

Innocence is No Excuse

-A Vendetta-Online story

By
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1. Rehabilitation

"....And so I believe we are finished for today, hmm?"

Hortan looked up at the elder man sitting next to him. He was clad in a tweed jacket, white shirt and tie discreetly hidden behind the brocade vest. His greying hair was in a complete mess and so out of place in the otherwise impeccable clothes of Dr. Lloyd Wyman M. D. that it made him human in some way. Trustworthy even, which was a very nifty ability in a psychiatrist.

The Dr. looked back at Hortan

"We have come a long way young man," he patted Hortan on the hand, " and I am going to lower the dosage of your anxiolytics. We are however going to continue with the Lithium-carbonate for a little while yet, ok?"

Hortan had hoped that he would have been free of the drugs altogether, but he knew that without them he would be reduced to the wreck he had been, when they dragged him in here those four months ago. He, as well as his guildmates, had thought that he could handle the situation, but as the weeks dragged on without the consolation of his Dark Queen, the loneliness and raw violence he could hear on the common Sub Space Communications Unit (SSCU) got to him. One day he rolled over on the other side instead of getting up. Three days went by before Mor Isil came to check up on him, and by that time Hortan was reduced to drooling. Well, mumbling, shaking and drooling.

Intensive drug therapy saw him almost back to almost normal within a month, and he started going to the shrink. He had done this with the usual dedication Hortan always put into his tasks, and now almost three months later he was on minimal dosage. He was grounded off course, but he was hoping that he would be allowed a supervised mining trip with one of the older guild members. That was why he was back at the Dr.'s office, trying to get clearance for launch.

"Will I be allowed to fly again doc? We have this event coming up that I really.." Dr. Wyman cut him off mid sentence with a curt nod of his head.

"I am going to send a message to Surbius, you may go on escorted flights for now, and we'll see how it goes." Hortan could barely contain himself. "If all is well, you may have your full clearance back in a month, and hopefully off he Lithium-carbonate as well son."

Hortan sat up straight and almost ran to the door leading out of the room.

"The next appointment is scheduled and in your PDA. Make sure you make it, ok?" Hortan barely heard the man as he stormed out of the room, leaving the chuckling Dr. behind.

"Notes on Hortan," the Dr. said to the computer that was recording everything, "Cleared for limited flight under supervision. Will be good for further treatment. New evaluation in one month from today. Must not under any circumstances be exposed to violence for at least the next month. Danger of relapse. End. Make copy and send to Surbius Bondevo. Use form 8729/4b Psychological Evaluation for TGFT Members, Junior status. Initiate."

"...Danger of relapse. Sincerely Dr. Wyman, M.D." Surbius stared at the screen as the medical report ended. "Oh crap!" he uttered angrily, and punched the No Reply button. Another message ticked in. Sender, Hortan. Smiling his crooked smile in anticipation, he punched Open. Already knowing what would be in the message, he scanned it briefly before sighing deeply and closing it.

"So, Hortan wants to go Heliocene mining, and the doctor says it is good for him and he needs an escort that I am supposed to supply. As if I didn't have enough on my mind as it is," he thought. "Who in the name of the Abyss do I send to baby-sit....?"

His eyes went to the highly polished TGFT logo on the wall and stared at the image for inspiration, a habit he had acquired over the years as XO. Alas, no inspiration coming, and his gaze started drifting to the immense amount of paperwork on his desk. He really did not want to force one of his pilots to take their busy time off as psycho support for something that might or might not help the young Hortan, and he was slowly resigning himself to taking the task upon his own shoulders. Yet another task that is. He sighed and grabbed some files. Better clear some of the paperwork first, he thought. Frowning, he noticed that the same name popped up several times on the 312B Non-Standard Behaviour Complaint forms that constituted the bulk of his paperwork. John Eldritch. Surbius frowned and scanned the papers. He smiled an even more crooked smile.

"The Muse of inspiration works in mysterious ways" he said aloud and punched up the contact number for John Eldritch. "But as long as she works for me, she can be as mysterious as she wants."

"What, no, I mean, why me? I am busy" John Eldritch protested vigorously, but to no avail. Slightly hung-over and wearing a rather wrinkled and too large TGFT uniform that looked like it had been used as floor for a viscous bout of

Combat Tango, John looked like he had just awoken without sleeping much. Which was the truth actually. He had been unable to find his own flight suit, and had taken Waldoze's, even if Waldoze towered some 15 centimetres over him and was 18 kilos more massive than him. At least he had found a spare nametag to put on.

Surbius took the very thick dossier and glanced at its more than fifty 312B's.

"Busy, Yes, I see, but hardly with guild matters." He pulled one file out at random. "These are just from last night. Complaint on non issue clothing worn in mess hall area, Complaint of utilising the water cooler for non standard drinks, Complaint on using the toilet paper for non standard use, the list is practically endless John," Surbius looked up at John over the top of the file, carefully keeping the folder to cover his mouth, so John could not see the immense smile he couldn't hide.

John laughed, "ha ha, yeah that was a good toga party." He remembered very vividly an unconscious Waldoze being wrapped in toilet paper. "But using the water cooler for the White Russians wasn't my idea," he said.

"Oh, and who did it then?" Surbius picked up his pencil.

"Never mind," John said defensively, "It doesn't matter. So, what do I have to do for the guild?"

Surbius smiled. That Machiavelli dude wasn't wrong at all. Find the right pressure buttons and you can get anything done. Besides, he didn't want to put Lambin on a 312B for the stunt with the water cooler. It was enough that Surbius knew who it really was after all, and he would get him later.

2. Hardware

Hortan was buzzing with energy. Finally, he thought, I get to take the Ole Sloth Moth out for a mining trip. He had packed his daypack and was skipping along the access corridor to Moda's workshop when he bumped into Vardonx, who was headed in the opposite direction with a pair of very pretty blonde girls on his arms.

"Hort, hi mate, long time since," he beamed at Hortan. "Are you going to the party tonight?"

Hortan looked at Vardonx slightly bewildered. "Party?"

"Yeah, Mor Isil is throwing this party to celebrate his new class XVII level trade license. It's gonna be a blast"

Hortan looked at Vardonx, at the two girls, immediately looked into the floor and blushed like mad when he realised that one of the girls was wearing bodypaint instead of a top, and muttered, "don't know, sure, if I can make it, gotta go mine, Helio can't wait, must fill one moth full.."

Vardonx put one finger under Hortan's chin, lifted his face and looked directly into the baby blue eyes. "You come if you feel up to it, ok? Girls, you are embarrassing my man here, lets go." With that the giggling trio side-stepped Hortan and left him standing in the corridor alone.

Shaking his head slowly, he started trotting down towards Moda's place again.

The entrance to the hangar was framed by two banners of black synth silk, with a painting of a happy smiling skunk with its arms folded adorning each sheet. As usual, loud Heavy Metal was competing with the sounds of various machines stationed at seemingly random places around the shop. The hard distortion guitar and drums had an almost intoxicating sound to it, and coupled with the deep raspy voice of the singer "*Sleep my friend and you will see, the dream is my reality. They keep me locked up in this cage, can't they see it's why my brain says Raaaage*" made Hortan stand still and listen intensely. He would probably have stayed still for the rest of the song, if it wasn't for a loud laugh that turned into an almost nasal guffawing. Fearing that someone was choking, Hortan ran quickly over towards the sound and spotted Zathras and Moda. Moda holding one arm on a bulkhead to stabilise himself while laughing, and Zathras standing with a puzzled look on his face, and a hydrospanner in his right hand that had very obviously and catastrophically malfunctioned. The hydraulics fluid usually contained inside such a device was covering most of Zathras, the bulkhead and some machine that was split into its component parts.

"Are you ok?" Hortan asked half waiting for an explosion of rage to come from Zathras. Instead, Zathras tossed his head back and laughed as well, while tossing the now defunct spanner into the spreading pool of hydraulics fluid.

He pointed one greasy finger at Moda.

"Ok, point to you for that one. What is the score then?"

"Thre, thre, three-two ha ha.." Moda managed to squeeze out between laughs. Noticing Hortan, he winked at him and pointed towards the refrigeration unit that was placed between three large comfy chairs. "Get us a beer, will you?" he asked while holding his side and looking at Zathras who had started cleaning his face and hands with a rag.

Hortan fetched two Serco Ales and one Nyrius Dew. Moda looked at the soda with distaste, and accepted the beers for him and Zathras.

"Still going dry, eh? Cheers anyway" Moda raised his beer and gulped it down in a couple of swallows.

"Yeah, I have to, at least until I stop on the Lithium pills." Hortan had never really been a heavy beer drinker, but he had always been willing to drink one in good company. Helio Mists on the other hand. Another thing he was longing for when he didn't have to take the pills.

"So, what brings you here son?" Zathras asked while sipping his beer. "He is here for his EAPRS, you know that." Moda's voice was almost completely drowned by the clinging noises from the refrigerator, that he has stuck his head into in the search for more beer. It didn't help either that he had stuffed his mouth with some leftover BioCom Natural Flavoured Imitation Synth Pork Rinds, better known as Pork Candy.

EAPRS, pronounced JAPPERS was a new invention that Hortan was testing for Moda. The Enhanced Automatic Pilot Recovery System was supposed to take the person it protected, and quantum teleport that person to a designated facility upon catastrophic failure of life support. This should supposedly allow the person to remain conscious all the time and eliminate the minutes normally needed after recovery.

"Oh yeah, we installed that like a month ago. It is ready for testing," Zathras smiled and nodded in the direction of bay five, "but you don't have to, you know, test is on purpose."

Hortan looked at the bright yellow Behemoth with its matte black mining beams inside the bay. Ye Olde Sloth Moth XXIV, his favourite mining ship.

"So, where did you put the buttons this time Moda?" Hortan asked, remembering last time he tested something for the tinker.

"No buttons man, it is all automated. Life support stops, JAPPERS kicks in. You see the cute face of the nurse and runs off to get another ship," Moda grinned, beer in one hand and pork candy in the other.

Hortan went over to his ship and stroked it with his right hand all the way from the nose along the flank to the large engines in the back. He went inside and checked the cockpit, made sure the dice's were at their usual spot in the window, and downloaded his favourite music to the computer. Satisfied everything was just as it should be, he dumped the daypack inside and jumped outside again.

"Can I take the Ole gal out now Moda?" he asked

"Sure, it is after all your ship. Enjoy, and don't test the JAPPERS too hard, you hear," Moda was shouting from the other side of the hall. He was bent over some engine or other with only Zathras's legs sticking out.

Hortan sent a notification to the dock master, and ran off to find John Eldritch. This day was becoming better and better. What could possibly go wrong?

3. Mining

Luckily Mor Isil's office was on the way to the launch bay. Otherwise he would have forgotten to run by, and Hortan had to get permissions from the councillor for Mining operations prior to launching. That way the roids were harvested most efficiently, and all the roids were sure to be utilised. The pretty young girl sitting outside beamed a smile at Hortan that made him blush slightly. Sensing his unease, she quickly picked up a file and shoved it at him. The slight smell of Eo roses accompanying her hand sure didn't ease his discomfort, but he took the papers nonetheless.

"Could you take this in to the Councilman on your way in please? He is waiting for you"

Hortan took the papers ever willing to help, and forgot his unease. Focus now, he was going mining! The office that Mor Isil inhabited was fairly large, with some of the most beautiful pictures in known space. Hortan thought so at least. All registered Heliocene roids were displayed in 3d on the walls, including Hortan's favourite roid. He remembered the first time he mined it, with Latin Queen Isabella...

"Yes?" Mor asked after he had observed Hortan enter the room, stop in the doorway, papers in hand and stare at the same picture for about two minutes.

"Oh, sorry, memories," Hortan snapped out of it and smiled to Mor. "I have these papers for you." He handed them over to a slightly puzzled Mor Isil. "From your secretary, she said you needed them. You have a list of roids for me councillor?"

Mor looked at the file, and put it in the out box where his secretary had taken it some minutes ago, and took the special file he had created for this occasion. "Sure have, it's just a small list to start with, but I expect the usual quality." Mor had been briefed by Surbius on Hortan's state of mind, and so had given him two station locations. Both Heliocene off course, but very far away from the usual hive activity.

Hortan took the file, looked the two pages through, and said with a bit of disappointment, "Is that all? I had hoped for a longer trip, maybe one or two of the lesser roid fields now I have John with me."

"Sorry Hort, best I can do on such short notice. Don't want you to miss the party tonight either, right? You are welcome if you feel like it, I think it will be great fun."

"Yeah, well, I'll see if I get the ore in on time for it," Hortan replied, even as he knew he would be finished at least four hours before the party would start. As soon as he had said it, he regretted. "Sorry, it's just, I wanted so bad to do a long time mining marathon, and this is, this is..."

"A start Hortan, it is a start," Mor Isil interrupted. "You deliver the quality I am used to, and we'll find some long term mining mission. That's a promise, you hear?"

Hortan stood straighter. "Aye aye councilman Isil. And I shall attempt to be in time for the party." Hortan turned around and hurried out of the door down the corridor towards the launch bay area.

Hortan found John in bay seven. He was going through the checklist for his Centaur Mk III, moving with infinite care and deep concentration, as he made sure the combat modifications to the trade ship were up to specifications. Satisfied, he signed the pre-flight check board and handed it to the anxious flight technician.

"Hortan," he turned and smiled, "are you ready for some mining? I have received the locations from Mor, and have programmed the navcomps on both ships. Ready when you are."

Hortan ran to his own Ole Sloth Moth, and engaged the autolaunch sequence, the great bulk of the Behemoth clearing the launch bays with centimetres to spare on either side. The green bulk of John's ship was off to the right, and with the usual 160 m/s, they accelerated out towards the jump point. Only a short jump, and they were in the Heliocene roid fields. Hortan engaged the High Density mining beams, and turned to activate the zero-G still. Soon, the only sounds were the droning from the capacitors on the mining beams and the drips from the still. Not even the SSCU was active.

Too soon he had filled his quota, and he jumped back to Dau K-10 with John.

"Station Traffic Control, this is pilots Eldritch and Hortan on course for docking. Requesting one offloading and one combat craft maintenance bay" Johns voice was clear across the SSCU. "Checking credentials. Ok, you are cleared inbound for bays seven and 18 respectively, approach paths to be downloaded immediately," the STC came back.

After docking, Hortan got out and waved byes to John, who was still inside the Centaur. It had been a great day. Now he only had two problems, how to convince the guild that he was ready to go out on his own, and what to wear for the party...

Seven figures sitting in high-backed chairs placed in a half-circle. All dressed in black robes, veiled faces, gloves, and all backlit. The single slab of highly polished obsidian that served as a common table, had seven embedded computer screens hidden from view. Only one large spotlight was turned on, and it was pointed directly at Ardon's face. He had been sitting in the uncomfortable three-legged metal stool for around twenty minutes now, and not a single sound had been uttered. The only action that had portrayed the

seven figures as alive was the single finger that pointed for him to sit when he entered.

"Hmm, so it seems to be running along nicely," one of the robed figures said.

"We have to be absolutely certain we take prime alfa out with the first blow," another voice said. "Otherwise I am not sure we can contain the situation."

Ardon looked in the direction of what he thought was the source of the voice. "I have a specially trained EVA team that is tasked with making sure that the APRS will not activate, and that it will look like malfunction. I have...."

"You have the right to shut up," the voice said. "I am sure you have planned well. It looks feasible, but someone has to figure out what we do if, or rather when, things go FUBAR. Now, plan agreed, you have two days from now to initiate. We will be informed as of the timing of attack. Leave us now."

Ardon kept his face neutral, and his body causal even as he was trembling inside with excitement. They accepted, **THEY ACCEPTED!** He nodded his head to the council and walked into the anteroom on shaky legs, that were only partly caused by the lack of blood to the legs due to the uncomfortable stool.

The hooded figure in the centre raised his voice. "Great dangers involved, but also great opportunities. I need a unanimous council on this one. I need it now, or Ardon will be terminated."

On his screen was the small chamber that held Ardon while he was waiting to be released to the station proper, as seen through the thermal targeting of the large calibre machinegun installed in the ceiling. With one touch of his hand, hundreds of bullets would shatter the frail body to a pulp.

"Vote now."

Six votes for aye, his own vote remaining. He slammed down his hand on the screen.

"The council has voted. We proceed. Adjourned"

On the screen, he could see Ardon move out of the room, oblivious to how close he had been to non-existence.

4. The Party

Dressed up in his finest uniform, Hortan entered the party and immediately knew he had missed something vital. The bar was full of what appeared to be a support group from CLM, all swaggering, bandanas, cutlasses and parrots. The rear of the room contained a Roman consul's table, complete with slaves, to the left side, and a Heavy Metal band with support groupies to the right. A trio of Victorian looking poets, one with a very thick book, were trying to perform something very loudly between these rowdy groups. But what took the price was the seven foot drag queen dancing on the table in the middle of the room and her, or rather his entourage with the very large moustache and broad shoulders, that was performing some kind of break-dance/martial arts on the floor to the tune of an ancient Swedish band named ABBA. Dancing Queen, how apt Hortan thought, and was just about to turn and bolt, when one of the pie rats swaggered up to him, bottle in one hand, eye patch on both eyes, a peg-leg and a wicked looking claw.

"Yarr, it be the Hortan yarr. What kinda costume be ye havin'? Some kind of trader, yarr? Pay ye me then"

Hortan looked closer, "Pasquel? That you?"

"Yarr matey, he be I yarr. Hey, didn't they tell you? It is a fancy dress party." Pasquel pointed to the consul, slurring slightly. "There's Vardonx, but who the two slavegirls are, I don't know. Unfortunately," he laughed. Hortan had some idea.

"Over there is, Moda, Zathras, M.2, Fluffy, Mor Isil and the girl that looks at him so adoringly is his secretary, Ms. Kanaka," he pointed to the metal heads. "The guy with the large orange Afro-Mohawk is Fluffy, just in case you are wondering." "Over here in the bar is me, Ato, John, Strat, and Mercy," he pointed with the bottle of Sedina Rum before taking another swig.

"The Victorian bard over there is Surbius, and I believe he is trying to force people to listen to his poem "An Ode to the 243-b, Permission to Dance form", but nobody seems to listen much. It has been going on for about three hours now anyway. The green clad fellow against the wall with the "Kiss me I'm Irish" t-shirt and a bottle of whisky in each hand is Buzz. And the attentive helper with the banjo is Tuinya. Amazing patience, deafness, or a momentary lapse of sanity is my bet as to why they didn't run off or perish hours ago." Hortan looked, but he failed to take his eyes away from the swirling drag queen for more than a few seconds.

"And la piece de resistance; Mary-Jo on the table, and Betty-Lou on the floor. Better known as The Boss and Waldoze." Pasquel took another swig of the bottle.

Ecka finished his table dance with a jump down to the floor, a swing around the chair, pirouetted over to the bar on the six inch plateau shoes, landed in

an empty chair and called in a very deep voice for whisky. Hortan was awestruck. The timing was perfect, as befitted an extremely skilled acrobat/fighter such as The Boss. Waldoze ended his routine with a handstand and vaulted over to Hortan. He pushed Hortan into a chair and sat on his lap. Taking Hortan's cap off, he quickly ruffled his hair.

"So, you came. Bloody marvellous. Need a drink mate, can you fix me one? These heels are killing me, and the skirt and stockings doesn't make it much better." He planted a huge kiss on Hortan's cheek, thereby painting it in bright neon red and switched lap to Pasquel, so Hortan could get up.

Completely confused, Hortan started for the bar, turned around and went back for his TGFT propeller cap, put it on his head and went up to the pie rats. He moved in between John and Strat, and tried to get the barkeep's attention. Dressed in black leather pants with cut-outs on the buttocks, a leather vest with metal studs, a huge moustache and a low leather cap, Lambin turned around and smiled at Hortan.

"So, what'll it be sailor?" he said with a slight lisp.

"One large rum, one large Helio Mists and one Nyrius Dew, please," he smiled at Lambin.

"Sorry, no can do mate." He pointed to the sign proclaiming that you had to be above 18 to be served alcohol.

"It is not for me, it is...Hey, I am over 18" Hortan protested.

"Not what you cap says. According to that, you are a minor," Lambin had to turn away so as not laugh too loudly.

Hortan tore his cap off and looked at the caption. The E in MINER had been covered with an O. Looking up, he saw that John and Lambin could barely contain themselves, and as he realised this, they cracked completely. Loud laughter was echoing through the bar, and Lambin served the drinks. Wiping away a tear at the corner of one eye, he stuttered "On the house mate, on the house."

Hortan looked at John fuming and indignant. "How long time have I been walking around with that?" "Oh, no more than some hours, a day at most," he hiccupped. Taking Hortan around the shoulders, he led him over to the table with Waldoze and seated him. "You have fun now, you hear? Chill out and have fun mate"

Hortan lasted two hours. Then he had to get some peace, and retired to his bed. He awoke to the soft chime of the guild internal channel. Awake almost immediately, he punched "answer" and croaked "yeah."

A soft female voice answered "Hortan, you are needed in the command

centre. You have 10 minutes. End of message."

Regretting that he had brought the dress uniform to the party yesterday, and especially that he had been active in playing "space helmet rugby" across the wet floor, he settled for a standard flight suit and propeller cap. He bolted down the corridor to the OPS room. Inside the room, he was greeted by Ecka, who was sitting as usual in his command seat, crossed Claymores and shield hung over the impressive tartan cloth that adorned the back wall.

