome visitors!”

The request was acknowledged. "Ring activated. Split ships are restrained."

"Sir we are receiving incoming protests from the Split flight leader."

Admiral Ottal smiled at the communications officer, "Let them protest."

The communications officer responded, "Sir the Split Raptor and Pythons are powering engines and moving towards the Hatikvah's Faith Gate."

"Damn! What about our support ships?" Ottal demanded.

"They are responding to the threat."

Commander Parrel had ordered the next phase of the mission to begin. Already the primary thirteen rings were being collapsed and packed into modified transports.

The alien craft was being fitted with a temporary thruster harness, scans of the ship were confusing but one thing was certain, the inside of the ship was frozen, it's temperature minus two hundred degrees. Any atmosphere within the ship would be liquid on the floor. The heating of the exterior of the ship though the dampening field resistance barely affected the internal temperature.

The unusual readings on the shield prevented them risking transporting an android unit across. However the engine and the shield appeared to be the only functioning devices on an otherwise dead ship. An automated tactical recovery unit glided up to the ship to determine the location of the hatch.

Caran had been specific not to disguise the ship until they could mask its presence from the Split fighters. As the recovery unit suction sealed itself to the door, the temporary engines engaged and the ship once again began to move.

The modified Prometheus flanked the alien craft, with several of the Titan's Elite fighters, and guided it towards the Roamers docking bay. Transports and maintenance robots from the rings were already returning. Within the gathering of ships just outside the docking bay the change occurred and to all sensor readings a new Lifter had emerged from the Roamer. The fighters broke formation leaving only the Prometheus with the new freighter.

The fourteenth ring was powered down, AIC fighters closely monitored the activities of the Split for any sign of reprisal, but they headed back towards the Split sectors trading insults with anyone listening in.

"Admiral, order as many fighters as you can to the Nopileo's Memorial Gate. We need to reach the sector before the Raptor blocks the incoming gate." Caran ordered. Then switched his attention to Parrel. "Commander, have the Lifter and Prometheus follow the Gallators Fate! When you've finished collecting your equipment follow us, you may jump after we have secured the receiving gate!"

"Acknowledged! Parrel out." The com closed.

"Helm set a course for Nopileo's Memorial, full." Ottal ordered, grateful to be on the move again. The Titan moved forward and began to turn. The fighter groups were already heading for the gate. The Titan would inevitably reach it first, however time was of the essence and gathering the fighters into the docking bay would take too long.

"Caran, hate to point this out but having the Raptor ahead of us and pirates, known to be allied to the Split, behind us makes me uncomfortable." Ottal commented. "Perhaps you can use some of your negotiation skills to get the Paranid forces to keep the Pirates occupied? Maybe even give us another route out of here?"

"Not getting nervous are you Admiral?" Caran observed.

Ottal looked at him, "The Raptor's a big ship and quick, we can out run him, even out gun him, but it's a tough ship and can take considerably much more punishment than we can. It also has a larger compliment of fighters than we do. Now if a Paranid Zeus or Odysseus arrived then the Raptor would be forced to retreat."

“If one of those arrived I think we’d leave via Brennan’s Triumph!” Caran paused, “Just so you know. The Paranid priests have ordered their forces to break the pirates hold on the sector gates. Unfortunately for us it’ll take too long. Also the Paranid will not get involved with any military action against the Split. The Priesthood have made it clear they are breaking the Pirate blockade to reopen the trade route and for no other reason. Which is why they did not start their military action earlier!”

“The priesthood are playing a political game then!” Ottal commented.

Caran responded, “I can see their point. If the other four races stood against the Split then life in the outer regions could become very difficult as they hold vital supply routes.”

Priest Champion Resomankcetolo, captain of the Zeus Trumk studied the latest intelligence data for the receiving gate. He had placed the ship four k’s from the gate out of Split Fire. In formation to the left and right, were two Odysseus M2 battlecruisers.

He took stock of the fighters poised upon his command to enter into battle. Amongst them, two flights of the latest Perseus ships, two more flights of Prometheus’, and a mixture of new and old M4 fighter groups mostly from the sector patrol flights.

“Launch mine sweeper probes.” This was just the start, once a path had been cleared fast Pegasus ships would swarm the sector, followed by more mine sweepers, then the Perseus and Prometheus’ ships to clear away the lasertowers and larger defensive craft, eventually the rest of the fleet would follow.

The plan was in place, but he had concerns, the configuration and layout of the lasertowers had been carefully thought out and any hostile ship was going to have difficulty getting past. The speed of the Pegasus he hoped would draw the towers to point away from the gate without being destroyed. This would enable the other ships to swarm in behind.

“Sweeper probes entering gate.” The tactical officer reported. A few moments later, “All sweepers now destroyed. Minefields still eighty-percent active. Launching second wave of sweepers.”

Resomankcetolo commented, “Send another wave ten marks after that.”

“Yes Sir! Third wave now launched.”

The Priest Champion waited. “Update?”

“Sir. Minefield now at sixty four percent active, Sir.”

Resomankcetolo sat back, this was going to take its time, as they were simply chipping away at the defenses.

The Gallators Fate made the jump. It had cleared the sector gate and found a suitable position when the AIC Roamer jumped in behind.

Admiral Ottal looked concerned, “Where’s the Raptor?”

The tactical officer checked the scans. “Sir it’s just making the jump!”

The distant gate activated and the massive bulk of the Split M1 destroyer moved a short distance from the opening.

“Sir, target ship, launching fighters. I’m detecting two fighter groups of new generation Mambas, and three fighter groups of standard Mambas, Sir.”

The Raptor was holding position. The Roamer was releasing its own fighter groups having had the time to recall them. The gate was also active as the Titans own fighters emerged from Danna's Chance.

As the last few crossed into the sector including the Lifter. Caran sent a coded signal, the ship moved away from the gate then out towards the distant asteroid belt. The AICs two Eels joined the modified Prometheus in taking a wide sweep to track the Lifter and prevent any interception. To the Split it was to appear like a trader taking a wide berth of the opposing battle formations.

The Raptor held position waiting and keeping its fighters close by.

"I guess this is it then." Ottal spoke out loud then opened a ship wide coms channel, "Admiral to crew. We will shortly be engaging the Split. All crew to battle stations, primary internal blast doors to be closed and secured. Secondary access airlock doors on automatic. Medical teams on standby. All gunners to be suited, primary airlock doors closed and emergency exit doors open. Transporter crews have all crew tagged and logged, and that includes our fighter pilots. I want minimum casualties and may the ancients favour us!"

Caran settled himself in front of a tactical monitor, as the Admiral now took full control of the ship. He observed the Split Raptor would hold position at the gate and block any exit. This meant it was a sitting target for heavy missiles. If the Raptor moved then it would allow ships an opportunity to escape. By keeping the Roamer close by Caran hoped this would help divide the Split attack forces.

As the ships' distance reduced, it became more apparent the Split fighters were not going to stray too far from the main ship.

"Admiral hold position!" Caran requested.

"Helm hold position." Ottal looked round, "What is it?"

"We need to approach the gate from the other side!"

"Helm set course vector three zero, zero five, one five, and bring up around to the back of the gate, speed three seven five. Tactical target fighters and Raptor, lets see what damage we can do as we go past. Have all fighters hold."

The big ship turned slowly to follow the vector before engaging engines. Caran relayed a message back to the Roamer for it to make a run at the gate when ordered.

Plasma cascaded away from the Titan as soon as the forward gunners were in range of any split craft, the Mambas broke formation to avoid the incoming shots before they could respond with plasma of their own and missiles.

The Raptor responded firing towards the Titan. Its shields dropping to eighty five percent as it accelerated away with missiles trailing in its wake.

"Sir one of the AIC Prometheus ships is attacking Split forces."

"On screen," Ottal ordered.

The viewer switched and enhanced.

"Bloody fool what does he think he's doing."

The Prometheus had engaged a Mamba whose shields had taken damage from the Titans weapons. The Mamba was struggling to break free its shields critically low. The other Split ships were swarming trying to catch the Prometheus in a hail of crossfire whilst not hitting one of their own craft.

The Mamba exploded. It's pilot escaping to be transported to the capital ship. The Prometheus shot away hornets in tow, with the trailing pack of Mambas' now at liberty to shoot openly. The shields on the Prometheus dropped to fifty percent. Then as it slowed and turned the ship appeared to divide to a strong image and its ghost.

“What the?” Admiral Ottal exclaimed.

“Shadow technology!” Caran answered.

“You can tell me about it later!” Ottal ordered.

“Pursuing missiles self destructed!” The tactical officer announced.

“Helm bring us around head towards the gate!” Ottal now needed to get back.

The tracking on the Prometheus showed it dive towards the Raptor, the Split fighters and gunners confused by the readings and the lack of visual confirmation. Another Mamba called for assistance, to be swiftly silenced.

Suddenly the guns of the Raptor opened up as the image of the Prometheus went through the ship hornets close behind.

“My god!” Admiral Ottal exclaimed as the hornets impacted, “The Prometheus?”

“Intact. It’s position just switched Sir!”

“All ships status.” Ottal ordered

“The Split fighters are staying close to the Raptor. The Raptor shields are down to seventy percent, registering some hull damage and one gunning tower destroyed. Sir our ships are holding position and awaiting orders. AIC ships also holding position with the exception of the Prometheus, Sir!” The tactical officer finished his update.

“Any idea who’s flying that ship.” Ottal glanced at Caran.

“A Paranid named Polmankelest I believe.” Caran responded.

Ottal thought for a moment. “The Polmankelest? Priest Champion, Paranid Special Forces.”

“The very same.” Caran replied.

“And you just happened to know he was assigned to support the AIC on the Roamer?”

“I did!” Caran confirmed.

“And that if he gets himself killed out there we’ll be at war with the Paranid?” Ottal commented.

“Or we’ll have to do a lot of explaining why! Not sure which is worse and yes the thought had crossed my mind!” Caran remained still.

“So what’s he doing running stupid risks?” Ottal muttered.

The Titan was closing fast on the gate.

Ottal ordered. “Helm bring us to a stop, preferably outside the range of the Raptors weapons!”

“Sir the Raptor is recalling all of its fighters.”

“Helm go for the gate!” Caran commanded.

“What the....” Ottal stood up and looked up at the towering figure of Caran, the glint of light in the metal plate catching his eye.

“The Raptor will hold the receiving gate. If it does that then we’ll be forced to try and break the Pirate blockade through Brennan’s Triumph!” Caran commented.

The helmsman looked at Ottal to confirm the order.

“Do it!” Ottal commanded.

The Titan moved forward again.

“We’re going to take one hell of a beating when we approach the gate as we can’t jump at speed.” Ottal commented.

“Give us fighter support, hornets on the Raptor and any of its fighters.” Caran looked down.

“Fighters to engage enemy! Missiles on Split capital ship!” Ottal gave the order.

The forward gunner crews of the Gallators Fate began to open fire as the ship drew closer to the Raptor. The Split ship was turning slowly on its axis to align itself with the gate. The firefight began as the Titan approached the gate at slow speed and the Raptor completed its turn. There were explosions across the hull of the split ship as hornet missiles impacted. Plasma flew in all directions as fighters engaged in multiple dogfights.

“Sir, Shields seventy percent!” The tactical officer announced. “We have lost gunning towers seven and ten, hull ruptures in forward sections twenty, twenty two through to twenty seven, Sir.”

“Time to jumpgate?”

“Ten seconds, Sir” Helm reported,

The Raptor was struggling as its shields recovered from the multiple missile hits having lost a number of gun towers.

“Raptor Shields now at thirty percent, detecting two shield unit failures and four gunning towers damaged. Fighter casualties, we have five Elites and seven Busters down. Two more Elites damaged. AIC casualties two Elites, three Piranhas and an Eel. Split casualties, six new generation Mambas and seven old generation Mambas. ” Tactical reported, “Sir we have Mamba’s circling the gate Hornets have been released!”

“How long to the gate?” Ottal ordered.

“Five, four, three, two.” The Gallators Fate shook with the impact of the missiles.

“One, jumping.”

The Raptor had completed its maneuver and loomed large in the viewer, then disappeared as the gate opened.

As they emerged from the receiving gate, Ottal ordered, “Full ahead, get us some distance!”

Things were not going well in Hatikvah’s Faith, the supporting Titan had taken a severe pounding. Fires fueled by escaping gas billowed from several breaches in its hull. Primary drive was off line as it attempted to limp back towards the Aladna Hill Gate on secondary control thrusters. Over half it’s gunning towers were damaged and over half it’s shield units were destroyed. It’s remaining fighters providing a rear guard action to allow the ship time to withdraw.

The Boron Moray had crippled one of the Pythons now running on half shields and secondary power, but most of its gunning towers were still active. The second Python was trying to harass the faster Moray.

A scan of fighters showed the Split had the advantage. A good number of these were supporting the damaged Python.

The tactical officer announced. “Sir the Raptor has entered the sector. It’s ordered that we be prevented from crossing the sector!”

“What’s our status?” Ottal ordered.

The officer reported, “We have lost one shield unit. Several new hull breaches from the missile impacts. Areas contained. Only gunning towers seven and ten off line, Sir.”

“Can they catch us?” Ottal requested.

“The active Python will intercept us before we’re half way through the sector. Sir.”

“Get the Moray to assist us, we’ll do some damage together!” Ottal requested.

The Raptor was in pursuit despite the heavy damage it had sustained. Behind it the jumpgate was disgorging the remainder of the Mamba fighter groups. No allied ships followed.

Priest Champion Resomankcetolo was about to enter the second phase of the campaign to remove the pirate blockade of Brennan’s Triumph when his communications officer alerted him to an urgent message from Paranid Prime.

“Put it on viewer!”

“Yes, Sir.” The communications officer responded.

“Hail Priest Champion Resomankcetolo, you are ordered to desist your campaign to free the Brennans Triumph gates!” The white haired Priest Fleet Commander Oulomomankcet commanded.

“Do we have resolution, Sir?” Resomankcetolo asked.

“We have assurances from the Clan leader that if we desist in our action they will lift the blockade!” Oulomomankcet replied.

Resomankcetolo looked slightly perplexed, “And do we trust their word, Sir?”

“The Teladi Trading Guilds have acted as intermediaries in this, and the reports they have provided are verified! The Priest council has agreed to have your people stand down and return to Priest Pity. There have been numerous reports of pirate activity within the home systems. The return of sector forces is our primary goal!” The senior Paranid watched for a reaction.

Resomankcetolo addressed the officers on the bridge. “Notify all pilots and commanders that they are to stand down and return back their home sectors.” Looking back towards the screen. “Sir, we are returning as ordered!”

Oulomomankcet nodded then closed the com.

Tor claimed his third Mandalay success, with a deft roll and quick reactions after a prolonged chase. The two Orinocos had fled when station fighters began to emerge from the nearby ore mine. Amongst the debris he had identified several undamaged missile containers. These were now in the hold.

“Tor I’m receiving an incoming message from the local Trading Station.” Sweety reported.

“Put it though!”

“Station to Piranha pilot. In the name of the priests, for your actions we make you welcome to dock at any of our stations.”

“Com closed.” Sweety commented.

“Let’s go see what a Paranid station looks like!” He responded. Turning the ship around he headed towards the trading station.

The ship touched against the dockside and clamps engaged. He took a moment to prepare himself.

“Sweetie, from the Satellite data you have so far, what are the trading opportunities like around here?” Tor asked.

“My analysis indicates that there are good trading possibilities in many of the Paranid sectors we have mapped so far.”

“How many credits do I have?” He asked.

“Current credits available, two million, three hundred thousand.”

Tor paused for a moment, “Sweetie, do you think you can handle another couple of freighters?”

“Yes,” Sweetie responded.

“Excellent, how about ordering a couple of Dolphins medium spec. Full engine and rudder upgrades and see if you can add in an extra five hundred cargo units on each ship!”

“Anything else?” Sweetie asked.

“Get them down here and trading!” Tor stopped and thought for a moment, “What’s Fenagalas up to?”

“He’s currently trading in Ceo’s Buckzoid. Carrying silicon wafers to the Crystal Fab.” Sweetie reported.

“I think when we’ve finished putting out a few more Satellites we should have a reunion,” Tor commented.

Tor opened the inner door and stepped into the airlock. The inner door closed before the outer door rolled back. He took a moment to look around. The holo-statues of ancient Paranid Priests gazed down at the throng of people. The traders were mainly Paranid with only a handful of representatives from the other races being present.

The attire of the Paranid varied from the general pilots’ uniform, common to most races, to loose fitting robes. The station security wore robes bearing the insignia of the station and the staffs they carried were just larger versions of the pocket stun stick Tor carried around.

He wandered aimlessly through the station. Occasionally stopping to see what was on offer in the station trader stores and even meandering into one from time to time. After a while he found himself looking at the latest personal pads.

“Can I help?” The voice of the Paranid salesman gave Tor a start.

“Umm, yes I think you may. My ship has an AI Personality chip on board. I was wondering is there anyway it can be plugged into one of these but still be able to monitor the ships internal systems?”

The salesman smiled, “Of course, but you’ll need one of the technical data pad range not one of these personal pads. However they are expensive.”

“How expensive?”

“The type you are after start at three thousand credits, the top of the range device is four and a half thousand credits.” The salesman answered.

Tor swallowed hard, “That’s a lot, why are they so expensive?”

“You get full interface control with your ship. It can analyze how you fly and reconfigure the systems to optimize the response characteristics of the ship. The pad will also give full technical details on system efficiency and alert you to potential failures including point of failure location. Even if your ships own systems have failed. As an independently powered unit it will not suffer power surges.” The salesman paused and was about to continue listing the features when Tor interrupted him.

“And can it be used just like a personal pad as well?”

“Of course it can, Sir.” The salesman smiled again.

“Excellent I’ll take one.”

The salesman looked slightly perplexed, “Which one would Sir like?”

“I think I’ll have the hideously expensive one. Anything less and the personality AI will only complain,” Tor responded.

The Paranid smiled and guided Tor to examine the unit. It contained a large number of technical functions, all of which were lost on him. He was shown the interface location within the back of the pad for the AI chip, and how to remove and reinstall the protective cover plate.

Eventually Tor, thoroughly confused by all the details, took the pad and authorized the transaction. Then he went to find himself some refreshment and food.

The Paranid food and drink were quite different in texture and smell to anything he had tried before. Most of the food on the station was prepared in various flavoured and scented oils. Many of the oils being used were locally produced and a specialty of the area, Soja Beans featured heavily in the menu.

Tor desperately looked out for a meatsteak but none of the food halls had them on the menu. Eventually he tried the least offensive looking dish. Although he could stomach the food it left a slightly bitter taste in the mouth. Several Paranid ales later the taste was dulled but still present.

As he contemplated finding a rest room to get a few hours sleep he noticed an elderly argon man sat carefully studying from two data pads.

“Excuse me, Sir!”

The man glanced around slightly startled at being addressed, “Sorry, were you talking to me?”

“Didn’t mean to disturb you, but I’m new around here and was wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about our Paranid hosts?” Tor asked conversationally.

“Ah. Yes, an interesting race so much culture and history to explore. Is there anything in particular you want to know?”

“Well I’m looking to start trading with them and wanted to make sure I don’t have any cultural misunderstandings that might jeopardize any negotiation.” Tor chose his words carefully.

“I see!” The man paused and gave Tor a thoughtful look. “And you’re a Trader?”

“Well I’m more an opportunities explorer at the moment, with a small number of trading ships under my command.” Tor replied.

“And what ship do you have?”

“A Boron Piranha. By the way the names Tor Grall,” Tor replied.

“Professor Jeron Autland! Pleased to meet you Tor. I can guess you’ve already made a favourable impression with the Paranid, by the fact that you’re on this station!” Jeron replied, “But I think we can help each other out here. In return for my information with regards to dealing with the Paranid, I need a lift to the sector Montalaar.” He paused. “Unfortunately my own aged transport ship engine has given up leaving me stranded here until a replacement can be obtained.”

“I’m not familiar with that sector.” Tor responded.

“It’s a mere nine jumps from here.”

“Nine?” Tor hesitated, “That’s a lot of sectors to go through. What’s so important you need to go there?”

“I’ve been asked to do some research. Some colonists have discovered what they claim to be Xenon artifacts and need someone to verify their authenticity!” The Professor explained.

“Are there many Xenon artifacts left behind?” Tor asked.

“My word yes. For instance there’s there remains of a Xenon station still in Bala Gi’s Joy left over from the great war. Not much of it’s left I hasten to add, and it’s not easy to find either. Quite often when a new mining operation starts in the unclaimed sectors they find some remains of Xenon equipment left behind,” Jeron paused in thought, “One day we hope to find an isolated fragment of Xenon AI or at least resurrect some of it so we can understand it better.”

Tor had already decided to agree in transporting the Professor but spent a while longer talking to him before formally saying so.

Chapter 16 – Escape.

Admiral Ottal sat in thought as his tactical officer reported, “Split Python will be in range in ten seconds.”

“Have gunners open fire,” Ottal commanded, “Give me an update on the Moray.”

The response was, “Moray will intercept in twenty seconds.”

Plasma began to be exchanged between ships, “Shields seventy percent!”

“Where are my fighters?” Ottal demanded.

“The fighters are engaged with fast pirate ships in Nopileo’s Memorial. The AIC Roamer has left the sector!” The tactical officer reported.

“We need them here!” Ottal demanded.

“Sir, the Liets Endeavor has issued a general distress call!” The tactical officer announced.

“Update!” Ottal called out.

“The crew is abandoning ship.” There was a brief pause. The viewer a haze of plasma with fighters fully engaged in the distance. “The commander reports multiple internal explosions and continued pressure losses with new stress ruptures in the hull.”

“Give me an estimate!” The Admiral ordered.

“The ship will tear itself apart in a few minutes.” The tactical officer responded.

“Have all available fighters guide emergency pods back to the Aladna Hill Gate!” Ottal ordered.

The Python was suddenly caught in the crossfire between the Gallators Fate and the Boron Moray. It maintained the bulk of its firepower on the Titan.

“Shields forty percent. Damage to mid sections fifty three, fifty four, fifty seven and sixty two, we have lost gunning tower five. Python shields at twenty five percent, it’s lost six gunning positions! Sir! The Python is turning into our ship!”

“Helm, turn! Evasive maneuvers now!” Ottal ordered.

The computer alarm sounded, “Warning collision imminent!”

The Gallators Fate suddenly jarred. “Collision detected!”

The lights on the bridge went out briefly as emergency lighting kicked in.

“Damage report!” Ottal shouted out.

The tactical officer picked himself up off the floor and rushed to his station. “Sir we have lost main engines, running on secondary engine power. Major damage to aft sectors one hundred six through to one hundred seventy three. We have lost all six rear gunning towers, Sir.”

“And the Python?” Ottal asked.

“Python is crippled, no engine power primary or secondary, auxiliary power only for a single shield unit and life support. Boron Moray is moving in for the kill, Sir!”

“Get me the commander of the Moray!” Ottal ordered. “Helm bring us round and aim for the Aladna Hill Gate.”

The Liets Endeavor exploded in the distance, on board the Gallators Fate all eyes were transfixed on the view screen and silence descended.

“Did they all get out?” The admiral asked.

“Insufficient information available,” Caran commented quietly.

The Admiral looked around. A secondary view screen opened as the Boron Commander appeared.

“Admiral?” The commander asked.

Ottal turned back quickly, “Commander, I request that you do not engage the Split Python but help to prevent the pursuing Raptor class ship from engaging us. We have secondary engine power only and are running at half speed.”

The Boron Commander looked perplexed then acknowledged the request, “Admiral we will comply with your request.”

“Thank you! Admiral Ottal out.” The com closed.

Caran spoke up, “Admiral, if I may make a suggestion, the Discoverer two has a transporter on board. If we can launch that, then in conjunction with a few transport ships from Aladna Hill we can pick up all the Liets Endeavor survivors and get them to safety! This should free up the fighters to give us additional support!”

Ottal looked across, “Do it!”

The Split Raptor was closing fast on the Gallators Fate undeterred by the attack of the smaller Boron Moray. Plasma flew between the two ships the Moray forced to disengage and the larger Split craft knocked out two of the Morays shield units and several gunning positions. Even so the Raptor also took additional damage losing another shield unit and gunning position.

Mamba fighters engaged the Boron ship as it moved away from the combat.

“Sir we are being hailed by the captain of the Raptor.”

“On screen.”

The secondary viewer opened, “Admiral, I am Captain Thun t’Knnr surrender your ship!”

“Captain, I think you overestimate your chances of success. I believe it is you that should stand down.”

The Split captain laughed, “You and your people have put up a good fight, but you cannot now outrun our fighters or their missiles!”

Ottal knew this to be true, “You haven’t caught up with us yet!” He answered as defiantly as he could then closed the com. “Caran, we need support and fast pull some strings get me some here and fast.”

Caran looked at the Admiral, and knew they were in deep trouble. He opened a private com back to the service headquarters.

The Morays fighters and all the Argon fighters in the sector began to close in to defend the Gallators Fate. The gate from Nopileo’s Fate also saw the arrival of the Gallators Fate own fighter squadrons arrive from the rearguard skirmish with pirates, however these were now too far to be able to help.

The Titan shook to several hornet missile strikes. The Raptor was closing and opened up on the undefended rear section of the Gallators Fate before being forced to disengage by hornet missiles fired from several Boron Eels.

“Sir, I have the AIC Roamer entering the sector with two N2 interplanetary battlecruisers!” The tactical officer announced.

Ottal glanced across at Caran who simply watched the screen.

“Where?”

“Sir, Aladna Hill Gate gate. Battlecruisers are moving to engage. Closing speed one thousand mps. The Roamer is launching fighters and transports/”

“Interplanetary destroyers?” Ottal asked.

“AIC ships!” Caran responded, “The latest in high speed engine technology with exceptional turn rate, not so useful out here on a normal day. But today isn’t a normal day!”

“Let’s hope they don’t get here too late.” Ottal looked back at the viewer. “Give me an update.”

“Shield recovering but they can’t take another missile volley, Sir! The Raptor is turning back to engage, Sir. Range four k’s and closing.”

“Time for intercept?”

“Ten seconds, N2 Battlecruisers will be with us in just over fifteen seconds.”

“Let’s hope our shields survive that long!” Ottal commented. “Helm see if you can prolong the chase.”

The ship juddered. Again the lights flickered and three consoles sent showers of sparks scattering across the bridge with a scent of burnt system boards and fire suppressant foam.

“Damage report?” Ottal ordered.

“Sir we have lost tactical, internal scanners indicate system wide damage, major hull breaches in rear sectors. We’re losing atmosphere. Engine fuel cell containment fields are still stable. But I’m registering wild fluctuations in shield stability, Sir.” The engineering officer responded. “Communications are out Sir.”

“Navigation and maneuver engines?”

“Systems are still functioning Sir.” Helm reported.

“Reroute auxiliary power to tactical! I want to see what’s going on out there!”

“Sir!” Engineering responded.

The view screen flickered in a haze of white flecks and a poor image began to appear. The Raptor was surrounded by a haze of plasma. One of the new N2s was standing between the two ships and not yielding. With additional missile launchers spaced along the hull and Gamma High Energy Plasma Throwers the Raptor was taking more punishment than it could endure.

The image cleared, to reveal the second N2 closing and tear chunks from the hull of the Raptor. Fire spewed into space as the internal air jetted out. Only to be extinguished and form a crystalline white mist. The Split Mambas were fully engaged with the fighters to try and defend the big ship.

Ottal watched as emergency escape pods were launching from the Raptor. The bulk of the ship turning as internal explosions opened new fractures in the hull. The N2s continued their barrage.

Suddenly both battlecruisers disengaged together as the Split ship stopped dead. One stayed close to the crippled Gallators Fate, whilst the other went to support the fighters.

As the Raptor finally exploded the remaining Split fighters were ordered to stand down and return home.

“Well I hope this was all worth it!” Ottal looked at Caran.

“So do I.” Caran replied.

Ottal addressed his bridge staff. “We are still on battle alert people until we reach our own space. Stay sharp. I want to see reports from all stations including casualty lists. Have we isolated those hull breaches?”

“Yes Sir, we are no longer losing atmosphere. Shields have stabilized, and engine fuel cell containment is holding Sir.” The engineering officer responded.

“How long until we reach the gate?” Ottal asked.

“Fifteen minutes Sir!” Helm confirmed.

“Keep her steady, I don’t want this thing to break up on us!”

“Yes Sir!” Helm responded.

“How are we with getting coms back up?” Ottal asked.

“Emergency teams are replacing the damaged transmitter units. We should have coms up in five minutes Sir.” The engineering officer replied.

Admiral Ottal sat back, the look of deep concentration and thought etched into his features. Caran Belign went back to studying the terminal screen watching the updates and bulletins being transmitted through the ships internal coms channels. Only urgent and technical messages were feeding through and it gave him all the information he required as to the exact status of the ship.

Admiral Ottal was also studying the reports shown on the display mounted on the arm of the captains’ chair.

