



INSIDE STRAIGHT

CODY

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Dead Man's Hand

*You got to gamble on your story
You got no guts, you get no glory
I'm bettin' my money on an Ace in the hole
Think I'm gettin' out of control*

'So then, señorita... how came you to be the bearer of such sad tidings?'

They were sitting in the backroom of *The Final Eight*, sipping beers. Coyote's old friends had welcomed her as kin, and for the first time since the ambush at Cemaaran, Sahana felt safe.

'Coyote made me promise to come here... but I'd best start at the... '

She broke-off as Jessica raised a hand for silence, her head cocked towards the bar.

'Incoming! Hit the deck!'

As they threw themselves flat, machine-gun fire shattered the front window, and two grenades were thrown through it. The explosions trashed the bar, setting it ablaze, and a hail of red-hot shrapnel shredded the partition, scything through the space they had just vacated. Belying her age, Jessica belly-crawled across to a locker, and fished-out two military handguns. As she slid one over to Esteban, she saw Sahana draw a small handgun from an ankle-holster.

'So... you have his old pistol too! I'm liking you more and more, girl... but can you use it?'

Had the situation not been so dire, Sahana might have laughed.

'I've killed with it... does that count?'

'Oh yes... that counts! Okay, now we wait... let the sprinklers handle the fire. When the coños come to gloat over our corpses, we take them down... with extreme prejudice!'

Right on cue, the sprinklers kicked-in and began dousing the flames. Laying prone on the floor, Jessica checked her gun's magazine, slammed it back in, chambered a round, and thumbed the safety off. Esteban did likewise, a scowl on his face.

'Some asshole picked the wrong fucking bar to bomb! They'll pay dearly for that mistake! You look a little shocked, señorita... did Coyote not mention we were once marines? That's where I first met Jessica... in the space marines! Radar, they called her... you've just seen why!'

'Yes... indeed! Coyote never mentioned the marines... he said you'd been traders.'

'Oh, we've done plenty of trading... not all of it illegal! You know something... with that pistol in your hand and that frown on your face, you remind me of Rachel. Not in looks... she was raven-haired and pale of skin, and not nearly as pretty... but I think... '

He broke-off as Jessica nodded towards the bar, four fingers raised. Teeth bared, Esteban took-up position by the door to the bar, motioning for Sahana to cover him, while Jessica crawled over to what remained of the hatch.

As he hurled himself into the bar, Jessica stood and fired three rapid shots, then dropped flat as fire was returned. Esteban hit the floor rolling and came up firing, taking two down with four shots. Jessica stood and double-tapped a third, and Sahana put a bullet through the head of the fourth. As quick as it had begun, it was over. Esteban frisked the bodies, then shrugged.

'Clean! No ID... nada! Very odd... downright sinister, in fact! I'd guess they were after you, señorita. You can tell us why later... right now we'd better leave before the cops get here! Too many questions, not enough answers! Home is out... they'll go there next, so we'll head for the cabin... ride the transit to the outer ring, then buy a landcar there. Jessica, empty the safe while I grab the crash-bags. No more talking 'til we're safely out of town... vámonos!'

The spanish quarter is Spacetown's poorest district, and its oldest – most of it dates back to the first colonisation landings – and its infrastructure is run-down, delapidated. The narrow streets of shabby four and five storey buildings allow little sunlight to percolate down by day, and at night the lighting is dim, adding to the downbeat atmosphere. As happens in most large cities, the rogues and chancers, the poor and desperate, the malcontents and rebels, they all gravitate

to such districts, where law enforcement is often minimal at best. Here can be found gambling clubs and bordellos, strip-joints and nightclubs, drug-dens and gin-joints. Street musicians and hucksters abound, and transient spacers are a common sight – drawn to the darker, seedier side of whichever port they happen to be in, much like mariners of old. Esteban had been born and raised here – he knew the spanish quarter well – and although now moderately wealthy, he had returned to his roots when he and Jessica had opened *The Final Eight*. It was a bar for spacers, run by ex-spacers, and it belonged here in this old district of Spacetown.

In most places, a bombed-out bar would have attracted plenty of attention and drawn a crowd, but people in the spanish quarter exist on the fringes of society – they know when to stay away, when not to get involved. When they left the wrecked bar, laden with holdalls, they found the street outside almost deserted. In the distance a siren wailed, but what few people were around studiously ignored them as they walked briskly to the station. Within minutes they were riding the transit, bound for the outer ring where Esteban had said he could obtain a landcar. Sahana was impressed by Coyote's old friends – pre-packed holdalls of emergency supplies, gemstones and ammo from the safe, military hand guns – they had been prepared for anything!

True to his word, Esteban bought a landcar from a backstreet dealer he knew. A nondescript old estate car, but with a reliable engine. With Esteban driving, they headed out onto the main west road, but turned off at the first junction, found their way through a small town, and came out on a minor road heading northwards across rolling farmland. After a couple of hours, they pulled into a roadside cantina for beer. The midday sun was hot and the place was deserted, apart from an old woman dozing behind the bar. She woke and somewhat grumpily sold them two jugs of beer and some tapas, then returned to her rudely-interrupted siesta.

'Now Sahana, we need to hear the full story. From how you came to meet Coyote, to arriving dirtside here. Take it slow, and skip nothing... we want every detail, every nuance.'

Sitting at a table in the dimly-lit cantina, Sahana Katik – born on her family's Anaconda whilst in witchspace, the only survivor of a bloody vendetta which had eventually led to the downfall of a powerful criminal clan, and now a fugitive with a hefty bounty on her head – took a long swallow of beer, then eased back in her chair. Sea-green eyes slightly unfocused, she told them of her chance encounter with Coyote in the bar on Bazaar main, and of the voyage across the fifth – of the companionship, the combat, the mission – and the consequences.

'... when they let me out of the medbay, I went to the salvage bays to collect my kit and a few other things from the ship, then went looking for the shipyard jefe... took him up on his offer of a beer. He wanted to hear all about that bloody ambush... how many bandits had there been, what classes of ship... it wasn't easy to tell, but I told him all I could. He was a lovely old guy, a spacer to the core and very sympathetic. I charmed him into having *Dark Star* towed out of the station and dropped into Cemaaran's sun. I spread a little cash, cut some red tape, and arranged for Coyote's body to be left onboard. I think he would have wanted that... it's what I would want... stardust, returned to a star. I watched the ship burn from the tug!'

Jessica sighed softly, her eyes moist. Esteban just nodded slowly.

'When the tug returned to Cemaaran main, I found my bank account had been frozen, as had Coyote's, the replacement insurance for *Dark Star* had been cancelled, and I'd been declared a fugitive. If not for the jefe's help, I'd never have made it off the station. It was obvious I'd been stitched-up... completely screwed, and he'd taken a shine to me. He put me on to an old trader who carried me here, then smuggled me onto the station. Someone is after my blood, it seems, and now I've brought trouble to your door. I shouldn't have come here, but Coyote was most insistent... and I have no other options!'

'Don't fret about it, señorita! The old trickster sent you to us for a reason... when we get to the cabin, you'll understand. We'll hide-out there for a few days while Jessica contacts the veterans

network. Whoever is after you has pissed me off right-royally, and we'll do whatever it takes to help you thwart them! Bomb my beautiful bar, would they... bad mistake! Pajeros!

'Yes! A question... did you contact that NavSec officer as Coyote instructed... Trent, was it?'

A flame of pain and rage flared in Sahana's eyes. She took a colita from the old cigar case and lit-up, drawing the sweet smoke deep into her lungs – it calmed her.

'Jonas Trent is in the brig on Zaeredre base! He's been summarily court-martialled for treason, for helping to fix that ambush, and sentenced to death... he has a few days left, at most. He's innocent of course! He worshipped the Admiral, and was in awe of Coyote... ain't no way he would have caused harm to them... or to me, for that matter. Coyote trusted him... as do I. If I ever find the bastard who framed him, I will kill them... without hesitation, without remorse!'

Sahana's eyes glinted with resolve – tinged with desperation. From her response, it was clear to Jessica that Sahana was in love with Trent.

'Hmm... you swim in deep waters, girl. Who was the primary target, I wonder... the Admiral, or Coyote... or you, perhaps? Some tangled threads to unravel there, Sahana! But it's time to hit the road... we have far to travel, and I need to think. You drive, Esteban.'

Sahana felt better for having told her tale, and she had a question that had been nagging at her.

'Esteban... something you said earlier, back at the bar... who is Rachel?'

'You don't know? Rachel was Coyote's daughter. She died some years ago, killed by a quirkum leak aboard her ship... whilst docked, which was strange. She was only twenty!'

'He had a daughter? He told me so many things, but never mentioned her... not once!'

'Rachel was a fine pilot... one of the best, and Coyote was immensely proud of her. Her death nearly broke him, and he rarely spoke of her after that. He blamed himself for it, of course, and it haunted him... but Rachel chose to become a spacer, against her poor mother's wishes. She could have lived her life here on Zaquesso... but she chose the stars!'

'Aye... as did we, querida! Come ladies, the wild northlands await us... vámonos!'

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On through the afternoon and evening they rode, Jessica and Esteban sharing the driving in two hour shifts – with dual controls, switching drivers was simple. Near midnight, they pulled into another cantina for a hot meal, then hit the road again. The two ex-marines were tireless, and with Sahana dozing fitfully in the back seat, they drove non-stop through the night.

Sahana woke as she felt the car pull off the road and roll to a halt. They were in a deserted lay-by, screened from the road by a row of trees and bushes. Jessica headed straight for the bushes, closely followed by Sahana, while Esteban set about making coffee on the travel-stove. Dawn's first light was creeping slowly over the eastern horizon.

'We've done well... covered about fifteen hundred clicks! Only another fifteen hundred to go, give or take. We should be there by nightfall, though the roads get tougher beyond Mérida.'

Sipping her coffee in the growing light of the new day, Sahana was subdued, pensive. She was caught-up in something she knew little about – and she was out of her depth.

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After three days holed-up at the cabin – an isolated, log-built affair with a small barn, tucked away in the northern forests – Jessica had received word from the veterans network, saying a contact would meet Sahana on Raleor main. When Sahana had asked how the hell she would even get off-planet, let alone to Raleor, they had led her out to the barn and shown her a ship, hidden there by Coyote. Jessica had had the password for the computer, and the ship's systems had powered-up sweetly. Once Sahana had entered her ID, the ship was hers. Four hours later she had bade farewell to Jessica and Esteban, eased the Adder out of the barn, and under cover

of darkness, boosted for orbit. As soon as she could, she had plunged into the relative safety of witchspace, wondering gloomily if a humble Adder was capable of getting her to Raleor.

Now, after six mostly-sleepless hours in a bunk barely long enough for her tall frame, followed by an unappetising breakfast of space-rations, she sat in the Adder's cramped cockpit, drinking sweet green tea – emergence at Artear was still three hours away. On a whim, she called-up the ship's log, expecting to find the usual comments and minutiae, but there was only one lengthy entry. The opening paragraph made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

Starship *Inside Straight* – Commander's Log:

Now down and safe at the cabin, about to power-down. When the mierda hits the fan, this could be my last resort, my hidden card! But if Atropos has wielded her abhorrent shears, then hopefully you are now reading this... whoever you are. We've yet to meet, but welcome aboard Inside Straight! You'll be wanting answers, and needing advice, I expect... and you've probably got the hounds of hades on your six. My fault, no doubt, but I guess you must've signed-on for the long-haul at some point, or you'd not even be here (or should that be there, seeing as I ain't here any longer).

First: you're probably wondering why I picked an Adder. Only crazy bandits hit on an Adder... it just ain't worth their effort. Likewise, Viper jocks rarely bother to even scan an Adder. I mean... what mischief could a tiny Adder get up to? Not the ride of choice for fugitives or pirates, that's for sure! But being small and agile, it can out-turn most ships in a close-quarters dogfight, plus it's dirtside-rated, which is useful, and not just for atmospheric flight... in extremis, that toughened underside can be very handy. If going unnoticed is paramount, then the humble Adder is ideal (and you'll be needing to go unnoticed, I'd wager). Of course, Inside Straight is not a standard Adder... the shipyard on Avernus Orbital has seen to that. See appendices for details.

Before reading any further, she scrolled-down to the appendices and studied the modifications wrought on *Inside Straight* on Avernus Orbital. The improved energy systems had been coupled to enhanced military shielding, the injectors were naval-grade, and a reserve fuel tank had been fitted. The duranium hull had been sheathed in black nullfoam, stealth baffles had been fitted to the drive port, and the running-lights were easily disabled. Along with the military laser and upgraded drives, plus an experimental device that Coyote had picked-up in a Navy shipyard, the modifications had turned *Inside Straight* into a capable fighting ship – one that was all but invisible, except up-close. She returned to the log, encouraged.

Second: the ship's safe contains 400 kg of platinum as an emergency operating fund. If you need that, then you have serious problems, and will need to avoid main stations, so barter it at rock hermits for anything you need. They run the black market in most systems, and usually have more kit available than is listed (for a price). They are far more organised than is commonly thought, and I am not unknown to their network, so trade on my name... it should stand you in good stead. The personal safe contains a pouch of finest quality Veonquatian firestones, other items of possible interest, and 200 capsules of ASD (Arzaquarian Soma Distillate). Extremely difficult to obtain, highly addictive, and not recommended for recreational use. ASD is a combat-oriented drug, popular with some special forces. It heightens the senses and enhances stamina, and for pain-suppression, it is more efficient than neo-morph. Standard dose is two caps every six hours, and it's fast-acting. If you need more, and need it ultra-fast, snap one under

your nose and snort it. Be warned though, there will be a huge price to pay later, both in body and mind... but in fatal terrain, there may not be a later to worry about!

