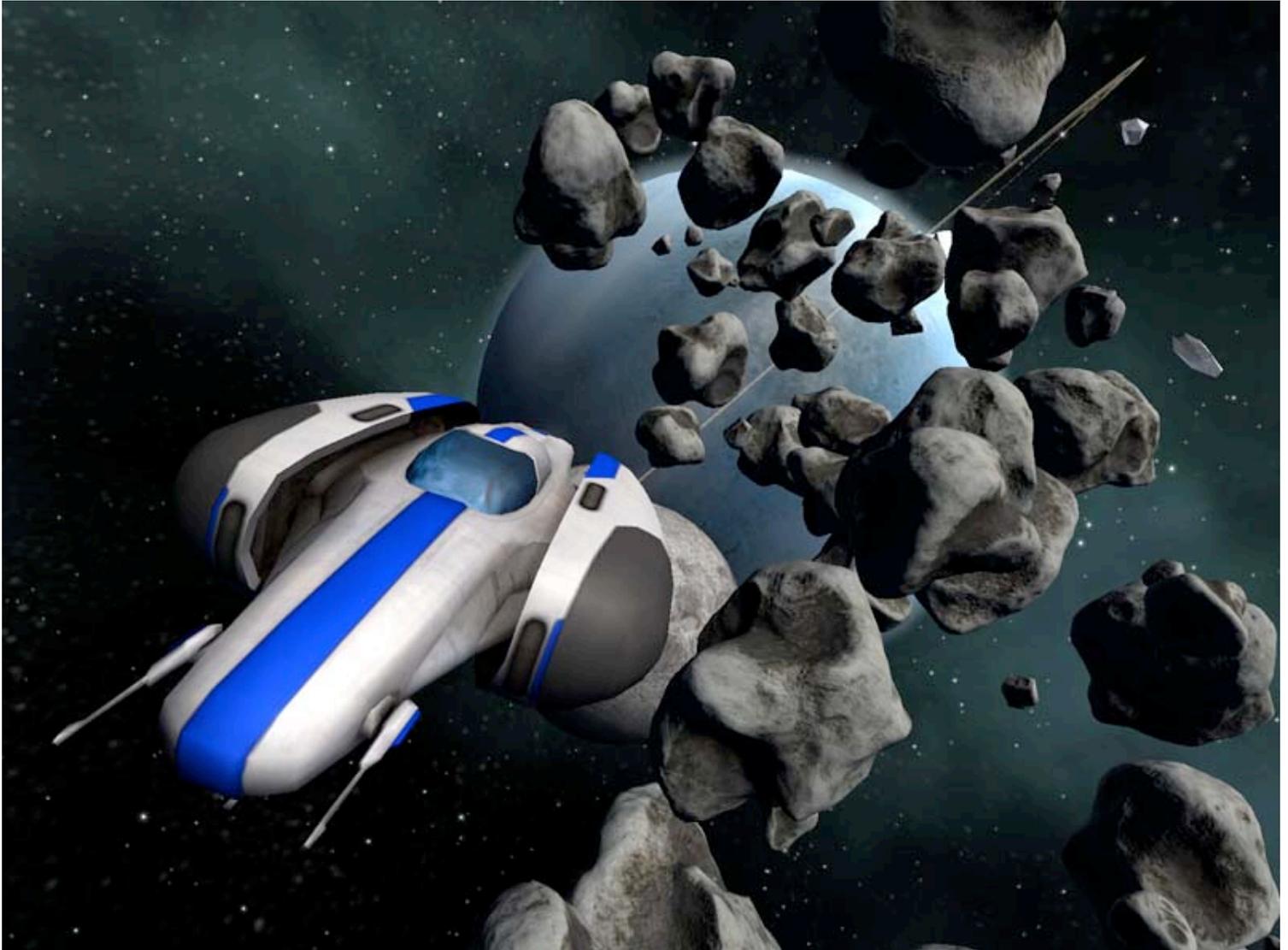


WhyTee

# Mutually Assured Destruction

-a sane policy in an insane World



A story set in the Vendetta Online universe.

(<http://www.vendetta-online.com/>)

## 1. Some of the players

The room was buzzing with static electricity. It was literally crawling along the walls with small cracks and puffs of lightning, in some places creating small auroras. It was very pretty and perfectly safe; the equipment was shielded against the electricity and the staff had long ago learned the hard way to use their elbows to press the control for the access tunnel to the outside, thus saving them from nasty jolts in their sensitive fingertips. The only thing the constant barrage of static electricity messed up was hair, creating big puffy globes of hair and securing the name "The Einstein Gang" for the crew.

Regardless, Utia Taerow was happy that he was wearing his thickly soled non-conducting boots instead of the light sandals that was the usual footwear of the research team in department Omega. Contrary to the other members of the team, he was not a scientist but a captain of the Itani Defence Force. And contrary to the other members of the crew, he didn't exactly want to be here. The other members of the team were supposed to see how far they could drive the subject, and he was supposed to help and to find useful applications for it. It, the subject, they had yet come up with a fitting name for the... phenomenon he guessed was an appropriate word. Anomaly or even freak would be just as fitting he reckoned, and if not for the complete incapacity to find anything humorous, he would have smiled at that.

He looked over at the freak and grimaced as he usually did, turning his head away. Like most people he had a hard time looking directly at the thing, not that it hurt or anything. It was the sense of something large and ominous scraping on the inside of his skull that made him flinch and look away. As a matter of fact, only two persons seemed to be unaffected and you could easily put them in the freak category as well. A set of former Siamese twins, jokingly named Huey and Dewey, were as usual totally oblivious to the mental strain everyone else were subject to by being inside the isolated area. Still, they had been gene-engineered to be able to do something like that. As a matter of fact they had been produced to be like the phenomenon itself, but had failed like the rest of their crèche. Though, where the others had been complete failures, dying

within weeks of conception, the single set that lived through infancy proved very useful in adjusting the next gene-engineered crèche with the subject as the result.

The freak was placed inside a Faraday cage, a device that took most of the spill-over static electricity, with the freak's body inside on a table and fixated by two xithricite chains; not to keep it inside, but to keep it from hurting itself while being experimented on. The door opened and professor Raewon walked in closely followed by his aide, Ms. Oselasis. Raewon nodded to the techs and scientists around the room and moved towards his chair. Taerow didn't really notice it; instead he admired the efficient feline movements of the young woman as she secured the professor to his seat near the centre console. She was bent over him while fastening his straps, but quickly looked up and directly at Taerow, catching his eyes and allowing the slightest of smiles to affect her Asian features. Taerow equally quickly looked away like a teenager caught looking at the older girls in the school yard and felt a warm sensation bubble up from his chest. Damn, she did it every time. The professor cleared his throat and Taerow looked back at him, noticing that Ms. Oselasis had moved to her own position and was now focusing fully on the professor. He missed her move across the floor, ah well there would be other times.

"Right team, this is going to be the first real test of the Omega project. We will focus the Omega", the professor's name for the freak's effect," into the special energy focus mounted on a standard IDF Valkyrie loaded with triple neutron gun mark III remote piloted by Captain Taerow and activate the systems. Once the system is up and running, we will send a series of IDF crewed fast attack ships to attempt and destroy the Valkyrie. Captain Taerow, when you are ready you may launch, the Omega should be ready when you are."

Taerow nodded to the Omega controller on the other side to indicate his readiness. He nodded back, and Taerow donned his helmet and inserted his hands into the controllers. He launched his Valkyrie.

###

Ruteli Vielio knew he wasn't allowed to fly security as long as the Itani Secret Police employed him as security, but the offer had simply been too sweet to let up. He would fly his Vulture Mk III along a force of six heavy Behemoths, three Centaurs and three Warthog Defenders to the huge Metana barracks station Sorus Hold as security. And furthermore, he would be flying rearguard, so not even a realistic chance of getting involved in combat apart from the odd hive bot or so. The 38.000 Standard Itani Credits, or SIC's that he would pull from this assignment along with credits for possible bot kills, would hopefully be enough for him and Edia to buy an in-vitro fertilisation, and maybe even from a good source too.

He would be in and out in six hours at the max; he even had a dinner appointment later with Edia. The night shift would be a pain to get through, but it would be worth it.

###

.... Earlier that week

"I tell you, they are up to no good."

Commander Fletholm turned towards the pale, thin, pimpled and bespectacled looking civilian in the bad-fitting suit that had just come to a conclusion.

"What do you mean Eggert?"

He didn't have to ask who "they" were; after all Eggert was the UIT expert on the Itani military research and development and thus "they" would be the scientists at the most secret facility placed in the space station Tellus Research circling Cantus.

"Look at these readouts and these power consumptions Sir. If you correlate them with the daily shipments of supplies and the amount of persons onboard the station you will see no anomaly. But if you take the trend and extrapolate over a month you have a slightly higher consumption than is

expected. So more matter and energy goes into the station than comes out. There is a net loss, Sir."

Fletholm looked at the young man and smiled. He understood what the eager data genius said, but just what should be concluded, he was not sure.

"So, the station is leaky or something?"

"Ah, that is what they want us to believe Sir."

Eggert looked triumphantly at his boss. He punched up another image beside the others, of two stations, one fuzzy.

"See, the picture on the left is how the computer analysis shows how it would look if the station was leaky by the amount indicated, but instead the long range image in full spectrum is as clear as any other station that is well kept."

Fletholm looked closer at the two pictures and frowned.

"So, what are they up to?"

Eggert grinned like a madman and pointed to a Valkyrie that was exiting from the station.

"See the small extra bulge on the top of that ship? If we assume that the ship has a standard weight and standard configuration, which is a safe bet, the ship is heavier by an amount that corresponds to about nineteen months of divergence. Besides, it has no IFF."

Fletholm looked closer at the image without seeing anything really.

"So, what is it?"

"I have no idea Sir, but I am going to try and find out. If it is a new modification to the Valkyrie it has to be something that is worthwhile. The ship is more than three thousand kilos heavier."

Fletholm scratched his ample belly and felt a small stab of fear in the reptilian parts of his brain. He would have to present this to his boss Admiral Stiern, the current head of the UIT military. But for now he would like some more information and some nice pictures from Tellus preferably showing the Valkyrie in question. He sent forth a message to the trade guild with a request for 100 crates of Eo Roses to be delivered to Dau Senate. It took less than a minute for the request to be received and answered. The free trader that took the assignment had for a long time been a paid agent of UIT intelligence, he would know what to do.

###

Hasdrubal Peppermint Peroncini the Third chuckled as he read his trade mission. A hundred crates of red roses from Eo, that could only mean one thing. He readied his battered Heavy Mining Moth with a mix of proximity and concussion mines before launching from the docking bay in Dau Senate. The advanced multi-spectrum scanner and camera fit perfectly into the small slot in front of his cockpit with a feed directly into the auxiliary computer that would normally be used for ore analysis. He loved the mining moth; it was the perfect spy vessel. Who in their right mind would spy in a moth after all? Besides, it had a larger than normal cargo hold allowing him to make a buck on the side. As most freelance spies he had several employers, but recently his UIT customers had been very active in getting information from Eo. Fortunately it was information he could sell to his other main customers as well, the Serco Geira Secret Territorial Border Office, better known as GESTEBO.

## **2. Rending of metal**

The large xithricite roid was slowly tumbling in the hive bot infested sector, unremarkable and ignored by just about everyone. Which was precisely how the Serco Long Range Recon Patrol known as the Lurkers liked it. When someone in Skycommand had first suggested creating a forward operations base inside the enemy's territory, he had been deemed insane and sent to the Tuol Sleng re-education facility of Sol II.

However, the idea refused to die and eventually someone with enough brass on their shoulders and a membership of the elite Special Operations Division suggested the same. He received a medal, a promotion and responsibility to make it work.

Through six months of top-secret work, the patrol base was finished, only slightly over budget, a mere three hundred and nine percent. It had been home to the Lurkers for about a month now, and they were supposed to stay in the base for another month before being replaced in place by their sister unit.

The mission had been to snatch stray traders and miners in bot infested areas and pump these for information as well as provide a collection point for any spy's inside Itani space. Thus far they had some success, but no big hit. That was hopefully about to change.

###

"Trade ship "Mental Splinter", you are cleared inbound on vector delta 390, speed 40 m/s to docking bay alpha three. Welcome back."

The Space Traffic Controller's voice crackled over the background radiation that was customary in Cantus. The main star, a type G-2 yellow star was orbited by a white dwarf that was wreaking havoc on the wormhole alignments from time to time. Still, Cantus was really not a true binary star system but a trinary system. The last star, a brown dwarf, was in the process of getting subsumed by the white star thus providing a lot of radiation throughout the system. This had two effects; one was that the background noise level was much higher than in any other system in known space, the second was the high level of sterile deep space workers. As a matter of fact, only about one in ten adult local inhabitants were not sterile making Cantus the In Vitro fertilisation capitol of known space.

Hasdrubal ignored the background noise and moved as the STC had told him into the docking bay. He was a known face around here; his usual stock of Verasi speciality products a nice break from the imported freeze-dried food from Eo. The Verasi koffee and the Helio Mists were especially sought after

and fetched a very nice price. This time he had even chanced it and brought some Dau fashion items, only a couple of crates but it would show if there was a market for it.

He noticed a ring of exotic radiation and activated the combined scanner/camera in that direction to collect all the data he could on the ship. Probably nothing, but you could never tell what the spooks liked back home.

###

Taerow piloted the Valkyrie slowly towards the jump-point, trying to get a feel for it from the remote position. He had piloted remotely before, but never liked it. Something was missing, something non-tangible but nonetheless missing. Intuition maybe? Anyway, he didn't want to be inside this particular Valkyrie at any cost so he would have to get used to it. He activated his engine and jumped the pre-planned series of random jumps until he was in the sector where the test was about to take place. The six Itani Centurion Border Guardians as well as the six IDF Valkyrie Vengeance were waiting for him although they too were empty and remotely piloted. Taerow sent a message to the Omega Tech to activate. He was a good pilot, but these odds were insane; nonetheless, he boosted towards the ships and picked a Valkyrie as his first target.

The enemy pilots moved out into a half globe to allow all the ships to fire at him at once thus reduce him to cinders in mere seconds. He reached the focal point of the globe and the pilots fired their various energy weapons towards him. He flinched and expected a cut-off when his ship would be reduced to plasma and scraps, but nothing happened. Instead, he drew a targeting solution on the nearest ship. He fired his three guns across the ship, making neat fist sized holes in the front of it. The pilot of the targeted ship tried to avoid but due to the surprise of Taerow's Valkyrie surviving the fusillade of fire, he hesitated for a second. That was enough for the neutrons to drill a hole straight through the ship and short out the battery. Flying through the explosion, Taerow turned and faced the other eleven ships that at no point had ceased firing at him. He looked at his damage controls, all green at 100%. He stopped his forward movement and stayed still in one spot. Still no

damage to the ship. He started picking the attackers off until only four were left. Then they started fleeing with Taerow in close pursuit, picking them off one by one. At last he was the only ship present in the sector. A message popped up on his HUD, "RTB", and Return To Base.

He turned and jumped for Tellus station, still marvelling at the complete unscathed Valkyrie. He docked and disconnected from the VR gear. He looked at the internal camera that displayed the VR rigs of his opponents and started shaking. He felt nauseous and sick, so very sick. He got up and walked to the door but never reached that far before he started vomiting. He had just fought against and killed 12 of the finest fighters from the elite Swift Wind squad without taking a single hit.

###

Captain Asteroth observed the new recruits as they exerted themselves beyond what would be humanely possible. As a matter of fact, they did feats of strength, dexterity and stamina that could potentially kill a regular unmodified human, what the recruits called with barely hidden contempt, human norms. Still, the Captain was not satisfied with the effort shown by the recruits. He nodded to the Gunnery Master Sergeant who turned the test machines off. Asteroth activated his direct coms implant and addressed the recruits.

"I have good news and bad news. First off, you have all graduated the same tests that the applicants to our glorious Sky Command Fighter Training programme has to achieve in order to get a chance to serve as fighter pilot."

The recruits looked at each other, most of them letting a small grin cross their features while gasping for air. Everyone knew how cruel the test for fighter pilot training was, or had at least read about it.

"The second thing is that you have all failed my test. If you want to be a pilot, join the pilot programme. You are here because you want to be the best, because you want to join the Serco Special Operations Division. And tiddly winking along on

my training course is NOT the way to pass. You will all run it again. Begin."

The recruits looked at each other, and then began running the course once more, this time giving it every thing they had. The Master Sergeant dialled the setting to the hardest and fastest possible and watched the recruits run. One recruit didn't duck fast enough after vaulting over a wall and got hit by a tree log crushing his abdomen in the right side; another missed his jump and landed awkwardly breaking his legs several places. Eventually the two injured had crawled over the finish line and the Master Sergeant turned the course off. He pointed to one of the recruits that had cheated. It was not a big thing; he didn't touch with both feet where he was supposed. Undoubtedly there had been others that had cheated, but that was beside the point. It was the fact that he had been caught cheating that pissed Asteroth off. He exited to the recruits, unholstered his heavy needle gun and walked over to that particular young man he had spotted.

"You cheated."

He shot the recruit in the leg and calmly holstered his gun again. The shocked troopers stayed in a loose huddle around the now three injured recruits and looked at Asteroth.

"Kids, go and join something else, none of you have what it takes. Dismissed to the recruitment officer."

The recruits turned and walked away, helping the injured along.

Asteroth walked in to the Master Sergeant and grabbed the paper readout, correlating it with the mental readouts.

"Hmm, I see volunteer 16 and 21 were good enough. Make sure they get kicked out and abducted on the way. I need them in a week Gunny."

"Zur, I will make it happen."

Asteroth nodded and walked out to his waiting hovercraft. Enough of the fun, back to the slavery and boredom of paperwork.

###

Ruteli finished his pre-flight check of the dove blue Vulture and signed her out with the dock master. He took the holo of his wife that he always carried and placed it on the small front left side window. Even though it blocked the view in that particular direction, it still gave him strength to know why he was pulling these extra hours. The convoy formed up outside Oscree garden and he launched to join them. He smiled; soon he would be so much closer to giving Edia what she wanted most.

### **3. Murphy's law**

The convoy had arrived at the final destination without any problems. The one time they had been trapped in the soup of charged particles so aptly named ion storms, the hive had glimmered with its absence and so it had merely delayed the arrival time by fifteen minutes. Ruteli received his bonus and was just about to walk out to his Vulture for the journey home when a merchant put a hand on his shoulder.

"Son, I have an offer for you."

"Sorry, I am not interested. I just want to go home to my wife. Besides I have to go to work later."

Ruteli smiled at the merchant disarmingly, but started to walk out again. Not about to let him get away, the trader raised his voice.

"I'll pay you half the profits on the cargo, up front. 200 thousand SIC's"

Ruteli stopped. That amount could ensure that he could get the prime quality incubators and maybe even a couple of geneplanted features on his, no their kid as well and that way securing his or her future. He turned to the trader.

"Depends. I absolutely have to be in Cantus in four hours or I am a dead man."

"No problem, I have to shift some time sensitive items to Eo and my standard guard got cocky and ran into a hive fleet yesterday. He is still recovering and will not be able to fly again for some days. Tell you what; as soon as we are inside the capitol sector you can leave us, the security is good enough there. We'll leave in twenty minutes, that will ensure that you can be in Cantus in three hours or less."

Ruteli nodded, this sounded like a sweet deal for sure. Today sounded like his lucky day!

"Sure, I'll make sure the old gal is up and ready in ten."

They exchanged IFF information and Ruteli made sure to ensure that the trader paid the 200.000 SIC's into his account, deliverable upon end of mission. He smiled like a crazy during launch, and even more when he saw that the convoy consisted of three centaurs and four atlases, with only a single vulnerable heavy moth. Easiest money in the World.

###

Hasdrubal launched his mining moth and exited on the vector given by the STC. It had been a very good short stay in Tellus, very profitable indeed. He had really struck a veritable gold mine with those Dau fashion clothes; who could have known that the regular shipments of standard socks had been delayed for two months? He had sold every single pair at a three hundred percent profits. He kept the scanners running all the way to the jump point but not really paying any attention to it. He jumped out to the unguarded sector that he had been briefed on previously by his Serco employers. A single Serco Vulture Guardian, better known as a SVG awaited in the deep of space. Hasdrubal floated through the void and watched as the SVG matched velocity and heading with style and grace. Even though the Itani were generally better pilots than the Serco, he still had to give it to the pilot of this ship. He or she was very good. The ship's computer received a query from the

SVG's systems and started sharing the data on his auxiliary system.

"Your payment will be in the account as usual."

Hasdrubal almost choked on the cup of Kappucino he was enjoying. A female voice, a female pilot on the SVG. Contaminated with a metallic background noise and completely without any trace of sensuality, the voice still gave him heart flickering.

"Thank you very much," he managed to croak, cursing his pulse that was now approaching 140 without any reason.

The data had almost transferred when his proximity sensors beeped, then again and again until it had nine contacts. He looked down at the IFF's and took a deep breath. This could be a problem. The SVG broke contact with his ship and accelerated towards the group.

A direct link opened with his communications unit.

"Stay put trader, help is inbound in seconds. Do not flee."

Screw this, what could a single SVG do against a whole convoy? He killed his IFF and started to set up a jump sequence for the wormhole to Eo. Hopefully he could talk his way out of this situation. Getting caught with a member of the Serco military three systems deep in Itani space was not a way to ensure continued good relations with the Itani government.

###

Taerow didn't realise that he had fainted until he awoke on the floor on his back, someone waving a probably "secret" stamped document in his face to give him some cool air. He opened his eyes and stared directly into the concerned features of Ms. Oselasis. Not able to summon the power to really do anything, he tried to talk but managed only a hoarse croaking. He tried to get his head up but couldn't find the power.

"You, get him some water, you, contact medtech and tell them we need an IV set now. Give me that."

Someone spoke with great authority, and if the movements of her lips corresponded it was probably Ms. Oselasis.

"Utia, this is going to hurt."

She called him by his first.... blackness

He woke up again, this time on a stretcher but still with Ms. Oselasis over him. She was wearing a pair of latex gloves and held a small bottle in her hand.

"That should wake you up. Hello Utia, are you with us?"

He responded, but no noise came out of his mouth. He nodded instead.

"You had a severe case of de-hydration and sensory overload. You have an IV tube in your arm now and the doctor is on his way. You'll be fine, I guarantee it."

She allowed a concerned smile to adorn her face, the effect like a sunrise on a perfect beach. Se moved out of his vision and he closed his eyes again. Just for a.... blackness.

###

"It seems that the sensory rig that allows us to remotely pilot the ship interacts with the neural pathways of the pilot. Thus the pilot not only feels a pain every time his ship is hit, he also feels a constant presence of the Omega. That is the most likely reason that Captain Taerow fainted today."

The sensory tech specialist nodded to professor Raewon to indicate that he was finished with his briefing. Raewon finished his notes and looked up.

"Very well, we shall have to find some way to work around that for the next trial. That is a priority Z, understood?"

The tech nodded and walked down to his chair already scribbling on his data pad.

"Biomics, how did the Omega handle the stress?"

"Well, we had no indications at any time that the stress level actually arose even slightly. There was some scrounging after the battle after sugary substances indicating that it had used a lot of energy during the encounter, but nothing on biometrics. There was a net weight loss of two hundred and nine grams."

The weapons tech looked up and frowned.

"Two hundred and nine precisely?"

"Yes. Well there were a net gain at one time of thirty grams in the form of a glucose stick, so the total loss was two hundred and thirty nine."

The weapons tech nodded.

"Sir I think I have a correlation. The Omega shielded a total of 3,9999 million kilojoules. That corresponds to roughly 239 grams sugar, give or take 0,1 gram per million joule shielded."

Raewon looked at the young woman over his glasses.

"So, as long as I feed the Omega with enough glucose it can shield an object from damage at the order of a million joule per gram of sugar? Make sure we test that thoroughly next time."

"Yes professor."

"Anything more for me biomics?"

"No Sir."

"Very well, good work both of you."

The biomics tech sat down and looked happily at the weapons tech. He was going to celebrate this with a bottle of the finest Verasi champagne tonight for sure. Maybe she wanted to join...

#### 4. Rescuers and recruits

The SVG engaged the group of Atlases first, exploding two in short order before the escorting Vulture Mk III engaged. The SVG danced in and around the trade ships, avoiding hits with a deftness that was awe-inspiring. However, there was not a chance that the pilot could hinder at least some of the traders escaping. That is, until several showers of Tau neutrino's betrayed incoming ships, four in all. Three Sky Command Prometheus's and a single Warthog Mk II. The Prometheus class ship was feared among the Itani Defence Force, and rightly so. With twin small ports and a single large port, clad in armour so thick that only capitol class ships had more and everything designed around the largest engine that had ever been designed for a fighter, the Prometheus was designed to take on odds of three to one and win. The three ships attacked the trade vessels and tore them to shreds in no time at all, only the Vulture Mk III surviving due to it engaging the SVG. After realising that he was now alone, he pilot of the Mk III tried to turn and flee but found himself in a sandwich between the SVG and the Warthog. With a set of well-placed shots across the rear of the Mk III, the SVG pilot managed to kill the ship but not the pilot. The Warthog then started chasing after the mining moth that was accelerating outwards.

The commander of The Lurkers leaned back in his pilot seat of his Prometheus and opened a private channel to the SVG.

"Did you get the information he had for us?"

"Sir, I still lack around 10%. But I figured that I better kill this voy and call for help before getting the rest."

"You did good Cat. Now go get the rest, I have a set of moths inbound to clean up. Looks like we have a couple of survivors out there."

"Will do Sir. Cat out."

The SVG started turboing towards the mining moth. The Warthog had intercepted it and with a single shot across the nose had stopped it dead in space. The SVG moved up close to the moth and initiated a secure link. The computers immediately re-established the

connection and moved data as if nothing had happened. Cat opened a personal link across to the trader inside the moth.

"I told you to stay put. You are lucky you didn't get away, or I would have free hands to kill you. Next time listen or die."

There was no response, but she didn't need one. She knew very well he had heard her. She stayed until the data had crossed over and disconnected with no waste of time, turning the SVG back towards the cleaning crew. Several new ships had entered the area, two Moths two Centaur Mk III's and a single heavily modified Atlas. The Prom's circled efficiently around checking for survivors and when finding any making sure that the Atlas picked them up. So far they had found six Itani alive of which four were expected to survive. The goods were distributed evenly among the ships and after the non-combat ships had left, the Prom's slagged the few remains and jumped to the relative safety of their secret hideout. By that time one of the captives had died, but it looked like the rest would make it at least as far as to the Interrogator from the Thought Police. Naturally, none of them were expected to survive for long after that.

###

The pickup had been easy enough. The two youngsters had been subjected to what was affectionally named a System D by the Special Forces trooper. In the morning when the training sergeant had called them to attention, the recruits had been chewed on and spit out as usual, doing an extraordinary amount of physical training before standing to attention once more behind their footlocker. That was a normal morning for the recruits; they had been subjected to it every morning the last three weeks. This morning it was different, as the sergeant stayed in one end of the building and two immensely large military police sergeants entered the building with a grey beast with massive tusks in tow. The beast moved around the footlockers and slobbered on two of them. One of the MP's took the beast outside and the other walked over to the nearest footlocker. He looked up at the recruit behind it.

"Care to open that for me son?"

The recruit looked confused for a second and the drill sergeant took over.

"Recruit! I know for a fact that your hearing is enhanced to a level that a human norm cannot even begin to comprehend so I'll assume that you heard the sergeant and in reality is even dumber than the Grey Render that was just in here. Now let me translate it for you. Open the goddamned footlocker you worthless piece of Itani coughed slime."

The recruit hurried to do as ordered and moved back to stand to attention behind it. The MP bent over the locker and scrounged around. Eventually he found what he was looking for, a translucent plastic bag with seven bright purple pills. He grabbed them with two fingers and acquired a look of distaste on his face that had been practised for at least a year before dangling them in front of the recruit's nose.

"Care to explain?"

The recruit tried to keep looking straight ahead but failed.

"That is not mine, I have never seen it before."

"That is what they all say."

The MP softened his voice and smiled at the recruit.

"But that hardly matters now, does it? I found it in your locker, and that is all that counts. Report to the MP outside. Dismissed."

The MP walked over to the next footlocker with drool all over. He looked down at the locker and up at the recruit, then knelt down while shaking his head disapprovingly.

"Let's see, what do we have here, not in here, this is not is. Hmm, what is this?"

The MP had found a small bag with more violet pills. He stood and pointed to the exit watching the recruit walk all the way out before turning to the Gunny.

"Sir, I have what I came for. Do you want to perform the customary punishment for desertion?"

The Gunny was about to pop a fuse in rage and anger, but merely nodded.

"Attention, everyone outside NOW. Form up in two rows facing each other, three metres distance. Move out."

With that the recruits ran outside and did as instructed. The Gunny grabbed a row of long wooden sticks and handed them to the recruits.

"Maggots, those two pieces of slime have betrayed you, the Lady Serco, themselves and me. They have by their actions deserted the righteous path of a Serco warrior. And the punishment for desertion Fustuarium twice with subsequent repatriation to a punishment unit. Any recruits that do not do their duty will be punished by Fustuarium as well. Begin."

