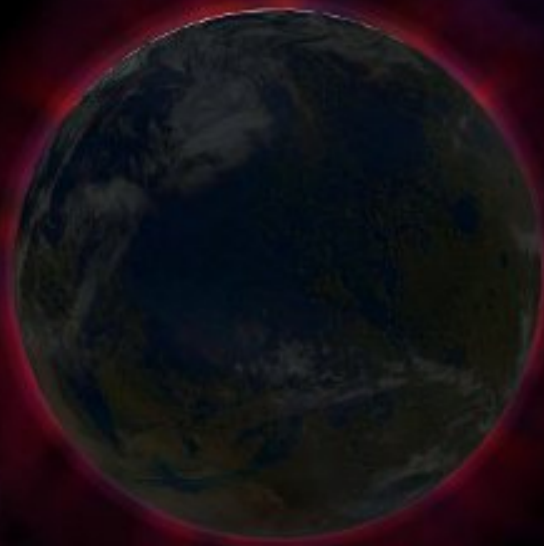


KAXGAR



CODY

Encounter

The old man sat alone at a table in the corner, quietly sipping a beer. Grey haired and bearded, wearing a faded blue shipsuit and a panama hat, he went unnoticed by the other drinkers... just another old trader, killing some time between runs. He finished his drink, and flipped a hand signal at the barkeep, who acknowledged it with a nod... within a minute a fresh, foaming beer was delivered to his table. That caught the attention of one of the spacers stood drinking at the bar... table service was not the norm in this spacer joint. A tough anarchy system, out towards the rim of Colesque, Lasoan was far from being civilised, and the station was little better. The spacer strolled over, and took a seat across the table. In his late thirties, with dark hair and grey eyes, he had a confident manner and an easy smile. On the collar of his spaceblack shipsuit, a tiny golden starbird glittered. The old man regarded him evenly... he knew all about elite combateers... he had earned his own starbird many years before.

'Cool trick with the barkeep and beer, sir... they know you well 'round here?'

'I've passed through here a few times, yeah... I've passed through most systems a few times.'

'Thought you'd the looks of a real veteran... you've had plenty of adventures along the way, I'd guess?'

The old man held his gaze for a few seconds... then he drained his glass, and held it up to the light.

'Sure do evaporate fast, sometimes... you wanna hear a tale son, you'd better arrange more precipitation.'

The steely glint in the old man's eyes warned the spacer that this was not someone to be trifled with.

'You order them, sir, and I'll happily pay the tab... and yeah, I could listen to a tale or two. Got badly shot-up inbound, and the repairs are gonna take their own sweet time... splashed all four of the bastards, though.'

'Only four of 'em... it's alright son, I'm just kiddin'. What're you carrying, 'stones or metal?'

'Platinum... contract run out of Xerirea, away down in the Fertile Crescent, bound for Arzace, out on the rim.'

The old man flipped another hand signal at the barkeep, a red bug-eyed lobster, and two beers swiftly arrived at the table. He took a long swallow from his glass... then lit a small cigar, inhaling deeply.

'Fourteen, maybe fifteen jumps, threading the Citadels of Chaos... that can be a tough run. I'm Franklin.'

'Zakari Lacon... Zak to my friends. Just Franklin... no other name?'

The old man ignored the question... he took a long drag on his cigar, blew a smoke ring, and grinned wickedly.

'Well then, Zak... I'd reckon you've done a few eights... ever heard of the lost planet Kaxgar?'

'Sure have done a few eights... no sir, ain't ever heard of Kaxgar... like the old legend of Erehwon, is it?'

'Erehwon ain't no legend, Zak... it existed... if you believe nowt else I tell you tonight, believe that. Those tales about it going nova are all true. No, Kaxgar ain't nothin' like Erehwon. Kaxgar, along with it's moon Khotan, orbits an isolated star, located somewhere in that vast reach of uncharted space that's come to be known as the Takla Makan... unknown... unconnected to the eight... unreachable.'

Franklin took another swallow of beer, and gazed intently at the younger man. Looking into his dark eyes, Zak felt a tingle at the back of his neck. He had a strange premonition that Franklin was about to tell him an unlikely, yet somehow true story... and he had always been fascinated by anywhere that was supposed to be unreachable.

'Takla Makan... named after a desert on Terra, back in Sol system. Some folks say it means 'place to abandon', others 'you can enter, but you cannot leave'. By all accounts, it was a most forbiddin' place, surrounded by high mountains, thousands of clicks from any ocean, zero rainfall... nothin' but constantly shifting sand dunes. You done much time dirtside, Zak... ever been in a desert? They're strange places... scorchin' by day, frigid at night.'

'No, ain't ever been in a desert... I was born on Laorlaza in the Far Arm Cluster, in a rough part of Spacetown. Had a tough childhood, signed-up for the naval cadet academy on my twelfth birthday... ended up a fighter jock at sixteen. Did two tours of duty, left at twenty-four and bought a Cobra three with my navy payoff... rarely been dirtside since. Got a Cobra three now... tried a couple of others along the way, but... well, you know.'

Franklin nodded slowly... he knew alright. The Cobra Mk III... best combat starship in the eight, perfect for the veteran privateer who made the long, dangerous runs. He waved a hand at the barkeep.

'I was in Eraronqu system, up past the Qucedi Bottleneck... real frontier sector that. Long time back now, I was about where you are, I'd reckon... five figure kill count, fully tooled-up Cobra, enough creds to cruise forever, an occasional mission for the navy... an iron-assed privateer. Anyway, I got tagged by a fugitive in a Moray, as hard as they come. We'd near shot each other to pieces, when he disengaged and started to limp away. I would've let him be, but the bastard took a partin' shot at me with his aft laser... bad mistake. I took him apart, plate by plate, 'til he ejected, then I blew his ship. Only one cargo pod, so I scooped that, then went for the escape capsule...'

Franklin left it hanging and drank some more beer, then relit his cigar. There was an unwritten code out there amongst combateers... if a badly damaged ship disengaged and ran, let it be. If it took the piss, frag it... all of it.

'I made it to the station okay... what I'd scooped was a cryo-pod, and for some strange reason I got this urge to see who the occupant was, so I paid the fees and hung around while the medics thawed him out. He turned out to be a she, a fierce green feline... an angry one, at that. When she'd fully recovered, we had a long talk... man, she had a tale to tell... and a wild theory that fired my imagination. I offered her a ride, to anywhere she wanted to go... that was to her homeworld, Zabeso, in the Zaedvera Pocket. We became friends during that run, passin' the long hours in the tube sittin' in the mess talkin', and I came to believe in her wild theory. Tell you what Zak, come along to my ship... I'm kinda hungry, and there's a chili in the pot, a fiery one, and wine in the locker.'

'Sounds good... I could eat some food... and I like my chili fiery.'

'Cool, let's go... we can talk there.'

They drained their glasses, Zak settled the tab, and they left the bar, taking the transit to the ship bays. Boarding the old man's ship, the first thing that caught Zak's eye was the highly polished brass maker plate on the central bulkhead... 'Cowell & MgRath Shipyard, Lave 3104'... a vintage Cobra Mk III, and in excellent condition.

'A very fine ship, Franklin... you don't see any of these for sale in the shipyards.'

'I bought Eridanus 'bout eight years ago... found it in the salvage bays of a private shipyard up in the Steel Halo, over in Proximus. It was a shot-up wreck... not seen many worse, but soon as I saw the maker plate, I had to have it. The main structure was basically undamaged, as sturdy as the day it rolled out of Cowell and MgRath's yards. It just needed massive amounts of hull work, new engines and torus drive, new bridge equipment, a complete internal refit... that little lot cost a whole bunch of creds. But when the shields have failed, and it's down to the bare metal, you'll not find a more durable ship... and that's an edge. Grab a seat, I'll get this food on the go.'

They made short work of the chili and tortillas, washing it down with a good red wine. Franklin set the coffee maker going and when it was done he poured two cups, lit a cigar and settled back in his seat, sighing happily.

'Real good food, sir... best I've had in quite a while. This planet Zabeso... close by the Takla Makan, ain't it?'

'Yeah, very close... the next system along, Beraer, that's right on the edge. No real surprise that the cat, Q'ja Fal was her name, should be interested in the uncharted space right there on her doorstep. She was principal of the ancient history and antiquities department at Zabeso's central university, an experienced archaeologist and a keen collector of antique charts... man, some of her collection must have been worth a fortune.'

'You actually got to see them... these charts?'

'Yeah... when we reached Zabeso, she insisted that I go dirtside with her. I got a surprise there... the faculty board were so overjoyed to get their most distinguished academic back, they gave me an honorary doctorate. You see, she'd been gone near on four years local, most of it spent in that cryo-pod. They'd pretty much given her up for lost, not knowin' she'd been kidnapped from her home, and taken off-planet. Next thing Q'ja Fal knew, she was several systems away and being interrogated by an outfit known as Eclipse, a very shadowy organisation indeed, about a project she was involved with. She'd been doing an audit of the university archive, and had found an old star chart that showed a star system in the Takla Makan, a system not shown on any modern charts. It caught her interest, so she delved deeper into the archive... and found another, even older chart. This also showed the system in the Takla Makan, but this one had a brief notation, namin' it as Kaxgar, and sayin' that it was inhabited by furless bipedal aliens. Only one problem... the chart was dated over thirty years prior to wormhole tech being invented... before Zabeso, or anyone for that matter, had an interstellar capability.'

Franklin finished his coffee, and relit his cigar, a distant look in his eyes.

‘So the chart was dated wrong, or the notation was rubbish. There’s no other conclusion... is there?’

‘That’s what I thought, at first... but Q’ja Fal was certain of the dating, and believed in the notation. She’d been in the process of trying to pinpoint the exact co-ords for the system, with the help of the astronomy department, when she was kidnapped. Her captors wanted to know everything that she’d discovered... they even used truth serum on her when she told them she knew nothin’. That sort of stuff don’t work on felines, their brains are wired different... but they didn’t seem to know that. When they realised that they’d get nothing’ out of her, they froze her, and she got transported all over Colesque... don’t ask me why. Nearly four years later, along I come and liberate her, and man was she angry... but she was also convinced she’d been on to something very strange, or why had she been kidnapped and interrogated. I had to agree with her.’

Zak had been watching the old man carefully while he talked, and saw nothing but sincerity in his eyes... he believed in what he was saying, that was plain... and Zak was beginning to believe as well. Franklin refilled their coffee cups and settled back in his seat again, puffing away on his cigar, a slight smile on his face.

‘While I was spending my time lookin’ over her collection of charts, Q’ja Fal threw herself into her interrupted research on Kaxgar system. One of her post-grad assistants had kept all her notes in order and she soon started to make progress. It took a couple of tenths, but the astronomy department finally managed to pinpoint the exact co-ords, which were just out of reach of any known system. That tickled the memory of a run I’d made, some years before... ever been across the Great Rift in Jaftra, Zak... to the Five Points Trade Barrier?’

‘I’ve heard tell it’s possible... but you need some very fancy kit, don’t you?’

‘Yeah... they call it an interstellar fuel collector. It’s very expensive... and very, very slow.’

‘And you used it to cross the Rift... what’re the ways of it?’

‘Get yourself over to either Maedrebe or Tiared and lay-in a jump between them. You gotta hack the hyperspace drive and force a mis-jump... then you gotta deal with the Thargoids that’ll be waitin’. If you don’t get snuffed, you’ll find yourself at the midway point, with no quirium fuel... but the navcomp will show Articeso at six point eight lights. Then all you gotta do is cruise for close to a tenth, and the fuel tank will fill... but oh so slowly.’

‘A tenth... that’s one helluva long time in interstellar space, Franklin... and splashin’ the bugs ain’t a given, is it?’

‘Nope... it’s a chancy one alright, and once in the Five Points, the only way back out, apart from a gal-jump through to Xrata, is to repeat the trick via a mis-jump between Esarxeve and Xeonar... that’ll put you six point eight lights from Belere, back across the Rift. But the bugs are the real problem... if it’s three or four warships, and you’re good, you’ve got a fair chance. Any more than that, and you’ll likely get your arse handed to you.’

Zak was fascinated... he was bound to try it himself one day, he knew it, and this sort of intel was priceless.

‘When I mentioned the idea to Q’ja Fal, she was all for headin’ right on out, getting the kit, and trying to reach Kaxgar... I had to put the brakes on that. A run like that needs very careful planning... and a fall-back option of some sort. Ain’t no problem if you can guarantee havin’ an undamaged gal-drive... but you can’t. Emerge into a low tech, or worse, an empty system, on a one-way ticket with no gal-drive, and you’re fucked, good and proper.’

Franklin re-started the coffee maker, then went to his stateroom, returning with a rolled-up chart in his hands. He spread it out on the galley table... it was large scale, showing only the Takla Makan and the surrounding systems. Over on the right, a system was marked in red... Kaxgar. The nearest systems were Inbibe and Maisso, and the midway point between them, as plotted on the chart, was six point eight lights from Kaxgar. While Zak examined the chart, Franklin poured the coffee, then lit another cigar. Spacers, like mariners before them, love charts, and the more beautifully that they are drawn, the more they love them... the best charts are works of art.

‘Fine bit of cartography... so, did you make the run?’

Franklin blew a smoke ring and grinned at Zakari.

‘Sure did, son... and it was quite a trip, believe me, quite a trip. I’d thought that the lack of any fall-back plan would make it impossible, and started makin’ plans to leave Zabeso, but I’d underestimated

Q'ja Fal. On a planet full of fierce green felines, she was one of the fiercest, and when she'd got her teeth into a problem, she didn't let go. I heard nothing from her for a few days... then she came to me with a crazy idea, something she'd cooked up with the astro-engineering boffins... a spare gal-drive, stowed in the cargo bay and designed so as to be installable in space. I didn't take it seriously at first, but she took me along to see these boffins, and they were certain it could be done... given enough time and resources... neither of which were a problem for Q'ja Fal.'

'That's some idea... it'd even make Oresrati do-able... but it takes a whole gang of grease-monkeys hours to fit a gal-drive, and that's in a bloody shipyard. How the hell are you supposed to do it in space... on your own?'

'Turned out the solution was two custom-built mechbots, also stowed in the cargo bay. As I say, funding was no problem for Q'ja Fal... she went to the university chancellor and pretty much got a blank cheque. The cats love exploration and research... and they're damn good at both. That settled it for me... the expedition was on. Took half a year, but they cracked it... a lot of re-fitting on Ouroboros, my old Cobra, and some serious hacking of the navcomp. It had to allow selection of a system that wasn't on the usual short range chart... they had to sort of pre-program it in, don't ask me how. Fitting the spare gal-drive worked like a dream on a test run in orbit, but the navcomp hack just couldn't be tested... not 'til we'd reached the midway point, anyway. Then we had to provision the ship for the long cruise in interstellar space... you can't predict the amount of time you'll need to fill the tank, it varies. At least a tenth, for sure, so we planned for a hundred and twenty days... if it took any longer, well... then we'd see. Of course, we'd have to get past the Thargoids at midway first, and as you say, that ain't a given. But I was confident enough... the three fates were leadin' me to Kaxgar, I could feel it.'

He finished his coffee, relit his cigar, and reached into a locker behind him, producing a bottle of liquor. Zak eyed the bottle suspiciously... it looked very old. Franklin fetched a jug of water and a couple of glasses, then poured two generous measures of the purple liquor, topping them up with water. He passed one over to Zak.