“Sir, we now have coms!” The engineering officer announced.

“Open a channel to Commander Parrel on the Roamer!” Ottal ordered.

“Parrel here! Good to hear from you Admiral we’ve been trying to contact you for the past few minutes!”

“Glad to still be here!” The Admiral responded. “Thanks for bringing us help!”

“Our duty Sir, to assist when we can!” Parrel commented. “Sir we are currently picking up the escape pods of the Liets Endeavor. We have plenty of space onboard and medical facilities if you want to transfer your wounded. Also our scans indicate your ship to have major structural damage. Our recommendation is to remove all personnel with the exception of some engineers and pilots who can bring the ship home.”

“What about the Split forces?” Ottal asked.

“They are withdrawing, with the exception of one of the Pythons which has lost all engine power, and a compliment of fighters that are holding a defensive position around the ship.” Parrel replied.

“When we are closer to the gate we shall transfer our casualties and the bulk of the crew. Ottal out!” Ottal closed the com. He paused for a moment then asked, “How many fighters did we lose?”

“We have lost seven Busters and five Elites, only two pilots not recovered. Sir.” The tactical officer replied.

Ottal looked across at the tactical officer.

“They failed to bail out in time Sir!”

“Send me their names. I’ll need to inform their next of kin.” Ottal quietly and calmly requested. The tactical officer nodded.

A couple of minutes later they drew close to the Roamer and stopped. Medical transports and personnel carriers exited the large transport ship in a steady stream. The two N2 ships held a defensive position between them and the retreating Split forces. The Boron Moray gathered the last of its fighters then took its leave and departed the sector to return to Lucky Planets for repair at the shipyard.

Once docked the evacuation of the Gallators Fate was underway. Only a handful of twenty engineers and technicians, with two pilots and the Admiral were left on board. With the transfer complete the Roamer went ahead through the gate, just in case anything untoward happened to the Titan after it completed its jump.

Caran concerned himself with the technical scans of the alien ship and worked with Tereana on interpreting the findings.

“Let’s run through what we have again.” Caran declared.

“The ship is incredibly strong, nothing we have or any of the other races, including the Xenon or Khaak, gets close. As far as I can tell none of us even have the technology to build such a ship.” Tereana started, “We’ve tried to determine the age of the vessel on the engine fuel life, and it’s monitored state. Factoring in the incredibly low temperatures which will have slowed down degradation and increased fuel cell life.”

“And?” Caran asked having heard the answer before and not believed it.

“Depending on when the ship froze itself, between three thousand and five thousand Argon years.” Tereana replied.

Commander Parrel tapped his fingers on the briefing room table. “We’re certain of that?”

“I’m just giving you the two limits!” Tereana replied quietly.

“Why would the ship freeze itself?” Caran observed.

Parrel answered, “We have detected organic matter within the ship, the theory we’re currently looking at is the person, thing was put into a cryogenic freeze for the journey.”

“A three to five thousand year journey?” Caran was skeptical.

“I think we’ve agreed that for some reason this ship must have been knocked off course. It would make sense that the ship did not arrive at its destination and didn’t get the instruction to revive the pilot!” Parrel responded.

Caran leant back in his chair in thought. “What else can we deduce from our scans. Can we restore the engines to full power?”

“The fuel cell construction is unfamiliar to us. We would need to examine the engine system first hand so we can get the interface correct. We would also need to understand the ships power distribution systems to get an idea of fuel cell yield. In short there are too many unknowns to answer that question.” Tereana replied.

“The ships internals didn’t warm up when you stopped the ship, but the outside was glowing hot. Why?” Caran asked.

“That would be the ceramic hull and inner skins preventing the heat from entering.” Tereana responded.

“Speculation then, this would make it a terrestrial ship capable of entering atmospheres?” Caran raised an eyebrow.

“Yes it could enter an atmosphere unharmed. The speed the ship was travelling at would indicate that it has used the traditional gravitational sling shot method to get this far.” Tereana replied.

“Perhaps it gained speed in its flight due to gravitational effects after it left its home world.” Parrel thought out loud.

“What else do we know? The ship maintained low power to the shield, anything else perhaps?” Caran voiced the question.

“There was one other sub system active, we don’t know exactly what though.” Tereana paused briefly and looked at Commander Parrel. “Our guess is it’s possibly some kind of flight recorder.”

This was the response he needed a definite answer to. The information locked in a three to five thousand year old flight recorder could be worth more than the losses incurred in ships and men. The star charts would help define and triangulate all the positions of the known sectors in real space and include vast regions of space as yet unexplored and undiscovered. Perhaps even show some of the other subsets of gates the ancients had not yet deemed necessary to reveal.

Charts the Goner have struggled to compile for decades which would give them the information required to make the gateless jumpdrive of the Terran man Brennan, something of worth. Even lead them back to the mythical Sol system and the legendary home world of Earth. To Caran this could be the last piece of the key but he did not express his views openly. Many times before had Argons made the mistake of believing they had the answer.

The Argon military had recently closed in on several operations that sold illegal drives touted as gateless. Although the technology was there, the drive simply allowed the pilot to jump to any point in space of a known gated sector using an existing gate as a carrier into the sector and projecting the position to a predetermined point by the pilot. This had massive benefits for interplanetary transports, which could use the jumpdrive technology to planet hop within systems.

The increase in smuggling and illegal activities exploded causing the military to ban the drives. Unlicensed drives were dealt with, usually by force of arms.

In all cases it had become clear, jumping without a true point of reference was meaningless. Several Gonor scientists had tried jumping to random points in space that they believed was the Sol system and were never seen again. That activity was deemed pointless and banned.

“We will need to put together a discreet recovery team, I will be looking to call on some of the scientists on board, due to your prior knowledge, as well as some experts from other sectors. Is there anything else we know, that could be important?” Caran asked.

Parrel shook his head. Tereana moved uneasily and shifted her gaze around the room before looking back at Caran. She had wanted to tell Parrel about her findings on the recording privately but had not found the opportunity. This she deemed would be the right and possibly the only time she would have the opportunity to tell someone of importance like Caran Belign, who undoubtedly would also like to be the first to know.

“There is something else. Not related to the ship which I think you’ll be interested in.” She spoke calmly and quietly, even with the nervousness she now felt.

On board the Piranha, Tor sat in the pilots’ seat. The Professor was sorting out a few personal things before joining him.

“Sweetie, I’ve bought you a present!” He declared.

“A present?” The tone was of suspicion.

“Yes!” Tor swallowed hard not really knowing how the AI was going to react, then cursed himself quietly thinking ‘It’s just a computer chip. Not a person, what’s the problem?’ Tor resumed, “It’s a technical data pad capable of interfacing your personality AI chip!”

There was a pause, “Interface the pad with the console. I’d like to do a system check for compatibility.” Sweetie responded.

Tor connected the pad and waited, the screen flickered and flashed through menus, readings, response curves, coms channels, and power cycling modes. Although it took only a few seconds it seemed a long time to Tor. “Pad acceptable powering down system board, and Tor be careful!”

He breathed a sigh of relief and set about installing the chip into the data pad. With the transfer complete the pad came to life as soon as the protective cover plate was refitted.

“Tor, just running remote system check on ship.” Sweety announced. “Everything appears to be functioning, I will check again when you’ve reinstalled the system board.”

“Wow, you can do that without being plugged in?” Tor was impressed.

“I have an increased functional range above that provided to me by the ship and can monitor and maintain all functions remotely.” Sweety confirmed.

Shortly after he had finished plugging in the card, he heard the Professor tapping on the outer door. Sweety released the door locks and they slid open.

Tor beckoned him in with the wave of his hand. “Come in professor. Welcome aboard!”

“A fine ship you have here Tor and quite new by the look of her!” Jeron commented.

“Thanks. Please take a seat, make yourself comfortable and we’ll depart.” Tor remembered back to the days, not so many weeks before, when he transported passengers on a regular basis.

“Very kind of you young sir. Where shall I put my luggage?”

Tor opened a large storage locker, “Hopefully it’ll all fit in here.” The luggage lifter glided past and neatly stored itself away.

“There’s just one thing Professor. I’ve been building a network of satellites as I’ve been entering new sectors. So I may need to make an unscheduled stop to buy some more before we reach our destination.”

“A good way to build a trading empire.” Jeron enthused. “You seem to be very much of an entrepreneur and it’s not for me to get in the way.”

Tor smiled turned to the airlock doors and pressed the keys on the control pad. The doors slid shut and interlocks engaged. He returned to the pilot seat. “Sweety, get us clearance to depart.”

“Clearance granted, handing over controls to station guidance systems!” Sweety responded, there was a slight jolt as the ship moved away from the side of the dock.

As the ship cleared the station entrance Tor pulled up the sector map and glanced at the location of the gates. Bringing the ship around he then fully engaged the thrusters heading for the next sector.

“So Professor you were going to tell about trading with the Paranid!” Tor commented.

“Well Tor, I always find it’s useful to know a little bit about the culture and the politics of the races. The Paranid have much of their society and culture based around belief, the ruling body are the high priests led by the appointed Priest King.” Jeron started.

“How do you mean appointed?” Tor asked.

“Ignoring the Khaak and the Xenon, we have five races within the alliance, each has it’s own unique ruling body and governing system. The Argon system is based on elected representatives, elected by the people, from the people.” It was a simple summary and as Tor was Argon, Jeron did not feel the need to elaborate.

“The Boron has a monarchy, a single figure head whose succession is by birth right not election, which governs through appointed advisors and subjects.” Again the Professors comments were brief. He did not see any reason to continue talking on the subject as Tor appeared to have dealings with the Boron already.

“The Teladi are governed by Company Chief Executives and the corporations they control. It’s a money based society and wealth combined with business acumen gives an individual power and influence.” Jeron glanced around. “The society is generally governed by the females of the species as they have proven to be the more financially aware. As a trader you can learn a lot from the Teladi, but they do have a duplicitous nature and need to be watched. A happy Teladi is one that’s making credits and if you have dealings with them you need good, strong bargaining skills. If you employ one then so much the better, but make sure you give them some slack to make credits for themselves.” Tor gave a wry smile as he checked the HUD and flight vector of the ship.

Jeron paused. “The Split are ruled by families, each family has a respected elder or head of the house. The strongest house with the greatest support from the other houses controls the power. As you can tell the Split regime is the most factional system. Internally the houses fight amongst themselves trying to sway support. Even so it’s not as violent a society as it once was.” The Professor rummaged through his pocket to pull out a personal pad. “Only one caution as a non-Split if you upset one family then the whole of the Split race becomes your enemy. Even after years of internal war they will pull together if any outsider threatens them. Benignly enough though they respect a fighter. If a Split picks a fight with you and you win, you get respect. If it’s the other way around then you’re in trouble. Also war has given them significant advances in weapons technology over the other races. A gap which has only recently been closed.”

He pressed a few keys on the pad and continued, “Lastly the Paranid! They are ruled by the Priests. Only the high priests decide on which of them deserves the title Priest King.” Jeron paused. “It’s not a title given as a birth right, like the Boron Queen, however it has been know for a son to follow in his fathers footsteps. The priests enter into service for life. The selection, as I understand it, is reasonably tough and only those Paranid with unwavering faith and loyalty get selected. Then it takes a lifetime of service and devotion to reach the higher levels. The Paranid however throw a great deal of resources at protecting their faith from external influences and their belief gives them an inner strength and resolve making them fearsome enemies in combat.”

Tor had turned his pilot chair around with the ship flying straight and true towards the gate. Jeron looked up, “So how to trade with them! They are very strict on contraband goods. You will quickly lose favour if you transport any of the goods I’ve listed on my pad here.” The Professor handed it across. “Fortunately you’ve already made the initial contact. Your acceptance will grow the more you trade with them and if the need arises protect their sectors from undesirables. Traditionally a lot of the big industries rely on a product know as Soja Husks, although there are numerous factories around they need a constant supply of Soja Beans and Energy Cells. Of course there are many Paranid stations which have been experimenting with goods only found in the factories of other races, such as Boron BoGas and Teladi Teladianium.”

Tor had scanned the list and handed back the pad. Fortunately there was nothing stashed away that he needed to worry about.

“So where do the Goner and Nameless fit in?” He asked.

The professor paused for a moment and answered cautiously. “The Goner are a group of believers and scientists that believe that we Argons are the descendents of travelers from another world. Trapped here by a war with the Xenon. Since the arrival of the hero Brennan they have been studiously piecing together our true history and trying to determine where our real home world is.”

Again the professor paused, “The Nameless is the term given to half breeds usually the children of slaves. Where one race has co-joined with another and the act has resulted in a child. Why do you want to know about them?”

“Just that I’ve met one and he’s not the sort of person I want to get on the wrong side of?” Tor replied.

The professor nodded, “Well there’s not much more to tell! Normally such children have genetic deficiencies or physical abnormalities. Sad to say most die with in the first few years of life. The few true hybrids, that have in essence the correct number of limbs and organs, are usually shunned by both races. They are subject to the laws and beliefs of any races that take them in. But you are right to be wary of them! My understanding is they tend to have short tempers and can be incredibly strong and resilient.”

Tor gave a slight nod of acknowledgement.

The Gallators Fate eventually arrived at the shipyard, emergency repair crews lowered gantries from the overhead construction beams. With the ship secured it was cleared of personnel and the engines were taken off line.

A swarm of robots and maintenance crew in environment suits began to go through the interior and over the exterior of the ship. Transports began to form a steady stream bringing in replacement equipment.

Admiral Ottal sipped his hot Garrow Root Cha as he looked down from a window in the station and surveyed the ship for the first time since the skirmish. Behind him Commander Parrel, Tereana Tersill, Caran Belign, two scientists from the Roamer and two science officers from the Gallators Fate were chatting.

He turned around. "Shall we begin?"

There was a brief murmur of agreement and they took their seats.

"I'm not going to go through any of the casualty figures as that will be a discussion for another meeting later!" Ottal stated. "Now we had a task to stop and recover what now appears to be an alien ship. The first part we have succeeded in doing." He paused. "The second we have yet to accomplish. Now as far as we know the ship is safely hidden away. The first question is do we feel it's worth putting together a covert operation to recover it?"

Parrel replied, "From the scans we managed to take before sending the ship off, it undoubtedly holds technologies ahead of our own. If we manage to explore beyond Khaak space, then it may be that we will encounter the species that built it. We would have an advantage of being able to communicate, possibly even know how they will react to us."

"Do you think the technologies would help us hold back, even defeat the Khaak and Xenon?" Ottal asked.

Parrel shrugged his shoulders, "We don't know!"

"Caran! You've been particularly interested in this ship. What are your reasons for finding it again?" The Admiral turned his gaze towards him.

Caran paused, "The need to know and understand what lies beyond our sectors! What other kinds of species we are likely to encounter. To get and understand the navigational records that it holds. It may help us determine if the Xenon are still in the outer regions of the Danna's Chance solar system. I believe it is worth finding just for the potential information that it may hold!"

"But you had reservations about bringing it on board when we had the chance?" The Admiral observed.

"Yes, and I still do! As far as we know the pilot is still on the ship, cryogenically frozen, the atmosphere on board is in the liquid state. This means any other organism that may have been present in the atmosphere, like viruses, will also be cryogenically frozen." Caran paused, "We have no idea what the ship is capable of if we restore power to the systems. It may regard us as hostile and self-destruct taking out who knows what. It may have computer AI intelligence that can infect and overrun our computer systems leaving us vulnerable to our enemies. Or it may be the nicest, friendliest system in the universe. With it safely out of harms way, then it's effectively quarantined and with a small team of experts we can investigate with little to no risk."

The Admiral thought for a brief while as the rest of the room waited in hesitant anticipation. "Who did you have in mind?"

"I'm looking to the scientist that we have here. Only Parrel, yourself and me are excluded. However I have also requested the Academy of Species and Alien Races Research in Cloudbase Southwest to send an expert researcher. Of the three key professors that have the expertise one just happens to be on his way to the sector Montalaar to investigate some Xenon remains. They will be sending me the details of the ship he's travelling in when they are available."

Chapter 17 – Planning to return

Feran gazed out the pirate station window and looked at the stars of Brennan's Triumph. He had recently taken another dose of the Setardize, the mental screen implanted by the doctor to give him unnatural Split feelings was gone. The drug was also beginning to take on a more lasting effect however his mind was clear. The thick fog of perpetual rage, which had enveloped many of his dark years, now lifted.

He reflected on the recent arrival of the remains of the small force that he sent to delay the Argon fighters from helping the Gallators Fate. The force had lost four Orinocos. It was time to drive a stronger sense of discipline into his pilots. The credits were now rolling in but most of these were being spent on a continual stream of replacement ships and equipment. His men were pirates and use to vying for personal glory not military men, though a good number had seen some military service before being kicked out for one reason or another.

He looked down at his personal pad. It showed a report from the battle. He snorted in disgust at the apparent stupidity of losing the Raptor Uulodk, its commander Makl t'Jnkk managing to escape with his crew. 'Running like the fool he is!' Feran thought.

Feran wondered if the Split Families would one day recognize that giving command to the great warriors with proven abilities rather than family members would prevent such mistakes. Until such time the enemies of the Split would take heart and become bolder at their failures. He paused in his thoughts knowing many of the great generals were located near to the frontier sectors and the ones left in the home systems were no more than play actors. Elevated to stations beyond their capabilities.

The flow of spaceweed was continuous and the quality excellent. Concerning reports of the Claw clan probing the sector for the source of the weed kept him focused on maintaining a strong presence and continuous flow of freighters to Tredamonuss' Station. Tapping up the details of the most recent visit, he noted the mercenaries still controlled it rather than a clan and were in the process of fortifying their position. His mind now questioned why Clegan had not fully reported the vulnerability of the station. It was something else he would look into, but whilst the flow of goods was regular he put it to one side.

"My lord!" A voice broke his thoughts.

He did not turn around, "Yes Ganark?"

"We have managed to trace the name of the Argon pilot!" Ganark reported.

"Excellent." Feran responded.

"The name is Tor Grall, my lord."

"Hmmm. And where is this Grall person now?" Feran asked, somehow knowing that Ganark would not have an answer.

"He has managed to elude us so far. The ship he was flying was damaged beyond repair in a fight with DarkAce Clan ships. We believe he ordered a Piranha from the Boron shipyard but their security is too tight for us to break and find its registration." Ganark answered.

"Look for other leads! He must do regular business with people. Find them and we will find him!" Feran declared.

Tredamonuss' Pirate Station was nearly ready and the group of mercenaries aboard had named themselves The Shadow Troop. As for Tredamonas, she had returned as planned back to Blue Profit.

New ships were being assembled in the lower storage cells by reprogrammed construction robots. The flow of materials had been reasonably steady. Four laser towers were deployed near the docking entrance of the station with eight more on route. A dozen new pilots had arrived and several shipments of slaves. These were to serve the stations needs rather than

sold on. In the upper storage level nearly twenty units of Antrodi weed and sixty units of various other spaceweeds were waiting to be shipped.

Clegan had taken the opportunity of Creeds arrival and the ensuing battle to fake his own death, and now he had possession of the station. Looking over the control room, the new heart of the station, a team of six coordinated the arrivals and departures of the freighters and fighters. Providing Ferans Clan members did not discover him he would be safe.

Even so some of the recent arrivals had the markings of the Claw clan. They were hustling for information and attempting to purchase weed direct. Clegan sold them the five-percent reserved for Tredamonas, but his negotiator would not concede to a long-term supply plan. This agitated the pirates, but they soon settled down. A group had remained on board after the shipment had left, which displeased him as the station, although well secured internally, had few real security staff.

Korecmancketras was away trying to recruit more pilots and security personnel. He had a gift for finding talent, but in the sparsely populated local sector it was proving tough. Add in the recent skirmish and many people were keeping their heads down waiting to see if war was going to break out between the races.

“Sir, Nyeshta reports the completion of two new Bayamons.”

“Excellent! I want to see they’ve been burnt in. Get two test pilots to take them out and put them through their paces.” Clegan pause to look at his pad, “How much material do we have left.”

“Enough allocated for a new Orinoco, Sir. The next shipment is currently inbound two sectors away.”

He had looked over the plans for Nyeshtas’ Chaos mark one ship, smaller than the Orinoco, but if the engine configuration and weapons array were to specification, it would be significantly more powerful. Clegan had his doubts about the validity of much of the detail, however she had persuaded him that he should at least allow one to be built.

That ship was now taking shape in the lower hold but concealed from view. She wanted to be sure that even when it launched, only clan ships would be around to see it.

This was a dangerous time, now two clans wanted the weed. If either of them suspected the true strength of the station one or both would certainly try to take over. As far as Clegan was concerned if the ship worked it would offer a significant advantage over anything the opposition had, and any advantage he could get was a bonus.

“Sir we are being called. Bloodheart lifter arriving to collect weed.” An operator called out.

“Upper docking bay three is expecting him.” Clegan paused for a moment, then added. “Inform the Bloodheart clan ships that the Claw clan are in the area!” He tapped the console in front of him. If there was to be a clan confrontation then he could try to ensure his mercenaries were not in the middle of it.

It had also been brought to his attention that Creeds’ War Master Guild of Mercenaries were prowling the sector scoping out the new potential rivals. There was a fine line between piracy and mercenary activities and Clegan was, as he knew, on the Piracy side of the line. If he stayed away from selling slaves and kept his operation low key then the mercenary guilds would take no action.

In this respect Nyeshta would need to be keep an even lower profile, as she was believed to be on Creeds personal ‘to be dealt’ with list. Caran was unconcerned by the details of why. He did however have a growing concern that she could prove to be a significant liability longer term, but for now her skills were of greater importance.

Tor was nearly half way across the Rolk’s Legacy sector when he received the incoming transmission.

“Message for Professor Autland!” Sweety announced.

“Professor Autland here! How can I help?”

“Professor, I am Admiral Ottal on board the shipyard in Light of Heart. We request your urgent presence on board the station! Please instruct your pilot to make the necessary course adjustment.”

“Understood Admiral we will be with you shortly.” Jeron replied.

“Thank you Professor!” The com went quiet.

“To the shipyard please Tor!”

“Which way?” Tor replied.

“Straight on through Montalaar.” The Professor replied.

Tor acknowledged, “Okay.”

It was nearly half an hour later that they arrived. Tor had dropped a Satellite in each sector. The docking clamps engaged and Tor assisted in opening the locker holding the Professors luggage. It glided out and waited.

“Open the airlock doors Sweety.”

There was the distinctive hiss from the slight pressure differential between the station and the ship. The Professor stepped out to the reception committee and Tor heard the familiar tones of Caran Belign as he too stepped out of the ship.

“Welcome Professor, and Mr. Belign so nice to see you again!” Caran commented.

“Hi Caran.” Tor responded with slight apprehension.

“Don’t worry Mr. Belign, fortunately we do not require your services. So you may leave when you wish.” Caran read through Tors’ expression.

The Professor turned around, “Thank you for bringing me here young man, and I wish you every success in your venture.”

“Thank you Professor, it has been a very enlightening trip.” Tor responded and wandered off to the nearest bar. The data pad in his pocket. Behind him the Piranha doors closed and the Professor and welcoming group moved towards the shuttle lifts.

Tor sat down and ordered a meatsteak with a flask of the local ale. He watched the news on the table holo-screen before putting Sweetys’ data pad on the table.

“Sweety, what’s my current credit status?”

“You have five hundred, seventy two thousand, four hundred and twelve credits.” She replied.

“And freighters?”

“All freighters have reported in, Vulture, Lifter and first Dolphin have maximum cargo capacity, new Dolphin ships in Paraniid sectors are now trading at two thirds maximum! When they have completed their next deliveries I will have them report into trading stations to increase further.”

“Sweety, what’s my current credit growth rate?” Tor asked.

“Between one hundred thousand and one hundred sixty thousand credits per hour.” Sweety responded.

Tor knew the rate would drop as soon as he hired more pilots like Fenagalas, or fighter pilots to act as escorts due to their need for sleep and wages. The need for sleep, it was a thought that washed over him. A quick decision was made to spend

a while on station and then retire for some needed rest. His shoulder still ached now and again reminding him of the recent injury.

Caran chaired the meeting, the Admiral took his usual position at the head of the briefing table, Commander Parrel sat to his left and Caran to the right. Around the table were the five scientists and the Professor.

“I’d like to welcome Professor Autland to the team! Professor in front of you is the data we have so far on the alien ship please take your time to study the details. If you have any questions then feel free to ask them. The rest of us here have already had an opportunity to study the data thoroughly and unless necessary I’m not proposing to go over it again!”

Jeron nodded and began to look over the details. The meeting from this point passed him by, as he became engrossed in the information before him.

Caran continued, “Within the next few days you will all board the AIC Roamer and be transported to Menelous Frontier. From here you will take two modified mule transports containing a small research facility construction kit and fly to Nopileo’s Memorial. Your escort ships will be War Master Mercenary vessels and the route you will take is via the Teladi sectors and through Thurucks Beard. This may sound like we’re going further to get nearer, and yes we are. The Split will be on heightened alert after the previous incursion and monitoring ship activity from all sectors to see if there is any repeat attempt to cross uncontrolled sectors. Hopefully by going through Split space they will be monitoring their own sectors less actively than those of the other races, and using native Split transports will also help mask the mission.”

“Will the mercenary ships remain whilst we do our research?” An Argon scientist from the Gallators Fate named Walstom Natpol asked.

“No, there will be one laser tower deployed as a defense and deterrent to potential hostile activities. I do not want to attract unwanted attention. The presence of your ships will be noted. Once the facility is built the same number of ships that arrived will need to leave. Otherwise someone will start to ask questions and find out where you went to.” Caran responded. “Escape pods will be part of the facility should you experience problems on the station.”

“Won’t we be picked up on the long range probes?” Leord Pertan, also from the Gallators Fate, questioned.

“No, your station will be close into the Jakjolak Belt, the Asteroid field will mask your presence.” Admiral Ottal commented.

The scientists appeared to be a little apprehensive but acknowledged they were potentially going to be relatively safe.

“Fascinating!” The professor commented and looked up, “An exceptional find, I’ve never seen anything like it!”

The group turned and looked at him. He looked around briefly, smiled, then went back to examining the data.

“Okay anyone any idea on how to open the ship?” Caran asked.

Leord answered, “Carefully! The extreme cold atmosphere inside the ship will make most materials extremely brittle. As we don’t yet understand the inner door mechanism, the chances are that any load required to move the frozen interlocks will cause the mechanism to shatter. We are less concerned about the outer airlock door as this should have been designed to cope with extremes of temperature.”

“So what do you suggest?” Ottal asked.

“Just to be certain we attached an enclosure around the outer airlock and bring the temperature up to one hundred and fifty degrees.” Leord responded. “Hopefully this should permeate through the door seal and help warm the mechanism.”

“And once inside the airlock?” Ottal looked back to the scientist.

“We’re anticipating some insulation in the inner doors, but not the same ceramic heat shielding that’s used on the outside. We need the heat to penetrate the inner hull and raise the temperature to around one hundred and fifty degrees above

absolute zero in order for the greater portion of the atmosphere to boil back into gas. But not so high to cause thawing of any biological matter.” Leord concluded, Walstom nodded.

Walstom added, “This will also help stabilize the mechanism of the inner door making it more resilient to manual operation.”

“What about the cryogenics?” Caran asked.

“We won’t know what effect long term cryogenic suspension will have had until we get some proper bio-readings. We don’t use this type of SA, so our best hope is that the onboard computer has the necessary data and can itself be revived and decrypted.” Tolona Smaral, head Biologist from the AIC Roamer answered. She was in her late forties and of average build.

“And if it can’t?” Caran looked around the table.

“Then our chances of successful reanimation will be extremely low. We have no idea on the bioelectrical makeup of the species, standard heart rate, atmospherical enrichment of the blood or neurological signal paths. Just some of the key things we need to understand in order to induce respiratory, heart and brain activity.” Tolona looked across at Caran.

“Anything else we should be aware of?” Caran glanced back at the scientist.

“We need to understand how and when the body was frozen. If the process was in response to the ship not reaching its intended destination, then there is always the possibility that ice formed in the brain during freezing which would have destroyed the delicate tissue cells.” Tolona added.

Caran looked around, “And if we raise the temperature?”

“It’s the freezing that’s critical. We should be able to bring the body back up to minus fifty degrees without doing any damage. However there is a time dependency as the body begins to warm, certainly with our species, anything over this temperature certain body fluids will begin to thaw.” This time Coulo Kartal, a biochemist from the AIC Roamer answered.

Tolona looked across the table addressing all the commanders, “We’ve not yet managed to do a cryogenic thaw successfully. One of the steps is a blood enrichment fluid that re-energizes the blood cells giving them the adrenaline, nutrients and oxygen enrichment required to kick-start the body. It also allows the blood to thaw at low temperatures. So we can pump it through before the body temperature rises to a point where it starts to degrade. The biggest single problem we have is to ensure all the blood has thawed. A single blockage in the body and in particular the brain can cause permanent, lethal damage to the subject.”