"Hortan, how are ye lad?" the Voice of Ecka cut through the clattering noises as clearly as if Hortan had been wearing earphones turned up to maximum. "Come over here, sit." Ecka pointed to the large synth leather chair normally used by Surbius.

Hortan walked over, sat in the chair, and looked up at Ecka. "I am good Sir, I am still on my medication, but the doc says that I can fly again."

"Aye lad, I read ye file. What he also tells, is that ye have ta do second line duty for a while. I have however a wee problem ye cae help me with if ye so care."

"Anything Sir, just tell me what," Hortan said eagerly.

"We be havin this convoy later that we are setting up fa the TPG, ye kenn? And we hae promised to support with five combat pilots. Yesterday Lambin tried a new trick with a cutlass and impaled himself with it. So he is outa flying for at least a week."

"Sir," Hortan protested, "I can't fly as a combat pilot, I don't know how."

Ecka stopped him with a smile and a shake of the head. "No lad, ye will nae be flying combat. I am asking ye ta take my space as leader of the TPG merchant convoy, and the I will take the combat duties. Truth be told," he winked, "I prefer a wee fight to a convoy duty. So, can I count on ye?"

"It will be an honour Sir," Hortan said, bursting with pride. Him, leading a TPG convoy for the greater co-operation between the guild and the ancient group.

"T'll have ta be a secret lad. Ye hae ta paint ye moth in green and pretend ta be me, ye kenn? I trust ye lad, contact Moda for specifics. We'll fly in 18 hours. Dismissed."

Hortan practically ran down to Moda to get the details. He would show them that he could handle it, he would show them. Then perhaps he would be allowed to do solo mining missions again.

Ardon watched the three EVA teams walk into the three Tunguska

Aggressors, silently counting them off as alfa, bravo and charlie. One team could do the assassination, but Ardon was a firm believer in triple redundancy. Besides, at just around 150k credits per team, he could easily cover it under the expenses allowed him by the Council. The strike force was almost ready and assembled. The navigation route for the convoy had been implanted in the correct computers. That was another million credits. Now he only had to wait for the main players to undock so the plan could unfold. His plan, his masterpiece, his entry into the council.

5. The Convoy

The briefing room was packed. But then again, it was going to be a massive convoy with more than fifty pilots. The block of regulation issue light blue flight suits was the 38 Behemoth, Centaur and Atlas pilots from TPG to the front and left. To their right were the six pilots from TGFT in their green suits. Right behind them were six Vipers pilots, their yellow and purple suits adorned with a large viper, fangs ready, on the left shoulder and flight badge on the right. In front of the large screen was another Viper with the name-tag Strat on his right side chest pocket.

"So, we are finally here, except for one TGFT pilot?" he asked. The leader of the TGFT group nodded. "Right, you have the route plan on your memsticks, with timings and jump sequence. Anybody missing one, come see me afterwards. Hmm, let me see," he looked through his notes, "Oh yeah, last minute change. Pilot Hortan will lead the supply convoy, as Mr. Estenk will be flying escort duty on Tangerine flight. I will still lead Purple flight. Green leaders call-sign will be unchanged, Green Alfa."

Hortan knew all this, but he, Strat and Ecka were probably the only ones. If anyone had any objections, it would be too late now, hence the secrecy.

"Right, Hortan, lead your flight out and form up at the vector given. Go signal to be issued on the encrypted SSCU from Tangerine alfa." Strat acknowledged that Ecka was the more experienced of them, and so should give the go. "Vipers in Purple launch in five, form on my ship, formation delta-33."

"Lads, lets get these supplies to Remley Station in time, and without pirate intervention. Be careful out there." Strat stalked out of the room, closely followed by his fellow Vipers.

Hortan stood and looked at the TPG group. "Ehm...lets move out." He tried to sound a bit like Strat, but only a vague croaking came out instead.

"All elements of Green, move out as ordered. Be at assembly the point in fifteen minutes." Surbius's voice cut through, and stuff happened. He leant towards Hortan, "You can do it, I have faith in you. And so has The Boss. Go show them, ok?"

Hortan stood and walked with the TPG group to the launch bays. His trusty Behemoth XC, the "Target Practice IV" was painted in standard TGFT green. He entered the cockpit, made sure the EAPRS was active, went through launch procedure and flew to the assembly point. The XC was not at all sluggish for once. The weight of the medicinal supplies was negligible in comparison to the Heliocene ore that was normally freighted. He felt like a buck out on grass at spring. Not that he knew what a buck was, let alone spring, but he had read about it in one of those Itani education holo's, and it felt right.

The SSCU activated with Strats voice "Space is clear all the way to Latos wormhole interface. Route is GO." Ecka came online, "Tangerine is ready in Latos H-2. All clear. We have GO on convoy, repeat, GO on convoy. Purple initiate block of B-6, Tangerine will initiate on O-12. Acknowledge."

All combat flights called WILCO, and so did Hortan. The only one in Green flight with the coded SSCU, he further informed the TPG group and gave the order to jump. He initiated his own jump sequence. They were committed.

Ecka jumped first into Latos O-12, followed immediately by Surbius, Mor Isil, John Eldritch, Waldoze and Vardonx. The radar picture he received left him with only one thing to say. "Shait. Buddy pairs and engage." It seemed like all of CLM was out on one of their blockade operations. Talk about bad timing. He ticked the pie rats off, yoda, LNH, ferskingen, Azumi, Wittman, Swag Man, tramshed. And MysticRogue. He punched the SSCU, "What is the activity at your place Strat? I could use some fighters over here. All of CLM is here for the party."

"Roger, all quiet here, I'll leave one pair and come to your location. Inbound in 4 minutes. Out." Ecka smiled, he knew that if CLM were around, Strat would be here in less than that. He targeted LNH, knowing that Surbius would get the information and do the same. He sent a happy thought to Lambin and engaged local hail. "On tin hats..". If it weren't for Lambin's ill fated stunt with that cutlass, he would have missed the fun.

Hortan jumped into Latos H-2 with his nerves on the outside of his suit. Immediately pressing the sector list after entering, he came up empty. The remaining transport ships of the convoys jumped in as well.

"All clear to the station so far. Purple and Tangerine has engaged pie rats around Latos O-12, and so far we are doing well. The pie rats thinks that we are going that way, thus leaving a clear path to us. Stand-by for further update and order for GO." Somehow it was easier for Hortan to give orders when he couldn't see the others. He texted Ecka and requested permission for go. The reply was almost instantaneous, GO. Hortan initiated jump sequence and jumped towards sector M-9 with the rest of the convoy right after him. The slight detour was intended to avoid any ion-storms, and form the convoy up before jumping out.

Ardon received the message. "Forwarded message from Ferrin Galders: Right on, all of TGFT and VPR are here at the wormhole. CLM owes you one. End" His hand trembled as he typed a message on his secure SSCU. MIRAGE. There, it was done. The order to initiate was sent, nothing to do now but wait. Wait and worry. He drank the remaining absinthe in his tumbler, leant back and closed his eyes.

6. The Dead Tell No Tales

Hortan re-entered normal space, expecting to find absolutely nothing. Or as close to nothing that complete vacuum and Heisenberg allows for. This was not it. The tumbling large roids right outside his XC were not supposed to be here. He had jumped into M-9 a lot of times before, and these roids were not supposed to be here. He looked down at the sector to check what had gone wrong, where they were. What the...

The radar was full of ships echoes, more than thirty of them. Fearing the worst, he started sweating badly and went for the SSCU switch. Maybe it was a coincidence? Instead of the SSCU, he punched up a sector list as his convoy started jumping in. A large PA convoy, he let his breath out, not aware that he had been holding it. PA, what are the odds, he thought and smiled. One of the lead ships in the PA convoy, a Warthog Mk II with the IFF responding as [PA]Mick, moved towards Hortan's XC. Hortan knew Mick, he was a very capable combat pilot, and he was very feared in Sedina for his skills with the Vulture. Wait, what was Mick doing in a Hog Mk II? He started to open a private channel to the Hog, when the screen glared out and his instruments died. He initiated diagnostics immediately, but all his boards were dead. The only thing he could do was look out of the view screen at the unfolding horror scene outside.

The PA ships had closed with the convoy, and were starting to destroy the ships. The lightly armed and armoured cargo vessel stood no chance against the onslaught of neutron and positron fire from the fighters, several had already exploded. Hortan saw how the TPG ships were ejecting their cargo in order to accelerate more rapidly, but all for nothing. The Hogs and Cents chased them down and slaughtered each end every ship. After three minutes, Hortan was left alone with the PA ships, one of them, the [PA]Mick Warthog stationed outside. He heard a clank in the hull, and looked up to see the armoured visage of an EVA marine with the telltale rising Phoenix on his left arm.

Hortan felt a glimmer of hope; maybe they had made a mistake and were going to rescue him? The EVA marine anchored himself to the outside of the view screen, and unfolded a long thin device. Another unseen marine handed some kind of cable to the anchored marine, who connected it to the device. Hortan has seen one of those before, where was it now?

The marine pointed the device at the interface of the chainglass and the hull. A slight humming sounded from the glass. He remembered. He had seen it at Moda's place, it was an ultrasonic drill for making very small holes in extremely dense material. Like chainglass and xithricite armour. Why would they make holes in his canopy? The marine lifted the drill and pointed it to a location further along the glass. The humming resumed. Hortan felt where the marine had drilled before. A slight movement of air was barely detectable, but an experienced spacer such as Hortan knew what that meant. And it was all bad news. Decompression, they were going to slowly decompress his ship.

He hit the chainglass to get their attention, even as he knew it would have no effect. He pushed his hand onto the small hole. The coldness of open space instantly froze the skin in a millimetre wide circle. He reached down to the next hole the marine had made, and pushed his other hand onto the hole. Seeing what Hortan was doing, the marine made another hole in front of Hortan's face and waited. Hortan pushed his forehead against the hole and felt the cold hit him badly.

The marine moved out of Hortan's reach and made three holes more before disengaging the nano power leach and abandoning the leaking vessel. He joined the other two marines of Alfa team and started jetting over to the Tunguska Marauder. He smiled inside his helmet. The look on the target's face when he bored the hole at the glass at his head was absolutely priceless. Pathetic beyond belief, the horror and fear at understanding what the marine was doing sinking in slowly but surely.

He was proud of his men; they had performed flawlessly and efficiently. After the convoy had jumped in and the mayhem had started, they had jetted to the green XC and secured the escape hatch. Not that he had expected that the pilot inside would be trying to escape, but you never knew. They had unfolded the nano net on the escape door, enabling the leach to interface with the emergency power grid. Then, they waited until the slaughtering had ended and the "PA" ships had left, apart from their own Marauder and the leaders Hog. They used the sonic drills and created the fake stress fractures on the green XC to make sure the person inside died without the APRS activating. Whoever thought of how to cheat the APRS was a real fiend he thought, normally it would activate upon catastrophic failure of the ship, but in this case the ship was in perfect condition. Except for the slow leaking of air, and the numbing coldness inside the cockpit.

He reached the rear of the Tunguska Marauder with his team mates. He grappled the handles outside the bay door and waited for his team to join him. He waived to the Hog and turned to initiate the airlock.

The marines were nicely lined up along the marauder. "[PA]Mick" lined his positron gun up on the engines of the marauder and fired without warning. The accelerated antimatter beams sliced through the armour plating as if it wasn't there at all, cutting deeply and eventually hitting the battery containment centre. The marauder exploded, flinging the marines away from the ship. He followed each of them, and with a slight touch of the trigger, he obliterated each man. Checking the sector for survivors, he found none. He activated the scanner and checked the green XC for leakage. Almost none now. So all the air had leaked now, killing prime alfa. He smiled, mission accomplished.

It had almost been too easy. He had placed the concussion mine on the side of the green XC, and when it went off, he had fired a short burst into the power coupler, effectively rendering the ship dead in space. The explosion had been the signal to engage for his pilots and the teams of EVA marines.

He was proud that he had come up with the idea of using the specialised nano power leaches to drain the emergency power from the green XC. That they had been able to use this power for drilling holes in the ship was almost ironic in his mind.

Satisfied that the mission was a complete success, he activated the turbo and lined up for a jump to Latos M-9. Just before jumping, Fadhe texted the prepared message to Ardon: The fish is on land.

Ardon opened his eyes when the message beeped in. The fish is on land. He sighed with relief, they had eliminated prime alfa, and the convoy was destroyed. Step one had worked according to plan. He poured himself a large glass of absinthe with shaking hands. Now for step two. He drank deep of the glass and texted his contact in Dau K-10. He was going to eliminate all traces that could lead to him, and at the same time he was going to make sure the blame was placed directly where he could use it for his master plan.

7. As Things Go South in a Most Delicious Way

The door chimed to the secretly rented apartment of Cenoeth Plabaru. He got out of his bed, and shuffled towards the door. He wondered who it could be; he wasn't expecting anyone at this hour. In reality, he wasn't expecting anyone, period. Nobody was supposed to know where he was staying. He had used a good deal of the money he had received for planting that practical joke in the NAVCOMCENT of TPG to ensure he couldn't be found for some time. He opened the door, and looked at the nondescript person clad in a flight suit with the rising phoenix on his chest.

"Mr. Plabaru? Mr Cannoeth Plabaru?" the man asked, reading from a tablet.

"Ehm, yes, but who are, ehm, how do.." Cannoeth was cut short by the angry buzzing of accelerated aluminium ions emanating from the top of the tablet. The man outside had aimed the tablet at Cannoeths head, and the ions punched cleanly through the top of his skull, spraying the room behind in an interesting new colour called hint of brain. The man looked at his victim, took a photo with the tablet's camera, sent it to his employer. He then touched a couple of buttons on his tablet, tossed it into the room and moved on down the corridor.

When he had walked about thirty paces, a small explosion sounded from the room, and the fire alarms started blaring. He walked into the main corridor, turned to the closest restroom and went inside. He took the cubicle furthest down and unlocked the door with a coin. Inside was a duffel bag with a set of clothes. He changed and removed his wig, fake nose, fake chin and contact lenses. He tossed the flight suit and extras into the bag, exited the restroom and went to the nearest garbage collection point, where he dumped the duffel bag down the chute to the nano eaters. Mission accomplished, he went to grab something to eat. Even professional anarchists have to eat he mused.

Just as sudden as the combat had started, the fighters from CLM started to drift off. Only Azumi, Swag Man and tramshed kept coming back. Ecka was satisfied that the two combat flights had kept the attention away from the convoy. They should by now be safely docked at Remley Orbital.

"Tangerine, break off and disengage. Reform on Remley Orbital," he sent on the combat net. He could follow on the radar as the highly disciplined fighter pilots broke off and start boosting for jump distance.

"Purple stays on station for as long as it takes. We'll show these pie rats," Strat forced out between clenched teeth, as his light fighter made a 5 G turn to line the guns up perfectly on tramshed's fighter. The hard beams of neutron fire and explosion. With less strain in his voice he called Ecka again.

"If we are finished with the mission, I shall now recall the team from B-6. We

can use them here." Ecka agreed, and Strat turned to watch the swirling combat 1800 meters away. Damn, he cursed silently. Han Shick and Vehement exploded silently under the combined guns of Swag Man and Azumi. Targeting Swag Man, he and Phaserlight boosted to engage. He sent an order for team Seta, the team at B-6, to jump to O-12 for combat mission. The battle was still wide open, but that would change once Seta Ralel and Maso arrived.

Inbound for docking at Remley Orbital, Ecka keyed the SSCU and asked for status from Hortan. They should all be docked now, and the cargo should be unloading as planned. No contact. Very odd he thought, and tested the system thoroughly. No faults. He sent a hail message to Hortan's SSCU, but again, no contact. Slightly puzzled, he was about to ask Surbius to hail Hortan, when a red flagged priority message ticked in. He acknowledged, and the very agitated face of the trade councillor for TPG popped up in his HUD.

"Huh?" Ecka cursed himself for answering the call with such eloquence. But the councillor was not who he had expected on the SSCU, to say the least.

"Mr. Estenk, care to explain why I have 38 pilot lying here in the Immediate Recovery facility? Unless they chose to unload their cargo by exploding their ships that is?"

"But, the, what?" Och, nice Ecka thought. Maybe I should find myself a shovel and dig a hole I could crawl into. Or maybe I should just get the foot out of my mouth.

"I have no clue. Everything was proceeding as planned. I have had no messages about that at all. I'll investigate immediately and call back." Ecka cut the holo and turned his ship, signalling to the rest of the flight to follow. He opened a link to the TGFT Immediate Recovery facility and asked for a status. No pilots in. Right.

"Tangerine flight, we are now officially a Search and Rescue team. Surbius, refurbish with an EVA salvage team and an EVA paramedic team. Vardonx, you get a scanner and cover him. The rest follow me to sector M-9. We are looking for at least 38 exploded ships, and Hortan's XC."

Eventually they found the remains of the convoy, and Hortan's XC. It became apparent that something was seriously wrong when they had searched M-9 for about an hour without a single trace. Doing a spiral search from there was time consuming, but essential. More and more TGFT and VPR pilots joined the search until after eleven hours Creyn called in with a trace of xithricite dust in a roid field in K-12. After another hour they tracked down an ass over head tumbling TGFT green Behemoth XC. Fearing the worst, Surbius sent over the EVA paramedics to get Hortan out. The salvage team started securing the XC to the two Tunguska mining Marauders for tugboat duty back to TGFT HQ in Dau K-10. The paramedics cut the emergency door out after making an inflated bubble tent seal over it, thus making sure not to expose the pilot to the

vacuum of space. When they drilled the first hole, the bubble tent collapsed inwards, as the vacuum inside the ship sucked the air out. When he saw that, Surbius cursed and looked down at his hands. He had promised Hortan that it would be ok, the young man had trusted in him, and now he was dead. He made a silent promise to pay the ones responsible back ten-fold.

"The XC is empty, no pilot." The voice of the paramedic crackled across the short distance. "The seat and mountings are gone as well. We'll wrap up here and seal for the forensics guys."

Ecka leant back and folded his hands across his chest, closed his eyes for ten seconds. Silent meditation, always worked best for thinking he felt. That, and a wee dram. Och, he could do with some of that *Phylatis Delicht* Moda kept in the secret stash behind his R&D console. Slowly the wheels turning inside the ancient miners head started clicking into place, and with a sudden cry of "Shait", he literally punched the SSCU. The radio was filled with concerned voices that had heard the commander over the open net, but he ignored them completely.

"This is Moda's automatic reply service. I am currently busy with some very important research, leave topic and preferred times, and I'll call you"

Ecka focused all the power he had learned at TGFT command school, and growled into the SSCU. "Moda, you pick up now."

As proof of the respect Ecka commanded, Moda picked up almost immediately, his holo picture showing him in a flight suit lightly covered in oil. "Sorry, Sir, I was changing hydraulics oil when you called, Sir."

"Did you use Hortan as test pilot on the EAPRS?"

"Affirmative Sir, that I did. Why?"

Ignoring the question and the unusual use of Sir, Ecka continued "Where is the recovery facility for it?"

"Ehm over in the back of the shop somewhere. I have meant to have it shipped down to Imme..."

Ecka cut him off with a very low voiced question, "Would you mind terribly, to shuffle over there and tell me what you find inside?"

"Sure Sir, stand by."

Ecka leant back. He hoped he was right on his hunch.

"Sir, Hortan is lying inside, he is sedated and out cold. He has some wicked looking sores on his hands and his head. I am requesting medical attention as we speak."

Ecka breathed a sigh of relief; maybe the young man was going to make it. At least now they could give him help. He cut out the SSCU and reached for the small emergency bottle to the left of his seat. After a wee dram, he called to the assembled pilots.

"Hortan is found. He is back at base, status unknown. I want all evidence here scooped up, and I want it delivered to Moda ASAP. The Guild will meet at 0800 station time tomorrow. No excuse possible. Surbius, with me, now."

Now he had to go to TPG and tell them that the convoy had been spattered across the vacuum. Not exactly how he fancied spending his afternoon.

8. Ultimatum Time

The TPG trade councillor's office was very large, including its own chainglass window to show the docking bays. Probably the room with the highest ceiling apart from the working areas, it was meant to impress. More than one deep spacer had had bouts of agoraphobia inside. Ecka still felt the walls and ceiling closing on him as the furious councillor was grilling him.

"The relationship between the guild of free traders and The Propeller Group, " you could hear how he was emphasising the size difference, " has been damaged immensely by this lack of protection. I give you 72 hours to come up with an explanation, or I will file a lawsuit to cover our losses. Any news and contact will be to the Security Council. You. Are Dismissed." The last came out not as a sentence but as single words, the contempt barely contained.

Ecka turned and left without a single word. Surbius waited in the reception, and without a single word he got up and followed his commander. Once outside of TPG controlled area, Ecka finally lost his self-control and punched his fist into the bulkhead, rupturing the plastic and burying his hand to above the wrist. Snarling he pulled his fist out and picked a plastic fragment that had stuck between his knuckles.

"I must say, I am impressed," Surbius said. "I wasn't sure you were going to make it this far."

Ecka looked at Surbius who held out a small hip flask. He took the flask and drank deep from it. Helio Mists, balm to the soul. Somewhat calmer, he looked at Surbius.