That had been now five hours ago. The two young men were seated on the floor, a hood over their heads. A strong multiband jamming device was placed inside the room, making their implants useless. For the first time since they had been able to formulate words, they were truly alone and very afraid. Their backs hurt immensely from the punishment they had endured so far, but nothing a Serco couldn't ignore. Or at least tolerate. What felt so much worse was that they had been kicked out of the regular Serco military and dumped in a penal unit. Asteroth looked at them and frowned; he just hoped that they would be as good as their papers showed them to be. They were going to need it if they were going to succeed. He motioned for the hoods to be removed and waited for some seconds until they had regained their full senses. They showed some surprise through their pained expressions at seeing the dark clad Captain in front of them.

"I have an offer for you. Before you ask me anything I am required to inform you that you have been stripped of your citizenship and as of now you have no rights at all. You will be entering a penal legion where you will serve for a period of ten years or until dead. Have no doubts, very few actually survive past one years duty and I have only heard of one person that survived all ten and regained citizenship. Now, I may have an offer for you that is equally full of danger but is much shorter in duration. I need to know your answer before I tell you what it is. So, penal legion or my thing?"

The recruits turned and faced each other before looking back at Asteroth. The left recruit answered for both of them.

"I think we'll take your offer Sir."

Asteroth smiled at the recruits and nodded to the soldiers behind them to open their chains.

"Welcome to the Diplomatic Service boys, I can guarantee you that it will never be boring."

## **5. Spook's time**

The uniform that the GESTEBO officer was wearing had been designed for two things, and comfort was not one of them. It mattered not to the intelligence officer who was wearing the uniform, because it did the other things so very well. All black except for the small silver lightning bolts on the collar, it had obviously been designed to intimidate. Right now it worked it seemed, with the Itani human norm cringing underneath the gaze of the interrogator. Most of the Itani that had been captured were of little or no interest being traders or gunners on trade vessels but this particular Itani had been flying security. And it looked like he had some military grade bionics in him that betrayed his former occupation.

"So, I will give you a last chance to tell me exactly where you got those implants and what you do with them."

The interrogator pointed to the young Itani male that was held by one of the massive Special Forces operatives, a picture of pure terror painted on his face.

"Or I can tell Günter here to start ripping your friends limbs off."

The brute showed absolutely no outward emotion, but the Itani both believed that he would do it. Still, the interrogated man refused with a shake of his head. The interrogator nodded to Günter who grabbed the left arm of the Itani and ripped it off. The screams of pain soon stopped as the young man fainted.

Günter applied a tourniquet to stop the bleeding and scrimmaged around for a wake-me-upper. The interrogated man shook his head and started talking, his loathing and contempt for the interrogator almost a physical entity in itself, but nevertheless, he talked. When the interrogator was satisfied that he had given everything he got, he once more nodded to Günter who removed the other Itani from the room.

"Well Itani, it seems that you have just won yourself a tour to Geira Rutilus where you will be entertained by the Serco State."

He took the captive's chin in one hand and directed his face to enable him to look straight in his eyes.

"And with the slightest of lucks, you have just secured my promotion."

The Itani spat in the face of the interrogator who moved back. Chuckling he wiped the spittle off with one gloved hand, showing the other thing that the uniform was very good at. It was stainless, perfectly stainless.

"I see. Well for that little insolence I shall let you witness what happens to the other prisoners."

He activated a control and the far wall became a video screen showing four Itani prisoners getting pushed out of an airlock. The captive tried to look away, but could not. Instead tears started trickling down his cheeks as he witnessed their agonising deaths in silence.

"Do not concern yourself with them, they got the easy way out. You on the other hand get to meet the Grand Inquisitor."

The GESTEBO officer injected something into the captive's neck and he passed out. Sweet darkness, sweet sleep.

###

Professor Raewon frowned and then shook his head. He marvelled, how on Eo do they find such stupid people and

place them in high command? He mentally agreed with himself that it had to be a question of loyalty way above capacity and intelligence. He cleared his throat and addressed the IDF high command.

"With all due respect Admiral Otestrom, I think you are grasping this whole idea wrongly. First, we do not know if we can duplicate the results with another Omega, we do not know if we can make another Omega, we do not know what the long-term effects are on the Omega, and lastly we do not know what the effects are on the pilot. So, I urge you to give us more time instead of throwing what may be our best shot at ending this continuous bloodletting away."

The officers around the table looked towards the Admiral of The Fleet in expectation of one of the outbursts of rage that usually was part of the retort to anything that went counter to what he wanted accomplished. They were disappointed when he merely leaned forward and explained in a low voice.

"I hear your arguments, and they are very good. However I aim to deploy the weapon as soon as possible against a Serco foe to test it in real combat. Have the necessary equipment set up for a combat patrol in Deneb in two days from now along with the 62nd fighter squadron. This is not a request, it is an order."

The Admiral leaned back and kept staring at Raewon until Raewon looked away.

"Yes Sir, I'll see to it."

"Very well, dismissed."

The Admiral opened the next matter of urgency for the IDF high command.

"What the hell is this? Who in the name of Akan wanted me to address this matter?"

He looked around and the Admiral in charge of logistics raised his hand slowly.

"I should have known it was you. Tell me in one coherent sentence why I should care about what problems you have with procuring socks for the navy? No, even better tell me what you are doing to solve this and why the HELL it is on my desk?"

Raewon got up and left the high command to more urgent matters, happy that at least the sock problem had been solved at Tellus.

###

Fletholm cursed under his breath and closed the screen on his computer to hide the game of solitaire he had been playing, before yelling a "Come In" in response to the knocking. Didn't they know he was a busy man? Eggert walked in, a sheet of paper in one hand and a data disk in the other.

"Sir, I think I have something on the Tellus case."

Fletholm looked at him without showing any signs of having understood what the young man just said, waiting for further information.

"Sir? The case with the Valkyrie?"

"Yes, I know very well. You said you have something, what?"

Eggert closed the door and presented the paper.

"I have here a hospital slip showing that Captain Taerow was submitted two days ago."

Fletholm sighed loudly.

"Just tell me what you have figured out? My time is valuable, I do not have extra to spare for drawing conclusions that I pay you to draw."

"Yes Sir. As I said, Taerow is hospitalised. However he has been working on that project as far as we know. Our informants

tell us that he is the attached pilot. The correlation is that he fell ill immediately after the Doom Valkyrie docked."

"The Doom Valkyrie?"

"Yeah, that's what I call it. Anyway, it has not flown since."

Impatiently Fletholm raised his eyebrows and looked at the young man.

"And?"

"Around the same time that the Doom Valk flew, a group of six regular Valkyries and six Centurion IBG left Botelli Hold. They never arrived anywhere, indicating that they were lost."

Fletholm felt the Interstellar Coalition of Ulcer inducing cells settle in his stomach with the force of a nuclear weapon. A stream of acid tried to force its way up in his oesophagus, always a sign that the end product of human food consumption was about to hit a particular rotating blade situated above his head.

"Do you have the proof on that disk?"

Eggert nodded and handed it over.

"Right, continue working on that Doom Valk, I want to find out what it does. I'll have to go brief the Admiral on this."

Eggert grinned fiercely, made a mock salute and walked out. Fletholm grabbed his coat and moved towards UIT HQ. Somehow he was not sure he was going to finish his game of solitaire anytime soon.

## **6. Prelude to slaughter**

Ms. Oselasis, or Yarina as her friends called her, entered the sickbay where Captain Taerow was held. A less controlled person would probably have gasped at seeing him as he lay in the bed. The colour of his skin was an unhealthy grey and was

sagging in his face leaving an impression of somebody deceased. The eyes were on the other hand very alive and the smile that arrived at about the same time as the realisation who had come to visit, brought definite proof of life to his features. She didn't move a muscle.

"Welcome to Ghastville, main attraction me."

Yarina smiled back and walked over to the chair next to the bed.

"I am not even going to ask you how you feel Utia."

She took his left hand in hers and felt the coldness of it.

"I know that the doctors are doing everything they can, and I know that they are going to succeed somehow."

He turned his head away.

"And I know you have a long way to go before you are fit for fight again."

She let his hand back on the blankets and waited for a second before continuing.

"But I have a request that I need to ask. A request from Raewon himself."

Utia turned his head back and looked her straight in the eyes.

"We need you to come and pilot the Omega ship in real combat against the Serco aggressors."

"Are you insane? I fought under controlled conditions and still came out looking like this? No!"

"We know Utia, and we would prefer to keep you here until you are well. We think we may have a solution for the feedback problem, but we have no clue as to how all this affects the Omega. Trust me, we would rather not fly the Omega ship

anytime soon, but we have been ordered to do so by the Admiral of the Fleet himself."

She extended a hand and softly let her fingers caress the cold skin of his cheek.

"Please join the team voluntarily Utia. It means a lot to us, it means a lot to me."

He looked at her almond shaped water clear blue eyes for the longest while until he closed his own and shook his head.

"I can't believe what I am about to do. Sure, when is it going to be?"

"The day after tomorrow. I'll come pick you up."

Yarina got up and walked to the door, turning and waving to the spectre of a man in the bed. She had made him volunteer, good. Then she didn't have to use the written orders she had received in case he would refuse. This made everything so much easier, and ensuring that was after all her job. Now she only had one more thing to do before meeting with the professor.

###

The two new members of Serco counter intelligence better known as the Diplomatic Corps marvelled at the immense size of the docking bay in Dau Senate, capable of working a full dozen Behemoth XC's at the same time. Likewise they studied a group of obvious Itani crew members all dressed alike in light blue uniforms and with the neural shunt behind right ear that allowed them to control their ships like they controlled their own bodies. This was the two young Serco's first glimpse of the enemy and they felt a bit disappointed that the Itani looked just like everyone else. Well, everyone not Serco that is. Both of the diplomats towered at least half a metre above everyone else and outweighed them by hundreds of pounds, even after they had the military fight implants taken out. Like all the other newly arrived passengers they shuffled forward to the station control, one long line among six. Eventually they arrived to the

pudgy sour faced middle aged woman with half glasses on her nose, who regarded them with as much kindness as would normally be reserved for a piece of used chewing gum on the sole of a shoe. Her high-pitched nasal voice betrayed an Ukari accent.

"Papers. Where doo yoo's hail from and where are yoo's gooing?"

They handed their bright new papers over, their proof that they were Aeolus Citizens. She looked down at the papers and swiped them in the computer and proceeded to write on the holo screen.

"We come from Helios III, Aeolus Trading Prefect and we have come here to seek work ma'am."

"I see yoo's were discharged with dishonour and subsequently loost citizenship. Whut was the charge?"

"Refusal of orders ma'am."

The woman looked up from the papers at the two young men.

"Goo oun."

"Well, we refused to execute a group of Itani prisoners ma'am. We are not savages."

She kept looking at them over her glasses until she came to a conclusion, found her stamp and approved the papers.

"Good thing too hear there are some decent Sercoo people oot there booy. Welcome to UIT. Next."

The two men grabbed their bags and moved into the station. A woman of indeterminate age approached them.

"Vaso, Arhem?"

They nodded.

"Follow me, I have a place for you to stay. I am Silia"

They looked at each other and smiled. Phase one, insertion, had so far worked perfectly. Now they had to go to stage two, target acquisition.

###

The afternoon shift mustered outside Geira Rutilus Command. The twelve Serco Skycommand officers along with the single SCAR liaison officer would run the Combat Space Patrol, COSP for the six hour night shift, ensuring that the fighter coverage of the Deneb/Geira Rutilus wormhole stayed functional and thus ensuring that it was open for Serco forces. At least twelve fighters were patrolling at all times, with a further twelve in reserve on two minutes stand-by. A cruiser and a set of frigates could be called upon as well if the Itani decided to try and interdict the wormhole in force, but fortunately that was rare. Along with the regular forces were pilots from the elite SCAR unit with between one and three fighters depending on the threat level. The border conflict was going pretty good for the Serco after they had started patrolling inside Deneb as well, and the threat level for tonight was alert level three with levels two meaning an attack on the wormhole and one meaning full scale invasion.

The operations centre was manned as well, with sixteen officers and enlisted personnel with a single SCAR member as liaison to SCAR command. The Command, Controls and Communications unit was known as the C3, and together with Intelligence they were the Serco nerve centre of the border defence. The closest command nexus to where the major military action happened, it was surrounded by more than six metres of xithricite armour and buried deep inside the massive station that guarded the wormhole nexus to Deneb. Nothing short of a multi-megaton nuclear warhead would be able to affect it and the odds were in favour that the personnel inside would survive even that, even if the surrounding station had melted away. Naturally, was that ever to happen they would have failed their duties as defenders of the wormhole and thus would be condemned to be shot anyway in the following court martial.

## 7. Decision time

The commander of The Lurkers frowned at his new orders. Why was he ordered to replace one of his finest pilots in the middle of a rotation and without an explanation? That bugged him, and he turned the paper over in the vain hope that the explanation was written on the backside. No such luck, it was as blank as it had been a minute ago. Orders were orders however, and he could hardly discuss it with GESTEBO anyway, nor request a why. He tossed the paper onto the table and leaned back, fingertips touching fingertips in front of his face. He was willing to bet a years pay to a single Lady's KC that it had something to do with that prisoner they had caught a fortnight ago. But why would they replace... ah, Cat was the only one that had opened communications with the UIT traitor. He must have found something enormous or betrayed the wrong people since they wanted to have Cat back. No doubt for "re-education" which was the GESTEBO synonym for a plasma bullet through the brain. Not on his watch, not one of his pilots. While he could not disobey a direct order, he could circumvent them if he really wanted to. He opened the secure sub-space communications unit, the SSCU and called a number he had kept for himself for years now. The voice in the other end responded with his name and nothing else.

"I need a favour."

"Okay. What did you do?"

"Not me, one of my pilots."

"No problem, is he any good?"

"It is a she, and she is very good."

"Consider it done. Rendezvous in Helios B-7, Aeolius Trading Prefect as fast as possible. Go to the "Arms of Kali" bar, ask for Beria. Send me her vitals and I'll transfer her effectively as of now."

"I need it done yesterday."

"You are pushing it. Yesterday it is. Consider yourself in my debt my friend."

"Yeah, whenever I see you, I'll grab you a Dark Lady myself. Out."

He smiled, always nice to work around the secret police. He summoned Cat to send her packing and started to draft an answer to the GESTEBO order. How unfortunate that she had been requested to do service in the Special Diplomacy branch a day prior and therefore could not be called back.

###

The Serco High Command met in the most secure wing of the military facility orbiting Sol II. Unlike the Itani high command, no voices were heard here with all communications running on the ultra secure implants that were required for ranks of Colonel and above. Along with those implants came a small fusion reactor usually installed instead of the spleen that had been rendered obsolete by the cybernetic and bio-mechanical implants that transformed any Serco military personnel from a normal human into a nightmare of raw power, speed, survivability and deadliness.

The Serco trooper had an extra heavily modified heart, a digestion system that was more than 90% efficient, muscle boosters, a modified nervous system to enable faster response times, thicker and almost bullet, cold and heat resistant skin, new types of eyes with thermal and infrared capability, implants that allowed the trooper to communicate with anyone on the battlefield in secure voice, sound sensors that would make an owl jealous and lungs that could extract all of the oxygen before exhaling. A trooper could survive hard vacuum for more than fifteen minutes before dying of cold, as well as shut down the blood flow to any part of his body. In other words, scarcely human anymore. Thus giving rise to the derogatory term, human norm for anyone not so modified.

The leadership of the Serco Armed Forces shared the data they had just received from GESTEBO and decided to activate

plan URANUS to be initiated if the information proved to be correct. They all knew what the risks would be, but if the information they had received was correct, some crackpot in the Itani high command had just pushed the precarious balance of mutually assured destruction far over towards the side of the destruction of the Serco people.

###

Space around Tellus was very busy with a heavy assault cruiser, "Pride of Eo" flanked by a trio of frigates floating very close to the station with a screen of two squadrons of mixed IDF Valkyrie Vengeance and Centurion IBG's flying overwatch further out. Several Atlas class ships were moving equipment to the cruiser from the station. The faraday cage containing the Omega (which it was now officially named) was packed in a specially modified Atlas that would not unload inside the cruiser, but function as mobile laboratory. The last thing that was loaded was a set of thirty-megaton nuclear warheads that were placed on either side of the docked Atlas inside the cruiser. No way was the Omega going to be captured by the Serco. The convoy moved out towards Deneb and the border-war.

Inside the cruiser, the Einstein crew was frantically running tests on the complicated equipment while Captain Taerow was getting strapped into his VR gear. He could barely lift his arms, but nobody else had trained for the Omega. He groaned as the mask was set over his head, not that it was activated but at that moment the implications of what he was about to do hit him.

###

The Serco patrol was making a sweep of sector B-12, a sector that the Itani used a lot for staging attacks. Nothing was in sensor range, not even for the scanner equipped Prometheus. The patrol leader called in all clear and the patrol jumped back to the wormhole sector to join the other nine craft that swirled in a defensive pattern around the rift in space. The sector was unusually quiet, and so it was decided to send a raid force to the Itani station to gain intelligence and disturb the defences.

Two Warthog Mk II and a TPG Atlas X piloted by the SCAR member set their course for Deneb O-3. They entered real space again with the sensors recording and fingers on the over-drive button ready for evasive manoeuvres. Immediately space was torn asunder by huge globs of plasma death that engulfed one of the Warthogs, dissolving the armour before killing the pilot inside. The other Warthog and the Atlas tried desperately to break away and avoid the instant killer weapons knowing that the effective range was no more than 1500 metres. A group of fighters attempted to intercept them, three ships flying towards each Serco. Keria pulled her Atlas X in a sixteen G turn and avoided the certain death of yet another plasma glob. At least they were sending fighters after them now, that meant that they were outside of the effective range of the Capitol Gauss canons. She accessed the data collected by her scanners and smiled. This looked like an invasion force, two heavy assault cruiser, four frigates and what looked to be around 50 fighters. She outran the scrambled interceptors easily and jumped back to the wormhole. The other Warthog made it as well and formed up on her wing. She checked the data with the data from the warthog and finding a 100% agreement she squirted it to the sensor buoy that provided a secure link directly to Geira Rutilus command. The effect was immediate. The Skycommand went to DEFCON 2 and scrambled everyone.

## **8. A change of seasons**

Hasdrubal moving his considerable bulk onto the chair that was provided inside the "Pearls for Sus", his favourite eating place in Dau Senate. The cuisine was a blend of Serco sizes, Itani sophistication and UIT prices. The perfect place when someone else was paying, as in this case the UIT state in the form of Commander Fletholm.

Hasdrubal went through the menu with a trained eye and decided on the three most expensive dishes and a bottle of very expensive red wine before settling in to wait for the Commander. He didn't really know what the Commander wanted; he had after all delivered all his data except for the

part about being intercepted by the Serco patrol. Maybe they had a hunch that he had been involved in that incident, maybe they suspected something. He had initially thought about declining this meeting, but in the end had realised that if they wanted him, they could have sent someone nasty instead. So he settled for getting the most out of it, maybe they just wanted to congratulate him on a job well done.

He licked his full lips and carefully studied the other guests, trying to guess what they did for a living. At least three of the women were easy to guess, he had purchased the services of two of them on other occasions, and that one over there looked a bit like senator Rosebund. The waiter arrived with the wine and he smacked his lips in anticipation of tasting it. He let a few drops roll over his tongue and let the taste fill his mouth with its potency. Very good indeed, maybe even worth the 6000 UIT Credits that it was listed to. He nodded and let the waiter fill his glass before leaving him again. He quickly drank some more of it, the notes of cherry and sweet blackberries completed the experience. He nibbled on one of the delicious almond cookies that were a perfect companion to the red wine. Although it did make him thirstier, much thirstier.

He started sweating and his pulse picked up quite a lot. He looked around for a waiter but had difficulty seeing details, everything was blurry and it was hard for him to focus on anything. He wondered what was happening as he started to get nauseous. Fortunately his awareness centre in his brain decided that this would be a good time to shut down, and Hasdrubal fainted into his wine and cookies headfirst. When Fletholm arrived five minutes after, Hasdrubal had been declared dead.

###

The wormhole to Geira Rutilus, the key to controlling the border between Serco and Itani space was the most contested piece of space in all of the known systems. The Serco military had tried to build a base on the Deneb side of the wormhole, but this had been thwarted by repeated Itani attacks.

The wormhole was right now glowing with exotic particles that burst into space with each passing of a ship, the radiation more energised and plentiful in response to the mass the ship was forcing through the rift in space. The particular heavy shower of muons and tachyons that quickly self annihilated with their anti parts releasing a shower of hard radiation, predated the arrival of the Nemesis, the flag ship of the Serco fleet. The set of Tridents arriving shortly thereafter formed up on the dorsal and ventral sides of the ship with a squadron of Prometheus's protecting the rear. Two sets of six bombers were ready to attack in heavy Ragnaroks with a set of six SVG's and one Atlas X flying security for the attack team. It was just in time too; six kilometres away from the roid field that had gathered around the wormhole, a group of expanding rings indicated incoming ships. It was just the advance force, a set of tridents with fighters and with the Nemesis battle group around the wormhole they kept their distance.

The Serco commander signalled for the attack squadrons to engage and the heavily laden Ragnaroks surged forward to attack speed with the escort flying around them like wasps. Halfway across the distance, space once more filled with rings of particles, with an Itani Heavy Assault Cruiser arriving along with several fighters. The Serco commander decided that the bombers should attack the frigates anyway and did not intervene. The blue strings of heavy swarm missiles drew lines of death across space from the Ragnaroks towards one Frigate and at the same time it crackled dryly over the radio from the bomber squad commander.

"Stores."

He had fired all his ordnance and turned the cumbersome ships to escape the heavy gauss canons on the frigates. The six bombers of the other unit likewise emptied their heavy missile tubes five seconds later and switched to evasive tactics. Their secondary load of flares was essential for taking the frigate down if the missiles didn't do the job. The swarm missiles impacted on the sheer nothingness of the capitol ship's shields, overloading them and burning the shield generator out in the process. The second set of missiles impacted all over the top of the frigate, converting long streaks

of armour into strings of plasma that tore through the insides of the ship, effectively destroying it. Fires appeared where pockets of oxygen was found and giant fighter sized sparks flew at random from the incapacitated jump engine.

Team leader two emptied his flare launchers into the wreck and applied full boosters to get away from the explosion, his now empty ship lighter by 50%. Which was a good thing, a set of Centurion IBG tore into the squadron like ill-tempered gnats, but gnats that were so very deadly. Their neutron guns managed to destroy one heavy bomber before their own escorts were entering the fray. Framed by the very large explosion from the flares impacting on the frigate and the following detonating of its onboard stores of munitions, the two IBG were destroyed by the SVG's. The bombers returned to the Nemesis for reloading, their number having been reduced by four. One had died to the IBG and three to the heavy gauss canons from the other frigate. The ejection system had worked on two of the Ragnaroks, and the pilots would be joining the force again within a day. The other two had to be restored from their last memory plant and inserted into a cloned body, thus effectively taking them out of the conflict for a month or more. At least the Itani had no survivors on the frigate, with at least the usual crew of fourteen dead.

The Serco commander, with an advantage in capitol ships moved in towards the Itani forces with the mass of his ships. He was going to take them on and teach them to stay away from the wormhole. As soon as the bombers had reloaded, they were launched and ready to strike a crippling blow as soon as the capitol ships were engaged. It was a matter of timing really, but the commander was sure that his bomber squadrons were up to the task. The escorts were sent forward to clear the route for opposing light fighters.

###

The Itani group of space superiority fighters in the form of six Valkyrie Vengeance ships received the order to go and disengaged from the main force, striking out on their own to engage the Serco bombers before they could launch their deadly cargo. Moving to a particularly empty part of space, the

fighters initialised their jump engines and left the battle. Immediately after they had recharged their batteries to the required 25%, they jumped again, this time to an empty sector. They waited for thirty seconds and then jumped into the sector where the battle was taking place, but this time from another angle and only around a thousand metres away from the bombers that were hanging back behind the capitol ships. Deprived of the fighter escort, the bombers had no chance at all against the six heavy fighters and tried in vain to scramble in different directions. Within eight seconds, the first ship exploded followed by two more in quick succession.

One of the bombers tried to launch its swarm missiles against a fighter, but the missiles were too slow to actually hit the ship. It was in turn rewarded by a string of neutrons and flights of flares, destroying it and producing a large fireball. The Serco commander, realising that his bomber force was about to be destroyed, and that the Itani now had six fighters on top of the wormhole, dispatched his seven light fighters and the three of his six Prometheus's to engage the Valkyries. This was anticipated by the Itani commander, and the real reason that he had sent them there. The Valkyries killed off the remaining bombers before the Serco fighters smashed into the formation like a battleship through a wave. Quickly the Serco overwhelmed the Itani, with four of the Valkyries exploding in fireballs to the loss of only three SVG's. The battle was not over yet. The Prometheus's moved in for the kill, with the three SVG's circling like barracuda surrounding a school of fish.

###

Keria kept back a bit, this looked to be a long fight and she saw no reason to destroy the armour of her Atlas X when the Prometheus's were going to close with the two Itani ships anyway. A set of twin flares and a string of gauss fire smashed one Valkyrie to bits, but not before it in return had critically damaged one Prometheus. A string of neutrons from a circling SVG finished the Itani fighter, leaving one to go. However, that pilot was immensely lucky and extremely good. He danced his ship around, not taking damage from neither the flare explosions that almost engulfed his ship, or from the neutrons that criss-crossed space around his ship. It was inconceivable

that he would be able to keep it up but he still managed to send a string of death into the damaged Prometheus exploding it. Still not damaged the Valkyrie turned on its axis and unleashed everything into the belly of a SVG, destroying one more. Not believing what she saw, Keria moved her ship closer to assist in killing this über pilot. Oblivious to her presence, she managed to manoeuvre behind the Valkyrie and unleashed a long string of Gatling shots into the rear of the ship, followed up with a string of neutrons. She frowned as the Valkyrie continued to destroy the Prometheus it was engaging and move to the next target, the last of the heavy Serco fighters. She knew she had hit the ship dead-on; she could follow the ionisation paths to the ship all the way, but there were no indications of damage. She fired a long burst again, no effect. The Valkyrie had now stopped dodging altogether and merely focused on laying precise fire onto the Serco ships. The incoming fire had no effect at all as the Valkyrie finished killing the remaining Prometheus and the two SVG's before turning for Keria's Atlas. Keria realised that she was seriously outmatched by something she couldn't quite understand and hit the overdrive function on her ship, effectively turning it into a six-ton rocket. Avoiding the fire by mere milliseconds, she boosted directly towards the capitol ships.

"Delta 4 Alfa this is SCAR rep Willenium. Am inbound dorsal side Nemesis with bogey on six. Requesting full broadside heavy plasma and seekers on bogey, my posit long 324, targeting data inbound, respond."

She hit the send button and sent the data packets towards the frigate immediately in front of her knowing that the ships would share the data instantly as part of their integrated neural network.

"SCAR rep Willenium, Delta 4 Alfa, full broadside firing in six, five, four, three, two, one, firing, firing, firing, stand by, waiting for damage assessment."

Keria ducked in her seat even though the heavy plasma bolts was moving towards the Valkyrie several meters above her ship. A trio of seeker missiles streaked by her cockpit at 225 m/s inbound for collision with the enemy. The 1900-kilo missiles

consisted of three 70-kilo solid slugs and a very large explosive charge that exploded when the proximity sensor was triggered, accelerating the three penetrators to 8.000 m/s before impacting on the target. Most fighters died from a single penetrator, a heavy fighter like the Prometheus might take two before exploding. The combined effect of the weapons that had been fired on the fighter was enough to turn anything but a capitol ship into instant vapour. Keria kept checking her radar and saw the bogey coming on hard, shrugging the plasma bolts off like water on a duck, ignoring the penetrators taking them head on without doing any evasive moves at all.

"Delta 4 Alfa this is SCAR rep Willenium, good hits, no effect, say again no effect."

"SCAR rep Willenium, Delta 4 Alfa, roger. Dispatching cover to engage, assist and report."

Keria's heart sank, they were going to send the last Prometheus's to engage the phantom Valkyrie and in that way strip the capitol ships of their cover. She continued on course for the frigates in anticipation of the wave of Itani heavy bombers that were bound to attack when the Serco fighter screen had left.

## **9. Over my dead rotting corpse**

Vaso disengaged the semi-sentient neural network from the ship's mainframe and packed it into his backpack. He nodded to Arhem to indicate that he was finished and grabbed his things. Arhem engaged the timer on the incendiary device and put it against the pilot's seat. The Serco special operatives walked calmly out of the mining Behemoth and continued towards their pick up point. It would not do to go directly to the safe house, but Silia would have taken care of that; so far she had been extremely efficient. They reached their pick-up point and waited for a moment. The fire alarms went off with instructions to go to the nearest secure area and wait for rescue personnel. Vaso nodded to Arhem, they had succeeded so far.

###

Cat finished packing her things and boarded the unmarked Warthog Mk II. Not one to question orders, she had merely shrugged when she received the summons to Helios. She raised an eyebrow when her commander told her that she would have to go through Itani space alone as well as traverse UIT space as well before entering Helios from grey space, but orders were orders. She closed the canopy and checked her systems methodically as always when the alarm klaxons went off. Opening a direct connection to command was a matter of flicking a switch.

"Boss, I am ready for launch now. Send bogey update and I'll engage."

She started going through the engine start up sequence at double speed.

"Cat, belay that. You will go on with your orders. Acknowledge."

She frowned at that. With a general alert on, meaning an imminent attack or a critical situation, why wasn't she allowed to participate?

"Sir, I urge you to reconsider."

"Cat, I didn't want to tell you this. I have received orders from the GESTEBO. They want you, and I won't give you up. Now go to Helios as I said and make me proud."