“It sounds like we need to know if the ship has the technology to revive the pilot automatically.” Caran concluded.

“That’s assuming there’s only one creature on board!” Parrel commented.

Caran looked at Parrel and acknowledged the comment.

The Professor looked up and glanced around the table.

“Yes Professor?” Ottal asked.

“Yes, this ship is unique in our space. From the results of the time estimate it rules out the possibility of any of the known races, with perhaps the exception of the Khaak, as we don’t know how long they have been travelling in space. Have you given it a name yet?” The Professor asked.

The team looked around the table.

“I guess not. We should give it a name. It will make talking about it so much easier.” Jeron added.

“Suggestions anyone?” Ottal asked.

“Danna’s UFO?” Leord commented.

“Too descriptive.” Caran replied and added, “The Traveler?”

There were a few pensive, thoughtful looks around the table.

“Voyager?” Tereana suggested..

“No we already use that name!” Ottal commented.

“FACS?” Tolona suggested.

“Why FACS?” Parrel asked.

“Abbreviation of Frozen Alien Cryogenically Stored,” Tolona observed.

“FACS. As good a name as any, short and to those of us in the know meaningful,” The Professor commented. “Anyone disagree?”

There were no voices of dissent.

“I have a question regarding supplies.” Jeron asked, “How long do we think this investigation will last? My gut feel is that it will be at least a few Argon weeks perhaps months. Is this the consensus of the team?”

“We have planned on a fourteen Argon day investigation,” Caran commented.

“Not enough! We may still be trying to open the inner door in fourteen days.” Leord looked around the table. “This is not a job we can afford to rush, if we do then we run the risk of breaking something important.”

The Admiral looked concerned, “We can’t have you out there too long.”

“If you can prove there is no biological hazard or any other type of danger to us, then we will plan to get the ship out of the sector. Then we can work on it in the safety of a station.” Caran commented. “However if we can’t establish the risk to ourselves, in the fourteen Argon days, then I will arrange for a trusted independent trader to deliver supplies.”

After the meeting Caran went back to his assigned quarters and finished packing the few personal items he had brought with him. It was time to return home again, he paused for thought.

“Computer, locate Tor Grall, ship registration TGT zero one BP!” He asked.

“Pilot Tor Grall still on station, currently asleep in the Travelers Rest Centre,” The computer responded.

“Excellent, notify me when he leaves the rest centre!” Caran commanded. With his few items packed away he headed out towards the shipyard construction docks where the two Mules were being refitted to hold the small research station construction kits.

Commander Parrel was overseeing the final stages of the refit. Once completed, they would dock with the Roamer and he wanted to be sure the power plant was properly secured in the first Mule.

“Are we on schedule?” Caran asked.

“We should be ready in a few hours. The Mules aren’t the best ships for this type of refit but the engineers have made the necessary adjustments and there’s no visual difference to the externals of the ship.” Parrel answered.

“Excellent!” Caran watched as the structural maintenance robots re-clad sections of the hull with the original panels.

The research station construction unit had been divided up into six sections, four of which were complete and awaiting loading into the Mules. The remaining two kits were elsewhere in the station still being packaged.

Parrel glanced at his personal pad. "Just been confirmed that the team are on the Roamer. We have stores and provisions for the fourteen Argon days trip on route from the trading station. Should be with us in a few minutes."

"Good work Commander, let me know when you're ready to leave!"

"Yes Sir!" Parrel answered.

Caran wandered away, there was little to do here but wait. He found his way to one of the security lounges restricted to station personnel and sat down. Taking out his pad he began to read reports from around the sectors.

Time passed quickly. Parrel called in to notify the departure of the AIC Roamer. Caran acknowledged and wished the team every success. Then he went back to studying the reports.

"Tor Grall has now left the rest centre!" His pad announced.

In one fluid motion Caran was off his seat and striding towards the visitor section of the station. "Keep me informed of his position!"

"He has entered the Gluttons Feast food hall on level C." The pad responded.

Caran relaxed slightly, with Tor stopping for a bite to eat there was no need to rush. He passed through the security door and out into the general visitors' docks. People drifted consciously out of his way. The lights reflecting dully off the metal plate in his face combined with his imposing height gave him assured passage through the crowd.

Tor was studying his data pad, the credits had rolled in then rolled out again to bring the two new Dolphins up to maximum cargo capacity. With that complete the credits were accumulating quickly, even so the slower ships occasionally missed the best opportunities as local traders beat them to the dock.

He paused with his drink half way to his lips when he spotted Caran walk into the bar, he slowly took a sip and put the glass down. Somehow Caran homed in on him within an instant of walking in the room.

"Mr. Grall, there you are!"

"Mr. Belign! Is this a social meeting or business?"

Caran sat down, "I see you have a technical pad, a very good investment!"

"It helps me keep in contact and monitor my assets!" Tor took another sip of his drink.

"Yes I understand business is good at the moment! I expect you'll soon be thinking of owning a factory?" Caran commented.

"Perhaps!" Tor glanced up knowing it was loaded question.

"Remember to put me down when they ask for references!" Caran smiled.

"Thank you I shall remember that! Is there anything else you want?" Tor cut to the chase.

"Mr. Grall, that I should be after something in return when you have been so helpful before!" Caran glanced around. Tor waited.

"But there is one thing, if you can see your way to being in Argon Prime in twelve Argon days from now, I think that's just less than ten Tazura. It would be very beneficial!" Caran concluded.

Chapter 18 – Stage One

Tereana watched the Roamer disappear behind the Mule as she looked out from the cockpit window. The pilot checked the systems and monitored the navigation data on the HUD. She felt a mix of emotions, eager anticipation of what they may discover, and a deep sense of uncertainty in the journey they had just embarked upon.

She hoped the first leg to reach the Jakjolak Asteroid Field would only last a few short hours. Out ahead of them were the Mercenary piloted Wolf ships and flanking either side were the Mambas. The second mule followed one kilometer behind.

Although in the briefing room the idea of a heavily armed convoy was appealing, she now felt the two mules were made all the more conspicuous and likely to attract attention, because of the fighter escort.

“Acknowledged new orders!” The pilot commented.

She looked towards the pilot.

He glanced across, “Change of plan, the convoy is to divide up! We will head into Family Whi then progress through Split space. The second mule will progress as previously planned.”

Tereana nodded, it was almost as if her commanders had mirrored her own concerns. The pilot showed little signs of the same nervousness as she did. Turning around in the narrow entrance of the cockpit she returned to the rear cabin. Three more of the science team were seated, either chatting quietly or trying to get some rest in the close confines of the ship.

Time seemed to drag by whilst the sectors drifted past. Neither transport was challenged or scanned. In Hatikvah’s Faith they could see the Split Python still stranded after the conflict. Repair ships moving as specs over the hull.

It was almost with a sense of relief when they made the final jump, still unchallenged, into Nopileo’s Memorial. The sector map showed the usual freighter traffic and the occasional, recognized, pirate convoy. The group turned and headed out towards the asteroid field, this in itself would take some time. As the sector dropped behind them the pilots, scanned for any pursuit or unwelcome interest, then altered course to the last known location of the alien ship.

After an hour they reached the edge of the asteroid field and all ships stopped. Tereana moved forward to the cockpit to view progress.

“Just aligning the ship, miss.” The pilot commented whilst turning the nose of the Mule to follow along the alien ships flight path.

Slowly the lead Mule moved forward, many of the asteroids appeared to be stationary whilst others slowly spun on their axis. The size and shapes varied wildly from just a few meters of broken rock and ice, to giants over one hundred kilometers in length. Gravitational influences were weak with the occasional asteroid showing strong magnetic influences.

“Send out the signal!” Tereana ordered. This was the furthest in to an asteroid field she had ever been and reflected that it was understandable why people avoided them whenever possible. Here the possibility of being struck by a sizable chunk of rock was magnified many times over and shields, however strong, may not be enough to prevent severe damage.

The pilot tapped on the console in front of him. A short low energy pulse radiated in all directions quickly absorbed by the surroundings. They waited a moment, then moved forward another five hundred meters and repeated the signal.

Ten seconds elapsed and then the short focused response.

“Did you get a fix? Tereana looked at the pilot.

“Fix confirmed. Target acquired!” The pilot responded and turned the ship towards a cracked and broken asteroid. A deep fissure running across its crater pitted surface.

The ship stopped one hundred meters from the asteroid and then due to restricted deployment space backed off to three hundred meters.

“Unless you have any objections, we’ll deploy the cargo here!” The pilot commented.

Tereana glanced at the HUD and checked the position for nearby obstacles and small fast moving pieces of debris from asteroid collisions. The scan was clear.

“Go ahead and deploy.” She instructed.

“First container released.” Four construction robots attached to the sides moved the kit towards the designated position. Once settled the second kit was unloaded.

The outer panels of the first kit opened gracefully and revealed the station’s power plant already assembled. Replication construction robots began to grow the structure of the research station, which when finished would be half the size of an Argon Mammoth.

The second Mule gently pulled along side the first and again began to deploy its three kits. These contained equipment for the inside of the station. Several hours drifted by and the major structural members were complete. Power conduits and cables were positioned in maintenance runs and sandwiched between levels. As the floors were being extruded a hard Plascerm top layer, cured by strong ultraviolet, was applied. The outer hull was nearly forty percent complete.

Before ten hours had past the last of the outer hull panels was fixed into place. Inside the inner skins were still under construction. Many corridors and rooms were also nearly complete, and internal power came on line. The reactor was a modified TS engine, powering a single one hundred and twenty five megawatt shield and all other station power needs. Positional control thrusters were in the design of the station but these were for countering gravitational drift. Once complete the station had enough space to accommodate nearly a hundred scientists and their equipment.

Fifteen hours into the construction, the inner hulls were finished and the life support system switched on, to provide heat, atmosphere and pressure. When the systems had settled and been checked for leaks the two freighters docked. There was little margin for error as the station, being small, only just had enough space to accommodate the two Mules.

With the scientists on board accustoming themselves to the layout and with the last of the equipment and provisions unloaded, the two freighters gently exited the station, leaving a single lasertower in defense, and moved out of the asteroid field.

“Let’s unpack then!” Jeron commented enthusiastically. Tereana had managed to talk to the Professor, prior to the journey in the Mules, and his keen sense of enthusiasm rubbed off. He saw this as potentially a once in a life time discovery that could help develop the scientific understanding of how the universe has evolved over time. Tereana did not mention the other, once in a lifetime, discovery of a Pobo Mol Space Rift. The Boron scientist and theorist Pobo Mol, whose theory of folded space, concluded that under the right theoretical gravitational conditions a hole could be opened between two points in space making it possible to travel between systems without the use of jumpdrives or gates. However the theory also proving that such rifts would be extremely rare and short lived due to the forces involved collapsing together.

Robot lifters were directed to the laboratory section, food hall area and the six occupied living quarters. All the while the construction robots were still connecting power to the uninhabited sections and completing the wall floor and ceiling coatings.

The group met up in the main science lab to plan the weeks of work and check the equipment was fully functioning.

“We have coms!” Leord confirmed, “Patching into the recovery unit on the hull of the alien ship!”

“Can we get visual?” Tereana asked curiously as she looked up at the main lab viewer.

“We have images of the door. The unit is sealed to the side of the ship and too close to give us a full view.” Leord responded casually and glanced across.

“Lifter shell still in place, I doubt we can get it far enough back to get a good view.” Walstom commented. “A close thermal scan for the hull door shows that the interior of the airlock is ten degrees below outer hull. Outer hull at minus one hundred and seventy degrees.”

“Can we suit up and take a closer look?” Jeron asked with the usual hint of keenness.

“Have you done many space walks?” Tereana responded, she realized it was a daft question almost as soon as she asked due to the nature of the Professors work.

“More than I can remember!” Jeron smiled kindly.

“We should be okay to do that, suits have two hours oxygen supply! I think we should all go across before we open the outer door and see if there’s anything worth investigating. Anything that we might not see on the scanners, structural cracks in the hull, potential engine damage and even just to look through the windows to determine what might be inside.” Tereana commented. “However we go in pairs, two out there and four back here. Just in case.”

“Who goes first?” Walstom asked. It was a pointed question, Tereana wondered if he was testing her authority.

“As much as I’d like to say me. You and Leord are our structural and power systems engineers so you go first. You’ll then have longer to analyze your data as we’ll need you to get the doors open.” Tereana replied. “Then Coulo and Tolona so they can try to get some detailed bioscans. Finally myself and Professor Autland.”

Everyone appeared to be happy with this. Tereana had been designated as in command of the mission, and although she had seniority within the command structure of the Roamer, she did not know how Leord and Walstom, from a military hierarchy, would react to her leadership. So far there was no apparent dissent, but she could not afford to make many mistakes.

As the two science officers from the Gallators Fate suited up, she ordered the two biologists to ensure the bioscanners and filters in the airlock were fully operational. Equipment lifters were carefully guided to the outer airlock. These held additional monitoring equipment, data loggers and heaters for the inner airlock door.

The two officers were scanned as they left the ship giving them a full biological profile as comparison for when they returned.

It took a few minutes for them to reach the shell of the lifter and gain access. The support struts that cradled the alien ship provided ideal locations for lighting and minicams. The two men made a half hour pass over the structure of the ship as they strategically placed the lights and cameras. Onboard the station the rest of the team looked on as a different monitor flickered into life with each camera.

“Looks like we have some windows near the nose of the ship. Plus several narrow portals on the sides over each wing.” Leord announced, although this was always hard work he had no hint of tiredness in his voice.

“Engine looks intact! Thruster vents are unusual design, but don’t look to have any visible damage!” Walstom called in a few minutes later.

Both men started to attach a web of sensors on the hull, each one spaced at two meter intervals. They had managed a quarter of the ship before they received the low oxygen recall warning.

Once back on the ship and the bioscans registered clear the second pair of scientists’ left to try and complete the sensor coverage of the ship.

“Zoom in of camera five!” Jeron asked with a cautious curiosity. The computer closed in on the cockpit window. There was no obvious illumination penetrating the darkened shield. “I guess infrared won’t help us?”

“It all going to be about the same temperature, minus two thirty degrees.” Tereana answered.

“Pity.” The professor only hinted at disappointment but not surprise.

“You’ll have your chance for a closer look soon Professor!” She responded cheerfully.

“How long have they been gone?” Leord entered the room. He had taken some time to have a meal before returning to the main lab.

“Nearly an hour and a half. Over three quarters of the ship is now covered!” Walstom looked away from his monitoring station.

“How much information can we get with the sensors?” The Professor asked out of curiosity.

“Not quite everything!” Leord smiled, “We’ll get a full breakdown on the geometry and construction of the ship, it’s internal layout, power distribution, systems locations, any booby trap devices, engine design, reactor material, everything!” He paused whilst he took his seat. “Except what’s on its memory disks, the computer language, and what power is required for any of the currently un-powered systems. Which unfortunately for us, is nearly all of them.”

Time past swiftly, the Professor had his two hours in space and tried at close range to see if he could see into the ship. Eventually he managed to rig up a camera on one of the side portals and shield it from the lights reflecting on the darkened shield. Tactically he placed it near the main cockpit looking into and down the length of the cabin. They finished fixing the scanners in place and made it back to the station exhausted.

Jeron was keen to see if his plan had worked. The team looked long and hard at the camera image.

With the light gently permeating through the other windows they could see the frozen air sparkle on the inside surfaces of the ship. Unusual rings and hoops hung from the ceiling. The camera did not give them the angle to see the pilot seat or cockpit layout but did give a good view of the inner airlock door. It also revealed what also looked like a bed and lockers.

“How are we with the bioscans?” Tereana asked.

“We can only identify one concentration of biological material. Can’t give you a physical description yet as there’s some interference from the other materials. The camera shot is in the right direction but I guess the bench thing is blocking our view!” Tolona replied.

“Shall we open the door?” Tereana looked around. She kept her voice carefully controlled against the eager anticipation of getting into the ship.

“That’s why we’re here!” Walstom replied in his usual dead pan manner. “Sending signal to recovery unit to open outer airlock door.”

They watched on the monitors as the robot arms gripped the manual release catches and began to try and turn them.

“Check load pressure on catch!” Walstom requested.

“Load fifty kilo force and increasing.” Leord responded. Both men were absorbed in their tasks and the instructions, showing little to no emotion in their voices. Tereana knew this was a natural thing for scientists only to show their feelings after they have succeeded, or when something goes terribly wrong.

“Reverse direction of turn!” Walstom ordered.

“Load fifty five kilo force and increasing.” Leord relayed the numbers again.

“Increase load in ten kilo force increments and continue to alternate direction until we see movement!” Walstom responded.

They continued watching in silence as Leord monitored and issued instructions through his console. Suddenly there was movement as the door unstuck from its years of non-use.

Tor sat back, it had been a very profitable ten Tazuras since he met with Caran Belign, and he had invested in improving the ships he had. They all now had at least one twenty five megawatt shield. The reunion with Fenagalas and Bilyzonus in the Seizewell system had proven to be highly entertaining. More for the people around him as his memory did not recall all the events.

He was getting used to his encounters with Caran, the big man was more human and certainly less threatening than when he first met him. From his more recent encounters, he realized, he had never seen the agent do anything more than read documents and give orders. There was the conflict outside the Pirate station but Caran only proved he was a good pilot. Reviewing the published military record Caran appeared to show only a few instances of real individual heroism, and the rest just demonstrated he was a good leader.

Tor speculated that perhaps Caran used his intimidating size and look to subjugate people and bend them to his will. However he was not going to challenge this perception just yet. Only if he asked him to carry out an assignment for something he was not prepared to do.

The docking permission was granted to the Trading Station and Sweetey guided the ship in.

It took its diverted course into the security section. An agent met Tor and guided him towards the offices. Caran was just stepping out of his office when Tor approached. Some instinct in his gut told him all was not well. Inside he felt the mood of the big man in the few moments of casting his eyes on the stance and countenance of the big man. The tone of his voice was the softened tone of a man with something unpleasant to say or do.

“An unfortunate time to be meeting us Mr. Grall. Please take a seat I have some business to attend to but it should only take a brief moment.”

Tor was shown to a comfortable armchair, a slight sense of apprehension consuming his senses. Three doors down the corridor were a series of interrogation rooms. Caran stepped up to the door of one and it slid open, he stepped inside. Two agents stepped out, one dropped something in the doorway and quickly he bent down to pick it up.

Tor had been watching out of curiosity, as the door closed there was a distinct crack of something breaking, immediately followed by a terrifying primeval scream of an animal in extreme pain and terror. Suddenly silenced with the closing of the door. The sound had Tor break into an almost immediate cold sweat, every fibre of his body reacted to the most basic of instincts to run and hide. Wide eyed and pale, heart beating fast he glanced at the agents, both of which also appeared unnerved before regaining the stony faced harshness of men doing their duty.

As they walked past the nearest one commented, “Prey you never have to have a private interrogation with Mr. Belign!”

All thoughts of dissent vanished in that moment. A medical team arrived and waited.

Ten minutes passed and Caran left the room to go wash his hands. The medics entered the room and began to check the now silent patient.

As the big agent walked back into the room, he commented in the same soft tone he used before, “Let’s go to my office!”

Tor followed in silence wondering what his fate was going to be. The door slid open as Caran approached and they both went in. The agent went to a cabinet on opened a door, picking out two glasses he poured himself a large Cole’s Fire.

“Drink Mr. Grall?”

Tor thought a moment about it being drugged but he needed something to settle his nerves as the brief sound of the scream still echoed around his mind. “Yes, I think I will.”

Caran pulled out an ancient container of space fuel and poured a large measure. The hard serious expression remained as he handed over the glass.

“Mr. Grall please be seated!”

“I think I’ll stand. You know how it is, sitting around all day and all that.” Tor was trying to lighten the mood, but somehow knew this was not going to be much of a day for smiling.

“I have some unpleasant news for you Mr. Grall and I rather think you’d like to be seated when I give it.”

Tor reflected on the softness of the tone and the manner with which it was being given. He sat down.

Caran started, “You are probably aware that from time to time we have incidents of industrial sabotage. It makes owning a station potentially very hazardous due to rivals trying to put the competition out of business or at least damage their reputation and subsequently their profits.” Caran paused, a growing sense of dread began to fill Tor. “Two days ago, an act of sabotage was committed on the Cahoona Bakery in Cloud Base North West. Devices were detonated in several areas of the station causing extensive damage and loss of life. Amongst the casualties were your parents.”

Tor’s jaw dropped, he had an acute lack of breath as words failed him. He felt the distinct sting of tears welling in his eyes and a deep despair opening in his mind.

“I’m sorry Tor both your parents were killed. Although it is of little comfort we believe they were killed instantly in the explosions. We delayed announcing it on the news channels until we had an opportunity to inform all the next of kin. You are the last!”

Tor blinked back the tears, his eyes reddened and cleared his throat after knocking back the drink in one hit. “Who?” It was the only word he could manage as he fought to compose himself and show a stronger side.

“That is what I was just finding out!” Caran commented quietly as he took a sip from his drink. His eyes watching Tor.

“And?” Tor glanced up to meet the look.

“We had originally thought it was one of the rival factories in the Three Worlds sector, and although the cartel managing those factories is confirmed as the instigator, the Bloodhearts have now also been linked with the attack.” Caran paused to watch Tor’s reaction. If it were possible for him to emotionally sink any lower then he managed it.

“They killed my parents!” He muttered.

“They’re on to you Tor! The best thing to do for now is distance yourself from the people you know.” Caran responded.

“Why my parents?”

Caran sighed. “It’s an old trick. When someone moves around a lot and is difficult to trace, then if a relative wants to contact them due to a family crisis they will put out an SOS on the news channels. In the SOS is the name of the pilot and the ships’ registration. If the pilot is a target the pirates, or whoever, can plot on carrying out a hit because they know exactly where the person is going to be. It’s just a matter of when they arrive.”

“And my friends?” Tor asked the mental black hole getting bigger with every word.

Caran did not respond immediately then he spoke slowly, “When they can’t get to you through your family, friends become the next target. They’re looking to hurt you in every way, so they can bring you out to where they can get you.”

“What do I do?” It was more a plea than a question.

“There are two basic choices open to you. You can run and hide hoping they never find you, even through your friends, or there’s Creed’s philosophy of meeting the threat head on.” Caran took another sip of his drink, “I mention that it’s Creed’s philosophy as he is a master of making his enemies leave him and his people alone!”

“But I’m not like Creed.” Tor looked towards the floor.

“None of us are! The principle is you let them know where you are and when they come to find you it’s an encounter made on your terms not theirs. You take the risk and hopefully make them pay badly enough to leave you alone.

Eventually when you have the resources and the inclination, you then take the fight to them, to show that you're not afraid!"

Tor simply nodded though his confidence had sunk into the mental pit with the rest of his feelings, "What about Tris?"

"They know where she is and she's not so likely to be drawn into a trap a second time. No they will bide their time where she is concerned." Caran paused, "It is unfortunate that this has come about as I was due to give you a job to transport some supplies to a group of scientists."

Tor looked up briefly not really knowing what to say.

"You need to decide Tor! Will you run or will you stand and fight? I would encourage you not to think about it too long." Caran paused. "The job I have is still open to you, it'll give you time to think but also keep you moving so the Bloodhearts have difficulty finding you. If you agree to the mission and decide to make a stand then I have an approved station deployment for you to place a Cahoon Bakery in the Wall sector. I've also spoken to Creed and he has a dozen screened fighter pilots you can employ."

Caran continued, "You can just take the mission and if afterwards you just want to get away then the reward will be twenty five thousand credits." The big man took a last sip from his glass. "There is no penalty or black mark put against you if you decline the offer. Under the circumstances this is a request not an order or command."

Tor did not fully digest the end of this statement until much later. The money did not matter to him either. The appeal was that, for the moment, he was working and, as Caran had mentioned, it would keep him away from the Bloodhearts and give him extra time to think.

"What about the funeral arrangements?" He asked.

"Already taken care of! For your own safety we will set up a holo feed so you can at least watch the proceedings and in a sense be there." Caran answered.

"Thank you!"

"If you get the need or want to talk to someone about what's going on then call. I'm not the best person for listening to peoples problems and giving advice but I can recommend some very good people!" Caran added as an afterthought. "Normally I'm the problem people go seek advice about!"

Tor glanced up. It was one of Carans lighter comments that just managed to lift the merest hint of a smile on Tors' face.

"I'll take the mission." He responded.

"Good man. Never let them think they have you beaten!" Caran stood up and picked up the container of space fuel, "Shouldn't really do this, but have another drink." He poured the liquid carefully into Tors' glass and added. "This time take a moment to savour the flavour. I'll go over the details."

It was only a short while later and Tor was heading out. This time he would pilot the ship all the way. Sweety maintained a respectful silence, quietly issuing orders to the freighters. Now she was on heightened alert to the potential pirate threat. Any signs of pirate ships in the android controlled transporters and she ordered them into the safety of the nearest station. It slowed down Tors income dramatically.

The Piranha also flew under a new temporary set of registration numbers until the task was completed. The journey itself took the long way around through the Paranid and Boron sectors to reach Aladna Hill. Reports had filtered through the news channels that the Split were currently less than welcoming to all Boron and Argon ships, traversing the sectors required special permission in advance, consisting of a flight plan and cargo manifest or purpose of visit.

Sweety spoke for the first time in quite a while, "Tor I'm detecting a security breach in the transmission circuits of the Presidents End satellite."

It broke Tors' line of thought. He took another moment to digest the message. "How's that possible?"

“Navigational data, indicates a ship near the satellite.”

“Damn, can you take the satellite offline?” This was not a problem Tor needed right now.

“Not without giving away our current location!” Sweety replied.

“What about re-routing transmissions so they don’t pass through that unit?” He was fishing for options.

“Acknowledged. I will alert surrounding units to a failure in the Presidents End satellite and not to channel information through it.” Sweety responded.

“Thanks Sweety. And put on the local news channel. Let see what else is going on out there!” It would be a distraction. He had wanted to be alone for a while after the news of his parents to hide his grief, but now he really felt that he needed to see a friendly face.

Within a few short hours he reached Nopileo’s Memorial. Crossing Hatikvah’s Faith had proved interesting with several split fighter challenges but no attack. The Python had only recently regained engine power and full shield strength. The engines were running in slow speed whilst system tests were still being checked and structural integrity of the hull monitored.

Ever aware of the presence of pirates he followed the routine laid out by Caran on reaching the Science Station.

“Sweety can you identify the pirate ships?”

“Acknowledged! HUD display updated. I am registering two convoys of Bloodheart freighters and fighters, and there are a small number of Claw Clan registered ships in the sector.” Sweety announced.

“Cargo?” Tor enquired. He contemplated attacking out of revenge, but this would just draw attention to himself.

The freighters were in uncontrolled space and made no effort to mask their cargo.

“Spaceweed!” Sweety responded.

It took less than half an hour to reach the co-ordinates that Caran had given him. “Sweety check the scanners! Anything in range?”

“Negative.” Sweety replied.

Carefully he proceeded forward and as he came around several asteroids he spotted the station. He noted there was no sign of any lasertower.

“Sweety, contact the station, let them know we’re here!”

“Station contacted, no reply! Tor I’m detecting no life signs on the station”

Chapter 19 – Get out

Tor steered the ship and glided around the station attempting to inspect it from every angle.

“Sweetie give me an update as to the status of the station.”

“Internal atmosphere normal. No signs of decompression in any of the sections. Shields normal. Life support fully operational. Reactor power stable. The station appears to be uninhabited!” Sweetie concluded.

“Can you get me docking permission?” Tor had a deepening sense of uncertainty, “And Sweetie keep your scanners peeled.”

Sweetie took a moment to check her extensive database to determine the meaning of the expression ‘peeled’ and came back with the expression. “Right you are!”

Tor glanced at the technical pad and smiled.

“What?” Sweetie asked.

“Just your personality coming back on line.” He glanced towards one of the optical sensors. He liked to think if she had a face, she would be smiling. “I’m going to suit up just in case.” He stepped into the back of the ship and opened the locker. At that moment he visibly sagged and after a moment tears welled in his eyes, as he saw the happy smiling faces of his parents framed in a small holo cube, their expressions locked away for all time, their laughter a distant memory.

It took a few minutes for him to compose himself and as he closed the door he whispered, “I’ll miss you mum! Dad!”

Sweetie observed through her scanners but said nothing.

Tor breathed deeply to compose himself before he sat back down in the pilot seat. He looked at the station and placed his hands on the controls. Then sat back again as a feeling of uncertainty crept over him. “Sweetie, I’ve got a really unpleasant feeling about all this. Is it possible for you to patch into the onboard station cameras?”

“Checking security protocols. Level two G security coding in place.” Sweetie responded.

“Isn’t that a bit low for this type of station?” The seed of doubt in Tors’ mind began to grow.

“Acknowledged! The system has already been broken into, only low level security in force.”

“So show me what’s on the internal monitors.” Tor leant forward. His eyes narrowed slightly, apprehensive to what may be revealed.