"We need information, and we need it now. Do you have anything from Moda yet?"

Surbius looked at the now empty flask and re-pocketed it. "No, he is going over it as we speak with Zathras. They think they can jury rig the black box and get the footage up to the power out."

"And Hortan? Is he awake?"

"No, the psychologist insisted to keep him sedated for now. I had to listen to him reprimanding me, as he thinks I had pushed Hortan into flying. So until necessity dictates otherwise, I am going to keep him under."

Ecka was not happy with that, but he trusted in the opinions of his specialists. They walked down to Moda's hangar, and entered the large hall. Silent, so very unusual Ecka thought. Only a fizzle and crack came from the left of the hall. They went over to find Zathras bent over a holodisplay, wires in all directions.

"I need information, and I need it now," Ecka growled. Zathras looked up, startled and bumped his head into the compartment above the holodisplay.

"Oh, yes, sorry. We have some information, but none of it is good I'm afraid," Zathras replied. He looked over behind Surbius and called for Moda.

"Anything is valuable right now," Surbius smiled at Zathras.

Moda came over and sat in his favourite chair.

"Ok, Zathras show them the holo."

Zathras activated the recording. Ecka stood in silence as he saw the [PA]Mick warthog fly to the XC.

Moda stood and pointed to the collection of space debris spread on the floor. "In the wreckage, we have found one armour plate with what looks like a bonfire with what may be a wing in flames. And one of the suit pieces have the letter "...iance" in flames written on the shoulder. I can only see one suggestion, however impossible it sounds. The Phoenix Alliance."

Ecka grimaced, surely this was not true. Surely it could be explained by...he drew a blank.

"Thank you gentlemen. Good work so far. I need a copy of the recording and you findings in writing ten minutes ago. Surbius, call the PA liaison office for a meeting in the OPS cell. No subject, I want her to be unprepared." He walked out of the hangar. If Moda's findings were correct, they were in deep trouble.

The small PDA chimed twice, making Tohasandra Chi drop to neutral stance. Her close combat instructor did the same. Sometimes during practice the instructor would have set his own PDA to call Chi's, and so maybe throw Chi's concentration. All part of the Krav Maga training he said. But two fast chimes meant TGFT. And he had never messed with that. She walked over to take the call. Puzzled, she looked back at her instructor.

"Sorry, we have to finish another day. Business. I have been summoned by Ecka"

John Eldritch nodded. He would have liked to train some more, the strain in his back from yesterdays marathon combat patrol aching badly, but the Boss was not to keep waiting. Especially not for the PA liaison.

"Just say when Ms. Chi, you know how to reach me." He went to the free weights and looked for the 75 pounders.

Chi looked at John and smiled. She had almost had him this time. Next time

there would be no mercy. She went to her room and changed to regulation flight suit. The proud rising phoenix on her right side of her chest, her name tag on the left, and her councillors bars on her slender shoulders looked good on her, and she walked with all the confidence of a major guild official. The OPS room was strangely silent and empty. Only Ecka in his chair. Strange, she thought. This was the first time ever she had seen the OPS room empty.

"Hi Ecka, so what is so urgent?" she asked cheerily.

Ecka merely pointed to a chair. Once she had seated herself he activated the holo screen in the centre of the room. Pictures of the tumbling XC, hurt and sedated Hortan, the [PA]Mick Warthog, the debris..

"Feel free to break in with an explanation at any time councillor." Ecka's voice rasped, the anger only barely contained.

"I am not sure.." Chi started, "I mean, this must be fabricated. Is this some kind of joke?" she asked and looked at Ecka. The look on his face suggested otherwise. Actually, she now had an idea of how it felt to be a mouse sitting in front of an Eo Pit Viper. Ecka looked directly into her eyes.

"I have a copy for you to present for your council. I suggest you move fast. I need proof that PA did not do this within 24 hours, or you can consider yourselves as KOS. Yourself included. If you have questions, consult Surbius. Dismissed."

Chi rose as if in a daze. All of PA KOS? Something was fishy. She accepted the disc and practically ran to her cubicle to open a secure channel to PA HQ.

9. A Visit to a Friend

Miexon turned to NP.

"As you can see on the footage, somebody set us up. I need you to do three things. First, find proof that it wasn't us. Second, help find out who did this. And third, retaliate. You have full support from the council." Miexon closed the holo that had been running in the background.

"Very well Sir, I will need to go to Dau myself and debrief this Hortan. I will need the support of the INTEL department, and of course nothing like this is ever cheap." NP's experience with undercover work told him that he would need a crapload of money actually.

"You have the guild's purse, and my authority. I cannot let you go to Dau, as we temporarily have no docking permission. You have councillor Chi on station. I cannot overstate the importance of clearing the PA name. Solve it please." Surbius waved his hand, and NP was dismissed.

As chief of the covert intelligence agency of PA, NP had long experience in finding out exactly what truths were hidden behind the information that he received on his desk. He knew for certain that it couldn't be PA. Nothing in PA escaped the spy-master, especially not a stunt as big as this one. Whoever did this, was good. He smiled as he walked to the most secure part of PA HQ. A worthy adversary maybe. His brain was already making lists of what to do.

Chi shook her head in disbelief and closed the secure message from NP. How was she going to interview Hortan? He was kept sedated in his room, with a TGFT guard outside. What did they think she were, some kind of ninja/agent? Sighing, she took a broad spectrum anti toxin and some quick action MAO inhibitors. You never knew what state he would be in when she awoke him.

She dressed in a nurse's outfit and a blonde wig, and went down to the corridor where Hortan lived. She peered down the corridor. A lone guard was standing outside, looking very young and very bored. Maybe this would work after all she mused. She dripped her eyes with an eye balm to make her eyes become moist in a minute, walked up to the door and motioned for the guard to open the door.

"Sorry Ms, but I am not allowed to let anyone in. Orders from Surbius himself." He looked insecure, and so Chi decided to turn up the charm. She looked up at his face.

"But I have been told that the patient need to get his medicine, and he said that it was important, and he trusted me, and I forgot the papers, and what shall I do, and how can I explain.." Chi let her mouth run with halfway coherent sentences, while looking like she was about to cry.

"Hey now, ok Ms, I guess if he needs his medication and all. Don't cry is all, ok?" The guard wiped a tear away from her left eye and opened the door.

Men, they are so easy Chi thought as she closed the door behind her. She looked around in Hortan's room. Nothing much had changed since she was here last. The framed picture of The Huntress was still on the wall, and the John Eldritch Action figure was placed standing with a foot in the face of a some kind of monstrous creature. Hortan himself was lying on his bed. Chi was startled by the discolouration on his forehead, the transparent bandage showing the centimetre wide hole through the skin and flesh all the way to the bone beneath. Shuddering slightly, she took the anti toxin and injected it into Hortan's arm. Nothing to do but wait now.

Hortan awoke to the sight of a pretty blonde nurse sitting next to him. His head and hands felt like they were on fire, and when he lifted his arms, he could see both hands covered in transparent bandages. They were all black. He looked in panic at the nurse.

Chi realised that Hortan didn't recognise her, and so took the wig off.

"Ms. Chi" he smiled, "You look better without the wig. Do you know why my hands look like this?"

Chi smiled back. Polite, always polite even when in obvious pain.

"Hortan, you were attacked in a convoy, can you tell me about it?"

The full onslaught of remembering hit Hortan, and he started to fade away again in denial, the memory too hard on his fragile mind. He started to turn towards the wall. Chi intercepted him and pressed the inhalator into Hortan's mouth while triggering the MAO inhibitor. It worked almost instantly.

"Why did PA attack us? And why did they want to kill me? And..." Chi interrupted him with a soft finger on his lips.

"Shh, start at the beginning, and I'll find out."

Hortan looked at Chi. He had trusted her before, and she had helped him then. He started talking. Fifteen minutes later, he had told the unbelievable story. If it had been another person, she would have been inclined to disbelieve, but she knew that Hortan never lied. Ever. She tugged him in, gave him some sedative to make him go to sleep, and watched as he closed his eyes again before going to the door. Cursing herself for almost blowing it, she went back to get her wig, and went outside again. The guard had been replaced. Leaning against the wall was John Eldritch. He looked at her.

"Care to explain Chi?"

Surbius's PDA chimed just as he was bout to take another bite of his NiceSoy™ stir-fry meal. No rest for the wicked he thought; wiped his mouth in the napkin and answered with a curt "Yes!"

"I have some information you might want to have Surb. Bring a secure SSCU. My cubicle." Johns voice sounded decidedly cheerful.

NP was humming tunelessly as he reviewed the classified TPG Police Force file. So the homicide case that turned out to be the missing TPG pilot, had received a transfer of 1 million credits three days ago. From a Corvus credstick, untraceable. Ha, to someone else perhaps. He smiled and opened the other file he had received some minutes ago. Interesting, the credstick was bought using an UIT government account. He wondered what else had been bought from that account.

10. The Set

Surbius was munching on the last of his food as he entered Johns cubicle with the bulky secure SSCU under one arm. John lived in a double compartment together with Waldoze, both bachelors, and both rarely at home. The "apartment" had seen a lot of parties, the last one was the one they had held after the bar had closed at Mor Isil's one. It showed. Surbius disregarded the blonde nurse as just another catch o' the day that was about to leave, and looked squarely at John.

"I brought the unit," he swallowed, "now, what was it you wanted to tell?"

John looked at the blonde girl and asked her to tell. Surbius looked confused at first, but when she started speaking he recognised her as councillor Chi.

"I only have a couple of observations really. I noticed two things that he said."

With a move of the hand Surbius stopped her "Wait, who?"

John broke in. "Hortan, she woke him up and questioned him." He lifted his hands palm out, defensively as Surbius was just about to explode with anger. "He is ok, and he was willing to talk. He knows Ms. Chi after all, and I think he trusts her more than most of the rest of us." He turned and nodded at Chi. "Go on, tell him."

Surbius crashed on a chair in preparation for more shocks.

"Good, the first thing is that the EVA marines were wearing obsolete suits. We changed the mark on them from the shoulder to the chest about two months ago. Now they are woven into the suits from side to side." Surbius nodded, he had seen the new suits, horribly flashy in his view.

"The second thing, and this is where I may be telling you stuff I am not supposed to, is that we knew about the EAPRS installed in Hortan's ship. We are fully aware that the EAPRS triggers upon life support failure instead of catastrophic ship failure. What I am trying to say here is, if we wanted him dead, he would be dead." Surbius nodded, and looked thoughtfully at her. Little did she know that Ecka didn't fly with it. But he could see her point.

"Lastly, and this is maybe grasping at straws, but I am willing to do that. Hortan didn't recognise a single name of the PA pilots. Not one."

Surbius protested immediately. "Surely he recognised Mick, I mean it says so right there on the holo."

"No, it says [PA]Mick. Normally it would have been [PA] Mick. I am aware that is a subtle difference, but somebody used the name [PA]Mick, and not the Mick affiliated with PA. Besides, Mick would rather die than pilot anything but

his Vulture"

Surbius looked at Chi, then at John.

"Ok, we say that I buy it, then what?"

John pointed at the SSCU. "That is why you brought that one. We need confirmation of a couple of things, and for that we need NP"

Surbius nodded and opened the unit. He punched in his own code and initiated contact with NP.

Surbius, John and Chi entered the silent OPS room. Only Ecka was inside, and he was brooding, staring at one of the screens where the holo from Hortan's XC ran on repeat. He looked at the trio as it entered.

"So, you figured something out. I can tell on Johns smug expression that you are about to spring a surprise." He poured a wee four finger dram and leant back. "Spill the beans"

Surbius opened the SSCU and activated NP's holo.

"As he has just as much credit for the solution, I brought him in via conference." The trio sat down and waited for the holo to stabilise. The PA chief of CIA looked slightly bored until the picture stabilised entirely, as if the reception on his side wasn't established. Surbius looked at Ecka, took a deep breath and started.

"Fact, PA is our ally. Fact, they would have nothing to gain from attacking us. Fact, someone did in fact attack and destroy that convoy. Fact; that same somebody attempted to murder you, as it was supposed to have been you leading the convoy. Now, the rest is interpolation and reasoning. We have pretty good intel that it wasn't PA that attacked the convoy, and that they were being set up to take the blame." Ecka grunted in agreement. He had never really believed that PA would do something as that.

"The evidence points to something even worse. As far as we with NP's help have been able to establish, is that the false navpoint was inserted by a certain Cennoth Plabaru, the pilot that didn't show up if you remember. He has died by the way; somebody shot his head off and torched his place. What is interesting is, that he was paid one million credits in the form of one Corvus credstick. This is where NP comes into the picture. He has been able to trace the money back to an UIT government account. And what is even more interesting is that the same account was used to buy another Corvus credstick that is in the possession of the PA. This credstick was used to buy some surplus EVA suits, nine in all. Now, we are trying to find out how many sticks were bought, and where they are. But the question is, why is the UIT paying

to kill off a combined TGFT and TPG convoy, while hanging the blame on PA?"

"Assuming that the track stops there," the holofigure said. "I need to investigate further, and for that I need time and maybe some of the famous TGFT resources. I suggest that we keep this amongst ourselves for now and see what we can flush out. As I see it, a state of war exists in" he glanced at his watch "three hours and fourteen minutes. I suggest we honour this and play the cards that we have been given. And Ecka, if you could please stay in the OPS room and play dead?" NP smiled at the ancient miner.

Ecka grunted. As long as he had his whisky, he would be ok. So that would leave them with about, lets see, two crates of 18 bottles, some ten days. They better hurry.

11. Remley Orbital

The explosion in the cargo bay at Remley Orbital was large enough to jolt the magnetic bearings, that allowed the central habitation module to rotate, and thus create 0.6 standard gravity, out of their safety parameters, which resulted in an emergency power shutdown to the ring. This ensured that the magnets didn't collide and smashed the delicate system, and further ensured that the rotating part of the station didn't hit the main part. No ruptures were detected in the habitation module, but it was still here they found most of the casualties. Fortunately few were fatal, but the supply of BoneGrid™ was soon exhausted. A lot of the lesser wounds were being set with improvised bandages.

The damage to the cargo bay was more severe. Apparently a Behemoth XC had been loaded with some kind of explosive and left to detonate inside the main bay. The cargo manifest had read luxury goods, and so a good portion of the TPG police had been present for off loading as per standard. None survived, and neither did the unloading crew. The entire lower level of the station was ripped open to space and none of the lower launch bays were even remotely functioning. Unfortunately, the blast caught the recycling facility and ruptured the tanks to the nano eaters. The cleanup from that alone would take at least a week. The pilot, a Marilyn Manson was recorded as belonging to UIT, and he was now the single most wanted man on the station. The remaining police was certain they would have the culprit in custody within the day.

The Anarchist wasn't sure they were right. After all, he had gone through quite a lot of trouble to make sure it didn't happen. When the explosion happened, he had been caught by a table across the leg as planned, and he was now proudly wearing a large bandage on his leg and one across his face. The last more for concealment. As a matter of fact, he was certain the police would have a lot of other more important things to do within this next day. He smiled. Sometimes it was good to be him, at other times it was absolutely marvellous.

""BREAK BREAK""

"CORVUS NEWS NETWORK with a special report"

Remley Orbital in Latos N-15 has been subjected to a vicious terrorist attack. Our on-site reporter tells of multiple deaths and many wounded. Sympathy has been offered from many factions, and emergency ships have been sent from Xang Xi and Corvus. TPG has blamed an unidentified male from UIT as the responsible. Until further notice, no UIT or PA ships are allowed to dock at Remley Orbital. CNN wonders how long time the station can afford to stay away from its usual business.

""BREAK BREAK""

NP looked at the pictures from the wreckage. Whomever did this knew exactly where and how to strike. He winced when he saw how many had been killed. Time for some more direct action. He grabbed the message capsule and went down to the launch bay where his Corvus Vulturius was parked. Looking at the sleek vessel, he focused on the job he had to do. Still, it was always a pleasure to fly such a fine craft. He launched and set course for Sedina B-8, better known as Sedina Bait, the favourite hideout of CLM.

As he was about to jump through the wormhole, a slightly burning Serco Axia bot with holes across the bow was passing the other way. The bot was one of the automatic convoys that freighted weapons grade Xithricite from Sedina to Pylonis, and a favourite target of the person he was about to meet. He engaged the jump engines.

He exited the wormhole with his hands firmly around the controls, and was rewarded by a hail almost immediately.

Azumi: Poor Lonely Maiden seeking economic assistance to purchase suspenders and exiting lingerie. Any amount will be accepted or I SHOOT.

He chuckled and sent his reply without hurry. "Greetings from the Phoenix Alliance." It would be some minutes before she would be free to engage him. The four Dentek Assault bots and the Orne Guardian that had survived this far from the CtC convoy was circling the pink Corvus Vulture, each of them succumbing to well placed shots of accelerated proton beams. Eventually only the guardian was left, and despite its heavy armour, it too was doomed to become expanding plasma.

The pink vulture turned to NP and accelerated to meet him. He checked his readout. 52% armour, and she was still charging in. He would teach her a lesson this time. He twisted his vulture into a sideways rolling turn and was rewarded by scoring a direct hit on Azumi's vulture. 43%, he could do this he thought. Rolling out and stabilising for a long strafe across the front, he unleashed neutron fire only to miss badly. Azumi had roll/turned and boosted down, thus getting his belly across her front. Accelerated protons flashed out and reduced the armour to 51% almost immediately. In reflex he tumbled the vulture ass over head to avoid more shots to the belly, and thus aligned his top with Azumi's guns. Actinic flaring across the top of the ship, and the armour was reduced further to 22%. Damn, he was getting hammered. He rolled and dodged randomly to shake loose from the deathlike hold she had on his ship, and he succeeded in moving 128 meters away from Azumi's vult. Calming his nerves, he pulled and pushed at the controls to make the ship fly in a random up and down wave pattern, and started closing while firing the neut. Score, he hit the pink vulture right on the front across the CLM logo, 36%. Now if he could just follow the movement to the left and fi...

Azumi smiled. He had flown right into the beams as she had anticipated. The rewarding explosion hurt her small craft, but nothing critical. She scanned the wreckage as usual, and today there was a gift. The 0.3 cubic meter of Xithricite was designed to survive anything. The container inside would be safe, and nobody would have suspected that NP had in fact dropped a message for her. She scooped it up, just in time for her radar to ping. Chana Slan, in a Centaur Mk III. She immediately hailed him and engaged the turbo. At 1300+ meters she would need all the distraction she could get.

Azumi: Pay me 10k. You will probably just run, and then I will have to chase you down and kill you. Sometimes I wonder why I hail.

Sure enough, he ran. At the 2800 meter mark, she drew a targeting solution on him and fired. Multiple hits, but the armour on the Centaur was pretty thick she knew from past experience. She watched him jump to Sedina D-14 and jumped after him with no hesitation. She had been lucky. Only 670 meters away and inbound for docking, the Centaur had been hit for around a third of its armour. Azumi engaged and poured shot after shot into the trade vessel that was boosting like mad toward the dock. Any second now she thought, as the station dock master called for her to cease firing in the no-fire area. She lined up for the last burst when Chana dumped a set of Mines in her path. At the very low armour she was at, she had to attempt dodging, and so was unable to kill the Centaur that crash-docked into the station. The Mines went off and scoured off most of the remaining layers of her armour, reducing it to 3%. She aligned for the docking bay Chana had entered and engaged the turbo.

The Centaur had made a controlled crash landing, resulting in burning hull plates scattering themselves all over the dock. And not more than six seconds later, the well known pink Corvus Vulturius crash landed even more spectacularly as it hit a support structure at 225 m/s, cartwheeling into the holding facility before stopping in front of the loadmaster's office. The canopy popped open and a small person jumped out. Azumi removed her pilots helmet and looked around with a mischievous grin. There, the Centaur. She tossed the helmet into the cockpit and peeled the sweaty flight suit down to her waist and tied the empty flapping arms from it around her waist while she started walking. This served a double purpose, first it allowed her to cool down after the intense combat, and secondly let her show the world her CLM tattoo on the left shoulder. The dockhands were moving towards her shouting, but stopped when they saw who it was. She barely noticed them as she walked over to Chana's Centaur.

Chana had just left the cockpit when he heard the click click of heels on metal behind him. Turning, he saw a raven haired young woman in a pink tank top and flight suit walking over to him. That would have to be Azumi he thought and smiled sheepishly while turning his hands out. Nothing she can do here, he thought, the station protects its traders. The intensity of her gaze was however a little unnerving.

Azumi walked over to Chana, slid in real close and grasped his buttocks firmly while she planted a violent kiss on his lips. As he was completely taken by surprise, he was just standing with his hands to his sides for several seconds before the male genes in him woke him up. He smiled and kissed back. Azumi stopped, took one step back and looked at him. "Well, hello Mr. tongue. Pervert" she said and slapped him on the cheek and walked off again. Tasting blood, and not from the slap, he knew it wasn't him that had been naughty.

Azumi left Chana with a dumb smile on his face, went over to the dock master and tossed him the newly liberated large credstick. Chana wouldn't miss it she was sure, besides, she was poor, she couldn't afford the repairs.