Third: you'll have talked to Jessica and Esteban and any advice they've given should be followed. They'll have arranged a contact (I hope) who you can trust! Obviously, at time of writing I have little idea of the exact situation, so can only speak generally. But this storm has been brewing for some years, hence all the advance planning. Things may have changed, but I somehow doubt it... all roads lead to the Tetiri Conclave!

Did I ever mention the Aquiti Incident during our acquaintance? Truth be told, I was the perpetrator of the crime that came to be called the Incident, so one could probably say I was responsible for starting the war in the Conclave that ensued. A weight I have borne for decades, but now (your now, that is... in my now, I'm alive and kicking) it seems I have at last laid my burden down. I do wonder who you are? Where did I find you? Do you deserve the mierda I may have dropped you into? Most probably not, but the fates play with us mere mortals in ways we cannot fathom... as you will no doubt discover! But I digress...

Fourth: the Aquiti Incident! As I said, I may have mentioned this, but I doubt in much detail... even Jessica and Esteban know little of my part in it. I can't say I'm proud of my conduct that day (I was angry and drunk... bad mix), but my life was both greatly enriched and later utterly impoverished as a result, and the repercussions in the Tetiri Conclave weighed heavily upon me, even though I was only the trigger. Repercussions which have echoed down the decades!

I was on Aquiti (I'd been trekking in the mountains), when I got word of a major poker tournament soon to start in the capital city, Qarani. Aquiti is a true democracy now, but way back then the democracy was a charade. In reality, the planet was run by two global agri-corps controlled by two of the founding families (the Toussaints and the Murrells). Working in partnership, they had bought themselves into power over many generations. Aquiti's world council was merely a front, a puppet... an age-old way of doing business for powerful people. Anyhow, I headed for Qarani and the tournament, a high-stakes event by any standard. I made it through to the final table okay, but lady luck deserted me and I got washed-out early on. So I drifted into the bar... and fell hopelessly in love. She was beautiful and she was drunk, and I knew that my duty as a gentleman was to join her in that joyous state. She laughed at my sombrero... I said her nose was too big... we hit it off straightaway!

I'll skip the details of the dance! But along the way, I learnt that she was a Toussaint, that one of the guys still playing poker in the games room was a Murrell, and that she had been 'promised to him in marriage'! The resignation in her eyes as she said that was eloquent, so I told her to just walk away. In fact, I advised her to accompany me up to the station and I'd damn-well fly her away. For a second or two, a flame burned in her eyes and I thought she might do it... then she shook her head sadly and said 'if only that were possible' and the magic moment was gone. I was about to try a different approach when there was a commotion from the games room and everyone turned to the big screen. Her fiancé had just bet his stack on a full house, Jacks over Tens... and lost to Queens over Tens. He wasn't at all happy when he stalked into the bar. I said

something about rotten luck and he glared at me, called me an 'amateur' and told me to 'mind my own goddam business'. Before I could reply, he grabbed Evangelina by the arm and marched her out of the place, his two bodyguards clearing the way. That got me mad as hell, and I was about to follow, but a hand on my arm restrained me. It was the guy sitting next to me at the bar, who'd obviously been listening. He convinced me of the futility of picking a fight with such locally-powerful people, and we ended-up having a few drinks and a chat. He advised me to get on up to the station and haul ass. I went on up to the station alright, but I couldn't let it go, so I hatched a drunken plan. It took a little trawling of the worldnet, but I found what I needed to know (primarily, where they'd both be the next day, which was together at a fancy garden party in the grounds of the Toussaint mansion). Then I hit the bar!

I drank steadily through the next ten hours, and I was in a bloody filthy mood when I eventually launched. I told station control I was dropping-down to Qarani's spaceport to collect a VIP, but on final approach I called an emergency, told them my main drive was failing. With control shouting at me over the coms, I veered away over to the city and headed straight for the Murrel mansion. I strafed the damn place! I didn't harm anyone, I just shredded their stupid ornamental, gold-plated roof with the laser. While pandemonium broke-out below me, I sped across town to the equally ornate Toussaint mansion (thought of themselves as bloody royalty, those two families). I came in fast at tree-top level, straight into the garden party, and set my Cobra down on the lawn, laser pointing right at the top table. Oh, you should've seen all the toffs... frozen, they were, like a bloody waxworks collection.

I left the ship in space-armour, toting a pulse rifle. I blasted a couple of statues to show I was serious, then strolled up to Evangelina's fiancé, shoved the rifle's muzzle into his fat gut and called him an amateur. The pajero actually wet himself! Then I looked at her and her eyes said 'yes', so I marched her onto my ship at gunpoint... made it look like I'd kidnapped her. I took us up to a hundred metres, shredded their roof too just for the hell of it, then stood the ship on its tail and boosted for orbit.

I expected to have plenty of pursuit on our six, but oddly there was none, so when we'd cleared atmosphere I was preparing to hyperspace on out when we were hailed on the comms by a Python, holding station just outside the aegis. It was the guy from the bar the night before, telling me to heave-to and catch the news feeds. Heavy fighting had broken-out in Qarani, which was why there'd been no pursuit. The capital was in turmoil and the security forces were going under. Turned-out, a well-organised bunch of revolutionaries had been planning a coup attempt within weeks, but they took the chaos my mansion-strafing caused as their chance and brought the people out on the streets early. History tells us that if you get enough of the people out on the streets at the right time, organise and arm them well enough, then the end result is inevitable!

As it was on Aquiti... the revolution spread rapidly and irresistably! The fighting was effectively over within a tenday, but it spilled off-planet as different factions within the Conclave squared-up to each other for various reasons. The situation turned nasty and several stations and a couple of moons got nuked, but the Navy turned-up with heavy firepower, splashed a few combatant ships, and order was restored. But the resentment

lingers on in the Conclave. The guy in the Python turned-out to be Squadron... he'd been liasing with the coup's leaders and was right pleased with me.

The two families, the Toussaints and the Murrells, lost all their political influence and dirtside wealth. The Toussaint family disintegrated and are no more, but the Murrells survived, and swore vengeance on Evangelina and me. I have no absolute proof, but I'm certain they had our daughter Rachel killed. Her death destroyed Evangelina, and nearly broke me! If they have connected you with me, then you are now their target, and they will hunt you. They have regained much of their influence and power in that sector recently, and are almost certainly behind the unrest in the Conclave. They crave control on Aquiti again... and that simply cannot be allowed to happen. GalCop has adopted its usual 'wait and see' attitude, which just isn't good enough. As I write, the head of the Murrell family is Toby Murrell (a nephew of that fat pig I stole Evangelina from). He's known as 'Cunning' Murrell, and he's smart and utterly ruthless! Chances are, he'll attempt to isolate the Conclave by establishing a blockade at Ereddive. He'll be tricky to handle, but remove him somehow, and the troubles in the Conclave should become containable. As for Aquiti itself... it is the eye of the storm!

Sahana closed the log – there was more to read, but she wanted to digest what she'd just learnt, and trawl the datanet for background. But first she went looking for the personal safe, inside of which she found the pouch of firestones, an old leather-bound book, a box of .380 ammo, the caps of ASD, and a silver brooch. An intricately-worked coiled cobra, set with tiny firestones for eyes, she thought it beautiful and pinned it on her shipsuit. Then she emptied the pouch onto the bunk and turned the cabin lights down. Aglow with an inner fire that flickered and danced, the firestones enchanted her. She could see why these gems, mined at great risk inside active volcanos on Veonquat, were so highly prized.

Inside Straight

*Everybody's braggin' and drinkin' that wine
I can tell the Queen of Diamonds by the way she shines
Come to daddy, on inside straight
Well I got no chance of losin' - this time*

Sahana sat slumped in the galley, clutching a half-empty bottle of Zaquessoian evil juice. She was drunk – miserably drunk. She was being pursued by a deadly professional hunter, and she was running out of options. The hunter had latched onto her at Artear, followed her wormhole to Ririqu, and had begun sniping at her as she headed sunwards. Not once had the Asp closed the range, and when she had tried to engage it, it had turned away, evading her fire. When she had turned sunwards again, it had dropped back onto her six and resumed sniping, eroding her shields until she had been forced to forego the skim and hyperspace out. The relentless pursuit had continued in similar fashion through Isbianon, Teatriin, Gesoed, Edxexe, Tiqu and on to Raleor, gradually degrading *Inside Straight's* systems, never allowing her to skim a full tank. All the while, the hunter had taunted her via the comms, insulting her, calling her a whore. It had been hard, but she had kept her cool and not responded. Now, emergence at Anleis was twenty minutes away, and although it had only been a short jump from Raleor, there was nothing but vapour in the tank. *Inside Straight* needed the services of a shipyard badly, and her nerves were shot from stress and exhaustion. Beset by despair and self-doubt, she hung her head to cry. 'Oh mama!'

Though tears filled her eyes, the sour taste of defeat stirred something in her soul, and her head lifted defiantly, the tears unshed. She was a Katik, and Katiks went down kicking and snarling to the bitter end. She splashed her face in the wetroom, then went to her cabin and swallowed another two caps. Her gaze fell on the old book from the safe – she hadn't even looked at it yet, but she picked it up now on impulse. It fell open at a page bookmarked by a photo of Coyote, standing beside a strikingly beautiful woman. In front of them stood a young girl with waist-length black hair, frowning at the camera. A sentence on the page beneath caught her eye, and in her drunken, drug-addled state, seemed to glow like burning coals – *In encircled terrain, devise stratagems!* It struck her that she had one card left to play, one she had forgotten – but could she find the right circumstance to play it. With the ASD top-up already coursing through her veins, mixing dangerously with the alcohol, she headed a little unsteadily for the cockpit, grim-faced. 'Hunt a Katik down, would you! Call me a whore! Last man to call me that is dead!'

Far off on the port bow, a large asteroid swarm appeared on the scan, and her eyes lit-up. She switched to the reserve tank, lit the naval afterburners, and hurtled into the heart of the swarm, careering wildly through the tumbling asteroids, burning precious quirium fuel, desperately seeking the ideal combination. Then she saw it – a small rock next to a large dark asteroid. She headed for the rock, but at the last second cut the drive, pulled the nose up, flicked the cloaking device on. and the running lights off. The hardened belly of *Inside Straight* hit the rock hard, smashing it into a cloud of debris. But she had judged it perfectly, and had just enough way-on to drift onto the larger asteroid and settle the Adder gently against it.

Outside the swarm, the Asp came to a dead-stop. Its quarry's red blip had disappeared from the scanner amid a cloud of white, but the hunter was not convinced. He edged the Asp slowly into the swarm, cursing under his breath – if he'd lost the kill, he had lost the contract. Without proof of the kill, there would be no pay-off – only trouble.

As the Asp nosed through the swarm, Sahana watched it on the scanner, keeping one anxious eye on the energy banks. The naval cloaking device that Coyote had had fitted to *Inside Straight* drained energy steadily, and it was below fifty percent already. Agonisingly slowly, the hunter cruised unknowingly past her, the Adder's stealthy qualities keeping it unseen. A nasty grin on her face, Sahana eased *Inside Straight* off the asteroid, and slipped onto the hunter's six, slowly closing the range – she would get only one shot. As the energy levels hit critical, she flipped the cloak off, locked-on to the Asp and launched her sole missile, then red-lined the laser.

'Check six, asshole!'

'What the fu...'

He was cut-short as the laser beam punched through the Asp's shields and hit metal, followed a second later by the missile. The crippled Asp veered away, trying to gain time to recharge its shields, but Sahana had already hit full throttle, and slamming *Inside Straight's* hardened belly into the Asp, she forced the hunter to eject as his ship came apart around him.

'You fuckin' bitch! I'll get you for this one day! Puta!'

She was turning sunwards, content to leave the hunter in his escape pod, but something inside of her snapped at the insults. Snarling, she brought *Inside Straight* about and rammed the escape pod, watching stony-faced as its occupant was thrown into the vacuum. She put the twitching body out of its misery with a single laser shot.

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Main stations handle all the official trade to and from the planets which they serve, and though they operate round-the-clock – local time means little to starfarers – they do have quiet periods in the early hours, periods when incoming traffic slows to a trickle, few ships launch, and the

malls become deserted. Even the bars empty out, and *Gravity's Rainbow* on Raleor main was no exception – just one spacer stood at the bar, the only other patrons being an on-call shipyard gang playing cards in the corner. The spacer, a young buck in his twenties, was chatting idly to the barkeep when Sahana strolled in and turned his head. He whistled admiringly, then licked his lips and looked her over leeringly, as if perusing a whore in a bordello.

'Hey lady... you's a real babe, that's f'sure! Fancy a little... '

He broke-off as he found himself staring into the hollow, combat-weary eyes of a cold-blooded killer. Though half-drunk, he had been around long enough to recognise that look, and knew when to back-off – a core skill he had learnt the hard way. He hastily averted his gaze.

'Beggin' yer pardon, lady... err, ma'am! Don't mind me... 'ad a few too many t'night!'

Dismissing him with a contemptuous nod, Sahana turned to the barkeep.

