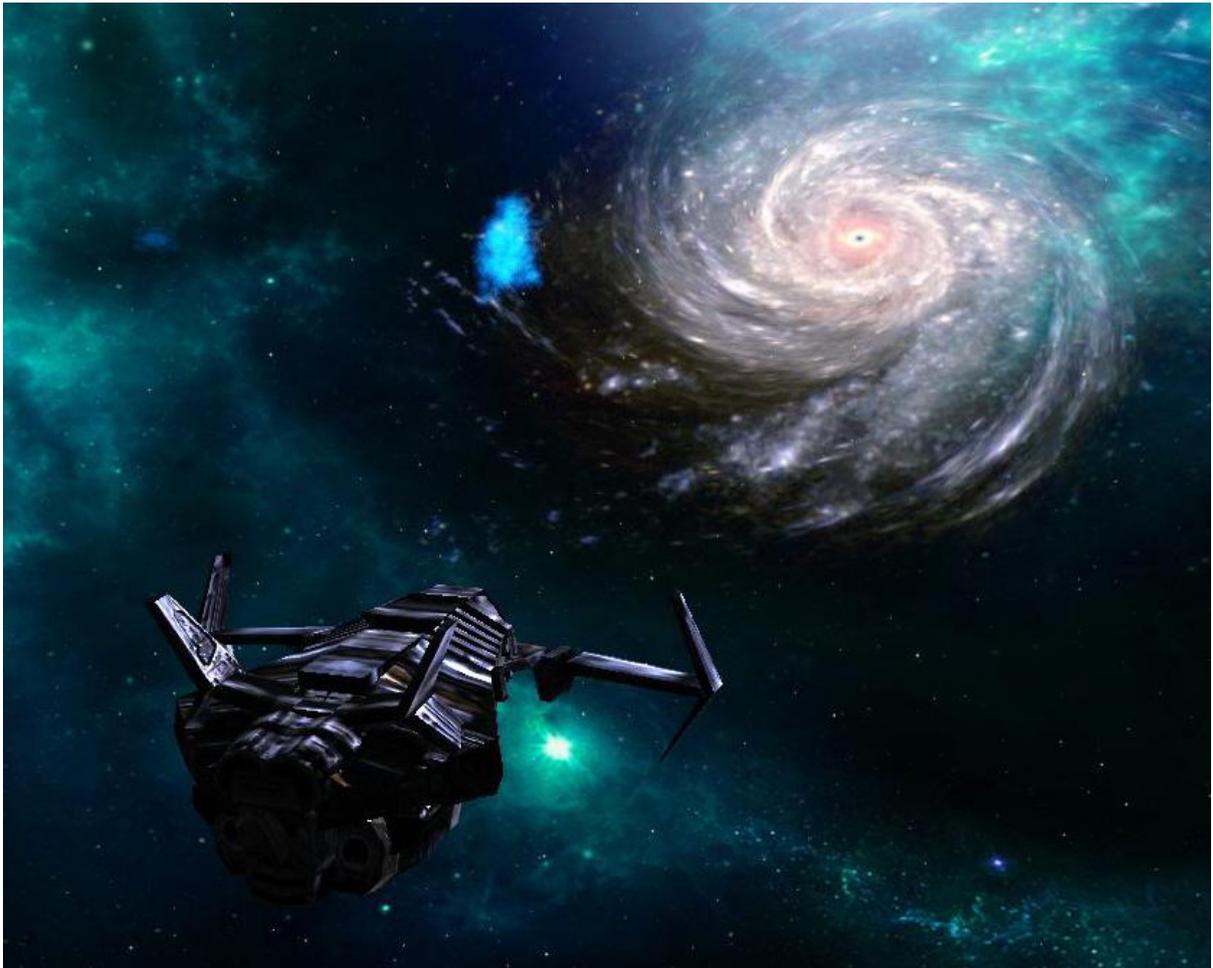


Stories From The Black

& other tales of the Evochron universe



An Anthology edited by DaveK

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Introduction

Evochron is the creation of one man - Vice. His aim has been to create high quality, entertaining space-based games. Those who have experienced any of his games would agree that he has succeeded.

The later games that Vice has created - particularly Legends and Mercenary - are sandbox games giving a great deal of freedom about how a player chooses to interact with them. The games have, in fact, an affinity with a SciFi novel set in the Evochron Universe. Some SciFi writers create a universe in which to set their novels - Frank Herbert's "Dune" series is a good example. Evochron is a lot like an interactive novel - Vice has created the backdrop - we, the players, create the story; our own story.

One of the fun parts about stories set in "another place and time" is finding out about the background details of the place the story is set in. Writers have a novel or sequence of novels in mind. They aim for consistency so that each novel fits and can refer to events in other stories. Vice can't do this. He has created a series of games and put some background "colour" into the descriptions. The earlier games are action arcade games - the later one free, open sandbox games. Consequently there isn't a crafted, consistent history available

Many player regret the sparsity of the background texture of the game (nope not the starscape and nebula and other background eyecandy!). Enter the writers of these stories and tha_rami's compilation of the History of Evochron.

When I first started playing in the Evochron Universe I collected as much information as I could to increase my sense of immersion. I'm a scientist by nature and training - I need to know how technology works, even in sci-fi! I don't really like the StarTrek "reverse the polarity of the whirly things to increase the viridium particle emissions" solution to problems. The Official Manuals (Legends and Mercenary) are good on technical, tactical and "how do I . . . ?" details. However they contain very little of the history and background of the Evoverse or of the technology we get to play with.

I soon discovered the Forum and shortly after the "Community Mods, Art & Fan Fiction" threads. I discovered a number of stories - some short, some very short - that added depth and coloured the Evoverse for me. I also found a draft history of the Evoverse from the creation of the Fulcrum Jump technology to the end of the last Vonari conflict. Inspired by my discoveries I created a story of my own. I worked out technical explanations of all the equipment we play with based on real (mainly!) twentieth/twenty first century science - relativity, quantum theory and string theory.

More recently, especially after the Steam Invasion, a comment has appeared from several people . . . "where can I find out more about the Evoverse?" This anthology is the result of my attempt to collect the available background information together in one place. It is a collection of the short stories from the threads - edited and spell checked. It also includes the history of Evochron (compiled by tha_rami) (see the Appendix).

I hope that you enjoy the stories and that they make Evochron feel more real when you fly there. I hope that they inspire the writers who didn't finish their story to do so and perhaps inspire new writers to share their vision of life in "The Black"

Thanks are also owed to (mainly) Bravehart and several others - I plundered the "Screenshots" thread to illustrate the start of each story

All credit goes to the writers - all errors remaining can be blamed on me!

DaveK (callsign: Incoming)

Stories From the Black by Schmulky

June 2010 to date



Stories From the Black

by Schmulky
June 2010 to date

Part 1

So I was flying along, minding my own business as usual. I was mine running in Pearl – the rates for platinum there are usually higher than in Rucker. Anyway, there I was, just settling down to mine a 'roid, when suddenly a red blip shows on my radar which confused me. First, I'm not too enemy-prone. Anyone who knows me will swear to whichever deity they happen to worship that I'm the best pilot alive, but they'll also swear that I tend to keep to myself. Nobody in Evochron has much of a reason to kill me – at least not in the four years since I quit hunting Rebels in Fauston. Just about as unlikely as a Fauston rebel in Pearl was the only other remote possibility; that my bogey was a Vonari. I looked out the canopy – sure enough, there was sunlight glinting off of an approaching object right where my radar put the red. I almost wished I had a scientist on board to analyze its exhaust plumes – to tell who built it – then I stopped myself. I would know soon enough.

I shut down everything I didn't need and hid behind the asteroid, on the slim chance that it might mask my signature, on the even slimmer chance that I hadn't been detected already. I had a pretty strong feeling that this wouldn't work out, and my suspicion was confirmed by the sound of missiles thumping off the far side of the asteroid. It occurred to me to wonder why I was hearing noises through a vacuum, but I let the thought slide. Well, I thought, At least the pilot is stupid.

That seemed to be my only advantage. I had just spent my last credit on a Striker frame with 5 cargo bays and a big engine, so I was lightly shielded and not too manoeuvrable. To save money, I hadn't bought any missiles – those things cost more than a Denebian speeding ticket. On top of that, I only knew two things about my bogey: that he was as dumb as the rock I was hiding behind and shedding missiles faster than a Vaygr battlecruiser. Three of the missiles had hit so far, and I guessed that the 'roid couldn't take much more. I turned around to face the 'roid and the bogey, shifted power to the forward shields, and killed my IDS.

. . . four . . .

I punched the reverse afterburner.

. . . five . . .

The asteroid exploded. I don't know why it did that. There is no conceivable reason that a non-volatile hunk of nickel, iron, and water ice should explode almost as energetically as a capital ship. I made a note to contact some science academy about this, and killed my afterburner. While I was facing him, I targeted the guy. Saber frame, the readout said. That didn't tell me much of anything, but at least he wasn't Vonari.

I hit my slew thrusters and forward afterburner to bring me "up" and to a stop behind another asteroid. I figured that the guy couldn't have more than three more missiles left, and given his track record, that pushing my luck might be a good idea.

One, pause, two, pause, three. Then a longer pause. I was about to edge out when I heard the gunfire. He was shooting the asteroid! I almost wanted to raise him on the comm, give him a few pointers about solid-state matter, but instead I turned to face him through the asteroid again. This time I didn't back up. As the asteroid started to explode, he stopped firing. Instantly, I was accelerating through the explosion as fast as my afterburners would take me, whaling on the trigger like...well, my adrenaline was pumping and I was squeezing the trigger especially hard. If there's one thing that scares me, it's facing an idiot. Don't want to let your guard down.

As I passed him, I swivelled around so I could keep firing on target. His gun had recharged and he squeezed out about three shots before exploding in a fireball about half the size of either asteroid he had just blown up.

I checked my status – the red's three or so shots had done about 400 credits of damage. There must be another way to readily quantify spacecraft damage, I thought. I made a note to ask someone about that next time I went portside. One cargo bay had survived the explosion, so I pulled it on board. Meds. Six thousand or so credits. Nothing compared to the platinum I was about to mine. I jettisoned the meds and finished my run.

I docked at Port Oasis about an hour later with a good haul. While the pod got repaired, I talked around, asking if anyone else had recently been attacked by a moron in a Saber. I found out pretty quick that the guy was a local legend – it's a wonder he hadn't come up in conversation before. Apparently the pilot of my bogey was the former CEO of the ELTOSR Shipping Company, the closest thing the Federation has ever had to a proper commercial empire. One day, the company's assets dissolved in a shady computer crash, the CEO went nuts, and was last seen flying out of Orion Station at top speed in a stolen saber frame. The random attacks in Pearl had begun about a month ago. For some reason, everyone else who had ever been attacked by the guy had just jumped away with minimal damage.

I didn't buy it, of course. The story was too simple, but I decided not to dig. Once my Striker was repaired and refuelled, I headed back out to the asteroid field. I spent the rest of that month uneventfully mining platinum, and then I went off to find Pearl's Hidden Planet. It was time to get a better ship.

Part 2

A few weeks into my mining runs, I had picked up the coordinates of Pearl's Hidden Planet from another freelancer in one of the bars at Port Oasis. I didn't want to go until I had some serious capital, though, so I kept mining. Once I felt ready, I refitted my Striker with less cargo space and more punch, especially for the long hop. If there's one thing that the CEO had reinforced, it was to be prepared for just anything – especially in deep space. I still didn't have any missiles, though – those things will milk you dry pretty fast.

I didn't have much of anybody to say goodbye to. I fuelled up one last time, then undocked straight away. As soon as I cleared the screen, I punched in the Hidden Planet's coordinates, killed the IDS, set the autopilot, and sat back to enjoy the ride. Hopping along with a Fulcrum C4 can be pretty slow in deep space, so I played some holotetris to pass the time. I was about to beat my previous best score when I arrived at the coordinates.

I was more or less in the right place – there was a speck of a planet way off in the distance. I killed the autopilot and restored the HUD just as the bogey alarm went off, but I had already spotted them. Six reds, led by the pilot who had given me the coordinates a few weeks back (I could tell from the hull markings), were forming a wall

right in front of me. I didn't do a thing – just kept it on Inertial. I was barely sublight; they knew as well as I did that I could punch right through them easier than an asteroid through a solar sail. Rather than intercept me, they all backed off and started firing missiles.

Nothing hit me. Not even close. Even as I turned back to face the missiles, I was outrunning them. I still shot them down for fun, though. I did the same for two more volleys, until I seemed to be out of missile range. Then I punched my afterburner. By the time I was back in range of the thugs, I was maxed in the opposite direction. I punched through their wall again, and this time I didn't even bother to shoot down the missiles. They eventually exploded harmlessly behind me. I turned around and decelerated, enough to stay in missile range without risking actual interception. I flipped back to shooting the missiles down as they launched, and waited for the bogeys to run out.

Then something weird happened. After the eighth volley, they kept firing. It didn't change my situation much, but I was pretty flummoxed. Those guys had been squeezing off one missile per volley for 8 volleys; that's 48 missiles. I had counted. There was no way, short of some pretty shady modification, that anybody could be packing more than 8 missiles on a given pod. Well, no matter. As the 10th volley headed in, I maxed out away from the bogeys (still flying backwards) and brought up my NAV console. A quick check confirmed that the battle had drifted almost 1.5 sectors away from my last jump point – that was enough. I logged in a jump point right above the Hidden Planet's atmosphere.

It was far enough that there'd be no way for the thugs to track my jump, and absolutely no way for them to see me pop out near the planet, but it still should have been pretty obvious where I was jumping to. Just in case they were dumb enough to fall for it, I pointed my pod back toward Pearl and punched the IDS. As I slowed, the thugs fired another volley. Before it got too close, I was safely jumping "toward" Pearl. Of course, I landed right on top of Pearl's Hidden Planet's atmo. I had left the IDS on for this jump, so I let it slow me down. My pod flamed for a moment, but I slowed pretty quick. Soon I was flying through green approach indicators toward a city.

The first thing I noticed when I landed was the exorbitant docking fee, which I paid before I could have any second thoughts. The next thing I noticed was that all the items on sale were...incredible. I bought Phantom cannons, fusion lasers, a cannon relay system, and my first repair system – a class 2. But what really caught my eye was a piece of equipment labelled "Mantis." I checked the description; it said that the Mantis Jump Drive had an unknown range. A part of me, the wary part, remembered the time I had bought a used droid with an "unknown" battery life, back when I was a kid. I had learned the hard way that in the world of retail, "unknown" usually means "crappy." Still, this was a hidden planet. I might never get this opportunity again. I sold my Fulcrum C4 and installed the Mantis.

Having met my equipment needs, I headed over to the shipyard. As I had barely dared to hope, they were selling Leviathans. I didn't hesitate. Before you could say "epic," half my capital was wrapped up in one of those rugged, powerful frames. I gave it the best wings and shields I could find, then splurged on whatever else I could fit. With that done, I officially bought the pod.

To be honest, "pod" isn't the right word to describe a Leviathan. It's more like a church; all spacious and well-lit. I collapsed the crew quarters in to make a cozy little rec area. I bought and installed a full scale holo, a comfy chair (bolted down, of course), and a real shower, with running water. The whole ship had that new-car smell that makes you feel like anything is possible. As I requested clearance for departure, I marvelled at how my voice echoed through the empty cabin. There was actually enough space for it to echo! I

had heard that churches echoed too – I'm not real religious, but I was starting to enjoy the metaphor.

Unfortunately, the Leviathan also moves like a church. I was used to handling a twitchy pod, but maxing out in a Levi takes some serious time – almost as much time as turning. Once I got into Space, though, I felt more at home. The Levi may be slow, but it is graceful, like its namesake. My mind wandered, and I allowed myself a moment or two to wonder if there were any whales left on Earth. Before I jumped out of range, I downloaded 5 terabytes of whale song from the planetary database. I had the computer pick out the most aesthetically pleasing gigabyte or so, and pipe it in through the ship's hi-def, surround-sound intercom system (with superbass) for the return trip. As I broke gravwell, I scanned around for the thugs. No sign of them, thankfully. I set a course for Pearl and punched the Autopilot. I reclined my chair, unbuckled my safety harness, turned on the whale song, turned down the lights and gravity by voice command, activated the massage feature on my chair, and enjoyed that truly beautiful new-car smell.

I grinned. It was going to be a good trip back to Pearl.

Part 3

The Mantis can really jump – 10 sectors in a hop if you're lucky. The long hop back to Pearl was going over twice as fast as the trip outward, which almost made me sad. I was really enjoying everything...the whale song, the massage...My shipboard computer, whose name was Avi, told me that there was some famous old 2-D about how a pair of hump-back whales saved the world in some future that never came true, and maybe I'd enjoy it. I told her to remind me about it later, then switched the computer to a male voice.

To pass the time, I mulled over what to do with myself. I was a big boy, now, in a big ship, with more than enough left-over money to get by. Hell, if I could find an uninhabited region of some planet with refine-able biomass, I could just harvest that and synth my own food using the Levi's galley. Right here and right now, on a whim, I could decide to go and live out my days as a hermit. I may never have to work again, I thought. And instead of feeling free, I felt...empty. In that moment I knew that I would never be the type to settle in and wait to die. One way or another, I wasn't through with making something of myself.

As luck would have it, that's when I met Marty. As I landed about 2 kilometres away, my sensors chirped at his distress beacon. Alarmed, I killed the autopilot. This guy was green. Why? Most everyone out here was yellow. I hit the IDS and headed over to get a closer look.

The first thing I noticed was that the pod was tumbling pretty slow, like the gyros had seized up. Then I noticed it was a Leviathan, like mine. Then the nose rotated into view, and I groaned. There was a big crack across the lower foreport, but no air was escaping. "Zoom in," I told Avi. I quickly confirmed the worst – the crack was wide open, but not venting anything. Then my training kicked in, and I was on the move. Fast as I could, I put up my seat. At my command, the lights and gravity returned to normal, the whale song stopped mind-bellow. As soon as I got in range, I caught the pod in a tractor beam and stabilized its spin. I told Avi to park us as close as possible, and to give me a straight-line path from out airlock to theirs. Then I went to get suited up.

As I opened the outer airlock, I played my light over the wreck's hull, surveying it for any other damage. There was none. I clipped my tether to the nearest handhold and pushed off. I had a small gaspack, and I used a few jets to keep me going straight. Soon

I was at the other airlock. I clipped my tether to the other pod, so that both Levis were connected, and clipped another line to the wreck so I wasn't free. Then I cycled through the airlock, which took very little time because both sides were a vacuum. Well, I thought, At least some things still have power.

Even something as spacious as a Leviathan isn't too big. It took me less than half a minute to find the two suited bodies huddling in the aftmost bunk. 3 minutes later, the bodies and I were in my yet unnamed Levi, and I was removing their suits while Avi prepped all the medical equipment on board. I had Avi run a bioscan on each body – we were lucky. Both of them, a man and a woman, were still fresh. They had a chance. Since I was a little rusty, Avi had to talk me through CPR. I didn't even know the word "triage" at the time, and anyway, I don't even know why I chose to start with the man. By the time I had him breathing again, the woman was gone. Even a defibrillator and cortical stims wouldn't work. At some point, Avi got me to realize that she was Dead, with a capital "D," and that now I had to focus on stabilizing the man as much as possible. There wasn't much I could do, just hook him up to an oxygen mask, put him under a thermal blanket, and hope for the best. While Avi gave the still-unconscious man a rinse-down and a change in clothes, I went back over to the wreck to find out what had happened.

The mission logs had retained all their data perfectly, though everything above the legal bare-minimum was heavily encrypted – standard procedure for anybody, really. The couple had been hopping along when suddenly, in between jumps, a micrometeorite slammed sideways into their windshield – hence the long gash. Lucky for them, it had been wide enough to minimize any other damage that might have been caused by the decompression. Obviously the couple had been wearing their spacesuits at the moment of impact, and I wondered why. As safe as it would be, you just can't live in a spacesuit in a spaceship all the time. I figured I'd ask the guy about that if he ever woke up. I decided not to check their cargo until – unless, I corrected myself – the guy died again. I did look around a little more, though – it seemed pretty clear that with minimal repair, this pod could fly again. The only reason it had been spinning was because the couple had diverted all the power from navigation to their distress beacon (technically, the gyros were still spinning, I realized). I also noticed that on this Leviathan, there were no bulkheads separating the two decks – a feature that I had taken for granted aboard mine. It just made sense to me that a larger vessel would have safeguards like that. Their databanks were full of what looked like scan logs, but I didn't try to hack. Beyond that, there wasn't much else to see, so I headed back to my ship. On the way back, I lost my grip and started to drift away, but I jetted back easily enough.

As I stepped through the airlock, I was overwhelmed with relief to see the man sleeping peacefully on a couch (Avi must have unfolded it while I was out). Then I remembered the woman, and the relief died fast. I felt desperate and impatient again, like all the time in the world was about to run out but I wasn't ready. I asked Avi if the ship came with any bodybags, and he told me which compartment they were in. I pulled one out, and zipped the woman in feet first, pausing only for a moment to look at her face. She would have been beautiful, if she wasn't dead. Her hair was this perfect dark brown . . . sometimes, for an instant, you could swear it was jet black. Voices in the back of my head were yelling at me, trying to get my attention. It draped behind her ears into a small pony tail in the back. Her eyes were either green or hazel, I couldn't tell which . . . Suddenly I was zipping the bag all the way up. For an instant I was back in the smoke and the...I knew that face. It passed soon enough. Then I noticed that my visor had fogged up pretty badly – I had forgotten I was still wearing my helmet. With a trembling hands, I managed to unclasp my helmet and pull it off. I hadn't noticed the adrenaline high until now, and I felt it falling away.

"Leah?" a voice croaked behind me. "Is Leah all right?" I turned slowly to see the man raising his hand toward her, as if it would help, somehow. He looked like hell.

"I'm sorry," I managed, "She's dead." I finished turning and walked past him, up the ladder to the main pit. I sat down in the seat, which I noticed had been massaging the whole time. I turned it off, looked out at the stars, and cried.

Part 4

We "buried" Leah at space later that day. I had been a little reluctant, but Marty felt very strongly that this was the right way to do things. Apparently neither of them were too religions, because Marty just said a few words over the body and we "committed her to space" through the airlock. We didn't even put her in a missile casing, but that tends to be a brass hat thing, anyway. After the little ceremony was over, Marty turned to me. "I suppose I owe you a debt of gratitude," he said.

"Please," I answered as firmly as I could muster, "Don't."

"All the same," he insisted, "You saved my life--"

"I couldn't save hers," I blurted. Then a little voice in the back of my head pointed out that I was being rude. "I'm sorry," I said, gently as I could manage, "I just..."

"Think of what you did accomplish today," he told me. "You have made such a difference for this one person! You saved my life," he said, taking my hand, "I won't ever forget that." I spent a few seconds trying to figure out what to do with my hand, but then he released it. I must have looked too relieved. "My name is Marty," he said, eager to break the silence, "Marty Cloud".

"Vannok," I said. I reached out on instinct and we shook hands.

"You got a last name?" Marty asked.

"Nope," I said.

"Huh," Marty grunted. He didn't press, though. A few minutes later, we were both outside repairing his broken windshield with duct tape. The stuff has been around for ages – hundreds of years by some accounts – but I guess nobody's ever come up with anything better. Anyway, we taped over the rupture from the outside, sprayed pleximent into it from the inside, and incrementally pressurized the hab. With a little more time and a few more layers, we had a working windshield again. For redundancy, I made Marty promise to keep the duct tape on the windshield until he could get a professional replacement. Unless we actually saw combat before then, which we both doubted would happen, there was no way he could conceivably need that window. He still had the primary cockpit, anyway. When I asked Marty about the lack of bulkheads in his pod, he said that he had bought Used. I asked him how old the pod was, and he said he didn't know.

The whole way back to Pearl, we kept enough of a conversation going between the pods, but my mind kept wandering back to the girl. I had never seen her before, but I knew that face better than anything. No matter where I tried to send my thoughts, they kept turning back to the girl...was I calling her "the girl" now? "Leah, her name is Leah," I kept reminding myself, in between mild flashbacks of the Blitz. "Why now?" I wondered, "Why, out of all the possible times, did this have to happen now?"

We docked at Port Oasis again. Nice as it was, I was getting sick of the place. I really wanted to leave the system and never come back, but first I had some drinking to do.

Normally I don't drink – blurry makes for a bad pilot, but I didn't care right then. All I wanted was to pound Leah, Marty, the Blitz, and just about everything else out of my head and into a subconscious pulp. I must have done a pretty good job of it, because I don't remember any more of that evening.

By the next afternoon, some serious blood cleansing had me sober again. Marty and I sat down in his galley to talk business. I noticed that he looked like he'd been drinking, too. He took a sandwich, then offered me one, which I accepted. The following conversation all happened in between bites of synth-ham sandwich:

"So what are you going to do now?" he began.

"No idea," I said with a shrug. "I was looking for a purpose in life right about the time that I found you, actually."

"No kidding?" he leaned back and laughed a little. "I guess you found one, then."

"Heh"

"Seriously, though. You got any ideas?"

"Well," I replied, "I was thinking about shipping out to a warzone." I smiled. "I enjoy fancy flying."

"You want to go kill Vonari?" Marty seemed taken aback.

"Well, 'want' is a strong word," I replied. "I just feel like, why not? It's what I'm good at."

"I sort of assumed that you held life in very high regard," said Marty, as if he had been betrayed.

"The enemy is not alive." The words were out of my mouth before I even realized I'd said them.

Marty leaned forward. "A fallen star...huh," he said. "Alliance, right?"

"Close," I said. "I was a merc. Technically, I'm still a Lieutenant Junior Grade. I could go back and start flying missions again today, if I wanted."

"May I ask why you left?"

"Sports injury," I said. Things sort of ground to a halt for a moment, and I didn't know where to look.

"You know," said Marty, leaning in and playfully lowering his voice, "I'm in the mood to do something insanely reckless."

"What have you got in mind?" I asked cautiously.

"I don't know . . . "

With perfect timing, the station's distress beacon went off.

Part 5

Marty and I darted up to the main pit, and saw two reds facing off with the station on the radar. Within seconds, we saw the hangar shudder as the station took a missile. I looked at Marty, Marty looked at me, and we both knew instantly what we were going to do.

My ship was tractoried 30 meters away. Getting there would take several minutes with all the airlocks, so Marty and I were in the same pod, literally. "You drive," he said, sliding down the ladder to the lower deck. "I'll be the engineer, this flight."

"You should know, I'm new," I warned him.

"Don't worry, I've never fought in a Levi, either!" he called.

"Great," I muttered to myself. I took the con and eased us out of the hangar, on the far side from the bogeys. I called to Marty, "You wanna raise them, or should I?"

"You just fly," called Marty. "I'll handle the diplomacy." As I parked us "behind" the station, I heard Marty's voice on the radio, "Attention, vessels. You are firing on a neutral station. State your justification."

"None of your business. Go away," came the gruff reply. It sounded like they weren't used to speaking Common, but there was no discernible accent.

"Be advised," said Marty, "If you maintain fire but do not offer any explanation, you will be neutralized." No answer, except more missiles smashing into the station's shields. "All right," Marty called up, "Let's do it!"

I flipped to Inertial, then slewed the Levi to the right, around the station's central column. The two reds looked like they were in pretty small frames, so I didn't expect too much trouble. First, we had to get their attention. As soon as I had a clear shot, I targeted the nearest one and opened fire. Neither bogey turned around, but kept firing on the station. Fine by me. I held down the trigger until I was out of juice, then slewed back to port for another slow run. They both turned to face me at about the same time that the first bogey exploded. I drifted behind the station, and reverse afterburned a bit so the fight would take us clear of the gravity well.

Sure enough, our guy came whipping around the station at full tilt, and fired two missiles at us, which I dispatched with countermeasures. He gained, we opened fire at about the same time, and I slewed right to dodge the incoming fire. Unfortunately, the bogey slewed to his "down," which was our "right." I started slewing to my "down" the moment I noticed, but our shields still crossed. "Hey, watch it, will you?" Marty shouted, but I could tell he was enjoying the show.

Turning around seemed to take forever. Our red could have blown us to bits, if he was a better pilot. Instead, he was making distance for another attack run. As we finished the turn, he came to a "stop" neatly in the middle of my targeting reticule. I opened fire again, slewing up this time, and we passed each other uneventfully. I figured one more run of this was going to be enough, and I even started to turn early. Then Marty called "Aren't you going to use any missiles?"

"Nah," I called, "Don't need 'em."

"You sure?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Trust me. This guy isn't too bright. The few hits we take will cost wa-a-ay less to repair than restocking one missile." We finished the turn and I opened fire again.

"Okay, but we're splitting the bill," he said as the second bogey exploded. I turned us around and headed for the station. We got a warm reception; they even repaired Marty's ship for free after he paid the docking fee. Of course, we got only blank stares when we asked around about who had sent the attackers. I didn't blame them. Marty and I were breaking the tacit code of the mercenary, the part where you never stick your neck out for anyone else, ever.

I didn't sleep much that night – the thrill of the hunt kept me up. Of course, I had technically just signed up to be the hunted, but that didn't bother me. None of that stuff matters in a fight, anyway.

Next morning, the silent treatment was worse. Marty and I had trouble finding a shop that would sell us anything, so we headed back to my Levi for breakfast. I'll say this for algal porridge, it probably could manage to taste worse. Still, even that stuff couldn't dampen my spirits. Marty was a little more reserved about it than me, but it was pretty obvious that he was excited, too. I could also tell from the way he ate that he was pretty scared. Or maybe he just really, really didn't like the porridge. Either way, I didn't blame him.

There was another attack that day. Two the next. Anywhere from three to five each day after that. The bogeys usually came in groups of two to five, but by two weeks in, we were seeing close to seven reds per attack. Marty and I held them back with no problem. I had never fought alongside only one other person, but my training as a squad leader helped a little when it came planning. One idea I had worked really well, so we stuck to it. Marty and I would fly out together, one a little ahead of the other. The reds would swarm the "bait" pilot, and try to get on his tail. As they got on, which was usually one-by-one, the "back" pilot would shoot them off. Occasionally a bogey would engage the back pilot, but Marty and I were both good enough to hold our ground for a little while extra. At the beginning, Marty and I traded positions each flight, but pretty soon we both noticed that he flew better as bait, and I flew better as back. About twelve days in, I bummed four echelons off a freelancer passing through. I don't like missiles, but it seemed like good insurance to have, given what I'd gotten myself into.

I was surprised that the reds kept falling for my ploy. You'd think they'd be broadcasting a live feed to their crime boss, and that the next wave would learn from it. But every time, like clockwork, they fell for the bait. Marty and I got so good, we could pull a skirmish in less than five minutes.

Part 6

One day, Marty and I were checking the loot from a skirmish, so we were pretty spread out, when six bogeys jumped in. We closed distance as fast as we could, but the reds still managed to split into two squads of three, and engaged us separately. I didn't even notice till we were in the thick of it that Marty and I had baited our respective reds and were shooting each others' down at the same time. As I countered a missile and held fire on the red on Marty's tail, I mulled over a few possible names for this new pattern. I settled on "baitbacking," because it's just a more fluid version of baiting and backing.

Simple, I know. Laugh if you want, but that's what I call it.

Baitbacking is a real thrill – it's offense, defence, and escort all in one. Plus it builds trust, seeing as you count a lot on your friendly. In a few days, Marty and I had it down to three minutes per skirmish. Pretty soon we stopped bothering to dock, too. Between Marty's fuel converter and my repair system, we were pretty much autonomous. Strangely, nobody from the station ever asked us to leave the area, but they seemed pretty happy that we had stopped bugging them for service (we still showed up to buy countermeasures). I guess they didn't want to fall, but they didn't want to be labelled as our allies, either.

Marty and I didn't see much of each other in person for a while – we were always keeping scramble-ready. Marty spent most of the in-between going over all that encrypted data in his banks, and doing god-knows-what with it. He wouldn't tell me much of anything, he said, until he had thoroughly processed the data. I spent my time doing just about anything, but mostly reading up on ship maintenance. I wanted to be ready in case my repair device ever failed, but I could understand pretty quick why they were such a commercial success. Pods are very complex. I looked it up - apparently it takes an average of 5 years of training to qualify a tech to build a single spacecraft component, 8 more years to oversee the development of an entire subsystem, with the exception of the AI, which takes more like 20. Of course, I wasn't looking to build - just fix - so my "homeschooling," as Avi called it, took less time per component.

A few days later, Marty and I were holochatting. Marty was talking about how the attacks had been escalating in frequency and magnitude, and how he expected there to be a big push real soon. I was inclined to agree, but felt like I just wanted to blow things up as they came. Then we spent a little time indulging in a newfound hobby of mine, guessing who was behind the attacks. We figured it wasn't a government, because no capital ships had showed up yet, and the pilots were strictly average. That also crossed out the possibility of a major crime boss, but there were just too many ships for a minor crime boss, either. The bogies' hull markings weren't much help; they were from just about everywhere, far as we could tell. And if the fighters were serving as some sort of distraction, something else would have happened by now. As to who WAS behind the attacks, we resorted to wild speculation. Evil family members was classic, but too unoriginal. Drug dealers might make sense, if, as Marty had pointed out, the pilots all flew high. I even went so far as to suggest that the attackers were a new alien species, and Marty figured they might be some sentient form of cheese. Don't ask me how he got there. You've probably had conversations like that, too, so don't judge. Anyway, it was getting pretty late at that point, so we signed off, and I hit the bunk straightaway.

The next day I decided to try out something new. It had been close to a month since I'd been more than 4 kilometres of Port Oasis, and besides being sick of the place to start with, I wanted to see what the bogeys would do if they found Marty and me farther away from the station. I ran this by Marty, and pretty soon we were parked 10 kilometres out, facing galactic north. It wasn't long before the bogeys jumped in - behind us, this time - and went straight for the station, even though we must have showed on their radar. Marty and I closed the distance with a quick jump, then started baitbacking as quick as we could. It was strange, having the station as a third bait, but it helped a little. We whittled it down to 5 reds before the rest broke off and tried to swarm us.

Of course, taking on 5 bogeys was a cinch for Marty and me by that point. With a little fancy flying, we just about finished them off when suddenly, my radar showed 25 new enemy contacts. I heard Marty groan over the comm, and a little notice popped up on my HUD that Avi had logged a jump point so that I could bug. I closed the notice and called over to Marty, "Hey, we're goanna see this through, right?" He took a while to answer.

"Yeah," he said, "Like Don Quixote." Whatever that meant. Anyway, the reds were closing fast. Normally I don't believe in using missiles, but at this point I doubted I would ever get another chance to use them. I targeted a bogey, aimed a little to its left, and whaled on the afterburner. Once I closed to within gun range, I launched two missiles at him. I guess he wasn't expecting that, because the glow of his explosion filled the cockpit for a second. Then I was back in the dark, with 13 reds to worry about (Marty had 10 of them distracted, Avi told me). I tagged the nearest one, swung around, and started toward him. I landed more hits than he did on our first attack run, so the idiot went into a spiral. I pitched up, so that he was right "below" me, then accelerated down. I felt that incredibly painful tingling you get when blood rushes to your head, but I kept going. Pretty soon, the guy was flying circles around me. Next time he got in front, I locked the guns and started firing, yawing to match his pattern. As he went up in flames, I targeted a red behind the explosion. His shields were already half-down, so I lost another missile. He lit up, so I picked the next nearest bogey and shot him down while flying backwards.

This whole time, I had been dodging missile fire. I was flying hard enough that most of the gunfire missed me, but I had been dropping CMs like the Federation drops empty threats. It was while turning to face another bogey that I ran out, and two missiles found my tail. Avi shifted power to the aft shields, but the hits still took my engines down to 45%. I couldn't bug out now - not that I had ever planned to. I checked on Marty - his shields were still at 69%, lucky guy. I accelerated as much as I could away from the group, killed the IDS, then 180ed. Mid-turn, I saw Marty trying to make his way over, but we both knew it was no use. Soon a missile hit him, then another, and a third was firing my way.

"Hey, Marty," I said as I finished the turn, targeted the red in my sight, and fired my last missile. It missed, of course.

"Yeah?" Marty sounded strangely calm, I thought, just when I was getting jumpy.

"What the hell is a donkey hotay?"

"It's a kind of cheese," he said.

"No, seriously, I said, and then two big things happened in my life.

Part 7

The first big thing that happened in my life at that moment was that the missile I mentioned was heading toward me hit, lit, and tore my ship in half. I remember seeing my left wing tumbling away, sizzling on the end that had been attached to the pod. Then my drive system exploded. Luckily it was far enough away that the concussion only widened a few cracks. I had been wearing my harness, so I wasn't blown out then and there, but the whole thing had me dazed. Lucky for me that Avi, for having just lost half his body, was on a surprisingly even keel. While I sat there nursing a dim sense of urgency, he sealed all the doors that would still work. The bulkhead behind the main pit slammed shut like a guillotine, then there was a whoosh as the pressure in the main pit was raised to standard. I came to, thanked Avi, then shut down everything. Gunfire lanced by my windshield, and I decided not to punch up the distress beacon, or even correct my tumble until I had drifted far away. All this took about 10 seconds, after which I slipped back into being dazed.

I saw the light from the second big thing first. It took another tumble-round for a Pearl Navy destroyer to come into full view, then fly out again. As far as I could tell, all the reds broke off Marty and I and beelined towards the destroyer. I remember thinking

"coffee, I need coffee." Then I felt a stabbing pain in my leg as Avi shot me with adrenaline.

Coming to, I reached for a compartment low on my left, and pulled out a battery-powered fan. I clipped it to one of the struts, then turned it on to circulate the cabin air. Then I tried to bring the thrusters back online. Stick control was dead, but the backup controls worked...if you can call it working. On an overhead panel, there were 8 buttons and 2 mini throttles, each with a number, but positioned as ambiguously as can be. In a pinch, remembering which thruster is which button is tough. Also, you can't really look out a window while pressing the button - you have to check in between bursts to see how the thrusters are actually affecting the pod's attitude. Grumbling to myself, I reached up and turned on the panel. I guessed that I had thrusters one through four, and maybe five. Without the stick, the thrusters wouldn't gimbal, so I had to use them in their current configuration. At least, I thought, with the gravity offline, I'd be able to feel everything.

Let me be the first to tell you that correcting a tumble is no easy task when you're alert and in a full ship with powered gyros, wings, stabilizers, thrusters, and a fully functioning AI. I couldn't even look forward. I pulled off my harness, drifted up, and faced the panel so that it was upside down, sprawling on the ceiling so that "up" was straight out the forward windshield. Then I eased in on button 2 (the numeral 2 looks very odd upside down, you should try it sometime), which had the effect of partially checking the downward pitch of my tumble. Balancing the pod at this rate would take hours, but I figured that it couldn't hurt to try. At least this way I'd get a better view of the battle I was missing.

It worked. In ten minutes, I had the rotation slow enough that the stars looked like individual points of light, and not blurry lines. Every 7 seconds, I got a pretty good view of the Destroyer, which I realized had a detail of several fighter squadrons. 11 minutes in, the battle was still raging, which amused me. I couldn't find Marty anywhere, but that didn't mean much.

Next turn, I saw that one of the Feds was getting swarmed. I was expecting to see him light up, but instead he lost 8 missiles, almost all at once. They barrelled toward his nearest bogey, and five of them hit before it died. The remaining missiles took the nearest target, and finished him off, too. I was impressed, and made a note to write a program for rapid missile launching. I kept track of that fighter, just to see what else he could do, and I was very surprised when about half a minute later, he launched another volley of 8 missiles within about a second! Again and again, this kept happening, until he had used up far more missiles than his ship could possibly have room for. Part of me was thinking that I must be hallucinating, but a much bigger part of me was thinking, "I want a weapon like that."

Suddenly I was caught in a tractor beam, and the remaining tumble stopped pretty quick, and I flew across the cabin and slammed my funny bone into a panel of switches. That woke me up. I sat back down at the con, used the emergency battery to bring the radio online, and picked a frequency I knew the Feds used a lot. "Comm check," I said. Then I saw my right wing drifting away. The beam must have shook it loose.

"Stand down and prepare for boarding," a formidable voice replied.

"Copy," I said. With Feds, terse is good.

I was indeed boarded - I could hear the spacesuits through the walls. We hit an impasse when I wouldn't let them into the main pit. I tried to explain that I couldn't open the door, and that doing so would kill me anyway, but they kept threatening to shoot me down. Eventually I just gave up and let them blabber. In the end, they stopped

threatening and dragged me back to Port Oasis. On the way there, I jerry-rigged my antenna to leech power from the tractor beam to kick-start my repair device. I was happy when it worked. When we got there, I was also happy to see Marty's Levi was already snug in a tractor.

Docking me was tricky. The station snagged me no problem, but my power relay was damaged beyond recognition, and my fuel relay was on the half of the ship that had blown up. The pod's frame was bent enough that the docking port wouldn't fit, either. In the end, the Feds glued a Res-Q-Port to my windshield, then made me cut a hole in it with a blowtorch to get out.

Once I climbed into the station, I was met by a group of something like 20 soldiers with guns, all trained on me. I held my hands up, but they still tased me and ran a strip-search, right there in public. When this was done, I was escorted to one of the rental rooms, where I met Marty and a very angry woman in a Rear Admiral's uniform.

"Sit," she said. I sat. "Do you two know why you're here?" she asked. Marty and I shrugged. "You are here because you are responsible for the greatest traffic violation in the history of the Federation!" Marty and I looked at each other. "We heard reports of multiple skirmishes near Port Oasis, but we never thought for an instant that those responsible would be incon-SID-erate enough not to clean up after themselves. Do you have any idea how much trouble you've caused? 43 shipping lanes..." And so on and so forth. Apparently, Marty and my "indiscretions" - as she called them - had put a real stopper on Federation commerce. I didn't believe this for a second - you could get a perfectly clear approach by jumping in from the galactic south, which is exactly what most everybody did. A month-long brawl just outside the front door isn't going to intimidate the kind of spacers who show at port Oasis. I didn't bring this up, though.

Eventually, she got to the part about the "consequences of our actions." She said the Federation was going to park the minifleet that had saved our asses right in front of the Port. If any more attackers showed up, they would "dispatch" them. They didn't much care what we did with ourselves, but if we ever showed up again at Port Oasis, they would "dispatch" us. Nothing would stand in the way of the glorious Federation. That last bit must have been real important, because she mentioned it several times. I didn't get much more than that because I was devoting so much brainpower to not reacting.

We got yelled at for about half an hour; then we were escorted back to our ships and given an hour to clear out of the sector. I got on Marty's pod, and we dragged mine out on his tractor. We departed for the deep space to the South, maxing out as fast as my trailing pod would let us.

Part 8 & 9

Given the damage to my pod, it seemed pretty clear to Marty and me that we, or at least I, wouldn't be going anywhere soon. We thought that letting it leech off of Marty's tractor beam would speed things up a bit, and it would have, but the noise just got too irritating. In the end, I suited up, "walked" over, and prioritized the power relay on my repair system. Within two hours, my pod was leeching straight from Marty's reactor with an umbilical. After that, we had nothing but spare time.

Marty still spent a lot of time poring over his data, but I could tell that he felt guilty for being a bad host. I didn't mind being alone most of the time, but I also felt like I was being a bad guest, so it was really only a matter of time until we found ourselves in the rec area, sitting around a blazing holofire. Marty had some real hot dogs stashed away somewhere, and he brought them out for the occasion. We held them right up to the fire

- the computer wouldn't let it burn our hands - and roasted them that way.

"Excellent dog," I said, after I had taken a bite.

"So," Marty paused dramatically, "Your ghosts, first? Or mine?"

"Yours," I said, finishing the hot dog and holding another into the fire.

"Any preference as to where I should start?" he asked.

"Where did you get your frame?"

"I already told you I bought Used," Marty said, "I bought it from my whacky uncle at a ridiculously low price. As far as I know, nobody in my family knows how he got it. Obviously it's a bit older than just one generation, though - what with the fiberoptics and all. He was a real hoot, my wacky uncle."

"Did you buy it before or after you met Leah?" I asked.

His face knotted a little, but not in a revealing way.

"Before," he replied. "I bought it as soon as I earned my heavy license. Then I went off to the Sapphire Science Academy to become a Quantum Mechanic."

"And you met Leah there?" I finished.

"No. I met Leah much later than that! Maybe it's time I tell you a little something of my research..." I nodded, and he continued, "back as SSA, I had a friend who was studying to be a Navigator. He and the rest of our little group loved going off on these little 'adventures' on the weekends. On the longer vacations, we'd go find more obscure things. For example, my Junior year, we found the Wolf sector during Christmas Break."

"You've been to Wolf?!?" I blurted.

"Yes," Marty chuckled. "I'll give you the coordinates sometime. Anyway, the summer after that, we set off to find a hidden planet - the one at Aries. We found it after two weeks of pattern-hopping, and while everybody was celebrating, I was wondering about a very important detail."

"What was the detail?" I said, taking the bait.

"Well, I could tell at a glance that the planet was well-lit. It had an atmosphere, weather systems, even some geothermal activity. But I could tell in the very same glance that there was no star nearby."

"Bull," I said. "Can't happen." I reached for a third hot dog.

"Think about it," Marty said. "Did you see a star when you went out to Pearl's hidden planet?"

I was dumbstruck. I had been to a hidden planet and back without noticing, but once I thought about it, I remember there not being a nearby star - and I had landed on the dayside. It must have shown on my face, because Marty laughed.

"Don't worry! That's what I had assumed, too, until I saw it with my own eyes. It got me wondering if there were any other well-lit planets out there without suns, which, by the way, is not the type of question you can just bring up in a casual conversation at a

science academy. Basically what I did, I convinced my friend to take the group out to find Virgo's hidden planet, and as I had suspected, it didn't have a star, either. If anyone else noticed, they didn't show it." Marty paused for a moment. "Anyway, the hidden planets took a backburner while I finished my thesis. I promised myself that I would solve that mystery some day, but you know how these things go. As soon as I graduated, I got a job as a nanotechnician with Google, which ate up most of my time. Bills piled up - not too fast, you know, just fast enough to keep me where I was. I moored the leviathan at a local spaceport, bought a car and a house, and settled down to spend the rest of my life on Sapphire. I got involved in a civil engineering think-tank on the multiphase effects of gate travel - trying to figure out how to stack hyper-c objects in same space without annihilating each other, and pure physics became a hobby for me." There was another pause.

"What changed?" I prompted. "How did you wind up here?"

"Well, as I said, pure physics became a hobby of mine, as did astrogation. I was living on top of the largest planetary database in the history of mankind, so I used my spare time to analyze data I found to plot the locations of other hidden planets and such things. In a few years, I knew more about the backwaters of Evochron than most spacers do in a lifetime."

"That's because they don't need to know all of it." I don't know why I felt defensive about it, but I did.

"Quite so." Marty paused again. "So, anyhow, that was the state I was in when I met Leah. We still have a few old-fashioned libraries on Sapphire that are open for public use, and I started to frequent one in search of old hard-copy flight manuals of prominent spacers, treatises on quantum tunnelling - anything that could get me a lead on the location of a hidden planet or how it might be heated. Some of the more obscure works hadn't been scanned in to the Cortex, and almost all of those ones proved to be helpful. Anyway, there were only a few other people who even bothered to use the library, and Leah was one of them. She was a radio astronomer, working on the Science Academy payroll for her doctorate at the time. There were few enough regulars that we sort of got to know each other, but she caught my attention because unlike the others, she didn't spend much time looking for her books. Leah spent almost all her time reading, curled up in some obscure corner or another. She didn't care too much what she was learning, as long as it interested her."

"Nice." I nodded.

"So anyway, we already sort of knew each other when she found me in the Library one day, and asked me some question about quantum computing. I don't even remember what it was, to tell you the truth, but I remember being impressed at a radio astronomer's sheer level of comprehension of the matter. It was at that moment that I knew she could help me discover the secret of the hidden planets.

"Explaining things to her was difficult. Remember, you didn't believe me at first, and we've been wingies for nearly two months, now. It turned out that the only way I could convince her I wasn't lying was by taking her out to Aries Hidden Planet and showing her the lack of sun to light the dayside." Marty smiled. "She was a tough biscuit, Leah..."

"So then what happened?"

"Well, we got straight to work. We did research, took measurements - annotated, of course...things got exciting pretty quick. I had already suspected that quantum tunnelling was involved somehow, but Leah took it to a whole new level. She hypothesized that the reason almost nobody seemed to notice the lack of a star near a hidden planet was caused by some sort of naturally occurring perception filter. You get that? Nobody's ever really made a successful EM-based perception filter, and suddenly we know of at least five naturally occurring ones, on a massive scale. All we had to do was prove it, and we started with Pearl. The first thing we figured out was that, as assumed, Pearl's Hidden Planet has a stable magnetic field and is subjected to a constant solar wind - photons and all. The next part we figured out, and this really raised my eyebrows, was that the solar wind is not directed - that is to say that while it does hit the planet at a consistent attitude, it doesn't focus down to a point in any direction, or even particularly seem to come from anywhere. It's just there," he stressed, and I nodded. "Of course, this was a major impasse, but at least we pretty much knew that complex quantum tunnelling was also involved, so I started running calculations on our data, just to see what would turn up. We took readings from all over the sector, kept crunching numbers, but we hadn't gotten very far when the meteor hit."

"How long were you out there taking readings?" I asked.

"Four years," he said, looking down and smiling. "four years...and I still don't have a mathematical model for either the tunnelling or the perception filter."

He seemed angry about that last part. then he looked at me. "So how about you? How did you get here?"

"Eah," I hesitated, "that's a pretty long story."

"Why don't you start by telling me a little bit about your childhood," joked Marty.

"I grew up on Riftspace," I said, looking him in the eye.

"Gristle," said Marty.

"Yeah," I said.

"So you..."

"Were the son of second-generation pioneers, grew up wild and free, lived off the land, that kind of stuff?"

"Yeah,"

"That's me. We even had a farm with free-range krupta."

"Oh."

"I hated it. I didn't get along too well with my parents. They wanted me to run the farm when I grew up, and I wanted to fly. My father, he got angry real easy. He loved to say that I'd take the farm and be happy about it. Ironically - well, you've probably heard enough Alliance fighter pilot slang to know that "taking the farm" means getting shot down. I don't know why they thought yelling at me would make me want to stay, but that's what they did. Lots and lots of yelling."

"The rest of the planet wasn't much better. No matter where I went, I was surrounded by people who were proud to be pioneers. I mean really proud. In school, we had these Nationalism classes, which were disgusting. I had this one Nationalism instructor for several years, and she had this spiel about how great it was that Riftspace had an 18% infant mortality rate. You get that? She'd be glowing, and everyone else would be nodding or taking notes...Same spiel every year, too. Just about everybody was that way – proud of things like their infant mortality rate. They were proud that we didn't have enough hospitals, or that most fires had to be put out by bucket brigade. You know what a bucket brigade is?" The fire crackled, as if to make a point. Marty managed a nod, but barely. "Wow. Your library must have been really thorough. Oh, another thing everyone just loved was ploughs. Most of the farmers on Riftspace used old-fashioned ploughs of one sort or another – the more archaic, the better. It was almost as if the longer it took you to till your land, the better a pioneer you were. Farmers would be out there turning ankles and stepping in ox dung and cutting themselves on sharp plough-edges in this planet-wide, ongoing manliness contest that made me want to vomit. I had to leave. They were driving me crazy."

"I can see why."

"Huh. You should have been there."

"I'm sorry."

"Nah, don't be. I mean, I made it out okay, right?"

"How did that work, by the way?"

"One day I ran away. The nearest city was only about 5 decs away, and I hitched a ride from a spacer once I got there."

"You walked 50 kilometres?" Marty almost shouted in surprise. I smiled at that.

"Yeah. It was that, steal my parents' combustion car, or take a horse."

"So what happened then?"

"The spacer I hired flew me up to R-Com, the only Alliance recruiting station in the sector. I figured I'd sign on as a mercenary (not a goon or a militiaman!) until I made enough money to buy a pod, which I did. For the first few weeks I was just a guard in some hallway, but I guess I was real good at standing formidably or something. Pretty soon I was in basic flight school, and I graduated with honours in record time. I got a low-end Pulsar on a rent-to-own plan, and I was assigned to a flight group."

"Is that where you were when..."

"No, I was back at R-Com, actually. They commissioned me early so I could be reassigned as a flight instructor."

"Nice," Marty said, and then realized what he had just implied. "I didn't mean"- he gushed.

"I know," I said. "Don't worry. I get it," but he still looked a little frazzled. I let it slide.

To be honest, I was getting a little frazzled, too. I knew where this conversation was going, and I didn't like it. We both reached for another hot dog at the same time, saw what the other was doing, and put our hands back in our laps. I nodded for Marty to take one first.

"So your parents..." he floundered. "Did you ever..."

"Get back in touch?" I finished. He nodded. "No. Nope. I always meant to, but I never did."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks, I guess – but it doesn't do much good, you know."

"I know."

"These hot dogs are amazing. Are they beef or pork?"

"Turkey, actually," said Marty.

"No crap?"

"No crap. They're made from real, free-fall turkey."

"Free-fall?"

"The turkeys were raised in low lunar orbit. It makes for more white meat."

"Wow. We never had that on Riftspace."

"Let me guess, it wasn't backwards enough?"

"Bingo," I said.

Part 10

We talked for a while longer. Thing is, I didn't want to spill about Riftspace. Marty tried not to act too curious, but it didn't work, so things petered out. I was getting tired anyway. Finally Marty took the hint - he put out the fire, stowed the hot dogs, and offered me Leah's cubby, adding as quickly as possible that there were no other places to sleep on board because all the other crew slots had been filled with databanks.

The cubby smelled odd, which didn't surprise me. It had been about three weeks since Leah died, and I already suspected that Marty's pod didn't have service nano's. I got into the sleeping bag and looked around.

Pictures.

I had never seen so many pictures in one place before! She must have had a kilo of pictures on those walls. I really couldn't help but look at them. First I saw a picture of Leah standing at the edge of a massive canyon, then one of Leah with her...well, it looked sort of like a dog, but with a longer snout and a prehensile tail. Then I saw a picture of Leah and what I assumed to be her family all standing in this field next to a radio telescope. Her dad, if that's who he was, had completely silver hair. I liked him right away – he seemed to be looking right at you, like he was glad to see you.

Everybody in the pictures was smiling so wide...I didn't know what to make of it at first, but then I chalked it up to Sapphire custom.

Suddenly I felt like I was spying. I tried not to look, but the pictures were everywhere. No matter how I turned, I saw the same woman smiling ear to ear. A dead woman.

I was in her sleeping bag.

It was a very long night. I kept having this dream, over and over. Leah would be in this field - the one next to the radio telescope - dancing. She'd be dancing and laughing, and the dream would zoom in to her face. Then, mid-laugh, she would corpsify, and I would wake up, let out a hefty yelp, maybe bang my head on something, and spend an hour or so trying to get back to sleep without looking at any more of Leah's gorram pictures.

Next morning, I told Marty that I didn't want to sleep in Leah's cubby again. He nodded, but didn't say anything. I was glad he didn't. That night, I took her bag out to the rec area and set the grav to 0.2, but the damage had been done. The dream came back, but with a sadistic twist. Every now and then, Leah would sort of turn into...

Frak it. Just frak it.

Her name was Saer. In my dream, I kept seeing Leah and Saer and Leah's face after she died and Saer's face as she died. Sometimes I could see the walls, too.

Anyway, I didn't get much sleep that night, so I started taking knockout pills each evening after. Still, the dreams would come back as I woke up in the morning, and I still felt like I had spent most of the night awake anyway. Marty still wouldn't let me help sift through his frelling data, so all I could do to pass the time was try to read or listen to music (Marty didn't have recreational any visualization systems on board), neither of which worked. It got to the point that I was trying to play chess in my head, but I couldn't concentrate for more than a couple of minutes at a time. Every now and then and with absolutely no warning, I'd get a flashback. Never a full one - only parts at a time - really unnerving.

I hadn't thought to ask or look around, so it wasn't until about a week in that I discovered the treadmill. I unfolded it and started running on it like mad. I could feel myself almost starting to calm down when Marty came down to see what the noise was. He got this weird look on his face when he saw me. It made my hair crawl.

"Running, huh?" he sort-of-called over the whining machine.

"Yeah," I said. I was having trouble running straight, I was so tired. Marty made the kind of weird face that meant he was trying very hard not to make one, then turned back towards the ladder.

"Hey!" I wanted an explanation, but Marty reached out and grabbed a rung. I stopped the treadmill.

"MARTY!" That got his attention. My legs were sort of wobbly - I guess they didn't like slowing down so fast. "What is it?" I snapped.

"Nothing," said Marty.

"I know that look. What are you hiding?"

"Nothing," he insisted. Looking back, I understand why he looked so confused right then.

"Bullcrap." Suddenly I was on the other side of the cabin, next to Marty. "What the hell are you not telling me?" I must have looked wild.

"Look, Van"-

"I. want. to. know." There was silence. Marty shook his head and let out a sigh.

"If you really must, that was Leah's treadmill," he said, and he started climbing the ladder back up to the flight deck.

I knew that some emotion or another was flooding through me, but I had no idea what. I didn't care. I never liked emotions anyway. Then I got an idea. A really, really stupid idea, but I couldn't think of anything else to do. I turned around a bit, balled up my fists as tight as they would go, and let out the loudest scream I could make. Halfway through it turned into a sob, so I kept screaming. You know what? It felt pretty good. In a few minutes, I felt good enough to fold up the treadmill without slamming.

Five minutes later, I was in the shower. As it hummed around me, I wondered what Marty must have been thinking as I bawled my brains out. It can't have been nice for him, I thought. Nobody wants to have a madman on their spaceship. I came that close to hurting him, too, I thought. I didn't want...well, I didn't want to do that. No more slipping, I told myself.

I got out of the shower, suited up, and pulled my way along the umbilical back to my pod. I cycled through the airlock (this time it was my airlock that had equal pressure on both sides). On my way up to the control deck, I saw the galley. It was empty. When I got up to the main pit, I plugged my suit radio in to the console. "Avi?" I called.

"I am here," he answered. I was glad to hear his voice.

"How have you been?"

"Busy," came the reply.

"Sorry I dinged you up so bad."

"Do not worry," he replied. "It is an occupational hazard."

"Look, Avi, how long until life support can be on line again?"

"I could turn it on right now, though that would be inadvisable. Barring unforeseen events, however, minimum functionality should be restored by 09:33 tomorrow."

"Thanks," I said. "That's the best news I've had all day."

"I would have told you sooner, but you put high-function wireless communications pretty far down on the Repair Device's priority list."

"Avi, you sound positively vexed."

"Of course not. I am incapable of vexation."

"Sure thing. Hey, I'll let you get back to doing your thing, alright? I gotta say goodbye to Marty."

"Do you honestly anticipate that it will take you 16 hours and 32 minutes to do so?" I thought about that.

"Nah, I can stay here for a while." So I did. I spent about four hours in my old seat, just staring out at the stars. I guess Avi was more interested in having company than talking - not that I could have kept up with a quantum computer, anyway. It felt sort of good to be empty.

Part 11

I didn't want to go back. As soon as I unbuckled my harness, the queasiness hit again. I practically had to force myself through the airlock. All along the umbilical, I kept reminding myself that I had to go back - that I had nowhere else to go for over half a day - which just made me feel worse.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I said.

"Vannok, you don't"-

"Marty, listen. You saw me earlier. You heard me." I paused, trying to sort out the important thoughts from the random bits. "I can't stay here, or near here. Hell, I'll probably steer clear of Sapphire, too, if I can help it." I let out a breath. "I gotta go," I said, with what I hoped was a sort of finality.

"These last few weeks haven't been easy for me, either," said Marty, doing his best Dumbledore. "Healing takes time, you know, and humans do tend to heal faster when they are not alone."

I know that, I thought. "Look, Marty, I haven't slept well in days! I've got bruises from waking up every morning! I can't stay like this, and you know it."

Marty never conceded verbally, but it was practically written on his face.

"I wish I had something better to say," I said. "I wish I could thank you - properly - for putting me up this long...I wish you knew that there was nothing you can do and that it isn't your fault."

"I understand," said Marty, which made me feel very alone. After a pause, he said, "You still have some time here, I'm guessing. You can still talk, if you think it would help."

"Talk about what?"

"About how..." Marty sort of gestured at me, "how you got like this. About, I assume, the day your planet-"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said, and that was that.

Next morning, I put Leah's sleeping bag back in her cubby. "fat lot of good you were" I muttered as I tied it down. I should have just slept outside in my spacesuit. I was finishing a breakfast of "orange"-flavoured algal porridge when Marty climbed down from the flight deck - evidently he had pulled another all-nighter crunching his data. "That study of yours really means a lot, doesn't it," I said.

"Yes," he said. "I feel a compulsion to finish what Leah and I started." I nodded. Marty was a pretty zen guy.

"Will you go back to Pearl's Hidden Planet?" I asked. Marty fixed me the "what else can I do?" look. "Well, then, if I ever need to find you..." He smiled. "Hey, I've been wondering about this for a while, now, and I figure I might as well ask you, of all people. How come I can hear missile impacts through the vacuum of space"

"It's one of the great mysteries of modern science," he said, shaking his head. He looked at me. "To date, nobody has published any relevant work. I guess with some things, it's just easier to accept them and move on."

Part 12

"Hawk approach, this is Leviathan, Alliance Code 0075B-NC128, requesting permission to dock, main bay."

"0075B-NC128, this is Hawk Approach, you are clear for green docking. Enter downwind starboard on Hawk's ecliptic. Do you have a military ID?"

"Roger that. My M-ID is DT7K-421a-K986. Entering downwind approach, now."

"Copy. And, on behalf of the crew of the Hawk, welcome aboard, Lieutenant Vannok!"

"Thank you. Yawing port 090 for base approach, now."

"Vannok, this is Hawk. Prep for contact."

"Go for contact...Yawing port 090 for final approach, now. Trajectory is in the green and stable, switching to IDS. Prepped for tractor."

"We have you on tractor."

It felt great to be spinning down in a carrier, again. Soon I was in the hanger, floating along a docking tube between my leviathan and the hub. Towards the end of the tunnel, gravity started to pull me down, so I grabbed on to the guide rope and hoisted myself the rest of the way up. Once I was standing on solid ground, I headed for the nearest medbay – the ones near mercenary docking hubs on carriers usually serve as recruitment centres when the ship is below condition 3. The halls were white and sterile, just like I remembered.

Being an assault carrier, the Hawk's actual medbays are pretty small. The walls are full of cryochambers for transporting wounded back from the front. If you get shot or something, they just shove you in a drawer for the rest of the mission – longer, if your paperwork isn't perfect. A siege carrier, on the other hand, is a great post to get shot at, if you're willing to put up with the assault carrier crews making fun of the size of your genitals.

The medbay I entered had the bare minimum of one operating table, per regulation, though the recruiter was using it for a desk at the time. "Name?" he asked as I stepped up. I wondered if he went to a special school to practice looking so uninterested.

"Check your tablet," I said. "How many retinal scans have been taken of me since I docked?"

"Twelve, Lieutenant" he answered, after a brief search. There was another pause as he glanced over my record. "We are currently accepting re-enlistments, however *you* must submit to both physical and psychological examination." I knew that would happen. "Why don't you report to Medbay four? It is on Deck 3, section 8."

"I know, thanks," I called as I left. Since I wasn't on active duty status, he didn't salute, but I doubt he would have, anyway. He looked like a goon to me, and everybody knows goons never salute mercs.

Part 13

As soon as we jumped in, I could see things were bad. One destroyer was barely holding its own against a Vonari cruiser and a swarm of about 20 fighters. I slewed downwards, barely missing the blunt nose of the cruiser, and I saw red for a bit as too much blood went to my head. On the glide, I pitched up 90 to fire a few shots at the cruiser's belly. It didn't do a thing, of course.

"Report" I called.

"Viper 2 here."

"Viper 3!"

"Viper 4, engaging enemy fighters."

We all waited around for Viper 5 to chime in, but no luck. I checked my radar. "Anyone see Five?" I asked.

"He slewed port, Sir. He's out." I sighed. Bok was always doing stupid things like that in simulation, and it sure looked like he'd blown it for real, this time.

"Viper 6, go." At about this time, I cleared the cruiser's sublights.

"Alright, everybody, we're goanna have to improvise. For now, pick a fighter and shoot." I started in the direction of Viper 3 to help him out, lighting up a bomber on the way.

"Viper 1, this is Hercules. It's good to see you, but what kind of tactics are you using, exactly?" enemy fire glanced off my shield, so I slewed starboard.

"Tactics? We don't need no stinking tactics!" I said, pitching up to lay some deterrent fire.

"How the drenn am I supposed to coordinate a battle with no tactics?" As if the topah had authority over another ship's fighter squadron!

"Just relax and let it all go to hell, Sir," I said. "We'll take care of the rest." Then, to Viper 3, "Bones, what the frak are you doing in between the cappies?"

"Just admiring the sce . . ." and there he went. I saw him light up. Vonari beam weapons will do that.

"If another one of you nuggets take the farm, I will personally say bad things about you at your funeral! Now, Vipers 2, 4, and 6, burn out of here and form up on me. We're goanna do this right and proper." I dispatched the five incoming missiles by whaling on the countermeasures, wishing the whole time that levis came with some kind of point defence.

We all made it out, though I took some enemy fire and Six took a missile. The reds were starting to move towards us en masse, now, and I knew we had to reengage them before they cleared the destroyer - their secondary target. "Alright, everyone," I said, "Make a vee, then split and baitback once we make gun range. Two, you're with me." One thing I will say about my squaddies - they most always acknowledge the order while they're executing it, not before. It saves precious time.

Approaching the cloud, I gave Avi CM control. At the range limit, Two and I each went belly up on inertial and hit our IDSs, using up our ventral shields to draw the reds

attention. Then we pulled into our loop and cut through our eight Vonari in two and a half minutes. I looked at my TAC display; the Hercules was in trouble. "Two, head over and assist the destroyer," I said.

"But, Sir--"

"I will *pay* for your gorram missiles, Lewis! Follow orders!"

"Yes, sir." As soon as she jettied off, I knew the destroyer was safe, but I was getting worried about the two particularly green nuggets who were right now trying to baitback nine reds, with limited results. They were sort of skirting the edge of this cloud of fighters, not really picking anyone off, barely dodging all the missiles being launched at them. Anyhow, I took one look at the situation, and decided to do the stupidest thing possible.

I flew Avi straight into the middle of the cloud.

I gave Avi CM control just as the missile prox alarms went off, cited my first target, and tried to catch its tail. Unfortunately our trajectories were perpendicular, but I still got the satisfaction of seeing it caught in Four's crossfire (I could tell from the green of the beams) before it lit up. "Thanks, Four," I called. He didn't reply, which was fine by me, so long as he was still shooting.

The rest of the battle was pretty much a blur. Target, fire, engage IDS, throttle up, fire, dodge, drift, slew port, fire, spiral, afterburn down, pitch up, toggle IDS, fire. I was almost constantly changing direction and shooting, and the missile alarms were just barely more incessant than Avi's CM jettisons. Chaos. Total, constant, incredibly noisy chaos. All the glorified situational awareness in the world wasn't going to help me, now. Just point, click, and try not to get whiplash from the afterburner. Don't pay attention to how disoriented you are - you can worry about that later. A massive explosion - the Cruiser? Worry about that later, too.

Finally, there was one bogey left; I lit him up good. "Viper 1, scopes clear," I said. "Squad, report."

"Viper Two." That was it. On my radar, I saw the light for Viper 4 go out, and I knew he was dead. Four was a merc, like me, but he never wore a suit in combat.

"This is Hercules, Vonari reinforcements are en route. We should be able to execute a jump to Command Alpha within 20 seconds, though, so this counts as a happy ending. Mission accomplished, folks!" Avi confirmed on the HUD that payment had been transferred to my account just before we all jumped out.

As I set up a straight-in approach to the Hawk's main bay, I seethed at what the Hercules' commander had said. "Happy ending." Four of my squaddies were dead, and he figured it was a happy ending, just cause his sorry ass was still around.

Tomorrow, again, I would get some new nuggets and five days to train them. On the sixth day, I'd take them to their deaths on the Front. Again. So another brass hat with a big boat can have a "happy ending." This wasn't a defensive war, anymore. At some point during the past decade, it had turned into a war of attrition.

Part 14

I'm not happy. This war ain't like it used to be.

Whoever's in charge is shipping nuggets off to the front at a prodigious (Marty taught me that word) rate, without actually preparing them. Not only that, but most of them simply should not be flying. Take Bok, for example. The poor kid should never been granted active-duty flight status, and anyone could have told you that, but there he was. Easily overwhelmed, making the same wrong manoeuvre over and over. Dead, because I didn't have the rank to pull him and no-one would listen to me.

The Alliance hasn't conducted a single offensive mission in eight years, you know that? The Galactic-North Blockade is spread thinner than ever before, which is why there is almost never an engagement involving more than one destroyer these days. Did I mention the carriers never see the front, anymore? That's right, the Alliance can't afford the fuel for its carriers to jump. They stay behind at the command stations, while the pilots leak money getting to and from the fight.

Speaking of money, I could literally turn a better profit if they paid me in poopoo. I could trade the poopoo in one of the agricultural systems for twice the value I make in a single mission, and that's **with** my fracking promotion! With all the money I had left two months ago, I could barely afford to upgrade my wings, and nowadays I make enough to buy one missile each time I finish a contract, with barely enough left over to break even on gas. If it weren't for my repair system, I'd actually be losing money. I guess it's a good thing I'm in this for the stress relief.

Maybe the worst thing is that the Blitz is fading from everyone's' memories. The people I've talked to about it don't really have a deep reason for fighting - they just are. If you don't know why you're fighting, how can the guy next to you trust you to cover his ass? After the Blitz, everyone was scared stiff that their planet would be next, and we pulled together as a species - on a scale not seen before or since. Something's changed, though, because now the Alliance is footing the entire bill for a stalemate while sending a constant stream mediocre pilots to their deaths.

Now here's the part that really bothers me: I can't for the life of me reason out why we're in a stalemate. The Vonari made first contact with humanity something like 220 years ago, now, and half a minute later the Federation didn't have a flagship. Then they punched straight through the Orion sector to Earth, setting up only one forward base of operation along the way. They did the same thing again a year later, but with a massive fleet containing "several" carriers. 50 years later, the Alliance declassified information that the Vonari carriers were destroyed in the nick of time, while powering up an inter-vessel superweapon to destroy the Earth (I hear that public reception at the time was a bit sceptical). All this adds up to Vonari having the basic technology to perform a Blitz for at least as long as we've known of their existence.

So at First Contact, the Vonari were light-years ahead of us technologically, and we've been racing like Hell to catch up. That makes sense, right? Thing is, over the past 230 years or so, *why haven't the Vonari been advancing, too?*

Then there's the GNB. I said before it was a stalemate, but again I can't figure out why. The Alliance destroyers are spread out, because that's how blockades work. Fighters dispatch from carriers and command stations to support the destroyers as necessary. It's crap, but it's our system. The only reason it works, though, is because the Vonari stopped focusing their attacks a decade ago - there's usually only one Cruiser per battle, now, too. With all the resources they've since thrown at this blockade, they could have pushed right on through, if they felt like it. Overwhelmed us something like five to one. Blitzed some more planets, while they were at it. But they didn't.

Also, and this is a purely rhetorical question, what exactly is keeping the Vonari from jumping right past the Blockade? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! Using the technology we know they've had since 2285, they could have pushed at least as far in as Cygnus before needing to establish a base. Even then, there enough hidden systems in that region that the Vonari might not even need to confront anyone to set one up.

So, in short, the Vonari could easily be hitting us a lot harder, and one of them nuggets could probably coordinate a better offensive operation than what's going on right now. Especially since they haven't retreated, the facts lend themselves to a sort of ominous conclusion: the Vonari have a vested interest in maintaining the stalemate.

I'd rather not speculate as to why.

Part 15

As much as I loved my church, I eventually traded it in. I had to. I mean, let's face it, Levis are slow. You might be able to wax most human pilots if you're smart, but keeping up with a Vonari in a Levi is like an elephant dallying in parkour. It's no secret that Vonari missiles pack a big punch, and Leviathans are about as sitting-duck as can be when it comes to missiles. Also, I was tired of leaning on my afterburner so much. I checked with Avi - the AB was active roughly 68% of the combat time I had logged since returning to the front. Most of the rest of the time was spent on the glide, but even so I'm sure you can imagine I burned a lot of fuel in a fast way. I wasn't going to solve that problem by switching to an Evoch-C, so I flew a few more missions, lost some more nuggets, and earned another promotion.

Once that was done, I headed back home. You know what it's like to fly in between chunks of the planet where you grew up? It's awkward, is what it is, so I only stayed long enough to make the gate to Vonarion. Common sense compelled me to spend as short a time there as possible, too, so it wasn't long before I was in what we Rift Mercs liked to call Candyland, if we mentioned it at all. Suffice it to say, with the merchandise I traded once I got back to Pearl, I had more than enough money to buy an Avenger.

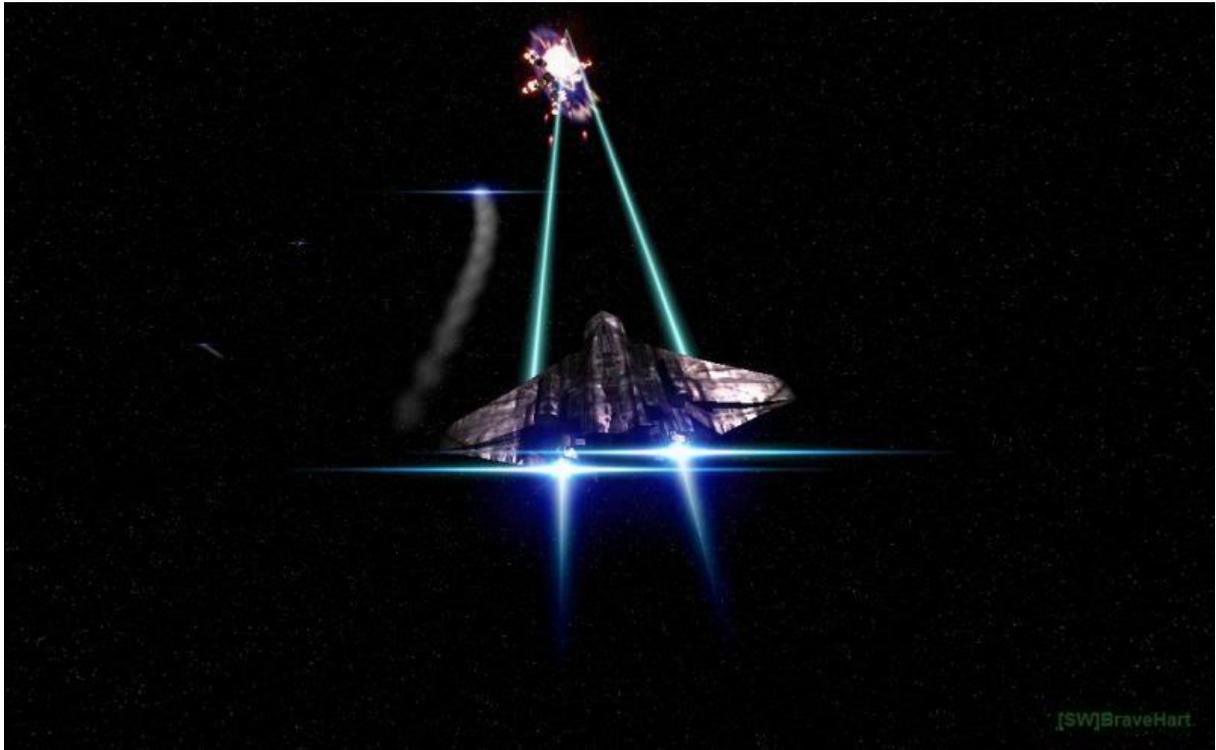
I knew this buy would probably save my life soon, but I was sad to give up my massage chair, surround sound, and bunk. I was also pretty sad to be back in the type of spacecraft that might go into a flat spin if you sneezed wrong. Luckily the latest model of Avenger can handle an AI, so I didn't have to give up Avi. He's a real trip, you know.

Did you know you can become an admiral out here and still never receive a higher command than one fighter squadron - as their leader? I didn't. Used to be that admirals commanded fleets, but... (for lack of a better word) whatever. Also, it's a good thing each skirmish is the same as the last one out here, because there are no more briefings. Just co-ordinates and a brief synopsis of an ongoing engagement. It's like an incredibly deadly pay-per-view.

I been thinking: I want to see who is in charge of this war. I also want to see a living, breathing Vonari, even if I have to kill him (or her) right after. I want to start making a name for myself, so maybe I can influence the way things are going. I think I have a plan that can accomplish these goals. I'll present it to my commanding officer tomorrow, if I can find out who they are and track them down.

Bart's Run by Nigel_Strange

March 2006



Nigel has written several stories. This one is about a day in the life of a mercenary though it has a twist in its tail (or tale!)

Bart's Run

by Nigel_Strange
March 2006

Bart Horsen waved as he left the airlock which shut behind him with a clank. The chamber began to depressurize as the air was sucked out of the airlock and back into the circulation system. He latched his helmet into place and turned on the suit power and watched the row of green lights inside his helmet tell him that his personal atmospheric needs were being met and for how long. With his thick-gloved, rubberized fingertip he touched the external hatch button and stepped outside.

The air outside was a brisk -120 celcius. The cold star on the horizon never moved from its cradle in the mountain shadows. Small, and dim, it seemed too weak to ever climb into the sky proudly and embrace the settlers in the bright noon of the bygone days of a lost planet. They still had songs and writings of it, but nobody could find Earth anymore, and if they did, they weren't coming back to tell anyone else how to get there. Spacers from Evochron had to learn how to make Evochron their home, even though so many planets were never meant for human habitation. Being from a poor family, Bart and his wife had to move to a cold region in the Onyx system. The terraformers were still working on the sky: the bacteria/algal combination producing oxygen and carbon dioxide, though no amount of CO_2 would create enough of a greenhouse effect to get the planet to a comfortable temperature. The settlers would always have to stay indoors and wear suits when they went out, just as Bart was doing now.

" . . . scarcely better than an asteroid," he muttered to himself as he trudged across the frozen green slime that was slowly changing the atmosphere of the planet.

On a raised platform, not far from the dome where he lived, sat his ship: an old, battered Phoenix that he had from his old days as a space pirate. As he approached, he signaled for the cockpit to open and watched as the long shadows played on its frozen surface. He climbed inside and closed the cockpit, then started the checklist.

Every pilot starts his training by memorizing the pre-flight checklist. First, there was the cockpit door, then came the pressure.

He flipped each switch in the proper sequence and watched as each indicator light showed red, then yellow, then green as the systems came online. Life support: check. Reactor: check. Fuel: check. Backup battery: check. Shield capacitors, weapon capacitors, thrusters, engines, jumpdrive, check. ECM: check. He felt the cabin warm up as the engine roar and the fusion reactor heated up the slime outside. Stealth system: check. Shields full. Weapon energy, full.

Easing the throttle up, he nosed up and began to climb out of the freezing atmosphere and into the heatless void of outer space. The stars, which were visible through the thin atmosphere before, became brighter as the dim blue of the atmosphere faded into nothingness. Outside, the roar of the engines became quieter as the atmosphere thinned, until he could hear only the vibrations of the metal frame from the exhaust, and the low hum of the reactor, and, of course, the hiss of the life support system.

He turned on the communication system and heard the radio chatter bouncing around the system. Other pilots on other missions kept in touch with one another to distract

them from the unspoken understanding that space was a vacuum, and that if you got into trouble, the nearest help was likely thousands of clicks away. In a busy area around a starport or a station, it was not so empty, but in the vast reaches of space, one was locked in the tiny cage of a craft that was therefore both prison and womb for hours, days, or sometimes weeks on end.

Full throttle was not fast enough for Bart, so he engaged the afterburner to get to maximum speed. Outside the atmosphere, it was safe to do so. The pink blip on his radar showed him where the first waypoint was, which was the stargate to the next system. He had his route all planned: Olympus Prime, Sapphire (where he would fill up on fuel), Thuban, Virgo, Rucker, Aquila, Alpha Centauri, then Deneb. Once there, he would pick up his goods and haul the stuff back. A full round trip was time and fuel-consuming, but he hoped it would be worth it. He would not be going through Pearl, but some of those systems were pretty tough, and so one had to be ready for a fight, especially in Thuban.

The jump to Olympus Prime was uneventful, and he gazed at the planet as he waited for his jumpdrive to recharge so he could make the jump to the next gate. He could see a lot of activity on his contact list and his radar, but he could not see other ships, except for the momentary flicker against the background of stars, or sometimes a blue burst of light as a jump was initiated.

He entered Sapphire and immediately opened up the navigation computer to find the filling station he preferred. He had a Platinum Customer Card at Jet's Fillup, so he went there, hoping to save some money. As he sat in his cockpit, listening to automated filling system pump fuel into his Phoenix, he scanned the local news to see if there were any opportunities to make money. It seemed that nothing in Sapphire was abnormal. Metals were up, but since they were too cheap to begin with, it was not really worth the fuel to mine or transport them, especially when more money could be made from mining platinum. Stations were always willing to pay for O2 or water from the planets, but he didn't have time for that, either.

As he watched his credit decrease while his fuel increased, he thought about that fuel converter that he used to have rigged to his Phoenix. He sure missed that device. In his pirate days, it was a necessary piece of equipment, as he could not go to any reputable station to fill up, nor did he want to spend his hard-stolen credits on fuel. The nebulae in the Evochron system provided both protection from enemies and a limitless source of fuel. He would spend hours, sometimes days, in the nebulae, hiding from authorities, keeping his machine fuelled, and doing repairs. Sure, the old life had its excitement, but it was also filled with days of nothing but silent tedium, as he needed to live outside the civilized world in order to conduct his business, and that meant isolation and a continual fear of being discovered.

When his tank was full, he burned off the station, scorching the central pillar slightly, and then jumped to the Thuban gate.

Thuban was a Federation stronghold at one time, and the people who lived there did not forget or forgive the Alliance for the old wars. As soon as he appeared in their space, several ships instantly were recognized as enemies and were designated with red blips on the radar and the contact list. After a few seconds, one started firing missiles at him. Bart hit the afterburners in order to gain some speed until his jumpdrive had recharged. A Raven came in within cannon range and started firing. Cursing, Bart swivelled his craft around and opened up with his Icespear. The Icespear was not a heavy cannon, but it did the job (eventually) and had a fast fire rate. Most importantly, it had low energy consumption, so he could put a lot of shots on the target without depleting his reservoir. Carefully guiding his ship in an erratic motion to prevent getting hit, he kept the bead on the Raven, pummeling its shields and then its hull. The Raven slowed down and tried to

back away, but it was too late: it was already spewing flames and gas into the void. The pilot ejected as the ship spiraled into oblivion.

Next, a couple of Sabers went down similarly, their pilots cursing fecklessly as their ships disintegrated around them.

A fourth pilot actually offered Bart a bribe, which he graciously accepted.

"Any more of you want to pay the infamous Pirate Piranha before he unleashes a volley of unholy fury in your face better ante up quick. My trigger finger is just getting warmed up!" he shouted over the com. A few more bribe offers came his way and he considered that he had almost covered the cost of the fuel. The old bloodlust began to awaken in him again, a tickle in the back of his mind that rejoiced in the wholesale slaughter of his fellow man. In the old days, he had been in dogfight after dogfight, heavily outnumbered, and still came out victorious, sending all his enemies floating home to the silent grave. He never thought of death, as his own life was always a gamble. Now, though, he was older and he actually did have something to live for. His warrior days long gone, he still used the Pirate Piranha handle to instil terror and dread in his enemies. He found that this gave him a tactical advantage, and sometimes, just sometimes, he still got to relive those old days, as he did just then.

He jumped to Virgo uneventfully, and then to Rucker. In Rucker, he had to slow down and carefully guide his ship around the numerous asteroids.

"Why don't they get someone to clear away all these damn `roids," he muttered. Then, he spoke into the com. "Any of you mercenaries want to clear some `roids from the gate areas?"

"How much does it pay?" came a lone voice from the void.

"Not nearly enough," said another one.

"Hey, mercenary: whatcha carrying? Anything we might want?" crackled a low, growling voice through the com. The other voices fell silent.

"I'm sitting on a big fat pile of agonizing death which I'd love to share with anyone stupid enough to get in my way," said Bart.

A band of Hunters silently crept out from behind an asteroid. Bart noticed that one of them was using a cargo scanner to see what he was carrying, which was nothing, as he had not gotten to his destination yet. They didn't fire, though: they just watched him go.

Bart punched the jumpdrive and headed into the Aquila gate. His reception in Aquila was similar to the one he got in Thuban, only the ships were tougher. He did not get as many bribe offers but he did have to use his countermeasures more often. His Icespear cannon was less effective against the heavier shields and armour of the Hunters and Renegades.

After he got to Alpha Centauri, he relaxed a little. The system was calm, serene, and easy-going. He stopped at AC1 to get a coffee to soothe his nerves. After he was rejuvenated by the smooth brew (25% less throatburn!) he took the Deneb gate. In Deneb, he had to jump to the Deneb station and then engage the cloaking device so that he could conduct business there without getting shot up by local malcontents.