"Fix the Pink Lady, the rest goes to the dock and to you guys, ok? Make sure you get another ship out here pronto, I am leaving"

The dock master smiled and nodded when he saw the 100k credstick. He followed her with his eyes as she walked over to the vulture and retrieved something from a large metal box inside the vulture's small cargo hold. He kept on following her until the protests and yells of theft from the other ship was becoming too loud to ignore. Damn traders.

12. Yoda

Azumi landed the Pink Lady at Latos C-2, CLM headquarters. The station was not as she had left it. Somehow, someone had used a lot of time and effort in drawing paintings all over the walls in, was that lipstick?, well, different colours. She recognised LNH and giggled. It was about as lifelike as a smiley, but she had no trouble discerning that the drawing, that more or less looked like a hippopotamus in a skirt with a German WW I pike helmet, was LNH. The shotgun and a can of beer was a dead give away. Well, that and the two crude prosthetic hands.

She went into her own room before going to yoda's, and changed from the sweaty flight suit, and into a skirt, knee high socks and a white shirt. To finish it off, she made a set of pigtails. She looked i the mirror and decided that she was now officially irresistible. Too bad yoda doesn't fall for these things, she thought.

Yoda had his apartment in a little used part of the station, On the way there she heard the large noises of an industrial sized sandblaster going at full power in the OPS room. She ignored it, lots of stuff happened that she was not a part of, and it was better not to find out sometimes. The door to yoda's place had a very large "KEEP THE HELL OUT" sign, but that didn't stop her the least. With precision and speed she kicked the buzzer without triggering the sensor device that normally ensured that 5000 volts would hammer through whomever disturbed yoda.

The door opened, and the little man peered out. Initially he looked at the floor where a person that would have been stunned would fall, and then before looking up, he nodded his head slightly.

"Azumi"

Azumi bowed deeply and replied "yoda-sensei."

He motioned her inside, closed the door and led her across the tatami mats to a small table. He poured two glasses of water and motioned Azumi to drink first. He then drank deeply before seating himself on the mat.

"So, what brings you here? I know it is not for a hot date, so spill it." yoda's voice was a stark contrast to the very tranquil surroundings. Hard and rasping and full to the brim with barely contained anger. Not at Azumi she knew, but at the whole world.

"I have a parcel for you sensei. From NP."

Yoda's interest was awoken. He looked at the sealed mem-crystal inside the small translucent container that Azumi produced from her backpack. "Very well, leave it on the table. Do you have more?" Azumi shook her head, knowing better than chattering unnecessarily in yoda's presence.

"You are dismissed. I will summon you if I need to leave an answer." With that Azumi got up and walked out of the room and down the corridor. She wondered what to do now. No option really, she ended up donning the flight suit again and launching the Pink Lady. There was cargo to be liberated, traders to hassle and Serco to kill.

Yoda finished the holo. According to NP, whom he trusted as far as he could bowl a samoflange laden Behemoth XC, someone were whipping up a trade war. As mush as he liked the sound of that, he was enough of a realist to know that if the trade through Latos H-2 and Sedina B-8 were to stop, CLM would be in deep trouble. As in any prey/predator relationship, it was one of mutual interdependence. Yoda wondered who could possibly gain from this. For anybody looking at him, it looked as if he had gone into hibernation with his eyes open, but in reality he used all his energy for his implants. He would solve this.

Tohasandra Chi was not happy. Not only was she treated like the enemy of everyone on the station, but she was also prohibited to use the stations facilities to find out more on the terror attack. Well, almost everyone that is. She could make an appointment with her TGFT liaison, John Eldritch, or make an appointment with Surbius, but what she really wanted was to sit in the cafeteria and make small talk. And she desperately wanted to check up on Hortan, but the shrink had forbidden it. He would rather keep the young pilot sedated, kept on the shelf like some vegetable. She thought he was wrong, but nobody would listen. She started thinking of a plan to achieve all this. At least then she was occupied.

Surbius received an Ultra Secret report through the secure SSCU. Receiving it, he started decoding it with a onetime pad before sending it through a set of quantum decoder stand alone computers. The resulting twelve lines of text was enough to make him shiver all over. This just might be it. He erased the data twice by overwriting it with nonsense 64 times before taking the only copy now in existence with him as hardcopy to the TGFT OPS room. Once inside, he checked twice to make sure that Ecka and he were the only ones before he presented the document to the commander. If this paper was right, some very disturbing things would happen tomorrow. And that would necessitate that Ecka came out of hiding, if nothing else to calm things down.

The seven figures were once again gathered with Ardon in the middle. He had been left there for some ten minutes, which he considered a new record when

one of the robed persons spoke.

"Status reports indicate that everything is moving according to schedule. Apart from the massive amount of damage wrought to the station."

Ardon winced, he was not proud of that. But The Anarchist only worked well with completely free hands. If the council was squeamish about the bomb, he was going to get some heavy critique for what The Anarchist was up to next. Too late to anything about it anyway, it was not as if he had regular communications with The Anarchist, and he surely did not follow orders.

"For now, we have confidence in you Ardon. No leads must lead back here on pain of death. Remember who you serve. Dismissed."

Ardon rose and bowed, turned and left to the chamber outside. He would soon be stop serving and start commanding. In a few days his plan would be complete and he would no longer be a servant but a master.

13. The Anarchist

Sedina chocolates, his only vice. Well, that an an occasional drink or two. Whomever had sent him the package, knew that. He checked the card again, the swirling text read "From your admirer. Thank you for the times to be." He wondered who it could be, maybe the girl from the noodle shop, or that one pretty girl down at the gym. Oh, or maybe even that sweet young new secretary that Surbius had hired, what was her name again, ah yes, Naoko. He munched on the chocolates as he imagined going up to her and inviting her out.

A sudden stab of pain hit him in the stomach, like a cramp, or a.., oh God, he really had to go now. He waddled to the toilet as fast as he could, and almost got his pants down when his stomach released its contents. The cramps continued, and the honourable Dr. Lloyd Wyman M. D. completely missed The Anarchists biggest stunt ever.

The Anarchist was whistling to himself. "Happy feet, I got them happy feet." He had dressed in a janitors suit and was walking towards the air recycling plant, a bottle of O2 under one arm. He showed his ID to the TPG guards outside the plant and were allowed inside. He had studied the system for a long time, and he knew exactly where to go. The main feed channel for the air recycling had a valve that was used to feed fresh O2 into the system. He had a small present however. One of the more nasty inventions from the Serco-Itani ground war, DiCloetan was what could best be described as a kind of psychotropic nerve gas. Like LSD on air. Rather short lived, dissipating in around an hour, it turned the inhaler into either a complete psychopath or a blubbering fool for some time. An antidote existed, and he had injected it hours ago.

He put the bottle into the valve and opened for the gas. He imagined the horrific scenes that would play out in the habitation module and chuckled. It was not really what he had been asked to do, but to create limited chaos sounded so immensely boring. He really hated the word limited. There, all done. He was going to stay inside the plant for the next few hours. Too dangerous outside now, the screams started sounding, like a serenade to the mad. He sat down, got his book from his pocket and his lunch from his small satchel. He looked at the cover, The Ranch Owner's Daughter. He was a sucker for a good love story.

The messages from Remley Orbital were broken and distorted at best. The dock master had been outside with his repair crew when the air was poisoned, and so they were on independent air. The rest of the crew had no such luck, and as the psychosis spread among them, the casualties mounted. The dock master and his crew landed in their space suits, and when one of

them disconnected the independent air and opened his helmet, he started going psychotic. Acting on a hunch, the dock master called to his crew to stay in the suits until they could get the scrubbers working. It was no problem to activate them, it was possible from the OPS room He asked his 2iC to take two dock hands and go activate it while he and the rest of the men were going to find and deactivate all the guns they could. After a grizzly walk through blood spattered corridors, they were able to enter the room and activate the scrubbers. In less than thirty minutes, the air was back to Sol II standard.

The dock master slowly unsuited and organised a cleanup group. The dock area was a mess, most of the personnel that had worn weapons had used them on either themselves or others. He had never seen anything like it, never. Two of his poker friends, now ex friends, were lying together. One had planted an axe in the chest of the other. He had in turn impaled his friend on a fire hose and pumped CO2 into his belly, neatly inflating him like an oversized pink balloon until the innards had popped out. However, he feared that he would have a worse task ahead. He took his three most sturdy men and steadied himself for entering the living habitat. He opened the airlock and braced for the worst. A barricade was thrown across the corridor, with ten frightened women behind it wearing slings and knives. Due to a mechanical error caused by the emergency breaking, the life support on the habitation module was disconnected on the main air recycler, and was working on the auxiliary system. The views on the telescreens and the poison detectors at the airlock had warned the women to seal off the corridor, undoubtedly saving many lives among the women and children living and working there. Exhaling heavily with relief, the dock master recognised his wife, and knew that the children would be safe too. No way that Hannah would abandon them if they were not secure.

Sooner than he wanted, the dock master found himself the not too willing master of Remley Orbital. The council that normally ran the station were all hospitalised, the TPG police force was either dead or wounded, and the only person he could ask was a council ranking pilot from Corvus that had docked due to a mechanical failure on his ship. They needed help, and they needed help fast. The Corvus pilot, Galders or something, suggested to get a group of Corvus medical personnel and police officers to the station, and within one hour they were in place. It was better than the other offers, with PA and a leaderless TGFT at war, and UIT and TPG not talking to each other. The grey uniforms of the Corvus police was now patrolling the station, something the dock master never would have believed even remotely possible just three days ago. He was considering calling a council meeting the following day to discuss the future of Remley, and he hoped that the majority of the council would be well enough at that time. After all, he was a dock master for Pete's sake, not a politician.

Tohasandra Chi missed the stunt as well, but that was because she was waiting for an answer to a message she had sent to John some time ago. She

had once again requested permission to see Hortan. John sent a message back to her, that he could not ask the psychologist, as he was currently hospitalised with suspected food poisoning. Chi smiled, she knew exactly what was wrong. He was not in any danger, but the drug she had put in the chocolates were very efficient in simulating botox poisoning. She sent back a request to be allowed to see Hortan as a trained psycho therapist in the absence of the doctor. It took a while before Surbius answered in person.

"You are a trained psycho therapist too?" he asked not really convinced. Chi showed him her diploma that she had received from NP along with the chocolates. It said she graduated six years ago. "Well, I guess you are better than anybody else we have now, so you go ahead. Take John along, will you?" She waited patiently until Surbius had left, and then practically ran out of her room and down to get John. Finally something was happening.

Yoda smiled. Well, in reality he stopped frowning, but that was as close as he was going to get. He needed some proof, and if the data NP had given him was true, he knew how to get it. He stayed still for a while, then turned and touched the button that summoned Azumi for an escort run. He thought briefly about calling Mystic and informing her, but disregarded it. She had enough trouble as it was with the orb and all. Besides, if he was right, it would solve itself. If he was wrong he wouldn't look like a complete idiot.

Ecka watched the reports from the Remley Orbital station with a frown. He had been letting whomever was behind this have too much to say in order to flush them out, but that was going to end now. No longer would he stand by while innocents were getting harmed. He sent a message to MiexonBionic. After that, he summoned Surbius. They had a lot of planning to do now.

14. Awake

Ardon was, well not satisfied, rather relieved. He had once more been summoned to the Council of Seven almost immediately after the Remley incident. He had heard what had happened from Galders, and he was shocked to hear about the massive damage that had happened. He counted himself fortunate that The Anarchist had chosen not to attack the habitat module. He was a bit surprised that he hadn't actually.

The council had congratulated him on the successful implementation so far. They had been interested in knowing when he was going to secure complete control and bring the plan to fruition. Days, merely days he told them. He had the papers and fake evidence planted already, and he was going to activate the last part of his plan tomorrow. After all, he had to make sure to get The Anarchist in place again before striking. They had sent him out again as another servant. No more, with the next strike he would have something on them, and then he could force them to admit him. The Council of Eight. It sounded pretty cool to him, he could definitely live with that.

He was going to celebrate, but for now there was work to do. He sent a message to Fadhe, telling him to initiate in 24 hours. There, it was set in motion. Nothing and nobody could stop him now, he had made sure of that with his very first move.

The door chimed, and he opened the door. "You are late" was the only comment yoda had. Azumi bowed deeply and said "I am sorry yoda-sensei." She was dressed in an indecently revealing slim fitting tank top and hotpants with lace-up stiletto-heeled boots.

Yoda ignored the outfit completely as usual. "Be on time next time Azumi. I need for this message to be delivered immediately. Now, go and do what is tasked for you." Azumi received the small holo crystal and remembered to bow deeply before leaving. She loved delivering, it was always very violent and intense. She walked down towards her room to change into her flight suit as she ran into LNH and sharingan. They nodded, and LNH smiled as he saw her tattoo on her shoulder.

In reality it was his fault that she had it made. He had told her on the first day she was initiated into CLM, that all female personnel got a CLM tattoo. Old tradition and all, for good luck and profitable hunting, even MysticRogue had one. New as she was, she had jumped at the chance to show that she was one of the crew. Maybe she was slightly intoxicated with it all, but at the end of the day she had the CLM logo superimposed on a Vulture on her shoulder. She had never regretted, but she had been mercilessly teased for it ever since.

"Hey Azumi, I hear they have a Warthog sale at sedina D-14. Maybe time to

get a new tattoo?" sharingan winked at her, a half-empty beer keg under one arm. Used to the hazing, she smiled her prettiest innocent smile and extended her middle finger on the left hand and shoved it in his face as she walked past. She liked sharingan, but he needed to be treated like the pitbull he was. He laughed as she passed, and turned to look until she had swaggered around the corner. LNH punched him on the shoulder when she had left.

"Come on, you still need to paint those "Hello Mystic" drawings over," LNH slurred. Damn, he shouldn't eat before drinking so early, Or was it drink so early before eating? He couldn't remember and took a swig of the strong ale to help him. Nope, he definitely needed more. He would finish the keg while sharingan worked, yep that was a plan.

Chi had just entered Hortan's room together with John, when his PDA rang twice. Guild business he knew immediately. He received the summons from Surbius. Mlck and Killdog Deathwad were inbound on fake pilot ID's. He was to escort them down to Moda's for help with the forensics.

"Chi, I have to go, and I am not authorised to leave you here alone with Hortan. So that means we have to go." He saw her start to protest but rose his left hand to stem off protests. "I don't like it either. I trust him with you, but orders are orders. We'll come back later, ok?"

"What if I stay here with her?" The soft melodic voice came from the door. "I am, I'm sorry. The door was open, and I thought that if he were up, I would see if there was something he needed, or .." She looked down. "Forget it, I am out of place here. I am sorry."

Chi looked at the young girl, and then back at John. Grab the moment, her teachers had always told her. "That is ok with me, please come in Ms?"

"Kanaka, Miharu Sena Kanaka" she answered almost in a whisper. "I am secretary to Mor Isil, and I saw Hortan there when he was first allowed to fly. He was so happy, and so sweet."

Chi looked at John and smiled her most innocent smile. "See John, I am not alone with him now. Please?"

He looked back at her. He started to tell her no, but something in her eyes made him waive and in the end relent. He rolled his eyes and put his hands up into the air. "Gah, what do I know. Stay for all that I care, but you stay with her. And that is not up for discussion!" He pointed at Miharu who nodded and followed him all the way out of the door.

"I am Tohasandra Chi, liaison from the PA," Chi presented herself. "Could you help me wake him up please. And maybe clean him up a bit?"

Hortan had been sedated for five days and looked the part. The wounds on his head and arms were now covered by pink synthskin, but he had not been washed at all. Tohasandra set up the medicines for waking him up while Miharu found some washing utensils. She started cleaning him as gently as she usually did her own baby back home. Having more time than last, Chi gave Hortan a smaller dosage of the antidote, thus ensuring that he would wake up as from sleep instead of with a jolt.

Miharu finished up and sat to wait beside Chi. She was fingering her necklace nervously. Chi noticed it looked very new.

"A gift?" Miharu looked confused. "The necklace, was it a gift?"

Miharu noticed she was fiddling with the necklace and stopped. "Yes, it was a gift from my boyfriend on Valentines day. He has one identical to this." She smiled shyly and looked down. "It says return to Miharu on his, and mine has his name."

Before Chi could ask who it was, Hortan stirred in his bed. Chi went over and sat on the edge immediately, softly calling his name. He folded his arms and legs in foetal position with his arms protecting his head. Chi had hoped she wouldn't need the MAO inhibitors, but she had brought them anyway. She walked over to her purse and started preparing the drug. In the meantime Miharu sat next to Hortan and started stroking his head and neck while talking to him in a low voice. When Chi turned back with the ready inhaler, Hortan was half sitting, with Miharu hugging his thin upper body and holding his head, still talking in that low voice. After some minutes had passed, he lifted his head and looked at Chi.

"Why would someone kill me? Would would anybody do that?"

"You were never the target Hortan" Chi replied. "It was supposed to be Ecka. Your presence saved his life actually. You saved his life."

The information sank in slowly in the drug-numbed mind, but eventually Hortan stammered. "But why did someone want to kill Ecka?"

"I think we are going to find out shortly. In the meantime, what about we get you dressed and go grab a bit to eat? I hear they make excellent pancakes in the mess hall." That brought a little smile out on his lips, and he nodded, slowly at first, but then with more enthusiasm. Hortan loved pancakes.

15. No More War

Azumi waited impatiently at Sedina B-8. She had attacked five convoys so far, but she was forced to let two of the run unhurt. She was not about to get her Vulture destroyed before time. And the one ton crate in her cargo room made her Vulture react like a full moth. A lone ship exited from the wormhole, right on time. She hailed it immediately,

"You wouldn't hit a girl, would you? Blink blink"

NP turned his Vulture towards her ship and hailed her back.

NP: You have been recognised as a type three radar echo. Authorisation for immediate destruction has been granted. Cease all movement and be destroyed.

She smiled a predatory smile and hailed back.

"So, are you gonna bite or are you only gonna bark little doggie". With that she fired her Itani Mk III Neutron Guns across his ship.

She destroyed his successive ships seven times before she stopped flying back to replace the lost armour. And even then it wasn't until his third ship had been boomed that he succeeded in firing that last neutron beam into her ship resulting in a most gratifying explosion. He searched immediately and found his Xithricite box. He scooped it up and set his navigation up for home. He entered the wormhole as Azumi jumped in again. Now the traders passing B-8 would get no more free passes. He passed the information on the VPR channel. Contacts may be contacts, but he was after all, a member of PA.

Killdog Deathwad was poking around the wreckage parts, measuring and comparing. The pipe in his mouth was emanating obnoxious fumes of smoke, but that did not seem to disturb him at all. He would close one eye from time to time when the smoke got too bad. At other times he would take the pipe out and point it at one or another thing while thinking. Moda was sitting in his chair with Mick, slowly drinking a beer and observed as his carefully laid evidence was examined.

"Hrumpf, now that IS interesting" Killdog said, "if that is not evidence, I don't know what is." He grabbed one particular piece of shrapnel and motioned to Moda and Mick to join him. Killdog showed them the barcode on the side.

"Unless I am much mistaken, this is a piece from a sunflare rocket launcher. And as far as I know, I recall that this particular barcode is from a production run made for the Corvus military branch. Find the recipient, and you find one fake PA pilot." Killdog looked at Moda. "Now, you were about to get us some of that famous Helio Mists young man?" He smiled, the gold tooth he had

implanted instead of his upper left canine flashed as he inserted the pipe on its usual place.

NP had his confirmation. He hated owing anything to anyone, but it wouldn't be long before he could repay yoda. He sent a secure message to Surbius with the information he had received. He answered with the information they had found from the wreckage which made NP nod. It all made sense. He reported his findings to MiexonBionic.

"Good. Time to end this charade" Miexon said, "I'll contact Ecka immediately. About bloody time to act instead of react"

""BREAK BREAK""

"CORVUS NEWS NETWORK with a special report on the TGFT versus PA was"

Our reporter in Dau is right now at a press meeting in TGFT HQ, where the top of TGFT and PA is declaring that the war was a scam, to draw out criminal elements that had attacked and destroyed the TGFT protected TPG convoy to Remley Orbital. Whether this attack had anything to do with the two hideous attacks on said station, they have not informed the public. The head of state of UIT has offered his apologies to TPG for the misunderstanding that has happened.

What happens now? This reporter is at a loss. The criminal elements that did this are still at large. Maybe BLAK is still lurking in the depths of space.

""BREAK BREAK""

The Anarchist was whistling. He was setting up what was going to be his biggest show yet. And right under the noses of the powers involved. This time he had made certain that nothing would interfere with his work. The timings were worked out perfectly, and he had even found an agreeable place to activate it from. The Paddy's Pancakes. They even served a decent pancake menu. Catastrophes always made him so hungry, and here he could watch and eat at the same time.

Arton received the urgent message on the way down to his fighter. Only the Council of Seven had the authority to flash an Urgent message directly to his PDA. He was slightly puzzled, but opened it at once. The message made him lose his cool for a couple of seconds. They wanted him to abort the last attack. Abort and clean up, the euphemism for eliminating The Anarchist. They had to be joking, he was about to finish his work and fulfil his quest. Something must have gone wrong. He checked CNN and almost lost it there

and then. How the H*** had Ecka survived? He had made sure himself, that the TGFT commander would be killed. He started running for his ship. Abort? No way he would, not even if he had been able to. He had to run and stay low for a long time now. He sent a message to Fadhe and informed him to meet him at the usual place. Somebody was going to have to explain all this.

