

## **A Rose By Any Other Name...**

A story in the Vendetta Online Universe

by  
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### **1. Here we go**

Hortan awoke just before the clock was supposed to ring. Today was going to be an exciting day, first the check-up with the shrink, he sniggered, it was Waldoze that had taught him that word yesterday, then a visit to the medical facilities to check up on the bruises from the stag party, and then mining for the rest of the day. He dressed, repositioned his newest John Eldritch action figure, the new "Deep Space Trader with Coolant cargo" so it kicked an alien creature in the face, and got up for breakfast. Pancakes, today as with every other day.

He entered the food court just as they were opening, and went to his usual table. The waitress, Julie, had long time ago stopped asking him what he wanted, since it was always the same. Ten pancakes with syrup, and a large mug of dark Sedina Chocolate. With two marshmallows. The first thing she usually did when she came in on the mornings was making the chocolate so it would be ready. He finished his breakfast, put the credits including a too large tip under his cup, and ran down to the launch bay, to his ship "Ye Olde Sloth Moth XXIV".

The old girl was magnificent in her yellow striped hull plating, with the twin high density mining beams polished to a mirror gleam, one on each side of the cockpit. He checked the pre-flight status and opened the ship comp. True to his word, Mor had assigned eight sectors of Heliocene roids for Hortan to work with. Hortan wondered slightly when Mor had found time for that with the amount of alcohol he had consumed last night, but not to worry. He stocked up on "Primmers" cheese/cardamom/dill flavoured beef jerky, a speciality from Verasi, made sure that the computer had his latest play list, and left the pilot seat. Better go see the shrink. He sniggered again, shrink. Not entirely sure what the word meant, but he wasn't allowed to tell Mr. Wyman, or so Waldoze had told him.

As he walked down to the psychiatrist's office, he came through corridor 5-C, the corridor where Fluffy and Buzz lived. Loud, no very loud electronic music came from Fluffy's room, and the door was open. Hortan peeked in and saw a floor covered in clothes, with Fluffy lying half in, and half off bed. He must have knelt before going to bed for some obscure reason, and then fallen asleep with his head and upper torso on the bed and sitting sideways on his knees. He had almost taken his shirt off, with the process frozen somewhere between attempting to get it over his head and actually doing it. His head and his right arm were still covered by the shirt that was now inside out. Hortan cursed, well he would have if he knew any swear words. Now it amounted to "oh well", and he went inside to help Fluffy properly to bed. Hortan went over to the music

and switched it off, turned and looked at Fluffy. Hortan saw with alarm that the shirt was red and wet with blood on the right shoulder. He took the shirt over the shoulder, over Fluffy's head, and looked at the shoulder. A large Behemoth with the TGFT logo was tattooed on the back of the shoulder, with the caption BAMF underneath. Hortan smiled and pushed Fluffy up into bed properly, tugged him tightly, and exited again, this time ensuring that the door was closed.

Expecting silence, he was badly mistaken. Some type of harmonica and fiddle heavy music came from the room that Buzz inhabited. Hortan went over and knocked, no response. He tried the door on the odd chance that Buzz had done the same trick as Fluffy. It was open, and he popped his head inside. Buzz was sitting in his chair, only wearing a pair of boxers, head back and snoring soundly. Hortan sighed and walked in to help Buzz into bed as he had Fluffy. As before, he condemned the twanging male singer to silence, and then turned his attention to Buzz. Seeing him from the back, Hortan could see the new tattoo identical to the one on Fluffy's shoulder. In his right hand was the calibre 45 revolver, lying halfway on the floor. Hortan frowned a bit, why would he have that out? Hortan went over to carry Buzz to bed when he saw a large pair of very shapely, but also very hairy breasts on Buzz's chest. Hortan blushed immensely, then remembered that it was Buzz, and blushed even more. Deciding that he better not touch anything in the front, Hortan pushed the chair over to the bed and pushed Buzz into bed. Buzz started mumbling in his sleep, something about "bstard biocom dead mutha mmmmm better get the mmmm pop a cap in you mmm goddam mofo mmm". Hortan withdrew silently, and left Buzz to dreamland.

Hortan came into the psychiatrist's office panting hard. He had been running flat out to make it, and even then he was late. Dr. Wyman looked disapprovingly at Hortan over his glasses, and closed the large synth leather book he was sitting with.

"You are late Hortan. For the first time I believe. And what on Eo happened to your face son?"

Hortan looked down at his feet, embarrassed. "Sorry Sir, it won't happen again." He pointed to his face, "it was an accident in Sedina. I slipped and fell."

"I believe you Hortan," Wyman smiled, "shall we?" He opened his hand and pointed to the recliner.

Hortan took his boots off and and got comfortable. He wanted this to be over quickly so he could go mine. Twisting deep into the pillows, he folded his fingers behind his head.

"Now, we were talking of these girls names for roids that you have. Tell me about why you named them with those names you did."

"Well Catherine is a rotating roid, and very roundish with a beautiful colour, and she reminds me of a girl I used to play with when I was younger, so I named it after her. Trinity is all the way out on her own, and that reminded me of a girl I helped with some transport from Helios B-14 to Dau K-10. She was very alone too." Hortan stared hard at the ceiling. "I think she was in trouble, but I hope she is okay now."

Wyman nodded and smiled, "go on." He put his pencil back in his mouth and chewed slowly on the end.

"Tracy is small and chubby. She reminded me of a girl I went to school with." Hortan blushed, "I guess I can just as well call the roid Buzz now, they were very similar really."

Dr. Wyman almost bit through his pencil. "Buzz, as in the TGFT pilot Buzz McKenzie?" He looked at the now frayed end of his pencil, shook his head and started scribbling furiously.

"Yeah, that is why I came too late. Buzz was just sitting in his chair, and when I went in to help him I saw his very large breasts. I was deeply embarrassed, but he didn't seem to mind, and then I took him to bed. It took a little longer than I anticipated, but I think that I got the best out of it." Hortan smiled at Dr. Wyman. "I mean, it didn't hurt or anything, it was just uncomfortable."

"Yes, yes, I am sure." The Dr. was making notes with the same speed a long time desperate junkie snorts cocaine, not digesting what was being said. "And so this is maybe why you currently does not have a girlfriend Hortan?"

"I have My Queen doc, and that is all there is for me."

"Yes, but she had renounced you, right? She said that it was too dangerous, no?"

"Ah, but that was just a cunning plan," Hortan pointed a finger to the side of his nose, thumping it a couple of times, "see, she wanted to protect me by pushing me away, and so it proves that she wants me still."

Dr. Lloyd Wyman M.D, suddenly felt very old, and very sad for the extremely deluded young man who had fallen in love with one of the most dangerous individuals of the universe. And now he was starting to project onto his fellow pilots and was seeing strange visions. He would have to talk to this Buzz, but in the meantime he would have to stabilise the young man.

"Right, I am going to put you on Lithium-carbonate again Hortan, and I am going to give you another type of antipsychotic, okay? You will not feel as drowsy as you did with the last batch, I promise." He wrote a note on his pda. "There, it has been sent to the distribution system, and you will receive the medication in the medical room shortly. I have notified Lieutenant Surbius

Bondevo of the medication, so you should go and visit him before anything else, okay?"

Hortan was devastated; this would surely mean that he was grounded again.

"Now, now, let's see how you have been feeling with it after, say a week?"

Hortan got up, and walked slowly, like a condemned man soon to be hanged, out of the office. Instead of turning right towards the medical bay, he turned to the left towards the office of the XO of TGFT.

Hortan entered the small office where Naoko dominated. She had two more screens online now, and she was very focused on the four-dimensional Fourier transformation that was spread over the three screens. Hortan waited until she had found the error that was hidden deep within the data, and corrected it with a single tab. The screens started rolling streams of data again, and she looked up.

"Yes Pilot Hortan?"

"Ehm, hi Naoko. It is me, we had pancakes together at Miha's place, remember?" Hortan said with an insecure voice, not wanting to appear pushy.

"Yes, I remember, and what can I do for you?" Her tone of voice indicated that the time for social stuff was another time.

"Ah, yes. Can I please see Surb? I need a clearance for launch, my medication has been changed."

She looked at him like a seventeen-year-old testosterone filled teenager looks at the math assignment he has to do before going to the party with the boys.

"Hortan, you know that Lieutenant Bondevo is an immensely busy man. So please write your problem on the screen over there," she indicated a comp next to a chair, "and I'll check it and forward it to him. Then he will let me know if you can get a time, okay?"

Hortan was sick of sentences that ended with "okay?" but he sat down and started jotting his problem.

## 2. Procedures must be followed

Hortan looked anxiously at Naoko as she scanned the document. She was frowning a lot, but eventually she looked up at Hortan and smiled.

"Looks good, I'll send it in, and we'll get an answer shortl..wait, there it is. You can go in."

Hortan got up and entered the small cubicle that contained the XO of TGFT, Surbius Bondevo. The humidifier was softly humming in one corner, but apart from that there were no sounds at all from the cubicle. Hortan wondered if he could hear breathing inside if he were to hold his own breath. Surbius was looking at his completely empty desk. He moved his hand across in a sweeping gesture, and the desk turned all black. He looked up at Hortan with mechanical precision and held his gaze firmly with his eyes. "The man doesn't blink" Hortan thought at first, and when his own eyes started watering in sympathy, he was certain.

"Are you going to take root, or tell me why you are here?" Surbius asked.

Hortan, aware now that he had been stalling, stuttered his problem. "Ah, ehm, I have been put on new, ehm, new medication, and the psychiatrist wanted me to ah, check with you Sir."

Surbius let a small frown run across his face at the mentioning of Sir.

"Ah, sorry for the Sir bit, but I am, eh, a bit ehm, nervous Sir. Damn, gah, sorry again."

Surbius cut the almost incoherent blubbling short with an extended index finger across his own lips.

"As I can see from the side effects described on the medication, your flying will not be affected by the drugs, so I will grant you launch rights for today. I will review your flight path and productivity later, and if they are not up to specs, you will be grounded. Don't disappoint me pilot Hortan."

With that, he pointed to the door with the same index finger, and Hortan left bewildered. It was not until he was standing outside that he realised what had happened.

"YES!", Hortan pumped a clenched fist towards himself, and smiled broadly at Naoko. "I can fly, I can mine."

"Good, good, then I suggest you run off and start and let me do my work, okay?"

She smiled back, and refocused on the screens. That was the best suggestion Hortan had received all day. He felt like hugging someone for sheer sharing of his joy, and looked to Naoko. Then again, it would probably result in him lying on his back in pain, with her standing over him in a ninja suit pulled from out of nowhere. He admitted defeat, waved and ran towards the medical facility. He checked his watch; he was going to be so late. He had already used four hours on this, and he still had to see the doc. Outside in the reception centre he spotted Waldoze dozing in a chair. He got a number and sat down heavily next to Waldoze. The giant man opened one eye slowly and peeked out beneath his bushy eyebrows.

"Hi bubba, what are you here for?" he grumbled.

It took Hortan about five seconds to realise that he was being addressed.

"Oh, just minor bruises, cuts and scrapes," Hortan pointed in turn, "and you Dozer?"

"My stomach hurts like hell. Must have been something I ate."

"Like a set of keys?"

Waldoze opened the other eye as well. "I ate keys? Crap, I must have been plastered. Why did I do that?"

"To make sure that Mor couldn't break out of the handcuffs in the Priggly Pear," Hortan said cheerily.

A smile slowly grew under the black walrus like moustache that defined Dozer. "Ah, yeah, now I remember. It seemed like such a good idea at the time." He closed his eyes again and chuckled slowly. Suddenly he opened both eyes and looked directly at Hortan. "Oh, and now I remember where you got those bruises you STUD you."

Hortan looked confused, "what do you mean? I fell and hit my eye when Ms. Azumi caught me with her knee, and I accidentally grazed my chin on her boot. It was just an accident."

Waldoze sat still for a whole second before exploding in loud booming laughter. "And was that before or after you got your head under her dress? Ha, ha, no stop it hurts," he held his stomach tightly and attempted to hold his belly still while laughing his head off. The nurse that called him in saved Hortan, who at this time was as red in the face as the colour of the SCAR fleet.

Three minutes, two pills and one large bandage later, and Hortan was out again. Fortunately, Waldoze had once more closed his eyes and were snoring slightly, and so he got away without more teasing.

He ran to the launch bay and entered Ye Olde Sloth Moth XXIV, got into the pilot seat, engaged the EAPRS, and asked for permission to launch. The ship was ejected from the station by the large magnetic sled that held the ship tightly, and he was in open space. Engaging the thrusters, he oriented his ship for the nearest jump vector and whistled tunelessly while chewing on a Primmers. He was going to do this by the numbers and prove to Surbius that he could do his part.

### 3. Helios

The traffic was very heavy in and out of the Helios wormhole nexus to Ukari, with convoys of Behemoths escorted by Warthogs and vultures all painted in garish pink and violet colours. Hortan had hailed the pilots as usual, but the members of the KAOS guild apparently had a no comms policy, or they simply didn't want to hail back. The names of the members flying the combat ships were enough to make Hortan's blood run cold, but they seemed uninterested in a lone miner. He seemed to remember that the name Chainsaw Slan had been very prominent in Dau last year, something with the disappearance of some young women.

It was a good thing that they ignored him, because as he had a belly full of Heliocene ore his ship was rather unresponsive and heavy. No way he could outrun anything, and as usual he was only armed with twin mining beams, so fighting was equally impossible. He kept to the nadir, and after the convoy had cleared the wormhole, Hortan engaged the turbo and set the course to the jump point. Exiting the unreality of between space, he was greeted by a very unwelcome Atlas TPG X coloured in white.

*M. Wittman: Yarr, pays me 300.000 or ye be boomed. Yarr!*

Hortan started to turn the cumbersome behemoth way from the roids that were stopping him from jumping, but realised that the Atlas was merely hundreds of metres away, and that he would never get away safe. Sighing deeply, he disengaged the engines and found his cred stick. Even if he were the official TGFT Diplomat to CLM didn't make him less of a target. He had been pirated by Wittman before, and he knew that if he paid he would get off sound and safe. Besides, the cargo was more than 2,5 million credits worth. He keyed his radio.

*"I thought you usually charged 100k, not 300. Why are you so expensive now?"*

*M. Wittman: I have a large beer bill from last week's party in HQ. 300k will cover about half.*

Hortan smiled, he could imagine the party in CLM HQ. He wondered if she... he blushed hard and fumbled the cred stick into the transmission slot. He transferred 500k to Wittman.

*"Give some beer on me please?"*

*M. Wittman: Sure, I'll get some kegs from you. Safe trip Hort.*

Hortan re-engaged the drive and accelerated towards the 3k mark. He was smiling like a madman at the thought of the immensely drunk pirates in Latos.

He hoped that..he started blushing again. What was in those pills the doctor had prescribed?

He jumped into Dau K-10 and moved the 52-ton craft into the docking bay, with only small taps on the side and top thrusters to guide him to the cradle. As soon as he was allowed, he exited the cockpit and walked the length of his ship, one hand following the flank of the Behemoth like the caressing touch from a lover. He had not felt this happy since, well ever.

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John Eldritch woke slowly to light that was too bright and sound that was too loud. He opened his eyes a smidgeon and scanned the room for the goat that must have been tongue kissing with him ever since he came home from the stag party. His tongue felt three sizes too large for his mouth, and he was so thirsty that he contemplated just putting his head into the toilet and slurp the water from within like a dog. He slowly sat up and grabbed his head with both hands to make sure it didn't crack and ooze the contents down on the floor. Why, oh why hadn't he stopped earlier last night? He was never ever going to drink again, not a chance. He looked around for a jump suit, could not find any, put on some loafers that was around his size and got up. He sat down again fast, looked in desperation for some painkillers, and sighed mightily when he saw the bottle on his table. He shook two pills out, decided that two was not going to do it, doubled and chucked them dry. He staggered over to the lavatory and relieved himself of the excesses from his nightly drinking binge. With a sigh of relief he started humming while splashing into the water.

"Mmmm, are you awake?"

John stopped immediately. The female voice was NOT supposed to be there. He was very certain about that. He drew his boxers up and slowly turned, aware of his semi-nakedness. A young girl clad in a pair of high heels and a several sizes too large T-shirt that proclaimed "I Hate All Prejudiced People" sat on the other bed. Her makeup was smeared, and she looked just as fresh as John felt. He looked in panic for a jump suit, and found one that was marginally clean. He quickly put it on while the young woman rubbed her eyes and found her purse. John was in panic. He could absolutely not remember how, where or even when he had seen the girl, and he could not for his death rememb....oh shit. He noticed a blonde wig lying next to a small string dress, and the connection slammed into him like a Teradon on steroids. Her name was Rose, and she was from The Priggly Pear. Now, if he could just remember how she had arrived here...

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Waldoze felt more that usually crap today. He was used to headaches, he was used to the heavy fatigue after a binge, and he was used to the shaking and blurred vision that followed the extreme ethanol poisoning that he regularly

submitted his body to. He was however not used to be getting several enemas before breakfast, so he was more than regularly sore in his behind. At least the keys came out eventually, and his stomach stopped cramping. This was the last time he swallowed a set of keys, no matter how drunk he was getting. At least he could sleep for the rest of the day, maybe play on the station net or something. He stopped and fumbled with his keycard outside the room, his hands shaking more than normally. Finally he got the card out, and he started to open the door. Laughter greeted him, female laughter. Not entirely what he expected, matter of fact, he had expected to hear a deep snoring from John inside. He opened the door fully and saw John and a slender girl sit on Waldoze's bed. They turned to look at him as he walked into the room with wider than normal steps.

"And so the prodigal son returns. We were just talking about you Wal. Off course you remember Rose, right?"

Waldoze's headache just intensified immensely. He remembered Rose, oh boy how he remembered Rose. How he was going to get out of this one on the other hand, was another matter entirely.

"Rose here told me that you had promised to get her back to Daltas hold in the morning. And I must say that it is way past morning now." Waldoze cursed John's cheerful voice that felt like a cheese grater being pulled across his brains.

"Right, right, just let me find a ship or something." Waldoze sat down hard on the single chair at his desk. He put his head in his hands, pulled up and wiped his hair back. He looked around for salvation, and found a half-full bottle of Helio Mists. He grabbed it and drank a large chunk of it. Pure medicine. "Right, where were we?"

"Easy now big fella, I have arranged for Rose here to be taken by a far less drunk pilot than you." The girl giggled and John grinned at Waldoze's look of relief at getting off the hook.

"Man, I owe you one. My ass, pardon my language Ms., hurts in eighteen different new interesting ways, and I am not sure I would be able to sit down for the entire trip." He got up and crashed himself on John's bed, spilling the covers on the floor.

"That was one crazy party last night, but we got Mor, we got Mor good."

John nodded. "Yep, we sure did. I am not entirely feeling too hot myself. Wonder how Mor is feeling now with all the Helio Mists you poured on him Wal. Not to mention that purple drink that Buzz ordered."

Waldoze could feel the drink in his belly try to force its way up his throat, and grabbed the bottle to force it down again. "Don't mention Buzz. I have to get back at him somehow."

"Oh, why is that?"

Waldoze turned and bared the right shoulder. A large Behemoth with the TGFT logo and BAMF written underneath was tattooed on it. "How he managed to talk us into it, I do not know, but I have to get back at him somehow."

John didn't stop laughing until the door alarm rang despite the hard glare from Waldoze, accompanied by various things he could throw after John.

#### 4. Sedina

Hortan entered the bachelor suite as John and Waldoze called their common room. He immediately started retreating, as it looked like he had entered a menage a trois that was just about to start. That is, until he looked at the extremely red eyes that were semi-closed under the bushy eyebrows that inhabited Dozer's face.

"Your ride is here Ms. Rose." John rose like the gentleman his mum had taught him to be, and handed Rose a cred stick he had found among Dozer's possessions. "I expect that this will cover any expenses you may have had, including the fare back."

Rose got up and smiled at John before letting Hortan take her out into the corridor.

"To Daltas Hold Hort, you know where."

Hortan escorted the young girl from John's quarters down towards the launch bay. She had clad in a too big cotton coat and very high plateau heels, and had a scarf over her hair. Hortan was glad that she had covered herself up, at least then he stopped blushing. She was a bit unsteady, and so he offered her his hand for support. It turned out that she needed more than a hand, and so he ended having his hand around her waist and her arm over his shoulder, with her head resting on the shoulder as well.

They exited the residential area and ran into Fluffy, who was on his way back to his room with some take-away food, some caffeine enriched Nyrius Dew, a large bag of peanut flavoured potato chips, and a bag of films. He looked at Hortan, at the young girl, and then back at Hortan.

"How the hell do you do it? You are the official TGFT stud man. She is from the Pear, right?" Fluffy patted Hortan on the shoulder and looked admiringly at him.

"Oh, yes, her name is Rose. I am just flying her back to Sedina, she is finished here." Her head nestled a bit deeper into the crook of Hortan's neck.

"Some guys have it, and some guys doon't. You have so much Hort. Respect." With that, Fluffy punched his own chest with a fist and presented and inverted V to Hortan before staggering on down to his room.

Hortan didn't really understand what had just happened, and so he happily helped the young girl down to his Atlas "The Certain Death IX" and got her strapped within. He launched and set course for Daltas Hold, expecting them to be there after about thirty minutes. He turned to make sure that his passenger was okay, but she was fast asleep. He smiled; he was going to

make sure that she came home safe. He flew to the wormhole from Latos to Sedina and engaged the warp drive.

When he re-emerged into real space, the ship was almost immediately pummelled by neutron fire across the flanks, scoring hit upon hit. Hortan engaged the right side thrusters in emergency maximum setting, fired the left roll booster and flicked the slightest turbo drive into the main engines. He broke contact, but it was merely a question of time before the chase ship would once more have target lock. Hortan engaged the turbo, and due to the lack of cargo, the Atlas behaved like a fighter. He accelerated very fast with the vulture trying to keep up. Finally he had time to look at his damage screen. 12% armour remaining, with none on the side and top. He tapped the radar screen and got an echo on his IFF. Some pilot from CLM called Lebermac it seemed. Hortan was furious; this was not how CLM was supposed to act. They were supposed to hail and extort money, not shoot innocent traders. And especially not when those traders had human cargo that was not covered by the EAPRS. He accelerated to the 3k mark and jumped to the relative safety of the Xang Xi station guards around Daltas Hold, but still punched up a radar image. Lebermac was following. Hortan engaged the turbo again and moved as fast as possible towards the docking bay, only disengaging the turbo and hitting the brake immediately before crashing into the bay. Rose woke up when the violent braking stopped the craft.

"Mmh, are we there yet?"

Hortan flipped the off switches and turned slowly. "Yes Ms, we are here now. Let me help you with those straps and get you on your way." Hortan's voice trembled just the tiniest bit, but he tried to keep his hands steady as he unfastened the straps that had kept her in the seat. There was no reason for the girl to find out how close she had come to death just minutes earlier. He escorted her out of the Atlas, and tried to shield the damage that was wrought to the side and top of the ship with his body. She got out and started to walk into the station proper. Hortan followed close behind, he was going to make sure that she got all the way to the Priggly Pear unscathed. She turned and brought a small camera phone up in her right hand.

"I just want to take a picture of you and the beautiful painting on your....." She saw the long melted streaks of xithricite armour plating that had completely destroyed the painting Vardonx had made. She had seen enough combat damaged ships to know that this had been a close call. Several places had the internal wiring showing, and at least two streaks of damage were shown towards the cockpit, but were twisting away just before hitting it. Signs of evasive manoeuvre, signs of near destruction. The melted wreck would take a full set of armour plating to work again.

"I slept through that? But you must have been taking evasive action? How did you do that?" She looked at Hortan with awe, and when he realised this, he started blushing.

"It was nothing Ms., really. I just didn't want to scare you, I promised to John that I'd bring you safe back, and so I had to."

She lifted her left hand to his cheek and gently stroked it with the outside of her fingers. "You really are special. Thank you pilot." She took a picture of the wreck with Hortan blushing like a beacon next to it, and then she let her be escorted inside to the Priggly Pear.

Hortan walked back to his shattered Atlas. This was going to take some time, but the damage was only to the armour plating. He walked down to the food court and grabbed himself a NutriSoy™ NearlyMeat burger while the mechanics worked. He was wondering how he could make this Lebermac behave properly, and let the traders get a decent chance. Maybe through the regular CLM channels, but how would he get an audience with yoda? Eventually he boarded his now grey ship and launched for Dau K-10. He arrived without problems, and ordered a bright yellow paint job for the ship. He was going to need it eventually, so he could just as well have it in good shape. He would have to ask Vardonx for a new painting on the front if he could take the time off to do it.

## 5. CLM HQ

So, maybe the idea wasn't the cleverest in the World, but it was the only one Hortan could come up with on short notice. He would launch in an empty ship and pretend that he was going to visit Azumi. He was certain that she would help him; she seemed so honest and helpful. Not like the other pirates, she was more...he blushed, well that too. He just hoped that he wouldn't run into Mystic as well, or he would probably have the same problem as he did last. He could just barely think coherently around one of them, but with both it would be impossible. He found his newly yellow painted Atlas and launched for the pirates nest.

Hortan entered Latos C-2, CLM Headquarters with the worst feeling of impending doom he had had for a long time. He had stocked up on diprimezine, an anxiety reliever, but it only helped a certain amount. The feeling of dread only intensified as the two guard ships launched. Retractable and Sharingan, two of the most experienced pirates, and not ones given to mercy or free runs.

*I am here to see Azumi*

Hortan broadcast his message on the sector frequency, but braced for evasive action in case the two pirates decided to give chase.

*->Retractable: yarr, pay us 220k each and we'll think about it trader.*

Hortan initiated the transfer of the money, after all he felt lucky that it wasn't Lebermac that was on guard. He was pretty sure that no matter the amount, he would just shoot until Hortan's ship exploded.

*->Retractable: you can dock trader. For now*

Hortan engaged the turbo and flew straight for the launch bay, prepared for evasive action. Just as he was about to dock, streaks of neutron fire flared across the rear of his newly painted Atlas and scoured the armour down to mere microns before he hit the cradle hard. He shut the engine down with emergency procedure, not sure how much damage the engine section had taken. With shaking hands he checked the damage screen, and started shaking even more. One percent armour left on the rear, and almost none around the power coupler and power cell. He opened the canopy manually and swung himself out of the battered Atlas. Two dockhands were approaching, one of them wearing a large grin, was slowly drying his greasy hands on an equally greasy rag.

"Looks like you need the big treatment on that yon ship."

Hortan looked at the two men, remembered what had happened last time and decided that he would go nowhere very fast unless he acted now rather than later.

"I am here to see Azumi, fetch her please. There is a reward for getting her here."

The two dockhands exchanged looks before returning attention to Hortan.

"Ok, we can do that. And who may we say is wanting an audience?"

"Just tell her that Hor...that the TGFT ambassador is here."

"And just how big would this reward be?"

"Well, let's say three hundred for getting her here?"

"Three hundred, sure thing bubba." The dockhands turned and walked into the station, grinning and punching each other along the way. Hortan turned and looked at the damaged craft. He frowned, but then recognised what the neutron scars on the side of his ship was making. It was forming some kind of picture or text. He squinted and finally recognised the CLM written in one metre letters, partially covered by slag from molten xithricite armour. He had been tagged.

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Azumi was almost lying in her reclining chair, her feet on the desk listening to some metal band with a female vocalist, while throwing daggers at a picture of a Centaur Mk III on her plasteel wall. The tune fitted her mood perfectly, as "Equally Destructive" described what she was doing to the wall but in reality wanted to do to the owner of the ship. The Centaur was rather holed by now, and it was almost impossible to read the pilot name beneath the cockpit. Just as she threw the last dagger, her door alarm rang, making her hit closer to the name than anticipated and changing the name to Slaine instead. She frowned at that, but got up to open the door. The two snickering dockhands outside stopped their amusement and grabbed their hats in their hands when she opened the door; she was not known for her good temper when interrupted.

"Just what the fuck do you two sad sorry excuses for human beings want?" Her voice was sharp and caustic enough to strip the paint of the doorframe, and the dockhands moved back a bit.

"Eh, sorry Ms Azumi, there is someone to see you, some TGFT dude. Amabasedore or sumthing."

Azumi looked puzzled to one side. "Hortan? What the hell is he doing here." She looked at the dockhands again. "Good, thank you. Now scurry along and do whatever it is you do."

The guards moved away, and Azumi slowly closed the door. Why would he come here? He had not been summoned, at least not that she knew of. And unless she had fallen from yoda's grace, he usually used her to send summons. Maybe he was here for..nah, not likely. She had better go and fetch him. She opened the door, and looked down at her utility jump suit. She closed the door again and smiled. "Not like this you aren't girl, not like this." She had a devious idea that unfortunately would take some time, but what did she care. He could wait, he would wait.

## 6. Repairs

The two dockhands came back to the bay and went over to where Hortan was standing with the chief artificer of the Latos Stations Custom Designs. Apparently they were haggling over the price of a new suit of armour for the "Certain Death IX"

"I don't care about the new lightweight streamlined chrome covered armour plates, I am happy with the standard plates, preferably painted yellow, but really any colour would do."

"But you save the craft for about 120 kg, and the new rounded angles makes it much easier to dodge the harmful effects of impact weapons. The chromium finish reflects up to two percent of the energy from positron weapons, and we can for a small extra fee put a coating of neutron absorbing material underneath as well."

Hortan sighed loudly. "Listen, I do not care. I just want the cheap and easily replaceable panels installed. I only use it for running, and if the guild needs it for transporting healing nanites. It is never meant to come into combat, nor even a combat zone. How long time will it take you?"

"Well, I do not have any of the cheap Xang Xi plates lying around, my customers are usually willing to pay premium price for the products that we install on their ships. But I will see what I can do, maybe strip some other ship of the factory plating maybe. So, it depends really."

"On the price too I can imagine?" Hortan raised his eyebrows at the man who smiled back at him broadly.

"Well, it depends on how many guys I put on it. For something like this, and in a hurry too, I'd say around 25k would do the trick."

Hortan sighed and grabbed his cred stick. "25.000 it is then, but then I want it yellow as well."

"Yellow indeed. Do you want to see the range of patterns we can make at a fraction more?"

Hortan shook his head and turned to the two dockhands. "So, is she coming?"

"Three hundred first, or we won't tell you that."

Hortan sighed once more. These stations in grey, they only lived to pump the average trader for money. "Not until she is here, that was the agreement. Now, here is a hundred, the rest is when she arrives, agreed?"

The dockhands nodded greedily, and accepted the hundred credits each.

"Aye, she is coming, but she didn't look happy at all. So, you need help unloading that ship?" He indicated the smashed up Atlas with one greasy finger.

"Nah, I do not have any cargo aboard it. Too many pirates around here for that."

The dockhands shrugged and walked over to their pet project in the corner, an Inebis defence bot they were modding heavily with the addition of an Orion needle gun.

Hortan sat down on an empty crate that was lying on its side, the TPG marks proudly displayed on the side of it. Hortan scratched bit in the residue that was covering the label to see if it had been in a ship he knew of. Time passed slowly with that, accompanied by the hammering of the dockhands as well as the sizzling from his ship. The hammering stopped, as well as the noises from the ship, and Hortan looked up, initially at his Atlas but when he realised that all the mechanics were looking in the same direction, he did the same. Azumi, in a long flowing black lace dress with a bodice that was tied in the front with a red silk ribbon that continued up and was strung around her neck several times before being locked with a needle that was adorned with a single black pearl. She had her raven black hair made in a towering bun netted with a platinum string with white pearls, framed by a blood red gemstone in each ear. Her otherwise bare arms were covered in black silk gloves from her elbows and down. She was looking directly at Hortan with a small coy smile.

"You wanted to see me?" she said in a low husky voice.

Hortan snapped out of the trancelike state he had entered when he saw her. "Ms Azumi, I am so glad to see you. I need to see yoda, can you help me?"

"You need to... right. I should have known." Her voice changed, as did her facial expression. It was like donning a mask, and her pirate's face was now on. Only showing slight disappointment, she walked over to Hortan. "And what do you want him for?"

"I need to discuss the behaviour of one of your pilots with him."

"Oh, and who might this be?"

"Lebermac."

"He is beyond reach. Besides, he is missing as well. What do you want to discuss about him?"

"He shot me without hailing, and he almost killed my passenger too. It was really quite frightening."

Azumi couldn't help smiling, sometimes he was so innocent and....well, cute.

"Hortan, don't you know anything? Come with me and I will see if he is in." She turned and showed the twin red ribbons that ran from her neck to her waist, each adorned with a small kitty; the ribbons that only partially concealed the rolled up whip attached to her lower back in a single ring, and led him into the station. He entered the trancelike state again, his eyes fixed on her heels as he was used to. He hardly noticed the small gold skull that adorned the hilt of the whip. And definitely not her back that was so enticingly almost covered. He blushed, and remembered who was in front of him. The sense of having an important mission with the associated sense of urgency that could bury his insecurity vanished with the presence of her.

"Ehm, ah...Ms Azumi, I am very thankful that you are helping me like this, I really need to talk to yoda about it, I think that it is a horrible mistake, if only..." Hortan blabbered on, and Azumi smiled to herself. Now, that was the Hortan she knew.

## 7. All traders are KOS

They arrived at yoda's door, and Hortan reached for the buzzer. Azumi stopped him with a gloved hand on his lower arm.

"That is not advisable," she said, and pushed his arm back. She took a step back and kicked sideways at the buzzer, hitting it with her high-heeled boot. The electric arc that flashed from the buzzer was enough to stun a grown man, and would have resulted in Azumi lying on the floor had she not been wearing her isolated boots as always. Now it merely resulted in Hortan staring even more in awe at the young woman than before, and eventually the door opening as well. The small green commander of CLM peeked out at the floor and uttered a sigh of disappointment before turning and returning to his room.

"I guess it is you Azumi, nobody else has the audacity to come here without permission. What do you want?" The voice grew dimmer as he walked inside, and Azumi followed motioning Hortan to follow.

"Indeed it is I yoda-sensei, but I am merely the delivery girl. I have someone here who want's to see you sensei."