'Ever tried Zaquessoian evil juice, Zak? Some drink it neat, but that ain't really advisable... it needs water.'

'I've tried a fair few kinds of evil juice, 'round the eight, but not one from Zaquesso... how evil is it?'

'It's positively satanic... but it sharpens the mind, if drunk carefully. This one's a vintage... Salut!'

They raised their glasses, and Zak took a tentative sip... smiled, and took a larger swallow... then gasped.

'Fuckin' hell, that's got a bloody kick to it... and that's with water. People drink this poison neat?'

'Not many... you gotta be a real hard man to drink it straight, believe me.'

'You ain't kiddin'... did you get that bottle on Zaquesso?'

'Yeah, it's a beautiful planet. I stop off there whenever I'm in Proximus... do a bit of fishin', get rat-assed in a bar I know in spacetown... and bring a couple of cases of evil juice, and a few of the local Zinfandel, away with me.'

Zak took a more cautious swallow... there was something about the flavour that lurked behind the fire, something that he liked. Taking a pack of cheroots out of a pocket, he lit up. He smoked rarely, but it was one of those days.

'Anyhow, we finally boosted away from Zabeso station and hit the first of eleven tubes... only one way out of the Zaedvera Pocket, and that meant the long way round to Inbibe, skirtin' the Takla Makan. It was a mostly clear run up Kob's Ladder, skimmin' some systems, but then we had to jump across to Dixeza... and Q'ja Fal got her first real taste of combat. From the witchpoint, all the way in-system... one long runnin' firefight.'

'Yeah, I know Dixeza... right unfriendly folk in that system. Even the station's a dangerous place... not nice.'

'GalCop barely hang on there... it'll go rogue some day, I reckon. We took some damage, but made it to the station okay. Q'ja Fal actually enjoyed it... she was panting, eyes glittering... quite a lady. The cats evolved into a civilised, spacefaring species long before mankind, and they're way smarter than us... but they're still wild hunters at heart. I learnt a lot of cat history on that run... man, you wouldn't want them as enemies, I tell you. But for some reason they like us humans... they seem to think we have 'potential', was how Q'ja Fal put it. Said we'd somehow bootstrapped ourselves from simple hunter gatherers to spacefarers in a remarkably short time.'

‘Many of my squadron were felines... including my wingman. Ace pilots, and fearless in combat... none better.’

‘Ah... then you’ll know why I like them. If there’s ever an inter-species war, we’d want the cats on our side.’

‘That’s a fact... do you think that’s possible, an inter-species war?’

‘I doubt it, but one thing I’ve learnt... this universe can always surprise you. Several sectors across the eight are more or less no-go these days... that ain’t a good sign. If the navy decides to go in, then... well, we’ll see. If it ever happens, it’ll kick-off between the frogs and the insects... they really hate each other, have done from way back.’

Franklin refilled their glasses, and lit another cigar.

‘We boosted away from Dixeza station, and jumped to Laribebi. Got a full overhaul and ordnance load-out for Ouroboros there, and took some time dirtside. Then it was away to Inbibe, the mis-jump to midway... and the Thargoids. There were three warships waitin’, and they spawned a large swarm. It was close run, but I was right on it, in the zone... plenty of damaged kit though, the standard gal-drive included. Before startin’ the interstellar cruise, the reserve had to be fitted, then that navcomp hack had to be tested... it worked right enough, a system named Kaxgar showed on the chart at six point eight lights. I locked it into the navcomp straightaway, just in case it disappeared. The smile on Q’ja Fal’s face was as wide as the Rift... it was a great moment.’

‘I’ll bet... so how did the cruise go?’

‘It was long... a hundred and twelve days. But it slipped away easy enough, mostly because Q’ja Fal took it upon herself to teach me galactic history... and man, could she teach. I had a keen mind way back then, and I soaked it up... especially ancient Terran history... fascinatin’ stuff. The fuel collector did it’s thing, and the tank slowly filled with each passin’ tenday, then at last we had a full load and it was time. I barrell-rolled Ouroboros into that wormhole just for the joy of it, and forty-six hours later, we emerged into Kaxgar system. A long way out, no beacons or bouys, no comms of course, just a whole lot of asteroids and way off in-system, a single planet and one large moon, showing as thin crescents. No jovians or other planets, only asteroids, a G-type primary and Kaxgar and Khotan. We didn’t go hurtlin’ in on the torus drive... if the system was inhabited, we didn’t want to alarm anyone, so we took it slow and easy. First priority was to skim and get a full tank, just in case, and that took a while. Eventually we slid into orbit above Kaxgar... a beautiful planet, roughly sixty per cent ocean, with several large land masses, mostly vast green plains and mountain ranges. It looked to have a temperate climate, with minimal polar ice caps. No trace of anything man-made that we could see, no lights on nightside, nothin’.’

Franklin was sprawled back in his seat, unlit cigar hanging from his lip, eyes unfocused... light years away. Zak lit another cheroot and waited, sipping his drink... he had taken a liking to Zaqueussoian evil juice.

‘I put Ouroboros into a geostat orbit, and we talked it through over a meal... should we risk a surface landing, do some exploring, should we just gal-jump on out... we decided to sleep on it, and take a look at Khotan the next day. On the way in-system, the instruments had detected an atmosphere, which made it an unusual moon... more like a small planet, in fact. It was near a third the size of Kaxgar, with a fair bit of cloud cover, but what surface we could see when we went into orbit was just plains and mountains, with a few rivers. Again, no lights on nightside, no sign of habitation... nothin’ at all. We’d done several orbits when we got a nasty surprise... the shipcomp went to conred... the scan was clear, nothin’ on the screens, but something had locked-on to us.’

‘Ah, not an empty system then... a cloaked ship, by the sound of it.’

‘Yeah, but this was some advanced cloak... you’d normally get a hint, but there wasn’t a flicker on scan or screen, zilch. Q’ja Fal thought the shipcomp was fritzed, but me... well, you’re a combateer, Zak... you get a feelin’, way back in the lizard brain, call it instinct, intuition, whatever you like, it’s real... I knew we’d been tagged.’

‘It’s saved me a few times, that instinct... all the best pilots have it, in some way... if you ain’t got it, you don’t last. One cat back in the squadron, she had it for missiles... in close-quarters dogfights, she’d feel a missile launch a split second before the shipcomp called it. Enough extra time to twitch the stick and evade, was what she said.’

‘Oh, it counts at close-quarters alright, and that’s when combat becomes an art... a beautiful, deadly art. You wantin’ another juice Zak, before I cork the bottle?’

‘Yeah... one more will about do it, I reckon... that’s fearsome liquor.’

Franklin poured two more drinks, then stashed the bottle away in a locker, and relit his cigar.

‘I didn’t cloak to break the lock-on, wanted to keep that up my sleeve, so I brought Ouroboros to a dead stop, went silent and killed the runnin’ lights. We quickly suited-up, then I flipped the ship... I knew that bandit was on my six, it’s where I would’ve been. We sat there quite a while... Q’ja Fal was really wired, eyes slitted, ears flattened, growling softly deep in her throat... hunters don’t take to being hunted, I can vouch for that myself. So I sent a message... one brief burst from the port, aft and starboard lasers in turn.’

‘Clear enough... ‘I’m heavily armed, I know where you are, I didn’t fire on you’... cool.’

‘It worked... after a couple of minutes, the comm chimed and a female voice asked us to ident. I waited ‘til she repeated, then replied, introducin’ ourselves as the survey ship Ouroboros, out of Zabeso system... then invited her over for a glass of wine. Much to my surprise, she accepted, her ship uncloaked close on our bow, and five minutes later she jetted over and cycled through the lock. She was human and strikingly beautiful... had amazing violet eyes. Q’ja Fal was a bit of a shock to her, a fierce green feline in space armour, but the cats have that knack of being able to charm anyone, if they really wish to, and Q’ja Fal was so plainly delighted to see her.’

‘What class of ship was it?’

‘One I’d not seen... fighter interceptor by its looks, with twin lasers. Its pilot, Jani Kahzin was her name, she was right relaxed and confident... that’s when I knew there was another one out there, locked-on to us. They weren’t takin’ any chances, that’s for sure. Advanced stealth, some sort of tight-beam comms, mean-lookin’ ships, an apparently empty system... these people had me puzzled. Q’ja Fal kept asking questions, but got no real answers from Jani... just polite evasion. Said we’d have to wait on seeing her superiors, which was being arranged.’

‘Sounds like they were hiding from something... expecting some threat, that’s clear.’

‘Yeah, that was my take on it... I was starting to wonder what we’d stumbled into.’

Franklin drained his glass, re-filled the coffee maker and set it going, then called up a file on his compad.

‘That’s a pic of Jani and her Skorpion fighter... taken later that day.’

Zak looked at the pic... a very attractive, dark-haired woman in space armour, helmet under her arm, smiling broadly in front of a sleek, deadly-looking spaceship. The old fighter pilot in Zak stirred... it was a very tasty ship.

‘I wouldn’t mind takin’ that out for a spin... the lady too.’

As he poured the coffee, Franklin smiled... he’d had the same thoughts himself, at the time... and he’d done both.

‘We’d near finished the bottle of wine, when Jani took comms via her earpiece... we were politely invited to follow her to their base and meet some poobah for a chat. Within five minutes she was back on her ship and we boosted out-system, heading for the belt, where she led us to one of the larger asteroids. They’d mined it out to create the base and it was quite a place, very high tech. The base commandant, Ferenz Arkan, didn’t ask many questions of us... he seemed to know all about the eight, the politics, the sci-tech... everything. Q’ja Fal badly wanted to know their history, though, and Ferenz was kind enough to oblige with a short lecture.’

Franklin called up another file on the compad and handed it to Zak.

‘That’s part of Q’ja Fal’s written up notes... have a read through... she got it nicely ordered, all professor-like.’

Zak lit a cheroot, and started reading.

‘The people of this system, the Kaxgari, are the descendants of an ancient Terran tribe, from a region known as Asia, called the Anak-Altai... a reference to the Altai mountain range that was their home. They claim to have an oral history going back nearly to the last great ice-age on Terra, and their recorded history pre-dates any other peoples on Terra by a couple of millennia. Originally, they were nomadic and their homeland was the vast green plain of Aral and the marshy basin called Tarim, but over the millennia following the ice-age, this slowly became a desert and they were gradually forced to retreat to a few oasis settlements, then eventually to migrate north to the caves and pastures of the Altai mountains, a refuge of early hominids from before the ice-age. Their

forebears had probably taken shelter in the same caves. When the tribe migrated northwards, they abandoned the oasis settlements in what had become the Takla Makan desert, Kaxgar and Khotan among them, all soon occupied by other tribes, and destined to become major towns on the so-called silk road. They were skilled metalworkers and the Altai range was very rich in copper, gold and many rare and heavy elements. This brought them much trade, and allies, and the tribe quietly prospered.

As civilisations and empires came and went on Terra, the Anak-Altai remained in their mountain dwellings, mostly unknown. Those who did know of them treated them with great respect, probably due to their skills with metals, and their ancient wisdom. Their shamans travelled far and wide, spreading their knowledge of science and medicine, and in later centuries they were often associated with the Sufis, a quasi-mystical sect whose adherents spread throughout the then known world. Terran historians and anthropologists seem to have overlooked them completely, which suited the tribe, I suspect. They saw themselves as guardians of an ancient knowledge, and the Altai mountains as a place of riches entrusted to them by the gods, though they have no religion as such... an interesting contradiction. As Terra went through it's many wars, it's industrial revolutions, it's space age and all that followed, the abundance of rare minerals buried under the Altai range became immensely valuable, and here the wisdom of the tribal elders showed itself. It was clear to them that Terra was going downhill fast, and that a fresh start was needed. Rather than lease the mineral rights of their sacred mountains, and get gradually edged out, as happened to most tribes in that position, they sold the entire tribal range to a transnat for an astronomical sum. This was quietly invested in one of the first generation ships, the TGS Event Horizon, and the entire tribe, over twenty thousand of them, took to interstellar space.

Twenty-three standard years into a voyage expected to last many centuries, the TGS Event Horizon fell into a natural wormhole... nineteen days later it, and it's completely bewildered crew, were spat out in this system. An extraordinary event in the history of an extraordinary people, but they took full advantage of their fate, and colonised a planet that seemed well suited for them... oceans, vast green plains, and high mountain ranges. All the resources they needed were in the ship's holds and cryo-banks, so they set about the task in a patient, carefully organised way, and within a few generations the planet had become home to many nomadic groups, all living in the ancient ways. No permanent dwellings, no villages, towns or cities, only their traditional yurts and livestock, roaming the rich, fertile grasslands. However, they didn't neglect the sci-tech side of things, quite the reverse, in fact. The Event Horizon was parked in geostat orbit and became their centre of science and technology, a high grade research establishment and university, system ships were built and crewed for survey purposes, the unusually large asteroid belt was mined for minerals, thereby allowing the planet to remain unspoilt, a system-wide comsat network was set up and the whole colony enjoyed a very high standard of living, even if it was mostly in tents. Their admirably egalitarian system of self-government has not changed in millennia, and dissent is virtually unknown, as is crime. The tribe's elders earn their places through the respect of their peers. All in all, a thoroughly impressive society, quite unusual for humanoids.

All was well for many generations, the colony flourished and expanded, the moon Khotan was settled, and habitats were constructed in the asteroid belt. The Anak-Altai began to think of themselves as Kaxgari. Then the system suffered an incursion by a Thargoid fleet, and everything changed. They were not set up militarily and took heavy losses, the Event Horizon was badly damaged, and if there had been any surface targets, they would surely have been destroyed. A very harsh lesson was learned, the Kaxgari Space Force was established, and all citizens became reservists. All space habitats and bases were hidden, usually underground, the Event Horizon was stripped of everything usable, and the hulk was dropped into the sun. New sci-tech and academic facilities were established on Khotan, also underground. The whole system went silent, stealthed. The next time a Thargoid fleet emerged, the Kaxgari were ready and managed to wipe it out, and the next, and the next. It became a regular occurrence and the KSF improved fast, as did the ships being built. Kaxgari cosmologists, conducting long-term research into the wormhole that had brought them to this system, soon realised that it's appearance always preceeded the Thargoid incursions. The wormhole is cyclic, occurring every twenty-seven local years, and often spits out a ship of some sort. Ouroboros was the first ship to arrive under it's own power, although it is clear

that the Kaxgari, having gal-drive and hyperspace tech, regularly visit other systems in the eight, returning by the same method that we employed to reach Kaxgar.'

'That's a fascinating history... and they've been forced to become expert bug fighters along the way. They could probably teach the navy a few things, and a squadron or two of those stealth fighters would be well cool.'

'They'd prefer to remain isolated... they're not impressed by GalCop... but if the navy offered them assistance against the next incursion, they'd take it. They have two carriers, launchin' twenty fighters each, quite a strike force, and I reckon one of their frigates could give a navy cruiser serious troubles... but they lack numbers. Mind you, it's been a few years since I last went back there, and their tech has likely progressed some.'

'So you've left and been back... how long did you stay there, that first time?'