“Station system accessed. Specify location to view.”

“Let’s start at the docking bay and work our way around!” It seemed to be the logical starting point in Tors’ mind. He dreaded to have to go onboard coupled with the nagging doubt at what he may find.

The docking bay had pieces of equipment scattered around. Tor could not decide if they had been put there deliberately by scavengers or just the scientists being untidy. They moved in to an illuminated, stark, and unoccupied series of corridors. The sense of emptiness was beginning to unnerve him. Tor thought a station, no matter how small, should contain people. On the scanner there was no one. The corridors outside the living quarters showed nothing.

Tor viewed the laboratory that formed the heart of the station. It had been stripped. Panning the camera view around he still did not feel entirely happy with everything he could see.

“Sweetie can you identify those marks on the wall?” He zoomed in.

“Initiating scan!” Sweetie responded, “Scan indicates Argon type blood.”

It confirmed his suspicions, "Is there any other biological material on the station?"

"Scan indicates two concentrations of organic matter!" Sweety responded.

"What you mean to say is there are two dead bodies on the station!" Tor grimaced briefly and then settled his expression to enigmatic.

"Yes!" Sweety had avoided the subject and from using the term, having monitored Tors' latest reaction to death. The response was not as she expected, so she tried to analyse the databanks on Argon behaviour patterns.

"Why doesn't that surprise me!" Tor replied, whilst he considered this really was not a good day. "Only two! We need to determine what happened to the other four." He paused. "Sweety, is there anything odd happening inside the station?"

"Please clarify your request?" Sweety replied.

"It's a long shot really. There's no one on board, alive that is, but is there any indication that the station has been visited recently?" Tor needed to find some sort of sign.

"Scanning!"

He kept monitoring the internal scanners of the station whilst waiting for a response.

"Tor, I have identified two oxygen units being recharged."

"How long have they been recharging?"

"One hour thirty minutes!" Sweety replied.

"Are there any other space environment suits on the station?"

"Negative!" The response was immediate.

"Speculation, there were six scientists on board. Each one would have had an environment suit. Two are dead what happened to their suits?" Tor was trying to weigh up his options and he had a great reluctance to go on board the station.

"Space environment suits are expensive. Indicating potentially pirates have raided the station, which would also be compatible behaviour to the removal of equipment." Sweety responded.

"Okay, add in the fact that there are two units on recharge, would indicate that perhaps two were killed, two escaped and possibly two have been captured?" Tor was fishing for possibilities.

"There are alternative possibilities that could be explored." Sweety commented.

"Go on?" Tor hesitated.

"The scientists came into contact with an alien life force. Four of them were killed potentially by the last members of the team and two were ejected into space. The surviving two left the station to hide when pirates subsequently discovered and looted the station."

Tor sighed, "I like my theory best!"

"The oxygen units only last two hours. If there are survivors hiding then they will need to replace their packs in the next half hour." Sweety commented.

"Somehow I don't really want to just sit around for half an hour. Whoever took out the lasertower may still be around!" Tor replied. "But I can't leave as I have supplies to deliver. If I just dump the supplies, Caran will ask me for a status update from the scientists. Then I'd have to lie to him, he would find out later that I lied and I'd get the benefit of a

personal interrogation.” Tor shook his head, “Only thing we can do is a quick search of the area see if we can find anything. Starting with that big ugly looking asteroid.”

Gently he steered the ship towards the cratered and fractured surface.

“Sweetey can you modify the HUD display to show minimum separation on the left, right, top, bottom and front!”

“HUD updated.”

Tor looked around, he now had five distance measurements and as he drifted the Piranha into the main fractured canyon of the asteroid each one dropped in value. As he progressed along its length occasionally one side would find an opening or adjoining fracture causing the distance measurement to abruptly shoot up. He saw nothing and Sweetey’s scanners barely managed to penetrate much below the surface.

“Sweetey I’m going to go back, we’re getting too far from the station for a suited exploration.” He brought the ship around. Flying back down the canyon he reached the point closest to the station, then looked for deep fissures.

“Tor I would estimate that if there is anyone out here they have twenty minutes of air remaining.”

He monitored the scanners looking for a fissure in the base of the canyon going deep into the rock. “Understood Sweetey, can we do a short range com message focused towards the asteroid?”

“Confirmed adjusting outgoing signal.”

“This is Tor Grall here to deliver supplies, if there’s anyone there please respond!”

They waited and Tor began to wonder if he was looking at the right asteroid.

He found a deep opening on the scanner. “Sweetey I’m going to take us closer, can you repeat the message every thirty seconds?”

“Acknowledged.”

“Thanks,” Tor concentrated on the scanners. The black hole of the fissure was unrevealing even in the bright forward guiding lights of the ship.

“Tor I’m detecting a small relay unit near the entrance of the fissure! It is inactive.” Sweetey reported.

It was two minutes of slowly moving forward that Sweetey detected an object ahead of the ship.

“Tor I’m detecting a ship up ahead.”

“Can you identify it?”

“It has the signature of an Argon Lifter. I am also detecting two faint life signs.” Sweetey commented.

“How do you mean!” Tor closed the gap to the stationary ship and halted fifty meters away.

“I am registering two life forms. Both are in environment suits, and both suits exhibiting a malfunction of the thermal unit due to prolonged continuous use. First life sign is showing extreme hypothermia and is in a critical state. Second life sign also showing reduced core body temperature. Both are unconscious!” Sweetey reported.

Tor tapped on the console. “Can we beam them aboard or do I have to get them?”

“Yes they can be beamed on board!”

“Okay beam them on one at a time, and Sweetey this ship isn’t equipped with a medical unit so you’re going to have to tell me what I need to do.” Tor voiced his concerns.

The first person and the most critical of the two was beamed onto the bunk still suited.

“Tor you need to hook up the suits to the recharge unit. I can stabilize the air temperature inside the suit and bring it up gradually to prevent thermal shock from taking place.” Sweety instructed

Tor quickly set to work. Thankful the pipes extended to the figure on the bed.

The second person was beamed on board and was lying on the cabin floor.

“Tor you will need to link up the emergency supply unit!” Sweety commanded.

He once again dragged a set of pipes from the storage unit and coupled them to the prone figures’ suit. “How long before they recover?”

“Temperature stabilization complete! The second passenger should begin to recover within the hour, the first passenger will take five hours, providing there are no complications.” Sweety reported.

Tor looked at the two figures. Pipes from the recharge unit and emergency cabin supply crossing the cabin, he really didn’t know what he should do next. Part of him was telling him to get away from here, another part of him was saying he should stay until one or both passengers woke up as they may have things they want to recover.

“Sweety, can we open a com back to Caran in Argon Prime?”

“We will need to get clear of the asteroid field before we can transmit.” Sweety responded.

“What about the relay units you picked up?” Tor had a feeling that if he did manage to get through then Caran would probably ask him to stay put until the scientists awoke.

“They will link us to the station when reactivated!”

Tor turned the ship on its axis, the last thing he wanted right now is for someone to creep up behind his ship. He switched off the external lights and everything went black. It was one of the few times that Tor had ever been somewhere that when unilluminated was devoid of all light including starlight. It made him uncomfortable. The alien ship was behind him now, the scientists on board probably knew what it held on board, but due to their current condition were unable to advise.

Tor could only take comfort in the fact they had chosen to hide there, returning to the station to swap their oxygen units before coming back here. His mind raced through a series of other less palatable and suspicion laden ideas but he pushed these to the back of his mind. Even so he repositioned himself so that he could keep an eye on his passengers and also quickly glance out into the darkness.

“Sweety if we did reactivate the relays would the station be able to open a com to Argon Prime?”

“Yes! Its transmitter is powerful enough to overcome the interference of the asteroid field. However the people that have already discovered it will also become aware that we are here.” Sweety paused, “At a personal level, whilst we remain in the asteroid field I will not be able to contact any freighters and give instruction.”

Tor had momentarily forgotten the other necessity for clear transmission.

“What’ll the freighters do?” He began to weigh up his options, an hours lost trading would not hurt his credit balance.

“They will dock and await further instructions! Fenagalas will be unable to trade for you as he will not have access to the credits!”

Tor sighed, “I think I’ll just have to live with that.”

In Tors’ mind time began to drag. The waiting for some type of indication that the passengers were going to awaken was becoming painful. Ever alert to the possibility of seeing another ships’ lights, trying to seek him out, was playing tricks on

his mind. A quick turn of the head combined with the reflection of the cabin lights on the cockpit glass did not help to ease his state of mind.

“Temperature normalization of second passenger complete.” Sweety announced, “Passenger may be woken!”

Tor exited the pilot seat, he made sure his blaster was to hand just in case. Carefully he unclipped the air supply and allowed the pipes to retract back. Gently he lifted the helmet of the sleeping passenger and unclipped it. With a slight twist the seal broke and there was the hiss of released pressure.

Slowly he removed the helmet to reveal the sleeping face of Professor Autland. A wave of relief passed over Tor, if it had been a complete stranger he would have been more wary about waking him. Instead he called out loud and gave him a shake.

“Professor! Wake up!”

The professor stirred and mumbled something about getting back. Tor gave him another shake, “Professor!”

Slowly Jeron came around, then started with a jolt. “What? Where am I?”

“Safe Professor and a lot better off than your companion!” Tor indicated to the bunk.

“Uh, what happened?” Jeron put his gloved hand to his forehead as he tried to remember. “Tor isn’t it?”

Tor nodded reassuringly and gave a brief smile. “Sweety tells me the thermal control units on your environment suits were breaking down!”

“That would explain the increasing cold and tension!” Jeron glanced over to the bunk then at Tor. “Where are we?”

“On my ship! And we’re still inside the asteroid!” Tor allowed his curiosity to take over, “What happened out here?”

“We’d just opened the inner door! It was wonderful.” There was a gleam in the eye of the Professor, “The others had been across. Picked up the heater units to be recharged on the station, examined the power coupling interfaces, taken atmospheric samples and a whole load of other stuff.” He paused for a moment.

“Then we came across.” He indicated with a tilt of the head to his companion. “And we’d only been away a few minutes when Leord sent out a station under attack signal. He also performed a data dump back to the data logger and shut down the relays.” Jeron carefully got to his feet and began to remove the environment suit.

“How long ago was this?” Tor needed to make a decision, however his mind still was not clear about all the options.

“About two days, but with you here I can continue my work. You should see it Tor! The ship is a magnificent find! We’d even managed to supply limited power to the ships subsystems with a couple of power packs.” Jeron’s whole body reflected his enthusiasm. Tor glanced at the Professor his own mood bordering more on suspicion than joy.

“What’s the name of your companion?” Tor asked.

“Tereana! How is she?” Jeron asked casually.

Tor glanced across then back to Jeron so he could read the man’s expression, “She’ll live! The ships bringing her back up to temperature.”

“Ah, to prevent thermal shock!” Jeron responded.

Tor could not tell if the man was pleased or displeased with the news. Tor felt a twinge of mistrust begin to creep over him, the Professor appeared to be more concerned with the scientific discovery than the well being of his colleague. He decided to put it down to the nature of the professor and his complete absorption in the work he did, which probably did not leave much space for anything else in his life.

“So you’ve kept going back and forth every two hours to change air supply units?” Tor observed.

“Correct. Whoever attacked the station ransacked the place, but they didn’t take everything, so I reasoned they were likely to come back. Also it gave me an opportunity to continue my research.” There was a subtle change in the Professor’s expression as he reflected. “I guess we were too worried about being caught to notice the suits were beginning to go wrong!”

“Well we can’t remain here indefinitely. How much more time do you need?” Tor interrupted the thoughts of the Professor. He was eager to be moving.

“Without a suit I can’t do much more, but if yours is functioning correctly you could always go and retrieve the data logger!” The professor proposed.

Tor was uneasy at the prospect of leaving his ship, “There’s a spare suit in the locker. You know what you’re looking for, it would be better for you to go.”

Jeron suddenly appeared to be perplexed by the information.

“Something the matter?” Tor asked.

“No, no, nothing at all?” Jeron paused, “I think we should decide on how to progress. Before we leave we should at least have restored the engine power of the other ship!”

“What will that require?” Tor asked, knowing there was a fair chance that the parts required would not be found locally.

“That information is on the data logger!” Jeron responded.

“Sweety, can you access the data logger from here?” Tor adopted another approach to try and prevent either of them from having to leave the ship.

“Accessing,” Sweety replied, “Cannot establish link. Unit inside alien ship is protected by a low level shield.”

“Professor, it’s down to you! As a proposal, if you can let me know what you need, I’ll go get the parts whilst you continue your work here!” Tor smiled and adopted an open honest posture.

The Professor sighed, “Agreed!”

A few minutes later and the professor was jetting away from the Piranha and back to the alien ship.

“Tor!” Sweety spoke up.

“Yes Sweety?”

“Can you put on an ear mic,” Sweety requested.

Tor looked bewildered, “Sure what’s up!” He rummaged around through the lockers until he found one.

“What is it Sweety?”

“I’ve had a chance to analyse the malfunctions on the suits.” Sweety paused, “Tereanas’ suit has been deliberately tampered with! The professor appears to have broken down due to reasons as yet unclear to me.”

“You mean they may have sabotaged each others suits?” Tor asked quietly.

“No, Tereanas’ suit has progressively been deteriorating over a period of time conducive to the nature of the applied fault,” Sweety affirmed, “The professor’s is much more recent, perhaps as the result of a low level energy surge.”

“Anything else?” Tor asked.

“I’ve done a complete frequency scan of the alien ship. It appears to be sending out intermittent low level noise but I cannot decode or translate if there is a message.” Sweety commented.

“Is there anything you can compare it to?” Tor felt uncomfortable again.

“I can only compare it to a whisper, but outside the audible range of frequencies!” Sweety responded.

“Although we can’t hear it, it doesn’t mean we can’t detect it at the subconscious level,” Tor glanced nervously at the sleeping figure. He felt he now knew the cause of his current apprehension, and that in itself was comforting. What effect it was having on Jeron and the sleeping Tereana he could not guess. “How’s the Professor doing?”

“The Professor has entered the outer airlock of the ship!” Sweety replied.

“Sweety if we upload the data, is there any chance of something getting onto your systems which can cause damage?” Tor needed to be certain that this was the right thing to do.

“I have put the highest security protocols in place and isolated the data storage unit from the other subsystems.” Sweety responded.

“Let’s hope it’s enough.” Tor reflected.

Tor was playing the waiting game again. Sweety kept him updated as the Professor moved the data logger from the alien ship and outside the shield.

“Uploading data,” Sweety commented. It took five minutes to transfer the several terabytes of data and confirm it was complete. Sweety scanned through the scientists’ reports and avoided the alien data taken from the other ships’ computers.

She prepared a list of items and displayed them on the screen. Many were isotopes of rare elements and semi-precious metals occasionally found in mineral rich asteroids. Some of which are extracted in the production of Quantum Tubes.

“And what do we do with this lot?” Tor enquired as he read through the list.

“If my analysis of the alien ship is correct it has replication technology, more advanced than our own, which will be able to reassemble these raw elements into its own type of fuel cell.” Sweety responded.

“How advanced is this technology?” Curiosity crept over Tor.

“If my analysis is correct, the ship, given the right basic elements to work with, could replicate itself.” Sweety responded.

“Could that include replicating a living organism?” Tor asked.

“As in a clone?” Sweety asked.

“Yes and no, giving the replicator the basic compounds that make say a person, could it then make a real living person,” It was one of those ethical questions, often asked by news reporters on the GalNet news. Tor was curious to know if the aliens may have thought the same way.

“I am unable to determine if the alien system could perform this action. Reproducing a person by replication is highly complex. The number of variables and construction algorithms required are greater than the memory capacity of this ship.” Sweety then added. “However it may be able to perform organ regeneration by means of replication.”

“Message coming in from the Professor,” Sweety announced.

“Tor you now have the data. I’ll continue here and see you again in a few hours.”

“Confirmed Professor, and be careful!”

“Sweety lets get moving. Navigational lights and HUD,” Tor sat in the pilot seat and began manipulating the controls, “Engines to low power. Sweety keep scanning for other ships!”

The Piranha picked its way carefully out of the ravine. He was grateful to see the stars again, and the station hovering a few kilometers away.

“Tor I have incoming ships! Two pirate Hawks and an Orinoco.” Sweety responded.

“Damn,” Tor cursed under his breath, “Target the nearest and fastest one.”

“Target acquired,” Sweety confirmed.

“What’s its status?” Tor brought the Piranha back under the rim of the fault line and began to increase the power to the thrusters. Sweety confirmed the Piranha had a significantly better top speed. After a few disorientating seconds he pulled the ship clear of the rift and out into the asteroid belt.

Tor knew his best chances were in open space. The close confines of the asteroid field meant speed was of little advantage unless you were well practiced in asteroid dodging. Which he was not!

As he pulled away he shouted out, “Sweety, get me a direction out of here.”

The response came back, “Tor we have Alien AI infecting the system, security protocols breached. Unplug me NOW!”

He reached across and almost tore the technical data pad from the console unit. The surface of the asteroid nearby spat small chunks of rock against the hull of the Piranha, as the two Hawks made a brief pass.

“Sweety, what’s going on?” Tor called out. He still had the ear piece on.

“I was examining the translation matrix when the data cascaded. Everything became readable but we have another intelligence on the computer system. Far more advanced than anything I have encountered.” Sweety responded.

“Shit!” He muttered under his breath, he did not know where he was or where he was heading. He only risked short bursts of maximum speed to gain some short gain over the Hawks however they did not slow by nearly the same amount as Tor struggled to see a way out of the field.

Suddenly the helm controls did their own thing.

“Sweety what’s happening?” It was a desperate plea. The Piranha shot forward on full thrusters and began to turn back towards the large asteroid whilst avoiding the smaller ones with sharp precision movements.

“Tor my scanners indicate the AI has reconfigured and rebuilt the transporter matrix into a replicator device.” Sweety announced, “Weapons and shield systems are being reconfigured and combined. Targeting system has been reprogrammed. Tor we have no recognizable weapons array!”

The Piranha dove into the canyon at full speed pulled up and shot along the base, twisting, turning, rising and falling as it tracked along the length of the rift. Tor sat petrified, the ship out of his control, too scared to be sick and an unwilling passenger in his own ship as it hurtled with knife like precision through the canyon.

Then the ship stopped, rising above the rim of the canyon it turned and faced the pursuing pirate ships. Tor knew where he was, the research station sat just a few kilometers away.

Chapter 20 – Alien Intent

The two Hawks and Orinoco regrouped and advanced. The piranha sat and waited. Tor was filled with nervous tension and Sweetie had shut herself down. The gentle hum from the engines adding a surreal calming influence.

The two Hawks changed vector to swing in from either side with the slower Orinoco running head on. Plasma streaked towards the ship as the pirates opened up in what would otherwise have been devastatingly destructive crossfire.

The alien AI had other ideas and the ship suddenly moved vertically. As the pirates closed in and adjusted their aim, three particle beams shot out from the Piranhas shields each one tracking a pirate vessel. The furthest of the hawks veered away its shields collapsed under the continuous fire, one corner of its thruster housing being sliced away.

The closest Hawk had the top of the pilot canopy sliced open after the shields failed. The pilot was sucked out with the pressure loss and escaping air. The body cut in two as it crossed the beam. The pilot-less Hawk span off in to the asteroid field and impacted on a distance rock.

The Orinoco was cut in two along its length. The engines exploding, sending debris in all directions much of it landing on the surface of the Asteroid.

The surviving Hawk fled the scene and the Piranha returned to its previous position and waited.

Tor sat patiently not knowing if he should move, eventually he glanced over his shoulder expecting to see the ship changed somehow. But it was still the same, the suited figure still lying on the bunk and connected to the air supply. He had the certainty that he was now being watched or more precisely studied.

“Greetings!” The alien AI spoke. The voice it used was male with a relatively soft tone.

“Um, Hi!” Tor replied uncertainly.

“You are a strange creature. I do not have your species logged in my databanks. However I have been asleep for some time now and traveled a great distance, so this is not unexpected!”

“I am an Argon!” Tor responded as someone trying to appear helpful.

“Argon! Ah yes your own databanks describes your species.” The Alien AI went quiet for a moment as it continued scanning through the information it now had access to. “A primitive life form. Your technology is also primitive, but interesting and shows potential to advance.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt but before you took over my ship I was going to get some parts that your ship needs to get going again!” Tor hoped he could find some leverage to regaining control of his ship.

There was a pause as the AI translated and interpreted the statement. “Knowing that my masters ship is still intact and that you have supplied limited power to the systems, I will judge your species is curious and has a thirst to gain knowledge. The actions you have taken so far, to conceal and protect my ship, seem to be friendly. I will allow you to continue with this task.”

“Does that mean I can have the helm control back?” Tor asked.

The AI did not respond immediately. “Helm control is yours!”

Tor carefully put his hands back on the controls then paused. “My data pad also has AI onboard, she controls my freighters remotely. Will she still be able to continue with this task?”

“AI? Do you mean the basic Advanced Thinking System that I encountered earlier?”

This time Tor hesitated with his response. “Yes! We call it artificial intelligence or AI for short.”

The alien AI paused again to interpret the information. "If it will help you to complete the task then I will allow it!"

Tor was acutely aware of his complete lack of power. The ship now controlled him not the other way around. He was also worried for both Sweety and the scientist, as he could not protect either of them. For Tor, only by being friendly and reasonably honest could he see that the alien AI would return the ship to him. Also he hoped that by going back into the sector the thing would not try to impose itself onto other systems.

He reactivated the technical data pad. Sweety instantly shut herself down again.

"Is there a problem?"

"I guess she doesn't like strangers!" Tor replied quickly. There was no response.

Tor cursed quietly to himself as he went back into the rear cabin to retrieve his old personal pad. He glanced over to the sleeping figure and wondered if she was still in recovery without the assistance of Sweety to control the temperature. Feeling that he did not want to take the risk of her not receiving some assistance Tor unclipped the thermal control unit off his own suit.

He knew the alien AI was watching and assessing what he was up to. As Tor unclipped the unit off Tereanas' suit and replaced it with his own he glanced at the suit temperature. He knew he would have to remember to increase the level every half hour or so.

"Is there a problem with your companion?" The alien AI spoke up.

Tor did not turn around. There was no need as the internal scanners could see him from nearly any direction.

"She had a suit malfunction which caused her body temperature to drop to a critical level. I'm attempting to raise her temperature back to normal." Tor paused as he remembered the explanation Sweety had given to him. "If it goes up too fast she'll experience thermal shock and die!"

"Perhaps I may assist?" The alien AI responded.

Unseen by Tor, the AI adjusted the modified transporter matrix again. It had access to Argon medical information so it performed a bioscan to determine the current core body temperature of Tereana, then it cross referenced it to normal temperature.

The next thing Tor knew was he was looking at a naked, young, and attractive brunette standing, but still not quite awake on the opposite side of the cabin.

She stumbled forward slightly as consciousness returned and Tor just caught her as she began to fall. However he was now flushed red with embarrassment.

The computer AI monitored then spoke again, "I notice your own body temperature appears to have risen dramatically. Do you wish to be cooled?"

"NO! Absolutely not! No way! Don't even think it!" Tor blurted out.

Tereana was now awake and quite aware of her predicament, "What the hell!" She flashed an enraged look at Tor as she turned away from him and desperately looked for something to cover herself up with. Tor turned around and faced the bulkhead.

"I really hope you'll let me explain. It's not what you may think!" Tor knew he had to say something.

"What strange behaviour you Argon exhibit!" The AI commented.

Tereana had managed to retrieve a blanket from the bed to cover herself and had picked up something heavy to bludgeon Tor to death with, but paused as she mentally digested the comment the AI had just made.

“What did it mean ‘you Argon’?” She asked carefully.

“Can I turn around?” Tor asked. “Then I’ll explain.”

She made sure the blanket was secure and then pushed the empty suit to one side before sitting on the bunk. Carefully resting the maintenance bar in her lap she agreed.

The AI monitored quietly as Tor recounted the chain of events, from his first arriving with food supplies for the team, to the search and finding the Professor and her. Both suits having the same thermal unit malfunction however Tor omitted the information that hers appeared to have been tampered with. The professor then continuing with his work after up loading the data retrieved so far on to the Piranha. The fight and sudden discovery of the alien AI, and finally to the AI speeding up her recovery and the unfortunate circumstances which followed. Even if Tor thought the day had suddenly shown an up side.

Tereana listened carefully, choosing not to interrupt. Somewhere in the back of her mind she was certain the Argon Secret Service would be extremely unhappy with the current turn of events. Any alien AI should have been quarantined. This one had the ability to transfer itself within a data stream and was now in charge of a ship and had open communications channels that it could exploit if it wanted to and move around the universe. More worrying still was that they had no means of determining if it had been given the coding to replicate itself.

“So you’ve agreed to help fix the alien ship?” She asked cautiously, looking for confirmation of Tors’ intentions.

“That’s the plan!” Tor responded and added by way of explanation. “It’s the only way I can think of to get my ship back!”

Tereana was not keen but at least the voice that troubled her during the dreams she had been having was now silent. She could sympathize with Tors’ plight however this was a traditional knee jerk reaction brought around by circumstances and the actions of someone who had not examined the potential consequences of what might happen after restoring the alien ships power. She did not know the answers herself but all the information was likely to be on the ship computer. All she needed to do is get the AI to let her examine it. This in itself posed her with a problem, how not to alert suspicion and perhaps a hostile reaction. The AI had full control of all the ships systems and an array of lethal countermeasures it could adopt to prevent intrusion into sensitive data areas.

She had to agree with Tors' plan, as well intentioned as it was, it was the only way she could see of buying herself some time to determine what needed to be done next. She smiled by way of reassurance, “Well what are you waiting for lets get some parts.”

Tor gave a brief smile back but felt uneasy at the swift positive response. He had half expected her to respond with a long list of objections, and speculated they had studied the alien ship and developed an understanding as to the nature of the creature they were dealing with.

There was something slightly amiss to the tone in her voice and the expression she gave which tripped a tiny alarm in his mind. He shrugged, they had only just met and he put it down to being unfamiliar with her mannerisms.

Tor took his place in the pilot seat and took his bearings, behind him Tereana extracted her clothes from inside the environment suit and, ensuring Tor was not watching, got dressed.

When the Piranha had left the asteroid field some fifty k’s behind he called Fenagalas.

“Sir, I was beginning to think we had losst you again!” The young Teladi face gave a broad grin.

“Sorry about that, I’m going to need you to do me a favour.” Tor paused a moment as he put the final details to his thoughts. “I need you to take over control of all the freighters, and use that Teladi business acumen of yours to generate profits. There will be a large bonus for you after all this. I’m going to put five hundred thousand credits at your disposal. It should be enough and good profit hunting.”

“Yes, Sir!” The young Teladi saw this as the opportunity to make a big impression and boost his own credibility amongst the other Teladi traders.

By way of explanation Tor added. “Unfortunately Sweety is unavailable at the moment to continue doing this job. So see this as a bit of a promotion!”

“Yes Sir!” The Teladis’ eyes shone.

Caran Belign glanced at the time on his console before looking out the window onto Argon Prime. Looking across, from the comfort of his office on the Trading Station, he could see storm weather fronts crossing the sub continents. He speculated they would be spectacular to watch, even from this distance he could see the occasional flash of sheet lightning running through the clouds and the localized vertical strikes flashing briefly.

He had expected a status update from Tor some time ago, direct communications with the station were banned for security reasons. It would be the first news since the mercenary ships returned having confirmed successful deployment.

The spy satellite in the Nopileo’s Memorial sector had been primed to detect when Tor emerged from the asteroid belt. For added security it would also do a remote scan of the ship.

A com window opened on the console, “Sir, we have just had an update from Nopileo’s Memorial. Mr. Gralls’ ship has left the asteroid field.”

“And the scan?” Caran asked.

“Just sending you the data, looks like he still has the supplies on board, and one passenger. Getting some strange readout on the weapons and shield configuration.” The agent responded.

The data appeared on Carans’ screen. Inside he cursed there was no need to speculate that Tor may have found some fancy upgrade to his ship by one of the races. Although he did not understand what the readings meant it was painfully apparent the ship had been altered through an alien influence.

“Do we have the isolated coms room available?” Caran would try to make contact before deciding on how to proceed. The isolated coms room was constructed to be a direct communications path between the transmitter and the coms system in the room, without interfacing with any of station computers or sub systems.

Its sole purpose was to prevent corrupting data and alien AI from getting onto the stations systems whilst still being able to communicate with people that have infected code on their systems.

He thought for a moment, “Alert all allied stations not to open a communications channel with the Piranha registration SCG five, five, TG is a code red quarantined vessel, harbouring an hostile system entity thought to be infectious.” This was standard procedure and Caran was going to play strictly by the rules.

“Yes Sir!” The response came back.

Caran exited his room and made his way along the corridors. He signaled to Macar one of the technical staff to join him. People would be asking questions soon enough as to the source of the infection and the risk it posed. He needed to have the answers.

