

Astra Ascendant

Erik Luken

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Coventry Chronicles 1

by

Erik Luken

Arkayn Designs - Elgin IL

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Chapter 1

5,000 BC

The whip cracked over the backs of the enslaved. The wielder exhorting the slaves to greater efforts. They pulled on the ropes, heaving the giant blocks of stone further along the track. One individual looked up at the overseer, hatred glittering in his dark eyes. He bent his head low and shuddered. With a guttural roar, he dropped the rope and charged the supervisor. Catching him by surprise, he grappled the overseer, wresting the whip from his grasp. Soon the whip was wrapped around the overseer's throat, choking the life out of him. The now former slave grunted in satisfaction as the lifeless body of the overseer dropped to the dusty, sandy ground. The sun shone brightly on his lightly furred body as he raised his arms in triumph and roared his defiance to the skies.

4,000 BC

The formation of soldiers slowly stalked through the field, their camouflaged armor blending in with the dark green grass. The lead soldier made a quiet hiss as he raised his fist as he came to a stop. The unit following him silently repeated the gesture as they came to a halt, spreading out slightly. The leader of the company crawled forward to see what brought his force to a halt. Across the

meadow, another unit of soldiers slowly crept along the periphery of the field. A immediate hissed command brought the unit forward into a skirmish line. Another quick command brought them to their feet, armaments raised. And the thundering crack of the weapons crashed across the still morning. The targets of the attack crumpled and changed as they leaked a viscous green fluid from their wounds. Within moments, the attackers were victorious, chasing the fleeing remnants into the ground as they showed no mercy to their foes.

3,000 BC

The young men stood silently in the early morning mist. With a focusing cry, they drew swords in a fluid motion with a pace forward. Another shout, another step. This drill continued for the balance of the morning. Shouts interspersed with weapon moves. After a brief rest, the trainees paired off to put their training to practice against a live opponent. The shouts of the young men now became mixed with the clash of steel on steel. Soon a silence begins to ripple through the trainees as a robed figure emerged from the building facing the training field. He slowly walked to the edge of the yard, his blood-red robe the splash of color among the uniform grey of the trainees' clothes. They all bowed low as he passed them, remaining kneeling. The elder, for that is what he was, reached the dais at the edge of the training yard. He stepped up onto it and turned to face the apprentices who were all now bowed low to him. He uttered a single word, and the students sat back on their heels, all facing the elder. He slowly drew an ancient looking sword from the scabbard at his waist. A flick of his thumb and energy crackled along

the length of the blade. He stepped forward until he was a couple of feet from the group of trainees. With no discernible signal, a trio of the students leaped up, attacking the elder. Sparks flew as steel met energy.

2,000 BC

A phalanx of red-robed warriors sprang forward, blades of energy cutting down their opponents in gory splashes of green blood. Behind them, throngs of warrior-soldiers, clad in synthetic armors, wielding dangerous looking sleek rifles fired their weapons at opposing troopers. Bodies began to fall on both sides as the two lines of battle closed and clashed. The roar of combat rose into the cloudy sky. A couple of warriors at the fringes of the battle looked up at the sky as the roar of jets screamed overhead, weapons spitting molten energy at the rear formations.

Centuries pass. The civilization spearheaded by the red-robed warriors cleanse their home world of the scourge they had found. Time passes. The hulking inhabitants of this world, covered in their light fur spread out through their local space, hunting. But never finding. More centuries pass.

2300 AD

The blue-garbed steward brought the new-born into the chamber. The red-robed elder at the far edge of the room looked up. His face showed no emotion as the attendant brought the restless infant to him. Taking the baby into his grasp, he stood and walked around the desk. He looked the baby over carefully, looking for signs of defects, abnormalities that would condemn the new-born to a lesser caste. The first tinge of emotion crossed his face as he found none. He turned to a green-robed assistant, "Let him

be known as Star-Born-Fury,” he stated. The attendant nodded and made a note on his tablet.

The Present

Star-Born-Fury walked calmly through the ancient halls of the Den’Zardo sect. His mind raced at what his summons might mean. Before long, he was at the ornate doors to the Hall of Masters. The attendant quickly snapped to attention as he looked him over and opened the doors. Stepping inside with the attendant Star-Born-Fury caught his breath at the scenes depicted in the frescoes on the walls. Scenes of battles, triumphs, and losses. Glory to all who fought and died in them. He noted with a quick glance that the Venerable Elder was waiting for him. He quickened his step slightly, so as not to keep the Elder waiting on him.

He reached the dais on which the Elder sat. He fell to his knees, abasing himself before the Elder. “I am at your service Venerable Master,” he said.

“Rise Star-Born-Fury. Stand as the warrior you are,” the Elder said. He continued, “Spies have found that which we have sought for so long.” At this, Star-Born-Fury’s ears perked forward. At his in-drawn hiss of breath, the Elder nodded. “Indeed, my greatest warrior, we have found them. Hidden in the heart of the *Skáp’Rudáksu*. A fleet is awaiting your command. You will take this fleet and destroy that which we have sought. Take this fleet to the star known as 31 Aquilae and destroy all that you find there!”

Chapter 2

“Alright, you maggots! Time to get your sorry asses out of those cozy bunks and show me what kind of man you are!” The drill instructor continued to bellow his morning greeting to the barracks as he strode through them, smashing a metal lid onto a trashcan.

Miles Coventry rolled out of the bunk and grabbed his kit before rushing off to the showers. He finished his morning ablutions and was dressed and standing at attention in front of his bunk in less than ten minutes. He wasn't the first to be finished, but he was not the last. Soon, the drill instructor, a sergeant by the name of Gunderson was stalking through the trainees, marking them off for small items. A misaligned hem here, a stray piece of lint there. He got to Miles and looked him over, then proceeded on to the next trainee with a “Harrumph.”

It was nearly noon before Miles could seemingly catch his breath. This was his third day at New Sandhurst on Mars, and he was mortally certain he'd made a big mistake signing up for the Confederation Marines. His mornings had been filled with exercise and strenuous tests designed to build him up as a soldier. His afternoons had been much easier in his opinion, classroom lessons on Confederation history, upkeep of the main Marine weapon, the M-102

carbine, how to move in low- and zero-g environments. He had only another six weeks of this before he'd be thrust out into the world as a fresh Marine private.

His ruminations were cut short as a hard plastic tray thumped onto the table next to him. "Centicred for your thoughts, maggots."

He looked up into the face of one of his fellow trainees. He wracked his brain for a moment before recalling the young man's name, "Don't start that shit with me, Vallot. You're not Sergeant Gunderson, so you are a lowly maggot like myself."

Francois Vallot grinned as he sat down next to Miles and began to shovel food into his mouth. He spoke around a mouthful of food, "I know, but the look on your face was priceless!" He laughed and took a bite of bread. "What made you join up Miles?"

Miles thought for a moment, "It seemed like the thing to do. It was either this or spend time in classrooms at some university learning about Warpspace physics."

Francois rolled his eyes, "Oh yeah. The Marines are the better choice of university or this."

"Why'd you sign up?" Miles asked.

"Family tradition. For the last two hundred years, there has been a Vallot in the Confed Marines. It's also a lot of history pushing me down."

"So that's one of your relatives out front in statue form?" Miles inquired.

"Yeah. I think it's six or seven greats ago. Pierre d'Vallo. First Marine to encounter a Kal'Shak and live." Francois grimaced.

Miles shuddered at the thought of running into one of the extremely large and exceedingly aggressive aliens. The Kal'Shak were a formidable race. They attacked anything that they thought could be theirs. And frequently took it to be theirs.

Miles panted as he jogged over the course. He hated the course. He and every other recruit. He neared the final obstacle, the Wall. The Wall was 10 meters high, it had a couple of knotted ropes dangling from it as well as hand and footholds embedded into it. Most recruits took the ropes. Miles preferred the handholds. He was nearly as fast with the free climbing as most other recruits were with the ropes. The Wall was the one obstacle on the course Miles did not mind. He scampered up the wall, rappelled down the far side and jogged to the finish. Sergeant Gunderson motioned for Miles to join him.

Over the next few weeks, Miles became accustomed to the physical exercises, though not excelling truly at any of them. Where he did shine was in the classrooms. Frequently he was ranked in the top spot. If not, he was a close second to his friend, Francois.

Another area he showed great aptitude was in marksmanship. Give Miles a weapon, any weapon, and he'd put the munition right where he wanted it. Soon though, the end of his training loomed near. Miles was confident he'd graduate. In fact, he figured everyone left in the training platoon would. The ones not fit for the service had been washed out early.

It was a bright morning, bright for Mars that is. Miles stood at the front of his platoon, as trainee sergeant. His position as sergeant of Alpha Platoon was an honor. The only greater honor being that of trainee lieutenant, held by Francois Vallot. Miles smiled inside, Francois' blood had shown through, and he had an incredible knack for leadership. As they marched their unit through its paces for the graduation ceremony, Miles wished that he had a family in the reviewing stands.

Freshly minted Private First Class Coventry stood at attention. Lieutenant Hopkins was reading his file. He finished and looked up at Miles. "Private Coventry, welcome to Echo Company. You'll be in Sergeant Gillespie's squad. I am sure he'll be pleased to have you with him. Dismissed."

Miles saluted and turned a one-eighty before marching out of the office. He blinked in the abrupt change from indoor lighting to the natural light. He glanced at his wrist comp, which directed him to where Echo Company was quartered. He started off in that direction, after hoisting his bag to his shoulder. Again, Miles thought he might have made a mistake in joining the Marines. He soon arrived at the Echo Company quarters and grabbed the first private he saw, "Where is Sergeant Gillespie's squad at?" he asked him.

The private glanced at Miles and replied, "He's got his squad down at the range. You can dump your kit in the First Sergeant's office and get there before he's done with them."

As Miles approached the range, he could hear someone swearing in a loud voice, “Is that what they are teaching maggots at New Sandy these days? How do you expect to keep yourself alive if you cannot hit the broad side of a building from one hundred meters?”

Miles entered the range area and saw a small, red-faced man doing all the yelling. The man caught sight of Miles from the corner of his eye and motioned him to come closer. “I bet this maggot can out shoot you without even trying!” he yelled at the hapless private. The sergeant ripped the weapon from his hands and tossed it to Miles, who reflexively caught it. The sergeant shooed the private from the firing line and pointed at Miles, “You! Here! Now! Kill that target for me!”

Miles stepped to the firing line while quickly checking the weapon over. He brought the weapon up to his shoulder and snapped off a three round burst. The sergeant, looking downrange grunted and said “Again.”

Miles fired off another burst. And a third at the sergeant’s grunt. The sergeant turned to Miles and said, “That’s enough.” Miles flicked the switch to safe and set the rifle down on the firing bench. He took a step back as the sergeant brought the target in from down range. The target was a mess of holes, mostly around the perimeter of the target with the exception of three rather large holes in the center.

“Private Dunberry! This is how you shoot your weapon!” the sergeant bellowed, and followed in a quieter voice, “Nice job son, at least some maggots know how to shoot.” He looked Miles over. “You must be my new maggot. Williams! Front!”

A corporal nearly jumped forward to stand at attention before the sergeant. “Corporal Williams, take my new maggot in hand. You are his eyes now.”

The corporal quirked an eyebrow at Miles and replied, “Yes Sergeant Gillespie! Come along private.”

Williams and Miles retreated to the cluster of soldiers watching the sergeant renew his yelling at Private Dunberry.

“I’m Jake Williams, and we’ll be getting to know each other very well if I stay as your eyes.”

“Miles Coventry. What does the sergeant mean by ‘eyes’?” he asked.

“It’s slang for the observer half of a sniper team. It looks like you are going to be the squad’s long arm from now on.”

Miles nodded, “Who am I replacing? And is it going to cause any trouble?”

Jake shrugged, “You’re replacing me, and if you continue to shoot like that, then no problems with me. Of course, Dunberry might be a bit put out with the way you showed him up. But he couldn’t hit shit if he tried anyway.”

Over the next few months, Miles settled into life in Echo Company, Third Squad as the team’s sniper. Private Alan Dunberry had taken an issue with Miles, but a calm conversation in the barracks head straightened things out between the two men. Dunberry still could not hit anything with a rifle or pistol, but given a heavy weapon, he could hit nearly anything. Miles was engaged in one of the numerous mindless cleansing tasks that the Marines

seemed to love when Sergeant Gillespie stuck his head in the barracks. “Five minutes in the day room!”

Miles quickly finished the bit of polishing he was doing and headed to the barracks day room. Most of the squad was present, and he took a seat next to Jake. “What’s up? Any idea?” he asked Jake.

Williams shook his head, “Nope. Nothing in the chain about anything.”

Sergeant Gillespie entered the room after the last member of the squad came in. “Gentlemen, we have an Issue.” Miles could hear the capital letter in Gillespie’s voice. “Echo Company is being deployed to Tau Ceti. Evidently, there is a bit of noise about seceding from the Confederation. We are being sent to show the common man on the street that the Confed does care about them.”

Miles took a quick glance around the room. No one seemed to be too bothered by this revelation, except for his partner.

“Pack your gear and form up at 1600. Our ship leaves promptly at 1830. If you miss it, I will personally come back here and shoot you.” With that, Gillespie turned and marched out of the room.

Miles turned to Jake, “What do you make of this?”

Jake looked at him, his eyes bleak as he answered. “Nothing.”

It took a moment, but then Miles recalled that Jake was from Tau Ceti. He touched Jake’s arm and said, “I hope so.”

Miles stood uncomfortably in the combat armor and harness. He tugged at the straps one last time before the rear

hatch of the assault shuttle opened to the humid air of Tau Ceti. His stomach clenched a bit tighter as the squad began to deploy in a combat drop. Soon enough it was his turn to jump out of the shuttle. He raced forward and flung himself out of the shuttle, the antigrav unit on his harness stopping his headlong plunge to the ground. As he set down, he immediately took to one knee, his rifle in his hands. He scanned for any potential hostile as the rest of the squad formed up. Gillespie's voice crackled over his helmet commlink, "Gator Five, Gator Four, make a nest for yourselves on that hill." A small map appeared on Miles' HUD with the hill outlined. "Gator Two, take your squad and form a perimeter around this hill." Another hill lit up on the map. "Gator Three, take your squad and set up house there." Marines began to move out as Gillespie stalked towards the hill he had designated for their camp.

Once they had a shielded sniper's nest built, Miles flipped to his private channel with Jake, "How is sitting out here in the jungle reminding the common man on the street?"

Jake hesitated a bit before replying, "I've heard that there are separatist rebels out here. The people in the cities are still pro-Confed. It's the miners and jungle farmers that are unhappy."

The next week was uneventful, the Marines stayed at their camp in the jungle, and Miles was certain the natives were just laughing at them. The nearest town was approximately three kilometers away from their camp. Gillespie had not yet let anyone approach the town, but it seemed as if he was wavering on that point. Miles approached him after dinner, "Sergeant, we need more info. Let me and

Jake go to town and see what we can dig up.” Gillespie eyed him for a long moment, then replied, “Okay Coventry. You and Williams can go to town to find any useful intel. This does not mean hit up the first bar you see and get drunk!”

