

# RECLAMATION

BOOK ONE OF THE ART OF WAR TRILOGY



**RICHARD SWAN**

**RECLAMATION**  
**RICHARD SWAN**

Copyright © Richard Swan 2015  
Cover illustration by John Harris

All characters in this publication are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons,  
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

## Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to John Harris and Alison Eldred for the superb cover art; Chris Hopkinson for his wizardry; Tim Johnson and Tim MacDonald for reading early drafts; Kate Haigh for her tireless efforts; William Smith for reasons known only to himself; Katie Swan for her PR know-how; and Sophie Watson for her endless support.

Reclamation is for Jackie and Mark, without whom the book would not have been possible.

## Table of Contents

### The Crusade Fleet

#### **I Exigency**

Uvolon

Code Cyan

Exigency

Borderlands

Tip of the Spear

Navem Sigma

First Light

Retribution

#### **II Tier Three**

Head Start

Gonvarion

Firewall

Salted Wounds

Hard Lines

Mission Creep

Persons of Interest

Diplomacy

#### **III Cause and EFFECT**

Iyadi

Blackworld

Nerve Centre

Pinnacle

Planetfall

Duplicity

Zecad

## Empire of the Fallen

## THE CRUSADE FLEET

*‘Our sins do not fade with the passage of time; they grow, like a cancer of the ages. Our sons, and their sons, will bear the burden of our wrongdoing for eternity.’*

### **Executor Kohan Vesani, at the conclusion of the Ossican Civil War**

The Sixteenth Crusade Fleet, a vast, meandering flotilla of a hundred thousand provari ships, vectored leisurely through the Vadian Spiral like some immeasurable intergalactic worm.

Two hundred thousand kilometres away, a pair of UNIS agents, ensconced within an invisible, refraction-shielded deep space relay, observed it.

They electronically marked and inventoried every single ship. It was an interminable and thankless task, one undertaken by an endless procession of dead-eyed junior intelligence personnel rotating into the relay every forty-five days. Forty-five days of eight-hour shifts, staring at holos, watching robotic clippers, corvettes, destroyers, cruisers, Deus-class capitals and Atlas-class MPVs, as they manoeuvred against the kaleidoscopic starfield in a perpetual ballet of naval logistics.

The surveillance yielded an inordinate amount of information. Millions of exabytes of data were processed, sifted and encoded by a dedicated army of virtual intelligences, then streamed sublight to the Vadian Mission Station, bounced off the Fleet Comms Array, and stored in a vast data sink buried under UN Joint Intelligence Command. There it would languish, occasionally agglomerated into neat dossiers and disseminated by people they would never meet, for reasons they would never know.

Matas Javik exhaled loudly and blinked bleary-eyed at the holo in front of him. Both the scale and futility of it defied comprehension. The Sixteenth Crusade Fleet was just one of dozens across the galaxy. The Provari Ascendancy had a staggering war machine, one that had been in motion for centuries and showed no signs of slowing down. Every year the United Nations Intelligence Service counted over a million ships sent across the Khāli Barrier and into Andromeda. The only purpose, the UN and its Tier-

Three partners conjectured, was to wage some distant alien war, though against whom and for what reasons gave rise to few credible theories.

A small alarm on the holo bleeped in front of him, and he cancelled it with an irritable wave of his hand. Behind him the hatch to one of the sleep capsules swung open, and his colleague, Alec Horst, floated free of his harness and into the cramped hold.

‘G’morning,’ he mumbled, yawning. Using the grab hoops lining the hull, he pulled himself to their food cabinet and pulled free a few freeze-dried cereal bars.

‘Mm,’ Javik replied, not taking his eyes from the holo. The station computer had scanned and tagged another twelve ships during his shift, and he completed his review of the last – a sleek, fifty-gun corvette named after one of the provari winter gods – cursorily.

‘Anything interesting?’ Horst asked, arriving next to him with his mouth full of food. He floated above the console and zipped up his battered white jacket before pulling on a baseball cap and levering himself into the chair’s harness by his feet.

‘No,’ Javik replied and waved his holo out of existence. The enlarged, stylised graphic of the crusade fleet disappeared, and the nebulous blue gas clouds of the Upper Vadian Spiral took its place. Without enhancement, even the crusade fleet was near-invisible against the absence of any substantial starlight.

‘Mm,’ Horst grunted. He ripped open the second cereal bar. With a ripple of his fingers, his own holo sprang into life in front of him, and he activated a small music terminal, filling the hold with a lazy beat. Javik wrinkled his nose. He preferred silence, but then it wasn’t his shift.

‘Only twenty more days,’ Horst said with relish, taking control of the relay’s scanner and engaging the on-board computer. The crusade fleet appeared in front of them once again, the holo this time trained on a spherical Atlas-class MPV. ‘Any plans for tonight?’

Javik shrugged, loosening the shoulder straps of the harness. He nodded towards his sleep capsule. ‘Ultraporn, probably,’ he said tiredly, then changed his mind. ‘No. Sleep. Just plain, old-fashioned sleep.’

Horst slapped him on the shoulder, his ebony face splitting into a grin. ‘Have fun.’

Javik offered a half-smile. He was tired and bored. As a human presence,



both he and Horst were practically obsolete, but unlike Horst, he had well over half his detachment yet to complete.

With a sigh he shouldered his way free of the harness and gently pushed himself out of the chair. He floated to the ceiling, and using the grab hoops he pulled himself to his sleep capsule. The entire life-support module was less than five metres in length and half that in height. It was also about as spartan as one would expect a deep space relay to be. Aside from a few basic furnishings – a pair of chairs in the cockpit, a food cabinet, two sleep capsules and an ablutions cubicle – the rest of the hold was bare metal, lined with thermal panels and ribbed by kilometres of pipes and wiring.

He did a lazy backflip and unzipped his jacket, stowing it in a small netted cargo hold on the wall. His eyes, despite their optical implants, were sore and dry, and he savoured the prospect of a good night's sleep. He pulled open the hatch to his capsule and swung his legs up–

And abruptly stopped as a proximity alarm wailed into life.

‘Shit,’ he muttered. He thumped the console in front of him.

‘Event horizon, seventeen hundred kilometres,’ Horst half-shouted, twisting round in his harness.

Javik kicked off from the hull and glided to his seat, activating his holo with a flick of the wrist. ‘Who is stupid enough to even try that?’ he asked wearily. He manipulated the station’s enhanced optics and pulled up a holographic cube of their immediate vicinity. The crusade fleet appeared as a long strand of red in one of the topmost corners, the event horizon a pulsing blue circle three kilometres beneath it. Red warning graphics littered the grid.

‘I don’t like this,’ Javik muttered after a short pause, adrenaline coursing through his guts. Suddenly the boredom of cataloguing didn’t seem so unattractive after all.

‘What’s to like?’ Horst snapped, pulling on a headset from the console in front of him. ‘I’m putting this on the net.’ He opened an encrypted channel to the Vadian Mission Station.

‘It could just be another provar ship.’

Horst glanced at him. ‘Yeah, well, whatever it is it’s about to be another cloud of radioactive dust,’ he spat, tilting the peak of his cap up and mopping his brow with the back of his hand. He jabbed a finger at the holo. ‘And if that fleet starts getting antsy, we’ll be one with it.’

Javik cleared his throat. While they were operating under the mandate of

the UN, they were still acting very much contrary to a host of galactic espionage treaties. The crusade fleet wouldn't give a second thought to vaporising the relay along with them in it, and would face little censure for doing so.

Javik began to sweat. Their stealth capabilities could shield them from almost all long-range invasive scans, but they weren't infallible.

'VMS, possible hostile contact at Crusade Fleet Sixteen,' Horst said next to him. 'Event horizon opening at... sigma echo one, five delta nine, four four one six.' He would provide a running commentary on what they saw; there was no point in waiting for a reply. The mission station was close to six billion kilometres away, and on sublight comms any message they sent wouldn't be heard by UNIS personnel for over five hours.

Javik couldn't take his eyes off the screen. The event horizon was large enough to fit a clipper through now, and its presence was causing discord in the nearby crusade fleet. Already the heavy frigate *Vosporia* had detached from the line and disgorged its payload of combat drones in anticipation of this unwelcome visitor. Other more recognisable defensive formations were being adopted among the smaller ships, but their reaction time was far too slow.

The wormhole was enveloped in phase fire and clouds of flak, and searing white light split the void beneath the crusade fleet. The relay's on-board computer logged five ships exiting the event horizon, each matching the profile of a clipper but bedecked with a cruiser's worth of weaponry.

'*Kaygryn?*' Javik shouted. There was no love lost between the two races, but even the kaygryn in all their genetic stupidity wouldn't be so rash as to assault a crusade fleet. It was a move worse than suicide.

'VMS, we have five kaygryn clippers at Crusade Fleet Sixteen, they have engaged, repeat, engaged CF16 with phase and solid ordnance,' Horst dutifully continued, in a voice thick with self-doubt. Javik looked over to see the older man's eyes wide and his brow damp with sweat.

A blinding sphere of white light heralded the destruction of the *Vosporia* at the hands of a scythe-like beam of energy which neatly bisected the frigate, causing both men to start in their seats. They watched in horror as atomic missiles burned through the *Vosporia*'s venting atmosphere in seconds, the heat of the nuclear flash-fire melting reinforced bulkheads as though they were wax and allowing implosion propagation to rampage through the

remainder of the ship. Any crew that weren't instantly vaporised or crushed to a fine paste by the collapsing bulkheads quickly suffocated in the freezing void.

'Provari heavy frigate... destroyed...' Horst murmured.

Another squadron of five kaygryn ships slingshotted through the wormhole before the event horizon winked out of existence. Provari combat drones quickly surrounded all ten kaygryn ships, making short work of four and badly damaging a fifth, but the newcomers blazed incessantly with phase fire and atomics, dispensing their own combat drones and clouds of mines and flak in a desperate, suicidal bid to inflict as much damage as possible.

Another alarm blared into life, and a fresh, unsolicited holo, dense with warning graphics, flickered into life in front of Javik.

'The crusade fleet has engaged LRIS,' he breathed, his voice shaking. It was nothing their stealth systems couldn't withstand, but prolonged long-range invasive scanning would uncover them sooner or later.

Horst relayed as much to the UNIS Mission Station. The kaygryn clippers were being torn apart now. The remaining three hit the nearest Atlas-class MPV with close-range phase fire, but they had lost the element of surprise, and their atomics were stopped in their tracks by defensive laser batteries.

Fourteen seconds later and the last of the kaygryn clippers was nothing more than radioactive cinders cooling in the void.

'Engagement over,' Horst breathed and pulled the headset off. His baseball cap came off with it, and he dumped them both on the console. They both sat in silence for a few minutes, watching as the crusade fleet repositioned. After a while, the provari LRIS stopped, and the alarms holos faded to nothing.

Horst cleared his throat. 'We've got ten hours until we get anything back from command,' he said, watching as the computer finished streaming its own vastly superior interpretation of the alien engagement back to UNIS. 'You want to hit the capsule?'

'No,' Javik said and pulled two sachets of whisky out of his console drawer. 'What I want now is a drink.'

# I EXIGENCY

*‘The opportunity to secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.’*

## UVOLON

*'As humans and citizens of the UN, you have a birth right. You have the right to a home; the right to an education; the right to food, and to drink. The right to security. These things we will provide you with, free of any charge, without any expectation or requirement. We ask nothing in return. These things, these gifts, are yours to do with what you will. But I urge you never to forget that everything comes at a price, no matter how remote it may be or how inconsequential it may seem. This is not a zero-sum game.'*

### **Undersecretary Brandon Williams, addressing the UN after signing the Treaty of Hadan's Reach**

The air was hot and thick and smelled of storm. For most of the day the sky had been a perfect, unbroken cerulean; now, as late afternoon gave way to evening, a black thunderhead was gathering.

Ben Vondur sat on the beach, watching languorously as the swollen, rain-pregnant clouds approached. For a short while he contemplated staying. He had been on the beach for most of the day, listening to the hypersled broadcast and steadily making his way through a pack of chemically chilled beers. A long, low peal of thunder, however, put paid to the idea. It lingered in the charged air like a drum roll, the bass of it shaking him. Irritably, he waved off the holo and sat up.

It wasn't difficult to feel isolated on Anternis. A small UN nation on an otherwise alien world, it formed an unimportant scimitar of tropical land protruding from the underbelly of Vos'Shan, the larger and considerably more populous kaygryn state that lay to the north. Together they made up the only two countries on the otherwise uninhabited world of Uvolon, itself a minor planet in a sector of space two hundred light years from Vargonroth. For Captain Vondur it was soft detachment, technically a military deployment, but in reality a holiday with only the most cursory of duties to undertake. He and the rest of his squadron had done little more than spend five months firing railguns in a leased desert range a thousand kilometres north.

He gathered up his things as the first of the rain fell, a few fat drops of cold

water splattering the sand by his feet. Within minutes it had gone from light to torrential, accompanied by crackling lightning and deep peals of thunder. Unperturbed by the tropical storm, Vondur reached the end of the beach and crested a shallow sand dune covered in scrub. Just beyond lay the ring road, a wide, six-lane highway, a mixture of metalled asphalt and railway track junctioned by a dozen accessways running arrow-straight into the city. From orbit it formed a near-perfect circle, the accessways making it look not unlike a crosshair.

The ring road was, like the beach, largely deserted save a few distant tankers and a solitary express train. He ambled slowly across, feeling the heat of the road through his sandals despite the cool rain. He made straight for a civilian parking bay where his transport was, a battered four-wheel jeep branded with the UN insignia. Well beyond, perhaps another five kilometres away, lay the City of Anternis, a UN-basic, predesigned metropolis carved out of the bedrock by orbital construction rigs years before. It languished at fifty per cent capacity. After the Treaty of Hadan's Reach, kaygryn terrorism had meant that, as well as requiring a permanent military presence, Anternis had been shedding colonists by the thousands for the last five decades. It was one of the reasons, Vondur concluded, why the place was so boring.

A long, low rumble broke him from his reverie, for the only reason that it wasn't thunder. Frowning, he searched the sky for the source of the noise. The atmosphere over Anternis was relatively clear, with only a couple of air transports visible, though it took a few moments of searching before he saw it: a large kaygryn corvette, flying at what looked to be an illegally low altitude over the city. As the rain cleared slightly, he could see that the corvette was being escorted by a host of UN combat drones, all blaring with warning lights. A shot of adrenaline fired through his system as he briefly entertained the thought of the ship attacking the city, but it did not take long for the corvette to clear it and make for the open ocean. The noise of its atmospheric engines was tremendous as it passed almost directly overhead, rattling the glass awning over Vondur and triggering his automatic audio filters to prevent damage to his hearing.

Seen from just ten thousand feet, the craft was spectacular. It was formed of a three-hundred-metre, half-torus shape, covered in gun emplacements and with two bulky engine units at the open end, currently burning white-hot and emitting exhaust in the order of tonnes per second. Such a large vessel was

not designed for extended intra-atmosphere aviation and it had perhaps twenty or thirty minutes' worth of liquid fuel before it would crash. Vondur watched agape as the ship soared overhead and changed trajectory so that as it reached the seafront it began to climb. Despite being so high above, the increase in air turbulence was palpable, manifesting itself in hot, fast winds that drove the rain hard into him, stinging his bare skin.

He was on the verge of radioing the UN Armed Forces base when the corvette was struck by a javelin of light, as if God himself had thrown a spear straight through the ship and into the ocean below.

A kinetic rail strike.

'*My God!*' he shouted as the shrieking thunderclap of shattered superstructure and tortured atmosphere hit him. He could only watch in mute fascination as the corvette immediately listed into a spin, trailing smoke. It must have taken thirty seconds for it to fall out of the sky, shedding its innards and kaygryn crewmen as it went. It hit the ocean in a huge plume of superheated steam as its vast bulk displaced thousands of tonnes of seawater. The ocean, cold and grey, swelled around the impact and churned into a miniature tsunami, frothing with corpses and debris. It raced towards the shore, threatening to engulf the beach which but a few minutes before had been a picture of tropical relaxation.

Already his IHD was flashing with return-to-base orders. Without a second thought, he leapt into the jeep, selected manual transmission and with an ear-splitting screech of tyres, tore on to the ring road. To his left, the swell from the impact crested the sand dunes that made a crude bank before the road, and choppy grey water, filled with debris, ploughed into the inner barrier. The jeep peaked at a hundred kilometres per hour and continued at that speed for a couple of minutes, before slowing violently and screeching off the ring road and onto an arrow-straight accessway that led all the way to the northern quarter of the city. It would take him five minutes to reach the base, but there were restrictions for land-based vehicles inside the city which would double his travel time.

He sped between two huge plastic hydroponics domes, the city ahead dotted with thousands of lights in the gathering dusk. His mind was still trying to process what he had just witnessed. Little of it made sense. As far as UNIS was concerned, the kaygryn didn't even have any void-capable naval hardware in Vos'Shan, and the morning update on sector fleet movements

had confidently projected orbit to be clear all week. He shook his head in disbelief. A fatal rail strike on UN sovereign territory gave the lie to all of it.

A moment later, the jeep's dashboard holo blinked into life, and the face of the UNAF base commander, Aryn Vance, filled the screen.

‘Captain,’ he snapped, scowling. ‘What’s your ETA?’

Vondur checked his digital display. ‘Ten minutes, sir,’ he replied, lifting his hand to shield his face from the worst of the rain.

Vance grunted. ‘Good. I need the whole squadron deployed in the next half-hour. See to it, Priority One.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Vondur replied, and then, with not a little concern, ‘what’s the situation?’

‘Developing,’ Vance replied, and the holo terminated.



## CODE CYAN

*‘Why must we continually wage war? Because we excel at it. Mankind, for whatever reason, is predisposed to the effective prosecution of warfare. If one replaced war with gardening, every planet would be a paradise.’*

**Attributed to Ambassador Kijoa, shortly before the destruction of Ariandana**

He awoke, mouth dry and head swimming with alcohol from a state dinner the night before. A sour, unpleasant wave of nausea washed up from the pit of his stomach, and he swallowed it down, reaching for the glass of water by the side of his bed.

‘Colder,’ he mumbled to the room. The climate control clicked obediently. He took a few gulps of the tepid water and with weak hands checked the time on his terminal. To his surprise, he had a pending call.

‘UNSOC,’ he breathed slowly, bemused, wrinkling his nose as he read the digital shorthand of the sender bar. Next to him, his wife moaned something irritably, and she rolled over, her naked body parting with the duvet.

He sighed, trying to ignore the stirring in his groin as thoughts of the vigorous, inebriated sex of the night before popped into his head like a blearily erotic slideshow. ‘Yes?’ he mumbled, accepting a sound-only transmission.

‘John? It’s Roge from Colonies Admin.’

He sighed, trying to place the name. ‘Roge. What time is it?’

‘Four-thirty. I wouldn’t have troubled you but we have a serious situation. The President is expecting you. Can you can come in?’

John rubbed his eyes and sat up, and felt his wife pull the covers away from him. He took another gulp of water and tried to think of an excuse not to go in, President or no. ‘Yeah, I can come in. Where are you? Halo Arch?’

‘No, Solar Ops Command. We’ve got a shuttle waiting for you at Whiteport. I’ve told your PA where it is. No need to check in.’

John shook his head resignedly. ‘Yep, fine. I’ll see you in an hour.’

‘Thanks, John.’ The signal terminated.

He massaged his temples briefly, then turned and put a hand on his wife’s

hip. ‘That was Roge Viersson. They want me to go in.’

‘Who’s Roge Viersson?’ she asked dozily. ‘Have I met him?’

He blew his cheeks out. ‘I think he’s a civil servant in Colonies Admin,’ he replied. ‘You haven’t met him. Hmm, or maybe you have, in Vonreigis.’

She made an uninterested noise. ‘When are you getting back?’

‘Not sure. I’ll give you a call when I know what’s what.’

‘See you later.’

He swung his legs out the side of the bed and had his semiautonomous implant microbots dampen as many of the effects of the hangover as possible. Almost instantly the throbbing ache in his head began to recede, and his nausea disappeared.

He stood up, only a little off-balance, walked over to the wardrobe and changed into a dark, braided and medalled suit with high-stock collars, rolling up the sleeves of the shirt and stuffing a dark blue tie into his trouser pocket. He sprayed his neck with a shot of aftershave and then pressed a tiny button on the side of his skull, just behind the ridge of his right eye socket. A metre-squared translucent calendar and an array of application options appeared in front of him. He mentally selected the day’s date, and a large window displayed the day’s engagements.

<Meeting with EUROSCOM and UNIPTF re: insurgency and humanitarian crisis on Enceladus... 13:00> flashed in red lettering. ‘Shit,’ he muttered and sent it instead to one of his staff. There was nothing else.

He made for the door. ‘See you this evening,’ he said to his wife, but she was already asleep.

One of his aides, Chris Hayeson, was waiting for him outside, holding a black umbrella morosely against the thick sheet of torrential rain. The sky was a deep black, bellied by ragged thunderheads so low that the tops of Arrengate’s monolithic skyscrapers were lost in the gloom.

‘Jesus, this weather,’ he said, pulling the collar of his raincoat up and darting out the entrance of his town house. Chris did his best to shield him from the onslaught as he got into the back of the car. The door slammed, and a few moments later his PA dived in next to him, dripping with rainwater.

‘Has Roge been in touch?’ he exhaled, running a hand through his damp, sandy mop of hair.

‘Yeah. What’s the story?’

Chris shrugged. ‘No idea. He was being very coy about it.’

The driverless car pulled away from the kerb with a melodic hum of its engine and headed down Gosling Street, windscreen wipers on full power. After a minute they pulled smoothly onto the elevated Grymfriars trackway, locked into the central line, and accelerated neatly to a hundred and fifty kilometres an hour.

He sat in silence while Chris made two cups of coffee from the machine in front of them, watching the swollen river Arren race past, writhing with huge, snake-like wave power generators. Municipal hazard lighting cast a soft, amber pallor over much of the roads below, though fifty metres above street level the harsher glow of elevated trackway halogen lamps seared his retinas with dancing patterns of blue and green. Beyond them, tower blocks ribbed with crimson warning lights loomed in the darkness, latticed by suspended walkways and the glow-worm-like carriages of the city monorail.

‘Where are we? At Whiteport, I mean,’ he asked eventually, breaking the rain’s monopoly over the silence. He slurped the hot coffee.

‘Terminal eighteen,’ Chris replied, busy navigating his implant hard drive by the vacant expression on his face. ‘They wanted to stick you in a Bluebird but I got you a...’ He paused. John winced in anticipation. ‘... a V14 instead.’

John’s wince deepened. ‘A V14? I thought those days were long behind me.’

‘It’s much faster,’ Chris added hurriedly.

John conceded that with a nod. ‘That’s true. Though for comfort’s sake, in future I think a Bluebird will do just fine.’

The car continued on, taking a fork in the elevated trackway that led directly to Whiteport, a thirty-kilometre, fifty-terminal complex that handled the vast majority of all the Vargonroth’s interplanetary flight, as well as a healthy slice of the atmospheric. On a clear day, the landing pylons could be seen for hundreds of miles, colossal spikes of carbon nanotubes that needled elevators into the lower atmosphere, guiding the atmosphere-capable ships down, and passengers and cargo up.

The rain showed no signs of letting up, as much as the sun showed no signs of rising. Ahead of them, though, despite the bloated clouds above, the well-lit security cordon of Whiteport loomed like a second halogen sun, absorbing the lights of the elevated trackway, the street-level municipals and the skyscraper hazards.

The car rolled to a controlled stop at checkpoint East-Four, a miniscule corrugation in the slabbed rockcrete and chain-link perimeter fence, capped with curls of electrified razor wire and guarded by hypertrain-tested crash barriers and the keen electromagnetic sting of the Port Authority's railguns. Either side of them, the guard stations snapped into life, and John felt the familiar feeling of static wash over him as they were invasively scanned. Once cleared, the gates opened to reveal two kilometres of smooth, rain-skinned concrete, and the car made for the government terminals, skirting a wide parabola around the nearest band of orbital pylons.

'There it is,' Chris said, nodding ahead of them. John craned to see out the front windscreen and saw, a hundred metres ahead, the blunt black insectoid form of the Manticore sitting on a circular VTOL platform. He noted, with a pang of dismay, that the hold door was open, letting the rain soak the spartan interior.

'It's certainly something,' he said morosely.

The car drew to another smooth stop outside the V14, and the pilot, dressed in a black pressure suit and helmet, yanked open his door.

'Commander,' he half-shouted over the combined roar of the foul weather and the turbofans of the Manticore, 'Squadron Leader James Lang. It's a pleasure. I understand you're going to UNSOC on a Priority One?'

'Have a pleasant flight,' Chris called from the car. John gave him a thumbs up. 'How long is it going to take?' he asked Lang and found himself being steered towards the hold.

'Fifteen minutes, tops.'

John climbed into the hold and sat down in a space on one of the partitioned benches. He was just as familiar with the hold as any other career officer. Behind him the hold door sealed shut, and his ears popped. Instantly the roar of the torrential rain was drowned out, and the charging turbofan nodes were confined to a low, vibrating whir.

After a few moments, he felt the cockpit slam shut.

'Can you hear me?' crackled Lang's voice over the intercom. It was their only point of communication, save narrowband messaging via their IHDs.

'Yes,' John replied, and with a crescendo of turbofans, the Manticore pulled away from the ground.

The trip took less than the estimated fifteen minutes. He accessed the V14's external feeds for the majority of it, watching as the dense, largely

urban topography of Arrengate sped past below, and then for the rest of the short journey, the roiling confluence of the East Sea and Straights of Qatrin. They followed the line of the ES1 hypertrain for the most part, a vast quartet of vacuum-sealed tunnels flanked by the Whiteport Land Bridge and surrounded by the cold grey sea below. When the train lines curved away to the left, however, the Manticore maintained its course, leaving them over open water until they reached the United Nations Solar Operations Command, a squat grey building occupying a small island a hundred kilometres from Arrengate.

They touched down on a small landing platform on the western end of the island, and John climbed out of the hold, his feet finding the wet, rainswept concrete of the platform. Ahead of them, the landing platform stretched away, lit by the harsh glare of the spaceport floodlights. The nearest craft – a sleek, executive jet – was two hundred metres away, being refuelled by a dishevelled crew of men in sodden overalls.

A long black staff car was waiting to take him to the main building, and he climbed into the back of it. As soon as the door slammed shut, the car was moving, accelerating smoothly across the concrete of the spaceport. They exited through the southern gate and took a short road towards the building – much larger and more impressive than when seen from the air. They drove down a boulevard lined with hundreds of flags of the UN's constituent worlds, dependencies and protectorates, though each one was wrapped slackly around its pole. John tried to identify as many as he could. There had been a time when he was able to name them all, but the UN had contracted vastly even within his five decades of life, haemorrhaging territories in the wake of Hadan's Reach in a far-reaching consolidation strategy. As a result, half the flags he saw were totally alien to him.

The road was short, and it wasn't long before the staff car had reached the wide gravel turning circle just outside the pillared façade of the HQ building itself. They swung smoothly around the fountain in the centre of the circle, a bronze depiction of First Contact, now eroded from centuries of Vargonroth's hard weather systems. The car reached a complete stop parallel to the bottom step, and John waved his hand over the door release holo. Once again at the mercy of the elements, he ran up the stairs and past the pillars, and walked through the door field. Above his head, a security light flashed green, and the guards waved him through.

The entrance hall to UNSOC was large and cold despite its climate control, formed of a chessboard pattern floor and large, multi-pronged staircase that dominated the south wall. The hall itself was mostly empty, though one of its occupants he instantly recognised. The woman, Josette Chevalier, saw him and immediately strode towards him, bringing short a conversation she'd been having over her terminal. She was dressed in a tight and well-decorated blue suit, her medals tinkling with each step. She offered him a half-smile as she drew up before him.

'John Garrick,' she said, proffering a hand. He took it, determined not to appear awkward.

'Josette Chevalier,' he replied with a charming, confident smile. 'It's been a while.'

It had been a while, nearly a year. Josette had been the UN Commissioner for Refugees, but had been seconded to Solar Command as one of UNIS's attachés six months earlier after excelling, to the surprise of all, at counterterrorism. That had caused quite a stir over in Halo Arch.

'What's going on?' he asked, falling into step beside her. 'I got a call from Roge an hour ago asking me to come in.'

Josette activated an audio damper brooch on her lapel. 'We have a developing situation on Uvolon,' she said, still in a low voice despite the brooch, leading him up the central staircase. 'Possible Code Scarlet.'

That set his heart racing: Code Scarlet – a UN/xeno conflict. Thanks to a comprehensive scheme of legal, administrative and diplomatic integration that had spanned centuries, such incidents were incredibly rare, though not unheard of. The infrequency of such episodes made them no less frightening to consider; history had taught him that they tended to be very violent.

'Christ,' he muttered. They were walking down a corridor in the upper east wing, their footfalls softened by plush royal-blue carpeting. Wood panelling and gilt-framed portraits surrounded them on both sides, and soft lighting emanated from regularly spaced and ornate fixtures.

Josette made a half-shrug, a strange look of distaste written across her face. It irked him how much she'd changed since her short secondment to Solar Command. No longer was she the enthusiastic, personable Commissioner of Refugees. It was like she'd adopted the sullen attitude and cagey mannerisms of what she considered a UNIS agent should have and pretended they were her own.

‘We received a report from the Vadian Mission Station overnight,’ she said. They reached the end of the corridor and made through the door there, into a carpeted stairwell. She led them upwards. ‘Apparently one of the provari crusade fleets was attacked by the kaygryn. The fallout has reached Uvolon.’

‘The kaygryn attacked the provar?’ John asked slowly. There were many things wrong with what she’d said, but that struck him as the most immediately ridiculous. The kaygryn were some bastard, artificially evolved provari slave race, existing under the boot heel of the Ascendancy and routinely subjugated and out-and-out massacred. For the kaygryn to attack them was like soft flesh trying to attack a scalpel.

Josette nodded. ‘The President’s here for a briefing; you may as well hear it all then.’

They continued up the stairs until they reached the top floor. They were scanned by security hardware once more before being permitted access. Another corridor greeted them, and they made straight for the briefing room – one which John was very familiar with. The room represented the nexus of the UN’s military, political and intelligence communities, where the highest echelons of those executive arms of the UN met and made far-reaching decisions – decisions with often violent consequences.

Two armed guards in full Mantix body armour flanked the door and permitted them access to the briefing room. Although no formal challenge was issued, John knew from his own experience that the software suites in the Mantix suit would have scanned him and Josette for threats a thousand times over in the space of a picosecond.

Inside was a wide, oval-shaped table of polished Terran mahogany atop a cream-carpeted floor. Three arched windows looked out across the flag-lined boulevard to the north, though it was lost to the dark and rain. The room was aglow with dozens of holos, each display different: sector maps, topographical scans, charts of information. Hardcopy dossiers sat in untidy piles on the table, and a haze of stim smoke filled the air.

Around the table were most of the key players. The President of the United Nations, Rick Aurelius, a wizened, hundred-and-fifty-year-old man, sat at the head of the table, his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a stim dangling from his lips. Next to him was Roge Viersson, Undersecretary for Colonies Administration, a slight and easily animated man hunched over his dossier.

Two of the Joint Chiefs were standing next to each other around a revolving holomap of Uvolon, both gesticulating and note-taking and otherwise disagreeing. General Gordon Pike, head of the UN's planet-based forces, was a bull of a man, barrel-chested and covered in thick black hair, dressed in breeches and a khaki shirt with red stock collars and epaulettes. Next to him was the altogether more slender, grim and raven-featured Fleet Marshal Warren Scarcroft, dressed in cream breeches and a midnight-blue jacket trimmed with silver braid.

The other occupants John was less familiar with: Alistair Frost, Director of UNIS and Josette's new boss; and Karl Howarth, Commander of EFFECT, the executive arm of UNIS. Both were quiet, thoughtful men, dressed in plain dark clothing and engrossed in the information before them. The last of the staff was Xander McKone, the wizened and softly spoken head of the UN Diplomatic Ministry.

Interspersed between them were a number of more junior officers, aides and security personnel, bringing the total number of occupants to fifteen. Everyone looked tired and dishevelled, and the room smelled of stim smoke and sweat.

John and Josette moved into the room and went their separate ways, John towards the Joint Chiefs, Josette towards Alistair Frost. The doors were closed behind them.

'Right,' the President said, pressing himself to his feet. Perspiration marked his brow, despite the conditioning units humming unobtrusively above. 'I think we're all here.' He pinched the bridge of his nose wearily and blinked a few times as if to try and clear his fatigue. He waved a holo on next to him, the print of his fingers glowing where his IHD synced with the briefing room's processor. At the other end of the table, a small, revolving hologram of Uvolon appeared twenty centimetres above the desk.

He made a few quick gestures with his right hand and another holo sprang into life, this one showing a data stream still developing as they were fed information from the Vadian Mission Station. Smaller subscreens appeared, extrapolating the more important bits of information. He then brought his two index fingers together so that the two screens floating across the table became adjacent.

'We have intelligence that the kaygryn have attacked Crusade Fleet Sixteen,' he said without preamble and then sighed loudly. 'That much I



appreciate.’ He made a beckoning motion and the holo displaying the Vadian data enlarged to form a translucent screen a metre squared. ‘“VMS, we have ten kaygryn clippers at Crusade Fleet Sixteen, they have engaged... CF-16 with phase and solid ordnance... provari heavy frigate destroyed.’ That’s what the transcript from agent Alec Horst reads.’

After further digital manipulation, a three-dimensional image of the provari heavy frigate *Vosporia* appeared, and an animation of its destruction, faithfully replicated from the Vadian deep space relay, played out in front of them. The room remained silent as Aurelius cancelled the holo and steepled his fingers.

‘We have been told by the Vadian Mission Station that the clippers were kaygryn, but they were not Uvolonese,’ he continued, more to himself than to anyone else. The room remained dutifully still. ‘Yet I am informed by... Station Commander Aryn Vance that a kaygryn corvette has been shot down barely a stone’s throw from Anternis by a provari cruiser, which, incidentally, is still holding orbit over Uvolon.’ He mopped his brow with a kerchief. ‘Obviously, this situation is unacceptable.’

He stood up and paced the room, his footfalls cushioned by the plush carpeting. All eyes remained on him. ‘From now on, until this matter is resolved, none of you are to leave this building. Whatever engagements you have, delegate them. Any other work must give way to this.’ He wagged a finger at the assembled chiefs. ‘At the moment this is a Code Cyan; I do not intend for it to become a Code Scarlet. God knows we haven’t had one of those for years, and with good reason.’

He moved towards the rightmost window and stood in silence for a few moments, looking out over the dark, rainy grounds of the UNSOC headquarters. When he turned back to them, his features were hardened by resolve. ‘So, the kaygryn and the provar are at war, or if not now, they soon will be. History has taught us that the kaygryn tend to fare very badly in wars. And to make matters worse, we have a colony in the middle of it all. Each of you undoubtedly has your own opinion on the best way to proceed.’ He gestured to the assembled staff. ‘So? Let me hear it.’

There was a short pause. John cleared his throat. ‘Where’s the governor?’ he asked. ‘Who’s our man in Anternis?’

Roge Viersson fielded that one. ‘Antoine Lefebvre.’ A picture of him dutifully blinked into existence. ‘He’s offworld at the moment, holidaying

with his family in Theyde. He has been informed, and I believe he is due to return within the next three days.'

Fleet Marshal Scarcroft was the next to speak. 'We do not have a Fleet presence around Uvolon, nor will we for another three months,' he remarked, his eyes fixed on his IHD readout. To everyone else it looked as if he was staring into empty space. 'The Fleet Auxiliary has a voidbreaker, the *North Star*, which patrols the sector throughout the course of a year. It appears that we do not regard the Upper Vadian Spiral as possessed of any particular strategic value.'

Aurelius offered a slight shrug. 'It and many other worlds, no doubt. How soon can we have a Fleet presence over Uvolon? I don't like the idea of this provari cruiser having the run of the place.'

Scarcroft offered a shrug in return. 'I can put a quick-reaction force there within twenty hours,' he said. 'Though such a move might be... misconstrued by the provar.'

A murmur of agreement sounded throughout the room. Communicating with the other Tier-Three species was difficult at the best of times, but the provar were particularly obtuse. They participated in galactic affairs very openly under sufferance.

'Then we tell them of our intentions,' Aurelius said, unperturbed. 'Anternis is home to four hundred thousand UN citizens. I will not have them unprotected while war is waged on their doorstep.'

General Pike cleared his throat and took a short step forward. 'Not entirely unprotected. Aryn Vance has reported to me that we currently have one squadron of Interdictor-variant amrocovs based on Anternis on soft rotation. We also maintain a permanent battalion of troops there, as has been policy since Hadan's Reach.'

Aurelius frowned and conjured up a hologram of an amrocov, a scale model of a two-and-a-half-metre, man-shaped suit of exoskeleton and heavy body armour bristling with weaponry and slaved drone pods. Above it in digital green lettering, it read 'Advanced Mechanised Multi-Role Combat Vehicle' and then 'GV11b Goliath' to give it its moniker.

Aurelius grunted as he studied the revolving model. 'How many of these do we have?'

Pike looked slightly cross-eyed for a second as he consulted his IHD. With a ripple of his fingers, he transferred the data from his own screen to a holo

on the desk in front of him. '11 Squadron is formed of seven Goliaths. They are captained by Ben Vondur. From his record, he seems to be a perfectly competent officer. The squadron saw action in New Carthage and sustained no casualties. At the moment they are on a peacekeeping tour in the Vadian Spiral.'

'These Goliaths,' Aurelius said, pursing his lips, 'how useful are they in combat? My IHD has provided me with a small novel of data and schematics which no doubt makes for good bedtime reading, but I'd prefer to hear your take on it.'

Pike nodded curtly. 'One Goliath is usually considered a force multiplier of a hundred. I've never piloted one except in controlled circumstances, but as assets to a force commander, their utility cannot be overstated. An entire squadron fully kitted could hold an area the size of Arrengate for six weeks before they'd need a resupply.'

'Presumably that's dependent on the enemy,' Aurelius asked, although he looked suitably impressed. Pike nodded.

'Yes, well, against a heavy frigate in orbit they wouldn't do a thing,' he conceded. 'Though they do have orbit-capable weaponry.'

The President took a step back and then cancelled the holo. 'Can we put these to good use? Vos'Shan is directly north of Anternis; I don't want a million kaygryn pouring over the border seeking asylum.'

Pike nodded. 'Of course, though we want to be careful not to incur civilian casualties, especially kaygryn casualties.'

Aurelius waved him silent. 'Of course I'm aware of that. Frost, what's our intelligence position on Anternis? Tell me we can at least see what's going on.'

Frost nodded slowly. 'We maintain a one-man mission station in the Tiberean Mountains, directly across the border and into Vos'Shan. We also have round-the-clock orbital surveillance, though that's likely been junked if that provari cruiser is running LRIS.'

'Fine,' Aurelius said. 'Prioritise any intelligence traffic coming out of Uvolon. I want to see a live feed running in this room as soon as possible. And General Pike, have your men move to the border and see that any kaygryn attempting to cross are turned back. Our first priority should be to protect the UN citizenry.'

'Yes, sir,' both men replied.

‘Fleet Marshal,’ Aurelius said, turning his attentions back to Varren Scarcroft. ‘What’s the nearest of these quick-reaction forces?’

‘We maintain a fleet muster at Navem Sigma, in the Coriolanus Sector. As I said, I can put three destroyers in orbit within twenty hours, if the order is given now.’

‘Do these destroyers have some form of evacuation capability? Could they recover substantial numbers of civilians from the ground?’

Scarcroft shook his head. ‘A destroyer couldn’t. They only have life support for twenty men. We do have contingency craft for supernovae and meteor strikes and the like, and I know that we keep at least one at Navem Sigma...’ He consulted his IHD. ‘... the *Achilles*. That has capacity for five hundred thousand, or a million in storage. It’s slower though; I couldn’t get it to Uvolon for twenty-five hours.’

Aurelius stroked his chin. ‘All right,’ he said, clapping his hands. ‘Put all of them in orbit. Give the orders now. The three destroyers and the *Achilles*. And initiate any naval evacuation procedures we have.’

Scarcroft bowed slightly and exited the room to make the arrangements. As soon as the door closed, Xander McKone spoke.

‘Might I make a suggestion,’ he said. His voice was smooth and soft yet carried undertones of considerable authority. The UN Diplomatic Corps had perfected the art of persuasion, and their maxim *Verba pro Militia* – Words before Warfare – was well known throughout the colonised galaxy.

Aurelius gestured to him. ‘By all means,’ he said, in such a way as to convey the fact that he had no interest in what McKone had to say at all.

McKone smiled warmly. ‘It is laudable, the desire to protect one’s own citizenry through force of arms. But there is always a diplomatic solution.’ His tone bordered on what could be described as benign condescension, yet it was in no way inflammatory. It was genteel and almost fatherly; indeed, some members of the Diplomatic Corps were artificially aged for precisely that reason. Though the Joint Chiefs were wise to it, it was easy for someone without the requisite training to become enraptured by such diplomatic personnel. For that reason, the Corps was still considered a weapon by many.

‘Quite,’ Aurelius agreed, yawning. ‘I don’t recall ruling that out.’

McKone inclined his head. ‘Might I suggest a summit? Considering the provar are, arguably, the greatest martial force in the known galaxy, if only numerically, it would be prudent to involve the other Tier-Three species at an

early stage. The provar undoubtedly believe themselves to be above diplomacy, but even they can be curtailed if they are one against many.’ He smiled knowingly. ‘And if not, then at least we will have gained valuable allies.’

‘And what about the kaygryn? By all accounts it looks as though they started this,’ Roge Viersson said. ‘Why shouldn’t we be attacking them?’

John met Josette’s gaze very briefly.

‘When the dog bites his tormentor,’ McKone said, this time his tone laced with a hint of ice, ‘do you allay the tormentor, or help him kill the dog?’

The silence deepened. Viersson squirmed in his seat, until Aurelius came to his rescue.

‘I will call for a summit,’ he said wearily. ‘You are right, of course, Xander. Make the necessary arrangements. Let’s get the Exigency Corps on this, and call the Office for Xeno Affairs. Andrea Constance and her staff can tag along too. We’ll use Gonvarion as a venue. Tell the zhahassi.’

Xander bowed. ‘Of course. Very good, sir.’ Garrick had no doubt that everything the President had just said, McKone had engineered.

‘And make sure everyone knows of our intentions to place naval craft in orbit, especially the provar. Bloody write it down if you have to,’ Aurelius warned.

McKone bowed again and left the room.

Aurelius wrung his hands. He turned to John. ‘Mr Garrick. You will doubtless want to liaise with General Pike and Fleet Marshal Scarcroft. I’m sure we have strike contingencies for all Code Cyans. I want to see a list of my options in the next hour; give me targets and likely fallout. Include provar civilian targets as well for now, although not as a priority.’

John nodded, unperturbed. ‘Yes, sir. Right away.’

He turned to leave the room, catching Josette’s eyes one last time. Behind him, he heard the President dismiss everyone except her, Alistair Frost and Karl Howarth. That bothered him more than it should have. Junior officers and other personnel filed out behind him, and a small message flashed into existence in his IHD, informing him that the room had been audio blocked.

Once he was out in the corridor, he made for Pike and Scarcroft. They were both standing at the far end, as usual animated in their discussion. He turned back to the briefing room, but the door was shut. A sense of

melancholy suddenly overcame him, and not for the first time in his life, he found himself deeply regretting his affair with Josette.

He ordered his IHD to flood his system with endorphins, and riding an artificial sense of happiness, he approached the two generals. They were both talking, though neither was making any sound, like watching a holo on mute. Once he was within two metres, the audio deadzone enveloped him as well, Pike's IHD granting him access.

'Gentlemen,' he said with a smile.

'Strike Commander,' they both echoed, Pike with a grin, Scarcroft without.

'Turns out I'm quite famished. Shall we breakfast in the mess?'

Pike assented with a nod, as if he too had suddenly discovered his own hunger. 'Yes,' he said, eyes flashing. 'I always love discussing strategy over a good breakfast.'

## EXIGENCY

*‘The quorl of Kanthuba eat their tribal elders on the last day of the Sundering, a late summer festival on Vhorris honouring their war dead. They believe that by ingesting the flesh of those of such great fortune and martial prowess (to have never been defeated in battle), they too can gain such proficiency at arms. It is horrifying and yet... strangely alluring. Never before has cannibalism been so revered.’*

### **From the journal of Ambassador Iyvan Geygrich, during the Long Insanity**

Bedding women had become so contemptibly easy for Yano that he was half-considering moving on to men. Perhaps straight men, to make it even more of a challenge.

Like most members of the UN Diplomatic Corps, and despite many people believing it to be a myth, Yano had been cosmetically enhanced. Extensive studies commissioned by the UNDC had shown that people were much more responsive to – and thus considerably more likely to be swayed by – somebody more attractive than them. And while the old mantra ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ still held some currency (he snorted at that), there was certainly a biological, evolutionary level of attractiveness which none could deny existed.

Of course, each cadet hoping to make it in the Diplomatic Corps had to be naturally possessed of certain qualities before they could be subjected to such enhancement. Yano had never been a handsome boy, but he had always had a sharp mind. The charisma he had developed, inexplicably to most, in his late teens had been of a brand which the Corps had found particularly appealing. He had been encouraged to apply for a job, had done so, and had been accepted into one of the most coveted occupations the UN Service had to offer.

He had taken to the training exceptionally well. As an awkward and unsociable boy, he had observed his peers from the peripheries, teaching himself to read body language, to second-guess thought processes and emotions, and had developed, piecemeal, his own brand of magnetism. His

insightfulness in reading people enabled him, conversely, to conceal his own emotions. Where others were excited, he would remain passive. Where others were quick to anger, he would remain calm. When his IHD had been upgraded with the UNDC's software suite, he had found that many of the programs simply reinforced what he already knew.

During the many months of training, what surprised him the most was just how many of the things he'd heard about the Corps, and dismissed as utterly fallacious, were true. Charisma, after all, only got one so far, and then the UNDC's more subversive methods came to the fore. Yano had been trained in how to flirt with women and homosexual men. He had been trained to flatter and seduce, and how sex and the promise thereof was one of the most powerful techniques in the ambassador's employ. He had been trained how to threaten, either verbally or subconsciously, and how to wield his IHD's Mindjack software. He had undergone armed and unarmed combat training, for when it all went wrong. Everything, from compliments to lovemaking to fighting, everything was a tool to be used to gain an advantage. Once this gruelling regime of training was over, then, and only then, did the cosmetic enhancement begin. After weeks of what could be termed surgery, they had made him into an Adonis, gifted him a body of sculpted muscle and perfect features based on thousands of hours of psychological and psychosexual research into the perfect man. He was genetically charming, the very essence of what it was to persuade, calm and incite. Men and women would follow him, obey him and fall in love with him. Yet this new, perfect body was as much a prison of responsibility as it was a key to a life of limitless hedonism.

The UNDC's ethics programme had been as long as it had been tedious. He had been taught the diplomatic history of the UN and the power of words to pre-empt wars, to defuse all situations, to calm and to assuage. The weapons in his arsenal were there to coax the tyrant into submission, to soothe the wronged from engaging in combat and, if necessary, to encourage the weakling into just war. They were not, under any circumstances, to be used for personal gain. It was called the UN Service, after all. They had been shown videos of the executions of disgraced Exigency Corps personnel, those who had been caught running vast criminal empires, or been involved in high-profile sexual scandals. They were held to a much higher standard than ordinary people and would be punished accordingly.

Unfortunately for Yano, it turned out that, upon completion of the five-year



intensive training period, deep traits of narcissism had come to the forefront of his Character Map. The cosmetic enhancement quickly made him vainglorious, his new sexual prowess, promiscuous. Unsatisfied with the Corps's VI training programmes, he honed his skills on real women the galaxy over, seducing and bedding them in ever more hedonistic ways. His lack of sexual experience from his youth only compounded his libido; his abundant, perfect charisma became simply a means to achieving IHD-enhanced orgasms.

He concealed his activities as best he could. Often there was no need; many succumbed to the temptation as quickly and as easily as he had. He heard rumours that initiates were given some leeway for the first few months; many tired of the playboy lifestyle as quickly as they started it, settling into the respected and important role for which they had been groomed. Yano, on the other hand, had surrendered himself totally to profligacy. Sex and seduction became a game, and he was an exceptional player.

After a while, he had had to keep his activities utterly secret. Such was the hedonism of his personal life that, if it became public, he would be disgraced and ejected from the Corps. The extravagant state dinners, the diplomatic parties, the travelling to beautiful and exotic corners of the colonised galaxy, all would be snatched from his grasp. In all likelihood, he would be stored for a few years as punishment and then ditched on some Terran hellhole.

Most importantly, delectable dishes like the Undersecretary for Xeno Ecology's daughter would be forever unobtainable. The circles he mixed in meant that there was always a daughter or girlfriend or wife of someone important to pursue. Nine out of ten times he could seduce them and bed them – the risk of being discovered only added to the thrill of it. Provided they were old enough, and he did not have to persuade them beyond the bounds of consent (obvious ethical considerations aside, most UN colonies operated a mandatory death penalty for rape), everyone was fair game. Including the chubby Port Warden's daughter he was currently thrusting his cock into.

He had been sent as an ambassador to the Emergency Trade Federation on Bashik under the mandate of the Exigency Corps, the wing of the UNDC trained specifically to deal with the direst diplomatic incidents in the UN sphere of influence. Most Tier-Three players had similar teams, all trained in xeno etiquette should an interspecies situation develop. In the last two weeks,

the ETF had seized control of Voga City spaceport following the planet's embargo on shipments to the Golgron Alliance. It was a reasonably typical occurrence and had taken Yano less than a day to solve. Apparently the UN had been seeking to depose of Bashik's current governor anyway, which had given him an absurd amount of leverage.

The rest of his time had been spent in the lamentably awful diplomatic quarters of Voga City, waiting for his charter offworld. The Port Warden's daughter had seemed like an obvious target, comely and flirtatious and an easy lay. Too easy, as it had turned out.

He sighed, bored of his current conquest. She was no Undersecretary for Xeno Ecology's daughter. She had been a class act. He smiled as he remembered her, flowing black ball gown hitched up about her waist, underwear about her ankles, face half-pressed into an oil painting of General George Udis as he took her from behind. Well, it had certainly made the speech more interesting...

But he was broken from his reverie by the Port Warden's daughter's sudden and loud moaning. He looked away from the mirror in front of him to see her grasping the pillow with both hands, her plump face pressed into its fabric so as to stifle her gasps. His brow furrowed in annoyance. At least she had great tits. They swung back and forth like pendulums as he reared half-heartedly behind her, her nipples rhythmically brushing the duvet. It was enough to tempt him into climaxing, but he had his IHD contain it. He would come exactly when he wanted to – and when he did, his IHD would make her come as well.

Of course, it didn't work the other way around.

'Oh my *God*,' the Port Warden's daughter suddenly announced and within seconds their coitus ended. She slid forward off him, thighs jerking and spasming, her face pressing harder in the pillow. Yano studied his own baffled expression in the mirror.

'Are you... *coming*?' he asked, watching her jerk and moan. He wondered if anyone had made her orgasm before and felt a strange pang of regret that he might be the first.

She hadn't heard him. After thirty seconds of deep breathing, she brought her face up from the pillow and manoeuvred onto her side, smiling up at him.

'Mmm,' she moaned airily, newly confident, her eyes half-lidded. Her face was flushed and lined with perspiration. Yano hadn't moved, still on his

knees, still fully erect.

‘That was... *amazing*,’ she said, smiling and then giggling. Yano offered an insincere half-smile, frustrated he had been denied his own climax.

‘But I’m not done!’ he said, employing a sexy, playful tone. He moved so that he was lying next to her, his cock resting on her thigh. Obliging, she wrapped her hand around it, and making an expression that he assumed was supposed to be one of false coyness, finished him off.

He got bored after thirty seconds and had his IHD make him ejaculate. She squealed, partly in revulsion as it shot onto her stomach. That gave him some satisfaction.

It took him half an hour and a regrettable amount of empty promises to get her to leave. Once she had, he went immediately to the small shower cubicle at the far end of the room and cleaned himself. He whistled tunelessly as the hot air vac-dried him, and then he exited the cubicle and walked naked back into his quarters.

‘Holo on,’ he muttered and stood at the foot of his bed as the wall behind it transformed into the hypersled post-race review. He wrinkled his nose in annoyance. The Golgron Alliance had comfortably beaten the Kansubashi Raiders in the Galactic Super League, temporarily killing the Kansubashi captain and three spectators in the process. A highly animated argument was taking place on the track itself, with two of the racers – Kansubashi’s Tsomo Ashigara and the Alliance’s number six (even with his IHD’s phonetic pronunciation guide, he failed to pronounce the name correctly) – coming to blows.

‘Ridiculous,’ he muttered. He cancelled the holo after the crash was replayed for the third time and clothed himself in a navy-blue jacket, cream breeches and high-stock collared shirt with a patterned silk cravat. To his left lapel he pinned his Exigency Corps Xeno Division brooch, a red-and-yellow sunburst inlaid with a pair of silver hands, one human and one alien, clasped together, the words *Verba pro Militia* embossed above them. Once he was satisfied with his appearance, he stuffed his personal effects into his bag, ordered the door to the dank hab open and stepped out into the undecorated carbon-concrete corridor of the Seadon Hotel.

The smell of damp was almost overpowering as he strode down the corridor and towards the stairs. To call it a hotel was charitable. Supposedly he was based in one of a selection of suites permanently seconded to the

governor's office, which was perhaps why Bashik had such a poor track record of diplomacy. The Diplomatic Corps's quarters on Earth and Vargonroth were palaces (an actual palace in the case of the former), beautiful old ornate buildings with large and luxurious state rooms, haute cuisine and a dedicated waiting staff. The Seadon Hotel was a squat block of grey carbon concrete on the edge of Voga City, four thousand kilometres from the governor's office and the rest of Bashik's administrative apparatus, and almost completely automated except for the local vermin, the 'plague vole'. Not for the first time in his life, Yano was grateful that he was immune to every disease in the galaxy.

He made his way down the stairs and out through the main entrance of the hotel, checking out with his IHD. Outside, the thick, smoky air of Voga City greeted him, along with the intense summer season heat of the local M-class star. He immediately began to sweat uncomfortably in his suit and took his jacket off and stuffed it into his bag.

A few moments later, a small mailbox icon flashed into life in the top left corner of his vision, and he brushed a fingertip over the activation button below his left eye socket. A large, translucent calendar sprang into life in front of him and was quickly superimposed by an urgent encrypted missive from UNSOC headquarters. He frowned at that, given his current orders were to return to Earth for debrief. A new message, and one directly from Solar Command (rare in itself) would automatically supersede them, and undoubtedly meant a particularly dire situation which, at that moment, he did not have the stomach for.

He briefly toyed with the idea of not reading it but quickly relented with a sigh. It had come from Xander McKone after all, the head of the UN Diplomatic Ministry, though his direct superior, Bran Savach, had hijacked it somewhat to make himself seem more important. He stood on the steps of the hotel as he read the short statement:

Special Envoy Yano. Report to the Fleet Auxiliary voidbreaker *Blue Bolt* immediately. Further orders will be provided en route. Transport waiting at dock 15b, Voga City spaceport. Full diplomatic dispensation is in effect.

– Xander McKone, UNDM, Vargonroth

He cancelled the display to see, as if on cue, a Voga City Police Department cruiser pull up to the base of the steps. It was a sleek, rotor-driven shuttle, black and white and tigered with fluorescent yellow strips, crewed by a pilot and a civil compliance officer who manned the hatch-mounted railgun. The compliance officer, clad in full police-issue Mantix body armour, unhooked himself from the safety rail as the cruiser came to a stop and stepped onto the pavement.

‘Special Envoy Zavian Yano?’ he asked, except that with the Mantix software suite and its access to the UN’s Bashik database, he already knew exactly who he was.

Still, Yano obliged the courtesy. ‘Officer,’ he said and proffered a hand. The policeman took it, his grip firm and his armoured glove cold to the touch.

‘I have orders to take you to the spaceport as a matter of urgency.’

‘Yes, I imagined you would,’ Yano replied.

‘Right this way, sir.’

The officer pulled him into the cruiser’s hold, which was formed of four seats and a small detention unit. He sat in one of the seats and strapped himself in while the officer resumed his position behind the railgun, perched on the floor of the hold and with his feet resting on one of the cruiser’s landing struts. A few moments later, the cruiser’s rotors roared to full power, and they were flying through the city at speed.

It was moments like these that Yano lived for. Police and military escorts, especially the urgent kind, were the ultimate ego trip, irrespective of what any other member of the UNDC claimed. They tore through the city at breakneck speed, a screaming, flashing cacophony of turbofans, sirens and stroboscopic blue warning lights, shunting other traffic out of the way with automated civil compliance subroutines as they soared through Voga City’s tower blocks and arcologies.

The trip to the spaceport took less than ten minutes. The Emergency Trade Federation ships were still withdrawing under the terms of the agreement which Yano had brokered, but despite their lack of impetus, he expected them to keep their word. He had deposed of Bashik’s UN governor implausibly swiftly, which had defused the situation in the space of a few hours. They called it Summary Diplomacy, and it was what they were all supposed to aim for: swift, conclusive and lasting terms without a shot fired.

They cruised through the many low-orbit elevator pylons and wide,

circular platforms, most occupied with grounded freight traffic. The chunky yellow-and-red ETF ships swarmed through the port like a mob of fat insects, spewing clouds of liquid fuel exhaust into the already smog-throttled air. Yano watched them distastefully and wondered whether the UN had been too lenient – but the thought was snatched away by the civil compliance officer, his voice crackling over the cruiser’s closed comlink.

‘We’re approaching 15b now,’ he said, not turning around. Yano craned his neck to look and saw, framed in the dirty golden sky, a UN shuttle waiting in the centre of the platform. It was a sleek, fishlike craft, formed of little more than a pair of wings and twin plasma engines. Stencilled onto its sky-blue hull was a large black ‘UN’, with the Exigency Corps insignia next to it. Its pilot was standing next to it on the platform: a woman, his IHD informed him, who had once flown Valstar atmospheric destroyers in the Fleet Auxiliary.

The VCPD cruiser landed without ceremony, sirens and lights silenced at the flick of a switch. He unstrapped himself from his seat and stepped out onto the platform, suddenly sweating again now that he was back in the heavy, unmoving air. He thanked the crew of the cruiser and watched it for a short while as it pulled away from the platform in a crescendo of whirling rotors and soared among the ETF freighters like an insect flitting among elephants.

‘Special Envoy Yano,’ the woman said behind him. He whirled around and smiled disarmingly.

‘You must be Lia,’ he said, taking her hand.

‘Yes, sir,’ she replied, suppressing a smile. ‘I have orders to take you to the *Blue Bolt* post-haste.’

‘Then let’s get on with it, shall we?’ Yano replied, deciding that he wasn’t going to screw her on the flight up. It would have been easy enough, given time, but the journey to the voidbreaker was unlikely to take much more than thirty minutes with those plasma engines. To have any kind of chance in that time frame, she would either need to be intoxicated or he would have to use his Mindjack, and using the latter would be the end of him. Mindjack software could subconsciously alter the target’s mood by remotely hacking their IHD, but it was considered such a potent weapon that each use was logged and reviewed on the UNDC’s central diplomatic database.

She nodded curtly and climbed aboard, and he followed, appreciating her

buttocks as they passed within a metre of his face. He took a seat by one of the few port holes, while she moved into the capsule at the front of the shuttle. Her role in the flight would be largely redundant, since the shuttle would literally fly itself. UN decrees following a series of highly publicised space disasters involving entirely autonomous ships, however, meant that all space-bound flights had to be overseen by a qualified pilot.

He sat back as she spoke to traffic control, and soon the gentle hum of the plasma engines filled the hold. The shuttle pulled smoothly away from the ground, and the smoggy air of Voga City turned to white cloud, then deep cerulean sky and finally a glittering black starfield within the space of a couple of minutes. As they exited the atmosphere, Yano felt himself pull away from the chair slightly, and he was overcome by the familiar and irritating feeling of weightlessness.

The journey was shorter than he had anticipated. For the most part he read an article from his IHD about the Pillars of Cain, a trio of gigantic, yellow-and-green gas clouds observable from the starboard side of the shuttle. A few times he tried to strike up a conversation with Lia, but she rebuffed him, apparently uninterested, as if she had been able to overhear his earlier thoughts. After that they both sat in silence, until Yano waved on the seat's holo and activated a playlist of soothing music.

It was automatically cut off by an alarm sounding in the cockpit.

'What's that?' he asked in an annoyingly worried tone.

The pilot donned a headset. 'We're approaching the exclusion zone,' she said simply, and that was that.

For the next three minutes, the cockpit was alive with various alarms as they passed through the *Blue Bolt*'s three separate exclusion zones, concentric spheres of space that enabled one to be met with varying tiers of force depending on how close they came, unauthorised, to the voidbreaker. At each challenge, the pilot carefully read out a number of authorisation codes, but despite that Yano was still warned by his IHD that he had been hit by several waves of LRIS. By the time they were fully cleared to approach, they had passed into the third and final exclusion zone, which saw them liable to be spaced with zero warning. The voidbreaker would also have a suite of bioterrorism drones, a host of autonomous robots whose only function was to hunt out spacesuit-clad survivors and, well, terminate them. The thought made him feel what was uncomfortably akin to terror.

They docked without incident, however, and Yano was quickly waved through the airlock and the shuttle's docking proboscis. He was met by a pair of marines, both clad in full Mantix pressure suits and armed with a pair of hull-friendly, flechette-loaded railguns. They knew Yano wasn't armed from the intensive LRIS carried out by the *Blue Bolt*, but he supposed they might still have to kill him.

'Welcome aboard, Special Envoy,' one of them said. His IHD tag identified him as Lieutenant Sykes. He proffered a hand, and Yano took it. He was pulled through the open airlock, and the other marine closed it behind him and sealed it.

The voidbreaker was the smallest craft in the Fleet after the clipper, and designed for lengthy, deep space patrols. As a result, there were only two life-support modules: the smaller one he was currently in, which held the two marines' quarters, the armoury and a host of boarding equipment; and the second, slightly larger module, which held the command centre, the captain's private quarters and the remainder of the crews' sleep capsules. All of it was crammed inside a grey hull the shape of a whale's head, meaning there was little space for anyone other than the five crewmembers – and that number included the two marines.

Yano tried to hide his disdain as he looked around him. Every conceivable space was stuffed full of equipment. Indeed, the ship was little more than a cargo hold bolted on to a trio of FTL engines and coated with thermofoam. This was nothing like the stately diplomatic cruisers he was used to travelling in. The recycled air smelled stale, despite the scrubbers, and it was almost unbearably hot.

Sykes gestured to one of the sleep capsules. 'That's the VR sync,' he said, his voice tinny through the helmet speaker. 'Let me know once you're done, and we'll make the jump.'

Yano nodded. He used the grab hoops randomly decorating the hold to pull himself into the capsule, and once he was strapped in, he accessed the VR sync with his IHD and fell into a state of unconsciousness.

He awoke after what felt like a full night's sleep to find himself standing in a standard VR briefing chamber. The room was drum-shaped, filled with an oval table, eight chairs and a scattering of holo projectors. Light poured in through a two-metre window encircling the full diameter of the room.



Outside, there was nothing except endless green grass and above it a featureless blue sky.

There were two other men sat at the table, both of whom he recognised. The first was the President of the UN, Rick Aurelius, looking positively dishevelled. The second was Yano's boss and the head of the UN Diplomatic Ministry, Xander McKone. He looked much less dishevelled.

'Sit down, please,' Xander said, gesturing to one of the chairs. Yano sat, vaguely amazed that he was talking to the President.

Aurelius cleared his throat. 'I've been told that within the Xeno Division of the Exigency Corps, you're the best,' he said without preamble. 'Spare me any false modesty you might have at this point, and tell me truthfully whether this is the case.'

Yano shrugged inwardly. Certainly he was one of the best, though he was genuinely unsure whether he was the best. McKone obviously thought so; otherwise, he wouldn't be there.

'Yes, sir. I am very good at what I do,' he decided, even if his xeno diplomacy had been a little light recently. Practically non-existent, in fact.

'Good,' the President continued without pause. 'What I'm about to tell you is highly classified, though doubtless it will soon become common knowledge the galaxy over,' he grumbled. 'We have a developing Code Cyan. A short while ago, the kaygryn attacked one of the provari crusade fleets in the Vadian Spiral. The provar are probably hours from obliterating the kaygryn. In fact, they have already started attacking local targets, one of them being Vos'Shan on Uvolon.'

Yano felt his mouth go dry but managed to nod curtly and professionally.

'To make matters worse, we have a colony there,' McKone added, his voice calm.

'Anternis,' Yano said. He had been there on holiday.

'Precisely,' the President replied. 'We have measures being implemented as we speak to ensure the safety of the civilian population, and in any event, we are not about to rush into a war against a superior enemy. Obviously, we believe it is in everyone's best interests to defuse the situation as soon as possible.' McKone nodded sagely next to him. 'To that end, we have called a mandatory summit in line with Galactic Protocol Nine.'

Yano nodded. More than anything, he was surprised; this sort of thing didn't usually take more than a few hours to become UN-wide news. Beyond

his initial shock, though, was greed. There had been no decent xeno work recently, nothing interesting since Merisgard. This situation – terrible though it was – would generate a significant amount of coverage, and he would be at the middle of it, centre-galactic-stage. To lead on such a diplomatic mission would make him.

‘Where is the summit?’ he asked mildly.

‘Gonvarion,’ McKone replied.

Yano shrugged and nodded at the same time. It was the obvious choice. The traditional summit venue, Gonvarion had been a non-contentious territory for centuries, maintained by the peace-loving zhahassi deep within the Zhahassi Commonwealth. Every trans-civilisational summit for the last hundred years had taken place within its famed Memorial Tower.

‘You will go there immediately,’ the President said, standing up. ‘Xander is in the process of assembling a team – they will meet you there. You will receive your full mandate on arrival.’

McKone stood up as well. ‘Good luck, Yano,’ he said. ‘There will of course be a full support network back on Vargonroth as well. We aren’t throwing you under the bus.’

Yano nodded, this time slightly uncertainly. He hadn’t thought he was being thrown under the bus. It was not like McKone to make such a clumsy statement.

‘Good. That’s all we have time for right now,’ the President said. ‘You have your instructions. We’ll speak again in the near future.’

Yano was about to say something else when the VR sync terminated, and he was left blinking dry-eyed at the dark interior of the sleep capsule in the cramped and horrible *Blue Bolt*. Blearily, he unclipped himself from the harness and pushed the door open, floating free.

‘Gonvarion,’ he croaked to Sykes, feeling like he had just woken up from a coma. ‘We’re going to Gonvarion.’

## BORDERLANDS

*‘Be careful what you say. They are watching us right now.’ (trans.)*

### **Deputy Executor Tel’Caan Son on the United Nations Intelligence Service, overheard at the summit of Acturis**

She had been in the VR sync for less than an hour when the message came through. Usually it wouldn’t have bothered her, except this time she had selected one of the sync’s staggeringly large collections of Ultraporn programs to run while she slept.

She sighed and shrugged off her computer-generated lover’s hands. The program immediately sensed her receding libido and misinterpreted it as boredom with the simulant. Hastily it offered her the option of syncing with a real person, but she politely declined. Having vigorous cybersex with the avatar of what was almost always going to be a teenage boy had never appealed to her.

The moorland breeze ruffled her dark hair as she stood up, pulled her underwear back on and tucked her breasts back into the 19th-century bodice she was clothed in. Tonight she had opted for a program with a setting akin to that of *Wuthering Heights*, though doubtless its contents were considerably more pornographic than the original text. Or at least it would have been had she been allowed to finish.

She turned around and dismissed the unfeasibly perfect (and perfectly naked) simulant, who faded into nothingness. In his absence, she was left standing outside a small, empty farmhouse. To her left sat a pair of squat brick outbuildings and to her right a pen of sheep, or at least what the program insisted sheep used to look like, unlike the pulsating vats of GM meat which passed for modern Terran livestock.

She exhaled loudly, her eyes scanning the rolling moorland beyond the farmhouse, marshy green hills punctured by fingers of grey rock and covered with ferns, stretching all the way to the horizon and the looming slate-grey sky. She briefly felt like running, running into the moors, feeling the cool rain on her face and the soft, squelchy ground beneath her feet. Instead, somewhat dejected, she opened the message. It was from another agent, Karris Haig,

who was monitoring Vos'Shan via aerial drone from Anternis's UNIS installation. It read simply:

Commander Iyadi is on the move.

She cursed softly. Haig wouldn't have disturbed her sleep without it being important, and it was.

She had her IHD cancel the program and awoke to find herself staring at the inside of her sleep capsule. The words 'Welcome back Lyra Staerck' flashed in front of her, followed by 'It is 03:45 local time'. She unstrapped herself from the harness, pushed the door open and stepped out into the module.

The mission station was reminiscent of a deep space relay, a cramped, cubic unit with bolted-on sleep and ablutions capsules, and jammed full of holos and operator consoles. A locker towards the south-facing wall contained a UNIS-issue Mantix suit complete with refraction-stealth capability and a palm-coded railgun, while the rest of the available space was taken up by exterior drone housing, counter-LRIS generators and electronic warfare pods.

Lyra walked two short yet awkward steps to the module's only chair and activated the master command console. Immediately, the wall in front of her turned transparent, affording her an unparalleled view of the kaygryn nation state of Vos'Shan from a thousand metres up the gentle northern slopes of the Tiberean Mountain range, the natural land border between Vos'Shan and Anternis. She keyed in a number of authorisation codes and accessed Haig's drone, currently circling the city two kilometres overhead. Once she was satisfied the optic feeds were running and recording, she established an encrypted, audio-only link with the Anternis installation.

'What's going on?' she asked, allowing her IHD and the station's intelligence processors to digest all of the pertinent information for her. So far there was very little.

She heard Haig sniff on the other end of the line. 'Iyadi is moving,' he said tiredly. The gravelly, drained state of his voice made her itch for a stim.

'From where to where?' she asked.

'From his hab to I-don't-know-where-yet,' Haig replied. He coughed. 'You want to take this one?'

Lyra snorted unsympathetically. 'I hope that was a joke.'

'Hmm. Fine,' Haig replied, stifling a yawn.

They sat in silence while the drone's enhanced optic feed zoomed in to their quarry, proffering a whole load of useless data as it did so. Iyadi was a kaygryn troop commander of one of the city's many sanctioned militia groups, captaining about two or three thousand volunteers currently camped out to the north of the settlement. Kaygryn forces had been building up in Vos'Shan over the last few months, much to the bemusement of UNIS, and taking into consideration the fact that Anternis maintained no UNIS presence beyond a deep space relay in the Upper Vadian Spiral, Lyra had been drafted in from a considerably more intense posting on Borealis 174 to pull together and surveil a list of kaygryn of interest.

She watched as the feed closed in on a solitary figure meandering through a narrow street. Iyadi was typical of most kaygryn: average human height, dark skin covered in close-cropped dark fur, and a leathery, craggy head with grooved barbs in place of where human hair would have grown. Like all kaygryn, he also possessed a pair of vestigial arms positioned roughly halfway down his ribs, a hangover from their artificially accelerated evolution at the hands of the provar.

A quick scan from the drone showed that the kaygryn was intoxicated on human draft beer, imported from Anternis, and post-coital.

'Someone got lucky,' Haig murmured and then snorted. 'He's fucking drunk.'

'Literally,' Lyra replied drily. She watched in silence for another five minutes. 'Karris, what am I supposed to be looking for here? He's just walking.'

'You say that,' Haig said, 'but look at this.'

At the top left-hand corner of Lyra's main screen, a group of holos appeared, depicting all of the kaygryn of interest they were supposed to be keeping an eye on. The holos automatically clustered around a single, dome-shaped building near the centre of the city.

'Wait – they're all in there?' she asked, concern creeping into her voice.

'All of them,' Haig replied. 'Even Oné.'

Oné was the Vos'Shan'i fleet skarl and the most elusive of all of them. It was rare for any of these kaygryn to be seen together, but for reasons unknown, Oné especially.

‘What do you think?’ Haig asked.

Lyra frowned. ‘What’s that building? Have I seen it before? Do we have any eyes or ears inside?’ she asked. It should have been easily possible for the drone to see and hear inside the hab, even from two kilometres above.

‘Nope, another deadzone. It’s just a regular kaygryn hab. We’ve tried infiltrating local assets into them before but they never gain access. You know what they’re like about their habs.’

‘Yeah,’ Lyra murmured. She vaguely recalled reading the dossier on other notable deadzoned habs around the city. It looked like they had just found another.

‘Do they know we’re watching?’ she asked.

‘Unlikely. Kaygryn intelligence is a joke.’

‘Doesn’t mean they don’t know,’ Lyra scowled. Haig’s laziness annoyed her.

She watched as Iyadi swaggered into the domed building and disappeared from her screen. She ordered the drone to try and penetrate the deadzone anyway, but it was futile without engaging some seriously heavy-duty LRIS. Whatever they had inside the building, it was advanced.

‘There are only a few electronic warfare pods I know that can create a deadzone that strong,’ she said. ‘We checked the arms market for any unusual kaygryn activity, didn’t we?’

A moment later an e-dossier appeared on her screen, displaying the results of a comprehensive search through the various legal and illegal galactic arms markets active on and around Uvolon.

‘We have, and it turned up zippo,’ Haig replied a few moments later. ‘Besides, EWPs that strong aren’t that uncommon. We sell a lot of them. To a lot of people.’

Lyra wrinkled her nose. ‘It’s almost like the UN enjoys making our lives difficult.’

‘Ha,’ Haig replied unenthusiastically.

They watched the feed from the drone for another hour, during which nothing happened. Once it was clear nothing else was going to happen, Lyra wordlessly left the drone in Haig’s hands and closed down the master operator console, letting the station tick back over to its VI-controlled night shift. She returned to the sleep capsule and drifted into plain, deep unconsciousness.

The capsule woke her at the much more sociable hour of 09:00 local time. Yawning, she climbed back out and reactivated the console to see that the drone was still focussing on the same building. She quickly undressed and entered the ablutions cubicle opposite the capsule, and activated the express wash function. Several nozzles sprayed her with an antibacterial vapour for thirty seconds, before they vac-dried her. She exited the cubicle, donned a t-shirt emblazoned with the UN insignia and a pair of loose-fitting shorts, and sat down in front of the command console chewing on a stick of tooth cleanser.

With a wave of her hand, she reinstated the encrypted link to Haig. 'Karris?' she asked.

'Good morning,' he replied almost immediately, sounding even more exhausted.

'Anything happen overnight?'

Another bout of holos appeared on her screen. 'Iyadi sent a few doppelgängers out of the front door overnight to try and throw off any surveillance. They're all still milling about the city. I tasked a couple of slaved subdrones to watch them anyway, but we were able to rule them out pretty quickly.'

'He's suspicious,' Lyra said, swallowing the cleanser gum.

'True, but that doesn't mean he knows anything. Anyway look, I need to sleep. Have you got this?'

Lyra briefly cast an eye over the overnight intelligence from the VI. 'Yes,' she said, satisfied that there was nothing else save the multiple doppelgängers. 'I can take it from here.' Her screen was populated with the drone's daily command list as Haig logged off, and then he was gone.

She watched the city for an hour through the enhanced optics of the drone, compiling information for her monthly report as the sun steadily climbed into the sky. It was more of a formality than anything else. Since she communicated with Haig almost every day, his own reports contained all of the pertinent information she was able to distil.

After a while, she opened the module's food locker, took out a few ration packs and chewed on one of the pink, foamy bars. She played around with the drone's optics, cycling through the visible and non-visible spectrum, but the deadzone prevailed each time. Mild LRIS also bounced off the deadzone harmlessly and continued to do so even when she dialled it up. They would

need naval-grade hardware to crack it. Though she would never admit it, it was galling to be outsmarted by a kaygryn.

She spent another few hours reviewing intelligence with the assistance of the module's on-board VI while the sun continued its punishing climb, cooking Vos'Shan with its powerful rays. The location of the Bayscillic Ocean just to the south of Anternis made the air incredibly humid, and she knew that outside the module, daily temperatures could easily reach forty degrees Celsius. Once she began to sweat, she purged the atmosphere and activated the climate control scrubbers, refreshing and cooling the station's interior, then activated a video feed and set it to record.

'Special Agent Lyra Staerck, UNIS serial number 983082-16 Omega. Mission Station designate Vos'Shan One, Uvolon, Upper Vadian Spiral.' She paused to let her IHD add its own unique time and location stamp to the triple-encrypted transmission and then resumed with well-rehearsed words. 'I am still observing Commander Iyadi and the other identified kaygryn of interest. The situation remains unexplained. Irregular kaygryn troops have been growing in numbers for the last ninety days, though to what end remains unclear. Drone scans have now counted ten thousand, most concentrated in a camp three kilometres north of the Tiberean Mountains.

'Last night we observed a gathering of a number of KOIs, including Commander Iyadi and the kaygryn fleet skarl, Oné. It is of note that Oné has now become the most elusive of the KOIs. This marks his third sighting in the last thirty days. I append drone optic records for reference.' She did so via her IHD. 'Note that the building which they currently occupy has been deadzoned to any long-range invasive scanning – and has been for an unknown period of time. Agent Haig has the full dossier available on request. It seems that there has been no new or historic kaygryn activity on any of the international arms markets concerning EWPs which might emulate these effects. Conjecture: they have stolen the pods, been provided with them by another Tier-Three player, or they were in possession of advanced electronic warfare countermeasures before we even began monitoring Vos'Shan.'

She paused the report, rubbing her neck. The last of those scenarios almost certainly wasn't true. On provar insistence, the Treaty of Hadan's Reach had resulted in the confiscation of almost all kaygryn advanced warfare technology. She pushed the thoughts from her mind. She was not immune to the UN's collective guilt for Hadan's Reach.



‘There is nothing else of interest to report. We will continue to observe until ordered otherwise. As an addendum, I would repeat my request for better resources; we are reliant on one ancient observation-only drone seconded from UNAF and one dedicated satellite with no naval-grade LRIS capability.’ She paused again to stop herself getting worked up. She had been asking for better equipment since she had arrived. ‘Staerck out,’ she finished tersely, packaging the transmission before sending it to the Anternis installation over an encrypted link. Once the report had been confirmed received by the installation VI, she reclined in the chair, clasped her hands behind her head and closed her eyes.

Her IHD roused her an hour later, after she had evidently dozed off. In itself, it wasn’t a problem. The module’s VI, drone surveillance and her own IHD were programmed to track any suspicious activity, and her job as a human operator was designated as seventy-five per cent redundant. Still, she was annoyed with herself. She sat forward and enlarged the drone’s optic feed on the tac screen.

And felt a stab of adrenaline through her guts.

‘Jesus fucking *Christ*,’ she said, staring wide-eyed at the screen.

The kaygryn were on the move, and in force. Four columns of militia were moving up the base of the jungle-strewn mountain slopes. There were hundreds of the aliens, clad in all manner of scrappy, ragtag armour, some clutching outdated chemical-propellant rifles, others railguns. Some were even carrying melee weapons, slung over their shoulders or dumped in push carts.

She quickly activated an emergency channel, and moments later Haig was on the other end of the line.

‘Karris, what the fuck is going on?’ she asked, linking him into the drone’s optic feed.

There was a moment’s silence. ‘Fuck,’ he agreed. ‘When did this start?’

She quickly checked the drone feed. ‘We started recording twenty minutes ago. Half the bloody encampment is moving south.’ The Suspicious Activities Alarm should have sounded immediately once hundreds of armed aliens began to move towards Anternis; there was no way the triple surveillance net would not have picked it up. Angrily, she increased the sensitivity of the alarm, despite the VI insisting it was in full working order. The protocols would have to be thoroughly reviewed.

She enhanced the drone's optic feed and scanned the kaygryn militia lines. She swore when she saw them: surface-to-orbit missile batteries, at least one per column.

'They're moving heavy artillery,' she said, her eyes wide with incredulity. There must have been an explanation for it. 'Where on Earth did those STO batteries come from? They haven't done something stupid like declare war on us have they?'

Haig didn't reply. Rather than wait for an answer, she opened a new e-dossier and started making notes on some of the heavier weapons being pushed and dragged up the mountains. Some of them were antiquated shell-loaded guns with three-metre barrels, propelled on metal caterpillar tracks by large, smoke-belching engine blocks. Others were sleeker and more modern satellite-guided, surface-to-orbit missile launchers, though some were being pulled by lumbering beasts of burden. The disparity in kaygryn technology was fascinating.

'I've spoken with Aryn Vance over at the UNAF base,' Haig said. His voice was strained with annoyance. 'Apparently he was pre-warned by the kaygryn attaché that they were going to be conducting military exercises this afternoon, and we have formally sanctioned it. UNAF have their own drones surveilling the border as we speak. So nothing to worry about.'

Lyra didn't take her eyes off the screen. 'They have a dozen heavy artillery pieces here, Karris,' she said. 'Surely we would have picked up on this if it was a pre-planned exercise.'

Haig sighed. 'Look, Vance says it's a formally sanctioned exercise, so it's a formally sanctioned exercise. It's their country so they can do whatever they want, provided they don't cross the border. Relax. Let them get on with it, and if they get too close, we'll have to warn them off.'

Lyra nodded. 'Okay,' she said. 'Sorry to wake you.'

'Don't worry about it; I'm glad you did,' Haig replied and was gone.

She didn't doze off again. Instead, she spent the next few hours observing the troop columns and making notes. Disturbingly, detailed drone scans indicated that every ranged weapon the kaygryn had with them was in working order and supplied with live ammunition. Each artillery piece had also been cleaned, judging by the particles of residue the drone was able to detect, and was ready to fire. There was even evidence that some of their melee weapons had been sharpened.

She spooled back in time through the drone memory banks to watch the kaygryn militia encampment to the north slowly empty while she had been asleep. The encampment was made up of hundreds of tents, each dome-shaped, and all made from the same heavy brown fabric. Some were huge, housing hundreds of the aliens; others were smaller, which she assumed housed the officers. A motor pool to the south of the camp held all manner of technologically advanced and technologically backward vehicles, as was usual within post-Hadan's Reach kaygryn society. It was from that pool that the artillery pieces had come from, though the surface-to-orbit batteries were certainly a new addition. She had the VI search the galactic arms markets for recent purchases of Sauben E0-16 Hydra missiles, the particular brand which the drone had identified. Predictably, the search of both illegal and legal markets turned up nothing.

Once she had finished reviewing what she had missed, she revisited the last thirty minutes of activity around the Iyadi deadzone. She was frustrated to find that he, along with the other kaygryn of interest, had remained inside the hab – in itself odd, given that what was taking place to the north would undoubtedly require senior military direction. She made a note to redouble their efforts in gaining access to the deadzone. They would probably have to infiltrate the higher orders of the militia with local assets – perhaps even turn some of the officers themselves. She snorted. That was going to be nigh on impossible.

She collated her notes and appended the drone recordings and sent it to Haig's office as an e-dossier. Then she double-checked the clearance Aryn Vance had supposedly given the kaygryn to perform this charade of a military exercise. To her surprise, she found that the UNAF base had indeed authorised it weeks before, though they had neglected to tell the UNIS team. That was irritating: her paranoia had been expecting a last-minute request.

She used the subcutaneous inserts in her hands to manipulate the holo so that the optic feed from the drone panned across the four columns of kaygryn troops, trying to build up a more accurate picture of what they were dealing with. Each column consisted of roughly a hundred kaygryn and on average three artillery pieces. To give them their credit, they moved at an admirable pace given the technology they were utilising, and the lead troops of each column had already made good progress. That said, the lower, shallower slopes of the Tiberean Mountains were an easy climb, and what was more,

dozens of roads and pathways had been cut into the side of the mountain from a now decommissioned quarry, further aiding the ascent. She estimated that they would crest the plateau on which the mission station was situated by the early evening.

Her attention was drawn to one of the holos crowding the tac screen. Frowning, she enlarged it to see that it was the feed from Uvolon's meteorological satellite, issuing an amber storm warning. It pulsed orange, filled with swirling, kaleidoscopic graphics denoting pressure patterns, wind speed and precipitation. According to the feed, it would continue until midnight.

'Good,' she muttered to herself. Outside, she could already see dark clouds sailing low overhead, heading north from Anternis. Heavy rain would make the kaygryn attempt at the summit treacherous, especially with heavy machinery. If they were smart, they would abort the whole silly exercise.

Now another holo took precedence on the tac screen, the feed from an invasive diagnostic which their drone had infiltrated remotely into the kaygryn intelligence network, such as it was. The program continuously scanned all known communications frequencies that the kaygryn militias, regular army, air force, navy and government and administrative apparatus used, as well as the Uvolonese black market. It also made covert copies of all files transferred between those bodies, and flagged suspicious data using state-of-the-art autonomous discrimination programs.

The data streams appeared as sequences of numbers which her IHD decoded in real time. Most of the official kaygryn armed forces channels contained nothing but uninteresting chatter and white noise. It was the militias they were more interested in, and the militias who were, due to their chequered use of technology, much harder to track. The fact that Argish, the universal kaygryn language, was very difficult to translate into Terran further complicated matters; detecting coded messages, which were almost entirely idiomatic, was practically impossible. That was why they relied so heavily on local assets, except that half of them would tell UNIS anything for the money they received, and the other half had a strong tendency to get murdered.

Consequently, Lyra concentrated on the files they transferred more than the live chatter. Even then, the documents were mostly unintelligible gibberish, though the pictures she could understand well enough. Unfortunately there were thousands of those, topographical readouts of Vos'Shan, star charts of

the Vadian Spiral, shipping manifests, thermal readouts, civilian traffic schedules... Even with the module's discrimination programs running on full, there were too many to study. She could see why her job as a human operator was seventy-five per cent redundant. Perhaps seventy-five was charitable.

She cycled through the picture files without purpose, pausing on a few every minute. The discriminatory program had also flagged a number of images independently which it adjudged to be noteworthy, which she stored to the right side of the screen, occasionally cross-referencing them against the pool. It was only when she came across a satellite photo of the border region between Vos'Shan and Anternis for the third time that she sat forward in her seat. She cycled back through the images and frowned. Two were identical and unremarkable, but the third had a highlighted section within the northern part of Anternis City, surrounded by annotations in Argish. She assigned a VI subroutine to try and translate some of it.

She studied the third picture intently. It had been taken by a kaygryn satellite; the VI was able to verify that much. With a thought, her IHD produced a UN-sanctioned geopolitical map of Anternis. She drew her two index fingers together so that the images overlapped and then enhanced the highlighted area again.

'Anternis General Hospital,' she said, bemusement wrinkling her features.

Her concentration was broken by the harsh trill of the module's incident alarm. She started in her seat and in doing so waved the holo off.

'Shit!' she snapped, turning to the tac screen to see what the commotion was. The drone's rain-blurred optic feed had focussed on a mountainous area north of Vos'Shan, where a large, circular lake was slowly draining, the water swirling in a massive, foaming vortex like someone emptying a sink. As the waters receded, they revealed a grey half-torus shape, ribbed with piping and external conduits and antennae, covered in all manner of algae and Uvolonese littoral fauna.

Lyra activated her comlink to the Anternis installation. 'Karris!' she shouted as the kaygryn corvette's engines began their power-up sequence, 'you need to look at this!'

