

X2 Universe story...

"Heads up bro, we're nearly there." Ryhan's voice penetrated through the back of the cabin.

"Be right there," shouted Lan, throwing on a shirt and walking into the cockpit section of his mate's Discoverer.

Lan headed for the co-pilot seat, navigating his way past all the empty food pots, half eaten snacks and bits of mechanical junk that lay strewn throughout the cockpit along with things which he was loathe to identify.

"Do you ever clean anything? I swear there's a half eaten cahoon burger back there that was winking at me!" Lan commented as he sat in the co-pilot's seat.

"Maybe you should have asked it out for a drink, it would have been a step up from the last thing you dated," came the reply as Ryhan turned around to flash a grin. "As I recall there was some ambiguity as to the actual sex of the 'girl'."

Lan put on a tragic face, "your right Ryhan, I should never have tried it on with your sister. I should have listened to the Boron workers of silicon mine alpha."

Ryhan's laugh rang out causing Lan to grin in response, "you wanna dock this thing or stand around impinging my sister's 'pristine' reputation?"

Lan glanced through the cockpit windows and out into the velvet blackness of space. He could see the Argon home world; the birthplace of humanity unless you were a Goner and only the ancients knew what universe they were on. The swirl of the white clouds over the blue green oceans lent it a majestic air, no matter how many times Lan had seen the sight it never failed to move him. He could see the rotating shape of the trading station just off to the right and looming closer, its metallic structure reflecting the rays of the sun so it seemed to glow with its own light.

"Dock her?" Lan asked with a slight frown, "isn't the autopilot doing it?"

Ryhan just looked at him. "Alright, I'll take her in" sighed Lan knowing better than to argue. "That's my boy!" replied Ryhan jovially slapping him on the back and making his way to the co-pilot seat. "We'll make a true pilot of you yet".

Lan took the pilot's seat and manoeuvred the Discoverer to the right, bringing the trading station to the front of the ship.

"You are talking to the automated voice interactive system, please state your request" the mechanical voice of the trading station came over the comm. Lan asked for docking permission and was already rolling up to face the entrance to the docking bay as the reply came across. "Docking permission granted, please dock as soon as the green lights appear."

Lan increased speed as he saw the station's heavy blast doors open and proceeded to enter the station. As he approached the internal docking bay doors the station's automated docking computer took over and the ship was moved into the visitor's docking bay.

"Done and dusted" Lan said over his shoulder to Ryhan, "lets go get something to drink."

"I'm with you there bro, and let's see if we can't find some accommodating pretty girls" replied Ryhan with a wink.

They stepped off the discoverer and into the multitude of people and aliens that thronged the docking bay. They took a moment to take in the scene and absorb the feel of the busy trading port before heading towards the 'social area' to get something to eat and possibly a drink or two.

"Well bro, let's get a bite to eat and ya can tell me about this Gonerish idea of yours to become an entrepreneur" Ryhan called out heading for their regular bar 'Primes sanctuary'. "It's not that mad Ry, there are hundreds of traders doing the same thing," Lan argued "And I got to make a start somewhere, so I figure I'll give it a try".

They took a table by the corner of the bar and ordered two Cahoon meat steaks and a couple of ales. Chewing around a mouthful of steak Lan asked, "Thanks for the lift Ry, how long are you going to be here for?"

"Just for today as I have to be at a hearing with sector police in Home of Light" Ryhan sounded annoyed and had a disgusted look on his face. "I can't believe the amount of fuss they are making over a minor incident of political protest, it's not even like I did any damage."

Lan smiled round his mouthful of steak, "as I understand it Ry, you evaded the sector governors escorts and closed on his ship, you carried out an inverted flyby matching speeds and coming so close as to set off the collision warning alarms on his ship. If that wasn't enough, you then proceeded to 'moon' his Excellency and his staff." Lan was laughing openly now.

Ryhan just shrugged, "he's such a bare faced arse I thought it appropriate to hold up a mirror." Any ways tell me about your amazing plan to become a billionaire and when ya learned to do miracles? The chance of making it big as an independent trader is about as likely as a Teladi refund."

"Well first of all I'm going to get a job as a pilot, there are always trading groups looking for pilots for their freighters. Once I get some credits stored I'll invest it and climb the ranks maybe even get myself some shares in one of the major trading concerns." Lan tried to look certain, "I'll work on the details when I'm out doing the trade runs."

"If ya say so bro, it sounds like a looooong boring stretch is ahead of ya, any way I'll be around to liven it up for you no problem." Ryhan said grinning.

"Thanks, that's exactly what I need a couple of xenon destroyers to dodge" Lan replied dryly.

When they finished their meals they headed for the more 'lively' bars towards the back of the station. Heading into one called the 'Queens Tentacles' they proceeded to partake in the age old custom of getting completely inebriated.

"Arghh..muwhh head," groaned Lan as he tried to move his head, the stale acidic smell gave clues to the origin of the dampness he felt beneath him. His head felt like a dozen split had decided to hold a death match there, and he was positive something had crawled into his mouth and died.

Lan pushed himself up on hands and knees and waited for the wave of dizziness to pass. He hadn't made it to his bed and was lying on the floor, what he was laying in, he reflected was better left unexplored. He crawled into the shower, stripping of his now aromatic clothes and slowly managed to clean himself off.

By the time he was dressed and ready for breakfast the cleaning bots were already removing the last traces of the night's excessiveness. The mild beeping noise alerted him to a message pending his attention; Lan activated the holo screen and Ryhan's face popped up.

"Hey buddy, I see your up and about, good night huh?" he grinned, "I had to leave early and ya looked so happy lying on the floor I didn't have the heart to wake ya."

"Thanks. I appreciate it so much," Lan replied sarcastically, "when am I going to see you next?"

"Not sure bro, depends on the damn sector police, hopefully in a couple of days. if not then I'll send ya a message. Coming up to the jump gate, catch ya in a couple of days." "See you Ry." Lan said as he ended the message.

"Now to get some breakfast and see to starting my trading career."

Tchak'ta stepped out of his harrier to the hissing sound of the airlock and walked through the docking bay heading for the central entertainment area. His investigations lead him to the sector Profit share and specifically to the Bliss place located here.

The cloying smell of spaceweed permeated everywhere along with the acrid stench of unwashed bodies. His honed teladi instincts, automatically assessing and measuring the profit potential of the establishment. He could see from the run down look and patched up repairs that investment into the place was a minimum while the many casinos, bars, show stages and all forms of entertainment crammed into the limited space would maximise profit margins.

"The way it should be" he nodded to himself in approval.

Tchak'ta made his way through the throng of revellers heading for the station managers office located just beyond the commercial venues.

"Watch where you're going lizard face" slurred a drunken Argon as he stumbled into Tchak'ta, "you steal an honest mans credits and then think you can push us around."

The smell of strong whisky or space fuel as it's more commonly known emanated off him, intermingled with other more unsavoury smells. From his clothes and the posturing Tchak'ta surmised he must be a mine worker either silicon or ore and had no doubt just blown his whole pay at the casinos.

"You're all a bunch of cheating, stealing, money-grubbing scaly lizards! And I'm not..."

The few bystanders who had stopped to see the show did not hear the rest of the sentence as Tchak'ta stepped into the Argon and gave him a vicious backhand which snapped his head back and knocked him to the floor where he remained unmoving. Turning around he carried on walking towards the station manager's office in the same purposeful strides.

He knew everything there was to know about the manager of this station, as he did about nearly all Teladi of any means along with the prominent business owners of the other races. It was his job to know and to discern patterns if any from the chaotic trade transactions, both in the open and those carried out in more secret.

The managers office turned out to be a cordoned off portion of one of the more high market casinos. Tchak'ta could see the booth where the station manager was sitting and conducting business. There were two large Teladi dressed in mercenary clothing and sporting hand blasters on either side of the booth. Tchak'ta walked up and took a seat opposite, "Leave us" he hissed at the Argon sat there without looking at him.

Maglixt Cazixt'nt the 4th looked at the Teladi who had just sat opposite her. "Who would you be to come to my station, sit at my booth uninvited and summarily dismiss my guest?" She hissed, her mannerisms adding the threat to the question. The Argon sensing something in the atmosphere made his excuses and decided to leave.

Tchak'ta did not reply but just stared at Maglixt, he could see that two of her guards had moved forward with their blasters up. "I will ask questions, you will answer" stated Tchak'ta "I do not..." she began angrily as Tchak'ta drew out a small glowing blue pyramid stamped with a green claw holding a credit chip. The pyramid pulsed slowly turning from blue to red to green then back to blue.

The guards stopped moving when they saw the pyramid; they looked uncertain and slightly apprehensive. Maglixt throat went dry as she recognised the ID of the Profits Protection Agency, swallowing slowly she signalled her guards back. There were few Teladi who did not fear a visit by the PPA as at some point each Teladi had procured profit without providing the

board of directors their cut. It is this fact which makes the PPA feared along with the ruthless methods they employ when making an example.

Maglixt searched her brain for every thing she knew about this agency, anything that may give her a bargaining angle.

The PPA worked for the Teladi board of directors or so it was officially claimed. There have been persistent rumours that the PPA had their own agenda and worked towards their own ends, what that maybe remained in the realm of speculation. What was fact was that they had near absolute autonomy and their judgements were always backed by the board.

The members of PPA were chosen through some elaborate scheme the requisites of which remains unknown, they come from all walks of Teladi life with no discernable pattern. Unlike the military who forsake the gain of profit the PPA are measured by the credits they have acquired. Their only restriction is that they are not allowed to own businesses or factories, a strange restriction the reason for which is unknown.

They are said to be immutable to bribes and threats only resulted in the complete loss of profits and business ventures (a fate worse then death for a Teladi). There have been some VERY frightening rumours regarding the fate of those who cross them. All this floated through her mind, leaving her with only one choice.

"I shall answer any questions that you may have, would you like some refreshment in the mean time?" she managed to croak out.

"No. Let us start" Tchak'ta replied softly. "You have been supplying the pirate clan Karrak's Vampires located in Atreus Clouds with spaceweed shipments."

"y..y..yes, I assure u it is all accounted for" stammered Maglixt, " I provide the required duty to the board, this is all documented".

Tchak'ta just stared at Maglixt, "what is not so well documented is the other items being shipped with the spaceweed."

He leaned forward slightly staring into the nervous eyes of the female Teladi, "you have been providing biological and bacteriological equipment along with research data regarding spaceweed and space fuel to the vampires."

"Now I will ask you questions starting with your contacts and you will answer them, if I find you have been lying then very bad things are likely to happen, starting with unfortunate luck in your business ventures." He could see from her eyes that she would answer his questions.

Tchak'ta climbed back aboard his Harrier and asked permission to launch. Maglixt had been of little use in shedding light on his investigation, it was obvious she was but a tool used to deliver the restricted laboratory equipment and the classified data he was tracking. He had a sector to go to and two names to look up, maybe they will have more relevant information. He pulled up the universe map and set the ship to head for Argon

prime. Harold and Henry, strange names for Teladi he thought to himself as he adjusted his heading.

"Look kid I'm sorry, I was looking for someone with more experience and maybe some combat under their belt."

Lan cut the channel in frustration, he'd been receiving replies like that from every pilot position he applied for. "The bloody captain of the bloody Elite Frontier Scouts wouldn't stand a bloody look in for these jobs" he swore vehemently.

The stats they are looking for seems to indicate that for some unfathomable reason they expect the whole damn Xenon and Pirate fleets to attack their freighter, granted delexian wheat is very versatile but as far as he knew it couldn't be turned into Hornet missiles.

Lan decided to head to the bar, see if he could calm down and think on what to do next. He'd spent the whole morning and afternoon at the console listening to rejection after rejection, the frustration and incredulity had built up steadily and was beginning to show.

As he sat nursing his beer and cursing all the paranoid freight companies he could remember, a large shadow fell across his table. Lan looked up at the (he assumed) smiling faces of two Teladi.

"Good day ssir" said the one on the right,

"we have a propissition for you" said the other as they sat round his table.

"Im not interested, thank you" replied Lan right away.

The last thing he wanted was to get involved with a Teladi undertaking. There is an Argon saying, 'when a Teladi smiles, watch your back and count your credits'. There is a similar saying in Boron as well, come to think about it there's also one in Paranid and Split, possibly in Zenon too for all he knew. The Teladi reputation is well known.

"We are in need of pilotss to do short delivery" said the one on the right,

"You are a pilot, yesss??" said the one on the left.

"Yea, I'm a pilot" said Lan suspiciously "what kind of delivery??" he asked despite himself.

The Teladi on the right said "let usss introduce ourselvess, my name is Harold and my partner iss Henry, we represent many trading companiesss."

Lan looked at them with a raised eyebrow, "Harold and Henry?" he asked trying to keep the disbelief from his voice. "Well... Harold and Henry, my name is Lanowar Holden. What does this delivery entail?"

Lan found himself looking out of a discoverer cockpit onto the asteroid laden field of the sector Ore Belt. Cursing himself for a fool for the hundredth time Lan still couldn't work out how he had been manoeuvred into taking this job. He was to deliver the 'special

goods' in his cargo hold to the Ore Belt, a ship would meet him at these designated coordinates, and he would eject the container and head back.

They had provided this well used discoverer and had even registered it in his name. That seemed like a good idea at the time, a sort of insurance in case they didn't pay him, but now it just seemed like a signed confession. It's his ship carrying Ancients know what illegal goods, nothing to trace back to the damn Teladi if he was caught by sector police.

Worst of all was that this ship did not come with any weapons and only 1MW shield. Granted it had been maxed to full speed and cargo hold. Not for the first time he wished Ryhan was here, his supernatural piloting skills would have made him feel more confident and the easy banter allaying his fears.

Lan check his HUD radar for any ships in his proximity, lots of the usual Argon Mercury freighters and some light fighters moving along the trade lanes heading for the jump gates. The occasional red blips came up signifying Pirate transports with their escorts of light fighters.

"Just great" Lan muttered to himself as he kept an eye on the pirate transports, he was located on the western edge of the asteroid field, away from the sector stations (no surprise there, damn the Teladi). He had this sinking feeling that he had made a very big mistake.

That feeling turned into a plummeting dive when he saw that four pirate ships were heading towards him. His HUD identified them as one Orinoco heavy fighter and three Bayamon medium fighters.

Lan checked his surroundings, the asteroid field lay only 2k away and looked like the only place he could head to if things got awkward. The stations were too far off to be of any use and the gates the same. Maybe they're not interested in me; Lan thought to himself

"Yea right and the Split smile too much." He muttered out loud.

Three Bayamon medium fighters with their distinctive cross shape hull, each end of the cross having the ability to mount a weapon and an Orinoco heavy fighter sometimes referred to as the spade due to its shape which was no doubt heavily armed.

Lan waited nervously for them to draw closer, hoping that they would pass by but knowing in his gut that they wouldn't. He placed himself closer to the asteroid field facing the oncoming pirate ships at an angle so his ships nose pointed towards the asteroids placing the pirate ships slightly off to his right.

The psychic ability of his gut was confirmed when he received a transmission from the lead Orinoco and a face which could only be described as villainous came on to his viewer.

The face was that of an Argon male with a beard that looked like a bristling hedge, he sported an eye patch over his left eye and had a visible white scar leading from that eye and disappearing into the beard.

Not a face to inspire confidence Lan thought to himself.

"You have the cargo? Drop it now." demanded the face, his beard adding the emphasis all by itself.

"Am ejecting the cargo now" replied Lan as he flicked through the controls and pulled up his cargo bay. There were nine containers of something which his ships internal scan could not penetrate and just came back as unidentified.

He began ejecting the first container when he noticed that a Bayamon had moved behind his ship. He assumed it was going to pick up the containers he was ejecting.

Lan then noticed the second Bayamon drifting to his bottom right, blocking his route towards the stations.

That plummeting feeling he was experience just went up several notches as Lan realised that the Pirates were not going to just let him go.

"Shit! shit! shit!" Lan swore, frantically trying to think what to do. He couldn't do a runner while carrying the cargo as the pirates would hunt him relentlessly and he knew the moment he released all containers he would be space dust.

He had to gamble and hope the pilots in the Bayamon were nothing more then common space thugs and wouldn't be able to carry out any fancy manoeuvres.

"What's the hold up?!" demanded the pirate as the viewer displayed the animated hedge. Lan started as he realised he had stopped ejecting, he looked at his readout and saw he had four containers left.

"Damn those soulless money grabbing lizards. This hunk of junk they gave is barely able to fly! Give me a few moments" Lan replied stalling for time.

"Keep ejecting" ordered the pirate, narrowing his eyes in suspicion "you will get what is due when we have the last container." The viewer went blank as the pirate cut the transmission.

Lan ejected a container and waited for the Bayamon to come closer to scoop it up, when he saw its cargo bay doors open and the shields go down Lan ejected the other 3 in quick succession. As the last container left his hold he hit the throttle pushing to max speed and pulling sharply to the left away from the Orinoco and keeping the Bayamon who was scooping the cargo, between him and the second Bayamon.

As the Bayamon was scooping up the first container the other three Lan had released floated into it causing minor hull damage, as the shields have to be lowered to open the cargo bay doors. This caused the pilot to react instinctively and pull away towards the right to avoid hitting the canisters again at the same time putting his ship in the line of fire of the other Bayamon thus providing Lan with the few precious seconds he needed to get his speed to full.

Lan shot towards the asteroid field, glancing down at his radar he saw that two of the Bayamons were in pursuit. One of them was nearing firing range; it must be the one which stayed with the Orinoco as the other one had to fly around his comrade who was now scooping up the last containers.

Lan pulled hard left as he heard the sound of purple death ripping across the intervening space between the lead Bayamon and his ship. A glancing hit from what he now recognised as particle accelerator cannons tore at his shield bringing it down to 70%. Lan executed a barrel roll while dropping below the bayamons line of sight. He saw the purple flashes of the PACs tear through his last position as he entered into the asteroid field.

"Warning incoming missile" the ships calm voice pointed out.
"Crap!" Lan exclaimed as he pulled past the outer asteroids heading deeper into the field. The proximity alarm started ringing out insistently as the missile drew closer.

Lan flew in between the asteroids twisting and weaving trying to lose the missile. He had to keep his speed reduced to be able to weave through the large lumps of rock and try and avoid the Bayamon which had also entered the asteroid field.
The fact that he was still alive was due to the difficulty in targeting anything with hundreds of giant rocks floating around.

Lan spotted several asteroids moving together across his right side, he pulled a hard right and flew at them twisting through the gap between them and pulling left while engaging the boost. The missile following on his vapour trail was unable to manoeuvre through the asteroids and collided with one of them sending out shards of rocks and minerals.

Lan breathed a sigh of relief which turned into a startled oath as several jarring impacts rocked his ship. "Warning, shields at critical" notified the onboard computer.
"Give me a break! It's just not my day" shouted Lan.

He pulled the ship diagonally up and towards the left to avoid the incoming PAC fire from the Bayamon. Weaving around the asteroids prevented the Bayamon from getting a lock on his ship or being able to get a clean shot at his rear.

"You will die like all the rest, this shall be your rocky grave" the grating voice came over the comm's.

