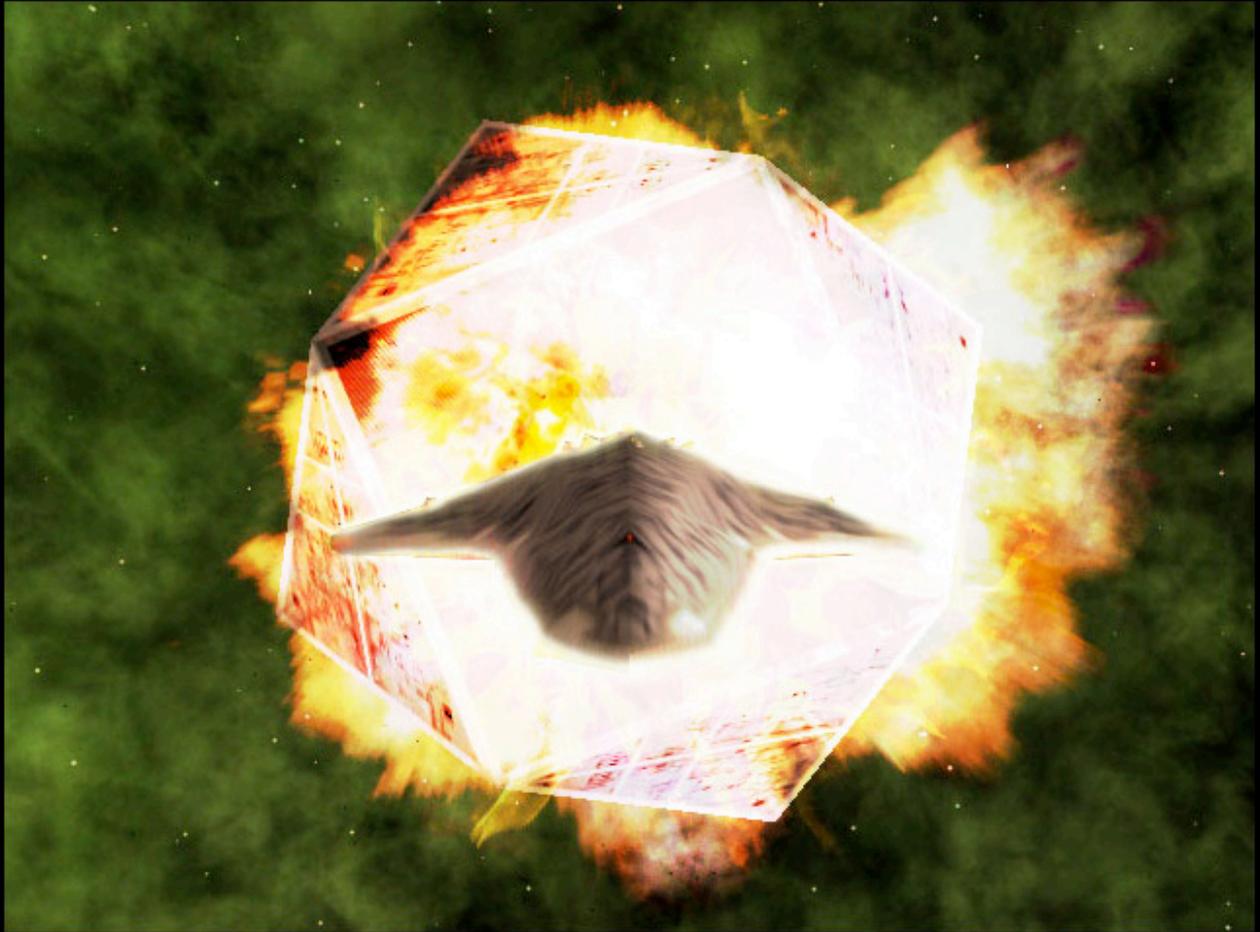


Rise Of The Kirin



**An Oolite Novella By
Commander Wyvern &
ClymAngus**

Preface by ds

Table of Contents

Preface	4
Blackmail	5
Getting Settled	7
Shell Game	8
Respite	10
A New Direction	12
Capitulation?	13
Surprise Party	16
The Wages of Greed	18
Mind Hack	19
Special Delivery	20
The Plot Thickens	21
Esei	23
Starship in a Bottle	25
Plan B	27
Burning Bridges	28
Cloak and Dagger	29
Wolf	31
The Gathering Storm	32
Eve of War	33
Into the Hornet's Nest	34
Fools Rush In	35
Arrival	36
Hell-fight	39

Hard Negotiations	41
10 Seconds	43
A Chance Meeting	45
Blossom of Destruction	46
Face-off	47
Resurrection Man	49
Ghosts in the Mist	51
Bugout	53
Revelations	55
The Machine Waits	57
Mixed Fortunes	58
The Coming Storm	59
End Game	61
Cold Justice	63
Rise of the Kirin	64

Preface

Hello friend, trader, pirate, bounty hunter, or whatever you happen to be this year (or month). I, _ds_, bid you welcome and hope that you enjoy this story.

(Unless you're a Thargoid. We don't like Thargoids around here.)

This novella was written by Commander Wyvern and ClymAngus and was posted in several parts to the Oolite bulletin board (<http://aegidian.org/bb/>), the first chapter and the cover image being posted on 6 April 2009, and the last not yet having been posted.

The text contained herein is essentially that posted to the board, with some attempt to integrate suggestions and improvements made in the forum and with some minor changes of my own (well, I am self-appointed editor!). Those of you who followed the postings on the bulletin board may notice that I merged the original chapters 4 and 5 and called chapter 11 chapters 10, 11 and 12. It just works a bit better this way, I think.

(I'm now absolutely not hiding in the Isdibi system, should any bounty hunters not be after me for the heinous crime of over-editing a story, which of course I've most definitely not committed.)

It was created on 21 April 2009 and last edited on 16 June 2009.

Anyway, enough waffle, on with the story. We find our protagonist aboard a space station, and in a bit of a situation. Must dash; somebody's on my tail...

But before we do a quick word from one of the authors;

If your reading this preface, then the cat is already out of the bag; this novella was (for want of a better word) a bit of an accident. It was a flight of fancy, a moment of whimsy in between posts relating to the very serious business of building ships.

It occurred to me some time ago that Oolite was missing something. There had been a lot of talk on the boards about the ratio of ship size to cargo capacity. Station and rock hermit access size, kind of restricted the maximum size of shipping and there was a gap in the market for a really heavy hauler around the 400 ton mark.

After chatting with Wyvern he agreed that we might be able to fill this gap with something a little special, so began the long slow process of creating the Kirin. I brought my flare for art and 3D design to the table, Wyvern brought his considerable skill for making ships work, focused logic, common sense and flawless reasoning. This partnership forced me to raise my game and not accept half measures that had dogged my earlier work.

Honestly, I could talk about the ship all day, how every part of its creation was reasoned over and honed. That would however be fairly pointless, because if your reading this, then you have already downloaded the compressed file of which this pdf is a part.

The novellas genesis is a little more exotic. It began as an creative game between the makers of the Kirin. After about chapter 6 we realized that we might actually have something here. So we kept the game going. Going so long in fact, that we were still writing a good month after the oxp that inspired it was done and dusted.

Looking back, I personally feel Rise of the Kirin serves several important purposes; It enabled both of us to cut loose with a creative project that didn't involve photoshop or plist text editors. Secondly it enabled us to write our characters into the fabric of Oolite fiction (always cathartic) and finally it kept up the grand tradition of supplying a book with the software to "sweeten the deal".

Sure, we're not talking "Dark Wheel" here, but as e-mail games go I think we got our monies worth.

Blackmail

The large dracolid stood casually at the doors of the hangar bay.

“**State your name and pass clearance,**” the grating voice of the I.D. computer spat.

“Derik Roh'i, Commander 1st Class.”

With a hiss of recognition, the air-tight hangar doors clanked slowly open, splitting the military star painted on them neatly in two.

The hangar was dark. Not a problem, thought Roh'i, as his cybernetic CCD eye, a replacement for the left eye he'd lost in a blaster duel with a fugitive slaver long ago, engaged night-vision mode.

A massive shape loomed out of the darkness. Sitting squarely on three large retractable landing gears, it resembled more of an sleek planet-side apartment building than a ship.

“Beautiful, isn't she?”

Roh'i turned with slight surprise, drawing his blaster; usually, his enhanced senses informed him in advance of impending company. Green eyes glowed unblinkingly from the long grey hood of whoever or whatever it was that addressed him.

“I must apologise for my lack of physical presence,” the stranger continued. “I do find it much easier these days to conduct business via proxy.”

Roh'i put two and two quickly together. It was a conference droid. The operator was probably several light years away, strapped into a total-immersion conference suite. Roh'i holstered his sidearm, knowing the weapon to be practically useless against cyborgs and droids.

“You startled me,” he rumbled. “Who might you be...?”

Before Roh'i could quiz the stranger any more on his somewhat excessive need for privacy, he heard the familiar sound of well-heeled military boot leather approaching behind them. His heat pits pricked and his CCD scanned the newcomer in infrared mode. Hmm, about six foot tall, he's warm, probably used the back entrance, and his cheap aftershave is losing the battle to mask his mammalian body odour. Now I wonder what a military man has to be nervous about?

“Gentlemen, I see you've already become acquainted. Excellent. That means we can keep things short and sweet,” the officer began. “Commander Roh'i, I expect you're wondering why we have requested your presence here today.”

Roh'i immediately recognised the General Senior rank and the SeCom insignia. His mechanical eye speed-scanned the barcode on the General's security badge; Gouglass vor Cheem. Roh'i hadn't heard of him. Not surprising, really; soldiers – even higher up ones – came and went with stark regularity these days.

The reptilian frowned. “Requested? My ship impounded on a Z-code technicality, then I'm practically frog-marched down here? Oh, come on, don't pull my tail! If you'd wanted to, it wouldn't have hurt to call.”

“Well you were littering.”

“I'm a reptile. It's called ‘shedding’.”

“Yes, very handy that.”

Derik shook his head and grumbled. “Seeechleenssy militacch GalCorp feshsssssseeellss...”

The robot made a reasonable attempt at a chuckle. “Yes, I too can see the resemblance.”

The General went a light shade of scarlet. “You weren't brought here for your wit, sun-basker.”

Roh'i got two of the five steps he needed to be able to break both of the General's legs when the cowed figure intervened. It proved to be surprisingly strong for a mere comms droid.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, whilst there is little love lost between any of us at this point, we all, for better or for worse, need each other. Mr. Roh'i, you need your ship back, I need these army types off my back and the general here requires your flying skills and my access to advanced technology.”

“The mass murderer has a point,” retorted the General.

“Look, do you want to win your precious war or not? If so then I humbly suggest we move away from mutual contempt and towards the mutual rewards. I believe you have an offer to make our friend here.”

Gouglass shrugged. “Well, as you two know very well, the war does appear to have entered a new resurgent stage. The problem we have currently is one of supply.”

The robot's eyes burned fiercely. “You spent too much time buying guns and too little time buying the wagons to get them to your war, is what you mean.”

“That's one interpretation of events.”

“What the general is trying and failing to say is, he requires you to test the Kirin here.” The android gestured to the ship. “It's a resupply/drop ship capable of limited naval action. I am correct in thinking you are the commander who test piloted the Dragon class heavy escort craft?”

“Ayup,” nodded Roh'i. “Had a claw in helping to fix the prototype's flaws, too.”

The robot's eyes swam through shades of olive green. “Excellent.”

The reptile crossed his arms defensively, “And what exactly is in this for me?”

Gouglass piped up once again. “Ship returned, 5000 credits in untraceable gem stock, legal records lost. Slate wiped clean, you could say.”

“Really?” retorted the sizable reptile. “I didn't think my ‘slate’ was particularly dirty in the first place. I do help keep the pirate population under control, after all.”

“It's not, but it could be.”

The dracolid considered his options. “8000 credits and you've got yourself a deal. And not a scratch on the Tiomat's paint, ya follow?”

“7400.”

“Deal. You know this all would have been a lot easier if you'd just said please.”

“Do you want to shake on it?”

“No, I'd probably end up happily crushing every bone in your hand for blackmailing me into this travesty of a mission in the first place...”

The comms droid reached into its robes, removed a ship pass key and tossed it to Roh'i. “Have fun and remember to fill the fuel tanks before you bring her back.”

“What makes you think I'll bring it back?” Roh'i grinned, trying not to show off too many of his fangs.

“Well, that's simple,” the machine replied wryly. “He's got your ship, and my great-great-grand-daughter. Welcome to the khaki party, pal.”

Getting Settled

Ramania DeFlores, Derik's young felinid employee and companion, looked around the Kirin prototype's cavern of a bridge. "Wow, what a monster!" she exclaimed. "I almost can't wait to see the living quarters."

"Why don't you do that as you stow our duffels," chuckled the reptilian with a fond squeeze of her shoulder. "We're going to be aboard this tub for a while, shaking the bugs out. Get familiar with her, Kitten."

DeFlores scooped up the bags. "You got it, Boss." She skipped off towards down the corridor leading to the LQ, swishing her tail.

Roh'i set about examining the pilot's chair. "Hmm. Good thing someone considered adjustable seats."

He was adjusting the chair for his height and tail as Ramania returned.

"Got it all stashed?" he asked.

"Sure thing, Boss."

Ramania flopped into the engineering station chair with an easy lack of grace, and began calling up systems readouts. Roh'i settled himself into the pilot's seat, and wrapped his hands around the yoke handles to test the control action.

"While you're in there, check for anomalies that may point to a hidden warhead," he remarked to his crew mate. "I have a hunch our 'employers' aren't on the level and may pull an unpleasant and lethal surprise on us."

Ramania looked to her boss. "Suspicious of something, Boss?"

Roh'i nodded to her. "Something about this deal smells very dishonest to me, Kitten. As you know, crooks are everywhere. Found anything?"

"Not yet... wait, what's that?" Ramania tapped on the console. "Prob'ly just a glitch in the power systems, but I'll keep checking."

Roh'i nodded to her. "Yeah, do that. Meanwhile, begin powering her up. If there's a bomb, we'll eject it into a sun somewhere."

Ramania tapped commands into her console, and the ship sprang to life around them. Roh'i opened a comm channel.

"Control, this is Kirin 1-X, umm..." - the ship needs a name - "*Therenback*, requesting launch."

"Copy, *Therenback*," came the reply. "Permission granted. Stand by for automated launch in three minutes. Have a good flight, *Therenback*."

"Thank you, Control. *Therenback* standing by." Roh'i closed the channel. "Another adventure begins, Kitten."

What an adventure it would turn out to be...

Shell Game



On the station's viewing deck, the droid and general watched as the giant tear-shaped craft swept gently beyond the bounds of the docking slit. The general's grip tightened on the hand rail.

“Why him of all people? I have hundreds of test pilots.”

The hooded figure moved slightly. “That particular family has excellent genetics. Also, I like to keep things as simple as possible, by making life difficult for those who stand in my way. You have my kin. You now have some of the best mineral tech money can buy, blueprints practically for free. I'll be damned if I'll see you in total control of the sea trials too. Whilst it is true that you have a certain amount of leverage and I have slight sympathy with your cause, please do not mistake us for comrades. This is business, pure and simple.”

Gouglass smirked. “It must really hurt to be caught in such a simple trap, Shulth.”

The droid turned, its eyes burning. “You have your family's genetic propensity to gloat, a dangerous trait for someone with such tenuous control of the situation. You really need to learn to quit when you're ahead. Your father didn't know when to stop either, and look what happened to him.”

The colour drained from Gouglass' face.

The machine continued. “The deal stands. You get a dryware ship, no wetware, but with enough tech to keep your R&D departments happy for decades. As soon as the trials are complete, a complete schematic will be delivered by the family to several independent ship yards. This is a tool to help you fight the Thargoid war and is not to be used for general oppression; the easiest way to assure that is to give access to everyone. My great-great-grand-daughter will be returned to me; she will be bio-scanned and, if I find so much as a hair out of place, I will be zeroing four core GalCorp worlds, starting with your home planet. If you have a tiger by the tail, General, it is wise to remember that he still has claws.”

Gouglass began to open his mouth, but the droid ignored him. “This is pointless. Everyone gets what everyone wants. Don't be foolish enough to trade in a physical win for a pyrrhic emotional victory.”

It turned to walk away. “Enjoy the show. We'll be in touch.”

Respite

It had been an easy shakedown cruise so far, with the Kirin prototype showing some quirky behaviour at first, then settling down as Ramania found bugs in the flight system's programming and fixed them. Along the way, they had got in some milk-run trading, using the ship's cavern of a hold to make a respectable profit, well enough to kit it out with the necessary combat equipment.

Now, taking a rest at Oresle while the remainder of the equipment – beam lasers, injectors, military missiles and scoop – was installed, Roh'i, needing less sleep than his young companion, scanned the local news channels while holding Ramania, who'd suffered a nightmare earlier; and, as was her habit during those times, she had climbed into his lap and fallen asleep against him.

The computer terminal beeped for attention, signalling an incoming call. Roh'i patted Ramania's shoulder gently and shook her awake, grinning as the felinid stirred in his lap, then reached to tap the accept call key. The terminal screen showed a live connection, but otherwise remained blank with no video.

“Quite a touching scene. Looks like the infamous Wyvern has a soft spot among all the scales and scars after all,” came the caller's electronically distorted voice. “I hope I'm not being a disturbance.”

“I figured it would be you calling, Mystery Man,” rumbled Roh'i. “And my soft spots are none of your concern. I take it you're calling about the ship?”

“Very intuitive, Mr. Roh'i. How do you and your... companion, find her?”

“Understand that I'm used to the handling of fighters,” Roh'i answered. “I'm not a trader, so freighters aren't my usual choice in ship. With that in mind, your Kirin looks like a freighter, flies like a freighter... you get it, it's a freighter. Any pilot worth the ink on his ticket can fly a freighter, even in combat. As a freighter, it handles well and has a respectable bite in battle, at least against pirates. I'll lay odds it'll live up to the design expectations. As for the rest we found, I'll let Ramania here have the say. I don't keep her around just because she's warm and cute,” Roh'i grinned, “although those are good reasons.”