She didn't have time to wait for a reply; another alarm went off, and one of the holos to the right of the main screen flickered over to display an orbital astrograph of Uvolon. The VI was already working hard to obtain a direct VL

feed from their low-orbit satellite, even going as far as sucking power from some of the module's ancillary functions. That was not a good sign.

'Oh Christ, what now?' she snarled, frantically trying to issue the drone commands. Its optic feed started to flicker and fail as naval-grade electronic interference from the corvette propagated through the atmosphere. Already her screens were being clouded with warning graphics from Anternis's UNAF base, and she could see from yet another holo a swarm of UN combat drones clustering around the border, ready to shoot down the corvette if required.

'Lyra! What the fuck is happening?' Haig shouted over the link, his voice automatically filtering through the cacophony of alarms.

'They have some kind of... *buried* corvette in Vos'Shan and they're about to fucking fly away in it,' Lyra replied, wiping her brow free of perspiration.

Haig's voice seemed to catch in his throat for a second. 'Lyra, they're all on that ship. Shit, have you seen this?'

She hadn't, but Haig had already sent her the diagnostic from their one dedicated satellite. Scanning had detected all the kaygryn of interest except Iyadi aboard the corvette.

'How did they...?' she breathed. 'How is that even possible?' She conjured up the image of the deadzoned hab only to find it completely unchanged. 'The drone says they're all still in the hab!'

'Then it's been compromised,' Haig said matter-of-factly. 'Scrub it. We'll use the orbital feed.'

Lyra tapped the emergency override protocol into her console, and the drone wiped its drives before self-destructing in a blaze of plasma. The optic feed cut out for a microsecond before readjusting to the orbital feed, except that instead of being afforded a vertiginous orbital view of Vos'Shan, a haze of static filled the screen.

'I'm not getting any reading from the orbital feed,' Lyra said, anxiously trying to reach it via the module. Three of her holos were now showing FEED TERMINATED. The VI was desperately trying to come up with a workaround when her attention was drawn to the astrograph of Uvolon. As soon as she saw it, her flesh crawled.

'Karris,' she said slowly. 'There's a provari cruiser in orbit.'

'What?' came Haig's dismissive reply. 'Lyra we're blind; I'm co-opting one of UNAF's drones. You should start receiving the feed any second – let

me know when you do.'

Even as he spoke, the tac screen in front of Lyra changed from static to an aerial view of Vos'Shan, this time from south of the border so that the Tiberean Mountains took up much of the view. Not that it mattered, since Lyra wasn't watching it.

'Karris,' she said, this time slightly more nervously, her eyes transfixed on the astrograph. 'There's a provari cruiser in orbit and it's currently following a strike trajectory.'

There was a pause.

'Oh Jesus *fuck*.'

It was at that moment the corvette took off, its massive engine units vaporising much of the lake which had hidden it for the last decade. Once more, a mass of alarms activated within the module, and a fresh batch of screens popped into existence, each one recording a different aspect of the ship – roster, mass, weaponry, actual and predicted trajectories. It powered through the air, flying barely ten thousand feet above the ground, bearing due south towards Anternis. Given its vector, it was quickly flanked by a dozen UNAF combat drones flying escort.

'What the hell are we doing?' Lyra sang, her heart beating so hard she felt as though it was about to burst through her chest. If the corvette fired on Anternis, they would be at war – and she was less than a kilometre away from four hundred kaygryn in possession of a lot of firepower.

'It's out of our hands,' Haig said simply. 'It's a military matter n—'

The kinetic rail strike shot through the clouds like the fist of God, punching the corvette into the grey, choppy waters of the Bayscillic Ocean in a blaze of superheated steam and blinding plasma. Lyra didn't even know the provari cruiser had manoeuvred into its final firing position until she saw that all their orbital equipment had been destroyed, rendering several more of her holos blank.

'Cruiser is running LRIS,' she managed, swallowing. 'All orbital modules are junked.'

'I'm speaking to Aryn Vance now; we have surface-to-orbit voidar and tracking equipment. We'll know what it's doing soon enough,' Haig said.

Lyra tapped into one of the UNAF drone feeds. A large wave was currently making its way across the outer ring road of Anternis, though the enormous cloud of boiling vapour resulting from the corvette's seawater-flooded

engines was already dissipating. The ship had been engulfed so quickly by the waves that it was almost like it had never happened.

She swallowed back her fear, ordered one of the UNAF drones to monitor any data traffic passing between Vos'Shan, Anternis and orbit, and opened a new e-dossier. She began to populate it with all the salvageable information from the last hour when the feed from one of the UNAF ground relays monitoring the orbit spluttered into an undulating whine. A shaky astrograph indicated that the cruiser was on the move again, and the VI's estimated strike trajectory filled her with equal measures of horror and disbelief.

'Karris...' she said, realising that the comlink, as well as a lot of the module's ancillary functions, was starting to crack under the intense strain of the provari LRIS. 'That cruiser is prosecuting kaygryn military targets.'

'Just stay put for now, Lyra,' Haig replied, the feed fading in and out. 'Vance is trying to hail them.'

A painful jolt of adrenaline fired through her system. The astrograph gave one more whine and then cut out. The VI's predicted strike trajectory put the next shot directly on top of the kaygryn militia still struggling up the rain-soaked mountains. They were less than half a kilometre away.

'Exfiltrating!' she announced, her heart pounding in her constricted chest. A deep, animal terror was taking root inside her as she launched out of the command chair and made for the locker on the far side of the module.

'Hol... osition...' Haig's voice came through before the link died under the pressure of the cruiser's electronic warfare pods.

Lyra ignored him. The provar probably wouldn't shoot at the kaygryn while she was there, not unless they wanted to start a war with the UN; the only problem was they couldn't see her. The module was refraction shielded from the entire LRIS spectrum and could withstand the most intense orbital scrutiny for upwards of an hour. What was worse, it took almost as long for the shielding to wear off after being shut down, ruling out the possibility of pre-emptively revealing it.

She began to weep as pure panic gripped her. She yanked open the locker to reveal a full UNIS-issue MG-14 Mantix suit, a form-moulded cocoon of armour, exoskeleton and cutting-edge sensor suites. Frantically, she pulled the leg sections of the suit free and stuffed her feet into them, tearing off her left large toenail in the process. The pain of it didn't register, even as blood



began to squelch between her toes. The imagined itch of the provari targeting laser was all she could feel now.

Hot tears streamed from her eyes as she snapped the waist lock closed and pulled the torso section free from the locker rack, slotting it into the exoskeleton's upper spinal plug. The suit was deceptively lightweight, given that its nanogel matrix had a shockwave dissipater which would protect her from everything short of hypersonic projectiles. She hastily snapped the thorax locks closed, her fingers shaking and fumbling. Somewhere in the back of her rational mind, she vaguely recalled training for exactly this eventuality, many years before in a pitch-black room on Earth – one rapidly filling with water and alive with the sound of blaring alarms and screaming comrades. They had joked about how absurd the simulation was.

She pulled each of the arm and shoulder sections free and donned them, then the gloves and finally the helmet – which she then remembered she was supposed to have put on first. The HUD flickered into life and synced with her IHD and the module's on-board computer, the helmet storing most of the raw data in its own hard drives, but Lyra didn't wait for the upload to complete. Forgoing the hefty railgun within the locker, she punched the emergency door release and broke into an exoskeleton-powered sprint, through the explosively ejected door and out into the torrential rain currently lashing the entire peninsula.

Aided by the Mantix visor, which had plotted out a course for her down the mountain, she made it nearly one hundred metres before the second rail strike hit. A beam of pure white light stabbed through the clouds above, the thick black thunderhead corkscrewing down around it like a tornado. The blast hit the kaygryn columns with needlepoint accuracy, vaporising them in an instant and burying them under several thousand tonnes of Tiberean Mountain rock.

The Mantix absorbed the worst of the force with its inbuilt nanogel matrix, but it could do nothing to prevent Lyra being hurled off the plateau by the overpressure at close to a hundred kilometres an hour. Unfortunately, UNIS-issue armour didn't contain inbuilt microjets or even a parachute. Instead, it secreted sedatives into her bloodstream to lessen the terror of her unhindered freefall and readied its impact-trauma protocols. It estimated she had a seventy-seven per cent chance of surviving the landing intact.

Once the Mantix logged that she was to land in an area of jungle three

hundred metres below her take-off point, it revised the estimate down to thirty per cent.

As soon as it realised she had been decapitated by a branch, it revised it further down to zero.

## **TIP OF THE SPEAR**

*‘There were two of them. The first killed over a thousand of our men before it and its drones expended the last of their ammunition. It only stopped after we were able to pry it open with two hulgyrs and kill the pilot. The second killed both hulgyrs and lasted for most of the afternoon. We had to kill him with orbital fire when it became available. We surrendered once we learned they were sending four more.’ (trans.)*

### **Quorl Marshal Exvonsa’s war crimes testimony on the Gorman-Valstar mk.11 Goliath, following the Insurrection on Merisgard**

The United Nations Armed Forces base on Anternis lay just beyond the northern boundary of the city, a small, low-tech military installation containing troop quarters, basic training facilities, an STOL landing strip and a three-hangar vehicle bay. When Anternis had been a teeming hub of galactic trade decades before, with its favourable taxation rates and relative astrographic obscurity, the base had been a hive of activity, its UNAF personnel akin to a corporate army ensuring the smooth operation of the international economy. Now it existed as little more than a tick box for military units on soft rotation, an easy and comfortable stopover with warm, tropical weather and an almost non-existent training regimen.

It was a lethargic standing which did not suit its incumbency at the centre of galactic attention, and by the time Vondur reached the base, much of Anternis was in a visible state of panic. Some civilians who had seen the kaygryn corvette and its destruction were already following post-Hadan’s Reach civil contingencies and heading for orbital bombardment shelters deep within the bedrock. His high-speed journey through the streets of Anternis City had demonstrated, however, that many were simply content to run around in blind terror. He had some sympathy for that, since he himself had experienced the feeling of raw helplessness as unopposed naval forces cruised through orbit hundreds of kilometres above with the power to raze continents at the touch of a button. That didn’t stop his lip curling in distaste as shop windows were smashed in and the first wave of looting began.

His IHD automatically warned him that he was being invasively scanned

on approach, an annoying reminder that the base was legally obliged to provide to everyone. He brought the jeep to a stop just short of the main gate, and a guard in full UNAF-issue Mantix exited his station and confirmed Vondur's identity through the suit's inbuilt sensor suite.

'This weather,' the guard mumbled as he punched the gate release, the banality of the statement so perfectly juxtaposed with the severity of the present situation that Vondur found himself concurring without even thinking. It was only then he realised how soaked he was; the jeep's footwells were sloshing with a good three inches of water.

He gunned the engine and drove straight out across the empty landing strip towards the vehicle hangar while all over the city orbital-raid sirens wailed into life. Vondur knew that most of the shelters were practically obsolete, given that they hadn't been upgraded since the colony's founding. Decades of token maintenance and a lack of investment meant that they also only had capacity for about a quarter of the population – not that any of it particularly mattered. Given the needlepoint accuracy with which orbital strikes could be effected, the only reason for a high civilian death toll would be if it was intentional – in which case, a few de Havilland Crust Busters would do the trick, bunker or no.

The jeep shot over the wide, rain-slicked strip, kicking up twin fountains of water in its wake. The air was cooler now as the evening slipped further into twilight, and he shivered as the wind plucked at his soaked clothes. In less than a minute he had reached the end of the runway and pulled to a stop outside one of the drab green vehicle hangars that contained the squadron's Goliaths. He grabbed his duffel bag from the back seat and threw the door open, opening a link to Vance as he did so.

'Commander,' he said, striding over to the door of a squat, olive-green building marked 'OP-PREP' in red lettering.

'Captain,' Vance replied. 'We're in briefing room one. As quick as you can, please.'

'Roger,' Vondur replied, terminating the link. Moments later, the world around him turned white. Everything was thrown into sharp relief as a second sun erupted in the evening sky, accompanied by an almighty crack that triggered his IHD's audio dampers.

'Jesus *Christ!*' he shouted, whirling round to see a second rail strike stabbing into the Tiberean Mountains. He clasped his hands behind his head,

staring in disbelief as the beam dissipated, leaving a vertical contrail in its place. Above the wailing of the city bombardment sirens, more base alarms trilled into life, and at the end of the landing strip, he could see vehicles laden with Mantix-clad troops gunning away from the base, accompanied by swarms of overhead drones.

Swearing under his breath, he tore himself away and turned back into the building, heading right and down the corridor, leaving a trail of rainwater in his wake. Within twenty seconds he reached the briefing room. He shoved open the wooden door to find his entire squadron sitting inside, all clad in full pre-flight gear.

‘Captain, sit down,’ Vance said immediately. He was a short, portly man, moustached and dense with what had once been muscle, wearing olive-green shorts, an olive-green shirt with sky-blue epaulettes, and a pair of khaki boots. His uniform was dark with sweat.

Vondur sat down heavily. In front of him, concentric horseshoes of desks led down to a green linoleum floor where Vance stood, illuminated from behind by a five-metre tac screen currently split between several live drone feeds. The second kinetic rail strike Vondur had seen from outside was being replayed fivefold to his squadron, with dozens of subsidiary holos providing reams of secondary information on the blast. Many of the screens were pulsing discordantly with warning graphics so that Vance looked like he was standing, oblivious, in front of some kind of military-themed rave.

‘For the captain’s benefit, I’ll quickly run through that again,’ Vance said, firing him an irritated look. Vondur’s sodden, dishevelled appearance did nothing to alleviate the reproach. ‘I have spoken directly with General Gordon Pike at SOC Vargonroth. While he did not delve into very many specifics, the gist of it is this: there is a provari cruiser in our low-orbit band. It is currently prosecuting what appear to be exclusively kaygryn targets, for reasons apparently known but classified.’ He rolled his eyes at that. ‘High Command is naturally concerned that, given our proximity to Vos’Shan, we may soon become inadvertent targets ourselves. In light of that fact, current orders dictate that we are to prevent any kaygryn personnel, civilian or military, from crossing the border.’

He performed a sharp waving motion with his left hand, and the holo behind him transformed into a satellite image of the Tiberean Mountains. ‘Provari LRIS has junked all our satellites, as one could expect, so this is an

*historic* image. Nonetheless, the topography remains largely unchanged – though only largely, and only for the moment.’ He added the last comment with a wry smile, which drew some laughs. Vondur himself wasn’t quite ready to join in with the gallows humour while kinetic rail strikes continued to tear two hundred-metre craters out of the Tiberean Mountains.

‘And... the border,’ Vance murmured, watching as a red line superimposed itself across the satellite image. He pointed to it. ‘Anternis is closed for business, gentlemen. Your job is to make sure it stays that way.’

‘If we’re to patrol the border,’ Lieutenant Jarvin asked, Vondur’s second-in-command, ‘isn’t that going to put us directly in harm’s way? The suits are good, but even at medium range, they’re not going to take that kind of punishment.’ He shrugged. ‘It seems to run contrary to Vargonroth’s intentions.’

Vance shrugged back at him. ‘As long as you stay south of the border, there is no reason to think you’ll be hit. SOC has assured me that the provar won’t strike with UN forces in the area.’

It was little comfort. Even the overpressure from kinetic rail strikes was lethal. Vondur had seen what it could do to a Goliath on New Carthage.

Vance turned back to the satellite map. ‘The main passes are here and here,’ he said, indicating the only two lower-altitude crossing points that civilians could realistically attempt to use. ‘You’ll split into three fire teams, two at each of these points, one in reserve... *here*.’ He circled an area using his IHD’s fingertip interface. ‘Captain, I leave the make-up of the fire teams to you. Please, try to keep civilian casualties at *nil*, gentlemen. That is if any of them are stupid enough to attempt to cover a mountain range, in a storm, at night.’

‘What about military targets?’ one of the pilots, Cox, asked. His personal holo terminal was displaying a mosaic of known Vos’Shan’i military technicals.

‘If you feel as though they will draw orbital fire into your AO, then you are cleared to pre-emptively engage any targets, military or otherwise. One can only assume you all know that as a legitimate course of action available to you under the Galactic Convention on the Rules and Conduct of Warfare...’ He offered a sardonic grin when no one answered. ‘Good. Please do try and just wave them off first, though,’ he said, waving his own hand. ‘I don’t want a bloodbath if we can help it, understood?’

A disjointed chorus of affirmatives answered him.

‘Outstanding,’ Vance said tersely. ‘This is a dynamic situation, gentlemen, and unprecedented in the recent history of Anternis. Expect orders to change at short notice.’ He deactivated the large holo. ‘Callsign is “Gatekeeper”. Base is “Thunderhead”. Operation is “Beacon”. All clear? All right, dismissed.’

They all stood and made for the door. Vondur let everyone out first, returning their nods and acknowledgements, and then followed. In the corridor, Jarvin turned to face him.

‘What’s the plan?’ he asked. He was clad in the same pre-flight gear as the rest of the men: a black, form-moulded nanotech suit that looked like a second layer of thick, rubbery muscle. It encased the entire body, ending at the neck in a Mantix gorget interface where the helmet, once in place, would fasten to form a pressure lock.

‘Stay out of the way of those provari KRSs,’ Vondur murmured, his face grim.

Jarvin nodded slowly, sucking his teeth. ‘Yeah,’ he said after a while. ‘Don’t want to end up like we did on New Carthage.’

Vondur grimaced. ‘No,’ he said, recalling the crumbling tower blocks and constant, unending rain of the ruined world. ‘We don’t.’

Jarvin and the rest of the squadron made straight for the vehicle hangar at a brisk pace while Vondur headed for the locker room. Inside, he stripped off his sodden clothes, vac-dried for twenty seconds, then donned his own pre-flight suit. During training, they were supposed to spend up to thirty minutes performing detailed visual and electronic diagnostics of the suit. Instead, he cast a perfunctory eye over the torso area, then had his IHD run an analytic subroutine that would pick up on any glaring issues.

He snatched his helmet from the top shelf of his locker, slammed the door and jogged out of the room, his IHD automatically syncing with the suit so that the thick interface layer became an extension of his own body. He had described the feeling in the past as being painlessly burned alive as the suit’s nanotech interface reached out and connected with his nerve endings, though in truth he was so used to it that it felt like little more than growing a new layer of skin. The end result, once the sync was complete, was a slightly heady sensation in which all his senses were vastly amplified: the rain became a ceaseless cacophony of drumming, the cold linoleum of the floor

turned to ice against the soles of his feet, and the dull olive walls became a corridor of polished emerald. Consequently, his IHD began to passively monitor the heightened input to prevent sensory overload.

He reached the entrance to the armoured hangar and punched in the manual code lock. The door slid open to reveal a vast open space, echoing with the static crackle of plasmastats powering up and pungent with the smell of liquid fuel exhaust. The floor for the most part was bare concrete demarcated by a number of gaudy orange-and-blue warning markers, while the walls rose fully thirty metres high, painted in the same drab olive-green as most of the rest of the base. A trio of gigantic grey Valstar loaders, bulbous military air freighters stained with exhaust fumes and grit, took up one-half of the room. The rest of the hangar was taken up with hundreds of tonnes of equipment and ordnance, tended to by buzzing drones and automated loader mechs.

In the centre of the hangar were the seven GV11b Interdictor-variant Goliaths which made up the squadron under his command. They were aptly named. Each was a three-metre, humanoid tank, clad in thick plates of diamond-reinforced armour and replete with LRIS-proofing, force shielding, atomic weaponry, a full complement of slaved offensive, defensive and orbital reconnaissance drones, a Sauben V591 Hydra surface-to-orbit missile battery and twin Royce-Khan plasma-powered jet packs with a thousand-kilometre range. It was said that the only thing in the UN more expensive to build was a planetary colony and the only thing more advanced, a starship. It was such a versatile design that it was the only piece of military hardware in recent memory to have been copied by the provar.

Vondur smiled to himself as he approached the behemoth, drinking in its impressive lethality. It was currently being serviced by one of the few engineers on Anternis qualified to do so, assisted by a dozen maintenance bots and surrounded by a cloud of diagnostic holos. She was standing on a two-metre platform in oily blue overalls, performing a number of pre-flight system diagnostics. Below her, watching intently, was ZEN.

‘Hello ZEN,’ Vondur said, pulling his helmet on and twisting it so that it locked with the gorget seal.

‘Hello, Captain,’ ZEN burbled in a voice that sounded like liquid data. ZEN was a combat VI, an autonomous humanoid robot built by the Zhahassi Commonwealth and employed almost exclusively as infantry. Vondur had acquired it on Tranquillity after a joint UN/zhahassi anti-piracy action, and,



much to the envy of every soldier he met, it followed him on most operational deployments. Consequently, he and his men had gone to great pains to ensure it was properly inducted into 11 Squadron, even going as far as having the UN and 11 Squadron insignias laser-etched onto its chest carapace.

Vondur yanked on the IHD-coded cockpit handle, and his Goliath's thoracic cavity unlocked and split open, revealing its snug, human-shaped interior. Save a safety harness and oxygen tube, there was little in the way of visible interface; the nanotech suit he was wearing would ensure that all the Goliath's movements were synchronised with his own.

He climbed inside, strapped himself in and plugged the tube into his helmet, allowing the hatch to automatically close behind him. As soon as it was sealed, what space remained in the hold filled with a gooey orange nanogel matrix that acted as both a very proficient shock absorber and IHD amplifier, so that when his IHD synced with the Goliath's head-mounted optical feeds and his flight suit logged with the cockpit interface, it was as though he had never entered the vehicle at all. Indeed, the three-tonne naval-grade rail cannon clasped in the Goliath's gauntlets felt no heavier than a standard infantry rifle.

He ran through his HUD, checking off his ammunition and ordnance counters, drone-status feeds, targeting computer overlay, fuel loads and his personal physiology indicator, the latter particularly important given that it was not unheard of for Goliath pilots to continue fighting while being unwittingly body-dead. Once he was happy with the display, he brought into reserve a three-dimensional holo map of the local terrain, overlaid with select pieces of intelligence which UNIS had made accessible via the net. A feed to the right of his vision contained the status graphics of the rest of his squadron, a small stylised Goliath each currently marked 'Gatekeeper' in turquoise lettering followed by the numbers 2–7. Corresponding location markers appeared on his map as well; currently they were all in a cluster over Anternis's UNAF base. Had a civilian – or an enemy xeno for that matter – tried to access their whereabouts, the squadron wouldn't even appear to be on the planet.

He finished running his diagnostics and activated the Goliath's force shielding, though not its LRIS refraction. The force shielding would prematurely detonate any incoming explosive munitions and formed his last

line of defence after the physical diamond-composite armour of the Goliath itself, provided he couldn't physically shoot the ordnance out of the air. The LRIS refraction, on the other hand, made him invisible to all enemy scanning frequencies. Given that their current mission parameters dictated that they were to be a visible presence on the border, he left it off, instead activating the suit's orange-and-blue civil compliance colour scheme.

'All callsigns report,' he said, performing several jumping-jacks as a last rough-and-ready test of his sync ratios.

'Gatekeeper Seven, standing by.'

'Gatekeeper Five, standing by.'

'Gatekeeper Six, standing by.'

'Gatekeeper Three, standing by.'

'Gatekeeper Two, standing by.'

'Gatekeeper Four, standing by.'

Vondur nodded to himself and turned to face the open hangar exit. Beyond, rain sheeted down onto the darkening landing strip, cascading over the threshold to stain the concrete floor a deeper shade of grey.

'Thunderhead, this is Gatekeeper One, we are ready to commence Operation Beacon, on your go.'

'Gatekeeper, this is Thunderhead,' came the operator's reply. 'Updating mission objectives on your HUD; confirm acquisition.'

Vondur opened his holo map to see the crossing points over the Tiberean Mountains were now marked, as well as the recommended waypoint for the quick-reaction reserve.

'Acquisition confirmed,' Vondur replied.

'Copy that. Operation Beacon is a go.'

Vondur walked towards the hangar door, ZEN to his left. 'Lieutenant Jarvin, you and August take objective east as fire team Alpha. Sergeant Cox, take Vandemarr to objective west, fire team Zulu. Elyan and Syoba, with me in reserve. Understood?'

There was a chorus of assent. Vondur nodded to himself and stepped out of the hangar and into the stormy twilight of Anternis, illuminating the rain around him with the gaudy colouring of his fluorescent orange-and-blue armour. He could feel it as if it was pattering against his own skin.

'Let's go.'

He snatched up ZEN in his left gauntlet and activated the Goliath's

powerful twin Royce-Khan thrusters. They exploded into life with a flash of blue plasma and fired him into the air on a rapid response trajectory – steep incline, steep dive. Behind him his squadron followed suit, swiftly falling into a flying V formation as they soared through the turbulent troposphere. The Goliath's enhanced optics and UNAF-grade night vision, however, meant that rather than powering through thick, low-level storm clouds, it was akin to flying on a clear summer's afternoon.

'Got two friendlies three hundred clicks south-west,' Cox said over the net. 'Bunch of bots over the City... all blue. Other than that, skies are clear.'

'Copy,' Vondur replied.

The base shrank rapidly behind them. He programmed his flight path to terminate at the reserve marker which Thunderhead had uploaded to his holo map, giving him a precise flight time of thirty-two seconds, then sat back and let the machine do the work. They were already directly over the Tiberean Mountains, and he could see where the last rail strike had gouged a deep scar into the rock. Thick black smoke poured from the open crater, and his HUD identified a large number of kaygryn bodies and the remains of what looked to be surface-to-orbit missile batteries.

'I see bodies,' he said, sharing the images over the closed net. A quick diagnostic put the tally at over four hundred separately identifiable biological masses, though that number nosedived at anything over cellular level.

'Jeez,' Vandemarr murmured, whistling. 'That's a lot of dead kags.'

'Language,' Vondur rebuked.

'Sorry, chief,' Vandemarr said quickly. 'Just this is... not good.'

It wasn't good. From a distance, the rail strikes had been terrifying in their raw power and the sense of helplessness they instilled, but seeing the twisted and charred corpses of the kaygryn troops jutting out of the pulverised rocks below was what brought it home. As a soldier, his task was a simple one: follow orders and either succeed or get killed, and most of the time, having such a lack of options was a comfort. But taking a step back from the situation, it was impossible not to see that there would be far-reaching implications from this skirmish.

'We're just keeping the peace,' Vondur murmured. 'That's all we're doing.'

His HUD informed him that he and his men had been logged as potential targets by the provari cruiser and were being actively monitored from orbit.

That was both good, in the sense that the aliens were aware of their presence and so could not now be surprised by the squadron, and bad, in the sense that it was incredibly distressing. He put out of his mind the thought of the laser-accurate naval guns drawing a bead on them and instead concentrated on his descent vector, which at that moment in time was at peak velocity.

‘Disperse,’ he ordered over the comlink, and the squadron split apart into their pre-designated fire teams. He watched as Jarvin and August streaked away to his left, while Cox and Vandemarr banked off to his right. Elyan and Syoba maintained formation until seconds before touchdown, when they pulled back slightly so as to form a defensive triangle on landing, with Vondur at the head.

‘Three... two... one... I’m down,’ Vondur said, as he ploughed into the densely jungled southern slopes of the mountains. Around him branches and vines snapped off against the armour of the Goliath, and the plasma exhaust kicked up a vast plume of leaves and soil from beneath him before his feet sank into the rain-softened ground. He immediately released ZEN from his gauntlet and brought his rail cannon to bear, performing standard battlefield LRIS to sound out any lurking enemy drones.

‘Clear,’ he said when nothing appeared on his HUD. Elyan and Syoba reported the same, while fire teams Alpha and Zulu also gave the all-clear.

‘Establishing a perimeter,’ Jarvin said a few seconds later, and suddenly two graphics representing the lieutenant’s CODOR drones appeared on Vondur’s HUD.

‘Ditto,’ Cox said, and a further two drones were physically hurled into the air by the sergeant.

Vondur activated his rear-view optics to see Elyan and Syoba a hundred metres behind him, each slowly tracking their rail cannons in languorous arcs. Satisfied, he switched back to his fore-view and did the same, drawing his own cannon back and forth in a slow, methodical sweep of the jungle. The barrel was pointed directly at the sky given the gradient of the mountainside, and every so often a flash of lightning would crackle across his vision. Every time it did, the sudden light input would knock his rain-eliminator offline, affording him a split-second view of the dark, stormy dusk of Anternis.

He opened a channel to base. ‘Thunderhead, this is Gatekeeper One, we are in position and prosecuting Operation Beacon. So far no contact.’

‘Copy, Gatekeeper. Eyes peeled,’ came the tinny reply.

The CODOR drones began feeding them information microseconds later, steady streams of raw data appearing in a dedicated subscreen in Vondur’s vision. The Goliath’s filters scrubbed the feeds for anything pertinent, updating his HUD map in lieu of the now-junked orbital feed.

‘Drones returning... zero useful data,’ Jarvin observed. ‘Nada. Nothing. It’s a ghost town out here.’

‘I think we get the point, Lieutenant,’ Vondur said. He watched as ZEN stalked the jungle in front of him, appearing in his field of vision only due to the Goliath’s enhanced optics. The VI moved uncannily like a human, darting in and out of cover between the ancient alien trees, railgun up, bringing it back and forth in tight, alert arcs. After a few minutes, it disappeared over a moss-covered rocky outcrop and reappeared as a distant figure making for the crest of the ridge. It was silhouetted briefly against the roiling, lightning-lit sky, before dropping off the visual grid and appearing only as an icon superimposed on his HUD.

‘I’ve got zilch,’ Cox said as his own drones completed their initial sweep. ‘LT’s right; it’s dead out here.’

Vondur grimaced inside the cockpit and relaxed his arms slightly, bringing the cannon diagonally across the chassis of the Goliath. Still, he kept his eye on the little warning icon in the top corner of his vision, pulsing slowly, serving as a constant reminder of the provari cruiser watching from above. ‘All right,’ he said, exhaling loudly. ‘Everybody stay alert, and maintain LRIS. Understood?’

‘Copy,’ came the chorused reply.

Vondur idly tapped into a live feed from one of Cox’s drones and watched as it performed a high-velocity sweep over the city of Vos’Shan. There was little movement in the rain-soaked streets. The rail strikes of the provari cruiser seemed to have put paid to any civilian activity, and the dwellings were crammed full of white-hot bodies. The militia encampment to the north of the city was in a state of lockdown as well, insofar as rows of tents could be locked down. A small warning icon indicated the presence of weapons in the encampment, and the drone compiled a list of armaments which could be accessed at will. He declined to do so and cancelled the feed.

‘One downed kaygryn corvette, four hundred kaygryn corpses and a provari cruiser in orbit responsible for the whole mess. Anyone want to guess

what's going on here?' Jarvin asked over the net.

'The provar fuck with the kags all the time,' Cox growled. 'Someone in that corvette pissed them off, and they got smoked. Kags wheel out the orbital artillery to try and counterattack – probably thought they could make a dent in that cruiser – and they get wasted as well. End of story.'

Grunts of agreement all round.

'That doesn't strike me as serious enough to be classified,' Vondur said, wincing slightly at the sergeant's casual racism. It made it a damn sight harder to chastise the squadron for using the pejorative term 'kag' when Cox did it without censure.

'What's that, chief?' Elyan asked.

Vondur shrugged, and the Goliath shrugged with him. 'In the briefing Commander Vance told us that the reason the provar were prosecuting kaygryn targets was "known but classified". I think if the provar are going to knock out a corvette in-atmosphere next to a UN territory they're going to have a damned good reason. This is more serious than the usual provari arseholery. Serious enough to be classified over Vance's head anyway.'

More grunts of agreement. Sometimes Vondur thought the squadron would make a good cast in a farcical play.

'I think–' Vandemarr started, but his potentially incisive commentary was cut off by the lieutenant.

'Hello,' Jarvin said. 'Picking up something on the grid. Chief, take a look at this.'

Vondur squinted as a new screen popped up in his HUD. The feed had come from the lieutenant's primary reconnaissance drone; it revealed a tiny, light grey smudge on a black, cold tangle of jungle. He enhanced the image as high as it would go but seemed to be unable to get any kind of satisfactory resolution.

'What is that?' Vondur asked, running a diagnostic via the drone. The data streams were analysed by the Goliath but produced nothing but error messages.

'It's human, whatever it is,' Jarvin replied, sending him a biological readout. 'Well, part of one. Not kaygryn, in any event. Can't find a tissue match on any public UN database.'

Vondur felt his pulse rise slightly. That piqued his interest.

'Can we get any clearer reading on it?' he asked. 'I'm getting quite strong

interference.’ He cursorily checked the other drone feeds to make sure a secret kaygryn army wasn’t making its way up the mountain passes.

There was a brief pause. ‘Negative,’ Jarvin replied. ‘I’m running full LRIS on it, but it’s a tough nut to crack. Whatever it is, it is refraction shielded and Tier-Three tech.’

Vondur enhanced the drone’s optics again, but even without thick wet foliage of the jungle, it was difficult to get a clear visual. He cycled through the various wavelengths, but they all came back negative. Only infrared was showing anything, and that was faint – very faint. He dialled the view back and marked its position on his HUD map – nine hundred and seventy metres from the quick-reaction reserve.

‘Could be nothing,’ Cox grumbled.

‘It’s human and it’s shielded, Sergeant,’ Jarvin said, irritably. ‘It’s not nothing. It might be a body.’

‘But it *is* off-mission,’ Vondur said, wrinkling his nose. He thought for a moment. ‘Hold tight,’ he said, opening a private channel to the base. ‘Thunderhead, this is Gatekeeper.’

‘Copy, Gatekeeper,’ came the controller after a few seconds.

‘We have located an unidentifiable human mass approximately one klick away from my present location. Mass is refraction shielded, but warm and showing up on the infrared grid.’ He sighed to himself as he sent the base an encrypted readout of the object’s location. ‘Requesting permission to retrieve mass, over.’

There was a brief but perceptible crackle over the link, followed by a garbled transmission. Then, unexpectedly, the link terminated.

‘Ah, Thunderhead, say again your last, I lost the feed,’ Vondur said, assigning one of the Goliath’s diagnostic subroutines to his comms log. The link remained dead. ‘Thunderhead, come in, over.’

There was a blurt of static. ‘Gatekeeper, this is Thunderhead,’ the link suddenly squawked, activating his IHD’s automatic audio dampers. ‘We are instructed to inform you that at this time the mass is to be left undisturbed, please confirm.’

Vondur’s brow creased. ‘Thunderhead, please be advised that the mass is reading as human and Tier Three. Suspect it is one of ours, over.’

Another pause. ‘Gatekeeper, again we are informed that the mass is not to be disturbed. Please confirm your compliance, over.’

Vondur looked incredulous. ‘Thunderhead, who is advising you? The mass is warm, it is a suspected casualty and I repeat my request to retrieve the mass, over.’

The link fell silent again. ‘Something’s going on here,’ he briefly transmitted to Jarvin on a private channel before the comlink to the base was re-established. This time he added the lieutenant to the conversation.

‘Gatekeeper, base has received superseding orders from non-mission assets. I have been asked to confirm your compliance. Please do so now, over.’ A detectable element of irritation had crept into the controller’s voice.

Vondur sidelined the feed. He was half-minded to pull Vance into the link.

‘Non-mission assets?’ Jarvin said, his voice laden with scepticism. ‘Smells like UNIS to me. Or EFFECT. Non-military.’

‘Agreed,’ Vondur replied, nodding, ‘and I don’t like it. Frankly, I wouldn’t leave a warm body out here if the order came from the Strike Commander himself.’

‘Still,’ Jarvin said after a moment’s reflection, his tone betraying a latent reticence, ‘you should be careful, Captain. You don’t want to get yourself court-martialled.’

That was true. If he went for the mass now, he would be disobeying a direct order. Still, where there was a will there was a way, and he had many ways at his disposal.

‘I have an idea,’ he said, ‘but don’t say anything.’ He reactivated his link with the base. ‘Thunderhead, compliance is not possible at this time. My ZEN is already recovering the mass and due to a software fault I am unable to recall it, over.’

He sidelined the link again and quickly ordered ZEN to make a beeline for the mass. In seconds the VI had abandoned its current course and was making a calculated sprint for it, shadowed by one of Jarvin’s reconnaissance drones providing advanced topographical mapping of the route. Even so, it would still take precious minutes for the ZEN to cover a kilometre of jungle. He tracked its progress, briefly dipping into its optical band to watch as the dark foliage whipped past.

‘Gatekeeper,’ the comms controller cut in, ‘what is a zhahassi ZEN doing with you and why can you not recall it? Please respond with urgency, over.’

Vondur smirked. Whoever was ordering the controller about, they were getting agitated.



‘Thunderhead, the ZEN is mine, legitimately acquired on Tranquillity and commissioned into the squadron. It is zhahassi tech; sometimes the Goliath has trouble interfacing with it. It’s not a problem though. It’s an autonomous VI—’

Then he was interrupted by the comms controller – an unusual breach of protocol. He was really pissing them off now. ‘Gatekeeper, I have been asked to ask you to recall your drone immediately; please take all steps to recall the drone and report back when you have done so. Recall the drone physically if you have to. The mass is to remain unmolested, over.’

Vondur checked the ZEN’s distance to the target. It was still a minute away.

‘Elyan, is there anyone else on the grid making for our position? From Anternis,’ he asked.

‘Negative, Captain. Troops are preventing anyone moving north.’

‘Captain, I’m not sure this is a good idea,’ Jarvin said.

Vondur looked about him at the slimy, wet boughs of the trees, intermittently illuminated by lightning. The lieutenant was right, but he had committed now.

‘Thunderhead, I am having trouble communicating with—’

‘Gatekeeper, my diagnostics display your Goliath is functioning at triple redundancy on all comms and command substrates. Recall the ZEN immediately. That is a direct order, over.’

Just a few more seconds...

‘Thunderhead, I—’

‘Captain,’ ZEN interjected politely on the wideband, as only a zhahassi VI could. ‘I have located the mass. It is a human female’s head, encased within a Mantix helmet of unknown class or pattern. It is still alive. Shall I retrieve it?’

The net fell completely silent.

‘Jesus fucking Christ,’ Jarvin said.

The net fell completely silent again.

‘Thunderhead,’ Vondur said, trying to control the anger in his voice, ‘we need a medevac at my location. Immediately.’

The link fuzzed with static, then clicked a few times.

‘Copy, Gatekeeper,’ the comms controller said, exhaling loudly. ‘Medevac is on its way.’

## NAVEM SIGMA

*‘The political machinations of the UN Establishment are bewildering in their bureaucratic complexity. There is some semblance of democratic rule, but in most cases of planetary authority this process yields substantially to centrally installed governance. In real terms, the UN operates as what one could term a benign dictatorship, though I recoil slightly from the negative connotations of the latter word. Citizens of the UN, though by and large shielded from the many manoeuvrings of their political superiors, are remarkably well provided for.’ (trans.)*

**Extract from ‘Tier-Three Governance: A Comparative Study’, by celebrated zhahassi political commentator Zelkamar**

The briefing had taken less time than he’d expected, given the apparent severity of the situation, though doubtless they’d be drip-fed more information once they got underway. He curled his lip in distaste. The unfailingly opaque meta-strategies of Solar Command irked him, as they did most captains who were not afforded the same galaxy-eye view as those on distant Vargonroth. The UN’s phobia of provocation led to sometimes staggering inefficiency in the conduct of operations, and not for the first time he considered penning an exposé and retiring on the royalties.

He looked up sharply as there was a knock at his door. ‘Enter,’ he said, and it slid open on its magnetic rails to reveal a young, red-faced ensign, holding his peaked and braided dress cap under his left arm. He snapped to attention.

‘Captain Rynn, *sah*,’ he said, saluting smartly with a white-gloved hand and staring at a point somewhere over the top of Rynn’s head.

‘Yes, sir?’ Rynn replied, stifling a smile. The enthusiasm of the recruits was relentlessly amusing. He wondered how smartly the boy would salute after three months in a cramped, gravity-free voidbreaker of the Fleet Auxiliary.

‘Sir, Lieutenant Gross-vennor reports the UNS *York* will require another hour to prepare, sir.’

‘It’s pronounced Grove-ner, sir,’ Rynn said, rolling his eyes. He waved his desk terminal active and brought up a holo. ‘Lieutenant Grosvenor, please.’

Moments later, the face of the moustached second-in-command of the quick-reaction fleet appeared, a stubby cigar poking out of the corner of his mouth. He wore a grimace, and his forehead was smeared with what looked to be some kind of pink foamy grease.

‘Lieutenant, I have Ensign Hobbes here informing me the *York* will not be ready to depart for another hour. Somewhat contrary to the nature of a *quick*-reaction force, wouldn’t you say so?’

The lieutenant snatched the cigar from his mouth. It trailed a whorl of smoke that briefly obscured the feed. ‘Thirty minutes at most, Captain,’ he said, offering a grin. ‘Minor hitch with one of our Star Witch tubes. Latent vermin infestation, I’m afraid. Still, nothing a good hose down can’t fix, sir.’

Rynn’s nose wrinkled. The presence of vermin, even after exposure to hard vacuum, was an ever-persistent problem on the semi-lawless hellhole that was Navem Sigma, and a few fat golgronic rats nestled in an open weapons port would result in a misfire nine times out of ten. Still, one had to admire the tenacity of the little shits.

‘I expect you will act with all due expedition,’ Rynn said. He cancelled the feed and turned his attention back to Ensign Hobbes.

‘Was that everything?’

The boy saluted again. ‘Sir, aye aye, sir.’

‘Fine. Dismissed,’ Rynn said and waved the door closed. It sealed with a satisfying click.

A few moments later, his holo reactivated. His IHD automatically authorised the encrypted transmission, and he leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers under his nose.

Captain Rynn. Quick-reaction alert force is to depart Navem Sigma with all speed. Target world is Uvolon, sector Upper Vadian Spiral [est. journey time 20hrs]. UNS *Achilles* will tow. Fleet is to hold orbit at geosync L1, equatorial planar. T3 forces present: 1, cruiser, provari, the *Impraxes*. Do not engage. Confirm by return.

Ft. Msl. Scarcroft.

He sighed and had his IHD provide a time-logged, triple-encrypted receipt confirmation. It was nothing more than a written rehash of the verbal briefing

he'd just received. With a wave of his hand, he copied the message into his IHD and wiped it from his desk terminal.

He sat in quiet contemplation for a second, then stood up, pushed the seat neatly into its alcove under the table, and pulled his jacket on – a thick, midnight-blue coat bearing a number of honorifics and service medals. The ever-conspicuous UN Fleet insignia was also present, forming a blue-and-silver roundel on his left shoulder and bearing a stylised, star-surrounded frigate. He ensured the stock collars were stiff and upright, adjusted his white cravat slightly, and satisfied, made his way out into the corridor.

Navem Sigma was one of the few habitats in the galaxy shared by all six Tier-Three species. It had been constructed over several decades in the spirit of co-operation and mutual respect that had defined the early years of Contact, centuries before when the UN and the quorl had been welcomed into the Tier-Three community. Now, it existed as a multijurisdictional naval port and slovenly, lawless habitat, the source of an endless intragalactic game of cops and robbers.

To the outside observer it appeared as a thick gunmetal cylinder, encircled at both ends by two rotating rings joined to the spine with vast spokes and extruding vast arrays of solar power vanes which extended into space like the petals of a flower, soaking up the heat from the nearby M-class star. The whole structure performed one full rotation every ninety seconds, providing close to Terran-standard gravity, which all Tier-Three species found generally acceptable, and sat in one of the Lagrange points of a huge violet gas giant which the UN had called Gamma Serpentis. At last count, Navem Sigma housed over two hundred and eighty million residents, living in a vast, enclosed city broken only by the thousands of tiered kilometres of agricultural land that provided roughly half of the station's food supply. The other half was supplied from local star systems, contracted lucratively to a handful of corporations whose methods were so underhand the resultant organised crime was the main reason for the station's naval presence.

Sigma had originally been purposed as a civilian galactic waypoint, a useful refuelling and resupply centre for trading missions to some of the more obscure astrographic worlds – Uvolon being among them. The provar had been the first to use it as a naval base, albeit briefly, to service the Ascendancy's Sixteenth Crusade Fleet. The UN established its own voidbreaker waypoint a few months later, and the quorl, who at the time

believed themselves to be the UN's civilisational equals, were quick to throw in their lot.

The provar abandoned Sigma as a naval base only a handful of years later, preferring their purpose-built waypoints and navy yards established along the crusade fleet lines. The UN, in counterpoint, expanded its naval presence to include comprehensive docking facilities and a dedicated command station, and tasked itself with policing piracy in the Coriolanus Sector. The zhahassi were quick to join that enterprise, as were the quorl, whose citizens by that stage formed the largest proportion of the station's inhabitants by a significant margin.

Slowly and steadily, the naval facilities of all three species increased to the point where it became an intergalactic fleet muster, and thereafter a vast black market for arms dealing which had, by the present day, become so ingrained in the legal economy that many subsector governments were entirely dependent on its income.

Still, it would always be little more than a shithole to Rynn, he thought, as he strode down one of the corridors of the Fleet headquarters. He looked around disdainfully at the damp, dark metal walls, the flickering light panels above, and the jingoistic oil paintings which depicted modern naval combat as akin to that of the mid-19th century. He snorted; if an artist wanted to really capture the essence of space combat, they needed only paint an empty starfield. Nearly all engagements took place at ranges of thousands, if not millions of kilometres.

He sighed, grateful that tours at the Sigma muster lasted only a year. He found it odd that so many craved an operational deployment here. Of course, anti-piracy work was fun, if not easy; even the quarters were pleasant in places. The officers' mess in particular was delectable, a vast hall replete with wood panelling, more oil paintings, old flags and – most significantly – a large bar. But it just wasn't... *important* enough. Sigma was old news, routine, dull. It was no Fleet Command Halo Arch, or Merisgard. Hell, even Earth had juicer roles.

He rounded a corner and continued on, footsteps ringing dully against the metal grilling of the floor. To his left, a line of holos gave the impression of windows, and he could see out across the dockyard itself. It was actually rather bland when one got used to it, despite its impressive size: just rows of vast gantries, engineering hubs and docking proboscises, thrown into sharp

relief against the gigantic violet orb of Gamma Serpentis. At any one time, the Fleet maintained a hundred ships of varying classes there, with the quick-reaction force making up a tenth of that number, though Scarcroft had only ordered three destroyers to Uvolon – the *Seraph*, the *Retribution* and the *York*. If it had been up to him, Rynn would have taken the *Trafalgar*, a monolithic, thousand-metre capital ship with three rotating life-support modules (absolute extravagance by Fleet standards) and enough firepower to reduce an entire planet to a bubbling sphere of radioactive slag. That would have had any Tier-Three cruiser running for cover, provar or not.

But, three destroyers it was, and Rynn was nothing if not unquestioningly dutiful.

‘Lieutenant Aulden,’ he said, spying the man at the end of the corridor. The commanding officer of the *Seraph* looked across and snapped smartly to attention.

‘Sir,’ he said. He was wearing standard operational, non-vacuum-capable garb: a pair of light grey boots, cream breeches and a tight-fitting blue jacket with all the usual rank and insignia decorations. In his right hand was a black holdall, and in his left was a book which Rynn’s IHD revealed to be a work of historical fiction.

‘On your way down?’ Rynn asked, catching up with him. Aulden nodded.

‘Aye, sir. Got the word from Vargonroth. Although I hear Grosvenor is having problems with the *York*.’

Rynn nodded and summoned an elevator, which dutifully acknowledged his senior rank and prioritised his request. It whooshed up to meet them, and its doors opened with a pleasant chime. Rynn gestured for Aulden to enter, then followed, authorising the elevator to take them to the restricted quick-reaction force dock.

‘Vermin in the Star Witch tubes. Nothing a good hose out won’t fix. It’ll add forty minutes to the journey time, but the fleet marshal has given us twenty hours – and even then instructions not to engage on the other side.’ He shrugged, and a familiar – somewhat signature – look of distaste creased his features. ‘Doesn’t seem that pressing to me.’

Aulden nodded thoughtfully. ‘Still, sir, provar. Not had a run-in with them in decades.’

‘And I intend not to have a run-in with them now,’ Rynn remarked drily. ‘Not with an entire crusade fleet in the next sector.’

‘Mm,’ Aulden grunted. There was a brief silence until Aulden, clearly uncomfortable, filled it. ‘Do you think anyone outside the Ascendancy will ever know what the crusade fleets are for, sir?’

‘Christ, Lieutenant, keep calling them the Ascendancy and they’ll start to bloody believe it,’ Rynn said. The elevator arrived at their destination, and both men exited into another dim, metallised corridor, this one bathed in red, rather than white, light. ‘Quite frankly, as long as they keep pouring their endless military strength into the next galaxy over, they can do what they like.’

They walked in silence down the corridor, a thick metal tube sprouting fifteen proboscises accessed via large, evenly spaced airlocks, each surrounded by a host of gaudy warning markers. They were now at the lowest point of the muster, almost half a kilometre below the rest of the dockyard, where the QRF ships were docked in silent vigil.

‘The *Retribution* is at fifteen,’ Rynn said, gesturing ahead. ‘I’m going to take the express.’ To his left was a trackway which ran the length of the corridor, powering a number of small platforms to facilitate rapid transportation.

‘Aye, sir,’ Aulden said, inclining his head. ‘I’m at four, so I’ll walk, I think.’

‘Fine,’ Rynn said and nodded. ‘I’ll be in touch. Lean on Grosvenor. I feel we should at least try to act with some semblance of quickness, given that we are the muster’s quick-reaction alert.’

‘Aye, sir,’ Aulden replied, smiling.

Rynn activated the throttle with his IHD, and the platform accelerated smoothly down the corridor. He gripped the railing, relishing the breeze against his face. The journey was brief, and in less than a minute he was undergoing the rigorous IHD identification process that would enable him access to the *Retribution*. A few microseconds later there was an audible hiss, and the airlock’s display panel flashed green. Beyond was a small tube into which he climbed, and he felt the door lock and seal shut behind him. The air was noticeably colder inside the lock, and not for the first time in his long career he was thankful for his thick, standard-issue overcoat.

‘That you, sir?’ came a voice over the small terminal bolted to the *Retribution*’s entry hatch. There was another hissing noise which made

Rynn's ears pop, and the hatch smoothly recessed into the secondary life-support capsule of the destroyer.

'Indeed it is,' he said, stepping inside and using the grab hoops to steady himself.

The secondary life-support capsule was a cramped, roughly cube-shaped hold, lined with lockers housing the crew's vacuum suits and personal weaponry, quarters for three of the ship's ten-marine garrison, and the usual paraphernalia which was stuffed into every available recess and alcove of an operational warship. Currently it was occupied by four UN Marines dressed in full Mantix, reclining on makeshift seats and either reading or eating. In the centre of the floor was a hatch that led directly below into the deployment chamber, a small hangar which housed the destroyer's planet-based equipment – vehicles, one-man rapid deployment pods, drones, deployable satellites, and heavier weaponry than the standard flechette-loaded railguns which the marines carried.

'Gentlemen,' he said, nodding to them. An assortment of grunts was all he received by way of reply. UN Marines were a separate breed, quite unlike their planet-bound counterparts. Quite what would possess someone to spend an unbroken six months on a warship, often without gravity, in some of the most cramped and claustrophobic conditions known to UNAF, was beyond him. Not only that, but they almost invariably lacked respect for any senior, non-marine officer, were insatiably bloodthirsty, and spent all of their off-duty VR sync exclusively in Ultraporn.

On the bulkhead opposite Rynn was another sealed hatch, which connected the secondary life-support module to the primary via a tiny crawlspace. He made for it, stepping over Mantix-clad limbs and eyeing the food wrappers lying on the floor with a mixture of disgust and resignation.

'Can we please ensure all rubbish is disposed of before we break gravity?' he asked, opening the hatch via his IHD. Again, a chorus of grunts. It was like being stuck in a prison for murderous teenage convicts.

He made his way through the aptly named crawlspace in a somewhat undignified fashion and opened the hatch to the primary life-support module. The primary module was larger than the secondary and housed the quarters for the remaining seven marines and the five crewmembers in the form of a torus of sealed cubicles each housing a VR capsule. They formed the only



ornament in the room, save for a hatch in the centre of the floor which, as in the secondary module, led to the hangar.

The small, communal area of the module was full, as it often was before the destroyer deployed. Seven marines clad in full-pressure Mantix were milling around with their weapons casually slung, filling the close air with gruff chatter. At the rear of the module stood the ship's crew, all of whom were now out of uniform and in pressure suits, holding their helmets. They all dutifully saluted on his entry – as did maybe half of the marines, to his amazement.

'Gentlemen,' he said, returning it. The module fell silent. 'The *York* is dealing with a vermin problem, so I expect we shall be delayed by another thirty minutes. Lieutenant Commander Burkhart?'

'Aye, sir?'

'Take us through pre-deployment drill, please.'

The man nodded. 'Aye, sir.'

Rynn paused for a moment. 'All right. Carry on,' he said and made his way to his cubicle. He opened the door using his IHD, stepped inside and closed it behind him.

He exhaled loudly, listening to the muffled sound of Burkhart giving the men their orders. In front of him was a floor-to-ceiling locker which housed his pressure suit, and he opened it. On the inside of the door was a picture of his wife and two sons outside the family home on Bospen. It had been taken shortly before his deployment to Navem Sigma, during a particularly crisp autumn. It was strange how he seemed to lose all concept of seasons on operations – even time itself.

He changed out of his uniform and donned his pressure suit with a practised ease. It was a thick, rubbery set of sealed overalls, not unlike a stripped-down version of Mantix without all the armour and enhanced nanogel matrix, with a gorget seal for his helmet to lock into. Once his IHD was satisfied he had donned it correctly and it was in good working order, he folded his uniform up into a neat pile and placed it on the top shelf of his locker, picked up his helmet and exited the cubicle.

Burkhart approached him. 'All in order, sir. We'll run a full systems diagnostic when we enter sync, of course.'

'Of course,' Rynn replied. 'May as well get everyone in now.'

Burkhart saluted. 'Aye aye, sir,' he said, then turned back to the communal

space. ‘All right, everyone in. Let’s go.’

Rynn pulled his helmet on and climbed into his capsule, a two-metre black ovoid fitted out with a body harness and a neural interface. He strapped himself in and then felt the harness automatically tighten, pulling him firm against the gel layer of the bed. Once he was comfortable, he ran a series of diagnostic checks through his IHD, then, satisfied that his oxygen supply was functioning correctly, he pulled the door closed. It sealed itself, and the capsule slowly filled with a thick, viscous gel that both shielded him from the punishing acceleration forces they were about to experience and acted as a shock absorber if the destroyer was hit.

Once the pod was full, he took one last look around, checked again that his oxygen supply was functioning correctly and activated the VR sync, wincing as an unavoidable drone of data babbled in his ears for a few moments. The capsule was simultaneously inducing him into a coma-like state and uploading his consciousness to the destroyer’s virtual reality space, a program hosted by the ship’s own quintuple-redundancy processor housed, like the VR capsules, in the ship’s diamond-encased core.

When the synchronisation process was complete, Rynn felt himself awaken, refreshed, as if after a long night’s sleep. The space he was in, informally known as ‘the sync’, could be theoretically programmed to take on any appearance, though the default and current setting was that of a glossy black platform. A small amphitheatre of consoles lay in front of him, and the crew were slowly appearing in front of them as they uploaded, firstly as human-shaped blocks of code and then as their fleshy, uniformed selves.

The view around him would have been staggering – if not a little alarming – to the uninitiated. Optical feeds and scanners located all over the hull of the destroyer meant that a real-time and true-to-life image of space appeared in all directions. Overlapping the image were graphics representing the massive Navem Sigma station, distant colonies and their positions relative to the *Retribution*, other stations, allied ships, sectors, subsectors, gas clouds, black holes and every other piece of astral topography imaginable. The result was a riot of information and stylised graphics appearing in a grid-lined sphere around him, and one which could – and would – be personalised to his view via his IHD.

‘Everyone is present and correct, sir,’ Lieutenant Commander Burkhart said, approaching him. Rynn smiled. One of the many benefits of operating in

VR sync was that they were back in uniforms, in boots and breeches and stock-collared and braided jackets. If there was one thing he liked, it was his men to be well turned out.

‘Thank you, First Officer,’ Rynn said, nodding.

‘Lieutenant Aulden reports that the *Seraph* too is ready, sir. All men in sync and standing by.’

‘Good. Inform Mr Grosvenor that both the *Retribution* and the *Seraph* are now ready to deploy.’ He checked the time. ‘The force will leave in fifteen minutes. If he is not ready by then, he shall have to perform repairs in orbit.’

‘Aye, sir. Very good, sir,’ Burkhart replied and walked back to his console.

Rynn surveyed the scene in front of him. Aside from Burkhart, who was the destroyer’s weapons officer, there was Dieter, the damage-control officer, Smith for navigation and Rankin on comms. The marines were in a separate sync, but one that was easily accessed for the giving of orders. There was simply no point in having them milling about on what was essentially the bridge.

‘All right,’ he said, checking the time again. He absentmindedly ran a full systems diagnostic and reviewed the information to find everything – engines, shielding, weapon systems, life support – in perfect working order. He turned and sat down in his command station and waited for the all-clear.

‘Mr Grosvenor reports all repairs completed, sir,’ Rankin informed him after an interminable pause. ‘Force is ready to deploy.’

‘Good,’ Rynn replied, checking the time. ‘Mr Smith, let’s make the jump at a million clicks out, please. Mr Rankin, inform traffic control that we are departing.’

‘Very good, sir.’

Rynn opened a comlink to Vargonroth. ‘QRF is deploying. ETA...’ he checked the *Retribution*’s navigational holo. ‘... Nineteen hours and forty-one minutes.’ He packaged the transmission via triple encryption and sent it to Vargonroth via the Fleet Comms Array on Navem Sigma.

‘Take us out, please.’

## FIRST LIGHT

*‘They taught themselves religion and to worship their sun. We taught them science and that their sun was a nuclear fireball. The golgron taught them warfare and how to make their own nuclear fire.*

*Then four billion died.*

*They don’t worship the sun any more.’*

**Extract from the memoirs of UN Ambassador Tomas Sellwyck, describing the nuclear holocaust on Illythia**

They breakfasted on scrambled eggs, real smoked salmon and buttered toast, and washed it down with hot black coffee. Together, the three of them formed the only human presence in the officers’ mess, and the gentle clinking of cutlery and their low conversation made the only noise inside the old, classically decorated hall. Outside, the rain had subsided somewhat, and the first shafts of light were appearing on the horizon, giving the massed storm clouds a red glow.

‘Ah, the quick-reaction force has departed Navem Sigma,’ said Fleet Marshal Scarcroft, setting down his cutlery and focussing on his IHD. He sniffed. ‘That was sooner than I’d expected.’

General Pike snorted into his plate. ‘Didn’t you give the order hours ago?’

Scarcroft nodded impatiently. ‘Yes. I see the inherent complexities of interstellar communication and travel still escape you.’

Pike smiled and swallowed his mouthful. He opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it and took a slurp of coffee instead.

John Garrick ignored both of them. He stared out the window, studying the thick grey clouds and the way the weak, early morning light slowly welled up on the horizon. He and his team had been contemplating strike targets for the last two hours since their first briefing with the President, and had come up with a comprehensive list of viable objectives, including Ascendancy military centres, industrial complexes, deep space relays and large civilian centres. Even the crusade fleets hadn’t escaped his attentions, though out of a long register of targets, they were the most suicidally ridiculous.

One of the many downsides of his job was that it allowed him a lot of time

to think. Liaising with military intelligence units across the galaxy and pulling together dossiers on the Ascendancy's weak points was a task which took many hours to do badly and many weeks to do well, and one did not spend all of that time sifting through reams and reams of documentation, satellite images, drone feeds and data streams without doing a lot of thinking. Garrick dwelled on things at the best of times, but in this matter he felt sure that the product of these years of reflection was inescapably correct: that the UN was essentially powerless against the provar.

The realisation had come to him fairly slowly, and he still considered himself the only member of the Joint Chiefs to have been thus enlightened. The fact of the matter was, as a nation, the Proviri Ascendancy existed as a toxic combination of state-sponsored militarism and fanatical religious doctrine, both of which pervaded their society to a grassroots level and neither of which, more dangerously, the UN truly understood. Historically, the UN and other Tier-Three species had relied on the provar's obsession with their own secret intergalactic war to keep them from violently meddling in Tier-Three affairs, though recently their willingness to become more involved had markedly increased. It was only now that the UN was realising the danger, and it was already decades too late.

Consequently, to say that drawing up a strike contingency against such a society was daunting would be, in Garrick's opinion, a gross understatement. Of course, the Ascendancy was still roughly fifty per cent civilian – or what the UN termed civilian, since the provar made no such distinction – and it would be easy enough to threaten to drop a few nukes on a city or irradiate a planet. But the consequences would be beyond comprehension if the provar were to about-turn even one crusade fleet in retaliation. The UN maintained thousands of manned and unmanned deep space relays around the galaxy with the sole purpose of cataloguing the fleets, and current counts put the number of ships at over a million and a half. That was a martial force larger than all the other Tier-Three fleets combined, and one crewed by utter fanatics.

He sighed inwardly, trying to comfort himself that the UN would not be stupid enough to pursue a course of action which would lead to war, but even if that was not the outright intention, circumstances were still dictating against him. The UN scraped by on a notoriously opaque system of governance, but the presidential election was the one political event

guaranteed to draw the attention of the population, and Aurelius's first term was almost over. He would not put it past that idiot to take a needlessly tough and provocative stance against the Ascendancy to win the popular vote.

'Commander Garrick?' someone said. From the tone, it didn't sound like it was the first time either.

He looked up, his reverie broken. Both Pike and Scarcroft were looking at him.

'Yes?'

'You just muttered something,' Scarcroft said, then forked a roll of smoked salmon into his mouth.

'Did I?'

Pike nodded. 'Everything all right? You look preoccupied.'

'Mm,' Garrick grunted. 'Just thinking about our strike options. And how the provar will react.'

'Badly, one would imagine,' Scarcroft said with just a hint of a smirk, sipping his coffee. 'But for all his bluster, I don't think Aurelius will actually do anything. You know how excited he gets when he's surrounded by the General Staff.'

They were all distracted by the sound of the mess door opening. Josette appeared a few seconds later and strode across the hall, her heels rapping loudly against the old wooden floorboards. From the look on her face, it was not good news.

'General, Fleet Marshal, you are both needed in the ops room immediately,' she said, her face, on closer inspection, appearing slightly flushed. Garrick checked his IHD but found there were no pending messages.

Pike sighed and downed the rest of his coffee. Scarcroft did likewise, and they both stood.

'This had better be good,' the old general mumbled and stifled a belch. Scarcroft shot him a look of disdain, and they exited the mess together like an odd couple.

There was an uncomfortable pause as Josette stood by the table, waiting for the two men to leave. Garrick found being alone with her under any circumstances was now invariably awkward, given their affair, but their present location exacerbated the situation, since it was in the officers' mess that they had first embarked on it. The thought soured his already melancholy mood.

‘There is news,’ Josette said and then sat down opposite him. She took a clean cup from the centre of the table and poured herself a coffee.

‘I guessed as much,’ Garrick replied. He felt a stab of adrenaline and then familiar feelings of resentment suddenly well up within him – not only at their affair, but at her secondment to UNIS too. He still thought about the days when it was he who had the exciting job, who fed her the information and gossip and impressed her and then fucked her afterwards. Now she was privy to Cyan-classified information before him and knew all of UNIS’s secrets in HQ Vargonroth. She was part of an elite club, a club that was openly disdainful of military personnel and so one that was forever closed to him quite irrespective of his potential lack of ability and no matter how badly he might secretly want to join.

Josette cleared her throat. ‘The mission station on Uvolon has been destroyed,’ she said quietly.

Garrick contemplated this for a few seconds, pretending to remain calm. ‘Presumably by the provar?’

Josette nodded. ‘KRS. Took down half the mountain with it. Initial intelligence suggests that there were up to four hundred armed kaygryn in the vicinity when the cruiser fired.’

Garrick exhaled through pursed lips and clicked his tongue a few times. ‘Anyone dead?’

Josette nodded again, grimacing, and took a sip of coffee. ‘Aside from all the kaygryn, one agent, as far as we know. Body hasn’t been recovered yet.’

Garrick snorted. ‘After a KRS? Good luck.’

Josette scratched the back of her neck. ‘It’s not impossible.’

He contemplated for a moment. ‘So we’re blind?’

‘Not really. Our orbital feeds are gone, but we have drones with FTL comms. The UNAF base commander says the Goliaths are patrolling the border as we speak. We have plenty of eyes.’

‘Just not where we need them.’ Garrick said, sipping his own coffee. He was actually quite enjoying this. She had a lot more at stake than him. ‘Not all bad news. Well, aside from the fact that this is now, what, a Scarlet?’

Josette brought her elbows on to the table and rested her head in her hands. When she spoke, she stared at the cup in front of her. ‘Our mission station there was, naturally, illegal.’

‘Oh, Christ,’ Garrick said, rolling his eyes. ‘They kill one of our agents and

of course we're not even going to say anything.'

'Well, what on Earth can we say?' Josette countered. 'Imagine if we revealed that we had cloaked assets in the area.'

Garrick opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. She was right, of course. Being a contrarian would only irritate her – and more importantly for him, close her off as a conduit of information.

'So what's happening now?' he asked as calmly as he could, quelling the numerous and conflicting emotions boiling inside him.

Josette sat back and looked at him. For a few seconds he watched as her eyes searched his face. 'We have a contingency,' she said after a short while. Her voice was measured, as if she was taking stock of him.

Garrick swallowed back his bitterness. 'Go on,' he said, fighting to keep his teeth from clenching. He hated her being condescending to him, *hated* it.

She appeared to be about to say something and then paused again. 'What do you think about Hadan's Reach?'

That threw him. 'Hadan's Reach? The Treaty?'

'Yes,' she replied simply.

Garrick sat back. The Treaty of Hadan's Reach was fifty years old, though its impact was still hotly debated in modern politics, news outlets and bars the UN over. The agreement had been simple enough – millions of square kilometres of unused human territories in exchange for millions of tonnes of exotic matter – though retrospectively had been an absolute diplomatic whitewash, responsible for the downfall of the then UN government, hundreds of brushfire conflicts across the galaxy, and the death and enslavement of tens of thousands of kaygryn at the hands of the UN's contractual counterparty, the provar. It was a stain on the collective conscience of every citizen of the UN and had earned them the ire and vitriol of every other Tier-Three player which had taken decades to work off. Josette, as the then Commissioner for Refugees, had been in the middle of it all, working round the clock for months solid. Garrick knew she felt more strongly about it than anyone else.

'Well... I don't know,' he said, slightly flustered. 'Back then they had a monopoly on... whatever those jump drive heavy elements are called – EXM? – and we needed it. The quorl made a similar deal.' He shrugged. 'It was poorly handled, but we couldn't have known that they were going to do what they did.'



‘Genocide. The word you’re looking for is genocide.’

Garrick cleared his throat. ‘I think *attempted* genocide might be more—’

‘Never mind,’ Josette snapped, making him start. He cursed internally.

‘That was idiotic,’ he tried, but she waved him quiet. Whatever the contingency was, she wasn’t going to tell him about it now.

They sat in silence for a full minute while Garrick did his best to think of something to talk about. Eventually, he came up with, ‘Speaking of the kaygryn... do we know any more about that corvette that got junked?’

Josette shook her head slowly. ‘UNIS’s Anternis station is pulling all the recoverable data from the destroyed module. There’s tonnes of intel – even with dedicated VI scrubbers, it’s going to be hours before we can review it.’

‘Mm,’ Garrick said. ‘No doubt will be an interesting read.’

‘No doubt,’ Josette nearly sneered, with what was evidently another spike in irritability. ‘Karl Howarth is already talking about picking up known kaygryn for questioning. It’s like international law means nothing any more.’ She paused as she checked her IHD. ‘We’re needed in the ops room.’

Garrick nodded, annoyed he’d abjectly failed to toe the line with her. He threw back the last of his tepid coffee and they exited the mess.

It was a short, brisk walk back up the stairs, and they spent it in silence. The now familiar guards remained outside the door, scanning them silently. They entered the room to see the President sat at the head of the table, his head resting on his palms. In one hand was a kerchief, damp with brow sweat.

‘This “exercise” by the kaygryn,’ he said, not lifting his head. ‘You say it was pre-planned?’

‘According to Commander Vance, yes,’ General Pike said. ‘Sir, it looks as though the kaygryn were within their own borders when they were hit. On the strict letter of the law, they aren’t even obliged to inform us.’

‘Though presumably they’d be stupid not to.’

‘Presumably,’ Scarcroft said, his voice smooth.

‘What do you think happened here, Strike Commander? Let’s get a fresh opinion, shall we?’ the President said.

Garrick looked briefly perplexed. ‘I’ve not been made aware of the most recent developments,’ he lied and inwardly praised himself for his quick thinking.

‘Varren, apprise the man,’ the President said impatiently.

‘The provar have fired on Vos’Shan,’ Scarcroft said. He was quite alive to the fact that Josette had already told him, even if the President wasn’t. Garrick wondered then if the fleet marshal knew about his affair with her.

‘Again?’ Garrick said, a parody of surprise.

‘Yes,’ Scarcroft said, his eyes narrowing slightly. ‘Into the borderlands. Four hundred kaygryn militia have been killed. It seems as though our man—’

‘Woman,’ Pike interjected.

‘Woman,’ Scarcroft repeated, ‘on the ground was killed. Our UNIS agent. At least, she is not accounted for.’

‘I think you’ll have trouble accounting for her,’ Garrick said, after a pause.

‘Never mind that. What do you think?’ the President asked.

‘Think about what, sir?’

‘The strike hitting the mission station? Of all the places!’ the President said, on the verge of shouting.

‘At this stage, sir, I’d venture that it’s an unfortunate coincidence.’ He noticed that Frost was watching him very intently from across the room. ‘The station is, after all, refraction shielded, is it not?’

‘It is,’ Frost spoke eventually, when no one else answered.

‘Well then. The provar couldn’t have seen it. Not unless they were scanning that specific area for a long time.’ Garrick shrugged. ‘To the contrary, they did see the militia – were they armed with any kind of STO capability?’

‘Yes,’ Frost said, tersely.

‘Then I think the answer is rather obvious, isn’t it? The provar thought nothing of shooting a corvette out of the sky; why would they think twice about killing hostile militia with orbit-capable weaponry?’

‘I agree,’ Pike rumbled. ‘It’s too soon to be second-guessing these things. I think for the sake of the safety of Anternis, we should treat this as an unfortunate accident.’

‘Of course, it will remain an unfortunate *secret* accident,’ Scarcroft said. The President looked up to face him. ‘After all,’ the fleet marshal turned to Frost, ‘your position there was illegal, yes?’

‘Yes,’ Frost replied, unfazed.

Silence descended on the room.

‘Christ,’ Aurelius said quietly. ‘I can’t have this escalating. We’re supposed to be defusing the situation.’

‘With respect, sir, it is not an escalation, not as long as we refuse to acknowledge it as such.’ This time it was McKone speaking. ‘General Pike is correct. For the moment we should treat this as an accident. If the provari *were* somehow aware of the mission station there, and killed our agent deliberately, then I should expect more “coincidences” to follow shortly. Their intention as regards UN forces will soon become apparent.’

‘How do you mean?’ the President asked, clearly irritated.

‘The arrival of the naval task force at Uvolon,’ McKone replied.

‘If they attack the fleet, it will be an act of war,’ the President rumbled.

‘Precisely my point, sir.’ McKone bowed.

Aurelius made a frustrated gesture with his hand. ‘So we do nothing?’

‘No,’ several people said at once.

‘We still have a UNIS operation on Anternis, run by Karris Haig. The Tiberean station broadcasts data to the Vadian Mission Station automatically, every sixty minutes,’ Frost said before anyone else could speak. ‘It is also backed up on Anternis, on servers beneath the UNAF base. Assuming we can recover all the data from Anternis itself, we’ll get everything up to the second before the KRS hit. If not, the most intel we’ll lose is an hour’s worth. That might give us some clues as to why the kaygryn attacked the crusade fleet and why the station was hit – *if* it was intentional, and *if* the two are linked.’

Aurelius nodded. ‘All right. Frost, Howarth... where is she... Josette, I want you three personally to oversee the intelligence recovery. You have complete discretion.’

‘Yes, sir,’ they muttered in near unison.

‘I need to speak to my communications officers,’ the President said, more to himself than anybody else. ‘I should address the public, and the Ascendancy, thinking about it. Broadcast on all networks. If our missives haven’t penetrated the provari embassies on our intentions, then perhaps a public broadcast will do the trick. The press are all over this, I take it?’

‘Interest is spreading through United Information,’ McKone said. ‘A few more hours and this will be headline news on most worlds.’

‘Right,’ Aurelius said. ‘In which case, you are all dismissed. Let’s reconvene once our man reaches Gonvarion.’

Vondur had ZEN package the head carefully in an ammunition crate, then waited for the medevac. It arrived ten minutes after he had called for it, in the form of a battered olive-green UNAF Medical Corps shuttle. He launched up to meet it with a burst of thrust, and, avoiding the air intakes, handed the crate over to one of the medics leaning out of the open cargo hold.

‘Is this it?’ the medic asked over a private channel.

‘That’s it,’ Vondur replied.

The medic opened up the crate and took the head out while Vondur moved back so that he wasn’t interfering with the shuttle’s stability.

‘What’s her status?’ Vondur asked, as the shuttle spun slowly about on its horizontal axis and headed back to Anternis.

‘It’s... still in good condition,’ the medic replied, sounding preoccupied. ‘Can’t speak for her psychological state, but medically, everything that we would like to see intact is intact.’

‘Okay. Keep me posted,’ Vondur replied.

There was a pause. ‘I’ve been ordered to keep the matter NTK, sir.’

Vondur was already back on the ground, Goliath squelching into the muddy jungle floor. ‘Keep me posted, *private*,’ he repeated, irritably.

Another pause. ‘Yes, sir.’

Vondur terminated the channel and absentmindedly reviewed the incoming data from the squadron’s active drones. There was nothing new. He had his Goliath perform a biological mass scan, then laughed at his own stupidity when the entire jungle lit up. He cancelled the readout.

‘So, what was that all about?’ Jarvin asked a few moments later, via a private channel.

‘I don’t know,’ Vondur replied truthfully. ‘Though I’m not sure I like the idea of a base controller – hell, anyone – being unwilling to recover a human casualty.’

‘Exactly,’ Jarvin replied. ‘There must be a reason.’

‘There is a reason. Just not a very good one.’ Vondur was aware that, despite it being a private channel, it would not be impossible to hack with UNIS-grade technology – and this had UNIS written all over it. He maximised the encryption to deter the casual hacker.

‘Do you think it was something to do with that KRS?’ Jarvin asked.

Vondur nodded to himself. ‘Likely. We probably had assets in the area. Got blitzed. She can’t have been out here for long; she’d have been picked up by now.’

‘Or not,’ Jarvin remarked.

Vondur was about to reply but paused as an incoming-message icon winked in the corner of his vision. ‘Hold on,’ he said and sidelined the private feed. ‘This is Gatekeeper Actual, go ahead.’

‘Gatekeeper, this is First Light. We have orders to relieve you at oh-three-hundred. You’re being reassigned to Anternis, confirm copy over.’

Vondur frowned and checked the time. They still had hours left on the clock. ‘Copy, First Light. Anything else?’

‘Negative, Gatekeeper. First Light out.’

The channel closed, and he re-linked with Jarvin on a wideband channel. ‘We’re being relieved by first battalion at 3 a.m.’

‘Troops?’ Jarvin replied. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t know,’ Vondur replied.

‘Probably because it’s dead out here,’ Cox said. Vondur watched him launch into the air in the distance and slowly descend back into the jungle. ‘Can’t see shit, sir.’

‘Use the drones, Sergeant; stop making yourself a target,’ Jarvin said irritably.

‘I’m fluorescent orange, sir! A blind man on the moon could hit me with a stream of piss!’

The net erupted with laughter.

‘Can it,’ Vondur snapped, and the laughter abruptly stopped. The business with the head of that woman had soured his mood.

They spent the next few hours in silence, idly trudging up and down the border. By one o’clock the rain had lightened off, and in another hour it had stopped completely. The mountain passes remained defiantly clear of refugees; in fact, the city seemed to be in a state of near-total lockdown. The drones’ continual surveillance showed almost no activity.

By three o’clock Vondur had almost completely forgotten about the provari cruiser sitting hundreds of kilometres above them – or would have if there wasn’t a constant, pulsing warning graphic on his HUD informing him that he and his squadron were being actively targeted.

‘Blues approaching from the south,’ Syoba said.

Vondur blinked a few times and amplified his scanners to see three troop carriers making a beeline for their position. A negligibly invasive diagnostic informed him that almost the entire battalion was being deployed, nearly two hundred men.

‘They’re deploying in force, then,’ Jarvin snorted. ‘Did no one tell them there’s nothing to do out here?’

‘Get ready to move out,’ Vondur relayed tiredly and recalled ZEN. He received a further transmission from First Light – this time an HUD marker informing him of the exact location of their objective. He sent it to the rest of the squadron via a wideband transmission.

‘Anternis General Hospital?’ Cox asked.

‘Ours is not to question why,’ Vandemarr replied.

‘Still,’ Jarvin said, powering up his Goliath’s plasmastats. ‘You can’t say this isn’t odd.’

‘No,’ Vondur murmured to himself, ‘you can’t.’

\*

The journey to Gonvarion, thanks to the VR sync, was actually rather enjoyable. Given the near-endless number of programs available and the sync’s variable time perception, Yano was able to partake both in the immeasurable debauchery of Ultraporn and the ferocious violence of interactive war games, back to back, in what in real time would be the blink of an eye.

Of course, every time the voidbreaker exited a jump he was bombarded with diplomatic cables – many from Xander McKone himself – and had intragalactic political reports to review, the latest Protocol legislation to revise, and when all of that was done, there was the good old-fashioned news to watch.

The latter had been the easiest to keep track of. United Information, one of the only UN-wide news channels, had dedicated, round-the-clock coverage of ‘The Anternis Crisis’ – though they had already been reduced to repeatedly showing the same five-minute montage of footage since almost all comms were being blocked by the provar. In between the low-quality images of a

kaygryn ship being obliterated, there were also interviews with former and serving UNAF personnel, including one ex-Goliath commander who reeled off some impressive statistics about the machines, and an alleged ‘provar expert’, who even spoke the language.

Of course, the most engrossing coverage was about him. That had taken him slightly by surprise, partly due to the speed at which United Information had found out about the summit, and more specifically his presence there, and partly due to the large Exigency Corps portrait of him they were showing behind the newsreader. In all likelihood, they had already wangled it so a reporter was embedded in the diplomatic team.

‘In response to the crisis as we’ve already said, we can now *confirm* that Xander McKone, the head of the United Nations Diplomatic Ministry, *will* be deploying the Exigency Corps Xeno Division to Gonvarion, and we understand that leading this team will be Special Envoy Zavian Yano, pictured behind me.

‘Special Envoy Yano is well known for his work during and after the Insurrection on Merisgard, and despite being one of the youngest members of the prestigious Xeno Division, superiors have described him as “uniquely talented”.

‘The crisis on Anternis comes just months ahead of the UN presidential election, and is seen by many political commentators as the first real test of Tier-Three relations since the Treaty of Hadan’s Reach fifty years ago. The Treaty, which ceded surplus UN territory to the Provar Ascendancy in exchange for scarce resources, remains a sore point in interspecies relations and is likely to colour talks on Gonvarion.

‘Our political correspondent, Natasha—’

He cancelled the feed and found himself floating in unconstructed VR space.

‘Christ,’ he whispered and exhaled loudly.

He checked the time to see that the voidbreaker had made a further two jumps since he last looked, the latter of which had taken them into the Zhahassi Commonwealth. They would likely make one more to reach Gonvarion, which itself was deep inside the Demilitarised Zone. The zhahassi were the only Tier-Three species to have reached their current technological plane without warfare and the means to effectively prosecute it being the main driving factor, making them natural diplomats.

He absentmindedly drew up a galaxy map and checked their progress from Bashik. Their estimated arrival time was in two hours, formed of one short jump and then forty minutes at point-five lightspeed through the solar system. While it would give him more than enough time to partake in several war games spanning weeks of relative time, he didn't feel like it any more. Every time he thought about the upcoming summit, a shot of adrenaline coursed through his body uncomfortably, and his mind felt saturated by the news broadcasts and diplomatic cables.

No, he thought, he would spend the rest of the journey unconscious. He checked his IHD to see that there were no further pending messages, although he would invariably be inundated the moment they touched down. Once he was satisfied, he cleared his vision of all his IHD clutter and had the capsule knock him out.

He awoke after what felt like three seconds, to find they had arrived.



## RETRIBUTION

*‘This is a victor’s justice, nothing more. I do not repent. Release me now and I would do it again a thousand times over.’ (trans.)*

### **Executor Iourix, after being sentenced to death for the massacre at Beng’Tusk**

It took them just over twenty hours and three jumps to successfully reach Uvolon. Rynn had wanted to do it in two, but the *Retribution*’s astrographic navigation suite had been misaligned at the last moment by a gravity well three thousand light years from Navem Sigma, causing them to abort at the last second. Still, twenty hours was not unreasonable and within operational parameters. They had managed to exit jumpspace much closer to Uvolon than originally planned as well.

They emerged from the event horizon a million kilometres from the upper atmosphere and immediately accelerated to point-one lightspeed. The *Seraph* and the *York* closed to formation, maintaining a two-hundred-kilometre perimeter, and within a minute they had made a high-velocity pass through Uvolon’s high-orbit band, sowing decoy pods and hundreds of microsatellites in their wake.

‘Smith, let’s have voidar on our cruiser, please,’ Rynn said, searching the astrographic sphere around them for any sign of the provar. The *Retribution* made another high-G pass through the low-orbit band, dispensing more pods. They would have the effect of confusing enemy voidar and proliferating gibberish across all foreign wideband comms.

‘Still looking,’ Smith replied, using the microsatellites to amplify the *Retribution*’s void radar signals.

Rynn checked the engagement counter. They were scanning in real time and had already spent the best part of ninety seconds searching for the provar cruiser.

‘It must have refraction shields at maximum,’ Smith complained. ‘I’m not going to get it on voidar; we’d have picked them up by now.’

Rynn clicked his tongue irritably. ‘All right. Take us down to point-oh-one lightspeed. Rankin, bring the *Seraph* and the *York* into diamond defence

pattern three.'

'Aye, sir.'

They were being too aggressive, he realised. High-G low-orbit passes were too hostile a manoeuvre; it was little wonder that the provars were cloaking. 'Any sign on voidar?' he asked.

'Still negative, sir.'

He sighed. At the very least he would have liked to have known where they were. 'All right, take us to geosync L1, equatorial planar. Mr Burkhart, ensure all weapon systems are on full standby, please.'

'Aye, sir,' he replied.

'Rankin, prepare a status report for command. Post-EH defensive manoeuvres completed. No sign of the *Impraxes*, assuming position at L1 geosync. Bounce it off Fleet Comms Array at Navem Sigma.' He paused. 'Actually, find out where the nearest array is.' The Fleet Comms Array was now many thousands of light years away; it was far better to have the message safely logged at a closer relay first.

'Aye, sir.' Rankin replied.

Rynn studied the astrograph again. It was like standing in the middle of a glass bubble in space, a sensation that took many weeks to get used to. He cast his eyes over the readouts with a practised ease, selecting pieces of information with his IHD, scanning, processing and discarding them, all, often literally, in the blink of an eye. As he did, the green-and-blue orb of Uvolon slowly filled the fore VL sensor feeds.

'Hold on,' Smith said suddenly, leaning in towards his console. 'I think I'm getting something.'

Rynn looked up. There was nothing on the astrograph overlay. 'Where?'

The LRIS hit them entirely without warning and with the electronic warfare equivalent of the force of a nuclear bomb. Immediately, warning graphics and alarms filled the sync space, and countermeasures sprang into action, terminating already corrupt programs, setting up firewalls and proliferating junk signals to flood the enemy LRIS bandwidth. Within a few microseconds, the *Retribution's* plasma core had diverted power to the refraction shields, and full-spectrum defences leapt up to maximum efficacy.

'Contact,' Smith reported. 'Two million clicks four-three-oh-four spinward and closing fast.'

'What?' Rynn shouted, his IHD cycling through the voidar readouts. It was

large – larger than his destroyers – and from its electronic signature almost certainly the *Impraxes*. ‘Ping it. IFF, immediately.’

‘Aye, sir,’ Rankin replied and fired off the standard Tier-Three identify friend or foe signal. There was no reply.

‘That’s not good,’ Burkhart mumbled.

‘It’s not, is it,’ Rynn murmured in agreement. The *Retribution*’s VR sync had automatically slowed their time perception down to half-speed, giving them a good five minutes of adjusted time before the *Impraxes* would reach them on its current trajectory. But two million kilometres was already too close if the provar had hostile intentions; effective range of naval-pattern rail cannons was theoretically infinite on a stationary target.

‘Rankin, keep trying to hail them,’ he said, ‘and inform Sigma of the situation. Have you found a closer station?’

‘The UNIS Vadian Mission Station is the closest,’ Rankin replied. ‘Already on it, sir.’

‘Good. Burkhart, tell Mr Grosvenor and Mr Aulden to prepare diamond defence pattern one, with a five-hundred-klick spread. No guns yet.’

‘Aye, sir,’ Burkhart replied.

‘Mr Smith, let’s have a decoy barrage as well. Voidar pods set to maximum resonance. A hundred should do it.’

‘Aye, sir.’

Rynn took a deep breath. These naval manoeuvres were a tense affair. At the moment they were jostling each other with garbage comms chatter, decoy voidar pods and the more extreme LRIS, despite the fact that the use of LRIS on another ship was technically a hostile act. One slip or misinterpretation would see the whole thing blow up, all too literally, and usually within a few split seconds.

‘Sir... target is deploying voidar countermeasures. Discrimination programs are cutting through the chatter but at the moment I am now tracking eighteen objects instead of one, and that number is increasing,’ Smith said, perspiration marking his brow. ‘It’s definitely provar.’

Rynn felt his heart rate increase slightly. High-velocity, head-on manoeuvres with advance-masking decoy pods was about as aggressive as one could get short of actually firing. He was beginning to regret his cavalier entrance into Uvolon’s territorial orbit.

‘Right, time to move I think,’ he said. ‘Smith, take us away at point-two

lightspeed, please. Withdraw the voidar pods and tone down the junk chatter, will you? It's just pissing them off.'

'Aye, sir,' Smith replied.

Rynn watched the astrograph as they twisted away from Uvolon and accelerated to sixty thousand kilometres per second. He felt his pulse slow. They were conceding the territory, recalling their pods. There was a fine line between protecting and consolidating one's position and being deliberately provocative. He had leaned a little too far the wrong way and now he was doing the gentlemanly thing and retreating. There was no shame in that. Besides, he had been given strict orders not to engage under any circumstances by the fleet marshal.

'Uh, sir? Target has increased speed and is running codebreakers on our transmissions,' Rankin said, clearing his throat.

Rynn's eyes widened slightly. 'They can't do that,' he said with a frown, more to himself than to anyone else. Hyperspace transmissions to home bases were protected under Galactic Naval Protocol. Of course, no one paid much attention to GNP, but in peacetime you at least had the manners to make an attempt at secrecy.