Lan didn't bother to reply as he had just seen what he was looking for. Banking sharply across a small asteroid he flew towards a large oval shaped one as purple bolts of plasma hurtled across his right hand side. Small jarring impacts notified him that some at least had hit his regenerating shields.

"Shields at 50%" stated the onboard computer.

To make sure he kept his pursuers attention, he opened his comm's.

"Could you ask your mother to return my boxers? I'd get them myself but seeing as she's so busy entertaining anything that crawls I thought I'd ask you."

There came a strangled gurgling noise over the comm.'s and a sustained burst of PAC fire racking erratically from left to right.

Lan kept his ship weaving right and left as well as dipping down and rolling to avoid most of the fire.

"Shields at 20%" the computer pointed out.

"Guess he's a mommy's boy" muttered Lan to himself as the oval asteroid began filling his cockpit view. As he came within 400m of it he pulled a hard right just as PAC fire slammed into his shields then immediately another hard right brushing the surface of a second asteroid which had floated to the right of the oval one.

"Warning, shields at critical"

The Bayamon squeezed down hard on the fire trigger sending out bolts of PAC fire just as the discoverer pulled a hard right. As the oval asteroid closed in, the Bayamon also pulled a hard right following the discoverer, only realising his mistake as the scarred and pitted surface of the second asteroid filled his vision.

Lan watched as the ship was unable to pull away from the second asteroid and slammed into it with an impact which shattered the bayamon into glowing hot fragments and twisted metal.

Two cargo canisters came floating out of the cloud of debris and dust which Lan then scooped up into his hold. Checking his cargo hold Lan saw that he had pick up 3 wasp class missiles.

'About time I had some luck' Lan thought to himself with a show of relief. The missiles would give him a fighting chance to get past the other Bayamon which was no doubt waiting outside the asteroid field.

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Escape:

Pisula Ma or Pi to those who knew her was in a difficult situation, in fact as difficulty levels go this would be somewhere between advanced interdimensional string theory and black hole quantum probability mathematics.

The Argon have a phrase which seemed perfectly apt to her Boron mind, she was indeed in 'Very hot water.'

She was at this moment fleeing for her life in a borrowed Bayamon from the Werewolves pirate base in Ore Belt. Werewolves she had found out were an Argon myth or legend regarding a large predatory land animal which had the ability to transform into an Argon. By all accounts these creatures were very inhospitable, revelling in the baser instincts of death and destruction which she guessed was the reason the pirates had taken it as their own.

Bringing her wandering mind back on to the more immediate problem of the two Mandalays which had just launched from the base and were now on an intercept course, Pisula Ma tried to think how she could solve her dilemma.

Her natural Boron instinct was to talk and discuss things through but she had quickly realised that these pirates were much uncivilised and their idea of a meaningful discourse would be a crude threat followed by inevitable laser fire.

As she was deciding what course of action to take, the pirate base launched four Bayamons and two Orinoco's.

Her tentacles went limp at the prospect of escaping so many ships but as she considered surrendering (which at best would mean slavery) three Bayamons and an Orinoco pulled away heading towards a different section leaving one Bayamon and one Orinoco chasing after her.

Pi wondered where the other ships were heading and what they were up to. "Concentrate on your own problems Pi if you want to survive" she admonished herself.

Maybe she could try threatening them, Pi thought to herself. She had seen many pilots do this and cause hesitation in others, she opened her comm.

"Pisula Ma politely ask you to turn and leave" she said trying to sound threatening "You will find only aggravation if you continue."

There was no response and no turning around of the pirate ships. Maybe she had overdone it with the 'aggravation' part and made them really angry, she thought to herself.

The Bayamon she was piloting was flying at its top speed of 130m/s, equipped with 3 alpha level Particle accelerator cannons the fourth being damaged in some skirmish before she borrowed it. The ship read out showed two wasp class missiles and the fight command software both Mk I and Mk II versions.

The Mandalay's being scout ships were barely shielded but extremely fast and very manoeuvrable. They were travelling at over 200m/s and quickly eating up the distance that separated them from Pisula. In less than a minute they would be in firing range.

Unfortunately the north gate she was headed for was over 4 minutes away, she didn't know what to do, she couldn't out run them and she had never fought in a spaceship before.

Pi's indecision was cut short by raking particle fire as a Mandalay opened up from extreme range; the cockpit view took on a purple tinge as the ship shields flared in response to the pounding fire.

"Shields at 80%" the ship computer intoned

"Thank you" Pi responded automatically as she tried to evade the incoming fire by turning left.

Now both Mandalay's were in firing range and carrying out hit and run tactics using their superior speed to zip in, rack the bayamon with quick bursts of PAC fire and zip out again.

"Shields at 60%" the computer voice rang out

"Thank you" Pi replied absently as she tried moving the ship left and right in a weaving pattern.

Unfortunately her weaving was perfectly symmetrical and consistent thus even though it looked good, it meant that her position could be easily predicted at any point.

The Mandalay pilots realising they were dealing with a complete novice dropped their hit and run tactics and came in hard staying close and constantly firing.

They flew in from opposite ends and caught the Bayamon in a concentrated crossfire.

"Shields at 10%" the emotionless voice notified as the screen flared a deep purple under the heavy fire and lights flashed across the HUD screen.

This was not working she thought to herself; she just didn't know anything about combat or combat defence.

"Computer activate any defensive programs" she asked politely

"Unable to carry out request, there are no programs of that nature installed" the computer replied calmly just as the ship shook under more purple fire.

"Warning, shields at critical. Sustaining hull damage" the computer informed as consoles began to crackle and sparks began flying.

"Hull integrity is at 80%. 5MW shield generator destroyed, engine tuning damaged."

Pisula was thrown forward on to the console in front of her avoiding any serious damage by the restraining harness holding her in the pilot's seat. The cockpit began to fill with

acid smoke from numerous consoles which had short circuited and vented gases from the coolant systems.

"Run any program available," Pisula shouted above the roar of more incoming fire desperately trying to avoid some of the shots. She pushed down hard on the steering stick causing the Bayamon to drop while spinning to the left avoiding another sustained crossfire by sheer luck.

"Initiating Fight Command Software" the computer informed her. "Acquiring nearest hostile target."

Her Bayamon rolled out of its dropping spin as the autopilot came online and reduced speed neatly rising behind its target Mandalay.

The pilots of the Mandalay's having realised they were dealing with a non pilot had disregarded their strengths as hit and run ships and had become fixated with gaining the kill.

Thus when the first Mandalay lost track of the Bayamon as it righted its dropping spin he carried on flying at reduced speed to pull up on the Bayamon once it came back up. The Bayamon did rise back up but the Fight Command Software now controlling the ship brought it up behind the Mandalay and within firing range.

Pisula stared with out comprehending at the rear of the Mandalay filling her cockpit view as she watched three continuous bolts of purple PAC fire converge on the Mandalay stripping its weak skin thick shields and tearing into the meat of the hull.

The Mandalay tore apart in an exploding ball of fire and fragments as the Bayamon flew threw what remained. No pilot had ejected.

Pi just stared in shock at what was left of the Mandalay, still not registering what had happened when the ship shook with juddering impacts throwing her about the pilot seat.

"Shields at 20%" the computer informed while her Bayamon rose towards the right trying to come about and drop in behind the remaining Mandalay.

Pi checked her ship stats. Her hull had been reduced to 80%, she was running on a single 5MW shield now at 20% and her max speed had been reduced to 70m/s, numerous systems were being flagged as damaged and environmental controls were offline thus the cockpit was filling with smoke.

The Bayamon came up as the Mandalay shot way using its superior speed to gain distance then turned around and came head on. The Bayamon fight command software kept heading straight at the Mandalay bringing on a head to head pass.

The Mandalay opened up fire at extreme range and flew onwards still continuing to fire. The Bayamon fight command software being designed for support rather than actual dog fighting flew full on into the oncoming PAC fire.

"Warning shields at critical. Hull at 60%" the computer called out as damaged consoles exploded and hull fractures appeared. The bayamon opened fire as the Mandalay came within target range but the pilot pulled up avoiding the triple purple bolts and opened up fire again as he flew above the bayamon.

"Hull at 50%" the computer stated as the Bayamon pulled a U turn trying to follow onto the back of the Mandalay as it passed overhead. Due to the damage sustained the speed of the Bayamon had been further reduced to around 50m/s allowing the ship to pull a tighter turn.

It opened fire as it followed the Mandalay catching it glancing blows which practically reduced its puny shields to nothing. As the Mandalay pulled to the right to avoid the PAC fire a wasp missile launched from the Bayamon.

The Mandalay was at near point blank range when the wasp missile came roaring out of the Bayamon. Lacking a boost drive the Mandalay pilot was unable to reach his max speed quickly enough to outrun the missile.

Pisula watched again as the Bayamon righted itself still following the Mandalay; she watched the wasp missile strike the Mandalay's now non existent shields transferring the explosive power straight to the hull smashing it to nothing but glowing point of light and expanding debris.

"Oh dear" Pi said in a breathless whisper as the full import of what had happened began to sink in. "I just extinguished two sentient life forms." She sat in numbed unawareness while the sound of hissing consoles and frying circuits continued in the background.

Before Pi could fully deal with the feelings just beginning to assault her adrenaline soaked awareness her ship began to roll and turn around, the target reticule turning red as it locked on to a hostile, the Fight command software was still active and carrying out its program.

The Bayamon and Orinoco were closing in on Pi's ship with the Bayamon in the lead. It came into firing range as Pi's ship began to turn to meet the threat and opened up with all four of its mounted PACs.

The charged bolts tore through the remainder of Pi's shields hammering the hull as it turned to follow the offending Bayamon.

"Warning Hull integrity at 15%, Fight command software destroyed cargo bay exten... Alpha Particle.. Engine tun.. Alpha particle accelerator cannon destroyed!" the computer listed the damage cutting itself off mid statement as the list grew in number. The ship rocked sideways from the impacts and vented gases into the void through spreading fractures across the hull.

Pisula could not see anything, partly due to the building smoke and partly due to the lack of any lights, but mostly due to her having her eyes tightly shut.

She opened them slowly to see what the afterlife was like and was disappointed to find she was still alive though probably not for long.

She peered through the smoke at her HUD console which seemed to be the only console which wasn't fried. She wondered why the Bayamon hadn't finished her off when she saw on her radar that it had veered off to the left at full speed with a wasp missile hot on its tail. The fight command software must have launched it before it got destroyed.

"By the queen!" she exclaimed out loud as she saw the Orinoco still heading her way; it would be within missile range shortly. She had to disable it somehow; her ship was just floating dead, too damaged to move on anything but manoeuvring thrusters.

The Bayamon had pulled ahead of the missile and would soon outrun it and return to finish her off.

If the Orinoco didn't do it first she thought.

She fell out of the pilot seat in her haste to get what she needed; only then feeling the pain from her side and neck, so intense it was that she nearly blacked out. Steadying herself on the floor she felt dizzy and very weak. Crawling on all her tentacles she reached her data pad stored within her carry case and dragged herself back to the ship console.

'I should use what skills I have' she thought to herself as she connected her data pad to the universal connection port and through the haze of pain and fatigue she did what she does best.

She began Hacking, trying to gain access to the Orinoco's command console via the communication protocols.

She uploaded the ARINOX software, a program she had designed, initiated, given birth to and nurtured.

The level of sophistication and ingenuity of the software was the reason why it was classified as Top secret and highly dangerous by the Boron intelligence service. ARINOX was also the reason she was in this mess.

She saw she didn't have much time as the Orinoco headed in closer, under 2mins it would be in missile range while the Bayamon had escaped the wasp missile and was headed back.

Using her modified data pad she opened communication with the Orinoco and piggy backed the ARINOX software on to its comm.'s array, and from there it was deposited at the command centre.

It was a bonus that the Orinoco was an old generation spade shaped one as the security protocols would be outdated and unsophisticated compared to its newer model.

She gave it just one simple command: Gain access.

ARINOX emerged into existence on the fringes of the command protocol centre; it arose in the shadows that lie between the active and dormant commands of any information system.

It has no intrinsic awareness or self assessed consciousness, only a driving need, a sole purpose, a command to follow.

Gain entry.

ARINOX activated its sensory and data awareness subroutines and began to process the stream of information flooding in.

The codes, the strings of data, the protocols being activated and deleted, the information flowing into and flowing out of the command centre, the programs and security measures carrying out their tasks all these things ARINOX collated and processed into a reality based upon the perceptions of its creators.

It stood in shadow looking at a small square building, somewhat worn and battered surrounded by other buildings of varying shapes and sizes, each one connected to the square worn building by connecting tunnels through which it could see commands, protocols and information flowing back and forth.

This would be the command centre, the place where all the ship board systems received their orders.

It watched as packets of data approached the command centre and waited at the door. The data was then scanned and queried for a password by two security programs.

ARINOX assessed the security measures and knew its abilities were more than sufficient to hack into the centre.

It moved further into the shadows blending easily and flowing from position to position as it waited for a suitable target.

It selected a packet containing sector information, it tracked the packet as it headed for the command centre, always staying to the shadows it moved with a grace and swiftness which left everything else standing.

As the packet approached a patch of shadow, ARINOX flowed out of it and dragged it back into the darkness deactivating it with a swift blow.

ARINOX then began to absorb the packet into itself, taking the code and moulding it around itself like wearing someone else's skin. With the absorption of the packet all its information including the security password was now a part of ARINOX.

It left the shadows as a sector information packet.

As it approached the command centre it was halted by the two security programs and scanned. The password was then requested by one of the security programs and ARINOX provided it.

The doors of the command centre opened to allow entry.

As it was about to enter into the command centre, a dormant part of its program activated. ARINOX took on an aggressive stance and went on the offensive; latent subroutines fired causing it to attack the security programs.

It delivered a lightning fast blow to the program on its right causing it to crumple into a heap while twisting low and lashing out at the one on the left taking it down before either programs could register an attack.

ARINOX then walked inside as the two security programs shimmered and became fragments of deleted data.

It deployed the remote command software allowing Pi to take control of the ship functions and then attached itself to a target identification query, returning back to its point of origin.

Pisula Ma watched the Orinoco approaching missile range with a sense of increasing desperation. She glanced down at her data pad and saw the ARINOX program gain entry into the command centre masked as a data packet.

"It's not supposed to do that" she said in surprise as she watched the ARINOX software destroy the security programs.

'Access granted' flashed on the data screen as the remote control software was deployed.

Thoughts of the anomalous act by ARINOX were forgotten as the Orinoco came into missile range.

"Please let him get nearer before he fires, please just a few more seconds" she chanted to herself as her tentacles blurred over the data pad bringing up the weapons commands and then the missiles subsections.

She accessed the first protocol she came upon which happened to be targeting. She was going to disable the targeting scanners but saw on her data pad that the Orinoco had just armed its missiles.

In desperation she did the fastest thing she could, which was to reassign the Orinoco's targeting scanners to the next nearest ship. Just as she finished executing the Orinoco launched its missile.

Pi watched as a Dragonfly missile hurtled out of the Orinoco missile launch tubes and shot straight ahead towards her ship.

Just as she thought she had failed to reassign targeting the missile banked a sharp left, flew over the Orinoco and smashed straight into the following Bayamon puncturing its shields and tearing its hull to pieces.

Pi didn't stop to marvel at her luck as she saw the Orinoco trying to manually target her ship, using her data pad she accessed the missile launch sequence and deleted the command which opened the launch tube doors.

She reasoned that if the doors would not open then the ship would be unable to fire its missiles as safety protocols would cut in to abort the launch. She could then disable the lasers and hopefully discuss things in a more civilised manner.

As she then began to access the laser controls she saw that the Orinoco had armed more missiles. 'Curious' she thought, 'it shouldn't be able to do that.'

Then to her horror she saw the command to launch execute.

She looked out of the cockpit view screen just as two large explosions rocked the Orinoco like seaweed caught in a thermal current. The explosions which came from within the Orinoco tore through the ship vaporising the hull and sending out thousands of glittering particles, leaving nothing but an afterimage burned into the back of her eyes.

Pisula Ma just stared at the now very quite and serene universe outside. All she could think about was having strong words with the person who wrote the safety checks for that ship. She was still staring stunned when her HUD flashed with an incoming transmission. The beeping sound pervaded her thoughts and she looked down to see who would be trying to contact her.

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Lan edged his ship close to the outer fringe of the asteroid field, pulling in behind a large asteroid. He decided to take stock of his situation and allow his shields to recharge to full strength.

Lanowar Holden or Lan as he preferred to be known had started the day with high sprits and glowing visions of the future. He had decided to become an independent trader, carve out a fortune between the stars, to experience the thrills and spills of commerce, to face a little danger and make lots of credits.

Instead he had been fighting to survive, evading homicidal pirates, dodging missiles, hiding behind giant rocks and generally having a bad day. He hadn't even seen anything that remotely resembled credits.

He was sat in an M5 or Scout class ship of Argon design known as a Discoverer. At this moment he was with in the asteroid field located in the sector 'Ore belt' having just survived and destroyed a pirate clan ship.

The reason he was hiding at the fringe was due to the other Bayamon pirate ship waiting outside the asteroid field.

He fervently hoped the Orinoco he had also left out there had indeed left with the Bayamon now carrying the cargo he had dropped. He reasoned that if the cargo was valuable enough to send 4 ships to secure it then the Orinoco would escort the Bayamon back where ever they were going.

That still left one more Bayamon to deal with and with no weapons fitted to his ship this would not be an easy task.

He did have an ace in his hand thou, well actually three aces in the form of three wasp missiles he had salvaged from the destroyed Bayamon.

"Well can't stay in here forever" Lan said to himself checking all systems and increasing speed angling out of the asteroid field. "Might as well see what's out there."

Lan's Discoverer crept out of the asteroid field further down from where he had entered, unfortunately the awaiting Bayamon had picked him up on its radar and was already coming into firing range.

Lan pulled out and into evasive manoeuvres avoiding the quadruple PAC fire flashing across his right side. He dropped below the Bayamons sights and cut his speed watching the ship shoot over him.

A good idea now would be to aim for the north gate and hit full speed, the discoverer would out run the Bayamon quite easily, but Lan felt all the frustration and anger at being duped along with the fear of being hunted rise to the surface.

He wanted to hit back, to smash his fist into someone, to give vent to the burning anger.

The Discoverer rose up behind the Bayamon and accelerated to within 2km of its rear.

The pilot of the Bayamon knew the Discoverer had no offensive capabilities so when he saw it rise up behind him he wasn't worried.

When he noticed the Discoverer accelerate towards him he thought the crazy fool was going to ram him, but he wasn't worried as he had 10MW of shielding while the Disco had only 1MW, it would be suicide.

Instead of pulling out of the way he did a tight turn slowing speed to face the disco head on.

What he then saw catapulted him past worried and into the lap of terror. Two wasp class missiles launched from the Discoverer and rocketed towards his ship, at near point blank range it was too late to pull away or evade.

As the first two wasp missiles smashed into the Bayamon ripping its shields to near nothing Lan launched the third one. The Bayamon had managed to turn to the left and

was now trying to gain speed and allow its shields to recharge but the discoverer was right behind it and the third wasp missile exploded across its right side stripping its remaining shields and eating into its hull.

Lan followed the Bayamon and moved into position to launch another missile when he realised he had none left.

"Damn!" he said and for a moment contemplated ramming the Bayamon.