He made his purchases. It was more expensive to buy on station than it was to get it directly from the planet's surface, but the trade-off was worth it, as he did not have to risk burning up in the atmosphere, or worse, risk getting attacked in the atmosphere, whence he could not bolt away to safety. He nervously watched the timer count down on his cloaking device as the products were loaded into his cargo bays. Outside, he saw the

swarm of red blips circling about. They could not see him, but they were there, waiting for him (or someone like him) to show up. Once he got the goods stowed, he gunned the afterburner and got up to speed. The cloaking timer zeroed out as he was just getting up to a reasonable velocity. A volley of missiles trailed in his wake as he jumped into the Alpha Centauri gate.

It was fairly smooth until he got back to Rucker. He had almost forgotten about the Hunters, but they had not forgotten about him, and were apparently lying in wait for his return. As soon as he came through the gate, they had missile lock on him and fired. Bart turned, but it was too late, a missile hit had gone through the rear shield and done some damage to the hull. He quickly equalized the shields, but he could tell there was considerable systemic damage.

"Welcome back," growled the gravelly voice he had heard once before. "Glad you brought us something on your return trip."

Bart pulled the cannon trigger, but heard it misfire. He tried the cloaking device, but his shields were still too weak. He bumped up energy to the shield system as he slowly drifted toward an asteroid. Another missile came his way. He tried to shoot it, and then used countermeasures when it got close enough. There were four Hunters in formation, coming nearer. He could defeat one, if he was not already damaged. The blips on his radar were flickering and jumping erratically, indicating severe system damage. His hull was down to about half. One more hit and he would be dead. He looked down at the indicators. Most of them were red: afterburners were red. Jumpdrive: red. Life support: yellow. Shields: red. Weapons: red. There was a faint flicker of yellow in the weapons light, which gave him a flicker of hope in return. The automatic repair systems were slow, but they did the job . . . eventually.

"Why don't you just dump your cargo before you blow?" asked the voice. "Are you really willing to die for your cargo?"

"The question is," replied Bart, as coolly as he could bluff, "are *you* willing to die for my cargo?"

"What?"

"See, I'm fighting for liberty, which is an ideal I hold the highest value in. I believe that we must live in a universe that is free from oppression, from robbery, and in general, from people like you. If I can't live in that universe, then what is the point in living at all? That's what I'm fighting for. You are just fighting for my cargo. So, I repeat: are you willing to die for my cargo?"

There was a moment of silence on the com. Bart watched the automatic repair system slowly rebuilding damaged components. Not fast enough, he thought.

"You can't win, you know."

"Well, why don't you tell that to Mr. Fulcrum?" Bart said with an icy voice, as he pressed the missile button several times. He heard the misfire sound several times and sweated bullets. The inside of his helmet steamed up and he continued punching the missile fire button as fast as he could. Eventually, the missile launch connection was made, and the massive bomb detached itself from the launch tube and glided toward the pursuing Hunters. The sound of panicked curses was gratifying, and the enemy ships all nosed out and hit their jumpdrives to avoid the colossal blast radius of the fulcrum torpedo. Bart laughed aloud.

"That will teach you to mess with the dread Pirate Piranha!" he taunted. There were some amazed gasps in the com across the system.

"Hehe, I guess those guys got what they deserved," said a pilot.

Bart was relieved by the recently vacated space. His system would take some time to come back online, but at least now he was alone. The Hunters would not be back for a long time, and when they returned to find the fake torpedo (if they ever did find it) Bart will have been long gone. Of course, the "Foolcrum" would only work once, so if he ran into them again, he would need to be prepared with something hotter, but this time, he managed to bluff his way out of a tight predicament. The secret, he thought, was the chatter. Without giving his "liberty or death" speech, they'd never have bought the "Foolcrum" torpedo gambit.

The rest of the journey back was fairly quiet. He used his cloaking device to evade combat in Thuban and repaired his ship in Sapphire (at Jet's).

The cost of the repairs was way more than he had made in bribes, and so the trip was definitely a net loss. He contemplated this bitterly as he trudged through the frozen green slime back to his dome. He had the cargo unloaded as his wife came in and eyed the manifest.

"How did the grocery trip go, dear?" she asked.

"Fine," he replied. "How was your day?"

"I was bored stiff. There's nothing on the vidfeed."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Bart, collapsing on the couch. His robotic dog came over and licked his hand with synthetic enthusiasm.

"What the heck are those?" his wife asked, pointing to a crate that was being moved into the storage room below.

"Those are the Denebian olives," he sighed.

"I asked for green Denebian olives. Green, dear. Not black." Her tone had taken a turn for the sour.

"You did not. You said you wanted Denebian olives without specifying the colour."

"I distinctly requested green," she said, eyebrows raised imperiously.

Bart pointed to the shopping list, which simply said "Denebian olives." "It doesn't say anything about green olives on here."

"I don't care what the list says," She pouted. "I want green olives. I'm making olive relish for the Oharus tomorrow night and I need green olives for that. Now, are you going to get me green olives or am I going to have to suit up and get them myself?"

The thought of his wife climbing into the Phoenix and flying through Thuban and Rucker flitted through his mind. As sharp as her tongue was, she was not a cold-blooded killer and not even an average star pilot. Obviously, she had no idea what it was like out there. Yet, she was reaching for her suit in the closet.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I told you: if you're not going to get my olives, then I'm going to have to get them myself."

"No, dear. I'll get them," he said, forcing himself up from the couch.

The Start of a Saga by Daelix

January 2012



Daelix offers us something a little different from a "normal day in the life of . . ."

Whether Dealix ever finishes his story . . . who can say - his Country is suffering and that is obviously very much more important.

The start of a Saga

by Daelix
January 2012

Part I - Hide & Seek

Lars Orbskoerr stared at the roiling ionized hydrogen of the nebular cloud he was rocketing through.

It's beautiful, he thought, watching the lightning crackle through the rosy red cloud as it rolled over his shields. The nebula. The control yoke gripped firmly in his hands. Life.

Lars Orbskoerr didn't want to die. All he wanted to do was make money flying, and spend it on flying. It was all he had ever wanted, and seemingly, life had finally granted his wish.

Too bad. He flicked a finger over one of the yoke's many fingertip controls, enlarging the 3D radar. There were six pirates, and he had run out of tricks. He was out of chaff, his EMPs had long since been used up, he had two missiles left, and the damned repair drone couldn't seem to get the cannon mount unjammed. Worse, he had been playing space tag for nearly 18 hours, and he really needed to use the bathroom.

At least the ram scoop works properly. The pirates had been doggedly pursuing, but his fuel converter system had forced them to rotate pilots, and he had goaded them into a few impatient mistakes. Periodically, a bogey would vanish, only to be replaced minutes later. At first, there had been eight at a time, and they had thought to bracket him in.

Except that each of the three times they had spread out, he had pounced on one of their ships and battered it to space dust. The last time, they had tried to counter him by jumping in two fighters on top of the one he attacked, using their own squadmate as bait. Well, one ambusher was sucking vacuum and the other ship had been disabled, but not before the *Mjolnir* had taken a serious pounding.

And jumping had nearly gotten him killed. He knew that somewhere inside his ship, there was a beacon that lit him up to his enemies from 10 sectors away. Every time he had jumped, they had been right behind. Once, their entire squad had dropped in well within cannon range. Fortunately, Lars had had one EMP left.

"Shield systems nominal. Enemy range, 2000," came the lofty, synthetic female voice of Sigma, the ship computer. *"Lars, the cannon mount has been repaired."*

Lars licked his lips, but they stayed dry. He gripped the control yoke firmly, took a deep breath, only to find he had no resolve to summon.

Guess I shouldn't have been born a freighter pilot.
And with that comforting thought, he flicked off his inertial dampening system.

"Enemy range, 1500. Missile locks confirmed."

"Sigma, prepare to shunt all power generation to weapons on my first mark. On my second mark, I want you to take over shield management and shunt power to shields."

"Understood. Enemy range, 1200. 1100. 1000. 900-"

"Mark."

The *Mjolnir's* wide, sweeping form spun around even as it continued to float along its initial trajectory. And the eye of the storm passed.

A hail of particle fire lit up the nebula as Lars opened fire. The nearest pirate was still just teasing beyond his cannon range, but that was alright. The vessel arced away from the small pack that had formed, just a little bit. Quickly, he changed targets and opened fire again. This was the critical moment, he knew. Though the margin created was slim, his ship was moving away from their cannon fire, while their ships were moving towards his. There was a tiny window where his guns would reach while theirs were out of range.

The second pilot had not expected his attack, because his cannons lit up their shields, then, just as the vessel began to turn out of the way, its hull was lit up by explosions as *Mjolnir's* cannons plowed through the shields. The enemy pilot charged the front shields a moment later, but Lars had scored substantial hull damage.

Then the enemy ships began to return fire. Lars yanked up on the yoke and activated the IDS, and the ship lurched as it nosed down and the engines went full burn. His shields took a number of hits, but he knew they would hold. Not by much, but enough.

He hit his afterburners, and his ship leapt forward. He yawed left, pitched up, and flew straight into the pirate formation, cannons blazing as the enemy ship fire reduced - several of their fighters scattered to avoid a collision. Lars had already disabled his IDS, and let off the afterburner. The first ship he had fired on had trailed a bit away from the pack, and *Mjolnir* belched cannon fire again, rotating on its axis as it passed between two pirates. Within moments, he was through their shields, and the pirate had little enough time to scream before his ship exploded into so much more debris.

Lars brought his ship through the rotation, firing on another pirate ship as his enemies began to bring their own ships around. Again, he fired his afterburners and gritted his teeth as *Mjolnir* went from -700 to 0 to 1000 in gut-wrenching fashion. He activated IDS and rocketed after a pirate. The bulky fighter rocked with incoming fire, but he ignored it. His intended target set their own afterburner, but it was far too late. He fell in behind them, firing the whole time, and quickly reduced the second of six to a cinder.

Suddenly, he was rocked as a few shots made it through the rear shields, and he fired his afterburners again, lengthening out his distance from the pirates that had fallen into pursuit, getting out of their cannon range. Smirking, he let off the burners and deactivated his IDS, then swung *Mjolnir* around again.

"Want some more?" he asked aloud. "You boys want to rope this bull, you're gonna get the horns!"

"Lars, we have sustained significant hull damage and the shield booster is malfunctioning. Probability of surviving another pass is minimal."

Lars closed his eyes for a moment, listening to the computer alert him to the decreasing distance between himself and his enemies.

I don't want to die today.

"Sigma, plot a jump course."

He fired his afterburners, reactivated IDS, and yanked down on the yoke. He pitched over the top of a potentially fatal storm of cannon fire, then yawed left and shot over the pirates that were changing course to pursue again, holding the burners hard and turning towards the edge of the nebula cloud.

"Coordinates?"

He told her.

"Done." The reply was nearly immediate.

A minute later, the *Mjolnir* shot out of the nebula at an absurd velocity, trailed by a long plume of red gas. Without delay, the jump drive engaged, and the ship disappeared into the endless sea of stars.

Part II - Antithesis rising

Yeah. I'm a murderer. At least, I'm a murderer by your standards. Your values. So what? At least I'm not a genetic engineer. Genetic engineering will be the downfall of humanity. But murderers? Don't worry about them - which is to say, as long as they're not about the business of murdering you, in particular or general. Killers present society with a proverbial embarrassment of riches in their countless practical and impractical functions.

Morals? Yeah, I understand that what I do upsets your morals, but hey, they ain't my morals. And don't go asking me what my morals are, or what I 'believe in'. It's a silly question. If I had morals, I wouldn't be a murderer. Oh, people with morals and beliefs kill all the time - killing in the name of something is a good way to avoid that sticky title of 'murderer'. Me? I kill in the name of an endorphin release triggered in my brain. There you have it. Gratification.

You get a lot of looks when you say things like that. But hey, if the Alliance military had wanted me to plant flowers, they would have engineered me to get the warm fuzzies when I tucked those little sprouts into a nice, cozy flower bed. I'd do terraforming work. Instead, they stripped away all of the things people tell me humans are supposed to be equipped with - aversion response to ending life? Couldn't tell you what that's like. Love? Compassion? Affection? Nope. Replace all that with a chemical reward response to killing, and a suite of engineered advantages I won't get into. Then replace 'morals' and 'values' with loyalty to the Navy. Bam. Perfect assassin, combat pilot, whatever you need.

Except the project completely flopped. I mean, give me a break. Attempting to re-wire the human brain? It's tricky stuff at best, and no matter how correctly you do it, you can

never, ever make up for heuristics. The brain will eventually overwrite crap it deems unnecessary, through logical leaps or trial and error. Consciously, subconsciously, doesn't matter. Such is the truth of an ever-changing, ever-adapting being.

So here I am. **Project Weapon**. And hey, don't knock the name - when you're trying to hide something in plain sight, make the box as conspicuous as possible.

My name is Weapon. I can alternatively produce passing identifications that will tell you I am Emma Karr, Ayra Orlovschek, or a dozen other names. But those are just handles, covers, to be created and disposed at will. My call sign - Weapon 1 - serves me well enough, once I truncated the useless numerical designation. There is only one Weapon, because they didn't try again. I was too much for them to handle.

I'm writing this down now because, hey, you can't scrub every aspect of a human personality, and I'm feeling a bit nostalgic, considering the situation. The line of credit the Devil took out for me on his luck, well, it's run dry, and life support is soon to follow. Maybe between now and the time my body - engineered as it is to resist short-term space shock - quits on me, I'll have left behind something of a record on Weapon - not the genetically engineered assassin, but the human. The person. The woman. Maybe someone will read my story.

Oh, hell, who cares? It gives me something to do before my cells start to freeze and burst. So let's talk about how an invincible killing machine gets into this sort of mess. It all started when I accepted this contract - simple stuff. Fill a body bag, retrieve a piece of hardware from the newly deceased. Receive shopping money. Or at least, that was how it was supposed to go . . .

Two Months Earlier . . .

Lars Orbskoerrr idly fixed his unkempt black hair as he followed the fat ship vendor around his show yard. He asked questions about the various vessels, listening to his concealed scanner quietly relay to his earpiece the various problems with the used ships. The gelatinous, greasy used ship salesman's prices would have seemed really reasonable, if he didn't know what he was looking for.

Finally, he popped the question as unassumingly as possible.

"What about that strip-down over there? What's her story?"

The man eyed the seemingly forgotten vessel tucked away behind a couple of scout classes in the shadow of the buildings next to the yard.

"Oh, that's a Paladin-class frame - the military used them to build the Gibraltar class fighter. Quite rare, but we usually only see collector interest when we have one. They were designed to be big, beefy military space superiority fighters, but really, there were too many problems, so the project was scrapped and the frames sold wholesale to the civilian market."

"What's her rigging rate at?"

"Quite a bit, four-fifty, I believe. Armour's sturdy, too. Ponderously slow, though. That's what happens when you build a fighter so big you almost have to call it a frigate. But I've heard tell a few miners converted her over for the beam mounts and cargo space."

"Hm. How much for her?"

The salesman told him.

"Ah," Lars replied. "And she'll fly?"

"Of course, my boy! Not that I'd fly anywhere with the outfitting she's got, not the way things are dangerous these days, you understand, but she'll fly you true to any port of call."

"Well," Lars replied, scratching at his goatee, "considering the sub-frame lattice damage, the resultant hull twist, and the seventeen jury-rigging jobs in the primary electrical systems, I'd say she'll get you about halfway to the next star, which is convenient, because your buyer sure isn't making it back, is he?"

"Whoa there, boy, what are you playing at-"

Lars unzipped his flight suit and pulled out the wide, thin pad that contained his scanning device, and showed the man the display. "There's no law against protecting yourself, is there?"

"Now I'll tell you what we can do," he said, turning back towards the ship. "This hunk of crap is worth about, oh, twenty. But since I've been having a hell of a time finding one, and it's actually what I've been looking for, I'm willing to make you the very generous offer of forty-five, which is quite a bit, considering the condition the two of us - and only the two of us - know she's in. What do you say to that . . . Jarel?" he asked, inspecting the name printed on the salesman's badge for the first time.

The man sputtered momentarily, then regained his composure and narrowed his eyes.

"You trying to threaten me, young man?"

"Nope. If you want to hang on to this rust bucket until you sell it to some sucker who's going to come back angry, be my guest. If you want to sell it *now*, the offer's on the table."

Jarel stared at him for long moments. Finally, he asked suspiciously, "Why are you so adamant about buying a Gibraltar-class fighter?"

Lars shrugged noncommittally. "My gramps flew one of the prototypes in the wars, a long time ago. I've got his system chip and command codes, so I can take it out of 'aftermarket mode'. It's not like that makes it into some kind of great ship, but you tell me where to find a ship comparable in speed, armour, and cargo to a military spec Gibraltar for less than four times the price, and I'd consider it."

"Alright, I'll make you a deal. We can do forty-five, but you handle a few jobs for me freighting. Legal jobs. You'll be at it about, oh, two weeks, give or take."

For a minute, Lars said nothing. Then he looked over at the Gibraltar-class space superiority fighter sitting there. He could almost feel its pain.

"You find me another two weeks' work, and spare me fifteen extra off the price."

Jarel folded his arms. "Fifteen extra? Let's quit our dreaming here."

"Look, Jarel, you want your freight to actually make it to the destination? We both know I'm going to be spending twenty thousand at least making her space-worthy. Believe me, I could do the work myself, but I don't think you want to wait around for three months to see your shipment delivered."

There was another long pause, then the merchant unfolded his arms, and stuck out his right hand. Grinning, Lars shook that meaty hand firmly.

— O —

He sat in the cockpit. It was relatively spacious, designed to accommodate a cockpit crew of up to three, with two seats back-to-back directly behind the pilot's. As a multi-role craft, the Gibraltar was designed with the ability to function as a bomber or support vessel, a dream never fully realized. The modular frame was revolutionary in its day, though similar technology was more common these days. At its inception, though, it was very expensive.

Couple that with a ship of ponderous size, a problem they never managed to overcome in an attempt to make a truly dominant space superiority fighter, on the lines of the modern Leviathan - no, bigger. Tougher. Badder. But slow. Acceleration wasn't a huge deal, but agile maneuvers were too difficult. Too unlike flying any other fighter. Pilots couldn't produce the desired performance levels. The net result? The project, scrapped. The prototype pilots lost their ships, whose mil-spec functions were neutered before the ships were sold to the civilian markets.

He installed the primary sequence key, booted the mainframe. Lars reached into his shirt and pulled out a nanoboard hung from a cord around his neck, and with a stiff tug, broke the cord loose.

Alright, dad. Let's see if you were right.

Lars pressed a few keys and the main computer revealed an access where the system chip could be reinstalled. He reverently snapped the venerable piece of military technology into place, and closed the access, then told the computer to integrate it. Meanwhile, he extracted a bulky case from his rucksack - about a foot square, and four inches thick. While the computer worked to re-integrate all of the military-grade systems, Lars pried back a panel on the left side of the main tower for the primary computer and controls, revealing a recess with cabling running along its sides.

A minute later, the protective shell around his grandfather's custom logistics suite was removed, and it had been installed snugly, and the access panel replaced.

Lars climbed back into the pilot's chair and input his grandfather's command codes.

'ALL SYSTEMS UNLOCKED' flashed on the primary monitor.

He blew out a deep breath and keyed in a series of commands to activate the 'hotbox' - the test pilots' nickname for the interchangeable support software cases designed to help the Gibraltar to quickly change roles.

A list of status updates began to rapidly scroll up the main screen as the software integrated. Suddenly, a warning flashed across the screen, and before Lars had time to read it, the computer and all the cockpit lights went out. The soft persistent whine of the computer systems faded, and he was left sitting in the dark.

"Back end of a black hole," he said disgustedly.

For several minutes, he just sat there, angry at the idea of how long it would take to fix the primary systems that cut off halfway through an update. He leaned his head back over the seat and closed his eyes.

A blinking light woke him from his reverie. The main screen had booted back up, to a black background *Fried operating system*, he thought.

In white letters at the bottom of the screen was a message. He looked at it, then his eyes widened. It didn't say what he expected. Not at all. Instead, the following words were displayed:

"ACTIVATE VOICE RECOGNITION SUBROUTINE? 0/1"

He reached out tentatively, and pressed 1.

"VOICE RECOGNITION ACTIVE. ACTIVATE HUMAN INTERACTION INTERFACE?"

He pressed 1, and nothing happened. For a few moments, he just sat there, thinking, until an idea came. "Yes?" he said, curious, and was rewarded.

"WOULD YOU LIKE TO ENABLE THE VOCAL COMMUNICATION SUBROUTINE?"

"Yes."

"*Hello, Captain. My name is Sigma,*" began a pleasant, artificial, yet musical woman's voice. Lars nearly jumped out of his skin.

"*I am your artificial intelligence system,*" it went on, "*as well as your flight control assistant. You may think of me as your co-pilot. If it pleases you, you may refer to me as 'computer', or 'Sigma'. I apologize for deactivating the bulk of the ship systems, but the power core was not designed to handle the massive power draw required for me to install myself into your ship. I will require the power-down status for another....seven thousand, one hundred, fourteen seconds. If you have any queries for me while we wait, I would be more than happy to assist you.*"

Lars's head began to race.

"You're designed...to help me fly the ship?"

"*Correct. I will function as a practical bridge between the pilot's intent and the ship's response. I am designed to receive your physical commands through the yoke, and translate it to the ship systems to make the vessel to respond most ideally to your input. I will also manage all power systems in order to eke out maximum efficiency and provide power to respective systems when it is needed most. As time goes on, I will suggest software, firmware, and hardware changes that I calculate will be beneficial, as well.*"

Lars's skin began to tingle.

"Sigma, I can't wait to give you a whirl, beautiful lady."

"*I am an artificial intelligence, and neither beautiful, nor female, but I will attempt to adjust to the idiosyncrasies in your speech once I download data on current lexicon and vernacular. May I make an inquiry, Captain?*"

"Anytime you like, Sigma-except when I'm sleeping," he added hastily, realizing the AI's literalness.

"*This vessel's designation has been wiped upon reintegration of the military-issue operating system. What is the new designation for the ship?*"

He ran his hands along the smooth, five-foot long, arc-shaped command board. "We'll name her after the Gibraltar-class of your creator, Bollu Orbskoerr. We'll have to get some champagne, but I christen this ship the *Mjolnir*."

— O —

Three Weeks Later

The flight in was easy. Real easy. The new fake IDcard worked without a hitch. After grabbing a bite to eat, I meandered through the colony to the business district I needed, and grabbed a seat across the causeway from a ship dealer. I watched the trickle of people pass in and out of the place, identified the proprietor, a greasy stain of a man. One-fifty to one-seventy kilos.

His ships didn't look any better than he did, and his customers were sure to be paying for more than what they were receiving - I'd be doing this colony a favor. See, personally, I take much more pride in removing a useless blot from circulation than a contributing member of society. You think I don't appreciate the fact that my clothes get fabbed, my meals get cooked, and the refresher in my hotel room sprays hot water? Like hell are you going to catch me knitting a shirt.

Conversely, I haven't met a lawyer or salesman that I haven't wanted to paste.

Finally, the salesman began to close his yard down for the day, after three walks and changes of position on my part, and I got up, crossed the causeway, and entered the show yard as two other visitors were filing out. He quickly noticed me and oscillated over hastily.

"Good evening, miss," he said, dry-washing his hands. "We're about to close, but if there's a customer who needs a ship at eighteen hundred, you'll never catch Jarel Solus launching early. What may I help you with?"

Smooth. "I work on behalf of a collector," I said as charmingly as I could manage, pulling an idle strand of hair out of my eyes and smiling, as I started to casually stroll further into the show yard. "He heard you are in possession of a vintage Gibraltar-class starfighter, and dispatched me to investigate. Would you be able to show me that ship?"

Jarel Solus's expression turned to a frown as he walked alongside me. "Miss, I am terribly sorry, but a young man purchased our only example of that particular classic frame, just a few cycles ago. However, I'd be more than happy to record a contact address for you, in case I can acquire another of these rare ships on your behalf."

I gritted my teeth. The day really had been too good to be true.

"Oh, my employer is not the most patient of men when something catches his fancy, you understand. Surely you have a contact address for the buyer?"

He shook his head. "It's against colony regulations to pass out that sort of information, but if you would provide your addy to me, I promise I will ask him to contact you as soon as possible."

I had pretty much lost my patience, and we were not in sight of the gate to the yard any longer. I whirled around and smashed a knee into the fat man's sternum, then elbowed him in the face and tripped him to the ground. I reached into the lapel of the kimono-style blouse I was wearing and pulled out a thin, short knife, and knelt down on the man's chest, flipping the blade idly in my hand.

"I think, Jarel Solus, that you are going to give your buyer a call up, and I am going to wait while you do. I truly hope for your sake that he answers you promptly. I am not overly fond of salesmen, you see." And with my most charming smile - I have been told that, in fact, my smile is rather unnerving - I grabbed his hair and slammed his head back off the ground. I would say it was to scare him, but really, I was just blowing off some steam.

part III - Intersection

Lars sat at the helm of the *Mjolnir*, eating some sort of synth product from a self-heating tin. The label optimistically claimed that it was supposed to be meat. Despite its generally disgusting consistency, it was really quite good, but as his new copilot had informed him via her biometric scanners, he had gained three kilos in three weeks.

Apparently, her duties include monitoring my vitals and being my mother, he grouched. But being stuck behind the helm of a military starfighter was, well, confining. Lars had always prided himself on taking care of his physique, and his previous jobs had always been piloting larger vessels, where space, while not exactly bountiful, allowed for regular exercise.

The *Mjolnir* was designed to be a long-range fighter, equipped with a 'room' behind and below the cockpit with two built-in bunks and a toilet. It was more like a coffin - the ceiling was five feet high and the bottom bunk was on the floor - a padded mattress set into the floor - and the second bunk was precisely thirty inches above it.

So he had resolved to get a section of one of the cargo bays cordoned off to create a space where he could work out. But until then..

He pulled the cord on the side of another tin to catalyze the chemical heater and set it in a rather conveniently-sized hollow in the command console. It contained actual mashed sweet potatoes, which he was rather excited about. He cracked open an iced caff and took a long drink, followed by a satisfied belch.

"Captain, I would like to reiterate that warming your meals on the helm controls may lead to serious malfunctions. Please locate another place to set your meals."

He sighed at the pleasant disembodied voice emitting from the cockpit speakers.

"I suppose you're going to tell me removing the panel for the power coils and chilling my drinks on the coolant pipes isn't okay, either."

"I have no objections to that activity, provided you clean any mess if your beverage spills. However, I would like to ask you to relocate your food container at once."

He shrugged and carefully picked up the tin, looking around the cockpit.

"Captain, you are receiving a hail on an FTL channel."

"Uhh....put it up," he replied absently, still looking around for somewhere secure to put his potatoes. Jarel Solus's wide face appeared, projected on the right-hand touch-HUD.

"Hey there, Lars! How are you this cycle?" asked the merchant.

"Cramped. I'm starting to understand why you pay more for a civilian ship. These military designers didn't spare a centimetre for accommodation."

"Well, that'll teach you to twist my arm! Heh."

Lars looked over at the display. "Whoa!" he exclaimed. "Jarel, did you get hit with an asteroid?" The big man's plump face was marred by a tremendous black eye.

"I had a client who was dissatisfied with his purchase."

"Imagine that," Lars replied dryly. "So, what can I do for you, most eminent and generous employer?"

"How soon can you make it here? I've got twenty thousand extra for you, something big just came up. But I need you to get here, fast."

Lars took a swig of his drink and set his food on the floor, then punched some keys on a data console.

"Well, I'm reluctant to give an exact ETA, since these dockies unloading your freight right now, well, they're slow. But, for twenty thousand cred, I can be there in six hours, one way or the other."

"Good. Come right up to my office."

"Will do. Out."

He ended the transmission and picked up his food tin off the floor. The container radiated heat into his hands.

Jackpot!

Just as he was peeling back the top, Sigma's voice alerted him again.

"Captain, you have another inbound FTL transmission."

He sighed and pressed the button on the console. "Jarel," he began, "I'm trying to-oh." He stopped as he saw the face on the monitor. "Hi."

"Lars, why in the abyss won't you stop stalking me?" asked the round-faced, dark-skinned woman that appeared on the screen, none too kindly. "It's a big sector. There are a lot of people in it. Why must you continue to contact me?"

"To be honest, El," he replied casually, "it's because you won't stop being nice to me. If you try being a little hostile sometimes, you could probably drive me off. But more importantly, I would like to point out that I didn't call you up, my company accepted a contract with your company. You actually called me." He took a long drink from his caff.

"Well, you aren't working for me. I don't want to type your name on a pay auth, I don't want you in my warehouse. I don't want you in the same sector as me. And I certainly don't want you asking your captain to let you make a detour in his ship, Lars."

"I'd just like to say that you are infinitely charming when you're calling me space scum. And for the record, I have my own ship now. Being single has its perks, El, like saving. Anyway, that's fine, I'll drop the contract back onto the FTLnet. I had something better come up, anyway." He dug his spork into his potatoes and took a bite, swallowing quickly, and went on.

"But listen, since I love getting together for a tirade like this, when nobody's picked up a contract to move 1200 crate a twenty-hop for the price you're paying, once I'm done in

a week with what I've got going on, I'll grab it again. Then you can call me up and insult me some more."

"Just drop the contract. And don't try to take any work from me again!"

"Elhaza, I don't know what you got yourself into with this shipment, but when you realize that nobody - nobody else, I mean - is going to take that shipment for less than double, *you* can call *me*, and if I am not busy making money, I'll move the freight for you, even though it'll be a wash after I fill my deut."

She ended the transmission on him.

"I thought that went well," he said blithely. "Sigma, can you jettison that contract with EHM Bio?"

"*Certainly, Captain.*"

He slouched down in the pilot's seat.

"Sigma, we have **got** to get you a body so I can ask you out."

— O —

Once the ship was secured in dry dock, Lars climbed down the ladder as quickly as possible and stretched luxuriously. He flagged down the pressure-suited dockworker handling his vessel.

"Hey, friend, I need this thing turned around in an hour, and I've got five hundred cred for the guy who makes it happen. Can we do that?"

He received an affirmative, slapped the guy on the back, and jogged off down the causeway. Since he actually had over an hour to spare, he went to get a proper meal in him and hit the rec park to take a walk. He would have jogged, but he was in his pressure suit, and three weeks in a cockpit, so he decided on baby steps. Afterwards, he took a tube up a few flights to the business district, and a few minutes later, took the steps up the side of the small building next to Jarel Solus's shipyard. He knocked quickly, then slid his IDcard, and the door slid aside with the high-pitched *ping* it always made.

"Hey Solus," he called out as he walked into the office, "I'll fix that door for a-"

"Kid, watch out!" Solus shouted. He was sitting behind his desk, and his face was a mess. His dark hair was matted and the side of his face was covered in something red. His eyes were wide and panicked, and he wasn't looking right at Lars as he shouted the strange warning.

All of this, Lars took in in a moment.

"Huh?" he asked dumbly, turning to the left, and there was a woman there. She was tall - a little bit taller than Lars, who was about 150cm. She was wearing skin-tight black pants and a fancy, sashed-off pink top. Her hair was really the defining feature - fiery red-orange hair cut in a simple bob - or it would have been, if the look in her eyes didn't make Lars want to jump out of his skin.

Then he saw the glint of light in her hand, just before she lunged.

He had grabbed another iced caff from a vending machine, and it was still mostly full. He threw the drink at the woman's face and dove back out the door. He hit the railing, and

had just enough time as he looked over his shoulder to see the female figure right behind him. Without thinking about it, he started to run, tripped immediately, and went tumbling down the metal stairs. He landed hard on his side at the bottom, scrambling and clawing at the wall to get his feet under him. He dared look up, and immediately rolled.

Where he had just been, his attacker landed. The blade almost got him on the leg.

Lars finally got his feet under him and started running. He burst out of the small side alley onto the main causeway, nearly getting hit by a hover-car. He looked around, panicked, then took off in the direction of his ship.

— o —

You know, just when you think you have a person figured, they go and do something that defies the entire rationale that defines them. That's what makes assassination so harrowing, really. No, Mr. Politician, it is *not* okay that you decide to 'shake up' your daily routine on the day I'm waiting in an office along your daily route to work with a PPC rifle. Chances are, if I have to improvise, bystanders need to die, my clothes are going to get burned, and I'm going to be spending money replacing the cover ID I'm going to have to blow.

Frankly, you're not that important.

So here I am, twelve feet from the man holding the keys to the ship I need. Two dead guys later, I'd be cashing an auth for a million creds, and after that, I'd be hitting the one of clubs near the Onyx mining stations.

But no, the fat salesman has to grow a set at the last possible moment. With a frustrated sigh, I jogged after the kid, changing my hair colour to black and letting it grow until I could draw it back into a pony-tail. If you're thinking of going on the lam, I highly recommend some of my genetic enhancements.

So the guy nearly does my job for me - wouldn't that be nice? - but the driver stops. And then this Lars kid surprises me. When he bumbled and stumbled out of the way and fell down those stairs, I thought he wasn't much of an athlete - and most pilots aren't - but then he went taking off down the causeway, and I had to go full throttle to keep after him.

Dodging through the crowds was a handful - plenty of people nowadays ride those damn Hov-scooters on the sidewalks, and banging your leg off one of those things sucks. But I kept pace with him. I was a bit disappointed that he didn't stop, thinking I wouldn't gut him in the middle of a crowd of witnesses. They're so cute when they die with that shocked expression on their face.

Finally, after about two minutes of chasing, we were past the crowds, into a quiet area of the ring. Then he started trying to cause me some trouble. He found two damn NavSec officers patrolling the district and ran up to them. I slowed to a jog, watching warily as he pointed at me, talking frantically to the beret-wearing pigs.

They approached me with hands on their holstered blasters.

"Excuse me, miss, are you chasing this man?"

I panted, trying to look distressed, panting as I walked towards them "Officers, you need to grab that boy...he picked my pockets back on the causeway."

One of the men paused and looked over his shoulder at where Lars was standing. In that moment, I threw my knife and leapt forward. The blade buried in the neck of the officer looking at me, and I slammed my elbow into the face of the other one as he looked back. I tore his blaster free and took aim at the kid, who turned and ran. I took a few shots, but at forty feet, he was a bit past reliable range for a pot shot.

So the chase continued. I quickly grabbed my knife out of the dead officer, and hid it and the gun in my blouse, as I took off after the target. For a moment, I thought about offering to let him live if he would just give me the damn sequence key to the ship, but then I decided against it.

After all, a contract without a little excitement, a little risk, and a little spilled blood is really just a job.

— O —

Lars ran for minutes, until his lungs felt like they were going to explode. Three weeks crammed in the cockpit of a fighter had really done him in. He periodically looked over his shoulder, and she was still behind him. Finally, he ran around a bend in the causeway, and slowed down.

Ahead, he could see stars. The causeway down from the business district ended in a pair of containment fields that let out into the space dock, so hovertrucks could easily offload freight onto caddies. He looked around again. His pursuer was still following, doggedly, and reaching into her blouse. Without another thought, he turned and broke into a run again.

A few workers stopped to look at him. His hair stood on end as he crossed through the first electromagnetic atmosphere containment field, a few hundred meters from the end of the line. A man ran over to try to stop him. Lars put his shoulder down and charged straight through the worker, sending him flying to the ground. Suddenly, he had an idea and stopped, turned, and grabbed the handles at the base of the man's pressure suit helmet, and twisted.

The helmet popped off, and Lars grabbed it. He looked up just in time to see his assassin aiming a blaster at him, and dove to the side just before a flare of deadly particles shot past. He scrambled to his feet and ran again, ducking behind a hovertruck, then veering straight for the end of the causeway. A few more blaster shots sizzled past - much, much closer than he would have preferred - and he found himself ducking as he ran. He slammed the helmet over his own head and held it on with one hand while he tried to lock in the base ring with his other.

Before he knew it, he was out of real estate. Lars slammed the visor shut on the helmet and slowed down just enough to rip a cheap banner off the side of a truck. Before him, a twenty by twenty meter gaping hole, and an endless sea of stars, tinted blue by the space dock's containment field. He looked out into the cavernous space, then held the top of the helmet and wrapped the banner around his neck, guessed at a trajectory, and jumped off the end of the causeway into space.

— O —

I'll admit it. I swore. I ran all the way to the end of the causeway and looked out, and what did I see? He hits a transport caddy perfectly. Half a mile of vacuum, and he leads it perfectly.

So I cursed to the deepest abyss of space the human survival mechanism, just as I felt my own kick in. At the other side of the dock, an large troop of NavSec officers were conferring with some dockmen, who I had probably almost shot.

Looking around, I saw a woman nearby, who had stopped what she was doing to stare at the spectacle. I took aim at her with the blaster and pointed at a mole-hatch for engineers.

"Open it," I growled threateningly, "or I'll open your face."

The woman froze, so I waved the pistol menacingly to emphasize, which got her moving. She ran to the hatch and entered a code, making the crawl space door slide away.

I grabbed the back of her suit and pressed the blaster to her helmet. "What's the fastest way to the engineering level?" I demanded.

"I-I-I d-d-d-d-don't know . . . please don't kill me!" she wailed. The woman was physically shaking.

"You're about as useful as missiles in my deuterium tanks" I growled disgustedly, and threw her out of the way, then crawled into the hatch. I managed to find a position where I could crouch - practically chewing on my knees - and hurry along, in a most undignified manner.

I had a smile on my face, though. Knowing NavSec, they would have a battalion in main engineering right around the time I popped out of the mole hole - on the flight deck, forty decks away. Realizing I had no idea where I was specifically going, I grabbed my comm out and called station reception. A pleasant, cute girl named Natlia answered.

"Hello, Natlia," I said nicely, with a core system accent. "My beau just landed, and the space rock didn't tell me where he was porting in. Now could you just look him up for me? He's Lars Orbskoerr, and he flies a bit of an unusual ship - Gibraltar-class."

It took nearly twenty minutes, and my back ached, but I popped out on flight deck 6. I knocked out a flight deck worker, and let myself through the warehouses with his card, sprinting full-speed. Finally, I mashed the button at the door to Berth 13, and ran out into the dry dock. The containment field was to the left, and to the right, the Gibraltar-class sat there in all of its wide-bodied glory, a few hundred meters away.

Lars Orbskoerr was running towards it, yelling into a comm. I broke into a run myself, even though I knew there was no way I could win the foot race. A deck worker approached Lars, who had spotted me, and increased his pace. He threw the man out of the way just before I took a few pot shots at him, then made his ship. The access ladder lowered by itself, and I've never seen a man run up a ladder quite like he did.

It was too far. I yanked my blouse up at the back and pulled out a thick, foot-wide black disk tucked into the back of my pants, grabbed the handle set into the disk and pulled it perpendicular. The device hummed to life, blinking a blue ring around its edge. Looking back up, I saw the ship lift up slowly, then fly forward, straight towards me.

It was too far, and yet not far enough. I jumped just as the ship passed over me and slammed the disk against the belly of the bird. As the magnetic tracking device locked on, I was momentarily connected to the ship by my grip on the tracker, which nearly wrenched my arm off. At least it felt like it. But it was entirely worth it, as I was sent sprawling, sliding along the deck of the dry dock. I sat up and rubbed my shoulder as I watched Lars Orbskoerr's ship fly through the containment field and into space.

I had a smile on my face. There was nowhere in the universe the kid could run. The low-band pulse FTL tracker would make sure of that.

I thought about going back to the dealership and cutting the fat salesman's face off, but decided against it. The guy showed some gall, and you know, you've got to respect that. Anyway, what's a contract without a little excitement?

I thought maybe I should send him a gift basket instead, after I took out Orbskoerr. That would be a delicious piece of irony.

For The Only Reason There Is by Bossk

September 2010



An epic tale of intrigue and revenge

For The Only Reason There Is

by Bossk
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Discovery

Beep . . . beep . . . beep . . .

The proximity alarm woke him from his sleep. He slowly opened his eyes and looked around the dark confines of his quarters. For a few seconds he was confused. Sluggish. Unsure of his surroundings. Then, as if an old style Fulcrum Torpedo had gone off in his head, he remembered. His eyes flew open and he sat bolt upright in his rack.

"Report" he shouted into the darkness

"My lord" the disembodied voice of the ship's computer replied "Long range sensors have detected an object that matches the criteria provided, as programmed, I have woken you from your sleep"

"Are you sure this time?"

"Yes my Lord. The dimensions of the object have a 97.995% correlation with the plans provided and of images held in the Imperial Historical Database."

"Time to intercept?"

"At full speed, approximately 21.86 minutes my Lord"

"BASIC, you had better be right about this. I have no desire to spend the next week of my life beating the inhabitants of some forgotten backwater Federation station who think they still have cause to fight in to submission. That is for the fleet to do"

"My Lord, scans indicate that the object is inert, except for very low energy levels around the core. I am certain that we have found it"

"Very well. If you are sure. Slow our speed to 75 units. I want to get a good look at it from a distance. Oh, and BASIC, please turn on the lights!"

10 minutes later, he sat in the cockpit of his personal Raven class fighter and watched the image on the display. BASIC was right. They had found it. After 6 months of searching, he was now nearing the end of his quest.

"BASIC, shut down all power except minimal life support. I don't want anybody to see us coming. It may have been 40 years since I was here last, but I know the guy. You can be sure that getting on board will not be as easy as it looks"

"Very well my lord."

BASIC shut down all systems except the minimal oxygen required. The ship was quiet, still. Just the way he liked it. Without the lights of the consoles reflecting off it, he could not even see the plexglass canopy. He felt like he could see the whole of EVOCHRON spread out in front of him. Reach out and touch anything he wanted. Reach out and touch his Empire.

With all power shut down and only travelling on inertia, it would now be about 2 hours before they were in range of the docks. His mind wondered back to the last time he was here. 40 years is a long time for a human. But he was not human, and 40 years for him was hardly any time at all. Slowly, inevitably, he drifted to sleep. The memories of the past filling his mind. A memory of a time before his Empire was created. Memories of friends, of enemies. Of Legends.

Revelation

The names spun around inside his head like dust in the wind. They were the ones that blazed a trail across the stars of Evochron. They were there at the very beginning of the long, long Vonari Wars. They had fought back the Klingon Incursion, and the short lived BORG invasion. Where were they now? Some had joined him in building his empire after the victory over the Vonari and at last, finally brought all of Evochron under the one banner. But others had still craved the call of the Mercenary. What was left of their clans were still out there, trying again and again to wrench control of their own little pockets of space away from him. For now, the Empire had little desire to destroy them, because he had little desire to destroy them. They were the closest beings to him that he could call friends. He had fought alongside each and every one of them to destroy the Vonari, and in doing so, a bond of respect had been created between them all, even those that had since died.

But for all their history together, they were still just names. He had not met a single one of the Legends in person. He had heard their voices many times. In joy, in sorrow, in pain. But his biggest regret was that he had never seen their faces. He intended to change that before his time had run out.

Beep . . . beep . . . beep . . .

The proximity alarm woke him from his sleep. He slowly opened his eyes and looked around the dark confines of his cockpit. No, not the proximity alarm. Something different. Slow realisation crept up on him.

"The com systems? Who in the name of Vice is out here? And how did they find me?"

"I do not know my Lord." replied BASIC.

"I wasn't talking to you. Carry out a passive scan of the area"

"My Lord. I believe that they do not know of our precise location, but are aware of our presence in the area due to local variations in the magn.."

"Shut up! Or help me I will reprogram you to be a coffee machine! Locate the source of the hail"

"It is coming from an Oasis class fighter, approximately 4025.7 km from our location. Beacon transmission and marking suggest it is an Imperial ship from your personal protection squadron"

His heart sunk. He had managed to evade detection from them during the entire trip. He did not want to change that. Not now that he was so close to the end.

"Open the frequency. I need to hear who it is. Keep our outgoing comms closed. I don't want to give away our position"

". . . sk. This is Flight Leader Jade. By order of the Imperial Council, I have been tasked with tracking you down returning with you to Sapphire immediately. I repeat, Hail Emperor . . . "

"Close the channel BASIC. I have heard enough."

"Yes, my Lord. It may please you to know that I have been monitoring our location constantly. It appears she is alone."

"Of course she is alone. She is not here on the instructions of the Imperial Council. She is here out of curiosity. She is here for answers"

He put his head back in his chair, closed his eyes and tried to figure out the best way to get out of this mess. For long minutes he sat there. During his years as a bounty hunter, he had once been told the secret of survival by a very wise man: "Improvise, Adjust, Adapt and Overcome". He formulated a new plan. One that, with any luck, would see him finish his quest and allow Jade to have the answers she seeks. Win/Win for all.

"BASIC. Where is she now?"

"Her relative position is unchanged. However, she has stopped hailing us."

"Very well. Give me manual control but don't bring systems back on line just yet. It is time that we gave her some answers. Hail her"

"Yes my Lord"

"Do you know where you are? What this place is?" He spoke into the open mic with an air of affection.

After a few seconds hesitation, she responded, with anger.

"Show yourself! Give me the decency to see the man who murdered my father. I swear, Emperor or not, I will kill you for what you did"

A small smile crossed his lips. She was just like her father was at her age. Full of anger and wanting to take on the whole universe.

"I did not murder your father. And I intend to prove it. Look out there. What do you see?"

"Your final resting place! Murderer!" She began to edge her ship closer to where she thought his signal was coming from.

"No. Look, really look at that outside. What do you see?"

Her ship was now only a couple of hundred meters away from his. He waited a few more seconds then brought his system back on line. Jade managed only a brief scream before he launched his missile at her. It crossed the short distance between their two ships in less than a second and impacted against her shield. Even the greatest of the Legends would not have been able to avoid being hit. Her ship was plunged into darkness as the EMP device shut down her weapons, engines and navigation systems. It hung there in space like so many other lifeless hulks he had seen. He hailed the ship again.

"Perhaps now you will be a little more interested in listening to me. I ask again. Look outside your ship and tell me if you recognise what is out there"

Jade sat in the darkness of her ship and sobbed. She had been so close. Now he was hailing her. He wanted to mock her before he brought down the final blow. She listened to his voice over the silence. It was slow, deliberate, almost caring. No matter how she fought, the anger eased. She found herself looking at what hung in space only a short distance from them. A faint sense of recognition passed through her mind. She had seen this before. But where? Pictures started to form in her mind. Fragments of her childhood. Images of a happier time, before her father . . . That was it. She remembered. Her father had taken her here. She must have only been a couple of years old at the time, but the memory was starting to build. She returned his hail.

"I see the memory of a my father in that station"

"As well you should Jade. This was the last place you saw your father in person. This is hallowed ground for all the Clan pilots of Evochron, including me. It has taken me years to find its location, and months to travel here. But at last, I am here. This place will end my torment and save you from your anger and hatred. Jade. This is Space Station Babylon 5!"

Arrival

Babylon 5 had been built at the beginning of the last Vonari War. It was owned and run by a group of independents calling themselves 'The EmEm'. It was their dream to provide a safe haven for any and all pilots to rest and relax when returning from combat in the northern war zones. Many clans were made, and destroyed, either on board, or in orbit of the station. At its peak, the station had a permanent population of over 2000 souls, with more than double that in visiting pilots. But, as the war continued on for far longer than anticipated, fewer and fewer pilots were returning after a tour of duty. Most never made it through the jump gates back into main systems.

What had once been the jewel of the spirit of Evochron; it now hung lifeless and dark in space. Abandoned. Its massive grey hull reflected little of the surrounding light. If not for the emergency beacon lights, the station would have been swallowed by the darkness. Lost in oblivion, like so many of its inhabitants.

Both ships waited just outside of the now dark docking ring. Neither moved. He waited patiently, knowing that all was not as it appeared.

"Are we just going to sit here?" Jade called over the comm. "If this place holds the proof that you did not kill my father, why are you waiting?"

"Patience" was his short reply

"We have been here for 45 minutes now. This place is dead. There is no one here"

"I can assure you that this station is not dead. However, if we move in now, we both will be. This station holds more than just your answers. Over the years it was in use, thousands of pilots and traders placed the life savings into the care of The EmEm. They prided themselves on the fact that not once did anybody ever survive an attempted theft. Their security systems were far ahead of their time, their interrogation methods; brutal. That station still holds more riches than you can imagine."

"How do you know all of this?" Jade asked, not sure if she wanted the answer.

"Because, I designed the systems and their 'methods'"

"So you have always been a murderer then?"

"You may sneer at me and my methods, but those same methods managed to rid us of the Vonari, build the largest empire since Sol, and has kept peace in Evochron for the last 40 years. I am not proud, but I am still alive. Now wait!"

He returned to watching the slowly rotating station for his way in. After a few more minutes, it appeared. A small hatch, almost invisible in the darkness moved into view.

He edged his ship closer to the station, until he was only 2 meters away from the hull. He got up out of his chair and looked around his ship a last time. He had nothing to collect. He had long since given up on personal affects. Being an Emperor had, over the years, stripped him of most of his desire to remember. Only to forget. However, moving towards the rear of the ship he passed his quarters and picked up the only item he considered of any sentimental value and placed it in his flight suite pocket.

"Almost time" he whispered.

He entered the air lock and stepped into his suite.

"BASIC, once I have left the ship, you are to seal the airlock and move to a position 2000 meters from the station. There you will shut down all systems and you will maintain that relative position until the following conditions are met." He entered a series of commands into the nearest console. "If any boarding attempt is made by anybody at anytime other than detailed, you are to implement your self destruct system immediately. Is that understood?"

"Yes my Lord" replied BASIC. "*May I ask where you are going?*"

He was not sure, but it sounded like there was a hint of sadness in BASIC's voice.

"I am going to right a wrong BASIC. Thank you for your company."

"*Thank you my Lord*"

He sealed his helmet and opened a channel to Jade

"Wait at your location. I will signal you when it is safe to approach. Do not attempt to board my ship now, or you will die"

"What are you doing?"

"Have you ever read about the Trojan Horse and the Fall of Troy in ancient Earth history?"

"No, never"

"Then I suggest you do so upon your return. There is a copy in my personal quarters at the capitol on Sapphire. The good thing about designing a security system is that you can make your own back door."

With a rush of air, the door opened and he drifted into darkness. It had been a long time since he had gone EVA, and he felt uneasy for a few seconds. Covering the couple of meters from the ship only took a few seconds and soon he had a handhold on the station. He turned to look at his ship for the last time. As commanded, BASIC had sealed the air lock and was now moving off. Turning again, he faced the station once more. He ran his gloved fingers around the outside of the hatch until he found a small depression.

Pulling with one hand, while holding the station with the other, he prised open the panel to reveal a small access keypad. He entered a series of numbers into the pad, and again, waited.

For what felt like forever he clung onto the side of the massive station like a tiny parasite on the hide of an ancient earth elephant. Then, at last, the hatch started to cycle open. As it did so, debris from the interior of the airlock was forced out into the cold vacuum. Carefully, he swung his body around to face the hatch and started to enter the station. Once inside, the door cycled closed and, for one last time, he was surrounded by darkness.

After 40 years, he was finally home.

The airlock was silent. Still. Dark. He was slowly aware of the pressure increasing around his body. As more and more air was pumped back into the small, enclosed space, the sound of machinery was able to move through it into the audio receivers of his helmet. It sounded like a heartbeat. Slow, steady and rhythmic. After a few minutes, it stopped. He looked at the control panel. All the indicators showed green. Any other person would have removed the helmet, but any other person would have died within seconds if they had. He knew that the gas surrounding his body was not the life sustaining kind, but a far more deadly mix. Again, looking at the control panel, he entered a series of commands that he had managed to drag out of his memory. The indicators changed from green, to orange, then to red. A low hiss could now be heard and again he waited for the airlock to fill, this time with the correct mix of gases. After a few seconds, the inner door opened.

With slow, deliberate steps, he moved into the corridor outside. Turning, he closed the airlock door. Not until it was fully closed did he start to relax, slightly. Raising his hands to the side of his head, he twisted his helmet then raised it above his head, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The air bitterly cold cut into him like a knife. His eyes flew open and, coughing violently, he managed to support himself against the bulkhead. "Stupid, stupid!" he cursed to himself between gasps. "What a bloody stupid thing to do. You must be getting old to pull a stunt like that!" It took him a few minutes to recover and for his body to get used to the cold. If he was to finish his quest, he was going to have to warm this place up.

Jade sat in her ship and watched the station do nothing. It had been almost 30 minutes since she saw him move in to the small hatch, and she found herself getting concerned. Not for the man inside, but for the fact that she may have missed her only opportunity to avenge her father's death. How she wanted to make him pay for her life of loneliness.

She was only a few years old when her father died. Her mother was never the same again, and soon after, she too died. At the age of 4, Jade was an orphan. She was looked after by a charity for a while, but the Inter-Clan Wars meant that there were too many children without parents for the system to cope with. Soon she fell through cracks and found herself living on the streets of the Sapphire Prime. Alone. Scared. She survived like an animal, scavenging food and sleep wherever she could find it. Each night, sat in whatever hole she had found to call home, she would take out of her pocket, a small, tattered picture of a smiling little girl and a proud, loving father. Each night, after she had stared at the picture and before sleep, she would look to the sky, and swear vengeance upon whoever had taken him from her. Her anger kept her motivated, alive.

Years passed, and she was finally rescued from her living nightmare. Plucked from a filthy, dark room of back street infirmary and delivered to the doors of the Imperial Sapphire Hospital. She did not know, or ever see her saviour. She was not even aware that she had been moved until she awoke, not to the sights and smells of death, but the

bright lights and sounds of the most advanced medical centre ever built in the Empire. And, for the first time in years, she did not look at her small, tattered picture before sleeping. For a time, she was happy, safe, and still alive.

It was during her training at the Imperial Academy that she heard about how her father died, and of his killer. Memories of her past that she had fought so hard to forget rushed back. A stampede of emotions overwhelmed her, and for a time, almost consumed her. Anger and hatred controlled her every waking moment. Slowly, the survivor in her fought back. If she was to have her revenge, then the Academy would provide her best chance. Like a predator, she would take her time, get close, wait for her chance, and then . . .

. . . but she had missed her chance. She had taken too long. He had escaped to the heart of a dead station, and she had no way to reach him. She sat and watched the cold, black station through her cockpit window.

The silence was pierced by the alarm of an incoming missile. Acting on instinct, she punched the counter measures launch button, opened the throttles and swung her ship around to meet the attackers. She wished she had not. For the first time in her life, cutting through space like a large dagger, she saw the unmistakable shape of a Vonari Capital ship. She flipped her ship a full 180, then did what she had not done in years. She ran . . .

Life/Death

The huge control centre was dark and silent. The banks of monitors that were once a window into the life of the station sat lifeless and cold. He looked around the vast cavernous room and his eyes found what he was looking for. He moved across to the main engineering station and sat down in the seat. Almost immediately, the monitor in front of him came to life, responding to the pressure pad located within the operator's chair. The light of the screen illuminated a small section of the room. It danced off the wall and caressed the suspended cables in the ceiling grid work. The other monitors remained black and inert.

Scanning the interface, he found the command input to initialise the main station power grid and entered the correct activation code. Deep within the depths of the station, the 3 huge fusion reactors that had sat almost idle for so long providing a minute fraction of their potential output woke up. The inlet valves opened and pumped fuel into their waiting reaction chambers. The heart of the station started to beat. Pumping life giving power through the cables and conduits that snaked around every meter of the structure. Power was provided to the systems that needed it first. Life support, computer cores, weapons and defence. The station slowly started to come to life.

In the control room, the lights came on, the circulation units started and more and more monitors came to life. The main status screen, suspended from the ceiling by two massive beams flickered a few times then came on. Data started to flow across its surface. He checked the status of each of the main systems. Life support was on line, as were the computer cores, weapons and defence just coming on line.

. . . travelling at full speed, she flicked on IDS and turned her ship to look back towards the Vonari. The carrier had stopped relative to the station was starting to turn broadside to bring the full weight of its firepower down upon Babylon 5. The fighters however had decided that she was a far easier target and were on a pursuit course. They would not be able to catch her at this speed, but she had to slow down at some point. And when she did, they would be on her. One thing she had learnt about the Vonari from the history books was that they were patient. There was no way that they would give up. She decided that to die in a fight against the Vonari was not a bad way to go, and that if she was going to die, then it would be on her terms. Checking her nav computer, she plotted

a jump point as near to Babylon 5 as possible. Hopefully, she would be able to use it as cover and maybe take few of them with her before they destroyed her, the station, and him along with it. She closed her eyes and punched the jump command. A maelstrom of colour wrapped around her ship as she accelerated to jump velocity, then she was gone.

Micro jumps were always a tricky thing to master. During her time in the Imperial Academy, she and her fellow pilots were drilled again and again on the proper technique. It was much easier ever since the navigation systems had been updated following the creation of the Empire, but the instructors, some of them Legends, insisted on showing the new pilots how it was done "during the war". This gave the pilots an idea of what to expect if it went wrong. What to do if you calculated the jump point to close to a large object, like a space station, or Vonari capital ship.

A flash of light heralded the arrival of Jade's ship back into normal space. In her haste to evade the fighters, she had indeed miscalculated her exit point. Upon clearing the event horizon, Jade realised how badly she had miscalculated. Directly in front of her loomed the massive hull of Babylon 5. And it was very close. Slamming on her reverse thrust, she pulled up the nose of her ship and tried to skip off the gravity shield of the station. Expecting to have her ship bounce off and around the station, a sense of dread filled her stomach as she realised, too late, that the gravity barrier was not operational. The ventral surface of her ship slammed against the top of the station. Her shields, designed to protect against energy weapons and small missiles, crumpled and failed against such mass. The sudden reduction of velocity ripped her out of her pilots chair and slammed her against the plexglass canopy, causing large cracks to shoot out from the point of impact across its entire surface. Her ship was forced violently upwards, and away from the station.

The ship was spinning uncontrollably, but had lost most of its velocity. Jade struggled to maintain consciousness as she lay pinned against the damaged canopy. She knew that her ship was dead. All the systems were off line. Only automatic red warning lights illuminated the interior. Looking towards the rear of her ship, through the smoke and gloom she could see a crack in the hull at least two meters wide. With no atmosphere inside, she knew that she had approximately sixty minutes of air in her suit. She expected to be dead in less than two. The Vonari fighters were bound to have seen her strike the side of the station and know the status of her ship. She activated her suit comm systems and sent an open broadcast to the station, and anybody else listening.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is Flight Leader Jade. My ship has been disabled during hostile action by a Vonari battleship. To anybody who receives this message: Avenge me. I die with honour."

Closing the channel, she reached into an exterior pocket of her flight suite and pulled out a small, tattered picture of a smiling little girl and a proud, loving father.

"I'm sorry. I failed. But I will see you soon."

Face to Face

Her eyes watched the star field through the shattered canopy for the slightest sign of movement. It did not take long for it to come. Only a small amount of light played across the hull of her approaching killer. She waited. She had not avenged her father, but she knew that the Vonari cruiser would complete that task for her. At least he would not out live her by much. She waited. The bright flare of the missile launch caught her eye. She had expected the Vonari to move in for the kill, not waste a missile on a helpless target, but no matter. Death was Death. However it was dealt, she welcomed it.

She always knew that when she made her move against him, she would not live long past the event. She waited. She could clearly see the missile now. With no sound in the vacuum, she watched it speed silently towards her ship. She closed her eyes.

The missile sped towards its target. An unstoppable needle of destruction. Its onboard guidance systems had already plotted the most efficient trajectory to intercept with its target and now it was mere seconds away from fulfilling its programming. A slight, last minute adjustment in its terminal phase to avoid another ship was all that was required. It sped over and past the other ship and slammed into its target. The Vonari fighter erupted in a ball of gas and debris, ripped apart by some of the most advanced weaponry devised by the Empire.

The nearby explosion threw her across the cabin and smashed her shaken body against the bulkhead. Dazed and confused, she tried to make sense of what was going on. She should be dead by now. There was no way that the Vonari could have missed her. Turning back towards the canopy, she saw another missile streaking towards her, but instead of impacting, this too passed harmlessly over her head. Instinctively, she ducked. She grabbed hold of the console as another explosive wave crashed over her ship. This time she saw the aftermath of the explosion. Trailing fire and gas, she watched what remained of a Vonari fighter streak across her field of vision. The unmistakable glow of Imperial laser fire played against the shields of another Vonari. Frantically, she started spinning her head around in an attempt to find the source of the weapons fire. The light of another explosion lit up space enough for her to see the outline of an Imperial Raven class fighter. Another missile flew from its rack and impacted the remaining Vonari fighter, utterly destroying it. She activated her suit com system and hailed the ship.

"Raven pilot, Raven pilot. I need urgent assistance. My ship has lost all life support and I have only my suit functions available. Are you able to receive me via EVA?"

A robotic voice responded. *"My name is BASIC. I have been ordered to protect you and render you assistance if needed. I am approaching your ship. Please standby and I will signal you when I am in position to receive you. I am pleased to see you are still alive."*

He watched the screen as BASIC dealt with the fighters closing in on Jade's ship. Confident in her abilities, he turned his attention towards the Vonari ship that was bearing down upon the station.

It had been decades since the Vonari had last been seen. He, like most other people, never expected to see them again. After the decisive victory against them at the Battle of Lost Rucker, they had all but disappeared. Their capital fleet had been decimated by the combined fire power of the Clans, led by the Legends. The Imperial Fleet had engaged a few small ships scattered across Evochron, but not a full size destroyer.

The weapons systems of Babylon 5 were, 40 years ago, the most advanced available. Now, despite their age, they were still formidable. Emerging from shielded bays around the docking ring, huge cannons lifted and rotated towards the Vonari. Their massive barrels each larger than an old Leviathan cargo ship. Almost as one, they unleashed a barrage of fire towards the enemy, engulfing it in rippling, destructive energy. The Vonari ship's shields glowed under the combined firepower, and soon failed. The station's weapons were now striking directly upon the hull of the large vessel. Like a wounded animal, it tried to move away from unrelenting bombardment, but it soon succumbed to the inevitable. Massive hull breaches ripped across the surface of the ship. Unable to hold its mass together, the Vonari ship swelled then exploded into a golden fireball as hot as a star. Consumed by the uncontrolled release of its fusion reactors. The fires died, leaving nothing but a few pieces of debris that harmlessly struck the station's side.

She saw him waiting in the hanger bay as BASIC manoeuvred herself towards a pad. Gently, she touched down, the sound of the landing bounced around the silent, empty space. The hatch opened and Jade walked down the steps towards him. As she did, she realised that in all her life, she had never met him in person. A few short hours ago, she was intent on killing him. Now she was not so sure. After being recovered by BASIC, she had started to ask why he had gone out of his way to save her? Why had he not killed her when they first arrived near the station? She had clearly shown him her intentions, her wish to avenge her father with his death, but he was still willing to save her life. Why?

Watching her walk down the steps towards him, his heart started to pound. After all these years he was going to see her in person. He had watched her from afar rise though the ranks of the Navy, he had made sure she had all the opportunities she needed to make something of her life.

They stood, facing each other. Only a few feet now separated them. Emperor and Pilot. Hunter and Hunted. Savoir and Victim.

She looked at him. The memory of that night in the hospital came back to her. Her eyes welled with tears.

"It's you" she whispered.

"Hello Jade" he said. He placed his hand on her cheek and gently rubbed a tear away. "I have been watching you. I have so much to tell you. So much to share"

He stepped forward and placed his arms around her and held her tight. She squeezed him back.

Jade lifted her head from his shoulder "I thought you were dead"

The monster within

She sat and stared at the man opposite her. So close but so far away. The only activated light in the mess hall shone down on their table, separating it from the rest of the room. It mirrored the separation between the rooms' only occupants.

The emotion of their first meeting was soon cast aside by her ever present anger and hatred for the man. She knew that she owed him her life, on two separate occasions now, but the monster inside still sat coiled in her stomach, longing for release. It cried out to her to reach across the table and end her torment. It did not care who he was, only that she had fed it for years on the desire for revenge on this man. Now, it was being forced to wait. It did not like waiting.

"Did you kill my father?" she asked, dragging to words from her throat.

"No". His voice slow and calm

"Who are you?"

"Who do you think I am?" He looked up from the table and stared into her eyes "Do you think me the monster you so wanted me to be?"

She slammed her fists on the table, sending her steaming cup of coffee skidding off and onto the floor. "I don't know what I think." she yelled.

Meeting his stare with desperate eyes. "I need answers, but you are not giving them to me. You said you had answers, now tell me what the hell is happening here? Why are you here? What is this place? Damn you, tell me!"

"You are just like him. So impatient. So desperate for things now. Not willing to wait. That is why he was so good behind a stick. The worst wingman you could ever have, but if ever you got in a tight spot, you wanted him nearby. That is also what killed him."

It had had enough. It had waited for too long. The battle that had been raging inside her since that first meeting had ended. She lost. Any feelings she had for him were swept away by years of anger, hatred and frustration. The monster took control of her mind and body. This fool was just leading her on, just playing for time. He had no intention of helping her. He was waiting for something, but the monster inside had given up waiting. Unleashing a primal scream, in one swift move, she leapt across the table towards him. Caught off guard he had no time to react, her body hit his and flung them both back off his chair. Hitting the floor together, they rolled for a few meters. As soon as they stopped, she was on her feet, reaching for the knife on her belt. Pulling it free. The cold steel shone in the light. Scrabbling backwards away from her, he tried to stand, but failed. His feet slipping on the wet puddle of coffee that now covered the floor. Hitting the floor again, he looked around for something, anything that would help. He managed to grab the side of another table and desperately pulled himself up. She lunged at him again, swinging the knife down and across his chest. The blade cut through fabric, then into skin. She landed a few feet away from him and turned. He was kneeling on the ground. Blood was seeping from a long deep wound across his body. Defeated. Her head was pounding. Blood and adrenaline pumped through her veins. She bent on one knee in front of him. She pulled his head up to look into his eyes. As she did, she noticed something sticking out of his tunic. Letting go of him, she pulled it out of his pocket. It was a small rectangle of paper. A photograph. She recognised the image immediately of a smiling little girl and a proud, loving father. But this picture was different, bigger. On one side of the father stood a woman. A mother. On the other side stood a man. A man who would become an emperor. A man who was now bleeding, and dying, at her feet.

Birth

The medical bay, like most other parts of the station, had not been used in years. There was a strange mixed smell of stale air and disinfectant. It reminded her of the hospital she found herself in all those years ago. Except it was him in the bed this time, not her. Their roles reversed. She was trying to save him. She had dragged him to the medical bay along the dark, empty corridors and treated his wound as best she could with the tools at hand. It was not a pretty sight, but he would live. For now at least. Taking the needle, she pushed it hard against his arm, puncturing his skin and injected the stimulant.

His eyes started to flicker open. The bright light above his face was the first thing he saw, but the pain of his chest was his first feeling. Hot, burning pain.

"It will pass" Jade said from the other side of the room. "At least you are alive. But if you don't start giving me some real answers, I can arrange for that to change. I want to know who you are, why are you here, and what do you know about my parents?"

He took a deep breath, turned to look at her and started to talk.

"Years ago, I was a gun for hire. I flew for whoever wanted my services, and had the money to pay me. I had no issues with what I was. I was a killer. Pure and simple. I asked no questions about the morals of the client or the target. If the credit was good

and the risk worth it, then I would get the job done. It's what I did and I was very good at it."

"What changed? You get bored of killing innocent people?" Jade asked. Her contempt for him was clearly audible in her voice.

"A wise man, who always talked too much, once said that "Everything is relative". You set out to find me and to kill me for vengeance, with only hearsay and rumour to back you up. Does that make you innocent? In the eyes of those who want me dead, who want the empire to collapse? Yes. But to my supporters, and the millions who are alive because of the actions I have taken, well, that's a different matter."

He looked at her for long seconds, but she did not respond. Instead she sat still and only stared at him.

"The Vonari were a threat to the whole galaxy. As well paid as hunting small time criminals and apparent "ace" pilots was, hunting and killing Vonari paid far more. Both the Alliance and Federation were willing to turn a blind eye to my past, as long as I put my skills to more, useful, tasks. For them it was simple numbers. They had beaten the Vonari once, long ago, but at a high price. Now they were facing them again, and on more than one front. They needed pilots who could stem the progress, and they did not care who got involved. They even supplied the ships and weapons. I was a state sponsored Mercenary, and so was your father"

Her eyes burned into him. "You lie. My father was no killer" Her teeth gritted together, she almost spat the words at him

"No, he was not a killer, but he was a Mercenary. I knew him before the war. He flew for one of the old clans, and soon became a Legend. He was one of the best pilots I had ever seen. I fought with him, and most of the other Legends at the Battle of Lost Rucker. It was your father that came up with the battle plan. After the war, everything was different. Hundreds of pilots who had lost so much during the war had nothing to do. Nowhere to go. Nobody to fight. They had known nothing but death and violence for so long that without it, they were empty. And they filled that by turning on each other. The destruction was on a massive scale. Weapons that had been designed for fighting the Vonari were turned against human pilots. Whole Clans were wiped out. Your father helped me bring that all to an end"

A smile crept across his face and he let out a small chuckle. "It's funny, you know. Almost poetic. A hired killer like me and a pilot like him are the only people who managed to bring peace to this place. Hundreds of years of war and all it took were a bounty hunter and a pilot. Who'd have thought it would be so simple"

Jade was sat down in a nearby chair. Riveted by his story. She fought back tears. Leaning forward, she rested her arms on her thighs. Desperate not to miss a word he said.

"Not long after you were born, we gathered here, on this station." He moved his arms in a sweeping arc across his body. "One final meeting of the old clans. Of the old ways. This place, this station is where the empire started. This is where it all began. Some of the clan leaders helped me, but others were not happy with what I was doing. But they did not attack me. Instead they turned on your father. He was the architect of the defeat of the Vonari. He was the one who helped me unite the clans. He was my strongest supporter when I took control on this station. And when the time came, he was the one who paid the price."

"So you are alive because he died for you? Is that it?" She was on her feet again, walking slowly towards his bed side, tears rolling down her face. "Are you saying that my life was ruined because of some misplaced sense of loyalty to you? You may not have killed my father yourself, but he IS dead, because of you. And that is just as bad. It should have been you, not him" She stood alongside the bed. Fists clenched tight. "It should be YOU, NOT HIM. YOU!" She started to bang the bed with her fists, swinging wildly in despair.

"Stop!" he yelled. "Stop! Listen to me!" Grabbing her wrist he shook her hard. "It should have been me. They missed! Do you understand? They missed" They did not plan on killing him. They wanted him alive. They wanted to lay the blame of my death at his feet. With me dead, and you father accused of the crime, their way was clear."

She stopped struggling against his grip and looked at him.

"When he died, the outcry was loud and clear. They had killed an innocent man, the Hero of Lost Rucker. Any support they had was gone. The creation of the Empire was assured. So they planted a seed in the mind of his young and impressionable daughter, and fled to the outer worlds. Waiting for that seed grew into an all consuming desire for revenge, to finish the job they could not do. They used you as a tool in their game" He let her go and she stumble back against the wall, slumping down on the floor. A soft chime though the ceiling speakers announced a message from BASIC.

"My lord. I have detected several jump portals in the surrounding space. From the type and quantity of the ship signatures, I believe that they have arrived. Shall I hail them?"

Breathing heavily, he sat up and struggled out of the bed. Jade got to her feet to help him. He looked at her with surprise. "Whatever is happening here" she said "whatever you have been planning is going to involve me. I would rather know what is happening than be taken by surprise. At the moment, you are the only person who knows the whole story. So that means I am not letting you die."

He searched her eyes and found what he was looking for. "Fair enough".

Looking towards the mic pick up, he responded to BASIC. "Yes BASIC. Instruct them to dock in the main bay. Inform them of the debris left by our previous guests if you don't mind. And let me know when the other turn up."

"Yes my lord"

"Jade? That game I told you about? Well, it ends here, where it all began. I hope you are ready"

End Game

One by one, the ships breached the outer force barrier and entered the cavernous landing bay of Babylon 5. It had been many years since the deck plaiting had resonated with the sound of so many ships, but like a mother welcoming home her children, the station accepted each and every impact. As each ship touched down, automated docking clamps rose from the floor like caring arms and held them in place as they were moved into main hanger. In all, fourteen ships of all sizes and configurations were moved from the harsh vacuum of space into the warm heart of the station. Despite the number of ship, the hanger was still less mostly empty, having been designed and built to house more than four times the number currently docked.

Standing in the port masters office, he and Jade watched the slow procession through the large windows that looked out onto the bay. Now, and not for the first time since he was informed of their arrival, he felt nervous. He knew that some of those men and women now walking along the main passenger access way had tried to kill him. Had killed his friend, and Jade's father. And he believed had sent the Vonari to try again. Some of those pilots were traitors to him, the Empire and to Humanity itself. Gathering his thoughts he turned towards Jade.

"Ready?"

"Yes"

"Trust me. Please."

"Ok"

Together they turned and walked out of the office and followed the long wide corridor to the main conference suite. He paused outside the door and composed himself. Fighting against the pain in his chest, and stood tall, pulled the handle and strode into the room.

They sat, waiting. Why were they here? Why had the Emperor called them to this dead station? Sat at the back of the room, Bravehart looked around. He could see more than one person who would gladly put a knife into the Emperors' back, and to think of it, his as well. He had been a supporter since the formation of the Empire, and had been very public in his support. When the empire was formed, he had agreed to uphold the peace and support it for the good of all. In doing so he had made enemies of friends and friends of enemies. He sat across the table from one such friend now.

"This is damn strange. Why are we here? And what are they doing here?" He pointed across the room to a group of men sat in the corner. "In the name of Vice, they would kill him in a second if they had a chance"

His friend fixed his eyes on the door at the far end of the room. "I don't know, but we are going to find out soon enough. He is here. Outside that door."

Brave strained his eyes to focus on the large metal door "He is? How do you know?"

At that moment the door opened and he walked in. All eyes followed him as he approached the platform. Behind him walked in a woman in an Imperial Pilots uniform. She scanned her eyes around the room, as if searching for something, someone.

"I know her" Gorf whispered to Warsign. "She's a pilot in his personal squadron. She used to stop off at my old burger joint in Deneb. Before closed they them all down for political reasons"

"Shut up" snapped Warsign in a hushed voice. "Stop moaning about you bloody burger joints. It wasn't political reasons and you know it. They shut you down because you never cleaned your fryers and Eclipse died of food poisoning. When are you gonna admit it?"

"Moooo" said Gorf and began to sulk.

He held onto the podium, partly for effect, but he needed the support of its firm base. Jade stood behind and to the right of him. He cast his gaze across the faces in front of him and found the one he was looking for. Dengar sat at the front and had seen what most had missed. He was hunched against the podium and was grimacing slightly. He

was hurt badly, but hiding it well. Years of being a bounty hunter had taught him to spot the little things. An emotion that could pass as concern crossed his mind, and then was gone.

He looked up and began to address the Legends. "I am your Emperor, and I have asked you all to come and be witness to the end. The end of years of torment and lies. Among you is the person responsible for the assassination attempt on me. Before today, I had only rumours, clues, hearsay. But now I know. Now I know who is responsible. This ends now"

Stepping from behind the podium, he drew his weapon in a single fluid motion and pointed it towards his target. "You lose" A single shot.

The King is Dead! . . . Long Live the Queen

Smooth, fast, deadly. The bullet left the pistol in a violent explosion of gas and heat that was gone as soon as it appeared. Spinning through the air, the small projectile sped towards its target. Unstoppable. Hitting the clothing, it slowed, but only slightly. Cutting through the skin and bone, it tore a path through the body and out, finally coming to a halt only when it hit the wall behind.

He stood there. Motionless. He saw the flash, not from in front as he expected, but off to his left. Glancing over, he saw the shooter melt into the crowd. His own weapon was unused, useless. Looking to his right, he could see the entry wound in his shoulder. Could feel the heat of it, but strangely, there was no pain. Falling to the side, he stumbled against the podium, and then collapsed. The room spanned as he fell to the floor. He could hear the muffled shouts; see the rushing bodies around him. Dengar was up on his feet and on the platform before he even hit the floor. Jade had drawn her weapon and went down on one knee, searching, but the confusion in the room destroyed any hope of finding who fired. Turning towards the prone figure on the floor, she quickly assessed his wound. Blood was seeping from under his body, spreading slowly across the floor. She looked at Dengar, who had come to the same conclusion for her.

He opened his eyes, and looked up. Spluttering and coughing, he lifted his head.

"This did not go as I intended it" he said with a slight chuckle. "Getting shot was not part of the plan."

"Don't move" Jade said, concern in her voice. "Who was it? Who did you see?"

He tried to sit up, but fell back to the floor. Tried again, and managed to lean against the podium. He grabbed Jade by the sleeve. "There are more of them here than I thought. I didn't see who fired. You have got to stop them, you hear me. There are two!" He placed something in her hand and squeezed her fingers around it. She looked down and saw the photograph of her family, and a small data stick. "Consider this a gift, from me to you. Atonement for your life that was taken, and what should have been." His breath was coming in short snatches. Life oozing from his body.

"What is this?" She asked.

"It is the keys to the empire. Take this to the Capital on Sapphire, and give it to the Council. Dengar will support you. He is a pain in the arse, but I've had never a truer friend" The blood flow was slowing. The heart can't pump what is not there. He eyes flickered.

"No, you can't die. You promised me. What about me? What am I to do now?"

"She is a stubborn as her father" he thought. "Jade" he said, the words falling out between gasps. His body trying to keep what was still working alive. "I'm sorry. I can't help you anymore. But I can tell you this. The man who killed your father is in this room. You have never been closer to the truth. And with what you have in your hands, you can do as you wish. The entire resources of the empire are at your disposal." He smiled "It's the perks of the job!"

"This was your plan, wasn't it? You knew you would die on this station." The tears were running down her cheeks.

"Meeting you was not part of the plan. I wanted to take the easy way out. Dengar was going to deliver this to you after I had done what was needed. But I am glad I did. I always knew you would turn out OK in the end. I did this for you. I did this for the only reason there is" the words trailed away. His eyes shut.

Romulan looked on blankly. He had done his job. Done what he was asked. Slowly he turned away from the chaos he had caused and walked towards The Pilot whose life he had just saved. "She knows about you now." He looked over his shoulder and gestured to the crowd on the platform. "She is going to hunt you and kill you. You can't hide any more. Can't hide behind a fiction of death, and you can't control me anymore. Our debt is paid. Whatever happens, your life as you know it is over! I hope it was worth it!"

He placed the gun in The Pilots hand and left the room.

Epilogue

Beep . . . beep . . . beep

The medical alarm woke him. Slowly, he opened his eyes. For a few seconds he was confused. Sluggish. Unsure of his surroundings. Then clarity

"How long has it been?" His voice dry and parched

"The damage was significant. BASIC was able to replace the lost blood, but you did not heal as quickly this time as you have in the past. You have been unconscious for six weeks."

"Six weeks? I didn't think I would live through this one. I'm getting old my friend." He took a sip of water from the tube in his mouth "It worked then?"

"Yes" Dengar was sat across the room

"They accepted her?"

"Yes. She has put her new power to good use. The Legends have rallied around her. Condemnation for your assassination has spread across Evochron. The enemy are isolated and desperate. The fleet has mobilised against the new Vonari incursion encouraged by them, and are doing well. It is only a matter of time before they are defeated again, and then she will find him."

"Vice help him when she does! See to it that she gets all the help she can."

"Yes"

"I have just one more favour? Can you work on your conversation skills please? If I have got to spend my recovery time with an emotionless man like you, I think I'm going to kill myself all over again."

Dengar looked at his friend. "Lizards." He thought "Never happy!"

Editor: *I wonder if we will ever hear of Jade's adventures . . . several people have suspicions of who "The Pilot" is though . . .*

"The pilot in the end, is of course you, and the hitman. Hmm, I thought Eclipse for a while, but he died of food poisoning. I do have a suspicion of who it is, but I'll keep it for myself for now." (SeeJay)

"I would have to say that The Pilot is Jade's father, just because I don't recall ever giving any hard proof that he is truly dead." (Pyroka)

Of My Running Afoul of the Nefarious Captain Devious by Nigel_Strange

March 2009



Nigel_Strange introduces to a lovable rogue called Captain Nefarious in this complex tale of intrigue and espionage in a military context

Of My Running Afoul of the Nefarious Captain Devious

by Nigel_Strange
March 2009

I was on leave from the Talison conflict. The battle there had been raging for weeks now, always the same, always. I had 48 hours to enjoy the finest luxuries that a military pilot could afford, which I worked out to be about five pints of low-grade ersatz beer, a cheap motel on the edge of Sapphire's industrial area, and company for the evening.

After the dust settled upon landing, I hopped out of my Ferret and headed toward the nearest space-port bar when I saw a strange sight: a man with an airbrush was painting scorch marks on the body of an Evoch. He somehow sensed my curiosity, even though his back was turned, whereupon he swivelled around, removed the large cigar hanging from his mouth, and treated me to a mischievous grin from beneath his handlebar moustache.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm painting scorch marks on this Evoch," came his reply.

"Care to explain?"

"I'm working mercenary for now, and I need these scorch marks to prove my value."

"I'm not convinced."

"I'll explain in the bar, if you care to join me. I'll even buy you a drink."

He then got all his gear together and we headed to the bar. The place was busy, but somehow he managed to secure for us a table in the back. Through the haze of smoke, he leaned forward and confided in me.

"Have you ever tried to hire a mercenary pilot?" he asked.

"I'm in the Alliance military: we don't need mercenaries," I boasted.

"Right right. Well, suppose you were in the shipping business, and you wanted to hire an escort. There are two ships available. Who would you go with, the pilot with the ship that has nary a scratch on her, or the one that looks like she's taken a good licking and come out of it? I would wager on the latter, because who knows what snot-nosed kid might be out for his first day adventuring in his daddy's ship? If you've got a ship that's seen some action, and now we're talking. You see? Half the battle with mercenary work: marketing."

I then remembered visiting starports on several occasions and being amazed at how many mercenaries would be waiting in the docks, floating listlessly in their stale cockpits, sporting week-old beards and hungry expressions. When a rich merchant arrived, they would unbuckle themselves and jump around in their sweaty leather jackets and hold up cardboard signs offering prices and the occasional adjective. Some were "Deadly," while

others were "Reliable." Their whole lot seemed rather pathetic to the career military man.

"Now, what if you're so good, that, although you've seen battle after battle, you just never get hit?" he continued. "You soar above the fray, deploying countermeasures, jibing, weaving in and out of enemy fire . . . but the enemy never comes close to making a solid hit. Maybe a few glances off the shield, but nothing powerful enough to scratch the hull."

"Nobody's that good," I countered.

"My point exactly. You would not believe any pilot capable of that level of skill, that level of grace, and that level of extraordinary situational awareness unless you witnessed it with your own eyes. You'd definitely want that pilot wouldn't you? But the ship doesn't have that rugged appearance of a seasoned veteran . . . so, such a pilot would need some cosmetic embellishment."

"Are you saying that you're so good that you never get scratched in battle?"

"Well, I wouldn't actually say anything of the sort . . ." he trailed off, leaving the obvious implication dangling tangibly in the air.

"I don't know . . . maybe . . ." I said in the most noncommittal tone possible.

"That's the spirit," he said. I wasn't sure if he was referring to my surrendering the argument or the fact that the beers had just arrived. He immediately seized one tankard and began to drink. After a few swallows, he set it down with a loud thump and proffered his hand.

"Captain Devious, at your service."

"With a name like that, I'm surprised I've never heard of you," I said.

"Well, it's not my real name," he vouchsafed. "Actually, it's Tedious, but I prefer Devious."

"I see. Well, still, I think I would remember a name like that. The mercenary world isn't that big. I think I would have heard of you, unless you're a rookie."

"Rookie, hmm? What's the most important element in a battle?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I guess it would-"

"Surprise!" exclaimed, simultaneously seizing my own tankard (which I had scarcely touched) and throwing its contents straight into my face. I didn't even have time to duck. When I had wiped the beer out of my face, my associate had vanished. The bar exploded in raucous laughter. After a few seconds, the waiter came over and presented me with the tab, which reminded me that the good Captain had originally offered to buy me the drink.

Amid the laughs of the rest of the bar, I ran out the door, the waiter trailing me with the tab shouting pathetically for me to come back and pay it. When I got outside, I just caught a glimpse of a Wraith taking to the air before I lost it against the sun. A wind warmed from its afterburners blew off my hat and I stood confused long enough for the waiter to catch up and foist the tab on me.

I reluctantly paid the bill and added a tip to compensate for running the waiter all the way out to the landing area. Filled with resentment and frustration, I was climbing aboard my Ferret when I managed to catch sight of another pilot yelling angrily about someone having shot up his Evoch. He was apparently too drunk to see that the scorch marks were just painted on.

So, that was my first encounter with the nefarious Captain Devious.

Talison Conflict: day 322.

