

COYOTE



CODY

Prelude

The starship hung motionless in the far deep space of Laquused system. No running lights were showing... it was just a dark shape silhouetted against the starry backdrop, barely visible even up close. The once spaceblack hull was pitted and scarred, furrowed by countless laser strikes. It might have been a relic of some long-forgotten combat, a shot-up wreck hurriedly abandoned by its pilot sometime in the distant past. Just a derelict hulk that the scavengers had missed due to its remote location, perhaps... a vintage Cowell and MgRath Cobra Mark Three, built long before Faulcon DeLacy started to mass produce them. Yet the ship was alive... slouched comfortably in the left-hand seat, wearing a faded black shipsuit and a beaten-up sombrero, a man was laying-in a cross-chart route. The interior of the old starship belied its battered outward appearance. The bridge fittings were of the highest quality... luxury command seats with Walch control sticks, an Ahruman AI shipcomp, custom KEV instrument panel, AC screens and a DH hypercomm array. The Magellan navcomp was loaded with charts by Clym and Angus, astrocartographers of renown. The two staterooms, galley and mess were opulent and stylish, and much more spacious than on a standard Cobra... the result of extensive re-fitting that had reduced the cargo capacity to ten tons. The wetroom was a spacer's fantasy, straight off of some rich playboy's luxury yacht.

Like many since the diaspora, when mankind had migrated to the stars from Terra, the man was of mixed heritage and it showed in his features... a blend of Hispanic and Anglo with a touch of Chinese. Lean and wiry, of medium height and sporting a mane of thick black hair with full beard to match, he could have been aged anywhere between fifty and two hundred and fifty. For those who could afford it, Rejuv treatment had made the ages of many people over forty hard to determine. His gray eyes were old though... eyes that had seen many things, both good and bad... eyes that had the 'eight lights gaze' as veteran spacers called it. He was a spacer to the core and being utterly alone as he was now, several million kilometers from the nearest life, was just fine with him. He loved space... especially deep space, and often went EVA just to float at the end of a tether and drink in the universe, only his space armour between him and hard vacuum... and the stars.

Hitting enter on the keypad, he saved his chosen route... time was of no consequence, he had no deadline to meet, so he had favoured a meandering path across the chart, avoiding troublesome systems where ever possible. Not that 'troublesome systems' worried him all that much... he was a veteran combateer and a vastly experienced contrabandista who had done countless eights. He was just in the mood for a leisurely cruise, and Laquused to Lazaso, away up in the Steel Halo, was a long run... and there would most likely be trouble enough in the Halo. Two jumps would bring him to Zaquesso, where he planned to go dirtside for a few tendays and visit a couple of old friends... he hadn't been home for a long time. He was thinking about Zaquesso when the shipcomp chimed. [contact bearing zero seven two - extreme range - fugitive]

'What the fuck... way out here... zafado!'

The trace appeared on the scanner... it was a solitary Python. Fingers curling lightly around the stick, he brought his ship onto the bearing and watched the trace as it moved slowly across the rim of the scanner. His curiosity piqued, he decided to follow it and see what transpired. Throwing his sombrero across the bridge, he quickly donned his space armour, resumed his seat and eased the Cobra into motion. So began a slow, covert chase using the millennia-old method... sneak up, take a quick bearing, drop back and follow... after a while repeat. Getting the timing right needed a lot of experience... and a bit of luck. Coyote was on the hunt... sensing prey.

He had been following the Python for a while and had just crept a little closer when the shipcomp chimed again. [contact bearing three four three - extreme range - fugitive]

It was a Fer-de-Lance... he watched the trace on the scanner as it took up position just astern of the Python.

'Curiouser and curiouser... come Watson, the game's afoot!'

Trusting his instincts, he upped the speed a little and began to close the range. Behind his helmet's visor a wicked grin spread across his face... he was in his element and he savoured the prospect of the chase.

[wormhole initiation - analysing]

As the analysis displayed on the screen he maxed the speed and aligned on the blue cloud, then engaged the injectors. The combat starship Dark Star hurtled towards the wormhole... and a free ride to Ririqu.

As usual he was in full space armour for emergence, an old habit that had saved his cojones several times over the decades. The screen flared blue and they were out... and taking heavy hits. Shields dropping fast, he wrenched the Dark Star into a tight corkscrew and launched a missile at the Fer-de-Lance, which was forced to break off and evade on injectors. Meanwhile the Python had been making best speed in-system, so he engaged the injectors briefly and began to snipe at it. As the range closed the Python turned to take him on, launching two missiles, but they were unhardened and the ECM snuffed them. Grinning, he checked the scanner for the Fer-de-Lance... it was off-scan but he knew that it would be back. Several long raking laser bursts convinced the Python to turn and try to run instead... it was far too late for that. He hammered it hard and as gobs of plasma began to fly off the Python's hull, its captain lost his nerve and ejected. He ceased firing immediately and hardly slowing he scooped the escape capsule, then brought his ship around onto the last bearing of the Fer-de-Lance, knowing it would have

outrun his missile by now. Sure enough it came screaming back in on injectors, launching a hardhead and hitting hard with it's mil laser. He zeroed the speed, flipped the ship and took the hit on the aft shields, then flipped again and red-lined the fore laser. Still it came on, so he spun ninety and scored with a long burst from the port laser. The Fer-de-Lance disintegrated in a cloud of debris which clattered across the Cobra's already battered hull. He turned back towards the abandoned Python and bringing the Dark Star alongside, he went EVA to tag it with a phony Naval beacon which declared it a 'plague ship'... with luck that would keep any scavengers away. Having had a free ride from Laquused there was more than enough quirium fuel for the jump to Zaquesso and there was a Navy base in that system that was the perfect place to drop-off his captured fugitive. After that it would be dirtside for a little rest and recuperation. He needed it... the contract run that he had just completed had taken him clear across the fourth chart and on into the fifth. Exchanging his helmet for his sombrero, he took a colita out of an antique iridium cigar case, lit it and called up some ancient pre-diaspora rock music on the JBL sixty-four point sound system... Cobra by Quicksilver Messenger Service. As the bridge filled with thunderous chords and sweet smoke he initiated hyperspace, and fifteen seconds later the Dark Star plunged into that little understood realm of hyper-dimensional no-space known as a wormhole... or for some strange reason... Witchspace.

Local space in Zaquesso system was empty so he engaged the torus drive and set course out-sytem. The Navy base was on a small moon orbiting the second gas giant, and as he neared the jovian he slowed.

[beacon bearing zero three five]

Veering onto the bearing he approached the moon and commed an ident. Having receiving clearance, he docked and handed his captive over to the local NavSec official ... a Captain Zhi-Ata. Once the fugitive had been locked in the brig he followed the Captain to his office, where he gave him an account of the chase from Laquused and the engagement in Ririqu system. He added the co-ords for the abandoned Python, which he somehow suspected would be carrying a very dubious cargo. It was only a feeling he had, based on the strange behaviour... two hard-assed fugitives making an ultra deep space rendezvous in an Anarchy system... it just didn't fit.

'Good work Commander, we'll have a prize crew on that Python in no time. As for that fugitive you brought in, let's just say that we look forward to asking him a few gentle questions. I am sure that he will have an interesting tale to tell us... I doubt that he was expecting to find himself in Naval custody. May I offer you some coffee?'

Captain Zhi-Ata, a red feline resplendent in spaceblack uniform, was right out of the NavSec mold.

'Coffee would be very welcome, thank you.'

The NavSec cat issued orders via his deskcom, then sat looking at his screen for a while. An aide entered the office bearing freshly brewed coffee. NavSec always seemed to have the best coffee... there were rumours that it was shipped secretly from Terra in Sol system, from an island called Jamaica. Coyote sipped his cup with relish.

'I see that your reserve status goes back a long way, Commander. Your mission record is excellent, I might add.'

'Over the years I have done a few favours for NavSec. How is my old friend Admiral Carruthers these days?'

'The Admiral is very well, but I believe he is now flying a desk, as they say, and it doesn't sit too well with him.'

'A desk job... no, I suspect he hates that. Not his style at all... or mine for that matter.'

'It comes to us all eventually, Commander. I was a young fighter jock once... never thought that I would end up behind a desk. But as you see... anyway, apart from fuel and ordnance is there anything else that you may need?'

'Nothing thank you, Captain... apart from a kilo of that delicious coffee perhaps.'

'It is rather good isn't it... I'll have it sent to your ship at once. Thank you again, Commander... good hunting.'

Coyote took his leave and made his way to the ship bays. Sure enough a young Ensign was already waiting there with the promised coffee, which would find a very good home in the Dark Star's galley... trust Naval efficiency. He boarded his ship, launched immediately and boosted in-system for Zaquesso station... and a holiday.

Once he had docked at the station, he took the next shuttle down to the surface and made his way to a small, dimly lit dive in Spacetown called The Final Eight. It was early morning local time, and the joint was empty. The manager was busy doing admin on a compad and didn't notice him as he strolled up to the counter.

'Dos zumos malvado por favor, posadero.'

The manager, a huge bear of a man, looked up and a massive grin split his ancient, space-ravaged face.

'Coyote you old rascal. It's been a long time... como estas mi amigo viejo?'

'I am well Esteban, very well... how are things with you?'

'Life is good 'mano, very good... are you here for a while? Our spare room is yours for as long as you need it.'

As he spoke he selected a bottle from a shelf, eased out the cork and filled two shot glasses with a purple liquid.

'A few tendays, then I'm away to the Halo... the Dark Star needs a hull job and there is only one place for that.'

'Too right amigo, those Griff shipyard fitters are wizards with hull plating... Salut!'

They clinked glasses and downed the fiery liquor... then both gasped. Zaquessoian evil juice is fearsome stuff.

'Hades that was good... dos mas por favor.'

As Esteban re-filled the glasses he called through a hatch behind him.

'Jessica mi querida, come see what the damned cat dragged in.'

A woman's face appeared in the hatch, old and lined but still beautiful... her smile was like a sunrise on Zaonesdi.

'So the trickster returns... welcome home, Coyote. Esteban, pour a shot for me as well please, I'll be right there.'

Esteban filled a third glass as Jessica came out from the backroom... it was the start of a very long session. He lodged with Esteban and Jessica at the villa they owned, up in the rolling, wooded hills around Spacetown. He actually owned an adjacent plot of land, but had never got around to building his dream home on it, the allure of space keeping him away for years at a stretch. He spent his time either fishing for samlon or walking the hills, only occasionally propping up the bar at The Final Eight. Even hardened spacers needed downtime, and his homeworld of Zaquesso was a very beautiful place. He and the two ex-spacers were very old friends and the time passed easy, recalling past escapades along the spacelanes, remembering old friends. The couple had been very astute traders in their time, amassing considerable wealth, and now had a very comfortable life, only running the bar as a 'hobby' as Jessica liked to put it. Coyote knew there was more to it than that, much more... old spacers themselves, they loved spacers and spacer banter. The bar was a haven for any spacer, grounded or not... and Esteban was always generous with his credit. Three tendays passed.