Yoda turned slowly and looked. "Ah, Meatan, the TGFT ambassador. Just the person I have absolutely no use for right now. Speak your mind, I am certain your mewling will dull my senses sufficiently that I may sleep well tonight. "

Hortan was stung by the harsh words from the person he had hoped would help him with the Lebermac situation, and his heart sank.

"Sir, I am here to file an official complaint to stop the situation that may be running out of control. The code that CLM has been living by for a long time, namely that of hailing pilots that you intercept and want to help your cause by donating some minor monetary amount, and not shooting said pilots before they have had a chance to respond, has been broken."

Yoda silenced Hortan with an annoyed swinging of his cane. "Eventually you will get to the point I assume. In the meantime I shall stand here silently and listen in utter misery. Don't mind my agony, go on, be as wordy as you like." The sarcasm was flowing as freely as the waters of the Nile, but to no avail.

"I thank you master yoda, for the chance to address this most unpleasant of businesses which I hope we can solve to common satisfaction. The issue here is the misconduct of the CLM pilot named Lebermac, whom I had the unfortunate experience of encountering earlier today, and who shot at me without hailing with the intended purpose to explode my ship and by doing so, hurting myself and killing my passenger who was not covered by the APRS." Hortan bowed slightly with as much grace as he could muster, it seemed the correct ambassadorial thing to do.

"What the fuck is the problem?" yoda barked, annoyed by now.

Hortan's false sense of kinship had now disappeared completely "Ehm, the problem is that leber shot me without hailing Sir."

"So fucking what? I shoot traders without hailing sometimes. Where have you been for the last fourteen days? Do you have a permanent reality filter installed? Or have you just had your head so far up your own ass that you could see your own tonsils? Your pansy trader guild chose to take the side of those back stabbing treacherous pieces of filth in PA, and that means that a state of war exists between your guild and mine. Do you understand that? Next time I see any TGFT member, I will kill that person on sight." Hortan had been slowly moving back while yoda had been moving forwards, but he was just about to run out of space.

"So I guess you have your problem solved for you right there. You and your kind is KOS until further notice, that is Kill On Sight if you are too dim-witted to figure it out yourself."

Azumi looked closely at Hortan, who was so stricken with fear of yoda that he was hyperventilating and completely white in the face.

"Sensei, might I lead the ambassador out to his ship?" She grabbed his arm and started to push him towards the door. She moved between yoda and Hortan, and waited for a response from yoda. He looked at her and then at Hortan. The hard glare in his eyes that was best suited for arc welding dimmed in intensity. This young man was scared to death, and he had in reality done nothing apart from being very very gullible.

"Get him safely out of here 'zumi. Make sure the boys know he has my protection until he jumps away. And Hortan, don't come back unless I summon you, it is not safe even for you anymore." With that, yoda opened the door and allowed Azumi to drag the semi-catatonic Hortan out of the room.

Once outside, she turned him around and looked directly into his eyes. No response, he had withdrawn into his happy place. He was in no condition to fly right now, and for lack of other options she dragged him along to her cubicle, fortunately not meeting anyone along the way. Once safely inside she placed him on the bed and frisked him quickly. Two bottles of pills, some papers, an official TGFT cred stick, two no-trace sticks and a memory crystal. She placed the items on the table and read the labels on the pill glasses. Deciding that it could only become better, she shook out a pair and stuffed them into Hortan's mouth. She looked around and found some stale green tea that she had left from earlier today. She poured a cup and made him drink, taking the pills along. He closed his eyes and after a minute or so lay himself on his side. She took his boots and socks off and tucked him on her bed, he was asleep before noticing.

"Shit, where am I going to sleep?" she thought, "and even worse, what the hell am I supposed to do with him?" She shook her head slowly and walked over to grab a jump suit and put it on instead of the dress. She had no idea when he would wake up, she could just as well make herself comfortable. She sat in her reclining chair and put her feet up, opened the pieces of paper from Hortan's pockets and started leafing through them. Haiku poetry, and apparently to roids or girls, she wasn't sure. She once more shook her head and put on her headphones. "Equally destructive that we aaaaree" rang into her very soul. She opened her pda and sent a message to the guards that they were to provide Hortan free passage away from the station as per yoda's orders, and then leant back and closed her eyes.

###

Buzz awoke to the hangover from Hell. Something was applying pressure directly to his brain from all directions at once, and the combined drums of the universe were playing from somewhere near his door. He took a pillow and tried to drown the sound by putting it over his head, but he almost gagged with the bad smell emanating from his own mouth and had to take it off again. Admitting defeat, he got up and slowly crawled to the door where he pulled himself to standing position before opening it. A flash as intense as one from a nuclear detonation, or at least so it felt to Buzz, filled the room as soon as he opened the door, and Buzz staggered back blinded and hurting. Another flash and what sounded like someone hitting a large piece of sheet metal with an ice pick. He fell on his back and hammered his head into something metallic and cold. His .45 revolver, he would recognise that shape anywhere. He grabbed the revolver and aimed at the location of the first flash when he heard the

"Whoa whoa Buzz, are you all right mate?"

"Do I look all right to you?"

Fluffy grinned, "well, apart from having the largest boosoom in TGFT, I must admit that you look immensely like crap. I have pills, Nyrius Dew and chips. And the entire collection of "The Adventures of Hathor the Librarian".

Buzz grunted, "hand me the pills, the chips and the dew and get the fuck out of here. Let me die in peace."

Fluffy grinned even wider and put the package on the floor, took another picture of the prone man and left the cubicle to Buzz and his misery. Now he had picture proof of Buzz's nightly mishap, and that more than made them even for the tattoo on Fluffy's shoulder. He started walking over to his own cubicle when he heard the "Aw CRAP" shout from the room he just left. Apparently Buzz had re-discovered his new boobs.

###

The TGFT HQ was slowly recovering after the stag party, with most of the members meeting in for the late shift. Trade routes were allocated and coordinated, mining missions were delivered, and deals were struck. Tomorrow would be business as usual, immense profits and resource collection.

## 8. Morning

It was in the very early hours of the morning when he received the coded signal; the mission had been effectuated with almost 90% success rate. That was way and above what had been hoped for when the plan had been first suggested, and it was mostly due to him. Without the information he had collected in the last months it would have been very different, but it was only a question of time before they found out now. He entered the database and checked once more that he had left no traces. He entered the mission planner and ordered himself to Sol II for the next two months upon Surbius's order, sent it to his own mailbox and left the command room. The odds were pretty good that he would never come back here again. Not looking like this at least. He checked his Warthog II out and launched, setting a course for Latos and Remley Orbital.

Buzz walked warily down to Surbius's office, to the eternally vigilant Naoko that was looking as fresh as ever. He had dressed in the largest flight suit he had, and it still felt tight across the chest. For the first time in his life he understood why women used braziers, and he wished to the Almighty God in the bottom of the bottle that he had purchased one too. His nipples were chafed raw, and his shoulders were sore. Especially the right one, but that was also pin from the tattoo.

"Naoko, need to have the day off."

She looked up at him and frowned. Something was not right.

"Are you sick Buzz? Then I'll need a 392a-3 form, Request for Sick Leave with the details please."

"Ehm, I'd rather not ma'am, I just need the day off. I need to do some stuff of a medical nature of sorts."

"Not sure I can do that Buzz unless I get the 3922a-3." Naoko found the form and almost printed it.

"Ah, no. How about I show you what the problem is, and then we don't file papers?"

Naoko looked closely at Buzz. He was almost always very loud and in control, but today he looked like he would crawl into just about any hole he could find to avoid attention.

"I can't promise you anything Buzz, but okay, show me."

Buzz opened his jump suit and displayed a very shapely but also distinctly hairy cleavage. Naoko had to hide her face behind her hands not to laugh, but she managed to control herself.

"I really need to get this fixed, and you can probably imagine what would happen if the rest of the crew found out. So I would appreciate it very much if this was kept kinda secret."

"I'll have to tell Lieutenant Surbius, but I think we can work around the form. Just report back when the, well procedure I guess it would be called, is completed."

"Thank you Ms Naoko, I owe you one."

Buzz turned and walked away. Naoko managed to control herself until she couldn't hear his footsteps before submitting to the laughter that was forcing itself up into her throat.

Hortan woke with a start. Something was wrong, the smell, the sounds, the fact that he was wearing his jump suit, the other person breathing inside the room. He opened one eye slowly and was startled again. He sat up on the bed with the blanket in front of him, covering his lower torso and legs. He was in Azumi's cubicle, and sleeping on Azumi's bed. She was sleeping in her recliner, breathing heavily. Hortan looked around bewildered, how on Eo had he fallen asleep here? He looked for his boots, found them and put his bare feet into, lacing them lightly, but fast. He looked for his socks, found them and put them in his pocket. He spied the TGFT cred stick on the table and sneaked over to grab it. When he reached across Azumi, she stirred in her sleep, and he stood absolutely still for a minute until she had resumed her deep sleep. He grabbed the stick and turned for the door. When he was just about to leave the room, he looked back at Azumi once more. He tiptoed over to the bed and grabbed his blanket and covered Azumi with it. He then exited silently to the corridor and turned in the direction he assumed was the docks. He looked directly at two persons, one in a black coverall with a CLM logo on his left chest and twin silver distinctions on his collar, tall, slender and with light blonde hair; the other was shorter and more muscular, dark haired in a double Elvis mohawk, dressed in a pair of very colourful long shorts, a pair of sandals, an open shirt and several heavy gold chains around his neck. Wittman and Sharingan, and they had just seen him exit from Azumi's cubicle. With nowhere to go, and not knowing how to handle this, he froze completely.

"Hi Horzan, wat are...."

"What the fuck are you....."

The two pirates started talking at the same time and moved in Hortan's direction, with the predictable result that Hortan turned his gaze to the floor and waited for the inevitable. Sharingan grabbed Hortan's arm.

"What did you do in there? Is Azumi inside? Did you hurt her?" His concern was enough to shake Hortan out of his defensive passivity.

"No, I mean, she is fine, I never touched her, I don't know what happened, I just woke up."

Wittman put a hand on Sharingan's shoulder to calm him.

"Maybe we should knock on ze door and find out. But if Horzan says zat she is okay, zen I believe him. We are talking about Azumi here Shar. Wat could he do to her?"

Sharingan looked from Hortan to Wittman and nodded.

"Yeah, let us knock and find out, I mean, he could have been stealing her stuff like he did with Leber"

Sharingan pressed the call button, and after some seconds and a lot of noise from inside, the door opened and Azumi peeked out holding the blanket up in front of her. Her hair was caught in a rough ponytail and she had very obviously just awoken.

"What do you want Shar? It better be good." She spied Hortan behind Sharingan and covered her face with one hand. "Shit, ehm, Shar he is with me. Just let me get dressed, I'll come out and take care of him." She closed the door.

Sharingan and Wittman looked at each other, and then at Hortan. And then back at the closed door. Sharingan stared straight into Hortan's eyes.

"I have no idea how you pulled this one off. But you have just made an enemy today."

"Relax Shar, Horzan ist one of ze good traders. He always pays, is zat not true?"

Hortan nodded and looked back to the floor. Sharingan grabbed his chin and tried lifting his face up, but Hortan was saved by the click of the door lock disengaging. A tired looking Azumi came out of the door and grabbed Hortan by the arm.

"Let's go." She started dragging him, but was stopped by Shar that held on to the other arm. "What Shar? Let him go."

"Did he, like do anything Az?"

"Aw, what are you, some kind of chaperone? What is it to you anyway? Let him go I say, I need to get him to the dock."

Shar let Hortan go, and Azumi dragged him along, away from the two confused pirates.

"Verdammt Shar, let us go and drink some beers, and maybe play ze pool, wat do you say?"

"Yeah, let's get plastered. Maybe we can get some of that stuff that was left from the party yesterday."

The two pirates walked off towards the main bar, the beer and the pool table. Important business to do, plans to discuss or friends to talk about. And that would be best resorted intoxicated beyond sane levels.

## 9. Late Call

Azumi escorted Hortan down to the docks as fast as possible. How she was going to wiggle her way out of this one, she had no idea. Still, Shar and Witt she could handle. As long as she could avoid running into...

"Leber, hi. And hi Look"

Lebermac and Look were sitting in the corridor, Leber with his head in his hands, the dirty flight suit showing the signs of four days of heavy abuse. Three empty bottles of the Killa were scattered around his feet, and the stench of vomit was heavy in the air. Look was leaning back, his head against the wall and his eyes almost closed. He waved a tired claw in greeting. Azumi stepped gingerly over the bottles and motioned for Hortan to follow. He didn't. Instead he stopped in front of Leber and looked as sternly at him as he could. With a sinking feeling about the same as jumping off a cliff only protected by a piece of used dental floss, Azumi saw Hortan's mouth open as if to start speaking.

"Pilot Lebermac. I must protest in the greatest amount about these recent attacks that you do. They are indiscriminate and very dangerous. I did not get the chance to pay for passage, and so you exposed my passenger to high risk. Now, what do you have to say about the matter?"

Hortan folded his arms, very satisfied with himself for speaking up, and looked at Azumi for support. That spared him getting hit in the face at least. Leber answered with the contents of his stomach, vomiting all over the TGFT flight suit, spattering small droplets on Hortan's face.

"Aw, shit." Azumi looked at the vomit splash. " We need to get you into something else. Lets go back, I'll get you something."

Too stunned to do anything, Hortan allowed himself to be dragged back the way he had come, away from the drunken duo. They went back to Azumi's room, leaving footprints in interesting shades of stomach content. They dropped the boots outside and entered the cubicle.

"Take the flight suit off and wash that off. I'll go look for something." She left again, and he did as he was told. The bathroom, or rather the shower room, not much else in there, was very much like his own. Except for the one or two very female only items that made him blush immensely. He stayed in the shower until he heard the door click.

A towel was pushed in for him, pink with frills, and after drying he came out smelling of roses. No, really of roses. Azumi pushed a flight suit at him.

"Was all I could get at such short notice. I'll bag your own clothes."

He nodded and got in the flight suit. A too large light grey flight suit with a large CLM logo on the chest, and the name Sharingan on the tag.

"I can't wear this Azumi, really, I can't"

"Fine, then you will have to walk naked. It is the best I could do. Now move it."

She opened the door and took another corridor to the docks, dragging Hortan behind her. Fortunately they got to the dock with no further incidents, and Azumi could get Hortan into the Atlas. She was having a sinking feeling in her stomach that something was wrong with her. Only one person on base to ask about these kinds of problems, Mystic, and she was not here. Second best thing, get medieval on someone. She walked to the fighter launch bay and got into her pink Rev C.

Hortan looked at the command screen, he was not going to make it for his morning appointment with Mor. How had he allowed this to drag on so long? He asked for launch permission, got it and punched the thrusters to full immediately after coming out of the bay. Nobody followed him, and he made for the speediest route to Dau K-10. Entering the launch bay at breakneck speed, he jumped out of the Atlas and started running for the TGFT mining office. Ms. Miharuru, soon to be Mrs he remembered, was outside as any other day, and looked up at him as he arrived puffing hard. She smiled very broadly at him and covered her mouth with one hand.

"I am sorry I am late Ms Miharuru, but I fell asleep and woke too late."

"Wait Hort, Mor is going to want to see and hear this."

Hortan's heart sank; he was going to be hammered for being late. The door opened and Mor in his standard green uniform looked out.

"Yes Miha, oh hi Hort.."

"I am sorry I am late Mor, but as I explained to Ms Miharuru, I fell asleep and woke too late."

Mor took one knuckle in his mouth and bit on it.

"I see, and where did you sleep? Anywhere in Latos by any chance?"

"How did you know?"

"Well, the CLM flight suit was a dead give away" he managed to force out without laughing.

"Oh, Ms Azumi gave that to me after I showered."

Miharu blushed and looked down into her screen, while holding her mouth with one hand.

"Did she now? And was that where you slept as well? With Azumi?"

"Yes. I awoke this morning in her bed. And I must have forgotten to bring my watch, so that is why I am late. Also I seem to have lost my cred sticks and my memory crystal."

Mor started hulking with laughter, and half-turned while pointing to Miharu.

"She, ha, Miha-ha will give you the schedules, ha ha."

He walked back into his cubicle and closed the door before the laughter came rolling for real.

Hortan received the schedules and excused himself. He needed to get into his own clothes as soon as possible. And then he really needed to come out in the tranquillity of his roids.

## 10. Trade routes

Buzz launched his vulture from Daltas Hold. He was so angry that he had to drink half a bottle of Helio Mists just to keep his hands steady. He steered away from the station, but that single movement reminded him of why he was here, and why he was so angry. As he flew his ship, his chest, or rather, his breasts pressed against the jump suit that was not designed for the double D's that were adorning him. The BioCom salesman that had sold him the nano tech implants had not been present in the shop, apparently he had left for Nyrius. With the antidote to the nano machines that had created his breasts. He set the course for Nyrius and the salesman. He would find him, and then he would get rid of these things. Or else he would have to use his trusty .45 to persuade someone to fix it. Just maybe he would use it on him afterwards anyway.

###

Somewhere deep in Itani space, John was slowly rolling his bright green Behemoth XC towards the station, his hold filled to the brim with coolant fluid. The last batch of 20.000.000 crates that would guaranteed make an immense profit for him as well as for TGFT. He had borrowed around 400 million credits to pay for the cargo, as well as sinking a massive 1.6 billion into it himself. And today was pay dirt day, with a sell price of 200 credits each, he would net 4 billion, effectively doubling his stake. Then he would repay the guild with interests, but it would still net him a hefty 3.2 billion. That was around 120 million bottles of vodka. He smiled at the thought of so much vodka. He briefly wondered how many cows would be required to make all that vodka into White Russians, but eventually gave up and docked the ship. He sent for the dockhands to unload his vessel, and went to punch up an inventory screen, grabbing a mug of coffee from the stationmaster along the way. Humming tunelessly, he activated his account. He accessed the usual buyers on the station, and punched up the buy screen. Coolant Liquid, buy price 68 credits. He choked on his coffee, getting some in his windpipe, and almost gulped it all over the screen. How the, what the, who had....that would net him 1.36 billion, effectively a loss of 800 million once he had paid the guild. He punched the public SSCU for trade data from his other station. He had almost 20 million holo discs on the station from where he had bought the coolant fluid. He had been chartered of the guild to buy these discs and sell them for the guild, and while they were not his money it still represented four billion credits. Feeling his stomach contract to golf-ball size, he opened the buy screen. Holo discs, price 124 credits. He suddenly felt nauseous, and as he got up from the chair, he had to support himself before staggering over to the bright green Warthog Mk II he used for moving sensitive cargo. He would have to go to Ecka and discuss this; maybe the old miner knew something that John didn't. No matter what, he would have to explain that 4.4 billion of the guild money was not going to be paid today along with the expected 4.2 billion profit. He felt physically sick, and as he launched he had to keep the cooling fans to high, or sweat through his jump suit.

###

Dau K-10 was bustling with activity at least thirty TGFT ships were either docking or approaching the station, with only one or two ships leaving. Ato boosted as fast as he could for a docking bay, and smashed the ship into the cradle. Jumping out of the ship, he ignored the dockhands and walked directly towards the XO's office. The room outside was full of guild members shouting and making gestures, with Naoko behind her screen looking all lost.

"..need to see Surbius.", "I have lost", nobody should know".....

"Gentlemen, calm please." Ecka's deep voice cut through the chatter like a fusion torch through a foam wall. "I be sure tha Surbius will hae time fae each n every one a ya. So ya get in yon line behind Pasquel thare, and then when ye are finished, come have a blether with me in the command. Move it."

The guild members got in line as commanded, and Naoko looked admiringly at Ecka. Any other day he would have beamed back, but today he was stressed to the max. He needed a drink badly.

Pasquel moved into Surbius's office, and found it a terrible mess. At least nine papers were scattered semi-randomly on the table, and Surbius was staring furiously at his screen.

"Hi Surb."

Surbius waved a hand without looking up, indicated the chair in front of the table and went on reading. After a minute he looked at Pasquel, and spoke, fatigue heavy in his voice.

"Well, how much?"

Pasquel was somewhat surprised about his tone of voice, but managed to stutter a reply.

"Estimated loss of 2.1 billion, including the return goods. How, I mean, I thought I was the only one?"

"If only that Pasquel, if only that. Apparently someone has crashed the entire trade net that TGFT has built over the last four years, and crashed them bad."

"Who would do something like this?" Pasquel was outraged, the amount of skill and money to do that was very high, and would only be possible for one of the semi-nation factions, or one of the major guilds.

"We do not know right now, but we have a couple of leads. Give the details of your trade route to Ms Naoko, and send in the next. We'll get to the bottom of

this." With that, Surbius returned to his screen, and the despairing figures displayed upon it.

Hortan received a summons as he was floating in tranquility deep in a Helios roid field listening to Delibés Viéns Mallika Sûr lé Dome, one of his favourite classical pieces of music. He had found it by accident among some data thrash he had purchased from the original Diaspora years and years ago. Most of it had been gibberish, but this particular piece of music had survived. Slightly annoyed that somebody interrupted him while he was mining Cassandra, he nevertheless took his feet down, faded the music and pushed the receive button.

"Assembly in the command. All are required to attend. Priority ASAP-Z." From Surbius's own terminal. Something must have gone terribly wrong Hortan knew, and he aborted the mining operations. 109 crates in the bay, it would have to do for now. He slowly turned the Ole Sloth Moth XXIV towards open space and engaged the engines, slowly at first so he wouldn't make heat scars across the surface of the roid, and then engaging full turbo after he was five hundred metres away. He set up the jump sequence, and brought the volume of the music up to full. The twin powerful female voices filled the cockpit to a crescendo as he jumped out of Helios towards Ukari. He would get the bad news in time, no reason not to hear the music out.

Hortan docked his lumbering ship in the cargo unload area of Dau K-10, and took the time to order storage space for the Heliocene. He had a stash of around five thousand metric tonnes of the ore in storage on the station, but he needed space for another thousand metrics for the ore he had mined. He exited the side door on the Moth, and started to walk away to the TGFT command. He only got a few metres before someone shouted.

"Hey Hortan, did yoo get the summons too?" Fluffy exited his own ship and walked over to Hortan. "Yoo know what it is about?"

"Hi Fluffy, no I have absolutely no idea. I was just mining when I got the message to come here asap. Do you know?"

"Nah, but I expect we'll find oot soon, don't you?" Fluffy smiled at Hortan. "How's the princess these days?"

Hortan looked confused at Fluffy. "Which one?"

"Ha ha, yoo are so bad mate, yoo are sooo bad." He grabbed Hortan around the shoulders and started walking towards the command centre. "Tell me all about it, every sordid little detail mate."

## 11. The Damages

The command centre was buzzing with voices when Hortan and Fluffy entered. As the last pilots to arrive, they took the last two seats to the rear. Ecka and Surbius were standing to the front discussing something. Surbius noted their arrival on his board and scouted around the room. He looked at Vardonx and nodded. Vardonx stood, turned and faced the crowd.

"Attention Front. We are all gathered except one pilot. I know you are all worried, but please stay calm and listen to the commander." With this he nodded to Ecka and sat.

Ecka, grim looking, walked up to the centre.

"Thank ye Vard. Weel, I cannae even try tae put ah lid on yon here kettle o bad news. The quick version be this un. Somebody crashed all trade routes that TGFT kent. All of 'em. Needless tae say, this has some blerry awful impacts on all o' us. We'll be now 275 million short o' meeting our weekly expenses, and this means we arr gunna have tae ask TPG for more loans, before we can sell some items even at a loss. Any and all information ar help will be appreciated. Surbius."

Ecka looked sternly around the room, making sure he made eye contact with every member before nodding to Surbius. He then sat in his command chair and focused on his XO.

"Gents, this is an attack on TGFT, and a very serious one indeed. If we cannot come up with 220 million within this afternoon, we are bankrupt. Somebody with inside knowledge has effectuated this attack at our most vulnerable time, where, as far as I can see, all published trade routes were coming to fruition. This means that you all have immense assets tied up in goods on various stations, and very little cash. The guild was due a lot of money today, but this looks impossible now. If you by any chance have not tied your assets into goods, come see me afterwards. The second matter is an arrest warrant on the former TGFT member Tufan Oreminer. He is the only pilot that has not responded to this call, and we would like to talk to him. He may be the mole that stole this data."

"I'll fucking kill that bastard," John rose, all red in his face with rage.

"Not if I see him first," Waldoze had risen as well.

Now more pilots started rising and shouting, effectively turning the command centre into a cacophony of angry voices.

"Silence lads, Surb is nae finished." Ecka's voice, powerful like the turbo thrusters on a Valkyrie X-1, cut through the chatter like a Teradon class plasma canon through a govbus.

"Thanks Ecka. This is most important; we need the money this afternoon. Whatever you have will be appreciated and paid back naturally. As soon as we know more we will inform you further. That is all, dismissed."

Hortan looked around the room at the white-faced pilots, well mostly white faced, some of the pilots were crimson in their faces, mostly John and Dozer. If it hadn't been for the reasoning voice of Neagoth who held them back, they would have stormed out of the room, found the first combat ship available, and torn a large hole in the Universe. The only pilot that was appearing to be normal was Fluffy. Well apart from the usual distant semi-mad glare in his eyes, but that was quite the regular thing with him. He turned his head to Hortan and smiled.

"Paranoia, the ultimate survival trait my friend. Just because nobody is out for you now doesn't mean that they won't do so at one time."

Hortan looked at Fluffy without getting it, and it must have been apparent because Fluffy reached over and ruffled Hortan's hair.

"Not all of us have logged our trade routes in the mainframe, so some of us have all our ill begotten wealth still."

He got up, and with Hortan trailing him he walked up to Surbius, who was trying to calm John Eldritch.

"I know John, but if it comes to the worst solution we are going to have to sell anyway and take the losses. We cannot afford that this gets leaked to the press. We have to carry on regardless, even if we have to kill your trade route."

John looked at Surbius with eyes that were flaring with an anger so deep that Hortan felt sorry for whomever was going to be on the receiving end. Even if they deserved every bit of it.

"Let's not get too hasty Surb, I think that I can handle at least a weeks worth." Fluffy interrupted before John had time to retort. "I have been running my route outside the mainframe, and I can realise that for around 800 million tomorrow. I have about 100 million in cash you can borrow now and pay the vultures from TPG with."

Surbius and John looked at Fluffy first with incomprehension, and then with joy. John punched Fluffy lightly on the shoulder and then hugged him.

"I have some money too."

They turned and looked at Hortan who looked very concentrated at Surbius, and John smiled for the first time in a day.

"Okay buddy, but we are talking serious money here. I am.. "

"I can supply the remaining money for today up front Surbius." Hortan interrupted John. "I just need to find my TGFT cred stick, it has about 200 mill on it. I usually have it in my pocket, but it seems to be missing"

John looked at Hortan and slowly shook his head.

"You need to find it? How, what do you mean you need to find a 200 mill cred stick? Let's go right now Hort. Where did you last see it?"

Surbius and Fluffy observed John lead Hortan towards the dormitories with Pasquel in tow. It wasn't until they had walked out of the room that they both shook their heads and turned towards Ecka for the immediate rescue plan. One week was not a long time, but it was breathing space, and a lot could happen in a week. Assuming that Hortan found the cred stick.

###

NP was slowly digesting the daily trade report from UIT with closed eyes via the implant he had installed three months ago in Sol II, while leaning back in his favourite chair and listening to Requiem by Verdi. He was not looking at anything in particular, nor was he looking for specific pieces of data, he was mapping trends. Nothing that was worth noting so far, the fluctuations were well within the normal values for...oops. He opened his eyes in surprise, pure reflex. The data disappeared and he cursed an oath that would blister paint or be used as a sonic weapon. Fortunately he was alone, so no damage was done. He closed his eyes again, and the data popped back on his retina. A person or entity called TATE was launching a hostile take-over bid on TGFT at a price that was around 40% lower than the actual value of it's assets. Actually, it was only two percent above the debt that TGFT had, and immensely undervalued. Something was wrong, very wrong. He checked the data available on TGFT but nothing showed up. Well, almost nothing. A lot of assets were right now tied up in tradeable goods, just around...35 percent. He opened his eyes once more and cursed even harder causing his computer to crash. He needed some answers, and he needed them now. He texted Tohasandra Chi and asked her to join him in the docking bay ASAP. Another day that was supposed to slog along and be remembered by its complete lack of excitement just joined the imaginary league of days that meant massive work to NP. He lived for those days....

## 12. As greater complexity develops

John didn't stop speaking as he walked Hortan down to the cubicle.

"I mean, how can you not know where you left two hundred million credits? I can understand ten credits, or even a hundred, but a cred stick worth millions? Where did you have it last, or rather who did you use it with last?"

"I told you John, I put it in my pocket and that is the last time I saw it. I used it when I docked the last Helio down in the cargo bay, but I specifically remember that I put it back in my pocket."

They arrived at Hortan's door and he opened with his thumbprint. The room was somewhat messy with a light grey flight suit and a bag of dirty laundry in a corner. Actually, the room was very neat and tidy compared to some of the other pilots, but Hortan was quite embarrassed about the dirty clothes.

"Uhm, sorry about the mess, let me just clear that up."

He started to move towards the clothes, but was stopped by John.

"Let me look here Hort, and you can go to the dock and make sure. Pas, can you help him with accessing the account and check if it has been used?"

"Sure, let's go Hort, I can do the checking from the dock mainframe, I know the foreman very well, so it shouldn't be a problem buddy."

Pasquel led Hortan down towards the cargo bay and John turned to the room. Ok, if he had dropped it, it would be somewhere on the floor. He dropped and checked under the bed. Clear, actually clean as well. John frowned, who cleans under the bed? He checked under the table but nothing as well. He took the laundry and checked its pockets, empty. Smelly, but empty. He frowned at the light blue uniform, but didn't check it out any further. So, no cred stick here. He took the laundry with him, he could just as well drop it off when he was handing his own in. He opened a link to Pasquel.

"Nothing here, page me when you find it. Tell Hort I took his laundry for washing."

Dammit, this was proving to be the worst day in like forever. He walked down to his own room and dropped the laundry in his already large pile. He would take care of that later after training. Now he needed badly to hurt something. He switched to his training fatigues and loped down to the centre, laundry bag over his shoulder.

###

Tufan dropped his ID card and his TGFT passkey into the incinerator. There, it was done. He was no longer Tufan, he was now himself again. He had shaved his head and removed the long thin beard. His accent had disappeared and he was now clad in a violet and red flight suit with a large KAOS guild badge. He watched his last four months of life twirl and burn away, and then walked to the launch bay. He was due for a meeting with his guild leader Ahriman in Latos, and he better not let the commander wait for too long. He was generally not known for his patience, maybe the reason he was no longer a member of the Serco Thought Police. Asteroth chuckled as he remembered the first time he had met the brooding hulk of a man. He had just been arrested upon docking in Geira Rutilus with the remains of his command following the catastrophic operation Zephyr, and the interrogator had introduced himself as the Master Inquisitor. Asteroth had been surprised that the Thought Police was interested in the mission, but apparently they had been exposed to some new Itani thought manipulation machine. Asteroth hadn't cared one bit, he was too angry about the losses his unit had taken under his command, but over the next three days Ahriman had slowly unlocked his doubts about his own capabilities and instead shown him how he and his entire 2nd Special Ops group had been sacrificed. When Ahriman called him after the farcical court martial, he was not in any doubts whatsoever. He had joined KAOS with this specific mission in thought, and he had never looked back. He had delivered what they wanted from him, and now it was reward time. He launched from the station in his EC-107 and set course for Latos B-6, a nondescript piece of real estate, just what they needed.

###

Azumi came out from the shower and was drying her hair when she saw the cred stick on the floor almost under the bed. She bent down to get it while she fixed the towel around her hair and fixed it in a bun. A TGTF cred stick, with no name on it. She frowned and put it into her terminal to see whom it belonged to and more interesting how much money they had previously had. She found some underwear while the terminal was crunching the data, and was just about to get a dress on when the amount available popped up on the screen, resulting in her falling back on the bed. Who in their right mind would keep 211 million credits on one cred stick? She got up from the bed and checked the name, Hortan. She sighed, yeah, who else. She looked at the other cred sticks she had swiped from him and thought about what to do. She eventually came to a conclusion and swore badly under her breath. She was a pirate, not some goddamned immoral thief. She would have to give it back to him, but she couldn't just barge into TGFT HQ unannounced. She took the dress off again and opted for the jump suit instead. She punched in the code to open the programme yoda had given her and sent the coded signal for retrieval to her contact. Time for a rendezvous with Sedina B-8

###

NP met with Tohasandra Chi in the launch bay. She had a stay-over bag over one shoulder and her helmet under the other.

"What took you so long, you said we had to leave right away."

He shrugged and smiled, turning his hands outwards to his front.

"Sorry Lieutenant, I received a message that I have to respond to. If I could get you to fly ahead and take contact to your usual sources initially, I shall be along shortly and we'll make it an official visit at that time."

"Well, I guess I can do that," she smiled, "I need some exercise anyway. Do you know how long time it will take?"

"Well, it depends on whether or not I am there to pick up a parcel or not. The days that I actually have to receive something tends to take quite a while longer."

"Are you sure you can handle it alone?"

NP grinned back at her, nodded and walked over to his Corvus Vulturius that was ready for launch. He was inbound for an extremely hot if somewhat hostile date in Sedina B-8.

### 13. Workout

The exotic radiation that preceded an incoming ship looked like an expanding heat ring on the face of reality followed by a spike of equally exotic materials that slowly expanded and left an opening for a ship to exit. In this case a Corvus Vulturius bearing the colours and marks of the Phoenix Alliance and the name tag NP. Azumi smiled, she loved killing his ships, especially in her newest favourite ship, an Orion Centurion, Revision C. Basically a rocket with twin light weapons mounts and a small external cargo space, it was only just rated as a fighter instead of a torpedo with a human guide. It fit her fighting style perfectly, light and agile with the same punch as a CorVult, the only drawback for her was the lack of real armour. Sure, they had welded some xith plates on here and there to protect the most fragile of the systems, but the designers had tried to minimise weight and succeeded. The weapons were just under half the total weight of the ship, but she was used to the performance of the Axia positron beams and so had retained them instead of lighter weapons. She pushed the throttle to maximum and pointed the nose towards NP.