'Near on nine years... twenty-one years, local. We kinda went native... long story cut short, Q'ja Fal fell in love with the research library on Khotan, and I fell in love with Jani. When she'd finished her tour in the KSF, we set up with her family on Kaxgar, roamin' the plains on horseback, livin' in yurts... very high tech yurts, mind you, all mod-cons. It's a really beautiful planet, completely unspoilt with a lovely warm climate, and the Kaxgari are amazing folk. We raised two daughters, and I could've happily spent my life there... but by the time the kids had grown and flown, the next incursion was due, and Jani rotated back into the KSF... I enlisted too. Got the chance to pilot one of those Skorpions... man, they're a bitch to ride, but what power... awesome ships. Anyhow, when the Thargoids arrived it was bad, very bad... far worse than any previous incursion. Good as they were, the KSF took heavy hits and were forced to fall back in-system. Ouroboros was assigned to help screen the carrier Canopus, and we took serious damage... first time I'd been in a major fleet action, and those bug warships were everywhere, spawnin' large swarms. I took on the warships, relying on the turret gunners on Canopus to take out the bots. Last I saw of Jani, her flight went to assist a crippled frigate being hammered by a swarm... the frigate blew, atomising the swarm... and Jani's flight. The KSF held the system, just... but the losses were horrific.'

The old man sat back in his chair, staring at the bulkhead, eyes vacant. As a navy fighter jock, Zak had taken part in many fleet actions... he'd seen frigates blow, had even seen a carrier blow once, taking eight fighters out with it, eight pilots he'd known well. Memories of fighting Thargoid fleets sent a cold shiver down his spine... but he'd enlist again, if it came down to it. The navy had been his way out of a bad life and he owed it, big time. Franklin stirred, came back from somewhere dark. He poured more coffee and relit his cigar.

'That cyclic wormhole, that often spat out a ship... what types of ship?'

'I was intrigued by that, too... their records are good and go way back, I had a look through them. All classes of ship, mostly types I knew from the eight... but a couple of very strange ships had come through, from where, I couldn't even begin to guess. Most of the ships that came through, especially the exotic ones, turned hostile when challenged, and ended up atomised. The Kaxgari Space Force don't fuck around, their rules of engagement are quite simple... comply or die, and those Skorpions they've got carry some seriously heavy-duty firepower. That day we first met Jani... she told me later that there were three other Skorpions locked-on to Ouroboros... one on our eight, one on our four, and one hangin' loose as control... they'd been tracking us since soon after we'd first emerged. That's some stealth tech they've got, and the tight-beam comms top it off. They're a formidable fightin' force, the KSF. Anyway, once the dust had settled, it became clear to me that I'd have to head on out... Kaxgar just wasn't the same without Jani, I missed her far too much. The kids had lives of their own, and plenty of Jani's kin for support, if needed... and Q'ja Fal needed to return home to Zabeso. In our second year there, the Kaxgari had one of their extra-system ships relay comms to Zabeso university from her, explainin' the situation, her intention to remain on Kaxgar doin' research, and requesting patience and discretion. They'd got an update every half year or so, but it was way past time for her to leave. So we said our many goodbyes, boosted away and hit the first of eight gal-jumps in quick succession, only stoppin' for a couple of tendays on Zaquesso. Kaxgari liquor is all well and good, but I really needed some evil juice, and a bit of good fishin'... Zaquesso's got both, in spades. We stayed a while in spacetown, mostly gettin' rat-assed in The Final Eight, a real spacer's joint, then I took Q'ja Fal off to the hills for a few days camping, taught her how to fly fish for samlon... man, you should've seen her when she caught her first one... ate it raw, straight off the hook... tore it apart with her bare

teeth, while it was still flappin' around. I love those felines... but sometimes they worry me, just a little.'

'How often do you go back to Kaxgar?'

'It was every couple of years, but it's gotten much harder to take out the bugs at midway. Fact is, I'm gettin' too old for it... I can still handle anything the spacelanes throw at me, but the bugs very nearly did for me on my last run. The next time will be my last... if I make it through, I'll stay on Kaxgar... end my days in a yurt.'

'The Kaxgari, when they're out and about in the eight... what ships do they use?'

'If you saw one, you'd think it was an Interceptor, and it would ident as one... they're smart, only fools pick on an Interceptor, and they've got that stealth tech as well. They like to remain unknown, except to a few people like me... and the government of Zabeso. That's Q'ja Fals's doing... the two systems have strong diplomatic ties now, all on the quiet, of course. They're working jointly on the concept of a star bridge... constructin' a way-station midway between Zabeso and Kaxgar, connectin' Kaxgar to the eight. A very ambitious project, that's for sure.'

'You say a few people like you... how many people have you told this tale to, Franklin?'

'Apart from a couple of friends in navsec and the navy, you're the first, Zak.'

'So why tell me... and why now?'

'As for why now, my race is near run... I can feel it in my bones. Why you... well, I got a little confession to make here. You see, I've been trackin' you since you pulled out of Lasoce station, way back in the Citadels.'

'No fuckin' way, I would've... dammit, you're that good?'

Franklin grinned wickedly, and gazed intently at the younger man, watched as he thought it through... he was smart, no doubt of that, he'd get it. Zak glared right back at him, grey eyes hard as stone... then he laughed.

'Well I'll be dipped in trumble shit... I've been recruited, suckered right in, ain't I? Oh, sweetly done, Franklin, sweetly done. Let me guess, you want me to be some sort of agent for the Kaxgari, right?'

'No, though that might be an option for the future... no, I want you to go to Kaxgar and join the KSF, become a fighter pilot again, maybe. Not that you ain't thinkin' of heading for Kaxgar anyway... am I right?'

'Remind me never to play poker with you... yeah, it's in my mind alright. That pic of your beautiful Jani and her Skorpeon... it was like a siren calling, to an old fighter jock like me. Okay, seems like I might be on my way to the Takla Makan, to Kaxgar... you got good reasons why I should go, right... why I should enlist in the KSF?'

Franklin relit his cigar, blew a near-perfect smoke ring and nodded, smiling serenely.

Mission

'Station control, this is Arcturus, bay eighteen... request launch sequence.'

'Copy that, Arcturus... minimal traffic, you'll be in the slot in fifteen. Good hunting, Commander.'

While his ship was being ported to the launch slot, Zak ran through the events of the previous night in his mind. If he had held any doubts about Franklin, or his motives for urging him to go to Kaxgar, they had been completely dispelled when he had learned that Commodore Jackson Sloane had recommended him, which was why Franklin had been tracking his ship, covertly checking him out. Throughout his two tours in the navy, Zak's squadron commander had been Captain Jackson Sloane, and Zak would have followed him all the way to hell and back. If old 'one-eyed Jack' had recommended him to Franklin, then he was going to Kaxgar, no question. As his Cobra barrelled out of the slot, an image of a beautiful young woman, smiling proudly in front of a mean-looking Skorpeon fighter, hovered in his mind... and a massive grin split his face. The old man had told his tale, had cast his fly, perfectly. Commander Zakari Lacon, ex-navy fighter pilot turned privateer, pulled a ninety, boosting hard, and initiated hyperspace, bound for Arzace, out on the rim... he had a contract to fulfill. 'Bread before circuses', as his mother had used to say. His laughter filled the bridge, as the starship Arcturus plunged into the wormhole.

It was a clear run in to Arzace station, no bandits, hardly any traffic. He docked and cleared the contract, making a handsome profit, refuelled, and launched straight on out, heading back to Lasoan... the first leg of the long run to the Takla Makan. On through Usceed, Esesbi, Levera and Vesozaxe to Recexela, where he had a fuel collector fitted, straight across the Redline Stars to Atzaxe, down the

Tomoka Run to Esbete, then over to Laribebi... Zak ran hard, stopping only for fuel and ordnance. Any pirates foolish enough to get in his way were disdainfully brushed aside... he was on a mission, and nothing was going to distract him, not even tumbling pods full of loot.

Laribebi system was very busy, as was the spacer bar on the station when Zak eventually got there. He weaved his way through the drinkers to the counter and bought a beer, took a few sips, then looked around the joint. At a table over in the corner, panama hat pulled low over his eyes, Franklin was sitting, smoking a cigar. Sat next to him, dressed in a dark grey shipsuit, was a slight, balding man with a handlebar moustache. He had a nasty scar running down the left side of his face, from temple to jaw, broken only by a black eye-patch. Zak was not entirely surprised to see the old man, but the presence of one-eyed Jack was a real shock for him. He hadn't seen his old commander for many years... the fact that he was here with Franklin meant that the waters were running deep, very deep. He made his way through the crowd and joined them. Franklin nodded at him and smiled, but said nothing. Commodore Jackson Sloane, of the navy's strategic command, fixed him with one piercing eye.

'Captain Lacon... it's very good to see you. You're looking well... life as a privateer obviously suits you.'

'It's good to see you too, sir, and a privateer's life does suit me... but it's kinda on hold, right now... your friend here has seen to that. The captain thing is a bit ominous, Commodore. It was lieutenant, last I heard. I ain't been sneakily re-enlisted have I, by any chance? Promoted two ranks in my absence, for some devious reason?'

Franklin laughed and one-eyed Jack grinned... it was a thoroughly evil grin, matching the piratical look of the eye-patch and scar. The only thing missing was a cutlass... though the Commodore did carry a pistol on his hip. 'Her Imperial Majesty's Space Navy couldn't possibly dispatch a lowly lieutenant to take up the new posting of naval attaché to the system of Kaxgar, now could we, Zakari? What would the Kaxgari think of that, eh? No, executive responsibility requires executive rank, as well as ability, and you now have both. Your promotion is back-dated, as is your active status, by the way, so the navy now owes you a whole pile of back-pay... Captain.'

Sitting across the table from the two fiendishly grinning veterans, the phrase 'hook, line and sinker' ran through Zak's mind. What had started out as a quiet, time-filling chat in a spacer bar had become an adventure, then turned into a mission... now he was back in the navy... and a captain, to boot. Executive responsibility, indeed! What the hell had he got himself into? Zak drained his glass, set it down on the table, and glared at Franklin.

'Run that trick with the barkeep and beers, old man! What with gettin' me re-enlisted, it's gotta be your shout.'

Laughing, Franklin waved three fingers in the direction of the barkeep, and three beers duly arrived, carried by the potman, a green furry rodent, who nodded to Franklin as if they were old friends... which indeed they were.

As Zak reached for his glass, a man lunged out of the surrounding crowd, aiming a gun at Franklin. The old man didn't move a muscle, but the Commodore reacted like lightning, drawing his pistol and putting a bullet in the assailant's head. As his body crashed to the floor, three men at the next table jumped up, drawing pistols, and rapidly formed a defensive screen in front of Franklin and the Commodore. Zak dived for cover, thinking that they just had to be marines... they all looked alike. Several shots rang out, and one of the marines fell to his knees as his pals returned fire, taking three attackers down. There was pandemonium in the room, drinkers scattering tables and chairs, seeking cover... more shots were exchanged, and a second marine fell as the Commodore picked off the last assassin. A deathly silence followed... no-one dared to move. Four marines in full combat armour rushed into the bar, closely followed by a medic. Franklin, still sat calmly in his chair, but now with a pistol in his hand, looked down at Zak laying prone on the floor... there was a bitter smile on his face.

'Better get yourself one of these, son... mighty useful thing to have, sometimes. Jackson... how bad is it?'

'One marine dead, two wounded, one badly... seven hostiles dead, one dying, by the looks of it. Not good, not good at all, but it could have been much worse... you thinking what I'm thinking, Franklin?'

'Yeah... they'll try again, and soon... time to boost, gentlemen. Can we leave your men to 'sort' the clean up?'

'You and Zak head for the bays... I'll detail two marines as escort... give me an hour, I'll meet you in orbit.'

As they left the bar with their escort, the Commodore was 'talking' to the dying hostile... none too gently.

An hour later, two Cobras and an Interceptor boosted away from station space, heading out-system for the belt. A rock hermit's asteroid was their destination, and once docked there, the three men gathered in the owner's office. The old yellow feline sitting behind the desk, immaculate in the spaceblack uniform of navsec, ordered coffee on his deskcom, smiling grimly at his guests as they sat. Franklin eased back in his chair, lit a cigar and pulled his panama hat low over his eyes... Zak was thinking hard, trying to put some pieces together... they didn't fit.

'Franklin my old friend, it is very good to see you... alive, luckily. It would seem that there has been a serious lapse in navy security and I do not take kindly to that, most especially when it occurs on my patch. The matter is being investigated as we speak, and when we find the traitor, I will deal with him personally. Ah good... coffee!'

The feline flashed a feral grin, showing vicious teeth, and flexed a hand, its fingers suddenly tipped with razor-sharp claws. As an aide served the coffees, Zak stared curiously at Franklin... the old privateer certainly had highly placed friends in the navy... and some very nasty enemies... 'who was he', Zak asked himself?

'Captain Lacon, it is highly probable that these so-called gentlemen have not yet given you a full briefing... I will remedy that shortly, so please bear with me. Jackson, did you get anything of use out of that dying assassin?'

'He didn't last long enough, Admiral... but we know who we're dealing with here... Eclipse! Franklin is high on their hit list... has been for decades, and we know they'll do anything they can to disrupt contacts with Kaxgar.'

'Fuck their hit list, Laq S'an old friend... I'm away to Kaxgar, soon as, and I ain't comin' back this time.'

'Horses and yurts again, Franklin... I can see the attraction. There are times when I yearn for the blue forests of Zamaes, where some of my people still live in the ancient ways, hunting their food on foot, with tooth and claw.'

'Well then, Zak... the plan has changed some, since I recruited you back on Lasoan station. The navy is deeply involved now... they're committed to helpin' the Kaxgari fight off the next Thargoid incursion, and they badly want the KSF brought into the fold, so to speak. The navy boffins are very interested in that cyclic wormhole, and the way it attracts the bugs... Laq S'an thinks another Thargoid invasion is highly likely, and Kaxgar might just be the trigger... or the cure. The navy wants a permanent, official presence there... and you're it, it seems.'

They were sitting in the mess on Eridanus, drinking evil juice. Laq S'an's briefing had lasted nearly an hour, the content surprising even Franklin, let alone Captain Zakari Lacon, newly appointed naval attaché to the Kaxgari.

'I'm still digesting all that... but there's something I need to know... who are Eclipse, and why do they hate you?'

'Long story, Zak... can it wait 'til we reach Kaxgar? I want to boost soon as, and head for Inbibe... and beyond.'

'Yeah, it can wait... long as we both actually make it to Kaxgar. You said it's gettin' pretty tough at midway.'

'Ah... well, I've dreamed-up a rather fiendish plan for that... with you on point, we share the wormhole and the misjump... and both arrive at midway together. Your tank'll be empty, but mine'll be full... with me on point, we share the tube to Kaxgar... no need for a fuel collector or an interstellar cruise... no need to take on the bugs.'

Zak stared at Franklin in utter amazement... it was a crazy idea, never before tried, as far as Zak knew, but if it worked, and there was no reason to think that it wouldn't, they'd be in and out of midway before the bugs could even lock-on. The more he thought about it, the more he liked it... he drained his glass.

'That's one helluva wild idea, old man... but I like it, I like it a lot. Okay, you got a deal... let's boost.'

Ten minutes later, the two Cobras launched from the asteroid, moving into close formation, line astern. Franklin opened the wormhole, and the starships Eridanus and Arcturus slipped into the tube... bound for Inbibe system.

The screen flared blue... and they were out. Zak was not expecting trouble, but was in full space armour, just in case. The klaxon blared as the shipcomp went to conred... it was trouble... big trouble. At least ten bandits, two of them Thargoid warships, were laying in wait for them... the comm chimed. 'Eridanus, heave to for boarding! Arcturus, you may continue on your way... we're only interested in Franklin.'