It was high summer in this part of Zaquesso and the evenings were long and warm. They had eaten a delicious meal of pan-seared samlon served with wild rice and a fierce chilli sauce, and were sitting out on the terrace, sharing a vintage bottle of local Zinfandel and a few colitas. The sun had slipped slowly beneath the horizon and the high wispy clouds were turning from gold to pink... two full moons were rising in the darkening eastern sky.

[comms for commander coyote - eyes only]

'Now who could possibly know you're here, trickster... one of your old NavSec friends maybe?'

Jessica raised an eyebrow inquisitively as she spoke... Esteban laughed heartily, then quaffed his wine.

He shrugged as he got up and went inside the villa to read the comm, which was brief.

'Admiral Carruthers would be pleased to meet with the Commander on Zaquesso station in thirty-six hours.'

A wide smile creased Coyote's face as he went back out onto the terrace to tell his hosts... vacation time was over. He would be sad to leave but he could feel a mission in the offing... and he never could resist taking on a mission.

Arriving on the station, he found Carruthers awaiting him. The old NavSec officer had hardly changed... tall and cadaverous in his spaceblack uniform, with those piercing blue eyes and that same old feral smile.

'I trust that you are well, old bean... have you had a peaceful sojourn on Zaquesso?'

'I am very well, your grace, and Zaquesso was very restful. It's a beautiful planet and the fishing was excellent, not to mention the local wine... and the evil juice of course.'

The two veteran spacers shook hands warmly... they went back a very long way.

'Fishing and wine are a good combination... I'll pass on the evil juice though. Come, we can talk on my ship.'

They rode the transit system to one of the many ship bays and boarded a heavily modified Viper Interceptor.

'This is a very tasty boat your grace... a NavSec special for officers of flag rank only, I presume?'

Like the Cheshire Cat with all the cream, Carruthers just grinned hugely and offered no reply. They sat at the galley table in companionable silence while the coffee maker did it's thing.

'It's been a long time, Coyote... are you still up to your same old tricks... still the wandering contrabandista?'

The Admiral's eyes twinkled mischievously as he poured the coffee... NavSec coffee of course.

'Somebody's got to do it Carruthers, so it might as well be me... it's a vocation. The art of the contrabandista is an ancient and honourable one and I am proud to continue that tradition. Anyway... I wonder what brings you to this system, old friend... would it have anything to do with an abandoned Python, by any chance?'

'Zhi-Ata commed me, ostensibly to double check your security clearance... but I think that your long mission record intrigued him somewhat. When he mentioned the Python I became interested... the cargo that the Navy prize crew found on board was heinous enough to warrant a full mindsweep for that fugitive. The results were intriguing, and one little snippet of unrelated intel caused a minor flap at Central... enough to get me out of the office for a while, thankfully. There is a small favour that we would like you to do for us, old bean.'

Coyote looked at his old friend. The steely blue eyes gave nothing away, but a 'small favour', as NavSec liked to put it, was never small... nor easy for that matter. Very often lucrative and interesting, always highly dangerous.

'I'm always happy to help NavSec out, as you know... go right ahead your grace, I'm all ears.'

He took a colita out of his cigar case, lit it and sat back to listen.

Sometime later he sat on the bridge of his own ship, thinking it through... it would certainly be an 'interesting' mission. It wasn't time critical as yet and he would need to visit Lazaso system for a certain piece of specialist kit... which was serendipitous as he had been on his way there anyway. It was time to head on out.

'Station Control this is Dark Star, bay forty-three... request launch sequence.'

'Copy that Dark Star, wait one... okay, you'll be in the slot in twenty. Good hunting Commander. Control out.'

Intervention

Twelve jumps out from Zaquesso found him sitting in the spacer bar on Bizaar station. Not a very wholesome place... or system for that matter. Apart from a ferocious firefight in Anisat system, the run so far had been fairly uneventful, but he had been expecting some hassle here. This was a gateway system... if you wanted to get from Spaceway Five to the Extrinsic Reach, you had to pass through here. Most anarchy systems were dangerous but Bizaar was doubly so. However, the local bandits had stayed well clear of the Dark Star. They were an

experienced lot around here, and with that experience came a sixth sense about when not to pick on a lone ship. He was well into his fourth beer and thinking of leaving the joint and boosting, when a fuss at the next table caught his attention. Three young redneck spacers, drunk and boisterous, were getting too fresh with a girl... and she wasn't having any of it. Some heads were starting to turn. He was about to look away and finish his beer when one of the young rednecks spotted him watching and challenged him loudly... the bar quietened a little.

'What yer lookin' at, yer old codger?'

'A pajero, by the looks of it.'

The old spanish insult enraged the youth. He was up off his chair and going for him, a knife glinting in his hand. Deceptively slowly, Coyote stood... swivelling at the last moment, he caught his knife arm in an iron grip and using the youth's own momentum pulled him on past, delivering a sharp blow to the side of the head with his other hand in passing... the poor schmuck dropped like a stone, out cold. Coyote kicked the knife away and turned to the other two rednecks, who were stood rooted to the spot, not sure whether to try their luck or not.

'Scrape that piece of mierda up and take it to a medbay... now.'

The authority in his voice made up their minds for them. As they dragged their unconscious mate out the door the normal hubbub of the bar returned, as if nothing had happened. He turned to the girl and smiled at her.

'Would you care to join me, señorita?'

She was still a bit shaken and didn't reply... but she shuffled over and took a seat across the table from him. He looked at her... despite the dirty tangled hair, drawn white face and filthy beaten-up clothes, he could tell that she was beautiful. She met his gaze unflinchingly. There was sorrow in her sea green eyes, and fear... and defiance. That impressed him... she had obviously been through some troubled times recently, but remained uncowed by the experience. If he were only a couple of centuries younger... the thought made him laugh out loud.

'What the hell... you think this is funny? I'm out of here.'

'I do apologise... really. I wasn't laughing at you... please... stay.'

She hesitated for a moment, standing there not sure what to do... then she sat again, looking at him warily.

'They call me Coyote, most places. I can see that you've had some hassles lately... maybe I can help. How long is it since you had a long bath and a full meal... way too long, right?'

She shrugged and nodded... then looked down at the floor. He could see that it hurt her pride to admit it.

'Yeah, way too long.'

'Okay, we'll fix that first. You can tell me your tale later... know this... you're safe now, you can relax a bit.'

There was doubt in her eyes... she was still wary, not sure whether to trust him... but she plainly needed his help.

'Come on, let's get out of this dive... I confess to being rather hungry myself.'

He led her over to the counter to have a quick word with the manager, who had a broad smile on his face.

'Sorry about that little fracas Hari, these kids have no respect anymore... and no idea how to use a knife either.'

'Too right Coyote, too right. Your tab's on the house... worth it just to see those moves. Take care 'mano.'

Outside the bar he looked her up and down... she was a sorry sight... but she still had that defiance in her eyes.

'You haven't got any kit... have you? Come on, we can get what you need in the mall.'

She didn't say a word... the poor girl was close to tears. They strolled slowly along to the mall, found the StarKit Spacer Emporium and went in. There was a StarKit franchise on just about every station in the eight.

'Fill a kitbag with essentials... shipsuits, clothes, toothbrush... whatever you need... I'll pay.'

When she was done, he settled the bill and they rode the transit system in silence to the best hotel on the station, where he booked a suite for two hours. That got him a look... as she was about to protest he gave her the keycard.

'Go take a long shower, then have an even longer bath... spoil yourself for a while. I'll be in the lounge.'

He turned away before she could reply, and left her to it.

She drew some admiring glances when she walked into the lounge ninety minutes later. A turquoise shipsuit that emphasised her tall lithe figure, wavy chestnut hair loose on her shoulders, confident stride, face bright and clear... it was a complete transformation. He had been right... she was beautiful. He stood to meet her.

'Encantado señorita... shall we dine... or have you lost your appetite?'

For the first time since they had met, she smiled... it was a joy to behold.

'I never lose my appetite señor... and right now I'm hungry enough to eat a hold full of trumbles.'

An hour or so later they were sipping sweet green tea, having demolished a gargantuan meal in near silence... she really could put the food away. It was late and the restaurant was quiet, nearly empty... sitting back he lit a cigar.

'Ahh... that was delicious... and badly needed.'

'Yes it was, as was the bath... thank you Coyote. Life doesn't seem quite so bad now.'

'You're very welcome... so then señorita... time to tell me your tale of woe.'

'My name is Sahana... Sahana Katik. I worked on the family ship, an old Anaconda, with my parents and two brothers, ploughing The Great Wheel and the Spaceways. We got ambushed inbound to Xebecs from Ingeisdi, blown apart. The pirates fraged all the escape capsules but somehow missed me. The capsule was damaged... no thrusters and no comms... I was in it for hours. Those scumbags in the bar... they were outbound from Xebecs when they scooped me. When we got here, I found out that my father had carried no insurance, no nothing. I was stranded, penniless. They promised me a ride to Leteisan, up in the Steel Halo. I've got distant family there... all that's left now. It turned out they wanted payment for the ride... you can guess what they were after... bastards!'

She slumped back in her chair, eyes vacant. She was succinct, he'd give her that... it was a quality he appreciated. 'These kin you have, away up in the Halo... will they be willing to help you?' 'I can't be sure... I've never had any contact with them... but they're kin, and it's about my only option now.' He sat watching her, thinking... there was something about the name Katik, but he couldn't pin it down. He was inclined to help her, even though he never carried passengers... and it was on his route anyway. 'Leteisan... only a dozen or so jumps and I happen to be heading for the Halo... would you like a lift?' The light leapt back into her beautiful eyes. 'Are you serious? I can work my passage... I'm a damned good cook.' 'That's settled then, I like good food, especially when it's cooked by someone else. Can you pilot a ship, Sahana?' 'I don't have a license... but yes, I can. My brother Oskar taught me on the quiet, when father was off-watch.' For a few moments she was lost in memories, a haunted look in her eyes... then she shook it off and smiled. He was increasingly impressed by this young woman... she had something about her, something that he recognised. 'Well then señorita... shall we be on our way?'