“Very well,” the caller noted. “What's your take, little miss?”

Ramania grinned, and fed a data disk into the terminal. “Here are the flight recorder data and performance improvements I programmed into the flight computer. I added some revised specs for the power system; I found some instability there that didn't look right to me.”

There was almost an audible smile in the caller's masked voice. “Cute and smart. I thank you, Miss Ramania.”

“Aww, y'welcome. It's what I do.”

“Excellent. Good work, both of you. I'm uploading co-ordinates to your navigational array now. I'll meet you via proxy at the pre-agreed location.”

Udian Foraga Shulth felt the space around him, deep and infinite. He'd forgotten how lonely and cold being a ship could be. A small seed of fragile life bobbing in an inhospitable sea. It wasn't as if he was alone however. *The Hammer of Sorrow's* synthetic mind, with whom he currently shared a body, was by all accounts the nicest kind of schizophrenia. The small but dedicated crew, mostly creations or relations went about their light duties, bioforms and nanotech swarmed and eddied. Repairing, replacing and consuming in beautiful symbiotic unity. Still, it's all about perspective and when you are the ship forging through nothingness, the size of it all can easily lead to thoughts of melancholy.

He pushed this away. There were bigger issues to address and this respite between trials was the perfect time to think. Things had been going well, but this whole situation had not been of his making; and that worried him. Getting Roh'i involved, however, had been a master stroke. He's not on my side or the military, which complicates things for whoever's pulling the strings.

This wasn't about being blackmailed into designing a ship, although lord only knows the universe needed a good-sized trader that could actually defend itself. No, this was about someone trying to get him to stick his neck out just far enough so they could take a good swing at it. Good thing the *Hammer* was packing a modified photon refractor. Having bio-plates pigmented with Melanin didn't hurt either.

Whatever was going to happen, he needed to be ready for it. Shulth reviewed the cargo manifest: 14 medium-yield plasma turrets. If he was going to be flying back into a trap, it would be prudent to halve the odds.

It was time to give the Kirin her full set of teeth.

A New Direction

Shulth's droid silently watched Roh'i eat. It was typical fare for the dracolid: a sizable chunk of raw meat, eaten with bare-handed gusto, followed with a large tankard of local beer. Shulth found this aspect of the reptile's carnivore nature fascinating. Roh'i wiped his snout and clawed hands, stifled an otherwise loud belch, then looked to the droid.

“So what's the game plan, Mystery Man?”

“At this moment, a team of technicians are refitting the Kirin with the components Miss DeFlores specified,” the droid answered. “We are also improving her defences with a battery of automated plasma turrets.”

“Nice! A little extra firepower never hurts, especially if you're wanting to fly into Bug territory.” Roh'i chuckled. “Okay, it does hurt, as in doing out some anguish to the poor pel'k crossing your path.”

“Indeed. I see you equipped the Kirin well. I suppose we'll owe you extra for the service?”

Roh'i shook his head. “No, it's on the house. I took advantage of that big hold and played freighter captain. Made enough to kit her up plus a little windfall. No contraband dealings, mind: computers, furs, booze, spare parts and food. Strictly legit. Why give our pompous partner any more leverage, eh?”

“Your honesty is appreciated, Mr. Roh'i.” The droid produced a data disk from within its robes. “Our business is not yet concluded. This contains the details of the next stage of your... contract. You're expected to launch within three hours, and deliver a special cargo to the co-ordinates detailed within. Any bounties you collect along the way are yours to keep. I will of course be doubling your agreed fee.”

Roh'i eyed the droid suspiciously as he took the disk. “Expecting trouble?”

“None that you won't be able to handle. Some mercenary units may attempt to intercept you. I'm afraid that for reasons I cannot detail at this time, I cannot offer the assistance of an escort. Good luck, Mr. Roh'i.”

“Thanks.”

“I'm curious, Mr. Roh'i, as to your relationship with Miss DeFlores? Feel free to tell me it's none of my business.”

Roh'i chuckled, then grinned. “To be frank, it is none of your business. We're not lovers, if that's what you're thinking. Good Giles, that would never work! We're both orphans, and she was once a hostage with nothing to look forward to but misery as a slave. I took her in after killing the pirate scum lord that was holding her prisoner. She's like a daughter to me, Mystery Man.” Roh'i's expression turned darkly serious. “If she is endangered, then nothing will stop me from taking pleasure in gutting the being responsible, no matter where he's hiding. Understand?”

For a moment, the droid actually seemed to show fear in its green eyes. “I understand completely.”

Roh'i nodded. “I'm sure you do. I don't trust either of you... but I respect you a little more than that pompous fat arse at the moment. The less I smell of him the better.”

Capitulation?



General Senior Gouglass vor Cheem walked smartly and smugly towards the very heavily guarded brig. The aging Coriolis station in which he walked turned lazily in ever decreasing circles around the snow-covered world of Tibecea. For the 10th time that day, he congratulated himself on picking the perfect location to exact his revenge.

Resting on the outer reaches of Galaxy 1, this planet lay within a hair's breadth of the habitable zone of its parent star system. The population, colonists who had been reduced to a feudal state by the planet's harsh environment, seldom ventured within half a kilometre of the surface. The only visible evidence of them being there at all were the insulated smelting stacks that billowed plumes of acrid black and yellow smoke into the thick, pristine white atmosphere.

It was a snowball: an inhabited snowball, but a snowball none the less. You could have a hundred thousand ship strong fleet action here and no one on the planet would feel it, know about it or even bat an eyelid. No innocent casualties. That was important. It gave the military a reason to care, a reason to react and be seen to react. Nothing fills the Sector Commander's heart with more joy than seeing some one-shot squaddie kissing a colonial baby in front of a cheering group of liberated colonists. Hearts and minds, people, you can fight like a madman but if you lose the political game on the home front – well, it's time to cash in your pension and take up Sundack fishing.

So, no civilians, it's bad for morale. The troopers under his command, however, the ones that had swept in and commandeered the elderly Coriolis from its fur-clad colonial custodians: now, they were different. They were window-dressing, infinitely expendable, as was the station itself. It had been easy enough to convince his superiors to agree to this specific location. It's bad for Public Relations for the military to be seen

fraternising with career mercenaries and planetocidal maniacs. It doesn't look good on the holovision. Once again, hearts and minds.

The stage was set. All the unwitting actors were ready to play their parts, especially the reptile and the freak. The general knew that blackmailed allies were the most fair-weather. So, when they returned with the Kirin in a few days time they would both die in such a way that the rest of the Shulth clan would have their star-shaking retribution pointed in a more pleasing direction and his father would finally be avenged. Two birds effortlessly dispatched with one stone.

The trooper stood to attention as the General approached. "Officer on the deck!" the crew-cut feline announced.

"At ease, soldier," Gouglass replied, the words felt comfortable like a well travelled path through a thicket. No surprises, no changes, just simple obedience. "Report."

"The prisoner is secure, sir," The soldier barked nervously. "She's receiving treatment for vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and she appears to be able to eat for a man three times her size, sir!"

Gouglass's eyes narrowed. "Well, despite all the threats, it would appear that the Galactic Navy treats the daughters of Shulth better than the Shulths do."

"Hee-yah! Sir!" replied the guard.

The door complained viciously as the feline wrenched it open. Sitting neatly on the top bunk was what appeared to be the outline of a young human female, no more than 20 cycles old. She was dressed practically in a pocket smattered black flight suit. She made no movement as Gouglass entered.

"Mima Shulth."

Still obscured by shadow, the young woman slowly slid off the top bunk, she moved like a predator eyeing a rival to her territory.

"Yes?"

More amused than generally worried, vor Cheem continued. "You'll be pleased to know that your family has capitulated utterly. My superiors are very happy with the ship they are in the process of supplying, and have instructed me to release you to the care of Udian as soon as he returns from the ship trials."

"Capitulated utterly? Have they really? I doubt that very much."

"Is it so difficult to believe that your family actually care enough about you to do anything to get you back?" he scoffed.

The shadow turned its head slightly, and began to move slowly into the light.

"No, I know they're coming, I just don't believe Papa Chimera is coming empty-handed or that this will end with a simple, bloodless exchange of goods."

It was not the face that horrified vor Cheem. Although sallow, the high cheek bones gave an air of intimidating nobility. Her skin was unblemished and her body well proportioned.

It was her eyes.

They were a vibrant purple, speckled with spinning white flecks that lazily rotated round the pitch-black iris. These two silver hurricanes tore into his very soul.

"You do realise that he'll pull you apart at the cellular level for this? He will know you intimately before you die. Every precursor, every flawed detail of your fat, sweaty mammalian form will be lovingly teased from your still-living flesh."

The general's plasteel night stick flashed across Mima's face, connected solidly with her jaw with a sickening crack. She somersaulted away, slapping the metal wall of the brig then half-slid, half-crumpled to the grey laminated floor below.

"Muuuuuppprrrrrrhhhh!" Mima groaned, dribbling dark orange blood from her prone position.

"That's the first respectful thing you've said since we captured you," vor Cheem retorted as the mocking shrieks of the closing door drowned out his retreating footsteps. "Guard! The prisoner appears to have met with a small accident. Wait eight hours then send for the surgeon to patch that little freak up."

"Sir! Yes sir!" came the familiar reply.

The general retired to his more than comfortable quarters and the full brandy decanter which resided there. "Know me intimately, will he?" snorted Gouglass pouring himself a generous glass. "Well, two can play at that game, Shulth." He eyed part of the partially functional guts of a Thargoid robot fighter, pulsing menacingly on his desk. "You're not the only creature in this galaxy with a long memory. They're coming, Udian; for you, your bitch in the brig, even your pet gecko if he gets in the way. They're coming for all of you."

Surprise Party

Roh'i checked the cargo manifest for the sixth time since leaving Oresle. A few tons each of industrial lubricants, first-aid kits, tools, component parts, industrial-grade gems and alloys, and one hermasealed and triple-locked UPS container simply labelled 'Technical Documents'. All completely legit, and not the sort of haulage that attracts pirates in most circumstances. Also not unusual was the destination, Pteredyne Tech's Factory Station no. 4 at Enonla; it was the sort of cargo a shipbuilding business like Pteredyne ordered all the time.

Yet no details were given on the nature of the load in the briefing data he was given, which struck him as odd. Equally strange was the extra equipment fitted along with the turret batteries: a military shield enhancement, a naval energy unit, and a piece of kit so rare and irreplaceable that only a few lucky commanders had one: a cloaking device.

It was all very strange that such invaluable kit was fitted for a mere milk run, and the Mystery Man's warning that hired guns may try to stop him made Roh'i suspicious that there was more going down than was normal for shakedown runs of a prototype ship, especially a fracking freighter. Not your run-of-the-mill bulk carrier, granted; the beast packed as much total firepower as his Dragon M, if not more, and its laser aim and precise turning made long-range laser sniping a desirable tactic. Still, nothing about this job was adding up...

While they had encountered a few pirates along the way, most of the criminals were flying medium-sized craft armed with beam lasers and standard missiles, and weren't much of a threat judging by their poor evasion tactics. With the skills of Roh'i and his brilliant young mechanic at the controls, the armaments of the Kirin were able to dispatch or scare them off with swift efficiency.

So much for hired mercs, Roh'i thought as he pulled away and out of the corona of the Maxeedso system's sun. Whoever was doing the hiring was reaching for the lowest, and most expendable cannon fodder he, she or it could find. Not to mention the most untraceable... Best to come up with a Plan B, and soon. This deal is starting to smell rather rotten.

Ramania interrupted the big saurian's thoughts. "Hey Boss, the mystery guy... Always puppeteering a mech and masking his calls. Kinda spooky, y'know?"

"Yeah," Roh'i nodded. "Like having conversations with a ghost."

"I gotta wonder what's up with that..."

"I don't know, Kitten, but I'll respect his reasons for the privacy. None of our business, Kitten. We just fly this damn ship, nothing more, nothing less. If this fiasco turns sour on us, we'll ditch this beast and cut our losses, I'll call in some favours, and good riddance to the whole rigmarole. I don't intend to put up with the crazy crap any more than I have to." Roh'i snorted. "I'm getting too old and jaded for nonsense."

Ramania nodded. "I trust your gut feelings, Boss. As always."

She knew he had limited tolerance for cloak-and-dagger dealings. It was all too shady and dishonest for his nature, and usually his instincts steered them away from trouble too hot to handle.

"One more witch-jump, Kitten. You ready?"

"Finally! On your mark, Bossdragon."

"Let 'er rip!"

Ramania tapped a few command buttons on her console, and a soft rumbling vibrated the deck plating as the hyperdrive spun up. A few seconds later came the gravitic surge as the ship fell into a self-generated wormhole.

Enonla. A shining blue-green world. For a high tech-level industrial economy, the planet was mostly pollution-free, due to strict local laws controlling industrial waste. It also helped that most of the factories were orbital platforms. The system was also heavily patrolled; as a corporate state, system authorities could afford to deploy large numbers of police craft. Despite the policing, pirates did make assaults on trade traffic coming into the system.

The warning klaxon sounded as soon as the ship emerged from witch-space.

“Contacts!” Ramania swiftly ID'd the incoming ships. “*Krait mark 1, Krait mark 2, Dragon AN and Imperial Courier*, closing fast!”

“Now that's a welcome wagon. Arm all weapons, Kitten.”

Roh'i opened a broadcomm channel and hailed the ships. “Welcome, gentle beings, to Hell's Kitchen. I'm your chef, Wyvern...” – his jovial rumble turned into a vicious, predatory growl – “and I'm gonna cook you bastards for lunch!”

The reaction from the hostiles was immediate.

“Wyvern? The Wyvern?! Oh frak this! I'm outta here, man. I have kids to support!”

“Ditto what Rosco said, I'm not taking that guy on. My ass ain't iron enough.”

“Vin, Rosco! Get your asses back here, dammit!”

Roh'i switched off the comm, watching the Kraits break and run without firing a shot. “That's two out of the picture already.”

An incoming laser volley from the two remaining hostiles stitched across the Kirin's forward fuselage, quickly dropping the fore shield and cutting through the fuel scoop, rendering it useless.

“Mil' lasers! So they want to play hardball, eh?” Roh'i growled, his throat reddening with rage. “Gimme the nuke!”

Roh'i turned the ship to present the Kirin's narrow side profile to the remaining pirates, locked the nuclear torpedo onto the *Courier* and launched it before targeting the *Dragon* and lancing its hull with a burst from the the side beam laser.

The *Courier* triggered its ECM and turned away from the torpedo, but too late: the weapon struck home, blasting off the *Courier*'s vulnerable outboard engines and leaving it tumbling harmlessly out of control. Escape pods ejected from the stricken craft, the pirate crew deciding to abandon ship before a few rounds from the Kirin's turret batteries caused its overloaded reactor to detonate, spraying debris in all directions.

Meanwhile, the *Dragon* broke to escape the Kirin's side laser barrage, only to come within the firing arc of the Kirin's dual aft turrets. Roh'i switched to the aft gun camera, triggering the ECM as the *Dragon* launched a volley of standard missiles, and lined up the aft beam laser while the *Dragon* began to bleed sparks from its damaged hull. The *Dragon* fired a token laser burst into the Kirin's aft shield; Roh'i returned fire, and the withering combo of plasma ‘shells’ and precise beam laser fire tore the hostile ship into an expanding cloud of debris.

Ramania smirked. “They shoulda taken Rosco's advice.”

“Ayup. What's the damage, Kitten?”

“Minimal. Some hull damage but we're not holed too bad, no atmosphere loss. The nav array is fried, and the scoop is offlined. That's it, Bossdragon.”

Roh'i nodded to her and pulled the ship back on course, activating the Torus.

“Overall, not too bad. Repairs shouldn't cost too much.”

The Wages of Greed

Meechuck Vin, despite the rather fetid air in his cockpit, breathed a huge sigh of relief. His lashed together, clapped-out Krait had, for once, performed within range of its elusive factory specs. He watched, as some distant acquaintances and the smart-looking military corporal paying him for this 'simple' blast-and-grab operation evaporated into white blossoms of shrapnel and cargo contents. Vin didn't mind admitting it he was a coward, and a bloody good one too. If the alternatives were 1) coward or 2) brave frozen blood streak smeared evenly through deep space, then he knew which one he wanted to be.

He had to admit, nagging doubts had started creeping into his mind as soon as the 'target' arrived in system. It had all sounded so much simpler in the bar where he'd woken up that morning: his bar bill paid, 500 credits wired directly into his account, a free tank of sun juice; and all they wanted in return was to scare some hick trader who'd be witching in that afternoon.

The plan was good. "You're just there to make up the numbers, Vin, it's not like you'll actually have to do anything! That's what we've got the *Dragon* for." The plan looked even better after three large measures of Enonlan SornBerry rum.

Unfortunately after the time taken convincing flight control that he was sober enough to fly and getting everyone out to the beacon, they were running late and he'd lost his alcohol-fired urge for the whole endeavour. Still, a job was a job. Then that thing had arrived. It wasn't a ship; it was a small town with engines stuck on the back of it. Correction: it was a small town with engines and enough plasma turrets to happily wage a small war, and it was being piloted by one of the 8 charts' better-known killers. The rumours Vin had heard painted the combateer known as Wyvern as a ruthless demon, said to have very little fear or mercy. *Piss that guy off and you'll soon end up dead*, they said.

Dragon, shmagon, he didn't care if the corporal was a secret elite. This was bad magic; time to go. So Meechuck used the fuel bought for him that morning to leave the others to their fate. Regrettable, but the only witnesses were either dead, as cowardly as he was, or hunter-killer hard-arses like Wyvern who frequented bars much rougher than those he frequently lost himself in. His reputation, such as it was, appeared to be safe.