'Smith, increase speed to point-three and bring us about. Follow this trajectory,' he added and sent a course map over his IHD. 'Rankin, pip them again, please.'

The *Retribution*, with the *York* and the *Seraph* in tow, performed a long, slow parabolic pass out and back towards Uvolon, all the time broadcasting IFF. The *Impraxes*, larger and more cumbersome in its acceleration, peeled off from its pursuit and instead followed an intercept vector.

'What on Earth are they doing?' Rynn breathed. 'Can't they see we're retreating?'

'Cruiser not responding to pips, Captain,' Rankin said, looking over at him. 'Or any transmissions.'

Rynn's features creased in frustration. 'Is that because they aren't actually receiving, or are they receiving and ignoring us?'

'Comms would indicate the latter, sir,' Rankin replied. 'I also have Lieutenant Aulden on the line, sir. He wants to know "what the fuck is happening". Sir.'

Rynn cursed. It was not like Aulden to break comms discipline. 'Do not respond. Maintain silence for now.'

‘Aye, sir.’

‘Sir? We’re heading for deep space,’ Smith informed him. Rynn checked the astrograph to see that they had completed their pass and were currently hurtling at ninety thousand kilometres per second away from the solar system. Uvolon was already a shrinking dot behind them.

‘Bring us about, slow to point-two and keep making elliptical passes. Rankin, I need orders from command, see to it,’ Rynn barked.

‘Aye, sir,’ came the chorused reply.

He checked their voidar readouts on his IHD but the provar decoys were still scrambling the *Impraxes*’ precise location. Discrimination subroutines had selected several of the most likely targets – all of which were still pursuing them.

‘Sir, might I suggest we power up defensive batteries?’ Dieter, his damage-control officer, asked. ‘Should be unreadable on LRIS.’

‘I’m not going to take that chance,’ Rynn replied curtly. The provar LRIS could see power blooms within the *Retribution*, but given their own sophisticated countermeasures, it would not be obvious exactly what they were channelling power to. From the provar perspective, it could just as easily be the *Retribution*’s rail cannons.

Rynn reviewed their movements and formation. Currently they were still in diamond pattern one, a defensive combat stance, but one into which they had been goaded. He felt perfectly justified within it, but evidently it was still not having the desired effect. What was more, he would have a hard time explaining it to the fleet marshal if they and the *Impraxes* came to blows. In the circumstances, it would probably be better to adopt a neutral formation or disperse entirely.

‘Rankin, inform Aulden and Grosvenor to break formation.’ He paused. He had half a mind to order them to leave the solar system altogether. ‘Order them to disperse to L2 and L3, equatorial planar, respectively. Hold there and broadcast IFF until further instructions.’

‘Aye, sir,’ Rankin replied.

Rynn watched the astrograph as the *Seraph* and the *York* twisted away on high-G trajectories, while the *Retribution* banked back around in a long, smooth arc. Rynn checked the engagement counter. The ship’s VI had been altering their time perception up and down by the picosecond, but at the moment they were running close to real time.

‘Smith, how are we doing?’

‘We are still being pursued, Captain.’

Another alarm wailed into life as a fresh bout of LRIS hit them, battering their refraction shields, shutting down and corrupting programs and triggering another wave of firewalls; then, over the existing cacophony, another alarm – one which Rynn had not heard for a long time.

‘Enemy is running out guns!’ Burkhart shouted, a look of incredulity written across his face.

Rynn felt a chill run up his spine. He gripped the railing of the command pulpit in front of him, a grimace twisting his mouth. ‘Dieter, force shielding at maximum. Rankin, I want those orders from base, please, immediately, and send warning pips to the provar. Smith, engage LRIS, now.’

If this was bluster, it was fast becoming bad taste.

‘Sir, I have Lieutenant Aulden on the line,’ Rankin said.

‘Captain, they’re drawing a bead on us,’ Aulden’s voice sounded over the net. It was strained with an undercurrent of what sounded uncomfortably like fear. ‘Shall I return to formation?’

‘Fuck buggering fuck,’ Rynn hissed, running a hand through his hair. He considered their options for a long second of adjusted time. ‘Yes, Aulden, return to formation immediately, trinity pattern five.’ Trinity pattern was an active, three-ship combat stance, recognisable under GNP standardised tactics as “back off”. Coupled with full force shielding and warning pips, they were now at their highest alert short of combat.

‘Rankin, bring the *York* back in as well, please,’ Rynn said, wishing more than anything he had orders.

‘Aye sir,’ Rankin replied, and he issued coded missives over the net. They were intercepted almost immediately. ‘Shit, they’re in our comms!’ he said, thumping the console in front of him. Immediately the network was filled with junk chatter, thousands of gigabytes of information clogging up the bandwidth which the *Retribution*’s discriminatory programs struggled to keep up with. It was fast becoming impossible to ignore the fact that they were being engaged.

‘Rankin, where are my orders?’ Rynn shouted to his comms officer.

‘There’s nothing coming through, sir; they’ve jammed up our FTL array. Short-range and sublight comms only.’

Rynn wrung his hands around the rail in front of him. They were alone

with no hope of instructions from Navem Sigma or Vargonroth for at least a dozen hours. Three UN destroyers could take a provar cruiser, though they would undoubtedly lose at least two ships in the process, and more likely all of them. They had the advantage of greater acceleration and manoeuvrability, but that was tempered by the *Impraxes*' far superior firepower and armour.

He watched the astrograph as the *Seraph* accelerated smoothly into the aft starboard slot of the trinity five formation, but the *York* was lagging nearly quarter of a million kilometres coreward.

'Rankin,' Rynn asked, trying to calm his adrenaline-fuelled heart. 'Why is the *York* where it is?'

'I can't raise Mr Grosvenor, sir; I told you, the provar have jammed all comms. Last orders to get through were to the *Seraph*.'

'Christ,' Rynn breathed. Some mammalian reflexes were impossible to eliminate in the VR sync – sweating was one and trembling was the other. Rynn felt himself experiencing both as he cleared his throat and gave his orders.

'Run out guns,' he said, in a slightly hoarse voice.

'Running out guns,' Burkhart replied, his tone admirably unquestioning. Outside, across dozens of ordnance pylons, the *Retribution*'s guns – mass drivers, quad-powered lasers, chaff pods and Star Witch flak missile launchers – extended from their recessed hard points so that the destroyer resembled something like a sea urchin.

'Power to all weapons,' Rynn recited. Given that power was always a scarce resource on board a naval warship, almost all systems remained dormant until required. He still hoped he was wrong, that they would not need the guns and that he was just being overcautious. His stance thus far had been reactive – after all, the damned aliens were drawing a bead on one of his ships! What was he supposed to do? – but this course of action was, undeniably, an escalation. In exercising these defensive manoeuvres, he was almost guaranteeing an engagement.

'Under fire,' reported Lieutenant Grosvenor over a concentrated, narrowband beam of coded information that barely penetrated the *Retribution*'s firewall. It was his first, and would be his only, transmission on the engagement counter. The struggling *York*, now close to half a million kilometres away within the high-orbit band, suddenly vanished from the

astrograph in a blaze of crimson graphics, wideband ghost chatter and full-spectrum radiation.

Rynn felt the blood drain from his face as information reached the *Retribution*'s sensors and drip-fed the ship's VI with data on the exact time and manner of the *York*'s termination. It would be another point-five seconds of real time before the light of its destruction reached them; their perception-adjusted dumb optics still registered the destroyer as intact, a tiny spec silhouetted against a band of bright white Uvolonese cloud.

'Smith, point-six lightspeed, now!' Rynn shouted, fear and rage in equal measure pervading his every fibre. He took two deep breaths. 'Rankin, get the *Seraph*, reaper three formation, all guns authorised. He is to engage and destroy.'

'Aye aye, sir.'

The two UN destroyers accelerated smartly to one hundred and eighty thousand kilometres per second and began twisting about on high-G evasion vectors, throwing out decoy pods, microsatellites and comms-scramblers in their wake. Immediately their voidar profile changed from that of two ships to a couple of hundred – most of which the *Impraxes*' discrimination programs could eliminate in a matter of microseconds, but some of which would provide for very convincing doppelgängers.

'Rankin, get a report back to base at the double, as a priority,' Rynn said, swallowing back the anger. 'Do whatever you have to. Tell them the *York* has been destroyed in an unprovoked attack and we are engaging. Bounce it off the Fleet Comms Array as well as the Vadian Mission Station, understood?'

'Aye, sir,' Rankin replied.

The *Retribution* and the *Seraph* curved violently through Uvolon's high-orbit band, seeking out the *Impraxes*. The provar were using the magnetosphere to enhance their junk chatter proliferation, and it was making their voidar profile almost impossible to track. On the astrograph, ghost signals were appearing in dozens of places anti-sunward, and Rynn quickly realised that they were far more outmatched than he had initially thought.

'Smith, where is it?' he asked, eyes searching frantically across the spherical surface of the navigation suite.

'I'm running full discrimination, sir, but I can't get a fix on it. It could be any number of those decoys,' he said, using his IHD to project onto the astrograph the swirling cloud of false cruiser signatures sweeping through the



high-orbit band. To the uninitiated, it looked as though an entire fleet of provar ships was less than fifty thousand kilometres away.

Rynn snarled his annoyance. ‘Burkhart, hit ten of the most likely targets with Star Witch,’ he said. ‘Rankin, have Lieutenant Aulden do the same.’ He nearly asked for Lieutenant Grosvenor, but realised, with a pang of adrenaline, that the man was dead – and the rest of them were likely to follow suit at this rate.

The *Retribution* blossomed with flashes of light as ten event horizons seared into life and swallowed ten Star Witch thermonuclear missiles. Rynn smirked; their FTL comms array might have been jammed, but their FTL weapons array wasn’t. A split second later, EMP from the nukes wiped out all ten targets – revealing them all as decoys.

‘Rankin, engage LRIS on all remaining targets. Take power from the mass drivers.’ He was going to smoke the provar out, one decoy at a time.

It took four more salvos from the *Retribution* and the *Seraph* for the provari cruiser to move. Their LRIS picked it up immediately – it was the only power bloom in the high-orbit band not to have a voidar profile associated with it, a dead giveaway for a fully refraction-shielded warship.

‘There!’ Rynn snapped, pointing at the astrograph. He absentmindedly checked the engagement counter to see that just over six seconds of real time had passed. The *Retribution* and the *Seraph* continued on their violently twisting, curving trajectories, directionally randomised by their respective VIs to minimise the risk of the provar displacing a missile within their force shields.

The cruiser’s engines left a bright violet flare on the astrograph as they powered to full thrust. The inertia of the ship meant that, initially at least, the going was slow, but once it reached full power its straight-line speed would far outmatch theirs. Still, its turns were slow and ponderous in comparison, and that made it a prime target for their Star Witch targeting computers.

‘Fire at will,’ Rynn said, now slightly giddy with excitement. Burkhart did exactly that, bringing up thousands of firing solutions on the astrograph and unleashing a swarm of ordnance. Immediately the space around the *Retribution* and the *Seraph* filled with micro event horizons, and salvos of missiles slid into hyperspace and re-materialised around the *Impraxes*. Although nuclear weapons had little impact in space beyond their EMP, Star Witch was a robotic, VI-powered shaped-charge that would laser through the

hull of an enemy warship before detonating, creating catastrophic overpressure that simply burst the ship apart like a water balloon.

Their VL sensors fuzzed as the *Impraxes* activated its defensive quad-powered laser batteries and destroyed or deflected all of their missiles. A few cursory shots raked the *Retribution*, but it was nothing its force shielding couldn't handle.

The UN destroyers shot past the *Impraxes*, giving it a wide, hundred-thousand-kilometre berth, and battered it with hypervelocity flak from their rail cannons. Solid shot was much more effective against defensive lasers, and the effect was instantaneous. Rynn watched on the infrared feed as the *Impraxes'* shields overloaded from the kinetic energy and its armoured nanoform hull cratered from multiple impacts. In some places, he could make out venting gas where they had punctured the armour entirely.

'Good hit,' Rynn said. 'Smith, bring us back around. Burkhart, stay on the railguns but keep up the pressure with Star Witch.'

'Missiles are down at sixty-five per cent, sir,' Burkhart said as another salvo went. One of the missiles managed to get close enough to activate its cutting laser before it was turned to junk by a spray of chaff.

'Incoming,' Dieter said, his face glowing red from the warning graphics on his screen. 'Sentrax online.'

Had they not been in the VR sync they would have felt the vibrations from the *Retribution's* sentry guns as they whittled away at the cloud of ordnance approaching from the *Impraxes*. Proximity alarms – by far the most disconcerting – also stuttered into life intermittently as an event horizon sparked into existence nearby and disgorged its thermonuclear payload.

Rynn watched on the astrograph as another cloud of flak lanced towards the twisting, spiralling *Impraxes*. Compared to the destroyers, it was painfully slow, but they dared not venture too close for fear of falling foul of its close-range batteries.

'Bring us round again,' he said to Smith, and the *Retribution* streaked past Uvolon's terminator and straight towards the sun. Another high-G pass and another broadside saw them score two more hits on the provar cruiser – before a nuke was displaced inside the hull of the *Seraph*.

'It was an hon–' Aulden managed before the blast vaporised him. The *Seraph* shattered like burning glass plunged into ice water and vanished into the void in an expanding cloud of radioactive dust and plasma.

The command sphere of the *Retribution* fell silent. The destroyer soared through the high-orbit band and put Uvolon between them and the *Impraxes*, and Smith quietly cleared his throat. ‘Shall I bring her back around, sir?’

It was at that point that Rynn realised the astrograph was still screaming with alarms. ‘Would somebody turn that damn noise off,’ he said, bringing his hands up to his temples. How had this happened? How had he *let* it happen? He brought his hands down to his sides and clenched them into fists. ‘Burkhart, prepare the entire battery for deployment.’ He wanted to hit the cruiser, to kill its crew. He wanted them to die painfully. Christ, if this had been a provari world, he would have nuked it in anger by now.

‘Aye, sir,’ his first officer said. Rynn’s IHD informed him that their entire contingent of Star Witch was ready to launch.

‘Inform the marines to prepare for launch as well,’ he said. That drew some looks, though he didn’t acknowledge them.

‘Aye, sir,’ Burkhart replied and did so. It would be utter suicide to dispatch marines against the *Impraxes*, and he knew it. But if the provar could displace a nuke inside a destroyer moving at a third of the speed of light, then what chance did they realistically have?

The *Retribution* shot out from behind Uvolon, bristling with weaponry, spoiling for a fight. Except that the *Impraxes* had vanished again, leaving nothing but ghost signals pinging across their voidar.

‘Oh for Christ’s sake!’ Rynn swore, thumping the railing in front of him. However, it meant their FTL comms array was working again. ‘Rankin, inform base of the situation immediately. Tell them the provar have murdered my men and violated Galactic Naval Protocol. Tell them they are in flagrant breach of international law and that they must be fucking *ruined*, understand?’ he spat.

‘Yes, sir,’ Rankin said and began to relay the message. Rynn surveyed the astrograph. The provari cruiser was nowhere to be seen; even its decoys were giving off weak and obviously false signals. The *Retribution*’s discrimination programs had no trouble in singling out the junk chatter and eliminating it.

‘Where are you, you son of a bitch?’ he said through gritted teeth. The astrograph chimed to inform him that it had finished gathering all the information available on the demise of the *York*, ready for his perusal. The thought infuriated him, and he cancelled the reminder from his IHD.

They made several more high-G passes of the equator, engaging LRIS on

anything that moved, but there was nothing, not even the tell-tale high-energy signature of a recent event horizon.

‘Where are you...?’ Rynn said again, this time whispering.

The *Impraxes*’ railguns hit them before the *Retribution* had even picked up the power bloom of its mass drivers.

‘Gah!’ Rynn managed, flinching violently as half the astrograph – and half the crew – vanished in a blaze of poorly rendered VR graphics.

He screamed. The command sphere resembled a smashed disco ball, with jagged slivers of software buzzing and crackling and failing to produce anything useful. Dieter and Rankin had gone, as well as the lower half of Smith, whose intestines were currently being rendered as sickeningly cuboidal blocks of red. His torso hovered in the air fifteen centimetres above his chair, a look of abject confusion etched across his face as his hands passed through the empty space where his stomach and thighs should have been.

‘Captain,’ he said woozily, looking over to Rynn. ‘I think they’ve killed me.’ He disappeared as his capsule was automatically ejected from the ship.

The command sphere was wailing now like a wounded animal. He managed to decipher from the crippled VI that the ship was cartwheeling into deep space, though much more slowly than before given that the impact from the provari railguns had robbed the *Retribution* of much of its forward momentum. All of the marines had been killed, torn to bloody ribbons by the cloud of flak that had been blasted through the ship like a shotgun firing through an orange. It was nothing short of a miracle that he had not been killed; his body, buried deep in the diamond-armoured core, had not even been hit, his IHD informed him.

‘How... did this happen?’ Burkhart said, staring ahead of him, his voice laden with melancholy. He had managed to fire off their entire magazine of Star Witch, which impressed Rynn somewhere in the back of his mind, though none of it had made it through the *Impraxes*’ defences.

The first officer’s VR avatar fuzzed and disappeared as his capsule ejected from the ship too, heading for Uvolon. Rynn suddenly felt very alone.

He checked the engagement counter. From beginning to end, they had been in Uvolon’s orbit for less than three minutes, and the engagement itself had lasted in the region of twenty seconds of real time. He snorted. One of the

longest engagements he had ever been in. He liked to think they had made a worthy adversary.

His capsule ejected automatically a few seconds later, and he was snapped violently from the VR sync back into the cramped, dark and claustrophobic interior of the gel-filled capsule. He writhed briefly inside his stifling pressure suit as the worst of the disorientation passed, until his IHD calmed him and produced for him a screen tracking his progress towards Uvolon. By its current speed and trajectory, he would hit the upper atmosphere in three hours before parachuting gently down to Anternis – although the *Impraxes* was obliged under international law to recover him.

Instead, it dispatched a bioterminator drone.

Supposedly a relic of the altogether more violent, though bygone, age of Contact, the drone's only function was to seek out escaped biological matter in the aftermath of a naval engagement and terminate it. The drone had a variety of means at its disposal, but the most widely reviled and prevalent was to latch on to the mass in question and physically rip it apart until it no longer functioned.

The provar were the strongest proponent of their use, officially only as a deterrent, though historically they had frequently dispatched entire swarms of them into crippled kaygryn battlefleets and refugee flotillas. They had been accordingly classed as a Terror Weapon under Galactic Naval Protocol and banned, though like many GNP rules, the prohibition was widely ignored, and most modern warships carried them. Still, their use now was sufficiently rare that they had acquired an almost mythical status, so much so that Rynn had never seriously countenanced the possibility that he, as a human, would ever be the target of one. To discover that not only were they real but that one was now honing in on his escape capsule was so terrifying a sensation that it was physically painful to experience.

*Beep.*

The terminator forcibly synced with his IHD and began transmitting its approach countdown. He writhed inside the pod again, but the gel was so viscous it was like trying to sprint through treacle. He tried screaming, but even in his terrified state, he knew deep in the back of his mind that such was pointless.

*Beep.*

His pressure suit became a reservoir of hot sweat. His bowels relaxed,

despite the Herculean efforts of his IHD, and the frequency of his breathing increased to the point of hyperventilation.

He thought of his family. That made him wail in anguish. He wanted to be at home, on Bospen, with his wife and two sons, not soaring through the cold, empty void, hundreds of thousands of kilometres from anyone, about to be—

*Beep beep.*

He screamed again, a long wail that ended in angry tears. He willed the capsule to travel faster. He tried thrashing about again and felt overwhelmingly claustrophobic.

*Beep beep beep.*

He cried. He cried and cried. This was not why he had joined the Fleet. No one seriously expected to die like this when they joined. The navy was supposed to be a jolly, a laugh; you wore the uniform and you flew warships and had fabulous dinners and parties. This was not it. This was *not* it.

*Beep beep beep beep beep beep – thud.*

The noise of the drone latching on to the capsule hull was more than he could bear. He would have shit and pissed himself right then if the suit would have allowed it. The tearing, drilling sound of the drone's cutting tools seared through the capsule, amplified by the gel, rattling his brain.

He ordered his IHD to seal off all his sensory nerves. If he was going to be killed, it would at least happen painlessly. He suddenly thought of a group of provar huddled round a holo, watching from a remote optical feed as the drone slid into the gel, cheering and whooping and celebrating his death. He wasn't sure where the thought had come from.

The hard, unfiltered light of Uvolon's sun speared into the capsule as the drone peeled back the metal-like petals from a flower. It wasted no time in burrowing into his stomach. He squeezed his eyes shut, his throat closing with horror, willing himself to die faster. He could feel the squid-like drone painlessly dicing his organs.

'It's not so bad,' he whispered, feeling his gullet fill with blood.

His IHD was alive with foreign-body warning graphics now. They clamoured for attention across his vision, physiological representations of his body flashing in and out of existence surrounded by simultaneously frantic and dispassionate text.

He closed his eyes, feeling himself unplug from life.

'It's not so bad,' he whispered, his breath rasping. Blood filled his mouth.

It's not so bad, he thought, and then the drone scurried up his spine and scrambled his brain.

## **II**

### **TIER THREE**

*‘All warfare is based on deception.’*



## HEAD START

*‘No one is dead until I’m through with them. Bring me half a brain and I’ll get you something out of it.’*

**Attributed to Field Surgeon Argus von Vox, during the battle of Rawdon’s Wake**

‘Good morning, Miss Staerck.’

She awoke to see a man in a white lab coat and a pair of spectacles – the latter doubtless an affectation – enter the bedroom through the main door, carrying a clipboard. He sat down on the chaise longue at the foot of the bed and rested one leg across the other, revealing a pair of red-and-blue striped socks. He noted something down on the clipboard, nodded to himself and then the clipboard vanished.

‘I am Doctor Lee.’

So, unless the man was an accomplished magician as well, she was in VR sync. ‘Good, uh, morning,’ she said, startled at the clarity of her own voice. She had expected something a little... raspier. ‘I’m alive,’ she remarked and was quite pleased about it.

‘Very much so,’ Doctor Lee replied, flashing a grin of brilliant white teeth. He also had grey hair, she noticed – doubtless another affectation, since no one had grey hair any more. In fact, he was visibly elderly, though perhaps seasoned would have been a better choice of word. ‘You have the Mantix Corporation to thank for that.’

She frowned. Of course, the suit. She had been wearing a suit, Mantix – UNIS issue. She struggled to remember more, but her mind refused to cooperate, pushing back against her. It was like pressing against the skin of a balloon: initially easy, then progressively harder. Her confusion must have been palpable because Doctor Lee frowned in turn and made a soft tutting sound.

‘Don’t try to think too hard for the moment. The memories will return. An unfortunate consequence of mild cerebral hypoxia, though entirely treatable, given time.’ He offered a reassuring smile.

She ran her hands across the sheets bunched up about her thighs, mulling

this over. ‘What is mild cerebral hypoxia?’ she asked slowly. Usually she would have just consulted her IHD, since it contained, like everyone’s, the UN Library, the most vast and comprehensive source of knowledge in the galaxy. But for the first time in her life, it did not seem to be working. The experience was a deeply unsettling one, as if part of herself, her mind, had been amputated.

‘Parts of your brain were starved of oxygen following your decapitation,’ Doctor Lee said, as though it were nothing more trivial than an insect bite. ‘The Mantix helmet is designed to displace oxygen to whatever blood remains within the cranium, but more often than not there simply isn’t enough blood to properly oxygenate.’ Another reassuring, if slightly lopsided smile. ‘Consequently the helmet prioritises. Nine times out of ten, the parts of the brain which make you you are recovered completely undamaged. I’m pleased to report that you are one of those nine.’

She breathed deeply. She knew she had lost her head, though that in itself would have been difficult to believe even if it wasn’t currently attached to a body, since decapitation, on an intrinsic level and quite irrespective of modern medical and military technology, still seemed quite un-survivable. She couldn’t, however, seem to recall the manner in which she had come to be decapitated and trying to do so was evidently futile.

‘Where am I?’ she asked. It seemed like the next obvious question.

Doctor Lee reclined slightly. ‘Your head is in the United Nations Armed Forces base on Anternis. In the medical bay,’ he added, as if that had not been obvious. ‘As is probably apparent, this is a computer simulation generated from our installation processors. I have not been informed of how you came to sustain your injuries. Apparently that is... classified.’ A flicker of annoyance creased his brow as he said the last part. ‘Still, you are doing well, very well in fact. You have been physiologically conditioned quite expertly. A civilian head would take closer to a month to take to a new body. I estimate that you will be fully repaired within a few weeks – though only physically speaking of course.’ He smiled again, that same, perfect-teeth smile, and it was at that point she realised that it was quite possible that Doctor Lee was not a real person. It certainly accounted for his appalling bedside manner.

‘Are you a VI?’ she asked. It sounded much ruder than she had intended, and she did not really care whether he was or not. She just wished he would

stop being so cavalier about her having been – for all intents and purposes – killed.

Doctor Lee snorted, perhaps with incredulity, though it was difficult to tell. ‘No, Miss Staerck, I am as real as you,’ he said, his gaze suddenly on his feet. He folded his arms. ‘I do have a personality construct, but I thought it would be best to speak to you in person, at least initially.’

‘Oh,’ she replied, suddenly embarrassed. The doctor looked visibly uncomfortable as well, though that was forgivable. It was probably rather unpleasant to be mistaken for a robot.

‘I’m sorry,’ she began, but Doctor Lee held up a finger.

‘Not to worry,’ he said, and he was back to his chipper self as quickly as if someone had flicked a switch in the back of his brain. ‘Now, as I say, I suspect it will be another fortnight before we are through with you. Your body was recovered, but unfortunately the process of decomposition is a swift one and with the damage to the rest of the suit, it was easier to dispose of it entirely and bring a fresh body out of storage.’

Lyra promptly retched violently. Given that the VR sync only translated largely exterior human components for efficiency, her stomach was empty, saving the bedspread from a sudden stream of vomit. Still, the process of dry heaving in virtual reality was as unpleasant as it was in real life, and it took a minute of grasping and perspiring before her guts unclenched and the feeling passed. It was another reason to lament the absence of her IHD, which could have easily overridden the muscle contractions.

‘What kind of doctor are you?’ she gasped, glaring at him. Doctor Lee had remained remarkably impassive throughout the entire episode, though the slight glimmer in his eye suggested that he was perhaps regretting his conversational tack.

‘Forgive me,’ he said, clearing his throat. She looked up to see him cleaning his spectacles. He didn’t seem particularly contrite. ‘In my line of work it is sometimes easy to become a little... mechanical about these things, if you see them often enough. Being an army doctor, traumatic amputations are sadly commonplace. Perhaps you will take comfort from the fact that your injuries are actually reasonably trivial by modern medical standards?’

Lyra remained staring at the bed sheets. Actually, that was rather comforting, but she wasn’t going to let this tactless shit of a doctor know it. ‘So my body is rotten, is that what you are telling me?’ she said, bitterly.

Doctor Lee cleared his throat again – an obvious tick, when one honed in on it. ‘It was in the early onset of decomposition, yes,’ he replied. ‘We were compelled to destroy it for reasons of sanitation, though I have the physiological records from your helmet. Your new body won’t be exactly the same, but it will be very similar. In fact, while I think about it, if there is anything you did not like about yourself – cosmetically, that is – we can change it now while we finalise the genesis?’

Lyra exhaled angrily. She *liked* her body. It hadn’t escaped her that this comfortable setting – a wide, plush bed in a lavishly decorated room overlooking an ocean of some sort – was cushioning the impact of what would otherwise be a severe psychological trauma. In short, she just didn’t *believe* that she currently existed only as a head on a hospital bed somewhere outside of the simulation, which was, on reflection, precisely the point of the whole setup.

‘No, I’m sure the new body is fine,’ she said resignedly. ‘You’re not going to make me a man, are you?’

Doctor Lee raised his eyebrows. ‘We can certainly do that, if you would like?’

‘No!’ she said and could not help but laugh. Doctor Lee beamed. Clearly, insofar as he was concerned, he had negotiated this initial conversation quite expertly.

‘Now you are faced with a small number of options, really,’ he said, studying the walls. ‘You can remain conscious within the VR sync until we are ready to begin testing your nervous control. That won’t be for at least five days.’

Lyra nodded. ‘Fine. Is there anything to do here? I can’t hurt myself can I?’

Doctor Lee shook his head in a patriarchal manner. ‘Heavens no, it’s just like any other VR sync. There is a library of programs to access, although you’ll have to wait until we reconnect your IHD. That won’t be for another few hours I’m afraid. The other option is to remain unconscious for the duration of your reconstruction.’

Lyra thought about this as well. It certainly had its benefits, though as tempting as it was to remain blissfully ignorant of the whole grisly process, she could utilise the time well.

‘Can you link me to my helmet once you have restored my IHD access?’

she asked.

Doctor Lee wrinkled his mouth. ‘Your head is actually still within the helmet. At the moment it is the best place for it. Everything we need to do – blood, nerve stimulus, oxygen – can be done through the gorget interface much more efficiently than the equipment we have on base.’

‘Oh,’ she said and offered a smile, trying to ignore how horribly macabre it all was. ‘Well, presumably I’ll have access then?’

‘Yes, I should imagine so, unless it was damaged in some way.’ Doctor Lee replied.

Lyra smiled inwardly. It was practically impossible to destroy the near-microscopic memory elements of a UNIS-issue Mantix helmet. ‘Excellent. In which case, I think that’s everything for now,’ she said.

‘Uh, right,’ Doctor Lee replied, having clearly expected to end the conversation on his own terms. ‘Well, yes. Good.’ He cleared his throat again. ‘I can be reached at any time via your IHD, and if for any reason you can’t reach me, my personality construct is available around the clock. Hopefully all the business with the provar will blow over and you will be my only patient!’

He had obviously intended his last remark to be a jovial one, but it had the effect of jolting Lyra’s memory as if someone had smacked her on the back of the head with a shock baton. Her mind swam with images and blurts of conversation like someone playing a holo on fast forward – the provar, a kaygryn corvette, Iyadi, images of Vos’Shan’i militia, a rail strike. It was so overwhelming that, had she been in reality, her IHD would have intervened in some way, in all likelihood by knocking her unconscious. It was all she could do not to scream.

‘Miss Staerck? Is everything all right?’ Doctor Lee said, frowning with concern. He was on the verge of leaning forward.

Lyra covered her eyes with one hand, grimacing. She felt as though her mind itself should have been in physical pain. A deep feeling of adrenaline-fuelled nausea emanated from the pit of her stomach, and she began to rock back and forth with the sheer... *suddenness* of it. Data, information and intelligence filled her head: hundreds of dead kaygryn, obliterated; Karris Haig in the Anternis Mission Station; drones, so many drones and robots, enhanced optics spying, tracking; Iyadi, drunk, stupid Iyadi, outsmarting them.

‘Christ,’ she said, bringing her other hand up and rubbing her face. It was like trying to piece together a jigsaw in a hurricane ‘Yes, I’m fine,’ she said, feeling dizzy and sick. She wanted to vomit again. She felt like she had just been locked in a centrifuge. ‘I’m fine.’

She breathed deeply – pointless in the VR sync, but it carried with it a potent psychological impact. Doctor Lee eyed her warily. ‘Would you like anything? Perhaps a short spell of sleep?’

‘No,’ she exhaled. ‘No. Honestly, just a little bout of dizziness.’ It did not seem prudent to inform him that, apparently, her memories were beginning to return. While he did not present an obvious threat, the carefully nurtured conspiracy theorist in her knew that this man, this ‘Doctor Lee’, could have been anybody – or anything – irrespective of whether he said he wasn’t a personality construct or not. And without her IHD or any other kind of independent verification, she could have been anywhere. It was better to be cautious; it was *always* better to be cautious. She had to carefully go back through every memory and reconstruct it from the ground up, filling in all the details she could. Her IHD could assist her to some extent, and her psychological and physiological conditioning would make the task considerably easier. But until that process was complete, she decided it was best to keep any improvement in her mental condition to herself.

Doctor Lee nodded, outwardly relieved. ‘All right. I’ll sign off now, and give you some time to think. As I said, your IHD will be back online in a few hours of real time.’

She smiled inoffensively, trying not to blink too much. ‘Thank you, Doctor.’

The man vanished into thin air. Lyra put her head into her hands and wept.

\*

She spent a good ten minutes crying. In her head, a large, detached part of her knew that she just needed an outlet. She needed to cry away the initial shock, to get it out of her system. So she bawled and sobbed and wailed, ensuring she felt very sorry for herself as she clutched at the sheets and rolled around on the bed, her face turning red and her eyes and nose streaming. That

same, rational part of her mind thought about how ridiculous she must look, chastised her for this folly like a mother would a child. That was the part of her mind, the strong, logical part, that she would eventually tap into.

UNIS psychological conditioning was, at its core, a compartmentalising exercise. Just as blood loss after a traumatic amputation could be controlled by sealing in the blood supply, as her Mantix helmet had done, so could a psychological trauma by sealing off the memory. It took many months of intense mental exercise to become proficient at controlling one's mind in such a way, but the relevant UNIS experts agreed – rare in itself – that, initially at least, pretending that something had not happened at all was actually rather a useful tool.

Crying was a good way to clear the initial stress, psychologically speaking, but beyond that placebo effect it was useless and time-consuming. The second phase involved identifying the source of her stress – in this case, her own decapitation – singling out the exact memories surrounding that one event and compartmentalising them. In doing so, one could control their exposure to the trauma and come to accept it incrementally and therefore much more quickly.

Concordant with that process, she finished crying, rolled on to her back and closed her eyes. It was important to get her breathing right. A good trick, she had been taught, was to imagine the lazy, rhythmic wash of waves breaking against a beach. It took about thirty minutes to activate the relevant parts of her mind to become fully calm and focussed. Once she had done this, she imagined a wall. The wall in her mind was tall, maybe three metres high, stretching down the length of a beach. The face of the wall was featureless white stone, arranged in large rectangular blocks. Above, the sky was brilliant blue, and the air was filled with that steady, rhythmic boom and wash of the waves.

She studied the wall. On the other side of it were the memories of her decapitation, physically obstructed from her view. At the moment, having her head removed was an abstract concept. It had not happened to her. Not yet. Theoretically she could make it so that it never happened, at least as far as she was concerned. Provided she utilised her UNIS training and kept the memories at bay, locked away behind the wall, then she could potentially erase the thoughts from her mind altogether.

But that was pointless. Her beheading was in itself important intelligence.

She needed to find out exactly how and why it had happened, and for that, she needed to envisage the precise circumstances and carefully, methodically, work backwards until she had the full picture.

The wall had a door now. The door was blue, like the sky. It had a metal handle on it, halfway up on the right-hand side. She reached out and opened it.

Snap.

She yanked the door closed with a stab of adrenaline and took a moment to calm herself, breathing deeply. She looked up at the sky and behind her at the sea. She imagined the warmth of the sun on her face. She was conscious of not going into too much detail, since they had been warned of the dangers of overusing the compartmentalising exercise and trapping themselves inside their own heads. But for the moment, she was fine.

Her last memory was the sound of her spine snapping in two.

She mulled this over. The act itself of having her head ripped off had presumably lasted only a handful of split seconds, and it was difficult to remember the exact moment anyway as she had passed out. Clearly, whenever she had fallen unconscious, it was not until after her spine had been severed. It was not in itself a particularly useful piece of information, but recognising the most gruesome part of her death and immersing herself in it was the best way to become detached (ha!). The sooner it no longer bothered her, the sooner she could concentrate on more important things.

She took a deep breath and opened the door again.

Snap.

A sound like the skin being ripped off an orange.

A tree branch, dark brown, slightly lichenous, slicked with rain, slicing towards her neck.

Tropical forest, clinging to the mountainside like a fungus, sagging under the monsoonal rain.

Flying through the hot, humid air. Freefall. UNIS-issue Mantix has no descent-arrestor hardware. Intense, pervasive frustration and terror, irrespective of sedation.

Arms flailing, legs pistoning. Estimated chances of survival nosediving.

Sedation. Impact-trauma protocols initiated.

Lift off.



Nanogel matrix force-impact distribution. External conditions hostile.

Shockwave, supersonic impact detonation. Velocity: ten thousand metres per second.

Kinetic impact, source orbital. Heart rate spike.

Light.

Running, heavy footfalls on regolith. Sweating, screaming, high blood pressure.

A wave of vertigo overcame her, and she took a break.

\*

She had opened thirteen doors in relatively quick succession. UNIS recommended a cautious approach, but once she had moved past the decapitation, the rest was actually not that bad. It was quite surprising how quickly the memories had returned – although perhaps not, when she thought about it, since it had been her neck, rather than her head, which had been struck with the full force of the blow.

She continued to control her breathing and slowly brought herself back from the compartmentalisation exercise, like surfacing from the bottom of an ocean. Once she was fully free of it, she opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling for a while, letting the memories sink in. She went over them again and again, this time not in the dream world but by simple conscious recall. It was phase three – reinforcement.

After a while she began to feel slightly exhausted. It took a lot of brain power, after all, to compartmentalise, immerse and reinforce. She decided she would get up and explore for a bit while she waited for Doctor Lee to reconnect her IHD, so she climbed out of the bed.

The room she was in was one of many, she soon discovered. She was actually in some kind of mansion, with long, ornately carpeted corridors, large, luxurious state rooms and beautiful gardens that surrounded the house and ran all the way down to the seafront. She spent what must have been a few hours going through all the rooms. The entire mansion was deserted, though richly decorated and obviously modelled on a real building. No VR

architect would have spent that long imagining all the detail from scratch. Outside, the air smelled of saltwater and the wash of the waves reminded her of her psychological exercises. She felt soft grass beneath her feet and relished in the false breeze, though as she drew closer to the ocean, she could see that a lot of it was actually static, and the wave effects were poorly rendered in places. Even the grass, on closer inspection, was obviously pixelated. It had the unwelcome effect of reminding her of the fact that it was all just a simulation, a computer program hosted by the medical bay's central computer.

She made for a paved area that was surrounded by an overgrown trellis and sat on a bench flanked by a pair of stone lions. Despite the fact that none of it was real, it was relaxing, and she soon found herself dozing in the warm sun, listening to the waves. When she woke up, the sun had dipped to sea level, and the sky was reddening. She had not meant to fall asleep, but felt quite rested, and so decided it probably was not a bad thing. She sat up to discover Doctor Lee sitting on the bench opposite her.

'Hello, Miss Staerck,' he said. 'I am Doctor Lee's personality construct.'

She was surprised at how unsurprised she was – almost as if the virtual representation of a doctor appearing out of thin air was the most natural thing in the world. 'Hello,' she said, never really sure how to talk to these things. In Ultraporn it was easy, since there you could be almost manically abusive with no consequence. This was different, like she had to be more... civilised. 'Pleased to meet you.'

Doctor Lee's personality construct smiled. 'I'm just here to inform you that the connection to your IHD has been restored. You should be able to access it immediately.'

'Oh. Thank you,' she said.

'My pleasure,' the personality construct replied. 'Any luck with your memory? Given your conditioning, Doctor Lee said that he expected to see improvements relatively quickly.'

'Nothing yet,' she said, pulling a slightly zany face as though it were all very unfortunate indeed.

Doctor Lee's personality construct nodded unnaturally. 'Okay. Make sure you get plenty of rest. Sleeping in this sync will have the same effect on your brain as it would in real life.'

She knew that, of course. 'Thank you, Doctor.'

The personality construct offered an alarming impression of a smile and winked out of existence.

She sat on the bench for a while longer, enjoying the solitude. An IHD was a connection to everything and everyone, and she had never felt alone while hers had been active. Now that she had had a taste of what it was like without one, she wanted to prolong that feeling of privacy – however false it was – for a little while longer. So she enjoyed the sunset for a while and walked around the estate, relishing the warm breeze and unrealistically perfect gardens. Once more, she found herself slipping into a calm, detached mood, becoming so engrossed in the tranquil surroundings that she almost forgot how she had come to be there. Eventually the memories began to reassert themselves.

It was slow at first, a gradual retrospective that was initially free of emotion, simply a dispassionate chain of events that culminated in her death – much like watching the news. The more she thought about it, however, the angrier she became. The *provar* may not have killed her deliberately, but they *had* killed her. Her death had not been some accident: a weapon had been fired, and she had died, and in a particularly horrible manner to boot. Affront was not an emotion that sat comfortably with her naturally calm and incisive personality, but now it was pervading her. The fucking *provar* for Christ's sake! A bunch of aggressive, murderous aliens, so used to getting their way that they had slain her along with four hundred kaygryn with what they no doubt considered to be impunity. The thought was so galling she wanted to scream.

She knew that she was still nowhere near ready to tackle what would be an incredibly difficult and dynamic intelligence investigation, but her fury was suddenly at the fore, smashing through her judgement like a tornado annihilating a city. She strode back to the mansion in a blind rage and burst into her bedroom, snarling 'fucking aliens' as she slammed the door and threw herself on to the bed. She hated this false, computer-generated body. She wanted to be out of the whole simulation, back in reality, back in her own body. The pure *technology* of it sickened her. Claustrophobia, like a stifling blanket, enveloped her, and adrenaline, fuelled by her anger and frustration, coursed through her bloodstream.

'Fuck!' she screamed, balling her hands into fists and pounding the bed with them. 'Fuck!'

She broke down into great, heaving sobs, waiting for her UNIS training to kick in, her psychological conditioning to compartmentalise her grief. She waited for the impartial, observer-like part of her mind to take over, to tell her to have her ten minutes of crying and then get back to work. Except this time, it didn't happen. A pervading sense of isolation and loss filled her to her core, so deep and terrifying that she found herself wishing that she had just died.

So encompassing was her sorrow that she did not notice the small, almost imperceptible flashing in the bottom right-hand corner of her vision. It was like a pinprick of light, a distant star, slowly pulsing like a heartbeat.

She stopped crying, her grief quickly succumbing to the much more powerful sense of intrigue. She hastily wiped her eyes and made a point of looking around various areas of the room to make sure that the graphic was embedded in her vision and not some glitch of the VR sync. The little, twinkling light faithfully followed her gaze, like something stuck to her pupil.

'What the...' she whispered, her brow creasing. Slightly reticently, she accessed her IHD to find it was a tiny file, only a few bytes of data, military in origin, and *astronomically* heavily encrypted.

She swallowed and had her IHD begin to decode it. She had known of very dangerous IHD viruses communicated in this way, usually in professional hits, but the thought did not bother her anywhere near as much as it should have done.

It took her IHD almost twenty minutes to work through the million layers of encryption. Once it had done so, the text flashed up on a translucent blue frame in the centre of her vision:

You may be in danger. I will contact you when I can.

## GONVARION

*‘Diplomacy is the preserve of the weak.’*

### **Closing remarks of Executor Algour son’Cai, at the short-lived Third Summit of Tassis**

The *Blue Bolt* had a small atmospheric shuttle which carried Yano down to the surface of Gonvarion. Lieutenant Sykes accompanied him as a close protection officer, though they spent the short journey in silence, Yano electing to concentrate on United Information and his endless diplomatic cables. Among the very last pieces of information he was acquainting himself with were the UNDM profiles on his own people, a team of Exigency Corps diplomats, xeno affairs politicians, press attachés and general movers and shakers who made up the UN’s diplomatic offering to the summit. They would disseminate into the throngs of aliens, each authorised by the UNDM to offer, ask for, or threaten certain things, each with their own particular list of goals and a virtually unlimited line of credit. Some, undoubtedly, would also be UNIS plants, there to gather intelligence, spread disinformation and provide counterespionage oversight.

His second and Deputy Head of Mission was a man called Bal Codey, a member of the Xeno Division Old Guard whom Yano had once seconded for during the Merisgard war crimes tribunal. Codey was middle-aged, portly, utterly loyal and fiercely competent, a deeply charismatic man who was almost universally loved – senior UNDM personnel being the main exception. The qualities which made the man so charismatic were the same qualities which would have made him fail the UNDC Character Map if he were forced to retake it, and his presence alone put Yano in a much better mood than he had been in thus far.

The others on his team, save the politicians he knew by name, were unfamiliar. The Secretary of State for Xeno Affairs, Andrea Constance, would be an irritation, since politicians tended to want special treatment, and Yano would not afford her any. Her own small team of people – the undersecretary, Erik Graydon, and a pair of communications officers, Bennett Yuh and Tanja Henrikson – all looked young and annoying. Well, they could

go off and communicate, or try to, since none of them had anything like the level of technical diplomatic capability he had. There were also four attachés he didn't know: a trio of shabby men who had UNIS written all over them and Charlotte Asha, their Press Officer who would liaise directly with United Information and put a UN-friendly spin on proceedings.

The shuttle bucked as it hit the convection currents swirling up from the surface of Gonvarion, the name of both the only populated landmass and the planet itself. Lush, green and swelteringly hot in the current summer season, Gonvarion consisted of thousands of square kilometres of temperate grassland and wildflower prairie, and was ensconced by a ring of coastal mountain ranges after which the continent had been named – literally ‘grey eye’ in Old Zhahassi. Historically a meeting place for the numerous solar tribes of the Commonwealth, modern Gonvarion existed almost solely as an intragalactic hub of Tier-Three diplomacy, and as such the continent contained only a small handful of cities, many of which were at less than half-capacity. The largest, Vhalysia, lay exactly fifty kilometres due west of the Memorial Tower where the summit proper would take place, and it was in this small city that Yano and his team would be stationed for the duration of the talks.

The shuttle came to a controlled stop in Vhalysia's largest spaceport, formed of a collection of raised circular platforms and dome-shaped control towers and punctuated with hundreds of metres of needle-like antennae. He grabbed his holdall and bade the insectoid Lieutenant Sykes a perfunctory farewell before stepping out into the hot, mildly clammy air of Gonvarion. He took in a deep breath, waiting for a few seconds as his IHD completed its synchronisation with the local public net. It was early afternoon on Gonvarion, and though a few wisps of white cloud were forming against the mauve sky, it was largely unmarred. It was strange, then, that the atmosphere felt so leaden. Part of it could undoubtedly be attributed to the difference in gravitational pull – slightly more than most UN Veigis-Class worlds – though he suspected that it was nothing more than his own nerves getting the better of him.

He watched as the *Blue Bolt's* shuttle careened into the air on twin jets of white-hot plasma and traced its steep parabola with his eyes until it disappeared from his unaided view. Then he turned and headed for the nearest building, boots rapping loudly against the hard surface of the landing

platform. His arrival had already been logged by both the Vhalysian Port Authority and his zhahassi liaison. Thankfully it was the latter who intercepted Yano as he approached the arrivals terminal, flowing gracefully from the arched entrance in a whirl of airy white and crimson robes.

‘Special Envoy Zavian Yano,’ the ambassador spoke in heavily accented Terran. Zhahassi physiology meant that they were one of the few races in the galaxy able to successfully enunciate human words, though the high-pitched, breathy voice prompted Yano’s IHD to confirm that the highly androgynous alien was in fact male.

‘Ambassador Kiridi Velsze,’ Yano smiled in return, bowing. His heavy, midnight-blue cloak slid over his shoulders so that it enveloped him. He kept his head low and counted out three seconds in his head before rising and clasping the proffered hand of Velsze. The hand was cold, despite the pervasive warmth of Gonvarion.

‘It’s remarkably quiet,’ Yano observed, noting that, far from being mobbed by the galaxy’s media and their infuriating little pressbots, the port was practically empty. On Merisgard it had been nearly impossible to move for the crush of press and protestors.

‘Yes,’ Velsze said, a little lateral wobble of his neck indicating pride. ‘The spaceport is a sterile environment. We were not prepared to compromise its security at this time of heightened tensions.’

Yano nodded sagely, noting privately that the ambassador had had to consult his IHD for the word ‘heightened’.

‘The press are still here, however,’ Velsze went on. ‘Exit the terminal and that fact will become quite obvious.’ The alien’s mouth did an impression of a human smile, and Yano found the effect quite disarming.

Yano offered a smile of his own and another nod. ‘Shall we continue?’ he asked, inflecting his voice in a way the zhahassi would recognise as polite and respectful.

‘Yes,’ Velsze said and made a sweeping gesture with his right hand. ‘Please, join me inside. Your Mr Codey is waiting for you.’ Before Yano could reply, Velsze’s long, double-jointed left arm, sheathed in near-translucent skin, was draped over his shoulder, steering him gently towards the arrivals terminal.

‘Have any of our learned friends arrived yet?’ Yano asked, as the ambassador loped in a more ungainly fashion beside him. As he spoke, he

studied the side of the zhahassi's face, which was milk-white and faintly tattooed. His IHD deciphered the markings as diplomatic in nature, though their use was too idiomatic to make out a more specific meaning.

'Yes, they have indeed,' Velsze replied and gestured to another platform away to their right. A squat, gunmetal shuttle bearing the scarlet markings of the Golgron Alliance could be seen refuelling, though Yano couldn't be bothered to enhance his optics to see which one of the composite nations it was. Beyond was another shuttle, unmistakably human, though non-UN. Likely Kansubashi, but he was ushered through the archway of the terminal before he could check.

'Mr Codey has insisted he himself lead you to your quarters in Vhalysia, though I have explained to him that such a move is highly unorthodox,' Velsze said as they walked through the wide, largely featureless atrium of the terminal. Like many zhahassi buildings, this one was controlled and maintained almost entirely by VIs.

'Oh,' Yano said, suppressing a smile. The zhahassi were easy to offend, especially over matters of trivial protocol and courtesy. Their carefully nurtured reputation as the galaxy's patrician peacekeepers was, to be fair to the aliens, largely deserved, but the fact that it was a self-assumed reputation meant that they often took it far too seriously.

'Well, I'm sure Mr Codey simply didn't want to be a burden,' Yano lied, searching the atrium for any other signs of life. He was finding the emptiness thoroughly disconcerting.

'Yes, that is the conclusion I reached,' Velsze said, 'and with that in mind, I have assigned you a personal escort anyway. A ZEN, demilitarised, naturally, will accompany you to your quarters and furnish you with answers to any questions you may have.'

Yano nodded. 'Thank you, Ambassador. That was very prudent.'

They crossed the empty atrium and made for the row of arches opposite. It was only now that Yano could hear anything through the leaden atmosphere: a dull roar like a distant hypersled arena, the volume of it ebbing and flowing with the occasional breeze. Its provenance soon became clear as they approached the terminal exit: a hundred-metre deep scrum of reporters and pressbots, channelled via carbon steel barriers and surrounded by armed ZENs, all clamouring for attention with various reporting accoutrements. Members of every Tier-Three race were present – even a few dishevelled-



looking provar, who no doubt risked official censure simply by being offworld. There were a few foreign dignitaries loitering here too, doubtless from the Golgron Alliance and Old Colonies vessels he'd seen docked in the spaceport. As soon as they spotted Yano, however, the crowd reached fever pitch, and for a moment he thought they would scale the barriers and try their luck against the ZEN railguns.

'We are expecting fifty thousand sanctioned political activists to arrive in the next thirty hours,' Velsze said as they approached the wall of screaming reporters before thankfully turning left down a concourse that took them parallel to the exit end of the terminal. They ducked through a low arch, traversed a short, unmarked corridor, and a few moments later emerged into the humid air, heading down a roofless passageway with **DIPLOMATIC PERSONNEL ONLY** written along the walls in all six Tier-Three languages.

'I'm surprised there weren't more,' Yano remarked, his IHD informing him that he was being monitored by concealed scanners.

'As I say, sanctioned activists,' Velsze said, leading him through an archway and out into an enclosed parking bay. A diplomatic cruiser – sleek, black, with tinted windows and bearing two miniature UN flags on the bonnet – sat alone in the rough centre of the park. The moment he appeared, the rear passenger door opened and Balthazar Codey stepped out, sweating in the heat.

'Yano!' he shouted in his flamboyant way, a grin thick with pearl-white teeth splitting his face. Like all members of the Exigency Corps, the man was absurdly handsome, though visibly older and stouter than Yano, with carefully modelled salt-and-pepper stubble and a thick, stylish mop of silver hair. Yano knew the man well despite a paucity of opportunities to work together, and had always found the man's brand of diplomacy very appealing. His loud, pragmatic and sometimes borderline aggressive negotiating skills would complement Yano's own, which were calm, rational and with a slight air of aloofness. It was no accident that the character techs back in UNDM had paired them.

'Bal!' Yano said, smiling broadly and proffering a hand. Codey pointedly ignored the hand and grabbed him into a bear hug, crushing Yano's arm awkwardly between them. In the afternoon heat of Gonvarion, the embrace was decidedly unwelcome. 'How the devil have you been?'

'Good!' Yano wheezed, slapping his old friend on the back. Codey

released him and straightened his cloak out. The older man was wearing the same dark blue Exigency Corps uniform as Yano: navy-blue jacket, cream breeches and stock-collared shirt with a white silk cravat, with the Xeno Division brooch pinned to his left lapel. Yano often lamented the heat-retention capabilities of the ensemble. ‘How are you?’

Codey winked. ‘Better than ever.’ He gripped the cruiser door and gestured for Yano to enter. ‘No time to waste – your briefing is in twenty minutes. The rest of the team is waiting in the Vosmark, usual suite.’

Yano winced, both at the breakneck change in conversational tack and the fact that Codey hadn’t offered Velsze any kind of greeting. As a consequence, he hovered for a few seconds, unnervingly unsure what to do, until Velsze swooped gracefully between them as if reading his thoughts.

‘If I may interject,’ the ambassador said, ‘I have spoken with Special Envoy Yano privately and he has agreed to your being escorted.’ The zhahassi manipulated something on the gorget he wore under his robes, and a demilitarised ZEN dutifully jogged across the parking space. ‘I really do think it is for the best in all the circumstances.’

Yano caught Codey’s eye. A brief look of irritation passed across his second’s face before the usual warmth returned. Yano could understand the man’s frustration. For all their talk, the zhahassi were just as partial to diplomatic espionage as the next race, and the demilitarised ZENs – seemingly impassive VI retainers with no visible armaments – were undoubtedly the perfect red herring with which to accomplish extensive intelligence gathering. But then Yano had not wanted to offend their zhahassi liaison, and if the price was ten minutes of journey spent in the company of an eavesdropping robot, then so be it. They would need Velsze on side, and there was always the weather to talk about.

‘That’s fine,’ Codey said eventually, smiling lamely. ‘It was good to see you again, Ambassador.’

Velsze looked slightly uncomfortable for a moment at the diplomatic slight before bowing. ‘It was a pleasure, Special Envoy Codey.’

Yano ducked into the back of the cruiser. Inside was a wide ring of black leather couches encircling a holo projector, and at the head of the vehicle, a seat for an optional pilot in front of a bank of controls. They glowed dully while the cruiser was dormant. He shifted round and dumped his holdall on the seat to his right while Codey climbed in after him. He sighed loudly as

the ZEN decided to occupy the pilot's seat, though Yano assumed that the journey would be automated by the cruiser's own on-board computer.

'Voscmark Hotel,' Codey said, pulling the door closed behind him. The cruiser chimed in acknowledgement and smoothly levitated to a hundred metres before accelerating through the vast white domes of Vhalyssia City. The ZEN sat unmoving in the cockpit.

'What was all that about?' Yano asked when they were well out of range of the pressbots' audioscanners. The cruiser was deadzoned, naturally, but it never hurt to be cautious.

'Oh, nothing,' Codey replied, running a hand over his stubble. 'The ambassador and I have... something of a history.' He made a slightly embarrassed look.

'Go on,' Yano said, not dissuaded by his second's coyness.

Codey rolled his eyes. 'You remember the business on New Carthage?'

'Of course,' Yano replied.

'Well, I was posted to Gonvarion with Xeno Division in the usual way. Ambassador Velsze was something of a diplomatic nobody back then. To cut a very long story very short, I ended up punching him. And that's why we don't really talk.'

Yano's eyes widened in genuine incredulity. 'And you weren't kicked out?'

Codey shook his head. 'No. I was working with Special Envoy Dask at the time. He considered the incident...' The man searched for the word. '... amusing.'

Yano laughed a good, deep belly laugh. 'Christ, I've missed you, Codey.'

'Aye,' Codey said in faux-weariness. 'Anyway,' he said, making a blasé gesture with his hand, 'are you ready for this?'

Yano nodded. His self-confidence was fairly unshakeable, though he would admit to himself that the prospect of leading this particular summit was daunting. 'I'm ready.'

'You've been reading the news?'

'Yes. United Information, IG News, SKTS, the xeno outlets that aren't impenetrable.'

'Pirate channels?'

'Of course.' In the age of unlimited information – and almost universal access to it – there were many pirate news channels which showed raw,

unedited and usually colourfully commented-on footage of galactic events. Often they were more informative than the official outlets. United Information, for example, the official news network of the UN, was widely known to be UN-biased. Ascendancy news outlets, where they could be deciphered, were nothing more than propaganda. It was no coincidence that both UNDM and UNIS had entire teams dedicated to scrubbing millions of exabytes of data from pirate feeds and packaging them into diplomatic cables.

‘You know the team?’

‘I read the brief, Bal,’ Yano said, allowing a note of irritation to creep into his voice. He loathed being babied.

‘Good,’ Bal said, smiling in a way that was calculated to annoy him further. Yano couldn’t help but laugh. It would do no good to get angry at Codey – the man had too many years of practice on him. ‘So, why are we here? Give me the sound bite.’

‘Mandatory summit under Galactic Protocol Nine,’ Yano said, reclining and watching the impressive vaulted architecture of Vhalysia whip past. ‘From what the President tells me, the kaygryn attacked one of the Ascendancy crusade fleets in the Vadian Spiral and we don’t know why. Now the provar are wasting the kaygryn on Uvolon, some corvette and a group of militia attempting the summit of the Tiberean Mountains. Incidentally I’ve been to the Tiberean Mountains. Gorgeous place.’

Codey grunted.

‘About five hundred kaygryn killed,’ Yano continued. ‘No further attacks that I’ve been made aware of through any of the FTL channels – though the provar are still sitting in orbit from what I gather. Aurelius is keeping the cards close to the chest at the moment. Personally I’m encouraged that they’ve called a summit at all, since I wouldn’t put it past him to try and take that provari cruiser out.’

Codey grunted again. ‘We have Federal Socialists with us. Political support. Andrea Constance and Erik Graydon. They’ll be out of our way so don’t worry about them too much. To be honest with you, I’m not sure why the President sent them in the first place.’

‘Well, he likes to meddle in everything doesn’t he,’ Yano said, stopping himself from sneering. He had no love for Aurelius. Few in UNDM did. The Federal Socialists thought the Diplomatic Corps held too much power, and

attaching idiots like Andrea Constance to the team was his way of asserting authority. It was like someone drawing a bead on you with a railgun.

‘Does she have authority to can the mission?’ Yano asked.

Codey nodded. ‘Yes, in the usual way. But she won’t.’

As diplomatic personnel, even the elite Exigency Corps Xeno Division, they were still answerable to the elected government. Constance had the authority to close down the mission if she wanted, though even Aurelius, for all his hot-headedness, wouldn’t kick that hornet’s nest.

‘Relax,’ Codey said after a short while. ‘You’ll have your time in the spotlight. Hell, you’re the darling of the UN media. Teenage girls have posters of you up in their rooms.’

Yano laughed like he didn’t care, but he secretly loved hearing little throwaway morsels like that. ‘Lot of interest in the foreign media,’ he said, pretending not to be interested in how eminent he was. ‘At least, the outlets I could translate.’

‘A lot of Tier Three wants to know how this is going to play out between the Ascendancy and the UN. I should imagine a lot of Tier Two does as well; it’s their worlds which will burn if it comes to war.’

Yano nodded. He couldn’t imagine anything worse than living in Tier Two: Contacted, technologically advanced civilisations but confined to their home planets and mandatorily unmolested under Galactic Protocol. Many were able to monitor Tier-Three broadcasts remotely, but as voices in the galactic community, they were all but ignored. They would be utterly powerless to protect themselves in the event of Tier-Three war, where proxy and brushfire conflicts ignited readily.

There was a brief, contemplative silence as both men watched the scenery before Codey said, ‘We have specific interests as well. I have an objectives list. I’ll not go through them now,’ he added with a glance shot at the ZEN, ‘but the President is, understandably, keen for this not to become another Hadan’s Reach.’

‘We’re not throwing the kaygryn to the wolves again?’

Codey murmured something. ‘We’re going to try to help it this time. If we can.’

‘I’m brimming with confidence. How wide is my mandate, by the way?’

‘As narrow as it gets,’ Codey said with a grin. ‘Though I managed to negotiate myself out of accompanying you to the toilet. They’ll let you do

that by yourself.'

The cruiser concluded the short journey with a stomach-loosening swoop that brought them to the Vosmark Hotel, or rather, what the Xeno Division mission in Gonvarion called the Vosmark Hotel. The building was close to a kilometre tall and ancient even by zhahassi standards, made of fluted blocks of sturdy white stone and topped with a bronze dome inscribed with a number of murals, most of which had been weathered to obscurity. A number of massive violet pennants hung from the walls, fluttering in the hot breeze. The cruiser landed on a rectangular platform between two of them, halfway up the side of the building. The ZEN remained in the cruiser as Yano and Codey climbed out. Yano was braced for a wave of heat, but it was noticeably cooler five hundred metres above sea level. The cruiser powered into the sky with a hum of its engines, and they were both left standing on the old platform.

'Quite a view,' Yano said, gazing around at the ancient, monolithic towers. The Vosmark wasn't even the tallest building he could see, though it was certainly one of the most striking. It was a shame that most of the city was empty. There was no visible traffic, which immediately set it apart from ninety per cent of vehicle-choked UN cities. Indeed, it was practically silent, save the odd caw from the local avifauna. It put Yano in mind of one of the Terran ghost cities, vast metropolises on Earth gathering wildlife and dust following the Expansion.

'Where is everyone?' he asked, looking over his shoulder. Codey was busy consulting his IHD, given his vacant, slightly cross-eyed look.

'The Zhahassi Commonwealth is massive,' Codey said. 'The zhahassi population isn't.' He shrugged. 'A summit venue in the Demilitarised Zone doesn't need permanent residents.' He cancelled his IHD and blinked. 'Most of those reporters you saw outside the spaceport live here, waiting for a scrap of a story, the latest political scuffle. That's about it.'

'Mm,' Yano grunted, feeling vaguely melancholy about it. The moment passed quickly.

'Come on,' Codey said, 'the team is waiting inside.'

They made their way through the archway that led away from the platform. Inside was a vast open hall, vaulted like a cathedral and covered in decorative murals. Yano's IHD identified them as depicting the zhahassi's first contact with each Tier-Three race, including with the then Xeno Division, though it seemed they wore different uniforms back then. He would have been happy

to study the murals for hours, given their marvellous detail and vibrant colour, but Codey was already striding purposefully towards a side corridor. He followed, making a mental note to revisit them.

From the hall branched a warren of passageways, some leading to similar halls, others to briefing rooms, quarters and kitchens. The entire floor was leased semi-permanently to Xeno Division and had a dedicated staff of demilitarised ZENs to wait on them. The efficiency of it wasn't in the least surprising, given that zhahassi diplomacy was, like a ZEN, a well-oiled machine. Yano smiled to himself, pleased with the joke.

It took them five minutes to reach the briefing chamber. It was a circular room with a domed roof, ringed with pane-less windows which let both light and fresh air in. It in fact appeared to Yano to be an old library, given its walls were lined with wooden bookshelves and filled with actual hardcopy books. In the centre was a wide table, likely a UN import given its human-friendly height, and around the table were an assortment of people muttering among themselves. The chatter stopped the moment he and Codey entered.

'Special Envoy,' Andrea Constance, Secretary of State for Xeno Affairs, spoke from the head of the table. 'Welcome to Gonvarion.'

Those who had not noticed his and Codey's arrival immediately turned to see him. Those from the Exigency Corps – Kaivan Bastian and Abena Ghani, the two junior envoys – stood up as a matter of professional courtesy. The rest, and irritatingly the majority, did not.

'Thanks,' Yano said, flashing Constance a smile. Her welcome had already annoyed him. 'Good to be here.'

His IHD had already tagged each person with a little name, rank and organisation marker above their heads, but he let Codey perform the introductions anyway.

'You know Kaivan and Abena,' he said dutifully, indicating the standing envoys. Actually, Yano had no idea who either of them were, but it was an old custom within UNDM to pretend every other diplomat was at least an acquaintance.

'Of course,' he said, shaking their hands in turn and smiling warmly. Bastian's handshake was too limp, causing him to instantly dislike the younger man. According to Yano's IHD, he'd only just qualified from the UNDC's ethics programme, making him next to useless. Ghani was equally uninspiring, though had at least had some experience in the field. Together

they made two competent aides and nothing more. He'd keep them away from the sharp end of the summit.

'From the Office of Xeno Affairs, you know Andrea Constance, of course,' Codey continued. The woman nodded her head from the end of the table. She was the oldest in the room, insofar as anyone actually looked visibly elderly any more. Politicians tended to be the exception to the general, moneyed population, allowing a certain amount of wizening to creep into their facial features. Again, Yano didn't like her, but then he didn't like any Federal Socialists.

'The undersecretary, Erik Graydon.' That earned Yano a curt nod, and he responded in kind.

'Andrea's two comms officers, Bennett Yuh and Tanja Henrikson.'

It was here that Yano paused. He didn't give a flying shit about Bennett Yuh, little obsequious dolt as he was likely to be. His attentions were on Tanja Henrikson, who was gorgeous and naturally so, since she clearly hadn't undergone cosmetic enhancement. What she was doing traipsing around with that sow Constance he didn't know, but what he did know was that, before the end of the summit, he was going to sleep with her.

'Hi,' he said neutrally, utilising all of his training to decipher her demeanour. Already he could tell that she was irritatingly loyal to her employer, though her façade of professionalism was just that – a façade. She was clearly nervous, not unlike the two envoys he'd been sent from UNDM, and anxiety could always be exploited. She was cynical enough to see through any overt attempt on his part to befriend her, however, and his devastating good looks would make her assume he was as promiscuous as he actually was. A challenge, then, though not an insurmountable one.

'This is our press attaché, Charlotte Asha,' Codey continued with a tone that told Yano he'd been clocked.

'United Information's diplomatic correspondent,' Yano said, ignoring his second. He recognised her instantly as one of the few UI reporters officially sanctioned by Xeno Division, graded on their charts as 'Onside'. She was physically nearer to him than the others, so they shook hands.

'Glad someone watches it,' she said, smiling. She'd been cosmetically enhanced, much like himself, though in such a way as to make it look natural. Very expensive, certainly, and he would have staked his life on United Information having footed the bill. Her hand lingered for the briefest of



moments against his, letting him know that she would be exceptionally easy to sleep with. He sighed inwardly. Reporters were just no fun.

With the introductions concluded, Yano took a spare seat between Charlotte and Abena. He had no doubt that to anyone else, the assembled personnel represented the pinnacle of the UN's diplomatic offering, a collection of calm, professional and incredibly intelligent and talented individuals in whom the UN could repose its confidence. To him, he'd been given the dregs, a collection of morons scraped from the UNDM bar at closing and ushered into a Fleet Auxiliary voidbreaker.

'Well, you're all aware of the situation,' Codey said. 'You all read the news – or in your case, Charlotte, make it.' That drew a smattering of laughs. He manipulated the desk terminal in front of him and a holo of Uvolon, rendered in beautiful detail, sprang into focus in the centre of the table. 'Suffice it to say, the kaygryn attacked an Ascendancy crusade fleet about ten hours ago, the provar are... understandably annoyed about it. That's what we do know. What we do not know is *why* the kaygryn attacked it. Finding that out will be one of the goals of this summit. As always, information is king.'

He altered the focus of the holo so that it enhanced a landmass in the northern hemisphere and highlighted two nation states in red and blue respectively. 'This is Vos'Shan,' he said, pointing to the larger of the two countries, 'home to thirty million kaygryn. *This* is Anternis, which you'll all be familiar with from the news.'

Nods all round. Of course, everyone knew this, thought Yano, but it never hurt to ensure everyone was reading from the same page.

'Reports from Commander Aryn Vance, head of the UNAF base on Anternis, have confirmed the following publicly: that the Ascendancy has stationed a naval cruiser in orbit, which has now fired two kinetic rail strikes – that's a "KRS" in military parlance – the first of which hit and destroyed a kaygryn corvette over the Bayscillic Ocean just south of Anternis City, and the second of which hit a convoy of kaygryn militia *here*, in the historically neutral Tiberean borderlands. The Vos'Shan'i militia were apparently transporting, *inter alia*, surface-to-orbit weaponry in what was a routine military exercise before they were all killed. Estimated casualties stand currently at five hundred kaygryn and nil human, and that is the way we all intend to keep it. Understood?'

Nods and grunts all round.

‘What about the military units which have been placed on the border?’ Andrea Constance asked. She waved her hand irritably at Yuh. ‘I heard that we’ve moved... Bennett, what were you telling me earlier?’

‘Seven GV11b Interdictor-variant Goliaths,’ Bennett replied. ‘Moved to the Tiberean border.’

‘You’ve pre-empted me,’ Codey said, smiling in such a way as to convey tested patience. ‘You’re correct, of course,’ he continued, highlighting the position on the map of the Goliaths. ‘Under orders from the President, a squadron of seven amrocovs—’

‘You know we don’t know what amrocovs are, Balthazar,’ Constance said. Yano was beginning to form the impression that Codey and the Secretary of State didn’t get on.

‘Tanks, Andrea,’ Codey said, looking her directly in the eye. ‘Big, human-shaped tanks. Advanced Mechanised Multi-Role Combat Vehicle. Amrocov. I have a hardcopy file on them if you’d like to read up on it?’

‘Yes, that would be perfect, thank you,’ she replied, knowing full well that Codey had no such thing.

Everyone pretended to study the holo for a few seconds as Codey refocussed it.

‘Under orders from the President,’ he continued, not quite through clenched teeth, ‘a squadron of seven Goliaths has been stationed on the border to prevent kaygryn refugees from entering Anternis. The President has made it clear that as a matter of policy, protecting the human population is his number one priority. Allowing a flood of kaygryn refugees over the border will only inflame the situation. We are *not* throwing them to the wolves; we just have to prioritise our own people – that’s the party line, understood?’

Another chorus of assent. The holo changed with a wave of Codey’s hand and now displayed a trio of UN destroyers and one enormous ship, labelled as the UNS *Achilles*.

‘The President and Joint Chiefs at UNSOC have decided to dispatch a trio of warships, operating as a “quick-reaction force” out of Navem Sigma, to Uvolon post-haste. The force is led by Captain Jacob Rynn and will arrive ahead of the *Achilles*, a stellar disaster contingency craft, in the very unlikely instance we need to evacuate the colony. The ships are to observe the situation and ensure that no harm befalls any UN citizens – essentially escort duty for the Ascendancy cruiser. There is intense media speculation that this

particular move will be seen as inflammatory and counterproductive; it is therefore incumbent upon all of us to ensure that the situation is not misconstrued.'

'Good luck with that,' Constance said drily.

'It's your party's policy,' Yano snapped.

'It's the President's policy,' she retorted. 'The dangers of this course of action are well rehearsed. New Carthage, for one.'

'*Nonetheless*,' Codey said loudly, 'we're all on the same team and we're all playing from the same rulebook. The quick-reaction force is due to arrive in the small hours of tomorrow morning, local time. The President released this statement earlier today.' The map of Uvolon changed to a UI feed of the all-network broadcast of the Presidential Address. In front of a small retinue of UNSOC generals, he calmly delivered a narrative on the situation and what was being branded a policy of 'limited Fleet oversight' to ensure the safety of UN citizens. They watched it in silence for five minutes before Codey cancelled it.

'Does he think the provar will watch this?' Charlotte Asha asked. 'We have second-by-second figures on broadcast uptake. I can tell you right now, most Ascendancy worlds actively block UN signals.'

'Can we assume that Ascendancy SIGINT will pick it up?' Bennett Yuh asked.

'Our government will have told the provar,' Codey said wearily, 'on that we can count. The question now will be how the provar choose to receive that information. We cannot rule out the possibility that they'll simply ignore it. Our job at the summit tomorrow will be to reinforce the position that unjustified violence in all forms is to be condemned, irrespective of how it is initiated. We called the summit, so we can hardly be taken to be the aggressor.'

'You're assuming a lot there, Balthazar,' Andrea said.

'This is diplomacy, Andrea. I do not assume anything until I have it in writing.'

'We'll be calling for a ceasefire,' Yano interjected, growing weary of the feud. 'I'll send the provar executors our position statements tonight once they're finalised. We're going to ram home the point that talking, or "constructive dialogue" to use McKone's favourite phrase, is the way forward. The provar won't be so rash as to blow the quick-reaction force into

radioactive dust with the whole galaxy watching.’ He wondered idly why this had become a soothing session for the attendant Federal Socialists. Or was it themselves they were trying to convince?

‘Presumably, though, we’re not going to let them have the run of the place?’ Charlotte Asha pressed. ‘What if they continue to obliterate kaygryn targets?’

‘She’s right,’ Tanja Henrikson said, drawing everyone’s attention. ‘It’s all well and good saying that we should all talk about it and get along, but there are fuck-ups all the time, more often than not because no one can understand one another. What are we going to do if they continue to fire on Uvolon? Accidentally or not, we can’t let them keep shooting one of our worlds just because they feel like it.’

Yano and Codey traded a glance. Yano was starting to think he’d misjudged the room.

‘We’re prepared to meet the Ascendancy with military force if any UN citizens are killed or injured as a result of provar activity in the area,’ Codey said, addressing Tanja directly. ‘It’s in our position statement. I’m aware most of you haven’t seen it yet; that’s because it isn’t finished, but it will be this evening when we’ll distribute it. But essentially those will be the key tenets: condemn the violence, encourage a dialogue, warn them that we’ll use force if we have to. We are trying not to take sides in this.’

‘And the kaygryn? What about Hadan’s Reach?’ Tanja asked, not flinching from Codey’s attention as Yano suspected he’d banked on.

‘We’ve orders to lean towards the kaygryn if the situation permits it,’ Yano said before Codey lost his temper and shut her down completely. ‘We’re naturally more concerned about the people living in Anternis, of course, and if we can extricate ourselves from the mess and negotiate a ceasefire, we will.’

Tanja’s lip creased in distaste, but she merely nodded in reply. It was an unsatisfactory answer, but then it was an unsatisfactory position. Hadan’s Reach was fifty years old, and the ramifications of it were still being felt. They were unlikely to solve that political debacle in the next afternoon. Besides, it had been the kaygryn who had initiated the whole mess; it would be a cold day in hell before the UN paid for it with human blood. They needed peace with the provar much more than they needed a moral victory for the kaygryn.

‘What is the Ascendancy position on this?’ Andrea asked, neatly segueing to the next point on the agenda. ‘By the time we left for Gonvarion, we’d still had nothing through my office.’ Nods of agreement from Bennett and Tanja.

‘They’ve ignored all of our missives. Runners are turned away from the gates of five Telmun Square,’ Tanja concurred, referring to the well-known address of the provari embassy on Vargonroth. ‘We’ve had nothing since we landed either.’

‘Ascendancy networks are largely silent on the issue,’ Charlotte said, confirming what many already knew. ‘The networks our broadcast scanners have picked up, anyway – certainly not claiming that it’s comprehensive.’

‘All to be expected,’ Yano said dismissively. ‘The fact that the Ascendancy isn’t engaging anyone over the issues is nothing new. Provari attitudes to Tier-Three relations have been hardening for decades. Besides, they’ve sent two executors to this summit. Not the actions of the ignorant.’

Codey grunted his agreement. ‘We’ll have a chance to speak to the provari executors tomorrow morning before the summit. I’m not concerned about that. I’m more concerned about the kaygryn position – or lack thereof. Abena, you were canvassing this.’

Abena nodded and manipulated the central holo with her own IHD. The view transformed to a number of muted screens depicting violent clashes on kaygryn worlds and a number of kaygryn news and current events broadcasts.

‘The kaygryn position has been generally evasive and contradictory. There has been no official acknowledgement from any kaygryn worlds of the attack on the crusade fleet. It is possible that many of them simply aren’t aware of the attack.’ She shrugged. ‘It may even have been a rogue faction – we all know how fragmented the Kaygryn Federacy is. The point is, we can’t definitively say whether their political establishment is being deliberately obstructive or genuinely ignorant.’

‘Or presumably some combination of the two,’ Codey remarked.

Abena nodded. ‘Precisely. All we have on that is conjecture. What we do know, however, is that kaygryn skarls across the Federacy have actively called for intervention from other Tier-Three players. There is a kaygryn legation here which, as far as we can tell, speaks authoritatively for all kaygryn nations, so tread carefully. They’re going to want us to take an active and unified stance against the provar. They are savvy enough to know that

Hadan's Reach is still a hot topic in UN politics, and our analysis strongly suggests they'll play heavily on this tomorrow.'

'Okay,' Codey said, nodding. 'Excellent work, thank you, Abena. Kaivan,' he said, turning to the other junior envoy. 'The Old Colonies and Kansubashi Empire.'

'Yes,' Kaivan said, clearing his throat. 'Well, I can be fairly quick on this one. The Old Colonies will be sending a legation, and since we are their biggest trading partner, they are naturally on side. The Kansubashi Empire will also be here under Isao Hasato, and we can count on their full support.' He paused. 'Do you need me to go on?'

Yano shook his head. 'No.' He knew Hasato. The man was a former Griffin pilot, decorated for bravery after the Tauran Industrial incident two decades before. They'd met at a number of diplomatic functions and Yano considered him a good friend. He made a note to ensure he met with him personally over the next few days.

'Golgron Alliance,' Codey said. He cancelled the holo in the middle of the room, still displaying the scenes of kaygryn unrest which had come to distract the room. 'They're actually already here, which is surprising. Neutral, of course. We expect them to be withdrawn and unhelpful, though not obstructive. They certainly don't owe the provar any favours, particularly following their dispute with the Ascendancy over the Perseus ore belt, and political relations between the golgron and the UN are nominal. If we can get them onside, more's the better, but they have a track record of non-intervention and we won't be concerned if they remain impartial.'

'Xenos that are onside or we are actively seeking support from. This is for everyone, all right? When you're out doing whatever it is you came here to do, these are the people we want.' He reactivated the holo to a portrait of a pair of zhahassi males, both dressed in the traditional white and crimson robes of the Commonwealth political elite. 'The successful anti-piracy operations on Tranquillity and in the Coriolanus and Volscian Sectors have earned the UN "Trusted Friend" status in the Commonwealth. This has given us a *lot* of currency within the establishment. I've already started lobbying zhahassi diplomats to take a more active stance against the Ascendancy, so we are *all* to try to have them condemn provari aggression as much as possible. The provar know that they can probably defeat the UN militarily, but an alliance of Tier-Three partners will be a much harder pill to swallow.'

He gestured to the holo. ‘These two are our key points of contact. The one on the left is Illiris Fhalco. The chap on the right, that’s Gendremar Zvell. They are both young, highly popular reformist politicians who are eating up huge swathes of formerly conservative, non-interventionist heartland. They are the rising stars, and we have their ear. If you see them, introduce yourselves, flatter them, take them out for a drink, reassure them that the UN is keen to work with them in the future. Understand?’

The usual murmurs of assent.

‘Outstanding. The quorl. Rash, unsubtle, aggressive insects. Merisgard still hangs over them. We all have to be aware that, although they’ve been brought back into the fold, the war crimes tribunal has discredited them. We don’t want to be discredited by association, all right?’

‘Still, probably the only Tier-Three player who can actually be counted on to provide military support,’ Constance said. To Yano’s amazement, Codey actually agreed with a thoughtful nod.

‘Their man goes by the name Aks-sta – he’s a personal friend of McKone. Zavian, you don’t need to worry about him.’

‘Fine,’ Yano said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

‘Last on the list, the Xhevega Enclaves.’

‘What?’ at least three people said among a collective intake of breath. Even Yano, who was supposed to be the most intelligent and well informed of the lot of them, couldn’t help a brief ripple of surprise playing across his features – and with good reason. The Xhevega Enclaves were formed of provar exiles, political pariahs and designated apostates who, under provari law, had been excised from both the Ascendancy and, in theory, Tier Three altogether – though in practice participated from the fringe of most diplomatic and trade dialogues. They existed as a collection of nation states on the planet Xhevega, on the edge of Ascendancy-controlled space, where their ships were regularly impounded by local forces and where they were routinely invaded and killed wantonly. The UN had historically lobbied on their behalf, as they had for the kaygryn, but in recent years relations had faded after a general lack of interest from the other major players.

‘The President and senior military and intelligence figures from Vargonroth have issued direct orders on this matter,’ Codey said, unperturbed by the reaction. ‘We are to privately treat with the Enclaves’ representative, a provar called Faunix Siun. The orders were light on detail and I expect they

shall remain that way, but let me be clear: this is UN-wide security we are dealing with, and this Xhevegan is very precious to SOC. He's been granted special diplomatic immunity and will attend the summit as an observer. He'll be accompanied by a small team, all travelling under falsified details. All of them are staying here in the Voscmak, on the floor below. Under no circumstances are any of you to go down there or introduce yourselves to anyone other than Siun. Have I made myself clear, or do I need to repeat anything?'

Silence claimed the room.

'Good.' Codey checked the time. 'Right, I think that concludes the introductions. Unless anyone has anything else to say, I suggest we break there.'

\*

Yano spent the rest of the day in and out of briefings with Codey, the team, Velsze or some combination thereof. Occasionally he would take a break to wander around the huge open spaces of the Voscmak, revising xeno ticks, tells, vocal inflections and gestures, practising them in the echoing hallways and in front of the silent, sentinel-like ZENs. Over the course of the afternoon, he watched as more and more ships arrived in the distance, disgorging alien ambassadors and diplomats in preparation for the summit. Some would be staying in the Voscmak with them, notably the provar and the kaygryn, which Yano felt was ridiculous. The rest had their own bases in and around Vhalyssia.

When he wasn't in briefings or ambling through the cavernous hallways, he was watching the news, reading the latest diplomatic missives and finalising their position statement, which he would give to Velsze that evening for filing and distribution. Most of this was done in the recuperation chamber on their floor, which was filled with plush couches and cushions, had a dedicated serving ZEN and a huge, five-metre holo taking up the entire southern wall. Thankfully, since Andrea Constance and her retinue had their own suite, and since Charlotte Asha had already left for the spaceport with her little entourage of pressbots, ready to clamour like a madwoman against



the steel barriers for a statement, he was left in relative solitude, with only Kaivan, Abena and Codey flitting in and out when they wanted him for something specific.

As the afternoon wore into evening, the whole team regrouped in an open-air courtyard, largely talking shop as they ate dinner. Yano managed to mutter a few semi-flirtatious remarks to Tanja, though she was less receptive than he would have liked. He would have to try a different tack, probably when the whole team wasn't present, though he grudgingly accepted in the back of his mind that his attentions would be better focussed on the impending summit.

After dinner most of them retired to the recuperation room to watch the late-night UI broadcast. Yano found it amusing to watch Asha standing in front of the spaceport talking about the arriving diplomats. He and Codey loudly shared opinions on the arriving ambassadors and discussed the war crimes tribunal on Merisgard, while Kaivan, Abena and Tanja sat quietly, occasionally laughing at their jokes and rude remarks. They all sank a few potent zhahassi beers over the course of a few hours of good-natured conversation, then Yano took his leave and made for bed, drinking in the First Contact murals on his way one last time.

His bedchamber was a large, cool and well-appointed room, with a bed big enough for a pair of zhahassi to sleep in and an en-suite bathroom retrofitted for human use. He shed his clothes and collapsed heavily onto the bed, considerably more exhausted than he realised. More missives and cables had filled his IHD inbox over the course of the evening, though none seemed particularly important and he ignored them all.

He ordered the lights off and lay spread-eagled in the dark for a few moments, adrenaline coursing through his body as he thought about the summit tomorrow, and then, predictably, Tanja. There were downloadable IHD Ultraporn programs that could impose someone's likeness from the memory of the user onto an otherwise blank body, though he had always found the software to be tasteless and, more importantly, cheating.

He sighed loudly. He knew he would be unable to sleep naturally and was in the process of having his IHD knock him out when the door opened.

'Codey?' he asked into the darkness. He couldn't be bothered to activate his corneal night-vision implants.

'Christ, you're quite the charmer aren't you,' Charlotte Asha said as she

strode into the room, her clothes smelling of outdoors and sweaty alien reporters. She quickly stripped off to reveal a naked body which the Exigency Corps and all its cosmetic meddling would have been proud of. 'Let's just get on with it, shall we?'

Yano nodded, hiding his disappointment quite expertly as she climbed onto his artificially erected cock and screwed him aggressively.

\*

The second time the door opened, it was Codey.

'What time is it?' Yano asked, noting somewhere in the back of his mind that Asha had left. It was still dark.

'Get up,' Codey said, his voice strained with anxiety. 'Get showered and changed. We're leaving.'

'Christ, Bal, it's four a.m.!' Yano said, checking the local time on his IHD.

'Yano, the quick-reaction force was destroyed an hour ago. We've just received word from Vargonroth. Jacob Rynn and thirty men are dead. The UN is preparing for war.'

## **FIREWALL**

*‘I prefer enemies to allies. Allies are fickle, treacherous, manipulative; enemies can be killed at any time without censure.’*

**Attributed to Commander Ingram Mack, three days before his assassination by quorl mercenaries**

On dumb optics from four thousand metres up, Anternis was a latticework of glowing lines, arrow-straight capillaries of luminescent blood welling up from where the orbital construction rigs had cut into the bedrock centuries before. It was as if someone had branded the planet and the wound was still fresh, kilometres of thick tropical jungle burned away by uncaring mechanical hands and replaced with a stamp of high-tech infrastructure.

Behind them, Vos'Shan, already considerably darker despite housing seventy-five times the population of its tiny human neighbour, faded into the distance, melting before the advance of the deep blue morning haze like a tablet effervescing in water. After thirty seconds of flight, the country was blocked from view entirely by the cold peaks of the Tiberean borderlands, and on looking ahead Vondur was left staring at the vast stretch of the Bayscillic Ocean, a decommissioned orbital pylon representing the only scrap of civilisation for tens of thousands of kilometres. The thought of that vast, deep ocean made him shiver inside the thick nanogel matrix ensconcing him in the Goliath's control capsule.

A chime in his ear informed him that he was less than a minute from their target. Anternis General Hospital was currently marked on his HUD by a pulsing turquoise chevron, hovering over a trio of architecturally impressive towers located in the densely packed centre of the city's commercial and financial district. Surrounding it were dozens of branded skyscrapers, planetary headquarters of the many banks and corporations which had set up on Anternis in its heady days as a tax haven. A constellation of red and white altitude warning lights pulsed dissonantly up and down the length of them.

He performed a targeted topographical scan of the local area, which quickly revealed several suitable landing zones. The first was the wide, tree-lined hexagonal plaza situated in the centre of the three hospital towers; the

second was the boulevard which segregated them from the surrounding buildings. The plaza was fed by five roads, one of which was a dedicated emergency access road, the rest open either exclusively to pedestrians or both pedestrians and ground traffic. He wasn't anticipating much in the way of either.

He assigned waypoint markers to each member of the squadron, then keyed in the wideband. 'All right,' he said, nudging the attitude thrusters on his Goliath for a steeper descent angle. 'Jarvin, August, I want you on the boulevard south of the xenopathology lab, at the junction of accessways five and eleven. Sergeant Cox, you take the roof of the global IHD med-uplink. Vandemarr, north-east, on the ground, junction sixteen. Syoba, Elyan, drop short, I want you both on the north-west corner of the traumatic injuries ward. I'll be in the plaza. Watch your sectors for civilians and civilian air traffic, especially medical priority traffic. This is a functioning hospital; let's try and keep out of the way as much as possible. Any questions?' A chorus of negatives. 'Good. We're open comms so talk to each other. Any problems, you know where I am.'