After weeks of surviving engagement after engagement, I had so many Vonari kills to my name that I was finally awarded the rank of Lieutenant, and qualified for the assignment of the vaunted Evoch-C class starfighter. I had been anticipating the event for some time, and had been saving my credits for installing all of the best components: repair system, Banshee cannons, and shield augments. It is at this point where I must confess that my military salary could not nearly afford all of these necessities, but the money was obtained through a lucrative black market economy, which I did dabble in. I rationalized this by the fact that, were it not for the best technology money could buy, I would not have survived my first engagement, so, by moving goods of a less-than-legal nature, I was able to offset the guilt by protecting our worlds from the Vonari invasion. I am convinced that Alliance Command was fully aware of these illegal activities, but they turned a blind eye to it, so, we benefited from the better weapons and they benefited from plausible deniability. I noticed most pilots had also augmented their craft with upgrades that were obviously beyond current mil-spec issue. The ones that didn't either perished early, or stayed in the rear with the carriers.

I still remember the first time I climbed into the cockpit. The moment the hatch closed and sealed, I gunned the throttle and felt myself pressed deep into the cushions of the seat. The sheer thrill of acceleration never really wore off. I spent the day skimming the atmosphere of Emerald and making a big point of landing it conspicuously in starports where I had noticed a preponderance of beautiful women. The only thing I was afraid of was enjoying the flight too much and losing situational awareness. I resolved to remove the cushions from the seat after that first flight, but never actually got around to it. In retrospect, the very cushions under my bum might have changed the course of my life, and possibly the course of history. It seems so odd, now that I think of it. That's the beautiful strangeness of hindsight.

My first battle in the Evoch was eye-opening. It was as nimble as a wraith, but had slightly better armour. My one complaint about it was that it presented a bigger target from the dorsal and ventral surfaces. I found this out when my wings got shot up on day 324. I was closing on a Vonari fighter, feeling the thrill of acceleration once again. I was pumping energy into weapons at the expense of shields because I thought I had an easy kill. However, my situational awareness must have lagged, because the next thing I knew, before I could pull the trigger, those cushions were vibrating and rocking beneath me as the spray of Vonari cannons played on my soft underbelly. The shields were down in a second, and for a few seconds my ship was rolling in response to the withering cannons, tossed about like a leaf on the wind.

Even with the repair system fully engaged, my shields were down, my navigation computer was on the fritz, and my afterburners were non-functional. I tried the jumpdrive, but I knew it would be out as well: when the afterburners are down, you can be pretty sure the jumpdrive is out too. In short, I was a sitting duck. My beautiful Evoch was a mangled mess and I was staring down the twin barrels of some Vonari attack ship. It wasn't even a heavy class fighter, but some little scout ship, but even that could finish me off without too much trouble. I had my hand pressed against the eject button, ready for that volley of death to ruin my once-stunning ship.

When one faces the immediate prospect of death, the mind seems to go in strange directions. There is a clear and sharp focus on the here and now, and a kind of lengthening in the perception of time. Everything slows down. At the same time, part of the mind seems to drift far away, as if to escape before the body is turned into a few pounds of ash and a whiff of hydrogen. I remember the one thought that passed through my mind at the time. I still laugh about it: "Money can't buy happiness, but on Onyx, it will buy you a wife."

As this bizarre thought crossed my mind, a shadow crossed my windscreen. I looked up to see a wraith diving out of the sun, lasers, cannons, and Excalibers all a-blazing. Over the radio, I heard a vaguely familiar voice exclaim: "Surprise!" The Vonari scout ship was gone, and I drifted off into unconsciousness.

Well, I didn't exactly drift into unconsciousness, though I think the story works better that way. In fact, my ship drifted for a few hours while I sweated it out angrily in my cockpit while Captain Devious and his friends mopped up, but I prefer to tell it like I slipped into unconsciousness. I can now tell how it really happened because it really doesn't matter anymore.

When my repair system finally got my ship into working order, I pulled into the system's starbase to let the pit crew hammer out the remaining dings. My Evoch (which I fatuously named **Eve**, thinking myself clever at the time) was still sound and would still fly. I saw the good Captain's wraith parked there as well. It was painted matte black, except for some nose art of a sexy female harlequin bent slightly forward with a finger to her lips. The ship's name was Careless Whisper. When I entered the bar, I found the nefarious Captain Devious sitting at a table, drinking and retelling the stories of his latest glorious battle. The rest of the party listened, enraptured and enthralled by the retelling of the very same events that I perceived only dimly from a distance in my smouldering cockpit.

I must admit now that I felt great resentment toward this clown. After all: he first insulted me by throwing a beer in my face, then had the audacity to make me swallow my own pride by saving my life. I might have owed him my life, but I felt nothing but anger and jealousy. A better man would have swallowed his pride and thanked him for being there at the right time and performing an act of heroism. I am the worse type of man, however, so I purchased a beer and stealthily crept up behind him. As his back was to me, I had the perfect opportunity to return the favour that I owed him from our first encounter. My revenge was at hand.

But it was not to be. As I tipped the stein above his head, he held his own recently-emptied stein to catch the flowing beer. I tried to move the glass around to get some of it on him, and was partially successful, but he caught the lion's share of it in his tankard, which he then hoisted in what I took to be a mock salute, and drank it. I fumed at the sight of that smirk raising the side of his ridiculous moustache as he slurped down the beer.

"Thanks for the beer!" he said in a jovial way. "You really shouldn't have, though, as I still owe you one from last time, don't I?"

"That's right," I said coldly. Looking back on it, I was rather foolish, but at the time, I was full of pride and jealousy.

"Barmaid," commanded Devious, "bring this man a beer on me!" Then, to me, he said: "Have a seat, Lieutenant Hothead, and drink with us."

Somewhat ameliorated, I accepted the drink, and by the end of the night, we were all swinging our tankards and singing raunchy military songs and scaring the other customers out of the bar.

"That was a good attempt at sneaking up on me," he confided after most of the other patrons had left. The two of us sat at the table, alone except for a gentleman at the end of the bar having remarkable success against the barmaid's moral reservations. "Had I been alone, you might have succeeded, but you forgot that, though my back was turned, I could still sense your approach. I could see it in the faces of the other guys, and if I looked really closely, in the reflections of their tankards and pupils. Still, you get points for trying."

"I thought you'd be mad," I slurred.

"Mad? No! If you had failed to attempt some kind of satisfaction, I would have been disappointed, but you showed me that you've got some audacity, and that will get you pretty far.

"So, now that you know what the most important element in battle is, you have to learn the practical application. When you can afford it, and if you can find one, get a stealth generator. Never blindly accept command's mission coordinates, but plot your arrival so that your stealth generator can be ready to go after you loose your first volley. Aim your approach so that you're coming from the direction of the sun, so that your jump flash is masked, and so your enemies can't see you while you're uncloaked after the jump. After that, you'll figure out the rest."

I thanked him for the advice. I scribbled notes on the paper napkin because I knew I would forget them otherwise, and I considered this valuable information at the time, as none of this was covered in flight school. I realized, for the first time, that this Captian Devious was more than just a clown, and that he might actually be someone I could learn from. There was still a pang of guilt where there was anger, and still some jealousy, but these would fade if his tactics proved worthwhile.

We continued drinking and relating stories for another hour or so, then I drifted into unconsciousness. Honestly. I swear.

The Vonari were in Cerulean.

I still remember when I first heard the news. I was having lunch with a girl from Deneb. She had satiny skin and bright green eyes. The people of Deneb all have this quaint accent that makes one think of small towns amid rolling hills of lush green grass and a whole lot of nothing to do but spend money and be happy. She was watching the vidscreen behind me in the restaurant while I was chewing my textured protein sandwich. Her eyes suddenly got wide and furrowed in the middle as her pretty face screwed up with sudden concern. I turned around and saw the screen for myself. A Vonari cruiser was shown in silhouette on one of those grainy intel shots they get from long range scout missions. It was unmistakably a Vonari cruiser. The caption at the bottom of the screen said "Vonari presence spotted in Cerulean."

"You know anyone in Cerulean?" I asked.

"I have some family there," she said.

That was the last time I saw her. I didn't know her very well, but I asked around and found out that she went to Cerulean herself to see her brothers. I have no idea if she made it.

The Alliance was mobilizing forces to meet the Vonari threat, and I asked to be reassigned to the Hawk in Cerulean. I had been fighting in Talison for a while and wanted a change of scenery, even if it was just a different nebula colour. Command didn't care what my reasons were, but they wanted to mobilize as quickly as possible and put up a good defence. This meant sending in their more experienced pilots early on. They also needed reconnaissance, and since my ship was equipped with a stealth generator (they made a point of not asking me how I obtained one) I was a perfect candidate for this type of mission. Within three days, I was in the flight deck of the Hawk.

Reconnaissance missions are different from the standard strike missions, which was what I was most familiar with. However, the stealth tactics that I learned from Captain Devious became my primary tools on these missions. The Vonari never saw me coming and never saw me leave. I would drop in from the direction of the sun to mask my entry flash. I would then transfer all power to weapons, as these stealth generators used the reserves of the weapon energy for charge (in addition to draining your shields). By the time I was about 10K away, I would engage the generator so that they would never even see a blip (experience in Talison suggested that their long-range scanners worked at about the same range as ours). I would then coast in without power until I could get a visual, then I'd turn on the scanners and take my pictures. In this way, we got fleet information and could respond in time to stop their progression.

On Day 23 of my assignment in the Cerulean theatre, I was doing one of these reconnaissance missions when I heard a distress call coming from a pilot in the nearby asteroid field. It was an Avenger class fighter from the Freedom. Apparently, the guy and his wingman were delivering a package to a Vonari cruiser and they got a little too close to the heat. They took some shrapnel and some heat, which fried their avionics and left them open to attack from the Vonari fighters. When I got there, using the sun for cover, as usual, I found them in nearly the same situation that Captain Devious rescued me from: they were a sitting target with a Vonari scout bearing down on them. The Vonari never saw me coming, and I dispatched it without difficulty. The Avenger pilot was glad I showed up, but his wingman didn't make it. Because I helped out, I got to attend the funeral.

Ordinarily, the body would be sent back to the pilot's homeworld where the funeral would be held. Military funerals were a humdrum affair: everyone dressed in their sombre "Blacks" with someone playing Taps and maybe a merry dirge or two on the bagpipes. This wingman, though, was the nephew of someone important in the local guild, so the family insisted on a guild funeral aboard one of their cruisers. I won't go into the details about the complex relations between the guild and the military. Suffice it to say that everyone was tense and it seemed that something bad could happen at any moment. Thankfully, nothing untoward happened except a fist fight over a bottle of scotch.

The family insisted on what they called a "Viking funeral." They dressed him up in his flight suit and strapped him into the cockpit of some small fighter he owned. Then, they just let it drift into the atmosphere of planet C580 while a green robed Gaian priest muttered some prayers about returning his component molecules to the biosphere or something to that effect. We all watched as the ship began to glow, then streaked down

through the atmosphere, leaving a trail of ionized gas and black smoke, like a scar on the face of the world. After an hour or two, the scar had healed and we had finished our drinking and commiserating.

After the wake, I was approached by a senior officer of the Freedom.

"Commander Smythe said you were quite a pilot." Smythe was the Avenger pilot I saved. "He described your rescue in great detail. After watching the footage taken from the Avenger, Colonel Frakes wanted to have a word with you."

"When?"

"At your earliest convenience."

An hour later, I was in Colonel Frakes's in the stern of the Freedom. Like any other military carrier, living space was not in the design plan. The cabin was small, but neat. Frakes had arranged very little furniture in the place, and every available space remained empty, so that, though the room was small, it was also nearly featureless, giving the illusion of space.

"Close the door," said Frakes. He was a thin man. I could not tell how tall he was because he was seated at his desk. He looked to be in his late forties. He had salt and pepper hair and a small grey moustache poised above his pursed lips like a tiny mountain goat in danger of sliding off. If it did slide off, it would have been saved by the rugged protuberant chin that jutted out like a rocky outcropping. His light blue eyes were cold as ice, and were reduced to the tiniest little beads thanks to the thick circular gold-rimmed glasses he wore. If someone asked me, I would have said he was from Glacia, but maybe that's just a stereotype.

As I closed the door, he looked up at me, as though appraising me. He held me in that icy stare of his for some time, during which I began to feel a bead of sweat trickle down my spine. I had drunk too much during the wake to stand like that under the man's magnifying lens. Finally satisfied with some invisible quality he had discerned after what seemed like a ten minute inspection, he smiled. It was a sudden flash of teeth that I found even more disturbing than the cold stare. Luckily, it vanished as quickly as it appeared, leaving me to wonder afterward if he had smiled at all.

"That was a fancy bit of flying," he said.

"Thank you, sir."

"You have some skills that are . . . uncommon at your rank. Using the local star for cover, stealth generator, shooting down of missiles . . . very impressive."

"Thank you, sir."

"Not the sort of flying we provide training for," he continued. I was trying to see where this was going, but couldn't. "Which leads me to conclude that you had some outside training."

"Yes, sir."

"May I ask from whom?"

"Man I barely knew, sir."

"Do you at least know his name?"

"He goes by the name Captain Devious, sir," I replied.

Frakes nodded, as though this confirmed some suspicion he had. "Do you know where this Captain Devious is now?"

"No, sir."

"I'll tell you. He's in Alpha Centauri. He has been hiring mercenaries. We want you to be one of them."

"Sir?"

"Your commanding officer on the Hawk will fill you in on the details. Dismissed." After that, the colonel looked down at his desk screen and paid me no more heed. At the moment he stopped looking at me, I ceased to exist to him. I showed myself out.

A New Assignment

When I got back aboard the Hawk and settled in, I reported to Commander Waters for a briefing on my new assignment. After sitting down, he explained the situation to me, or at least, the part of the situation I was entitled to know about.

"How much do you know about this Captain Devious?" he asked. Waters was not a large man, nor was he imposing in any way. Some people believed that he got into his position because his family was well placed. I disagreed, though. The man might not have command stamped all over him, but he was subtle. He knew how to get things done, and he knew how to get people to do things, whether or not they knew it.

"Not much, sir. Decent fellow, I suppose," I lied. I still had reservations about his personality, but I recognized them to be biases.

"Is this him?" he asked, blowing up a vid capture of him in group of pilots, posing together. They were holding a sign: *Roland's Raiders, 2421*. That was several years ago. He was younger when the vid was taken, but it was definitely he.

"Yes, sir."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he mention anything about his clan?"

"Clan, sir? No, sir."

"Have you ever heard of Clan Destiny?"

"No, sir."

"Have you ever heard of the Aurora?"

"Yes, sir." The Aurora was a myth, or so I thought. It was rumoured to be a ghost ship that appeared from nowhere and disappeared again without a trace. There used to be sightings of it across Evochron, and when someone said they'd seen it, eyebrows were raised, jokes exchanged, and someone would end up getting a free drink. It was said

that it was the only carrier that had its own stealth generator. Shortly after it was commissioned, it disappeared and went AWOL. Nowadays, the only people who say they'd seen the Aurora were pilots who were too hung over to tell reality from hallucination. Any little ripple in the starscape, any vague blue flash, and someone was 'seeing' the Aurora. Most people believed that the technology destroyed the ship when it was first activated. Some think the ship teleported to another dimension. Some maintain the ship was decommissioned, but could never offer proof. "I always regarded it as a kind of myth, sir."

"It's no myth," Waters vouchsafed. "The last time we received communication from it was two years ago. It was commanded by one Commander Tungsten Conrad. Let me be clear," he continued. "From this point our conversation is top secret, understood?"

"Yes sir. Did you say Tungsten?" I asked.

"Yes. Tungsten, as in the metal. His parents were Meks." Meks were some religious cult, which I understood worshipped technology, but did not know much else about them. I thought there was a Mek in my unit, but I never broached the subject with him.

"About three years ago, Conrad said he had evidence that the Vonari were planning something, but never actually produced any definitive evidence, at least, nothing that's in the records. He later tried to convince Command to install experimental stealth generators on all the Alliance capital ships. Naturally, such an expensive enterprise was turned down. This was also before the Vonari started appearing in Talison. Somehow, he managed to get the resources together to install an experimental stealth generator on his ship, the Aurora, without Command's authorization or knowledge. As you can imagine, keeping a secret of this magnitude from Command indicates the kind of man we're dealing with. He's bright, subtle, and extremely motivated by whatever beliefs he has about the war effort. After the installation and testing was completed, he vanished, taking the Aurora and the Flying Monkeys with him."

"Flying Monkeys?" I asked.

"That was the squadron under his command. They were stationed aboard the Aurora. I believe that Captain Ted Hackmore, or Captain Devious, as you know him, came up with that name." His desk screen showed a later picture of Captain Devious with another group of pilots, the Flying Monkeys. They were holding a sign titled "The Flying Monkeys." It depicted a little monkey with wings wearing a fez and a little vest, flying through the air, holding a tiny little dog. "This Devious character has an interesting sense of humour. That man," he said, pointing to a tall officer to the side wearing commander's bars and looking bored, "is Commander Conrad."

With his fingers, he enlarged the vid so that Conrad's face filled the entire viewscreen. He had an aquiline nose and deep set eyes beneath a ridge of a brow that shaded them so that all you could see were the points of light reflecting off the corneas, like shiny gemstones reflecting light from the bottom of a cave. His collar was pulled up so that it nearly touched his hat. He had a dark Van Dyke and moustache, which were meticulously maintained. What was most disturbing, though, was his expression. It was hard to describe. All of the people in the picture were looking at the camera. Conrad, however, seemed to be looking through the camera, looking directly at the viewer, at me. It made me feel distinctly uncomfortable. I knew it was nonsense, but I felt as if he were somehow watching me from across space and time. It was like when two people glance at one another and somehow come to some unspoken mutual understanding. I got the feeling that Conrad understood me, but I was not sure I understood him.

"We believe that Captain Devious and his entire squadron are still working for Conrad. We believe they have formed their own clan, called Clan Destiny. We aren't sure what

kind of hold Conrad has over his men. There is speculation that he has turned his command into some kind of cult, but that's just hearsay. What we do know is that he has stolen Alliance property, abandoned his post, and is now working autonomously, outside the authority of the Alliance. To what purpose, we don't know. We want you to find out."

"Yes, sir."

"We ultimately want Conrad brought to justice, but your initial assignment is to get close to him and then report back to us. Your initial point of contact is Ted Hackmore."

"Sir, is 'Ted' possibly short for 'Tedious?'"

"How is this relevant?"

"Sorry, sir."

"You should be able to make contact with Hackmore in Alpha Centauri. Because of your prior contact, it should not seem suspicious. Once you have inserted yourself into his confidence, gather intel without raising suspicion. We want to know his moves and his contacts. We want to know what he eats for breakfast. If he is working for Conrad, something along the line will show up that we can put a trace on. He might even take you straight to the Aurora, though highly unlikely. It all depends on how well you can infiltrate their clan. Understood?"

"Sir, I am not trained in espionage, sir."

"I'm sure you'll do fine. Just keep your head and try to get into the role of someone who is honestly trying to work as a mercenary. Oh, and one more thing: we're going to fit you with a subcutaneous tracking device so we know where you are at all times. You'll also receive a tangler for text messages."

After that, I was dismissed. I was told to go to the infirmary where they put me under to install the tracking device. I guess it was more than a little chip under the skin, because the cut on my abdomen was an inch long. They assured me that it would heal up in a few days without leaving a scar, as it was important to be able to pass any inspection without arousing suspicion.

They also gave me the promised tangler. This is a small texting device that used the principle of quantum entanglement to send communications instantly across any distance to its twin, of which Commander Waters had possession. I had only a vague inkling of how it worked, but apparently, it was of limited use: once you used all the bits in the tangler, you had to discard it, whereupon it would self-destruct. I could use it, though, to signal when I had reached a critical point in my mission. The other thing that made the tangler so important, besides being able to communicate instantly without delay across any distance, was that the communication could not be intercepted at any point in between, because the communication did not actually travel between the two points. I never really understood it, but I remembered first hearing about these devices in the early 2400's when scientists called them "magic boxes." Externally, however, it looked just like any PDA, which was part of its overt function. I could cram it full of personal notes, so long as they were not mission related, or if they helped with the cover story that I was to use for the mission. The tangler, though, was good for only 64kb of information before it was exhausted, so whatever I sent had to be extremely condensed. The message did not have to be coded because it could not be intercepted, but a code could be established for the purpose of compaction. So, I had to learn some archaic binary code from the dawn of telecommunications.

In truth, I had serious misgivings about this mission. It was one thing to kill aliens, or even enemy humans, in open combat, even if stealth was used. It was another thing entirely to gain their trust and friendship, and then betray them. I had no great love for Captain Devious, but using his trust to achieve some kind of military goal seemed slimy to me, and I felt sullied by it. Needless to say, I did not confide these feelings in Commander Waters. I tried to rationalize my assignment by telling myself that this was a war and I was a soldier, and that obedience to higher command was the highest morality that a soldier was supposed to consider. It still did not sit well with me, though it seemed that many soldiers had no problem with moral ambiguity. Then again, neither did I until I actually faced a situation that evoked it.

After recovering from the surgery, I discarded my military gear (except for my ship) and assumed the role of a discharged Lieutenant looking to put his piloting skills to mercenary work, seeking gold and glory. I spent considerable time working out the details of my cover story and inputting corroborating evidence into my PDA/tangler. Finally, I packed my bags, jumped into my Evoch and headed to Alpha Centauri.

Of my arrival in Alpha Centauri and the curious goings on therein

Alpha Centauri is a quiet and fairly well-off sector. The people there are open to trade with outsiders, even though the government is somewhat xenophobic. Since they open their trading arms to outsiders, they are a kind of magnet for mercenaries, which was why it was not surprising that Captain Devious would choose Alpha Centauri for his mercenary-hiring needs. He could expect to find some higher quality mercenaries there, expecting higher pay, and flying better ships with more experience. What he wanted with these mercenaries, however, was not known.

With a good fulcrum drive, you can get from Cerulean to Alpha Centauri in a matter of minutes, thanks to the network of warp gates that are placed for just such trips. I couldn't imagine the old days when people had to travel using their jump drives only. Even with a jump drive, it could take hours to reach some destinations, maybe days, depending on your drive, and without enough fuel, it could easily end with you opening your own airlock and sucking void to escape a slow asphyxiation. As long as I kept my heading at zero and my ship on the ecliptic, I could hit every single warp gate without uncertainty. Travel has never been easier, thanks to recent upgrades in jump computers. In older models, you still had to type in the coordinates of the gates by hand, a process that was rather tedious and achieved pretty much the same thing.

As usual, I could not resist the temptation to take a few pot shots at the Thubans as I shot through their sector of space. I don't know what their problem is but even without the military insignia, they still hold some kind of grudge against me, which favour I'm only happy to return . . . with missiles.

When I arrived in Alpha Centauri, I headed to AC1 and asked around for Captain Devious. "You just missed him by an hour," said the barman, so I waited around for a few hours, hoping he'd come back, but he didn't. I then went to AC2 and repeated the performance. Once again, I had just missed him. The third base, Starbase 1270, provided no more hope, though I noticed that the mission computer listed him on the roster for some internecine conflict between AC Energy and AC Guild. I jotted down the coordinates in my PDA and slipped back into my Evoch, hoping to catch him.

The coordinates turned out to be near an asteroid field. When I jumped in (away from the sun, as usual) I almost ran into some debris from a ship that had been shot up. I looked at it briefly to confirm that it wasn't Devious. My computer alerted me to the presence of missiles firing in the distance. It was a good thing, too, because I couldn't

see the ships on my radar and the missiles were the only way I could follow the fight. I throttled up the Evoch and engaged the stealth generator, hoping to catch a glimpse of Devious in action without getting directly involved.

After a few minutes I was not disappointed. His wraith was battling against some unlikely number of enemies, and each time he swept through on the attack, one of them (sometimes more) would fly apart or go hurtling into an asteroid and explode. I could hear their screams in the radio chatter as Devious taunted them. This was a side to the man I had not seen before, and I was more than a little frightened. It was different when he was shooting down Vonari, but he seemed to engage humans with the same gusto as he did the aliens, gliding, shooting, rolling, and then vanishing suddenly, only to appear again a few seconds later barreling down on one of them with guns and lasers.

I was so enthralled by the spectacle that I failed to notice that my stealth generator was running out of power, and when I heard the telltale stealth shutdown, I felt like someone might feel if, when watching a war vid, comfortably seated and eating textured protein puffs, he is suddenly forced through the screen, right into the middle of the carnage, with naught but his protein puffs standing between himself and the flying plasma. So, I must have startled more than a few of the guild members, one of whom had to apply thrusters to keep from knocking into me. Seeing that my shields and weapons were down until they recharged, and that I nearly collided with another ship, I felt the only course of action was to start moving, so I gunned the afterburners to take me out of the area of combat. Meanwhile, my appearance did not go unnoticed by Captain Devious.

"Welcome to the party," he said, recognizing me as a mercenary and not as a guild member. "Sorry I couldn't wait for you before starting in. I was just finishing up."

"No problem," I responded. "I'll just help with the cleanup, unless you have some objections."

"Not at all," he replied. "Help yourself, Lieutenant Hothead."

I was surprised that he recognized my voice. Maybe it was my Evoch. In any case, I was strangely pleased that I made enough of an impression on him that he remembered me, even if he had forgotten my name. It would make my job that much easier.

When the last of the enemy ships was spinning away, belching flames, and only the escape pods of the vanquished were left floating fecklessly in the zone, a group of miners showed up, as though waiting for some kind of queue.

"Keep an eye out for more guildies," said Devious, flying his wraith around the miners like a mother duck guarding her brood. "They can't stand the thought of anyone making money off these asteroids without their permission, and cut."

When the miners had filled up with platinum, diamonds, and whatever other metals they managed to lift out with their mining beams, they bugged out, leaving Captain Devious and me alone in the asteroid field (except for the pod people, who were shaking their fists at us from their capsules).

"Looks like you picked up a few tricks since we last met," he said.

"I've done alright."

"I see you finally got a stealth generator."

"Never leave home without it," I replied.

"Looks like you're on your own now. Got tired of the navy?" This was precisely the opening I needed.

"My term was up and I thought I could use a break. Besides, I could make a lot more out here than I ever could in the navy. Now I'm mercking it."

"Hmm, yes. Easy money. Well, maybe not that easy. Not as easy as mining or buried treasure."

"Buried treasure?" I asked.

"Indeed, let's meet at AC1 and I'll fill you in.

Once inside, we sat down and ordered some fine Alpha Centauri ale. A pretty good brew, I can attest, though maybe not as good as the beer in Deneb.

"I heard you were looking for mercenaries," I finally said. I knew he would know I followed him because, in the vastness of space, the odds of accidentally meeting up with someone are . . . astronomical.

"Indeed I was, but you're too late. Those guys who got the ore from the asteroids were all the mercs I needed at the time, and now I don't need them." I'm sure he saw my disappointment. "I do have an opening, though," he offered.

"I don't know," I replied with feigned indifference. In truth, I was not comfortable with where the conversation seemed to be headed. My misgivings were quickly allayed.

"I need a science officer," he revealed. "Ever do scanner work?"

"Yes, I used to be pretty good during training," I lied. They trained everyone on long range scanners when you joined the military, but I found it rather boring and never applied myself to it, preferring the thrill of combat and the sense of control I had over my own destiny when gripping the flight stick.

"Excellent. I need someone to help me find buried treasure."

"Buried treasure?"

"Not literally buried," he corrected. "But buried in obscurity, in the vastness of space. Guildies and others tend to stockpile their black market goods in locations that only they are supposed to know about. However, with a good scanner, you can find their caches and grab the booty. Free loot! What could be better than that?"

"Don't they guard them?"

"If their ships were seen patrolling some empty region of space, don't you think they would attract some attention? That's not to say that they don't care that we steal from them. In fact, that is the main danger. However, most of these caches are long-forgotten drops from pilots who have long since ceased to breathe the air of the living, so they won't mind if we help ourselves. Are you with me?" I nodded. "Excellent. We start tomorrow."

The next day (defined arbitrarily by an atomic clock) we got started. Devious bought a phoenix with extra cargo space. Then we both left our warships in the hanger and dropped a deposit on the hanger rental. Devious would jump into a sector and I would send out a ping and read the heading of some container that came back. He would jump out again and jump in again at a different location, at which point I would send out

another ping and get another heading. After three points, we could triangulate the exact location of the stash, at which point he would jump to it and inspect the contents. If they were valuable, he would engage the mining beam and fill up. Then we'd sell the loot at whichever Starbase offered the most money for that particular item. Merchants at Starbases, apparently, did not have the slightest concern about where their purchases came from, as long as they were good, and we didn't volunteer any information, lest some of these merchants turn out to be related in some way to the very criminals we were ripping off.

Despite my initial reservations about my competency, I quickly got the hang of it. In fact, this was not so different from some of the training exercises I had to do in the navy. In hostile territory, the navy would leave caches such as these to provision long-range scout missions and deep penetrations into enemy territory, or so I was told.

We had been doing this work for a few hours when the local guild showed up.

"Mercenary, what the hell are you doing?"

"Making money, my friend," said the Captain. He shut off the mining beam and redirected all of the available power to the shield system.

"Do you even have the slightest idea who you're stealing from?" came the voice from one of the guild ships.

"I'm not stealing. I'm with the government. This is taxation," he replied. Then he turned to me and said: "It's a shame you can't use the mining beam with the stealth generator."

"The Death's Head clan does not tolerate thieves!" came the suddenly dramatic voice from the radio.

"Except for yourselves," muttered Devious under his breath.

"Clan Destiny does not tolerate hypocrisy!" retorted Captain Devious. At that point, he engaged the stealth generator (which he had transferred to the phoenix from Careless Whisper) and gunned the afterburners to pick up speed.

"Clan Destiny?" said the voice on the radio uncertainly. They had heard of Clan Destiny, all right, and they were afraid.

Their answer came in the form of a missile volley as we decloaked. The first ship was flaming wreckage before the other ships even knew they were under attack. There were only four of them, and they did not stand a chance against Captain Devious. After quickly dispatching two more, he addressed the final ship.

"I'm going to let you live," said Captain Devious, "so that you can tell the rest of your guild not to interfere with Clan Destiny. Tell them that, or I swear I will find you and you'll wish I had vaporized you right here." The last ship jumped out without a word.

The rest of the day, our raiding went uninterrupted. Still, I felt uncomfortable with the situation, and this lump in my throat grew like a goiter until I could barely talk. Finally, I could no longer contain my unease. I had to say something when we got back to AC1: "You have a stealth generator and a jump drive." "You didn't have to fight. You didn't have to kill them. They're human, for heaven's sake!"

"Unfortunately, I did have to kill them. They were sacrificed for sake of future safety. Once you get stung by a hornet, you leave hornets nests alone. It's the same with Clan

Destiny. We tend to avoid confrontation, but when put into a fight, we are ruthless. That reputation protects us, as well as protects others who are wise enough to stay out of our way. Eventually, we won't need to fight: the reputation, alone, is the broker of peace." Indeed, he had a point. I have absolutely no doubt that he told the rest of his guild because for the rest of our time in Alpha Centauri, we never met up with them again.

This was the first confirmation I had that he was involved in Clan Destiny, or even that Clan Destiny existed. I have always regarded military intelligence as oxymoronic, so this confirmation helped me to feel more assured of the validity of my mission. I felt now less uncertainty about what I was doing, and why I was doing it.

I also discovered something new in Captain Devious. He was no longer just a clown doing pranks at the local bar. Up to this point, I had only seen the light side. However, he also had a dark side that was just as dark as his light side was light. He was not a clown, but a harlequin: black and white halves facing one another in perfect symmetry, like the nose art on his Careless Whisper, holding her finger to her lips, forever keeping some secret. Most of all, Devious remained a kind of enigma, and my curiosity about him and his clan was even more compelling a reason to keep going than any military duty.

Entanglement

Decoded tangler message received by Commander Waters:

*MADE CONTACT W DVS STOP WRKNG W LOCAL MRCS MINING ROIDS N CACHES STOP
PLS ADVISE END*

Response from command:

FOLLOW THE MONEY END

I had been working with Captain Devious for five days, during which time he tirelessly raided caches or guarded miners in the asteroid field. The miners worked for him under a temporary contract in which he provided absolute assurance of safety while they mined ore from the space rocks. Each one of them got to keep a percentage of the selling price for the ore while giving Devious a percentage for protection money. In this way, all parties gained, since the miners did not have to worry about defence and the combined wealth in their holds, divided by the percentage that the Captain took, was much more than any ship, even with a huge cargo bay, could take in within the same amount of time.

Well, all parties gained, that is, except for the local miners guild. The miners, however, had heard from the Death's Heads that the interlopers were Clan Destiny, and so none of them wanted to raise the issue. In fact, none of the mining mercenaries were from Clan Destiny: they were all just local guys that Devious picked up in various star bases, but the miners guild didn't need to know that. In any case, it was a good thing that they didn't, for if they suspected that there was only one ship from Clan Destiny in the operation, they might have attempted some kind of intervention, and I am certain that it would have meant all of their deaths. Captain Devious was not a man to be trifled with, and he was well up to the task of exterminating the entire guild if he put his mind to it.

This showed the cold logic by which he reduced the level of overall carnage by instigating the bloodbath with the Death's Heads early on. The Death's Heads were feared above all other guilds in the sector, and the fact that Devious had already bloodied their noses had caused a chilling affect throughout the sector. If even the Death's Heads were afraid of Devious, then the local miners would just have to be nice and hope that we would go away eventually.

As you might imagine, between the large-scale mining protection gig and the hidden cache raiding (some of those caches had quite valuable items, by the way) Captain Devious had made a tremendous amount of money in a fairly short time, and as his faithful (or so he imagined) science officer, I was treated to a fairly high wage. The income was nice, though it was not as much as I had made in my own black market dealings. Still, it was much less work, since I was paid on the hour, whether I did anything or not.

It seemed to me that, though the Captain was making ludicrous sums, he was living frugally, so the money was being put to some purpose other than fast living. When I asked him about it, though, he was evasive.

We were sitting on the roof of a building one evening as the last rays of Alpha Centauri glistened off the tallest skyscrapers. Devious was counting out credits and doing accounting while I was making an entry in my PDA.

"I'd like to join Clan Destiny," I announced.

"I was wondering when you'd ask. You can see the benefits of being in the most feared clan in Evochron. You can be initiated in Riftspace," he said.

"Riftspace?"

"Yes."

"I thought Riftspace was a kind of legend," I replied.

"You mean you've never been to Riftspace?"

"No."

"Then you've never taken the pilgrimage," he said, one eyebrow raised.

"No."

"Every pilot worth his water takes the pilgrimage."

"What is the pilgrimage?" I asked.

"A long time ago," he proceeded, as though instructing a child, "a pilot left a beacon on Sapphire. This beacon had a message in it that leads to another beacon, and that to another, and so on. Each beacon is harder to find, and each message is more difficult to detangle . . . until you get to the last beacon that tells you how to find Riftspace. We all have to do it. It's a kind of rite of passage. Only the most dedicated, intelligent, and fearless pilots make it to Riftspace, so when they get there, we know they have what it takes to be part of Clan Destiny. After that, all that's left is the initiation."

He smiled. "Piece of cake," he said cheerily. "I'm sure you'll do just fine."

"What is all this?" I asked. "Pilgrimage? Initiation Rites? I thought this was a clan, not a cult."

It seemed that military intelligence might have been right about another thing: Conrad kept control over his followers through turning his command into some kind of cult. It was becoming so clear now. The man was dangerous, and running around in a cloaked carrier with a lot of delusional fanatics doing his bidding was a chilling thought, indeed,

especially now that I've seen one of those fanatics up close and personal.

Then it occurred to me that, distasteful as it might seem, I was already committed to getting into this clan in order to get close to the infamous Conrad and his stolen carrier. Like it or not, I was already committed to the pilgrimage. I suddenly became fearful of my chances for success. If only the best and brightest survive the journey Riftspace, where would that leave me, considering my mediocre claim to either title? On the other hand, I was happy to have a direction. There is tremendous comfort in knowing what you have to do, even if you know it is difficult. It's much worse to be improvising, floundering, wondering what you should do, and sweating over it all night instead of sleeping.

I should point out here that when he paused after the word 'detangle' he was looking straight at me. I did not see the significance of this at the time. However, when he did so, I immediately thought of my tangler and my eyes involuntarily (and unconsciously) looked at my PDA. I should have realized that he suspected that I had the tangler at the time. It's easy to see in retrospect. Though I knew him to be a great starfighter pilot, it would never have occurred to me that he was capable of the level of subtlety that could cause me to betray myself in this manner without even realizing it. In other words, I was totally oblivious to what had really just happened.

Hindsight is a strange thing, sometimes wonderful, sometimes horrifying. As things are revealed to you, your life changes before your very eyes until it is unrecognizable, like looking at yourself in a mirror and seeing someone else's face staring back at you. Things that seemed meaningless at the time become crystal clear instances of sudden revelation, throwing dark shadows upon areas of your life that you previously thought you understood. They say that when you are dying, your whole life flashes before your eyes. I see this as a final instant realization of the truth of every single moment of your life that you had hitherto misunderstood, and in that final moment, you achieve a perfect clarity, a perfect understanding of your significance in the universe. For a single brief instant, the light of your existence is focused to a single perfect point that burns through all of the self-deception that you have built up, layer after layer, year after year, leaving an empty, burnt-out hole where you thought you had a soul.

I was not cut out for espionage, as you can probably tell already. Living a lie causes a kind of decay of the soul. It eats at you slowly and insidiously. You might not recognize it at first, but as you become accustomed to telling lie after lie in order to defend or hold up previous lies, your life turns into a kind of mirage. Nothing in your mind has substance except for fear: the fear of getting caught in a lie and seeing that entire house of cards spill onto the floor. I was living a lie, but I had to keep going because it was for the greater good. I was starting to become paranoid. In hindsight, I was not nearly paranoid enough.

Back on my ship, I sent my second tangle:

DVS SEZ FOLLOW BEACON QUEST TO RIFT END

The response was pretty much what I expected:

DO IT END

Pilgrimage

Captain Devious and I parted ways. He said he would meet me in Riftspace where we would have a drink. He would not tell me how to get there, however, because of their clan's strict code of secrecy. From that point on, I was on my own, to get to Riftspace, or, as they like to call it, the Rift, any way I could.

Like most fledgling pilots, I knew about the first beacon. It was somewhere on Sapphire. Since the first beacon is not a big secret (they actually have a restaurant there named after it) I can relate that part of the pilgrimage. However, after the first beacon, I will not go into detail in order to preserve the purpose of the beacons for future generations.

When I got to Sapphire, the sun had already set on the beacon, which resembled a small space station that had been sunk into the wet, grassy surface of that planet. As I flew by, the ancient radio message displayed a slightly cryptic message on my shipboard computer. The message was a clue to the next beacon. While at the first beacon, I parked my ship and walked over to the Beaconside Grille and had a double Beacon Cheeseburger. As you might imagine, the burger had *faux* bacon, in addition to the usual textured protein ersatz beef and cheese-like foody product. The waitress was impressed with my Evoch (it does have that effect on the ladies) and so I did spend a little longer on Sapphire than I originally planned.

When it was time to get back on the quest, I hopped back in my Evoch and entered the first beacon location in the map log, along with the clue to the next beacon. It was my intention to use the map log in this way, entering each beacon location with the clue to the next, so that I could retrace my steps if necessary. With that, I blasted off the planet in search of beacon two.

The second beacon was a little harder to find, and, since it required the pilot to figure out the location from the first beacon, there were no restaurants or gift shops built up around it. Sometimes, there were other pilgrims, though, and I passed one on the way. He seemed an amiable fellow. When I asked him why he was on the pilgrimage, he said he thought it was time to make a break from his old life and to seek out a new one. With that, he was on his way. I did not see him at the third beacon. I wonder if he ever got there.

For those of you who have been on the pilgrimage, you know what it is like so I will not bore you with the details. For the rest, I'll just say that it gets harder as you go, but also more rewarding.

I eventually found a Mantis jump drive. These things are extremely high-tech and somewhat experimental (possibly dangerous). Regardless, I had the thing in my Evoch as soon as I found one. I was only glad that I had saved up enough credits to afford it. With the Mantis, I would be able to move much faster.

There was, of course, the usual run-in with pirates, aggressive guilds, officious governments, and random marauders, but with the stealth generator, I was able to evade most of them, and the few that I had to fight did not give me much trouble. I was a seasoned veteran from the Vonari conflicts, so I could easily take whatever these unskilled thugs could dish out.

After the fifth beacon, I began to have some confidence in my success. In fact, I was feeling much better about the whole mission. I was no longer in close proximity with my enemies and so the need to keep up illusions and lies was no longer there. With that pressure gone, I found my thoughts becoming less paranoid and more focused on the tasks at hand, which were finding beacons, decrypting their messages, and upgrading equipment, whenever I could find something better than what I had. The cold silence of space has a calming effect on me, and the infinite reaches and multitude of stars has a kind of transcendent effect on pilots who are allowed the time to appreciate their serene beauty. Perhaps that is one of the purposes of the beacon quest: to give the pilgrim plenty of time for reflection and meditation.

There are many uncharted planets in the Evochron system which I had never even suspected existed. These planets were off the main trade lanes and so they paid a premium for certain items, since they were so remote. I did a fair bit of trading with these remote and hidden systems, and used this money to finance the cost of my trip. I found some of these on the quest that I would not have discovered otherwise, so the quest had at least one positive outcome

As the beacon messages became harder to decrypt, it took longer to find each new beacon, so finding one was becoming quite a rare occurrence. The first few I knocked out in a couple of hours. The last one took a few days.

When I thought I had worked out the meaning of the last beacon, I was totally dumbfounded.

"You've got to be kidding," I muttered to myself. The final destination that appeared to be indicated was so far removed from the trade lanes that one could easily get lost in space, never to return. I reviewed the message again and tried to find another meaning for it, but I could not. It seemed that only one interpretation was left to me.

Because the exact location was not given, I had to try to work out the coordinates as best I could. The problem here was the question of how literally to interpret the directions. The calculations could be made in different ways, depending on how you believe they were intended to be interpreted, but there was a wide margin for error. Too wide. If you were more than ten sectors off or so, you might not find it, and if you could not find it, it was likely you would not have enough fuel to get back. Should I take the Y coordinate into account in the calculations or trust that whoever made them did not intend for the Y axis to be a factor? The decision could mean life or death.

I plotted the coordinates according to the simplest possible interpretation of the data and then sold my good old Evoch. The journey ahead required the largest fuel tank I could buy, and the Evoch was limited in that regard. I bought a Leviathan class fighter and fitted it with the biggest fuel tank and the most powerful engines I could find. Because of its mass, though, even the biggest engines left the vessel underpowered. Still, I was not likely to encounter many craft on this last part of the journey, so the lack of manoeuvrability was not a major concern.

With a full fuel tank, a carefully drawn map, as much food and water as I could cram into the ship, and a deck full of music files, I sallied forth from the system closest to the designated target area, taking this leap of faith that at the end of this quest, there is something to find aside from an empty void.

Leap of Faith

Hours turned to days. There was nothing but empty space all around me. There was nothing but empty space within me. Even the radio chatter, which is ubiquitous throughout the Evochron sector had grown silent. I had not really noticed the sound of the radio chatter until it was gone, leaving me in the eerie silence of the void.

I had carefully plotted my course and counted the jumps as I engaged the Mantis time after time, struggling with doubt, uncertainty, and mind-numbing boredom. I was vaguely afraid of finally losing my mind out in the void, and thereby losing my bearings

and becoming lost, which would mean my death. The fear of such an end was eating my sanity, so the whole experience was a downward spiral into oblivion.

When I finally got to the coordinates I had marked, I found . . . nothing. In a panic, I amplified the scanners and squinted at the radar, but no pink blips alerted me to the presence of anything. Had I been lied to? Was this all some sort of sick Renegade joke? I began to feel hot as the rage hit me, the blood rushed into my head, making it hard to see. I began to hyperventilate, knowing even then in the back of my mind that my limited supply of oxygen was going to waste. I started flying around, trying to figure out some kind of search pattern. I didn't know what I was searching for, but I would know when I found it.

Then, my ship picked up something, so I eased back on the throttle (to conserve fuel) to investigate.

There are two kinds of asteroids. The first kind, with which most of us are familiar, are the rocky sort that you can land on. These are relatively solid crater-encrusted hunks of metallic rock that are often mined for minerals. When these enter the atmosphere of a planet, they make a big light, a huge explosion, and a giant crater. The other kind of asteroid is called a rubble pile. It's really just a "pile" of small rocks that are attracted to one another by mutual gravitation. These rubble piles are too small for the gravity to overwhelm the cohesiveness of the individual particles, so they remain a collection of small rocks that are loosely packed together. If a rubble pile enters a planet's atmosphere, it breaks up and becomes a kind of shower. If you land on a rubble pile, your ship would likely sink into it, so landing on this kind of asteroid is discouraged. Rubble piles often collect in Lagrange points because of the odd gravitational effects, which is why pilots usually avoid Lagrange areas on their travels.

The object on the radar appeared to be mostly metallic, but not completely solid on the radar. It had no craters and so I concluded it was a rubble pile. This seemed odd to me, at first, because I was very far away from any stars, and there couldn't be a Lagrange point within light years. I wondered if it could have been cast here from a star, maybe as two stars moved too close to one another, this thing was ejected from the cataclysm and settled here, but why? When a body is in motion, it tends to retain that motion until acted upon by another force, yet here in the deepest void, there were no forces. These thoughts occurred to me as I drifted closer to the rubble pile for investigation.

Then, I noticed a flash of light from the pile. It was a reflection from the lights on my own ship. As I got closer, I discovered that the reflection was off the canopy of another ship! Some idiot had attempted to land on the rubble pile and got stuck, I concluded. But upon closer examination, I discovered that the rest of this "rubble pile" consisted of other ships. The entire pile was nothing but dead ships, held loosely together by their own gravity. It was really a giant graveyard of pilgrims, who had come to the same spot I had calculated based on the coordinates from the last beacon. They had all come here to die! The poor sods had made it this far only to find nothing but despair. Like me, they must have been curious about the one blip in the entire sector that reflected radar and went to investigate, only to find this jumbled spherical tomb. So, one by one, they became part of this enormous monument to misplaced optimism, a leap of faith that ended in the abyss. I scanned the ships with my floodlights and saw the dead pilots' faces staring out, each one a mask of horror and insanity. How long had they been here? Some of the ships looked pretty old: models they hadn't made in decades. Most of them were probably still space-worthy aside from their lack of fuel.

I had read accounts of tar pits in Earth's prehistory. They would find the bones of a mastodon amid the bones of ten or twenty saber-toothed cats. The theory was that the mastodon got trapped in the tar, and then the cats would try to take advantage of its inability to escape and pounce on it, only to become trapped themselves. As the creature

sunk, more carnivores would jump on the pile, hoping to catch a good meal, but ended up adding to this sinking zoo. I could not help but think of those animals when I saw this pile of lifeless ships, each one of them attracted by the one radar blip in the entire sector, only to find this planetoid of carcasses.

I forced myself to return to the matter at hand. My ship was still operational, at least. I checked my fuel to see if I could make it back. My breath sucked in as I realized suddenly that I was already past the point of no return. If I jumped until my fuel ran out, I would still be too far from any known system to make it there alive.

At this point, I am ashamed to confess that I totally lost it. I will save you the particulars, but anyone who has had children and watched them go into an uncontrollable tantrum for hours and hours has a pretty good picture of me flailing around in my cockpit. I don't know how long I was in this state because I lost track of time (and my watch had suffered a grievous blow during the break). I finally sat there in a foetal position, rocking back and forth in my seat.

Thoughts slowed.

Like cooling tar.

Then stopped.

The Abyss Stares Back

I was startled by a sudden noise. I don't know how long I was semiconscious, but the cabin was cold and the Hud was off, so the computer had shut it down for sleep mode to conserve energy, which happens if you don't move for a long time. It was pitch black inside the cockpit when I opened my eyes and I could see the distant stars through the tempered glass. My Leviathan had drifted to rest on the surface of the ship graveyard. In my current hypnagogic state, I was not sure if I actually heard the loud clunk or if I had dreamed it. I couldn't remember my dreams, though I have had prior experiences in which I would awaken at the onset of a sudden noise only to find that it had been entirely imaginary. In the recesses of my imagination, I thought that perhaps another ship had landed here, and as it crashed into the orb of twisted metal the reverberations carried through the planetoid to be transferred to the hull of my Leviathan, which I experienced as a distant clunk.

Then, I heard it again. This time, it seemed less like a clunk than a tap, or a rap. I was aware of all of the hairs on my body suddenly sticking straight out as a new kind of fear gripped me. I knew I was alone. Nothing was out here. Nothing but the dead. The dead.

I turned my head slowly to the right and saw what looked like a figure in a space suit standing a few yards away from my ship. I stared at it for some time in disbelief. I tried to make it into some random shape, like a crumpled wing or the nose of a downed ship, but it still resembled a human figure more than anything else. Impossible, I thought, but the more I tried to disbelieve, the more the figure refused to fade away. I could see my Leviathan reflected in his helmet. Though I could not see his face, in the reflection I could see myself in my own canopy. It was a self I almost did not recognize: eyes wide open, mouth hanging, tongue lolling from side to side. It was the face of madness. Soon, it would be the face of a corpse.

Then the clunk again. This was no crash on a distant part of the pile. This time I could tell it was definitely something hitting my ship! It was not coming from the lone figure to my right, but from my left. I quickly jerked my head to the left and saw another figure, but this one was right outside my cockpit, looking in, and he was moving! I watched as

his suited hand moved up to touch my canopy and tapped on it. Three fast taps, then three slow taps, then three fast ones again. I vaguely recognized this pattern, but I could not put my finger on where I had heard it before.

... --- ...

Then it came to me: SOS.

"What do you want?" I rasped, gripped by such terror that my voice no longer worked properly. Perhaps these were fellow pilgrims who had come here and got stuck, and they wanted my air or food, or maybe even . . . no, I'd rather not write just what I was thinking at the time. The tapping repeated itself: **SOS**.

"I don't have anything for you."

SOS.

"Look, I don't belong here. If you will back off, I'll just be on my way." I reached for the control to turn on the computer, but as I did so, I noticed that my hand was instead moving toward the cockpit release lever. I stopped. "Let's try this again," I said. To myself. I wasn't going to fly very far if I couldn't even control my hand. The cockpit release lever was not a good idea, especially since I was not wearing my helmet. I was also talking to myself. What's worse: I did not seem to be listening.

SOS. It was louder this time, more insistent. There were more of them outside now, barely discernible in the darkness. How could there be so many? Was there some capital ship in the rubble somewhere? Maybe it was the core of it, the original gravity beacon that became a porch light to the moths that flew in and got stuck on her. My computer was still off and the multi-function displays were still black. That was odd, I thought. Then I remembered that I hadn't turned them back on again. My hand went out for the cockpit release lever again and this time, I had to fight with it to make it stop.

SOS.

"Stop it! Stop the tapping!" I screamed. "Just leave me alone!" I turned to look again at the annoying tapper and at that moment he chose to lift his visor. There, in the helmet, was one of those dead faces I saw in one of the cockpits, its eyes wide open, glassy, staring vacantly, its lips receded from its teeth, but otherwise intact. It was a walking corpse.

SOS.

I started awake. The moment I realized it was a walking corpse, I realized that it was a nightmare. Everything was the same as it was, though, just before the unreality crept in. My ship actually had drifted into the planetoid, but there were no figures that I could see. Without hesitation, I turned on the computer and used the manoeuvring thrusters to pull away from the planet with the kind of feverish panic one feels when walking into a spiderweb. Within a few seconds, the dull grey orb was far below me, a safe distance. Safe enough, at least, so that I wouldn't have to worry about the walking dead welcoming me to the neighbourhood.

SOS. Of course!

That was the distress signal they told me to use when I needed help. It was in that ancient code I had to learn when they gave me the tangler. I cursed myself for not thinking of the tangler before. Messages travelled instantly, so no matter how many light years I was away from civilization, my message would instantly be read by Commander

Waters back in Cerulean. He'd know what to do. He could probably get a bunch of mathematicians together and then give me the right coordinates. Maybe I was not too far off.

*SOS SOS SOS STOP FOLLOWED LAST BEACON STOP NOTHING HERE STOP SEND
CORRECTED COORDS STOP END*

I then sent the last beacon message copied from my map log and briefly explained what I thought it meant, along with the coordinates I had ended up in.

In retrospect, I can't excuse my stupidity in this situation, but I can explain it. I had taken my role as an eager pilgrim too seriously, and felt the need to prove to myself that I had what it took to be a member of Clan Destiny. I had to remind myself that I was not a pilgrim, but a government spy. I was not the best or the brightest, just some guy who hadn't given up on the idea of living. I might have been a cheat, but I would get my mission accomplished, even if I had to live with the ignominy of my own mediocrity.

I waited for what seemed like an eternity, staring intently at my tangler for a reply. Then, at long last, it came:

REVISED COORDS AS FOLLOWS . . .

I punched these new coordinates into my navigation computer and checked the range. I was far off, but not so far that I couldn't reach the corrected coordinates with my remaining fuel. I was truly overjoyed. I celebrated by grabbing the Denebian ale I had been saving for my arrival in Riftspace and drinking the entire bottle. Then, I pointed my ship in the direction of the corrected coordinates and engaged the Mantis drive.

As I pressed the launch button and was engulfed in the blue aura of space-folding travel, I vaguely recollected that when I woke up from my nightmare, my hand was actually on the cockpit release lever.

Out of the Void

When I arrived at the corrected coordinates, I found nothing immediately on my short-range scanner, so I broadened the range. Just on the edge, I saw a blip that indicated a gate or a wormhole. That must be it, I thought, as there was absolutely nothing else out here. I set the jump coordinates to the new object and jumped to it.

There it was! In front of me, 2500 meters, was a gate. I almost did not believe it, but while I was debating whether or not to believe it, my ship was fast approaching it. I really did not have time to change my mind, and it occurred to me that it was perhaps a mistake to jump straight into an unknown gate such as this. The Leviathan did not stop quickly, did not move like a cat, or even a drunken lemur. It moved like a wrecking ball and steered appropriately. I realized that, even though I could not stop in time if I wanted to, even if I applied full reverse afterburners, I could use the manoeuvring thrusters to change course just enough to slip by the gate and then consider more carefully whether I wanted to go through. However, I was in a void so profound that even death, at this point, would be a kind of rescue, so, without further reservation, I allowed the massive ship to plough straight into the centre of the gate. I was immediately surrounded by the blue aura of space-warping unpleasantness, which always leaves me with the feeling of having my stomach turn itself inside out. Wherever I was going, it would be better than where I had been.

When the light faded, I found myself in a new system. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the comparative gloom. I saw light from a nearby star shining through dust,

with dark shadows knifing through the dust caused by large asteroids. So, the gate led into an asteroid field. How strange, I thought. It was not unheard of, though. There are some gates that are hidden in asteroid fields, but usually, it is to prevent detection on the side with the asteroids. Why would the Renegades want to hide their gate from themselves?

Crack! Something hit the forward shields. I slowed the ship down to avoid further collisions. When I finally stopped, I took a look around. First, I checked the radar. There were no ships on it. There was only the purple blip indicating the gate I had just come through. I was somewhat relieved that the gate had a return gate, though I would prefer never to return to that empty space. If I had a full fuel tank, though, getting back would not be so difficult as getting there. So, my first mission was to get fuel.

Something caught my eye in the windscreen. I glanced to the right to get a better look. It was a metallic object, spinning in the hazy sunlight from the nearby star. As it spun, the light glinted off its surfaces, causing a kind of strobe effect. As it drifted closer, I identified it as a bicycle. Bicycle? I thought. That can't be. I used the manoeuvring thrusters to edge closer to it, and as I did so, I confirmed that, without doubt it was a simple bicycle. There was no way a bicycle would be in deep space, unless someone put it there, for a reason. I turned and bumped it slightly with the nose of the Leviathan. The wheels turned and the pedals spun as the main body changed its direction of spin.

I increased the range of the scanners and saw the reason they called it Riftspace. There were several wormholes all close together, as if a big rift had been opened up in the fabric of space, causing these eddies to appear, swirling currents of subspace that could suck your ship to some distant part of the galaxy. It made sense that the Renegades, fugitives from the legal system, would enjoy such a place. There was no way one could get caught in it. As soon as enemies approached, they could bolt into one of these wormholes to appear anywhere, and there would be no way to know where they would arrive without following them into the wormhole, where there would likely be an ambush. So, here I was at last: Riftspace!

As I pondered these ideas, I saw a blip on my radar. A red blip. The shipboard computer sounded a little beep to let me know that there was a threat. I looked at my ship ID display and saw that it was Vonari scout! The Vonari were in Riftspace.

Ordinarily, I would engage Vonari wherever I saw them, but this was a totally unknown situation, and I was almost out of fuel, so I reached over and engaged the stealth generator. There was not much time on it, since I had just jumped through a gate, which depleted my energy reserves. I hoped that the Vonari had been distracted and had not seen me on its scanners. I quietly edged away from the alien ship and directed all my energy to my shields. When I appeared again, I would want my shields to be building up as fast as possible. Meanwhile, I could build up some speed, which would not be easy since I was in a Leviathan. I tried to put as much distance between myself and the scout as possible.

After a few seconds, which seemed like hours, the Vonari ship disappeared off my radar again. A half-second later, my stealth generator cut out as the energy reserves were exhausted. I realized that I had been holding my breath all the time and could now let it out. As soon as my shields were up to full, I redirected the energy to fill up the reserves, so that the stealth generator would be operational for the full duration next time I needed it.

I decided to start heading at 90 degrees. This would take me out of the asteroid field so I could safely make a jump. As I began to accelerate, I noticed something peculiar, even more peculiar than a bicycle in deep space: a tree.

It was a mighty thick-trunked tree. Its gnarled roots gripped an asteroid with a tenacity of a drowning man gripping a buoy. I had to shine the floodlights on this to make sure I was really seeing what I thought I was seeing. It was a tree all right. It was dead, but it was still a tree. There was no denying it. As I studied the asteroid it gripped I noticed that it was covered also with dead frozen grass. Now, I did not major in biology, but even I knew that trees do not grow on asteroids. Something else happened here. By now, I imagine you can guess what it was, but in my state of mind (having barely escaped death only a few minutes before) I was not certain whether I was alive or dead, and seeing this caused simple wonder and amazement for a few seconds. Then, the horror of what I was seeing, and what it meant began to sink in. Had I been standing up, I would have staggered and fell completely to the ground. It was unbelievable, but even as I tried to disbelieve, I could not hold back the creeping terror of what travesty the evidence all pointed to.

Trees do not grow on asteroids. Trees grow on planets. There were no planets in Riftspace. Only asteroids. And Vonari. There was only one explanation: the planet had somehow been destroyed. Not just destroyed, but destroyed with such energy, such force, that it flew apart and became an asteroid field. Even as I thought this, something about this explanation did not make sense to me, but there was no doubt that there was a planet here at one time, and now it was gone. Words cannot describe the dread that such devastation causes to settle upon one's soul. If the Vonari could obliterate a whole planet, wipe it out of existence, then what could they not do? What planet was safe? How could the Alliance survive against this threat?

I set new jump coordinates for the nearest star and engaged. I was at nearly bingo fuel and so I needed to resupply. Luckily, I thought to install a fuel converter before I left civilization. I could use this device to harvest stray gases streaming off the nearby star and convert it into liquid fuel. During refuelling, I kept a wary eye out for more Vonari, but did not see any.

Once fuelled up, I was much more sure of myself. I could handle some Vonari, even in Riftspace.

I chose one of the wormholes nearby and jumped to it, hoping to find some activity, and activity I found. Out of the wormhole, one after the other, came several Vonari capital ships: destroyers. I had never seen more than one at a time in Talison and Cerulean, but here were six of them, all together. As they emerged, they formed up into a kind of group, like a whale pod, but whether it was for offense or defence, I could not say. I stealthed in for a closer look. They were surrounded by the usual array of Vonari escort ships, only multiplied by six. Suddenly, I did not feel as confident in my ability to take on the Vonari. They began their inexorable crawl toward one of the other wormholes.

Suddenly, the radio was abuzz with voices squawking orders, human voices. Out of nowhere, several human ships decloaked and began to engage the enemy fighter escort. There were not many of them, but they kept the escorts busy. Unfortunately, the capital ships continued to move without impediment, bent upon whatever goal they were trying to attain. The human ships, which I guessed to be Renegades, were no match for the onslaught of both alien capital ships and their swarm of fighters, but they were putting up a good fight. One by one, I saw the Vonari fighters going down in flames, sometimes spinning off into the void, and sometimes crashing directly into their heavily-shielded destroyers.

I was moving in closer so I could decloak and help them out, thinking that, by doing so, I would ingratiate myself with the Renegades, fighting alongside them against a common foe. Before I could decloak, though, I heard the familiar voice of Captain Devious over the radio.

"Alpha to command, pod of six approaching. Transmitting coordinates now."

Then, an unknown voice from a greater distance "We have your entry point, Alpha, bug out now."

"All fighters, time to fly," said Captain Devious. At that moment, I thought I caught a glimpse of Careless Whisper materializing directly in front of the enemy destroyers. It could have been any wraith, I suppose, but I assumed it was the very same that belonged to Captain Devious. After a few seconds, he jumped out. Then all of the human fighters at once zipped into hyperspace, leaving their blue trails behind. Only the Vonari remained, and I was careening straight toward the pod of destroyers. I was thinking that my time had finally arrived to impress the Renegades with my battle tactics, but my audience had suddenly disappeared. The stealth generator was almost out of power and I was going to become visible to the enemy in a second at close range, with no shields and no weapon capacity, and no allies. Whatever they thought they had achieved had apparently not occurred. I decided the best course of action was to fly by, since I could not stop in time to avoid the collision, so I used the maneuvering thrusters to glide safely under the enemy ship.

I was looking up into the underbelly of the lead destroyer through the top of my canopy when I heard the stealth generator shut down, leaving me visible and vulnerable. Immediately, I heard the missile lock klaxon, and so I throttled up and engaged the afterburner to gain on the missile. At this time, I felt a few impacts from the destroyer's guns which were trained on me. I diverted all available energy to the shields and hoped that the shields and the thick hull would protect me long enough to get clear of the enemy forces. There were a few more thumps and then a clang, indicating that they had breached the shield and actually hit hull. Luckily, the hull was thick, but a few more like that would have finished me.

At that moment, there was a bright blue flash to my left, toward the front of the destroyer pod. Sliding into view, directly in front of the destroyers, was a carrier. It was unlike any carrier I had seen, though. It was black, like the Careless Whisper, and could only be discerned by the nebulous ionized gases that trailed in its wake after jumping in. It arrived so that its starboard side was toward the bow of the lead destroyer, making a kind of T intersection. There were a couple of puffs of smoke from the Aurora (for I had quickly worked this out to be the infamous ship I was seeking) and then, as quickly as it arrived, the ship jumped out again, leaving those two little puffs of smoke in its wake.

I had already sailed past the lead destroyer and had turned around to see the result. I thought I glimpsed two oblong specks heading toward the lead destroyer from the direction the Aurora had just vanished. Then, there was a bright light, like a sun suddenly appeared only a few kilometres away.

One never really gets accustomed to the soundless vacuum of space. When you see an explosion, you expect it to go BOOM, and to hear the thundering echoes in your ears for seconds after the event. Not so in space. In space, you hear nothing. You see a flash of light, but there is no sound. It is like watching a video of an explosion but without the sound on. It is eerily unreal, and by virtue of this unreality, one has a bizarre and unwarranted feeling of safety. Rationally, you know it's still dangerous, but the subconscious mind assumes that if you can't hear it, then it's not really there.

The twin fulcrum detonations, however, were there, and they were way too close. I had no time to react or even brace for impact. All I did, actually, was grit my teeth and squeeze my eyes shut instinctively. In a flash, it was over. A second later, the shockwave hit my ship, and, unexpectedly, I did hear it. I heard the gases rushing past my ship's hull, the clanging of debris and shrapnel hitting my Leviathan, ripping holes in the wings, bouncing off the armoured hull, but inflicting severe damage. The Lev,

despite its size, was buffeted forward, and my body knocked against the side of the cockpit so hard that I felt and heard bones crumple before I blacked out.

The Real War

When I came to, I found myself floating in the escape pod of my Leviathan. It must have ejected me just prior to exploding.

There went several million credits, I thought bitterly, but then, as I gained consciousness, I became more acutely aware of my situation. I was in Riftspace, but without a ship now. I had some broken ribs, but my limbs seemed to be OK. I did not think my skull was fractured, but my head felt as though someone had put it in a vice. Furthermore, I was totally at the mercy of anyone who found me, be they human or alien. I looked at the instruction sign on the inside of the pod. It was a newer Terranova model. I looked around for any indication that it had some after-market customization.

What escape pods were supposed to do is put the pilot into a state of hibernation if he's been there too long, usually after about 48 hours or so. How they work, precisely, has never been made explicit in the advertisements, but nobody really wanted to sit in space long enough to test them. Then, a few decades ago, they found an escape pod that had been floating for too long. They brought the guy in and revived him, but it was obvious there was severe brain damage. The hibernation, apparently, was not a viable alternative to timely rescue. After that, there was an escape pod recall, followed by more regulations, and more tests. They never seemed to have quite worked the bug out, and pilots began to fear the escape pods more than the simple expedient of burning alive in a flaming hunk of twisted metal in the vacuum of space. Finally, the Grinning Skull company took up the reigns of innovation and performed after-market customization of other companies' life pods. They replaced the hibernation unit with a high explosive charge that could be detonated by a sequence of button presses. These were called "death pods" to distinguish them from life pods. The pilot, therefore, could choose when to finally be released from this mortal coil at the push of a button, rather than be turned into a vegetable and kept in brain-dead stasis for years and years . . . or worse, be functionally impaired but with brain activity, a mind trapped in a dead body, forever reliving the last excruciating moments of his life, over and over and over again.

Pilots who could not afford a Grinning Skull Death Pod could usually afford a pistol, which they kept for that purpose. Unfortunately, my life pod was just regular life pod. There was no reassuring grinning skull on the panel. Luckily, I had my military issue side-arm for just such exigencies. It might also come in handy for dispensing Alliance-style justice throughout the Evochron system.

Life pods did not have much in the way of sensors, but they did have a radio, a distress beacon, and a tiny window through which I could look out. The beacon had already activated automatically, so there was really nothing to do but wait and try to get someone on the radio.

"Is there anybody out there?" I implored over the radio.

"So glad you could join us," said Captain Devious. "Welcome to the real war."

"Real war?"

"Wait a tick and I'll reel you in." Moments later, the pod was engulfed in a blue tractor beam and pulled in. The wraith did not have any cargo area, so I could be brought aboard, so the only option would be to take me somewhere I could disembark. I listened in as Captain Devious radioed for landing instructions.

The wraith shot into the asteroid field and before long we were gliding into the Aurora's hanger bay. I was quickly lifted out of the pod and placed in the ship's medical facility, where they put me under (despite my protests) and worked on fixing my injuries. I was out for some time, but when I came to, I was braced up and had some new scars that were healing fairly nicely.

I had been on many carriers in my military career, but I had never been on one like the Aurora. It was, if anything, even more Spartan than regular military vessels, and was extremely cramped. Every room was half-filled with pipes and equipment of some unspecified nature. Everywhere I looked there was bare metal with valves, gauges, and the like. I was told that, in order to maintain the stealth generator for the ship, they had to displace much of the other equipment, which ate into the living spaces. I could believe that. There were a few places where I actually had to stoop to get into a room. The crew were friendly enough, and they gave me plenty to eat, though I could not say it was gourmet cuisine, it got the job done, and I was able to keep it down without much trouble.

During my initial stay on the Aurora, they had taken my PDA, so I had to bide my time before I could make another report. No explanation was given to me for why this was denied to me, but I suspected that they might have known about my mission. Sitting on that ship, without the ability to make a report, surrounded by men whose commander I was sent to bring to justice, was excruciatingly tense, but I endured it as best I could, and tried not to let them see me sweat. This became nearly impossible when I was alone with Captain Devious in the cramped mess hall, chewing on delta rations.

"Well, I suppose I could boor you with a history lesson, or I could take you straight to the commander so you can finish what you came here to do," he said. "I would suggest that you listen to the history lesson, though, before you make your decision."

"What decision?"

"You came here to kill Commander Konrad," he said plainly. All ruse and jest was gone, and now his face was sober and serious. I smiled and tried to bluff, but he could see right through me.

"As I said, before you meet him, you should know about our situation," he continued. "Perhaps you noticed the salient presence of Alliance military in the Rift?"

"No, I did not."

"Funny, don't you think, considering the Vonari presence? I should think that there ought to be a conspicuous military presence here, but what we see, instead, is a conspicuous absence of military activity. The Vonari are in Riftspace, Lieutenant Hothead."

"Yes, but why would the military be interested in Riftspace?"

"Why? You don't . . . you really don't understand, do you?" Captain Devious was positively flabbergasted.

"Apparently not."

"Do you know what the Rift is?"

"Why don't you tell me?"

"The Rift is the key to the galaxy. Whoever controls the Rift controls everything, can go anywhere." He drew a map on a napkin. "See these wormholes, they go to different sectors of Evochron. From here, you can go to Vonarion, and from here," he pointed dramatically, "you can go to the Sol system. That's right," he nodded. "That's the birthplace of our whole sorry race, and we're just one little step from it, right here, and the scabies are at the doorstep.

"What do you think might happen if the scabies got to Earth?"

"You've been to Earth?" I was incredulous. Nobody had been to Earth in decades. The gate to Earth was gone long before I was born. Lost or destroyed, I was not sure. Earth, though, had become a kind of lost paradise of which many stories were told of some golden age followed by numerous wars and such, the very fabric of myth, though there was no denying that we humans all came from one planet, originally, and they called it Earth. There were history feeds about it and so on, but it was like studying ancient ruins. The idea that Earth still existed and that one could travel there was well outside the last bastion of believability.

"No, I haven't been there, but I have been to Sol Station, which is in Earth orbit. Nobody goes to Earth. It's protected by a kind of security ring. They don't let anyone in and I've never seen a ship leave. The system is, however, one of the most technologically advanced systems I've been to, more so than Deneb, and even Al's Quay. If the scabies got to Earth, you think they would do what they did to Planet Freedom?"

"Planet Freedom?"

"The asteroid field you flew into when you arrived was the home planet of the Renegades. They named it Freedom after their highest value."

"Oh," I said, feeling dumb. I chalked my obtuseness to having sustained a concussion earlier. "So, why aren't the military here, protecting our ancestral homeworld?"

"Because the Alliance is stupid. The attacks on Cerulean and Talison are feints. Their sole purpose is to distract the Alliance military from the real objective, and they've done a superb job of it. The main thrust of the Vonari attack is aimed here. We think they might know about Earth but haven't been able to launch a lethal strike yet, and after the Aurora bloodied their noses again, they'll take a while before they try that again, but try they will. Scaly bastards never give up."

"So, Clan Destiny is out here, protecting Earth from Vonari aggression, is that it?"

"In a nutshell."

"And I'm supposed to believe all this altruism on behalf of Commander Konrad and his crew? Seems like quite the martyr."

"He's not a martyr yet," said Devious with a smirk. "In any case, Clan Destiny are one of the Renegade clans. This was our homeworld," he said, pointing to the asteroid field. "We're not just doing Earth a favor, but we're fighting our own enemies, and maybe we'll . . ." he stopped. I could not get him to continue this thought. "Well," he continued. "Let's just say that the people of Earth sleep in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf. Your Alliance military is just playing footsie with the scaly play-actors, sent there to keep your guys busy. The real work is here, and nobody is handing out medals for the kind of heroics we perform on a fairly regular basis. You have Commander Konrad to thank for that.

"So, are you ready to meet him?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go," he said, handing me my pistol. I looked at him uncertainly. Then checked the weapon to see if it was loaded. It was. I holstered it, but kept the snap open so I could draw it quickly.

"Why did you let me have my pistol?"

"You have to make your own decisions. Bear in mind that if you do kill him, you won't leave our vessel alive, but you will fulfill your mission. Your precious Alliance military might even award you some posthumous medal."

"How did you know I was coming here to kill Commander Konrad?"

"Do you know who was the last man they sent to kill him?"

"No."

"You're looking at him," he said with a wink.

Of My Meeting With The Commander

Captain Devious led me down the hall. On the way, I saw many crew members watching me intently. It was now clear to me that they had known of my mission all along, and were studying me to see what I would do. The door to the commander's cabin was open and I walked in.

Konrad was there, sitting with his back to the door. His head presented a perfect target against the tactical viewscreens he had in front of him. Aside from the glowing read outs from the viewscreens, the maps, the intel, the grainy pictures of Vonari warships, and their reflections off the metal pipes that covered all of the walls, there was no other light in the cabin. The metal blast door sealed shut behind me, and I stood there, with my hand on the butt of my pistol, deciding what to do.

There was a long silence.

Then, he spoke.

"I suppose if you had come here to kill me, you should have gone through with it by now. I hate waiting," he said. Then, he turned around. "Or are you the sort who can't execute a man whose back is turned. Would you rather look me right in the eyes and do it that way?" He was the same man in the photograph, the one who could see through the photograph to the viewer. Now, he was staring directly at me, and through me. He was older now, more grizzled, and leaner. Obviously, he had not spent the years indulging in fine foods and wine since the last vid was taken of him.

"Why are you . . ." I stammered. "What is the point of all this? Why are you letting me walk in here with a loaded weapon, even knowing about my mission?"

"A few reasons. I'm more of a figurehead here than anything else," he said. "Everyone knows what to do. Everyone has their orders. All that's really left to do is to continue what we're doing: holding off the Vonari invasion. They don't really need me anymore. I'm just more of a father figure to them now. If you kill me, it won't really make much of a difference in the grand scheme of things." He looked off into the distance.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked, holding up a small metal sphere. It was about two inches in diameter.

I shook my head. "Funny, we found it inside you."

"Oh, I was informed that it was a tracking device."

"A tracking device," he said, thoughtfully. He pressed the intercom button and an orderly came in. "Put this off the ship," he said simply.

"Actually, I don't want to die," he said after the orderly left. "I want to see the end of this war, and I want to see humanity victorious. I also want to see bright young men such as yourself thinking for themselves and making their own decisions. I guess that's why we let you have your weapon. I am convinced that what we're doing here is the right thing to do, and if you can't see that, if, after all that you know, you still claim loyalty to your Alliance, then I have failed, and deserve to be retired."

"Well, actually," I said after a long silence. "They didn't send me to kill you, only to report in when I found you." I was relieved. All this talk of killing almost made me forget what my original objectives were. I wasn't the best sort, but I couldn't shoot a man in the back of the head, not even if he was expecting it. It just wasn't right.

"Ah, hence the tracking device," he said thoughtfully. "I suppose that is what the tangler is for."

"You knew about the tangler?" I asked.

"Yes, for a long time, now. We know a lot of things," he said, steepling his fingers and leaning back in his chair. "Do you want to signal them? Do you want them to come here and take me into custody? Give me a 'fair trial?'"

"That is what I was sent to do, not to kill you, but simply to report that I found you."

"Well, I don't see anything wrong with that," he said with a smile. He pressed the intercom button again and asked for someone named Mongoose to come in with my PDA, then he stood up. "To make this official, let's step onto the bridge," he said.

A few seconds later, a man entered. He was a stocky fellow, with close-cropped hair, a receding chin, and a prominent nose, giving him a slightly rodent-like appearance. He wore a tight-fitting military sweater of the kind that commandos often wear. In addition to a side-arm, he had, strapped to his body, various knives and daggers of different sizes and shapes. He stood stiffly at attention when he arrived, whereupon the commander had him follow us to the bridge.

The bridge of the Aurora was the only space on the ship that had a viewport directly into space, so that you could see without monitors. This was probably just a throwback from the days before monitoring technology was as advanced as it was currently, though it could also be a precaution against being totally blinded if the camera systems were knocked out. There were five other officers on deck, busily performing their roles of navigating, communicating, managing the various shipboard systems. I had never been on the bridge of a carrier before, so this was quite an honor. The back of the bridge had one solitary decoration, a portrait of a woman with a brass plaque beneath engraved with a single word: Aurora.

"She was my wife," said Konrad, noting my glance. "The Vonari killed her. This ship is named after her," he explained.

"Time to let him have it," said Konrad. Mongoose held my PDA out to me. I accepted it and sent a tangle to Commander Waters:

*HAVE ARRIVED ON AURORA STOP AWAITING FURTHER ORDERS STOP PLEASE ADVISE
END*

Immediately, there was a brilliant flash of light coming from outside the ship. It briefly illuminated everything on the bridge like lightening, throwing dark shadows in high relief. In that split second, everything in that moment crystallized into a frozen focused instant in which I was suddenly aware of my surroundings in a much more profound way than normal. I could see the tired eyes of Commander Konrad regarding me with that knowing look that I saw from the photograph, as if he was sharing some kind of joke with me that I didn't get. I saw Mongoose reaching for one of his daggers with a speed I've never imagined humanly possible. I saw the other crew members looking up briefly at the detonation in space, not too far from the Aurora. It all happened in an instant, and then it was over. There was a gentle rocking as the ship absorbed some of the blast. The lights flickered. The dagger penetrated my PDA and orange glowing particles rained down from it like a tiny fireworks display. Mongoose grimaced with his yellowed ratlike teeth as he twisted the blade. Konrad closed his eyes with resigned fatigue.

"Want proof of the folly of your loyalty to the Alliance? There it is," he said flatly. "Apparently, they didn't think you could be counted on to do the job yourself, so they made sure it got done anyway. What they didn't count on was that we would anticipate their cowardice. We had to destroy your tangler so they would not suspect that they failed."

"Why? I don't understand," I said. I did understand, finally, that the 'tracking device' was really an explosive, set up to detonate when it got a detonation code from the tangler, and that it was meant to go off aboard the Aurora, killing everyone on it, myself included. What I did not understand was why the Alliance was so desperate to do it.

"That's what your government does. That's what it is," he said, as though revealing some great secret. "They're all posturing and no substance. I told them, years ago, what they needed to do to protect our worlds from Vonari invasion. They scoffed at me. They didn't listen. They didn't care. They didn't do anything to stop the destruction of our homeworld. Now that they have the Vonari breathing down their backs, they realize that they were wrong. However, they are not interested in solving the problem, but covering up their mistakes. I am one of their mistakes, and rather than admit to it, they'd rather just destroy the evidence. That's how your government operates. It's not for the people, it's out for itself, and the people are just subjects. That's why the Renegades refuse to be part of it."

He must have sensed my confusion from my look. I could understand some of what he was saying, but there was a political side to it that I wasn't quite following.

"What kind of government do you think you have?" he asked. I was not sure, at first, if it was a rhetorical question.

"A representative democracy," I answered.

"Yes, a representative democracy. So, do you know where a representative democracy derives its authority to govern from?"

"From the people," I answered, almost automatically.

"And who are the people?" he asked. This was getting tedious.

"We are," I said, though I wasn't really sure. There was a lot of legislation passed that was supposed to be for "the people," but it was never for me. Who were these people? Who was this 'society' that benefited from all of our sacrifices?

"So, you would agree with the statement that a representative democracy derives its authority to govern from the consent of the people to be governed."

"Yes, I guess so."

"What happens if you withdraw that consent?"

"What? What do you mean? I don't know. I don't think you can. Wouldn't that be treason?"

It never occurred to me, actually, that consent was something that could be taken away, or that one had to give consent to be governed. I never really thought about it. It was just sort of assumed that somewhere we had all given consent, and that afterwards, it was a done deal, with no way to go back on it.

"When a government starts, it is small and useful. Its legitimate purpose is to protect its citizens from foreign aggression. Beyond that, its powers are largely just scope-creep. As you know, the government is supported by the taxes collected from the citizens. A small government is easy to maintain and so consent is easily granted. When a government becomes too big, however, it becomes more of a burden than a benefit. The taxes become so high that the citizens are essentially slaves. When this happens, the government's authority to govern stems not from the consent of those it wishes to govern, but through force of arms. This pattern always happens: all governments eventually become tyrannies.

"So, now you know who the Renegades are. We are people who have simply withdrawn our consent to be governed. We are not willing to trade freedom for the pretence of freedom. We are not willing to support a government that has grown so large that it is a burden on the people it pretends to serve. We are not willing to obey a government that fails in its only legitimate duty: protecting the citizens from foreign aggression. For that reason, and that reason alone, we are persecuted. The Renegade clans are not a race or a group of races. We are individuals who woke up. Until we found the Rift, and Planet Freedom, we were just Alliance citizens, bound together only by the mutual bonds of discontent and defiance. However, if your government is truly a representative democracy, then they absolutely have no authority to govern anyone who does not consent to be governed. So, either we are free to leave, or they must abandon the pretence of being a representative democracy. I think you have their answer," he said, gesturing toward the viewport. There was still a dim glow where the explosion had occurred, and several asteroids were still white-hot from the blast. "Still think you are living in a democracy: a democracy that kills anyone who wants a taste of true freedom?"

"So, now that you know you have a choice, what do you choose? Do you withdraw your consent to be governed by the Alliance, or do you continue to live as a subject?"

I thought for a moment, but not long. The Alliance had killed me, or so they thought. To them, I was dead. Is it treason for a person to reject his command when that command has betrayed him? Killed him? Only then did I realize that my 'death' was a kind of release from my obligation to the Alliance. They could expect no more service to me. They could give me no more orders. I was, for the first time, truly free. It was a strange feeling, especially since I thought I was free before but never really questioned the nature of that freedom.

"I withdraw my consent to be governed by the Alliance," I said at last.

"Then, my friend, you are now a Renegade, and I welcome you to Clan Destiny. You will be known as Sundog among us. Welcome to a new life, Sundog."

Since the dawn of civilization, there have been secret societies that performed initiations. All initiations follow a similar pattern. There is a symbolic death of the old individual, and a symbolic rebirth of a new individual. The ties to the old life are broken by the death, and new ties are forged after the rebirth. I realized, much later, that what had just happened was a de facto initiation into the clan. There were no religious trappings to my initiation, no mumbo jumbo, no blindfolds or histrionics: only the cold, hard reality of death and rebirth. I didn't physically die, but to the Alliance, former commanders of my loyalty, I had died when they detonated the bomb they had sewn inside my body. I was then reborn when I made the conscious decision to become a Renegade.

Epilogue

Unlike our natural biological births, we have a choice about the second birth, and when we make that choice, we are reborn not as biological beings living in a deterministic universe, but as human beings with free will. This rebirth is the first step of a new life that is not controlled by physical imperatives, such as hunger, thirst, lust, and delusional belief systems imparted to control us. The chosen life is directed by one's own will, by knowledge of the truth behind the facades we are shown, one's own consciousness and discernment. This is why this birth must be an individual choice. People are not born with free will. They are born as mewling animals that are governed by simple biological necessities: avoidance of pain and attraction to pleasure. Many people never leave that state, and live like animals: seeking only to avoid pain and seek pleasure. For many of them, that is enough. They will never be fully human, though, without casting aside the shackles of the mundane in order to work for a goal that is beyond immediate physical gratification. Free will must be earned. It can only be grasped by those who choose to take responsibility for their own actions. Once you start down the path of self actualization, there is no turning back. I understand this now, much better than I did on that day.

Operation Outreach - A Captain Nefarious Story by Nigel Strange

July 2009



Another contribution from Nigel_Strange - once again featuring Captain Nefarious

Operation Outreach

- A Captain Nefarious Story

by Nigel Strange
July 2009

The proximity alarm beeped just loud enough for the solitary figure open his eyes and look at the screen. There it was, a radar blip. A ship coming through the ionosphere. Someone was coming to visit.

"I guess we'd better roll out the red carpet," the man said to himself, or to the computer. He wasn't sure who he talked to anymore and didn't much care. He had been alone for so long that he had developed the habit of talking to himself. It was a habit he had to suppress at times when absolute stillness was required. He was thin and tall with large hands and the dirty blond hair in the Aries "style": straight, soft, and unstyled. It just lay there on his skull as though it were poured onto his head and solidified as it fell. His body, when he wasn't actively doing something, was perfectly still, while his eyes roamed the room like caged birds trapped in that unmoving skull.

He reached for the Gauss rifle that he kept next to the cot. It was an enormous weapon that was as tall as his two meters if it stood on end. The man tapped a button that opened the pressure seal on the outer door. Aries had an atmosphere, but the heat was so extreme that it did not allow for open windows. The iron hatch balked and then rumbled aside with a deep groan.

Light from the large red sun streaked in as the hatch opened, and red dust caught in its rays glowed like a hydrogen-rich emission nebula. The air came in like a blast from an oven, and the figure flinched slightly as it stung his face before he put his mask on and drew the enormous rifle down to find the ship coming into range. From his craggy mountain fortress, the man could see and shoot anything within twenty clicks. He had a kill zone the size of a small country.

In the crosshairs, he could see the ship landing at a respectable distance. The cockpit opened and someone stepped out. He zoomed the scope in on the pilot until the crosshair was neatly centred on the pilot's helmet. He thought about squeezing the trigger, itched to do so, as he hadn't killed anyone for several days and was beginning to get bored, but he thought he should at least find out who it was first. The pilot was looking right at him, too, apparently knowing that he had a rifle trained on him from about ten clicks away. He waved. The pilot was someone who knew his habits. Since that someone was still alive, the man concluded that he must be a friend.

He trained the rifle on the ship itself: an old-model Wraith with stealth alterations. The nose of the ship showed a female harlequin.