->NP: Thanks for coming, I need a favour.

NP: ehm, okay. I thought I would be shot to bits.

->NP: I can do that later if you feel like it, but this is important so pay attention.

NP grinned. Sometimes he was not sure if it was healthy for her to be as self confident, but she had a point in this particular case. He opened his pda, ready for notes.

###

Chi flew without incidents to the docking bay of Dau K-10, and walked to her TGFT provided cubicle. She logged onto the station net and punched in her search. The result chimed in on her screen and she smiled a loop sided smile. Looks like she got a chance to use her training suit after all. She changed into her combat fatigues and exited the room, turning for the training area. The music from the inside was loud enough to be heard several corridors away, loud deep booming goth metal. Looks like her search programme had been right. She slowly opened the door and saw John Eldritch move around and attack a full action combat bot. And from the amount of sweat on his body and face, he must have had it on maximum difficulty for quite a while. She slid slowly into the room and left her bag by the door. John attacked the bot again, fist, fist, block, fist, block, kick and retreat, his focus fixed on the combat bot. She slid slowly over towards his rear and extended a single finger to point at his shoulder. As she touched his shoulder he whirled and parried with one hand, slid close and blocked her other arm while hooking her left leg. She lost her footing instantly and her reflexes took over. She let herself drop to the ground while she twisted her right leg around his knee and pulled, dropping

him on top of her his lock broken. He realised what he had done and looked down upon his opponent into the most fascinating pair of brown eyes he had ever....

"Do you mind?"

John realised that he was pinning her very efficiently with his bulk, and had done so for some time. He rolled off and helped her get up.

"Sorry Ms Chi, I really am. But I was in the middle of the combat programme, and ..."

She smiled coyly at him and lifted her hands in a defensive posture.

"I was not prepared, the first lesson of Krav Maga, so it is my bad John."

He stepped one step back in preparation for her attack, but instead she smiled broadly and winked at him. He relaxed one iota, but that was too much. Chi lifted one leg forward while tipping her body back, hitting John right in solar plexus with her toe. He bent like a piece of plastic under a ten giga-watt laser, and Chi used the inattention to move in under his reach and hook his legs while punching with all her might at his chest. He lost his balance, but managed to grab the much lighter Chi in the forearms, thus dragging her down on top of him. Once more he looked into those bottomless brown set perfectly in her face, the face that came closer and clo....

"Bdrrriing bdrrriiing," something was ringing from the laundry bag.

"Shit Chi, I gotta see what that is." They disentangled and John crawled over to the laundry and found the guilty machine, Hortan's PDA. A priority message, the screen was blinking on and off. He turned the PDA on to see what the message was. He read it and slowly shook his head.

"Oh fuck, what have you done little buddy. Chi, I am sorry, I would love to stay and, well, I would love to stay, but it will have to be another time."

He dropped the PDA into the laundry, grabbed the bag and ran out of the room. He went by Hortan's room and left the PDA inside before running down to the launch bay. He needed to go to Daltas hold, and get there fast.

Chi was a bit confused. She had been tasked with getting information for NP, but ended up with more and less than she had anticipated. It seemed like Hortan was in quite some trouble, but that would not be the first time. She decided that she would have to find out what it was all about. She ran down to her room and switched to a flight suit while letting her implants order up her white Orion version Hornet so it would be ready for launch when she arrived in the dock. She was thrilled, this was fieldwork, real information gathering where

she had to think on her feet. She grabbed a thin needlegun and secured it in the low of her back before bolting for the dock.

###

Pasquel and Hortan had searched the area thoroughly, but no cred stick. Pas had used his connections to make ensure that the stick had not been used, but in the end they had to give up. Hortan wasn't concerned, his stuff had a nasty habit of disappearing and then appearing again. Pasquel walked Hortan down to his room before leaving him for the command room. Hortan entered his room and went over to his bed. The PDA was vibrating and the screen was blinking on and off. Hortan grabbed it and looked at the message. A message from NP, about a meeting in Daltas hold, the corridor where he had....he blushed. How did NP know about that corridor, and why did he want to meet with him right now? And why did he want to meet him on CLM business? Ah well, all would be revealed, and besides NP was good company. Maybe they could go to that new pancake place in the main plaza and get lunch. He grabbed his pills and walked down to the Certain Death IX, mentally preparing for a trip into grey space.

###

The 107 exited into normal space with a stream of high energy tachyons announcing the fact. Asteroth punched up the radar, searching for the telltale reflection of his commander's ship. There, a 107 like his own, colours violet and yellow. He opened a local channel.

"Mission accomplished boss. Tufan is no more."

He smiled at his accomplishment and anticipated the praise. He would be disappointed.

"You will cease your informal mewling and refer to me as Master Inquisitor as always. Use the one time pad in your ship for secure channel. All is Dust."

Asteroth cursed at himself for forgetting the correct procedure. He should have known better, but it was hard to shake the last twelve months in the trader guild. He engaged the one time pad and opened a direct link.

"Master Inquisitor, I have accomplished the tasks set for me. I request to be released from this assignment and be given a new."

"Well done Asteroth. However, you are not finished. I need you to do one more thing for me, after that I shall find a new use for your skills. The tasks are adhered to the message and should appear on your screen now. Report."

"Yes Master Inquisitor. I shall do your bidding. Asteroth out."

## 14. Hostile intent

Why is it that when you have to hurry the most, things start to go wrong in spectacular ways? John was fuming, what was meant to be a simple high speed move to Sedina had started out bad and then walked straight to worse. First his ship had been launched from the cradle in Dau, but due to some obscure computer malfunction that was not supposed to happen, it had launched him without a battery. Fortunately he was within range for his pda, or he would have drifted for aeons. Well, at least until the next time that cradle was used and someone had bumped into him. After the old battered station EC-88 salvage vehicle had grasped his ship with the magnetic clamps and shoved it back in the docking bay, he had used ten minutes. Fortunately he had a spare ship that had already been prepared, and he could launch with that immediately. Then his NAVCOMP failed to get the latest storm update from the StormTracker centre, and he hit two ion storms on the way in through Azek. He was practically yearning for a fight when he entered Sedina b-8, but nobody was there to receive him. The Ion storm that blocked his path on the other hand was more than willing to suck him in. Delayed by more than thirty minutes in the end, he finally docked in Daltas hold. He jumped out of his ship and headed directly to his destination, not noticing anything in the docks nor on the way.

###

This made it so much easier for Chi to follow him. In reality, she probably didn't even need the disguise that she had donned, but the first rule of field operations was never to assume anything and always prepare to the maximum. She had arrived a safe twenty minutes earlier courtesy of her connection in Dau K-10. It had cost her 15k, but when the dockmaster had heard that she wanted to make a friendly prank with John Eldritch, he had made sure that she had the time she needed. She smiled as she imagined the look on John's face as he launched without battery. She followed John at a safe distance, never losing him from her sight. He walked towards the bar area, and straight for one of the strip clubs named The Priggly Pear. She cursed under her breath, if she was going in there she would have to use some resources or take her disguise off. She was relieved when he walked past and into a corridor next to the club. Chi waited a bit, but John did not come out again. She decided that she needed to see what happened down there, and so slowly walked past, sneaking a view down as she passed. She clicked a picture and stored it as she passed; John was with a young woman she didn't know. She sent the picture to NP and asked for an ID. It came back almost immediately, Councillor Azumi of CLM. Chi cursed herself twice for not bugging John as she had thought of earlier, now she would have to wait and see what happened.

###

She had been rather surprised to see John Eldritch barge down the corridor towards her, furious and puffing for breath. Why he was here, she had no idea, she had asked NP to send her message to Hortan. Feeling trapped, she took her right hand to the small of her back and grabbed the high power stun gun she had there without taking it out in the open. She would go down fighting, that much was certain.

"Whoa, stop right there. I have no quarrel with you trader, but I warn you fairly. No further."

John stopped as if hit by a xith loaded Behemoth at turbo speed. The lithe young woman had an aura of danger emanating that came from everything she did to the things she wore. The long black dress that was laced up in front and probably also back, her long black gloves that ended above her elbows, and the in-your-face attitude of her black and red make-up all signalled look, but not touch. Her hair was braided with small red silk ribbons, but in such a way that it would fit under a helmet.

"You have called and set up a meeting with Hortan. I am here to make sure you behave."

Azumi smiled coyly and turned her head almost imperceptibly sideways to the right.

"Is that so. And what if I say that you can stuff it?"

"Then we fight here and now. And when we are finished I am going to grief kill you forever."

"Wait, is that a threat? And am I supposed to be scared now? If so, you failed miserably hun, rather you made me curious." She moved one leg slightly back as she said it, and smiled even wider.

John realised that this was going nowhere fast and decided to switch tactics.

"Okay, we may have come off on the wrong foot here. You told Hortan you wanted to meet him here. I do not know why, and that scares me. He is a very special kid, and I am somewhat protective of him. Can you tell me why you wanted to meet him?"

Azumi observed the fury drain from John's face, replaced by obvious concern. She could continue to bash him, although she was a bit uncertain how much more he could take before cracking, or she could maybe gain an ally. Not much competition there really.

"I have asked him to come here so I could give him his cred stick back. I am an honest pirate, not a thief."

John frowned, that would actually explain a lot. Well, some at least.

"Where did you get it?"

"For me to know, and you never to find out hun. Now, I told you why, can you scuttle along to yon trade vessel you came in? It was after all not you the message was sent to, or should I tell Hortan that you read his mails?"

John stared hard at the piratess before nodding. He squinted at her while thinking for a second, but eventually turned and walked out with no further comments, passing Chi without seeing her again, and walked towards his ship. She better be true to her word, or he would use all his resources to fight her. He didn't usually fight women, well Ms. Chi now and again, that was different, but he would make an exception in this case. He would have no problems with getting Azumi across his knees and provide a good spanking if she messed Hortan up.

## 15. Recovery

Chi walked after John down towards the launch bays, taking care that he didn't see her. Fortunately he seemed to be deep in his own thoughts and so it was no trouble for her. Almost too easy. As he walked around the last intersection, she moved faster to catch up, and ran directly into Hortan who apparently had not seen her. She started to backtrack, but for some reason or other she caught his eye. He looked straight at her, frowned, and then smiled broadly.

"Hi Ms. Chi. What's with the orange hair?"

"Ehm, Hi Hortan," she looked after John, but he had disappeared completely. She stepped back in the corridor she came from before smiling to the young man. "So, what brings you here my dear?"

Hortan blushed slightly. "I am here to speak with NP, he told me to come here and meet him on something with CLM. Didn't read it too closely." Hortan smiled even more, he looked really happy to see her.

"Oh, okay, then I really shouldn't keep you here. Say hi to NP for me, and take care." She squeezed his shoulder and walked back the way she had come. Just making sure that John didn't see her. She needed to get back to Dau before him, and she already knew how. She sent the messages, paid the right people and moved to the launch bay. She would have to get into her training outfit again, John would want to blow some steam off when he came home with all those delays that had incurred on his trip.

Hortan looked admiringly at the lithe orange topped woman as she manoeuvred deftly in and out of the crowd of people in the corridor. Shucks, now he forgot to ask her why she was wearing a wig. He had almost missed her when he walked down the corridor, but he would recognise her brown eyes anywhere. Ah well, better go and meet NP. He walked with no hurry towards the Priggly Pear, smiling with the memories of the stag party. Somehow the bar had grown more gritty since he was there last, and the lights weren't quite as enticing. Maybe it was due to the large amount of alcohol he had drunk last. He turned into the corridor to the right of the bar and almost ran away again. Azumi, fiddling with a stun gun, not exactly what he expected. Why was she here, and what had happened to NP? In usual Hortan fashion, he couldn't decide what to do, and so froze in place like a deer in the headlights. Or in this particular case, like a mouse in front of an extremely hungry Eo Pit Viper. Azumi finished what she was doing with the stun gun and looked up. She must have missed his big entry, because she took an instinctive step back and rose one hand before laughing out loud.

"Dammit Hort, you scared the shit out of me. Thought you would be Vehement or some other VPR."

"Ahm, eh. I ah am sorry Ms Azumi, I didn't, eh" he managed to croak before she walked one step closer, effectively stopping his ability to speak at all.

"What, cat got your tongue"

"Mh, I, what, no, I mean" Hortan managed to squeal out before she wiggled her eyebrows at him. His face colour turned from slightly pale with small freckles into a landscape dedicated to the colour red.

"What exactly " she drew her words out long and looked at the floor while moving even closer until she was very close, and then looked up at him directly into his eyes, "is it you are trying to say?" The last came out almost whispering. She reached out for him and played innocently with the zipper on his flight suit, twirling it between thumb and index. She drew it a centimetre down and up again.

"Mh, need, ahem, NP," he managed to croak.

"Hun, you have all of me, and you think of NP?" She released his zipper with a flick of her wrist and pushed him back one step. She looked at him before slowly shaking her head and pushing Hortan to the side so she could exit. She moved with the grace of a ninja-ballet dancer, sliding past him like wind through a grassy field. She looked back and up at him, smiling that special Azumi smile he had only seen once or twice. The real Azumi.

"Later hun, take care now, you hear? And stay away from Lebermac for a while, he is slightly mad. "

And with that she was gone in the crowd, and Hortan regained his vocal faculties.

"..because he had sent me a message." Hortan looked in vain for another glimpse of the piratess, but to late. He put a hand in his pocket to look for his pda, but came up with the pda as well as a TGFT cred stick he had thought he had lost. Strange, he was dead certain that he had checked his pocket earlier that morning, but at least now they didn't have to look for it anymore. He checked the message from NP.

"Meet NP contact from CLM in the corridor next to Priggly. Take care, NP"

Oh, he had read wrong, NP wasn't going to be here after all. He was supposed to meet a....

The wheels inside Hortan's head slowly turned, switches connected, power turned on. "Oh!"

###

Chi left the small self adhesive spy cam on a pillar facing the docking area. Once it had recorded the next twenty minutes, it would code and then squirt the file to her pda before self de-assembling. Only a grey dust would be left. These gadgets were hideously expensive, but she absolutely needed to record John's face when he once more arrived on station. The delays in Sedina and the malfunctioning storm tracker would probably have him somewhat annoyed, if no absolutely furious. She sent an invite to his pda, asking for some more Krav Maga training. She then hurried to her room to change, better be ready when he arrived.

## 16. Respite

In a Universe as large and diverse as the one currently inhabited, chances are that everything has happened many times. There are a few select occurrences of events that seems so unlikely or unique that it can be assumed that it happened only once. The Big Bang is probably such an event. Inside the bowels of TGFT HQ, another singular event was about to take place.

Surbius noted what could only be interpreted as an attack against the guild, in the form of a hostile take-over attempt by an entity named TATE. Masterly planned, the take-over was bound to be a success if TGFT failed to provide the 220 million credits before the 1100 deadline. The failure to pay would mean that TGFT would go straight for bankruptcy, and if TATE could provide the money to pick up the debts, they would own TGFT, with all resources and contracts. Surbius looked up at NP who was fiddling with a pencil on the other side of the desk, and from him further up to Naoko who was standing with her usual calm demeanour and detached attention. She was getting to be invaluable to him, he made a mental note to make sure she was set up for priority access, the kind only reserved for council and above. He looked back at his screen, 10.58.38. Soon it would happen, only a few seconds to go. 10.59.00, and Surbius touched the transfer switch, effectively moving the 275 million credits into the TPG account, settling the daily bills as well as the debt. He then switched over to the stock market at Dau central and watched the value of the TGFT stock stay stable through 1100, with the resulting withdrawal of the hostile take-over bid. The Event happened, Surbius smiled and laughed out loud. The effect was enough for Naoko and NP to look at each other in surprise, Naoko quickly regaining her composure.

"Looks like our enemy has withdrawn his attack." He looked up at the still surprised NP again, "at least he has shown his face, and that means we can seize the initiative."

He looked back at his screen and activated the software NP had brought along. A data leech, it attached itself to a secure transmission and provided the physical location of the sender. Upon entering the actual terminal from where the signal was sent, the leech would check for the buttons pushed, telemetrics entered, effectively receiving log-on and personal information. It would then send this to a "dead box" where it could be retrieved with another special piece of software. Needless to say, the leech was highly illegal, owning it meant permanent ban from the UIT data sphere. Using it usually resulted in a very long prison term for the user. Surbius had uploaded the leech to the UIT stock exchange, targeting the bidder from KAOS. He waited until the leech would have found the data and activated the retrieval software that in turn downloaded the information to his screen. User name, LITTLE\_MAN\_TATE; Log on, All\_is\_dust\_666; location, Remley Orbital. Surbius nodded to NP, who used his own tablet screen to activate the account.

"This guy is slick Surb, the log-on is no longer current. He has changed the log-on while the leech was working. He must be pretty paranoid, no way that he could have known that we leeches his info."

NP frowned as he concentrated, punching the keys furiously.

"Oh, here goes the account. The link is dead Surb." He looked up at Surbius with a crooked smile. "But I know who TATE is."

###

Buzz entered Dau with naught to show for his search. The BioCom trader had disappeared completely and with him the promised anti-nanites. He docked with complete carelessness scratching the wall of the docking bay as well as breaking the left side thruster off. He opened the cockpit and climbed out, ignoring the dockhands that were around. He walked slowly towards the dorms, dragging his bulk along like a sack of potato's. It had been a long time since he had felt this down. Something hit him on the shoulder, sliding to the floor. He looked down at the floor at the oil and grease encrusted rag on the floor.

"Yeah you, I am talking to you ladyboy."

Laughter erupted from his right side, and he looked up at a group of station workers that were idling it on some crates. One of them, long dark hair greased back with powerful muscles and a rather dirty overall was standing in front of the others, obviously the owner of the rag. His hands were out from his side in a "come on" attitude. When he got Buzz's attention he turned to the others for support before re-focusing on Buzz.

"You had those things implanted for your hubby?"

He turned again to the others that laughed loudly. He was about to turn back when a single gunshot pierced the laughter and noise. The station worker dropped and clutched his knee that was now reduced to a single .45 calibre bleeding hole. The men stopped laughing immediately and looked at Buzz who was holding his revolver in his right hand, pointing at the men.

"Come on, one more joke. I dare you wise cracks. Didn't think so."

Buzz put the revolver back and continued towards the room, somewhat less slouching. He felt slightly bad for shooting the man, but he had to admit that deep down it had helped his current mood considerably. If only he could do the same to that BioCom trader...

###

Waldoze's pda beeped softly on his table. Three chimes, then one, then three. TGFT business, and important too. He opened his eyes and moved his head away from the pretty redheaded thing he had picked up earlier. She tried to follow, but he put three fingers on his right hand under her chin while propping himself up on his left elbow.

"Wait a bit gorgeous, I need to take that call."

She rolled to the side of the bed, propping her head up on her arm, the red curls covering the pillow like a flow of snakes. Waldoze walked over to the table, quite unashamed of his nakedness and grabbed the pda. Used to stuff like this, he expertly opened it voice only. Ecka's voice.

"Dozer, need ye fa a job. Get tae strike team an report ASAP tae briefing room B-21. Orders are ticking in on ye pda as we blether. Confarm reception. And git dressed will ye man."

Waldoze chuckled and signed received. The Old Man knew him too well. He scanned the orders and cursed slowly and methodically under his breath.

"Is something wrong my love?"

The redhead. Shit, he really needed to run and get this thing under way. He turned, ready for some lame dismissing excuse to run off, and saw her lying there. The deep green eyes and pale face perfectly framed by the crown of deep red hair, the coy smile on her red lips.....

Nothing could hurry that much, he went back to the bed. After all, he had a reputation to uphold.

## 17. Planning

Waldoze entered the briefing room as the last one, probably half an hour late. He looked at the crew and tried to keep a straight face. John just looked at him and shook his head, a slight smile mitigating his apparent displeasure. Dozer walked up to the front of the room and turned. Pasquel, Lambin, Fluffy, Gramps, Rowan, Riddik, Vardonx, Neagoth and Strat were sitting more or less relaxed in the reclining chairs. Dozer grabbed his pda.

"Right, this is what we are gonna do troops."

He noted Fluffy raising a hand and sighed.

"Yes Fluffy, what is it?"

"Was it the blonde?"

The rest of the pilots smiled and looked expectantly at Dozer who tried to keep a straight face.

"Just what the hell does that have to....oh well. Nah, it was that redheaded girl I picked up in Ukari last week."

"Yes!" Lambin stood and extended his hand to the other pilots who handed him the money they had been holding in their hands, getting a high five from Pasquel.

"Now that is out of the way, can we get back to business?"

"I have one more question Dozer."

Dozer twirled his mustachio and stared at Fluffy for five seconds with piercing eyes from under his bushy eyebrows trying to intimidate him into yielding. Not a chance, Fluffy's smile widened even further.

"It better be relevant or you are point all the way."

"You have been seeing that redheaded chick for a whole week now, is it official and stuff? And does she have a name?"

Dozer tried to look stern, but failed miserably.

"Shit, I can't win this one, can I? Yeah, I kinda like her, so I figured that I'd ask her to stick around. And yeah she's got a name, it's Melody."

Gramps slowly whistled and smiled.

"Looks like the girls win another round. Best o' lucks ma boy, sounds like you'll need it."

Waldoze grinned and combed his fingers through his hair.

"Yeah, I guess you are right Gramps. Okay, now that this obviously important guild matter has been resolved, can we get back to business?"

He opened the plan on the screen and started the briefing.

###

The remote control slipped from the limp fingers, dropping onto a discarded beer can that had been crumpled before used as floor cover, hitting the change button and resigning the two girls on the screen to the data vault from whence they came. The viewer was lying in his reclining chair, several weeks worth of beard on his face, clad in a crumpled t-shirt matted with beer, food and worse, a pair of equally stained jeans and bare feet. The screen turned to the next channel with a young pretty androgynously looking man in the latest fashion clothes from Verasi.

"...brings us back to the last years complete neutering of the former terrorist movement SYN. This channel attributes it to the alliance of The Guild of Free Traders and the Vipers, which has enabled the complete elimination of the menace to the honest traders in Latos and Sedina. Now we need to do the same to the so-called Cargo Liberation Movement. I say that we need to root the filth out from grey and allow the trade guilds to set up sovereign stations under the benevolent shield of the Union of Independent Traders. Only then can we ensure the continued peace, profit and prosperity for all, that UIT has always been a guarantee for. And some unrelated new; an orphanage in Divinia has burned out completely with no survivors. The police are currently investigating the matter. Dork Rufus, Daily Senate News channel five."

The viewer stirred slightly, and then sat up in the chair. His raspy voice made the German Shepherd in the corner lift his head and raise his ears. He uttered only one word, but that was enough for the dog to start wagging his tail.

"Motherfuckers!"

###

Probably best described as mean and grumpy at best, decidedly vicious and vitriolic at worst, yoda was for once in a very good mood indeed. He switched from DSN five to the regular eighteen split screens that showed a plethora of information. So the UIT was considering CLM as the single worst threat of grey; that must mean that the trade block that had been in effect for three weeks running was actually functioning. They had fulfilled their part of the

agreement, now it was about time for a bit of rewards for the guild. He packed a diplomatic parcel and called for his courier.

###

"I cannae give im tae ya coppers, he be one o the members, and that means that Ah protect im. And ye nae wanna farck wit TGFT noo doo ya?"

The TPG station rent-a-cop was visibly withering under the visage of Ecka. It was supposed to be a clear-cut case, go and arrest the member of TGFT named Buzz McKenzie. Normally TPG was in charge of the entire station, but for the TGFT HQ. And that is where the suspect was located. Normal protocol was to go directly to the TOC and get the officer on duty to fix it, but this case was special. Buzz was under suspicion for an alleged shooting in the dock area, an offence that was big enough to have him sentenced to exile.

"No Sir, but I must remind you that TPG SecuriCore is the legal police force on station, and as such we do have jurisdiction of all areas Sir."

"Now that is a crock a shait son, and ye ken it. Listen, Ah'll have me a wee blether wit Buzz, 'n then ah'll let ya know. Capiche?"

The rent-a-cop nodded and left, taking his security team along. Ecka sent a message to summon Buzz. He'd better find out why one of his more normal pilots suddenly behaved like that.

## 18. New Guy

The tracking software left only the tiniest of traces, but for the right kind of detection gear it could be found. Someone had followed his account to the public terminal that he had used. He would have to assume that they had sent something to track him as well. Asteroth closed the terminal and turned to the small thin man that was standing right behind him. He swallowed his distaste and addressed the foul smelling person.

"Looks like you were right Burn, someone with resources followed us."

"You"

"What? What do you mean?"

"They followed you, not us."

Asteroth decided that his former loathing for the smelling man-ling was about to reach new heights.

"Ok, so they followed me. And what can we do about it?"

"Not my problem. I have done what was asked. My mission is over."

Burn turned and walked with that peculiar gait that comes from having the feet and lower legs replaced with implants shaped like underarms and hands. Asteroth secretly wished that he would fall over, but he was not that lucky. Instead he walked to another terminal and opened his secondary account. He ensured that the communication was secure, and entered the sixteen-digit address to Ahriman.

"Mission not accomplished. Will continue attempt. May have been detected."

He closed the connection and walked to his cubicle. He would have to be ready for moving at very short notice if the authorities ever found out where and who he really was.

###

It was probably the best noodles in UIT space, or at least Hortan thought so. Madam Phatt's Noodle shop in the food plaza in Dau K-10. He always had the same cashew nut with synth-chicken dish, followed by a steaming bowl of sweet and sour synth-cow. He was slowly munching on the last of his sweet and sour when he spotted the New Guy. Looking completely lost in the plaza, dressed up in a completely new green uniform with pants that were slightly too small and very much too tight in the groin, a jacket that had too short sleeves, extremely shiny boots and a propeller cap on his head. He had a large binder stuffed with papers, Hortan assumed they were forms for whatnot, and a name

tag that read Prissken. The slightly scared young pale man was staring at the food plaza like a Kalahari Bushman would stare at a Pachinko hall.

Hortan slurped the last of his noodles and walked over to the new pilot. He extended his hand.

"Hortan, and I assume you are not named Prissken?"

"Sir, Recruit Plissken reports for duty Sir."

The young man attempted something that may have passed for a salute and managed to drop the papers to the ground, effectively scattering what amounted to a small forest in paper all over the corridor. Hortan sighed; he could swear he had never been that young or gullible.

"Hey buddy, we don't really Sir at all, well maybe when the Boss is around, but definitely not to me. You look lost, first day?"

"Sir, ehm, yes it is Pilot Hortan. I am so hungry, but I need to fill these forms before I can do it Si..Hortan."

"Easy now, let's go have some noodles, and then I'll help you with the forms, okay? You look famished."

Plissken smiled back at Hortan in gratitude and let him be led towards Madam Phatt's. Hortan smiled broadly; finally he was not the new guy anymore. He considered dropping his own propeller hat, but quickly canned the idea and instead tilted it slightly so it didn't follow regulation 212B-1, Mandatory Headwear for TGFT Personnel.

###

The trade vessel was doomed. Down to 12 percent armour plating on the vulnerable parts of the engine with a Centurion Rev C immediately behind ready to flash more positron fire into it. The crew accepted their fate and activated the APRS systems, leaving the heavy moth to a bath in near light speed positrons. The explosion resulted in a blast wave that was more than a hundred metres in diameter and included the centurion, rocking it slightly while peeling armour and paint of the xithricite hull. Azumi swore, she had been too damned close to that one, now she would have to get "The Pink Fly" a new set of plates. She would have to get a transport ship anyway; those high-density mining beams she just liberated were quite valuable.

She entered real space around the station orbiting Sedina V, Sedina V Hold at the same time, as Chana Slan was just about to exit the station. He promptly tried to turn the Chaos Swarm loaded moth around, knowing that it would be a tight run between the incoming pirate and the 98 tonne ship. And one he could ill afford to lose. He managed to turn the moth around and almost dock when

the streaks of positrons started eating away at his armour plating, only stopping when the blast door sealed his ship safely inside.

Azumi swore once more as she turned the Rev C away from the station, deftly avoiding this month's edition of rent-a-cops that were scrambling like madmen to get to her. She had missed that nice juicy trader, and now had to run from the strike force. Not because she was afraid of them, but she really couldn't be bothered fighting them. She had some loot that needed to be picked up. She jumped to C-14 and then immediately back, outracing the strike force on the way inbound to the station. She crashed her ship into the docking cradle and jumped out of the ship, a mischievous grin on her elfin face. She looked for Chana and located him next to the rather scarred moth. Her grin got even wider when she saw who was right behind him. She walked slowly towards the trader while peeling her flight suit down to her waist revealing a white tank top with the caption "I went to Sedina, and all I got was flared". Chana slowly backed up to his moth while lifting his hands in the universal defensive posture. Azumi ignored the dockhands and stared directly at him, fixing him like she had immersed him in quick drying cement. She would have some fun yet.

## 19. Snatch

In the end it was completely anti climatic. What was supposed to be a high-risk arrest with the involvement of the Remley Orbital SWAT team supporting the local Rent-a-Cops, turned out to be very undramatic. After localising him in one of the many non-descript cubicles of sector DD-56-A3, the SWAT team crashed through his door and found a slightly bewildered man inside. After identifying him on his DNA and prints, he was read his rights, and that was basically it. The prisoner boarded the secure Centurion and was escorted by the specially selected TGFT security detail, but even that turned out to be unnecessary. After escorting Asteroth to Dau K-10, they handed the prisoner over to the local Rent-a-Cops who took him away to a secure facility. Waldoze was slightly pissed off that he had been pulled away from Melody for this.

###

"Ecka, let me first say how sorry I am for that poor guy, I have no idea what went through my head. I mean, I had a bad day and he really didn't help at all. I don't know how I can make it better, I don't know how to sort myself out."

Buzz was a wreck, the normally so correct and sturdy man was trembling, looking into the floor and keeping his hands in front of him to hide the very female attributes that was the cause of all this. Ecka poured two drams of 18-year-old Nyrius cask strength Pylatis Delicht, handing one to Buzz and ensuring that he drank it before muttering a quick thanks to his ancestors who invented the stuff and drinking his own in one long swallow. He poured another set, one for each.

"Ah cannae tell ya how tae fix that bosom a youse, but ah'll git the coppers oaff ya back fer that shot. Mah best bet would be tae go 'n hae a blether wit Moda son, ya ken?"

Ecka drank his own shot of whisky and nodded to Buzz to do the same. He really didn't have time for all of this, but a guild member was like family, and family needed to look out for each other. He sent Buzz off and turned to his terminal. Who to send to the injured dockhand for persuasion....hm, ah yes, the perfect person for this job.

###

An alert chimed softly in NP's inner ear, making him wake up. He was disoriented for about three seconds, and then the system kicked in making him aware as surely as a three litre pure caffeine shot would do. He smiled; he absolutely loved his new brain toy. He activated the logger and received all the data his systems had deemed worthwhile of his attention while he slept, prioritised for importance. It was not a perfect system, it had absolutely no intuition and lacked the capacity to interpret, but it gave him the basics of

news while he slept. He accessed the list and almost opened his eyes in surprise. Somebody was attacking the cognitive semi-self aware network in the HQ. He sent a message to Toha that he would be leaving, got dressed and bolted for his vulture. He had to access the network directly to avert the attack; besides he trusted that Toha could keep on top of the situation here.

###

Azumi walked over towards Chana, the smile widening as she closed. Chana felt the unwelcome cold streaked surface of his behemoth and realised that he could back no further. Azumi walked closer and closer and right by him, switching her gaze to the tall girl with the waist long brown hair that was leaning against a *Corvus Vulturius*. She smiled right back and when she had Azumi's attention, she pushed herself off the vult and moved towards her.

"Hi baby girl"

"Hi Az, did you miss me?"

"Sure did Jas, as always."

The two girls met and embraced, Jasmine letting herself be spun 180 degrees by Azumi who was once more eyeing Chana.

"Why don't you introduce me to your guild mate there baby girl?"

"Sure hon."

They walked over to Chana still embraced, the two girls grinning like madmen at the complete discomfort that Chana so obviously displayed. Small beads of sweat were appearing on his forehead, and his flight suit felt like a sauna. The two girls walked in very close, Azumi having to look up at Chana unlike Jasmine who was as tall as Chana.

"Azumi, let me present Chana, Chana, this is Azumi."

Chana started nodding to Azumi who cut him short with an even wider grin.

"Isn't he the one they call Mr Tongue?"

Jasmine started giggling and Chana's head started to turn red. Azumi leant in closer to Jasmine and nestled up under her chin while keeping her eyes on Chana, put one finger in her mouth, slightly biting it with her teeth, the grin never leaving her face.

"I wonder why that is hun."

Chana took his arms out to the sides in protest.

"Ms Atamoss, Ms Azumi, I swear I was completely innocent in that incident. As well you know Ms Azumi."

Azumi slid closer to Chana, catching him unaware, and managed to get her hands around his waste.

"Aw, all I did was this deary."

Azumi grabbed his buttocks with one hand, grabbed his neck with the other and tilted his head down so she could reach him.

"Ew, tongue again. It is true enough Jas, he is the undisputed Mr Tongue."

Jas was giggling like a group of pre-school girls at a Ricky Martin concert. Azumi stepped one step back and looked Chana in the eyes.

"I'll get you next time trader."

She took a step over to Jas, placed a kiss on her lips that spread a shock wave of ooh's and aah's from the dockhands and waved to her as she walked slowly over to her own cargo ship. Jasmine had to bite her lip not to laugh at Chana, who was staring at the black and red haired pirate like a child looking at the Christmas presents underneath the tree. He slowly opened and closed his mouth as if he tasted something until she had disappeared from view into the pink CLM tagged Behemoth. Only then did he remember to check his pockets.

"Ah fuck, she took my cred stick again."

"You don't seem too upset Chana, matter of fact you seemed to enjoy it quite a bit."

He snapped out of his semi-comatose state, whirred his head and then realised what Jasmine had said. He shot her a hard glare that failed to impress due to the pretty red colours on his cheeks and stalked over to the dockhands to arrange for a new set of armour plates.