'Fruit beer, please... the best you have! And one for yourself!'

'Your wish is my command, ma'am... two Zaanerian Frambozen coming right up!'

Grinning happily, he fetched two bottles from the chiller, cracked the flip-tops and handed one over to her, then took a long pull from the other – he loved fruit beer, and Zaaner produces the finest, and most expensive, in the sector.

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'Commander Katik... may I have a word?'

Exhausted and pre-occupied with dark thoughts, Sahana was caught unawares. Snapping back to the present, she found herself confronted by a tall, middle-aged man who was stood by the airlock of her ship's bay – fair-haired, with cool blue eyes and tanned face, he was dressed in Navy uniform. Sahana reacted without thinking – she stepped into him, grabbed his arm, and slammed him up against the corridor wall. Before he could recover, she'd drawn her pistol, but to her consternation he just grinned at her, unfazed by the threat to his life. For a couple of seconds they stared at each other – then in a blur of motion he disarmed her, and she found herself on the floor, her right arm numb. He stepped back a pace while she picked herself up, examining the pistol he had taken from her with such ease. With practised skill, he ejected the chamber round, and slipped it into his pocket.

'I'll keep that, seeing as it had my name on it. Excellent craftsmanship... a fine reproduction of the old Walther PPK. A lethal weapon from a bygone age... very nice!'

With that, he flipped the antique pistol in the air, caught it by the barrel and handed it back to her, butt first. His eyes bored into hers as he grinned at her again.

'Excellent first move, but you've got a lot to learn... as you just discovered! Anyway, we need to talk... on my ship, I think. This way, Commander Katik!'

He turned on his heel and led her along the corridor to another bay, where they cycled through the airlock and boarded his ship – a ship of a class unknown to Sahana. Once in the galley, he set about making coffee, while she sat watching – he had an aura of quiet authority about him, which reassured her a little. The coffee made, he joined her at the table.

'What class of ship is this... I've not seen its like?'

'Nor should you have! *Essence of Now* is a naval vessel, Constrictor-class. I'm privileged to have use of it. Now Commander, I have good news... Lieutenant Trent's execution has been stayed, and his conviction quashed, by order of the Admiralty Board. He remains in custody though, for security reasons. I'll talk with him soon, but Zaeredre base is currently in lock-down!'

Sahana felt a dark weight lift from her heart – she sat back with a tired smile.

'That is wonderful news... Jonas is no traitor! Listen... GalCop have declared me fugitive, I've been hunted all the way here from Artear, an enemy from someone else's past seeks to kill me, I'm angry and frightened... and exhausted, so I'm a little slow tonight... who are you?'

'Alexander Haldane, Captain, SIS. I have nothing to do with that bunch of pissants at GalCop, or those cowboys at NavSec, so you are secure here... dastardly criminal though you be!'

The last was said with a disarming smile and twinkling eyes – she nearly laughed.

'Ahh... the contact that Jessica arranged? Damn it, I should've known!'

'Yes... I was asked to look into the matter by Admiral of the Fleet Lord Grenville himself. You knew Jessica and Esteban were once in the marines? That's how they know the old Admiral.'

'Yes... Esteban said he'd first met Jessica in the marines.'

'Yeah... on some godforsaken moon, apparently... in an ambush. Heavily out-numbered, their platoons got caught in a vicious firefight... ended-up fighting hand-to-hand... nasty. They took seventy percent losses that dark day, and a young Lieutenant Grenville was the only officer to survive the carnage. Those that came through have stayed in contact over the decades. Bonds forged in such an inferno tend to endure... at least, that has been my experience.'

'That I did not know! You're very well informed, Captain... you know all about me, then?'

'Yes... even down to the mole on your left hip! I know all about clan Katik too... a thoroughly evil bunch, who will not be missed! That was clever work by Coyote up in the Halo... a classic covert op! My friends call me Alex, by the way... more coffee, Commander Katik?'

'Call me Sahana... and yes, more coffee please... Alex.'

'Tell me... where does the name Sahana come from... originally?'

'It's an old family name on my mother's side. Clan Katik traced their lineage back to Terra, to a region called Russia. From the research I did after their demise, it seems they were always an evil bunch, but my mother's kin are another matter. I now know my parents had to renounce their respective clans before they could marry... hence the vendetta. You see, my mother's clan can also trace their lineage back to Terra... to Hindustan. In ancient times, the Naga were a warrior dynasty, a major force of their time... and my mother's kin are descended from that dynasty. I have the blood of proud warriors and heinous criminals mingled in my veins... but I think my mother's genes have proven dominant... so far, anyway.'

She sipped her coffee, watching him with amused eyes – he grinned at her.

'Warrior's blood, eh? Coyote must have sensed that... he knew what was coming, I think.'

'Yes... he said I was a natural-born combateer. He trusted me, legally adopted me, and I'll not let him down while I can still breathe! Did you ever meet him?'

'Our paths did cross a couple of times. SIS tried to recruit him once, but he was ever the loner and would never have obeyed orders easily. Sahana... I need to hear your tale of woe... every detail of every event that led up to you being here now. Take it slow, omit nothing!'

Once more Sahana told her tale, Alex asking the odd question. He was mainly interested in the agent-extraction mission in the Gates of Damocles, but mention of the log caught his attention, and he listened intently as she related the gist of it. Intrigued by the intel about Aquiti, he also wondered which naval shipyard Coyote had obtained the cloak from.

'That agent you rescued at such risk proved to be a double... he died during interrogation, but we did obtain some very useful intel! So... is it all down to Aquiti, I wonder? My own enquiries point towards the Conclave certainly, but I'd not even considered the Aquiti Incident... so long ago, and only a minor act in a much larger play. There's more to this than a personal vendetta, though from your own experience you probably think that fits. No, there must be other factors involved! Aquiti would seem to be key though, which is strange, as the Tetiri-Orlaed axis is the power in the Conclave. I need to consult with the Admiralty and trawl their archives! You're aware of the current situation in the Conclave, of the blockade at Ereddive... yes? Navy have no assets available, and prefer to remain uninvolved... overtly, anyway.'

Sahana nodded, and drained her coffee. He stared at the bulkhead for a minute or so.

'Hmm... something heavy is going-down, I can feel it! Sahana... your only sensible option is to provision *Inside Straight* up to the gunwales, and go hide in deep space until this storm blows over. I'll ensure that Trent gets to you... or vice versa... when circumstance permits!'

Listening to him, she recalled how Coyote had once given her the option to jump ship, to walk away. She had refused vehemently – as the sly old fox had known she would. She had to smile.

‘Sound advice, which I should probably follow... but Katiks don’t back-down too easily.’

He grinned at her – it was a wicked grin.

‘Is that the proud warrior talking... or the heinous criminal?’

‘Both... if that’s what it takes! Coyote taught me you have to be what you need to be!’

‘Excellent outlook... if you can pull it off. Okay... do you know what a lightning-rod is?’

‘Yes of course, it’s... oh, I see! You want me to go draw their fire... right?’

Now his grin became positively satanic – he nodded slowly.

‘Right! Coyote was, as you are now, inextricably entwined in this... they hunt you obsessively, for whatever reason. If they’re concentrating on you, it will make my job somewhat easier. I’ll try to back you up, but I’ll be occupied with other aspects at times. Now... could that stealthed Adder of yours slip past the blockade at Ereddive, do you think? Coyote picked the right ship for the task, then had it upgraded... he knew what he was about. Which reminds me... at some stage, you must tell me more about Avernus Orbital. SIS are aware of it, have been for a while, and we’d like to make discreet contact with the Council of Avernus... or its representative. I believe you could be the ideal conduit.’

Now it was Sahana’s turn to grin wickedly – they would need her alive for that.

‘I could, yes... if I survive long enough! As for running that blockade... I have to! Something from Coyote’s past draws me to Aquiti, and there I must go! But what of Jonas?’

‘I will deliver him to Aquiti... you have my word on it. When exactly that will happen I cannot say... but soon, I hope. He has a fine service record, and has been treated abysmally... he will want a piece of the action, of that I’m certain. Okay, I’ll brief you on what I know, and what I suspect, then we’ll talk specifics... more coffee?’

She nodded – they had an understanding, and she no longer felt quite so alone.

‘Better make it strong, I think... lots of sugar!’

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‘I just read the GalCop alert, Skipper. Kill on sight... astronomical bounty! NavSec endorsed, too. Unlikely bed-fellows, those two... either she’s evil incarnate, or someone’s pulling strings.’

‘Undoubtedly the latter, Exec... but that is of no concern to us. Our orders are to track covertly and do not harm. Whether that means prevent harm is unclear, of course... but lack of clarity is not uncommon on special-ops... especially when SIS are involved!’

‘Subject has launched, Captain... designate *Spook One*... scanning. Ah, sweet... drive baffles, anechoic hull, minimal EM emissions... naval-grade stealth, in fact. By the sig, I’d say its drive has been enhanced too. No pursuit, as yet. Ah... *Spook One* is about to dematerialise, sir.’

‘Very whimsical, Eyes... thank you! A heavily-stealthed Adder, eh? I see the thinking... small, agile, dirtside-rated... well-shielded too, I’d wager. Ideally suited for spook work. Nav... when you have the numbers, lay-in a parallel jump and initiate. I am intrigued... it takes high-level clout to have a ship-of-the-line deployed on special-ops... but merely to track a fugitive? Their Lordships at the Admiralty must have very compelling reasons. We’re headed in harm’s way, people... I can smell it! You have the con, Exec... rig for silent running!’

‘Aye Skipper, I have the con... silent running it is.’

As a thoughtful Captain Kutuzov left the bridge, the object of their attention hyperspaced-out, bound for Soteri. The Orion-class destroyer *Bellatrix*, tracking it from beyond civilian scanner range, engaged its own hyperspace-drive and followed suit.

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Cruising sunwards through empty space, Sahana was thinking ahead. Next would be Zaxeed, then the long jump to the Tetiri Conclave, and the witchpoint blockade at Ereddive. She had to believe that *Inside Straight*’s unique stealth qualities, enhanced by the cloak, would enable her to slip through. As she neared Soteri’s sun, she was brought back to the present by the appearance

of three bandits. Her heart sank as she IDed them – two Mambas, *Void Shark* and *Fallen Angel*, and a Blackdog Python, *Kerberos*. Any hope she had of them ignoring her swiftly evaporated as they locked-on and the klaxon sounded. The two Mambas raced towards *Inside Straight*.

‘Fuck... why me? Think I’m an easy kill, do you? Bad mistake!’

She brought *Inside Straight* about, lit the injectors briefly, and sped between them, evading their fire. Taken by surprise, the Mambas hesitated and she bore down on the Python, hammering it with precision shots, forcing it to turn away and launch missiles. She brushed them aside with the ECM, corkscrewed around and crippled *Void Shark* with a long burst, then set about *Fallen Angel*, paying little heed to the hits *Inside Straight* was taking. When her laser overheated, she rammed the Mamba with the Adder’s reinforced belly, sending it cartwheeling away, fatally damaged. But now *Kerberos* was back, pounding *Inside Straight* with its military laser, and her shields dropped swiftly. Taking damage, she launched her only missile, forcing the Python to evade. She followed, dodging its aft laser, holding fire while her own laser cooled, waiting for the hardhead to hit and lower the Python’s shields. A quick glance at the scanner showed *Void Shark* limping away, and *Fallen Angel* already abandoned. Then her hardhead struck home, and she hammered *Kerberos* mercilessly, going for the kill. When it blew, she fragged its escape pod, came-about, and chased-down the stricken *Void Shark*, atomising it without compunction. She laughed out loud, but her triumph was short-lived – another blip had appeared on the scanner, heading straight for her. Again her heart sank as she IDed it – a Wolf Mk II called *All Cretans Are Liars*. Despite the gravity of her situation, she giggled at the name. Already badly damaged, *Inside Straight* had no chance against such a ship, no matter how well she fought, and she knew it. She readied herself for the inevitable – but to her surprise, the Wolf’s pilot hailed her.

‘Right on, Commander! But you’ll be needing a class-A shipyard, I reckon... follow me!’

‘A class-A shipyard? Way out here? Damn right, I need one... lead on, sir!’

‘Ho! A feisty filly, eh? Wonders never cease! Let’s be away, then... ma’am!’

The Wolf set course for the sun’s farside, its pilot unerringly matching his speed to an Adder’s rated maximum. Sahana followed, much relieved and not a little intrigued. Once well beyond Soteri’s sun, an asteroid swarm appeared – a huge swarm, the likes of which Sahana had never seen before. Three rock hermits, connected by illuminated glassteel drop-tubes, dominated the scene. Festooned with holo-signs, they were surrounded by scores of asteroids, all inter-linked by a network of luminous cables. Tiny spacesuited figures could be seen gliding along them, and jetting to and from the dozens of haphazardly parked-up ships. The comm channels were alive with chatter – one even had rock music blaring out.

‘Go dock at *Corke’s Drift*... they’ll fix your ship up good, and at a fair price. Soon as they’ve got the repairs underway, drop down the tube to *Gasparyan’s Grill*... I’ll be at the bar.’

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‘You were correct, Pilot... she did not require assistance. But what have we here, I wonder?’

‘Takes an Ace to know an Ace, Captain! Erm... this is *Corke’s Drift*... a free zone, of sorts.’