Miles nodded and went to collect Jake. “Come on Williams; we’re going to town.”

Jake looked at Miles and said, “Does Gator know about this?”

Miles nodded and said, “Yes he does. Only order was not to drink.”

Miles and Jake cautiously approached the small town. It was a farming and logging town, the smell of freshly cut lumber hung heavy in the humid air. Miles wiped the sweat from his brow and walked forward into town. “Any idea where we should go?” he asked Jake.

Jake looked around a bit, then said, “There. The corporate office.”

The two soldiers walked to the corporate office and entered. The cooler air hit Miles in the face, and it felt like the sweat on his forehead had immediately frozen. The two approached the receptionist who greeted them, “Welcome to Tau Logging, how may I help you?”

Miles glanced at Jake who shrugged as if to say, “Your idea, you lead.”

Miles quirked his lips into a quick smile then looked back at the receptionist, “I know we do not have any sort of appointment, but would it be possible to meet with the trade attaché here?”

The receptionist eyed the two soldiers for a moment before flipping a switch on his headset. The hush mike blocked any part of the conversation leaking out to them, but after a moment the receptionist said, "Trade Legate Thompson can meet with you for five minutes."

Miles thanked the receptionist and headed to the indicated door. He stepped through into an office decorated with carved objects from the local woods. The trade legate stood from behind his desk, "A pleasure to see you again Mr. Williams. Now gentlemen, how may I serve the Confederation Marines?"

Miles cleared his throat and began, "Thank you for your time Legate, we greatly appreciate it. We are Confederation Marines as you have already noticed. We are looking to get a feel for the local situation here. How the people feel about the Confederation."

The legate sat back with a surprised look on his face. "You must be joking! The Confederation drops you here and tells you nothing? Your deployment here was like striking a match and setting it to a fuse. Attached to a large number of explosives. If you can, you should leave here as quickly as possible."

Miles looked at Jake, who returned his look sadly. "What do you mean Legate? Leave your office?"

"No no! Your entire squad should go, preferably before anyone attacks them tonight. Now if you will please excuse me, I have much work to do."

Gillespie stalked across the small area in the command tent, "He said we were going to be attacked?" he asked.

"Yes Sergeant," Miles replied.

Gillespie looked at the pair a moment and then wheeled around, yelling orders to the men. Soon the unit was alert and focused on sensors and looking out into the jungle. Miles and Jake were ensconced in their hide, keeping a sharp watch out.

“You think there was anything to what the legate said? About us being attacked?” Miles asked.

Jake sat silently for a minute, “My family has a plantation 500km south of here. Legate Thompson has always traded fair with my family. I think that’s the only reason he warned us. He would have his fingers on the pulse of the people around here. I think it’s a good bet that something is up.”

Miles looked out into the jungle, watching silently. Jake bent his head to his sensors and was silent. The sudden crackle of rifle fire to their left snapped their heads up. Jake swiveled his scanners to that area, the members of Echo Company marked with green icons. A rash of red icons was scattered in the jungle approaching the company.

“Gator units, Gator Actual. Engage targets. Gator Twelve lay down the heavy shit. Gator Five, engage under ROE Alpha-Mike-Six,” Gillespie ordered.

Miles clicked his radio twice in response as Dunberry’s grenades began to crash into the jungle. “Okay Jake, give me some targets.”

Jake highlighted a half dozen targets, “Right to left Miles.”

Miles grunted softly in reply and gently stroked his trigger. The icon flashed briefly and flicked out as Miles moved on to the next target.

The next few hours were a blur in Miles' mind. Eventually, the attackers fled, hotly pursued by a squad of marines. As the sun rose, Miles rolled onto his back and stared up at the lightening sky. "Gator units, Gator Actual. Regroup at Gator Two's location," Gillespie's voice crackled over the comms.

Jake and Miles slowly climbed down from the hill and approached the camp. Miles looked around slowly, counting the missing people.

Over the next weeks, Miles' unit was at the forefront of the rebellion. Heavily reinforced by the Confed, Echo Company was fully entrenched in the jungles of Tau Ceti. Miles lost count of how many insurgents he killed, but he was sure there was a record of each one.

Miles looked up from the adjustments he was making to his scope as an alarm began to blare from the perimeter of the Marine camp. He hastily reassembled his scope and shoved it into a pocket as he grabbed his rifle and shrugged into his armor. As he arrived at the meager fortifications on the perimeter, he was met with a hail of bullets and explosions. Miles dove for cover and attached his scope back onto his rifle before he began to scan the jungle for the attackers. Each time he saw one, he put a round into the target. A few moments later he grinned as Dunberry let loose with a rapid fire barrage of grenades.

"That'll teach them," he muttered to himself.

He looked up briefly as another marine dropped prone next to him. With a silent nod to Jake, he began to service the targets Jake pointed out to him. With a wry grimace he

thought, *Servicing targets? Milspeak is good at reducing a violent act to something innocuous.*

His thoughts were interrupted by the whistling shriek of an incoming mortar round. He lunged to his feet and grabbed for Jake, pulling him to a new location as the round impacted and exploded, leaving their previous location a burning, shattered ruin.

Jake cried out and staggered. Miles looked at him to find Jake on the ground, missing most of his left arm. A piece of shrapnel or a heavy round had wounded his friend grievously. Miles dropped to his knees next to Jake, tearing at his medkit. He applied a tourniquet as he yelled over the comms, “Gator-Four needs a corpsman immediately!”

Within minutes, Jake was being moved back to the heavily fortified and secured prefab bunker that was the unit’s field hospital. Miles peered through his scope, looking for whatever might have wounded his friend. He flipped his scope to infrared, in hopes of picking up something more, but the ambient heat of the jungle made that near impossible. With a grunt of frustration, he switched back to normal vision.

“Gator-Five, watch your targets,” Sergeant Gillespie said over the comms, “I’m sending you Gator-Eight to replace Gator-Four.”

Miles grunted into the mic as a reply.

“Jake will be okay Miles, the medics have him sedated and the wound is stabilized. Though I’m afraid his tour is done here,” Gillespie said over a private link to Miles.

Miles frowned as he replied, “I know Sarge. It’s his own people that did this to him.”

“Get that shit out of your thinking space right now,” Gillespie ordered. “His people are Terran Confederation Marines, not these insurgents.”

Miles nodded even though he knew Gillespie could not see him, “Yes sir.”

He heard a snort over the comms, “I’m no officer Coventry, I work for a living.”

Miles nodded as Gator-Eight, Jewel Tanaka dropped down next to him. Tanaka was one of their new reinforcements in the weeks since the original blow up. She was tough, and if Miles had to admit it, beautiful. In a deadly, I-will-gut-you-with-your-own-knife-if-you-piss-me-off sort of way.

With an inner smile, Miles began to deal with targets as Tanaka listed them.

Weeks passed. Miles seemed to be eternally tired. They had retreated twice since Jake was evacuated from Tau Ceti. Tanaka had even warmed up to Miles somewhat, though she still was an ice-cold bitch.

It seemed Miles had just fallen asleep when the night was shattered with explosion from grenades. Miles rolled from his cot and grabbed his rifle and armor. “Gator-Four up,” he said into the comms.

He smiled briefly to Jewel as she slipped into their blind next to him. To his surprise, she returned his smile and then began to call off targets.

After what seemed to be hours, but was only fifteen minutes when Miles checked his chrono, the silence fell over the jungle again, broken only by the cries of the wounded and people calling out orders.

“Miles, you and Tanaka stay in your perch. We’re not sure if this is a prelude to anything or not,” Gillespie said over the comms. Miles acknowledged and settled himself a bit more comfortably in the blind.

As the sun rose over the jungle plants, Miles could barely keep his eyes open. He started with a grunt as Tanaka nudged him, “Stay awake Miles.”

Miles was about to reply when his comms interrupted with an all-hands signal “All Confederation units on Tau Ceti, this is General MacIlvy. As of 0500 this morning, Tau Ceti Meridian time, a temporary cease fire has been established. Your unit commanders will have further orders for you. MacIlvy out.”

Miles looked at Jewel in surprise, “What the...?” was all he managed before his comms chirped again. “Gator, Caiman, and Gharial, this is Crocodile Actual. Prep for evac and extraction. Boats are leaving at 1130 hours, and if you miss it, you will be left behind. So don’t miss your boat.”

Miles and Jewel exited their nest and jogged towards the bunks. Miles was packed and prepped in just a few minutes, so he sought out Sergeant Gillespie.

“Sarge,” he started when he found him, “what’s going on?”

The sergeant ran a calloused hand over his face before replying, “We’re pulling out. Guessing enough political pressure has been brought down on someone that the rest of this mess will be handled outside of the Confed Marine Corps.” Gillespie looked sour at his own words, then grabbed a tablet. “I’m backdating this to three days ago

Miles.” He stabbed at the tablet with a finger then tossed it onto his bunk.

Miles looked at the sergeant confused before his own comp chirped. He looked at the message and then to the sergeant, “A promotion? Why backdate it?”

Gillespie shrugged, “We were in combat conditions then. The only approval needed for that is Hopkins and he agrees with it. Now go and make sure the other snipers are all packed up and ready.”

Miles left the command tent and moved through the camp. He found Tanaka packed and sitting on her bunk. “Good to see you are packed up. Grab my gear and sit on it with yours at the extraction point. I need to go find the Gharial and Caiman snipers,” he said to her. She raised an eyebrow but nodded as he turned to leave.

Miles had managed to find the other two sniper teams and sent them to Tanaka well within the time before they needed to be on the transport shuttles. Miles took the opportunity to swing through the field hospital.

He wandered through the area, looking for friends. He stopped short as he saw a nurse pull a sheet over a marine’s face. He stood silently next to Dunberry’s body before his comm chirped, “Miles, Tanaka. We are all here and our shuttle is down in five.”

Miles stood for a moment more before replying, “On my way.”

Miles stood at attention outside Lieutenant Hopkins office. Soon a voice from inside called out to him, “Enter!”

Miles entered the office and stood at attention, “Corporal Coventry reporting as ordered sir!”

“At ease Coventry,” Hopkins said. “This is Major Velasquez. He’s here to speak with you.” With that, Hopkins stood up and left the office.

Major Velasquez looked over Miles, occasionally referring to a handcomp. He finally looked Miles in the eyes and said, “Corporal, I have an offer for you. There is no negative if you decline, but there are a great number of benefits should you accept.”

Miles looked at the major, “And what offer would that be Major?”

The major placed a unit flash on the desk and slid it over towards Miles. Miles looked at the patch with a brief glance, and then took a long second look at the patch. He reached for it and touched it lightly, tracing the embroidered emblem of the Confederation Rangers. He looked up at the major, his fingers still resting on the patch.

“You want me to become a Ranger?” he asked bemused.

“We’ve had our eye on you since New Sandhurst,” the major said. “You did your time as a line Marine. And now you have the chance to become a Ranger. If you decline, you’ll stay here as a line Marine. You accept, and it’s off to Io and Camp Zeus.”

Miles looked down at the patch again, “When do I leave?”

If Miles had thought that joining the Marines was a mistake, he knew that accepting the offer to join the Rangers definitely was one. Io was an inhospitable place, to begin with, and nothing the Rangers had done for Camp Zeus made it any better.

Camp Zeus was situated on the moon Io, near the equator. The camp was above ground, unlike the rest of the settlements and outposts on Io. This made Camp Zeus extremely cold, and by extension outright miserable.

At first Miles was heady. The Rangers wanted him to be there, so he thought it would be a relatively simple period of training. Within the first ten minutes of arriving on Io, his training sergeant, Master Sergeant Ian Dunholm removed any thought of that from Miles' head. He was once again a maggot, the lowest of the low and not worth the time and energy of anyone higher up in the evolutionary scale, that is to say sergeants.

In addition to the PT, which was the simplest portion of Ranger training, Miles was subjected to batteries of psychological tests. He frowned as he was reading the latest question thrown at him by the head docs. *“Given that you have been separated from your unit in hostile and inhospitable terrain, you find yourself approaching a native settlement. At your first assessment it looks to be a single-family dwelling, a farm house. You are certain their are supplies you need inside the dwelling, but your prime mandate on this mission is complete secrecy. No one may know you are present. If you enter the dwelling and are discovered, you will be required to eliminate all of the inhabitants. What is your course of action?”*

Miles thought for a few moments before entering his answer on the comp. The comp chirped in reply and displayed the next question for him. Miles sighed and read through the question. An hour later, Miles stretched and exited the test room. Master Sergeant Dunholm was wait-

ing for him, “Time to do some High Orbit, Low Altitude insertions.”

Miles groaned and jogged to his bunk where he suited up in the necessary gear.

Over the next twenty-six weeks, Miles learned various methods for insertion from orbit and from atmosphere. He learned demolitions, sabotage methods, and methods to counter sabotage. He learned to infiltrate and exfiltrate from urban and rural areas. He could look at a ship and find the best places to breach it with a team. He learned how to use most small-arms from the Confederation, the Ursae Republic, and the Novaya Ruskayan Commonwealth. He learned how to pilot and drive many civilian and military vehicles from the same entities.

As the weeks progressed, his training cadre dropped from one hundred to just under forty. Most of the dropouts went back to their previous units, though some were granted Ranger status and buried.

At the end of the twenty-six-week training course, Miles stood in front of a reviewing stand with the remnants of his training cadre. He looked at the stand from the corner of his eye. He noticed Major Velasquez among the officers on the stand. The major seemed to catch his eye and nodded briefly.

After the ceremony, the new Rangers were gathered in the common hall of the base. Major Velasquez walked in to a call of “Officer on deck!” Miles and the others jumped to attention.

“At ease Rangers. I have your duty assignments here with me. Your full orders will be in your comps by now also.”

The major looked down at his handcomp, “Aarons! Ship duty on the *Los Angeles*. Atherton! Embassy duty on Lupus.” The major continued down the list, calling out names and assignments. “Coventry! New Sandhurst. Cvetik! Ship duty on the *New Orleans*.”

As the new Rangers began to disperse to pack and examine their full orders, Velasquez pulled Coventry aside.

“Miles, your assignment may look like a nothing post. But I think you will be pleasantly surprised when you arrive on Mars,” Velasquez said.

Miles nodded and said, “I should pack sir.”

Velasquez nodded, “Dismissed Sergeant.”

In his quarters, Miles brought up his orders on his hand-comp. He skimmed them briefly and paused. “What is Bureau 17?” he wondered.

ASTRA ASCENDANT

Chapter 3

Bureau 17 was a top secret covert operation. Mainly consisting of Confederation Rangers, there were a few Marines and Naval personnel in the ranks. He stopped outside of a door with a number on it to differentiate it from the other identical doors in the hallway. He knocked briefly and a moment later he heard a click as the door unlocked and a voice called out, “Enter!”

Miles entered and stood at attention, “Sergeant Coventry reporting for duty!”

“Coventry.” the man sitting behind the desk was not wearing a uniform, and Miles wondered who he might be. “Confederation Marines, saw action on Tau Ceti. Lost a couple of friends. How does that make you feel about the Taurans Coventry?”