He watched his radar as the squadron's neat chevron formation dissolved into a swirling ballet of icons, each member breaking ranks to follow their pre-planned insertion vectors. Ten seconds out, Vondur traded a brief blurt of comms with the hospital air traffic controller, then exchanged out his main thrusters for the Goliath's plasma retro-burners, which brought him to a controlled, if slightly heavy, stop. He released ZEN on landing, who walked across to the far end of the plaza and took up position on the near side of the uplink building. High above he could see Cox, his luminescent orange armour panels easily marking him out amidst the altitude warning lights, satellite dishes and antennae of the tower roof.

'I'm down,' he said curtly over the wideband as per protocol, the paving of the plaza sinking slightly under the tonnage of the Goliath. A suite of external conditions scans revealed nothing untoward, and he allowed himself to relax slightly.

The plaza was a hundred metres across at its widest, hexagonal in shape and hemmed in on three sides by the hospital towers. It was a pleasant space, tree-lined and with a large water feature in the centre. It was bathed in light from the surrounding buildings, and he could see that despite the city being in a state of lockdown, the hospital was still bustling with activity. Indeed, the

traumatic injuries ward was probably busier than it had been in a long time, thanks to the mass panic caused by the provari cruiser. If what he'd seen the day before was anything to go on, then the medical technicians would be wrestling with all manner of cases from vehicle collisions to crushing and suffocation in the orbital bombardment shelters.

He took a few steps, getting a feel for the area. Already he was drawing a lot of attention. He could see people in the windows of the traumatic injuries ward looking down at him and pointing, and medical technicians and patients alike stared as they hurried through the plaza. He couldn't blame them. Most UN worlds were strangers to both the personnel and hardware of UNAF, which seemed to exist as occasional features on news broadcasts where some brushfire conflict had ignited between two irrelevant alien tribes. Indeed, most Veigis-Class worlds were open in their distaste for UNAF, which they described as jingoistic and a relic of the age of Contact. Well, they would be grateful for them soon enough.

He finished taking stock of the area. There wasn't much of Anternis he hadn't seen already, though admittedly most of it wasn't through the enhanced targeting grid of a Goliath's ocular display. The initial excitement of being deployed had long worn off, and in its place the stressful realities of modern combat weighed on his mind, embodied in the ACTIVE TARGET WARNING icon pulsing in the top of his display. It was like sitting in a room with someone pointing a loaded gun at his face. One wrong move and he'd have tenths of a second to react before a kinetic rail strike punched through the atmosphere with needlepoint accuracy and vaporised his luminescent orange Goliath – and a good deal of the hospital with it.

The wideband remained practically silent in the ensuing hours as the deep blue of the early morning slowly gave way to watery grey daylight and each member of the squadron trudged out his patrol sector with heavy, clanking footfalls. In the downtime, Vondur found his thoughts returning to the head of the woman again and again. They had clearly overturned a stone that someone, somewhere, had intended to be left undisturbed, and it was not beyond the realms of possibility that their physical removal from the Tiberean borderlands was a direct consequence of his actions in calling for a medevac. He had easily broken the hospital firewalls to access the inpatient register, and there were no VIPs and no persons of interest inside. The

hospital itself was of no strategic significance beyond its central location and admittedly excellent sight lines. Why else relocate them from the border?

‘Gatekeeper, this is Thunderhead, over.’

His heart rate spiked at the suddenness of the transition. He checked the time. It was 5 a.m. local.

‘This is Gatekeeper Actual, go ahead,’ he replied, watching the plaza. It was a different comms controller, judging by the voice.

‘Just checking in. System shows you at the objective, grid five-five-two sigma, confirm please.’

Vondur checked his location marker. ‘Five-five-two sigma, on the money, Thunderhead.’

There was a few seconds’ pause. ‘Gatekeeper, be advised, we’ve had word from base command that naval evacuation procedures have been effected as of zero-four-thirty zulu. Anticipate heavy traffic in all civilian airspace sectors, how copy?’

‘Heavy traffic, copy,’ Vondur replied, absentmindedly pinging the local civil aviation control and recovering a live feed of the airspace. Already the map was crowded with blue lines showing logged trajectories of civilian transports.

‘That’s all for now. Sit tight, Gatekeeper. Thunderhead out.’ The channel terminated and Vondur cancelled the feed.

He thought for a few moments, then opened a feed to the local television network. After five minutes it was clear that they had nothing new. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected; the FTL comms array would have been liquidated along with everything else when the provar had junked all their orbital feeds. UNAF had a backup, but that was one link, and it was stuttered. Only comms flashes would come through, no two-way traffic. That was how it had been designed. The simpler it was, the more resilient it was.

He cancelled the television feed and cycled through his weapon systems, more out of habit than any genuine need to. All of them, save his CODOR drones, were locked at SAFE.

‘All, just be advised that they are running naval evacuation procedures citywide,’ he said over the squadron wideband. ‘We’re going to start seeing a lot of civilian birds in the next few hours. Keep an eye on the skies.’ He scanned the area again and spotted an executive landing platform two-thirds

of the way up the xenopathology building, on the south-west side. ‘I am relocating. Read marker. Out.’

He broadcast an IHD marker of his new location, and with a short burst of thrust launched himself off the ground and on to the platform. He walked to the south end, avoiding a few sleek black cruisers parked there, and looked out across Anternis towards the ocean. Below, down the A5 highway, he could see one shelter already emptying into a temporary marshalling yard.

The tepid dawn gave way to a hot, tropical morning, and over the course of the next few hours, Anternis transformed from a state of lockdown to a hive of ordered chaos. Vondur was informed by the comms controller at 10 a.m. that the UNS *Achilles*, an old cosmic disaster contingency craft, was on its way to Uvolon and would be in orbit that evening. In the absence of any reassurance from the provar that they would stop prosecuting kaygryn targets in and around UN territory, all orbital bombardment shelters would be emptied over the course of the next few days and the population ferried to a staging ground a thousand kilometres south, closer to the equatorial salt flats where the large evacuation shuttles could land.

The squadron garnered a lot of attention throughout the day. Desperate for any kind of news, the local television news networks soon learned of their presence at the hospital and dispatched a small fleet of pressbots to film them standing around and doing nothing. A few members of the squadron watched the live coverage on and off, and occasionally someone would snigger over the wideband when a reporter made a comment or assumption that was well wide of the mark. Those who were based on the ground were approached by inquisitive members of the public or reporters, but after being invasively scanned by the Goliaths for any kind of hazardous material, they were roundly ignored. The civilians soon lost interest.

The squadron continued to patrol as morning transitioned into afternoon. Overhead, large civilian freighters and transports lumbered along their pre-logged flight vectors, picking up thousands of civilians from marshalling areas on the southern curve of the ring road and shuttling them south across the ocean. A full evacuation of Anternis, if it followed the letter of the naval procedure, would take three days, though the bulk of the population could be shifted in two. By nightfall, Vondur reckoned a hundred thousand, fully a quarter of the population, would have been transported to the huge temporary camps on the salt flats.

His comlink pipped at 2 p.m. local, after another hour of radio silence in which he'd reverted to targeting clouds and passing civilian traffic with his vambrace-mount railgun. He checked his HUD to see that it was Vance on an encrypted channel, audio-only.

'Commander,' he said, locking on to a scudding stratocumulus two kilometres away.

'Captain, how is everything down there?'

'Quiet,' Vondur replied. 'Very quiet. We're in the centre of town, running limited oversight.'

'Hmm, fine,' Vance said dismissively. 'There's not a great deal we can do with you right now anyway. Listen, Ben, I'm being sent offworld to meet with Governor Lefebvre. He's been away on Theyde and has missed most of the action, so they want me to brief him on his way in. SOC has the ops room locked down; my preference was to redeploy you south to the landing zone, but if you're not there already then that's probably been superseded.'

'Nothing's come in about moving further south,' Vondur said, irritated that Vance had been locked out. Local command meant nothing when SOC and UNIS got involved. He didn't like either of the comms controllers who had delivered their orders, both probably Vargonroth men.

'One more thing to be aware of,' Vance said. 'Fleet Command has dispatched three destroyers from Navem Sigma to fly escort for our provari friends in orbit and oversee the evacuation. They're due to arrive...' There was a pause. '... sometime this evening, probably sixteen or seventeen hundred zulu. Ahead of the *Achilles* in any event.'

Vondur nodded to himself, idly toggling through his weapon systems. 'The provar won't like it. Do they know?'

'Apparently. The President gave an address this morning.'

Vondur grunted. 'It's itchy enough already without having three Fleet destroyers on its back.' He paused as a huge civilian freighter powered overhead. His passive scanner offered him a list of the inhabitants. 'I don't like it,' he said, dismissing the feed.

'I don't like it any more than you do, Captain,' Vance replied. He sounded weary. 'Nothing to be done about it now.'

Vondur shrugged, and his Goliath shrugged with him. 'No, sir,' he said. Vance was right. It was out of their hands.

'There will be a full debrief on my return. My safe passage offworld has



been negotiated, though I can't say I'm particularly looking forward to running the blockade. As you say, it's twitchy up there.'

'Yes, sir,' he replied. He debated whether to raise the matter of the woman's head but decided against it. There was no guarantee the channel was scrubbed. 'Good luck,' he added and meant it. If the Fleet were sending three destroyers, then it was about to get very crowded in orbit.

'And to you. Knowing how these things tend to play out, I daresay it'll all have blown over by tomorrow.'

The channel went dead, and Vondur cancelled the feed. He was left staring at the clouds through his targeting grid, driven across the sky by the cold ocean breeze. After a few minutes of reflection, he keyed in the wideband. 'Alright, listen in. Commander Vance is being escorted offworld to meet the governor. SOC is taking over, same callsign. No change to orders at present. Be advised that we are expecting a Fleet presence this evening, three destroyers from Navem Sigma.'

There were a few exasperated sighs. 'The President is sending in the Fleet?' Cox growled. 'They've forgotten New Carthage then. We'll be pasted the minute those event horizons open.'

'The orders won't have come from the President; they'll have come from Halo Arch,' Vondur said, summoning in his voice a level of calm that was not forthcoming. 'The provar know the Fleet is on its way to oversee the evacuation. Everybody just stay calm and sit tight. Watch your sectors. Sergeant Cox, get a drone above these clouds would you? And make sure it's pinging recon and friendly, for Christ's sake.'

'Yes, sir,' Cox replied. Vondur watched as the sergeant's Goliath grabbed a CODOR drone from its spine nacelle, affixed it to the mass driver on his right vambrace and fired it vertically into the air. Vondur tracked it with his own enhanced optics, ensuring that it was actively broadcasting a reconnaissance-only signal. The Goliath's VL sensors could penetrate through cloud cover without too much difficulty, though they would get a much clearer signal this way.

'We're online,' Cox said, the second a crystal-clear tactical feed of the drone's optics appeared in Vondur's HUD. He manipulated the range so that, within a few seconds, he was looking into the deep, ink-black void of space. The drone had already picked up the cruiser in the low-orbit band, a three hundred-metre, rifle-shaped warship resplendent in sky-blue livery and

bristling with ordnance pylons. Its main rail cannon battery was extended, a long, needle-like mass driver protruding from the bottom of the cruiser like a pinnacle of ice, glinting in the light from Uvolon's sun. The drone tagged it in bright red graphics and downloaded a stream of data to the squadron for analysis.

'That's some serious firepower...' Jarvin murmured.

'Damn it, Sergeant, stop scanning it will you,' Vondur snapped, and the feed abruptly terminated – though not before a partial diagnostic of the rail battery had been downloaded. He read the readout despite his anger, and after two minutes concluded with a weary sigh. The cruiser had enough ordnance in that sole weapons system to raze the entire surface of the planet.

'All right, back to work,' he said over the wideband, though he didn't order the recall of the drone. Instead, he spent most of the afternoon watching the cruiser through its enhanced optics, idly wondering what the provar crew, tucked inside the gel-filled armoured core of the ship, were thinking.

The number of civilian transports shuttling through the sky increased throughout the day as the central bombardment shelters slowly disgorged their occupants and evacuation efforts moved to the outer sections of the city. By the early evening, as the sun was beginning to set and Anternis was bathed in brilliant orange light, the central shelters were largely empty, though there were still huge numbers of stragglers loitering along the accessways. Many were carrying heaps of personal possessions which directly contravened naval evacuation procedure, and Vondur smirked at the thought of their outrage as Mantix-clad controllers forcefully rid them of their belongings.

'Ninety-eight thousand cleared, with another thirty thousand by midnight,' Jarvin remarked over the wideband. 'Rally points A through D are complete.'

'Not bad,' Cox said. 'Still plenty I can see, though.'

'Anyone who was due to report to A, B, C or D is now being told to go to E and F, apparently,' Jarvin continued. 'Imagine that. Wouldn't want to be left behind.'

'You'd be the first on,' Cox said, and laughter filled the net. Even Vondur allowed himself a chuckle, though that was brought to a halting stop by the quiet whine of his CODOR alarm. Cox's drone had registered three spacetime anomalies in Uvolon's orbit.

'Ah shit, here we go,' the sergeant said, perfectly summing up the

squadron's thoughts on the matter.

'Everybody stay calm, we are still locked on safe,' Vondur said over the wideband. He watched the readouts from the drone feed for half a minute, then opened a direct feed to the UNAF base controller. 'Thunderhead, this is Gatekeeper Actual, come in.'

The link fuzzed for a second. 'This is Thunderhead, go ahead, Gatekeeper.'

'Thunderhead be advised, we have identified three event horizons opening one million kilometres from Uvolon, how copy?'

'Three event horizons, one million kilometres. That's the quick-reaction force from Sigma, Gatekeeper. Sit tight. Out.'

Vondur cancelled the link irritably. 'Son of a bitch,' he muttered to himself.

'Any orders, sir?' Jarvin asked over a private link.

'Sit tight for now,' Vondur replied.

'Blues, out of the hole,' Cox said on the wideband. Vondur turned his attention back to the CODOR feed to see three UN-tagged ships exiting the event horizons at speed. The squadron fell silent for a few seconds.

'Naval forces making high-velocity passes of the planet,' Syoba observed to no one in particular.

There was a minute's pause.

'Those are combat manoeuvres,' Jarvin murmured. The destroyers, marked out by the drone as bright blue dots, were travelling at point-one lightspeed through the orbit bands – far too fast for the naked eye, though just about traceable through highly enhanced optics. With advanced trajectory-mapping and a working knowledge of naval exercises, it was clear that the quick-reaction force was sparring.

'Where have the provar gone?' Vandemarr asked suddenly. Vondur felt his heart rate spike. He checked his HUD. The active target warning icon had disappeared – as had the cruiser.

'No event horizon,' he said.

'It's cloaked. Must have,' Syoba said.

Vondur called up his squadron schematic. Everyone's weapon systems were reading as safe. 'Everybody stay locked to safe,' he said anyway. They were the only things on the planet currently capable of inflicting damage on the cruiser; the last thing he wanted to do was make the squadron a target again.

‘Christ,’ someone said. Vondur turned back to the CODOR feed. The destroyers were jinking all over the place in randomised high-G combat vectors. The drone was far from the most sophisticated piece of equipment available to UNAF, but even it could detect ghost chatter and junk signals proliferating across its sensor suite. Waves of IFF pips soon followed. Taken together, it all added up to bad news.

‘They’re spooked,’ Cox said. ‘Defensive formations.’

‘But why?’ Syoba asked. ‘It’s not—’

He was cut off by five separate profanities. A starburst of light and a stream of red CODOR graphics heralded the destruction of one of the destroyers. Without the cloud cover, it would have been visible to the naked eye. Full-spectrum radiation bounced off the drone’s sensors, bombarding it with a debrief of destruction. Vondur’s mouth fell open as the data stream populated his Goliath’s processors, the unmistakeable signature of atomics blooming iridescently across his enhanced optics. The wideband lapsed into stunned silence as each member of the squadron watched the feed aghast.

‘Shit,’ Elyan said after what felt like an eternity. ‘Do we arm?’

‘No!’ Vondur barked. The best thing to do would have been to deactivate the Goliaths entirely. Even with all weapons set to safe, they would be leaving a huge signature on the cruiser’s sensors. He thought for a few moments, trying to decide what to do. Their priority had to be to protect civilian evacuees, though flying escort would be more likely to put them in harm’s way.

‘Right, everybody listen in,’ he said, but before he could marshal his thoughts into orders, the drone calmly logged a second destroyer lost.

‘Goddamn it!’ Cox roared amidst a chorus of incredulity. Vondur could see the sergeant’s Goliath ball its fists.

‘Stand down!’ Vondur shouted, adrenaline coursing through his guts. ‘Everyone stand down, that’s an order!’ He could feel himself sweating inside the Mantix interface. He decided on the only course of action he could think of that would keep the maximum number of people – including his own – safe. ‘Gatekeeper, prepare for exfiltration. We are RTB, understood?’

They understood. His squadron tracker flared as the Goliaths’ plasma thrusters powered on. The last thing he saw was a battery of flak smashing through and terminating the third and final UN destroyer before Cox recalled

it. It soared down through the clouds like a bird and slid mechanically back into his Goliath's spine nacelle.

'ZEN, RTB,' he said.

'Yes, Captain,' ZEN replied, and Vondur watched it break into a run, exiting the plaza via the northbound carriageway of the A5 highway.

'Let's keep it slow and controlled,' he said over the wideband. 'Vanilla insertion vectors, everyone.'

He ignited his main thrusters and had managed to lift a metre off the platform when the MASTER ARM lettering on his HUD flickered from SAFE to ARMED entirely of its own volition. Tenths of a second later, the high-visibility armour scheme of his Goliath faded to its default tactical dark grey, his refraction and force shielding hummed online, and his weapons cycled and racked to active.

'What?' he managed dumbly as his passive ocular display transformed into an active targeting grid and immediately picked out the hostile provari cruiser in orbit, filling his vision with ordnance diagnostics and attack vectors. He could only watch in mute horror as his Hydra battery whirled free from its housing, acquired the cruiser's position on his targeting computer and moments later began systematically discharging missile after missile into orbit.

'Uh... Captain?' Elyan asked, one second before a cylinder of tungsten travelling at Mach six obliterated his Goliath like a sledgehammer hitting a vase. Syoba, along with a hundred square metres of bedrock and a good portion of the adjacent hospital building, was lost in the blast wave. At such close range, the nanogel matrix layer of his cockpit was powerless to protect him from the overpressure, and his IHD immediately knocked him into a deep coma to salvage what it could of his consciousness.

'INCOMING!' Cox roared, immediately extending his own surface-to-orbit battery and firing off a long salvo of Hydra void missiles.

Vondur looked wide-eyed about his HUD, his heart beating so hard it felt as though it would burst through his chest. Every time he tried to disarm, his targeting grid would scramble kaleidoscopically. All other systems read nominal or were completely unresponsive. In a matter of seconds, the Goliath had gone from lethal war machine to remotely controlled tomb.

'Thunderhead, this is Gatekeeper Actual!' he yelled, his mouth dry. All around him rail strikes were smashing into the ground in a spectacular

calamity of light and noise, wantonly obliterating buildings in vast explosions of blinding white flame. He could only watch helplessly as the squadron scattered on rapid evasion trajectories and reverted to full tactical mode. Within seconds, a vast salvo of missiles from five different sources speared into the sky on lances of smoke and light, and fleets of drones zipped through the air attempting to rob the rail slugs of some of their kinetic power through a concentrated lattice of laser beams and x-rays.

‘Thunderhead!’ he shouted, sweating from every pore in his skin. The comlink remained defiantly silent. Every channel he opened to the base was immediately corrupted, and the squadron wideband wouldn’t even initiate. He strained against the nanogel matrix, trying desperately to elicit any kind of response from the machine, but he only succeeded in straining his muscles and nearly herniating his gut.

He forced himself to relax. As with any piece of military equipment, there were procedures to follow in an emergency. He checked the plasmastats, which provided his backup power supply. They were fine. His main engines were functioning impeccably. The firmware suite was functioning on triple redundancy. His ancillary systems were reading normal across the board. His weapon systems – judging by the terrifying amount of ordnance being unleashed from his batteries – were operational. In the two seconds it took him to perform a full diagnostic, absolutely nothing was out of place. The Goliath’s firewall was supposed to be incorruptible, backed up by UNIS-grade encryption. Firmware malfunction was beyond countenance, and yet, against every fibre of his will, it had engaged the cruiser quite automatically. He realised then, with a horrible stab of adrenaline, that the only explanation was malicious intervention – and by a necessarily highly sophisticated operator.

He wasn’t given long to think about it. A javelin of tungsten hit the xenopathology building at its apex and travelled, completely unhindered, through seventy floors of carbon steel before coming to a stop deep within the bedrock under Anternis. For the briefest of seconds, nothing seemed to happen at all; then the entire superstructure disintegrated outwards in a twelve-thousand-tonne storm of steel and glass, hurling Vondur’s Goliath three hundred metres west into the First ITG Bank building.

Whatever had overcome his Goliath’s firewalls, smashing through three floors of office building and a severe dose of electronic warfare from the

cruiser above somehow rid him of it. The familiar, powerful feeling of limb-sync returned, and ten seconds of jammed-up comms were suddenly released into his ears, a dissonant cacophony of screams and profanities, including several loud demands from Thunderhead.

‘... Directed fire, attack pattern Gamma! All STO batteries cleared to fire! Keep all drones on maximum disruption – read my marker and proliferate on all bandwidths!’ It was Jarvin issuing orders. He’d assumed Vondur was either incapacitated or dead and had – rightly – taken command.

‘I’m back in!’ Vondur shouted on the wideband, igniting his main thrusters and powering free of the shattered bank building. He could hear orbital bombardment alarms now, wailing across Anternis as rail strikes continued to thunder down. There were dozens of civilian transports still airborne, all banking wildly to avoid the solid grid of ordnance which had suddenly descended from the heavens. Many were unsuccessful in their attempts and either exploded violently in mid-air or careened into the hydroponics domes or the ocean beyond.

‘Captain! Orders!’ his lieutenant shouted.

‘Disengage and pull back!’ Vondur roared in reply. He retracted his Hydra battery and disarmed his primary weapon systems, then opened a channel to the UNAF base. ‘Thunderhead!’ he snarled, igniting his primary thrusters on full burn and soaring to another bank building east of the hospital.

‘Jesus Christ, Gatekeeper, what the hell is going on?’ the comms controller yelled. ‘Stand down at once, that’s a direct order!’

‘Thunderhead, my firewall is compromised,’ Vondur growled as calmly as he could. He leapfrogged to another building, IHD-marking the remaining members of the squadron, then dispatched his entire suite of drones to try and curtail as many of the rail strikes as he could.

‘Gatekeeper, your Goliath is reading as functioning on full redundancy!’ Thunderhead shouted. ‘Pull your men back at once and RTB!’

‘Damn it, Thunderhead, lis–’

‘Captain!’ Jarvin roared. Vondur turned to his right just as the lieutenant’s Goliath tackled him off the side of the bank roof. Moments later, half the building disintegrated in a blinding flash of light, and Vondur was given precious seconds to activate his thrusters on full burn before he hit the ground.

‘Gnnnn,’ he managed, as tonnes of blast-powered debris bombarded his

force shielding. LRIS warnings flashed across his HUD, and another rail strike hit the ground a hundred metres away, tossing them both bodily into the smoking ruins of the building. For all its efficacy, his refraction shielding couldn't conceal the multiple intense power blooms of both his plasmastats and primary engines, especially while his drone suite was engaged in damage limitation. Usually they could be relied upon to proliferate full-spectrum junk signatures; instead, they were fully utilised trying to disrupt the rail strikes.

'Think they've got a bead on you,' Jarvin said without a trace of irony, jogging back towards the plaza.

'Thank you, Lieutenant,' Vondur exhaled. A host of natural and artificial stimulants were keeping him calmer than he should have been. Jarvin had just saved him from certain death.

Over the course of the next couple of minutes, the rail strikes reduced markedly in intensity, now that the squadron was fully refraction shielded. The last few went well wide of the mark. One flattened an empty hotel; the other gouged a huge crater in the westbound carriageway of the hospital's emergency access route, the crunching of rock echoing loudly through the city.

'Christ,' Jarvin breathed over the wideband in the silence that followed. It was the only thing the squadron as a collective could muster before their tactical displays were once more filled with warning graphics and burbling streams of data.

'Multiple objects incoming,' Cox said over the wideband. Vondur scrambled to his feet, dislodging a good deal of pulverised masonry and shattered plate glass, and immediately picked up the reading from one of his CODOR drones. Six signatures, travelling far too slowly to be rail strikes, had just entered the upper atmosphere.

'Thunderhead, we have six refraction-shielded masses closing on attack vectors,' Vondur said, re-arming his entire weapons suite.

'Gatekeeper, you have orders to return to base,' the base controller said. 'Stand down and—'

'Incoming fire!' Vandemarr shouted. A series of mid-air explosions heralded the destruction of several of the squadron's CODOR drones.

'Engage all targets,' Vondur said, calmly switching off the feed from Thunderhead and IHD-tagging all of the incoming masses. 'Weapons free. Read my marker.' The rail strikes had stopped, but they were in no less



danger. The provar had dispatched their own manned interdictor-variants, Violator-class Zealot attack craft, if the engine signatures were anything to go by. They moved on supersonic engagement vectors, and their ordnance pylons were thick with force-shield-busting munitions. Any chance of an ordered retreat was now out of the question. They would have to go on the offensive.

His tactical display wasted no time in picking out likely attack trajectories, and within a few tenths of a second, the air was rife with missiles twisting away from his Goliath's shoulder-mount batteries on corkscrews of smoke and flame. Violet beams from the Zealots' prow lasers made short work of most of them, and the rest detonated prematurely against their force shielding.

'Here we go,' Cox said, soaring through the air four hundred metres to the east of Vondur's position. A vast cannonade of rail slugs erupted from his RRG, slashing among the careening aircraft and once again battering their force shielding. The projectiles exited the triple-barrelled mass driver at such a high frequency that the individual discharges merged into one steady hum so that it looked as if the sergeant was attacking the Violators with a lance of blue light. It was enough to overpower the shields of the rearmost craft, which was quickly shredded. It fell apart in mid-air in a blossom of radiation of twisted wreckage.

'Scratch one,' Cox said, twisting round on a high-G evasion vector and unleashing another barrage of ordnance from his LAO battery while hypervelocity projectiles ripped through the air around him. The Zealots quickly dispersed, each discharging a host of subdrones which cluttered the tracking bandwidth with decoy signatures. Since Vondur had IHD-tagged the mother drones, the squadron simply tasked their own CODORs to engage the slaves. As a result, a high-tech proxy war raged above them between roaming bands of screaming cybernetics, filling the air with high-energy munitions as they flitted between the remaining buildings like flocks of supersonic birds.

Ancillary fire peppered the road around Vondur and sprayed him with molten asphalt as he ignited his thrusters to full burn and acquired a target, a Zealot in the middle of the flight which was about to engage August to the south. He cycled his RRG to full and unleashed a long salvo of rail slugs while burning hard to the west. A barrage of Hydra missiles from Cox intercepted the Violator as it vectored north to re-engage and overloaded its

shields, allowing Vondur's parabola of rail slugs to blast away a good portion of the craft's starboard casing. Moments later, it lost control and ploughed into the ground.

'That's two!' Vondur shouted, and then he was forced to drop as two of the Zealots hit him with enfilading fire. A lattice of laser beams carved up the towers either side of him, one connecting with his force shields so powerfully that it threatened to overwhelm them entirely. His cockpit was suddenly filled with power warning alarms, forcing him to beat a hasty retreat while his plasma cores fought to re-boost them to full.

'I'm under fire!' Vandemarr shouted from the south-east. Vondur checked his HUD map to see that he was actually approaching Vandemarr's position from the west, past the ruins of the traumatic injuries ward, at the same time the other two Zealots were closing in on the man from the east. He cycled his RRG.

'Cox, watch my back, I'm coming in-' he started, but was cut off as a spear of phase fire from the lead Violator hit him square in the chest plating, wiping his force shielding out and burning a three-centimetre hole down the length of his number one plasmastat. Critical warning graphics exploded across his HUD as his power tanked, and rather than coming in on a high-G attack vector, his Goliath ploughed into the ground face first and skittered across the surface of the road. He came to a crunching halt in a pile of rubble.

'Fuck!' he shouted, cross-hatching the engines and running full diagnostics to see where he could suck power from. Alarms shrilled into life inside his cockpit. 'Vandemarr, pull back, I can't cover you!'

'I'm pinned!' Vandemarr shouted in response. Even as Cox and Jarvin burned in on red-out vectors, a triple blast of precision phase fire overwhelmed the man's struggling Goliath and left him a sitting target. Vondur could only watch in horror as a shower of hypervelocity rail slugs pummelled the Goliath, punching through the naval-grade composite armour as if it were paper and obliterating the pilot's capsule. Orange nanogel, mixed with blood and viscera, exploded from the Goliath's sternum section. Vandemarr's vitals immediately flatlined.

'Read!' Vondur yelled across the wideband as he frantically tagged the two Violators which had killed Vandemarr. They screamed past him and looped upwards so that they were travelling directly back towards the upper atmosphere. Vondur managed to propel himself on to his back and empty

thirty per cent of his Hydra battery at the tail sections of the retreating craft, but none of them hit home.

‘I’ve got them,’ August snarled, re-directing his drones to pursue. The smaller CODORs were capable of greater acceleration than the heavier Zealots, and within seconds of full burn they had intercepted them six kilometres above Anternis. Eight were destroyed by blurts of directed defensive fire, but four still made it through the Zealots’ shield barrier. They detonated in high-intensity EMP blasts, shorting the Zealots’ primary shields and leaving them exposed for a few tenths of a second while their ancillary systems kicked in. With needlepoint accuracy, August obliterated them both with a perfectly timed blast of phase fire.

‘Scratch two,’ he snapped, spinning into the air to search out the remaining two Violators.

‘They’re gone,’ Vondur said over the wideband as Cox and Jarvin converged on his position. The final two Zealots were twenty kilometres up and tracking back to the cruiser, leaving their slaved drones to be massacred by the squadron’s CODORs. The debris left from their high-energy termination sprinkled the city below, and once again an eerie calm descended. This time, the targeting grid remained clear.

Vondur managed to stand after an intense period of diagnostics and jury-rigging. In front of him, Cox and Jarvin stood, phase cannons and RRGs up, Hydra batteries extended and LAOs primed. In the distance, August soared slowly towards them on a lazy insertion vector, trailing the squadron’s remaining drones.

The centre of Anternis was in ruins. Greasy black smoke billowed into the sky from hundreds of sources. Beautiful, sleek skyscrapers had been replaced by vast piles of twisted steel, rubble and shattered glass. The Bayscillic Ocean was on fire where oil slicks from downed civilian aircraft had spread insidiously throughout the pristine turquoise water. Vondur didn’t even want to think how many civilians had been killed. He’d lost three of his own men. He felt exhausted. His firmware had been battered by wave upon wave of electronic warfare, his force shielding had been burned out and his plasma cores were shot. Without one, the other two would degrade. His chest plating was buckled and warped. The whole machine would need a lengthy overhaul. When he could afford to stop running his combat stimulants, there would be high emotion.

He was pleased to note, however, that ZEN had made it safely back to base.

‘Christ,’ August said as he came to a stop next to the three of them.

Vondur grunted. He could see Vandemarr’s ruined Goliath smoking in the evening breeze, surrounded by a pool of nanogel and other fluids. Combat protocol dictated that they leave all battlefield casualties until the engagement could be safely assumed to be concluded, and it couldn’t. He knew that that fact alone should have made him furious, but he only felt detached and absent, partly because of the combat stress and partly because of the host of stimulants coursing through his bloodstream.

‘Fucking cobs,’ Cox spat.

Vondur ignored him and re-opened the channel to base. ‘Thunderhead, Gatekeeper Actual.’

‘Damn it, Gatekeeper, next time you break comms I’ll have you court-martialled!’ the base controller snapped.

‘My firewall was hacked,’ Vondur said tiredly. ‘Do you understand? The suit is compromised. Malicious intervention. I need to shut down, and *you* need to run diagnostics. The whole damn base might be compromised!’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Gatekeeper. My data reads your Goliath has been functioning on triple redundancy all day. You must have—’

‘Send a medevac, Thunderhead,’ Vondur interjected. ‘I’ve got three men down, two technicals and a fatal. I’m combat ineffective and RTB, how copy?’

The base controller sighed angrily. ‘Medevac is already on the way,’ the man snapped. ‘All effective Gatekeeper units redeploy to the borderlands immediately. Read marker.’

Vondur wrinkled his nose. ‘What? Why? *Negative*, Thunderhead, we need to disarm before that cruiser hits us again!’

‘Negative, *Gatekeeper*. First battalion is overwhelmed.’

‘Overwhelmed how, that’s two hundred men!’

‘Gatekeeper, learn to follow orders or you will be relieved of command!’ the controller shouted. ‘Every kaygryn from Vos’Shan is attempting to cross into Anternis.’

Vondur growled his annoyance. ‘Understood, Thunderhead. Gatekeeper out.’

He cancelled the feed and opened a private channel to Jarvin. ‘Lieutenant,

take Cox and August to the border. Crowd control. You have command.'

'Yes, sir,' Jarvin replied. A few moments later, the three of them powered into the air in a blaze of plasma and powered north to the border.

Vondur stood for a moment, looking around him. He noticed absently that a trio of Valstar loaders were incoming to transport the remains of the three Goliaths back to the base. A swarm of bright orange incident-control drones were in hot pursuit, ready to contain the area and recover any unspent ordnance and sensitive military hardware from the engagement zone. Casualty recovery bots would also screen for survivors among the wreckage and rubble, though now the hospital was gone, they would have to set up triage and treatment centres in its place. It was going to be a huge operation, one which would require the entirety of the Anternis Metropolitan Police force to co-ordinate and a good portion of the UNAF base staff. God only knew how many of them had already been killed in the bombardment.

'Shit,' he muttered to himself. It was half past seven in the evening and already the light was fading. With his plasma cores gone, he had no choice but to limp back to base through the deserted accessways.

The orbital bombardment alarms were still droning cyclically as his Goliath trudged home through the empty streets.

## SALTED WOUNDS

*‘Communicating with the provar is like communicating with a brick wall: an arrogant, zealous, disdainful brick wall.’*

**Xeno Minister Brin Vyban, after the accidental killing of three UN servicemen by the provar on New Carthage**

He had found somewhere to sleep in the labyrinthine basement of UNSOC, a small office fortuitously appointed with a large chaise longue. The combination of the office’s ancient heating system and plush green carpeting gave rise to perfect sleeping conditions, a snug chrysalis deep in the warren of old, empty corridors, cosy and silent. An antique clock on the wall had lulled him to sleep like a metronome at some point late the previous night, and it was to this steady ticking – and the slow pulsing of his IHD – that he awoke.

‘Bugger,’ he breathed. It was just after three o’clock in the morning. He couldn’t have been asleep for more than a few hours, though it had been a deep and unaided sleep. He sighed and rubbed his face with his hands, then sat up, bleary-eyed in the dark, the leather creaking beneath him. So many sleepless nights, he thought wearily, somewhere in the back of his mind while his brain warmed up to full consciousness.

He picked up his jacket-cum-pillow and donned it, the metal of the buttons and medals cold against his hands. ‘Lights,’ he mumbled, and the lights obliged him, casting the office in yellowy relief.

He had one pending message, received the second before his IHD had roused him. His employment contract specified that his IHD messages had to be set to ‘rouse’ at all times, and not for the first time, he found himself lamenting the terms of his employment contract.

Quick-reaction force destroyed 02:31 zulu. All hands lost. Goliaths engaged, confirmed casualties. Report to ops room immediately. SCARLET SCARLET SCARLET.

‘Mother of God,’ he whispered, and yanked the door open. Already he

could hear rapid footsteps banging through the ceiling as, evidently, more had received the message. He ran down the long, empty corridor, shouldered the door open at the end and leapt up the steps to the ground floor three at a time.

He saw Scarcroft in the main hall, his normally infallible facial composure a mask of rage. He was carrying his jacket crumpled up in his left hand, his collar open at the throat, with a fine layer of stubble coating his cheeks and chin. Striding angrily, he slowed only to allow Garrick to fall into step beside him.

‘How the *fuck* did this happen,’ he hissed, flecks of spittle ejecting from his lips. ‘Jesus Christ, this can’t be happening.’

‘How many dead?’ Garrick asked, slightly breathless.

Scarcroft scowled. ‘At least forty,’ he said, staring straight ahead. ‘We’ve only just got the word through from the Fleet Comms Array. Happened not half an hour ago.’

They were up the stairs now and striding down a long, richly decorated corridor.

‘Does Pike know?’

‘Everybody knows,’ Scarcroft snapped, then winced slightly, regretting his tone. ‘Bloody media will have this across the galaxy in two hours. They’ve hit Anternis as well, multiple strikes. Civilian casualties in the hundreds and rising. Half our bloody amrocovs have been wiped out.’ Scarcroft threw his arms up in the air. ‘To make matters worse, initial reports suggest that they fired first!’

Garrick closed his eyes in disbelief, pinching the bridge of his nose. ‘Oh... *shit*,’ he managed after a while. ‘They were given orders not to fire!’

They reached the corridor where the ops room was. Garrick could already hear Aurelius shouting. The Mantix-clad guards bade them straight in.

‘Good luck,’ one of them mumbled in a sing-song voice. Garrick glowered at him and pushed into the room.

‘... at war! At fucking war, is that what you’re telling me? Two months left of this presidency, two *fucking* months, and my parting gift to the UN is galactic war! Is that what you’re telling me? Because it sounds like that’s what you’re telling me!’

Garrick and Scarcroft slipped into the room and silently made their way to the rear of the crowd of Joint Chiefs. Aurelius’s face was pure scarlet – much

like the Code that had just been issued. His unbridled apoplexy made Scarcroft's anger look like mild petulance.

'Sir—' Pike began.

'Shut up! *Shut up!* This is a disaster! I said nobody was to engage! I was explicit! No shots should have been fired by anybody! I've got dead soldiers and dead civilians and dead provar, and now, for a reason completely alien to me, ten thousand fucking *kaygryn* swarming over the border! What the hell are we supposed to do with *them*? Don't they understand the concept of borders? Am I the only one who sees this?'

Garrick noticed out the corner of his eye a few more people sidle in. It was Josette and Karl Howarth, plus a couple of people who, at a guess, he would have placed at Xeno Affairs.

'A hospital too! A fucking *hospital!*' Aurelius continued. Sweat dribbled from his forehead. 'Along with half the city to boot! Am I to have another Carthage, as well as a war that nobody wants?'

'Our missives were explicit—' Pike tried again, as red as Aurelius, though undoubtedly from embarrassment rather than rage.

'Oh, well, great fucking job, eh?' Aurelius said, his face a rictus of sarcasm. 'Great fucking job. Really! That message got through loud and clear, didn't it? No confusion there! Jesus *wept.*'

He seemed to stop and calm himself for a few seconds – but then he reanimated, like a corpse coming back to life on the power of anger alone. Had he not been physiologically enhanced, Garrick was certain he would have had a heart attack by now.

'Is Folhourtian Provari really that difficult to translate? Is it really? I mean, *some* humans can speak it, can't they? Could not at least one human fucking being who speaks Provari have checked the missives before they went out?'

Pike cleared his throat. 'Sir, the cruiser in orbit was running intense LRIS. It's not inconceivable that it fried its own incoming orders to stand down.'

'It's not inconceivable that those provar pricks fucking ignored them either, is it?' Aurelius suddenly blurted. If it was possible, the silence of the room seemed to deepen. The mere suggestion of a deliberate act of war by the provar was deeply unsettling.

'Anyway, General,' the President said with an almighty sigh, taking stock for a few moments. 'You're not even responsible for the Fleet, are you? Fleet Marshal, where are you? Somewhere at the back?'



Scarcroft glided forward through the parting crowd of the General Staff, cutting a tall, grim figure – even grimmer in his slightly dishevelled state.

‘Sir,’ he said, his deep voice clipped and restrained.

‘Your orders to the quick-reaction force. What were they?’

Scarcroft’s expression went blank for a moment as he transmitted the encrypted missive to the President via his IHD. The President mumbled slightly as he read it, and then, to the palpable relief of the men around Garrick, nodded.

‘All right.’ He sighed again and rubbed his face in his hands. ‘All right,’ he repeated and took his seat at the head of the table. He reclined, clasping his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. ‘We are not at war. Nobody has declared war.’ He soothed himself, repeating this mantra over and over again, then turned to the standing group of officers.

‘John, Warren, Gordon, Alistair... uh, Xander, Karl and Josette, stay. You too, Janek,’ he said to his chief communications officer, as an afterthought. ‘Where’s Andrea?’

‘Gonvarion, sir,’ someone reminded him.

‘Oh, of course. Everyone else, leave us for the time being, please.’ He waited while the half-dozen generals, marshals and Federal Socialists filed out the room. Once the door had closed, he gestured to the table. ‘Everybody sit.’

There was a clattering of chairs. Garrick was sitting at the opposite end of the table to the President. Howarth, McKone and Josette were distributed unevenly on his left, Scarcroft, Pike and Frost to his right.

‘Sorry,’ Aurelius said quietly, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. ‘That outburst... that was not prudent of me.’ He activated the holo in front of him, and the familiar revolving sphere of Uvolon appeared.

‘My public address, for all the careful crafting that went into it, seems to have gone unheeded. Evidently, I am not to be surprised by this, but honestly, I am. The inherent difficulties in communicating with the provar – and vice versa – do not escape me. I am as well versed in those particular difficulties as anyone else. But I was quite clear. Warren, you were quite clear. So something, somewhere, seems to have been lost quite literally in the translation. Either that or this is a deliberate act.’

He was speaking quietly, in the measured tones of a man on the edge of both rage and despair. It was as agonising to listen to as his apoplectic

ranting.

‘Our first priority must be to protect the UN citizenry. It must. This excursion of the provar has already cost hundreds of human lives, and I cannot tolerate it. We have contingencies to bring the UN to a war footing and it is my intention to implement them.’

Garrick sighed inwardly. It was absolutely the wrong thing to do. ‘Sir, if I could just—’

The President held up a hand, silencing him.

‘Thank you, Strike Commander, but if it is your intention to dissuade me from this then I will save you the trouble. If it comforts you, then rest assured I have no intention of going to war with the provar. Indeed, I will do everything in my power to avoid it. But I will not be caught off guard by them either. They have clearly thought nothing of destroying UN ships and cities and killing UN citizens. These are acts of *war*, and if they intend to continue in this vein then I will not stand idly by while they do so. So while I understand you seek to counsel me otherwise on this matter, Mr Garrick, it is my intention to bring the UN to strength, and if you will not help me achieve that, I will find someone who will. Is that understood?’

Garrick searched the table for an ally, but did not find one – though McKone wore a melancholy look. ‘Very well, sir. I would just like the record to show that I believe this is a mistake.’

‘Duly noted,’ the President replied. There was no anger in his tone. ‘Does anyone else have anything for the record before I go on?’

Silence claimed the room. Garrick had to stop himself from rolling his eyes at the spinelessness of his colleagues. He knew that Pike and Scarcroft, at the very least, knew it was a bad idea.

‘Fleet Marshal,’ Aurelius continued. ‘We have killed at least four provar that I can see from the report. I consider it likely that, given their nature, the provar are going to seek reprisals. So, the Buhrman Protocol. What is the time frame for its implementation?’

Garrick was close to shaking his head. The Buhrman Protocol involved the mobilisation of the entire UN Fleet, calling up all Fleet Auxiliary reservists, implementing orbital bombardment contingencies across almost all UN worlds, and a restriction on the sale of arms to other Tier-Three species. Even things as trivial as hypersled fixtures between the UN and the provar would be cancelled.

Scarcroft cleared his throat. 'Forty-eight hours, galaxy-wide, sir. Veigis-Class worlds are drilled to less, one Terran-standard day. The Outer Ring will take longer.'

'When was the last time we practised the Protocol? Do we even practise it?'

'Exercises run biannually, sir. The last one was in Vespasian – no, June of this year.'

There was a silence as the President contemplated, his eyes flashing occasionally as he consulted his IHD. After a short while, he nodded to himself.

'Varren.'

'Yes, sir,' Scarcroft replied.

'I am authorising the Buhrman Protocol. Bring Fleet Command at Halo Arch up to speed.'

'Yes, sir.'

The President seemed to hesitate for a moment. 'Is there a... subtle way of doing it?'

Scarcroft's brow creased. 'Doing what, sir?'

'Implementing the Protocol.'

'I'm afraid not, sir. It was not designed to be a subtle measure.'

The President nodded, resigned.

'The order can be rescinded within thirty minutes, sir,' Scarcroft said softly. 'After that, it will be too late.'

'No,' Aurelius replied. 'No, I have made up my mind.'

'Very good, sir.'

Scarcroft bowed again and exited the room quietly. The President clasped his hands together. 'Frost,' he said, turning to the director of UNIS.

'Sir,' Frost replied.

'Liaise with Home Division, would you? I want a report on pro-Ascendancy elements within the UN, and any seditious activities. We can't have violent demonstrations disrupting mobilisation.'

'Yes, sir,' Frost said. 'By your leave, sir, my men have already prepared a dossier. Preliminary reports suggest that the threat from terrorism has been steadily climbing since the news on the crisis broke. Far-right-wing groups – the United Human Church, Olympus, The Brotherhood of Azariel – have begun protesting outside provari embassies on most Veigis-Class worlds.'

There have been no reported deaths yet, but plenty of injuries. We expect the violence to increase exponentially as a result of the deaths of UN servicemen.'

'Shit,' Aurelius breathed, rubbing his face. '*Shit*. This is the last thing I need.'

'Metropolitan police in most jurisdictions can handle anything up to a planetary riot,' Janek said in a placatory tone. 'This was to be expected. The key now is not to give in to populist demands. The people are going to want blood; we cannot give it to them.'

So, the President's chief communications officer was slick. A former attorney, Garrick's IHD informed him. Young, too, at thirty-three.

'I've half a mind to nuke Folhourt and be bloody done with it,' Aurelius growled.

There was a silence. Hitting the provari homeworld – sacred, hallowed ground that UN ambassadors rarely got to glimpse, let alone step onto – was on Garrick's list of contingencies as the most insane. Irradiating the planet was one option. Vanilla nuking was another. Better still to capture the Zecad, the Ascendancy's most holy relic, and hold it to ransom.

'What are they saying about me?' Aurelius said quietly.

'Alexander White is taking an aggressive stance,' Janek said, 'predictably. The shadow Xeno Minister, Harris, is bending the ear of the right-wing media.' He gestured to Frost. 'As this man has said, sir, it's a frenzy out there. Once news of the destruction of the so-called "quick-reaction force" reaches the general population, it will only get worse.'

'Alexander White is a prick,' Aurelius sneered to a brief ripple of laughter. White was the main contender for the UN presidency, usually a moderate, but, as with all politicians, a populist when not in power. His party, the Human Democrats, were strong in the Outer Ring but less so on Veigis-Class worlds where the more authoritarian Federal Socialists held sway.

'He may be a prick, but the people like him, sir,' Janek said, not perturbed by the President's cavalier attitude. 'It's times like these that define a presidency.'

'Well, this fucking presidency is going to be pretty well defined one way or the other isn't it,' Aurelius said, with a sardonic smile. 'Anyway, it is done. The Fleet has been mobilised, for good or ill. Now, someone advise me on what to do with all these bloody kaygryn flooding Anternis.' He nodded to

Josette. ‘Chevalier, you were the Commissioner for Refugees. What would you do with the bastards? I won’t be backed into granting them asylum.’

‘You should grant them asylum,’ Josette said immediately. The President laughed at that, a genuine belly laugh.

‘Where? Anternis is ten kilometres square,’ Aurelius said. ‘Last I checked, half the city has been reduced to rubble by that *shit* of a provar cruiser.’

Josette’s eyes widened ever so slightly. ‘Sir, the least we can do is give them food and shelter.’

‘Why? Vos’Shan isn’t under attack. As far as I can see, Anternis seems to be the most dangerous place in the Upper Vadian Spiral. Letting them in is just putting them in harm’s way.’

Josette sighed loudly. Garrick could tell she was getting annoyed. He had seen that look once too often. ‘They’re clearly afraid, sir. A good portion of the militia has just been killed. Kaygryn civilians hold their militias in very high regard, higher than regulars. They think the UN can protect them, and they’re right. We can protect them. Since we all seem to be operating on the assumption that the provar wiped out our destroyer detachment by mistake, or through some misunderstanding, we can continue to assume that they will avoid hitting UN targets where they can?’

‘In light of the attack on the Goliaths—’ Aurelius began, but Josette cut him off.

‘The report from Anternis says that the Goliaths fired first after the destruction of the fleet. We cannot hold the provar responsible for responding in kind. Plus, Ascendancy troops were killed. This is no longer unilateral. Tit for tat, certainly, but not unilateral.’

‘I don’t think we can assume that the provar are avoiding UN targets,’ Pike said, throwing his hat into the ring. ‘Not any more.’

‘Then we are at war,’ Josette said, folding her arms. The general had exasperated her.

‘We are not at war,’ McKone said. ‘We are at diplomacy. Gonvarion will yield results momentarily. We can sound out the provar on their intentions and avoid future misunderstandings. I am confident this situation can be defused in a matter of hours.’

‘You’re the only one,’ the President growled.

‘We should still give the kaygryn asylum,’ Josette said. ‘We owe it to them after Hadan’s Reach.’

‘Oh for God’s sake!’ the President snapped. ‘How long must we go on about bloody Hadan’s Reach! It is done! Fifty years ago!’ he made a dismissive gesture with his hands. ‘As far as I am concerned, the presence of the kaygryn seeks only to inflame the situation. Granting them asylum will give the provar the mistaken impression we are somehow in league with them.’

‘Forgive me, sir, but I think Ms Chevalier is right,’ Garrick said. ‘We can’t just abandon the kaygryn. These are civilians we’re talking about here, women and children.’

‘Humanitarian assistance always does well in the polls,’ Janek added.

‘Are you serious?’ The President shook his head. ‘General?’

Pike cleared his throat. ‘Looking at it cynically, sir, if the provar start firing on Anternis again, there is at least some political currency to be gained from a large civilian death toll.’

Someone made a disgusted noise. Garrick would have put money on it being Josette.

‘My Joint Chiefs have all gone soft on me,’ Aurelius said. ‘Fine. So be it. They can stay for now. But you,’ he said, jabbing a finger at Josette, ‘are in charge of this humanitarian debacle.’

He rubbed his chin, then turned to his communications officer. ‘Janek, find a good way to spin this in the press. Might as well make me look like the compassionate type.’

The door opened at that moment, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. Scarcroft entered and nodded at the President.

‘The Buhrman Protocol is now active, sir. The Fleet will be fully mobilised within forty-eight hours.’

‘Thank you, Fleet Marshal.’

‘I am informed that the *Achilles* has made its final jump stopover. It is making better time than expected and will reach Uvolon in just under four hours.’

There was a moment’s pause.

‘I forgot about the evacuation,’ Aurelius said, then hissed a curse under his breath. ‘We should have told it to pull back. The last thing I need is for that to be destroyed as well.’

‘The summit, sir,’ McKone said. ‘I’ll brief my man to inform the provar personally. We should be able to get assurances that they will not attack. We

have already successfully negotiated to have Aryn Vance escorted offworld.'

Aurelius exhaled loudly. 'Is it too late to pull the *Achilles* back?' he asked Scarcroft.

'Yes, sir,' Scarcroft replied.

The President fixed his eyes on McKone. 'See to it. *Personally*. Understand?'

McKone bowed, unfazed. 'Of course, sir.'

'We could even evacuate the kaygryn on board the *Achilles*,' Josette ventured.

'Don't push your fucking luck, Commissioner,' the President snapped. 'Janek, I want a report on what foreign media outlets are saying about this. Canvass xeno reactions to our present course, please.'

'At once, sir,' Janek said.

'Right, that's it. Everyone is dismissed. Frost and Howarth, you stay. I want a word.'

Garrick stood up with everyone else, this time making sure he was at the back of the exiting group. The last thing he heard before the door closed was 'Xhevega'.

## HARD LINES

*‘We do everything in numbers.’*

### **Station Master Kellick, on the functioning of the Tier-Three Trade Pact**

Folhourtian Provari was the official language of the Ascendancy. Linguistically indecipherable to the human mind and phonetically unpronounceable to the human mouth, Yano had spent over a year learning instead what the provar termed *veshx-Han’ghar* – ‘bastard provari’ – a Terran creole with Folhourtian Provari as its lexifer. It had been a very long and very unenjoyable year, and at the end of it, he had felt no closer to understanding the aliens or their culture.

The difficulty arose both from the complexity of the language itself and from the physiology of the provar larynx. Folhourtian Provari was highly idiomatic, and in written form, consisted of nearly ten thousand variable glyphs which, singularly or combined, represented every state of affairs known to the Ascendancy. Terran, the official language of the UN, was so simple by comparison it was laughable. Nearly all FP glyphs had no Terran equivalent at all.

In the spoken form, FP was no less difficult to grasp. Aside from the fact that there were at least half a dozen ways of saying any given thing, depending on the context, regional accent, and even the speaker’s own personal experiences, the provar larynx consisted of three separate resonating chambers. These chambers, naturally harmonised from adolescence, produced a tri-tone voice which added another emotive and contextual layer to the language through modulation. Words spoken in a lower pitch, or dissonantly, for example, demonstrated anger, frustration or hatred. Words spoken in a higher pitch, or melodically, indicated jollity or amusement.

At least, that was what Yano had been trained to believe. While it was broadly correct, even that was staggeringly simplistic. In an effort to facilitate communication, provari ambassadors had trained themselves to utilise only one resonating chamber, but the result sowed as much confusion and discord among the provar themselves as it did among their Terran counterparts. Any



willingness on the part of the provar to assist the listener, too, was tempered by their almost genetic disdain for every other Tier-Three species.

Consequently, any envoy within the Xeno Division dealing directly with the provar had to be possessed of, at the very least, a natural musical talent, a keen ear, endless patience and at least a year of intense training. Fortunately for Yano, he had all of these qualities and more.

Unfortunately for Yano, the provar were unlikely to care.

He watched as the moonlit grassland sped below. At any other time, it would have been beautiful. The current conditions – balmy air, deep violet sky and strong lunar light – had coaxed many of the luminescent zhahassi wildflowers into life. They shot past like laser beams as the diplomatic cruiser smoothly accelerated to one hundred and eighty kilometres per hour, heading straight for the Memorial Tower across the dark, deserted savannah.

‘I’ve spoken with McKone directly,’ Codey was saying. The man was sitting opposite him, arms spread across the top of the leather couch. Like Yano, he was watching the wildflowers. ‘Our most urgent priority is to tell the provar executors about the *Achilles*.’

‘What time is it due to arrive?’ Yano asked. As an afterthought, he had the cruiser make him a strong black coffee. The aroma of it filled the hold.

‘About eight o’clock.’

‘There’s still time then,’ Yano murmured.

Codey made a show of checking the time. ‘If you can get that across to the provar ambassadors in under four hours...’ he said. He let it hang.

‘Mm,’ Yano replied. It was an exaggeration, but not a ridiculous one. ‘The ambassadors aren’t half as bad at Terran as they make out. They can be pretty clever about it when they have the inclination.’

‘It’s the inclination they don’t have,’ Codey muttered, then shrugged. There was a short silence. ‘Just make sure they know about the *Achilles*,’ he said again, his voice strained. Yano looked away from the window to face him.

‘Did McKone give any other instructions apart from that?’ he asked, annoyed that McKone had not just spoken to him directly. Diplomatic protocol could be ludicrous at times.

Codey’s lip curled, and he shook his head. ‘No. No instructions, just an update.’

Yano recovered his coffee from the machine and took a sip. He turned

back to watch the wildflowers, but his eyes settled on his own reflection in the window instead.

‘So the UN really is preparing for war,’ Yano said quietly. ‘Not good.’

‘No, not by a long way,’ Codey replied. ‘The Buhrman Protocol has its uses, but Aurelius must know it will be inflammatory.’

‘What can he do? Forty, maybe fifty UN servicemen dead? Hundreds of civilians? Not to mention the outright obliteration of central Anternis. He’s a politician. The people want blood.’ He shrugged. ‘Give the people what they want.’

‘He’s sleepwalking us into a war,’ Codey said harshly, making Yano start. ‘A war we can’t win. I’d love to stick it to the cobs more than most, but this is not prudent.’

‘We can’t just let them have the run of the place,’ Yano replied, feeling his own temper rise. ‘We might not be able to win, but a war with the UN would still be costly for the provar. Very costly. *They* are the ones who should be worried.’ He made an exasperated gesture as an afterthought. ‘They can’t just kill hundreds of people, Bal! *Christ!*’

Silence descended in the cruiser. Yano had never considered himself a hardliner – or even particularly engaged in the political process, beyond what his job demanded – but there had to come a point at which the UN stopped kowtowing to the provar at every turn just because of their ridiculous crusade fleets and overbearing military fanaticism. Indeed, there was a growing body of evidence suggesting that the provar wouldn’t even be able to spare the crusade fleets in an intragalactic war, at least in any meaningful way. Both government and private strategists had calculated that in order to maintain fleet numbers in Andromeda, the Ascendancy would only be able to spare a one-hundredth of the total for a domestic conflict. Combined with the Ascendancy Home Fleet, numerically it was no stronger than the UN navy.

Codey waved a hand dismissively as if to defuse the tension. ‘We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Just concentrate on warning them about the *Achilles* for now.’

‘Yes. Fine,’ Yano said, taking a deep breath to rid himself of his irritation. He took another sip of his coffee. ‘What time does the summit start again? Nine?’

‘Nine,’ Codey nodded. ‘Although I should imagine it will be earlier, now. We don’t know how the provar will react to the deaths of their pilots.’ He

studied the ceiling as he thought. ‘We must prepare ourselves for the fact that they might not turn up at all.’

‘That’s right, what’s his name – the Goliath Captain?’

‘Ben Vondur.’

‘Ben Vondur,’ Yano echoed. ‘Killed four of them. About time some cobs bought it, wouldn’t you say?’ He grinned and sipped his coffee. He was trying to wind Codey up, but the older man didn’t take the bait.

It took a further fifteen minutes to reach the Memorial Tower. On a clear day it was visible from Vhalyssia, and even at night its silhouette could be made out against the deep violet sky from tens of kilometres away. It was a magnificent structure, formed of an attenuating spire of chaotically organised stone obelisks a thousand metres tall. Five hundred years ago it had been the heart of the Demilitarised Zone, and the architectural gravitas of the structure made it easy to see why. Tassis, the current seat of the Commonwealth government, had always been a disappointment in Yano’s eyes.

‘Here we go,’ Codey said as they reached the foot of the tower. The cruiser pitched down gently and made for one of the empty landing platforms, of which there seemed to be a paucity. Most were occupied by goods vehicles, and swarms of maintenance bots and loaders were carrying dozens of pallets of fresh food into the tower.

The cruiser came to a stop adjacent to three massive Alliance-branded trucks, each carrying hundreds of fresh methane canisters inside for the golgron. Yano stepped out into the warm, early morning air and inhaled deeply, then regretted it immediately when he achieved a chest full of hot exhaust.

‘This way,’ Codey said, moving past him.

‘Lead on,’ Yano said, relishing in the adrenaline coursing through his gut. He was not nervous; rather, he was anticipating it. This was real xeno diplomacy after all, not like the dross he’d been dealing with in Voga City.

Ambassador Velsze was waiting for them in the entrance hall, which, like the halls in the Voscmak, was beautifully and intricately decorated.

‘Special Envoy Yano,’ Velsze said. The ambassador’s voice was low and sombre, deliberately reflective of the gravity of the situation. ‘We came as soon as we heard the news.’ He gestured to the pair of robed zhahassi behind him, who bowed synchronously. Illiris Fhalco and Gendremar Zvell.

‘Thank you, Ambassador,’ Yano replied, bowing in return. ‘It is a pleasure

to finally meet you, Representatives,' he said to the two zhahassi politicians.

'The pleasure is ours, Special Envoy,' Zvell replied.

'We have the provari executors waiting in the Hagr Suite,' Velsze said, wearing a worried look. 'I feel it incumbent upon me to warn you, Special Envoy, that they seem most... *displeased*.'

Yano nodded, adrenaline once more coursing through his system. He did not consider it beyond the provar to murder him. He smiled warmly. 'We were expecting as much. Please, lead on.'

Fhalco and Zvell took their leave, and Velsze led them to the Hagr Suite, a large, well-appointed audience chamber on the thirtieth floor accessed by a maglev elevator. In the corridor outside, Velsze bowed once more.

'I remain at your disposal, Special Envoy, for the duration of the summit. If there is anything you require, please do let me know.'

'As always, Ambassador, you are most helpful.'

Velsze's neck wobbled in pleasure, and he loped off down the corridor.

'Are you ready?' Codey asked.

'Of course,' Yano replied. He activated his IHD's FP modulator and opened the door.

'*Ashgurn-valta!*' a voice snarled, deep, tri-modular and dissonant.

Yano blinked at the sheer volume and force of the phrase. It was a familiar one and had been for decades – so much so that Yano didn't even need to translate it. It was the Ascendancy's pejorative term for humans, and it meant, quite simply, 'kaygryn lover'. There was no greater insult, as far as the provar were concerned.

'*Ghengari-Zecad valta samman'ackha, hai,*' Yano intoned in a calm, mid-spectrum major key. In Terran, 'Glory and love be upon the Zecad, Ascended One'. It was the Standard Imperial Greeting – or rather, what both races had come to accept as the best possible translation of the Standard Imperial Greeting. In response, the foremost executor spat a glob of pink phlegm onto the floor.

The spitting provar was what Yano would consider a standard size and build for a citizen of the Ascendancy: two metres tall, alabaster-white skin, great, muscular thorax and disproportionately thin waist. A dense and highly efficient adipose layer meant that they were always bare-chested – a direct evolutionary consequence of the semi-Arctic temperatures of Folhourt. The head and facial features were a strange mixture of reptilian and mammalian,

with an enlarged throat, rounded muzzle and bisected mandible, while the skin was smooth and hairless, leathery in places and rough, almost armour-like in others.

Yano smiled warmly as both executors regarded him, nictitating membranes flickering in the wan light. They both wore sarongs made of thick, sky-blue material, and about their waists were strapped ornate, gold-hilted sabres, or *caldars*. Something about that last detail annoyed him, though he couldn't think why. A network of scars and tattoos marked both their bodies, some ceremonial and others undoubtedly authentic. The Ascendancy made little, if any, distinction between its warrior class and its diplomatic personnel.

'*Ashgurn-valta*,' the same executor said again, still in a low voice but reduced both in volume and dissonance. Intense irritation, rather than outright anger. A marked improvement, as far as Yano was concerned.

'Executor Xavanis, Executor Folgana, I have an important message from the President of the United Nations,' Yano said in his best FP, modulated, with the assistance of his IHD, to convey respectful urgency. 'I would be grateful if you could hear and acknowledge this missive before we address the problems that have arisen in the past twenty-four hours.'

He winced at his poor choice of words and felt Codey wince too. 'Twenty-four hours' had been the wrong phrase. The expression was technically irrelevant even in the UN, where the variance in day lengths between worlds varied infinitely, and existed only idiomatically to mean a single day/night period. In FP, it would have been total nonsense.

Predictably, the provar had no idea what he was talking about. '*Ai'ee*?' the executor said. It wasn't even a word, more a blurt of sound. It was, however, close enough to 'eh?' to sound almost comical.

'Important missive: I am in possession of one. It is for you,' Yano tried, in a syntax marginally more faithful to FP. There was less confusion this time. One way of discerning how the provar had understood was to watch their nictitating membranes. Closed indicated deep thought.

'Give throat,' the executor said, after a minute of silence. Yano suspected they were both running through the near infinite combinations of translations on their IHD equivalents in order to arrive at the most likely. The executor's anger had given way to wariness, judging by the new tone.

'*Vyax herren'ghet ona khatesh*,' Yano said, carefully reading the FP name

for Uvolon written phonetically by his IHD. The mere mention of it caused some consternation among the two provari executors. ‘Three ships. Fleet. Armed. Destroyed.’ With the last word, he made a gesture with his hands which looked like he was holding a rapidly inflating balloon.

‘*Ai*,’ the lead provar replied, with some relish. Evidently they both understood and delighted in the fate of Captain Jacob Rynn and his men. The lead executor cocked his head to the left: indifference.

‘Fourth ship,’ Yano continued patiently, holding up four fingers. Fortunately, mathematics was the one universal constant. It was the only thing that made the Tier-Three Trade Pact possible. ‘It will arrive in four hours.’

The provar grunted, cocked its head again. Not indifference this time: incomprehension. The future tense was, frustratingly, one of the main stumbling blocks in Terran/FP translation.

‘Three ships,’ Yano said, holding up four fingers and gripping three of them with his left hand. He made the *explosion* gesture again. ‘Destroyed.’

An upward tilt of the chin. Understanding. ‘*Ai*.’

‘Fourth ship. No weapons. Peaceful ship.’

‘No four ship. Three *klashi*.’

Yano exhaled, though he was not frustrated. Xeno Division had bled him free of frustration many years ago. ‘Fourth *klashi*. Now travelling to *vyax herren’ghet ona khatesh*. Evacuate non-military people.’ He clicked his tongue in thought. Already there were further difficulties; the provar had no concept of a civilian. Despite the fact that the Ascendancy was made up of a majority of what the UN would term civilians, the provar simply considered them a form of non-armed serviceperson. Everything in the Ascendancy was done in furtherance of the common purpose. Still, the provar were at least aware of how the UN functioned from a dozen such historical summits. The lead executor appeared to understand.

‘*Vhyrmin klashi*, no attack *Imphraexes*. *Imphraexes* no attack *vhyrmin klashi*.’ It was a question, though lacking in the vocal inflections a human would associate with such.

‘They’ve got it,’ Codey murmured from behind him. Yano nodded. It always struck him how closely the FP word for human resembled the Terran word ‘vermin’. A cosmic coincidence, but at least as far as the Ascendancy was concerned, a fitting one.

It took another thirty minutes to hammer home the imminent arrival of the *Achilles* and the intention of the UN to have it evacuate Anternis. Once those basic facts had been established, the two provar soon readopted their hostile attitudes. Their disdain would only ever be tempered by their curiosity temporarily. The best Yano could hope for was for these periods of grace to last long enough to get the message across, and that was precisely what Xeno Division had trained him for.

After a further hour of intense, if obstructive, discussion, Yano had managed to secure what could loosely be termed an assurance that the unarmed *Achilles* would not be attacked immediately upon its arrival into Uvolonese voidspace. Anything further – what the ship would then do, and how it would go about it – was a different matter entirely, and would require hours of further explanation, discussion and negotiation.

Already Yano was not hopeful. For it to take so long simply to get the provar to agree not to obliterate a non-military craft was deeply disheartening. Provari disdain was nothing new, but this fresh obstreperousness did not bode well at all.

‘Tell McKone we have secured assurances that the *Achilles* won’t be attacked,’ Yano said quietly as he turned to Codey. Codey nodded, stood and exited the room, bowing to the two executors as he did so. Xavanis dismissed Folgana to relay the same orders to the relevant Ascendancy personnel. For a few minutes, Yano and the lead executor were alone in the Hagr Suite.

‘*Vhyrmin ghastr*,’ the provar growled after thirty seconds of silence, his eyes fixed on Yano’s. ‘Humanity is finished’ or perhaps ‘We are finished here, human.’ Yano hoped it was the latter but strongly suspected it was the former.

‘Charming,’ he shot back in Terran, with a smile so perfect it passed for real. Not that the provar would have any idea what he was doing. He probably thought Yano was insane.

Codey came back in after a few minutes and nodded to him. ‘I’ve told him. He passes on the President’s gratitude.’

‘Lucky me,’ Yano said quietly to himself. For all his bravado, he was slightly unnerved by Xavanis’s comment. During the war crimes tribunal after the Insurrection on Merisgard, the provar had been helpful, co-operative even. There had certainly been no love lost between the two species – the action on New Carthage had seen to that – but the Ascendancy executors had

never been outright hostile, instead adopting a pained, disdainful but ultimately collaborative approach.

It was then that Yano finally realised what had bothered him about the executors' *caldars* – the fact that they were even wearing them at all. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen the provar wear the ceremonial weapons to diplomatic meetings. It had to have been a statement of their displeasure, something to mark a downgrading of diplomatic relations between the Ascendancy and the UN following the deaths of the provari pilots – and this quite irrespective of the fact that it was the Ascendancy who had engineered the whole debacle in the first place. It was absurd, akin to he and Codey walking into the summit with rail guns strapped to their chests.

< They're wearing *caldars* > he sent to Codey via IHD text-only transmission. < They haven't worn *caldars* in years. I can't remember the last time I saw them >

< I know > Codey replied. < We should debrief with McKone. We may have to rethink our position >

Xavanis grunted from across the suite, drawing their attention. He had been unsettled during the silence, as if he'd reflected on their earlier agreement and was already regretting it. Now, he was actively pacing up and down the room. The movement reminded Yano of a caged animal, angry and confused and helpless all at the same time.

'Exchange,' Xavanis said suddenly, his voice brash and dissonant. It was all Yano could do not to start. '*Vheygari* murder. *Vhyrmin* killed *vheygari*. *Ixa vheygari*. Exchange!'

'He means explain,' Codey murmured.

'I know what he means,' Yano snapped, sweating hands clasped calmly on the table in front of him. The executor was asking him why the UN had murdered four provar – as if it had been some unilateral act. The arrogance of it made his blood boil.

'We don't want to address this now,' Codey said quietly. 'We should wait for the summit later. We want this on record.'

'An explanation, we will give one,' Yano said, his voice modulated to urge patience. He was faintly aware of sounding utterly ridiculous, half-heartedly singing at an alien who hated him. 'We will give one at the summit. Agree?'

The executor brought his fist down hard on to the table. A shot of adrenaline fired through Yano's body, though his face remained impassive. It



was difficult not to be frightened in the face of an angry provar, especially one who had the means to stab him through the lungs with a sword.

‘*Vas!*’ the executor snarled. ‘*Ixa vheygari!*’ Executor Folgana chose that moment to return, charging into the room and standing behind Xavanis’s left shoulder. He puffed his chest in some ancient, ritualistic display of dominance, and breathed deeply and loudly.

‘Okay,’ Yano said in the same stern way an annoyed parent would deal with a child. He turned to Codey. ‘Call Velsze. We’re done here. I’m not going to sit here taking this.’

Codey nodded and left the room calmly and purposefully under the glare of the executors. The worst thing they could do now is appear frightened. If they did, the provar would treat them like they treated kaygryn.

‘We will explain,’ Yano said, modulating his voice once more to convey patience. ‘Urge calm. We will explain. Assurance.’

He wanted to scream. It was intensely galling to act so meekly in front of the representatives of the race who had but hours before wantonly killed hundreds of UN citizens and blown up half a city.

Codey returned momentarily with Velsze, who loped into the room, his voice upbeat and sing-song and completely divorced from the severity of the situation.

‘Now that Special Envoy Yano has communicated his message, perhaps it would be best if there were a cooling-off period ahead of the summit, hmm?’ The zhahassi reiterated as much to the executors in considerably better FP than Yano’s, though they seemed no more placated.

‘*Ashgurn-valta!*’ they snarled boringly. ‘*Ashgurn-valta!*’

‘Easy, *Jesus Christ*,’ Codey muttered, glancing over to Yano. < This is insane, these freaks are going to kill someone >

‘Let’s go. Let them stew,’ Yano said, hiding the disgust from his face. He took his cloak up from the chair next to him and brought it round his shoulders.

‘*Samman Zecad, hai*,’ he said, bowing to the executors. With angry growls and much chest thumping, they stalked out of the room via the archway behind them.

‘Oh dear,’ Velsze observed, as if he had spilled some tea. ‘Did you manage to... settle your differences?’

‘No, Ambassador,’ Yano said tiredly, shaking his head. ‘Far from it.’

\*

They spent the next few hours of the morning in a comfortable caucus room somewhere near the top of the Memorial Tower, taking in the vertiginous view across the Vhalysian plains and drinking zhahassi tea from thin, translucent mugs. Kaivan and Abena joined them an hour after the meeting with the executors had concluded, having come from a separate meeting with Andrea Constance and her communications officers in the hotel, locked in VR sync with Vargonroth for a briefing on the activation of the Buhrman Protocol. Constance and Graydon had then gone on to a separate part of the Memorial Tower to speak with Zvell and Fhalco to update them, leaving the two junior envoys back at the disposal of Yano and Codey.

Codey filled them both in on the developments with Xavanis and his Second, while Yano brooded, cursorily reading through his briefing ahead of the summit.

‘Shit,’ Abena Ghani said after a short silence.

‘So what are you going to do?’ Kaivan asked.

Codey shrugged. ‘We’ve already spoken with McKone this morning. Our diplomatic brief hasn’t changed. Nothing for it but to bite the bullet.’ He pinched the bridge of his nose, as if the memory of the meeting with the provar had physically pained him. ‘The provar are usually like this, albeit that this morning was an... *extreme* example. They’ll settle down as time goes on.’

‘We hope,’ Yano called from the other side of the room. Xavanis’s comment lingered in his mind. The more he went back over it, the more he was sure it had been a threat. His IHD had, after careful phonetic and modular analysis, reached the same conclusion.

‘What do you mean?’ Abena asked.

Yano’s lip curled. ‘I think our government has, once again, completely overestimated how much the provar consider themselves responsible for the human death toll on Anternis. They don’t care. At all. Trying to get them to admit culpability is useless.’

‘Then their attitude has hardened in the last decade,’ Codey remarked.

‘They were contrite enough after New Carthage. Initially at least,’ he added as an afterthought. He mused for a moment. ‘Hm. Actually, maybe they weren’t.’

They all looked around as Charlotte Asha walked into the room, looking flustered.

‘The *Buhrman Protocol*? Sounds like something out of a shitty holo special.’ A zhahassi lhyrin stick dangled from her mouth, trailing vapour. ‘It’s all over everything. Every UN and xeno news outlet there is. If you were trying to piss off your provari friends, mission accomplished.’

‘Tell us something new,’ Yano muttered.

‘I’m telling you it’s an absolute media frenzy out there. You’ll not be seeing Andrea for a while, that’s for sure. And her comms lackeys.’

Yano’s heart sank slightly. He had hoped, in an adolescent sort of way, that Tanja would have come. ‘Shouldn’t you be covering the story?’ he said. She looked at him slightly incredulously. ‘What?’ he asked. He was supposed to be nicer to her, or even *grateful*, for the sex that she’d foisted upon him? Fine, so he’d allowed it, and hell, having Charlotte Asha bouncing on his cock – *the* Charlotte Asha, from the news – had been good fun, eventually. But he certainly didn’t owe her anything, especially not his courtesy. Not right now.

‘I’m sorry,’ Codey said for him. ‘The executors—’

‘Pissed him off something good,’ she finished for him and waved him off. ‘Whatever. As a matter of fact, I am covering the story...’ She made a show of checking the time. ‘The story which starts in forty minutes. Or had you all forgotten?’

‘I’ve just had word from Ambassador Velsze,’ Codey interjected before Yano lost his temper. ‘The Xhevegan observer is here and on his way up. Once we’ve collected him, we’ll go to the summit floor.’

Yano sighed loudly. ‘Fantastic.’ He got to his feet and straightened his robes out, then looked out the window again to reflect on Xavanis’s words. *Humanity is finished*. With the arrival of this Xhevegan observer and the mobilisation of both the Fleet and the Fleet Auxiliary, it wasn’t far from the truth.

‘Observer Faunix Siun, Special Envoys,’ Velsze announced from the door. Everyone turned. Velsze was standing in the doorway next to the provar in question, who was gestured inside.

‘*Samman*,’ Siun said, much more practised in the use of the single resonating chamber than his Folhourtian counterparts. The provar was, physiologically speaking, practically identical to the Ascendancy executors, though he wore a deep golden sarong rather than blue, did not wear a *caldar*, and bore nothing like the number of tattoos and scars.

‘*Samman*,’ Yano replied, singularly unsure how to deal with the apostate. Just being in his presence made Yano feel deeply uncomfortable. Decades of Ascendancy mandates had expressly forbidden any interactions with representatives of the Xhevega Enclaves, and to disregard them now, despite such being officially sanctioned by the UN government, did not sit well with him at all. The provar didn’t even use the Standard Imperial Greeting – though on reflection it was obvious why.

‘Special Envoy Zavian Yano,’ he said in FP, closing the tips of his fingers together and pressing them into his breastbone. ‘Special Envoy Balthazar Codey.’ He gestured to the older man using an open palm.

‘*Samman*,’ Siun said. ‘Thank you for meeting me.’

Yano’s eyes widened. The provar’s Terran was impeccable. He glanced at Codey, who, equally bewildered, offered nothing beyond a tiny shrug.

‘Forgive me, Mr Siun, but your Terran is... quite excellent,’ Yano said, astonished. It was better than most zhahassi pronunciation.

Siun’s ears twitched: pleasure. ‘Thank you, Special Envoy. I have had many long years of training. Even now I am learning – please, I insist that you correct any mistakes I make.’

Yano opened and closed his mouth, then opened it again. ‘I – of course. Of course. You’ve quite disarmed me, Mr Siun; I don’t think I’ve ever heard a provar able to enunciate the Terran language quite so perfectly before.’ His foul mood was temporarily forgotten, evaporated by his surprise.

Siun’s ears twitched again, and his outer eyelids closed: deep joy. ‘I am glad to hear you say that, Special Envoy. Certain surgical procedures have meant that I find it much easier to speak your language.’

There was a pause.

‘Shit,’ Charlotte Asha breathed, voicing what they were all thinking. Yano had never heard of a thing like it done. He was suddenly filled with a sense of melancholy, that this provar had had no choice but to have his resonating chambers chopped up just so that he could speak ugly, functional Terran. But before any of them could get too depressed about it, Siun continued.

‘What would you like me to do, Special Envoy?’ he asked. ‘I understand I’m to “keep out of trouble”, as you humans would say. My fellow Xhevegans are back at the Voscmark Hotel. We are on the floor above the kaygryn legation.’

Codey cleared his throat. ‘Mr Siun, we would be honoured if you would join us at the summit table as an observer.’

Siun bowed, having clearly anticipated the invitation. It was all a bit of diplomatic theatre. ‘It would be my pleasure. I express my deep thanks for your hospitality, to you and your President.’

Yano had to stop his jaw from hanging open. No provar he had ever met had been so pleasant, so friendly and accommodating. Talking to the Xhevegan was a pleasure. Talking to the Ascendancy executors had been unremittingly stressful and had caused him to fear for his life.

Codey extended an arm and gestured Siun towards the door. ‘We were just leaving, Observer. Please, follow me.’

Codey led Siun out the door, and Yano followed. In the hallway, Velsze was waiting for them. ‘Ready to begin?’ he asked, his own Terran sounding positively mediocre by comparison.

‘Yes,’ Yano said, ‘we are.’

They made their way to the summit chamber briskly and with a pervading air of adrenaline. With the last-minute preparations made, there was little to discuss, and the group moved in silence – broken only by the quiet, melodic voices of Siun and Velsze.

Though he would not admit to being nervous, Yano still opted to distract himself for the short journey. The walls, where they were not interrupted by ZEN-stacked alcoves, were layered in intricate murals and carvings, and he took pictures of as many as he could with his corneal-mounted cameras. Some of them were instantly recognisable, including replicas of murals discovered decades before Contact, when UN exploratory missions had uncovered decolonised worlds mere light years from the Demilitarised Zone. Others were older still, and given the age of the Memorial Tower, undoubtedly authentic. His IHD, using image-matching software, compiled a file on each one for him to study in his downtime.

Yano smiled to himself. For many within Xeno Division, cultivating an active interest in xeno art, architecture and other cultural pursuits was both a hobby and a professional necessity. But while many of Yano’s peers

maintained their interest under relative sufferance, he himself genuinely enjoyed poring over hardcopy texts and high-definition pictures of xeno paintings and sculptures. When he wasn't working, there was little he relished more than visiting galleries and exhibitions of alien art. Like bipedalism, mathematics and a free market economy, art was the one thing all Tier-Three species shared. Provari religious murals, Xhevegan political cartoons, zhahassi sculpture – even the golgron partook in the creation of art, though it was strange and often impenetrable.

They made their way from the thirtieth to the fifteenth floor via a labyrinthine series of corridors and maglev elevators. The final elevator journey saw them segue from quiet, largely empty passageways to a cavernous hall, easily twenty metres from floor to ceiling and packed with Tier-Three players. The air was rife with shouted conversation, and there was a palpable air of tension. Huge holos lined the walls, each split into subscreens displaying news feeds and the mostly empty Grand Chamber, where the summit proper would take place.

'I'll be around,' Charlotte said and disappeared into the crowds before anyone could say anything.

Andrea Constance intercepted them twenty seconds out of the elevator, her face grim set. Behind her, Tanja and Bennett were both occupied with IHD comms, judging by their vacant expressions and occasional mumblings.

'You're about to get some bad news,' she said. Any trace of banter was gone.

'What do you mean?' Codey said in the same second Yano's IHD flashed with an incoming priority communiqué. Between the official UNDM markings, the extraneous Presidential Seal and Constance's tone, he did not have a good feeling about its contents.

'It's Vargonroth,' he murmured, opening it. He waited patiently for the security coding to satisfy itself that he was who his IHD claimed.

'Is everything all right?' he heard Siun ask behind him.

'I'm sure it's nothing to worry about,' Kaivan said in an admirable imitation of reassurance.

'Good,' Siun replied, 'good.' It was only then Yano detected a trace of anxiety beneath Siun's warm, if slightly obsequious, exterior. Well, the Xhevegan had every reason to be anxious. Despite the summit's veneer of

civilisation, it would be considered fairly de rigueur by many if one of the Ascendancy executors murdered him.

‘Don’t worry, you’re in safe hands,’ Ghani added. Again, it seemed to appease the observer, but Yano wasn’t really sure what she had meant by it. If it came to a fight, he and Codey wouldn’t be much use against a pair of Ascendancy *caldars* – not that he’d even attempt to get in the way. He wasn’t even sure the ZENs would put a stop to it.

The message decrypted, and his vision suddenly filled with a field of text.

New summary position statement:

1. The UN requires an AOC and an official apology from the Ascendancy for the deaths of Captain Jacob Rynn and the Fleet servicemen killed in Uvolonese voidspace.

2. The UN requires an AOC and an official apology from the Ascendancy for the destruction of three UN Fleet destroyers, and reparations to construct like-for-like replacements.

3. The UN requires an AOC and official apology for

a. the deaths of Pilot Officer Elyan and Pilot Officer Vandemarr;

b. the technical death of Pilot Officer Syoba;

c. the damage to and/or the destruction of 11 Goliath Squadron; and

d. reparations for that damage and destruction.

4. The UN requires an AOC and official apology from the Ascendancy for the [as yet] unquantified damage to the United Nations Sovereign Territory of Anternis and the unquantified civilian death toll thereof.

5. The UN requires forthwith the removal of the Ascendancy naval cruiser *Impraxes* from Uvolonese voidspace and a guarantee that the commander of the *Impraxes* be immediately stripped of his rank and subjected to a UN-

mandated court or courts martial on a location to be agreed with the Zhahassi Commonwealth.

Yano pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling a potent mixture of rage and frustration well up from the pit of his stomach. Codey finished the message and winced.

‘Shit,’ he breathed. Andrea nodded, her face a rictus of genuine sympathy.

‘What?’ Abena and Kaivan asked simultaneously. Behind them, Velsze and Siun shifted uncomfortably, the latter once again visibly anxious.

Yano forwarded the message to the two junior envoys and Andrea’s comms officers, shaking his head bitterly.

‘What’s an AOC?’ Bennett asked stupidly.

‘Asseveration of culpability,’ Codey said. Yano had a face like thunder.

‘This is *ridiculous*,’ he said after a while. ‘What is McKone playing at? He must know we won’t get any of this.’

‘They’re the President’s orders,’ Andrea remarked. ‘Xander didn’t come up with this.’

‘What was your briefing with Vargonroth? This morning? What did they tell you?’ Yano asked. He couldn’t keep the anger from his voice, which was quickly transforming into petulance. He sounded like a teenager who had just been given more homework.

‘That the President had authorised the activation of the Buhrman Protocol and we were to anticipate a harder line from the UN.’

‘We’ve already filed our position statement,’ Codey observed. ‘This is going to look very unprofessional.’

‘Well, unfortunately I don’t think you have much of a choice,’ Andrea said. She paused, visibly irritated, as a troop of golgron walked in between them, trailing a vapour cloud that smelled of petroleum. ‘This one’s from the top.’

‘We only deal with the top,’ Yano snapped. ‘It’s all been from the top.’  
*Idiot.*

‘Be that as it may,’ she continued, close to rolling her eyes, ‘we should start canvassing again. Everyone will be onside while we’re yapping about peace. We’ll lose friends quickly if we start demanding apologies and threatening war.’

Yano opened his mouth but Codey got there first. ‘You’re right. I’ll take



the quorl and the golgron. You take the zhahassi.’ He checked the time. ‘We’ve got a couple of minutes yet. This should surprise as few people as possible.’

Andrea nodded and departed into the crowds with Tanja and Bennett. Codey turned to Yano.

‘I know you don’t like it, but she is right. We *don’t* have a choice, so we might as well make the best of it.’ He turned around to check one of the huge holos. The Grand Chamber was slowly filling up. ‘I’ll see you in ten minutes. Take this lot inside.’

Yano grunted. ‘See you in there.’

Codey disappeared into the crowds. Yano batted a pressbot away irritably and turned to his entourage. ‘Everyone ready?’

Nods.

‘All right, come on,’ he said, turning back. ‘This is about to get ugly.’

The Grand Chamber was half-full by the time they had moved through the press of diplomats. One final security check – for visibility only, given the continuous scangrid maintained by the ZENs – and they were through one of the dozens of archways that led inside.

The chamber itself was huge and airy in keeping with zhahassi architectural mores, a fat cylinder with a cavernous, vaulted ceiling plastered in murals. A mezzanine stacked with hardcopy volumes of Tier-Three Galactic Protocol overlooked the circular table surrounded by concentric rings of chairs, those closest to the table for lead diplomats, followed by seconds, attachés, politicians and sanctioned press. Holos lined the walls and would provide written translations.

Some legations had already taken their seats. As Yano moved to their designated section, he could see representatives from the Old Colonies and the Kansubashi Empire. A couple of quorl stood opposite, wearing dark grey togas. They looked like ugly, insect-bastard versions of the zhahassi, although neither race had anything to do with each other genetically.

He took his seat without saying anything, his palms sweaty and his heart rate jacked. He refused to have his IHD run anything. He wanted to be alert, but naturally alert, quite contrary to what the UNDM Practice Manual prescribed. He consoled himself with the fact that if anyone else had been in his position, they’d be both nervous *and* hopeless, whereas he was still possessed of his natural ability to act under pressure. Even Codey, affable old

Codey, was no more than a first-rate, dependable second now, backup-tier, working junk in Veigis and little more than junk in the Outer Ring. They'd picked him for his outstanding admin skills and xeno-magnetism, but as a first, he was finished.