‘You know this place? From your mis-spent youth as a freelance, perhaps? Do enlighten us.’

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Floating down the drop-tube, she found herself in a plushly-furnished lobby served by several airlocks. She was facing two over-sized doors set in a high arch of stone, with two of the largest men she had ever seen stood on either side of it. They courteously scanned her ID, then swung the heavy doors open, and she was hit by a blast of sound. As they closed the doors behind her, she looked around, stunned – she was in an enormous, dimly-lit cavern carved from bare rock, and it was jam-packed with people. Down one side ran a long bar, complete with mirrors and brass rails. Half a dozen bartenders were struggling to cater for the jostling crowd, while on the opposite side of the cavern, an open kitchen area was a hive of activity. Diverse meats were

being barbecued over real charcoal pits, presided over by sweating chefs, while others prepared salads, flatbreads and sundries. The aroma of cooking meat, mingled with the smell of tobacco and dope, created a potent mix, and her head spun briefly. The hubbub of people talking and laughing merely provided a background to the music coming from a small stage, where eight musicians in traditional robes were creating a pulsating rhythm on ancient stringed instruments and drums. Looking up, she saw that the cavern had a domed ceiling, with a large glassteel panel inset at the apex, displaying a glittering starfield. Round three sides of the cavern ran a mezzanine floor, reached by two wide spiral staircases. There, people were sitting at tables eating and drinking, or just watching the scene below. Feeling a little light-headed, she began to weave her way through the crowd. She had nearly made it to the bar when a man stepped in front of her, deliberately blocking her way.

'My oh my, ain't you the pretty one!'

She ignored him and moved to go around him and again he blocked her – and again. She was fast losing patience, but wasn't quite sure how to handle it – the guy was big. She tried to walk around him once more, and again he blocked her way. She'd had enough, and was about to try something drastic, when a voice came from behind him – a voice she recognised.

'Quit being an asshole, Ballantyne! The lady is angry now... and you're playing with fire!'

'This girl is dangerous? Hmm... if you say so, Doc! Barkeep, get this gorgeous creature a beer!' Bowing theatrically, he stepped aside and she caught sight of the voice's owner. He was stood at the bar, one cowboy-booted foot up on the brass rail, watching her in the mirror. Dressed in a pinstripe suit, sporting a black stetson, and toting a holstered pistol on his thigh, he cut quite a dash, and was clearly respected here. The stool beside him was politely vacated, as a barkeep placed a foaming beer and a shot-glass on the bar. Nodding her thanks, she sat and took a long swallow of beer, wiped her mouth on her sleeve, and sighed contentedly. He grinned, filled the shot-glass with clear liquid from a half-empty bottle, then turned and raised his own in salute.

'Cheers! I do hope you like raki? Be wary... it's potent liquor.'

'Raki? Ahh... smells of anise... salut! You are the guy with the Wolf Mk II... right?'

'Yeah, *All Cretans Are Liars* is my ship, and Empedocles Smith is my name. Most people call me Doc, though. You fly that Adder of yours like a fighter ace... impressive!'

'I learnt from the best, and *Inside Straight* is not standard issue. Those bandits shot me up some, though. I owe you for leading me here... in my position, a safe shipyard is hard to find.'

'You owe me nothing... I damn-near left you to your fate, as it happens. But something about the way you fought your ship... attracted me. Classy combat skill, and ruthless too... miss... ?'

'Katik... Sahana Katik. This is an amazing place... what's the story?'

'Well... *Corke's Drift* was founded by Xanthe Corke and her partner Kamran Gasparyan... they first found the swarm. It's become a neutral zone for those in-the-know, no matter their legal status. We have an accord with the Grand Vizier of Soteri, who is refreshingly enlightened for a dictator, so the local Viper jocks stay well away. The shipyard's top-notch, and the *Manikaran Inn* boasts luxury suites. It's the only five-star hotel in deep space, and many of us reside there permanently. As for the other 'roids, they're inhabited by all sorts of people, from rich traders to poor hermits. There's even a hydroponic-farmroid producing fresh fruit and veg... and really far-out weed! Then there's *Radio Sombrero*, pushing-out the finest music in the Eight... though the jocks are mad as hatters. It's illegal to tune-in on Soteri, but half the planet does anyway, including the Grand Vizier himself, apparently. All told, it's a diverse and somewhat eccentric community here... an interesting place to dwell. As for *Gasparyan's Grill*... as you can see, it's unique! The crowd that hang-out here are mostly space-crazed veterans, and it can get rowdy, but the bouncers are efficient and kindly, the food is excellent, and the music rarely stops! But tell me something... that brooch you're wearing is also unique... how did you come by it?'

He was smiling, but his eyes were hard, probing – it was no casual query.

'You recognise it? Did you know Coyote, then? I was his exec... he left it to me.'

Her use of the past tense was not lost on him. He frowned and nodded, his eyes suddenly sad.

'Someone finally got him? Yeah, I knew Coyote. He was a regular here... always came for the poker tournament too. That brooch... he had it crafted for his daughter's twenty-first... but she never got to wear it, poor girl. Last time we spoke, he said something about old trouble on his six... was that the way of it? I could do with hearing about it, anyway... over dinner, perhaps?' 'Buy me dinner and I'll talk, Doc. I've been on space-rations for days... I crave real food!' 'You get that here. Barkeep... a mezzanine table for two and a bottle of house red, please.'

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Dinner at *Gasparyan's Grill* consisted of many courses – various meats served in subtly different ways – and Sahana had happily indulged her not-inconsiderable appetite for good food. Doc had proved to be a charming and erudite host, and once she had related the events surrounding Coyote's demise, the conversation had been wide-ranging. Now, relaxing with a postprandial smoke and coffee, her thoughts turned to the immediate future – and the blockade at Ereddive. 'I've gotta make it to Aquiti somehow... any advice about running that blockade, Doc?' 'Yeah... don't bother, you'd never make it! Use the backdoor instead... via Tetiri.' 'Back-door? Tetiri is out of range from either Soteri or Zaxeed... or Latile.' 'I'll bet you've got the local chart fixed in your head... look at it... trigonometrically.' Grinning, he watched as she thought it through, saw the light dawn in her eyes. 'Oh... it's within range from midway, between here and Zaxeed. But fuel wou... ah... if I hitch a ride through a jiggered wormhole, then... but surely the bugs make midway too chancy?' 'Thirty seconds of dodging green death, then you're away... if you don't panic, of course. Your mule too... on to Zaxeed, or Latile, or back here... or even across to Tetiri too. Piece of cake!' She laughed at the elegance of it – and she had a feeling that Doc had just volunteered himself for the role of mule. She suddenly felt more confident of reaching Aquiti. 'Tell me, Doc... apart from offering your services as a mule, what do you do for a living?' 'Ha! For meat and bread, I deal in rare gems and narcotics... for gravy, I assassinate people!' 'Oh... you're a member of the Guild of Assassins?' 'Those pajeros! Jumped-up bounty-hunters, is all they are... and I despise bounty-hunters! I am a professional assassin. I only accept righteous contracts... and I name my own price!' Having recently been hunted, she shared his despite of bounty-hunters. But her thoughts were elsewhere – an idea had occurred to her. 'So... what would be your price to assassinate a head-of-state... a world president, let's say?' 'More than a bankrupt fugitive such as yourself can even imagine... but you are serious? Okay, purely as an intellectual exercise... which particular president did you have in mind?' 'Ereddive's! The Conclave would be better off without her... don't you think?' He grinned, but his eyes were expressionless, unreadable. 'That'd be an extremely challenging target, and very high-risk... and the repercussions could be far-reaching. A seven-figure sum... as I say, way beyond your means.' 'But would you consider her a righteous target?' 'I may well do... but I kill for cash, not for ideological reasons.... as such.' She widened her eyes and smiled enticingly at him. 'Only for cash, Doc? Come to my ship... I'll make you an offer you can't refuse!' He frowned as he tried to discern her meaning. Giving up, he grinned wolfishly. 'Lead on, young lady... surprise me!'

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As the two ships moved away from *Corke's Drift*, Sahana tuned-in to *Radio Sombrero* – dramatic, sonorous chords were dying away, and the jock was back on. 'You just heard *Raiders of the Lost Quark* playing *Cherenkov Blues*. Next, gentlefolk of the galactic gyre, we got a genuine golden oldie... positively antediluvian, in fact. This is for all you hitch-

hikers out there... you got your towels, guys? Okay... this here is by some long-forgotten band called *Eagles*. Hey amigo, gimme that joint! Ahh... that's one small toke for man... and a giant toke for mankind! What the heck... bugger, I done hit the wrong switch... again! Oh well, who gives a fuck anyhow. Turned-on sounds, folks, brought to you by the pirate of the aether, *Radio Sombrero*. We put other stations in the shade! Oh yeah... a quick word for one of our sponsors, the Grand Vizier of Soteri. Ave Imperator... y'all copacetic? You'll be the first against the wall when the revolution comes, amigo... enjoy it while you can! Meanwhile, the inimitable *Radio Sombrero* plays on. From the top... this will be *Journey of the Sorcerer!*

The opening chords sent shivers up her spine, and a wave of dark foreboding swept over her as the haunting, banjo-led instrumental filled her head. Aboard *All Cretans Are Liars*, Doc was also listening, similarly struck by the music. For a moment or two, he was beset by doubts – then he grinned fiercely. There was something special about that girl, as Coyote had clearly known. As the tune began to fade, he opened a wormhole and the two ships plunged into witchspace.

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'Nav... initiate a parallel jump to Zaxeed. Exec... you have the... '

'Belay that, Nav! I'm getting anomalous readings from that wormhole, sir... fine-tuning now!'

'Oh... hyperdrive failure, do you think, Eyes? If so, they're in trouble.'

'No, not exactly hyperdrive failure... it's been jiggered! A deliberate mis-jump, sir!'

'Ah... interesting. Pilot... you seem to be familiar with the dark side of this sector. What could possibly be of interest at midway? Another hermit collective, perhaps?'

'Erm... the jump-point for Tetiri, sir... it's the backdoor into the Conclave!'

Kutuzov's eyes narrowed as he thought it through. They had to stay with that Adder, and the only way now was to gamble that Tetiri was indeed its destination.

'Nav... we have ten-two in the tank! What's our max jump, as regards accuracy?'

'Ah, six-nine, sir! I'm pretty sure I could hit the spot at seven, though!'

'Scuttlebutt has it that *Rigel* edged seven in a test run, Skipper... blew the hyperdrive, though.'

'Seven-one, to be exact! Captain Locke is of the opinion that seven-two is possible... as am I.'

There was silence on the bridge of *Bellatrix* as the implications of that sank in. Kutuzov let it hang for long seconds, pondering his options one last time – he had no choice.

'Orders require us to stay with that Adder. Exec... lay it out for us, please.'

'Okay... transit to midway is twelve hours, from midway to Tetiri is forty-six hours. Transit from here direct to the vicinity of Tetiri will be roughly fifty-two hours... if we make it! At best, six hours to get *Bellatrix* within range of that witchpoint... and we'd want to tank-up too.'

'On reflection, forget the witchpoint. SIS believe Aquiti is her ultimate destination, so I think we'll have to double our wager, and precede her there... we're out on a limb now, anyway.'

'Aye, makes sense... big gamble though! I'm glad it's your decision, Skipper!'

'The joys of command. Sometimes you have to go with your gut instinct... and sometimes you win. Nav... you are about to earn your corn! Lay-in a jump for Tetiri and initiate! Chief... you listening? Emergency power to hyperdrive systems, please... and stand-by for critical damage!'

'Aye, Skipper... emergency power is online, damage-control on stand-by! Anything but a total can likely be jury-rigged within fifty hours, but the follow-on jump could be... unpredictable!'

'Yes... it could, Chief! But their Lordships at the Admiralty, in their infinite and unfathomable wisdom, deem our mission to be of great import, which leaves us little choice.'

'Aye, Skipper... 'twere ever thus. Aquiti or bust, it is then... morituri salutant!'

Kutuzov almost smiled as he opened the ship-wide comm.

'All hands... this is the Captain! The good ship *Bellatrix* is about to break the hyperspace jump record! You may wish to have a quiet word with your deity of choice... or not! That is all!'

## *Wild Card*

*When you're dealin' cards with Death  
The Joker's wild, the Ace is high*

Sahana was dragged out of a deep, dreamless sleep by loud music. She slipped out of the bunk and shuffled along to the cockpit in her pyjamas. Coyote was there, slouched in the command seat, booted feet up on the dash and a colita hanging from his lip. She took the right-hand seat, automatically scanning the instrument panel. All displays were nominal, the screen was filled with the grey nothingness of witchspace – a normal hyperspace transit, emergence still two hours away. Coyote pushed his sombrero up and turned to her, grinning crookedly.

'I love witchspace, Sahana! There is something delightfully paradoxical about it. It exists, and we're hurtling through it at unimaginable speed... but it's intangible, mysterious... in another dimension. Do we follow in the wake of Chronos? We experience the passage of time... yet I wonder if we even exist at this moment. Are we real... or do we imagine ourselves?'

'I know what you mean, but I'd rather not dwell on it. I was born in witchspace, remember.' She sat staring at the screen, music pounding in her ears. All was well, but something nagged at her. Then memories came in a flood of images. She turned to find him staring at her.

'This is wrong somehow, Coyote... you're dead! I watched you die! I watched as *Dark Star* was dropped into Cemaaran's sun, with your body aboard... I watched it burn!'