"I did nothing wrong Sir, shouldn't I just return?"

"No, they wanted you for questioning. Nobody comes back from questioning Cat. Now go and do as you were told. Hail Lady Serco."

Cat mumbled a reply and killed the connection. So that was why she wasn't allowed to go through Serco space. It made sense somehow, but that didn't mean that she liked it. She launched and set a course for Helios.

###

She had been right, the moment the three remaining Prometheus's had left their overwatch position, a squadron of Itani heavy bombers engaged at full speed towards the trio of capitol ships. Keria ignored her orders to engage the Valkyrie and kept boosting for the frigate in front of her, hopefully she would be in time to kill at least some of the bombers before they could release their deadly cargo. The three Prometheus's fired a full barrage of flares at their top speed, ramming them down onto the vector of the Valkyrie. She shuddered as it emerged unscathed from the fireball and mentally wrote the Prometheus's off as dead. She kept moving at full speed and was rewarded with seeing the Itani bombers accelerating towards the Serco capitol ships. Shouting a combat cry she unleashed everything she had at the bombers taking them unaware and head on. One practically disintegrated in flight as the onboard munitions detonated under the fusillade of Gatling fire, another dropped the armaments to evade the incoming flares, skirting the damage envelope and managing to escape, limping back to the main Itani battle line. The remaining four bombers ignored her Atlas X and continued for the frigates, unleashing full sets of swarm missiles before turning back to re-arm. The missiles impacted and collapsed the shield generator on the frigate with one or two missiles hitting the ship below.

Now lighter by 50%, the bombers' manoeuvrability were enhanced significantly but that was not a factor for an accomplished pilot as Keria. Aligning her turret's auto targeting reticule on the closest bomber, she depressed the trigger and allowed the Gatling to spit death upon the ship. Knowing that the Gatling would destroy the ship she twisted the front slightly further to the right and fired her remaining flares indiscriminately into the other bombers. A satisfying explosion meant one less bomber, and she moved her reticule onto a new target. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the Itani capitol ships fire a full broadside at the now defenceless frigate and cursed the Itani for the deaths they were about to inflict. She ground her teeth and fired into another bomber, probably the last one she was going to get.

A squadron of IBG's were moving to intercept her now and she decided to make a run for it. Leaving the three bombers to fly back, she took evasive manoeuvres and bolted for the Nemesis. The Heavy Assault Cruiser was momentarily lit by the destructive fire from the now exploding frigate, the damage from the explosions enough to weaken the shields on the Nemesis but not powerful enough to burn the generator out. Slowly, ever so slowly the shields were regaining potency. Keria's heart took an extra beat in pure joy they could still make it. Her joy was however short-lived, another set of bombers had moved around in the cover of the scattered roid field and could now disgorge their full complement of swarm missiles and flares towards the Nemesis. The shield generator, already under immense strain from the splash, disintegrated under the immense bombardment and the combined heavy gauss canons and plasma launchers on the Itani cruiser crushed the armour on the Serco Flagship. The burning hulk lost controls and started tumbling slowly towards the roid field. Keria cursed an oath that was illegal in most systems and moved to the last frigate to protect it. She scanned the sector and found only herself and the frigate in-system, outnumbered at least five to one. The phantom Valkyrie was sitting still in the middle of nothing, apparently undamaged but with no movement. The route to the Geira Rutilus station was open, only the frigate and her to stop them.

"Delta 4 anyone, this is SCAR rep Willenium, report."

"SCAR rep Willenium this is Delta 4 Charlie fully combat functional. 80% stores remaining."

"Roger Delta 4 Charlie. Suggest full frontal on the Itani cruiser. May force her to break off."

"SCAR rep Willenium for Delta 4 Charlie, if you can keep the bombers occupied for a couple of seconds we can take her."

"Wilco Delta 4 Charlie. It was good knowing you."

"Delta 4 Charlie inbound. Glory to Lady Serco."

The frigate turned and faced the Itani cruiser with about as much grace as a hippopotamus in a giant glue-ball. Meter long plasma streaks flamed out the engines as they were fired on 120% power, causing the frigate to accelerate slowly, ever so slowly. Keria went under the cumbersome ship and moved to engage the bombers as they returned to the melee. This time they were defended by the remaining IBG's, with a set of six Valkyries hanging back. Odds of twelve to one, this is what she lived for. Screaming her battle cry at the top of her lungs, she hit the turbo and engaged the bombers with her Gatling turret.

###

The command post at Geira Rutilus was silent as they watched the large red pentagon that signified the remaining Serco frigate meld together with the even larger blue hexagon that was the Itani cruiser. The hexagon remained after the impact, probably damaged but not destroyed. The secondary defences had been activated with twelve Monitor class defence drones launched and circling the wormhole. Still, the mood was pretty bad with the loss of the last frigate.

Riddik Willenium, Duty officer of SCAR never noticed the death of the remaining frigate, he was busy staring at the small triangle that signified the only person that he absolutely could not bear to lose, his wife Keria. The twelve blue triangles and ten blue squares denominating fighters and bombers respectively closed on the lonely red triangle that eventually after removing two blue squares, faded out. Riddik waited one second before punching his fist directly through the radiation prepared screen burying his arm in the console.

"She is still alive, I am going in."

He stood and looked around, daring anybody to say anything, almost hoping that it would happen so he could get a quick target to vent his aggression on. It was in vain, not even a Serco serviceman wanted to take on the 280-pound bundle of cybernetically enhanced raw power. Snorting his contempt, he turned and ran down to get his Marauder fitted with auxiliary life support and launch for Deneb. He was going to find her no matter what.

## 10. UIT CSI

Fletholm walked over to the burnt-out hulk of the mining moth and stopped at the yellow and black plastic strung across the bay entrance, patiently waiting for the investigator in charge to have time for him. Several minutes passed before a very dirty small man in an even dirtier boiler suit came over to him.

"You's de special guy?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"Boss said tae take good care a ye. So, whut can Ah do tae help ye?"

Fletholm was relieved; obviously his connections to the UIT Internal Police had worked their magic. He noted the heavy Verasi accent of the man for future reference, moved under the plastic and extended a hand in greeting.

"Fletholm, counter intelligence. I am looking for any data storage devices aboard that ship. Anything at all, even the burned remains of anything."

"I guess ye are in luck den, dem 'ere geezers took de main computer oot 'n smashed de auxiliary. However dey obviously didnt'na kenn aboot de extra storage 'n scanning capacity o yonder mining moth. Dat computer is unscathed. Dar's some unusual gear in de small port, mebbe ye wanna have a looksee?"

"That would be interesting. You say that the scanning computer is unscathed? I will have a set of technicians down to take it to my lab."

"Ye cannae do dat son, twould interfere wit de investigation. Ye can have it when we hae finished milking it."

"No. I am sorry that I interfere in this way with your investigation, but I must insist. As a matter of fact, I must insist

that you let your investigation point to a natural cause even if it doesn't. This is a matter of national security."

He revealed his credentials and let the investigator study it. He had more than ample authority to remove anything from any scene of crime if the security of the nation was in danger.

"Ah guess ye can den. Ah'll write a report saying dat all was burned oot, yeah?"

"It would be preferably if you would. Thank you for your cooperation Sir."

"Ye doo no Sir me, Ah work fae a livin."

They both chuckled and separated, the investigator to pack his kit and Fletholm to investigate the scanner and wait for his own crew. This was the best news of the day. When he had arrived in "Pearls for Sus" ready to be ripped financially, but also with a new mission for his contact, it had been closed and several medical units were outside. Asking around, he found out that a person had suffered a bad case of poisoning with botulinum toxins, probably from an old bottle of wine. Even if they had tried to administer adrenaline to him, he just got much worse and died. A simple query to the data sphere had confirmed that it was Hasdrubal that had died. He sighed and dispatched one of his agents to figure out what had happened. That was now two hours ago, and he was not really in doubt as to what had happened, but now he needed to find the details of how.

###

Riddik launched his Marauder without getting flight approval from the STC, not because he was being obnoxious on purpose but because he was focused on the one mission that made sense in his World right now; finding and saving Keria. He entered the wormhole and tightened the chest strap further, readying himself for evasive action. He re-entered real space and immediately boosted down and right, twisting his ship to avoid the incoming fire. Nothing, no ships came up on the radar only a mass of debris where the frigates and Nemesis had been destroyed. Frowning but glad that he would no be

hindered, he started scanning for live pilots in the form of ejection pods.

Several responded to his call for IFF, with one of them showing critical status for the life support systems. He boosted towards that one and picked the Serco pilot up, continuing along the most efficient vector to pick up all the pods in the least amount of time. He spotted Keria's pod and noted that the pod was functioning with one unconscious, but alive pilot inside. He moved directly to her pod and retrieved it, the others could wait. He left his pilot seat and let the Marauder boost into infinity as he moved down to the auxiliary life-support unit and extracted Keria. He checked her vitals, no permanent damage. As far as he could see it was a question of neural overload and maybe one or two burned out implants.

He kissed her forehead gently and put her in the crash couch inside the auto-doc, making sure that the straps were securely fastened before moving back to his seat. He picked the remaining three Serco pods up and moved towards the wormhole. A set of eight circles of radiation signified incoming ships, and Riddik hit the overboost button to avoid any incoming Itani. The incoming ships turned out to be three battle scared Prometheus's, two battered SVG's and a trio of very damaged heavy bombers with Serco IFF codes, making Riddik wonder where they had come from. He hailed the front Prometheus, but did not get a reply. Probably some Spec Ops team, he didn't care at all. He had Keria, and that was all that mattered. It was the only thing that mattered.

###

"Well done boys, looks like you hit the nail right on the spot."

Silia threw a news stick onto the table where the two diplomats were playing a game of Go. They looked up at her smiling face and relaxed; ever since the hit they had been on the edge in case the UIT police came for them.

"What does it say?"

"Well Vaso, you can read the details yourself, but generally it says that a fire broke out in a mining moth due to faulty electricity, and another story talks of closing "Pearls for Sus" because a customer died of botulinum poisoning. You did good."

Arhem nodded, it has been his idea to use the botulinum, but not as a stand-alone poison. The wine had contained enough botulinum to kill half the station if untreated, but it was fairly easy to treat. A shot of adrenaline would stop the worst, and give time for the emergency services to get him to the intensive care unit. The second ingredient had been a very small amount of cyanide in the almond cookies, not enough to overshadow the effects of the botulinum, but when the adrenaline to treat the botulinum poison hit the nervous system, it would trigger a super destructive cascade of destruction that the cyanide had already started. Thus the symptoms of the botulinum would hide and the treatment would greatly enhance the real cause of death, cyanide poisoning.

The waiter had removed the cookies and delivered them back to Arhem in the kitchen before receiving his pay. In this case immunity for the crimes he had committed a long time ago in Initros, and thus a renewal of his Serco citizenship. He was right now on his way to Pyronis, back to fulfil his duties to Lady Serco.

"A time for new missions I guess? Or do we just continue to wait?"

Silia laughed out loud.

"You should know boys, nine tenths of all time spent in the diplomatic corps is like time in the army. It is waiting."

###

The medical crew rushed the burned and vacuum damaged body of an Itani bomber pilot from the docking bay to the large medical facilities in Ellias Stand, the largest in Itani space. The pilot was not breathing and hadn't done so for quite a while but that didn't really matter. The body had been so damaged that it

would probably have to be discarded anyway, and as far as the IDF standard bionic implant told the system onboard the stretcher, his brains and nervous system was still fully functional and ready for transplant. But they hurried; it was a question of minutes now.

Unlike the Serco military that routinely cloned their soldiers and kept memplants of the soldiers updated every month, the Itani did not believe in that. Once you were dead, you stayed dead and the Itani people would mourn you appropriately. Thus a death loss of a pilot for the Serco was a setback of six months plus new conditioning, for the Itani it was irretrievable. That was one of the reasons that the medical facilities were the best in all of known space, and partly a reason that the war had never escalated beyond a border skirmish. The Itani people were not ready to accept the multi-thousands deaths such an escalation would take. That is also why the research into the Omega project was so important, and why it could not be allowed to fail.

Inside a secluded medical bay, a single person was worked on by several medtechs. His increasingly shallow breathing and deathlike pallor were indications of a body failing its host. The medtechs were however at a loss, the body was completely unharmed; it was the mind that had decided that it was dead. Captain Taerow had been in a coma like this for six hours now and apparently he would be dead in another six hours or so no matter what the medtechs did. They informed Professor Raewon that they could do no more for his pilot and left him to die in peace.

## **11. Unreasonable demands**

Riddik docked his Marauder with all the care he could, which was a lot. After all, he carried the most valuable cargo he could imagine, his wife. The emergency life support units were ready when he landed and he along with the dockhands started unloading the valuable cargo from his hold. When the medical recovery crew had taken the other pilots away, he found a stretcher and readied it for Keria. He was bent over her,

unstrapping her gently when someone started to shout over at the entrance.

Not used to shouting in a Serco military installation Riddik looked up and saw two small black clad officers that had stopped the stretchers. They were using a handheld DNA scanner to identify the pilots but didn't seem to find what they were looking for. Riddik shook his head slightly; he absolutely hated the secret police. They always seemed to carry themselves with an air of self-importance that didn't measure up to their effectiveness. However, what they lacked in efficiency they made up for amply in ruthlessness. Riddik lifted his wife gently; the fact that he outweighed her four times and the fact that was cybernetically enhanced to the maximum ensured that he didn't tremble the slightest while lifting her out of the prone position. He turned to put her on the stretcher but was interrupted by one of the GESTEBO agents.

"You must submit to a DNA scan at once. And the unconscious pilot."

Riddik slowly ground his teeth; these guys were incredible. He started smiling, unsettling the GESTEBO agent and rightly so; Riddik imagined the untold mental horrors that would be unleashed upon the manling if he ever were to say please and it probably showed on Riddik's face. He nodded; after all it was probably not worth calling for SCAR immunity right now. He extended his right hand to the man, keeping Keria to his chest comfortably resting on his left arm. The machine swiped across his hand and the manling nodded. He took the scanner and pressed it against Keria's arm and let it do its work. He looked up at Riddik.

"We need this female for questioning. Hand her over immediately."

The manling looked up at Riddik, pointed to the stretcher with one hand and put his hand on the ornate needlegun at his side for emphasis. Riddik didn't know why the GESTEBO wanted her but this would be a good time to call in the guild.

"No. We are SCAR; you have no jurisdiction over us. Take it to my commander."

"If you will stay there one second, I will."

The GESTEBO agent's eyes glazed over as he initiated a secure call to his command. The other agent placed himself behind and to the left of Riddik, the place where it would be hardest for him to see and thus attack the agent if trouble was to arrive. The first agent blinked and smiled, the effect chilling on Riddik.

"I have received an extradition order countersigned by SCAR. I will send the form over now. Hand her over citizen."

Riddik received the signal, but chose to upload it in his auxiliary brainplant, using a rather illegal programme he had purchased in Aeolus Trading Prefect in Helios by one of his trading associates. The extradition order was in order, complete with SCAR digital signatures and all, but it was the small black ice programme that was uploaded at the same time that decided for Riddik. The black ice programme was designed to shut all of his implants down, effectively rendering him defenceless.

Riddik dropped Keria, drawing the small thin-gun from her waist, the small one-shot holdout pistol that she kept for extreme situations, with his left hand and extended it towards the agent behind him. At the same time Riddik bent in his knees, allowing the right hand to grasp the large calibre flechette pistol that he had strapped on his thigh and point it towards the agent to the front. Simultaneously he depressed the triggers of the two weapons, firing the single shot from the thin-gun through the left eye exiting in the back of the skull of the agent behind him and six hundred hyper velocity fourteen gramme samoflange darts that turned the agent in front into a bleeding hulk. Riddik dropped his left gun and caught his wife; the entire sequence had taken less than 0.3 seconds. He looked down at the quivering mass of bleeding flesh that was the sorry remains of the agent. The man was going into shock, but in itself the wound was not lethal; he was Serco after all.

"I said no."

Riddik raised the gun and fired another set of darts into the neck of the agent, messily separating the head from the body. He then turned and put Keria back in her crash seat, strapping her down methodically but fast. He launched his Marauder and set the course for Helios. He was not sure that he would be welcome in Serco space the next many months.

###

"If he dies, the entire programme will have been set back for a long time, it may even stop here unless we find out why it happens. We need to think out of the box, we need Captain Taerow up and about. Gentlemen, ladies, I need your ideas and I need the right solution within the next hour or we are deep inside Arklan land with no turbo."

Raewon looked around the table for any takers but nobody had any ideas. He fixed his gaze on the senior medtech.

"Tell me again why we can't just put his brains and vitals inside a clone?"

The medtech looked down to the table and then up at Raewon.

"We would love to Sir, but as far as we can see the body is doing fine. It is the mind that seems to be slipping away slowly. We can keep the body alive for an indefinite amount of time but according to Itani law, a body that has no mind is legally dead and can be reused or destroyed as per the last wishes of the previous inhabitant. We expect that with the current decline, the body will be uninhabited in less than four hours."

"Anybody have anything?"

Nobody had any clues and they adjourned to their respective departments for an hour. Yarina Oselasis decided to pay a visit to the captain in the vain hope that she would be inspired to a solution. His appearance shocked even her but still she didn't let it show on her face. The technician inside looked at her and decided that she should just keep focus on her readouts instead of talking. Yarina walked over to the comatose grey-

skinned man and grasped his hand. It showed no sign of life except for a feeble pulsing at the wrist, the fingers feeling very cold in her own hand. She squeezed his hand slightly for support, stroking it slightly with her thumb. She felt a small quiver in the hand she held and almost dropped it in surprise. She got an idea and turned to the medtech.

"Leave us."

The medtech frowned and looked into her screen, deciding that she could use a break anyway. The patient was not going to move any time soon.

"All right, but I'll stay outside if ya'll need me."

Yarina nodded and waited until the medtech had left before testing her idea.

###

Fletholm was briefing the UIT high command on the recent developments regarding several pirate incursions into the Azek system and the connections and implications regarding the low scale war between the trade guild named Sigma Shipping Company (SSC) and the Cargo Liberation Movement (CLM) when his beeper went off in his pocket. Ignoring it he continued to show in what intervals the attacks happened when the beeper went off again. He finished his part and nodded to the Chief Security Officer of Azek and walked outside to see who had called. It was not one but two persons, both with priority ASAP-Z signals. He sighed and informed the military policeman that was standing guard that he had to go and left for the secret facility nicknamed Hobbitrup but he called work. He entered to a flurry of activity in almost all his departments with several calling for him as soon as he entered the room. He sighed once more and walked over to his office with the lead expert on the Itani and Serco military following with Eggert in tow. He sat and immediately punched a message to his wife Camille explaining that he would once more not be home for dinner before looking up at the impatient men.

"So, what happened?"

###

Cat docked the by now rather battered Warthog in Aeolus Trading Prefect and exited the ship warily. It was the first time she was in a grey sector station, and the first time she was outside of Serco space alone. She walked over to the dockhand and haggled a good price for storage of her ship before heading deeper into the station. She was probably ripped off but she was satisfied with the agreement. She had to find the Hands of Kali, and if this station was anything like the standard Serco barracks it would be in the commercial sector on level 42a. She found an elevator and entered it along with some of the human wreckage that space always seemed to wash up in grey. One of them was an amputee, and without a prosthetic arm too. She had never seen anything like it and found it hard not to stare, Serco space might not be perfect but was at least rich enough that nobody went without medical aid if so needed.

The elevator stopped at 42a and she walked out expecting to smell the usual powerful spices and heavy tangy smelling drinks that were on all Serco commercial levels. Instead it was pungent as hell in the corridor she entered and she was immediately aware that she was in the wrong place. The many crates of unidentified gunk emanated a smell that was sweet and yeasty but at the same time oppressively pungent. It was immensely hot and moist in the corridor and her skin started to gleam of sweat as her body responded. She checked the crates and saw that they were connected by brass pipes with openings in the top. She was curious enough to peer into one of them and was hit by a solid dose of the smell and moisture of the liquid below. She pulled her head back and would have gagged if her body hadn't been modified to such an extent that she did not own that reflex. She moved back to the other side of the corridor and looked at the crates. All 23 of them had the same label on them, "Property of Hortan". Someone had a sick sense of humour, or just a very weird and obscure hobby. The elevator pinged and she turned ready for anything.

"I should have known. Good thing that the boss is so prescient as to the behaviour of you military folks."

Cat frowned, who the hell was this human norm talking to her as if he knew her.

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Beria, at your service. I believe that we should meet up at The Arms of Kali? How about I show you where it is and let you meet the boss?"

Cat merely nodded and entered the elevator with the small man. This was going to take some getting used to.

## **12. Hobbitrup**

The Serco expert, Major Timisoara went first, walking up to a model of Serco space to illustrate his points.

"Sir, we have what looks like a crushing defeat of the Skycommand forces in Deneb with the complete annihilation of the rapid response force including the SMV Nemesis. The Serco forces have regrouped in Geira Rutilus with everything they have in the area, which is actually much less than we had thought available. A large force looks to be assembling around Sol II with several capitol ships and a lot of Prometheus's. The border defences has been upped to DEFCON 2 with all Monitor class turrets manned and active. Also, we have Strike Forces launching in all systems from Geira Rutilus towards Helios, chasing a Marauder that has its IFF turned off but managed to escape seemingly functional to grey space. We do not have any information as to whom, why or what the Marauder was hunted for but we are investigating. Conclusion, the Serco Defence Forces are preparing for invasion and may have been compromised by an inside traitor that has escaped."

The Serco expert returned to his seat and sat down. Fletholm squinted at the map before nodding to the Itani expert.

"Sir, we have several indications that the Itani is about to launch a full scale assault on the Deneb/Geira Rutilus wormhole perhaps with the intent to destroy the Serco

command nexus on the GR side of the wormhole. He have three Heavy Assault Cruisers, the IDV Pride of Eo, the IDV Sword of Eo and the IDV Sola gathering around the barracks station in Deneb along more than hundred and fifty heavy fighters and bombers, seven Trident class frigates and around thirty Atlas class troop transports. On top of that, the Jallik border has been striped of the reserve contingent of heavy bombers, nine squadrons in all and there are some indications that they are also moving to Deneb. However, we have run the simulations and there is no way that it would be enough to destroy the station as long as the fighter cover and the Monitor class mobile defensive turrets are still intact. To sum it up, we have no clue what is happening."

"Hmm, I see. Timi, if the Serco forces are chasing a traitor, especially an Itani traitor, why didn't that person leave to Deneb? As I recall, the wormhole is less than 3000 metres away."

"Ah, yes Sir. You are probably right. We'll look into it further Sir."

"Right, but apart from that is looks like something has upset the MAD doctrine."

The MAD doctrine, or the Mutually Assured Destruction was the not-quite agreed upon doctrine that allowed the Itani-Serco conflict to huddle along as a mere border skirmish instead of escalating to full scale war. Neither side used nuclear weapons, neither side killed the other sides rescue pods, nor did any side allow the conflict to escalate to civilian targets aside from the odd convoy now and again. It was also the doctrine that allowed UIT to work both sides at the same time, profiting on both sides while keeping the war out of the core systems. If something had upset the balance it could mean the end of the UIT, as they knew it.

"Sir, I think I have an idea as to what it is."

"Go Eggert, let's see if you have come up with something plausible."

Fletholm started massaging his temples, he could feel the usual headache and nausea associated with crisis-long nights already presenting themselves like a crew of over hyped cheerleaders; irresistible and not really caring whether he had asked for it or not.

"You remember the phantom Valkyrie?" Fletholm nodded and Eggert continued. "We have looked through our data and it looks like the phantom Valkyrie was taken along the Itani battle line to Deneb where it was used in combat. I have reason to believe that it was actually instrumental in stripping the SMV Nemesis of its fighter defences, thus leaving her open to attack and destruction. That the Serco managed to damage the IDV Sword of Eo so badly is actually a bit baffling to us, at that time only a frigate and a single Serco fighter remained but somehow the frigate managed to skirt the fighter cover and while firing all guns forward rammed the SoE right below the primary command nexus, effectively crippling the ship and taking it out of the battle for at least six months. How the Serco managed to avoid the fighters is anybody's guess. That is beside the point really. It seems that the phantom Valkyrie can freely engage a complete battle force flight of fighters and come out of it unscathed. That means that we can expect the phantom Valkyrie can engage the wormhole defences and take them out alone."

Fletholm had been massaging his temples slowly with his eyes closed; now he opened them and looked at Eggert.

"Scuse me?"

"Yes Sir, I believe that the Itani forces can with no difficulty engage and kill the entire Serco defensive force on the Geira Rutilus side of the wormhole with that single Valkyrie. None of the Monitor class gun turrets have shields neither do the fighters. I am not sure how the Valkyrie would fare against the heavier ships that have shield generators but at the moment the Itani heavies outnumber the Serco by two to one. If the fighters have been taken out it is more like five to one in comparative power. Sir, the balance has been grossly upset by that thing."

Fletholm nodded slowly while string into the table. He could feel his pet ulcer wake up in malevolent glee and expectation of the soon to be misery it would cause him. He grabbed the bottle of anti-acid and put it on the table, mentally noting to buy a whole crate of these. It sounded like it would be necessary.

"Gents, that is all. As much information as you can possible get me please, now leave me. I have several calls to make."

###

The Serco high command was a silent as always, the communication taking place in an entirely different forum. The virtual reality where the commanders lived most of their time ensured almost instantaneous and fail proof communications across large distances making it possible for the Serco commanders to actually be in their designated ships and still have a common command nexus. They had discussed the scenarios many times already, they had war gamed the different options and arrived at a conclusion. If they could not contain the IDF at the GR wormhole, they would have to resort to escalation through targeting Eo. The transfer of several very old and very large nuclear warheads had been transferred to a group of six heavily modified Atlas' from the Serco Death Squad Penal Legion. The group would have to run the gauntlet along with a fighter/bomber cover but it would only take one that got through to smash into the surface of Eo to make the Itani to break off. Or as some scenarios indicated, press the attack. The best thing was a tilting of the balance, back to how it used to be. Right now the High Command had no clue as to how this could be re-established but the Diplomatic Corps was working on it with all resources. Operation URANUS was launched with the target still to be decided.

###

The almost still cold body that lay in the bed was much like that belonging to a dead person, and Yarina shuddered slightly at what she was about to do. Undressing to her underwear, she slipped under the covers and pressed her body against Taerow's, embracing him and ignoring the coldness of his body that leached her body warmth. She started singing a nursery

rhyme in a low soft melodic voice while rubbing his chest with her left arm. It only took about a minute before she started shaking with cold, but she could sense that something was happening. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes, like a drowning man being brought back to life. The confusion on his face was partly waking in the medical ward and mostly waking with Yarina wrapped around him.

"Don't you get any ideas Ut. But welcome back to the land of the living."

He grinned, it was too late about the ideas; he was a man after all and they popped into his head like starbursts during a meteor shower. How could he not? He closed his eyes again and relished in the sensation of having her against him.

"How long time was I out?"

"Nine hours and dying slowly. We had no idea what to do to you until I tried this."

He swallowed dryly but made sure he didn't move his muscles apart from that. He seriously did not want to accidentally give the impression that he wanted her to leave. He never wanted her to leave, he could stay here forever and never again use the Omega, never again be confined to his own head with only the sounds of nails sliding down glass, the incoherent screeching and babbling of utter fear emanating from his own voice, never again be confined to the darkness of...

He awoke to Yarina's alarmed voice.

"You are slipping away again. Stay with me Ut, stay with me until we can get the psychologists down here and help you."

Ne noted that she had left his side and that there were a lot of people in the room. A familiar face appeared in front of him, Raewon.

"Good to have you back son. The doctors here need to do some tests on you, but you'll be back in no time. We are moving back to Tellus as we speak. Dammit son, you gave us a

real fright there. We thought we had lost you for a second there. Well, we'll leave you in the hands of the doctors, get better soon, you hear?"

He saw the scientists walk out of the room with Yarina as the last one. She turned, as she was about to exit as if to say something but didn't, looked down and waved a small wave before leaving. He was left to the medical staff.

### **13. Allies**

Riddik docked his Marauder in Aeolus Trading Prefect and purchased a stretcher to move Keria into the station to get some medical assistance. The dockhands raised an eyebrow when they saw him pull a Serco female out of his hold, but them not noticing anything was what they got paid for. Riddik moved as fast as he could and only narrowly avoided the two groups of six black uniformed persons that exited a set of Centaurs. They immediately spotted the Marauder and after leaving three men to guard it the others moved into the station. Riddik thought about finding the local SCAR representative but didn't want to have even the slightest chance of them turning Keria over to GESTEBO. He mentally thumbed through his contacts in Grey and disregarded the Serco ones. That left him with one person, Lebermac from the Cargo Liberation Movement. He sent a query asking where Lebermac was. Within seconds a link opened.

"Riddik you ole swinger, how's it hanging?"

"Pretty bad my friend. I need help and I need help bad."

"Not really all that welcome up the Ladies way buddy. But I can probably send someone if ya need it."

"Not necessary, I am in Grey."

There was a moment's silence on the other end before Lebermac answered.

"This is going to land me in a lot of trouble isn't it?"

"Probably, but I have nowhere else to go mate. I need medical help for Keria."

"Roger, send me your posit and I'll be there in a jiffy."

"Leebs, I owe you one."

"Yarr, don't think of it. Think Tequila instead."