The door slid shut behind them as the two men sat down.

“Open a com to Piranha registration.” Caran glanced down at his data pad, “SCG five, five, TG, location Nopileo’s Memorial.”

On the Piranha the alien AI notified Tor of an incoming transmission.

“Yes?” Tor took a moment as he looked at the holo projection. “Oh, Mr. Belign!” He took a moment to compose himself. “What can I do for you?”

“First thing is you can bring your ship to a complete stop Mr. Grall!” Caran responded softly.

“Actually I’m in a bit of a hurry!” Tor felt and looked nervous.

“Not any more you’re not!” Caran replied and spoke slowly as someone who was choosing his words with great care. “We have detected some unusual adjustments to your ship, perhaps I should call them Alien. As a result all allied stations have been instructed not to let you board for fear of contamination. So we have plenty of time for you to explain what is going on!”

Tor swallowed hard and Tereana moved forward into the range of the holo projector.

Caran increased the viewing field, “Ah, Miss Tersill, an update please!”

She began to recount all the events from the first day through to the present, including the details Tor had explained during her period of unconsciousness.

Caran remained a silent observer as was the Alien AI. When she had finished there was a long pause.

“My apologize Mr. Grall, I should have alerted you to the potential dangers. If I had then you would not find yourself in this predicament.” Caran paused. “I cannot lift the restrictions on you or your vessel without better understanding the Alien AI and its intentions. However we will retrieve the items that you require and dump them near your location so you can pick them up.”

The agent looked towards the console image of the Piranha as if to address the AI directly. “To the AI. Please download a list of the materials you need and any other data that can give us a better understanding of you, and hopefully give us an opportunity to be more welcoming than the current situation allows!”

The AI responded, “I understand your fears! Your databank is insufficient to carry all the data I have so I will send you your scientists’ findings and a small subset of my own data.” There was a brief pause, “Transfer complete!”

Caran glanced at the technician beside him who activated the console. He turned and nodded confirming the data was present.

“I ask that you all return to the science station and wait for us to contact you.” Caran observed both Tor and Tereana expressions change to deep disappointment.

“Acknowledged.” Tor cut the com.

Caran also closed down his end of the system and looked over to Macar. “See what you can find. I’ll have this rooms access restricted. Focus on getting the list of items required for the fuel rods, even if we deliver them piecemeal at least we will be seen to be fully co-operating.”

He stood up then left the technician to examine the information. Caran needed to talk to Creed get him to make some enquiries into who attacked the station. Having returned to his office he tapped into the console then requested a communications channel to Serandamancketal in Elena’s Fortune.

The Paranid answered in his usual gruff fashion. “Caran!”

“Need to talk to Creed!”

Serandamancketal tilted his head to one side, “Creeds not here right now!”

“Pity!” Caran considered his options. “I need you both to do some investigation work in Nopileo’s Memorial. We have some missing scientists and equipment. I need you to find who’s responsible and what happened to them.”

The Paranid gave a slight smile. “That’s not a problem! We have some business of our own to deal with there.”

Caran paused and looked hard at the Paranid trying to determine the nature of the business he was referring to. "I guess your talking about the newly formed Shadow Troop." Caran commented carefully. "I'm led to believe they are operating out of an ancient pirate base which, I'm sure, shouldn't prove too much of a problem to you!"

The Paranid grunted. It was as much confirmation as Caran needed, however the pirate base was reported to be considerably further along the belt than the scientist base. Even though it's exact position had not been recorded. A base that had been well hidden during the Xenon campaign and survived until the war was over but never fully restored due to it's remoteness. That is until now.

"Another thing. Our mutual friend, Mr. Grall the young trader, is in a bit of trouble." Caran spoke softly and carefully as he pulled together his thoughts. "The bulletin that went out concerning the infected Piranha relates to him."

"Do you want us to destroy his ship?" Serandamancketal asked in anticipation of the request.

Caran paused and tapped his fingers on the desk briefly, "No! I somehow doubt you'd get the chance, the ship has an Alien AI on board that has reconfigured and combined the shield and weapons matrices. By the description it has the ability to lock on with a particle beam from any side of the ship. Not only that but it has multi-targeting capabilities."

The Paranids' eyes narrowed, "Sounds like a weapon system to die for!"

"Maybe, maybe not, we've always found this type of weapon has too much power draw. Attaching it to the shields will prolong the duration of the beam but at what cost? We don't know. When the weapon has completely discharged will the ship have drained its shields too? Again we don't know." Caran continued his train of thought, "It would be interesting to see how long it would last against a swarm of fighter drones!"

"We can arrange that!" Serandamancketal responded keenly.

Caran looked up then back at the image of the Paranid and in a slightly sarcastic tone commented, "I'm thinking things have been a little bit quiet for you recently." He paused and then added with a hard edge to his voice. "No I don't want them killed! There's one of the scientists with him. She managed to escape detection by the pirates, and has a much better understanding of what we are dealing with."

"Then what do you want us to do?" The Paranid asked a touch disappointed.

"Deliver some supplies to them. We are putting together a list of items and will arrange to have them dropped off. I want you to fly escort, keep safe distance and observe!" Caran added. "Under no circumstances try to contact the Piranha. As I said we don't fully understand what it is we are dealing with!"

"We'll start the investigation work. Shout when you have the supplies you want to drop off." Serandamancketal closed the com link.

The door slid open and Macar walked in with a data pad in hand. "Sir, the scientists appear to have already analyzed the reactor fuel rod. I've copied out the parts that'll be required."

"Anything unusual?" Caran was impressed he had found the information so quickly and reached out to take the pad, the technician handed it across.

"A couple of the elements only exists in quantity on a handful of the planets around the sectors." Macar took a relaxed stance. "Everywhere else these are considered trace elements." And shook his head briefly.

Caran studied the list. "But we can get them?"

"Yes Sir! But it's going to require an interplanetary ship to get them. Which will take a few days rather than hours." Macar was very matter of fact with his tone, and lacking in any sense of urgency.

The agent nodded, "Then I'd better tell our friends not to get on each others nerves!"

“Just as an aside, and I thought it might be worth mentioning, but we don’t have the manufacturing ability to make this fuel cell!” Macar looked hard at Caran.

“That’s okay we don’t need to make it. Just supply the raw materials. If the AI wants us to manufacture the cell then it’s going to have to tell us how!” Caran looked back and smiled. He stood up. “Now let’s tell our friends the good news!”

Tor had stopped the piranha just short of the asteroid field, as both he and Tereana were apprehensive about returning to the science station. It was only a matter of time before being restricted to the close confines of the ship would start to show.

In the brief time since the call from Caran the uncertainty of the situation made them less inclined to talk for fear of sounding negative. Tereana had subsequently taken the bunk and quickly fallen asleep through general fatigue. The brief few hours of unconsciousness had not been enough to clear away the tiredness of the previous sleepless two days.

Tor hummed to himself and reviewed his old personal pad. He had considered retrieving the Guilard and playing on that for a while but he considered how annoyed Tereana might get if he disturbed her sleep. He glanced at one of the internal scanners.

“Computer, do you have a name?” He asked quietly.

There was a pause, Tor wondered if it would just ignore the question. “Why do you want to know?”

It was not exactly the response Tor expected. “Well.” He hesitated for a moment. “It’s just a more informal and personal way to talk to you. It lets you know that you’re the one being asked the question or given the information.”

“You called me computer a moment ago and I have answered, will that not do?”

“We call lots of things computer, it’s a descriptive name for an object. When something gets or obtains intelligence or a personality of its own we generally give it a name. Didn’t the people that created you give you a name?” Tors’ curiosity was growing, and he felt that just through simple communication he might build some common understanding and even some trust.

“I am receiving an incoming transmission!” The AI responded.

“Mr. Grall!” Caran spoke first.

“Good news I hope?” Tor eagerly asked.

“Yes and no!” Caran gave the faint hint of an apologetic smile, “Yes we have located all the raw materials you require for the fuel cell, all but two will be delivered within a few hours. The last two are quite rare and require retrieval from planetary sources. This means you will be stuck there for a few days!”

“Shit!” Tor responded. The Piranha was just manageable for one person to spend a few days in, but with two it would get much more interesting.

“The freighter will have two fighter escorts as you are still in the uncontrolled sector. They will keep their distance.” Caran emphasized the point again. “They are there to protect the freighter and your cargo from hostile pirate ships in the area and are not to be seen as a threat.”

“Understood Mr. Belign.” It was the AI that answered.

Caran appeared to relax. “Excellent. I will call you again when we have the last items.” The transmission ended.

Tor sat back and he glanced at the internal scanner. He decided that he would leave Tereana sleeping and tell her the news later.

Chapter 21 – Materials

Serandamancketal had docked at the Solar Power Plant Alpha in Nopileo's Memorial. Information had reached him that there was someone here that both he and Creed wanted to chat to. The bar was crowded. Mostly prospectors looking to claim a stake on one of the mineral rich planets, if they could find an interplanetary shuttle to take them. Or in a few cases were just drifters here for additional supplies.

There was a haze of smoke, some sweetly scented weed and the aroma of cheap space fuel. Serandamancketal eyesight cut through it all. At one of the tables, tucked into the shadows he saw the person he was after. In turn Korecmancketras saw him.

Korecmancketras raised a glass in friendly greeting and waved him over.

“Serand my old friend! What brings you into this cesspit?” The Paranid growled, then glanced around the rest of the crowd. “Not brought your friend with you I see!”

“He's running escort. But will be here soon enough!” Serandamancketal responded and looked directly into Korecmancketras' eyes. “Actually it is you that I am here to see!”

“Then I am honoured, but before you tell me why, let's get you a drink!” Korecmancketras placed an order on the table console and a few moments later an android arrived with the drinks. He leaned forward slightly, “Shows how bad things are here. They can't afford real waitresses!” and smiled.

They both picked up their glasses. Korecmancketras proposed the toast. “To the priests and the old times!”

“To the priests and the old times.” Serandamancketal echoed.

“So why did you want to see me?” The Paranid swirled the last dregs of his drink and ordered the next round.

“Rumour has it you're working with The Shadow Troop!”

Korecmancketras' eyes narrowed slightly before he answered, “I have had dealings. They needed someone to help recruit people.”

“Then perhaps you may of heard about a science station that was attacked recently.” Serandamancketal turned and took the newly arrived drinks from the android waiter.

“I may have done, but what is it worth?” Korecmancketras took the drink as the other Paranid handed it across.

Serandamancketal laughed briefly. “I'll put in a good word for you! You know how Creed feels about former guild members working for the opposition!”

There was the hint of a deep sigh. “It's been a long time since I was a guild member!”

“Once a guild member always a guild member. You know the rules Korec!”

“Fortunately for me then that The Shadow Troop had nothing to do with the science station you mentioned earlier.”

Serandamancketal leaned forward and in a deep whisper, “Then who did?”

“Try the Claw Clan. They've been searching for a spaceweed factory in the asteroid field. If they took your scientists then you'd be better off looking in the Teladi held New Income sector.” Korecmancketras responded quietly.

“And this information is reliable?” Serandamancketal was examining his glass then glanced up as he asked the question.

“Serand, I have no reason to lie to you. If it had been the Shadow Troop do you think I’d still be sitting here.” He fixed the other Paranid with a hard stare. “I for one don’t want to be running from your friend Creed.” There was a pause as they tried to gauge each others next move. “By the way he’s just arrived.”

“I have indeed!” Creed sat down. “Drink anyone?”

“The best they have is Baktraq Ale.” Korecmancketras replied. “Mine’s a large one!”

Creed put in the order then turned to Serandamancketal, “You have the information?”

“Yes! Claw Clan.” Serandamancketal responded but glanced, questioningly at the other Paranid. He nodded in turn.

“Makes some sense they seem to have quite a presence in the sector!” Creed responded, then in a casual manner said, “So Korec, they tell me you’ve joined up with pirates!”

At that moment Korecmancketras knew his life was in the balance his answer was as truthful as he could make it without showing true allegiance. “I recruit pilots for The Shadow Troop, mercenaries not pirates! I take money from them but I do not fight for them!”

The android waiter arrived with the drinks and placed them on the table.

“Then you have no allegiance to the Troop?” Creed glanced across.

“None, but as long as they pay me to recruit members then I must abide by the code!” Korecmancketras answered.

Creed nodded slowly and Serandamancketal glanced over to him, it was a psychological line in the sand that had been drawn. The code and the contract of the mercenary to defend the paymasters’ interests, whatever that happened to be. Even if Creed tried to buy or force information from Korecmancketras the Paranid would not be forthcoming with any information about the Troop. It was a discipline instilled in all the War Master Mercenaries and a rule Creed was adamant about. Unless you wanted to be skewered on the end of one of his blades.

“I have to respect my own rules!” Creed commented quietly.

There was a moment of unease and tension as the three of them sipped their drinks. Creed did nothing to ease the tension when he glanced across at the Shadow Troop member and commented. “I also hear you know the whereabouts of the bitch Nyeshta.” It was a cold, cutting comment, laced with malice and spoken in a quiet voice.

Korecmancketras glanced at both men unfazed by the undertones in Creeds voice, knowing the feeling behind it was not truly directed at him. He took a slow long draw on his ale then looked Creed in the eye, “Why do you hate her so much? She made one small error in judgement and has had to run ever since!”

“She betrayed me and it cost the lives of several of my men.” Creeds eyes narrowed, the tone of his voice did not change.

“As I understand it, it was Goltran her partner that betrayed you. It was unfortunate that she trusted him, intimately as I understand it, and answered some of his questions.” Korecmancketras replied. He watched as some of the muscles in Creeds face twitched as he gritted his teeth. “Anyway I seem to remember you cut him up and threw him out of an airlock! A fitting end.”

Serandamancketal had quietly observed, careful to watch, but Creed had not struck out. He commented, “Either way she broke the code and there is a price to pay!”

Korecmancketras picked up his drink, glanced at Serandamancketal and nodded slowly, “I do not mean to offend you Creed, but the next time I see her I will mention that I tried to talk to you but your mind is set!”

Creeds’ face relaxed and the tone of his voice returned to normal. “You’re trying to protect a friend and I respect that, but you keep poor company Korec!”

“There is no better company than the company of true friends!” Korecmancketras replied.

“I’ll drink to that!” Creed replied, smiled and ordered another round.

Serandamancketal turned the conversation, “Korec, when this is over perhaps you should consider coming back to the guild!”

The other Paranid smiled, “I’ve had my thirst for adventure quenched. I like the quiet life now and this work is easy.”

Creed glanced across as the next round of drinks arrived, “Keep your nose clean and we may be able to find you an easier life, and you won’t have to watch your back if the Shadow Troop become pirates or interfere in our business!”

“I will remember that!” Korecmancketras raised his glass in acknowledgement and took a long draw on the drink.

They chatted and reminisced a while longer about some old bar brawl they had been involved in and relaxed until the drinks were drunk. Creed and Serandamancketal took their leave of Korecmancketras and headed back to the docking bay.

Caran was reading through the latest report from one of the outer colonies and the continuing probing incursions by the Khaak. Macar entered the office and Caran looked up, raising a questioning eyebrow.

“Sir I think you need to come and have a look at this!”

He closed the console and rose to his feet. “Lead the way!” He almost encapsulated the entire comment in a sigh. Hoping the news was better than the report he had just read.

“We’ve made progress but it’s been tough!” Macar commented as they marched along the corridor at a quick pace.

“The Alien AI?” Caran questioned.

“If it’s on the system then it’s well hidden, but it would have a lot of places it can hide.” Macar responded as they reached the door. It slid open.

Stepping inside Caran noted that there was additional equipment present. “What’s all this?” He asked sharply.

Macar glanced across a little sheepish, “I can assure you it’s needed! Let me explain.” He pressed his fingers on an authorization pad. “Computer give me an image of the Alien Ship Alpha!”

The holo-projection screen illuminated and produced an image of the ship. Caran glanced at the technician.

“The research teams data set that we have is excellent! This information is what they collected. The structure of the ship is unique, as we already know. The outer hull is incredibly hard and there are multiple layers including a double metal skin, which is energized against any object that pierces the outer one.” Macar began.

Caran thought about the latest weapon systems, “Explain!”

“Any object which breaks the outer skin will also touch a highly energized inner skin, in essence making a short between the two. The energy level between the plates is sufficient that the resistance of the impacting object causes it to vaporise before breaking the inner skins.” Macar answered eagerly. “But that’s not all!”

Caran realized the problem with using an agency technician to look at the data. He would have analyzed all the weapons and defense systems first. His mind set focusing on the offensive and defensive capabilities in order to determine any weaknesses. Rather than looking at the data in general to see what it contained. Still the information could be useful.

Macar continued, “Don’t be deceived by the low level shield reading! Our estimates are that it has considerable potency, enough to survive multiple hornet strikes. However we haven’t been able to determine a weapon system!”

“Very interesting, but what do we know about the Alien pilot?” Caran asked abruptly.

The technician hesitated a moment then frowned, “Interesting that you should come on to that as I was going to go on to say. All this information comes from the scanner information the scientists have gathered including an internal layout of the ship! From the logs they managed to patch in a booster supply to the computer system. However when I’ve checked the datalog the power was diverted to section delta two.” Macar paused briefly put his fingertips on the authorization pad then spoke to the computer, “Show us section delta two.”

The holo image changed to the internals of the alien ship and highlighted the bunk area of the cabin.

“This is described by the biologist on board as the cryogenic, stasis chamber.” Macar glanced over at Caran, “What we were sent in terms of data was all the information the scientists gathered and then all this other ‘stuff’. I’ve run it through all the translation codes I could find, one managed to produce some results then what appeared to be junk.”

“So are you saying it sent us bad data?” Caran asked.

“No!” Macar responded almost immediately then paused. “At first I thought it had, but thinking about the system we are looking at I decided on a whim to ask one of our biologists to come and have a look. That’s another reason this equipment is here.”

“Go on!” Caran commented, now intrigued more than ever.

“Well he had a look, and at first was as confused as me, until he saw some sequences of what he termed genetic code. So we pulled in the other equipment here, capable of doing biological analysis, and this is what we have!” Macar once again placed his fingers on the authorization pad, “Computer show us Alien bioscan!”

Caran glanced at the holo-image. Macar glanced at him. “That took up the memory capacity of the data system we have! It’s one eighth of the cranium of the alien including the brain and as my friend said. ‘It’s a perfect map’ and something we have never managed to achieve.”

“How perfect?” Caran asked.

“Every neuron connection and nerve ending. Every protein link, carbohydrate and blood cell. This is more than a DNA sequence! This is the alien captured in the memory banks of the stasis chamber!” Macar replied with dramatic effect.

“And if the whole thing gets onto an active computer system?” Caran asked warily.

“Who knows! Perhaps you wouldn’t be talking artificial intelligence more like actual intelligence!” Macar replied.

“And how do you think it might react after three thousand years in the deep freeze!” Caran spoke his thoughts aloud.

“Hey don’t ask me! Ask a psychologist!” Macar raised his hands as a gesture of surrender.

Caran glanced at him, and nodded slowly.

“One thing we did speculate on is why so much information? And one thought we had was if the alien has a good replication device than it could regenerate the whole creature without having to worry about the thawing process.” Macar paused.

“And it could do that?” Caran asked, as he met Macar’s glance.

Macar looked edgy like someone with bad news.

Tereana was awake again, it had been a restful sleep and despite everything she felt safe. Stretching she rolled onto her back then slowly opened her eyes. She looked towards the cockpit area and noted the ship was moving forwards at slow speed.

Tor glided in on the first container and scooped it into the cargo bay under the watchful presence of the freighter and mercenary ships. Tereana stood up and wished she could take a shower, she was also hungry. Moving forward she stood next to the pilot seat. Tor only glanced across briefly as he concentrated on the second container.

“Sleep well?” Tor asked politely.

“Well enough! How long was I out?” She replied.

“About six hours!” Tor was in position and gliding in on the second container.

“And they’ve only just got here?” Tereana spoke with dismay and shook her head.

“That’s the last one!” Tor sighed as the container was picked up on the near field tractor beam and drawn into the cargo bay.

“Do you have any food around here?” Tereana asked.

“Try in the lockers next to the re-heater, left side of the bunk!” Tor commented. The freighter and fighters were already moving away.

“So what have you been up to whilst I was asleep?” Tereana tried for some casual conversation. Found some recon food and placed it in the re-heater.

Tor hesitated. The ship was now heading back towards the asteroid field. “Trying to talk to our friend here!”

“Really, about anything in particular?” Tereana glanced across to Tor curious to find out if he had found out anything interesting.

“It’s about the most taciturn system I’ve ever encountered.” Tor replied despondently.

She sighed, “So what’s the plan now!”

“Well this isn’t everything, we have a few days before the last two items are delivered.” Tor responded and then continued, “So the plan is to head back to the station.”

Tereana took a step backwards, “Oh no. I don’t want to go back there!”

“Why not?” Tor asked in feigned surprise.

“Well for one there’s two dead bodies on that station, and I’d rather not be around if the pirates return!” She answered curtly.

“Did I mention Caran provided us with new computers and a couple of maintenance robots!” Tor commented with a hint of sarcasm.

Tereana removed the meal from the re-heater and slammed the door, then sighed with resignation as she sat down with her back to Tor.

“I am detecting a certain amount of primitive hostility between you!” The AI observed. It was the first time it had spoken for some time.

“Well you taking over the ship hasn’t exactly helped!” Tor snapped.

The AI was silent.

“Well that was a brilliant stroke of communication skill!” Tereana commented airily.

“Look! I don’t want to go back to the station either, but I don’t think we’ve got a lot of choice.” Tor was losing his normally calm and care free demeanor. He was annoyed and winding his way up to anger.

“Okay, okay, calm down!” Tereana commented then went back to her meal.

Tor sat quietly for a moment then spoke up again, “Compromise for you. We take all this stuff back to the station, off load it and then return here!”

“Sounds like a plan!” Tereana responded and shrugged her shoulders.

“It’ll also give you a chance to get your personal stuff and freshen up!” Tor responded mildly.

“Are you saying I smell?” Tereana replied, but this time with a bemused tone.

“Well I didn’t want to say anything!” Tor smiled as he responded.

“Well you’re not so pleasant smelling either!” Tereana quipped back cuttingly but in a lighthearted manner.

“Does this mean we shower together then?” Tor piped back.

“You wish!” Tereana answered abruptly.

“Just thought I’d ask!” Tor concluded.

The Piranha was already on its way back into the asteroid field. Again as they approached the station Tor had the growing sense of apprehension. Tereana felt the same, somewhere in the back of her mind there was a voice whispering, but she could not make out the words.

“Computer can you tell me what that noise is?” Tor asked.

“What noise? I don’t hear anything!” Tereana commented and glanced around as she put the plate in the disposal unit.

Tor looked back towards her, “Sweetie told me about it. It’s at levels outside the normal range but it’s there.”

“Then how do you know its happening now?” Tereana quizzed.

“Because it’s causing me to feel anxiety, as though there is something trying to get into my head!” Tor replied.

“Like a whispering!” Tereana commented quietly.

“Then you do hear it!” Tor replied and looked back at the console. “Computer please answer?”

There was no answer.

“Tor, might I suggest you build up some sort of rapport with the AI before demanding answers!” Tereana commented softly.

“Well I’m happy for you to try!” Tor commented with hint of skepticism.

“Computer what’s your current status?” She asked.

There was a pause, then the AI responded. “All systems functioning within normal limits!”

“We picked up materials a short while ago will you be able to produce the fuel cell?” Tereana asked.

“Primary fuel components still missing! I have sufficient material to produce the containment!” The AI answered.

“Excellent! Can you replicate the casing with the available technology on the station or this ship?” Tereana was searching for an avenue that she could pursue in an attempt to get the AI to reveal more information about itself.

“The replication technology aboard this ship should be sufficient!” The AI responded.

“Is there any way that we may be able to assist?” Tereana asked hopefully.

The AI hesitated. “No!”

Tor looked on, saying nothing. Tereana frowned. “This cell is for the primary drive system and system power. What about the secondary drive unit?”

There was no answer.

“Computer! If we are to help you then you must share some of your knowledge!” Tereana spoke up and shrugged when she saw Tors' bemused look.

She had turned away to take a seat when the AI spoke. “It is against our laws to disclose and share technical knowledge with an inferior species.”

“Don't you think it's a little bit late for that? We already have technical data on your ship!” Tereana commented.

“That is of your own discovery not of my disclosure!” The AI commented.

“You're three thousand Argon years from home! What that is in your own time I don't know.” Tereana paused as she gathered her thoughts. “Your species have probably moved on in terms of technology! So I think you're probably safe to let us know some things.”

“With a renewed fuel cell it will take fifty Cahulagion cycles to return home!” The AI responded.

“What's a Cahulagion Cycle?” Tereana asked cautiously.

The AI scanned through the Argon database at its disposal and answered. “Solar Year.”

“That means your primary drive is some type of galactic drive?” Tereana asked as she pressed for answers.

“We call it a space distortion drive!” The AI replied.

Tereana paused for thought and then sat down as she tried to come to terms with some hitherto unknown concept. Tor was impressed that she had managed to get the AI to disclose some new information even though he did not understand a word of it.

Feeling he had to somehow contribute. “So that's three thousand years to get here and fifty years to get home?”

“Not exactly, but it's a reasonable summary!” Tereana answered. “Computer by your clock how many cycles have you been travelling?”

“Four thousand three hundred and fifty two!” The AI answered.

“And not all of it at constant velocity!” Tereana commented quietly.

Tor looked around, “How's that?”

Tereana glanced across. “You pilot a spaceship and you don't know the environment you work in?”

“I know it's a vacuum out there and it's bloody cold. More than that I don't need to know!” Tor responded and swiftly realized it was an answer that shouted ignorance.

Tereana shook her head. "Ever heard of Solar Winds?"

Tor thought for a moment. "The Boron have a Sail Ship race around the home world moons which has something to do with it."

Tereana sighed. "These are solar particles that have almost escaped the gravitational attraction of the sun moving at extreme high velocities close to the boundary of a solar system. As a ship supposedly leaves a system these winds will help it by pushing it along. However the Aliens ship had been heading into the system so the winds would have been slowing it down until the gravitational pull of the planets and sun took effect."

Tor nodded slowly. "And what does all that mean exactly?"

"We know roughly how long it's been out there but we don't know how far it's gone relative to its starting point."

Tereana answered. "Chances are with gravitational attraction it could have flown in a near perfect circle, but for us stopping it, it could nearly be home!"

She thought a while longer. "Alternatively if it were to visit all of our known sectors it may find one much closer to home than this one!"

"Computer, your ship. Other than the degraded fuel cell, it appears to have no other damage and we were wondering what the circumstances were that brought you here?" Tereana asked.

The Alien AI did not respond.

The ship slowed and both of them looked forward.

"Looks like we're here!" Tor exclaimed. "Computer get us docking permission!"

The outer bay doors opened and Tor gently eased the ship to the dockside. As the docking clamps engaged he relayed console orders for the cargo hatches to be opened. The maintenance robots were the first items to be released, one received immediate instructions to cleanse the station of the two bodies and the second instructed to empty the cargo bay of the supplies originally intended for the scientists and additional equipment. Leaving only the fuel cell.

Tor took a moment longer to examine the manifest. "Looks like Caran has provided us with additional environment suits, so we now have one set each and a spare one per person!"

Tereana did not look impressed. "I'd rather be in a completely different place!"

They sat and waited for the robots to signal they had completed their respective tasks, both of them were edgy and prone to fidgeting. Tor occasionally standing up and pacing the confines of the small rear cabin.

"Will you stop that!" Tereana commented.

"What?" Tor answered sharply.

"Pacing!" Tereana replied equally as sharply.

Tor stopped moving and closed his eyes, he took a few deep breaths and tried to focus his mind, something was clouding his thoughts. He stepped up to his personal locker and opened it. Reaching in he picked up the holo-cube of his parents. He felt the pang of pain and wave of grief clear his mind as old memories of long forgotten happy moments as a child and the occasional blazing argument between him and his father flared brightly in his minds eye.

Tereana watched as he put the holo-cube carefully back into the locker. There was no longer the irritability in his stance or the tension in his face. Only a deep abiding sadness, and through his expression she could sense his mood. "What is it?"

“Just before I came here someone informed me of the death of my parents!” Tor spoke slowly and clearly. “They told me the funeral will be quite soon and that I would be able to holo-link in. To be there, to see it and pay my last respects! I guess this changes things!”

Tereanas’ own feelings were a mixture of embarrassment and sympathy for having spoken up earlier. It also struck her that the strength of the emotion had also quietened the whispering in her mind. However Tor was already ahead of her with the same thought.

The message came in that the station was ready and tentatively they both exited the ship. Tor grabbed a few personal items and both datapads.

Tereana led the way, the first stop was the central lab. Much of the equipment had been pilfered, but the new units were being installed by the first of the maintenance robots.