16. Pancakes

It became apparent to the council that the plan was now in effect officially FUBAR when Ecka's face appeared alongside the CNN reporter. Not ones to believe in throwing good money after bad, they voted and decided to end the plan immediately. When Ardon did not respond, they started investigating how they could cancel the last act that was supposed to push the ruling council of Remley Orbital to ask for permanent Corvus protection and status. However much they searched, they could find no contact information on the free agent known as The Anarchist, and so the hunt for Ardon intensified. All favours were being called to stop the most horrifying act yet.

The pancakes at the Soggy's Pancakes and Waffles house were the best thing Hortan had eaten in at least five days. They happened to be the only thing too, but that was a coincidence. Miharu were slowly getting Hortan to talk, mostly about the John Eldritch action figure, where he had bought it and the like.

Chi recognised what Miharu was doing, she was comforting him by speaking of things he felt secure about, and thus paving the way for Chi to ask some of the less pleasant questions. She had to admire the subtleness with which she was luring him further and further out into unknown territory. It would make Chi's work easier. They had turned to talk about ships, a topic Hortan was very interested in.

"I must admit that I like flying a Warthog Mk II once in a while, the continuous acceleration makes it very nice for fast moves" Miharu said innocently. Chi looked closely at Hortan to see if there would be a reaction. Not really.

"I admit it is nice, but in reality you could do the same with an Atlas" he said, "and that is what I do the one or two rare times I need to hurry." He munched another pancake making it his number seventeen. Chi decided to risk it.

"Wasn't it a Warthog that was the main ship in destroying the convoy?" she asked causally.

Hortan swallowed and looked at her with while answering with unease in his voice. "Yes, it was. A black Hog Mk II actually." As his reaction had not been that severe, Chi decided to go all out.

"All black or did it have any markings or names or anything?" She made sure not to look too focused on Hortan's face and skimmed the surroundings while sipping her latte.

"All black," he grabbed another pancake, "with only the PA mark on the bow. It wasn't pretty made as on your craft Ms. Chi, but looked like it had been made hastily." He took a bite and chewed slowly a bit. "Come to think of it, when the

craft turned, it had some spotty places that you couldn't see to start with" He ate the last of his pancake and smiled brightly as he took his mug of hot chocolate with marshmallows.

"And what colour was beneath? Or did you by any chance see a logo or anything?" A young couple was entering the place along with a single man. This place was quite popular.

"Now that you mention it, I do believe it was red, and there may have been a name or something like that. But I am not too sure of that." Chi was just about to find her 1000 watt lamp and turn it on, point it at Hortan's head and pull the information out. She needed what he knew, and he was obviously completely oblivious to the fact that it was needed sooner than later.

"And that name was?" Chi asked with infinite patience. The young couple had received their waffles and were sharing at one of the rear tables. The lone man was sitting at the window observing the life outside while drinking coffee. He had unpacked an expensive looking laptop and was slowly typing.

"Mmh, the last of it was painted over, but I believe the first part was Elos Dreade." Chi sighed, at last something. She smiled to Hortan and patted his hand. She excused herself and went to the back of the room where she found her secure small PDA that linked directly to the secure SSCU she had in her room. She texted the information immediately to NP. She knew how significant this information would be, so she staid in the back waiting for an answer. While she was pacing, she observed the young couple that were completely lost amongst themselves, Miharu and Hortan, equally lost in some small talk, and the lone man that was working. She knew that it was terribly impolite to look at what other people were doing on their computers, but her covert ops training almost forced her. The structural drawing with of the Dau K-10 station was ringed at several junctions with green rings, and at two locations with yellow rings with counters set at 06:00. The man pointed at one of the green rings and clicked it. A password prompt came on, and he entered the password. It slowly turned yellow, and a counter appeared.. He then moved to another green ring. Her PDA beeped, and she opened the call.

"Chi, are you in a secure location?" NP's worried face peered at her.

"Somewhat, I am having pancakes" she replied not sure what to say.

"I have information from a most secure source that the K-10 station is the most likely target for the next attack. I want you to warn TGFT immediately and evacuate." Chi looked at the lone man with the PC. All the circles were now yellow. A central prompt were in the middle with the words INITIATE YES/ NO.

"Make sure you..." She never heard what NP said. The lone man moved the mouse to YES and clicked just as Chi figured out what the schematics meant, and she shouted NO.

He turned and looked at her with a crooked smile. The counter was at 5:59 and counting. Chi did the only thing she could think of. She jumped him.

The Anarchist looked with amusement at the small brown haired slender girl. How she had guessed that he had just killed the station, he did not know, and neither did it matter. She could not do anything anyway. She started moving towards him, and he rose to meet her. His much larger size and strength would soon decide the outcome, and then he would have to leave. A shame, he had fancied seeing the destruction from in here. However, it had been a long time since he had fought with his fists, and with this girl it might even be fun.

Chi moved quickly towards him. A bit larger than John she thought, much less bulky though. She weighed her options and decided she had none. She moved into his range, and he swung his right arm at her. Parrying with her left arm in an up going parade, she moved in closely and hammered him in the face with the thick of her right fist three times, not enough to hurt him as such, but enough for him to lose concentration. He put his left arm up in front of his head, and Chi folded her arm and connected solidly with her elbow directly into his sternum at full force. She felt him lose his breath, and used the momentum to slide her left arm up and over his right arm, thus locking it against her chest. He tried to get her away by pushing at her head, but she ducked and swung her lower right arm forwards between his legs. Impact. A small grazing with a feather swung with tender care in that exact region, has about the same effect on a grown man as the Dinosaur killer of the Cretaceous had on Earth. Chi had swung her arm as hard as she could. The gasping man fell to the floor, and she dropped a knee with her full weight on his chest, making sure he was not going to run away anytime soon. Then she looked up at the stunned pancake and waffle restaurant. Hortan and Miharu were watching her with open mouths.

"Hortan, come over here and sit on him. Don't worry, he is a bad guy of the worst sort." Hortan did as he was told, and sat on the writhing man's legs. She got up and grappled the laptop. 5:18, it had taken her 41 seconds to get him down. John would be proud she thought irrationally. She clicked on one of the yellow rings. It opened a password prompt. Swearing internally, she tried another one, same. She kneeled down to the man.

"What is the password?" He didn't reply. Chi was a firm believer in not using torture, but if she couldn't get him to talk, the station and everyone on it, would die.

"What password?" Miharu had gotten up from her chair and was now standing in front of the laptop.

"We need the password to deactivate whatever it is he has planned. And we only have 4 and a half minute." Miharu looked at the man, and realising that they were never going to make him talk.

"Mind if I have a go?" Miharuru asked, looking at Chi for permission. Chi looked sceptic, but nodded for her to go on.

"Mor Isil used to lock himself out all the time. And then he would need my help to reset the password for him. I was a bit slow at the beginning, until I realised he was doing it to make me be in his office." She frowned and pushed some more keys. "Not working. Ok, I will have to get the toys out." She took a memstick and pushed it into the interface. Chi looked out of the window at the station security that was running towards the restaurant. Great, the cavalry, and late as always. She got up and found he diplomatic credentials, knowing that they were going to be needed if she wanted to avoid the stun guns.

"Almost there...yes. Entering password. Disarmed. Next," Miharuru frowned. "That rotten bastard, he has separate passwords for all. I hope I make it" she mumbled.

Chi looked at the rent-a-cops approaching the place, and then down at Hortan.

"Hort, I need for you to do me a favour." He looked up at her and nodded. "I need that you take credit for getting this guy down, ok? You recognised him as a terrorist and incapacitated him?"

Hortan looked confused. No way were these cops going to believe that he had put this guy on the floor. He looked up at the slender woman standing in front of him with the piercing eyes that always seemed to fix him in place. As if they were going to believe that it had been Ms. Chi. He nodded. Chi turned and looked over Miharuru's shoulder. She only needed one now, and with more than a minute to go it could be done.

"Ha, the last code is Dau." Miharuru entered the name, and it turned green. No counters were active. Chi allowed herself to sigh a deep breath of relief. She put her left trembling hand in her pocket and grasped her diplomatic credentials harder with the right. Miharuru got up and looked at Chi, and then went and gave Hortan a hug, as much for his sake as for her own. She was shaking with the realisation that they had been seconds away from death. She saw Chi present her ID to the guards and be allowed to leave. She looked at Hortan that was sitting all flustered and decided to tell his story. He wasn't able to right now anyway.

17. The Usual Suspects

Elos Drade was in reality Corvus pilot Elos Dradenak. NP had no problems finding him, he was still active in the Sedina D-14 station defence force. He waited for Chi to report that the terrorist had been apprehended, by none other than young Hortan, and then launched to Sedina B-8. He had coded the data and dropped in his Vulture. Ready for another drop. He was getting tired of this, he had been dropped nine times yesterday to retrieve the emergency packet from yoda that allowed him to warn Chi. But in the end it was worth the effort. No contact could be seen between CLM and CIA/PA, no matter how expedient it was.

He exited the wormhole in the middle of a convoy going the other way. Azumi and sharingan were attacking it, each going for a Behemoth. One large explosion indicated that one of the behemoths never made it, and the rest of the convoy was through. Azumi and sharingan jumped after it, not willing to let their prey get away. NP shuddered slightly, he hated seeing trade vessels treated like shooting targets. Azumi exited back into B-8 and turbo-ed towards the 3k mark. If she had seen him, she ignored him completely. He wondered if he had done something wrong, when she reappeared in a pink Behemoth. Ah, the cargo. He decided to let her get some of her own medicine, and flew the vulture over towards the front of the Behemoth and flared a couple of shots at her. Azumi ignored it, opened her cargo hold and scooped 118 of the 120 crates of synthetic gems into the cavernous hold. NP was puzzled, why didn't she take them all? He moved closer to examine the two remaining crates. What was wrong with those?

Azumi: You are green

The front of the Behemoth erupted in a fusillade of missile fire as Azumi unloaded her chaos swarms at the vulture. NP never got to even try and avoid, before the explosions tore his ship apart, thus solving the first part of the delivery mission.

Azumi laughed out loud. Even as she knew that NP was supposed to be exploded, she had wanted to make it spectacular. And this gave her a kill even on a boring cargo pick-up mission. She intercepted the Xithricite case. 119 crates in all, capacity full. Sharingan exited the wormhole in his vulture, having sold the cargo in Latos.

"Are you getting picky? What is wrong with those two crates left?"

"Had to get some scrap metal for a mission I am about to take" she replied, lying easily.

"More for me then." Sharingan scooped the crates into his vulture. "Ok, go and unload, lets set up for the next set of traders."

"On my way, this ship is as manoeuvrable as a 40 ton brick house with

engines. Wait, it is a 40 ton house.."

Sharingan chuckled, "yeah, but get moving before I decide that you need to be pirated."

Azumi accelerated slowly to the 3k mark. She absolutely hated flying this thing, and she would only do it to pick up the cargo they had liberated. Once she had docked, she grabbed the crystal from the box and ran directly down to yoda's. As he opened the door, he was his usual pleasant self, and accepted the mem-crystal. She was about to leave again when he called her back.

"Yes yoda-sensei?"

"Next time, make sure you change out of that horrible flight suit before you come down here. It looks horrible on you Azumi.

She had no idea what to say, so she merely bowed and left. Wow, he had actually noticed that she was dressing up for their meetings. She had just the right dress for next time. She smiled as she ran down the corridor. Well, dress may be stretching it a bit.

Yoda de-frowned for a brief moment as Azumi left. In reality he didn't care one iota what she wore or not, but he could see that she did. And he liked the relationship just as it was. He inserted the mem-crystal and started working. Interesting and fascinating. So the pilot that survived against all odds and spoiled whatever plan had been set into motion, had apparently succeeded in apprehending the person responsible for the terror attacks on Remley Orbital. It seemed the young Hortan had a knack for being at the right location at the right time.

He started working on finding the pilot, and it didn't take him long to run the data to its conclusion. The issue here was, how was he going to turn the biggest profit on this for himself and CLM. Never one to be timid, he decided to play both horses.

Hortan was sitting with John Eldritch at the TPG security office. He had been asked to stay until they had checked that his story was actually true, and that there was in fact bombs placed at every critical junction on the station. John was grinning like a madman, finally the pacifist in Hortan had been replaced by a born again hard fighter. He had listened to Hortan as he described how he had incapacitated the man, and was surprised over the amount of Krav Maga Hortan had knowledge of. He was looking forward to sparring with him.

Hortan on the other hand, was slowly drinking a cup of hot chocolate to wash down two of the tranquillisers he had received from Ms. Chi. He knew that he had to protect Ms. Chi, and so he had agreed to take responsibility. But no

matter what, he could not bring himself to lie. He had told the story from someone else's perspective, never mentioning himself, but never mentioning Ms. Chi either, and the rent-a-cops were only too happy to fill out the blanks. He was trying to keep from correcting them, and so far succeeding.

With a large "There you are", Vardonx came into the room. They both looked up and saw the full combat gear clad fighter pilot.

"Hortan, you are needed, and right now. Me and Lambin are to take you to Odia immediately. I have your suit here and a Warthog Mk II ready for you."

Hortan looked at the combat flight suit and swallowed hard.

"I don't, I mean, I really can't" he said.

"What do you mean you can't? You bloody well have to. Surbius received a message from an undisclosed source requesting your skinny butt in Odia. It was of the utmost importance to the TGFT, and that means we'll fly whether TPG likes it or not." Vardonx thought that Hortan was unable to leave because of the police matter.

"It is not that, I can't, no, I won't fly a combat ship under any circumstances, and I will not wear a combat suit."

Vardonx looked at him with disbelief. "Will an Atlas TPG do? And a regular flight suit?" Hortan nodded. "Then get moving, because we are leaving 10 minutes ago." Vardonx opened the door and started moving. John looked at Vardonx, and then at Hortan.

"I am going too."

"Nope, Surbius said only me and Lambin" Vardonx replied.

"You seem to have misunderstood. I said I am going. It was not a question." John rose slowly and purposefully, steadying Hortan at the same time.

Vardonx rolled his eyes, "right, right, can we go now then at least. By the profits of TPG, why can't it be simple just once?"

The council received notice that the terror attack had been stopped. Now they just had to find Ardon and let him account for his actions. They needed to find out where things had gone wrong, so they could ensure that the next plan would succeed. They needed to figure out what parts of the plan could be salvaged. And that aside, he was still holding a significant amount of credits.

18. Diplomacy 101

The bright yellow TPG Atlas was flanked by a trio of TGFT green combat ships, Vardonx and John Eldritch in Centaur III's, and Lambin in a Valkyrie X-1. Hortan's ship was armed with a healing gun and a scanner. You never knew when you ran into some nice roids that needed to be logged. Lambin was scouting ahead to make sure the wormholes were secure. Finally they arrived at CLM headquarters in Latos, one of the few places that was out of bounds for TGFT. Lambin and Vardonx kept a respectful distance, but John insisted on flying all the way with Hortan. When he came to the 3k mark from the station, a warning tone beeped and the CLM strike force, consisting of sharingan and Azumi this day, undocked and started their intercept course.

sharingan: You are trespassing. Go away or be plasma.

At the same time that John received the message from sharingan in his HUD, the radio crackled,

"Hortan can dock, he docks alone. Azumi, escort him to me." Yoda had spoken, and that was all there was to it. Hortan swallowed an extra time and boosted for the station with the pink vulture right behind him. He started sweating as he always did when he had a pie rat on his six.

The station disgorged two more fighters, tramshed and LNH. They boosted directly for John, and he drifted slowly towards Lambin and Vardonx. Three on three was ok odds if it was to be a fight, but he hoped that yoda would be true to his word and that it would not come to that.

The docking was quite uneventful. As Hortan went through his post flight checks, something hammered on his canopy. Azumi, standing outside with what looked like a wrench in one hand, was trying to get his attention. He looked out at her and held three fingers up, letting her guess the meaning. It seemed to work, because she jumped down from the steps. He continued with his checks when an even larger noise came from his canopy. Startled he looked to the side of his ship and saw her standing with a sawn off shot gun that she was reloading. The lead hail had been smeared across the window and the side of his ship. Deciding against getting even more lead paint on his ship, he abandoned the remaining checks and opened the canopy.

"Yoda-sensei said to bring you at once, not when the trader felt like it. So get a move on, we have to go by my room first."

Hortan was rather scared already. He was easily scared to start with, but the prospect of going to this young woman's room alone, was almost enough for him to get inside his Atlas and launch, let mission be mission. She had a predatory sneer on her face that made her look a bit like a pale version of His Queen. And as he realised that, he knew how to handle her. With utmost patience, a little flattering, and complete submission. Maybe these pie rat vixens received a course in sneering and swaggering after joining a pie rat

guild. The thought almost made him forget his fright.

"Was it Azumi they called you?" Seeing her nod, he continued, "I am very sorry that I have kept you waiting. Any bad standing you will get with yoda, I will naturally explain to him as being the fault of my lack of understanding of the issue of speed, with which I have been sorely misinformed, naturally not by yourself." He bowed deeply and looked up at the young woman again. She was smiling broadly, making her face much more pretty he thought, and much less dangerous.

"Shit, are you for real? Now, really, we have to go." She pointed in the direction with the shotgun and let him lead them down the corridor. Hortan noticed how clean looking the white walls were, they looked as if they had been painted within the last week maybe.

"Very well maintained here." Hortan noted, trying to ease his nerves with small talk.

"Yeah, well, tell that to sharingan. It is his doing. I liked the paint stick creatures better, but this is probably for the better" she laughed.

Hortan missed the joke completely, but at least he made her laugh. He felt slightly more at ease. She stopped him at a non-distinct door, and he started to open it, believing that they had arrived.

"You wait here, it'll only take a minute for me to get ready," she said and slid the door shut in his face after entering.

He looked dumbfounded at the door. Now what? Why had they had to hurry up so much if he was going to stand and wait for her to get ready? Was this some kind of CLM ritual he was witnessing?

Just as he was about to become impatient, and that is not easy for a miner to become, the door clicked open and the room, that had served as chrysalis for this particular pie rat, revealed the butterfly emerging. Azumi had changed into a dress made of strings and beads, created so it did not reveal anything, but at the same time you could see she was not wearing... Hortan felt the familiar heat rise in his cheeks and instantly looked away. Too late, Azumi had seen that he blushed immensely and smiled coyly at him.

"So, you like it I can see. Shame it doesn't work like that on everyone. Follow me," she said and started walking towards the depths of the station. Hortan really didn't know where to keep his eyes, if only she had let him lead as before. He settled for her heels, and even that was a bit too much for him.

The large KEEP THE HELL OUT sign alerted Hortan to the fact that they might have arrived. Azumi showed Hortan the call button, and he pressed it. Apparently he had done something wrong, because she let out a snort of disappointment. He thought about pressing it again, but the door opened

before he had decided. Yoda was standing inside. Hortan was surprised, he had expected yoda to be at least three meters tall, not three feet. His surprise must have been obvious, and along with the still blushing cheeks, he was looking like a complete fool.

"Think of me as espresso," yoda said, catching Hortan completely off guard. "The most potent of caffeine shots comes in small cups. Just like skill and malice," he smiled a very unpleasant smile.

"And you are the Meatan that managed to survive the convoy attack, solved the TGFT-PA conflict and single-handedly took out the terrorist that was responsible for the Remley atrocities. I guess looks can be deceiving, no?" He motioned them both inside.

"Ehm, the name is Hortan sir, and let me first say that Azumi was completely guiltless in us arriving late, she did her utmost to make me move faster, and it was not until she, at great risk to herself, made me open my canopy that I realised the need for haste."

Yoda looked at Azumi, then at Hortan and back again. He shook his head slowly. "Testosterone, GHU knows you young folks have too much of it. You didn't make it easier for him Az, but then you don't like easy, hmm?"

"I have brought you here for a reason, and it is not merely to look at young female pirates. I need for you to deliver a message to your guild, and I want you to be my personal liaison. A diplomat of sorts if you need it spelled out. The first item is, that once you find the person that masterminded all this, I want him delivered. Let that be my payment for the help I have given you so far."

Hortan shivered with the thought of being CLM's prisoner, kept deep in some wet dungeon, and only taken out for torture or worse. Yoda handed him a mem-crystal and looked him in the eyes.

"Here are the findings I have made so far. The name is for Surbius or Ecka only. Let them decide how, where and when. But make sure they understand that I want him." With that he waved his hand at Azumi, who bowed deep and led Hortan out of the door.

"So, do I call you Your Excellency from now on?" she asked Hortan, only halfway jesting.

"Just Hortan will do nicely," he responded. "I never asked for the position, I never asked for anything of this to happen."

"Well Just Hortan, it did, and now you have work to do." She moved in front of him and started walking towards the docking area, hips swaying and lips smiling as she could imagine him blushing once more.

Yoda sat down after they had left. He chuckled silently as he thought of the young man thrown to the lion, or rather lioness. He remembered that even he had once been that young and innocent, back before he flew with [CLM]Demon. Those were the days where yoda had terrorised all traders no matter where they were to be found. And now he was so mired in paperwork he rarely got time to fly. Getting older was not what he had envisioned. Maybe it was a time for a change. He would use this present situation to his utmost advantage, and then he would focus his attention elsewhere.