They left the hotel, rode the transit system to the ship bays and boarded the Dark Star, where he showed her to the second stateroom. She was surprised by the luxury interior of the ship, but asked no questions... he liked that. 'You'll have to make the bed up, all the stuff should be in the lockers somewhere. We boost in about thirty minutes. I'll be on the bridge... join me there when you're done.' Within ten minutes she joined him, slipping into the right-hand seat, looking around in awe at the bridge fittings. 'Station Control, this is Dark Star, bay twenty-three, requesting launch sequence.' 'Copy that Dark Star, minimal queue, you'll be in the slot in ten. Good hunting Commander. Control out.' As the ship was being ported to the launch slot, he turned to her. 'Sahana, bear this in mind... this is a combat ship, regardless of the luxury furnishings, and there may well be combat... hard vicious combat, with no quarter asked or given. You do understand what that may involve... what the consequences may be, don't you? If you have any doubts at all, it would be better to say so now.' She met his gaze squarely and shook her head. 'No, no doubts at all... I'll take what ever the three fates throw at me, damn them.' The minutes passed... then they were in the slot and barrelling out into space. Boosting hard, he pulled a ninety, eying the scanner. Not much traffic, no threats... he initiated hyperspace and fifteen seconds later the Dark Star plunged into the wormhole. They sat in silence for a while... she seemed suddenly exhausted, drained. 'We've got about nineteen hours in the tube. Go get some sleep... lots of it... you look like you need it.'

Sitting in the command seat, the Dark Star enveloped in Witchspace, the old tales and legends ran through his mind... tales of ghost ships, stranded spacers, ancient generation ships... here be dragons. Sahana shuffled on to the bridge. She was still half asleep, dressed in loose purple pyjamas, her hair tousled. 'Is it day or night?' 'That is a very good question... it's fourteen thirty-two shiptime so I guess you could call it day. You've been asleep for over seventeen hours... are you feeling any better?' 'Much better thank you, and very very hungry. Can I make free with the galley?' 'Yeah whatever you want, it's well stocked. I'll join you as it happens, it's been quite a long while since dinner.' 'I'll take a quick shower and be about it... be ready in about thirty minutes, okay?' 'Thirty minutes will be fine, Sahana.' 'Coyote... the way you dealt with that scumbag in the bar... could I learn how to do that... could you teach me?' 'It's a variant of Tai Chi... and yes I can teach you the basics... enough to be able to defend yourself anyway.'

Ninety minutes later they were seated on the bridge, both in full space armour... the screen flared blue.
[two contacts - hostiles]

They were right on top of him and he was taking hits, lots of hits... the shields were dropping fast. Maxing the speed and pulling the Dark Star around he launched a missile at the first bandit, a Mamba, then rolled out aligning and firing on the second, a Fer-de-Lance. The Mamba bugged-out but the Fer-de-Lance came on, it's mil laser scoring heavy hits... the fore shields failed and the energy banks started to drop fast.

[missile launch]

He spun the ship just in time to take the hit aft, took a long pot shot with the aft laser, then launched a missile. The bandit was forced to break off and he swooped round and hammered it relentlessly, red-lining the fore laser. When the missile hit, the Fer-de-Lance exploded, showering the Dark Star with debris. Coyote smiled grimly and checked the scan for the Mamba ... it was gone and local space was empty. Aligning on the sun, he engaged the Torus drive and relaxed a little. He looked over at Sahana... behind the visor she had a rictus-like grimace on her face. At first glance he thought that she had lost it, had frozen with fear... then he saw her eyes... they were glowing, vibrant... she had actually enjoyed it. Maybe, just maybe, she had what it takes... he would have to think about that. They removed their helmets and Coyote reclined his seat, lit a colita and called up some of the ancient rock music that he loved so much. Some time later the Torus drive mass-locked as they neared the sun. 'You have the con Sahana, and the Dark Star needs a full skim... make it so, number one.'

Without hesitating she took the stick on the right-hand seat and confidently began to pilot the Dark Star. After only a few minutes he had decided that she was a 'natural'... she had that innate feel for the stick that so few had. Seven jumps, sun-skimming all the way, and they were in Bizalein system. He set course out-system, boosting hard for the Naval base. Having received clearance and docked, he left Sahana on the Dark Star and sought out the local NavSec office, where he met Lieutenant Trent, a tall rangy young man who seemed to be in awe of him. 'We have comms for you, Commander... eyes only, from Admiral Carruthers. You may use my terminal here.' He stepped away from his desk and Coyote sat down, idented and read the comm. An idea popped into his head. 'Thank you Trent... I wonder if you would run a SecTrace on a trader family operating out of Leteisan for me?' He gave him the name of Sahana's kin. Trent re-took his seat and started tapping at keys. An aide brought coffee which was excellent, as usual. He sipped the coffee appreciatively while Trent tapped away at his terminal. 'Ah yes, they're an old criminal clan from way back, mostly smuggling... some other murkier activities. GalCop have a large file on them... they have pirate connections. They are a major player up in the Halo apparently, close to being untouchable... tentacles everywhere. Bloody unsavoury bunch that's for sure... are they on your radar?' 'I rather think that they might be... thank you for your assistance Trent, most informative.'

With the Dark Star motionless in space, he sat on the bridge, thinking. Sahana was in the galley cooking more exquisite food... she loved her food and enjoyed cooking it. He appreciated her reticence, the lack of questions and he admired her spirit... a can-do competent young spacer, born and bred. She had taken some heavy knocks recently that was clear, and had put it quickly behind her. She was a competent pilot and learnt fast, was already completely at home on the bridge of the Dark star. But her tale about being part of a normal trader family running the Wheel and the Spaceways just didn't square with what he now knew about her kin. She wasn't lying to him, of that he was sure... he came to a decision.

Ergeso system... local space was empty. He set a course between sun and planet, engaging the Torus drive. It was a clear run until a cluster of asteroids appeared on the scanner. He cut the Torus drive and veered towards them. [beacon bearing three three eight]

Coming onto the bearing he slowed and cautiously approached an asteroid, circled it and located the slot. He commed an ident, received clearance and docked. Sahana glanced over at him.

'Stay on the bridge and be ready to boost, number one... I'll not be too long.'

He found his way to the living quarters and entered a very expensively furnished office. The owner of the asteroid was sitting at a desk reading. She looked up at him... she was ancient, but her eyes were clear and sharp.

'Coyote... it's been a long time.'

'A very long time Li Yan... too long, maybe. I hope that you are well, querida.'

'I am very well, thank you, but age is slowly catching up with me, as it does with all of us... please... sit.'

She filled two small bowls with tea from a samovar, which they sipped in silence gazing at each other... there was old history between them, very old. They left it unspoken, as they always had... it was better that way. But it was there in their eyes. The rare white tea was exquisite, redolent of ancient times and far off places.

Somewhat reluctantly, Li Yan broke the spell.

'What brings you to my asteroid, amigo viejo... que quieres?'

'Information... there's a clan based on Leteisan up in the Halo, name of Katik... what can you tell me of them?'

Li Yan ran an intelligence network in this sector that surpassed even NavSec. Information was her life blood, and she somehow kept it all in her head, never trusting comps. She bowed her head and sat thinking for a while.

'Are you entangled with them, Coyote? If so, then perhaps you should re-evaluate... they are evil...'

She carried on for well over thirty minutes. When she had finished, he laid a small pouch of gemstones on the desk. She didn't bother to check the contents, there was no need... she trusted him of all people. Besides, anyone who crossed Li Yan usually ended up paying dearly... she had powerful friends, and a very long memory.

He watched her carefully as he stood up to leave... he needed her help.

'As usual Li Yan your information is thorough, your advice valued... and your tea heavenly.'

'You have that old flame in your eyes, Coyote... might clan Katik be about to take a hit, by any chance?'

He held her gaze, knowing that such fore-knowledge, carefully used, could be worth a small mint to her.

'That is a distinct possibility, Li Yan. If it were to happen, it would be a rather large hit, with a slow-burning fuse... the squadron may well play a part. Would you be interested in providing intel and contacts, querida?'

She nodded slowly saying nothing... they understood each other well. They clasped hands, her grip like cold steel.

'You can comm me through Ergeso station... take very good care of yourself... Jaguar.'

Sahana threw him an inquisitive look as he returned to the bridge but said nothing... he could sense questions building though. They would need to have a long talk about her kin on Leteisan sometime soon. It seemed that he may have to get involved. Settling into his seat, he gestured for Sahana to take the ship on out.

'Time for some serious relax, I think... and Bizalein has a nice climate. How long since you've been dirtside?'

'Oh, a few tenths at least, I can't remember the last time.'

That was not at all unusual amongst spacers... with many it was years since they had been dirtside. Once clear of the asteroid he initiated hyperspace, absently thinking about Zaquesso... the samlon fishing... the wooded hills

and The Final Eight... perhaps he might enjoy retirement. He chuckled quietly... not bloody likely. The Dark Star dropped into that indefinable realm of ghosts and legends... Witchspace.

Back in Bizalein system he commed Trent, requesting a couple of favours. Once docked at the station, they took the shuttle down to the surface and outside the terminal they found a private aircar waiting for them in a VIP slot. The driver, a young woman in Navy uniform, stowed their kitbags and eased the aircar smoothly away from the spaceport. It was raining hard from low, dark clouds, and lightning flickered eerily away to the south.

'Didn't you tell me that Bizalein has a nice climate.'

'Sometimes Coyote speak with forked tongue, number one.'

'An hour or so ma'am, and we'll be out of it. Then it's sunshine all the way... have you been here before sir?'

'On occasion, and it's always been raining on Spacetown. It's different on North Island... always sunny there.'

'It'll take about six hours to get to Port Tana, sir... unless you'd prefer to go sub-orbital, of course?'

'Sub-orbital sounds just fine to me.'

A broad smile creased the driver's face as she pulled the nose of the aircar up and lit the afterburners.

Eighty minutes later their driver landed the aircar on the pad beside a small chalet, set right by the dark red beach and the sparkling green ocean. Sahana was entranced... she had never seen an ocean up close before, only from orbit. The driver dropped their kitbags and departed, having agreed to pick them up in five days. Coyote stood for a few moments just staring at the horizon... then throwing his sombrero down on the sand, he kicked off his boots, stripped off his shipsuit and went running full-tilt into the surf, whooping wildly. For a minute or so she stood watching him swim... then she did exactly the same. The emerald green water was warm and crystal clear.

Late in the evening they walked along the cliff path to the small fishing village of Port Tana and found a cantina down by the harbour. The setting was picturesque... timeless... they could have been back on old Terra millenia ago. They lingered over a splendid meal of local seafood washed down with a bottle of red wine, soaking up the atmosphere and relaxing, chatting about Terra and ancient history... one of Sahana's favourite subjects. Much later they strolled slowly back to the chalet. The night was warm and fragrant, and he sat out on the porch smoking a colita, watching the three small moons drift slowly across the star-filled sky... a quite beautiful place. Sahana came out onto the porch and sat across from him. In the flickering lantern light, her eyes were serious.

'You have something that you need to tell me... something about my family... am I right?'

Coyote was a good poker player and his face was hard to read, but she had managed it... or was it just intuition.

'I was going to leave it for a few days, but as you're asking... what do you know about your kin on Leteisan?'

'Not very much really. Dad talked of them sometimes, but only in general terms. We had no contact with them as far as I know. Mum never talked of them and we never went to the Halo. An old family falling-out, I imagine.'