Just then the comms activated and a static laden voice called out, "Stop! Don't fire. Here's my ship, you just put me out of business."

Lan laughed out loud, "Guess he didn't know I had no more missiles."

Lan pulled the Discoverer in close to the Bayamon now floating dead and patched into its onboard computer. The laws of salvage were pretty much the same in every sector; any unoccupied ships belonged to the first person to lay claim to it.

Many pirates made a living by 'persuading' other pilots to leave their ships.

He'd even heard of 'organisations' whose members were rated on the number of captures they managed, friendly or otherwise. Those who owned M3 heavy fighters had to watch their backs, Nova owners especially.

Lan checked the status of his new acquired asset, its hull was at 60%, it contained a 5MW shield and 2 Beta PACs also some software and was carrying 2 units of spaceweed. Lan was very pleased, the fact that it still contained shields and weapons was a rarity. When a pilot ejects from his ship it sets an auto destruct sequence which destroys as much of the equipment and software onboard as possible, supposedly to make ship stealing less profitable.

He accessed the ship's registration and copied his details across, now legally he owned the Bayamon. He activated the autopilot and told it to follow his ship.

He then checked his HUD radar and didn't like what he saw, the north gate leading into 'Home of light' where he was headed lay over 20km away a short distance for his discoverer.

What he didn't like was the fire fight taking place maybe 3-4km from the gate. It looked like pirates attacking other pirates. He didn't want to attract anymore attention especially with a pirate Bayamon in tow.

As Lan was thinking of his alternatives and whether he could wait out the mini battle taking place his eyes were drawn to the fight. His interest was piqued when he saw the erratic movements of the lone Bayamon being hounded by the two Mandalay's.

Lan was somewhat incredulous when he saw the Bayamon carry out the weaving pattern and almost laughed out loud.

"Must be an amazing cocky pilot or a complete beginner" Lan said to himself.

As he watched the fight progress he found himself rooting for the Bayamon pilot and actually shouted out loud when the two Manadalay's were destroyed. It was obvious that the Bayamon pilot was using the 'fight command software' and surviving on what Lan would call sheer luck spoke volumes about the pilot. Obviously not a pirate or a mercenary or even a trader pilot, so must be a civilian.

"Why would pirates be chasing a civilian? Obviously the pilot's not a threat, unless you count to other pilots of the trade lanes.

He decided it would shortly be academic as an Orinoco and another Bayamon were approaching and he didn't think the civilian's luck would hold out.

Lan was torn between going to the aid of the Bayamon under attack and protecting his own skin.

The pirate Bayamon had caught up with the civilian's now and opened fire tearing through its shields taking chunks out of its hull. The civilian Bayamon managed to launch a missile just before being wracked with particle fire which caused the pirate Bayamon to veer off and head away.

Lan was surprised to find that his Discoverer was at full throttle and heading towards the now listless civilian's Bayamon. He had acted with out realising and thus made up his own mind. He didn't know what he could do or even if he would make it there in time to do anything but he had to try.

He knew that he wasn't going to make it and could only watch as the Orinoco and its partnering Bayamon closed in on the helpless civilian. The Orinoco launched a missile which from its speed was probably a dragonfly class.

What surprised Lan was that the missile turned around and smashed the Bayamon following the Orinoco into nothing but chunks of metal.

"What just happened there?" Lan asked himself

What he saw next stunned him completely, the Orinoco coming in for the kill just spontaneously exploded in a massive ball of bright light leaving nothing but an afterimage burnt into the back of Lans eyes.

"What the F**k just happened?" Lan breathed, double-checking his HUD.

He scanned the damaged Bayamon and opened communication channels; there was no picture and a lot of static.

"Hello Bayamon, I'm reading ship wide hull breaches and shield failure is imminent. You have probably a few minutes erm... mizuras before your ship becomes space debris." He always had problems using the universal time references which were based on the Teladi unit of time.

Pi checked her ships damage readings and saw the pilot of the Discoverer was correct. The Bayamon had taken a pounding and was barely keeping structural integrity; it could

fall apart at any moment. The shields were failing and life support systems were offline, she was breathing through her space suit.

"I'll lower my shields and open the outer airlock so you can space walk it to my ship, I can't get any closer for fear of causing your ship to break up" came the Argon voice which sounded male to Pi over the comms.

Pi was wracked by indecision on what to do, it was true that she could not stay aboard this vessel as it was near disintegration but she had learnt the hard way that trust was a rare thing in space. Besides the Discoverer was shadowed by a Bayamon even thou it wasn't displaying a pirate signature.

'Hmmm... I wonder why that is?' Pi thought to herself 'maybe he's a bounty hunter who captures pirates for money.'

"Erm... Bayamon pilot I'm reading power fluctuations across your engine core. If your going to leave you better do it now otherwise I'm off. I'd rather not be here when your ship explodes."

The Argon pilots voice broke Pi's thoughts, looking at her console Pi could see he was right. She stood dizzily and gathered her meagre belongings into a space container.

"I am departing vessel now, I thank you gratefully for your assistance." Pi replied as she entered the Bayamon airlock and depressurised.

Lan watched with a worried frown as the Bayamon pilot who had sounded Boron made their way to his ships airlock. He kept an eye on the power readings of the Bayamon which were now beginning to build up.

"Come on, faster. Swimming in space should be second nature to you Borons." Lan muttered out loud still watching the readings.

When he heard the outer airlock seal shut signifying his new passenger was onboard, Lan hit the throttle and turned away from the wrecked Bayamon quickly putting distance between it and his discoverer.

A large flash of light and rumbling sound signified the demise of the Bayamon as Lan watched it disintegrate on his HUD display.

"I better go let out my new passenger" Lan said to himself, 'and see what new trouble I've landed myself into' he thought.

Lan un-strapped himself from the pilot seat and then pressurised the outer airlock. Once it was done he opened the inner airlock cautiously and allowed the Boron to enter inside his ship.

He couldn't tell that much except that the person was Boron from the type of space suit they wore, the tentacles were also a dead giveaway. He wasn't that familiar with the other

four known species which inhabited the X universe apart from the basics learnt of the galactic news and various soaps.

"Hi, my name's Lanowar Holden" Lan said resealing the inner airlock. "Are you ok?" he asked as he noticed the Boron was staggering a little.

"Pisula Ma is my name, thank you for your help" Pi replied a little hesitantly looking around the cramped interior of the small ship.

Lan noticed the hesitant reply "in case you were wondering I'm a trader not a pirate" he said reassuringly.

"Thou I'll admit I haven't actually done any trading as such, while I have captured a Bayamon" he said wirily

"May be I am more suited to being a pirate." Lan joked

Pi looked up fearfully and took an involuntary step back, nearly falling over as a wave of dizziness hit her.

"Whoa, that was a joke!" Lan said hurriedly, helping her to sit down on the floor. "Sorry, it probably wasn't a good one."

Pi sat down on the floor and let the dizziness pass. She still wasn't sure what to make of this Argon but didn't want to appear rude.

"Please could you take me to a station with medical facilities, I must apologise but I don't have any credits, I will be able to pay for the passage once I'm on a station."

"I'm headed for Argon Prime, they have the best medical facilities this quadrant but if you need I can drop you off at the trading centre in home of light." Lan offered

"I do not wish to upset your schedule, Argon Prime is good for me" replied Pi thinking that she would be safer in the Argon home sector and further away from the Werewolf clan.

"Well you rest yourself at the back there" Lan said pointing to the small pallet at the back used for catching naps when on long haul trips. "Its going to take us about a day, that is a tazura to get to Argon Prime. I have to travel at the Bayamons speed and it's quite damaged" Lan explained apologetically.

He returned to the pilot's seat and set course for the jump gate leading to Home of light. From there it was just one more jump to Argon Prime, thou the jump gate would be at the opposite end of the sector.

He looked at the approaching jump gate, a gigantic circular opening constructed with some incredibly resilient unknown alloy, placed by beings far advanced then any of the five known species inhabiting the X universe, referred to as the Ancients thou there have been no recorded contact.

As his ship neared the activation zone, the swirl of the wormhole opened up displaying myriad colours all spinning chaotically as the fabric of space was folded around him and time became infinitely stretched.

He entered the tunnel and headed back home.

As Lan entered the northern jump gate into 'Home of Light,' Tchak'ta entered the western jump gate out of the sector 'The Wall.'

His M5 class Teladi Harrier emerged from the vortex of the jump gate into Argon Prime, bathed in the light of their sun 'Sonra' the Argon home sector filled his view screen.

It was a magnificent sight to his Teladi eyes; many high profit stations graced this sector including a shipyard (where factories can be purchased), equipment dock and a wharf (where spaceships can be bought or sold).

Tchak'ta piloted his Harrier towards the IMW shield producing factory and asked for docking permission. He set the autopilot to dock the ship while he gathered together his equipment and a modified blaster of Split design. He also strapped a small blade under his tail where a scale had been hollowed and sensor bending alloys integrated.

In his line of work you could never be sure of safety and must be prepared for all outcomes. His time with the Split had taught him that along with many other things. He had actually managed to complete his investigations despite the situation, adapting quickly to the quagmire of politics which governed the prominent families of the Split dynasty.

His investigations and subsequent actions had gained him a grudging respect among the Split families and bequeathed him with some powerful allies. As with any form of politics it had also created powerful enemies.

The name he used now was given to him by the Split; rarely did he use his real name anymore.

Putting aside all thoughts of the past and of the strange honour led Split he finished dressing and waited as his ship was scanned by station sensors and allowed to pass through the blast doors. Once inside the station the security systems take hold, dampening fields prevent the discharge of energy weapons and each passenger is scanned for dangerous artefacts once leaving their ship.

The modified blaster he carried was of split design, outlawed in all civilised space it was a weapon of torture rather than death. It fired a low powered electrical discharge which caused all the neuronal pathways of the victim to become hypersensitive while at the same time activating every pain fibre pathway.

In short it causes excruciating prolonged pain, causing a person to feel as thou they are on fire from the inside. It doesn't kill directly but if fired for long enough the victim ends up breaking their spine. His had been modified to run on chemical reactions activated by the heat of his palm, this meant that it lasted for a short time before it had to be replaced but it was undetectable by standard security scanning.

Tchak'ta exited his Harrier on to the docking bay of the shield factory. Since this was a high end factory he could see scores of mechanics, scientists and labourers going about their assigned tasks. There were a few other ships in the docking bay two of which were having new 1MW shields fitted.

"Excuse me sir, may I be of any help?" came a voice from his left. Tchak'ta turned to face the person addressing him. A young Argon female of average build for their species, wearing the uniform of a technician and holding a data pad greeted him.

"Would you like to have any of your shields replaced or repaired?" asked the technician.

"Check my shields for erratic power distributions and replace any faulty relays" replied Tchak'ta watching the technician as the universal translator plugged into her ear converted, almost instantaneously his soft harmonious speech into the ugly guttural noises that passed for speech amongst the Argons.

The universal translator was one of the biggest product releases to date, it was an item which could be sold everywhere in the known universe, it was small and fitted to the inner ear allowing nearly instantaneous translation of all know languages.

"Of course sir, had a few run in with pirates I assume?" she said while typing into the data pad and shouting out instructions to the ground crew.

Tchak'ta did not reply but just waited. The technician looked at Tchak'ta as if expecting a reply then became discomfited when she realised she was not going to get one.

"Right, erm... is there any thing else I can do sir?" she asked awkwardly

"I am looking for Fugalas Aldamox Quat the 9th" he said, "where can I find him?"

"Fugal? I think he's down in the assembly area. I'll see if I can find him. Who should I say is calling?" she asked as she headed to a wall control panel.

"Tchak'ta." came the short reply

"Tchak'ta? That's not a Teladi name is it?" she enquired as she sent the message.

"No. It is not" stated Tchak'ta and just waited.

"Erm... right, well Fugal should be up in a mizura. I have other things to attend to so if there is nothing else..." she asked

"No." replied Tchak'ta "That will be all."

The technician turned away and walked off muttering something as she went.

Tchak'ta surveyed the area while he waited for Fugas to make an appearance, his mind analysing the information he had gathered and reasoned conjectures he had made, trying to look at them from different angles to see if any thing had been missed.

He let his subconscious wrestle with the problems as he saw Fugas appear at the far doorway and beckoned for him to follow.

They walked through what looked like a workshop to the back and into a small room packed with shield components and energy cells.

"The high energy field and the leaking shield generators will scramble any listening or video devices" Fugas said as he turned around to face Tchak'ta. "How can I be of service to the PPA?"

Tchak'ta took out a hand held scanner and confirmed that no form of surveillance could take place; he then put the scanner away and said "I need information regarding two Teladi going by the name of Harold and Henry. My information reports that they were last seen in this sector."

"Let me check my contacts on the other stations, it will take a few mizuras" Fugas said as he took out a data pad and a data encrypter and began sending his messages.

"I have been informed that the research on enhancing the intoxicating abilities of spaceweed plants has been stolen" he said while encrypting the message.

"Yes" stated Tchak'ta "They somehow managed to hack into our research facility computer banks, we still do not know how this was managed as the facility was protected with state of the art Split security systems. They destroyed the computers after taking the data so no retrieval of information is possible. The Board stands to lose a significant amount of profit if the research hits the open market."

"It has come to my attention that Karrack's Vampires have been ordering specialist biological equipment, they are also one of the largest distributors of spaceweed. Maglxt Cazix'tnt the 4th has been providing them with spaceweed and smuggling the equipment with in the shipments. Her contact for the Vampires and the people supplying the equipment are these two Teladi" added Tchak'ta.

"Maglxt? At the Bliss place in Profit Share? It is highly unlikely she is anything more then just a pawn as she does not have the means or influence to be more then a delivery vessel." replied Fugas.

Tchak'ta nodded.

"Have you heard that the 'Boron Caravan' enterprise has been shelved due to the Boron army declining to guard the trade ships? They are worried about the aggressive image this would give." asked Fugas in disgust.

"Yes. The PPA Admiral Betndysis Ylyliys Bywumys the Vth was not pleased. We stand to lose a large profit potential. The Boron have no sense they lose profit." said Tchak'ta with a hint of contempt.

"There were two Teladi introducing themselves as Harold and Henry at the Trading station." informed Fugas as he looked up from his data pad. "I have a person there, an Argon male by the name of Sevren Gronas who works in the bar 'Queens Tentacles' he will be able to give you specific details you require. I have informed him of your imminent arrival."

Tchak'ta nodded and began to walk back the way he had come.

"There has been increased activity by Argon intelligence recently, we are unable to gain specifics but I believe something of theirs was stolen. You will undoubtedly be tracked by their agents." Fugas said as he followed Tchak'ta.

"I will keep that in mind" replied Tchak'ta

Fugas headed back to the assembly area while Tchak'ta headed for his Harrier and the annoying technician.

"Your ship is ready to go sir. We replaced 3 power relays and readjusted the distributions to within optimum range." The technician called out seeing Tchak'ta heading for the ship. "You have some very interesting modifications sir; I've not seen them before. If you don't mind me asking, what do they actually do?" she asked smiling

'Why do Argons feel the need to make profitless conversation' he thought annoyed while out loud he said "Yes I do mind. If you knew, your life would be a short one."

Her smile turned a bit sickly as she decided this conversation wasn't a healthy one to have. "If you will just authorise the credit transfer then you're all set to go." she said rather quickly.

Tchak'ta authorised the transfer of funds and climbed aboard his Harrier.

He left the shield factory and targeted the Trading station through the sector map on his screen. He activated the autopilot and headed over to the station, he was granted docking permission and taken into the visitors docking bay.

Tchak'ta walked out of his Harrier into the throng of people jostling around the docking bay. As the Trading station of the Argon home sector it was always packed with pilots, traders, business consortiums, professionals of all kinds, dignitaries and celebrities though the last two had their own private docking bays.

He could feel the transactions going on all around him, from the smallest independent traders to the large quadrant wide enterprises to the gigantic universe spanning conglomerates.

Credits were flowing like blood through the veins, pumped through the trading stations and on to the rest of the universe. Credits from around the universe were flowing into the station while at the same time credits were flowing back out.

His home sectors were bigger trading hubs, dealing in sums that could be used to buy whole sectors and even quadrants. Out of the other species to share this universe only the Argon's showed a similar thirst for trade as the Teladi, many not restricting themselves with ridiculous notions of morality or ethics above the accumulation of credits.

Tchak'ta like many others born on the Teladi historical home world of 'Ianus Zura' believed that once a contract was made you have to abide by it. Breaking a contract for short term gain of credits will lead to a loss of profits in the long run as others will not trade with you. Many Teladi especially the females hatched outside the home sectors are greedy and focus on short term profits breaking contracts or duping trade partners which has led to the dubious reputation of all Teladi. It is perpetrated even more due to most space faring Teladi being females and most being from the once lost colonies.

It is these colonies which were cut off from the home world for hundreds of Jazura's due to the jump gates being mysteriously re-routed which gave rise to the high proportion of Teladi females in space. Due to the biology of the Teladi, male's are only hatched on the home world where as every egg hatched in the colonies is female. This may seem disastrous for breeding except for the fact that Teladi females do not require a male counterpart to lay eggs. The only restriction being that the eggs hatched this way are always exact copies of their mothers like a clone.

It seems that these Teladi colonies became all female over the Jazura's and as time went by they became very bitter and self serving following the path of profit but with pure selfishness.

When the gates realigned again (for unknown reasons) these Teladi were able to return to the home world but found it much different to what they expected. The Teladi of the home world are much like the other race's though they too followed a trade oriented lifestyle, they did so without sowing bitterness and mistrust among the other traders. This changed with the Teladi's from the colonies joining the trade lanes.

All of the other races are now suspicious of Teladi in general and will rather lose profits than deal with Teladi traders.

Tchak'ta had amassed his fortune through many shrewd trade contracts, always coming out with the greatest profit. This has caused consternation among his trade partners but they are all willing to trade because they know he has never broken a contract. Of course if the contract wording allowed you to do something which your partners may not have realised or thought possible then that is their oversight and your right to exploit. He would deal with any individual or consortium if the profit was high enough not restricted by what other races term moral or ethical obligations.

There's a Teladi saying which when translated into Argon goes something like, "friendship is friendship but Business... is Business!"
The closest Teladi word for friendship is 'preferred trading partner.'

Tchak'ta moved through the press of people heading towards the recreational area which housed all the entertainment. After asking a few people he located the bar 'Queens tentacles' and entered inside, he scanned the interior marking the points of exit and location of the staff along with the few customers.

It was early and most people were still at work thus the bar was relatively empty. Tchak'ta went to a table and sat on one of the modified chairs specifically designed for Teladi anatomy with a padded rest for his tail.

Fugalas would have informed this Sevren Gronas to make contact when it was clear to do so, he had to just wait. Ordering some rishik, a Split ale type drink for which he had acquired a taste, he waited.

Lieutenant Toki Gilharno strode through the corridors heading towards the bridge on 'Argon One', the flagship of the Argon navy. An M1 carrier class ship it boasts 6 cannons, 3 of which mounts the devastating 'Gamma Photon Pulse Cannon', it is protected by 750MW of shielding and can also carry and deploy up to a 130 fighting ships. It was as always stationed in the Argon home sector of Argon Prime providing both a show of strength and a feeling of total security.