Abena and Kaivan sat quietly behind him, not wanting to disturb his abundantly foul mood, and behind them, Siun and Velsze. Velsze would spend the remainder of the summit with them as an escort and advisor. Every legation was urged to take on a zhahassi attaché, though the UN was routinely in the minority in actually doing so.

The room was nearly full now. Using the UNDM's diplomatic database, he began scanning and tagging every individual present. Everyone who was supposed to be there was there. Aks-sta, McKone's personal contact and whom Codey was meant to be finding and briefing, was one of the quorl sitting at the table. Hasato, the Kansubashi lead, was engaged in conversation with José Lenés, the third for the Old Colonies. Fhalco was talking to a group of zhahassi. The Golgron Alliance mob were all from Ghessis, and a quick IHD history told him that it was Ghessis which was embroiled in the Perseus ore dispute with the Ascendancy. He filed that morsel of diplomatic intelligence away for later.

The atmosphere in the Grand Chamber was what he had expected: largely irritatingly light-hearted. Because the dispute was between the Ascendancy and the UN, the rest of the legations spent time socialising, sharing jokes, bantering and talking to the press. They had no skin in the game, no commitments which they were expected to honour. Any side-taking on their part would be a favour, and probably symbolic anyway. So while the ten-strong provari legation stood in one corner, haughty and unmoving, the rest swaggered about, shaking hands and catching up. Yano just wanted to stand up and scream at them all to take it seriously.

Charlotte came in at the last moment with Codey and Tanja. Codey looked pleased and winked at Yano on approach. 'Constance got Zvell,' he said quietly as he sat down next to Yano. 'The zhahassi are happy to take a harder line. There's plenty sick of the Ascendancy in the Demilitarised Zone. I'll tell you more about it later.'

'Good,' Yano said absentmindedly. There was no sign of the kaygryn anywhere, which was his latest preoccupation. 'Where are the kaygryn?'

Codey wasn't given a chance to answer. The mediator – an old, wizened

zhahassi who sat in a large, throne-like chair at the head of the table – instigated a harmonic that was something between a lullaby and an alarm, and the Grand Chamber fell dutifully silent. The provar who had been standing in the corner sauntered over to their seats opposite Yano. They all wore the same blue sarongs, though only Xavanis and Folgana wore *caldars*, meaning the remaining seven were not executors. All ten pointedly ignored Yano, their collective gaze instead falling on Siun over his left shoulder.

‘Representatives,’ the mediator said, his voice like tearing paper, amplified – and translated – by an unseen speaker system. ‘Today we have come together once more, in the spirit of peace and brotherhood, to settle our differences through words.’ The provar were still staring at Siun. For the first time, Yano felt sorry for the Xhevegan. ‘I urge politeness. Calm. Composure. Heated tempers often lead to heated words, and heated words lead to heated actions. We have all suffered wrongs, injustices...’

Yano tuned out and instead studied the table. Most around the table were engrossed in their IHD equivalents or translation holos in front of them. Zhahassi syntax was roughly in line with all languages save Provari and Argish, so the entire speech would have to be repeated in an approximation of both those languages. It was time-consuming and tedious, and the trick was to keep everything that was said as short and simple as possible. The well-worn Trade Pact adage ‘we do everything in numbers’ was well worn for a reason. Everyone understood numbers well enough.

The mediator knew what he was doing. He was an old hand, and by the time Yano broke from his short reverie, he had repeated the speech in elegant *veshx-Han’ghar*. There was no need to repeat it in Argish – the kaygryn were still nowhere to be seen, a fact which was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

< Good luck > Codey sent him as the mediator stopped speaking and turned to him expectantly.

‘Here we go,’ Yano breathed as he stood. The eyes of the room – and the galaxy – were now on him.

‘Special Envoy Zavian Yano, of the United Nations,’ an anonymous zhahassi voice announced over the speakers. The holos around the room switched to a live feed of him, all manner of text scrolling in banners across the bottom. His name, translated into all six Tier-Three languages, overlaid the image.

‘Good morning, Representatives,’ he said in a clear, steady voice. ‘As you all know, the United Nations has called this mandatory summit under Galactic Protocol Nine to resolve the crisis which has developed between the kaygryn and the Ascendancy, and to which we are now an unfortunate and unwilling party.’

He paused briefly as Zvell and Constance slunk in from the side. It was not unusual for there to be a constant stream of diplomats entering and exiting the room, particularly as a summit progressed. He took the time to look at each of the representatives in turn. The Golgron Alliance Representatives sat unmoving to his far left, clad in fully sealed methane breather suits which hissed mildly with every breath. Their expressions were hidden behind their greasy, tinted goggles, while any body language Yano might have discerned was concealed under thick dark cloaks and chainmail-like filament. Next to them, the zhahassi, Fhalco and now Zvell sat patiently, nodding, clad in the same crimson and white robes as Velsze behind him. Their near-translucent skin was, like Velsze’s, covered in tattoos, though there was a shrewdness about them, an aggressive maleness which was absent from Velsze’s androgynous form.

The insectoid quorl were next to the zhahassi, like a child brought to heel. There were more quorl present than any other legation, a testament to their hive-based civilisation. While all species considered it execrably vulgar to treat appearances as a valid comparator, there was no doubt that the quorl were the ugliest of all the Tier-Three species. It was as though someone had merged a human, a zhahassi and a praying mantis into one being in some catastrophic teleportation experiment. The Old Colonies and Kansubashi Empire Representatives, reassuringly human and therefore reassuringly onside, sat comfortably next to them, some already nodding sympathetically at his fairly vanilla opening.

Finally, his eyes rested on the provar. Already the executors and their Folhourtian entourage looked angry, stewing from their emergency meeting that morning. Yano had no doubt that to them, there would be no greater pleasure than to organise the destruction of the *Achilles* holding orbit over Uvolon.

‘The crisis has left many civilians dead,’ he continued, again struggling with the Ascendancy’s lack of the concept of civilian. Fortunately the superior zhahassi technology would take care of the translation for him, so he

didn't have to simplify the syntax too much. 'Unarmed men, women, children. Non-combatants. UN servicemen as well, pilots and naval personnel. The threat of further death and destruction hangs over our heads. I urge all parties to settle their differences now, in this room, so that we can avoid further hostilities.

'It is my purpose here to reconcile the Ascendancy and the Kaygryn Federacy, and try to understand your grievances before more lose their lives. The United Nations abhors the use of violence. We oppose violence in all its forms. Yet we recognise that sometimes violence is necessary to further a greater good, and the UN will not flinch from defending what is right and what is just. Simply because we detest the use of violence, does not mean we will not employ it when it is required.'

Yano cleared his throat and checked his notes. He made himself look directly at Xavanis, who was, fortunately, engrossed in the translation holo. 'In order to settle these grievances, we must be honest with each other. Through our honesty we generate respect.' There were some nods at that. 'Before I go on, then, and before the United Nations can fully engage in this summit, I must ask of the Ascendancy the following. In light of the deaths which the provar have inflicted in the United Nations Sovereign Territory of Anternis, and the killing of UN servicemen, the unwarranted destruction of UN military hardware, and the deaths of civilians or unarmed men, women and children, we require the following...'

He listed the President's demands – or attempted to. He barely made it past the first before Xavanis launched to his feet. For a moment Yano saw the provar reach for his *caldar*, though the executor luckily thought better of it.

'*Insult!*' he roared, voice deep and dissonant. Everyone in the audience chamber started. The holos around the room all switched from Yano to Xavanis.

'Imperial Executor tan'Vex Gochrayne-an Xavanis, of the Provar Ascendancy,' the zhahassi announcer said over the speaker system.

Xavanis had already launched into a tirade in FP, too quickly for anyone to understand except those provar present. It became quickly evident, however, that it was not directed at Yano. It was directed at Siun.

'Executor,' the mediator attempted. Then Yano felt Siun rise to his feet. He turned to see the observer's face darkening, and where before he had seen a passive, almost weak aspect to the Xhevegan, now there was a terrible wrath,

a deep, engrained loathing for Folhourt and the Ascendancy which stormed across his features.

‘*Xhevega cressin’as lachma hai!*’ Siun bellowed in response to Xavanis’s insults. Other members of the table were standing now, unsure of what to do. The Grand Chamber did have ZEN marksmen scurried away in alcoves, though they had not been used in Yano’s lifetime. Yano guessed they were drawing a bead on Xavanis and the Ascendancy legation, since they were the only bipeds in the room who were armed, ceremonially or otherwise. It would not look good if they started stabbing foreign dignitaries left and right.

Xavanis snarled and thumped his chest. It made a hollow sound. ‘Why here?’ he made a jabbing motion towards Siun. ‘*Xhevega dast’a ghan!*’

‘Xhevega’ and ‘traitor’ were the two words Yano took from the outburst. The mediator was loudly calling for calm, though he was not being listened to. If they carried on like this, the entire summit would be a waste of time.

< We need to get rid of Siun > he sent to Codey.

< Not yet. See what you can do > Codey messaged back.

‘Executor,’ Yano said, loud enough to be heard over the exchange. ‘Please, hear our position. The Ascendancy has killed UN citizens. All we ask—’

Xavanis snarled, and most of the rest of the Ascendancy legation snarled with him.

‘Think we care? *Vhyrmin* people are *nala!*’ He spat more pinkish phlegm onto the floor. That caused some more consternation among the assembled representatives. A thrum of muttered conversation filled the air, though it did not escalate to remonstrance. None of the other Tier-Three species had achieved their civilisational status by picking a fight with the Ascendancy.

‘Will the Ascendancy executor please remain calm,’ the mediator tried again, his gravelly old voice this time much more loudly amplified by the speakers. ‘Your behaviour is not in keeping with the spirit of this summit.’

Xavanis waved the mediator off, snarling again. ‘*Vhyrmin klashi* – fleet, aggressive, insult Ascendancy *Imphraexes*, hostile, death deserved! *Vhyrmin* groundmen, fire on *Imphraexes*, deaths of *vheygari*, therefore deaths of *vhyrmin* groundmen, deserved! Now *vhyrmin* mobilise fleet! Claim *vheygari* hostile!’ Xavanis was holding both hands out wide now. His entire delivery had been a dissonant tri-modular basso, resonating throughout the entire Grand Chamber without the need of amplification. ‘Insult! Constant insult, *vhyrmin* insulting, weak! *Ashgurn-valta*, *Xhevega-valta!* Zecad is not blind,

*vhyrmin*, we know your plans, plans for allies friends! No apologies, no currency from *vheygari*, *vhyrmin* apologise to us and give us *ashgurn*, *ashgurn* folly started this, *ashgurn* attack crusade fleet, I do not view them here? Exchange, man!’

Before Yano could reply, Siun stuck his oar in again, initiating another shouting match between the two provar. After a minute of futile interjections, Yano sat down, waiting for them to finish.

< This is farcical > he sent to Codey. < They want the kaygryn, and they think we’re protecting them. Until they get them, this is only going to get worse. Where the hell is the kaygryn team anyway? >

< I have no idea > Codey admitted. < They have skarls in the building, just not in here. I don’t know what kind of diplomatic authority they are operating under either >

‘Executor,’ Yano said, standing up again. ‘It is not our desire to provoke you. We are seeking to defuse the situation, not inflame it. However, you must understand that an apology on behalf of the Ascendancy demonstrates good faith and a willingness to engage. You have killed many hundreds of humans, unprovoked. We do not want to end up in a situation where our hand is forced.’

‘Not sorry for deaths of *vhyrmin*. Never! *Vhyrmin*...’ the provar searched for the words. ‘*Interfere* with Ascendancy and Zecad. Will go ill for you if you ally with *ashgurn* and *Xhevega dast’a*!’

Before Yano could do anything, and much to further consternation among the rest of the representatives, Siun was on his feet again, and he and Xavanis launched into another shouting match. The argument continued for at least five minutes until the mediator sounded the harmonic that had called the initial session to order. To the surprise of all present, both the Ascendancy executor and Siun stopped.

‘It is time for the first caucus, I think,’ he rasped, allowing a note of frustration to creep into his voice. Yano noticed that all the live-feed holos around the room were going crazy, flashing with breaking news banners about the latest folly on Gonvarion. At least it made for good media – it made for appalling diplomacy.

‘Special Envoy Yano, please meet me in my chambers,’ the mediator continued in clipped tones. ‘Everyone else, let’s have an hour to cool off. Meet back here at eleven o’clock.’

The Ascendancy legation, seething, immediately stalked out the room, angrily pushing past serving ZENs, minor diplomats and reporters. The rest of the room fell to talking among themselves. Yano watched them leave, then turned back to Siun.

‘You’re supposed to be *observing*,’ he hissed, finding it difficult to keep the anger from his voice. He hadn’t interrupted the Xhevegan during the heated exchange for fear of damaging his pride, but now the spotlight was off them he had half a mind to punch him in the face. ‘That was not observing.’

‘I am sorry—’ Siun began, but Yano waved him quiet.

‘Special Envoy Codey will brief you. I need to go.’

He stood with a swirl of his cloak and strode out of the Grand Chamber and into the mediator’s chambers, accessed through a small archway behind the raised chair where the mediator had been sitting. The old zhahassi was waiting for him inside. He looked up, then looked back to the holo built into the desk in front of him.

‘Close the door,’ he said in excellent Terran, and Yano obliged him. The room was well appointed with beautiful wooden furniture and smelled faintly of fresh Vhalysian wildflowers. A small window was open behind the mediator’s desk, letting in a warm, pleasant breeze.

‘What are you hoping to take from this?’ he asked. In any other situation his frankness would have been appealing, but the lack of tact from the provar that morning had already wearied Yano.

‘To be honest with you, sir... I don’t know.’ He shrugged. His pride had been carefully massaged when he had been given the assignment. Now it seemed as though the summit was already spiralling out of control. ‘I am acting on the orders I receive and my diplomatic mandate,’ he said after a while. It sounded so lame.

The zhahassi nodded, his deeply wrinkled face creasing into that disarming smile which all the aliens seemed to possess. ‘A word to the wise,’ he said, ‘to borrow one of your expressions. Aim low. I have presided over many summits. The provar deign to appear at a very small number and fewer still yield useful results. They see themselves above negotiation. They do not care for your dead civilians, and you will not change their mind on the matter. You will sooner receive an apology from a rock.’

The mediator reclined, his long fingers pulling a lhyrin stick from the uppermost drawer of his bureaux. He lit it and the smell was sickly sweet. It



was a narcotic, though with humans at least, not a particularly powerful one.”

‘I know that your President wishes to appear strong. We have all watched his address. I wish we could all be as belligerent with the Ascendancy – Kashgar knows they need it.’ Kashgar was the ancient zhahassi god of war. Yano had seen paintings of it in the Linden-Holmes Gallery on Vargonroth, depicted as an ebony-black demon a hundred kilometres tall. However, he knew the mediator was not a religious man. Much like ‘Christ’, the word Kashgar existed only proverbially or as a generally mild profanity, its religious etymology largely forgotten.

‘But it is provocative, perhaps deliberately so,’ the mediator continued. ‘If it were my place to counsel him, I would tell him for one to call off the Fleet.’

‘Would you tell him to abandon the kaygryn to their fate?’ Yano asked. It was not a question he had envisaged asking, since, if he was honest, he did not care one jot about the kaygryn.

The mediator laughed. ‘Therein lies the problem.’ He took a long drag of the lhyrin stick. ‘People will die either way. If the UN stops now, some kaygryn will die. If the UN and Ascendancy go to war, the whole galaxy will burn.’

Yano inhaled deeply. ‘I’ll keep it in mind,’ he said after a short while.

‘You should,’ the mediator said, ‘and watch out for Representatives Zvell and Fhalco. They are troublemakers in the Commonwealth.’ He peered at Yano through narrowed eyes. ‘If I were you, I would not trust them.’

Yano simply nodded. It was advice they would ignore, of course, and given that that was the case, there was no sense in arguing.

‘Thank you for your time, sir,’ he said. He pressed himself up out of the chair and quietly exited the room.

\*

‘What was that about?’ Codey asked as he entered their caucus room, a small chamber on the fourteenth floor.

‘He wanted to sit there and offer me pointless advice like a geriatric fool,’ Yano said, wrinkling his nose. ‘We need to speak to McKone. This hard line

is counterproductive, and having *him* here...' he gestured to Siun. '...is only making things worse.'

'Let's be civil, Yano,' Codey said. 'Xhevega is an ally of the UN.'

'No it damn well isn't!' Yano snapped, then laughed out of sheer frustration. 'Not officially it's not. And if it is, I sure didn't get the memo. This morning was an embarrassment, Bal, a total fucking embarrassment. I preach reconciliation and mutual respect and within two minutes I'm making, no, bummer that, *attempting* to make a list of demands to xenos that *hate* us, and what do we get out of it?'

'Yano—'

'A violent argument that sees all of our demands rejected and the whole Grand Chamber emptied within the hour!'

His hands were shaking. Codey's face was infuriatingly impassive.

'Yano—'

He was cut off by the door opening. Velsze stepped inside, his face slightly flushed.

'I have spoken with the provar executors, insofar as they are amenable to discussion. I have been asked to bring you the following message. We've done some work on it to ensure it's comprehensible. It's a useful summary of their position, though I'm afraid its content is rather negative.'

'Just read it,' Yano said, seizing an apple from a fruit bowl in front of him. Siun was conspicuously silent, sitting uncomfortably in the corner.

'The Ascendancy rejects all your demands. It makes no apology for the deaths of UN citizens. It will not reimburse you for any damage caused by its forces. The *Impraxes* will remain in orbit around Uvolon, and will be reinforced. The commander will face no censure for his actions. While the provar will permit the evacuation of humans from Anternis, the safety of those humans will not be guaranteed. Any hostile activity will be met with force. Any alliance with the Xhevega Enclaves and/or the kaygryn will result in a declaration of war. The UN is to hand over any and all kaygryn responsible for the attack on the crusade fleet and to cease harbouring kaygryn war criminals.'

The caucus room was completely silent. Velsze folded the holo away. 'That's the end of it. Oh, also there is a charity dinner tonight at the Summer Palace. Your attendance is expected.'

The caucus room remained completely silent.

‘Was there—’

‘Thank you, Ambassador,’ Codey said. Velsze bowed and left.

Yano replaced the uneaten apple in the bowl and balled his hands into fists.

‘Fuck,’ he announced to the silent room and left.

## MISSION CREEP

*‘It is much easier to blame a race for what they did, rather than to try and understand why they did it.’*

### **Quorl Marshal Exvonsa’s war crimes testimony, following the Insurrection on Merisgard**

Lyra didn’t recall falling asleep. She didn’t even recall being particularly tired, though as she slowly surfaced into consciousness, she felt groggy and exhausted. She reached out instinctively with both hands, feeling her way around the bed, but found nothing save the thin sheets. She lay still then, concentrating, slowing her slightly panicked breathing. Gradually, she heard the rhythmic boom of the waves and realised then that she must still be in her computer-generated mansion. It was more comforting than she’d have readily admitted.

‘What happened?’ she mumbled, trying and failing to open her eyes.

‘Hello,’ said an exuberant voice from somewhere in the room. The incongruity of it made her start, and a second, more concerted effort to open her eyes partially succeeded. She could then just make out a vague, human-shaped blob in the back corner of the room, neatly perched on the edge of an exquisitely upholstered mahogany chair.

‘Who is that?’ she said, the words spilling out of her mouth in a languorous blurt of sound.

‘Doctor Lee’s personality construct,’ Doctor Lee’s personality construct said. ‘Doctor Lee was just running some tests, tests which required you to be unconscious.’

‘What tests?’ she asked, her speech slow and slurred. She glanced at the antique clock hanging on the wall at the end of the bed. If it was accurate, she had been unconscious for nearly eleven hours.

‘Just some medical tests. Nothing to be alarmed about. Good news, though; your new body is nearing the final stages of preparation. Doctor Lee has made it his top priority. I’m pleased to report that its eventual resemblance to your natural body will be quite remarkable.’

Lyra’s brain ached. It was a feeling she was vaguely familiar with, like

being mindjacked by one of those maniacal Exigency Corps envoys.

‘My head,’ she said, straining her voice to properly enunciate.

‘Yes, an unfortunate side effect of the testing, I’m afraid. Still, the more we can do and the sooner we can do it, the quicker we can attach you to your new body.’

‘Great,’ she mumbled, a thin seam of drool attaching her mouth to the pillow. Her UNIS conditioning was beginning to kick in, clearing her mind, sloughing away the grogginess like a surgeon debriding a wound. ‘Why did he not inform me?’

‘There was no need,’ the construct said simply.

Lyra snorted. There was no arguing with that.

‘Please inform me next time you are going to knock me out,’ she said, regaining her composure. She propped herself up on one elbow, though her head was still lolling slightly.

The personality construct hesitated. ‘Miss Staerck, I should inform you that due to the ongoing nature of the tests, the unconsciousness may come and go—’

She waved it quiet. ‘Whatever. Thanks. Please leave me alone now.’

‘Of course,’ the construct said without missing a beat, and blinked off.

As soon as it had gone, she rechecked her IHD.

You may be in danger. I will contact you when I can.

The message was exactly where it had been before, unmolested. She read it again, the tiny, million-layer-encrypted, text-only file.

She read it a third time, and her sync-generated heart palpitated for a few brief moments.

*Danger.* Danger from what? Immediate danger? It did not take much for her suspicions to fall to Doctor Lee, her underlying misgivings quickly exacerbated by her recent and lengthy bout of curiously timed unconsciousness, but she put those thoughts to one side for the present time. She was not familiar with the process of regenerating a body, of course, and the explanation regarding the tests, for all she knew, was sound. Even if Doctor Lee did have designs on her life, evidently there was something which had prevented him from killing her thus far.

She concentrated deeply, utilising her UNIS training to access the fringes

of her subconscious. The sophisticated over-encryption bore all the hallmarks of a military source, there was no mistaking that, and there were no other people on Uvolon who had access to electronic warfare equipment. It followed logically that someone within UNAF had implanted the message into her IHD.

She tried to recall any military personnel she had come into contact with in the last year. Commander Vance was one, though their interactions had been sporadic, and in any event, she was sure that the man did not like her – though admittedly she couldn't envisage that being a reason in itself why he would refuse to save her life. She also knew a few Fleet personnel from the *North Star*, though the voidbreaker had not docked – nor would dock – at Uvolon for months.

She brought her hands up to her face, pressing on the bridge of her nose with her fingers. The mission station in the mountains had been placed illegally under Galactic Protocol, and therefore the number of people aware of its presence had been kept deliberately low. Karris knew, obviously, and Vance, but beyond them, she simply hadn't had any contact with anybody save through the module's VR sync, and in that she was subject to a strict comms protocol – so strict in fact that the sync would be severed a full microsecond before her larynx and lips even began to enunciate any number of buzzwords.

No, she knew of no one privy to that level of military encryption. Karris could pull it off, certainly, though it would have been far easier for him to simply use UNIS encryption, or any number of personal code words accrued between them over a lengthy professional history.

She sighed and let her hands flop onto the bed either side of her.

'Think,' she whispered to herself. '*Think*. Why am I here? How did I *get* here?'

She summoned Doctor Lee's personality construct through her IHD.

'Yes, Miss Staerck,' Doctor Lee said, the construct appearing at the foot of her bed in a whirlwind of pixels.

'How did I get here?' she asked.

'You were brought here aboard a UNAF Medical Corps shuttle,' the construct replied in a neutral voice.

'How did I get into the shuttle?'

'I'm afraid I am not acquainted with the circumstances of your recovery,

Miss Staerck. Few are.'

She wrinkled her nose. 'Thanks. You can go.'

'Of course,' the construct said and winked out of existence.

She looked out of the window, across the topaz ocean, listening to the white noise of the surf lapping against the shore. Irrespective of any deliberate enhancement, the VR sync had a tendency to passively alter one's time perception during lengthy usages, so she found it very difficult to gauge exactly how much time had come to pass since the beginning of her virtual presence. On an intrinsic, mammalian level, it certainly didn't feel like eleven hours since she had last been conscious, though her IHD happily confirmed the fact. In which case, she decided, she had wasted a tremendous amount of time languishing in insentience.

'Right,' she breathed and opened her IHD's visible net interface. Like many intelligence agents, she often relied on the good old-fashioned news to gather a primer on galactic events, and an astonishing level of coverage greeted even the most constricted search terms regarding Uvolon. One of the first things she discovered was that Commander Vance had in fact left the planet to meet with Governor Lefebvre, swiftly eradicating him as the provenance of the encrypted message.

She read on, sifting through dozens of articles and holos, both from formal and informal sources. Her eyes widened as she caught the coverage of the destruction of the UN Fleet destroyers dispatched to Uvolon, and her mouth involuntarily shifted from closed to agape as the savage, stroboscopic follow-up on the Goliaths in Anternis City played across her vision. Photos and details of each serviceman killed came next, blurbs of information about their lives and loves which had sent civilian populations in the Outer Ring into a frenzy, itself engendering extensive media attention.

The non-combatant death toll was appallingly high, particularly given it was what the UN widely considered to be peacetime. Thousands had perished in the indiscriminate storm of provari rail strikes, and the centre of the city was nothing more than a pile of pulverised stone and melted girders, illuminated by high-intensity spotlights as emergency crews worked through the night. Among the notable demolitions was Anternis General Hospital, which had been replaced by UNAF-marked prefab triage centres, two huge hospital landers and a steady stream of emergency vehicles ferrying the wounded from downed evacuation craft. Another holo showed UNAF men

clad in bright orange hazard Mantix pulling mangled provar corpses out of their wrecked war machines.

She read on, absorbing the information, storing it, compartmentalising. The latest developments focussed on the thousands of kaygryn civilians and militiamen who had, bewilderingly, flooded across the Tiberean borderlands and into Anternis, much to the displeasure of the utterly overwhelmed local UNAF forces who were now engaged in housing them in temporary accommodation. At some point the local government must have anticipated this course of events, to Lyra's mind, as the encampments were being thrown up with extraordinary efficiency. Holos and footage of this aspect of the operation, however, were relatively scarce, since it was military-run and prosecution awaited any soldier who uploaded images of a live operation to the public net. That in itself, of course, did nothing to stem the constant flow of conjecture from hundreds of news anchors.

She moved on to wider events. The President had called for an emergency summit on Gonvarion under Galactic Protocol Nine in response to the crisis. Progress, insofar as there had been any (and to Lyra it seemed there had been none), was glacial. Both the provar and the UN were taking hard lines. The UN had mobilised the Fleet with all the trappings of the Buhrman Protocol, stymieing what could otherwise have been productive talks. Pressbots and reporters in the Memorial Tower on Gonvarion told of a tense, almost violent, atmosphere in the Grand Chamber, with the UN and Ascendancy legations having been at each other's throats all morning. The summit was barely a day old and already in diplomatic stalemate, exacerbated by both the absence of the kaygryn diplomatic skarls, who apparently were barricaded in their quarters for fear of the Ascendancy executors, and the presence of a Xhevegan observer, Faunix Siun.

She paused her reading. The Xhevegan Enclaves – hated apostates. Their presence on Gonvarion would certainly aggravate tensions between the UN and the Ascendancy; McKone and the UNDC would have known that. She knew the UN and its machinations well enough to know that the presence of this 'Siun' had been motivated by reasons quite apart from altruistic attempts at reconciliation. To be so openly engaged with the Xhevegan, to allow him to sit with the UN legation, it went well beyond recognition of legitimacy – it was practically an endorsement, and a foolhardy one at that.

Her IHD provided her with a list of articles and commentary on the



presence of the Xhevegan at the summit, and she stored those written by the more reputable journalists. There were as many again on the absence of the kaygryn, which she also put to one side. The destruction of the kaygryn corvette and the massacre of the kaygryn militia seemed to have been entirely forgotten. She had to do quite a bit of digging to find out what had triggered both attacks in the first place. According to a number of reports, the kaygryn had attacked one of the Ascendancy Crusade Fleets in the Vadian Spiral, though reasons as to why were speculative and conflicting – and in any event seemed to have become worryingly irrelevant.

She read on, for much of the next hour. The UNS *Achilles* had been in orbit over Uvolon for the last four hours and had initiated the evacuation of Anternis. Both the UN and the Ascendancy had pledged to send more ships to oversee the evacuation, and consensus across the net was that if something was not done soon to ease tensions between the two empires, there would be further conflict. The unanimous view was that the charity dinner at the Summer Palace that evening was unlikely to help anything.

She took a break. It was unnerving not to feel hungry or thirsty. To the contrary, she felt constantly well fed, her thirst persistently slaked. Instead, she went for a walk around the mansion and gardens, to stretch legs that did not need stretching and to take fresh air into lungs that did not exist. On her return inside, she did not go back into the bedroom, but instead made for one of the offices branching off from a ground floor corridor, an ostentatiously decorated room with lavish fittings and a large antique desk. She sat down.

‘Doctor Lee,’ she said to the thin air. Doctor Lee’s personality construct materialised.

‘Yes, Miss Staerck?’

‘The UNAF medical facility in which I am being kept; who else is here?’

‘Doctor Lee, Miss Staerck,’ the construct said, smiling. ‘Will that be everything?’

Lyra shook her head. ‘No, I mean patients.’

‘Ah. As I’m sure you understand, Miss Staerck, I cannot give you any details due to patient confidentiality.’

‘Just give me a number, then,’ she said, smiling. ‘I can’t be the only one here, given the attack on Anternis.’

The construct’s smile twitched for a split second. ‘I believe you are the only patient present on the roster, Miss Staerck. I would have to check, of

course.'

Lyra nodded, her composure steady. It was a ludicrous suggestion; the personality construct was an extension of the medical bay's internal VI. It *was* the roster. 'If you would.'

The construct's expression went blank for a full three seconds – an ice age by modern processing standards. 'Yes, you are the only one here / there are thirty patients present.'

Lyra squinted at the construct. 'Once more?' she said.

'There are thirty other patients present. The medical facility is running at full capacity. Will that be everything?'

'Yes,' Lyra replied briskly, and the construct winked off, and then, 'Shit.'

Her mind raced. Such a clumsy rewrite could only have been achieved by a rattled human – VIs didn't make basic mistakes like counting. Someone, most likely Doctor Lee, if he actually existed, was clearly monitoring her conversations with the personality construct in real time, which in turn rendered the deployment of the construct itself totally superfluous. On the assumption that no one competent and with malicious intentions did anything without a good reason, her suspicions reached a new peak and plateaued there.

She paused, realising then that she was very afraid. The fact of her helplessness was hard to overstate. She was alone, with absolutely no perception of her immediate surroundings outside the sync and with the entirety of her fate governed by the will of a single, malignant man. She recalled the message for what felt like the thousandth time, trying to exercise some pragmatism before her fear overwhelmed her. *You may be in danger. I will contact you when I can.* She was alive, but incapacitated, that much was certain. It would have been very easy for someone to kill her at this moment in time, and there was evidently something preventing that. There were only two possible conclusions she could reach: that there was some third party aware of her condition, and who themselves could not easily be dealt with by Doctor Lee; or that she had something, or knew something, which could not be accessed or hacked via her IHD without her conscious authority.

She decided that the most obvious piece of information which she had come into receipt of was the anonymous text message. Someone invasively scanning her IHD and brain activity would be aware that she was accessing something highly encrypted; her unconsciousness could logically have been

part of an external attempt to hack it. The hacker would have been able to deduce from her IHD records the time at which the message was implanted, but nothing beyond that, and so they required her to give up that information freely, either that or via a very sophisticated method of torture – something that would not trip her IHD's torture-resistance suite and UNIS conditioning. All the other information she had access to, the recovered data from the Tiberean Mission Station which had been uploaded to her Mantix memory banks, was capable of being hacked by a skilled operator really quite easily. Someone like Karris could do it in literally seconds.

She attempted to contact Karris via IHD text-only, but the package was rebuffed by the base's firewall. She tried again, this time using no encryption but with the same outcome. UNAF was evidently operating a very strict electronic blockade in light of the Ascendancy's presence over Uvolon, so it was not entirely surprising that she couldn't reach him. Still, he might have been able to help her – protect her, even.

She thought about who else she could alert to her situation. Overtly calling for help might trigger her premature murder, though saying nothing might guarantee it. There was also the question of range. Inter-IHD messages would be limited to Anternis, since they were dependent on satellites for transmission. Theoretically she could beam one into space, although it would probably never be heard – the modern equivalent of the message in a bottle.

She gritted her teeth, gripping the edge of the wooden desk. No. She would send no messages for now. Whoever had sent her the anonymous message had said they would contact her. So she would wait.

She shook her head, trying to set her rampaging train of thought in order. She opened up the Mantix helmet's memory bank, and her IHD interface presented her with a myriad of options. There was an exorbitant amount of information, almost as much as the banks of the mission station itself. She started with her own report from two days before, a situation report which contained a useful summary of the intelligence position. Then she reacquainted herself with the last minutes of the mission station before its destruction. They had been watching six kaygryn of interest, and she brought up photos of all of them: Iyadi, Ventu, Havé, Lok, Oné and Bega. All were skarls, either in the Vos'Shan'i militia or regular armed forces. All save Iyadi had been aboard the corvette when it had taken off from its hiding place, and therefore all save Iyadi had perished in the crash.

So where was Iyadi?

The arrival of the provar cruiser had destroyed their satellite coverage of Uvolon – right down to their microsats – and they had also scrapped their drone coverage of Vos'Shan after it had given them corrupted readings on the deadzoned hab, an assumed hack which had cost them a lot of data. Assuming, then, there had been no one surveilling Vos'Shan in the intervening period, there was a two-day black hole in their coverage.

She reviewed the situation in orbit. Aside from Aryn Vance, whose safe passage offworld had been explicitly and painstakingly negotiated with the *Impraxes*, no one had left Uvolon for the last two days; indeed, the only objects which had travelled into orbit, as far as she could decipher from the information available to her, were a number of surface-to-orbit missiles. That meant Iyadi had to be on Uvolon, probably in Vos'Shan or, if she were to guess, skulking anonymously among the refugees in Anternis.

She went back further through the Mantix memory banks. 'Ah,' she said softly, opening up a file containing three orbital photographs of the Tiberean borderlands. In the mission station she had assigned a subroutine to try and translate the Argish annotations on one of them, and it seemed that in the short time between her coming across the photos and the destruction of the station, the program had made some progress in that endeavour. '*Valleron* re-emplaced to centre' was what the translation had to offer. She frowned. She knew that Argish was almost as difficult as Folhourtian Provari to translate, but that wasn't far from complete nonsense. She made a note of the translation anyway before closing the file. The rest of the Argish on the picture was basic data, and most of it she had seen so many times on official kaygryn dossiers and satellite feeds that she did not need to translate it.

Next, she opened her Mind Map, a UNIS software suite built for sorting and storing vast amounts of intelligence in a coherent way. Her visible net interface faded to a dark blue, and the familiar spider web pattern came to the fore, each branch and tendril ending in a database or a file location. In the centre of the Map, she put the fact of her own death.

She returned to the main view and created a new branch, then placed an empty file at its terminus marked with a stylised '?'. In the file, she wrote, 'Period between technical death and regaining consciousness, course of events currently unknown'.

She spent much of the next hour creating new branches and files,

categorising them logically and supplementing them where she could with media from the public archives and recovered data from the mission station memory banks – a surprising amount of which had been corrupted in the transfer to her suit. She lumped all the intelligence into three main headings: ‘Iyadi’, under which fell the six kaygryn of interest, the recovered Vos’Shan intelligence, the destruction of the corvette and deaths of the militia; ‘Uvolon crisis’, under which came the destruction of the UN Fleet, Goliaths, the centre of Anternis, the current humanitarian crisis and evacuation; and finally, ‘Summit on Gonvarion’, under which came the absence of the kaygryn, the presence of the Xhevegans, the Buhrman Protocol and all other diplomatic matters.

Naturally there were crossovers, and therein lay the beauty of the software. The Mind Map automatically drew what it perceived to be connections – coincidental timings, identical or similar phrases or buzzwords which cropped up in disparate places, locations repeatedly visited by different persons of interest – based on central and local intelligence banks and publicly available information. Already it had brought to her attention the destruction of central Anternis and the three annotated satellite images of the same recovered from the kaygryn military net. She almost dismissed it as meaningless, but then stopped.

‘I wonder...’ she said and pulled back out of the core files. She opened the satellite photo with its highlight of Anternis General Hospital and then the Argish translation which the mission station had come up with. ‘*Valleron* re-emplaced to centre,’ she said, reading it out loud. *Valleron*. Untranslatable as far as the mission station had been concerned.

She ran a search for it through the UNIS intelligence archives. The search was so comprehensive it actually postponed much of the non-vital functions of her IHD for an entire two seconds before it turned back nothing. Not one single hit.

She tried again, this time running it through the UN public net. She winced; running a search on the largest library of information in the colonised galaxy often returned a ludicrous amount of information, even on the most specific of topics. An eye-watering six seconds later, the results came in.

‘Valleron is the latest in cyborg and android hardware maintenance and servicing suites. Developed by Kansubashi scientists—’ she cancelled the

feed. She had to laugh. ‘Valleron’ had turned up many millions of bits of information, mostly about the brand of robot cleaner. She dismissed the search and cancelled the Mind Map, then reclined into the wing-backed armchair, resting. Although building up an intelligence dossier took her mind off her current situation, it was a draining task. She made a note to follow up the *Valleron* lead and closed her eyes to rest.

She was awoken by a priority message icon pulsing in her vision. She opened her eyes and looked around her. The VR program was still running on daylight, though the sun was certainly lower in the sky. The time on her IHD told her that she’d been asleep for two hours.

She studied the incoming transmission icon. It was a pending live feed, voice-only, and like the text file she had received, highly encrypted. In fact, a quick comparison by some embedded UNIS cryptanalyst software revealed the same encryption signature. Her heart leapt. It was the same person who had sent her the first message. She allowed the feed, though not before running it through her own security scrubbers to add another layer of anonymity to the exchange.

‘Hello,’ she said, cautiously and needlessly quietly.

‘Hello,’ answered a man’s voice, one she did not recognise. He too was talking quietly, and his voice carried with it a faint air of nervousness. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Who are you?’ she asked immediately, her voice louder and level, ‘And why do you think I am in danger?’ Somewhere in the back of her mind, she had been expecting to hear Karris’s voice.

‘I’ll explain everything soon,’ the man said. It seemed, from the way he spoke, that he was not well versed in this sort of situation. ‘I’m a serving member of UNAF. I don’t want to say too much over this channel.’

‘Alistair Frost himself couldn’t crack this encryption,’ Lyra said, snorting. ‘You have access to some pretty decent gear.’

‘Forget that,’ the man said quickly, apparently wary of losing control of the conversation. ‘Listen, there’s something going on here on Anternis. Are you a member of UNIS?’

Lyra paused. She didn’t like *that*. ‘Do you think I’m a member of UNIS?’

The man sighed, loudly and deliberately. ‘I’m not sure we have time for this.’

‘Why? What’s happening?’

‘Some of my men are supposed to be in the medical facility, tech-deaths. I can’t reach any of them. They appear on the patient roster, but their IHDs are making all the wrong noises. I think it’s something to do with you. You’re the only one in there, in a catastrophic injuries ward built for thirty.’

‘How do you know where I am?’ Lyra asked, running a host of discriminatory programs on the message he had sent. They turned up nothing. Of course, they were never going to, given the encryption, but sometimes the manner in which her codebreaking suites failed was intelligence in itself. ‘You tell me who you are,’ she continued. ‘Not like I can do anything with the information anyway.’

Another sigh. ‘Captain Ben Vondur. I’m a Goliath pilot. I was the one who found your head in the borderlands. Or rather, my ZEN did.’

A shot of adrenaline set Lyra’s heart to pounding. She stood up and began pacing the room, her footfalls cushioned by the ornate rug beneath her. ‘You recovered me? When? How?’

‘Well, that’s just it,’ Vondur said, his voice sharper, more engaged. ‘I found your head on the slopes and we called it in Cat One, but base told us to leave you. They said they were going to take care of it themselves.’

A nauseating flush permeated Lyra’s gut, settling in her throat. ‘Go on,’ she said, holding back tears. Any emotional distress would show up on the brain monitors in the medical facility. She didn’t want to draw more attention to herself.

‘I don’t know who the base controller was. I didn’t recognise the voice,’ Vondur continued, ‘but whoever they were, they were acting on orders. That’s why I asked you if you were UNIS, since UNIS has locked down the entire base and all comms. After the provar pitched up, Solar Ops took over.’

Lyra was pacing quickly now, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts. There was too much to think about. ‘So they tried to stop you from retrieving my head?’

‘Yes. Vigorously. *We* didn’t know it was your head until my ZEN picked it up. It just read as a refraction-shielded biological mass.’

‘But they *did* know it was my head?’

‘I don’t know. Whatever they thought it was, they did not want me to pick it up.’

Lyra sat down, then immediately stood back up again and resumed pacing. ‘You sent me that message.’

‘Yes,’ Vondur said, his voice growing impatient again. ‘I thought it was too strange that UNAF wouldn’t want to evacuate a UN casualty – under any circumstances. I wanted to put you on guard, but I’ve been on deployment since we found you and this is the first time my comms haven’t been monitored. Damn Goliath firewall got hacked too, so now I’m wondering whether all of it is linked or whether I’m going insane.’ He paused, muttering about something which Lyra couldn’t hear. ‘Are you all right anyway? What’s your name?’

‘Lyra Staerck, and I don’t know,’ she replied. This time she could not stop the tears. Rescue seemed so close and yet so perilously far away, and even then, she was still just a damned *head*. ‘I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t trust my doctor. I think they’re trying to hack into my mind.’

‘Who’s your doctor?’ Vondur asked sharply.

‘Doctor Lee.’

‘Who?’

‘Doctor Lee. The resident Med Corps doctor,’ Lyra replied.

‘I’ve never heard of him,’ Vondur said, sounding worried. ‘I’m coming to you. There is more I need to tell you, but I still don’t like speaking about it on this channel.’

‘Can you hurry up, please,’ Lyra said. This new information was making her feel very vulnerable. ‘Where are you?’

‘I’m on the base, in the service hangar. I’ll be there in a couple of minutes.’

Lyra’s breath caught in her throat. Out of nowhere, her vision was fading.

‘Help!’ was all she managed before the iron grip of unconsciousness overcame her.

\*

‘Shit!’ Vondur shouted, thumping the comms panel in front of him. ‘Shit!’ He burned the feed and wiped it from the console. ‘ZEN!’ He cancelled the holo and leapt out of the chair, running out of the comms shack and onto a suspended gantry.

‘Is everything all right, Captain?’ ZEN asked him, looking up from the Goliath’s mobile service platform.



‘Get to the med bay as quickly as you can,’ Vondur shouted. ‘Secure the trauma ward. Detain everyone in there, understand?’

‘Yes, sir,’ ZEN replied, unquestioning as always. It jumped off the side of the platform and sprinted mechanically out of the open hangar door.

‘I’ll meet you there!’ Vondur shouted after it. He ran down the stairs and across the hangar floor to the empty service bay. His rail pistol was lying in its thigh strap on the table where he had left it, and he snatched it up, yanked it free of the holster, deactivated the safety with his IHD and sprinted out the doors and onto the asphalt outside.

The medical facility was on the other side of the base, which, as a result of the thousands of kaygryn refugees to the north, was now a ghost town. The cold, early morning air stung his face and roared in his ears as his combat-enhanced legs pistoned him across the grounds. He passed the old college and turned down a wide gravel path to his left, past two hardened bunkers and the bombardment shelter, and towards the medical facility. It was a squat building, drab UNAF green in colour, with a large red cross painted above the main entrance.

The door was open, no doubt ZEN’s doing. As he drew closer, he saw that it had actually been kicked clean off its hinges. He brought his pistol up to bear as he entered, and saw, in the ill-lit building, a sign directing him to the traumatic injuries ward.

He turned right and ran down the gleaming, linoleum-lined corridor, barging through a pair of double doors at the end. A short stairwell took him down a floor, and at the base of the stairs was another pair of double doors, this one with a host of warning markers above it. His IHD also chimed a warning, informing him that the ward contained severely damaged and technically dead patients.

He looked through the clear plastic panel set into the door. The ward inside was long, a good thirty metres, and very dark. He activated his corneal night vision and slowly opened the door, gun aimed into the ward. Immediately he saw ZEN at the far end, standing over a large isolation chamber. Crumpled at his feet was the body of a man dressed in a white lab coat. The back of his skull gaped open, and a thermal scan revealed a starburst of cooling blood, brain matter and fluid dribbling down the wall behind him.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Vondur breathed, cancelling his night vision. ‘Lights.’

The ward lights obliged him, flickering on in a sterile blaze of harsh white.

The hot yellow thermal stain was replaced with a dark red wet one.

‘ZEN, I said *detain*,’ Vondur growled, striding towards the combat VI. ‘Not kill.’

‘I am aware of that, Captain,’ ZEN replied in its dispassionate voice. It was like listening to liquid data. ‘The doctor’s wounds are self-inflicted. I tried to prevent it, but...’ it did a very human shrug. ‘Absence of proximity.’

Vondur reached the foot of the isolation tank. It was only then that he saw a pistol in the doctor’s left hand. It was an old-fashioned one, chemical propellant, with a round that was actually made of jacketed lead. He whistled. It had some stopping power, he gave it that much.

‘Did he say anything before he shot himself?’

‘*Stay away from me! No! I don’t give a shit about the kaygryn, I swear, they made me do it!*’ shouted the doctor from a speaker mounted on ZEN’s chest. There followed a single gunshot, followed by a strangled gurgling for five seconds. The recording cut out.

‘What does it mean?’ ZEN asked.

‘I have no idea,’ Vondur admitted, ‘but save that recording.’

He came to the edge of the isolation tank, and using the holo panel, he depolarised the glass covering. Inside the sterile containment field was the Mantix helmet housing Lyra’s head, hooked up to a number of wires, nutrient tubes, a direct VR sync interface and an emerald green nanogel medical pack which had been melded to the stump of her neck. At the confluence of the wires was a white box marked with virulent red-and-orange warning symbols. Inside, according to the labels, was an artificial body, mechanical respiratory, digestive and circulatory systems compacted into a space no larger than a shoebox. A bag, connected to an artificial sphincter at the base of the unit, collected waste and piped it away to a biohazard bin at the end of the isolation chamber.

He felt a slight revulsion at the whole setup and turned his attention away to a holo on the inside of the chamber, currently displaying a live optical feed direct from the VR sync. The words NO FEED AVAILABLE: PRIVATE ENCRYPTION were displayed in red in the centre of the screen.

‘What’s going on here?’ he muttered to himself, studying the console in front of him. ‘Get me into this, will you?’ he said to ZEN, who obliged him, easily overcoming the doctor’s primitive firewall. As soon as he gained access, a host of holos sprang into life; file after file of information on Lyra’s

thoughts and movements inside the sync. He winced as he watched videos of her reliving her death. The final impact with the branch made him physically flinch.

‘Go and find Elyan, Syoba and Vandemarr,’ he said to ZEN, who was watching the feed next to him. ‘They should be around here somewhere. Quickly.’

‘Yes, Captain,’ the VI replied and darted out of the ward with a whir of servos.

Vondur turned back to the feed in front of him. The doctor – and a quick check confirmed his name was Sorper, not Lee – had evidently been building up a corpus of intelligence for someone. His own annotations, appended as text files, appeared on almost every piece of data, some containing frustrated invective where Lyra had accessed encrypted UNIS programs or transmissions which had been blocked from his view. Two of the most prominent black holes he recognised: one was the message he had implanted in her IHD before handing her head over to the Medical Corps shuttle, and the other was the conversation he’d been having with her but five minutes before. Both times Sorper had knocked her unconscious in an attempt to circumvent some of her conscious-control firewalls, but he had been frustrated by the sheer depth of the encryption. According to the doctor’s records, his attempts to break into Vondur’s text-only message had taken eleven hours, during which time he had managed to penetrate only one dummy layer of encryption.

He uploaded all the data the doctor had collated to a secure file on his IHD. He saw, with a sneer of distaste, that there were several Ultraporn programs in the console in which the doctor had uploaded Lyra’s likeness. He purged them from his hard drive.

Using his IHD, he regained access to the isolation chamber’s controls and opened its main command holo. He recalibrated it to the most junior doctor setting and then hit the ‘consciousness: activate’ key. The live optic feed holo next to Lyra’s head flickered back into life, this time displaying the inside of what looked like some kind of antique-choked mansion. She was slumped in front of a desk, with a window behind it looking out over an ocean.

‘Lyra?’ he said, cautiously opening a comms link directly to the Mantix helmet.

‘Who’s that?’ she said, her voice groggy.

‘It’s Vondur,’ he replied. ‘I’m in the base med facility, next to your... head. You should know that I can see everything you can see; there’s a direct optical feed in front of me.’

‘That asshole,’ she said in a weary voice. ‘What’s he doing? Do you have him? What has he said?’

‘Not a lot,’ Vondur replied, looking at the corpse by his feet. ‘He’s dead. He shot himself when my ZEN arrived.’

The holo screen pitched downwards, giving him a full view of her bare breasts under the loose-fitting blouse she wore as she checked her body over. He looked away, clearing his throat. ‘Lyra, I can see everything—’

‘Oh for God’s sake, they’re just tits,’ she snapped. The turnaround in her voice was quite startling. ‘You have a ZEN? A zhahassi ZEN?’

‘Yeah,’ he replied. ‘Useful bit of kit.’

‘I’ll say,’ she replied, looking around the room. She started pacing again, impatient now that she was out of danger. ‘What’s going on up there? Can you describe the situation to me?’

Vondur looked around him. ‘You’re in an isolation booth. You’re hooked up to an artificial body, a med pack and... a bunch of wires and tubes. I don’t know what any of it is for. There’s no one else in here as far as I can tell.’

‘Right,’ Lyra said. She was pacing down a corridor now. She pinched the bridge of her nose with her hand. ‘What’s going on with you? Why are you here?’

‘My squadron is either dead or taking care of the kaygryn refugees to the north. My Goliath got canned, so I’m back on base. Which is also empty, by the way.’

‘Okay,’ Lyra replied. ‘I think you need to get me out of here. Whoever Lee was working for—’

‘Sorper,’ Vondur interrupted. ‘Not Lee, Sorper.’

‘Okay, well, whoever Sorper was working for is probably still on Uvolon, which means they’ll know he’s dead sooner or later. Being a head, that puts me at a significant disadvantage.’ She was talking in such a way as to brook no argument, causing Vondur to briefly wonder what his obligations were when receiving orders from the intelligence services.

‘There’s no getting off Anternis at the moment,’ Vondur replied. ‘The provar have got orbit stitched up.’

‘What about the *Achilles*?’ she said. ‘I read they’ve already started loading

it.'

'Humans, yes,' Vondur said. 'SOC is still debating whether to let kaygryn on board. They're worried if they do the cruiser will junk it. There's a lot of pressure on the UN right now.'

On the holo, Lyra stopped walking. 'Shit,' she said.

'What?' Vondur asked, looking around him. His hand instinctively reached towards his pistol, currently sitting on top of the isolation booth. 'Listen, I don't know how much time we have—'

'Shut up a minute,' Lyra said. 'I was posted here to track six kaygryn skarls, right? Months ago. You know that corvette that got shot down?'

'Yes.'

'Well, that corvette had five of them on it, killed the lot.'

'Right...'

'One of them, called Iyadi, a militia skarl, was not on board. This guy,' she said, sending him a picture. 'The night before the corvette got shot down, he went into a deadzoned hab in Vos'Shan. The next day the other five had somehow made it aboard that corvette without us knowing.'

'I really don't—'

'Iyadi knows what's going on here,' she said impatiently. 'He is the key. I think there is someone – some people on Anternis helping him. Sorper was probably one. There are others, others with access to high-grade counter-LRIS equipment. They need to get him offworld, and the only way they are going to be able to do that now is aboard the *Achilles*.'

Vondur said nothing for a few moments, trying to get his head around the implications. 'These people – let's assume they exist, as you say. Would they – or *anyone* – be able to remotely hack a Goliath and activate its weapon systems?'

'Uh,' Lyra said, shaking her head. 'I'm not sure. I don't know what firewalls a Goliath runs, but I can imagine they aren't easy to crack.' She paused, thinking. 'That said, it's not impossible if you knew exactly what you were doing and had some very sophisticated equipment. SOC-level stuff, I'm not sure we'd have it on Uvolon, but then I said the same thing about deadzones.'

'So it's possible?'

'I'd say so. I'd say so even more, given the circumstances. When did it happen?'

‘Straight after Jacob Rynn got killed. Burned my firewalls and fired off half my Hydras before I even knew what was going on. Right at that cruiser.’

‘Are you sure it was hacked?’

‘You sound like the goddamned base controller!’ he snapped, then instantly regretted it. ‘Sorry,’ he said, a little sheepishly. It was not like him to lose his temper.

‘No, don’t be,’ Lyra said, her voice distant. ‘If it’s true, there’s a link, I’m sure of it. The corvette, the deadzones, my death... your hack...’

‘This kaygryn, Iyadi, he knows what’s going on?’ Vondur asked, leaving the conspiracy theorising to Lyra.

‘I’m certain of it. He *must* be in Anternis, trying to get aboard the *Achilles*. You said so yourself: they’re debating whether to let kaygryn refugees offworld. If that’s the case then it must be where Iyadi is heading. We need to find him and follow him. Where is the evacuation zone?’

‘They’ve been shuttling civilians to the salt flats south since yesterday morning,’ Vondur said. ‘But that’s a catastrophe at the moment. Half the transports were destroyed in the rail strikes.’ He knew where this was going.

‘All right,’ Lyra said, walking back to the office she had started in. ‘I’m going to need you to transport me to the evacuation centre. At some point you also need to tell me exactly what’s happened with you and your squadron as well. I know this involves you going AWOL so I’m going to second you under UNIS Executive Order 28.03, understand?’

‘Right...’ Vondur replied, slightly uneasily. ‘I need to find out what happened to my men, first.’

‘They’re in the morgue,’ ZEN said, appearing next to Vondur. ‘All three are fully dead. It seems that Syoba has been poisoned. I detected traces of Haradoxin in his system. Pilot Officers Elyan and Vandemarr have, it appears, succumbed to the wounds dealt to them by the provar.’

Vondur gritted his teeth. Of course Elyan and Vandemarr were dead, but Syoba could have been saved. He became angry at Sorper then for taking his own life. He would have dearly liked to kill the man himself.

‘You son of a *bitch*!’ he shouted, kicking the corpse. Liquid brains sloshed out of the gaping hole in his head.

‘*Captain!*’ Lyra said, sharply. ‘I’m sorry but we don’t have time for this. The ship will not take that long to load. You need to get me to the evacuation

area now. Have your men search for Iyadi. If they find him, have them put a net-wide tag on him, encrypted for the squadron only, got it?’

‘Yes, I get it,’ Vondur said. His hands were trembling with anger.

‘Focus, Captain,’ Lyra said. ‘This is important. We need to act quickly, but not rashly, all right?’

Vondur sighed, reining in his anger. It was easier to ignore it for present purposes, rather than try and overcome it. ‘Right,’ he said sullenly. ‘How do I get you out of here?’

‘I don’t know, I can’t see what you can see,’ Lyra replied. ‘Is there some way of disconnecting me without killing me?’

Vondur searched the control panel. ‘ZEN, how do I do this?’ he asked, turning to the VI.

‘One moment,’ ZEN replied, interfacing with the isolation chamber’s console.

‘I have studied the schematics,’ it said a few seconds later. ‘The artificial body has a portable plasmastat power core. It is like a Goliath’s, but on a much smaller scale. According to the medical facility’s core VI, there is a plasmastat store across the hallway. One will provide enough power for ten days.’

‘Get three,’ Vondur said. He re-engaged the safety on his rail pistol and slid it back into its holster while ZEN jogged across the ward and out the double doors at the far end. ‘It’s all right, Lyra, ZEN knows how to disconnect you. I’m going to take you back to base and get a holdall, then we’ll make our way to the nearest evacuation centre. Shouldn’t be too difficult with the base as empty as it is. Is there anyone I need to tell about you leaving? A boss or supervisor or someone?’

‘No,’ Lyra said hurriedly. ‘I have already tried to reach him. It’s completely locked down. Besides, the less they know right now the better.’

‘Mm,’ Vondur said, as ZEN returned with three small metal cylinders. He took them into his hands. They were warm to the touch and would have melted his skin in a flash had they not been thoroughly insulated.

‘Do you know how to remove her and keep her alive?’ he asked ZEN.

‘Yes,’ ZEN replied, nodding once. ‘Now that she has the artificial body, much of this is superfluous.’ It gestured to the connecting pipes.

‘We’re going to disconnect you now,’ Vondur said to Lyra. ‘Are you ready?’

‘We’re wasting time, Captain,’ Lyra replied, though it was clear from her vital signs that her impatience was feigned.

‘Do it,’ Vondur said to ZEN.

Unplugging all the cables and wires took two minutes and produced a worrying amount of bloodlike fluids, although ZEN assured him it was nothing to be concerned about. Once the head was free of its crown of plugs, all that remained was the helmet, the nanogel med pack and a single spine-like tube which plugged Lyra’s neck into the artificial body. Vondur kept the voice-only channel open while the chamber’s holos fizzled out, each reading NO INPUT.

‘You okay in there?’ he asked, letting ZEN carry her – a much safer pair of hands. The zhahassi had built them well.

‘I’m fine,’ Lyra replied, her voice once more tinged with a hint of worry. ‘You have the plasmastats?’

‘Right here in my hands,’ Vondur replied. He nodded to ZEN. ‘Back to the hangar, double time. And for God’s sake, be careful.’

\*

They made their way back to the hangar with an exaggerated nonchalance that in other circumstances would have bordered on comical. Not for the first time, Vondur found himself thankful that the base was so empty. Even the Valstar loaders which had brought the ruined Goliaths back were sat motionless on the runway, dark and un-crewed. The crisis could spare no hands, not even airmen.

The Goliath hangar was as empty as he’d left it. He had ZEN put Lyra down on the maintenance platform and quickly found what he was looking for: a metre-long, armoured holdall, padded inside with a nanogel matrix that would mould around whatever was placed inside and protect it from all but the most violent of assaults. It was also conveniently code-locked, and he encrypted the access panel so that only he, ZEN or Lyra could open it. Once Lyra was secure, he changed out of his Goliath gear and into a pair of plain combat trousers, boots, a squadron t-shirt and a battered old jacket. He



slipped the rail pistol into a chest-mount holster and put a couple of spare magazines into his inside jacket pocket.

He accessed the base's data net via his IHD to see the current situation regarding the evacuation. The *Achilles's* heavy landers had been brought into action and had been shuttling people into orbit for a good few hours now. According to the latest classified reports, there were already ten thousand civilians on board, and that rate of boarding was due to increase as the pilots and crew grew more accustomed to the flying conditions of Uvolon. The third tranche of evacuees was gathering at the hydroponic compound to the south, and Vondur reflected that it was fortunate Anternis was not a large city. Even travelling within the land speed limit, it would only take him ten minutes to reach the evacuation point.

He commandeered a jeep from the motor pool and strapped the holdall into the back seat. ZEN would make it impossible to travel unnoticed, given the inherent difficulties in disguising it, but it was just too useful in a fight. It buckled itself into the passenger seat harness, sitting patiently. Vondur gave him a portable rail carbine, currently compacted into an extendable twenty-centimetre block, and then jogged back into the hangar. He drew up to his Goliath, currently being fussed over by a pair of robotic repair arms, and accessed the external comms hub.

'Lieutenant,' he said, opening a secure channel to Jarvin.

'Sir?' Jarvin replied. Vondur could see through the lieutenant's optical feed a never-ending row of tents being erected automatically by a half-tracked, VI-controlled truck. Around him, hundreds of dishevelled kaygryn, filthy and exhausted, milled about while Mantix-clad troops from Anternis's first battalion handed out bottled water and freeze-dried rations.

'I need you to listen to me very carefully, Jarvin. I'm on the clock and don't have a lot of time to explain, understand?'

'Yes, sir,' Jarvin replied immediately. Dependable, trustworthy Jarvin. Vondur could have kissed him at that moment.

'That woman's head we recovered, she was a UNIS agent. She's alive, I'm with her now. Someone tried to murder her in the medical facility. ZEN saved her life.'

'Christ. Good old ZEN,' Jarvin said.

'Quite,' Vondur replied. 'She's been stationed here for months, tracking some... important kaygryn, or something. She knows all about the corvette

that got wasted. She's got some theories about what's going on here, and she thinks my Goliath being hacked is something to do with it. I'm taking her offworld because she's not safe here, but we can't afford to lose one of these kaygryn either. His name is Iyadi, and he's a skarl in the Vos'Shan'i militia. We think he's going to try and make his way offworld if they authorise the evacuation of kaygryn as well. Or he might just make a crack at smuggling himself on board. What I need you to do is keep an eye out for him. He looks like this.' He sent Jarvin the picture that Lyra had sent him.

'Ugly son of a bitch, isn't he?'

'Yes he is. If you see him, tag him with a squadron-only *IHD* marker, right? I'm not going to be in my Goliath so I won't see it unless it's IHD. Tell Cox and August. I'm going to have to go now, good luck, all right?'

'Yes, sir. Same to you.'

Vondur cancelled the feed and climbed out of the cockpit. He jogged back over to the jeep, climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine.

'Ready?' he asked ZEN.

'Yes, Captain,' ZEN replied.

Vondur saw in the distance the *Achilles*'s landers still shuttling back and forth in the deep blue morning light, their plasma engines flaring brightly in the cold air.

'Right then. Let's get on with it, shall we?'

## PERSONS OF INTEREST

*‘The machinations of government are not the concern of the common man. If he is happy, secure and well provided for, free of all charge, then I do not see what right he has to discover the means of his comfort.’*

**George Louk, Human Democrat and Governor of Theyde, shortly before his suicide**

‘Sir, I’m sorry to wake you,’ Garrick said, peering into the darkness of the President’s personal UNSOC office.

‘I’m not asleep, Strike Commander,’ the President said, his voice ringing clear in the darkness. Behind him a large, arched window looked directly out onto the roiling East Sea, allowing the room to be filled with parallelograms of weak grey light. It was 4 p.m. on Vargonroth, and twilight and cloud already dominated the sky, a symptom of the planet’s unforgiving eight-month winter. The President was slumped over his desk, head resting in his folded arms. ‘What’s the problem?’ he asked, without looking up.

‘Another briefing, I’m afraid, sir,’ Garrick said, clearing his throat. He had decided that he would summon the President personally to the briefing room. Since none of them were allowed to leave the building, he was taking any excuse for a good walk.

‘What’s the problem?’ the President repeated.

Garrick looked at the ceiling. ‘The triumvirate has returned. Your intelligence briefing is ready, sir.’

The President snorted. ‘Oh, all right,’ he said. He pressed himself up, and Garrick watched the man’s pupils visibly dilate. ‘I don’t know how I would get by without these stims,’ he muttered as he caught Garrick’s eye, smoothing his thin hair back over his head. He straightened himself out, exhaling loudly, and gestured to the door. ‘Lead us on, Mr Garrick.’

They spent the walk to the briefing room in silence, the President clearly preoccupied with his IHD. Garrick’s own mind was a whirlwind of thoughts. There were a hundred different things he wanted to say to Aurelius, from offering his counsel to simply shouting his objections in the man’s face, but he bit his tongue. He did not think for a moment that the President’s threat to

remove him from his staff was an idle one, given his recent conduct, and Garrick was not a particularly principled man. It would be far better to remain at the nerve centre, where his work and opinions would count, than to resign in protest and martyr himself to a sphere of silence. And there was his UNAF pension to consider.

They reached the briefing room in good time. Garrick noticed that the Mantix-clad sentries had been replaced by two different Mantix-clad sentries. They saluted as he and the President entered, once more greeted by the electronic hum of holos and the smell of stale sweat and bad tempers.

The room was filled with the usual suspects, save a new woman who must have come in after he had left to summon the President. His IHD informed him she was called Mary Johnson, and she worked for EFFECT, meaning that her name almost certainly wasn't Mary Johnson. She stood in between Howarth and Josette, wearing a dour countenance. In front of them sat a short stack of hardcopy dossiers, which they distributed on his and the President's assumption of their seats.

'Mr Garrick, this is Mary Johnson,' Howarth said. 'Ms Johnson, this is John Garrick.'

'How do you do,' Garrick mumbled. She offered a smile which was insincere.

'Sir, we have finished our review of the data recovered from the mission station in the mountains,' Howarth said without preamble, turning to the President. Howarth was an odd man, an incongruous mix of good looks and social ineptitude who much preferred the company of a VI datascrubber to that of his colleagues. Still, he had to have been the best EFFECT commander Garrick had known. Many of his predecessors had been too quick to favour a direct application of force in situations which did not warrant it; Howarth had a lightness of touch which was deeply refreshing. He found it surprising that Aurelius tolerated him, actually.

'The data was largely burned. Most of what we did manage to recover was scrubbed by the VIs as junk. The EMP element of the provar rail strike, coupled with fairly intense LRIS saturation, has done for a lot of the useable intel. The station records state that a copy of the data was automatically uploaded to the module's Mantix unit before it was destroyed, but that unit has not been recovered. Our man on Anternis, Karris Haig, has informed me

that both the suit, as well as the agent wearing it, were destroyed in the blast. This is unfortunate but to have been expected.'

The President nodded, chewing his bottom lip. 'Anything useable at all?'

Howarth exhaled loudly. 'We're slightly better informed than we were yesterday. We know from speaking with the Vadian Mission Station that there had been a build-up of kaygryn militia in Vos'Shan. They decided to monitor it, did so for a few months and built up a small portfolio of persons of interest. I have the list here, just over ten kaygryn skarls. Bits and pieces of salvageable intel suggest some, if not most of them, are dead. A bit of investigation and inspired guesswork has led us to conclude that there is at least one of these skarls still at large, a male called Commander *Iyadi*. Karris Haig believes he was killed in the initial strike on Uvolon that destroyed the kaygryn corvette, but on reviewing the information available I believe that he was not.'

'Who is he?'

'Iyadi? He's a skarl, a militia commander. Old enough and with the right history to have been directly affected by Hadan's Reach. Almost certainly hostile to the UN. It's more than likely he had something to do with the STO exercise on the Tiberean Mountains, the one which got hit by the *second* provar rail strike.' Howarth was flicking through the dossier idly. 'He and the other kaygryn of interest had access to some very advanced technology. I must admit to being slightly surprised by this. The mission station had been tracking a number of deadzoned habs across Vos'Shan—'

'Deadzoned?' Aurelius interrupted.

'Impenetrable to Long-Range Invasive Scanning, sir. Or at least it would have been to the UNIS gear available on Anternis. Our outpost there was not particularly well funded or equipped.'

'Right. Shame. Carry on.'

'We would not have expected to see the Vos'Shan'i kaygryn privy to deadzone technology at all, is the point. A trawl of the black market has revealed nothing.' Howarth flicked the page over. 'The corvette was another surprise for us. There is no mention in any of the UNIS inventories of kaygryn hardware of any space-capable naval vehicles on Vos'Shan. The Vadian Mission Station thinks that the clippers were not Uvolonese, but we disagree. UNIS does not have the inclination, equipment or mandate to monitor every offworld flight from Vos'Shan, or the rest of Uvolon for that

matter. Going back through Anternis's civil aviation VI, there were a number of UN passenger flights off Uvolon twenty hours before the time the crusade fleet was attacked. Ten, to be precise. The report from the Vadian deep space relay spoke of ten kaygryn clippers. I do not believe the two to be a coincidence.'

'You think they fooled the VI? Kaygryn?' Scarcroft asked. Garrick frowned at that. Scarcroft was usually more prudent.

'Yes,' Howarth replied simply. 'They appear to have access to, and the ability to operate, deadzone technology. Fooling a civil aviation VI, by comparison, is extraordinarily simple. Especially as rudimentary a program as the one Anternis uses.'

'So the clippers came from Uvolon,' the President said, shrugging. 'We still don't know why they attacked the crusade fleet.'

'No,' Howarth said, closing his dossier. 'But we believe this Commander Iyadi does. Or he knows who does. The official kaygryn response to the crisis has been bewilderingly contradictory and deliberately obstructive. The kaygryn legation on Gonvarion have refused to attend the Grand Chamber, ostensibly because they fear the provar executors, though it should be clear to anyone paying attention that this is only partly true.'

The President wrinkled his nose. Garrick knew that Howarth had not meant to insult the President; he was far too intelligent for that. Too intelligent for his own good, perhaps.

'So what are you saying?' Aurelius said. From his tone, his patience was evidently thinning. 'What's the upshot of all this?'

'Our conclusion is that Iyadi needs to be found as a matter of priority,' Howarth said. Frost and Johnson nodded next to him. 'We would also like to talk to the kaygryn diplomatic skarls at Gonvarion. That is something that perhaps Xander can arrange.'

McKone inclined his head. 'I can have my men arrange a private audience.'

Howarth turned back to the President. 'We also think we should begin to countenance the possibility that the destruction of the Tiberean Mission Station was... machinated.'

The atmosphere in the room changed. The President looked triumphant.

'I bloody *knew* it,' he said, slapping his palm on the table. 'I told you it was too much of a coincidence. I *told* you.' He was looking at Pike and Scarcroft,

who were both sitting at the other end of the table, looking wretchedly tired. Neither of them said anything.

‘We believe that the so-called “military exercise” organised by the kaygryn militia was a charade,’ Howarth continued, ignoring Aurelius’s insufferable tone, ‘and that the irregulars ascended the mountain with the STO batteries with the deliberate intention of provoking an orbital rail strike.’

‘Why?’ McKone asked softly. It was not a question born of ignorance but rather of interest.

‘We think that the kaygryn were aware of the presence of the mission station, but did not have the means to destroy it in any credibly deniable way.’

‘They sacrificed themselves?’ Pike grumbled, unconvinced, from his apparent reverie. ‘Four hundred of them?’

‘The threat to the provar cruiser had to appear believable. They surrounded the station in the hope that the force of the strike would be enough to disable it and perhaps kill the occupant. We believe the attack on the crusade fleet, the destruction of the corvette and the deaths of the militia are all part of the same strategy.’

Silence descended on the room. After a few moments, Scarcroft said, ‘To what end?’

‘That is what we are hoping Iyadi will be able to tell us,’ Frost said. ‘Whatever the reason, we are clearly dealing with fanatics.’

Aurelius reclined in his chair. ‘Everyone’s a goddamn fanatic these days,’ he said quietly. ‘These... your theories, they do not change our stance with the provar.’

‘No, sir, I didn’t expect they would.’

Garrick had to conceal a smile. Aurelius appeared to have missed the barb.

‘How do we find this Iyadi character then?’ he asked.

Frost took a deep breath. ‘On board the *Achilles*,’ he said, lips pursed in anticipation of the President’s censure.

‘What do you mean?’ Aurelius asked sharply.

‘Sooner or later, we are going to have to evacuate the kaygryn civilians from Anternis,’ Josette said, breaking her silence. ‘With the Ascendancy in orbit, it will be the only safe passage off the planet. It is likely that Commander Iyadi and other militia figures will try to get aboard among the refugees. We should let them. An operation on Uvolon to try and locate and

detain him there is not presently viable. If Iyadi reaches Navem Sigma, we can detain him on our own terms.'

'As soon as the provar see you're evacuating kaygryn, they'll destroy the *Achilles*,' Pike said.

'No,' Josette said simply. 'We can secure safe passage for kaygryn refugees at Gonvarion.'

'Don't think I don't see through your bullshit, Chevalier,' the President said, his voice level. 'This intelligence farce is something you've cooked up to staunch your bleeding heart over these sodding refugees.'

There was an uncomfortable silence during which a large number of the room's occupants took an intense interest in their dossiers.

Josette met the President's gaze, unflinching. 'We are looking at evacuating ten thousand kaygryn civilians at most. Ten thousand out of the millions who the provar will decimate once we leave Uvolon. So no, this is not some "intelligence farce" I have just cooked up. In fact, it's not even my damn plan!'

There was a vulnerability to her, then, that Garrick could see. Her years as Commissioner for Refugees had written themselves into her DNA. Despite her façade, she cared too much – too much for this kind of heartless, remote work, where casual remarks dictated the lives of thousands. But then, he supposed, she was a better person for it.

The President waved her quiet with a decrepit hand. 'All right, calm down will you. Even with these damn stims I still feel like death warmed up. Howarth, will any of this interfere with our... contingency?'

Howarth looked visibly uncomfortable as all eyes focussed on him. 'No, sir,' he said, clearing his throat.

Aurelius nodded. 'The rest of you will find out about this later,' he said dismissively. 'Just collateral in case this situation blows up in our faces. We are walking a very fine line here between legitimate self-defence and hostile provocation. A very fine line indeed.' He sighed, toying idly with his holo. 'Are you *sure* you can get kaygryn aboard the *Achilles* without it being attacked? Why can't we get UNIS on Anternis to just pick him up?'

'UNIS equipment has been comprehensively destroyed,' Frost said. 'All our orbital feeds and our mission station are gone. Orbit is hostile, and the situation on the ground is unstable. We're down to a skeleton crew, and in



any event, we believe they're compromised. Picking him up on Navem Sigma would be much safer, and with a much higher chance of success.'

The President scowled. 'I'm going to need guarantees on this before I can authorise it.'

'I will speak with my men on Gonvarion,' McKone said. 'Although, by all accounts, the summit today has not gone as well as I'd hoped. I fear our early successes with the *Achilles* and Commander Vance will not be repeated. We have underestimated how much the provar hate the kaygryn. The demands for apologies, sir, have not gone down well.'

'Yes, yes,' Aurelius said impassively, not taking his eyes from the holo. 'Fleet Marshal?'

'Yes, sir?'

'When is the second detachment of ships due to arrive over Uvolon?'

'About five o'clock tomorrow morning, sir,' Scarcroft replied. 'I have authorised the dispatch of the 7th Fleet, as per your request.'

'Well, I suppose if a push comes to a shove, we can always engage the damned provar cruiser in orbit. We have the firepower, I assume, to now do that?'

Scarcroft inclined his head. 'It might not be wise—'

'I didn't ask you whether it was wise, did I?' Aurelius snapped. 'I asked you whether it was possible.'

'Yes, sir,' Scarcroft said, his voice smooth. 'It would be possible for the 7th Fleet to engage and successfully destroy a solitary Ascendancy cruiser. Easy, even. However, it is my understanding that the Ascendancy have, as of this morning, also pledged to send more of their own ships to Uvolon.'

'Then we'll send *more* ships, for God's sake! This is the United Nations, damn it! I will not be kowtowed and bullied by these cob fanatics! Understand?'

'Yes, sir,' Scarcroft replied. Garrick felt sorry for the man. It seemed that he had borne the brunt of the President's temper more than anyone else.

'Thank you,' Aurelius said, turning to Howarth. 'Do whatever needs to be done to pick up Iyadi. You have full dispensation to track down and detain any other persons of interest. Find out what the hell is going on. Your men on Gonvarion will be able to speak with the kaygryn skarls there.'

Garrick looked up and met McKone's eyes very briefly. 'What men on Gonvarion?'

Aurelius looked at him, squinting. ‘What?’

‘Excuse me, sir, but you said that Commander Howarth had men on Gonvarion. What men? I thought the summit was a diplomatic one.’

‘We have assets on Gonvarion providing security for our diplomatic detachment,’ Howarth said easily. ‘Standard practice.’

‘It’s standard practice to have EFFECT agents doing bodyguard duty?’ Garrick asked. Something in Howarth’s tone, a tiny modulation of his voice, was warning him against pressing his line of enquiry, but he ignored it. ‘This has got something to do with the Xhevegans, hasn’t it?’

‘Strike Commander, this is an intelligence matter that does not concern you,’ Josette said, piping up from across the table. The rebuke made his blood boil. That trumped-up *bitch* giving him orders?

‘I am one of the Joint Chiefs of the President’s General Staff,’ Garrick half-shouted, losing his temper. ‘I think everyone in this room should be apprised of this little side-op you’ve got running, especially considering what’s at stake here!’

‘Strike Commander,’ the President said reasonably, ‘I have already told you and the other Joint Chiefs, we are putting into place collateral to warn the Ascendancy off. It is, dare I use the phrase, top secret, and to be perfectly frank the fewer the number of people in the loop, the better. It’s not personal.’ He smiled avuncularly, making Garrick feel desperately foolish. The President’s mild manner had made him look obstreperous and petulant, utterly justifying to the rest of the table his having been overlooked. Being the least important person in the room was grating on him in a way he had never experienced before.

‘My only concern is the welfare of half a trillion UN citizens,’ he mumbled lamely.

‘Speaking of which,’ the President’s communications officer, Janek said, infuriatingly segueing to his own agenda. He had just sashayed into the room, carrying a handful of hardcopy dossiers and a few pull-out holos. He dumped them all on to the table. ‘It’s not looking good out there.’

Those who were standing now sat down. The President took a dossier in an outstretched hand.

‘Hot off the press. This is real-time data, folks, straight from the horse’s mouth.’

‘Shut up and get on with it, for God’s sake,’ the President snapped.

Janek cleared his throat. ‘Of course. The destruction of the quick-reaction force has now saturated every major news outlet in the UN, and it’s turning ugly. Civil disturbance is now widespread, riots, looting et cetera.’ Janek was reading the hardcopy in front of him like it was a shopping list. ‘The mobilisation of the Fleet has split people down the middle. Veigis-Class worlds are divided pretty much fifty-fifty, half in support, the other half obviously against. The Outer Ring is actually much more supportive, closer to seventy-nine per cent approval. That’s good, since it gives Alexander White less to talk about – and believe me, he’s been doing a lot of talking.

‘Ascendancy embassies on Bospen – that’s Rynn’s homeworld, by the way – Yokoman and Ashima have been attacked. There are also reports of technical deaths on Oberon Minor, Luthuan and New Persia. The demonstrations there are particularly violent.’

‘What do they think of the evacuation?’ Josette asked.

‘Actually much more divided, again, than we expected. Many are comparing it to Phaetonis. Others think it’s a prudent move. A greater proportion of people, according to the data nets of ten worlds, believe that the UN should be doing more to protect the kaygryn population. You have widespread support for allowing kaygryn refugees to stay in Anternis – you’re welcome, by the way.’ He allowed himself a little smirk. ‘People still feel guilty about Hadan’s Reach. A lot of media outlets are now focussing on what you’re going to do next. If you were to evacuate them, I think you’d be in line for the Nobel Peace Prize. Oh, another thing: the summit. Thanks to the almost ridiculous level of coverage that is generating, many more people than we expected are turning against the provar. Even though most people can’t understand a word they’re saying – and the news translators are doing a frankly appalling job – you don’t need to be a genius to see that they’re being aggressive and unreasonable. Plus people are easily frightened by aliens.

‘Your demands, sir, for apologies sit well with the UN. People think that was a prudent and reasonable thing to do. Foreign media outlets – obviously Kansubashi, the Old Colonies, but also the GA and some important factions within the Zhahassi Commonwealth – are also supportive.’

‘Good. Conclusion?’ the President asked, bored.

‘I daresay you could be even more aggressive and still have the support of the people,’ Janek said. ‘At the moment, the consensus is that you’re dealing with a difficult situation in the best way possible. We can expect people’s

hostility to the provar to increase over the next few days, but I would make sure this civil disturbance dies down. A short statement condemning the violence would be useful.'

The President nodded. 'Thank you, Janek. Excellent work. I trust you can make up a statement for me.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,' Janek said and left the room.

Aurelius turned back to them. 'Anything else I need to know? Xander? Why is the summit going so badly?'

'The presence of the Xhevegan observer, sir, Faunix Siun, has pretty much stonewalled talks with the Ascendancy executors already, and it has not even been one full day. His presence is insulting to them, and positioning him so closely to our own diplomats will seem as though we endorse the Xhevegan's cause.' McKone's voice betrayed the tiniest hint of irritation. That was rare in itself. The man's composure, even under the most stinging of onslaughts, was legendary.

'Well,' the President said. 'Perhaps we do. Perhaps we do.' He was muttering to himself, but it brought some alarmed glances from the Joint Chiefs. The intelligence mob remained completely impassive. Garrick tried to catch Josette's eye, but she kept her attentions on the holo in front of her. He wondered whether he would be able to sleep with her for the information. He shook his head, then, and had to stop himself from laughing. Of course, that might work if their roles were reversed; she was hardly begging him to screw her.

'And Siun, he's all right, is he?'

'He's fine,' McKone replied. 'Though might I suggest he not be placed with our diplomats within the Grand Chamber? We will not get anywhere with the Ascendancy while he is there. Our envoys are the vicarious recipients of that anger, even where it is not merited.'

Aurelius steepled his fingers under his chin. 'No, I want him where he is for now,' he said simply. 'Your priority at the moment is to see that the provar do not attack the *Achilles* once we start loading kaygryn on to it. *If* we start loading kaygryn on to it. Tell them of our intentions to do so. Try and raise the support of the rest of Tier Three as well. Our position is that we will attack and destroy any ship attempting to engage the *Achilles*. Understand?'

'Sir, threatening the provar does not enam—'

'Just bloody do it, will you, man?' the President said. Too many stims,

Garrick decided. Too many stims, too much stress. If he carried on like this, he would face an outright rebellion among the military and intelligence experts who he himself had appointed.

‘Yes, sir,’ McKone said, bowing. He left the room quietly.

‘Right, anything else?’ He checked the time to see it was closing on 5 p.m. ‘Isn’t there some ridiculous dinner going on at Gonvarion tonight?’

‘The summit charity dinner, sir,’ Garrick said, unsure as to why he was being so helpful. ‘It’s customary. It’s supposed to ease tension, but I imagine neither the provar nor the kaygryn will show up.’ He had been keeping well abreast of the news. Watching holos was just about all there was to do in the long, tedious hours between briefings, especially since he had been sidelined.

‘Sounds like a load of shit,’ the President said. ‘I’m going back to my office. As soon as we’ve got the go-ahead from Gonvarion to proceed with the kaygryn evacuation, you can authorise it. In the meantime, I can’t afford to have any more dead civilians on my hands. Jesus Christ this is a mess. Dismissed.’

## DIPLOMACY

*‘There is no one more dangerous than an idealist.’*

### **Unofficial maxim of the United Nations Exigency Corps**

Insofar as their diplomatic mandate was concerned, the day had provided little success. Some hot air and declarations of support counted for nothing as far as Yano was concerned, and he sat sullenly in one of the caucus chambers, flicking bits of balled-up hardcopy into a zhahassi coffee mug. Codey sat silently opposite him, letting a plate of untouched food go cold, while Velsze and Siun reposed in the corner, maintaining a quiet hum of conversation with the junior envoys and Tanja and Bennett.

Yano knew he should have been in a better mood. Irrespective of the lack of tangible results, they had achieved relatively widespread support from the other Tier-Three players. The Kansubashi Empire and the Old Colonies had been the most vocal in that regard – though their diplomatic planners in the UNDM had countenanced nothing else. The zhahassi, led by Fhalco and Zvell, had led a decent charge in the middle of the afternoon, effectively declaring the Ascendancy the aggressors and hinting, ever so subtly, that they would support the UN if it came to military action. Constance had really earned her stripes there, for all he detested the woman. He learned later that she had played heavily on Tranquillity and Volscia, both actions having meant more to the aliens than any of them had anticipated. That, and the fact that both Zvell and Fhalco were now gaining serious political currency within the Commonwealth, wholeheartedly endorsed by their ‘Trusted Friends’, the UN.

Aks-sta, the quorl ambassador who was bewilderingly one of McKone’s personal friends, had declared the quorl’s support for the UN even earlier in the day than the Commonwealth. It somehow felt hollow, more of a personal favour to their government than any kind of real conviction, though that was not to say Yano would have rejected it. Xavanis had countered in a rare moment of lucidity by calmly calling Aks-sta a war criminal – which in fairness he was – and that had almost led to the quorl leaving the summit altogether in a fit of pique. Codey had been able to smooth things over in a

hasty recess, though it had been a waste of time. The damage was done, and the quorl had lost their credibility once again. It would take decades for the species to shake off the spectre of Merisgard.

The welcome surprise had been the Golgron Alliance, who had declared for the UN an hour before the closing of the session. The golgron were the hermits of the galaxy, a species which took precious little interest in the affairs of its Tier-Three peers. They had made a few attempts to influence Tier-Two species – something strictly prohibited by the Galactic Protocols but in reality practised by everyone – but the holocaust on Illythia seventy years before had put paid to that endeavour for good. Since then the already enigmatic collection of states which made up the Alliance had retreated from intragalactic politics, preferring an existence of quiet introspection and self-augmentation.

The squabble with the provar over the Perseus ore belt, a rich mineral field eighty-five billion kilometres long, sandwiched between the Alliance and the Ascendancy's Fourth Crusade Fleet, had evidently hardened their attitudes. Yano knew that golgron civilians had died on the second moon of Ghessis as a result of provar intimidation, which perhaps made the Alliance's support less surprising in retrospect, but the golgron still had no conventional military to speak of, save about twelve voidseekers. As a consequence, for all their altruistic or self-serving intentions, their declaration of support wasn't worth the hardcopy it was written on.

Yano sighed angrily, landing another ball of paper into the centre of the mug. It was easy to dismiss the support and pains of other species as worthless, without pausing to appreciate the risks they were taking. In siding with the UN so overtly, most of the Tier-Three players were putting themselves in genuine danger. The quorl and the golgron were extremely vulnerable, and impressive rhetoric meant nothing when entire cities were being drenched in radiation beams and civilians by the thousand were cooked inside their houses. Perhaps they were hoping the UN would protect them, emboldened by the UN Fleet's provocative actions and the President's bluster. Yano almost wanted to stop and tell them just how selfish humanity had become. The UN meddled when it suited it and sold entire species out when it didn't. They only had to look at the kaygryn death toll following Hadan's Reach. At the end of the day, though, none of the declared support

mattered. Until the Ascendancy withdrew from Uvolon, the day would be considered nothing but a failure.

‘You can’t blame yourself,’ Codey said, not taking his eyes off the cold curried meat in front of him. ‘You can only follow your mandate.’

Yano absolutely did not blame himself; he blamed the air-headed idiots on Vargonroth for the whole situation. But since Codey was trying to comfort him, he smiled tolerantly. ‘Thanks, Bal,’ he said, deciding that that was the time to stop flicking bits of paper everywhere. It was surprising how little they were actually obliged to do in between each session in the Grand Chamber, though there was plenty they *should* have been doing, cosying up to other diplomats and making deals and alliances through the back door. Since the majority of Tier Three had declared unilateral support for the UN, however, there didn’t seem much need. Constance and Graydon were out there anyway, which made him feel less guilty about moping.

It didn’t fully clear his conscience, however.

‘We should be doing something,’ he mumbled after a while. He gestured vaguely to the door. ‘Out there.’

Codey gave a noncommittal grunt. ‘We can do that at dinner,’ he said, his eyes tired. ‘If we can do it at all,’

‘Why don’t we go home, then,’ Yano said. Part of him – and it was a large part – actually wanted to. He was not used to such comprehensive failure with the provar. He was a rising star for God’s sake; they said as much in the news.

Codey didn’t answer, presumably because he thought Yano was joking.

‘The President is sending more ships to Uvolon,’ Yano said after a while, trying to find company for his misery. ‘It’s so... I can’t get my head around it, Bal.’