Jasmine laughed out loud and walked back to her vult and the custom paint job she was making on it.

## 20. Skunk Works

The workshop was its usual busy mess when Buzz walked into Moda's domain. The usual heavy and loud music was replaced with something that best resembled a cat being dismembered by an industrial harvesting machine that needed oil badly. Buzz looked around and saw Moda and Zathras standing at a metal box, two by three metres, maybe one metre tall that had thick cables entering at various points. Moda was wearing what looked like industrial grade headphones, and Zathras was slowly rocking his buttocks completely out of tune with what may have been music. He even tapped the rhythm out with one boot, out of tune with the music and his own buttocks. Buzz walked over to the duo that and stopped two metres away, not wanting to break their apparent concentration. After a minute or so, Moda extended one finger and pressed a single button on the top of the container, activating something inside. The "music" stopped and Buzz took the chance to shuffle his feet. The slight noise was enough to make Zathras turn, and when he saw Buzz, pull Moda's sleeve and point.

"Brrr, click, we have detected a visitor Moda."

Moda smiled at Buzz and shouted in a very loud voice.

"WE'LL ONLY BE A SECOND. GO GRAB A DARK LADY," and pointed to the fridge.

Buzz turned and walked over to the fridge with the large painting of a happy skunk holding a rifle with a daisy in the muzzle in one paw and a drink in the other, the caption underneath saying "If you can imagine it, we can build it". He opened the fridge and marvelled at the completely full racks of Dark Ladies all cooled to perfection by a constant flow of air that circulated through the precisely placed bottle racks. He grabbed a bottle and turned to look at the duo as they once more bent over the crate. Buzz drank slowly of probably the best ale in the known systems while enduring the horrible sounds that seemed to be enjoyable to Zathras. He had drunk about half of it when Moda exclaimed a "YES!" and turned around holding a small pitcher with maybe two ounces of amber liquid in it. Moda looked up at the speakers, and the electronic sounds died allowing him to take his ear protection off.

"Grab us a set will you buddy?"

Moda walked over to another large machine and inserted the amber liquid into the machine. Buzz walked over with the two ales and passed them on. Moda accepted, opened and drank deep from the bottle. Zathras looked at the bottle for some time before he too took his bottle, opened it and inserted a straw from his pocket. The trio was standing in silence, enjoying the beer until the machine started printing a sheet of paper. Moda took it and compared it to another series of graphs.

"Zath, I think we found it."

"Brrr, click, aye it appears that you and we have indeed done so, fzz click"

"What is it?"

Moda turned to Buzz and smiled.

"Sorry, would spoil the surprise if I told you friend. So, apart from the fantastic beer, the good company and the awesome music we sometimes play, what brings you to the Skunk Works?"

Buzz looked down into the ground and mumbled something.

"This one here cannot hear you. Please to speak up if you can."

Buzz looked at Zathras, who in return stared back intently.

"Sorry Zath. I have a problem with some nanite implants."

"They do not look troubled to this person"

"Aw come on Zath, can't you see he shouldn't have boobs?" Moda pushed Zathras coyly on the shoulder.

"We are not at liberty to judge other persons personal appearances."

Moda shook his head in wonder and looked back at Buzz.

"So, nanite implants? What is wrong apart from the fact that they are very shapely?"

"I want them off."

"Okay, then you'll need some anti-nanites that are tailored to the type of nanites that made them in the first place. Fortunately Zath here is somewhat of an expert on that subject, and he has many connections in BioCom."

Buzz fumed at the mentions of BioCom, but he nodded at Moda.

"Whatever it takes Moda, whatever it takes."

###

Chainslaw Slan was slowly sifting his way through the innards of the outside maintenance bot he had disassembled with a shot from his mega positron blaster. He was looking for the small telltale receiver/recorder he had implanted in the bot, the receiver that had recorded every signal that went in

and out of the station and recorded them. He found it and fished it out of the rubble, accidentally cutting himself on the left index finger. He looked at the finger as the blood ran along the it and started dripping into the assorted electronic junk. He took the finger up to his mouth and slowly licked the blood off, relishing in the taste of it. He kept his finger in his mouth while he lifted the receiver/recorder up to his eyes, reading the serial on it's back. Dau-K-10-003C. The one he was looking for. He smiled showing the blood in his teeth and scaring the two guild members that were sitting opposite him. He gave it to psych0cobra and got up from the rubble.

"This got it all?"

"Yeah, it should get us in."

Psych0cobra inserted the receiver/recorder into his pda and started the search programme that Burn had created. It ran for ten seconds before coming up with a seemingly random series of digits, 160 in all. He logged the signal into his pda and sent it via a one time encryption pad to Ahriman and then gave the receiver/recorder back to Chainsaw Slan.

"He has it, so now we wait."

They got as comfortable as they could in the cramped cargo space of the centaur. It wasn't bad, they had all done much worse. After a while, Red Tide even found a deck of cards.

## 21. Black Ops.

Dozer opened the door slowly, ever so slowly, and sneaked into his new double cubicle. He slowly and silently closed the door, making sure that the lock engaged as silently as possible. He shook one shoe off, and then the other and tip toed over to the bed where someone was snoring slightly under the covers. He smiled at the almost imperceivable sound she made when she slept, it was so cute. He sat down and listened for three whole minutes, almost a new record in concentration for him. He took one of the roses he had brought and placed it near her nose, the deep red of the flower matching the colour of her hair, making sure the fragrance of the flower woke her up gently. She stirred and Dozer smiled like a man on drugs, which he was in a sense. She opened her eyes and looked at the rose, a smile crossing her face like sunlight on a rainy day. She stretched and held her arms out.

"Mmh, where have you been love?"

"Sorry dear, I had to do some urgent guild business, and after that I went to the flower shop and to the...no, I am not going to say anymore. I am not going to ruin he surprise."

He smiled down at her and kissed her on her forehead as she started to rise.

"What, let me go, I want to see."

He grinned and let her up, admiring her milky-white skin that was framed by the long red curls. He had one hand on his back, hidden from sight.

"Promise you'll behave," he said in a mocking voice.

"Absolutely not."

She tried to reach behind his back, and after a mock fight she grabbed his hand, and what was in it. She took the small box and stared at it with big round eyes. She looked up at Dozer.

"You didn't, you shouldn't, you"

"Why don't you just open it?"

She did, and saw the large deep-red ruby necklace that matched the colour of her hair perfectly. Needless to say, they ordered room service later....much later.

###

Retractile readied his Rev C for a high speed run across Latos and rendezvous with Remley orbital. He was carrying the heavy pouch that yoda had given him

containing a single sealed envelope, not sure what was supposed to happen to it. He knew he was supposed to deliver it to a person in Remley station, but he wasn't too keen on searching a whole station for a single packet, no matter how important it may be. He launched and had to focus hard as he moved to the jump point, as a convoy of Orion ships exited the station at the same time, their slow reaction times indicating extremely heavy loads. Weapons or the like, probably very profitable. He sent a message on the pirate net and received a single answer from Swag Man. Retractable jumped to Remley orbital and initiated the docking procedure. Inside the station, he was greeted by four Rent-a-Cops in the finest TPG uniforms, all had readied weapons pointing at him. He ignored them completely and calmly reached into the ship for the pouch. He looked at the large bore rocket hand canon that was inside the cockpit, but merely smiled and turned to the scared cops, his hands in his sides.

"Now listen I know you all want to do your jobs and be wary of the pirate, safeguard the station and all that stuff that little Betty-Lou Wetpants likes to hear down in the bar, but could you at least do me the courtesy of having the weapons loaded and the safe off?"

The guards all as one looked down at their weapons, and Retractable attacked at that time. He swung the pouch into the face of one of the guards, snapping his head back and launching him across the bay, moved up to two others and placed a single kick in the chest of the second man, crumbling him to the floor. The third guard managed to look up and see Retractable's head impact on his own, the twin metal studs in Retractable's forehead shielding his own brain and working like a club on the guard. The very loud sound of a safety switching off pierced the air, and Retractable turned slowly and by doing so relaxed the guards attention precisely enough that when he ducked and spun, the shot went over his head and impacted on the chest on the guard behind. Retractable kicked a single foot up into the groin of the shooter with all his might, making him double over and loose his taser. Retractable stood and turned slowly around, eyeing the hurting guards.

"Pah, what a bunch of losers."

He once more kicked the guard that had tried to shoot him and walked off into the station. Now where the hell was he supposed to deliver this pouch?

###

The thirty minutes was almost too much for the automatic defence systems in the PA main computer system. When NP jacked in, the virus was only one level away from the main data core of the host. He immediately counter attacked with everything he had, and managed to freeze the virus where it was presently. Using software that was illegal to use in all nations, he tried to burn the virus out of the immediate critical systems, but only partially succeeded. He cursed in his mothers language, the soft syllables so much better than

Standard for swearing, and then started on a smaller infestation with some alternative programmes. Again, he was only moderately successful in burning the virus, but he now had an idea of what to do. He smiled inside, his outward appearance that of a corpse while jacking, this was a nice challenge for once. Whomever made this virus was very good. He found the file that would enable him to attack the virus, opened it and froze. It had been a trap, inside the file was a trojan that took control of NP's headware and shut him down, the mental interface first, and then proceeded to open the headware to the outside attacker. NP could only observe the mind rape that happened on him, while floating impotently in his own head.

###

The order to go was given, and the centaur slowly accelerated towards the station. The lights inside the cargo bay went from yellow to red, and the five troopers inside readied themselves. Outside the station two ships from KAOS with the pilots called William Cutting and Fagious Maximus entered controlled space and engaged the nearest trader with a load of swarms, easily attracting the attention of the tactical operations centre of TPG. The first Strike Force wave was quickly annihilated in a swarm of jackhammers, and the next group readied themselves for launch, even if it was probably a suicide mission.

In the meantime, the centaur docked in the TPG part of the station to the complete black of a station that had lost power. The cyber attack that was the third component of the attack, had succeeded in taking over the power sub-mind, the station was now under foreign control. The doors to the cargo hold of the centaur opened and five figures in black combat suits fanned out, covering the docking bay in seconds. A series of short bursts came from one of the figures, and several thumps were heard where the dockhands had stood before. Sounds of shuffling feet and strip-locks as the dockhands were tied in their prone positions, and then some not quite seen movement towards the entrance to the station proper. The lights went out in the corridor, and the safety door opened. So far the plan had worked very well.

## 22. Counter Insurgency

Gramps grumbled as he walked down to the TPG infirmary, walking with the slight limp that was his trademark, a legacy of a particular bad fight with a pirate in Odia years ago. He had dressed in a moderately clean boiler suit meant not to intimidate the dock hand he was on his way to talk to. When Ecka had asked him to solve this matter, he had not hesitated a second, after all that was what the council members were supposed to; help the members. He still grumbled, but that was because he had to walk almost the entire length of the station to get there. He arrived at the infirmary and walked up to the nurse on duty.

"Hello Ms, I am here to see the dock hand that was shot in the knee three days ago. I am expected."

The nurse looked at him over her glasses, smiled and flicked through her files.

"Yes, you must be Gramps, legal representative of TGFT? Pardlon is waiting for you with his attorney in room 23, it is right over there."

Gramps nodded his thanks and walked over to the room, ready for negotiations.

###

Naoko enjoyed this particular problem. She had the name of the person that was attacking TGFT, and now she was doing a search for all and any connections across several screens and databases. She had come up with four names already, only one of whom was known. Ahriman, the guild leader of KAOS. She followed up with a search on Ahriman as well, but that came up empty. She allowed a slight frown to cross her picture perfect visage, and tried something else. She stole one of PA's bugs and started leeching data from the TPG mainframe's secondary memory store. She had sifted through data for about ten seconds when the screen went dead. Puzzled, she called up her log and checked what was wrong. Something had snubbed her, but not TPG. It looked like it had been NP, but why would he do that? She tried another access to the mainframe and got the same result within six seconds. Something was wrong, she had to notify Surbius and do it now. She sent the priority note and tried another way in. Something was very wrong, and she wanted to find out what it was.

###

The guards at the entrance to TPG central never knew what happened. One moment they were on boring guard duty, the next second the lights went out. Fumbling for the light switch, they never noticed the group that advanced on them and eventually put a sonic taser to the head of each man in turn. The smell of voided bowels quickly filled the room, not that anybody noticed from

behind the masks. The point man used the ID card along with a limp right hand from one of the guards. The door chimed open and showed a dark room behind it, the software still cloaking the attackers in night. A single shot rang out and the lone guardsman who was trying to get his night vision goggles on, dropped in cramps. The cells were three on each side, no marking at all. The point man walked over to the second cell, hesitated for the smallest amount of time, and then set a xith toothed chain saw to the frame. The noise of a super charged engine revved to the maximum level rocked the corridor, making the guard wince on top of his involuntary shaking. A shower of plasteel rained down on the deck as the point man cut the door frame clean off. When the frame was unsupported, the trooper ripped it out into the corridor, revealing the man behind.

"What took you so long?"

The answer came from the second trooper.

"You know Commander, someone wise once told me that if you want something done, do it right."

Asteroth smiled at that. He remembered the deep penetration mission he had planned with the Serco Spec Ops, and the exact time he himself had said precisely those words.

"Point taken Red. I assume you have a plan for extraction as well?"

"Yes Sir, Skull over here has your survival kit. Cat, are we ready to move out?"

A low female voice responded.

"Aye Chief, we are ready. I have multiple bogeys inbound Chief, I am switching to lethal response instead of stunners."

"Belay that Cat, as long as we have the upper hand, we use stunners only. Respond."

"Aye aye Chief, stunners only."

Asteroth donned his gear quickly, after all he had trained for this scenario many times. Once suited up, he activated the dark vision and watched the former Terror Troops and Red Tide with pride. They moved with the economy of countless hours of training, they still had it. The guy with the chain saw was another chapter entirely. Bearing the saw he was named for, he appeared by almost non showing, an effect that was eerie and scaring. When you didn't look directly at him he seemed to disappear, a very nice trick. Red Tide nodded in appreciation when Asteroth finished within the time limits that he had himself described those years ago when he was commander of their unit.

"Cat, you have point, Skull, you second, Bloody Mayhem, you take rear. Oh, and Chainsaw, with me. Sir, we are ready to move out."

Asteroth nodded, and Cat slid along the wall into the corridor again.

###

The Behemoth could be described with many words. Elegant, slim, sleek, or even vicious were not among those words. To Hortan, there was only one word that could describe the large cargo vessel with the stripes in panic yellow, the colour that contains just enough red that predators go nuts and believe that the wearer of this colour will turn tail and flee at the earliest opportunity, and so will drive said predator to a feeding frenzy, and that word was beautiful. He ran his hands down its pockmarked sides, the armour having in some places been scoured clean several times by ionstorms, plasmafire or just plain old collisions. He removed the pre-flight caps from the high density mining beams, and ensured that they had no cracks in the crystal lattice that made the focal point. He checked out the cargo, 120 crates of the finest luxury goods, fashion clothes and chocolate, signed the receipt and handed the credits over. Better get this done before he lost his nerves.

At 0920 standard time, he launched, and programmed his NAVCOMP for Sedina. He hoped that his timing would be correct, but he was ready for some evasive manoeuvres if he would encounter pirates. Avoiding the usual ionstorms in Azek by plotting around, he entered the Latos wormhole, and grey space with something resembling the entire collected Monarch butterfly emigration swarm in his stomach. This was going to be intense to say the least. At least space here was empty, most pirates would be asleep now anyway. Or that was what he had been told. He entered Latos O12 some 5k away from the wormhole, and started boosting towards it. The butterfly's were now on helium and acid, because they were more and more active in his stomach. He entered the wormhole and activated the jumpdrive.

###

Azumi sighed deeply. That was without doubt the worst piece of poetry she had ever heard, and the worst part was that it was aimed at her. Fortunately Denji did not know precisely where she was, but this had the unfortunate side-effect that he had broadcast his "dedication" poem on the general news channel. It reminded her of the time where an equally lovesick Hortan had blabbered about His Queen on and on. She sighed again and turned the Rev C around once more to make sure her radar had the best resolution. There, an Atlas that had just jumped out of the system. Crap, it must have been in the slight four degree dead angle that was a legacy of the Rev C's extra mounted weapon, the reason why Rev C pilots had to keep flying in wide turns for full coverage. She sighed once more, she didn't even bother to curse; that poem was just good for nothing!

Retractile: Az, I know you do stuff for yoda, do you know who I have to talk to in Latos?

She looked at the guild coded message from Retractile and shook her head in wonder.

->Retractile: Hun, I have no clue what you are doing deary. How do you expect me to help you then?

Retractile: I need to deliver a pouch to some KAOS dude.

->Retractile: Try their commander, I think he is called Ahriman.

Retractile: Thanks Az, will do.

Azumi shook her head slowly and resumed her sweep of Sedina B-8. There, the telltale tachyons of a ship emerging, and a Moth as well. She engaged the turbo and flew in on the left side of the ship, forty metres away. She targeted the ship, ready to pour positron fire into the helpless trader. Hortan. She punched the controls and disengaged from the firing position.

"Why the hell are you here all alone? Don't you know it is dangerous here? There are pirates all around, they WILL kill you Hortan"

She fumed, she had told him that it was dangerous, she had told him that the pirates were...hang on, she was a pirate. She sat up in her seat as the implications hit her. Why hadn't she pirated him instantly? Why hadn't she fired a warning shot across the bow of his ship?

Inside Hortan's moth, he punched the two buttons he had set up prior to entering Sedina, as he did not trust his nerves to enable him to type once he encountered Azumi. And he was right, he was barely able to even do this. He sent his message and dumped his cargo.

->Hortan: Ms Azumi, Roses are red, violets are blue, Heliocene roids are beautiful, and so are you. Please accept these gifts as a token of my gratitude. Yours, Hortan.

Azumi stared at the crates dumbfounded, and barely noticed the moth turn and jump out again. Great, two would be poets without an ounce of talent between them. This was probably the first time she had ever been likened to a roid, but she knew he meant well. Sighing she jumped to D-14 to get her loot-moth, after all a girl needed her chokkies, and it seemed that some of the crates contained the new clothes collection from Dau.

## 23. Breaching

NP had no choice but to observe the misuse of his systems as it was being thrust into the TPG mainframe by his own small bugs that he had inserted over the years. The attacker had neutered NP completely, there was nothing at all he could do. He was continuously searching for ways out, but the attacker was too good. All of the normal security measures in the Dau K-10 station were under the attackers control. A glimpse of a way out, but it was closed fast. NP focused in that direction, ready for an emergency squeak of data. There, it happened again, but closed even faster. He got ready and waited for the opening. Once more, the wall of security was breached for 0.12 mili-seconds, but that was enough. NP squirted his location and status out through the breach. He kept his attention on where the breach was located, but nothing happened. Well, he had tried.

###

Cat knelt down and brought her multi purpose gun up. The two guards that walked towards them were suddenly in complete dark, and it was no problem for her to dispatch them with twin shots from the taser. She walked over to them and inserted the stunner between helmet and jacket, firing it at maximum power. The guards went unconscious instantly. Only three more corridors, and the most daring prison break ever would be pulled off with no casualties. The Jacker had ensured complete control over the station; it was almost too easy.

###

With the last crate stowed, Azumi walked out to her pink Rev C. She needed to fly, to pirate, to fight. Something blocked the path to her ship, a packet of something with flowers on top of it. A card was next to it, pastel colours and flowers. She opened the card.

\*\*\*\*

My sweet, You have my love not yet spurned  
Alas, my limitless attraction is yet to be returned

Lest my hopes will not yet expire  
I will act from my hearts desire

A token of my devotion I aim to provide  
By dying to your neuts in willing suicide

Denji  
\*\*\*\*

Azumi cringed, this was almost as bad as the last one, and with the flowers and chocolates it was getting a bit too personal. She dumped them in the

cargo hold of her Rev C and climbed aboard. Her ship system was chiming softly, a message in her terminal.

Retractile: Az, I can't find the bubba. Care to help? Will make it up to you

She grabbed her helmet and closed the coffin like lid, the normal snug comfort of her ship calming her mind. She launched, heading for Remley Orbital.

###

Gramps shook hands with the dockhand and his lawyer. This was going to be expensive, but at least he had secured an agreement that would keep Buzz out of court. He got up and started limping towards the TGFT command centre, almost colliding with Fluffy who was moving very fast around the corner. Fluffy dropped a collection of papers that scattered all over the corridor, face down.

"Oh darn. Sorry Gramps, didn't see you there."

Fluffy knelt and started to collect his papers with Gramps watching him while leaning on his cane. Gramps frowned, the papers looked like pictures of somebody semi-naked lying on a floor. Not expecting that from Fluffy, he nodded towards the photos.

"What is that you have there son?"

"Revenge Gramps, sweet sweet revenge."

"How so?"

Fluffy looked up at Gramps and smiled. He bared his shoulder and showed the Behemoth with the caption BAMF underneath.

"Buzz somehow got me and Waldoze to have these made in Sedina in a slight state of intoxication. And now I am going to get even, and get even good."

Gramps looked at the posters again, now he recognised the semi-naked person with the big breasted hairy chest as Buzz.

"Son, I understand your need for revenge, but you may wish to reconsider. Walk with me, I need to enlighten you a bit."

Fluffy got up and walked with Gramps while he was told of the shooting, and just how much trouble Buzz was in.

###

Neagoth and Vardonx were walking down the corridor, heavily loaded with chips, Nyrius Dew, Helio Mists and junk food. The monthly gathering they had

with Fluffy, Waldoze and John was today. They had made it a tradition to meet and play Faction War and talk about everything and anything. They arrived and opened the door to Neagoth's cubicle where the board game was already set up on the round table, with five comfortable chairs surrounding it; a screen saver projecting pictures of places that Neagoth had been on the far wall, changing every ten seconds, provided the decoration in the room. John was going to be a bit late but the others should be here any second.

###

Naoko received the message in her terminal. At first it didn't make sense, then she ran it through a language filter. She had been right, something was very wrong, apparently the station was under attack. Where were the klaxons? The running troopers? She hit her connection to TPG security and it came up busy. She prioritised the message, no difference. She was deeply puzzled now, and tried to see what was holding the line. Her terminal popped up again.

"PRIORITY DISENGAGE COMM SYSTEM ENABLE GENSTART17289"

Naoko frowned, what was genstart17289? She looked at the message and found the string. She was not sure what would happen, but just maybe it would allow her to punch through the blanket that was covering TPG security. She closed any connections to the TGFT database and typed genstart17289 and pressed enter.

## 24. Through these walls

NP opened his eyes, the semiconscious entity that was PA's de-centralised mainframe had been rebooted and he had been kicked from his own skull. Smiling a real life smile, he opened a good old-fashioned terminal window on his pda and started a search programme. He knew what to look for, and it was only a matter of seconds before he detected the node that had controlled his assets so efficiently. He followed the data stream and saw what was going on as Dau K-10. He opened a link to Naoko and sent her a message about what had happened, and what he was about to do. Grinning fiercely, he started entering commands the old fashioned way with a keyboard and in raw code.

###

Gramps walked into TGFT command, nodded politely around and stepped up to Ecka's chair. Ecka looked at Gramps who nodded in return. Ecka sighed a breath of relief, reached behind his chair and grabbed the bottle of Phylatis Delicht from which he poured two drams, handing one of them to Gramps. They looked each other in the eyes before drinking the fiery liquid that balmed the soul all the way down while raising the temperature several degrees. Gramps held the cup out gain for a refill, one dram was hardly enough.

"Sir, it has been solved. The dockhand has agreed to a compensation of one point three million credits and all expenses paid regarding his hospital stay. He then drops all charges and claims it was an accident"

"Tis nae as bad as feared Gramps, wiel done."

"I wish. There is another small item, but I hope I can work that out as well. He wants Buzz to apologise, and you know how Buzz is"

"Aye, Ah kenn Buzz, It cannae be done. Unless ye can git Waldoze o Fluffy tae blether im into it."

"I'll see what I can do Sir. I'll get on it right away."

Gramps held his hand out for another dram, he had deserved it.

###

The corridor was cloaked in black, which was precisely what the strike team wanted. So far Cat had located all the roaming guards before they had detected the team, dispatching them with taser shots and letting Skull tie them up and gag them. Two corridors down and they would be able to enter the unmarked centaur that psych0cobra was waiting in. Cat turned the corner, taser at the ready when the light turned on. The safety filter in her goggles turned them off, blinding her for half a second before the override enabled her

to see in light conditions. She saw the blast door close in front of her, and heard the warning klaxons start up.

"INTRUDER ALERT INTRUDER ALERT, SECTOR A-29-G."

Not slowing a second, she switched weapons to her preferred heavy calibre gyro stabilised rocket gun, or gyrorock, dropping the taser unceremoniously on the floor.

"Corridor closed, need alternative exit." She kept watch towards the blast door, nobody would come through and live to tell.

Red Tide sent a query to the jacker and came up blank. Calling up a virtual map, he found a possible route to the centaur.

"Chainsaw, cut the wall here and here."

He sent a tactical overlay to Chainsaw's HUD showing an outline on the bulkhead. The blast doors were made to resist most things, and were made of xithricite alloy. The bulkheads on the other hand, were made of plasteel. Chainsaw turned his xith toothed saw on and started cutting a hole in the wall. Once more the corridor filled with the infernal noise from the super charged engine as the one centimetre wide blade shredded the wall. After cutting the three sides, he stepped back and let Skull smash the wall in. An empty cubicle. Chainsaw stepped through and set the blade to the next wall. This was going to take longer time, but it would still be faster than going through the blast doors.

###

The klaxons were sounding on all levels, even in the TGFT autonomous part of the station. Vardonx and Neagoth looked at each other before grabbing their weapons and body armour. If there were intruders, they wanted to be part of the tag team. They ran outside and into Fluffy who was standing with his pda, rapidly punching up data.

"Fluffy, you coming or what?"

Fluffy looked up at the two pumped traders in full kit with something like fear in his eyes.

"They are punching through the walls. This way."

Vardonx and Neagoth exchanged looks.

"What, where? Show us where they are." Vardonx was demanding from Fluffy, who pointed at the nearest door. "Right, lets move then."

Vardonx drew his two large bore slug throwers and walked over to the door. He nodded to Neagoth who swiped his special security all access card and open the door. Inside was a bewildered Plissken caught in the middle of filing a 251-D Request for Purchase of Non-Standard Sleeping Gown form.

"Recruit, get out and report to headquarters. This is no place for a young ensign."

Plissken looked confused around; just what in his issued cubicle was deemed unsuitable for him? He could see that Vardonx meant business with the implied threat of the two guns, so after grabbing his form, he ran to TGFT operations to report. Being new in TGFT was sometimes very strange.

Vardonx stood still and listened closely. That bulkhead, the noise came from that bulkhead. He braced himself and pointed both guns, motioning for Fluffy and Neagoth to be ready. Not carrying a gun, Neagoth drew a four foot long slightly curved blade and positioned himself to be able to attack the first person through the bulkhead. A large crash from the cubicle next wall over, followed by several "Boom-swoosh-Crack" that punched holes in the wall immediately in front of them. The high pitched whine of an auto needler played second fiddle, followed by a man's scream. Vardonx bit his teeth together, they were NOT coming through him, not alive. "Boom-swoosh-Crack-fwump-Gung", and silence from the room.

"Fuck, they have a gyro rock gun."

Vardonx slowly nodded and replied with clenched teeth.

"It appears you are correct. What fun we are having."

###

It didn't cost him much to gain access to the forensics file from the Divinia station cops. He had found that with the low salary of most cops, asking to see relatively harmless information for a "donut contribution", was really no problem. He sifted through the names and DNA tags, fearing to find the one that matched. It took him half an hour, but in the end he didn't find his match. Sighing with relief, he looked down at the German Shepherd that had been at his side all the time, scratching it behind its ears.

"Looks like the assholes missed her buddy. What do you say, should we get back at them?"

The dog closed its mouth and turned its head sideways, its ears standing.

"I'll take that as a yes boy."

The dog started wagging its tail. He got up and walked out to his vulture, the dog at his side. He had been in hiding long enough. He had actually believed that if he disappeared from active duty, his enemies would stop the efforts to hit him via his family. He should have known better, after all they had no inhibitions when it came to making a profit. They had shown before that they would kill off an entire population and destroy a planet to gain wealth, so the torching of an orphanage to get to him was nothing. He was going to come back, he was going to find the ones responsible and make them suffer.

## 25. If it can go wrong...

The pink Rev C docked at a sedate 70 m/s in the docking cradle of Remley Orbital. A faction rating that was just a smidgeon above hated ensured a welcoming committee to Azumi when she vaulted out of her ship, the knee length tartan skirt with calf high white socks and white shirt not quite what the guards expected. She ignored the bruises on them as efficiently as she ignored them, turning her back to rummage through the hold. Finding what she needed and calling a high pitched "Golly" when she did so; she turned and stared directly into the eyes of the largest of the guards. She took the lollipop she had found and inserted it between her black lipstick coloured lips, twirling one pigtail at the same time.

"Did I do anything wrong Mr Officer?"

The guards hesitated, they had been told to expect a vicious pirate with a lot of innocent traders on her conscience, not a schoolgirl. The guard in charge managed to move a step forward.

"I am sorry Ms, I am going to have to see some identification please."

Azumi looked at him over her lollipop and popped it out of her mouth slowly. The guards never knew what hit them. After they woke up they could watch the surveillance camera feed and see the slender bald man with a tattoo of twin snakes that twisted from his neck up and over his bald head calmly walk over to them and put a stunner to each of them in quick succession. They could also see the man smile at the young girl and extend his palms to her so they could touch palms in traditional Itani greeting. She smiled a crooked smile to him, placed the lollipop in her mouth and did a pirouette.

"Do you like my outfit?"

"You knock 'em dead babe. I especially like the Hello Kitty bands in your hair, immensely cute, yet deadly."

He knew what she hid in her hair-band, and he knew very well that she was as skilled with that monofilament wire as with her Rev C.

She feigned innocence and smiled broadly. Motioning for him to follow, Retractable and Azumi walked together into the station.

###

The noise from a chain saw revving to high sounded very loud in the cubicle, and Vardonx flinched as the first series of plasteel splinters cascaded onto him and the rest of the room. The chain saw cut a line five feet high, then extracted and did the same on the other side, turning near the top and connecting to the other cut. The chain saw was retracted and silence followed.

Neagoth looked to Vardonx for support but he was immensely focused on the wall. A large boom, and a single figure crushed through the wall, quickly followed by a series of high cracks as Vardonx shot several large calibre soft-nosed bullets into the first person, following him as he tried to roll away. A string of grenades were popped from Fluffy's 40 mm automatic grenade launcher, impacting in the room behind the hole in the wall. A mix of tear gas and flash-bangs, they were mainly for nuisance and confusion, not deadly. He didn't know if the civilians were alive after all. Vardonx only stopped firing when the figure was near Neagoth, and that was enough for Neagoth to take a step forward and swing his blade. A non-trained person would cut against the main mass of the target, and a non-trained person would then smash the sword on the armour plating covering the intruder. Neagoth had trained for this for many years, and he chose to strike at where most persons are vulnerable; the ankles. Cleanly separating the Achilles tendon from the foot, the target dropped like a sack of flour unceremoniously to the floor, not a sound emanating from the man. Neagoth was about to swing once more, taking the other foot out, and perhaps do the same to the knees.

Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack, Vardonx threw himself out of the room to get in cover from the gyrocock gun, taking Fluffy down with him. Neagoth tried to blend in with the wall, and crawled behind a table that had overturned, covering up to it like a turtle to its shield. A noise like an angry swarm of bees clashed into the table as he dropped behind it, protecting him from the thousands of needles that would have reduced him to a bloody pulp had he not reached cover in time. He hugged the floor, any second fearing the stinging pain from the needler. Boom-swoosh-Crack, a hole the size of a fist appeared in the table just about his head. Boom-swoosh-Crack, another just to the side of his head. Neagoth froze, he was actually going to die now, and by someone he had never even seen.

###

The plan had worked okay so far; they had cut themselves through the plasteel walls easy enough, not meeting anyone until that last room. The man and woman had been surprised, but not enough. The man had been holding a gun in his hand when the wall crashed in, enough of a threat that Cat hadn't hesitated a second, stitching a pattern of bolts across the wall towards him. The woman in the bed had risen and taken a bolt as a direct hit in her left leg, blowing it clean off and showering the room in meat, blood and bones. That was enough for the man to lose focus and stand still for half a second, which was his undoing. The shot of needles from Skull hit him on the chest and left arm, turning it into a bleeding raw wound and dropping him fast.

Chainsaw had entered the room with the saw and started cutting once more, allowing Skull to crash open the section. Several bullets hit his chest immediately and would have been deadly if they hadn't impacted on his armour. At the same time, several grenades flew past him and impacted on the back wall, covering the room in smoke and debris. Even though the armour

took the brunt of the damage, Skull still reeled from the force of the impacts and tried to get out of the line of fire to the left of the room when someone or something cut his foot in half.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, they are three. Cat, pepper it. Ah, Lady Serco this hurts."

Cat heard Skull over the team radio and replied with a string of bolts that hit the far wall, making holes in the plasteel as neatly as a sewing machine through fabric. She moved up to Skull who was lying on the ground, shooting deadly canisters of needles into a tabletop that covered most of one side. Unable to see the target behind, she flicked through her vision modes until she had a vague blob behind the cover. Smiling inside the helmet, she aimed at what she felt was the head or feet and shot one single rocket. Boom-swoosh-Crack. The target moved slightly. Boom-swoosh-Crack. Once more the target moved, this time away from the hole in the tabletop. She had him now. She aimed at the head of the man and slowly depressed her finger.

###

Most of the systems had been restored to normal, and NP slowed a smidgeon. He had delegated internal systems to Naoko and continued to lock the outer systems from the attacker. Finally he had the surplus of time to begin a counterattack, or maybe just a detection probe to find out who it was. He sent a query to Naoko to see how she was handling the defence and chuckled. He had to remember to take her out to dinner one day; that was one devious lady. And she had saved him as well not to forget.