'No fuckin' way, coño! Zak... go for it... get the hell out of here!'

Zak was torn... the mission was paramount, he should leave... as he was about to hit the injectors, four beams of magenta laser fire erupted out of nowhere, and both bug warships disintegrated in massive explosions. Eridanus leapt forward, engaging two Mambas with missiles, and crippling a Sidewinder with one long burst from its fore laser. Quickly changing his mind, Zak threw Arcturus into the fray. The bandits, caught by surprise, scattered and a frantic firefight ensued. He atomised a Gecko with two long bursts, launched a hardhead at a Python that was closing in, then swooped around to engage a Moray which was hammering his aft shield... only to see it taken out by twin beams of magenta laser fire from a ship that wasn't there. It uncloaked close off his bow, as did another which had just killed an Asp, and for the first time Zak laid eyes on a Kaxgari Skorpion fighter, up close and in the flesh... it took his breath away. Within seconds it was over... Franklin picked off the last bandit, and nothing remained of the ambush but clouds of debris... the old man's voice came over the comm.

'Thank you, my Kaxgari friends... a timely intervention. How come you're hangin' round here?'

'A real pleasure, Commander Franklin... we run permanent patrols here now, and in Maisso system also.'

'Sound thinkin'... my friend aboard Arcturus, Captain Lacon of Her Imperial Majesty's Space Navy, is Kaxgar bound along with me. He's a veteran fighter pilot, and is to be the naval attaché to your system.'

'Salutations to you, Captain Lacon... any friend of Commander Franklin is a friend of ours. I'm Lieutenant Xan Tarim of the Kaxgari Space Force, and my compatriot aboard the other Skorpion is Lieutenant Tanji Arkan.'

'I'm right pleased to meet you both... and thank you from me as well.'

'You're very welcome... we enjoy splashing bugs. Commander Franklin, those other ships... they were Eclipse?'

'Indeed they were, Tarim... an unholy alliance. Lieutenant Arkan, are you related to my old friend Ferenz?'

'His great granddaughter, sir... he will be very pleased to see you again, as will many on Kaxgar. If you'd care to follow us, we have a base way out-system, and can offer you fuel and ordnance... and some green tea, perhaps.'

'Lead on, Lieutenant Arkan... green tea and ordnance... a beautiful combination.'

The two Cobras followed the KSF fighters to their base on a small, ice-covered planetoid way out towards the Kuiper belt. As they approached, two Skorpions passed them, heading in-system to take up the patrol. Easing Arcturus carefully into the dock, Zak marvelled at the construction... these people really did things well. If he hadn't known it was there, he would never have spotted it. When he cycled through the lock, he found Lieutenant Tarim awaiting him. He was about thirty, dark-haired and olive skinned, with coal-black eyes.

'Welcome Captain, to our humble home... please, come with me... Tanji should have the tea brewing by now.'

Zak followed him along a couple of corridors to the mess, where Franklin was already sitting, smoking a cigar. He was about to pass comment, when he caught sight of Tanji Arkan, pouring cups of fragrant tea from a pot. Tall and slim, in her twenties, with long raven hair and dark eyes, she was beautiful... for the first time in many years, Zak was lost for words. Franklin spotted the look on his face and chuckled... he knew that feeling well.

'Welcome, Captain Lacon... do you take sugar in your tea?'

'Err, yes... lots of it please, Lieutenant.'

In a daze, he joined Franklin at the table and sat, hardly taking his eyes from Tanji, who flashed him a wide smile as she brought the teas over. He fumbled his cheroots out and lit up... he felt like a teenager again.

'So... how is your great grandfather, Tanji ... last time I saw him, he was thinkin' of retiring?'

'He has retired, sir... he's roaming the plains of Kaxgar with our family group now, and enjoying it greatly. He's told us many tales about you, sir... especially about how you single-handedly saved Canopus from the bugs.'

'Enough of the sir... call me Franklin... that applies to you as well, Xan. That was a long time ago... I was in a red rage that day. The KSF were taking a slappin', and I'd just seen my woman atomised... I was mad as hell.'

'I've seen the logs from that engagement... they're part of the combat course at the academy. You splashed seven warships, with no support, apart from the few turret gunners left alive on Canopus.'

Zak glanced at the old man with deepened respect... seven warships... that really took some doing.

'It's a mark of the Cobra's durability... Ouroboros was a right mess, but it held together... just long enough.'

'My great grandfather showed me some pics of your ship, or what was left of it... it's amazing you survived.'

'Quality space armour helps, Tanji. Tell me, Xan... what do you know of Eclipse?'

'Very little sir... sorry, Franklin. In our briefings we were told we may encounter them, that they are a threat.'

Franklin glanced at Zak, saw the question on his face... he sighed and nodded.

'Okay... my friend Zakari here, he needs to know as well... time for a little lecture, I suppose.'

'Eclipse has its roots in the Thargoid war, long before my time. Started out as some sort of anti-war movement, but got taken over by a few well-funded extremists who wanted to co-operate with the bugs... to learn from them, so they said. They went militant when rumours began to circulate that the navy had used biological weapons to defeat the Thargoids... don't ask, Zak, that subject opens up a whole bucket of snakes. After the next incursion's been dealt with, and we're sittin' on a sunny hillside on Kaxgar, quaffin' wine, maybe I'll tell you what I know.'

Franklin paused to re-light his cigar and settled back in his seat, staring off into the distance.

'At first, they were dismissed as a bunch of crackpots, but they soon proved themselves to be a dangerous outfit, and the navy had to start takin' them seriously. They got some real heavy funding behind them... navsec thinks it may be from a major crime cartel, but they got nothin' solid. At some point, Eclipse made contact with the bugs and forged an alliance, of sorts. Well, they think it's an alliance... I suspect the bugs see it differently, are probably just usin' them to gather intel, and spread a little chaos 'round the eight. Anyway, over the decades they've been a small but naggin' thorn in the navy's side. They shun publicity, which is why very few people outside of navsec know of them. Fifty and some years ago they took over an isolated anarchy system, and the navy decided it was time to take them down... but they wanted it done on the quiet. You ever heard of the squadron, Zak?'

'Yeah... I've heard tell of them... a whisper here, a word there. Never was sure if they were for real, though.'

'We're for real, right enough... anyhow, navsec persuaded us it'd be 'beneficial' to take back the system, and wipe out a large chunk of Eclipse at the same time... we had no problem with that idea... we despise Eclipse.'

Franklin's use of the first person was not lost on Zak... nor on the two Kaxgari fighter pilots, both of them sitting spellbound, listening intently to the veteran combateer, a man who enjoyed near-legendary status in the KSF.

'Some background... way back, some bright spark in navsec came up with the idea of puttin' together a bunch of elite combateers, guys who'd all done covert missions for the navy... the naval reserve squadron, they called it. They were to be used for black ops... stuff the navy couldn't be seen to be involved in. It worked well for a while, but once those guys got together, they got to talkin'. They were free thinkin' people, and some jobs the navy gave them were too dirty... and there was dissent. The navy quickly disbanded them and thought no more of it. But the network was still there... we're talking the cream of elite combateers here, with intimate knowledge of the eight, and contacts everywhere... and they began to operate as a unit, when they thought it was needed. The naval reserve privateer squadron was born... loosely organised into flights of four, spread right across the eight. We take down criminal clans that go too far, clear systems plagued by too many pirates, that sort of thing. We act unilaterally, without regard for GalCop or local laws... 'enlightened vigilantes' or 'arrogant bastards'... I've heard us called both. Enlistment is by invitation, and only the very best get an invite, and are

carefully vetted first. We got contacts in navsec, GalCop, navy, industry, government, crime... you name it, we got connections to it.'

Franklin drained his cup, and set it down. Tanji wondered if her great grandfather knew all of this.

'And you've been one of the squadron... for how long?'

'Since a couple of years before we took on Eclipse, Zak. I'd fought in several actions with them, involving just one or two flights, but nothin' like that assault on Adien system. It was dirty and vicious... we went in with eight flights, and covert support from the navy, ordnance and such. We took the system but at great cost, and those of us that came through were feelin' mighty pissed off. The bugs had been in the system in force, and the station was infested... I nuked it with a small tactical the navy gave me... I nuked it, and watched it blow with a big smile on my face, not knowin' there were innocent men, women and children on that station, as well as bugs. Intel said they'd been evacuated dirtside... snafu. Eclipse have never forgotten, it's why I'm on their hit list, along with a few others who've been taken out over the years. I ain't forgotten either... it haunts me to this day.'

There was silence as Tanji refilled their cups with tea... but the question hung in the air... Xan asked it. 'How many?'

'Three hundred and some... navsec hushed it up... blamed it on the bugs. It near broke the squadron, and we don't do navy work now. We still co-operate on the vital stuff, as we are over Kaxgar... and we weed out any Eclipse cells we find with extreme prejudice... which brings me back to the bastards. We presume the bugs want Kaxgar system because of the wormhole. Navsec think Eclipse want in so they can take over the planet, but navsec don't know why. How they came to know about Kaxgar in the first place is a mystery... but almost as soon as Q'ja Fal found those old star charts, they were on to her. You guys know all about Q'ja Fal, I take it?'

Xan and Tanji both nodded. Franklin pushed his panama hat back on his head, and fixed his gaze on Xan.

'Okay, end of lecture... now, if I know anything about the KSF, there'll be a bottle of apple schnapps stashed somewhere 'round this place... that right, Xan? I need a drink or three... and Captain Lacon has never tried Kaxgari apple schnapps. After that, I'm wantin' to be away to midway... to Kaxgar.'

While Xan 'found' the bottle of schnapps, Tanji commed the other patrol and quietly exchanged a few words.

'I'll escort you to Kaxgar, sir... great grandfather would never forgive me if any harm came to you now.'

A couple of hours, and a bottle of schnapps later, two Cobras and a Skorpion launched from the base. Franklin's plan for midway had stunned the two Kaxgari pilots, but both had agreed that it was a brilliant idea. Now it was about to be put to the test... Zak opened the wormhole and Tanji, then Franklin followed him in. Tanji was facing two jumps, of thirty-four and forty-six hours, in the cramped Skorpion, but she was unfazed by the prospect. It worked perfectly... the forced mis-jump wrenched them out of the tube at midway, still in close line astern. There were six warships awaiting them, but before the bugs could lay a beam on any of them, Franklin had taken point and opened the wormhole to Kaxgar, and the three ships plunged into the relative safety of witchspace.

The screen flared blue and they were out. Aboard Arcturus, Zak got his first sight of Kaxgar... a long way in-system, two thin crescents marked the planet and it's moon, Khotan. Tanji's voice came over the comm.

'System control have directed us to proceed in-system, direct to Aksu station... I'll take point.'

'Copy that, Tanji... lead on. Zak... let's make it a nice tight arrowhead... impress the natives.'

'Copy that, Franklin... how're you doing, Lieutenant... that's a long time in a fighter... I know, I've been there.'

'After three days, Captain, I need a shower badly... and I'm sick of sandwiches and water... and my bum aches.'

Zak couldn't help but laugh, as the two Cobras formed up close behind the Skorpion, and the three ships cruised sunwards, Tanji keeping her speed down to the Cobras' max. Aksu station was unlike any station that Zak had ever seen... and it was hard to see, even up close. They docked on auto, as ordered by station control.

Kaxgar

Bathed in the golden glow of late afternoon sunlight, the lush green plains stretched unbroken into the distance. In all directions there was nothing to be seen but gently rolling grassland... no trees or bushes interrupted the endless vista. Far away on the western horizon, a range of mountain peaks reached up towards the slowly sinking sun, while off to the south, the first of the evening thunderstorms was brewing. The hot, dry winds of the afternoon had faded away, the air was still, and the cloudless azure sky above was mirrored in the smooth surface of a small lake. Right by the water's edge, his panama hat slanted down over his eyes, Franklin sat on a low stool, smoking a cigar, absently-mindedly watching the approaching storm, as he did every evening. In an hour or so, it would sweep overhead, bringing with it torrential rains, the lifeblood of the plains... it was the rhythm of life on this planet... hot sunny days, heavy evening rainfall, warm clear nights. Fifty metres away, two horses wandered untethered, grazing contentedly on the succulent grass surrounding his yurt. He was at peace with himself, and with Kaxgar, for the first time in many years, and was looking forward to spending his last years roaming the plains with his daughter's group... but he would stay camped here alone, for a few more tendays. Lost deep in thought, it took him a few seconds to notice that something had changed... he glanced at the horses... they had both stopped grazing and had their heads up, ears pricked forward, looking to the southeast. Following their gaze, he spotted a tiny dot low in the sky, heading his way and coming on fast... an aircar, a rare sight on Kaxgar. Sighing, he strolled over to the horses and whispered soothingly to them, patting one affectionately on the neck.

Circling clear of the horses, the aircar settled to the ground close by his yurt, and two people emerged... his granddaughter, Katya, and Zak. Franklin grinned broadly... it had been half a year since he'd seen Zak, but he hadn't seen Katya for over six years, as she had just begun her first tour in the KSF when he'd returned to Kaxgar two years ago. She looked so like her mother... and Jani... in her KSF shipsuit. She ran into his arms and hugged him fiercely for a few moments, before stepping back a pace... they looked long at each other, holding hands.

'Mother said to tell you that you're a naughty old man for turning your comset off... but I'm pleased that you did... gave me the chance to fly an aircar all the way out here... by Captain Lacon's orders, of course. Are you eating properly? We've brought goodies, and some of mother's apricot loaf... oh gramps, it's so good to see you.'

'You're the finest sight I've seen in years, Katya my dear... how'd you know where to find me?'

'Mother said you'd probably be here or hereabouts... said it was a special place for you... and grandma.'

'Yeah, this was a very special place for us. Now then, young lady.... you mentioned apricot loaf... hand it over.'

'It's in the 'car with the rest of the tucker... but I gotta go talk to the horses first... there's rain coming.' With that, she skipped away to the horses, producing small treats from her shipsuit pockets for both of them. Chuckling, Zak turned back to the 'car and hauled out a couple of bags of 'goodies'... and a bottle of liquor with a faded label. He handed the bottle to Franklin, who stared at the label in disbelief... a wicked grin split his face.

'Stone me, Zak... how the fuck did you get hold of this? It's a right old vintage, rare even on Zaquesso.'

'It arrived with the regular navy courier. Q'ja Fal had it sent, along with this... it's encrypted, your eyes only. I reckon it's gotta be important... you don't get to use a navy courier to deliver 'mail' and a bottle of liquor.'

Franklin took the proffered memchip somewhat reluctantly... he led Zak into the yurt, and slipped it into his compad. He was still reading when Katya came in... she sensed the tension and was about comment, but caught a look from Zak, and so said nothing, just set about making tea, and laying out the food. Outside, the sky had darkened, thunder was rumbling, and the first swollen drops of rain had started to fall.

Dinner was a subdued affair... the atmosphere was heavy from the storm outside, and Franklin was silent as he ate his food. He said nothing about the message from Q'ja Fal, and the expression on his face discouraged any questions. He finished the last piece of apricot loaf, brushed a crumb from his beard, then uncorked the evil juice, taking a slug straight from the bottle. Katya quickly fetched some glasses and a carafe of water, and the old man poured himself a generous measure, then passed the bottle to Zak, who poured a couple of much smaller measures, adding plenty of water. Katya took her first ever sip of Zaquessoian evil juice... and choked, tears filling her eyes. Zak couldn't help but laugh, and even Franklin chuckled... the tension was broken.