As his adrenalin levels subsided, his thoughts began to clear and the other driving force that directed Meechuck Vin's rather simplistic actions began once again to assert itself. Opportunism. Looking down, Vin saw the rim of his scanner was freckled with inviting white dots. The mountain ship had Torus-jumped planet-side a few moments ago, apparently completely ignoring the cargo and debris left over from the somewhat one-sided battle. The vague notion that there would be a certain amount of disrespect in sifting through the remains of his compatriots' ships, especially considering his somewhat lacklustre performance, sailed right through his mind without so much as touching the sides.

Screw 'em. They're dead. He's not. Someone was going to profit from this galactic abortion. It might as well be him.

He spun the somewhat sweaty yoke. Next stop, free cred city.

But there was something wrong. Usually, to close the last few clicks, Meetuck double-tapped the Torus drive. This not only got him to his catch quickly but also acted as an early warning system, just in case there were any other ships around that he might need to be aware of. It failed to engage. He rechecked the scanner; a spotted sea of white, no green, yellow, orange or purple, nothing. So he sailed on, blissfully unaware that the cloaked predatory form of the *Hammer of Sorrow* was looming ahead of him, its tell-tale scanner trace hidden behind a sea of pure white squares of cargo and debris...

Mind Hack

Udian Shulth retracted himself from one of the *Hammer's* many bio-interfaces. The feeling of sensory loss always left him cold. He would have to do something about that; leaving a pilot momentarily disoriented whilst they worked out where the ship began and where they ended, was a luxury any commander could ill afford. The shattered *Krait* spun lazily, roughly a kilometre away off to starboard. The catch had been simple enough; by the time he had de-cloaked, the *Krait* was already reeling from one emerald green plasma blast with another on the way. This had convinced its occupant to eject, whereupon he had been dutifully scooped up and confined to the brig.

Flanked by two guards, this tired, heavily scarred old man made his way slowly to meet the erstwhile raider. Upon entering the brig, Udian was subjected to a rare and almost refreshing barrage of verbal abuse.

“What the frak do you think you're doing? I'll have the Corp. down on you like a ton of bricks for this! I know people! I've got a lot of friends here. When I'm done you'll never dock anywhere again. You like flashing blue? Well, you'd better get used to it, that's all you'll be seeing from here on in, you farntless forknuggers!”

This two-bit pirate had made a serious error of judgement. His assumption of strength was not based on the ship which almost killed him but the stature of the man he found himself facing now. This flaw was a telling one. Udian sensed the unmistakable scent of adrenalin in the air. Fight or flight. As fight wasn't an option for this piece of interstellar lung lint, then flight thinly veiled behind dumb, semi-suicidal bravado was the only other possible alternative. This man was a house of cards that would take the merest whisper to bring crashing down.

“The fact you have an escape pod,” Udian began, “leads me to believe that you are adequately insured against the loss of your ship. Convincing said insurer to pay out after they realise its destruction coincided with your misguided foray into piracy – that may be a little more difficult to pull off. Still, the Shulth family would be happy to cover the cost of the cargo you stole from your former compatriots. I trust their frozen corpses didn't clog your fuel scoop?”

“Did you say Shulth?” Meetuck's fear-fuelled confidence evaporated, leaving just the fear.

“Yes, that is correct. Now you have some idea of the situation you've found yourself in. I would really like to know the events that led up to our chance meeting. In as much detail as you can muster, if you please.”

Vin related his story as quickly and concisely as he could. The old man listened intently and seemed especially interested in the Corporal who had hired him. Still, to Meechuck's growing dismay, Udian seemed disappointingly dissatisfied.

Shulth considered for a moment. “There is of course still a small problem here my friend. Although I fully realise you wish to co-operate.” He raised his head and tasted the air once more. “I can smell your considerable distress from here.” The old man took a painful step forward. “I do have serious doubts regarding your ability to recall events with the necessary detail.”

Vin took a step back. “What do you mean?”

The two guards immediately locked onto him like a vice.

“Unfortunately in order to discover the information I require, I can't just simply interrogate you. I have to directly access your memories. I realise that this could be somewhat psychologically disturbing, suffering such an intimate physical invasion. Please rest assured I will be as quick as I can,” – Udian removed his own lower jaw, and his portable translator activated, effortlessly turning his gurgles and wet clicks into the rest of his sentence – “and leave as little damage as possible.”

Meechuck Vin of course, did what any coward would do in his position – he struggled violently, and when that failed, he began to scream hysterically, and when that too wasn't enough, he forcefully lost control of his bodily functions. Because by that point, losing control was the only real control he had left.

Special Delivery

The factory platform's landing deck hands watched with quiet awe as the huge bulk of an advanced, heavily armed freighter extended three landing pads, each nearly the size of a *Sidewinder*, and touched down with ponderous grace in berth number three. The monstrous machine vented coolant steam as its three massive engines shut down, then its cargo ramp unlocked from the hull and slowly unfolded to the floor of the berth.

As used to advanced starship designs as the employees of Pteredyne were, the Kirin prototype was beyond their wildest imaginations. It was a full three minutes before anyone spoke.

“Holy Braben,” a deckhand muttered to a comrade. “The village of New Boston lifted off from planet-side and landed on our deck!”

“Well don't stand there gawking, people,” the deck foreman yelled. “Get moving! Let's not keep the good Captain waiting.”

It was another full minute before several forklifts started up and began to drive up the Kirin's cargo ramp. The cargo wasn't going to unload itself after all, and they weren't paid to stand and stare. The service trucks of the repair crews soon followed, as the ship's captain had ordered immediate repairs to hull and equipment damage.

It was then that the captain and first mate came down the ramp, both dressed in average rock driller's garb, the big scarred reptilian commander hefting a UPS canister over his shoulder. To most at Pteredyne, these two were well known and well liked, having been freelancer test crew on a number of occasions, most recently with the *Dragon* and *Xarik* prototypes. The skills of Roh'i and DeFlores were nothing short of legendary at Pteredyne. The coffee-machine rumours started flying as fast as a *Constrictor* on full injectors; there was already speculation on how Roh'i had got hold of such a ship.

After a word with the foreman, the two headed for the offices section of the platform with the UPS container. Behind them, a large blue centaurid managed to sneak aboard the Kirin unseen.

If the presence of the giant freighter berthed on the landing deck wasn't enough to cause a stir with the suits, the contents of the container was. Within were data cartridges containing the full specs and blueprints of the Kirin, both civilian and military variants, and a rush order to begin production of 100 of each, signed by none other than Udian Shulth. The cartridges were quickly copied and the data rushed to manufacturing, then the container was handed back to the mildly baffled Roh'i, who decided to corner the station's CEO and ask a few questions.

“Something smells off here, Jace. Who or what the hell is this Shulth they keep whispering about?”

The manager turned a shade paler than usual. “You mean, you don't know?”

“Not a clue. I don't get in folk's business till they make it my business, you know that. And for better or worse, this became my business. Let's have it.”

Jace spun a wild yarn about genetic manipulations and fierce wars which cost billions of lives and credits, and almost brought GalCop to the brink of collapse. Events which to Roh'i were all so much ancient history from well before the opening rounds of the Thargoid Wars, and as far-fetched as the tales of Raxxla.

Roh'i shook his head in baffled disbelief. “Hold on here. You're telling me that these folks fraked it up royally, disappeared for hundreds of years, then make a reappearance once they think the heat is off? Well... wrap me around the Empress and call me a corset.”

“You're too ugly to make into a royal corset,” Jace quipped back. “But seriously, Derik, that's exactly what I'm saying. For whatever reasons – your reputation, perhaps – I believe the Shulth have taken a liking to you. That can be a good thing, or really bad voodoo. Watch your tail out there, old friend.”

“Oh, I intend to. So far they haven't shown any want to blow me from the sky, even seem to be benevolent in an oddly detached way. Besides, for what crimes they may be accused of, I'm sure the statute of limitations has long since ran out. A hunter gains nothing but fugitive status for blasting clean ships, and that's one thing I can't afford.”

The Plot Thickens

Back aboard the *Therenback* and the UPS container safely stowed, Roh'i sat listening to the distant thumps of the repair crews patching up the hull, while Ramania worked on replacing the cell in his cybernetic eye. These were sophisticated and compact electro-optical devices; removing his from its socket and changing out the lithium cell wasn't a task Roh'i could handle by himself. Nor was he fit to fly while the eye was off-lined, as its removal left him half-blind. So, he relaxed and quietly mulled over what Jace had told him.

As if on cue, the terminal beeped for attention. I don't have to guess who that is, Roh'i thought as he fumbled for the 'receive call' key. As expected, the screen remained black except for a 'connected call' indicator.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Roh'i. Umm... Lost a hoopy game?"

Roh'i shook his head and chuckled. "No, nothing so drastic. I needed a power cell change." He tilted his head over, letting Ramania reinstall the eye. "And we got a tad shot up at the witch beacon, so a little layover for repairs, too."

"Which brings us directly to the nature of this communication. I have reason to believe you were being hunted deliberately. We captured one of the criminals responsible for that assault, and he was quite happy to divulge that he was employed by a military officer."

"Hold on. You saw that fight?"

"To be honest, yes. We've been following you under cloak, just out of mass lock range. Why pass up the chance to see how the Kirin performs in your capable hands? It's quite an enjoyable show. By the way, you managed to defeat the officer in question, which results in you being safe from further organised attacks for the time being."

Roh'i sat bolt upright. "Well frak me! By the way that sounds, our old lard-arse 'friend' is up to some dirty tricks. I thought that *Dragon* pilot was better than usual..."

"But not good enough. You are refreshingly, brutally efficient, Mr. Roh'i. I have chosen well."

"Alright, thanks for the compliments. Now that I know that attack dogs are after my hide, I have a bag of tricks of my own. Faked flight plans, calling in some favours, and even the cloak you helpfully installed on this beast." Roh'i leaned back to let Ramania complete the installation of his eye. "So, Mys... Oh frak it, you must be getting tired of that moniker by now. Mr. Shulth, where do we go from here?"

There was a hiss of surprise from the other end. "How did you find out?"

Roh'i chuckled softly. "Ghost stories. Tales of wonder. Rumours and nonsense, all sounding as moon-bat crazy as Raxxla or the Dutchman. A lot of it is just too surreal to believe, and the rest that might have some truth to it, heh, way before my time."

"I was actually starting to enjoy being called the Mystery Man. Oh well. I suppose you're going to be a good hunter and turn your talents on me now?"

"Nope. The past is the past. It's the present and the future that concerns me. No grudges held against you here, Mr. Shulth." Roh'i reached over and snugged Ramania, whom had been strangely silent the whole time. "In particular, it's Kitten's future that concerns me most."

Shulth almost sounded relieved, "Very well. Mr. Roh'i, or should I say Captain Roh'i, I determine that the trials are concluded. Full production can begin immediately. You may return to Tibecea, but do not take the straight route. Instead, visit these locations along the way, and deliver the UPS container." The terminal screen lit up with a listing of practically all the medium to high tech shipyards in chart 1 between Enonla and Tibecea. "You are free to hire additional crew and make cargo runs as you see fit, but do not lose that container. Ensure at all listed stops that its contents are copied and returned. I am investing considerable trust in you, Captain. Please do not let me down."

Roh'i nodded. "Will do. Captain Roh'i, I rather like the ring of that... When we get back to Tibecea, what then? Put any thought into that?"

"I have, actually. The General still holds my kin hostage, and your *Tiomat* under false charges. He shall have to be dealt with in due time. Be prepared, you may yet have to play a pivotal role. Farewell for now, Captain. I shall contact you again shortly."

As soon as the connection died, Rmania spoke up. “Captain, eh? Betcha didn’t see that one coming, huh Boss?”

Roh'i chuckled then squeezed her gently. “It would've blindsided me with both eyes in. Get some sleep, Kitten; I'm going aft to see how they're doing on the repairs.”

Esei



While Roh'i strolled past the empty crew suites, he failed to notice one door opened slightly, or the eye watching him walk past. Mmm... big fella. Dangerous... the stowaway thought, noting Roh'i's claw-tipped fingers and the blaster at his side. Esei ur Nelp settled herself down on the floor of the stateroom, and prayed to the Happy Eye that she weathered the trip to this splendid ship's next stop safely... and at least found a job there. Very few wanted to hire space gypsies like her, and it was getting hard to afford a decent meal, let alone anything else. Alas, the Happy Eye answers prayers in strange ways, but not always by knocking a chair over with your tail.

Roh'i heard a frightened grunt and something hitting the deck with a crash in one of the staterooms. He went to the door and quickly yanked it open, pulling his blaster.

"Come out of there, or I'll shoot you and drag you out."

"Eep! Yesh... Yesh shir!"

Esei plodded out of the stateroom, a blue-scaled centaurid creature roughly the size of a draught horse and just as muscular. "Ahm sho sorry, shir! Pleashe don't shoot me!"

Roh'i backed up, looking the huge, and very timid creature over. The strangely horselike alien reptile was unarmed and, indeed, unclothed save a crude harness of leather and nylon straps from which various drawstring pouches hung. It was also impossible for Roh'i to determine the creature's gender, if any. The massive creature stood on four large, short toed paws, sported short horns on its head, and had a tail nearly as long as his - or her? - body. The being's body language said herd mentality all over. This along with the Happy Eye medallion the being wore on a neck chain told Roh'i this was a sworn pacifist. The creature was

also on the edge of malnourishment; its ribs were showing. Another lost soul. I'll give this poor starving tosser a chance too... Roh'i sighed to himself. Shulth is right, I do have a soft spot.

"I won't, if you tell me who you are and what you were doing hiding in there."

To Roh'i's amusement, the stranger saluted him. "Esei ur Nelp atcher shervice, shir! I wash jush lookin' fer work, shir!"

Roh'i grinned at Esei and holstered his weapon. "Alright, that sounds honest enough. I need a cargo-master, and you certainly look sturdy enough to handle that. How does 500 credits a week plus room and board expenses covered sound to ya, Esei?"

Esei squealed and caught Roh'i up in a bear hug almost powerful enough to squeeze the wind from him. "Oh thank you shir! Ah'll do my besh, I promish!"

"Okay, okay," Roh'i gasped, "Let me down, willya?"

Esei blushed bright blue and set Roh'i down. "Shorry, shir."

"The apartment you were hiding in is much too small for you, Esei. Feel free to pick the largest one you can find, ok? And don't call me sir, I work for a living!" He chuckled and nudged Esei gently. "I run an informal but tight ship. I'm Derik Roh'i, the captain, and you're aboard the *Therenback*. Call me anything you like, as long as you're not cussing me out. Meanwhile, I was on the way to see how the repairs were going. Care to tag along?"

Esei caught up and fell into step behind her new captain, apparently already getting comfortable with him. Inwardly, she was thanking the Eye for her good fortune. No-one had ever treated her with respect before, or offered her that much! She was even more grateful that she didn't offend the captain, and even made him laugh a little, and for once not at her slurred speech.

"I need you to understand this may only be a temporary job, Esei," the captain was saying. "But while you're with us, I'll see to it that you're well fed and have some decent duds."

Esei felt a tear roll down her cheek. For a little while, life would be good, better than she had hoped. "Thank you, Capt'n," she said, and offered her Captain a grateful smile.

Starship in a Bottle

Udian pawed over the holographic star maps of the local sector. This was turning into a deadly game of chess with either a madman or a tactical genius; despite trying to dictate as many of the rules of the game as he could, it would appear that military were trying to double-cross him at every turn.

He had successfully predicted the attempt to intercept the Kirin plans, although this prediction owed more to paranoia than deduction. Paranoia, too, had sent the Kirin crew on a roundabout route. It would become exponentially more difficult to keep a lid on the Kirin as more shipyards received the plans.

Another thing worried him. Why agree to such an outrageous term in the first place then openly attempt to stop it? Deniable culpability? Then why have a corporal in his nice shiny military uniform lead the charge? He was clearly planning something...

Udian thought back to his father; his flawed, arguably psychotic, brilliant father. When he was barely six cycles old, Udian, all bloodied and crying, had gone looking for him and found him in his study. He had been in a fight and, having lost rather badly, had hoped to find some form of comfort. Mirias had been cold and abrupt with him, as he always was with anyone who disturbed his work, but he had said something – something that echoed down the centuries and tolled in this scarred old man's mind like a bell:

“You let your enemies pick the battle field, Udian, and yet still you wonder why you lost.”

Gouglass had picked Tibecea. But why? The planet itself was unremarkable. Its position then? Outer edge of Galaxy 1, surrounded by lobster worlds, mostly anarchies, confederacies and dictatorships. Not a rich area, although its isolated position dictated a heavy defence, the nearest sizable garrison being a short jump away on Ceedra.

Udian checked the SECCOM records: Navy Sector Command 14, commanded by General Senior Gouglass vor Cheem. Udian cursed. This was a very very foolish mistake on his part. Vor Cheem's reaction to Roh's presence should have rung alarm bells. Given the population of Ceedra, it wasn't surprising at all.

Much like a chess player unexpectedly checked by his opponent, a final terrible realisation of intent crystallised in his mind. What's at the end of recorded space? The start of everything else of course. With the protective umbrella of Sector Command 14 gone, that area was extremely isolated and vulnerable to Thargoid attack. The next capable garrison was Sector 12 based at Aleusqu, several days' jump away. Tibecea and the surrounding worlds became one big bottleneck of relatively expendable systems; any news of any significantly large invasive action would take time to reach Aleusqu, then maybe a day to amass a fleet – not to mention the travel time.

Gouglass didn't want to use the military to kill him; he couldn't. He wasn't high enough up the food chain. But the Thargoids could be practically counted on to arrive in force if they knew an area of space was defensively compromised. All he had to do was wait for him and the Kirin to fly down the neck of the bottle and somehow inform the insects that the red carpet was out. Then any suitably large force coming down from war-torn Beenri, but more likely from Zaleriza or even Diquxe, would trap them in a small pocket of systems for easy disposal. It was a plan worthy of his father.