'Much more than a family falling-out, Sahana... more like a blood vendetta. Your kin have a real bad history... '

He didn't hold back, telling her all that he had learned about clan Katik... it was brutal but she had to know it all.

He didn't mention his certainty that the clan had arranged to have her father's Anaconda atomised, leaving no survivors... she was smart, she'd work that out for herself. When he had finished they sat in silence for a while, just watching the ocean. One of the moons was setting... and away on the eastern horizon the sky was lightening.

'That kinda makes the Halo a no-go place for me, doesn't it? How can such a beautiful universe be so terrible?'

The heartache in her soft smoky voice made his mind up... he was definitely going to get involved... and how.

'As for the Halo, we'll be there within a tenday or so... as for your second question, think of it this way... how can such a terrible universe be so beautiful? Just look at that sunrise... come on... let's go swim for a while.'

Ortema... first system in the Steel Halo... another gateway system, a choke point. All traffic to and from the Halo

had to pass through here. When the Dark Star emerged local space was busy, very busy with lots of Vipers about.

[multiple contacts - no hostiles]

He aligned for the cruise in and glanced at Sahana. Back in Port Tana she had been subdued, distant for a couple of days. She had hardly spoken, had just sat watching the ocean. He had left her to her thoughts and worked on his suntan. Then she had somehow shaken it off, come to terms with it and become her old self again. He had got the diving gear out, taught her the basics and they had gone spear-fishing, cooking the catch on a beach fire. The next day they had borrowed a small boat and gone sailing on the green ocean... she had adored it. On the last afternoon, waiting for the aircar to return, she had asked him what he had in mind. He had told her most of it, had clearly outlined the very real risks. The feral grin that had lit her face would have made Carruthers proud.

Docked at Ortema station, he spent some time sending comms to several systems. When he had finished they made their way to the spacer bar, which was as busy as the spacelanes. He bought two beers and looked around for the manager, who was perched on a stool across the room, doing admin on a compad by the look of it. They weaved their way through the crowd.

'Como estas... Zorra... long time no see.'

The manager looked up from her compad, surprised to hear her old call sign... and smiled when she saw him.

'Estoy muy bien, Coyote... it's a real pleasure to see you... and your beautiful companion.'

'It's really good to see you, Veronika ... this is my number one, Sahana. What of Lobo... how is the old wolf?'

'Tomaz is fine and he will be very pleased to see you... look, I'm a bit pressed at the moment but we'll both be clear in a couple of hours or so. Join us for a meal later... let's say three hours... at Zarquon's restaurant, okay.'

'Ah Zarquon's... I remember it well... we will look forward to that. See you later, amiga.'

The restaurant was one of the best in the sector, and Sahana was in heaven. The food was varied and beautifully cooked, the service adroit and unobtrusive. The wine had Coyote sighing contentedly. When they had finished he lit a cigar and looked at his two old friends. Conversation over dinner had ranged widely, from old times and shared experiences, to which Sahana had listened in rapt silence, to the current state of the sectors and the possibilities in an uncertain future. Now though, it was time to get serious... and his friends knew it.

'Coyote amigo viejo, you sure didn't come all this way just for a meal. What mischief have you got in mind?'

'Hardly mischief, Veronika... more of a covert guerilla action, really... a thoroughly despicable 'black' operation.'

Veronika and Tomaz glanced briefly at each other, then turned back to Coyote, both of them grinning fiendishly.

'You have our undivided attention, 'mano... would you care to enlighten us as to your... intentions.'

Coyote gave them a detailed history of clan Katik... told them how a vendetta had led to Sahana being stranded on Bizaar station. He embarrassed Sahana, describing her as the most promising young pilot he had seen in many years. He told them why he had decided to become involved, mainly citing the clan's heinous record, what his objectives were and exactly how he proposed to achieve them. When he had finished there was a short silence.

'Delightfully sinister... and as you say, thoroughly despicable... well worthy of you, Jaguar... count us in.'

'As Tomaz says, we are with you. You have no doubt visited La Bruja... her intel will be vital... is she onboard?'

'Li Yan is certainly with us... in a tenday or so, I will speak with Cuervo... he would hate to be left out.'

Sahana was awed to be among such experienced spacers, who she now suspected were something more than just veteran combateers. She was sure that the nicknames they used among themselves had to be old call signs.

Four jumps on from Ortema brought them to the twin systems of Lazaso and Zaenza. As soon as they emerged in Lazaso, Coyote laid in a jump to Zaenza, but as the countdown hit zero, he pulled-up hard on the 'stick, forcing a dangerous misjump into interstellar space, where they were immediately attacked by two Thargoid warships. He splashed both of them with little trouble, then set course through the asteroid swarms for a blue gas giant, where they located an orbital of unusual appearance... he opened the comms and requested permission to dock.

'Copy that, Dark Star... wait one... okay, you have clearance... please dock on auto. Welcome to Avernus.'

'So very nice to see you Coyote, does the universe treat you well?'

They were in the office of Xan Tsen. He was of pure chinese stock and Buddha-like in appearance... completely bald with a round jovial face. Aside from being a veteran combateer and master pilot, he was a wizard in the black art of 'covert stowage', a highly valued skill. He was also an expert in upgrading ship systems.

'The universe is my friend at this time Xan Tsen, tomorrow... we'll see. This is my number one, Sahana Katik.'

'I am delighted to meet you Sahana. The name Katik is not unknown in the Steel Halo... you are related, yes?'

Sahana told her tale, and her kin's history to the old man, who listened attentively, asking searching questions.

'Coyote my old friend, you are aware of the possible consequences of what I deduce you are intending... you will need my help, and the help of others. I presume that you have talked to La Bruja, yes... how is the old sorceress?'

'La Bruja is very well... as are Lobo and Zorra. A flight of four, Cuervo... the squadron will fly once again.'

Both men were laughing as an aide brought tea in to the office. They lit up two of Xan Tsen's expensive Gran Corona cigars, content to sit in silence for a while, sipping the fragrant tea and smoking... and remembering.

'You also need some modification to the Dark Star I expect... something unrelated to clan Katik, yes?'

'Indeed we do amigo... a small internal job.'

He explained exactly what he required. Sahana listened intently, intrigued by this development.

'Also, we want two custom fitted suits of that new KAKS space armour, the Dark Star needs a complete hull job... the Griff EV Special, I think, a full overhaul... and any other upgrades that you think may be necessary.'

Xan Tsen sat thinking for a while, sipping his tea. He started tapping at keys on his comp... then he sat back.

'There is no real problem with any of that... an interesting challenge though. It will take four... maybe five days.'

'Time is not really a factor... six days will be acceptable... how much will that little lot cost me, zhu rén?'

The 'master' named an astronomical fee. Sahana gasped but Coyote didn't even blink as he made the payment.

Avernus offered five star guest suites for clients and there they stayed. There was little to do on the orbital except eat, sleep and make plans... and talk... which they did, covering many subjects. He told her outrageous tales of the spacelanes that shocked even her, a born spacer. She responded with stories of life on the family Anaconda, the good days and the bad. He related the history of Avernus... the story of the asteroid prospector Bertilak La Verde who established it, after striking it fabulously rich in the massive asteroid swarms that surround the gas giant, which he named Lago. Once the orbital had been constructed and populated, the word had quietly spread amongst the more experienced spacefarers... Avernus was open for business, and being beyond the control of GalCop, business had soon boomed. Here the hackers, boffins, engineers and technicians who now call Avernus home had carved out an exclusive market for themselves in high spec, discreet, and very expensive customisation of ships and ship systems... amongst other things. Status, of any type, means nothing on Avernus... if you know the right people, have received an 'invite', have enough credits... and have the combat skills to stay alive in this

part of the Halo, you are a 'client'. There would be many a raised eyebrow at GalCop and NavSec if they knew half of what goes on here... but Avernus is careful to remain covert.

Zaenza system... they had been in deep space for thirty-two days, only docking at the station a couple of times for supplies. He had been on the comms constantly... collecting intel, putting the pieces in place, calling in old favours. At his behest, Sahana spent her time on the Aegidian combat simulator that Xan Tsen had installed. He was thinking ahead, now completely confident that she had the ability to become a very good combateer. Ever since Usinribe he had been letting her take the controls regularly. She had learnt so fast and could now dock the Dark Star at full speed on manual, no problem. She was superb at long range sniping and her spatial awareness was excellent. In theory she had to do the academy course to obtain a pilot's license, but there were ways around that. He would probably have a quiet word with Carruthers, get her Naval rated and licensed. The comm chimed again and as he read the message, he lit one of the Gran Coronas that he had pirated from the master on Avernus. 'I love it when a plan comes together.'

Over the next few tendays, ships started to disappear along the spacelanes of the Steel Halo. One here, a couple there at first, then more, and more frequently. No type of ship was immune... trader, hunter or pirate... alone or with escorts. Even the odd GalCop Viper or two. Not the usual losses that happen along most spacelanes. There were no distress calls picked up, no wreckage or escape capsules or cargo pods were found. Just ships long overdue... gone missing... disappeared. As the losses continued to mount the traders around the Halo, legal and illegal, became nervous and spacelane traffic dropped. Wild rumours flew... picked off by some mysterious ghost ship was a popular one, spontaneous implosion, even 'chrono-synclastic infundibula' were mentioned. There were other, much darker theories... in some spacer bars, veterans spoke in low voices of a rogue Naval squadron. To astute analysts however, a pattern slowly began to emerge... the missing ships were all either owned by, managed by or had connections with, however convoluted, clan Katik. As this information slowly leaked out, the rumours took on a cutting edge... someone, or something, was taking the clan down ship by ship, and the clan seemed to be powerless, unable to do anything to stop it. The effects snowballed... other crime families, in the Halo and beyond, began to distance themselves, no longer co-operative, some openly hostile. Their bankers took the same stance, as did their insurance companies. Then their dirtside operations started taking hits... police raids, lost consignments, betrayals... the sharks were sensing blood, beginning to circle. The clan elders and their families held yet another crisis meeting at the family estate on Leteisan, and tempers were fraying. Whoever was responsible obviously had access to the clan's inner secrets, and they were beginning to suspect each other.

Leteisan system... in deep space. On the bridge Coyote read the comm and howled. Engaging the Torus drive, he sent the Dark Star screaming in-system. Sahana came on to the bridge and settled into the right hand seat.

'What will happen now? You never quite told me how this would end, did you?'

'The heart of the clan is gathered on their isolated, heavily guarded estate, arguing... an easy target... fools!'

'We can't take them out from orbit surely... can we?'

'Would you take the shot if we could?'

She thought about it... but not for very long.

'Yes... yes I would.'

The ship was sliding in to orbit above Leteisan, approaching the nightside... and certain co-ordinates.

'Good... very good, because any time soon the estate reactor is going to suffer an inexplicable catastrophic failure and an old house, along with it's nefarious family and their cohorts, will cease to exist... any second thoughts?'