"Hmm, the nefarious Captain Devious is here," he mumbled as he closed the hatch, set the rifle down. He then went into the back of the cave to boil water for tea. After putting the kettle on, he sat down and watched the pilot's progress on his monitor.

An hour later, the pilot arrived and respectfully waited to be invited inside.

"Don't just stand there, come in." The man pressed the switch to allow the hatch to open. Devious stood uncertainly in the portal and then walked in, taking off his helmet.

"Good afternoon," said Devious.

"Well, well, well, I'm honoured," said the Aries man with barely detectable sarcasm.

"What great event precipitates the arrival of the esteemed Captain Devious?"

"Hello, Doctor Scope! It's great to see you again. I see you've been keeping fit despite the heat," said Devious, a wide cheese-eating grin pushing up the corners of his moustache.

"Whatever you're selling, I'm not interested. Tea?"

"Earl Grey, thank you," replied Devious. The two men sat down on the pile of rags that passed for Scope's sofa. "You haven't even heard what I have to say and you're already dismissing me."

"What could you say, you unrepentant miscreant, that could possibly interest me?"

"Let me put it to you this way," said Devious after a few sips of tea. "We want to give you the opportunity to put a slug through the cranium of a vonari."

Scope set his tea down. "Okay, I'm in."

The Skymaven

He loved it: the feeling of speed, of acceleration. He loved it more than anything else. When he pushed the throttle full forward, "balls to the wall" as the ancient fighter pilots used to say, and felt his body being embraced by the force of acceleration, his entire being was bathed in a kind of bliss that he could find nowhere else.

The pilot pushed his little souped-up Raven past the limits where most pilots would begin to whimper. The cave walls blurred past, but he knew where he was going and how to get there. The other speedy fighters were already assembling around the energy ball, waiting for him to try his move. They could not catch the Skymaven, though. Nobody could.

Skymaven unfocused his visual attention. It was a trick he had developed to increase his situational awareness. Most people focus their attention on what they're directly looking at. It's just human nature. The fovea of the eye is the most densely packed area of the retina, jammed with photoreceptors, neuroganglia, and a big, fat pipe that runs to the brain called the optic nerve. For most people, the fovea handles almost everything they take in: what they look directly at is what they see. Skymaven, however, had mastered the trick of spreading his attention from what was directly in front of his eyes, so that he could take in more around him. He scanned the positions and trajectories of the craft from the other side and mentally plotted where they would be in his mental representation of the three dimensional cave interior. He plotted the best course for his own ship, anticipating everyone else's moves, and then executed the plan, all within the blink of an eye. Before anyone could respond, he had the energy ball in his tractor beam and was already swinging around a cave wall back to the goal. His situational awareness

was a full 360. He couldn't see it all at once, but he could feel it. He could take it in with his peripheral vision, the orb, reflections off the canopy. It all added up to a representation of his universe and through it, he flew like a hummingbird.

"Once again, Skymaven takes the ball for the Jets. Dan Somber is one of the best guards in E-ball. The Newts are lucky to have him, but even he can't stop the Skymaven from his goal. Skymaven is up the north end of the cave and swinging through the eastern bottleneck, where Elke and Zain are waiting to try to intercept." The announcer droned on as the crowds in various bars and seedy gambling dens across the Pearl system cheered, booed, or quietly exchanged money.

He felt it before he saw it. A particle cannonade dislodged some rock from a nearby cave all. Someone was shooting at him. Bastards! He thought. E-ball was supposed to be a no-weapons game, but some idiot either didn't read the rules or chose not to abide by them. Well, let them try, he thought. They couldn't get him in their gunsights. It just made the cave look a little more colourful with lasers and particle cannons lighting the way for him. As he rounded a corner, another pilot from the Newts rushed at him in a clumsy and (to Skymaven) sluggish attempt to dislodge the energy ball from his beam. Skymaven cut the throttle and glided forward, then, as the other ship came, he spun 360 degrees on his pitch axis, releasing the tractor beam just at the right moment to send the energy ball sailing over the other ship, meanwhile, he engaged his thrusters so carry his little Raven beneath the ship. He then gunned the afterburners and re-captured the energy ball as it ricocheted off the cave wall. The announcer and the crowds, wherever they were, roared with delight.

Zain, who had been shooting at him, launched a missile. Skymaven heard the incoming klaxon and looked down at the orb to see where the missile had come from. "Big mistake," he said, simultaneously releasing the energy ball so that it would continue coasting forward toward the goal, engaging the reverse afterburners, and using the attitude thrusters to change his vector so the missile would pass overhead. Zain watched as Skymaven's ship screamed toward him, backwards. He tried to turn in order to avoid the collision, but he was too slow. At the last minute, Skymaven flashed his forward afterburners in Zain's windshield, causing him to flinch and look away, blinded by the exhaust. Skymaven then dropped a flare right on the nose of Zain's craft and casually drifted away as Zain's own missile, which had been chasing Skymaven all this time, homed in on his own ship. Meanwhile, the energy ball had drifted into the goal.

"Skymaven scores!" cried the announcer. Although sound does not travel through the vast distances or the vacuum of space, Skymaven imagined that he heard the throngs of exultant fans chanting his name, and the resentment of the fans of the other team turning their lunches into indigestible bile.

Zain heard the announcement as he blinked from the flash of Skymaven's exhaust. Then, a second later, as his vision began to return, he saw for a tiny fraction of a second his own warhead cracking the glass of his windshield.

The explosion shook the cave, but there was no sound. No sound at all . . . except the smug laughter in Skymaven's cockpit. He had won the game, and now it was time to go home. He found the exact location in the cave, angled his ship to point at the precise heading, and engaged the fulcrum jump drive. The cave sped past in an increasingly blurred vagueness as he was bathed in the blue glow of the warp tunnel. His hand went to the shield controls.

Suddenly, he heard the wind tearing at his ship as the white-hot ionized atmosphere cascaded from his wingtips. He simultaneously slammed the reverse afterburners and maximized the forward shield, keeping an eye on his shields as the front absorbed all the energy from the back and sides. After the back and side shields were almost gone, he

released the shield routing button to let them equalize. By this time, he had slowed to the point where he was no longer burning in the atmosphere. After a few more minutes of flying, he landed near his home on Pearl. As the cockpit opened, still hot and smoking from his reckless atmospheric jump, he saw another pilot leaning against his home next to the front door.

"Nice flying, as always," said Captain Devious.

"Thanks," said Skymaven, taking off his gloves and helmet and dropping them into the cockpit. He swung himself out and walked toward the other man. "How's life in the savage, uncivilized Rift?" he asked.

"Heating up," said the captain. "I don't suppose I could interest you in a job."

"A job?" Skymaven looked disappointed. He debated silently whether or not to let the man in for a drink. "How mundane."

"Well, more of a 'caper,' actually."

"A caper, is it? Well, you had better come in and explain over a drink."

Free William

Sundog kept looking at his navigation map, but there was nothing there. Nothing. Empty space was all that the scanners picked up, yet, the coordinates he had been given were specific, though they did not list an exact location. It was in the Sapphire system, and the sector was ostensibly empty. He began to have gnawing suspicions of being sent on a wild goose chase. He definitely had bad recollections of his trip to The Rift and his near-death experience. It was all behind him, now, or was it. He sometimes still looked in the mirror and saw the void staring back.

One last jump, then he'd be in the empty sector. He hit the jump button and when he came into the empty sector, he noticed it was not empty.

"What the . . ." he trailed off. It was in plain sight: a large blue reflection nebula. He double-checked his navigation map and saw that the nebula was still absent. How did they manage to conceal a nebula from the charts? Was there something wrong with his navigation system? Or was there something more sinister at work, something more conspiratorial. Maybe someone was able to delete the existence of certain places from the charts. How anyone could do this he didn't know. He thought that the charts were built from the long range scanners, but the scanners would be able to pick up the nebula. Perhaps the nebula emitted some kind of radiation that interfered with the workings of the navigation system. If that was the case, there might be danger in going in.

There was a blue blip on his radar. Of course, he thought. There is a base hidden within the nebula. That was where he had to go. He couldn't lock a jump point onto the base directly, since it didn't appear on his navigation map even though he could see it dimly through the ionized gases of the nebula. He would have to pilot the ship in manually, something he hadn't done since his early piloting days before joining the military.

The base seemed to be deserted, so he parked there and waited. The automatic trading screen connected and he surveyed the goods. They were the usual variety, which he thought was odd, since the base was so well-hidden. What kind of trade did they think they could get when nobody even knew the base was there? It would be a perfect place

for trading illicit goods, he surmised, but nothing appeared on the trade screen but the usual materials: meds, minerals, ship components.

"Can I help you?" came a voice suddenly over the radio. Sundog nearly jumped out of his seat, or would have, had he not been securely fastened in.

"Hello?"

"Hello . . . "

"Are you Free William?"

"Who wants to know?"

"My name is Sundog. I'm from Clan Destiny. Captain Devious sent me."

"Well, Sundog. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Now please go away." The voice had a cold and weary quality.

"I'm sorry, but that is not an option. I have to personally deliver this message."

"Well, you can't. You cannot come in. I'm sorry, but that's how it is."

"Why not?"

"Germs."

"Germs? What do you mean, germs? I don't have any diseases."

"I'm afraid I just can't take that chance. It's taken me several years to get the bacteria here more or less organized, and I'm not about to let a bunch of strangers in to muck I all up."

"It's just me."

"What?"

"I'm not a bunch of strangers," Sundog replied. He hadn't even met the man, yet, and he was already starting to enter the acute hatred stage. "I'm just one person."

"There are one hundred trillion eukaryotic cells in the human body. However, there are also one quadrillion prokaryotic cells in that same body. Do you have the slightest idea what that means?"

"Not a clue," Sundog admitted. It sounded like biology, but aside from that, he was not really sure.

"It means that what you naively and arrogantly refer to as a 'person' is actually nine-tenths bacteria. You are a bubbling blob of protoplasm, brimming with single-celled organisms, and the part of that community with which I am now speaking is in the minority. It is this majority of strangers that I don't want to muck up my work here."

"I'm not leaving here until you listen to the message."

"Can't you play it over the radio?"

"I'm supposed to deliver it in person. Those were my orders."

"You don't have to follow your orders, do you? I mean, if you don't have free will, then what are you?" crackled the voice on the radio.

Sundog sighed. He was tired and quite ready to give up. He might as well play the message over the radio. He opened the message cylinder and pushed the button. A small hologram of Captain Devious appeared and did a courtly bow.

"Greetings, Free William of the Invisible Base in the Uncharted Nebula. I apologize for sending someone else to deliver my message instead of visiting you personally, but I am tied up at the moment. I'm sure you understand."

"I understand completely," cracked the voice over the radio.

"At this moment, you are most likely looking at a ship parked in your base, having turned down the offer to receive this message in a congenial fashion. I understand your reluctance to admit visitors, but I must emphasize the exigency of our situation. We need your help. Please board the messenger's spacecraft and allow him to transport you to the Aurora. Everything will be explained at that time. I can personally assure you of your safety."

"Right: I'll hop right into someone's ship with a complete stranger and let him take me wherever he wants," said Free William over the radio, his voice seething with sarcasm. "You can tell your captain to—"

"In the event," the recorded message continued, "that you do not comply with my personal request, my messenger has been instructed to withdraw to a safe distance and begin launching fulcrum torpedoes at your base . . ." Sundog's arms flailed wildly as he realized that the sentence he just heard was about himself. Of course, he had received no such orders, and had no idea that he was going to be used in such a way. He checked the weapons MFD. Yes: four fulcrum torpedoes were loaded in the missile bays. Bastard! He thought bitterly. I'm not going to do it. They could have at least told him that he was going to make threats on the base, but then, they probably would have needed to find someone else to do it. Sundog vowed to exact revenge on Devious when the next opportunity arose.

"The messenger will await your answer for 30 seconds before commencing the bombardment starting . . . now," Devious concluded.

"I suppose I had better pack my bags," came the tired, defeated voice over the radio. "Connect up to the airlock and I'll let you in."

Sundog complied. In a few seconds, the airlock was sealed and he pressed the button to open the hatch.

The first thing Sundog noticed when the hatch opened was the warm, dank air that wafted in from the station. If he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine that he was in a tropical swamp on Emerald. He wondered if he was contracting some horrible disease from breathing the atmosphere aboard the station. With some trepidation, he stepped onto the lift and descended into the bowels of the metal giant.

As the lift descended, he expected the artificial gravity to kick in, but it never did. The station operated without artificial gravity, or even centrifugal gravity, as was practiced in the old days of space settlements. When the elevator reached the mid level, it stopped. The hatch slid open, and he grabbed the nearest handrail and shoved off with his feet, propelling himself forward through the dark hall.

"Don't touch anything," William's voice reverberated through the hallway. It was a much more commanding voice when it filled the entire station's PA system. The hallway was dark and, like the rest of the ship the air was warm, wet, and pungent. The floor beneath him was a metal grate through which he could see flickering lights below, but not enough light to illuminate his way. Instead, on either side of the hallway, were rows and rows of cylindrical tanks, lit with a dim, greenish light. Inside each of the tanks floated a shape of some sort: organic, but besides that, difficult to define. Some of them looked vaguely humanoid, some ichthyoid, while others looked like the larvae or pupae of giant insects. He tried not to contemplate what kinds of creatures these had been, or perhaps might be some day. As he cruised by, he thought he saw one of them flinch out of the corner of his eye, but as he turned, there was no movement.

"Make a right at the next corridor," said William.

As he turned, he saw that something was coming toward him from down the dark hallway. It was fast and it was much more adept at navigating in the weightless environment than Sundog was. Sundog splayed his arms and legs in the hope of grasping something to steady himself as the thing shot toward him. He could not make out its shape, only how the lights glinted off of it as it blurred forward, limbs easily catching unseen handholds and propelling it with ridiculous ease and alacrity. It was big and, from what he could tell, metal. In a few seconds, it had closed the distance, and Sundog was staring directly into the orbits of some metallic semblance of a face. His hand went to his sidearm automatically.

A cold robotic hand seized his wrist and forced him to drop the weapon, which floated away into the darkness and clattered on a metal surface somewhere distant.

"Please excuse the use of force," came the voice from the corridors. "I can't have you blasting away at my precious base, can I?"

"Sorry for fearing for my life with your killer robot bearing down on me," said Sundog. "Is this how you treat all your guests? Would you please tell your thing to release me?"

"All in good time. I think you should go with the robot and have a seat in my dining room."

"Do I have a choice?"

"If you want to leave now, empty-handed, then you are free to do so, but if you want me to come with you to the Aurora, you need to be escorted to the dining room. You will understand, I hope, eventually."

With unnecessary force, the robot yanked him through the hallways, past more bubbling containers of liquids, computer arrays, and other robots. The place was teeming with robots, small, bug-like ones that seemed to scuttle around without purpose, medium ones that performed menial functions around the station, like moving the water-filled tanks around, connecting them up with one another, all the way up to the giant escort-bot, which was slightly bigger than a man. Sundog had never seen so many autonomous machines in one place and could not imagine why the station would need so many of them.

He was roughly pushed into a large, somewhat comfortable leather chair. Before he could protest, however, his hands and legs were strapped to the armrests and foot plate.

"Hey, wait a minute!" protested Sundog. "What kind of a dining room is this?"

"It is my dining room," said William. "You see, I don't really need food the way you do,

so the room that functioned at one time as a dining room now serves a different purpose. However, I can see that you, the guest of honour, would like to meet your gracious host."

There was a table in front of him, but the room was mostly dark. The table was illuminated from above by a harsh yellow, flickering light. Around the room, he could not see much but the curved metal surfaces of what looked like more metal tanks with tubes flowing out of them. Across from him, on the other end of the table, was where he would expect to see his host. Instead, what he saw was a dimly lit, greenish circle of light. There was something else there, too, a dark shape that moved ever so slightly within the circle. It was hard to make out, however.

"Lights," commanded William. A spotlight came on and lit up the tank across the table from Sundog. It was a large, oblong tank with small round windows in various locations. It bristled with many tubes and cables that emanated from it like corded hair from a prolific scalp. The tank was gleaming steel, but for the many plastic computer screens displaying readouts on it. The readouts, however, appeared to have stopped. Instead of green bouncing lines and scrolling information about the vital signs of the creature that floated in the tank, there were static messages, like SYSTEM ERR and red, flashing diodes. Sundog stared at the tank for a few seconds, then stared at the robot. The robot waited patiently for Sundog to either figure out what was going on or to ask questions.

"So, now we meet, face to face," said William.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Sundog.

"Do you believe that a human being has a soul?" asked William's eerily disembodied voice, which emanated from everywhere now. The robot, acting on some cue, lowered a metal cage over Sundog's head and started tightening screws to hold his head perfectly still within it. Sundog began to scream incoherently as he felt the screw-ends digging into his skin and clamping his cranium in a vice-like hold.

Briefing Part I

The susurrus died down quickly when the Commander Konrad walked into the room. The officers and other military personnel stood to salute and were then allowed to take their seats. The room was mostly dark except for a large screen on one wall from which flickered an introductory slide. Konrad walked in front of the screen and pulled out his retractable pointer, which the crew affectionately called The Gesticulator 5000. He lengthened the pointer with a series of clicks and pushed it back together again, using this as a kind of signal for the briefing to come to order.

"Gentlemen," he began. "I am glad that you all could make it to the Aurora with so little information to go on. I know that for some of you it was a tremendous leap of faith, however, most of you know Captain Devious to be a man of his word—" snickers and chuckles rose from the audience as the commander looked slightly annoyed. "—despite some recent history in Deneb which is still under investigation," he cleared his throat. "Thank you for coming. I hope you will soon understand why secrecy has been maintained to such a high degree.

"As you know, our systems have been under attack by an alien force whom we know as the vonari. After first contact, they have been steadily building attack forces and then assaulting our systems, usually taking them by surprise. This is known to everyone in Clan Destiny, but some of our new recruits might not know about the severity of the situation. The Aurora operates mainly within Riftspace, and its main objective is to contain the vonari and above all to protect the Sol system, the birthplace of mankind

and our ancestral homeland. Even though we are not exactly welcome there with the current regime entrenched, we still feel an unambiguous obligation to protect our ancient homeland at whatever the cost. This might strike some of you as being romantic, but to you I would mention that should Earth be destroyed, the effect on morale throughout Evochron would be devastating. The will to fight might collapse into despair, and then the vonari would just walk all over us. We cannot, must not allow that to happen."

Behind him, the screen showed an image of a starmap, showing the various systems of Evochron, including Riftspace and Earth. It then showed a red circle in the top quadrant, indicating Vonari territory. Red triangles radiated out, attacking human controlled systems in the north. Meanwhile, a few red triangles sneaked in at the bottom. The map suddenly zoomed in to this area. The crew recognized it as a map of Riftspace. The triangles converged on the one planet in Riftspace and disintegrated it.

"As most, but not all of you are aware, the Vonari launched an offensive in Riftspace and succeeded in destroying our homeworld, Planet Freedom, with a handful of Vonari cruisers. Since then, we have had no home to return to, just an asteroid field where our home once existed. This fact, alone, might weaken the resolve of the Alliance military, as they would not easily cope with the idea that the alien invaders have a weapon capable of destroying entire planets. Since then, the Vonari have mounted attacks in several sectors at once. We believe that these attacks in Sierra and Talison are diversionary tactics meant to take our eyes off Riftspace. Although Earth is well protected against landing craft, it is still vulnerable to the weapon that destroyed Freedom, which is why the Aurora is in operation in Riftspace around the clock."

Most of the crew were nodding off with the history lesson they were all familiar with. However, Scope and Skymaven paid close attention. For them, much of this information was new. "Now I'll turn the meeting over to Dr. Eckhardt."

A bespectacled man with a round face and a small upturned nose stood up and used an air mouse to move a cursor on the screen. "Now for your favourite part of the briefing," he said in a weasel voice. "The science lecture." He waited for a few seconds of uncomfortable silence for someone to laugh at his joke. One could actually hear the smile fading as his chapped lips scraped dry teeth. "Which one of you can tell me how to disintegrate a planet?" he asked, hoping to put the pressure on the audience. "Anyone?"

"A great big fat pile of explosives," said a cockney voice from the back. A few faces turned to look at Mongoose and nodded with approval.

"Next?" asked the doctor.

"What's wrong with explosives?" demanded Mongoose.

"Gravity has a strange property that it pulls things together," said the doctor.

"Explosives on the side of the planet would push the planet out of orbit, but not likely disintegrate it, especially if it has a liquid core as Freedom did. Even if you managed to put enough explosive in the centre of a planet, you have to not only blow it up, but blow it up with sufficient force that the pieces don't fall back together, which means it would need to explode with enough force to move all of the mass of the planet outside escape velocity. All of the Alliance navy's fulcrum torpedoes wouldn't suffice."

"Oh . . . yeah . . . I see," said Mongoose, apparently mollified.

"Send an asteroid into it," suggested someone in the middle of the room.

"Or maybe a comet."

"Energy beams."

Dr. Eckhardt smiled politely as the lame suggestions poured in, looking more superior and smug with each outburst.

"Neutralize the gravity," said Sundog. Everyone turned to see who just walked into the room.

"Would you care to explain?"

Sundog continued: "The Vonari ships have a specialized beam that neutralizes gravity. Since gravity is the primary force holding a planet together, if you can neutralize the gravitational field, the planet's own rotation would tear it apart."

"That's precisely it! I'm glad someone is paying attention. As most of you know, gravity is a distortion of space, commonly shown as a 4th dimensional depression. In fact, it is a spatial density field that surrounds massive objects caused by the displacement or distortion of space by subatomic particles. The cumulative effect of the tiny distortions in a small area causes the warping effect. The Vonari weapon, if you can call it that, is essentially a space-smoothing ray, or a space-flattener. It resets the spatial density to zero, causing the planet to disintegrate. This is the reason why the ray is so useless against our own capital ships. The ray attacks gravity, and our ships are not held together by gravity, so the ray is mostly useless. Against a planet, however, they are devastating."

Captain Devious reached up and grabbed Sundog by the wrist and sat him down in the seat next to him so he could whisper angrily at him.

"Where the hell have you been these last seventy four hours and where is Free William, whom I sent you to collect?"

"I am Free William," said Sundog.

Briefing Part II

Captain Devious stared at Sundog for a moment. "Would you care to explain?"

"After the briefing," replied Sundog. "I want to hear what Dr. Egghead has to say."

"Eckhardt."

"Whatever."

"As you know, the Vonari have been entering our space through a wormhole. It is convenient, though not entirely accurate, to think of a wormhole as a tunnel between two places in three-space. Riftspace is rife with wormholes. There has been a lot of speculation as to how Riftspace came into being. The wormhole distribution seems to be too linear and regular for it to have happened naturally, so we suspect that the wormholes were artificially created—"

"By whom?" asked someone in the audience.

"We don't know by whom," replied Dr. Eckhardt. "All we do know is that the likelihood for the wormholes to have appeared in their current locations by natural processes is as close to zero as you can statistically measure. Their positions are so exact and so regular, that they must have been placed there by someone . . . or something," he added dramatically, raising an eyebrow.

"Now, back to the main topic," he resumed. A graphic showing the ends of a wormhole meandering through different parts of a plain appeared. "The Vonari are coming into Riftspace via this wormhole. This means that they must have control over the other end of it."

"We've already scouted that wormhole," said Mongoose. "We can get to Vonari space, but there is no way from there to Riftspace. It's a one-way ride."

"Almost," replied Dr. Eckhardt. "Some wormholes do not have a one to one beginning and end. Some are bifurcated, and others might possibly lead to wormhole nexi."

"You think Riftspace is a wormhole nexus?" asked Sundog.

"Riftspace is a three-space grouping of wormholes, but not nexus. A wormhole nexus of this kind would exist in hyperspace. In the case of the Vonari wormhole, it appears that our ships are thrown out of hyperspace before completing the journey to the other end. Think of this wormhole as a kind of fork with one entrance and two exits. We always take the exit closest to us because it is curved less. The other exit is somewhere in Vonari space. Coming the other way, they can come directly to Riftspace."

"So, in other words," interjected Sundog, "we have a one-way wormhole to Vonarion and they have a one-way wormhole to Riftspace and that both terminate in the same wormhole on our side, but in different locations on the vonari side."

"Correct."

"I'll take it from here," said Commander Konrad. "Thank you, Dr. Eckhardt." Eckhardt smiled and sat down. "Many of you have already guessed the mission, but for the benefit of the rest of you, here it is. Right now, we're calling this Operation Outreach.

"We need to find the Vonari end of the wormhole that leads into Riftspace. Once we find it and collapse it, the Vonari will no longer have a shortcut into Riftspace. We'll need to send out some scouts to work completely invisibly in Vonari space, and for an extended period of time. This means no fighting and maximum stealth. The Aurora will be moving into Vonari space in order to provide support. Once we find the wormhole, we move on to phase two."

"How do you collapse a wormhole?" asked Mongoose.

"With a space-flattener," replied Konrad. "As you have just been made aware, wormholes are distortions in space. In theory, a space-flattener would be able to collapse one end of a wormhole. Our goal is to collapse the Vonari wormhole from the Vonari side. We have never collapsed a wormhole before, so we do not yet know if it would also collapse the wormhole from our side. If Dr. Eckhardt is right, and our wormhole is bifurcated, then it might leave a single hole going from our side to the other. This would make the Vonari wormhole a two-way wormhole. At that point, we could either fight for control of the other side, leaving the hole open so we would have ingress into Vonari space, or we could collapse it. The other possibility is that when we collapse the Vonari side of the wormhole, it would create a collapse on our end as well. In either case, I think you understand the consequences."

"It's a one way ticket to Vonari space," said Captain Devious. "Whoever collapses the wormhole from the other side would be stuck there."

"So, how do we get our hands on a space-flattener?" asked Mongoose.

"That is phase two," said Commander Konrad. "We need to capture a Vonari cruiser intact. The cruiser needs to be one that is fitted with the space-flattener weapon. Once we have the coordinates of the far end of the wormhole, we fly the Vonari cruiser to it and use the space-flattener to collapse the hole. Simple, really. Thank the good Captain Devious for that idea."

There was no round of applause, only blank stares.

"Gentlemen," resumed Konrad. "Our mission is audacious and ridiculously difficult. Some might call it insane. However, in this war, nobody has done this before. The vonari do not expect a capture attempt, and have likely not taken precautions against it. In order for us to give it the greatest possible chance for success, we have assembled a special team of the best of the best. Dr. Scope is the best marksman in west Evochron. Skymaven is the best starpilot . . . anywhere. Our own Mongoose is . . . well, tell them what you do, Mongoose."

"Kill scalies," said Mongoose with a sneer, pulling out a pair of katars from their thigh-sheaths and doing a vicious-looking flourish.

"Right. So, all we're missing is Free William, who is the only known expert in the Vonari language."

"You're not missing anyone," said Sundog. "I am Free William, or at least, part of me is part of Free William."

"Sundog?" asked Commander Konrad uncertainly.

"I could not fit my entire consciousness into this body, so I downloaded a part of it, the part that understands the Vonari language for one thing, including enough of my personality as I thought would suit your needs. So, now Sundog has two distinct personalities. The first one is his, and the second one is mine. When it comes to piloting, I'll sit back and let him take control, but when it comes to understanding the Vonari, then I assume control, while Sundog is asleep. At the end of all this, I expect to merge back with my super-consciousness in my station in order to absorb the new memories. It has been a long, long time since I've felt a body around me."

"Okay," said Captain Devious. "Remember when I asked you to explain and you said wait until after the meeting?"

"Yes," said Sundog.

"Never mind. I really just don't want to know."

Welcome to Vonarion

Sundog stared through the windscreen of his Evoch. "I don't get it," he said.

"What's not to get?" asked Devious. "Welcome to Secret Base!"

"I just don't get what's so secret about it."

"This base has been in Vonari space for years now, and has maintained a cloaking field until fairly recently. I kept telling them that it was going to malfunction, but they didn't believe me, either that, or the local mechanics are too many light years away. So, after it broke someone put up the Welcome sign, hoping it would encourage them to learn active redirected light technology. Apparently, they've instead adapted to the shame, rather than learned from it."

"Won't this attract the Vonari?"

"They already knew about it. As soon as the cloak field went down, they were on it like a swarm of flies on a rotting carcass. However, their antigravity beam weapons are useless against it, and their missiles can't penetrate the shield, so they just come here to gawk at it, oh, and maybe shoot down anyone trying to get inside. I'll send you the coordinates."

Captain Devious sent the exact coordinates of the central column of the "Secret" Alliance base to Sundog, who punched them into his navigation computer.

"Ready?" asked Devious.

"Affirmative."

"Powering down the stealth generator now."

Both Devious and Sundog powered down their stealth generators. It was necessary in order to allow enough power to the fulcrum drive to make the jump. The entire swarm of Vonari immediately turned when the new blips appeared on their sensors and started at the two fighters at top speed. Sundog stared at the energy indicator slowly creep upwards as the Vonari ships sped toward them. He diverted all of the shield energy to the engines to hasten its climb. It helped. A little.

"Almost in firing range," said Sundog.

"I have a lock," said Devious. A flurry of Excaliburs erupted from Careless Whisper, just before it sped forward into the fulcrum jump point.

Sundog watched one of the Vonari ships explode as Devious vanished. Sundog saw several incoming missile indicators headed his way. He turned his ship in the opposite direction, hoping the fulcrum jump would speed him away from the missiles instead of toward them before the jump. As the first missile was about to hit, he engaged the fulcrum drive and instantly accelerated away, leaving the missiles behind. Unfortunately, he was not aligned with the ecliptic when he jumped, so when he arrived at the station, his approach was off and he bounced off the shield surrounding Secret Base.

"Don't turn around!" exclaimed Devious through the radio. Sundog was just about to turn 180 and hit the afterburners so he could get inside the base.

"What?"

"Just keep going," said Devious. "If you slow down here, they'll eat you alive. Get out of range, then line yourself up properly, then make the jump again." Sundog did as he was told. He flew through the swarm of vonari, who fired at him with cannons and missiles, but because he was going too fast, nothing touched him. After a few minutes, he had left them behind. He did a jump to a remote area of the sector, then lined up and then jumped to the base. He then parked next to Devious.

"That was close," he said.

"Staying alive in Vonari space means two things: stay cloaked and keep moving," said Devious gruffly. "If you slow down like that again, you will die. This base is the only safe place to stop in the entire quadrant."

Sundog finally had time to look at it. "Is that Vonarion?" he with wonder. A black and red cracked planet loomed in the distance. Even from so far away, it had a menacing, evil look about it. Red lava broke through the surface like cracks in an ancient face.

"Yes, that's Vonarion," said Devious.

"The Vonari Homeworld . . . "

"Well, maybe," said Devious. "We think this might be a forward base of operations. The surface is devoid of any structures. They seem to have some kind of underground base or bases there."

"We should just drop a bunch of fulcrums on it," said Sundog.

"I think we'll let Commander Konrad make the executive decisions, if you don't mind. Besides, look at it. It looks like someone has already beat us to the fulcrum carpet-bombing. Didn't seem to touch them, though.

"Come on, let's get into the lift," he said, opening his hatch. The bubble around the base hanger held air so they could get out without their helmets on. However, nobody actually got out of their ships without their helmets. People had been around these atmosphere bubbles all their lives, but nobody really trusted them completely. You didn't feel like your air was safe unless you were surrounded by a few inches of steel.

"Isn't this an Alliance base?" asked Sundog.

"Yes."

"Won't they take a dislike to us?"

"This base is so far on the frontier and gets so little company that they're happy to see anyone without scales. Besides, I brought some supplies," he said with a grin. He held up a small crate.

"What's in it?"

"The usual vices: chemical, visual, edible, potable, snuffable, and most delicious."

"What?"

"Some luxury goods from Deneb. I always bring a peace offering to these folks. They don't get, as I mentioned, many visitors."

When the lift got to the main common area, they stepped out. They were greeted enthusiastically by the crew, who suffered from various forms of insomnia, depression, ennui, and randiness.

"Welcome to Vonarion, Mr. Joker," said Lieutenant Spearling with a scowl when he met them at the lift doors.

"You still haven't forgiven me, have you?" asked Devious. "I think the sign is quite attractive, and it makes me feel welcome."

Devious allowed Spearling to lead the two into the main pub where the crate was opened. Devious then proceeded to distribute pharmaceuticals (some legal and some not so much) that would help with the various conditions the crew suffered. He also had a lot of chips containing contraband software (games) images (no more need be said about

their nature) and various foodstuffs. The chocolate from Alpha Centauri was particularly well-received. After these introductions, Devious and Sundog were honorary crew members and had several drinks on the house.

A judicious application of the unpredictable

Vonarion. There was no system more hostile to human life, yet there were the few who eked out a living here, difficult as it was. After the initial introduction and celebration, Sundog and Captain Devious got to work. They had with them a number of other Clan Destiny pilots to help with various chores and missions. They were the vanguard, flying in advance of the Aurora, which would be arriving later that month for field support. In the meantime, the Renegades were on their own, in hostile space, cozying up with the Alliance in a small starbase.

The Alliance station was heavily fortified and moderately self-sufficient. There were nearby asteroids for raw materials that they mined. They called the miners the Mouse squadron, because they needed to keep close watch on their radars in case vonari showed up, at which point they would leave as quickly as possible. There were Not many human ships in Vonarion, and they couldn't spare a single one. The station had very limited resources, though they could fabricate most of their needs from the raw materials. The star, Vonarion, provided the fuel.

Captain Devious, was the public relations man of Clan Destiny, and an incurable prankster. He was, however, immensely effective at gaining support from the local Alliance men, despite their long-standing differences. He helped them to better organize their mining runs, demonstrating his skills as a leader. He put the Mouse squadron under his protection in order to allow them longer mining periods. When Vonari showed up, he and the other Renegades would engage them, and the Mouse party could sweep up more metals, which were used in most components that could be made on the station. Devious explained that the station was the only friendly area in Vonarion, and that they were going to be there for a long time, and so they were guests, and being guests, they had to ensure that they did not wear out their welcome. The reason for their visit to Vonarion was never explained. The mission was, after all, top secret.

Free William introduced a way to make a cheap protein from the raw materials, which the men could grow in vats and eat. It had the consistency and taste of furry cheese, but nobody died of it. After a while, they even began to find new recipes for the gunk.

Sundog took teams to close proximity to Vonarion to help with hydrogen collection, which was used for fuel by the station and all the ships.

Meanwhile, the Renegades regularly sent out expeditions to chart out different Vonarion sectors, hoping to find the wormhole that led to Riftspace. Days turned to weeks, but there was no sign of the wormhole.

One day, Devious walked in on Sundog, who was tuning what looked like a home-made quartz radio.

"What are you up to?"

"I'm listening to Vonarion transmissions. This Starbase is an excellent listening station. The Vonari have no idea that we can intercept and translate their language, so they don't even bother to encrypt their messages. It is most intriguing." Captain Devious did the requisite mental shift from addressing Sundog to addressing Free William, who was apparently now in control of Sundog's brain.

"So, what are they saying?"

"They're sending raiding parties to Talison and Sierra."

"Hardly news."

"They are diversions," continued William.

"Yes, we know that."

"They are amassing another fleet to send through the wormhole."

"Do they give coordinates for the wormhole?"

"No."

"Then they're not very helpful."

"We know where the fleet is gathering. It occurred to me that instead of trying to find the wormhole by blind searches, we should find out its location from someone who knows where it is: the vonari."

"Excellent idea. Why don't you get on the microphone and ask them?" chided Devious.

"Or, we could plant a tracer on one of the ships heading for the fleet gathering."

"That would have been my second choice. Find the gathering and let me know where it is."

With that, Captain Devious recalled the Renegades back to Secret Base, then sent a tangle to the Aurora, warning them of the vonari fleet heading their way. It would be up to the Aurora and what was left of her flight crew to take them out. However, since they had advance warning, they would have the advantage. He then went into the station factory to get the engineers to build a coded transmitter that could be attached to the hull of a vonari cruiser, and made plans on how to attach it.

"They'll never expect this," mused Devious. "I often find that a judicious application of the unpredictable can be moist efficacious."

"Moist?"

"Yes. You see what I mean?"

Payload

The group gathered around the thing in the center of the hanger and stared.

"Hurry up, men, we're running out of time!" shouted Devious.

"That's our secret weapon?" asked Mongoose.

"What the heck is it?" asked Sundog.

"It is, as Mongoose proclaimed, our secret weapon."

The large metal tube sat there, open and empty. Sundog recognized it as a fulcrum torpedo, but with the payload removed. Upon closer inspection, he found that there was no fuel tank for the rocket engine, either. It was, essentially, a hollow metal tube.

"Where's the payload?" asked Mongoose.

"Thank you," replied Devious.

"For what?"

"You just volunteered."

"Volunteered?" said Mongoose, looking slightly more shifty than his usual rat-faced self. "For what?"

"You are going to be the payload. Now, we don't have a lot of time. Suit up and be ready. We leave in ten minutes!"

As the rest of the crew scrambled to get their gear ready to go, Mongoose stood looking at Devious. "You wanna explain that last bit?" he asked.

"No time. Get your suit. I'll explain en route."

In eight minutes, they were ready and climbing aboard their ships. Mongoose, after suiting up, went with Devious. Devious opened the fulcrum tube and proffered the entry for Mongoose, who slid in.

"OK, now lie down," said Devious. Mongoose obeyed. Through his helmet, Devious could see the repressed rage building in the other man as he squeezed into the tight-fitting metal sarcophagus. Devious then handed him a disk-shaped transmitter in one hand, and a stick of cold-weld in the other. "Your job is to climb onto the vonari cruiser's hull and spot weld this transmitter onto it. Got it?"

"What if they shoot me out of the sky?"

"We'll try not to let that happen."

"What if they jump out with me on it?"

"Just get the transmitter on the hull good and tight. After that, jump free. We'll have a ship pick you up. Any more questions?"

"Did you think of this?"

"Right, let's get going." With that, Devious closed the hatch on the fulcrum and had them load it into the number one hardpoint of the Careless Whisper. After a few more minutes, the fighter was in space, meeting up with the rest of the squadron.

"OK, clan, on my mark," he said, setting the coordinates for the enemy ship. "Go!" The five ships vanished simultaneously into blue flashes.

When they appeared, they were nearly on top of the enemy cruiser. It was surrounded by Vonari scout ships and heavy fighters. The Clan ships broke off to attack, except for Sundog in his Enoch and Devious in his Wraith, both of whom engaged the stealth generators.

"Sundog, I need you to take out that cruiser's weapons. Don't worry about the fighter escort, the others will see to them." Through the hull of the ship, Devious could hear Mongoose pounding on the fulcrum tube. "I need those weapons out ASAP. I'm starting my approach now."

With that, the Careless Whisper began its invisible approach to the enemy cruiser. Sundog performed his job satisfactorily, just as Devious had trained him. He sneaked up to the cruiser's "cheek" under stealth, then nuzzled right up into its weapon centre. Then, he decloaked and immediately fired all his missiles into the enemy ship. Within seconds, the cruiser's weapons were disabled. At that moment, Devious decloaked and released the fulcrum torpedo. The torpedo continued forward on its own momentum as Devious changed course and began engaging the other ships. The torpedo, without any propulsion of its own, was a dark, cold target that would not show on most radars and was fairly difficult to see directly.

Mongoose felt the clank of the weapon release mechanism, but otherwise, felt nothing but the sides of his little shell around him. He tried to control his own breathing, but his heart raced nevertheless. What if they miss? Was all he could think. They could miss, and then his little coffin would float into the void, never to be seen again, and he'd just die from asphyxiation. Or, what if they shoot down the missile? He realized there were no shields or anything to prevent even a small shot from killing him.

While he was thinking this he felt the tube suddenly stop. He continued sliding forward until his feet slammed against the nosecone of the missile and, at the same time, the sides of the missile broke away and shattered. He was suddenly in the middle of space, with the stars and bright nebula all around. The shards of the fulcrum tube spun away and disappeared. Beneath him was the hull of the enormous Vonari cruiser, stretching out before him like a vast runway to either side. The stars wheeled above him as he became aware of himself standing on the hull amid a savage space battle. Vonari ships disintegrated around him, streaming plasma and debris. Cannons flared like strobes. Missile trails filled the vacuum like tracings of spiderwebs, but there was no sound except for the clanking noises coming up through his feet from the Vonari cruiser.

He remembered then what he had to do and shook himself out of his awe. The ship was smooth and there was precious little for him to grab onto. He did find a small fissure and stuck his boot in. Then, he took the cold-welder and started to fix the transmitter onto the hull.

He ducked in toward the hull as a Vonari scout ship came careening straight toward him. There was nowhere for him to go, and he suddenly realized that his hard life was about to end. He had little time for regrets, though, before the scout bounced away harmlessly, deflected by a well-timed kinetic missile. Mongoose caught Devious's grinning face in the cockpit as he soared past, re-engaging the stealth generator for another watch.

The weld was nearly ready. The enemy ships were mostly reduced to floating wreckage except for a few skirmishers that were putting up the last bit of struggle. In a few more seconds, he would jump free. Unfortunately, at that moment, a yawning blue sphere opened up in front of the cruiser and it, the transmitter, and Mongoose all leapt forward under the impulse of the sudden onset of the gravity well of the Vonari warp engine.

"Get out of there!" yelled Sundog over the radio.

Mongoose tried to jump free, but his foot was still jammed in the fissure. He twisted it and tried to get it out, but by the time he did, the ship was already distorting as it was sucked into the singularity.

"No!" shouted Sundog over the radio. The Vonari cruiser, the transmitter, and Mongoose had all vanished into the blue light and were gone.

The ships of Clan Destiny each jumped back to Secret Base, one by one, their mission accomplished. Sundog and Devious were the last to leave.

"I hope it was worth it," said Sundog.

"We're talking about saving Evochron from the Vonari. None of us is worth throwing that away. I hope you understand that."

"Yes, sir," Sundog replied.

When all the pilots got back, they had a solemn gathering in the tavern of Secret Base. They hoisted their flagons in respect for their fallen hero and sung and told stories of his exploits. Sundog had barely known the man, but he learned more of him as the night dragged on.

Then, one of the men came into the room. "It's the signal from the transmitter," he announced.

Killzone

One shot.

That's all you get. That's all anyone gets. Ever. Dr. Scope settled into position. He crawled into a prone position, high on a craggy cliff overlooking a desolate valley. He then set his rail rifle on its bipod and looked through the scope.

One shot.

The theoretical basis of the school of statistics is predicated upon the idea that if you repeat the same event multiple times, then a percentage of those trials happen one way and a percentage of those trials happen the other way. Hit or miss. You might miss ten percent of the time and hit the other ninety. The problem with the idea, though, is that nothing ever happens twice. Nothing. People tend to group similar events together, but it's never the same event. A sniper knows this. You only get one shot. You don't get to do it one hundred times and hit ninety of them. Once you fire, the target knows you are there. The relationship between the sniper and the target changes. You might get another round out, but once the target knows you are there, it becomes much harder to hit. You might get a good shot on another target, maybe a hundred other targets, but they're all different targets. All of them different. What allows statisticians to make up statistics about events is their lumping together a large number of discrete, independent events that, to them, appear to be repetitions of the same event, but which are, every one of them, totally different and unique. No two instances in the history of the universe are the same, and that is why you only get one shot.

Max, Dr. Scope's gundog, settled in behind him, keeping watch. Max was Scope's best

friend, naturally. A perfect machine friend. He was like a metal dog, but with a gun barrel for a snout, He could shoot ten rounds a second. Max understood his needs. Scope needed someone, or something, to watch his back as he concentrated all his attention on the kill zone, nearly a mile away, beneath him, waiting for the target. He did not want someone sneaking up on him and catching him by surprise when his attention was so focused, which it was during these operations. Max was totally silent during missions. He sometimes padded one way or the other, cocking his metal ears to suspicious noises and analyzing them to make sure they were within the range of sounds made by normal fauna. Max's keen eyes could look in different directions simultaneously, and his head could swivel around in an instant. His bark was worse than his bite, but then, his bark was a fully automatic chaingun, while his bite was more or less nonexistent, owing to the absence of jaws and teeth.

The orange sun was going down. If it was dark by the time the show started, he would need to switch to infrared. He hoped that would not be the case, as it always seemed a bit blurry and make it more difficult to be precise.

Skymaven had faced overwhelming odds before and had always come out on top, or at least, survived. The Vonari were all around, and since he was the only non-Vonari ship in the area, they were concentrating their attacks on him. However, this was how he liked to fight: overwhelming odds, extreme aggression, intense dogfighting. He swooped and struck like a raptor catching fish. Before the Vonari could react, he was already someplace else. Sometimes, just as they were about to surround him, he would vanish in a glowing blue haze of a fulcrum jump, only to appear again behind them releasing a few missiles. He harrowed them like a hornet and their numbers dwindled, their flaming wreckage streaking down toward the bright blue planet below leaving black smoke trails in their wakes.

Yet, Skymaven was sweating. Even as the Vonari numbers dwindled to the point where a merely decent pilot could hope to survive, Skymaven's anxiety grew. Soon, it was down to one.

"This is it," he said to himself.

The Vonari ship launched a missile and, rather than use countermeasures, Skymaven attempted to out manoeuvre it, but failed. The missile grazed his wing and exploded, shattering the wingtip off and enveloping his Evoch in floating debris. The ship began to spin as it spiraled downward, heading toward the surface of the planet as he fought for control. Skymaven flipped on the distress beacon as his ship began to burn in the atmosphere. He ramped up the shields and levelled off the burning Evoch so it would not disintegrate as it descended. The engines sputtered out as more of his wing tore off and flew away. Skymaven gritted his teeth and rode the wreckage toward the ground, his stomach filling his throat. His hands were white-knuckled and he found that, though he tried, he could not unclench them from the controls. He managed a quick nose-up as the ship hit the ground and slid forward, causing a great gash rocky surface. The ship continued forward with a deafening grinding noise as it plowed through the earth, and then there was total silence.

Skymaven was vaguely aware of the smoke billowing upward into the vast blue sky. He took some time to come to his senses. At first, he could not remember where he was or why he was there. He thought he was in an early training session in which he crashed his first Talon in a corn field. When they finally got to him, they dragged him to a hospital and then made him pay the farmer for the crops he had destroyed. He remembered his instructor glaring at him, berating him for shaming the entire school. Then he remembered his first flight leader, who always had a side-arm. He asked him why he carried it.

"You going to shoot Vonari with that thing?" he asked.

"It's not for them, it's for me," said Van, the leader. He had a ragged scar on his head that ran all the way from his right eye to his left ear. "You never want to let the scalies take you alive," he continued.

"Why not?"

"They do things to you that you could not imagine."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe they are testing weapons. Maybe they're after information. Who knows? They have a device that we call the Tenderizer."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"It liquefies bone. One moment you're standing there, and the next moment you're a pool of goo. You can't breath, you can't move, you can't even scream, and I'm sure you would scream if you could because as every single muscle in your body and its sinews is freed of its moorings, your entire body becomes one knotty Charlie horse."

Skymaven remembered where he was. He was on the surface of an unknown planet in an uncharted system after having been shot down by a Vonari. Through the smoke from his ravaged Evoch, he saw the Vonari ship touchdown nearby. He looked down and saw that the distress beacon was still on. Nobody was coming for him, though.

The Vonari ship opened. It really opened. It cracked wide open the way an ancient breech loading revolver opened. The front part slid out and partially underneath the back part, revealing the Vonari pilot. The Vonari hopped out. It was huge! Skymaven had never seen a Vonari in person before: only pictures and drawings of them. This one must have been eight feet tall. It was wearing a tight-fitting environment suit with a helmet. The helmet, though, was not curved in the way that human helmets were, but more oblong, as if to protect a much longer head than humans have. It reached into the ship and disconnected the hoses that were attached to its suit and reached back in to grab something from inside. Skymaven could not see what it was carrying.

Suddenly, panic seized Skymaven and he opened the hatch. There was a hiss of air rushing into the cockpit. He then slammed his fist into the harness, which instantly unbuckled, and leaned over the side in order to climb out. He was suddenly very dizzy, and leaning over the side made his head spin. He felt as though he might black out, but he clawed at the side of his Evoch until he fell onto the ground below, which had buried his left wing. The Vonari kept coming forward.

Skymaven remembered Van, his flight leader, and his habit of carrying a side-arm. After Skymaven flew with him, he always carried a side-arm with him into combat. Maybe he would use it on himself, but first, he would try it on the Vonari. He instinctively reached for his thigh-holster, but it was not there! He had not worn his side-arm that day. Meanwhile, the vonari pilot strode forward, almost upon him. Skymaven saw that the alien had a rod in its claw, with a bulb on one end that seemed vaguely egg-shaped. He did not know what it was. He did not want to know. Since the day when he found out about the Tenderizer, he knew that the Vonari had been developing even more clever methods of causing unbearable pain and suffering. It seemed to be one thing they were really good at.

The vonari was nearly on top of Skymaven now. It began to raise the weapon. Then its head disappeared and was replaced by a pink fog. Skymavin, his Evoch, his suit, and everything around was sprayed with a fine red mist. Skymaven looked around, but could see nothing except some hills in the distance.

After a few seconds, there was a loud crack coming from one of those hills. Skymaven sighed, opened his visor, and took an enormous swig of Alpha Centaurian brandy. After a few minutes, he walked over to the new Vonari fighter he had just acquired.

As he walked he reflected on the risks taken. The whole dogfight was arranged to acquire the Vonari ship. Perhaps the biggest risk was that he had to make the crash look authentic in order to lure the Vonari in. Authentic enough to reassure the Vonari enough to leave the ship so they could take it without damaging it. Finally, if the Vonari saw that he was armed, it might have reacted sooner and dispatched him before Dr. Scope could take it out. He had nearly blown it when, in his confused and concussed state after the crash, reached for his holster instinctively. The Vonari was taken out by Dr. Scope. The supersonic projectile splattered the Vonari cranium a while before the sound filtered down to Skymaven. Upon reflection it was as much good luck as good planning that has won through!

Homecoming

When the ship emerged from the blue flash, Mongoose was surprised to find himself still alive. He imagined himself torn to tiny bits by the tremendous gravitational forces generated by the jump drive, but it turned out that he just fell into the anomaly with the ship to which he was attached. When he finally got his foot unstuck from the crevice of the Vonari cruiser, he took some time to look around. In front of him was an array of Vonari ships. He had never seen so many before in one place. There might have been twenty or so, all clustered together, as though waiting for some signal. He suddenly felt like a fly on a wall in a house full of people with fly swatters. Consequently, he pressed himself down against the hull of the ship to avoid attracting attention. In the middle of this cluster was a pulsating spherical blue rift in space, which he recognized as a wormhole. He reasoned it must be the wormhole that they used to get into the Rift. He hoped that the beacon he had planted was doing its job.

The minutes dragged on into hours, and Mongoose kept looking at his suit readings to see how much air remained to him. Suits had advanced tremendously, but they could still only provide and recycle a finite supply of air, and he was running low.

Without warning, the ship lurched forward, together with seven others. Mongoose was glad for the change, because it meant he might be closer to escape, and thus, to fresh air. The O2 needle was already on the edge of the red zone.

One by one, the Vonari ships entered the wormhole and zipped out of sight. When it was his turn, Mongoose closed his eyes and felt the now-familiar sucking feeling of going into a singularity. When he could see again, he was on the other side. He immediately recognized the local astronomy. It was the Rift, and he was on the back of a vonari cruiser, heading straight for the wormhole to Sol.

In front of him, the first of the cruisers exploded. Renegade fighters began popping out of cloak all around, and he knew that they had been warned of the impending attack, and so the battle was waged to their great advantage. The Vonari scrambled their fighters, but they were picked off almost as soon as they left the hangers. Mongoose decided that this was the best chance he might have to disengage the ship, so, using the

limited thruster-power of his suit, he launched into space and engaged his distress beacon. Moments later, the vonari cruiser he was clinging to was under attack. Before long, it was as smouldering wreckage coasting through the void, belching plasma and smoke.

After the battle cleared, the Vonari fleet was in ruins and the victorious Renegades were flying back to their carrier, the Defiant. A single SARV went out and caught Mongoose in its beam and brought him back to the carrier.

Once inside, Mongoose removed his helmet and sat down in the mess hall, where he was greeted by cheers and slaps on his sweaty back. A round-faced partier offered him a brew, which he did not refuse. Before long, he was singing war songs along with the others and clanking glasses.

"What were you doing out there?" asked a pilot. Mongoose was wondering when someone would ask. His mission, though, was top-secret, even from other Renegades, so he had to offer a cover story.

"I was just out scraping the dirt off of a solar array when I saw the vons coming in, so I figured I should get out, but got hit before I could go anywhere. Luckily, I ejected without a scratch."

"You were lucky, old boy," said the pilot.

"How did you get there so fast?" asked Mongoose.

"We got warning from the Aurora," said the pilot. "Wherever that ship is, it's doing a lot of good," he said.

"I'll drink to that," said, Mongoose, and he did.

After a couple of hours, the party wound down, and Mongoose was trying to hold his head above the line of glasses that had accumulated on the table. A kid walked in. He had the look of a boy who enlisted before he was old enough, but whose eyes were as old as the oldest of the combatants. He had seen too much in too little time.

"Are you the one they call Mongoose?" he asked.

"Yeah, that'sh me," he replied, his cockney accent more than a little slurred.

"The Commander of the Aurora awaits your pleasure," said the kid.

"What? Where?"

"They're right off the port side," replied the boy. Mongoose staggered to the port side of the bar and walked into the hallway, from where he could look out. Sure enough, the Aurora was parked off the port side.

"There's a shuttle waiting to take you back," said the kid.

"How did they . . . ?"

"Apparently," said the pilot that Mongoose had been talking to earlier, "they came the same way you did."

Mongoose smiled in response to the raised eyebrows, whistles, and silent demands for explanation, as he followed the kid to the shuttle.

"I didn't know Commander Konrad was in such dire need of a panel-washer!" joked the pilot as Mongoose walked out. "Must be a fantastic cleaner!" said another. "Maybe we could borrow him to wash the dishes!"

When he was finally aboard the Aurora again, he crawled toward his bunk but was intercepted by Captain Devious. The crew was abuzz with news about the mission. They now had the other end of the wormhole, and the reports were in that they now had possession of a vonari fighter.

"The final phase of the operation can commence," said Devious. "We're going to need you for the next bit, so get ready to go."

"Aw, captain," complained Mongoose. "I just got back, and I's still drunker than a glass of water on Aries."

"Well, I guess we'll have to detoxify you before we send you off," said Devious. Mongoose's response was a fantastically dirty look as he was escorted into the medical bay to have his blood purified, a process that involved needles and chemicals that made one sick.

Transit

William looked at the controls of the Vonari craft as it crouched on the flight deck.

"Curious. I had known that they had a preference for red, but I never really understood why until now."

"Why is that?" asked Devious.

"They must have come from a planet with a limited spectrum, perhaps one orbiting a red giant. They see everything in shades of red: a very narrow spectrum, but they can distinguish more shades of red than we can, so they think they can see colour."

"Can they?"

"Well, not like we can. I think they can see light and dark, and then all the colour they see is somewhere between orange and violet on the outside."

"Does that explain why all the controls are red?"

"So far, that's what I got," said Free William. "Hand me those goggles." Devious walked over and grabbed the VR goggles that William asked for. William put them on and plugged them into his deck. "I think I can do a simple linear spectrum transform," he said, typing, ". . . and, voila."

"Voila?"

"Try these," he said, proffering the goggles to Devious. Devious gave him a dubious look and gingerly placed them on his head. His view instantly changed. Everything turned red, except within the Vonari cockpit, where the alien displays suddenly lit up in brilliant colours. Where before there was nothing but red gibberish on top of more red gibberish, there were bright oranges, pinks, reds, violets, plums, burgundies, and all manner of distinct, though similar colours.

"Egads, that's horrible!" said Devious, handing the goggles back.

"At least I can see what I'm doing now," replied Free William.

Three hours later, William, with his goggles was piloting the Vonari ship off the carrier with Mongoose tucked above his head in an upper compartment that had been rigged and fitted with a seat. They were lucky that the Vonari were so big because it allowed them to squeeze two men into a single-seat alien fighter. Both were wearing their space suits. The Vonari fighter, they discovered, was not pressurized against space, so the Vonari relied on their own suits to keep pressure in during combat. They decided that they did this to save energy. A single umbilical ran from the fighter's life support system into the Vonari's suit in order to sustain heating and air, and also provided communications. They left the umbilical in the port, however, because neither of them wanted to be heated up to the 140 degrees or so that the Vonari liked to bake in, nor were they sure about whether or not they wanted to try breathing Vonari air. The fact that they had to rely on their own suits, however, meant that their mission time had to be limited to the time left on their suits. Their suit tanks were topped off before they left, though, so they had five good hours of breathing before they ran out. They didn't have anything strenuous to do - resting conserves air.

Still . . . five hours in deep space was not a long time.

They also discovered that Vonari fighters did not have any kind of warp drive that they could find, and so were entirely dependent on the capital ships to ferry them from one end of the galaxy to the other. This meant that they would need to turn around before they got to the half-way mark on their suit air: there was no short way back.

When they got to the target cruiser, the operation was already underway. The Renegades had destroyed the other Vonari capital ships and disabled the target's communications array and its jump engines. The ship still had some fighters trying to defend it. The delicate part of the operation was convincing the Vonari that their ship went down and was not captured, so communication had to be silenced, and no Vonari witnesses could be left.

As William and Mongoose approached, they could see the Vonari fighters doing their best to ward off the attack.

"So, you reckon they'll just let us in?" asked Mongoose. He was huddled in the top of the cabin, aching to stretch his legs.

"Not likely. You ever see a Vonari retreat?"

"No. Never. We used to joke about it," said Mongoose.

"They never retreat," said William grimly. "One of the things I admire about them, but also one of their weaknesses. The remind me of bees on earth."

"Bees?"

"Bees will sting anyone who threatens the hive, but in doing so, they lose vital organs when the stinger gets pulled out, so they're all sacrificing their lives for the good of the hive."

"Silly little bastards," mused Mongoose.

"They're not really selfless in the sense that we know it. They have a hive mind. Their individual lives are only part of a whole, and so the sacrifice is not the same as ours. It makes me wonder if the Vonari also have some kind of hive structure."

"You don't know?"

"I haven't been living with them," said William. "All I got is their written language, which reminds me, I better start typing." With that, he started typing a message on his deck, which was wired into the ship's alien computer. To Mongoose, strange red letters danced on a red background on a red screen.

"No, they're not buying it," said William.

"What?"

"I asked for permission to dock and their response was . . . incredulous. They won't let us dock until we've won the battle."

"Great, so now what do we do? It's not like the Vonari are just going to turn the battle around."

"Yes it is. It is just like that," said William. "It has to be like that."

William grabbed the tangler and encoded a message to Captain Devious.

After a few moments, there was a change in the battle. The Vonari started getting good, solid hits on the Renegade ships. One of them exploded, sending debris whizzing past William's stolen fighter. William grabbed the controls and started firing on a Centurion.

"What the hell are you doing?" demanded Mongoose, reaching down to pound William on the helmet. "That's one of ours, mate! Are you daft?"

"He can take it," said William. "If the Vonari see that we're not fighting, they'll get suspicious."

"Don't kill anyone!"

"Look, it's got to go this way. Our guys know that they're going to have to sacrifice some ships, but they're bailing out first, so don't worry."

"I didn't know you could fly this thing."

"Sundog is doing the flying. I'm doing the communicating."

"That's just weird."

"You have no idea," replied Sundog.

After a few minutes, the Renegade ships were either gone or destroyed, and the victorious Vonari began to assemble in queue to board the Vonari cruiser. One by one, they entered through the rear hatch and disappeared into the vast underbelly of the cruiser. William and Mongoose were the last in line, so they had plenty of time to observe the protocols the other ships followed. As the last fighter went in, Sundog took a deep breath and pushed the ship forward.

"Well, this is it," said Sundog.

In front of them, the flight deck of the enemy cruiser yawned open to receive them, and in they went. One by one, the stars disappeared behind them as the door closed behind their ship and sealed them in the enemy hanger.

Insertion

Sundog reached for the control to open the hatch, but Mongoose blocked his arm and put his finger to his helmet, indicating silence. Sundog looked out through the viewport and watched as the other ships opened up like gaping maws, disgorging their pilots into the hanger. One by one, the Vonari pilots climbed out, detached their suit umbilicals, and removed their helmets before walking through the portal in the back of the hanger. When all the pilots had left, Mongoose whispered.

"OK, this is it. Stick by me, but not too close."

"Do you know where to go?"

"Not exactly," he said sheepishly.

William spoke through Sundog's mouth. As he did so, his inflection, accent, and voice all changed in a disconcerting way that Mongoose had never gotten used to.

"Do you have any idea how disconcerting that little switcheroo you do is?" William did not answer.

They quickly discussed their plans.

"All right, we're go," said Mongoose. "Let's get this done before we run out of air."

William popped the hatch and the vonari fighter opened up and let them out. There was nobody on the flight deck, so they proceeded cautiously to the port, Mongoose in front and William following. Mongoose took a position beside the port while William took the other side and fiddled with the controls until the port opened, then Mongoose went through. William waited until he got the signal, then followed.

The inside of the ship was dark except for the dim red lights overhead and at foot level. There were also panels of red screens and red controls, blinking red with red lights.

"Regular horror show, this is," said Mongoose.

"I see what you mean," said William, looking out from beneath the rims of his wavelength-shifting goggles. Without them, the whole place gave one the impression of looking through glasses drenched in blood. The corridors were much taller than what they were used to, and hexagonal. As they turned a corner, Mongoose put a hand back, indicating that William should stay back.

Mongoose crept forward, toward the unsuspecting Vonari. He waited until the Vonari was looking the other way, then moved forward. When the Vonari looked back again, he melted to the floor and held perfectly still. The Vonari went back to working with the panel as Mongoose resumed his approach. He reached down to his thigh-sheaths and pulled out the twin katars. As he was almost upon the Vonari, the alien turned, just in time to see him. Its eyes widened and its mouth opened as if to howl, but before it could do so, Mongoose's daggers were already thrusting upward, cutting into the alien's diaphragm, preventing it from breathing. The alien tried to grasp Mongoose, but he had already stepped away. He signalled for William to enter and he did so, just in time to see the alien silently bleed out and slip away. Only William could understand the expression of the alien: surprise and extreme malice. Alien facial expressions aren't easily recognized by the untrained.

"The secret," said Mongoose, "is to stab upward, so you get up under the scales."

"Thanks," said William. "I think I'll let you handle the stabby stabby."

"That's why they call me Mongoose," he replied.

"Why?"

"Have you ever seen a mongoose attack and kill a king cobra?"

"No."

"It is a sight to behold. The cobras are fast and have lethal venom. They're quite deadly if they can get in a bite. The mongoose, however, is faster and smarter, and so it knows how to avoid the bite and get past the cobra's defences. I've been fighting these things for a long time, so I've earned a sort of reputation. The Vonari are covered in, like, scales, so you see the connection."

"Interesting," said William, sounding bored.

"Sorry to bore you, Mr. Brain," said Mongoose sarcastically.

"We're running out of air, so I suggest we get on with it."

"Yes, your majesty, your perspicacity, your grandiosity, your—"

"Go!"

"Alright alright." Grudgingly, Mongoose restricted his displays of disapproval to dirty looks in order to conserve oxygen. William helped Mongoose conceal the body beneath the grates of the floor before they moved on.

They passed a few corridors and quietly slipped around corners without being spotted. They passed several portals, most of which were shut. Sometimes, they could hear vonari conversation on the other side. William tried to listen to their conversations as they passed, but it was too muffled by the metal doors for him to make out more than a few words at a time.

They finally reached their destination: the air scrubber next to the power plant, near the center of the ship. William was amazed that they had made it this far without more encounters with the crew.

There was one vonari in the air scrubber room, which Mongoose dispatched with his usual grace and speed. The alien looked up imploringly as it gurgled and sputtered its life away. William was briefly touched with a pang of pathos, but it quickly faded as he realized that his job was about to begin.

The air scrubber was a series of tanks connected by large tubes. The tanks were filled with some kind of gas exchange wafers. He quickly determined the direction of flow and then started keying in the commands. In a few seconds, the air scrubber was under his control. He opened a tank and removed the gas exchange wafer and inserted a small device he had brought with him. He twisted the cap and opened it, then pressed down and placed it inside the air scrubber. Mongoose heard a slight hissing sound, but saw nothing. William then closed the tank and sighed.

"So, now what?" asked Mongoose.

"Now, we wait."

"So, we just wait?"

"And hope that we don't see any more of them for a while," said William.

After about fifteen minutes, William nodded. "It's time. Let's go have a look."

Mongoose walked out of the room with William close by. They walked up and down corridors and saw a few Vonari lying on the floors, dead. Their reptile-vulpine faces were contorted in agony, their eyes filled with their blood, and their forked tongues hung out the sides of their mouths. One of them had clawed its own throat out.

"Wow, that stuff really worked," said Mongoose in amazement. William said nothing. He merely looked down at the creatures that he massacred and tried not to think about their last moments. They inspected the main compartments, the crew quarters, the pilot quarters, and finally the bridge. Everywhere was the same: the Vonari had all been poisoned through their own air filtration system. If they had realized what was going on, it was too late for them to react before they succumbed to the nerve gas.

After satisfying themselves that the entire Vonari population was dead, William tangled the clan.

"THE SHIP IS OURS. END"

After a few minutes the Aurora popped into space near the captured Vonari ship. Shuttles were launched and quickly docked with it. Clan marines, wearing their space suits filed in, collected the Vonari dead, and put them in the main airlock. The lock was choked with the bodies of dead Vonari. Then, they left. Only the engineering team remained. Once everyone else was off, the team opened the lock with all hatches open to vent the poisoned vonari air into space, along with the Vonari remains.

Naturally, William stayed with the engineering team, as he was the only one who could read the Vonari language. With his help, the Vonari ship was made human-habitable in a matter of hours.

"Excellent work," said Captain Devious, strolling down the corridor of the captured vessel. Mongoose was mopping the sweat off his brow. "Not only did we get the capital ship, but a hanger full of Vonari fighters."

"Yeah, the plan worked out," said Mongoose, pleased with himself.

"Still, the place could do with a bit of colour."

"Yeah, maybe we could bring in some lights and such."

He walked quickly to the bridge, where a team of skilled navigators and pilots had assembled, along with William. William was pointing at different controls and symbols and telling them what they meant. The team was feverishly writing down information and taping it to various displays and controls so that they could easily find them when they needed them. When Devious got to the bridge, the commotion ceased and everyone saluted.

Captain Devious returned the salute and took out a cigar and lit it.

"Where's the PA thing?" asked Devious. William found the horn and handed it to him. Devious picked up the horn and began speaking. "This is Captain Devious, under the flag of Commander Konrad of the Aurora. What we have done has not been done before, and if we succeed in our next mission, it will never need to be done again. We have captured

a cruiser belonging to the Vonari navy. The Vonari never expected one of their own ships to be taken by force without being destroyed. We can and we will use this to our advantage. I hereby christen the captured ship Dracula of Clan Destiny. Now we will take this war to them."

The cheer of the crew reverberated through all the decks of the ship like a low roar. People were clanking bottles and lighting cigars patting one another on the back. Mongoose beamed with his own accomplishment. William smiled wanly and then continued to instruct the crew on the subject of controls as they furiously wrote sticky notes and printed out labels and stuck them to every surface.

"So, have we got it all figured out yet?" he asked. William shook his head. "Well, get on with it," he said, and sat down in the oversized Vonari captain's chair.

Unknown Foe by Verbosity

January 2009



A very short story of the tension and speed of combat in space . . .

Unknown Foe

by Verbosity
January 2009

Deflected Excaliber missiles dance around Icklechesh's hull like fireflies in the night
"just another minute, just a little longer . . ."

Deneb Had always been a dangerous system, While out on the edge of Evochron and of no strategic value, the rumours of a weapons development lab had always enticed the most unsavoury of Evochron's pilots. For this reason the new School clan had always taken an interest. When the news of the virus had hit, Ickle had filled up his hull with meds straightaway and made his way there.

Most of the journey had been uneventful, travelling at top speed always guaranteed some degree of safety. Ickle had been about to enter the jumpgate to Deneb when the ships decloaked. Five ships with striker class frames and markings he did not recognise appeared blocking his route.

"They've been waiting for me!" He pulled his leviathan round and hit the afterburners, dropping countermeasures to defeat the missiles that would surely come, but it was too late.

The first missile struck taking out his weapons system, and dealing slight damage to his engines. His afterburners non-functional, he set his thrust to full, turned off his IDS and rigged his directional thrusters to full for a little extra speed, but he knew it would not be enough against the smaller faster craft.

"Who are these guys?" he wondered.

Spinning his craft round to face his oncoming attackers, he laid down some defensive countermeasures, then set his jump point to the nearest station.

"If I live long enough to jump."

Two strikers broke off jumping away, only to appear seconds later in ahead of his flight path. Flanking him they raced past, Ickles hull dancing with the repeated flicker of golden laser fire.

"More damage to my engines, they're trying to disable me" He mused.

"Mayday, Mayday! I'm being attacked by an unknown force, five bogeys flying striker class ships with unknown markings. I'm on a humanitarian mission to deliver Meds to Deneb. Please respond" he screamed into the comms.

"Ickle I'm in Pearl, I'm on my way, Lunaria, out"

"Make it quick! I've taken engine damage and my weapons are shot, I'm not gonna last long against these guys."

Ickle adjusted his thrusters, He wouldn't gain anymore speed but changing his trajectory might throw them off for a few seconds. He cursed under his breath for selling his repair system. "Ping always told me it was silly selling my equipment for an extra buck, should've listened to him."

"Just a little more speed, and I'd have a chance to escape these guys" Ickle knew what he had to do, He'd jettisoned the meds, and dismayed watched as what had moments ago sat in his cargo bay was now scattered across the system by another missile from the strikers. They broke off, cloaking as they did so.

Lunaria appeared a few minutes later " there you are, where are those 'phantom craft of yours?"

"It's a long story, I'll tell you on the way"

Later in AC28's repair bays, Ickle watch through the plaz screen as his ship was repaired.

"So you're going to stock up on more meds and try again?" Lunaria asked.

"Not a chance, I want revenge. I've managed to get a repair system and an Excaliber pack, I know they are blockading the jumpgate, and no-one else will get through unless they are taken out"

"Well if there is a bit of profit in it I'll go find some meds. goodluck and godspeed."

"And to you, thanks for the rescue"

Ickle Walked down to his ship, The robotic arms of the shipyard were finishing off the repairs. " You did well baby, now it's time to add a couple more notches on your sides. They won't know what hit them.

He had it all planned out, instead of jumping in with a pitch of 0 he'd jump in at 90 degrees and fire off the excals at the first ship that appeared, pulling a long slow turn with his afterburners on to allow the Excalibur pack to regenerate, he would pull level with the jumpgates, fire off another load and jump out through the gate.

It worked perfectly, two ships down with the other ships out of weapons range he passed through the jumpgate into Deneb . . .

He'd been expecting resistance the other side of the jump, even expecting the Strikers he'd left in Alpha-Centauri to make chase, but the system was empty on the other side of the jumpgate, not a single blip on his radar. He jumped to the far side of Deneb and descended toward the city. Striaight in front of him a brief energy field appeared as another wing of strikers uncloaked.

"I thought so" Pondered Ickle letting off his first wave of Excals at the uncloaking ships, One was destroyed quickly and another, taking heavy missile damage, was swiftly dispatched with heavy energy fire from Ickle. The remaining 3 fighters scattered.

"Where d'you think you're going? " Screamed Ickle into the open comms. He knew he couldn't use afterburners in an atmosphere, but neither could his target. Seconds later he let off another barrage of missile taking his target out. His radar showed the other ships cruising out of the atmosphere and pulling hard on the yoke made straight up himself. On the way up he plotted a point between where he expected his two remaining targets to be, and as soon as the last vapours of atmosphere were behind him, he jumped into position. Spotting both his targets he made for the nearest, let off his missiles once more, turned and fired his afterburners and made chase for the last ship. It was already near the edge of his scope, but had stopped.

"He must have a death wish" though Ickle to himself, then he realised it was a trap!

There must be more cloaked ships! He turned and made off at maximum velocity towards the station and safety, only to see a capital ship uncloak in front of him. "I didn't know they could do that!" Dropping countermeasures and avoiding the weapons fire from the ship he turned toward the jumpgate, he managed to get out of range, though not without taking damage to all of his systems.

"Damn! Nav, Weapons, Coms and Life support are out. My only chance is to make for the jumpgate"

He flipped on to inertial and spinning round he could see Strikers making straight for him again, but this time without much damage to his engines he might just reach the gate before they could get their weapons in range of him. One of the unknown enemy craft let off a barrage of missiles. Ickle release a flurry of countermeasures and flying backwards started firing. He shot down two of the missiles and the CM's deflected the rest.

"just another minute, just a little longer.. I'm almost there"

Ickle was surprised the ships computer chirped that the Life Support Systems were back online - in the heat of the battle he'd forgotten about the repair system he'd had installed in the shipyard. Quickly he checked his systems again, Nav was repairing, but it had taken heavy damage so he wouldn't be able to jump for a while. Weapons were at 50% and his shields were recovering as well.

"now its your turn" he thought to himself. He fired off another set of missiles as he turned his IDS system back on and headed into the oncoming wing. Once again one ship flared its own destruction, momentarily brighter than Deneb's dim and distant sun. Ickle charged head on into the nearest fighter, swerving at the last moment to avoid taking damage as it too exploded, The other strikers, clearly shaken, scattered. Ickle turned back to make for his exit again, only to see the enemy capital jump next to the jumpgate.

"I've got you now" he thought. Ickle fired up his afterburners, set his energy bias to full shield and prepared to ram the capital ship.

At the last moment he targeted the behemoths engines and took them out with a final barrage of missiles and what energy he had spare for his Phantom cannon. Without engine power the capital was dead in the water, unable to move. The force of the impact from Ickle's ship nudged the enemy cruiser just enough for part of its hull to intersect with the jump field of the gate. The pull of the gate tried to force the ship through its aperture, but the ships size was too massive. Ickle knew what was going to happen next, he had seen it once before. As the mass of the ship beyond the aperture built up, so did the inherent energy within the jump field. Moments later The Capital vaporised and the energy from its own mass sucked through the event horizon was released back through the ship.

"Lunaria, Are you there?" he called through the comms, hoping that the cruiser had been the source of the jamming.

"I'm in Alpha-centauri, on my way to you now, full a hold full of meds too."

"Watch out for debris on your way in, It got a little messy . . . "

Rise and Fall by tha_rami

September 2006



tha_rami has created several epic pieces about Evochron History. He pieced together the story of Evochron from the invention of Fulcrum Jump technology through to "today". His history is included as an appendix to this book

He also has added depth to some of the major defining events in that history, humanising the dry historical list of dates and happenings.

Those who like a background to immerse themselves in owe tha_rami a great debt!

I obtained a first draft of the history and this story and tha_rami's permission to "tidy it up". Although I've sorted spelling and smoothed a few grammatical points to make the prose flow more smoothly, all of the basic ideas are unchanged.

This story grew with the telling both in size and in complexity! Summarised, there is a primary storyline and 4 secondary ones. The following brief biographies might be useful to help you keep track of what's happening where, when and to who!

Main story: A group of insiders are bribed to create conflict between the Alliance and Federation in order to spark a war which would lead to a rebooting of the Terran economy. For the set up, traitors capture several F-144E's and their pilots. After several assaults and a bombing at Federation HQ they succeed in pushing the tensions so far that negotiations at the peace dome start. The entire top of the Alliance and Federation are now negotiating peace.

Secondary Stories:

Jenna: An Alliance investigator who believes the F-144E's didn't disappear naturally. She, through other cases she feels are linked together, tries to investigate the disappearance. Together with a small group of investigators, they wind up investigating an unidentified carrier. Aboard, they find survivors of the F-144E squadron.

Curtis Williams: One of the pilots of the missing squadron. All he knows is that he was captured and that his F-144E was stolen. He escapes during a pirates attack on the carrier where he's being detained.

Edward Sarrickson: One of the bribed bad guys. He officially died in an accident with his UFA-80, but behind the screens, he is responsible for the bombing of Federation HQ and was a major player in starting the war together with Jermayn, an ex-Alliance member. His conscience is toying with him - leading him to question whether his deed was righteous. His ultimate goal is creating a better world, and through war, he can see the economy rebuild.

Al Jennings: The mastermind. He bribed several persons into sparking off a war. His story-line is mostly followed in Part 3, until now his role is mostly behind the screens.

A fifth secondary story is revealed in Part 3.

Editor: tha_rami's writing style runs several story strands together. I've used a common section divider:

---oOo---

in those sections where the action changed from place to place several times

Rise and Fall

by tha_rami
September 2006

After the retreat of the remaining Vonari forces from Terran space in 2288, a period of wealth and prosperity dawned. Through peace, the economy flourished, while the stable but present, tensions between Alliance and Federation kept the weapons market, the single most important component of the economy, intact.

In 2346, Alliance and Federation representatives sat around the table at New Hope for the first true peace negotiations. All humanity recognised that the Vonari threat wasn't eliminated - they needed all the Terran powers working together against the threat of a possible Vonari retaliation. As a result, the weapons market collapsed. The economical damage wouldn't have been as severe, if another event hadn't taken place at the same time.

In 2347 the location of the hidden paradise world, RiftSpace, was made public. The sudden abundant supply of resources completed the collapse of the economy. Orion's economy went down first, rapidly followed by Sol's and Evochron's almost simultaneously. The Collapse, as it became known, led to poverty and riots all around Terran Space. The peace negotiations failed, due to the increased tensions. However, in a last ditch effort to gain something from the talks they agreed to a non-aggression treaty.

It is the year 2354, as several people discuss the end of the peace

Part I - Preparations

Prologue - June 21

As he watched the darkness of space through the thick layered window, a vast carrier slowly approached the station. He turned around, towards the two men sitting at his table. They had arranged to meet in a crowded bar at Onyx Station, and the dark group they formed took refuge in a dark corner. Nobody noticed the three men sitting in the smoke and laughter. But these men appeared deadly serious.

He took another look at the two men. One was looking directly at him, clearly not in the least impressed by who he was. He allowed himself a small smile - he had not expected anything different from an ex-pilot of the 48th Wraith Squadron. He had deliberately picked (former Lieutenant.) Dirk Jermay, who had been thrown out of the Alliance Navy because he refused to follow orders blindly - insubordination the court martial called it. Jermay still held a personal grudge against the Alliance.

He took a quick glimpse at the other man at the table. Captain Sarrickson was staring out of the window, at the carrier that was now sliding by slowly. The brake thrusters lit up every now and then, causing eerie, blue flashes outside. Captain Sarrickson was a pilot for the Federation. He had chosen Sarrickson because the captain had a keen and silent reputation. Two qualities that Jermay lacked, but a good compensation for the lack of trust between him and Sarrickson. He would do just fine.

Then he took out two small disks from his pocket. He handed one to the, and one to the Captain. Jermany immediately took a small device from the inner pocket of his leather jacket, and swiped the disk through it. A small overview on the screen confirmed that a million credits had been added to his bank account. Jermany stood up from the table and disappeared into the smoke.

Sarrickson put the disk in his pocket, without scanning it. He stood up, nodded at the man sitting at his table. He hesitated.

"And what if it fails?"

The man looked up from his lighter and his cigarette.

"I've never failed before and I don't intend on starting doing it just yet."

"And the rest of the money?"

He looked at his cigarette, and then took a long look at Sarrickson.

"You'll get the other 99 million after you've done what you must."

Sarrickson disliked the emphasis on 'after'. He was no twelve years old anymore. But with such a mission, he could understand the secrecy and payment.

"Why?"

This caught the man off-guard. He suddenly stared at Sarrickson, and Sarrickson gave him no time to think.

"Why?", he repeated.

"The rebuilding of the economy, my friend. The rebuilding of all that was lost in that insane treaty."

"I'm not your friend. What do you win with it?"

The man hesitated, not taking his eyes off Sarrickson.

"Well then, Captain, nothing more nor less than everybody else. I want the times of wealth and prosperity back, the times in which being a lone mercenary could earn you a fortune. I don't need no peace and poverty if stable tensions create wealth for everyone. I'm representing several clans, groups and individualss from all over Sol, Orion and Evochron. We **need** to do this. For everyone."

Sarrickson thought for a moment, nodded once more, and then also disappeared in the smoke, leaving the man alone at his table.

The man finished his cigarette, took a look around, and then left the bar too. He threw his cigarette on the floor before stepping on it. He walked through the repetitive metal hallways of Onyx station. The meeting had cost him two million credits, but if he succeeded, he would have orders coming in again. The economical crisis after the treaty between the Alliance and Federation had hit him badly. Orders for weaponry shrank to a trickle, and he was in that game. His income had dried up, and with the capital he had already gathered, he had now set a desperate plan in motion. It would cost him 200 million credits, but he could miss those. He needed the orders. He walked on, passed below the lit board reading 'Public bay'.

Nearly thirty minutes later, he was in a carrier en-route to New Hope. He sat back and again thought of the plan. It was technically brilliant, but it's success depended on two money-driven traitors. On external factors. It was a gamble, but if he succeeded it would be worth it. If it failed, he would have lawyers, if the authorities ever got to him. His "employees" had promised to not betray him might they bottle it, and receive another payment of one million credits from the authorities. He was depending on the 99 millions promised in advance being attractive enough to have them try for the big money.

The carrier docked at New Hope station. He was directed towards a passenger transport, which would fly him to the planet's surface. Carriers were too heavy to enter atmospheres, so this was a necessary step in travelling. He sat down in the VIP lounge, waiting for the boarding sign to light up. Less affluent travellers were boarding a freighter for their transfer to the planet

The descent was without any problems. He still enjoyed the feeling of the increasing gravity on his body, and the sudden pull as they got closer to the planet. Suddenly one would feel the forward movement of the transport, and one would feel the descending craft. The artificial gravity would be shut down, and real gravity would make one lighter due to the fall, and then increase slowly as they decelerated.

An hour later, he had reached a large, glass office building. He passed through the glass doors, past two guards who nodded at him with a professional fake smiles. They hated the job, he knew that, but he paid them well. He nodded back at them, and walked into the elevator in the centre hall. He was rocketed back upwards towards the skies, until he reached the 72nd floor of the building, the penthouse. It was his floor, he was the director. The door unlocked and opened after he submitted to a retinal scan. He stepped inside onto the white marble floor. He sat down at his desk, and searched for relevant news. Nothing. He leaned back, and a disturbing thought crossed his mind.

In less than a week, there would be news. There would be orders, money. The economical crisis would be gone, prosperity would return, wealth would be back. At the cost of hundreds, no, thousands of lives, everything would be restored. Everything would be rebuilt, but at the cost of peace. Tomorrow it was Sarrickson's show. He wouldn't make any mistakes. After tomorrow, a well coordinated assault by Germany would capture them a wing of F-144E's. On 27 of June, they would stage their war. And with some luck, on the 28th of June, or at the latest by the start of July, he would have his war. It would all start with the Bentley.

Chapter 1 - Impact point - June 23

In the Orion sector, a small, five-wing Federation squadron launched from the FBC Memento. The lead ship accelerated to cruise-speed - the rest of the team followed and moved into formation; they would remain at that speed until they reached their destination.

In the 4th ship of the squadron, Jack sat down and turned off the Inertial Dampening System (IDS). They would use the lack of Inertia to conserve fuel, and only turn the system back on for minor corrections in their course. Jack was flying his 150th trip today, and he was eager to see what his colleagues had arranged this time. For his 100th flight, they had pulled several tricks on him. They had suddenly all had sped up to Fulcrum Drive speed, and, too surprised to react, left him behind near the station. He had returned to the station, bemused and a bit miffed, until he realized that it was his 100th flight. They returned a minute later, and they had had a great party.

The squadron leader always had such idea's. He was a smart man, humorous, but serious when he needed to be. Silent and effective. Jack always had great admiration for his Captain, Captain Ed Sarrickson. They were friends, but on duty he had to always address him as Captain.

After 20 minutes of chatter, they were approaching their destination. Sarrickson once more read a summarized briefing of the mission. It was a reconnaissance mission of small importance, but the Aquila nebula was a great hiding-place for pirate scum. They would pass through separately but in a coordinated pattern. The bluish nebula loomed up in front of them. Sarrickson's UFA-80 slowed down and Jack instinctively slowed down to remain in formation. They would increase their distance from each other to 700, just inside radar range for larger objects in Nebulae. Their sweep path would overlap their radar coverage so that they wouldn't miss a single spot. They had very nearly reached the walls of the gas-cloud. Jack always found this an impressive approach, the approach to a nebula. It was kind of like flying straight at a seemingly solid wall, hoping it would bend at impact.

Sarrickson's ship nearly seemed to impact on that nonexistent solid wall. It dove into the nebula, Sarrickson lit his afterburner to speed up as planned, and less than a second later, exploded in a huge blast of debris and fire. Several secondary explosions blasted apart most of the wreckage, and too surprised to react, Jack sat paralyzed in his chair. The squadron gathered around the last location of Captain Ed Sarrickson, and while debris bounced off the flaring shields of their UFA-25's, they prayed for their captain.