19. Preludium

Hortan was chaperoned into his Atlas by the energetic young woman. He had tried to make some small talk with her on the way to the bay. He figured that if she knew him better, she would not be as prone to shoot him, and besides small talk was soothing for his nerves. When they finally came to the launch bay, he was surprised to find himself sad to leave. Even though he would rather be anywhere else than in CLM HQ, well, SYN HQ would be just as bad, but that was about it, he really didn't want to leave the present company. She was in her own way a very interesting young woman with some fascinating stories. Not that she had told any, but he was certain of it. Alas, they had reached the open canopy, and he climbed wearily into the seat of his cockpit.

"Guess I'll be seeing you again soon. Take care, and safe flight." She extended her hand, and he stared at it. "You are supposed to shake it," she whispered amused. He cursed himself silently and took the offered hand in his own. So small, and yet so strong. He shook it quickly to disguise his nervousness, which of course showed exactly that. She smiled her predatory look at him and jumped down from the footrests, and swaggered behind the blast safes. He watched her all the way, only shaking out of his trance when she left his vision.

"...going to launch or what?" The dock master had been trying to contact Hortan for some time now, and he was getting mightily annoyed.

"Oh, sorry, I had some hardware problems" he blurted in reply, once more cursing himself, this time for the fantastically bad reply.

"Sure son, we can all get those from time to time" the dock master called back. Hortan was certain that he was right now the laughing stock of the entire launch bay.

He launched and joined the three waiting TGFT fighters where they had waited, the dark shadows of CLM fighters trailing them. They were escorted out of the sector and jumped for Dau K-10, TGFT HQ.

Once safely docked back at the station, Hortan went to the OPS room, directly to Surbius.

"I have something that is yours or Ecka's eyes only," he said to Surb.

"Ok, give it to me and I'll make sure we see it right away."

"No, first you have to make a promise." Surbius looked puzzled, he was not in habit of giving promises.

"I have this information from yoda, and he wants something for it. He wants the persons that he names. He wants him when we have captured him. And I promised him to ensure that."

Surbius thought about it for a second or two. When they apprehended the person, the maximum penalty they could give him in UIT space was a full memory wipe, just like the person Hortan had arrested in the pancake bakery was going to receive. The erasure of the person was considered a humane way of eliminating the ones that could not be expected to redeem themselves in any way, or that had done truly horrible things. The body was then used for a memory implant from a terminally sick person. He was certain that other rules were present in grey space.

"Sure, he can have him, but we want to be able to display him when he is captured."

Hortan gave the mem-crystal to Surbius and turned and left. His work had been done, his first ever diplomatic mission. He checked his PDA, almost two hours to the meeting with the shrink. Maybe a load of pancakes would help fill the time. He texted Ms Chi and asked her to join him. Hopeful, he went to the pancake shop.

Surbius called Ecka immediately, and together they watched the data unfold. Yoda had dug very deep, but then again, for an ex member of the notorious BLAK, he had the contacts and the knowledge to find just about everyone. The secret UIT account had been used to pay off a set of warthogs on Latos B-2, and as far as Yoda could trace it, a person named Fadhe had used it. When Surbius entered the name into his database, it came up flagged as a known contact of one person that was interesting. Ferrin Galders of Corvus Intelligence Service. The Sun Flare that had been used in the attack on the convoy showed up as having been purchased at Sedina L-2, at Daltas Hold. And the now familiar number of the Corvus credstick had been used for the purchase.

It turned out that the person that used the stick was named Paeko Leta, who Yoda had discovered somehow, in reality was Ardon Rala, a person that showed up on the wanted list. Surbius tried a check list for Paeko Leta and came up with a location. Daltas Hold again. He looked at Ecka who merely nodded at Surbius, and went to alert people. This was their chance to snatch him before he went under again with another alias, and TGFT was not going to sit on their hands and let that happen.

Hortan was in luck. Not only did Ms. Chi join him, but John, Lambin, Vardonx and Rowan were already at Soggy's Pancakes and Waffles munching away. They made room around the table, and Hortan dug right in.

"Training today Chi?" John asked. "You can join in Hort, looks like you know some tricks yourself."

Ms. Chi almost choked on her waffle.

"I really shouldn't John, I have an appointment with Dr Wyman this afternoon."

"Your loss I guess, but if you feel up to it, come and join us later, ok?"

Hortan nodded and munched some more pancake. It wasn't a lie at all, maybe he didn't tell everything, but he hadn't lied. Ms. Chi looked at him over her cup and smiled behind it. Her secret smile, just for him. He blushed madly.

"Thinking about that pierat wench again are you?" Lambin was merciless

"Noes" Hortan replied, thought of her and blushed even more.

"Now you are" Vardonx laughed.

The laughs stopped when four PDA's started ringing. They looked at it, and John looked up at Ms. Chi.

"Going to have to postpone the training today Chi. Guild business and stuff. Cya Hort, say hi to the Doc for me, k?" He spun Hortan's propeller before leaving, for good luck as he usually did

Chi's PDA started ringing too, and with a slight smile to Hortan, she had to leave as well, leaving Hortan alone. Not that he minded, because none of them had eaten all their pancakes. More for him.

The OPS room was full, almost all of TGFT was present. Two liaison from PA were there as well, Ms. Chi, and Mick. Ecka stood in front of the large holoprojector in full combat gear and waited until all were seated.

"Welcome all. The guild is about to undertake a mission that is quite unlike any mission we have ever done. We are about to cross from the realm of trade guild that only concerns itself with the members of the guild, into the realms normally inhabited by the armed forces of known space. We, as a non-national entity, can go where we please, and as such we can do justice where it was otherwise impossible. Pilots, we are going to find the person responsible for the station attacks, the convoy attack, and the attempted murder on my person. We are going to make a snatch attack on Daltas Hold and apprehend Ardon Rala, aka Paeko Lata and bring him to justice. Any pilot that is adhering to a code of non-violence, you stay here with Surbius and Toha for coordination. The rest of you, come with me for specific orders."

With that, Ecka walked to the pre launch briefing room, with the most of the active pilots in tow.

20. The Chase is On

Daltas Hold. Located in the asteroid field of L-2, and originally built to provide easy access to the Lanthanic ore that was found in copious amounts, the station was now the nexus for production of weapons grade Xithricite for export to the Serco military, as evidenced by the hourly convoy of bots. The communal area was rather small, especially since most of the manufacturing space was taken up by the Xithricite refinery, with most of the residential area isolated in small clusters around the core where the main utilities were placed. Xang Xi had invested quite a large amount in the station, especially the trading areas, that boasted some of the the best supplied weapons and ships merchants apart from Corvus. And like the Corvus managed stations, not a lot of questions were asked.

It was perfect for Ardon, away from the direct influence of the Council, but still in deep grey space. Especially now, where they were looking for him. He had to make it up to them somehow, he had to bury all evidence leading to him and to the Council, and then present a solution to the Remley situation. He had a plan, and he was going to meet Fadhe in around an six hours and discuss it with him. Until then, he was going to watch some blood sports, and maybe one of those new flesh movies. He needed to appear confident and relaxed when he met Fadhe, otherwise the freelance pirate would bolt, and take the money with him.

The TPG convoy glided through Sedina space, turbos flaring now and again from the Behemoths to let them keep up with the rest of the ships. The convoy was destined for Daltas Hold as so many other TPG convoys, and as such it was not only on time, but also contained several non TPG members. One of the ships, a TGFT Centaur Mk III was slightly damaged, a result of an errant hive bot that the convoy encountered during an Ion storm the convoy passed. The damage had resulted in a damaged thruster section on its left side, and the pilot had a tendency to overcompensate. Well, that was the story anyway. Ecka was fighting a lot to make the ship appear damaged while in fact it was only cosmetic. He drifted to the right side of the docking bay, and as he missed the bay, he hit the reinforced xithricite armour that surrounded the docking bay for this exact purpose. The Centaur recoiled slightly and drifted back from the station, and as it did so, the bay disgorged eight EVA marine suits. Covered by the bulk of the ship, they moved towards one of the many auxiliary personnel docks. The lead suit unhandled a piece of equipment and interfaced with the door lock. The door opened after about thirty seconds, and the suited person drifted inside. The same person interfaced with the door lock on the inside, and the airlock cycled and opened to the station. Six of the persons unsuited and revealed Waldoze, John, Pasquel, Lambin, Buzz and Mike. Creyn and Rowan were staying suited inside the air lock to keep the emergency exit clear.

Waldoze grabbed a large glue gun and motioned for Buzz to get the second glue gun. While the funnel shaped weapon didn't actually shot glue, it mixed a two component epoxy-based almost instant hardening foam under high

pressure, that was enough to incapacitate anyone with a touch of the button. The large guns were very heavy, thus the two largest members carried them. Pasquel and Mike grabbed a pair of tasers that looked like "Buzz Lightyear" toy guns, and John grabbed the pair of stun batons. Together they unfolded and assembled the cloth wagon between them. Lambin carried the only lethal weapon for the snatch team, a lethal looking heavy calibre gyro jet rocket gun. Firing small homing missiles nicknamed bolts, it was mostly known as a bolter. Only in the direst of circumstances would Lambin let the characteristic "Boom-swoosh-Crack-fwump-Gung" sound be unleashed. Waldoze nodded to John, and the group started moving down the corridor of the station.

Ecka docked the Centaur in the docking bay, and slowly went through his post docking checks. He didn't bother go outside, but merely sent a message for reload of weapons in preparation for launch with the next convoy. The deck hands were familiar with the old miners habits, and had already made the ammunition ready. Ecka turned and gave the thumbs up to the three persons in the back of the cargo hold. The specially created holding facility was able to hold the eight EVA suited persons and still left room for medical facilities should they be needed. Mercy and Lfor were ready in full surgical kits, with Vardonx in an armoured combat suit with three millimetre GAUSS guns under slung each arm. Ecka hoped Vardonx would not have to be used, but he was not going to take any chances at all.

John walked confidently around the corner and directly into a trio of red clad workers with SDF marks on their tunics. He nodded at them and moved aside to let them pass. They looked down the corridor and saw what they thought of a cleaning crew, why else would they be carrying vacuum hoses? They ignored the five green clad persons and chattered amongst themselves in the Serco dialect. Lambin gripped his bolter even tighter. He had overcome his intense animosity towards the Serco when he joined TGFT, but it was still ingrained in him to be more alert when members of that particular military was present. Pasquel clapped Lambin on the shoulder for support, and the moment passed. They continued down the corridor to the left. They had been given the room number 681, the one right in front of John. They readied, and John knocked on the door, ready with the stun batons.

Ardon had just about drifted off to light sleep when somebody knocked on his door. Strange, nobody were supposed to know that he was living here apart from Fadhe, and he was not supposed to be here for at least an hour. Still, he got his pants on and walked over to the door and unlocked the door. He grabbed the handle and opened.

The door opened, and John tensed, ready for action. A young man opened the door, and John smiled at him. "Ardon Rala? Paeko Leta?"

"Uhm, no. Who are you, and what do you want?" he asked John.

"Hanseman Luchter, Corvus gambling and winnings committee," John lied. "We are looking for a person named Ardon Rala, or his partner Paeko Leta in

relations with a somewhat large amount of money he has won on the last Deneb Run. We were told he lived here?"

"Who, Corvus gambling, Deneb run you say? Ehm, I am not supposed to say, but if you are bringing a lot of cash to him I guess it is ok. Paeko asked me to swap rooms, he is in my old room 536. How much did he win?"

"About six million credits. Thank you for your help. We'll go find him. And please don't call him, it is supposed to be a surprise," John smiled and winked to the young man.

John motioned to the others to go the one level up to 536 instead. They moved with as much haste as they could without drawing too much attention to themselves. It still took about ten minutes for them to arrive at the door, only to find it locked. Nobody responded to the knocking, and John motioned to Pasquel to bring the lock breaker gear out. Fifteen seconds later, and the lock clicked open. John and Waldoze peeked in. The room was small with a single large chair in the middle, the vid screen on one wall was showing two young women clad in what they had been wearing when they had been born, in some very anatomically challenging positions. They went inside to make sure that the room was empty, and quickly went out again. Well, John did. Waldoze had walked in to the chair in the middle of the room and seated himself to better see the show. John sighed and went in again to force Waldoze out of the room.

John keyed his mike. "PRIME is not in his room, and we have now lost his location. Aborting unless ordered otherwise."

Ecka swore under his breath, the effect was almost enough to blister the paint on his ship. "Your call J, but this may be the one shot we have."

John looked down to the floor and tried to focus on what was possible. "Roger. I have one shot left, and after that, the risks are too high."

"I agree," Ecka said, "but the moment you don't feel secure about it, you abort. You have control."

John looked up at his team.

"Thing just got interesting. Lets assume he went out with somebody, where would he go?"

Waldoze chuckled. "I know exactly where he is, The Priggly Pear, the best strip joint in Daltas." Buzz and Mick nodded and smiled at Waldoze. "Remember that one time with the girls that were....."

"That is quite graphic enough Waldoze. You know where it is, you led the way," John interrupted.

21. Almost There

Ardon had been pleasantly surprised when he opened the door. Fadhe had been outside with two girls clad in mini skirts and even smaller tops.

"I suspect you have called me here for celebrations," Fadhe slurred, his thick accent making the sentence barely legible. "So I have ordered a private show at the Pear, and these two delicacies insisted that I pick you up right away." He squeezed the giggling girls and motioned for Ardon to come with him. Not one to pass up an opportunity like this, Ardon closed the door after him immediately and grabbed one girl around the waist.

"Lead the way, and lets get plastered." The bad news would have to wait, they wouldn't get worse anyway.

The entrance to The Priggly Pear was a set of double doors in midnight blue with fluorescent tubes in yellow snaking around small pictures of semi-nude men and women. The door was blocked by two large very obviously heavily implant-enhanced men that looked like bad news for anybody that wanted to make trouble. Normally they were bored stiff, the very presence of having them put a cap on most trouble, and only in very rare cases was it necessary for them to activate their war implants.

Today was not going to be one they were going to tell their grandchildren about. John walked over to the men, slowly but purposefully, and stopped about five meters from them. He flicked a stun baton out and showed it to them, triggering their reflexes. They moved towards him, and he lowered the baton, signalling to Waldoze and Buzz to fire. The glue guns sprayed the two guards with the epoxy, instantly freezing them in their position. John walked over to them and pressed his stun baton to their neck implant node, whispered "sorry" and pressed the activation button. First one man went unconscious, and after John had repeated the procedure, the other went too.

They put the two guards into the Priggly Pear's entrance, and Pasquel and Buzz took up their place instead. The others went inside the club, and were assaulted by the high music and the dark room with flashing lights behind. Only spots on the stage where a girl, Rose Waldoze recognised, was dancing around while a man was lying on his back, illuminated the room. A low haze of inhalant narcotics was separating the room in height, with somewhat cleaner air towards the floor.

"Dooooooooozzer," the keening voice belonged to one of the girls from the bar. She ran to him on very high plateau shoes and threw herself around his neck. "Where have you been? We have missed you very much Dozzer, you want a drink? A private show?" More girls were moving over to him now. John eyed him and ground his teeth.

"Listen Lily, I am really here to find a person, he may be with someone. Maybe you know him, Paeko Leta?"

"Oh yes, he is getting a private dance over there by Azalea, spending quite well. Maybe you are next?" She indicated a booth with a white piece of cloth barely concealing what was going on inside.

"Can't honey, work stuff to do. Get the flower girls and move to the that side of the room." He indicated the opposite side from the booth. She started to protest, but he stopped her. "I mean it Lily. I'll make it up to you."

She pouted her lips in a fake display of displeasure, but did what he asked her. Waldoze motioned to the snatch team, and they got ready. John walked over and tore the sheet to the side, expecting a fight. Not likely in that position John realised. He pressed the stun baton to the back of the busy mans head and activated. The head of the person snapped forward, and then lolled to the side. Waldoze stepped in and motioned to the girl that she should get lost. He pressed a scanner against the neck of the man, and starred at the readout. The DNA profile was clear, Ardon Rala. He nodded to Lambin and Pasquel, who started to load the unconscious person into the small wagon they had brought.

They were interrupted by a crack of a gun firing. The many hours spent in combat training took over, and the team spread out and took cover within miliseconds. The shot had come from the man on stage, and he was now rolling over the side of the stage towards the back of the room.

"Status," John shouted.

"Leg hit, just grazed it" Lambin called out.

"Lethal force authorised" John shouted, as another round went tearing through the room close to his location.

"Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack" the bolts fired in rapid fire mode stitched a pattern on the wall above the stage, towards the man. The bolts were not having tertiary explosions as they had not connected with soft material.

"Cover us, we are exfiltrating," John shouted to Lambin. He grabbed the cart and together with Waldoze, he pushed it fast out towards the exit. They met the worried Pasquel and Buzz outside, and told them what was happening. Waldoze grabbed his glue gun and slithered inside again with John at his side. The room was quiet, with Lambin standing to the side of the room, actively covering Mike, that was searching behind the stage.

"He got away the bastard," Mike called back.

"Ok, exfil now. Plan charlie." John called out.

"Two secs J., I gotta fix something first." Waldoze went over to the scared girls

and squatted before Lily. He handed her the newly liberated credstick he had swiped from the unconscious Ardon and smiled at her. "If this doesn't cover it, tell me next time I come, ok? I strongly suspect that it does however." He winked at her and kissed her forehead before getting out with the others.

Plan charlie meant direct exfiltration to the Centaur. Since they were not exiting through the air lock, Creyn and Rowan packed the extra gear into the carry-alls, interfaced with the lock, and exited as quietly as they had come. They kept in hiding and moved to the girders that held the armour plates in place. They would be picked up, if all things went well, either by the Centaur as it launched, or by a specially modified TPG Raptor they had waiting in L-1 for that specific purpose, piloted by Ato Bashenk.

The rest of the snatch team moved as casually as possible down the corridors towards the launch bay. It was more difficult with the leg wound on Lambin, and the constant need for making sure that they were not jumped by the unknown man. They managed somehow to get all the way to the launch bay and safely inside the Centaur. Mercy took care of Lambin immediately, and the rest of the team either stored their gear, or helped putting Ardon into the confinement suit. Once inside, there was no escape, and that was how it should be. The suit was basically a plasteel exo skeleton with its motors locked. Ifor scanned Ardon's head for suicide implants, found the small explosive device covered with synth flesh in the small his neck, and disabled it. Finding no reason to remove it, Ifor left it in it's place. Besides, they wanted to tube Ardon up before he came to. Once intubated, he had no way of committing suicide. His every bodily need was taken care of by the suit now, he didn't even have to breathe.

Ecka undocked, roll-boosted to skim the armour plates, and opened the load bay for no more than ten seconds, which was more than enough for Creyn and Rowan to enter. Ecka signalled Ato as he boosted for jump distance, and Ato jumped into B-8 slightly ahead of the Centaur, ready to provide escort. The mission was so far successful. Chi breathed a little easier in the OPS room, and she left relieved that this ordeal was now over for her.

22. Ardon

Surbius was frustrated to say the least. For thirty six hours he had tried to question Ardon, and not a single answer. It was not that the man was not able to answer, he simply chose not to, and with no access to either truth serum, which had limited effect anyway, or any forms for sanction possibilities, only perseverance and time could bring answers. NP was questioning him now while Surbius was going to get some sleep.

Even if they would get some answers, the outcome would be the same. After discussing it, the leaderships of TGFT and PA had decided to honour the deal with yoda, and so Ardon would be delivered to CLM HQ when they were finished with him.

This was off course unknown to Ardon, who still considered himself lucky that it was TGFT that had caught him, and not The Council. Especially considering that they had caught him without his knowing, and so had had the opportunity to remove his suicide implant. He was wracking his brain with scenarios of what could have gone wrong, and every time he drew a blank. Ok, so they didn't get Ecka to start with, but how the wily old miner had escaped was beyond him. The plan was fool proof, and when he saw the video from the attack, he was certain that they had done precisely as they should to cheat the APRS. Still, that was not what made the plan collapse. They still had the firm Corvus presence in Remley, and with the attack on TGFT HQ in Dau they would still have sown so much destruction that nobody would care about some station deep in the bowels of Latos, thus paving the way for full take-over by Corvus and expansion of The Council's power. How The Anarchist had become so careless and stupid as to getting caught, was beyond Ardon. The one person he had trusted implicitly, had betrayed him due to incompetence.

The last thing that Ardon couldn't explain no matter how he analysed it, was how the H*** they had found his name, his whereabouts, and even if they had his room number, how had they known he would be at The Priggly Pear? Fadhe had invited him completely out of.....wait. He had been betrayed by Fadhe, that was the only solution. That double crossing, back stabbing, money grabbing son of a w****. It had been him all the time. Him that had falsified the video, him that had warned off the authorities in Dau, him that had set him up in Daltas. Ardon was fuming with anger and rage.

"Ok, I'm going to talk."

NP snapped his head up and looked directly at the faceplate of the immovability suit. He keyed the intercomm to Surbius's room and hailed him.

"Mmhwat?" Surbius's voice drunk with fatigue and sleep.

"The bird is going to sing" NP replied, knowing that it would have the same effect on Surbius as a 100 gallon drum of espresso.

"On my way now."

NP waited patiently for Surbius, made sure all the recording gear was active and functioning correctly. He even poured a mug of coffee and put it in Surbius's cup holder.