The knowledge of the nature of the trap was, in itself, useless. Udian had to go back. His ship, although strong and fast, was no match for a full-scale swarm – and it would be a swarm when the Thargoids found out he was there. His family would assume – correctly – the Thargoids were acting out of revenge, and align with the military.

Udian thought back to the death of Horgan vor Cheem. It was a regrettable incident, but not any Shulth's fault. Both families had lost a great deal the day he died, and Udian had let his sympathy for vor Cheem's loss cloud his judgment.

Not that this seemed to matter to Gouglass. Was he really mad enough to goad the Thargoids into a full-scale invasion, just to fulfil a personal vendetta? It was, he had to admit, a sure-fire way to guarantee his death.

Udian sagged slightly; for once, for a fleeting second, showing his age. His mind was furiously number-crunching. He was caught in a massive catch-22. Although he guessed Gouglass was working alone in this, he realised that his options were quite limited. He would inform the family of course so they wouldn't become puppets, but someone had to go back and try to rescue Mima.

He tapped keys feverishly, and an overlay of Galaxy 2 flowed over Galaxy 1. The two were sewn together in 3D, inches above each other by thin silver threads denoting Galactic jump co-ordinates.

The Galaxy 2 worlds of Inbeed and Soinuste, both low tech-level and unstable political systems and both nearly directly above Tibecea. Nearest SEACOM system, Onmate: close, but not close enough. Either could serve as a nice quiet second ambush point to finish off anything that somehow managed to survive the Tibecea bottleneck.

Udian sat back in the dark leather chair of the map room. There were still options, even at this late stage. Unorthodox tactics that might work. Ways of complicating the board. Outrageous gambles. Very much a chance to live in the moment. It was doubtful that Gouglass was going to die in his own trap; and if he can find a way out then Shulth might too.

The problem here was an inability to ascertain the strength of his initial assets; one could, however, assume that any invading Thargoid force would be bordering on the monstrous. Some family contacts were going to have to be re-forged and some pride swallowed. He had time; just a little, but some. The first thing that couldn't wait was enlightening the crew of the Kirin of this distasteful revelation. It was, he had to admit, far fetched but it was the only explanation that currently fit.

No one had actually asked the Thargoids nicely to invade before. It was, he mused, an assassination disguised as a war.

Plan B

None of the crew suites built into the *Therenback* were large enough for Esei; but, spacers being uniquely adaptable, they had the bulkheads cut away between three of the standard quarters, and the resulting large compartment refurbished for Esei's needs.

Now dressed in custom-made clothing and wearing custom moccasins on her paws, the Silurian centaurid was performing her duties as *Therenback's* cargo master with growing confidence and cheer, even assisting with in-flight repairs when needed. She showed remarkable talent as a chef and amateur brewer, building a distillery in the galley (with Ramania's help) from scavenged parts and copper tubing. Just as well, as she had an astonishing appetite, eating around 100lb of food a day. Fortunately, food is a cheap commodity, and Captain Roh'i made it a point to keep at least three TCs' worth on board at all times.

Filling out the roster was the brilliant Dr. Genray Pachensen, a three-foot-tall vaguely beaver-like rodent, a travelling chemist, dietician, cyberneticist, xenobiologist and frontier surgeon they'd picked up as a passenger and who then decided to stay onboard as the ship's medic.

Rupert Thorn, the only human on board, signed on as secondary pilot and tactical officer, and to help out where he could; the *Therenback* had scooped up his escape pod after pirates shot up his rusty old Cobra in the Geisgeza system.

Finally, Ossil and Na'lik Hanuris, Ceedran brothers who signed on as ship's security and assistants; the brothers expressed an interest in going to Tibecea, saying the General owed them money and it was past time to collect on old debts. Roh'i couldn't fault the brothers on that, but warned them to be on good behaviour.

A motley bunch, to be sure; but each loyal, talented and capable in their own ways.

The *Therenback* had taken a roundabout, seemingly random course and had effectively shaken off pursuers since departing from Enola, and had wound up in Tianve to deliver the plans to the last shipyard on the list, Z.P.G.

It was then that Udian called again. Roh'i made it a conference with his crew. Udian informed them of a possible Thargoid ambush awaiting them at Tibecea. In between them, a plan was formulated...

Roh'i would call in some favours and have his friends spread around the message of Thargoid assault fleets gathering in and near the Tibecea system, a rumour that was sure to draw in every hard-arsed privateer, merc and laser-happy pirate from across the chart. There are irresistibly huge bounties on Thargs, after all, and the Empress' ransom in alien items to be gleaned from the wreckage.

The *Therenback* would bounce around awhile and spread the rumour further in bars and on GalNet forum nodes, enticing large mercenary forces to gather in the vicinity of Tibecea, while Udian would monitor the buildup of mercs from a safe distance. This also allowed the *Therenback* crew to prepare for a swift 'get in, get out' mission to negotiate Mima's release – or if necessary, pull a jailbreak, while the mercs kept the Bugs busy. In the ensuing chaos, Udian could slip through under cloak and escape unnoticed, effectively throwing a large spanner or two into Gouglass' machinations to catch Shulth unawares. The *Therenback* would then follow with Mima safely aboard.

It was an insane plan, a brilliant plan, or so brilliantly insane that the chances of failure were slim. Surely Gouglass wouldn't see it coming. There was only one flaw in this mad plot: Mima. She didn't know Captain Roh'i and crew, and they didn't know her.

At Udian's request, Derik dismissed his crewmates from the conference.

“Captain Roh'i... Derik. I wish to record a message for my great-grand-daughter, that may ease tensions between you and her.”

Roh'i popped a blank disk into the terminal and engaged record mode. “Go ahead, Udian.”

While Udian recorded the message, Roh'i finished his tankard of 'Esei's Awesome Ale', as Esei's home-brewed drink was called around the ship. When Shulth had disconnected the call, Roh'i started making calls to friends around the chart while Thorn visited the local spacer bars and Ramania logged into GalNet.

Plan B was on.

Burning Bridges

The top brass were livid for a couple of reasons: firstly, they didn't like hush-hush military equipment being available to any Tom, Dick or Harry who might have the credits to buy it; and secondly, they really didn't like being implicated in a conspiracy to destroy the only prototype of said military equipment. The phrases '*Constrictor* incident', 'monumental incompetency', 'laughing stock' and 'consider your career options' were mentioned a great deal; but, to be honest, Gouglass had really stopped listening as soon as Supreme Grand Admiral Ahruman had appeared on screen.

The Corporal, vor Cheem explained, had been put on a watch list months before and had gone AWOL hours after the Kirin left. All lies, of course, but it slowed the wheels down just a little. The wheels of justice and punishment for all but the most grotesque offences turned very, very slowly in the military machine these days – the war had seen to that. Everything would change soon enough anyway.

The plan was having to be adapted to events, but its core was still the same. He could keep the pretence up for the few more days it would take for the Kirin to return with Shulth in tow. He had been using the military spy networks to track the flight, and he was confident that he could have a significant Thargoid presence in system in seconds: it would be like prodding an ant farm when he set the drone now hooked up to the station's communication array to broadcast distress. The ships would jump into space literally heaving with enemy ships.

Then came the difficult part: self-preservation. His luxury Fer-de-Lance was fuelled and waiting. Concealed bombs were set to make the docking port inoperable as soon as they registered that he had left the station. At the same moment, remote detonators would also cripple Ceedra Sector Command, giving vor Cheem a water-tight reason for not sending a force to meet the Thargoid attack. Even if by some lucky fluke he made it to the station, vor Cheem would leave Udian and his spawn in this spinning orbital coffin to be eaten alive by the swarm.

Not that he honestly thought that would be enough to kill the Chimera. So he'd added a little insurance policy to one of the larger in-system asteroids. A cloak jammer. He almost felt sorry for him. Frantically trying to cloak his ship as the Thargoids tore it out from under him... yes, the trap was a good one, the odds insurmountable and the bait impossible to resist.

From there, his job would be easy. It would be a short hop to Sector Command to give the obligatory speech condemning separatist acts of terrorist aggression. Just in time to look stern and do some sabre-rattling as the desperate news trickled in regarding a 'surprise invasion' of Tibecea and the surrounding systems. If, by some unlucky accident, the Kirin prototype was still flying, then a small but overwhelmingly powerful force could be quietly sent out to deal with that particular loose end.

Still, there were one or two worrying issues. The fact the top brass knew about the attack on the Kirin suggested that Shulth was more resourceful than he'd thought at extracting information and getting it to the right people.

There was a notable and disturbing increase in mercenary and freebooter activity, generally in well armed ships, primarily around Beenri, although Zaleriza had also been affected. It wasn't at intervention stage yet, but the steady gathering of the privateers was slowly becoming more and more difficult to ignore.

Finally, there was the problem with Mima. Again, it wasn't technically a problem, not yet, hopefully not ever; but she had managed to completely heal the fractured and dislocated jaw he had given her in less than three days. Since discovering this from the seriously injured navy doctor who'd initially tended to her, he had avoided entering her cell and had doubled the guard.

She ruled that small space now with the quiet, dark malevolence of a bio-engineered wolf in sheep's clothing. These were all unwelcome small surprises: insignificant on their own, they were gradually and insidiously escalating the situation.

Cloak and Dagger

Gelegeus. A poor agricultural frontier world sitting on the edge of Chart 1. Insignificant in many ways except for one. Surrounded by anarchies and feudal worlds, Gelegeus was a popular stop for smugglers to fence illicit goods, especially military-grade firearms. Equally illegal modifications were also obtainable here, and a no-ask, no-tell policy existed among the seedier warehouses. However, to do business here meant keeping your side-arm charged and handy, and having a backup weapon just in case.

The huge shape of the Kirin prototype sat parked on a landing pad at one of the spaceports near one of the major cities of Gelegeus. There was guarded activity around the ship. Welding flares lit the night under the bottom hull as work crews mounted chain-guns and R.P.G. launchers on pop-up or, rather, pop-down gimbal mounts. Nearby, modification work was being done on a forklift, as it was steadily armoured with pieces of cut-up cargo containers and converted into a mini-tank armed with an R.P.G. launcher and a couple of assault slug throwers. Other forklifts were loading a small number of cargo containers onto the ship.

Anna Welsh looked upon the massive ship and the work going on around it from a distance with binoculars. I've found them at last, she thought as she zoomed in on the tall dracolid overseeing the work. He's as big as the General said. It's almost a shame to have to kill such a specimen.

She gathered herself together, preparing to carry out her mission: kill the reptile commander and recover the Kirin. She checked the charge in her hand laser as Roh'i strolled off towards a darkened warehouse with two Ceerdians in tow. Perfect. He's making it easier for me, she thought as she sneaked off to intercept him, hugging the shadows. Maybe after he's dead, the crew would be willing to tell me what they're up to before they die.

"Stay alert, boys, we're being tailed," Roh'i rumbled softly to the brothers.

"How do you know, Captain? I don't see anyone."

Roh'i pointed to his cybernetic eye. "I saw her, Ossil. A human lass, about 5 and a half feet tall." Roh'i indicated a dumpster they were passing. "Hide behind here, and watch. She'll have to come out into the light. When she does, apprehend her. She may only be curious, but we can't be too careful."

As the brothers ducked behind the dumpster, Roh'i walked a little further on, then ducked against a door jamb, pulling his blaster, and engaging the virtual HUD mode of his eye.

Anna lost sight of her quarry and, sure enough, she stepped out under the streetlight, laser in hand. "Now!" someone bellowed, and the big saurian suddenly leaped out, levelling a blaster on her. Damn, he's fast!

She snapped off a couple of shots at him. She heard him howl in pain before someone dropped a truck on her. Something pressed into her shoulder, there came an intense electric jolt, and her world went black.

Roh'i limped over to where his security guards were holding down the stunned girl. She had managed to shoot him in the thigh before the brothers subdued her.

"Are you alright, Captain?" Na'lik asked.

"She got a round in me. One more wound. It's not the first time someone shot at me."

Roh'i picked up the woman's dropped weapon. It wasn't much, one of the many light, cheap hand-lasers flooding the underground market recently. Nothing about it to point back to who hired her to ambush him; GalCop's version of a Saturday Night Special. The young lady's dress was equally nondescript.

"Pick her up, and take her back to the ship. Lock her up and keep a watch on her; I want to question her."

Three hours later, Anna woke up on a bunk in a brig cell. The big saurian sitting on the other side of the bars told her what brig it was. She looked him over; he was dressed in modified swim trunks, a holster belt, and nothing else, showing the assortment of dark scars over his grey-green scaled body. He'd had time to shower and get patched up before coming down. A bright, bloodstained bandage taped to his thigh showed where she managed to hit him in her earlier attack; clearly, she'd failed. And her head hurt.

"So, another would-be assassin," the reptile rumbled. "I don't suppose you'd want to tell me who sent you after me? I have my guesses, but why don't you be a dear and enlighten me."

"And what makes you think I'm telling you anything, you damned gecko?"

The reptile smiled, showing a frightening amount of sharp fangs. "It may extend your life if you do, my dear. You see, I'd rather repay this 'favour'" - indicating the fresh wound - "directly to your employers, instead of delivering justice to a mere peon. Once again, girl, who sent you?"

Anna bit her tongue and pouted, and crossed her arms. "I'm not saying."

The dracolid shook his head. "I'm trying to be pleasant about this, despite you taking shots at me. You're failing to see the gravity of your situation. If you choose silence, your life is forfeit. And I'm not turning you loose to try again, or report to your employers. There's simply too much at stake."

Anna was sure he'd kill her anyway, and maybe a bit of bravado would anger him into getting it over with without divulging any information. "You fracking sunbasker! You can go to Hell! The Kirin will be ours, damn you, and you'll die with the Shulths!" Uh-oh. She'd just tipped her hand. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

The reptile sighed, and stood, approaching the cell door and drawing his blaster. "Unfortunately for you, that little outburst tells me exactly who's pulling your strings. I'm growing tired of that asshole sending young, inexperienced hit-beings like you to shoot holes in my hide. I'd say you can tell the General to stuff this ship up his fat arse." With the blaster levelled at her, he continued, "But you're not getting the chance - I'm going to tell him personally."

"But-but-but..." Anna stammered, staring in fear at the large-bore weapon tracking her.

But the dracolid was clearly in no mood to hear last-second pleading.

"My dear, you're a threat that I can't allow to exist." He sighed, seeming to Anna to be genuinely saddened by what he had to do. "It's such a shame; you're too young to throw your life away. I'm sorry, lass." The blaster spat a bolt of searing cyan plasma, and the smell of charred meat filled the ship's small brig as Anna's corpse fell lifelessly to the cell floor.

Roh'i turned to Na'lik. "Flush what's left of her out the airlock before we witch-jump out of the system."

Wolf

Mima had grown accustomed to the taste of acid in her mouth. At first bitter, it now mingled inexorably with the sweet taste of potential freedom. Her body had put the extra rations and supplements supplied by her captors to good use: repairing damaged tissues, mending broken bone, improving her senses and slowly granting her some quite extraordinary physical abilities.

It had started quite slowly at first. Answering some distant call buried deep in her quadruple-helix DNA, her body began growing what would have appeared to the untrained eye as pea-sized cancerous buboes around her spleen. This was admittedly quite painful until, dutifully, Mima's hypothalamus released just the right amount of endorphins into her bloodstream.

Within a week, these growths had started producing their first crude nanites. This initial wave bolstered her immune and regenerative systems, increasing muscle and bone density and, most importantly, rebuilding and augmenting the buboes so they could create better nanites. That was when the real pain started.

The next few nights were hell as these new improved nanites began re-engineering her from the ground up. During this time, she started noticing small lumps growing in her mouth. Long channels along the sides of her upper gum line slowly expanded and hardened.

She soon discovered, to her cost, that pulling her mouth up in a wry smile would propel a fine stream of a strong acid from the front end of those glands. She burned herself really rather badly the first time she realised this, and she spent an uncomfortable few hours nursing second-degree burns before the nanites could start repairing the damage.

With some practice, Mima became quite proficient at producing a burst of acid aerosol once, sometimes twice a day. It was then she began to work on the door hinges and lock. Since hurting the doctor, the guards and especially that fat bastard vor Cheem had tried to avoid being anywhere near her.

So there she sat, slowly but happily eating her way out of confinement.

The Gathering Storm

Near one of the outer gas giants in the Arzaso system, the Red Storm Bug Hunter militia – nearly 500 combat ships, all told – gathered from around the chart. Seven *Griff Boa battlecruisers*, surrounded by a swarm of small- and medium-sized ships – *Dragon M* torpedo boats, Excalibur fighters, Xariks, Asps, Fer-de-Lances, Imperial Couriers, Vampires, Eels, Sabres, Cobra Rapiers, Rattle Cutters and Iguanas, to name but a few, and all armed to the teeth, many illegally modified, some with cloaking devices. Even the local Black Monks had added some of their deadly gunships to the armada, saying they desired to collect on the debts the Bugs owed to society.

A message spread across GalNet forums and whispered in bars had brought them to this staging area; a message that a massive Thargoid invasion fleet had been spotted building in deep space near Tibecea. Whoever the commander was who'd spotted the Beetles had apparently died to get the warning out, and apparently the Navy was unaware of the Tharg invasion fleet and was not moving to intercept. Military Intelligence proves once again to be an oxymoron... well, if the Navy wasn't going to do anything until too late, then certain iron-arsed citizens' militias of GalCop were up to the challenge. The Red Storm was only one such militia unit gathering to engage the Bug threat, and many more were on the way. One way or another, the damned Beetles would be stopped here.

On an agreed signal, the ships spooled up their witch drives, and by ones and twos began jumping into Atage, en route to Tibecea.

Several kilometres away and hidden by cloak and the magnetic belts of the gas giant, the commander of a Caduceus-class cruiser watched, via telescopic cameras, the Red Storm armada jumping out.