Miles thought for a moment, “They are not my favorite people, but I have nothing against any one Tauran in particular.”

The man nodded and frowned some more at his display before he looked up again at Miles, “I am Cecil Black. I will be your handler for any missions you partake for the Bureau.”

Miles nodded, “What sort of missions are we talking about?”

Black frowned, “Any mission the Confederation deems necessary for your abilities and talents. You will initially be stationed on Lupus. You will be provided with a cover identity and funds. Any questions?”

“What exactly is Bureau 17?”

Black looked at him for a long moment, “We are the organization that will do what needs to be done when no other organization can or will do what is necessary.” Black handed Miles a portfolio. “Dismissed. And find some civilian clothes!”

Miles looked out of the window of his small apartment in the city of Landing on Lupus. The climate was habitable, if barely by Miles’ standards. Seven degrees Celsius for a high was not his ideal temperature. He preferred something a tad more balmy. *Though this is far better than Camp Zeus*, he thought.

Miles’ first order of business was to stash a few caches around the parts of town he might find himself in. He included the normal things he possibly might need; weapons, both heavy and light, money, survival gear, medical supplies, armor, and explosives.

He had been granted two weeks to settle in and prep himself before he was to consider himself “on duty.” He still was not certain what exactly that entailed. His fourth day of non-active on duty status was interrupted by a knock on his door. He cautiously approached the door, a pistol in his hand. He checked the external view and saw a small boy about twelve years old. He stuffed the pistol into his waistband at the small of his back where it was easily accessible and opened the door.

“Are you Charlie Brown?” the boy asked.

Miles grimaced, “Yeah, that’s me.” For some reason Black had sniggered almost non-stop when he assigned the cover identity to Miles.

The boy handed him a small envelope and scurried off. Miles watched him scamper down the stairs before closing his door and opening the envelope. A single data chip lay inside. Miles had been instructed that when he received his order chips, they were to be only inserted into his Bureau 17 issued comp.

Miles slotted the chip and opened the header file. His orders were to aid the insertion of a covert agent into Lupus for the CBI. The dossier he received showed the agent’s picture and a brief description. It also contained a number of challenge and responses for identification. The agent would be arriving some time tomorrow. Miles frowned as he considered what the agent might require.

The next morning, Miles found himself at the shuttle port, watching the debarking passengers. After two hours, a man exited a shuttle who matched the description of the agent he was waiting for. Miles approached him and said, “It’s an excellent day here on Lupus.”

The man eyed him for a moment before replying, “Better than on Mars.”

The challenge and proper response having been given, Miles stuck out his hand, “Brown. I’m here to ease you into Lupus.”

“Pleased to meet you Brown. Cristof Lindstedt. I have a room at the Lupus Marriot.”

The two men exited the shuttle port, chatting about the weather, sports, and other inane topics until they reached

the hotel Lindstedt was staying at. After checking in, the two sat in the hotel room. Miles pulled out a small device and set it on a table near them. He flicked it on and then smiled as Cristof pulled out a similar device and turned it on.

“So, Cristof, what can I do to ease your transition to Lupus life?” Miles inquired.

“Not much really. I know you are not CBI, though they didn’t tell me who you are. All I really need is a good lead on a long-term residence.”

Miles sat back thinking. “The building I have an apartment in has some free units. They are nothing fancy and it’s not the best area of town. Not the worst, but you’ll want to make sure you always lock your doors.”

Lindstedt eyed Miles before replying, “Okay. Sounds good for now” He passed Miles a card with a comm code on it. “Call me when you get confirmation of the apartment.”

Miles took the card and nodded, “Anything else?”

Cristof grinned, “Where’s the best place to eat here?”

Miles had been on Lupus for seven months now. Aside from seeing Cristof in the building occasionally and their monthly lunch at Wolfburger’s, he did not see the CBI agent much at all. Miles had had a few missions of his own, mostly surveillance. He was sitting in his apartment, watching the news when there was a knock on his door.

As was his routine, he checked the external feed and approached the door with his pistol at his side, but ready. It was another street urchin at his door. He opened the door and the boy asked “Charlie Brown?”

Miles nodded with a grimace. He had done some research into the name, and the most popular reference was a drawn character in a flimsy strip back in the 20th century. The character, a boy was totally inept at sports and always seeming to be in some form of drama.

The urchin handed him a small envelope, which Miles accepted and closed his door as the boy ran off. Miles slipped the chip into his Bureau comp and the sat back in surprise as he read the mission brief. This was not a simple surveillance op or aiding another agent. This was wet work. He scanned over the dossier and double then triple-checked the verification codes.

The next night found Miles perched on a rooftop overlooking a park. He peered through his scope with its night vision enhancements. He easily found his target. The man was talking to a young lady and seemed to be attempting to get her to go someplace with him. The target sighed as the girl walked off with a gesture. Miles chuckled softly and gently squeezed the trigger on his rifle. The round impacted the target's forehead, knocking him back onto the ground with most of the back of his head missing.

Miles began to disassemble his rifle when he heard shouts approaching the building. He cautiously peered over the facade of the building and saw the girl his target had been chatting leading two officers towards the building. Her voice was loud enough Miles could make out what she was saying as they got closer, "Yes officer, I saw a man with a rifle on the roof! He must have been the one that shot that poor man."

Miles ducked down and cursed softly under his breath. He kept low and made for the roof access, leaving his par-

tially disassembled rifle behind. He stripped the gloves from his hands and stuffed them into his pocket. He was three floors down from the roof when he heard a door open in the stairwell below him. A quick glance over the railing showed the two officers cautiously ascending the stairs. With another curse, Miles exited the stairwell, making sure the door did not slam behind him. He looked down the hall he found himself in and smiled as he noticed a window at the far end.

He jogged silently to the window and tried to open it. It opened with a loud squeal that made Miles curse again. He got the window open far enough he could squeeze his body through it. He grabbed a can of spider silk and attached it to the wall below the window. Attaching a carabiner to the silk, he began a quick, but cautious descent.

He looked out the alley and saw a multitude of flashing lights and police in the park. Not willing to risk anything that direction, he headed the other way, making sure that he was not followed. It took Miles nearly an hour to get back to his apartment. As he approached his door, he noticed it was slightly ajar. He stood there for a moment contemplating. Then turned and left the building. He had nothing of import there outside of the Bureau 17 comp, and each of his caches had a spare. He headed to the cache that was the furthest from his apartment, ditching his communit and handcomp on the way.

Once he arrived at the stash, which included a small living space, he grabbed a communit still in its store packaging. He called up Cristof.

“Cristof, Charles. Someone might have broken into my apartment. I am not there and probably will not return. Can you check it out when you get a chance?”

Miles disconnected after leaving Cristof the message. He sat back and tried to recall everything he could about the woman who claimed to have seen him. *She was slim, reddish-brown hair. Good-looking.* Other than her hair, there was nothing that made her stand out for Miles. Her hair and the fact she saw him. As she was walking away from his perch. *Now how did she see me? It had to be a setup.*

Miles fell asleep still pondering who could have set him up. He was awakened by the chirp of his communit. He blinked a couple of times and reached for the unit. “Brown,” he stated when he answered it.

“Charlie, Cristof. Don’t know what you are up to, but the pols have your unit sealed up tight. Best to lie low and stay out of sight for a while.”

“Dammit. Okay, thanks Cristof. Can you check into someone for me?” Miles asked.

After Cristof agreed, Miles described the girl who had outed him. They hung up and Miles closed his eyes, deciding on his next actions. He fell asleep again, not coming to any conscious decisions.

Two days later, with the police still looking for the assassin, Miles crept out of his cache. Luckily they did not have a description of him. He went to a nearby store to stock up on fresh foods, when his communit chirped.

“Brown.”

“Charlie, Cristof. I got some news about your girl. She landed on Lupus four days ago and took off yesterday. From what I can tell, she was only here to out you it seems,” Cristof told Miles.

“Thanks Cristof,” Miles said. “I will be getting a new place it seems, Best to not tempt fate.”

“Sounds good. Catch you around Charlie,” Cristof said and disconnected.

Miles grabbed a few days worth of fresh food and returned to his cache. He scanned the local ads for places to live, finally deciding on a small apartment in a slightly better neighborhood than his old one. Once he had secured the new apartment, he sent a coded message to Cecil Black, “*Mission accomplished. Complications. Full debrief to follow.*”

A day later he received his reply, “*Negative. Return to base.*”

Erik Luken

Chapter 4

Eighteen years later...

The sun shone in through the window, waking Miles Coventry. He blinked as his mind began to wake up and engage. The room was spartanly bare. A small cot and a rudimentary facility for waste in the corner. He sat up, the motion making his head swim. The last thing he could recall was shadowing the operative from the Bear's intelligence.

He held his head in his hands until it stopped throbbing, or at least subsided to a manageable level. Standing up, he stretched his tall, lanky frame and rubbed his hand through his short brown hair. He moved to the window and peered out. The skyline looked like the Greater New Boston skyline, he was still on Earth. He prowled around the room, checking for anything that might aid him in his escape.

The room was small, eight feet to a side. The cot took up most of one wall, with the barred window almost directly across from the sturdy door. He stared idly out of the window as his fingers ran around the bases of the bars, seeking out any weakness that might be present. His mind was racing, formulating and rejecting plans of escape when he heard a faint click behind him. He turned slowly as the door opened. The man who entered was dressed in a

business suit; his greying hair combed neatly. He stepped inside the door closed behind him with a sturdy click.

“Mr. Coventry, it is good to see you awake again. I hope the effects of the stunner have worn off by now?” His voice held a slight accent, and Miles frowned as he tried to place it.

Miles cocked his head to the side and looked at the man, “I don’t think we’ve been introduced. You know my name, why don’t you tell me who you are and why you’ve decided to kidnap a citizen of the Confederation?”

“Come now, Mr. Coventry. Kidnap? Surely you jest. Why, you are free to leave at any time you wish. My name is Anton Grigorovich, and I am the attaché to the Ursae Republican ambassador.”

Miles considered the man’s dark blue eyes for a moment, testing him for the truth. With a mental shrug, he walked past him and tugged the door handle on the door. To his surprise, it opened readily. He was halfway out of the door when Grigorovich called out, “Mr. Coventry, do you not wish to know *why* we brought you here?”

Miles stopped and turned to face him, “All right. Tell me why you locked me up in a cell; in what I am presuming is the Republican embassy. You can be sure I will be filing a complaint with the authorities once I am out of here.”

Grigorovich smiled slightly, his lips barely curving as he gave a low chuckle, “Mr. Coventry, may I call you Miles? Mister always sounds so formal, not used between friends. As you have surmised, this is the Republican embassy on Earth. In New Boston in fact. Come, follow me and I shall explain in detail why you are a guest here.”

Anton led Miles down the corridor from the cell; heading to what Miles guessed was the more public areas of the embassy. “The relations between your Confederation and my Republic have been estranged, especially for the last fifty years or so.”

Miles snorted at that, “Relations between the Confederation and the Republic have been cool at best, glacial most of the time. Your Republic is xenophobic, isolationist and ready to attack outsiders at the drop of a hat.”

“So, you say, Miles. The Republic was born of Terra, descended from one of the great generation ships that our ancestors built. We are no longer beholden to Mother Terra. Not since our ship boosted from orbit and headed out to the stars. What we found there...” Grigorovich fell silent. After a few silent steps, he seemed to shudder and then brightened, “That is not why we are here. Republican Intelligence knows that you are a senior field operative for the Confederation Bureau of Intelligence, which is why we invited you here.”

Miles stopped short, then continued walking, “A stunner to the back is not the politest of invitations you could have issued.”

Grigorovich smiled, his eyes twinkling, “Come now Miles, do you think we could have dropped an invitation in the mail and have you respond? At best, you would have thought it a joke and thrown it away. No, we needed to get you here and have your full attention. Ah! Here we are. After you.” He held the door to the conference room open for Miles. Miles looked at him briefly then entered, taking a seat at the luxurious hardwood table, “So why don’t you

tell me why you ‘invited’ me here? I’m a captive audience, as it were.”

“As you are aware, relations between your Confederation and my Republic have never been the most cordial. The generation ship that the Republic was founded by was one of three sent from Earth, financed by the Russian nation. One of course became the Ursae Republic. Another the Novaya Ruskayan Commonwealth, and the third,” Anton hesitated, ignoring Miles’ look of exasperation. “The third was lost. Destroyed. I believe you now call that system ‘Stronghold’ and have quite the fleet presence there. As isolationists, the Republic has caused some of its own problems, namely the Trit’ikk’it and the Kal’Shak. The Trit’ikk’it most of the Republicans who are away from the homeworld, understand they are merely traders. The Kal’Shak of course, are a thorn in everyone’s side. Hide-bound lizards concerned with glory and honor,” he snorted. “We have our worlds in the Republic. You have your worlds in the Confederation. The Commonwealth has theirs, the Trit’ikk’it have some somewhere out there, and the Kal’Shak want the worlds everyone else already have claimed.”

“Now, I did say you were free to go, and I certainly meant that. However, I do wish you’d stay long enough to hear what I must tell you,” Grigorovich sat across from Miles and slipped a data chip into the table’s reader port. A hologram sprung to life between them. “As you can see, this is Confederation space marked in blue, and Republican space marked in red, with the Commonwealth and the Taurus Republic on either side of your space.”

Miles nodded; the star map was familiar to him as it would be to any child. He looked at it briefly and then sat up straighter, peering intently at a section of space between the Commonwealth and Confederation space. Grigorovich smiled when he saw Miles' interest, "So you see it too." Miles nodded slowly, still staring at the small section of space, "What is it?"

Grigorovich zoomed the map in, bringing the sector into stark detail, "That, Miles is a Kal'Shak base. Or at least we think it is. The damned bugs come at us from the other side of our space, and we know where your fleets come from. That leaves only pirates or the Kal'Shak."

Both men shared a moment of humor at the thought of the pirates building something on this scale. "It's the size of a small planet if this scale is correct," Miles said.

"It is. As near as our long-range scanners have been able to determine, the Kal'Shak utilized most of the rubble in that system to fabricate this base."

"You've got my attention. What do you want me to do with this information?"

"Merely present it to your superiors. Let them decide what to do."

Miles looked at him, "And where am I supposed to say I got this information? Republican data chips don't just happen to be lying around much."

Grigorovich laughed and looked at his watch, "In about a minute, you are going to be jumped by the Republican agent you've been tailing for most of the day. Sadly, the agent is not as well-trained as he should be perhaps and is about to assault you in front of witnesses. After you defend yourself and incapacitate your assailant, you will find a

secure pouch on him. In that pouch, you will find this data chip.” He held up the chip after he pulled it from the reader.

Miles tensed, wondering what was about to happen. Grigorovich smiled and slid the chip across the table to him. “You’d best hurry. We have a vehicle ready to take you to near the site where you were attacked so you may arrive at your offices from the proper direction.” Grigorovich pushed a button and the door opened, allowing a young lady to enter. “Miss Smirnova will accompany you.”