Sahana's puzzlement turned to horror as the flesh of his face melted and dissolved, leaving her staring at a gruesome death's-head. Smoke wafting from its nasal cavity, the now-empty eye sockets glowing with an eerie blue light, the grinning skull spoke to her.

'Right or wrong, living or dead... nothing lasts. Here in the twisted strangeness of witchspace, anything is possible... even the impossible! Go ask the moonwatcher, he will know!'

She awoke with a gasp and sat-up, her body drenched in cold sweat. The ship was reassuringly silent. Shivering, she took long, deep breaths, trying to slow her pounding heart, trying to erase the ghastly image that lingered in her head. She rolled out of the bunk, stripped-off her sodden pyjamas, and crawled into the wetroom – the dream had shaken her badly. Like most spacers, she had heard tell of the hyperspace horrors – of the hallucinations and nightmares, of the dead appearing, of lone pilots gone berserk – but had never taken them too seriously. Now though, she believed, now she understood – or thought she did.

Later, after a long shower, she sat in the galley drinking sweet green tea – calmer now, but the haunting image of Coyote lingered. Her mind drifted back over the recent past – to how her family's Anaconda being blown apart, leaving her as the sole survivor, had led to her fortuitous meeting with Coyote, which in-turn had led to her discovering the truth about her father's clan, and playing a part in their demise. Then had come that mission to the Gates of Damocles, and its aftermath. She began to think that she was playing with a cold deck, which made her smile, considering her ship's name. She recalled how Coyote had taught her to play poker during the long hours spent hurtling through witchspace aboard *Dark Star*. She was in a very high-stakes game now, that much was certain, and she had to keep her nerve. Singing softly to herself, she headed for the cockpit – emergence at Tetiri was less than twenty minutes away.

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Local space was empty when *Inside Straight* emerged from witchspace. Sahana immediately set an oblique course for Aquiti, staying clear of the main spacelane, hoping to go unnoticed. She had no idea what to expect here, and was pondering that fact when an unexpected chime from the instrument panel startled her – a new entry had appeared in the log. A shiver ran down her spine as she called it up, memories of the dream still fresh in her mind.

Starship *Inside Straight* – Commander's Log (addendum):

Don't worry... no ghosts. Merely a system-sensitive delayed entry... clever stuff. Below you'll find co-ordinates of a contact on Aquiti... he lives on a farm in the outback. You can trust him completely, but he'll be wary of you at first. Suggestion: land by night, at least ten kilometres off, and walk in. The word is Tanstagi... comprendes?

Sighing in relief, she called-up the atlas of Aquiti, and entered the co-ordinates. Checking local timezones, she adjusted her course and speed accordingly. The drive on minimal, all running lights disabled, she settled-in for a slow, stealthy cruise in-system.

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He sat cross-legged on the bare rock floor, head bowed and body relaxed, his breathing slow and steady – in his early forties, lean and wiry with long black hair, he was naked apart from a loincloth. The only light came from a brazier of glowing coals, which filled the tiny cave with a sauna-like heat, and sweat poured from him, plastering his hair to his bronzed skin. He had sat thus for over twenty hours, unmoving, unseeing – but in the landscape of the mind he travelled far, and saw many things. He sought the aid of the ancients – the old spirits that had guided his people for millennia – for their way of life was threatened. But the spirits were often capricious, and he had wandered long through lush valleys and across barren deserts, sticking resolutely to his path, resisting the zephyrs of mental compulsion which tried to draw him aside, to lead him to other places – places where he could become lost, adrift. He was no stranger here, and knew the otherworld of the peyotl well, knew it could be perilous – even deadly.

Though he traversed great distances, no time seemed to pass, and he felt no fatigue, his steady stride effortless. A bloated orange sun and its tiny blue companion hung motionless above the horizon, neither rising nor setting, their combined light bathing the landscape in disorientating colours and double shadows. But over the years he had become accustomed to the odd light, as it was usually like this – when it wasn't, the sky would be black and starless. At last, after what might have been hours or days, he spotted a bird circling high in the distance, and using that as a beacon, he found his way to a small lake, hidden among sand dunes, and here he lay down to drink of the cool water.

His thirst slaked, he sat-up and looked around – where before he had been alone, now an old woman in black robes was standing watching him, her dark eyes fathomless. At her side sat a strange dog-like creature, studying him with black, intelligent eyes, its tongue lolling between white, razor-sharp teeth. Growling softly, it stood and moved slowly towards him. Never had he encountered anything like this before – the spirits had always been subtle, intangible in their manifestation – and for the first time in his life he feared for his soul.

Outside the ritual cave, under a crystal-clear sky crowded with stars, the bitter high-plains wind moaned and wailed, as it did most nights. The region known as the Mountains of the Moon is an inhospitable place – a high-altitude equatorial plateau criss-crossed by arroyos and canyons, where the temperature ranges from the high forties by day to below zero at night. Encircled by lofty, snow-capped mountains, it is considered useless, unworkable land by everyone on Aquiti, a world with an abundance of prime agricultural land. But for the people it is their home, their land, has been since the first colonisation, and it is a land that their ancestors back on old Terra would have recognised, and approved of.

Now, many of the people had gathered at the sacred rock. Clustered around braziers, huddled in shoaat-hair blankets, they awaited word from their shaman, wondering if the ancients would deign to speak with him. The nagging, incessant wind blew clouds of sparks off the braziers.

Inside the ritual cave, the shaman stirred. He began to tremble and moan, then sat bolt-upright, every muscle stretched taught, sweat streaming down his torso. For thirty long, aching minutes he remained transfixed, teeth clenched and eyes bulging, hardly breathing – then abruptly the trance broke. His heart thumping, he drew several deep breaths, then threw back his head and howled. When he staggered wild-eyed from the cave, gasping in the frigid night air, the people gathered round him. He gestured skywards, threw back his head and howled again – and was answered by a deafening clap of thunder as a fireball streaked overhead, falling to earth among the foothills to the west. Exhausted, the shaman fell to the ground, shaking uncontrollably. He was hastily wrapped in warmed blankets and fed thin soup – the ancient ones had replied.

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When Sahana came-round, the battered cockpit was full of smoke. *Inside Straight* was a wreck, but she had made her first planetary landing. It should have been trouble-free, but she had been jumped by a Viper patrol as *Inside Straight* had hit atmosphere. They had sniped at her from high above, and the situation had rapidly become critical, so she had launched her only missile and blown it immediately, creating an explosion as she engaged the cloak, then had thrown the ship into a too-steep dive, keeping an anxious eye on the gauges. As the temperature had risen and the energy had fallen, she had fought to regain some control – and sluggishly *Inside Straight* had responded. On the scanner, she had seen the Vipers pull away, believing her dead. Then had come the wild, barely-controlled descent through lofty mountains, losing altitude fast, her ship streaming a fiery tail. The plateau had come too soon on the now-unplanned trajectory for her to put down there, but she had found a convenient valley in the foothills beyond and had managed to guide the stricken *Inside Straight* towards it. There it had ploughed a long furrow along a wide arroyo before coming to a halt, half-buried in sand.

She unstrapped, ducked under a busted strut, and walked unsteadily to her cabin. She donned a climate-suit, grabbed her already-packed rucksack and left the ship, scrambling shakily up the arroyo's bank. She congratulated herself, even as she looked back at the still-glowing wreck of *Inside Straight*, its scorched hull steaming and crackling in the frigid night air – she had made it down. Shivering suddenly, she slid her hood up, shouldered the rucksack, and began walking down the valley towards the plateau, her way lit by starlight. She was two thousand kilometres from her intended destination, in a wilderness described as 'mostly uninhabited, except for a few nomads' in the database. Aware that daytime temperatures here would make walking any distance impossible, she knew she would have to walk by night and rest during the heat of the day. She had to believe that she would find help, and soon, as she had limited supplies of food, and more importantly, very little water.

Watching the sun climb into the sky above a mesa, Sahana began to wish she had stayed with the ship. It had taken her two nights to walk out of the foothills onto the plateau, and six nights trudging across the desolate, windswept landscape had brought her to a small rock outcrop in the middle of nowhere. She had picked a direction on impulse, navigating by the stars, but had seen no sign of life, nor found any water. Exhausted and dehydrated, aching in every bone, she had hit her limit, and knew she could go no further. As the bitter cold of night gave way to the rapidly-rising heat of day, she settled herself down in the shade of the rock. Almost reluctantly, she drank the last drops of her carefully rationed water, and drifted into a troubled sleep.

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Cascading down the rocks and crashing into the river below, the waterfall created a cool mist that hung beneath a vibrant rainbow, and all around was lush vegetation. Dragonflies darted to and fro, iridescent streaks in the golden sunlight. Overhead an eagle circled sedately, surveying the oasis. Standing on the lip of the gorge, she filled her lungs with the fragrant, moisture-laden air, and looked down. The deep, dark pool at the bottom of the cascade called to her, invited her to plunge into its cool embrace. As she flexed her knees to jump, the eagle swooped low.

She awoke, startled – all shade had gone, and the midday sun beat down mercilessly, dazzling her. She turned her head to find a young boy staring down at her, wide-eyed.

‘Papa! Come quick!’

Within seconds a man appeared, naked but for a loincloth. Semi-delirious, she tried to laugh, but her throat was too parched and all that emerged was a hoarse cackle.

‘To the cave, boy! Fetch water and a cloth!’

All she could do was stare up at him, not yet sure he was real. The boy soon returned, bearing two waterskins, and stood watching her, awe in his eyes. The man knelt, slipped an arm under her shoulders, and lifted her to a sitting position.

‘Listen! You must drink this slowly, mouthful by mouthful! Swill it round your mouth as much as you can before swallowing... understand?’

She nodded slowly, and he held the spout to her mouth. She made herself obey, though all she wanted was to gulp it down – never had water tasted so good. He let her drink half a skinful, then he soaked the cloth and gently wiped her face and eyes.

‘You may drink more soon... but too much, too fast... is not good.’

He soaked the cloth again, wrung it out over her head, and pushed it into her hand.

‘Hold that over your mouth, breathe through it... clear?’

Again she nodded and obeyed, watching him, wondering who he was, this handsome, bronze-skinned man. He read the question in her eyes, and smiled.

‘I am named Peter Longstaff... and the boy is my son, Sandro. We’ll get you to our village in a while... it’s not too far. There you can take a long shower... then we shall eat and talk.’

‘I... I am Saha... Sahana Katik. I... I would kill for a shower... and food... and more water!’

Her eyes pleaded with him. He laughed, and handed the waterskin to her.

‘Okay, finish that one... but take your time. Savour it... comprehend the magic that is water!’

She was too busy blissfully swilling the magic round her mouth to reply.

‘Your village... how far is it?’

‘Maybe ten kilometres or so... close by yonder mesa.’

‘Damn! I nearly made it!’

‘But you did make it... you were summoned from this rock. Eight nights past, many people gathered here and kept vigil while I sought the guidance of the ancients. In response, the spirits delivered a fireball to our land... that was your starship, of course.’

‘Yeah... that was my starship, alright. But no spirit sent me... I got jumped by Vipers. They forced me off-course... nearly killed me! I’d meant to land two thousand kilometres from here.’

‘Make no mistake... the spirits guided you to this place. In time, you will come to understand that. Your purpose here is not yet apparent though. So... do you feel able to walk?’

She closed her eyes for a few moments, confused – his certainty sent a cold shiver up her spine, despite the heat. She put it from her mind, and got shakily to her feet. She was recovering fast though, could feel her strength returning. She drained the waterskin and grinned.

‘Yeah... I can walk! And I’ll not forget the magic that is water!’

‘Good... Sandro will carry your pack. Welcome to the Mountains of the Moon!’

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Clean clothes, cold beer, the heat dying as the sun sank behind the distant mountains – Sahana felt almost human. The shower had been heavenly, the chilli and flatbread, washed down with glass after glass of pure sweet water, had been delicious, and now she was sitting outside the Longstaff family's hab, picking at cheese and fruit. Over dinner, she had learnt the history of the people – the eight tribes – and how they had come to dwell in this apparently inhospitable place. Their elders at the time of colonisation had known exactly what they wanted, and had dealt cleverly with the Settlement Bureau. They had been granted permanent possession of the entire plateau, and the surrounding mountains, on very favourable terms, in exchange for their undertaking to preserve the wilderness, to exist with and within it – a way of living they had known for millennia. She had also learned of the threat to their existence – of the government's unexpected plans to repossess the plateau, claiming the right of eminent domain, and construct a huge industrial complex and spaceport – and their determination to fight it.

'Why is it called the Mountains of the Moon... is it the desolation?'

'It's not as desolate, nor as arid, as it looks. There are subterranean rivers and aquifers beneath the plateau... and we know how to find them. Using small boreholes and solar pumps, we can easily irrigate our crops. If we wished, we could green the whole plateau, but that would not be fitting. In sheltered valleys high in the foothills, we have tapped melt-water from the mountain snows and created alpine meadows, where we graze our shoats and grow fruit. The mountains provide an income too, in the form of top-grade turquoise, which we trade carefully. There are many villages such as this dotted across the plateau, some permanent, others transitory... but ours is the largest. We are not a primitive people, we merely follow many of the old ways... yet we lack for nothing. As you've seen, our habs are high-tech and well furnished, we enjoy most of the comforts of so-called modern life... yet we live in harmony with this land, and benefit greatly from it. Oh... it's called the Mountains of the Moon because of the moon.'