Eve of War

Orborn Zorr approached the captain of the *Hammer of Sorrow*. Udian's stooped form was silhouetted against the large main tactical viewscreen as blue witch tunnels flashed into existence as the Red Storm Armada jumped, rippling across space like spring rain on a lake.

"Well, that's subtle," he commented drily. "How do you intend to keep that little lot a secret?"

Udian turned. "I don't. I intend to bring this to a head as soon as possible; the key is speed. This force, although strongly driven by revenge, bragging rights or loot, is so diverse that if they don't get their battle soon after arriving in-system, they'll start tearing into each other. I have to present the General with his target. My presence will instigate the invasion, so that's exactly what I intend to do."

Zorr smiled. "And then all hell breaks loose I suppose, just like last time. Starting wars... it's been a while, and not without cost – we've already had to pay off seven members of the crew. They've been blanked. It must be quite odd waking up with three-year amnesia but with a quarter of a million credits in the bank." He paused briefly. "We're a little short mind you, but seeing this ship practically flies itself, it's going to be good to see the rest actually have to work for a change."

Thinking for a second, Udian mused, "They didn't sign up for a war; always the truth, Orborn, you know that."

Zorr shrugged. "If you're not prepared to die then you have no place in space. Still, after Gardon, I'm glad to see you're keeping the rest of the family out of this."

The last of the armada was witching out, and the *Hammer* would have to move out too or risk not being able to keep ahead of the pack.

"Gardon was a foolish boy. He rushed in, always playing the hero, and paid dearly for it. I compounded his mistake by letting anger cloud my judgement. This is the ultimate price for that anger. Time to pay the bill... Did you bring it?"

Orborn handed the old man the three-hundred-year-old explorer-issue commander's long coat. "I wouldn't be much of a first mate if I didn't follow the commander's orders, now, would I? It's as good as the day it was last worn. Stasis cupboards – got to love them!"

Shulth took stock of Zorr's pause. He clearly wasn't finished and they both knew it. "Something on your mind, Orborn?"

"Yeah, about Gardon – he did rush in, saving lives, kicking ass just like someone I used to know. Seems to me a lot of people can try to be a lot of things in life. Doesn't change what they are or what they're good at, Udian. I just hope you're right; if not, you're going to look like a right prat, flying a force this size into dead space. I'll get the coils prepped; either way, we're going to need 'em."

Zorr left, leaving the Commander dutifully standing at the viewscreen as the last of the wormholes collapsed, leaving no hint of ever having been there.

Udian slipped on the old flight coat. It reminded him of a time when fighting was simple, life risked every day. There were, after all a billion and one bad ways to die in space. There were no shortage of things to fight back then either. His father and his bastard creations; The Shard, pirates, the odd bounty hunter. The youth of today enjoyed their petty intrigues, games and counter-plays, but it all came down to the fight in the end. Some things never change.

He touched the old, tarnished gold wings on the lapel badge; wings earned a long time ago when the idea of honouring bringers of death had been new and exciting. Wings given for piling murder on top of murder on top of murder, something he appeared to have (like most of the rest of his family) a natural talent for.

"By fortune, an eve of war. By honour, the fight. By conflict, an end. Through action, a victory." It was an old prayer, a tradition – nothing more – but one worth remembering.

It was high time to pick a fight.

Into the Hornet's Nest

The Kirin prototype had a passenger cabin installed and a refuel at Diquxe. The ship was now a regular battlecruiser, heavily armed with four military lasers, two nuclear torpedoes, a cascade torpedo, two drop-tanks, and military missiles. The ten cascade warheads packed in cargo containers with remote detonators, the improvised mini-tank in the hold, along with the hidden anti-personnel defences in the bottom hull and the aerosol stun grenades Dr. Pachensen had mixed up were extra insurance.

Roh'i felt they were ready for what lay ahead at Tibecia, but between the marines and the Bugs, things were going to be rough. He hoped the covertly-spread message of a Thargoid invasion had brought enough Bug hunters into the Tibecia system as additional cover.

Roh'i looked around the bridge. Everyone had taken battle stations: Ramania at technical, Thorn at tactical, Esei at the cargo control station, Doc and the brothers Hanuris were standing by. Roh'i himself had the helm.

“Everyone ready?”

“Not really, Cap,” Thorn sighed. “But do we have a choice?”

“I'm afraid not, Rupert. Esei, I'm counting on you to keep cool and not freak out. Can you do that?”

“Ah'll try, Capt'n.”

“Thatta girl! All right folks, it's victory or bust. Kitten, let 'er rip.”

The familiar shiver ran through the deck plates as the witch drive spooled up...

Tibecia.

Roh'i turned the ship towards the distant planet. “Torus and cloak!”

“Cloak failed, Cap!”

“What?! Dammit! So much for a stealthy ‘get in, get out’.”

Behind them, a Caduceus-class cruiser dropped out of witch-space, followed by the first wave of Red Storm fighters. Soon, as if on cue, Thargoid warships began arriving.

With taunts and curses sounding over the comms, the Red Storm ships ignited injectors and surged into the rapidly increasing Thargoid force, lasers blazing. With more Red Storm ships dropping into the system, the battle had been engaged.

Roh'i cursed under his breath as he wheeled the *Therenback* around to attempt an end run around the Thargs and reach the station.

“Figures the hotheads would get here first.”

Fools Rush In

“By Giles, there are thousands of them!” Zorr stammered as the outer edges of the scanner rippled through waves of green and red.

Shulth was unmoved. “I would have been surprised if there weren't.”

Orburn looked at him, cockeyed. “I would have preferred it if you were wrong, I'll take alive idiots over dead heroes any day.”

Ignoring him, Udian studied the table-sized 4D graphic over view. “Our more immediate problem is inconsistency. The Red Storm have broken formation despite being informed exactly what would happen if they did.”

Udian gestured at the map. There were serious discrepancies between the hastily drawn-up battle plan in deep blue and the current state of affairs flaring across the board in oranges and reds. Instead of an even advance, with fighting along the entire length of the battle line designed specifically to hold the enemy at bay whilst the Kirin rescued Mima, the Red Storm's first-wave wing covering the left flank had surged forward, injecting away and leaving a 10-ship-wide gap to the far left of the GalCop militias' formation. This had caused the middle to become cramped with a fifth less room to manoeuvre and, needless to say, the flank dangerously exposed. The two forces were now razoring down on each other like the blades on a pair of scissors.

“They seem to be doing all right,” Zorr replied optimistically as one of the monstrous Thargoid battleships was quite literally torn in two by the sustained fire of four *Rattle Cutters* which were swarming around it like angry hornets.

“Up to the point where their lasers overheat and they can't thrust out because they blew the quirkum on a pointless charge,” Shulth replied. “Until then I'm sure they'll do absolutely fine.”

Everything had started so well. They'd jumped into a relatively quiet system and the bulk of the fleet had managed to get roughly half way to the station before the main bulk of the battleships had started appearing. The Kirin had long since broken off and was making best speed for the station, burners firing all the way.

“Do we actually have a plan B?” Zorr commented. “At this rate we're going to be outflanked on the left, and all it would take is about ten or twelve of those warships to get through and start sweating out robots and...”

“I'm well aware of the situation,” Shulth snapped. The wave of conflict that was slowly surging down the line of ships began getting uncomfortably close. He dutifully addressed the ships crew: “Side gunners, remember, lock your targets, we'll be pulling some serious evasive manoeuvres and I don't want to see you waste one drop of plasma. White cannons, the same goes for you. Don't waste fire on the small targets; if you lock a warship, good, but if you can get an eye on a carrier or a battleship then all the better. If we can kill enough of the big boys it might be sufficient to overload the robot control capabilities of the rest. May Giles keep you; may Giles keep us all.”

Zorr interrupted as weak green laser fire began streaking past the *Hammer's* hull. “Now entering military laser range.”

This was Udian's cue: he could do much more as the ship than he ever could from the tactical display. “Condition Red. First Mate, you have the bridge,” he said, and with that, he stepped into the bio-interface.

Arrival

The *Therenback* had travelled halfway to the station, managing to avoid the attention of the main Thargoid force, when the Torus drive cut out. “Mass locked,” Roh'i rumbled. “Scanners?”

“We got Bugs. Large groups forward and behind.”

Roh'i cut speed. “Gimme the cascade torp. Esei, eject a cascade canister, detonate it on my mark.” He locked the torpedo on the nearest Thargoid ship ahead, a carrier, and launched it while the canister drifted away behind. Switching to aft camera and pushing the throttle to full, he watched the force of warships trying to intercept them overtake the canister.

“Mark!”

The rear squadron of Bugs erupted into spheres of deadly blue. Roh'i yawed the ship hard to port and hit the injectors as the torpedo struck home, dissolving the carrier group into blue oblivion. Roh'i let the injectors burn till they were clear of the cascades.

“Drop tank.” Roh'i turned the ship back on course as their last drop tank fell away. “What's the status on our friends?”

“The Red Storm reports fourteen fighters lost, but expects reinforcements to arrive soon with their command frigates. The *Hammer* says they're holding on.”

“Right. Tell them we cascaded about thirty Bug ships trying to break for the station, and we can expect more Bug battle groups to make a try. I suggest they pull together into a holding force and get between the Bugs and the planet till those reinforcements arrive.”

“Message relayed, Cap.”

“Ordinance?”

“Two nukes, five militaries, and the e-bomb.”

“An' nine cascade containers,” Esei added.

“Okay.” Roh'i turned the ship towards the distant nav beacon. “Torus.”

As the ship surged towards the nav beacon and the station on its gravimetric Torus jump drive, Roh'i rumbled, “Now for our part of the plan, we may have it rougher than our allies. Gouglass is a rank arsehole; he practically stinks of arrogance. Worse, there's a mess of armed Marines on the station under that bastard's command.”

“You think he called the Bugs, Boss?”

“I'd bet a million creds on it, Kitten. I think it's such a sure bet, it'll probably pay off four to one. Remember, folks, we're to pick up Mima then amscray. Hopefully without bloodshed. But if we're attacked, we defend ourselves. Got that?”

Echoes of confirmation swept across the bridge.

The ship dropped out of torus. Roh'i cruised the *Therenback* towards the bouy, and opened a comm channel, “Tibecia Station, this is *Therenback*, requesting docking clearance.”

“Welcome, *Therenback*,” came the reply. “Clearance granted. Would you like automatic docking?”

“No thank you, we'll take 'er in manually. But before we do, I suggest you launch a few *Vipers* – we lost our escort to some Thargoid ships halfway from witch beacon, and there may be more Bugs out there.”

“Copy that. Stand by, launching *Vipers*.”

As the station launched three *Viper* patrol ships, which sped off towards the witch beacon, Thorn asked, “Another insurance policy, Cap?”

“Yeah, a little one. Those are regular police ships, and I doubt the local constable is under the General's command. They probably won't last long against the sheer number of Bugs out there, but every laser helps at this point.”

The station radioed, “*Therenback*, you are go for approach.”

With a thought, the *Hammer* locked onto the front three Thargoid warships tearing through space towards it at just under half the speed of light. After a quick collision check, the ship reduced speed by a third, calculating that this would enable the lasers to cool enough for 2 more bursts before they were nose to nose with the Thargoid fleet.

Specialised hard-head missiles spun out into space seeking for the flanking warships. Shulth had long since tuned out the sound of ECM pulses going off two dozen a second up and down the battle line. Short of getting close enough to throw it at them, standard darts just weren't going to cut the mustard in this fight.

The front military laser targetted the spinning saucer opposite and fired. The emerald light tore along its shields, exhausting them in under ten seconds. Constantly correcting for velocity, thrust wakes and inertia from the simultaneous missile release, the *Hammer* slewed the laser up across the raised body of the craft, neatly slicing a third of it clean off. Turning drunkenly, the ship slammed into the saucer to its left just as the hard-head impacted from the front. Shaken and its shield flaring from the explosion, the remaining warship turned straight into the path of the last oncoming hard-head. It spun lazily in space, a large chunk blown out of its front saucer section; unable to get out of the way, it was soon chopped to ribbons by the shields of its own ships as the next three took up position on the front line.

Laser light started flashing in all directions now, as the lower-power weapons began to come into range. They would release their robot fighters soon; then, all hell would break loose.

Shulth had already been treated to the chorus of panic coming from the left flank as the rash Red Storm pilots were engulfed, the space around them pulsing thickly with Thargoid fighters and searing laser fire. With depleted fuel stocks and lasers practically at melting point, only the best and most creative pilots would survive – that is, if anyone did.

As if replying to his thoughts, robot ships spewed from the amassed carriers, warships and battleships in front of him like pollen in a summer meadow. The scanner array almost overloaded itself trying to keep track of all the traces, finally settling on a slightly more inaccurate but less processor intensive fleet cloud depicting depth of ships.

This was ridiculous. The enemy was closing fast. The *Hammer* crippled another warship and a number of the robot fighters; to be honest, wherever you pointed a laser in space right now, chances were you'd hit something.

Unfortunately as soon as the centre of the two fleets clashed it would make getting anywhere quickly extremely difficult. Moreover, thanks to the the Red Storm, the fleets would continue impacting down the line, ending up with the right wing swapping laser fire with the Thargoids practically on the Tibecia station's front doorstep. This couldn't be allowed to happen. A fight of this magnitude would inevitably take out the ageing station, Mima, the Kirin and some, if not all, of Captain Roh'i's crew. If that was the only decision to make then it would have been a laughably easy one.

Udian was also receiving worrying reports from the weakened left, where the robot fighters has successfully outflanked the edge of the GalCop militias' formation and were now merrily chewing up ships from the front and side. He couldn't be in two places at once: going for the station and risking the fleet being annihilated; or reinforcing the flank and maybe keeping the battle going, but he would risk losing people he didn't want to lose. As the seconds of indecision ticked by, the centre of the massive Thargoid force loomed, threatening to take any choice away from him.

Then it happened. Blue light from a gigantic cascade explosion tore through the Thargoid right flank, vaporising an entire carrier group which had been reinforcing that side of their battle line. This rebalanced things; their compromised left flank was now equalled by their weakened right flank.

Within a second, Shulth made the necessary adjustments, all plans purged from his mind as he injected squarely into the middle of the Thargoid fleet.

As the *Therenback* slipped into dock, the remaining fighters then the largest, heaviest ships of the Red Storm dropped into the system. The seven *Griff Boa* command frigates, escorted by *Imperial Couriers*, turned to flank the Thargoid forces towards the planet, while the Monk gunships and arriving fighter forces turned to reinforce the failing Red Storm lines. The *Dragon M* torpedo ships, durable vessels armed with military missiles and nuclear torpedoes, went after the heavy Thargoid carriers and battleships trying to break away from the main Thargoid force.

Meanwhile, the three patrol *Vipers* took on another carrier group making for the station, and held a delaying action until the combined force of *Boas* and *Couriers* could assist them.

More ships were arriving on the tail end of the Red Storm command forces, mostly lone wolf bounty hunters and privateers picked up along the way. More were sure to be inbound, due to the rumour – now an undeniable fact – still circulating around GalNet.

The arrival of the command ships began to bring the Red Storm back to being an organised fighting force. But with the system crawling with Thargoids, would it be enough?

Hell-fight

“What in the name of Giles do you think you're doing?” Zorr's sombre tones rang solemnly in Shulth's mind as he spun the ship slowly, still running on full burners into the Thargoid fleet.

“Can't talk, I just need to clear friendly ships.” Shulth thought in response, as he twisted the *Hammer* violently counter clockwise, narrowly avoiding the spinning edges of three Thargoid warships.

“**Shields at 97%,**” the bio-mechanical AI recited.

The voice drifted through Udian's mind again. “You're not... you fragging are! You're not going to make it! You're going to get us all killed, you mad bastard.”

Shulth couldn't respond to Orban's words. He was too busy helping the *Hammer* cross-calculate and assess the threat potential of over two hundred robot fighters, ten warships and three battleships. Then came the words he had been hoping and praying for:

“**Plasma turrets within range. Multiple firing solutions calculated. Fire at will.**”

The crew of the *Hammer of Sorrow* didn't need to be told twice. Within seconds green plasma broadsides and the two awesomely powerful white cannons opened up delivering devastating damage to the Thargoid fleet as Udian barrelled through them.

“**Shields at 80%.**”

The upper white cannon slammed three clean shots into an approaching carrier blowing it to pieces. Space shone as the shrapnel slammed into the surrounding Thargoid ships. The lower cannon was destroying war ships at roughly one per shot as they spun past. But the Thargoids, being a fearless race, continued despite the sheer shock and awe created by the *Hammer*. Even in full fight it wasn't nearly enough to delay the ferocious counter assault.

“**Shields at 63%.**”

A wall of fire met Udian as he penetrated deeply into the Thargoid lines. Robot fighters skittered off the hull as he desperately dodged the turning form of a warship as it peppered his ship with laser fire. Speeding past, it caught a three-turret broadside, sending it spinning listlessly away, shedding hull plates and venting fuel.

“**Shields at 46%.**”

This wasn't good. The tunnel in the Thargoid lines that the *Hammer* had opened up was being exploited by other craft in the fleet. Udian cursed.

“Zorr! Tell those ships to back off!”

Turning his mind back to the fight, he realised with growing horror how much his momentary lack of concentration would cost him as a Thargoid battleship loomed directly in front. Taking the ship through a desperate slingshot around the battleship, he skittered off his opponent's shields like a pebble on a mill pond. The battleship threw everything it had at the *Hammer*. Lasers danced off the weakening shields as plasma bolts were refracted and reflected around them, draining more and more precious energy.

The white cannon slammed home a crippling reply; the searing white plasma several times hotter than the surface of most suns made a mockery of the Thargoids' shielding. The second round struck home, lopping off one of the battleship's outer spinning arms. It immediately began to pitch violently as centrifugal force began to rip at the rest of its structure.