Riddik sent his position and the link closed. Now all he had to do was hide Keria until help arrived. He checked his heavy needlegun and the two liberated thin guns. He didn't really like the thin guns. Propelling a charge of xithricite powder that was lethal to a Serco at ten metres range or less, it was rather inefficient at more than 30 metres. A secret police weapon, but beggars can't be choosers. He moved along the grease stained, well he hoped it was grease and dirt filled corridors, to a coffin motel and checked in with only a slightly raised eyebrow from the clerk at the unconscious person on the stretcher. A small extra donation to the clerk guaranteed their privacy for at least a day. Riddik ensured that Keria was as comfortable as she could be and placed himself in front of the door with the needle gun ready. What the hell was he to do now...

###

The UIT Counterinsurgency Team Alfa was all kitted out for heavy combat, with two members carrying the heavy neural laces that was the only known way of restraining Serco soldiers. Some would argue that shooting the arms and legs off would make the Serco incapable of resisting but that was because they had never seen a Serco use his teeth and body to kill a man. Which they had been known to do. The team hoped that the Serco would follow willingly, otherwise it could get really nasty; the team was eight highly trained and extensively boosted soldiers but that was not going to be enough if the two Serco decided to slug it out. And why the team leader had decided to use nerve gas pre-emptively.

The team leader received a message that the nerve gas had been pumped in and nodded to his security man. He inserted the code breaker and cracked the door code, withdrawing his gear immediately upon getting a green light. The two gyrocock-equipped point men smashed the door open, their weapons at the ready and

moved fast into the room, the two soldiers with neural laces following. They were surprised by the two Serco persons that were deeply concentrated on a game of Go, ignoring the soldiers completely.

"Don't move" one of the soldiers shouted nervously.

One of the Serco raised one finger as if to indicate that they should wait before exclaiming a victorious cry.

"Ha, I believe I have won. If I put the stone here I win, correct?"

He put a stone onto the board and looked up at the other Serco who nodded slowly and methodically.

"I believe you are right. Congratulations. Now, what do we do to the intruders?"

The two Serco turned their heads and looked at the two point men completely unafraid.

"Don't move" the soldier shouted again.

"Yes, yes we have heard you. We heard you fifteen minutes ago and we hear you now. Silent please, the Serco are speaking."

The two Serco exchanged information fast and agreed.

"So officers, where are we going?"

With the prospect of the Serco surrendering peacefully the UIT team relaxed slightly, ever so slightly. The troopers never noticed the heavy blade that spun through the air as if appearing out of pure vacuum, impacting with the heavy xithricite enforced point upon the full face mask of the left soldier with a neural lace, ignoring the plastic and rubber of the mask and slicing clean through the skin, muscles and bones of his face before stopping when the point hit the inside of the skull in the back of his head severing the central nerve routing and removing muscle control immediately. The other Serco moved up and towards the two gyro-rock-equipped soldiers and managed to push them both aside as they started firing, Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack, Boom-swoosh-Crack-fwomp-

Gung. One of the small deadly rockets impacted on the left shoulder of the Serco that threw the knife, severing the upper arm by exploding inside it. The Serco didn't even notice it, instead twisting his body backwards and grab his needle gun from behind the seat. The other Serco pushed the two point men into the last standing UIT trooper with a neural lace, toppling the three of them and jumped on top of them with a blood-curdling cry. One UIT trooper looked into the room over his pulse rifle and was rewarded for his efforts with a full set of twenty millimetres long and two wide samoflange darts that had been accelerated to more than 350m/s from the needle gun of the wounded Serco. The trooper's head made no resistance to the darts whatsoever, the helmet flying into the corridor empty except for the remains. The team leader swore and decided to escalate. He found his thermal grenade and primed it.

The Serco with the needle gun walked into the door entrance and looked into the corridor left and right. He shot the security man in the lower neck neatly severing the head from the body and changed aim to the petrified soldier that was pointing at the floor with his pulse rifle. The thermal grenade flew into the room and the Serco in the corridor grinned fiercely. He dropped the gun and grabbed the soldier, yanking him inside and put him on top of the grenade pinning him with his bulk. The soldier's eyes widened in fear, as he was eye-to-eye with the one armed berserker and even more when he realised what he was lying on. The grenade went off, scattering the trooper all over the room and taking a sizeable chunk out of the Serco as well. The UIT team leader peeked in and drew a clean bead upon he neck of the unscathed Serco. He fired a maximum charge pulse burst that impacted on the Serco's neck, blowing a fist-sized hole in his head. The Serco finished dismembering the soldier he was working on before turning around to face the leader. Another shot rang out, this time slightly under the nose and removing another fist-sized chunk of Serco. The Serco staggered slightly but kept advancing. The troop leader aimed carefully and fired the remaining charge into the same hole under the nose and succeeded in toppling the berserker. The team leader sank to the floor in exhaustion, dropping his rifle to the floor. He keyed the command centre and gave the all clear. The second team was just in the next corridor ready to move in. The team leader looked around at the remains of his men and crawled over to the group of three mangled bodies in the corner.

"Almost UIT, almost. Pretty good for human norms."

He turned and saw the one armed Serco with a large hole in his stomach and chest, swing the rifle down upon his head, impacting with terrible force. Darkness.

###

The room was empty of personal belongings, empty of any signs of the inhabitant, devoid of atmosphere. The eight standard uniforms in the closet, the meticulously clean desk and the neatly folded bed could have been found in any cubicle. Nothing indicated who or what she was. Precisely as the circumstances dictated her but not necessarily as she wanted it. Yarina called her cubicle home nonetheless; after all she was going to live here until her assignment was finished. And so far she had liked it, relished in the opportunity to do her part for the Itani people, enjoyed the challenges. But now it was getting personal, the one factor she could not control. She needed to get out, and soon too. She opened the secret compartment in her desk and activated the small beacon inside, telling her case officer that she needed to be contacted. Nothing to do but wait now.

#### **14. Grey space station**

Cat frowned, this dump was even worse than the Spartan quarters inside the roid in Itani space. It was slightly larger than the cubicle she used to have, but at least that had been clean. She tossed the linen on the covers and dumped her knapsack on the chair. She took the covers off and was disgusted by the large stains on the mattress; obviously it had been used by a self-employed liberal businesswoman. Cat threw the covers back on and went out into the washroom. At least it had been scoured clean, the metal surfaces discoloured and rusty but apparently clean. There was a harsh antiseptic smell in the air and Cat shut her olfactory senses off. So, this was home for now. She sighed mentally and wished that she was back at the hot steam bath in the barracks around Pyronis with her friends but it looked like she inadvertently had become an enemy of the state, or at least a part of the state. Her brainpal activated with an incoming signal. She acknowledged it and a small

holographic image of a grim reaper with a caption that said BERIA was projected on her retina.

"Are you comfortable yet? I know it is not the best, but it is secure."

She ordered her brainpal to switch the image into a sunflower with a big smile. That made her a bit more comfortable at least. Her own avatar was that of a small bald cat but she assumed that Beria translated the icon into something he wanted as she had done to his avatar.

"What do you want?"

"Straight and to the point. Well, it is not a social call anyway. I need you to join us in the briefing room in an hour. Your skills are needed. I'll send a station map with location for you. Remember your weapons, we are in Grey after all."

"I'll be there."

In her brainpal the image of the sunflower got burned by an immense flamethrower, thus ending the link with Beria. An evil looking bat flew towards her until it reached her brainpal's translator-sphere that turned it into a fat grey pigeon. The data package from Beria. She acknowledged the data package with a message of her own and walked in to find her guns. She had a hard time imagining who could harm her but Beria had been right so far.

###

Brix Servan tried to control his temper, which was pretty hard; he was furious at the UIT SWAT member that had just turned him away again. What the hell was he to do, he had to deliver the data pad he had received from his employer to the research facility on the BioCom station within an hour or the data was worthless. He had a reputation for always delivering on time, no matter what. Always on time. Apparently something major had happened since they had locked down access to the launch bay. He couldn't let that stop him, not with this kind of money at stake. He tried to dial his buddy in the police but

didn't get a connection before his third try. Which was strange, usually it worked extremely well inside the station.

"Brix, kinda busy right now buddy."

"I know but I need a favour. I need a favour badly and I need it now."

"I can't man, I am pulling guard. Some terrorist is on the run or something. Can't really talk about it either."

"I figured as much. I need to launch my X within the next twenty or lose a ton of cash."

"Can't help you Brix. I am stuck here and if I leave I am toast."

"Remember last month? I covered for you with that girl you picked up. And who paid for your room update?"

"Screw you Brix. Okay, but then we are even you hear? Bay sixteen passage Delta 4 in fifteen minutes. If you are not there at that time we are still even mate."

"Yada yada. You know we are, I'll even sweeten it for you with a bit of creds buddy."

"Fifteen."

"I'll be there."

###

Taerow walked in a daze from his room to the food plaza intent on finding some sugary foods. He had always had a sweet tooth but the last couple of days he had felt a craving that was almost impossible to satisfy. It had started around the same time that he woke up after the mission, along with the constant feeling of being watched, a constant feeling of something scraping on the inside of his skull. He grabbed a bowl of "Sugar-Coated-Honey-Bombs" and poured sugar and chocolate milk on top of it.

"Are you sure you have enough calories in that bowl?"

He whirled in surprise and shock when he heard the familiar voice.

"Bill, I thought you were dead?"

"Nah, the rumours of my death were vastly exaggerated. Although I had my doubts some times. How are you these days?"

"Tired. Dead tired."

"You certainly look tired mate. What have you been up to, still that research programme?"

"Can't really discuss it but yeah I am still on it. Even though I wish they would find someone else. And you?"

"I have been running a search and destroy mission in Metana for a week now. We believe that the Serco have a deep penetration team in place somewhere for raiding traders. I sure would like to get my neuts on one of them."

William smiled in anticipation of the kill. He grimaced as if remembering something unpleasant.

"Before that we were test rabbits on some nutcase project. Some social science idiot with an ear in High Command wanted us to do combat simulations with the whole squadron and then rigged the scenario to see what our responses would be when we realised that we couldn't damage the opponent but only be damaged ourselves. I hear that he has a hard time walking these days, something with a kneecap and a piece of metal piping."

He grinned like a schoolboy that just paint bombed the teacher's house after final exams. He looked down at the extreme sugary breakfast that Taerow was standing with and then down at his own very rare steak.

"Maybe if you ate something healthier you would be less tired."

Taerow looked at the steak and felt his stomach do a couple of flips.

"You still prefer to have the meat directly from the tenderiser I see. You ever heard about cooking food?"

William gasped in mock horror.

'What, and risk burning this fine meat? Never. Listen I need to go to my squad. I'll see you around, hear?"

Taerow nodded in agreement, let William clap him on the shoulder and poured some koffee into his sugar before walking over to sit alone as usual. Seemed that the secrecy surrounding the Omega was still as tight as ever.

###

The guard on duty in the most secret facility in Pyronis received the signal from the distress beacon and logged it as he was instructed. The beacon was from one of their teams in UIT space and it meant that the team was detected and on the run. The guard alerted a snatch team to launch a set of Warthog Mk II's with special recovery equipment and set course for Dau Senate. He then sent a coded signal to the two operatives' brainpals that the mission specific data should self-erase in case of capture. They were on their own if they were caught as they knew prior to the mission, but if they could just get outside of the station they would be picked up. Lady Serco was not known to toss resources away needlessly.

## **15. Escape**

Brix walked into the corridor and found his buddy waiting for him as planned. He smiled a big smile in greeting and spread his arms away from the sides to show that he was very happy to see him.

"Ha, I knew you could help me my friend, you always can."

The guard scowled at him for a second but his serious visage cracked into a smile instead.

"Damn you Brix, I can't be mad at you."

Brix did some slight of hand and produced a non-traceable cred stick that he held between two fingers.

"Good for me I think. I brought you a little something mate. Now, let us get to my ship, I am in a bit of a hurry."

The two men walked over to the sealed pressure door that unlocked when Brix's pall entered the security override. That was the last thing he ever did. The almost invisible bulge in the wall animated and an arm emerged carrying a heavy-duty xithricite combat knife that impacted on the back of his neck burying it to the hilt. Brix followed the arm to its logical conclusion and found that it was attached to the wall. He stared in fear as the wall illusion turned off and revealed a one-armed Serco.

"You will take me to your ship. Then you will fly me to my destination. Once there I will get off and you will live. Or I can just kill you here and do it myself. Choose norm."

Brix used around a quarter of a second to decide before croaking.

"Live, I want to live."

"Wise choice norm. Move out as you usually would, I will be right behind you. Do not try anything if you cannot see me, I assure you that you will at all times be within my lethal zone."

Brix nodded and shook with fear as the Serco once more disappeared into thin air. If he looked carefully he could see a slight blur outlining the Serco but decided that he didn't want to test the patience of someone obviously on the run. He opened the door and at the same time tried to open a line to the UIT internal security via his communications implant. No connection. He tried again with the same result. A message appeared in his implant.

"Stop trying to contact the authorities. I have complete control of your implant."

Brix stopped immediately, so that was how he had found them. They walked out into the launch bay towards the black and silver Atlas X that was ready for leaving. Brix entered the sixteen-digit code and the door slid open without a sound. The two UIT SWAT team members inside the Atlas fired their neural laces as soon as the door had opened, one catching Brix and instantly overloading his neural pathways, forcing all his muscles to instantly contract and then relax in half second intervals. The other lace partially hit the Serco, short-circuiting his skin's Guise invisibility and overloading his left side. He sneered at the two UIT troopers and brought the stolen plasma rifle up to bear on them when another set of laces impacted on him, covering him completely. He dropped the weapon and started bleeding massively from the fist-sized hole in his stomach and from the stump that indicated where his other arm had been. The remainder of the SWAT team de-cloaked before walking over to the Serco to treat his wounds and take him prisoner. One of the troopers showed him an explosive collar before putting it on around his neck and locking it. They then turned the neural laces off on both the Serco and Brix. The wounds on the Serco stopped bleeding immediately when he once more assumed control of his body and he stood up completely unaffected by the effect of the nets. Brix didn't have toughened neural pathways and remained lying in a foetal position, moaning softly with his bowels voided.

The Serco stood with his head high, pride shining in his eyes.

"You norms can torture me all you want, it will not help you at all. I demand to be set free."

"Listen freak, we would rather just have shot you so full of holes that nothing remained. Someone wants to see you and that is why you are still alive. So do everyone a favour and grab a nice warm cup of Shut the Fuck up or I'll make you."

The Serco smiled warmly at the enraged trooper before punching him straight across the room into the side of the

Atlas, cracking several ribs and landing him in a not very flattering position. The Serco immediately thereafter stopped and stuffed his remaining hand in his pocket to show that he was not going to fight on.

"I shut up when I feel like it norm."

###

Cat was completely lost. Even though she followed the suggested route she couldn't guess what was on the next level at all. She hoped that the Grey stations in general were better organised than the complete anarchy of Aeolus Trading Prefect. She hadn't seen any police or other signs of authority so far and she began to think that the side arm that Beria had told her to wear was a good idea. She moved into the elevator as it arrived, keying sub-level 66a and waited impatiently until it arrived. At sub-level 48 a pair of black clad men entered the elevator and positioned themselves opposite her. She ignored them but couldn't help noticing that one kept staring at her. She turned and faced him, her hand on the gun.

"What?"

He smiled at her.

"Catherine Plissensky, currently working for the Diplomatic Service. How funny, we were just discussing what to do if we met you."

"What, how do... You are GESTEBO."

The realisation hit her like a ton of bricks and she immediately opened a link to Beria.

"Indeed we are. If you will just follow nice and quietly to our ship and we can get the questioning finished and let you resume your obviously important duties?"

The lift arrived at sub-level 66a and the doors opened. She remembered her commander's last words, nobody walked

away from a GESTEBO questioning. She drew her gun and pointed it at the agent that had stared at her.

"Sorry, I don't think so."

She backed out of the elevator while keeping the agent covered. She squinted in wonder, why was he smiling like that? He moved towards her and she pressed the trigger. Nothing happened. She looked at the gun and saw the finger depressing the firing stud all the way down but no firing emanated from the muzzle. She ran a quick diagnostic and found out that she had no access to the weapon; as a matter of fact her implants were failing at an alarming rate. She turned to run. The other agent lifted a strange looking gun and fired at her back, hitting her between her shoulder blades. The two needles bit deep and the electricity fired long the wires to her naked flesh shorting her muscles. She hit the floor hard, convulsing in tact with the electricity, absolutely helpless.

###

The engineer rose from his desk and shouted in victory. He looked sheepishly around at the faces that had turned towards him before sitting down again.

"What happened?"

He looked up at the beautiful aide to Raewon that was leaning over his chair to see what he was doing. He blushed as she was bent exactly so far that he could see... He looked away quickly and focused on the screen, which was pretty hard with the smell of her perfume teasing him and making him remember what he saw seconds ago.

"I have found a solution to at least some of the problem miss. If the brain scans of Captain Taerow are correct I believe that we can employ a filter directly to his brain and shield him from the damaging effects of the Omega shield. But I m not sure it is easily duplicated or if it can be implanted on Captain Taerow only."

"You did good Alfred, now send the results to Raewon please. Then we can act on it."

She patted him on the shoulder. He blushed even more, she used his first name. He was going to show her that he was up to the task.

###

Yarina smiled internally even as she kept her outwards appearance calm and detached. Men, they were so easy to motivate if you knew your tricks. Maybe this would solve Utia's problem and allow him to relax again. Captain Taerow, she corrected herself. She was losing her detachment from the subject and the assignment, a sign that she needed to be moved away from the case. She hoped her case officer would contact her soon before she did something stupid.

## 16. Favours

Riddik was slowly turning the situation over inside his head and came up with a blank every time. He did not see how he could ever come back to SCAR, and he couldn't see how Keria could either. How he was supposed to keep them both happy in grey he had no clue, but he was willing to do whatever it took. He just hoped that Keria would accept not being a part of the Serco people anymore but he knew that it would be a hard one to swallow for his wife. She had always been the patriotic of the couple, the one that was willing to defend the honours of Lady Serco against any and all injustices. He would put money on her surrendering to GESTEBO the second she awoke actually, and he would do just about anything to avoid that. His personal brainpal received a message from an unknown source. He received it in his auxiliary memory.

"Serco, we know you are hiding. Why does not matter right now, we need your help badly."

Riddik considered ignoring it for a second before realising that whomever called him had the resources to find out where he was.

"Who are you and what do you need?"

"I am working for the Serco Diplomatic Corps and I need you to help one of my agents."

"Why would I help you?"

"Because I can help you and your wife. Please Riddik, the clock is ticking."

Riddik didn't consider the implications too much. He had heard about the Diplomatic Corps before, and the fact that they knew that he was here with Keria and hadn't done anything about it made him listen at least.

"I am kinda stuck here, but tell me what it is."

"On the level below yours, 66a, two GESTEBO agents have taken one of our agents prisoner against our will. I am sending you the posit date now. We need you to take them out and set her free. She goes by the name of Catherine or Cat. Please hurry."

Riddik received the position, closed the link and hefted his guns; maybe help was coming from an unlikely source after all. He closed his outside connections to his brainpal and exited the coffin motel ready and alert. This was going to deepen the hole he had dug for himself but hopefully he could still reach up and lift Keria out of it.

###

Brix was shaking, from fear, from cold and from the shocks he had been subjected to since he ran into the Serco. This tribunal that was facing him didn't put him the least at ease either; the three persons in uniforms with no rank markers had grilled him as he kept repeating his story again and again. The middle man turned to his fellows.

"I don't think we can get more out of this human offal. Citizen Brix Servan, this tribunal has found you guilty in malicious

interference with state business, disregarding safety regulations, obstruction of police business and smuggling. Any of which are very serious crimes. We have however found you innocent of aiding a known terrorist, the murder of police constable Roin Bleave and the attempted bribery of said constable. This tribunal does not believe that you acted like you did out of desire to harm either the UIT or any specific persons in UIT. This precludes the death sentence for you but this tribunal does not believe that it has to be lenient in the punishment regardless. Citizen Brix Servan, you are hereby sentenced to permanent exile from UIT space. Furthermore you will be sold to a lifetime of hard labour with the Xang Xi penal station in Sedina where you will work the Xithricite mines for the rest of your wretched life. Officers, take him away."

Brix swallowed hard but only heard "no death" and "take him away". He let the two giant military policemen drag him out of the room and over to the Xang Xi guards. Only then did he realise that he was about to be joining a pitiable group of lowlifes in one of the most unforgiving prisons in space. He started mumbling his innocence, that he had not done anything bad, that he could pay for it, that he had connections. In the end they just gagged him for some silence on the long flight.

###

"Uncle Kassad, so nice to see you after such a long time."

Yarina bowed deep to show her respect for the black haired gaunt man with the prominent beaked nose that sat in a privacy booth inside "Clogging of the Arteries", the famous Verasi specialty restaurant on Tellus station. He half raised and showed her where to sit with a sweep of his arm before seating himself again. He leaned back and allowed the waitress to take Yarina's order, looking slightly bored with half closed eyes that nonetheless seemed to look in all directions at once. As soon as the waitress had left he pulled a small holodisc player out of his pocket and placed it on the table. He activated it and a rose showed above the device, spinning slowly while being sprinkled with droplets that were bathed in golden yellow light.

"Yarina, we are clear. You have a problem?"

"Thank you for arriving so swiftly uncle."

He waved his hand and shook his head in denial.

"No, you needed me and so I naturally came as fast as I could. We care a lot for you. After all, you are one of our most reliable assets."

She waited for some seconds before answering. She knew that she was an asset, she had even agreed to it but she didn't like him reducing her to a thing like that. It was probably his way of distancing himself from becoming too personal with his "assets" even though it hurt a bit.

"Yes uncle. I want to either be taken off the current case or have some slightly changed rules of observation."

"What happened my dear?"

"I have found myself becoming emotionally involved with a part taker in the test set-up. I cannot distance myself from said person anymore and either need to be allowed to continue with the slightly changed rules of observation that I am allowed to care for the test subject or be taken off the case."

"Care, that is a large word. Are you in love with this person?"

"No uncle, I do not love him. However I no longer feel that I can be completely ignorant to the damages he is causing himself to continue the experiment even though it is of vital importance to the people."

"I am assuming that we are talking about the test pilot here. Will you be able to liquidate him if need be? That is basically all I need to be certain of."

"Uncle, I am fully able to liquidate him if absolutely needed. I am not sure that I can safely distinguish when that time has arrived."

Kassad leaned forward and rested his chin on his hands, his elbows on the table. He smiled a predatory smile that never quite reached his eyes.

"I think that we can continue with the slightly changed rules. The mere fact that you ask for guidance in this matter shows that you have been taught well and that your judgement is still fully intact. Personally I think that you can get more information out of the project by being closer. Remember the old proverb; keep your friends close and your enemies closer. You can use that here as long as you do not become too involved with him. Make him love you, be careful that you keep your feelings to your self. Do we have an agreement sister?"

"Yes uncle, I shall continue to serve as I have so far."

"Very well, I trust you then. I assume that you want to run along now instead of having a boring meal with me. You are dismissed Yarina. Service to the state."

"Glory to the race Uncle. Akan guide us."

Yarina got up and left for the station main deck. She felt horrible, she had actually thought she would be pulled from the case but he could see why she hadn't been. This did not make her tasks any easier but she had always known that protecting the Itani people against the will of themselves would be harder than anything she had ever thought off.

###

Fletholm nodded to the twin security guards inside the room and sent them outside. He looked with no little fear at the heavily battle damaged Serco that was locked in place with several neural restraining devices. The almost feral viciousness was painted as a primitive snarl that showed that the Serco would and could still kill you in this state. Fletholm shook his head in awe and wonder, awe that it had taken them three full squads to get this one Serco soldier into custody, wonder that it had only taken three squads.

"Vaso Nulfheim, you have perpetrated several crimes that each are serious enough to destroy your current form and banish you from UIT space forever. That goes for your buddy as well although we can only destroy his brainplant with the recent memories; we can certainly ban him forever. I recognise that you have been working for the Serco Diplomatic Corps but so far we have received no extradition requests even though we have informed the Serco state that we have you boys in our custody. As a matter of fact they say you do not exist as citizens."

Vaso grinned fiercely at the slightly corpulent UIT officer before spitting on the floor in front of him.

"If you have come to gloat you have come to the wrong place norm. I told the interrogators and I tell you the same. Let me go and I will spare your life. If you do not I will be back and kill you and your family all the way to third cousin."

Fletholm didn't even flinch. Instead he grabbed a chair and seated himself with the back in front of him.

"Listen oversized toaster, you do not scare me the least. So cut the crap and let us talk about how you can help me helping you. Capiche? Or did they remove your intelligence when they punched extra muscles into that dumb head of yours?"

Vaso looked at the man and considered.

"Speak your business norm."

Fletholm steeled himself mentally; this was going to be tricky to say the least.

## **17. Target acquired**

Riddik had taken the emergency access to the level below to avoid the lift, the level where he assumed that the GESTEBO agents were right now handling their prisoner. He opened the door as silently as he could, cursing the maintenance crew for not oiling the hinges when they creaked ever so slightly. He

moved out into the corridor, needlegun and thin gun at the ready, moving as silently as the metal grille floor and his heavy pilot's boots allowed. He resisted the temptation to peek around the corner. His opponents were Serco after all, they would spot him immediately and he could not afford that. He heard the clacking of metal in the corridor; the sound of heavy handcuffs and knew that the GESTEBO agents were getting ready to move. He triggered a reflex booster and flooded his system with adrenaline, feeling his heartbeat accelerate and his focus narrow. He took a deep breath and swung himself out into the corridor both weapons up and actively targeting. Riddik counted four; this was going to be interesting. One of the dark clad agents was facing him with a thin gun readied with another moving towards a side corridor for cover.

"Do not interfere, this is.."

The deep boom of the needlegun and the sharp crack of the thin gun interrupted the agent who tried to get his gun onto Riddik even as the accelerated xithricite dust punched a fist sized hole clean through the head of the agent right below his nose. The shot from the needlegun hit the agent that was going for cover in the chest, throwing him to the floor. Riddik dropped the thin gun and pulled the other while firing once more with the needlegun at the same target. This time the Serco agent didn't move making him an easier target and Riddik placed the swarm of lethal darts in the face of the agent, slicing the skin and muscles off before crushing the skull beneath. The two other agents were now going after their guns and Riddik started moving evasively towards them while aiming for another agent. The sharp crack of thin guns rang out, one agent getting hit in the abdomen and bending over from the damages while both agents missed Riddik by inches. The other agent re-aligned and fired once more, this time hitting Riddik on the left shoulder, fracturing his arm and making him drop the thin gun. Riddik charged, shouting a combat roar and ignoring the thin gun in the agent's hand. The gamble almost paid off with the agent taking a single step back while steadying his gun. Riddik looked directly into the barrel and as time slowed to a veritable standstill, he could see the agent curl his finger to fire. "I am dead. Keria, I love you, I tried" went through his head as the thin gun belched forth its deadly load. He did not feel but

noticed the charge rip through his cheek and tear his ear off before he impacted upon the smaller man with all of his mass. Riddik hit him elbow first and immediately started punching and kicking the agent with all his force. Suddenly the agent went down, his legs removed under him and Riddik followed impacting on his chest with his knee, feeling the crack of splintered ribs in the chest of the agent reverberate through his legs. The agent flailed at Riddik with his arms inefficiently and Riddik moved blocked the hits with his destroyed left arm while going for the twelve-inch combat knife in his boot. The woman on the floor delivered a massive kick to the side of the agent's head, stunning him enough that Riddik could grab the knife and punch it up through the chin of the agent and sever his nerve connections from his brain to his body. The agent stopped flailing.

"Look out behind you."

Riddik rolled to the left and threw the knife reflexively as he saw the shadow behind him. The wounded agent he had shot before was standing with his thin gun pointing at Riddik and the knife hit him through that hand and equally through the gun rendering it worthless. The agent tried pulling the trigger several times wondering at the lack of effect while Riddik grabbed for his own needlegun and pointed it at the agent's stomach where the thin gun had already made a hole. With no remorse whatsoever he pulled the trigger firing a full burst at less than two metres distance ripping the agent in half. Riddik got up and walked over to the remaining agent alive and shot him in the neck.

"Who are you?"

Riddik considered giving a clever answer but couldn't come up with one with all the combat juices running through his head.

"I am Riddik, former member of SCAR, former member of the Serco Skycommand. Someone named Beria sent me."

The woman got up on her feet and shoved her hands towards him.

"Care to remove these please?"

He nodded and started taking the handcuffs off. They were the new bioprint type and required a live agent to remove. He would have to smash them to get them off. He was just about to grab his combat knife again when he received an incoming signal.

"Riddik, send me a posit. I am on the way."

Riddik smiled at the way Fate seemed to make everything happen at the same time and sent a position to Lebermac.

"I can't get them off painlessly, but someone is on his way that can. You just sit tight miss."

"Cat, I am Cat. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Hey, thanks for helping out there. I thought I would be dead for sure."

He grinned while remembering the surprise on the agent's face as he missed from less than a metre and even more when Riddik impacted on him.

"You know you have a hole right through your left side of the skull right?"

"I've had worse. Given time it will heal, it always does."

Riddik sat down; he needed a bit of a rest. The combat drugs were slowly being used up and his body started sending damage status to his brainpal. He smiled broadly, he was most certainly messed up but he would live.

###

"I do not see how that would work Alfred, how can we persuade his brain to ignore his body?"

The engineer looked down at his feet before looking up at the medical staff officer that was sitting leaned back in his chair.