Grigorovich stood, and Miles walked to the door with the young lady. Once into the hallway, she guided him to an enclosed vehicle bay. They entered a plain, unmarked vehicle and drove out into the falling darkness.

Miles studied ‘Miss Smirnova’ silently as they drove through the streets. She seemed to be in her late twenties, lithe figure, and her shoulder-length auburn hair neatly framing her face. She was relaxed as they drove into the gloom, passing him his wallet and identification, along with his weapon and spare magazine. His eyebrows rose as he took the gun and started to holster it. He paused and pulled the weapon back out, looking over it carefully. He popped the magazine out and counted the rounds.

“It seems you missed with one shot Mr. Coventry,” Smirnova’s voice was a soft contralto. “Not to worry, your other two shots took our poor agent in the chest, killing him instantly. Poor Grigory should have known better than to try to attack you, but you had him spooked.”

Miles smiled bemusedly as she recounted an attack that never took place as far as his memory went, “I only missed once? I must be improving.”

The vehicle came a stop and Smirnova opened the door for him, “Two blocks to the west is where you were attacked. Authorities in this neighborhood are somewhat lax in their response times, but they are on their way now. You should hurry and leave the area.”

Miles stepped onto the sidewalk and turned to face the vehicle again. “Thank you, Miss... Smirnova was it?”

“Veronika if you wish Mr. Coventry.” She closed the door, and the car sped off. He stared after it for a moment before the sounds of sirens brought him back to reality. He looked around and dashed off into the darkness, headed for safety.

Miles entered his apartment and stood leaning against the closed door. He straightened up and walked into the main room. Depositing his wallet on the counter, he shrugged out of his jacket. He darkened the windows and powered up his deskcomp. He made a connection to the TCBI offices and logged his report. He stashed the data chip in a secure box, and headed to the shower, needing to scrub the residue of the day from his body.

Miles lay on the bed, his mind drifting off when the door to his apartment burst open, and many figures in combat armor flooded into the room. He rolled off the bed, mind suddenly awake and filled with adrenaline. His weapon was in his hand as the first intruder burst into his bedroom. He didn't hesitate and fired two shots, hitting him in the chest. The intruder staggered back, and a second forced his way in, aiming a weapon at Miles. Miles

squeezed the trigger again, as the intruder fired, the stun blast knocking Miles into unconsciousness.

Miles lay for a moment; eyes closed gathering his wits and strength. He sat up, his head still swimming from the stunner. He glanced out the window and saw the familiar New Boston skyline. He stepped to the door and tried it. The door swung open at his touch. He looked out into the hallway, recognizing the medical section of the TCBI offices. He strode out and headed for the lift, ignoring the squawk from the attendant behind him.

“Mr. Coventry! Mr. Cov...” The lift doors closed, cutting the attendant off mid-word. He punched the code for his office level, then reconsidered and entered the code for his boss’s office. The lift silently took him up the seventy-plus floors from the medical section to the offices. He stepped from the lift and ignored the startled looks he got as he walked to his boss’s office. He walked in, interrupting his boss, who shut down his call with a curt “I need to go.”

“Dammit Harry, what is with the goons busting into my place and dragging me out like that?” Miles nearly shouted. “I’d had a rough day, and I was catching a quick rest before coming in.”

Harry Hargrove, once the top operative of the Bureau looked at Miles steadily for a minute. He sighed, “Miles, there were sound bites suggesting you might have been compromised by the Bears. We couldn’t take any chances you might have been flipped.”

Miles looked at him and then let out an explosive “Bullshit! If you were worried about me being doubled, I

wouldn't be standing here in your office. I'd have woken up in interrogation rather than medical. So, what's really going on?"

Hargrove shook his head, "I wish to hell I knew Miles. You tail a Republican operative, and he jumps you, yet you hang around almost until the locals show up? And this data chip. Where the hell did that come from?" Hargrove's raspy voice steadily rose through his short speech.

Miles looked around and dragged a chair to the desk. "Yeah, I got jumped. I wish I knew how he made me and got the drop on me." Miles tried to keep any reflection of his inner thoughts off his face as he recounted his 'encounter.' "And that chip was on the guy. Figured it might have some good data on it, so I snatched it. What was on it? I am guessing you've had it analyzed?"

Harry leaned back and steepled his fingers, "Yes, it's been analyzed. And the information that was on it is being cross-checked. We don't need another Io incident. Go back to your desk. I'll find something for you to do."

Miles looked at Hargrove for a minute and then stood, "Okay Harry. I'll be the good boy for now." He walked out of the office and back to the lift, going to his desk. At his station, he sat staring at the comp, wondering what was going to happen next.

The sun glinted off the stark white upper hull of the TCNS *Gyrefalcon*. Commander Paterno stood on the command deck of the small scout corvette, looking over the displays as his ship cautiously entered the system. "Ahead one-third helm. Bring us in-system."

"Aye, aye Captain."

Commander Paterno watched as his ship crept into the system deeper, her scanners reaching out to light up the Stygian darkness of space. His concentration was interrupted by an alarm as the scanners detected something.

“What do we have, Joe? What’s out there?” Commander Paterno asked his scan tech.

“I’m not sure sir. The long-range scanners picked up a momentary blip, but the second sweep showed nothing. I’m concentrating on the area where the blip was.”

Commander Paterno nodded subconsciously. “Let me know as soon as you have anything, Joe.” He stood back and watched his crew, watched the displays, his attention on everything on the small command deck.

He swore as proximity alarms blared, “What the hell? What’s out there?”

His tactical officer, Lieutenant Graves called out, “Incoming bogies! Six of them! Range six hundred kay!”

Commander Paterno cursed again. His ship was a scout. Not a warship. It was supposed to be the eyes and ears of the warships. “Bring us about 180, helm! Full speed! Jackie, prep and fire the drone.” Lieutenant Graves paled and replied, “Yes sir,” her voice quavering slightly. The ship seemed to shake a bit as the drone fired out of its bay. “Bogey range now four hundred kay.”

Commander Paterno nodded and mentally crossed his fingers as his small ship raced for the Van Klaiburn Limit of the system. “Let me know when we cross the Line, Raoul.”

His helmsman gave a brief acknowledgment and continued to try to wring every kps from the engines. “Two hundred kay!” Lieutenant Jacqueline Graves called out. Com-

mander Paterno tensed, the Line was drawing closer, but so were the bogies.

“Sir! The bogies!”

Paterno looked at the tactical display and blanched as each of the six bogies split into four missiles. Now twenty-four missiles streaked in on his little ship. He looked at the display, calculating distances and velocities. His mind kept rejecting the outcome of those calculations. His ship was going to be caught short of the line which meant he could enter FTL. He leaned back and watched helplessly as multiple streaks intersected with the symbol for his ship. His eyes closed as the first explosions tore through the tiny ship, turning it into rapidly expanding plasma.

Erik Luken

Chapter 5

He threw his arm over his eyes and cursed. As he lay there muttering under his breath, an alarm began to sound. He cursed louder and got up, taking a halfhearted swing at the clock bleating at him. He staggered to the sink and ran the water until it was as cold as it would get, then dunked his head under the stream. He raised his head and considered the mirror. Bloodshot brown eyes stared back at him, a pale scar on one cheek devoid of the dark stubble that covered the rest of his jawline. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and glanced at the depilatory, then walked to a small closet. He shrugged on a black tunic and pulled on a pair of scuffed boots.

Exiting the small set of rooms he called home, the man walked down the corridor, avoiding the trash and human waste. He kicked aside a drunk who staggered into his path and entered the largest section on the hidden base. Approaching a door, he cleared his throat and announced as clearly as he could “Westley Roberts, Captain.” A retinal scanner flicked open, and he groaned as he leaned forward. The security computers thought about granting him access for an agonizing minute before the door slid open.

Roberts made a bee-line for the bar set to one side of the chamber, snatching a bottle of whiskey. He popped the

seal and took a swig as he settled into his seat. The ten other men stared back at him disinterestedly. He cleared his throat again and used his whiskey bottle as a gavel, “This convocation of the Council of Shadow Captains is hereby brought to order.”

One man smothered a cough as Roberts stumbled through the line. Roberts glared at him, “You had something to say, Bellamy?”

The hulking redhead met Roberts’ stare, finally dropping his gaze, “No Roberts, I don’t.”

With a suspicious look at Bellamy, Roberts cleared his throat again and began, “Our profits are up from last month Captains. The routes between the Commonwealth and the Confederation are picking up more military and security traffic, so tell your clans to tread lightly there. The Ursae xenophobes have been sending out more ships, so they are ripe for the picking. Everything else is pretty much the same. Now, anyone have anything new, or can I go back to my hangover?”

Scattered chuckles rang around the room, but died down as a balding, portly man who looked more like a banker than a pirate looked up with a slight “Ahem.”

Roberts looked at him and nodded, “Alright Francois, what do you have?”

The man, Francois de Belleville stood and gave a soft cough, “One of my scouts out looking fer some tramps saw somethin’. I want to bring him in so he can give you a first-hand accountin’ of what happened.”

After a quick glance around the room, Roberts nodded. Francois touched a button, and the door slid open, allow-

ing a slight man to enter, “Captains, this is Domino Pete, captain of the *Iron Dagger*. Go ahead, Pete.”

“Well, you see, it was like this. We was over near the south expanses of Confed territ’ry lookin’ for some tramps we could jump and plunder. We been lyin’ doggo in a system fer a couple days when we sees a big-arsed warp splash. I got me boys up and on the scanners to find out what just came in on us, when some scout ship goes putterin’ past us ‘bout twenny, thirty million kay. So’s we got extra quiet, just in case. Then the scout flips a one-eighty and hightails it fer the Limit. She fired her drone off and was skedaddlin’ when she popped. We stripped her drone as it zipped past, but we never saw what did it, but we lay there fer three days before we creeped out o’ the system an’ came back home.” He stood shuffling his feet slightly and looking like a young boy called to account for transgressions. Roberts nodded, and Francois shooed the other pirate out.

“You got the drone data Francois?” another pirate demanded.

Francois held up a chip, “It’s all right here Captains.” He slotted the chip into a reader, and the captains watched the final moments of the TCNS *Gyrefalcon*. Quiet muttering broke out between the captains as the ship was destroyed. Roberts watched the data; eyes narrowed to slits then banged on the table again with his makeshift gavel.

“Alright Captains, this is what we’re going to do. That system is now Code Black. No Clan is to enter that system without the express unanimous consent of this Council. Any independent ship that enters that system is on their

own and cannot expect any aid from the Clans.” He banged the bottle again, “Meeting adjourned.”

Roberts sat there, staring at the data while the captains, save one left the chamber. The other captain remained unnoticed until he cleared his throat. Roberts looked up startled. “What is it, John?”

John le Morte, a cadaverous-looking man, thin and pale, eyed Roberts, “You seem to know what is going on in that system. More than you are telling us.”

Roberts sighed, “We’ve known each other for almost twenty years now John. Have I ever held out on you?”

Le Morte looked at the ceiling of the chamber, obviously contemplating, “Only twice that I can recall. The first was how you managed to get the *X* from Domingo, and the second time was just now.”

Roberts looked at him for a long moment before nodding, “I killed Domingo when he boarded the ship I was on and tried to hijack it. As for today, I don’t know what you mean.”

Le Morte held his gaze for a minute before nodding in acquiescence. “As you wish Westley.” He stood up and walked from the chamber slowly. He paused at the door, “The Star Reavers are with you Captain, should you need us.” He walked out without waiting for a reply, leaving Roberts to once again replay the data from the *Gyrefalcon*’s drone.

Miles Coventry opened his eyes reluctantly, waking up for once in his own bed. He lay for a moment before getting up and taking care of his morning ablutions. He had finished dressing when the buzzer sounded at the door. Cau-

tiously approaching the door with his gun in hand, he flicked the viewer on. He stared for a moment before opening the door.

“Miss Smirnova, to what do I owe this pleasure?” he asked as he holstered his gun.

Veronika Smirnova smiled as she entered the apartment, politely ignoring his gun. “A mutual friend of ours has recently received some data you should be aware of.”

Miles quirked an eyebrow at her, “I don’t suppose this would have anything to do with poor... What was his name? Grigory?”

Veronika smiled faintly, “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, Mr. Coventry. I don’t know anything about anyone named Grigory, nor do I know anything about anyone attempting to mug you.” She reached out her hand and shook Miles’ hand. His eyes narrowed as he felt her slip a data chip into his palm. He slipped his hand into his pocket, leaving the chip there as he escorted Veronika from his apartment and out onto the street.

“It was a pleasure to see you again Miss Smirnova.” He smiled at her and watched her walk off. As she disappeared into a car, he turned and summoned his vehicle and headed to his office.

Miles sat at his desk, scanning analysis reports when he noticed a flagged entry. He opened the details for the entry and frowned as the details of the destruction of the *Gyrefalcon* unfolded before him. He sat back and stared blankly at the screen, “*So Anton Grigorovich was right. There is something out there. But what? The scan data only showed the missiles, and if Anton was right, the base or whatever*

is the size of a dwarf planet.” He sat up abruptly as his communit chirped at him.

“Miles Coventry.”

“Miles, it’s Harry. We need to have a talk. Let’s go to that little sandwich shop on 43rd you like.” The line disconnected before Miles could respond. He sat for a moment longer and then grabbed his jacket.

The street level was awash in noise as ground vehicles drove along the streets, and aircars roared in the air above them. Miles walked slowly towards DK’s Deli, the sandwich shop Harry had referred to. He wracked his brain, wondering why Harry asked for a meeting outside, rather than in his office or a conference room. Soon he was entering the deli. He scanned the booths looking for Harry, finally spotting him near the back. He slipped into the seat across from Harry and looked at him quizzically. Harry had seemed to age a decade in the last twenty-four hours. He looked haggard and disheveled.

“Good Lord Harry! What’s wrong with you?” Miles looked concerned.

Harry looked around furtively before leaning forward to whisper hoarsely, “You really kicked over a Trit’ikk’it nest on this one Miles. That data chip has everyone from Grand Admiral Vallot to the Prime Minister squawking and demanding answers yesterday.” He shook his head wearily, “You saw the report on the *Gyrefalcon*. Don’t protest; I noticed your login on the access log. That’s why I’m getting you out of here. Everyone associated with that chip is coming up dead. The Bear operative you snagged it from, the crew of the *Gyrefalcon*... That leaves you and me.”

Miles raised a hand in protest, “Anyone else? Any John Doe bodies turning up in the morgue?”

Harry narrowed his eyes, “You’re holding out on me Miles. What else do you know?”

Miles shifted uncomfortably in his seat, “Only that there is likely someone else in the Republican embassy who had access to that chip and has seen it.”

Harry leaned back, looking less distraught than he had been, “That makes sense. Let me check.” He pulled out his pocket comp and made an inquiry, “Yeah. One John Doe turned up near the Republican embassy.” He flipped a picture up on the screen and showed it to Miles.

Miles pursed his lips in a soundless whistle, “Anton Grigorovich.”