Toki had just delivered his report to the head of Argon intelligence, stationed on this ship and was now on his way to inform the Admiral.

The Admiral had a tendency to want to meddle in everything and insisted on knowing any information the intelligence service had. Being stationed on his ship meant that his orders no matter how annoying had to be followed. Toki guessed it was due to the Admiral knowing that there was so much going on that he was unaware of, which the Intelligence service kept to itself.

Toki stepped onto the bridge, nodding at Sendly on tactical he approached the Admiral, "Excuse me sir"

"Yes lieutenant?" enquired the Admiral

"We have just confirmed reports that Tchak'ta is in this sector and heading from the 1MW shield factory to the Trading station, sir."

The admiral looked at Toki blankly

"He's with the PPA sir. One of their finest and very well known sir." informed Toki with a slight emphasis on well known.

The Admiral failed to notice the dig and asked "What is one of Teladi's finest doing in Argon home space? Especially at this moment in time?"

"We are not sure sir. He met a Teladi called Fugalas on the shield station whom we know to be an operative for the PPA but due to interference we were unable to monitor the conversation."

"Interference? Some sort of scrambling device?" asked the Admiral

"No sir. They were in a room with high energy output and shield generator leakage, common in shield factories."

"Well they are not common in trading stations. Put a tail on him lieutenant." the Admiral replied beginning to turn away.

"He already has a tail sir. Any more and he will not be able to sit down." replied Toki with a straight face.

The Admiral looked up at him and said "Are you trying to be funny lieutenant?"

"No sir. Don't have a sense of humour sir. Common in the service sir." replied Toki still maintaining a straight face.

He could hear a slight sniggering coming from tactical.

"I only meant that an agent has already been assigned to track him sir."

The Admiral stared at him suspiciously then finally said "Very well lieutenant, that will be all" and turned back to the monitors in front of him.

Toki departed the bridge, winking at Sendly as he left and made his way to see Ban Dana, the head of Argon intelligence and receive his orders.

Tchak'ta had been waiting for half a stazura, sipping his drink when an Argon male, tall for his kind and slim wearing the bar's uniform came over. He looked to be young for the species and displayed facial hair around his mouth in a box shape.

"Good afternoon sir, my name is Sevren, can I get you anything to eat or drink?"

"What do you recommend?" asked Tchak'ta looking up at his contact.

"Well sir the agnu beef casserole in stott spices is quite popular, also the spicy sojahusks marinated in a mixture of stott spices and herbs seems to be doing well. In fact just last tazura two Teladi were complementing the sojahusks."

"Well the opinion of two traders is of little consequence" replied Tchak'ta carefully.

"Oh no sir. These were business men for sure. They spent the whole tazura hiring pilots for drop off runs, giving the new inexperienced pilots a chance even those with out ships." assured Sevren.

"Businessmen you say. Maybe I know them, did they give any names?" enquired Tchak'ta making it sound like idle chatter.

"They introduced themselves as Harold and Henry. They ordered sojahusks for the pilots too sir. They visited many other places here but said that this served the best food and would eat here after carrying out purchases, even taking it back to their rooms." informed Sevren.

"Good enough, I shall have the sojahusks and another rishik." ordered Tchak'ta.

"Right away sir" said Sevren following which he returned to the kitchen.

As the waiter walked away, Tchak'ta ran over the conversation pulling out the facts. So Harold and Henry were here less then 24 stazura's ago but are not here now, otherwise Sevren would have mentioned where to find them.

They had spent the whole tazura hiring pilots, which should leave records of departures and possibly destinations for him to check, although circumventing this stations security would be very difficult.

There must have been many items of high value for them to hire that many pilots, probably to increase chances of delivery which would suggest items not available freely or the need to keep the pieces separate so if intercepted it would be difficult to extrapolate the use.

They were hiring new pilots only, those willing to take any jobs so the distance must not have been far otherwise new pilots would not have the navigation layouts. Also new pilots usually have minimal defences and basic offensive weaponry as they are just starting to trade.

This would suggest an unfortunately early demise of their trading career, no doubt involving pirate clans.

They would expect all hired pilots to be dealt with especially if they were hiring pilots without ships, which would mean providing ships for them. This increases the risk of being tracked; if a ship was to survive it would provide many clues and valuable data and information.

They visited other establishments and bars, possibly they have contacts there or some sort of arrangement, buying equipment or merchandise from the stores here will leave records of transactions and bill of sales, thou he didn't doubt they would have covered their tracks.

They also must have had their own rooms near by if they took food back. That would leave records and maybe he could check the room. Security usually kept a record of sensor reading from all rooms and possibly some video footage. The difficult part will be in obtaining this information.

He had a lot to do now and some leads to follow. He didn't think any of the pilots would have survived otherwise they would be back and Sevren would have mentioned it. If he could have got his hands on one of the ships or even any of the pilots he could have gleaned much information.

Leaving the bar Tchak'ta headed for the trading area, this was the place where all the serious trading happened. Where profits are made or lost, lives built or destroyed, where opportunities to make substantial profits existed.

Tchak'ta smiled to himself, feeling the tingling of transactions as the lure of commerce called to him. The investigation can wait a little; he was after all a Teladi.

Ryhan sat and waited for his punishment to be set out. He was pretty sure that it would be another fine and possible community service.

He was sitting in the audience room of the sector police in 'Home of Light' awaiting the verdict of the captain and the representatives of the sector governor. They had been taking an unusual amount of time in deciding, usually it was a quick 10-20 mins wrapped up with a warning and told to behave like a model citizen.

It had been over an hour now and Ryhan was getting a bad feeling about all this. He had left Lan about 3 hours ago now and still he didn't know what was going to happen. He had been surprised when he was told that representatives of the governor were here too, it didn't bode well.

The far door hissed open and Captain Rasilyn walked back inside followed by the two representatives, introduced earlier as Moralin and Fargal. They took their respective seats with the Captain in the middle.

Moralin was a plump woman in her mid 40's who seemed to be continually frowning; she had been practically frosty in her brief introduction. 'She was probably on the Governors ship at the time of incident' he thought ruefully.

Fargal was a large man with a girth to match; he looked to be in his late 50's possibly early 60's with some grey showing at the temples. He had showed more humour towards the incident which seemed to irritate Moralin.

"After much discussion and reviewing your past records we have come to a decision" Captain Rasilyn's voice cut through the chamber. She was a slim woman in her late 30's quite tall and cut a prim picture in her uniform.

"Because of your past infractions and continuous flouting of the law we have decided some regimental discipline would do you good. Towards this end we have placed you under the authority of the Argon Navy for 5 mazura's to take effect immediately.

Maybe they can put to good use your piloting skills."

Ryhan stared open mouthed.

"A member of the Navy will meet you outside on the docking bay and give you your orders. I hope that we will not meet under these circumstances again." Captain Rasilyn finished and rose, signifying an end to the proceedings.

Ryhan couldn't believe what was going on. He had just been enlisted into the Argon Navy without any choice, and for what? Just a cheeky display of protest. "You can't be serious? 5 months in the navy?" Ryhan said incredulously. "I'd get a fairer trial if I was Boron held in Split custody."

The Captain stopped walking towards the exit and slowly turned around to face him, her eyes blazing as she spoke. "If it was not for Fargal you would be serving 2 years at one of the mines, you may think nothing of placing innocent peoples lives at risk carrying out your fool hardy stunts but if an accident had occurred or fatalities taken place it would have been my duty to inform the family. Do not ever question justice when you have shown a blatant disregard for the lives of others." She practically hissed the last part, turned and left the chamber.

'Guess that just killed my appeal chances' Ryhan thought.

"I hope the Navy teach you some decency young man, thou I expect you will end up in the brig on some ship somewhere." Moralin said stiffly as she walked past him.

"Don't fret lad, the navy will do you good. I spent 12 years serving and I wouldn't give that up for anything. Just try not to irritate your superiors too much." Fargal said smiling. "That was some fancy flying you did there, made Moralin faint with your stunt." He whispered winking as he went past.

Ryhan stood by himself letting it all sink in, then shrugged his shoulders "well there's nothing to be done but to get on with it" he said to himself.

He headed back out to the docking bay to see if he could find that navy officer, 'maybe they wouldn't turn up' he thought as he left the chamber to start his hopefully short naval career.

Ryhan walked out onto the busy docking port of the trading station in 'home of light.' This sector was recently re-colonised and deals with high quality electronics along with versatile fabrics. The large company known as Terracorps has its headquarters located here as well as its own power plant and cattle ranch.

Looking around for any naval types Ryhan headed over to his Discoverer. He patted her hull fondly and smiled thinking about the mischief they had both been in. His smile

turned a bit wiry as he remembered the mischief had now led him to half a year in the Navy.

Over the years he had upgraded his Discoverer and even fitted some extra's internally like the extended passenger cabin for comfortable long haul flights.

She was at nearly full speed and had her cargo bay maxed to 50units. She contained her max shielding of 3MWs and sported 'Gamma Impulse Ray Emitters,' the best weapons she could mount.

He had needed them many times as he more often than not managed to irritate people especially when gambling the main method through which he had gained the credits to carry out the upgrades.

"Ryhan Paase?" asked a voice behind him.

Ryhan turned around to face a young looking man, possibly in his late 20's, broad shouldered and tall. He had dark brown hair and wore a serious expression. He wasn't wearing any distinctive uniform or marking.

"Are you Ryhan Paase?" he asked again

"Erm... I might know where he is. Does he owe you credits?" asked Ryhan cautiously

The man looked at him quizzically, "I have been instructed to meet him here by captain Rasilyn. This is his ship."

Ryhan considered pretending to be someone else and walk away but he'd lose his ship and be tracked down, things would just get worse.

"I'm Ryhan Paase, sorry about that, can't be too careful. I assume you are from the navy?" he asked.

The man looked at him but made no comment. "I am Lieutenant Markus Rollem and you will be under my command.

Until your parole is up you are a navy cadet and will be expected to act accordingly, any breaches of discipline or behaviour will be dealt with in navy fashion, is that understood?"

"Erm, yea sure. Will do." Replied Ryhan wondering what he had got himself into.

"When answering a superior officer you will do so with respect cadet. Is that understood?" He said firmly with out changing expression.

"Yes sir" Ryhan answered trying to sound respectful while inwardly groaning. 'Just my bloody luck' he thought to himself 'an officer with a by the book attitude.'

Ryhan listened to his assignments and the role he was to play in the Navy with a growing horror. This was worse than he had thought a lot worse than he had thought. He was to carry out deliveries from stations to Navy installations and ships, act as a courier or ferry passengers as the need arose.

He was to be bored to death.

Ryhan was to pick up some special quantum tubes from the factory here and deliver them to the satellite production factory in 'Red Light' just one sector over. What was so special about these quantum tubes he wasn't told but they were much smaller than their normal counterparts.

His ship would not normally be able to carry quantum tubes as it could only carry small containers and the tubes used medium containers.

Ryhan waited in the docking bay of the Quantum tube factory while the tubes were being loaded into his cargo bay. It didn't take long and soon he was out among the stars cruising towards the jump gate which led to Red Light.

There was a queue forming to use the busy jump gate but Ryhan accelerated and cut across the paths of the other traders fitting through the gaps by mere inches and gliding in front of an Argon Mercury practically brushing shields all to the accompaniment of obscenities hurled at him over the comms.

Ryhan smiled as the jump gate worm hole enfolded his ship and he entered subspace, 'guess I could have a little fun on these boring trips' he thought to himself.

Lan was halfway across the sector Home of Light, he would be able to move a lot faster if it were not for the damaged Bayamon he'd captured. His own Discoverer was flying protectively around the Bayamon as both ships made for the jump gate to Argon prime at the opposite end of the sector.

His Boron passenger was at the back, probably sleeping. He didn't know what to make of her, a good idea or a big mistake?

She was obviously being hunted by pirates for something; he still couldn't believe she had survived against 4 ships with no piloting experience. And what had happened to that Orinoco? So many questions and too many surprises, this trading career was not quite what he had expected.

From the little he had spoken to her she seemed like nearly all Boron, very polite and considerate, and well... Nice.

He had considered docking and moving into the Bayamon ship as it had weapons but decided he would rather run than fight; besides he couldn't leave the Boron in the Discoverer and doubted he could wake her up anyhow.

He wondered what repercussions today's events would have and how they would affect his future. Hopefully the Pirate clan, 'Werewolf' he thought it would just put down the loss of two Bayamons as a minor scratch on their finances.

'Of course with the Boron tally, in total they lost 3 Bayamons, two Mandalay's and an Orinoco... expensive day for them' Lan thought worriedly.

He hadn't heard from Ryhan yet and had tried contacting his ship when he entered 'Home of Light' sector but no answer. He had left a message asking him to get in contact and to find out how much of a fine they had slapped on him this time.

Lan grinned to himself "either he's in the nearest bar laying it on thick with the local ladies or in the dingiest gambling den wining credits from dangerous people."

'What ever he's doing he's no doubt having fun. Precious little of that going round here' he thought.

If all goes well they should be in Argon Prime by tomorrow, in space the terms today and tomorrow were more a measure of hours rather than daylight and nightfall but it was a convenient reference point.

He couldn't wait to put this all behind him and make a start with actually becoming a trader. The cash from the Bayamon should help him get started.

Lan thought about the steps he would need to take and how to invest his credits if he wanted to become a successful trader. Outside his ship the star studded void slid by as he slowly moved towards the jumpgate leading to Argon Prime.

Ryhan had been making deliveries for most of the day now and had one more assignment to do before he would be allowed any 'free time'. Lieutenant Rollem had informed him that the Navy owned two thirds of his time and in no particular order so a call could come at anytime.

His next task should be more interesting as he was to pick up a passenger from a BioGas factory in sector 'Farnhams Legend.' This sector is controlled by Pirates so if nothing else it should be exciting.

Ryhan pulled up the sector map and targeted the east gate.

"Gate. Presidents End," the computer notified as he pushed to max speed and headed out of Home of Light.

He exited the jump gate into Presidents End and slowly increased his speed away from the jump gate and towards the opposite end of the sector.

There are 11 space stations dotted around the sector, each one buzzing with activity from freighters docking and departing.

There was a lot of tension and unrest in this sector as its east gate led directly into the old Xenon sectors which were cleared not that long ago but are now controlled by the pirate clans.

As a result this sector receives a lot of pirate activity from smuggling of illegal goods to hijacking of freighters and cargo.

Ryhan targeted the east gate.

"Gate. Elena's Fortune" the computer voice droned out as the ship picked up speed and oriented on the gate.

Ryhan's Discoverer emerged from the jump gate into a melee of weapons fire and drone activity. The multicoloured laser fire lighting up the void like Boron fireworks during victory day on Argon Prime.

A quick scan of his HUD showed that two Mandalays and a Bayamon were pounding away at a Boron Dolphin freighter with an Orinoco closing in. There were six defensive drones which must have been released by the freighter zipping in between the ships firing their weak lasers in a bid to distract the Pirates.

The Dolphin freighter was trying to reach the gate he just emerged from but from its speed and the pounding it was getting Ryhan doubted it would make it.

Maneuvering his Discoverer to the left he tried to edge away from the conflict taking place not 5km from his position. He didn't want to get involved with something that was none of his business; he had annoyed enough people in his time already.

His comm channel crackled to life displaying a broken up picture of a Boron in a smoky cockpit.

"Please, Boron needs Help. Pirates attacking Hisulam Po, request urgent assistance please," appealed the distress call.

"Sorry bro, not my fight," muttered Ryhan to himself as he tried to get past the now twisting freighter. There were only 4 drones left as the Mandalays took out one each while the Bayamon pounded at the freighter shields.

His ship suddenly jarred from impacts as his shield indicator dropped below %100, Ryhan swore and pulled evasive. One of the Mandalays had decided to attack the Discoverer as he tried to sneak past firing on it with its alpha PACs.

Ryhan pulled his ship into a twisting dive trying to put distance between him and the Mandalay, hoping it would just leave him and return to the fight.

The Mandalay dogged his tail all the while firing.

"Shields at 70 percent," the computer called out as Ryhan twisted to the right.

"Fine, have it your way," Ryhan said out loud as he cut his speed and pulled a full circle to face the oncoming Mandalay. He opened fire with his Gamma IRE's while pushing his speed up.

The Mandalay not expecting such a move flew full into the blue impulse rays while trying to dodge the oncoming Discoverer. Its shields fell to 10 percent.

Ryhan fell in behind the Mandalay as it tried to pull to his left.

"Bye bye ass hole," he said as he opened fire with a sustained burst of his weapons, exploding the Mandalay into bits of unrecognisable melted alloys. He flew close to the pilot who had ejected knocking him spinning with his shields as he passed through the debris of the Mandalay.

The second Mandalay was coming in to engage him as Ryhan took his ship towards the freighter. He was angry now and wanted to fight.

"I would of left ya be, but no ya all had to get greedy," he said to himself as he engaged the Mandalay.

He dodged the incoming fire easily snapping back some of his own while barrel rolling to the right. He fell in behind the Mandalay before the pilot could react and let loose with a long burst of fire tearing the shields away and puncturing the hull.

The hull dropped to 20 percent and the pilot ejected but Ryhan kept firing and destroyed the Mandalay in a ball of fire and plasma.

The Bayamon had finished the defensive drones and left the freighter to the oncoming Orinoco and began to engage the Discoverer as it finished off the second Mandalay.

As Ryhan flew through the debris of the second Mandalay instinct kicked in causing him to swerve his ship up and to the right without his conscious thought as his left side was lit up by quadruple PAC fire cutting through his last position.

"Sneaky bastard," Ryhan breathed as he dodged fire from the Bayamon while trying to maneuver onto its tail.

He spun to the left avoiding the Bayamon PAC fire then immediately hit a hard right, cut his speed and twisted on the spot to fall in behind the Bayamon.

The Bayamon pilot anticipated the move to the left and while firing also pulled a hard left. The pilot was not expecting the sudden move to the right and was caught unprepared

as his mind was unable to process quickly enough what it had just registered and kept moving to the left for a few seconds before righting himself.

By then the Discoverer was already firing into its tail pushing the Bayamons shields down. The Bayamon pilot tried to shake off the pursuing Discoverer making sharp turns and slowing speed, even trying to imitate what Ryhan had carried out in the first place.

All this availed him little as Ryhan stuck to him like a Larsian leech on a Teladian warthog, inexorably eating away at the shields before they had time to regenerate and beginning to bite into the hull.

Suddenly his ship dropped below the Bayamon, barrel rolling to the right just as streams of deadly green superheated plasma tore through where his ship had been mere seconds ago.

"Arghaaaaaaaa!" came the dying pain-filled scream of the Bayamon pilot as the plasma ripped through his ship vaporising metals and flesh leaving only particles of matter and an afterimage of light.

It's only then that Ryhan realized that he had pulled his Discoverer to the right and below the Bayamon without consciously thinking it. His eyes and ears must have registered the incoming plasma fire either by the faint sound or slight increase in light and through his subconscious acted directly while bypassing his conscious decision-making process.

Those few seconds had saved his life and sent the Bayamon into oblivion.

"I must say I'm very surprised you're still alive. I was absolutely sure you were going to be space dust," drawled a voice over the comms, there was no picture.