‘That, Katya, is one reason why they call it evil juice... don’t tell your mother you’ve been drinkin’ it, or I’ll catch a right bollockin’. She’s seen me on an evil juice bender too many times, and doesn’t approve of the stuff. Now, I’m gonna get thoroughly rat-assed... whereas you Katya, definitely will not... after that juice, you’ll switch to the beer I notice you’ve brought along, okay. Zak... where’s Tanji at this time... is she on patrol or something?’

‘She’s been testing a new Skorpion variant, out at Aral station, but at present she’s here on leave with her kin.’

‘Good... I need to go talk with Ferenz, and she’ll be with him... you’ll get some time with each other. Make the most of it... it might be your last chance for quite a while. Tomorrow, we’ll be headin’ over their way in the ‘car. Katya... I’ll need you to fold the camp, and take the horses and kit back to your mother’s group... can do?’

‘Yes, gramps... it’ll take days, but I’ll love every minute... it’s been years since I was out here with the horses.’

‘Good girl... Zak, you’d better read this... you were right, it’s important.’

With that, Franklin handed the compad to Zak and reached for the bottle again. Outside, the thunderstorm was easing away to the north, the rain had all but stopped and the sky would soon be clear... but only for a short while... the next storm cell was already moving in from the south. The old man began to regale Katya with tales and anecdotes from his time along the spacelanes, shocking her with some of the more ribald episodes, making her howl with laughter at others. Zak grabbed a bottle of beer, and listening with half an ear, he started reading.

‘Greetings, dear old friend... I hope all is well with you and that retirement suits you. Are your daughters and granddaughters well? Are you enjoying life with the horses again? I feel certain that you are, as I know how much you love Kaxgar. I too have been retired for some years now... but I still love research, and since I have had the spare time, I’ve been investigating two enigmas that have puzzled me for many years... you’ll know which I mean... how did those Eclipse bastards know about the charts that I’d found... and how did those old astronomers, the ones who created those charts, know that Kaxgar was inhabited by ‘furless bipedal aliens’? Zabeto had a mature, system-wide interplanetary capability at that time, well ahead of Terra and most other systems, but we had no interstellar capability... we had launched no generation ships, and even our deep space probes had barely left the heliosphere. Research into faster-than-light ships was on-going, but nothing more.

I tackled the less enigmatic question of Eclipse first, and using my connections (as you know, the president is a close friend), I enlisted the help of our government’s security agency. They trawled through a mountain of their old records, and eventually came up with an interesting fact. At the time that I found those charts, there was an exchange student studying in the university astronomy department... from Adien. I am sorry to throw that name at you, Samuel... I know how much it must pain you, but you see the obvious conclusion. Our security agency believes that he was an Eclipse agent, and passed word of those charts to Eclipse... who acted very swiftly, as I found out. They also believe that Eclipse must have been actively seeking any intel regarding a lost system in the Takla Makan. Apparently, there were exchange students from Adien in the university astronomy departments of all systems bordering the Takla Makan at about that time. The bastards knew it existed... they just didn’t know it’s name or location. One can only assume that their awareness of it came from the Thargoids. The bugs want Kaxgar system... they want to control that cyclic wormhole... I have some ideas about that, by the way, which I’ll come to later. Eclipse seem to want the planet itself for their own reasons... why? Talk to Ferenz, old friend... he may have some clue as to why Kaxgar is so important to Eclipse. The fact that they could deploy numerous agents, only a few years after they were taken down, worries me, as I’m sure it will you... Eclipse must still hold sway on Adien, even though Adien system is ostensibly controlled by GalCop. Remember, this was more than fifty years ago, and they have presumably grown in strength in that time. My government, with it’s strong ties to Kaxgar, is now ‘officially’ concerned about Adien and Eclipse, and the threat that they pose, both to our allies, the Kaxgari, and to the stability of the eight in general. Intel hints at increasing Thargoid activity in Adien system... you should perhaps talk to one of your friends in navsec... but take care, our security agency have reason to think that navy security is compromised, which is why I double encrypted this message, and had it delivered by courier. I had to exert some influence to obtain the use of a navy courier... it was not easy. You will know

who you can trust, I'm sure. I fear that the navy will have to intervene again at Adien.... directly this time, and the next incursion is due in Kaxgar system soon... the navy will need a presence there too, I think, to support the KSF. It seems that a peaceful retirement may be denied you, Samuel. I think that you will have no choice but to take up the sword again, to take on one final mission, perhaps... you must hunt down the power behind Eclipse and destroy it... utterly. It is the only way to emasculate that bunch of fanatics.

How about that, Samuel my friend... an old green feline academic throwing a mission at a veteran combateer such as yourself. However, should you require a co-pilot, a companion in arms, I am most definitely at your disposal... I may be old, but my teeth and claws are still sharp, my eyes keen... and I have an old score to settle with those bastards.

As to the other enigma... this one caused me many sleepless nights. No matter which angle I approached it from, it made no sense. I consulted several of the major thinkers at the university, I consulted anyone who would listen... all to no avail. I had pretty much given up on it, but a few tendays ago I attended a university function, you know the sort of thing... lavish food and drink, too much chatter... not really to my taste, but I was there, and I fell into conversation with a professor of logic. He listened politely to me, thought for a few seconds, then said simply 'reciprocal wormhole', and wandered off to the bar. To say I was astounded is a massive understatement... I was more astounded than that day when, as a young kitten, I first realised that the tail that I'd been chasing was my own. Needless to say, I was in the cosmology department first thing the next morning, where I received some promising answers. Given the known existence of a naturally occurring cyclic wormhole, the cosmologists had no problem postulating a reciprocal wormhole... the idea rather excited them, in fact, and they very soon lost me in theory and calculations. After much discussion, the consensus was that if it existed, it would manifest itself at a point in Kaxgar system diametrically opposite to the known wormhole, and would almost certainly link back to whichever system the known wormhole was linking from. Samuel, you must ensure that the Kaxgari cosmologists try and locate it when the cyclic wormhole appears next year, even though all the attention will be rightly focused on the incursion that will follow... if it exists, then it could be a major breakthrough. Now, you will see where I'm heading... that chart is dated to AE forty-eight (Kaxgari calendar), one year after a wormhole event in Kaxgar system. I became convinced that something must have come through from Kaxgar to Zabeso in AE forty-seven... it was the only possible answer. So now I knew what to look for, but not where to look for it, which took me off to our security agency again. Zabeso records are good, but we are talking half a millennium ago and I was not that hopeful. However, I now have some serious credibility with the agency, and they took up the task of finding and sorting through five hundred year old paper files with great dedication... and it paid off. That year, a strange discovery was made out in Zabeso's asteroid belt... a small alien ship, with a dying occupant. It was found by a survey ship, with a crew who were smart enough to try and find out whatever they could from this dying alien, no easy thing without any common language... it came down to rough drawings, but they were surprisingly informative. Judging by the records, the affair caused quite a stir on Zabeso at the time, and this would appear to be the reason for that notation on the chart. What happened next though, is strange... the discovery was publicly discredited as a hoax and the records suppressed, hidden away... buried. Why, we will never know... but I have my solution. You must ask Ferenz to go way back in the Kaxgari archive on Khotan and search for any spacer listed as missing in that year. I feel sure that there will be one... I know it.

You will see the possibilities, Samuel... we know where one end of that wormhole will be next year, but not where it is linking from. The Kaxgari records of the ships that have come through, specifically the exotic varieties, including the Event Horizon itself from close to Sol system, show that the wormhole often originates beyond the eight... indeed may even originate in interstellar space, at times. This is intriguing... we know that the origin is not fixed to any one location. Is it possible that the Kaxgar terminus is not fixed either, that the wormhole is a permanent phenomenon, that just happens to sweep through Kaxgar system every twenty-seven years? Probably not... far more likely that it is anchored to Kaxgar, for some reason. If a ship did come through to Zabeso from Kaxgar in AE forty-seven, a distance of nine point two lights, as opposed to the much greater distance to Sol, we can surmise that the wormhole's length is extremely variable. There is much for the cosmologists to investigate. If a reciprocal wormhole were to be found, would there be

a ship crew brave enough to dive into it, not knowing their destination... probably somewhere in the eight, but it could be anywhere. If I know anything about the Kaxgari, the answer will be yes. Again, I think that you must talk to Ferenz... retired or not, he can get things done, as you well know. There are so many questions concerning that cyclic wormhole, mainly what anchors it to Kaxgar... this may be one of the reasons why the Thargoids want to take Kaxgar system. Whatever the cost in men and ships, that simply cannot be allowed to happen.

That is all from me, Samuel... hopefully, if you do return to the eight, you will decide that you do require a co-pilot... a friend to join you in your hunt for the power behind Eclipse. I take passage to Laribebi soon, as I judge that will be your first port of call in Colesque. I will await you there... my kit bag is packed and ready.

So his first name was Samuel... Zak laid the compad aside, and sat thinking for a while, sipping his beer and listening to Franklin and Katya. The old man was two thirds of the way through the bottle of evil juice, and appeared thoroughly drunk, though Zak had a feeling that if an emergency of some sort arose, he would be stone cold sober and capable within seconds. Some men had that knack... but it usually required a lifetime of heavy drinking to acquire it.

'Food for thought in there, eh, Zak old son! Katya... you may as well read it too, but not a single word to anyone... except your mother... understood? Good... now, I'm gonna take the rest of this noble bottle of liquor, and go to talk to the horses. Be ready to haul ass at first light, Zak... there's interestin' times a comin', methinks.'

He stood, a little unsteadily, donned his panama hat, picked up the bottle and lurched outside into the warm, sweet rain. While Katya was reading Q'ja Fal's message, Zak sipped his beer and smoked a cheroot, still thinking.

'He'll be away again, won't he? Back to the eight to take on this Eclipse outfit... mother will not be pleased.'

'Yeah, he will, Katya... he has little choice. But he won't be alone... your grandfather has friends who will help.'

They breakfasted on dried fruit and oatcakes, washed down with green tea. Outside, in the cool, pre-dawn air, tendrils of mist hovered low over the lake, while overhead, the cloudless night sky glittered with countless stars. Hanging above the horizon in the east, the thin crescent of Khotan heralded the rapidly approaching sunrise. The two horses were already grazing, perhaps somehow aware that they would be moving-on this day.

'Interesting, and intriguing... as usual, Q'ja Fal is probably correct. I'll have the archives on Khotan trawled for any mention of a lost spacer in that year. As for a reciprocal wormhole, the cosmology boffins will love it... if it exists, they'll be crawling all over it. However, her reports of a resurgent Eclipse are disquieting, to say the least. Why they might want Kaxgar I cannot guess, but I will talk with the elders. What are your plans now, Samuel?'

'Ain't really got any choice, Ferenz... back to the eight, hunt those bastards down... should've done it years ago.'

'I feel for you, old friend... you deserve some peace. And you, Captain Lacon... are you away to the eight also?'

'Yeah... my two year tour is up, I've finished my assessment, and must report to strategic command in person.'

'Do you know what your navy intends? It's less than half a year until the next incursion... will they send ships?'

'I can assure you that they will... confidentially, a heavy battle group is already forming up in Laribebi system.'

Relief showed on Ferenz Arkan's lined, weatherbeaten face... a heavy battle group was far more than he had dared to hope for. Zak had spent the last two years looking into every facet of the Kaxgai Space Force, laying the groundwork for combined ops with the navy. He had been immensely impressed with the KSF... as a fighting force, they were highly motivated and superbly organised and equipped... what they lacked in numbers, they tried to make up for with sheer power... but their lack of numbers was the problem. Put them alongside a navy heavy battle group, however, and he would back them to take on anything... even a major Thargoid invasion fleet.

The three men were sat on cushions in the Arkan family yurt, attended by Tanji... who, whilst serving green tea and falafels, was trying to memorise every word that was said... the two old men were legends in the KSF. Outside, the midday sun beat down on the encampment, and the hot, arid wind tugged relentlessly at tent flaps.

‘Will you return to Kaxgar with your navy... to fight against the coming incursion, Captain?’

‘I’ll return to Kaxgar, yes Ferenz... but not to take part in any actions... I’ll be... elsewhere.’

The old man’s black eyes, full of ancient wisdom, bored into Zak’s... Ferenz nodded slowly.

‘I see... most admirable. Tanji... no doubt you are aware of the Captain’s intention, and wish to accompany him. You have my blessing... I’ll fix it with the KSF... consider yourself detached on special ops, as of now.’

Zak and Tanji exchanged a lingering look... they understood each other, oh so well.

‘Samuel... your mission is vital and will be highly perilous... I cannot permit you to undertake it alone. Now that I know the navy will be here in force, we can afford to have two Skorpions assigned to you as escort... the new variant that Tanji has been testing has long range capability, with much better pilot facilities. Sharing your wormholes, and using your Cobra as a relax base in normal space, they can stay with you indefinitely... we’ll have tight-beam comms fitted in Eridanus. Woe betide any pirates that try to jump you now, eh.’

‘Ha... that’ll sure make life in the eight easier... very generous, Ferenz, thank you.’

‘A suggestion, great grandfather... you should assign Xan Tarim and Nila Tsien as the escort pilots. I’ve run many active patrols with them... they’re very good, and will be up for it. They’re on Aral station at the moment.’

‘Thank you, Tanji... I’ll talk with KSF command, and have them sent in-system in two of the new Skorpions.’

‘Something else that’ll help, Franklin... the techs have added a gizmo to the navcomp... you can now program in the co-ords for a gal-jump, to any system in the next chart... and the gal-drive will take you there.’

‘What the fuck... Zak, are you tellin’ me that I can gal-jump from here to, let’s say Lezaer... then to Gebiisso, Zaquezzo next, of course. Then maybe Radiesar, Zarausxe... Tevebebi next, then Aona... and then drop straight into Laribebi system... with no hyperspace jumps in between... just emerge, dock, fit a new gal-drive, launch and gal-jump onwards? Oh man... that’s really cool... I wonder what the record is for a full eight?’

Rodents

The starship Eridanus, closely followed by two Skorpions, emerged into Laribebi system. It had been a whirlwind circuit of the eight, only stopping at Zaquezzo for a tenday, which had been a new experience for the two Kaxgari pilots, Xan Tarim and Nila Tsien... their first visit to another planet. They had run many patrols away from Kaxgar system, but had never been dirtside, and Franklin had taken great pleasure in showing them the sights of Zaquezzo, introducing them to the dubious delights of evil juice, and to the joys of fly-fishing for samlon. Back on Aksu station, Eridanus had undergone a serious refit... the cargo space had been reduced, making room for extra crew space, the port and starboard lasers had been removed, and their cooling systems routed to the fore and aft lasers, increasing their efficiency, the navcomp had been upgraded and tight-beam comms had been installed, alongside the standard comms. A large starship like Eridanus could not be stealthed in the same way as the much smaller Skorpions, but the Kaxgari techs had improved its cloaking ability... it was now a very serious fighting machine, and with two Skorpions as escort, a match for anything in the eight. The pirates that had tried their luck so far had learnt a bitter lesson, and Franklin was remorseless, leaving no survivors to tell the tale.

The three ships set course out-system for the belt, and soon docked at the navsec asteroid base, where Franklin made his way to Laq S’an’s office. The old yellow feline greeted him warmly, the two veterans clasping hands.

‘So, old friend... what brings you back to the eight, and with an escort, as well... they are Skorpions, I presume?’

‘Indeed they are, Laq S’an... are we secure?’