## 26. ...it will

There, the final command was given, and Naoko enabled the programme. The security forces were in complete disarray and split up, only the blast doors and one or two TGFT members stood between the raiding party and freedom. There was only so much she could do, open the doors when security forces wanted to come through, close them at strategic point or this little trick she was about to do.

###

The index finger was just about to depress the trigger on the gyrocock rifle when the lights started blinking on and off, complete darkness and blinding light. At the same time the sprinklers turned on, spreading a non-toxic flame retardant all over the room, and a siren started wailing very loud. All transmitters started spitting out random noise across the spectrum. Cat was blinded, but pressed the trigger nonetheless. Boom-swoosh-Crack, a miss. Blind and deaf, she switched to full auto and sprinkled the area with the rest of the magazine, Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack-fwump-Gung. There, a hit. She had at least hit the person she had been shooting at. She ducked back behind the wall, her back against the false safety and started switching magazine. She disengaged the vision aids and stared at the blinking lights through her visor. Something punched her shoulder and she grabbed after her combat knife on her left boot. The person put his helmet near her own.

"Cat, status."

"I am on half ammo chief, and I think Skull is hurt bad. I got one of the two next door, but I do not know how many they are."

"Cover Mayhem, he will get Skull. I'll take the other side. Chain will open another wall. On my shot, unleash hell."

"Aye aye chief."

She got ready and saw Red move among the rubble of the room and give commands in the blinks of light that allowed her to see. A stream of tracer bullets from the adjacent room told her that the cavalry had arrived on the other side. Time to play. She drew a small thermobaric grenade and readied it for when they would leave this room. No way was she going to run with a group in her rear.

###

Vardonx cursed slowly and methodically while he changed magazine. The soft nosed bullets had been replaced with Teflon coated accelerator projectiles instead, better known as armour piercers. He had heard the softer secondary

explosion from the gyrocock and knew that Neagoth was dead or dying. No way they were going to walk away from that, no way. He kept up his litany of curses and hatred, waiting for the right moment to ambush the filthy murderers. He saw three guards come running in full combat gear, their movements jerky and twisted in the almost stroboscopic light. He held up his badge and pointed at the prone Fluffy, giving him the thumbs up. Fluffy looked up and nodded, reloading his grenade launcher as they waited.

One of the guards knelt at the door and fired a long burst of tracer fire into the hole, staying erect to change magazine after offloading all of it in one burst. His lack of training was rewarded by a single shot from a sliver gun. Named for its thin wide beam of accelerated aluminium powder, it was extremely lethal against un-armoured targets, cutting right through flesh and bone without slowing. Like the upper face of a guard. The other guards looked in horror at the headless corpse as it slid to the floor and was himself hit by a gyrocock. Boom-swoosh-Crack-fwump-Gung, Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack-fwump-Gung, a hit directly in the chest of one guard, penetrating the armour and exploding him from the inside spreading him all over the corridor, the other gyrocock hitting the guard in the leg almost dismembering him before exploding his hip off. Several new holes joined the rest on the back wall, proof of the extreme lethality these murderers were willing to take in use.

Vardonx cursed even more, this time about the bloody idiots that allowed complete novices to join the station security force. Fluffy shot a group of grenades in retaliation, and the gyrococks stopped. This was great, just great, outnumbered, outgunned, what could be more fun. The chain saw started again, they were going another way. Vardonx crawled over to Fluffy and looked at the digital map and motioned to Fluffy to follow him. When they were clear of the doorway, they ran towards the next room. Four guards came running, and Vardonx motioned for them to cover the open door and smashed room. Vardonx and Fluffy had a fifty fifty chance of choosing the right room, it depended on whether the chain saw had burst through the left or right bulkhead. They opened the door and saw the telltale line of the chain saw track. They took as much cover as they could in the doorway and waited for the wall to collapse inwards. They were not disappointed, and a single person stepped in through, his weapon at the ready. Vardonx aimed and fired at the figure, twin tap. The figure stopped dead in his tracks and collapsed to his knees. Fluffy unleashed the entire content of the grenade launched straight at the chest of the person who disappeared in an immense cloud of gas and debris and light. They both pulled back and grinned at each other when the air was sucked from the room and used for the explosion of the thermobaric charge that Cat had dumped in the room they had just left. Unconsciousness left them, and mercifully so. The pain associated with first negative and then extreme positive pressure on the eyes and lungs was enough to kill an unprotected person.

###

Surbius watched the carnage unfold and did the mental calculations in his head. This would become very bloody, and he was not sure that he would be able to catch them. He sent a query along to Ecka, and received the answer he expected and hoped for. He went out to Naoko and asked her to stop with the countermeasures and give him control of the comms system.

"All security forces pull back and regroup around sectors A-13 to A-19. No offensive action is authorised. We are letting them out."

He nodded at Naoko, and let her unleash electronic hell. He may be letting them out of the station to save the civilians from more deaths, but no way in any of the circle of Hell was he going to let them go. He needed to know who they were and where they were going. He wanted to find the ones responsible for this and submit them to precisely what they had done here.

###

Space around Dau K-10 was empty apart from two ships that bore the marks of KAOS. The ships were pitted with holes, signs of several engagements, but they had come out of it relatively well. It had helped that only one set of fighters had emerged from the station, the rest blocked by the electronic attack, but close space was still full of combat debris. William Cutting hummed tunelessly as he turned his ship in a long slow circle, scanning for incoming ships. Suddenly the lights on the launch bays activated, and it started to disgorge fighters, three vults and two seekers. He smiled, finally something to do. With the lightning mines activating and hammering the light xithricite armour of the ships, he had no problems in killing the survivors with a well placed double flare shot. He signalled to fagious who came in and dumped a new set of mines. This was almost too easy.

## 27. Escape and recover

Cat looked down at her chest at the two pinprick holes in her armour. She remembered getting hit, remembered the grenade onslaught, but she didn't remember getting into this room. A large dark figure was standing over her with a large syringe.

"There, that should wake you up Cat. You were hit with penetrators, shot your heart to bits. Good thing you don't use it or you would have been dead."

Cat got up and looked down at her chest, noticing a deep brown stain from the two holes along with three one centimetre deep impact craters from the grenades. She looked for her gyrocock rifle and saw Mayhem play with it.

"If you drop this again, it is mine."

She looked at him, or rather at his helmeted face.

"If you take my rifle again, you better make sure I am in no condition to come and get it."

He chuckled and handed her the rifle, going back to secure the rear.

"Right troops, this is what we are gonna do. Cat you take point, Mayhem you take rear. Chainsaw, you help Skull limp out, and I'll protect Asteroth. We are going through the last bulkhead now, so expect heavy fighting on the other side. Cat, when you are ready."

She stood up, feeling as fresh as ever. That meant the Chief had pumped her full of happy juice, and that her suit was still in working order. She braced herself for the fire and pounded the wall down. A single target running to the left shooting ineffective pellets of full metal jacket shot at her armour, Boom-swoosh-Crack-fwump-Gung, one person sitting in the cockpit of a Vulture ready to launch, Boom-swoosh-Crack-fwump-Gung. She walked in and scanned the room.

"Clear, we are go."

The rest of the team moved in with all the grace they could muster and rushed across the bay to the waiting unmarked centaur in perfect unison. Once inside, the ship launched with no haste and accelerated for the jump point, William and fagious riding security. The whole insertion had taken 27 minutes.

###

Vardonx woke up to a world that was dark and slow. Something covered his eyes, and he could hardly feel himself. He sensed that something was over his nose and mouth, but it was not unpleasant. He could only hear a single tone

very loud inside his ear. So, he had survived, and somehow they had won. He tried to move his hands but could not. Someone moved the blindfold and he could see a shadow that was between him and the red lamp on the wall.

"Fluffy?"

A deep voice full of concern and grief answered from the shadow.

"Fluffy is hurt pretty bad, he took a fragment in his buttocks, neatly shaved of half his ass."

Vardonx almost smiled at that, but he needed to ask one more question.

"Neagoth?"

"Hurt pretty bad, but mostly blast injury. He needs some new eyes and lungs, but apart from that he'll be fine."

"How, how can that be? I heard the tertiary explosion from the gyrocock."

John actually smiled this time as he answered.

"Well, it seems that our new recruit Plissken had just recently acquired the cubicle from a well known TGFT pilot, and said pilot had forgotten a, well let's call it a life size doll that was freed from the locker with one of the shots, and as it fell out it took a direct hit to the torso, a hit meant for Neagoth's head. It exploded most of the doll, but created a kind of bubble that landed on top of Neagoth's upper torso and head, effectively shielding him from most of the blast. He survived by being inserted into a sex-toy really."

Vardonx smiled briefly and stopped again. That hurt badly.

"Waldoze?"

"You got it, Waldoze's toy saved Neagoth's life. And just to be absolutely graphic, you can guess which end covered his head."

Vardonx started chuckling, but that hurt too much as well and the medicines shut him down for a bit.

John got up and sent a message to Ecka. All TGFT members were going to be okay, even if it was going to take some time. He sat in the chair next to the trio of beds and leant back. He would stay until they were awake.

###

He launched his vulture towards Sedina, the wormhole nexus to grey. Taking the long route through grey space in order to avoid the UIT police forces, he

encountered several traders and miners. No pirates were seen along the way, peace had arrived in deep grey. He kept his calm even as he wanted to kill them all, attack their ships and spread their ill-begotten wealth all over vacuum. He entered his old hunting grounds and saw the first pirate, a CLM member called Swag Man in a bright green Vult III. The ship turned towards him and moved slowly in his direction.

Swag Man: Gavan, is that you? Long time no see.

->Swag Man: Yeah, I am back. Call yoda, I need to talk to him.

Swag Man: Good to have you back man. Will do.

Gavan Ardgall slowly smiled his predatory smile that made regular Rent-a Cops duck even deeper in their on-station security details, and made the traders dump their cargo several jumps over. The rightful commander of the so called terrorist organisation named SYN was back. And this time he was not going away before the bastards that controlled UIT would admit to their money grabbing evil ways and pay for the damaged they had wrought. Until then, he was going to create mayhem in grey and UIT space.

###

It wasn't Retractable or Azumi that found Ahriman, eventually they were found. As they were walking down the corridor to the main residential area, he seemed to appear out of thin air. The cloaking field that had shielded him from detection faded to grey and revealed the very tall man clad in a long dark flowing robe, obscuring his face in a rolling veil of darkness.

"You have been seeking Ahriman."

His voice was almost metallic and hoarse, like someone that had trouble speaking or was forming the vowels with a mouth that was unfamiliar to speech.

Azumi stepped back away from the figure, and let Retractable do the talking.

"Yeah, I have a note from yoda."

He presented the pouch that the robed figure took with a gloved hand, opening it and discarding of the pouch by tossing it into the nearest nano disposal unit. He opened the message and handed it back.

"Yes, I have what he wants. You can deliver it. But I would like her to stay."

He pointed at Azumi while giving Retractable a small container.

"Well, she doesn't stay bubba. She leaves with me. Is that a problem?"

The robed figure seemed to consider for a second before turning and leaving. Retractable pocketed the container and turned to Azumi.

"Let's beat this joint, we did what we had to babe. Sushi in Odia?"

Azumi smiled at him and nodded.

"Sushi sounds delicious. And may I suggest a trader or two for desert?"

Retractable grinned as they started walking to the launch bay.

"You've read my mind babe. A course of sushi and traders is just what we need."

## 28. New tasks

The assault force assembled in a non-descript room in Remley Orbital. The kit used for the mission had previously been stashed in a common carbonic roid in a Latos minefield, and only the tired look on all and a slight limp on one of the members gave away that they had just returned from Dau K-10. The chitchat was kept to a minimum, most just wanted to go sleep. A plethora of folded robes and shadows entered the room; their elusive commander had arrived. Known to most of known space as Ahriman, commander of KAOS, the crew knew better than that. To them he was Master Inquisitor Ahriman. Each and every one of them owed their life, sanity or more to him, either by his personal intervention or by present team members. He moved up to the front of the room and removed his hood, leaving the flowing robes. A bald head completely covered in tattoos with piercing eyes that seemed to glow on top of a hawkish nose that was underlined by a well-trimmed beard.

"We have succeeded in two out of three objectives, and for this our employer has paid his fee as was agreed upon. Furthermore we have paid our debts and KAOS is now again completely without ties to anyone be it person or guild. To each of your accounts I have entered 5 million credits, and put the same amount in the collective account. Before we take on a new assignment, I have a task that I need you to fulfil for me. For this I have enrolled a new team member, Temmin Shard. Pay attention, we need to move swiftly."

###

Naoko almost jumped through the roof when the hand touched her shoulder ever so lightly, her pulse briefly accelerating to above 200.

"Relax Naoko. You need to take a break."

She looked up at a very concerned looking Surbius.

"Sir, I am fine. I almost have it now, the data is converging around this single piece of information..."

"I am sure you are Naoko, and I have no doubt in my mind that you will eventually find it. But I am telling you hat now is not the time. You have been at it for more than a full day."

He glanced at the empty stimulant containers that were in the waste bin next to her desk.

"But we need to nail these murderers Sir. And I am almost there."

"I am sure Naoko. But I need you to go and get some rest now before you collapse here. You did so very very well, and I need your skills up at full in eight hours. Now go rest, I have NP working on it as well."

"But Sir I....Yes Sir."

The act of taking responsibility of her shoulders had the effect of all the fatigue hitting her like a twenty-pound sledgehammer. She yawned and felt dizzy and had to rest one hand on the table when she stood.

"I have arranged an escort for you Naoko."

She looked up at Surbius all blurry eyed and then to the other person behind.

"Hi Ms Naoko, it is me Hortan. Let me take you to your cubicle."

Surbius looked at Naoko and then at Hortan.

"You better be ready to carry her Hort, I am not sure she is going to last the whole way."

Hortan nodded and lifted the surprisingly light young woman up in his arms.

"Let's go get you some sleep Ms Naoko."

She didn't hear him; she was already sleeping, her arms around his neck and head buried on his shoulder.

###

NP had left only slept for a couple of hours; his reactivated brain-plant flushed the fatigue from his system as fast as his tired brain could make it. The counterattack or counter probe had found some very nice details about his attacker, details that Naoko until now had been very efficient in tracking. Apparently the attack had not taken place from Remley as first thought, but from Dau Senate instead. The security around that particular station was awesome, and he really had to probe gently so as not to draw attention to himself. He used a couple of seconds to check up on the status of his TGFT friends in hospital, and seeing they were stable he refocused on his task. He would get the assholes that had done this, and he would preserve a special place in his own personal vengeful hell for the person that had attacked him directly.

###

Buzz had received the summons from Zathras and ran as fast as his legs could carry him. Arriving in the Skunk Works, he saw Moda and Zath sit in their reclining chairs slowly sipping beers. He slowed to a walk and smiled and waved to the pair. Zathras looked at Buzz and indicated the third chair with a facial expression that fitted best in a morgue. Moda put an open Dark Lady in

front of him and lifted his own beer in greeting. Buzz took the beer and waved it in return before drinking deep from the bottle; it would be impolite not to.

"So Zath, you had news for me?"

"This one calls you here to say that nothing more can now be done whirr, click"

Buzz looked at Zathras and slowly it dawned upon him what he just said.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me? Are you telling me that these, these abominations cannot be removed?" Buzz rose and looked down at his chest.

"We shall repeat, we have done what we can, we can do nothing more brr."

Buzz was about to blow a fuse and stalk out of there when Moda put a calming hand forward.

"Rest easy buddy, what Zath is trying to say is that he has now dosed you and all we can do is wait and see."

Buzz looked at Moda without comprehension, until he followed Moda's gaze and looked at his beer.

"You put it in the beer?"

"Well, there may be some side effects that you may or may not be interested in knowing, so we just dosed it and let you drink."

"Side effects?"

"Let's see what happens, shall we? They are maybes, not for sures. Oh, and you may want to find a toilet soon. Real soon."

Buzz allowed Moda to lead him out of the hangar and close the door with the happy skunk painting. He stood for a couple of seconds feeling something strange happening to his stomach. A gurgling, then a protracted movement followed by another gurgling. Stomach cramps hit him like a Samo laden moth XC on turbo for eighteen days, and he felt a serious, nay a life or death need to empty his bowels. He ran/crawled/staggered to the nearest toilet.

###

The capsule that Retractable brought back from Remley contained precisely what yoda had wanted for such a long time. His implants had originally been installed by the Serco department of R&D as part of a test of how much hardware could be cramped into a single person. They had nearly killed yoda as well as their other test subjects, but some dark force had kept it's malicious hand over him and spared him alone. That was a long time ago and yoda had

since then removed himself from the Serco military, indeed anything Serco. Everything had worked fine until last year when one of his implants stopped working, cascading to the other implants as well until only his most essential ones functioned. Cause of failure? Simple lack of power. He needed to change his batteries. It had taken him quite some time to figure out where he could obtain a new power source, and even more to find out how to liberate one from the depths of Serco Necrose Thought Police. He had trawled for information and come up with this Ahriman character that could obtain one for a favour. Nuff said, he had scanned the power source several times, it came out clean. He inserted it into his power cradle and started to turn his systems on. Oh sweet merciful crap, it felt SO good to be fully himself again. He actually smiled and started humming an old Serco military song from the academy.

Swag Man: Boss, somebody you wanna meet is in the Sedina/Latos wormhole

->Swag Man: And just who might that be?

Swag Man: Gavan Ardgall. He seems mightily interested in talking to you

Yoda smiled even more. How good was this day going to get?

## 29. Out on a limb

Waldoze padded Fluffy on the shoulder and got up to leave. He had visited Neagoth and Vardonx as well, bringing some illicit Helio Mists and bad company. The two girls from The Priggly Pear had achieved complete success with the show, and even Neagoth who was blinded while waiting for the implants had enjoyed himself. Waldoze ushered the two scantily clad and immensely giggling women out of the hospital ward and towards the dock area. Waldoze took the girls down through the large commercial plaza; that was the reward he had promised them for doing a show so far away. It was just like good old days, one giggling beauty on each arm. He nodded to Rowan, Ifor and Pasquel who were standing at a coffee stand, enjoying something hot and powerful. He strutted over towards them full of attitude, living life to the maximum. Well, not quite.

"Waldoze! Honeybunny!"

Something was not like good old day, he had forgotten Melody.

"What are you doing with those two, those..tramps?"

Waldoze looked over to the redheaded beauty that was standing opposite the plaza, a tiny armless summer dress matching perfectly to the small bag with an even tinier dog inside the bag. Her two equally picture perfect friends were staring at Waldoze like he was a paedophile or worse. Waldoze looked at himself and at the two dancing girls and smiled at the crazy coincidence. For once, just this once, he was actually innocent.

"Dear, it is not what it looks like. These girls are from The Priggly Pear, I brought them here to perform for Fluffy, Neagoth and Vardonx."

"And what does that make you, a pimp?"

The two friends nodded righteously at Melody and stared back at Waldoze. He was now officially worse than a paedophile pimp.

"No dear, it is nothing of the sort. I was merely offering my special transport services, they never had to pay at all."

This seemed to enrage the redhead even more, and she looked around for something to throw, found some vegetables and tossed them at Waldoze.

"Honey, honey what did I do?" Waldoze was ducking and weaving to avoid getting hit with some success.

Melody turned, her friends turning with her and stomped out of the plaza. Waldoze stood with his hands out from his sides, a surprised look on his face. He turned to Ifor and Pasquel who were laughing their heads off.

"What did I do?"

Rowan walked over to Waldoze.

"Perhaps the Grove can help? Let me escort these pretty young women back home. May I suggest that you run after your female companion and may I also suggest flowers and jewellery? In massive amounts?"

Waldoze looked at Rowan without comprehension until Rowan nodded at the direction Melody with friends had left. Waldoze left the two girls and ran after her.

"Sisters, may I suggest an evening in the company of The Grove? We have the best stimulants in known space."

He took a girl on each arm and walked off with them towards the launch bay, the trio merrily chatting and giggling all the way.

###

Ifor looked after the running Waldoze and laughed along Pasquel. It took them about three minutes to stop laughing, and in the end Pasquel had to wipe a tear away from his eye. He slowly raised the Helio Toddy to his lips and sipped slowly while smiling. Ifor waited until he had some of the liquid in his mouth.

"Well, even the biggest ship can be brought down by the smallest weapon it seems. Guess that is what they are talking about when they say that someone is getting Neut-ered"

Lambin sputtered his Toddy all over himself and joined Ifor in laughing at Waldoze's expense. This time they laughed even more.

###

Hortan made sure that Naoko reached her bed safely. Once inside, he called her sister to come and tug her in properly. It would be frightfully indecent of him if he were to do something like that. He waited outside for Miharu to arrive.

"Ms. Miharu, I am sorry to inconvenience you so, but your sister needs tucking in. She has been working for some 35 hours straight."

Miharu walked over to Hortan, put her hands on his shoulders, stood on her toe tips and gave him a light kiss on the cheek.

"You are a darling Hort. I wish there were more like you."

With that, she walked into her sister's cabin and closed the door. Hortan never knew what hit him, but immediately after he felt the effects. He felt a sudden urge to buy luxuries, chocolates, fashion clothes and gemstones and spread said items across Sedina B-8 with a certain person in the sector. He sent a query and got an order placed, one moth full. He practically ran to his quarters and changed to a flight suit. She should be up and patrolling at this hour.

###

Buzz was in pain, major pain. He had been on the toilet non-stop for more than three hours right now, and there were no letting it up. When he was almost finished and thought it was over, his stomach cramped and growled again, explosively voiding his bowels. But no amount of pain could remove the smile on his face as he saw the breasts become smaller and smaller, eventually hitting the size that was just about right for a grown male of his age.

After five hours of non-stop toilet sitting with several in-between flushes, he finished and tried to stand. No such luck, his legs were absolutely bloodless and could not sustain his weight. He hit the floor hard and crashed the door open, falling out into the corridor while laughing hard. Nobody saw him crawl away laughing all the way, but he couldn't have cared less. The boobs were gone, he was himself again.

###

The battered Vult made a controlled crash into the docking cradle, quite an amazing feat considering that only the port side thrusters worked, and those only at about ten percent. The main engine was fluttering and leaking power, catching fire as it docked in the atmosphere of the station. A non-conducting flame retardant dosed the ship, covering it in a fine sheet of white and smothering the fire. The chainglass cockpit opened and a German Shepherd jumped out followed by a man with a huge fierce beard and shining eyes, his body covered by a filthy flight suit. The small green man that had waited for ten minutes, incidentally the longest ten minutes of the dockhands present, walked over towards the man and greeted the dog that came running.

"Hi boy."

He looked up at the man and smiled broadly.

"Gav, you look like shit. And I am not just saying it to strike up conversation. You really look like shit."

"Good to see you too yoda. I need some of my stuff, a place for some days, and I need for our guilds to do something together."

"Our guilds? SYN is hardly your guild anymore."

"Oh I think it is yoda, I think it is. They just don't know it yet."

Yoda chuckled and showed the way into the station. Yeah, the day just got even better.

### **30. Alliances**

The liberated Helio Mists balmed Gavan's parched throat and he relaxed a smidgeon more than before.

"This is some good stuff you have here yoda."

The little man grunted in agreement. He never drank himself, the cybernetic implants had removed his sense of smell and taste. Well, to put it correctly it had changed the way that smell and taste was used. Technically yoda could taste the difference between more than 200 different explosives and smell the fear hormones in his prey.

Gavan had dressed in a clean flight suit, had a shave and was looking his old self. Maybe a bit leaner, a bit more haggard looking; a bit more dangerous. The dog was lying at his masters feet, the ears moving and pointing towards the different sounds in yoda's room, its eyes fixed on the aquarium that yoda was attending to. Or maybe the dog could smell the large piece of prime beef that yoda fed to the Piranha in the tank. The slab of real meat was quickly gobbled up and yoda turned around and faced Gavan.

"So a complete embargo of UIT, slash their pilot inside their own protected territory and neuter the worthless rent-a-cops. Push the free traders out of grey and UIT?"

"Yep, that's the idea."

"Do you have any idea how much disruption you would cause in UIT space, how many people would be affected, how much Grey would suffer? And that is not even mentioning the trade to Serco and Itani space, which would shut down as well. I mean, we would piss everyone off seriously."

Gavan took another swallow and nodded.

"Sure, what the hell. It's not like we have anything else to do. Besides, your granny would be bursting with pride."

Gavan put the glass down.

"That is not what this is about yoda. This is about getting to those that exploit the little man, the ones that thrive off the misery of everyday hardship. The ones that carelessly would kill of a planetary population and demolish the planet for nothing more than filling their own pockets."

"Bravo, I like it. I should have taped it for posterity. A bit of that dude Che something in it."

Gavan half rose in anger, he would not be mocked like that. The dog sensing the sudden hostility as well lifted its head and stared at yoda.

"Don't get your panties in a knot there. You know that doesn't work on me. I was plying the trade lanes pirating when your granny herself, bless her sweet memory, was in diapers. So you just stay in that seat and calm yourself down. Jeez, what the hell is wrong with you kids today?"

Yoda stared at Gavan until he sat down again, his expression full of impotent rage and ignominy.

"Damn yoda, they tried to kill my girl to get to me!"

"Is she safe?" Gav nodded. "Do you know who did it?"

"No, but I am looking into it. I know who is responsible though, and that is who I am trying to hit back now."

"Right, okay. I expect we'll rise a decent profit from this anyway so I can't see why not. But we do it for as long as CLM pleases, and for our own sake. Any time we feel that it is no longer in our interest, we pull out. That is the deal."

Gavan rose and walked over to yoda extending his hand.

"Deal. I knew I could count on you."

"Right."

###

The strike plan was a simple one and as such it had probably the best chances of succeeding. The assembled KAOS force entered Latos O-12 inbound for Sedina, four heavy fighters, three light fighters and two pursuit ships. Ahriman himself was flying in the front, his blue and yellow EC-107 leading the lights. It would be an in-snatch-and-out mission, their speciality. The guild was actually busy, it had already been asked to undertake another mission. They had one agent that was deep undercover in Divinia on a most secret mission for their former employer, but him aside they were all ready. Well, once this business had been taken care of.

###

NP leant back and folded his hands behind his head. This was it, the last barrier before the unknown assailant. He had crossed so many boundaries, broken so many laws and regulations, misused so many accounts that there was no way he could stop now. Something held him back, a sense of.....loneliness was probably the right feeling. Who would he share his triumph with? Who could he tell of all these different things he had done to get to the

man that was responsible for all this? He needed to share this with someone he trusted completely. He punched a number, not really expecting an answer. A drowsy voice on the other side answered.

###

John was sitting in his room, feet on his table, slowly swirling a White Russian in his glass, looking at old holos. Mostly pictures from when Waldoze still lived in the double bachelor's room, one or two of pretty girls and some that he really should have had removed a long time ago. Low blues music was playing, fitting with the mood. A low rasp was at the door, picking up to a real knock when John didn't answer right away. He got up, looked down at himself and decided that only wearing a pair of almost closed jeans was good enough and opened. Fortunately it wasn't girl scouts on the other side or he would have been fined immensely, not to mention haunted forever. Instead a large man with bushy eyebrows, deep set eyes and a large moustache that would look good on a walrus filled the corridor.

"What up Dozer?"

"Need a place."

"You got the bad bed."

"Okay, got beer?"

"Yeah, and pizza from yesterday in the fridge."

Dozer walked in and tossed his clothes on the floor among John's, grabbed a beer from the fridge along with a piece of cold pizza, crashed on the sofa and took one of the game controllers for the screen. John crashed next to him and took the other controller. And that is how Dozer moved in with John again after being dumped badly by Melody. Somewhere a trio of girls were crying and discussing what a pig he was, but Dozer was actually rather pleased to be with his buddy again.

### 31. Activate

The stomach cramps had finally given in and Buzz was in an extremely good mood, cramming down pancake upon pancake as fast as they could make them in Soggy's Pancakes and Waffles house. Still, Gramps approached him warily as the bearer of bad news. Buzz smiled a toothy and pancakie smile at him.

"Mwhlo Gramps."

"Hi Buzz, how are the pancakes?"

Buzz didn't answer but merely gave a thumbs-up in reply before attacking a new one like a cash strapped pirate attacking a moth XC. Gramps sat down next to him and ordered coffee, extra black and caffeine enriched. He would supply the shot of Mists from his hip flask, half and half the way he liked it.

"Buzz, I need you to do something for me."

"Shure, chomp chomp, whatever I can do to help."

Gramps cringed, waited a bit while the coffee was put on the table, remembered to smile at the waitress as she left before spiking it. He tasted it, ah Verasi Blue, and perfectly roasted. Buzz had finished his pancakes and was slowly wiping his mouth, his appearance somewhat puzzled. Gramps decided that now was a good time as ever.

"I need you to go apologise to the dock hand that you shot in the knee, and do it publicly. Then he dumps all charges."

Gramps quickly lifted his cup and sipped the elixir, as good an excuse as any to avoid Buzz's glare.

"Sure, I mean it would only be appropriate. After all, I did shoot him, right?"

Gramps swallowed slowly, surely this was too easy.

"So, shall we go?"

"Ehm, right, sure, let me finish this."

###

NP hit enter, and the programme started to crack down the last barrier of his opponent. There, a series of 0's and 1's that held the information he needed. He looked at his companion and entered the data into his database as a query. A name popped up, and NP looked in surprise at it. Now there was a person he

didn't expect. He exchanged a shocked look with his partner, and sent the information to Surbius and Miexon. This was...well interesting.

Now he had the original name of their attacker he could make his own attack on the person that had raped his mind. No longer would he have to be subtle, now he could attack with everything he had. He made a package and sent it forth.

###

Tokash Oricu was nervous. He had checked and double checked the feed cables to his heavy gatling canon, he had run preliminary target packages on it, he had co-ordinated a battle plan with the pilot, everything checked out. Still, he was always nervous when the heavy moth he was a gunner on was crossing the Latos/Sedina wormhole, the single most pirate infested transit point in space. This was his nineteenth crossing, and after the next one his contract was over. Twenty runs, and the bonus of 35.000 credits would allow him to marry Tirina. The moth transited the space anomaly, the usual five seconds of dead time passing too slowly.

"Tok, multiple bogeys. Lead has been destroyed. Quadrant 4-2 distance 283 metres. Single fighter, Centurion."

Tokash turned his gatling towards the centurion and started hosing the sky with plasma bolts. His actions were rewarded with a stream of blue, accelerated positrons and green neutrons that tore xithricite armour plating off like a polar bear through a cardboard building. He tried to track the centurion as it spun and twisted, gave it the lead he knew that type of ship needed to have to be hit, and depressed the firing stud. The ship exploded, but unfortunately for Tokash, it was his ship. The other centurion, bright pink in colour had arrived from the belly side and torn all the armour away before hitting the power cells and rupturing the ship. The twin life support bubbles slowly spun as they were exited from the ship, carrying the pilot and gunner. Retractable ignored them as he scanned the cargo. 120 gyroscopes, valued at 191 credits a pop.

"What a crap load Az, these aren't even worth the effort of transporting them."

"Nah, but at least we got some kills."

They flew back to over-watch with Swag Man and Tramshed, and kept an eye out for the XX salvage service that would be here shortly to pick up the rescue bubbles. They were not going to kill those ships, but they were going to make sure that all the pilots and gunners were taken back. They were after all pirates second, but pilots first.

The wormhole lit up like a candle once more, indicating multiple inbound ships. The pirates got ready to intercept the convoy and destroy it, but the ships that

arrived were all combat ships, all with the label [KAOS]. The pirates relaxed slightly, KAOS were not friends, but not exactly enemies either.

Ahriman opened a radio link to local space.

"We have come for the pilot named Azumi. Come peacefully and nobody gets hurt."

The CLM members s one turned their engines to full power and started evasive patterns.

"I told you before asshole, it is not gonna happen."

Retractile fired a long string of positrons and neutrons at the EC-107 carrying the commander of KAOS, impacting and reducing the armour to 30%. And with that, the furball was started.

###

Hortan dropped into his command seat, checking everything was in place as it should be. He counted out his pills and dry-swallowed them, taking two extra happy pills. He checked the cargo, yep he was sure this was what was on the most wanted list of Dau Woman's Weekly, and in copious amounts. He touched his magic furry dices that were suspended from the manual ejection handle. He checked the EAPRS and ensured that its control lamp glowed a calm green. He saw the note blink on his screen and saw that it was from Moda. Probably another fine tune to some system or other. It could wait, he was in a hurry. He ignored the message. The usual fluttering in his stomach had arrived, but he felt good with them right now. Actually he felt very good with everything right now. After the drop, he would go to Daltas Hold and find that shop that sold the extremely rare John Eldritch action figure where he stands with a blaster in each hand a woman at his feet looking adoringly at him, even though it was expensive. And then he would ask Ms. Chi for pancakes at Soggy's. Yeah, and apply for council in TGFT. Nothing in the World he couldn't handle now!

He was ejected from the station and immediately boosted at max. speed towards the 3k mark. Why was this ship so slow?

## 32. Furball

Swag Man turned his Vult III towards the Centaur that carried the tag "Temmin Shard", unleashing neuts in a long burst, scoring a pattern of damage across the ship. He rolled out and re-engaged, going in for the kill. He missed the twin lightning mines that Temmin had dropped, and spun directly into the left of them, getting his own ship smashed in return. Swag Man cursed hard and turboed out of the kill zone. He was now at 8%, and he had a Warthog approaching fast. Knowing that the likely loadout was going to be flares and turret, he spun his ships while dodging left and down, firing neuts like they were free. Scoring a pattern of hits across the ship, he disengaged as fast as he could, ready for another fly-by.

Tramshed in the meantime had engaged one of the two proms with his own Warthog, easily outmanoeuvring the larger ship and peppering it with gatling bolts. Dodge-spinning his own ship, he managed to avoid his opponents flares and turret, only slightly grazing his own armour as the larger ship exploded. He twisted for a new target and found William Cutting in a Valkyrie approaching fast.

Retractile continued to chase the EC-107, dodging several flares and energy shots, but not landing any hits of his own. Azumi spun her own rev c in an aggressive flight pattern above his, attempting to take out the twin vultures that pumped shots after her wingman. Retractable opened a radio link to Az.