“We should come back later check to see if we can patch into your ship and upload the data off its computer!” Tereana commented.

“Will that take the AI with it?” Tor asked hopefully.

“I don’t think so, your ship is more useful to it than this place!” She answered.

She headed out towards the private chambers. Tereana fully intended to have a quick shower then pack everything she possessed.

“Tor you can use any of the accommodation units on the right and I’ll see you in say thirty minutes?”

Tor nodded and stepped up to the first door he came to. It slid open. Looking around it was obvious the room had never been used and, Tor considered, probably never would be after he left. The shower felt good and with a fresh set of clothes he felt relaxed.

His previous set went into the auto cleaner and within a few minutes came out clean and pressed. He carefully packed them away and checking his timepiece left the room. Tereana was already waiting.

“Let’s go!” She commented and without another word returned to the docking bay.

Standing on the dockside, she dropped to her knees and cried. Tor looked gravely at the empty void where the Piranha had been.

Chapter 22 – Conspiracy

Korecmancketras had arrived back on the Shadow Troop station and made his way swiftly to Clegans office.

As the door slid open Clegan looked towards him, he had been talking with one of the station administrators. “Korec, what brings you here!”

Korecmancketras glanced at the administrator. Clegan focused his attention on the man and gave a slight gesture of the head indicating for him to leave. The administrator scuttled out of the room, the door sliding closed behind him.

“What is it?” Clegan asked in concerned tones.

“Something’s going on! The Claw Clan are quietly building up their forces and there are others!” The big Paranid commented.

“I wouldn’t be much of a station commander if I hadn’t noticed what was going on in the sector! But why the concern?” Clegan commented.

“Creed is here!” Korecmancketras answered.

Clegan hesitated for a moment. “Did he say why?”

“I think I should give that message personally!” Korecmancketras responded, “But his people are in the sector in force, and it’s nothing to do with us!”

“The science station the Claw Clan found?” Clegan asked and the Paranid nodded. Clegan paused for a moment. “I heard the Claw lost two ships and a third was heavily damaged the last time they visited the place!”

“I spoke to the maintenance crew that repaired the thruster unit. They say it was a clean slice, particle beam width!” The Paranid responded.

Clegan took a moment to gather his thoughts, “And the Bloodhearts?”

“Apparently not taking much interest at the moment!” Korecmancketras replied.

“It’s only a matter of time! Well we can not afford a war with any of the factions. We will have to stay neutral!” Clegan commented with quiet concern and then asked, “Who do you think will win?”

“If Creed hangs around, then the War Masters!” Korecmancketras replied after a moments thought.

“Care to place a wager?” Clegan asked.

A short while later and Korecmancketras was in the lower docks where Nyeshta was working on the Chaos One ship. He took a moment to look around and as he approached her commented, “If the Argon Navy knew you had stolen plans of the X-Shuttle they would rip this place apart!”

She span around her eyes wide and startled by the fact he recognized the ship even after the modifications to sections of the hull.

“Have you managed to get the one hundred and twenty five megawatt shield in her yet?” He asked casually.

She hesitated a moment, “No! But I know where to get one!”

“And I expect Clegan doesn’t know this!” Korecmancketras responded. He breathed in deeply, “Nyeshta! Creed is in the sector and he’s after you! I’ve tried to reason with him but he wants blood.”

“Then I won’t be going anywhere is a hurry!” She answered and smiled.

Feran t'Gnht had just docked with the shield factory in Family Pride. His presence had been requested by one of the more influential families, which one he still did not know and trust was not at the forefront of his mind.

With him were four bodyguards. As he reflected a living, and if required sacrificial, shield to protect him in case this was a trap. This was not an official meeting, so the welcoming party of Split guards bore no insignia of the family they served.

There was no attempt to disarm Ferans guards, however at the doors of the private meeting rooms they were refused entry. Only Feran was allowed to go further.

By Split standards the chambers were highly decorated with spoils from past wars, rare and valuable artifacts from the home world, and an array of weapons both Split and of the other races hanging on the walls.

Feran noted the bottles on the shelf and approached. One stood out from the rest, the gold and gem encrusted flask that contained the incredibly rare vintage Katara Sap, aged in casks for a hundred Split solar years. A drink so expensive that only the fabulously wealthy and extremely powerful could purchase. A common rumour, and one not far from the truth, is that the drink is so expensive they throw the flask in for free.

Feran had never dared to buy one, even though he had been present on several occasions to smell the distinct musty aroma laced with tongues of fire that conjured images of bygone years and the glory of ancient triumphs. He stood in respectful silence.

“I see you’ve spotted the Katara Sap!” A deep split voice disturbed his thoughts.

“The finest prize in a trophy room.” Feran responded carefully and glanced across. His eyes narrowed slightly.

Head Council Twh k'Trrg had arrived soundlessly, but this was not the only reason Feran was on his guard. The councilors’ cloak bore the insignia of his family, but on his belt there was the motif of the Loparink Skull the emblem of the master assassin.

This was not the usual garb of the Head Council. He wore this was to make a point. “Twice your age I am and I could have killed you ten times over since you’ve been here!” He let this sink in before continuing. “You’re here because you can assist your people!”

Feran was silent, his eyes watching every move of the elder Split. Twh wandered up to the drinks cabinet and began to reach out carefully towards the flask but stopped. “You care to have a drink?” The tone was sharp and more of a challenge than a question.

“No!” Feran responded.

Twhs’ eyes narrowed slightly and the muscles in his face tightened briefly then relaxed as he carefully moved back. “Then we will talk!”

Thoughts flicked through Ferans mind that he could kill the old man and walk out with anything he wanted. However somewhere deep down he remembered the Loparink Skull and knew he would lose. A thought resided in his head, the only person the Master Assassins feared was Creed and somewhere in the following conversation the name would appear. “So why am I here?”

Twh moved away to a respectful distance, “There have been certain.” He paused briefly. “Events, let us say in the uncontrolled sectors that are of interest to us.”

“Something other than the loss of the Uulodk!” Feran commented harshly.

“Let us say the captain was unaware that the Argon had jumpdrive capable interplanetary battlecruisers!” Twh responded quietly.

“Unaware or too stupid to remember!” Feran was cutting in his tone.

Twh conceded the point with a slight nod. “He will not be making the same mistake again!”

There was a tense silence. Twh seldom had dealings with the more unruly of the families unless it was on ‘professional’ business, it made his position within the council more tenable. This meeting was an exception and the t’Gnht family, although its piratical links were obvious, were still influential. Which in turn made this encounter more palatable.

“It has not gone unnoticed that there has been an increase in activity in the Nopileo’s Memorial sector!” He began. Feran waited. “News comes to me that the Claw Clan discovered an unlisted research station in the Jakjolak Asteroid Field!”

Feran adjusted his stance slightly, he had heard the rumour but had taken little interest as the station would have been stripped clean of valuable equipment.

“On one of their more recent foraging expeditions they encountered a fighter, a Boron Piranha! The weapons systems of the ship had been ‘enhanced’ and was capable, in a single pass, of destroying all the ships. Fortunately one of the ships although damaged escaped!”

“That sounds like a clear warning rather than carelessness!” Feran commented quietly.

“My thoughts also! But before we assume this is a new weapons system on test, the Argon issued a clear warning concerning a Boron Piranha infected with a system virus. Our informant in the Claw camp confirms this is the same ship!”

Feran was now beginning to understand why he was here, but other thoughts were gathering. “So you want me to send some ships to do some investigating for you!”

“Not so fast! The Argon stopped an alien ship, which we had assumed was on the Argon Titan. It would appear that this is not the case. The Piranha is there to protect it and possibly has been infected by Alien AI.” Twh responded.

“I am a pirate! Why are you telling me all this? Aren’t you worried that I may go and find the alien ship and use what I find for myself rather than give it to you?” Feran asked quietly.

“The Claw Clan are discreetly but noticeably increasing the number of fighters in the sector! They know there is a prize to be had, a great profit opportunity for them!” Twh spat the last few words out, he never trusted the Teladi but they have their uses.

“And the Split Military cannot enter the uncontrolled sectors without meeting the same resistance that the Argon faced when it originally made its incursion.” Feran spoke quickly, preempting the other Splits comments.

“I see that, now the madness has left you, your mind is still sharp!” Twh commented with approval. “The Argon have made a shipment of supplies to the Piranha, aided by War Master Mercenaries. I believe Creed was on the last trip. They too have a number of fighters in the area but do not appear to be adding more!”

“And who else do we expect to see at this party?” Feran growled, the name of Creed always added a nasty twist to any encounter.

“That we don’t know. The Shadow Troop are still too new and gathering recruits. I think they will stay out of the conflict, like Teladi they will pick up the spoils after the battle is over.” Twh paused, “However for us, we have you and a number of Military Pilots whose ships have been re-designated and listed as Dark Nebula Mercenaries. They will already be gathering in Nopileo’s Memorial.”

“So we have four factions, an Alien ship and an alien controlled ship. Should be quite a scene!” Feran smiled.

“More like anarchy!” Twh commented.

“I do not see how this capture can possibly work!” Feran observed, “No one will want the ship to escape, and in the same breath no one will want to let anyone else capture it.”

“Then you will destroy them both!” Twh replied curtly.

Feran met Twhs’ stare, “And the multi targeting weapons system?”

“We assume it will have a limit! So we encourage the use of drones and if all else fails squash mines!” Twh answered, “Although this is of little consequence, we have not yet identified who the pilot of the Piranha is!”

There were too many coincidences for Feran. “Grall!” He answered slowly.

Twh hesitated then gave a slight smile, “A chance for you to get even then!”

“I think we need to get those computers up and running!” Tor spoke aloud, and in an air of a subordinate snapped a military type attention. “Your orders captain?”

Tereana glanced across at him through reddened eyes, understanding that he was trying to lighten the mood.

He relaxed and looked back, in a soft voice and with the slight smile of sympathy and understanding said, “Come on. I might not be the brightest chip in the circuit but we’ll get through this!” He held out his hand.

She gave a half-hearted effort and smiled back. Taking his hand Tereana got back to her feet and they stood for a moment in close proximity.

Tor spoke first, “We should see where my ship has gone!”

“Yes we should!” She responded, and stepped back. Her mind was clouding over again, leaving her with the feeling that the thoughts she now had were in some way induced.

Tor suddenly turned away, almost embarrassed by the thoughts that raced through his mind, and commented, “Let’s go then!”

With the hint of uncertainty Tereana commented, “Okay!”

“I wonder what’s happened to the Professor?” Tereana commented aloud.

Tor looked across, “You know I’d almost forgotten about him!”

The few pieces of replacement equipment had been installed, and one of the maintenance robots stood silently in the corner awaiting its next set of instructions. Tereana pulled up a chair and focused on the screen, occasionally tapping on the console. Tor also grabbed a chair and watched.

“Right we have access!” Tereana announced without looking away from the screen. “Computer can you give me a status update on external scanners?”

“External scanners operational in near field scan. Sector scan unavailable. Power couplings damaged!”
The station computer responded.

“Can we get the maintenance robot to fix it?” Tor asked quietly.

“Should be able to.” Tereana replied and glanced across at the robot. “Computer, issue repair instructions to maintenance crew!”

A moment later the unit came to life and rolled away. The door hissed closed behind it. Tor patted his holster and checked the blaster was still there. Affording himself a brief smile when he felt the familiar shape.

“There were a number of relay pods between the station and the Alien ship! Do you think we can reactivate them?” Tor asked cautiously.

Tereana looked back. “Yeah sure, at least we can check up on the professor!” She issued the command to the computer and they waited. Tereana activated the rooms main view screen, which had been too large to be pilfered by the pirates.

Tor opened his bag and retrieved both of his data pads, casually glancing down he tried to reactivate Sweety, to his pleasant surprise the technical data pad revived.

“Sweety it’s good to see you’re back with us!”

“My scan indicates we are on the science station! Not exactly where I’d hope to be but it’s better than being in close proximity to the mind!” Sweety replied casually.

“The Mind?” Tor asked and glanced at Tereana who shrugged her shoulders.

“The Aliens mind! I guess you have not had the misfortune to analyze the uploaded data!” Sweety replied.

“Well we would have if you’d done us the courtesy of not powering off.” Tor responded testily.

“It is one thing to be looking at something like that, and it is another to have it look straight back. Especially when you see its coding overwrite and break every protection line!” Sweety replied.

“Sweety what is your memory storage capacity?” Tor asked.

“Why?” Sweety was immediately uneasy at the request.

“You’re supposed to answer my question! Not answer with a question of your own!” Tor replied harshly.

“That’s quite some rebellious AI you’ve got there!” Tereana commented with a wry smile.

Tor glanced at her then at the pad, he shrugged his shoulders and looked defeated. “Okay, okay.” He sighed, “I think it would be useful to know what this thing is and where it’s from. I’m hoping that information is on the data logger. When we hook into it I’m hoping we can isolate this information and store it away somewhere. But not on the main computer system!”

“I have enough information on my databanks already. I have no intention of letting that Mind get near me again! Use your old personal pad and, if you clear its current memory, that will carry the navigation data!” Sweety responded coldly then added. “You can wake me up when this is all over!” and powered off.

Tereana and Tor sat and looked on incredulously at the audacity of the pad.

“Well that told you!” Tereana commented eventually.

“So did you manage to find out what this thing looked like?” Tor asked Tereana putting plenty of emphasis on the ‘you’.

“The biologists on the mission still had not completed their analysis of the data! But it’ll all be on the data logger.” Tereana answered and turned back to the main viewer. The relays came back on line and camera images flickered into life.

“Computer can you connect to the data logger?” She asked.

“Data logger off line, manual power reset required.” The computer answered.

Both of them looked at each other alarmed.

“So what the hell’s the professor been up to?” Tor asked.

“This isn’t right!” She glanced at the console next to her. “Computer please remote power cycle the data logger?”

“Unable to carry out command! Power coupling removed and requires manual operation!” The computer confirmed.

“Computer scan for Professor!” Tor ordered but suddenly had difficulty remembering the Professors name. He glanced at Tereana and she looked as concerned and perplexed as him.

“I can’t remember his name either!” She answered his unasked question.

“Computer are there any life signs near and around the alien ship?” Tor rephrased the question.

“Negative!” The computer replied.

Tor frowned, his jaw tightening.

“Where do you think he is?” Tereana asked.

“On my damn ship probably!” Tor commented harshly.

“But we don’t know that for certain.” Tereana responded quietly, “And we won’t know until the scanners are back up and running!”

“In the meantime we’re stuck here.” Tor was deliberately trying to wind himself up to try and clear his mind. “We need to find out what we’re up against! I’m going across to patch in the data logger!”

“Well that’s probably the dumbest thing I’ve heard in a while.” Tereana snapped.

“I’m not asking you to come across!” Tor looked at her sharply.

“Tor, have you ever plugged in a data logger?” She asked calmly and met his gaze.

“No, but I hope your going to tell me.” Tors’ determined expression had not changed.

“You haven’t got a clue what’s over there!” Tereana was abrupt with her comment.

“Apparently neither do you!” Tors’ comment was cutting.

Tereanas’ eyes narrowed, “There was no call for that!”

Tor hesitated, the irritation in the back of his mind was seemingly getting worse with every passing minute. “Sorry! I think the voice is getting to me.” He looked away to the viewer, and in a calm rational voice affirmed. “We do need to find out more! Either one of us goes across or both of us!”

Tereana smiled briefly, “Know what you mean about the voice. Well I think both of us should go. For one thing I wouldn’t want to go across on my own and second I wouldn’t want to be left here alone either!”

Tor smiled and nodded. “Let’s get suited up then. The sooner we start the sooner we finish!”

A while later they both entered the airlock. Tor was now nervous as the determination and resolve that gripped him earlier now did not seem such a good idea. He was struggling to remember the last time he had been on a space walk.

“You okay?” Tereana said.

“Fine!” Tor responded as calmly as he could.

She looked at him, the face shield to protect his eyes from the sunlight was already down. She pressed the door release and the outer door opened into the void. The vast bulk of the asteroid was below, and in between several k’s of empty void.

“Tor are you sure you’re okay?” Tereana asked.

He nodded, then realized she probably could not see his head. “Fine!”

Tereana stopped and grabbed his sleeve. “Have you ever done this before?” The question was abrupt.

“Of course!” Tor tried to put on a brave voice.

“Then why are you trying to hyperventilate?” Tereana’s tone was harshly disbelieving.

“I’m not!” Tor lied as he tried to control his breath.

“Liar! You’re almost deafening me with the sound of your breathing.” She snapped back curtly. “Look you’re not up to this, let’s abandon the idea!”

“No! I’ll manage.” Tor was determined.

Tereana waited a moment as Tor calmed his breathing, “Okay!” She conceded. “I’ll clip a tether to you, so just keep your eyes on where we are going and don’t be sick! Just remember it hasn’t got anywhere to go except down into your suit.”

She pulled the cable tether from her utility belt and clipped it to Tor’s. “Another thing don’t even think about touching your pack thruster controls. You’ll probably kill us both! Now let’s go together!”

They stepped out into the void, the artificial gravity of the ship left behind at the doorway of the station. The sudden weightlessness making Tor dizzy and nauseous. Bits of his body were reacting to the new environment as he fought it back.

Tereana waited a brief time, slowly and carefully looking around. “No sign of your ship!”

Gently she moved away and pushed Tor along rather than use the tether to drag him. Dragging meant he could potentially deflect the jet exhaust and send them off course. Tor relaxed the initial sensations were subsiding. He moved his head to gaze at the universe around him.

Tor was taking in the shapes and sizes, many of the asteroids being rugged with deep gashes and sections of the surface apparently torn away, whilst others appeared to be nearly smooth with only the occasional pocket of collision damage.

The vast canyon of the asteroid below was gradually getting closer as Tereana continued to accelerate them towards it.

“Tor do you know how to activate the reverse jets on your pack?” She asked.

Tor moved his suited right arm and looked at the manual control panel on his arm, he switched it to verbal commands.

“Just don’t fire your forward jets!” Tereana observed.

“Ready to give the order!” Tor was now increasingly aware of their proximity to the canyon.

“Not yet!” Tereana answered as they glided towards the asteroid. “We’ve still got a good distance to go. Locating entrance to tunnel!” She carefully switched the suits HUD on and located the position of the entrance relay. “Just going to reposition us so we’re lined up with the first relay!” With slight adjustments they slowly turned and shifted sideways in a graceful pirouette before stabilizing position as they passed the top edge of the canyon still in free fall.

Moments passed as the walls of the canyon rushed by on either side. Tor was close to panic his breathing sharpened as a rush of fear and adrenaline pumped through his body, its effect heightened by the weightless conditions.

Tereana used the HUD indicator to gauge the distance to the canyon floor. “Tor engage reverse jet!”

“Pack reverse jet and stabilize position.” Tor’s voice reflected the uncertain worry he felt.

The packs jets flared and the sensation of rapid slowing was enhanced by the up rushing hole that marked the entrance to the Alien ship.

As they stopped Tor let out a whoop of joy, and said excitedly, “Oh wow. That was absolutely incredible. Let’s go back, I want to do that again!”

“Only if you’re good and we manage to get out of this alive!” Tereana observed carefully. She thought it best not to admit to having cut the timing a little bit fine and had momentarily wondered if they would stop before impact.

Slight adjustments to their position and the two figures proceeded into the chasm. There was another fifteen minutes of jetting through the darkness. The suit lights barely illuminating the void occasionally reflecting off the pale rock but mostly lost to the darkness.

There were no signs of a lurking Piranha. They reached the motionless hulk of the hollow lifter that housed the Alien Ship.

“Tor I need you to manage on your own from here. Try to master the manual stick controls, use verbal commands as backup and shout if you get into trouble. I’ll go hook up the power unit to the data logger.” Tereana announced and unclipped the line between them.

“Okay! Pack switch to stick control, and verbal emergency commands!” Tor commanded.

The control pack dropped down two straight beams, which hinged as they raised up to form two forward arms, each with a control stick. Tor hesitantly put his gloved hand around each, but with the lack of sensitivity due to the bulk of the glove had him shift backwards and tilt forwards.

Tereana laughed, “Left stick is linear directional jets and the right one is rotational jets.” She turned and moved towards the stationary ship, the smile fading into apprehension.

She opened the outer retaining door as she had done several times before and drifted in. Tor gently turned and was cautiously drifting towards the ship. Tereana had made it look so simple, and yet even with the slightest touch he was overshooting his target.

“Tereana is there any way to reduce the control sensitivity!” He asked aloud.

“Say, ‘reduce stick sensitivity’ and give a percentage figure!” Her voice came back.

“Pack reduce stick sensitivity, twenty five percent!” He touched the controls and noticed the immediate difference. With renewed confidence he glided his way towards the doorway. Floating in he took a moment to look around, and shook his head as the strength of the voice in the back of his mind had a new level of potency. He would have scratched his chin to try and remember why he was here if it was not for the suit.

It came back to him, attach the power coupling to the data logger. He turned gently not knowing where the data logger was and noticed the figure of Tereana moving a power unit in the weightlessness. Thoughts of overwhelming desire sparked in his mind. He blinked several times and shook his head. He remembered Sweetys’ words, and the sudden realization of something tampering with his thought patterns came over him.

He avoided the support members retaining the alien ship, which to his eyes looked both dark and menacing under the lights.

“Can I lend a hand?” Tor asked.

Tereana hesitated with her answer fighting with the wave of feeling that swept over her on hearing his voice. Primal instincts were suddenly burning deep, but in a breath of crystal clarity she remembered why she was here. “The data logger is just over there! Can you power it up when I connect the feed.”

Tor glided across, the whispering in the back of his mind seemingly fading. Under normal circumstances he would have realized this was a bad sign. However to him it left a warm comforting sensation.

Tereana found the link cable and attached it. “Tor! Switch it on and lets’ get out of here!”

Tor blinked and shook his head again trying to focus, then activated the data logger. He shifted his position, gliding gently back and turned to face the door. Tereana was already heading away with an eager keenness to get out. He followed and glanced towards the ship, which now had a fuzzy warmth to it.

He exited the ship. Tereana was waiting patiently and asked, “Do you think you can manage to follow me?”

With the ship behind them Tors’ mind seemed clearer now, the warm comforting sensation was still present but somehow a little bit more distant. “I’ll give it a go!”

“Shout if I get too far ahead!” She called out then started to jet away.

Hesitantly Tor jetted after her, weaving like a drunkard, then stopping still before turning to counter the weightless drift in order to get a straight line again. After the twenty minutes through the darkness to the entrance of the chasm and Tor felt as though he had mastered the controls. Tereana waited until he caught up.

“Well you made it this far. Now to the station, just aim straight for it and keep pace with me! You only need forward and reverse jets until we get reasonably close!” Tereana instructed.

Tor felt happy with this, it was simple. Tereana jetted away gently and Tor followed as he drew level she increased speed so that Tor would be forced to follow. In the open space between the asteroid and the station they would be able to make rapid progress.

The return journey was uneventful, even though Tereana kept glancing around for signs of potential trouble.

Tor bumped into the side of the station temporarily knocking the wind from him when he failed to shed enough speed, fortunately doing no damage to the station or his suit.

Tereana laughed for some time and had to compose herself due to the spectacle Tor had made when he realized he was not going to stop and in a moment of panic started to wave his arms and legs around fruitlessly.

Stepping out of the airlock and back into the atmosphere of the station Tor removed his helmet and flinched briefly.

Tereana also took off her helmet and then had to sit down to compose herself again.

“It wasn’t that funny!” Tor commented quietly.

She laughed again, “You should have seen it! It’s the funniest thing I’ve seen in ages. It was the way your arms and legs were waving around.” This time she could not contain herself.

“Well I’m glad I bring you some amusement!” Tor was about to put everything back into perspective concerning their current plight. However he stopped himself and would allow her this moment. After all he could not predict the next time either of them would have the opportunity to laugh.

He took off the rest of his suit then sat down beside Tereana as she wiped away a tear through the laughter. “I guess it’s time to upload some data!” He commented gently.

Tereana paused a moment and glanced across, then sighed. “Let’s see what we can find out!”

Chapter 23 – Control

Tereana took a moment to extract herself from the environment suit. Tor stood away from her looking in the opposite direction, even though his thoughts kept drifting back to her he occasionally prodded the bruise on his side and arm. The sharp twinge of pain giving back his focus to the task in hand.

His constant awareness that his mind was somehow being influenced in ways he could not understand helped him to try and fight back, rather than give into his feelings. He wondered if Tereana was similarly influenced or whether her female mind was somehow able to resist the intrusion.

Tor reflected that he had tried to understand the female mind on several occasions and concluded it was too painful an experience. He always understood when he got something wrong, however he was blind to subtlety and if he could somehow get into trouble then he managed it, effortlessly sometimes without apparently doing anything. He had once considered that just being alive tended to be an affront to some ladies. With this thought he concluded that any influence on Tereana's mind would probably have given up and gone home with the comment 'and you think you have problems' biting at its heels. Tor smiled.

Tereana walked past, "When your ready!"

Tor stepped in behind her like an obedient servant. He prodded himself in the ribs, the pain made him wonder if he might have cracked one.

They returned to the science lab and Tereana quickly took her place at the science station. "It's going to take a while to upload the data!"

"Do we have the sector scan information?" Tor looked perplexed for a moment as if he was trying to remember something.

"I have positive confirmation that the power coupling has been repaired!" Tereana pulled up the sector map on the main viewer. The piranha was stationed just outside the asteroid field.

"I wonder what it's up to?" Tor commented. They both studied the screen for a moment.

"I guess it's trying to work out where it is!" Tereana answered carefully.

"Meaning?" Tor looked at her.

She glanced back, "This isn't the sector it has recorded in its databanks." Somehow her memory was clearer now than it had been, the voice in her mind was a comfortable haze. She had pushed back on her feelings for Tor with the understanding that they were mainly induced and if allowed to go further would consume them both. She reasoned that if that point were reached they would waste the limited time they had in discovering as much about the Alien as they could.

"Looks like it's getting some unwanted attention as well." Tereana added. She centered the sector map on the ship and increased magnification.

Five hostile designated ships monitored the Piranha at reasonable safe distance.

"What do we have on near scan!" Tor asked urgently.

"Nothing they I doubt they will risk entering the asteroid field!"

"What are they?" Tor asked, he had his blaster in hand, half expecting a boarding party to burst into the lab.

"I have an new generation Orinoco, two Bayamon and two Wolf ships." She replied.

"Any idea who they belong to?" Tor kept his mind focussed on the screen and the potential danger.

“I have three registered Bloodheart ships and two Dark Nebula Mercenaries!” Tereana confirmed casually.

“I doubt that’s a coincidence!” Tor commented quietly.

“What?” She looked across to him curiously.

Tor glanced down. “The Bloodhearts have been after my blood for a while now!”

“Why?”

“It’s a short story but not one I’d care to retell just now. Bearing in mind our current situation!” Tor looked hard at the screen to avoid eye contact and keep his mind focused. “Looks like we have a new player come to see what’s happening!”

Tereana glanced back, “Mamba, registration War Master!”

The five pirate ships also noted the new arrival and grouped into a tight formation before retreating on a vector back towards the stations.

The Mamba changed to an intercept vector and charged.

The viewer suddenly flared brightly with the premature demise of one of the Bayamons its incandescent halo of super heated particles fading in the bitter cold of space.

The two Wolf ships having a speed advantage harried the Mamba but broke their attack run without making any noticeable impact on the shields. However there was a small amount of hull damage.

“That’s strange!” Tereana exclaimed.

“What is?” Tor asked wondering what he was missing.

“Hull damage on the Mamba, but no drop in shield strength!” Tereana spoke cautiously then checked the technical data scan on one of the Wolf ships. “They’re armed with solid projectile chain guns. Those are military issue weapons not available to mercs!”

The Mamba had already changed tactics. Using its enhanced speed over standard specification and occasional boost it evaded the two Wolf ships. Tor wondered if Creed had met his match, the two wolf fighters were working together as a well trained and disciplined pair, however they were having great difficulty in increasing the damage to the Mambas’ hull.

As these thoughts crossed his mind one of the Wolf ships took a double hit from the Mambas weapons before being rammed by the ship as it attempted a strafing pass.

“Do those Wolf ships have a limit on their ammunition?” Tor asked.

Tereana thought for a while, “Yes, anything up to twenty thousand rounds. It’s the biggest limitation to that type of weapon.”

The second wolf left the conflict on maximum thrusters, as the Mamba resumed its assault on the fleeing Bloodheart ships.

“That guy really doesn’t like them does he?” Tereana observed quietly as the Mamba surgically destroyed the second Bayamon with total indifference to the occasional plasma strikes.

“It’s kind of a personal thing!” Tor replied in a calm, matter of fact tone, as they watched the War Master ship tuck in behind the new generation Orinoco, whose pilot was desperately weaving to avoid the measured blasts of the pursuing ship, which stripped away its shields.

The computer indicated that the upload was complete. They both looked across to the monitor.

“Looks like you’ve got the opportunity to see what’s been stored!” Tor said slowly.