“**Shields at 19%. Core output at 95%.**”

He needed just a little more time. There were only two friendly traces left on the scanners now; the rest was a sea of flashing green and orange. Twisting the ship deeper still into the Thargoid formation, the side turrets slammed one last salvo into the already-crippled battleship. It detonated, sending spinning shards of saucer section slamming into the *Hammer* and other ships in the vicinity. Udian was rocked by the force of the blow as the wing punched along the side of his retreating craft.

“**Shields bypassed, F.O.D. impact. VaporStasis measures activated. Mag shell activated. Expelled nanite recovery in progress. Port engine inoperable; regeneration time 8 hours. Witch fuel injection system automatic safety shut-off engaged; maximum speed reduced to 0.192. Shields steady at 4%.**”

Normally, with injectors, most ships could just about outrun a Thargoid; it took a lot of fuel but it was possible. Without injectors, any ship became a very easy target.

Hard Negotiations

It was odd that the engines of the recently-berthed Kirin remained idling, instead of shutting down as was usual for docked ships. The cargo ramp of the Kirin slowly unfolded and came down, and sitting at the top on a UPS crate and sipping at a tankard of ale was the captain, Derik Roh'i, just within the ship's still-powered shields.

Several marines opened up at Roh'i, only to have their fire ping harmlessly off the shields. Roh'i donned a wireless comm headset, and whispered a couple of commands. Instantly, panels opened on the bottom of the ship, and an arsenal of rotary chain guns and R.P.G. launchers dropped down, spun up, turned and opened up on a nearby Fer-de-Lance, blasting the cockpit canopy away from the little fighter and blowing holes in the engine section, then trained on the marines – but didn't fire.

“Hold your fire, troopers. We come in peace – for now,” Roh'i's voice boomed over the ship's external PA.

As the fire died down, Roh'i continued. “We come to negotiate a new deal. Marines, this directly concerns you, so please, stand down and listen up. Gouglass, get your fat arse out here where I can see you. Now, you miserable arsehole!”

There was a pregnant, silent pause of thirty seconds, then Roh'i's voice boomed out again, much louder, “Gouglass! Don't make me come looking for you, you Giles-damned bug-loving punk!”

Another long, silent pause...

“Very well, since General Traitorous Bemarian Slimerat is cowering under a bunk somewhere,” Roh'i continued, “I'll let you boys and girls know what's going on. Right now, a lot of my friends are putting their arse-ends on the line to keep a whole hell of a lot of your boss's friends, the Thargoids, from over-running this system, this planet, and this station. Believe me when I say the Bugs have pulled out all the stops. They want this system something really bad. We don't have a lot of time, people, the Bugs will be knocking down the door any minute now.

“We came for Mima Shulth. Tell her Udian sent her a five-star stretched and tricked-out limousine to freedom. Take a moment to wrap your cerebral cortexes around that while you're rolling out the red carpet for Mima right to the luxury cabin I set up for her. And, by Giles, you had better be treating her like she was elected Empress!”

Two Marines ran off down a corridor, then returned after a few minutes and conferred with another. The third man, a sergeant, set down his weapon and approached the ramp of the Kirin. “Captain! We can't find her!”

“What the hell do you mean, you can't find her? How do you lose somebody you have locked up?”

“That's just it, sir! She escaped somehow.”

Roh'i groaned. Things just kept going from bad to worse. What the hell else can go wrong today? “In that case, Seargant, I suggest you find the young lady and escort her to my ship. As pleasantly as you mugs can muster, be all smiles and rainbows when you find her. You think you can manage that?”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Good man.”

As the seargant set up and sent out search teams, Roh'i switched to intercom and spoke into his mic. “Kitten, can you hack me into the station-wide intercom?”

“I can try, Boss.”

“Alright, give it your best shot.”

“I'm on it.”

Roh'i switched back to external PA. “If there's any of you that can fly, I suggest getting in some of those Asps and going out to bust some Bugs, or better still getting to the nearest SECCOM and alerting the fleet.”

“Boss, I'm in,” Ramania said in his earpiece. “I patched you through; you're channel 3.”

Roh'i switched to channel 3. “Paging Mima Shulth. Paging Miss Shulth. Please come to ship berth #10; your ride home awaits. Udian sent you a limo. He's kicking Thargoid arse trying to keep them away from this station, and our borrowed time is running out. Let's get out of here while the getting is good. Thank you. And

Gouglass, keep hiding, you sorry Bug-kissing bastard, you better hope I never get my claws on you, frakin' turncoat!"

Roh'i switched off channel 3, and turned to the small rodent who had padded up quietly beside him, while a few Asps powered up for launch. "How's the leg, Derik?" the doctor asked.

"Itchy and a bit sore," Roh'i answered. "How're you hanging on, Doc?"

Dr. Pachensen shrugged. "A little bored. I thought I'd come back and watch the action."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Doc. Not much 'action' happening for now, and that's how I like it to be honest. All the real action is happening in-system, and trust me, that's action you don't want to be a part of."

10 Seconds

It happened quite slowly, really. With the *Hammer* running at under a third of the speed it should have been, the Thargoid fighters swarmed round the crippled ship like a shoal of hungry piranhas. First thing to go were the shields, torn away by the hail of laser fire.

9 seconds.

Still far from helpless, the ship angrily spat plasma at its tormenters, raking the machine ships with a withering barrage as it continued to dive into the Thargoid formation. It wasn't enough; some shots got through and with every hit the *Hammer* became less able to defend itself.

8 seconds.

Lasers seared the heavily-armoured deck plating. In a shower of sparks, the rear starboard turret was disabled. VaporStasis fluid spurted from the wound, hardening almost instantly and leaving trailing white tendrils twisting in space like a giant cobweb. As the liquid hardened it plugged leaks, extinguished fires and provided a honeycomb from which the nanite armies of the ship could start repairs.

7 seconds.

A warship took a large chunk out of the upper tail fin with a burst of green plasma and was blown to smithereens for its pains by the monstrous reply from the lower white cannon.

6 seconds.

Just one trace left: one friendly ship in range on the outer edge of a scanner swimming with flashing green and orange. The *Hammer's* systems began changing from green to red as the hail of fire began to find its mark, chewing up the ship from the outside in.

“Fuel scoop offline. Landing gear offline. Port engine critical damage. Armour failure in sections 2, 5, 8 & 11. Rear laser offline.”

The *Hammer* could take a lot, but she was fast approaching her damage limit.

5 seconds.

The whole ship lifted as a malfunctioning robot fighter slammed into the upper white cannon at the neck base of the ship. More VaporStasis fluid, more cobwebs. Twisting like a worm on a hook, the black ship turned violently directly into the path of an oncoming battleship.

4 seconds.

Rotating clockwise, the battleship simultaneously disgorged its fighters and slammed a plasma round into the tip of the starboard wing as it spun past. The diamond-shaped shield generator mounted there shattered musically, leaving a shining trail of sparkling debris.

3 seconds.

The impact viciously twisted the ship. The remaining engine dimmed to a glow as it flared out, cutting down vitally-needed power to the remaining plasma cannons to a trickle. Udian dragged his failing ship back on course as the stabilising thrusters overloaded themselves trying to compensate. The *Hammer's* starboard laser arced off the battleship's shield, shimmering in mixing shades of green and red. Although depleted, the shields held as the spinning ship charged its array of lasers for a sustained counter-strike.

2 seconds.

With a sickening crunch, three laser blasts tore through the neck and head of Udian's ship, disabling two of the three powerless turrets on that side and cutting a neat hole through the command bridge. The hexagonal structure held, but Udian was wracked by white hot pain as shrapnel cut through him. The *Hammer* looked more like a cocoon now than a ship, festooned with matted threads of VaporStasis, lights sputtering erratically and floating dead in space. The Thargoids seemed to pause for a moment, almost as if they were gloating over the hard-fought victory. Here was a kill to be savoured and enjoyed; a revenge which had been long in coming and was now inescapable.

1 second.

Udian was dimly aware of the final yellow trace disappearing from the scanner screen as the blinding laser light from over thirty enemy ships surged towards him. With a final pain-filled effort, he willed his burned and broken craft to deploy the energy bomb.

Then white, then nothing, as the wave of unstoppable energy encircled his soul and claimed him as its own.

A Chance Meeting

Mima was standing in one of the plush state rooms of the station when she felt the cold barrel-tip of a mark 2 Force Pistol pressed unyieldingly against the base of her skull.

Up until then, the improvised escape had been going really, really well: she had waited for the guards to be distracted by the station-wide report of the Kirin returning to the system, and one swift kick had toppled the door of the brig she had been eating out for the past couple of days. Admittedly, the rib shot she had received from the one guard she'd not managed to drop the door on was annoying, but the recharge speed of his woefully-maintained service-issue hand-laser had given her the vital seconds she needed to subdue him.

Stripping the bodies, loading them in the cell and replacing the door would not only buy her time, but also weapons; and the uniform she might just be able to use to bluff her way onto the hangar deck.

Making her way down the corridor from the cells, she kept her left arm high to mask the orange stain which was lazily spreading down the lower top half of her military grey disguise. First door, fine. First lift, so far so good. Then suddenly she appeared to become the meaty filling in an intergalactic space-war sandwich. Klaxons rang throughout the station, warning of a Thargoid invasion force and sending troopers running around like headless chickens looking for that jaw-breaking meat-biscuit of a commander, who seemed to have completely disappeared. Well. No surprise there.

One wrong turn and there she was, standing in the commandeered commander's quarters with the broken shell of a Thargoid robot fighter merrily blinking its homing beacon at her. Talk about out of the frying pan and into the fire. The one person she didn't want to see, and here she was practically standing in his living room. Well, at least he wasn't there...

Shlock-click, went the primer bolt of the force pistol.

“You're remarkably quiet. It must be all that fat insulating your creaking joints.”

The pistol barrel came down with a smart rap on the back of her skull. It wasn't enough to seriously hurt her, but certainly enough to give her a splitting headache.

“Less of your lip, young lady. Now, if you would like to keep your head, I would suggest putting your hands on it. We have a ship to catch.”

Blossom of Destruction

The force orb formed around what was left of the *Hammer of Sorrow*, reflecting the green laser beams of the Thargoid fleet around it like a floodlit disco ball. The ship was invisible now, eclipsed by the ever-expanding light. It was as if an artist, hatefully eyeing his own failed creation, had in a moment of fury, brushed his palm over this still-wet galactic canvas.

Robot fighters, warships, battleships and carriers were smeared into oblivion before the unstoppable wave of elemental force. Force fields flashed, held for a moment, then failed as the wall of energy overwhelmed them. Ship by ship, battle group by battle group, they all succumbed to the irresistible power of the relentless energy arc which swept away everything before it. Weapons, ships, crew and even the laser fire itself dissolved back into the raw base elements that formed them.

For over twenty-nine kilometres in every direction, it was the same. Nothing remained alive. It was all turned into a gigantic orb of interstellar dust, sparkling in the distant sunlight of Tibecia. The entire centre of the Thargoid fleet was gone, evaporated by the unbridled power of the energy bomb.

Orborn Zorr wiped the blood out of his eyes. It had given, to him, the lazy strobe light of the shattered bridge a strange red hue. Coming more to his senses, he began to check; first himself, then the ship. Head wound. They usually looked worse than they actually were; even a small cut would bleed badly. What else? A couple of cracked ribs. Again not too bad; just don't breathe in too much and he'd be fine. Right. Scrapes and bruises and – ouch! A surprise twisted ankle; how novel. Okay, so nothing life threatening – what about the ship?

The status display was a sea of red. Roughly half the crew were missing, injured or dead, and injured personnel were being hurried to the med tubes for treatment. Zorr sighed; what he wouldn't give for twelve hours of med-tube time right now. Wishful thinking aside, back to the job at hand...

The nanite systems were concentrating on hull integrity first. That had bottomed out at 66%: not advisable to be flying at full power on that, but considering one of the engines was nothing more than hot honeycombed slag at the moment, top speed was now, at best, a quarter of top speed normally, so that wouldn't be a problem. The one remaining engine was in stand-by mode and appeared to be in remarkably good nick, considering. Restart would take a minute or two, time enough to give the rest of the *Hammer* a once-over.

Shying away from what didn't work, he decided to concentrate on what did and how it could be improved. One shield generator and four turrets were still operable but starved of power. Running a quick calculation, he believed that with the starboard engine, he could comfortably run life support, damage control, the three small turrets and maybe shielding at 25% with a little rerouting. Getting the one remaining white cannon powered up, however, seriously broke the maths. Best not to push things.

Seconds later, the remaining engine cycled up. With the influx of power, Orborn was able to get a better idea on what was going on outside. With the centre of the Thargoid fleet obliterated, the previously-dominant left flank was now over-stretched and locked in a life-or-death struggle with the newly-reinforced Red Storm fleet. The weakened right, however, was cutting its losses and making a break for the Tibecia station with the centre and right of the GalCorp forces in very slow pursuit.

With the Thargoids flying at top speed, there was no way the fleet could engage the rear of their formation until they slowed to annihilate the station; either way, the *Hammer* was out of this battle.

Okay, that's the best I can do; time to inform the boss.

Orborn turned to see the shattered shell of Udian's bio-interface staring back at him. Shrapnel from the bridge had torn jagged leering holes in the bio-mesh dome as dark orange blood seeped from the cracks at its base.

He raced as fast as he could to the remnants of the interface. If there was a life left here to save, then he would have to move quickly in order to save it...

Face-off



Roh'i had spotted a familiar figure crossing the hangar deck, heading towards the disabled Fer-de-Lance. Calling the Hanuris brothers to follow with stun rifles, he moved out to intercept the General and the prisoner.

Gouglass looked over the shot-up frame of the little fighter. With the cockpit holed and the engine section badly damaged, the ship wasn't spaceworthy any more, much less capable of flight. The scores of illegal weaponry bristling from the Kirin's hull had made a wreck of it. The snarling Ceerdans holding stun blasters on him from on top of the little craft were even less assuring. And to make things worse, a familiar deep growl came from behind him.

"Game over, fat boy. Drop the gun and release the young lass, and maybe I'll go easy on you."

Gouglass turned. "Well played, Commander, well played." He pressed the pistol to Mima's head. "But you haven't won yet."

"Oh, but I have," the dracolid rumbled. "Kill her, and I'll gut you... slowly. Then I'll leave what's left of you to your Bug buddies out there. And my friends there will have you kissing the deck if you try shooting at me. There's no way out for you, General. Speaking of... You ok there, Miss?"

"I've had better days," Mima snorted.

"Yeah, I can imagine. Don't sweat it; lard-arse has run out of options."

Gouglass had to admit to himself that Roh'i may be right. The deck was all but deserted of operational ships; every ship that could fly had scrambled, leaving the shot-up Fer-de-Lance, the Kirin and, across the deck, a

gold and purple Dragon, Roh'i's *Lady Tiomat*. There was no clear path to the Kirin; Roh'i and the Ceerdans would be on him swiftly. But maybe... He tightened his finger on the trigger of the pistol.

With a growl, Roh'i drew his blaster and fired. The cyan bolt struck the General's gun. Gouglass cried out in pain, dropping the searing-hot pistol, which Roh'i kicked away.

“Not happening, you son of a bitch!” the draconid growled in his face. “Now I'm gonna kick yer arse!”

In a panic, Gouglass ran for the Dragon, bolts from the Ceerdans' stun blasters whizzing around him.

“Enough! Let him go,” Roh'i called to the brothers. “Let's get out of here. Miss Shulth, if you'll follow me, we'll get you home.”

Outside, the first of the surviving Thargoid warships entered the station aegis and decelerated, heading towards the station. Panels on top of the alien ship opened, revealing cutting equipment...

Resurrection Man

“I can't see!”

Udian's voice appeared to echo through the nothingness. The light of the energy bomb had long since faded, leaving nothing but a deep penetrating black. He was cold, an almost wet-like feeling crawled across his skin – or at least that's what his nerve endings told him it was.

“UDIAN SHULTH,” the god-like voice boomed around him, through him, carrying his soul like a piece of drift wood on a sea of sound.

“Yes?” he replied, somewhat questioningly.

“UDIAN SHULTH, DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?”

More thunder.

“Well, there's the rational option and the hysterical religious option. As the latter renders me and any choices I make completely pointless, I'll cling to the one that grants me the the most control.”

“YOU DIDN'T ANSWER MY QUESTION.”

“True. I believe I'm currently floating, or to be more apt, what's left of me is floating in a resus tube. The reason your voice has no inflection and is, quite frankly, annoyingly loud, is you're communicating directly to my brain via keyboard. To answer your question in the spirit in which it was asked: we are floating in a crippled ship, slap-bang in the middle of a big embarrassing hole in the middle of the Thargoid fleet.”

“AND YOUR OTHER POSSIBLE EXPLANATION OF YOUR CURRENT SITUATION IS?”

Udian shrugged. “Oh, well that's easy, I'm dead. You're Giles, and I've just insulted the creator of all things. Even for an ex-human bio-form like me that's a pretty good days work.”

“OK, YEAH, YOU GOT ME. IT'S ORBURN HERE. GOOD TO SEE YOU'RE STILL WITH US BOSS.”

Shulth moved his hand up to his face to rub the bridge of his nose in mild frustration. It went straight through. Not surprising really, considering; still disconcerting, none the less.

“If it wouldn't be too much trouble, can you turn the gain down on the neural interface jack? It's like trying to have a conversation with a public address system.”

There was a pause.

“Is that any better?”

“Fantastic. Now starting with me and moving outward from there, what, exactly, is our current situation?”

Another pause.

“Well, you're about as mortally wounded as a non-dead person can get. You're damn lucky that none of that shrapnel shook hands with your brain, else you would be smart-mouthing Giles now, not me. It was touch and go there for a minute or two. We had to treble your personal nanite load in order to stabilize you; most of them are holding your veins and heart together as we pump in transmorphic blood, stem cells, vitamins and minerals. It is going to take weeks to completely rebuild you though – you really are shredded meat.”

Udian thought for a second. “How long have I been out?”