"Seven"

With that, he turned the reverse thruster to full on, spun toward four o'clock, turboing straight up under one of the vultures and fired directly at the winglets. The Vulture pilot had anticipated this move and so turned and twisted to avoid getting hit, alas directly into the stream of positrons from Azumi's rev c, turning the ship into an expanding ball of fire.

"Right on Az, next one twelve."

He turboed towards the EC again, and then turned and did an Immelman. Well, not quite, since he moved sideways at the same time and an Immelman needs atmosphere and wings and a lot of things that the rev c wasn't able to provide, but close enough. Azumi had at the same time boosted down and turned her ship, pointing the deadly end at the second vulture that was now forced to choose. He chose to stay on his previous target and so continued for Azumi. By doing that presented his top to Retractable who tore the armour plating off and destroyed the light fighter.

"All Right!"

They turned the attention once more to the EC that was turning up towards the Centaur. A Warthog was trying to avoid the hits from the Vult III, but took

most of it head on. Reduced to almost no armour, it twisted and tried to avoid more damage by hiding behind the Centaur, but it was too little too late. The last stream of neutrons tore through the medium fighter, exploding it and scattering Swag Man with debris. 3% armour left now. He turned and tried to bear once more on the Centaur that dropped more lightning mines but in the process showed the belly to the oncoming EC. A flash of positrons and Swag Man's pod was violently ejected from the ensuing explosion.

Tramshed and William Cutting were dancing around each other, hardly scoring any hits when the second Prometheus sent a pair of flares up into his belly armour, spinning his Warthog and enabling William Cutting to slash his armour to 12%. Disengaging, he called for help.

The odds were now more even, with the CLM pilot flying two rev c's and one damaged Warthog, and KAOS flying a prom, a valk, a cent and a 107. Tramshed growled,

"That valk is mine, cover me."

He engaged his turbo and got ready for evasive action. Retractable and Azumi engaged the centaur and prom respectively. Tramshed dodged to the right, and straight into the flank of the valk. Aligning, he stitched a string of holes into the thick xith armour around the left side weapon pod. Twisting and rolling, he managed to outspin the valk and drew a targeting solution once more. More damage wrought to the valk, once more twisting and turning, but this time William was ready for him. With a cry of "Fuck me", Tramshed took a flare shot head on, exploding his ship and ejecting his life support pod.

Retractable moved towards the centaur that kept on dropping mines. Like a dancer, he twisted, ducked and weaved in and out of the radius of the mines while trying to get an opportunity to shoot. There, at 487 metres, very long range for his weapons, he fired a long stream of neutrons and positrons. Scoring multiple hits, Retractable smiled as Temmin started doing evasive manoeuvres, a fatal mistake. Retractable boosted close and unleashed everything in a slow roll strafe, hitting with every shot, and unfortunately missing the mine that Temmin dropped as his ship exploded. The entire front of Retractable's ship fused solid as the extreme voltages of the lightning mine savaged his ship, dropping him to 0% in armour, but by some miracle not exploding it. His weapons were slag however, now he was reduced to flying an unarmed rocket. He moved out and away from the expanding cloud of debris and looked back at the fight.

Azumi had dropped on the prom, evading the first volley of flares and managing to get away from the lethal cone of the advanced gauss turret. She spun her ship for all it was worth while pumping accelerated protons into the side of the prom to little effect. The ship was so massively armoured that even six direct hits failed to make a colour change in her damage scheme. She kept on twisting, this was as much for survival as for sheer joy of killing. Her ship

was rocked upwards by a flare shot, delivered by the valk that had killed Trammie, and she appeared once more in the lethal cone of the AGT. Taking three quick hits, she spun out and placed the prom between her and the valk. Three more shots and the armour was in the red. The valk pilot tried to squeeze a flare in between the prom and Azumi, but managed to miscalculate and hit the prom dropping its armour even further. Azumi sent a string of shots into the doomed ship and shouted with joy as it exploded.

"Az, run. They are two and you are hurt bad. It is you they want."

Azumi reacted to Retractiles warning with look on her armour status, 21%, not enough to a valk that was halfway there and a 107 at 30%. She started boosting out for the safety of the 3k mark.

###

Surbius cursed inwardly, he would never have guessed that someone this high in UIT would do such an attack on a friendly guild, but the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. After all, the killing of the markets was nothing if not regular trade war, and this was something that TGFT could counter. As far as NP had been able to see, there was no linkage between the Senator and the attack to extricate Asteroth. Which meant that it was probably KAOS acting on its own. He put down a note to classify KAOS as a terrorist organisation, KOS with TGFT and its allies. Surbius wondered how he could get back to the Senator without showing that TGFT knew his dirty secret. Maybe Miexon or NP had an idea.

###

Slowly he managed to align the moth towards the wormhole while the fast charge battery trickled power into the jump core. Aligned and at 250 power he initiated the turbo switch and thundered towards the Latos/Sedina wormhole. His auto jump switch engaged and fed the entire content of the battery into the jump engines that surged and propelled the 47 ton ship through the unreal of the wormhole and exited him to Sedina in a shower of Tachyons. Hortan had arrived in sector B-8. And in the middle of the remains of a fight.

### 33. Under Cover

Chi had received the mission from NP. An undercover mission with 00 privileges and under no circumstances was she to leave traces back to PA or TGFT. She packed her kit and dressed in a non-descript blue jump utility suit and walked down to the launch bay ready for the next shuttle to Dau Senate. This was going to be a challenge, but also very fun. She checked in under the name of Paltor Chissen, the ID being one of her get-aways if she ever messed up.

###

William Cutting kept on boosting towards Azumi, never quite reaching her, but keeping the distance so small that if she were to slow for a jump, she would be shot to bits. Ahriman turned to the bright yellow moth that had just entered through the wormhole and boosted over to the ship. He quickly and expertly shot a string of positrons into the ship, forcing it to slow.

"Azumi, I shall kill this trader if you do not move along peacefully."

Azumi knew that all of the traders in TGFT were covered under the Automated Pilot Recovery System, APRS, and as such the worst that would happen for Hortan was the loss of his ship, which wasn't supposed to be here in the first place, and a good long sleep. She decided to call Ahriman's bluff.

"Go ahead swine, he is covered."

Ahriman complied and sent a torrent of fire into the mining vessel, resulting in a single strange looking life support unit being ejected to one side and the ship exploding around the armoured cargo hold, scattering the precious content all over space. He immediately boosted after the life support pod that accelerated slowly toward the 3k mark, matching speed with it easily.

"Lets try again, turn back and I won't kill the trader."

Azumi had seen with horror how the APRS on Hortan's ship had malfunctioned and how the escape pod that was an integral part of all ships had instead activated and by launching violently was protecting its valuable human cargo. She knew what it would do, it would slowly run towards the jump point and jump to the nearest station unless scooped up by a ship... or killed by an unscrupulous person like Ahriman. The pod was slowly turning, something leaking out of it, some fluid or such. She slowly turned her ship around and started twisting and dodging to avoid the flare shot she knew was coming from the valk.

"Let him go you bastard."

She moved towards the valk at 70 m/s, and at the optimum firing distance for the flares, she activated her turbo instead of dodging, hoping to get under the arming envelope. The gamble paid off, only a single neut hit her ship sending it to 14% armour. As she came to ten metres from the valk, she activated her belly boosters at maximum for half a second and started turning her ship ass over head. The top of the valk appeared and she poured positrons in a double pattern across the top of the valk, one of the shots penetrating to the power coupler and exploding the ship. Her own small ship was rocked by the explosion that was large enough to further reduce her armour. She was now at 3% effective armour and Ahriman was closing fast. She resumed her avoidance pattern, dodging, spinning and boosting in all directions seemingly without pattern. She could not afford getting hit once. Ahriman was equally a very good pilot, and for about twenty seconds the two ships exchanged shots with none of them landing hits. Azumi noted that Ahriman always dodged down after a left dodge, and so she waited for the next left and put a torrent of positrons under his ship at that time. Hits, reducing Ahriman to 7% armour, effectively in the one shot to kill range like herself. She smiled, she had him now, he once more dodged left, and she steadied her fighter and unleashed under the EC expecting the victorious blast. Ahriman had anticipated this and lured her into a trap. The millisecond she steadied her ship, he dodged up and managed to glance her ship with a single dose of positron fire. Her ship ejected the life support pod and duly exploded, the damage finally ending its proud life.

Ahriman aligned his ship toward the pod and opened his cargo bay. He was going to get his cargo even if it had been expensive. He engaged the turbo to close the 780 metres that the pod had moved from the burning wreck.

###

Captain Burn was slowly and methodically sifting through the data logs of the attack he had orchestrated on PA, TGFT and TPG. As far as he could see, nothing had gone wrong, all his programmes had done what they were supposed to, even the data lock he had thrown on NP's headware. He really couldn't blame himself for not anticipating how paranoid his target had been, or how skilled the tracking person in TGFT had been either. Now he merely had to take these factors into account if he was to make another attack another time. Which was rather likely considering the nature of his guild's work. He noted a small dissonance in the data around the time that the reset occurred, what you could call a speed bump. He took the data and unfolded it, how had this been achieved? He had taken his precautions, the programme he used for these tasks was on a separate system, and if anything violent were to happen here, the system semiconscious AI would just shut it and him down. After that the AI would restart his own internal headware after un-jacking him manually from the separate system allowing him to choose to online the headware or not. It was fool proof. Interesting, the bump unfolded to a very complex search algorithm that had been sent from TGFT HQ. He would see if it could be used for his own purposes and maybe shove it up their backsides.

###

The semi-self aware AI attack programme that NP had sent forth did not care about bumps in the data. It looked specifically for software to hardware integration interfaces and located these while noting their function. After three milliseconds, the AI had noted all these and started infesting them. The AI was best likened to a fungus, with mycelia spreading along opportune venues and maturing where the parameters were fulfilled. Once it had infiltrated a location completely, it took over all processing power and used it for further mutation of the data mycelia and spread it along all connections the location had. The central node cut all connection with the infestation and settled in to watch for its real target. The digital fungal infestation continued to spread and blossom in every interface, data mycelia from different locations trying to infest each other with a resulting infiltration war collapsing the control points switching hardware off-line in the process. The central computing centre that Burn was the proud owner of, was failing rapidly.

###

Burn was alerted by his brainplant that the temperature of the main server cluster was uncomfortably hot, more that 19K. He connected to the main system and sent a query down to the coolant control. It came up empty. Strange, he sent a query down to the secondary unit, expecting it to be online if the primary had for some reason failed; no reply. He frowned and sent a wide-ranging query for systems readiness across the board. Half his critical systems and nearly all his non-criticals came up dead; something was blocking his queries and shutting the systems down. He cursed just like everything he did, slowly and methodically while working on a counter measure. He tried to subvert the data mycelia that had infested his subsystems, but managed to spread it even more, even crashing two of his life support systems. Crap, that had been a mistake. He was down to single systems across the board and needed some raw power now to flush the fungal infestation. He opened his brainplant connection to the main cluster. That was the last mistake he was going to do for a long time. Something large and bad with a multitude of long hairy legs, that went bump in the night swarmed into his brainplant. The last message he received before tottering into insanity on shaky legs was from the owner of the virus.

"We all float down here."

### **34. No F\*\*\*ing way**

The open dock bay was ready to take the rescue pod into the EC-107, the ample cargo space was empty save a large autodoc. Ahriman was satisfied, he was going to get what he came for, the female Itani born CLM pilot. He briefly considered taking some of the other pilots as well but decided against it. He needed that one and after her, he needed the twin sister too. Then he could carry the research done by the honourable Dr. Lecter even further. He was dead certain that he had the key to unlocking the mental powers that the Itani people by some accounts possessed. There, a mere 128 metres to go, he tapped the thruster slightly to align the ship perfectly. His radio crackled, the shock of an incoming signal enough to make Ahriman pull the joystick slightly and push him to the left.

"I told you scum, ain't no fucking way she is leaving with you."

Ahriman looked down at his radar and the cracked screen. Not getting the information he wanted he looked out of the viewport and saw a Centurion Rev C with a completely fused front that boosted directly towards his ship.

"Lady Serco, save me."

The rev c collided with the EC-107 at 225m/s slightly below the viewport of the hunter bus like a penetrator missile hitting a five metre thick brick wall. Both ships detonated in a common fireball that disintegrated the two ships, leaving no piece larger than could pass through a chicken-wire fence. The ejection pod that Retractable had engaged immediately prior to hitting the KAOS ship passed through the debris at full speed, effectively peppering the un-armoured rescue pod with what could best be likened to multiple large calibre shotgun shots. The pod started leaking air from several holes but continued its flight along the trajectory it had started on, the leaking air merely making it tumble randomly.

###

The rescue service in CLM HQ received a single hail and the officer on duty noted the location and status. He alerted the venerable Revenant Hospital ship and sent a report to the commander. Another hail, and then another. He frowned, he hadn't been asked to provide extensive service for today's shift, but the revenant should still be enough to handle up to eight pods. The screen started flashing in red and white, a pod had been launched and then breached. The pilot was in danger of asphyxiation within minutes. He pressed the alert button, launching a specially modified warthog Mk II towards the damaged pod. He just hoped they would be there in time. He alerted the commanding officer in the operational part of CLM, leant back and poured a cup of coffee. Nothing more he could do now anyway.

###

The warthog moved at maximum speed across Latos and moved through the wormhole to the scene of the battle. Quickly scanning for the location of the damaged pod, the pilot boosted at full power towards the last known location. There, moving along at a sedate pace, the damaged pod. The bay on the warthog opened and swallowed the pod. Inside the compartment was quickly re-pressurised and the medical officer opened the pod to get to the human cargo inside. In the meantime the warthog had started its acceleration towards CLM HQ again. The other pods would be recovered by the regular medical ship, all three glowed a steady green across the monitors. As the Warthog exited the wormhole to Latos, it sent an updated situation map to the revenant inbound along with vitals on the pilots.

The revenant entered Sedina and started picking up the CLM members. It only took about five minutes, long enough to get the first pilot out of her pod and check the vitals. She was healthy even if she was a bit pale. The autodoc injected her with a stimulant and she woke with a violent intake of air, like a drowning person that reached the surface. The autodoc moved on to the next pod. Azumi looked around and got up, moving across to the pilot of the revenant.

"Pilot, status on the CLM pods?"

"One is unknown, the emergency warthog has taken that one directly to CLM HQ. Possibility of vacuum trauma. Name, Retractable. The rest are collected and green."

Azumi swore, he had done this to protect her. She looked at the radar and came up blank, no other rescue ships were inbound.

"Pilot, you need to take that pod along as well."

She pointed, indicating Hortan's strange looking pod that was slowly leaking fluid.

"No can do Ma'am, I am only under contract to take CLM members."

Azumi looked at him as if he had just dropped from the moon. She leant over close.

"I see. Well, it was not a question. You will take him if you like those worthless pieces of meat you have dangling between your legs."

The large combat knife she always wore on her left thigh was now resting easily along the belly of the pilot, the engine's vibrations making it tap occasionally on his groin. The pilot started sweating heavily and turned the ship towards the damaged pod.

"I will report this you know."

"See if I care. You will not work for us again. We do NOT leave damaged pods in space to themselves. We are pirates, not murderers."

Not like KAOS, she thought. At least there was no pod containing Ahriman, so maybe Retractable had killed him.

The revenant scooped Hortan's leaking pod up and headed for CLM HQ.

###

Chi cleared the arrivals personnel without incident and moved to her safe house in the lower quarters of the station. She switched into something less comfortable that included a blonde wig and heavy make-up, and walked on her high heels up towards the senatorial quarters. She made sure that the data collection device in one high heel was switched on, and that the the other contained her small leech. The usual request that the senator had sent had been intercepted and re-routed by NP. The girls from Tanaka's escort service would not be working this particular senator tonight.

###

Dark, but not dark so you couldn't see. Dark in a way that you can't see directly at things. Only the peripheral vision was able to detect movement of..... of something. Sounds of metal scraping slowly across sheets of metal, clanking of chains, dripping of a liquid that sounded thicker than water, all of it coming from nowhere and ever present. A tingling sensation in the back of the neck, something is watching, something malevolent, ancient and dark. Every move associated with fear and uncertainty. A slow chant from unnaturally large beings present but not seen nor heard, merely felt in the bones, not on the skin; *ia ngai ygg ntain*. Only one solution to this continuing bombardment of sensory failure, one solution that would give meaning to the nightmare. Insanity.

NP noted the fungal virus take hold in his opponent's brainplant and knew that this particular foe would not surface anytime soon. He remembered when he had bought this piece of software from a small company that had tried to make a full immersion sim of a Lovecraftian story, the Haunter of the Dark. The sim had never been any good, too difficult to play and the fact that it was impossible to win made the company discard it shortly after the launch. NP had taken the game and fed it to a semi-cognient AI, creating a horror setting that was mind boggling in its complexity and no longer a game. He was very careful to keep it away from himself; even though he knew it was a sim, he was not sure he could withstand it. NP was no longer afraid of the dark, after all he knew what went bump in the night. He left the former adversary to his own lethal thoughts and focused on supporting Chi. This was going to be interesting.

### 35. The Senator

The decor would best be described as immensely garish, yet also completely without style. Everything was very expensive, but placed to show off their monetary value instead of adding to the rooms natural style that had apparently given up hope and crawled off into some corner to die in peace. Chi looked around in fake awe and exclaimed a round mouthed "Oh" at the monument to the man that lived here. The guards had allowed her to enter after running her through a metal detector and checking her miniscule handbag. They confiscated the small bottle of mace, just as she had expected. Her petite gold paillette strop dress, little girls smile, giggle and explanation that she had to take care of herself, being self-employed and all, had calmed the guards and they had led her through. They never checked the false bottom of her lipstick, the make-up box or even the handbag.

The Senator was polite enough. He offered champagne, imported directly from Sol II and a delicacy even Chi had not had for some time. She accepted and drank while eying the Senator over the top of the fizzy, smiling in response to his broad grin. He was not disappointed by the looks of her. Chi refrained from using her higher mental faculties; somehow she knew that the Senator had not asked for a girl to discuss the policies regarding CLM or the newest ships design. Instead she smiled, laughed and giggled a lot when he said things where such a response was expected; otherwise she just looked sufficiently impressed. After about an hour of mindless talk, the Senator got up and excused himself to the bathroom. To become ready as he said. Chi smiled and waited until he had closed the door before taking her lipstick from the purse. She moved so her body shielded the drinks from the hidden camera she had noticed in the ceiling light and dropped a single pill into the Senators drink. When he came out, wearing a robe and nothing else, she stood, lifted the glasses and drank the content of her own glass in one go, waiting for him to do the same. He did and tossed the glass away, the crash of crystal against marble making him grin widely. He opened his robes; it was time for business. She dragged him over to the bed and made him lie down on the belly. She told him to get comfortable and relax. She took the large tube of oil and started to spread it on his back. Within a minute he was asleep as planned, snoring slightly. Chi wiped her hands and pulled the sheets over him. Not because she was afraid he was getting cold, but because she really didn't want to look at him. She wondered for about half a second where NP had found the rape drug, but pushed it out of her mind; it had worked after all. She walked over to the camera in the ceiling and smiled up to it. If somebody was looking, she was toast. But the odds of the Senator allowing someone to view his escapades were minimal. He would be taping it for his own enjoyment.

Chi took her high heels off and opened the secret compartment in each. She opened a connection via her headware to NP, coded and scrambled.

"I am in position. Target is... well incapacitated is the best description. Am opening the leech and accessing his mains."

"Roger, I am standby with all systems. Let me know when you have access to the mains."

The voice in her head was soft and full of confidence. She chuckled, well he could be, he was in a cosy office in Nyrius and she was here inside a most secure location in UIT space. Finding the main frame in the room was a question of searching for the nearest holoscreen. A very large one was hidden behind a real painting on one wall. Chi moved the painting to get access and entered the leech.

"Engaged. Am waiting for your go."

"Roger, activating the system. Expect two or three minutes."

She walked over and helped herself to the last of the champagne. She walked over to the large paintings on the far wall and allowed herself to be impressed by the skill of the painter. She enjoyed the brief moment of peace that was so rare these days. She also missed the fights with John, but he had been so busy with that KAOS thing. Maybe he would have time when she came back to K-10. Her system chimed and she sighed. The calm was over and she walked over to her equipment and disconnected it. She placed it in the same containers that they had arrived in, took the glass and placed it in her handbag. She then left the room and walked out to the guards. She smiled at them, received her mace and was cheered on. She walked directly down to her safe house and disappeared from UIT security. Hours later a young black haired woman with a hideous scar named Silia Katrie jumped on the shuttle to K-10.

###

The warthog had docked and Retractable had been moved with all haste to the emergency reception room. Three surgeons were waiting for him. They immediately disconnected his comatose brain from the damaged body and set about to repair whatever they could. No use, the body was destroyed beyond repair and even with limb grafts it would fail catastrophically within minutes of disconnecting from the machines that circulated and oxygenated the blood. The doctor in charge looked up over his mask at the sad looking green man outside and shook his head. Yoda was used to violence and massive trauma, but it was fortunately rare that he was confronted with deaths. He nodded and turned to walk down to the other pilots. He was going to find out what had happened.

###

The hold slowly filled with a smell of very good whisky, a smell emanating from Hortan's ungainly looking rescue pod. The autodoc was perplexed as how to open the pod, but after a bit of human intervention the collected pirates managed to pry it open. Hortan was inside, safe and sound. The autodoc

injected a stimulant and came up without result. It injected him again and he slowly woke up. Swag man dropped to his knee and looked closer at the pool of liquid under Hortan's pod, sniffed a bit and then put his finger into the amber fluid. He tasted it slowly and smiled.

"Either this boy pisses Helio Mists, or he had a bottle in here that broke."

Tramshed started looking around the pod and found the small copper tube that slowly dripped.

"Found it, it is right here buddy."

He squatted behind the pod, put his cup under the tube and collected the liquid. Swag man moved over to him and waited for his turn, after all this was free Helio Mists.

###

The meeting in Dau K-10 was held in utmost secrecy. Only the highest ranking members of TGFT were present and after the meeting they were all sworn to secrecy. They only had one item unresolved, how to snatch the person. John and Waldoze thought of enrolling Hortan in the plan and thus it was agreed upon. As soon as he came home from his fool's errand they would contact him. Two days from now the mission would be initiated.

###

Buzz walked over to the dockhand as he was standing among his friends. He smiled and extended his hand. The dockhand, unsure what to do, shook the offered hand.

"I wish to express my sincere apologies."

The dockhand grinned and turned to his buddies.

"Yah, accepted man, don't think of it."

Buzz nodded to the workers and turned to Gramps, indicating with a nod of his head that they should leave. Gramps followed and waited until they were in the corridors again before talking to Buzz.

"I must say, a powerful show of restraint on your side Buzz. I am impressed."

"Yeah, well I didn't say what I was sorry for now did I?"

Gramps stopped and looked at the grinning Buzz.

"I guess he will develop a nasty skin rash within the next day or so. The only thing I am sorry for is that I won't be there to see it. Well, that and the fact that I didn't hit him in the head to start with."

Gramps shook his head slowly. Youth, he would never understand them. It didn't matter, his task was over.

### **36. ....is still a Rose**

Hortan opened his eyes and saw Azumi standing in front of him, a pair of black tears on her cheeks and a very serious expression on her face.

"Hrm, ehm Hi Ms Azumi."

He smiled, but stopped as she kept her serious looks.

"Hort, you have got to stop coming to Sedina with all those presents."

"But why can't I do that? I mean you are always so nice to me."

"They put you and me in danger. And you have to remember, I am a pirate and you are a pacifistic miner, hardly a perfect match."

"I see you as a beautiful flower Ms, not a a pirate."

Azumi laughed, that was not what she had expected.

"Right. I have been called a lot of things, but never a flower before."

Hortan blushed and looked down for some seconds before looking up and replying.

"Well my mum always said that a rose by any other name is still a rose."

Azumi stopped smiling and lifted one hand to push the strand of hair that was falling down over Hortan's forehead out of the way.

"Yeah, I guess. But this rose has thorns Hortan. Many thorns, and she lives in a place that is very deadly. So please stay away?"

He could see that she meant it for his protection as well as protection for herself and her mates.

"Guess so Ms Azumi. I better get on home. They must be looking for me by now."

Swag man stood and intercepted Hortan.

"I'll walk you, I have something I wanna discuss with you anyway."

Hortan wasn't entirely happy with that, but the pirate wouldn't let go of his sleeve. He steered him along towards the launch bay, without giving Hortan a chance to say good bye. Probably the best anyway.

###

NP sent the siphoned data to Miexon and Surbius. He had done his job and could once more go back to sifting the information streams of the nets. He leant back in his reclining chair and turned the brainplant to active. The information started flowing immediately with some interesting trends especially regarding the revival of the terrorist organisation SYN. He did not choose where the data took him, but somehow, subconsciously he was watching for what would happen when the Senator crashed and burned. He smiled, victory even old tastes sweet. He received a message. Opening it he smiled even more. This felt even better than victory.

###

Waldoze was shouting in rage.

"What the hell do you mean she sues me for half my belongings? How can she do that? I mean we only dated for three weeks and we were never ever married or anything? And dare I say it, she left me! She isn't getting a single credit from me, that is dead certain."

The lawyer from the well known lawyers firm "Lector, Lector and Shard" who had brought Waldoze the subpoena didn't flinch at all. As a matter of fact he studied Waldoze like a butcher would a piece of meat.

"She is entirely in her right as the papers you have just thrown so inefficiently to the floor would attest to. The law is very specific on this matter. Under the sub-charter 4, amendment 16-3d in the Valent civil code of law, a period of co-habitation for more than a week when it concerns a man and a woman, is either to be considered a lawful domestic partnership with all the normal rights of marriage or relationship between prostitute and pimp. In the latter case you will then admit to being a criminal with up to three years prison sentence and revocation of UIT citizenship."

"Ha, I am not a citizen of Valent, I am UIT through and through. So nyah!"

Waldoze pushed the two middle fingers extended towards the lawyer in a rather impolite gesture.

"We are quite aware of that Mr. Waldoze. However if you would care to read the relevant amendment through, you will see that if one part of the relationship is a Valent citizen, it pertains to both on the following jurisdictions: Valent, Axia and, need I say it? TPG. I'll see you in court Mr. Waldoze. Oh, and feel free to call our firm for a free offer on a defence."

The lawyer handed the stunned Waldoze his card, turned and walked away.

Waldoze slowly closed the door and stood for a minute before noting the guffawing from the sofa. John Eldritch was lying on his side laughing so hard that he had to hold his stomach and bend over.

"Knock it off man, this is serious."

That just made John laugh harder and louder, and after a little while Waldoze started laughing too.

"Guess I am fucked, eh hehe? Guess I'll better check with Gramps."

### **37. A note from our sponsors**

Hortan docked the battered Atlas he had purchased in Latos. The CLM markings had been painted over with some yellow spray paint, but the crew had still been wary about whoever jumped out. When the young man exited they sighed a breath of relief. He walked down to Moda's shop; he needed to tell him that the EAPRS had malfunctioned. The doors with the skunk in black and white were slightly ajar and fast paced music with lots of distortion, drums and a female vocalist who growled her way through the tune, poured out of the room like an intoxicating and welcoming balm for the ears. Okay, it was bloody loud speed metal, and Hortan liked it lots. Inside Moda was standing in front of a full size mirror playing air guitar and shaking his head up and down in tune with the drums. Hortan grinned and started nodding his own head in tune with the music until it stopped. Moda turned and grinned in response.

"Good ole Arch Enemy. Can't beat em. How did you like your new mod?"

"I am not sure if I have tried it. But I came to tell you that the EAPRS failed on me."

Moda had walked over to get a set of Dark Ladies and turned with one in each hand. He handed one to Hortan and sat in a chair motioning Hortan to do the same.

"Don't tell me you needed it."

"Well, I did. Ran into some of the KAOS dudes in Sedina and one of them blew my Ole Sloth Moth XXIV to high hell. I am now officially flying number XXV. But as I said, the EAPRS failed."

"Nope, it didn't. It was taken out prior to launch."

Moda drank deep of the bottle while Hortan looked to the floor and then up at Moda confused.

"But the EAPRS button was showing a clear green."

"Well, it was used for something else. Listen mate, you remember we talked about reworking your zero-g still?"

Hortan nodded and sipped from the bottle.

"Well, Zath and I succeeded, and decided to mount it on your ship. Unfortunately the inter-engine zero-G still went where the EAPRS was located, and so we had to remove it. I wrote you a note explaining all this, didn't you read it?"

Hortan blushed; well he had seen it but disregarded it in his hurry to launch. He shook his head.

"No, I didn't. Inexcusable I know."

"Pah, don't hate yourself, plenty of others to do that. We needed to test it and figured that you always go mining in Helios under guard, so you didn't need the EAPRS. Never mind, the still starts working when you turn the engines on and drips around three litres per hour. Naturally it is only a demonstration model, the real one will make ten times as much. And you can have an EAPRS as well since it will be integrated in the engines."

Hortan nodded slowly.

"Well, I probably won't need the EAPRS anyway. That was my last time to Sedina for a long long time."

Moda sensed the sadness in his voice, but felt that it wasn't the right time or place to fret him for it. They drank in silence until they were finished.

"Well Hort, make sure you tell me how it runs, okay? And I'll keep you informed when we have the full still online with the EAPRS. You take care now buddy."

Hortan nodded and left, leaving the door ajar once more letting the dark heavy music be a warning that Moda was working inside.

###

The holo screen was full with a picture of the rotating image outside Dau Senate, with a newsman in front of the picture about as natural looking as a thousand pound turd on a dinner table. His perfect face, teeth and skin colour was enhanced by the latest in fashion clothes from Verasi and his voice was modulated to give the viewer the impression that this was a trustworthy person. Naturally it didn't work on some people, like Surbius for instance. Still he watched for this special occasion.

"You are watching Daily Senate News on Channel five with Dork Rufus. Today's headlines are:

Senator Remor pleas not guilty to charges of embezzlement and corruption. The continuing attacks of SYN and CLM inside UIT space forces merchants to invent new tactics.

And finally, this year's Ms Dau has been found."

"The UIT Senate was earlier today contacted by the UIT internal tax department with a request to cancel the inherent immunity of Senator Remor, and after showing the evidence were granted permission to prosecute a case of embezzlement of funds set aside for refugees, and corruption. Rumours have it

that the Senator was involved in worse crimes. Senator Remor has as of three hours ago and immediately after losing his immunity, resigned his position as UIT Senator and left for Odia where he has been offered a high position in Corvus. He continues to claim that he was innocent and that he was framed, but refuses to release video from the security cameras inside of his apartment or any other evidence that supports his claim. If found guilty, the Senator faces up to 40 years of prison and exile after the sentence is served."

"The attacks from the pirate guild CLM and the terrorists from SYN has scared so many traders that many traders now choose not to fly alone. A trader we spoke to earlier today say that the only way to get valuable cargo across UIT space is to travel in large convoys with all the extra costs this entails. The Vipers have proven to be too few to contain the pirates and terrorists in grey space. This reporter wonders when UIT is going to deal with this menace once and for all."

"And on a more cheerful note, Ms Dau was crowned today in Dau Senate. But first, a note from our sponsors."

A group of indecently clad young women and men on a beach were having fun with a case of Nyrius Dew placed in the middle of them.

Surbius switched the holo off. He had seen what he wanted. The other charges that would be brought against the Senator were enough to put him behind bars forever, but the chances of getting him convicted were not big. And TGFT along with PA would have to give up some of their agent's covers. Not worth it really. The case that the UIT tax department was running was however a dead given. The amounts he had swindled over the years were tremendous and he had even kept a log on his system of every transaction. Which was what NP had supplied him and the tax department with. Vengeance is a dish best served cold.

### 38. Almost there

Gavan turned the holo off. Served him right the bastard. They had finally been forced to arrest one of their own in the cesspit of corruption called UIT Senate, and Gavan had a particular disliking for that Senator in particular. He was going to investigate further into the rumours surrounding the further accusations. Maybe yoda could find out, he always knew stuff like this.

###

Chi had dressed in her loose fitting training clothes, ready for combat training. When she had called John, he seemed as eager as her to practice and he had been able to find time later the same day. She arrived early, but he was already there punishing the combat dummy with savage kicks and punches. He had stripped to just a pair of loose fitting combat fatigues with the sweat running in small droplets down his chest. She stayed silent and observed his style. This was different, this was not Krav Maga or at least not Krav Maga as she had been taught. He landed a series of fast punches on the dummy, dodged the ineffective counter punches and kicked high towards the dummy's head, impacting with his heel on the dummy's jaw with bone shattering force before mock withdrawing and instead of moving away side kicked into the chest of the dummy, kicking it metres away from him. Chi knew that the dummy bot weighed in at around 300 kilo's, so this was no mean feat. He stayed his ground, once more getting his hands up and ready, one leg slight in front of the other. The bot regained its balance and once more moved forward, the pegs that made it for arms whirling menacingly. John took a half step back before pushing the leg forward again impacting on the front armour of the bot with a crack that was loud enough to make Chi flinch. It also broke the bot's carapace.

"Save some for me."

He whirled towards Chi and smiled when he saw who had interrupted him. He relaxed slightly enabling the robot to flail him across the back several times. He started defending himself from the multitude of hits.

"Stoi"

The bot stopped and withdrew to be recharged and repaired. He turned again towards Chi a grin on his face.

"Dammit Chi, you make me lose my focus."

"So much the better for me when we train."

She dropped her bag and took the sweatshirt off.

"That was something else you practised there. Very impressive John."

"It is an old form of combat, called Savate. Very savage, very efficient. Especially when you use it together with Krav Maga. Been a while Chi."

"Yeah, I missed doing this."

She swiped outwards at his leg while moving forward and elbowing his chest. If he had stayed that is. John rotated sideways opposite her leg thrust and while hooking her balance leg he pushed her hard making her fall to the ground. His knee landed next to her neck and he looked down at her.

"Points, me."

They got up and faced each other again. He feinted an attack with his left arm, and when she locked it in defence he dropped himself and her on the floor, letting her take the impact on her back. Her breath was violently forced out of her as John landed heavily on her. He turned his head and grinned wildly.

"Points, me."