Harry nodded, “Supposedly he’s an attaché to the ambassador, but he is or rather was the head of the Republican intelligence operation here on Terra.” Miles nodded slowly, his mind racing, “What about us Harry? There has got to be something we can do.”

Harry looked at Miles, “There is. I’m sending you on a priority undercover mission to meet with a deep cover agent in the Obsidian Blade. Hopefully, you’ll be off the scanners of whoever is behind all of this and be safe.”

“And you? What about yourself?”

Harry shook his head, “I can’t disappear like that. I’m the head of the North American Counter-Espionage Division. I can disappear an agent like yourself; I can’t do it for me. Don’t go back to the office or your apartment.” He slid a small package across the table, “Identity documents, a couple clean communits, thirty thousand credits and under the table is a duffle with some clothing. You’ve got four

hours to get to the Battery Island Transport facility. You'll be on a ship to Lupus by nightfall local."

Miles sat looking poleaxed. He scooped up the ID packet and reached for the duffle. Harry stopped him, "Wait five minutes. I'll leave first." Harry stood up and dropped a credit chip on the table. Miles was watching him walk to the door, so he saw clearly when a man at the counter reached under his jacket and pulled out a pistol. He raised the side arm and fired, spreading Harry's brain across the front of the deli. At the sound of the first gunshot, panic erupted in the deli as patrons screamed and ran for cover. Miles didn't hesitate. He snatched up the packet and duffle and ran for the back. As he burst into the kitchen, he heard bullets hit the door frame behind him. He ducked low and continued for the exit.

Miles exploded out the back door of the deli, into an empty alley, startling a cat that had been scavenging in a trash bin. Miles turned and ran for the street, slowing to a brisk walk as he entered the flow of humanity on the street. He resisted the urge to look behind him, expecting at any moment for a bullet to hit the back of his head and spread his brains across the scenery as Harry's had been.

Three blocks away, he relaxed slightly and hopped into a cab, programming it for the Battery Island Transit facility. He slumped down in the seat and relaxed further. He nearly nodded off when he had a thought. He opened the window slightly and pitched out his pocket comp and communit. He looked through the identity papers Harry had supplied. His face looked out at him from the docket with the name Andre Symons on it. He memorized the details and slipped it into his pocket. He began to sort through his

wallet, sorting out everything that connected to Miles Coventry and discarding it out the window as he came upon it. When he was finished, Andre looked at the ETA for the cab to the transit facility. He had another five minutes before landing. He began to relax again and then sat upright, grabbed the comp and made a query.

Andre closed his eyes briefly as the query returned affirmative. A Republican woman with shoulder-length auburn hair was found murdered near her place of residence. Andre frowned and re-read the report, noting the estimated time of death. “So, who visited me this morning?” he muttered to himself.

Passing through the checkpoints to board a shuttle to rendezvous with the TRF *Happy Go Lucky* was as nerve-racking as it was uneventful. An hour later, Andre was ensconced in his cramped berth on the “*Happy*” as the crewman who met him at the lock referred to the ship. Soon he could feel the ship begin to boost for the Limit. Andre finally relaxed completely as the *Happy* jumped from N-Space to Warpspace.

Erik Luken

Chapter 6

He rolled over in the bed and stretched out his arm. He came fully awake as his hand brushed the soft skin. He opened his eyes and looked over, smiling briefly as he took in the sight of the blonde in the bed next to him. She lay on her back, her bare breasts exposed to his view, gently rising and falling as she slept. He looked away and sat up with a bone-cracking stretch.

He padded barefoot into the bathroom and attended to his needs, then showered. He was drying himself off when he heard the blonde begin to stir. Pulling on a pair of pants he stepped out into the bedroom. He stopped in shock as he stared down the muzzle of a pistol pointed at his head. After a moment, he focused on the face behind the gun, noticing that the blonde was looking a lot less friendly than she had last night.

She spoke in a soft contralto, “You’ve been a very naughty man, Mr. Hawthorne,” and pulled the trigger. She made a small pout as she dabbed at some blood that had sprayed onto her. She dropped the gun onto the dead man’s chest and pulled her slinky black dress over her head. She searched his pants pockets and pulled a data chip out of one. Smiling softly, she gathered her purse as she walked out the door, locking it behind her. As she walked down

the hallway, she stripped thin gloves from her hands and deposited them into a trash receptacle. Once in the lift, she reached up to her hair and slowly pulled off the blonde wig, revealing her natural auburn hair. The wig was stuffed above the car where it would not be found for months or longer.

The woman who exited the lift looked entirely different than the woman who entered it. The auburn-haired woman exited the building and hailed a taxi. She entered the code for her destination and leaned back. There was only one more loose end to take care of. Then she could return home.

Westley Roberts stood on the bridge of his carrier, the *X*. His crew worked their consoles with efficiency and skill. His lips curved into an icy smile. “*Soon,*” he thought, “*soon this will be over, and things can go back to normal. Twenty years of my life spent as someone else. Soon I will be Terence Hawthorne again.*” He turned and looked at the stunning raven-haired woman who stood next to the command chair. “Are the flight crews ready, Cass?” he asked her.

Cass Peters, known to most of the crew as Cass Black nodded to her captain, “They are ready, as is the rest of the clan. You’ve forged the Illustrious Liberators into one of the most powerful clans in the Obsidian Blade. And you’ve convinced that skeletal ghoul le Morte to be your ally.”

Roberts clucked reprovingly as Cass made her last comment, “You know that without le Morte acknowledging my

takeover of the *X*, this moment would still be years down the space lanes, if at all.”

Cass nodded reluctantly, conceding the point. Roberts sat down in the command chair as his comm officer called out to him, “Sir, the *Deuce* is hailing us.”

“Patch Captain Henry through,” Roberts ordered.

“*Henry to Roberts. This is the Cutlass II. We’ve picked up Able’s ship on the long scan. The Dirk will be rendezvousing in 3 hours. Henry out.*”

Roberts rubbed his hands and chuckled softly to himself before ordering, “Acknowledged. Send it to the *Deuce*.” He leaned closer to Cass, and told her quietly, “Send a fighter to Madeira. Have the pilot tell him ‘*Green is the grass.*’”

Cass looked at him for a moment, then turned and walked from the bridge. Roberts watched her leave, enjoying the view of her tight leather pants.

Andre came awake as the *Happy* dropped from Warpspace back to N-space. He stretched as best he could in the cramped cabin. He exited the cabin and headed to the galley, hoping the chef had finally found something edible. He sighed as he detected the same unappetizing odors wafting from the galley. He took a deep breath and released it slowly before entering. Grabbing a plate, he scooped up a mass of congealed pale grey “stuff” and dropped it onto his plate. He looked at the plate and sighed again. The other person in the room was an off-duty crewman. He nodded briefly as the crewman looked up at him. He sat down and began to determinedly force the revolting substance into his mouth.

He gave a wry smile to the crewman who had chuckled at the look on Andre's face as he ate, "Tain't never been any good chow on this bucket. I done made six runs on the *Happy* and not once had anything worth eating on here, less I smuggled it in mysel'."

Andre swallowed and took a gulp of water, "I'll make a note of that if I'm ever forced to book accommodations on this vessel again." He resumed his dogged eating of the glop when the ship's PA system crackled to life. "All hands! Prepare for orbit!"

The crewman stood and tossed his plate onto a pile near the end of the chow station, "Best hurry eatin'. The Cap'n'll be shuttin' power to the galley in a minute."

Andre grimaced and stood up, scraping the remains of the glop into the recycler and stacked his plate on the others, "If we are that close to orbit, I can wait for some real food," he said to the crewman. He entered his cabin and quickly gathered his belongings, packing them neatly into the duffle. Ten minutes later the PA came on again, "All hands! Prepare to dock in three... two... one..." There was a muffled thump as the ship came to rest in the berth on Lupus Station. Andre stepped from the cabin and headed to the lock. He shook hands with the captain and promised to remember him and his ship if he ever needed transport again.

Minutes later, Andre was walking slowly down the corridor in the station. He spied a transient hostel and entered, booking a room for a few credits. He sat on the battered bunk and scanned through the station's news and infonet for any interesting tidbits. He spied an advert in the personals section, "Single hum fem seeking single hum male.

ASTRA ASCENDANT

Contact Ilsa at AH-32913.” He made a note of the advert and lay back, thinking to himself as he drifted off to sleep, *“I never did get that decent meal.”*

Erik Luken

Chapter 7

She blinked at the sudden light, having recalled she darkened the windows the previous evening. She stretched her hearing trying to identify any out of place sound. Hearing nothing, she cautiously opened her eyes. The room looked the same as it did the previous night, sans the darkened windows. Being awake, she decided to comply with fate and got out of the bed. Her morning rituals did not take more than fifteen minutes, and she was dressed and out of the door soon after.

The planet Lupus was the fourth planet from the star Wolf 359. It boasted substantial industry and the second largest population outside of the Sol system. It was, far from pleasant. The summertime high temperatures averaged -10C, and in the winter dropped to a frigid -34C. Despite an environment only a polar bear would love, humans thrived on Lupus. Even with the cities in self-contained domes, the temperatures did not get much above 7C.

The woman, a young lady in her late twenties, pulled her jacket tighter to her frame depending on her mind convincing her body that it was warm. She brushed a stray lock of dark blonde hair from her pale blue eyes and looked down the street. It was still early, and the streets

had yet to become the bustling madhouses they became later in the day. As she walked past the shuttleport, she noticed a tall young man leaving the transient hostel. At first, she did not give him a second glance, but something in the brief look she had of him triggered something in her mind. She looked closer and gasped.

“It can’t be! He died twenty years ago!” she thought to herself. She stood still in shock, watching him walk down the street away from her. He was nearly around a corner when her brain re-engaged itself, and she moved after him. She rounded the corner and looked around trying to see where he’d gone. After a minute, she noticed him sitting in a street café, drinking from a steaming mug. She slowed her pace and walked up to the café, taking a seat near him where she could see him. He seemed engrossed in whatever he had on his comp. She quickly ordered a hot tea and a breakfast roll. She feigned reading the news on her comp while she watched him from the corner of her eye. He seemed oblivious to the world outside of his cup and comp.

Her tea was nearly gone when the man stood, dropped a few credits on the table and walked away. She quickly paid for her tea and roll and hurried after him. As she rounded the corner, an arm snaked out of the shadows, and a hand covered her mouth, muffling the squeak as she was drawn into the dark alcove. A voice hissed in her ear, “Why are you following me?”

She looked around with terrified eyes and noticed her erstwhile prey holding her. She looked into his eyes, seeing a hardness she didn’t expect. “Well? What do you have to say for yourself?” he rasped at her. She looked down

briefly at the hand covering her mouth. He sighed and loosened his grip.

She took a deep breath and used the moment to try and calm her racing mind. “Why are you here? *How* are you here? You died twenty years ago,” she said.

He took a small step back, loosening his grip on her more, “I have no clue what you are talking about. I arrived here last night from Sol. This is my first trip to Lupus.”

She took a closer look at him, finally seeing a small difference in the face. A missing scar over the right eyebrow, eyes not quite the right shade. “Who are you?” she got out, “You look too much like...” She broke off and looked around. “Looking like you do, you are not safe on the streets. You need to get into hiding. Someplace safe. Follow me.”

She grabbed his hand and pulled him along with her, towards her apartment. As they neared the shuttleport, two large men got out of a waiting ground car. The man with her stopped and reached under his jacket. He pushed her to the side, sending her sprawling behind a parked car. He crouched down behind it and took a quick glance at the two men. They had weapons out and started shooting at them. She squeaked again as bullets hit the car near her and flew over the vehicle to hit the wall. The man popped up during a lull in the shooting and popped off two quick shots before ducking back down. After a couple seconds, he risked a glance over the hood and then holstered his gun. He grabbed her hand and pulled her into the transient hostel.

They ran up the stairs to his room. He gathered his clothes quickly while instructing her to keep an eye out the

window. “My name is Andre, from Terra as I mentioned earlier. Who are you?”

She stole a quick glance at him as he stuffed clothing into a duffle. “My name is Marie. Marie Georges. Who were those men out there?”

He zipped the bag and looked at her, “I have no idea, but if I were to guess, they were sent here to kill me.”

She looked a bit faint at that news and held her hand to her mouth. Andre looked at her and told her, “Get a grip on yourself. We need to go, and go now.” Marie nodded and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. Andre stepped out of the room, looking cautiously down both sides of the hallway. He led her to the back stairs and down. The service entrance exited into an alley next to the trash bins for the hostel. He pulled her down the alley, away from the shuttleport. “Do you have any sort of vehicle?” he asked her. “We need to get out of here quick.” She shook her head, “No, but there is a rent a flyer service nearby. We can get a flyer or ground car there.”

He acquiesced to her suggestion and let her lead him to the rental place. Outside the office, he told her, “Get a ground car. Preferably one that can withstand the weather outside.” Within the next half hour, they were on their way, driving out of the city into the blizzard.

Cass cursed and looked at her watch. He was late, and she didn’t like that. It meant something had gone wrong and that meant things were getting worse. She decided to wait a few more minutes in hopes that he’d arrive. Ten minutes later, she gave up and left the café. As she threaded her way through the crowds around the shuttleport, she saw a

tall, lithe redhead. Her eyes narrowed, and she drew the hood of her cloak tighter around her head. The redhead was walking away from Cass, she decided to follow her. The redhead seemed to be unaware of her surroundings, intent on wherever she was headed. Cass brushed her arm against her hip, feeling the knife sheathed at her wrist, reassuring herself that it was still there.

The redhead entered a small shop. Cass hesitated and then entered. The redhead was standing across from the doorway, a small smile playing on her lips. Cass threw back the hood of her cloak, “Veronika, it is you.”

Veronika looked startled for a fraction of a second, “Cass. Are you still going by that? Or have you changed your name again?”

Cass shrugged, “Still Cass. I’ve not thought of any other name in years.” Cass kept her arms loose and ready. “What happened to you, Veronika? Last I heard you were working with the Bears.”

Veronika grimaced, “That relationship was terminated recently. Bastards double-crossed me.”

Cass looked around the shop idly, noting the cowering sales clerk then ignoring her as unimportant. “Who are you working for now?”

Veronika hesitated, “I’m... freelance now. Though there is something about my last assignment that felt wrong. Very wrong. At least three or four people are dead so far because of it.”

Cass made a quick decision, “You need to get out of here, don’t you? I can help you.”

“How? Do you have a ship? Or better yet, a fleet?” Veronika asked.

“Now that you mention it,” Cass replied, drawing Veronika with her to the door, “I do.”

The sun was a weak sun, barely shining through the blowing snow. Marie drove steadily as Andre rubbed at his eyes. He reached back to pull a bottle from his duffle and took a long drink. He offered it to Marie, “Water?”

She nodded and took the bottle, taking a short sip before handing it back to him. Andre recapped the bottle and tucked it back into his bag. “Where are we?” he asked her.

“About 300 kilometers from Landing.” Andre grimaced at the unimaginative name that humans seemed to hang on every first settlement on a new world. She noticed his expression and chuckled, surprising herself. “I wonder just how many towns there are called ‘Landing,’ or some variation of that?” she asked.