Ryhan was still recovering from surprise when he pulled away from the Orinoco and scanned his HUD radar to get a situation update
The Freighter was now entering the jump gate trailing one defensive drone and registering minor hull damage. There were a couple of cargo containers floating around and the Orinoco shadowing his movement.

He clocked the Orinoco to be doing around 230m/s which more than surprised him as that ship should only be able to do a max of 175m/s. It was this which had allowed the Orinoco to get so close before Ryhan had consciously registered its presence.

"My baby is a bit nipier then standard ones, I'm sure you noticed," drawled the voice of the Orinoco pilot "If you would come closer I will be happy to show you more."

"Na, ya had your chance bro. but ya kinda blew it. Too slow ya know, maybe ya should practice a bit more," Ryhan replied targeting the Orinoco and trying to scan it but he could not penetrate the shields.

"I do so like my privacy, too many pirates around I've heard," replied the pilot, "how about we try it again, I can guarantee that it will turn out more satisfactory, at least for me."

Ryhan was tempted just to shake that cool confident attitude the pilot had but he didn't know what other surprises this Orinoco held. He still had a mission to do and didn't want to prolong his Navy career by messing with this pirate.

"Ya was useless the first time bro, got better things to do then mess about with a two bit 'cant hit a ship from point blank' pirate . It has been a disappointment but I'm sure we'll meet again," Ryhan taunted as he full throttled his ship towards the north gate.

"Oh we will indeed, I promise you that my Disco pilot," came the cold voice over the comms as Ryhan left the Orinoco behind and headed for sector Farnhams legend.

'Guess I just made another enemy' he thought as he orientated his ship for the north gate and watched it loom nearer.

"Gate. Farnham's Legend." the computer informed when it locked onto the gate.

Tchak'ta had hired a room adjacent to the one used by the two Teladi he was tracking. It had taken more time than usual to convince the hotel manager to let him have access to the hotel guest list even with the large transfer of credits.

Things were not as straight forward as he thought they would be. There were five hotels with in close proximity of the bar his contact worked in; all of them fit the criteria of being the hotel the two Teladi used.

All five of the hotels had a large number of Teladi staying there and all of these Teladi used Argon names, for ease of trade.

It also seemed that many of the Teladi had used the names Harold and Henry booking themselves in during the time the two he was tracking also booked in. Tchak'ta didn't trust coincidence and this one was too large to swallow. It made finding out which hotel they had used let alone which room very difficult to track down.

It had taken him awhile to narrow down the hotels to the one he was in now called 'The Lavisca.' He had visited the equipment shops, the trading stores, the food halls and also the casino's gently probing and asking questions. Triangulating the times and location of each transaction to take place by a Teladi at these stores with the distance from each hotel.

He had then correlated these with appearances in the bars where new pilots hang out and also the offices where piloting jobs are displayed.

He had taken all the data and processed it through a probability algorithm which had given this hotel an 87% probability of being the one he was after. The algorithm used was

originally designed by Teladi for the trading index system, a very powerful high throughput logic system used to predict the share prices by taking into account as many variables as possible.

He had modified it a little and added some Boron code taken from their security systems to give a very powerful probability program.

There were four pairs of Teladi staying here using the names Harold and Henry. Using the power of credits he had gained access to the security systems inside the hotel and viewed the video footage for the last few tazura's. He then correlated this with when certain transactions took place and the times when Teladi were seen talking to new pilots.

All this had taken time, nearly half a tazura and had led him finally to the room next door. His instincts and experience had warned him against just walking inside so he had hired the room adjacent and was in the process of setting up short range scanners.

The thermal imaging scan had revealed no heat sources while the motion detection showed no movement. He had scanned for electrical signatures or any radiation readings but none were detected.

The security records showed that the rooms had been vacated late this morning as Tchak'ta had arrived on the station. It was now late evening and he had under a stazura to check the room before the cleaning shift came online and set it up for new customers.

Tchak'ta placed his standard issue lock opener against the keypad of the door and activated it. There was an audible hiss as the door slid open and Tchak'ta moved to the side to avoid being framed in the doorway. There was no activity so he entered inside sniffing the air as the door closed behind him.

Something was not right.

He stood with out moving examining the room for any signs of danger. The room was adorned for use by Teladi. There were two large pedestals at the far end for sleeping on as Teladi perched when sleeping thou many Teladi nowadays had become accustomed to using modified beds.

Another door at the far end behind the pedestals led to the toilet facilities and cleansing area, that same as his room next door.

He was picking up a very faint aroma, tantalizingly familiar but he couldn't place it. He pushed it to his subconscious level while he concentrated on the room.

There were squat cupboards on either side of the room and a small glass table to the right. In front of him was something which looked like a storage container, tall and rectangular with a black oblong box at its base. The container had two holes one about chest height and one about head height.

'Hmmm... Something strange about that container, it seems a little out of place. It has a shiny new look like its only just been placed, no scuff marks or signs that it has been moved. The soft carpet it's placed on doesn't yet show indentation so it could not have been sitting here for long,' Tchak'ta thought to himself.

Over to the far left were the consoles for trading and communications, these were what he was after. If he could access the log files he may be able to determine who they were in contact with and what they were trading in.

Tchak'ta edged towards the left away from the storage container and heading for the computer consoles. As he took another step forward there was a slight give in the floor, a loud click like sound followed by the exploding rush of pressurized air.

Tchak'ta threw himself to the right when he heard the click as jazura's of training and his natural survival instinct kicked in.

He felt a searing pain tare through his right shoulder followed by a jarring thud as he hit the floor hard and rolled back hissing with pain.

He propped himself into a sitting position against the wall cradling his right arm which had gone limp. There was what looked like a dark metal bolt embedded in his shoulder which was now bleeding copiously.

He had little time to think as the consoles to the far left exploded in a shower of sparks and flying shrapnel pouring acrid smoke into the room while a pungent gas began to seep out of the holes in the storage container.

He knew he had to get out now but felt immensely weak and he could feel his whole right side beginning to go numb. He gritted his teeth against the pain and edged his way towards the door breathing heavily and fighting the waves of nausea that swept over him.

The door swished open as he crawled near it but could not move further, his strength giving way to fatigue and pain. His mind wanting the sweet release the insidious embrace of unconsciousness promised.

'Just a moment to get my breath back' he thought as he closed his eyes.

A thought battered its way through his pain soaked mind to reach awareness, his subconscious had identified the gas now pouring out of the container and presented it to his conscious mind.

Alarm bells rang as he realized what the gas was and that he would die if he remained here any longer. With that thought a burst of adrenalin coursed through his body dredging up reserves of energy and providing the bit of strength he needed.

He rolled towards the door crying out in pain as his right shoulder hit the floor, the sharp pain providing a moment of clarity to his foggy mind and he rolled out and down the corridor away from the room.

The now familiar smell of swamp gas emanated from the room as Tchak'ta crawled further away. It was a smell associated with home for a Teladi as their homeworld consisted mostly of swampy marshlands.

Before the discovery and efficient use of solar power to provide all energy needs the plentiful supply of swamp gas was used to power their civilization, it is a very highly combustible gas.

There was a sudden concussive blow that knocked the breath from his body and an ear shattering roar as the sparks from the consoles ignited the heavy swamp gas. There was a moment of intense heat; his breath was sucked from his lungs as the surrounding air was consumed creating a vacuum.

This was instantly filled with an explosion which tore apart not only the room it was in but also the rooms adjacent and opposite it. The whole hotel shook from the level of violence as debris was thrown in every direction and masonry fell all around.

Tchak'ta was lifted and flung further down the corridor with the initial explosion slumping into the far wall as the lights went down and he slowly sunk into the welcoming void of unconsciousness.

Karrak was once more staring out of his room's large window onto the vastness of space his mind lost in thought. He had been given to contemplation more and more these days wondering about philosophical questions regarding existence and his own place in the universe.

Karrak was a man in his early 50's and wearing the years well. He had broad shoulders and a lean muscular physique, a testimony to his love of physical fitness. The man was over 6ft in height, dark of hair thou now showing the grey of his age and had the most piercing grey-green eyes. There was an air of confidence about him borne not from arrogance but the sure belief in his own abilities tempered through experience.

"There is an incoming message for you sir, it has been encrypted using a technique not known to us," his communications man informed him.

"Put it through to my office viewer and secure the channel Mr. Rajkin,"

"Yes sir. Patching through now," replied Rajkin

He turned from the window to face the main viewer which appeared to have just materialized out of the wall. It had been hidden behind a holographic wall panel which deactivated when the viewer came online.

The viewer lit up and displayed the 'unable to decrypt message. Encryption method unknown' screen. Karrak took out a small metallic disk from his pocket and inserted it

into his desk control console; he punched in his authentication code and uploaded the decryption key.

The face of two Teladi appeared on the viewer followed by a message informing him of successful decryption.

“Good profits Karrak of the Vampires, we wish you favorable trades and your enemies to be impoverished,” the Teladi greeted him.

“May your profits run high and your losses low,” Karrak finished the formal greeting.

“Does everything go according to plan Karrak of the Vampires?” asked the Teladi

“The Adaptive Remote Intrusion (ARI) program worked as you said it would, allowing us to retrieve the data from the Teladi research station for the growth of the super spaceweed.

We have received the specialist biological equipment needed to grow them from Magalixt and our scientists are now experimenting and should have the first samples in one wozuras time,” informed Karrak.

“The Werewolves should have the Argon data on bacterial transformations and specific toxicity taken from the Argon research vessel ‘The Balmora’ as they are now in possession of the ARI program and the team of hackers.

I assume you were able to secure the required items and managed to deliver them to the Werewolves?” asked Karrak.

“We have acquired the needed items and have arranged deliveries to be made. We will speak with Sazix’st of the Werewolves to confirm all is as it should be.

We must make preparations for unexpected visitors before we leave, be aware our informants tell us the PPA is investigating and we know they are tracking us, so they will be tracking you also,” the Teladi replied.

“The PPA?” Karrak asked sharply, “they can be troublesome and very annoyingly hard to shake off.”

“Do not concern yourself; we have made suitable arrangements to discourage further pursuit. We must depart now ourselves, we will contact you soon. Good profits to you.”

“Good profits,” replied Karrak as the viewer powered down and faded into the wall.

Karrak removed his disk and pocketed it thinking about the scheme he was involved in. It was highly dangerous and very risky but it was certain to be extremely profitable. The only unknown factor which worried him was the two Teladi he had just spoken with.

He did not trust them, which in itself was nothing unusual especially with Teladi. These two thou were different, he could sense that they were dangerous. They had knowledge about things he was not even aware of and he made it his business to be aware of all major happenings among all the races.

They had their own unknown agenda and needed his resources to help fulfil it; this did not worry him as that was the normal course of things among pirate alliances.

What worried him was the fact that this agenda did not seem to be centred on making vast sums of profit, practically unheard of for Teladi agenda's. They had somehow managed to gain access to and steal unique prototype software from a Boron advanced research facility which even the Argons did not fully know about.

The 'Adaptive Remote Intrusion' program or ARI program as they called it could be used to hack even the most advanced security measures. Any other pirate would be hacking the universal banks and stealing unheard of amounts of credits but Karrak did not rise to his position by being stupid.

Such a move would destabilize the universal economy and his credits would be useless on top of which all the races would join to obliterate him.

No, if he had his way he would be using it to access top secret information and cutting edge technology then selling it to the highest bidder.

So far they had used it on two major occasions; the Teladi spaceweed research facility which he could at least appreciate. The sly Teladi had been devising a way of enhancing the potency and addictiveness of the spaceweed plant thus with a little manipulation they would have seized the market. Well they had the data now and had acquired the equipment to produce the 'super' spaceweed and should have the first test batch in one mazura time.

The other more recent theft they had carried out was on a biological research vessel belonging to the Argons. The data itself was regarding the transformation of common bacteria and manipulating toxicity levels something to do with curing disease or some such matter. He could not see why they had stolen such useless data, they could not use it nor could they sell it and they had now involved Argon secret service who would be investigating this theft.

There was no profit in it which was something to worry about as it was a Teladi idea.

Karrak ran through all the information he had and tried to work out what the agenda of the two Teladi could be. He sighed "I'm getting too old for this," he muttered as he opened the comms and spoke to Mr Rajkin.

"Get a message to Calanor; tell him to bring his squad back here. I have a little assignment for him."

“Yes sir.”

Karrak closed the comms and returned to his window trying to glean some answers from the stars but as usual they remained silent and distant.

“The Boron secret service, the Argon secret service and now the Profit Protection Agency, things are beginning to get too crowded,” he said to himself.

Lieutenant Toki Gilharno sat scanning through data pads and reviewing security logs and internal scans from the research vessel ‘The Balmora.’

Bacteriological and toxicological data had been stolen from the ships data banks along with other method and protocol procedures.

The research itself was as far as he could see of minor consequence, the transformation of bacteria and manipulation of their toxicity levels didn’t threaten national security.

What did pose a serious threat to security was the fact that someone had managed to steal the research from an Argon military research vessel. Granted the vessel was not top of the range and its security measures were not cutting edge but it still should not have been possible for someone to hack into it especially via remote access.

General Ban Dana the head of intelligence had assigned Toki to deal with this and find out how it was managed.

Ban Dana was preoccupied with other matters, something connected with TerraCorps. He had asked him to track down and locate a prisoner designated as 14776A; the file reported him to be a small time criminal with background links to pirate factions. He had been apprehended over 5 mazuras ago while trying to steal a TS class ship with his partner.

Toki had tracked him to be now onboard a prison transport ship flown by a Captain Minaro headed for the prison planet Artur.

A ringing chime announced the presence of someone at his door.

“Come in,” called out Toki

“Excuse me sir but reports are coming in from the trading station that there has been a large explosion,” informed the agent.

“An explosion?” asked Toki sharply “do we have any details and has the general been informed?”

“The details are coming in now sir; I’ve put it through to your data-pad. The general has been made aware and would like you to provide a full report when more details are available,” reported the agent. “Also the admiral is asking to see you sir,”

Toki grimaced ‘he probably wants to know what’s going on too,’ he said to himself.

“Thank you agent that will be all,” he said out loud.

Toki pulled up the details of the explosion on his data-pad and read silently to himself.

The explosion had occurred under 10 mizuras ago at the hotel ‘The Lavisca’ there were no casualties reported yet but many injured. The explosion had wrecked half the 5th floor as well as the floor above and below causing extensive damage. First suspects as always was the terrorist group known as ‘Sektor 21’ thou it was too early to point fingers.

On a hunch he opened channel to the the comms desk, “can you put me through to Nazeera?” he asked.

Nazeera was the agent assigned to track Tchak’ta the PPA agent.

“She’s not responding sir,” replied the comms officer.

“Where was her last known location?” he asked worriedly

“Last transmission was from the hotel ‘Lavisca’ on the Trading station in this sector.”

“Thank you, monitor the station and find out if she was caught in the explosion and where they are taking the injured. If she calls put her through directly,” he ordered cutting the channel.

‘If she was at the hotel then that means Tchak’ta was also at the hotel and he would bet his last credit that he was on the 5th floor,’ Toki thought to himself.

A beeping sound cut through his thoughts.

He opened a channel and said “Yes?”

“Sir the admiral would like to see you. He’s being very insistent.”

Toki sighed, “Very well tell the admiral I will be with him in 2 mizuras.”

Toki gathered up his data pad and had another quick scan of the details. He then left to make his report to the admiral.

Lan told the autopilot on the captured Bayamon to dock at the Federal Argon Warf while he pulled his Discoverer towards the Trading station and asked permission to dock, allowing the autopilot to take care of it.

He proceeded to the back to check on Pisula who was still sleeping. Looking at her more closely he decided to call in a med team as she looked a little too lethargic to be able to make it to hospital by herself.

As the ship docked in the visitors docking bay he noticed a lot of activity taking place towards the rest area where all the hotels were located. There were a lot of med teams and station security visible, and also many spectators.

Lan tried to raise the hospital medical centre on the comms but was unable to get through for some reason. 'Strange' he thought as he tried again but failed to get through. He decided to see if he could grab a passing medic from outside and get them to look at his Boron passenger.

Lan stepped outside on to the docking bay and homed in on a plump looking woman wearing the insignia of the medical team.

"Excuse me, I have an injured passenger who needs to be transferred to the hospital, I can't seem to get through to the medical centre." He explained.

The woman slowed down and looked at him, "yes, it has been very hectic since the explosion at the hotel and the comms are all clogged up. What's wrong with your passenger?" She asked.

"She's been in a fight with pirates and looks a little worst for wear; she's Boron so I'm not sure what's wrong with her," replied Lan.

"Ok, we'll take her in with the injured from the hotel," the medic replied, calling one of her colleagues over who was pulling an antigrav stretcher.

They went into the Discoverer and returned a few mizuras later with the Boron being carried on the antigrav sled. The medics were taking readings with their sensor pads and one of them administered something through the Borons space suit.

"Your friend should be fine, some internal bruising and a fractured tentacle is all we can detect. You will have to leave your details and ship registration so we know who to contact," the medic informed him.

"I don't really know her, I picked her up when her ship was destroyed," Lan said.

"I still need your details sir," said the medic holding out the data pad.

Lan gave his details and watched as the medics joined the others taking the injured away. As he watched his eyes were drawn to one such injured being attended to by three medics. From what he could see the injured was a Teladi male, unconscious bleeding from several cuts across his face and neck with some sort of object embedded in his right shoulder.

Lan felt a strange sensation rising from his stomach which had nothing to do with the Cahoon burger he had eaten earlier. He had this vague feeling that the injured person was important in some way.

Shrugging off the strange sensation as nothing more than anxiety he decided to get some rest and then find out if those double crossing Teladi were still here and ring their necks.

Some stazuras later Lan found himself sitting in the 'Queens Tentacles' drinking an ale and cursing the Teladi in general. He'd spend a few fruitless stazuras trying to find out the whereabouts of the two Teladi who had tried to get him killed. There were many Teladi on this station and apparently lots of them called Harold and Henry.

The explosion at the nearby hotel had made things even more impossible to follow so he had given up on the whole idea.

Lan finished his ale and decided to actually try and make some credits, things had not gone as expected so far and he fervently hoped life would be much quieter.

He had made around 110k credits from selling the Bayamon and all its equipment, even managing to sell the units of spaceweed along with the spaceship. This gave him a decent amount of credits to start his trading career with.

Lan decided to carry out some 'taxi' work to extend his funds even more and since he had a maxed out Discoverer it should be easy to find passengers.

He checked the bulletin board to see if people had posted any requests and found one to his liking. Not a great deal of credits but the person only wanted to go to another station within this sector so it would be quick and easy credits.

Lan contacted the person and gave his details and landing bay number. The Argon male identified himself as Larius Guill and wanted to travel to solar power plant alpha. He was willing to pay 3000 credits for passage.

Lan accepted the offer and in half a stazura had launched from the Argon trade station with Larius sitting in the co-pilot seat.

Larius didn't really say much except for a few polite greetings and Lan didn't bother to make further conversation.

After dropping off Larius at the solar power plant and collecting his pay Lan bought 40 units of energy cells at 11 credits each, a good price. He then decided to go to the cattle ranch as they always need energy.