"As I see it there are two ways of doing it. But I may be mistaken; I am merely a neuro-interface specialist. One is to use a Serco specially enhanced cyborg body, the other is to have the mind essentials disconnected from the body. There are pro's and con's to both solutions with the con's to the cyborg body primarily being the lack of available subjects, and the con's to the other being fairly obvious."

"Can't we just install him in another clone when he is finished fighting?"

"And when might that be Sir? A month? A year? As far as I have read from the most up-to-date journals from Miracle Outpost, the mind essential become adjusted to not having a host within a month and even rejects own-gene clones afterwards. Essentially we would then have a mind that would be unable to have a body Sir."

"I see, so two weeks would perhaps be a limit we could work with? How about continued replacements, have they shown any signs of damage?"

The medical staff officer cleared his throat.

"Sir, we have some experience with re-grafting minds in clones, even gene different clones. However it shows that a lot of neural damage is created every time. We estimate that even with the best surgical techniques we lose around 0.2% capacity and that is before any other damage to the brain and brain stem. That is good enough for the brain to rewire and effectively only affects a very few. With the current operator of the Omega we have however neural loss of 2-4% before transplanting and we fear that it will double during the transplant."

"Why is that?"

"Well, from the brain scans it looks like some new growths inside the brain are taking all the spare repair capacity."

"What? Are you telling me he has a tumour?"

"Not quite, we expect it is the Omega that needs the space. Thus the test person is adjusting to the needs of the Omega at the expense of his own neural hardware so to speak."

Raewon nodded and scribbled a note on his pad.

"To sum it, the subject has adjusted to the Omega. The subject has suffered brain damage as a consequence of the trials. The subject needs to be physically removed from his own failing body with more brain damage to follow. Gentlemen, these options are not very good but I see no alarm bells ringing, I see no reason to stop. Alfred, see if we can get a Serco cyborg body in working condition, the medical crew will clone a number of bodies and prepare a brain swap. The test pilot flies again in three days. Dismissed."

###

Vaso entered the plain grey Atlas, nodding to the fat human norm that had escorted him out to it.

"Commander, I'll make sure my superiors get the information. On behalf of the Lady, I thank you."

"Well Vaso, if it wasn't for that permanent look of distaste on your face at looking at me I would almost believe that you could be counted for a human."

Fletholm nodded in return and turned to walk into the station. Inside his head there was a small voice that shouted for the extraction of the Serco's spleen by the most unpleasant means possible, that is if he even had a spleen, but the harsh realities of life dictated otherwise. He needed to get the information to the Serco and he needed them to get it fast. Extradition of the agent with a small extra package from himself to the head of the Diplomatic Service could cover the trails from leading back to UIT and maybe to a restoring of the MAD doctrine. Back to making dollops of money, back to him having time to sleep and see his wife now and again. Now he only had one particular nasty piece of work left before letting the ball roll and lean back to see others do the dirty work.

## 18. The enemy?

Aeolus Trading Prefect resonated like a giant bell from the impact of Lebermac's Orion Convoy Guardian. He had aimed for the docking bay but missed by only a couple of feet. Okay, so he had missed by almost two hundred metres but at least he had hit the station, which was a wonder in his current stage of inebriety. He had moved towards Helios as fast as he could even finding his escort ship to be a bit faster but that had proven to be a bad decision. After launching from Bractus Stronghold he had found the stashed bottle of Teh Killa but recognising the importance of his mission he had put the bottle back untouched. Until he hit Odia and the bottle had somehow re-appeared in his hand, the top un-screwed and a quarter of it disappeared. He had looked for the capsule in vain for at least three seconds and decided that it would be a shame to toss the liquid now he couldn't store it, gulping it down instead. He grimaced as the oily taste of the synthetic liquid covered his mouth and grabbed his hip flask to rinse the evil taste away. Three healthy gulps later he had finished the flask of Helio Mists and the oily unpleasant taste had disappeared unfortunately along with his depth perception. That was the reason his ship was now a metallic smear along the side of the station and why the recovery service had to retrieve him in his pod. Fortunately he had tried it before and was quickly sent on his way. He rummaged around in his pockets and found a "Sobr-M-Up" pill that he downed along with a swig from a bottle of "Aeolus Finest Rhum" that he had appropriated from one of the rescue crew somehow. He requested a position from Riddik and got it, sub-level 66a. Why the hell did he want to meet up down there, the armpit of the station? Lebermac sauntered over to the lift; after all he was in no hurry at all. Wouldn't do to arrive before the bottle was empty.

The lift was a bit too fast and he had only just emptied the bottle when the doors opened. A familiar stench filled his nostrils but the pill had not yet flushed the ethanol from his body and so he couldn't place it. He walked out into the corridor and turned left towards Riddik's position. A lot of red liquid was smeared along one wall and it slowly dawned upon Lebermac that it was blood he could smell. Cautious now he

turned the corner and saw the three black clad persons in various degrees of deadness, Riddik against one wall and a single person on the floor that aimed something right at him. He reacted and pulled back instantly avoiding getting his head blown off by the shot of darts that instead impacted on the wall on the opposite side. Lebermac cursed and shouted.

'Riddik, what the hell is this for a welcome? I have crossed oceans of boring space to be here and then I get shot? I could understand a shot of tequila but not a shot of darts.'

###

Riddik opened his eyes again when the gun went off and heard Lebermac shout. He had been dozing slightly, his brainpal deciding that it would be best for him with the damages he had sustained. He saw Cat with his heavy needlegun in her hands pointing it towards the lifts.

"Hey Cat, belay that shooting."

"It was an Itani Riddik."

"Yes, I know. I asked him to come here."

The shock was almost palpable when Cat replied.

"But he is Itani Riddik. He is the enemy, they torture our kind to death, they destroy our sanity with their mind tricks."

"Cat, don't believe everything the Bureau of Righteous Thoughts tells you. Most Itani are decent people and this particular one is my friend even though he is a bit rough around the edges. Besides, your own kind was just about to interrogate you which would probably end with a plasma bolt in the back of your head, no?"

Cat looked at Riddik in amazement, she had never considered that the Itani were people and as such capable of all the same emotions and feelings that she had. She nodded and put the gun down.

"Leebbs, it is okay. Just had to convince this young lady that not all Itani are child eating monsters."

Lebermac peered around the corner and smiled at Cat.

"Where I am from, we are taught that all Serco suck the brains of living humans for sustenance. Took me a while to figure out otherwise. Hi, I am Lebermac."

Cat nodded and moved a bit to the side; apparently she was not entirely convinced.

"Crap Riddik, I thought it was Keria that needed help?"

Riddik smiled and grimaced from the pain that particular movement caused.

"It was when I was asked to help the young lady here."

"They were only three of them, you must have lost your edge."

Riddik pointed to the side corridor where the remaining corpse was sitting against the wall, headless. Lebermac nodded and produced a hip flask that he took a large gulp from before kneeling down to the handcuffs around Cat's hands.

"Right, I'll get these off and then we get Riddik to one of my pals. I need a location for Keria too mate, then I can send someone to get her there too, okay? I am pretty sure he can fix you and the missus even though he never graduated from med school. On the other hand, he is cheap."

The handcuffs released their grip on her hands as if by magic and Cat got up to collect the weapons and ID tags from the agents. She finished and turned to Lebermac.

"So, where are we going? I need to inform my boss."

Lebermac looked at Riddik who merely nodded.

"Tell your boss we are going to Dr. Nick Esquicilante, he can meet us there."

###

Kassad slipped away from the station as unnoticed as he had arrived boosting for the 3k-jump mark immediately. He needed to find someone to replace Yarina fast and he was not really all that sure he had anyone that could. At least her schooling had been good enough for her to realise when she became a liability instead of an asset and warn him in advance. He jumped to an unmarked location and from there jumped randomly seven times before powering his ship down to passive sensors only. He waited the full thirty minutes that the manual demanded before jumping a new set of three random jumps that ended with him jumping to the wormhole that was the closest guarded secret of the Brotherhood of Akan. The wormhole led into a cull de sack or at least they had not yet found another wormhole in the system. That enabled the brotherhood to keep their presence a secret not only for the Serco, but also for the Itani. Not all Itani were of the same radical opinions as the brotherhood after all, and the brotherhood did not hold evil will against them for that. In the end they would be saved from the Serco whether they wanted to or not.

###

Vaso was ejected into space and abandoned by the ship that immediately burned hard for the 3-k mark and jumped back to the safety of monitored space. The intense cold of nothing bit hard on the skin causing extreme discomfort but not as bad as the pain he felt on the raw ends of his wounds. He had his eyes closed; they were the only part of him that could not take direct vacuum for prolonged periods but was scanning in the entire electromagnetic spectrum for his new ride. After five minutes he began doubting whether or not the bloody UIT had dumped him in the wrong sector displaying their incompetence in a new and for him lethal way. He could feel his core temperature sink to below thirty degrees and activated the small emergency power source that would heat his vitals for around twenty minutes. After that it was a losing game for him and he would slowly become a large meatcicle ending with his brain freezing after about thirty minutes of exposure. He

stopped the blood flowing through his lower extremities and wiggled his toes for the last time. They were not essential after all, but he kinda liked them. The radar energy that hit him after a further five minutes almost made him open his eyes and shout with joy but survival ensured he kept as still as before. He felt the jolt of the ship scooping him up like a crate of Aquean ore and waited for the hold to re-pressurize before opening his eyes and taking a deep breath.

"You failed Vaso. You were caught."

Vaso searched for the voice in vain and realised that the person speaking was not present.

"I have something that needs to go directly to Diplomatic Services immediately."

The door to the inside of the ship opened and two heavily armoured and armed marines stepped in followed by Asteroth himself.

"This better be good if you expect it to save your skin son."

"Not only my skin Sir, but that of Arhem too."

Vaso opened his prisoner coverall and drew out two packages, one with a bio-contamination label on it.

"This is the brainpal of Arhem Sir, complete with his last memories. It appears that it is only slightly damaged but accessible. The other package is to you from commander Fletholm himself. He was adamant that only you were allowed to get the package."

Asteroth ignored the bio-labelled package and took the other. He opened it and shook the single mem-crystal out.

"When was your latest mem-storage that we have Vaso?"

"I believe it was two weeks ago Sir. We submitted one to Silia and I am assuming that she sent it to you."

Asteroth nodded and smiled.

"Perfect, that allows us to clean up this mess completely."

He turned and walked out of the door with Vaso following him with his eyes all the way. The two marines levelled their heavy plasma beams at Vaso.

"I see. So be it, Hail Lady Serco."

The marines fired the heavy plasma bolts into the torso of Vaso, vaporising the man from the neck down. One of them then used the stock to crack the skull open and extract Vaso's brainpal before firing a plasma shot into the remains vaporising that too. The two brainpals were handed over to Asteroth who smiled at the marines before heading up on the flight deck. If the data was as good as the late Vaso had said it was he would ensure that the two boys were given a new chance but without the trauma of having been defeated and captured. The two-week memory loss was not too much to sacrifice for operational security after all. He would get all the data stored in their brainpals and then destroy them. They would never know and neither would anybody else but him. Well maybe Fletholm but he would also know what had happened to Vaso and Arhem. Otherwise he would not have sent the brainpal along.

## **19. Beria**

Asteroth finished uploading the brainpals to his own system and stored their memories for further interrogation. He then took the mem-crystal from commander Fletholm and inserted it in the small data port behind his left ear alert for any forms for attack programs. Instead a simple rundown of the facts regarding the Phantom ship appeared with a position of the assumed command centre. Asteroth realised the importance of the data and switched into command mode opening a direct interface with the commander of the joint Serco intelligence services, Marshal Tuttle. The immense black egg that crackled with lightning energy appeared on the horizon inside Asteroth's brainpal and the translator software immediately replaced it with the fat spider it was programmed to.

"Speak"

"I have the target for Operation Uranus."

"I see. Send the data and I shall immediately take action."

"Slight problem boss, I am in kinda a fix here."

"What do you want this time Asteroth?"

Asteroth sent a picture of mock horror from his own slug like avatar.

"What, as if I always want something? Well, now that you ask I have a couple of things really. I'll send them with the data."

"Agreed. Ready your teams and standby for orders to go."

Asteroth severed the link and alerted his strike teams to be ready within five minutes. They had been ready for a week now except for the last pilot. The favour he just asked should take care of that as well as a couple of other things. He sent a message to Beria and informed him of the situation expecting him to work his usual magic.

###

Taerow got up from the chair slowly and stood on uneasy legs.

"And you are saying that it will only get worse doc?"

"Yes Utia, the necrotic patches on your internal organs are slowly but steadily growing. We expect that your body will fail within a month with minor fallouts along the way. As a matter of fact I would like for you to start dialysis tomorrow to take some load off your kidneys and liver. We can ready a gene clone for you and insert your self into it along the way but I really believe that we need to work with your mind as well. The new growths inside your brain seems to impact massively on your parasympathetic nervous system with the body suffering as a consequence."

"So basically I am going to be swapped again and again as long as I work the Omega?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact I think it would be in your interest for as long as you work with the Omega that you do not have a host body but rather just work it as a mind."

"That is why you are you and I am me, doc. I'll hold on to a host body for now thank you. I am flying again in two days, can you make the swap after the flight?"

"Not a gene clone, but we have a generic clone or even a foreign host body for you. Only temporarily off course."

Taerow sighed, this was not how he had envisioned his career in the Itani Defence Force when he signed up but he had also signed a pact that said he would do whatever was needed.

"Very well, I expect I can just as well go on a drinking binge since this body will be dumped in a week. And here I was getting attached to it."

He tried a smile but didn't succeed, instead getting hit even harder by the sinking feeling that he was about to submit himself to yet another bout of combat with the Omega in the back of his mind. Maybe death would not be as bad in comparison.

###

Beria entered the consultancy with two very large Serco that were carrying a stretcher between them with Keria on top of it. The consultancy was sparsely inhabited with almost half of it containing stacks of paper and books in a glorious chaos. The single glass door that lead further into the office was closed with a sign proclaiming "Surjery In Progrez" written in bad handwriting fastened with tape to the handle. Beria shook his head, of all the quacks they could have gone to this one was particularly inept. He walked over and opened the door not really expecting anything. He was still surprised when he saw Dr. Nick and Lebermac sit in two chairs side by side each with

a bottle of Teh Killa playing "Roid Bumpers 4" on the large medical diagnostics screen on the end wall quite ignoring Riddik who was slowly being stitched up by Cat using what skill she retained from boot camp. She saw Beria enter and rose.

"Sir, you have no idea how glad I am that you are here. I think Riddik here has some neurological damage that I am not skilled enough to repair."

Beria ignored her plea and walked over in front of Riddik. He extended his hand and they clasped wrist in the warriors greeting.

"I have your wife here along with a medical team. I owe you my thanks for rescuing Cat here and I am willing to pull some strings to allow you back in the embrace of Our Lady again."

"You can have her, I am done with Serco. My wife on the other hand will probably want to go back to join Our Ladies military but I am out of it."

"That is a sad thing to hear but I hope you will come back to the people after you have tried not to be a member. The orders for Keria's immunity from GESTEBO are moving through as we speak but I am afraid we can nothing to the SCAR command in that regard."

Riddik nodded slowly as if he was considering a reply but didn't. Beria turned to Cat and handed her a mem-crystal.

"Your orders Cat. You are in a hurry so leave Riddik and move along. We have the remaining GESTEBO members under observation and they should pose no problem. Dismissed."

Cat received the crystal and inserted it in her brainpal before nodding to Riddik and leaving. Beria turned to the two very drunk persons in the comfy chairs.

"If any of you break my station-wide record I am going to let my bodyguards break all of your bones starting with the pelvis."

He nodded to Riddik and walked out of the room. He had business to do.

###

Ruteli Vielio docked his Vulture Mk III towards Tellus Research with the usual care. The computer logged the time since he had last docked for work and alerted the head of security while asking for a DNA scan. Ruteli put his hands into the machine and allowed it to take the skin sample that was needed to determine his identity. It came up clean and welcomed him back to work before releasing his arms again. Ruteli received a summons immediately after he entered the station but ignored it instead moving directly over to the launch bay where he knew a special Valkyrie was held. The two guards on duty greeted him, they knew him well, and allowed him to pass into the area. He considered his options and decided for the easiest solution. He turned and shot the two guards in the back of the head with his silenced handgun before walking over to the two cowering technicians at the Valkyrie.

"Give me the launch codes."

He pointed his gun at the head of the youngest technician and looked at the elder. Not getting a response he fired, blowing the rear portion of the man's head away. He pointed to the other technician.

"Choose now."

The man closed his eyes and Ruteli acknowledged the choice with another slug. A klaxon went off in the bay and the blast door behind him closed.

"Intruder, put down your weapon and surrender peacefully. We wish you no harm."

Ruteli smiled and decided for option two. He took the large thermal device he had in his backpack and tossed it into the cockpit while activating it with a ten second delay. He then looked up at the camera that was observing him.

"We, the Movement for Rights for the Deceased protest about the misuse of government funds. Long live the revolution, long live MRD."

Ruteli jumped up into the pilot's seat, took the gun up to his head and pulled the trigger. Mere seconds after that the thermal charge went off inside the cockpit reducing it to melted plastic and fused wires in seconds with the fire burning everything organic inside including the remains of the corpse that had been Ruteli once.

###

William Cutting tossed his Valkyrie-X in yet another ever-expanding search spiral searching for the Serco presence in the nearby roid field. His squadron had been searching for them the last two weeks but so far had come up short. The extended range ship scanner that was equipped instead of the middle flare launcher made the job possible but did nothing to make it less boring. A set of hive bots appeared and he mentally wrote the sector off as a dead end. No matter how crazy the Serco were, he didn't think that they would make a base within a system with Hive activity. Bored beyond comprehension he turned his Valkyrie around to engage the two Hive bots, one Dentek and one Kannik miner. Approaching in a slow barrel roll designed to foil the bot's targeting computer he noticed the sluggishness of the bots before slagging them with a torrent of accelerated neutrons. The Kannik dropped a CPU and he scooped it up into the cargo hold. You never knew if it might come in handy. He frowned at his mission but realising the importance he soldiered on and jumped to the next sector.

## **20. MRD**

Alhambra, the second largest city on Eo was a rather rich city with only the parts on the eastern side of the river Granada in various states of disrepair. Originally created as a factory area to fabricate concrete for the growing population on Eo, it had been rendered obsolete by the advent of nano bot building and was abandoned until it would be useful to use the city again.

That time was not close and the buildings were mostly allowed to decompose and rust. Some of them had been taken over by people who could not afford to live in the city proper, people who distrusted the government and people who wanted to stay away from the attention of the city police.

Within an hour of the attack on the specially modified Valkyrie the Special Weapons Anti Terror team of Alhambra, surrounded the building that had been originally built for the manufacturing of steel girders and now taken over by a small group of people that called themselves the Movement for Rights for the Deceased. The SWAT team had called on everyone since they didn't know how much opposition they would meet and had moved in with extreme force. The six confused and vomiting people that they pulled out of the teargas-filled building provided no resistance at all and the team leader handed the prisoners over to the Itani State Police. At least that was what they called themselves; in reality it was a specialised branch of the counter-intelligence service that dealt with extraction of mental information. It was not a popular department, the process was guaranteed deadly to the subject and was only used in matters of utmost State importance. Like how the hell MRD had found information on the Omega project, especially how they had found information that allowed them to sabotage the project and set it on hold for two weeks.

###

Green text on black background.

".... noinput.parameterlocked.contactextern.override"

Silence.

"Init.Entit.Keria.Default"

"Enter.Code"

"Init.Entit.Keria.Full"

Light, dim as seen through closed eyelids with the small flashes of light that was provided by synapses firing

erroneously or hard radiation impacting on the nerve endings. But light, different from the complete darkness of unawareness that was just moments before her brainpal was told to wake her gently. The slow rhythmic sound that was halfway felt as well as heard slowly manifested itself as her own breathing. She opened her eyes to the sight she wanted to see more than anything else; Riddik.

"Hi babe."

She smiled and reached her arms up towards him and received a fierce hug in return. She pushed him back after some seconds and touched his face with her fingertips as gently as she could tracing the stitches on his cheek.

"What happened baby?"

"Long story. It ends with us being here and me no longer welcome in Serco space at least for a while."

Keria noticed the torn and flossed fabric where his SCAR rank insignia had been and looked at him questioningly.

"Not important, you are back with us now and that is all that matters."

Riddik turned to the neural interface technician and nodded a curt awkward nod in thanks. The lock that Keria had on her brainpal could only be unlocked by the commander of SCAR and herself. It was installed to prevent vital information to fall into the hands of the Itani in case of capture but it had kept her in a state of coma that had resisted all normal revival techniques. The interface technician had used some special Diplomatic Service program that didn't exist officially and after some work with the brainpal he had persuaded it to wake in default mode to allow Keria to enter the code and wake up. Riddik took the binder on the table next to Keria and handed it to the technician.

"I believe you have your orders here. Thank you buddy, I owe you one."

The technician took the binder and after nodding to Keria as well, he left the room.

Keria noticed the noise in the room and sat up to identify where the roaring came from. The left person looked back over his shoulder and winked to her before returning his attention to the large screen. He took a large swig from a bottle and grabbed the controls to play on. She rolled her eyes and looked back at Riddik.

"Baby, you brought Leebbs? You better tell me how we got into so much trouble."

###

The Itani ship jumped out and Lothion turned to the duty officer.

"Sir, we have clear space again. Do you want to retrieve the bot shells?"

The Serco marine lieutenant shook his head slowly and grabbed another piece of jerky that he scoffed like a starving man.

"Nah, maybe it is a trap. We'll stay low and get some other shells. The only thing that matters is that the Itani missed us completely even after snooping for hours and hours."

He emptied the bag into his mouth and tossed the empty remains into the recycle bin wiping his hands on his uniform. He grinned a meaty grin to the passive sensor operator.

"Time for lunch, don't you think? I'll send some down to you. Good job Loth."

Lothion smiled and returned to his duties, closing his eyes once more to concentrate on the information fed directly into his visual centre. Food could wait; after all he did not have the immense bulk that the EVA marine lieutenant had to provide fuel for.

###

Beria finished the brief and looked around at the soldiers. Even though they were all clad in identical brown flight suits Beria could identify what their jobs were just by looking at them. The massive EVA marines, the slender fighter pilots, the stout pathfinders and the ones that passed as human norms. Soon a lot of them would be dead but with typical youthful self-delusion, they all expected that to happen to the mate next to them. Beria remembered vaguely how that had felt and grimaced remembering the times he had been one of them. Especially remembering all his buddies that had been the ones next to him and hadn't made it back.

"Soldiers of Our Lady. Tonight we embark on a mission of utmost importance to the Serco nation and people. Some of you will not survive and that is why you have all been backed up last week. I am aware, as are you that it may mean True death to some of you if the back-up fails but that is a chance we are all going to have to face. Some of you will work alone; some of you will work in groups. None of you will get any thanks for what you are about to do. But all of you can go forth knowing that you fulfil your duties to Lady Serco and take comfort therein. Dismissed."

The soldiers walked out to their assignments without a word among them but Beria knew that their brainpals were exchanging data at a rapid rate. The exchanges were coded and it was considered bad form among Serco to try and intercept other group's communications. Beria was in a business where bad form was the norm and opened his decryption centre to take a sample of what the troopers felt.

"Ole Man pompous face... How hard can it be? They are only Tani's after all... We better grab lunch first"

The last remark made him smile; it must have been from one of the EVA marines. They were ready and morale was high for sure. And they had called him names, just as he had called his instructors names. He gathered his papers and sighed. He wished he was going too.

###

Fletholm was busy solving the game of solitaire he had on his screen when the door opened. Not even bothering to hide the game he looked up and saw the worried face of Eggert.

"Good news or go away."

Eggert grinned and moved into the room, closing the door behind him. Fletholm sighed and grabbed his cup of now cold coffee, sipping a bit from it before putting it on the table again in disgust. He leaned back and folded his hands behind his head.

"Sir, we have had an incident on Tellus."

Eggert sat on the chair opposite the table and waited. Fletholm closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

"Why do I have to drag it out of you Eggert? You have something to say, say it please."

"Right Sir. There was an explosion on Tellus station yesterday with three dead at least. It has been covered up as an accident with flare loading but I do not buy that. Today the Alhambra SWAT team detained a splinter group called the Movement for the Rights of the Deceased. At the same time the defence around Tellus has been beefed up quite a bit."

"And this means?"

"I believe that the Serco have made an attack on the phantom Valkyrie somehow. And I spoke to the Serco analyst who agrees."

"I see. Very well, continue and keep me informed."

Eggert got up and practically stormed out to his desk to find more information.

Fletholm continued his game of solitaire. The analysts were probably right; after all he had delivered the information to the Serco including the use of MRD as scapegoats. They had been

involved in killing one of his agents last year and while he was not a petty man, he liked getting even sometimes. He looked at the coffee and decided he could do without. They say that cold coffee made you beautiful but cold coffee just made him hurt inside.

## **21. Insertion team**

The old battered green and yellow matted moth was carrying a cargo of Carbonic ore, 120 crates of roughly 300 kilos each. Hailing from Azek originally and running under UIT government license, it had moved with no incidents at all to the border post at Jallik Watch. The customs officer had lifted one eyebrow in disbelief at why anyone would move carbonic ore any distance, but the manifest fitted with the actual cargo. He had scanned two random crates and come up with correct weight and content.

“Something about a special roid that would allow Eo roses to attain those fantastic colours” the pilot had said.

Sometimes he wished he were stationed in Deneb instead where once in a while a trader tried to smuggle contraband in the form of Serco items across the border, but his luck had guaranteed that he would be stationed here in the ass-end of Space. If he did well in this posting he could ask for a transfer maybe next year or something. Bah, and his lunch was getting cold too. Sighing deeply, he signed the customs document electronically and sent the trader away on his way to the home of the Itani people, Eo.

The pilot fired the twin engines on the moth and boosted to 160 m/s, the maximum for the ship. The pilot anticipated the 1,3 G forces as the ship accelerated and leaned back in his seat to let it take the brunt of the force. He smiled broadly; phase one was now complete and the team had infiltrated Itani space with no problems. The team had discussed whether to take the direct route to Cantus and thus transgress the border in Deneb, but the risks of getting discovered had been deemed too high. This route would take three days to insert the team but the risks of discovery were pretty low. Besides, with the team in

suspended animation inside the crates time was not really a factor and someone was supposed to have stalled the Itani program a bit. Bored at flying the large cargo vessel, he twisted it slowly doing a large barrel roll while engaging the jump engines.

###

The cancer inside Utia's head had decided to manifest itself in one of the most embarrassing ways that he could think of; he had lost bladder control. The doctor had been very understanding and had provided him with a small implant that could be controlled with a remote and ensured that he did not wet himself all the time, but that was beside the point. He had finally managed to gather the courage to ask Yarina out for dinner and she had against all his expectations accepted. However, the luck he had been receiving lately would naturally ensure that the device, so unflatteringly named an Incontinence Manager, would fail during the evening. Well, he could always hope that the good Lady Faith had forgotten about him for tonight and left him alone. He dressed in his uniform and made sure that his medals shone like they should. Especially the 100 kills starburst he had received three months ago. He grinned, all girls he knew off liked a man in uniform and he hoped that Yarina would too. He hefted the ceremonial dagger and placed it on his hip making sure the safety was on. Satisfied he turned and walked out of his room to go pick up his date whistling an old song slightly off-key.

###

Keria let her fingers caress Riddik's face in farewell and left him to board the Vulture that was standing by in the launch bay. While she acknowledged the decision that her husband had taken, it was not one she could take herself. She could not leave the Serco people no matter what cost and she knew that Riddik would never have it any other way. She closed the canopy and launched following the STC's commands for a safe jump vector to Serco space. She was going back to see if what Riddik had told her was really true. If SCAR had indeed allowed her to be delivered to GESTEBO it had lost its value for her and she would be forced to take drastic measures. At

least the extradition order had been rescinded and she was allowed to pass the boundary turrets with no problems with only a friendly hail from the border strike force to welcome her back into the realm of Lady Serco. She clenched her jaw and set course for Skycommand for the headquarters of SCAR.

###

The single photon canon attached to his helmet provided the only light in the otherwise pitch-black tunnel he was working in. One could be excused to assume that the depths of space would be cold, harsh and unforgiving especially when that particular piece of real-estate was so far from the nearest sun as to reduce it to a mere quarter-inch point, that is, when he was lucky enough to actually see it. They would be right too, well almost right. He had never sweated so much as after he started here, he had never been so tired and never had so little hope as the last week and he had no idea how he would last the next one. If there was a hell this was surely purgatory. Brix cursed the day he had called his friend to ensure the speedy delivery of a package that would have given him so little. Actually he cursed the Serco that had killed his friend and effectively himself as well that horrible day. Why the hell had he singled him out? He would give just about anything to get even with that accursed people. Her realised that had been inactive for too long again and the light inside his helmet flashed angrily red twice. He closed his eyes in anticipation of the punishment that was about to arrive and was not disappointed when the inducer implanted in his cortex fired and destroyed all the nerve endings in his entire body as if he had been power-hosed in sodium hydroxide. Well at least it felt like that; in reality he knew that the damage inflicted was purely imaginary but that did not make it hurt less. He awoke again, soiled and tired with little choice but getting up and heft the heavy mining drill. He would like most of all to get back at the Serco but in reality he just wanted this to end.