“How many settled worlds are there?” he replied. “I’m willing to wager it’s one per planet. Where are we headed?”

“There is a vacation resort up in the mountains. It’s isolated, and this time of year no one is there. We should be there in another couple of hours.”

Andre nodded absently and gazed out the window at the snow. His mind was on the events of the past few weeks. *Four people I knew, well three since I didn’t know Grigory. All dead. Plus, the crew of that scout ship. For what? A star map that he no longer had.* He froze as he recalled his last meeting with Veronika Smirnova. *She gave me another chip! I never had a chance to look over it.* He abruptly turned and grabbed his comp. He reached into his

pants pocket and pulled the chip out of it. He looked at it for a long moment before slipping it into the comp's port.

The data flashed up on the screen. Andre read, and then cursed, eliciting a alarmed "What?" from Marie. He shook his head and continued reading, his face becoming more and more grim as he read. Finally, as they neared their destination, he finished reading the contents of the chip. What was left was contact information for some deep cover agents spread throughout known space. As the car pulled to a stop in front of a shuttered building, he sighed. *I'll need to find a way to contact some of these people. See if they know more about this than I do.*

Andre and Marie gathered their bags and hurried through the blowing snow and wind to the building. Andre tried the door, but it was locked. A forceful shove with his shoulder popped the door open. He and Marie hurried in and began to look for someplace to hunker down while determining their next plan of action.

As Marie looked around for food and to get the kitchen functional, Andre scoured the local planetary infonet. He made a note about recent mysterious deaths, including a shootout that morning at the shuttleport which left two gangsters dead. The gunman was still at large and considered armed and dangerous. Andre snorted at that. Recalling what Marie had said when he grabbed her, he began to comb the archives, looking for a clue as to what she meant by "You died twenty years ago!" His mind drifted back to twenty years ago. He'd just graduated in the top five percent of his class at New Sandhurst on Mars. He didn't know that a mere year later he'd be recruited for the Confederation Rangers, or that when he didn't re-enlist after

his six-year hitch, how the TCBI snatched him up before the ink on his discharge papers dried. His comp chirped at him, bringing him back to the present. He read the article his search had turned up. A hijacking by a pirate, a ship scuttled, and all hands lost. He glanced over the casualty list briefly, and then stopped as one name jumped out at him. "Hawthorne, Terence." He queried for any information still on the net for one Hawthorne, Terence. A couple of minutes later, he had a file and a picture. His picture.

Chapter 8

He glared at the light shining in before sighing and sitting up. He idly scratched himself as his brain came alive. He looked around the small room, his eyes alighting on a bottle leaning precariously against the wall. He grabbed it and drained it with a satisfied “Ahhh!” as the last of the whiskey ran down his throat.

Westley Roberts, known to various and sundry law enforcement agencies as Dread Roberts, Captain of the *X*, scratched himself again. He staggered into the bathroom and let out a low curse as the cold water from the shower hit his body. Minutes later, and much wider awake he strode down the corridor to his Clan’s council chamber. He nodded to the guards at the entrance and walked in. He spied Cass’s raven locks from across the room. She had someone with her, seated in a position to have his view of the person blocked by Cass. As he neared the two, Cass straightened up and nodded to him, “Westley, this is Veronika Smirnova, late of the Ursae Republic Intelligence Service.”

Roberts raised an eyebrow, “A Bear spook? A late Bear spook? She looks pretty lively for the designation of ‘late.’” Roberts chuckled at his own joke. Noticing Cass’s serious look, he stopped laughing and sat down. “Okay,

tell me what is going on. You know it's a serious security breach to bring an outsider here Cass. Especially a spook."

Cass started to speak, but stopped as Veronika place her hand on Cass's arm, "He is right Cassie." Roberts' eyebrow quirked higher at the nickname bestowed on Cass. "As Cassie said, I am Veronika Smirnova. At least lately. I was not born with that name, but it is not important what my birth name was. Also as Cassie said, I worked for URIS until about a week ago. I won't bore you with mundane details, but URIS wanted to pass some information on to Confederation Intelligence. So, we set out one of our own as bait and waited to see who he'd pull in. Within hours, we'd landed a TCBI agent. He was apprehended and brought to the Republican embassy where the data was transferred to him. He was provided with a cover story and set loose. Within twelve hours, my direct supervisor was assassinated. Within twenty-four hours, the TCBI division head was assassinated, and a Confed scout was destroyed."

Roberts smothered a curse at the last, "*The Gyrefalcon.*" Veronika started as Roberts named the ship, but continued at his wave. "The TCBI agent disappeared, and I arranged for my own disappearance. When I attempted to come in from the cold, I was told in no uncertain terms that I was dead, and to stop calling. My research since then has uncovered an additional death that may or may not be connected. A man on Elysium was murdered in his apartment two days after the scout ship was destroyed."

"Why do you think it was connected to this?" asked Roberts curiously.

“The man’s name was Peter Hawthorne. And the name ‘Hawthorne’ is flagged in our databases,” Veronika replied.

“Goddamn son of a bitch!” Roberts exploded. He stomped around the room cursing and beating on the furniture and decorations as Cass and Veronika watched in stunned disbelief. Finally, Roberts wore himself out and sat down, slumped in his chair.

“Westley, what the fuck was that all about?” Cass demanded.

Roberts sighed, “Westley Roberts is not my birth name. I doubt any pirate’s name is his birth name. No, my name at birth was Hawthorne. Peter was my brother.”

Cass sat stunned while Veronika eyed Roberts narrowly. She started to say something, then thought better of it. Roberts nodded to her, “We’ll talk about this later. I want to know everything URIS knows about anyone named ‘Hawthorne.’”

Cass shook herself and leaned forward, “What about the Clan? You lead this Clan. Also, you’ve got our ships preparing for something, along with the Star Reavers Clan and the Silent Death Clan. That’s upwards of thirty ships.”

Roberts nodded, “I’m not abandoning the Clan Cass. I’ve been a captain in the Illustrious Liberators for twenty years, and Clan leader for the last twelve. As for the ships, when I find out where that thing is that destroyed the *Gyrefalcon*, I’ll take every ship I can get my hands on and spend them all to destroy that thing.”

Cass sat back in amazement; she’d never seen Roberts act this intense, this angry. His fists were clenched, and he was staring over their heads at only something he could

see. He closed his eyes and took a deliberate breath, forcing himself to relax. He looked her in the eye and quirked a smile, “You are still stuck with me, Cassie me lassie!”

She flushed bright red at his jaunty tone and reached for her knife, to stop as Veronika burst out in laughter. Cass flushed again and laughed ruefully. “Just don’t call me that where the rank and file can hear you, or I’ll have to gut a few to put the fear of Cass Black back into them.”

Veronika shook her head slowly, recognizing the nom de guerre from URIS file on the pirates. *Three of the five largest pirate clans of the Obsidian Blade, two of the blackest of villains sitting here with me. And one is my childhood friend.*

Andre woke abruptly, feeling something was amiss. He looked around the darkened room for a moment. Not seeing any immediate threat, he grabbed his pistol and slowly snuck out into the hallway. He checked the door to the room Marie had claimed and found it locked. He padded down the hallway, senses alert, gun at the ready. As he approached the main room, he saw a flickering light. Quickly peeking around the corner of the stairwell, he saw Marie slumped in a chair in front of a fireplace, the burning logs giving off the flickering light. He slowly approached her, trying to see her condition. He heard a soft sob as he got closer and stopped. Andre listened to Marie cry for a moment then backed slowly out of the room to the stairs. He silently crept upstairs back to his room and lay down.

After twenty minutes, he decided sleep was going to elude him, he picked up his comp and pulled up the file of

agents he got from the data chip. The names meant nothing to him, Ivan Petrov on Novaya Ruskaya, Cassandra Peters in the Obsidian Blade, Valeria Dubnikova in the Ursae Republic, Peter Hawthorne on Elysium, Cristof Lindstedt on Lupus. He pondered for a few moments and then sent a coded message to each of the attached names. He shut down the comp and closed his eyes, sleep finally reclaiming him.

Grand Admiral Francois Vallot looked over the fleet dispositions. The First fleet was conducting live-fire exercises in the outer system. The Second fleet was based at Stronghold in the Alpha Mensae system, and the Third fleet was split up for anti-piracy patrols and escorting merchants. He sighed. Something had kicked up a real nest of unpleasantness in the last few weeks. Naval Intelligence was scurrying around frantically trying to get a lead on what was happening. The TCBI was in disarray after a division head was assassinated by one of his own agents supposedly. Said agent was on the loose, having disappeared. The Ursae Republic was in an uproar over two of their embassy employees being killed. Francois sighed again and reached for the latest dispatches from ONI. *The usual reports*, he thought as he flipped through the summaries. He stopped suddenly and flipped back a page and called up the full details. After a minute, he swore and rang for his adjutant, "Jim! I want everything you have from the last week on Lupus." His aide nodded and started making some calls.

Within the hour, Francois and Captain Jim Barks were sorting through a stack of reports, looking for more information on the incident that triggered Francois' urgency.

After reading through a dozen reports, Jim sat back as he read. "I think this one is what you are looking for sir. Male human, late twenties, early thirties. Dark hair. Observed killing two Syndicate thugs. Though from the visual records, it is clearly self-defense. He was accompanied by an unknown female. Same approximate age. Blonde. After the firefight, they ran. Disappeared."

"Tell ONI I want their best field agent on Lupus as fast as possible. I want those two found. Alive and unharmed," Francois ordered.

Jim stood and saluted before hurrying to fulfill the orders.

Francois sat back in his chair and stared at a point on the far wall, not seeing it, but concentrating on the issue at hand. *Miles, what the hell are you doing on Lupus?*

Andre was checking his comp, searching for more information, waiting for replies to his messages. He sighed and was preparing to shut down the comp when his comm unit chirped at him. He answered it warily, "Hello?"

The voice on the other end was distorted, making it unrecognizable, "We need to meet. Two pm local time at Seahaven. Come alone and sit in the park, wear a red hat." The line went dead.

Andre sat for a moment, and then called up a map of Lupus. It would take him approximately four hours to reach the town of Seahaven. He began to pack his bag, calling for Marie. As she stuck her head in the door, he told her, "We need to be in Seahaven as soon as possible." She nodded and ran off to her room to collect what little she had.

Ten minutes later, they were back on the road heading towards the seaside town of Seahaven.

The shuttle landed, and passengers began to disembark. The man exiting last was in his late thirties, heavy set, but muscular. His close-cropped hair was beginning to grey, and his eyes were hard. He exited the shuttleport and stood on the street, surveying the area and ignoring the press of people around him. His immobility prompted a few muttered curses from people forced to move around him, which he ignored. His eyes narrowed as he looked across the street at the bullet-pocked walls. He abruptly turned and began to walk to the nearest rental office.

The clerk smiled at him as he entered, "How may I help you today sir?" she asked brightly.

"I need a ground car. For at least a week."

She nodded and began to fill out forms, asking him for his ID. He handed her a folio with the necessary papers, and she smiled as she returned them with a key, "You are all set, Mr. Raetz. I hope you enjoy your stay on Lupus."

He nodded curtly to the girl and walked out, summoning his rented vehicle as he did so. Soon he was driving out of town, heading north.

Andre and Marie entered Seahaven a little past noon. They stopped at a small deli, and Andre told Marie his plan to meet with the mysterious caller.

She sat silently nodding. "I want you to rent a room. Just for tonight. Hopefully, we'll be on our way tomorrow," he told her.

Andre meandered around the park for a half hour, noting avenues of approach and the best way to get out if things went bad. He settled the bright red cap on his head and sat on a bench, browsing through the local news on the infonet. At precisely two pm, a balding man in his late forties sat next to Andre. He glanced at the man momentarily. "What did you do with the girl?"

Andre took a closer look, trying to divine the man's intentions, "I told her to rent a room for the night." The man nodded slightly. He watched the slight breeze move the leaves of the trees.

"You are a Confederation agent. A field agent. I was too when I was younger. Then I got put on a deep cover assignment here on Lupus." Andre looked curious, and the man looked him in the eyes, "Why would we need a deep-cover agent here you are thinking. I thought that too. So, I started to cautiously ask questions. Questions I wish I had never asked."

"You know the Confederation has encountered two wholly non-human aliens in the last three hundred years. Every school child knows that. It's what we are taught." The man held his head in his hands, "They are all wrong. We've met three. The Kal'Shak are aggressive and want to subjugate everything they run into. We fight them off. The Trit'ikk'it are a hive race. Oddly enough, firm allies to most humans. What you don't know is that we encountered another race before either of them. They invaded us. We lost."

Andre looked at the man, the doubt clear in his expression, "Where? How? Who are these aliens? Where are they

from? Where are they now? Why does no one know about this?" Andre questioned.

"They are still here. In control. They are called the Syrilith from what little information I've could gather. No one knows about this, because the ones who find out are killed. You managed to elude them for now, but the longer you stay in one place, the greater the chances are they will find you." The man passed him a data chip. "This data chip has all of the information I've been able to gather. Find the others like me. I know at least two are dead. But if you can get to the Obsidian Blade, you might be able to find an ally." He stood up and walked away slowly. Fifty feet from Andre, he stopped and turned to face him, raising his arms. He looked to the sky and stood there, waiting.

A single shot rang out, taking the man in the head. Andre dove for cover, trying to ascertain where the shot had come from. More shots rang out as the sniper attempted to hit Andre. People screamed and ran around, looking to escape. Andre joined in the fleeing crowd, losing himself in it.

The sniper watched Andre blend into the crowd, tracking him. He considered taking the clear shot but decided to see what the human would do. Where the human would flee to next, and what other secrets would he flush out into the open. He watched a moment longer as Andre disappeared into the crowds. He stood, leaving the sniper rifle behind. His features flowed and changed as he strode from his vantage point. The heavysset, muscular man calling himself "Raetz" walked out of the building and down the street as wailing sirens grew closer.

Raetz found a perch atop a building near the shuttleport. One that gave him an excellent view of everyone entering the shuttleport. He settled down to wait, his hard eyes never wavering from the entrance.

Andre slipped into the hotel Marie had rented a room in. Soon he was in the room itself. He started to meticulously check every piece of clothing for any sort of foreign device. Marie started to ask him something but subsided as he lifted a hand. He gathered the data chips he'd collected during this adventure, separating them from the devices. The comps and comm units he unceremoniously dumped into the recycling oubliette, eliciting a squawk of protest from Marie. He ignored it and began to inspect her clothing.

Finally, after searching all their clothing, he settled into a chair, "We're being followed. I'm not sure how, or who. Well, I can make a guess as to who, but that's unimportant for now. We need to get off the planet, discretely. I am going on the assumption that the shuttleport is, or will be under observation. So, we will need either another means to get off the planet or another way into the port."

Marie looked worried, "Is there anyone we can call? What about the authorities? They'll be able to protect us."

Andre looked at her sadly, "No, the government has been..." he paused for a moment, searching for the right word, "compromised. We need some private transport. Someone with no connections to the government."