Once more they got up and faced each other. Chi waited for his next move, and when he tried for a strike against her neck she moved in under his arms, left elbow first. She impacted on his sternum, forcing him to withdraw. She swiped her arm out to move his right arm away and attempted to land her other elbow on his face when she felt a terrible blow to her left ankle that swiped her leg away and dumped her unceremoniously on the floor, a heel impacting next to her head.

"Points, me."

She looked up at John, the massive grin was equally at home on his face as it would be on the Chestershire Cat of Alice in Wonderland. She got up and readied herself once more. He was better than she had ever seen, clearly his mastery of martial arts was leaps and bounds above what she had seen before.

"John, have you been playing with me all this time?"

He displayed mock horror on his face and took his hands up as if surrendering.

"I wouldn't ever Chi. Everybody knows I only play for keeps."

The grin returned and he was once more ready for her attacks, his eyes searching for and getting the full attention of her gaze.

She grinned inside but kept her outward appearance calm and neutral. She would get him even if it took all day and night.

###

The unmarked Behemoth flew through Helios space with about as much grace as a hippopotamus with a rocket strapped to its back. The owner of this particular ship was used to much smaller crafts, but he was here on a mission. After a couple of minutes the vast emptiness of space was pierced by the inevitable pre-warp tachyons that showed a ship was underway. Swag Man felt the usual adrenaline rise in him, normally this meant a target to hunt and kill. In this case though, he was awaiting this particular ship. A bright yellow moth with twin High Density mining beams and the lettering Ole Slot Moth XXV down its side in metre high red letters. The painting of a beautiful woman underneath the cockpit was not what Swag Man had expected, but he knew he wanted one too.

"I am ready to receive the cargo."

"Roger that Swag Man. It is ready and protected. 30 crates of Helio Mists, 60 of Lady Serco Dark Ale and 30 of Sol II genuine pork rinds."

The yellow behemoth ejected the crates on three pallets.

"I have them. Thanks for getting it."

"Hey, no problem. I am always one to help a party get underway. Oh, and one of the Helio Mists crates contains a single bottle of genuine Tequila."

Swag Man smiled, that would get Lebermac on his toes if nothing else could. He scooped the goods up and started boosting for Latos and home. He didn't really know why yoda wanted to throw a party, but expected it to something with having Mystic back and stuff. Who was he to question that anyway, any excuse to party was in his eyes a good one.

"Hey by the way Hort, where did you get the painting?"

"Vardonx made the first one, but this particular lady is painted by Jasmine Atamoss from PA."

"Ok, thanks."

PA was KOS, but maybe he could get Azumi to set up an arrangement or something. Maybe even model for it.... maybe both of them..... Swag Man suddenly felt that the temperature of the moth had notched up significantly.

### 39. Loose ends

"I am telling you Ecka, we trawled the area immediately after we became aware of the explosions in Sedina B-8. Unless CLM took his pod away, there were no sign of Ahriman anywhere. And I seriously doubt that CLM has any more love for him than we do after all from what we can gather he tried to abduct one of their members."

"Tis nae good enough Surb, an ye kenn it. Ah need mare proof or Ah'll keep em o tae list a terrorists."

"Well, we did find a lot of pieces of flesh roughly corresponding to a single person. But something is wrong with the DNA. It is too short somehow, too clean."

"Ah kennt it. He is still alive ah tell ya."

"Yes sir. At least we haven't heard anything from KAOS since they got hammered. I guess CLM is good for something?"

"Aye. Och, is operation FNG ready?"

Surbius cringed, he hated the name of the operation but Waldoze and John Eldritch had planned it and as such they had chosen the name. At least Surbius was certain that the mission would be a raving success; it was right up their alley.

"Yes Sir, it is ready. We only need to brief pilot Hortan and get a go from Buzz. Fluffy and Vardonx have called in ready."

"A go frae Buzz?"

"Yes Sir, something..... spectacular I am sure."

Ecka chuckled, somehow he knew that whatever John and Waldoze had planned would be devious. That merited a helping of Phylactis Delicht.

###

"Hey Hort, wait up."

Hortan turned and waited for Waldoze to catch up to him. He had just landed from the delivery to Swag Man and he really couldn't remember if it was illegal to ship to members of CLM. His face and chest started to redden and he looked into the deck.

"What's up buddy, you look all sick. Are you okay? I really need to talk serious business with you mate."

Waldoze stopped in front of him and twirled the propeller.

"Dozer, It was only drinks and food. And it was for a party and I thought that it would be within guild limits."

Hortan was on the brink of tears now. Waldoze grabbed his chin in one of his massive paws and turned the young man's face upwards.

"Hey buddy, what the hell are you talking about? I need you to do the guild a favour."

"Ehm, okay Dozer, anything as long as it doesn't involve weapons."

"That's better. Now, what did you do?"

"I sold Helio Mists, Dark Ladies and pork rinds to the pirates."

"Ha, good on you. With any luck they'll get so drunk they won't fly for days. Except for Leeb who apparently only flies when madly drunk. Listen, I need you to get a hold on Plissken and present him to the initiation ceremony tomorrow."

"What ceremony, I didn't get a ceremony Dozer?"

Waldoze looked to the skies for help and was struck by the muses of inspiration.

"Well that was because you started that little war of yours instead. So we figured that we'd just accept you as is. You are the only one not initiated, so maybe we'll throw you in the pit as well."

Hortan chuckled nervously at that.

"Sure, I'll bring him. What clothes should we wear?"

"Uniform, and bring a spare one lad."

Waldoze winked and moved down to the common area again.

###

The party at CLM to celebrate that Mystic was back and recovering was almost ready. Swag Man had taken care of the drinks and food. Well, even though pork rinds couldn't be counted as food it did fit so very nicely with the Dark Ladies. Yoda made a mental note to find out how he had stolen all that but that would wait. There was only one more thing to do before the party could commence, and for that he needed a couple of pirates. Pirates with knowledge

of Itani space and especially the research station at Jallik. He could take Azumi for the local knowledge and Look for muscle. He opened a channel to the combat patrol that was flying in Latos H-2

"Azumi, come in and pack for ground operations. Find Look and meet me in the launch bay in 30 minutes."

"Yes Sensei. Covert or overt insertion?"

"Covert Az, so bring your finest."

He could almost see the broad smile on the pretty face of the young woman.

"Will do Sensei. Out."

###

The TPG SWAT team opened the door warily, with the two front men pointing their 3 mm gauss rifles so as to cover the entire room. A whirring of fans was the only sounds inside. As the front me moved in they scanned the room with mini thermal scanners. Over in one corner was a temperature difference and the two team members went over to investigate. A single person was lying in a cradle covered in his own filth; he had obviously been there for a while. The impressive computer array behind the man was showing flashes of something dark and foreboding on all the monitors. The system was turned off but the man stayed unconscious, a permanent fixed silent scream of horror on his face. The documents that were found in the room suggested three things. That the guild had been under contract by Senator Remos at least two times, that at least one assassination in Itani space had been carried out by one of the KAOS members, and that the guild KAOS had effectively ceased to exist with the death of its leader,

## 40. Miracle Outpost

Jallik Watch was anchored in the asteroid field of Jallik, the roids containing the most common of ores like carbonic, ferric and a smattering of Ishik. This was not why the station was placed here. And especially not why the station was a large research station either. The reason for the station was an anomaly some 5600 metres away, the wormhole that lead to Edras.

Jallik Watch was the primary research station for jump technology and regeneration. All ships that passed through the wormhole had their engine's performance logged and so unwittingly supplied an enormous amount of research data. As soon as a new UIT technology was put into the UIT ships, the Itani ship researchers were aware of it.

The reason for regeneration came from what lay on the other side of the wormhole, the lawless systems of grey. Not quite as active as the fighting area in Deneb, the area still saw its share of molested pilots. The medical teams in Jallik Watch had saved most of these, some of whom were not really alive when they arrived to Jallik Watch, The station was also called Miracle Outpost by the Itani pilots.

Azumi was flying her Warthog Mk II at a reasonable speed towards the docking bay that is about 190 m/s. She docked and opened the gull wing cockpit that was standard on the ships of that type and jumped out. A super massive black hole tearing through the station at a snails pace could not have done a better job of diverting the attention from the entire work crew. Her pleated tartan skirt that was cut just above her knees was accentuated by the white shirt that was tied below her bosom and only buttoned with one pearl. Around her neck was a black metal lace neck band with a single large red jewel, the colour of her lipstick. The raven black hair was set in a set of buns, one on each side of her head. In her left hand she had a pair of red pumps and in her right she had a lollipop that she promptly put in her mouth. She looked innocently around and started to put one shoe on her bare foot, bending over with her side to the dockhands. Some of them followed her down with their bodies and heads as if they would be able to see better from there and moved up again when she had put her pumps on. She looked over at the dockhands, grabbed her lollipop and popped it out of her mouth.

"Can any of you gentlemen please guide me to the place where one signs up for the test pilot watchamacallit majiggy?"

The dockhands tripped over each other to be the one that escorted her to the test pilot department, and in less than a minute the dock was clear. The cargo doors of the warthog opened and yoda stepped out closely followed by Look... No hands. Yoda turned and grabbed an active cryo-container that would hold about three litres. They moved into the station via the empty corridor.

###

Hortan was looking forward to the initiation into TGFT. He wondered what the initiation would consist of, maybe all the members wore a secret tattoo or something. He hoped not, he didn't like pain at all. He took his pills as the psychiatrist had prescribed and walked out to look for Plissken. Something led him to the launch bay. It was busy as always; Vardonx with a breathing aid was focused on painting a voluptuous woman in a bathing costume riding a sunflare rocket under the canopy of Fluffy's moth XC, Moda and Zathras were working on John Eldritch's hovercraft with John looking moderately bored, a white drink in his hand. And over in the old bays where the new pilots were placed were Urim and Plissken, both working on painting their Revenants. Hortan walked over and observed them for a bit before calling on Plissken. Hortan saw that his name tag still read Prissken and that his pants were still way too short and very very tight. Hortan grimaced at a particular bad memory he had back when he had been the new member.

"Hi Pilot Hortan, I am just painting my ship in the TGFT approved green as per regulation 212-b3."

Hortan winced, he had never gotten around to do that. He liked his bright neon yellow ships too much. He noted the new propeller on Plissken's cap. It read FNG in black upon yellow letters.

"Who gave you the new propeller?"

"Waldoze did Pilot Hortan. Why, is something wrong?"

Hortan almost blurted out that it had to be because of the initiation, but managed not to spill the secret.

"Nah, if Dozer gave it to you it is okay. So, tomorrow I need you to join me for a proper initiation to TGFT. It will be on the late shift at three strokes. You will need an extra uniform. We shall meet in the communal area and I shall guide you from there."

"I will be ready pilot Hortan. I look forward to become a full TGFT member."

Hortan clapped the young man on the back, shucks he was uptight. He reminded him of something, but Hortan couldn't quite put his finger on it. No matter, he walked over to his own Ole Sloth Moth XXV and admired the painting of The Huntress below the cockpit. Jasmine had outdone herself on this one, and that is to say a lot. He stroked his ship along the ungainly flanks, letting his fingers trace the half metre letters that extended towards the engines. Most would call the moth butt ugly, but to Hortan almost nothing was prettier. He clapped the ship as a farewell salute and walked out of the bay towards Soggy's, time for breakfast.

###

Buzz had the best joke ever. And this time it would not involve breast enlargements, although when he thought of it now it was kinda funny. He had found this latest prop in an add on the BioCom webspace and just knew that he had to try it. And even if it involved nanites, they guaranteed that the anti-nanites would get rid of them very easily. They even sent the anti-nanites in the same box as the growth ones. He swallowed the nanites. He skimmed the instructions and nodded. Now he just needed to digest the half-kilo of chalk that followed. He eyed the large beers that he had bought; he hoped it would be enough. He tossed the instructions into the box again, he could always read how to get rid of them when he arrived at that point.

###

Gramps cursed and looked at Waldoze.

"Tell me again why the hell I should become involved in your personal life Waldoze?"

He somehow managed to make Waldoze sound like Wall Doo's, incidentally making Dozer's eye twitch.

"Because I was framed Gramps, and you are the closest thing we have to a legal genius. Besides, with operation FNG coming up I don't have time for it. You hardly ever do anything, which is understandable with your age and all, so I thought I could give you something to do. I am in a way helping you."

Gramps tossed the rag he had been using to polish his ancient hand cannon over into the bin, put the five large calibre bullets that it could hold into the magazine and placed the cannon in his hip holster.

"You don't have time. You are helping me. Those remarks alone should probably cost you half your shit as it is."

Waldoze flinched, maybe he had trampled on Gramps feelings. And here he had tried to be so diplomatic as he could, to make the old timer feel needed and stuff.

"I'll look into it, because if I say no you'll just run to Ecka and cry and then he'll ask me. And I won't refuse him. But it is going to cost you."

"Sure thing Gramps, just send me a bill, okay?"

Gramps shook his head as Waldoze ran out of the repair shop. And then he smiled. Well, if nothing else, it would be interesting to go up against one of the best lawyer firms in known space. Beat the hell out of making Soduku while mining.

#### 41. A helping hand if you please?

The surgeon had worked for six hours on the young Itani fighter pilot that had been almost killed by the explosion that destroyed his ship just outside the main roid field of Jallik.

The small mining vessel had been no match for the Orne type Hive Guardians that assaulted him from all sides, and eventually one of the heavy gauss shots hit the cockpit. Now, if it had been a human pilot that had attacked him, he would have stopped and allowed the pod to jump clear to the nearest station. The Hive Guardians had no such qualms and kept on following and shooting at the pod until they hit it and made it tumble uncontrollably. At that point a collector bot flew in close and started to disassemble the pod with heavy duty laser cutting equipment. The laser cut straight through the pilot at the shoulder and neatly removed his left side all the way down to the groin. The pilot passed out and would have died if by some quirk his jump module hadn't activated and send his smashed pod to Miracle Outpost. It looked like they were going to save him and be able to restore him to health but it had been a near miss.

The surgeon put the controls to the autobot down and removed his osmotic mask.

"Right, that is it people. Good work all around. Let's wrap it up and call it a day."

A clapping sounded behind the crew and the surgeon. They turned and saw the small green man holding a cryo-canister and the tall person beside him with mechanical arms cradling a shotgun.

"Bravo, I am relieved to see that your skills are not only bragging among the Itani."

"What, who are you? You are not allowed in here."

The surgeon started to move towards the emergency alarm but was stopped by something that was thrown at him.

"Doesn't matter who we are. I am here with a proposition for you. And you would do well to accept."

The surgeon looked down at the cred stick that had dropped to the floor and up at yoda.

"You can't buy our services. We are free Itani citizens."

"Well, I'm gonna do it anyway. I have the remains of one of my buddies inside this here container, and he needs a new body bad. And you are going to fix it."

The surgeon was intrigued enough to walk over and get the cryo-container. He scanned the ID and checked his computer system. He turned to yoda.

"No way. This is one of the most notorious pirates that ever betrayed Itan. I am not going to do it, no matter what."

"Well, I guess we'll start slaughtering your staff then. Let's take the pretty young nurse over there first. Look, if you please?"

Look... No hands turned his shotgun towards the paralysed blonde nurse that merely looked at the surgeon in panic, her arms folded across her chest.

"All right all right damn you. But for that we need a new clone body, and we can't make that in less than two weeks."

"Bullshit. Nice try doc, but I am in the possession of secret documents that state that a new experimental technique has been developed, by yourself, to make the clone bodies in less than an hour. Otherwise we can take one of the nurses, I am sure Retractable would love to have a woman's body."

The surgeon, seeing that he had been defeated on all areas, conceded and started working on the remains of Retractable. At least he would be learning something new today that he might be able to use on loyal Itani pilots. Meanwhile, unseen by the surgeon yoda allowed a smirk to cross his face, these weak civilians were almost too easy to work on.

###

The Serco trader regretted swinging through Latos B-6 s soon as he saw the hail from the attacking pilot.

"You die now scum"

He tried to boost his behemoth to the maximum speed possible but it was all in vain. The pirate ship fired a flare at the cargo vessel that impacted directly on the SSCU transmitter and followed with several shots from the mega positron blaster that was slung under the pursuit ship like a poorly designed add-on. The cargo vessel was torn apart wherever the positrons hit the ship, ending with the main power coupler. The whole incident had taken less than thirty seconds, and within the next minute the debris would have left no trace at all except a radio signal moving at the speed of light outwards from the last known position of the ship. In five days it would have reached the station at Epsilon Hold, crackled and distorted by the ion storms that were frequent around the roid fields.

"Any ship, this is SCS Juno's Flower location Latos B-6 wormhole sector. Am under attack from KAOS pilot William Cutting. Sending pods towards wormhole for orbit. May Lady Serco have mercy on us."

## 42. The Itani Test Pilot programme

The bright neon pink Valkyrie Vengeance twisted and boosted upwards at full power with the bottom thrusters, aligning the pursuing Warthog neatly at the best targeting distance for the three Mk. III neutron guns. Pressing the fire button momentarily resulted in a triple stitching pattern on the warthog that immediately tried to dodge sideways to avoid the lethal barrage. The Valkyrie pilot turned the flight assist computer off and twisted the ship slightly neatly tracking the by now doomed Warthog. Another triplet of neutron beams finished the job and the warthog exploded in a larger than normal fireball betraying the flares that the pilot had never had a chance to fire. The Valkyrie pilot re-engaged flight assist and turned to the last ships, both Vulture Mk. IV's. The vultures tried to out-turn the heavier ship, but once more the flight assist toggle was tapped and the crossfire hammered across empty space. The Valkyrie pilot twisted the ship slightly and engaged the rear bottom thruster making the ship go ass over head and pointing the triplet of guns towards the lesser armoured belly of one Vulture. A stream of nothingness only marked by where the neutrons interfered with the leftover debris from the Warthog producing green lights of hard radiation, tore through the Vulture smashing the internal framing and disintegrating the small fighter. The Valkyrie pilot touched the turbo button for a half second, enough to dodge out of the deadly hail of neutrons that would have smashed armour and scratched the paint. The Valkyrie pilot again pushed the flight assist switch and turned the heavy fighter around to face the last foe. A series of quick random dodges to the sides made sure that the Valkyrie wasn't hit, and a stream of green streaks tore space apart all around the Vulture, eventually hitting and destroying it.

The technician that was watching the pilot destroy the last test fighters noted something on his board and flicked a switch.

"Excellent work Ms. Fluffy, truly excellent. Now you only need to dock the fighter to graduate for the Itani test pilot programme."

"In a docking bay?"

The technician chuckled, damn this pretty young thing was thick headed.

"Yeah, in the docking bay."

Azumi thundered inbound for the docking bay and hammered the Valkyrie through the cradle and buried it a full metre under the deck armour plates before the ship exploded violently.

"Oops, I never have been good at parking Mister."

The technician facepalmed and looked down at Azumi who was strapped in the remote piloting unit.

"I cannot graduate you if you cannot dock Ms. Fluffy. You'll have to do the whole thing over again."

Azumi smiled, this was the best way ever to pass time.

###

Clean steel walls and white lights dominated the department that Retractable woke up to. One second he had been tearing through dime sized pieces of fragments each of them going at a good velocity screaming YEAH at the top of his lungs, the next the only thing heard was the slow wheezing of a breathing apparatus. And an odd clicking noise, like metal sliding against metal in first a smooth and then a violent motion. He tried to turn his head to the sound but couldn't move. Something was holding his head steady. He looked up at the chrome finish of the lamps overhead instead and saw Look open and close his shotgun, apparently bored to death. He tried to smile, to speak but again couldn't. Something was close to his right ear and he could feel air moving on his cheek. He tried real hard to listen and by focusing on that and nothing else, he could actually make out words. Yoda!

".if you can hear me but it is good to have you back buddy. Just relax, the good doc over here tells me that your new body needs to make all the nerve connections to your senses before they start working. He could only bond your eyes so I know you can see."

A green face appeared before Retractable's eyes and he went all roundeyed from surprise.

"Ah, you can see. Good. Just lean back and relax buddy, we'll have you up and chasing traders in no time."

Retractable focused everything he could muster into a single word that was only spoken with his throat.

"Azumi"

"She is safe and sound thanks to you buddy. Mater of fact she'll be driving the bus home. You close them eyes and get some sleep yarr?"

Retractable closed his eyes and did what he was ordered. Yoda turned to the surgeon.

"For what it is worth, I thank you."

He pointed at the cred stick that was still on the floor.

"And if I were you, I would use the money that is on that one. You can always buy something nice to your staff or your wife. Or donate it away for all I care. But now I am afraid we are going to have to leave you. Later doc."

Yoda winked at the surgeon as he pushed the anti-grav sled with Retractable on top down towards the launch bay. Look got up almost as an afterthought, grabbed a two litre bottle of pure ethanol that the nurses had used for cleaning and moved after yoda.

###

Hortan used at least half an hour to ensure that the uniform was completely up to specifications, that the cap was correctly placed and the boots were regulation shiny. He didn't need to fix any of the things, he was always this tidy but he used a lot of time to make sure. When he had finished he took the extra uniform from the rack and slung it as casually as he could, which is not very much, over his shoulder and started moving towards the communal area where Plissken was supposed to wait for him. He was a bit early and so was Plissken. And Urim. And PickAxePete. Hortan grinned at their collective awkwardness and decided to break the ice. After all, he was a full member in good standing. He took his hip flask out and took a long drink from it before passing it to PickAxePete. Pete looked at the flask and then took a long drink as well before handing it on to Urim.

"That is some good shit you have there Pilot. Whisky?"

"Helio Mists, the very best. So, are you all ready?"

The trio nodded but stayed silent. Hortan felt he should say something but nothing came up. They pushed the bottle around until it was empty and then stood and looked in four different directions. The silence stretched into infinity, almost as embarrassing as holding the opening speech at the Nobel Prize awards only wearing a pink tutu. Fortunately Vardonx arrived to break the ice. He nodded to Hortan and turned to Pete. His voice was still raw and rasping after the damages wrought by the high pressure device KAOS had used.

"So Pete, ready mate?"

"Sure is Pilot."

Vardonx grinned fiercely at Pete who grinned back. He then turned to Hortan.

"And what is that I smell, mists? You better have some for my damaged throat Hort."

Hortan found his other hipflask and opened it so Vardonx could smell the whisky. He took a long swallow and one more.

"Better get some good use of this medicine before Fluffy comes along and wants some for his wounds. Oh hi Fluffster."

Fluffy was walking up behind Vardonx, his left buttock a mess of bandages and tape making it necessary to use the cane that ensured that he moved with a shuffle click sound. His uniform consisted of a pair of very loose shorts, an armless shirt and flip-flops. A very bad looking corn-yellow wig adorned his long narrow head.

"Well, now Vardonx has amused himself with my butt, perhaps we can get going?"

The group snickered and moved slowly towards the TGFT-only bar, Fluffy setting the tempo.

### 43. KOS.

The neon pink Valkyrie dispatched the last Vulture in a violent display of skill and turned towards the station. The overdrive on the engine was engaged and the seven tonne fighter tore towards the station at 225 m/s.

"Ms. Fluffy, now would be a good time to maybe not boost as much."

Azumi grinned, this was the fun part. She had trashed four docking bays so far and the technician had almost dumped her but the big round eyes and innocent smile won him over for another round each time. Men are such suckers she thought as she made an internal wager to see how many centimetres of deck armour she could drive the Valkyrie through this time. She was now at 200 metres from the station and closing fast, the technician wincing at the oncoming trashing of yet another docking bay when the alarm in her watch buzzed twice. Time for movement. She waited until 50 metres from the station, turned the booster off along with the flight assist, flipped the craft over and re-engaged the booster. The ship barely made a sound as it landed in the cradle, the timing perfect. Azumi looked up at the technician who was standing with his mouth open in awe.

"I like boosting."

He slowly closed his mouth and looked through his forms for the admission to the test pilot programme. When he looked up she was halfway out of the door, the lollipop once more secure behind red lips.

"Oh, ehm Ms Fluffy, I need your signature and bioscan here for graduating."

"Nah, I don't think Ms Fluffy wants that hun. Besides, I already passed once. Thanks for letting me pass time."

His jaw once more tried to find some peace on his chest and he stood with open mouth while Azumi skipped out of the training facility.

She was halfway to the launch bay when the alarm sounded. Cursing she started running instead of skipping and activated her internal radio.

"Sensei, I am moving to the bay as we speak."

"Good Azumi. Slight problem, the guards have launched so it will be a hot exit. They know we have Retractable."

Azumi smiled, at least they had what they came for.

"No problem Sensei, the Rent-a-Cop isn't born yet that I cannot outrun in a Warthog II."

"I know Azumi, but I am not sure if Retractable can take the violent turns and thrusts. I need you to make a diversion."

Azumi stopped dead in her tracks. A diversion, but that would undoubtedly destroy her high standing with the Itani people. She almost hit herself, she would be doing it for Retractable after all he gave his life for her. She started running again towards the launch bay.

"I am on it Sensei, in two minutes."

She found one of the Valkyrie X-1's she had purchased when she graduated from the Itani test pilot programme under her own name, checked the weapons load-out and smiled. Triple positrons, she loved herself sometimes! She launched and scanned space; sure enough a whole SF was outside of the station waiting for Retractable and yoda. Further out was an Itani trade convoy moving at a sedate pace towards the jump point. She cursed at what she was about to do and boosted towards the traders. She intercepted them easily and started flaying the rearmost behemoth with positron death. The retaliation was swift, the SF was dispatched towards her and the turrets on the behemoths started criss-crossing space around her ship with plasma streaks. Choosing not to boom the moth, she switched target and started tearing armour off the next ship. The SF arrived and she turned to kill the bots that always accompanied the human pilots. Three shots and they were debris. She moved further away from the station and called yoda.

"SF is occupied. You are clear to the wormhole."

"Roger Azumi. Thanks, I know how much your standing in Itani space meant to you."

Not replying, she instead boosted just a tad slower than the SF, promising them to catch her but making sure it would never happen. When the Warthog cleared the wormhole, she stopped playing and boosted for it as well. A last message from the station popped into her screen as she jumped out.

"Azumi, your pilot's license in Itani space has been revoked. You are no longer allowed to transit Itani space nor dock at Itani stations."

She looked down at her faction standing, the arbitrary diplomatic system that allowed the different nations and factions to decide if they liked a person or not and winced. Itani -898, hated. She wished her mother would never find out.

###

The TGFT bar looked deserted, no lights or music came from within. A dark piece of cloth was placed in front of the door, and the insides of the bar was a gloomy velvet draped display of soft shapes and deep secrets. Large black candlesticks flickered in the corners with white markings on the floor; some

kind of five pointed star. A low chant emanated from the back of the room and as the initiates entered they could see that a group of at least twenty persons were standing in the back all covered by black robes with hoods over their faces. A large chair was in the middle of the five pointed star, a piece of black cloth covering what was underneath. A single person was standing in front of the star waiting for the initiates, his robes red with intricate patterns in white along its hem. In his hands he held a large leather-backed book with brass bindings. A voice came from within the covered features of the man in front.

"So, you wish to be initiated into TGFT and learn the secrets that make us succeed where others fail? Have you the courage, Have you the will? Are you willing to make the sacrifice?"

With that he moved aside and two of the persons from the choir walked over to just outside the five pointed star and grabbed each side of the cloth covering the throne.

#### 44. Initiation

The two persons removed the veil that covered the chair within the five-starred figure on the ground. Sitting on what could best be described as a throne was a person that was resting his head on his right hand's knuckles that in turn rested on his leg. He looked like..... nothing the initiates had ever seen. The person looked up when the veil was removed, looked at the initiates and stood to his full height of more than two metres. The height in itself was impressive but that was not what was so different. Rather it was the goat's legs that the person stood upon that really did the trick. The initiates were pushed forward towards the star and could now see the horns that protruded clearly from his forehead and the long fangs that stuck out of his mouth. The rest of the face was covered in curly hairs, as was most of his body.

Hortan turned to run away, but Fluffy was there behind him his biggest smile plastered on his face.

"Easy buddy, nothing bad will happen."

Hortan looked towards Plissken who was staring blindly at the apparition before them.

The man in front of the star opened the large book and looked into it.

"Bring the first initiate forward."

The dark voice almost growled the words out, and Vardonx moved over with PickAxePete to stand before the star.

"State name of the initiate and reveal secret name of the champion"

"I am Malphas and I sponsor PickAxePete."

The person in front of the star removed his hood and revealed John Eldritch, but bald and with tattoo's covering most of his face.

"I am Belial. Bring forth your gift and proceed."

Vardonx found a small bottle and placed it in front of John. He then grabbed Pete under one arm and pushed him into the five-pointed star. Pete kneeled and the large person inside the circle bent low over him while the chant from the choir got higher. Suddenly there was a thump like a body hitting the deck plates immediately followed by some shuffling of feet. The person as well as everyone else looked up and saw Hortan lying on the floor, fainted, and the back of Plissken as he ran out of the bar in complete panic. Urim was standing next to Fluffy, an immense grin on his face.

"Heavy shit man, TGFT are vampire devil worshippers. That explains so much."

The show stopped and the acolytes that had been chanting revealed themselves as members of TGFT and two from PA. Tohasandra was the first to kneel beside Hortan, slowly saying his name while stroking him across the cheek. John took the latex hood off and looked concerned down at the unconscious Hortan and then up at the TGFT members that had crowded in.

"Stand back damn it, give him some space."

Hortan slowly woke up under the healing hands of Chi, opened his eyes and saw his usual saviour.

"Ms Chi."

He smiled and looked behind her directly at the horned and fanged beast behind. He promptly fainted again. John looked at where Hortan's gaze had rested before he went under again.

"Buzz, go have a drink in the bar will ya?"

Buzz nodded, took the fake fur off his cheeks and got some help from Neagoth getting off the stilts. Together they walked over to the bar where Ecka and Waldoze were sitting already. Buzz had to get a drink with a straw since the fangs precluded him from closing his mouth.

Hortan woke up again, this time without devils around. He looked around thoroughly confused and got up with John's help.

"Are you okay buddy?"

"I feel a bit dizzy, not sure I remembered to eat my pills."

John looked at Chi who nodded in the direction of Hortan's room. He nodded back and grabbed Hortan under his right arm.

"Come on, let's get you back to your room for some rest."

Hortan nodded and staggered along helped by John and Chi.

Urim was still standing in the middle of the room, the same insane grin on his face.

"Hey man, I am so ready Belial dude. Hail and shit."

Fluffy shook his head and led the initiate over to the bar where the real initiation was to take place, namely a drinking binge of enormous proportions.

###

Azumi thundered the X-1 towards CLM HQ at maximum speed, hardly braking before impacting on the docking cradle. She jumped out and ran for the control room, not even bothering to take the sweaty flight suit off. Sharingan and Lebermac were on duty, well in reality only Sharingan were active. Lebermac were desperately trying to calm his unnatural need for real Tequila by flooding his neural receptors with the cheap substitute Teh Killah that had the same ingredient list as military grade engine coolant. And to be fair, it looked like he had succeeded; the snoring was loudly drowning everything out.

"Shar, we need some help. Look and yoda are inbound with my Warthog and they have Retractable on a stretcher. I am not sure if he needs medical attention but we need to make sure."

Sharingan nodded, paged Wittman and Mystic and got up to leave with Azumi. The four of them met in the docking area as the Warthog was merely 300 metres away.

"Good to see you are decently dressed Azumi."

Azumi looked at Mystic and then down at herself. She was just about to tell her what she was wearing underneath when she thought better off it. She merely smiled at Mystic instead.

The Warthog docked and dropped the cargo bay. After a short delay yoda came out pushing the anti-grav stretcher. The waiting CLM members rushed over to greet Retractable and help him to the medical centre. The person on the stretcher was covered by a sheet that Mystic removed. Underneath was Look... No hands.

"Yeah, Look passed out roughly halfway here. Killed a two-litre bottle of pure ethanol by himself too. Retract is inside in good health. But you may want to walk him out."

The group went inside to greet Retractable and help him out, but it turned out not to be necessary. The hour it had taken to move to Latos from Jallik had been enough to steady him on his feet and he could stagger to his room by his own power. Cheating Death didn't seem to have significant side effects.

#### **45. That could have gone better.**

The mood in the bar was pretty low, with Hortan almost carried to his room and Plissken roaming somewhere in the station panicked. Surbius walked into the bar and directly over to Waldoze who was brooding on his chair.

"Care to explain Waldoze?"

"Huh? Explain what? I mean, who had imagined that Hort would drop like that and that Plissken would bolt like rabbit?"

"I can deduce that the party didn't quite go as planned. But that is not why I am here. I think the code word is Melody?"

Waldoze emptied his drink and got another one before answering.

"Yeah, well, what can I say? I was framed, ripped, cheated. I have asked Gramps for help."

"I know, and that is why I am here. You have been subjected to a very vicious scam and you aren't the first. Seems that the company Lector, Lecter and Shard has been making a lot of these cases against rich UIT traders, and these have more often than not been ripped off for half their assets."

"Fuck me! So Melody was just in it for the money?"

"No, well I don't know. As far as we can see she was approached after the break-up by LL&S who convinced her that she was to gain millions of credits for nothing. And at the same time get back at you."

Waldoze's head reddened considerably. As a matter of fact he became about as red in his face as Hortan usually did but Waldoze was red in the face with rage.

"Just tell me where I have to go and get them Surb."

"You don't get it do you Waldoze? They have all rights on their side. You screwed up, you are going to pay to these shady characters unless we can find some legal mumbo jumbo that can save you. As I see it the only chance you have is if Gramps stumble over a mistake they have made."

Surbius nodded to Ecka and walked out again. Waldoze looked angrily into his drink. All this and just because he wanted to cheer up a pair of mates. And he had even liked the girl. He sighed deep and emptied his new drink making a face as the fiery liquid tormented his innards. Not even the drink was good tonight. Buzz leaned close to Waldoze almost hitting him with the horns.

"Couldn't help hearing what ole Surbie had to say. There is another way mate. And you know what I am talking about."

Buzz waggled his eyebrows up and down, making him look absolutely stupid because the horns moved with the brow in a circular pattern.