###

William twisted his Valkyrie slowly while moving on the most efficient vector toward Tellus and a well-deserved break. He had been on search patrol for almost twelve hours with his

wingman Janice Parsons. Wingman, he grinned, Janice would take offence to that and probably beat whoever called her a man in whatever context it was delivered. She had been right about this assignment, it had been a wild goose chase with nothing but a couple of bot CPU's to show for it. Unfortunately he had thought that they would find something and had agreed to her wager meaning that he would have to use some of his hard earned money on a set of real steaks from real live cattle on Eo and prepare them in their home.

"Bet you are sorry we made that bet now Bill."

He laughed aloud at the message from the other Valkyrie; only Janice could manage to pack so much schadenfreude into one sentence.

"Nah, at least I am sure we are going to get some tasty well prepared food tonight."

"Don't tell me you are going to make raw meat again."

"What, raw? It was heated to several degrees above ambient. I wouldn't want to spoil the taste of the meat by charring it."

"There better be salad too. The little one needs her vitamins"

William laughed out aloud once more. Life was truly great and going to be better in five months time. He docked the ship and vaulted out of the cockpit, running to the other Valk docked next to him. He grabbed his fiancée around the waist to carry her into the station to mock protests about her not being made of glass and that he should put her down.

###

The special operative finished with the last memory reading and terminated the life of the subject he had worked on. In accordance with Itani law the bodies had been cleansed of their hosts and would be used again for a mind that needed it, most often the military. He smiled a wry smile when he considered that this exact mind/person had in fact been opposed to the military and especially the reuse of bodies.

Being convicted as an enemy of the state naturally removed any choice the person had had in the matter and allowed the state to use it as it saw fit. Sometimes life gave some unanticipated twists and this was one of them. As far as he could see the victims had all been guilty of crimes against the state in various degrees but none of it anyhow related to the project he had been asked to look for. He reckoned that the group would have been the recipient of maximum three years of suspension at the most for their collected crimes but that was second-guessing. Seemed like someone had needed a scapegoat. He sent the information on to the high secretariat and terminated his part of the case.

###

"All pilots power down and await my command. Do not acknowledge signal."

Cat received the signal from the leader of her squadron, Kalimenshae Kael, and did as ordered. The silence inside her SVG was deafening and when she closed her eyes she could just as well not have existed. She hated waiting like this but understood the necessity of extreme secrecy. If the Itani knew that two Serco strike teams were now floating through space no more than a jump away from the most secret research station in Itani space, they would undoubtedly be launching everything that could fly towards them. They had infiltrated Itani space in singles, forming up inside Cantus space a day or so before the attack was about to commence. Soon they would be given their flight orders and the wait would be over. Cat powered her internals down and slaved her awareness level to the threat indicator on the SVG. If something hostile arrived her ship would wake her.

## **22. Getting ready**

It didn't take long for the Itani intelligence service known as State Secret Intelligence, aka STASI to find the connection between the MRD and the UIT intelligence branch. How UIT had discovered the Omega project was anybody's guess but the secret was bound to be out sooner or later. Why they would

choose to sabotage it was however anybody's guess. Torstein Slainthel, the case officer for UIT, had investigated the case and come up with nothing. The only ones that would gain from this was the Serco and so it was assumed that they were behind this in reality, making UIT take the blame for the attack. That did not mean that the Itani would just let this slide and a plan was slowly formulated that would get back at the UIT. And while they were at it, they would get back at the Serco as well.

###

Beating Beria's record had been easy even if Lebermac was slightly intoxicated while doing it. It was Roid Bumpers, not Roid Avoiders after all, just the kind of action that he excelled in naturally. Riddik had placed himself on the table and were following the action, a beer in hand while Lebermac set yet another new record.

"Pah, this gets boring."

Lebermac finished bumping the last roid into place and scored yet another unbelievable new high score while reaching for his bottle again. He half turned to Riddik.

"It really painsh you that she'sh gone doesn't it?"

Riddik tossed his can at the wall and buried the aluminium container three inches deep in the wall plastic.

"What the fuck do you care?"

Lebermac looked at his buddy and tried desperately to make the few remaining sober brain cells function long enough to deliver a coherent answer. He hiccupped and swallowed the tiny amount of Teh Killa that tried to make an attempt at freedom. He grimaced at the foul taste and lifted his bottle to wash it down before discovering that it was miserably empty.

"Rats. We arshe out offff drinksies."

Riddik shot him a glare that could tear paint off a ship fifteen metres distant before shaking his head slowly and grab a new beer he tossed to the Itani.

"Thanks mate. Owe youse one for shure. Tell youse what, why don't I tiptoe shilently and shtealthily into Sherco shpace and hear a little bitty about Keria? And youse can go do my drinking for me in the mean time?"

Riddik nodded slowly.

"Yeah, I would appreciate that a lot. I just hate when she is not around, when I can't.... protect her!"

Lebermac tossed a new set of Sobr-Me-Up's and washed it down with a Lady's Ale. He got up and walked over to the hulking Serco and put an arm around his shoulder.

"Mate, you need to let her live a bit. You cannot protect her from everything you know? She knows where you are and that you will always be there. And that is enough."

Riddik looked at Lebermac with wonder before pushing him away.

"True words from a drunk man. Doesn't make it hurt any less my friend."

Riddik got up and left for the commercial area of Aeolus Trading Prefect, his head down and mood even lower.

###

Utia entered the restaurant with the same feeling in his stomach as he had had the first time he was out to fly a real fighter. The complete body tingling with an especially large tingling in his stomach that felt like he had a whole colony of army ants inside it. He only hoped that Yarina was as interested in going out with him as he was in going out with her. He looked from the left towards the right but his gaze never wandered past the bar. Seated on a high chair, dressed in a long golden dress that looked like liquid gold had been poured

down her shoulders and solidified inches from the ground without leaving the slightest on her back, was Yarina, looking more beautiful than ever. She was focused on the holo screen behind the bar where a sitcom was mindlessly churning jokes out with metronomic precision and charm. She laughed at one of the one-liners and Utia stopped dead in his approach almost overcome with a desperate urge to conserve this moment forever. She became aware of a presence and looked slightly to his side before noticing him and rising from the stool.

"Utia; I was just watching "The Munktards" on the holo."

".."

"What, cat got your tongue?"

Utia realised that he had been able to say absolutely nothing in the presence of this beautiful woman and what was worse; he was standing with his mouth open. Checking fast that he had not embarrassed himself completely by drooling as well, he managed to regain control over his vocal cords and especially his language centre inside his brain.

"Yarina, you look absolutely astounding."

He was about to say something immensely clever when his mouth started working without brain guidance.

"Not that it is anything special for you. I mean you always look beautiful even when you are not wearing that dress. I mean when you are wearing other clothes, I haven't seen you without after all. Not that I want to naturally, don't take me wrong or anything."

Yarina looked down to hide the smile before hearing the last sentence.

"Oh you don't, do you?"

"No, off course not."

"What a shame."

"..."

"Your mouth is open again Utia. Food?"

He managed to nod and allowed her to let him lead her to the table.

###

The order came in from central command that the following numbers had been killed in duty and were to be revived with the last available memory stored. The technician found the correct files and sent them to the central data storage for control. The procedures were pretty strict on this matter; before the new procedures they had actually revived someone who were alive. Now, when the data control centre had declared that a new body was to be revived, the old body was declared finally dead. He waited about five minutes before they came back with a correct mark on them. He cracked his fingers and started feeding the machine with data, requesting nine new full body clones and thirty-three de-icings. The de-icings weren't that bad, basically it was a stored body that just had to be jump-started with some memories and awareness. They would be up and running in a week or so. The full body clones would take at least a month to mature with the minds growing inside to assist the body in growing correctly. Oh well, at least with the war looking to heat up he was not going to be out of a job any time soon.

###

Keria entered the SCAR headquarter just as a new set of recruit pilots left through the door. They were in a hurry too by the looks of it never even stopping to let her enter as were customary among the Serco. She frowned at the lack of etiquette among the recruits but put it aside, she was after all here on rather important business. She walked up to the male receptionist, yet another new face, turned the charm on full speed and asked for a meeting with the CO.

"Sorry ma'am, that is not possible at this moment. The commander is not present."

“Then one of the lieutenants please. It is rather urgent.”

“Not possible ma’am. I can leave a message. May I have your identification papers please?”

Keria beamed her avatar over complete with advanced status as a fighter ace of the Serco military. The young man merely frowned and looked at his screen. He pushed a series of buttons and looked up.

“Mrs. Willenium?”

She nodded.

“I have here on record that you were cleared for GESTEBO questioning, that you fled from that questioning and that you are married to the traitor of the Serco people Riddik Willenium. Please remain in place while I call the guards.”

“For what?”

“You will be moved to a secure facility where you will be questioned for the whereabouts of Riddik Willenium, a traitor to SCAR.”

“And who wants to do this, the Serco command or SCAR?”

“That is by a decision of the SCAR council ma’am.”

Keria smiled at the young man, who was still wet enough behind his ears to believe that was a good sign and relax.

“And is it the Serco command or SCAR that has decided that my darling husband is a traitor?”

The warning klaxons should be sounding by now inside the receptionist’s head but gullibly he went on.

“The Council of SCAR. He put his personal life before that of the guild. He is to be apprehended and punished as the traitor he is.”

Keria took something from her pocket and leaned in over the receptionist.

“Do me a favour kid. Take this to the council.”

The young man looked at her hand as she hammered the guild insignia into his palm burying the needles all the way through the flesh.

“That personal life he put in front of this miserable excuse for a guild was I. Tell the bastards I quit!”

Keria turned on her heel and walked out of the office, her head held high and her focus re-discovered. The screams from the office didn't affect her at all.

### **23. Getting even pt 1**

Riddik had his hands in his pockets and was walking unhurriedly along the access corridor kicking at the small things he encountered along the way. His mood was terrible and his urge to fight, to hurt or maybe even kill something was pretty intense. He had only been away from Keria for about a day but he was unable to go to her and that was what hurt him the most. He kicked a can that had until now been a part of the local scenery and sent it flying down towards a side corridor where it bounced off the bulkhead and disappeared from his view. The can kicking had an effect, a shuffling of feet could be heard from the corridor and Riddik took his hands out of his pockets. He looked down the side corridor and spotted the two young punks that were bent low over a prone figure. Riddik shook his head and was about to walk on, not his business, when a little voice inside his head reminded him that Keria would scald him for walking on. He sighed and turned towards the youngsters.

"Boys, leave him alone and go home."

The larger of the two youngsters stood to his full size, almost as big as Riddik and spat at his feet.

"Yousa wanna besa de next?"

Riddik smiled at the youngster's feeble attempt at emulating the slang spoken around the self-declared gangsta community at Corvus. The next thing they would do was flick out a pocket vibro blade for sure. The click and slight humming confirmed his theory.

"I shall give you one last warning. You can choose to walk away now or crawl away in exactly one minute."

"Fock yoo drillhead."

The young men moved towards Riddik, switchblades in hand with one of them releasing a short chain that he swung in his other hand. Riddik turned his combat program on and set it to non-lethal. The left punk stabbed out at Riddik who deflected the knife out to the left side with his right hand, stepping one step forwards and punched his left fist directly into the punk's nose and sending him to the floor screaming in pain. The other punk tried to move to Riddik's left side and swung the chain for Riddik's head. Riddik bent low, folded his arm over his head for protection and took the chain harmlessly across his back before slamming his left elbow into the chest of the other punk. The impact was enough to make the youngster grab his chest in pain and that was the time needed for Riddik to turn and kick his right heel directly on the youngster's knee. The cracking sound told Riddik that the knee was shattered and that this particular punk was out of it. He turned and looked at the other prone punk deciding against an incapacitating kick to the head. Instead he slammed his heel down on the hand that still held the blade, crushing fingers and making him release the blade to the ground.

"It has now been one minute. You may crawl away now."

The punk with the broken nose started rising but got down again when Riddik pointed to the ground.

"I said crawl and I meant crawl. Or do I have to make you?"

The two punks started moving away on hands and knees moaning and sobbing in a very un-gangsta like fashion. Riddik chuckled, that had actually helped a bit on his mood. Now he had to see if their previous target was still alive.

###

The green amniotic fluid blurred his vision but it was still possible to see the room outside his storage tank. Vaso was not happy, if he were in a cloning tank he would have to have died and so failed in his mission whatever that was. In going with standard Serco doctrine he would now have at least one failed check on his papers. Getting three failed checks on his papers meant permanent deletion unless he had been redeemed for his actions. And Asteroth had made it pretty clear that redeeming themselves would not be an option as long as he and Arhem were in the Diplomatic Service. He didn't want to think about it but it was pretty hard not to inside the tank with nothing else to do. He didn't know who had framed him with the pills in boot camp but if he found out he would subject that person to as much pain as Vaso had been receiving himself these last months. The light turned from amber to red and he closed his eyes in anticipation of the sleeping drug that relaxed him for the next learning session.

###

Brix was shaking with cold on the hard metal bed, the single synth wool sheet not enough to let him keep warm. His muscles hurt by this small effort with an intensity that he had thought he could never endure. He wished for this to end, any way that it could. He suspected that he would last maybe two weeks more if he was forced to stay on the xithricite mining detail. Two weeks more of absolute hell. He closed his eyes and tried to rest while his muscles kept spasming.

"Get up scum."

Someone pounded Brix on the legs with a rubber hose adding to the pain that was already present. He considered staying in the bed but knew that the only thing he would gain from it was an activation of the cortical inducer. He opened his eyes and got up to sit on the edge of the metal sheet bed and squinted at his

assailant. A quick blow across his face with the rubber tube ensured that he looked down into the floor again.

"Keep you eyes down scum. You have a visitor."

The guard left the small cubicle and slammed the door. Another voice cultured and controlled unlike that of the guard.

"Mr. Brix. I have an offer for you. It will involve you getting out of here and getting a new start."

Brix looked up at the man. Tall, slender but with the light, what little there was, coming from behind his head and thus masking his features.

"Who do I have to kill?"

The man smiled and moved his face slightly forward into the reflected light displaying a very gaunt almost death like visage.

"The question is not who Mr. Brix, it is how many. Be ready on your next watch."

The man left Brix to his misery and walked out to pay the guards. The low pay of the guards ensured that he could get anyone he needed for next to nothing and the barbaric conditions of Xang-Xi ensured that the recruited person wanted to do whatever to get out of it.

###

The evening had been perfect with Utia managing to make Yarina laugh several times, The food had, as always, been fantastic in quality as well as in price and it had taken some considerable argumentation to persuade Yarina not to pay for her half. He paid the exorbitant price and got up to leave.

"Will you follow me home?"

Utia blushed and looked up at her.

"It would be an honour."

He took her arm and escorted her out to the area where the living departments were placed. They found her door and she opened it, stopping in the door. She turned and looked at him standing outside like a lost puppy in uniform.

"Utia, we are not supposed to, but do you want to come in?"

He tried to respond but failed, managing to nod instead.

###

"All pilots stand to. Be ready to engage the strike force in thirty minutes. We have five minutes to sweep the area clean of Tani fighters before our own assault force arrives. The assault force will be three modified Atlas class assault ships. They will NOT show up on the IFF. Pod'ed pilots will be gathered by The Lurkers' medic boat. That is another Atlas; that one will show on IFF. A group of Proms and SVGs will arrive with the Atlas's and escort them in."

Cat smiled inside her SVG at the mention of her old unit. She knew who would be flying the assault ships and the medic ship. She knew that the assault ships would arrive safely and she was confident that they would succeed in their mission. This was going to be a walkover.

###

William finished his cider and disentangled himself from Janice who had fallen asleep against his side on the couch. He chuckled at the slight snoring and got up to dump the trash in the recycling bin. He would just leave her on the couch when he left on combat patrol later. Now he wanted to play with those collector CPU's he had scooped up, see if he could figure out where the hive queen that had made them was nesting. He put a blanket over Janice and walked into his small workroom that could best be described as the stuff hive bot nightmares were made off. Disassembled bot parts were laying all over with schematics on the walls of the most common bot CPU's. And in the middle was the Kannik and Dentek collector CPU's he had found. It shouldn't take more than ten

minutes, loads of time to make it to the squadron as well. He started humming an old tune while disassembling the CPU's.

## **24. Operation Uranus.**

Yarina could do nothing but look on as Utia nodded and then collapsed in an undignified heap in front of her door. She immediately checked his pulse and came up with nothing. She took her personal com unit and opened a connection to the guard while starting CPR on Utia. A female voice responded.

"Officer on duty, Lieutenant Hralka."

"Hralka, I need a stretcher down to my location now with a full medical crew. Inform professor Raewon that we need to do the body swap now."

"I do not understand."

"You do not have to understand Hralka. Do what I said. Code Kappa niner niner four."

"Yes ma'am."

The connection died and left Yarina alone with Utia and her feeble resuscitation attempt. In less than two minutes the medical crew had arrived to take over and she just hoped that it would be enough to save Utia's mind. She followed the stretcher up to the surgery where Raewon was waiting with the medical staff.

"Report Ms Yarina."

"Professor, we had just eaten dinner when Utia collapsed with no warning at all. Looks like a heart stop to me."

"That is what the doctors have agreed upon. We will swap him into the generic body immediately and hope that he will be able to fasten in it in spite of his mind alterations. You should go get changed Yarina unless you plan on working like that?"

She looked down at her golden silk dress and back to Utia. She turned to walk away.

"Yarina."

She looked over to the professor.

"We will do anything to save him. You go change and come back. We will have started then and you can't do anything before anyway. Now go on."

The fatherly concern in his voice made her trust that Utia would be all right and she walked off to her room.

###

Brix sweated as much as he had frozen before, now dressed in a full body protection suit and working inside the xithricite roid. His tongue kept prodding the hole that was instead of his lower left molar. That was before the guard found out that he had a gold filing in it. He winced from the pain but kept on working to keep the guards from using his cortex inducer. The roid shook a bit and he grabbed the wall for stability. In the week he had been here it had never moved the slightest, and weighing in at around ninety thousand mega tonne it would have to be an immense force to make the roid shake. He waited a second and was about to start again when the air inside the tunnel started blowing towards the entrance. The small light inside his helmet blinked on and he started protesting loudly at the pain that was about to ensue. Nothing, instead words seemed to be directly forced into his mind as if they were words from God.

"Mr Brix, move forward towards tunnel 9 and then turn right into that tunnel. Walk on until you meet an airlock on he left. Go inside and wait. You cannot reply to this message."

Brix grinned; the path to freedom had been shown to him. He started moving and did as he had been told. The darkness inside the airlock was no worse than the darkness he had seen in the tunnels and slowly he drifted to sleep.

###

The heap of human refuse turned out to be a man in a boiler suit and when Riddik pushed him slightly he gave a large snort and spat something abominable that could probably kill an entire planetary population without even trying, against the bulkhead impacting with a metallic sound. A smell of dust and oil was around the old man and Riddik couldn't help notice the grime that covered his hands colouring them grey.

"Are you okay old timer?"

"Ah hae ne'er felt betta."

Riddik grinned and helped the man up. To his surprise the old man stood as tall as himself and had an air of power around him. The old man smiled slowly and extended a hand.

"Cheers fur helpin me."

Riddik took the hand and shook it, surprised by the strength of his shake.

"No problem, I don't think they would have hurt you but you would have been out of cash for sure."

"Whit, those yoong ones?"

The old man started laughing.

"Those wee shits waur in th' wey o gie gubbed. Ah was bletherin abit ye helpin me up."

Riddik took a step back and looked at the old man again, observing the slight swaying and large grin on him. Then he saw the nametag and the large golden starburst insignia on the neck of his boiler suit.

"Ecka Estenk, commander of The Guild of Free Traders. Yeah, I guess they would have been hammered Sir."

"Twas but a query ay time son. Wanna hae a bevvie?"

Riddik considered for a thousandth of a second before nodding. It was probably not the worst drinking buddy he could scrape off the deck plates.

"Barry. I'll caa aheid an' teel John 'at he is wanted fur serioos skitin'."

Riddik had a sinking feeling that he had opened a particular large and dangerous can of worms but it was too late. Ecka had grabbed his arm and was slowly and only slightly wobbly walking towards the bar area.

"Hae Ah ever tauld ye abit 'at bonnie yoong quine Ah kent in Sedina?"

Riddik decided to just give in and follow. He had heard a lot of good things about TGFT from his time on SCAR; maybe they could help him out. If he at some point deciphered that crazy Nyrius dialect.

###

William frowned; he had found the initial initiation on the CPU after a couple of minutes and use the remaining twenty to search for faults. He had swept that sector himself earlier and it came up clean. He had never seen that before in a hive bot. Every time the collector bots offloaded at the hive queen, they were erased and re-initialised to prevent their small systems from overloading. And these two had been initialised in an empty system. His watch beeped, it was time for his patrol and he would have to look into this after it. Besides, he might come up with a perfectly good explanation while he was flying the boring security mission around Tellus station. He sneaked out of the door to avoid waking Janice.

###

"All fighters this is lead. Stand to, stand to. We are GO for insertion, repeat GO for insertion. First and second squadron jump initiation in ten seconds on my mark. Third and fourth in

sixty seconds on my mark. Mark in ten...five... two, one mark mark mark. All pilot respond receiving mark."

Cat punched the time and ensured she had the correct time. A single string of data acknowledged the commander's order and she readied for jumping in the first wave. A quick look confirmed that all systems were operational and her battery was completely full. The jump engines were primed and ready for jumping upon her command. When the timer reached zero she gave the command via her neural jack and the SVG dumped the stored power of her Ultra Charge battery directly into her jump engine, tearing a hole in reality and forcing her ship through to the other side and Tellus Station. They were committed.

## **25. OP URANUS**

The warning klaxons went off inside Tellus station as soon as the incoming bursts of exotic particles disgorged their deadly cargo. The two vultures on duty attacked immediately to buy time for the larger strike force to launch. No match for the six Prometheus's and six SVGs, they nevertheless allowed the first three Valkyries to launch along with a group of five Seeker missile bots.

As per her orders, Cat let the Prometheus's engage the Valkyries and dove straight towards the station exits with her wingman to keep the next set of fighters from launching. The heavy Itani and Serco fighters engaged and seemed rather well matched until the second wave of Serco fighters arrived with another set of squads. The outgunned Itani tried to draw the Prometheus's away from the station but only lured the initial six after them. The other six of squad two engaged the Seeker missiles and destroyed them with only a single loss on the Serco side.

Cat kept above the dorsal launch bay with her wingman to the side. Another Valkyrie launched slowly through the force field that kept the air inside the station and Cat fired her twin neutron guns directly into the top of the fighter, hitting with every shot. Her wingman did the same to the side of the fighter

and when it finally exited and engaged the turbo, it was down to 5% armour. A stream of neutrons covered the distance from Cat's guns and to the remaining armour in no time at all and exploded the Valkyrie around 200 metres from the station. Several red dots on her radar told her that the others from her squad were as successful as her team had been. The second wave of Itani fighters tried to escape to open space with the same result as the first set. Cat counted the Itani losses and came up clean. The forces they had been informed would be here for protection had been killed except for the Valkyries that were having a running and losing battle with the six Prometheus's. The signal for all clear was given and ten seconds later another group of circular expanding ripples in space paved the way for the assault Atlas's that came in towards the station on full power.

It was going to be a cakewalk.

###

William started running as soon as the klaxons went off, moving at top speed towards his Valkyrie Vengeance heavy space superiority fighter knowing that the strike force on duty was launching while he ran. The launch bay was a mess when he arrived with seven out of nine berths showing red light above their empty cradles, meaning that the fighter was destroyed, and two showing amber meaning they were running on 30% operational capabilities. He bolted directly to his fighter and jumped into the seat expecting a go for launch immediately. When it didn't arrive he opened a link to command.

"Tellus command this is Banzai 01 ready for launch. Confirm clearance."

"Tellus command, Negative, no clearance Banzai 01. Stay put, acknowledge."

"Banzai copies, Wilco. Status on strike force?"

"Presumed destroyed. Stand by for new orders Banzai 01."

"Banzai ready, send."

William started to become concerned about the situation. If the Serco aggressors were audacious enough to attack a fully equipped military research station three jumps into Itani space, they had to be after something specific. And that would mean that they probably had a very good plan that took into consideration that the Itani defenders had to launch through one of the three gates. The natural choke points of the station so to speak. He started wondering what he would do if he would attack a space station and tried to come up with countermeasures. He saw several of his Banzai squadron pilots that were off duty, including Janice come running and watched her jump into her own Valkyrie. He immediately opened a private channel to her fighter.

"Baby, you can't launch remember?"

"The station is threatened, what do you want me to do? Bleat like a sheep while the Serco slaughter us? You should know better."

William grinned fiercely inside his helmet at the harsh rebuke. That was the Janice he loved and was going to ask to marry him in two weeks time when he made Flight Lieutenant.

"You just be careful my love, I don't want to have either you or the little one getting hurt do you hear?"

"Yeah, I know. Me neither love. What is happening?"

"I am waiting for orders right now but am in reality thinking options. All options. See what you can dream up beneath those pretty curls of yours that does not involve the launch bays."

"Wilco."

She terminated the link and left William to his own thoughts.

###

At some point, Brix had no point how long time had passed, the outer hatch opened and the air left the compartment with a mighty roar that silenced as quickly as the air exited. The awakening was very uncomfortable indeed as Brix was torn outside bumping into the door on the way out. Two persons in heavy armoured space suits were waiting outside and grabbed Brix like a bag of potato's before unceremoniously dragging him over to a battered and ion-storm corrosion-damaged Centaur Mk I. Once inside the hold of the cargo ship they stripped him of his helmet and placed him on the floor between them, keeping their own helmets on. He looked at the chrome surface of the helmets, trying in vain to see the persons inside. A loudspeaker crackled from somewhere unseen.

"Mr Brix. In a minute we will put a standard Serco mem-corder on your head. If you haven't tried it before I must warn you that it will be rather unpleasant. The process takes ten minutes and after that we can restore you into a clone or any other body as we see fit. When you have been mem-corded you will be briefed and sent on your way. Do you have any questions?"

"Yeah, why me?"

"Because you have a very good reputation among the Serco, as a matter of fact you are known as a Serco Pillar of Society. And that makes you perfect for our mission. Anything else Mr Brix?"

"Nah, just get it over with."

"Very well, the guards will show you where the device is and assist you in donning it. Then you will be on your own until the process is over. Godspeed Mr Brix."

Brix frowned, how bad could this be? After all he had escaped from the Xang Xi prison asteroid and that was right now all that mattered.

###

The assault Atlas hammered into the station impacting on where one of the access hatches ended in an airlock and

melted the front of the Atlas into the station surface with a special coating of nano bots that bonded the ship directly to the bulkhead. The massive EVA marines inside the Atlas unfastened their restraining harnesses and hefted their weapons ready for the automated systems to breach the station's outer walls. A metallic clunk and the air inside the Atlas thinned immediately by around 15 percent, the difference from Sol II standard and Eo standard; the station was breached. The first two marines charged into the station to clear the corridor. A set of Itani that were surprised enough about the massive noises from the airlock to linger and investigate were cut in half by the marines' heavy needle gun before they realised that the station was invaded. The squad leader Lieutenant Kelb Prinowalsky watched the remaining four privates and the sergeant move out into the corridor and secure the perimeter. Prinowalsky moved out as well and noted the slightly whiter light than on a Serco station, just as had been briefed.

"Sergeant Plimscoe, move out. We are on a tight schedule here."

The sergeant nodded and gave a hand signal to the point man who started to move quickly down the corridor towards their assigned target, the nerve centre of the station, the station traffic command, STC. The point men peeked around the corner with a small camera and stopped.

"Three Itani in combat armour with what looks like crowd control blasters. Permission to engage?"

"Jeez Tranklar, do I have to tell you everything? All Tanis are hostile. Take 'em out."

The sergeant shook his head in amazement over his marines before he remembered that it was their first live mission. The point marine jumped out into the corridor and fired his needle gun while his buddy peeked out at ground level with his 4,7 mm gauss rifle. The twin pre-fragmented depleted uranium slivers from the gauss rifle smashed through the air at mach 9 with a massive crack towards the Itani, impacting on his chest armour and ripping directly through as if nothing had been in

their way, taking quite a lot of the Itani along on the other side. The other Itani's were peppered with tiny darts that impacted and stuck in their armour with no effect. They both retaliated with shots from their blasters that hit the Serco equally impotently. A new crack announced another set of hyper accelerated slivers that killed another Itani soldier. The remaining Itani turned to run away but was caught with a set of slivers between the shoulder blades.

"Clear."

"Move out. Double speed now."

The Serco marines started running towards their target to keep the Itani security forces in disarray. The lead Serco turned a corner and was hit by a fusillade of gyrocks, their characteristics Boom-swoosh-Crack-fwump-Gung's spelling the doom for the marine as they ripped him apart. The other marines stopped immediately and brought their weapons to secure the corridor with the second man shouting back.

"Gyrocks"

"Roger. Trank is showing life-status negative, Plimscoe verify when we pass. Heavy weapons team to the front."

"Wilco Sir. Dada and Lumpskin get that mark seven up here."