‘Yano,’ Codey said levelly, fixing him with a stare. ‘The President has been locked in a room in UNSOC with his Chiefs of Staff for two days now. All this...’ He gestured about the room. ‘... this summit, this diplomacy, it’s all bullshit. It was McKone’s idea, not Aurelius’s. As far as he is concerned, this has been a military operation from the start, with a bit of left-wing summit garbage to satisfy the Veigis middle classes.’

Yano’s eyes widened slightly in genuine surprise. ‘Christ, Bal, I didn’t have you figured as the cynical type.’

Codey rolled his eyes. ‘Come on, Zav.’



‘All right, perhaps not as *brutally* cynical.’

‘Hold on,’ Codey said, sitting forward. ‘Vargonroth.’ Yano sat in silence while Codey read the message, his eyes scrolling back and forth across an invisible screen.

‘Well?’ he asked, trying to keep the irritation from his voice.

‘Apparently,’ Codey said slowly, ‘there are some UN agents here who want to speak to the kaygryn legation.’

Yano sat up. ‘What kind of agents?’ he asked, his face wrinkled in confused disgust.

Codey shrugged with an affected nonchalance. ‘UNIS probably. Maybe even EFFECT. I don’t know. To be honest, I’m not sure I want to know.’

‘We should be the only ones speaking to the kaygryn legation,’ Yano said. ‘This is a diplomatic mission.’

‘Mm,’ Codey replied, distracted. ‘Kaivan,’ he called over his shoulder. The junior envoy looked up from his conversation.

‘Sir?’

‘Would you go to the kaygryn legation’s official chambers, and then any caucus rooms they have, and see what’s going on? I want to know where they are, specifically. Come and find me when you’re done.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Kaivan replied and disappeared.

‘You’re not going to indulge this are you?’ Yano pressed, his voice dripping with contempt. ‘Aren’t you tired of having our authority undermined by SOC?’

Codey shrugged impassively, an infuriating return to form. ‘We’re all on the same team.’

Yano snorted. ‘If you believe that, you are a fool.’

A flash of anger passed over Codey’s face, and he was about to retort when Yano interjected, realising his mistake. ‘Why would UNIS want to talk to the kaygryn, anyway?’ he asked, pretending not to have noticed his second’s transient rage.

‘To try and find out why they attacked the crusade fleet, I should imagine. Since diplomacy isn’t getting them the results they want,’ the man replied, affably enough.

‘It’s only been one day.’

‘I’ve known the UN to abandon summits in less than an hour,’ Codey said, staring at the wall. ‘We are not a *patient* organisation.’

Yano reclined back into his appallingly comfortable chair, deflated. Codey's words had hit home. 'Shit,' he said, once again feeling the weight of failure on his shoulders.

'I'm going to find Andrea,' Codey said after a while. 'See if I can make myself useful.'

Yano watched as he stood up and left, settling back into his morose reverie. After a short while, however, it became apparent that no one was paying him any attention. He sighed, stood and walked slowly over to the group in the corner.

'How is everyone?' he asked, not caring in the slightest but unable to conjure a better opener at that moment.

'Good thanks,' Bennett replied, flashing that obsequious smile of his. Of all the five of them, he cared the least about Bennett.

'A little shaken, to be honest, Special Envoy,' Siun replied. 'It is difficult to retain one's composure in the face of ten baying Folhourtians.'

'I can well imagine,' Yano replied, offering a pat on the shoulder. Velsze and Abena Ghani both said something as well, which he disregarded out of hand. His attentions instead fell on Tanja, who thus far had avoided his gaze.

'I'd never witnessed an exchange between the Ascendancy and Xhevega,' she said after a short pause that was milliseconds from becoming uncomfortable. She spoke more to Siun than Yano. 'Their hatred is quite profound.'

'It is,' Yano replied, feeling himself already losing control of a conversation he had started. His professional confidence had taken a knock, but his courtship abilities remained first rate. Or were the two more entwined than he'd thought?

'They hate everyone,' he continued. 'Sometimes I wonder why they agreed to join Tier Three at all.'

'They are not all fanatics,' Siun said. It was all Yano could do not to stare.

'What do you mean? Of course they are.'

'As I was explaining to your colleagues,' the provar continued, indicating Tanja and Bennett, 'the Ascendancy is a population *governed* by fanatics. Many follow because they have to, not because they are willing. It is no different from a hundred human dictatorships you'd care to name.'

Yano sat down slowly next to him. He felt like this was something, as a diplomat, he really should have been aware of. But then despite the size of

the Ascendancy, they had developed an unparalleled aura of secrecy around their daily dealings. It made sense; they had had millennia in which to do it.

‘I didn’t know that,’ Yano admitted, embarrassed.

‘Few within the UN do, even those as senior as yourself,’ Siun said, gently massaging Yano’s ego back to form. ‘The Ascendancy media outlets are tightly controlled by the Zecad. They allow only flattering coverage of the state. Dissenting citizens are publicly and savagely executed. Space travel is restricted.’ Siun did the equivalent of a shrug. ‘And besides, many do believe the cause. Ascendancy infants are indoctrinated from birth. Raised to believe in the war, to glorify the crusade fleets. Their sole purpose in life is to travel across open space and die in battle against an enemy they know nothing about, for a cause they do not even realise they have been forced to believe in. They do it willingly. You cannot blame them for believing they are superior to every other race in the galaxy. Aside from the fact that, technologically speaking, they are, they have been told as much since the minute they were born.’

‘But why do the Enclaves remain silent?’ Yano asked. ‘Why do you not make this kind of knowledge public?’

Siun exhaled loudly. ‘And what would be the point? We are a principled people, but we are not stupid. If we spread word about the Ascendancy, the *true* Ascendancy, they would destroy us in a blink. The UN and the Ascendancy are trade partners within the Trade Pact. The UN does not want to know about our plight unless it suits them.’

‘The UN has intervened in the past—’

‘To stop *massacres*! Massacres that we should not have to endure in the first place!’

Yano flinched slightly at the provar’s sudden, anguished temper. Empathy, despite all his UNDC training, was not his strongest suit. Especially empathising with aliens. Yano was a superb negotiator, but he didn’t care how they *felt*. Perhaps not until now, anyway.

‘I’m... sorry,’ he said. Moisture was swelling up behind the alien’s nictitating membranes. Yano hoped to dear sweet Christ Siun wasn’t crying. He looked at the others for help, but Tanja looked as useless as he imagined he did. It was Bennett, to his great surprise, who reached out and placed a hand on the alien’s.

‘We will never understand what your people have gone through,’ he said,

‘but we will try.’

Siun gripped his forearm, nodding once. ‘Thank you, youngster. That day may come sooner than you think.’

Yano frowned. He was about to ask Siun what he had meant when the door opened violently. Kaivan stood there, his face marked with a seam of perspiration, flushed from running. He looked around the room until his eyes settled on Yano in such a way as to make very obvious that Yano was his second choice.

‘Mr Yano, the door is under armed guard,’ he said, breathlessly. ‘No one can get in or out.’

Yano frowned. ‘Guarded by whom? Kaygryn?’

‘And ZENs. Two kaygryn, four ZENs. I can’t find Mr Codey.’

‘Shit,’ Yano said, standing. His eyes went blank for a moment as he relayed the information to McKone. It took a full two minutes for the message to be encrypted, packaged and fired into a wormhole by one of Gonvarion’s satellite relays.

‘What does that mean?’ Tanja asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Yano murmured, walking back over to his corner. It took fifteen tense minutes for the reply to come.

Negotiate with the zhahassi to gain access. You are authorised to use force if necessary. I do not condone force. Be careful. The President has run out of patience. Harsh actions lead to harsh consequences.

McKone.

‘What force are we supposed to use?’ Yano said to himself, incredulous to the point of laughter. He forwarded the message to Kaivan and Abena. ‘Barge our way through six armed guards with fists flying?’

Codey burst back in a moment later, his own face flushed. ‘Where are these bloody UNIS agents who are supposed to be interrogating them?’ he said without preamble. The unapprised in the room were looking uncomfortably at one another. ‘How are we supposed to negotiate an entrance if we don’t even know who we’re negotiating it for?’

‘They’re in one of the caucus chambers,’ Kaivan said quietly, unsure of whether he was speaking out of turn.

Codey took a step forward. Kaivan nearly took a step back. ‘Bring them here,’ Codey ordered. ‘Now.’

‘Yes, Mr Codey,’ Kaivan replied, quickly exiting the room.

‘Ambassador Velsze,’ Codey said, looking over to the zhahassi in the corner.

‘Yes, Special Envoy?’ Velsze said, head bobbing with anxiety.

‘I want to speak to Fhalco and Zvell, please. Will you fetch them for me?’

Velsze looked positively uncomfortable at the request. ‘Yes, Ambassador,’ he said dutifully, though not before a moment’s deliberation. He followed Kaivan out of the chamber.

‘What are you doing?’ Yano asked. ‘Are we seriously going to break into the kaygryn legation room with armed UNIS agents? Have you *any* idea how illegal that is?’

‘Jesus, Yano, what do you want me to do? At least this way we can control some of the collateral.’

‘They have IMMUNITY! I can’t believe we’re even talking about this! Hell, I want to know what those fucking morons are up to as much as the next man, but there are rules! If we go charging in there, we’re no better than the goddamned provar!’

Codey’s glance shifted irritably to the wall. ‘Orders are orders, Yano.’

‘That’s it? “Orders are orders!” Fuck you, Bal, you sound like a goddamned Nazi.’

‘You want to leave?’ Codey exploded. ‘There’s the door! What are you, a fucking idealist now?’

‘Stop it!’ Tanja shouted from the corner of the room, leaping to her feet. ‘Stop it now! Please!’

Silence seized the chamber. Yano’s hands were trembling. He thought of a hundred things to say, things that he would regret personally and professionally for the rest of his life. Instead, he held his tongue for ten seconds, promising himself that if, after ten seconds, he still wanted to say them, he would.

He didn’t. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said quietly. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered when the last time he had said sorry was.

Codey waved him quiet. ‘Shut up,’ he said, though the anger had melted from his voice.

The ambassadors arrived five minutes later, still clad in their white and

crimson diplomatic robes.

‘Special Envoys,’ Zvell said, his neck wobbling in pleasure.

‘Ambassadors,’ Codey replied. Diplomatic protocol suggested he at least attempt Zhahassi before speaking in Terran, though evidently the time for diplomatic niceties was over. ‘We have a problem regarding the kaygryn legation.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Fhalco replied, quite unperturbed by the breach in etiquette. ‘The spectre at large. Strange, isn’t it? They are the lynchpin of this entire summit, and yet they are absent. It’s almost as if they intended it this way.’ A small smile played across the zhahassi’s lips. It was well done, since smiling wasn’t a natural expression for the aliens.

‘Quite,’ Yano remarked drily.

‘I have been informed that they are now under guard. Armed guard.’

‘I am aware of it. A squad of ZENs, no less. Barbaric, if you ask me,’ Zvell said.

‘Do you know why they are there?’

The alien frowned. ‘I can’t say I do. Though they are native to the Memorial Tower, of course. Given that the kaygryn fear the provar, the Custodians probably thought it prudent to take the precaution. The situation in the Grand Chamber was somewhat volatile, after all.’

‘I’ll get to the point, Ambassador,’ Codey said, with an undercurrent of irritation. ‘We need to get inside that room and speak with the kaygryn legation. The orders have come from the President of the United Nations himself.’

Yano had to stop himself from looking witheringly at Codey. It was the lousiest thing he had ever heard his second come up with. No one gave a shit about the President of the United Nations himself, especially when that President was a hot-headed cretin.

Zvell smiled again, that same knowing smile as Fhalco. They had evidently practised it.

‘Of course, Special Envoy,’ Zvell said, inclining his head. ‘I will see what I can do.’

Codey bowed in return, smiling a broad, slightly false smile. ‘We are much obliged.’

The two zhahassi ambassadors loped out of the room with a characteristic lack of grace. Kaivan almost body-checked Fhalco on his energetic return.

‘Mr Jean-Luc Courte is here to see you, as requested,’ he said to Codey. Behind him, a plain, grim-looking man, slightly shabby and well into his forties, appeared in the door. His navy-blue UNDC fatigues concealed a bullish frame of muscle which suggested to Yano that he was some kind of operations man.

‘Mr Courte,’ Codey said, ‘I’m Special Envoy Balthazar Codey. This is Special Envoy Zavian Yano.’

‘I know who you both are,’ Courte said in accented Terran, acting every bit as dour as he looked. ‘I’m sure you’ve guessed who I am and what I do.’

‘Actually—’

‘I have been tasked by our mutual employer with obtaining certain information from our kaygryn friends. I have a number of pressing engagements. This gives me a very small window of opportunity to sort this mess out. You are *diplomats*. This is a *diplomatic* summit. Do your jobs, get me inside, or so help me I will have my men do it – and if they do it, there will be no pleases and thank yous involved. Understood? Good.’

Yano was still trying to place the man’s accent as he turned smartly out of the room. He turned to Codey. ‘Our mutual employer?’

‘Must be EFFECT,’ Codey said, straightening out his uniform. ‘They’re all a bunch of cunts.’

\*

It took both Zvell and Fhalco an hour of strident negotiation with the Tower Custodians to get the ZENs to stand down, and another thirty minutes of rather heated argument between Courte and the kaygryn door guards to get them to open up. Yano and Codey watched from the end of the corridor, standing behind a pair of ZENs both impassively cradling large railguns. At the other end, two more ZENs were barricading off an ever-growing crowd of diplomats, runners and reporters. Yano grinned with deep satisfaction as the ZEN scangrid neutralised all the pressbots in the vicinity, eliciting a great cry of dismay from the assembled press.

Eventually the kaygryn guards agreed that, as long as the corridor remained sealed off by the ZENs, and the ZENs guaranteed to kill any provar

who attempted to break the cordon, Courte and his men could enter and ask a few questions of the kaygryn skarls. Yano noticed during the exchange that Courte could speak Argish really rather well – something which required many years of study and, preferably, immersion in the culture. Yano could think of little worse. It really was difficult not to dislike the kaygryn.

They watched as Courte was eventually shown in by the pair of kaygryn. He was gone for less than a minute before he reappeared, his face a rictus of anger. The kaygryn guards, ears back, looked slightly sheepish.

‘What’s going on here then?’ Codey murmured to Yano next to him. Courte was striding down the corridor, talking quietly to someone on the other end of an IHD link. He pushed past the unresisting ZENs and stopped short of Yano.

‘They’ve gone.’ His eyes went blank for a second. When he started speaking again, it was obvious he was no longer addressing Yano. ‘Scrub the satellite feed for the past twelve hours. I want them found.’

‘Is there anything further we can help you with?’ Yano asked, trying to keep a sense of triumph from extending his already wide grin.

‘No, just keep up the excellent work,’ Courte retorted and pushed past both of them.

‘Asshole,’ Codey said, checking the time. The atmosphere at the other end of the corridor was reaching fever pitch. ‘Let’s get the team together. Dinner starts in twenty minutes.’

‘What are we doing, Bal,’ Yano muttered, falling into step beside him.

‘Maintaining appearances.’

\*

They learned, sitting tensely in the back of the diplomatic cruiser, that their table at dinner was to be shared by the provar legation.

‘I’m going to have an aneurysm if I get any more bad fucking news,’ Yano complained, watching once more as the Vhalysian wildflowers sped past. The charity dinner and ball were to be held in the old Summer Palace, a huge building pillared with cream-coloured stone and topped with a vast latticework dome, beautifully appointed with crystal chandeliers cut to the



shape of the famous wildflowers, flowing tapestries and murals, an observation mezzanine laden with more expensive artworks, and a stream of running water which ran the circumference of the dining floor.

The ball had been customary for centuries, its purpose to reconcile ambassadors on a personal level who would have otherwise been at odds all day, and thus, as was often the case with attorneys, would have grown to deeply dislike one another professionally. In the process, legations would exchange state gifts and traditionally donate money to charitable causes in the process. To give away this year, the UN legation had a selection of framed, original maps of Europe in the 19th century, a recovered and reconstituted Ariadnian lily, one of the original UN standards replete with radiation burns from the battle of Rawdon's Wake, and a tea set made of real bone china. Yano would happily have thrown all of it out of the cruiser window rather than give any of it to the provar, but that would not have been very diplomatic.

'What's on the menu? Are we even going to have time to change?' Yano asked. They traditionally wore dinner suits to such events, leaving the traditional diplomatic garb for working hours.

'Yes, we'll change. Nothing wrong with being fashionably late,' Codey replied absentmindedly.

They sped back to the Vosmark Hotel. No doubt Courte and his merry men were searching the building from top to bottom, utilising scangrid, orbital surveillance and good old-fashioned eyeballs to seek out the elusive kaygryn legation, though there was no sign of any of them on arrival. Codey and Yano parted ways and arranged to meet back on the landing platform in twenty minutes.

Alone in his room, Yano allowed his thoughts to disengage from work and wander to Tanja. He was under no illusion that his desire for her was being disproportionately fuelled by her disinterest in him. With his genetically handsome features and tastefully Herculean physique – to say nothing of his devastating charm and intellect – he was bewildered by her distaste. It did not usually take more than a few minutes of conversation at the very most to seduce his mark, and she did not strike him as one who equated professional diplomatic success with attractiveness, though she was undoubtedly ruthless. One had to be as a comms officer with the Human Federal Socialists. But this

engrained savviness was not mutually exclusive with sexuality, and he did not think she was immune to his charm.

No, a more personal connection was required, some semblance of *effort*. She wanted to be wooed. It was impossible not to find him physically attractive – UNDC had seen to that. It was therefore his personality which was letting him down, something which he was usually very good at tailoring.

He grunted out loud, catching his own eye in the mirror. *Of course*. He had hardly covered himself in glory in the last few days. He had moped, been irritable, petulant – even ignorant. He was not so narcissistic as to not be self-aware. The toxic atmosphere which had permeated the summit had probably further dampened everyone's libido. He was not blameless, but circumstances – some evidently of his own making – were dictating against him.

He was broken from his reverie by a knock at the door. He answered it to see Codey, dressed in his own dinner suit.

'Ready?' Behind him, Kaivan was clutching the case of state gifts for dear life. Abena stood behind him, looking perfect. Of course, she had been genetically tailored to siren-esque levels of beauty, but there was a surfeit of that in Xeno Division and to Yano, enhanced beauty was *de rigueur*. Though to the common man Tanja would still appear unattainably gorgeous, to Yano she had many visible imperfections – though far from dissuading him, he seemed to find these minute deficiencies all the more seductive, more natural.

'I am,' Yano replied, with one last glance at himself. He checked the time: ten past eight. They were ten minutes late, and he estimated it would take another ten or fifteen to reach the Summer Palace. Twenty minutes' tardiness wasn't necessarily a problem, but they didn't want to leave it too long. Their absence would be noted and could be interpreted as an acknowledgement of defeat. 'Is Siun coming with us?'

'No,' Codey said, 'but Velsze will be sitting on our table, as well as Voctorick Gee.'

A quick check of his IHD told him that Voctorick Gee was one of the golgron representatives, the second in the Alliance diplomatic team. He did not mind having to talk to an alien, no matter how difficult communication was; the problem was the smell. The golgron were methane breathers and wore special gas recycler suits to that end which stank of petroleum and which whirred and clicked almost constantly, scanning the air for rogue

particles and pockets of lethal gasses. Being within a metre of one was like standing in the docking bay of a starport.

‘Fine,’ he said, trying and failing to let his mood alleviate. ‘Let’s just get on with it, shall we? Abena, you look beautiful by the way,’ he said, and she smiled broadly.

Codey got the message from McKone in the back of the diplomatic cruiser.

‘Oh, for *fuck’s* sake,’ he said, bringing a hand to his forehead and dragging his face downwards.

Yano felt his hand clench around the beautifully upholstered leather chair. ‘What now,’ he said through gritted teeth.

‘Orders from Vargonroth. We are to secure fresh assurances from the Ascendancy legation that they will allow the evacuation of *kaygryn* civilians from Anternis on board the UNS *Achilles*. We have to secure the assurances immediately, and failure is not an option. If they do not agree...’ He paused as his eyes flickered down the remainder of the message. ‘... we are to inform them that the UN Fleet will engage and destroy every Ascendancy ship that attempts to prevent the evacuation.’

Yano remained silent for a full minute. ‘Right,’ he said. Mindful of Abena and Kaivan and his recent poor behaviour, he simply nodded once. ‘Well, we’ll organise a private meeting once we get there,’ he said calmly.

‘Yes,’ Codey murmured. ‘This will get ugly. Uglier.’

‘At least we don’t have Siun with us,’ Yano said reasonably. Codey seemed appeased by that.

Yano spent the rest of the short journey in silence, while Codey took it upon himself to brief the two junior envoys on the ball protocol. They weren’t to go to the toilet once the meal had started; they weren’t to pour their own drinks; they were to stand for the toast and sit for the declaration of peace and goodwill. It was considered execrably vulgar not to have engaged every member of their table in conversation. By the end, both looked concerned.

‘If in doubt, just follow my lead,’ he said. ‘I swear half the rules get broken anyway. You are about to see a lot of drunk aliens.’

They arrived at the Summer Palace to see that many other dignitaries were still in the process of arriving, most of them zhahassi. Their cruiser pulled smoothly up to the entrance, itself unique in that it was on the ground floor, and they stepped out into the cloying night air.

‘Special Envoys Yano and Codey,’ the zhahassi doorman said, bowing low. It was rare to see a zhahassi in a lowly service role, but then the aliens were very good at concealing the lower echelons of their society from the rest of the galaxy.

‘How’s it going?’ Yano said with an easy charisma, gripping the doorman by the shoulder. The zhahassi wobbled its neck in pleasure.

‘They have pushed the dinner back half an hour, sir. Starters will be served at nine o’clock.’

‘Thanks,’ he replied warmly, and detaching his hand from the alien’s shoulder, he made for the interior.

They walked through the entrance hall, where dozens of Tier-Three players were milling about with drinks and entrées. Some were handing over coats to the cloakroom attendants, though how anyone could wear a coat in the stifling evening warmth was well beyond Yano.

‘Right,’ he said, checking his IHD for the seating arrangements. The Summer Palace had detected his entry and sent him a discreet message with the floor plan on it, and a helpful marker which appeared as a pulsing blue arrow in his vision directed him to his table. He made straight for it, peering through the crowds for any sign of the Ascendancy legation. If it came to it, they could always be summoned via the palace’s inbuilt concierge program.

They meandered through the crowds. The tables were wide and circular, each boasting a centrepiece of Vhalysian wildflowers and a ring of miniature Tier-Three flags. Each one was set for twelve people; unnamed places would be filled with lesser diplomats and zhahassi dignitaries. Given how much the zhahassi prided themselves on international diplomacy and how engrained foreign affairs were in their own political structure, he knew that seats at these tables would have been auctioned off for considerable fortune and favour.

‘Special Envoy,’ someone said from behind him, a vaguely familiar voice. Yano whirled about to see Isao Hasato, the Kansubashi Imperial Envoy, waving at him from a group of quorl ten metres away. He politely excused himself and weaved his way past a few tray-carrying ZENs, plucking a pair of drinks from one.

‘It’s a crime to not have a drink at a state dinner,’ he said, thrusting one into Yano’s hand. It was a fine, violet fluid, a cocktail of edible wildflower

paste, edged with the bitter fieriness of Terran-grade alcohol. Yano took a sip and winced. It must have been fifty per cent proof.

‘Christ,’ he said, smiling. He liked Hasato. He was a straight-talking military man, a former Griffin pilot and Admiral of the Kansubashi Imperial Fleet. They had met a few times before, exclusively at diplomatic dinners, and traded correspondence on and off for years.

‘I’ll catch up with you,’ he said briskly to Codey, sending him their table marker. He turned back to Hasato without waiting for a response. ‘How are you?’

‘Fine,’ he replied, ‘just talking to our quorl friends over there about the plight of your United Nations.’

‘Oh yes?’

Hasato nodded. ‘Yes. Mutterings about action against the Ascendancy.’ He looked around subtly to ensure there were no provars in the vicinity. ‘More than just a few summit declarations,’ he said, winking. ‘Something a little more concrete.’

Yano nodded mildly. ‘That *is* interesting,’ he said, looking over Hasato’s shoulder.

‘Just mutterings,’ Hasato continued. ‘It seems that with the UN and the Ascendancy sliding further and further into conflict, everyone wants to side with the UN. It must be a good feeling.’

Yano grunted distantly. Of course, if they had to come to blows with the Ascendancy, it was comforting to have the rest of Tier Three behind them, but it was disturbing to think they would come to blows at all. It was the best of a bad situation, but he would have preferred the bad situation to have remained non-existent. From the murmurs outside the Grand Chamber, war was not as unthinkable as it might once have been.

‘It would be an even better feeling if it was over tomorrow without a shot fired,’ he said, and he meant it.

Hasato inclined his head. ‘Agreed.’ He subtly checked his surroundings again. His voice was now barely above a whisper. ‘We know about your plans to evacuate the kaygryn from Anternis,’ he said.

Yano should have been surprised, but he was not. Kansubashi diplomatic espionage was second only to that of the Old Colonies.

‘You shouldn’t,’ Yano said in mock chastisement. Hasato smiled at that.

‘I have been instructed by my Emperor to pass on this message.’ He moved

slightly closer to Yano so that he was almost talking over his shoulder. A small icon in Yano's IHD informed him that their conversation had been audio blocked. It was just as well; another icon informed him that three separate terminals had immediately begun attempting to monitor their conversation.

'The Empire has not forgotten Na-Ban. We have thirty fully armed and operational warships waiting at Tulkaas. They can reach Uvolon in forty minutes. They are yours to command.' Hasato stepped back before Yano could reply, and the audio block faded away. 'And she says, "Jesus Christ, I said the moon!"'

Yano took his cue perfectly, arching back with a good belly laugh and slapping Hasato on the shoulder. At the same time, he packaged the man's message into a highly encrypted bundle and sent it to Vargonroth, bouncing it off Gonvarion's orbiting FTL comms array.

'I must remember to tell that to my table,' he said.

'You must,' Hasato replied. They shook hands, and then he was gone, back to the quorl.

Yano excused and pardoned his way through the clusters of diplomats until he reached his table where Codey, Tanja and Kaivan were sitting, Andrea, Bennett and Abena having been relegated to a table redolent of golgron. To his immeasurable surprise, both executors were also sitting down, clad in thick blue ankle-length sarongs, well appointed with intricate gold trim, patiently awaiting their dinner to be served. For all their unremitting arseholery, one couldn't fault their attendance record.

'*Ghengari-Zecad valta samman'ackha, hai,*' he said, bowing low. Xavanis regarded him casually, and to Yano's dismay, he noticed that both he and Folgana were still wearing their *caldars*. He had not escaped the threat of evisceration totally.

'*Samman,*' Xavanis growled. It was better than *Ashgurn-valta*, though judging from the modulation of the voice it was spoken with no less contempt.

He moved to his seat, which was directly opposite Xavanis. Tanja was on his right, while the chair to his left was empty, reserved for Voctorick Gee. Codey and Kaivan were sitting further round and given the level of noise in the room, almost out of earshot.

Yano took a deep breath. Sometimes, he really loathed his job. < Bite the

bullet? >

< Bite the bullet > Codey replied.

Yano nodded to himself, absentmindedly forwarded to Codey the recording of his conversation with Hasato and addressed Xavanis, smiling warmly.

‘I have to speak with you about something,’ he said slowly, making all kinds of gestures to get his point across.

Xavanis growled. ‘Give throat,’ he said, flicking an open palm away from his voice box. Yano wondered idly what the provar had done in his life before becoming a diplomatic executor. Given his impatience and tendencies towards outrage, he would have guessed either some kind of populist politician, insofar as they existed within the Ascendancy, or a military figure.

‘*Klashi at vyax herren’ghet ona khatesh,*’ he said. ‘Evacuating *vhyrmin.*’

‘Ai,’ Xavanis said, throwing his chin upwards. He was impatient but certainly nowhere near as hostile. Yano assumed it was the absence of Siun. ‘What?’

‘We want to evacuate kaygryn as well. Evacuation of kaygryn. *Ashgurn.*’

Xavanis cocked his head, looking vaguely puzzled. Too much Terran. Yano repeated himself with as much Provari as he and his IHD could muster. It took three further attempts before Xavanis and Folgana grasped the basic concept. Given the volcanic anger which seemed to well up inside both provar, it was a small miracle they managed to stay sitting.

‘*Ashgurn-valta!*’ Xavanis snarled, gripping the edge of the table. Yano thought he was about to flip it, but instead he let go and clenched his hands into fists.

‘They are innocent civilians, women and children and unarmed men,’ Yano said in *veshx-Han’ghar*, modulating his voice so that it projected calm respect. ‘All we want to do is move them somewhere safer.’

Predictably, Xavanis ignored him, preferring instead to unleash a stream of FP too quick and enraged to comprehend. Folgana added his own voice to the mix, the pair of them babbling away like angry lunatics, gesturing furiously and drawing a significant amount of attention from the surrounding tables. A few of the ZENs at the end of the room twitched. Yano’s IHD sensors informed him they were being actively scanned by a few ZEN marksmen.

‘Listen, all I’m asking is that you pass on the message to your masters,’ Yano continued, trying to placate them. ‘Tell them that we intend to evacuate

kaygryn civilians.’ He stumbled again on ‘civilians’, and settled for repeating ‘women, children and unarmed men’. ‘We will protect them with force if necessary. You are asked by my President personally to let us evacuate them without hindrance.’

He managed to get the message across, after a good twenty minutes of repeating and cajoling and enduring insults and outbursts, all while his starter sat cooling in front of him to the point of inedibility. The executors understood the request, of course; whether they would oblige it was another matter entirely. By the time the exchange had ended, there were three ZENs less than two metres away, surrounding them like statues.

Eventually, and unoriginally, both Xavanis and Folgana stood, practically shaking with rage, and stalked angrily from the room, leaving a wake of confused, though not entirely surprised, diplomats. Voctorick Gee, who had been lingering a few tables away unwilling to interrupt, had since decided to sit with a few compatriots of his who had cleared a space for him. It seemed that the rest of their table’s designated inhabitants had followed suit. The result was that Yano, Codey, Tanja and Kaivan were sitting entirely by themselves on a table redolent with twelve starters, surrounded by armed guards and observed by just about every set of eyes in the room.

‘Don’t join the Exigency Corps,’ Yano said to Kaivan, tucking wearily into his tepid fish. ‘Get out while you still can.’

He prepared a short brief as he ate and sent it back to Vargonroth, informing them of what had happened. They didn’t hear back from the executors all night, though their table remained stubbornly empty throughout all six subsequent courses. Kaivan eventually gave the diplomatic gifts to Velsze in their entirety. Yano told the zhahassi to sell them, and he wasn’t joking.

After dinner, Codey gathered up Kaivan and Abena and took them on an introductions spree, since half a diplomat’s job was making the right contacts and there was no better place to make them than at a Tier-Three summit. A thin, reedy noise filled the air that Yano eventually decided was music. Most of the room’s occupants were now drunk, or on their way to being drunk, as evidenced by the general increase in conversational volume. Yano had been careful not to get too drunk, but he was maintaining a pleasant, warm buzz. Tanja, next to him, was rosy-cheeked, enjoying the formidable Vhalysian wine.



‘So what’s it like, working for Andrea?’ he asked after a few minutes of relatively comfortable silence. He could see Constance on another table, ensconced by zhahassi.

Tanja looked at him, looked away and snorted. When she looked back she was smiling. Yano felt a brief flush of adrenaline. It *was* a gorgeous smile.

‘That’s so shit,’ she said, taking another sip. Yano had to stifle a look of surprise. ‘Such a shit line.’ She smiled again, then laughed to herself. ‘I know how the Exigency Corps operates. You know it’s deeply, *deeply* unethical to use your training to seduce someone?’

‘I asked you what it was like working for Andrea Constance,’ he said, doing an excellent impression of someone taken aback. ‘I agree, that would have been a shit line, if it had been one.’

Tanja rolled her eyes. ‘Okay, Special Envoy.’

‘That’s very arrogant,’ he said with enough seriousness to wipe half the smile off her face. The tiniest hint of panic flashed across her eyes. He took a sip of wine and pressed his advantage home. ‘Not to mention incredibly unprofessional to assume I’m flirting with you.’

She looked at him quizzically, searching his features for a good thirty seconds. ‘No...’ she said after a while, shaking her head. ‘No, I don’t believe you. Sorry.’

He laughed this time and shrugged. ‘Believe what you like.’

There was another silence while she regarded him. She took another sip of wine. ‘It’s fine. She’s actually very nice,’ she said.

Yano nodded reasonably. ‘She’s good. I can imagine.’

‘Can you?’

‘Christ!’ he said, laughing again. ‘If you don’t want to talk to me you don’t have to.’

She shrugged, focussing on her glass. Yano watched her as her eyes traced the room, taking in the mass of informal diplomacy. ‘I don’t dislike you, Zavian,’ she said, staring ahead. ‘I’m just... tired of your bullshit.’

He frowned in incomprehension as she turned and fixed him directly in the eye. ‘I’m not some...’ She waved a hand in the air. ‘... arbitrary mid-level diplomat you have to seduce with what you undoubtedly consider charm and wit, Yano. Do you think you’re being subtle? Because I can tell you, you’re not. I know you want to fuck me.’

Yano’s eyes widened at that. ‘Tanja, I—’

‘So for Christ’s sake, can we just get on with it?’

\*

They reached the back of the cruiser before she kissed him, savagely, pushing her mouth hard into his. He responded in kind, his lips engulfing hers, tongues rammed in each other’s mouths. It was inebriated, careless, excessive, a parody of passionate kissing. Neither cared. She was viciously frantic, fuelled by potent zhahassi intoxicants; he was pent up and desperate for her.

He yanked one of her shoulder straps down and bit into her neck. She gasped with delight, thumping the interaction panel and sending the cruiser into the air at speed, heading for the Vosmark. She pulled him closer, aided by the punishing acceleration forces, finding his lips again.

‘Fuck,’ he breathed, pulling away and sliding the other strap of her dress down. Her bare breasts, cream-pale, spilled free, and he grabbed them both with adolescent zeal, squeezing, fumbling, sucking hard on her nipples. His IHD performed an automatic search for any cyber-erotica programs she had installed and found 2Climax quietly syncing so that they would orgasm together. They landed at the Vosmark barely five minutes later. Yano pulled away from her as she pulled her dress back on, then led her by the hand into the building, practically running, driven by evolutionary, mammalian instincts to copulate.

‘Come on,’ he breathed, smiling and flushed, as they travelled down the hallway, past the silent, dutiful ZENs and straight to his room. She giggled as he threw the door open, amused by his desperation, and ran ahead of him, her dress sliding off her in her wake. She was wearing nothing underneath except a pair of smooth black stockings.

‘Oh Christ,’ he groaned, drinking her in. She was perfect, worth a thousand genetically manipulated Charlotte Ashas. He watched, entranced, as she lay down on the bed, smiling at him with that perfect smile. Scarcely more than five seconds passed before he was stripped and on top of her, his IHD intervening to contain his orgasm the moment he entered her. Tanja half-screamed as her 2Climax program brought her similarly to the brink, before aborting at the last moment. They both laughed then, locking eyes and lips, before Yano reared over her, pinning her hands behind her head and boosting

one of her legs up so that her calf was pressed against his shoulder. He built up an intense rhythm so that the bed started to shake and a layer of heat and sweat accumulated between them.

A deep, concussive explosion rocked the Voscmark, severing the power and triggering an array of deafening alarm klaxons.

‘Jesus *fuck!*’ Yano shouted as the entire building shook violently. Tanja screamed over the alarms and grabbed her dress from the floor. Outside, swift footsteps thumped through the corridor as the building’s ZENs activated and sprinted through the hallways, burbling with data chatter. A bomb. It had to have been a bomb. Emergency lighting flickered on, bathing the room in wan red light.

‘I don’t know,’ he said as his IHD flooded his system with *Fight and Flight*. His drunkenness melted away like ice under a flamethrower, replaced with combat levels of mental acuity. He tried to open a channel to Codey, but the link was dead. The EMP from the blast had scrambled his comms module. Further troubleshooting revealed his IHD was in a bad way, running on redundancy systems. Another hit like that and he would be running on good old-fashioned brainpower alone.

‘What was *that?*’ Tanja shouted as the muffled yet unmistakeable shriek-bang of rapid railgun fire emanated from the floor below.

Yano grimaced, feeling his forehead break out in sweat. He was up now and pacing the room. ‘We need to go, and we need to go *now*,’ he said, running a hand through his hair. ‘Is your IHD working?’

‘It’s – no,’ Tanja replied, on the verge of the same panic Yano would have been experiencing had he not been under the rationalising influence of warfare stims.

‘Okay,’ he grunted and repeated it over and over as he hastily pulled his clothes on. Once dressed, he ran over to the wardrobe, fished out a small strongbox from the top shelf and opening it, pulled out a small grey rail pistol.

‘What are you doing?’ Tanja shouted. Yano shoved the pistol into the back of his trousers and walked up to her.

‘You’re going to be fine,’ he said, kissing her. Her lips tasted of salt, and something stirred within him, deep, unfamiliar feelings of affection that even the *Fight and Flight* coursing through his bloodstream couldn’t overcome.

Something to think about later; at that moment, his first priority was ensuring her safety.

‘You need to get to Codey, tell him what’s happened.’ He held the side of her face, though her expression was already hardening – and that was without the benefit of drugs.

‘Okay,’ she said, nodding once and breathing deeply. She was frightened, but admirably calm. ‘Find Bal. Tell him what’s happened.’

‘I’m going to get a ZEN to get you out of here,’ Yano said. ‘All right?’

She nodded again, and he grabbed her hand and led her to the door.

The alarm in the hallway was even louder than in his room. He left Tanja and jogged down the corridor and back to the entrance hall, where he found himself detained in seconds by a railgun-wielding ZEN.

‘On the ground, immediately,’ the VI commanded. Yano dropped straight to the floor without a moment’s hesitation, not willing to stake his life on the situational awareness of an alien robot.

‘I need your help,’ he shouted, the marble of the floor cold against his face. ‘I have a civilian with me. I need to get her out of this building.’

There was a brief melodic babble as the ZEN communicated with its squad leader. Evidently its electronic make-up was made of stronger components than his damned IHD.

‘Special Envoy Zavian Yano, you are not supposed to be here,’ the ZEN said. ‘Get up.’

He did as he was told. ‘I have Tanja Henrikson with me,’ he shouted. The high, vaulted ceiling was allowing the alarms to reverberate, compounding and intensifying the volume. ‘She’s a communications officer in my team. She’s VIP. I want to get her to safety. Can you please take her to my cruiser?’

If the ZEN had an eyebrow to arch, Yano was sure it would have done so. After another babble of data exchange, it said, ‘Where is she?’

‘My room. I’ll take you there.’

‘Yes,’ the ZEN said. Yano immediately broke into a run, hearing the heavy metallic footsteps of the VI behind him. He reached the room in thirty seconds and threw the door open. Tanja was sitting on the end of the bed, staring at the floor in an IHD trance. She looked up and then flinched as more gunfire echoed from the floor below.

‘Time to go,’ he said, the *Fight and Flight* making him sound regrettably brusque and dispassionate. She nodded, and he kissed her again. ‘I’ll come

and find you as soon as I can.’ He turned back to the ZEN. ‘Please, take care of her.’

The ZEN offered a single nod, shouldered its railgun so that it was pointing down the corridor and led Tanja away at a running pace which it had calculated as her optimum.

‘Right,’ Yano breathed to himself once they were both out of sight, then turned and jogged down the hallway towards the nearest set of access stairs. Once he had reached them, he pulled the pistol free, feeling its comfortable weight in his hand, and descended them two at a time.

‘Shit,’ he hissed as a particularly loud gunshot sounded through the door in front of him. He could hear shouting now and more data chatter passing between the networked ZENs. ‘What are you doing, Zavian?’ he muttered to himself, reaching for the handle. He twisted it slowly and pulled, to see an empty corridor, apparently untouched by the fighting.

He stepped out, pistol pointing ahead in a distinctly amateur fashion, searching left to right. He decided on left, traversed the length of the corridor and turned into a wider hallway – before immediately hurling himself backwards as a hail of rail rounds chewed up the wall in front of him.

‘Fuck!’ he shouted, fumbling the pistol. The hallway was a wreck, a black starburst of shattered stone, obliterated furniture and charred, flash-cooked body parts. The explosion had ripped a hole in both the interior and exterior walls ten metres across, and had punched through both the floor and the ceiling. A hot breeze from outside whipped through the hallway, carrying with it the sour stink of death and melted modern materials.

‘Yano, what the *fuck* are you doing here?’ shouted a familiar voice. Yano turned around to see Jean-Luc Courte and a handful of heavily armed men behind him, some clad in armoured vests with EFFECT stencilled across the back, others in regular clothing, all holding a wide variety of assault railguns and micromissile pods. Another salvo of high-energy gunfire stitched up the hallway, tearing chunks out of the walls and spraying Yano with chips of stone and dust. At the end of the corridor, he could hear the unmistakeable shouts of Xavanis.

‘I have no idea,’ he admitted. He winced as a ZEN twenty metres to his left took a direct hit in the optical cluster. Its head exploded backwards in a shower of transparent transmission fluids and ruined VI components. It

crumpled to the floor like a ragdoll and was dragged away by one of its comrades.

‘You’re not supposed to be here. Fuck off now, before I shoot you myself.’

Yano, still sitting down like a moron, backed away from the corner until he felt he could stand up. ‘What the hell happened?’

‘A bomb, that’s what happened. The provar decided they’d had enough of your Xhevegan friends.’

Siun suddenly appeared in Yano’s mind, the easy-going, pleasant provar whom he’d been a complete shit to. The thought of his mangled, explosively dismembered body in the hallway was almost enough to override the *Fight and Flight* and make him vomit.

‘Oh... shit,’ he said, bringing a hand to his forehead. ‘They killed them all? How many?’

Courte shrugged. ‘Fifteen, twenty.’

‘I can’t... it doesn’t...’ Yano stammered. Another high-pitched salvo of ordnance smashed down the corridor. One of the ZENs returned fire, this time with a single, precision *blam* from a scoped railgun. From the sound of the screams of rage and pain, it had scored a hit.

‘Special Envoy,’ Courte said calmly and with a reasonableness which went well beyond what Yano deserved. ‘It is very dangerous here. People are dying. Please, for your own sake, leave before—’

Thanks to the drugs still flowing through his system, Yano didn’t even feel the *caldar* as the point burst through the front of his chest. He watched as Courte’s eyes widened in slow motion, and at least six guns pointed at something just over his right shoulder. The muzzle flashes were blinding, lightning bursts of blue-and-yellow fire. Slugs of tungsten speared through the air, travelling so fast they barely spun, and hit something soft and fleshy behind him.

He felt hot provari blood and brain splatter the side of his face, and the *caldar* slice through his lung as it was jerked backwards, cutting a deep trench down his back. The alarm had become a distant roar, barely audible. His IHD informed him that his lungs and liver had been bisected and advised him to seek medical assistance before he died. He would have laughed at that, had he not collapsed backwards with blood foaming from his mouth.

‘Somebody get a medic here!’ he heard Courte scream. He sounded far away, like he was shouting through a concrete tunnel a kilometre long.

The last thing he saw was the large, impassive helmet visor of a zhahassi Peacekeeper Commando, before he slipped blissfully into unconsciousness.

### **III**

## **CAUSE AND EFFECT**

*‘Opportunities multiply as they are seized.’*



## IYADI

*‘Never fear to do what is necessary, my children, for ours is a higher purpose.’*

### **His Most Excellent and Ascended Majesty, the Ghengari-Zecad Vhon IV**

The clicking flash of the capsule’s harsh white lights dragged him from the unconsciousness of storage and into the stale, recycled atmosphere of the *Achilles*. Bleary, confused and dehydrated, it took Vondur, quite irrespective of his combat conditioning, a good five minutes to reorient. Once he had achieved an acceptable level of wakefulness, a pounding headache announced itself, and he grabbed at a water tube dangling above him and sucked the two-litre bladder half dry, setting his empty stomach to growling. The absence of any substantial nutrition in the last couple of days had left him feeling irritable and weak.

The capsule wall, no more than fifteen centimetres from his face, sensed his return to consciousness and flooded with graphics and text. His journey time had been twenty-one hours, though he had been in storage for closer to thirty-five. Information about the safety and process of storage – essentially that of inducing a deep coma to enable ships like the *Achilles* to triple its life-support capacity – flashed up comfortingly in a holo of mint green. Other scraps, encouraging him to drink all the water in the bladder, swirled about. The latter he obliged, then cancelled them all.

He groaned, his voice loud and tinny inside the capsule. Thirty-five hours was an appallingly long time to be unconscious when the pace of galactic events was being dictated by the minute. Despite his grogginess, he pressed on in accessing the *Achilles*’s data core and brought up all the information he could on the ship’s roster.

‘Oh, Christ,’ he murmured, eyes scanning the holos. They had embarked all ten thousand kaygryn refugees, the vast majority of whom were now reposed in one of Navem Sigma’s vast emergency hangars to await processing and official designation. None had been stored; in fact, he and Lyra had been among the last. Only thirty thousand humans had been embarked after them. One didn’t need to be a mathematician to realise that

they hadn't evacuated anything like the population of Anternis. The roster put the number closer to half.

Further IHD administration revealed a pending message received thirty-three hours before. He cursed at not having noticed it immediately and opened the encrypted missive. It was from Jarvin and read:

Sir

Have tagged ten probables for your Iyadi on the squadron IHD net. Landers have started packing all kaygryn south in the last hour; suspect Sigma is your best bet. Will keep you posted if anything changes here.

Lt. Jarvin

Vondur nodded to himself, once again thankful to have such a competent second-in-command. He cancelled the message and returned to the data core, discovering that he was due to be disembarked within the next thirty minutes. A quick search of the passenger manifest revealed that Lyra had been placed, un-stored, in the cargo hold, guarded by ZEN. He opened a channel to her via his IHD.

'Lyra?' he said, then violently cleared his paper-dry throat. 'Sorry.'

'I'm here,' she said after a few seconds.

'They took the kaygryn then.'

'Yeah,' Lyra replied, sounding distant. 'All ten thousand of them.'

'Lot of people left behind,' he remarked, idly conjuring a UI feed on the latest from Anternis. What he saw caused him to start so violently he smacked his head on the ceiling of the capsule. 'Fucking...' the expletive died in his throat as his eyes, wide, disbelieving and frantic, absorbed the coverage.

'Yep,' Lyra said absently.

Vos'Shan was gone, and in its place was a haphazard network of vast, glowing craters. High-yield, thermonuclear crust-busters had excised the nation from Uvolon and a good four-fifths of its bedrock. Gamma beams, penetrating to a depth of tens of kilometres, had further guaranteed the long-term abandonment of neighbouring Anternis. Thousands of UN citizens were expected to perish from radiation sickness unless they were evacuated

immediately. The UNS *Jupiter*, another cosmic disaster contingency craft, was already frenetically deploying landers, ferrying casualties through a sky so thick with smoke and ash that the sun could barely penetrate it.

The situation in orbit was no better. While he had been comatose in storage, a vast naval battle had raged around the *Achilles*, forcing it to abandon the evacuation and jump outsystem before it was wrecked. It was clear that the evacuation of the kaygryn had been the final straw. Thirty-three Kansubashi and UN warships had been destroyed, for twelve Ascendancy vessels. The 7th Fleet was in tatters. Reinforcements from all sides were en route.

He pressed on, his mouth agape. The Voscmak Hotel on Gonvarion had been bombed, killing the Xhevegan legation there. Images showed the building with a huge hole gouged in the side, surrounded by emergency crews. Heavily armed ZENs and Peacekeeper Commandos were everywhere. Special Envoy Yano was in a state of technical death, having been stabbed by the Ascendancy executor. Dozens had been killed in the ensuing firefight, as had the kaygryn legation, whose diplomatic cruiser had crashed some five kilometres away as they tried to escape.

‘My God,’ he breathed, his brow deeply furrowed. It was one thing to face an enemy on the battlefield in a fully armed, armoured, refraction and force-shielded Goliath; it was quite another to watch your entire civilisation being sucked into a whirlpool of warfare with no end in sight. Even if Iyadi did hold the key to this crisis, it would take nothing short of a miracle to de-escalate. International tensions had reached fever pitch. Formal declarations of war were hours away, and military operations quickly built up their own momentum. The window for pulling back from the brink would pass them at the speed of light.

‘We need to find Iyadi,’ Lyra said. ‘That’s all we can do. Let everyone else worry about Uvolon now.’

Vondur shook his head slowly. In other circumstances he might have been thrilled. The prospect of a good conventional war was what he had trained for. Now, all he felt was a deep sense of dread.

‘Focus, Captain. It’s not too late to stop it. The kaygryn are the key – Iyadi is the key. Let’s find him.’

Vondur grunted, his resolve hardening. ‘You’re right. Of course you’re right.’

‘Did your men make any progress on Uvolon?’

‘Yes,’ Vondur replied, ‘they’ve identified ten possibles. All of them have been tagged.’ He forwarded the IHD markers – small, pulsing blue arrows – to Lyra. He pulled up the ship’s manifest again. ‘They’ve disembarked all kaygryn into Navem Sigma.’

‘I know,’ Lyra replied.

‘They’re being contained by Habsec.’ Habsec was Navem Sigma’s security force, run by the quorl for the last decade irrespective of the official rotational programme. Given the zeal with which they performed the task, however, the other races had come to accept their de facto tenure as the station’s police.

‘I know that too. And I don’t like it.’

‘Why?’

‘I’ve been going through the contingency procedures for the *Achilles*. SOP in a situation like this is to contain everyone in the holding area until they’ve been registered.’

‘Which is what they are doing?’ Vondur said slowly.

‘No,’ Lyra replied, ‘not with UN citizens. They’re being let straight through.’

‘Okay...’

‘Captain,’ Lyra said, allowing a note of frustration into her voice, ‘doesn’t it strike you as odd in this period of heightened tension that they would contain all the kaygryn but not the humans?’

Vondur snorted. ‘I wish it did. They’re kaygryn, Lyra. Habsec probably doesn’t want them here at all.’

‘No, this is more than racism. Such a direct breach of such a fundamental protocol... the kaygryn are being contained for a reason.’

‘There’s doing your job and then there’s paranoia,’ Vondur said. ‘I—’

‘Paranoia is my job,’ Lyra snapped. ‘Someone else is looking for Iyadi.’

Vondur sighed, unconvinced. ‘Even if you’re right, there’s nothing we can do about it now,’ he said, pressing his hands up against the cold interior of the capsule. ‘I’ve got twenty-five minutes before they de-store me. I can issue a UNAF executive command for all the good it will do, unless you can speed things along?’

‘No,’ Lyra replied, deflated. ‘I’ve lost contact with most of UNIS’s data stores now. Again, SOP. They think I’m dead, but they can’t confirm it, so they’re disavowing me.’

‘Tough break,’ Vondur said.

‘I would shrug if I had shoulders,’ Lyra replied, and Vondur couldn’t help but laugh.

They waited out the next twenty minutes in silence. An information blurb appeared to Vondur a few moments before he was due to be released, and then a smooth mechanical whir pervaded the capsule as it was decoupled from its connecting seal. His stomach dropped as he underwent a confusing shift in orientation. He had no idea how storage capsules were usually unloaded from a CDCC like the *Achilles*, so he was quite surprised when the whole process took less than a minute. There was a hissing sound as the capsule seal was broken and the lid was pulled off.

‘Just one minute,’ a crewman in grubby overalls said as he undid the harness. Vondur came free from the straps and allowed himself to be pulled out of the capsule.

‘You’re fine,’ the crewman said after performing a quick IHD diagnostic and slapped him on the shoulder. ‘Follow the signs.’

‘I need to get to the cargo bay,’ Vondur said, keeping his eyes locked on the crewman’s eyes instead of on the awesome, cavernous interior of the *Achilles*’s hold. It was like being in some vast cylindrical mausoleum, three hundred metres in diameter, with storage capsules lining the walls like half a million coffins. Huge yellow robotic arms fussed over the capsules, detaching them from the hold walls and plugging them into the disembarkation nozzles lining the bottom of the ship. Vondur himself was in the hold’s central axis, a small, cylindrical beam three metres in diameter mounted by a number of rail-driven elevators. Crewmen were floating around everywhere with small jetpacks, checking their holos for passengers who hadn’t taken well to the storage.

‘No can do, buddy,’ the crewman said. ‘Off limits to passengers.’

‘My ZEN is in there,’ he said, beaming his UNAF Captaincy credentials directly into the man’s eyes. ‘It is *very* important that I get it back, and the case it is carrying, immediately.’

The crewman looked genuinely frightened. ‘O-of course, sir,’ he stammered, opening a holo in front of him. ‘I’ll have them waiting for you in the disembarkation hangar.’

‘Thanks,’ Vondur grinned, slapping the man on the shoulder considerably harder, and mounted the nearest elevator.

‘Captain Vondur,’ Lyra’s voice sounded in his ear. ‘I’m impressed.’

‘Not just a pretty face,’ he replied, as the elevator sped down the rail at two G.

It took him ten minutes to get out of the *Achilles*, weaving through the mass of confused, storage-dazed civilians clogging the major disembarkation routes as they pulled themselves along fat, netting-lined docking umbilici. A few small portholes afforded him a view of the station’s massive solar power vanes and a glimpse of Gamma Serpentis itself, its surface wracked by violent storms.

He pulled his way through the crowd, using both hands and feet to scale the thick white plastic netting like an ape. At the far end he had to wait for the *Achilles*’s xenopathology suite to scan him in case he was carrying any alien viruses or bacteria into the station. Given its closed atmosphere and population density, they took the possibility of any viral introduction very seriously.

Once cleared, he pulled himself through the airlock and into the station’s central axis. He was immediately directed into a huge cargo elevator that powered down one of the transport spokes to the station floor, where gravity was thankfully close to Terran standard. At the base of the spoke was a huge, wide hangar, easily five hundred metres across, currently crowded with thousands of kaygryn civilians being herded into queues by beleaguered Habsec agents. Across the walls were large holo screens, some displaying live news feeds, others directing humans and kaygryn in both Terran and Argish. The air was thick with panic and chatter. Every time the news feeds showed a picture of the remains of Vos’Shan, a collective wail of anguish would ripple through the crowd.

Vondur moved to an alcove next to the base of the freight elevator and reactivated the squadron markers which Jarvin had sent him. All ten kaygryn were inside the hangar.

‘ZEN, where are you?’

‘We have been retrieved from the cargo bay, Captain, and are making our way into Navem Sigma. I have accessed the station’s VI and can see you on the security cameras. If you remain where you are, we will be with you in less than five minutes.’

‘Okay. As fast as you can, please.’

‘Of course.’

Vondur cancelled the feed and looked around. There was barely a human in sight, and every new tranche of humans that was ferried down by the freight elevator was shepherded straight through one of the hangar's multiple exits, into another, smaller hangar beyond. A large holo above the door read 'priority access only' in green lettering. Habsec manning the doors were not letting any kaygryn through.

'Christ,' he said to Lyra over his IHD, as he saw another image of the radioactive wasteland that used to be Vos'Shan. 'You'd better hope Iyadi is here. He sure as hell isn't there any more.'

'We'll be with you in two minutes,' Lyra replied tersely.

Vondur checked his pistol in his chest-mount holster and zipped his jacket up. It was cold in the hangar, despite the balmy temperature inside the hab proper. He caught glimpses of it intermittently through the opening priority access door, a ten-kilometre curved stretch of city and tiered pasture, a vast tract of land hemmed in by two ten-kilometre slices of thick clear plastic which allowed the sunlight in.

ZEN arrived a minute later, carrying Lyra's armoured holdall in one hand.

'I want to speak to Habsec,' she said via ZEN's chest speaker, 'to the left, by the gate.'

Vondur's brow creased. 'How can you see them?'

'ZEN has accessed the hangar's security cameras and is feeding me a direct link,' Lyra replied. Vondur looked at ZEN next to him.

'Good work.'

'Thank you, Captain.'

They moved through the crowds of kaygryn, many openly howling at the destruction of their country and the loss of their loved ones. They kept clawing at Vondur and ZEN, and at first Vondur thought they might have been begging, or even trying to get information out of him. It was only after one of them tried to force something into his hands, a small token, that he realised they were thanking him for the evacuation, for saving their lives. Despite everything the UN had done to ruin them as a species, they were pathetically grateful.

He felt terrible then. He had seen a considerable amount of civilian suffering in his time as a Goliath pilot, more than most UN citizens were even aware of on their comfortable, wealthy Veigis-Class worlds, but this

outpouring of grief and gratitude tore the soul. He couldn't even begin to fathom their suffering.

'I'm sorry,' he began to say repeatedly as they pressed through the crowds. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' He must have refused a thousand trinkets by the time they reached the Habsec line. The quorl there were clad in armoured, form-moulded pressure suits, looking like Mantix-clad insects, their mirrored visors impassively reflecting the tortured expressions of a thousand kaygryn. Vondur was seconds from accosting the closest when Lyra stopped him.

'What is it?' he asked, slightly annoyed.

'Over there.' ZEN pointed vicariously to the far right corner of the hangar, to a cluster of humans clad in black Mantix. Each had EFFECT printed in white between the shoulder blades. Surrounding them were crates of equipment, and all were armed with railguns. The commander, denoted as such by the stripes on his shoulder guards, was engaged in animated conversation with a Habsec officer. Both were helmetless.

'What are they doing here?' Vondur asked.

'They must be looking for Iyadi,' Lyra concluded decisively.

'How do *they* know about him?'

'We were openly tracking him on Anternis. I sent reports personally to the Vadian Mission Station,' Lyra replied. 'They all contained details of Iyadi. It was not a secret. SOC must have reached the same conclusion as us.'

Vondur hesitated. 'I don't like this,' he said. 'Not with what's happened.' He was still no closer to deciphering what had transpired with his Goliath. He hadn't ruled out some kind of false flag operation.

'Just as well we don't have a choice, then,' Lyra replied. 'If Iyadi is here, there's no way we can bag him without EFFECT knowing. They'll lock this whole station down in microseconds if they have to.'

'*If* they find him.'

'Captain,' Lyra said impatiently.

Vondur pulled a sour face. 'Shit.' She was right, but it didn't mean he had to like it. 'I hope you know what you're doing,' he muttered and walked purposefully over to the agents, ignoring the wall of kaygryn to his right. He stopped just short of the commander and cleared his throat loudly.

'Commander?' he said.

The man was tall, taller than Vondur, with dark hair and a hard, grim face. A scar ran down his right cheek like a lightning bolt. Vondur would have put



him at mid-forties.

‘Halder,’ the man replied. His voice was as grim as his face. ‘Who the fuck are you?’ His eyes flickered to the ZEN standing next to Vondur. Behind Halder, his men were slowly turning to face them. The Habsec officer watched him blankly, mouth parts clicking.

‘Captain Ben Vondur, Goliath pilot, 11 Squadron,’ Vondur said. Halder remained impassive. ‘This is... Special Agent Lyra Staerck. UNIS.’

Halder’s gaze slowly lowered to the crate ZEN was carrying, then back up to Vondur. He raised an eyebrow. ‘What is this, a fucking joke?’

‘Just show him, Ben,’ Lyra said over his IHD. Vondur nodded to ZEN, who opened the case, revealing the head, helmet and artificial body still ensconced within the memory gel bed. Halder cast his eyes over the arrangement.

‘Grief,’ he remarked quietly.

‘Commander Halder,’ Lyra said through ZEN’s chest speaker. ‘As you may have been able to guess, I have been decapitated.’

‘Yes,’ Halder said drily. ‘Something of a workaholic, Ms Staerck?’

Vondur, irrespective of the circumstances, had to stifle a snort.

‘Commander,’ Lyra continued patiently. ‘I was based on Anternis. I was tracking a number of kaygryn skarls before the attack. One of them was called—’

‘Iyadi,’ Halder interrupted. ‘We know. We know about you, too. Does SOC know you’re alive?’

‘No,’ Lyra said quickly, ‘and if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to keep it that way for the time being.’

Halder grunted in amusement. ‘Suit yourself.’

‘You’re tracking Iyadi, then?’ Vondur asked.

‘Aren’t you the guy who started this whole thing?’ Halder asked, making a show of peering at him.

‘We’re tracking Iyadi,’ Lyra said. ‘We have intelligence on his whereabouts.’

‘If your intelligence is “this hangar” then we can take it from here, thanks.’

‘Hey!’ Vondur snapped, jabbing a finger into the man’s chest. Halder watched the offending digit emotionlessly as it poked his Mantix. ‘Do you want our help or not?’

Halder wrinkled his nose and looked up to the ceiling. ‘Yes,’ he said after a

short period of reflection. ‘Actually I do.’ He threw an upward nod at ZEN. ‘This can-opener takes orders from you?’

‘That’s right,’ Vondur replied.

‘Outstanding. I’m jealous,’ he added with unfeigned sincerity. ‘You’re armed?’

It was a courtesy; even without his helmet on, Halder’s suit would have invasively scanned Vondur for armaments the moment he stepped within a hundred metres of him.

‘Just a pistol.’

‘Will it kill an adult male kaygryn?’

Vondur looked slightly taken aback. ‘I would have thought so.’

‘Then it’s all you need. What intelligence have you got for me?’

‘Before we left Anternis, I had my squadron scan the crowds for any kaygryn bearing a strong likeness to Iyadi. They turned up ten probables, IHD-tagged. All ten are in this hangar.’

Halder looked genuinely impressed. ‘Resourceful,’ he said, nodding. ‘Send them over.’

Vondur obliged the man, and Halder’s eyes took on a slightly vacant look as he reviewed the tags.

‘That was well done, Captain,’ he said. He fell silent again, and a shift in the behaviour of the surrounding EFFECT agents told Vondur that Halder had distributed the marker to the rest of his detachment. ‘All right, here’s the deal. Habsec is already preventing any kaygryn from leaving. We can make our lives easier by separating out the males from the females and kids – Habsec is going to put up messages in Argish on these boards.’ He indicated the large holos lining the hangar walls. ‘Once we’ve done that, we’ll check out your probables, then the rest if we have no luck. I’ve got twenty men with me, so we’ll spread out and do it in ten groups of two. You two...’ He indicated Vondur and ZEN. ‘... can be the eleventh. Clear?’

Vondur nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Outstanding. We move out in two minutes.’

Halder headed back to brief his men, and Vondur turned around so that he was facing the kaygryn. ‘Get that railgun ready,’ he murmured to ZEN, eyeing the crowd. Emotions were clearly running high. ‘I have a feeling we’re going to need it.’

ZEN obliged, strapping Lyra’s armoured holdall to its back and deploying

the rail carbine Vondur had given it on Uvolon, gripping it with both hands.

After the promised two minutes, Halder reappeared. 'We're ready. I'll be here with Habsec,' he said, gesturing to the habitat entry gates behind. 'The sooner we can bag this motherfucker, the sooner we can be out of this shithole.'

He turned smartly away and made for the back wall, where a line of armoured Habsec officers and their quorl commander waited. A few moments later Vondur's IHD chimed, informing him that he had been granted access to the closed EFFECT comlink. He had expected a sudden stream of chatter to clutter the net, but the bandwidth was silent. They had good comms discipline, though on reflection, that was to be expected.

Vondur turned to ZEN. 'Give Agent Staerck access to your optics and audio feed.'

'Yes, Captain,' ZEN replied, then, in Lyra's voice, 'Thanks, Ben. I didn't want to just jack in... I thought it would have been rude.'

'Don't thank me,' Vondur replied. He watched as the mass of kaygryn slowly parted like the Red Sea, with the females and their children moving over to the right-hand side of the hangar in a confused, slightly panicky mob, and the males remaining on the left. There must have been a good four or five thousand males to search through, though thankfully none of the IHD markers had been mistakenly assigned to a female.

There were some shrieks as the EFFECT teams quickly dispersed into the crowd, jostling and shoving their way through the packed aliens. The shrieks quickly turned to angry, affronted snarling, and it did not take long for all five thousand to join in so that the hangar was filled with a deafening crescendo of indignation. It was intensely intimidating, but beyond that harmless, and it did not dissuade the EFFECT teams from ploughing on. Of course, thought Vondur, it was easy for the EFFECT agents. They were equipped with railguns – railguns coded to their Mantix so that they would not fire even in the unlikely event of their disarmament. Their Mantix suits themselves also contained a suite of weaponry, from deployable high-resonance blades which could slice clean through steel, to microsilos stocked with vast quantities of lethal and nonlethal ordnance. Even the nanofibre weave which coated the gel matrix and armour plates underneath could emit a violent electronic pulse to reduce the strongest man to a spasming, pissing wreck. He, by comparison, was wearing a comprehensively unarmoured

jacket and combat trousers and had come equipped with a pistol that would happily put a whole magazine through him in the wrong hands.

He sighed resignedly and brought his pistol out of its holster, and he and ZEN followed suit, moving into the channel created by the EFFECT teams, searching methodically, heading specifically for any tagged aliens. Either side of them, male kaygryn roared and raged, gesturing angrily and making deep, derisory clucking noises. Once again, he was desperately glad to have ZEN with him; the aliens seemed much more reluctant to approach the VI with the railgun than the much less impressive human with the much less impressive pistol.

There could be no doubt that, on a civilisational level, the kaygryn hated the UN. Kaygryn militia groups had waged a violent and bloody guerrilla campaign in the wake of Hadan's Reach, leading to a much expanded UNIS and EFFECT presence on all shared kaygryn worlds. Because of the inherent difficulty in understanding Argish and the wilful ignorance the UN displayed in understanding kaygryn culture, any subsequent counterterrorism operations were heavy handed and counterproductive. The negative reaction to the presence of the EFFECT agents on Navem Sigma was deeply unsurprising, and the agents were hardly taking pains to minimise their footprint. One thing was certain in Vondur's mind: making arrests now was going to get violent.

They reached the first tagged kaygryn, a dark brown, crop-furred male with a head of long, dark blue barbs flowing down his back where human hair would ordinarily grow. He waved his vestigial arms about maniacally, producing a resonating cluck cluck cluck that emanated from deep within the chest cavity. Above his head, the turquoise marker flashed invisibly.

'Well? Is it him?' Vondur asked, facing a wall of kaygryn whose anger had reached fever pitch. Without the protective armour of a Goliath encasing him, he had never felt so vulnerable in his life.

'I... I honestly don't know,' Lyra's voice replied via the ZEN's speakers.

'Christ, Lyra, they're ten seconds away from tearing us limb from limb, is it him or isn't it?'

'I... don't think so,' she replied.

'Shit,' Vondur breathed, looking around to see if he could see the other agents. The crowd was too densely packed. 'We'll take him anyway,' he

decided. The kaygryn was looking at them suspiciously now, probably wondering why they were spending such a long time in front of him.

‘I don’t think we should,’ Lyra replied, her voice tinged with worry. ‘This was a mistake. There must be a better way of drawing him out.’

‘If we arrest this one we might spook the real Iyadi,’ Vondur said. ‘That would draw him out.’

‘Or we might get killed.’

‘Lyra, I thought you were a field agent,’ he teased, moving towards the tagged kaygryn. He had hoped that being cavalier would have given him more courage, but approaching the packed mass of furious bodies, he wasn’t so sure.

‘I’ve got some serious activity here,’ one of the EFFECT agents announced suddenly over the net. ‘Something’s... cover!’

The explosion wasn’t large, but it wasn’t small either. Vondur looked over to see a cluster of mangled kaygryn bodies jump four metres into the air, debris, limbs and rich red blood flying in all directions and carried on a wave of acrid smoke. Among them, a pair of EFFECT agents, their Mantix nanofibre rigid from absorbing the blast, cartwheeled slowly away like an acrobatic duo at the circus. For a split second there was silence, and then a wall of sound slammed into him like a tidal wave, a cacophony of screams, roars, commands, comms chatter and the shrill, penetrating station alarm accompanied by a sudden whirlwind of amber warning lights.

Around Vondur, kaygryn dropped to the ground as if someone had switched them all off, leaving him, ZEN and the EFFECT agents the tallest things in the hangar for three hundred metres. Immediately he saw an armed kaygryn male sprinting across the far wall behind the females and children. One of the markers pulsed above his head.

‘There! I see him!’ Vondur yelled over the net, breaking into a sprint. ‘ZEN! Get him, there! Everyone else on me!’

The VI quickly overtook him, its heavy legs crunching fingers and toes and limbs as it powered through the mass of bodies. Vondur, by contrast, had to barge his way through as the kaygryn slowly returned to their feet. It took him a while to realise that they weren’t wailing at him; they were cheering Iyadi.

Habsec officers were moving now to close Iyadi down, clustering round the gate into the habitat with weapons up, but Vondur could see Halder

gesturing at them furiously to take him alive. In that brief moment of hesitation, Iyadi opened fire. Blinding blue pulses exploded from the weapon's muzzle, searing straight through the Habsec body armour as though it were paper. Half a dozen quorl dropped, smoke spilling from their charred insides. The rest tried to fall back into cover, but Iyadi was merciless. Another two stroboscopic sprays and twelve quorl lay dead.

'He's got a fucking plasma rifle,' one of the EFFECT agents snarled over the net.

Vondur wasn't listening. Iyadi was through the gate now and into the habitat. The plasma rifle was powerful, but the usually single-shot weapon would be close to overheating after such a lengthy and inexpert discharge.

'Stop him, Captain!' Halder shouted over the link. Emergency bots were already swarming over the scene, and blast shutters were unfolding over the station's observation ports. The holos around the hangar were flashing with red-and-white warning graphics in Argish and Terran. Behind him, the EFFECT agents were firing on the kaygryn males as they mobbed them, using nonlethal rounds and shock pulses to blast them into unconsciousness. Even though they were practically invincible in the Mantix suits, they still had to wade laboriously through five thousand bodies. Vondur and ZEN were the only ones clear.

Vondur sprinted across the open space, past the steaming Habsec bodies with their blackened, cauterised wounds. He saw ZEN barge his way ahead through the priority access gate and into another crowd, this time of humans. Iyadi had already cleared a path through them, however, allowing ZEN to run almost unhindered through the secondary hangar. Vondur felt a stitch gnawing at his guts and cursed his six-month soft detachment. He and his squadron had grown fat and lazy on Anternis.

His IHD ran *Ice* in response, a UNAF-grade stimulant program which immediately eliminated the stitch. He felt energy flow to his muscles and his breaths ease and deepen. His pace easily increased. His feet slammed against the floor plate with such large and powerful strides that he covered the hangar within twenty seconds, and in another three he was through the gate at the far end and into the habitat proper.

Running into the interior of Navem Sigma immediately instilled within him a mind-bending sense of vertigo. He had been to habitats before, but none as massive and ambitious as this one. Entire cities hung from the ceiling

twenty kilometres above like gleaming stalactites, and through the three ten-kilometre plastic window sections, he could see the station's massive power vanes glittering in the starlight and the huge orb of Gamma Serpentis visibly moving as the station rotated.

'He's making for a transport,' ZEN said.

Vondur looked about him. The station's main transport system was the zero-gravity central axis, connected to the walls by maglev elevators, but Iyadi was unlikely to be that stupid. That could be overridden and locked down remotely.

'Where?' Vondur shouted instinctively, so focussed on giving chase that he'd completely overlooked the marker still pulsing over Iyadi's head.

A new tag appeared on his vision from ZEN. Three hundred metres to his right. He'd entered the station at one of the fringes of a quorl-ethnic city, though their buildings and accessways were similar enough to those of the UN as to be easily navigable. He continued his sprint down a broad, carbon-polymer road, turned right at the junction and saw ZEN ahead, with Iyadi a good hundred metres beyond that.

'Get him, ZEN!'

'Come on!' Lyra added, her voice tense.

'I cannot reach him,' ZEN said, defeated. 'Sorry, Captain.' It was strange to hear the VI speak without gasping for breath. Vondur saw a cruiser pull away from the ground ahead in a harsh blaze of engine fire. ZEN had been just beyond arm's length.

'Shit,' Vondur snapped. He had his IHD link with the station VI and searched the vicinity for a car. He found one just round the corner, a powerful Vequidin C40 cruiser. 'ZEN, this one,' he said, beaming it a marker.

'Captain, I cannot steal a civilian car,' ZEN protested.

'We aren't stealing it; we are commandeering it,' Vondur said.

'Yes, sir,' ZEN replied. There was a babble of data chatter and the doors opened. Vondur dived into the pilot's seat while ZEN climbed into the passenger's side, its movements clumsy and awkward with Lyra strapped to his back. The cruiser hummed online thanks to ZEN's electronic wizardry, and Vondur wrenched the control column back on full power, steaming into the air at a hundred kilometres an hour.

'Thank you, Jarvin,' he muttered to himself, endlessly grateful for the IHD tag. Iyadi may have been resourceful, but he was a rotten driver. The cruiser

zipped through the air so erratically that within two minutes of it being stolen, the station VI had assumed control before it could be ploughed through one of the habitat's windows.

'We've got him now,' Vondur said, grinning like a mad man. He ramped up the thrust until they pulled alongside Iyadi, and they watched him as he wrenched the control column in a futile fit of pique.

'Can you make it from here?' Vondur asked ZEN.

'No, he can't,' Lyra said.

'Yes, I can,' ZEN replied, kicking the passenger door. It squealed off its hinges and tumbled to the farmland a couple of hundred metres below, narrowly missing an agri-mech as it speared into the ground. The station VI immediately sensed the damage to the cruiser and tried to intercede, but ZEN overrode it with a smooth stream of data-packed gibberish.

Iyadi was to their left now, barely ten metres away. Vondur eased the control column across to bring ZEN within jumping range—

'Ben!' Lyra shouted through ZEN's speaker. The hold was suddenly filled with searing plasma bolts, punching through the alloy, the roof, the windshield, every penetration leaving a glowing yellow hole in its wake. Vondur flinched violently as a bolt punched the control column clean in half. Another speared the engine block, setting off an alarm inside the cockpit. ZEN managed to jump clear of the Vequidin before the engine spluttered and died entirely, pitching the cruiser forward and affording Vondur an unparalleled view of the field directly below.

'Damn... it...' he managed, his hands finding the ceiling before the harness pulled him hard against the seat and jet nozzles appeared from all sides, drenching the hold in impact foam. The fall to the ground lasted the best part of ten seconds. Vondur yelled all the way down, clawing instinctively through the syrupy foam that now filled the hold up to his sternum. The absent passenger door meant that much of it had leaked out.

The impact was nowhere near as violent as he had anticipated. Moments before the cruiser hit, air cushions burst from the bodywork, softening the initial blow. The gooey foam as well acted much like nanogel, absorbing and redistributing the force. The windshield shattered thanks to the structural weakening caused by the plasma bores, and smashed fruit and soil ploughed through the new gap, but what force the cushions and gel could not absorb, the deep, soft soil did. The cruiser ploughed and settled into it rather quietly.



Vondur remained seated in the cockpit for a minute, allowing the *Ice* to wear off. His IHD ran several medical diagnostics, reporting minor lacerations of his face and arms from the shattered windscreen, but he was otherwise fine. He started laughing, then, the shock of it pervading his entire system. As soon as the impact foam de-solidified, he undid the harness weakly and climbed out the back door, pulling himself out of the impact crater and on to a sticky layer of soil and mashed fruit. It must have been some kind of quorl analogue.

He searched for the marker on his IHD. Iyadi's cruiser had come down as well, two hundred metres away.

'ZEN? Lyra?'

'We are all right, Captain. We were thrown clear.'

'Where are you? Are you near Iyadi?'

'No, Captain. I believe he remains in the vehicle.'

'Okay,' Vondur breathed. He wiped some blood from his eyes where the lacerations on his forehead had leaked before being coagulated by his IHD, and pulled his pistol from its holster. He armed it and broke into a jog towards Iyadi's cruiser, his joints protesting despite the residual *Ice* in his system.

He reached Iyadi's cruiser. It had come down harder than Vondur's, judging by the extensive damage to the frame and the badly torn impact cushions. Inside he could see Iyadi slumped over the steering column, impact foam slowly evaporating around him. Blood was dribbling from a dozen gashes in the kaygryn's head. Some of his barbs had been entirely severed, and they leaked some kind of bluish tissue fluid.

'Get out of the car,' Vondur said, pointing the pistol at him. 'Commander Halder, I have him,' he said over the EFFECT link. He could see in the distance agents already racing towards them in small, one-man Habsec Wasps.

'We're en route,' Halder growled in reply. 'Good work, Captain.'

Vondur kept his pistol trained on Iyadi. 'Get out the car,' he repeated.

Iyadi mumbled something in Argish. The door bolts popped, and Iyadi slowly unfolded himself from the cruiser. The kaygryn took a wobbly step towards him, baring his teeth.

'Don't even think about it,' Vondur said. Iyadi took another step, then crumpled to his knees, sinking into the soft, refined soil. Unthinkingly,

Vondur leaned forward to check the alien wasn't about to die, and found himself disarmed in a matter of split seconds.

'*Fuck!*' he shouted as Iyadi smacked the gun from his hands. It sailed a good ten metres and jabbed barrel-first into the soil. Vondur instinctively brought his fists up, his IHD automatically running a martial arts program, but Iyadi was too fast and strong. Two punches and Vondur was dazed and on the floor with a broken nose, trying to stop the kaygryn from shattering his ribs.

He rolled over, taking in a mouthful of soil in the process, and pressed himself back up to his feet. Iyadi roared and took another swing at him, which he dodged. Blood spilled from his nose as he crouched and launched himself bodily into Iyadi's midriff, powering them both to the floor. He managed to land three good hits to the kaygryn's leathery face before he was thrown off. He rolled over and righted himself into a crouch, fists up. Somewhere in the back of his mind floated a distant memory of UNAF martial arts training.

He never got to use it. Seconds later, three Mantix-clad EFFECT agents ploughed into the alien from the side and tackled him to the ground, and the crack of high-voltage shock pulse zapped through the air, setting Iyadi to flopping and spasming about like a fish. They immediately cuffed him, gave him a thorough kicking for good measure and then knocked him out with a dart to the neck.

One of the agents approached Vondur. He could see in the Mantix mirror visor just how badly mashed up his bloody, soiled face was.

'I have orders from Commander Halder,' a woman's voice said from the shoulder-mounted speaker. 'If you want to come with, you're going out cold.'

'Where are we going?' Vondur asked stupidly.

'Can't say. You in?'

Vondur nodded, his breath rattling in his throat. 'I am.'

'Your people?'

Vondur followed her finger to see ZEN and Lyra walking towards them, flanked by EFFECT agents.

'Yes,' he said, 'I should imagine so.'

'Good,' the agent said. 'Let's go. We're running out of time.'

## BLACKWORLD

*‘The successes and failures of the United Nations are controlled directly by the willingness of this government to break the same rules which we insist the other nations of this galaxy abide by.’*

### **President Jan Jiao, giving evidence at the Clemens Inquiry into the massacre at Beng’Tusk**

NV-[Tier-One/Non-Sentient]-1509a/UN010, known colloquially as Sophia, was the chosen blackworld for Iyadi’s debrief. UN Joint Intelligence Command maintained a dozen such worlds throughout the colonised galaxy, on a register bearing a classification that far exceeded top secret. Habitable but entirely uninhabited by anything above Tier One, the planet was a black hole on all UN star charts, the only technological presence a solitary Janitor satellite tracing a lonely high orbit, maintaining a silent, morose vigil.

Almost all full-spectrum scanning would reveal Sophia to be a perfectly, boringly ordinary planet. The lower hemisphere of the world was covered in one massive saltwater ocean, and the upper a terrestrial-analogue string of temperate continents, both crowned by polar ice. The atmosphere was a breathable mix of oxygen and nitrogen, supporting millions of species of Tier-One fauna. The planet existed on an axial tilt of nineteen degrees and traced a circular orbit around the local M-class star of close to one hundred and twenty-eight million kilometres distant.

Sophia had once been a candidate for colonisation before the need and inclination to inhabit new worlds had slowly died. The UN had already claimed many terrestrial worlds in the galaxy, often co-habiting with the kaygryn who both flourished in the same atmosphere and, more importantly, were much less able to refuse UN settlement fleets. Indeed, the Expansion lasted the most part of a century before the enormous cost burden of seeding a fully self-sustaining colony forced the industry into public hands. The immediate consequence was a comprehensive downsizing and multi-phase sale of territories which, in its most recent incarnation, had resulted in the much-maligned Treaty of Hadan’s Reach. In the wake, UNIS had filled the vacuum. Blackworlds were useful, after all, and, Solar Operations Command

argued, necessary for the abduction and interrogation of foreign citizens. Sophia, like other blackworlds, was completely off the grid and utterly deniable, knowledge of its existence limited at any given time to a handful of personnel within the UN.

The only manmade feature on Sophia was a bunker hollowed out of a seam of limestone that ran a kilometre underground, beneath a temperate forest that ran unbroken for a thousand kilometres beneath the northern steppes. Its location was not marked by any electronic beacons. The only electronic equipment in the bunker consisted of a few old-tech sodium lamps and a generator, and they were buried beneath a kilometre of rock. The only way one would ever be able to locate and access the bunker was if they knew its exact physical whereabouts.

Fortunately, Commander Halder knew its exact physical whereabouts.

They reached Sophia on their fifth jump, having traced a highly erratic course from Navem Sigma to throw off anyone attempting pursuit. Their ship was a modified voidbreaker shaped like an arrow, its FTL drives a massive trio of cylinders that completely eclipsed the tiny, non-rotating life-support module. Crammed inside were thirty VR capsules and a small hangar containing one VTOL space plane and a five-man jeep.

The moment they were through the wormhole terminus, Halder broadcast a very specific code to the Janitor satellite. The Janitor received the code and relayed another, corresponding code to the Beta Thani Mission Station thirty-five billion kilometres away, who passed on a third code to the Fleet Comms Array at Halo Arch. Someone, somewhere in SOC Vargonroth was informed of the voidbreaker's arrival.

The Janitor watched the voidbreaker every centimetre of its hour-long journey through the solar system, scanning and recording every conceivable aspect of the ship. Even the Janitor, however, with its incredibly powerful LRIS, couldn't pull up any information on twenty-four of the twenty-five occupants. Only Captain Ben Vondur showed up, but with his UNAF-encrypted files even he was a partial portrait. The rest, not counting the unregistered alien or unregistered alien robot, were complete ghosts.

The voidbreaker reached low orbit and smoothly positioned itself above the bunker with directed blasts from its attitude thrusters. It took twenty minutes to bring the landing contingent out of VR sync, into Mantix and into

the space plane. Halder and two of his men, Cole and Takach, as well as Vondur, ZEN and Lyra, would escort Iyadi to the bunker.

The journey to the surface was brief and smooth, though the weather was miserable. The air was cold and filled with drizzle, and it evaporated off the space plane's glowing thermal panels in great clouds of steam. They landed in a fern-filled glade which perfectly accommodated the small craft, and Vondur assumed, as he walked down the landing ramp and into the cool alien air, that it had been manually cleared many years before. The fact that the vessel's wingtips sat just shy of the perimeter gave the lie to it having occurred naturally.

The Mantix he had been given immediately analysed the air, declaring it breathable after a few seconds, and he removed his helmet and relished in taking a few deep breaths. He had been breathing artificial atmosphere for nearly two days, and the cold air of Sophia's forests was pure joy in his chest.

'This way,' Halder said, marching through the glade and into the wood. Vondur followed. It was an unsettling feeling, being on a world which he knew to be completely devoid of sentient life. The only sound was the wind-driven rain against the leaves. Even the floor, carpeted in green and burgundy moss, softened their footfalls so as to preserve the forest's silence. It felt like they were trespassing on sacred ground.

His fingers traced waist-high ferns as they marched on, Cole and Takach dragging the unconscious Iyadi through the undergrowth. In doing so, they left a channel in the leaf bed and traces of ripped moss and torn ferns, but the forest would soon repair. Not that it even mattered; Halder had told Vondur on the voidbreaker, after he had finally been apprised of their intended destination, that the Janitor satellite hadn't picked up any activity around Sophia for over a century.

They spent twenty-five minutes traipsing through the forest. Vondur replaced his helmet after a few minutes, but no one spoke. The spectre of war loomed over them, even out here on this cold, empty world. It seemed a shame to Vondur that no one had colonised it. It was practically a twin of Earth, much more so than most other worlds. Even Vargonroth, the capital of the UN, was darker, wetter and generally more unpleasant than Earth.

They reached the hatch without incident. It was a small lump of moss-covered rock, easily missed and completely unremarkable. Halder had to scrape off most of the moss to get to the analogue entry panel. His gauntleted

fingers manipulated the code rolls to their correct configuration, and the hatch swung open with a clicking sound like that of clockwork.

‘Impressive,’ Vondur muttered.

‘All right, everybody in,’ Halder said, climbing down the rusty iron ladder and into an antechamber three metres underground. ZEN followed with Lyra, then Vondur and finally the two EFFECT agents, who managed to manhandle Iyadi down using their Mantix exoskeletons to take the kaygryn’s weight.

Inside the bare stone antechamber was an iron cage elevator, which operated via a simple yet painfully loud generator system. Cole, Takach and Iyadi went down first, the cage rattling and echoing unnervingly down the kilometre-long tunnel. Vondur and ZEN went next, though Vondur was not entirely comfortable sharing the elevator with the very heavy combat VI. At the bottom was the bunker proper, a much wider space covered in large, bioluminescent white tiles and lit by the generator-powered sodium lamps. A row of chairs lined one wall, and a door led through into the interrogation suite where there were three cells, each replete with a desk, four chairs and old-fashioned two-way mirrors.

Halder was the last down. ‘Take him to number one,’ he said, and Iyadi was dragged, still unconscious, into the interrogation room. ‘Take Agent Staerck into the observation room,’ he told Vondur. ‘We’ll have your ZEN.’ He wasn’t asking.

Vondur nodded, irritated but powerless, and took the armoured holdall into the smaller, darker observation room which looked into the interrogation cell via the mirror. There was no need for recording equipment; they would all be recording the interrogation via their Mantix helmets.

‘May I access ZEN’s optic feeds again?’ Lyra asked, as Halder ushered the VI into the interrogation cell.

‘Mm,’ Vondur grunted absentmindedly and ordered ZEN to grant her access. He watched Cole set down a plain black holdall and extract a number of chain-linked manacles, which he and Takach used to shackle Iyadi to the chair and floor. Once they were satisfied, Halder angled one of the sodium lamps so that it shone directly into Iyadi’s face and had ZEN stand at the back.

‘Fold your arms,’ the EFFECT commander told the VI, who obliged. Takach and Cole stood at the back as well and unlocked their railguns,

aiming them at Iyadi's head. Once Halder was satisfied that everything was just so, he extended his index finger and pressed it into Iyadi's arm. A small filament stabbed out from the finger tip, and a second later the kaygryn was conscious.

It took them a good five minutes to stop the alien from screaming and crying. It was not the reaction Vondur had been expecting. He watched, wincing slightly as the kaygryn tore at his bonds, the chains rattling intolerably loudly inside the interrogation cell. Iyadi babbled interminably in Argish, hands claspings and unclasping, tears streaming from his eyes. He looked about him frantically, at the Mantix-clad men with their frighteningly unreadable mirror-visors, at ZEN, at the railguns aimed at his head. If he kept it up they were going to have to knock him out again before he started damaging himself.

Eventually Halder lost his patience and through his Mantix speakers bellowed at Iyadi to shut up. The kaygryn did fall silent, more out of shock than anything else, though quickly resumed simpering. Vondur almost felt sorry for him.