'None at all... I hope that doesn't shock you?'

'It takes a lot to shock me, Sahana.'

The comm chimed and he gestured at the port screen.

'Let there be light...'

Far below on the planet's surface, a tiny bloom of light appeared... then slowly faded away to nothing.

Mission

Bizalein system again...

[multiple contacts - three hostiles]

They had emerged into the midst of a firefight involving a flight of GalCop Vipers and three hard-assed bandits. He didn't hesitate, plunging the Dark Star straight into the melee. He lined up on a Fer-de-Lance which had just fragged a Viper. It turned to take them on, raking the Dark Star with it's mil laser. He returned fire and launched a missile. The bandit took the hit full on and kept coming... it was going to ram them, he could feel it. He red-lined the fore laser as the range closed, both ships taking heavy hits, then zeroed the speed, spun the ship and managed to score with a long burst from the starboard laser. The FDL blew apart, debris peppering the hull. He checked the scanner... saw that the other two bandits were space dust, the three remaining Vipers re-grouping.

'Bizalein system police thank you for your assistance.'

'You're welcome... did your wingman eject?'

'No. Thanks for getting the bastard... Viper out.'
'You have the con number one... take us out-system, to the Naval base.'
He took off his helmet, lit a colita and relaxed.

Having docked at the base, he wasn't entirely surprised to find Carruthers in Trent's office, sitting on a couch working on a compad. He looked up as he and Sahana entered.

'Commander, so kind of you to drop in... and who might this young lady be?'

'Trent, Carruthers, may I introduce my co-pilot and XO, Sahana Katik.'

The two NavSec men exchanged a long look.

'Ahh... I see. Recent mysterious happenings in the Halo become somewhat clearer. I'll want a detailed briefing from you, Coyote. A co-pilot and XO, that must be a first... you are singularly honoured, young lady.'

The Admiral smiled, but his eyes were hard. As for Trent, he could hardly take his eyes off Sahana. Coyote knew that look all too well... the young officer was smitten. Carruthers knew it as well.

'Lieutenant... perhaps you'd care to escort the 'last' Katik to the mess. The Commander and I have certain important and highly classified matters to discuss. Oh, and send some coffee in as you go.'

After the two young people had left, the two old men looked at each other and burst out laughing.

An aide brought the coffee in almost immediately... he had obviously anticipated the order.

Coyote gave Carruthers a very thorough, only slightly edited account of the fall of clan Katik, and his part in it. The Admiral sat silently for a while, sipping his coffee and glaring at him with angry eyes. Coyote returned the look evenly. Something unspoken passed between them... the slight tension in the room eased.

'I need a small favour, Admiral. Sahana is already a competent pilot, but she needs to have a license... and soon. The academy won't be able to teach her anything, it'd be a waste of time... but a Naval license would suit nicely.'

'You must rate her highly or you wouldn't ask. If she had a Naval license, she would have to be on the reserve list. Do you think that she is really ready for that... she can't be any more than twenty.'

'She will be an elite combateer one day soon, no doubt of that. She has it all Carruthers, all the skills... one of the best I have seen. She only lacks the experience, that's all. As you know, we can be useful people to have on call.'

'Point taken, old bean... she's really that good, is she?'

'Oh yes, your grace... very good indeed.'

'Very well, I'll arrange that... perhaps I can persuade Trent to do the rating and qualification flights.'

'I'm sure that Trent will need little persuasion, the poor boy's hooked. How do you rate him Carruthers?'

'He's a rising star in NavSec... has an excellent record, including combat and covert actions... he is top notch.'

'A new generation Carruthers... we're getting old, I'm afraid. Shall we join them in the mess... I'm hungry.'

For the next eight days they stayed on the base, while Trent and a Navy instructor put Sahana through a crash exams program, and various qualifying flights, first on the Dark Star, then on the Admiral's Interceptor. She passed them all, easily. Trent was impressed... and definitely smitten, and if Coyote was any judge, Sahana felt exactly the same way. When she was issued with her pilot's license, he encouraged her to take the Dark Star out solo for the first time. She was gone more than a day, and came back with some damaged kit and two kills to her name... and she had scooped both escape pods. The shipcomp log made interesting viewing... jumped by two Asps and taking damage, she had sped away on injectors, drawing them into a stern chase. At extreme range, she had come to a halt, spun the ship and picked them off clinically with her superior sniping. She had even managed to pick off a missile, one of the hardest skills. Coyote howled with joy... she had what it takes alright. The forlorn, stranded girl he had first met on Bazaar station was now a confident, capable young woman... and a combateer in her own right. Carruthers was also impressed... he took Sahana out in his Interceptor to make his own assessment, and while she showed off her piloting skills, he took the opportunity to give her a lecture on the pros and cons of being on the reserve list... what would be expected of her. He warned her that she would be taking part in covert, highly perilous, and often questionable actions. He also gave her a lecture on the dangers of her involvement with Coyote and his friends in the squadron... and of what the possible consequences might be.

With rock music filling the bridge, and Coyote singing along with gusto, they boosted away from the base.

'The Free Mexican Air Force is flyin' tonight... flyin' so high-igh-igh.'

Sahana laughed, though the lyrics were mostly a mystery to her. They would be heading for Tirizaan system next... twelve, maybe thirteen jumps and from there it would be on to the Gates of Damocles, a dangerous sector. His boots up on the dashboard and his seat reclined, Coyote pulled his sombrero low over his eyes and lit a colita.

'Take us into the tube, number one... warp factor eight.'

Looking at him quizzically, she initiated hyperspace.

'Contrabandistas... Banditos of light... We're the Free Mexican Air Force and we're flyin' tonight!'

Qulecele system... lots of traffic, none of it hostile. Sahana set course in-system. Qulecele was a major trade nexus on the Zalex loop, and a very good place to provision the ship for the long run to Tirizaan. A well stocked galley was essential on long, sun-skimming runs across the chart. When the ship eventually docked at the station they headed for the stores. Coyote was a good cook, but Sahana was better, and knew exactly what she wanted for the

galley on the Dark Star. After that it was off to the bar where, surprisingly, Coyote didn't know the manager. 'Two Zaquessoian evil juices, amigo... and a large caraffe of water, if you please.'

The red bony lobster running the bar delved around under the counter and came up with a dusty, still-sealed bottle, the label faded... a vintage bottle. He deftly split the seal, eased out the cork and poured two shots.

'Not much call for this poison around here, sir.'

'There is today amigo, oh there is today. I think it's about time I got seriously rat-assed.'

Which he proceeded to do in high style, buying rounds, entertaining the other drinkers. Sahana made no attempt to keep up with him, switching to beer after that first shot. She never once left his side though, taking it all in, listening to the banter he exchanged with the other spacers, learning all the time about real spacer ways, how to mix easily with the various species. She was serenely impervious to the leery comments she got from some of the younger drinkers, and Coyote's presence somehow prevented any hassle. She thought about Trent, of where that might go one day... she liked him a lot, but the three fates were leading her elsewhere. She thought over what little she knew about the squadron. She sensed that Coyote was close to revealing many things to her, about the squadron and other matters, things she badly wanted to know... but she would let him choose the time.

When she eventually got him back to the ship, he started on the coffee, using his carefully rationed NavSec blend. It really was very good coffee. As he smoked a colita, he wondered if the rumours might be true, if it might actually be the legendary Blue Mountain coffee from Jamaica... with NavSec anything was possible. Sahana had gone to her bed, so he sat on the bridge smoking and listening to the celestial mathematics of Bach's piano music.

Xele system... they had raced non-stop across the Andiso Arch and there had been firefights in every system, even when skimming, which was odd. It seemed that skimming was no longer a relatively safe option in this sector. Coyote didn't like it... something felt wrong. He needed to see Carruthers in Tirizaan system... he had a few things to sort out... and he also needed to see an old friend who had made Xele his base of operations.

'Take us in-system, number one, we'll dock here. We need ordnance and there is someone here I want to talk to.'

'By your command.'

Ignoring the odd look he gave her, she set course for the cruise in... local space was busy, with plenty of Vipers.

In the spacer bar on Xele station, he bought a couple of beers and they sat at a table supping them and watching the other drinkers. Half an hour later a blue feline entered the bar, spotted Coyote and came over to join them.

'Coyote... it has been a very long time... who is this gorgeous creature you have with you?'

'Good to see you, Qa Ghi... this 'gorgeous creature' as you put it, is my number one, Sahana Katik.'

'I am enchanted, Sahana Katik... you must be a remarkable young lady, to hold such an exalted position.'

'I am a lucky young lady, Qa Ghi... I'm not so sure about the 'remarkable' bit.'

'Luck, or fate if you like, plays a part in our lifepaths... but how one responds, how one weaves the threads, that is the key. Coyote old friend, it is auspicious that you are here at this time... there is much for us to talk over.'

'Indeed amigo... come along to the ship, I am sure that Sahana could further impress you with her cooking.'

'XO on the Dark Star, therefore highly talented, strikingly beautiful, modest... and a chef as well... I love you.'

Sahana couldn't help herself... she burst out laughing... as did Qa Ghi. Coyote shook his head in mock despair.

Sitting in the mess on the Dark Star, the two old friends chatted while Sahana cooked. The food that she prepared had Qa Ghi purring... he was a gourmet and his waistline showed it. He flirted outrageously with Sahana, offering her lucrative inducements to come and work for him... all in jest of course. Coyote could tell that he was impressed by his first officer, and Sahana was thoroughly charmed by the cat. Hearing her throaty laughter was joyous. He had uncorked his last remaining bottle of vintage Zaquessoian Zinfandel, and Qa Ghi was even more impressed by that... the men lit cigars and the conversation became more serious. Sahana settled in to listen and learn, something she did often and well... one of the many things that Coyote loved about her. They talked for several hours, fuelled by the NavSec coffee which Qa Ghi declared 'divine', and it became clear that all was not well in this sector... pirate activity was rising fast, spreading from the Gates of Damocles where the situation was far from good... a couple of systems had gone 'rogue' there, kicking GalCop out and taking over the stations... a very serious developement. This particular fact had a direct bearing on Coyote's 'small favour' for Carruthers.

When they boosted away from Xele station, Coyote wasted no time in initiating hyperspace, bound for Tirizaan. Once in the tube they went to the mess for a late breakfast. He was pensive as Sahana cooked his favourite, heuvos rancheros, and they ate in silence. When the coffee maker was done, he poured two cups and lit a colita.

'There are things that we need to talk about, Sahana... well mostly I have to talk and you have to listen. Things are starting to unravel in these parts and I have a bad feeling... this will be a very dangerous task indeed. First of all though, you have to decide whether you want to stay onboard for this mission... or jump ship at Tirizaan.'

'Jump ship!... how dare you, Coyote! If you think I'm bailing out now, just when it gets fucking interesting...'