The feline’s eyes narrowed, holding Franklin’s gaze... he nodded slowly.

‘Perhaps you would care to show me one of these Skorpions... and I’d quite like to meet their pilots.’

‘Sure thing... let’s go.’

They walked briskly to the ship bays, not exchanging a word, and boarded Eridanus, where Franklin introduced the admiral to the two Kaxgari pilots, who were sitting in the mess, Nila brewing green tea. Unlike most Kaxgari, she was short and petite, with blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. Franklin handed Laq S’an his compad.

‘Read that for starters, old friend... it’s from Q’ja Fal.’

Laq S’an read through Q’ja Fal’s missive twice, then looked at Franklin, a menacing glitter in his eyes.

‘We have had no reports of any problems in Adien system... I do not like the implications of that at all. Zabeso security, being felines, are very good at what they do... I had better investigate this personally. Leave it with me, I’ll get to the bottom of it, rest assured. If Eclipse are in the ascendant at Adien again, then the navy will most certainly go in. As regards her theories about that wormhole... most intriguing. I presume that you are going to collect her from the station and go after this ‘éminence grise’... you have my best wishes, but that is all I can offer. Navsec have not been able to get a single lead on this in many years... however, that may be explicable if, as Zabeso security believe, we are seriously compromised. I fear that ‘interesting’ times are upon us again, Franklin.’

‘Too right, Laq S’an... and yeah, I’m off to the station next to pick up Q’ja Fal. Then I gotta seek out some people who might just be able to help. Should’ve done this years ago, but... well, you know.’

Laq S’an smiled bleakly... he knew exactly what Franklin meant... he had been there in Adien system himself, all those years ago, had carried the same burden as Franklin ever since... it was part of their bond.

On the long cruise in-system to Laribebi station, a group of four pirates jumped Eridanus and its escorts. The two Skorpions peeled off and splashed all four with minimal fuss... there were no escape capsules. If there had been, they would have been fragged as well... Franklin was in ruthless mode, and his rules of engagement were crafted to leave as few witnesses of the Skorpions as possible. In spacer bars, talk of exotic ships tended to attract chancers looking for glory, but more than that, he wanted no word of his activities to reach any Eclipse agents. He had commed Q’ja Fal, asking her to meet him in the station bar, and he went straight there after docking.

‘You’re looking well, Samuel... it’s good to see you.’

‘As are you, Q’ja... some grey fur amongst the green, but it kinda suits you.’

The feline and the human embraced warmly, drawing some odd looks from a couple of redneck spacers. As they sat down, Franklin waved three fingers at the barkeep, who rapidly dispatched the potman to their table with three foaming beers. The green furry rodent set them on the table, smiled at Q’ja Fal and nodded to Franklin.

‘Join us for a while, Skank... have yourself a beer.’

‘Right kind of yer, mister Franklin... sure will.’

The rodent sat and picked up a beer, draining half of it in one long swallow. He leaned back and sighed happily.

‘Don’t ever try to drink Skank under the table, Q’ja... he’s like a storm drain when it comes to beer.’

‘Don’t listen to ’im, ma’am... I gets thirsty in dis job, is all. What yer needing, mister Franklin?’

‘I need a contact, Skank... who’s runnin’ the ratline in this sector?’

The rodent’s bright red eyes narrowed... he finished the rest of his beer, hardly taking his gaze from Franklin.

‘Dat be risky intel yer wantin’... yer gotta ’ave plenty good reason.’

Franklin drained his glass and met Skank’s doubtful eyes... he leaned forward and spoke in a low voice.

‘I believe that Eclipse are in control on Adien, again. I need to know who is behind them... so I can kill them.’

The rodent stiffened, his eyes blazing... Adien was his home planet, and he loathed Eclipse, hated them for what they had done to his world, to his people, half a century ago. The empty glass in his clenched fist shattered loudly, bringing a sudden silence to the bar. Heads turned, then looked quickly away... not their business. Skank ignored the looks, holding Franklin’s gaze. At last he nodded slowly... producing a pen from his tunic, he flipped over a coaster and wrote three words on it, followed by several lines of indecipherable script. He handed it to Franklin.

‘Yer intro... ta for beer, mister Franklin... gotta go, stuff t’ do. Take care of ’im, ma’am.’

With that, the rodent stood and left them, heading straight out the exit. As the gentle hubbub of the bar slowly returned, Franklin glanced down at the coaster... Vezadi... Rock... Kurtz. Q'ja Fal looked inquisitively at him.

'Later Q'ja, later... shall we boost, number one?'

'Yes indeed, Commander... let's be about it.'

The feline shouldered her kitbag, and they left the bar arm in arm, chuckling at some of the stares they got.

'Station control, this is Eridanus, bay twelve... request launch sequence.'

'Copy that, Eridanus... standard queue, you'll be in the slot in twenty. Good hunting, Commander.'

As they were ported to the launch slot, Franklin gave Q'ja Fal some background on the ratline.

'Like most species, the rodents have their own unofficial network across the eight... for sharin' intel, things like that. The ratline is deeply covert, but along with the felines', is one of the best, and is very well connected to the criminal element, which is why I will try to enlist their help. My friend Skank is one of their stringers... he's been around the eight a few times. I'm hoping his intro will suffice to get me into their good books, so to speak.'

Then they were barrelling out into space... Franklin pulled a ninety, and boosting hard, set course for farside. As they came around the limb of the planet, two small ships slipped in behind Eridanus, closing fast. Ignoring Q'ja Fal's concerned glance at the scan, he opened the wormhole, and all three ships slipped into the tube, bound for Anusa. Man and cat headed for the mess... it was time for food and a long chat... they had a lot to catch up on.

Emerging into Anusa system, Franklin set course for the sun to skim a tankful. He showed Q'ja Fal how to use the tight-beam comms, so she could talk to the two Kaxgari pilots. The smile that had lit her face when he had explained about the Skorpions was joyous... she dearly loved the Kaxgari people. When he had a full tank, all three ships headed out into deep space, where they hove-to, allowing Xan and Nila to come aboard Eridanus for some relax, and a council of war. Franklin wanted a back up plan for all possible eventualities... it would be off to Xeabiti next, skim a full tank there, then the short jump to Vezadi, a very dangerous anarchy system, where they would need to find a certain asteroid, home to a rodent named Kurtz.

Vezadi... they got jumped by four bandits as they emerged. Franklin pulled Eridanus about, hit the injectors, and ploughed straight through an Asp, blowing it apart at the last second with a long burst of the fore laser. Xan took out a Gecko with two shots from his Skorpion's twin lasers, and Nila made very short work of a Krait... that left a Python, and Franklin was ruthless... he launched a hardhead and followed it in on injectors, hammering the Python with his fore laser. Within thirty seconds, nothing remained of the ambush but a few tumbling pods and rapidly dissipating debris clouds. Franklin turned and grinned at Q'ja Fal, then opened the tight-beam comms.

'Xan, Nila... go stealthed. Hang well back on my four and eight... do not assist unless asked. I'm lookin' to come across a lone bandit... a sentry ship, and I may have to joust some to get what I need... clear?'

'Copy that, Franklin... crystal clear... implemented.'

The two traces on the scan faded away... Franklin set course sunward, cruising on main engines only, holding them at fifty per cent. In a system like Vezadi, only a fool or a veteran combateer would do that, and Eridanus did not have the looks of a ship commanded by a fool. As they slowly approached the sun, a large cluster of asteroids appeared off the port bow, but Franklin didn't change course or speed. As the cluster passed astern, a Mamba slipped out of the shadow of one of the trailing rocks, locked-on and dropped onto Franklin's six, matching his speed. Franklin watched it on the aft screen for a few minutes, then safed his missiles and gradually brought Eridanus to a dead stop... the Mamba followed suit, so Franklin pulled a leisurely one-eighty, leaving the two ships hanging motionless in space, bow to bow, only five hundred metres between them... the comm chimed.

'Eridanus... an iron-ass like you ain't here for the trade... what business you got in this system?'

'The name's Franklin... I need to talk to the ratline boss... he's based on a 'roid in this system... Kurtz, by name.'

There was a short silence... then the Mamba's pilot was back on, his voice harsh.

'You'd better have an intro, Franklin... a good one. I'm Sagger... follow me, and stay very close.'

'Copy that, Sagger... and I do have an intro... lead on.'

Sagger's Mamba pulled a ninety, and boosting hard, headed out-system. Franklin deftly slipped Eridanus into the classic wingman position and followed, matching speed effortlessly. It took a while, but at last another asteroid cluster hove into view. The Mamba slowed and began to weave in and out of the many smaller rocks, often taking what seemed like the long way round. Franklin stayed right close, and opened the tight-beam comms.

'Xan, Nila... minefield... remain outside the cluster and wait.'

Two one-word acknowledgements came back... Tanji had been right, they were very good, and Franklin trusted them completely. At last they came to one of the smaller asteroids, and both ships hove-to.

'No dock here, Franklin... you gotta jet over to the lock. I'll see you airside... Sagger out!'

Franklin was already in space armour, as was Q'ja Fal. Before donning his helmet, he turned to the feline.

'Q'ja... stay on the bridge, be ready to boost. This should be cool, but if you've not heard from me after sixty minutes, you got two choices... you can try feelin' your way out through that minefield... or you can hit this rock with all the firepower that Eridanus has to offer, includin' the ship itself. Relay the current situation to Nila and Xan via tight-beam... they'll know what to do, if and when. Got any problems with any of that, number one?'

'Thank you for offering me such an intriguing choice, Commander... no, no problems at all, and you know damn well which option I'd choose, you old rogue. Be careful out there, Samuel.'

They smiled at each other, the way only very old friends do... Franklin fitted his helmet and headed for the lock.

Sagger was waiting airside, already unsuited... a tall, yellow rodent in a blue shipsuit, he had black, intelligent eyes, and a pistol in his hand. He watched carefully as Franklin removed his space armour, pulled his panama hat out of a pouch and donned it. Then he inclined his head, inviting Franklin to precede him along the corridor to a door at its end. At a word from Sagger, the door slid aside, and Franklin entered a comfortably furnished office, where the owner of the asteroid was sat back in a recliner behind an antique desk, smoking a hookah pipe. The smell of sweet tobacco, mingled with the aroma of mint tea, filled the room. Kurtz was an old yellow rodent, with plenty of grey streaking his fur, and piercing red eyes, which were now fixed on Franklin's face. After some seconds he gestured for the human to sit... Franklin did, placing Skank's coaster on the desktop. He lit up a cigar, while Kurtz read Skank's intro... then those sharp old eyes were on him again, evaluating him... trying to read him. Franklin returned the look evenly, and blew a smoke ring... the rodent grinned, showing sharp white teeth.

'I've known that rascal Skank for many years, Commander... he holds you in very high esteem, and Sagger is impressed with your style... I tend to trust Sagger's insights, he has been with me for a long time. That said, it is rare for the ratline to offer any aid or intel to humans, or to any other species, for that matter. However, given your credentials, I am prepared to listen, and then perhaps to offer assistance... will you take tea, Commander?'

'Call me Franklin... and yeah, tea would be good. A fine 'roid you got here, Kurtz... very comfortable.' 'In my line of work... how shall I put it... 'opportunities' arise every so often, and I take full advantage of them. I like comforts and expensive possessions, and one must enjoy them whenever possible... this old universe is a dangerous place and all things are transitory, even the universe itself. Ah good, tea is served... thank you, Rayn.'

A young yellow rodent had quietly entered the office, bearing two small bowls. Franklin took his, sipping the fragrant mint tea with relish, as did Kurtz ... for a minute or so they sat and watched each other in silence.

'So then, Franklin... I am sure this is no trivial matter... in what way may I assist you, if I was to be so inclined?'

Franklin decided that he would trust the rodent... it was there in those steely red eyes... dangerous honour.

'As we speak, I have little doubt that Skank is enroute to his home sector... he needs to be close by Adien system, maybe even on Adien itself. I've received disturbing reports that Adien is once again under the control of Eclipse, who I'm sure you're aware of. Being a rodent, you'll know the tale well... I was there fifty odd years ago, I was part of the squadron that re-took the system. If the latest intel is correct, as I'm sure it is, it's likely the navy will go in... but it's not only Adien that's at risk from

Eclipse this time, which is why I'm here. There is a serious player behind Eclipse, someone in charge of it, financin' it, which I reckon must be a major clan or crime syndicate. I need to hunt it down, to take it out, and castrate those Eclipse bastards once and for all, before their so-called alliance with the damn Thargoids puts the entire eight in peril. Two questions for you, Kurtz... will you assist my search for this éminence grise... and are you aware of a planet called Kaxgar... and its unique circumstances?' The rodent gazed impassively at him, but Franklin felt sure that his mention of Kaxgar had struck home... there was a long silence. Finally, Kurtz stirred... he hit a deskcom button and requested Sagger and Rayn to attend.

'Yes... we are aware of Kaxgar, but only vaguely... some hints from intel are all we have. A full rundown would be very welcome... and yes Franklin, the ratline will offer you assistance... we have contacts that can help.'

Within a minute, Sagger and Rayn entered, Rayn bearing more tea. Franklin lit another cigar, eased back in his chair, and gave the three rodents a very thorough briefing on Kaxgar, and the ongoing situation connected with it, even revealing the presence of his escort, loitering just beyond the cluster. When he had finished, Sagger laughed.

'You know, I had a strange feelin' a ship was tailin' us... I just didn't give it credit. They gotta be well stealthy.'

'You'd love one, Sagger... small and fast, twin super-cooled lasers, advanced stealth... and very tasty. Absolutely lethal... which reminds me, I must talk to my exec on Eridanus... she has certain 'orders'.'

'I can imagine what they are... no need to talk to her, Franklin... return to your ship. Sagger will guide you out of the cluster, and I will follow. Setting up the contact that you require will take some time, and I would talk more with you about Adien, and Kaxgar... I am intrigued by its history. We have a very comfortable base on a small planetoid, with full docking facilities... perhaps you, your exec and escorts would appreciate some downtime?'

'Surely would, Kurtz... as it happens, my exec is a history buff, and an expert on Kaxgar... you'll get on well.'

They stayed a tenday on the planetoid, where Kurtz proved to be a congenial host. At their first sight of the Skorpions, Sagger and Rayn had become charm personified, aching to get their hands on one. Nila and Xan had thoroughly enjoyed the attention, even allowing the two rodents a brief time in the cockpits... just to get the feel of it. Kurtz had indeed got on well with Q'ja Fal, and had spent many hours talking with her and Franklin about Kaxgar, and with Franklin about Adien... and the squadron. Then comms had arrived... the contact was set up.

Eridanus cruised away from the planetoid, the two Skorpions close behind. Q'ja Fal had the con... she was a fairly competent pilot, but unlicensed. Beside her, Franklin was tinkering with a new piece of kit that Kurtz had given him... an antique hookah pipe. He soon had it going, and was puffing away merrily as Q'ja opened the wormhole... the three ships plunged into the tube, bound for Errius, then on through Laatre, Ceerdiza and Titequ systems, not stopping, just skimming then jumping. At last they emerged into Soteve system, where Franklin made contact with the ratline on the station... the person he had come to see was awaiting him dirtside. He took the next shuttle down to the planet, and was soon ensconced in a seedy bar in spacetown, drinking house ale and talking to a fierce black feline by the name of Caya L'an. A native of Soteve, Caya had been a senior operative of Soteve's security agency, but had been unjustly fired over a sex scandal... she was now an embittered drunk, but her mind was still sharp. She had quizzed Franklin expertly about his life and times, and Franklin had responded openly, wanting to build a rapport... he liked her. She had been very interested in the squadron and its history.