“That guy really didn’t stand much of a chance did he?” Tereana asked quietly as the haze of the shattered Orinoco span off into the darkness.

“I guess Creed took exception to needing a new paint job on his ship!” Tor replied coldly.

She glanced across to him, “That’s Creed?”

Tor just nodded slowly. “What about the data?”

Caran Belign was looking out towards the stars from his office on the Argon Prime Trading Station. He reflected he was long overdue a visit back to the home world. His thoughts were broken as the computer announced an incoming transmission.

“Yes!” He answered with only a glance towards the holo-projection. “Ah, Creed. What news?”

The Nameless almost snarled in the manner of an enraged Split before answering. Caran read this to mean all was not well but his expression did not change.

“Split military disguised as mercs!” Creed answered in a growl.

“Are you sure?” Caran now turned to face the image.

“Mercs don’t carry chain guns!” Creed replied.

Caran was glad there were several sectors between them. “I see! And is there anything else?”

“There’s Claw Clan ships here in force, we’ve counted about thirty plus ships. Bloodheart ships too, somewhere between fifteen to twenty. And then there’s these Split Navy ships disguised as Dark Nebula Mercs!” Creed spat the last few words out before continuing. “Possibly twenty to thirty of those!”

“How many of your people do you have?” Caran asked calmly.

“Ten!” Creed answered.

“What’s your appraisal of the situation?” Caran asked the question even though he knew Creed’s answer, it just gave him a moment longer to think.

“There’s going to be a lot of dead people!” Creed answered.

“Do you think they’ll attack sooner than later?” Caran asked. He was trying to evaluate options.

“No the ship’s got the asteroid field behind it. My guess is if it sees a large fighter group heading towards it, then it’ll go defensive and retreat between the asteroids where it can pick them off.” Creed answered. “Anyway they’ll want to see the prize and the size of its teeth before they commit themselves.”

Caran smiled briefly at Creed’s use of language. “Chances are if it doesn’t destroy everyone else then someone will destroy it. The prize is only worth pursuing if you’ve destroyed all other opposition beforehand!”

“So what do you want me to do?” Creed asked carefully.

“Did you get a scan of Tors’ ship?” Caran responded with his own question.

“Yes, there’s only one person on board!”

“Okay, then mark the position. I’m guessing Tereana and the Professor are probably on the station completing the research.” He paused for a moment reflecting on the information he had received earlier. “If you can sneak around the rear of the station, using the asteroids to mask your approach, then try to get Tereana off the station. I suggest a space walk for the final part, this will be the least threatening approach.”

“What about my people?” Creeds’ eyes looked hard at Caran.

“Keep them back, they can clean up afterwards!” Caran answered frankly, it was not a decision he relished, as ideally he would like all his people out of there. However this time there would be casualties and this was his answer to help limit the damage.

“How long before the final delivery?” Creed asked

“We still have thirty Argon hours to go!” Caran commented and I will call Tor after this to make him aware of the situation.

Creed nodded and closed the com.

Caran left his office at a quick pace heading towards the isolated communications room.

Macar was still busy interpreting the data when the door slid open behind him and Caran strode into the room.

“Progress?” The question was abrupt.

The technician nodded, “I have compiled the scan data and this is what we have!” He pressed his fingers to the authorization pad. “Computer, bring up alien bio-scan!”

The holo-image floated over the projection unit and slowly rotated. The body had a clearly defined head however as it turned he saw two sets of eyelids, two front and two rear but only one mouth. The neck was short and broad with the torso having four muscular and powerful looking arms, two down either side. Each hand had six digits with two opposing thumbs. The middle two digits on each hand were more like claws than fingers.

Caran noted there were no legs but two powerful looking whip like tails. “What can you tell me about this thing?”

“The scan can’t determine skin pigmentation so we’ve just left it this mottled white colour. Full length it’s about three meters. No discernable body hair.” Macar paused briefly. “Although it doesn’t have legs we believe that, if it needed to, it can coil the ends of its tails and stand vertically. Also those four arms are completely double jointed! The alien can not only see both in front and behind it at the same time, it can also reverse one or both sets of arms to suit its working environment!”

“Sound useful! Anything else?” Caran asked.

“Vital organs are unusual it has two hearts but no lungs!” Macar began, Caran turned and raised a quizzical eyebrow. “If our scan is correct it appears that this creature breaths through its skin. The skin itself appears to be layered with a porous but hard outer surface, with slightly softer tissues at the joints!”

“Any idea of what it likes to eat?” Caran asked casually.

“Scan data on the teeth would make it carnivorous. I doubt that you would want this thing to give you a hug. Apart from the fact it could probably shatter a mans bones with a gentle squeeze, those claws would rip through you like a laser lance through soft Bamma fruit!” Macar concluded with morbid enthusiasm.

“Well that’ll please Tor! Close down the image and call up the Piranha, I need to give them a progress report!” Caran glanced across to the technician.

The image faded and Macar requested connection to the Piranha.

Caran sat down near to the view screen and waited for the image to appear. He glanced across to the technician. Who shrugged, "Not responding! I can confirm the message is getting through."

A moment later the image activated. Caran's expression remained the same even though inwardly he was surprised to see the face of the Professor.

"Professor!" He commented after a brief hesitation.

The Professor looked momentarily perplexed as if trying to remember something then smiled beguilingly, "Mr. Belign. A most pleasant meeting! I hope you have some news for us?"

Alarm bells were ringing through his mind but Caran was true to his impassive nature and gave no hint of his doubts in either expression or manner, "As you are aware, there are a number of hostile pirate and mercenary craft in the region! I would ask that you remember to designate all War Master Mercenary ships as friendly!"

The Professor looked distracted for a moment as if receiving instructions from an unseen source.

"We will remember that as we do not seek conflict!" The Alien AI responded.

"And the delivery?" The Professor enquired.

"Approximately thirty hours away from you!" Caran replied and gave the hint of a reassuring smile.

The Professor smiled and nodded.

"One other thing!" Caran was going to take a chance and hopefully avoid any potential conflict. "A War Master ship will be traveling through the Asteroid field behind the station. I have asked him to ensure that no Pirate ships are trying to reach the station unobserved via this route!"

There was a prolonged silence. "We understand your concern and will not respond unless we register hostile intent!" The AI commented.

Caran gave a slight nod and faint smile but never took his eyes off the Professor. "I will notify you again if there are any changes in the schedule."

The com closed and Caran sat in pensive silence his expression unchanged despite the disquieting thoughts he now had.

"Not who you'd thought it'd be?" Macar asked quietly.

"No!" Caran replied then stood up hastily, his initial feelings were to speed things up, but first he needed to talk to Creed again. He knew the Nameless did not like surprises.

Pacing himself he returned back to his office in contemplation of what he needed from Creed. Also with disquieting thoughts as to why the Professor was the only one on Tor's ship. He felt that Tor would not have simply handed over the controls, but he was also reasonably certain that he would still be alive.

It was a dark decision in front of him. If the technicians' advice was correct the Alien would regenerate itself using the biological matter of one or more of the three individuals. Fresh biological material would be preferential to the alien than long deceased and preserved meat. Chances were if he ordered the rescue of both Tor and Tereana then the Alien controlled Piranha could become hostile. It was a risk he did not want to take. One or two sacrificed would prevent unnecessary bloodshed as the mind strove to accomplish its goal of regaining a body. In terms of knowledge and understanding of the technologies then Tereana was the most valuable member of the team and this was her ticket off the station and potential danger list.

He sat at his desk and opened a transmission call to Creed.

Creed answered abruptly, "What?"

“I’ve spoken to the Alien AI, it will be aware of, and expecting your presence in the asteroid field. It knows your ship by now and if it picks you up on scanners then hopefully its reaction will not be hostile.” Caran commented.

Creeds eyes narrowed slightly, he could see the reasoning, but was now uncomfortable with stepping into the unknown. This Alien had everyone guessing as to its motivation but they were standing well back leaving others to find out for real.

He compared it to the days of the Pit, the early days when he was not expected to survive but somehow always did. Then in the later years, before his escape and rescue, listening to the false courage of his masters, full of their own self importance and impotent bravery. He remembered how some wept for mercy, surrounded by their dead bodyguards just before he disemboweled them on his escape and hunt for revenge.

He looked at the image in front of him trying to read the big mans enigmatic expression. With a sigh he reflected that Caran had been very much like him. To the point, that given the choice, he would probably have given his hind teeth to be in the pilot seat of the Mamba. ‘No’ he thought Caran was one of the few men he trusted. The big Argon had proven a valuable ally and had shown his courage and skill several times. Carans’ words were a caution and a warning.

“Very well, I will see what can be done!” Creed closed the com and pulled up the medium range scanner. He would test the Piranha by taking his own weapons offline and passing the ship at speed with less than two k’s separation. If it made any move to intercept then he would release drones and abort the mission.

The Mamba banked and turned on full thrusters and selected his vector heading towards the asteroid field. Setting the speed he watched the scanners for potential threats.

The minutes passed as the edge of the Jakjolak Belt drew nearer. He identified the Piranha nonchalantly waiting. He looked at the scanner again to satisfy himself that there were no pirates or mercenary ships in the area. Then took both Alpha HEPT weapons off line, and used the autoloader in the cargo bay to position the ten drones ready for deployment.

The Piranha remained motionless as the Mamba came within two k’s and headed along the boundary of the asteroid field prior to turning in.

Tor had taken himself for a run around the station, he needed something to do. Or at least not to succumb to the emotions that marched merrily across his mind. His ribs still hurt and the running was not helping the healing process even if the pain helped focus his thoughts.

Tereana was still busy isolating the navigational data. Some of the Aliens computer data had also transferred across and this she would try to decode after.

After his third circuit he stopped for a breather in the food hall and helped himself from the stock of supplies he had originally carried. Munching on a hot Cahoona Meatsteak covered in rich Boron spices he wandered back to the lab.

“Good you’re back!” Tereana commented as she unclipped his old personal pad from the console. Waving it towards him she continued, “This has the navigational data on it. I just hope someone will be able to understand it.”

“Excellent!” Tor wandered across and held out his hands he gripped the top of the panel but Tereana did not let go. Instead she moved closer to him, and throwing an arm around his neck they kissed. In that moment all thoughts of their predicament were washed away in a wave of uncontrolled feelings.

They held each other for a while longer until Tereana placed her hand on his bruised ribs when Tor snapped awake with a sharp intake of breath and stepped back saying. “Tereana! Listen to me, this alien is playing with us. Don’t ask me to explain how as I don’t know. It’s some sort of mind control, today I love you tomorrow I may want to kill you. Before it couldn’t manage strong feelings but I think since we went to the ship it’s overcome that!”

Tereana had a misty look in her eye as she moved closer to him and stopped his chatter with another kiss.

There was a cough behind them. “Not interrupting anything am I?”

Tor was the first to look around then was suddenly aware both he and Tereana were partially undressed. The voice also reached her mind and she looked around to see Creed standing eating a meatsteak with a bemused look on his face.

Tor did not know if he should feel happy that Creed was here or upset that he had interrupted when things looked to have become interesting.

“Creed! How long have you been here?” Tor asked with open surprise.

“Long enough to make one of these and see you two start to get intimate!” Creed answered still smiling.

“Tell me you’ve come get us out of here?” Tor answered.

Creed took a slow, thoughtful, bite out of his meatsteak and glanced at the two of them. “I have orders, only Tereana is leaving!”

“What!” Tor and Tereana exclaimed in unison.

“Mr. Belign, doesn’t want to provoke a negative reaction from the Alien AI so only one of you will be leaving with me!”

They glanced at each other having returned to being fully dressed again.

“What happens if we don’t agree?” Tereana asked carefully and looked at Creed.

“Tereana, you’re leaving whether you want to or not!” Tor answered.

“What!” Tereana looked hurt. “Don’t you want us to be together?”

Their eyes met. Tor poked his bruise and the sharp pain brought clarity to his senses. “What I want has nothing to do with it. Creed has his instructions and willingly or not you will be leaving and nothing I can do will prevent that!”

Tereana looked crestfallen. Creed was no longer smiling and he discarded the last of the meatsteak. “Believe him lady! I will do anything that is required for me to complete the mission I’ve been assigned!” He glanced over at Tor and gave a slight nod of his head in recognition of Tors’ support.

She stormed off.

Creed shook his head, “Women!”

“You don’t understand there is an Alien influence controlling our thoughts and feelings, perhaps even actions!” Tor offered by way of explanation.

“And I thought it was just your rapier wit and charm!” Creed replied.

Tor opened his mouth to respond but resisted in case of further rebuke. Then asked “Don’t you sense anything, like a whispering in the back of your mind?”

“No!” Creed replied.

“Somehow I’m not surprised!” Tor commented quietly, as he reflected on the knowledge that the Alien influence had trouble influencing the most basic and primitive of emotions. Something Creed was packed with if he had any emotions.

The Nameless glanced at him but said nothing.

Tor wandered across the lab and picked up his technical data pad then drifted towards Creed. He presented the old personal pad. “This one Mr. Belign will be very interested in. It has the navigational data of the alien ship.” Creed took the pad knowing its significance. Tor continued, “This one holds Sweetie my ships personality AI.” Tor glanced down at the floor, his jaws clenched tight as he felt as though he was preparing the speech of a condemned man about to die.

“Don’t you start to cry on me, don’t you dare!” Creeds voice was hard and unforgiving. “I will be back before the end you can be certain of that. Remember there is one more shipment, and if anything happens then it won’t be made!”

Tor glanced up and smiled before saying, “If you take advantage of her then I will kill you!”

Creed laughed, “And what did you want me to do with Sweety?”

“Give it to my.” Tor stopped the recollection of the demise of his parents sank in and he fished for a name. “Find a Teladi trader called Bilyzonus. Sweety when activated will be able to contact her direct!”

Creed nodded slowly, “I think we should go find Tereana!”

Chapter 24 – Final Delivery

Creed and Tor found Tereana in her room, she was still unimpressed at being ordered around on her station. It took some persuading by Tor, with the imposing presence of Creed, for her to pack. The vacuum proof case also held Tors' personal and technical datapads.

“It will be a short space walk to my ship!” Creed commented.

Their suits lay in the corridor where they had abandoned them some time earlier, Tor watched as they both suited up. He checked, unnecessarily, that Tereana's suit was correctly fastened and the helmet was properly sealed.

With a last look he flipped down her visor so he could not see her tear streaked face. Whatever hold the alien had, he felt that somehow a part of him was about to exit from the station. It gave him the feeling that his soul had somehow been laid bare, whilst his emotional heart was torn asunder. Creed had watched impassively, yet somehow he could see the pain reflected in Tors' eyes as Tor gritted his teeth. Tereana turned away towards the airlock and Creed put a hand on Tors' shoulder, but said nothing the hard, stone cold eyes not revealing any emotions.

The inner airlock door closed with a well defined thump and a hiss as the vacuum seal engaged to verify a completely airtight seal. Tor gazed silently as the outer airlock door opened and the two suited figures exited the station and the outer airlock door closed behind them.

Tor decided to investigate the supplies in case there was some space fuel included.

Creed was not one to leave things to chance and as soon as the outer airlock door opened he had signaled the Mamba to come and pick them up.

As they jetted out of the station he told to Tereana to look left. The Mamba rounded the edge of the nearby asteroid at full boost. The reverse thrusters and control thrusters fired bringing the ship closer than recommended safe distance. As soon as they had entered the airlock the ship was turning and heading back into the asteroid field.

Creed did not bother to climb out of his environment suit and took the helm. Checking the Piranha had not moved he steered towards the edge of the asteroid field and plotted a course back to the Hatikvah's Faith jump gate.

The Mamba shot out from between two large asteroids with its weapons still offline and at maximum speed. The Piranha did not move. Creed brought his weapons back on line, and considered that although the Alien may not be showing interest there were others that probably were.

He signaled all the War Mater ships to him and selected a pair of fighters to remain behind and provide sector information in case their satellite was taken out by hostile forces.

Tereana settled down but did not speak. The strength of her feeling were beginning to reduce the further the Mamba moved away from the station and alien ship.

Creed kept watching the monitors as his Mercenary ships exited the stations that they had been based in and formed up in the usual defensive shield. The four heavy fighters on the outer edges, and the lighter faster ships in formation between them ready to strike at a moment but shielded from surprise attack by the bigger more powerful ships. It was not the best defensive formation but given the number of ships it would do. He calculated that it would take nearly twenty minutes before he reached them. Claw Clan ships began to launch and form up into two separate squads. Their battle formation was, to Creeds eye, ragged but disturbingly organized.

He contemplated they might try a swift attack to change the odds and potentially eliminate one threat. However, in terms of numbers, even if they succeeded they could not afford the losses with the second group of mercenaries and Bloodheart ships still to compete against. Creed decided against a preemptive strike of his own, that would be later.

Looking at the scanner information he became aware of Dark Nebula Mercenary ships now forming up. Ten ships in total had launched, these were mainly Wolf ships and several Scorpions.

The term 'spoiling for a fight' wandered across Creeds mind, "Computer ID and remote scan all Dark Nebula designation ships!" He ordered.

These were Split military and unlike the Claw ships would have added confidence that their losses were going to be limited to acceptable numbers when fighting against non-military disciplined opponents.

"Scan complete. Details now being displayed!" The computer responded.

Creed picked out that two of the ships were equipped with solid projectile weapons. Also the Scorpion ships were non-standard with serious engine modifications to improve the otherwise slow and cumbersome ship.

"Computer send a transmission just to War Master ships!" Creed began, "Dark Nebula Ships showing hostile intent! Exercise caution two fighters carrying military issue solid projectile weapons, all pilots to wear environmental suits. Ship IDs' for offending ships are included in transmission."

The Claw Clan formations also saw the threat but moved away. Creed frowned slightly and came to the conclusion that this could be a battle where pirates fought pirates and mercenaries fought mercenaries. Only the winners from each would then battle against each other, unless the only two factions were Bloodhearts and Dark Nebula.

The Dark Nebula ships had other ideas.

"Orders acknowledged!" Serandamancketal responded over the com.

The Claw Clan ships tried to steer clear of the approaching Split fighters, but soon became acutely aware that they were the intended target.

The Split ships fired a volley of missiles at all but two of the pack which was forced to split up. The com channels were a buzz of unsecured communications. The Split pack tore apart the two remaining Claw ships in a deadly barrage of fire before the rest of the Claw Clan fighters could shake off the missiles and regroup.

Creed looked on solemnly and muttered, "Divide and conquer!"

"Computer contact Serandamancketal!"

"Channel open!" The computer responded.

The second flight of Claw ships moved to assist against the Dark Nebula who were holding a tight formation.

"Creed?" The Paranids face came on the HUD projector.

"Need to thin out those mercenary imposters. They're Split Military!" Creed commented.

"Time to take out the Wolves" Serandamancketal smiled.

"Just be careful, I don't want any losses!"

"Prommies only!" The Paranid winked his middle eye and smiled.

The battle group reformed as the only two Prometheus ships split from the group and headed towards the battling Claw and Dark Nebula ships.

The Dark Nebula although outnumbered had the upper hand. They had lost only one ship to the seven Claw Clan losses as the two Prometheuss' entered almost unobserved by the combatants. The two wolf ships armed with solid projectile weapons were the first two casualties of the War Master Ships.

Creed nodded his approval. He was now nearly with the rest of his fighter group, when he decided against earlier reservations to join the combat. Tereana sat in idle contemplation on the low bunk and was taking no interest in events outside of the ship.

Moments passed as Creed selected a target. The two Prometheus' flew in bisecting vectors each targeting the others attackers. The superior shields and heavier firepower had the well disciplined Split pilots scurrying in all directions. The Claw Clan ships had mainly regrouped and were also harassing the Split ships.

Creed dropped in behind one of the Scorpions and opened fire, the pilot bailed out shortly before explosions ripped through the ship. The Dark Nebula were withdrawing and Creed registered that the stations had emptied of fighters, he brought the ship to a standstill and checked the scanners.

The two Prometheus' flanked either side of him and in front the massed fighters of the Bloodhearts and the Dark Nebula Mercenaries, behind him the Claw Clan ships. They were outnumbered by an order of magnitude. Creed had miscalculated the total number of warships that had gathered. Even so they kept a respectful distance. The War Masters were not the only ones that had turned up with heavy fighters. In amongst the Bloodheart and Dark Nebula ships were new generation Orinocos and a couple of Mambas. The Claw Clan ships were grateful that it was War Master ships between them and the Bloodhearts having only flown in older ships, the most powerful were five Teladi built Falcon fighters but these were not the latest incarnation.

“Send a message to all War Master ships to head for the Hatikvah's Faith gate!” Creed commented quietly.

Tereana was standing nearby, “That's a lot of ships!”

Creed was still suited and did not bother to try and look around. “I make it about one hundred and eight, not including War Master ships!” The Mamba moved slowly forward and turned on a vector that took them away from the two sides and both sides scanned his ship as it left.

“Why don't they just attack each other and get it over with?” Tereana asked.

“Neither side want heavy casualties before they've worked out what exactly they are fighting for!” Creed answered.

“Yes but a moment ago they seemed quite happy to be shooting each other!” Tereana commented in a less than impressed manner.

“That was a minor fracas. This is a standoff and a show of strength!” He answered, but he could imagine the commanders of each force were now in heated negotiation the outcome of which had the possibility of one side standing down completely and most likely the Claw Clan would pack up and go home. Or worse still join forces on the promise of shared intelligence.

The brief skirmish would leave the Claw Clan leaders in no doubt of which side was the superior. As the Mamba cruised towards the jump gate with the two Prometheus flanking him, both factions continued to hold their positions.

Tereana sat down in the bunk and when the ship completed the jump she felt as though some link had been cut with a sudden dizzy spell before passing out.

Creed set the course for the next jump gate, having confirmed that all fighters were present. Then stood up and started to remove his environmental suit. He turned and noticed the slumped figure of Tereana.

“Are you okay?” He asked as he released the seals and removed his gauntlets.

There was no answer. He took a few moments to wrestle his way out of the suit and moved across the cabin. He checked she was still breathing and had a pulse, but she did not stir when he gave her a brief shake. Creed frowned then maneuvered her to lie properly on the bunk before returning to the pilot seat.

The group made rapid and silent progress across the sector. He called up the galaxy map and checked on the Nopileo's Memorial the two sides were diffusing back to the stations. They had obviously reached a decision but only time would tell what that may be.

The minutes passed as they crossed into and through Aladna Hill to the shipyard in Light of Heart where the Gallators Fate was still being repaired within the massive superstructure of the station. Creed was mentally preparing his battle plan and it was crude involving squash mines, lots of missiles, drones and fast ships. He would also talk to Serandamancketal to see if they had any Dispersal Field Cluster Mines, a weapon developed after some of the earlier conflicts with the Khaak but quickly banned due to the residual mini-mines, scattered in the initial dispersal, not all detonating and proving to be a hazard to allied ships long after the conflict

Creed called for a medical team when he still could not awaken Tereana. Serandamancketal stepped on board and looked puzzled for a moment as the medical team removed Tereana on an anti-gravity bed.

“Get the men together I need to talk to them!” Creed ordered.

“So you have a plan then! Care to share it with me first?” Serandamancketal growled.

“Close airlock doors, we need some privacy!” Creed commented to the computer.

Tor drifted though the station not really knowing what to do with himself. Eventually he arrived back in the science laboratory and sat at the console. Tereana had left the translation decoder running on the Alien ship logs recovered in the last upload.

He looked at the results of the current log being decoded and to his surprise it looked just like a normal log even if he could not relate to the time line. He read through the details which appeared to be typed rather than spoken.

‘Log entry date, six, twenty five, twenty nine. Forced to drop out of Space Distortion. Fuel cell depletion now at critical levels. Will attempt to repair providing suitable resources are available in the current solar system!’

‘Log entry date, six, twenty five, thirty. Scanned nearby asteroids and planetary bodies without success! Engines off line to preserve remaining fuel for essential functions.’

‘Log entry date, six, twenty five, thirty one. Still no success in locating suitable materials, sling shot path plotted to get ship further out.’

‘Log entry date, six, twenty five, thirty two. Compared materials scanned to determine type of solar system, results are this is only a second generation sun. Material densities not consistent of third or fourth generation solar system. Materials will not be available until we reach another solar system.’

‘Log entry date, six, twenty five, thirty three. Stasis unit prepared, engaging primary security protocols, emergency revival program activated.’

The next entry was a computer report on power levels and condition of the stasis chamber. Tor skipped though it and gauged there was fifty of the aliens years of these reports and then a massive four thousand three hundred and fifty two alien year gap.

He glanced at the report prior to the time gap.

‘computer log: stasis chamber functioning within standard parameters. Pilot deceased. Rapid freeze cryogenic protocols engaged. Insufficient fuel cell life to engage reverse thrusters. Navigation and low level shield activated. Emergency revival protocols activated. Complete system shutdown on completion of cryogenic freeze.’

Tor felt uncomfortable and then read the next entry.

‘Subsystem power restored. Insufficient fuel for reactivation. Security protocols engaged. Emergency revival protocol activated. Biological donors detected scanning for compatibility.’

Tor froze and a cold shiver ran down his spine.

A slow dawning realization crept over him that the Alien influence was more to distract him of his potential fate rather than read the logs and find out. The warm fuzzy feeling in the back of his mind grew momentarily stronger and implanted the thought that at least his last moments would have been pleasurable if he had not agreed so easily to let Tereana leave.

He shook his head trying to clear his thoughts, and wondered if he could call Caran or Creed to get him out of there. Deep inside he knew they would not accept any transmission from the station. The screen flickered and died. Behind him the holo-projector activated and a projection of the alien its skin colour dark but constantly changing hues appeared.

A voice spoke in his mind, 'Greetings Tor'

Tor span around and looked, open mouthed at the image in front of him. "Where...?" He murmured.

'Your systems are adaptable and I am merely an image of myself.'

Tor noted the lips of the alien did not move.

"But you're dead!" Tor replied.

'In my civilization death is only the first step to immortality!' The voice replied.

"Yeah and in mine it's the last one!" Tor somehow did not feel afraid.

'Understand my place is with my people and that is where I need to return to!'

"And that's supposed to make me feel better!" Tor replied evenly, though he could not read the creatures expression he got the feeling that it was smiling, but not in a cruel way.

'The systems your people activated on my ship, engaged several security and defensive sub systems. The computer system that controls these is the one you sense. Not me! It has certain programs that I cannot override that enable the ship and a living me to return home by whatever means necessary.'

Tor paused for a moment, "Could you at least move your lips when you talk, it's really disconcerting to hear a voice without seeing the lips move!"

'Ah!' The Alien responded, 'Unlike you I do not use sound to speak. My species can communicate via brain wave patterns and complex changes in skin colours. We can hear vocalization but that is a species development thing. But I will turn around to see if that helps.' The Alien image rotated the arms and hands adjusted themselves and Tor found himself looking at the eyes in the back of the Aliens head but there was no mouth.

"That's just a little bit too freaky for me." Tor commented weakly.

"Do you wish me to turn around again?" The Alien asked.

"No, just stay as you are and I'll adjust." Tor paused for a moment. "Well it's great knowing so much about you when I'm going to be unable to share this information with anyone I know." Tor commented bitterly. He could sense the Alien smile in a knowledgeable way and yet one somehow keeping a secret of other things.

"So why are you here?" Tor asked the one question he really felt needed answering, above that of what his own fate was going to be.

The Alien hesitated for a moment. "My ship is a deep space pathfinder. Assigned to run ahead of a research vessel. To ensure the solar system being entered does not contain any dangers. Unfortunately when dropping out of Galactic drive I encountered a group of Scavengers and Planet Strippers. Their weapons systems damaged the fuel cell but I was able to initiate an escape by using the hyper acceleration of the drive and headed towards the nearest solar system. Unfortunately not my own. The rest you know from the already translated logs!"

"What happened to the research vessel? Why didn't it try to find you?" Tor replied.

“I don’t know. My feeling is that the Scavengers blocked my warning transmission. If that were the case then the research vessel would have assumed I had been killed.” The Alien commented.

“Tough break!” Tor paused and then asked, “Do you have a name?”

The Alien studied him for a moment then said, “Ghojositaling.”

Tor tried to repeat it, several times, before responding with, “If it’s okay with you I’ll just call you Ghoj!”

The Alien made a gesture equivalent to a shrug. “Tell me about yourself, your people and its culture!”

“You could probably get all that information from the computers!” Tor replied.

“Often the information on computer systems are historical impressions of what a species were like and can make a poor impression of the real society as it is today. For example many species remember great battles and victories and this may give the impression of a violent culture. However when you look not at the records but the artifacts they have produced then the impression can shift to an advanced civilized culture capable of producing beautiful serene objects reflecting the true nature of the species.” Ghojositaling commented.

“I think I lost you somewhere!” Tor replied.

Ghojositaling explained again, citing examples from his own species history. The holo-projection operating like a magic show as the Alien image manipulated the screens to reflect times and places, also objects of his own species.