Plimscoe tossed a spider into the corridor while the heavy weapons team moved up to the corner with their heavy plasma canon and readied it for firing. The spider was basically a small multi-spectral camera on eight legs that was designed to be able to crawl on any surface and relay the data to the tactical squad command net. The spider showed four heavily armoured Itani security soldiers behind some sort of silvery protection screens. Probably moveable xith screens with shock absorbers to take the deadly javelins from the gauss weapons that was the Serco standard. Prinowalsky nodded, a very good tactics that would cost his squad a lot of casualties if they had to assault it frontally. Unless the Serco had a Fusigon mark seven that is. Designed for fighter combat, the plasma canon was basically a downscaled version of the same weapon that could

be equipped into a heavy weapons slot on a fighter but with a single shot in its battery. Weighing in at 250 kilo for the weapon and 190 for the battery, it was the only weapon that needed two Serco to operate. The two heavy weapons soldiers sent a ready signal and Prinowalsky gave the go. The helper hefted the gun on the tripod and moved it sideways into the corridor with the gunner holding him and the bulk of the gun behind the corner. As soon as the gun cleared corner the gunner fired the Fusigon and created conditions otherwise only found in the insides of a star among the Itani soldiers, vaporising the lot along with their shield, the bulkheads to the sides and the door behind. The back-blast melted the tiny spider and left the Serco blind again. The point man peeked out into the corridor.

"Clear."

"Move out and take the target. Leave the mark seven here."

The Serco moved out into the corridor and crushed the glassy remains under foot as they advanced, encountering no further resistance. The STC was full of smoke and the nine Itani inside were too shocked to resist the marines. Double taps to the head ensured that they would make no resistance at any time and Prinowalsky moved into the STC. He pointed to the large grey box to one side and watched as two gauss equipped marines reduced the station mainframe to so much scrap. Prinowalsky opened the higher command net and sent a message.

"Mission complete. Going for secondary objective."

So far the mission had been a huge success and with the destruction of the STC they had just ensured that the Itani could make no co-ordinated opposition. Time for the real mission.

## **26. Think out of the box**

The drinking was heavy, very heavy. Riddik could not recall anyone drinking an amount remotely like that before and still neither John Eldritch or Ecka seemed worse for wear. Riddik

had turned his liver's ethanol filter off out of politeness but considered really hard turning it on if nothing then just for a couple of minutes and get the worst of the ethanol out of his system.

"So the rent-a-cop stops me before I stagger into my Behemoth, looks very concerned at me and asks; "I notice your eyes are red Sir, have you been drinking?" Since I was going to fly my 150 tonne ship loaded with reloads to swarm missiles and had been drinking heavily all day with Neagoth I decided that a slightly cheeky answer was the best solution. I tried to stand as still as I could and squinted a bit before answering, "I am sorry officer, but I noticed your eyes are a bit glazed, have you been eating donuts?""

Ecka roared with laughter and clapped John on the shoulder. The very attractive blonde with braided pigtails and mini-skirt that John somehow had managed to attract and who had been almost glued to his side, laughed with a high nasal laugh that was a little too loud and shrill. Riddik chuckled and decided to leave the filter off for now.

"Then what happened?"

John turned to Riddik.

"I bribed him naturally and flew the ammunition to Sedina without incident."

The blonde looked at John with a look that would have made a Barbie doll look intelligent and the most popular nude model in known space look innocent before sipping her colourful drink. Riddik shook his head in amazement.

"Man, you guys are a nasty bunch. Here's to you."

"Wa dornt ye join us?"

"Naw, I am Serco. And not welcome back home right now."

"We hae room fur aw fowk in TGFT mate. An' we can help ye wi' yer status in Serco space."

"Let me think about it. I need to talk to Keria first and she needs to agree."

"We can set it up mate. We have a SSCU here in Aeolus Trading Prefect. And good connections with the Serco military and administration."

"I would like that John, I would like that a lot."

"No problems, let me give the guys a shout and then we can go as soon as I finished this pitcher of white Russians, okay?"

Riddik nodded. The offer was tempting if Keria could accept it. Or even better if he could get her to come along.

###

William tried to contact the STC with no luck.

"Bill, I keep getting static. I think we're alone now."

William nodded before realising that Janice could not see him.

"Yeah, there doesn't seem to be anyone around. The outside looks pretty hostile as well. I think I might have an idea."

He eyed the Itani Border Guardian, or IBG that was parked next to his Valkyrie and decided to chance it. He spun his ship up and turned the heavy fighter around to bear his weapons on the IBG. He fired a trio of shots at the left wing shooting it off. He then shot the right wing off thus reducing its width to around a metre and a half. It would handle like crap now, but it would be sufficient for what he had in mind.

"What are you doing Bill?"

"Relax Janice, I have an idea. Bear with me and stay in the Valk. I might need your help and need it fast."

He got out of his Valkyrie and ran over to the IBG, boarding it and ignoring the blisters he gained from the searing heat from

the shorn off side panels. The IBG was fully operational apart from the side thrusters that William just shot off, and equipped with twin neutron guns. He activated the anti-grav engine and moved the small ship down the corridor, into the station. It was Serco-hunting time.

###

The warning klaxons were silent inside the operating room where the surgeons were finishing transplanting Utia into his new body. The procedure was routine and it was only the lumps of extra growth that made it somewhat a challenge. Still, the transplant had succeeded and the patient was slowly awakening inside his new sleeve. Only minor bone mending was taking place and that was easily done with the help from a specialised dose of nano bone grafters. Yarina was dressed in a set of green surgical trousers and an equally green shirt while holding Utia's hand, a concerned look on her face. She had noted the assault on the station and knew what she had to do if the project was compromised. That is why she had inserted the device earlier to make sure. The device would go off on her verbal command or if her body dropped its temperature to below 25 degrees Celsius, a certain sign she was dead. She heard gunfire outside the operating room and assumed that the Serco was looking for Utia in particular. The doors to the room were torn open by a marine in a fully protective red EVA suit carrying a very large weapon. The single golden stripe on his chest probably meant something but Yarina didn't know what. She raised her hands and bowed her head in submission.

"I am his nurse. Allow me to tend to him."

The marine moved over to Utia and swiped a machine over his head. He hesitated for some seconds while Yarina stood absolutely still until his voice box spoke in accented and clipped Standard.

"You come along. Push the stretcher. Flinch and you die."

He shot the other medical personnel inside the room, efficiently with single gauss slugs through the head before grabbing

Yarina. She flinched but as the marines didn't kill her, she nodded and did as she was told. They still had a chance. Surely the Itani high command was notified and was scrambling everything. The Serco marine tossed something into the room after they left and pushed her and Utia out to the other five marines in equally bulky imposing red suits. The Serco with the golden stripe tossed her two translucent plastic bags large enough for a person. She grabbed them and looked puzzled.

"Emergency spacesuit. We are leaving."

He pushed Yarina forward and she moved with Utia towards the outer skin of the station passing her own corridor on the way. She searched for and found the mental strength to keep on going even while plotting how she would get Utia out of the grasp of these Serco. Dead or alive that is. There was no chance that he was allowed to be brought to Serco space, not even dead.

###

William steered the IBG with great difficulty around the bend in the corridor. He cursed silently but only for show really. Whoever designed this station had never dreamt of having a light space fighter moving inside the corridors for sure but it was actually possible. He had only met the signs of the attackers so far, slaughtered Itani that had been deliberately terminated with shots to the back of the head even after they had been body killed earlier. He ground his teeth and followed the trails of the carnage, only smiling once when he saw a single Serco EVA combat suit that had multiple suit breaches and was lying in a heap. At least they had killed one of them.

"Bill, a couple of the squadies has done the same as you. They are looking for an auxiliary airlock to exit and take the fight to the Serco and buy enough time for a set of Valks to launch."

"Stand by on that Janice. Good initiative but we need to do this co-ordinated or not at all. Find the airlock and wait for my signal. If my IFF goes dead you have command."

"Wilco. We are ready to launch all remaining nine Valks on your command."

William eased the forward throttle a bit, he could see the light flicker on and off further ahead and didn't want to charge directly into an ambush. Especially now they had a plan that might work.

###

The security guards that were supposed to keep everyone away from the Omega had been heavily equipped with gyrocks and fully enclosed body armour. That had not helped them in stopping the Serco EVA marines from gaining access to the most secret facility in Itani space. Their crushed and dead bodies were a testament to the ferocity and skill of the Serco assault team that had secured the entrance with only a single loss to them selves. The four Itani civilians inside the facility were gathered in one side of the room and the commander walked up to the faraday cage that guarded the Omega from the outside, or rather guarded the outside from the Omega.

Lieutenant Huing looked past the metal wires at the obese dwarf inside the cage and shook his head in wonder. How something so powerful could look so pathetic was beyond him but the results did not lie. He motioned for the transportable faraday cage to be brought forward and opened the larger one. Immediately after opening the cage a presence was felt inside his head. Something vast and unfathomable that trickled with raw power and lived of the fears and demons inside his reptilian hindbrain. The feeling of nakedness under the gaze of this being was horrible but it was at the same time alluring to be the focus of such powerful being's attention. A voice manifested itself inside or rather all around his own being.

"Such hatred. I will not let you take me."

The lieutenant tried to respond but found that he could not. The dark shapes that had been hinted at inside his mind grew in size and shape until they had formed into true and abominable forms. Slowly so as to relish in the experience they started tearing his mind apart, bit by screaming bit.

The trooper that had brought the portable faraday cage up to the Omega tried to contact Lieutenant Huing. Failing he remembered directive number three and shut the cage to the Omega shutting it inside the mental prison. The lieutenant collapsed to the floor, his vitals flat-lining.

"Sarge, the Lt is out of it. Looks like a viral attack."

"Roger, Lindt use the tranq gun on that freak. Asmin, see what you can do for the Lt."

Sergeant Pourdon swore under his breath. Why the hell had the Lt opened the cage before they had tranquillised the freak as they had been told? Now he was left with the shit detail of getting it out to the Atlas. Lindt shot the dwarf and they waited for four minutes until they were sure it was unconscious. Lindt then took the portable faraday cage, basically a double mesh of xith wire and with the help of Pourdon stuffed the freak into it. They helped each other in getting a seal bag around it in case of decompression. Pourdon looked over to Asmin who sent a no luck signal back. Pourdon cursed once more and walked over to put a gauss slug through the hindbrain of his former squad leader. Even the EVA marine's tough powered armour was no match for the slugs and the faceplate was blown clean off taking most of Lt Huing's head with it. It was standard operational procedure to deny the Itani the possibility of re-hosting the mind and thus getting a valuable prisoner. The GESTEBO was not entirely sure how long time after death the Itani could revive a person and it was better not to take any chances.

"Right, squad, the Lt is a goner. Asmin and Lindt, you carry the object. Nails and Tudero, you have point. De Assis, you guard the prisoners. Move out. Double speed."

## **27. Getting even pt II**

Lieutenant Prinowalsky received the news of the death of his fellow squad leader with the kind of stoicism born of several identical situations where his fellow academy classmates had

died. At least it looked like the other two teams had succeeded in their respective missions to get the primary objectives. Now they just had to secure the test Valkyrie to claim complete success for this mission. He looked at the schematics via his brainpal and found the optimal route to the smaller launch bay where they assumed the ship would be. He sent the information to the other team members mentally counting the received notes from their brainpals.

"Plimscoe, move out. We need to haul ass, the other teams are already exfiltrating as we speak."

"Roger Sir. Right, you heard the Lt, Dada you are front with Lazerre, Lumpskin with me, Kroke and Roeburn take the rear. Move out."

The marines moved with the efficiency born of years of training coupled with a sense of inevitability and invincibility from their first encounter with the Itani. The main opposition had been taken out; the worst they could encounter right now was station security and small arms, no match for the heavy armour and weapons carried by the EVA marines. The corridors were blacked out at this time but that was only a minor nuisance really with the brainpals showing the corridors, as they would look in broad daylight to their internal eye. No hotspots were detected in the corridors; the remaining Itani were clever enough to stay inside. It was almost too easy, almost boring.

###

William activated the twin neutron guns and watched the power plant trickle the remaining energy into the battery until it was completely charged. That would give the guns at least twenty shots continuously. He was parked, if such a word can be used about having a four-ton space ship hovering on its side, in a side corridor to the main corridor leading to the auxiliary launch bay, and from where he had seen the flickering lights. He wanted to boost the ship out into the corridor right now and get stuck in the action, but he needed to get maximum effect and that meant waiting until the enemy was gathered in the long straight corridor. He counted to thirteen and engaged the bottom thrusters slightly, pushing him out into the corridor and

immediately after pushing he top thrusters stopping the ship in the middle of the corridor. The Serco troopers stopped dead in their tracks and started firing at his IBG, the gauss rounds impacting on his armour like single shot popcorn guns. He grinned, they would have to fire for at least a minute to penetrate his armour, way too long. He dropped the targeting reticule on the front Serco and depressed the trigger, slowly twisting the ship to spray the corridor with massive beams of neutrons.

###

The point man stopped in confusion at what looked like the wall expanding into the corridor and effectively making progress in this direction impossible. Slowly it dawned upon him that this particular bulkhead had a shape he had seen somewhere else before. A crack boomed from behind him and he saw the twin gauss rounds impact on the wall, followed by the rest of the squad's guns as well. The connection clicked and he realised that the bulkhead was a Centurion on its side however unlikely that was.

Lieutenant Prinowalsky grinned hard while thinking "Point, set and match Tani scum." He sent a mission failure message back to the command network just in time before the one centimetre circular streams of neutrons tore him and his squad to pieces like a plasma torch through butter. As an attest to the resilience and toughness of the Serco and their EVA suits, the marines kept firing even after having circular holes punched through them, not ceasing fire until their arms or heads had been disintegrated by the powerful neutron gun. The corridor was filled with a fine pink mist that painted the IBG a deceptively cheerful colour as William moved forward to search for other Serco marines.

###

Brix piloted the Behemoth into Supay Outpost with all the care he could, docking with only a slight click to indicate that he had landed. The manifest of his Behemoth had been studied meticulously before he had been allowed to dock in Supay Outpost and it was only because of his Serco POS status that

they had considered it even though he was only moving synthetic gems. The station was busy with the strike force out in large numbers keeping the normal traders away from docking. Ten minutes ago the station had been attacked by a very disruptive piece of software that had infested the mainframe and forced the station commander, also known as the Legate, aboard the station to shut it down while the computer system was being scrubbed. In the meantime the revival facility, that was the single most important department in the entire system, worked on off their own mainframe until the station systems could be restored. Firm believers of triple redundancy, the Serco had installed a tertiary back-up system for the station mainframe and the medical mainframe under armour so thick that it would take a nuclear warhead hit to disable it. Still, with one system down the Serco Legate took no chances and only allowed POS personnel to dock, and only because State law demanded it. Nobody but the most paranoid would have thought about having a person that was Serco POS bring a thermonuclear device into the station, especially not a device known as an EMP pumper. Brix stayed in the Behemoth waiting while the clock ticked down to zero and annihilation. He would live in another clone somewhere with a different name and a different DNA profile. And even if the Itani bastard lied, he would have hit back at the Serco while getting away from the prison roid.

###

The technician hummed an old military march while thumbing through the latest issue of "Female Fighter Pilots", fresh from Dau and the Waldoze distribution centre. He opened the centre fold and admired the girl and her Prometheus with a nod and a soft whistle. He turned to the other technician on duty who looked at the picture and did a thumbs-up with a toothy grin behind. It was a slow day even though they had to run everything away from the station mainframe. They both scanned the boards quickly, all green lights across. The other technician went over to grab a couple of caffeine-enriched soft drinks and took careful aim to toss one over. He never got that far. A massive sound so deep it was not heard but rather felt, resonated in the floor plates that shook as if an earthquake had hit the station, the floor buckling in a single ripple across and

tossing both technicians to the floor. The light went off and all the monitors died along with their neural implants including the brainpal they had used since it had been inserted in pre-school. They both started screaming with the pain of malfunctioning implants enhanced by sensory deprivation in the now completely dark tomblike room. If it weren't for the complete lack of power inside the station, all the control lights would now be red for critical malfunction. More than two hundred and ninety million mem-cordings, sixty something million clones and the current hundred and forty eight revivals had been erased or died in the blast and resulting power out. The Itani had hurt the Serco war effort badly, and with a UIT pilot driving the Behemoth that contained the device, had put the blame squarely on the ones responsible for the terrorist act in Cantus.

###

Riddik looked over John's shoulder while he punched the address into the SSCU. A confused looking young man opened the channel, frowning as he saw John and Riddik.

"What, who, whom...How did you get this number?"

John grinned, he loved this part.

"Indecent Proposal six-three Alfa."

"Excuse me?"

"Check in your codebook son, Indecent Proposal six-three Alfa."

The young man looked doubtfully at John before nodding and pressing a button that made John's screen go black. A minute later he re-appeared on the screen.

"Councillor Eldritch, what can I do for you?"

"Get me Keria Willenium CIT ID (omitted for security purposes) online on this SSCU please. It is a priority Alfa-Z."

"Yes Sir. Standby Sir."

The screen went black again

Three minutes later a red-faced and puffing slender woman gathered her wet and bright red hair in a ponytail as the screen went online again, her confusion about being here very obvious. She turned to the communications tech.

"Is this on?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Keria!"

She turned and grinned fiercely at the screen.

"Riddik baby."

"Keria."

John looked at Riddik and cleared his throat.

Riddik almost blushed at that point but managed to suppress it. He turned to a broadly smiling Keria.

"My love, how are you? Are they treating you good?"

"Riddik, you didn't call me for that. I am good, they are treating me good. What do you want baby?"

Keria finished gathering her hair and wrung it, letting the water drip all over the floor and focused on the screen.

"Well, I missed you? Or rather, I miss you. I called you to tell you that I have been offered a spot with TGFT."

"That sounds good. Do you want to?"

"Yeah, they are kinda cool. I have a spot for you as well baby."

"Aw, that would be awesome but I can't. You know I can't and especially not now."

"What do you mean baby?"

"SCAR is dying Rid, and I am helping in twisting the knife. Besides, I cannot leave my home and my people. But you should do it and then we can move to Pyronis or Helios for both our needs?"

"Yeah, I will. Listen, you go and do that thing, and I'll join TGFT. I have been told I can reach you on this one at all times, so we'll talk. Love you."

Keria smiled and leaned close to place a kiss on the screen.

"Right back at ya love. Next time, a little less priority on the call, okay? Then maybe I can finish my shower before running to the SSCU."

She extended a hand towards the controls and the screen went dark.

"Guess I am in John."

"Not quite mate. We have a small initiation rite that you need to participate in. I'll book a time for you."

Riddik looked in amazement as John started cackling like a madman. What the hell was he getting into?

## **28. Counterattack**

William could not twist the ship into the corridor leading to the STC and decided instead to go for the nearest airlock. Sure enough, the airlock was cut open and some sort of ship was docked to the airlock blocking access to space. A plan started to hatch and William opened a secure line to Janice.

"Where are you?"

"No matter Jan, are those two pilots ready?"

"Yes, they are waiting for you command."

"Sweet, link the squad into this secure line and call me back. I got work to do."

Janice cut the line while she waited, giving William a bit of quiet time to fine tune his plan. It was going to be a gamble but as with most such things the gamble would be worthwhile if it paid off. He locked his neutron guns on the access door to the ship that was attached to the station and waited.

"Banzai 01, Banzai 02. All Banzai present and accounted for."

That meant that his entire team of the elite Itani Swift Wind squadron were present. Probably the top twelve fighter jocks the Itani military had to offer and the Serco did not seem to be aware of their presence. That was why the plan might work; they would have surprise on their side.

"All Banzai call-signs, listen up. We are going to do as follows."

###

Pourdon had guided his squad to the Atlas and managed to get them all onboard with their valuable cargo. They closed the airlock and secured themselves for high-speed manoeuvres including the thing in the cage. Something had happened to second squad that had prevented them from taking the last objective, but that was not mission-critical. They had the mission critical item in his Atlas and the first platoon had already boarded and was disengaging as his squad stripped in. They would need maybe another thirty seconds to succeed completely. He looked around to make sure all his troopers were securely fastened and met the gaze of each and every one of them. The grins said it all; they had succeeded above and beyond the wildest expectations. Pourdon nodded and hit the all-clear signal, informing the Atlas driver that they were ready for disengaging. A slight change in gravity signalled that the nano bots had been given a self destruct command and ceased securing the Atlas to the station. They were now back

under the ship's gravity drive. Pourdon relaxed slightly, it was now out of his hands. He opened a channel to the command net

"Lead this is marine three bravo. Target secured and stowed. Handing over command."

The reply was swift; their leader had been waiting for this moment.

"Roger marine three bravo. I assume command. Good job men. All assault teams disengage, I say again disengage."

The Atlas lurched sideways as the pilot engaged the turbo disregarding the damage the three metre flames would do to the surface of the station. Time was essential and they needed to get away before the Itani could reinforce from the other stations in Cantus.

###

Yarina kept her head down to keep from giving her thoughts away. She had heard of Serco face recognition software that could read your most likely thoughts from facial expressions only and even though she had received training in negating such intelligence gathering devices, she had no idea how sensitive it would be. And it would be a disaster if they could read her mind right now. She had three options right now. She could wait it out and hope for rescue, she could get close to Utia and detonate her bomb or she could just explode the bomb and hope that the explosion took the ship out as well. In reality though she couldn't use option three as it had too much chance of the Serco surviving with Utia and that was not an option. She had to decide what option to use before the Atlas jumped out of Cantus but as long as the Atlas was anywhere in Cantus there were still a chance of rescue. After all, she didn't want to kill Utia and especially not when it meant killing herself as well. She kept averting the gaze of the Serco marines and played her mind games silently as the Atlas roared outwards.

###

A large explosion that ripped the third Atlas apart heralded the counterattack. William had fired his twin neutron guns directly into the ship through the open armoured gate at the back wall of the cargo compartment tearing through the lightly armoured wall and tearing the safety covers on the battery to shreds before shorting it. The explosion pushed his own IBG back into the tunnel and shredded the front armour but cleared the route into space. He thumbed the turbo and roared into space on a pillar of flame like a vengeful angel of death. That was the signal for the other two IBG's to break out and engage the two SVG's that were guarding the launch bay. William twisted his own ship and roared with satisfaction at getting a targeting solution on the nearest SVG. He fired a long streak of neutrons into the dazzled Serco and tore the light fighter to shreds before the Serco had a chance to avoid the shots. The other Serco boosted down and away from the station almost directly into the path of the two other IBG's that had just exited through the air locks. Caught from three sides the Serco pilot hit the turbo to escape the cross fire but too late. The six neutron guns from the IBG's reduced the SVG to an expanding fireball and William gave the GO signal to the remaining banzai callsigns. This was not over yet.

###

Cat saw the Atlas launch and readied for the extraction. It had been fairly boring so far, precisely how it should be. The large explosion on the other side of the station changed all that. She focused on the launch bay ahead and waited for something to exit while listening to the curses of the two pilots that were guarding bay one. The disappearance of the SVG's on the screen and the new hostiles could only mean that the Itani had somehow broken through the barrier that the strike force had set in place. She twisted her ship and moved towards the now unguarded exit. It was spawning Valkyries at a faster rate than she had seen before; these were not rookie pilots for sure. She felt a knot form in her stomach as the three IBG's accelerated towards the Atlas that had only just launched and she boosted to intercept them. Within four hundred metres she had the rear most in her sights and depressed the trigger spewing neutron death into the lightly armoured rocket shaped interceptor, destroying it easily. The drain on the battery forced her to jump

out f turbo and the enemy surged ahead. The lead IBG closed the distance to the Atlas and punched holes all over the left side of the assault ship. A normal Atlas would have exploded under the withering fire but the extra armour had been worth every extra kilo. The Atlas continued as the lead IBG fell behind with the same problem she had just had. Cat smiled a predatory smile that would make herds of cattle stampede to get away. The shooting that the Itani scum had just done had in effect sealed his fate. She boosted at half battery towards the IBG and as soon as it was within reach she poured the remaining power into her guns hitting with every shot. The interceptor exploded violently and she screamed in joy. Now she just needed to kill the last IBG before it could hurt the Atlas further and she boosted after it. On the radar she could see the remaining SVG's and Prometheus's engage the by now nine Valkyries that had appeared in rapid succession from the station. The Itani were outnumbered two to one and the Serco only had to fight until the Atlas's had safely jumped out of the system.

###

The message popped in on Fletholm's screen and was about as welcome as a twenty pound turd. If it weren't for his extreme laziness he would have spilled his koffee, now he merely swallowed and summoned his Itani and Serco specialists. Eggert was the first to pop his head in, his boyish nerdy features sporting a wide grin.

"I knew it, or rather I knew they would do something like this."

"Spill it Eggert."

"Seems like we were framed Sir. A UIT trader named Brix," Eggert smirked and looked at Fletholm," heard of him?, escaped from the Xang Xi prison roid yesterday. Found some of his own stash and drove a Behemoth loaded with a nuclear device into the primary Serco revival facility and detonated the contraption. apparently he killed the entire revival facility in one stroke. If I may put in my two creds worth, this smells like Itani secret service so badly that I am willing to put a months pay on it."

Fletholm nodded and indicated the message on his screen.

"This is from the Serco Diplomatic Corps asking us kindly to explain why a UIT citizen would do that."

"Maybe it has something to do with the little thing we sprung on the Tani Sir? You know, the thing on Eo?"

Fletholm almost told Eggert what had happened but remembered that it was for him only.

"Maybe, but how do I wiggle out of this one?"

"That is why they pay you that exorbitant amount of money Sir."

Fletholm frowned and nodded while focusing on the screen again.

"Yeah, I get to earn my pay these days for sure."

Eggert grinned and left the office leaving Fletholm to solve the trouble. Sometimes it was good to be the smallest fish in the pond.

## **29. Defeat is not an option**

William was throttling the turbo on and off in small fast steps to keep the speed up and close with the Atlas. He was almost there with 1004 metres to go when he detected the very distinct energy spike of a battery being emptied into the warp drive generator. He throttled to maximum and tried to close before the Atlas jumped out. His HUD indicator lighted up.

"Targeted ship jumping to D-2. Activate warp drive to follow."

William grinned fiercely and hit the warp drive immediately, looking down at his battery read-out when he didn't jump at once. He cursed loudly and checked his rear facing radar to see where that chasing SVG was; almost two clicks behind but closing fast. As soon as the engine had trickled the required

25% power into the battery he hit the warp drive again, feeding the power into exotic material that made up the jump core and forcing the IBG through the small rift in space into sector D-2.

The Atlas was 832 metres away in open space and getting ready to jump again. William resisted the temptation to close and fire instead using the power plant to feed the battery with power.

"Targeted ship jumping to M-12. Activate warp drive to follow."

This time William was ready and engaged the warp drive immediately jumping at the same time as the Atlas. He exited 493 metres away from the Atlas in a small roid field. Several red radar echoes flooded his screen but he chose to ignore it focusing on the Atlas. He hit the turbo, closed to 240 metres and aligned his guns. The SVG that had followed him before had jumped in previously along with a set of Proms and were closing on his ship so he needed to make it fast. He fired his guns into the Atlas, tearing the remaining armour plating off and punching into the vitals. The ship exploded violently with two part ejecting, one large than the other; life buoys. He sprayed the large buoy with neutron beams and tore it completely apart slagging it violently into an expanding ball of plasma.

His ship lurched violently as neutrons peeled armour off on his rear; the SVG had closed with him. He started a random dodge that took him over towards the remaining buoy but had to swerve out of the way as the SVG pilot had anticipated that and was covering that direction with a torrent of fire. William hit the turbo and boosted outwards, the SVG hot on his tail.

The two Proms guarded the remaining buoy and the rapidly cooling ball of plasma. He grinned and made a long and wide turn back towards the roidfield at maximum speed. The twin Proms opened fire with their Gatling turrets but were apparently out of flares as William had hoped and calculated with. He dodged the turrets easily and went directly for the buoy. For no more than a split second he had a clear shot and took it. The buoy exploded as had the other buoy and William shouted a victory scream across the ether.

The single flare remaining on the rear most Prom almost took him out at that time reducing his ship to 2% effective armour and tossed him around almost colliding with a particularly nasty looking roid. The SVG hammered circular holes into the roid all around him but he managed to dodge the lethal beams. He once more boosted for open space with all warnings blaring inside the smashed up IBG. As he hit the 3k mark he had more than three hundred metres to the SVG and decided to chance it. He hit the jump switch and felt rather than saw the neutrons from the SVG hammer through space all around his ship but missing.

He entered the Tellus control sector and kept on going as fast as possible for a docking bay. He needed a new ship and come out to fight the remaining Serco.

###

Cat cursed as she saw the IBG dodge her streams of neutrons and jump safely out of the sector. That had been one seriously gutsy pilot and he had known how to fly as well but it still annoyed her that she had missed him. She kept flying out and opened a channel to the two Proms.

"Any survivors from the Atlas?"

"Nothing larger than a grains of sand in the two clouds. He smashed it up completely."

"Roger, wait for the medic Atlas and secure that. Let him scoop whatever we can salvage up if he can. I am jumping after him, I'm gonna nail that Tani good."

"Wilco Cat, good hunting."

"Yeah."

She closed the channel and jumped for the rendezvous point finding it a complete mess of red and green echoes. She went for the closest red echo and boosted within fighting range engaging the unsuspecting Valkyrie from the beneath the rear

hammering a well placed set of shots into the thinner armour around the engines. The Valkyrie, already weakened by the fight with the Prometheus took the safe choice and broke combat running towards the main Itani force. Cat grinned and followed the faster ship intent on killing it. After all, she had not been hit once today and most of the enemy were in the red.

###

Yarina felt the familiar sinking feeling in her stomach when the Atlas jumped out of the sector and then again and again. The heavy vibrations from the engines ceased and gave way to the relative silence of an active ship. None of her Serco captors said anything to her or among themselves. She focused on the slow and regular breathing of Utia II and tried to recognise any features, the small twitch he usually made in with his left eye, the slight downturn of his lips in the left side or anything really. She looked around the Atlas but was careful to keep her eyes no higher than at knee level of the marines. A hard sound of metal against metal shocked her and she peeked up at the sound. One of the marines had punched his hand into the wall, looked like it was in anger. She almost smiled but kept it from spreading to her features. The marine leaned closer to Yarina and grasped her chin in his armoured hand forcing her face upwards.