'So... I like you, Franklin... shame you ain't feline. What do you wanna know about those Eclipse bastards?'

'There's a major player behind them, for sure... and we intend to take them down... I need a name.'

'That's very dangerous talk, cher Franklin... by rights, I should leave now... but what the hell. Some years ago, I was runnin' an agent, a feline... he came to a nasty end, but he passed me a whole load of intel on Eclipse, before they got to him. Mostly hearsay... rumours and the like, but there was the odd gem buried amongst the dross. It took ages siftin' through it all, but I thought I'd found some useful stuff... that's when the axe fell, and I was out. Framed, of course... set up like a bowlin' pin, but in my trade there ain't no second chances. If I ever find the coño who ruined my career, I'll tear his fuckin'

throat out. Anyways, that poor agent I was runnin'... he operated out of Soinuste, down in Ramaan's Keep. That's your major player, cher Franklin... Ramaan Inter Bank!

Franklin said nothing... he sat thinking, smoking a cigar and watching Caya, as she finished her drink. He waved two fingers at the barkeep, and two ales swiftly arrived... Caya was straight into hers. Ramaan Inter Bank... it seemed almost unthinkable, it was one of the most powerful banking houses in Colesque. Yet it made an odd kind of sense, and he was inclined to trust Caya... even drunk, she had a certain something about her.

'That's a name to conjure with, Caya... if you're right, and I think you are, an intervention by the squadron ain't gonna work. No, we need another way... now we've got a suspect, I'll have their data cores discreetly penetrated, then we'll see. A question for you, pussycat... how long does it take a fuckin' tosspot like you to dry out?'

Feline eyes flashed... growling deep in her throat, she half stood, baring her teeth... she nearly went for him, but a look in his eyes stopped her. She sat back down, glowering at him... then quaffed her ale and grinned nastily.

'Forty-eight hours, you fuckin' colonial son-of-a-bitch... if I'm motivated enough.'

Franklin laughed, relit his cigar and inhaled deeply... he downed his ale in two long swallows, then met her gaze.

'Be on the station in forty hours, Caya... with your kitbag. I could use your expertise and contacts... deal?'

She glared angrily at him for long seconds, uncertain... but she liked this guy... at last, she smiled and nodded.

'Okay, cher Franklin... you got a deal. I'll be there... stone cold sober and hurtin' some... but I'll be there.'

They shook hands on it, man and cat, and Franklin felt the faint caress of the still unsheathed, razor-sharp claws that tipped Caya's fingers. She was still angry... 'tossport' she could take, but 'pussycat' was way beyond the pale.

Beedbeon

Surrounded by the inexplicable, n-dimensional nothingness of witchspace, the starship Eridanus hurtled through the wormhole between Zavezaon and Beedbeon... over four light years traversed in just nineteen hours, but there was no sense of motion. Sitting alone on the bridge, Franklin puffed away on his hookah pipe, idly contemplating the mysteries of the universe in general, and the peculiarities of wormholes in particular. Q'ja and Caya were sitting in the mess, drinking coffee and chatting. Caya had been really pleased to find another feline on the ship when she had boarded Eridanus, back on Soteve station, and the two cats had spent hours in conversation since, soon becoming firm friends. She had taken an instant liking to Franklin, for some reason that she couldn't quite fathom, and the presence of Q'ja Fal only raised him further in her estimation. Both felines had sharp, analytical minds, and they seemed to stimulate each other, which caused Franklin to feel rather pleased with himself.

Less than half an hour to emergence... they had raced non-stop across Fiddler's Green, through Titequ, Tigebere, Zaxerice, Onatzala and Zavezaon systems, which had been tough going for Xan and Nila in their Skorpions, but Franklin was planning on some serious relax on Beedbeon. He had left a long, eyes-only message with the ratline stringer on Soteve station, for forwarding to Kurtz, informing him of the latest intel regarding Eclipse... and Ramaan Inter Bank. The 'shaking of the tree' was about to begin, and Franklin felt confident that the combined resources of the ratline and the squadron would yield results... there wasn't a firewall in the eight that could keep out a 'ferret' created by one of the squadron's expert hackers, and he knew just the lady for the job.

Beedbeon is a beautiful world... nine tenths of its surface is covered by vast oceans, broken only by three small continents and millions of tiny islands, and sailing ships of every size, from small yachts to ocean-going clippers, are commonplace. As soon as they emerged, Franklin commed his contact on the planet, inquiring as to the whereabouts of a certain ship, and by the time they hit station space, he had his reply. Once docked, he wasted no time in taking the next shuttle dirtside, along with both felines and the two Kaxgari pilots. Outside the spaceport, an aircar awaited them, and they were soon soaring high over the deep blue ocean, heading southwest. Their destination was Serifos, the only island of any

size in an archipelago of islets and atolls that stretched for hundreds of kilometres, and after a two hour flight, the aircar landed on a pad by the old harbour.

A two-masted sailing vessel was moored at the quay... a lovingly built replica of a classic ketch from old Terra, she was a fine looking ship, her dark blue hull contrasting with the turquoise water of the harbour. Franklin led them across the gangway to the deck, where they were met by the ship's master, a short wiry man, with red hair and opaline eyes, set in a bearded, weather-beaten face... which was grinning hugely.

'Franklin, you old pirate... long time no see. Welcome aboard Thalassa, ladies and gents.'

'Call me a pirate... that's rich, that is... comin' from a rogue like you. People... let me introduce Captain Charles Lancaster, master mariner and scourge of the spacelanes. Chas old son... these villainous-looking felines are my partners-in-crime, Q'ja Fal and Caya L'an... and these two ace pilots are my escorts, Nila Tsien and Xan Tarim.'

Handshakes were exchanged all round... Chas looked askance at Franklin, one red eyebrow raised.

'Escorts... that's a new one. Either you're getting too old, or you're up to some mischief... the latter, I expect.'

'Both, as it happens... I got dragged out of retirement by a ghost from the past. How is the fair Madelon?'

'Maddy is fine... she's in the galley, cooking dinner for you people... come below, there's beer in the chiller.'

Dinner was a tasty meal of pan-fried fish, caught that morning, served on couscous and fresh spinach, with fiery harissa sauce. Caya had only one beer, which she sipped slowly, then when everyone else moved on to wine, she switched to water, not ashamed to admit that she had a problem with alcohol. Franklin smiled inwardly... he had been right about her. With dinner over and a large pot of coffee on the table, the talk turned serious.

Post-prandial cigar in hand, Franklin gave Chas and Maddy a full rundown of the situation... the likelihood of trouble with Eclipse at Adien, the probable involvement of Ramaan Inter Bank... and Kaxgar. Maddy, short and wiry like her husband, with long grey hair and blue eyes, asked a lot of searching questions, then turned to Franklin's need to penetrate the bank's data cores, and more importantly the Ramaan family's personal records. While Chas was the hot-shot pilot, the elite combatteer, Maddy was the brains of the duo, the intel and special ops expert, the computer hacker. Given a keypad and a hyperlink, she could by-pass almost any firewall... her ferrets were unstoppable and undetectable, and she was up for this... like the rest of the squadron, she loathed Eclipse.

'Okay... not easy, but it's do-able... I'll need to access the hyperlink network from within Ramaan system itself. I reckon we set up in Soinuste, jump through to Ramaan, loiter by the witchpoint while I hack the network, then jump straight back to Soinuste and wait, while the ferret does its work. Jump back in after a few days to collect the payload, hopefully. Caya, you say you've run ops in Ramaan's Keep... give me some background on Ramaan.'

'Sure... Ramaan is listed as a democracy, but it's a democracy in name only. The planet is controlled by the Ramaan family, the founders of Ramaan Inter Bank... they've held power there since it was first colonised, they bankrolled the whole thing. Most of the population have, how shall I put it... 'obligations' to this family, in one way or another... in the decennial elections they always vote, according to the stats that is, for the same puppet government. It's a very subtle oligarchy, cleverly hidden behind a veil of affluent democracy... high standard of living and apparent wealth for most of its citizens... 'bread and circuses', it rarely fails. The influence of the family extends beyond Ramaan system, they control five out of the other six systems that comprise the cluster... hence the name Ramaan's Keep. The one hold-out is Soinuste, which is inhabited by fierce bony felines... as you know, we felines value our independence highly. I've got good contacts there... anything you need, I can get it.'

'Good... you come with us, Caya... you got any contacts inside the government? You see, if Ramaan Inter Bank falls, there may be chaos in the cluster, and Soinuste could play a vital part... step into the breach, so to speak.'

'Yeah... I got a contact in the government there... and you're right, the whole damn cluster could blow. There's a lot of resentment in the other five systems... it's been festering for decades, especially in Onmate... felines again.'

'I may be of some help... I speak for Zabeso's president... I can offer Soinuste's government high-level support.'

'Good, another card to play... you come with us as well then, Q'ja. You and Caya can lay some groundwork on Soinuste, while we go do the dirty work in Ramaan system. Chas honey, it's time Kerberos took to space again.'

'Kerberos is being serviced as we speak, my dear... when I heard Franklin was inbound, I commed the station. Seemed likely we'd be hitting the tubes again... the old pirate always brings trouble... ain't that right, Franklin?'

'That's why you love me, Chas... I bring excitement to the life of a poor mariner... are we off sailin' tomorrow?'

'You bet... we slip our moorings at first light... a tenday or two on the high seas will set us up for the job.'

'A couple of tendays will do nicely... I should have word from Kurtz by then, and maybe some news from Laq S'an. Xan, when we leave here, you'll go with Kerberos... Nila, you'll stay with me... we'll rejoin in Soinuste system. Wait 'til you lay eyes on a Skorpion fighter, Chas... very tasty ships.'

Twenty-two days later, four ships launched from Beedbeon station... the Lancasters' old Fer-de-Lance Kerberos, closely followed by Xan's Skorpion, slipped into the tube, bound for Ramaan's Keep and Soinuste. Franklin, now alone on Eridanus, was bound for Vezadi with Nila in tow... and a conference with Kurtz. Two tendays sailing aboard Thalassa had been relaxing and invigorating, and had done them all good, especially Caya... for her it had been a new experience. From now on though, there would be little or no time for relaxation.

Ramaan's Keep

Isxees... the only gateway to Ramaan's Keep. Though an anarchy system, Caya was certain that the Ramaan family were covertly in control, and paid 'pirates' to keep it a very dangerous place. In effect, it was a buffer zone, a good method of isolating the Keep. Eridanus, with Nila's Skorpion, emerged and both ships immediately set course for the sun, Nila running stealthed. Two minutes later, Kurtz's Interceptor, trailed by Sagger and Rayn in their Mambas, emerged and slid smoothly into formation with Eridanus... the ratline had decided to take an active part in Franklin's planned take-down of the Ramaan family. How Kurtz had acquired a Viper Interceptor was a mystery to Franklin, but he was not all that surprised... the old rodent was a very resourceful operator.

Approaching the sun, six bandits appeared at extreme range, closing fast. Franklin toggled the tight-beam comms.

'Hit 'em hard, Nila... no survivors!'

'Copy that, Franklin... consider it done!'

Sagger and Rayn also peeled off to attack... Nila had already splashed two by the time they engaged, and the firefight was brief and merciless. The three escorts formed up again as Kurtz and Franklin prepared to skim.

'Hey Nila... that's some firepower you got there... wanna swap ships?'

'No fuckin' way, Sagger... besides, it takes a real pilot to handle a Skorpion.'

Aboard Eridanus, Franklin grinned, as the banter continued on the open comms. It was the first time that the rodents had really seen what a Skorpion could do in combat... it would not be the last. From Isxees to Anve, then to Onmate and on through to Soinuste, they ran hard, skimming in every system. Ramaan's Keep was crawling with bandits and it became one long firefight, but the five ships were a deadly combination, and their pilots were utterly ruthless... they left no escape capsules, no witnesses to tell the tale.

At last they emerged in Soinuste system... in tight formation, four ships headed in-system at best speed, low on ordnance but mostly undamaged... Nila stood off, stealthed as usual. Within minutes, six Vipers swooped in and took up outrider positions... Q'ja Fal had obviously been talking to local government and GalCop.

'Eridanus... Viper lead, Captain Daen at your service. Welcome to Soinuste, Commander Franklin... for your information, this system is now locked-down tight... no outbound traffic, by order of the president, endorsed by GalCop. Officially, it's a plague outbreak... unofficially, the whole system is at condition red, as a precaution.'

'Thanks, Captain... very sensible. You see four ships... a fifth is about to uncloak... do not be alarmed... Nila?'

A low whistle and a 'what the fuck' came over the comms from two Viper pilots as Nila's Skorpion uncloaked.

'Er... Commander Franklin... what class of ship is that? It's... well, it's beautiful.'

'That, Captain Daen, is my ace-in-the-hole... it's a Skorpion fighter, and it's as deadly as it is beautiful.'

'That I can believe... I'd kinda like to take that out for a spin.'

'Join the queue, Captain... I reckon Lieutenant Tsien would be happy tell you all about it over a beer... or three.'

'That's for sure, Captain Daen... last one to the station pays the tab.'

With that, Nila lit her boosters and leapt ahead... 'oh, what the hell' came over the comms, as Daen lit the injectors and sent his Viper in pursuit, to catcalls from the other pilots. Franklin grinned... a good start.

He sat alone on the bridge of Eridanus, thinking through the several briefings that he had attended in the last three days. By station time, it was close on four in the morning, and even the ship bays were quiet. Everyone else was dirtside, guests of the Soinuste government... Q'ja Fal had worked her magic with the locals, who had been quick to grasp the possibilities inherent in the situation. If the hegemony of Ramaan were to be broken, the felines of Soinuste would play an important role in maintaining some order in the cluster, and perhaps bringing democracy to a couple of other systems. A flashing light on the panel indicated that someone had boarded his ship. Shaking his head thoughtfully, he headed for the mess... he was not overly surprised to find Caya sitting there, grinning.

'Xan and Nila are aboard their ships, as are Rayn and Sagger, ready to boost... did you really think you could leave without us, cher Franklin. Xan and Nila were already packed, about to catch the next shuttle, when I went to them, and Kurtz had told Rayn and Sagger to be prepared. Even Captain Daen twigged, and has cleared us to exit the system... he's found himself an Interceptor, by the way, and insists on accompanying us to Ramaan.'

'Ah... you've been busy, Caya... my thanks. You agree, then... this is the best way to do it.'

'No doubt of it... a clinical strike, cut out the rotten core, and hopefully leave Ramaan Inter Bank intact. What were you intending, on your own... to just call him out... to take him down in single combat? Crazy human!'

'Exactly that... a foolish idea, but... well, never mind, you've pre-empted me, my friend. Does Q'ja know?'

'Of course... but she considers her diplomatic skills to be most useful here, in Soinuste... I agree with her.'

The data extracted by Madelon's ferrets had come as a surprise... there was no direct link between the bank and Eclipse. But when Madelon had eventually penetrated the Ramaan family's personal data cores, which had been encrypted in an entirely novel way, it became clear that one of the bank's vice-presidents was deeply involved. It had taken a serious amount of computer power, provided by Soinuste's security agency, to break the encryption. With this intel in mind, the local politicians and GalCop had opted for a softly-softly approach... Franklin did not like this idea, but had kept his own counsel. He had been preparing to slip away on his own, but Caya had discerned his intent, and had taken steps to ensure that he had support... the best support available.