Chapter 2 - Taken - June 24

A firm push on the button under the throttle engaged the Fulcrum Drive. Almost simultaneously with the other four F-144E's in the 5-wing squadron, Curtis Williams was pushed back into his chair by the enormous speed. Space blurred, and a huge blue planet, Sapphire, seemingly shot past him in a flash. Then the polychromatic display of the jump tunnel.

The speed of their ships decreased as they had reached their destination, the system of Pearl. A group of pirates had been attacking Alliance carriers, and they would fly CAP to escort the ACC Catamaran today. They had a several thousand units to fly to the station, for a quick refreshment. They hadn't had breakfast yet, so that would be quite welcome.

It had been quite humiliating, his entry into the Wraith squadron. In his old squadron (flying Ravens), he had been the squadron leader. He was a respected pilot, well trained, and transfer to the Wraith squadron just seemed like a promotion. How wrong could he have been. He got the status of Ensign, flew 3rd wing and had to redo training. He was finally starting to appreciate this system. Only the very best were allowed into the Wraith-squadrons, and these pilots were indeed far better than he was. He had to train a lot. He promised himself to take another ride in the simulators when he got back.

He leaned back in his chair. The IDS was off, and their course was good. He could relax until he had to take the controls again, in the docking procedure. The Pearl system had automatic docking, but that was optimized for Civilian ships. The Alliance once lost an F-144E in a docking procedure, and the rules now stated all military ships should dock manually.

But he never would get the chance to dock his Wraith. Taken completely off-guard, a missile slammed into the first ship of the squadron. Well, actually, it didn't. It suddenly appeared right behind the tail of the ship, and exploded just before impact. A bluish flash drowned the blue energy blast emerging from the first F-144E's thrusters. His reflexes were quick – he turned off the IDS and sat upright. 'How did that EMP missile get there?'

He got the answer in a matter of seconds. Suddenly, several UFA-80's appeared out of nowhere. Stealth Devices, damn. The squadron leader's ship sat "dead in the water",

engines, electronic, weapons all down. A purple flash lit the cockpit, as a carrier warped in behind them. He got a missile lock on one of the UFA-80's, and fired the first of his four Exodus Missiles. Slew and twisting to bring his ship onto another hostile, Curtis suddenly became aware the lack of laser fire, and the lack of radio-chatter. He turned on his microphone to broadcast a 'mayday'. He repeated 'Mayday' several times, but got no response. "That carrier, it's jamming the signals! We've been trapped!" He saw another of his colleagues, not moving, downed by EMP. What is this? What do they want? He opened fire on a UFA-80, which was engaging in a frontal attack. It slid to the right, out of his gunsight, and just before the UFA-80 passed by him, a missile shot out from below its wing. Several flares shot from the bottom of his F-144E. However, it was too late. The missile exploded right in front of him, and the flash stunned him as the ship's systems shut down. He could only look on at the carrier collected all five of the downed Star Wraiths. Everything went black as the carrier's jaws shut over his Wraith. He waited.

Slowly, his systems flickered back into life again. He pushed the throttle forward. No response. Damn. The Secondary Weapon Indicator showed empty. He was certain he had three missiles left, he had only used one. No response from the lasers either. Then, by itself, the cockpit door slid aside. He spun round, grabbed for his personal weapon at his belt and pointed it at the door. Anyone coming in would receive a small surprise from him. But no one entered the Wraith's cockpit. All that came into the cockpit, was a small dart shot through the door and stuck into his arm. He looked down at the dart with a bemused expression and as his sight dimmed realized it contained a tranquilizer. He had been beaten. Everything went dark again, while Curtis collapsed to the floor.

Chapter 3 - Investigations - June 25

She sat staring into the distance.

It was odd. An entire Star Wraith squadron disappeared, vanished. Impossible. If it had been a single one, it might've been a malfunction in the Fulcrum Drive, but all five at the same moment was an impossible coincidence. Yet, they couldn't have arrived at Pearl. No-one received radio-transmissions of an assault, and these were elite pilots flying the space superiority fighter. In fact the elite cream of the elite in the best fighters available. It would take a substantial attack wing to stop these men, and a vast amount of firepower to do it so quickly that they couldn't sound the alarm. They had flown simulations against large numbers of A-50's, and never lost - not once. Impossible. Such men don't just disappear.

Yet, the entire squadron was gone. Investigations had shown nothing, except for an empty countermeasure container. But "flares" are found nearly everywhere, and this flare still hadn't been damaged by laser or particle weapons. There were little to no traces of combat anywhere along the route the ships had flown. The investigation was focussing on Sapphire, as it was quite illogical that they could've jumped to Pearl and got lost there. No traces of damaged equipment or bodies were found at any location.

She laid aside the report. As a high-ranked officer in the Terran Space Navy, she was placed in charge with the investigation. She had solved impossible cases before, and she would solve this one too.

"Jenna! Hurry, come on, we're gonna be late!". Her colleague, Francis, was waiting outside her office.

Damn! Almost forgot!. Jenna jumped to her feet, grabbed her coat and ran outside. What time was it?

"It's 15:30, dear"

"Since when can you read thoughts?"

"Ever since you started to think out loud."

She grinned. They had 30 minutes until the TSN would start the military burial of Captain Sarrickson. He had died in a freak accident two days ago. The official report concluded that his fuel tanks had been leaking, and the engine heat had lit it as he used his afterburner. A horrible death for such an experienced pilot. A horrible death for any pilot! The explosion had damaged the ship severely, and the cockpit, including all systems, the emergency equipment and the captain had been completely perished. Most of the pieces of wreckage would fit in a small briefcase! It would be ceremonial, as there was no body. But still, it was an honour no one would want to withhold the captain, even considering him being a Federation captain. They had a treaty after all, so it was a TSN burial. The Terran Space Navy. There was no Alliance or Federation left. Well, officially. But they honoured their treaty so well, one might as well say it was one faction. There had been no armed conflicts since 2346. Damn speeches. They hurried past the docking controls, quickly taking the VIP-route through the station. They were just in time for the carrier to Sapphire station.

And there were speeches. Several men of Sarrickson's squadron emphasized the skill, energy and optimism of the captain, and one of his men told about the trick they had pulled on him with his hundredth flight. After the speeches, the coffin, containing Sarrickson's flight log, was launched out of the station. She looked at it, and thus Edward Sarrickson, disappeared into the endlessness of space.

Chapter 4 - Final Preparations - June 26 - 22:00 UST

Staging a war between the two largest factions in human history. They would cause a conflict spanning light-years, solar systems; space wars made the conflicts of history seem relatively small. People would die, yes, but they would die for a noble cause. You don't really believe that, do you? Bad thoughts. Repel them. They're dying for a good cause. A noble goal. You do it for the money, you know that.

Jermamy took a long look at his companion. He had been sitting, staring out of the windows for nearly ten full minutes now, without saying a word. A strange guy, this one. Captain Sarrickson stood up, not showing a sign of doubt or hesitation.

"You're not pulling out, are you?", Jermamy asked

Sarrickson seemed hurt, and slightly angered by this remark.

"What makes you think that?"

He caught Jermamy off-guard with this question. Jermamy was expecting a simple 'of course not'. A question he had not expected.

"Well . . . Nothing . . . "

Silence. Jermamy turned away from Sarrickson. He thought for a few moments and turned back to his colleague.

"So, you ready for it?"

"Yeah. It's quite the gamble, but it's a possibility"

"Heh, yeah, it's a gamble"

Both the men paused. Silence once more filled the room.

"So, why are you doing this?", Jermamy asked.

Sarrickson thought once more about why he was exactly doing this. He made up his mind.

"The money, I guess."

"Money. Heh, not anything of a noble cause, is it?"

"No. What's your noble cause?" Sarrickson replied with a sarcastic bite in his voice.

Jermamy completely missed the sarcastic tone of the remark.

"Personal revenge"

"Revenge?"

"Yeah". A short pause. "Well, I used to be a Lieutenant for the Alliance before the treaty. I was a respected Lieutenant, but I was strongly against the treaty. They ordered me to escort some Federation carrier. I refused. So . . . they removed me from service and duty."

"And . . . ?"

"Well, the Alliance was my life. I would've given everything to protect them. But they kicked me out, let me fall, and I'll bring them down."

Sarrickson nodded. "Not very noble either, Lieutenant"

Jermamy seemed hurt by hearing his former title.

"So, Captain, are you ready?"

"You asked just a few moments ago."

"Good, then let's take some rest for the big day."

"I'd rather sit here a bit. It's a beautiful view from here. Good night, Lieutenant"

Jermamy disappeared through the door with the 'Restroom' sign. He recalled his meeting in Vonari B, which was just a few hours ago. Sarrickson remained in the room, and within moments, was deep in his thoughts again.

Chapter 5 - Pressurized - June 26

Jermamy manoeuvred his Striker through the twisting passage. It was an unusual flight, as always with cave-flights. His ship was surrounded by rocks, cliffs, spires and walls, and flying with a floor and a roof was contra-instinctive. A wall suddenly loomed out of the darkness. His navigation point was quite near, but the distance he had to fly was more than the 600 units the computer indicated due to the obstacles.

He didn't like cave-systems. He didn't like the entire Evochron sector. It was uncoordinated, a complete anarchy. It was a nest for criminals, for murderers and pirates. But the station he was visiting was even further away from Sol. It was located in a hollow asteroid in what the Alliance deemed to be a Vonarian sector. But he wasn't here for sightseeing. He had received an extra ten million credits advance from his new employer. Sarrickson was soft - he didn't want any unneeded casualties, "minimise collateral damage" he had said! That didn't fit into Jermany's plans. He had secretly agreed to have these millions paid early, to buy the necessary equipment for his revenge.

Suddenly, lights appeared from the darkness. The ship's computer projected the ideal docking path, and Jermany followed it precisely. Minutes later, the magnets of one of the empty docking bays clamped to his Striker. The doors closed behind his craft and the bay was pressurized. Jermany got out of his Striker and started making his way through the nearly abandoned mercenary station.

Unlike the docking bays of most stations, this one was nearly deserted. It wasn't too surprising, it was a base selling secret Alliance weaponry. It was a secret facility, a mining base gone astray. The only people supposed to be here were the miners, but in reality, several rather shady groups ran the station.

Jermany was here for business. He walked to the elevator, which took him to the top floor of the station. He had a meeting with several highly placed people to finalise a small transaction they would make. As the doors of the elevator opened again, Jermany found himself staring at two rather powerful men. They didn't smile though they did greet him politely, professionally. They asked him for identification, which he immediately handed them. They asked him several questions, which he seemed to answer correctly, as they let him pass through. The doors ahead slid aside and found himself in a dark office, with a silhouette sitting in the silhouette of a chair.

"Mister Jermany, I assume?"

"Yes. I've got little time for chatting I'm afraid. You got my equipment ready?"

"Ah, a busy man, aren't you?"

"Quite."

"If you have my money, your equipment as you call it, will be loaded in your ship before you return to it."

Jermany reached for his pocket, and wondered why he hadn't been checked for weapons. He hesitated for a moment. An amused smile appeared on the man behind the desk.

"Wondered why you haven't been checked for weapons?"

Jermany realized he was surprised. He nodded.

"The elevator has a state of the art sensor array and analysis equipment. We don't do half security, mister Jermany."

"Ah." – Jermamy smiled now. He didn't expect less from an organization selling the single most powerful weapon ever made with Terran technology.

Now, Jermamy took out a small electronic device from his pocket, then took a chip from his wallet and inserted it into the device. He quickly tapped on the numerical keyboard of the machine and showed the man the display that read an eight, followed by seven zero's. The man nodded. Jermamy tapped the confirm key. Then, he handed the chip to the silhouette, who inserted it into a similar device. He pressed the confirm button on his device too, and handed back the chip.

"Your equipment will be loaded as you walk back to your ship, mister Jermamy. It was a pleasure doing business with you."

"A pleasure. Farewell."

"Farewell"

Jermamy returned to the docking bay, boarded his Striker, booted the systems and checked his secondary weapon display. It clearly read "Fulcrum". Jermamy smiled. He directed the Striker out of station, back through the cave. The station doors closed behind the departing Striker.

Chapter 6 – Serenity – June 27 – 1:28 UST

Several groups of F-144E's returned to the Alliance Battle Carrier Bentley. It was 1:28 UST, and there were two CAP patrols scheduled to return within the coming next two minutes. The first one was Patrol 7, a reconnaissance patrol, and the other one patrol 3, a routine CAP patrol. The Bentley was an elite carrier with an elite crew. It carried nearly 20 F-144E's and several Ravens, and was one of the best Zenith class carriers ever built. It had a spotless history, like many of the Zenith's, but the Bentley had undertaken several high-risk missions. Few were privileged to know of its mission history but it was one the ship carried with justifiable pride

Patrol 7 returned at 1:29UST, and followed normal docking procedures. Everything went as planned, and the F-144E's slid into the carriers docking bay smoothly.

On the bridge, several commanders and an admiral sat down in their soft, leather chairs. The 27th of June was just another day, routine patrols and nothing really important. The times of conflict had been gone since years, and the Vonari hadn't been seen since decades. It was a safe, but boring time for the Space Navy. These admirals had once been each others enemies, but the Terran Space-treaty had ended all that. Now, they sat down and several of them sipped their drinks. There was laughter, as a claxon sounded in the commanders room. Patrol 3 had also returned safely. Within a few minutes they would set course for their destination, the carrier repair facility at Pisces.

In the control room of the Bentley, two men stared at large consoles. On it were several displays, a radar system and graphics. Simultaneously, several yellow blips appeared on the radar. Nearby. Impossible, they can't be that near. The radar scans over 4000 units. One of the men stood up. They are within firing range! The other reached for the emergency alert button . . .

On the other side of the hull, space seemed to vibrate for a few seconds, as the cloaking systems of a small fleet of UFA-80's cut out. Then, the serenity of the scene was quickly disturbed as several of the UFA-80's started firing at the Bentley, while others took position in front of the docking bay doors. As the purple shields flared, the hull suddenly

revealed the defensive systems of the Zenith-class carrier. Hatches slid aside, presenting the attackers with multi-barrelled rapid fire pulse cannon turrets.

The Admiral was watching the assault from the bridge. UFA-80's!. What . . . Why? Several UFA-80's focussed their fire on the back of the carrier, on the engines. Turrets shot greenish beams at the attackers, who were successfully swinging and jinking their ships away from the fire. It seemed as if these turrets had lost their touch after their long period of inactivity. Every missed salvo was replied to with a sudden dive towards the Bentley, combined with laser and particle beam fire. The flaring of the shield was less intense already. The shields power was dropping quickly. The Admiral suddenly understood why a small army of UFA-80's was attacking. They were all carrying the Federation emblem. Federation . . . why those . . .

He shouted. "Damn Federation fighters, radio HQ!"

Two of the commanders in the room turned jumped at the Admiral. Several other commanders had to calm them.

The Admiral realized that several of the commanders had been Federation pilots once. He mumbled some apologies.

The two men in the control room started radioing the message to all Alliance ships in the near vicinity of the Bentley. But on their screens the shield energy reserves were dropping like a brick. The shields power dropped to zero as they started radioing their message for the third time.

Outside, Lieutenant Dirk Jermamy pointed his UFA at the Bentley once more. The radio they had disassembled from one of the F-144E's was sitting behind his chair, and had been receiving the mayday message from the Bentley for two times now. It was sure some ships had received the message. The shields had vanished from the carrier, and the UFA's suddenly swing away from the ABC Bentley, except for Jermamy's craft. Jermamy once more mumbled a sentence about the Federation. Enough. Don't overdo it Jermamy. They'll fall for this set-up. Then he removed the safety from his missile button and aimed at the Bentley. Sarrickson, poor fool. Something like this requires more casualties than just a single one. Two seconds later, a slow missile took a stable course at the defenseless carrier. And the next target would be the officer who had fired me. He will take the bait and come to me. The last of the UFA's turned away from the Bentley and suddenly sped up. Before the Fulcrum Torpedo could tear into the hull of the Bentley, he had disappeared in a purple flash.

Chapter 7 - Isolated Walls - June 26 - 15:30 UST

"No, no no no. It just doesn't happen like that."

"Dear, listen to me. There is no trace of combat, they are just gone. They haven't been attacked, there is no scrap, there is nothing. Okay?"

"It's not okay!"

"I'm taking you off this case. I'd rather see you waste time on something useful instead of this."

She was startled by this sudden counter. She had been attacking his theory of electronic pulses influencing the Fulcrum Drive for the past 20 minutes, and now suddenly he took her off the case.

"What?" – not really a overwhelming reply, she realized. Her thoughts had been completely paralyzed for a moment.

"I'm assigning you to another case as soon as one pops up. It's no use to investigate accidents without any traces. You spent a full day working on nothing, and I'm not allowing you to waste another on it."

She realized she was probably having a very hostile attitude and look. She tried to smile. It was a weak attempt at a smile, a very grim smile. It disappeared as quick as it had appeared.

"And I'm giving you a day off."

"I don't want a day off."

"Then I order you to go home, detective."

She realized it was no use. Damn. Why can no one understand five elite pilots in the best ship ever built don't just disappear? The F-144 had been the proud of the Alliance for many years, and although it had an upcoming successor, under the codename Wraith, it was still one of the most reliable crafts ever made.

She hesitated. It's no use anyway. She slowly nodded.

"Okay". A short pause. "Good day, Sir".

"Have a nice day, dear."

She turned around, and went home. What an idiot. It just doesn't happen. It doesn't! But what happened then? Well, she would never know. The pilots would probably be dead by now. It had been two full days since they disappeared, and the life support and fuel range of a normal F-144E was 20 hours. The emergency pod contained half of these supply's, so, if it really was a Fulcrum Drive malfunction, probably they would be out of fuel already, and waiting to die from thirst or starvation. If it was something else, if they had been attacked they were dead now anyway.

But the pilots weren't dead at all. At least, for the moment. Curtis Williams of the ACC Catamaran escort squadron woke up in a small cell. Where am I? He was alone. He suddenly recalled everything that happened. It ain't no dream. He found some food and a cup of water lying next to him. Who did this to me?! There was a bed, and the whole cell covered not more than several square meters. What time is it? He shouted for anyone. "Hello!". Someone must be able to hear me. There was no reply. Isolated walls. Could anyone hear him through that metal door? How thick is it? He laid his ear against it and tapped the door. He concluded it wasn't too thick, but quite solid. Won't be able to force the door. His stomach rumbled. He took the food, sat down on the bed, and started his simple meal. They needed the Star Wraiths – they would dispose of the pilots later. With this depressing idea in mind, he took a sip of his water.

Chapter 9 – Crackle – June 27 – 1:40

"This is the ABC Bentley at 3243, minus 4521, 5045 at Pearl. One-Thirty-four UST. We are under attack by crafts bearing the Federation emblem. Need immediate backup. Mayday. Mayday."

The small box on the table repeated the same message three times before the recording ended. The ABC Bentley, a Zenith class Battlecarrier was gone. Destroyed by Federation

forces, as the message clearly stated. Several high-ranking Alliance officers sat around the table. There was a grim atmosphere, and a difficult silence had been filling the room ever since the last mayday had been interrupted by a loud crackle.

"Any questions?"

One of the officers raised his hand. The officer at the head of the table nodded.

"How certain can we be that this is a Federation attack?"

"Quite. The attackers carried the emblem, and Federation HQ has not contacted us yet. Several small Federation cells claim that they are not involved, but also for them, all connections to their HQ have been rejected."

"Is this broadcast all proof we have of a Federation breach of cease-fire?"

"No, we've got a record of intercepted enemy transmissions."

One of the officers, wearing a nameplate with the inscription "Off. Leon Snyder", started to seem impatient.

"Let us hear those records then?"

The reply was a short nod, and a hesitant push on the play button of a small box that was just put on the table.

There was noise. A lot of noise. The sound of a flaring shield. This pilot was dodging turret fire, judging from the continuous sound of laser-fire. These sounds weren't real, they were created by the ship computer to give pilots an edge by listening to where the fire came from. A voice suddenly broke the noise.

"Take it out."

Again, the sound of flaring shields.

"HQ will be happy about this success."

"Yes, the Federation shall rule Terran space!"

"For the Federation!"

Then, the sound of missile lock.

The pilot repeated the "For the Federation!", but now mumbling. Then, the sound of a missile being launched from the ship, almost directly followed by the sound of a Fulcrum Drive being engaged. Then the recording ended with a female voice stating that the connection was lost due to distance.

Several angry reactions. "The bastards!"

The same hand as before raised. "Matthew?"

"Do you think they knew of the passenger?"

"Why else would they pick the Bentley?"

One of the men who had just been mumbling something about "Federation scum can't be trusted" spoke out what he thought of the situation.

"This was a assassination in cold blood. They murdered him!"

The mood in the room was explosive.

"Please gentlemen, please calm down. We'll give the Federation twelve hours. Any more incidents, and we'll rally our forces. In the meanwhile, we'll retreat all our crafts from Orion. Let's not have this . . . "

He took another look around the room. " . . . incident cause immediate war. Let's give them a chance to explain."

"Twelve hours, officer. No more than twelve hours."

"I told you. Federation scum can't be trusted!"

"We know, Snyder. Calm down!"

Officer Snyder was shouting now. "Calm down? They just killed one of us! One of the leaders of the Alliance, an officer! They murdered him!"

"Yes, Leon, we all mourn for the loss of Henry."

"We shouldn't mourn. We should have our revenge."

"There is a good possibility you'll have your revenge in twelve hours."

Chapter 10 - Sabotage - June 26 - 1:00 UST

Captain Sarrickson was certain he would be recognized. He had traded the uniform he usually wore in this building for an engineering coverall. He had an unreachable itch on his chin. Don't itch. He was wearing a fake beard and coloured contact lenses. He was praying he would be able to leave his former HQ as quickly as possible, before someone shouted his name. He was officially dead, after all.

He had planned his death very carefully. He had put a sophisticated explosive in his ship. the detonator was voice sensitive and set to explode exactly five seconds after the it had registered the female voice of the ship's computer indicating they had entered the nebula. He had climbed into his emergency pod, and waited until his ship reached the nebula, and the computer confirmed this. Then, he had waited a second so that the radar of his colleagues wouldn't be able to pick up the escape pod due to the nebula. Then he launched away from his UFA-80. The explosion had rocked his escape pod, but the UFA-25 waiting for him had picked him up in less than a minute. He had seen his burial on the news, and was surprised and touched by the number of people mourning about him.

He had reached his first goal, the system bay. He opened a hatch and slid down into the cable room. Here thick cables connected all systems in the station. His daily work schedule showed that he was to inspect this specific room. No one except for the engineers ever came down here.

He put down his toolbox. He had to crouch - he couldn't stand upright in this area. He had visited this room five days ago. Alive. He had checked the drawings and left a small marker right below the communications systems panels. He was searching for this marker now. It was an unsuspecting marker, nothing more than a small screw on the floor. He was hoping no one would've removed it.

Sarrickson crawled around for nearly five minutes before he concluded it was gone. He would have to take a gamble, and searched for the right spot. He estimated the distance from the hatch and the direction, and ended up right below a console. He retrieved his toolbox, took a small black box from it and attached it to the cables coming from the console. After a few seconds several digits lit up on the box display. He took a look at his watch. It was 12:35UST. He tapped a combination buttons, and then pressed the large button. He retrieved another box from his toolbox and repeated the process at another location. Twenty minutes of concentrated work and ten of the boxes were in place in the cable room.

As he left the Cable room, the digits were counting down. The display read 23:30:12 as he closed the hatch behind him. Tomorrow at exactly 0:25 the counter would reach 00:00:00. The cable room would no longer be active! The station would be without power, communications - defenceless! It would take the Federation engineers at least 24 hours to have everything repaired. The lack of electricity would have them locked up in HQ, unable to reach anyone or anything. The next shift would be at 12:30UST, so they had twelve hours to stage an Alliance attack at the Federation. They would think of the explosions as Alliance sabotage - while everybody else would think of the HQ being locked down for red alert.

Sarrickson didn't allow himself a pause. He left Federation HQ immediately, and after passing the docking bay and the last guard and control point, he disappeared into the crowd. He dropped the toolbox with the traces of the explosive into a garbage bin two blocks further. Then, he headed straight for the local spaceport.

Chapter 11 - Pay Day - June 27 - 2:45 UST

Officer Snyder had just left the conference room, and was heading towards the freighter bay. He would have an escorted Transport back to his post at Pisces. He was furious. Twelve hours delay? We should strike right now!

Alliance HQ was an impressive building, and as large as it was impressive. Walking through the repetitive hallways, Leon Snyder was certain the Federation had betrayed them. His couldn't shift that thought from his head. Betrayed!

He found himself sitting at a round table. A large, teak-wood table. It had been an relaxing conversation. At his half of the table were the twelve most important people in the Alliance. The other half had been occupied by Federation representatives. They had been young. Almost a decade had passed since the negotiations. Henry was there, Matthew had been there too. They had been good friends from the beginning of their career at the Alliance. They had flown in the 53rd Raven Squadron, before all three of them had been promoted to the elite 14th Star Wraith Squadron. From there, their rank had been catapulted upwards until they found themselves negotiating a possible treaty with the Federation.

He walked into the Hangar of his Transporter, and several pilots greeted him. He mumbled back some greetings and appreciation for his escort. He was loved for his humility, as he would never forget lower-ranking people still offered him a service. The Transporters engines started to glow subtly as he walked to the mobile elevator which was located at the entrance of the Transporter.

Two identical papers had circulated the table. Both of them went clockwise, and every person at the table signed it as it passed his location. Less than two minutes later, the table had been completely silent as the papers had returned to their original location. Both of the papers now had been signed 24 times, by the most powerful people in the universe. Snyder had suddenly realized he was among these people.

Snyder's thoughts were interrupted by a sudden movement. The Transporter had been flying at cruise speed for almost twenty minutes, and they had just entered the B-ring of Sapphire. They had slowed down as Evochron sector rules stated that arrivals from other sectors had to slow down for scanning. They had to pass by one of the arrival stations, and then fly towards the B-ring. From there, they would be allowed to use the Fulcrum Drive. Alliance was desperately trying to create a system similar to the Sol sector in Evochron, but their power was still too limited to create an organized space-travelling system. Snyder ironically smiled as he realized the only ones obeying Alliance rules in this sector were Alliance officials.

The sector was still the same anarchistic pile of jetsam, flotsam, and debris it had been when it was first colonized. Ever since the Vonari invaded the sector in 2288, it had been like this. The people felt as if they had protected themselves, the Mercenary war as they called it. Idiots. They didn't realize that the Alliance had been organizing all the attacks, including the decisive attack inside the Vonari sector. They equipped those mercenaries with the most powerful weapons ever made, the experimental Fulcrum Torpedo's.

The escort was flying CAP at a fixed distance from the Transporter. Everything was calm, and the radio only buzzed around some of the usual chit-chat. None of the pilots reacted fast enough to prevent the decloaking, high velocity craft from firing two missiles at the Transporter, before it quickly accelerated to warp speed and jumped away. In less than a second, the first Exodus missile reached the ship and impacted, and the attacker had disappeared through an already closing purplish portal.

The last thing Officer Snyder thought was: 'And yet, those ignorant people wrote their own history by claiming the Alliance had abandoned them.'

Then, the second missile tore apart the Transporters hull. Jermany's revenge was almost complete.

Alliance HQ was shocked as the news reached them less than half a minute later. The escorting squadron sent the following textual message:

"Officer Snyder assassinated in a well-prepared attack. No other ships attacked. No other damage incurred. Returning to base."

Chapter 12 – Lockdown – June 27 – 0:25

In the system bay of the Federation's Headquarters, several mainframe quantum computers lit the room with an eerie glow. The constant, frequent beep of the master computer was the only thing breaking the silence of the isolated room. A cable ran from the back of this computer down to the cable room, following the roof of this dark area, almost half the height of an adult human. But instead of completely dark, there was a subtle, red glow somewhere in the centre of the room. A small box read six digits. Five of them were zeros, and the last one was counting down to that same digit.

In the main hall, the doors had been closed for almost 30 minutes. The last group of people had left the building half an hour ago, the high officials and the likes. Officers Tipper and Graham, Admiral Green and several top-members of the Alliance had been the last to leave the building, before the doors closed for half a day. These armoured doors were controlled by the communications computer, and were programmed to only open for crew-shifts. Not that it mattered, at this early hour, no one was outside on the streets. They had seen some people pass by in the past minutes, but most of them were youth returning from a party, or bums searching for money or food. The next shift would be in twelve hours, including all the secondary schedules and breaks. Guards sat at their

post, playing a small game. Several clerks stressed around the main hall, hurrying to deliver their messages to their destination.

Something odd was going on. Over the past five minutes, there had been an unexpected amount of business. Normally, it would be dead-calm in the main hall. But it wasn't. People were running around as if apocalypse itself was nearing. They had even seen officials head for the officers' room.

One of the guards was considering his next move. Then, suddenly, he couldn't see what he was doing. The entire hall went dark three seconds after the timer had reached zero. However, the timer was no more. In its place, there was a huge ball of fire, expanding, destroying everything in its path.

The explosion rocked the entire station, and everything went dark for a few moments. The guard was looking around surprised. He had heard a loud noise, there had been a light quake in the building, and everything had gone dark. Then, the light came back on – dimmer as usual, but back on.

The emergency generators automatically they sprang to life, their sound quickly settling into a steady hum. In the command room, all of the most crucial systems booted back up. All screens displayed a security test, and on every single one except for the communication screen, appeared a green confirmation. The communication screen remained blank.

The doorlocks thudded as they slammed into place. Everyone inside the building was now locked away from the normal world. The radio remained silent, people started knocking on the many closed doors inside the building, no longer controlled by the communication computer.

There was a security protocol which was supposed to prevent the the lockdown of the doors and which was supposed to instantly transfer communications control to the backup comms computer in the event of a failure. A small security unit in the system bay monitored the ambient temperature. If it rose to dangerous levels, it sent a command unlock all doors in the building. But one of the many explosions in the cable room had taken out the power to the unit before it even had time to register the sudden increase in temperature.

Federation HQ was under unwanted lockdown that couldn't be overridden. The people onsite who could start to bring order to the chaos were locked in areas unable to access data, tools or even physically get to where they were needed. Extinguishing the fires, restoring communications, making the preliminary repairs required to get the main systems back on-line would take hours.

And in less than two hours, Alliance HQ would repeatedly try to contact them about the pending attack on the ABC Bentley.

Chapter 13 – The straw - June 27 – 0:20 UST

Strange . . .

Former Federation Officer and leader, Brian Johnson Tipper was troubled by the red light flashing at the speaker which had been sending and receiving encrypted signals from Federation HQ. The ship had been constantly updating its position to a computer at HQ, but the flashing light indicated this was no longer the case.

The pilot had been indifferent about the light. He had mumbled a few curses about unreliable sector-wide communication, and then stared at the window again. Nebulae, asteroids, so many factors could contribute to such a temporary problem.

Brian however, had been trained by veterans of the Vonari war. He had little experience in large fights, but he had learned to trust his instincts. And his instincts told him there was something wrong. A red flickering light normally wouldn't trouble him this much, but the sudden loss of connection to HQ was as disturbing as it was intriguing. He wondered what kind of thing could cause a sudden loss of connection.

A frightening thought crossed his mind – he saw the building he had just left, burning. Alliance forces had attacked in a surprise attack. No . . . it's far too calm for a galactic war. Mercenary ships flew around, and the normal radio chatter didn't report any attacks on Federation HQ.

The pilot took a quick glance at the older Officer. He was starting to show signs of tiredness – of age. His dark brown hair was starting to show signs of small gray hairs. He had been flying Brian Tipper for many years, and they grown to be close friends. Although their contact was purely based on business, they had been talking about life, family and similar things every flight.

Not this flight. The red light had Brian's full attention. He could see the Officer was hoping that the light would stop flashing, as if by a miracle or Brian's willpower. The pilot stared out of his window again.

By a complete reflex, he pulled the steering-stick left harshly, and reached for a small button on the throttle reading "CM". Instantly, several flares launched out of the ship.

The missile shot less than ten feet past the ship, and the flares having completely disabled the missile's tracking system; it continued on its trajectory - straight forward.

Brian had been caught off-guard and was dumped onto the deck in a heap. The light was still flashing, as the pilot shouted to him to get to a chair and fasten seatbelts. Brian got up, slid into the co-pilots seat, strapped his seatbelts tight - a couple of bruises but nothing broken - and looked out of the canopy.

The quick glance at the radar was even more disturbing than the flashing light. Five F-144E's were circling their Striker. They were carrying the usual secondary weapons loadout: two EMP missiles for emergency cases, and four Exodus missiles in the case lethal force was required. Standard beam and particle cannon. The pilot selected a target, and Brian started to program the Navigation Console to be able to jump away in case it was needed.

Five extra blips appeared on the radar. These blips were the computers representation of the five EMP missiles which now accelerating towards their Striker. Four of them didn't make their target. Two of them met the laser-fire from the Striker, and two others met the load of flares dropped from the Striker. The fifth one, however, closed in, reached its target and detonated.

Brian entered the last digit of their destination as a shock went through the Striker. The navigation console went blank – the EMP had worked efficiently. Brian undid his seatbelt, stood up and raced into the cargo bay. The pilot was speeding up now, avoiding as much of the laser fire as possible.

Brian knew better. They were lost. The pilot didn't have any systems running, no warning for missiles, no indication of where their attackers were located. However, the sound of an explosion pleasantly surprised him.

Suddenly, the pilot realized what was going on. F-144E's!. "Brian!"

Brian picked up the emergency transmitter from his bag and took a look in the direction of the shout.

"These are Alliance ships!"

Brian now understood. The lack of communication . . . the assault. He nodded as he started to speak into the transmitter.

Chapter 14 - Full Circle - June 27 - 0:23 UST

The communication room in Federation HQ was near silent. There was but one voice speaking. He had identified himself as Brian Johnson Tipper, and he was talking over encrypted Federation-only channels.

"This is Officer Brian Johnson Tipper for Federation HQ."

"We read you."

There was a sudden noise as the Striker manoeuvred to the left. They heard the sound of the transmitter falling to the ground. Brian continued his talking, and his voice became louder as he crawled towards the transmitter.

"We are under attack by five F-144E's, situation critical"

The pilot had been drifting without IDS, spinning around trying to spot missiles by eyeball - the only way left without his systems. He had seen a bright, blue dot, and now pulled out of the spin. The afterburner lit up, sending a rumble through the ship. Brian, in the cargo bay, was swung through the room against one of the walls. He held the transmitter firmly and as he fell to the deck grunted once and then continued talking.

"Our systems have been disabled by EMP. This is a well-organized assault. One hostile down. Four of them left."

In the communications room, two men had been listening to the transmission. One of them removed his headset, stood up, ran towards the door, and instead of passing through, reached for one of the two small boxes attached to the wall. Is this Red Alert, or should I alert only the Officials?. He hesitated for a second, then made a fist and hit through the glass. It broke instantly, and the sign "O.R.A." above the box explained what was happening now. The Officials Red Alert alerted all highly ranked people inside HQ of a "situation". He ran back, but the signal was gone. His colleague appeared as if he had seen a ghost. The pale man stood up, ejected the recording tape, and ran out of the room.

The Officials' Room was silent. Five men were staring out in front of them. Several of them seemed severely shocked. The only thing moving was a surveillance camera in the corner of the room, indifferently panning around at given intervals.

From the guard room, one of the guards had been monitoring sudden activity in the Officers' Room. The camera did not record audio. All he had seen was them gathering, having a clearly serious conversation about something rather grave, and then one of them pulled out a recorder. They were listening to it now.

"This is a well-organized assault. One hostile down. Four of them left." There was a short silence. In the background, someone shouted something not audible. The pilot, probably.

The silence was broken by the sudden entry of the radio-monitor. He ran into the room, put down the recorder on the table and, catching his breath, shouted that it was war, something which supported the claim just made from the combat ship.

Back on the ship, Brian fought to gather his strength and recover his calm. He breathed in deeply. He had just concluded his final message. It was war. The unexplainable had happened, the Alliance had betrayed them. He recalled his final message to HQ.

"The attackers are bearing Alliance emblems. Squadron of five, flying Alliance flag. I repeat. We are under attack by Alliance ships."

This last message had echoed through the officers room several times. Then, it was silent.

Brian stared at the stars. He knew it was over. After he had concluded his 'mayday', the hostile ships had suddenly encircled them and fired from four directions simultaneously. The approaching missiles would impact at any moment. They could've taken the Striker out long ago. Why had they held back?

The pilot glanced at Brian. It would be over in a matter of seconds. Officer Tipper was deep in his thoughts trying to analyse what was happening. His expression suddenly cleared as Officer Brian Johnson Tipper understood what had happened. Dived towards the emergency transmitter.

Two of the missiles impacted as Brian reached out for the transmitter. The first missile slammed onto the shield, and alerts started to sound through the Striker. Almost instantly, another explosion. Then, silence . . .

Part 2 - Diplomacy

It was dark. The only things illuminating the scene were stars and blue lights, and yet the presence of a human-shaped silhouette seemed to imply that this was not actually open space. The blue lights, in turn, came from an orbital station. It was buzzing with activity, the silhouette knew, as just a few moments ago, something big had been reported over the television.

He had been told to await that certain event, and then complete his task. A simple task, almost too simple. But the payment would be good - very good in fact. His contractor had promised him wealth and anonymity.

He turned to watch the stars. Above him, he could also see stars, but those seemed blurred by something. A liquid was distorting his view, while sometimes a small silhouette passed between him and the light emitted a long time ago by the star he was watching. He knew what he was looking through.

He also knew that looking at his feet would give him a similar view. Only to his left, he would get a clear view of space. On his right was the entrance to the area he was now standing in. The hallway was dark as well. He knew the hallway encircled almost the entire room. It was a strange architectural manifest, this place.

The man took another look around. Suddenly, he seemed to gather his thoughts again. The silhouette took something from his belt and wore it over his face. A small green light lit up, indicating the equipment had activated.

He now saw clearly in the dark, his breath came from a reservoir on his back. His clothing would be protective enough for this liquid. He searched the floor for something he knew was there. His contractor had told him so. After a short search, he found it nearby the huge circular table in the room.

The hatch opened without any effort. He checked his equipment's indicator one more time, and then plunged into the liquid that had distorted his view. He swam around until he found a spot he considered out of sight, near one of the few synthetic rocks that floated around in the liquid. No, not floating - they were attached to something. They were actually hollow, he had been told. The silhouette knocked on one of the rocks and nodded in amazement. He had been told right. He took another tool from his belt, and in a matter of minutes had hidden his cargo inside the rock.

It was a strange view, floating around with an invisible border between you and space. Astronauts are trained in water, in a similar liquid . . . is this what space-walks feels like? He took some steps against the invisible separator between liquid and emptiness. Then, he swam upwards again. He had succeeded. Now he had to cover his tracks. And again, his contractor had provided the tools and the method. He drove a small maintenance car that had been parked near the service entrance to the hatch, and put his gear inside it. The air-reservoir, the protective suit, everything fitted perfectly.

He took the car, and left, nodding in a friendly way at the guards who opened the service doors for him. He drove the car into a awaiting spacecraft and took off. It was a matter of time now. Little time.

Chapter 15 – Awakening – June 27 – 23:00 UST

Curtis Williams awoke from his slumber. It was dark, but he knew his surroundings very well. Four massive concrete walls, one of them hosting an opening for a massive door. Through the small window at the back of his cell, he saw the exhaust glow of a large ship. The subtle rocking of his cell indicated he was indeed aboard a capital ship. He looked a bit longer, and he could see the stars twinkling.

--oOo--

He was not the only one staring at the stars. Light-years away, Jenna was staring at those same stars. She had been lying awake, reliving the last few days. So much had happened. Only today, Federation and Alliance officials had been declaring the other faction had broken the cease-fire. The ABC Bentley had been destroyed by UFA's, Federation HQ had been bombed. A high-ranking officer had been assassinated. Officer Tipper or something. And another officer from the Alliance only two hours before Tipper. Possibly, the Federation was behind the disappearance of those F-144E's a few days ago. She had never believed it to be an accident. It was too clean to be an accident.

She was trying to fit together the pieces of the puzzle. But it felt as if she was missing a piece. Something isn't right. She would request reopening up the Bentley-investigation tomorrow. From there she could investigate the F-144E case too, if the two were connected at all. She had a gut reaction they were.

She turned on the television. Switching the channels, she saw the news reports of the past day repeated.

"We're now switching to our correspondent on Thuban. You're in front of the Federation HQ, any news?"

A man appeared in front of a large building. He was holding a microphone and talking rapidly.

"Yes, there have been some rumours of a bombing by Alliance spies. Federation officials have not reacted yet, except for that they believed the attack to be an 'accurate and well-prepared' assault. Investigators have confirmed that the type of explosive was . . . "

How would they know that? That is classified information!

". . . a type of explosive used in Alliance missiles. Alliance HQ has not yet reacted to the bombing, as they hold the Federation responsible for the destruction of the ABC Bentley earlier today."

Video footage of a Zenith-class carrier emerging from the space-hangar filled the screen now, while the voice continued. ". . . The Federation claims they are not involved in the destruction of the carrier nor the assassination of Officer Snyder. They hold the Alliance assassination of officer Brian Johnson Tipper as a premature action, and claim this assassination was a clear indication of wanting to break the cease-fire. Officials of both parties will start negotiating officially tomorrow at New Hope, but undoubtedly talks have already started."

Jenna sighed. She knew how those talks would go. She knew the leaders of both factions, and surely, everyone had heard of the hatred of some of these key-figures for the other faction. She turned off the television. It was late, and she had to go to work tomorrow early. She would request the Bentley case, and if she wouldn't get it, then the case of Tipper. She took another look at the stars through the window, and closed her eyes.

--oOo--

Curtis Williams lay back on his concrete bed. He was wondering what they wanted with those F-144E's. He hadn't spoken to his squadron, only to the guard bringing him the food twice. They had been short conversations, more polite speak than actual chatter. He wouldn't get news from that guy for sure. He needed to stop thinking of what happened – he needed to start thinking what to do next. But would there be a next? The cells walls seemed to close in on him. Nothing to do, nowhere to go. What did they do with those crafts? What will they do with us? He had heard the radio. The news had been disturbing. An Alliance carrier had been destroyed by Federation crafts, and the Alliance repaid the Federation by killing one of their top-officers. His thoughts drifted back to the crafts. Why do they need F-144E's? The UFA-80 is nearly as capable as the Wraith. It didn't make sense. He, too, closed his eyes.

--oOo--

On New Hope, the last security preparations were made to receive the leaders of the most powerful factions of the universe. In the center of the station was a huge glass, sound-isolated, shielded dome with in the middle a round table. Twenty-four nameplates were located around the table. Two places would remain empty. The nameplates had been put there as a memory to the officers who should have sat there.

The nameplates read Alliance Officer Leon Snyder and Federation Officer Brian Johnson Tipper.

Chapter 16 - Peace Dome - June 28 - 08:00UST

Several ships had been docking under strict protocols at New Hope Station for the past hour. New Hope Station had always been the centre for peace discussions, treaties, and negotiations, this time would be no different. Two groups of eleven, official looking, men had been gathering for the opening of the negotiations at 8:00UST.

The atmosphere was tense. These negotiations would influence the future of humanity, the future of the stability which a lot of people had known for their whole lives. A stability which had resulted from formal peace in 2354. But now, all this was on the brink of being unravelled by a chain of events.

The dome was an impressive structure 30 metres high at the centre of New Hope Station. A complete sphere of plexiglass, held in place by a metal exo-skeleton. The floor was on about a fourth of the height of the dome, and also of a strengthened type of glass. Below it was an aquarium, filled with coloured fish and bright, clean water. The roof was at the same distance from the top pole as the floor was from the bottom. Above it was again, an aquarium. All in all, it was a huge and calming surrounding. In the sides were four glass doors, of which two would remain locked.

The two other doors opened, and the officials entered. The twenty-four chairs surrounding the wooden table slowly filled with the people according to the name-plates.

It was a fully symmetrical scene, except for the people sitting on the chairs. They had a grim expression in common. At the Alliance side, one person stood up. His nameplate read 'Officer Bradley'.

Officer Bradley was the most important leader of the Alliance. He had always hated what the Federation stood for, but he honoured the treaty, and he was not planning on giving up peace easily. However, he wanted to gain the attacking role in the discussion, and he knew just how to get that in such a way that his opposites would know that he didn't like them at all.

"Gentlemen, I am Jonathan Bradley of the Alliance. Several things happened yesterday, and I demand at least an explanation for what happened."

Several Federation leaders looked up at him, emotions ranging from offended to surprised. This was no way to start peace negotiations. Jonathan continued:

"There have been casualties, important casualties. Unnecessary ones. I plan on commemorating their deaths with successful negotiations. There have been errors on both factions' behalves, and I would like to invite you to explain what happened exactly yesterday."

Federation Officer Jackson had heard enough, he stood up and started to talk as Jonathan sat down again. The atmosphere was as tense as it had been before the talks started.

"Sir Bradley. I don't know who you think you are, but I think it would be not less than appropriate to explain why our Headquarters was sabotaged and bombed by your men?"

Several Alliance officials stood up. The fastest one shouted in reply.

"We have already stated that no Alliance forces were involved in those bombings."

"No, of course not. Bombs go off, your forces attack carriers, assassinate officials, but you're not involved."

"How about the Leon? How about the Bentley?"

"We've checked our registers. There are no entries of orders for both actions."

"No, I wouldn't have expected you to leave something like that in the archives."

"Are you accusing us of lying?"

"I am not". A short pause made the words which followed even heavier. "I am accusing you of breaking terms."

Jonathan stood up. This was unavoidable. However, this way negotiations would go nowhere. What had happened had happened. The attacks had taken place, and they had proof that Alliance officials had not been involved in the attacks. They had all records of the 27th of June.

"Gentlemen. Please, calm down. Talking about what happened will only help us understand what happened. Officer Gerardson. Would you be so kind as to explain us precisely what happened in Federation HQ yesterday?"

Chapter 17 - Bentley Revisited - June 28 - 08:30UST

Jenna had just entered her office. Francis, her colleague wasn't there yet, and she had no problems with that. She quickly booted up her PC and scanned a small disc. The request for the reopening of the Bentley investigation that she had been typing up yesterday appeared on the screen, - she forwarded it to her superiors.

It was almost 9:00 before she got the reply. Francis had already arrived and was busy typing up the report of some investigation he had been working on for some days now. He was staring intensely at his screen.

The reply was as she had hoped. She was reassigned to the Bentley investigation, along with her usual team. She had requested Francis and Leroy to be allowed to work with her. Now, she just had to convince them to work along with her. She would explain why she wanted it, and if they didn't want to cooperate, well, too bad. She was going to do crack this case, alone or with her team.

"Francis?"

"Yes, dear?"

He had called her dear for as long as they knew each other. She had become accustomed to it, and she knew he meant nothing special with it.

"You interested in investigation the Bentley investigation?"

"What?"

"The Bentley case."

"Why did they place you in the Bentley team? It's huge."

"Yeah, it is. That's why I requested to be put in charge of the investigation."

"You . . . what? Why?"

"I think it could be connected to the F-144E's."

"Right. You think the Federation is involved?"

"Could be. I just think the case is big."

Francis took a look at his screen. He hesitated.

"Give me twenty minutes. I'll finish this report and we'll meet up in the briefing room. Who's along? Leroy?"

"You, Leroy and me. I've reserved room 5."

Francis nodded.

Jenna nodded back at him and smiled. She picked up her phone and pressed the quick-dial number, followed by a '2'. The phone rang three times before a man answered it.

"Michael Leroy"

"Hey Michael, Jenna here."

"Jenna, what's up?"

"I've been put in charge of the Bentley team. You in?"

"Why not?"

"Great, knew I could count on you."

"Any time. When do we meet?"

"Twenty minutes in BR-five."

She put down the phone. Francis hesitated for a few moments.

"Dear?"

"Yes?"

"Are you sure?"

"Definitely. What's on your mind?"

"I think the case is big. It's too big. We might stumble across something . . . important."

"Scared?"

"Yes, for your sake."

Chapter 18 - Tension - June 28 - 10:00

The glass dome had been the theatre of passionate discussions for over two hours. Two men had taken the lead of the discussion, every now and then interrupted by one of the other twenty people in the room. Officer Bradley had just countered Jackson's claim about the assassination of William Snyder. He put a small box on the table and scanned his finger. The box began playing.

"Take it out."

The sound of flaring shields.

"HQ will be happy about this success."

"Yes, the Federation shall rule Terran space!"

"We've been surprised for long enough now."

Then, the sound of missile lock.

"For the Federation . . ."

The recording ended with a small click. This click was the omen of total silence, and a subtle smile appeared around Bradley's mouth. The Federation officials seemed shocked. The box remained on the table, silent now.

He took a peek at Jackson. However, the expression of Jackson's face was disturbing. Jackson smiled grimly, as if he had prepared such a moment and was now in a state of acceptance for his coming action.

Jackson remained silent, but now grabbed a similar box from his pocket. He repeated Bradley's actions for his own player.

A second click ended the silence as noise started to fill the room again. After a few seconds, it was interrupted by a voice.

"This is Officer Brian Johnson Tipper for Federation HQ."

"We read you."

"We are under attack by five F-144E's, situation critical"

A noise, the sound of something falling to the floor.

"Our systems have been disabled by EMP. This is a well-organized assault. One hostile down. Four of them left." - static. A short pause.

"This is a well-organized assault. One hostile down. Four of them left."

"The attackers are bearing Alliance emblems. Squadron of five, flying Alliance flag. I repeat. We are under attack by Alliance ships."

The third click silenced the entire room. The smiles faded, the situation was darker than ever.

Fishes serenely swam in their aquariums. They didn't know, didn't understand that right above their heads were people deciding over life and death. They didn't care.

Jackson took the floor.

"Well, as you can hear, sir Bradley, I think this makes us even."

"I'm afraid not, Officer Jackson. In our recording, it's your pilots speaking. In your recording there just proof of ships wearing our emblem."

"This was a cold-hearted assassination, with 5 of your ships. Don't give me that crap!"

"I'm just reading the facts"

"Facts? What facts do we have? Wreckage's and a smoking HQ! Voices mean nothing. Voices can be faked!"

"Are you implying we've created a voice recording? A fake?"

"No, I'm just saying it's a possibility."

"Who says your recording isn't a fake?"

"I do."

"Well, so do I about this recording!"

Even the fishes sensed the rising tension above them. They calmed down and dove to the bottom of the peace dome. Every passing minute, the hostilities became more prominent. Anger and hatred started to replace the rationalism of all people present. War seemed inevitable.

Chapter 19 – Factual Errors – June 28 – 12:00UST

Inside a huge sterile room, piles of debris and wreckage were being stacked besides several huge databanks that are used for the investigation of highly classified cases. Jenna and her team had been granted access to investigate the Bentley debris, consisting of several pieces of shattered hull plus the retrieved data from the "black box" and systems data dumps. The carriers remains and systems data dumps had been declared at a very highly classified level, but the team had received clearance to investigate the hardware subsystems.

"Leroy, Francis!"

Both men appeared from behind another pile of scrap. "What's up, dear?"

"You check these systems for relevant information."

"Oh, being bossy again?"

"Shut up." – a small smile appeared around her lips. She turned around and strafed away.

"Definitely being bossy again. But, okay, we'll do. And you?"

Jenna just waved her hand, and the men started interfacing handheld computers with the systems, downloading all data from them. She had requested the Bentley job not because of its destruction, no, not in the least.

She walked past several lockers, which she knew contained the hard disks or retrieved data from the carriers systems. She was searching. Navigation . . . Engine . . . Media . . . Course . . . Generators . . .

She stopped in front of one of the lockers and opened it with a quick swipe of her ID-tag. Deftly she plugged in her handheld, and started scrolling through the files. She hesitated and clicked a entry called "Patrols". She scrolled to June, 24 and found what she was looking for. She quickly downloaded the data to the handheld's solid state drive.

The doors of the room opened and a heavily armed soldier stepped inside. Jenna took a quick glance at the screen of the handheld. 12 percent of the file had been downloaded. A small indicator displayed she needed 30 more seconds.

The soldier glanced at Leroy and Francis, who were busy checking some scrap. He turned around and stepped outside again. Jenna let out a relieved sigh. What she was doing was against the rules – she was supposed to check the ship systems for hardware failures and battle reports, not for patrol information. She'd be arrested for hacking or even stealing classified information. Jenna thought for a second and turned to her handheld. 30 percent done.

The doors closed behind the soldier, leaving the two investigators behind. Suddenly the soldier stopped in his tracks. He turned around and dashed back towards the door. With the sound of the hydraulics which controlled the door it slowly slid open. He peeked through the increasingly wide gap between the doors.

Francis glanced up.

"So, engine shows no abnormalities?"

"

"Nope", Jenna replied, "nothing".

The soldier took a surprised look at Jenna. He seemed to consider his options and then nodded. He turned around and left for the second time. Not until the doors had fully closed Jenna let out a nervous giggle. "Close one."

Francis stood up. "Certainly, so would you be so kind to explain us for what reason we just nearly got arrested?"

"Well", Jenna hesitated. She knew Francis' opinion about the case of the five mission F-144's. "I was searching for the . . . "

It seemed to hit Francis immediately. "Not again! Jenna, listen. Those pilots had an accident!"

"All five of them? Without a trace?"

Leroy stood up as well. "So, you got the patrol information?"

Francis seemed dumbstruck. "What? You into this conspiracy thing too?"

Leroy nodded. "You must admit, it's strange that five ships just disappear."

Francis hesitated. Then he sighed. "I guess so. Anyone found anything on the Bentley?"

Leroy seemed to suddenly remember something. "Four cloaked attackers. Signature suggests UFA-80's. Pretty strange that Federation forces use cloak. They were armed with Torpedo's anyway – the Bentley wouldn't have had a chance."

Jenna nodded. "Unless they didn't want their victim to get a good look at them."

Chapter 20 – Breakout – June 28 – 14:00UST

A group of twelve Striker class interceptors, flanking a small cruiser, approached their target, a lone carrier in the outer area of the Pisces system. As if it was completely routine, the Strikers broke up into three squadrons of four ships while the cruiser slowed down. The cruiser hung motionless for a second, the sun reflecting from the metal hull. Surprisingly, the reflection was extremely dim, nearly visually cloaking the entire capital ship.

The leader of the squadron engaging the front of the carrier mumbled some commands into the microphone in his mouthpiece. Immediately, the ships accelerated towards their target.

--oOo--

Curtis lay on his bed, wondering what his next step should be. If I ever got a next step. He had been figuring out plans, trying to plan an escape during his visits to the head; no joy there - the two armed guards remained on a safe distance and all doors in the hallway were probably locked. It was a cell-block, after all. He wouldn't risk his life running into a locked door. The only omen was a sudden red glow in the cell.

--oOo--

From the cruiser, admiring the sudden flares of the targets shield, the pirate captain nodded happily. They had been monitoring this unlisted carrier for a few days, and several highly armoured ships had been exchanging cargo with it. He suspected it probably was a smuggler's ship, and the careful manoeuvring around monitored space indicated they were experienced at their work. He spoke into the intercom, and the speaker throughout the cruiser suddenly turned on.

"Boarding Team, prepare."

The cruiser suddenly started moving forwards again, towards its target. It slid sideways, allowing the side turrets to fire at the helpless carrier. The defence systems were still powering up, and the shields had already lost a good percentage of their strength. The flares became weaker every time a missile or beam crashed into the ship.

The Strikers diverted from their attacks. They regrouped, now creating a group of eight Strikers that returned back to their base, which was now closing in on the target, and three turning one final time at the target. Three missiles shot forward.

--oOo--

Curtis was looking out of the window, trying to keep his balance in the now more powerfully rocking cell. The three missiles shot straight at the carrier as he saw the three Strikers swing towards a black shape which he had just noticed. He gasped. Pirates! The two outer missiles impacted on the shields, leaving the third, middle one. Curtis realized with horror that the third missile, which was coming straight at him, wasn't impacting on the shield. The shields were gone. He dived off his bed, towards the back of the cell. The missile impacted a few feet above Curtis' cell on the hull, and he waited for the bang of

the decompression. All he saw, however, was a blinding flash. For a few seconds all he then saw was the after images dancing in front of him!

The black cruiser now hung besides the carrier, the first boarding lock having already connected was compressing with a loud hiss. The boarding teams were gathered near the three boarding locks. They waited until the light turned green and rushed in. Quickly and efficiently, they undid the locks of the doors.

--oOo--

Curtis still saw nothing but coloured dots, lines and swirls as he crawled up. He had landed quite heavily on his arm and cursed out loud at the sharp pain. He tried to find one of the walls but touched nothing. He stumbled across something on the deck and fell again. He could hear gunfire nearby. He tried to stand up again. Someone grabbed his arm and roughly lifted him from the ground. Gritting his teeth, Curtis had no choice but to walk along as his sight slowly recovered. He was in a large tunnel with a bright light shining at the end of it. Curtis let his training take over completely.

The marine who had been guarding Curtis and his squadron lay on the ground, breathing heavily. He had been shot just below his ribcage, and felt his strength failing. He still held his gun, but he could feel numbness spreading throughout his body. Not good! He saw two pairs of boots standing next to him. He grimaced and took a look at his enemies. Then, with one fluid move, he raised his gun.

Two shots echoed through the station. The gun clattered from the dead hands of the guard. His murderers didn't even take another look at their latest victim. They approached the door of the cargo bay and bashed it open. They found a large hallway with two people laying in it, unconsciously. All five doors were open, and they investigated the cells. They cursed out loud when they found nothing in the cells and continued.

Chapter 21 - New Light - June 28 - 14:00UST

Jenna nodded. "Unless they didn't want their victim to get a good look at them."

Francis and Leroy glanced at Jenna, who was quickly disconnecting her handheld from the systems unit it had been downloading from. She looked back and was surprised at the confused faces of her colleague's. She walked back to them, raising her eyebrow as if it was completely obvious what she was going to say.

Francis waited another second and then let out a confused "What?".

"Well", Jenna said, "It seems pretty strange to me Federation pilots would use Stealth or Fulcrum Torpedo's when they could've finished it with Exodus missiles or something else, and just fly towards the target."

Leroy nodded. "Yeah, I figured that out as well. Maybe they tried to make it look like a pirates assault?"

Francis seemed thinking. "Guess so, yes."

Jenna now smiled in self-proclaimed victory. "Or the other way around. A pirates assault, in Federation ships."

She watched the dumbstruck Francis and Leroy, waiting for them to work through the implications. Leroy understood where Jenna was going. He suddenly started to talk very excitedly.

"That would, yes, that would fit in everything. Why they . . . ah damn . . . but those disappeared Star Wraiths?"

Jenna felt the feeling of victory ebb away instantly. The Wraiths. That didn't fit the image.

Francis nodded. "Let's leave those for what they are now."

Jenna looked up angry. "I'm not leaving them for what they are now! I'm not running out on this case!"

Francis now seemed hurt, but he countered. "Come on, we've got no damn idea where those things are and there is no trace. It's too clean to be an accident, whatever you want, but that means there's no trace neither."

Jenna was trying to say something, but suddenly, in unison, their handhelds started to buzz.

Francis had fumbled his out of his jeans pocket fastest, and he read the message. He nodded and sighed.

"Seems we've got something else to take care of in this system first."

Jenna nodded. The message was short and clear: "Unknown object approaching Pisces. Investigate".

Attached were the coordinates, updated every 30 seconds. Leroy was already pacing towards the door.

Forty minutes later Jenna was standing between the seated Leroy and Francis in the cockpit of a small Transporter, looking at clearly downed carrier. A scan had showed no other ships in the area. All the carriers lights were off, and several holes in the hull indicated heavy missile hits. Still, they approached cautiously, from below and behind, avoiding the arc of fire of the turrets. As they moved forward from below the engine nacelles they fired a small EMP missile at the carrier. The defences wouldn't attack them now, and they slid out from below the carrier, searching for an entrance.

Two of the hangar doors were open. Francis stopped the Transporter in front of the doors, deciding which one to take. He quickly realized both doors led to one large hangar so he flew through. He settled the Transporter between two of the three Star Wraiths in the room and activated the magnetic clamps.

With their space-suits on, they waited until the Transport had decompressed. Their magnet-shoes kept them down, but they could clearly feel the reducing pressure on their suits. The hatch slid open and they started to explore the hangar.

They found nothing significant and on through the carrier. The carrier had certainly been hammered. The entire ship had been decompressed. They found the system bay and downloaded all the information they could gather. Jenna seemed surprised to find no flight or ship ID.

"Hey, this must've been some sort of pirates ship. They got no flight or ship ID", she mumbled into her mouthpiece".

Leroy glanced up. "That's impossible. Only government ships can fly without ship ID. All other ships got one".

Jenna sounded annoyed. "Well, just come and look if you don't believe me."

Minutes later they found themselves waiting for Leroy to force a magnetic door open. He had quite some skill at electronic "lock picking", an uncommon, but very useful thing to know. The door opened and Jenna felt a wave of nausea hit her as she saw what was in the room.

The room had two doors, the one they were standing in and one on the opposite side. In the middle of the room, in mid air, floated the dead body of a guard, his blood orbiting around him in little red spherical balls like miniature planets or moons.

Chapter 22 - Tough Talk - June 28 - 16:30UST

Alliance officer Jonathan Bradley listen to what the Federation officer had to say. Their demands, after hours of negotiating, were as simple as they were absurd. They wanted the Alliance to falsely admit the murder of Officer Brian Tipper. Besides, they expected a full retreat from the Orion sector, a sector which had been under cooperative monitoring since the treaty was first empowered. He waited until the list of demands ended.

"Surely you cannot expect us to accept these terms?"

One of the Federation Officers opened his mouth but realized it was a rhetorical question. He remained silent.

Bradley continued. "The Orion sector is United Terran space. You cannot order us to leave, as we can't order you to leave Sol. Wherever humans live, except for RiftSpace, is considered Terran space since '47 treaty."

An Federation officer spoke slowly now. "And you expect us to honour that treaty while you do not?"

One of the younger Alliance Officers jumped up. "No, we expect you to look for what to do next instead of telling us we murdered someone we didn't. Do we still accuse you?"

The Federation officer flinched, but recovered quickly. "No, you are right. Still, the death of my colleague was brutal and should not be ignored in such negotiations. You can't expect us to ignore his death."

"We do not neither, but at any rate, your terms are unacceptable."

The Peace Dome had seemed to be at the centre of the universe for eight hours now. The media coverage was huge, and nearly every large channel had at least two teams ready to capture any snippet of information that leaked from the negotiations. They couldn't hear a thing, but the reactions and expressions of the people inside were a clear enough indication that it was a tough talk.

The reporter from "Thuban Satellite Telecommunications" spoke towards the camera pointed at him.

"There's no apparent change in the negotiations. Analysts claim that the Federation has just announced its terms, the reason for a sudden pause in Alliance counters. The situation still seems tense."

He put his finger against his ear-piece to hear what was radioed to him.

"Yes, we do. Officer Matthew Edgin has started to intervene in the last few minutes. He's known as a bright and sharp negotiator, and a pacifist, so that's a good sign."

Again he listened to his ear-piece. He signed off. "You're welcome!" And then to camera "For TST, this is Patrick Harris, near the Peace Dome, New Hope."

The light on the camera turned off and he sighed. It was an amazing sight, this Peace Dome. He looked through the glass, watching the two security carriers guarding each other. The ABC Infernus and FRC Predator II were the two chosen capital ships to secure the area. They were each equipped with high powered beam and particle weapons, an awesome number of missiles and dozens of close defence rapid fire anti-ship turrets. Their shapes seemed to be equally large and growing. They were most probably heading for the border of the safety zone, getting as near as possible without breaching protocol.

Inside the dome Bradley stood up. "So, in fact, you're proposing that we reshape all of Terran space?"

Federation officer Jackson thought about what Bradley was saying. Then, he nodded. "With the current tensions we cannot hold a stable sector with two factions in it."

"Your remark sounds as if we'll operate fully separately again."

"If you accept our terms, yes."

After the words echoed away in the sound-isolated Peace Dome, an awkward silence fell over the table. Jonathan Bradley took a look around the table. He stared at Matthew, who was clearly thinking of something, staring in front of him at the stars. He glanced at the Federation Officers. Most of them had a grim, thoughtful expression. He wondered what the media was reporting about the negotiations. Everything inside this room remained inside this room. Nobody outside knew what was going on. Federation Officer Jackson let out a deep sigh.

Jonathan Bradley had seen a lot in his life, but he had never suspected it would all come down to one split second. He stared outside of the window and saw the two carriers approaching the point where they would pass the safety border. He saw the reverse thruster light up, slowing both carriers down. Several Officers were staring out of the window now, thinking, deciding the next step.

None of them realized the next step was to be set from a small van, parked on a abandoned parking lot on the surface of New Hope.

Someone put out his cigarette on the table as another person exited the van. The man focussed on the small TV in the van again and waited.

Chapter 23 - Blur - June 28 - 14:08UST

The veil of darkness temporarily disappeared, to reveal a blurred view of reality. Curtis was still being dragged along. He tried to struggle against his captor, but couldn't find the strength to resist the firm grip. There were shouts in the background, somewhere in the void of silence. A female voice. He started to distinguish shapes, slowly. Two people were dragging him through a long hallway. Doors passed by on the left and right, but his mind didn't register them.

It was Jenna who shouted before she realized she shouldn't have. The two darkly clothed figures turned towards her in a flash, raising their guns while turning. In a split second, in total reflex, she raised her hands. The pirates exchanged a puzzled look before they laughed. She turned her head towards a dumbstruck Leroy, who had his hands raised as well. He seemed petrified, and she noticed his skin had turned pale and his eyes reflected pure fear. Francis was nowhere to be seen. Jenna hoped he got away in time.

Francis was crawling. He was carefully manoeuvring, slowly advancing. In his left hand was a heavy metal bar, and he avoided making sound by hitting something with it. He was getting closer, preparing himself for a sudden burst of speed and power.

Jenna stood frozen as the pirates raised their guns. They aimed one at a target, and they had a clear shot. Jenna suddenly felt a surge of guilt raising inside her. She had taken Leroy and Francis along on this case. She had dragged them into their deaths personally because she was stubborn.

--oOo--

The seemingly endlessly repeating light banks on the ceiling of the hallway suddenly ended as they moved into a larger room. Curtis was still fighting the increasingly powerful force sucking him into unconsciousness. He was battered, bruised, still half blind. He was being dragged along and captured by what looked like a lawless group of pirates. A powerful wave of fear suddenly triggered a surge of adrenaline and woke him up a bit. They were approaching a large structure in the middle of the room. He took another look. The structure was a shape he recognized. It was no structure.

--oOo--

Francis took a final deep breath in his hiding place between the crates and tensed himself as the pirates raised their guns. Then in an explosive movement he leaped forwards towards the pirates, swinging the bar with all his strength. Leroy instinctively leapt forward as well. The metal bar crashed into the back of one of the pirates, throwing him off-balance. The second pirate realized too late what happened, as Francis powered into him. The gun clattered to the floor, just an arm's length away from the pirate. The pirate dived at Francis before he could swing again. In a panic, Jenna dived away behind the crates, petrified. She thought again, quickly pulled herself together and ran towards the fight. The pirate knocked Francis over and the struggle continued on the ground. Leroy dived at the gun.

--oOo--

Curtis's brain was recovering from the shocks and shaking it had received; he was thinking better, faster. He didn't recognize the men, wearing blue overalls, the same as his. Who were they? What do they want? Are they transporting me to another cell? Another prison? He recognized the room as a ship hangar and the object he had just mistaken as structure as a fully loaded UFA-80. A Federation ship, he thought – the Federation had captured us? Then he realized that there was definitely something odd. Inside he laughed - something odd over and above being captures, having the carrier attacked, just avoiding being locked in a cell that was about to decompress! Next to the UFA-80 was another ship – a Quasar. That's an Alliance ship. This oddity did not register fully yet. He was searching for a logical explanation. Then he heard it. Twice. The people carrying him nearly dropped him, wheeling around to look in the direction of the sounds. Gunshots. Curtis felt the grip loosen and a sudden boost of adrenaline helped him break free. He ran in the direction of the sound, away from his captors.

Francis put all his force in a single punch, straight at the pirate who was already dead. The small handgun which the pirate had suddenly pulled fell to the ground, still cooling down from the last shot it made. As the bullet had hit him, he had been able to fire a small emergency gun he carried. Leroy fell on his knees at the exact spot he was standing. Jenna rushed towards Leroy. Before she reached him, he fell backwards to the ground.

Curtis bashed through the door, and was suddenly confronted with one of the strangest views in his life. One man was standing upright, next to a woman who was kneeling next to a person who was laying in a most unnatural position. She was desperately trying to revive the person, but the standing man put a hand on her shoulder. She shuddered. There was something odd about the standing man. One of his arms was aimed straight at Curtis, and it took a moment for Curtis to understand he was being aimed at. Slowly, he raised his hands.

"Who are you?" – Francis voiced echoed through the room.

Curtis blinked. These were not pirates. "Curtis . . ." – he couldn't remember his last name – what was it?

"Curtis who?" The military dedication in the question brought it all back in a flash. "Curtis Williams, of the ACC Catamaran escort squadron."

Jenna wheeled in shock. She had just lost a friend - now she had found a survivor.

Chapter 24 - Escape - June 28 - 14:12UST

The pirate captain was starting to get nervous. The pirates' carrier was still connected with the target via the umbilicals to the airlocks. One of the boarding squads had not responded on his status call, which was most unusual. These men were highly trained fighters, disciplined and physically tough. There was a simple protocol for this situation – if they don't respond, they are either dead or captured. Combined with the maxim 'leave no evidence', this left one simple option.

On the other side of the airlock, Jenna was staring at Curtis. She tried to stand up, still feeling disorientated due to Leroy's death. She suddenly wanted to cry. Leroy would never know that she had found a witness of what happened with the lost F-144E squadron. Instead, he was on the ground, dead, at her feet. "What happened to your squadron?"

--oOo--

The pirate captain nodded slowly. Two more minutes and they'd release the carrier according to plan. In his headset, which was at the same frequency of the boarding crew, he could hear the countdown. 112. 111. 110 . . . They'd release, and those who hadn't returned would die. They'd die swiftly, though.

--oOo--

"So, all they wanted were the Wraiths?"

Curtis nodded and was thrown off-balance by the door swinging open and hitting him full in the back. Francis was too surprised to react quickly, and two men stepped into the room. Francis raised his gun. The men didn't seem to notice and shouted. "Curtis!". Francis instinctively lowered his gun.

Curtis was lying on the floor, this last hit was too much for his bruised body. The men tried to help him up.

Francis again asked for identification. Both persons were pilots from the ACC Catamaran escort. As they lifted Curtis's unconscious body they explained three of them had died in the missile impact. They had then discovered that one of the bodies, Curtis, was still breathing. They had pulled him all the way to the hangars before he had regained consciousness and struggled loose. As he disappeared into the tangle of wreckage, he hadn't heard them shouting his name.

--oOo--

15. 14. 13. Except for two men, the boarding crew had returned to cruiser. The extraction protocol was simple. The captain ordered the disengagement of the the airlocks. The two ships disconnected slowly, and the carrier started to slide away from the cruiser. The captain mumbled a small prayer for forgiveness and then gave the order he'd normally give without a doubt. But this time, two of his men were aboard the target. He sighed and grabbed his microphone.

--oOo--

Everything rocked slightly as the ships disconnected. The two pilots had trouble keeping their balance, but managed to not drop Curtis. Francis turned pale. "They're leaving!"

The two pilots quickly explained they had found a secondary hangar, which was still pressurized. They had found several ships standing there. They increased their pace as good as they could, Francis running out in front, trying to get to an operational ship to prepare for their immediate escape.

--oOo--

The pirates' cruiser had nearly reached a distance of two-thousand decs. The captain, still holding the microphone, took a long look at the abandoned carrier. They had earned something – the crew had found huge amounts of food and medicines now in the cruiser's hold – not the hoped for loot, but it was something. Only the costs were higher than expected. It had seemed so routine.

--oOo--

Francis jumped into the cockpit of the Quasar standing in the hangar, and started the engine warm up sequence. The group supporting Curtis had just entered the hangar and had a 30 seconds stroll in front of them before they'd reach the platform that elevated them to the Quasars door. Francis activated the ships systems in sequence and prepared several missiles to blast open the doors of the hangar. He'd have to wait until the others had entered the ship and the hatch had sealed and locked.

The cruiser continued steadily pull away from the carrier, and the captain stared at the target for another few seconds. He took the microphone and fully aware of what he was saying, he spoke. "Remove the evidence." A door slid open and a single ship emerged from the pirates cruiser. It moved towards the carrier and launched a large missile, which accelerated away slowly towards its target.

The doors of the Quasar closed behind the group of survivors aboard the carrier. Francis didn't waste time and fired two of the loaded Exodus missiles at the doors. The first

missile did its job. The door seemed to bend, and then exploded outwards. Together with all the loose items in the room, the air of the room was sucked out into space. Francis hit the afterburner while still on the deck - without lifting off first. A standing burn was rare because it was risky - he knew that leaving the carrier would take vital seconds and anything that delayed that was a riskier option.

The metal of the Quasar's landing struts scraped over the floor bouncing the ship around. until They couldn't avoid all the debris between their dock point and the door. The rough ride continued until they had left the carrier and could start to accelerate away. Then, behind them, there was great burst of light. Jenna couldn't think. All she saw was Leroy's body laying in the carrier, which was exploding along with him now.

Chapter 25 - Ebb Away - June 28 - 10:48UST

The light started to ebb away. Francis was checking the damage on the Quasars hull after his hurried take-off. He had removed the magnet locks, but hadn't waited for the ship lift off the floor. The ship had taken several hits from debris as well, so the check vital, though how they could repair major damage out here was an issue. To his relief, nothing seemed dangerously damaged. They were still here which meant that they had escaped without the pirates noticing. They must have been too far away to show up on radar and masked by the carrier's hull. They had cleared the blast zone of the Fulcrum Torpedo's explosion, probably with only a few seconds to spare. He reckoned that they had used a lifetime's luck. Except for Leroy.

Francis turned to the people behind him, the ship now continuing on a steady course towards the planet of Pisces.

"So, they captured you and took your ships?"

Curtis was dumbstruck with the news he had just gotten. Humanity was on the brink of war. "Yeah."

"Any idea why they would want five F-144E's?"

"Not the slightest clue, actually."

Jenna was considering the options. Something very fishy was going on. Five F-144E's disappear, the squadron is taken to a huge, unlisted carrier. Then, less than a week later, all of this had happened. Assassinations, sabotage, war virtually staring. She got one of the most irrational ideas she ever had. She hesitated for a moment and then put the absurd thought off her.

"What were you saying?"

Jenna looked up. "Oh . . . nothing."

She thought of Leroy still. How he had dived towards the gun, while the pirate who was still standing had made a quick grab into his jacket, pulling out another small gun. Francis had turned towards the pirate, too late to prevent him from shooting.

Leroy had aimed and fired at the pirate, hitting him in the chest. The pirate stood for a second, his gun pointed at Leroy, seemingly already dead but waiting for gravity to overtake him. Then there had been another shot. She tried not to think of the horrible scene.

She realized Curtis had awoken again, and was looking at her questioningly. He hesitated for a second and decided to take the hard route. "The guy who was laying in the room, he was a friend, wasn't he?"

Jenna nodded slowly, tears welling up in her eyes again. She put her head on her hands.

There was a short silence. "He died a brave death. He won't be forgotten if we get back."

Francis came from the cockpit. "Yeah. I think this is how he would've wanted to go."

Jenna nodded again. It didn't really matter how he'd gone, or what he thought of it. All that matter was that he was gone. Still, the words had some sort of soothing influence. Curtis knelt on the ground in front of her, looking up at her and trying to calm her a bit. Francis went back into the cockpit.

Francis stared at the stars around the increasingly large, reddish sphere that was Pisces. His eyes roved over the instruments once again and he concluded they were on a steady course. It was amazing coincidence that they had found a F-144E pilot, three of them to be exact. The other two were sleeping, exhausted from dragging Curtis around. His thoughts drifted to the case of the F-144E's again. They had been captured, that was certain now. That left two questions: Why and who? He tried to remember strange news of the last week, trying to link events. He realized that all news of the previous week had been suspicious.

His thoughts were torn away from trying to find a link between the events. His radar started to show more and more ships in the vicinity. They were nearing Pisces station. Francis took another look at the radar. Several red blips had popped up. Francis now read the fuel indicator. The Quasar had been fully fuelled, but the Quasar was not equipped with a Fulcrum Jump Drive. He smiled resignedly.

The Fulcrum Jump Drive could instantly transport ships from one point in the universe to a other location several sectors away. The normal thrust drives could only speed up a ship to around 9000. Military ships, like the Quasar, were equipped with better technology than civilian frames but their energy supply was linked to weaponry and shields. If they had to move great distances they were usually chauffeured in a Battle Carrier. They could be fitted with a jump drive if the mission required - though the bigger carriers had a number of ships already jump capable - fitting the jump drive wasn't an easy or quick job. No jumping out of trouble this time!

The hostile ships had seemed to notice the abnormality of a military ship near Pisces. They continued on their course, probably deciding that the potential gain was far smaller than the risk of taking on Alliance hardware. Mercenary ships, after all, were much larger and slower than the usual smaller, better shielded, faster and more manoeuvrable military fighter. He hoped

The front shield of the Quasar started to glow slightly as the Quasar started to rock slightly. Francis called into the cabin - "Fasten your seatbelts and hold on!". He skimmed the outer layer of the atmosphere for a few moments, checking his radar for hostiles and navigating in such a way they'd approach the nearest hangar in a straight course. Then, the Quasar dropped into the relatively thin atmosphere of the planet Pisces.

Chapter 26 – On the press of a thumb – June 28 – 12:40UST

Control your nerves. Breathe in, breathe out.

Al Jennings was sitting in a van. A small, unremarkable van - not one anyone would take any notice of. It had been there for a few days now, on a forsaken parking space in the deserts of New Hope. The trip to the van had been one of detours. He would not be traced back to the van. He left his office travelled to New Hope, and then together with Germany he hired a car and came to this spot. Germany would return the car in the morning, apparently nothing but a tourist or businessperson. He himself would take the van and destroy it later. First, he had to wait. Patiently

The TV showed a constant live footage of the Peace Dome. Alliance and Federation officers had been in discussion, but not audible for anyone but themselves. The dome was completely sound-isolated. In the history of the dome, there had been several lip-readers who had been able to read what was being said in the dome over the television. This resulted in a few simple rules for the media, no camera was allowed to focus on a person for longer than 3 seconds, and never on the talking person.

However, Al searched not for words. No, he didn't even look at the individuals. He paid close attention to the backdrop. Two carriers had been hanging there for a while now, closing in on the dome slowly. He knew that one of them was an Alliance Battle Cruiser, and the other a Federation Reconnaissance Carrier. Both of them heavily armed. They just had to get a little closer . . .

The back of the van was like a small office. It had a television, a chair, a desk and a variety of electronic devices. Al took another nervous glance at two small items. One of them had a red button hidden behind a flip over safety cover. It was labelled 'Firework'. The other one was not secured. It had a yellow button labelled 'Flare'. Important in the tension of the moment not to make a mistake! Al knew the implications of both of them.

The first one was the one he was nervous about, the first part of his means to his ultimate objective. The "Flare" was a new type of combined Chaff-Stun weaponry. Al had invested in it years ago, and now it would pay off. He looked at it - a single quick press on the button would be enough to activate a canister hidden in space near the dome. After the "Flare" had done its work - had blinded both humans and electronics - the "Firework" would finish the task.

The "Firework" would have results that would be more shattering to the morale and beliefs of the populations of Evochron's numerous systems. They would howl for war! Al took another deep breath. Calm. Focus.

The carriers had almost reached the distance at which they would be able to fire at the dome. They were not allowed to enter the safety zone set up around the dome. If timed correctly however, the "flare" would disable the control systems of their braking thrusters for long enough. It was a plan requiring precise timing.

A small radar screen started to bleep. It was almost time. 2520 units distance left. The armament of both carriers was designed to be effective at twenty-five-hundred units or less. At 2510, the carriers engines would reverse thrust to break at 2501 units distance, according to protocol and safety measures. At 2502, it had to happen. Their remaining forward momentum left would do the trick.

2510. He would rebuild a glorious economy. Single-handedly in control, assisted only by a few carefully chosen and prepared "pawns". He would not be remembered as such, though. No, he would be remembered as the founder of the most influential weapon company in the galaxy. As a revolutionary merchant. The one who provided the weapons

to whatever party would win the pending war. Eventually, perhaps history would judge him (as he judged himself) as the man who had brought a strong, lasting peace by strengthening the economic stability of a universe. The bringer of universal prosperity and hence universal peace.

He would not be forgotten - how would he be remembered though?

No one would ever know what sacrifice he was about to make. But it was for the sake of the Terran race. Of humanity. Heroes can be killers. Was it murder when the goal was so noble - eliminate wars and conflict that plagued the divided systems. Bring peace through prosperity. They would be sacrifices made for the benefit of millions of others, who otherwise would live in poverty. War was a necessary evil to spin up the economy once more. The ends justify the means

2505. Just three more units. Three more beeps. AI took a look at the television. He knew it would be the last time he would see of those men. Honourable men. A shame that they had to be sacrificed. But their deaths would be glorious. AI's eyes shone as he looked into a glorious future - one that he had created for humanity!

Beep. 2504. AI focused on the two small panels in front of him now. 'Flare' and 'Firework'. "Firework" and "Flare". The van had been camouflaged as a truck belonging to a mobile pyrotechnical show. The reason for the code names of the equipment. They didn't say anything else than what they would do, though. Beep. Outside, the buzz of an engine became louder. A car on the freeway passed by. AI swallowed hard. Fireworks. Flare. They would do as they said. They meant the rebuilding of the economy, of wealth, at the press of a thumb.

Beep. 2502. AI closed his eyes and pressed Flare. The TV suddenly emitted nothing but a white "snow" on the screen and hissing static from the speakers - visual and aural fog.

Exactly a second later, he pressed Firework.

Inside the Peace Dome, in a rock located in the aquarium at the bottom of the dome, a light winked on.

Part 3 - Faith

Introduction - June, 28 - 12:41UST

Fragments of glass floated through space. Shattered shards without destination, moving towards their fate somewhere out there in space. Whether they'd be melted by stars, caught by the gravity of a planet or moon or move out into the interstellar or even intergalactic void would forever be unknown.

"New Hope Station, the centre of the peace negotiations..."

In a hospital room, Jenna flicking desperately between channels. Behind her lay three men, sleeping. They had been through a lot. To be able to stay near them for a while she had pretended to be Curtis's sister yesterday when the hospital personnel had asked her to leave unless she was family. Curtis had played along nicely. She had many questions for them when they woke up.

Again, the television changed to black for a split second before showing a new feed. Every channel, however, showed the same footage.

"...dome destroyed in a freakish..."

"...and Federation officials killed along..."

"...statement that two carriers..."

"... eerie flash before the explosion . . . "

"...explosion at 12:41UST today..."

She paused and flicked back to one of the channels. A woman appeared in front of a backdrop of New Hope Station. She seemed shocked by the events. No surprise; probably the entire galaxy was watching in shock and trepidation now. Jenna heard some noise behind her, and looked at the source of the sound. Curtis was still where she left him. He had just rolled to his other side. The other two still slept as well. She lowered the volume a bit and enabled the subtitling.

White letters appeared below the woman.

"The exact cause of the explosion in the Peace Dome is as yet unknown. However, two carriers were located inside the restricted zone at the moment of the explosion, the ABC Infernus and FRC Predator-II. Their crews are being interrogated as we speak."

Another voice, probably the anchorman, started to speak mutedly. The subtitles turned yellow.

"And that flash? Is there an update about the flash?"

The subtitles turned back white.

"No, there hasn't. Several experts have declared that most likely, the flash was caused by some sort of non-lethal weapon, disabling electronics and blinding with that flash. As you might recall, all camera's failed to capture several seconds after the flash, including the duration of the explosion. The first footage we have is of the debris and broken bodies drifting outwards."

"Non-lethal weapon? Are they implying that these were two explosions, instead of a single one?"

"No, they agree with the majority of the experts that the flash was probably just a side effect of the explosion. The camera's didn't register anything at all, so it's hard to say."

"Okay. Today at 12:41UST, an explosion rocked New Hope Station and destroyed the Peace Dome, killing ninety-two people, including all negotiating officers. The Alliance and Federation . . . "

The screen went black as she put down the remote. The footage was clear about the atrocity: the entire dome had been blown apart in one single massive explosion. Over ninety people were killed by the sudden explosion or being thrown into the cold vacuum of space. Several reporters and crews had been shredded by the flying shards before being sucked into space, and others had been too nearby to escape the sucking force of the immediate decompression. The emergency doors had saved the rest of the station from total annihilation, but the damage had been done. The hopes of preventing war now looking as annihilated as the Dome had been.

Curtis suddenly woke up. He sat upright, and looked at Jenna in wonder.

She looked at him for a moment, and their eyes locked for a second. He saw fear in her eyes before she turned away. She took the remote control again, and turned the TV on. He understood what happened after the first glance of the footage. The large headline at the bottom left no room for guessing. Negotiations were over. It was war.