'The moon? But Aquiti has no moon... or so I thought.'

'It is tiny... and somewhat odd. It is geostationary, neither rising nor setting, and is only visible just before sunrise and just after sunset. Soon, when the sky has darkened, look to the zenith and you will see. Of course, it cannot be natural, it must have been placed in that orbit... yet it was already there when the people arrived. Old myths say it is honeycombed with tunnels, but to the best of our knowledge, it has never been explored. It evades attention... somehow.'

She was about to comment, but movement caught her eye and she turned to look. An old man had hobbled from the next hab and was settling himself cross-legged on the ground. Something indefinable about him piqued her interest.

'The old man... who is he?'

'Oh, that's El Brujo... we don't know his true name. He positions himself thus every morning and evening to observe the moon. He wandered into the village some years ago, but has never said one word. We believe him to be a sorcerer, hence the name, and are pleased to provide for him. He sits and smiles, his eyes shine, he radiates goodwill... but never says a word. If any of the kids ask one of those impossible-to-answer questions, we say 'Go ask the moonwatcher, he will know'. They get no response, of course, he... Sahana, what is wrong? Are you taken ill?'

The blood had drained from her face, her hands shook, and cold sweat beaded her brow.

'That's... that's what he told me! Go ask the moonwatcher, he will know!'

'Who told you? Sahana... who said that?'

She barely heard him – her head was spinning, and spasms of nausea gripped her stomach. She didn't understand what was happening, but she sensed a connection here, however bizarre.

'I... I must talk to him!'

'Well... you can try.'

Followed by Peter, she walked over to the old man and knelt beside him. His gaze flicked her way briefly, then returned to the zenith, and her eyes followed. High above, a flash of reflected sunlight heralded the fleeting appearance of the moon. Shining like a tiny pearl set among the glittering diamonds of the now-darkened sky, it had an elusive, enigmatic quality about it, and

a strange feeling of *presque vu* swept over her. Within minutes it faded from sight, whereupon the old man turned and looked squarely at her, eyes placid, his weather-beaten face creased by a beatific smile. Sahana became aware of people gathering around them, drawn by the stranger from the stars – the girl that the ancient ones had delivered to them.

‘El Brujo... who brought me here? And why?’

If he heard, he gave no sign – he just sat there smiling at her.

‘The people need help, as do I... will you talk with us?’

There was no response – only the smile. Intuition told her there was something here, if only she could find the key. Feeling the need for a smoke, she got her cigar case out. Abruptly, his demeanour changed – gone was the smile, and his eyes became swirling pools of emotion. She heard murmurs of surprise behind her as he took the cigar case and slowly traced the engraving with his fingertips, all the while watching her intently.

‘He... he is dead? Coyote is dead? But you... you are not Rachel?’

‘Yes, he is dead... as is Rachel... both murdered! I am Sahana... his adopted daughter.’

His eyes glowed as he held her gaze, mesmerising her, probing her mind. Instinctively, though she knew not how, she resisted, blocking him. His eyes widened momentarily in surprise, and the spell was broken. He nodded once in approbation, and reached out to her.

‘Give me your hand, Sa-ha-na! Ahh... you have power, ancient power! The old trickster chose well! I am roused by sad tidings, and I sense storms gathering. Peter... please bring meat and fruit to my hab. This night will be long, and the coming days may be harsh... best we stoke the engine while we can. The wheel of history turns, and the past becomes the present... we must guard the future! Ahh... now do the bitter winds of night bestir themselves, and moan in old men’s bones! Let us seek the warmth, Sa-ha-na.’

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Circling high above the plateau, feeling the sensuous caress of slipstream across flight feathers, and the comforting updraft under her wings, Sahana was nearly overcome by the exhilaration of flying. Soaring ever higher, the landscape opened-up below – there was the village, and off in the distance, the foothills and snow-capped mountains. A glint of sunlight on metal caught her eye, and she swooped around for another look. Her aquiline sight zoomed-in, and she saw it was the wreck of *Inside Straight* – but there was another ship nearby. It was Haldane’s *Essence of Now*, and she tried to call out to him – and awoke. Wrapped in a shawl-blanket, she was lying on a low couch in El Brujo’s hab. The men were still talking in quiet, earnest tones. Last night she had told her tale, had eaten her fill while they talked it through, and along with Peter, had smoked El Brujo’s pipe, listening in stoned-out fascination as he had talked of times past, of his first encounter with Coyote, and of the subsequent revolution on Aquiti, explaining how the network that had organised it had been maintained over the decades since, in order to safeguard the future of the planet. As for how he had first come to the village, he had said only that an ancient one had entrapped him, struck him dumb, and ordered it thus. About midnight, she had pleaded fatigue and left them to it. Now, as the first light of day seeped through the blinds, she felt alive, restored – but the dreams were beginning to trouble her.

‘The new day greets you, Sa-ha-na... you slept well?’

‘Yes... very well. Though I dreamt of my friends... saw them at the wreck of my ship.’

The two men exchanged a glance.

‘Explain... how did you see that? Where were you?’

‘Don’t laugh... I was an eagle, circling high above the plateau. By the wreck of *Inside Straight*, I saw another ship... Haldane’s ship... *Essence of Now*.’

Neither man laughed – they simply nodded.

‘In the dreamworld, many things are seen... some are true. I’d wager your friends are there!’

‘What? How can that be... how could I know that?’

'The dreamworld is enigmatic, but can offer insight into the real world if one has power, which you have... though you know it not. Yet you sense it. It is buried deep... but it stirs!'  
She could see truth in his eyes, but she struggled to accept it.  
'Trust the eagle in your soul... direct them here. But be brief and cryptic... make no mention of places or co-ordinates... the worldnet is heavily monitored.'  
He handed her a commpad. Putting aside her doubts, she thought fast, estimated distances and bearings, keyed-in one sentence, and hit send.

Shaking his head, Trent scrambled up the arroyo's bank and rejoined Haldane.  
'Gone... no sign, nothing! Damn it, she should've stayed with the ship!'  
'No... in hostile terrain, you move-on! She did right! That ship's taken some punishment... she did remarkably well to get it down, let alone walk away from it.'  
'She's a superb pilot! What now? It's been nine days... she could've covered a lot of ground.'  
'On foot... in this environment? No, she'd have to lay-up by day, and walk by night... that will have slowed her down. C'mon... the sun's up. Let's get aloft and have a look around.'

As Haldane powered-up the drive, the comm chimed.  
'That's strange... via the worldnet! No-one knows we're here. It reads *Haldane – by the summer, it'll be one-sixty at four o'clock – Aguila!* I wonder...'  
'It's from Sahana! Aguila is her call-sign! She knows we're here... somehow!'  
'Ah good... it's gotta be her location. Hmm... if we take *the summer* to mean the Adder... then we get a distance, and a bearing, from the wreck. Clever girl!'  
'Well don't hang around... let's go get her!'

### ***Cold Deck***

*Goes to show, you don't ever know  
Watch each card you play, play it slow*

The day had passed swiftly, and the sun was sinking low. Sahana had taken Trent somewhere private, leaving Haldane deep in discussion with Peter Longstaff and El Brujo – revolution was in the air on Aquiti once again. Now they stood by the ship, about to say their goodbyes. Away to the north, dark clouds were gathering, rolling rapidly across the plateau towards them, and the air felt charged, heavy with threat. In the village, people were hurrying to their habs.  
'You must leave, and I must take shelter. That's a derecho heading this way. They're rare, and bring welcome rain to the land, but can be violent in the extreme!'  
As the sky darkened, all eyes were on the approaching storm. Distant lightning split the gloom, followed by reverberating thunder, and a blast of hot, humid air swept over them.  
'Time to boost! This looks bad, and *Essence of Now* is not ideally suited to atmospheric flight.'  
Haldane clasped hands briefly with El Brujo, then boarded *Essence of Now*. Trent did likewise, leaving Sahana alone with the old sorcerer.  
'Coyote chose us, and the ancient ones brought us here. Our threads became entwined... and I name you sister. But now does the crisis loom, and I fear for you. Should you survive, return to us... you will need our help, and there is a home for you both here. Viaje con dios, Sa-ha-na!'  
With that, he turned and hurried away. She watched him go, puzzled by his parting words. As the first raindrops began to fall, she shrugged and boarded *Essence of Now*. On the bridge, Trent was already belted into the jump-seat, and Haldane was waiting to lift-off.  
'Take the right-hand seat, babe... Haldane may need help!'

They had barely cleared the ground when the storm-front hit. Cursing softly, Haldane fought to keep the ship steady, slowly gaining height as hailstones pounded the hull. Then a massive downdraft slapped *Essence of Now* hard, sending it plummeting earthwards. Haldane maxed the throttle and managed to pull out of the dive, but the storm had them in its grip now, and the howling wind threw them around violently, whirling them in circles. Bolts of lightning slashed at *Essence of Now*, and the engines screamed in protest, then faltered. More bolts struck the ship, and ball lightning appeared in the bridge, filling it with the stink of sulphur. It hovered over the dashboard, then jumped across to Haldane's flightstick, and discharged itself up his arm.

'Bugger! Take over, Sahana!'

As she took control, the wind increased its fury, whirling the ship around ever faster. Ignoring Haldane's questioning glance, Sahana throttled-back, letting the storm take them for a while, trying only to maintain level flight, to avoid the killing downdrafts.

'Trust me... I know what I'm doing!'

'I sure hope so!'

In the jump-seat behind them, a white-faced Trent nodded.

After what seemed like an age, Sahana began to gently angle *Essence of Now* across the airflow, using the hurricane-force wind obliquely, as a swimmer would a current, not fighting it.

'Radar shows us heading deeper into the storm cell... windspeed will be even higher there!'

'Yes... but it's our only chance. The storm wishes to kill us. How's your arm?'

'Hurts like fuck! It's locked-up... can't even move a finger!'

He was talking through clenched teeth, obviously in great pain.

'Okay... it's about to get rough. Here we go!'

Sahana pulled the nose up as an updraft grabbed them, then wrenched the ship into a sickening corkscrew as another downdraft hit. As more hailstones hammered against the hull, she maxed the throttle and they burst through the storm's eye-wall into comparative calm. She stood the ship on its tail and boosted for the circle of clear sky high above, instinctively adjusting for the storm's rapid lateral movement – if they hit the eye-wall again, they were dead. Easing back on the throttle, she waited for the next assault. Lightning lashed-out from all around the eye-wall, enveloping the ship in pulsing plasma. The bridge lights blew and something akin to St Elmo's Fire danced along the dashboard, then jumped over to Sahana, flickering around her head and shoulders, silhouetting her in ghostly light. She threw the ship into a vertical barrell-roll and hit full throttle. Again, the engines faltered as more lightning lashed the ship. Throttling-back, she waited for the right moment – then lit the injectors and went for broke, her eyes glowing, every nerve in her body tingling. As the ship burst out into space, trailing tendrils of plasma, the St Elmo's Fire vanished, plunging the bridge into darkness. She screamed exultantly, oblivious of her surroundings, her mind in another place – the eagle was flying.

The lights came back on, flickered and dimmed, then brightened – voices brought her back.

'Holy shit! That was some fuckin' ride!'

'Hell, yes! I'll not forget that... ever!'

'Aye... just as well I got zapped, eh? This girl is dangerous!'

Sahana looked over her shoulder and grinned sheepishly at Trent, then at Haldane.

'I got a bit lost there... sorry! Alex... we gotta see to your arm.'

'Park us up high above the plateau first. I need to maintain direct comm-links with El Brujo for the next few hours. He now has secure naval kit... and some extremely sophisticated software, which his pals in Qarani are in the process of deploying. Certain private data-cores are about to be thoroughly compromised! Take us out, Commander Katik... pilot extraordinaire!'

Grinning, Sahana nodded, and took *Essence of Now* up to a stationary orbit.

Haldane's arm was badly burnt, and though he could swing it from the shoulder, below that he had no muscle control at all. Sahana applied salve to the blackened skin, then bandaged it and made a sling for him. That done, she rummaged in her pack and proffered two purple capsules. 'That must hurt like hell... ASD?'

Haldane grinned, and almost snatched them from her, well aware of its efficacy.

'Just what the doctor ordered! Rare as hens teeth, these days... how'd you get it?'

'There were two hundred caps in the safe on *Inside Straight*... not so many now. It's been tough at times, and the ASD got me through. Will there be revolution on Aquiti... again?'

'I have comms to deal with... then we'll have a council of war. But yes, it's inevitable now.'

Sahana lit-up a smoke, trying to relax – she felt vibrant, more alive than ever before. The battle with the storm, her experience on Aquiti, the strange dreams – all had changed her. She popped another cap into her mouth, washed it down with a swig of coffee, then leaned back and closed her eyes. Trent cast a questioning glance at Haldane, who shook his head. Meeting Sahana and Coyote had changed Trent's life – and the aftermath of the ambush that had killed Coyote and the Admiral had turned his world-view upside down. Accused of helping to arrange it, he had come within two hours of being stood in front of a firing-squad – an experience that had left its mark on him. Now he saw Sahana changing before his eyes – changing into someone different, someone caught-up in things way beyond his comprehension.