He reached for his comm unit, and then grimaced ruefully at the recycler, "I'm going to the lobby and use a public terminal. You stay here and don't let anyone in."

ASTRA ASCENDANT

Marie nodded with a scared look on her face. Andre gave her a reassuring smile as he walked out of the room.

Erik Luken

Chapter 9

Marie woke with a start, amazed that she'd managed to doze off. She looked around the room, checking to see if Andre had returned. Finding him still out, she checked the menu for food delivery. While waiting for her food, she turned the vid to the local news channel.

“A man was gunned down today, and numerous others injured as a mad gunman opened fire in the central park. The gunman is in his late twenties, or early thirties with dark hair. Authorities consider him to be armed and dangerous. If you see this man, do not approach him. Call for security.”

Marie gasped as a rendered picture appeared on the screen. The man in the picture looked like Andre. She looked up frantically as the door slid open and Andre walked in. He started to speak and stopped as he caught sight of Marie's face. He glanced at the vid, and his mouth dropped open in shock as he caught a quick glimpse of his picture just before it disappeared.

“Marie! I didn't kill anyone in the park. I found us a way off-planet and to someplace safe. You can come with me or take your chances with the authorities,” he said as he began to pack his bag again. Marie sat for a moment then began to gather her belongings. Marie heard Andre mutter

something about “Never unpacking again.” She giggled a little at that and finished her packing.

The pair left the room and headed for the service lift. They rode the lift to the service levels of the hotel and made their way to the back. Andre cautiously peered out of the door and into the alley, looking for any signs of trouble. Seeing nothing, he and Marie slipped into the alley. Andre led Marie to a disreputable looking bar near the dome-edge. They found themselves seated with a thoroughly rakish and undoubtedly unsavory character.

“I hear you are looking for a way off Lupus, without any official scrutiny,” the man started off with. Andre nodded, “We are. The sooner we are off Lupus, the better it would be.”

“Captain James Blake, at your service,” he stated with a small bow. “I’ve got a shuttle docked at a private pad nearby. We can be on board the *Lancer* in under an hour.”

Andre nodded again, “We are ready, and have everything we need.”

Captain Blake led the two from the bar and hailed a cab. Soon they were comfortably seated in a shuttle boosting for orbit.

Westley Roberts paced back and forth in the luxuriously appointed chamber. He preferred utilitarian decor, and his Clan followed his lead. The Star Reavers were led by John le Morte, and he did enjoy his creature comforts. A side door slid open, and Roberts ceased his pacing as John entered the room. Westley watched John as he walked to the seat behind the richly carved wooden desk that domi-

nated the room. He sighed and sat down as John did, “What’s this about John?”

Le Morte cleared his throat, “There’s a rumor floating around that you are not loyal to the Blade and that you should be replaced, or even your Clan broke up and dispersed to other Clans.”

Roberts lunged to his feet, his face thunderous, “Who is spreading these lies? I’ll gut the mangy cur myself!” Roberts resumed his frenetic pacing, muttering and cursing all the while.

“Get a grip on your anger Westley. They are only rumors,” John said. “If there were a shred of evidence to back them up, someone would have petitioned the Council by now.”

Roberts paused in his pacing and nodded, “True. But if I find out who started this rumor, I will cut him into bite-sized pieces and feed him to an energy converter.”

John chuckled, “If I hear of anything more, I will let you know Westley.”

Roberts nodded his thanks as he exited the chamber, not seeing the speculative look that crossed le Morte’s face.

Westley pressed the admittance button on the door frame. After a moment, the door slid aside revealing Veronika Smirnova. She looked up at him and smiled, “What can I do for you, Captain?”

“May I come in?” he asked.

Veronika gestured her acceptance and followed him to the main area. She sat in the chair and watched Roberts pace around the room.

“I need a favor to ask of you,” he said. “Rumors are circulating that could do irreparable harm to my reputation, and by extension to our efforts here. I want you to see if you can find the source of these rumors.”

She looked at him for a long moment and then nodded, “Okay. I’ll need some sort of semi-official status, just in case some people get twitchy about it.”

He looked at her and nodded, “Easily enough. You are now Cass’s adjutant. She is my second in command, so being her adjutant should put you high enough to give any troublemakers a second thought.”

Veronika nodded her head as she thought. “That will work just fine,” she said after a moment.

Grand Admiral Francois Vallot looked up from his paperwork as his adjutant knocked on the door frame, “Yes Jim?”

“Sir, ONI reports that while the TCBI agent was on Lupus, he’s since fled after killing another man,” Jim said. He passed the data chip with the report to the admiral, “The victim’s name was Cristof Lindstedt, evidently another deep cover agent.”

“Get me a list of all known or suspected assassinations in the last two weeks, Jim,” the admiral ordered. “And see if you can pry a list of deep cover agents out of ONI or TCBI.”

Jim Barkes acknowledged the order as he left his admiral’s office. At his desk, he began to make calls to ferret the information the admiral asked for.

Andre settled himself into the seat on the surprisingly well-furnished ship *Lancer*. He felt as relaxed as he had been since waking up in the Republican embassy. He pulled out the comp he borrowed and made sure all the networking and monitoring options were disabled. He slipped the data chips he'd collected over the last two weeks into the comp. Andre set up a sorting and collation routine to find any correlations between the various bits of data.

The door chime beeped, interrupting his thought processes. He stood up and opened the door, revealing a crewman of the ship. "Sir, the captain requests your presence in his office. If you'll follow me?"

Andre followed the crewman to the captain's office. He entered, noticing Marie was there.

"Ah, Mr. Symons! The lovely Miss Georges has already graced us with her presence," Captain James Blake stated. "We have much to discuss, which will impact where we go. Now, why did you need to leave Lupus in such a hurry?"

Andre glanced at Marie, "Well, all the cards on the table. I am or was a senior field agent for the Terran Confederation Bureau of Investigation. Approximately three weeks ago I was passed some intel from the Ursae Republic. This intel suggested there was something of interest to the Confederation in a remote system between us and the Novaya Ruskaya Commonwealth. A scout ship was dispatched to check out the system. It was destroyed. That's when things went to shit. My immediate supervisor was assassinated. The two Republican agents who passed me

the intel were assassinated. A contact on Lupus was assassinated.”

“And where does the lovely Miss Georges fit into all of this?” asked James.

“She started following me on Lupus, a case of mistaken identity. Soon after, some Syndicate thugs tried to get rid of me. She stuck with me out of self-preservation,” answered Andre. “My contact on Lupus filled in some more information. The Confederation has been invaded,” he paused for a moment. “And conquered.”

Marie gasped as James stood, “Damn you say! How? And by whom?”

Andre shrugged, “The how is a mystery. The who is an alien race called the ‘Syrilith.’ I hadn’t heard anything about them before a couple of days ago.”

James settled back in his chair, “And what are your plans now?”

Andre sighed, “I wish I had something more definite than surviving the next week. From what I’ve picked up, there is maybe one contact I can reach out to. A Cassandra Peters. Supposedly someplace in the Obsidian Blade.”

James’ eyes narrowed, and he stared at Andre for a minute then sighed, “It seems I shall have to make a revelation of my own.” He stood and sketched a quick bow, “Gentleman Jim of the pirate ship *Lancer* at your service.” He winked at Marie, “Your virtue is safe with me m’lady. I might know of your contact. We shall go to someplace I can get in contact with her.”

Cass threw the comp across the compartment, bouncing it off a chair. She strode angrily across the room and looked

for something to hit. After staring for a moment at the walls, she sighed as her anger drained away. *Something gave Cristof away. Why else would they kill him?* She wracked her brain trying to think of anything that would make sense.

The comm chirped, and she stabbed at the accept button, “What?” she demanded.

“Ma’am, the *Lancer* has landed. Captain Jim has a priority message for you,” the voice of her comm officer said.

“Okay, send it through.”

“I can’t say, ma’am, it’s hard-copy eyes only.”

Cass swallowed another curse and replied, “Alright, I’ll be up in a moment.”

On the bridge, she accepted the chip from her officer and entered her office, closing the door behind her. She sat at the desk and slipped the chip into her desk comp. She read the message and then stood. She entered the bridge and demanded, “How long ago did he land?”

The comm officer checked his logs, “According to this, about ten minutes ago.” He looked back to see what had his captain in an uproar, but she was gone.

Cass dropped to the boarding deck and pointed to the first three boarders she saw, “You, you and you. Gear up and come with me. Now.”

The three men jumped to grab weapons and armor, following their captain to the lock. “Umm, ma’am? Where are we headed?”

She ignored the question, and the three exchanged silent glances. Soon the small party was at the lock to the *Lancer*. The guard there stiffened to a reasonable approximation of

attention as she approached. “I want to see Jim now,” she demanded of the guard.

Within a minute, Gentleman Jim and two other people were before her, a woman she didn’t recognize, and a younger version of Westley Roberts. She stared hard at him, and then looked at Jim, “What’s going on? Who are these people and why are they here?”

Jim looked around and said, “We need to see Roberts, privately.”

Cass gave Jim another hard look and then nodded, “Okay. Let’s go. You three can go back to the ship.”

Westley Roberts stood as the party entered his office. “Cass? What’s...” he broke off as he caught sight of Marie. “Marie?? What are you doing here?”

At the sound of his voice, Marie looked startled. She took a hesitant step forward, and then lunged at Roberts, engulfing him in an embrace. The others looked on in amazement as Marie and Roberts hung onto each other, talking softly. Cass cleared her throat softly, and the two broke apart, Marie blushing furiously.

“Westley? What’s going on?” asked Cass.

Roberts looked at Marie and smiled, “As Cass knows, ‘Westley Roberts’ is not my real name. I was born Terence Hawthorne. When I became a pirate, I took the name Westley Roberts to protect my family and loved ones. Marie here is my younger sister. Unfortunately, when my ship was boarded, it was reported as all hands lost. And as you can see, that is not accurate.”

Roberts looked at the rest of the party, stopping at Andre and staring. He took a step forward and reached a hand to touch Andre’s face. Roberts looked completely

poleaxed at the sight of Andre. Andre looked equally stunned. He tried to speak and cleared his throat, “You look just like me. Who are you?”

Roberts sat at his desk and waved the group to seats scattered around the room. “As you’ve most likely surmised, this is the ‘homeworld’ of the Obsidian Blade. I am a leader of one of the Clans. Cass and Jim are two of my captains. Twenty years ago, the ship I was on was boarded by pirates. After a fierce battle, I’d managed to kill the pirate captain, a real unsavory sort name Domingo. Once the rest of the crew surrendered or were subdued, we scuttled the ship and came here.” He cast an apologetic glance to Marie, “If I was to keep you safe, I couldn’t let you know.”

Marie nodded, “I understand now. But what were you keeping us safe from?”

“That would be the reason we were in that uncharted system and easy pickings for the pirate ship. We were in 31 Aquilae doing surveys when we picked up the biggest ship any of us had seen. We scanned it, and it fired on us. Evidently, it misjudged ranges or whatever since we managed to escape. We hit the Limit and ran into FTL. We dropped out when the pirate ship hit us with a warp anchor. That part you know. After the battle, most of the remaining survey crew opted to stay with me. A couple of the more senior scientists opted to return to Earth and report in. They ‘died’ in an air-car accident.”

A couple of people snorted at that. Roberts grinned and continued, “The rest of us decided then that warning Earth was not the proper course. So, we started here.” He looked

at Andre, “And that brings us to you. As far as I know, I don’t have any twins or clones.”

Andre looked around the room, meeting each gaze squarely, “I was born on Earth. My father didn’t know his family. I entered the Bureau after a couple years in the Confed Marines. Worked my way up the ladder there.” He related the events of the last couple weeks with occasional interjections from Marie. He concluded with, “So far except for Marie and myself, everyone who has come in contact with this data has ended up dead.”

Veronika wandered the local hangouts on the base, listening to the talk and rumors that were flying around. She was coming up empty for any usable intelligence when she heard, “... and he threatened to disband the Council and run things hisself.” She started to pay closer attention to the pair of workers.

“You sayin’ Roberts wants ta set himself up like some dictator?” one asked in a hushed voice.

“Aye. He been bringin’ in outsiders and keepin’ secrets from tha oth’r cap’ns,” the other replied.

Their voices got lower, and Veronika could not hear any more of the conversation to her disgust. After a couple of hours of swilling cheap booze and popping various narcotics, the two workers staggered towards the exit. She got up and followed them, not getting too close but not losing sight of the one who was supplying the rumors. The pair split up, and she followed her target. He led her towards the residential areas. She waited until he entered a darkened area and caught up to him, expertly sapping him and knocking him out. She dragged him to an alley and called

the number Roberts had given her if she needed some muscle.

Within minutes a ground vehicle was there, and two large men she vaguely recognized from the *X* got out and cautiously approached her.

“I need this one someplace secure where I can question him without too much interference,” she instructed the two. The larger of the two touched a finger to his brow with a low “Aye, ma’am.” The pair carried the unconscious man to the vehicle. She got in and slipped some plastic restraints on the man, then settled back and pulled out her comm again.

She punched in another code, “I got a source now. Heading to question him with your boys.” She listened for a minute then said, “This one can wait. You’re right; I need to be there for this council.”

She disconnected the call, “Change of plans boys. Secure this one, and then take me back to the Clan enclave.” The driver nodded as the vehicle sped off into the dark.

Captain Jim Barks ducked behind the solid desk and drew his service pistol, wishing all the while he had spent more time on the range. The incoming fire slackened a bit, so he popped around the edge and fired a couple of rounds to keep his assailants honest. He hoped his call had gotten through and rescue was on the way. He kept firing a round or two every few seconds to make sure they kept their heads down. He checked his ammunition level and grimaced. He’d have to space his fire out more or run the risk of running out soon.

He stiffened as he heard an increase in gunfire. It seemed they had managed to flank him despite his efforts to prevent it. He glanced to the sides trying to spot the flankers. He caught a short glimpse of a camouflaged person heading towards his assailants. He breathed a sigh of relief and stayed hunkered down behind the desk as the marines moved forward and took care of the attackers. He heard a gruff voice shout, "Take one of the bastards alive you grunts!" Jim nodded to himself; he wanted to be in on that interrogation.

He waited until he heard the gruff voice call out, "Captain Barkes? All clear." He stood up and holstered his weapon, "Did you get any alive?"

The sergeant looked around, "Looks like two alive, though one is questionable."

Jim nodded, "Good, I want to listen in on that interrogation."

Roberts looked around the room, noting the somber looks on the faces. He looked up as the door slid open, granting Veronika entrance to the room. Andre started at the sight of her. She noticed him and looked equally startled. Roberts made a mental note to find out what caused that later. He cleared his throat, "As far as we can tell, that ship or base has not moved from that same system in the last twenty years. Come morning I plan on taking my Illustrious Liberator clan along with the Star Reavers clan and the Silent Death clan to destroy that thing. So, get what rest you can tonight, for in the morning, the Obsidian Blade goes to war!"