She stopped herself... she was furious, green eyes blazing. It was just the response that he had expected, wanted.

'Good, that's what I needed to hear... but I had to give you the option. The term 'interesting' bears a double-edged sword and we will feel both edges before this is over. Now... it's lecture time... questions later, okay?'

'The XO of the combat starship Dark Star forgives her esteemed Commander, and promises to not interrupt.'

She smiled sweetly at him and sat back in her seat, sipping her coffee.

'I left my home when I was fifteen... didn't fancy a life on the family farm. For the next few years I travelled around Zaquesso, making an uncertain living playing poker in gin joints... an interesting lifestyle and I learnt how to survive on the under side of society... I learnt how to fight. One night I found myself in a high stakes game in Spacetown... it was going well until I took a particularly large pot... and got accused of cheating. I was good at poker and had no need to cheat... but there I was, looking down the barrel of a gun for the first time. I was about to make a desperate and probably final move when an old man at the next table intervened, saying that any fool could see that I hadn't been cheating, emphasising his point with a gun of his own. Something in his eyes made my accuser back off, and the old man escorted me out of the dive, leaving my winnings laying there on the table.' He paused and re-lit his colita, smiling dreamily.

'I owe almost everything to that old man... he took me up to the station, on to his ship... and on out to the stars.'

He talked for a long time, pausing only for more coffee and to light another colita. Sahana was fascinated by his life history and she was bursting with questions... but she dared not break the mood. He talked of how he had first become a combateer, the thrill of his first kill, how he had been a 'natural' as the old man had put it, and of how he had eventually inherited the old man's ship... and his wealth. As the old man himself had done from his own benefactor, many years before. He told of when a young Captain Carruthers had first made contact with him, offering him a mission to hunt down an experimental ship... the Constrictor... and of the many other missions that had followed, how they had become friends. Then he related the history of the Naval Reserve Privateer Squadron... how he had been invited to join at the time of the Aquiti incident, had become involved in the dirty war in the Tetiri Conclave that had resulted, of his own part in some of the worst actions... and the consequences. 'But that was more than two hundred years ago... surely you aren't that old... are you?'

She knew her galactic history. Coyote lit yet another colita, blew a smoke ring and smiled at her enigmatically.

'There is a highly advanced Rejuv clinic on Avernus that is way ahead of the rest... they keep it very quiet, select clients only. When it's time for your first treatment, in about ten years or so, you will go there... you're already on their list, Xan Tsen has seen to that. The cost is awesome by most standards, but that will not be a problem as I have a fiendish plan, if you're agreeable. I have decided that I wish to adopt you as my legal heir... I have already instructed my solicitors to draw up the necessary papers. It can all be finalised at their local office on Tirizaan.'

She didn't say anything for a while... she just sat looking at him coolly with those beautiful sea green eyes.

'And so the baton is passed on... again... a weighty baton, at that. Thank you dear Coyote, and of course I am agreeable... how could I not be. One question... do I inherit a position in the squadron... or do I need an invite?' He was certain that she had grasped it... the reference to a 'weighty' baton spoke volumes... had understood the responsibility that would come with the wealth... had glimpsed the chain going back centuries, maybe millennia. She had matured so quickly, had listened and learnt so fast. He had no doubts at all... she had 'the right stuff'.

'I believe that the squadron already count you among their number. You took full part in the actions up in the Steel Halo... assisted in many kills and greatly impressed the flight. You are a 'natural' pilot and combateer. You may consider yourself invited if you wish but you are already one of us by default... and in spirit, I think.'

'Do I get to pick my own call sign... as a member of the squadron. If so, then it has to be Aguila.'

'You have been thinking on this already, I see... that is good... and Aguila is a worthy call sign.'

'Yes, I have been thinking on this... and other matters... and I do understand what I am taking on.'

'Buenno... if you ever need help... or just a friend, Tomaz and Veronika and Xan Tsen will be more than pleased to see you, as will Li Yan. As for your new feline friend... Nimitz... he will welcome you with open arms.'

'Nimitz... Qa Ghi is one of the squadron? I would never have guessed it... but now that I think back...'

'Do not be taken in by Qa Ghi... he likes to act the playboy, but he is as good a pilot as the master.'

'It was in there in his eyes... I just didn't see it at the time. How many of you are there... do you know?'

'A couple of flights here, a few there, spread across the eight charts... maybe two hundred. We are content to stay mostly unknown, going about our own affairs, but as you have seen we will take action if we think it is called for. A final thing, Sahana... when I am gone you will need to visit my bankers on Zaquesso. You can trust them completely... they can advise you and oversee your assets, as they have done for me. Also, if the circumstance allows, I want you to take this cigar case to a bar in Spacetown on Zaquesso called The Final Eight. Give it to the manager, Esteban... he will understand. He can offer you guidance and contacts... and a couple of other things.'

He held the irridium cigar case in his hand... it was always with him, even his space armour had an external pocket for it. Sahana nodded slowly, not questioning him at all on the matter... she would do as he asked, simple as that. She saw that he was done... that he had nothing more to say. There was a very distant look in his eyes.

Tirizaan system... a major trade nexus on the Serenic Arc with busy spacelanes, well policed by plenty of GalCop Vipers. That didn't stop a lone bandit from jumping them as they emerged. Sahana splashed it with ease, then set course out-system for the Navy base and engaged the Torus drive. Coyote sat slouched in his seat, feet up on the instrument panel smoking the usual colita. As they approached the base Sahana commed an ident, received clearance and docked the Dark Star with panache at max speed, causing Coyote to laugh gleefully.

'There are times when it is righteous to be flash, number one, and docking at a Naval base is most definitely one of them... it gives the Navy jocks something to think about. I cannot imagine where you might have learnt that.' 'I must have picked it up somewhere... from some old man of the spacelanes, probably.'

They were still laughing as they left the ship... and found Trent waiting by the lock in his spaceblack uniform. Sahana and the Lieutenant exchanged a very long look.

'The Admiral is in the NavSec office... if you would care to follow me Commander, Sahana.'

Turning, he led the way down the corridor. When they came to the NavSec office, Coyote made a suggestion. 'Why don't the pair of you go off for a chat, while I have a long talk with the Admiral.'

He entered the office, leaving the the two of them outside. Carruthers was sitting at the desk, reading comms. 'Good to see you Coyote... and on your own, I see... good. How was the run across from Bizalein?'

'Not as smooth as it would normally be, Admiral... a lot of hassle in fact. The Andiso Arch is very unsettled.'

Carruthers poured the coffees and Coyote lit a colita. He told him of the trouble they had seen along the route and of the things he had learned from Qa Ghi at Xele. Carruthers knew about the two rogue systems in the Gates, saying that the Navy were very concerned and had already moved some units into the area in case they were needed. They talked for a long while, first about the general situation in the sector, then about the possible effect on the mission. It had to go ahead... the Navy badly needed the 'passenger' picked up and delivered to a research orbital in Zaeredre system. Carruthers told him that the passenger, the subject of a manhunt in the Gates, was still holed up on Biceri station and would be expecting them. He would make contact with Coyote and Sahana, of whom he had been given good descriptions, in the spacer bar and the rest would be up to them. Coyote didn't want to know who or why... he trusted Carruthers. But extracting someone who was the subject of a sector-wide manhunt covertly from a system that didn't wish to let him go was made much harder when that system had gone rogue, and the whole sector was in turmoil. Unpredictability is the enemy of the contrabandista, and even one as experienced as Coyote would find this a challenge. The more serious stuff done with, he mentioned his intention to adopt Sahana as his legal heir... the Admiral had taken a liking to Sahana and approved wholeheartedly. They finished their coffees and strolled along to the mess, where Sahana and Trent were deep in conversation.

An hour later they boarded the Dark Star and boosted in-system for Tirizaan station. They would need to go dirtside to see his solicitors and Metropolis was the ideal place to buy a few items that they would need. On the cruise in, Coyote briefed Sahana on his plans and how they would go about it. Life was about to get 'interesting'.

The Gates of Damocles... an isolated sector, well off the trade routes and historically always troublesome. They had blasted their way into Atrare system, then on through Edceon to Atbiarxe system, fighting running battles all the way. Sahana added quite a few kills to her record. The spacelanes were chaotic and dangerous, with many pirates and what few traders they saw had large escort squads. The local GalCop Vipers were staying close in-system, and as they approached Atbiarxe station, four of them formed up around them.

'Dark Star, please heave-to for boarding and inspection.'

They had little choice but to comply. Coyote and Sahana were dressed in expensive designer shipsuits and dripping with jewelry which they had bought in Metropolis, playing the roles of rich old man and his much younger trophy wife... as they had been since leaving Tirizaan. The plush, playboy-style interior furnishings of the Dark Star and the Griff EV paint job on the hull fitted perfectly with their cover. Sahana was heavily made-up, her hair piled high on her head, the fitted velvet shipsuit showing off her tall body... she looked absolutely stunning, and was playing the part of an air-headed young wife brilliantly. The inspection was polite but thorough... very thorough, including electronic scans. The fiendishly well concealed, custom fitted cryo-pod that Xan Tsen had installed on Avernus passed it's first test. The long-ago installed safe in Coyote's stateroom also passed... it always had. Eventually they were allowed to proceed to the station and dock.

It was to his safe that Coyote now went, returning with two antique hand guns... ancient projectile weapons, but just as deadly as any beam weapon. They had two major advantages over hand blasters... they could not be jammed electronically... jammers were common on a lot of stations now... and they were small and compact, making them much easier to conceal. He passed one to Sahana, showed her the workings and watched as she weighed it in her hand, got the feel of it... saw the light in her eyes. He had no doubts that she would be able to use it if needed. He had been so right about her... she was a first class pilot and a very good combateer who took to weapons and combat instinctively... probably it was in the Katik genes. Ever since she had asked him back at Usinribe, he had been teaching her a combat variant of the ancient chinese art of Tai Chi. He had been amazed at how rapidly she had learnt... had become competent... even dangerous.

He showed her how to fit the soft leather ankle holster, how to draw the gun smoothly. Tarsed-up like a vidstar and waving a gun around, she made quite a picture... so much so, that he just had to take a snapshot of her on the cam, saying that he would send it to Trent. From the look on her face, it seemed that she rather liked that idea.

'They're reproductions of an old Terran gun called a Walther PPK... I inherited them from the 'old man'. From now until we reach Zaeredre system, you don't leave the ship without one. They have a six shot magazine plus one in the barrel. Accurate to twenty metres or so, and quite deadly. If you have to use it, fire two quick shots at the torso... the 'double tap', as it is known. Do not aim for the head... that's only for snipers.'

They remained docked at Atbiarxe station for a couple of days, spending a lot of time in the spacer bar, where Coyote listened to the local gossip and picked up what little information there was on the situation in Biceri system. Dressed up as she was, Sahana got a lot of attention but Coyote's presence prevented any hassle, as usual. It was late on the second day when two men walked over and sat down at their table.