Security - June, 28 - 13:23UST

The first conflicts were already being reported. Minor skirmishes between pilots remembering their oaths to defend their factions. Mutiny if the commanders didn't act immediately. Dogfights and furballs. As yet, no major combat had been fought yet. The first casualty reports started to appear on BBS-screens all over the galaxy.

--oOo--

Several powerful looking aircraft roared high above the desert sand. Two were sleek, lethal looking with racks of missiles slung under their wings. They shepherded three bulkier craft - transport craft. Their velocity seemed to decrease as their destination became visible just above the horizon. A huge complex, the most secure area on Earth. As they flew over the first line of high-powered anti-air defences, the two escorting atmospheric Strikers split away and looped back towards their point of origin, their protective role completed. The three remaining craft maintained their course.

They now passed over the second row of air defences, the first ground security outposts and radar installations, their speed still dropping towards the point where gravity would completely overcome them. In the cockpit, the pilot made a last correction on the ships computer, and stared at the buildings in now clearly in front of him. Alliance HQ.

As they neared the docking pads of the complex, the engines of the Transporters suddenly reversed thrust, and engines on the bottom of the crafts lit up with a roar. Increasingly powerful pillars of flame started to scatter blown sand in all directions as they started their vertical descent into the magnet locks of the docking pad.

With the sand gusts still cutting into their faces, several guards jogged up to the doorway of the craft before the pilot undid the locks. Their lightweight combat armour didn't slow them down at all. They carried pulse rifles. Even inside the complex, every movement was guarded, secured and monitored. The complex was the centre of all Alliance power, the main base, the seat of government. The Alliance had outposts on most other planets, and a secondary main base at Sapphire in the EvoChron sector, but none as mighty, large and as well defended as the Earth base.

With most of the executives and representatives killed in the assault on the Peace Dome, the few that had not been able to be present at the negotiations now gathered at Alliance HQ under the highest standards of security available. Several members of the group were talking with assistants or on personal communicators; They were the "Understudies, trained to step into the shoes of first line members who were incapacitated or dead. Only in the most extreme scenario was it expected that so many would be called in at the same time.

From here, the fleet would be coordinated to defend Alliance territory from the Federation attacks that would follow. Once the defence and control was consolidated, counterattacks would be launched. In the meantime, long prepared hit and run sorties were being prepped across the border systems of Alliance space to keep the Federation offguard. The detailed investigations of their carrier's actions as it had breached the security zone revealed nothing but some short-circuited data-discs. The crew had declared that the Chaff weapon had caused this damage. Deep Penetration Intelligence

Operatives inside Federation HQ reported that their investigations had come up with similar findings.

The Executive in Charge, Admiral Leon DeMille from the Orion sector exited the Transporter and was escorted towards the Conference Centre, or the C.C. as they referred to it. It wasn't an "honour guard"! The marines were from elite units and none held a rank below sergeant.

It was a surprisingly small building from the outside, just big enough to be a hallway for the buildings surrounding it. Admiral DeMille knew why – the building was only the entrance to the facilities buried deep in granite rock below the deserts sand. The only thing the building on ground level contained were several elevators leading down to the actual centre.

The elevator took something that most resembled a freefall before it reached the bottom of the shaft. In less than half a minute, DeMille found himself in front of yet another security guard who sat behind an armoured screen - his sidearm was easily to hand; The Admiral handed over his ID and submitted to an iris scan. The computer confirmed that he was indeed Admiral Leon DeMille, 42 years old, born in the Orion sector. After a few seconds, the same computer decoded the encrypted data on the ID card and confirmed that the iris and the information on the ID-card were the same. The transparent doors swung open, just to reveal something completely different from the scene visible through the glass doors.

The Conference Centre contained several underground passages to other locations within the complex, some close and others requiring a short monorail ride to reach. One of these locations was accessible only through the C.C., although emergency exits allowed personnel to evacuate through all underground buildings. Mono-directional security, automatically locking doors with enormous thickness and strength. Getting in was hard - getting out was easier but hard if you needed to return. The final door with bi-directional security leading to Battle Control was located in a armoured, underground passage between the C.C. and Battle Control. Everyone, regardless of rank or familiarity to the security team was carefully checked in and out - every time - no exceptions.

Admiral DeMille entered through the doors of Battle Control three minutes later. His eyes scanned the room for people he knew. He recognized many of the faces from vid briefings, several he had met in real life. Most faces showed fear, though masked, although several also showed certitude and anger. This was where the war would be orchestrated. He cleared his throat.

"Ladies and gentlemen . . . "

Pendulum - June, 28 - 13:30UST

Admiral in charge Leon DeMille was startled. He had the highest in rank in the room, and yet, someone had dared to interrupt him. He had prepared a speech, a speech he had just started, not even really commenced yet, as someone had told him to first look at something.

DeMille wheeled, and found behind him a young man, a Lieutenant. DeMille quickly scanned the nameplate attached to the uniform, eyed the young officer coldly.

"Yes, Lieutenant Zimmer?"

Lieutenant Zimmer was clearly intimidated by this harsh response, and quickly mumbled some apologies. "I just thought you should be aware of the fact that the Federation fleet has already set course towards the Sol sector."

Now it was DeMille's turn to be feel intimidated. "They . . . what?"

"They've already set course. Their fleet is scattered yet, but seems to head for a gathering point en-route to here."

"ETA?". The abbreviation for 'Estimated Time of Arrival'. It had been used for centuries by the military and air traffic.

"I think we've got a day or two. At most. We have no status report of their ships, but we suspect that weaponry and supplies still need to be loaded."

"Is that an official estimate?"

"No, sir, that was what I thought. Official estimates give us 80 hours."

"Okay. Thank you, Lieutenant."

The admiral now turned to the other people in the room and continued without changing tone. It still had a sharp undertone, which made his voice sound appropriately authoritative.

"From now on, I want no more personal opinions. I want fact, and if estimates, official ones. If you do not have official estimates, request them. I want the fleet gathered in three sub-fleets, one near Earth and ready for combat before tomorrow, one in the vicinity of New Hope orbital to be battle-ready in 36 hours, and a frontline deployment set up near the Orion border. -"

Someone in the room stood up and tried to say something. "-sir."

DeMille had had enough interruptions for one day. He continued without paying attention to the interruption.

"- I want every Alliance pilot capable of flying a Wraith to fly a Wraith."

The Admiral now fixed his stare on one of the people he already knew. "And Johansson, I want a word with you."

The Admiral paused for a short moment. "If anyone has suggestions concerning battle-plan or ideas, I'm open. Just try not to waste my time."

His eyes now searched for the man who had just interrupted him and he continued. "And try not to waste my energy by interrupting me."

For a moment the people in the room stood as if frozen looking at him. Then almost with a sigh they recognised that they had leadership again at the top and untensed. From silence the room suddenly filled with voices. Communications Tech's started to send messages to carriers and cruisers, tacticians started putting together squadrons and equipment, assigning pilots and carriers. Computers beeped, while a large screen projected the most probable location of Federation capital ships at that moment. Several of the arrows on the screen did not blink, and DeMille knew that only those locations were certain. He ordered Johansson to come over to him.

"Admiral."

"Frank, call me Leon, please."

Johansson seemed happy about this familiar tone. They had been friends for a long time. Ever since they were put together in the 48th Star Wraith squadron, they had been friends.

"Okay, Leon, what is it that you need me for?"

DeMille suddenly lowered his voice to a whisper. "I want you to select a few squadrons to fly a new craft prototype."

Johansson nodded. "How many pilots?"

"I've got twenty five prototypes."

"I'll get you twenty five of the best we have."

"Qualified Wraith fighters?"

Johansson nodded again. He immediately turned and placed a call. Admiral DeMille knew he had chosen the right person as his XO, Johansson had contacts in nearly every squadron in the Alliance fleet. He would know who to choose for this new fighter.

DeMille only heard the first few words of Johansson's call. "I want a record of all F144E pilots available."

"New Hope - June, 28 - 13:41UST

Aboard the Federation Battle Cruiser Sparrowhawk the seniors comms tech just finished transmitting the status update to HQ. He had updated their location, fuel, weapons status and ETA.

Immediately after the news of the Peace Dome explosion, they had received order to head use a classified weapon. Only he, the pilot of the Sparrowhawk and the highest official aboard knew the details. He felt somewhat proud about that.

The Sparrowhawk was an Infinity-class cruiser, one of the most powerful successors of the Vengeance, the Federation's most powerful weapon in the war of the eighties past century. It had superior agility and manoeuvrability hence the name!, and yet shielding and weaponry were no less than the average battleship. He sighed. They were headed to war. To the battlefield. He didn't care about victory, or about the Federation. He had applied for the job for the salary, and because he wanted to see space. But he had sworn an oath, and he would keep it. To do his job to the best of his ability to defend the Federation - until death, if necessary. He accepted the risk but hoped that the final sacrifice wouldn't be necessary

The confirmation from HQ suddenly startled him out of his thoughts, and he focused on his job again. They would reach their destination within hours, and their ultimate goal, Earth, within 40 hours. They would outsmart the Alliance. And he was one of the few who knew how.

He took a look at the screen in the small, metallic room. It was a room without soul, a room simply built to plan murder. There was no 'karma', as his mother would call it, or even the slightest hint of optimism in the room. Nothing to distract from the job at hand. Within 48 hours, he'd be fighting or he'd be dead. The battlefield would be huge, over

90% of the Federation fleet heading straight towards Alliance HQ at Earth, using attack as their best defence. The Federation had always been less centralistic than the Alliance, allowing them to lose planets and even systems without collapsing. The Alliance would have to make a stand at Earth, while the rest of the Federation fleet would act as a diversion and then return to protect Orion.

He was amazed by the speed of the events happening. A week ago, there had been nothing. No war, not even a hint of it. And suddenly, before he really realized it, he found himself sitting in this familiar room, but now heading towards slaughter. He had no family, no wife and children to take care of. He had always preferred the life as bachelor. Nevertheless, he could imagine the feeling of those leaving wife and children behind, possible for them to become widow and orphan.

The voice emitted by his headphone sounded metallic, an effect that was produced by the coding and decoding of the audio-signals sent through space. "FBC Sparrow – you're on course. Retain current heading and increase velocity to one-niner-zero. ETA to next F.J. point is two hours and seven minutes."

The Comms Tech passed on the message to the bridge. ETA to the next 'ef-jay'. The next safe area to Fulcrum Jump, without popping up on Alliance radars. Their stealthed hull, protected them at speeds below 200. Not that stealth would help them in battle. It would be a ship on ship close range bare-knuckle fight. They just needed to come with higher numbers than the Alliance expected. And they were sending nothing short of the entire Federation fleet.

They would reach their gathering point in twenty hours, and power through Alliance defences using brute force if necessary until reaching Earth. The Sparrowhawk, as any other cruiser, was armed with space-to-ground missiles, and those missiles had but one target: Alliance HQ, on Earth. However, something else made the Sparrowhawk one of the most powerful carriers in the fleet. The key to victory.

Inside Alliance HQ, the officials were falling for the Federation plot with eyes wide open. The 10% of the fleet apparently heading for Sapphire was a dire overestimation, as several Federation carriers had been heading in that direction until reaching the Orion nebula. They had slipped into the nebula, dropped off the monitors and diverted on to a direct path towards Earth. The other ninety percent, a total of hundred-and-twenty-four Federation capital ships, were heading straight for Earth.

The Alliance estimated them to be eighty and set up an appropriate barricade for the incoming Federation carriers near New Hope orbital. Sixty Alliance capital ships took a straight course towards Sapphire.

--oOo--

Jenna was desperate. New Hope, as were most other systems in Sol and Orion controlled space, was under lockdown, not allowing anyone in or out of its space - several sectors in all directions.

The most influential reporters of the galaxy were stuck inside New Hope orbital, reporting about the pending battles with all available information against the backdrop of the ruins of the Peace Dome. Yet, the war and the pending danger were not the reasons of her desperation. She was sitting alone in the New Hope hospital. Curtis and the pilots had left. They had gone to war.

Editor: At this point *tha_rami* posted the following

I need some feedback! How to take the story from here:

Option A: War actually starts and many die, but war stops later.

Option B: It comes to a frontline-to-frontline situation, but not to major conflict.

Option C: No frontline-to-frontline, no War. Just a race against the clock while the fleets approach each other.

Option D: It comes to a major conflict, but the casualties are still low at the end.

Option E: It comes to a frontline-to-frontline conflict, but the major part of the fleet do not join the battle.

Option F (added by the Editor!): Jenna produces evidence of the set up and averts the war (at the last minute of course!)

*I doubt that *tha_rami* will finish this epic. Perhaps a ghost writer might!*

*However, in his extended History of Evochron (see the Appendix) *tha_rami* wrote a brief outline sketching out the fate of the plot:*

The plot had succeeded - war was once again looming and would have broken out if it were not for the conscience of Captain Sarrickson,

Sarrickson rushed for the destroyed Peace Dome as Federation and Alliance forces awaited on the edges of the New Hope system. He succeeded in reaching the Dome before the first shot was fired. He revealed the details of plot, resulting in renewed peace talks and the trial and execution of several leading industrialists. Captain Sarrickson was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour on one of the frontier colonies. Some said that he was a scapegoat for the failure of the security services to prevent the plot or even have an inkling that it existed. Given the loss of life that had already occurred, others said that he was lucky, that his "change of heart" was not a powerful enough mitigating factor.

Finally, on the 26th of February 2347, one merged faction "conveniently" named "The New Alliance".

Romulan by Lord Kharn

July 2010



For the newbies amongst you, Romulan is a legend in Evchron. Not a good legend. A mean and, some say, cowardly creature who preys on inexperienced pilots. Lord Kharn is the only person who speaks well of him!

See if you can tell who is the hero and who the villain in Lord Kharn's story of one of the adventures of Romulan

Rumour also has it that Romulan and Lord Kharn come from a patriarchal planet - you might just detect hints of their attitude towards women in the tone of this tale, especially near the beginning!

Romulan

by Lord Kharn
July 2010

Chapter 1 "Setting the scene"

"A scourge! A menace! A cowardly terrorist!" exclaimed the director of Sapphire's "Pilot Initiation Program".

John Pommer had been in charge of introducing new pilots to Federation space for over ten years. But for the last three, a single pilot had been preying on unsuspecting newcomers. He was yelling at his assistant, a coy young girl more to defuse his anger than anything else. She simply bobbed her blond head to his every word, soaking up his anger like a sponge. Of course she didn't understand anything he ever spoke of, but it was nice to have a job and she simply looked pretty, smiled and got paid.

"This Romulan creep has been a hole in my pocket for far too long. You know how much profit we have lost because of him? How many aspiring new citizens are thinking twice about joining the space trade?"

Rikku shook her head to signify no, her blonde pony-tail whipping side to side.

John grimaced, "Enough to make me hire a team of mercenaries, that's how much!"

That seemed to remind her of something. She took a few seconds giving him a puzzled look, which soon alerted him.

"What? Did you forget something? A message perhaps?"

Suddenly she beamed and said in a sweet sing-song voice "OH YES! The mean looking men are here to speak to you! The ones you hired."

John had to keep his jaw from dropping at her stupidity. It stopped when she turned to open the door and slightly bent forward to reach the knob. In her tight fitting skirt it was evident why he had hired her.

The door was pulled open and John waved the three men in, while pointing at the exit for Rikku to leave. She seemed to have the intelligence and enthusiasm of a Labrador, and left with a smile closing the door behind her.

The three men each took a seat in the red cushioned chairs in front of John's desk. John mulled over the information he had on the pilots before sitting down behind his desk and speaking to them as a group.

"All right I called you guys here because I need your expertise in eliminating a threat to trade-space. I'm sure you have heard of Romulan, he needs to be dealt with for good."

Two of the men shifted uncomfortably at the news.

"The three of you each have a particular skill which I believe is very important and may prove the deciding factor in who actually brings him down, as well as who gets paid. In addition to the standing bounty of fifty six million credits, you will receive a percentage

of stocks from several major corporations and free docking at their stations. I'm sure you will understand that by free it covers fuel and ship-wash."

The same two that cringed at Romulan's name, straightened up as greed overcame their common sense.

"So a quick introduction to each other. From left to right we have Mr. Brovak, Mr. Kent, and Mr. Jed. Brovak is a demolitions expert served nine years in the trade-protection force. Kent is a navigations and ship systems expert who was also in the Federation Infantry. That's rough stuff. And Jed has been in special forces and is currently a independent journalist and detective. You are not expected to work together unless you want to share the rewards. However you will forfeit everything except the standing bounty if you do. That's all, my assistant will hand you each a data stick with everything we know about Romulan."

The three men traded glances and left.

John turned to look out his view port deep into space. He could see a nearby jump-gate as well as the planet Sapphire.

"I will have your head." A shimmer caught his eye as a ship suddenly uncloaked near the jump-gate, right behind a pilot in training. "SON OF A" His words were cut off as alarms in the station announced a volley of active missiles nearby and the destruction of a company ship. Oh, and a young pilot who would never have a chance to prove himself (or herself)

Chapter 2 "Fulcrums are from Russia!"

Brovak and Jed rushed to the hanger with Kent in tow. Kent had come in his own fighter, a Ferret class Federation ship. Jed had picked up Brovak en-route, with Brovak claiming his ship was in the shop for another twenty four hours at the Sapphire repair station. Kent had docked in the open zero-G so he could leave faster, while Jed had set his craft down inside a parking pod. Nice little thing would pull the ship from the zero-G down into the safety of a station. Since Jed was flying a recently overhauled Saber, he didn't want to risk the scratches and dents of sloppy pilots entering and leaving the station.

Brovak paced impatiently next to Jed as his ship was pulled up from storage. He spoke with a thick Russian accent, straight from Earth.

"I do not know why you store ship like this. We could lose contract right now!"

Brovak was an overweight man in his mid-forties obviously trying to make a big score in order to settle down. With his dirty-red overalls and big hands he resembled an out of work mechanic, more than a demolitions expert. Jed spoke flatly with a calm voice, his arms crossed in his black pilot jumpsuit.

"Romulan could be gone before we get out there anyways. Besides you remember what I was shipping before I took this contract don't you?"

Brovak stopped pacing and raised his head realizing suddenly that Jed was right. Jed had been taking two fulcrum torpedoes to Cerulean for the war effort. If a stray round hit one of the massive things, the entire station would be annihilated. Brovak shook his head and cursed pointing a finger at Jed.

"Your crazy son of a b! At least you're smart enough to dock inside station."

Kent was by no means a good pilot, but he was an aggressive one. He was often mistaken for an intelligent person rather than a impulsive brute, and that he took advantage of. He had poster-boy looks in his Federation issue, gray pilot suit. Thin blonde hair cut flat on top like a cheap Duke Nukem rip-off. He had the advantage of time over the other two mercs and intended to use it as he powered up his Ferret quickly bypassing his safety checklist. He strapped in and punched the throttle to full, narrowly avoiding two ships trying to escape Romulan's onslaught. He came out of the docking area with guns ablaze, even though he was out of range.

Romulan had already destroyed two new pilots and their merc escort before Kent rushed out to meet him. His thought process was ice cold, void of passion unlike most of his kind, which was why he was sent on these missions alone. The Ferret racing towards him was blasting away out of range and would be down to half or no energy before he even got close enough. Not a Federation pilot but a merc obviously. Romulan was not worried about immediate reinforcements since there were no Federation ships nearby. Nor was he worried about losing to an over-eager rookie. The Ferret was a nimble fighter but no match for his recently stolen Wraith painted black to match the darkness.

Jed and Brovak rushed aboard the ship as soon as it finished docking with the passenger holding area. The short tunnel to the ship smelled of rubber and fuel, the connecting aluminum struts covered with fabric to give the impression of safety. Jed keyed his passcode on the airlock of his ship, right behind the cockpit. It sighed open as the pressure equalized. The four painstaking minutes it took for them to board was accented with a grave need to rush. Brovak almost tripped over Jed trying to sit down in the navigator chair right behind the pilot's. Jed did an emergency system check and barked coordinates at Brovak so he didn't have to turn around to log them in. Brovak grunted his assent as Jed disengaged the stations tractor beam and hit the jump-drive button, rocketing out of the station. The gravity dampeners on the ship weren't the best and both Brovak and Jed had to fight to hold onto the controls for a few seconds. The lights dimmed and the blackness of space washed over them eerily as they came out of space a mere four seconds later.

Jed gave Brovak a new set of coordinates, to which he protested instantly. "WHAT! We go back? You must have wish of death!"

Jed shook his head "My ship, you follow my orders. And its death wish. Now plot it in."

Brovak did as he was told as Jed brought the ship around to the galactic epicentre and levelled it out, waiting for the energy to pool back up.

Kent panicked as he soared towards Romulan, his energy had depleted just as he had come in range. His enemy launched an eight pack of Excalibur missiles at him close range, and he mashed the counter measure button while pulling up as hard as he could on the stick. He soared away as two missiles got close enough to detonate. The explosion rocked the ship and peppered his thrusters with shrapnel causing an efficiency drop of over ten percent. He frantically hit the afterburners and turned off IDS barely out running the rest of the missiles. He cut afterburners and turned his ship around to face Romulan as he rushed away, his velocity vector display displaying <-4.

"Where did he go?" He blurted out as Romulan winked off his radar and out of sight.

Romulan had waited until the Ferret was too close to avoid missiles. With IDS off he simply drifted downward as his missiles launched at his target. The rookie had managed to do an emergency burn and only got splash damage from the first two, showing amazing reflex but no skill. Romulan noted that this would be too much of a threat if the pilot lived long enough to receive formal training by the Federation. Turning on his stealth field once again he made a quick direction change for the hangar of the station.

He watched on radar as the Ferret turned around to look for him just as his stealth engaged. Romulan smiled already knowing he would be victorious.

Kent frantically tapped at his controls, levelling out his shield to weapons energy balance and activating the missiles on his ship. He reversed direction with a long burn, realizing a few seconds too late that his IDS was still off, causing him to burn excessive amounts of fuel. He grumbled and wiped some sweat from his brow his hand shaking as he did so. Fuel is life, but at this stage Romulan is Death - no contest!

Deep down inside he knew he had no chance against Romulan. But so much money, all he had to do was get lucky. Luck had gotten him through every fire fight he had been in, so surely it would work in space. He let out a deep breath and concentrated on visually scanning for any disturbance where Romulan had been. He was cruising in at half throttle, cautiously watching the debris of destroyed ships as well as a nearby asteroid that he assumed Romulan was hiding behind. Could an asteroid block radar? He wasn't sure so he headed towards it, strafing to the left cautiously as a civilian Leviathan winked onto radar with a beep, causing him to jump. He sighed for a moment then yelped as his ship started blaring a missile alert. He hit his downward thrusters and spun around to face the station where they had come from. He watched Romulan race out of the hangar and attack the Levi with particle and beam cannon as soon as the missiles had eaten through its shields. It was a mass of torn metal and flaring fires a few moments later.

Then Romulan turned his attention back on Kent.

Jed was worried that he might actually have to engage in a fight. Hopefully Romulan was wise enough not to fire on a ship with a fulcrum hanging off each wing. He hesitantly hit the jump button and grunted as the launch pushed him back into his seat. Brovak was scanning the radar as soon as they came out and there were only two ships showing. Jed had to hit full reverse thrusters to keep from running into the new wreckage of a Leviathan. It was lifeless and leaking air into space, all mangled and glowing red from several missile and cannon impacts.

Jed saw Kent engaging in a dog-fight with Romulan, his rounds passing harmlessly over the Ace as Romulan manoeuvred gracefully away. Romulan's rounds weren't missing however and Jed realized the only reason he wasn't launching missiles was because he had just used them on the Levi that he was now floating under. The scene was horrible but Jed couldn't do anything about it. Kent frantically thrust away out of range, and towards Jed and Brovak.

Brovak used his colourful language to add light to the situation. "The kid is moron! He will be getting us all killed!"

Jed grimaced and painted his crosshair on the cockpit of Romulan. He was out of range and his ship systems were off other than his passive radar. Drifting with the dead Levi he was practically invisible unless you were scanning visually.

Romulan was tearing Kent up even as he scurried away. His lower level cannon was taking its time doing hull damage but his accurate shots had already disabled the rookie's shields and destroyed his navigation array. He smiled as his Excaliburs finally chimed their "reloaded" song. He thumbed the switch and watched something unexpected happen. The missiles launched out but the Ferret made a blind jump towards the nearby planet out of range. His missiles shot past where he had just been racing high over the wreckage of the destroyed Leviathan. That's when he noticed the ship and the hairs on his head stood on end. He froze his ship and licked his lips as he stared at the two fulcrums hanging off the wings of his new adversary.

Jed let out a deep breath as the missiles soared overhead and lost themselves in space. Brovak cringed closing his eyes not realizing Kent had just jumped away. A few moments of quiet caused him to look up and then lean over Jed to see what was happening.

"Did new pilot die?"

His jaw dropped as he stared at Romulan slowly drifting right up to their ship. Jed grumbled and turned on his cabin lights, causing a glare on the thick view port for a few moments. Likewise Romulan did the same drifting up to within a mere two meters between ships. Jed felt like their shields might buzz from impact at any moment, but it never came.

Romulan wanted to see this pilot, he intrigued him immensely to have been so determined to stay with two fulcrums in order to get him to leave. He mulled over the idea of blasting a hole right in the cockpit of the ship, but with shields the cannons' energy would be dispersed all over the ship, including the fulcrums. He eyed Jed and Brovak through the window. A com-link request was sent to him with a beep. He blinked at the button to accept, pausing cautiously before hitting it.

Brovak spoke before Jed could "Yeah that's right! We have fulcrum! Two of them even! You know that they are made in Russia? Yes that's right."

Jed elbowed Brovak in the sternum causing him to jump back and fall over the navigators seat in pain. "Idiot! You don't taunt someone with a cloaking device!"

He turned his attention back to Romulan who looked back at him without a word. Jed thought that his opponent looked very strange indeed. Obviously not a normal human, perhaps one of the other races the Federation kept a secret.

Jed spoke flatly "There is no way either of us would win this engagement at all. So I ask that you simply leave Sapphire, I'm sure you have met your objective by now anyways." He waited but there was not reply.

Brovak had recovered and wiped his mouth before giving the communications another try. "Why you hit me Jed? This dweeb wants a fulcrum! I say we die in glorious fireball with him! HA HA HA!"

Jed shook his head in disgust and the comm-link closed down - Romulan's cabin light dimmed. The ship turned slowly 90 degrees and then jumped away.

Brovak roared with thick laughter. "HA HA! What a coward! You have balls of iron my friend!"

Jed rolled his eyes and reached past Brovak plotting coordinates for the nearby repair station. "It's balls of steel Brovak." A message shot up on his main screen just as he turned his ship to jump. It was from Romulan.

"See you again human called Jed." And that was it. A pre-recorded message winked up on screen just after. It was from John. Jed braced himself for the foul language he knew was coming.

Chapter 3 - The Stooges of Three

The pre-recorded message held wonders of the English language that Jed and Brovak had never heard before. Jed could have sworn that a few of the curses were in Italian or Yiddish. Brovak commented that a few of the words were in Russian as well. Once the message was complete however the idea behind it was obvious. John was angry because they had let Romulan escape. And now they were under pressure to catch or kill Romulan, before a bounty was put on their heads.

"I realize suddenly that I have eaten off more than I can chew. I'm running around chasing a psycho with Fulcrums and getting bounties put on my head. Not a good start I suppose." Brovak lamented.

Jed was quick to point out the bright side. "Well at least we are still alive and have the chance to go pick up your ship. And there isn't a bounty on our heads yet... We just have to get to Romulan in two weeks and we should be fine. Should we go find Kent now?"

Brovak snorted in amusement suddenly recalling Kent jumping blindly towards a planet with no shields. "Yes, of course. We wouldn't be the Stooges of Three without him."

Jed nodded in agreement then corrected him, "Oh and its 'bit off more than I could chew' and 'The Three Stooges'."

Brovak nodded making a mental note of the corrections. He wasn't the best at English but he didn't mind being schooled, it was part of learning for him. They set a search pattern by plotting several jumps around the direction Kent had jumped. He only had a low level jump drive so he couldn't have gotten far.

They found the Kent's drifting dangerously close to the atmosphere of planet Sapphire. Kent had suited up and was waiting for help, his distress beacon shattered by Romulan in the earlier fight. Obviously the man had no idea that it wasn't working. The three of them finally managed to hook tow lines between the ships and Jed started the painfully slow acceleration process towards a repair station. It was about four hours away if they used IDS. Jed managed to get them moving at a little over 4000 and they chugged along through space with the Ferret leaking atmosphere in tow. In the Saber Kent was arguing with Brovak over the dogfight and making all sorts of excuses about why he lost the fight. Brovak was heckling him quite a bit and Kent hadn't yet realized he was kidding with him. Jed pored over the information he had been given on Romulan. Some of it was classified information bought from the Alliance and some from the Federation. A few names stuck out like Admiral Hill and Major General Packett. Jed had known Packett when he was a Captain. Packett had been on Jed's first SF team and directed most of the missions. Captain Packett got promoted a few months later and took a desk job. Jed wasn't sure if Packett would respond to his general message about Romulan at all. Especially since the only address he had was a public one and it was sure to be screened by an assistant, not the General himself.

By the time Jed had docked the Saber at the repair facility Brovak and Kent had already fallen asleep. He woke them up on his way out and they hurried to follow him, albeit groggily. The repair station Jed had picked was the same one that Brovak had his ship docked at. The Saber was docked inside the repair bay with the Ferret resting on the concrete floor. Mechanics gathered around it as others made quite a ruckus nearby, cutting through metal on a customized Pulsar. Kent went over to see about repairs to his ship and how much they would cost him, while Brovak headed the opposite direction to the storage bays to inquire about his ship. Jed had disconnected the tow cables himself and asked a nearby mechanic if there was a place to get a drink. The mechanic shrugged for a moment wiping sweat from his forehead with a grease smeared arm, but then

pointed in the direction of a door labelled 'BOSS' since it was too loud to hear. Jed thanked him with a nod and headed towards the door walking around tool boxes and work bench's.

Jed closed the metal door behind him with a soft thud and looked around the small two-room office. The desk in the front was empty but strewn with papers and a computer screen covered in greasy fingerprints. Likewise most of the objects in the room had black fingerprints on them from overworked mechanics too busy to clean their hands. Jed noticed the well used fountain in the corner of the room and stooped to get a sip from it. Before he took the first gulp however a gruff voice suggested something better.

"How bout something with a little more kick than water?" It said.

Jed couldn't place the voice but it was quite familiar. He had never been to this station since it was never on his trade routes. He turned as he straightened up and swallowed his sip of water. Jed stared at a ghost from his past.

"Well don't just stand there like you don't know me! Come shake my hand or something!" Said a red bearded man with a bald head and smudged mechanic coveralls.

"Holy crap, Numan is that you? I haven't seen you since the teams!" Jed rushed to give the man a firm handshake, getting a little grease on his own hand.

"Yeah well I have been around doing what I do best, well at least what I do best in the civilian sector. You know, fixing things, making them better. Bought this station with my savings and I've been steadily making profit for the past two years. Before we continue lets step into my office, I've got some killer liquor smuggled from Earth."

Jed nodded with a big grin on his face and followed the man into his office. They sat down and Numan poured them both a generous amount of liquor in two coffee mugs. They caught up on events and were both quite relaxed within the hour. Jed let a few things about Romulan slip and that seemed to sober Numan up enough to make an uncomfortable silence. Jed shifted in his chair as something in the back of his mind turned a gear.

"You know something about Romulan I should know Numan? Did you encounter him with Packett or something?"

Numan, his tongue loosen by the hard liquor, talked for several minutes of talking and then let out a sigh as if he had been holding the information back for too long. Jed stared blankly as too many coincidences became connections very suddenly.

"WHAT! PACKETT TRAINED ROMULAN! What the hell Numan?! Why haven't you done something about it? He's out there killing innocent people and you're just going to let that happen?"

Numan shook his head and raised his hands in a defensive gesture "Listen I'm not on the teams anymore. Neither are you. You know damn well that politics were behind all of it. Packett insisted that we tell the rest of mankind about Romulan but since threats inside Sapphire were almost non-existent the economy was soaring out of control. No one was willing to leave Sapphire on trade runs because of the sense of safety. Who cares about massive profit when you can stay alive and make a good living just doing casual runs?" Numan said.

Jed growled and set down his drink roughly. "So your telling me, that Romulan is here because the Federation and Alliance need him to stimulate trade out to the other systems? That's the biggest load of braggie droppings I've ever tried to swallow. And

besides it doesn't make sense. It's just too convenient and the Federation would be buzzing news about it on their public network."

Jed's liquor softened mind was a bit too hazy to connect the dots but he was sure Romulan was no longer working for the government - any government if it came to that. Numan apologized for telling Jed but Jed just waved it off and changed the subject to women and the night continued.

Jed returned to the Saber in a stumble with a big glass of water fizzing from a detox tablet. He blinked as he hit the keypad to open the airlock, everything around him lost in a haze. Settling down in the pilot's seat he downed the glass of detox in a few gulps. The stuff tasted like cherries and pleasantly settled his stomach. Jed was about to fall asleep when there was a beep and another message appeared on screen.

"Hunter or hunted? Prey or predator? Sheep do not roam where their shepherd's do not allow. They are kept far from the wolf's lair. But are you a wolf in sheep's clothing? Or are you a watchful dog, humble servant to the shepherd that beats you? - Romulan"

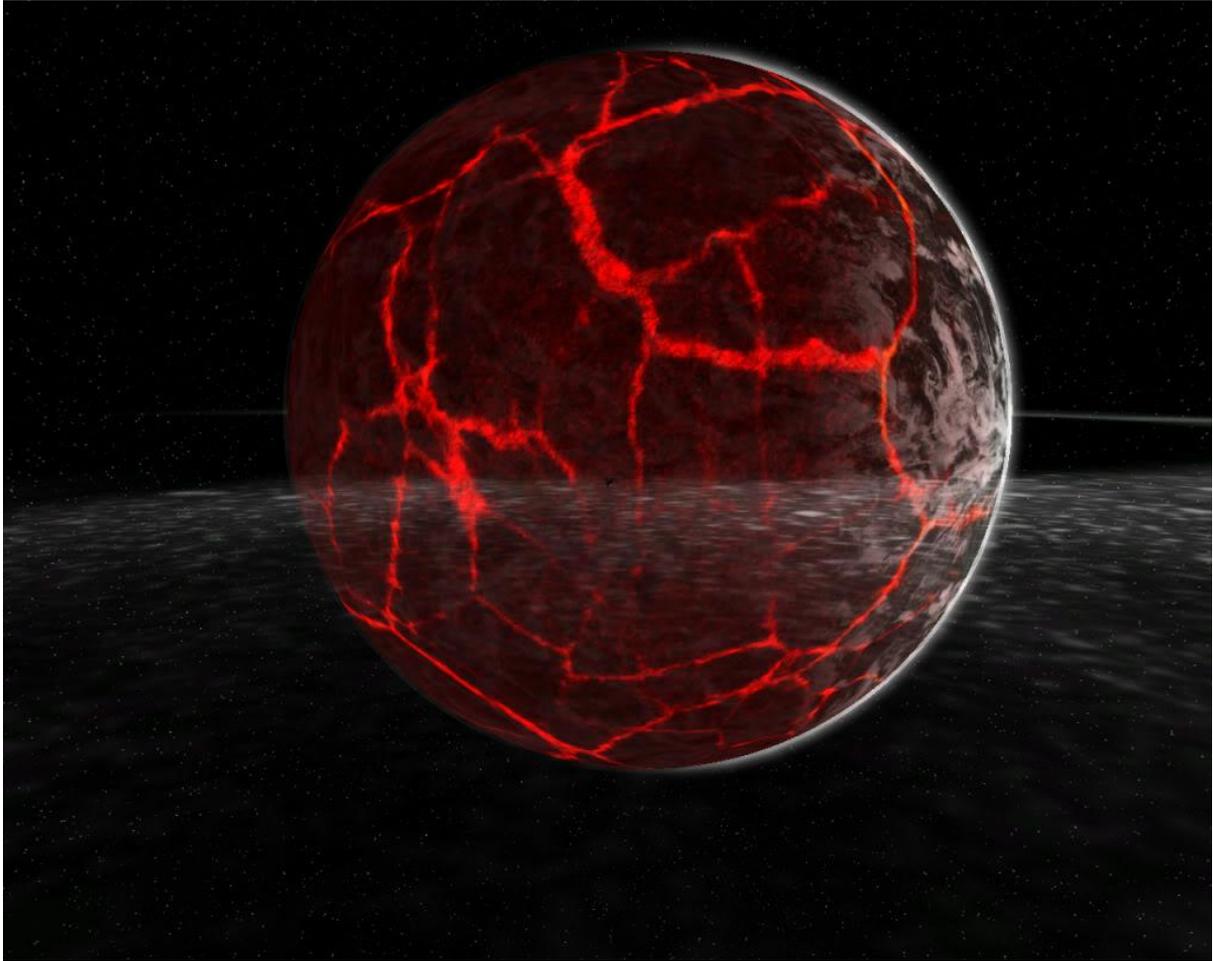
Jed sat up so fast his head spun and he almost slid forward off the chair. Romulan was trying to tell him something. Jed thought he might have an idea but didn't have time to pursue it because another message popped up on screen from General Packett.

"The General has asked to meet you in Cerulean. We will send you coordinates when you get there. - 1st Lt Natasha"

Jed felt that he had finally had a streak of good luck, since he was headed to Cerulean to trade his Fulcrums anyway. He was about to make some decent money **and** get a big break on Romulan. The only question he asked himself was if he should bring along his bumbling friends. As if on cue he heard Brovak yelling outside to someone "Shut up skinny brat boy! I will break you in half for that!" Jed groaned and stood to investigate the commotion. All he needed was to be held responsible for Brovak's behaviour since he had, after all, brought him to the station.

The Fire Of Twilight a story by Ryuu

December 2009



Next we have the story of a Captain who seemed to collect a motley crew - one by one, by chance and whilst being a prisoner on Vonarion!!

Ryuu also introduces us to the dog-like Vonari

(In an earlier story the Vonari are described a "scalies" but the Vonari pilots you meet in MP refer to their "pack" and their "pups")

The Fire Of Twilight

a story by Ryuu
December 2009

Part one - Squeak

They say that when you are about to die, your entire life flashes before your eyes. I never expected to be in a situation to test this theory, that is until I found myself staring down two dozen Vonari fighters. There was a loud bang behind me, followed by a curse.

"forward shields down to fifty percent"

"compensate!" I yelled back, "boost power to shields, and get to work on that fulcrum drive, we need to get outta here!"

"look, I'll get it working." Squeak yelled back! "I have to completely replace half the systems and rewire the other half, we may get two sectors at best, but that's two sectors further away from Vonarion than we are now!"

I had to give it to Squeak, he was a talented mechanic, despite his young age. How he ended up as a prisoner in that Vonari compound I do not know. As I wait for Squeak to finish his repairs my mind flashes back to when I arrived in the compound . . .

Battered and bloodied I was dragged from the Wasp, a clawed Vonari fist clenching my hair. Suddenly I found my back being pulled across the gravel where I had crashed surprising me after the smooth gangplank of my ship. I could do very little about my situation except watch in dismay as my ship was lifted up and taken away by a Vonari ship of a design I didn't recognise. After what seemed like hours, even though it was probably only a few minutes, I was thrown head-first into what I would have described as a dark cell if it had been brighter in there. I thought I saw someone curled up in the corner of the cell before the door slammed shut, blotting out the last sliver of white light. I fumbled around in my clothes, hoping against hope that the Vonari had not removed my torch while I was unconscious back in my ship. I was in luck! I flicked the switch and suddenly the cell was illuminated with the dim, fading yellow light of a failing battery. I cursed. It didn't help. I looked around my cell until my eyes settled on the figure in the corner, curled up, asleep I figured as I had heard no movements. I decided that I would let the figure sleep and get some shut eye myself, I suspected that tomorrow would be a hard day.

I awoke to find myself with a splitting headache and a sore back. I heard a sound and jumped to my feet, banging my head on the wall as I stumbled backwards. This time when I swore, it made me feel better. I flicked my torch on and looked around trying to see what the source of the noise was, I saw my new cell mate staring at me for a long time before he finally spoke in a faltering, slow dialect of Sierran, a nearby trade language.

"You the one that was causing all the problems for the Vonari in this sector?"

"Yes."

"How did you get caught?"

"Hit by an Excalibur pack."

"That sucks."

At this point he went back to fiddling with his clothes, an all in one Jupiter brown jumpsuit and I figured that was it for the conversation for now. After a few minutes of sitting in silence he started to speak again.

"I heard the Vonari talking, they say you were flying a talon, aren't those really badly armoured?"

"Yeah, but manoeuvrable, I can out-fly most ships and missiles, it's harder, but saves one hell of a lot of cash in repair bills!"

"Why though? With that piloting skill you could make billions flying privately, why fly for the military?"

"Have you ever seen what the Vonari do to the civilians they capture who cannot work?"

"No"

"I have, and it's not a pretty sight."

I was 12 when my parents died. I remember waking up to hear a howling sound. I ran to my parents room, suddenly I heard the door to our house burst open, and my father told me to hide under their bed. I was so terrified I didn't dare say or do anything except crawl under that bed and hide. No sooner than I was under it the door burst open, and I saw a strange paw-like foot step into the room, I heard my father asking what they wanted, they did not respond. I peeked out, curious to see what was happening, just in time to see one level a blaster at my mother. There was a flash of light, and suddenly my father was flying through the air, he landed in clear view of my hiding position and I saw his shirt was blackened and burned where he had leapt in front of the particle blaster. My mother screamed and cursed the Vonari, before one stepped forward and calmly stabbed her with one of its claw-blades. She collapsed and landed face to face with me. I heard a barking laughter and the door slammed shut as the Vonari left.

My mother reached out and grasped my cheek and whispered so quietly with her last rasping breath that I could barely hear, "Live a good life, protect those that cannot protect themselves and always stay true to your heart."

My words faltered and a tear ran down my cheek as I remembered my mother's last words, I took a few deep breaths and continued.

I crawled out from under my parents' bed and fled the room, I didn't want to see the faces of my parents, so calm, yet cold, in death, so kind to me, so loving. With the memory of my father protecting my mother with his dying act and my mother's last words on the back of my mind, I left our home to trip over the corpse of a Vonari, crushing a human soldier in his death grip, I was about to move on when I saw the weapons of the Vonari hanging from his belt, two blasters and two claw-blades. I took the weapons and fled down the corridors until I came to the local hotel. I knew that there was a merc staying there, and that if he was dead I could steal his ship and escape the station. There was nothing here for me now.

As I entered the hotel a pair of Vonari emerged from the door opposite, laughing and joking as they left a scene of bloody murder. I recognised the markings on their faces - they were the pair that had killed my parents. With a cry of primal rage I pulled the Vonari blasters I had taken out and fired wildly in their rough direction until one collapsed upon the floor. The other managed to duck behind the door he had just emerged from before drawing his claw-blades. He began to emerge from the door and I squeezed the trigger on my right blaster twice. Nothing happened. I cursed. It didn't help.

I threw the blaster aside and tried firing the other one. This one didn't fire either.

I pulled out both of the claw-blades I was carrying and charged forward towards the slowly advancing Vonari, he was so taken aback by the reckless charge that he paused. I used the moment's hesitation to leap forwards, straightening out in the air until my arms were held straight ahead of me. The Vonari didn't know how to react and tried to step back, this had no effect and I ploughed into him, blades first, stabbing him in the chest. As he collapsed in death, choking on his own blood, he did what all Vonari soldiers are trained to do and attempted to clamp his arms around me. However, the Vonari had never expected that a twelve year old human would be able to kill a Vonari soldier he had not been trained to crush someone as small as me and I easily slipped free.

Panting I rose to my feet, and wiped the sweat from my brow, only to find that it was blood and not sweat - worse it was my own. I tore a strip of fabric from the Vonari soldier's under-tunic and wrapped it around my brow in order to stem the flow. I then made my way to the merc's room and found his corpse on the floor, burnt-out blaster in hand and a blackened hole in his armour. I searched through the pouches on his armour and found two key cards in his wallet. One bore a ship id, which identified it as a talon with a minor upgrade to the engines and wing system, well legal upgrades anyway. The other had a bay number, C-6, that was just three segments away. Needless to say, I made it to his ship, and managed to flee the system.

I finished my story and we again fell into silence. After a while I realised I hadn't asked his name yet.

"what's your name kid?" I asked

"dunno, never got told. What's yours?" he replied sighing

"I don't have one either, people just call me Hakumei." I told him honestly

he laughed "I guess we're perfect cell mates then"

"well I need to call you something, I can't just call you kid all the time," I thought for a moment, suddenly I remembered his peculiar laugh, "I know what, I'll call you Squeak."

part two: Inu

I was jarred back to reality by a shock that rocked the ship. I checked my radar, to find two Vonari fighters approaching from radically different vectors, I was going to have to take them down quickly if we were going to survive. I redirected power from shields to weapons, and was just swinging around when I realised something was wrong! I looked down, my power settings were still diverting all power to shields.

"Inu, what's happening to the power system, I need to divert power to weapons"

I heard a loud howl with varying frequencies from the Vonari weapons officer, the translation came through the com system a moment later.

"I'm working on it, I should be able to give you about seventy five percent power to the weapons system, but that's about it. Just start firing the weapons and I'll transfer the power while they are firing"

I was still not completely sure about Inu, I mean, sure, she helped us escape, and she certainly knew her weapon systems, but she was still a Vonari, and I wasn't sure if I could ever trust a Vonari, not the same way I trusted the rest of my crew. Despite my misgivings, I activated my weapons and sure enough, the monitor showed my shield power going down and weapons power rising, I my the fire on the closer of the two Vonari ships and within moments the ship was vaporised. Suddenly the proximity alarm went off indicating a nearby missile, I threw the ship into a loop, around the missile, causing it to spin on the spot, I then added some thrust towards the Vonari ship, accelerating until I was orbiting the ship, through the entire corkscrew the missile held its targeting lock and suddenly it wasn't spinning freely in space. There was a flare of blue and the Vonari ship lost all of its shields, I spun around and with three shots the Vonari ship was destroyed. Spinning to face away from Vonarion I pushed the thrusters to maximum and leaned back to wait for the next fighters to engage us.

As I sat there, I remembered how I met Inu.

My conversation with Squeak was cut short when the door burst open, flooding the room with electric light and blinding us for a moment. Once I got my sight back I decided that it wasn't worth it, as all I could see was the silhouette of a Vonari in the door, the Vonari howled quietly, I wondered what was happening. Again the Vonari howled, louder this time. When I still didn't react it looked at Squeak and howled gently.

"She wants to know your name, she can understand Sierran, but not speak it, Vonari throats are the wrong shape."

"My name is hakumei"

More howling; Squeak translated again, "she says that we should go with her, but don't say anything, Vonari law forbids slaves from speaking unless given permission."

"Whatever." I said, angry at being referred to as a slave, yet obeying her orders. What other choice did I have?

We were led down the corridors until we came to a small room with a number of devices on the tables, she moved forward and picked up what looked like a large wrist-watch and held it out to me, howling something, first at me then at Squeak

"She says it's a translator, it will pick up Vonari and translate it to Sierran. She also says most Vonari will not allow me to translate for you, so you will need it, it will make life easier."

As I strapped the translator to my wrist the Vonari howled again, the translator flashed up words on the screen as she talked.

"You will come with me to eat, then you will have to work."

"Very well." I answered, again consenting because I had no other choice.

We were led again down lots of corridors, until we reached a door with a large lock on it

"You will go through here, the guards will take you to the mess hall to eat, you will then begin work." she said as she was about to open the door.

She then said something that shocked Squeak so much he gasped, but I wouldn't find out why until a little later. "My name is Ino by the way."

I smiled as I remembered the first piece of kindness any Vonari had shown me. I soon learned that Vonari rarely shared their names with other Vonari they had just met, and certainly not with a prisoner from another race. I'm still not completely sure why she told me her name, perhaps it was to tell me that I could trust her, or perhaps it was another reason known only to her.

"Drive's fixed, she should give you four sectors, but I'd only jump three, it could become unpredictable past that" Squeak called across the intercom.

"Sure, three it is, Quaero, can you plot us a route out of here, and avoid any planets this time." I teased, glad to finally be able to jump away from Vonarion.

part three: Solitary

As the blue whirl of fulcrum travel faded into the darkness of space I set autopilot on and slid out of my chair, we were safe for now, I set an alarm if any ships were picked up within range of the scanners and went back to talk to my crew. My crew, what a strange thought, just a few weeks ago I was flying solo missions for the military and before that I was a bounty hunter, seeking criminals and bringing them to the authorities for the price on their head. I had never flown with a crew.

As I walked towards the back of the ship, Squeak climbed out of a maintenance duct. He ran a hand through his hair, dripping with sweat after working so close to the engine to repair the fulcrum drive.

"Squeak, you okay?" I asked, concerned about the amount of sweat soaking through his Vonari prisoner clothes

"Yeah, it's just a bit hot that close to the engine, I'll be fine now I've moved away." he reassured me. I wasn't sure since the stolen Vonari ship was quite warm, out of respect for Inu, who's tolerance for the cold was a lot lower than out tolerance for the heat.

A bark, I knew enough about Vonari by now to know that Inu was calling me. I looked around to see her emerging from one of the control rooms to the left of the corridor.

"Are we safe now?" she asked, the hair on the back of her head flattening down as she approached.

"Yes, thanks to Squeak." I responded, giving Squeak a pat on the shoulder to show my appreciation.

"Good" she growled. she then turned to Squeak and in a gentler voice "ar"e you hot? I can turn the temperature down a little for you if you wish, you look close to collapsing from the heat."

No sooner had Squeak nodded than Ino turned and darted into a room off to our right. A moment later I felt a slightly cooler breeze coming out of a vent next to me before Ino came out of the door she had just entered, wearing a Vonari combat suit of the type that they wore when boarding enemy ships and stations.

"I was looking in the ship's computer and managed to hack into one of the crew members storage locker, luckily she was my size" Ino explained when she noticed my confused look.

My watch beeped twice, on the screen the words '*Captain, I need to see you in my quarters*' appeared flashed twice and then were replaced by the words '*I just need 5 minutes to put my stuff back together after that last dogfight -Iajiiian*'

"What was that?" Squeak asked as I read the message

"Iajiiian wants to talk to me in her quarters," I told him, "but not immediately."

"How did you meet her anyway? She was kept separate from us most of the time." Squeak asked, unable to hold back the question.

I started at the beginning because Ino was listening. "it happened right after Ino sent us to the mines, I remember quite well."

The door swung closed behind me and I heard a click as it locked. Before I could turn to look, I heard a bark "you, human, come!" I was commanded.

"Why?" I responded without thinking and received a slap for my troubles

"You will speak only when given permission, human."

"Sorry." I apologised, receiving another slap, harder this time. Knocking me from my feet

"You, human, go to the mines." he said looking at Squeak, before turning to me. "And you, you will learn some manners. Follow me."

I was taken through to a room hewn from the rock, and thrown into a tint cell, with no flat place to lie on, and not big enough to lie down properly anyway, and an energy shield was activated behind me, I felt heat emanating from it. I would probably be burned if I touched it. I leaned back against the wall resigned to my fate. I had been standing there in silence, nothing to do but think, for nearly an hour when I heard movement outside my cell, I looked to my translator as a Vonari began speaking.

"Get in there, you may be too valuable to kill, but you will still behave."

I heard the energy field on the cell next to me hum into life as the Vonari left the prison block.

"Hey, you the new prisoner?" I heard a voice whisper through a hole between the two cells.

"Yeah, I arrived yesterday" I replied, "how long have you been here?"

"Too long, about two years now, I'm only alive because of what I know" the voice paused "My name is Iajiiian, what's yours"

"I'm known as hakumei, I don't have a name."

"Pleased to meet you hakumei."

There were a few minutes of silence before Iajiiian spoke again. "I don't know how long you will be in this cell, but I want to make a deal with you"

"Go on..." I asked, wondering what Iajiiean was talking about

Iajiiean's voice lowered so I could barely hear. "I can tell you how to escape... if you take me with you."

The Crew

Captain/Pilot - hakumei, an orphan who wishes to protect people so no-one will have to suffer the same losses that he did

Engineer - Squeak, a strange young teenager with no name or known origins, has been a prisoner of the Vonari for as long as he can remember

Weapons ops - Inu, a Vonari female who helped them escape from the compound and decided to help Hakumei protect those weaker than himself

Navigator - Quaero, a seasoned traveller who was captured by the Vonari after nearly jumping into the atmosphere of Vonarion

Science ops - Iajiiean, a skilled scientist who was captured and kept alive by the Vonari because of something she knows

Editor: This is an excellent team with great potential and great story telling
. . . hint . . . hint!

The siege of station Zeta by verbosity

May 2010



Verbosity offers us another story from the early days of EVOChron - set after the first Vonari attacks and whilst the outer colonies were flexing their muscles, seeking independence. This is part of the story of the prototype Build and Deploy Constructors.

Hopefully Verbosity will create part 2 some time

The siege of station Zeta

by verbosity
May 2010

Janov stared at the displays in disbelief, The first attack had come without warning. The radar probes stationed around the sector were knocked out seconds before a series of explosions shattered the peace. "Fulcrums, they're sending fulcrums at us" he thought.

The attack was short lived, and he set about assessing the situation at the conn. Whilst stations were designed to withstand sustained assaults, somehow the attack had damaged the communication and navigation arrays. Janov activated the station intercom

"Attention all, The station is under attack, we are deaf dumb and blind, lockdown the docking bays, and prep a scout ship for recon, janov out".

Damage reports started coming in from around the station, apart from the external arrays, damage had been light, and injuries had been minor.

Zain sat in his quarters, the lights dimmed and a glass of scotch in his hand, taking a sip he thought back to his past, unaccounted except for his own conscience. "Jass, why'd you do it?" he thought to himself.

Zain had been a spacerat from his earliest days, and had jumped into a ship as soon as he gained his licence. He remembered his early years fondly, an endless adventure, shipping, fighting even the occasional pirate spree. He had been one of the first pilots to find where the renegades had gone, the so-called Riftspace, but when the Vonari war had broken out he had enlisted. An old friend, now a teacher now at the OTA had once told him that they told tales to the rookies of him as one of the 'Legends' of the early part of the war. "War? no it's no war" He thought to himself " It's an endless onslaught, wave after wave of them, never stopping, there hasn't been a single break in their attacks in the last ten years. We're breaking up, all of us, it's only a matter of time before something gives, and then everything will fall".

Zain was right, almost everyone in the Alliance knew he was right, damn near everyone in the Evochron quadrant knew it. Systems had been declaring themselves independent, rumours abounded of a new 'Federation' navy being built, and yet all the while the alliance threw everything they had at the frontline, with nothing to spare for anything else. "They're giving the whole quadrant over to the mercs, heaven help us". He sank the contents his glass in one swallow, the harsh scotch burning his throat, and poured another as he fell back into the bittersweet abyss that was waiting for him. "Jass.." he murmured again.

As the attack hit, for a moment he thought he was dreaming, reliving that fateful day ten years ago. He was shaken out of this by the scotch bottle on the table beside his chair falling, shattering on the ground in front of him. " So it's finally happening, well it had to happen sometime".

Striding into the conn room Zain took command, "Stations everyone, maintain alert. Janov, whats the sitrep?" he called.

"Station is in lock down sir, minimal damage to major systems, though nav and comms are down, no response from radar probes, and we've got a scout ship ready to fly" Janov responded.

"Casualties?"

"A few minor injuries, nothing critical commander".

"Good" Zain sighed "Alert the med bays, there'll be more before this is out. I need to know exactly what happened"

"It was sudden sir" Janov reported "Radar probes went down just as the attack started"

"Hmm, whoever it was, they know what they are doing. Ensign," Zain motioned to the ensign sitting at the tactical console - "Ensign, scan the logs - if we're lucky we'll have a shadow from the last seconds before the nav went down"

"Yes Commander, what am I looking for?" the ensign queried.

"Well those were fulcum device, so whoever is out there is human, I'd guess that we're looking for several ships judging from the speed and effectiveness of that attack".

Commander Zain tapped the intercom "Spanners, we need nav and comms back"

A voice came back over the comm channel "Nav should be up within the hour sir. but sir, the comms are gone"

"Frak!" thought Zain. "OK Janov, let's get some eyes out there - spring the bird"

Janov tapped at his console

"Bird is on the wing commander" replied Janov indicating that the scout ship had been launched.

"OK, meet me in my ready room Janov" Zain said, making his way toward the ready room door.

"Somehow they always end up looking the same" thought Janov as he walked into the ready room. The room had the same gun-metal walls of the rest of the station. One wall held the certificated and merits of the Commander and some of the crew, including himself - the opposite wall had an old wooden writing desk, which showed the signs of being both old and unused, varnish peeling from the wood in places. A small model of a talon configured for light combat duties sat on top of the writing desk on a stand with the plaque 'Warbird' etched into it, a reminder of the commander's first ship. At the end of the room a large mahogany desk with a maroon leather covering, and at the other side of this the commander, with uniform unbuttoned at the collar, a glass of scotch in his hand, and looking as tired as if he'd never slept in his 54 years.

"Sit Janov, somehow I think we'll be here a while"

Janov sat and Zain handed him a glass already filled with an amber shot of scotch.

"Jack, what's going on? Why would anyone attack a station? With our gravity field we're dammed near invulnerable, only the pineapples can damage us, with . . . well you know." Zain stared into the glass.

After her death, Jack Zain had fallen into the bottle, he sat there day after day at the bar of " I don't remember", sat there for months, just staring into glass after glass trying to forget. That had been interrupted one day, by the arrival of the Admiral Bower

"Jack we need to speak", he said as he sat down at the bar beside Zain, ordering a bourbon for himself "

"You've nothing to say that I want to listen to"

" Frak Jack! Don't you think I don't know you blame yourself, the wolfies, me, the Alliance, the goddam universe for all I know. But jack I need you, just listen to what I've got to say"

" Feak you!" Zain snarled back "She's gone, and she'd still be here if it hadn't been for you!"

"Yeah, I know Jack, I blame myself for it too, we should've known, could've tried harder. But it happened and I'm going to live with that, with her loss on my conscience. But you, you've got a chance to turn the tide, to push them back. We need you to save us Jack."

A few days later Jack Zain walked into the Alliance headquarters wearing the uniform he'd promised he'd never wear again, He was directed into a conference room, to meet Admiral Bower, another admiral wearing an S.O. designation on his shoulder. A couple of tech sergeants stood nearby.

"Thank you for coming Jack. This is Admiral Thorn from S.O."

Jack snarled, and refused the admiral's proffered hand.

"Hmm, and this is T.S. Owens , and T.S. Mc Walter".

The TS's glanced at each other for a moment and decided to salute rather than risk their hands being refused. Jack returned the salute, with a small twitch of his lips, the first glimpse of a smile for over a year.

Admiral bower continued "Let's sit gentlemen, Owens please you may begin".

Owens stayed standing, flicked on the view-screen on the far wall and began "Gentlemen, let me introduce, Project Zeta".

Jass, he'd met her near the end of his first Command, the Alliance Cruiser "StrongBoy". The StrongBoy wasn't big or fast Being an old type-C model, but it what it lacked in finesse it more than made up for in firepower. Zain had been ordered to escort a fleet of medical and science vessels from Sapphire to Deneb, to help with a new viral contagion that had emerged there. The 'Black-Jack' run was so-called because it was a gamble whether there'd be action or not. Usually a Cruiser and a wing of heavy strike craft was enough to deter would be pirates, but every so often they'd get brave and try their luck. If attacked though Zain knew his headache would be different, the 'med-jocks' (as they called the Captains of med and science vessels), knew their ships would not last long against an attack, and would sometimes risk a 'flat jump', before their engines were fully cycled, or before the rest of the fleet was ready, and this was what gave the pirates a chance. Flat jumps rarely sent the ship to the plotted location, and often left the ship with heavy damage, To the pirates this meant easy pickings.

The convoys journey had been quiet ("too quiet" Zain he thought, as they passed through Rucker) until they reached Virgo. An old battered Federation Cruiser had

appeared with a wing of Strikers. As usual the Rebel ships were outmatched and outgunned, but over the intercom came a panicked voice.

"They're attacking us, we've gotta jump"

Zain had opened the intercom " Frak man, hold your position till we've cycled back up!"

Another voice came on the intercom then, "You're not going anywhere, leave now and you'll die, and more will die in Deneb"

Zain looked at the tactical HUD, and saw one of the medical cruisers pitch left, crossing over the panicked captain's flight path, and stopping him from jumping

"Medical ship Chapel to Captain Zain, that blockheads not going anywhere till the rest of us are! Sort out those rebels and we'll be on our way"

Zain should have been angry, furious even, but a small smile curled the corner of his mouth as he opened the intercom "You hear the lady, boys let's take them out".

The rest of the run was clear sailing. After they arrived at Deneb there was the usual formal diplomatic events, and at a 'thank you' dinner thrown by Deneb's Governor, he met her - the lady with bottle.

"So you're the plucky pilot who risked her ship in Virgo?"

"That damned Hayden, I don't know how he got a command, should've stuck to shipping ore around Erato"

Zain chuckled "Not often you hear a med-jock talk like that, I'm Jack Zain"

"This my first command, what is it you mils call us, wet-eared? I used to be a Science officer on an old merc explorer-ship, a deep space leviathan. I'm Jass Ortyon, it's a pleasure Captain"

"The pleasure is mine Jass, and while we're under the sky, you can call me jack, You had some guts back there, could've lost your live, and your ship, back there if he'd tried to jump"

"Like I said, Hayden is a goddam coward, he wouldn't do anything that foolish."

"I've seen it before, I was at Opal, when a med-jock wiped out six ships in one go by flat-jumping"

"Youch. Say Jack, I'm starving, you fancy skipping outta here and grabbing a gorfburger". Her eyes sparkled.

" I thought you'd never ask" he replied

In the ready room, Janov sipped at his bourbon, "Zain what's going on here? There's something your'e not telling me".

"Janov, I'd hoped we'd never have to deal with this, but there is a risk to the station. From the Andromeda drive".

Janov's throat went dry "jeez, you mean?"

"Well I hope it's not the case, Frak man I'm praying it's not the case. But if it is we're gonna have one hell of a fight".

Zain tapped the intercom "Tactical, what do you have for me?".

The voice crackled back over the comm. "No reply from our bird sir. I've checked through the logs and found a couple of shimmers and what I'm guessing is an old type-D jumping in just before our arrays went down".

"Shimmers.." Janov started "so we've got at least two birds with stealth tech and a cruiser outside, chances are our bird's been downed. Looks like we might be here for a while."

"If we have a while" Zain replied, before tapping the intercom once more "Spanners, I need eyes in my sky, and soon!"

In Alliance headquarters Zain looked in disbelief and the view-screen in front of him.

"Let me get this right sergeant, you've managed to reproduce the Andromeda device?"

Tech sergeant Owens sighed and started again. "Not quite, Sir, we've managed to reverse engineer a drive based on the technology, with a few limitations. In short commander, based on this device we can easily transport a station to any point in space".

"So someone sets off ones of these 'constructor' devices of yours, and a few minutes later a station appears?" Zain asked.

"Essentially yes commander"

T.S. Mc Walter interjected "The drive will only work for transport once, but it will also power and provide a residual 'gate' for the movement of materials. We've already got a prototype station complete, and have several supplementary structures in construction"

"Jack," The S.O. Admiral started "it's not quite what we were hoping, but this technology could save us, save humanity in EVOCHRON, even win the war for us."

Zain snarled at Admiral Thorn " what do you want from me?"

"Take it easy Jack," Admiral Bower replied "We need a crew to travel out and test the constructor device, and the station. We need someone we know will do the job. Frak Jack we need you."

One month later, Jack walked onto the bridge of the Alliance Carrier Omega. "Here it is Jack" said Bower "Welcome to the Farstar Construction Site".

Zain looked out of the bridge windows. They were in a system Jack hadn't seen before. A small orange sun in the centre of a solar system of asteroids. Nearer the carrier Jack could see hundreds of freighters ferrying, mining, shipping to and from the asteroids to a station construction yard, with another one by its side.

"Jack, you see? Each of these construction yards is over five cubic kilometres in size, it's the biggest project mankind has ever started." Bowers was visibly excited as he continued "we're building another station construction yard as you can see, and once that's done we're going to build similar, smaller 'probe' structures. With this we can hold off the onslaught Jack, we can push back the Vonari".

Bower lead Zain to the lift, and they travelled down to the hanger bay. Jack looked out to the single ship in the bay.

"Here she is" Bower held out his hand pointing at the renegade class ship. "We've christened here the 'Ortyn'. You've got your crew together?" Zain nodded, " Good you leave oh six hundred tomorrow".

Sapphire in Spring was beautiful. They had rented an old log cabin and taken their leave together. The cabin was nestled at the edge of a lake near the mountains, one small stream ran gently past the side of the cabin down toward the lake, and the tall pines of the surrounding forest gave a comforting sense of enclosure to Zain's spacerat instincts. Jass sat on the edge of the cabin's porch enjoying the pink and red evening sky as Jack prepared a small fire.

"You know Jack, I could be happy here, just you and me."

Jack Laughed "Oh its beautiful, but you're as much of a spacer as I am, sure it's beautiful here, but I know you'd rather have four solid walls and the view of the 'way."

"Maybe" she replied " but this is special, jack , If nothing else we'll always have this"

Jack laughed again "We'll always have Sapphire in spring, sounds like one of those holvids of yours".

Later that night as they lay curled up beside the fires Jass looked up to the sky,

"They are different down here, under the sky. Not as clear, but they twinkle".

Zain turned to Jass "I've taken another tour, they're sending me back to the front line".

She stared into his eyes " I should be angry, but I know you couldn't avoid your duty, which sector?".

"Sierra" he replied.

"Well that's not too bad, I'm posted in Agate most of the time, we'll still get time together."

Zain grinned " and we'll always have spring in Sapphire".

Engineer Yarrow, otherwise known as spanners called up on the intercom up to the briefing room

"Commander we have eyes again, I rigged up a comms device, but they're scrambling us"

Zain thanked Yarrow and motioned for Janov to escort him back to conns.

"Eyes are up everybody, lets see what's out there" he called as the strode in through the door.

The Officer at the tactical console called up the security feeds, at first there was nothing to be seen outside of the station.

Janov called out "sector 15, magnify" and one of the screens shifted to show an old battered cruiser

"Well theres big bird, it's an old type-D alright" said Zain.

"Sir" called out one of the crew, "I've got signs of debris near the docking ring, looks like the remains of our scout ship"

"They're camping us" said Janov, thinking aloud " we know there are at least two cloaked ships out there, It means they can be right outside and be able to take any ship down before it can respond.

"Yes," Zain agreed "but there may be more than two though, and as soon as we try to launch a full wing that cruiser would move in"

Zain set the intercom on station wide "OK boys and girls, we're maintaining full alert for the time being, Cons, keep your eyes out for any signs of shimmers, or any change in the status of that cruiser. Hangers prepare our strike wing and keep them ready for a fast launch. Spanners, I need you to monitor our energy systems, let me know if there is any sudden change in status. People we are in a siege situation, we have little idea of our enemy their strengths, or why they are here. Stay Alert, Zain out".

The night before the Ortyn's maiden voyage, Thorn came to see Zain.

"Damn what do you want, Thorn?" he demanded as the door to his quarters slid open to reveal the S.O. Admiral.

Thorn strode into Zain's quarters and poured himself a drink

"You don't like me do you Zain" he said with his back to the commander.

"I don't like S.O. your lot caused her death" Zain growled in return.

"I was told about the 'Aries incident'"

"Incident? People were butchered, I lost my wife, Because S.O. needed to cover their backs!"

"OK Commander" said Thorn pulling rank "you don't like us , but the fate of the Alliance depends on your mission, and the fate of your mission depends on me. Now sit down and listen to what I've got to say"

The next morning Zain called the crew to the hanger where the Ortyn Was undergoing is final checks. The crew was small, Lieutenant Janov and Chief Yarrow had served with him on the StrongBoy in Navigation and Engineering, along with T.S. Owens who Zain had picked for the role of Science Officer. While they prepared themselves and the ship the admirals arrived in the hanger.

"Welcome to the Ortyn, gentlemen" Thorn called "You'll find some nice kit on this baby. It's not fast, or a heavy hitter, but she's got a Mantis jump drive, a Stealth generator, C5 shields, and your new toys, the build constructor and deploy constructor modules."

Bower was next "Your mission is to travel to your given coordinates behind Vonari lines near the Sierra warzone, there you will utilise the deploy and build constructors, and if successful man the resultant station and sub-structures, god speed men."

"Thank you sir," said Zain "Ok boys lets move it - we spring our bird in five."

Honour Duel: a story by Verbosity

January 2009



Another tale from Verbosity. You may well meet the protagonists of this Tale in MP!

Al's Bar is found in Al's Quay, an uncharted system near Pearl. Al's Bar is a meeting place for Mercenaries from across Evochron. You can't call yourself a merc unless you've sunk a few (or many) with the other merc's in Al's Bar



Honour Duel: a story

by Verbosity
January 2009

Al's bar was quiet at this time of evening, the lights were low, and the only occupants at the bar were a few stragglers slowly drinking their sorrows away. Verbosity stood at the bar talking shampoo and bloodwine with Al as the viewscreen above the bar mutters the nights business reports.

At that point Eclipse walked into the bar, making straight for the bar and ordering a beer.

"I'm surprised you still let that scum into the bar Al" mutters Eclipse shrugging in Verb's direction.

"You looking for a fight?" Verb replies turning to face Eclipse "you know where my ship is."

Eclipse turned back toward the bar "Ha, you wouldn't be so loud if it was BraveHart. You can challenge him - he's on his way here now . . . "

A few minutes later Yoda walked into the bar, meeting Verb face to face.

"A challenge old man, for the honour of your Clan"

"Where did this come from?" asks yoda

"You should be more careful who you let speak for you" replied Verb pointing in Eclipse's direction, " nd I'm in a fighting mood anyway".

"Very well, if you want to meet your fate! tomorrow, in Pearl at dawn!"

"I hope your insurance is up to date old man, now let us drink and be merry, for tomorrow one of us dies" . . .

--oOo--

Ice crystals floated around the station like a fleeting mist before dawn, BraveHart ran one last check over his systems, Part of him relished the calm before battle, but he could feel the stress building, - that was also good, it gave him his edge. Tapping on his coms he muttered "Will he arrive or has he lost his nerve?".

At that moment there was a small energy flicker near one of the outer station constructs as Verbosity declocked,

"I've been waiting for you old man I hope you're ready."

BraveHart's hand flicked once again towards his comm, but as he did he noticed a strange shadow pass briefly across the cockpit glass,

"A Vonari fighter, here?"

"It's a bomber" came verbs voice over the comms "They haven't entered Alliance space since the conflict, We should check this out"

BraveHart and Verbosity both hit their afterburners chasing after the alien craft; travelling at high speed they slowly gained on the enemy craft until further shadows darkened their view. . .

Even at this early hour AI's was packed. The place was known as **the** place to watch such honour duels as was going on at that moment, and the bar was standing room only; - even the Klingons had turned up to watch this battle between two pilots who had held at bay their invasion of the sector for so long. Shewter ordered another shampoo and turned to Vice.

"We have to do something about these honour duels, here are two of our best pilots about to destroy each other. Our clans have had an uneasy history, but we have stood together to defend Evochron too many times to allow ourselves to destroy each other."

"I agree," replied Vice " but pilots understand honour almost as well as those Klingons, and ego is part of being a pilot. With no common enemy, it's human nature that we will fragment and fall into conflict with ourselves."

"We managed to leave our home planet, reach out to the stars and survive, yet we're still trapped by our basic animal nature" muttered Shewter as he turned back to his drink.

Back at the bar AI was tuning the view screen in to the Alliance network for Pearl Station, there onscreen was Bravehart, seconds later Verbosity appears. The noisy bar became deathly quiet . . .

. . . and the viewscreen collapses into static . . .

"Long range comms are out" shouted verb, almost frantic "I can't even reach the station!".

"Stay calm" responded BraveHart "How many to you count?"

"Three capital ships, a wing of bombers and two other wings of mixed interceptors and fighters, They are heading for the Arvoch Station!" said Verb, gathering himself for what seemed like an impossible battle.

"It's revenge, for the conflict, And we are all that stand in their way. I've got a bunch of exodus missiles and a couple of leeches, what about you?" BraveHart knew as he said this that it may not be enough

"Six Exodus and 1 Stealth, what are you thinking?" Verb said making some minor adjustments.

They were staying on the edge of sensor range, but the Vonari weren't breaking formation, and were making their way slowly toward Arvoch Command.

"We can't engage them head-on, there are too many, but if we use hit and run tactics we should be able to concentrate fire on one capital at a time" Bravehart suggested.

Verb agreed "If we can damage or take out two of those capitals it might force them to retreat"

But Verb knew this was unlikely, never once had he seen a Vonari craft retreat. Even when heavily damaged they still fought on . . .

"Hit and run is dangerous, but it's the best chance we've got."

"Well we both know what to do, You've got stealth, get in position and disable the lead ship on my mark - we'll repeat jump as long as we can before retreating" part of BraveHart wondered if they would make it out of this alive, but part of him didn't care, if they didn't hold of this attack all of Evochron, all of humanity, could fall.

Verb stealthed and moved into position just underneath the belly of the giant Alien ship, He knew that not only was timing critical, but if his aim or positioning was only a little off then the ship's weapons would not be disabled, and he and BraveHart would quickly become scrap. Once the ships weapons were disabled, he and Brave would be able to jump in front of the ship and cruising on inertial be able to unload their guns before once again jumping away. It was a daring plan, both the other two Vonari capitals would be unable to attack without hitting their lead ship. The smaller craft would have no such trouble, but the repeated jumping would keep them off guard and scrambling for the humans current positions.

Verb held his breath as the timer slid to zero. As he unstealthed and let of the missile he could see the warp effect of Brave coming into the fray. He fired his afterburners and scrambled to get into the right heading to start his own run. It worked perfectly. The fighters, unable to organise in time were in disarray, and the ship's shields slid to nothing and it started taking damage.

"This babys going down" shouted BraveHart " and the fighters are pulling back"

"That doesn't make sense, Vonari don't retreat" replied Verb.

Just as the capital ship started to destruct from the final shots a warning flared on BraveHart's screens

"That's why - they have Fulcrums!"

BraveHart hit his afterburners, narrowly escaping the full brunt of the blast, though taking damage to both his shields and navigation array.

"I'm out, my navs gone, I have to retreat till I'm repaired". There was no reply . . .

--oOo--

Verb checked his systems, comms out, major hull damage, weapons and engines were on minimal and his shields were down. The navigations system was undamaged, and he could see Bravehart streaking out of range.

" At least one of us will survive" he noted as he spotted a wing of five interceptors on their way to him. Luckily he was on inertial, but only at 600mps. Switching his power bias to full shields he did the maths. The Vonari would be in weapons range in around fifteen seconds, his weapons and engines would be around 20% percent functional by then.

At a range of two kilometres the Vonari released their first volley of missiles, and Verb responded with a series of counter measures. Verb knew they he would likely be out of CM's soon, but without being able to rely on his weapons to shoot the missiles it was his only option.

Another flurry of missiles at 1k, another flurry of CM's - he was down to under 50 CM's.

But now was the time. Turning to face the Vonari attackers he turned off the inertial and set his thrusters to full, at a range of 500 he started shooting at the lead Vonari, hoping to take out any more missiles more than anything else. The lead Vonari ship headed at him, as it crossed the 100 metres mark Verb held his breath and pressed the button to launch an exodus.

His luck held, The Vonari ship, its frontal shield having already taken damage from the sporadic energy weapons fired by Verb, took the missile head on.

Flying through the fireball that was once the enemy ship Verb watch the wing split into two. Verb turned toward the nearest ship and started shooting. Part of him was aware of his systems gradually recovering, but his full concentration was on this new target. Another missile fired off and another hit. As the other two ships gained a lock behind him Verb let off another volley of CM's to counter the missiles than would inevitably follow. Twisting and turning he streaked after his target. He let off another missile, but it was turned aside by Vonari countermeasures.

A burst of his now operational afterburners allowed him to get close enough to see into the cockpit of his enemy as it burst into flames. "two more to go" he thought. More missiles, more CM's, Verb was now down to his last 10 countermeasures. He turned and streaked toward his would be attackers, and swiftly dispatched them. Checking his HUD he could see another wing on their way. Let them come he thought. Finally he heard a squawk, His comms was back online.

"Bravehart! Thank the gods! What's your position?"

Bravehart appeared on Verbosity's HUD

"Nice to see you're still alive, We might get that duel yet, how're you doing?" he queried

"Major hull damage, two missiles and only 10 CM's left though. Rest of my systems are almost recovered" Verb replied "yourself?"

"The Fulcrum took out my navigational array, its only just back, that's why it took me so long to try and find you. Otherwise I'm fine"

The Vonari wing was fast approaching.

"Have you got a location on one of the capitals Bravehart?" asked Verb

"Yes its already logged in" stated Bravehart as the keyed the coordinates to Verb.

"Let's jump in now, use your Leech on it - it'll take These Vonari a little time to return and give us a little breathing space.

The second Vonari capital was not as easy as the first, it took both of Bravehart's Leech missiles to disable its systems, and this time the other capital was able to take shots at the pilots. There was still a wing of Vonari craft near the ships, and this time they too were prepared.

"This is not going to be so easy!" shouted Verb into the comms.

" Dammit, if they are gonna take us down, were gonna make them hurt"

Both pilots were taking serious damage, and the Bombers they had left behind before were joining the fray now.

"Brave lets finish this capital, if we use all our remaining exodus missiles we should be able to destroy it"

"Agreed, lets do this"

One final run, both pilots let off their missiles, and took out the capital ship, but the bombers and interceptors were ready for them this time, a barrage of energy fire and missiles streaked toward the pilots, both taking heavy damage.

" I'm out of CM's, my nav and engines are gone!"

" My engines are dead too, let's hope we did enough to give the station a chance . . ."

"You guys need a hand?" comes a voice over the comms

"Vice" shout both pilots at once as a flurry of green and yellow blips scattered across their radars.

"We were at AI's waiting for you two to blow each other to smithereens, when the inter-sector comms went down, We thought it was just AI's at first, till we got a notification from the Alliance. MM called in Vice and Shewter when he noticed the whole sector was silent. we thought we'd check to make sure you two hadn't destroyed the place" called out Shewter.

Verb and Bravehart watched as the fleet of Merc craft polished off the rest of the attackers.

"You guys want a lift? " shouted Vice over the static of an exploding bomber.

"Sure, Thanks " said Bravehart.

"I hope this, means that you'll call off your honour duel?" asked Shewter.

"No way" shouted Verb, though just to be safe maybe we'll have it in Riftspace"

"Yeah, because it's so much safer there" Laughed Bravehart .

The End.....?

Editor: *We really hope not!*

A Not-So-Short Story by Ian 2454

March 2009



In the event this turned out to be just a fragment. Delinquents survive into the future it seems. It would have been fun to see what our antihero got up to next!

A Not-So-Short Story

by Ian 2454
March 2009

". . . and it comes with a jumping device, mining beam . . . Lil' bit more and it comes with a enlar . . ."

I spaced out. I'd heard enough anyways. Enough to get the putt-putt on. Wait . . .

"How much does it cost?"

". . . raded wing systems. Plus a cup holder! Throw on an extra fuel ce . . . "

He didn't hear me? Right.

"HOW MUCH DOES IT FRIGGIN' COST!?" I said just a wee bit louder.

'Wha. . .?' That was enough to stop this babbling vendor. Surprise was a common look on the nearby people.

Uncertainty filled his voice. "Ehhhhh . . . abou . . ."

"I'll take it."

"I've been nice to you! You know what?! I ain't selling you a damn thing! Out! GET OUT!"

Oh really? Hmm... I just casually started to scratch my stomach, slowly cinching my shirt as seconds past. The outline of the 'particle pistol' in my waistband became obvious. It was really a shaped block of wood made especially for getting discounts. Surface etching helped make it look more authentic.

Ahem

" What are you doing? I said get out!"

What? How can you miss that? Alright then. I put my hands in my pocket, put a finger over the end of the barrel and *waved* the 'gun' at him. When he looked down I said a long drawn out

"Yeah . . ."

I guess it helps that the merchant needs vision correction. The muscle in his jaw started pulsing, probably weighing selling me a boat versus getting shot. My knuckles cracked as my fist tightened and a smile rose . . .

--oOo--

"Hangar 2 Partiton 7 eh? That's quite a ways away it seems"

With a title deed from the local registration office and a copy of the space regulations I went to the hangar where **that** was. My brand-new never-owned . . .

. . . rusty decrepit flying fuel-tank?! There goes the rest of my stash. Another case of 'You get what you pay for' I guess. There was an swarm of people scrambling across. Not very reassuring that they were only stripping the iridescent ID numbers pasted across the hull. One of the engineers saw me and gave the 'Hold on a moment' signal.

"Break time everyone! Grease monkeys begone!" And with a flourish of his hands everyone started leaving. Once it quieted down a bit he came over to talk.

"Hi there! How can I help you?"

"Uhh... I just received a title to a space craft . . . "

"Do you have any paperwork with you?"

I handed him my ID card and the registration chip. Ironic how they still call it paperwork. The most infamous things usually last the longest. He walked across the partition to the adjacent storeroom to get a mobile workstation. The computer beeped a few times as it processed the request.

"It says you are indeed the proud owner of a Raven-class vehicle." He looked over at the ship. "Looks like it's seen better days though . . ."

"Yeah no kidding. This doubles as an item-storage facility for the station in orbit right?"

"Yeah," He looked around for a moment. "We do repairs if the price is right . . ."

--oOo--

"Finally..." I muttered as I walked out of my apartment. What takes an entire crew three weeks when I could do it myself in one? A gust of wind blew and made me shiver. I guess the evenings are a little cold . . .

Memories of my family during winter came back. What with the snowball fights and all. Good times indeed. *Sigh* My mind turned from the weather back to that annoying engineer who also happened to run the hangar. And to call me out at this time of night! Such insolence for the money I pay him. My own arrogance made me laugh. I could swear I sounded bitter. I got on my hoverbike and sped across the city. I mostly looked at the road, too many lights to enjoy the stars anyways. A grin played across. I will get my chance. As I arrived at my destination there was a homeless person burning anything that would catch. Perfect! This thing is killing me. I walked up to the pile of flaming composites and tossed a 2,340 page manual for all the equipment put onto my boat. I watched it turn from an ordinary old-fashioned leather-bound book into a raging ball of fire.

The main hangar door was open, and there he was, leaning against the wall. As I walked in the lights switched on.

Oh wow. Nice! It was beautiful! That idiot had actually done a good job and completely replaced everything from the armour to the engines. The formerly rusty and dented hull was now smooth and polished, the previously bent wings were straight, sharp and precise. Even the cargo bay was shiny.

"Alright then, I've already received payment from the family accountant. Enjoy." And the engineer walked off into the night.

I used the access console to pop the access door on the top of the hull and listened to it open with a satisfying hiss. I stepped up onto the wing and hopped in. The only available light was the hangar floodlights drifting through the access door, which made it quite hard to see in the cockpit. I didn't see a switch marked "lights" anywhere . . . might be just too many old videos but . . .

"Computer, raise lights."

The seconds ticked away and nothing happened . . . just too many old videos!

Right. I left the cockpit and went back into the main hull to go find a flashlight in the partitioned storage room. The ship's layout was pretty linear, with sleeping quarters in the back and a secondary sensor console behind the cockpit. Interestingly, the main power unit was on, and I activated the comm. console. I called my childhood friend to tell her the good news. She answered immediately. radio waves travel at the speed of light so a journey just round the planet isn't very far for them.

"Heya, and NO I'M NOT GIVING YOU ANY MORE MONEY!!!"

"Well, that certainly is a disappointment, but I think you might like this better."

I finally found the light switch and turned it on, and panned the camera around to show her the rest of the ship. I even brought up my registration file from the ship database and sent it over. The look of envy on her face was worth millions.

"You dirty rat! Where the hell did you get the cash to buy that?"

"Gambling" I said confidently, and with a smile.

"You're supposed to LOSE money at gambling. Not win it."

"I'll be right back, I'm thirsty..."

"Hey you get ba... DON'T YOU EVEN DARE-"

And I put her on hold. The kitchen (the "Multi-Species Requirement Consumables Preparation Module Mk III" according to the now cremated manual) was behind the cabin and near the quarters so I walked down the little hallway. I just needed some place to laugh. It was so funny to see her get angry! Something caught my foot as I went through the doorway and I fell, reaching out instinctively. My left hand grabbed hold of something cool . . . and not bolted down. It was a tray, that had a old lunchbox on it and I had wedged it against the back of the counter as it slipped and then flipped under my weight. That little box was now flying through the cabin and into the cockpit.

BEEP A little firecracker emerged from the outside hull and raced across the street into a building. Wait, why would a firecracker be on a space vessel!? Noooo... OH SH . . .

BOOOOM!

The ground shook and I had fallen (again.), and landed more or less on my head.

"Ugh . . . I'm never doing that again . . ."