'I know you speak Terran,' Halder said. He held up a hand to silence Iyadi before he could speak. 'Please do not deny it. I have personally heard recordings of you speaking fluent Terran.'

Iyadi nodded, deflated.

'We have some questions for you.' Halder's voice was neutral and informative, with no hint of aggression. It demonstrated, to Vondur at least, a fairly staggering indifference to the illegal abduction and interrogation of an alien citizen. 'If you answer truthfully and comprehensively, you will come to no harm. If you do not, or I suspect you do not, I will hurt you, and I will hurt you badly. Do you understand what I have just told you?'

'I don't know anything,' Iyadi said, tears still streaming from his eyes. 'Please, I don't know why you have brought me here.'

'You do, Commander Iyadi. You do and we know you do. We have been watching you for a long time. We know about your activities. We know about your associates. You know why you are here, and nothing you can say will convince me otherwise.' Halder spread his arms. 'We are off the grid, Commander. Blackworld. We are light years away from all traces of civilisation. Your compatriots have no idea where you are. They would not be able to find you even if they did. We are alone and time is on our side.'

‘I don’t know anything!’ Iyadi repeated and fell to crying again. Halder shook his head and clasped his hands on the table in front of him. ‘Stop it. Immediately. You are embarrassing yourself. Be straight with me, save us all the time. The sooner you answer my questions, the sooner you can go.’

Vondur knew that they would never let Iyadi go. The best thing the kaygryn could hope for was lifelong imprisonment in some EFFECT dungeon. In all likelihood, he would be summarily killed.

‘Please, please, please,’ Iyadi was saying, rocking back and forth in the chair, the manacles tinkling. ‘Please, I don’t know anything.’

‘I’m going to start asking you my questions now,’ Halder said. There was no movement from the Mantix suit, nothing. It was like watching a statue talking. ‘Easy questions to get started. Where are you from?’

‘Please, I don’t know anything,’ Iyadi wept. ‘Please let me go, please.’

‘*He’s convincing,*’ Vondur said to Lyra in the next room. ‘*Do you think we have the wrong man?*’

Lyra snorted. ‘*They all do this. This act. It’s nothing Halder won’t have expected.*’

‘*You’ve interrogated kaygryn before?*’

‘*Yes. A long time ago. We used to pick them up and hand them over to the provar.*’

‘*Christ,*’ Vondur said, eyebrows raised. ‘*That’s brutal.*’

‘*Yeah,*’ Lyra replied. ‘*As you can imagine, we didn’t see many of them again.*’

‘You don’t know where you’re from?’ Halder asked Iyadi. ‘Come on, that’s an easy one.’

‘*Ashan,*’ Iyadi said, after a period of reflection, in one long exhalation.

‘Vos’Shan, yes? We call it Vos’Shan.’

‘Yes.’

‘How long have you lived there?’

‘Years.’

‘How many years?’

Iyadi shrugged.

‘You used to live on Phaetonis, yes?’

‘*How did he know...*’ Lyra trailed off. ‘*Even I didn’t know that.*’

‘*How long were you watching him for on Uvolon?*’

‘*Months.*’



‘Yes,’ Iyadi replied. The alien’s fear, at least partly authentic, was slowly evaporating. Wariness, a pan-cultural vocal inflection, had crept into his voice in its place.

‘You were involved in the insurrection there,’ Halder pressed.

‘No! I—’

‘Cole.’

Cole shouldered his railgun and stepped forward, producing a large knife from a pouch at his waist.

‘*Ash, ash!*’ Iyadi said, holding his hands up. He sighed again. ‘I was in the militia on *Vantona*, yes.’

‘You were involved in the insurrection on Phaetonis,’ Halder repeated more forcefully. His façade of neutrality was slipping.

‘Call it what you want,’ Iyadi said in a flash of animation. ‘It was self-defence.’

‘Your people murdered four hundred UN civilians.’

‘*Where is this going?*’

‘*I don’t know.*’

Iyadi shrugged. ‘I do not grieve for them.’

For the first time, Halder moved. It wasn’t much, a slight shift of his arms. Iyadi’s comment had riled him.

‘What do you know about the Treaty of Hadan’s Reach?’ Halder asked.

Iyadi made a low, growling noise. ‘Your compact with the provar that doomed my race to oblivion? All there is.’

‘That is why you left Phaetonis.’

Iyadi’s hands clenched. When he spoke, it was through bared teeth. ‘After my family was killed, I had nothing to stay for.’

‘You left for Vos’Shan.’

‘Yes!’ Iyadi exploded. Both railguns trained on him twitched. ‘Why are you asking me these things? Why am I here?’

‘We’ll come on to that,’ Halder replied casually. Cole had resumed his place at the back of the room; now Halder summoned him forward again. This time Cole produced a small syrette from a panel on his vambrace and handed it to his commander.

‘What is that?’ Iyadi asked, suddenly visibly nervous. Once more he began to strain against his bonds, muscles flexing against the unbreakable chains. Wordlessly, Halder leaned forward and grabbed Iyadi by the throat.

*'Is he going to kill him?'* Vondur asked.

*'No. It's a chemical compound we developed in the wake of Hadan's Reach. Tailored for kaygryn. Makes them talk.'*

*'What, like truth serum?'*

*'Sure.'*

*'How long does it last?'*

*'Never as long as you'd like.'*

Halder jabbed the syrette into the thrashing Iyadi's neck, squeezed the tube and tossed it away. He sat back and gave it a few minutes to work its way into the alien's bloodstream. It was immediately clear when it had taken effect; Iyadi became woozy, his head lolled and his breathing became deeper and more laboured.

'Commander Iyadi, why did you travel to Vos'Shan?' Halder asked levelly.

'To... plan,' Iyadi replied after a good deal of staring into space. He spoke slowly, as if he was heavily intoxicated and each word had to be physically forced out of his mouth.

'To plan what?'

'To plan our... *yenghari*...'

'What does *yenghari* mean? In Terran?'

'*Yenghari*...' Iyadi replied stupidly.

'ZEN,' Halder said. 'What does it mean?'

'It is difficult, Commander. I would say either revenge or reclamation,' ZEN said. 'It might be neither.'

'Which is it, kaygryn?' Halder growled.

Iyadi shrugged slowly and with a great deal of effort, as if there were weights piled on top of his shoulders. 'Revenge.'

'Revenge for what?'

'For... Hadan's Reach. You sold our land to the provar... they killed millions of us... the UN did nothing.'

'You left for Anternis to plan your revenge,' Halder said, immune to the anguish in the alien's voice. 'Who did you plan it with?'

'Soldiers... comrades, friends...'

'Give me names.'

'Ventu, Havé... Lok, Bega... Oné. Others. Many others.'

'Any UN personnel?'

‘... Yes.’

In the viewing chamber, Vondur stood up and moved forward so that his face was so close to the two-way mirror it was practically touching it. ‘*Shit*,’ he said, his features creased into a deep frown.

‘How many exactly? Give me names and details,’ Halder continued.

‘Three... they... didn’t tell me their names.’

Halder pressed a button on his wrist, and a holo flickered into life above it.

‘Is this one of them?’

‘*Jesus Christ... that’s Karris*,’ Lyra said.

‘*Who?*’

‘*My fucking boss!*’

‘I know him...’ Iyadi slurred. A slow, deliberate finger jabbed at the holo. ‘He, he was helping us.’

Halder nodded and deactivated the holo. There was a silence, during which Vondur assumed he was talking to Takach, because after a few moments Takach nodded and exited the room.

‘The man you have identified is a United Nations Intelligence Service agent called Karris Haig,’ Halder said grimly. ‘How did you meet?’

‘Two months after I arrived on *Ashan* he... found me. He told me that he had been listening to my conversations and that he could help. He... *hated* your treaty with the provar, even after all these years. He was embarrassed and... *ashamed*. He wanted to help us strike back against you.’ Iyadi was talking as though comatose, staring at the table in front of him.

‘How did he help you?’

‘He... told me that we were being watched by your UNIS. He told us that UNIS on *Ashan* had no money, that we were being treated as a... low priority. Told us how to avoid detection. Gave us your deadzone technology to hide our activities from your drones... helped us plan revenge.’

‘What was your plan?’

‘To... attack the provar.’

‘Why?’

‘So that they would attack you.’

There was a long silence. Halder rapped a finger absently against the table top, and Vondur had to marvel at how calm the man was. His own hands were clenched into fists – fists which he would have dearly loved to pummel Iyadi to death with. He lay the deaths of his men directly at the alien’s door.

*'I can't believe it,' Lyra breathed. 'I don't believe it...'*

'Tell me how you went about putting this plan together,' Halder said calmly. 'You attacked the Vadian Crusade Fleet.'

'Yes.'

'With ten clippers.'

'Yes.'

'Where were these clippers? Where did you keep them?'

'On Uvolon.'

'Not in Vos'Shan.'

'No... we kept them south, on an island. Karris helped us smuggle them there... got weaponry on the black market. It took... months.'

'Then you hacked the civil aviation VI. Hid the clippers in the civilian traffic.'

'Yes.'

'It was a suicide mission.'

'They volunteered. The pilots... They knew what they were doing, knew... what was being asked of them. They... *hated* the UN for what it had done to us. They were more than... willing to give their lives to the cause.'

Halder reclined slightly. Vondur wondered how much of this EFFECT already knew. Intelligence heavyweights in SOC had clearly been on the case.

*'We need to get the word out,'* Lyra said, her voice shaky. *'We are on the brink of all-out war. If the Ascendancy knew that they had been tricked into this by the kaygryn—'*

*'Shh! Listen!'*

'The corvette that your comrades tried to escape on. The one that got shot down. Was that part of your plan?'

'My plan... Karris's plan. It left fewer who knew. My skarls did not know.'

There was a short pause.

'Then the provar began bombarding your men. Four hundred kaygryn died in the Tiberean Mountains. You're telling me that was part of your plan too?'

'Yes... Karris told us that UNIS was watching from the mountains... We massed troops where he told us to so that the provar would fire on us and... kill the UNIS woman inside...'

*'... Oh my God...'*

‘... *Shit. Lyra...*’

Halder clasped his hands together again. ‘You’re telling me that you sacrificed four hundred of your own men for the chance that the provar would accidentally kill *one* UNIS agent?’

‘They didn’t know... It was an officially sanctioned exercise. It had to be a large number with... anti-orbit weaponry to pose a threat to the provar... Your man told us that the... woman posed the greatest threat to the plan... told us she was already suspicious... that her death would help to anger the UN.’

*‘I’m going to kill him, Ben. I’m going to kill him. I can’t... Jesus Christ that... motherfucker.’*

*‘He’s already a dead man, Lyra.’* Thoughts whirled around Vondur’s head. He had no idea what to say to her. It was all too much to take in, too insane to be real, as if he were in some movie and that as soon as he climbed back out into the cold air of Sophia, the entire interrogation would be consigned to memory, imagined and free of consequence.

‘What did you do after the second rail strike?’ Halder pressed.

‘I hid... and waited. That was only the first part... of the plan. Karris told us that the UN would be slow to get involved. Reluctant. He told us that we had to... keep building the pressure.’ Iyadi’s breathing was still laboured, though noticeably improving. ‘Your President is reckless... He would react badly...’

‘What was the second part of the plan?’

‘To kill your... *Valleron.*’

*‘That word!’* Lyra exploded. *‘Valleron re-emplacement to centre!’*

*‘What are you talking about?’* Vondur asked irritably. He really wished she’d stop interrupting.

*‘Salvaged intelligence from the mission station said “Valleron re-emplacement to centre”. This kag asshole’s just said it again.’*

‘ZEN?’ Halder asked.

‘I do not know, Commander,’ ZEN intoned.

‘What’s a *Valleron*, kaygryn?’

*‘Valleron is a kaygryn hero... old stories, like... moral stories. Valleron was a large kaygryn, undefeatable in combat. Was killed by Ing’hen. Ing’hen was pure, good man. Valleron was powerful and arrogant. Ing’hen was poor and weak.’*

‘You mean like David and Goliath?’ Halder said, and then, nearly interrupting himself, ‘I see. *Valleron* is what you call a Goliath.’ He fiddled with his wrist holo, producing a picture of one. ‘This?’

Iyadi nodded slowly. ‘Yes. Karris said that there were seven... *Goliaths* on Uvolon. We were going to get the provar to kill them. Karris said that they needed it to look like... they provoked the provar into firing... said he had a way of making it look like the UN was the... aggressor.’

Behind his mirrored visor, Halder wore a sceptical look. ‘And how exactly did he do that?’

Iyadi shrugged. ‘I do not know.’

‘Want me to zap him?’ Cole asked.

‘No,’ Halder said, helmet twitching. ‘He’s telling the truth.’ The EFFECT commander stood up, causing Iyadi to flinch, and exited the room. A few seconds later, he opened the door to the room Vondur and Lyra were in.

‘Captain,’ he said levelly. ‘What happened on Anternis? Every news station in the UN says you fired first.’

Vondur grimaced, his face a rictus of distaste. ‘Someone remotely hacked my weapons suite and released half my surface-orbit battery. Completely undetectable. Lasted maybe thirty seconds.’

‘Someone who had to have been very familiar with Goliath firmware,’ Halder said.

‘Yes. It was a triple redundancy, UNAF-grade firewall. The base controller didn’t want to know. Said I had been in control the whole time.’

Halder nodded to himself. ‘That fits.’ He ducked back out of the room without another word. A few moments later, Vondur saw him re-enter the interrogation chamber.

‘So,’ Halder said, resuming his seat. ‘You hooked up with Haig, you cooked up a plan, you smuggled your clippers on to the planet, and you knocked off Agent Staerck.’ He spoke as if he were reading a shopping list. ‘Then you got four hundred of your own men killed, your skarls killed, you got a few Goliaths killed, you got a few provar killed, you got...’ He performed an elaborate shrug. ‘... a few thousand UN civilians killed. That was *all* part of your plan?’

Iyadi shook his head emphatically. ‘No. There was more to it... Much did not work. Corvette was supposed to be... shot down over... human city, for one.’

‘But that was the gist of it?’

‘The... what?’

‘The gist. The... that was broadly what you intended?’

Iyadi offered what could have been a shrug and a nod. ‘Do not ask me to... mourn for your people. I... hate them. I *hate* them.’ Tears suddenly brimmed in the kaygryn’s eyes, but it was difficult to tell whether they were the result of anger or distress. ‘Soon you will see... that your actions have... consequences.’

If the kaygryn’s comments fazed Halder in any way, his voice did not betray it. ‘Is that something that Karris Haig told you to say?’

Iyadi shook his head quickly, growling. ‘I have told you... everything I know.’

‘The dose is wearing off,’ Cole remarked. He was right. The transformation in Iyadi’s demeanour was slow but obvious.

Halder leaned forward. ‘What about the refugees? Your people crossed the border into Anternis – were you with them?’

Iyadi’s head lolled again. ‘... Yes. It was the only way to get me offworld, on your disaster ship. The other one told me.’

‘The other one?’

‘The UNIS agent. The woman told me. It was the plan. I knew that the provar would attack... *Ashan*. Need to move to next phase; needed to get offworld before... country destroyed.’

‘Why?’ Halder hissed, his curiosity getting the better of him. ‘What are you hoping to achieve? Once the provar find out that you’ve been manipulating them, they will destroy your people. They have already begun! Do you think that the UN will stop them?’

‘You have no... *idea* what is going to happen. No idea at all.’ A grin split Iyadi’s face. ‘It is too late for the UN now. Too late. The Reclamation has already begun.’

Halder leaned forward and grabbed Iyadi by one of his leathery ears. ‘Tell me what you know or I’ll pump you full of so many drugs it’ll make your fucking heart explode,’ he snarled.

Iyadi laughed, the final few drops of the serum metabolised by his system. The drug’s effects couldn’t have lasted more than ten minutes.

‘I don’t know anything else.’

‘All right,’ Halder said, letting go of the kaygryn’s ear. ‘All right.’ He took

the knife from the pouch in Cole's waist, and in one smooth movement jammed it into Iyadi's left eyeball. The kaygryn threw his head back and screamed, writhing in his chair so hard it looked as though the chains would snap. Halder watched impassively as Iyadi roared in Argish, cursing so forcefully that the blood vessels in his neck bulged and pulsed visibly.

*'So you do torture people,' Vondur said to Lyra.*

*'Of course we do. So what? You feel sorry for him?'*

*'... No. No, I... suppose I don't.'*

\*

They tortured Iyadi for another three hours, but for all the EFFECT men's numerous and imaginative efforts, the kaygryn yielded little further useful intelligence. Whoever had orchestrated the plan had compartmentalised information at least reasonably competently. Vondur left after twenty minutes and sat in the antechamber alone, listening to the screams.

At the end of the three hours, a single gunshot rang out from the interrogation cell. A few minutes later, ZEN and the three helmetless EFFECT agents walked out. Halder was sweating and his body armour was covered in kaygryn blood and brains. Takach and Cole looked as impassive as ZEN.

'I want to find out who this third person is,' Halder snapped to the other two. 'I'll speak to Johnson. Vondur, get Staerck and let's go.'

Vondur stood and recovered Lyra from the observation room. She had opted to watch Iyadi's torture and death via ZEN's optic feed, so he had left her in there, unwilling to remain in her company.

'We're leaving,' he said to her over his IHD. 'Did you enjoy that?' It was hard to keep the bitterness from his voice.

Lyra didn't reply.



## NERVE CENTRE

*‘This human empire that we have built is fragile. Frighteningly so. You would not believe me if I told you what went on in the dark corners of the galaxy while the Veigis Worlds slept. Do not be fooled into thinking that the size of the United Nations makes it infallible. We have been to the brink and back so many times... The last great war, when it finally comes, will almost be a relief.’*

### **UNIS Director Garlan Pol, during the Long Insanity**

Josette hummed loudly to herself as she donned the sprite suit. Loudly and tunelessly. United Nations Solar Operations Command was a ghost town; there was no one nearby to hear.

The sprite suit slipped on easily enough, the fabric melding together in an invisible seam running from her navel to the crown of her smooth, bald head. Once it had closed, external nanosensors synced with her IHD, reuniting her with her sight. She gathered up her clothes, underwear and wig and folded them neatly into a sealed plastic bag, which, in turn, she placed into a holdall. She then dumped the holdall on to the chaise longue next to her and donned the rest of the suit: a featureless black helmet less than a centimetre thick, a pair of featureless black boots and a gauntlet with an inbuilt monofilament needleflex IHD scrubber.

She looked ludicrous, of course, but that was not the point. A sprite suit was the only technology capable of affording the wearer full-spectrum refraction shielding that was virtually impenetrable to EFFECT-grade LRIS. Even UNIS-issue Mantix, with its bulky power cells, could be cracked from prolonged invasive scanning. The sprite would stay cloaked indefinitely. Its only downside was that it was incompatible with UN issue rail weapons, given the particular electromagnetic interference, and chemical-based propellants were so loud they rendered the suit’s stealth capabilities pointless. For this particular murder at least, she was going to have to get within touching distance.

She activated the sprite’s refraction shielding with her IHD, then checked the mirror to make sure she was invisible. Once satisfied, she picked up the

bag, exited the room and walked casually down the corridor. Beyond the floating black holdall, the foot-shaped divots in the carpet and the vaguely perceptible shimmer against the straighter lines of the hallway, even a determined observer would see almost nothing. Slow movements would shield her further still, and stillness granted complete invisibility, though given how empty SOC was, she was free to work up to a quiet run. She entered a stairwell at the end of the corridor, made her way up the steps and stopped at the fourth floor.

A scan of that storey told her that there were three warm bodies, including the one she was about to make quite cold. She tiptoed now, creeping along one side like a cat, running interference on all the sensors as she went. She stepped carefully through pools of watery orange light as the sun dipped below the horizon and moved to a large office that looked out across the boulevard at the front of the building.

Her quarry stood inside, facing out the window, animated in conversation. The door was closed, which was annoying, but far from insurmountable. She placed the holdall down and activated the suit's audio damper as she turned the handle, fortunately concealing what turned out to be a penetratingly loud squeal, and slowly pressed the door open. Grimacing, she slunk inside, hoping desperately that the glass panes set into the door would not catch the sunlight, and carefully closed it again.

'... It's as we expected.... Yes, we'll find them. I already have some ideas as to who it is... Excellent work, Commander... I look forward to receiving the debrief...'

Josette crouched at the back of the room, listening. Judging by the two-minute pause between every sentence, the target was talking via the FTL comms array to someone exceedingly distant.

'... Yes, I'm meeting the President now at Halo Arch. He'll be fully apprised then...'

Josette smiled to herself. She had timed it perfectly. Mary Johnson would receive her update from the EFFECT team that had blackworlded Iyadi and then transmit her findings directly to the President and Howarth. Josette had a window of perhaps ten seconds between those two sets of transmissions in which to make her move.

'... All right... Johnson out.'

Josette covered the distance between her and the other woman in two

seconds, and in a flash, deadzoned the room.

‘Oh, Josette, you *bitch*,’ were Mary’s last words, as Josette activated the gauntlet and slapped it to the side of the EFFECT agent’s head. She was still facing out the window when the needleflex scrubber scurried free of the glove in a silvery, hair-thin blur and slid into her brain like a pin through jelly. It immediately lanced into the component parts of her IHD and sucked them dry of data before the monofilament lattice expanded inside her skull and scrambled her brain to soup. The whole process took less than a second, in which time Mary had managed to crouch partway into a jiu-jitsu throw which would likely have seen Josette’s spine broken. Instead, she slumped forward as the scrubber slid back into the gauntlet, blood leaking from her nose and ears like water from a tap. She hit the ground with a bodily thump.

Josette stood very still for five minutes, hardly daring to breathe, but there was nothing – no alarms, no footsteps in the corridor, no suspicious or inquisitive calls. The scrubber had uploaded Mary’s IHD signature to the sprite; so as far as her digital presence across the full spectrum of UN nets was concerned, she was still alive. That did not free Josette from the painstaking responsibility of concealing Mary’s body, however. The building could, and would, detect a corpse fairly quickly.

She took a few minutes to review the deadzone. All of Mary’s inbuilt Death-of-Agent protocols had been easily contained by the sprite, which had in turn bounced them directly into Josette’s IHD. Most were the standard warnings and data purges she would have expected, but there were some highly encrypted personal messages, presumably to be sent on to her family. One priority message was a dossier on Josette herself and a smattering of mostly true theories about her helping to smuggle kaygryn political prisoners off a number of worlds during her time as Commissioner for Refugees. She felt a stab of adrenaline at that, but the suit had done its job, and there was no need for concern.

She transferred Mary’s IHD data to a compartmentalised section of her own and purged the sprite’s data banks. Then, checking the position of the other two warm bodies on the fourth floor, she walked back to the door, opened it and recovered her holdall. She locked the door behind her and polarised the glass panes.

‘Right,’ she said quietly to herself, eyeing Mary’s corpse queasily. She had not anticipated such a high volume of blood. It had soaked into the carpet in

vast quantities, leaving a large wet red stain easily thirty centimetres across. Given that the President was already waiting on her, she also didn't have time to clean it up.

She forced herself to remain calm. She knew the only way to ensure success was to stick to her carefully laid plans. She shed the sprite suit and put her own clothes and wig back on, then stripped off Mary's blood-soaked garments and dressed her corpse in the sprite suit. The latter took a good twenty minutes, however, considerably longer than she had planned for, and by the time the first message came through from the President to Mary's IHD, she had started to panic.

You're late. We're in bunker 5. Bring Josette with you.

'*Shit,*' she hissed, fumbling the sprite suit against Mary's cooling skin. Misgivings were quick to cloud her judgement, but she beat them back with thirty seconds of quiet reflection and a long series of deep, calming breaths. She consoled herself with the fact that the course of galactic events was now well beyond her control, and there was nothing she could do except continue down the path she had started on. The murder she had just committed would dictate the pace of the next stage of the plan, but the conflict between the UN and the Ascendancy was already snowballing. All she needed to do was guide it in the right direction.

Once she was dressed, she checked her wig in the mirror and, licking a thumb, cleaned a few spots of blood from her cheek, then dragged Mary's corpse into a cabinet, shoved it inside and deadlocked the door. She took one last look in the mirror, then exited the room and locked the office door behind her. She cancelled the deadzone almost as an afterthought, and was relieved to note, once more, that there were no alarms. A macabre thought of Mary decomposing inside the sprite suit for months suddenly popped into her head, and she quickly shivered it away.

She walked briskly down the hall, sending a cursory reply from Mary's IHD to the President about being delayed, then turned into the stairwell and retraced her steps. This time, however, she exited via the main doors and out into the unseasonably warm evening sun. There was an unmanned cruiser waiting for her at the top of the boulevard, a sleek black shuttle that would take her back over Arrengate, past Whiteport and over to Fleet Command

Halo Arch. She climbed into the hold via a trio of steps, strapped herself in and within minutes was speeding over the turbulent, roiling waters of the East Sea.

Once she was comfortable, she opened the dossier which Mary had been preparing on her. It detailed the last thirty years of her career, focussing heavily on a number of investigations into her department regarding trafficking. Josette smiled to herself. The time with which the report was concerned was when Hadan's Reach was still biting hard. Using the official refugees register and a clandestine network of sympathisers, her office had managed to smuggle over twenty thousand kaygryn political prisoners, spies and dignitaries out of kaygryn countries and off kaygryn worlds, and the resultant campaign of what the UN had termed 'terrorism' had been a direct consequence of that same network arming and organising these kaygryn into cells and seeding them across the galaxy. Mary's report speculated that Josette had had a personal hand in organising and funding this campaign of sabotage, and Josette had to admire the woman's investigative skill. Indeed, she regarded the operation as the highlight of her personal and professional life – though that particular accolade was soon to be eclipsed.

The rest of the dossier concentrated on theories about Josette's career path, including her time spent in the Xeno Aid Office, her time as Commissioner for Refugees, and finally her UNIS secondment, which had, for the last six months, been spectacularly and deliberately bad at tracking down kaygryn wanted by the Ascendancy. It was that ineptitude which had piqued the interest of EFFECT in the first place, or at least that of Mary Johnson. Fortunately for Josette, a quick scan showed no sign of the dossier having been sent. She ran a special deletion program that erased all trace of it and burned it from Mary's Implant Hard Drive. She spent the rest of the journey staring out the window as the vast city of Arrengate sped below, chased by the flat, emerald plains surrounding Halo Arch.

The Fleet Command building was, in her opinion, considerably more impressive than Solar Ops HQ, formed of a great white pillar jutting free from the surrounding plains like a giant's shinbone, crowned with a vast box of concrete and glass bristling with antennae. At its base, beyond the field of FTL communications satellites, the grass flats were divided into vast quadrangles, each centred by low-orbit elevators anchored into the ground via

enormous, high-tensile cables and surrounded by hundreds of landing platforms, runways, hangars and arms depots.

A blurt of data chatter passed between the cruiser's VI and the air traffic control VI, and the shuttle banked with a gut-churning swoop to its assigned landing platform at the base of the main building. Josette stepped out into the warm evening air at a brisk pace and jogged up the stairs to the entrance, filtering out the sounds and smells of a busy spaceport and the dizzying view of the Halo Arch. Focus was everything; she couldn't afford to let her concentration lapse for even a second.

She pushed through the entrance and had her IHD direct her through the lobby to Bunker Five. Guards clad in blue-and-white Mantix suits stood everywhere, cradling their railguns, ambling about in twos and threes. Holos lining the walls provided near real-time updates on the conflict with the provar and flashed constant reminders of the security situation and the need for heightened vigilance.

After several security scans and a manual search which roundly missed the needleflex scrubber, she made it into an elevator which smoothly and rapidly descended four hundred metres to the presidential command bunker. Even ensconced within its metal walls, she could not escape the news broadcasts. The latest detailed the nuclear attacks on Sonato Go, the Kansubashi Empire's second largest port and naval muster, by the Ascendancy Home Fleet. Deaths were estimated to be in the tens of thousands; the loss to the Empire's war effort was inestimably vast. The formal withdrawal of the UN's closest ally from the conflict was now, already, all but guaranteed.

The elevator arrived with a smooth hiss, and she stepped out into another short hallway bright with warning markers. A brisk walk brought her to the guarded doorway, and a final check preceded her entrance into the bunker proper.

'About damned time,' the President growled as she stepped through the door.

'Sorry I'm late,' she replied, making a show of being out of breath.

'No matter. Sit down.'

The President gestured to the large, round table where the rest of the Joint Chiefs were sitting. Alistair Frost smiled at her warmly, while the rest simply regarded her. John Garrick was making some kind of attempt to narrow his eyes, but she ignored him.

‘We are running through the Xhevegan contingency with the rest of the Joint Chiefs,’ the President said, indicating the active holo hovering over the table in front of her. ‘Frost and Howarth agree that now is the right time.’

Josette nodded slowly, then held up her hands. ‘Don’t let me interrupt,’ she said and adopted a serious expression.

‘Where is Ms Johnson, by the way?’ Aurelius asked no one in particular. He checked the time. ‘We need her here. She was supposed to be here half an hour ago.’

‘She is still in SOC, as far as I can tell,’ Howarth said. ‘There is no record of her having left.’ Josette’s heart rate spiked as he briefly caught her eye. She clasped and unclasped her sweaty hands, then silently berated herself for being so ridiculous. She had carried out the plan perfectly. Howarth had no idea. He was good, but he wasn’t omniscient.

‘Did you see her there?’ the President asked her directly.

‘No,’ Josette said, too quickly. She performed a small shrug, once again chastising herself for being so obvious. She was very quickly learning how difficult it was to conceal one’s guilt.

‘Anyway,’ Garrick said through gritted teeth, mercifully drawing the attention of the bunker’s occupants away from her. ‘You were telling us how you fooled half the galaxy?’ He was looking at Frost, who in turn looked across to Howarth. The commander cleared his throat.

‘Yes is the answer to your earlier question. The bomb that was planted in the Vosmark was placed there by my men, acting on my direct orders. We knew the Xhevegans were being watched round the clock by the provar legation. Since Xavanis and Folgana – and in fact all of them, to a greater or lesser extent – were reporting directly to the Ascendancy, there was no way we could have smuggled them offworld without being seen.’

Garrick’s lip curled. ‘Well? Carry on,’ he said, spreading his arms. ‘Tell us all how you did it!’

Josette watched as Howarth came close to rolling his eyes, then stopped himself. ‘We used refraction-shielded explosives. Most Xhevegans were extracted to a safe house on Vhalyssia, then to Zhaash, then offworld.’ He shrugged. ‘The rest were not briefed and had to be killed for identifiable body parts. We have zhahassi who will affirm that the entire legation was killed. EFFECT teams and our Xhevegan specialists are holding orbit over Folhourt.’ He turned to Aurelius. ‘They await presidential authorisation.’

Garrick expressed his frustration by smacking the table top with an open palm, the report of it rapping through the bunker like a gunshot. A moment later he buried his face in his hands. Pike and Scarcroft looked no happier about the situation, and McKone's face was a rictus of distress.

'We... *feigned* the deaths of the Xhevegans on Gonvarion?' Scarcroft asked after a while, his raven-like features creased downward in distaste.

'Yes.'

'And pinned it on the provar?'

Howarth inclined his head. 'We allowed that conclusion to be drawn.'

'And the kaygryn skarls? Did we ever make any progress with them? Did we even try to?'

'The skarls were killed in a vehicle collision thirty kilometres from the Voscmak,' Howarth said.

'Yes, we all saw the news,' Garrick sneered. 'Or were they blackworlded?'

'Actually, they *did* die in a vehicle collision, during our pursuit,' Howarth said, sounding irritated. 'Believe me, there is nothing I would prefer than to have them on a blackworld right now. I make no bones about it.'

'You nearly killed my man,' McKone said. The tone of his voice immediately drew everyone's attention. Josette had never seen the old diplomat look so angry before; he was practically shaking. 'Yano.' He waved a finger at the EFFECT man. 'He was impaled on a provari *caldar* because of you.'

'With respect,' Howarth said reasonably, 'he was supposed to be at dinner.'

Garrick evidently didn't care about Yano. 'Never mind any of that,' he snapped, letting his hands clatter to the table. 'What in *Christ's* name do you plan to do with these Xhevegans now you've got them?'

It was Frost who fielded that one. 'We received intelligence – years ago – of a faction on Folhourt,' he said. 'In a nutshell, they're seeking to overthrow the Ascendancy and install something akin to a pro-UN autocracy.' He cleared his throat, suddenly uncomfortable with the looks he was getting. 'We have it on solid authority that they have gained considerable traction within the Ascendancy, as well as with Home Fleet elements. All they require is someone to light the fuse, and they are confident that they can oust the regime in a matter of months.'

A deadly silence gripped the bunker. Scarcroft, his eyes the widest by



some margin, made an incredulous noise. ‘Have you taken leave of your *senses*, Alistair? What preposterous intelligence is this? Hell, to what *end*? With our involvement we stand to lose everything, even if your sources are telling the truth!’

‘Our sources have been thoroughly vetted. The pro-UN faction will not make a move without UN involvement.’ Frost’s voice was strained. ‘Our presence on Folhourt will demonstrate our commitment to their cause. We will be supported by all of Xhevega as well. Without our involvement, it is likely that key players will lose their nerve.’

‘There is no *commitment to demonstrate!*’ Scarcroft exploded, throwing his hands up. ‘This is ludicrous! You mean to embroil the Ascendancy in civil war through our *direct* involvement? Is that the nub of it?’

Frost was withering. He ploughed on quickly, trying to get out the rest of the plan before his nerve failed. ‘We plan to insert the Xhevegan provar into the Zecad and support them in taking and holding it. The Ascendancy will not risk attacking their holiest relic. We will hold it to ransom while the coup progresses.’

Scarcroft sat dumb, simply unable to muster any more incredulity. Even Pike’s eyes were wide – aggressive, gung-ho, nuke-a-continent Pike. Garrick looked like he was about to have an aneurysm.

‘We have never heard of an organised opposition movement on Folhourt,’ Pike said after a long pause, his voice thick with doubt. ‘I would like to speak to these sources of yours myself.’

‘The intelligence is sound,’ Howarth said hotly, affording Frost a sideways look of contempt. ‘Sedition is rife within the Ascendancy, we just never see it. Highly placed provar sympathetic to the UN will turn the tide of popular opinion in a matter of weeks.’

‘*Weeks?* Jesus Christ, Karl, I really thought you were smarter than this,’ Scarcroft boomed. ‘*This* is your contingency? A suicide mission?’

‘That’s enough, Fleet Marshal,’ the President snapped, breaking his reverie. ‘We have been reliably informed by the Xhevegans that they can give us Folhourt on a plate. Given the incumbent galactic instability, now is the perfect time to strike. UN opinion has never been so universally against the Ascendancy. We have all the home support we need.’

‘Just because the people want it doesn’t mean it’s a good idea,’ McKone said quietly. ‘I abhor this proposition. I think you are a fool if you persevere.’

‘Oh, shut *up* with your damned proverbs,’ Aurelius moaned tiredly. He waved his hand. ‘Actually, you’re done. Go. You failed me on Gonvarion. You undermine me at every turn. Leave now, before I have you hanged.’

United in astonishment, the rest of the bunker’s occupants watched in silence as McKone stood up stiffly, turned on his heel and left the room without another word.

‘Gentlemen, I will give you the nub of it,’ the President said as soon as the door closed, jabbing a finger into the table for emphasis. ‘The Ascendancy is the shadow on the wall. They are *always* there, they are more powerful than us, and they hold far too much traction both politically and militarily. This may be the best and only opportunity we ever have to rid the Tier-Three community once and for all of its greatest threat, and I mean to seize it with both hands.’

‘Sir, we are talking about turning the most powerful civilisation in the galaxy in on itself. Civil war will hurt the UN as much as it will hurt the Ascendancy.’ Pike was talking as earnestly as Josette had ever heard him talk. It was a disconcerting experience. The man was as pro-war as they came. ‘The Home Fleet is only one part of the Ascendancy’s strength. Think of the crusade fleets. All they have to do is turn one around and we are finished.’

‘The crusade fleets are already stopping,’ Howarth said, drawing himself up. ‘Sixteen has been bleeding momentum for twenty hours. Our deep space relays have confirmed it. Two others show similar signs.’ He fixed Pike in the eye. ‘If we do not act now, we will be overwhelmed within a fortnight.’

No one spoke. No one breathed – except Josette. In fact, it was all she could do not to smile. She knew about the crusade fleets, of course; that was one of the perks of being so senior within UNIS. To hear it so plainly spoken, however, elucidated as fact and corroborated, was so exhilarating that she had to suppress a shiver of delight. Decades of planning were finally reaching fruition.

Eventually, Scarcroft stirred, wiping the sweat from his brow with a kerchief. ‘Do you mean to tell us that we face the prospect of a million provari ships in UN space within *two damned weeks*?’

Another silence seized the room, longer and deeper and more frightening than the first. Disastrously for Josette, even the President seemed to be wavering. No doubt he had anticipated his Joint Chiefs to be thrilled at the

prospect of finally using all their expensive hardware. Instead, they were united in dismay, save Howarth, and the latter was losing credibility fast after the lapse of Frost. Josette felt her heart palpitate as the first signs of panic began to set in. Not now, she thought, feeling a bead of sweat trickle down her back. Not when we're so close.

She cleared her throat. 'Sir, if that is the case, then surely our only hope is to overthrow the Ascendancy regime before we are overrun. Attacking the Zecad might be the only chance we have.'

'Oh for God's sake,' Garrick snapped. 'Really? We're going to be taking advice from the *Commissioner for Refugees* now? On this *military* matter?' His voice was so thick with venom his mouth was practically burning.

She took the barb, against her better judgement. Rage blossomed inside her, churning her guts and chest so hard and so suddenly that she thought she might vomit. Her hands clenched into fists underneath the table. All she wanted to do now was tell him what was going to happen, once the crusade fleets stopped. That would wipe that look off his face. Just wait, she thought, desperately trying to keep her fury from writing itself across her face. Just wait and see what happens when you pull back the tide. When you force the fleets to turn back. You won't like it. The Ascendancy will be the least of your fucking worries then.

Frost interjected before she could blow everything in a fit of pique. 'That was impudent, Strike Commander,' he said, trying to salvage his standing. 'Ms Chevalier is as competent and thorough as any UNIS operative we've ever had.'

It was a lie, of course, given that she'd performed her office deliberately badly, and she had to stop herself from snorting. 'Based on my *intelligence* experience,' she said calmly, utilising every ounce of her self-control, 'the Xhevegan contingency seems like the only option we have left.' She afforded Garrick little more than a glance.

They weren't convinced. The atmosphere was toxic, and despite her repeated attempts to convince herself otherwise, she knew she was losing them. She had none of the Joint Chiefs on side, and even Howarth, the man who had personally crafted the Xhevegan contingency, was looking less and less convinced. Only the President had any kind of conviction, and he was half-mad.

But then, it was only the President she needed.

‘Anyway, what about Iyadi?’ Garrick asked. Now he was looking at Howarth. ‘What happened to him? You said so yourself but two days ago, he is the key. Have we taken anything from him yet? I presume you’ve got him somewhere; your little shoot up on Navem Sigma was public enough.’

‘When we have yielded viable intelligence from Iyadi, you will know, Strike Commander,’ Howarth replied. ‘Ms Johnson is liaising with the EFFECT teams as we speak. I am expecting her report momentarily.’

Josette cleared her throat absentmindedly, concentrating very hard on a spot at the back of the bunker.

‘Should we at least not wait to see what he has to say?’ Garrick pressed. ‘I feel like we’re making decisions – *radical* decisions – off the back of some very flimsy evidence. One thing we all seem to be forgetting, *repeatedly*, is that it was the damned kags who nuked a crusade fleet, yet we seem to be the ones picking up the tab!’ He was talking as though he were drunk. Josette had never seen the man so recklessly animated on anger.

‘We do not have time for that, Strike Commander,’ Aurelius said in a tired voice. ‘In any event, it is too late to back down now. UN civilians are being killed en masse. Uvolon is a goddamn fireball. The entire Kansubashi Empire is being systematically destroyed along with our 7th Fleet, and we have barely enough strength to support her.’

‘But we *know* that Iyadi had UN help!’ Garrick shouted, looking at Howarth. ‘You said so yourself that the destruction of the Tiberean Mission Station could have been engineered. I thought this Karris Haig character was being arrested? Isn’t anyone interested in what he has to say either?’

Josette sat up sharply, adrenaline firing through her system. She didn’t know Haig had been arrested. That was a serious complication. He knew the entire plan, and she knew that he would never commit suicide like they’d agreed. She had less time than she’d anticipated.

‘No,’ the President said tersely, holding up a hand. ‘Whatever the kaygryn’s or the traitors’ motives were is no longer important. Too much human blood has been spilt by the provar to back down now. The time for peace has passed.’

‘The *time* for *peace* has *passed*? At what *cost*?’ Garrick exploded. ‘Unprecedented, full-scale, Tier-Three war! How many millions will die then?’ He searched the ceiling as if trying to find some kind of divine explanation. ‘*How* can you be this stupid? I just... I just can’t *understand* it!’

‘Strike Commander Garrick!’ Aurelius roared. ‘You will not address me in—’

‘You’ll kill us all, old man!’ Garrick screamed, spittle flying from his lips as he thumped the table. ‘And for *what?*’

‘John—’ Scarcroft began in a placatory tone, but Garrick was unstoppable. He lurched out of his chair, fists bunched, and strode over to Aurelius, his eyes bloodshot and frenzied. Josette had to suppress another laugh. The maniac was going to get himself killed.

‘No! Please – wait!’ Scarcroft wailed as Mantix-clad guards burst through the door, summoned by the President’s IHD alarm. Garrick had managed to get his hands around Aurelius’s paper-thin throat when the first shot was fired. The hollowpoint tungsten slug tore off everything from Garrick’s nose upwards in a shower of skull and brains, and Pike, whose outstretched arms were moments from pulling the Strike Commander away, were showered with gore.

‘Gah! Je... *Christ!*’ Pike gasped, flapping his arms about as the blood soaked in. Everyone was on their feet now, shouting and diving for cover as ten more deafening shots blew Garrick’s collapsing body to bloody bits, ripping fistfuls of flesh out of his torso and scattering them across the table and polished black floor. Josette put on a good show for her former lover, ensuring she was still screaming when the railguns stopped. It was much easier, as it transpired, to observe a violent murder than to commit one.

The guards immediately set to fussing over the President, but he swatted their armoured hands away, eyes wide, clearly struggling for breath. ‘Howarth,’ he gasped, rubbing his bruised throat, his eyes fixed on the remains of Garrick. ‘Give the order.’

Howarth and the rest of the bunker’s occupants were in no fit state to do anything. With a cacophony of gagging, choking, wailing and expletives, they pressed themselves off the floor, trying to avoid the steaming remains of their former colleague with both eyes and hands.

‘What have you done?’ Scarcroft cried, holding a hand to his forehead. ‘John... Jesus Christ, John...’

‘Howarth!’ the President snapped, ‘For God’s sake! Give the order now, that’s an or— I’m ordering you to give the order, understand? Those provar fucks will see who’s laughing at the end of this.’

I will be, Josette thought, watching dispassionately as Garrick’s blood

slowly flooded the bunker floor. His expiration couldn't have worked out much better for her, if only in terms of timing. He had been asking all the wrong questions, after all. She'd never have guessed that, in the end, he'd turn out to be the most competent man in the room. It was a fact which did not reflect well on the rest of them.

'*Howarth!* Damn it, Karl, answer me!' the President shouted when the man continued to ignore him.

'Sir,' Howarth said, snapping out of his daze and climbing back out of his chair and to his feet. At no point did he take his eyes off the two guards. When he spoke, he did so distantly. 'Once that order is given, it cannot be rescinded.'

'I don't want to have to tell you again,' the President said in a crescendo forced by contracting stomach muscles, then bent over suddenly and vomited down himself.

Howarth shook his head in disgust and strode out of the bunker, eyes glazed as he communicated over his IHD. Scarcroft sat down heavily, head in hands, while Pike staggered through to the toilets on the far side of the room, sleeves dripping blood. Frost just stared uselessly into space. Josette studied them all with barely concealed contempt. These men formed the nerve centre of the United Nations. It was plainly obvious that they didn't have the stomach for what was to come. Not that it mattered of course. With any luck they would be killed within a year, hauled up in front of a baying mob of provar and publicly executed.

She realised, at that point, that she'd quite inadvertently forsaken her façade of grief and quickly set to great heaving sobs. It wasn't too difficult. Violent death at such close range was hardly a pleasant experience. She ran *Countershock* from her IHD as well, to make her hands tremble.

'Fleet Marshal,' the President said, eyes and nose streaming with acidic mucus from where he had been sick. 'I want ships in Folhourt's orbit within the next twenty-four hours. As many as we can spare.' He too was visibly shaking. 'If necessary we will nuke their damned homeworld to slag.'

Scarcroft shook his head, seething, and ripped the fleet marshal's stripes from his epaulettes. Wordlessly he threw them down on the table and strode towards the exit, eyes red-rimmed.

'Fleet Marshal!' the President screamed after him. 'Damn it man, get back here or I will have you *flogged!*'

Scarcroft paid him no attention. Within a few seconds, he was gone.

‘Josette,’ the President said in a ragged voice, turning to her. He was looking more and more desperate. ‘Bloody Christ, do something. You and Frost, run the op. Take over from Howarth. I don’t trust him.’

Frost locked eyes with Josette. He seemed uneasy, but she knew him to be too spineless to refuse the President.

‘Yes, sir,’ he said eventually, his voice strained.

‘And have the fleet marshal arrested. I want him in a cell, do you hear me?’ he stabbed a finger into the table. ‘In – a – *cell*.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Josette replied when Frost didn’t, making sure to dab her eyes. ‘I’ll take care of it.’ She realised then that she might have to kill them all herself. Try as she might, she would not be able to contain the intelligence gained from both Iyadi and Haig indefinitely. Together they knew every aspect of the plan. No matter how hell-bent the President was on a war with the Ascendancy, if he knew the truth, it would be enough to bring an end to the hostilities.

‘Come on,’ Frost said to her, doing everything in his power to avoid looking at Garrick’s body. Josette nodded, climbing to her feet.

Not long now, she thought, as they made their way to the exit. She checked the time on her IHD.

The UN had just entered its twilight.

## PINNACLE

*‘May the gods forgive you for what you have done, for I cannot.’*

**Anonymous, thousand-year-old provari transmission intercepted by the UNS *Aries*. Context and origin unknown**

There would be no blackworld for Karris Haig. Instead, it was the arid air of the UN Fleet Command North Africa terminal that scorched his throat.

Ten hours before, he’d been sitting down to dinner with both kaygryn and human friends on Phaetonis, and spirits couldn’t have been higher. The plan was advancing apace, and with the exception of the death of his friend Dr Sorper and the disappearance of Lyra Staerck, the situation was snowballing much more quickly and with much better results than any of them could have anticipated. They had toasted their successes, laughing and contented, and they’d discussed the next phase of the plan with cautious optimism.

Ten minutes after that, all of them were either dead, dying or in the process of being abducted, and he had been dumped into the back of an EFFECT Manticore with an IHD damper strapped to his head and a leg pulsing with untempered agony where one of the agents had thrown a pan of boiling water over it.

No, there would be no blackworld for him. Not with their bunkers and manacles and low-tech medieval methods. His torture would require something much more refined.

His captors dragged him across the scorching concrete of the terminal landing platforms and manhandled him into the back of a waiting jeep bearing the Fleet insignia. He landed hard on the open, searing flatbed, and a few moments later the engine grumbled into life with a throaty roar. The doors slammed, and then they were moving across the wide landing platform and making for the terminal proper. The cords of his neck bulged sorely as he craned his head upwards and watched as the EFFECT shuttle disappeared into the distant, shimmering haze.

Fleet Command North Africa was a staggeringly large complex. Alongside the space elevators and landing pylons common to all spaceports, there was also a vast manufacturing installation and an equally vast trading hub that



shipped most of the Earth's state-sponsored goods offworld. Thousands of vacuum-capable shipping containers lay stacked about the place like a blocky, multicoloured sea, rusting in the salty arid air blown in from the Atlantic. From his position, Haig could see hundreds being loaded into the gaping maws of heavy landers and more still being packed away into freight warehouses or carted into space elevators.

The jeep followed a road that was marked on the asphalt in bright turquoise paint, taking them through a gap between two huge warehouses criss-crossed with cable-choked I-bars, antennae and satellite clusters. The hot air was not much more pleasant when it was moving, and for the longest time Haig felt as though his skin were being scoured off his body by wind-driven grit. Then they were enveloped by a large shadow, and he craned his head up once more to see that the jeep was slowing in front of a large, rectangular building.

His head dropped back onto the hot metal of the flatbed with a hard thump, and his stomach soured with adrenaline. The building was unremarkable, little more than light grey concrete soaking up the afternoon heat, but he knew it well enough. Below the baking hot, gaudily marked asphalt was Pinnacle, a Fleet Intelligence installation specifically tailored to the interrogation of UNBTs – United Nations-Born Terrorists.

Josette had warned him about this place during one of their very brief meetings. She had told him what she knew, which hadn't been much. The gist of it had come down to two things: once you were inside, they could make you tell them anything they wanted to know; and once you were inside, you rarely came out again.

He had *Brain Viper* installed, an IHD program that would kill him immediately on activation in what was alleged to be a completely pain-free manner, but once the EFFECT agents had smashed down his door, his courage had leaked out of him like so much urine from his bladder. The IHD damper they slapped onto his head detected and neutralised precisely that kind of program, and they had fitted it to him in a matter of seconds. His only hope now was that Josette could get the Joint Chiefs or the President to authorise the attack on the Zecad before he gave up their entire plan.

The jeep rolled to a stop outside the building. The two EFFECT men, the sun glinting off their mirrored visors, hoisted him bodily out the back of the jeep.

'You stink of piss,' one of them said, gripping him tightly by the arm with

an exoskeleton-powered gauntlet. The servos of the suit whirred and hummed quietly as they frogmarched him across the asphalt, the heat of it cooking his feet inside his de-laced shoes. He could think of nothing to say in response as they thrust him through the entrance. Instead, he started to cry.

‘Quiet,’ the other agent snapped. When he didn’t stop crying, the agent shook him roughly by the arm. ‘I said shut *up*. You brought this on yourself, kag-lover.’

Immediately through the entrance was a long, pillared hallway of blue and white marble, a row of potted plants and a pair of triple-barrelled Sphinx autosentries. As soon as they stepped across the threshold, a deep, electronic warning issued from somewhere in the hallway, and a three-metre holo sprang into life displaying a sad face. Haig recoiled violently and would have bolted had he not been held fast in the vice-like grip of the EFFECT agents. Instead, he waited for a pair of agonising seconds while one of the agents pacified the Sphinx, and the sad face became a smiley one.

‘One word from me and those things cut you in half,’ the agent on his left said, gesturing towards the sentries. ‘Pretty cool, huh?’

They carried on down the hallway, the only sound their echoing footsteps and the slow whirr of the sentry turrets as they tracked the three men across the marble tiles. Haig looked to see that the hallway extended all the way up to the roof of the building, where a row of windows allowed him a plaintive glimpse of the unbroken cerulean sky. They were the only source of light in the hallway, creating parallelograms of sunlight that illuminated motes of dust floating in the quiet air. Haig watched a distant freighter crawl across the sky and wished more than anything that he was on it.

Their journey across the hallway ended in front of an elevator, which opened automatically on their approach. They stepped inside, the doors closed and they sank almost imperceptibly into the bowels of the facility. The journey took thirty seconds. Once the doors opened again, Haig was confronted by a white, cube-shaped room, featureless save a stainless steel table and an inverted black pyramid attached to the ceiling. There were no doors except the one that opened into the elevator. Haig’s features creased in bemusement.

‘On the table,’ one of the agents said, in a voice that would normally be accompanied by someone checking a wristwatch and sighing. Haig knew that *on the table* was the last place in the galaxy he wanted to be, yet he found the

powered Mantix exoskeletons of his captors very persuasive. Within a matter of seconds he was lying on the cold steel slab, and one of the agents was placing an open hand on the side of his head.

‘Wait, wait just one minute, I just need one minute, please—’ was all he managed before there was a buzzing sound, then a flash of light and finally an electrical crack, and he was completely paralysed.

‘You watching the race tonight?’ he heard one of the agents say to the other as they entered the lift. Then the doors closed, and they were gone.

\*

The relay had become full of junk. Freeze-dried ration wrappers floated languorously about the cramped hold, bouncing gently off the exposed wires and pipes, spinning and colliding and trailing crumbs like voidbreakers sowing mines. It was strictly against protocol, though the days when crumbs and wrappers could have any kind of detrimental effect on UN electronic consoles were long past.

Javik and Horst had not left their seats since the kaygryn clippers had attacked Crusade Fleet Sixteen. Running on stimulants and freeze-dried rations, they had watched their holos relentlessly, neither daring to move for fear of missing something. Dry-eyed and bleary, they scanned constantly for any further sign of rogue kaygryn ships and departing provari forces, and all the while reported back to the Vadian Mission Station through sublight communications in tired, nervous voices.

They were besieged by LRIS, and the relay’s electronic countermeasures were slowly failing, tripping offline one by one as the redundancies burned out and their refraction shielding aborted barrier by barrier. If it continued, their stealth capabilities would be gone within an hour, well before any kind of rescue would arrive. It was something that neither man could bring himself to consider. Instead, they focussed on the data and the dull, distant crusade fleet. For hours now it had been shedding mass as the Ascendancy Home Fleet was battered by UN railguns and called for reinforcements – or so their codebreaker suites informed them. It was hard to imagine the provar losing

any conventional naval battle, but Javik supposed they couldn't win every one either.

He munched absentmindedly on a freeze-dried roast dinner bar as another ten destroyers slipped away from the fleet like a flock of birds and disappeared into ten infinitely black event horizons. Horst dutifully relayed the information in a tired voice, while the computer logged it with a bleep and a wink of holos. It was simply another piece of information from a very long log of information that slowly, inexorably, pointed to one rather alarming fact: the crusade fleet was slowing down.

They had known for a while, of course. With the advanced discrimination programs that they had running, every trend imaginable was deduced from the data and logged in split-second increments. Something as major as a decrease in fuel burn from seventy-five per cent of the entire fleet was heralded with everything short of the main system alarm. With the situation with the UN such as it was, they had anticipated loss of mass to supplement the Home Fleet, but not the effective reversal of the entire crusade line. The addition of close to a hundred thousand provari ships entering the melee would put their victory beyond doubt, though the UN would certainly make them pay for it. Because of that, neither he nor Horst seriously anticipated the war to go on for much more than a few weeks or months.

The same, sadly, could not be said for them.

'Refraction failure in twenty-eight minutes,' Horst said, reading from a holo to his right. Perspiration marked his brow, despite the perpetual cool of the relay's interior.

Javik exhaled loudly. 'Shit,' he announced eventually, throwing the wrapper of his roast dinner bar into the air. It span lazily towards the ceiling and was sucked against the mesh that covered the atmospheric scrubbers. It sat there, flapping slowly, sending tiny, moist brown crumbs across the interior of the relay.

Horst cancelled the live feed with a wave of his hand and sat back, adjusting his baseball cap. He looked older than he ever had done, with the beginnings of a grey beard sprouting from his chin and cheeks, and deep lines crowding his eyes and forehead. Javik had known the man for close to a year, but he had the kind of easy-going manner that had made it feel like much longer.

They had prepared messages for their loved ones, Javik for his wife on

Navem Sigma, Horst for his two daughters on Earth. They would transmit via the FTL comms array a few minutes before their refraction shielding failed. That had been emotional. Javik had been married for five years, and he had planned to conceive children during his next off-relay rotation. He had told his wife to move on, to find another husband, to have lots of children. Then he had started uncontrollably weeping and so erased the transmission and re-recorded it. The VR sync was soundproof, so he didn't know what Horst had recorded, but the man had come out red-eyed as well, and then they had embraced and wept. It wasn't the impending death that reduced Javik to tears; it was the sense of loss and longing, the thought of his wife weeping, and the thought of all the things he had never done and had wanted to.

That was all done with now. All that remained was to watch their time tick away on the holo, to listen to the electronic whines of the consoles as the provari LRIS burned them like a man in an acid bath, and to eat the very finest of their freeze-dried rations.

'You know,' Horst said, floating out of his seat and over to his holdall strapped into the webbing on one of the walls, 'I completely forgot I had this.'

'Had what?' Javik asked, turning in his own chair to see the older man pull a plastic bottle out of his holdall. It was brown, with a sky-blue and sunburst label, a waxed cork and a silver ribbon encircling the neck. Despite everything, his face split into a grin.

'You... ridiculous bastard,' he said as he saw the stylised picture of the provari soldier on the front of the label, wearing a turquoise sarong and wielding his *caldar* at the drinker.

'Ascendancy Rum,' Horst said, his own face creasing into a broad grin. He floated back to the chair and grabbed the two tumblers off the console in front of them and then pulled a utility knife out and started on the wax.

'How long have you had that?' Javik asked, incredulous.

'A very long time,' Horst said, his voice edged with melancholy despite his smile. He uncorked the bottle, letting it spiral away, and plugged it with a drinking tube. Javik looked at the time. They had twenty-five minutes left.

'A toast,' Horst said, flicking the live feed to the Vadian Mission Station back on.

'Who are we drinking to?' Javik said. He felt suddenly giddy, a strange mix of dread, anticipation and excitement.

‘To Anna, your beautiful wife, to Shayla and Denise, my two beautiful daughters... to those motherfuckers in the VMS,’ he said, shouting the last bit directly into the live-feed mouthpiece, ‘thanks for nothing.’ Javik laughed. ‘But most of all, cheers to our dear, dear friends, the provar. *Samman Zecad, hai!*’ Horst said, raising the bottle.

‘*Samman Zecad, hai!*’ Javik shouted in reply, laughing so hard he cried, and taking the bottle from Horst, he swallowed down a long draught of the fiery rum.

They managed to finish the bottle just as the LRIS finished their shields. Javik was still laughing as the point defence laser cut into the relay.

\*

Fifty thousand kilometres above Sophia’s sea level, the Janitor satellite prepared to make its thirtieth scheduled scan of the hour. The scheduled scan happened to coincide with the satellite’s fifty-first random scan of the last twenty-five-hour period, and in a rare act of self-determination, the Janitor’s fairly rudimentary VI decided to combine the two for efficiency.

The level of activity required was minimal. The Janitor had scanned Sophia’s high-orbit zone many millions of times in the last century, and its Recursive Self-Improvement software had made it very good at doing so at the smallest possible expense of energy. With forty seconds to go, it opened the two dome-shaped LRIS modules on either side of its hull and the recessed full-spectrum scanners emerged like the stamens of a flower.

Each stamen unfurled a sail-like vane, packed with high-density, cross-spectrum nodes. To the seventeen crewmembers of the EFFECT voidbreaker holding low orbit, it would have looked almost like two giant squids locked head to head, each tentacle sprouting a flower of circuitry. Like the voidbreaker itself, however, the Janitor was comprehensively refraction shielded, and the crew had only anecdotal evidence of its presence.

Once the Janitor’s scheduled scan clock reached zero, the LRIS stamens emitted a five-second burst of energy that shot away from the satellite in two expanding domes of radiation at the speed of light. On board the EFFECT voidbreaker, alarms were triggered – as they had routinely been for the last

four hours – as once again the LRIS wave hit their electronic countermeasures like an Aldarian hypertrain, tripping fuses, burning circuits and delivering the on-board VI the electronic equivalent of a baseball bat to the face.

The Janitor knew about the voidbreaker. It had already told the Beta Thani Mission Station of its presence. The mission station had long since acknowledged the Janitor's message and confirmed the authorisation the voidbreaker had given it. It did the equivalent of quietly pocketing the voidbreaker's IFF reply.

What was troubling the Janitor was the ghost chatter it was picking up from the high-orbit band. It was not emanating from the EFFECT space plane, which was so painfully obvious on the satellite's VL scanner that it was like a second sun had erupted on the face of the planet. It was also not emanating from the voidbreaker in low orbit. The problem was, after those options were eliminated, the Janitor did not know where else the signal could have come from.

It dredged the memory banks of its passive AO scanner, a shorter range, less accurate low-power scanner, but with the convenience of being Always On. The banks revealed the same, albeit with less clarity: ghost chatter in the high-orbit band.

The Janitor did the equivalent of a frown. It analysed the chatter. It was Foreign, certainly, bearing none of the hallmarks of UN comms protocol – even the secret codes. Its codebreaker suite revealed nothing in the known spectrum.

The Janitor repowered its LRIS scanners and fired out another burst. The now agitated voidbreaker pinged back another IFF response, but the Janitor practically ignored it. It was looking at the pattern of the chatter, mapping it across the high-orbit band and comparing its progress across the entire spectrum. It looked to the satellite like the remnants of a single, hyper-high-frequency burst of data, originating from the surface of the planet, though quite different from the earlier two-way EFFECT communication to Earth.

The Janitor was worried now. It tried again to scan the occupants of the voidbreaker and those on the surface of the planet, receiving a host of angry automated warnings from half a dozen Mantix suits, but again turned up nothing except the partial profile of Vondur. Indeed, the earlier unregistered alien was dead.

The Janitor ran that new fact through its Logic suite to see if there was a pattern. Within a few microseconds, Logic had identified a likely seventy per cent correlation between the death of the unregistered alien and the high-frequency transmission.

The Janitor scratched its digital head with a digital hand. Its analysis of the ghost chatter – little more than junk data proliferating across the comms bandwidth – couldn't pull together a destination either. The Janitor checked its Context bank, as updated from Beta Thani twice a year, to see if there was anything in existence which the pattern could be compared to. Within three seconds, the bank had come back with two options: the high-frequency transmission was analogous to EFFECT Death-of-Agent protocols, or it was a warning.

Anxiety in VIs was more comparable to human confusion than actual emotional anxiety, and the Janitor was incapable of panic. Had it been, however, it would have been positively sweating. Sophia had been undisturbed for a hundred years, lulling the Janitor into a century-long sabbatical consisting entirely of meditation and quiet introspection. Now, it had no choice but to activate its Engagement Modality.

The moment it did, three things happened.

Firstly, the Janitor broadcast an External Conditions Hostile Warning to the voidbreaker. The satellite's first priority was to ensure that the planet was not disturbed, but its second was to ensure the safety of any humans in the vicinity. Insofar as it was able to divulge non-classified information on the nature of the problem, it did so.

Secondly, the Janitor brought its long-dormant though routinely inspected and serviced weapon systems online. Its electronic warfare pods, a trio of hemispherical bulges clustered on its hull like warts, thrummed into life. Recessed hard points slid open, revealing ordnance pylons bristling with Star Witch, flak cannons and a triplet of point defence lasers. Its LRIS vanes opened and stayed open, and began pinging every ten seconds. Its refraction shields powered to full intensity, and its high-G dynamic thrusters came online.

Thirdly, an alien ship of untraceable origin and design jumped into the mid-orbit zone and destroyed the Janitor satellite with one swift blast of phase fire.



\*

Paralysis was every bit the nightmare Haig had imagined it would be. Inside his head he was raging, screaming, bouncing off the walls and pummelling them until his fists were bloody. He was sprinting into the distance, the cool air blasting his skin, heaving down into the bottom of his lungs like an avalanche. He was dancing like a maniac, he was kickboxing in zero gravity, he was hypersledding on Bospen...

Except that he was doing none of those things. Once it became clear that, for all the will in the world, his limbs wouldn't even twitch, his heart palpitated so hard it felt as though it would burst in his chest. But it was worse than that: he couldn't even *feel*. The cold metal of the table had vanished. He knew he was breathing only because he could hear it in his pounding ears. He didn't even realise he was sweating until the beads on his forehead trickled into his eyes and blurred his vision.

It was then he panicked. He would even have taken the guards – the expressionless, impassive, disgusted guards – as company over this intolerable solitude. He would have traded everything he owned for a good old-fashioned kicking, anything to feel again, even if it was to writhe and adopt a foetal position while he was pummelled with heavy boots. The highest levels of agony were infinitely preferable to this mind-bending numbness.

His eyes, wide and frantic, had no option but to drink in every aspect of the pyramid above him. Blacker than the blackest obsidian, its point rested directly above the bridge of his nose, and where at first it had seemed ominously featureless, now he could see lines on it, seams and indentations which hinted at something, some machinery, contained within. He knew that whatever was going to happen to him, the pyramid was going to be somehow involved. Given the circumstances leading up to his presence beneath it, it was also unlikely to be a pleasant experience.

His half-terrified reverie was broken as his tongue flopped loosely down the back of his throat, forcing him to breathe through his nose. He quickly set to hyperventilating, which lasted for about thirty seconds before his chest was overcome with a slow crushing sensation that managed to puncture his shield

of numbness. The tightness spread to his neck and jaw, and he realised, as his vision began to fade, that he was having a heart attack.

Tears pooled in his eyes and dribbled down his cheeks. The crushing sensation slowly morphed into pain and spread to his arms. His breathing slowed and became distant, and his vision consisted of little more than the smallest circles of light, as though his eyes had receded into his skull and their sockets were connected to thousand-metre concrete tunnels.

His dedication to the kaygryn cause bled out of him as quickly as his vision faded. That bitch Josette was probably off somewhere screwing all the Joint Chiefs and drinking wine and laughing at a sting operation well done, watching his torment on some screen in SOC with a big fat grin on her face. Iyadi was probably dead, stupid, self-important Iyadi who had used him for his own ends and deserved everything he got. The whole mission had been juvenile and pathetic, and now thousands and thousands of his countrymen were being killed as a direct consequence of his actions.

He tried to conjure up the reasons for his hatred of the UN, why the alternative and its undoing seemed so preferable. As his expiration neared, the most sobering thought was his ennui. Had he fallen for Josette? She was undoubtedly attractive. He was bored in UNIS, looking for excitement. Had he ever believed in the kaygryn cause? Only facing death could he admit it to himself. It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt, but, apparently, only when the someone was him.

The pyramid opened. With an almost imperceptible hiss, a thin black proboscis wormed its way out of a hole just left of the point and slid into his temple like the needle of a tyre pump. Immediately the pain in his arms, neck and chest died away, and he felt himself regain control of his mouth, though a very loud scream which he had planned died in his throat as he was quickly rendered unconscious.

When he came to, he was floating above the Earth.

'Hello, Karris,' a man's voice said.

Haig didn't – couldn't – move. But this time, for whatever reason, it didn't matter. Indeed, he felt no desire to move. Instead, he was almost overwhelmed by a deep feeling of relaxation and tranquillity. He watched, content, as the Earth rolled slowly beneath him. He was... *aware*. It was almost as if he could feel the billions of lives beneath him, existing on the surface of the planet.

‘Hello,’ he said. A part of him remained frightened, remembered where he was and how he had come to be here, but at that moment, it seemed like an irrelevant part, a part that could be relegated to the back of his mind with little consequence.

‘How are you feeling, Karris?’ the voice continued.

Now he was sitting at a table on a rocky grey beach. The sky, a dark, striking blue, was thick with clouds, and a vast body of water stretched to the horizon on his left. To his right, a solitary stone tower formed the only feature in otherwise bleak moorland. The air smelled of salt spray, and the occasional trill of a seabird accompanied the rhythmic boom and wash of the surf.

‘Amazing, isn’t it?’ there was a man sitting opposite him. He was dressed in a light blue linen shirt and a pair of three-quarter-length trousers. He was what Haig would consider traditionally good-looking, with strong features, thick dark hair and a close-cropped black beard. He smiled an easy smile of perfect white teeth. He was reclining in the chair, with his hands clasped behind his head.

‘What...?’ Haig managed. His bemusement was starting to intrude on his state of calm, which had until that point seemed fairly unshakeable. ‘Is this real?’

The man smiled again. ‘Nope. Pretty good though. I designed this one myself. I love dramatic skylines like this.’ He traced a line of violent-looking thundercloud with an open hand. ‘All that black cloud and yet – *there*, look. Blue sky. Others like to do... I don’t know, tropical beaches or jungle treehouses, or even a bloody great desert... but this one’s mine.’ He smiled again. ‘Much more impressive, I think you’ll agree.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Haig said, shaking his head. He found himself unable to leave the chair, but he had at least regained control of his limbs. That both states could exist simultaneously was briefly unsettling but certainly in keeping with the odd physics of his environment.

‘You are a United Nations-Born Terrorist,’ the man remarked. He said it as though he was dismayed he could no longer discuss the sea view. ‘I don’t think you’ll have a hard time agreeing with that.’

Haig opened and closed his mouth a few times. His mammalian mind was rallying against the physics of the environment. He felt calm, but the more he

thought about it, the more it felt like an external calm, one that was being imposed on him and slowly rejected by his subconscious mind.

‘*Relax,*’ the man said. ‘This will be much easier if you relax. I can control your feelings relatively easily, but it’s much better if you talk to me willingly.’

Haig shook his head and wiped the sweat from his brow. He felt his chest constricting. ‘I... what is happening here? Where am I?’

‘You can call me David. I work for EFFECT. This,’ he said, spreading his arms, ‘is my interrogation cell. Like I said, I designed it myself.’ He shrugged. ‘I spend quite a lot of time in here, so I’m sorry to say it suits my preferences rather than yours. You don’t mind, do you?’

‘I...’ Haig’s brow furrowed in bemused concentration. ‘I was expecting...’

‘A deal more pain, I should imagine. We don’t do that here. Pain has its uses, but there are better ways to get information.’ The man who called himself David smiled again when he saw Haig’s expression. ‘Honestly, this isn’t a trick. You’re completely safe here, I promise.’

‘Why are you being so nice to me?’ Haig asked, feeling both pathetically grateful and deeply suspicious. It was certainly not beyond the insane machinations of EFFECT to play some twisted psychological game with him.

‘I want your information. I could torture you, and you would of course tell me what I want to know. I’ll be honest with you, Karris, that’s still an option. But torture takes time, and you would also tell me a great deal that I *don’t* want to know. My colleagues tortured your friend Commander Iyadi for three hours on a blackworld. *Three hours.*’ David pulled an expression of distaste that didn’t suit his genial features. ‘The moment they started was the moment he stopped being useful.’

He sat back, clasping his hands on the table in front of him. ‘This being a computer program, we can go as quickly or as slowly as you like, though I can’t *stop* time altogether; I can only alter *our perception* of it. This means that time is and remains our enemy, as much as you are an enemy of the United Nations. That makes the length of our conversation now doubly important, since, thanks to you, we are having a great deal of trouble with our friends the provar.’

Haig winced. David’s tone wasn’t exactly angry, but there had been a steely undercurrent to that last part which made him feel like a naughty child.

At that point in time, the thought of David being angry with him was unbearable.

‘I know. I’m sorry,’ Haig added ludicrously, not taking his eyes from the table in front of him.

David waved him quiet and leaned forward so his elbows were resting on the table. ‘Listen. I’m going to tell you what’s going to happen, all right? How this plays out is entirely up to you, but essentially we have three options. Number one. You tell me everything from start to finish, right here at this table. I can let you access certain parts of your IHD, you can show me files, pictures, dates, people, whatever.’ David held up two fingers. ‘Number two. You don’t tell me anything. I take you out of this simulation, I flood your system with a cocktail of drugs, I’ve got about ten minutes’ worth of truth to get out of you, then I use very sophisticated and painful techniques to get the rest. As I said before, this takes way too much time and we really are on the clock here.’ He extended a third finger. ‘Number three. We jab a big data sponge into your brain and suck it dry. You die, we translate your thoughts into code at about thirty-five per cent efficiency, and we get the information that way.’

David reclined. ‘Option one is good. Everyone is happy; everyone gets what they want. Option two is bad for me and worse for you. Option three is a total disaster. So, Karris...’ He flashed his easy smile again. ‘...which is it going to be?’

Haig’s mouth felt very, very dry. He thought of Josette and his kaygryn friends. He thought of Iyadi being tortured at the hands of EFFECT agents. He thought about the thousands of UN citizens across the galaxy dying as a direct consequence of his actions. He thought about Lyra Staerck.

‘This is the end of the line, Karris,’ David said softly. ‘The very end. Your part in this plot is long over. I promise you, you will never see any of them again.’

Haig thought about the very real possibility of his own torture and death. ‘I’ll tell you everything,’ he said, with barely a moment’s hesitation.

David all but beamed. ‘*That’s* what I like to hear.’

## PLANETFALL

*‘We have and always will directly involve humans in warfare. We do it to remind our civilisation that warfare is not something to be entered into lightly, that lives are and always will be at stake. If the day comes when we wage war through machines and machines alone, our citizens may not perish but our humanity will.’*

### **General George Udis, appearing before a UN Select Committee on the Automation of Warfare**

They sat in armoured Mantix pressure suits in the life-support module of the *Vekantis*, holding high orbit over the grey, storm-wracked surface of Folhourt while Ascendancy mobile defence platforms processed their landing codes. They were posing as a Home Fleet starseeker, the most numerous and easily faked of provari ships. It was a squat arrowhead design, twenty metres in length and with the vast majority of its mass given over to a trio of bulbous FTL engines. Every other scrap of space was covered in ordnance pylons and communications hard points, jabbing into the cold void like the spikes of a morningstar.

As always, the waiting was the hardest part. Simply holding orbit over Folhourt was a nerve-shredding experience, while waves of scanning checked the ship’s electronic logs, its history of service, its payload and occupants. The Xhevegans had built the vessel using the blueprints from UN LRIS scans, authentic Ascendancy construction techniques and materials, and had even crewed it with provar, though Xhevegan rather than Ascendancy. It had taken years of work in a UN blackworld facility, had cost the lives of a hundred Xhevegan provar as they attempted to smuggle themselves offworld on UN-chartered freight ships, and had led to the execution of twelve UNIS agents posing as traders whom the UN had quickly disavowed.

But it had been done.

The hardest, not to mention most expensive part had been fitting the starseeker out with as much UN equipment as possible, and filling it with as many troops as possible, while maintaining the ship’s conventional profile. In the end they had stripped the Goliaths down into their component parts and

buried them in the hull, and developed highly sophisticated Mantix programs that could convincingly emulate the physiological structure of a provar down to a cellular level. The same Mantix suits were now broadcasting slow, calm heartbeats; their own, human hearts were thumping with adrenaline.

Jean-Luc Courte's own heart was relatively calm but only because he was preoccupied. While the troops and Goliath pilots under his command hung in their gel-filled VR syncs with nothing but their own thoughts to occupy them, he was assisting Faunix Siun with their interrogation. Since Commander Howarth's presidential authorisation code had come through, they had passed the point of no return, and lingering hope of aborting the mission had been snuffed out like their lives were likely to be if they failed to convince the Folhourtian mobile defence platforms.

'They say that we have above the expected crew occupancy level for this starseeker,' Siun said to Courte over a private channel. 'I can't account for the surplus men.'

It was a problem they had been expecting. With the UN platoon and the fifteen Xhevegan apostates, they were well over the typical life-support capacity for an Ascendancy starseeker.

'Tell them they are survivors from another ship.'

There was an agonising pause as Siun relayed the information, and Courte preoccupied himself with the VL feed. Folhourt's orbital traffic was bad at the best of times, but open war had left its voidspace teeming. From the stylised graphics of the VR command centre, hundreds of ships were visible, including a dozen Atlas-class MPVs. They clustered around mobile defence platforms or in Lagrange points, pinging IFF constantly and tracking LRIS across vast swathes of orbit. War had left them understandably jittery. Of course, Earth and Vargonroth would be no different, but that was little comfort to Courte.

The plan, despite having taken a very long time to formulate, was relatively straightforward and depended almost entirely on the seditious elements of the Ascendancy in fulfilling their part of the bargain. For Courte's part, these supposed UN sympathisers were far too elusive and mysterious for him to have any kind of faith in them, but UNIS had insisted forcefully on more than one occasion that such elements were capable and willing. He was but a lowly EFFECT captain and pulled little weight in high-stakes political manoeuvring, but the smell of bullshit hung heavy in the air.

Once Siun had talked them down to the surface, they would immediately deploy around what the UN had long-termed the Forbidden City, a sprawling temple complex which housed the Zecad. As they descended through the atmosphere, the starseeker would discharge its nuclear ordnance at pre-designated targets, which would simultaneously destroy the City's guardians and act as the signal for their Folhourtian allies to initiate their rebellion.

Notwithstanding the time that had gone into the plan, Courte still felt desperately underprepared. The operation hinged entirely on how important the provar considered the Zecad to be. Joint Intelligence Command was convinced that they could hold the entire Ascendancy to ransom if they controlled it, but that seemed like a serious stretch to Courte. No one could provide concrete intelligence on what it actually was or contained. Only semi-corroborated conjecture on the subject existed. He shrugged inwardly. Whatever it was, they were to locate it, secure it and hold it while their allies overthrew the Folhourtian theocracy. Anything else was, blissfully, not his concern.

A chime heralded their clearance through the mobile defence platforms. 'They have accepted my explanation,' Siun said, his voice so thick with anxiety that for a moment he sounded almost human. 'They have granted us landing clearance. The nearest suitable spaceport is fifteen kilometres from the Forbidden City.'

'Okay. Make for it.'

The starseeker curved into a steep dive, making what was ostensibly a beeline for the spaceport. According to the vessel's navigation grid, they could get within three vertical kilometres of it before they would need to fire their contingent of thirty micronukes and corkscrew into an unforgiving nine-G, high-acceleration trajectory that would see them into the Forbidden City itself.

Courte had been wrong, of course, and the waiting was not the hardest part. The hardest part was in fact those minutes spent powering on near full burn through the roiling, turbulent atmosphere of Folhourt. The starseeker was thrown violently about, kept only on course by its advanced navigational VI and liberal use of attitudinal thrusters, while it was battered by precipitates in various stages of solidity the further they descended, hissing off the thermal panels still glowing from their atmospheric re-entry.

Hearts were pounding even harder now, both human and provar alike.



Courte ordered them all to run *Fight and Flight*, though he knew that most, if not all of them, would not. EFFECT men liked to keep a clear head, and their ability to fight without any IHD stimulants was one of the many things that set them apart from the ordinary UNAF soldiery.

‘Two minutes,’ he said, more out of habit than anything else. They would all be synced to the starseeker’s mission timer.

He accessed the ship’s forward sensors and was afforded, between gaps in the thick grey cloud, a satellite’s eye view of the Forbidden City and its surroundings. At its most basic, the City was a large rectangular shape, three kilometres by two, enclosed on all sides by a ten-metre wall of grey rock. At the northern end was a cluster of buildings with wide, sloping roofs, while the Zecad itself was to the south, a triangular pinnacle of black stone a hundred metres tall, encircled at its base by a temple carved out of the bedrock. Between them was a wide, largely empty plaza, two square kilometres, occasionally punctuated by a statue, but otherwise flat and featureless.

‘One minute.’

They were close enough to the surface now to make out, unaided, large swathes of the landscape. Surrounding the City was an endless sea of barren grey rock, carved by the wind and rain over millennia into thousands of striated crags and gullies. The only visible structures were four elevated roads leading directly away from the centre of each of the four sides of the City. The west road led to the nearest settlement, that which contained the spaceport and which had been marked, alongside twenty-nine other targets, for nuclear destruction. The bare-faced massacre of hundreds of thousands of civilians was something that usually rankled Courte, but given that most provar citizens were as zealous and arrogant as their leaders, it bothered him considerably less. Like most people within UNAF, UNIS, Fleet or EFFECT, he operated under a relatively broad spectrum of xenophobia.

The three-kilometre boundary came and went, and with it, the salvo of nukes. They hissed free of their recessed hard points and zigzagged away on evasion vectors, heading for concealed surface-to-orbit batteries, defensive positions and population centres. They came under sustained orbital fire within a few seconds, as anticipated. Courte had allowed for a contingency of fifteen, fifty per cent of the salvo, and it was just as well. As the first of the mushroom clouds began to blossom on the surface of the planet, the defence platforms had already accounted for thirteen.

There was no time to concentrate on them now. Their own evasion vector had kicked in, a skull-rattling nine-G lateral acceleration which saw them dodge at least five blasts of phase fire and three times as many kinetic rail strikes. The starseeker was jinking all over the place now, its trajectory randomised by the on-board VI, taking a circuitous and painful, but ultimately safer route to the Forbidden City. They only had to endure it for twenty more seconds; UNIS had assured them that once they were over the City's exclusion zone, the orbital fire would stop. Then all they would have to contend with were the warrior monks who inhabited the City, as well as any other ground-based forces Folhourt deemed it fit to throw at them.

'Ten seconds,' he shouted over the comlink, wondering in the back of his mind whether he was going to contribute anything to the mission beyond acting as a clock. He checked the live mission feed to see that fourteen of the nukes had hit home, including that destined for the settlement and spaceport. Initial casualty estimates based on IR scans of warm bodies indicated two and a half million. All four roads had also successfully been knocked out, as well as the estimated locations of the SO batteries. The only target they had missed was a concealed freight landing pad three kilometres away. Important, but not mission critical.

He cancelled the feed just as the starseeker was pulling to a stop over the central plaza. They had opted to land as close to the southern Zecad end as possible, in case the provar decided to try their luck with precision orbital strikes. It also meant that they were as far away from the living quarters as possible, meaning that the City's attendant monks would have to traverse a good two kilometres of open ground before reaching them.

The starseeker performed a 'tactical' landing that was closer to an out-and-out collision with the ground, jolting them all violently within their harnesses. Then the life-support module's quick release hatch was opened, landing ramps were explosively deployed, and the relatively tiny hangar door was already disgorging Goliath components onto the smooth, flat rock below.

'Everybody out,' Courte shouted across the comlink, activating his harness's quick release via IHD and snatching his railgun from its overhead clamp. Already he could see the starseeker's prow-mounted rail cannons firing into the living quarters two kilometres away, reducing the buildings to rubble wherever armed provar appeared.

Courte ran down the ramp and on to the plaza below, and was greeted by a

violent mass of seething black cloud, crackling with lightning and intermittently spraying the City with bouts of rain. Beyond the surrounding thicket of talon-shaped rock, fourteen mushroom clouds slowly dissipated into the atmosphere, bringing with them turbulent, radioactive winds.

Minor but effective small arms fire began to fall around him almost immediately. Despite the starseeker's best efforts, the City's inhabitants were well armed and well trained, and the air was filled with the hiss-crack of railgun slugs and the occasional stony thud where one tore a deep gouge in the rock beneath his feet.

'Get those Goliaths up, come on!' he shouted to the men dashing from the hold. By their best estimates, they had somewhere between ten and fifteen minutes before an effective strike force reached their position and overwhelmed them – and that was heavily reliant on the assumption that the provar would consider a strike against the Zecad so preposterous, so beyond the bounds of contemplation, that they would not even have a contingency to deal with it.

Courte was not convinced. 'Come on, just like we trained,' he shouted, ignoring the slugs plinking about him. They had rehearsed the mission of course, for twenty months on and off, on a blackworld deep in the Trillian Veil. Buried into the superstructure of the starseeker's hold were not just the Goliath's component parts, but also their means of assemblage. Robotic arms seamlessly implanted into the interior, and exterior armour plating now whirred free so that the undercarriage of the ship resembled some monstrous sea anemone, twisting and unscrewing and cutting Goliath limbs free from ingenious hiding places and constructing them on what was, for all intents and purposes, a UNAF assembly line.

In truth, the men would only be required to do something if the automated systems went wrong. They had managed to reduce the Goliaths to six component parts for speed of assembly: the four limbs, pilot capsule and then the thrusters, the latter of which to be attached last since it was deemed the least operationally necessary. Every man and Xhevegan among them had then had rigorous training in troubleshooting, construction and maintenance in case they had to assemble one of them manually, or indeed, fix a broken one. But for the moment it was all they could do to take up firing positions around the ship and hope that their involvement was kept strictly unnecessary.

Courte grimaced as he checked the mission timer. They had been in the City for ninety seconds.

‘All right. Fitz, start getting ready,’ he said over wideband to his second-in-command, Daro Fitzroy.

‘Sir. Zulu, on me,’ he said, and fourteen men – nine UN and five Xhevegans, including Siun – peeled away from their firing positions at the side of the starseeker and sprinted across the fifty metres of plaza that separated them from the foot of the temple steps leading into the Zecad.

They passed the two-minute mark. Thick globules of black slush, highly radioactive according to Courte’s External Conditions Hostile Warning alarm, began to splatter down from the storm-wracked sky, peppering the stonework like diseased raindrops.

‘Kene, take Holt and Cedano up to that statue, and see if we can pick a few of these assholes off,’ he said, setting a waypoint marker via his IHD at the base of a statue a hundred metres away.

‘Yes, sir,’ Kene replied. She sped past him, grey Mantix on full exo-power, cradling a sniper-variant railgun. Holt and Cedano were not far behind, while above them, the seeker’s prow-mounted rail cannons cycled to maximum to provide two blinding crimson streaks of covering fire.

‘Three minutes,’ one of the Goliath pilots said. Courte turned back to the seeker to see that the first of the Goliaths was assembled. The squadron leader, Lance Kanova, immediately jumped in, and before the pilot’s hatch was even closed, was jogging down the disembarkation ramp in great, hulking strides, cycling his rotary railgun, phase cannon, CODOR pods, LAO battery and Hydra batteries in a martial parody of automata.

‘Vanguard One, up and running,’ Kanova boomed, the Goliath’s force shielding shimmering into life. Immediately it attracted the attentions of the distant provar, who despite the seeker’s best efforts insisted on firing at them. The shots bounced harmlessly off the naval-grade shielding, and Kanova barely turned before unleashing a three-shot salvo from his Hydra battery. The missiles streaked away in a near-invisible blur, smashing into the slowly crumbling network of buildings at the far end of the plaza in a trio of blinding white flashes. The provari small arms fire reduced markedly in intensity.

Courte nodded. ‘Stay put for now.’

‘Yes, Commander,’ Kanova replied, punctuating his response with a healthy dose of phase fire.

Another five minutes saw three more Goliaths assembled, all bearing the same dusty grey active camouflage over full refraction shielding to conserve power. They stood, aligned, running through their hardware, and not for the first time Courte was filled with an almost insane amount of jealousy. He had only ever had the pleasure of seeing one Goliath in action; now he had four, with another four on the way. Eight Goliaths could hold a continent without a stretch, and they had enough reserve ordnance jammed into the seeker to see them resupplied for six months. For the first time, he was beginning to feel a confidence which had, up until that point, not been forthcoming.

That was, of course, until the provar started to arrive.

‘Multiple contacts incoming,’ Kanova said warily over the comlink. ‘Five... no, six hostiles, rapid-insertion vectors, eighty kilometres and closing. They’ll be here in three minutes.’

‘Gah,’ Courte spat. He accessed the seeker’s VI. They could get three more Goliaths assembled in that time, including the one currently under construction. Seven was as good as eight. ‘All right. Start loading the spare munitions into the temple. Let’s move, go, go, go!’

All four Goliaths, as well as the remaining contingent of men and Xhevegans, scrambled for the hundred bulky crates of ordnance stacked in the hold: phase cannon emplacements, scatterlasers, micromortars, micronukes, rail cannon ammunition, phase cells, Hydra missiles, CODOR drones, millions of rounds of tungsten rail slugs, grenades of every type, as well as Goliath fuel cells, Mantix fuel cells, deployable hard shields, portable trauma units – everything down to ration packs. The Goliaths stowed their RRGs and phase cannons and sprouted forklifts. The men and Xhevegans powered their exoskeletons to full. Courte’s IHD informed him that the seeker’s railguns were down to fifty per cent ammunition.