'Tumblin' pods, if it ain't Coyote... how're they hangin' amigo?'

'And who is this enchanting young woman that you have with you, begging your pardon, ma'am?'

'My cojones are copacetic. Sahana, let me introduce Greer and Cameron, very old friends. Sahana is my XO.'

'Exec on the combat ship Dark Star, yet made-up and dressed like a Voogue model... this is a front, am I right?'

'That's for sure, Cameron... you think I enjoy wearing all this bling... old playboy and young wife is the story.'

'Lady, you sure got the looks... but that don't get you XO on Coyote's ol' tub. You gotta be one hell of a pilot.'

'She is the best young pilot I have seen for many years, Greer. Sahana, these gothic cowboys are two of the finest hunters in the eight... and they look hungry. Come along to the ship amigos, we can eat and talk in peace there.'

In the mess on the Dark Star the talk ranged far and wide... from the 'good old days' to the current events in this sector. Cameron quizzed Sahana on how she came to be Coyote's Exec... she gave him a brief account of her life, and a full account of the demise of clan Katik. Greer listened with great interest, saying that he had had serious trouble with that clan many years before, and was very pleased to hear of their downfall. It was clear to Coyote that the two hunters had taken a liking to Sahana. Her self-deprecating account of her own part in the action didn't fool them for a second, they were far too experienced for that. They knew a combateer when they saw one.

They were eating judias refritos with tortillas while they chatted, washing it down with red wine. When the food was finished, all three men lit colitas and the conversation turned to the immediate future. Coyote had a plan.

'Would you two gentlemen be interested in a little contract... a bit of escort work.'

'You wantin' an escort... that's gotta be a first... what're you needin', amigo?'

'Cover on the way out of Biceri system... and then on through to Zaeredre. It might get a little difficult at times.'

'What might this little contract be worth, Coyote old friend? You are talking about an Anarchy system gone rogue, and I suspect that you will be carrying someone or something that the locals do not wish to leave.'

Cameron was very sharp... as was his long-time partner... but Greer just enjoyed playing the yokel.

'Right on the mark as usual, Cameron... two hundred thousand... paid up front.'

Greer and Cameron looked at each other for a long moment... then they turned back to Coyote, grinning.

'That done get you the best escort in town, amigo. You wantin' to split soon?'

Coyote nodded and they got down to the details. It was agreed that Greer and Cameron would enter Biceri system an hour behind the Dark Star, skim and jump straightaway to Biarra where they would refuel, and then loiter near the witchpoint. Meanwhile, the Dark Star would cruise in-system to Biceri station and dock, make contact with the passenger and hopefully extract him, jumping to Biarra as soon as they had launched from the station. If they were pursued through the tube then Greer and Cameron would be waiting to lend a hand. In Biarra system, the three ships would stay in close formation while the Dark Star skimmed, then jump to Teesbi and from there on to Zaeredre system. Once the Dark Star had docked at the research orbital there, the contract would be done. It was a good plan, and Coyote quietly thanked the three fates for meeting the two hunters.

Biceri system was strangely quiet... they had a clear run in, but as they approached the station they were again boxed in by Vipers... rogue Vipers. Once again they were ordered to heave-to for inspection, which they did. This time the inspection was even more thorough, but not at all polite... it was downright rude in fact, and Sahana had to endure a lot of leery comments. She played her part well, even to the point of flirting with one of the inspectors. Eventually they were allowed to proceed to the station and dock. So far it was Xan Tsen two... inspectors nil.

All dressed up, Sahana and Coyote went straight to the spacer bar. He appeared to get very drunk very quickly, blatantly ignoring Sahana, who started flirting outrageously, causing a bit of mayhem. After an hour or so, with all the attention on Sahana, their passenger was easily able to make contact with him. Coyote whispered a bay number and strolled unnoticed out of the bar, leaving Sahana to look after herself... he was fully confident in her ability to do that. Thirty minutes later, she slipped away from her many admirers in the bar and took the transit to the shipbay, only to find a large brute of a man standing by the lock. He had 'enforcer' written all over him.

'Where's that drunken sugar daddy of yours got to, puta? Someone wants a serious word with him.'

'Who the fuck are you, arsehole?'

The cold contempt in her reply made him blink... he had thought he was dealing with a bimbo. He attempted to slap her, but Sahana deftly caught his arm and threw him to the floor with ease. Before he could recover, she had her PPK out, it's muzzle pressed to the side of his head. There was steel in her soft smoky voice.

'Stay very still and very quiet, and you might just live to see another day... not that I care.'

The goon had enough sense to obey, and a minute or so later Coyote came along the corridor... just as another goon appeared further up the corridor behind Sahana, aiming a flechette gun at her back... Coyote shouted at her. 'Down Sahana!'

As she dropped flat he appeared to stumble, came up with his PPK and fired two rapid shots at the second goon, who crumpled to the floor. The first goon had seen his chance and made a break for it. Firing from the floor, Sahana killed him with one shot to the head at ten metres. She had that rare skill... starships and laser beams and

bullets tended to go exactly where she wanted them to go. She picked herself up and smiled at Coyote, who was speechless for once... in awe of her. With excellent timing their passenger chose that moment to appear.

'To the bridge Sahana and request launch sequence... now!'

She quickly cycled through the two-man lock. As soon as they could he and the passenger followed her. On board Coyote led him to the concealed cryo-pod, getting him settled in and chilled down. So far so good, if you didn't count two dead goons. He joined Sahana on the bridge and settled into his seat as the Dark Star was being ported to the slot. She was subdued, coming to terms with her first kill 'up close and personal'... it was different up close. As soon as they had launched Coyote pulled a ninety, boosting hard, and initiated hyperspace... as the count hit four, he saw five traces appear on the scanner... an Interceptor and four Vipers had launched from the station and had locked-on to the Dark Star. They were not GalCop... they were rogue, and they were hot on his tail. They would analyse his cloud, would know his destination. With the jump-capable Interceptor to open a wormhole, they would soon be pursuing him through to Biarra.

Endgame

The screen flared blue... as soon as they were out, Coyote opened the comm... his voice was cold.

'One Interceptor and four Vipers on my six... all rogue. Take out the Vipers... and any escape capsules.'

'Copy that Dark Star... consider it done, old boy.'

Cameron's laconic response was very welcome... as was Greer's more down-to-earth reply.

'I kinda dig fraggin' rogue Vipers.'

The five rogue ships emerged just thirty seconds after the Dark Star, expecting to chase down and kill a lone Cobra and it's playboy pilot. Instead they found themselves in a vicious firefight with three Cobras... iron-assed Cobras piloted by veteran combateers. Greer and Cameron were perfectly positioned, ready to kick ass... which they did. Coyote took on the Interceptor, confident that the two hunters would deal with the Vipers. It became a nasty furball and all the Cobras took damage but the Viper pilots were not GalCop's finest, they were rogue... and they died. It got a bit hectic while the Dark Star was skimming... four bandits tried their luck but Greer and Cameron took them out in short order. Coyote had the con and boosting away from the sun, the three Cobras slipped into a tight arrowhead formation, with Greer on point. Sahana had seen GalCop Viper pilots fly close formation, but hadn't thought that it could be done with Cobras and was about to comment on it when the three ships moved even closer together, all without a word on the comms. She knew she that was a very good pilot but this... this was surely beyond her. Greer opened the wormhole and the three ships slipped into the tube.

Teesbi system was one long running battle all the way from the witchpoint to the sun. By the time Greer had fueled up, all three ships were very low on ordnance and over the comms they agreed that they would have to detour to Anbedi system and dock there. The three veteran combateers were not prepared to emerge in Zaeredre system without any missiles and with lots of damaged kit... especially as anyone on their track would expect them to jump straight to Zaeredre... and could get there ahead of them by making two shorter jumps. They fully expected that there would be an ambush waiting for them in Zaeredre system.

Anbedi system... local space was busy. Maintaining the tight arrowhead formation they boosted in-system. A few bandits took a look at them, but then thought better of it and turned away. The aura of menace that the three Cobras seemed to exude was almost palpable. As they approached the station, five GalCop Vipers came out to meet them and somewhat nervously boxed them in, ordering all three to heave-to for inspection... they obliged. There seemed to be less tension in this system and the search was polite... very thorough, but polite. Coyote and Sahana had dropped their act now that they had left the Gates... the designer shipsuits and the bling were gone. Once again they passed the inspection and were allowed to proceed and dock. Xan Tsen three... inspectors nil. It was a fairly slow turnaround... they replenished their fuel and ordnance, and while a few repairs were being made, they gathered in the spacer bar for a beer and a discussion of tactics for the expected ambush at Zaeredre.

'We emerge in line astern, with Greer on point, you third. We take on the bandits, while you boost in-system to the orbital on injectors.'

'No way, amigo... we fight as a trio... and all three of us make it to the orbital... more certain that way.'

'I go with Coyote on that... job's not done 'til I see you dock.'

'I agree... that's the way it has to be.'

'Okay gentlemen, ma'am... then that is how we will play it. Shall we be about it?'

'One question guys... just how do you pull that close formation trick?'

'Automagically of course, Sahana.'

'They call it 'mojo', lady.'

'Sorcery number one... just wait till we barrel-roll the arrowhead.'

Sahana's jaw dropped as Greer and Cameron chuckled.

'You are serious aren't you... you can actually do that?'

All three men just smiled enigmatically.

They left the bar and returned to the ship bays, launching as soon as they could. The three Cobras formed-up outside the station and boosting hard, proceeded to demonstrate the tight arrowhead barrel-roll... all the way into the tube. For the first time since she had boarded the Dark Star, way back on Bazaar station, Sahana found herself gripping her seat nervously. The fucking flash bastards, she thought to herself... Coyote turned and grinned at her, as if he had just read her mind. A newsbot happened to catch it all on vid... it became an instant hit on the feeds.

The screen flared blue... and they were out. There was an ambush in Zaeredre system alright... three FDLs and four Asps were awaiting them. Whoever was after them had resources... plenty of resources. It was a very nasty firefight and a close run thing. Greer was on point and got bracketed immediately by two Asps ... he took one out and crippled the second before an FDL slipped in and finished him. He ejected just in time, and Sahana's jaw dropped again as Cameron somehow managed to scoop his escape capsule in the middle of a dogfight with the other two Asps, then splashed one of the bandits in spite of taking heavy damage. Coyote engaged two of the FDLs with missiles, then went for the one that had fragged Greer, red-lining the fore laser then spinning to finish the job with the aft. One of the FDLs survived his missiles and Coyote took that on next, taking a missile hit full on whilst hammering it into space dust. Though badly damaged, Cameron was able to kill the other Asp with his port laser. Coyote picked off the Asp that Greer had crippled and fragged the escape capsule. Two heavily damaged ships headed in-system on Torus drives, then on injectors when the drives mass-locked. They veered off towards the research orbital, commed idents and docked at max speed, contract fulfilled... mission completed.