After launching from the power plant Lan checked his HUD radar and monitored the ships heading for the cattle ranch. He tried calling up the trade section of the ranch but realised he didn't have the relevant software.

"Damn, first thing I'm buying is a 'trade extension' program" Lan said to himself as he realised he could not access the cattle ranch resources section.

He noticed a Mercury class transport ship half way to the ranch. He had a feeling that the ship was packed to its bulkheads with energy cells and if he did not arrive before it then the demand for the energy cells will plummet.

The Mercury was much further ahead but moving at a speed of 50m/s, Lan put his Disco to full speed and shot towards the cattle ranch.

He easily caught up with the Mercury which was now 3km from the cattle ranch and cut across its front forcing the pilot to swerve and slow down. Lan cut his speed to around 70m/s and heard the comm chatter with a few obscenities from the Mercury pilot and smiled. He'd learnt that from Ryhan.

He docked the Disco into the cattle ranch and pulled up the trading index, the station was buying the energy cells at 20 credits. Lan smiled and sold his cargo of energy cells making a profit of 360 credits, practically nothing but it would buy a few ales.

As he watched the trade prices he saw the buying price of energy cells drop from 20 credits to 9 credits. "Guess the Mercury pilot was carrying energy cells after all," Lan said as he grinned at himself.

He accessed the bulletin board to see if there were any taxi jobs going or similar type of work.

Unfortunately there was nothing of interest advertised so Lan decided to get that Trading extension. He launched from the cattle ranch and locked in the Argon equipment docks and engaged the autopilot.

'This was more like it' he thought, 'the most he had to worry about was the odd spacefly deciding to kamikaze his shields.'

Lan walked off his Discoverer onto the docking bay of the Equipment dock and was amazed at the amount of technicians running around. The place seemed to be crawling with robots and engineers, which he supposed made sense.

There were plenty of other ships docked here and even another Discoverer which looked as 'well used' as his own. Lan headed over to the software upgrade section and waited for a technician to come over.

"Hello sir, may I be of service?" inquired a technician; he was average height, slightly stocky and had a friendly smile.

"Hi, I was after a trading system extension," replied Lan, "That's my ship over there on bay 17."

"No problem sir, we'll have one of our people fit the necessary software to your ship, it will take about 10 mizuras as we are quite busy," answered the technician.

"Sure, I'll be on the docking bay when your done," Lan headed back towards his ship. On an impulse he changed direction and headed over to the other Discoverer and was

checking out its weapons, he saw that it was fitted with alpha impulse ray emitters when some one behind him spoke.

“Can I help you? That’s my ship you’re scoping.” There was a tinge of suspicion in the voice.

Lan turned to face the voice and replied, “sorry I was checking your weapons layout as I have a Discoverer myself and am looking to upgrade it.”

The person in front of him was a tall Argon male, well built with an athletic look to him. He had short brown hair and chiselled features, dressed in pilots clothing. He had a slight frown on his face as he spoke.

“You a bounty hunter?” he asked

“No, nothing like that, I’m just taking my first steps on the trading ladder and already I’ve had a bad experience with pirates. Thought I should actually put some weapons on my ship, it’s at full speed but sometimes you just cant out run a fight,” explained Lan.

The pilot relaxed and said, “I understand exactly, I’m just starting out on a trading career too. My names Julian by the way,” he said holding out his hand.

“Lan, nice to meet you Julian,” said Lan shaking his hand. Lan had that strange sensation again, like at the trading centre. He mentally shook himself and said, “So you have anything lined up? I’ve been starting with ferrying people to different stations.”

“Actually I’ve been given a transporting job with Terracorps delivering computer components or such. Just came into upgrade cargo bay and get some engine tunings,” answered Julian.

“Maybe you should try Terracorps, see if they have other delivery requirements. Any way I better get going, don’t want to be late on my first job. Nice meeting you Lan, maybe bump into again.”

“You too Julian, thanks for the advice I might just do that,” Lan said as Julian climbed back into his Discoverer.

Lan headed back to his own ship and found the technician waiting.

“Its all been done sir, just need your payment and you’re set to go,” said the technician holding out the data pad.

Lan transferred the credits and boarded his ship. He pulled up the bulletin board and checked to see if anything worth while was on offer.

“Great!” Lan said out loud as he found someone who wanted to go to the Cahoona bakery in this sector and was willing to pay 2300 credits.

After the passenger had boarded, a Boron male he thought he could never be sure with the Borons, Lan asked for docking clearance and launched. He targeted the bakery and headed off towards it.

The Boron introduced himself as Sisulam Po, a poet by profession who was to meet his partner at the Bakery.

“Boron find endless beauty in space, a timelessness which touches Boron soul,” Sisulam said, “I’ve heard pilots say that if you politely listen to the depths of space, the song of the universe can be heard.”

“Yes well I would imagine if you hang about long enough in deep space you would hear all manner of music not to mention voices,” Lan replied.

“Boron politely inquires if you do not find space to be a stimulating and enriching place?” asked Sisulam politely.

“Certainly been stimulated the last few days... I mean tazuras, PAC fire does that to a person and as for enriching, I’m working on that bit as we speak.” Lan answered.

The Boron nodded, “Yes, conversation is good place to start enrichment, Boron think you are wise.” Sisulam seemed to completely miss Lans light hearted banter and took his words literally.

Lan smiled at Sisulam as he couldn’t really think of anything to say to that and remained silent. The Cahoona bakery filled his view screen and he guided his Discoverer in line for docking, asked permission and followed the green lights into the station.

After collecting his payment and bidding his passenger good bye Lan decided to get something to eat and catch up on some sleep. His body ached with weariness and his mind was a little cloudy.

As he ate his Cahoona burger and Bofu slices Lan wondered how Ryhan was doing and what kind of fun he was having.

Ryhan lounged against his Discoverer, his arms folded and one leg bent back pushing against the hull of his ship as he waited for his passenger to turn up. He was docked at a BioGass factory in ‘Farnhams Legend’ a sector controlled by pirate factions and known for its hi-tech criminals.

Hackers, Crackers, Cyberpunks, Virtual warriors and all the other technology related criminals could be found here. This was also the system for information as a lot of data passed through the virtual hands of the residents.

Ryhan had spent some time here when he needed a few things ‘taken off his record’ back at Home of Light. They were all mistakes anyhow and he didn’t want to bother the

authorities with such minor matters when they were obviously busy with much more weighty problems.

Ryhan checked his time piece and found he was 20 mizuras early, “Might as well get something to remove the space dust from my throat,” he said as he headed toward one of the nearby bars.

He smiled to himself as he stepped into the ‘Black Code’ bar. Some mazuras back he had picked up 20 units of spaceweed and some Majaglit jewellery in a game of Pokir of a very unhappy Split.

That had been a tidy some which unfortunately had to be paid to a very ‘insistent’ and dangerous Teladi who went by the name of ‘Breaker’ who Ryhan had the misfortune of being in debt to.

Ryhan took a table at the back which was shrouded in darkness near the booths where private conversations took place. He ordered some Space Fuel which was basically whisky but much stronger, only legal in Teladi and Pirate space.

He thought about lighting up some Spaceweed but didn’t think the Navy would appreciate him picking up their passenger while stoned.

Taking a sip of his drink, Ryhan settled in to wait allowing the noise and conversations to wash over him.

After a while his ears registered a conversation taking place in that hushed whisper which immediately identified it as something interesting. He couldn’t yet make out what was being said so filtered out the background noise and chatter while concentrating on that single conversation.

This skill was learned by all good pilots allowing them sort out the important incoming weapon fire from the back ground noise of engines, chatter, interference etc.

The conversation seemed to be taking place in a booth behind him between a Teladi and someone else. One of them was whispering some what loudly which Ryhan could make out but the other was harder to discern.

“You have informationsss? I wantss sship,” said the Teladi voice.

There was a short reply and some exchange which Ryhan couldn’t make out then the Teladi voice was raised.

“I am Yagoslas Oliloas Lussundrois VI and I will not be cheated... Am too sssmart for that. You not take advantage of my need.”

Ryhan smiled to himself, ‘obviously not the smartest egg in the clutch, as he let the other person know he had need of what ever he was looking for.’

Ryhan began to lose interest and listened half concentrating as they were not talking about anything worthwhile.

He caught the words 'Ship' and 'Broken gate' and something about Goners. Ryhan stopped listening and finished his drink.

He stood up and checked his time piece, "three mizuras until my passenger is to meet me, might as well head back to my ship," he said to himself and made his way out of the bar.

What he saw standing by his ship took his breath away, he just stopped and stared his mouth hanging open as his blood rushed from his heart to a different organ. "Please, if there is any higher power or being out there let her be my passenger," he begged breathing slowly.

The woman turned on the spot looking left and right as if searching for someone. She was average height probably around 5'7, dark luxurious black hair reached halfway down her back and flicked about as she moved her head. Her tight fitting travel clothes revealed a figure both curvaceous and lithe, projecting a sense of gracefulness about her movement.

As she turned her face towards his direction he realised he had never seen anyone so beautiful in his life. An oval shaped face with high cheekbones framed by her black hair looked out at him through eyes the colour of sapphires.

It was a few moments before Ryhan realised that she was looking at him, she was wearing an impatient frown and had her hands on her hips.

'What would be perfect now is if someone started to hassle her, then he could step in and make a good impression,' Ryhan thought as he looked around hopefully but with no luck. "Never any scum around when you need them, but get caught with a card counter and they fall out the wood works," Ryhan muttered under his breath.

He looked back at the woman and found her still staring at him impatiently but now had one eye brow raised and her arms crossed.

Ryhan walked over towards her thinking of what to say and how to start the conversation. He was about to make a witty remark about finding the most beautiful things in the unlikeliest places when she spoke before he could open his mouth.

"Well come on Pilot, I have to be in Argon Prime in a couple of stazuras," with that she turned around and headed for his Discoverer.

Ryhan stood there a moment still about to speak when he suddenly broke into a grin, "Yes!" he said to himself as he realised she had to be his passenger. He followed her towards his ship already planning his strategy for conquest; it should be easier as they would be in close quarters with only each other for conversation. 'A few

funny comments to make her feel at ease, some half compliments nothing direct so as not to make her feel uncomfortable, some innocuous questions leading on to more personal ones to let her feel comfortable talking then share something about myself possibly that time me and Lan escaped from those Split smugglers,' Ryhan thought to himself.

He began grinning with anticipation as he walked into his ship behind his passenger. "Guess being in the Navy isn't all bad" he said to himself as he took the pilots seat.

A few stazuras later the Discoverer exited the northern jump gate into Argon Prime and made its steady way towards the Trading station with a very frustrated and some what bemused Ryhan at its controls.

'Nothing had worked!' Ryhan thought annoyed, the whole trip and all he had learned was that her name was Merissa Larnar and she was visiting friends on Argon Prime. Every move he made had failed, actually that wasn't true every move he was about to make was countered before he had opened his mouth.

To make matters worse she had asked random questions which led him to reveal far too much about himself then he would normally have.

"How long till we dock Ryhan?" Merrisa asked in a soft musical voice, turning around in the co-pilots seat.

"Just a few more mizuras," he replied a little sulkily

Merrisa laughed out loud, a tinkling sound like bells which Ryhan at first had found enchanting but now found himself looking at her suspiciously, "What's so funny?" he asked.

"Nothing Ryhan, I just remembered something. Watch out for that trade ship," she replied her eyes twinkling.

Ryhan jerked his eyes back to the front viewer and sighed when he saw that the Mercury ship was over 3km away. She had a habit of doing that, it annoyed him greatly.

A thought came to him that made him feel better, "Lan should be here building his trading career. I haven't seen him it nearly two days, we got a lot of drinking to catch up on.' Ryhan smiled and looked forward to docking at the trading station.

Pi sat in her hospital bed with her modified data pad hooked into the commercial network watching the latest episode of the Argon soap 'Races apart.' It was at an exciting moment as Mariana was about to tell Kison her lover that she was in fact half Split and had been having an affair with his step brother Saska'ta. Kison already knew about the affair and had been seeing Mariana's best friend Lucy who happened to be the long lost half sister to Saska'ta jilted lover who had died under mysterious circumstances.

Pi sat riveted watching the drama unfold as a web of interspecies bed hopping, backstabbing, murder and deceit was revealed setting the stage for the ultimate confrontation between Mariana, Kison and a persistent Teladi station to station salesman.

Just as the main characters were gathered together in one room her data pad beeped and went blank.

"No, not now," gasped Pi as she tried to reconnect to the internal network, failing this she tried a direct feed through the outside network but to no avail.

She looked around desperately for any medical staff or technicians but the room was empty except for one other patient located opposite and two beds up from her. She couldn't see him clearly as it was the late shift and all the lights were off, only the slight glow from the consoles could be seen.

She tried to raise the light levels but there was no effect, "Strange," she muttered as she tried again but still nothing. Pi tried calling a member of the medical staff but the comms were not responding either.

Pi began to get desperate as she would have to wait another tazura before finding out what Mariana had to say. She pulled up the hospital internal network on her pad and over rode the security lockouts which blocked unauthorised access. She thought about using ARINOX to create a direct tunnel through the hospital internal network to the soap broadcasting station but decided against the idea as the medical staff may mind not being able to access their network.

Pisula accessed the hospital schematic layout and narrowed down to her room, "how did that happen? She asked herself as she noticed that the room had been isolated. Power, communications and security had either been disabled or rerouted around her room.

She wasn't sure if she should route power back as it had been moved for a reason and she didn't want to be rude.

Pi pulled up the security subsystems and using a simple logic probe and analyser of her own design bypassed the lockouts to gain access to the security commands. She then connected to the internal security cameras and passed the feed to her data pad hoping to see a member of the medical team.

The other patient was stirring about as if in discomfort, Pi could make out his shadow sitting up in bed with his right hand and shoulder in a restraining field.

A flicker from her data pad drew Pi's attention back; she could just make out three shapes making their way along the corridor leading to her room's wing. The whole corridor was in darkness as the power had been routed away. Pi randomly applied different filters as she wasn't sure what each one did. Suddenly the picture became relatively clear and took on a light green hue; Pi could now make out the people easily.

"Oh, their not medical staff," She said her face falling.

They were not wearing staff uniforms; in fact they were wearing what looked like dark body suites and had some sort of goggle type visor on their heads. Pi watched curiously the soap plot forgotten as the three Argons made their way furtively up the corridor unhampered by the lack of any lights.

'I wonder how they see in the dark, maybe it's those strange looking goggles their wearing' Pi thought to herself.

She heard the other patient groan and looked up to see him fumbling with the light panel trying to switch the light on.

"They're not working. There's no power coming into this room or the outside corridor," said Pi helpfully

There came an annoyed hiss from the patient and she could just make out his left hand trying to activate the emergency call sensor.

"The communications are down too, there are also no internal or external network access so no TV is available," Pi said in a some what dejected tone.

"Race's apart has already finished and just when Mariana was going to confront Kison."

The shape of the other patient seemed to freeze for a few seuras. Pi understood as she felt the same way but her nature compelled her to provide some sort of reassurance.

"It will be repeated tomorrow and I'm positive that not many people will have seen it today."

"No power, no communicationss, no ssecurity can only mean trouble." The sibilant reply identified the other patient as being Teladi.

Pi wasn't sure what the Teladi was saying but it would be impolite not to reply, "May be we can ask the three people coming this way. They should be here in a mizura."

Tchak'ta took in what the Boron said and new he was in trouble, the loss of power and communications along with any security measures could only mean an attack was imminent. It was classic mercenary tactic to isolate the prey before coming in for the kill.

Tchak'ta reached down to his tail and slid open the hollow scale removing the modified blaster and the small blade. The Boron had said that three people were nearly here and he had no time to ask how she knew.

"How rude of me, Boron apologise. My name is Pisula Ma, it's nice to meet you," the Borons voice filled the quite room.

"Be quite!" hissed Tchak'ta as he heard a faint nose coming from the door. He heard the door open slowly; Tchack'ta rolled off the bed landing with a soft thump and moved behind his cabinet console. He held the blade in his free left hand and the blaster in his restrained right hand.

Pi felt a little affronted, 'there was no need to be rude,' she thought. The door at the far end opened and Pi saw shadows moving inside. She was about to call out to them when she heard a soft thud, looking over at the Teladi bed she couldn't make out his shadow. 'Where did he go?' she thought to herself peering hard at the bed. 'He's going to hurt himself in the dark. I know!' she thought as she had an idea and tapped a few things into her data pad.

Tchak'ta watched as three shadows crept into the room, they made their way towards his and the Borons bed. He could probably take out one before the others killed him as they were no doubt using night sight equipment. He could just make out the shadows raising their blasters as they saw the faint glow of the Borons data pad, 'maybe if they stopped to check the Borons corpse he could make a run for the door.'

In that instant the room flooded with pure bright fluorescent light, bright enough to hurt Tchak'tas eyes. He heard three screams followed by profuse cursing as the three Argons tore off their night sight goggles and clutched their eyes.

One of them began firing his blaster randomly in the general direction of the Boron missing her by inches.

Tchak'ta watched as the Boron rolled backwards from the bed while at the same time reaching out and hurling something from her cabinet at the mercenaries. It hit the Argon firing the blaster and smashed open spilling a viscous liquid all round them while causing him to knock into his comrades, who were unable to keep their balance on the slick floor.

Tchak'ta rose and hurled his blade at the nearest mercenary taking him through the throat and ducked back as his comrades swivelled to fire in his direction.

Pi had managed to route power into the room and activate the lights so the Teladi could see what he was doing but had used a bit to much power as the room became brilliantly lit in an instant.

She heard screams and looked up to see the three Argons clutching their faces and tearing off their strange goggles. One of them pointed something in her direction; Pi wasn't sure what it was then gave a start as blaster fire rained around her.

“Eeep!” screamed Pi falling backwards off her bed in shock while flailing her tentacles to try and stop her fall. She grabbed the liquid used to refill her space suit but lost her grip on it as she hit the floor and it flew from her tentacle. There was a loud crash as the glass container smashed followed by a loud gurgling sound like someone was trying to talk while drinking.

Pi lay on the floor, her bed and cabinet between her and the other men. She peeked out past her bed to see what was happening and rubbed her sore third tentacle. Two of the men were on their knees firing at the Teladi’s cabinet while a third seemed to be lying on the floor holding his throat from which something seemed to be protruding. There was a lot of blood on the floor mixing in with the viscous liquid.

Pi didn’t know what was going on but was sure that if everyone just talked calmly and politely then everything could be resolved. She decided to stand up and ask what was going on.

“Boron inquires what is going on?” said Pi as she tried to rise from behind the bed. She gripped the gravi-bed control panel to help her rise up but managed to turnoff the magnetic field which kept the bed in place.

As Pi pushed forward to steady herself the Bed shot ahead and she fell forward with another startled scream, narrowly avoiding the blaster fire which tore past her descending head.

Tchak’ta was pinned behind the cabinet by continuous blaster fire which was beginning to melt his cover. He couldn’t move without getting a hole burnt through his head but soon he would have no cover left. What he needed was something to distract the mercenaries but he couldn’t think of anything.

Just then he saw the Boron rise up saying something, causing one of the mercenaries to twist and fire but the liquid caused him to slip and lose his aim. She then pushed her gravi-bed towards the mercenaries while falling forward thus avoiding the incoming fire. The Argons tried to scramble out of the way of the incoming bed but the viscous liquid caused them to slide all over the place.