Xavier Suleiman Ramaan, known as Suli to his friends, was a brute of a man, in demeanour as well as physique. Over two metres tall, weighing more than a hundred and twenty kilos, most of it solid muscle, he nevertheless had an intellect that bordered on the genius. Pale blue, emotionless eyes peered out from beneath a high forehead, topped by a mane of thick black hair. Operating mainly from the office of his large, well-fitted asteroid, he was the paymaster and prime mover behind a terrorist organisation, an organisation whose reins had been selectively handed down through his family for generations, spanning three hundred standard years. Three hundred years of careful, clandestine planning... and the plan was close to fruition. A deeply-held grudge, going back over half a millennium, was close to being laid to rest. The Anak-Altai, or Kaxgari, as they now called themselves, would soon cease to exist, and their planet would belong to him. His leadership of Eclipse was cleverly hidden behind his role as vice-president of a respectable and powerful banking house, which controlled an entire star cluster, and he thought himself to be untouchable. When his aide entered the office, and

informed him that four ships were inbound, he almost dismissed the fact out of hand... but something in the man's eyes caught his attention.

'What ships are these, Aldan? If they are hostile, launch some Kraits... four ships should present no problem.'

'All Kraits, and the Asps, are on standby, sir... it's something in their manner that disturbs me. An Interceptor, two Mambas and a Cobra, all iron-assed... approaching at minimal speed in close formation... I sense trouble.'

'An Interceptor, you say... that is odd, I must admit. Hmm... are our Thargoid friends in-system?'

'Three warships are on patrol, sir... shall I summon them?'

'Yes Aldan, do that... your instincts have rarely let us down. Launch eight Kraits... and prep my ship.'

Aboard Eridanus, Franklin smiled grimly as the Kraits appeared. Xan spoke over the tight-beam comms.

'Detecting unusual comms from the 'roid, Franklin... it's bug-talk... they got warships in-system.'

'Ah... that kinda adds a bit of spice, don't it. You and Nila take the warships, Xan... we'll take the Kraits.'

He glanced at Caya... she grinned fiercely, green eyes glittering... he grinned back, then toggled the comms.

'Asteroid base, this is squadron lead... Ramaan, your Kraits are gonna be space dust shortly, as will the warships. Simply put, you got two options... stay holed-up in there and rot... or come out and take it like a man.'

'What the fuck... the squadron! Whoever the hell you are, you don't fuckin' dictate 'options' to me... coño!'

'The name's Franklin... pajero!'

'You! I'm gonna enjoy takin' you down, Franklin... it's fuckin' long overdue.'

As the eight Kraits manoeuvred to engage, three traces appeared on the scan, closing fast... Franklin grinned.

'Eridanus... Kerberos and company, at your service, you old pirate. The Kraits are history... Tally-ho!' The Lancasters' Fer-de-Lance, with two Cobras in close support, swooped in on the Kraits' flank. Sagger and Rayn also engaged... Franklin waited close by the asteroid, motionless, as a furious furball erupted around Eridanus. When two Asps launched, he splashed one with a hardhead at point-blank range, and crippled the second with a long laser burst. Some way off, another firefight had begun... green and magenta lasers lashed out across space, as Nila and Xan engaged three Thargoid warships. Captain Daen lit his injectors and went to assist.

With surprise on their side, Nila and Xan had taken out one warship each, but Nila had taken heavy damage, and the warships had spawned a large swarm. She was getting badly hammered, but Xan had his hands full with the third warship, and could not assist. As the shields went down, the Skorpion's main systems failed, and she hit the eject, just as the ship came apart... the capsule was immediately surrounded by bots, and Xan feared the worst. Seemingly out of nowhere, a ship hurtled in on injectors... in a fantastic display of piloting, the Interceptor rammed its way through the swarm, scooped Nila's capsule, then came about and began splashing bots. His spirits raised, Xan ignored the heavy hits he was taking, and threw his Skorpion furiously at the warship, trading blows, hammering it relentlessly at point blank range... at last it blew, and the remaining bots died with it.

'Way to go, Captain Daen... thanks for saving Nila. Come to Kaxgar one day... we'll get you a Skorpion to fly.'

'My pleasure... you got a deal there, Xan. C'mon, hotshot... let's go bag a Krait or two.'

Three more Asps launched and joined the firefight, but it was too late... the battle was lost, and their pilots knew it. Two disengaged immediately, and headed out-system fast... when Sagger fragged the third Asp, the last two Krait pilots realised the game was up, and hastily ejected. Amid the confusion, a Fer-de-Lance slipped out of the slot, and headed in-system on injectors. Sending Eridanus in hot pursuit, Franklin toggled the comms.

'Xan... did Nila eject?'

'Sure did, Franklin... Captain Daen scooped her capsule.'

'Fuckin' right on... stay with me, Xan. You also, Captain Daen... you're gonna have to do some fast talkin' with the local GalCop Vipers, I reckon... and the station. Sagger, what about Rayn... I saw his Mamba blow?'

'He went out with his ship, Franklin... he always said he'd never eject... not his style.'

'Mierda... ain't livin' long like that. If possible, secure that 'roid, Sagger... it'll certainly be rigged to blow, so take care. Madelon will be wantin' to examine the comps in there... if they're usin' bug code, it'll be very useful intel.'

'Copy that, Franklin... luckily, I have a knack with booby-traps and such... comes from setting a few myself.'

'Okay... just be careful. Kerberos, stay and assist Sagger, please.'

'Will do, Franklin... and you're right, Maddy's itching to get her hands on those comps.'

As Ramaan's Fer-de-Lance approached the station, six Vipers launched, heading straight for Eridanus... Ramaan 'owned' this system. Franklin had no wish to mess with GalCop's finest, but if they got in his way, he wouldn't hesitate to splash a few... killing Ramaan was his priority. Daen hit the GalCop comms channel, talking fast, and whatever he said, it worked... the Vipers held off, but Ramaan was allowed to dock. Franklin swooped in, lobbed a missile up the slot to clear the way, and docked at max speed, ignoring the outraged shouts of station control.

Both clad in space armour, Franklin and Caya cycled through the lock... and found Ramaan waiting for them, in his hand, a nasty-looking weapon resembling a rather bulky pistol. It was pointed at Franklin's head.

'Unique handgun this... had it custom made... fires armour-piercing bullets... allow me to demonstrate.'

Dropping his aim, he put a bullet through Franklin's left knee, armour and all. Franklin toppled to the floor, his knee ruined. Caya quickly knelt beside him, removing both their helmets... he was in great pain, but not a sound escaped his lips... he just glared contemptuously at Ramaan, who was smiling pleasantly.

'I'd like to stay and chat... shoot you to bits slowly... but, well you know how it is, old man. I've tried to have you taken out several times... looks like I've gotta do it myself... still, I'll enjoy it all the more, this way. Sweet of you to bring your pet along, though... it can comfort you as you die.'

Growling deep in her throat, Caya stood... Franklin grabbed her arm, wincing from the movement.

'No Caya... he wants you to jump him... don't be a fool.'

'Caya... Caya... I know that name... got it! Caya L'an, yes that's it, Soteveian agent and pisshead... didn't I get you fired? Yeah, I did... a sweet little set-up, that was... but times a pressin'... see you in hell, Franklin.'

Still smiling pleasantly, he took aim at Franklin's head, and slowly squeezed the trigger... snarling, Caya hurled herself at him. She took the bullet meant for Franklin in the chest, but her momentum carried her on to Ramaan, knocking him to the floor. Before he could recover, she fastened her fangs on his throat, and with a savage shake of her head, ripped it open. He lay there, twitching and gurgling, blood pooling rapidly on the floor around him. Franklin dragged himself over to Caya... her chest was a ragged, gaping hole... but her eyes were open.

'Ahh... that felt so... so good... but the coño's... done for me.'

'It's only a... only a flesh wound, pussycat... you'll be fine.'

'You're a... lyin' bastard, cher Franklin... but I like... you.'

She grinned at him, clutching his hand... then she shuddered, and her eyes closed.

When Daen and a station security team found them, a couple of minutes later, he was cradling the feline's body, tears rolling slowly down his face. His space armour had sealed itself around the mess that had been his knee, stopping the bleeding, but he was in deep shock. They had to prise Caya from his grasp, so they could carry him to the medbay. He was unconscious by the time they got him there... the medics went to work, watched by Daen.

Coda

Three spaceships hung motionless in the outer reaches of Kaxgar system. Two were small survey craft from the cosmology department on Khotan, loaded out with sensors and instruments, their crews all hoping that they had calculated the co-ordinates correctly. If the putative reciprocal wormhole did

manifest itself, they would analyse the hell out of it for as long as it lasted... maybe only thirty seconds, but they were hoping for much longer. The third was the starship Arcturus, which had undergone a massive re-fit on Aral station... advanced, super-cooled lasers fitted, fore and aft, enhanced stealth, luxury crew quarters, and the hold had been converted into a small hangar, housing a Skorpion fighter. Now, loaded to the gunwales with provisions and spare ordnance, the ship was ready for anything. On the bridge, Zakari Lacon gazed deep into the beautiful dark eyes of Tanji Arkan.

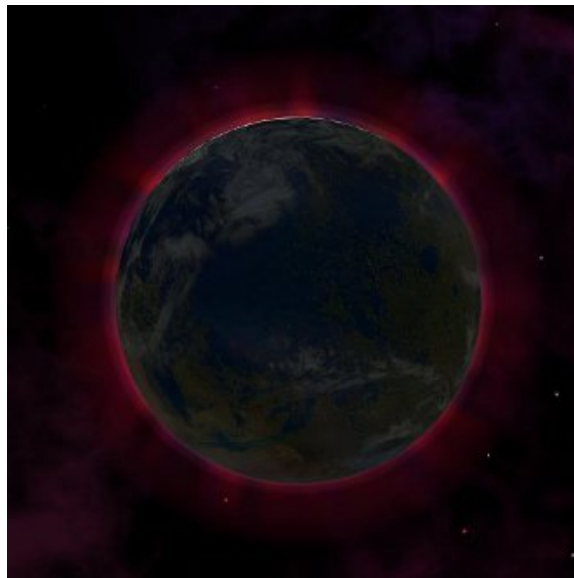
‘Are we really sure about this, babe? We could boost across the system... splash some Thargoids instead.’

‘Yes, my love, we are really sure... leave the bugs to the KSF and the navy. If... when that wormhole appears, hit the injectors and barrel-roll us in, wherever it leads... full speed ahead, and damn the torpedoes!’

On the screen, a tiny blue cloud appeared, way off the port bow... with a howl of delight, Zak lit the injectors.

Some days later...

Eridanus emerged into Kaxgar system, followed by Xan’s Skorpion and Daen’s Interceptor. Nila had the con, as Franklin was still not fully fit... his new carbanium knee worked fine, but his leg pained him unmercifully. It was immediately apparent that there had been a titanic battle in the system... debris clouds were scattered everywhere, and wrecked ships abounded, Kaxgari and navy... and Thargoid. System control directed them in-system, to Khotan orbit... Aral and Aksu stations were out of action, and the carrier Canopus, though badly damaged, was serving as a makeshift shipyard and shuttle base. After they’d docked, Franklin limped slowly from the ship bays to the shuttle dock, passing KSF personnel, many of them wounded, with pale, drawn faces... but with triumph in their eyes. They all stopped to welcome him back, to exchange a word or two... it made his heart swell. Arriving at the spaceport down on Kaxgar, he found his daughters Kristina and Sonja waiting for him... he was home.



Appendices

Timeline: Kaxgari Calendar AE (After Exodus)

(1 Kaxgari year = 1.1 Standard years = 0.4 Ship years)

- 000 The Terran Generation Ship Event Horizon leaves Sol system
- 020 TGS Event Horizon falls into wormhole... arrives in Kaxgar system

048 Q'ja Fal's star chart dated to this year
 081 Wormhole technology discovered... human diaspora begins... thousands of systems colonised
 096 Her Imperial Majesty's Space Navy established in Zaeredre system... slowly spreads throughout the eight
 102 Confederation of Feline Worlds established... co-operates with HIMSN... period of stability follows
 155 Erehwon, gateway system connecting the eight to the Orion arm, goes nova... contact with Sol is lost
 167 Galactic Co-operative of Worlds (GalCop) established by HIMSN and CFW
 228 Thargoid invasion... HIMSN and CFW merge into 'the navy'
 230 Thargoids forced back to their home system... sporadic incursions follow
 269 Naval Reserve Squadron formed by naval security
 278 Naval Reserve Privateer Squadron (the squadron) formed
 290 First Thargoid incursion into Kaxgar system
 424 Samuel Franklin born on Geusqubi
 434 Jani Kahzin born on Kaxgar
 445 Franklin joins the the squadron
 447 Action by the squadron in Adien system... major part of Eclipse taken down
 454 Q'ja Fal finds old star chart... is kidnapped
 458 Franklin rescues Q'ja Fal
 459 Franklin and Q'ja Fal arrive in Kaxgar system... encounter Jani
 461 Jani and Franklin have first child (Kristina)
 462 Second child (Sonja)
 469 Zakari Lacon born on Laorlaza
 478 Tanji Arkan born on Kaxgar
 479 Jani killed fighting Thargoid incursion
 480 Franklin leaves Kaxgar with Q'ja Fal... returns briefly every two or three years
 487 Katya, Franklin's granddaughter, born on Kaxgar
 503 Zakari Lacon encounters Franklin... journeys to Kaxgar with him
 505 Q'ja Fal's missive to Franklin arrives on Kaxgar... Franklin returns to the eight
 506 Large Thargoid invasion fleet hits Kaxgar... defeated by the KSF and the navy in titanic battle

Her Imperial Majesty's Space Navy... some background

When wormhole technology was discovered, the human race exploded outwards from the madness of ruined, massively overpopulated Terra (this had been the driving force behind the waves of generation ships). Rapidly colonising planet after planet, mankind spread throughout the Orion arm of the galaxy... in many cases, entire tribes or ethnic groups claimed whole planets, and imported their way of life and beliefs from Terra. One such planet was Zaeredre, a green and pleasant world in a backwater sector that was to become known as the 'eight', and here arrived the remnants of the British people (an ethnically mixed, but somewhat reserved and insular race), who established a constitutional monarchy, in memory of a once-glorious imperial past. The first monarch of their new world was Her Imperial Majesty Queen Elizabeth XIV, descendant of a long line of so-called aristocracy, and it was she, in her royal wisdom, who established a small space navy... there was no GalCop at this time, and much uncertainty. Neighbouring systems saw the benefits of this navy, and slowly, system by system, they all signed up for the security this offered them, and Her Imperial Majesty's Space Navy gradually expanded and spread throughout the eight. When the Confederation of Feline Worlds was established some years later, the two forces forged what was to become an enduring alliance between humans and felines.

After a period of stability, Erehwon, the gateway system that connected the eight to the rest of the Orion arm, went nova and all contact with Sol was lost... and the alliance came into it's own. Within fifteen standard years, they had established the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds, destined to become the main provider of system security, and the sole regulator of trade, throughout the eight, for centuries to come. The Thargoid invasion forced the human/feline alliance to merge into 'the navy'... the rest is history.

Galaxy names:

G1 Santaari	G5 Proximus
G2 Colesque	G6 Solans
G3 Lara'tan	G7 Jaftra
G4 Angiana	G8 Xrata

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