They said goodbye to Greer and Cameron on Zaeredre station, after a refit and a long session in the spacer bar, where they all got rat-assed, even Sahana. She had come to really respect the two hunters and they had made it clear that it was mutual. After they had launched and hyperspaced for Inmaarxe, she retired to her stateroom to recover, leaving him alone on the bridge of the Dark Star, drinking coffee. They would be meeting the Admiral on the Navy base in Inmaarxe system and after that Coyote had a yen to return to Zaquesso for a break. He knew that Esteban and Jessica would take Sahana to their hearts... and he really needed to go fishing again.

Sahana was very pleased to find Trent awaiting them in the NavSec office with Carruthers. The relief on the young officer's face was obvious, and even the Admiral was clearly very relieved to see them.

'First class operation, Coyote... you even made the feeds with that barrel-roll stunt. It's all over the sector.'

'It was very nearly a shambles, your grace... without our two escorts we would most probably be space dust.'

'Who were they, by the way... members of the squadron, by any chance?'

'Admiral, if I were to tell you that I would be forced to shoot you.'

Carruthers burst out laughing and Coyote howled. Sahana and Trent just looked at each other in despair. As an aide served the coffees, Coyote lit a colita... what he said next surprised Sahana.

'Okay number one, perhaps you would care to give the Admiral and the Lieutenant a thorough mission de-brief.'

He slouched back in his chair and blew a smoke ring. She gathered her thoughts... and obeyed her commander.

When she had finished, Trent took her along to the mess for a chat, leaving the two old men in the office.

'NavSec are pleased... payment has been credited to the usual account. Where are you headed next, Coyote?'

'I think we need a little vacation... on Zaquesso. Sahana will love it, and the samlon are calling me.'

'I am outbound as well... I'll come as far as Cemaaran with you, then I'm away to Xevera. Trent will be off to Tirizaan... his new base of operations. He and Sahana are going to miss each other, I think.'

The next day the Dark Star and the Admiral's Interceptor boosted away from the base, and in close formation the two ships slipped into the tube, bound for Cemaaran. Sahana was subdued for a while... thinking about Trent. Coyote made no comment... it was clear that the two young people had something going, but they would have to work it out in their own way. Trent had a career and so did Sahana now, in a way. During his long life he had had many relationships, none of them long-lasting, and on this subject he didn't feel qualified to offer any advice.

The screen flared blue... and they were out... and taking multiple hits.

There were many many ships... all hostile and they were focused on the two recently emerged ships. Coyote wrenched the Dark Star into a vicious triple, hit the injectors briefly, then rolled out and took on the nearest bandit, a Krait, vapourising it with one long burst. As he aligned his ship on a Mamba, he opened the comms.

'Hades, this is one fucking mother of an ambush... see you on the other side, Carruthers.'

'Where's the damn Navy when you really need them... or the bloody squadron... Tally-ho!'

Sahana had been calmly concentrating on the scanner and fiddling with the overloaded multiple targetting array.

'Twenty... make that nineteen bandits... four Pythons, six Mambas, two FDLs, four Cobras... and three Vipers.'

'Mierda... take missile control Sahana, go for the Pythons and FDLs, but keep one back... the Admiral will take on the Vipers... we'll take the Mambas first... then we shall see. I fear that Atropos is poised with her shears.'

The next ten minutes flew by in a chaotic tangle of laser beams, missiles and frantically maneuvering ships. The Admiral, his ship already badly damaged, had taken out one of the Cobras and two of the Vipers, but was taking heavy fire from two Cobras as the third Viper sped in on his six to finish him... instead of ejecting, he spun the Interceptor and rammed the Viper, both ships disintegrating in an instant. The Dark Star was also badly damaged by now... the fore and aft shields had failed, they had several hull breaches and red lights were coming on across the board. Coyote had splashed two of the Mambas and one FDL. The three missiles that Sahana selectively

launched had accounted for the other FDL and one Python. In an amazing feat of space combat, Coyote splashed two more Mambas and a Cobra, but the odds were overwhelming... and the energy banks were dropping fast. Gobs of plasma were flying off the hull, as a Mamba and a Python closed in for the kill... the Mamba opened fire.

With all the shields down, the mil laser punched clean through the already weakened hull and deflected across the bridge, showering Sahana's space armour with plasma. It vaporised Coyote's seat, throwing him violently against a broken bulkhead with sickening force... he lay there motionless. Sahana took control and hit the injectors briefly, then spun the ship and took out the Mamba with the port laser. That just left three Pythons, one Mamba and two Cobras. With a feral snarl on her face, Sahana fought for her life... firing her last missile at the nearest Python, she twisted the Dark Star into a sickening triple, then rolled out perfectly aligned on the last Mamba. She red-lined the fore laser, spun and fragged it with the aft laser. One of the Cobras was coming in fast on her six so she did the unexpected... she zeroed the speed, spun ninety and took it out with two long bursts from the starboard laser. Again she surprised them... instead of trying to evade, she engaged one of the two remaining Pythons... it broke off and she swooped around to align on the other, red-lining the fore laser again, then spinning the ship and vaporising it with the aft. As the last Cobra closed in, she was spinning again, red-lining the port and then the starboard laser in turn. Another debris cloud resulted and she was at the last Python, which was right on her bow, shredding the hull with its mil laser. She waited as long as she dared for the fore laser to cool, while the Python's fire wrecked the Dark Star around her. At point blank range, she red-lined the laser one last time... the Python exploded and debris came hurtling through the shattered bridge, thudding into her already battered space armour. Apart from rapidly dispersing clouds of debris and tumbling cargo pods, local space was suddenly empty.

She half fell out of her seat, and crawled shakily over to Coyote. He still hadn't moved, but behind the helmet visor, his eyes were open and alert. There was blood trickling from his mouth and his voice was faint.

'Right on Commander... yours now, number one... find Trent... tell him about this... this trap.'

His suit's life monitors were turning red. The advanced KAKS space armour had withstood the laser strike, but it had thrown him across the bridge with such force that he had been impaled on a sheared metal beam. The 'smart' armour had sealed itself around the breach in his back, saving him from decompression, but the internal injuries were killing him. The drastic maneuvering of the last few minutes must have been agony... and she could do nothing to help him, nothing at all. Somehow he managed to fumble his cigar case out and push it into her hand... then his eyes closed and he was gone. Kneeling beside him Sahana howled in anguish, not moving for what seemed like ages. At last she crawled back to her seat to check the scanner... local space was still empty, mercifully... one hit from a pulse laser would have finished the Dark Star. She brought the severely damaged ship around with difficulty... attitude control was minimal and the thrust was erratic... and headed in-system for the station, engaging the Torus drive... about the only kit that still functioned. In her spacegloved hand she still held his cigar case and for the first time she noticed the beautifully engraved script on one side. She read it with tears rolling down her face.

*Dark Star crashes, pouring its light into ashes
Reason tatters, the forces tear loose from the axis
Searchlight casting for faults in the clouds of delusion
Shall we go, you and I while we can?
Through the transitive nightfall of diamonds*

*Mirror shatters in formless reflections of matter
Glass hand dissolving, in ice petal flowers revolving
Lady in velvet recedes in the nights of good-bye
Shall we go, you and I while we can?
Through the transitive nightfall of diamonds*

~The Grateful Dead

'Station Control, this is Dark Star, requesting emergency clearance. We are badly shot-up, red lights across the board, multiple hull breaches, minimal attitude control and thrusters jammed on max... no eject available.'

'Copy that, Dark Star, got the full set there, don't you ma'am... wait one... okay you're cleared, bring it on in.'
'Thank you, Control... one casualty onboard... coming in hot and fast... Dark Star out.'

Even the extreme sims didn't throw this at you, thought Sahana as she fought with the stiff, unresponsive controls on what was left of the bridge. Somehow she got the ship aligned on the slot, after three passes of the station at

max speed. If she could just coax a bit more roll out of the stick... she'd only get one shot at it. Side-swiping the rim the ship bounced and scraped up the slot, trailing long streamers of sparks and debris. She had made it... just. The vintage Cowell and McGrath Cobra Mark Three Dark Star had docked for the last time.

The thoroughly wrecked ship was ported to an emergency bay in quick time. When she cycled through the lock, still in her battered, plasma-scarred space armour, the shipyard boss and a medic were waiting. The grizzled old shipyard boss was examining what was left of the Dark Star using a cambot in the bay, slowly shaking his head in wonder. She removed her helmet and took a deep breath of station air.

'I have never seen a more shot up Cobra in all my many years, Commander. That was a masterful piece of piloting, quite remarkable considering the state of that ship. I think that I would like to buy you a beer, ma'am.' 'I'll have to take a rain check on that beer, Jefe. As for the piloting... I had a very good teacher... the best.'

Through tear-filled eyes she looked at the vac-suited medic who was about to enter the lock.

'Too late I'm afraid, amigo... far too late.'

Exhausted and overwhelmed with grief, she took a colita from Coyote's cigar case and lit it. Filling her lungs with the sweet smoke for the first time in her life, she felt a soothing calmness and clarity enfold her... then she fainted.

Epilogue

The planet Zaquesso...

It was mid-morning in Spacetown and The Final Eight was quiet... just three punters stood at the counter. When the young woman strolled into the joint, all three heads turned. Spaceblack shipsuit, tall lithe body, wavy chestnut hair cascading past her shoulders, the face of a fashion model. At first glance, she seemed to be totally out of place in this dive... until you saw her eyes... fathomless sea green eyes... the 'eight lights gaze' that only veteran spacers had, very unusual in one so young. She walked confidently up to the counter, disdainfully ignoring the admiring stares and comments from the drinkers standing there. The huge bear of a man behind the counter smiled at her.

'Good morning... would you happen to be Esteban, by any chance?'

'That is indeed my name... Commander.'

A veteran spacer, he knew a combateer when he saw one... and he knew that look in her eyes.

'My name is Sahana Katik... a very dear friend asked me to bring this to you.'

She laid a battered irridium cigar case gently on the counter. Esteban stared at it for a long long moment, then he looked up at her... his eyes were moist and shining... as were Sahana's.

'Gentlemen, I am sorry but this bar is now closed... your tabs are all on the house. Jessica... come here please.'

His tone brooked no argument... as the three grumbling patrons shuffled out the door, Jessica came out from the backroom. She took one look at her husband's face, looked down at the cigar case laying on the counter and burst into tears... that set Sahana off and all her bottled-up grief came tumbling out. Jessica opened her arms to her and the two women hugged each other, sobbing. His eyes stinging, Esteban filled four shot glasses with vintage evil juice. They each took one, leaving the fourth standing alone on the counter.

After a moment's pause they raised their glasses and downed the fiery purple liquor.