“Since the bomb, you mean? About fifteen minutes. The Doc wanted to leave you out for a good few hours – yeah, right, like that was going to happen. You'd have crawled out of your tube and throttled the pair of us. You're running on some low-level stimulants and a cocktail of lucid pain suppressants.”

“Hmm. Get me an outside line. Hang on... those are all self-contained processes; oxygenate my float juice and I'm good to go.”

Udian felt the warm flow of information into his senses as Zorr connected his brain to the ship's AI.

“That's very optimistic of you. You're in a bubble, Udian. Even with a line to the ship, you're not really this year's hot tip for the Sky World methane-surfing championship.”

“I'll pop the core out of a C.C.R. Mec. I'm accessing the schematics now, rerouting a few repair units to perform the necessary work... oh dear, we are in a bad way, aren't we? Still, I see we're headed in the right direction. Let's just hope that Roh'i is doing a little better than we are. Oh, and Orburn?”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Thank you.”

“That's what you pay me for, Captain. Keeping you alive so you can try and get us all killed again. Now if you'll excuse me there's a slam patch and a stimujection gun that I fully intend to get slightly better acquainted with.”

Ghosts in the Mist

Captain Reese Mintel's last moments were ones of confusion and mindless pain. With the disappearance of the General Senior, the chain of command had been reduced to autonomous captains and their troopers.

One commander and eight men. Lots of little groups of headless chickens all squawking to the same tune.

Then the bounty hunter had come over the station comm. Reese thought it was a trick at first – a massive Thargoid fleet in system? Now, after hearing the massive mechanical impacts on the outside of the station's hull and seeing the slow change in colour of the outer corridor wall, from grey through blue to dull then ruby red, he wasn't so sure.

“Squad Echo-Charlie-Sigma, pull back to the main intersection. I want three men covering each side of the T-junction, ten feet apart, everyone keep a bug-out clip in reserve to get you back to the pressure doors.”

It was a judgement call to defend the intersection. He figured that he could use the room and turn it into a two-way bottle-necked kill-zone for whoever or whatever was trying to tear its way through the walls.

The paint was bubbling now, and sending acrid smoke into the corridor; the troopers kept low to avoid it. Within seconds, the cutting lasers began carving arching holes into the outer walls. Mintel reassured his marines.

“Flechette rounds only, lads; I don't want to go space-walking without a suit.” Gallows humour – yeah, felt kind of right, right about now.

With a creaking slam, the cut-out chunks of metal began dropping musically into the ageing walkway. A menacing green glow filled the frame made by the rapidly cooling metal, and almost immediately smoke began billowing through the opening.

“Dark veils and respirators!”

The troop flicked down their visors, but it wasn't smoke – it was fog. The air coming out of the breach points in the walls was at least -20°C , instantly crystallising out the humidity maintained by the station. The frigid blast hit Reese squarely, chilling him to the bone.

“Visibility down to eight feet, can't see any heat traces... Wait, movement! Left to right, low!”

The marine manning the right forward firing position squeezed off several rounds, causing the mist creeping towards him to spin and swirl. No cries, no blood, nothing.

“What did you see, soldier?” Mintel demanded.

“I don't know sir – something black, something big. It's difficult to see, visor's getting fogged up.”

This was not good. They were having their senses systematically crippled and they hadn't even seen the enemy yet.

“Marines, fall back to the junction; we're leaving this section. We'll establish a perimeter behind the pressure do...”

It was then that Captain Reese Mintel stood up, into the flowing river of near pure ammonia that was pouring into the station from the breaches in its walls.

It was then that his now near-blind men started to die. Their staggering, screaming bodies were pulled back into the fog by the predatory forms of their Thargoid counterparts.

To his left, one marine's trigger finger spasmed as a Thargoid claw ripped through his belly, spewing steaming guts into the now frigid deck plates. Turning as he fell, the feline peppered the corridor with flechettes one of which cut neatly through Reese's right femoral artery. His now useless leg buckled under his weight, he hit the ground hard.

Despite suffering a mortal injury, Mintel managed to reach down with his shaking hand, found and detached the side-arm resting there. They were close now; he could hear them.

Still monitoring marine comms traffic from the bridge of the Kirin, Rmania listened grimly to the final broadcast of Troop E.C.S.

“Thargoids have breached the station, squad dead. Get out, get out! Come on then, you son of a...”

Reese's last few words were punctuated by three muffled hand-laser blasts, making him barely audible as they crackled across the channel. Then, silence.

Bugout

Roh'i had brought Mima to the infirmary to get her wound tended to when Ramania's voice came over Roh'i's headset.

“Boss, we got trouble. I'm monitoring the combat channels, and the word is the Bugs are cutting their way into the station. The troopers can't hold them.”

Roh'i sighed. “Dammit, that's worse than I feared.”

Mima asked, “What's wrong?”

“Trouble. The Thargoids are boarding the station. That's a new one, seems they're trying to take the station in more or less one piece. Usually, the Bugs destroy GalCop property and replace it with their own tech.”

“I saw a Thargoid device of some kind earlier, in the fat bastard's quarters. I wonder if that has something to do with their change of tactics.”

Roh'i nodded. “I'd say that's pretty likely, Miss. No time to worry about that now, though – time has run out, we've got to escape. I'll leave you in Dr. Pachensen's care while I see to getting the hell off this station. Oh, Udian recorded this for you...”

Roh'i passed her a data disk then made his way aft.

“Kitten, patch me through to the Marines.”

“A moment... You're on, Boss.”

“Troopers, this is Captain Roh'i of the *Therenback*. I'm given to understand that the situation has become untenable. Looks like we're the last ride out, and I don't intend to stick around. Everybody that can walk, grab everybody that can't and is still breathing, and double-time it. All aboard!”

As the marines started running for the ship, Roh'i switched to internal intercom. “Rupert, prepare to give those guys some cover fire. I reckon the Bugs are gonna be hot on their heels.”

As the troopers boarded the ship, the rattle of chain gun fire spraying into the mists pouring onto the deck, Roh'i greeted them. “Welcome aboard, folks. Sorry about the lack of seating. Make yourselves as comfortable as possible.”

“Hey Captain! What about this thing?” A trooper had found the improvised minitank.

“Let's push it down the ramp,” Roh'i said. “There's enough fuel and ammo on it to make a big bang.”

With the help of two of the soldiers, Roh'i shoved the former fork-lift down the cargo ramp and into the vapour cloud, then tossed a plasma grenade after it.

“Fire in the hole! Kitten, seal all hatches and fold the ramp. Prepare for departure.”

Roh'i made his way forward, towards the bridge.

Thorn moved back to the tactical station as the Captain arrived and took the helm.

“Liftoff,” Roh'i commanded. “Autolaunch?”

“Not responding, Boss.”

“Are we clear for manual launch?”

“I got a jam condition on the station doors.”

“Dammit. We're going to have to make our own door. Arm the nukes, dumb fire mode.”

“You got 'em, Cap.”

Roh'i rotated the ship around to face the back wall of the station, then launched the nukes. The torpedoes sped across the central axis of the station then detonated against the back wall, blasting a large hole outward. A volley of fire from the plasma turrets and forward laser cut the hole larger.

“Shields down, no damage,” Ramania reported.

“EMP effect,” Roh'i rumbled. He pushed the throttle forward, and snaked the ship through the hole. Almost immediately, hostile lasers started striking the hull. Roh'i slammed the throttle to full.

“Let's give those Bugs a parting gift! Esei, dump the remaining cascade canisters.”

With Thargoid battleships in pursuit, the canisters drifted away from the Kirin, spreading in a loose pattern.

“Wait for it...” Roh'i rumbled.

“Detonate!”

Roh'i punched the injectors as the cascade detonations behind them swallowed the Thargoid ships and slammed the remains of the station, knocking the aging and battered hulk into a rapidly decaying orbit.

“Damage?”

“Energy unit off-line, E-bomb off-line, shield systems off-line, and ECM off-line. Four turrets disabled, fuel exhausted.”

Roh'i sighed. “Oh well, could've been worse.”

He turned the ship towards out-system, to rendezvous with the *Hammer*.

Revelations

Mima sat in the infirmary of the Kirin, turning the data disk over and over in her hands. Dr. Pachensen was busy treating the half-gassed casualties of the battle for Tibecia Station. She had been helping where she could, administering mildly acidic drops to blood-shot eyes and binding some wounds. In many ways, this hands-on approach was quite refreshing, if a little odd; she was used to her family's ways of fixing such things. This was different in the same way a watch maker would find car mechanics familiar but, at the same time, strange. A fix is a fix at the end of the day, and this was no time to be playing fast and loose with bio-nanites.

That wasn't the main thing worrying her. From the day of her birth, Chimera had always been a commanding presence in her life. He was the patriarch of the family. Always sure, like an immortal rock in a endless sea of change. Ruthlessly and fearlessly, he put things right.

The data disc spoke volumes even before it was played. It meant he was worried – worried that even he wouldn't be able to fix things this time. That this system, in all likelihood, would be his grave. A shiver ran down her spine as she inserted the data disc and pressed 'play'.

There he sat, on the bridge of the Hammer, a king on his throne. He looked older, tired, like the weight of several worlds weighed heavily on his shoulders.

My dear Mima, if you're viewing this then you at the very least are safe. The shock of the past few months has probably left you feeling quite estranged from me right now. You've probably realised that, despite your father's wishes, a dormant base survival formula was inserted into your genetics. I'm sorry if it caused you pain but I couldn't take the risk of you being left with mere human abilities in a life-threatening situation like this one.

I owe you an explanation for my actions up to this point, especially considering the probable forces involved and the odds of my survival. I hope I am wrong; but if not then it would be hateful to me if you were misled or manipulated regarding my reasons and intentions. Before you were born, your uncle, Gardon, once tried to impress me by taking on a large invading Thargoid force when he could and should have flown away. He had an endearing impetuosity that was unfortunately over-encouraged.

He saved a great many lives and caused a lot of damage. Although I had built him a strong ship, the *Point Of Action* wasn't invulnerable and despite being a good pilot, he was far from invincible. He died with his friends, saving traders, bounty hunters and other citizens of the universe. My loss-fuelled rage focussed wholly on the Thargoid race. I killed their warriors and workers by the million. I waded waist-deep through their black blood as we brought their mile-high hatcheries crashing down around them. The still-living larve were collected by the billion just so I could see their reaction as they burst and burned when we ejected them in front of their attacking ships' shields.

I was free, free to be an abomination; a mass murder of breath-taking proportions. I sterilised whole systems, no pity or mercy, just endless endless death and destruction. In short, I became my father, forging again everything I used to fight against – worse, in fact. Mirias sent death out into the world; I had to see it, taste it, make it and see its culmination. Gardon's death made me the son of a monster Mirias always knew I was. That's why the Thargoids would invest such a force in killing me and allow themselves to be manipulated by that nothing General.

Yes, the general. His father was a good friend to Gardon; they shared the same talent for foolishly rushing in. Just as I blamed the Thargoids for my personal tragedy, vor Cheem blamed me for his. Somehow he managed to find the one group that would stop at nothing to see us all dead.

If I do not survive, I leave it up to you to convince Aantar, Mishmon and the others not to seek further retaliation for my death. Too much blood has been spilled over this already.

Which is where the Kirin comes in. It is much more than just a bargaining chip I used to try and secure your release. With it in mass production, both military and traders alike will be able to do more, go further and defend themselves better than ever before. It is my – no, our – gift to the

citizens of the universe: a tool for building and defence, and I hope in some small way it will make up for our families' petty barbarisms.

By now, Commander Roh'i is busy trying to lock onto my ship's beacon. If he can't find it then, I fear, there will be nothing left to find. He is a good friend. He didn't have to come for you, but he did so any way without any hesitation. He reminds me in many ways of Gardon, but his self-confidence is tempered by experience and common sense. He is someone to be trusted.

I hope to see you soon.

Mima wiped away a tear as the image faded from the viewscreen.

The Machine Waits

It waited motionlessly, standing like some ancient alien totem as the stars turned lazily around it. It had watched the station burst into flame and crash from orbit like a falling angel, taking myriad Thargoid ships with it. It stood impassively as reinforcements arrived on the far left flank of the original line, finally matching the Thargoids ship for ship and slowly whittling them down like driftwood. It had viewed the opportunistic commanders arrive late for the battle, scoop and leave as true fighters fought for their lives against a relentless and fearless adversary.

The machine itself stood on three tree-trunk-like squat legs, its four-toed feet partially buried in the settling asteroid dust. The hulking armoured waist, capable of a full 360° of rotation, glittered in the starlight. Arms sprang like branches from its angled box-like upper body: retractable fine manipulators were impatiently crossed across the lower chest, and larger utility arms with a cornucopia of adaptors and attachments were folded neatly under the upper hulking cargo-manipulating claws which hung by its sides. The two barrels from the rotating shoulder-mounted heavy weapons stuck vertically up like snub-nose chimney stacks. In front of it, a smug radar dome and solar array were sat.

Behind it and half a lifetime away, so it seemed, the *Hammer of Sorrow* lay, wreathed in white Vapour-Stasis, its nose inelegantly languishing in the asteroid dust. A humanoid figure was slowly approaching from this direction.

The machine turned. Its form whizzed and buzzed, efficiently performing the two functions given to it: jam any cloaking device in-system and deflect any long-range scans of the system from beyond. The optic eye of the machine narrowed and regarded the solar array with a cool calm annoyance.

Firing stabilizing spikes into the ground, the 7-foot-tall Cargo-Combat-Reclamation Mec spun up and charged its left shoulder weapon. Within seconds the rail-gun was spitting explosive pellets into and through the dome and array. Shards of solar cell spun gently round the now-destroyed facility like snow in a snow globe.

“Seems like a bit of a waste,” Orburn Zorr commented as the machine emptied the rest of its clip into the already shredded and ruined dome.

“Of course, I could have dissected it,” Udian retorted from inside his metal sarcophagus. “Deciphered the particular twisted arm of physics that enabled Cheem to inhibit all cloaking devices and render Tibecia practically invisible to all the military's long range scanners. But sometimes when you've had a really bad day, you just need a big, fat, satisfying, albeit disappointingly silent, bang. If you know what I mean?”

Zorr's eyes drank in the destruction. “And two thirds of the Thargoid fleet wasn't a big enough bang for you?”

Shulth attempted to shrug. “I was too busy bleeding to death to fully enjoy the moment, unfortunately.”

He rotated his new body to look directly at Zorr. “Whilst I would love to flatter my ego into thinking you're just out here to watch me get some small measure of pay-back, I assume you have news?”

“Of course, the Kirin, crew, Mima and a good company of rescued marines are en route.”

Udian managed a mechanical chuckle. “That commander doesn't just pull it out of the fire, he pulls it out of the fire with a fanfare.”

“One small problem boss,” Zorr replied. “They lost Cheem. He stole the Dragon.”

The machine flexed its fine manipulators.

“Unfortunate. You know the container we had in safe-keeping for the commander? Fill three instead, one of each type. It won't buy him a new ship; but, still, the Kirin should make reasonable reparations for his loss on that score. It is after all the least we can do.”

“What about Cheem?”

Udian was silent for a moment. “Someone will catch up with him eventually. If he's anything like his father, any thoughts other than personal safety would have left his mind the moment he realized he'd lost control for the situation.”

“I hope you're right,” Orburn replied. “We're in no state to take on a pissed-off rock hermit, let alone an iron-ass *Dragon* with an inflatable vendetta for a pilot.”

Mixed Fortunes

Sweat stung General Senior Gouglass vor Cheem's eyes as he piloted the stolen *Lady Tiamat* through the last of the Thargoid fighters. He had exhausted almost half the fuel tanks bouncing off the atmosphere, dodging and weaving through the seemingly never-ending wave of Thargoid ships converging on the station. The cabin, although not uncomfortably hot, was more humid than he was used to. The pilot's seat made him look like a dwarf, and his right hand was weeping from the minor plasma burns that the lizard had caused him on the station.

Several pieces of good fortune had transpired to make this situation far from unsalvageable. He had scraped out of the hangar bay by the skin of his teeth; the demolition charges had done their work, trapping the Kirin and its crew on the station. It had warmed his soul to think of that reptile and his freak crew being torn limb from limb by a swarm of Thargoid warriors – a thought that was cut short by the unexpected sky-fall of the station. It didn't matter, torn apart or burned to death; dead was dead.

Next had been the timely arrival of the attacking GalCorp force, providing a closing envelope of targets between him and what was left of the Thargoids. Now, there was nothing but clear space in front of him. There was no sign of Shulth; and even if he had survived, Mima was dead, and that would be revenge enough for now. Just one more loose end to tie up, then he could comfortably fly back to SecCom and make up any story he wanted.

The jamming station had to be destroyed. It was the only thing left linking him to the battle.

Turning, he made best speed towards the slowly-spinning speck that was Tibecia-Beta 44. An uninhabited 5km-wide irregular asteroid, slowly circling the system just beyond the outer witch-point nav beacon.

Clean up, go home. What could be easier?

Buried within the equipment section of the stolen *Dragon*, something malevolent began to stir. Resting in a small metal canister lay the very heart and soul of the *Lady Tiomat*. The positronic neural net which resided there was seething, or as close to anger as an artificial intelligence can get. Unfamiliar hands were at her flight console. No input came from her tech station. She came to the only logical conclusion that she could: she was pirated. This would not do. As programmed by her legal Master, she began slowly making herself as close to inoperable as possible.

Reaching out into her systems, she began scrambling weapons controls, retuning the injectors, locking the fail-safes on the ECM and the energy bomb. She dangerously over-clocked the Torus drive and began to slowly parboil the witch-drive coils by starving them of coolant. She rendered the shields next to useless by deliberately burning out the power links to the shield arrays.

Like a cancer, she ripped through herself. Slowly, insidiously, she started to die around the hated nameless thief who had taken her. Turrets were locked in place. Lasers were allowed to fall out of alignment, warping their housings. Gradually, the temperature of her living quarters began to drop as she vented the heat into the unforgiving void of space. She informed GalCorp Central Command that she and she alone was responsible for over a thousand police deaths in a hundred different systems.