"If this is another of your harebrained schemes I don't want any part of it Buzz. You usually end up with messing things up even worse than they are in the first place."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence Dozer but I really have the golden idea this time. And the only ones hurt are the lying thieving bastards from LL&S."

Waldoze nodded to the barkeep for more drinks and when they arrived pushed one to Buzz.

"Go on, I am listening."

###

The dead Connie was as good a place as any to meet when you wanted to avoid attention. Not many knew of its location deep in Latos space and it was only due to random chance that Red Tide had found it. He had been pursuing an Ineubis courier vessel to find an opportune time to snatch its valuable cargo and sell the highly valuable drug prototype to the opposing faction when he encountered an Ion Storm that covered much of Latos. Deciding that now would be as good a time as ever, he attacked the courier and just as he killed the ship he was beset upon by several Orne guardian bots. He twisted his ship the best he had learned and managed to kill them all getting some damage to his own jump engine in return. He scooped up the data pad the courier ship had been freighting and started boosting for the storm exit. When he arrived at the exit he found out that the damage he had taken would preclude him from jumping out of the storm, the higher energies inside the storm was enough to dampen what little power he could focus into the jump engine. Resigning himself to hours of endless boredom as he would have to wait for the storm to pass, he started making a three dimensional spiral search pattern outwards. After three days of intense boredom with the highlight of the day consisting of eating the synthetic glue that the Warthog dispensed from the life support kit, his radar bleeped. A large contact, the drifting Connie. The entire drive section had been ripped off and the ship was left for dead with no power or air. Red held on to the Connie and within a day the storm had dissipated allowing him to make an emergency jump to a station, taking the location with him. The members of KAOS had since used a lot of time reinstalling air and power and used the hulk as a secret deep space hide-out.

Ahriman moved his EC-107 slowly to his docking ring and mated the ships. Wearing his usual flowing robes he walked purposefully into the Connie and headed straight for the briefing room in the old weapons section to port. As he entered the room a low mumbling stopped as full attention was focused on

him. He turned his front to the members of KAOS and started speaking in that peculiar fashion like if his mouth and throat were not used to forming words.

"Rumours of my death have been vastly overstated. Little do they know, we are Legion."

## 46. Post Initiation

John and Chi almost carried Hortan back to his room. He was so confused that he kept turning the wrong way and would have crashed alone somewhere in an unmarked corridor if they had not guided him. Once inside the room they couldn't help smile at the surreal display of John Eldritch figures or the extensive series of trashy John Eldritch novels, most of them rather used. John helped Hortan to bed and tucked the blanket up under his chin. He then walked over to the door and waited while Chi sat down on the bed and handed Hortan his pills.

"You have to go see the doctor tomorrow, you hear?"

Hortan took the pills and swallowed with the glass of water Chi had put on the night table.

"Yes Ms Chi."

"And you better close your eyes now and sleep tight. It has been a long day for you and I bet it will be a long day tomorrow."

Hortan smiled at Chi and closed his eyes. She moved the errant lock of hair from his forehead back to where it belonged and got up to join John at the door. They walked outside and closed it.

"So, I am not much for partying after this. What do you say we grab a cup of Sedina Chocolate instead?"

Chi smiled at the suggestion; it was a bit unlike John not to go back to a party but she knew exactly how he felt. She grinned mischievously at him.

"Only if we can have pancakes with that."

"Devious, sneaky, cunning even. I like it, Soggy's it is then."

###

The party in the TGFT bar had certainly picked up after most had chipped in with suggestions to alter the almost bulletproof plan that Buzz had explained to Waldoze. As a matter of fact most had not been as drunk for at least two weeks. They had even embarrassed and hazed the new guys properly, well only PickAxePete and Urim, who by the way still was convinced that TGFT was a secret devil-worshipper coven; they had been unable to locate the whereabouts of recruit Plissken. Fluffy showed Pete a set of very shapely large breasts and Pete who was by then slightly inebriated stated loudly:

"By Jove that is a perfect pair. Fluffy, make the introductions, that is my bride to be!"

Fluffy snickered and showed him the rest of the picture including Buzz's hung-over face.

"Sure, Pete this is Buzz, Buzz this is Pete. Hey, can I be the best man?"

Everybody laughed and drank some more. For some reason Urim was giggling in the corner for himself.

"What're you up to mate? What's so funny?"

Vardonx had found a chair near Urim.

"I know what FNG stands for. Man you guys are so evil."

Vardonx took his beer up to his lips.

"Oh yeah, well enlighten us then Oh oracle."

"Follow No Gods man, right on."

Vardonx almost spat all his beer out, but managed to keep a straight face.

"Really. Well, you should have it tattooed then. Look at Dozer, Fluffy and Buzz. They all had BAMF tattooed on their shoulders along with their favourite trading ship."

"BAMF What does that say?"

"Bad Ass Mutha Fuckers."

"Right on, okay I'll do it. Give me ten."

And he was off in such a hurry that he missed Vardonx loose his beer in laughter this time as he turned and tried sobbing with laughter to explain to the others what Urim was about to do. It took more than an hour and by that time the party had forgotten why he had been missing. They remembered as soon as he proudly scrolled his jacket up and displayed the letters FNG tattooed onto his shoulder with a Revenant in silhouette behind it. Everybody cracked in laughter that just grew when Urim's expression went from victorious pride to deep confusion.

"What, did he spell it wrong? Lemme see, no it says FNG as you said. Follow No Gods right?"

He grinned a smile that was suppose to rally his confidence but it didn't happen, Instead Waldoze walked over and grabbed him around the shoulder.

"Son, there comes a time in life where you must face up to the fact that what you just did will not only haunt you for the rest of your life, but will also ensure that you will have a running tab at the bar. The haunting is so so, I mean most of us enrolls it in our flashy persona, but the tab is going to hurt forever because of the sheer amount that the members of TGFT consumes. You my young, so very very gullible young friend has just made such an error. FNG does not mean Follow No God; it stands for Fucking New Guy. You may begin your tab now son, I'll take a triple Helio Mists straight as a shot."

## 47. Dr. Lloyd Wyman M.D

Relaxing in the warm amber glow of control lamps that were all showing full operationality, Captain Sraer felt as good as ever. He was sipping on a nipples bottle of Divinia Rootbeer and listening to ambient/trance music, while hurtling his Behemoth XC loaded with luxuries through grey space. He always made sure before leaving station that his computer was updated with the newest information about pirates' hideouts and killing grounds; today was no exception. He had logged the location of the two pirates he feared most into his route, avoiding them completely. And the one pirate he didn't fear at all blocked the last wormhole. He loved flying past this particular pirate, his membership of ITAN and high Itani standing made him impervious to the attacks from the pirate's ship, and so he had not been hurt at all ever when encountering her. Today would be the 56th run past Azumi, and as usual he would wave and thumb his nose at her while watching her fume with anger but unable to hurt him at all. He smiled as he entered the jump sequence and activated the jump engines towards Sedina B-8. Sure enough, her pink Rev C boosted towards him like a missile. He grinned; this was going to be fun.

Azumi: Filthy-rich trade guild member, stop your engines at once or I shoot. You must pay a fee of 300.000 or release your cargoes. 3. 2. 1.

He chuckled and thought about just ignoring it. Nah, where's the fun in that?

->Azumi: Hi Azumi. I don't think so, but you can shoot all you want.

He twisted the XC and presented the less armoured underside to the Rev C without turning away from the course towards the wormhole. "*That'll piss her off major*" he thought.

His next awake thought was back in Jallik when he woke up after the medical team of Miracle Outpost had resurrected him from his pod. And that thought was about how right he had been.

###

Azumi saw the XC turn the belly towards her and did what she had threatened. The extremely light armour of the XC disintegrated under the fusillade of accelerated protons that punched fist sized holes all the way through the ship. Fifteen shots or three seconds of continuous firing later and the XC exploded. It had been a slow day so far but killing Sraer in an XC was precisely what she needed for the party tonight. She called in the location of the liberated cargo and waited for the CLM hauler to arrive. She glanced at her watch and sighed. Merely two hours left and she had only killed Sraer on this watch, not any real traders. She wished for a TGFT or a PA member, or even the Holy Grail amongst pirates, an SSC member. That Xang Xi convoy that was inbound for the wormhole would have to do for now. She hit the boost button and

accelerated at 5G's towards the convoy grinning all the way. They would never know what hit them.

###

She should have been at the wormhole between Dau and Nyrius where a convoy of two Moth XC's belonging to PickAxePete and Fluffy flew through towards Dau K-10, with an escort of two Valkyrie X-1's piloted by Mor Isil and Buzz. The moths docked and the crates were taken directly to Waldoze. The conspiracy was underway; the brothers in crime were ready.

###

Hortan woke in his room, the nasty dream disappearing as dew before the sun at equator. He got dressed and bounced down for breakfast, pancakes as usual, before dragging his feet down to Dr. Wyman for his weekly session. His mood dropped like a rock inside a super-massive black hole's gravity well as he entered the office, everything inside conspiring to drag his spirits down; the many synth leather-bound books on the imitated teak synth wood shelves, the brown and dark beige walls, the synth wood and synth leather furniture and the many diplomas on the wall framed in gold. But what made Hortan's mood drop the most was Dr. Wyman wearing his half glasses, leaning back in his chair with the notebook containing Hortan's stories in his suede pant covered lap. He looked up over the glasses when Hortan came in.

"Ah, right on time Hortan. I thought that today would be a good time to review what we have discussed, hmm?"

Hortan's already low mood dropped considerably. He had no real wish to go through all that again.

"I guess if you say so Sir."

"It is quite an interesting case you have young man. I am thinking about writing a paper regarding your illness. You will be anonymous naturally, and it just might land me a position with the Psychiatrists department in Dau senate. So, shall we start?"

He pointed with open hand to the heavy chair in front of the desk. Hortan sat and made himself as comfortable as he could.

"So, last time we talked about those roids that you have given girls names, and the breasts of a person named Buzz."

Hortan flinched at that last name.

"I see you have a reaction to that name?"

"Well, Buzz doesn't really have breasts anymore Sir, he has lost those and gained horns and long nasty fangs instead."

Wyman frowned at Hortan and started jotting into his notebook.

"Oh, and he had goat's legs and fur all over and a long curly beard."

"I see, a bit like old images of devils? Is Buzz your demon Hortan?"

Wyman leaned forward in his chair; he might be at the root to all Hortan's problems here.

"Yes, I mean no he is not Sir, he is just Buzz I guess. But he sure looked like a demon now you say it. But it was dark and I can't really remember."

"So last time we were talking about your roids you were mentioning that you could call one of them Buzz."

Hortan actually smiled at that and then frowned and looked into the floor.

"I would never do that doc, they would never accept that. Maybe I could call one of them Azumi instead."

He looked straight at the psychiatrist and smiled a broad smile.

"Azumi you say. Is that a real girl you have met?"

"Yeah, she is really special."

Wyman scribbled some lines in his journal before noticing that Hortan was not going to say more and looked up at him again.

"Is it a girl that you are dating or are planning to date or even that you would like to date?"

Hortan blushed deeply and looked down to the floor.

"I guess I would like to doc, she is always so nice to me in a special way you know? But she said that we cannot meet because it is too dangerous for her and her friends."

"I see, and what does this sweet young girl do for a living, where does she live?"

Wyman had a plan hatching in one side of his brain. Maybe he could get this girl to confront Hortan in his office and see the response. He could probably charter a flight from TGFT that could get her here and return her the same

day. It couldn't be that much of an expense, besides he would just send the bill to Surbius.

"She lives in Latos and is one of the councillors in CLM."

"Yes yes, Latos hmm? That is not a place for a young girl I think; and what does she do in that organisation?"

"She is a pirate Sir."

Wyman mentally crunched his plan and sighed extremely deeply inside. Every time he sensed a plan, reality crushed it.

"I see. Back to square one, eh Hortan? I'll recommend you for another month's of the same medication and some better Lithium carbonate, a new formula that is more efficient. I'll see you in a week, okay?"

#### **48. A pretty girl is like a...**

The scent of roses permeated the recycled air of the residential quarters of Dau K-10 and not the cheap synthetic version from the chemical foundries of Nyrius. This was the real smell of fresh Eo high quality prime cut roses. The scent emanated from the thousands of flowers that were placed outside of one small apartment with the nametag "M. Lockhill". A single person was standing in the middle of the roses easily recognised by the bushy eyebrows, huge moustache, hulking body and immaculate dark green uniform; Waldoze. He nodded to Buzz who were sitting out of sight from the door and pressed the door button. At the same time Buzz hit the enter button on his portable discotheque and played the tune he had found with the help of Hortan's massive collection of old Earth music. Old crackling music with a male singer that almost drowned in static noise but still audible.

"I have an ear for music, And I have an eye for a maid.."

The tune went on and Waldoze gave the thumbs up to Buzz before concentrating on the door in front of him. Nothing happened, the tune went on through the first part and was almost through the chorus when a door further down opened and a young girl peered out. Waldoze had seen her before on the commercial plaza standing next to Melody. He flinched but managed to nod to her and she smiled cautiously back. She turned and waved to someone inside. The chorus ended and the second verse started making Waldoze extremely nervous.

"A pretty girl is like a melody, That haunts you day and night..."

This had to work now or fail miserably. The door opened to the last half of the verse:

"You can't escape she's in your memory, By morning night and noon..."

Melody peered out; her make-up slightly messed up but dressed in a pretty white summer dress. She looked at Waldoze with loads of resentment but that faded a bit when he struck to his knees at the end of the song, singing along in his very deep voice.

"She will leave you and then come back again, A pretty girl is just like a pretty tune."

The hardness in her eyes faded slowly and when she peered down the corridor to her by now two friends that looked out of their door with giant smiles on their faces, it almost disappeared. When they noticed her looking they made shooing motions with their hands and nodded eagerly. She looked back at Waldoze who were looking up at her.

"Melody, gorgeous, I am miserable without you. I know I was a fool, but can't you just forgive me?"

She was almost swayed and this is where Waldoze pulled the coup de grace. From his belt pouch he pulled a small black box up and presented it to her, opening it slowly. Inside was a gold necklace with a single diamond shaped like a rose. She smiled and threw herself around his neck.

"Oh Honeybunny I have missed you too."

The two girlfriends looked at each other and hugged too. Melody grabbed Waldoze by the hand and tore him inside; that was the last they saw of him that day.

###

After helping his friend get the many crates of Roses, Fluffy steered his Moth towards the wormhole at Azek. He had a mission to deliver fifty crates of medical supplies to Remley Orbital that he would do free of charge for the guild. The medical supplies were essential and needed to be delivered within a very strict time limit. He decided to chance it and jumped across Azek directly to the wormhole nexus to Latos. He breathed out slowly, that had been a chance, but he cut about a minute off his time. He entered the wormhole to Latos and was hailed immediately.

Mephostopholes: Pay me 50.000 credits to pass this wormhole or eat hard vacuum. Thank you, Come again.

Fluffy ignored the hail and boosted at full power towards the 3k mark while keeping an eye on the radar. Mephostopholes kept on closing and Fluffy decided that he wouldn't make it on a straight run. He turned the overdrive off and flipped his ship around so it faced the incoming Corvus Vulturius that was boosting as fast as it could towards him. When the smaller ship was about 400 metres away it fired the neutron guns that were mounted one on each wing. The neutrons tore a pattern of destruction across the moth's front but drained the powercell on the Vulture. The shooting diminished to single shots, and that was the time Fluffy triggered the twin CHAOS swarm of homing missiles towards the light fighter and cringed when he saw the sixteen explosions envelop the ship. Knowing that it would not kill or even deter the pirate, Fluffy triggered another flight and then another watching the complete inferno that covered the ship in flames and debris before turning the Vulture into a hulk. Without flipping back Fluffy hit the 3k mark and pushed the jump button, leaving the pirate to the rescue services. The exit point was supposed to be just outside Remley Orbital but the Ion storm that was covering the roid field halfway there, wrestled his ship out of the express route and directly into the soup of ions that also had the unfortunate side effect that his systems only reached 500 metres. He checked his ammunition level and cursed, only two flights of sixteen missiles. Fluffy wished for an empty sector and punched the

ID list up. No such luck, Orne guardians, TyCorps Assaults and one surprise, Azumi. He turned his ship towards the safe exit point and boosted for it. Two bleeps appeared on his screen, a set of assault bots. He turned and fired a ripple of missiles into the first one, exploding it. The second bot stayed outside of effective missile range and was soon joined by a new assault bot. Knowing that he could not kill two bots with one ripple of missiles and that he would not be able to outrun them, he decided that his cargo was more important than his pride. He opened a link to the piratess.

###

Note: The song is stolen from: A Pretty Girl Is like a Melody by Irving Berlin

#### 49. An indecent proposal

The ion storm was not really helping her in tracking the Moth that had avoided Mephostopholes, and the occasional scrap with a bot was only so satisfying. She lazily twisted the Rev C and avoided the neutron guns on the TyCorps before slicing the bot in two with a series of well-placed shots. She kept on scouting for the moth, it was reported to be a TGFT pilot and thus a very tasty target. An Orne came towards her and she just boosted away not deeming the armoured brute as worthy of her attention. Damn, only twenty minutes to go of her combat patrol and not any real chance to find this nice juicy trader. She boosted for the exit point, maybe she could ambush him at the Sedina/Latos wormhole. Her radio crackled:

"Azumi, desperate here. I need to get these medicals to Remley. I'll pay you good if you can help me. Almost anything, please."

"Define anything trader."

She could hear the strain in Fluffy's voice as he replied, no doubt due to trying to avoid the assault bot that was attempting to hammer its way through his armour and into his vitals. He would have to be truly desperate to beg like this.

"Money, a service. Please help me get this cargo away from the hive."

She smiled, this had potential.

"Sure trader, I'll come to you. Send your position and I'll kill the bots until you are away."

A position came on her recognised radar picture, only 1800 metres away. She boosted hard and found the assault bot that had hammered the armour on Fluffy's moth. She fired a stream of protons through the bot and destroyed it. The other bot kept its focus on the Behemoth and that was its undoing. A set of well-placed bursts reduced it to so much scrap. She moved up close to the moth to provide the protection he needed. Another bot came hurtling through

the storm and Azumi intercepted it halfway, twisting her ship in a slow spiral pattern that she knew nearly always defeated the tracking system on the hive bots, while pouring protons at the bot. Another bot exploded and Azumi returned to the side of the moth. They flew in formation until they were 600 metres away from the exit when Azumi's radio crackled again.

"I must say, you pirates do have some honour after all. For the people of Remley, I thank you. Now, how much do you want?"

Azumi smiled, she had an idea and just maybe this Fluffy was crazy enough to do it.

"I don't want money. I want a favour instead. Meet me in Latos Mining in four hours. Dress nice."

She could almost hear the hesitation on Fluffy's part. The exit point came closer, now only 50 metres away. She considered killing him if he jumped out without answering and readied her targeting grid.

"Ehm, sure. Later"

With that he jumped out and so did she, him to Remley Orbital and her to Latos mining to fix a couple of things.

###

Gramps was in a very good mood and walked down the corridor whistling an old tune to himself. It was slightly off-key but he could recognise it and that was his main goal. He turned down towards the offices of LL&S and walked straight in. The young attractive woman in the office ignored him completely while filing her nails and chattering away like a machine to someone unseen; Gramps suspected a two-way vidphone. He stayed still and waited, nothing could bring him out of the current good mood and the message he was here to deliver was worth any amount of waiting. The woman finished her nails and started to apply nail polish, methodically painting each nail and admire the result before deeming it was time to look up. Her voice changed from a normal voice to a high pitched nasal caricature of a female voice as she spoke, making Gramps smile even more.

"Welcome to Lector, Lector and Shar, what can I do for you?"

"I need to see the lawyer that is handling the Melody Lockhill case. I have some information I think he needs."

The woman looked at Gramps with about as much loathing as if he was a condemned child molester before pushing two buttons on her screen. She pointed to a door to the left of her desk.

"Through there, Mr. Lector is waiting for you."

Gramps smiled at her as he walked past and towards the impressive looking door. He knocked and opened it, nodded to the lawyer inside and walked inside.

"Ole Gramps from the TGFT I assume?"

"Indeed Sir, and I am talking to Mr. Lector surely?"

The lawyer nodded and indicated a large comfortably looking chair in front of the desk.

"So, you have something for me?"

"Indeed I do Sir."

Gramps found the papers he had guarded since receiving them this afternoon and pushed them forward onto the table in front of him.

"The papers contain the withdrawal of the claim set forth by Ms. Lockhill herself. It seems that she would rather have the man than his money. I trust that the papers are in complete order and that the next step from you will be a formal withdrawal from the legal system here and in the Valent faction. Failure to do so by no later than tomorrow will result in a lawsuit from TGFT on the behalf of councillor Waldoze to ensure this."

Gramps smiled wide and leaned forward.

"I must say it has been a pleasure to deal with you trash. I expect that I won't have to hear from you again apart from the documents describing that you have withdrawn the case. Good day to you."

Without offering his hand Gramps got up and walked out of the office, head held high and in the best of spirits.

## 50. A dilemma

Fluffy did not know what to do. After returning from Latos he had moved straight home to Dau and docked, allowing the dockhands to repair the damages from the many attacks he had endured traversing the ion storm inbound for Remley. He had made a promise but really didn't know if he could keep it. As a matter of fact, he didn't know if he were allowed by the TGFT charted. Wasn't it fraternising with the enemy? He needed some advice. He limped over and accessed the roster for today's missions and found the pilots that were in the station. Seemed like John Eldritch was eating breakfast and he was probably the right one to ask. He headed over to Soggy's pancakes and waffles cursing his buttock-graft that made him walk like a badly drawn version of Quasimodo all the way.

###

John had called Hortan and asked if he would join him for breakfast as he was on his way to his brand new heavy mining moth dubbed "The Queen". Even though he had just eaten he accepted; you could never get too many pancakes really. He joined John, Neagoth, Lambin, Pasquel and Ms Chi and started his usual attempt at world extinction of anything pancakie. The topic was naturally Waldoze and his newly re-found love-of-his-life Melody. The consensus was that they would give it another two weeks and then they would split again in a spectacular argument. Maybe continue the cycle of mutual love and hate for a while even before finding an acceptable level. When Fluffy limped over they nodded to him but continued talking among themselves.

"Scuse me, I need to ask you a question John."

The group stopped talking and looked at Fluffy. This was unusual, Fluffy was rarely timid. Neagoth grinned, lifted his dark glasses up into his forehead, revealing the one green and one blue eyes he had implanted in honour of a long dead singer and pointed with his fork at him.

"Sure, you can ass a question, but no cheeky ones."

The group laughed except Hortan who didn't understand the joke. Fluffy smiled at Neagoth while taking one finger up and pulling down on his left eyelid.

"Right here buddy, right here. No, seriously I need a word John, please?"

John put his napkin down, nodded to Ms. Chi and got up.

"Sure Fluffy, let's walk."

They walked down to a table further in the restaurant and sat.

"So, spill the beans Fluff. What is the problem?"

"I have made a promise to someone that I am not sure I am able nor even allowed to keep."

John raised an eyebrow but didn't say a thing.

"I have...gosh. Okay, here goes. I did a run with pharmaceuticals to Remley, got in trouble and asked Azumi to help me. She did and wanted a favour in return."

John started smiling along with the raised eyebrows.

"And she is now expecting me in Latos Mining dressed nicely in around an hour."

"I fail to see what the problem is? I mean, so she wants a hot date with The Fluffy or something. No problem here mate, just make sure that you don't do anything that goes against your morals and I am sure you will be fine. Oh, and please don't tell Hortan buddy. Have fun and good luck."

John patted Fluffy on the shoulder and walked over to his pancakes again, a grin on his face showing that Fluffy was in trouble but okay.

Fluffy got up and limped out of the restaurant, waving to the crew as he passed and dragged himself to his rooms. He needed to change, the shorts and sleeveless shirt combined with flip-flops was probably outside of what Azumi defined as nice. He found the dress uniform and wormed into it, complete with all his mining ribbons, trade ribbons and the special TGFT ribbon for Successful Defence Against Pirates with the C on top of it for 100 kills. He looked in the mirror and was satisfied. Maybe not as flashy as John, maybe not as impressive as Dozer, maybe not as clear-cut as Surbius, but still looking pretty good. He picked a blonde wig and placed it on his head. There, it couldn't get any better now. He walked down to his Atlas TPG X special edition and launched for Latos Mining. He arrived without problems, docked his ship and sat himself in the dock area and waited for Azumi steeling himself for the encounter with some Helio Mists from his hip flask.

On the hour a pink Warthog Mk II trainer version docked at a breakneck speed, actually making a turn with full thrusters inside the dock. To the sound of super heated metal cooling, the canopy gull wings opened and Azumi jumped out. Fluffy managed to swallow some of the whisky into his windpipe and started coughing like as if he had tuberculosis. He had only seen Azumi once before, and that had been in a very intoxicated state in a dark room where she had been escorted by several pirates that definitely had taken some of his attention away. Not so this time. Azumi had dressed in a long black armless flowing dress that swirled around her feet like a lovesick puppy yet managing to avoid hindering her movement in the slightest, complemented by a jade green necklace with an obscenely large blood-red gemstone that matched her

make-up. A pair of long black gloves that were adorned with red and green semiprecious stones in two swirling lines from her slender wrists to her elbows seemed to lead directly to her raven-black hair that was kept in place by a silver net with the same kind of stones as the ones on her gloves. She smiled at Fluffy and twirled, her hands out from her sides and showing her naked back where her second tattoo dominated. She grinned mischievously at him after showing off and walked over.

"You can breathe now, otherwise you'll faint and then you won't be of much use."

Fluffy realised that he had held his breath for more than a minute, actually the whole time he had looked at the pirateess. He took a deep breath and even remembered to close his mouth. He got up and bowed formally for her, showing that he would vacate the chair for her if needed, even if his ass hurt like ever. She smiled coyly at him and shook her head. He looked somewhat confused at her and was about to ask her something when she put her left index finger on his lips.

"I am going to a party, and I want you to join me."

Fluffy was speechless, what could this Goddess possibly want him for?

"Relax, it is not as you think dear. I need you for a little gimmick. It won't hurt at all and you might even have fun if you are the least curious and flexible."

She opened her right hand and a long silver chain fell from it. She then explained her idea, which Fluffy hardly heard and merely nodded his agreement to. At this stage he would have agreed to just about anything.

## 51. Curtain

CLM headquarters was a hive of restless energy with all the pirates making ready for the party that was due to take place in almost no time now. The main dining facility had been transformed from the bare metal bulkheads into a true pirates nest as imagined from Old Earth complete with lianas from the ceiling, granite chairs, parrots flying around, several large treasure chests standing around, some open and displaying gleaming metal beneath and crate upon crate of alcohol. Sharingan had been in charge of the decorations, a task that Mystic felt he could handle very well especially after he had decorated her own chambers some three months ago. Wittman and Lebermac had been supposed to help, but by some slip of mind Sharingan had asked Leeb to put the alcohol that Swag Man had supplied them with into coolers. Two hours later he and Wittman had decorated the room with a drunken pirate as well, complete with twin black eye-patches and an empty bottle of Teh Killa in his hand.

The pair of them was standing at the bar underneath the banner proclaiming "YARR, good ta have ya back Retard-tile" drinking a Dark Lady and nodding to the guests as they entered. Sharingan was dressed in all black silk with a crimson scarf around his head and a deadly looking scimitar from his black leather belt with brass buckle around the waist. Wittman was wearing a pair of brown leather pants with a white blouse crossed in front and back with a broad leather strap in which he kept a pair of flintlock pistols. A cutlass was hanging from his right side. His ears were pierced by several gold earrings and he had a fake scar across his cheek.

Look came staggering in with a genuine hook instead of a hand on his right arm and a prosthesis on the left that ended in a large mug already half full or half empty depending on your own personal view on life. He had brought Tramshed, Mephostopholes and Swag Man along, all of them intoxicated to some degree already. Swag Man dropped his cowboy hat on the bar, sat down and put one booted heel on the table. Tramshed walked over to the computer and entered a code changing the music to something that was vastly different from what had been before. The drums fired away as the pistons on an old style petrol engine going at max. revs, heavy guitar and bass creating a cacophony of sound to complement the growler's deep voice. Sharingan walked over and looked at what Tramshed had entered; Dying Fetus - Homicidal Retribution. Sharingan turned to Tramshed and shouted.

"Man, this shit is heavy dude."

Tramshed replied by starting to throw his head up and down in rhythm to the drums and playing imaginary air guitar, actually very appropriate to the all black leather outfit with spikes he was wearing. Sharingan grinned at the others and walked back to the bar. The four of them looked at Tramshed as he tore all over the place, even using Leeb as dancing partner even if he never woke up to realise it. Swag Man slowly drank his beer, apparently unmoved by

the music until it changed over to some country sounding heavy guitar riff. He put down his beer, got up, walked over to Tramshed and pushed him hard in the chest. Tramshed pushed back and for the next ten minutes they pushed each other around, fight-dancing to the music. Exhausted they wandered over to the bar where Mystic had joined them.

"So, who won?"

Tramshed and Swag Man looked at Mystic and were about to come with some smart-ass comment but decided against it. She radiated leadership as always and they respected her too much to do that. Tramshed grabbed a Dark Lady and turned to face her.

"Wasn't a fight Mystic, 'twas a dance."

"Oh, for a minute there I was worried. That must be the only dance where it is fortunate to have elbows and foreheads surely."

Tramshed grinned and looked back at Swag Man's new pretty blue eye that was an unfortunate result of a collision of Tram's elbow and a vicious Swag Man headbang. He had received several blows himself without noticing it making his ear bleed from a small tear on the top of it.

"Yeah, blows off steam and shows you that you're alive Myst."

Mystic raised her glass in salute to him and Swag Man. The mojito, heavy on the rum fitted her image very well; besides it tasted so very nice. The group started a talk about the best wormholes to camp and the best trade routes to intercept when Azumi made her entrée. The outfit she was wearing had the same effect on the male members as if a Trident light frigate had decided to dock in the bar; the conversation stopped and all attention was focused on her. Mystic half choked on her drink.

"What the hell is that Az?"

Mystic pointed to the person entering with her. Well, entering with her is an understatement really; in reality he was entering connected to her. Clad in an immaculate TGFT uniform except for the leather strap around his neck that was connected to Azumi's hand by a silver chain, Fluffy limped in slightly hunched over making him even more Quasimodo like than he had ever been. When they had entered the bar, she pulled on his leash and he held a chair out to her before standing alert behind her. Anyone that knew Fluffy could see his nervousness but the pirates didn't so he was able to hide it.

"It's my pet TGFT member Mystic. You should get one, it is all the rage these days. It is like having a freak on a leash."

The pirates roared with laughter, even Fluffy grinning. Azumi pulled on his leash and made him walk over to the bar and get her a drink with loads of umbrellas and colourful things. He grabbed a bottle of Helio Mists for himself and limped back to his position behind his mistress. The pirates gathered around the table and started fretting Azumi and Fluffy about how he became her servant if only for a day. Several of the pirates had either pirated or attempted to pirate Fluffy over the years and they exchanged fight stories from both sides easily agreeing that TGFT and CLM were the best fighters, way above and beyond SYN and PA. The party almost stopped when Retractable walked in helped by RIBA 3.14RAT and Bidi, Bidi smoking on an obscenely large home made joint. Retractable spotted Fluffy and immediately frowned.

"What is that trader scum doing here?"

"Relax Retardtile, he is a cool cookie."

Sharingan walked over and hugged Retractable before grabbing him around the shoulders.

"Let me introduce you mate. Retractable, this is Azumi's newest pet, Fluffy. Azumi's newest pet, this is Retardtile. There introductions made, drink."

Fluffy handed Retractable a large glass of Helio Mists before tossing an identical one down himself. Retractable tossed his drink down and stared at Fluffy again. They both started coughing at the same time, making people laugh again. Helio Mists in such large doses were not without repercussions. Fluffy poured a new set and Retractable looked at his glass once more.

"Well, if you are 'Zumi's pet I guess you can stay."

He tossed his new drink, sat down next to Azumi and joined the discussion of best fighters in known space.

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Leeks woke to a deep bass sound that had been thumping for at least an hour. He licked his dry lips with an even drier tongue and cursed the goat that had been French-kissing with him all night. He felt as if he had been the ball in a particular nasty game of polo played with spiked clubs. He opened one eye and discovered the thing that was making the noise, a cleaning bot that thumped against his head while attempting to clean the floor. He slowly rolled away and the bot continued the high whining noise of a vacuum cleaner. He decided then and there that he would stop drinking. This would be the last time ever he would wake up on a floor unaware of how he had ended there. He spotted a banner that was slowly being eaten by another cleaning bot; only the word "Retard" was still visible. Never again, this time he meant it. He got up and staggered up to the bar to get a soft drink when he spotted the bottle of genuine 52% proof Tequila. He shook his head, he had to be seeing visions but

the bottle with the amber liquid did not go away. He grabbed for it, maybe just one more drink to have something to remember now that he was a teetotaller. He opened the bottle and had to close his eyes with pleasure from the smell. He opened them again and looked around for a glass, he only wanted one little drink really. After a few seconds of looking he gave up and took a swig from the bottle. Mmmh, very very good. Now no more, after all he was not an alcoholic, he could control it. He took another large swig and looked at the bottle. Oops, he had taken a quarter from the bottle. Now the others would think that he couldn't control it. He'd better get rid of the evidence. He drank deep from the bottle again while staggering towards his quarters. He felt pretty good now actually, maybe he had been a tad rash there before, I mean a drink never hurt anyone surely....

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Fluffy had no idea how he had come back to Dau K-10, and even less how he had arrived in his bed. By some strange quirk of fate, the same goat that had French-kissed with Leeb's had kissed an equal amount with Fluffy. He got up and staggered towards the door. He noticed the leash on the table next to the picture of him and Azumi in the CLM HQ bar and grinned. That had been a wild party; actually he had been happy that he had agreed to join as the freak on a leash. Smiling hurt his head, this was going to demand Nyrius dew, painkillers, chips, more chips and a lot of sports on the tube, otherwise he would not make it through the day. Just another average day in TGFT.....