Impressed by the Boron’s tactical ability Tchak’ta rose swiftly while the mercenaries were distracted and levelled a viscous kick at the head of the closest Argon who was on his hand and knees trying not to slide flat. There came a sickening crunch as the man crumbled under the blow the side of his head caving in.

The third mercenary avoided the bed and twisted to bring his blaster inline with Tchak’ta but was not quick enough as Tchak’ta fired his weapon.

An agonising scream tore from the mercenary’s throat as all his pain nerves were activated. The feeling of molten lava coursing through his veins while his brain was set alight caused him to writhe in pure agony as Tchak’ta watched in clinical detachment at the effect of his weapon.

Tchak'ta took his finger of the trigger and the mercenary flopped about in the mixture of blood and clear liquid on the floor as his nerves all spasmed. His breath came out in ragged gasps as the agony began to fade.

"Who sent you?" asked Tchak'ta in a slow measured voice

Before the man could answer Tchak'ta fired his weapon again tearing another agonised scream from the mercenary.

Tchak'ta released the trigger and said, "That's so we understand each other, I have no time for heroics or stubbornness."

"Hired... through normal... channels," the man croaked out.

"How did you locate me?" asked Tchak'ta

The man was breathing less raggedly now and trying to sit up when Tchak'ta pulled the trigger of his weapon again.

After the man had stopped screaming and his writhing had lessened Tchak'ta said, "I would not want you to forget the reality of your situation. You can answer my questions while lying on the floor."

"We were... just told... to eliminate... whoever... was in this room... we expected just one... person."

"Are there anymore of you?" asked Tchak'ta

The mercenary remained silent up until the point Tchak'ta pulled the trigger which elicited a raw croaking scream from his torn vocals. Tchak'ta held the trigger for a long moment watching as the mercenary's body thrashed in agony and started to become rigid and twisted as his nerves began to seize up.

"Three more," he managed to croak out between coughing up blood and taking gasping breaths, his legs and arms twitching involuntarily.

"Erm, excuse me," said a quavering voice from behind Tchak'ta, "Boron ask if you please stop doing that."

Tchak'ta looked over his shoulder at the Boron who was now standing a little behind him and wearing a sick look on her face. She was holding a data pad in one tentacle, covering her ears with the other two while the fourth pointed at him.

"You're right. We do not have time for this. They will come to investigate soon and I do not want to rely on luck again," with that Tchak'ta went over to the dead mercenary and removed his blade from his throat stopping to wipe it on the body's clothes.

He walked back to the still twitching form of the third mercenary and squatted down grabbing his head back and exposing his throat.

Pi had watched the horrific exchange between the Teladi and the mercenary, the screams of the latter nearly making her throw up as the agony of the man hit here senses. The Teladi seemed nonplussed about the pain of his victim.

When she saw him retrieve his blade and then pulled the head back of the mercenary she realised what he was about to do and blurted, "Stop! Please no more violence,"

The Teladi looked up at her; his eyes unreadable and paused while holding the mercenary's head in one hand and his blade in the other.

"As you wish," he said after a while and placing the blade back into his tale delivered a solid blow to the temple of the mercenary causing him to crumple.

"Let us go," he said rising and walking past Pi heading towards the door.

Pi didn't know what to do as she just stood there staring at the bloody scene in front of her. She looked around the empty hospital room and shivered, she didn't want to stay here by herself but then the Teladi didn't seem like a very nice person either.

Taking a final breath as indecision gave way to her natural curiosity and her mind locked away that which she wasn't equipped to deal with, she decided to find out more about this violent Teladi and see if she could find out what happened in Races apart.

Since the corridor outside their room was still in darkness, stepping outside would highlight them against the door making easy targets. Tchak'ta turned the lights off in the room and waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom.

He checked his modified neural disruptor and found that the chemical reaction he had activated which powered the disruptor was nearly spent. It was not of much use in a blaster fight as the electrical impulses it sent out were very short range. A torture weapon rather than a blaster.

He glanced over at the Boron, once more weighing and measuring what he saw. She looked like an ordinary Boron, a technician like millions of others. She seemed to be at this moment startled that he had turned the lights off.

She was either an extremely lucky and naive idiot or an extremely clever and talented agent. He wasn't yet sure which.

As Tchak'ta slowly opened the door through which the mercenaries had entered making sure he wasn't framed with in the doorway, he hissed over his shoulder, "Follow me and keep silent. Do as I say when I say and it's possible we may survive this and actually find out what in the name of profit is going on."

The corridor outside was pitch black with some faint glow from the medical consoles dotted along the walls. The mercenaries would have a limited time with in which to carry out their assignment as what ever distraction they had engineered to empty the staff from this wing wouldn't last long.

Throwing a final glance at the Boron trailing behind him Tchak'ta crept out into the corridor keeping to the wall his ears scanning for any sound. He moved lightly, his feet barely making a sound as he moved ahead into the darkness.

Pi watched the Teladi open the door to the corridor and creep outside. He had told her to stay near and do as he said which Pi was happy to do as she didn't have a clue what was going on or what to do about it.

She moved out after him into the corridor and felt the velvet darkness enclose around her causing a sense of dread to build which nearly set into panic as she realised that she couldn't make out the Teladi.

Hastily she activated her data pad and accessed the security cameras on their floor. They were still active from when she had routed a small amount of power to them earlier. The cameras were still set to what she figured was night sight as she could make out the Teladi moving slowly along the left wall

She began to copy his movements, pressing against the wall and slowly creeping forward. It would have been a lot harder to do this silently if she didn't have her data pad to show what was in front of her and where the Teladi was.

'He must be able to see in the dark,' she thought as she watched him navigate past a monitoring unit and a hoverbed in front of him.

Pi thought maybe she should tell him about her data pad and the security cameras as she could see that the corridor was empty, but he had told her to be silent and just follow. She didn't want to aggravate him so decided to mention it when they next talked.

Tchak'ta had his eyes closed as they were of no use at this moment while his other senses went on full alert. He concentrated on his immediate surrounding as he slowly moved along the wall, using a technique the Split called 'Kar'An Dax' which combined the senses and magnified them allowing a warrior to 'sense' things near to them.

He moved around a console and diagonally past a hoverbed moving slowly to the end of the corridor. Here it turned to the left for a short distance leading to the lifts while in front were double doors leading to the stairs.

Tchak'ta pressed against the doors, concentrating on his breathing and allowing his senses to extend beyond the door. It required a huge amount of effort to maintain the

focus necessary to achieve the melding of all the senses and Tchak'ta could feel himself getting tired.

He was aware that the Boron was a short distance behind him moving slowly against the left wall. A part of his mind registered the surprise that she had been able to navigate past the obstacles with speed and relatively little noise. He would have to find out more about this intriguing Boron, but for now there were more immediate problems.

His senses were picking up a slight whispering sound, soft and regular coming from the other side of the doors. Tchak'ta waited and focused on the sound trying to glean more information.

An Argon male from the rate and depth of breathing, situated a few meters from the door possibly on the stairs leading up.

Tchak'ta released his concentration and allowed his focus to dissipate thinking on how to deal with the mercenary waiting behind the door. He was no doubt wearing night sight equipment and armed with at least a hand blaster.

Pi came up behind Tchak'ta as quietly as she could; he seemed to be pressed flat against the door unmoving. Pi wondered if he had fallen asleep and was deciding whether to cough indiscreetly when he moved. She could just make out a slight shifting of the darkness as he came to face her.

"One of the mercenaries is waiting behind this door. I need away to distract him while I get through," he whispered out of the darkness.

"What are you going to do?" whispered Pi hesitantly.

"Stay to the left and away from the door. I'm going to put my disruptor on instant discharge. It has only half chemical charge left but will cause a large discharge of electrical impulses which should enfold the mercenary. It will only last 3-4 sezuras but should incapacitate him long enough for me to deal with him."

Pi moved of slowly towards the left corridor and pushed back near the lifts. She watched on her datapad as Tchak'ta did something with his weapon and placed it touching the door. He then made tiny scraping noises with his feet and a single tap on the door then moved silently back towards her.

Pi switched to the camera on the other side of the door which was just a bright blurr so she switched from night sight to normal and saw the mercenary armed with a large hand rifle move near the door, positioning himself so that anyone who came through would be facing away from him. The stairway was dimly lit by emergency lighting which meant that power was coming back online but not yet on their corridor.

There was a slow fizzing sound then a sharp hiss; this was immediately followed by a high pitch scream which cut through the silence like a laser knife as the mercenary was caught in the discharge field.

Tchak'ta counted out 30 sezuras and heard the scream which told him the mercenary had been caught by the field; he then counted another 3 sezura and moved swiftly for the door.

He pushed through and ducked down as laser fire sliced above him. The mercenary was leaned against the wall groggily with his laser rifle aimed towards the door firing randomly.

Tchak'ta moved in swiftly as the mercenary tried to bring his rifle down but his movements were spasmodic. Tchak'ta delivered a left handed blow to his midsection followed immediately by a right hook to the mercenary's left side.

As the mercenary tried to bring the butt of his rifle down Tchak'ta side stepped to the right while landing a straight right to his head snapping it back. The mercenary staggered back leaning against the wall and tried to bring his hand up to cover his head while trying to point the rifle at Tchak'ta.

The Teladi lashed out with his left foot at the hand holding the rifle in a round house kick which tore the weapon from his grasp and followed the movement through so his tail smashed into the knees of the mercenary causing him to fall.

Tchak'ta turned back with a right kick to the head of the kneeling man knocking him down the stairs where he lay sprawled and unmoving.

The door behind him cracked open and he whirled around the mercenary's laser rifle in his hand. He lowered it when he saw the Boron poke her head through.

"Come, we must hurry. There are two more left and they will be guarding the emergency exit," saying that he hurried down the stairs.

Pi followed after him gingerly passing the sprawled mercenary who was lying in a very painful pose.

Lan sat in the 'Queens Tentacle' enjoying a Teladi drink called rasii, an alcoholic beverage with an aromatic full body taste and a fiery kick at the end. 'Made from the rotting husks of the rasa fruit, grown in the stagnating swamps of Teladi Gain, The taste of Profit,' was how the advert for this particular drink went.

Lan was pleased with himself as after the initial bad start with his trading career it seemed to be going rather well.

He had been carrying out taxiing jobs through out the Argon home sectors as he knew them very well and had even carried out a few simple delivery jobs. Along with the sale of the captured Bayamon and its equipment his funds were now in the mid 200,000 credit range.

His next step he decided was to sell the Discoverer and buy a trade class ship, possibly the Argon mercury although he should look into the other races ships too. Still that was a while away yet as he needed more credits to buy an upgraded trade ship and have enough reserve credit to buy and sell products.

Right now he was waiting for Ryhan as the message he had received said that Ryhan would be docking with the trade station soon. Lan shook his head in disbelief, “working for the Navy,” he still couldn’t believe it. Ryhan had filled him in briefly on what had occurred and that he was delivering a passenger for the Navy.

Lan finished his drink and decided to go meet Ryhan at the docking station. He might be able to see this passenger that Ryhan was to deliver as his curiosity was now piqued.

Ryhan pulled into docking bay 12 of the Trade station and let the computer do the parking. He turned to face Merissa in the co-pilots seat and smiled, “as much as I wish I could spend an eternity basking in your radiance, we have unfortunately, arrived.”

Merissa smiled back at him as she rose from the chair, “Thank you for the pleasant journey Ryhan, it’s been entertaining.”

‘Entertaining? It was down right frustrating, he’d not even got her call access,’ he thought to himself but said out loud, “Well how about..”

“Unfortunately I have some things to take care of before getting that connecting flight to the surface,” she cut in before he could finish asking her to join him for a drink.

“Not even a..” Ryhan began intending to ask her if she was hungry but as she did nearly every time he thought of something Merrisa would head him off before he’d finished thinking the sentence.

“Not hungry really but a little tired so I’m going to get some rest, you’ve been amusing company,” she said laughing her silvery laugh.

Ryhan had given up trying to work out what she meant by her comments so just nodded and walked her out of the Discoverer onto the docking bay.

Suddenly Ryans face split into a grin as he recognised a face strolling along the docking bay.

“Lan, over here bro!” he shouted waving as Lan made his over to bay 12.

“Ry, it’s great to see you mate, we got a lot of catching up to do,” Lan said grinning, “not to mention a lot of drinking.”

They clasped hands and shared a shoulder hug.

Ryhan turned to Merrisa who was standing a little behind him, “Lan this is Merrisa, the passenger I mentioned.”

Lan was slightly startled and not because the woman was gorgeous but because seeing her invoked those strange sensations, this one was the strongest he’d felt. This wasn’t just one sensation like seeing that injured Teladi but several of them each feeling distinctly different.

Lan just stood there for a moment as he struggled with the alien sensations and finally managed to get a half stumbled greeting out.

Ryhan just grinned wider, “I know the feeling, absolutely gorgeous isn’t she,” he whispered towards him.

Merrisa shook Lans offered hand but was frowning at him. She seemed partly startled, and partly curious.

“Hello, it’s a pleasure to meet you Lan. Ryhan has told me a great deal about you,” she said to him. “He tells me you’re starting up a trading career, how’s that been going?”

“It’s getting a lot better now, had a bumpy beginning but thank fully it’s been much quieter recently,” Lan replied.

Merrisa was staring at him and Lan felt a little uncomfortable like she was trying to stare through him. She seemed to be frowning at him without realising it which made Lan hesitant to say anything.

“Me and Ryhan were about to go for something to eat, we know a place that does great things with agnu beef, would you care to join us Merrisa?” Lan asked a little hesitantly as she was frowning again.

“No dice bro, I tried to conv..” began Ryhan.

“That sounds lovely Lan, Ryhan has mentioned the food here and if its not a problem I’d be happy to join you both for something to eat,” Merissa said cutting off Ryhan and smiling again.

‘She really is lovely,’ Lan thought, ‘trust Ry to find gorgeous women.’

Ryhan was surprised at her change of heart but then grinned, “Well then that’s settled, and it would be our pleasure to dine with ya,” he replied with a small bow.

Ryhan led Lan and Merrisa towards the commercial area and to their favourite establishment the 'Queens Tentacles.'

Tchak'ta moved silently along the dimly lit stairway, his eyes constantly searching for any signs of movement. They had travelled down to the ground floor and had not encountered any one else, no staff, no visitors, no patients and no technicians or workers. This was worrying as the other two mercenaries could be lying in wait at any point and with out crowds they could not hope to escape notice.

He glanced over his right shoulder at his Boron companion; she was trailing along behind him trying to imitate his movements. Was she just a civilian caught up in his problems or was she an agent dragging him into hers? He just wasn't sure and that bugged him. He had to concentrate on getting out of here and deal with the Boron mystery later.

Tchak'ta moved onto the ground floor corridor which stretched ahead and both to the left and right of him. The walls were lined with doors spaced evenly along the length of each corridor except for the end of the left one which lead into a large canteen area.

Pi moved through the door and came to stand next to Tchak'ta. She peered hesitantly left right and ahead. The dim lights left deep shadows along the corridors and shrouded the ends in darkness. 'Any thing could be waiting in that blackness,' Pi thought.

"It's very dark and silent, I wonder where everyone is?" Pi said softly peering around and trying not to imagine horrors lurking in every shadow.

"We will need to split up and search the corridors for a way to exit the building. The main and emergency exits will be watched. The corridors all connect to the main lobby so that's where we will meet up. Keep silent and stay alert." Tchak'ta said quietly.

"Split up? You mean like go separately, by myself along those dark corridors?" Pi asked fearfully glancing down the shadowy corridors.

"Boron doesn't like that idea, shouldn't we stay together and search."

"We need to check for another way out, we will search much faster if we separate," so saying Tchak'ta walked straight ahead and vanished into the shadows.

Pi blinked, "hello.. are you there?" she whispered towards where Tchak'ta had vanished. There was no answer, just an eerie silence which made Pi wish she was still tucked in bed watching Races Apart.

Pi looked left and right, unsure which way to go as both options looked very uninviting. It didn't even cross her mind to pull up the schematics of the hospital ground floor and work out the best route from there as Pi just didn't think strategically.

Deciding to head towards the left as she could just make out what looked like a canteen area Pi perked up a little.

‘Maybe I can find something to eat while I’m searching, possibly some more of the Bofu soup they gave at lunch,’ Pi thought to herself.

She moved gingerly towards the shadows, staying against the wall and trying to remember how the Teladi had moved.

Pi tried to open a few of the doors along the corridor but they all seemed to be locked. One of the doors about half way was a lot larger than the rest and had shielding in place which made Pi curious as to what was on the other side.

She activated her data pad and had a look at the level of security in place.

“Wow, multi level encryption with a search and destroy program for unauthorised access,” Pi said to herself as her curiosity increased. She wondered if the Teladi would mind if she just stopped to have a look, ‘Just a quick peek to see what’s inside,’ she told herself.

She could bypass the security herself but it would take time and the Teladi seemed the sort who would be upset if she was late.

Pi activated ARINOX and gave it the simple instruction of removing the shielding and opening the door. She then deposited it into the security framework of the door and waited.

ARINOX emerged into existence and immediately began assessing and weighing the strengths and weaknesses of the security measure before it.

Three level numeric encryption which would have to be breeched level by level. The encryption technique was standard Argon level 3 and stored within its data banks. If ARINOX could make a comment it would have said, “A piece of cake.”

ARINOX could detect the central core, a round flat structure which was surrounded by three giant circular walls of pulsating energy evenly spaced from each other. Each of these circular walls represented a different level of encryption; they were shimmering because of the constant shifting of the energy inside, without deciphering the key it would be impossible to grip the wall.

It moved towards the first shimmering wall, its movement’s fluid and light as it ran. Without slowing pace ARINOX suddenly shifted into energy form matching the rotation and discharge frequency of the wall. It then simply moved along the energy field shifting frequency and rotation with the wall and climbed to the top and over.

Landing on the other side ARINOX was aware that a search and destroy program had been activated but carried on towards the second wall.

This one was a shifting miasma of energy seemingly chaotic as they collided and moved around each other. ARINOX assessed the randomness of the shifting energy clouds applying the pattern from its memory banks in an instant. It now saw solid formations of stable energy forming for a hundredth of a millisezura along the length of the wall. It easily jumped from each stable spot to the next and reached the top then over.

As ARINOX landed it became instantly aware of the search and destroy program tracking in on its position. In that instant it also assessed the threat potential and quickest method of dispatch of the approaching program.

ARINOX moved still in energy form and picked up speed heading straight for the program. The search and destroy program was also another standard Argon program used in commercial protection. It was of the solid power kind built with blocking the intruding software in mind then dispatching it with its dual deletion armaments.

The program now stood blocking ARINOX from the next wall and holding its dual blades in its hands. It was a giant program and if it landed a clean blow could delete most normal intrusion programs with a single blow.

With blistering speed ARINOX launched itself at the program and punched straight through with out slowing. The program shattered into fragments of code before it could activate any reaction protocols while ARINOX continued to the next wall. As it moved its speed kept increasing and as it reached the third wall ARINOX was moving much faster then the energy rotations of the wall.