Surbius entered, crisp looking as ever. Not for nothing had the dress regulation been made on basis of what he wore. He sat and grabbed his coffee as if it was the most natural thing in the world that someone had placed it there.

"So, has he said anything yet?"

"Just that he wanted to talk. We have waited for you."

"Excellent. Ardon, I know you can hear me. We want to know why."

Ardon gave a hoarse laugh.

"If you want information, you have to promise not to mindwipe me. Put me in a labour camp, put me in the deepest dungeon, but no mindwipe. I want your promise on that as 2iC of TGFT, or no deal."

Surbius didn't even flinch or reflect over the deal.

"I hereby as 2iC of TGFT promise that neither TGFT, TPG, UIT or PA will conduct mindwipe on Ardon Rala. Satisfied?"

"As much as can be. As I assume that everything here is being one time recorded, I guess it is as good as it gets. The guy you want, the mastermind, is a guy named Fadhe."

After two hours, it became clear that the man named Fadhe was the evil mastermind genius that had led the Corvus masters around by their noses. Not that either NP or Surbius believed any of it, it became quite clear after a while that whenever Ardon said Fadhe, he in reality meant himself. And when he described himself, it was Fadhe's role he assumed. The entire plan was a power grab by Corvus, to expand into Latos by overtaking Remley. Ardon made one comment about the council of seven, but it was not clear who these guys were. And after he had said it once, he would explain it away as non-important. After six more hours of interrogation, NP and Surbius had confirmed everything they had found out, and that meant that Ardon was now officially worthless. They dosed him with sleep gas, and informed their respective guild leaders that the case was closed. Well, almost closed. Three things still remained to be done. Extradition of Ardon to yoda, the expulsion of Corvus at Remley, and the secret one.

Surbius paged Hortan, Vardonx, Lambin and John. They would take care of

the extradition, and then he and Ms. Chi would take care of the expulsion of Corvus from Remley Orbital.

Hortan was lying on the very comfortable bench at Dr. Wyman's office. He was tired, he had been asked repeatedly for more than two hours now, about the slaughter of the convoy primarily, but also about his obsession with His Queen.

"So it seems that you dream less of The Huntress than you used to. In some fashion, that is good. It is a sign that you are getting over the obsession. I still believe that you should be on a strict no combat daily routine, and we'll change the medication to something else. With less side effects, but the moment you feel something is wrong, you come back here." He closed his book and started tapping on the side of the ledger with the pencil. "I am not sure that you are telling me everything, I believe that something is hidden. But with my help and your enthusiasm, we'll get it out and cure it, ok?" He smiled reassuringly at Hortan, and took his glasses of and let them hang dangling from a strap around his neck.

Hortan was certain that they wouldn't get it out. No way was he going to rat on Ms. Chi. No way, never. He would not lie, but he could shut up, even to the shrink. Besides, he felt better than he had for a long time.

"Sure Doc, but I feel good lately. And I would really like to let go of the drugs. They make me so drowsy. Why, yesterday I fell asleep mining my favourite roid Mary-Anne. And that is the first time I have done that ever."

Dr. Wyman almost choked on the pencil he had started biting on.

"What, who is this Mary-Anne? You haven't mentioned her before?"

"I told you, it is my favourite Heliocene roid. I have names for them all. The big one in Helios B-14 is Helena, the small one behind is little shy Ariel." He chuckled. "She hide sometimes, and so I have to run around after her. The one all the way out in the deeps is Cassandra, or Cassie for short." Hortan beamed at the doctor.

"You have names for the roids...Girls names.." He started scribbling something on his ledger. "Have you had any girlfriends Hortan?"

"Ehm, not really. Well, not if you don't count My Queen."

"I think we have hit upon one of those small hidden things, mmh? Let me think about that one until next time. For now, lets try to get you on as little medication as possible. Just some uppers, ok?"

"You know best Doc," Hortan smiled and got up to leave. They shook hands,

and Hortan left for his bunk. He was wasted. He would just swing by the Xang Xi merchant and see if they had received that new John Eldritch "Hive Skirmisher" action figure he had ordered for his collection, but then it was off to sleep.

23. The Atlas

John didn't like those diplomatic Surbius missions had assigned him to at all. First of all, he hated that he couldn't attack them the moment he laid his eyes on them. Second, he was not sure if Hortan was able to cope with this kind of work. No matter now, he would have to brood about this later. Now it was Krav Maga, and the slender figure in front of him. He was making ready to defend and counterattack with a lock or two. He would not attack in full force, he was much stronger, and he could punch her right across the room. He feigned an attack with his right fist against the head and was instantly locked. The twin "nose" punches that Chi put on his forehead confused him greatly, the elbow in the chest was textbook and took his breath away, and when she tossed her arm forward and connected with the inner thigh on his right leg, he knew he was defeated. They were only sparring, in a real situation, he would now be on the floor with a broken nose and a groin on fire.

She pulled back and grinned at him.

"What the, have you been practising without me? Don't tell, you have been training with Hortan, right?" he smiled as he realised how good Hort must be if he could improve Chi that much.

Chi stopped and frowned at him. "Well, not really John." She opened her hands in defensive posture. "I may have kept something from you." She struck again, this time moving forwards, and then when John responded, she tipped her torso back and swung her leg forwards to connect lightly with his right inner thigh. Getting him again, she retreated out of his reach.

"It was never Hortan, was it?" The truth dawned on John. It had been the other Krav Maga master at this station. He slapped himself on his forehead. "Points for not seeing the obvious. It was you, right? And you let him take the fame while keeping low. Ha, and I fell for it." She moved right and low, and went for a punch with her right hand to his knee, followed by the left elbow in his chest. She never got so far. Once she got inside his reach, he side stepped and jabbed her twice in the kidney region before slapping down on her knee, forcing her to lose balance and drop to the floor. He landed his body on top of hers. His elbows would have dug deep in her abdomen if it had been for real, now he merely landed on his arms. "Gotcha," he said.

They untangled and smiled at each other. It had been a good workout, both giving and taking, both exploring new options.

"So, are you going to deliver Ardon to yoda?" Chi asked.

"No, apparently they are leaving that to Hortan. As if he doesn't have enough on his conscience already. Lambin, Vardonx and me are going to escort him to Latos, but he is going to do the handover himself." John got his kit bag. "Thank you for the workout Ms. Chi. It was a pleasure as always. Don't worry, I won't tell about the incident with Hort if you promise to train again tomorrow."

He winked at her.

"Extortionist, I always knew you were a shady character. Ok then. Tomorrow, same time?"

He nodded in reply and went to change into his flight suit.

Vardonx was slowly painting the name of Hortan's ship on the side below the canopy of his Atlas with an airbrush when Lambin came into the dock. He had checked his own ship completely hours ago, and was now putting finishing touches on the side of Hortan's. There, almost ready now. Lambin walked over and looked at the pin-up girl wearing a TGFT propeller cap and not much else. She had covered the most intimate parts of her body with a stylised TGFT logo, and the name The Certain Death IX was painted below.

"Nice one Var, one of the best you have done so far." Vardonx didn't reply, but merely nodded in thanks. He was deeply concentrated on painting small bottles around the name. Lambin had persuaded Vardonx to paint his X-1 in shades of green, mottled to look like ancient reptile skin, and even at a somewhat steep price; he had agreed to running naked through the mess hall wearing only Ecka's tartan cloth over his head for cover. Ecka never found out who had done it, and Lambin wished for matters to stay that way.

Lambin checked his X-1, and settled in for the wait. Wouldn't be long now before they would be going.

It slowly dawned upon Hortan, that he was going to have to go back to CLM HQ again. He was thrilled and terrified. Mostly the latter, since his dealing with CLM had so far mostly been "detect, run, get boomed". And he was not really all that keen on being the ambassador to CLM. On the other hand, if he was lucky he would be escorted again. He blushed.

"...utmost importance tae tell." Ecka looked at Hortan. "Dammit son, are ye even listening? Forget it then, just take the cargo and deliver it in person tae yoda. What is it with ya young uns these days? Is it testosterone week or something? I caught Mor singing this morning, can ye imagine that, singing? Twas bloody horrible too, and he had the absent face that ye do now. What is the guild coming tae." He grabbed his bottle and poured a dram, deciding that it was not enough, and poured some more. He looked at Hortan. "Well, what are ye waiting for? Get a move on now."

Hortan scuttled out of the room, and went by the cargo handlers to sign for the box he was supposed to deliver. It had already been loaded in his Atlas, and it was waiting for him in the launch bay with John, Vardonx and Lambin. At least they were there to protect him. He met Waldoze and Buzz on the way down there, they were also headed for the bay.

"So Hort, are you going to do the delivery?" Waldoze asked.

"Yep, it is expected I think, so I better do it. And where are you headed off to?"

"Just making sure some old debts are paid. Nothing to it, will only take a couple of hours I think." Buzz grinned like a madman and punched Waldoze lightly on the shoulder. "Only stepping in for a snack or two." They both laughed, and sent a bewildered Hortan away to the merchants launch bay while they moved to the combat wing.

The crate had already been loaded, and Hortan walked up to his ship. His escort was standing in by the side, below the canopy. Hortan raised his hand in greeting, and Vardonx stepped one step forwards.

"Hort, old swinger. The three of us have decided to make your ship more worthy of a TGFT diplomat. We want you to represent us, and so we have decided to spice your Atlas up a bit."

Hortan swallowed hard as they stood aside and showed the pin-up on the side. It. Was. Beautiful. How they had found a picture of His Queen, he would never find out he reckoned, but it was beautiful. He realised he was supposed to say something. It was difficult, his heart was thumping like he had been running a mile.

"I, ehm, what?, ah. Thank you guys. It is the best ever. How did you get a picture of My Queen? I mean, she is absolutely gorgeous."

Vardonx frowned, he had not used a picture of The Huntress, he had merely used his imagination of how he thought that pirate wench Hortan had thought about would look like. He had not tried to make a painting of The Huntress, but if Hortan was happy, he was happy too.

"I am glad you like it," Vardonx said. "I think I may have overdone it with the bottles, but it is kinda neat."

Lambin clapped Hortan on the shoulder and led him to The Certain Death IX. "Lets go then, ok? Back home in time for beers in the mess hall."

24. The Pirate Queen

It was quiet in CLM HQ. Most pilots were out doing whatever they usually did. Mystic was sitting in her new reclining chair with her feet up on the command console, a cup of hot Sedina chocolate in her left hand and the latest status reports in her right. She had slept for twelve hours straight after returning from Itani space, and was feeling sated and a bit like the day after a rough party. She sipped some more chocolate and turned the page. What the h***. She read the docking/launching report again just to make sure. Why had a TGFT member, let alone someone unknown, been allowed to dock here? She started worrying, that name, where had she heard it before. She put her feet down and started searching. She was mildly annoyed, her drowsiness gone completely. Ah, so that was Hortan, it was all over CNN. And he had been escorted by Azumi. And she had, what?

Mystic pushed the call switch and dialled for Azumi's ship computer.

"Yarr," the young woman answered almost immediately. "What is is Myst?"

"Az, that young man, Hortan you escorted in the station some days ago, why and where did you take him?"

"Oh him," she laughed aloud. "He was there to see yoda. Some deal yoda had made, but I don't know the specifics. He is coming today too, in around one hour or so."

"Thanks Az, page me when he arrives, I would like to meet the hero of Dau myself."

"Will do Myst. Trader inbound, I'm out."

What in the name of everything that was holy was yoda up to now? She had asked him if he was on top of the TGFT situation, and whether CLM would benefit. He had said yes, and that had been that. But curiosity got the better of her now. Mystic decided that she would just show up at the meeting with Hortan later, and see what he had to say. Yoda could have told her if he wanted to have secrets. Besides, why should he have all the fun?

Hortan launched his Atlas, and found his place between the two Centaurs. Lambin scouted on ahead, and was boosting as fast as the X-1 could go. The others went at a more rational pace, with Hortan deciding for 160m/s. They received the all clear form Lambin, and jumped for Azek, expecting to arrive at CLM HQ in about 30 minutes. Hortan called ahead to yoda to inform him that they were inbound.

Azumi received a message from yoda. "Hortan on the way. Make ready to escort on station. Bring the cargo crate that he is delivering." She was just

about to set off in pursuit of another convoy, but that would have to wait. She turned the Pink Lady around and disengaged from the tempting target. Better make it fast, then she could have changed before he arrived and they wouldn't have to keep yoda waiting. She docked her Corvus Vulturius and jumped out of the ship with her PDA in her hand. She touched the small credit sign in the top, and the daily tally popped up. 1.4 million so far. She interfaced with the CLM mainframe and transferred the money to her account, minus the ten percent to the guild. She paged Mystic to let her know Hortan was inbound, as she had been instructed. She then walked to her room to switch into something less comfortable. Something with latex and leather, and not too much of it. Or that thing with the small skirt and the tight sweater. Choices, choices. She had about half an hour she reckoned, more than enough.

The SF undocked, as the TGFT convoy arrived. LNH and sharingan today, but they didn't even bother to boost out towards the Centaurs, the X-1 and the Atlas. The Atlas moved towards the docking bay, and LNH followed behind the vessel. When Hortan entered the docking bay, LNH fired a stream of neutron fire into the rear of the Atlas.

"For old times sake," he chuckled over the radio.

Hortan docked with only 10% armour left, the rear of the Atlas a smouldering wreck. He immediately opened the canopy in anticipation of Azumi's presence. He looked at the smiling dock hands that were eyeing the damages.

"That is gonna cost ya matey," one of the dockhands, a large man with a tattoo across the left side of his face that disappeared down his neck and under his coverall almost snarled at him.

"I hope you can fix it quickly, I have an appointment," Hortan started, his weak confidence waning further.

"I don't know if me and the boys can fix anything that massive in under, lets say two hours."

Hortan looked desperately at the man.

"Unless we can see a small incentive, if you understand," the large man rubbed his thumb and index indicating money with the second oldest sign known to humanity, the first naturally being used to tell other people that you were mightily annoyed with them.

"How much do you need?"

"Well, you are from TGFT, so you must be rich. I'd reckon about half a mill would do it for us."

"I'll give you half a million kicks in the ass if you don't fix it at standard Corvus

prices. Or you can discuss it with yoda." Azumi was standing in the entrance to the bay, her small form perfectly enhanced by the latex lace-up dress she wore with the knee high stiletto healed leather boots. She was playing with a lollipop in bright pink, and looked over it with big eyes at the dockhands. She slowly pulled the lollipop out of her mouth and smiled sweetly at the men. "Is that OK boys?" she asked innocently.

The men stared at the pirate vixen, and the large man nodded. "Certainly, we were only joking. Now, if we can get started, we'll be finished in no time at all." He nodded to Azumi and started giving orders. The men busied themselves to get away from the young woman.

Hortan was standing with a slack expression on his face while he starred at Azumi, his mouth slightly open.

"Cat got your tongue?" She smiled innocently again, this time to Hortan who blushed immensely. To top it off, she popped the lollipop again and twirled her left pigtail. "Do you have the crate for yoda?"

"Mjem, ah, shu. I mean, yes m'am. It is right here." He wrestled his gaze away from Azumi and looked at the cargo bay where they were unloading the crate and loaded it onto an small transport wagon.

Azumi led Hortan over to he crate, his eyes very firmly on the girls feet. He was going to get the crate, bring it to where yoda wanted it and run out of here. He dared looking at the calf of Azumi, but blushed immensely from the daring move, and so again starred at the stilettos.

"So, how's the Who?" The female voice came from the corridor that led down to yoda's chambers. Hortan looked and saw a slender woman with dark red hair, dressed in a pair of stretch jeans, a white shirt that was tied beneath the bosom with a red jacket slung on as carelessly as John usually pre-flight checked his ship. She was wearing an indecently large projectile revolver on her right thigh and a smile on her beautiful face.

Hortan was about to reply when the pheromones hit him. And hit him hard. His otherwise very analytic brain felt like it was turning slowly to mush, his unusually eloquent reply was drowned by the extremely important need to stand very still with his mouth open and stare.

Mystic walked over towards Azumi and Hortan, her smile turning slightly wider. "Still got it it seems." Mystic grinned at Azumi.

"And where is the rest of that dress?" Mystic nodded towards Azumi's skimpy outfit. "Looks like you started well, but forgot to finish. I'd might as well tell you that it doesn't bite on him at all."

Azumi looked confused.

"I don't think yoda has thought about a woman for ages, no matter how scantily clad," Mystic said.

"Oh, this is not for yoda, this is for me" Azumi replied and pointed at Hortan.
"Well, and a bit for him as well. Even if it is a bit unfair."

Mystic looked at Hortan, smiled and extended her right index finger, pointed it under Hortan's chin and closed his mouth. "Yes, I see he is easy prey. Just use your head is all I ask."

Azumi nodded.

"So, what's in the box?" Mystic indicated the cargo crate behind Azumi.

25. Unfinished Business

The two fighters docked in Daltas Hold. Both were painted in TGFT regulation standard green. The two ships disgorged two pilots clad in identical flight suits, the same colour as the ships. Waldoze and Buzz walked over to the dockmaster and arranged for two rooms where they could dress in somewhat less official clothes. Six minutes later, Waldoze was pounding impatiently on Buzz's door. Buzz opened and Waldoze was outside with a bottle of Helio Mists in his left hand, and an immense grin on his face.

"What took you so bloody long?" Buzz grinned back. He had changed out of his jump suit and into a pair of slacks, with a very colourful shirt open to the third button. He closed the door and accepted the bottle Waldoze presented him. He took a large swig of the bottle, grimaced as the fiery liquid hit his palate, flinched when it trickled down his throat and smiled as it hit his stomach with the potency of an Avalon.

"Ah, nice. What the h*** is that you're wearing? A skirt?" He indicated the skirt that Waldoze was wearing.

"Tis a kilt you daft trader. I made a wager with John, ok? And so, here I am, wearing Ecka's kilt, and hoping that he will not find out until it has been returned. Or I will be minced meat." Waldoze accepted the bottle and drank deep, his adams apple bobbing up and down several times.

"And?" Buzz looked expectantly.

"And what?"

"And what would have happened if you won the bet?"

Waldoze took another swig and grinned like a madman at Buzz. "I won the bet mate. Now less talk and more movement."

Buzz wracked his head for a reasonable reply, but failed miserably. In the end he merely laughed out loud and started walking after Waldoze.

"Oooh, the liquor was spilt on the barroom floor
And the bar was closed for the night." Waldoze sang at a very loud voice.

Buzz shook his head, nothing else to do but join in.

"When out of the hole came a little brown mouse
And sat in the pale moon light."

The two men walked down the corridor singing and drinking all the way. They came to their destination, a black door with blue neon lights. The Priggly Pear. The two large men outside directed their attention towards Waldoze and Buzz, and one of them reached back to get a stun baton out.

"Now now, we are not here to fight. We are here to shpend shome moneys" Buzz slurred, having drunk around half a bottle of Helio Mists. The first bottle was finished, and Waldoze was trying his best to make a huge dent in the second. The larger of the bouncers started to block the way for Buzz, but the 5k credstick Buzz put in his hand made him move aside. Waldoze staggered into The Priggly Pear without noticing the bouncers at all.

The music inside was very loud as last time they were here, with the same amount of lighting, and the same show on the stage. A girl Waldoze knew was called Dandelion was slowly dancing under the lone spot.

"Dooooooooooooooooozzzzzzeer," the very loud shrill voice was calling him from the bar. Lily, the reason he was here. She came running on her usual plateau shoes and threw herself around Waldoze's neck and kissed him hard. She turned while hanging there and shouted to the room.

"Girls, this is the guy that ensured your retirement fund. Make sure he has a great time with his buddy Buzz here."

She planted another kiss on Waldoze's mouth and lead him to the front chair. Two girls entered the stage, Rose and Magnolia, and Buzz focused all his attention on the stage.

Waldoze leant over Lily and whispered, "Lily, honey, just how much was on that credstick? Not that I want it back or anything, just curious."

Lily looked at him and whispered back, "38 million credits, and some change."

Waldoze smiled immensely and leant back, dragging Lily with him. "Life is good,' he said, "life is sometimes really really good."

Mystic waved her hand in front of Hortan's head, no response, then snapped her fingers, same. Azumi walked over and pinched his ear, and that made him snap out of it.

"Me, Mah," he swallowed hard, "I, I fwal, pah."

Azumi leant over and kissed Hortan on the cheek, and that gave him the necessary shock to snap out of it. The result was a bit more than she bargained for though. Hortan fainted. Mystic and Azumi caught him as he dropped, and were standing with his arms around their wastes and their arms holding his body and head, bent low over him as yoda entered the bay.

"Well, rip off my arms and beat me to death with the bleeding stumps. How the bloody hell did he manage to seduce the two off you in less than five minutes. He has got to be the best bloody hero ever to come out of UIT."

Hortan woke up, Mystic's and Azumi's faces merely centimetres away from his own. Their arms were holding him, and his arms were. He blushed even more than he ever had before, and tried muttering something.

"It is not what it seems yoda, he fainted after I kissed him," Azumi protested, letting Hortan down on the floor with Mystic's help.

"I am sure you swooned him Az, how could he resist? But you too Red? I am stunned beyond comprehension," the little man actually smiled.

"No yoda, it is not like that." Mystic started, and then stopped herself again. What was she saying, and why was she defending herself? Going for the old tactics of attacking when on the defensive she rose to her full height which was twice yoda's.