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The tunnel went on and on, always curving, but in which plane she wasn't quite sure. Down or up, or even sideways, had little meaning here. The tunnel was hexagonal in cross-section, local gravity was minimal – and disorientingly omni-directional. Four metres wide, its smooth stone surfaces emitted a faint glow, providing a soft ambient light which cast no shadows. She kept up a steady pace, half-walking, half-floating, occasionally passing side-tunnels, all unlit. After an indeterminate time, she came to a hexagonal chamber, with five other tunnel entrances. She paused on the threshold, uncertain – the chamber was lit, but the other tunnels appeared dark, and she had an uneasy feeling that the tunnel she was about to exit would go dark too as soon as she left it. Which it did – as did the chamber itself when she reached its centre, plunging her into total darkness. Forcing herself to remain calm, she shut her eyes, counted to one hundred, then opened them again. The chamber was still dark, but no longer pitch-black – the faintest of glows could be seen deep in one of the tunnels. With a relieved sigh, she pushed-off towards it, entering a tunnel identical to the one she had just exited. Guided by the gradually increasing glow, she soon came to a second chamber, and there found the source of the glow – a chinese lantern. Sitting cross-legged on the floor beside it was an old woman, unmistakably oriental in appearance. Slowly unfolding her limbs, she stood to greet Sahana.

'Welcome to Ixtlan! Come closer, child... give me your hand!'

She surprised Sahana with a grip of iron, which she returned – that earned her a wintry smile.

'Bueno... you know who I am, child?'

'Yes... Li Yan. We never met, but Coyote described you well. Why are you here?'

'Such a man... would I not wish to avenge him? And I will... that is certain! But we have little time, and there is much to discuss... sit with me, child.'

Sahana opened her eyes to find herself lying on a bunk. Disoriented, she thought she was back aboard *Inside Straight* – but the cabin lay-out was all wrong, and the realisation slowly dawned that she was aboard *Essence of Now*. She stretched languidly, then lay staring up at the ceiling, listening to the faint hum of the air-con – thinking things through. The dreams, her experiences on Aquiti, the encounter with El Brujo, the storm – all had shattered her world-view. Whereas before she had doubted, had thought herself crazy, now she believed – she did not understand, but she did believe. Ancient spirits, parallel space-time continua, dreams with meaning, altered states – all strange new concepts for her, but she was learning fast, and something inside of her

resonated with it all. She wondered if being born in witchspace had any bearing, had perhaps predisposed her to such phenomena. She had so many questions to ask of El Brujo, when next they met – but for the present, she was content. A feeling of tranquility pervaded her being, and for the first time in days, she felt in control. She had Jonas back too, which filled her heart with joy, and a mysterious artifact to explore, when circumstance permitted. All thoughts of revenge had gone – Tobias Murrell would meet his fate soon enough, of that she was certain. Swinging her legs off the bunk, she stood and stretched her back, checking the cabin clock – oh-six-fifty local. She had slept for eleven hours, and felt much the better for it, if a little light-headed. She needed coffee and a large breakfast, she decided, even if it was only space-rations. The thought of coffee reminded her that she needed to visit the head.

Twenty minutes later, she was wolfing down fresh-baked rolls filled with cheese, watched-over indulgently by Trent. He and Haldane had been up all night, trawling through the mass of data that had been uploaded, via El Brujo's network, from now thoroughly compromised data-cores in Qarani. Haldane was on the bridge, doing what he did best – organising and analysing intel in his head, sorting the wheat from the chaff, searching for nuggets of gold.

'Did you carry me to bed... or did I walk?'

'You were spark-out, babe. You're no lightweight... Haldane had to help. Coffee?'

'Liar! Please... sweet and strong! Are there more rolls?'

'Pig! Yeah... they're in the oven. Give 'em a couple of minutes. You want some dried fruit?'

'You bet... and more cheese too. Put it in front of me, and I'll eat it... I'm hungry!'

'Glutton! Here... the finest apricots, from the Mountains of the Moon.'

She wrinkled her nose at him, and greedily stuffed an apricot into her mouth, swiftly followed by a second, and then a third. Chuckling, Trent poured the coffee.

She was happily ploughing through the next batch of rolls when Haldane entered the galley.

'A report from Ereddive... its president has been assassinated! Long-range hit, professional job, shooter unknown! They picked the... er, why the clenched fist, Sahana? Don't tell me... damn it, girl... I see it in your eyes! Presidential contracts cost big bucks... very big bucks! How?'

Trent was staring at her. She swallowed a mouthful of roll, and smiled demurely back at him.

'I ran into a little trouble near Soteri... and chanced to meet a professional assassin known as Doc. We had a long chat over a candlelit dinner... and I made him an offer he couldn't refuse.'

Trent's jaw dropped, and even Haldane looked at her askance. She let it hang a second or two, then delved into her pack and tossed a Veonquatian firestone onto the table.

'There was a stash of these on *Inside Straight* too... more than enough to buy that contract. Doc and I discussed the overall situation in the Conclave, and she seemed like the ideal target.'

Haldane took the gem and turned it slowly in his fingers, admiring its inner fire.

'Beautiful! As I was going to say, the president was indeed the ideal target. She was certainly in league with the Murrels, and the driving force behind that blockade... which may well collapse now. Excellent! There could be a position for you with SIS when this is done and over... I like your style, Sahana. Trent has already accepted a post... and been promoted too.'

'I did? I have? Well thanks a bunch for telling me, Haldane! Bloody spooks!'

Smirking, Haldane grabbed a coffee and returned to the bridge, silently blessing whoever had discovered ASD. He had taken more through the night, but could still function properly, albeit one-handed, his mind was crystal-clear, working in overdrive – and there was no pain from his ruined right arm. He knew the arm was gone – if he had sought immediate hospital treatment, it might have been saved, but his priorities had been inescapable.

He was back almost immediately, no longer so cheerful.

'The stakes have just increased! There are capital ships in-system... Murrell-controlled capital ships! They're making a big play for control of this system, that is clear now, and may outflank

the coming revolution. Admiralty policy has always been no Navy involvement in planetary affairs. But the game has changed... capital ships in civilian hands will not be tolerated! Navy do have one asset in-system, but it's most likely out-gunned! I've sent a code-omega message to the Admiralty... this could turn nasty... very nasty!

Trent saw the question forming on Sahana's lips, and pre-empted it.

'The asset he mentioned is *Bellatrix*, an Orion-class destroyer. It was tracking you from Raleor, but you lost them with the mis-jump at Soteri. They had to gamble on Aquiti being your final destination, and blew their hyperdrive jumping from Soteri to Tetiri. Something prompted the Admiralty to take exceptional measures, and it looks like they got it right. Kutuzov commands *Bellatrix*... he's old-school, utterly ruthless. His Exec is hard as nails too, and the Orions are the Navy's newest ships. Any idea of the opposition's strength, Haldane?'

'No, not yet... nor where they are. I've informed Kutuzov... he'll do what he can. He and I go way back... I was there at Teveriat, in fact. No, don't ask... ever!'

Trent stared at him, intrigued. The public history of Teveriat was of a holocaust – of the brutal extermination of an entire race – and although the Navy had always denied responsibility, they had never given their version of the affair. The truth was buried deep in the Admiralty archives on Zaeredre. In Her Imperial Majesty's Space Navy, classified meant just that – classified.

'Hang on... a Navy destroyer tracked me from Raleor? Why the hell didn't it help me out?'

'No idea, babe... Haldane and I weren't aware of *Bellatrix* until we hit Aquiti. Their Lordships at the Admiralty move in mysterious ways... as ever. It was *Bellatrix* that pinpointed the wreck of *Inside Straight* for us... they'd tracked it down to the surface after the Vipers jumped you, and were certain you'd survived. *Bellatrix*'s pilot spotted your trickery on tele-optics... she likes you, called you an Ace. Bad time to get jumped though... must've been rough.'

'It was! *Inside Straight* was a fireball... but what a ride! I'll salvage her one day... fine ship!'

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In clipped tones, Haldane gave Sahana a quick rundown of the relevant intel he and Trent had gleaned from the compromised datacores in Qarani, explaining how some factors could affect the outcome down on Aquiti – for better or worse.

'Oh yes... there was mention of a moon, but I... '

'It's not a moon... it's an asteroidal artifact of some sort... tiny, honeycombed with tunnels!'

'How could... oh, another dream? Yes, Trent told me about them... he's thinking you've taken too much ASD. It can be mind-bending stuff... but you seem so certain... are you?'

'Yeah, babe... you are beginning to worry me... just a little.'

'I'm fine, Jonas... honestly. At first, I thought they were just bizarre dreams... then I thought I was losing it. They're strange, but they have import... I know that now! As for the ASD... yes, I took too much. But I needed to... I know that now too. I'm fine, guys... believe me!'

'Fair enough. I've seen some strange things in my time too. That El Brujo... he's a strange one, that's for sure. Anyway... that moon, artifact or not, belongs to you... part of Coyote's estate, which he inherited from Evangelina Toussaint upon her death. Could be why they hunt you?'

'What? But that's... '

The klaxon cut her off, sending them running for the bridge.

The scanner showed three Vipers heading for *Essence of Now* – and all three had locked-on.

'Unknown ship, you are in restricted space! Make no attempt to power-up your drive, and safe all ordnance. Failure to comply will be met with deadly force! Identify yourself!'

'Kill them!'

Sahana glanced questioningly at Haldane, but his face was impassive.

'I... yes, Captain!'

The three Viper pilots, though experienced, had made a fatal error in challenging an unknown ship so aggressively. The Constrictor is compact, fast, mounts military lasers fore and aft, and is heavily-shielded – in the hands of an ace such as Sahana Katik, it is a killing machine.

Hitting the injectors briefly, she sent *Essence of Now* hurtling in amongst the Vipers, looping and spinning, alternating between fore and aft lasers, scoring heavy, precise hits, while disdainfully ignoring what few hits they managed to land. It was a masterful display of combat flying – a fast and furious onslaught that caught the Viper pilots completely by surprise. In no time at all, all that remained were three escape capsules heading for emergency re-entry and landing down on the plateau far below. Already in pursuit, Sahana glanced at Haldane, raising an enquiring eyebrow – she was prepared to atomise them if so ordered – but he shook his head slowly. ‘Leave them be... I’ll contact El Brujo, have his people round them up. Restricted space, eh? I wonder... take us round to the aegis, Sahana! But cautiously... something’s afoot, methinks!’

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‘Bandits, Captain... just came around the sun! Very faint sigs, but... yes, three ships... capital ships, in fact! Designate *Rogue One* through *Three*. Oh... *Rogue Three* is cruiser-class, sir!’
‘So... they show their hand! The other two ships, Eyes... frigates?’
‘Yeah, mass and sigs match frigate-class, sir! All older ships, but they pack serious firepower!’
‘Indeed they do! Exec... what would the manual recommend when so heavily out-gunned?’
‘Ah... withdraw and await support, Skipper.’
‘Correct... only a space-crazed fool would engage such superior force. Sound battle-stations!’
Lieutenant-commander Katrin McGill, Executive Officer of *Bellatrix*, had deferred a command of her own – a newly-commissioned frigate – to serve under Kutuzov for one more tour of duty, and this was why. A feral grin on her face, she opened the ship-wide comm.
‘All hands... battle-stations! I repeat... battle-stations! Suit-up and check-in!’
Kutuzov moved his cursor through the holotank that occupied the focal-point of the bridge.
‘Pilot... put us there, we’ll engage well away from the aegis! And don’t spare the horses!’
‘On our way, Captain!’
‘Guns... primary target is the cruiser! Ignore the frigates, even if they hurt us, clear?’
‘Aye, Captain... cruiser is primary target!’

‘All hands suited-up and checked-in, Skipper... and Ptolemy is secure!’
Kutuzov frowned, and made no reply. It was thought he disapproved of the ship’s mascot, but Maynard, the veteran mess-steward, knew otherwise. He had seen the Skipper slyly slip the cat prime morsels on many occasions, and often found it curled-up on the bed when he took the Skipper’s morning coffee in. Maynard was devoted to Kutuzov – he had shipped with him for many years – and understood him better than most. As for Ptolemy, he regarded *Bellatrix* as his own domain, and went wherever he chose. Closed doors meant little to him – he could find his way almost anywhere, and probably knew the innards of the ship better than the Chief. He was smart too – he seemed to know when trouble was imminent, and within seconds of the klaxon sounding, he would appear in the mess, ready to be put into his custom-built life-pod.

Its feline mascot secure, its crew going through pre-combat routines, some tense and nervous, others quietly confident, the Orion-class destroyer *Bellatrix* hurtled sunwards at flank speed.

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‘Message from Kutuzov... *Bellatrix* is about to engage two frigates and a cruiser! They’re in for a pounding... and it leaves us with aegis picket duty. When it kicks-off dirtside, I intend to stop

all station dockside operations... nothing in or out without my say-so! If a ship makes a run for it, don't fuck about with warning shots, Sahana... kill it!

'Understood! Coming-up on the aegis soon... you want us hove-to just beyond it, yes?'

'Yes... for the moment. Trent... I need more ASD, if you'd be so kind. And you two love-birds had better dose-up too, I think... when it starts, there may be no time.'