She watched with cool satisfaction as her legal rating went from clean, to offender, to fugitive and the clock on her bounty span out of control.

The Coming Storm

The Kirin, having a still-operational Torus, made it without further incident to Tibecia-Beta 44. They were met by a pitiful sight. The *Hammer of Sorrow* lay mummy-like on the surface. Men and equipment scurried around the shattered hull; the lights of more than twenty repair lasers twinkled like stars around her.

Roh'i looked at the ship on the viewscreen then at his own weather-beaten crew.

“Yeah took a kickin' but kept on tickin'. Pop the gear – I'm putting her down.”

His clawed index finger stabbed at the widecomm. “Hail and salutations. We're glad to see you in more or less one piece! Good Giles...! What's your damage?”

The comm crackled for a second. “Not too good. Shot to hell and back. We're slowly getting things back together, but by no means are we in fighting shape. Yourself?”

Roh'i ran his eyes over the damage readout. “I'm afraid we're not in much better shape up here. The Bugs got in a few good shots at us while we were getting out. Holed the hull up pretty good on the dorsal, knocked out a few turrets, the ECM, and the shield enhancer. We're almost out of munitions and we're out of fuel, but we can still bite.”

The *Therenback* hovered like a mauled great grey eagle just above the surface of the asteroid, her hexagonal heat shields glistening in the sunset. Slowly matching rotation with that of the asteroid, she descended, gently but firmly impacting with the soft ground of Tibecia-Beta 44. Landing pneumatics took the load and she came to rest within fifty yards of Udian and the shattered remains of the cloak jammer. The machine waited patiently as the cargo bay opened and Roh'i, in a custom EVA suit and rebreather helmet, descended onto the dusty wasteland, followed a long way behind by Mima, sitting on Esei's back, Ossil and Na'lik Hanuris and a small number of marines, all in survival suits.

“Heh, nice gravity!” Roh'i commented as his miner's boots hit the soft dust.

“Yes,” cracked his intercom, “it would appear that this particular rock has a hyper-dense core. I can see why Cheem chose it for his jammer.”

Roh'i eyed the robotic figure that stood in front of him. “What's this? Still too scared to face me in person, Udian?” he rumbled, with a wry smile. “Any chance of talking to the man instead of another robot flunky?”

The machine approached. “Unfortunately, you're looking at him, or at least what's left of him.”

The front armour of the C.C.R. Mec twisted open, revealing the shattered remains of something vaguely human. Its broken and severed limb stumps bobbed gently in bile-coloured liquid. The plasteel resus tube containing both fluid and man sat cradled in the core of machine. Its leather-like skin crawled with glistening nano-creatures. Several internal organs bobbed free of the body cavity as the machines slowly cleaned and repaired them.

“Trust me, I looked a hell of a lot more whole hearty and biological this morning.”

“Giles Almighty you're a mess... Hell of a medical bill there.”

The machine retracted its charge back inside itself again. “I know. And, by the looks of things, I'm not the only one that's paying.”

The Kirin had been through the wringer. She looked weathered now; space-hardened. The paint was chipped and laser burns crisscrossed her hull.

“I'll send a repair team over, get those burned out turrets fixed.”

Roh'i looked quizzically at him. “You sure you can spare them?”

The C.C.R. turned slightly in acknowledgment. “With the cloak back, I can spend a small spell here getting the *Hammer* functional again. Beta 44 may be spartan, but it is at least peaceful.”

“Pappa C!” Mima had finally caught up with Roh'i and threw herself at the Mec.

“Careful, child – I'm not as soft as I used to be, you know,” the machine replied.

Mima looked at the hunk of metal. “What happened?”

“It's a long story. But I would appreciate it if, in future, you could refrain from telling half the world that you are a Shulth. As you can see, a lot of people don't like us. It's – how do you young people put it? – a bit of a drag having to lie; but, unfortunately, sometimes we have to.”

Mima looked slightly annoyed. “Well, I'm happy to see you too! I wasn't the one who started all this in the first place, remember?”

Udian straightened his mechanical back. “Mima, we're not doing this right now, your father will be here for you shortly. I'm sure he'll want to have a long chat with you about your conduct. Now make yourself useful and get that reserve quirium tank off the Hammer and hooked up to the Kirin.”

Grumbling like a typical teenager, Mima shuffled and mumbled her way in the direction of the Hammer.

Once she was out of ear shot Udian apologetically turned back to Roh'i, “Kids... you sacrifice the world for them and it's never enough. Still, they are the future.”

Roh'i wasn't listening. Rmania's worried voice had come over his secure comm.

“Boss, we've got a hostile contact coming in fast. Its a fugitive – oh, er, boss? It's the *Tiamat*. ETA at current speed, one minute thirty seconds and counting.”

Roh'i's mind raced. He would have to set the stage quickly in order for any of them to survive this. He turned to his crew.

“We've got incoming! Get back to the ship now!”

After the fight on the station they didn't need to be told twice.

“Rupert? We've got a problem, how are the shields looking?”

“Rmania got the system jury rigged, taking it up to capacity. I can give you 20%.”

Roh'i rolled his eyes towards the heavens. “What about the enhancer?”

“Sorry Boss, the EMP burst baked it. It's toast.”

“OK, twenty will have to do. Open the safeties on the damaged turrets – I want to see venting plasma halos. That ship has to look a lot more badly damaged than she actually is.”

“What is it?” Udian asked genuinely concerned.

“I'll give you one good guess, and here's a clue: big mouth, big ego, and a big fat arse. But not very big in the brains.”

Udian sank back slightly on his third leg. “Oh, I see, Zorr? Get everyone inside, base-cycle the engine and engage the cloak.”

In a beat, the reply came back. “But what about...”

Udian cut him off mid-sentence. “No time, do it! That's an order! Look, Roh'i, I'm sorry for getting you involved in all this. I honestly thought that if I delivered a good ship to the men in grey, they would leave me and mine alone. It was never meant to get this badly screwed up. Old vendettas, system-wide battles; these are games for young men to play. I really am getting way too old for all of this you know.”

“What's wrong, old man, feeling your age?”

“You don't know the half of it.”

“You've got nothing to apologise for, I haven't had this much fun in ages.”

Udian looked at the *Dracon* incredulously. “This is fun?”

Roh'i nodded. “Hell yeah. Especially this next bit, you're going to love this next bit. Fatboy, however, is going to hate it.”

The sun rose over the the tumbling end of the asteroid, framing the menacing form of the approaching *Dragon*. To their left, the Kirin began belching gas plasma from her damaged turrets, which shimmered briefly in the sunlight as her shields engaged. To their right, the Hammer slowly melted from existence, leaving nothing but an impression in the soft dust.

The *Lady Tiamat* was almost upon them now. Roh'i turned to the C.C.R. Mec standing beside him.

“Cheer up, bud. Looking on the bright side, he's picked a lovely sunny day for an end game.”

End Game

Rising over the edge of the asteroid, Gouglass thought all his birthdays had come at once. The jammer was a smoking memory; and there, venting plasma, lay the wreck of the Kirin. Standing helpless on the surface was that reptilian thorn in his side, the scale-coated spanner in the works, practically waiting to be vapourised.

The reptile somehow managed to escape doom on the station, but there were no clever tricks left. This was going to be a very, very sweet moment – so sweet it would be a pity to waste it on a mere second's action. This instant should be teased out and devoured as slowly as possible. As Gouglass slowed, the ship hiccuped beneath him. Stupid animal couldn't even keep his own vessel ship-shape. He's probably driven the Kirin into the ground too, just like he's done with the rust-bucket Cheem's been having increasing difficulty flying.

Roh'i opened a channel. "Hello lardarse, surprised to see me again? Sorry about nuking my way out of the station, but that's better than letting the Bugs have it. Just set my ship down over there. Grab the spare laser pistol I keep under the pilot seat. Take it into the hold, lock yourself into one of the empty cargo pods and cook your brain with it."

"Oh, very witty, gecko," Gouglass sneered over the channel.

"Oh no, I'm deadly serious. You seem like a fried-noodle kind of guy to me."

Gouglass sat back in the somewhat large seat and shivered. The heating must be on the fritz.

"Oh, I see what you're doing – you're hoping that if you make me angry enough, I'll kill you nice and quick and forget all about your crew. Sorry, lizard, it doesn't work like that. I'm going to make you watch me execute every last one of them."

Another voice crackled onto the comm channel. "I understand your anger, Gouglass; your father's death was a tragic waste of life. But don't you see in coming after me, you did a deal with his real killers and enabled them to take even more lives? Can't you see how idiotic and pointless this all is?"

A grin rippled across vor Cheem's face. He'd completely disregarded the cargo robot standing next to the draconic reptilian.

"Udian, is that you in there? You're alive... This just keeps on getting better and better, all my loose ends all in one place. Your ship must be round here somewhere; and as you haven't used it against me, I'm betting it's looking as worse for wear as the Kirin is. Which just leaves me to tie up all these untidy loose ends... actually, I think I'll just cut the lizard's legs off and spend some quality time with his filthy felinid bitch."

Udian winced from inside his bottle. That had, indeed, torn it.

Derik stepped forward. "Shut yer gab and bring it. 'Cos I don't think you've got the stones for it; the best you got is to beat up women and kids. You're a frakin' coward with a mouth. A sad, pathetic punk. Like daddy, like son."

Vor Cheem didn't even reply. He jerked the trigger for the forward laser. It exploded, spraying fine shrapnel which pinged harmlessly off the C.C.R. and Derik's spacesuit.

Without missing a beat, Roh'i continued. "I've been threatened more times than I can remember, and I let it roll off up to a point. But when you threaten my crew, my friends, I tend to take it a bit personally. You see, this isn't about revenge any more. It's bigger than that now; much bigger. You sent people to their deaths trying to kill me. The Marines I have aboard and the surviving Red Storm fighters lost many shipmates thanks to you. You jeopardised the folks that call this system home, not to mention what Miss Mima suffered. And for what? How many more will suffer and die because of this mythical crusade? No, revenge has nothing to do with it. It's about closure. It's about letting those poor ghosts rest. It's about justice."

In the smoke-filled cockpit, Gouglass spat into the comm. "And you're the one to judge me, lizard? I'll do as I please, and damn you and your freak friends!"

He armed and fired a missile, but the clamps stayed closed. Part of the front wing of the *Lady Tiamat* disintegrated with the resulting explosion.

Derik shook his head. "You've got a habit of underestimating me. You seem to believe you've got me outsmarted. Big mistake. That ship, my ship, is dying around you, Cheem. I know everything about her, including the AI that's her heart and soul; even now, she's not going to let you use her to commit piracy. She has a booby-trap program. She started killing herself as soon as she realised you were an unauthorised pilot.

Being a marine, you'd be familiar with the saying 'never let your weapon fall into enemy hands'. Did you really think I'd let you kill me with my own ship? Think again. You're done, ace. It's over."

Udian stepped up. "Gouglass, I want you to listen to me very carefully. You have but one chance to live. Eject and I'll see you go unharmed. Derik?"

The dracolid considered for a second. "He'll go unharmed but in custody in my brig, until he's turned over to the proper authorities."

Vor Cheem kicked the thrusters and aimed the smoking craft directly at the two figures in front of him. "Go to hell, both of you!"

Face like stone, Derik replied, "So be it. I wish I could say it was nice knowing you, but it hasn't been. You deserve this..." He signalled the wounded Dragon and its occupant with the universal sign of contempt, the raised middle digit. "Arsehole. *Lady Tiomat*, Command Omega, spalia stesst'narwl."

"Command Omega accepted. Executing," came a cold, metallic female voice over the channel, then the *Tiomat* twisted off course, climbing steeply upward, trailing debris. The Witch-drive coils burst and burned as they were flooded with Quirium from the ruptured tanks. A pulsing, warping hole into Witch space tore itself into reality and swallowed the stricken craft, and the comm screamed with the unmistakable wet ripping sound of a catastrophic mis-jump.

The dark blue abomination hung there for a few seconds, shimmering angrily against the blackness of space. Then, slowly at first, it sputtered, collapsed and died.

Cold Justice

In the dark, vast, frigid expanse between worlds, a ship flies ever onward. The charred, shattered remains of a military laser hang uselessly from its bow. A large hole has been torn in the wing where a missile destroyed itself. At its current speed, it will take many lifetimes to reach its destination, but its badly damaged engines will burn out long before it ever gets there.

There is breathable air on board, but it will stagnate long before it reaches its goal. There is food on board, but it will run out long before it can ever be replaced. There is some warmth there now, but the temperature inside will soon drop until it is as cold as the space around it. For the moment, there is light, but that too will dwindle and die as the reserve batteries, starved of energy once provided from a cold, dead reactor, lose their meagre charge.

There is a gun on board. A gun that promises unconditional release from all these problems. It sits patiently, quietly waiting for the time it will be called on to perform a single act of mercy.

The pilot of this craft knows all these things and that's why he's screaming. He knows the truth. This ship is not really a ship. It's a coffin. A tomb in which he is buried alive.

“Well, that's cold justice,” Udian commented philosophically as Derik explained the finer points of Command Omega to him.

Rise of the Kirin

The last few days had been an industrious one for both crews. Within hours of the General's departure, two more Caduceus-class ships had arrived. The *Apex Of Reason* and the *Annulus Of Deceit* had hovered over the two stricken craft like a pair of young crows over a corpse.

Aantar Shulth was overjoyed to see his daughter Mima who, despite his best efforts, wanted to stay and help with repairs. So, after dropping off supplies and repair equipment, they headed out to set up a scan perimeter just in case any of the ongoing fighting were to head in the asteroid's direction.

Some hours later, they returned with the odd minor scar and cargo holds brimming with alien artifacts. Throughout the rest of that day and half the night, the two ships continued, industriously flying sorties back and forth to the remains of the battle, invisibly intervening on behalf of the GalCorp force, saving lives, mopping up resistance and filling their holds with booty. By the time they were done, there was enough to fill all four ships.

Thanks to a nanite swarm fine-tuning Ramania's fine engineering work and Thorn's patch welding, the Kirin looked once again factory-fresh. The *Hammer of Sorrow* was functional but a little rough around the edges, but that was nothing a bio-bath back home (wherever home was) wouldn't fix.

The Navy had finally arrived and busied themselves throwing their weight around in system with a massive, if now totally redundant, show of force. A rather apologetic transport had arrived soon after to pick up the marines.

Evenings were spent watching surveyor ships zipping planet-side, clearing debris from the space lanes and around Tibecia ready for the new station that would be towed into place any day now.

Late on the fourth day, Derik and Ramania were eyeing the *Kirin's* almost full-to-bursting cargo bay, overseeing the loading of the last few containers.

"The ships are all together; must be nearly time to leave." Udian and Mima had come aboard.

"Not a bad haul, so where do you want us to take all of it?" Derik commented as the last canister was loaded on board.

"Anywhere the stars take you," Udian replied. "That includes the ship too, of course."

Derik looked back at the robot encased bioform with one brow raised. "You serious?"

Udian ruffled Mima's hair with his right fine manipulator arm. "When any creature risks its life to save the child of another and asks for nothing in return, then that is an act that should not go unrewarded or forgotten."

Ramania was bouncing up and down in sheer excitement at this point.

"But that's not all," Udian continued. "It looks like you've still got a bit of room in there; let's see if we can't fix that."

He twisted down his cargo claws, which had been stashed behind his back. Both had a cargo container clamped in the claws. He laid them gently down on the deck, where they were soon joined by a third.

"You know I could get used to this body. With some small bio-enhancements, of course."

"You'll only go and grow out of it," Mima chimed in.

"No, my dear, I'll be growing throughout it, thank you very much. Anyway..."

As if on cue, the three cargo pods popped open. Derik's second eyebrow joined the first as they revealed one ton of gold, one ton of platinum and one ton of gems.

"Okay. What's the catch?"

Udian chuckled. "Ships and money mean little compared to people. The first two can be rebuilt or re-grown; the latter cannot. You know that."

"True," Derik nodded. "A ship is a machine, and can be replaced. It's the crew that makes a ship more than that."

"Very wise, Derik. I'll have to remember that. Mima, I believe you have a parting gift for our friends here too."

Mima handed the barely conscious Ramanía a GalCorp credit transfer card. “As your boss doesn't appear to be able to close his mouth, I had better start with you instead. It's the original deal, 7400 credits plus an additional 3700 per crew member to be divided any way you see fit.”

Mima turned. “And a little something for my knight in shining armour? I found her in the debris field a day ago. I had dad give her the once-over; he's better at neural pathways than I am. I think the only thing she doesn't remember is her name.” She pulled a small, lightly dented metal canister from her backpack and placed it in Derik's rough hands.

It was the AI of the *Lady Tiomat*.

Derik smiled. “Ahh, that dear, clever lass. She ejected her braincase somehow. She's pretty smart for a positronic brain.” He handed the container to Ramanía. “We'll have to integrate her into the *Therenback's* systems.”

“Thank you,” Mima whispered, stretching up and giving Derik a kiss on the end of his nose.

Derik grinned and snuggled her gently, “You're very welcome, hon. Take care of yourself, and try to keep this old fellow from getting his arse shot off again.” Derik chuckled.

Udian laughed. “Like I have one to shoot off!”

“At least now you can say you really do have an iron arse, Udian!” Roh'i chuckled. “Oh, Esei wanted you to have this.” He placed a large bottle filled with a dark golden liquid in Mima's hands.

“Awesome Ale!”

“I reckon a cup every once in a while can't hurt. Something to remember us by.”

As the asteroid turned once more into the glare of the Tibecian sun, the gigantic ship slowly rose, breaking gravitationally free of the enigmatic Tibecia-Beta 44. The trinity of thrusters fired just as the first rays of sunlight flashed across her hull.

It was a new dawn – a dawn that saw the rise of the Kirin.