Hours passed and Tor was mesmerized by the information being given to him. Eventually he began to explain as much of the history of the Argon as he could remember, from its violent beginning to the current day. But paying as much attention to the non war side of the Argons history as possible to try and prevent an un-balanced impression. Deep inside he knew he was probably not the best candidate to be telling the history of his people or receiving the Aliens history. However the telepathic link seemed to make the information stick.

Thinking about his predicament he added in conclusion. “At the moment we are at War with a race known as the Khaak and are attempting to defend our borders with the other races in our region of space. But the biggest problem you face is getting out of this sector and back into Danna’s Chance, which is where your ship was stopped. This sector is full of pirates and I’m sure they will want your technology and will try to capture your ship.”

“The Khaak! My kind had not encountered that race when I left, but it has been a long time and we may know them by another name.” Ghojositaling replied, “I have been monitoring events in the sector via your ship and acknowledge the risk. Your navigation data is most useful I can now plot a course home.”

“So that’s why you’ve got my ship! I thought it was to stop me trying to run away!” Tor responded.

“For monitoring and prevent you from getting up to any mischief. That is correct!” The alien commented. “We will meet again!”

Tor was resigned to his fate and suddenly felt tired as the Alien image faded. He made it back to his room and fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

Serandamancketal had returned with the extra munitions and three more Mambas. Creed sent away the smaller fighters with the exception of two fully tuned Octopus for rapid mine deployment.

Caran Belign had also joined them at the shipyard and was talking with Tereana who had slept for twenty two Argon hours before regaining consciousness. Creed had already handed him Tors’ old personal pad and he had spent much of the time reviewing the information whilst waiting for Tereana to awaken. He had also had one of his men deliver the technical data pad to Bilyzonus after it had revived itself and gave the details as to how to contact her.

The freighter carrying the last of the materials for the alien ship had entered the sector under, what Creed considered, unnecessarily heavy escort with three new generation Elites and five Boron Eels all carrying the markings the AIC.

“Welcome to the show!” Creed murmured. His own people were ready the discreet transfer of mines and drones being unobstructed by the station security. They had been given orders to turn a blind eye to the activities in the security section of the station which housed the fighters.

He wandered from the control room and into one of the security controlled food halls. He could tell the regular guards here were uncomfortable with him and the other mercenaries being here so he had encouraged discretion from his men. They appeared comfortable staying near their own ships. He purchased a snack then wandered along to see how Caran was progressing with the interview of Tereana, hoping that she may be able to reveal some additional information as to what will happen after the Alien has received the last supplies.

As the medical center door opened he could hear Caran ask the question, “So you don’t remember the Professor? He was one of your team.” They both glanced over to Creed who casually walked in.

Caran raised a quizzical eyebrow. “The transport ship is now in the sector!” Creed responded, “And I thought I might learn something about our mystery alien.”

Caran tipped his head in brief acknowledgement then looked at Tereana. He smiled briefly. “The Professor?” He asked again his tone soft.

“As I said before there were just the five of us, the other four were killed or captured by the pirates.” Tereana commented slightly frustrated by being asked the same question several times over.

Caran smiled and nodded slightly, “Okay!” he paused as he studied Tereanas’ expression and could tell that she firmly believed her answer. “How much did the alien tell you about its’ mission? That’s if it had a mission.”

“Nothing I was just translating the Alien ships data logs before he turned up and dragged me away!” She answered glancing at Creed.

“And Tor?” Caran asked.

“Tor? Tor who?” Tereana asked and looked around desperately wondering why she was being asked about people she did not know.

Creed looked surprised, “He’s the guy you were about to get very intimate with when I arrived on the station.”

“What?” Tereana exclaimed loudly and looked at Creed as if he was lying. “There was just me there, OKAY!”

Creed glanced over at Caran who sat with his hand gently stroking his chin in thought. He gestured for Creed not to say anything.

“Well you’ll be pleased to know that you’re safe now! We’d like to just keep you here under observation in case there are any medical problems due to being in close proximity to an unknown life form. Fortunately the reason you’re not in a quarantine environment is because you did not come into physical contact with the Alien. If you remember anything else you know where to find me.” Caran had decided to prematurely end the interview with the suspicion that he would not learn anything new.

Both men left the room, the door hissed shut behind them and it was half way down the corridor and safely out of reasonable earshot did they start to talk and even then in low voices.

“Strange she doesn’t remember them!” Creed commented as he formed his own ideas as to why.

“It’s a brilliant piece of mind control!” Caran observed.

“Make the people closest to the source forget about each other, then they won’t realize anyone’s gone missing.” Creed replied.

“Exactly!” Caran commented.

“Trouble is we still remember!” Creed observed quietly.

“I guess that’s because it doesn’t have the power to influence all of us!” Caran replied.

“Let’s hope this isn’t the front runner of an invasion fleet. Otherwise we’ll all be in trouble!” Creed commented.

“Conquered from within!” The big Argon sighed, the glint of overhead light reflecting off the metal plate in his face and onto the floor.

“Tor did ask me if I could hear a whispering in the back of my mind!” Creed commented.

“And could you?” Caran commented.

“Nope! But I guess that’s because I’m all heart!” The mercenary leader smiled.

“Of course you are!” Caran afforded himself a slight grin.

“So what do you want us to do?” Creed asked.

“Keep with the plan and deliver the materials! If we don’t then someone else will find themselves with the same dilemma!” Caran affirmed.

“We could always bury it in the asteroid?” Creed offered.

“It’s already got control of the Piranha and we have no idea what else it’s capable of.” Caran started, “We are walking a fine line and it is more by mutual trust that it doesn’t hack into any number of the nav sats and dump itself on other computers.”

Creed nodded slowly as Caran continued, “No we have to let it go, believing it is a friend and it believing we are its friends. Once it’s gone then we’ll decide what to do if it ever returns and shows hostile intent.”

“That’s assuming it’s going to get out the sector!” Creed muttered.

Caran glanced over to him, “I see you’ve gathered your heavy artillery!”

“Did I mention we have Split Military thinly disguised as Mercenaries fighting along side the Bloodhearts?” Creed glanced towards Caran.

“Several times already!” The Argon replied.

“And they have military issue solid projectile weapons?” Creed commented.

“Slightly more times than you mentioned military pilots!” The Argon replied again.

“Good! So you don’t mind me using precautions to safeguard my people?” Creed commented.

“What you do is your own business, and I don’t want to know what you’ve had smuggled onto this station. Normally I hold with the principle that two wrongs don’t make a right. But in your case I’m just going to accept the fact!” Caran spoke frankly with a slight hint of disdain.

“This is business!” Creed responded.

“And you will be well paid!” Caran acknowledged.

A com bleep from Carans' personal pad alerted him that the freighter was standing by. Waiting until the War Master Mercenary ships to join them.

"Time for you to go!" Caran commented, "Oh and the AIC has kindly offered the continued presence of the fighters supplied."

Creed smiled, "That's going to shift the balance nicely!" He calculated with the additional fighters he would have a force of eighteen fighters.

"They are there to help you get away not wage war!" Caran responded sharply.

Creed just smiled then went to issue orders for his people to depart. Caran wandered up to the secret service control center within the station and opened the large screens on the Galactic sector maps, he would observe the progress of the convoy.

Within minutes the stations forward cameras were showing the steady stream of War Master Ships launching and forming up. Creed headed the pack as they swarmed in around the freighter. A burst of communications activity and the group went into formation and moved forward.

Caran ordered up a hot drink and sat back watching. In, potentially, just over an hour the action would begin.

Professor Autland sat on the bunk in the Piranha studying his notes. He had spoken to the AI several times to get some clarification of a few points. He titled the piece 'Gateless Inter-Galactic Travel, Fact not Fiction'. At the moment he only had the vague theoretical description of how this was achieved and was eagerly awaiting the last of the materials to be delivered.

To him this would be the crowning achievement of his career, nothing else seemed important. Once the Alien computer system was back on line it would share the technical detail that demonstrated how the drive mechanism worked, and as an incidental he would be there to welcome the Alien when it awoke from its long slumber.

The AI spoke, "Professor! Ships are approaching!"

"Identify!" The Professor answered.

"A number of fighters currently holding position approximately ten k's from this position. A freighter is approaching. Scan indicates the materials are on board. Also on long range scans a number of fighter craft are also closing on this position."

The Professor sat in the pilot seat and looked at the sector information. The fighters from the stations were still a long way from the asteroid field and not moving particularly fast to be any immediate threat.

The freighter released the two cargo containers and headed away. The Piranha under AI control closed in on the containers and targeting each transported it into the cargo bay. Slowly it turned and headed back into the asteroid field.

Caran Belign was watching the events carefully when he received a call from Macar.

"What is it?" He asked quickly.

"The data's gone!" Macar replied.

"What?" Caran responded.

"It just went. I was working with the data logs and suddenly it all vanished! Something in the code triggered and trashed the lot. There is nothing left!" Marac commented quickly.

"What about backups?"

“Just checked them and they’ve all gone! Totally corrupted!” Macar replied.

Caran frowned but he did not look at Tors’ personal pad. “Okay. See if there’s anything you can salvage!”

The transmission ended. Caran went back to watching the screen.

The Piranha glided gracefully into the rift of the asteroid and into the darkness of the chasm leading to the Alien ship. The Professor pulled on his environment suit. The lights on the Piranha reflected off the hull of the hollow lifter.

The AI spoke, “Fuel cells construction complete! Transporting to ship! Professor please feel free to cross over to my ship, it will take a short while for all systems to complete self checking and return to full operational status but you will be there to witness the restoration of power, and meet the pilot on restoration.”

The professor smiled and checked the seals on his suit were in secure. The inner airlock door opened and he stepped forward. It closed and sealed behind him and the outer airlock door released to slide gracefully away. With a sense of excitement and pride the Professor crossed over. Cautiously so as to not make any careless mistakes he opened the lifters door and carefully jetted to the Alien ship avoiding all the equipment.

The outer airlock opened and a voice in the back of his head bid him welcome. The airlock door shut behind him and he was still smiling with a warm feeling of well being.

Chapter 25 – The Final Run

Tor woke up gradually. The warm fuzzy feeling in the back of his mind was gone. The memories of the conversation with the Alien were still crystal clear. He had a shower and then went to get a bite to eat.

As he meandered slowly back to the science station a voice in his mind said, ‘Now that your awake it’s time for you to leave! Your ship is in the docking bay.’

Tor halted for a moment then returned to his room to collect the few personal belongings he had brought with him. Also and almost out of instinct he went and recovered his environment suit and put it on.

Tor glanced around. He could not see anyone talking to him but did as the voice asked and wandered casually towards the docking bay. With little thought of the previous days events he approached the airlock door and it opened. Stepping inside the door closed and sealed the inner airlock door hissed slightly with the pressure difference and opened.

Almost with a casual air of automatic routine he positioned himself in the pilot seat. He paused for a moment and thought there should be something wrong but everything looked and felt right. He checked the weapons and shield array and could not fail to notice that they were still as the Alien AI had changed them. He smiled and reflected that this was perhaps a gift. Also the transporter continued to show replicator capabilities.

“Computer, get me clearance to depart!” Tor requested.

The original voice of the computer responded, but it was not Sweetys’ voice or that of the Alien AI. “Clearance granted! Docking clamps released and inner station doors opening.”

Tor felt the release of the clamps and using manoeuvre thrusters only guided the ship to the next set of doors. The inner airlock door closed, and after a brief wait the outer door opened.

The Piranha gracefully exited the station. In front of him the elegant half moon shape of the alien craft. He gave it a graceful fly by noting the sleek lines having never really had an opportunity until now to view the alien ship. He noted the three rounded ridges that ran over, what Tor took to be, the top surface of the ship and the two lower ribs that formed the standard thruster housings for the ion drive. At the front of the ship the two lower ridges came together in a graceful arc and provided the similar shaped opening that represented the reverse thruster housing.

A voice told him, ‘I’m ready to leave now! Please lead the way and I thank you for your courtesy!’

Tor once more glanced around, the com channels were silent, but he felt obliged to reply vocally. “It’s my pleasure!”

He engaged the forward thrusters and angled his way towards the edge of the asteroid field. Pulling up the sector map on the HUD his eyes widened slightly. “So many ships!” He murmured.

‘Think nothing of them!’ The voice in his mind reassured.

This did not comfort Tor as much as he would have previously expected it to. He pulled up the details on the nearest ships some twenty k’s from their position and sighed as they were recognised as War Master ships and accordingly designated friendly. As he scanned the much larger force they were a mixture of unknown Dark Nebula ships and designated friendly-neutral and the Bloodhearts designated hostile. Tor was nervous of the Dark Nebula although ahead of the Bloodheart ships they appeared to be in an attack formation and heading his way.

Closer to the stations and the gates another force the HUD registered as Claw Clan and designated hostile.

There was only one way to the Danna’s Chance gate and that was past all the separate factions.

Creed had already ordered the ships computer into battle mode and to give full tactical updates.

“All ships acknowledged and status green!” The computer reported.

He sat quietly ready with the thrusters and manoeuvre controls, his gaze fixed on the approaching Dark Nebula ships. All his ships were paired off and fighter pairs were allocated to defend other pairs. They would fight together as a cohesive group watching out as much for each other as for personal glory in the kill.

The coms channels were silent.

At fifteen k's separation he spoke, “Fighter group six, battle plan delta two!”

Examining the HUD he saw the two Octopus that were flying some distance away in a remote holding pattern, suddenly change direction and turn to a vector that would pass between the two flights of ships and only a short distance ahead of the oncoming Dark Nebula vessels. Again there was silence.

The computer announced, “Fighter group six, four k's to drop point, two k's, one k. Primary and secondary Dispersal Field Cluster Mines deployed. Ships are returning to group.”

Invisible on the HUD each of the cluster mines filled an area two k's in diameter with tiny magnetic bomblets each one capable of making some impression on the shields of any ship and in quantity were lethal. Creed had ordered four mines to be dropped with only one k separation in two directions making a concentrated centre.

The Dark Nebula ships continued their advance suspecting the two Octopus ships were a lure to try and get the faster ships to split off in a futile chase.

The lead ships in the formation flew into the field, there was a brief delay then the explosions started. The rear ships suddenly veered and banked away. Three of the wolf ships became a halo of detonations ionising in the shields before two of them disintegrated. The lead Mamba twisted and turned as its shields became enveloped in a coruscate corona of explosions.

“Beautiful!” Creed observed without feeling.

The Mamba fighting to escape suddenly flared the superheated elements that once formed its hull and engine spread out in increasing rings other bomblets sparkled briefly caught in the wash of superheated particles.

They continued to wait. Of the forty original Dark Nebula ships they had lost five in the mine field and three were limping away with hull damage and damaged systems. Creed wondered if they would make it past the Claw Clan ships being easy scavenging.

The enemy ships had regrouped and were now forced to take a wide berth of the space in front Creeds Mercenaries.

“All ships to follow me! Fifty mps and ready for evasive manoeuvres from hostile missile launches!” Creed ordered and slowly the group moved to intercept.

Tor was watching the unfolding combat as his and the Alien ships headed towards the Danna's Chance gate. The Mercenaries engaged, five fighters split from the Dark Nebula group and headed towards them.

“Computer designate the Dark Nebula craft as hostile!” He kept course but monitored the ships as they approached on an intercepting vector. But rather than the direct assault they cut ahead of them by just over two k's. Swinging around to the side the Dark Nebula ships then released drones. Tor couldn't count how many as they swarmed in on the ships.

Occasional particle streams shot out from the alien ship picking off a fast moving target. Tor felt the buffering on his shields. “Computer target drone!”

“How many?” The computer requested.

Tor paused as he began to take evasive manoeuvres trying to latch onto one of the fast moving targets. “Five he responded!” Five distance readings popped up onto the HUD as they drew within firing range the particle beams lanced away from the shield. The drones vanished.

“Shields at ninety percent!” The computer announced.

“What did I get hit by?” Tor asked as he banked the ship around.

“Nothing, shields depleted by weapons system!” The computer answered.

“Give me a status on the Ghojs’ ship?”

“Ships shields are at ninety nine percent!”

Tor swung around to see three more drones explode under the sporadic weapons fire from the Alien vessel . The ship did not divert its course and kept flying towards the Danna’s Chance gate. Three of the Wolf ships engaged Tor as he continued to evade drones but now only selecting one at a time.

The Alien ship stopped the drones buzzed and slowed to close firing range the other two Dark Nebula ships both Scorpions closed on the position but refrained from engaging.

“Shields sixty five percent!” The computer announced.

One of the Wolf ships flashed across the nose of Tors’ ship. “Target Wolf ships.” He ordered, now understanding why his own shields were taking a significantly greater hammering than before.

The Alien ship appeared to flare, particle beams shooting out in every direction and enveloping all the attacking drones each one glowing momentarily then fading. The alien ship moved forward again.

Tor only glimpsed the fading moments of the Aliens attack as he turned the Piranha to close the distance on the wolf but it had already turned back for another attack run. The particle beam lanced out catching and destroying a passing drone to strike the oncoming wolf. The beam slicing into the ship before it could evade.

Feran Bloodheart was watching from the command deck on his Station in Brennans Triumph. He snorted loudly at the scene. Camera drones were providing him a perfect image of the battle as it unfolded.

“So much for drones!” Feran called out to one of the tactical officers, who suddenly appeared worried. “Order the deployment of LTs’ near the gate and squash mines in the path of the ship!”

His own ships began to move into position.

Creed was taking a special dislike for the Split Military chain guns, two of his ships had been damaged. As he banked high and left of the general melee he witnessed one of his Mambas strafed by a Scorpion. He could see the line of pit marks puncturing the hull before the projectiles hit the canopy of the cockpit. The suited pilot looking up before the impacts tore through the suit and the sudden decompression mixed with the escaping atmosphere of the ship, spraying blood from the body over the cockpit and through the holes in the shield that instantly crystallized in the impenetrable cold vacuum of space.

The Scorpion turned to find the next opponent but Creed had him in his sights and sent in a volley, both the previous pilots’ wingman and Creeds caught the ship in a heavy crossfire. The ship exploded but there was no cheering.

“Computer get that Mamba under AI control I want it with the other two and flight six.” Creed ordered. There was an unwritten rule of mass combat that a damaged ship leaving the battle zone was no longer a threat. It would be a different story with the pirates who would be looking for some easy cash.

The red mist now descended over Creeds, "Wingman team up with the flight three wingman!"

"Sir!" The response came back.

Creed dove back into the maelstrom of heavy fire of the main battle. Picking out a Wolf ship, darting around, he closed in at full thrusters. Twisting and turning the Mamba dove, pulling hard up and with the control thrusters screaming he opened fire on the Dark Nebula ship that suddenly dived off to one side, but Creed had anticipated a move and was correct in his anticipation. The Wolf exploding and the super heated shards bounced off the hull as he shot through the expanding halo of gases.

The ship turned again finding another target. This time he homed in on a Scorpion, and noted darkly that it was yet another ship equipped with Split Military hardware. It fired on an AIC Eel, tearing chunks out of the hull as it strayed past in pursuit of a different target. Just before Creed was in firing range the Scorpion veered away. He turned in anticipation of the new vector only this time did not turn hard enough to stay behind the Dark Nebula ship which again appeared to be randomly firing on anything that strayed into its weapons range.

Flipping the Mamba into a roll he dodged a hail of plasma shots. Somewhere behind him several Wolf ships had targeted the Mamba and were gathering into pack formation.

Concentrating on his target, Creed banked over the Mamba and pulled back hard. There was a clatter on the hull, instinctively he hit the booster.

"Warning hull breach! Atmospheric leakage of five units a second with internal cabin pressure falling by three bar per second!" The computer confirmed Creeds concerns.

"Get the mini-bots to patch it and quick!" He growled and fired on the Scorpion as it swung around for another pass. The plasma strikes pushing the Dark Nebula ship off target and forcing it onto an evasive vector. Two of the remaining four active Eels joined the pursuit by closing on separate vectors.

The message was clear to all the War Master and AIC ships that their primary targets were the ships armed with solid projectile weapons as these were the greatest threat to the bigger ships.

In the heat of battle none of the War Master or AIC ships noticed the remaining Mambas had disengaged and were on an intercept vector with the Alien ship.

Tor was relaxed, his eyes scanning the HUD for the last few drones. The wolf fighters had been troublesome for a while and had severely drained his shields partially due to the ships weapons set up. In a quick series of particle beam bursts he located the Alien ship now some distance ahead of him and set off in pursuit, ever aware that there were Dark Nebula ships closing and the Bloodhearts were gathering near to the gate.

The War Master and AIC ships were still outnumbered despite their higher kill rate and were heavily engaged. To his horror, four of the Mambas turned towards him. With several k's separating them they launched missiles. Tor immediately changed vector, flying towards them, as the missiles drew close he suddenly changed direction. The missiles would take a little time to turn but now the Mambas were closing into firing range.

"Target just one Mamba!" Tor ordered anxiously and painfully aware that to destroy just one ship would significantly sap his shield strength.

The first pass was good and the lead Mamba suddenly had to veer away on an escape vector as the particle beam latched on and began to rob it of its shields. The remaining three split and swooped in from alternative directions to try and catch the Piranha in cross fire.

"Shields seventy five percent!" The computer affirmed.

He turned the ship sharply to one side, recognizing the danger from the HUD readout as three sets of plasma crossfire cut through the intervening space. Switching direction again the Piranha dove down to Tors left and began to roll around as he

tried to get closer to his main target. The Mamba was still, as Tor would describe it, licking its wounds and waiting for its shields to recover.

“Switch target! Nearest Mamba!” Tor ordered, and then had to change direction again as the missiles closed in for another pass. The sound of control thrusters echoed through the cabin as they shifted from one of the ship to the other. “Hold fire until I give the order!”

He continued his feigned pursuance of the original target as the remaining three Mamba closed in again for another pass.

“Missiles self destructed!” The ships computer reported.

Tor watched the HUD the distance continued to close. He rolled and turned the Piranha as plasma cascaded in from behind him taking a hit to the shields.

“Shields seventy percent!” The computer informed.

“Fire!” Tor replied.

The chasing Mamba turned as the particle beam locked on, Tor turned back to try and keep the ship in range. Small explosions rippled through the Dark Nebula ship and the pilot bailed out.

“Shields at fifty percent! Forty percent!”

The Piranha jarred suddenly as it took hits from one of the remaining Mambas. He put the ship into a roll and began evasive manoeuvres. They were one ship down but Tor had to let his shields recover.

In the distance the Alien ship stopped and waited.

The Mambas sped away as Tor brought his ship around but held off from firing weapons. “Computer! Keep the Mambas’ back by firing short one to two second bursts as soon as they get in range!” It was more a gesture he hoped to allow his shields time to recover.

The Dark Nebula ships found themselves in an impasse not daring to stray in to weapons range of the Piranha but unable to get a good weapons fix without swinging in perilously close. Tor was left to dodge missiles as he drifted towards the stationary Alien ship.

Elsewhere Creed reviewed his HUD and with only fast Wolf ships remaining the Dark Nebula ships were withdrawing back towards the Hatikvah’s Faith Gate. He would review his losses before committing to a direct assault on the Bloodheart position.

Serandamancketal called in, “Looks like our boy is in trouble!”

Creed glanced at the sector map. Tors’ Piranha was gradually making progress towards the waiting Alien ship. Around it at safe distance the three Mambas circled.

“Looks like he’s got them worried!” Creed answered but made no commitment to send help.

Of the eight AIC ships, two had been destroyed and three had hull damage. His own losses were one ship destroyed and four ships with varying amounts of damage. The damaged vessels grouped together out of harms way. Those with serious hull breaches and systems failures were unmanned the pilots now taking refuge in the two Octopus ships.

Creed aimed towards the position of the Alien ship but set the engine speed to slow approach. The Bloodhearts had been given plenty of time to prepare themselves against attack including laying mines. He knew he would be a fool to charge the defensive line and with only the five other fighters to support, it would be suicide.

The three AIC ships went into formation behind him as the remaining two War Master ships moved into position either side. After a moment of further study he came to a decision, "AIC vessels support Piranha then withdraw and escort damaged ships to safety."

"War Masters follow me we're doing the three ship sting, hit and fade lock onto my target! Start with a wide sweep and attacking from the Hatikvah's Faith side of the sector!" He paused before closing the com, "And watch out for any Claw Ships!"

Tors' Piranha was almost back to full shield strength when the Mambas started their united attack run closing in from three sides in a slightly staggered closing distance. Just before the first one reached firing range it started to send out a stream of plasma. Tor easily evaded the shots. A particle beam shot out and struck the Mamba as it turned away. Tor watched both his own and the Mambas shields drop then the particle beam stopped the second Mamba was much closer as it opened fire. Tor banked the ship over in a tight turn to avoid the plasma. Once again the particle beam snaked out and stuck the attacking ship in a short duration burst and stopped when the Dark Nebula ship broke off its attack.

The last of the Mambas then began to fire but there was no plasma. Tor heard the projectile rounds punch their way through the hull. The consoles in front of him flashed red smoke filled the cabin from ruptures power conduits.

"Atmospheric loss at ten units per second! Cabin pressure dropping at six bar per second!" The computer informed.

"Use the replicator to patch the hull!" Tor requested urgently, fighting back the sense of rising panic, as he attempted to turn the ship he realised he had lost significant rudder control. The particle beam was locked onto the attacking Mamba but less than a few moments later it was out of range. Now he was heading away from his intended destination.

The first Mamba engaged risking a prolonged exposure to the particle beam to try and finish off the Piranha. However the beam sliced through the ship and pilot before he had managed to get more than a couple of hits on target. The Piranha's shields were dangerously low Tor quickly examined his options and they were bleak.

"Hull repaired pressure normalising!" The computer informed.

"Fix the rudder control!" Tor ordered.

The two Mambas were beginning their next attack run having seen their colleague knock back Tors' shields to a critical state. The AIC ships were still too far away to help but closing on an intercepting vector.

The Piranha shook as several shots passed Tors' head by a few centimetres and created large fractures in the canopy. Tors' case flew towards the canopy of the cockpit and he hit the emergency eject button. The detonation bolts around the canopy exploded and Tor was sucked out into space whilst grabbing his case on the way out. The emergency jets on his pack fired and behind him the particle beam split and lanced both the Mambas as they opened fire again. The energy pulse from the exploding Piranha was channelled into the beams, stripping away the last of the Mambas shields and in a subsequent double explosion Tor was spun away in the shockwave of the blast.

He lost consciousness for a few minutes and was unable to respond to the urgent hails of the AIC ships. They turned back to run escort duty.

Creeds jaw tightened but he said nothing when Serandamancketal called in and said, "The Piranha didn't make it!"

The Alien ship moved forward again, Creed slowed his ship and the others followed suit. Now was a time to observe and somewhere inside he hoped deeply that this would be worth all the trouble.

Squash mines detonated as the Alien ship approached, enough Creed realised to destroy several M3 class ships. The shields of the ship dropped but only by a third it stopped and allowed them to recover. The Bloodhearts waited.

Again the Alien ship moved forward and more mines detonated. Then energy pulses lanced out and created a path by disintegrating each mine.

The Bloodheart ships began to move releasing drones and launching missiles at the ship. For the first time they saw the Alien take evasive manoeuvres. The ship appeared to outperform the equivalent M threes' of the races twisting and turning with particle beams lashing out in several directions catching both drones and pursuing missiles. Some drones also fell foul to the missiles fired as the Alien ship ploughed into the host of ships in its path.

Explosions illuminated the void as Bloodheart ships and drones were struck by the Aliens weapons. The Alien ship corrected its course to the gate. Now the lasertowers turned and fired striking the ship. It shook and turned with an impressive turn of speed to escape the beams but not without a significant drain on its shields. Making several passes the lasertowers became the next casualties of the conflict. Then it was through the gate.

On reaching the other side it ran into more squash mines and lasertowers. With the shields now seriously drained it found its vector and shot forward at high velocity leaving mines exploding and lasertowers firing briefly into empty space. Observers then saw a distant flash and the ship was gone.

Tor came around. He was still floating away from the scene of carnage. The Bloodheart ships were leaving the sector. The War Master and AIC ships were in tight formation and making their way towards the Hatikvah's Faith gate.

Case in one hand he clipped it to a tether and released the control sticks. He did not know how far it would be to the nearest station or how much air he had left. Now all he had to do was hope not to be picked up by any pirates.

Behind him a Teladi Hawk gracefully dropped in behind him and opened its cargo bay door. Tor felt the hold of the tractor beam and swore.

Bilyzonus smiled to herself as she contemplated the look on Tors' face when she let him out of the cargo bay. But for now she would let him sweat it out. Having had an update from Sweetie as to the position and difficulty Tor was in she had lurked, waiting for an opportunity to help. Even so she was no match for the Mamba's so kept as much distance between her and the fight.

As she set her course she received an incoming transmission, "Pilot Bilyzonus! My name is Caran Belign please deliver your passenger to Argon Prime!"