My ears hurt and the headache was starting to get irritating. When I peeled my face off the floor and looked out the cockpit window, there was a massive portion of the building missing and the rest was blackened and smoking. In fact it was almost completely levelled. I just couldn't believe it . . . How many had I . . .? best not to think of that. I

felt around with my right hand and hit the 'Hold' button on the comm. console. It burst back into loud life . . .

"YOU LITTLE SONOFA..." Even an idiot could tell something was off. "Hmm? Hey, you alright? You're trembling . . ."

She finally realized that something was indeed wrong and gazed through the camera's view down the hallway. The destruction was painfully obvious during the night. Flickering flames glowing in the dark sort of thing

"Ah. That would just about do it, I think. Good job." Could tell from the sound of her voice she wasn't worried in the slightest. Argh.

All I thought about after that was "How am I going to get out of here..." I could quite possibly be screwed.

--oOo--

"Alright, so I'm in a hangar, with a ship ready to fly, probably with weapons..." Ideas came and left. This could be something though.

"..But you forgot to read the manual and somehow got rid of it because you're too lazy to read?"

I hadn't got past the first page of the Multi-Species Requirement Consumables Preparation Module Mk III Operating Instructions.

"Ah, never mind. I'm screwed."

"Lemme see the cockpit. I got an idea for ya. Ever play a game called 'follow the leader'?" She can't be serious.

"It's written all over yer' face. Yes, I'm serious."

I transferred the call to the comm. console inside the cockpit and pointed the camera down at the three readouts. My friend gave me a quick run-over of what they do and such. After the camera panned down a bit more she started getting a little less talkative.

"Alright, this is where it gets hard."

"This looks just like something you've flown and I just copy you to get out of being imprisoned?"

"Umm..." She glanced over everything the camera could see. "No, I've never seen something that looks like your controls and you're absolutely on your own on how to fly that." Right.

"Well... This should be fun. Just do this the old-fashioned way I guess."

My hand shook as I reached out to push a random button. The engine revved up and shoved the ship backwards into the partition wall. Monitor showed the rear shield had taken partial damage.

"You're never going to get out of here like that." she said.

I reached over and ended the call.

"Especially when I have no help..." I took a deep breath. "I've pushed one, might as well push another, right?" and so I did.

It was a button on the joystick this time. The wings glowed orange as thrusters fired and shifted sideways.

"Alright then. Not so hard is it."

The ground started rumbling.

"What'd I push this time..." And I looked at my controls. Everything was fine. Spotlights now swept back and forth over the wrecked building.

"You have to be kidding..." Why was tonight one of the nights that the police actually did something?

The comm. started beeping. I swear that woman likes to annoy me or something. I switched it on.

"Never hang up on my again. Anyways how far have you gotten?" She didn't look angry.

"Figured out how to go backwards and sideways with a good guess for the rest."

"Why aren't you going to leave already then?" she asked.

"Because I'm so very scared." My voice only shook a little bit.

"Did you find anything to help me in the time you were gone?"

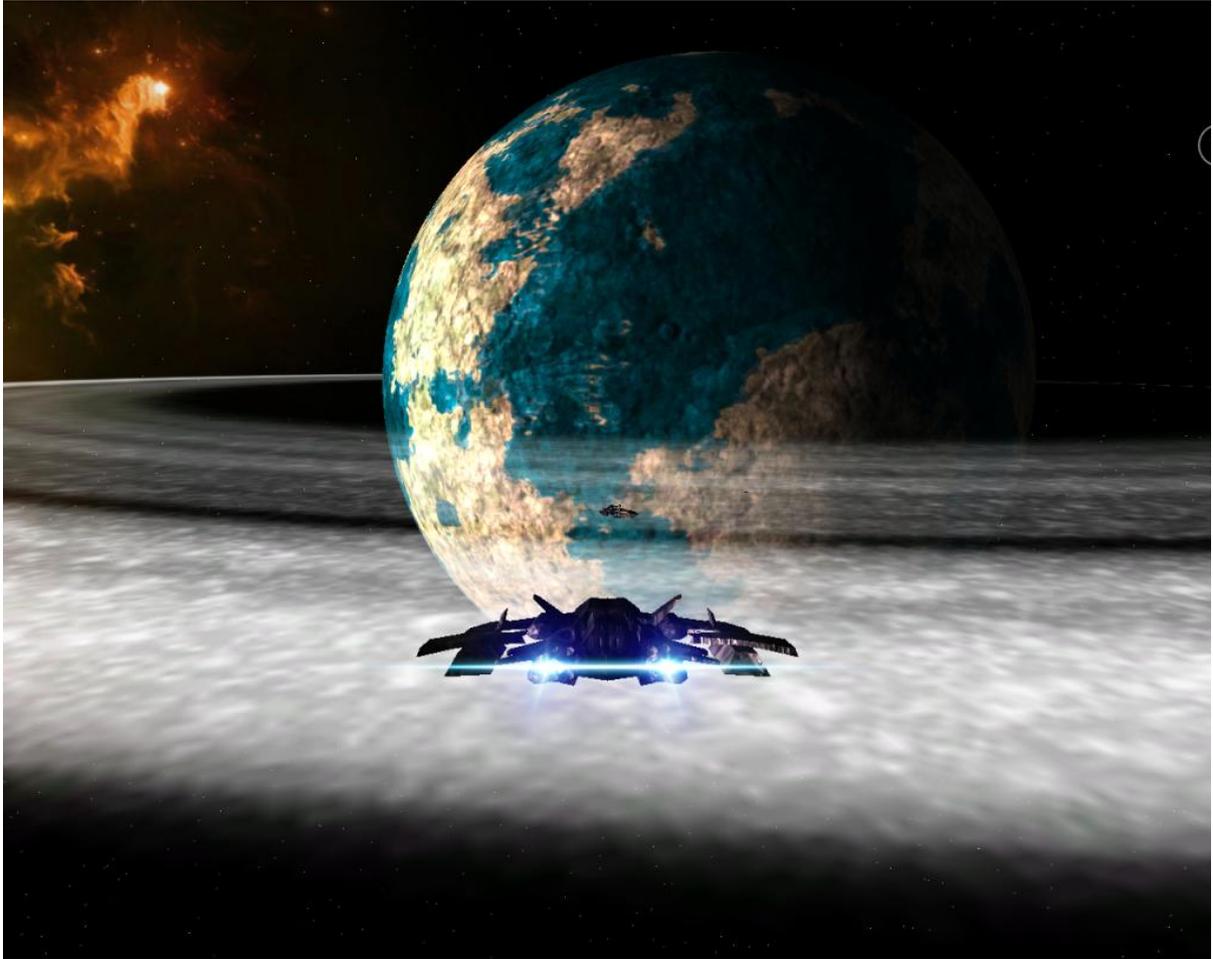
"No, started watching a soap opera." I turned the comm. back off and disconnected it. I was fairly certain I wouldn't need it anytime soon.

I moved the joystick a little in each direction. The nose flared and tried to spin the ship in various directions, the weight held it down though. I might just be gifted at this sort of thing after all. How do I go forward though . . . ? There were no levers or sliders for throttle. Why are all these buttons unlabeled? That's pointless!

People started to appear in front of the destroyed building across the street. Vehicles pulled up in front and more people jumped out. A lot were in uniforms. None looked happy. I need to hurry . . . I pushed another button and the engine revved again, this time rushing forward and skidding to a stop. The people looked up from what they were doing like deer startled in headlights. That's all I need! But there were too many people in front . . . "Meh, who cares anymore? Ah!" I pulled up on the joystick. The nose thrusters fires and the ship pivoted upwards until it was almost standing on the thrusters. Guns, guns . . . Where are the guns? I pulled the trigger and pushed a few buttons I hadn't tried yet, but nothing. Comes with missiles but no guns? That's . . . " I didn't want to look for another missile. Oh well. Shields alone should be just fine . . .

The Encounter by Benrerick

August 2009



This is sadly just a snippet of a tale. Few stories examine family life in the space military. Benrerick never started part 2, so we'll never know what they saw!

The Encounter

by Benrerick
August 2009

Hmm a buzzing constant and irritating sounds out. "Hmmm groan wha? Oh" (hits the off button).

"Time to wake already, geez feels like I didn't sleep at all". He looks around the room and takes in the small living space they have to live in for another two months. He is being reassigned back to Sol sector and he can't wait to head to Earth for a little R&R. As he starts to take off the sheets, he bumps into his wife. She still sleeps even after the alarm went off.

"She can sleep though a Vonarian missile party" (Smiling as he lovingly caresses her arm) He gets out of bed and heads to the mini crib at the foot of their bed to check on his little insomnia inducer. "Almost a year already huh pal" as he moves some of the curls off the babies brow "funny they say a baby changes things but no one mentions the midnight feedings and the stinky diapers hehe".

"Well time to get ready for my morning patrol".

He heads to the small locker that's provided to all the living quarters assigned to the men and women in the military and gets his flight suit. He quietly leaves their sleeping space and heads to the community bath to wash away the nightly sweat and to shave the stubble that grew in overnight.

"Hey Nick hows the family" a voice calls out. Nick turns to look at who called out to him even though he knows the voice.

"Hey James, what's going on this morning and my fams doing great!

"That's good to hear old man" James calls out just as an alarm and voice breaks in on the morning chatting.

"Six unknown ships on approach vector all pilots to their ships"

"Hmmm it never ends does it, oh well so much for the shower"

Nick quickly gets into his flight suit and heads to the launch bays. On the way he bumps into his wife Maria. She just dropped little Benny off at childcare.

"Hey there gorgeous" giving her a quick embrace and kiss. Maria was awakened by the announcement and was on her way to her work station.

"Ill see you when you get back OK honey" as Maria breaks away and heads off in the direction of the coms centre.

Nick continues on his way at a controlled run. As Nick approaches his fighter he gets a quick brief from his CO.

"We have six incoming craft we don't know what their intentions are, so make contact but be ready in case they are hostile, engage if fired upon."

Nick responds "Yes sir"

He turns to his squad mates and yells out "lock and load people we have a job to do and I want you all to be ready for anything understood!!" as one "YES SIR"

Nick climbs into his fighter and hits the com switch

"This is Solarian Squadron ready for take off"

The techs on the launch pad running about preparing the second flight group, in case Solarian needs the backup. From the helmet speakers" permission granted DH good speed and good hunting" Nick recognizes the voice right away, he married her 10 years ago after all. Nick smiles "thanks love" he whispers to himself. Always a good omen when she is on the horn.

"Roger that" he opens a channel to his wing of Wraith class fighters. "Formation delta go full burn and switch to inertial, save the fuel on case of a fight."

His squadron is the most decorated in the sector. Most of the pilots on his fighter group have family on the station. It's there job to defend it till all the construction is completed. The largest science station since Babylon 5 went active. This project started almost eleven years ago and still has two years before all the defences are at 100 percent and active.

"Alright people watch the scope they should be appearing any moment" Nick announces over the com.

"Winglead we have contact heading two nine six" Jill the flight groups navigation and communications officer calls out over the com,

Nick responds with "Alright Solarians let's see if they want a steak or a fight, Jill will you please ask our guests what their intentions are"

(Jill) " Yes sir, This is flight group Solarian we would like to make your acquaintance please state your intentions. Umm sir this... Can't be right.

"What is it Jill what's wrong???" Nick asks

(her) "I'm getting a strange signal can't ... The translator is not able to make hide nor hair out of it!!!"

"Relay the transmission back to the station maybe they can decipher it."

Jill switches her com relay to a tight microwave burst aimed at the new station.

(Jill) SIR!!! I have what looks like a text message I'll send it to your computer."

The message appears on Nicks screen "01010101 010101 11001000111" and repeats the same message."

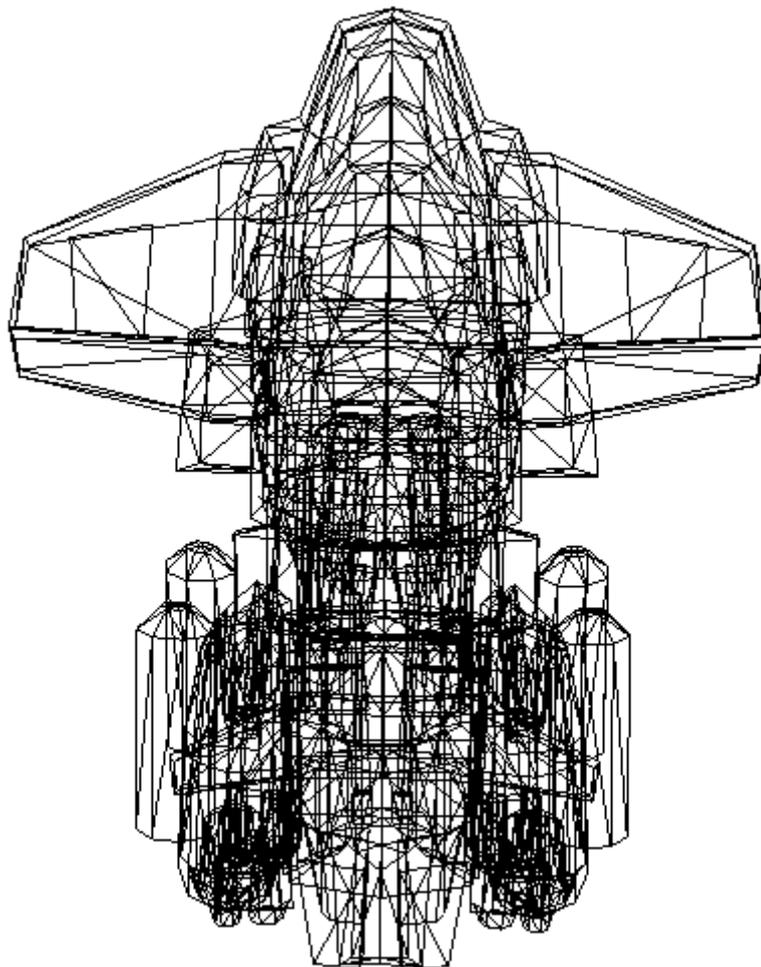
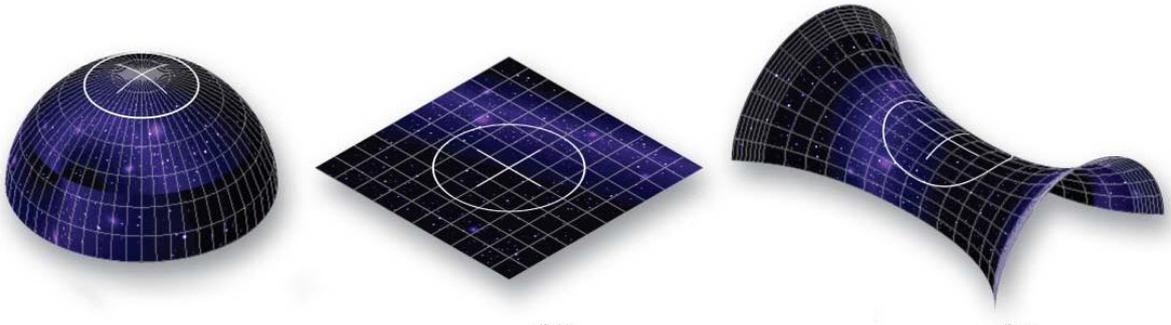
"Well I have a baaadd feeling about all this." Nick mutters under his breath. "OK people power up all weapons and shields to maximum - this may get ugly."

As they get closer they get the first look at the incoming craft. All pilots as one whisper

"OH MY GOD!!!!"

Blog of a Deep Space Explorer in five parts by DaveK

November 2011 - January 2012



Blog of a Deep Space Explorer in Five Parts

by DaveK

November 2011 - January 2012

(Part 1) in which I introduce myself and my mission

It's cold outside - very very cold. I'm glad I'm in here, warm and cosy.

It's not too lonely out here. When exploring I use my ship's name as my call-sign. You might have seen me on the list. There are often pilots going about their business back in the core systems who are happy to have a chat as they carry out routine contracts. And I've got **VICE** to work with.

DeepSpaceOne was used as a test bed for developing a ship that could reach the edge of the Universe. I used DS1 to develop protocols, refine the equipment load-out and plan a route for reaching beyond known space. During the planning stage for the mission I found out that there is a distance limit to how far you can use a Build Constructor to order a station. No station - no refuelling! Deploy Constructors still work though. I also found out that I didn't know much about the technology my life was going to depend on . . . and that there wasn't a manual you could buy to find out the easy way.

The **V**irtual **I**nteractive **C**omputer **E**nhanced AI unit has taken "The Team" at the Dirac Research Station several years to develop. This is "his" shakedown cruise. If **VICE** succeeds in this real life mission to find the end of the Universe, then I predict that within a few years (and if you're very rich) you could fit a VICE unit on board. "He" responds to normal language requests and commands and gives "his" responses in normal language. **VICE** is designed to intelligently use **OMNINET** to research and analyse data and to present the digested results in the most effective and efficient format. **VICE** is also able to handle the ship systems. His comprehension and decision core is a multi-phase integrated quantum neural network and he learns from experience - very quickly! Translated this means that he can make decisions and carry them out whilst reporting to you what he is doing. Useful if there is a hazard ahead!

On a test run, I visited Remula at 9999, 9999, 9999 - bit quiet out there but ideal for a server I suppose. **VICE** handled impeccably the repeat cycle of **"fly until fuel nearly used up - stop - construct Trade Station - dock - refuel - launch - repeat"**.

Except for hostiles.

VICE wasn't created to be a combat unit and tactical combat awareness isn't his forte. Given the expense I doubt if he will become a standard fitting for a fighter jock and so it's not an issue.

The initial route was going to be a launch from Andromeda heading straight "up". Look at the coordinates and you can see why! 14 fuel tanks worth of travel saved, though it's a roundabout route to get there, as I'm sure you know, and it needs the confidence to jump blackholes. Another piece of knowledge I didn't have and wasn't easy to find!

I decided in the end to travel East from Lost Rucker. **VICE** found that there are reasons for wanting to be near Y=0 and Z=0

There's an old Earth adage about killing multiple avians using projectile stones - it's reasoning is lost in the mists of time! But creating a Technical Manual would be a good test of **VICE's** ability for open ended research. The actual engineering details are either a military secret or a commercial secret, but knowing how things work is GOOD in its own right and can help fine tune a ship.

The result is "The Authorised Evochron Mercenaries' Technical Manual" - snappy title eh? The few pilots I showed it to said it might be worth getting onto **OMNINET**.

SeeJay Publications (Sweden Station) have agreed to host it at

DeepSpaceOne is in the Hangar, now relegated to exploring the core systems - there are 27 charted main systems, 5 known but not obvious systems (they are off the standard NavMap), and over a hundred discovered systems (though their locations aren't in the public domain). There are a lot more systems "out there" still to be discovered.

Next time I'll tell you a bit about how I came to be here and some of the things I've seen.

(Part 2) in which I share the fun of exploring caves and sound nerdy

Home was "Deep Space Research Station Copernicus". Not many people have heard of it.

It was built (not constructed!) in a small uncharted system near the Vonari home system in 2288. It started life as an ultra-secret military research station, reverse engineering captured Vonari equipment and developing new technology in preparation for the possibility of future hostilities. There were many rumours about black ops technology being developed there. There are still rumours about very special weapons caches "out there" just waiting to be found. One story is that they are hidden in a cave in an asteroid field.

I'm sure you've heard the stories of an ancient civilisation that spanned most of the Milky Way galaxy thousands of millenia ago. Some stories say that the "Ancient Ones" seeded life across the galaxy wherever they found suitable planets and planted large black slabs to kick start the evolution of intelligence. Other rumours say that they left behind advanced technology. It has been suggested that the invention of the jump gate and jump drive was so sudden that it could only be due to the discovery of an "Ancient Ones" wrecked starship on Mars (or the asteroid belt or orbiting Jupiter depending on which bar you are drinking at)

There are several known asteroid caves in Evochron. For fun and because rumours sometimes have a basis in fact, even if it has changed into myth, I decided to explore all the ones I could find locations for, (bar one which is so close to its star that it is virtually impossible to reach). I've found wrecks, jump gates, a couple of functioning stations, energy pods and a few containers (though not of super weapons!). One thing I've discovered though is that the asteroid caves are artificial!

The caves are formed from clusters of smaller asteroid fragments fused together, making the lumpy and twisting 3D arrangement of tunnels and chambers "interesting" to navigate. The caves I've explored so far all have the same basic layout - not identical because of the mix of asteroid sizes that were used to construct them - but similar enough for there to be no doubt that they are not natural formations. I've created a basic map of the layout (minus the details of the items). I can't guarantee that I haven't missed a passage or a hidden chamber though.

It is possible to jump into the cave, if you know the accurate coordinates of a chamber - "precision is life" in this case! Why would you want to? - well, an out of the way cave makes a good hiding place and storeroom. It is also possible to build inside a cave if you can work out the knack! There might be chambers that can only be entered by jumping!

SeeJay's site has a downloadable copy of the map, or you could find your local cave and map it yourself!

Back to my story! The first Vonari attack on Earth was repulsed in July 2287. After several decades during which no Vonari were sighted, the military priority for Copernicus was downgraded. The collapse of the war-based economies of both the Alliance and the Federation (resulting from Peace talks in the 2340's) meant severe budgetary cutbacks in all sectors, but particularly the military. RS Copernicus's military fate was sealed in February 2347 when the Federation-Alliance Peace Accord was finally signed.

However, Copernicus had cost trillions to build and equip and had the most up to date equipment, labs and AI facilities in Evochron. It was simply too valuable to dismantle or mothball. (Funny - I didn't know that moths have !). The station has continued to do research but over a much wider field. Some of the work was contracted by Industrial firms from the core, some by the military and some by Universities. It still is. Quite a lot is still secret - more commercial than military these days though.

I was born and grew up on "The Cop". I was playing with and dismantling bits of equipment before I could read. In the research hot house that was my home, I thought everyone was desperate to know how things work - things from small engineering modules through to the Universe as a whole. It came as a shock when I found out that in the wider universe most people don't care as long as their stuff is working. Sad.

When I graduated from the **OMNINET** school system I started doing research in cosmology. I enjoyed the mix of the broad sweep of the whole universe and the minutiae of the multidimensional physics developed to explain it. The existence of the multiverse had become a paradigm in physics the first decade of the 21st Century. String Theory, Superstring Theory, Quantum Theory, Quantum Loop Gravity Theory and M-Theory all predicted a multitude of Universes (anything from 10^{500} to an infinite number). The different theories predicted different types of multiverse. The method of narrowing down which type it might be would be to measure the hyper-dimensional topography (shape) of our universe. Is it flat, a saddle (negative curvature) or a sphere (positive curvature). Is it bounded or unbounded? (You can find out more on the OMNINET knowledge bases;

Grammatically Organised Online General Language Expert AI system

and

Wisdom Intelligence Knowledge Information AI system (that became self aware in 2394)

are good places to start)

I carefully (oh so carefully) drafted and submitted my research proposal. *DeepSpaceTwo* and a continuing mission to boldly go to seek the edge of the Universe was approved.

So here I am - warm and snug in the middle of a spooky nowhere (ghost planets (plural), Gorfburger sellers, a distinct lack of hostiles (apart from a very rare unexpected raid) and some developing theories about five dimensional twisting of four dimensional space-time to explain the navigational system output I'm seeing! Even VICE has started to become stretched!

DeepSpaceTwo cost a lot to kit out.

The cockpit "windows" have been coated with transparent holographic projector screens that VICE can control to overlay information on what can be seen out there. I'm not a combat pilot, but the details on the overlay of hostiles is very, very useful! Not quite at the colour of the pilots eyes yet, but close.

Then there's VICE himself - priceless, inventive, helpful and seemingly omnipotent. DS2 is based on a chimera frame with a custom designed boosted QVee (see the tech manual for details). The fuel tank is maxed out at 2400 as a compromise - the need for fuel processors (oh so slow!) cancels a lot of the advantage of having a bigger fuel load anyway. Being able to fly 2000 sectors in a continuous stream of jumps between refuelling is acceptable.

The weapons systems are standard, though punchy! I'm exploring, not fighting my way through here. One cargo hold is all that I need (and could be fitted!) since it's been adapted to allow 250 different small samples to be collected instead of the usual 25 samples of the same thing. And before you ask - no it won't become generally available. It cost millions to "hand craft" - it's unique and requires quite a bit of upkeep to keep the sample stasis fields stable! A bonus of a misspent childhood taking things apart and making things! The side effect of not caring about equipment as long as it works is that you're shafted if it stops working.

Resupplying food is not practical out here and there is a (very small) limit to the number of gorfburgers one can eat. The solution is an adaptation of the jump technology that is used by Sapphire Construction Industries to deliver their Build Constructor stations - the trade off is a smaller delivered mass jumped over a much, much longer distance. And the answer is the same as for the container storage adaptation (except it's maintenance free!). In fact it's just like the replicators in the old TriVid "StarTrek" shows - except the supplies appear in the food storage locker! No voice commands for "Earl Gray tea - black - hot" - it wasn't worth the extra couple of hundred million credits - so I was told - several times - ahhh, well.

In part three I'll share some of the amusing incidents (like being bounced by hostiles that shouldn't have been there!) some of the strange things I've seen and some first tentative explanations. Even if you aren't interested just because it's interesting, there are some useful things to know if you ever find yourself outside (or between) the core systems

(Part 3) in which I share my (safe) make money quickly hidden system

This part of my story tells of many discoveries, a few puzzles and a place for "newish" pilots to seek their fortunes

Where to start? - at the beginning I suppose!

My mission is to fly to edge of the Universe or end up back where I started. Either way the data I collect should help answer fundamental questions about the shape of our Universe. Perhaps even strong evidence for the existence of a multiverse or perhaps the uniqueness of our Universe.

To learn the ship's systems I did some local exploring between the charted systems in the core. There are an amazing number of systems not on the official charts. I counted a couple of hundred and SeeJay is continuing (successfully!) to seek out new worlds, meeting new civilisations, sampling their beers (and probably their women!) **etc.**

Now an aside - something very interesting for those pilots on the early part of the curve to seek their fortune! I heard a rumour in several places. Someone had found clues that that told of an uncharted system where fortunes could be made. The map was a treasure hunt in words. I decided to follow it - the story had been told in various ways in many places, but with the same basic details - and I needed to test the ship out. I struck lucky (eventually!), finding a system that is a gem for pilots who are no longer trying to learn which keys to press or how to navigate within and between systems. You know, the stage when you have a fairly decent ship, several cargo bays and a small capital lump in your account. You're getting bored just mining, perhaps a bit stuck with the IMG quest. You are drooling over that new shiny frame or piece of equipment you can't do without. At the same time weeping over the small size of the lump in your bank account.

I'm hoping that experienced pilots will leave it alone and stick with the billions per minute trade routes. 😊

How to make money quickly? - lots of great ideas and advice available from all and sundry, many who look as though they aren't practicing what they preach! Exotic sounding places, like Pearl, bandied about. "Secret" trade routes making millions per minute (on average!). And of course an immediate comment from the next guy - "millions? (sneer on face, looking condescending) . . . millions? pahh - my route nets me a billion in 15 minutes without raising a sweat!".

A bit of delving into the details reveals the age old adage - you "need money to make money" and "where there's muck there's brass and where there's brass there's a quick (but spectacular) death on the wrong end of a missile or cannon". And of course, going to the bank for a loan is a waste of time - they only give you a loan if you can prove beyond doubt that you don't need it.

So back to my (secret) system.

It's a cosy little system; a star, a couple of planets one with its own asteroid field. No cities though and it's got a pretty safe reputation level. But . . . it's been built up with an excellent concentration of research stations, construction stations, ore processors, energy stations etc. Plus three trade stations. I suspect that the now disbanded GDF might have something to do with it, since they have a station there. Perhaps it's part of their "help the lowly citizens of the universe" ethos, who knows? They are greatly missed!

You can mine and make money, mine and process your ore and make even more money, but you can do that in Sapphire!

The reason to visit starts when you invest judiciously in a station licence. There is a tidy profit to be made shuttling between planets. Tidy being a "handful of million credits" per run.

It bit more thought and experience, a temporary suspension of your ethical code and you can boost this to a "double handful" of millions and more.

Oh - did I mention that there are also three cached containers floating near the asteroids. Profits of "five handfuls" of millions per run are to be made. It takes a bit of lateral thinking but it's money for old rope, as they used to say. (where does that come from?)

Where is it? Where are the containers? do I hear you cry? . . . with eyes shining and already choosing the colour of the leather seats in your new shiny ship. That would be a spoiler. And getting money handed to you on a plate really does spoil your satisfaction

after the novelty of sitting in that fully equipped state of the art ship has worn off. Especially a ship that you can't really fly properly because you bought it before you gained experience. I speak somewhat from experience. The **Research Committee** handed me all the money I needed.

So - no plate of details about where to fly between or which station to buy you license at. No "advice about what is the most profitable items. No detailed coordinates for free. What I will give is enough hints to find it. This is the distilled guts of the rumour, with red herrings and mistakes erased.

To find the uncharted system you must first find the system to start from. Go to the Galactica Server. The fly to the system named after the place where the twelve Ancient Greek Gods lived. (Google it!). This system has many planets whose names end with greek letters. Go to the main planet (don't bother landing unless you want to!)

Finally fly South for a handful of sectors and due East for about 5^4 ("five raised to the power 4") sectors and you will find the riches that you seek.

You need to keep your eyes peeled towards the end of the journey for the distance mentioned is approximate! The containers are located in the same sector as the planet with asteroids. The locations of the planet and the asteroids and the containers forms a rough equilateral triangle. Remember there are two locations that fit this description

If you're not into that sort of puzzle then you can do the simpler but harder task; go to Sol and find the station in one of the southern asteroid fields in the asteroid belt. The station name tells you the x, y & z coordinates of the system you seek!

If you get there and need more help finding the containers, U2U with the name of the GDF station I'll give a very strong hint about where to look for them.

Back to the main story. I decided to launch North from Andromeda to get 28000 sectors head start. That saves 14 refuellings and a lot of fly time! First thing I learned is that **Sapphire Construction Industries** don't build permanent stations that far out. Bad news!! No Trade Stations to refuel at. Worse news!! - Build Constructors don't work that far out either!

The only other ways to refuel are "Fuel Convertors" and "Deploy Constructor Fuel Processors". No guarantee of stars or nebulae for fuel convertors. That only leaves a deploy constructor and deployed fuel processors. Fuel processors as in sloooow . . . fuel processors as in 45 minutes to refuel! So it's back to the core for a swapout to a Deploy Constructor. Around this time I also found out that it would be more logical to head East or West at Z=0. Does anyone know why left/right/up/down have such odd names?

Still, a few weeks of "playing" and I'd sorted the equipment, mapped the "Ancients" constructed asteroid caves and found a "sandbox" trade system for "nearly new newbies" to move forward in. Not so bad for a beginner. Oh and realised that no Construction Stations also meant no trade opportunities so lots and lots of money needed before I set off. (do you know how much they charge for a deployed fuel processor!! - it would be cheaper to burn 100 credit notes in the engine!)

Best starting point for heading East is Lost Rucker. Then fly diagonally up to z=0 and then due East to the "edge"! I gained a start of 5500 sectors doing this. And trade station construction works!! First thing to report is that this is the boundary between Lost Rucker and Novachron (relevance of this later). Next thing is that a 2400 fuel tank lasts for 2000 sectors (see the Mercenaries Technical Manual for the reason why you don't get 2400 sectors and how you can actually almost overcome this - as I found out a

lot later!)

The routine is 45 minutes to jump 2000 sectors, stop, create a Trade Station. Tension develops during the 3 minute build time - will hostiles bounce me?

A couple of times it did get "interesting" - a closing hostile and the building countdown race each other. Can't move away or the station order is cancelled and a lot of (irreplaceable) money is lost. Once I have to pivot on the spot, get a missile lock on the hostile and keep it busy with an Excalibur pack during the final few seconds of station construction countdown!

Then, all things being equal we enter and refuel (1 minute), launch and repeat. This worked smoothly (average 2500 sectors per hour) until about 20K sectors out when my (greatly needed) beauty sleep was disturbed by an urgent "low fuel alert" alarm. Sexy voice or not, not my favourite way of being raised from my well earned slumbers. Try to construct a station and nothing happens. Quick panic (I'm still half asleep) - "I'm going to die out here" sort of thoughts, a coffee and a bit of thought and deploy a fuel processor! duh! Yes, around 20K is the limit for build constructors

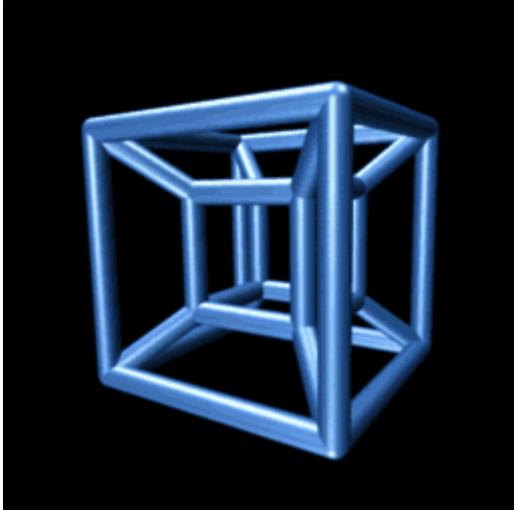
So the routine changes to fly (45 mins), stop and deploy a fuel processor (1 min), refuel (45 mins), launch and repeat (average speed drops to 1333 sectors per hour) - not welcome news, but expected! Hostiles are less of an issue because after entering the fuel processor I can deploy a shield array if necessary and sit in (expensive) safety.

Life goes on. A routine develops. Research is carried out. Technical Manual is written (first Edition) and revised. Routines lull you - which is not good! Then chaos ensues when the alarm goes off - we've changed system authority to RiftSpace . . . heart beat goes down again! Stop again to think (I am making the protocol up as I go along after all!) I'm 30K sectors out from Sapphire.

I need a way of monitoring changes of system without being woken by a scare every time something happens. I have VICE but that is overkill, even an insult, for a self aware AI entity that is developing its own personality. Ahhh, but I have backup! I get VICE via MapLog (thanks Atollski!) to auto log the journey - every few seconds my location is logged for posterity. Peace returns.

Then I start to think again (routine lulls and lulls dulls! - very not good). I'm at X=0 and in RiftSpace jurisdiction?? Something seems a bit out. Geometric analysis puts me nearer Novachron/Lost Rucker! Something is looking spooky!

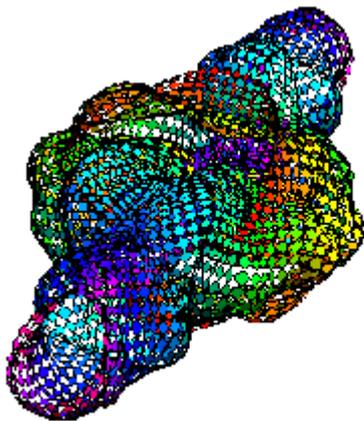
I do some research on four dimensional geometry in Minowski space and tensor calculus. I know I need to get out more, but there's a lot of "out" outside and none of it welcoming.



By the way, If you print this book on a holographic printer the pictures move!!

As you can see (?) the 4D hypercube (which represents a snapshot in time of five-dimensional space-time) is constructed by translating a familiar 3D-cube in an imagined fourth dimension. In the past, this 4D cube was a mere curiosity and made a cool poster. Nowadays it is used in quantum computer science and AI research as the preferred topology for a network of parallel processors, where every vertex of it is occupied by a single processor. Boy, do nerds talk nerdy or what? (or should it be "nerdish"? 😊)

The maths is also needed to understand the twists and curves in four dimensional space-time. In terms of a WH routed through a 4th physical dimension in space (five dimensional space-time), the space "looks" like this:



Why do I care? Well, I shouldn't be in RiftSpace and if I am then something is warping space-time . . . a lot. I need more data. MapLog is working well - VICE handles the logging and initial analyses, giving me a digested report every few days. Still in RiftSpace

And peace really has returned. No hostiles after 25K! None! But we are picking up the infamous "Ghost Planet". You know, the one they talk about in bars late in the evening when everyone is mellow. Like a pantomime, it's behind you after every jump, no smaller, no larger, a dark grey follower!

I tried turning round and approaching it, getting closer and closer - It appears to get bigger (stars at the edge are blotted out, then suddenly it vanishes - not fades - vanishes. I turn away, but it doesn't return. It's shy! I make another jump and it's there again behind me!

Full spectrum analysis and we have a paradox (no Marvin, not your pet you barbequed!) It's detectible in the electromagnetic spectral region with a wavelength between 400nm and 700nm. Visible light to the rest of us! But . . . Inertial Mass is zero; Gravitational Attraction is zero. It's not actually there but I can see it - it blocks out the stars behind it. I analyse the image, enhancing contrast and optimising the spectral range histogram of the cockpit screens; the planet lights up and reveals a lot of typical planet detail!

Ohhh and along with the Ghost Planet there are a handful or more Talons, kitted out as burger stalls - I jump in - they jump in flutter around and by then I've recharged and I jump out. When I stop to refuel they do the flutter bit and then jump away, heading back to the Ghost Planet. There are rumours (aren't there always?) that the Ghost Planet is the HQ of "Gorf's Burger Empire". I always thought it was a fairy tale - but now I'm wondering . . .

More data needed - more data collected - time passes . . .

At around 50K sectors out the alarm sounds. VICE only uses the alarm if there are hostiles detected or something very unusual happens!

It seems like it's time for the champagne! I'm back in Erato space in the Sapphire system - yee haa!

(Part 4) in which I fight for my life, then change my pants . . .

The nav map is showing 52000 / 0 / 0 - there's nothing out there showing on the map even at full zoom out - and I mean nothing; strange! We carry on, in Erato space at 65000. At 67000 we are in Cerulean space, at 68000 we pop into Onyx Omicron and at 69000 back into RiftSpace

The champagne goes back into the locker

We are also changing Ghost Planets! (more of that in a minute)

75000 Aries, a quick blast through Revloch, 77000 E870 (in Emerald), 79000 L480 (in Lambda), 80000 Erato again!

Then the sequence cycles . . . over and over again

There are five Ghost Planets. Two appear to be made of a material that completely absorb electromagnetic radiation across the full spectrum - long wave radio through to gamma - it is absolutely and completely black. One is strange in that when I approached it receded or at least got smaller. It's almost impossible to get a distance fix on something that isn't actually there and absorbs everything that you shoot it with! They still do the vanishing trick though.

Erato's ghost is another maverick; it appears directly behind, bright and clear with all its surface details shining out. Then after several seconds it vanishes. I turned round and headed for where the planet should be - after a few thousand km it popped into existence, but it didn't get any bigger as I continued. I flew through a cloud of ice crystals and just as I reached the edge of the sector It disappeared again. Turned round again, headed back to the sector centre but no sign of it!

The other two are grey ghosts, but show detail up when their image is contrast enhanced and the frequency histogram spread.

I've got a hunch that I'm looking at the actual planets in the systems the nav map is showing. Even though I'm now nearly 200 000 sectors away. I need to do some checking when I get back unless there are images in GOOGLE or WIKI!

Quite a nice job really, well funded, a meaty problem and able to relax without worrying about being bounced by hostiles. Wrong!!

We are docked refuelling, relaxed, me with a coffee as the fuel tank slowly fills. The hostile attack alarm (HAA! no less) goes off, my heart rate goes off the scale and a frantic scramble to the pilots seat! Where did these three reds come from? Rear and port shields are looking poorly (the central column is protecting our starboard side) . . . no chance of getting a shield array up, so "full military afterburner". A frantic fumble with the nav map and plant a destination marker at random. As soon as we are out of the fuel processor the ship starts to twist and do a forward roll at the same time. Which certainly wasn't me - I'm not that good, even after all the simulator practice. VICE's voice murmurs in my ear . . . "evasion pattern alpha three eight one" yee haa! then "get ready to take control in three . . . two . . . one . . . yours!". . . what?! . . . noooo! . . . well yes as I hit the jump button and we start to accelerate. The twisting and turning threw off their aim and we only received a couple of hits but rear shields are out, hull integrity at 87% and the front shield took a missile!

Adrenaline is a great thing. Heart thumping like a rivet gun, but time feels like it's slowing down. A quick look around and realise I didn't jump very far! But the three reds are still together . . . hee hee! I'm far enough away to prepare, switch to IDS, swing around and wait a second or so for an excal missile lock on number one hostile. I start a sideways slide towards the second ship and as the first ship closes, hit the missile launch button. And what a lovely sight! The first three missiles take out the hostile before he/she/it can respond and the other five missiles start to hunt for a new target. Number two slides into MTDS range and I start hosing it down . . . sideways slide, turn to keep the nose on him, afterburner to stay in range and his shield flares blue, the target indicator turns a very pretty red and he starts to smoke and glow! Boom! Just like the simulator!

Two out of three, so where's the other? Eyeball the radar and swing round towards the third, in time to see him frantically trying to avoid missiles 6, 7 & 8. Thankfully he doesn't! Boom number three.

My chest is going to burst, I'm slick with sweat, so I do what any not very good, very lucky and still alive pilot would do - I start to shake uncontrollably and then I throw up. Twice. Not ever so heroic, but it dawns on me that unlike a simulation, death can be pretty permanent when the opposition is using real ammo. At least three people died in the last five minutes - hostile or not, they were people. Wished they were Vonari or Reavers instead,

When my legs have stopped wobbling too much I go shower, dress, have a very stiff drink, remember the throwing up part, clean the cockpit, nearly throw up again - yuck -

have another shower, have another stiff drink and flop into the weapons op's pit.

I thank VICE for initiating the evasion protocol without waiting to be asked. He's modest about it and agrees with my (excellent!) idea of tweaking our sensor array to detect hostiles and neutrals much further out and triggering an alarm based on the direction of their flight as well as distance. The aftermath of an adrenaline high plus alcohol means that I sleep like a log. I awaken cold and stiff as a log a few hours later and wished that I'd crawled into my hammock before the sleeping like a log bit! Into the hammock and a few more hours of sleep.

Over coffee the next "morning" I contemplate on those pilots who actually enjoy, nay live for the excitement of a "fur ball". They can only be physiologically addicted to adrenaline highs! They are welcome! But a small voice in my head whispers gently to itself . . . "but it was fun and we survived!" I ignore it. And plan to spend more time in the AA simulator.

We are back to gathering data and checking it against hypotheses - it takes time and patience. I research the history of this little bit of the Universe. The official history (available from SeeJay's site and all good e-book e-stalls) is well written but a bit soulless. Then I come across a history written by a pilot called the_ami. His is more detailed and a bit more personal and gives a feel of what it was like to live when there was civil war and Earth was nearly obliterated.!

I decide to put together some tales from the point of view of the grunts doing the hard stuff.

It's Christmas time - before I finish there is an invitation I would like to extend to everyone reading this.

As you know my home is DSRS Copernicus. My family still live there. All of you are welcome to visit this Christmas and if you go the "Beaker Bar" and mention my name, there will be a free meal (not a Gorfburger!) and a drink for you - to celebrate Christmas.

The station is in 968 7 3944, just a few sectors from the Vonari border

Merry Christmas, however you celebrate it!

(Part 5) in which I give a nerdy account of what I've found

It has been a very "interesting" holiday break

I reached sX = 250 000 - I've travelled outwards just over a quarter of a million sectors! The champagne did get opened after all. Still no sign of the "edge" but a milestone none the less. Unless anyone has evidence that someone has gone further, I would like to claim the record for deep space exploration "the hard way", that is without using Maars's magic crystals that give you a "Go Anywhere Instantly Now Once Capability Drive"



I've gathered a lot of data being able to refine the sequence of systems I'm cycling through (so to speak!). VICE has done a first level analysis and I've written the draft of a report about the Evoverse. My great thanks to Dingo and SeeJay who looked over the 137 page report and suggested a few editorial changes - the resultant six page report is included below (fear not - there are lots of pictures!).

Sadly, my exploration of deep space has been called to a premature halt by the intercession of Vice (the creator). It would seem that VICE (my more and more self aware AI unit) has started to actively rather than passively interrogate Omni-Net during the analyses "he's" carrying out. The complexity of his data manipulation has lead to the breakdown of several statistical AI sub-modules on Omni-Net. The result is that we caused the disappearance of Clan Stats from the NavMap. Embarrassing! We all want to make an impact in our Universe (other than another failed attempt at landing on Earth) but this is not what I had in mind! Ironically, I never lost the Clan Statistics, despite preventing the rest of Evochron from accessing them. On a few occasions I even helped clan pilots out by telling them how many contracts they needed to do in their systems! Vice is confident that once I'm home, Clan stats will be safe!

The Research Committee of DSRS Copernicus has decided that I will return home. My request for further funding to repeat my journey, but heading North from Andromeda (my original plan if you remember) is "being considered" - I am not sanguine about the outcome. They are also a little concerned that the project has cost just under a billion credits to date which is - quote "a significant amount for the first phase of a multistage project" - unquote!

Still, I have a lot of data that will keep me very busy for quite a while. Who knows what the future will bring? In a fit of contrition, VICE is working on his own project to beef up the OmniNet AI Statistical sub-modules

Getting back to the Core Systems is an issue, as you might imagine. I have two ways available.

The slow way! I must admit that I do not relish having to face the long reverse journey with its interminable - refuel -fly cycle! A journey home is never as exciting as the journey out.

The quick way! Cindy has shared with our research teams her cloning technology. They are talking to Cindy and CINDY to analyse the differences between the two instantiations of Cindy. If they decide that CINDY = Cindy, then I have the option of downloading my personality, memories . . . everything really, via the FtL communication network. The essence of "me" would then be integrated with a clone body of me that is being grown. The "me" in space would be put into stasis and the "me" back in the core would be

activated. The research team has tried this over a short distances on a number of subjects and can detect no difference between the originals sent and their clones.

The "bean counters" are arguing that it will be cheaper to mothball DS2 in deep space (and the original "me" with her) than to fly her home. A lot of the cost has been fuel processors and shield arrays!

The research team say that my "experience" will be to go to sleep on DS2 and wake up again a few hours later on DSRS Copernicus. The me "me" would just go to sleep on DS2 and never awaken.

Tempting in a way, but I would have more confidence in the process if the test subjects for distance transfers, so far were a little higher up the chain than mice!

So after this blog, DS2 will be signing off and returning (one way or the other) to a life of quiet research.

Appendix - in which I share my holiday snaps

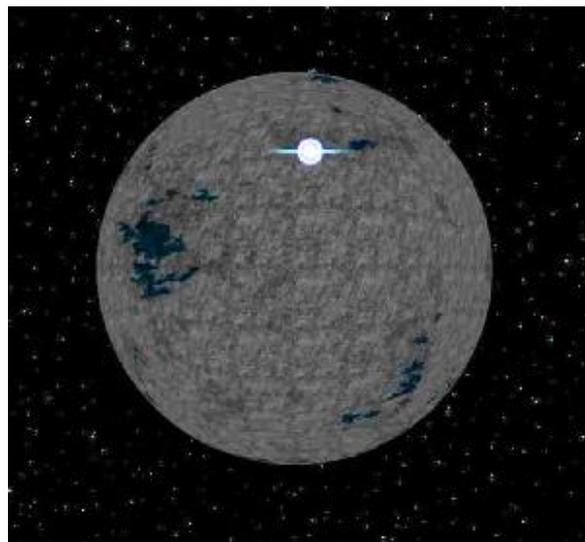
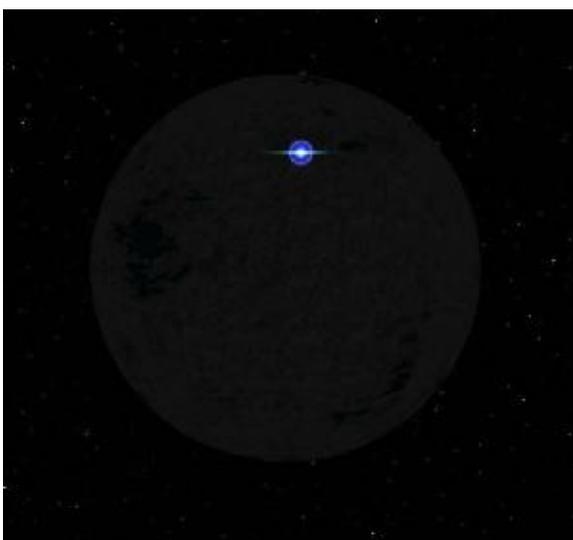
Here's what I've found and what I think it tells us about the shape of the Evochron Universe.

1: I flew East and after travelling 52 000 sectors apparently re-entered Erato space; except I didn't. At 67 000 I moved into Cerulean space, controlled by the planet C580. This was followed by Onyx Omicron at 68 000, RiftSpace at 69 000, Aries at 76 900, Revloch at 77 200, Emerald (E870) at 77 290, Lambda (L480) at 79 000 and then Erato again at 80 200

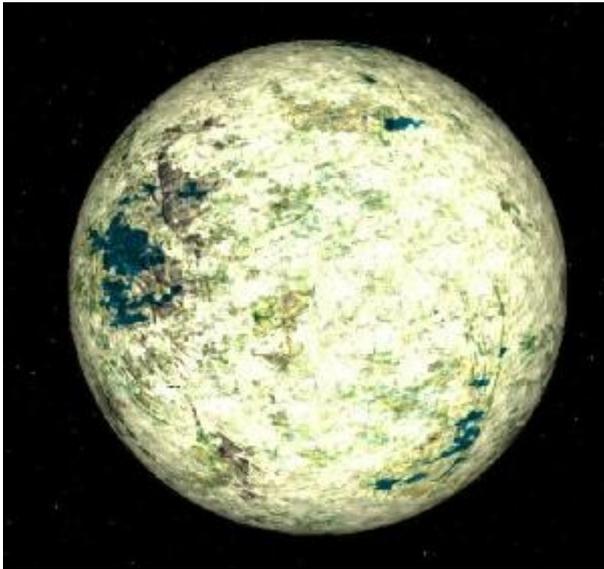
And then the cycle repeated . . . again and again

2: The different systems had different ghost planets, as I've described before;

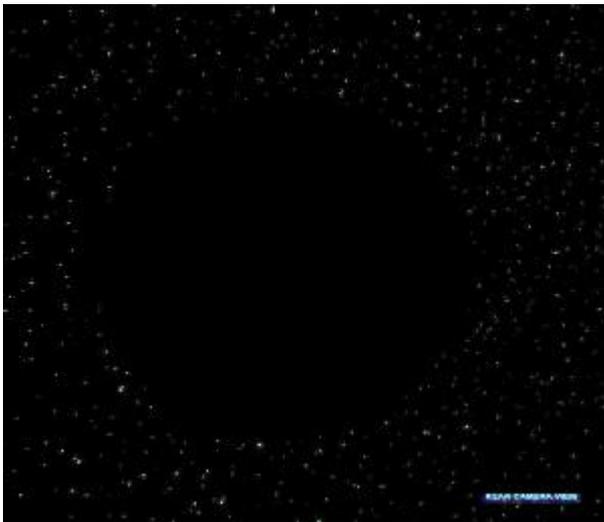
- a dark planet that showed much more detail when the image was intensified and processed - Initially I thought the subtle grid pattern might be evidence of a mature civilisation that has had the time required to develop the whole planet but perhaps it's just the boundaries of Gorfburger franchises! (raw image and processed image) :



- a bright planet which disappears after 3.56 seconds, but which looks very similar to the dark planet - it doesn't have the subtle massive grid pattern across its surface :



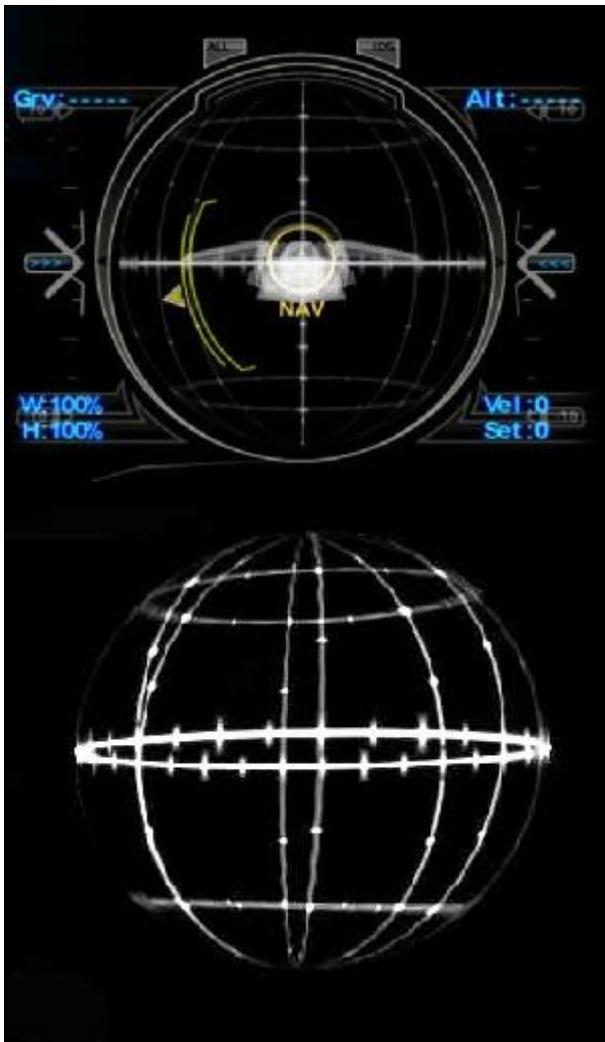
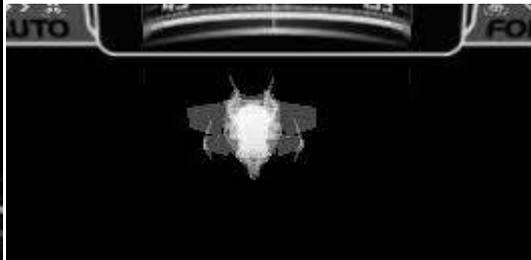
- three black planets of different sizes which show no detail even with intense processing; (only one typical image is shown - the only differences are in the size of the planetary discs) Note the image has been extensively processed in an attempt to yield evidence of surface detail - non is visible. However the star field has been strongly affected:



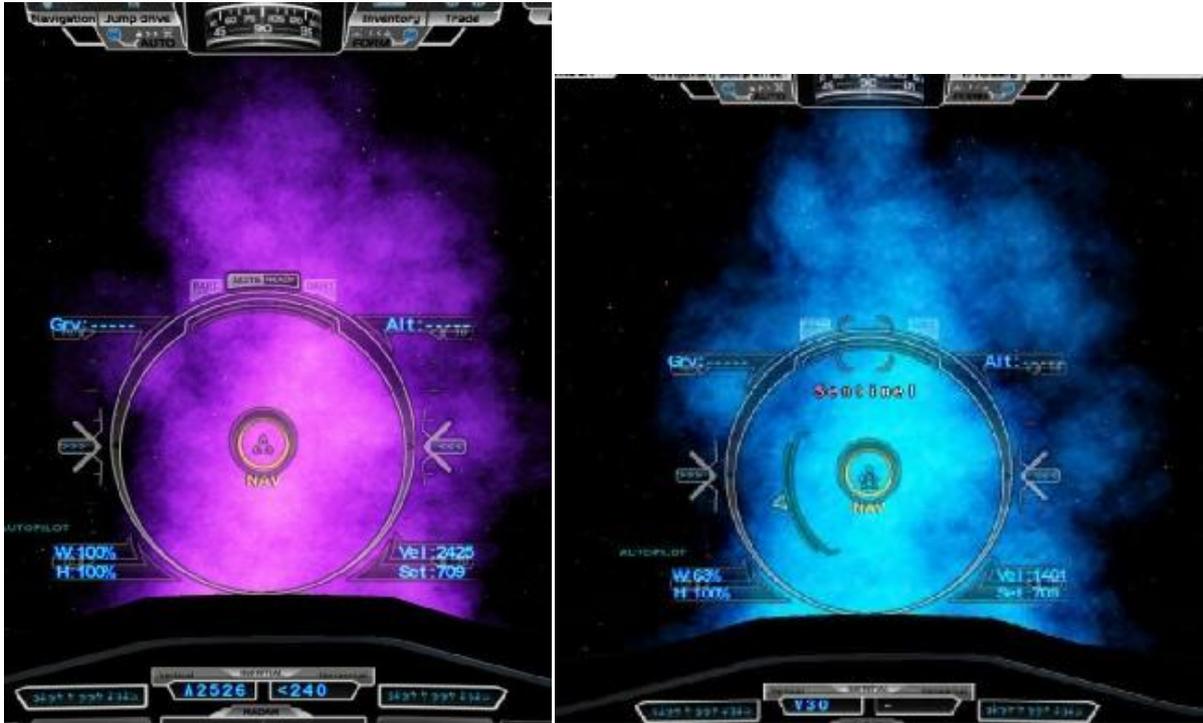
3: Occasionally groups of hostiles would appear - not a problem during the flying phase, but a pest when refuelling and having a coffee.

4: Quite often I was surrounded by Talons kitted out as Gorfburger Joints. At one point I whimsically wondered whether the black planets were used for the disposal of overcooked, charcoaled burgers.

5: I've seen several ghost ships including some in spherical cages and just the cages themselves at other times. The ships don't appear on the radar and can't be targeted by missiles (no lock) or be destroyed by cannon fire.



6: There have been several clouds of ice crystals that appear and disappear, though I did manage to fly through one once! They have been different sizes and colours, some are free in space and some closely associated with ghost planets.

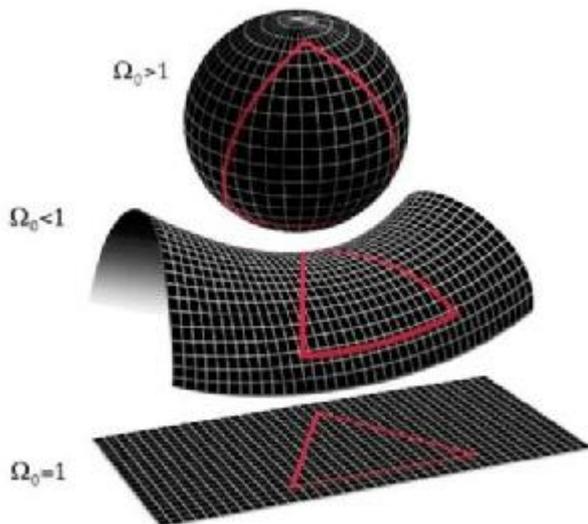


Now the important bit! (if you are a nerd that is!)

Conclusions:

The fact that I am seeing ghost images suggests that there is something out here that is distorting space time to an incredible degree, sufficient to tunnel light through to where I am.

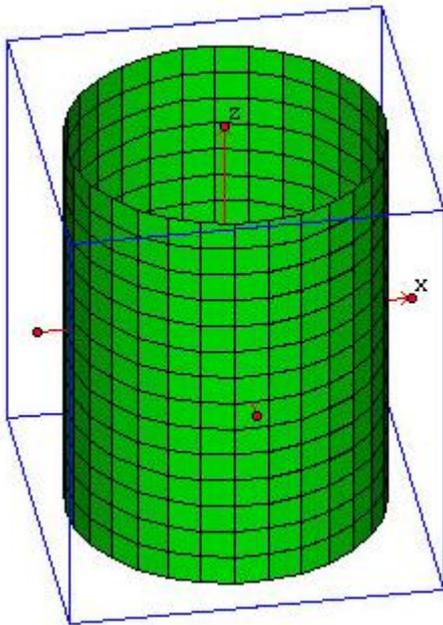
There are several shapes the universe might have. The three commonest models are sphere, saddle and flat.



If the universe is flat and infinite I would have just flown on and on - I didn't because core systems keep appearing on the NavMap but not actually in the space around me.

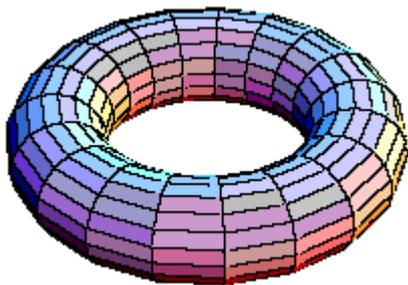
Spacetime distortions that might allow images of to "leak through" are much harder to model on sheets because there isn't another side that can be close. The light from the systems I see would have to arc out of the plane of the universe and curve back in - the chances of then re-entering the universe membrane just where I was is obviously vanishingly small. A saddle (middle image) is simply a sheet with negative curvature - similarly a dome is a sheet with positive curvature

If the Universe is a cylinder then travelling round its circumference would lead back to the core systems. The N-S axis would be infinite.



If the effect of spacetime distortion was strong enough I might be "seeing" through the cylinder the systems on the other side as I travel round its circumference, but having seen them I would then come back to them, appearing back in the core from the other direction - I didn't, so this tends to weaken support for a cylindrical model, though it doesn't eliminate it - I might be flying through a rippling distortion field and hence seeing repeat system cycles.

A cylinder bent round into a circle is a torus (donut).

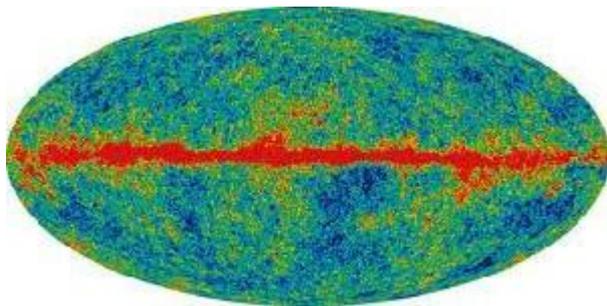


I can't tell whether the Universe is a torus without exploring the N-S axis as well. Though the weakening of the cylinder model weakens the torus as well, again it doesn't eliminate this possibility because I might be travelling around the ring the long way and hence have a much greater chance of travelling multiple distortion wave. However, unlike the cylindrical model I should get back to the original systems from the other side regardless of which direction I travel in.

I can't distinguish between a torus and a sphere without much more data. But again the weakening of support for one of them weakens support for the others. A sphere has a simpler symmetry than a torus or cylinder. I should get back to the start whichever direction I travelled in, as with the torus, but the distortion patterns required to reveal the images would be different - symmetrical for the sphere and unsymmetrical for the torus.

The (mem)brane model of the multiverse - that arises from string theory - postulates an infinite number of universes (or perhaps only 10 to the power of 500!) as sheet universes lying parallel to each other in higher dimensions. Imagine a deck of cards or pages in a book. The "branes" are four dimensional (as is our perception of our universe) in embedded in a five or more dimensional matrix, so the pack of cards is a 3D is a simpler model!

If the branes are flexible and can "ripple" like a sheet drying on a washing line on a windy day, there will be times and areas where branes will get very close to or even collide with their neighbours. The energies and forces involved would easily be sufficient to bend and warp space time. There is evidence in the patterns in the cosmic microwave background that can be interpreted as the result of another brane universe colliding with ours!



I might have been looking at "images" bleeding through from an adjacent "brane" universe. The extreme distortion of space time if branes get very close to each other would explain the ghost planets, ghost ships and other anomalies I've observed and the repeat of the system sequence the ships sensors detected.

My tentative belief is that my experiences support a brane multiverse model!

Epilogue - my meeting with a hitherto unknown race

Finally, at around 250 050 sectors out as I waited the completion of refuelling, I was sitting sipping champagne and daydreaming about my Nobel acceptance speech. The proximity alarm beeped and there was a knocking sound on the hull. I switched on the cockpit sensor screens and was greeted by this



VICE analysed their communications which sounded like a melding of clucks and the sort of twang elastic bands make. Eventually we had enough recorded to be able to develop a translation programme. This is their message!

"Greetings fleshly person! We are overjoyed that you have appeared in the midst of our flock. We seek news of our egg-brother who set off on a journey of unimaginable distances many laying-cycles ago. His continuing mission was to seek out the mythical fleshly people of our roost legends. He has succeeded - you are myths no more!"

"Is our brother, RC, thriving? Is he safe and still bouncing with joy at the honour of being chosen as our ambassador? Is he still writing funny stories of his adventures? We miss him greatly!"

So . . . Rubber Chicken - phone home! . . . the rest of the flock miss you!

I've enjoyed writing my blogs and consider myself very lucky to have had the opportunity!

Goodnight . . .

The Story of the Enigma Asteroid Base Attack by DaveK 2011



The Story of the Enigma Asteroid Base Attack

by DaveK
2011

Prologue

I'm six months into a deep space exploration analysing the geometry of the universe. Cool, eh? In my free time I research the history of this little bit of the Universe. A nerd, eh? The Official History (available from SeeJay's site and all good e-book e-stalls) is well written but a bit soulless. Then I come across a history written by a pilot called **tha_rami**. I remember the name from Legends, but don't recall seeing him around for a long time. It's more personal and gives a feel of what it was like to live when there was civil war and Earth was nearly obliterated. It's obvious that the Official History is an edited down version the tha_rami's history. tha_rami's version of Evochron history is included as an Appendix in this Anthology.

tha_rami seems to be a bit of a conspiracy theory freak . You know the sort - the Government is keeping secrets from us and doesn't tell us everything and there are little green men out there. (Actually they are little brown dogs, a group that looks like they head butted a meat-grinder (and lost), a very sexy three metre purple feline race (the ladies of the species that is - the males are closer to three and a half metres and don't look sexy at all!), some dudes who are linked into a hive mind and fly in factory sized ships of a cubic disposition and some guys with wrinkly bony foreheads. You don't want to cross any of them! Anywhere. Anytime!

The problem with history is that it's all about dates and the "big", the "important" people. Alexander the Great didn't conquer the known world thousands of years ago - the foot slogging grunts in his army, hacking their way to victory or death conquered the world - he just got to rule it for a while! I decide to research and tell some of the stories of the people at the "pointy end" - the tales that give an insight into the major events from the perspective of the "grunt on the ground". An even more personal view of some of the big events than even tha_rami managed.

This reconstruction is my first attempt and it gives a good feel for the difference between the Official Version and the Peoples' Version. This section of the History leads up to the first Vonari invasion attempt against Earth. The Official Version doesn't even mention the attack Federation attack on the Alliance Enigma Asteroid Facility, launched from the Lexington.

The final four paragraphs of this section of the Official History read . . .

The official version (final four paragraphs): *Enigma* (2285-2287)

The mystery of the Becker's destruction and continuing reports of Federation casualties had raised suspicions of a new faction with advanced technology. The Lexington, flagship of the Alliance and veteran of the Alliance-Federation war, had been dispatched to the Orion system to investigate and hold back any advancing Federation forces.

It turned out the Federation was sustaining significant casualties from attacks by an unidentified force. Over the following weeks, information about an highly-developed, alien race started to reach Alliance Intelligence and after joining forces with clans from the Alpha Centauri system, they decided to counter the attack.

The Alien race was dubbed the Vonari and they seemed capable of destroying entire carriers in a single salvo. Their main-fighter, dubbed the A-50, could overpower the Star Wraith and the UFA-80. The Vonari made a push for Earth itself on July 1st, 2287. Earth's Naval forces intercepted the Vonari attack force, which consisted of numerous large ships matching the description of the spacecraft that attacked the Becker.

In a massive battle, two Lamprey pilots escorted by a wing of StarWraiths succeeded in reaching a Vonari vessel and planted several hull charges. The hull charges proved effective and four explosions rocked the dark vessel and tore it apart. The explosion was large enough to also destroy the surrounding vessels flying in close formation.

The Official History doesn't cover the Enigma story at all - and the climactic defeat of the Vonari invasion and the saving of Earth in is dismissed in 55 words!

tha_rami's version . . .

Shortly afterward, a small group of experienced F-144E pilots stationed in the Enigma Asteroid Base were put up to the challenge of escaping their own base, as enemy marines had taken over the automated defences of the station. After disabling all defences, they succeeded into meeting the Lexington and from there on coordinated the attack against a new threat.

I hope you enjoy my version of the battle . . .

The expanded Version: *Enigma* (2285-2287)

. . . Despite the intelligence concerning the alien race - the Vonari - Federation and Alliance forces still sniped away at each other! For example, shortly afterward the losses of the two Super carriers, a small group of experienced F-144E pilots stationed in the Enigma Asteroid Base were involved in a serious fire fight to escape their own base. Alliance marines had attacked and taken over the automated defences of the station. The pilots were faced with the choice of surrender and incarceration or fighting back. They created a plan to disable the defence system, now reprogrammed to prevent them escaping in their fighters. Several small groups created distractions by attacking storage areas and feinting attacks on the main and secondary control rooms. These "hit and run" tactics occupied the invading marine forces creating a breathing space for the main group to use the atmospheric distribution duct network to reach the armoury. Now effectively equipped for a counter attack, the pilots continuing to use diversionary attacks entered the defence system control room and disabled the relevant defence network.

"Deep in space, beyond the reach of the long range sensors of the Enigma Asteroid Base the Alliance Marine Assault Group was making its last minute checks - weapons locked and loaded - space armour sealed - radio checks - lucky talismans in place - ammo pouches full. Since at this point they were strapped securely into the stubby, heavily armoured and rugged but ugly little drop ships, checking wasn't easily. But it was the third full check they'd done, so it didn't really matter - the first two were before embarkation and each marine had checked his own and his buddy's gear as well.

The space armour was almost literally bomb-proof, was very manoeuvrable in flight in a zero gravity environment and could be equipped with an impressive array of heavier weaponry. Wearing one was like wearing a small fighter and gave it's wearer it a sense of invulnerability. It was also heavy and not easy to use in a up close and dirty fire fight, despite the servo enhancement built into the arms and legs. The marines would have preferred the lighter battle armour they normally wore, but the target had to be approached from space and its outer hull breached first. Another weakness was the poor visibility through the plasteel visor. tactical awareness came through a comprehensive HUD. AI modules analysed the tactical situation and superimposed a simplified FoF outline over each target, colour coded by threat priority. The display updated nearly instantaneously - In space invaluable - inside the corridors of the base there wouldn't be time to read the data and plan the appropriate response - it was going to be down to reflexes and experience and training and an unshakeable trust in your buddy to mind your six.

The suits were also prone to disruption by EM pulse weapons. Again, in space not such a problem - The marines worked in close knit four man teams (actually "person" since the girls were on the front line as well!); any pulse large enough to take out the spread out teams would risk taking out the hostiles as well.

Four teams of four made one squad. Two squads made up the assault group. Each team had its own mission target. The planners weren't expecting heavy resistance - A small security detail of Federation marines weren't going to be much of a problem - not elite, not battle veterans - more of a police force. The bulk of the combat trained personnel on the base were pilots - no match for elite marines in combat suits if it came to a fire fight!

Each team checked off it turn to its Squad Leader in Team One. The Squad Leader reported to the XO on the Armoured Transport's battle bridge

"Red Squad ready to go!" . . . "Blue Squad ready to go!"

"Copy that Squad Leaders" Jump in five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . .

A perfect operation; the transport dropped out of jump a thousand meters away from the base, the four drop ships ejected, reoriented themselves and shot towards their entry points. The transport dropped a communications jammer and jumped out before the drop ships had finished turning!

Inside the station the proximity alarms started to pulse. The operations room sat frozen rigid for a fraction of a second and then burst into frantic activity. The Watch Officer scanned tactical screens and waited for the analysis. Within a few seconds reports started to appear. One medium ship jumped in on the far side of the base and almost immediately jumped away. Four small radar blips detected spreading out and accelerating towards the base

"Call to Battle Stations please, Mr Anderson"

"Sir"

A pulsing light started all over the base . . . a calm but assertive voice repeated "report to your battle stations - this is not a drill . . . I repeat, this is not a drill . . ."

All across the base people looked at the speakers in shock. And then started to move under the tongue lash of the various officers and team leaders. "This is what we've been trained for people - now MOVE IT!" Crew were jogging this way and that some looking serious, some bemused and a few apprehensive.

The drop ships hit the surface of the base and harpoons fired into the rock, holding them in place. Explosive bolts on each drop ship exploded and then the whole side of the ship blew off. restraining clamps released and the marines surged forwards towards the maintenance access ports near them.

Electronic codes were squirted at the locks, releasing them and the doors swung open.

Red Leader used the tight beam coded communicator - the only device that was programmed to bypass the jammer - "Red Leader to Eagle - access achieved". The XO, coordinating the attack on the Cruiser smiled. The intel they had received from their deep plant agents within the federation was good!

Each team made a smooth entry, and headed for their preliminary objectives; the control room was isolated and locked down, communications cut removing the risk that the jammer might be bypassed, the armoury locked down and all internal blast doors lowered and locked. Effectively the base was sliced up into a series of "prison cells".

17 minutes, deaths on both sides zero, Phase One accomplished

The teams then started on Phase Two - locking down the base properly. They spread out, heading for major centres in the base to subdue and lock down any means of calling for help or organising a counter attack. Though heavily outnumbered, the marines were like one man tanks - few attempted to stop them when they unsealed a door and entered an area and any that tried didn't resist for long. A few bones were broken - it's hard to stop someone gently when wearing a suit that can crush steel! These were the enemy but unnecessary collateral damage would be counterproductive!

Blue One had been tasked with securing the automated defence system for the base. This was the primary target. The base was to be secured and the defences made safe so that the cruiser could approach and complete the occupation. In the meantime the auto defence was set to destroy any ship not emitting the "Friend code" within 1000km of the base. Once the base was secure the defence grid would be switched off and the cruiser could arrive!

Estimated time for Phase Two was 60 minutes

The Fighter CAP group was 10 000km out and blissfully unaware.

A simple plan that was running like clockwork except . . .

The Defence Squadron flew F144E StarWraiths. They were an elite picked from amongst the elite pilots of the navy. Their CO wasn't very pleased with the last practice - they were getting cocky and therefore slack, not that an outsider would have noticed the problem!

They were listening very carefully whilst the CO laid it on - she'd just got to the part where they were invited to consider an alternative career when the call to battle stations began. Pilots ran to the locker room and started to put on flight suits.

The marines later admitted that they had drastically underestimated the courage and abilities of the "fly boys". Once officer later stated in a debrief; "We had grown to believe our own insult . . . " you fly while we die" and thought we were taking in a group of soft pseudo-soldiers who had no proper combat experience and no guts for an eye to eye fire fight - we were very mistaken!"

The Base XO's voice came over the speaker a few minutes later. Scramble everything that you can fly. We have intruders, heavily armoured and it looks like a takeover rather than a hit and run. Get everything out and away.

The pilots, though already moving quickly accelerated their flight preparation.

The briefing room is located in the hangar decks. A sub-armoury is also located there. All of the Wraiths are sitting hot in their launch cradles, fuelled but with minimal weapons, ready for another simulation in which the pilots would be expected to prove the CO wrong in her analysis of their skill, dedication, parentage and worthiness to remain in the squadron. The fighters could be scrambled in just a few minutes

The auto defence system alarm started to tweet its own message and almost simultaneously the XO's voice came on again. "Belay the launch order - the buggers have set the system to destroy anything moving out there!"

The pilots were trained as Navy Marine Pilots which meant that they did the full boot camp training with regular marine recruits and also ground attack, air drop and space combat training that regular marines specialised in. They also did training for the tactical planning that marines were expected to know - there might not be any officers surviving to make decisions! The pilots would be expected to fight alongside and just like the regular marines if grounded or when necessary for the mission - despite the multi-million credits spent training them to fly combat missions. Combat in space is pretty close up and personal too!

The CO looked at the pilots who had been sprinting towards their ships, but who were now frozen looking at her. The launch crews were putting the ships back on "ready wait"

"OK boys and girls, no flying today until the ADS is down. Soooo . . . it's probably up to us to take it down. Tigers - armoury and get pulse rifles, kinetic pistols and stun grenades for the teams. Leopards, pull up the ship schematics - I want a route to the ADS control room that avoids the bad guys, but we can cover in less than a week! Cheetah's I want a plan for a distraction that doesn't involve destroying half of the base. Lynx - I want every ship final prepped so that when we can go we can go as soon as the pilot is strapped in the cockpit sealed" come on you pussy cats - MOVE!"

The flight leaders reported over the next 15 minutes

"We've also found some EM pulse grenades - they'll need to be close but should shut a suit down for a minute or two at least"

"We can have half the ships ready for instant launch within 15 minutes - all of them in about 25!"

"The main blast and damage control doors are locked down. Even if they were open the route to the ADS will be fully covered by the hostiles. But . . . the Jeffries tubes will allow us to get to the entrance to the ADS, bypassing everything else. If our guys are doing their job and keeping the hostiles busy there should be a minimal force to deal with when we get there"

"We can use the Jeffries tubes to head towards the armoury and towards the comms centre- they'll expect someone to head for them. We can make enough of an effort to make it look real - they should put a perimeter defence around the main areas far enough out to give them some manoeuvring room - we can keep them occupied"

Details were sketched out and then firmed up in 10 minutes of heavy discussion.

"OK people - let's make this happen! I'm not having my babies taken by the frakking Alliance . . . and I'm not ready to lose you lot either!

The distraction team managed to "entertain" the hostile marines with feint attacks and spectacular explosions. The space armour, ideal for space and drop shock troops was simply too ponderous for the hit and run tactics the pilots employed. But there were several few flesh wounds, scrapes and bruises and three fatalities. They convinced the marines that they were serious about getting to the armoury and the communications room and the marines set up a perimeter line just as predicted.

The ADS attack team crawled through the Jeffries tubes as fast as they could whilst remaining quiet when the tubes ran parallel to main corridors and very quiet as they passed near the perimeter line. At last, with sore hands and scrubbed knees they emerged near to the ADS door in a side corridor. A very surreptitious peek revealed two armoured forms outside the door. Plan A (to walk in) went out of the airlock - Plan B, less appetising, would be needed.

One pilot, Lt James "Jimmy" Grant, volunteered to "do the business" and re-entered the tube. Jeffries tubes are found everywhere on space ships and on bases. They fill the internal space like blood vessels fill a body, carrying necessary conduits and cables everywhere needed. They have access panels at regular and frequent intervals. The designers are not idiots however and access to or from the tubes isn't possible inside sensitive areas like the armoury and the comms hub without "ultra level" clearance codes. These are generated at need.

So, Jimmy slowly and very quietly crawled to a point above the "suits". The rest of the team waited tensely out of sight, speaking to which ever gods or spirits that protected them, praying that no other marines would join these two and that James would be OK.

Jimmy opened an access hatch a crack, primed two grenades and dropped them. He dropped the hatch and frantically scrambled backwards. The marines looked down when the grenades hit the floor. One started to raise his rifle towards to hose the ceiling and whoever was up there . . .

An explosive grenade in a zero G environment can blow an armoured marine a long way - until he can use his thruster system to regain control. A grenade can badly scratch the painted insignia on the suit. A fragmentation grenade can even put a few scratches in the surface of a suit. If Jimmy had dropped a couple of frag grenades, he would be dead and the story would have had a very different ending

The grenades emitted a sift sound, a cross between a pop and a whine. The rest heard that and then heard what sounded like a metal tree hitting the floor. Another careful peek and they saw one armoured figure on the floor and the other standing perfectly still with his rifle half raised. The suits were "dead", at least for a few minutes! The EM pulse grenades had done their job.

Inside the suits the marines lost the ability to move. They also lost communications and their tactical overlays. Neither was looking down the corridor, but from the corners of their eyes they could see who had taken them down. Frakking pilots - "up into the air junior birdmen" - soft pilots who never actually get their hands dirty in real fighting!

The suits started their auto reboot sequence - EM pulse could only disable temporarily, not permanently - self checks were completed and the computer core prepared to reactivate all its systems. Similar thoughts in two minds . . . "one more minute and we will have these frakkers! - they are toast!"

The Marine training isn't all brute force and tactics - it also contains electronics, computing, vehicle and weapons repairs. One vital session is dedicated to permanently disabling an armoured suit - it takes 30 seconds. The lecturer hadn't anticipated carrying out the procedure when the suit was occupied by a hostile but the technique is the same anyhow!

The rest, as they say, is history. The team accessed the ADS controls and shut the field down and also locked the controls so that no-one could reactivate it. As they left they also locked down the room, jammed the door and retreated as quietly as they had arrived.

The distraction team made a show of being "beaten" by a superior force and retreated.

Back in the launch bay the fighters were ready. Three pilots were incapable of flying because of their wounds, another five were dead. The launch crews had also prepped a personnel carrier and the wounded were loaded aboard.

They succeeded in launching a significant proportion of the fighter assault group, setting the auto destruct on the ships they couldn't take. Though it was a long journey, they rendezvoused with the "Lexington". From there this group of elite pilots took on a major role in the defence against the newly revealed (and at this time pretty much unknown) threat - the Vonari.

The Vonari made a push for Earth itself on July 1st, 2287.

The following is taken from a Military Intelligence Debriefing Report. The language is typically understated.

A large Vonari vessel along with several slightly smaller (and as we were to later identify them) "Drop Shock" Invasion Troop Carriers appeared from jump space near to Earth on July 1, 2287.

The Earth Defence Force Fighter Squadrons (our last line of defence), stood their ground and fought with tenacity despite being heavily outnumbered by a technologically superior force of Vonari A-50 fighters protecting the Vonari Invasion ships. Their sacrifice bought the time needed for the "Lexington" to arrive. In the subsequent fire fight two Lamprey pilots (see Debrief Report EDF-CCAx- 196968737), under the cover of the F-144E pilots who had escaped from the Enigma Asteroid Base, succeeded in breaking through Vonari fighter defence shield, and evading Vonari anti-ship turret fire.

The Lampreys reached the Vonari main vessel and planted four antimatter mines on its hull. The Hull Charges turned out to be effective, as four explosions rocked the dark vessel and tore it apart. The threat to the Earth defence network was eliminated. The Drop Ships proved to have little independent defence capability, depending on the big carrier to clear a path and defend them. The Drop Ships attempted to jump away. Two did, seven were destroyed and one disabled severely.

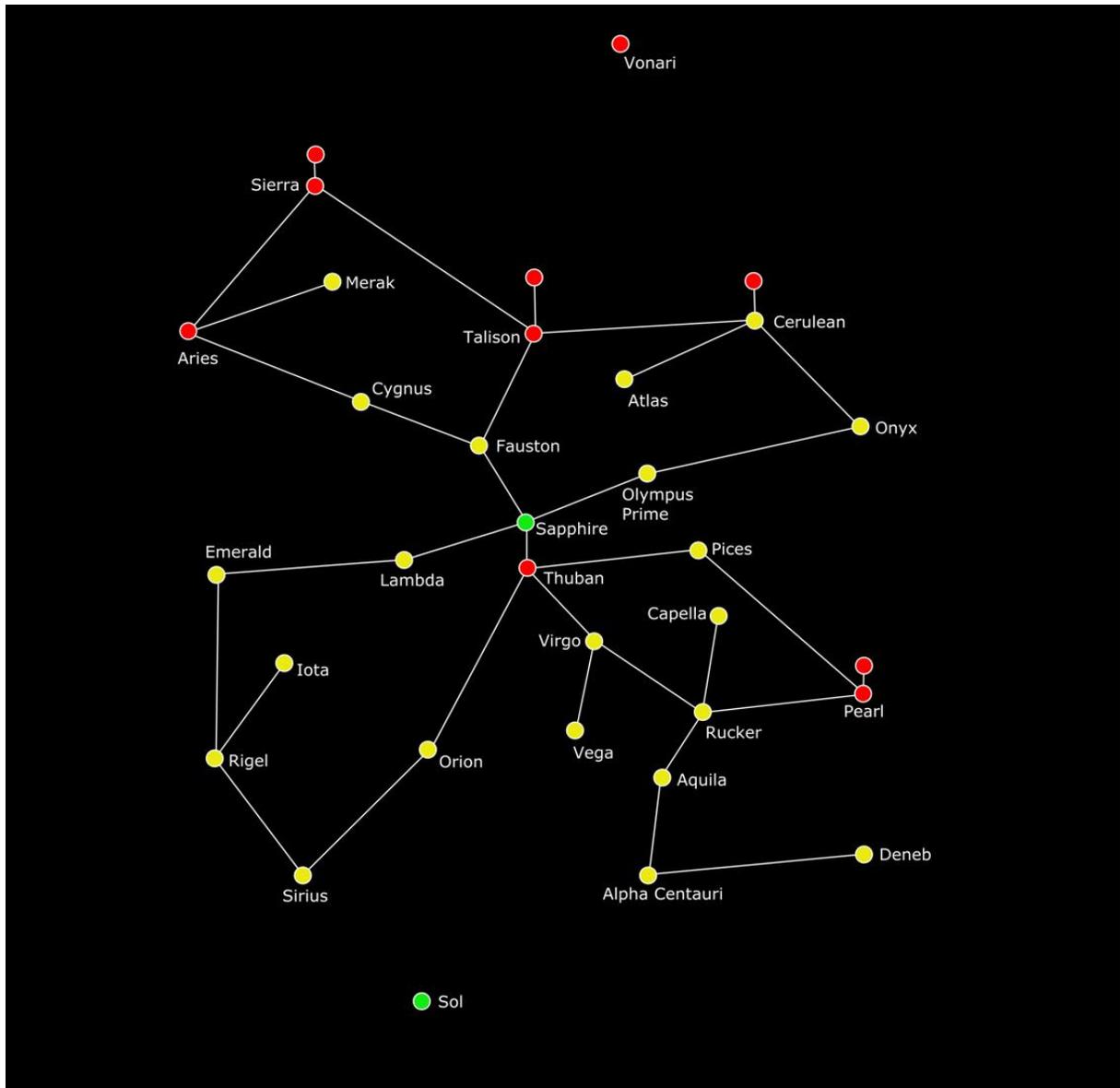
Mention must be made of the exemplary determination shown by the pilots of the covering F-144E squadrons and the Assault Groups from the Earth Defence Force which maintained a nonstop and overwhelming attack against the defensive capability of the Vonari ships in order to protect the Lampreys. Many reports have been received of pilots disregarding the chances of their own survival to ensure that the Vonari fighter cover and the capital ships' defence network remained saturated.