"What is in the box yoda, a present?"

"You can say that Red, I guess it is somehow." Yoda walked over to the box and ignored the prone Hortan with Azumi still holding his head. "If I am guessing correctly, we have a real honey pot right here."

Hortan got up in sitting position. "Mr. yoda sir, I am to deliver this crate to you from TGFT, as we agreed. And now I will please ask for permission to..." yoda waved a hand at Azumi and interrupted Hortan.

"Wah wah, yada yada. Azumi takes care of you, you have delivered, and I have no use for you now. So scuttle along."

Hortan got up and looked at his Atlas. It would take at least another hour for them to finish it. He was just going to wait in the cockpit then, because he could not stand here next to the enchanting..... Azumi grabbed his hand and pulled him down the corridor for about ten paces until he started to get out of the range of the pheromones that Mystic was wearing. Then he realised that he was standing with his mouth open staring at Azumi. The by now familiar warm tingling sensation bubbled up from his stomach to his chest and cheeks. He blushed madly and tried to look anywhere else but at her.

She smiled, now she was in control again. "Come on, lets let you buy me a drink while we wait for the mechanics." She turned and walked down to the residential area, sure that Hortan would follow. As he did.

26. Behind the Mask

Ardon was awoken by an injection of an antidote that cancelled the sleep medicine in his veins. The drugs were still heavy on his mind, his thoughts feeling like thick mud pressing through a gravel filled barrel. He opened his eyes slowly, expecting to see Surbius or NP above him. Ah, he was still asleep, and having a nightmare too it seemed. The little green man with the terrible sneer was surely not for real, especially not with the larger than life redheaded woman behind him. And besides, what was the famous pirate Queen doing behind such a horrible creature. He chuckled and closed his eyes again. Suddenly he realised who the green man was. It could only be yoda, meaning this was not a dream at all, and that he was now officially up Shit Creek, without a boat even. He opened his eyes wildly and screamed.

"I guess he is awake now Red," yoda said cheerfully, staring into the panicked face of Ardon. The screams were contained inside the suit, but there was no mistaking it. Ardons face was twisted into a mask of horror. And probably rightly so.

"How is this going to be profitable?" Mystic asked.

"Red, meet the person responsible for the current Remley Orbital crisis. And, dare I say, the person that is going to ensure that I make a wallop of money."

The sympathy that Mystic could have felt for the prisoner evaporated like fog beneath a tactical nuclear weapon's detonation. She had seen the pictures from the station, it was horrible. She pushed the audio button on Ardon's suit and leant towards his faceplate, so she was absolutely sure that he could hear and see her. The ice that was in Mystic's voice was almost enough to make the dockhands, that were working on Hortan's ship, freeze.

"Whatever you feel like yoda, I am behind you all the way. This particular piece of scum has deserved the right to whatever fun you can poke him with. Really, whatever you can dream of yoda." She stared at the panicked face of Ardon, turned and walked away. She was not going to loose sleep over these particular horrors yoda was going to perform.

Yoda looked down at the panicked man, and bent low over the mike. He whispered exactly what he was going to do to Ardon, and how much it would hurt. He then set out to do exactly what he had told Ardon, starting with pumping him full of truth serum. He was going to milk him dry for information. And then he would play with him afterwards before selling him to The Seven.

Azumi took Hortan down to the vending machine, let him buy them a bottle of Nyrius Mists each, and then, for lack of anything better to do, took him to her small apartment. She opened the door and went inside, and Hortan motioned to sit against the wall in the corridor.

"Are you going to sit there for an hour? I don't bite you know."

Hortan had to think for a few seconds before entering. This was the first time ever he was in a girls room, and he was determined not to make a fool out of himself. He failed miserably, the first thing he did was to fall over a pair of utility boots, stagger across the floor and land on his back in Azumi's bed. As if the bed had been made of molten lava, he bolted from it, got up and stood unsure in the middle of the room. Azumi had walked into the small bathroom to get some glasses, and had missed his show completely. Her room was very much like his own, the bed and the small synthwood desk were the dominant features in the room. A frame with a picture of a family of five, mum and dad, two sisters and one brother was hanging next to a picture of a young girl in a light blue uniform. Her braces were marring the smile that would have been pretty otherwise. A poster of Eo was hanging on the wall with a throwing knife marking one of the larger cities.

Azumi came out from the bathroom, the dress switched for a flight suit, the pigtails into a bun in the neck, and the coy smile now reduced to a smile. To Hortan, she was still beautiful, and he realised that he was seeing the real Azumi, not the dressed to kill Azumi. She walked to the chair at the desk and crashed into it. She turned and looked at Hortan, who had resumed looking at the poster, for some time.

"Aren't you going to sit? Or is it so uncomfortable to be in my presence?" Azumi asked.

"Sorry, I truly am. I just, I mean, I have never, well. This is awkward." Azumi smiled inside. It seemed Hortan's middle name was Awkward. "I have not been invited inside before, to a girls room that is, and I am a bit unsure of where to sit." Hortan eyed the bed nervously, and to his horror she pointed at that exact piece of furniture.

"Just sit on the bed, I only have this one chair," Azumi replied.

They sat in silence for some minutes, none of them having anything to say. Hortan would have been quite happy just sitting there for the remainder of the hour, now and again stealing a glimpse of Azumi, but she was continuously staring at him it seemed. To break the feeling of being a mouse in front of a pit viper, he decided to do what he believed Waldoze would have done, and make a bold move. He pointed at the pictures.

"Is that your family?" Azumi looked at the wall.

"Yeah, my younger sister Myfwani and my brother Jebu."

"And the picture of the girl, is that your sister too?"

She grinned at Hortan, "No, that is me at 15. Just entered flight school in the

Itani Defense Force, proud as can be."

He grinned back, he remembered when he had flown the first time. He had been a pimply young boy, but he had felt like he was on top of the world.

"What was your first ship?" he asked

"A centurion, standard issue. And yours?"

They chatted away about ships and flying, none of them noticing the time flying by. It wasn't until Hortan's PDA chimed that they realised that they had been chatting for quite a while. Hortan looked at the screen. John E. was calling. Accepting, he activated the screen for voice only, but hit the wrong button and got full immersion. The holo of John in his flight gear popped up.

"Hort, are you ok? Where are you, how long time do you have stay? Are you in trouble?"

Hortan reached for the visual cancel button, but it was too late. The small 3d camera in the front of the PDA panned and stopped at Azumi.

"What in the name of all the bloody hive queens bastard offspring are you doi...Oh. OH." John cut himself off mid-sentence. "Tell me later you bad boy. How much time do you need matey?" He grinned fiercely and winked at Hortan.

"It is nothing like you think, we are just waiting for The Certain Death to be finished with the repairs, and it should be good anytime soon," Hortan protested a little too loudly. Azumi laughed out loud and looked directly at the camera.

"I think the Atlas-" when she said Atlas she raised her hands and made quotation marks with her fingers in the air "-is ready now." She smiled the innocent smile at the camera. Hortan saw how she had reverted to the Azumi he was used to. The moment had passed.

John laughed out loud. "Yeah, not for nothing do the call it the little death miss. You get him safely to his ship now, you hear? John out." The holo collapsed, and Hortan was sitting with the PDA in hand, wondering what he had done in a previous life to deserve all this.

"Lets go Hort, they are waiting for you." He looked up at Azumi surprised. She was not demanding as he was used to, she was gentle with him, and almost nice. He stood too quickly, felt how the blood drained away, got nauseous and dropped to the floor, utilising his cheekbone as a brake by hitting the edge of the bed. He rolled over and grasped his face with his hands and started rubbing his cheek. It hurt like hell.

"Are you ok?" And now he could hear that she was concerned as well. He was

not sure he could handle that. He got up and started for the door, went back and got his PDA, and walked over to the door again. Azumi was blocking him.

"Here, let me see," she insisted.

He let his hand down, and she whistled softly. A large bruise on the side of his face was slowly emerging. It looked like someone had ripped a claw from his forehead and down his cheek to his chin without scratching the skin.

"Better get you into your ship before you do more damage on yourself," Azumi decided, and Hortan nodded, following her as she exited and walked to the docking bay.

The head of the Council of Seven received the message from yoda.

"I have the man you want. I know what he knows. I want the money you stole from me. and then I want the same amount for shutting up. You know my account, when the money is there, you get Ardon."

He frowned. 270 million was a lot for one man, but they would probably be worth paying. He put it on the agenda for tomorrows meeting.

27. Digging the Hole

He had expected to be teased all the way back to Dau, but neither Vardonx, Lambin or John had mentioned the PDA incident with word. Maybe this once, he would actually not be teased for something he hadn't done. He docked and went through his post flight routine as usual. Satisfied that the ship was in good condition, he opened the canopy and jumped out. They were standing outside, with mischievous grins on their faces. Lambin started clapping, and Vardonx joined him. John walked over to Hortan and started sniffing around like an old dog.

"Mmmh, nice flowery scent." He put his hands on Hortan's shoulder and looked into his face. "What the hell have you two been up to? I know she sounds rough and all, but she must be a real tigress, eh?" John turned to the others and nodded towards the streaks on Hortan's cheek.

The obvious thing happened, Hortan blushed deeply and tried to stammer a reply. John stopped him immediately.

"Now, I know you must be tired, I know I would, so you can tell about it later mate. Maybe you can even invite her to one of our parties?" The trio laughed loudly and sent Hortan on his way with Vardonx making claw movements with his hands and growling "rawr, rawr."

Hortan walked slowly towards his room, and then decided that he was seriously hungry. He decided to go for pancakes, his favourite dish. When he arrived, he saw Ms. Chi, Mor Isil and Ms Kanaka already seated, and so he joined them.

"What happened to your face Hort?" Miharu was asking him concerned.

Hortan blushed and answered, chewing on a pancake. "It was an accident. I slipped on Ms. Azumi's bed."

Mor Isil and Chi choked on their waffles, and Miharu reddened considerably.

"You did what what with whom?" Chi asked after drinking some coffee to help her swallow.

"I fell on the bed when I got up from it," Hortan said innocently. Mor started giggling with Miharu, while Chi was looking directly at Hortan, not really believing her ears. Hortan looked up, and with even for Hortan tectonic speed, his mind slowly realised what he had said. The implications hit him like a samo laden Moth going at full tilt with concussion mine assisted launch. He blushed from toe to head and stopped eating immediately. Chi smiled, now this was the Hortan she knew better.

"No, I mean, it is not, we were only talking, and it she only had one chair, and she said I should." Hortan was rambling, he knew it, but there was nothing to

do. Mor Isil and Miharu started laughing loudly, and Ms. Chi smiled at Hortan while putting one hand on top of his.

"I understand Hort, I understand. You don't have to explain at all. I still hold you very dear." Chi had meant to support Hortan, and get him out of the embarrassing situation, but Hortan's face only reddened deeper to an almost crimson. "Shit," Chi muttered under her breath. New plan.

"I forgot to mention, you have to go to Surbius, and he wanted you right away Hort. You better hurry."

"Oh, oh ok. Better leave then." Hortan rose and left hurriedly, his face the colour of arterial blood.

The Council of Seven was gathered. Only one big topic was on the agenda. Whether or not they were going to pay yoda.

"It is a lot of bloody money," Kragmier said.

"Aye, but if yoda decides to use the knowledge he has wrung out of Ardon, we are seriously fucked," kalb replied.

"I call for a vote on this." Gingerbread the Swift's high pitched voice was cutting through the chatter.

"Aye, I agree, the council will vote as per the ancient rules of SYN," Jolly Roger agreed. As commander, he would have three votes. "Vote now."

The result was clear, only one voted against.

"I suggest we clear the remaining trace to here then. I shall authorise the transfer from our account into yoda's. Gents, this has been a very expensive adventure. I shall not tolerate more mistakes." Jolly rose from his seat at the centre. "You may leave, Death Incarnate, you stay."

Hortan entered the small office where Naoko was sitting. The young woman was busy behind the holo screen, some four layer matrix that looked immensely difficult. She didn't look up until Hortan had stopped puffing from the running. When Ms. Chi said hurry, he did.

"Can I help you pilot Hortan?" She looked at his nametag and lack of distinctions or rank, not all that impressed.

"I was told that Surb wanted to see me," Hortan was a bit insecure now, surely she must know these things, being his secretary and all.

She checked Surbius's appointment list, no entry with Hortan's name. "Sorry, I do not have you on his schedule." She smiled and went back to her holo.

"Well, it must be a mistake, can I see him?"

She looked up at Hortan. "Lieutenant Surbius Bondevo is a very busy man, and he does not like it when he is interrupted during his daily routine. So no, make an appointment like everybody else."

"But, it was Ms. Chi that said it," Hortan protested.

"Lieutenant Chi from the Phoenix Alliance? Why didn't you say so? Go right in." She smiled to him, the charm turned on big time.

Hortan entered Surb's office, where the Lt. was planning something vastly complicated. He looked up when Hortan came in.

"Hortan? What can I do for you?"

"Ms. Chi told me you wanted to see me."

"Ehm, ok. Ah, I am not sure why she sent me, but now you are here I might as well fill you in. Tomorrow we'll make a convoy to Remley, and we need your XC. We are going to take the initiative now, and end this thing."

"Yes Sir, I'm ready. My XC "Target Practice IV" is ready Sir."

"Good good, and while we are at it, we are having a party tomorrow after the conclusion of the convoy. Make sure you are dressed up for the occasion, it will be a madhouse. Dismissed"

Hortan smiled, he knew exactly how he would dress up. This time he would fit right in. "Aye aye Sir." He snapped a salute, did an about face and left.

28. Innocence is No Excuse

The great convoy had lined up outside of TGFT HQ, ready for transporting everything that could be used for re-building Remley Orbital, including a complete TPG police force. On Ecka's signal the convoy headed out for the jump point and jumped. The combined ships of TGFT, PA and TPG was an amazing sight, the largest collection of Behemoths and Behemoth XC's ever assembled in known space. Hortan was at the very front, just behind Ecka's Centaur III, The Target Practise IV ship being the first cargo vessel in the convoy.

The first half of the combat ships had jumped ahead, almost forty light fighters led by Lambin and Mor Isil. Another forty fighters, light and heavy, were staying with the convoy all the way. The pirate activity was light, and after the few pirate ships had been swept away by the massed firepower, the route was free for the trade ship convoy to jump into the sector that contained Remley Orbital.

Ecka keyed his system comms.

"Attention all Corvus personnel. TPG is now on station to take over security and responsibility. We acknowledge your great help in this matter, but this station is TPG property, and as such TPG territory. All Corvus personnel must board and leave this station immediately. Failure to do so will be interpreted as an act of war. You have thirty minutes."

The first three TPG extra armoured Centaur troop transporters were already docking with Remley, ready to disgorge their cargo of 20 heavily armed marines each. After them six regular troop transport Behemoths contained the new TPG police force, that would ensure that the Corvus personnel only left with what they had brought. No problems were anticipated.

Ferrin Galders conceded defeat, and gave the order to evacuate station. The stuff he had pillaged so far, was safe in Sedina already, but he hated the idea of leaving with his tail between his legs. Maybe he could leave an unpleasant gift to the future owners. He knew precisely what to do. He got up and started to walk out of his room towards the fusion plant that was essential for the station. He opened the door and was surprised by a man standing outside. Dressed in a robe with the hood over his head, he looked very menacing.

"I guess my search has ended," the deep whispering voice came from within the robes.

"What do you mean?" Ferrin asked.

The robed figure slowly raised his bone-like hands to the hood and removed it from his skull-like face. So gaunt that his face was permanently set in a

fearsome grin, Death Incarnate fit his name perfectly.

"I mean, I have been looking for you."

"Oh, who are you, and why do you look for me?" Ferrin was starting to feel uneasy. This day was proving to be a crap day so far.

"I am Death, and that is why I have come." Death Incarnate stabbed forwards with his ancient wave-formed Death Cult Keris, hitting Ferris squarely under the ribcage.

The Corvus Spy Master looked down as his life blood was pouring down over the blade, and then up at Death Incarnate again. The blade had been placed perfectly, slicing the heart in half. He was losing conscience rapidly, and dropped to the floor with a thump. Death re-sheathed the Keris, reached for a hidden pocket and took a small incendiary device out. He waited for the fifteen seconds it took for the blood to stop flowing, and then placed it in Ferrin's mouth. He turned and walked down the corridor, pushing the small button on his watch after ten metres and heard the satisfying muffled explosion. Mission accomplished, he would board his Vulture and leave with the Corvus troops.

The sounds coming from the Warthog Mk II were frightening. Any other hog pilot could have hummed while flying with a cheerful effect, but when the pilot was yoda, it was scary. He entered the agreed upon sector and dumped Ardon's suit as he should. The Warthog in SYN colours picked it up almost immediately, and boosted away. Yoda chuckled, Ardon was relieved when yoda had stopped playing with him, but that had turned to horror when he was told whom he had been sold to. That was the best part really. He was now free to focus his attention to his other pet project. Resuming command of CLM. He had already spoken to Red, and she was ok with the idea. Besides, who could face his fabulous charm and not agree? Grey space was going to be a much more dangerous place now.

It took slightly more than thirty minutes to clear the station for the CLM personnel, mostly because of the discovery of the man with no head in the residential area. A man called Ferrin Galders, actually the guy that had suggested that Corvus came here in the first place. Someone had really wanted him dead, and the information he knew destroyed, because the incendiary device placed on his head had burned the head and the upper torso to ashes before the fire fighting equipment had extinguished it. Corvus infighting was the best bet.

The convoy disgorged all the things necessary for Remley to resume normal business, and the TPG police was once more patrolling the corridors. Mission complete, Ecka led his own TGFT contingent together with the PA ships to

Dau K-10 for the celebration of a job well done. The party was going to be held in the TGFT mess hall, and all of PA was invited as well. Hortan docked his XC in the cargo handling area, and practically ran to his room. He was going to change into the best outfit ever!

He was not accustomed to wearing these kinds of clothes, and so he was a little bit late when he walked into the hall on six inch stilettos. The mess hall had been humming with small talk, the almost hundred persons inside mingling and chatting. And, Hortan discovered to his horror, all in their dress uniforms, the room a sea of green and light blue. Hortan half-turned to leave as silently as he had arrived, but it was too late. The humming had stopped, the silence in the room was deafeningly loud. Hortan looked over his shoulder and saw the full attention of all of TGFT and PA on his frail frame. He understood why. The banana skirt and the coconut top he was wearing along with the two foot high plateau high heeled shoes were neatly framed by the garishly coloured very large wig on top of his head and the pineapple handbag.

The silence stretched for an eternity, with Hortan making the obvious Ostrich move and freezing completely. Killdog Deathwad turned to Vardonx and grinned, speaking a little too loud on purpose.

"Well, I guess the entertainment has arrived. I have heard about you TGFT guys parties, but this beats everything." The entire room erupted in laughter at Hortan's mishap, and they started talking again. Ecka, John and Vardonx walked over to Hortan and looked at him up and down.

"Very nice Hort, very nice," Vardonx said.

"Stylish even, especially the pineapple bag. What the hell are you dressed as, the fruit salad?" John managed between guffaws.

"The poole be yon there Hortensia," Ecka wiggled his eyebrows and pointed to the place where he had performed some weeks ago. They all started laughing even more loudly.

"I didn't know, Surbius said to dress up, so I thought" Hortan was desperate to leave, but they grabbed him and pulled him towards the bar.

"Weel, ya ken, innocence is no excuse son, so ya better do yer best." Ecka pushed Hortan towards the pole and laughed.

Fortunately for the mental health of Hortan, Chi decided to walk over and rescue him.

"I think he better come with me, ok? Come on, lets go get a drink Hort, it is safer up there."

Hortan was relieved, and followed as inconspicuously as he could, which is

hard to do with bells around your ankles. At least the presence of Ms. Chi saved him for further attempts of fun on his behalf. Once more she had rescued him.

After around an hour had passed, Mor Isil rose to the the stage in the rear of the room and asked for attention.

"I know I have been more than unusually inattentive these last few months my friends, but I have a perfectly good explanation. And no Waldoze, contrary to what you are so elegantly insinuating with your shouting, I have not been doing drugs. Only if you see love as a drug. For in that case, I have been drugged well and truly, and I am now deeply dependant on this particular drug. I have found the love of my life, I have found the reason to get up in he morning. I have found the woman to share my days with, and as I have already asked her once, I shall do so again." Mor got to his knee and starred intently towards one person. "Miharu, will you marry me."

Miharu blushed, not because of Mor, but because of the entire crowd that was now starring directly at her awaiting her answer. "Yes Mor, I will."

The entire room erupted in a cheer, and people started moving up to shake Mor's hand and hug Miharu. All the girls admired the gold ring with the emerald, Mor had given her.

Hortan was perfectly happy to stay unnoticed in the bar. He would come around later instead, when he was decently clad. John and Waldoze came over to get a drink, and John turned to Dozer.

"You know what that means, right?"

Dozer gulped down a very large shot of Helio Mists shot and smiled broadly to John and Hortan. "Aye, stag party. And I know the perfect bait." He winked at Hortan and got himself another drink.

Hortan had a feeling that somehow, he was going to be involved in this. He poured himself a drink of Helio Mists, the first in a long time. Oh well, life as an ore miner was still good.