‘Zulu, move in. Secure the entrance,’ he said and watched as they peeled away from the low stone wall at the foot of the temple steps and began to rapidly ascend, weapons up. By his Mantix there were a hundred steps, terminating in a wide plateau of smooth stone. Ten metres on, the curved façade of pillars concealed much of the squat, drum-shaped temple behind, and then, rearing out of the centre of that, the obsidian pyramid itself.

‘How are we looking, Kene?’

‘Lidded about five. Seeker must have hit thirty or so. Not sure how many cobs they’ve got stashed away in those buildings, but they’re running out,

that's for sure.'

'Keep up the good work,' Courte replied. Zulu team were at the top of the temple steps now, with four crate-laden Goliaths not far behind. The rest of the men, limited to a crate each, lumbered up at the rear, waiting for Fitzroy's all-clear.

Another Goliath lurched off the assembly line; another pilot scrambled into the cockpit.

'Roth, start hitting those incoming,' Courte ordered, and the massive gauntlet of the Goliath clanked against its head in a cocky salute.

'Roger,' Roth replied. He extended his Hydra pods and fired off four CODOR drones, and Courte watched on his Mantix's tac screen as they began immediately to jam up the spectrum with junk chatter. Moments later, his ocular units dimmed as the blinding flash of Hydra missiles seared from the Goliath's shoulder-mounted pods and careened towards the incoming provari fliers, now – dismayingly – fifty kilometres away.

'Going dark,' Roth replied and, powering on his refraction shields, boosted a hundred metres into the air.

'Don't do anything stupid,' Courte replied and jogged back over to the seeker. Its rail cannons were now positively glowing, and a quick check of his IHD told him it was down to thirty per cent ammunition.

'How are we looking, Fitz?' he asked, looking over to the temple. The entirety of the Zulu team was inside now, while the Goliaths, each loaded with eight crates, waited outside the main entrance.

'...eserted in here... can't eve...ou copy?'

'Say again your last, Zulu, scrub the channel, I do *not* read you,' Courte said. He grimaced. The provar would be on them any time now. 'Damn it. Kanova, dump the crates inside now, we're out of time.'

'Roger,' Kanova replied, and the Goliaths powered into the temple. Mercifully, they were out seconds later, shed of their crates.

'Getting all kinds of interference in there,' Kanova said, igniting his thrusters on full burn. A few moments later he was back up the disembarkation ramp, along with the rest of the squadron, loading up.

'Shit,' Courte replied. 'Keep moving. Yung, you and X-Ray team, start setting up the scatterlasers either side of the temple entrance, enfilading fields of fire. Forget the crates, Vanguard can do it faster.'

'Aye, sir,' Yung replied – his third-in-command, overseeing the remaining

seven men and ten Xhevegans. They immediately began to set up hard points and emplacements. Fortunately the scatterlasers were straight out of the box, the crates acting as turrets. They anchored themselves into the ground via a quartet of fission bolts and were soon tracking wide arcs of fire across the plaza.

The static interference in the temple was something they had considered – they were EFFECT, after all, and considered everything – but it had been disregarded as a low risk. Given that the plan was for the entire mission team to remain inside the temple, he did not envisage it becoming a problem beyond these early stages of deployment, but it was an irritant, an independent variable on an operation that already hinged on a razor's edge.

'Kene, pull back. Get inside the Zecad. Tell Fitz we have dead comms. Now, please.'

'Yes, sir,' Kene replied and shot past him once again.

The seventh and penultimate Goliath was assembled now. Refraction shielded, they formed Vanguard Two under Roth's command, as would the eighth – if they had time to complete it. The provar were under a minute away now, harried by CODOR drones but largely unmolested. They were close enough for Courte's optic sensors to describe them in great detail: six atmospheric fliers, silver, delta-winged, big-bellied monstrosities, doubtless containing a host war machinery that would, in six conventional battles out of ten, wipe Courte's relatively inferior team off the face of the planet in a matter of hours.

'Let's keep it *moving*, come on!' Courte shouted over the wideband. Kanova and the rest of Vanguard One had all but a handful of the heavier crates inside the temple now, X-Ray under Yung had set up four scatterlaser emplacements, a shallow, semi-circular escarpment of diamond-coated, carbon steel firing covers, and Fitzroy...

Well, Christ knew what had happened to Fitzroy.

'Kene? Where's Zulu?' he asked impatiently.

'... again chief? Line's... here.'

'Fuck,' Courte snapped. 'Holt, Cedano, pull back to the temple, you're done for now.'

'Sir,' came the reply.

He turned to watch the last Goliath being assembled, the pilot waiting, visibly apprehensive, on the ramp. Vanguard One was already shuttling back

for the last of the crates.

‘Kanova, if you can’t get them inside in the next ten seconds, scuttle,’ Courte warned, jogging up the temple steps. He could see the fliers unaided now, surrounded by clouds of CODOR flak. Roth and the rest of Vanguard Two had chosen not to fire yet. To do so would give away their position, if the provari LRIS hadn’t already picked them up.

‘Roth, back to the gun line now, please,’ he said.

‘Yes, Commander,’ Roth replied, and Courte felt, rather than saw, the three Goliaths soar overhead to the temple entrance.

‘Number eight, forget it, back to the temple, now,’ Courte ordered the last Goliath pilot. ‘Grab a gun, there’s no time.’

‘Just ten more seconds,’ she replied.

‘Liza, that’s an order,’ Courte growled. She was now the last UN unit beyond the temple entrance, horribly exposed, even with the starseeker between her and the provar.

‘Just five more seconds, Commander, I can—’

The phase beam from the lead flier cut the seeker in half, finally silencing the prow railguns after eight minutes of solid firing. Liza was halfway up the disembarkation ramp when the ship exploded. Courte didn’t see her die, but her Mantix vitals flatlined instantly.

‘Vanguard on the gun line, *right now*,’ he shouted, as the seven remaining Goliaths formed up behind the hard covers, Hydra batteries extended, railguns and phase cannons primed. Around him, X-Ray team were kneeling, weapons up, covering behind their diamond hard points. The scatterlasers were still tracking, waiting for an IHD command to fire. Stacked up behind them were piles of terawatt power cells, and behind them, piles of one-shot disposable micromortars.

‘Kanova,’ he said over the wideband, ‘you have command. Buy me as much time as you can.’

‘Will do,’ Kanova replied.

Courte nodded and turned into the temple entrance.



## DUPLICITY

*‘I don’t believe anything any more, irrespective of how trivial it is. If my husband makes a passing remark on the weather, I have to go to the window and check it for myself.’*

### EFFECT Commander Renata Gaville

They had been sitting in silence for about thirty seconds before Haig spoke.

‘Look,’ he said slowly, fully exhaling afterwards as if that one word had been a plug in his trachea. ‘I don’t want to sound... I suppose *ungrateful*.’ He fidgeted, thinking of the best wording. ‘Having worked in UNIS for quite a few years, I’m... I suppose I’m having difficulty believing that you’re not going to hurt me.’

David’s brow creased in a parody of confusion. ‘I’ve already listed your options. You’ve chosen to co-operate. I told you that your co-operation would mean no pain.’

‘It’s not that I don’t believe you, it’s just—’

‘Karris, look. You’ve done a lot of very bad things. We know this. If you give me the information I want, you’ll come to no harm. I can’t make it any plainer than that. It’s more than anyone else gets, but I explained why we don’t use torture, didn’t I? You remember that part of our conversation? It wasn’t long ago.’

Haig nodded, but his expression betrayed him. For a brief second, David’s smile faltered.

‘Karris, remember what I said about time? Move past this please. You don’t have any choice anyway; you’re going to have to take me at my word. Some people find a lack of choice comforting.’

‘Sorry,’ Haig said, nodding, feeling like he was rapidly losing his mind. ‘Sorry, David. Yes of course. And thank you. I don’t want to annoy you, really I don’t, it’s just... can you *guarantee* that you’ll let me go after I give you the information?’

David’s eyes widened in genuine surprise. ‘Karris, *obviously* we can’t do that, can we?’ He laughed. ‘Permit me to say that you’ve already been quite

fortunate. I think you can agree that this...' He gestured to their environment. '... is considerably more than you deserve.'

Haig felt the false calm start to give way again. Instinctively he tried to access his IHD but found he couldn't.

'No, now remember you can't access that without permission,' David chided.

'I wasn't going to use it,' Haig said quickly. 'I wasn't. I just... I—'

'Why don't you start from the beginning,' David said. 'Easy things. Where you were born, your family? Start with your name, if you like. Just be open and honest. I'm sure you know about Clairvoyant, yes?'

Haig nodded, swallowing. Clairvoyant was the UN intelligence community's polygraph software. It was very, very sophisticated.

'Good.' He held up a hand. 'One last thing before you begin. I am also obliged to tell you – sorry, this is boring – that you have been officially designated a United Nations-Born Terrorist and an Enemy of the State as defined under UN Hegemony Code 300686. That means your United Nations citizenship is hereby revoked along with all its attendant rights and privileges and your life is now, by law, a chattel owned by EFFECT. Do you understand?'

Haig understood. In his terror, he could only nod dumbly. He would have told David anything at that point in time, anything to get out of this claustrophobic computer simulation.

'Great,' David grinned. 'Over to you.'

Haig cleared his throat. 'Well... what do you want to know?'

'You know what I want to know,' David replied with a shade of irritation. 'I want to know what you've been doing with the kaygryn. I want to know their plans. I want to know who's involved and how long it's been going on for. I want to know how you've managed to engineer a war with the Ascendancy that could spell the end of the United Nations. I want to know *why*. I want to know how your plan ends. Everything.' He spread his hands. 'But if it suits you, start with something smaller. Just remember...' He winked. '...to be honest.'

Haig nodded slowly, trying to accept the calmness the program was forcing on him. They had been meticulous in their secrecy. How could EFFECT know so much? Iyadi must have told them everything he knew, but they had

compartmentalised. Iyadi didn't know everything. Had Josette been captured as well?

He stared out across the choppy sea, watching the wind whip spray off the waves. Somewhere at the back of his mind, he remembered swimming off the coast of Anternis, in the tropical waters out by the low-orbit anchor.

'I was born on Quinn's World in the Outer Ring,' he said, not taking his eyes off the sea. He wondered how it would feel against his skin, whether the EFFECT processors would be powerful enough to render its brackish cold, the effervescence of each individual foam bubble, the silty murk of the sea floor. 'My childhood was fine. My parents were... I don't know, loving and hardworking. I attended the University of Gesscert and read Xenology. I joined UNIS on a graduate recruitment programme after hearing the standard bullshit. "Travel the galaxy" or whatever it was at the time. Ended up doing two years in a deep space relay in the Vadian Spiral listening to provari wideband chatter and eating freeze-dried roast dinner bars.' He was surprised at how bitter he sounded.

'Your kaygryn activism during university, presumably, did not go unnoticed by UNIS?' David asked.

Haig shook his head. 'Of course not. They said I was talented enough to let it slide though and put me on a five-year probationary period.'

David nodded his agreement. 'You were. A first-rate data analyst and intelligence officer. Tell me, at what point did your activism resume?'

'In almost every respect it never ended,' Haig said. 'Once I was on the inside, it became frighteningly easy to subvert UNIS systems. Most of the software in the Outer Ring is woeful, and the Vadian Spiral is no different.'

'It's something we're aware of,' David replied. 'As much as we'd like to be, we can't be everywhere at once.'

'You should be worried. I was not the only one doing this stuff.'

'Like I said, we're aware of it,' David said. 'Tell me about your activism.'

Haig rubbed one of his eyes. 'Well, obviously I was too young to remember Hadan's Reach directly.'

'By about fifteen years,' David observed.

'When I was at Gesscert, it was still hugely contentious. The massacre at Beng'Tusk happened in my late teens. Three hundred thousand kaygryn slave workers killed by the provar on Vonvalt, just for refusing to resettle offworld. I remember coming across the pictures on the public net. Piles of corpses,

rotting in the summer heat. The men had had their genitals cut off and the women had been raped by the thousand.'

'Vonvalt had been ceded to the provar fifteen months before,' David remarked, as if idly flicking through a short history of the UN.

'For four million tonnes of EXM.' Haig's lip curled in distaste. 'We gave them Beng'Tusk knowing that they would enslave the kaygryn there. *Knowing* that they would be massacred. We knew and we still sold it.'

'IHDs, nanotechnology, FTL drives... All of them depend on EXM, in one form or another. The provar had it; we did not. The undersecretary at the time seemed to think it was a good deal.'

'Did he still think that after the massacre?'

'The Clemens Inquiry found Executor Iourix guilty of war crimes on Gonvarion. He was hanged with the Ascendancy's blessing.'

Haig rolled his eyes. 'And what was that, exactly? *Justice*?'

David clasped his hands on the table. 'Some would call it that.'

'I call it horseshit,' Haig spat, staring daggers into the other man's face. The old fire was back in him again, girding his soul. Recounting was making him remember why he did what he had done in the first place.

David made a placatory gesture, spreading his palms and leaning back. 'I only said some would call it justice. Would you have had us kill three hundred thousand provar in retaliation? We are supposed to be above such things, as a society.'

'I would have killed three hundred thousand provar, then I would have killed three hundred thousand humans,' Haig said, practically snarling. 'Then we would have been some way towards *justice*.'

They sat in silence for a moment while David contemplated his answer. 'All right,' he said, after a short while. 'So you protested at university. You and many thousands more across the galaxy. What happened next? When did you step up to activism?'

'I met someone called Dominique during my third year. I had seen her around at rallies and protests. We both recognised each other, though we had never really spoken. She approached me one evening in a café on the outskirts of Gesscert City and asked me if I wanted to 'take it to the next level'.'

'Go on.'

'I said I did. She introduced me to the underground movement. At the time

I think we were called Kala-Amore. Just a bunch of students writing pamphlets for the public net and distributing them to every IHD connected to the system. This was back when the firewalls were manual and not AI-controlled. That was when I really got into software hacking, during that last year. We talked about sabotaging EXM freighters and other nonsense but never really did anything about it.'

'Dominique was working for UNIS,' David said. If he was consulting his IHD for any of this information, he was concealing it very well.

'Yes,' Haig said bitterly. 'She shopped all of us. I don't know how long she had been a plant. I think that was part of the reason I wanted to join UNIS: to be able to avoid that kind of thing.'

'Was it your experience with the Gesscertic Metropolitan Police that radicalised you?'

Haig snorted. 'I wouldn't say *radicalised*. Their Special Branch knocked me around a bit. I didn't even know at the time they were working with UNIS, that's how naive I was. They decided I was not a threat and tossed me back into university. I played it straight after that and applied for UNIS's graduate programme. And had a very similar conversation to this, funnily enough.'

David smiled his warm smile. 'Okay. Let's fast forward a few years. I want you to take me back to the earliest point at which you began planning this current catastrophe.'

Haig thought for a brief moment, too involved in his own life's story to notice the barb. 'It was a few years after I was posted to the Anternis Mission Station. A total backwater, though less so than it is now. At that point I think I was the only man there, tracking some wanted tax-dodgers and acting as a bounce station for the deep space relay watching Crusade Fleet Sixteen. It was very boring. Forty per cent human redundant. So I started monitoring kaygryn military traffic, illegally. Something to pass the time.'

'When was this?'

'Would have been... almost exactly eight years ago.'

'And what did you discover?'

Haig took a deep breath. 'I discovered that the kaygryn had been hiding a vessel on one of the islands in the Bayscillic Ocean, about seven thousand kilometres south of Vos'Shan.'

David frowned for a brief second. 'Clairvoyant tells me your adrenaline

levels have just about skyrocketed.'

It was true. Haig's heart was thumping in his chest, despite the EFFECT software attempting to force his body to feel calm.

'You're not lying to me, are you?' David asked, his features darkening.

Haig shook his head emphatically. His mouth suddenly felt very dry. 'No, I promise you...'

'What was the ship? We already know about the clippers you kept there to attack the crusade fleet.'

Haig's eyes widened. Iyadi must have told them. 'This was before, years before. Before UNIS came sniffing around and put a mission station in the Tiberean Mountains.'

'So? What was it?' David asked. He was getting impatient.

'It was a kaygryn ship,' Haig said, feeling his fingers tremble. He felt sick. To have kept the secret for so long, unburdening felt simultaneously like insane relief and profound treachery. 'It was a kaygryn ship, but... but...'

'Yes?' David said.

Haig cleared his throat. 'It was not from this galaxy.'

David remained remarkably impassive as he processed this information. 'What do you mean, not from this galaxy?'

'The kaygryn ship was not from this galaxy,' Haig said, on the verge of tears. Betrayal, as it turned out, was a miserable feeling.

'Well? Where *was* it from?'

'... Messier 31.'

'Andromeda?'

Haig blinked back tears. He nodded.

'And how exactly did it cross the Khāli Barrier?' David's eyes suddenly widened. His façade cracked. 'Christ – the crusade fleets. You know what they're doing.'

It was too much for Haig. In one clumsy motion he sprang to his feet and ran. The gravelly beach crunched beneath his pistoning legs and the wind roared in his ears for all of three seconds; then the air turned to syrup.

'Karris, don't be ridiculous,' David said from immediately behind him. Haig slowly turned, clawing his way through the viscous air, to see the chairs and table and EFFECT agent were, impossibly, barely a metre away. His heart sank so violently that for a second he thought he would have another stress-induced heart attack.

‘This is a computer program,’ David said. ‘Sit down and stop it. Remember what I said about co-operating.’

Haig did as he was told. The chair felt real enough beneath his buttocks, but any last vestiges of his spirit were utterly extinguished.

‘Tell me what you know,’ David said reasonably. For the first time in the entire interrogation, Haig caught a flicker of IHD usage in the man’s eye. Others were listening. He imagined a group of EFFECT officers sitting round a table in VR sync, watching a holo of the interview with bated breath.

‘The kaygryn are not from this galaxy. Neither are the provar.’

David sat back in his chair. He took a long look at Haig. ‘Clairvoyant is never wrong,’ he said after a while.

‘Then Clairvoyant knows I’m telling the truth.’

Another pause. ‘All right. Go on.’

Haig wiped his eyes. ‘I reached out to the kaygryn on Vos’Shan. Specifically Commander Iyadi. It took me almost a year to gain his trust. I had to give him a lot of good UN intelligence and equipment for him to bring me into the inner circle.’

‘Ventu, Havé, Iyadi, Lok, Oné and Bega. The Vos’Shan’i militia commanders. Your “inner circle”.’

‘They were more than that. They were my friends. Like the kaygryn you murdered on Phaetonis, by the way.’

David shrugged. ‘Keep going.’

Haig swallowed back his anger. ‘They told me that they had been visited by a kaygryn from another galaxy. They told me that this kaygryn was different to them, that he was highly intelligent and that he possessed technology that surpassed even that of the UN.’ His eyes were glued to the table as he spoke. ‘They told me that he even looked slightly different. He stood taller than them, and that his vestigial arms weren’t, well, vestigial. I remember them being very earnest and excited, like children.’

David said nothing.

‘So... being a professional cynic, I told them I had to see this new kaygryn for myself. Since I was the only UNIS man there at the time, it was not difficult for me to manipulate the civil aviation VI and completely erase all traces of our flight from the system. I took Iyadi and Oné with me, and they directed me to the island.’

He waited once more for David to say something, but the man remained

completely impassive. Perhaps enthralled would have been a better description.

‘Well, sure enough, he was there.’

‘What was his name?’ David asked quickly.

Haig clenched his teeth. ‘Executor Hasani.’

‘Executor Hasani?’

‘That’s the name and rank he gave.’ Haig knew they would already be running a trace program on any kaygryn by the name of Hasani.

‘Hasani sounds like a provari name,’ David remarked. ‘Executor is certainly a provari rank.’

‘It is a rank in the Kaygryn Empire as well,’ Haig snapped.

David’s expression was unreadable. After a while, he said, ‘Perhaps you’d best tell me what Hasani told you.’

\*

They tried to catch up with Scarcroft, but he was already gone, untraceable on Vargonroth’s Civil Aviation VI. Josette squinted up into the cloudless blue sky, as if she might be able to see the fleet marshal’s ship through unaided sight alone, but instead merely found herself staring at the traffic as it shuttled up and down the enormous pylons. The evening air was still warm, despite Vargonroth’s prevailing climate, and she felt almost calm standing in the sun, letting the warmth of it soak into her skin.

Frost irritatingly broke her reverie. ‘We should find Howarth,’ he said, slightly out of breath. Instead of the cool, decisive tone she was used to, the man sounded plaintive and pathetic. She rounded on him.

‘He’s back inside, if his locator’s anything to go on,’ she said, annoyed. Frost nodded slightly, hesitated, and then when it was clear she wasn’t going to follow him in, headed obligingly back into Halo Arch.

Josette cast her face back up to the sky, closing her eyes. She knew she would probably die soon, though thanks to IHDs, death had become a much less frightening prospect than it had been for her ancestors. The simple flick of a mental switch could turn a violent, painful expiry into a blissful, pain-free drift into unconsciousness, and knowing that made it much easier to



accept. It did not, however, mean that she craved it. She would miss her revolution, for one.

She toyed briefly with the idea of going into exile, of finding some nothing world in the Outer Ring and living out her life on a tiny island, free of the terrible burden of responsibility, but a large burst of thrust from one of the nearer Fleet ships snapped her from her daydream. She found her resolve no weaker. She had entertained the same doubts in the wake of Mary Johnson's death, and yet here she was. It was difficult to break the habit of a lifetime, after all.

With a sigh, she turned back into the building, shouldered her way past a pair of idling security guards and walked back into the elevator to the President's bunker. White-clad clean-up crews for Garrick's lightly smoking corpse were already present, scraping the brains off the floor with a plastic edge. They deposited the gory remnants into white, ovoid shells, which were set into a crate in an arrangement which looked like eggs in a carton. It was a gruesome sight, but no worse than the many hundreds of hours of UN drone surveillance she'd seen of kaygryn being slaughtered in provari death camps.

She caught up with Frost, who was standing at the end of the table with Howarth. They had been talking quietly but stopped on her approach. The President was nowhere to be seen.

'Where's the President?' she asked.

'In the toilet,' Frost said.

'Still?'

'Still.'

'What's going on?' she asked.

'What do you mean, what's going on?' Howarth said tiredly. 'You watched him vomit.'

'No, I meant with the order. The Xhevegan contingency.' She tried not to sound too enthusiastic. 'Have you given the order?'

Howarth looked at her. 'Yes,' he said after a while. He regarded her for a long moment. 'It should reach them within about thirty minutes.'

Josette nodded slowly, wearing a look of sombre concentration. 'Let's hope that that intel pays off then,' she said, more to Frost than Howarth. Her voice was giving her away. She was giddy with excitement.

'The intelligence is sound,' Howarth practically snapped, irritated on Frost's behalf. 'It's the only thing in this entire mess that we can rely on.' He

looked away, focussing on the distant bunker wall. ‘I just hope our men don’t get shredded in orbit.’

‘Hmm,’ Josette replied. Despite being one of the architects of the latter stages of the Xhevegan contingency, even she had not been privy to the Xhevegan intelligence sources on which Frost and Howarth had relied – though it was easy to simply dismiss them as revenge-driven obsessives. They would have said anything, after all, to garner UN support for their vendetta against Folhourt. In the end, it mattered little whether they were telling the truth or not. The crusade fleets were already stopping. An abortive attempt to capture the provar’s holiest relic was more likely to bond the entire Ascendancy in rage than to pave the way for a bloody coup by a pro-UN faction.

She had to stop herself from reacting as Mary Johnson’s IHD received a message from Howarth.

I think you might have been right about Josette. I don’t trust her. Let me know when you are coming to fleet command.

She read it and dismissed it, feeling suddenly light-headed. It was one thing to jump at shadows, to read too far into comments, to treat meaningless glances as direct suspicion; it was quite another to have it all confirmed in writing in front of her face. Fortunately, Howarth wasn’t looking directly at her. If he had been, he would have noticed a tremor pass across her face as she tried desperately to suppress the whirlwind of thoughts now clouding her judgement.

She cycled back through Mary’s IHD messages. There had been no others, nothing telling her of the authorisation of the attack on the Zecad. A cold, cloying fear constricted her throat. Had she even killed Mary? Or had she just murdered some doppelgänger, some decoy set up by Howarth to entrap her? Or did Mary have some second IHD, some backup which contained all of Howarth’s newer messages, unread and unanswered because Mary was actually now a corpse in a sprite suit?

Josette sat down at the table, pretending to be bored. It crossed her mind then that if Howarth suspected her, he might easily have lied about the authorisation of the mission to the Zecad. In which case, she was quickly running out of time.

She needed to make a decision, fast. She ran through the closing aspects of the plan, considering all the possibilities, deciding whether Howarth was needed alive in any of them. Once she was satisfied that he wasn't, she was resolved. She would not take the chance that he was telling the truth. She would use the needleflex scrubber on Howarth and authorise the mission herself from his IHD.

'Karl, can I have a word with you in private?' she said, keeping her voice admirably level. Was it her imagination or did the hint of a smile cross the man's face?

She turned as the door opened to see two Mantix-clad guards walking directly towards her.

'Yes, of course,' Howarth said, and this time he did smile, broadly. 'I think it would be best if we had a chat in private. A *long* chat.'

\*

A late afternoon appearance from Sophia's sun gave the atmosphere a warm, leaden feel as they trudged through the soft soil and ferns and back towards the space plane. Vondur, morose and in no mood to join the sporadic conversation of his companions, instead traced Sophia's unnamed moon through gaps in the piles of cumulonimbus, an ethereal and brilliant white orb stark against the claret hue of the sky. Around him, at a spread of about fifty metres, the rest of the party moved through the forest, though with considerably more purpose. Indeed, he was in danger of falling behind.

ZEN had been tasked by Halder with carrying the vacuum-sealed corpse of Iyadi, much to Vondur's chagrin. The VI walked at the front of the column next to Cole, who had taken point, insofar as point was required on an empty planet. Halder strode behind them, engrossed in his IHD, and Takach was behind him, his Mantix exoskeleton easily handling the additional inconvenience of Lyra's armoured holdall.

Vondur had not spoken to Lyra since Iyadi's death. He was no lover of the kaygryn – nor any one particular alien race for that matter – and like most UN citizens, his feelings on other Tier-Three species ranged from indifference to media-influenced dislike. He was certainly surrounded by

more interspecies racism than most, on account of his being a serving member of UNAF, but that had never really been his way.

No, he was no lover of the kaygryn, but he was no lover of the lazy hedonism of the UN way of life either, and he certainly considered the clandestine, above-the-law activities of EFFECT and UNIS to be staggeringly hypocritical. The sadistic torture and murder of another living being, even given Iyadi's crimes and even in these times of impending war, just felt so... *appalling*. It was shameful that it had taken such extreme circumstances to cure him of his apathy, but he was certainly not going to help Halder abduct and torture another alien, whatever they knew or had done.

He fidgeted with his Mantix helmet strapped about his waist and finally, after a few minutes of reflection, placed it on his head and opened a private channel to the EFFECT commander.

'What is it, Captain? I'm busy,' Halder said before Vondur could even open his mouth.

'What are we doing, Commander?' Vondur asked, swallowing back his anger. He had meant it philosophically, but it was in the most literal sense that Halder took it.

'Awaiting orders,' he growled. His conversation with 'Johnson' – presumably the man's commanding officer – had taken up the best part of half an hour, each transmission encrypted, packaged, sent to orbit and then bounced off the voidbreaker's FTL comms array to wherever it was Johnson existed. It was probably now up to Johnson to speak to her superior officers before they broke orbit. Vondur knew the system well enough to know they were about to do a lot of waiting.

'I will not help you abduct anyone else,' Vondur said. Ahead, Halder didn't even break his stride.

'You're right, you won't,' he replied. 'From this point onwards, Captain, you're nothing but an oxygen sink. We'll be dumping you on the next UN world we hit, along with Miss Staerck and Iyadi's corpse.'

Vondur's fists clenched within the suit. He was about to snarl his riposte when a loud bang distracted him. The party stopped immediately, railguns aimed at the sky. Comms discipline, which thus far had been sacrosanct, went out the window.

'That was a sonic boom.'

'Orbit's gone dark.'

‘I can’t raise the ’breaker.’

‘Something’s approaching.’

‘What *is* that?’

‘Up there, two o’clock!’

Vondur looked up, only vaguely aware of the chatter.

‘ZEN?’ he asked over a private channel.

‘Yes, Captain?’

‘What is that?’

ZEN took a few seconds to respond. ‘I’m not sure, Captain. It is a ship, though it is not a type I recognise.’

Vondur frowned. He could hear its thrusters unaided, though the intermittent cloud cover was still obscuring the source of the noise.

‘Provar?’ Lyra asked over an open channel. ‘Could we have been followed?’

‘Quiet,’ Halder snapped.

The ship breached the cloud level less than ten kilometres away. Vondur’s enhanced optics immediately locked on, describing a shining, featureless, silver cone tipped on its side. Behind it stretched a long plume of white exhaust, languorously dissipating in the warm air.

‘Orders, Commander?’ one of the EFFECT men asked Halder.

‘Stay still, and shut up,’ Halder replied.

Vondur couldn’t argue with that. The ship was of a pattern and class he had never seen before in his life, and he was as well versed in the machinery of modern warfare as they came. Trying to avoid it would have been pointless. Whoever was piloting it was clearly aware of their presence – the fact that it was making a beeline for them was testament to that.

His heart thumped in his chest, and he began to sweat inside the Mantix suit quite irrespective of its nanofibre weave. The vessel was barely two kilometres away now and visibly decelerating. Even its engines made a strange, unfamiliar sound.

‘Where is it going to land?’ Lyra asked. It was a valid question. The forest surrounding them was dense. There were very few places a space-going vessel could land safely without causing fatal damage to its superstructure.

The question was answered swiftly. A stunningly bright beam of phase fire emanated from the alien vessel and connected with their space plane in the clearing ahead, obliterating it in an instant and blasting a maelstrom of

shrapnel-like bark through the forest and into the EFFECT team. Vondur's vision was flooded with External Conditions Hostile warnings as the overpressure crashed into him, causing his Mantix to harden to better allow the nanogel to distribute the force of the explosion. Judging by the pressure readings, an unprotected human would have had their insides liquefied.

'... Shit,' Halder allowed after the blast wave had passed and the shrieking crack of the phase cannon had echoed its last. The craft hovered above the scene of destruction, its powerful down-jets blasting the remaining debris out of the way and extinguishing the infant flames.

'ZEN... tell me you know what that is,' Vondur murmured, transfixed.

'I'm afraid I still do not, Captain. I cannot find records of this design or specification on any of my databases. There are no FTL comms arrays in orbit, either. I could have used one to widen the search.'

The clearing ahead filled with a hissing whine as the craft descended vertically. From the thick end, a trio of curved limbs sprouted free of the hull, cushioning it as it came to a graceful stop over the smouldering ruins of the space plane.

'All right,' Halder said over the comlink warily. 'Lower your weapons, but keep them ready. Whoever this is, they're our only ticket off this rock. We're either going to hitch a ride or kill them for it.'

It was a thought that hadn't yet occurred to Vondur, such was his preoccupation with the ship. With the apparent loss of the voidbreaker, and now the space plane, they truly were adrift on Sophia – a planet which had been one of the UN's best kept secrets for over a century. The realisation of just how isolated they had become overcame him like a wave of vertigo.

They moved up slowly, all of them edging closer to the boundary of the clearing so that, when they all eventually came to a stop, they were more or less in a line. Halder stood at the front with Takach, ZEN and Cole next to him. Vondur took Lyra's head and stood behind. Next to him, Iyadi's bagged corpse lay on a pile of charred ferns.

'Nobody do or say anything unless I tell them to,' Halder snapped. Vondur had to hand it to the man: he was calm under pressure. His own heart was fit to burst.

They waited, standing in front of the vessel like their ancestors during First Contact. Vondur toggled through the squad's bio-monitors to see elevated heart rates in all three EFFECT agents. His own IHD was struggling to keep

his body sweat free, and the inner layer of the Mantix suit was slowly soaking through, making it itchy and uncomfortable despite being designed to entirely resist both conditions.

All of them except ZEN flinched as the perfectly smooth skin of the vessel hissed, and a vertical rectangle of hull recessed into the hold. Vondur could just make out the dull blue glow of holo panels inside before a ramp perhaps two metres in length slid out from the base of this new door and nestled snugly among the charred, blasted earth.

‘All right everybody, stay sharp,’ Halder murmured. Vondur’s fingers itched for the massive, weapon-packed gauntlets of a Goliath over the comparatively poxy gloves of the Mantix. Even a railgun would have been better than nothing. Instead, he stood uselessly by Iyadi’s corpse, hoping against hope that this didn’t turn into a shooting match.

Something stirred in the doorway. His audio sensors picked up brief signatures of vocal sound emanating from inside the vessel’s hold, but before he had time to try and decipher what it was, a pair of figures appeared on the ramp.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Vondur managed.

‘*Kaygryn?*’ Lyra said, her voice thick with astonishment. Similar sentiments echoed from the EFFECT men, cluttering the shared bandwidth. Only ZEN remained impassive, instead proceeding to quietly gather information.

The pair on the ramp certainly appeared to be kaygryn of some description, though to Vondur they were a far cry from those crammed aboard the holding areas of Navem Sigma. Instead of the poor, unkempt and often foul-smelling aliens he was used to, these were remarkably well equipped. Each wore a thick yellow sarong trimmed with turquoise and a white cuirass of interlocking armour plates not unlike those of a Mantix suit. The weapons they carried, totally unclassifiable according to both ZEN and his sensor suite, looked like two-metre halberds.

‘Sweet Christ,’ Cole said. ‘Look at the arms.’

It was true. Instead of a second pair of vestigial appendages, like all other kaygryn, each bore two pairs of fully-formed arms.

‘Shut it,’ Halder snapped. ‘ZEN, what’s going on? Are these kaygryn?’

‘They are,’ ZEN replied. ‘Their genome is identical. Phenotypically, of course, they are different, but as a species, they are exactly the same as the

kaygryn from Vos'Shan.'

'You mean they're biologically the same, just... better?'

'In a manner of speaking,' ZEN replied.

One of the kaygryn snarled at them and lowered its halberd, and Vondur could see that as well as being a bladed weapon – with a likely monofilament edge – there was also the tell-tale prism of a quad-powered laser at the crown of the staff.

'That's a ranged weapon,' he said over the wideband. 'It can—'

'Thank you, Captain, we all have Mantix – and *eyes*,' Halder added. 'It's what the fuck they want that worries me.'

He didn't have to wait long to find out. The first beam of light to emanate from one of the laser-halberds cut Halder's railgun in half. As soon as Cole and Takach attempted to return fire, their railguns – along with, unfortunately for them, their bodies – were correspondingly bisected.

'Gah – *fuck!*' Halder shouted as the two EFFECT men peeled apart from nose to groin in a gory mess even the advanced medical abilities of the Mantix suits couldn't salvage. Vondur, who was at this point lying face down in the engine-roasted soil, looked up only when Lyra began to make odd jabbering noises, to see that they were two men down and the kaygryn, if they could so be called, were one man up. The new addition was a head taller than his bodyguards, though the disparity was in large part made up by his headdress. Where the others wore sarongs and body armour, he wore a full toga of pearl and turquoise. His fingers and ears were covered in gem-encrusted rings of gold and silver, and his short fur was an altogether glossier chestnut brown. In fact, the only equipment the three of them shared seemed to be an ocular display, a four-centimetre rectangle of blue holo emanating from a band around the forehead. It was through this that he regarded Vondur, an unmistakeable look of disdain written across his features.

'ZEN...?' Vondur said when Halder didn't move. 'Tell it in Argish that we aren't a threat to it.'

'I know you aren't,' the new kaygryn replied, in quite impeccable Terran. 'My men have just destroyed all of your weapons – or at the very least, your resolve to use them. That you aren't a threat to me is painfully evident. I am sorry to say,' he added.

Vondur almost flinched at the alien's perfect enunciation of Terran. Such flawless diction was reserved almost entirely for alien diplomats – and even



then, it was rarely perfect.

‘Who are you?’ Halder asked. The fight had left the commander. Unarmed and de-manned, he was just another stranded human a long, long way from the UN.

‘I am Executor Ghesovius Hasani, nine hundredth Fleetmaster of the Kaygryn Empire and Third Member of the Conclave Militant to His Most Excellent and Divine Majesty, Emperor Vun’Daal XI.’ It was well said and evidently well received by the kaygryn’s two guards, if their brandishing and growling was anything to go by.

Vondur cleared his throat. Despite the impressive lethality of the vessel, the laser-halberds and indeed, the outward appearance of the three kaygryn, even he knew that there was no Kaygryn Empire.

‘Where did you say you were from?’ he asked as inoffensively as he could.

‘The Kaygryn Empire,’ Hasani replied with exactly the same conviction – perhaps even ferocity – as before.

‘What is he talking about?’ Lyra asked him over a secure channel. ‘Does he mean the Kaygryn Federacy?’

Vondur grimaced. There was little about the situation he liked – especially the four smoking halves of the EFFECT men – but he knew that the one sure-fire way to make it worse was to anger Hasani. Denying the existence of an Empire which the kaygryn seemed rather proud of seemed like a good way to go about it.

‘What do you want from us?’ Vondur asked.

‘Commander Iyadi,’ Hasani said, in what was fast becoming a trademark candour. ‘I know you have him. What I do not know is where he is. I hope, for your sake, that he is not the corpse in that bag next to you.’

Vondur did not doubt that, given these kaygryn’s surpassing level of technology, Hasani knew that the corpse in the bag was indeed Iyadi.

‘We don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Halder growled. Vondur winced.

‘Hmm,’ Hasani replied. Something rippled across the ocular display of the leftmost kaygryn guard, and in the space of two seconds it had lowered its laser-halberd and swiftly killed Halder. Vondur turned away as his gorge rose, though not quickly enough to avoid seeing the two halves of the EFFECT commander crumpling to the floor like the sides of a butchered pig.

‘Oh *God*,’ Vondur half-shouted, spitting away the last of his vomit-slicked

saliva.

‘You are fast running out of friends,’ Hasani remarked to Vondur.

‘Commander Iyadi is *dead*,’ Vondur said, doubtful that this was an exercise he was going to survive. ‘He was tortured and murdered by the three men you have just killed.’

Something akin to a smirk played across Hasani’s lips. ‘Of course, it would be prudent for a man in your situation to blame these three corpses for Commander Iyadi’s demise, would it not? They are not about to contradict you.’

Vondur grimaced. ‘What does it matter? You are going to kill me anyway.’

Hasani snorted. ‘You may be right. What is your name, human?’

‘I am Captain Ben Vondur. This is Special Agent Lyra Staerck.’

‘Ah yes, the head in the box. We were most amused when our long-range scanners picked up on that little treasure. Tell me, Miss Head-In-The-Box, who is responsible for the death of Commander Iyadi?’

‘Like the Captain said, it was these three men. They tortured and killed him for information,’ Lyra said, via ZEN’s chest-speakers.

‘Remarkable,’ Hasani said. ‘And what information were they trying to glean from poor Commander Iyadi?’

‘Why he was trying to engineer a war between the UN and the provar.’

That seemed to throw Hasani, albeit briefly, judging by the way his eyes widened. ‘Impressive,’ the kaygryn said. ‘Perhaps you know then why I am here.’

Vondur shook his head. ‘I’ve never even heard of the Kaygryn Empire.’

‘And why would you have?’ Hasani snapped. ‘We have been existing under the boot heel of provari crusade fleets for centuries.’ He waved his hand dismissively. ‘But all that is about to change. It was sad that Commander Iyadi had to die; I would have liked to have seen him at least one more time, to congratulate him on all of his fine work. Alas, I cannot delay.’

Hasani growled something to the two guards, who moved forward to collect the body of Iyadi. They dragged it unceremoniously through the blasted undergrowth, up the ramp and back on to the shuttle.

‘I don’t *understand*,’ Vondur shouted after them. ‘What is the Kaygryn Empire? I don’t understand!’

‘Nor, I fear, shall you ever. Goodbye, Captain Ben Vondur. I doubt our paths will cross again.’

Hasani turned on his heel and strode back into the hold of the ship.

‘Wait!’ Vondur shouted, but Hasani did not. Instead, the ship retracted its landing gear and launched. Within thirty seconds, the only sign of it having ever visited Sophia was a pair of slowly dissipating contrails in the evening sky.

‘Shit,’ Vondur breathed, staring at the clouds above. ‘Now what?’

## ZECAD

*‘Hadan’s Reach is the worst thing we have ever done as the human race. Our collective responsibility is beyond question.’*

### **Michael Constance, Federal Socialist Xeno Affairs Minister**

The turbulent atmosphere of Folhourt had never been a forgiving one. On a good day, most of the populated continents could expect blustery weather and overcast skies. On a more typical day, the tumultuous climate could produce anything from freezing fog to the *Ecriotha Rac* – a scouring, hundred-kilometre ice storm strong enough to flay the skin. They had been warned to expect either when operating in and around the Forbidden City, though Courte had thus far avoided both.

A temperature warning, then, flashing on his visor and undoubtedly incurred by his entrance to the interior of the temple, was not what he had expected, and it was certainly nothing the unexotic interior could account for. Yet his Mantix sensor suites were not wrong: the atmosphere was fully ten degrees colder, and his breather units had had to up their heat-exchange to keep the filters scrubbed of ice. It did nothing to calm his pounding heart. He would have preferred to find the Zecad nothing more than an old relic, boring and lacklustre. Anything that added to the aura of mystery already surrounding it was deeply unwelcome.

He moved forward carefully and quietly, his eyes darting across the interior. The temple was formed of a circular, arched hallway, perhaps fifty metres across, with the floor consisting of a smooth, unembellished grey stone. The ceiling was festooned with old murals, which he had neither the time nor the inclination to try and decipher, and the walls were much the same, except those frescos appeared to be painted, albeit ancient, faded and barely discernible from the rock they covered.

Within five seconds his electronics went haywire. It happened suddenly and without warning. His comms were the first to go, then his railgun targeting suite, the latter followed swiftly by some of his more peripheral IHD systems. It was deeply irritating, though not mission critical. He stopped in an alcove for a brief second to run a comprehensive diagnostic, and,

frustrated to find there was nothing tangibly wrong with any of his Mantix, flicked the iron sights up on his railgun and carried on.

After another five minutes, he cancelled his tac screen altogether. The interference from the temple was scrambling it to such an exasperating degree that it was more of a hindrance than anything else, and for the first time in years, he found himself operating outside of a training environment without an ocular sensor overlay. Unsettled, though undeterred, he continued to follow the curvature of the temple. Intermittent testing of his comlink revealed nothing but ghost chatter. A few times he tried to raise Fitzroy and Kene, or any UN or Xhevegan forces that had entered the temple, but to no avail.

The temple was virtually soundproof, though a long career of warfare told him that the distant basso rumbles which he could occasionally hear were explosions. He quickened his pace, hoping that their calculations on the longevity of their ordnance had been correct, then stopped. He could see something, only just visible round the curvature of the inner temple wall – something which long reliance on enhanced optics meant that even his perfect vision couldn't make out fully. Peering into the gloom, he brought his railgun up and advanced slowly.

'Shit,' he said, once he realised. It was Kene. She was propped up awkwardly against the outer wall, railgun slung across her lap, though as he neared he saw that *pinned* would have been a more apt description. The guard and handle of a *caldar* jutted from her breastplate, telling him that it had been driven into her chest with some considerable force, though that in itself should not have been a problem for the medical suites of the Mantix. The mere presence of blood, seeping from the wound like crude oil from sand, alarmed him much more.

'Kene,' he breathed, coming to a stop next to her. He kept his railgun trained on the temple ahead for a few moments but could see nothing ahead.

'Commander,' she rasped, clearly in pain.

'Christ, Kene, what's going on with your IHD? Why are you bleeding?'

'Gone,' she sighed, her voice quiet and muffled without functioning Mantix speakers. It also sounded worryingly drowsy. He didn't want to think how much blood was sloshing around inside her armour.

He looked over his right shoulder again, then popped open a box pocket on his utility belt. Inside were two syrettes filled with a cocktail of coagulants,

painkillers and stimulants, and he plugged them into the intravenous lock in the gorget seal of her Mantix.

‘There... are provar...’ She struggled as the drugs worked their way into her jugular. ‘... concealed... hiding in the walls... I don’t know where... Fitz is.’

‘All right,’ Courte said, studying the sword protruding from her chest. ‘I don’t think I can take this out.’

Kene shook her head. ‘Just... leave me,’ she gasped. The strength of her voice was improving but to nothing like the level he wanted. ‘I’ll hold the fort here.’

He could just make out the barest hint of a smile through her visor.

Courte clenched his teeth and gripped her by the shoulder pad. ‘Listen, don’t you fucking die, all right? I’ll be back. Did you see Fitz at all?’

She shook her head, suppressing a cry of pain. ‘No,’ she managed, trying to shift her weight to take some of the pressure off the *caldar*. More blood seeped through the gap in her armour.

‘I’m going to get you a trauma unit—’

‘No!’ Kene gasped. ‘Go, you’re wasting time.’

Courte stood. He knew she was right. ‘I’m coming back. Just don’t fucking die.’

‘I’m... not planning on it,’ she said. He took one last look at her, then turned and ran down the hallway.

\*

It was over. She had hoped that she might live to see her plan reach fruition, but that hope bled out of her now. It didn’t matter; the very last stage of the plot was complete. The presidential authorisation had been given. With any luck, Howarth’s EFFECT team would have already landed in the Forbidden City, setting the UN and the Ascendancy on an irrevocable path to full-scale total war. That was enough. It would have to be.

‘What’s going on?’ Frost managed. He was looking dumbly between the two of them, trying to decipher some meaning from the tense, strange

atmosphere. Josette had made no plans beyond the presidential authorisation, and so in a flash of inspiration, she grabbed him by the throat.

‘Nothing,’ she grunted, spinning around him so that his body became a shield between her and the two guards Howarth had summoned.

‘Josette,’ Howarth said, rolling his eyes.

‘Drop the guns or I kill him,’ she said to the guards. It was more to buy time than anything else; even without the railguns, there were so many weapons secreted within their Mantix suits that it made little difference.

‘*Josette*, for Christ’s sake, it’s over, let him go,’ Howarth said, in a voice that was bordering on amusement.

‘Forget it,’ she snarled back. Frost’s face was turning a shade of claret as her hand slowly throttled him. ‘Drop the guns or he dies.’

‘Josette, why are you doing this?’ Howarth asked.

‘Shut up,’ she replied. The two guards were already splitting up. Keeping his weapon aimed directly at her head, one peeled away, moving around her as if tracing a circle she was at the centre of. She gripped Frost’s throat harder.

‘Call them off!’ she shouted, compensating for her rising panic with aggression. She could practically feel the railgun’s bead on the side of her face. She didn’t want to die at all, but if she had to, she’d damn well take a few of them with her.

‘Gnnrrr... *Christ... Karl... hnnn... do as she... arcggggghh, says,*’ Frost spluttered.

‘Why?’ Howarth retorted calmly to Frost. ‘You’re going to be deadweight in twenty seconds. We can revive you later.’

‘Not if I tear his throat out,’ Josette replied as Frost’s eyes bulged. A seam of blood opened from under her fingernails and trickled down Frost’s neck. ‘Call them off!’

Howarth allowed himself another five seconds of indecision before his face split into a sneer.

‘Fine. Stand down.’ He nodded to the guards. ‘But stay put,’ he added.

‘That wasn’t difficult,’ Josette said, feeling Frost’s legs begin to give way. She was running out of time. She studied the nearest guard. ‘Toss me that sidearm,’ she snapped at him, nodding to the rail pistol strapped to his hip.

‘We’re not giving you a weapon, Josette,’ Howarth said, practically laughing. ‘You have no options. The only thing you can hope for is to leave

here in custody.'

He was right, of course. She still had the needlex scrubber on her, but it was in her pocket and not in her hand where it needed to be. Without anything more than the threat of liberating Frost of his trachea, she really was in trouble, and Howarth was an industrious man. She had no doubt that the net was currently jammed up with IHD alarms emanating from his head.

Then a thought struck her.

'Stay where you are,' she said, wheeling the choking, spluttering Frost towards the toilet, doing so in such a way as to retain his services as a human shield.

'Why, Josette?' Howarth asked as she walked awkwardly away. 'At least tell me that, before we kill you. I didn't think you had it in you.'

'That's probably why it's taken you so long to find out,' she replied simply. She heeled the toilet door open, her hand still gripped firmly about Frost's windpipe, and dragged him backwards inside.

'Josette!' exploded a familiar voice from behind her. 'Why on Earth have I just got a message from Howarth telling me to detain you?'

Josette wheeled around to see Pike standing by the row of sinks, rail pistol in hand, a look of profound confusion etched across his formidable brow. The pistol was not pointed at her.

'Oh, Gordon, thank God,' she said. She gave Frost's vocal cords a quick clench to render him dumb, then dropped him and ran towards Pike, crying. 'He's gone mad – he said he was going to kill me!'

Pike's features creased further in bafflement as she wrapped her arms around him. Outside, she could hear Howarth shouting at them to come out through the door.

'What on Earth is going on? Alistair?' Pike said, awkwardly returning Josette's embrace. She could have laughed then, at his stupidity. She brought both hands up in one swift motion, and leveraging her full bodyweight, twisted his thick, muscular bull neck until it snapped.

'Josette!' she heard Howarth shout again. 'There's no way out of there. Get out here now!'

She ignored him and picked up the rail pistol. It was coded to Pike's IHD, but she was easily able to overcome its Death-of-Agent protocols with Mary's EFFECT software suite. Frost was still writhing on the floor, clawing



at his crushed and bleeding neck. She ignored him and began to kick open the toilet stalls one by one.

*'Ah shit, the goddamned President! Get in there!'* she heard Howarth suddenly start screaming as he realised – too late. The President was in the stall furthest from the door, sitting on the toilet seat and smelling like vomit. His eyes regarded her with a mixture of disbelief, mad fear and profound rage.

'What are you doing?' he asked stupidly, focussing on the pistol aimed squarely between his eyes.

'Killing the UN,' she said without a trace of remorse and shot him through the forehead.

*'Josette!'* she heard Howarth roar at a volume fit to burst his larynx. The net exploded with IHD warnings. The President's death protocols were something quite aside from those of his relatively lowly Joint Chiefs, and comprehensive footage of his own murder – something which his corneal implants would have had no trouble in recording – would be beamed to hundreds of different sources arrayed across the galaxy.

She ducked out of the stall, her whole body trembling as adrenaline crashed through her system. The sheer enormity of what she had just done was incomprehensible. She could barely hold the pistol her hand was shaking so hard. She felt giddy and terrified all at the same time.

The outer toilet door splintered open from a well-placed, exo-powered kick, and a moment later, a trio of hollowpoint tungsten slugs tore through the inner door and chewed into the stall around her, centimetres from her centre mass. She yelped and fired back at the same time as trying to shield her body with her arms, and the resultant high angle of her pistol put all of her shots into the bunker wall above the door. A piercing shriek told her that she had, quite by chance, nicked open a high-pressure pipe running through the concrete.

'Wait!' she heard one of the guards shout to the other, but it was too late. The next slug to slam through the inner toilet door ignited the pipe's spewing contents, and Josette watched, paralysed, as a mass of kaleidoscopic flame blossomed into life at the far end of the room.

The last thing she felt was fragments of bone from Frost's body tearing into her like shrapnel, before the explosion claimed her.

\*

By the time he reached the entrance to the Zecad proper, his IHD had ceased all but its most remedial functions. His exoskeleton was deadweight against his limbs, pulling on his Mantix like a corpse, and he had half a mind to switch his railgun to chemprop rounds in case the electromagnets jammed up as well. Everyone in UNAF, and especially EFFECT, had to undergo IHD-deprivation training, but he had never experienced such a profound system failure on operations. Considering this was likely to be the most important – if not last – mission he ever undertook, the timing could not have been worse.

The entrance to the Zecad was a wide, circular door, hewn into the black obsidian of the pyramid itself. Given what it represented, it was quite unremarkable: just a door, unadorned, glistening black. Beyond was a short tunnel, and after that, what looked to be a balcony of some description overlooking a wide, circular chamber. A low blue glow provided the only light.

He brought his railgun up and moved forward slowly into the chamber. He could hear movement now, voices, though not clearly. Swearing under his breath, he paused, removed his Mantix helmet and strapped it about his waist. There was a scream, cut short halfway through, as if someone had flipped a switch. He suppressed an urge to dash forward, and instead continued to prowl towards the edge of the balcony. When he got within a few metres of it, he crouched down and crawled to the lip.

The chamber was entirely black, like the outside of the pyramid, and towered above him, a conical hollow which had been carved out of the Zecad and which travelled all the way to its peak. Below, no more than fifteen metres down, was a wide, circular floor space. At its centre sat some kind of holo generator, and above it, a blue orb, not unlike a tac screen, displaying a graphic of two galaxies separated by a huge void. He was no astrographer, but he knew the Khāli Barrier when he saw it – the vast, unnavigable space surrounding the Milky Way.

His attention, however, was not fixed on that, but was rather directed at the headless bodies of three of his men as they lay spasming and jerking on the

floor, long, glossy streams of crimson ejecting from their neck stumps in great pulsing gouts. At least one other EFFECT agent and two Xhevegans had also been killed, shot in what was, judging by the still-smoking slug holes torn into the obsidian walls, quite a recent firefight. The rest were lined up on the floor, face down, with four Folhourtian monks standing over them.

He checked the anger which quickly threatened to impair his judgement and scanned the rest of the chamber, keeping in mind what Kene had told him. There were no obvious hiding places that he could see from his vantage point, inside the walls or otherwise, but it took a significant advantage to overwhelm nine EFFECT agents. There had to have been something.

He considered his options. The provari monks were not armoured – indeed, he could see that one of them was wounded – his men were not bound and he had the key elements of surprise and superior elevation. Against that, the provar were armed with ranged weapons, he was relying on iron sights and they knew the full layout of a building which likely included a network of concealed tunnels.

He brought his railgun up. The choice was clear. Shoot now and salvage some warm bodies; better that than return to the entrance, secure reinforcements and return to collect nine cold ones. He lined up the sights on the nearest provar and fired.

The railgun made an appalling amount of noise inside the Zecad. The shape of the structure positively amplified the sound, though it had the welcome benefit of inflating the apparent number of shooters. The first rounds hit home, blowing the intended provar's chest cavity to pieces and killing it outright. His volley on the next monk hit a glancing blow, destroying a calf muscle and causing the provar to stagger to an alcove he had not seen at the far end of the chamber. The rest of his shots went wide, a combination of the bucking railgun and the fast-moving targets. The latter pair of survivors egressed through a concealed door and vanished.

Courte leapt to his feet and, keeping his railgun trained on the floor below, moved down the wide staircase that spiralled to the floor of the chamber.

'Commander!' Fitzroy shouted, recovering his weapon from the pile. His face bore a large gash across the right eyebrow, though he looked otherwise unhurt. 'Thank God.'

'What the fuck happened here?' Courte snarled, keeping his railgun trained on where he had seen the provar go – or at least, approximately where. There

wasn't even the barest hint of a door.

'We lost all electronics,' Fitzroy grunted, checking over the dead. Siun appeared next to him, an angry red mark around his alabaster neck where he had been mistreated. His Xhevegan-tailored Mantix was intact, though there was no sign of his helmet.

'Ambushed,' the Xhevegan growled. 'The Zecad must be filled with secret passageways. They were all over us before we even knew what was happening.'

Courte sucked his teeth, surveying the scene. Four dead men, two Xhevegans. No comms, no electronics and a highly mobile and determined enemy.

'I am concerned,' he said, his attention now turning to the vast, static sphere taking up much of the floor space, 'that they are firing in here. They are not supposed to be firing in here. This is supposed to be...' He frowned, searching for the words. '... a fucking holy relic.'

'It is a map,' Siun remarked. The alien raised a hand, tracing through the air the pattern of wormholes. 'A map of the safe passages across the Khāli Barrier. Their crusade fleet lines. It isn't a relic; it's a strategic display.'

'How old is it?'

'It must be hundreds of years,' Siun said. 'I am not sure....'

Courte started to pace round the circumference of the chamber. 'Watch that,' he said, pointing to the now disappeared door. He continued to trace a line around the base of the room, searching for a power source to the generator. There was none – at least, none that he could see. He made another sweep of the room, this time tracing the walls for signs of more hidden alcoves or doorways. Deeply unsatisfied, he returned to Siun and Fitzroy, while the remainder of the men shifted the corpses to one side.

'What do we know,' he said to the ceiling, claspings his hands behind his head. 'We know that there is some kind of persistent electromagnetic interference saturating this whole damn temple. That means we won't be able to move *any* functioning armour or personnel into this room at all. We know that there are provar inside – although we don't know how many. They have the means to move about the Zecad unmolested and attack at will. What other good news do we have? Do we even know if this is the only source of this information?' he asked, gesturing at the display. 'Seems like something you'd back up, doesn't it?'

‘I think, for the sake of the mission, we have to assume it’s the only one,’ Fitzroy said, wiping some mixture of blood and sweat from his eye.

‘We need to find the power source,’ Siun said. ‘There must be more levels, below.’

Courte stared at the display. ‘So this... this tac screen gives them the navigable routes across the Khāli Barrier?’

‘That is my guess, Commander,’ Siun replied.

‘The crusade fleets move along these lines?’

‘Again, I believe so.’

‘So what’s on the other side? What are they crusading against?’

No one answered. No one knew.

Courte let out a long sigh, his gaze shifting from the display to the corpses of his executed men. ‘Damn fucking cobs,’ he grimaced. He caught Siun’s eye. ‘No offence.’

Siun shrugged. ‘I hate them as much as you do, Commander, for much the same reasons.’

‘Mm.’ Courte shouldered his railgun, looking around the chamber for what felt like the thousandth time. ‘All right everyone, listen in.’

The remaining, ragtag band of bloodied humans and Xhevegans gathered round him. Courte didn’t even want to think about how the rest of the insertion team were faring out by the entrance to the temple.

‘Siun is right: there has to be a power source, and it has to be deeper underground. That is now our target. If we can hold that, we’ve got them by the balls. Once we’ve secured the power source, a team will return to the temple entrance to bring in heavier weaponry and a nuclear insurance policy. Analogue as far as possible, understood?’

‘Yes, Commander,’ came the chorused reply.

‘Fitz,’ Courte said as his second-in-command raised his hand.

‘How do we get down there?’

‘There are tunnels around here somewhere.’ He shrugged. ‘Start looking.’

The squad immediately dispersed across the chamber, scouring the walls for any hint of a door. Courte turned his attention back to the holo display.

‘This is bigger than all of us,’ he murmured as Siun appeared by his side. ‘Routes across the Barrier. It’s huge.’

‘Yes,’ Siun replied, then seemed to hesitate. ‘Commander... I do not believe we are likely to survive this mission.’

Courte snorted. 'I didn't think we'd get past orbit.'

'Commander!'

Courte turned sharply to see Fitzroy standing ten metres away, his arm embedded into the wall up to the elbow. He moved it in and out. 'It's just a holo. There's a tunnel just behind it. It's going to be a tight fit.'

'Son of a bitch,' Courte said. He walked over to where Fitzroy was standing and examined the holo. It was perfectly flush with the smooth obsidian interior of the chamber. He raised his rifle up and ducked through. Beyond was a tunnel just narrow enough to allow a provar to squeeze through. The tac screen's glow only managed to light a few metres of it. Beyond that it was pitch-black.

He stepped back out. 'I'll go first. Siun, Fitz, on me. The rest of you stay here. Shoot anything that moves.' He started to move off, then stopped and turned. 'Except us, obviously.'

He turned back into the tunnel and activated his corneal night vision. It was functioning at eleven per cent, roughly the same efficacy as a small candle, but it was enough. He turned back to see Fitzroy and Siun directly behind him, weapons up. He pressed a finger to his lips, let his railgun hang on its strap by his side and drew his combat knife from its sheath about his waist. The others did likewise, and Courte started walking, slowly. He had gone about five metres before the tunnel twisted away sharply to the right. From then on they found themselves walking downwards in a tight corkscrew, moving silently in the increasing heat, all the while their inoperable exoskeletons tugging at their limbs. They walked for ten minutes, deeper and deeper into the bowels of the Zecad, before Courte heard voices. At the same time he realised the tunnel was growing perceptibly lighter. He turned and could just make out Fitzroy and Siun behind him at a good spacing.

*Enemy*, he motioned with his hand. Both acknowledged with hand signals of their own.

Courte was barely breathing now. Even the slightest movement seemed to be impossibly loud, as if the walls themselves were conspiring to reveal them. He edged closer and closer until he could see the tunnel exit. This time it was not blocked off by a wall-mimicking holo, and he could see into the room beyond.

It was a vast, circular space, easily five hundred metres in diameter, crowned by an enormous dome twenty metres from floor to apex and

supported by evenly spaced pillars carved directly from the bedrock. Between each one was a tube of some kind, like the plasmastat of a Goliath but much larger. There was a static tang to the air as well, a heaviness that seemed to reverberate through his entire body.

He saw now that the voices he had heard were coming from a pair of provar, standing a few metres from the exit of the tunnel. One was wounded, blood pooling around its feet. The rest of the chamber, insofar as he could see, was unoccupied.

*Two enemy... he motioned to Siun and Fitzroy ...five metres. Guns. Capture and interrogate. Siun translate. Understood?*

*Acknowledged, Siun and Fitzroy motioned back.*

*Shoot to kill if unsuccessful.*

Courte turned back to face the chamber beyond and sheathed the knife. As delicately and quietly as he was humanly able, he wrapped his hands around the grips of his railgun and brought it up. He then beckoned Siun and Fitzroy over so that they were standing in a line, weapons aimed at the backs of the unsuspecting provar.

Courte's heart was thumping so hard it felt as though it were about to punch through his sternum.

'Now,' he said under his breath.

Siun bellowed something in Folhourtian Provari. The two provar visibly started and whirled around, hands already grasping for *caldars* about their waists.

Siun bellowed something else over their angry snarls. Courte kept his railgun aimed squarely at the chest of the leftmost alien, directly at its alabaster sternum. His finger twitched on the trigger as they began to advance.

'*Varna ash gheyekh ah, hai!*' Siun tried once more. The provar on the left continued to take slow steps forward, but his companion seemed to pause, nictitating membranes flickering. It was sagging slightly, drawn down by the severe channel wound just below its ribcage.

'Stop,' Courte growled, gesturing with his weapon. The provar on the left was still babbling away angrily.

'What's he saying?' Fitzroy asked Siun.

'It is mostly just insults,' Siun replied.

The left provar lunged at him, *caldar* poised to cut him in half. Courte fired

three times, punching a triplet of fist-sized holes in the alien's chest. The railgun banged loudly, switching automatically to chemical propellants after the electromagnetics finally failed. Fitzroy fired as well for good measure, even as the provar was hurling backwards in a welter of blood. One of his shots punched clean through the side of its skull, braining it.

Courte turned his weapon on the other provar, as did Siun and Fitzroy.

'*Veyikh*,' Siun snapped. '*Veyikh*!'

The provar gave them one last lingering look, then let its *caldar* go. The blade clattered noisily against the floor, and the alien doubled over and slumped to its knees, clutching its wound.

'Fitz, check right. Siun, you watch him,' Courte said, gesturing to their apparent prisoner. He moved cautiously out of the tunnel and into the hall beyond, ignoring its impressive size and emptiness and instead searching for any sign of more provar. There were pillars to either side of the tunnel exit as well, and he could see clearly now just what it was sitting in the strange tubes between them.

'What the fuck is that?' he murmured, except he knew exactly what it was just by looking at it: the body of a kaygryn female, with four matured arms instead of the vestigial limbs he was used to, suspended in a tank of fluid. On her head was what looked like a helmet with dozens of thick wires protruding from its crown. On top of the tank was an array of antennae, each pointing to the dome's apex.

'Commander... have you—'

'I'm looking at it right now,' Courte interrupted. He forced himself to concentrate on the spaces behind the pillars, the gaps where an alien with a weapon might hide and try and surprise them. He completed a slow and methodical sweep of the immediate area, noting that between every pair of pillars was another tank with another kaygryn in it. Once he was satisfied that there were no provar nearby, he backtracked to Siun and their captive.

'This guy's got plenty of explaining to do,' he said, letting his rifle hang on its strap. Fitzroy finished his sweep and walked back over to them, confusion marring his features. A few times he looked over to the centre of the hall, and Courte followed his gaze to see what looked to be a black disc surrounded by a large block of machinery, bolted to the apex of the dome.

'That's an FTL comms array,' Fitzroy said, moving stiffly in his dead Mantix exoskeleton. 'All of these tanks, they're all broadcasting into it. You



can see the antennae. All the way around, they're pointing straight at it.'

Courte lifted his foot and gently kicked the provar backwards. It let out a howl of pain, both hands pressed firmly against the wound in its side. Blood was seeping through the gaps between its fingers, trickling into the ever-spreading pool on the floor. One of the disadvantages of having multiple hearts, Courte supposed, was appalling rates of blood loss.

'Siun, this guy's going to die in about two minutes,' Courte said to Siun, his voice devoid of compassion. 'Find out what this place is.'

Siun nodded and began talking to the wounded provar in FP. Courte let him get on with it, looking around the hall for any sign of enemies. His corneal implants offered him some optical enhancement, but thanks to the electronic interference from the Zecad, its zoom function was as woeful as his night vision had been.

'Fitz, go and check it out,' he said, nodding towards the comms array.

'Chief,' Fitzroy replied and jogged over to the centre of the vast hall.

Courte turned back to Siun. After their captive's initial recalcitrance, he seemed to be fairly animated, responding to Siun's questions with only a trace of decipherable contempt. Courte put it down to the alien's impending death, but it was possible that not all provar were utter shits – as difficult as it was to believe.

After five minutes, during which time Siun became visibly and audibly shocked, Courte decided he had waited long enough.

'What's he saying,' he said, drawing the attention of both aliens. 'What's going on with these kaygryn?' He was looking at the wounded provar as he spoke. It stared back at him, doing an excellent impression of a human grimace.

'The map room above us is indeed that – a map of the routes across the Khāli Barrier. The map is derived from the mind-states of these kaygryn. Each one has a piece of the map embedded in their cerebral cortex. The information is broadcast to that FTL array in the centre of the hall, where it is consolidated and then transmitted to the crusade fleets in near real time.' Siun paused, looking across to the nearest tank. 'These kaygryn... They are hundreds of years old, Commander. The fluid in those vats has been preserving them.'

Courte wrinkled his nose. 'Couldn't they have just copied the information? Why keep them in this suspended animation for so long? And why the *fuck*

do they have *four arms*?’

‘Apparently, the safe navigational passages through the Khāli Barrier change frequently. They are corridors of safe space a thousand kilometres wide, fluctuating daily. The means of accurately predicting their location and movements is embedded in these kaygryn brainstems. Apparently, it cannot be replicated.’

‘So this is the only source of this information? In the galaxy?’

‘If this provar is telling the truth, yes.’

‘Then why isn’t this place as completely fucking locked down as a Prism Bunker?’

Siun performed a very human shrug. ‘My best guess is that our original theory about the Zecad is right: the Ascendancy considered the very idea of trying to capture it so absurd that in practice guarding it would be unnecessary.’

Courte reflected on this information for a second, acutely aware that their provari friend was on the verge of expiring.

‘So it’s a map. For what purpose? Where do the crusade fleets even need to go to?’

Siun looked visibly uncomfortable. ‘I’m not sure if you will believe it... To be honest, I am having difficulty in believing it myself.’

‘Out with it.’

‘He says...’ Siun paused, looking back at the Folhourtian. The provar simply looked back through lidded eyes, dying. ‘He says that the crusade fleets are fighting the kaygryn. The Kaygryn Empire, to be precise. The kaygryn have an empire in the next galaxy, and the Ascendancy has been locked in a stalemate with them for centuries.’

Courte blinked a few times. On the floor, the provar grabbed Siun by the ankle, causing the Xhevegan to cry out. Courte scrambled to bring his gun up, and Fitzroy started to sprint back to them.

‘Wait!’ Siun shouted, slapping the barrel of the railgun to one side. The Folhourtian was trying to enunciate something, but each laboured breath was rattling in its throat. The spread of blood had long since enveloped Courte’s boots and must have been a couple of metres wide.

Siun squatted down, much to Courte’s chagrin, and put his ear close to the dying provar’s mouth. The alien took one deep breath and managed to speak a single word before it died.

Siun remained very still for a while, then stood. Courte cleared his throat.  
‘What did he say?’ he asked, just as Fitzroy appeared next to them.  
‘Brother,’ Siun said quietly.  
‘Contact!’ Fitzroy shouted.

\*

Haig cleared his throat. David’s eyes were fixed on his. He reminded Haig of a raptor, seeking out its prey from hundreds of metres away. Except David’s prey was information, rather than blood.

For now.

‘Hasani told me that the kaygryn and the provar are brother races. He said that they evolved within the same system in Andromeda, through some... extraordinary cosmic coincidence. They were equal in every respect – intellect, strength, technology. They shared everything. Never even had a war.’ He snorted, his eyes fixated on the table in front of him.

‘Keep going,’ David said. There was a fresh urgency to his voice.

Haig took a deep breath. ‘About a thousand years ago they hit their technological plateau. Nanotech, biotech, FTL, extrasolar colonies, all of it. The need to progress died away once everyone was... I suppose *comfortable* would be the right word. Much less impetus to evolve technologically once you have everything you need.’

‘I’m familiar with the technological plateau and the theories behind it,’ David said, making a circular motion with his hand as if he could physically speed Haig’s narrative up.

‘Well, it’s important,’ Haig said, annoyed. ‘Because it also meant neither race could progress beyond Andromeda. They couldn’t.’

‘The Khāli Barrier,’ David observed.

‘Right,’ Haig said. ‘The Khāli Barrier. Untraversable intergalactic space – at least, as far as we’re concerned.’

‘And every other Tier-Three species,’ David said, but Haig waved him off. He was getting into the history of it now, despite himself.

‘It was the kaygryn who cracked it. Specifically, a scientist-philosopher called Anmet vos’Shan.’

‘Vos’Shan as in–’

‘As in the country on Uvolon named after him, yes. vos’Shan is a kaygryn god, though they have no idea where the namesake actually comes from. He developed the theory of what we call the Khāli Barrier.’

‘So named after our Bhaswar Khāli.’

‘Right,’ Haig said. ‘He realised that there were ways to cross it with basic EXM heavy element jump drives – there were routes. Routes which fluctuate on an hour-to-hour, day-to-day basis. Huge corridors of space through which a ship could easily pass – if it knew where to go.’

‘The kaygryn seeded the Milky Way,’ David said, mesmerised.

‘And the provar followed,’ Haig said, eager now, as if he were speaking to an impressed teacher. ‘That’s when the Rift began. The kaygryn allowed the provar through, but wouldn’t share the information itself. They considered themselves Ascendant. You see, both races shared a religion which prophesied that one of them would eventually surpass the other and become Ascendant—’

‘I’m assuming they go to war at some point?’

‘Almost *simultaneously*,’ Haig said as he leaned forward, impassioned. ‘In our galaxy the provar attack the kaygryn on Folhourt. They abduct vos’Shan and imprison him and his entire scientific team in the Zecad. vos’Shan won’t give up the information, so they data sponge him – but it only gives them a tiny portion of the mathematics they need. So they data sponge *his entire team*. Only then, by keeping them in permanent stasis, are they able to build up an algorithm sufficiently robust to navigate the Barrier. Even now it only functions at about eighty per cent efficiency.’

‘The crusade fleets.’

‘The kaygryn purge the provar from Andromeda in retaliation. It’s straight up genocide. Both sides claim to be Ascendant. The provar declare jihad against the Kaygryn Empire. The Kaygryn Empire swears to reclaim the Milky Way. They fight their way to stalemate, and...’ Haig shrugged. ‘They’ve been at it ever since.’

David regarded him in silence long after he had finished, but Haig ignored him, his own attention on the roiling sea. He was unsure how he felt. Unburdened was too simplistic – as was guilty, though as his passion for the pure narrative died away, he certainly regretted telling it to a man who essentially represented his enemy. But who had he betrayed? The UN or the kaygryn? Was it possible to betray both? He was already responsible for the

deaths of thousands of his own people, though even something as objectively amoral as that produced in him a dichotomy of elation and nausea. He also bore collective responsibility for Hadan's Reach. Everyone in the UN who used an IHD or took an intersolar flight had the blood of the kaygryn on their hands.

'Who knows this?' David asked eventually. 'If what you're saying is true, why don't the kaygryn in this galaxy know about this... vast empire in Andromeda?'

'The provar captured and enslaved all the seeded kaygryn in the Milky Way. They've spent centuries breeding the intelligence out of them. Anything that remains, any lingering knowledge, is passed off as religion or myth. A lot can be forgotten, given enough time.'

'What about the provar? There's billions of them. This information *must* have leaked.'

'Why? The UN has billions of citizens. Our society is as open with information as it is possible to be, and yet even now there are things the government knows that the population never will.'

'What about returning crusade fleets?'

Haig scoffed at that. 'The crusade fleets don't return. Most ships are destroyed the second they exit the Barrier.'

David fixed him with a stare. 'All right,' he said. 'All right. Say all of what you've just told me is true. Where does your UN–Ascendancy war fit in to all of this? You felt bad about Hadan's Reach? Is that it?'

'We're all responsible for Hadan's Reach.' Haig picked up a pebble and flung it into the sea. The splash effect was remarkably good. 'I hate the arrogance of Tier Three. I *hate* it. The provar and the UN. We use the kaygryn because it's easy, because they can't fight back. We let the provar kill them by the thousand because we need their rare elements. Would we have ever signed Hadan's Reach if we'd known about the Kaygryn Empire?'

'You're insane,' David said. 'This... Hasani is a talented fake. He's duped you.'

'The Ascendancy cannot fight a war on two fronts. It will have to split the crusade lines to defeat the UN. It will buy the kaygryn enough time to gain the upper hand. They will retake the Barrier.'

'You would sacrifice every human in this galaxy for the sake of some ridiculous alien myth?'

‘Do you know what the Kaygryn Empire calls their war?’

‘Stop it. Tell me the truth,’ David said. The calm façade was well and truly gone. Now he was just another angry EFFECT man shouting at him.

‘They call it the Reclamation. It is holier to them than you can imagine. And the answer is yes; I would sacrifice every human in this galaxy. But it won’t be the provar that kill them. It will be the kaygryn.’

‘Enough!’ David snapped.

Something happened. The environment switched off, and Haig was back on the steel table in the basement of Pinnacle. The black pyramid resumed its silent, formless overwatch.

He exhaled the breath he had taken the moment before his unconsciousness.

The room was silent.

He was paralysed and alone.

He began to laugh.

\*

They were enveloped in fire. There were four provar in the tunnel entrance, each armed with mid-range plasma rifles. The bulky black weapons made horribly loud whining noises as they fired, each shot like a thunderclap followed by a metallic screeching sound that made Courte want to jam his hands over his ears.

He flicked his railgun to full auto and emptied the magazine in the direction of the provar, while Fitzroy grabbed Siun and dragged him away from the blistering haze of phosphorescent blue bolts and towards the far side of the chamber. They were utterly exposed, and without functioning exoskeletons, they were relying on old-fashioned muscle power alone.

‘Moving!’ Courte shouted, as Fitzroy turned and laid down the next bout of covering fire. All three of their railguns were only functioning on chemprop rounds now. They chattered away like ancient machine guns, laying down lightning-white bands of enfilading fire.

‘Ah – *ah*! Fuck! I’m hit! Fucking *fuck*!’ Fitzroy shouted. Courte turned just in time to see him topple over, his left leg below the knee sliced free by a

scythe-like plasma round. The wound had partially cauterised, leaving little blood, but their Mantix and IHD trauma subroutines were not functioning. The man would soon lapse into shock without treatment.

‘Siun!’ Courte shouted, his railgun already soaring towards him. The Xhevegan snatched it deftly out of the air and, wielding them both, unleashed a twin stream of whickering fire while Courte dragged Fitzroy up and draped him over his shoulder.

‘Christ,’ he grunted as the surplus weight of the Captain’s muscle-stacked frame, Mantix and exoskeleton pressed on his shoulders. Siun had done a good job of making the provar duck for cover, but they still had a lot of open ground around them. It would not take the Folhourtians long to stop, take a breath and actually *aim* at them. At that point, whenever it came, they would all be killed.

Courte began to hiss rhythmically with each step, focussing his energy on his enhanced quadriceps, forcing himself onwards, thinking back to basic training and the many thousands of hours since then spent on PT. Fitzroy managed to squeeze off a few shots as Siun reloaded both his and Courte’s railguns, before the Xhevegan resumed his perishing salvo of covering fire. Siun wasn’t even running any more, just walking backwards like a Goliath with both vambrace-mount ordnance points on full auto.

‘Head for the FTL array!’ Courte shouted. The array was not far now, perhaps a hundred metres, and he could clearly make out the event horizon situated at the apex of the dome – an impossibly black circle three metres in diameter. Below it was a comms beacon receiving all the signals from the enslaved kaygryn around the hall. As they neared, the effects of the FTL array could be clearly felt; Courte’s hair was standing on end, his mouth tasted like copper and his chest felt weird, like his heart rate was being interfered with.

‘I’m going to die,’ Fitzroy announced as they neared the beacon. Courte grimaced. Despite the intense heat of the plasma shot, there were plenty of blood vessels in his leg which had not been cauterised, and a long trail of glossy crimson traced their journey from the man’s severed shin.

‘You’ll be fine,’ Courte lied. Traumatic amputation required much more sophisticated medical packages than those they carried on their Mantix. They had them, of course – several crates’ worth with the team by the temple entrance, but they might as well have been on Vargonroth.

They reached the FTL array. The incoming fire grew more sporadic the closer they got – something which Courte had banked on. The aliens would not risk shooting at them now.

‘Siun – tourniquet, now,’ he barked, laying Fitzroy down on the floor. Siun tossed him his rifle back, and he caught it, bringing the weapon up. The Folhourtians were not standing in cover any more; instead, they just stood at the far end of the hall, weapons half-stowed, evidently arguing among themselves if the rapidity and pitch of their voices was anything to go by.

Courte immediately set to work, bringing out all the explosives he was carrying in his webbing. He had a handful of microgrenades the size of breath mints, one micromortar shot, a block of high-yield plastic explosive and the remainder of his chemprop rounds which lay in neat coils in a box at the back of his waist. He set them down on the floor, and, using the plastic explosive as a binding agent, mashed all of the remaining ordnance into it until he had one large wedge that he could stick to the side of the array. From another pouch he produced a remote detonator, one that would function irrespective of his fragged IHD. He pressed the metal contacts into the ball of explosives and then pressed it firmly against the side of the array. Once he was sure it had adhered, he turned his attention back to Siun, who was performing perfunctory first aid on Fitzroy. The Xhevegan had peeled back the seared Mantix as best he could. The nanogel matrix which formed the Mantix base layer was oozing free like the armour itself was bleeding luminescent orange blood.

‘Tighter,’ Courte said, watching as Siun applied the tourniquet. The alien obliged him, pulling the cord so tight the muscles on his arm began to bulge. The constant, trickling blood flow from Fitzroy’s leg slowed to a drip and then stopped completely.

‘Stay with us, Fitz,’ Courte said, ignoring the sporadic fire hissing through the air around them. He crouched down next to his second-in-command and lifted a small flap on his Mantix breastplate. Underneath, a small, battery-powered heart rate monitor showed the man’s pulse to be both slow and weak.

‘Shit,’ he murmured, then flinched slightly as Siun unleashed a long burst of fire in the direction of their assailants. At the far end of the hall, he could hear the Folhourtians bellowing their anger.

‘Commander,’ Siun said, searching his Mantix for another magazine of



ammunition. Frustrated, he dropped the rifle to the floor. 'What do we do now?'

Courte looked about the hall. There was nowhere to go that he could see. They were boxed in, alone, with no comms or electronics or ammunition, facing a fanatical enemy on foreign and hostile territory.

They also had hostage the greatest and most valuable artefact in the history of the Ascendancy.

'We need to negotiate,' he said.

Siun looked at the Folhourtians, then back at Courte. He nodded slowly. 'I will do what I can,' he said.

Courte grimaced. 'Here,' he said, unstrapping his sidearm and handing it to Siun. The Xhevegan checked over the pistol and manually thumbed off the safety.

'If they take me, destroy it,' Siun said. 'They will kill me either way. Do not try and bargain for my life.'

Courte nodded. 'Good luck,' he said.

'Thank you. It has been an honour to serve with the UN.'

Siun turned away, bellowing something to the Folhourtians at the far end of the hall. There was a pause of a few seconds while the sporadic fire died down, followed by some distant, animated conversation. Siun roared a few more things in FP before advancing towards the Folhourtians with his arms raised.

Courte turned back to Fitzroy. 'Don't worry, Fitz. Siun is going to get us out of here.'

'I... can't see,' Fitzroy murmured.

'Just stay awake,' Courte replied. He squinted into the distance as Siun reached the enemy line. Three more had come out from cover now so that all seven were lined up with their weapons aimed squarely at Siun like a firing squad. They were too far away to hear, though judging by their body language they were not happy. Siun still had the rail pistol in his hand. He wondered how many the Xhevegan could take out, if he was quick.

His optics were on full zoom but that didn't mean much given all the interference. Siun was about ten metres in front of them now. He watched him gesticulating, pointing back at him and Fitzroy, making an explosion with his hands.

'It's going to be okay, Fitz,' he murmured. 'We'll get you out of here.' He

looked over to see the man staring glassy-eyed at the ceiling, expired.

Siun was still talking to the Folhourtians, and for a moment, Courte entertained the notion that they might actually survive – until he spotted something a hundred metres to the left of the group of provar. It was the tiniest hint of movement, the smallest glint of light off a weapon, but he knew what it was, as clear as day.

‘Siun!’ he roared as loudly as he could. Seconds later, the Folhourtians shot him through the forehead, and Courte was punched backwards as a phase bolt blew his arm clean off at the shoulder.

Luckily, it wasn’t the arm carrying the detonator.

‘Fuck you!’ was the only epitaph he managed, before he destroyed the FTL array and himself with it.

## EMPIRE OF THE FALLEN

*‘One day war will become obsolete. All we need to do as a species is stop inventing new reasons to wage it.’*

### **Xhevegan dissident Alourani Akeck**

He woke up to the sound of screaming. Screaming people, screaming engines. His eyes were gummed shut, and his nose and mouth were plugged with tubes, leaving his aural sense horribly accentuated. The searing, soul-piercing shrieks dragged him from his brain-weary unconsciousness and back into the harsh light of the real world.

It was the worst possible awakening. Every muscle in his body seemed to have utterly atrophied, making even the slightest movements painful and exhausting. He could feel tubes running all the way down his oesophagus and trachea, a nauseating sensation that stimulated his gag reflex and caused his heart rate to spike. The source of the screaming must have noticed something at that point because he was suddenly aware of a presence next to him, a woman by the faint smell of her perfume.

If it was possible to reek of fear, she would have done. As he waited as patiently as he could for her to extricate the tubes from his mouth and nose, he could sense her jerky, flustered movements. Her hands, on the few occasions when they made contact with his bare skin, were clammy with sweat. The biggest tell, though, was her breath. Every exhalation was ragged, shaky and uncontrolled.

The tubes came out, along with a lot of accumulated fluid that his beleaguered body was all too eager to reject. He vomited it out weakly, feeling the hot ejecta cover his chin, throat and chest.

‘Oh God,’ the woman said in a panicked voice. He felt a cold, rough flannel being rubbed vigorously over the affected areas and desperately tried to open his eyes.

Another scream tore through what he presumed was a trauma unit, the unmistakeable shriek of hypersonic engines cutting through the atmosphere not a few hundred metres above them. This in turn elicited another scream from the woman fussing over him, which caused him to murmur pathetically.

‘Anna! Come on, we need to go!’ shouted another woman’s voice from the door.

‘He’s waking up!’ Anna replied from next to him. ‘I – can we... just leave him?’

He didn’t know what was going on, but one thing he certainly did know was that he didn’t want to be left.

‘Mmmmmaaaaauhhhhhhh,’ he mumbled through dry, cracked lips, trying to wave his arms. Something that sounded worryingly like an explosion boomed from far away.

‘President Constance said that Pavonis wouldn’t be hit,’ the woman next to him was babbling. ‘She said that we wouldn’t be hit but they’re here; how could they have been so wrong? They must have known!’

‘Anna,’ the slightly further away woman said levelly, ‘we need to go. We only put his heart and lungs back in yesterday afternoon. He won’t last ten minutes out there.’

More engines, more screams. He could hear rapid footsteps thumping through the corridor outside. People running scared. Another series of distant explosions.

‘Anna,’ the woman persisted. There was a trace note of panic in her voice now. ‘You saw what they did to Trinity. That was a month ago. Remember what Constance said then? She said they would respect the Tier-Three War Accords. And did they?’

The woman next to him was crying now. ‘No,’ she sniffed. She must have been young. His guess was that she was a TU-tech, while the woman at the door was probably a doctor.

‘So let’s go. You can’t help him.’

‘He tried to save us all! Don’t you even know who this is?’

The doctor sighed. Her desire to leave was palpable. ‘Of course I know who he is,’ she replied, exasperated. ‘Hell, most of *them* probably do. But we can’t help him. If you stay here you will die, or worse.’

‘Mmmmmmm,’ was all he managed from the mentally screamed ‘Don’t you fucking leave me.’

‘Doctor Lynn – shit, Anna,’ – a man’s voice now, breathless. ‘What are you both doing here?’

‘Special Envoy Yano has just come to,’ Lynn replied.

‘Shit,’ the new arrival said. ‘Shit.’

‘We can’t leave him,’ Anna said.

‘We have to. Pavonis Met Police just issued a planet-wide evacuation order. The provar are allowing CDCCs to leave for the next sixty minutes, and then they start shooting.’

‘They can’t kill civilians,’ Lynn protested. ‘Fuck, what is *wrong* with them?’

‘There’s no such thing as a civilian to the provar,’ the man replied. ‘I’m sorry, both, but I have to go. I can’t wait for you. Christ, I have a family to think of.’

‘I’m coming too,’ Lynn announced. ‘Anna, come on.’

‘No,’ Anna said, somewhere between petulant child and a noble TU-tech who took the Hippocratic Oath admirably seriously. ‘He nearly died trying to save us all. I won’t leave him now.’

There was a brief silence, punctuated by the sounds of distant – but closing – warfare.

‘Oh, God,’ he heard Lynn say, followed by what sounded like crying and embracing.

‘Doctor Lynn,’ the man urged from the door.

‘Please be careful,’ Lynn said. ‘Here, take this.’

‘Thanks,’ Anna replied in a shaky voice, as if she couldn’t quite believe they were letting her stay on her own. ‘I will try and make the evacuation, I promise.’

‘Okay,’ Lynn said. It was the guilt-relieving panacea she was clearly after. ‘I’ll see you soon.’

They embraced one last time, then Lynn and the man left.

Another wave of screaming engines thundered overhead, rattling the entire trauma unit.

‘Christ, what am I doing,’ Anna muttered to herself. Yano felt one of her tears spatter his cheek. She pressed a cold hand to his forehead.

‘*Thank... you,*’ he managed.

‘Don’t thank me,’ Anna said, sobbing. ‘Now the provar are here... it would have been kinder to let you die.’