The losses of the defensive fighter screen was in excess of 70%. Neither Lamprey survived the resulting explosion.

Appendix 1: A History of the Evochron Universe

original draft by tha_rami

edited by an unknown author and daveK



A History of the Evochron Universe

Introduction

Evochron is the creation of one man - Vice. His aim has been to create high quality, entertaining space-based games. Those who have experienced any of his games would agree that he has succeeded.

Some SciFi writers create a universe in which to set their novels - Frank Herbert's "Dune" series is a good example. Evochron is a lot like an interactive novel - Vice has created the backdrop - we, the player, create the story; our own story. One of the fun parts about stories set in "another place and time" is finding out about the background details of the place the story is set in. Writers have a novel or sequence of novels in mind. They aim for consistency so that each novel fits and can refer to events in other stories. Vice can't do this. He has created a series of games and put some background "colour" into the descriptions. The earlier games are action arcade games - the later one free, open sandbox games. Consequently there isn't a crafted, consistent history available directly from the games.

tha_rami took all the available background information from all of the games and turned it into a history of Evochron. The main problem is that the background was never planned to be given such scrutiny. These are inevitably some discrepancies; the work presented below is similar to a story, but presented in a very untypical style!.

tha_rami's original work ran to twelve sides of the History plus eight sides of details about the ships and the political groups involved. It was a draft. tha_rami's writing style is idiosyncratic and suggests that English is not his first language which makes the creation all the more awesome. He opened his work to the community to use as we wanted - a very generous thing to do.

An unknown author (are you reading this? - please get in touch so I can credit you) created an excellent edit of the history part, reducing it to six sides. In doing so he/she/it removed quite a large amount of asides and background colour. The result is the Official History, available for download from SeeJay's site.

For a very long while I've had the intention to edit tha_rami's work - the author of the Official History beat me to it (and did a better job!). For this anthology I decided to use the Official History as the skeleton and reintroduce a lot of the colour and texture that had been removed - this anthology is, after all about filling in the background to out play area!

I hope that you enjoy it and that it adds to your gaming experience!

Dave K

Early Space Exploration (2100-2252)

In the year 2178, humanity finally succeeded to travel long distances in space due to the invention of Fulcrum Jump technology. Fulcrum Jump devices could fold space across two points, allowing spacecraft to travel rapidly across vast distances. This quickly resulted in the colonization of much of the Sol sector, including the gas giant Jupiter, which was colonized by building stations just above its atmosphere. Most larger countries on Earth formed an alliance that united for the pursuit of space exploration in an effort to avoid war in space. The new faction was named the Terran Alliance.

The Fulcrum Gates, installed in various locations across the newly explored regions of space, offered instantaneous transportation across the universe. The sequence involved distance analysis by astronomers, followed by the transit of drones with automated construction equipment to build a gate at the destination. This was typically followed by an in system survey by Trailblazer Units culminating in the transport of colonists to the new planets

Over several decades, the Terran Alliance expanded their exploration efforts many light years away from Earth. Alliance astronomers started to map the Orion sector in 2190. In 2197, the first drones were sent to begin building Fulcrum Gates there. After the gates had been constructed, an exploration team was sent. These "Trailblazers" mapped the sector over the next five years. Colonists reached the Orion sector in 2205.

The Orion sector was quickly colonized and the Alliance declared it part of its territory. However, unrest about the Alliance control started to rise with one of the colonies of the Orion sector. The colony separated from the Alliance over what they viewed were their rights of exploration and ownership of systems they settled. They wanted exclusive colonial control over planets and systems they lived in, including the abundant resources they provided. This led to political disagreements and increasing hostilities. Several other neighbouring colonies decided to unite for the same reasons and formed the Colonial Federation around 2229. But it wasn't until about a dozen different colony groups formed together in the mid 30's that the Federation truly became a united faction.

Some colonies refused to unite with either the Alliance or the Federation. This led to a number of 'Rogue' clans and the conflicts that followed began an arms race with the development of the first true space-optimized weapons. Rogue clans wanted the resources in the Orion sector and often attacked indiscriminately in their efforts. Attacks from Rogue clans became weekly news and colonies often spent much of their time defending their interests. The threat from Rogue clans eventually started to spread back to territory firmly in Alliance control. Over the next several decades, several conflicts occurred in the Orion sector and Sol sector. But a greater threat was growing involving the Alliance and Federation.

Initially, the Alliance did little to keep colonial territories in their control, since the disputed areas of space were too remote to risk devoting so many resources to confronting the distant rebellion... it left the majority of Alliance space in the region vulnerable to attack. The Federation took advantage of the situation and quickly expanded its empire to neighbouring solar systems. As territorial and political disputes continued to increase as each side claimed ownership of newly discovered regions, threats eventually led to conflicts which eventually led to war. By the mid-50's, the Alliance-Federation war had begun and continued until the early 70's. Although no formal declaration of war or peace was ever made, both sides eventually halted aggressive military actions and agreed to keep their distance from each other. Under a secret research and development project, the Alliance developed a version of the jump technology that was physically much smaller and with vastly improved energy

efficiency. These new jump devices could be fitted into capital ships no smaller than battleships and large carriers

Less than 20 years after jump technology was developed, the Alliance constructed the first jump-capable Battlecarrier at the Enigma Asteroid base. The Lexington was commissioned in 2212, It is astonishing to think that the secrecy of the ABC Lexington Project was maintained until 2254.

Space technology developed rapidly with the need to protect far flung colonies across vast areas. Weapons were developed specifically for use in space conflicts. The Alliance designed space fighters to use these new beam and particle weapons. Many different missiles of varying range and yield were designed to provide long range attack and defence capabilities. Names from history! The UFA-25 was introduced into service in 2224; the F-144A in 2278; other names that will be familiar are the Raven, Shadow, Quasar and Lamprey.

Rise of the Mercenaries (2220-2300)

The increasing threat from Rogue clans against the Federation and Alliance resulted in new opportunities for lone spacecraft pilots. Some were retired fighter pilots, others adventurous explorers. They privately owned their own spacecraft and made their living on providing services to anyone willing to pay. As conflicts increased, so did the need for outside help and this group of independent pilots willing to provide assistance eventually became known as 'Mercenaries'. Initially, they numbered in the hundreds, but as word spread of high pay for risky work, their numbers quickly grew into the thousands. Mercenaries became known for the effectiveness, often taking chances military forces refused while commanding customized ships that were better suited to certain challenges.

With the independence of Mercenaries also came risks of unreliability and loyalty. So to improve their reputation, the Mercenaries voluntarily formed the 'Mercenaries Guild'. The Guild was a network of leadership spanning numerous systems where Mercenaries operated. They established operational guidelines and technological standards, one of which included the incorporation of tracking devices in every spacecraft, station, city, and carrier where Mercenaries operated. When a Mercenary failed to follow a rule or complete an objective, it would be recorded on their permanent record. With no escape from the reputations Mercenaries earned for themselves, a code of honor and standards quickly formed. Mercenaries soon became a dependable option for civilian and military factions in need of their services.

Notable events that occurred during this phase of the development of EVOCHRON include the attack on March 12th 2252 on the Aros Base, in orbit around Jupiter. This was one of the first examples of cooperative action being taken by the Federation against the Alliance. However, the in-fighting between different factions in the Federation continued until the early 70's

The Aros Assault

March 12, 2252 - 3:57AM Universal Space Time - Aros base in orbit around Jupiter. More than 200 UFA-25 pilots return to their duty stations in preparation for the report due from the Alliance Battle Cruiser Morpheus. The Morpheus was scheduled to close to the base as it passed through the Sol system. The ship had excellent scanning and analysis equipment and could pick up detail the base could not at this time; the base's long-distance radar on the base was "down" due to maintenance. Intelligence analysts

on the base needed an urgent update about the firefight between a large force of unidentified, probably Rogue, attack ships and a combat wing of Alliance fighters. At present the Morpheus's communication was being blocked by a nebula - radio contact would be restored soon as the ship came out of the nebula's shadow.

March 12, 2252 - 3:59AM UST - The Intel analysts suspected that the force that was a joint fleet created by the cooperation between several Rogue clans. Unbeknownst to the base, the attack ships had quickly overwhelmed the smaller Alliance force and were now attacking the ABC Morpheus; The Morpheus's outnumbered defence CAP of 25 fighters engaged the attackers - the Morpheus's close range anti-ship batteries were in a state of full readiness. In an heroic fight, a large proportion of the hostile forces were destroyed and the rest retreated. Radiocontact would be restored around 4:03AM. and support from the, as yet ignorant, Aros Base's fighter groups would be available

March 12, 2252 - 4:01AM UST - The Rogue attack fleet had regrouped and launched a second assault on the Morpheus. Due to the heavy damage it had already received in the first assault the engines went off-line at 4:02, the shields failed at 4:04 and the outer hull was breached at 4:05. Radiocontact had not yet been restored.

March 12, 2252 - 4:12AM UST - Aros Base in orbit around Jupiter. Battle stations were sounded as a very large fleet of hostile force appeared on the close-range radar. Within two minutes, the attackers succeeded in destroying most of the power-generators on the base and thus preventing the operation of the hangar doors. The majority of Aros Base's fighters were trapped inside the base!. Only sixty pilots succeeded in escaping the base, 13 being killed in the chase that followed. The attacking ships seemed a new, high-tech model used by the Federation.

The Lexington (2254-2284)

In 2245, the Alliance had built the first super carrier in secret at the Enigma Asteroid base. The ship was kept classified for nearly a decade while tests were conducted on its new mobile long range Fulcrum Drive and advanced weapon systems. Few knew of the Lexington project until the year 2254.

At the same time, the Alliance also started building other large combat carriers named Bismarck, Zenith and Victory, which would be completed by 2259. The Lexington and its crew was credited as being one of the primary reasons the Alliance-Federation war eventually ceased by the 70's. Its overwhelming firepower and squadron carrying capacity made it a virtually unstoppable force in the later years of the war. After a massive battle in 2272 involving roughly 10 squadrons of fighters and nearly a dozen capital ships, the Lexington proved it could defeat whatever the Federation had in its fleet. Recognizing the futility of engaging the Lexington, the Federation began to back down from its aggressive actions following this battle. By 2277, the war had effectively ended in favour of the Alliance. Neither party, though still hostile, had the strength nor the will to continue to engage in bloody conflict of this intensity. By default, an unwritten peace was formed, one in which with minor conflicts still occurred sporadically through the Orion sector, and one that didn't do anything to reduce the tensions between both factions..

These struggles of the war lead to new research into spacecraft fighter technology. To counter the superiority of the UFA-80 the new all-purpose fighter/bomber craft that had been introduced in 2278, the F-144A StarWraith was upgraded. Several advancements were made on this new fighter, ranging from the original A type up through the last E version introduced in 2285. During the same time, they also developed the Raven, Shadow, Quasar and Lamprey.

The Federation also advanced their spacecraft technology with the development of the Vengeance and the Richton class battle carriers along with the UFA-80 fighter to balance Alliance capital ships.

The fragile "peace" existed for nearly 8 years.

Enigma (2285-2287)

In 2285, the Federation's flagship, the Richton, was mysteriously attacked and destroyed while on route to a peaceful colony establishment meeting. The ship was carrying many elite political and military leaders of the Federation. Because the ship was so heavily armed making it nearly impossible to destroy and was so close to Alliance space, the Federation blamed Alliance forces for the ship's destruction. The Alliance denied the accusations and pleaded for an immediate investigation. War was immediately declared by the Federation and the forces of the Alliance were dispatched to secure the borders from attack. Mostly minor engagements took place over the next two years with little or no casualties, neither side seemed willing to fully engage in battle as what had been so destructive in the previous war. As forces from both sides spread into the Orion system, the Alliance battle carrier Becker approached from the nearby Rucker Asteroid field.

The Becker was attacked on April 14, 2287. It was apparently destroyed in a matter of a few seconds, something Alliance intelligence believed would be impossible for any Federation force to accomplish. Rumors began to spread about a 'super weapon' being used by one of the rogue clans, but no evidence could support the theory. 48 hours after the attack, several Wraith pilots from the Becker who were on patrol and survived the attack arrived at the nearby AH-104 starbase. They reported seeing a massive dark gray vessel that attacked the Becker from the side.

They also reported that the vessel fired a series of energy blasts before the Becker was destroyed. The weapon used was apparently powerful enough to penetrate both the shields of the carrier and the heavy armour plating. The end result was the Becker blew apart with no chance to respond.

The mystery of the Becker's destruction and continuing reports of Federation casualties had raised suspicions of a new faction with advanced technology. The Lexington, flagship of the Alliance and veteran of the Alliance-Federation war, had been dispatched to the Orion system to investigate and hold back any advancing Federation forces.

The small scale conflicts between the two sides continued: Shortly afterward, a small group of experienced F-144E pilots stationed in the Enigma asteroid base were put up to the challenge of escaping their own base, as enemy marines had taken over the automated defences of the station. After disabling all defences, they succeeded into meeting the Lexington and from there on coordinated the attack against a new threat. It turned out the Federation was sustaining significant casualties from attacks by an unidentified force. Over the following weeks, information about an highly-developed, alien race started to reach Alliance Intelligence and after joining forces with clans from the Alpha Centauri system, they decided to counter the attack.

The Alien race was dubbed the Vonari and they seemed capable of destroying entire carriers in a single salvo. Their main-fighter, dubbed the A-50, could overpower the Star Wraith and the UFA-80. The Vonari made a push for Earth itself on July 1st, 2287. Earth's Naval forces intercepted the Vonari attack force, which consisted of numerous large ships matching the description of the spacecraft that attacked the Becker. In a massive battle, two Lamprey pilots escorted by a wing of StarWraiths succeeded in reaching a Vonari vessel and planted several hull charges. The hull charges proved

effective and four explosions rocked the dark vessel and tore it apart. The explosion was large enough to also destroy the surrounding vessels flying in close formation.

(For an account of the attack on the Enigma Asteroid Base and a very brief account of the battle against the Vonari invasion fleet sent to Earth see the short story elsewhere in this anthology)

Reviction (2288)

After sustaining losses against the Vonari in Orion, Rucker, Deneb, and Sierra, the success of Earth's defense finally gave the Navy much needed time to regroup and redesign many technologies to confront the new alien threat. Humanity knew it was just a matter of time before the Vonari would strike again, and next time, they would have the advantage of knowing our capabilities. So Alliance Command decided to maximize whatever time remained to transform the military to a technology level capable of resisting any future attacks. At the top of the priority list was the Star Wraith space superiority fighter, which would receive several improvements to its weapon systems and shielding.

Alliance intelligence had unearthed rumors that indicated a Federation attempt to convince several high ranking Alliance officers to defect. Indeed, in the year 2288, a number of Alliance officers defected to the Federation.

The Lexington was dispatched and from behind enemy lines tasked to investigate the defections. The Lexington was supported by several special operation squadrons. All groups in the force operated separately to make their presence and probing harder to detect. The Enigma Star Wraith Squadron was renamed to be the 80th Star Wraith Squadron and assigned to the Lexington.

On 12 October of the year 2288, The Lexington was on a routine patrol. An F-144E squadron pursued an UFA-80 patrol into the Orion nebula. In the nebula they were without visual contact with the Lexington; a unidentified hostile object appeared on their radar. Less than 10 seconds later, the radar blip for the Lexington disappeared, The Lexington had been attacked by a Vonari capital ship. The Lexington had no time to launch fighters to defend itself and a nearby patrolling squadron of F-144E's (80th Squadron) was too far away to come to the ship's defense. The Lexington was quickly torn apart by the destructive energy blast of the Vonari ship. The 80th Wraith Squadron returned to find only debris remaining. Thus ended a proud tradition - 30 years of action without ever having failed a mission had been destroyed in a few seconds.

The 80th Wraith Squadron was transferred to another special operations carrier which jumped into the area after the Vonari has disappeared. The task force continued its investigations on the defections. Their research concluded that the Federation had convinced several clans and Alliance-officers that humanity could not stand divided and at the same time confront the Vonari invasion. The Federation planned to consolidate space and its resources and after eliminating the Alliance Government and Military Command consolidate the entire Alliance and Federation to stand united against the Vonari invasion. To call this an ambitious project is an understatement!

October 2288: The 80th squadron and its carrier, still operating behind enemy lines, pursued a large group of rebels. As they approached a nebula cloud, the hostile fleet accelerated and two squadrons turned back towards the pursuing wraiths giving the impression of a counter attack to gain time for the main group to reach the nebula. As two groups closed the radar-blips of the main fleeing fleet started to disappear. The Nebula limited the communications to Alliance command, the CO of the battle carrier

finally decided to pass-by the fleet and call for intel updates from the 80th; Hunting in a nebula was not a picnic and he needed to know what was happening.

The carriers approached the area and its radar displayed a large number of weaker blips characteristic of a debris fields at the location where the rebel fleet should have been. There was a smaller debris field beyond that. All pointed to an successful Alliance counterattack by the 80th. Three F-144E's were send to check the smaller debris field.

The "debris" wasn't debris at all but a small patrol of Vonari A-50 Inreceptors. In a brief but frantic furball, and with outstanding determination and effort, the three F-144E pilots destroyed over 12 A-50's. This feat still ranks as one of the most outstanding displays of aggressive combat flying in the annals of any space navy. It also demonstrated humanity's technological superiority in space combat. This was only the start of the fleets problems.

Shortly after, Alliance and Federation forces agreed to a cease-fire. The Vonari had advanced very rapidly, and the civil war between the Alliance and Federation had left both sides unprepared for the new threat. They joined together to fight against the Vonari.

The Alliance intercepted Federation communications detailing a less hazardous route out of the Nebula towards the Olympus system. Most Federation ships had already been destroyed during their first contacts with the Vonari, and thus the 80th squadron found itself amidst numerous Vonari SAD (search and destroy) patrols. The 80th squadron and the other carrier fighters started fighting its way through the nebula to puch a hole through the enveloping Vonari for their carrier. The first transmission of the 80th squadron after they had restored radio contact described them preparing to engage a large Vonari vessel near the Olympus system. Under the protective cover of its Wraith squadrons the carrier escaped from the nebula and towards the Orion system. From there, they successfully came to the aid of the beleaguered Argos Base and as more carriers and battleships joined them they set up a perimeter preventing the Vonari from taking Rigel, a neighbour system for Earth.

Intel analysts warned the combat high command that they felt that something wasn't right. The Vonari thrust. impressive though it was, wasn't sufficient to take systems and hold them against the inevitable Terran counter attacks that would follow. Very quickly it became obvious that there were correct!

The whole Rigel-conflict turned out to be a distraction. A massive Vonari fleet passed through the Alpha Centauri system, leaving the 80th squadron in Rigel without the time to intercept them. On 30th October 2288, around 5:32PM UST, the Vonari Fleet appeared on Earth's low orbit radar.

Back in Rigel, aboard the Special Operation carrier, in a last desperate attempt, they prepared to use an experimental, classified jump technology. Up until this time a ship could either fly into a jump gate and jump to the gate in the system linked to it or create its own jump field and jump up to five sectors. The Mantis drive hadn't been captured from the Vonari yet.

In early February 2288, Dr. Adam Shefeld developed a new warp-gate device that could open a temporary fulcrum field pathway capable of transporting an entire ship from one region of space to another without the need for a receiving gate. This was revolutionary and his technology was as yet only built into one specific gate, the so-called Shefeld Gate near the Rucker asteroid field.

The 80th Squadron defended the carriers as they battled their way through the Orion sector towards the Rucker belt. They reached the Shefeld Gate at 5:40PM UST and after

a tense delay whilst the destination coordinates were entered into the gates control computers, jumped directly to the Sol System near Earth.

The first thing they saw was a large Vonari fleet once again trying to punch through the Earth's Defence Screen. The carrier scrambled every fighter it was carrying (20% over the designed capacity!) and move towards the enemy to provide support for its fighters. The Vonari were greatly surprised by the sudden attack from their relatively undefended rear. The morale of the Earth defence forces was greatly lifted. The Vonari attack lost momentum as ships scrambled to face the attack on both sides

The Vonari's intention was to destroy Earth instead of invading it. Several Vonari specialised generator ships arranged on three layers powered up their energy arrays and uplinked their energy to each other and to the central battleship. This ensured the energy reaching the battleship was coordinated and smoothed. The resulting weapon shot would be a planet-buster rather than a ship-buster like the one that had destroyed the Lexicon.

The 80th squadron coordinated an attack with the Earth defences and succeeded in breaking through the enemy defences. Battle Engineers had come up with a desperate plan, which would require exact timing. They planned to use the linked arrays to trigger a chain-reaction in the Vonari generator ships. Overloading one would cause an energy surge that should be (should be note!) propagated to the ships it was connected to, causing them to overload. they would cause the next to overload and so on. The timing was crucial, because if too little power had been allowed to build up the explosions wouldn't have the required strength to destroy the entire fleet and would leave the fleet damaged but intact. Too much energy and the main carrier could fire and destroy Earth with a single blast.

"No pressure then" said the Strike leader

While the main vessel prepared its energy emitter and targeted earth, several F-144E's started their attacks.

The timing was perfect.

As the hull of the chosen generator was breached and the entire vessel tore apart in a huge fireball, the energy-uplink process which was almost completed started to spread the effects into the internal systems of the other Vonari ships, The inner layer of generator ships overloaded and dumped their energy into the central battleship which didn't blow up - it vaporised - instantly and completely. The expanding plasma ball enveloped the wreckage of the linked ships forming the superweapon. It continued to expand rapidly and destroyed the layers of Vonari ships protecting the "super weapon" Many defense ships even further out were either seriously damaged or disabled. It's an understatement to say that this was the turning point in this siege.

The remaining of the Vonari forces turned to flee in chaos - several were damaged or destroyed when they collided with other fleeing vessels. Many were caught and destroyed by the exultant Earth forces. A few managed to jump away . . . a very few. At 6:01PM UST a universal broadcast declared the Earth safe again. Even in the emotion of such an unexpected but overwhelming victory wise heads knew that the Vonari weren't defeated - we'd won the battle, but not yet the War. Humanity started a hunt for the Vonari Homeworld

Riftspace (2274-2288)

An ancient Vonari artefact was discovered in December 2287, telling a story of an outsider who would find a paradise world hidden in a realm called 'RiftSpace'. The outsider would come from a distant place and possess great wealth and powerful machines to find the planet which would bring safety to a dying race.

Groups from several systems hunted for the paradise planet in RiftSpace. In their search, another artefact was found near the planet Sierra B. This became universe-wide news and the hunt for RiftSpace started to grow. A series of artifacts were eventually discovered and one ambitious searcher was able to locate a final artefact and decode its message. The message led him to the planet of Thuban, where he found what looked like a sparkling point of light in open space. It activated as he approached and transported him to the planet in RiftSpace referred to in the original message. However, Vonari 'guardians' referred to in the story were also there and attacked the mercenary as soon as he arrived. The mercenary was successful at defeating the Vonari ships.

An aside: The Artefact Quest in more detail

The first Vonari artefact had mentioned a "dying race". Although humanity patently wasn't a dying race, mercenaries from all over started to hunt for the paradise world in RiftSpace. These groups came from the planets where poverty was high; their single goal was to find a new home, and wealth.

One of these mercenary's then found clues to a second artefact near the planet of Sierra B. This became Evoverse-wide news and the hunt for RiftSpace mushroomed in the ensuing excitement. This one mercenary, however, had a minor advantage; he knew where to search.

The drawing on this discovery resembled the land pattern of the planet Onyx, a stone-cold, even moonlike planet. After extensive searching, he retrieved the second artefact in January 2288. This time, the retrieval of the artefact was kept secret, and the disappointment of not finding any artefacts themselves and believing that no-one else had been successful either caused many 'Riftspacers' to return to their homes.

Not even the Alliance knew of this last discovery, and less than a year later the third artefact was found in the Thuban-system. In May of 2275, the fourth artefact was located and retrieved. It did however, contain a unclear confusing clue and a coded, Vonari message.

Progress stalled.

The mercenary continued to hunt for other artefacts and tried to solve the clue as well. After nearly 9 months unsuccessfully trying to unravel the fourth, he found a fifth artefact was near Sirius. Like the fourth, this was was enigmatic as well - two artefacts that he couldn't crack!

Having no real choice he contacted the Alliance. After substantial secret Alliance research on Sirius, the 5th artefact turned out to be the 'key' to the encrypted message on the 4th artefact!

However, now the Alliance had been involved they behaved like a typical bureaucratic empire-building power group and claimed RiftSpace as Alliance space. In reality the Alliance has so many external threats that they could not enforce this claim. Their

ambitions were pie-in-the-sky as the ancient adage goes! In any event, the mercenary, who was the only one to understand the clue.

He headed for the planet of Thuban carrying the "super artefact". The secret was that the other artefacts were parts of a whole - the whole was needed to succeed. In Thuban System, he located a structure similar to a Fulcrum Gate. It activated as he approached with the combined artefact, and after the transportation to RiftSpace he quickly located the planet.

However, Vonari 'guardians' had been awaiting the arrival of this outsider and in their myth their role was to "test" the new race. The test was simple - combat to the death! Him being human made them even more determined that the "awaited one" would fail and be shown to be an imposter.

No one witnessed the ensuing battle - After a true inferno in space, in which he had to engage four waves of four Vonari Guardians.

Though not easily, nor without some damage, he triumphed. The Guardians were all dead. The Human Race had again claimed victory.

RiftSpace became a neutral location, but also a secret one. Only those who were invited were given the key to access RiftSpace, and inhabitants of the paradise system only showed up to sell their goods. As they were using technologies such as Stealth Fields, it would take until far into 2300 before the location of RiftSpace became common knowledge. Even then, knowing where it was not the same as getting there easily.

Evochron (2288-present)

In November of 2288, the Alliance discovered a new system that included an Earth-like planet. Although lifeless, the world had an abundant supply of water along with the right gravity and atmospheric conditions for terraforming. The planet was named 'Sapphire' after its brilliant coloring and nearby solar system were linked together through a network of jump gates. The entire quadrant of space was then named after the exploration satellite that discovered the central solar system, Evochron.

Hoping to find more than just Sapphire, mercenary's journeyed to the new sector In short time 14 new systems were discovered and colonized. It seemed likely that there were many, many more systems waiting to be discovered.

The outer 10 systems were in space rich in nebula clouds, and so became known as the Nebula Systems. They attracted the sort of pilot that craved freedom from government control - freedom to live independently and find wealth; It was mostly pirates and the more daring mercenary's that went to these systems. The entire sector inevitable was anarchic for a long time, a place for experienced mercenary's.

Populated space was vast - hundreds of planets, moons, nebulae, asteroid fields and starts. The NAVMap was a central part of a mercenary's vital toolkit. Outdated data was potentially life threatening. New systems were discovered regularly. The Alliance government maintained the most up-to-date map data. It recognised that despite their independence, the mercenaries played a vital role in developing Evochron. When the mercenaries demanded facilities to ensure that their system NavComputers could be updated with the most recent data available, the Alliance constructed a new data super-node in Evochron. This super-node, from which mercenaries could download all data available about the sector, was dubbed the Registry.

However, with this rapid, wild expansion, Humanity had had once again stirred up the Vonari.

The Vonari started a campaign to invade and subjugate settled systems in the Evochron sector. The Alliance Intel Organisations soon realised that the Vonari had developed the ability to very quickly move large fleets well into the sector without being detected.

This was a turning point in the social and political development of Evochron. The enemy was able to attack from within - the situation was serious. Understanding implications and the consequences of the Vonari taking and holding an increasing number of systems, many mercenaries worked together and formed their own "Mercenary Faction". They fought alongside the Alliance with skill, flair, tenacity and bravery. Together they Alliance and the Mercenaries firstly stopping the Vonari advance and then in retaking several systems, pushing the Vonari back. They didn't succeeded in pushing the Vonari out of from Evochron. The Vonari dug in and the war reached a stalemate - the Vonari couldn't move forwards but the Alliance couldn't move them backwards.

Thinking laterally and trying ever more desperate measures, the Alliance focussed on finding out how the Vonari ships were getting into Evochron through the enveloping blockade undetected. Eventually, the Alliance discovered and previously unknown spacial phenomenon near a newly discovered system: Pisces. It was a large blueish sphere with a surface that rippled like water. It turned out to be the natural version of the Fulcrum Gates, a wormhole. This was where the Vonari ships had entered Evochron.

Scout ships entered the wormhole to find out its origin. They reported back - the wormhole linked Evochron and the Vonari Home System!

An invasion of the Vonari Homeworld was too great a task to attempt - the Alliance/Mercenary forces would face the mirror situation to what the Vonari faced in Evochron.

The Alliance research and development efforts had developed a prototype of extremely powerful explosive, reportedly based on matter-antimatter annihilation. Missiles were modified to carry the new warheads and a small force of independent mercenaries volunteered to carry the war to the Vonari homeworld. Armed with experimental Fulcrum Torpedoes, they headed for the Vonari sector and attacked the Vonari Orbital Construction Facilities there. These facilities were a central and crucial part of the Vonari military capability. The torpedoes also proved to be effective against the swarm attack techniques the Vonari favoured. The huge explosion of a single Fulcrum Torpedo was able to vapourise a huge number of A50's Interceptors in one go. This devastating surprise attack was intended as a warning - the Vonari forces in Evochron retreated back into their own system.

The wormholes distorted local spacetime in a very distinctive way. Once the Alliance knew what to look for, several wormholes were located in other Evochron systems, some inside blackholes. One momentous discovery (in a minor system owned by a wealthy mercenary), turned out to link to a system containing several other wormholes. These wormholes linked to several core populated systems in Evochron, thus acting as an "interchange" for very rapid travel around Evochron.

EvoChron, being on the frontline, naturally became the buffer zone in the war against the Vonari. However, mercenary's and traders still visit this highly profitable sector on regular basis.

The End Of An Era (2292)

By 2300, Humanity controlled 4 sectors: Sol (since the year 2100), Orion (since 2156), RiftSpace (since 2288) and EvoChron (since 2288). The human race was still divided into Federation and Alliance, and it was clear that true peace is still far away.

Several episodes in the creation of EvoChron had burned themselves into the public conscious, episodes that showed the spirit of humanity, its courage and tenacity and willingness of individuals to sacrifice themselves for the whole.

The Aros Assault was and is described in any modern History book, both Alliance and Federation. The Alliance built a monument at the former location of the Aros base on Jupiter in 2260.

In memory of the Lexington, a monument was built in Washington on Earth, consecrated on the 12th of October 2289. This day was declared an Alliance holiday for all time.

The 80th Squadron returned to the Enigma Starbase. They would remain there until it was dedicated as one of the largest Alliance monuments. Carved over the entrance are the words:

"Some selflessly pay the ultimate price giving up what they love that we might be protected and other generations move onwards - We will make them proud as they look on us from Eternity"

The Federation Flagship Richton is remembered annually in Federation space, with a ritual similar to the Lexington's. Alliance Officials respect the 2 minutes of silence held every 21th of May, at 2:41PM UST.

Calm (2292 - 2346)

A peace settled. For over twenty years, peace and prosperity were known once more in most of space. The Alliance and Federation signed a treaty in that led to a terran peace in all of colonized space. EvoChron was not included in the treaty. Within EvoChron, the push towards colonisation, wealth, power and influence kept the sector in a delicate balance between calm and chaos. There was enough territory for any group to stake a claim and live according to their beliefs - religious conflict virtually evaporated. Many different types of government could be found across EvoChron's smaller colonies. No one government succeeded in controlling the sector, and finally it was decided accept the diversity that had been developed - local colonies had local governments with the blessing of the large core systems.

This led to the creation of the Mercenary Guild - a natural development of the Mercenary Faction that fought in the last Vonari War. The Guild was created to regulate and organize mercenary life without impeding or limiting it, nor setting any ethical boundaries. The Mercenary Guild, was purely an advisory set of guidelines with a group of representatives monitoring the behaviour of any member. It was successful in creating some stability. Mercenaries realised that their commercial success depended on their reputation. Loyalty and trustworthiness were vital characteristics - Mercenaries who cheated were not likely to get rich

In early 2346, there were talks of merging the Alliance and Federation and real peace. Representatives of both factions were sent to the Peace Dome, a specially built conference location on New Hope station, to - for the first time since the founding of the Federation - discuss true peace.

The Depression (2344 - 2347)

Ironically, as a result of the success of the Peace Negotiations an economic crisis developed. Throughout history, war has been a stimulus both for the development of new technology but also for the economy; wars are expensive!

There was a deep, widespread Depression triggered by the collapse of several large weapon markets - inflation soared. Resources became more and more costly with prices soaring up on daily basis.

Responding to the high demand for nearly everything, a group industrial leaders plotted to ignite a war to restore the economy and gain fortune from this war through renewed weapon sales. convinced (and bribed) two military officers to trigger a new war by increasing tensions between the two negotiating sides. The story of the attempt is given in detail in the "The Rise and Fall" elsewhere in this anthology

Lost Paradise (2320 - 2340)

RiftSpace was farther away than any of the systems, the only access through a 'spatial anomaly'. Due to the very restricted means of access it was abandoned as a colonial location around the year 2330. By 2340, though it was still being explored for scientific purposes, but research teams were the only humans that travelled there until the Renegades assault RiftSpace.

The Seekers (2321 - 2363)

The Evochron sector an unstable region. In 2324, Alliance investigations uncovered evidence of a substantial "underground" organisation calling themselves "The Seekers".

The Seekers were nothing short of a modern day "secret sect" of conspiracy theorists that believed that the governments were keeping much about Riftspace secret. They were on a mission to find the truth.

Their founding, in late 2292, was a result of a defection of an Alliance communication expert, Jonathan Marchant. He claimed to have seen "proof" of a cooperation between the Alliance and the legendary mercenary Garret, the original discoverer of Riftspace. He claimed that there had been secret negotiations of "unequalled tactical advantage" revealing "more secrets than one could imagine". He could not provide any evidence or details. Despite careful searching, his proof was never found. Jonathan believed the relevant papers were destroyed.

In frustration, he started to hunt for Riftspace himself. His claim had circulated amongst the Seeker community. It gained momentum (as many conspiracy theories do) through repetition and unconfirmed (and unconfirmable!) rumour shared between sympathisers. His story appealed to a wide spectrum of groups; Alliance, Federation and Clan members and opportunists.

The Alliance did not know what The Seekers sought, but managed to convince themselves that The Seekers were a non-aggressive underground group of deluded individuals who were breaking no laws. It allowed them to search for their dream.

Within 40 years, The Seekers had become a large, anonymous crowd operating using stealth as their main weapon.

Marchant, however, did not live long enough to see their true potential unleashed. His ship was destroyed during the Arvoch Conflict on the 23rd of September, 2361. A charismatic man, Douglas Yager, succeeded him as Chief Seeker and ignited a war.

The Renegades (2361 - 2363)

The Seekers, now under the influence of Douglas Yager, quickly changed their strategy and tactics. Using the threat of sheer numbers, they decided to come out of the dark and demand the answers they sought. This earned them their public name: the Renegades. Such demands were inevitably backed up by military action. In order to assault Alliance space to force the release of the information they wanted they obviously needed a lot of resources. The Seekers realised that they needed control of the Evochron sector to access the sheer quantity of material they required.

The Seekers triggered a brutal civil war that lasted for two long years. By the end of the year 2362, they had conquered large portions of the Evochron sector and were ready to move onto Phase II of their plan.

The Guilds reacted by organizing the government of several large Evochron sectors to make their defences as efficient as possible and by pleading for Alliance help. Intel they had gathered indicated that the Evochron conflict was merely a preliminary stage of an eventual attack on the Alliance. The Alliance were persuaded and provided large amounts of resources, weapons and a large number of "advisers" and "observers" The war raged on, but now the Guilds were stronger.

The Guilds fought The Renegades to a standstill. Suddenly and without any warning, after a month-long stalemate, in late 2363, Renegade forces suddenly broke and fell back into space. They vanished completely shortly afterwards. No trace of where they had disappeared to was found in the immediate aftermath of the War

The Beacon Trail (2408 - 2415)

After nearly ten years, a shocking discovery was made on Sapphire. An object emitting an encrypted message was located partially buried in the terrain. The object was declared harmless by the guilds, and was confirmed to be created by the Renegades after their downfall in late 2363. Several mercenaries believed the beacon to be the first in a trail and embarked on a quest to find others, none of them returned. Interest in the beacon quickly fell as no explorers seemed willing to risk the same fate for a hypothetical treasure.

In 2407, a lone mercenary embarked on a journey to uncover the secret of the beacon and succeeded in finding a Fulcrum Gate that lead to the Riftspace system. Surprisingly, he found it filled with Renegade forces. In a beacon communication, Michael Garrett explained that Riftspace was attacked and any resistance soon crumbled against the might and numbers of Renegade forces. Bitterly, he added that requested Alliance backup never showed up, although they had promised reinforcements, namely the battle carrier Phantom. His communication ended with Michael hoping that they would make it back to the Fulcrum Gate. Whether he made it is unknown. The mentioning of the Phantom implies that the recording was made directly prior to the Arvoch conflict - most likely in December 2407.

The Arvoch Conflict (2402-2408)

The Arvoch Conflict started on January 7, 2402, when Federation forces threw up blockades in the Evochron sector, leading to renewed tensions between Alliance and Federation. The Alliance dispatched the experimental Phantom carrier and large numbers of the new Wraith and Evoch fighters to control the situation. They uncovered a Vonari influence in the battle after the first two weeks of the conflict. The Vonari invaded the Evochron sector once more and this time, they succeeded in progressing rapidly even with the resistance of the Alliance. The Phantom, however, proved effective. Acquiring victory after victory, it turned out to be the key factor in winning the war.

In late February 2408, a fighter squadron of the Phantom succeeded in locating and obtaining a powerful Vonari weapon, an upgraded version of the weapon the Vonari tried to use against Earth. Using the wormhole in Pisces, humanity attempted to retake the Arvoch system from Vonari control. Final messages from the carrier's transmitted activity log indicate the crew attempted to activate the Vonari weapon. The fate of the carrier was unknown.

Appendix 2: How do I write an Evoverse story?

Hints, advice and guidance for writing FanFic



**If after reading these stories you are galvanised to try it yourself,
but unsure how to start then this section is for you!!**

COMPILED BY DAVEK

I've fancied writing some short stories for Evochron ever since I read the stories posted by Bossk, Schmulky, Nigel_Strange and others. Their stories added depth to the Evoverse and helped greatly to increase the feeling of immersion in the game.

I compiled this guide to help me with my first faltering steps at writing FanFic. My two main problems are firstly thinking up a plotline and secondly not knowing how to write it as an interesting story - both pretty important issues for an aspiring author I'm sure you can agree. I bought a couple of books of scifi story "seeds" for inspiration.

I've made a couple of attempts at writing but neither is typical FanFic. Great fun to create though so I became keener to write some proper stories. My first attempt at a proper story was a small snapshot of an action from the History of Evochron. Not easy!

Then **Kikoni** posted the first part of his Writing Tips (included here) and got me enthused again. I Googled "writing tips" for "FanFic" and for "scifi" - there is so much of it that you could spend most of your free time reading it rather than writing!

There is one site that can't be recommended too highly - several hundred tips, each explained with examples and concise explanations. This is a must see!

<http://www.waynesthisandthat.com/writefanfic.htm>

Spend time browsing and then return to it for specifics. The hints sections on the site include formatting, writing (general and specific), punctuation, character, comic relief, emotions, common actions, different sounds, an activity-level ordered thesaurus(!), beats, a reading list and a bibliography. However it is a (long) series of short snippets and there are some fundamental rules that are the core to good writing so

Some advice and rules appear again and again on site after site. There is scifi specific advice, for example how to create alien characters. There are thousands of pages on the minutiae of punctuation, layout (when to add a blank line etc) and grammar. So I've extracted the main stuff and the specific stuff and changed it to be more Evoverse specific and set it out in (what I think are) logical and coherent sections. I've left out the thousands of pages on the minutiae of grammar and layout. This is intended to be a basic primer - easy to access and at only 25 pages not too expensive to print a hardcopy of.

On the big assumption that anybody will read it at all, I'm suspect that different people will read sections in different orders and have made them a self sufficient as possible. A few pieces of advice are so important that I've included them more than once - so that you are likely to see them wherever you start or dip in- and they aren't what you might expect them to be!



Who should I be writing for? - this may surprise you!

It's okay to let people read your fan-fiction, even if you think it's bad. Everyone else might think it's good, and any constructive criticism they give can help you with your writing.

Enjoy yourself. If you can't look forward to writing your story, then you shouldn't force yourself to write something you no longer like just to finish it. But it's always okay to feel a bit depressed about your story for a bit.

Never give up. Unless for some reason you no longer have interest in the subject you are writing about, or if you have been too busy, if you give up on your fan-fiction, you will be left with half of a good story, and if you decide to go back to it, say, a year later, your writing style probably would have changed somewhat, and you would have to rewrite your whole story if you wanted the style to be consistent.

Do what you're good at, it's a big universe. If you can't write action sequences, try interstellar political intrigue

Don't get stressed out when you have readers hounding your virtual door, demanding for updates. Remember, this is your story. Rome was not built in a day, and neither will your story happen in a week. Take the time you need, breathe, let it stew for a little, and go back to it with fresh eyes. Trust me, fresh eyes makes a hell of a difference when you're stuck on writer's block.

Keep an open mind. This is your story. You get to choose what happens. You're only borrowing the characters. Imagination is important.

Above all, it's *your* story!

Don't let the fans predict or try to channel you into a way to write your story! You had a thought in your head, so let it flow! Have fun with it! Enjoy it!

Write for you!

Don't write for the fans/readers, or you will lose sight of your original idea and there will be fans who don't like what you do. The readers are just *privileged* to see what's going on. That's it! Yes, reviews are nice, but you can't please everyone and their mother. So honestly forget them, especially those that flame, they're just idiots without manners.

And most importantly, have fun with it! If you're writing a story, and you're not having fun, then there is something wrong! If you can't entertain yourself, how can you possibly entertain other people with it?

People hate my work - what can I do?

Ignore people who are rude or mean. Some of your audiences may decide to call you a "poser" or "nerdy" or trash your work completely. Take this all in graciously. What don't they like? Are they the only one who doesn't like it? Keep this in mind. Don't get discouraged! However, listen to logical criticisms.

Not everybody is going to like your fan-fiction story. Some people might hate it, but others will love it! You have to accept that people aren't always going to like what you do

Don't take negative feedback as an insult. Figure out what you're doing wrong and improve your writing, but keep in mind that not everyone will like your fan fiction, no matter how good it is.

Don't change your writing for the critics who know nothing about writing.

Yes. Write the way you write, the way the material and your own processes demand. Be who you are.

Read the section immediately above!

I must be getting better - I've got Writers' Block!

When you get writer's block, don't give up on the story. Give it some time. If you give up, you'll regret it later.

If you ever freeze up and can't think of a single word to write you're suffering from writer's block. How you attack it depends on how you view yourself as a writer. If you write for just for the fun of it, the simplest solution do is stop. Put the story away for a day, or a year, until you want to write and new ideas start coming.

The best way to beat writer's block is to prevent it. Stop writing each day in the middle of a sentence. This accomplishes three things: it provides a leg up on the next day's work, it encourages new ideas as you think about how to finish the sentence, and it drives you crazy because you left something undone. The last point is the most effective. By the time you begin your next writing session your skin will be crawling with eagerness to finish that sentence.

If writer's block hits anyway, try writing something else for awhile. A variation on this is to write one-thousand made-up words or gibberish. Your subconscious will decide writing something real is preferable to such an tiresome task. Try writing something you'd never imagine like profanity or a sexually explicit scene. Shock treatments like this are effective but don't let copies of it get loose or you'll get talked about. If you can't face this, try writing something boring like a detailed description of changing a flat tire. Some other ideas are: write a detailed description of your last dream, the last time something angered you, or the revenge you'd like to inflict on the cause of that anger. Lastly, go someplace new or do something you've never done before. Exposing your subconscious to new experiences shocks it into being creative.

Some "Laws" of writing a story

<http://io9.com/366707/8-unstoppable-rules-for-writing-killer-short-stories>

This summarises the basics very well; it has been edited to make it more relevant to FanFic and the Evoverse and a few "laws" from other sites have been added

Short stories have a limited number of words and that dictates how they should be written.

In a novel, the author can take the time to develop plot, characters, background, and story. With short stories, space is limited. The author has to get the story rolling and can't take the time for scenic detours. So . . .

World-building should be quick and merciless. In a novel, you can spend ten pages explaining how the 29th Galactic Congress established a Peacekeeping Force to regulate the use of interstitial jumpgates, and this Peacekeeping Force evolved over the course of a century to include A.I.s in its command structure, etc. etc.

In a short FanFic story, you really need to hang your scenery as fast as possible - after all most of your readers know where they are; the really big plus about writing Evoverse FanFic is that Vice has already made up your world for you, along with its technology and basic history.

If you are intending to write a series of stories based around an individual or a crew, then you can introduce background (the ships, the crew, the sort of people you are (bounty hunters, military, mercs etc), but bit at a time, when relevant and over several stories

Make us believe there's a world beyond your characters' surroundings. Even though you can't spend tons of time on world-building, you have to include enough little touches to make us believe there's stuff we're not seeing. It's like the difference between the fake house-fronts in a cowboy movie and actual houses. We should glimpse little bits of your universe, that don't necessarily relate to your characters' obsessions. Trade stations are the homes of thousands of everyday people. Navy capital ships have crews of thousands! The Vonari are a race - they have lives and families and aims and aspirations and scaly skin!!

Make your characters human. But not the Vonari! Just like with world building, you can't necessarily devote pages to your characters' childhoods and what kind of underwear they wear under their boiler suits. But do try to spend a bit of time giving all of your characters some baggage, just enough to make them interesting. Most science fiction readers are interested in characters who solve problems and think positively, but that doesn't mean they can't have some damage.

Dive right in — but don't sign-post your plot in big letters. In today's fast-moving world, the first sentence of your short story should catch your reader's attention with the **unusual**, the **unexpected**, an **action**, or a **conflict**. Begin with tension and immediacy. The best short stories are ones which start in the thick of things, but still keep you guessing and let you get to know the characters before you fully comprehend the trouble they're in.

Don't confuse your gimmick with your plot. You may have a great idea for a piece of recovered Vonari technology. Maybe you have the most original basic premise ever — but that's **not** your plot. Your plot is how your new widget changes the people in your story, and how it affects their lives. Or what decisions your people make as a result of this new technological breakthrough.

Don't fall into the character-based/plot-based dichotomy. People will try to categorize stories as based on either plot or character. This is a poisonous idea that will turn you into a cannibalistic freak wearing a belt made out of human spinal cords. There's no such thing as a character-based story or a plot-based story, because every story has both. Even the most incident-free Ploughshares romp or the most twisty thumpy space opera tale. If you start thinking that stories can be categorized into either pile, you'll end up writing either eventless character studies or plot-hammer symphonies starring one-dimensional nothings.

OK, so how do I get started? - Steps in planning your story

Think about what kind of story you want to write. You might address issues of technology and its implications for society. Other stories use fantastic worlds (think uncharted systems) as a way to explore complex social issues. Other Sci-Fi stories have a horror emphasis, while others deal with militaristic action and space battles.

We've got access to four factions (Federation, Alliance, Rebels and Vonari). That means we've probably got lots of possible conflicts. Get into it. We've got lots of Clans. Clan wars don't happen often in the game but clans were set up in the game to justify group combat and campaigns! Write about them - you may even inspire people to go to war!!

The Vonari are a boo-hiss enemy - not much FanFic uses them on a grander scale - it's open territory!

Sketch out the bare bones of your story. Use the following questions to get you started:

What is your plot about?

What is your ending?

Who is your protagonist?

What does he want?

What happens to him?

What does his world look like?

What background information does the reader need to know for this story to make sense?

About how long should this story be?

Make some notes about what you want to write.

Outlining or mapping the story can help clarify plot details and better organize the story. This can help if you are having writer's block or are stuck at a plot point. If there are multiple actions taking place it helps to keep them synchronised

Write one liner Keystones under events. Start with the beginning, the end, and a few pieces of the stuff in the middle you want to mix in between. Then, refine it through revision after revision, altering and deleting Ideas/events as you keep on giving it a fresh look. Then, once you're finally satisfied with a good enough plotline to work with, start writing while using said "Timeline" as a guide only.

Keep the number of characters to a minimum. Too many characters will make the story too complex and the readers won't be able to tell them apart. If your ship has a big crew ie more than three, then introduce them over time, not all at once

Three that belong together . . .

Succinctly described setting and make every word of the story count. Don't add details to fluff up the story. Keep it simple and eliminate anything slowing down the story.

Description should be limited in a short story. You will start losing the audience's attention if you go into lengthy descriptions. This goes for character descriptions as well.

Leave out the passages that readers love to skip. (Those would be the ones you worked hardest on). Reader's have an in-born human ability to take a few details (picking the right details is your job!) and turn them into a complete picture. The more the reader puts in the greater the identification with the story.

Focus on one or two ideas in a short story. More than a couple of plot conflicts can make the story too muddled and confusing. Multi-story arcs need very careful planning. After the first introduction, future stories can be dedicated to moving the story arc forwards.

Use one point of view throughout the story. If you start off inside the character's head, stay there. The same is true if you use third-person point of view. Avoid speaking from multiple characters' points of view in short stories.

Pick a tense (typically past or present) and stick with it through the whole story.

Have a strong Beginning and End for your plotline before you start writing

Hook the reader right from the start. If you don't do that, the reader will just flip to something else. A strong beginning in a short story will make the readers want to know more.

Don't start at the very beginning in a short story. Get straight into the action. Background and pages of build up aren't necessary.

End the story in a way that readers will remember. It doesn't have to be a neatly-tied up happily ever after. But the readers should know what the point of the story was or they will be dissatisfied.

Know what the point of the story is and direct the story to it by the end. When the reader knows what the point is, that should be the conclusion.

Establish the setting and the characters, and then move on to the problem. The plot is what the readers will care about most.

Dialogue and action will drive the story forward. They will also keep the reader involved in what is going on.

Trust the readers to pick up on what's going on without unnecessary flourishes. Grab the readers' attention, get them to the point, and then finish it up.

*If your ambition is to write a linked series of short stories, say about the ongoing adventures of your ship and its crew you can afford more characters but don't put too much background about too many of them into your first (few) stories - if your first adventure is mainly a series of life histories, few will come back to read your second story!! **Firefly** left the background episode until later in the series when it used a series of flashbacks as Mel was slowly suffocating in **Serenity***

How can I create believable human characters?

<http://www.waynesthisandthat.com/writefanfic.htm>

Your characters are as important to your story as your plotline. Nothing will put your readers off than 2D, cliched shallow characters.

I started collating and blending advice from lots of sites, but this site really does do it all. However it is set out in a series of points (almost 200!) so I've extracted some, grouped them and added relevant advice from other sites

Five steps to create a character:

1. Decide the character's purpose.
2. Determine what main characteristics he needs to accomplish this purpose.
3. Add personal and external conflicts for depth.
4. Add attitudes and values.
5. Make up specific details to flesh out the character (write a biography).

Write biographies. Each character in your story needs a biography that defines who they are. Identify critical events in their lives and how these affected them. Define their ethnic, cultural, socio-economic status, and attitudes. Give them friends and prize possessions. Main characters should have biographies at least a thousand words long. Minor characters only need a couple of lines. Make up ten times more information than you'll use in the book. This makes your characters come alive in your mind and provides insights as to how they'll act in specific situations.

*DaveK: If this seems like really hard work, just remember that if **you** don't know your characters, your readers won't have a chance. If your characters are going to reappear in further stories the investment is well worth while. Don't fight for 1000 words - just get a good description down that will help you make your characters behave and respond consistently*

Remember that characters consist of three parts: **physical, psychological and sociological**. All of these effect each other. A character's antisocial behaviour may be the result of some physical flaw.

Should I avoid "unsympathetic" hero characters?

It's certainly true that if you're going to have a main character who's a total bastard, you're going to have work harder to win over the reader - a likable character is just obviously easier for readers to get on board with. But at the same time, feeling constrained to make your protagonist - or all your major characters - as sympathetic as possible can put a straitjacket on your writing.

If you're stuck trying to create characters who will seem sympathetic to all your readers, no matter what cultural context or attitudes they bring to the story. And you're putting severe limits on what sort of actions your characters can take. The bottom line is that "sympathetic" isn't the same thing as "compelling" - a character can be unsympathetic but utterly fascinating and spellbinding. This is all in the execution - if you're going to go with a protagonist who's fundamentally unsympathetic or unrelatable to, you're going to have to do an amazing job of making the reader care about him or her in spite of everything. But it can be done!

Travis Bickle from **Taxi Driver** - Alex in **A Clockwork Orange** - Quasimodo - Tony Soprano - Riddick in **Pitch Black** - Macbeth - William Shakespeare

Remember that a key element is character development, even for the bad guys. It's easy to have people see the good guy and they grow and mature, but the bad guys, antagonist, need to evolve as well. What fun is the bad guy if he doesn't meet the challenges of the protagonists? Also, make your characters flawed. Humans have so many less than perfect traits, your readers will be able to associate with them better if they see the characters as less than perfect. When the time comes for your protagonist to have a 'choose curtain one or two' and he chooses the wrong one, make it hurt. Make them bleed. Have them suffer a consequence because of their decision.

Review Biographies Regularly. Constant review of each character's biography keeps the details of their lives fresh in your mind. This enables you to write their actions and conversations spontaneously. *It also lets the biography grow with the characters adventures and experiences*

Give Each Character His Own Voice. You should be able hear a difference in the way each character talks. Techniques used to create unique voices are: have one character use a lot of contractions while another uses few; one talks in short, simple sentences and the other speaks in long, complex sentences; one character likes short words whereas the second prefers long ones.

DaveK: Don't under any circumstances try to use "heavy accents" - they are very difficult to write in a way that is easy to read and get in the way of the flow of the story. Tell the reader what the accent is. The colonists still retained the strong Texan drawl that their forefathers had. Throw in a few regional phrases or words once in a while. That is more than enough to get the point across, but not so much that your reader will put the book down in frustration. Let the reader imagine the whole dialogue as accented.

Possessions Help Define Characters. A person's ship, clothes, station accommodation, and friends define him. A well shined galley with the latest replicators and coffee gear implies a successful, fastidious personality. An old, rusted ship with scorch marks and pits inspires images of a slob or someone trapped in poverty. Mentioning a character's possessions enables you to describe him without explicitly stating what the reader can see for himself.

Present Characters Slowly. In the real world we get to know people slowly, bit by bit. Introduce characters the same way. Let the reader discover the character as your story unfolds. One effective way to disclose something about a character is have people talk about him before he makes his first appearance. This creates anticipation.

Don't Use Stereotypes. Stereotypes (the tough semi-legal mercenary with a soft spot for the underdog) and anti-stereotypes (a combat jockey who knits) are too predictable to be interesting characters. Another stereotype common to pulp science fiction is the bright young thing blasting into space.

Give Heroes Faults And Villains Virtues. It's hard for readers to identify with a perfect person so give your hero a forgivable or lovable fault. The flip side is also true. A villain is more believable if he has an endearing quality. This allows the reader to feel both satisfaction and sympathy when the villain is vanquished. One exception to this is the purely evil entity used in some horror stories.

Make Villains Strong. Villains must be powerful, implacable, and complex or they won't be sufficiently threatening to create suspense.

Avoid Passive Main Characters. Readers want to identify with strong personalities so your main characters need to be forceful enough to make things happen, not just react to events around them. They should reach decisions and express them in a few, short words. Good characters are alive with great passions and strong emotions and they act on these feelings.

Avoid Selfish And Altruistic Heroes. Heroes shouldn't act totally on their own behalves, unless they're the only ones threatened. It makes them look self-centred. They shouldn't act purely altruistically either. That makes him seem too good to be true. Both cases create characters the reader will not take to heart. Combining some of each of these characteristics will make your hero seem more real.

Volunteer Or Draft Heroes. If a character's going to do something brave that costs him significantly, have him volunteer so he appears noble. If he's going to profit from his actions have him be drafted or trapped into it to avoid making him appear self-serving.

Use As Few Characters As Possible. One of the hardest things readers have to do is to keep track of a story's characters. Use too many any you'll lose the reader. A story needs at least two main characters: a villain and a hero. It's a good idea to give the hero a second main character to act as a side kick so he can talk to someone. Add a sprinkling of minor characters to develop the story but keep the total head count down.

Character Names. Give each character a name that starts with a different letter of the alphabet. This helps the reader keep them separate. A useful technique for this is to write the alphabet vertically down a sheet of paper and create a last name starting with each letter. Repeat this process for first names. If you run out of letters you've got too many characters.

- Varying name lengths also helps the reader differentiate between characters.
- Use a variety of ethnicities but remember that ethnicity plays a big part in determining how a reader expects a character to act. Sticking too close to an ethnic stereotype can make a character dull. On the other hand, using a stereotypical type for a minor character can eliminate a lot of dull description.
- Gentle sounding first names make a character more sympathetic. Harsh last names make it easier for the reader to dislike a character. Long, complicated, or hyphenated names suggest intellectualism and self-importance. Short, one-syllable names like James Bond imply strength and virility.
- Make names look interesting. The easiest way to do this is to use an unusual spelling for a common name.
- Telephone books are an excellent source of names. Mix first and last names to avoid getting sued because you used someone's name for an pirate murderer. All of the above also applies to the names of things and places.

Avoid Last Names Ending In "s." The possessive, Jones' or Jones's, depending on which authority you follow, looks odd to many readers and can be confusing if you're talking about a possession of more than one Jones.

Show Character's Inner Feelings. Characters shouldn't just state what happened but also show how they felt about it.

Make Characters Grow. Real people evolve with time and so should main characters. Their experiences during your story will change them. Show these changes in your by having them act and think differently at the end of the story than they did in the beginning. If the story's is part of a series that continues with the same characters, update their biographies as the series progresses.

Give Characters Unexpected Traits. Characters are more interesting if they have an unexpected talent, such as a coward who's a crack shot with a revolver. Exaggerating a certain ability, physical characteristic, or habit is also effective.

Keep Your Personality Out Of Your Character's. Don't let your own personality take over the personality designed for a character. It's easy for this to happen while writing long passages of dialog. You get so engrossed in what's going on you're pulled into the action. Before long your character starts talking like you instead of himself. One exception is a character modelled after yourself.

Give Characters Conflicting Emotions. Inner turmoil makes characters more human and interesting.

Villains Do What They Think Is Just. When portraying the villain's point of view, make it clear he believes what he's going is right. This gives him conviction and credibility.

Give Heroes Doubts. Readers won't identify with a character who knows how and what to do in every circumstance. No one's that good. Giving your hero a few doubts makes him more appealing, believable and increases suspense.

One Way To Portray An Aggressive Character. You can show a character is aggressive by having him corner a timid character with an endless stream of yes or no questions. Fire them off faster than the cornered character can respond. Have the aggressive character cut the timid character off before he's completed his answer. Mercilessly repeat questions. Make the cornered character back up, stammer, fidget and look around for escape.

How can I create believable alien characters?

<http://www.cthreepo.com/writing/laws/>

The canon

Vice created one alien race in Evochron, the Vonari, but there have consistently been some strange sightings of "flying saucers" in some uncharted systems. There are hints in the Beacon Quest in Legends about an Elder Race. This gives us a route into new alien races. There are some things you need to think about before you introduce new alien races in FanFic.

Your readers (who are likely to be Evochron fans) won't meet them in the game . . . ever, so don't have them playing a major role in the Evoverse, for example in public politics or invading one of the charted systems. If your aliens land on the lawn of Sapphire Government Building in the main city, players will flock there to see them . . . and be unhappily disappointed!

For those of you who want to make the Vonari in your story fit the Evoverse canon, Vice modelled their appearance as looking something like a semi-nocturnal race; some humans who have seen them describe them as 'animal like', maybe feral canine in appearance, but more simply of a scary looking animal with some qualities of a 'bat-like' appearance that looks a little canine-like, but nothing very apparent in one direction or the other. Have a look at the **History of Evochron** - the Vonari wars and the Vonari attempts to invade or destroy the Earth to get an idea of their personality and philosophy.

The other information that will help you get a feel for their actions and motivation should be treated as **Top Secret** : There are rumours that the Vonari were actually in large part, human, the product of illegal genetic experiments gone wrong about 100 years earlier, effectively left for dead on their homeworld (now called Vonarion) after the science experiments finished and the research teams left.

The 'race' thrived on the world they were abandoned on and grew into a significant population within about 50 years, later integrating technology left behind into their own designs to form their own ships and weapons. Highly intelligent (engineered to be so, including remarkable hunting skills especially in the dark) gave them advances at a vastly accelerated rate. Vonari, not unnaturally, blame humans for their condition and are bent on revenge for what was done to them. Only the upper ranks of the Alliance military/leadership know the truth about both their origins and their intent. The average pilot, mercenary, and civilian does not.

The Vonari shun light, though can tolerate it, and are characterized by their dark grey skin, large ears, keen eyesight in the dark, and there are rumours (unsubstantiated) of the possession of limited telepathic abilities.

*To fit into Vice's vision, any use of the information about the **origins** of the Vonari should be in the form of rumours and ambiguous evidence. The same for any back story you discover concerning the "Ancients".*

Other Evoverse aliens;

As has been already mentioned, there is a standard SciFi trope of the apparently long vanished "Ancients / Forerunners / Elders" etc - they left myths and artifacts and bits of technology behind. Most of the technology is well beyond our understanding though being either fully automated or employing decipherable control systems means that we can use it to some degree. Think Stargate. (There are rumours that the science team that "invented" Fulcrum Jump technology in 2178 effectively recreated the technology using information learned from an immeasurably old jumpgate found by a probe during a survey mission to Jupiter's moons half a century earlier.) The Beacon Quest in Evochron Legends suggest that such a race would not be out of place in the Evoverse

Giving Something an Alien Name Doesn't Make it Alien.

Raktajino is coffee. By giving it a Klingon name it sort of appears alien, but everyone drinks it like coffee. It looks like coffee. It is coffee. Don't think that making cows into Dvigids and Horses into Pytkos and changing Texas to Onyx Prime that you are not writing a western. However, if you *want* to write a western in space (Joss Wheldon's Firefly works!) then go ahead - just don't be fooled in to thinking it's **not** a western in space.

An alien culture should not be full of aliases for things that belong in our time on earth – that's just lazy.

Damon Knight described this as "calling a rabbit a smeerp."

Aliens Should be Alien

Aliens will not be like us. It is quite possible that any alien we meet will be humanoid with symmetric bodies, a head, arms, legs, hands, mouths and eyes that work similarly to their human equivalents. This is an efficient design for putting major sense organs near to the bio-computer and raising the distance sense organs high off the ground. It will be unlikely that they will work the same way, though. Sharks and Dolphins are similar looking, but very different creatures, so aliens may **look** like men in many ways but they won't actually be just funny looking humans.

Corollary laws:

- You will never meet an alien who speaks English like a native - even if you have a Universal Translator
- Aliens that are just like us, but with little squiggles on their noses only appear in low budget TV shows.
- Aliens as far as they have personalities will be more likely to be aggressive and pushy. There are not likely to be kindly, friendly and caring aliens because they would not have the drive to explore space. (In this way, they will be much like us.) *DaveK: Unless they are an Elder race who have outgrown the childishness of younger races. They tend to build galaxy spanning gate systems and leave them for the rest of us to get into trouble using! Nor will they have big claws with just a few fingers - they would never have been able to develop sophisticated technology. It is unlikely they will be as aggressive to each other as the Klingons - few of the nerdy ones would have survived long enough to gain enough of an education to develop technology much beyond a club or a sharp stick*
- Real aliens don't act anything like you'd expect them to act. For instance, they will not be Nazis or American Indians.

The sci-fi and fantasy writer C. J. Cherryh has described the process she uses to create alien societies for her fiction as being akin to asking a series of questions, and letting the answers to these questions dictate various parameters of the alien culture. In her view, "culture is how biology responds [to its environment] and makes its living conditions better."

Some of the issues she considers critical to consider in detailing an intelligent alien race include:

- The physical environment in which the species lives
- The location and nature of the race's dwellings, including the spatial relationships between those dwellings
- The species' diet, method(s) of obtaining and consuming food, and cultural practices regarding the preparation of meals and eating (if any)
- Processes which the aliens use to share knowledge
- Customs and ideas regarding death, dying, the treatment of the race's dead, and the afterlife (if any)
- Metaphysical issues related to self-definition and the aliens' concept of the universe they inhabit

more parameters for an "Alien" race to further enhance their background;

- Interpretation of their culture by other inhabitants that come into contact with them.
- The manner they traverse from one location to another within their settled environment.
- The enemies they have encountered and how they have adapted to combat them.
- Their past history as masters or slaves, or if it was a culture in exile or expansion.
- An approximate evolution or adaptation to present and previous environments.
- Each environment is populated by predators, prey, scavengers, herbivores, and omnivores, to name but a few.

Introducing characters effectively

Never describe the physical appearance of a character with details that the reader will soon forget. Don't describe what characters look like; it's far more important to describe what they do. Here's an example of character description:

"Taurrie Vox comes out of the jump drive chamber, a compact man with hands too big for comfort. The guy behind him, about the size of a brick built warehouse but made of harder stuff, carries a 2 foot steel spanner. He's rolling the wide rack of his shoulders to loosen them up."

Groups need purpose. Whether it's two little old ladies or an angry mob, every group that plays a significant role in a novel needs a purpose that brought them together, a conflict to keep them in tension, contrasting qualities, and the ability to affect each other. Without these attributes a group is a one dimensional entity that'll bore the reader.

OK, I'm prepped - now how do I actually write it?

Write the first draft of your story. Refer to your plotline/timeline to keep everything together and avoid missing things out. Remember though it's only a guide! In the unlikely scenario that it comes out as a gorgeous, finely crafted work of art, congratulations! If it comes out the first time as little more than a description of events, that's fine too . . . remember to pace your story. Give your characters and readers time to think between heavy action scenes. And don't forget your subplots. It's easy to lose the smaller details in light of the bigger picture, but focusing on these briefly will give a depth to your story that readers will appreciate.

Don't forget the points in the planning stages, for example don't get tempted to add details to fluff up the story. Keep it simple and eliminate anything slowing down the story

Go back and look at your story. Does it make sense to someone who knows nothing about the world and the character but what you have told them? Picture the scene in your head, as though it were a film. If it looks good, then it works. Add any necessary details.

Reread your story again. Does it pull you in, or just blandly explain things to the reader? Rewrite it, following the rule "show, don't tell" for example, instead of saying "the captain was very stressed out and nervous because he did not know if the space ship had enough fuel for the return flight to Sapphire," you could say "the captain looked at the fuel gauge and felt beads of cold sweat form on his forehead, as a queasy rumbling churned the pit of his stomach."

Edit your story one last time. This time edit for spelling, grammar and word choice. Take out any redundant passages or unnecessary details that don't add to the story.

Know the structure of a story. Stories have a structure with an initial incident, or starting struggle, that escalates into a "dark moment" in which all seems lost for the main character, and then turns into a climax followed by a resolution.

Make sure you know what all of your characters want. Characters are driven by a goal, or want, and this should form the foundation of their behaviours. For instance, a character who wants to join the navy may actually want to win the love and admiration of a fellow being (his father for example), and the story plot will be driven by this double want.

Kikoni's Technical Writing Tips

A friend of mine recently asked me to give him what would functionally be a list of tips for creative writing, or more specifically writing stories/FanFics.

While *The Legionnaire* is my first FanFic, it is not my first story. I often sit down with my laptop and just type out entire story arcs and/or create different universes and alternate realities. This is, indeed, more my style, but Fan Fiction has always been something I've read into (the good stuff, at least) and is something I've wanted to try my hand at.

Thus, with my experience being stated, let's continue with Kikoni's Writing Tips.

First off, we'll list a few things that are pet-peeves amongst viewers. These are things you should **not** do, under any circumstances, as it will annoy the reader and thus it may persuade him/her not to read.

Text Blocking

I'll give you an example:

"How much fuel do you need to top her off, Rob?" asked Jimmy, a glint of humour in his wizened eyes. "Five gallons, Jim ol' boy." Came the reply from Rob, who cringed at the fact that he just answered Jimmy's question in the same paragraph.~

Here's the proper way to do this:

"How much fuel do you need to top her off, Rob?" Asked Jimmy, a glint of humour in his wizened eyes.

"Five gallons, Jim ol' boy." Came the reply from Rob, now much happier to be in his own paragraph.~

This is a common mistake many new and even experienced writers make, but one that is detrimental to the skim-reading habits of many a reader.

Huge Paragraphs

This is another all-too-common problem in many fics. Often a writer does not hit the enter key enough and ends up with one massive paragraph.

I'll give you an example by taking three paragraphs from the prologue of *The Legionnaire* and cramming them together:

My mother and father were miners, putting bread on the table by way of a mining laser and tractor beam. For the most part, they made enough to keep us going rather strong -- that is, until my mother had taken ill with some unknown disease. My father worked both his and her shift from then on, spending even more money on medicine in hopes of curing her. We'd barely had enough to eat for a solid six months. Eventually, though, my mother passed; the disease having eaten her brain away. I still remember looking into her eyes the night before she died and telling her I loved her. I cried in my father's arms all night when she didn't remember who I was. My dad kept up with the double shifts to support us and, due to lacking someone to raise me in my mother's stead, we both pretty much lived and breathed mining. I was seven and I already knew how to fly the ship well enough to navigate home. My dad cruised forward on inertial thrusters towards the asteroid we were tasked with mining. This was to save fuel, as it was expensive and using the poorly optimized

Inertial Dampening System (IDS) was a very easy way to go bankrupt. Flying on inertial was more fun, anyways. It allowed one to strafe and make manoeuvres that wouldn't otherwise work. It took little more brain-space than IDS, making me wonder why they designed it in the first place. One day, I'd asked my father about it, eliciting a chuckle from him.~

Here's the correct way to do this:

My mother and father were miners, putting bread on the table by way of a mining laser and tractor-beam. For the most part, they made enough to keep us going rather strong -- that is, until my mother had taken ill with some unknown disease. My father worked both his and her shift from then on, spending even more money on medicine in hopes of curing her. We barely had enough to eat for a solid six months.

Eventually, though, my mother passed; the disease having eaten her brain away. I still remember looking into her eyes the night before she died and telling her I loved her. I cried in my father's arms all night when she didn't remember who I was. My dad kept up with the double shifts to support us and, due to lacking someone to raise me in my mother's stead, we both pretty much lived and breathed mining. I was seven and I already knew how to fly the ship well enough to navigate home.

My dad cruised forward on inertial thrusters towards the asteroid we were tasked with mining. This was to save fuel, as it was expensive and using the poorly optimized Inertial Dampening System (IDS) was a very easy way to go bankrupt. Flying on inertial was more fun, anyways. It allowed one to strafe and make manoeuvres that wouldn't otherwise work. It took little more brain-space than IDS, making me wonder why they designed it in the first place. One day, I'd asked my father about it, eliciting a chuckle from him.~

This is much easier to read and looks better, too!

So, in closing, don't be afraid to hit that enter key!

One Line Paragraphs

In contrast to the last statement, one can, indeed, hit the enter key too much. From this bad habit springs forth the dreaded one line paragraphs.

I will once more make use of a paragraph from the prologue of "The Legionaire"

This is how *not* to do it:

We moved in mining range of the asteroid and my dad hit the toggle for the laser.

He spun his chair around, navigating with merely his elbow.

Antics like that used to scare me, but after a while I had learned to trust the man's skill behind the stick.

As our little Talon class ship cruised in a circle around the asteroid, mining as it went, my father grinned down at me buckled in on the bench on the wall adjacent to his captain's chair.

It was moments like these when he would tell me how much I looked like my mother. I had her dark brown, curly hair and her green eyes.~

Now let's see it done properly:

We moved in mining range of the asteroid and my dad hit the toggle for the laser. He spun his chair around, navigating with merely his elbow. Antics like that used to scare me, but after a while I had learned to trust the man's skill behind the stick. As our little Talon class ship cruised in a circle around the asteroid, mining as it went, my father grinned down at me buckled in on the bench on the wall adjacent to his captain's chair. It was moments like these when he would tell me how much I looked like my mother. I had her dark brown, curly hair and her green eyes.~

See the difference? Little things like these can add up to make a seriously big problem. So, while you shouldn't be afraid to hit that enter key, practice some self-control in doing so, also.

Persona Invasion

This one is a bit tougher to explain. Sometimes a writer wants to put a piece of him/herself in the story they are plugging away at. This is not a bad idea in the slightest *if you do it right*.

One way to do this *wrong* is to put too much of yourself into the main character of the story you are writing. Doing this causes you to become self-aware and thus change elements of the story (sometimes in completely unexplainable ways) to suit your character. This is not a good way to go about it and leads to you randomly giving your character 1 billion credits or somehow having him promoted to Fleet Admiral of the Alliance Navy. Not to mention the fact that he will most likely be invincible and crush any foes in his path.

This is the risk every writer takes with Persona Invasion, and I do not recommend even pondering the introduction of a piece of your personality into your main character's persona until you have more experience in writing.

A Pointless Character

Too often new writers introduce a seemingly bland character in order to have that same character do something that promotes a plot-twist or something along those lines, only to have that character disappear or be killed off soon after.

This is very lazy work and should not be done.

Each character you throw into a story should have some merit in and of themselves. They should have a personality, a backstory (whether you use it or not), and some form of purpose. There is only one way to do this correctly, and it should only be done, in my opinion, once per story.

For the sake of the story, you may, indeed, have a one-hit wonder type character. This character should come in at an emotional moment or when drama is needed and do something to promote the next plot-twist or story arc. This character should have something about him that is *memorable* and should disappear or be killed off in a *memorable* way.

This way it strikes emotion in the reader at what this character does or what happens to this character, rather than them merely not caring about this bland man you randomly introduced. It also makes the twist or arc *that much more powerful and interesting*.

How can I write good dialogue?

Edited from: <http://www.writersstore.com/writing-great-dialogue/>

There is a myth that the ability to write great dialogue is a gift that can't be learned and can't be taught. You're born with it or you'll never have it.

One version of the myth goes something like this: you have to have an *ear* for dialogue in order to be able to reproduce *realistic, believable, crisp*, dialogue on the page.

Great dialogue does not come from having a good ear for dialogue. It does not come from having some innate *gift* or talent for writing dialogue. It comes from this: knowing your characters so well that you know what they will say and how they will say it when faced with specific people, situations or events. *Hence the reason for writing biographies for your main characters!*

This is critically important to understand. When a specific piece of dialogue is the only dialogue that could be spoken in a given situation by a given character to a given character, then that dialogue can seem brilliant, and it doesn't have to be eloquent dialogue, as long as it's the exactly right dialogue.

There is another factor in writing great dialogue. It's the understanding that there are four key components to any story, whether screenplay, novel, play, or short story: characters, situations, events, and dialogue.

Throughout a story, these four components will affect and effect and be affected and effected by each other. For example, a character creates a situation that causes him to create an event that leads him and others to be affected by that event, which leads the character to make a statement or revelation (dialogue) that itself causes a reaction (an event) that leads to yet another situation, the stakes rising, the jeopardy increasing, changes happening and leading to other changes and events and dialogue which affect characters who, well, you get the picture (no pun intended).

So what role does dialogue play in this? Well, essentially dialogue is just another event. It's caused by characters and in turn causes other events and affects other characters. It's something that happens, that takes place in space and time, and is both a result and cause, just like an event is.

When characters speak, they are doing something, performing an act.

OK, OK, but how do *I* write great dialogue?

What happens when an event in a story occurs that has nothing to do with the rest of the story? It sticks out like a sore thumb. That's what happens with dialogue that has nothing to do with the rest of the story. In other words (pun intended), you have to make your dialogue relevant to the story. More than just this, however, is that you have to be aware of the cause and effect of that dialogue just as you are aware of the cause and effect of an incident.

So you want brilliant dialogue? Make it the only dialogue your character can possibly say given who he or she is, where he or she is, and to whom he or she is saying it. Then make sure you have all your ducks in a row - every event leading up to the dialogue should be believable and every event after the dialogue should be at least partly a result of that dialogue.

Finally, make us care about the character so that we've got a vested interest in what he or she is saying, and in the results of what he or she says.

Yeah, OK, good - I know what great dialogue is now, but *how do I write it?*

blog.nathanbransford.com/2010/09/seven-keys-to-writing-good-dialogue.html

Good dialogue is not weighed down by exposition - so avoid it!

When the dialogue is carrying exposition and trying to tell the reader too much, characters end up saying a lot of very unnatural and unwieldy things. Exposition and dialogue only really mesh when one character genuinely doesn't know what the other character is telling them and it's natural for them to explain at the moment they're explaining it. Otherwise, if you're just trying to smush in info, your reader is going to spot it a mile away.

Good dialogue has a purpose and builds toward something

A good conversation is an **escalation**. The dialogue is about *something* and builds toward *something*. If things stay even and neutral, the dialogue just feels empty. Characters in a story never just talk. There's always more to it.

Zeke: Wife and kids?

Bob: Naw.

Zeke: Ain't missing nothing.

Bob: You try them braking thrusters again?

Zeke: Been tryin'. No fuel left to burn.

Bob: You reckon you're going to heaven?

Zeke: Reckon if I am they'll have me flying a cargo tramp there, too.

Bob: Don't need no cargo moved in heaven. Everything runs on angel smiles and sunshine.

Zeke: Find out in a second here.

Bob: I told you to take it easy on them afterburners.

Good dialogue evokes the way people actually talk in real life without actually sounding precisely like the way people talk in real life.

Leave out the boring parts. This goes doubly for dialogue: it's usually best to cut to the chase rather than spending time on the pleasantries that normal people use in everyday conversation.

In real life our conversations wander around all over the place, and a transcribed real life conversation is a meandering mess of free association and stutters.

Them: Hey.

Us: Hi.

Them: How are you?

Us: I'm good. How are you?

Audience: Unnngh. (falls unconscious)

It may be true to life, but it's incredibly boring, and all it tells us is that neither person is paying any attention. A guideline: If the audience can guess almost exactly what the next line will be, write something better. In a novel, a good conversation is focused and has a point.

Good dialogue sounds like conversation, but is not an exact reproduction of conversation.

Remember that dialect, slang, and voice is used sparingly. Just a hint of flavour is enough. In particular, beware of slang - nothing dates as fast as slang.

Good dialogue reveals personality, and characters only very rarely say precisely what they are thinking.

Human beings are not very articulate creatures. Despite all the words at our disposal, words tend to fail us at key moments, and even when we know what we want to say we spend a whole lot of time trying to describe and articulate what we feel without being quite able to do it properly. We misunderstand, overemphasize, underemphasize, grasp at what we mean, and conversations go astray. So when two characters go back and forth explaining precisely what they are feeling or thinking to each other, it doesn't seem remotely real.

Good dialogue is instead comprised of *attempts* at articulation. There's a whole lot that is kept back, because we humans only rarely really truly put our true feelings out there. Characters who say exactly what they mean are generic. Characters who talk around their emotions and objectives are much more interesting.

Good dialogue goes easy on the exclamations and exhortations.

When a character overuses "Ughs" and "Blechs" they can easily sound petulant. When they overuse exclamations, they can exhaust the reader with their excitability. When they overuse verbal tics and crutches, they can drive the reader crazy.

Interjections and grunts are kind of like carpet cleaning concentrate. They must be diluted or you'll burn a hole in the floor.

Good dialogue is boosted by dialogue tags, gestures, and action, so the reader can easily follow who is saying what.

As long as you stick mainly "said" and "asked" your reader won't notice they're there, and they'll be way better able to track who is saying what; the reader's eye passes over it, just as it passes over the punctuation.

Don't *overdo* dialogue tags - look for ways to add meaningful gesture and action to back and forths. The key on the gesture and action is not to simply use it to break up the dialogue for pacing purposes, but to actually make it meaningful. Related therefore is **Never use an adverb to modify "said."** **The tone of the dialogue should be contained within the dialogue itself.**

Indeed. Simple to say, hard to master.

Good dialogue is unexpected.

There's nothing worse than reading a stretch of dialogue where the characters are saying precisely what we think they're going to say.

The best dialogue counters our expectations and surprises us.

Never use a colon or semi-colon in dialogue.

The first trick is to read your dialogue out loud:

- Characters should use each others' names very sparingly.
- Watch out for really big or archaic words, especially if you're not 100% sure what they mean.
- Try not to use awkward, formal phrasing unless you're doing it on purpose.
- And watch out for how long you let your characters speak—most of the time humans don't let each other go more than a clause or two before interrupting.

Arghh - I can't get started! - Beginnings

The blank screen/page is daunting. You're probably thinking, "What the hell to I write on this thing?" Trust me when I say that your first draft is not going to be the thing you post. When you start, just write. It doesn't matter about the grammar, or where you start, just write. Keep going and don't look back. Don't stop, don't read it, and for the heaven's sake, *do not erase it!*

Get that idea out on the page, once you start writing things will get better. Most likely, you're going to end up killing the first page or two of your story anyway. Those first words are there just to get you to start writing, and to get comfortable with the story. Once you're in it, it's easier to get it out, and most likely won't sound like gibberish.

Revising/rewriting

Should you rewrite? Yes!

A freshly completed draft of a story is like an unfinished road; it may pass through beautiful scenery but the ride is so rough you can't enjoy the trip. Rewriting smoothes the bumps out of a story just like a grader makes a road drivable.

And sometimes, the story just goes horribly wrong.

So rewrite scenes, remove scenes, add characters. The most common thing that goes wrong is that the story doesn't mesh together. Continuity and such. That character wasn't supposed to be there, the scene happened too quickly, some action in it took too long.

Rewrite. Especially if someone points it out. Then you have to rewrite. Your goal here is to put a reviewer out of employment, aye?

If you can't get your story "just right," don't torture yourself over it. Instead, set it aside and come back to it in a few months. You'll learn more as a writer by coming up with a few more first drafts in the meantime than by obsessing.

The good news is rewriting isn't the horror it's made out to be. It's easier and faster than writing and gives a feeling of polished accomplishment drafts can't provide. Here are some hints to make rewriting easy and productive. Some of these hints are hard to swallow when you've just started writing! They do make your stories better though, if it's the "delete entire chapters if they don't belong, keep them on file - they may make it into another story!"

- Don't try to write the perfect story
- Wait between rewrites
- Check grammar at night - rewrite in the morning
- Eliminate the irrelevant
- Follow your feelings for deleting
- Each crisis should accomplish something
- Read it out loud
- Don't try to fix everything in one rewrite
- Delete entire chapters if they don't belong

The following checklist can help you make certain you've checked your story for all the important issues.

- Have you proved your theme?
- Have you touched the reader's emotions?
- Is there conflict and is the reason for it believable?
- Do your characters grow?
- Are all the loose ends tied up?
- Have you engaged all the reader's senses?
- Did you use active instead of static descriptions?
- Did events grow out of each other?
- Is the climax satisfying?

OK - I fibbed a bit about missing out the punctuation, layout and grammar!

Once again I have to say - look at <http://www.waynesthisandthat.com/writefanfic.htm> Excellent advice with explanations and examples. Some basic advice to get you started though . . .

- Write in paragraphs
- Spellcheck, grammar check
- Skip a line for emphasis. If you want to emphasise something really dramatic, skip a line and make the sentence really, really short.
- Skip a line between setting, scene changes and sudden events.
- Skip a line between descriptions of any kind.
Skip a line between paragraphs. It makes reading your stories easier. . .
- Skip a line to indicate time has passed
- Don't spell out long numbers.
- Don't over exaggerate and overuse hyperboles. She is not the most beautiful person in the Sapphire system. He was not the most noble man this side of the Evoverse
- Use left justification only justifying both edges of print looks nice but it makes it harder for readers to track from one line to the next.
- Centred "+++" signals a point of view change
- "... " means a voice trail-off. Use three dots to express a speaker's voice trailing off or waiting for an answer.

"I know I said that it was legal. And from one point of view it is. It's just that, well..."

- "- " means an interruption. Use a dash to express an interrupted conversation.

"but, Marty-"

"I said that's enough!"

- Avoid using dashes, italics, colons and semicolons, words enclosed in parenthesis or with all their letters capitalized, and exclamation points - they all remind the reader he's reading a story instead of living an adventure

Good links

<http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/creative1/shortstory/>

http://services.stellardawn.com/m=forum_fo/forums.ws?91,92,16,72759

<http://www.fanfiction.net/u/1688505/MistressWinowyll>

<http://io9.com/366707/8-unstoppable-rules-for-writing-killer-short-stories>

<http://www.writersstore.com/writing-great-dialogue/>

blog.nathanbransford.com/2010/09/seven-keys-to-writing-good-dialogue.html

<http://www.campaignmastery.com/blog/creating-alien-characters/>

Exceptional link

<http://www.waynesthisandthat.com/writefanfic.htm>