Alone on the bridge, Haldane was monitoring the comms, and thinking. They had been hove-to just beyond the station aegis for two hours, and all seemed well – but something nagged at him. The latest message from El Brujo had assured him that everything was going according to plan, and that zero-hour had been set for dawn on the following day, Qarani time – eight hours off. But did he dare wait – once word of the capital ship engagement now underway sunwards hit dirtside, the plan could easily fragment – and still something nagged at him. He made his mind up – it was time to act. He sent a terse message to El Brujo, informing him that he was about to close the station down, and to be prepared to move early.

'Trent, Sahana... to the bridge, please! Time to go!'

'Station Control, this is Captain Haldane of Her Imperial Majesty's Space Navy! I require you to suspend all dockside operations immediately. This system will shortly be locked-down, and placed under temporary Navy control!'

'What the fuck? You ain't got no jurisdiction here, Navy... and what's more, you ain't got the firepower to enforce a demand like that anyway! piss off!'

As he spoke, six Vipers scrambled from the slot and surrounded *Essence of Now*. Sahana flexed her fingers around the flight-stick, wondering if she could take-down six Vipers. Haldane was about to give her the nod, when *Bellatrix* came screaming into the aegis, decelerating hard.

'Did someone mention firepower? Viper Lead... lay one beam on that Navy vessel and you are toast. I suggest you and your flight head for the witchpoint! This system is now in lock-down, and you will enforce it... no ships in-system until advised otherwise! Station Control, this is Captain Kutuzov, officer commanding, Her Imperial Majesty's Ship *Bellatrix*. I insist that you comply with Captain Haldane's request, and suspend all dockside operations... immediately!'

'Nah... I ain't convinced, Kutuzov! Scanners show you're shot-up bad... and we got our own heavy firepower inbound, as I speak! Back off, Navy... or you'll soon be spacedust!'

'Imbecile! Who do you think shot us up? Fucking Pirates? The heavy firepower you're waiting-on is already spacedust! Enough! I have too many dead and wounded aboard to piss around!'

Deliberately leaving the comm open, Kutuzov issued orders, his tone coldly formal.

'Weapons Officer... arm a nuclear torpedo and target that station! Set for high-yield, proximity detonation! Entering my ident and authorisation code now... done!'

'Ident and authorisation code confirmed, Captain... nuclear torpedo is hot and locked!'

There was a long silence, during which the Vipers peeled away and headed rapidly out-system.

'Now just a goddam minute, Navy! You can't do that... this is a civilian station!'

'Believe me, I can! It's been many years since I atomised a main station... but as I recall, it was rather spectacular. My crew are hurting... they may appreciate some light entertainment!'

Urgent whispering was heard over the comm, followed by heated argument and what sounded like a scuffle. When at last a breathless Control replied, all bravado was gone.

'You... you're that Kutuzov? The... the Terror of Teveriat? Shit! Dockside ops suspended!'

A rare smile creased Kutuzov's scarred face – it was not a pleasant sight.

'Very sensible, Control! Wait one!'

Kutuzov switched to the naval channel.

'All done, Haldane... we have the aegis secured.'

'I'd like a presence on that station, Kutuzov... a couple of your marines, perhaps?'

'No can do. Their quarters took a direct hit... seven dead, two injured. We're short-handed all round... many wounded, some seriously. It's down to you... I'll assist if and when I can.'

'Ah... harsh! Very well. Be aware... there may be another capital ship lurking.'  
'That would be... inconvenient. *Bellatrix* is barely combat-capable. I'll have another little word with Control... encourage him to co-operate.'  
'Fear is the key, eh? Take care... Haldane out!'  
Kutuzov grinned – he liked Haldane – and cleared his throat.  
'Station Control... Captain Haldane will dock shortly. If any attempt is made to obstruct him in the pursuance of his duties, in any way whatsoever, I will hold you personally responsible, and have you skinned alive, dipped in vinegar... then spaced! Kutuzov out!'  
'Okay, take us in, Sahana... at speed.'  
Grinning mischievously, she lit the injectors, pirouetted around the nav buoy, and hurtled into the slot at full tilt, counter-rotating on approach. She was rewarded by astonished gasps.  
'You did say at speed, yes? They call it docking with panache.'  
'Bugger me! I've seen some hair-raising stunts in my time... but that... what are you, girl?'  
'Dangerous! This ship is top-notch... tough, compact, handles like a dream, muy rápido! A girl could become very attached to a high-performance ride such as this!'  
'Oh no... ain't no way you're keeping *Essence of Now*, young lady! Navy would keelhaul me!'  
'Just have a quiet word with your pal, Lord Grenville... I bet he could swing it.'  
'I'll arrange an audience for you, Trent... you can ask the old curmudgeon yourself!'  
That wiped the grin from Trent's face.

Watching the two men straightening their uniforms, and fastening collar studs, Sahana felt like giggling – but she realised this was Navy business, and that looking the part played a part. She quickly pulled her hair into a severe ponytail, slipped a band around it, and smartened her own shipsuit. Haldane nodded approvingly, and opening a locker, produced two military side-arms, one of which he handed wordlessly to Trent – the other he offered to her.  
'You take it, Sahana... I'm a useless left-handed shot!'  
Obediently, she strapped the bulky weapon to her right hip.  
'Are we expecting trouble, Alex?'  
'No... but I want to make an impression, a statement of intent.'  
'You'd look pretty good in naval uniform, babe... one day, perhaps.'  
'Yeah... maybe!'  
'Okay... you two enforcers take the airlock first, I'll follow. Lets be about it!'

As Sahana and Trent exited the two-man airlock, leaving Haldane waiting in the docking-tube, Tobias Murrell stepped out of a pod storage compartment, toting a pump-action shotgun, and blew Trent's chest away – he was dead before he dropped. Murrell quickly turned the shotgun on Sahana, his eyes full of manic triumph. Time slowed to a crawl as she watched him squeeze the trigger. They had been caught cold, wrapped-up in themselves – now Jonas was dead, and she was about to join him. Murrell grinned in anticipation, unaware of the diminutive woman who had appeared behind him, unaware of the expertly-wielded katana. His head hit the deck with a wet thud, followed by his body, blood pumping from its neck. The stroke came too late to prevent him firing, but the impact did cause his aim to waver – instead of her chest, the shot ploughed into her stomach. A chest hit would have been more merciful – the end result is the same, but gutshot is the worst way to die. Blood pouring from horrendous wounds, her system going into shock, she crumpled to the deck, her vision dimming. With the last of her strength, she inched a trembling hand towards Jonas, managed to touch his shoulder with outstretched fingers – then she sighed and lay still, her sea-green eyes suddenly lifeless.

Blood dripping from her katana, the old woman stepped over Murrell's headless body, silently cursing the unexpected bodyguards who had delayed her for precious seconds. She bent down and laid a hand gently across Sahana's eyes, closing them.  
'Forgive me, child... a heartbeat too late! Soar with eagles, Sahana... sleep among the stars!'

## *Queen of Diamonds*

*With an Ace and a Queen  
It's the best hand I've seen*

The girl raced full-tilt across the lush grass of the alpine meadow, swerving and leaping as she ran, her long raven hair streaming-out behind her – barely eight, yet she moved with a graceful athleticism far beyond her years. To her left, holding station at shoulder height, flew a young eagle, matching her turns and jumps with ease. She had hand-reared the bird, and human child and juvenile avian moved as one, attuned at some unknown level. Watching from the blanket, Sahana felt awed by her daughter. Raising her here, among the people of the plateau, had been the right decision, for she was a strange girl – thin and pale-skinned, with electric-blue eyes, she was intelligent and understood all that was said to her, but was verbally mute and usually lost in her own world. For the people, who knew what Sahana had suffered whilst pregnant, it was no problem. The girl was cherished, and her rapport with animals – apparent from a very early age – was celebrated. When Sahana had reclaimed Coyote's legacy – which had taken years of wrangling with lawyers and courts – she had paid a princely sum to have the two eagle chicks imported. Why, she wasn't quite sure, but it had seemed important to her – and the people had welcomed the idea. Her daughter had been drawn to the two birds, and had quickly established a bond with them – a bond so profound that even El Brujo had shaken his head in wonder.

A second eagle swooped down out of the cloudless sky, and took-up station to the girl's right, calling raucously. Laughing joyously, she threw herself forward into a somersault, which both birds matched in flight – then all three were racing across the meadow again. Sitting watching her daughter playing with eagles, the morning sun hot on her face and a steady breeze ruffling her hair, Sahana sighed. She could sense thermals rising, knew instinctively where they could be found, and ridden – as would Rachel, of that she was certain.

As often happened, her thoughts turned to Jonas, and she wondered what he would have made of Rachel – the daughter he had never known. One short night in a cramped bed on Inmaarxe base had been enough to leave her pregnant. They had known each other for such a short time, but their love had been instant and profound. She still yearned for him, but over the past eight years the heartbreak had faded to a dull, nagging ache – as had the pains in her abdomen. Her mind drifted back to the day she had awoken in that hospital. She had believed herself dead, could remember dying beside Jonas on Aquiti main. But as Haldane had later told it, when he had exited the airlock and been confronted by the carnage in the corridor, his mind had gone completely blank, numb with shock. But a voice had thrust itself into his head, ordering him to freeze her. So intense had been the mental compulsion, he had obeyed without thinking, and had dragged her body into the pod storage compartment, bundled it into a cryo-pod, and crash-frozen it. Only then had his brain started working again. He had loaded the pod aboard *Essence of Now* and flown straight to the combat trauma wing of the Orlaed Military Infirmary – had in fact crashed-landed on its Director's prized ornamental gardens – and demanded treatment for her. The surgeons there, vastly experienced in dealing with all manner of combat trauma, had shaken their heads, saying nothing could be done for her. But Haldane had ordered them to at least attempt to revive her, threatening them with violence – so they had acquiesced. First they had patched-up the torn arteries and critical wounds while slowly thawing her, replenished her almost non-existent blood supply, then had electrically resuscitated her and dropped her into a medically-induced coma. They had then been able to go about the massive bone-reconstruction and tissue-regeneration at their leisure, quietly pleased with themselves at their success.

Roused much sooner than they had intended, she had still been in a dreamy, post-coma fugue when they had told her she was forty days pregnant – that had brought her crashing back down

fast. Amazed that they had been able to revive her, they had been astounded that the embryo had survived too – but they had said there was absolutely no chance of it developing normally, and they needed her consent for the termination. They had told her it was for the best, and that her complete recovery, even her life, was at stake. But a voice deep inside her had cried no – as had she, repeatedly. Eventually they had relented, and had done their very best for her. They had been forced to cut her medication drastically, which had left her in constant pain, and after having been immobilised for some time, the months of physiotherapy that followed had been harsh on her. But with their expert guidance and encouragement, she had slowly regained her strength. Haldane had been a frequent visitor, amusing her with his laconic wit, and unlikely tales from his long career as an SIS operative. He had lost his right arm, but they had replaced it with a very realistic prosthetic of which he was inordinately proud. When they had eventually discharged her, by then heavily pregnant, Haldane had collected her and flown her to Aquiti – to the Mountains of the Moon. The people of the village had greeted her return with joy, and had taken her in as one of their own – and the shaman's knowledge of medicinal herbs, along with the experience of the older women, had greatly eased what would have been a very difficult birth. Apart from a clear memory of dying, she had only the vaguest recollection of all that had befallen her prior to awakening in the hospital, and she had puzzled long over how she could have survived being gutshot, then frozen. She had begun to think that the embryonic Rachel has sustained her somehow, impossible though it seemed. When asked, El Brujo had said only that the balance had been maintained, that the child's rightful place was here, and had told her not to dwell on it, saying that understanding would come in time.

She sighed again, wondering what Coyote would have thought of Rachel, his granddaughter by adoption. She pictured him throwing his sombrero in the air and howling with delight, and she couldn't help but smile at that. Then she heard her daughter laughing again, which cheered her even more, and the smile became a grin. She had been pondering on an idea for some time, and now she came to a decision – soon they would make the long journey from the beautiful desolation that was the Mountains of the Moon, to the sprawling metropolis that was Qarani, capital of Aquiti. Rachel needed new clothes, the trip would be good for her – and there was a specialist store in Qarani that Sahana wanted to visit.

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High above the plateau, four winged shapes circled slowly. Far below, the people of the village had gathered, watching them through scopes, listening-in via the helmet-comm. With Sahana on point, Rachel behind and slightly above her, and an eagle on either flank, it made a unique sight – two humans and two avians, flying in diamond formation. After days and days of low-level bumps and circuits – during which the two eagles had been cavorting wildly around them, as if overjoyed that their friends had finally taken to the air – Sahana had judged Rachel ready for the real thing, so early that morning they had ported the newly-bought ultra-gliders to the top of the mesa, strapped them on, and launched themselves off the edge, both screaming wildly. For the past three hours they had been slip-sliding smoothly from thermal to thermal, Rachel following her mother's every move, mutely obeying every instruction, for once totally focused and soon becoming adept. Now they were cruising ever upwards in a majestic spiral, and Sahana revelled in the exhilaration of flight – she was in her element. A fleeting thought crossed her mind, something about exploring an artifact – but it escaped before she could focus on it, lost in the sheer joy of flying. She looked back over her shoulder – even at twenty metres, the exultation on her daughter's face was clear to see.

'Rachel... take point! Take us back down... slow and steady! Click to acknowledge!'

'I... it... oh ma-ma! Cl-ick!'

They were the first words she had ever spoken. As her daughter took point, wagging her high-tech wings cockily, both eagles called, and Sahana had to grin – even as tears filled her eyes.