"Don't get your hopes up wench. We still have you and the pilot and that will be enough. The Lady will triumph after all."

He pushed her away with such force that she fell backwards and hit her head on the bulkhead. The pain almost made her faint and she had lights flashing on the backside of her eyelids. She kept her eyes closed and touched her neck gingerly. She brought her hand in front of her eyes and opened them. The fingers were bloody. The marine on the other side saw the blood as well and smiled broadly at the damage he had done. She realised that that she didn't count in this equation and that they would eliminate her as soon as they had qualified medical personal on hand. She smiled a sad smile at the marine and nodded slowly. She extended her hand to touch Utia II's ever so softly. She couldn't quite say it but formed the words with her lips.

"I love you unknown soldier. Another life."

She looked back up at the marine that had observed her pain with glee. She smiled a sad smile again.

"For Akan."

The small device she had inserted detected her vocal command, detected that it was her voice and fulfilled its parameters. The miniaturised containment field that was the main bulk of the device and was storing zero point nine grams of anti-protons, stopped the power feed. Within a millisecond the remains of the containment field had malfunctioned catastrophically and the device detonated with about as much force as two hundred kilo's of high explosives. The effect on the Atlas was devastating; the innards of the ship were torn completely to shreds with multiple secondary explosions melting the remains to a cloud of mixed elements. The remaining part of the Omega project ceased existing.

###

Janice twisted her Valkyrie away from the incoming fire and boosted for the main group of Itani fighters. That Vult had appeared from out of nowhere and hammered her engine section into the red. The Itani were winning slowly but surely. The elite Swift Wind squad had already evened the odds and the Serco pilots were outnumbered slightly now. The turning point had come when the last Prom had used all of its flare ammunition and was at that point reduced to a Gatling turret for weaponry. Not really a challenge to a halfway decent Valkyrie pilot, and these were the very best. She held off for a minute and tried to see who needed her help. That Vult from before seemed to be deciding for her, going at top speed towards her own Valkyrie. She grinned and started her dance of death with the Serco pilot the intended victim.

###

The wormhole streamed exotic particles, the indication that something was defying normal space and transcending the

vastness into Deneb. The Itani Battle Commander sighed and moved his icons on the command screen. The twenty or so triangles that were shown in red around the wormhole were quickly swarmed by his triangles of blue assisted by the blue squares and pentagons from further away, eliminating them one by one. It took maybe two minutes and the red triangles had all disappeared. He had lost a couple of triangles himself and a single square. He counted his geometric shapes and decided that he could still fulfil his mission parameters. As he had done nine times now.

In real space the twenty Serco fighters piloted by new pilots recruited by SCAR had entered the wormhole with not much other than patriotism for help. Given a barely adequate training that allowed them to fire their weapons and hit training bots while piloting out-dated ship models, they were expected to do precisely what they achieved. Buy time for the Serco defence forces to mount a credible assault force and take the wormhole back. The twenty fighters exploded one by one in a gesture of futility, destroyed by the Itani pilots almost as derived of feelings as the Itani Battle Commander; it could just as well have been bots.

Some of the Itani pilots had been flying Combat Space Patrol (COSP) for more than 70 hours now with the aid of combat drugs and could look forward to another 40 hours of COSP at least. A large assault force was being assembled to take the fight to the Serco by invading Geira Rutilus and destroying the station on the wormhole exit. It had been debated in high command whether to try and take the station with marines but since the Serco marines outfought the Itani by a factor of five to one; the complete destruction had been seen as the rational choice.

### **30. Orders**

William crashed the IBG into the docking bay hitting the cradle with enough force to melt the ship into the latches normally used for securing the ships. That ship was not going to fly anywhere and the cradle was going to be completely refurbished before it could be used again. William recovered

from the impact and jumped out of the wreckage sprinting for the Valkyrie that sported a large Banzai 01 below the cockpit. He vaulted into the cockpit and hit the launch button before the system had powered up. Nothing happened and a red light popped up instead telling him that a message was waiting and needed to be answered. He swore and punched the receive button.

"Banzai 01, what do you want?"

"This is Colonel Masatinha. I need you for a special mission."

"Sir, with all due respect I need to go and lead my pilots against the Serco."

"Negative. I have someone that needs to be escorted off the station now. And I need a pilot for that vessel."

"Honestly Sir, I am needed in the fight."

"No. Get over to the transport Atlas and do as you are told. Masatinha out."

William punched the radio hard cracking two knuckles on his left hand. He pushed the tactical frequency and called Jan.

"Banzai 02 this is 01."

"Go for 02."

He heard the strain in her voice and winced, she had to be in a fight right now.

"Baby, I have been re-tasked. I cannot come and help you."

"Crap, we could use you. Stand by."

William winced as he could hear the impacts on the Valkyrie through the radio."

"Crap he is good. We'll take them my love. 02 out."

William put his hand on the radio with the affection he could muster. He needed to be out there, not flying a crappy support vessel. He got out of the Valkyrie and ran over to the Atlas that was opposite in the launch bay. He pushed the power button and opened the pre flight coded destination. Deneb; cargo two passengers, both frozen. What the hell was so important that they couldn't wait? He launched and opened his radio on the tactical net. He checked his weapons load and was moderately satisfied. The mega-positron and flares suited his combat style fine, not that he was going to do anything on this flight. Besides, with all the medical facilities in the cargo bay of his ship he was so heavy that he could not dodge if they paid him.

He launched and turboed immediately for the jump point.

"All Banzai, 07 is down. Pod active."

That was lance corporal Tatting, the freckled kid from Divinia. William wished him well as he chucked away towards the jump point.

###

Janice shouted a curse at the pilot in the SVG as the ship dodged stream upon stream of neutrons. She dodged the incoming rays herself as well, but maybe once per twenty shot the neutron beams tore armour off her Valk. The SVG moved in once more in a forward barrel roll and Janice fired a stream where the SVG would be in half a second. But it wasn't, once more dodging her shots and sniping a single pack of neutrons into her own front. The SVG danced outwards again no doubt setting up for another run.

"All Banzai, 08 and 04 are down. Pods active."

The enemy was down to four Proms and two SVG's, one of them the one she was fighting. A large explosion signalled the end of another Prom and they were now equal in number. She focused on the SVG again and tried to compensate for the dodging. There was a tendency to dodge down and left every time and she set her strafe up to compensate. The SVG moved in again in a forward barrel roll and Jan fired a stream of

neutrons where she believed the smaller ship would be. She was rewarded with twin hits on the SVG but was hit by another stream herself. She glanced at the armour status and winced at the 2% she had left. Another explosion, this time a double removing a Prom along with a Valkyrie, lighted space in flames of red.

"All Banzai, 03 is down. Pod active."

The SVG danced inwards again, this time dodging in a diamond shape pattern almost straight at Janice. She disabled the auto aim function and sprayed the area with neutrons hitting the SVG again and at the same time dodging the incoming fire. The SVG rolled slowly and strafed closer and closer to Janice's Valk eventually hitting it. The life support pod detected the impending danger and launched her sideways while the fireball expanded slowly like a flower opening to the morning sun.

"All Banzai, 02 is down. Pod active. 05 assuming control."

Janice was not aware, she had lost conscience when the pod was ejected and she would not wake up again before being picked up by the recovery ship.

###

Cat flew through the expanding ball of debris, ignoring the life support pod and targeting a new Valkyrie, this one fighting a Prom. A well-placed set of shots exploded the heavy fighter and she targeted the next Valkyrie. Only two of the Itani left now and she called for the recovery Atlas. She sent the prom off to assist the other Prom and went to help the SVG's that were deep in the red both of them. The Valkyrie saw her close and dodged to the side at the cost of a hit from one of the SVG's. Slowly rolling and boosting up, the Itani pilot repaid the kindness with a twin hit across the wings of the lead Vulture, exploding it. The dance of violence continued with streams of neutrons marring the space all around the ships. The last two Proms exploded with 0.1-second delay, the force from the destruction of one spilling over and destroying the other.

A new wormhole exit spawned the recovery Atlas along with a SVG and the surviving Valkyrie boosted hard to intercept it and deny the Serco to rescue their own pilots.

"Cat this is Kael. Defend the Atlas at all costs."

Cat was reassured that the Serco commander was still in charge and broke off her engagement to intercept the Valkyrie before it could harm the Atlas. The Itani pilot managed to fire several shots into the recovery ship before Cat came into range, but broke off and turned to Cat's SVG. Cat dodged hard left and down while rolling slowly, defeating the auto aim on the opponents ship. The Itani knew of this tactics however and countered with a slow backwards roll as well while keeping the fire up criss-crossing space in front and to the sides of her with powerful neutron streams. A flashing of red in her HUD indicated a hit on her left wing and she dodged right and up almost as per reflex avoiding the long burst of neutrons that followed her. Cat disabled the auto aim function and depressed the trigger spraying a burst in a small cone around the Valkyrie. One of the shots hit true and the larger fighter exploded to a victory shout from Cat.

The other Itani ship had exploded as well finally succumbing to the two SVG's. She opened a connection to the Atlas and queried the amount of pods. Satisfied that her fellow soldiers had been saved, she flew over to the other SVG's to provide protection for the recovery ship. At least something could be salvaged from this crap mission.

"Cat this is Kael."

"Go for Cat."

"Bad news Cat. I just received our new orders."

"You've gotta be kidding, are we going to attack the station again?"

She glanced at her damage readout and frowned at the 37% left. Not a good start for an assault.

"Worse. I received orders from the highest authority to eliminate all Itani pilots."

"So what, we already did that."

"No Cat, the pods."

Cat felt bile rising in her throat; that was so wrong. You didn't kill unarmed and chanceless pilots.

"Roger Sir. Is that an order Sir."

"Don't be like that Cat. I'll send you a copy. It is signed by Grand Inquisitor Ahriman himself. Sorry about this Cat, but you are it."

Cat almost spat at the screen but remembered that she was wearing a full-face helmet.

"I'll go to the secondary sector and the station sector. You eliminate the ones here. That is an order, acknowledge."

"Wilco Kael. Or should I say Asteroth?"

"Yeah, whatever. The Lady be with you Cat."

He disappeared along with the other SVG leaving her alone with the Itani life support pods. She grimaced and sent a small prayer to the Lady as she aligned the first pod in her targeting reticule.

"The Lady's peace to you Itani."

She depressed the trigger tearing the Itani pilot to pieces along with the pod. Eight to go.

### **31. Descent into hell**

"Noooooooooooo"

William saw in horror as the emergency pod indicated that it was getting hit and then stopped sending vitals. That was the second pod in less than thirty seconds and meant that someone was deliberately killing his squad's life support pods.

"Tellus control, I am ditching this mission and am going to intercept the pods of the Banzai call signs."

No response, static. He turned the Atlas away from the course towards the system wormhole and engaged the turbo once more boosting for the jump point to the sector where the emergency pods were, where Janice and their unborn baby were. Another pod winked out and William punched the screen hard cracking it and making him remember the two smashed knuckles.

"Aaaah stop it you fucking maniac!"

Another winked out before William could jump into the sector. A single SVG that was rather damaged flew from a small piece of wreckage towards another pod. He opened the inter sector hail.

"Stop it Serco. For the sake of Eo, stop it."

"Sorry Tani, orders."

He saw in horror as the SVG destroyed another pod and shouted impotently in rage. He boosted directly for the SVG intent on its destruction before it could destroy the remaining five pods. The SVG ignored him and likewise boosted hard for one of the pods. William checked the readout and winced. Banzai 07, Tatting, the new kid was never going to have a chance to invite that girl from the Baked Onion out on a date. The SVG destroyed the pod and the life behind with too little effort switching target immediately. William found Janice's pod and moved to block access to it. The SVG destroyed two more pods making William nauseous. It was his best friends that were getting executed there and all he could do was watch. The SVG turned towards William and the two pods that were behind his Atlas. It moved in a slow barrel roll forward until it was within 800 metres of the Atlas where it hit the turbo and

surged forward at great speed. William fired a spread of flares and mega positron beams at the SVG but due to the unexpected burst of speed he overshot and missed. The SVG fired a set of neutrons that William dodged easily. He was however not the target and the pod behind him didn't dodge taking the beams head on. It was completely destroyed leaving one pod left; Janice's.

William focused on the SVG as it twisted out of his reach setting up for another run. It rolled slowly inwards but he kept his fire. Suddenly it accelerated and he shot a single flare towards the SVG firing the mega positron below the light fighter. It evaded upwards but still sniped off a set of neutrons. William dodged into the shots and took them head on.

"How long can you last Tani?"

"Longer than you bitch."

He knew that one solid flare hit was enough to kill the Serco pilot and kept the pod behind him while aiming carefully. Apparently the Serco pilot knew it too and kept outside of the 800 metres that was the effective range of his mega positron gun. That kept her safely away from the pod however since neutron guns only had a range of 600 metres. William punched the Itani defence channel.

"Any pilot this is Banzai 01. Need immediate help with single Serco Vulture."

"Roger, this is Oscree Garden strike force, inbound your location in one minute."

William focused on the Serco, he just needed to keep it away for one more minute and then it would be swarmed and killed. The Vulture made another forward rolling attempt at closing to Janice's pod and William fired another flare just above the Vulture with several beams of positrons underneath it. The Vulture twisted and dodged out to the side firing a set of neutrons at the pod. William dodged into the beams and winced when he saw the damage readout turn to 66% left. A

set of expanding rings of exotic rays predated the arrival of a set of Vultures.

"Banzai 01 this is Oscree 11 and 12, we will take over from here."

"Negative Oscree 11, I'll stay on station and guard the pod."

The two vultures started chasing the SVG and William focused on the pod. It was still showing full functionality and he considered dumping his cargo and scoop Janice up instead. He didn't know what was inside the medical pod he was carrying but he was certain that it would kill the two "passengers" inside if he dumped them and that would be the same as murder. The three twisting vultures moved closer to William and he focused once more on the SVG ready to take any shots that were fired at the pod. The SVG moved with its rear to William and made an ass-over-head move while sniping yet another set of neutrons towards the pod before twisting back to dodge and engage the strike force. The strike force pilots used the manoeuvre to fire several strings of neutrons at the SVG but missed. William was ready and dodged into the SVG shots taking the hits on his armour but missed the beams of the strike force, one of which tore into the pod. The life status indicator flickered from green to yellow to red in two seconds. William looked at the display in shock trying to understand what just happened. He sobbed one loud despairing cry before his voice broke and became a keening. He hammered the sector wide radio button.

"You incompetent pieces of shit."

He fired a flare directly at the strike force vultures disregarding the IFF that prevented his flares from detonating, hoping that the presence of the SVG would trigger the detonation. It did and the three Vultures flew apart damaged by the flare. The two strike force vultures were now designated as enemy on his radar, the direct hit overriding the IFF. He pumped another flare into the Vultures strafing them with mega positrons at the same time. The SVG boosted off and ran for the jump mark. William ignored it for now and proceeded to smash the two strike force Vultures to bits. The hails that cried for cessation of fire were

ignored as he killed first one pilot and then the other, ensuring their demise with a mega positron shot to the rescue pods. He was alone in the sector with only the holed pod that contained the dead Janice as company. A large warning sign blinked on and off on his HUD telling him that the Itani government now saw him as their enemy. He had been labelled KOS. William frowned and thought for a second.

"If that is how you like it, so be it."

He ejected the cargo and scooped Janice up instead. Through tears he boosted for the 3k mark and deep space. He needed to be alone and figure out what he was going to do now. He had been betrayed by his own people. He had failed Janice and their baby by blindly following orders from the same people. Someone was going to pay for this.

###

Kalimenshae Kael aka Asteroth jumped away from Tellus station after fulfilling his grizzly task and met up with Cat.

"Finished?"

"Yeah. Had some problems with a Tani in an Atlas but the stupid strike force finished it for me."

"Can you make your own way out to Helios?"

"Yeah, I'll just lay low for a day or two until they get tired of looking for me."

"Roger Cat. Sorry for that last task but it was directly from the headquarters. I'll be seeing you in grey, ja?"

"Yeah, sure."

He watched her jump out and turned for his own escape route. He would have to take the long route with the Itani still in command of the Geira/Deneb wormhole, but at least then he would get some time to think the scenario through and figure out why it had gone so spectacularly wrong.

###

Admiral of the Fleet Otestrom sat in his command chair with closed eyes and received the news from Tellus, all of it bad. Not only had the Omega been destroyed along with the unfortunate Captain Utia Taerow and the entire team been killed, but it looked as if the Serco had succeeded in killing the entire Swift Wind squadron as well. And not just disabling it, but pod killing it to a man and woman.

"We have a theory that William Cutting, the squadron leader, helped the Serco invaders. He is accused of at least two kills on the station guards from Oscree, the two brain-frozen in his custody and finally we believe that he killed his girlfriend as well Sir."

Otestrom opened his eyes and stared at the intelligence officer in front of him who immediately stopped speaking. Sweat started emerging from pores on his forehead and a slight trembling forced itself out into his hands. The intelligence officer stammered on.

"Ehm, we, that is ah, the recovery vessel recovered the recovery pod. No, eh the medical transportation pod that he was carrying, sorry Sir. But the prolonged exposure to vacuum had destroyed the contents Sir, ehm thus finally killing professor Raewon and one of his people. Eh, I do not have the name here Sir."

The Admiral leaned forward and folded his hands.

"Are you telling me that William Cutting, winner of the Deneb Star with golden leaves and stars for bravery, the Divinia Commander's seal for valour in combat and last but definitely not least the Itani medal of Heroes in gold with swords and Oak leaves, top scoring ace of his class and incidentally my nephew deliberately killed his team mates he himself had trained for three years and then killed his girlfriend of five years and their unborn baby merely months before they were getting married?"

"Ah, Sir if you put it like that."

"I do. Maybe you need to dig a bit further into that before flinging theories around. How much exists of the Omega project."

"Absolutely nothing Sir. Three low level techs is all. We can attempt a mind reading on the remains of professor Raewon but that would take an executive order from you Sir. Since he is dead he is effectively beyond our reach."

"And I shall honour that. You may not mind read him. Understood?"

The Intelligence officer looked shocked but managed to stammer his understanding across. Otestrom frowned; it had been a high price to pay for the restoration of the status quo, now he had to persuade his Serco opponent to stop these mindless killings of pod'ed pilots.

"Give me the head of the counter intelligence team up here and now. The rest of you, leave us."

He had a plan but it would be risky.

### **32. Taking back what is ours**

The Itani battle group was placed around 1200 metres from the wormhole to Geira Rutilus with a set of fighters parked on the wormhole itself. They had thrown back nine assaults during the last week so far and were still at 80% combat efficiency. The last three attacks had consisted of between fifteen and twenty fighters of obsolete designs and they had been destroyed easily within minutes of them arriving in-system. When the sensors were initially showered with exotic particles no-one expected it to be different this time but after a minute of continuous radiation the tech's in the Itani command ship started sweating slightly. The wormhole had disgorged no fewer than three Tridents, two HAC's and 60 fighters. Of these fighters, 12 were the newest Prometheus design and were marked with a large [ONE] on the side. The battle group pulled further away leaving control of the wormhole to the

overwhelming Serco force and called to Deneb command for help while dispatching its fighters to create a screen for the capital ships.

###

Keria hated the large bulky Prometheus but knew that it was the best ship she could use for this mission. The other eleven members of the new Serco military guild flew at her side in identical Proms, silent and deadly. It had taken her some work to establish, but with the help of three of the better Serco pilots, Veracity, sheffield and Aelius she had convinced Skycommand to accept the new guild as a responsible and powerful part of the Serco military. And this re-taking of the wormhole was going to prove precisely that. She set out for the nearest flight of Itani and designated targets across her squad. A literal wall of flares sped across the ether and impacted all around the IBG's, tearing three apart immediately and damaging two others. The other squad had done roughly the same as she and sheffield had agreed upon earlier with not quite as devastating a result but that was expected, after all the other squad faced a squad of Valkyries. The remaining Itani boosted on still, they knew they had to take the fight to the Serco. Within a second the opposing fighters merged in a furious melee.

Keria hammered Gatling fire into the flanks of a desperately dodging IBG and destroyed it completely, shifting target as fast as her fingers could press the button. The initial Itani screen had been smashed and the secondary was inbound. Keria checked her squad and noted with a small smile that they had only taken slight armour damage. She frowned as she saw a SVG from the Serco Defence Force engage an Itani life pod and hailed the pilot immediately.

"Pilot, belay that. We are Serco, we fight with honour."

"Just doing to them what they did to us."

"Last warning pilot. Belay that and return to your position. Just because the enemy doesn't have honour does not make it necessary for us to lose ours."

"Yes ma'am. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, just don't do it again. For the Lady."

"For the Lady."

She saw the pilot return to his position and smiled. This was the right way of fighting. The second Itani wave entered the 2k-kill zone and the capital ships started firing gauss canons at them. Keria gave the go and her squad surged forward to max. speed before launching another wall of flares at the enemy. The result was not quite as good this time but then they would at least get some fighter vs. fighter combat. Keria grinned, she only hoped Riddik was having as good a time as she was.

###

The light reflected in the mirrored sunglasses of the slender man that sat slowly thumbing through his newspaper in the fashionable cafe "Heart's Desiré". They reflected the warm glow of Dau's yellow sun, the asteroids that had been placed in a pattern outside the station, a testament to the power of UIT, and the slightly pudgy face of Fletholm as he seated himself opposite. The man smiled and removed the glasses revealing the deep blue eyes behind and showed Fletholm that the smile did not reach his eyes. This was no social call after all.

"Mr. Fletholm. I m glad you could make it."

"And you would be...?"

"Not important Sir, I assure you. Call me Utia if you must assign me a name."

"Very well Utia. I received your somewhat strange message and am here. What do you want?"

The man smiled at Fletholm's discomfort. The message had consisted of Brix's personal items and a meeting place.

"I want you to help me."

"I don't see why I should do that? As far as I can see you caused me a lot of trouble."

"Well, tit for tat I guess Mr. Fletholm. "

"I have no idea what you are talking about Utia."

The man smiled broadly and leaned forward.

"Lies Sir. When I said my name was Utia your pulse increased by six percent, a slight reddening of your neck and a minuscule twitch of your left eye gave you away. You are very good at hiding these emotional responses but not good enough. You know precisely what I mean."

Fletholm was no longer in doubt who he was talking to by now.

"How?"

"I need you to ensure that the Serco Diplomatic Service receives a message without any chance of anybody else getting it."

"I see, we can probably do that."

"No, you will do it. There is a slight difference."

"Yes there is. We are even then. This message?"

He indicated a small envelope in the table. The man nodded.

"Yes, we are. Back to business as usual."

Fletholm rose and grabbed the envelope. He stuffed it in his jacket and walked away without further niceties.

###

Asteroth docked his Warthog II in Helios Outpost and gathered his kit bag from behind the cockpit. He had dumped the SVG in Pelatus at the Ineubis station and bought the Warthog instead.

That had allowed him to escape the obligatory pirates haunting Sedina and Odia with little more effort than pushing the turbo toggle to on. He was tired, dead-tired. After leaving Cat deep in Cantus he had boosted immediately for the Jallik wormhole dodging strike forces at every wormhole before running the gauntlet around the Itani nation's border, always a challenge in a SVG. Still, it had taken him more than three days to get out of Itani space. Once out, he had flown aligned for grey space and immediately boosted for Pelatus and a little bit of rest. When he had landed a message signed Skycommand popped up in his HUD informing him that his presence was requested immediately in Helios B-7. He had downed a couple of quick-me uppers with a large mug of caffeine enriched koffee and moved out almost immediately.

A couple of Skycommand Military Policemen were waiting for him, large MP signs on their collars, as he crawled out of the ship.

"Captain Asteroth?"

"Yeah, that is me."

One MP swiped the surface of Asteroth's hand with the DNA scanner and nodded to the other.

"Sir, I must inform you that you are as of this moment a prisoner. You have not been accused at anything yet Sir, but we must insist that you follow along without any problems."

Asteroth sighed tiredly; this was the reason he had hurried home?

"Whatever. Is the Diplomatic Services informed of this?"

"Yes Sir, a certain Mr Beria is going to visit you shortly."

"Right. Well, I hope you have a bed wherever you are taking me. And a shower."

The two MPs walked with Asteroth without forcing him but in such a manner that it was impossible for him not to comply.

### **33. Mutually Assured Destruction, business as usual**

Keria's face beamed with pleasure when the window opened. Riddik's heart was instantly filled with joy at seeing her and especially at seeing her so happy.

"Riddik baby!"

"Keria my love."

"Miss you."

"Miss you even more."

Keria grinned; this could become the longest conversation with fewest words very fast.

"We kicked the Tani out of the wormhole sector Rid, we kicked them out good."

"How so my love? With SCAR?"

"Nah, screw them. They are at best an anachronism by now, an appendix to real warriors. I started a real guild now with sheff, Aelius and Vera, called the Big Red One."

"That explains the uniform and the strange insignia."

Keria grinned even more now.

"I am now officially an Admiral."

"Congratulations love, I can see you are having fun."

"You know what could be more fun?"

"Ehm, not on this public channel."

Keria blushed and looked down before flashing him with eyes shining with mischief.

"Yeah, well that aside. If you came and joined us baby."

"Can't do that. I was initiated into TGFT two days ago. Still hung over."

"Well, nothing to do about that baby. We'll just have to, you know... have more fun? Helios Outpost in an hour?"

"Leaving as we speak."

Riddik grinned like a pimpled teenager that had just been offered a year's lodging at the Playboy Mansion and shut the SSCU off. How the hell he was supposed to make it to Helios in an hour he had no idea. But he would make it, no doubt about it.

###

Beria entered the small cubicle where Asteroth had used the last ten hours sleeping soundly like a dead person. He nodded to his commander and closed the door after him, the loud metallic sound informing them both that it was locked as well. Asteroth got up on one elbow and smiled at Beria.

"Ast, I am not here for a social visit."

"I kinda reckoned. Spill the beans."

"The powers that be holds you responsible for the failure of operation Uranus."

"Yeah, well no surprise. Did they mention anyone else?"

"No, there doesn't seem to be a list of persons that participated in it. You must have kept it a very tight secret."

Asteroth grinned, Beria must have anticipated that this would have happened and deleted everything. And now Asteroth was set up to take the fall, or rather immense plunge for all of them.

"Well, operational security and everything."

"You know that you will be charged with war crimes right? Why the hell did you do it?"

"Did what? You bloody well know why Beria."

"No, why did you kill all the pilots?"

Asteroth considered informing Beria about his orders from Ahriman but decided against. He looked straight into Beria's eyes.

"They were Tani scum. Besides, they had killed a lot of my people."

Beria saw the facial features betray the words and slowly nodded.

"I see, any last words before you'll be taken away?"

"Yeah, take care of my cat will ya?"

"Your cat?"

Asteroth grinned.

"Ah, your Cat. No problem, I am on it as we speak."

Asteroth nodded and rolled over in his bed. He would not be condemned to death, of that he was reasonably sure. After all, he protected some pretty important persons, but he would probably be tossed out of Serco space. It could be worse. He closed his eyes and saw the pods being ripped to pieces again and again until he fell asleep once more.

###

The Grand Admiral of Skycommand received the message from the Diplomatic Service labelled Ultra Secret, GA eyes only. He activated his neural protection software and inserted the chip. The chip acknowledged the identification of the Grand Admiral and decoded the message into the main memory. He assimilated the information and immediately set in motion the

signs that would indicate agreement. He agreed with the Itani Admiral of the Fleet. It was time to revert to the good old times of MAD where the two nations could exist in relative peace with only major actions going on in Deneb. After all, MAD was a good principle when everybody had the capacity to destroy everyone else. The Lurkers would have to be withdrawn, but with the current combat losses they were but a shadow of their former selves, no big loss to the state. Naturally this would have to remain secret. And that meant rooting the persons responsible for the current quagmire out of the Serco military.

###

William let the cargo crate slip away from his ship and watched it as it silently glided into the very outer regions of Cantus Prime. He stayed motionless, seated in his cockpit crying silently as the love of his life along with his unborn baby slipped away to the fiery burial in the sun. Only when he had not been able to see them for more than an hour did he pull slowly away and boosted for Jallik and the border. He was going to make them all pay for this. He was going to cut them all, he was gunna cut them good.

###

Cat received the message from Beria and frowned. Why had she been fired from the Diplomatic Service? And why had he paid her ten million credits? She wanted to ask a lot of questions, but the message had been very clear. No answers were forthcoming and the only thing she would gain from asking would be a plasma shot in the back of her head. She docked in Aeolus trading prefect and walked up to the residential area. She had better find herself a new place to call home.

###

Kassad touched the grey marble slate with the rows upon rows of stars and bowed his head in remembrance. He had fostered her like a daughter and had been as proud as he had been scared, the first time she went on a field assignment. She had done way above what was expected of her, naturally even

identifying her own limits before her handler. In the end she had ensured that her mission was not compromised, the anti-matter explosion was an attest to that. Unfortunately nobody would know what she had done, how she had done it or even who she had been, however that was the way of Akan. Unlimited devotion to the people coupled with extreme secrecy. But he would remember her every time he stood in front of the memorial slate. He would remember which star was the one that was representing Yarina Oselasis. He would remember her name. He would remember.....