At that speed it just shot through the minute gaps which appeared for a hundred millionth of a millasezura along the wall.

The data pad flashed green and the door shields went down allowing entry. Pi retrieved ARINOX and marvelled at the speed with which the security was bypassed. It had taken ARINOX under 5 sezuras to do that which would have taken her a good 15-20 mizuras.

Pi opened the door and stepped inside.

The room was large and like the rest of the hospital dimly lit. There were consoles all along the room with a large circular shaped work station dominating the centre. Many of the screens were flashing a hazard warning and the room echoed with the quite buzzing of alarms and sirens.

Pi looked around the room taking in all the workstations, consoles and computer hardware. She moved over to the central one which had the greater number of screens and the most comfortable looking chair.

Pi sat herself down feeling the chair adjust and change according to her physiology and shape.

“Hmmm comfortable, Boron misses own chair,” Pi murmured to herself in appreciation. It has been awhile since she had sat at her own command module chair and even longer since she had worked with her team.

Looking at the main viewer Pi took notice of the hazard warning flashing across the screen.

“Warning! Biohazard level 3, air borne contamination detected. Bio-containment procedure underway. Time till total irradiation 14 mizuras and 33 sezuras.

Pi pulled up further information and specifics of the biohazard while shutting off the alarms.

“Not good, Boron in trouble,” she said to herself as she read the information.

Pi’s tentacles moved over the screens and consoles, accessing command functions and biohazard protocols while at the same time she activated the internal camera to see if she could locate the Teladi.

The screen segmented into many smaller squares showing the view from every camera on this level. The security software automatically switched them to night sight vision and also thermal imaging.

Pi could see practically the whole floor, several of the camera views showed dark red outlines. She highlighted these squares and they expanded to cover the rest of the screen bringing the images closer.

She recognised the Teladi from the smaller shape and lighter shade of red as their body temperature was lower then that of Argons. He was moving along corridor 3R according to the map.

The second view held two Argons who were hidden at the intersection of 3R with corridor 3S. When the Teladi came to the end of the corridor he would be exposed to them before he saw them.

There was one Argon in the third view crouching behind a corner in corridor 6Q which Pi dismissed as he was not anywhere near the Teladi’s position.

Pi thought on how she could contact him and was about to use the general comms when she realised that they Argons would also hear it. The Teladi was moving steadily closer to the junction and Pi was frozen with indecision.

“What should I do?” she asked herself,

Then an idea came to her and she smiled. There was a trick she used to play when in school and had been isolated for causing problems. It allowed her to communicate with her friends without the tutor realising thus getting past the boredom.

Pi linked her data pad and sent the appropriate commands. She glanced at the hazard warning which showed just under 13 mizuras left, not much time.

Tchak'ta moved stealthily along the wall keeping to the deeper shadows and concentrating on sensing what was a head.

He could see the junction coming up and realised it posed a problem. That would be a perfect place to set up an ambush as anyone coming along this corridor would be seen before they could gauge which turning to take.

He could not sense any presence close by but then they would not need to be close by, a blaster shot would have the same effect regardless of distance.

Pausing to decide the best course of action Tchak'ta suddenly noticed that the wall panel opposite was flashing different colours randomly.

The coloured squares then formed a circular shape blinking on and off, then a square shape then a triangle. Tchak'ta watched curiously wondering what it meant and had dismissed it as a computer glitch when it formed an arrow and moved along the panel going back the way he had come.

'Interesting, what could it mean?' Tchak'ta thought but pushed it away as he could not afford to be distracted by a minor mystery. He returned his gaze back up the corridor and was moving slowly again when a flickering caught his eye. Turning to face the wall opposite he realised that the lights had moved with him and were now showing a red circle with a solid black triangle inside intersected with a red wavy line.

Now they were an arrow again pointing back down the corridor.

Tchak'ta instantly fell into a crouch, pressing himself back into the wall and looking all around. The shape the lights had assumed was the universal symbol for warning or danger, usually placed near gates to warn traffic. Someone knew he was here.

Since there were no Argons rushing in on him or blaster fire coming out of the darkness he surmised it could not be the mercenaries, unless it was some sort of ploy for their amusement. He wouldn't put it past the Argons as they were a strange race with an incomprehensible sense of humour.

Logically it would have to be someone else who knew he was here either an unknown party or the strange Boron. Going on the abilities the Boron had shown so far Tchak'ta would not be surprised if it was her.

Tchak'ta followed the lights back the way he had come to a door he had checked and found locked earlier. The lights terminated at the door so Tchak'ta pressed the door pad and moved to one side as it slid open. Waiting for a few sezuras he cautiously entered what looked like an office. The door closed behind him.

Looking around the dimly lit room, Tchak'ta noticed the personal comms console flashing an incoming message. He walked over and activated the channel and the view screen lit up showing the smiling face of his Boron companion.

“Hello there, did you like my message in lights? Boron wasn't sure if you would understand, not that you do not have the capacity to understand as it was a simple message, not because you would not understand a complicated one as I'm sure you are very smart and erm...” Pi trailed off not sure what to say, “You must not carry on as there are two mercenaries at the intersection of your corridor,” she finished in a rush.

Tchak'ta stared at the Boron and shook his head slightly, ‘If she's an agent then she is very good at her character role,’ he thought to himself, out loud he said, “Send me the details to this console and a map layout of this floor. I assume you are in a security command centre?”

“Erm... yes,” Pi replied sounding a little relieved, “The details have been sent to the console.”

Tchak'ta spent a few mizura's looking over the map and the positions of the mercenaries and also checking for emergency exits or other points of exit.

“Oh, Boron almost forget,” Pi said, “We have to get out in just under 10 mizuras or we get irradiated as the bio containment procedures are underway.”

Tchak'ta looked up from the map and stared hard at the Boron trying to discern if it was some sort of Boron humour.

“You waited to tell me this fact last?” he asked quietly.

“Erm... yes, I sort of forgot... and you looked... busy...and...erm..” Pi replied fidgeting a little in her seat.

Tchak'ta continued to stare for a few more sezuras then said “We must move fast. This is what I want you to do.”

Tchak'ta left the room at a loping run staying to the shadows but not trying to conceal his movements. He had a mental image of the layout and the position of both mercenaries which negated the need for caution.

As he neared the intersection of the corridor he launched himself forward and slightly to the right while tucking into a ball shape. Blaster fire came out of the darkness from his left sizzling past him as he sailed through the air and landed with a soft roll holding his breath. The corridor he had landed in was suddenly filled with a loud hissing noise as the vents in the ceiling pumped in a mixture of inert gases and chemical heat retardants.

Pi had initiated the fire containment procedures in this corridor as soon as he had reached the intersection.

Tchak'ta held his breath as most of the oxygen was flushed away by the gases and heard a gasping cough coming from just ahead. A figure staggered out from an alcove on his right fighting to breathe and did not notice the PPA agent until it was too late. Tchak'ta easily overpowered him with a hammering blow to the back of his head followed by a series of rapid punches to the face.

The extractors on the floors and walls activated to draw away the gasses while the vents began pumping oxygen back in again returning the normal atmosphere to the corridor.

Tchak'ta began to breathe again and went to see if the Pi had managed to take care of the other mercenary. He moved back to the intersection and had a quick glance to his right where the blaster fire had come from.

He then stepped out and walked up towards the now frozen mercenary. The corridor was still very cold and there was liquid coolant all around thou now it was evaporating fast.

The mercenary was in a semi crouched stance with his hands held above his head as if fending off something from above. It obviously hadn't helped as he stood there like a frozen statue no doubt dead.

He had told the Boron to activate the plasma fire control system along this corridor at the same time as the normal fire control measures along the other corridor. Plasma fire required all heat to be removed instantly and thus strong liquid coolant was used first.

He had to admit that after leaving the Boron his instructions on which corridor to initiate which fire procedure he had been a little worried she would get them mixed up. It would have been unfortunate if she had.

Pi breathed a sigh of relief as she watched Tchak'ta on the monitor as he inspected the frozen mercenary. She hadn't been sure which procedure would activate on which corridor as all were linked and had expected both procedures to run on both corridors. She hadn't wanted to say anything to the Teladi as he already seemed a little upset with her.

Pi wasn't sure what the instant freezing would do to the mercenary but the Teladi had said that he would just thaw out later and be fine. Pi had a feeling that the Teladi wasn't telling her the truth but it would be impolite to suggest such a thing.

In a research facility under a small island off the shores of the third continent of Argon Prime General Xin Ling ordered him self a coffee and took a sip.

“Blood and ashes!” he swore “The most advanced technology known to the five races at our disposal and we can’t build a machine which can make real coffee.”

Grimacing at the taste he headed towards the opps room to see what the latest news in the universe was. He liked to stay abreast of current affairs as well as the usual political manoeuvrings of the four races, the Xenon didn’t really have a political arena unless you counted ‘Kill everything not Xenon’ as a political stance.

General Xin Ling was the head of a unique agency, a small man in height with an average build and no distinguishing features. He wore his 60 years of age like a favourite coat and kept him self fit and healthy, he had lost most of his hair except around the edges which was now mostly grey.

Having been a General in the Argon army for near 10 years had given him a military bearing and an aura of command.

Right now he just looked like a man dissatisfied with his coffee.

Xin walked into the operations room to find Jurgan lounging at the back monitoring the commercial networks and Alicia at the central communications console most likely talking to one or another of their operatives. It was early morning and the others were either not up yet or had not arrived.

The Opps room was the heart of the facility, a large room filled with all manner of electronic hardware, cutting edge technology and some more then that all humming away softly. The room was dominated by the central communications console and the giant view screen at the opposite end. Other consoles and stations dotted the four walls and would normally be buzzing with activity as people went about their tasks.

“Morning boss, I see from your face that they still haven’t fixed the coffee machine,” called out Jurgan smiling.

Jurgan Clinz, a tall and gangly man with a slight stoop and sporting a very thin frame, almost emancipated. About 32 years of age with short light brown hair, his face seemed to be constantly gaunt and he looked like he could do with more sleep. His most striking feature would be his eyes, a cloudy shifting grey colour which always had a distant look to them like he was somewhere else.

“Blasted thing can’t even mix water, coffee and Boron spices together! And we call this advanced technology,” snorted Xin.

“Maybe it’s a sign for you to give up the evil brew boss,” joined in Alicia from her console. “Its not helping your blood pressure you know.”

Alicia Sanders, a tall fuller figure woman with a sunny disposition and a ready smile. Shoulder length blonde hair framed her freckled face, more homely than beautiful but when she smiled it was striking. In her mid 30's she got on with everyone and was well liked which wasn't surprising considering her talent.

"Bah, I've survived uprisings, wars, assassination attempts and even a case of the Paranid Roxian virus. I'd be very put out if I fell to a mug of Borons royal blend," replied Xin.

"Any news on the missing Boron program?" asked Xin.

"Nothing concrete yet, the Borons are trying to keep it to themselves but Argon intelligence will find out about its existence soon. One of our research vessels was hacked into via remote and some research on bacteriological data was stolen," informed Alicia.

"The Teladi PPA will also be aware of its existence soon as they are investigating the theft of their spaceweed data which took place over a wozura ago. The Borons will have a lot of explaining to do very soon I think," added Jurgan

"We'll let the respective intelligence agencies deal with the Boron program, we have the code from one of our people and our security systems have been updated. What has me worried is the apparent increased cooperation between the pirate clans," said Xin.

"Also the increasing hostilities between Paranid and Split; the last thing we need is another pointless war."

"Has Merrisa reported in?" asked Xin

"About a stazura ago, she's here at the Trading station having lunch with her navy pilot and his friend," replied Alicia.

Xin raised an eyebrow, "Having lunch? Well she's entitled to have a social life too I guess."

Jurgan laughed out loud, "Well I feel sorry for her companions, no doubt they will be tearing their hair out in frustration by the end of lunch."

Xin smiled, "No doubt. Do we have anything more on the Paranid black out?"

Alicia shook her head, "The opposition have decided to keep their activities to themselves, very unsporting of them. We are unable to penetrate their barriers and our telepaths just develop a headache when they try. What ever or who ever they are using to block our telepaths is beyond our ability to breach."

"Well the Paranid have been at this a lot longer than the rest of us, their gifted are trained from birth and we don't even know the range of talents they possess," answered Xin, "keep me posted of any change."

“The Boron scientist Mi Ton is going to be transported to Terracorp HQ to help them with the new fusion drive they are working on. Rue has reported that there is a good chance that his ship will be attacked by the local pirates. Apparently he made some unflattering comments about them to the local media recently,” informed Jurgan

“Hmmm I’m tempted to let them have him; he’s got to be the most insufferable being in the universe. Unfortunately he’s also the most eminent scientist we have too. Who’s the pilot?” asked Xin

“Julian Gardner, we vetted him a while back for Ban Danna, he was convicted for piracy, showed lots of potential. Great pilot too,” replied Jurgan.

“We had our people do a full psych profile on him to make sure he wasn’t going to just return to his colourful past. Ban Danna gave him a ship and now he works for Terracorps,” added in Alicia.

“We passed on the suggestions to Ban Danna’s lieutenant, as I recall his answers consisted of ‘but he’s a pirate?’ or variations there of,” said Jurgan.

“Send Tomas to shadow the ship. Tell him to keep his Dragon cloaked and not to engage unless the ship looks to be in real danger. Oh, and emphasise that he is to stick to conventional weapons only, I don’t want a repeat incident,” said Xin turning to Alicia.

“Conventional weapons, that’s going to upset him,” Alicia answered grinning.

“I can live with it,” said Xin dryly, “How’s the security looking for the presidential meet next wozura Jurgan?”

“Tight, the intelligence service is monitoring the president constantly, there’s also a detachment of marines spread out in to key positions and the Navy has sent a full squadron as sector security. We’ve placed two of our agents into the presidential staff and one will be located at the site,” replied Jurgan.

“He’s decided to call the operation ‘Presidents Ass’ as in protecting it haven’t you Jurgan?” put in Alicia with a smile.

“Well I had to call it something,” he replied shrugging.

Xin laughed, “I don’t think she would take it too well, you could call it president’s rear end?”

“Or just The Presidents End,” laughed Alicia

“Come to think of it maybe we shouldn’t discuss her posterior, it’s quite a large subject if I remember correctly,” joked Xin. “I remember an ambassador once remarked...”

“Boss!” cut in Alicia urgently, standing up from her seat and pointing at Jurgan. Jurgan had jerked straight in his chair, his hands gripping the arm rests hard enough to turn his knuckles white. He sat frozen rigid for a few seconds then began to tremble slightly as beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. His face took on an intense expression and his eyes became glazed as his talent manifested and took control.

Both Xin and Alicia came quickly to his side and watched his every expression waiting for him to come out of his trance and maybe fill them in on things yet to come.

That was Jurgan’s talent, Precognition or in other words being able to tell the future. It came to him randomly and in snatches with out any conscious control. It was never straightforward and many times not relevant to what they were doing but he was the best they had and could provide valuable knowledge on events still to occur.

Xin looked at Alicia, a questioning look forming on his face.

“Shock; He’s feeling a large amount of shock right now,” she said before he could ask the question.

“Now there is fear mixed with anger, he’s feeling very angry,” she continued.

That was Alicia’s talent, she was an Empath. Her talent allowed her to ‘feel’ what someone else was feeling, to understand their moods and know something of what they were thinking.

Alicia looked up at Xin, her eyes moist and a look of deep sadness framed her face. “He’s feeling very sad, a deep sorrow, oh Xin he’s grieving, what ever he’s seeing its filling him with so much grief that it’s frightening,” she half sobbed.

Xin put his arms around Alicia holding her tight, “It’s alright Alicia, let it go. Let it go.” He said gently.

Alicia stopped crying and wiped her eyes saying, “Thanks, I’m ok. It just got too much for me for a moment there.”

They both looked at Jurgan who had tears streaming down his horror stricken face. Suddenly he shook and blinked rapidly, focusing again on the present reality.

Alicia got up and said, “I’ll get you something hot to drink.”

Xin looked at Jurgan noting the haunted look in his eyes and the residue of horror still lingering on his face. “What happened? What did you see?” he whispered. Jurgan looked back at Xin and took the hot tea offered to him by Alicia. Taking a deep breath he said, “Death. I saw death and destruction, carnage and mayhem on a scale not

seen since the Xenon war. I saw the total annihilation of a sector Xin, the death of millions of people taken without thought or remorse.”

Jurgan paused to collect together his turbulent thoughts as he tried to make some sense of his vision. Always the future came to him in snatches, he would see events unfold some clear some just a blur most of the time they would be all jumbled up together.

“I saw a sector, not clearly but I could make out two planets and many space installations. The wheat farm and cahoona bakery I glimpsed places it as one of ours. Everything looked normal as it should do but then I saw what looked like the formation of jump holes, lots and lots of jump holes forming through out the sector.”

“Jump holes?” asked Xin “people were jumping out of the sector? There are only a few civilians who have access to jump drive technology, were they military ships?”

Jurgan shook his head, “No Xin, people will not be jumping out but something will be jumping in. It or they will not use the gates but jump right into the heart of our sector.” Jurgan paused to let that statement and all that it entailed sink in.

“The scene shifted and blurred but when it became clear, I could see a full scale battle raging, all our installations will be aflame, attacked by ships the like of which I have never seen,” Jurgans eyes became distant and his voice fell as his face became sorrowful.

“They will have no chance Xin, no chance at all. The alien ships will attack and destroy every installation; they will attack every ship, every transport and even the escape pods. Their weapons will slice through our ships and cut through our stations while their planetary ships rake fire on the colonies below. I could see thousands of bodies floating in space like the swarming of space-flies, lifeless faces contorted in pain and terror as the vacuum of space takes them.”

Xin felt a cold shiver run down his spine as the image came to life in his mind; he could almost see the dead bodies.

“Who can do such a thing? The Xenon, the Split?” he asked in a whisper.

Jurgan shook his head again, “These were ships I’ve not seen before, all hard lines and points like clusters of pyramids. They scatter apart into tens of smaller vessels, very fast and purple in colour. The weapons they fired looked like beam technology which sliced through our fighters, their capital ships even more deadly.”

Behind the alien carnage I could feel another presence, something malevolent, watching and waiting. A sense of anticipation and... pleasure?” he slowly fell silent as the last phrase hung in the air.”

Alicia asked, “Do you know when this will happen or where this sector is?”

“I’m not sure, its still jumbled up. There was a lot more there but it’s all a blur, the images and events were mixed together. There were faces of people and snatches of other battles.” replied Jurgan.

Xin stood up, “Right, we know from past experience that Jurgans visions always manifest themselves, most of the time not in the way we thought but they do always occur. We need more information and possibly establish a time frame.”

Turning to Alicia he said, “Put us onto alert 3 and get in touch with all our field agents, tell them to monitor for any possibility of attacks on Argon sectors or rumours of any strange sightings of unknown ships.”

He turned to Jurgan, “When you’ve got yourself together I need you to get our best telepaths out to key sectors of every race, baring the Xenon of course. See if the other intelligence agencies are monitoring for anything.”

Xin turned and headed for the far right console, “I’m going to assemble the command team together and get in touch with my superiors. Get every body up and explain the situation to them, we could be facing the beginning of a war we don’t have the resources to win. Let’s hope we’re wrong.”