Chapter 10

Star-Born-Fury growled at his reflection in the mirror. His soft black fur bristled as his sub vocal growl rumbled in his chest. With a last glance at the mirror, he walked to the doorway, his massive eight-foot-tall body seeming to dwarf the room around him. He idly ran his thumb along the hilt of the sword sheathed at his side. He stopped his march down the corridor abruptly as his conscious mind realized what he was doing. Taking a deep breath, he willed his mind into calmness, seeking the center of his being and projecting the calm befitting a Den'Zardo master.

Once he had regained his composure, he continued along the corridor. He stepped into the bridge of his command ship, the massive twenty-five-thousand-ton battleship *Star Render*. The huge forms of his crew hunched over their consoles, the soft deep sounds of their murmuring voices brought a smile to his face. Most species seeing a Kal'Shak smile would turn and run the other direction. Star-Born-Fury padded to his command chair and eased his bulk into it. He punched a button on the arm of his chair, and the main viewer sprang to life, showing the tactical view of the system his ship was in. Icons representing other ships of his armada glowed a comforting dark red.

He growled a command and his ship began to ponderously move forward, her consorts following.

As the ships picked up velocity, he sat back and waited for the fleet to cross the Limit. He found himself tapping his fingers as he waited and growled a soft curse. Soon his ships were free to enter Warpspace, and the normal view of stars around them disappeared into the hideous mélange of coruscating colors that was Warpspace.

Soon now, he thought, we shall gain revenge on those who subjugated us for so long. Soon shall the star of the Kal'Shak rise and dominate the galaxy!

A day later the Kal'Shak fleet dropped from Warpspace back into normal space near the Limit of a small yellow star. Star-Born-Fury was once again on the bridge. He growled orders to his officers and his armada flowed into their attack formation. He knew the enemy was out there, waiting for him. His tactical officer shouted a warning as the first signs of incoming fire were detected. The tactical display rapidly grew cluttered with signals from his ships and weapons and the weapons and single malevolent yellow icon of his hated enemy.

Missiles raced from the ships of the Kal'Shak to meet the missiles of the Subjugator. Some of the missiles streaked past the enemy's, racing in to try and damage the opponent. Beams of light stabbed out destroying missiles before they could impact on the shields of the ships. Rapid-fire projectile weapons filled space with a veritable curtain of shrapnel causing missiles to burst and flare into gigaton explosions. Occasionally a missile got through everything that could be thrown at it, and a ship rocked as

the explosion tore deep gouges into the armor, revealing internal spaces to the cold hard vacuum of space.

Star-Born-Fury moaned in agony as he saw his ships begin to die, the vile yellow marker of his enemy unscathed. He made a quick calculation, at this rate his ships would be so much dust and debris before his enemy would even take a scratch. He turned to his tactical officer, intending to order a retreat when a rash of yellow appeared behind him. His howl of fury reverberated through the hull as the trap closed in on him.

The ships of the Obsidian Blade dropped out of Warp space, their scanners alert and reaching out to find an enemy. Almost immediately they found something, and alarms began to howl as the scene began to unfold in front of them. Roberts stood silently on the command deck of the *X*, flanked by Cass, Andre, Veronika, and Marie. The scanners showed a scene from hell, ships broken in half sparks flying from conduits. Occasionally a secondary explosion would rock a wreck and reduce it to smaller pieces. "What went on here?" Andre breathed.

"Sir! Those wrecked ships are Kal'Shak design," the tactical officer of the *X* called out. Roberts looked at him sharply and nodded.

"Search for any signs of survivors. And keep an eye out for the Syrilith ship," Roberts ordered.

The pirate fleet slowly moved through the wreckage, seeking out signs of life. Marie stared at the screen depicting the destruction, tears silently running down her cheeks. Veronika reached out and grabbed hold of Andre's hand,

clutching at him. He glanced at her and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

A sound from one of the scanners caught everyone's attention. Roberts was at the console in a heartbeat, looking over the officer's shoulder. "There! A lifeboat! Send out a shuttle and tow it in," he commanded.

The five hurried to the hangar bay where the life pod was being docked. They watched from the observation gallery as the shuttle carefully settled the pod to the deck. Soon the hangar was sealed, and the air was back. A technician approached the pod and began to work the controls when the hatch blew open, and a massive furred being erupted from it, sending the technician head over heels. It stood near the base of the pod, a massive two-handed sword with an energy blade crackling in its hands. The being looked around wildly for a few seconds, then slowly lowered the sword, powering the blade down.

Roberts looked at the others and shrugged, "Someone needs to greet him."

Cass laughed blackly and strode to the lift, "I'll do it." Soon she was on the hangar deck, striding towards the furry bulk that was standing near the pod. She stopped a few feet away, but even with that distance felt dwarfed by his presence.

"Welcome to the carrier *X*," she said. "I am Cass Black. And you are?"

The furred head cocked to the side, and his mouth opened revealing a great number of sharp pointed teeth, "Greetings Cass Black. I am Star-Born-Fury, Den'Zardo Master of the *Star Render*." Cass blinked, taken aback by

the Kal'Shak's grasp of her language. "What is a den-jardo?"

Star-Born-Fury growled softly in his native language then replied in English, "Den'Zardo. It is," he stopped, plainly confused by the lack of a proper analogue. "You may think of it as an admiral," he finally said, "Though that does not begin to encompass the totality that is a Den'Zardo master."

"Regardless, welcome again to the X," she said, "Captain Roberts wishes to meet with you. If you will accompany me?" Cass led Star-Born-Fury to the lift.

Once everyone had settled in chairs, except for Star-Born-Fury who sat on a cushion on the floor, yet still seemingly towered over everyone else, Roberts began. "I am unsure why you are in this system, but we came here to attack a ship of the Syrilith. We have reason to believe the Syrilith are in control of the Confederation."

Star-Born-Fury nodded growling softly, "That fits with what we of the Kal'Shak know of your Confederation." His accent made the words sounds strange and alien to their ears, "I know not of these 'Syrilith' you speak of. My armada came to this system to destroy a ship of the Subjugators. To know of the Subjugators, one must know of the Kal'Shak."

He paused and looked around the room at the humans present, "Eons ago, when your kind was still squabbling over small domestic issues, the Kal'Shak rebelled against those who had held us under their heels for millennia. These foul creatures had infiltrated our society by changing their shape to look like us. It took many brave

Kal'Shak many years to discover and throw off their oppression.”

The room was silent for a long moment, then Veronika cleared her throat, “So your Subjugators and our Syrilith are the one and same?”

Star-Born-Fury looked at her, “It is hard to say. The ship my armada endeavored to destroy was certainly one of the Subjugators. If you were there to try to destroy one of your Syrilith, then yes, they are the same. Though it is hard to tell since they are shapeshifters.”

Raetz surveyed the scene of the assassination. His mark was dead, but he now had new prey. The quarry had talked to another. He scrutinized the scene looking for details. He sniffed slightly as he picked up a faint trail leading from the park bench towards the shuttleport.

He followed the trail, occasionally sniffing to stay on track. He eyed the hostel the trail led him to. It was faint enough he decided to ignore the hostel for now and continue. The trail led him closer to the dome edge to a run-down bar. The overwhelming odors of humans and stale alcohol caused him to lose the trail. He cursed silently to himself and traced his steps back to the shuttleport.

Plugging into the infonet, he scanned for all shuttle departures from the time of the assassination to the current time. One departure stood out, a hastily authorized private shuttle to the ship *Lancer*.

He queried for more information on the *Lancer*. After receiving his information, he took a shuttle to his waiting ship.

Andre was nearly asleep in his bunk when the door chimed. He groaned and sat up, cursing whoever was interrupting his longed-for sleep. He opened the door to see Veronika standing in the corridor. She looked at him and asked, “May I come in? We have some things to discuss.”

Andre nodded and waved her into the room. He sat on the bunk as she sat on the edge of the lone chair. Looking uncomfortable she began, “I thought you were dead at first. Then I thought you were responsible for the assassinations. Including the attempt on me.” She held a hand up to forestall his interruption. “I know differently now, and I am glad.”

Andre looked at her for a moment then replied, “I did some info searches. My boss and your boss were both dead. You were supposedly dead. But here you are now.”

Veronika nodded, “After the attempt on me, I decided to let whoever was behind it to think it succeeded. At the time, I thought it was you. Now we know it was the Syrilith or their agents. What about you? How did you get out?”

Andre told her about his escape to Lupus, his meeting with Marie there, and subsequent escape to the Obsidian Blade.

“Marie mistook you for her brother, which is understandable. You two look almost identical. How?” Veronika asked.

Andre shrugged, “I’m not sure. It might be that my father and his father were related. My father never knew his family. He grew up an orphan.” Andre shrugged again.

Veronika looked at him for a moment, then stood and unfastened her shipsuit. She stepped out of it and pushed Andre back on the bunk, turning out the lights as she did so.

Captain Jim Barkes watched the interrogation of the surviving attacker dispassionately. The man knew next to nothing. All he could tell them was the name of his employer. An employer who was about to be ensconced in a similar room and undergo similar questions.

The door opened, and Grand Admiral Vallot walked in, “Has he said anything new?”

“Not in the last hour or so,” Jim replied. “His boss is being brought in now.”

“Let me know if you get any workable intelligence from them,” Vallot said. “And Jim, I’m glad you are okay.”

Jim saluted as the admiral left. He turned his attention to the other interrogation room as the boss was brought in.

“*What’s your name?*” asked the interrogator.

“*Get stuffed. You can’t hold me here. I done nothing wrong,*” the man complained.

“*See, that’s where we have differing opinions. Your punk Joey di Strefano says you told him to, and I quote, ‘Go whack that Admiral’s man.’ End quote. So, you see, we got you on conspiracy, attempted murder and probably a few other things we could come up with if we wanted to. Why don’t you cooperate and tell us what we want to know?*”

The prisoner looked scared, more than a hardened criminal should have when facing some charges with no evidence. “*They’ll kill me if they find out I squealed. If I talk, you need to get me off this planet. Or better, out of the*

Confederation entirely.” The interrogator glanced at the one-way mirrored window and shrugged. Jim hit an intercom and said, “Done.”

The prisoner looked up, “*You promise?*” At the nod from the interrogator he continued, “*I was hired by Gaston St. Claire.*”

The prisoner continued, but Jim was no longer listening. Gaston St. Claire was the Prime Minister’s top aide. Jim made a note to watch rest of the interrogation later as he left to brief Admiral Vallot.

Roberts sighed as Cass got up from the bunk. She looked at him with a question in her eyes.

“What? Don’t give me that look,” he said.

She smirked and put on her tunic. “What is with you and this Andre? You two could be twins.”

Roberts nodded and said, “My grandfather had an affair at one time. It’s possible he had a child he never knew about. Regardless, we should be concentrating on the Syrilith and what we can do about them.”

Cass thought for a moment, “Why didn’t their ship attack us when we dropped into the system? They obliterated the Kal’Shak fleet, and it was much larger than ours. It makes no sense.”

Roberts sat up, “You’re right. They should have destroyed us. Send a scout into the system; see if there is anything to find other than wreckage. And have them be careful.”

Cass acknowledged Roberts as she left the room, “I’ll send Gentleman Jim and the *Lancer*.”

“Send the Kal’Shak with him!” Roberts called out after her.

Veronika idly ran her fingers down Andre’s chest. He smiled at her, then chuckled, “We’d both be in a lot of trouble if our agencies knew what we were up to.”

She laughed with Andre, “We’ll just tell them we are fostering closer cooperation between our peoples. Though I am not sure entirely that such a line would work on my superiors.”

Andre frowned, “I’m not sure I’m still an agent of the TCBI. The last notices I saw had me pegged for the murders of you, Anton, Harry, and the agent I met on Lupus. I’m sure by now I’m also responsible for the destruction of the Kal’Shak fleet, the entire Tauran rebellion and probably the deficit too.” Veronika looked at him, “Are you going to stay as Andre Symons, or go back to Miles Coventry?”

“I suppose I can go back to Miles. It definitely is a more comfortable fit for me,” he smiled. “It might cause some confusion around here though.”

“Not for long,” she replied, “Anyone who needs to know will know.”

“Miles Coventry it is then,” he exclaimed. “Of course, all of my identification papers in that name are long gone.”

Veronika smiled, “We have two master spies, and a planet full of pirates. You don’t think we could come up with plausible identification for you?”

Miles chuckled again and pulled her close for a kiss.

Chapter 11

Grand Admiral Francois Vallot sat watching the interrogations with Captain Jim Barkes.

“Do you think St. Claire is working on his own or is the Prime Minister Zemin Yun aware of this?” Jim asked.

Admiral Vallot watched the replay silently for a few moments longer, “We can’t bring either one in for questioning. The Bureau would be the ideal front-runner on this, but they are still in disarray after the assassinations.”

“Have they determined who the assassin was?” asked Jim.

“If they have, they haven’t shared that information with me,” replied the admiral. “I’m going to go before the Senate’s Naval Board tomorrow. I’ll quietly ask some of the senators if there are any other options.”

Jim nodded and brought another file up, “The first fleet is at 94% readiness...”

Veronika entered the chamber and looked at the bedraggled man that was chained to the wall. She hid a smile, *Pirates. Always trying to be melodramatic.*

She approached the prisoner and decided to lay on the melodrama herself. In a thick accent, she began to question

the pirate, “Who hass giffen you ziss order to make up lies about Keptin Roberts?”

The pirate looked up at her, trying to pierce her accent, finally blurting out, “I ain’t talkin’ to you ‘bout nothing!”

Veronika clicked her tongue at the pirate and pulled an old-fashioned pair of pliers from her pocket, “With zees, I can make you talk. I only need to pull one off your fingernails out, da?”

The prisoner paled as she grabbed his hand and move the pliers close. As she got a grip on his nail, he screamed out, “I’ll talk! I’ll talk! It were Hatless! He put me up to it!”

Veronika smiled and dropped his hand, “Thank you kindly. I’m sure Captain Roberts and Captain Hatless have much to talk about now.”

She continued to question the pirate at length with reference to his activities and knowledge of the plot against Captain Roberts. She smiled as the pirate began to repeat himself. Still grinning she turned and walked from the room, leaving the prisoner softly sobbing in his chains.

Roberts met with Veronika in the hallway and asked her curiously, “Would you have ripped out his fingernail if he hadn’t answered you?”

She nodded, “Yes, but I guessed that he wasn’t the ‘I’ll resist any torture’ type, so no mess was needed.”

Roberts pursed his lips in a soundless whistle, “Ferdinand the Hatless. I think the Council of Shadow Captains needs to meet. Thank you for your work, Veronika.”

Star-Born-Fury paced the small cabin restlessly. The ship he was on was headed back to the place where he lost his

armada. He was not sure how that made him feel, besides a need for vengeance. At the sound of the comm unit chiming, he stopped and carefully pushed the accept button.

“Yes?” he growled into the comm.

“This is the bridge. The captain would like to offer you a seat as we enter the system.”

“I shall be right there,” replied Star-Born-Fury. He composed himself and exited his temporary cabin and made his way to the bridge.

Gentleman Jim Blake looked up as Star-Born-Fury entered the bridge, “Ah my good,” he stumbled a bit, in his greeting, but continued, “man, we are about to drop out of Warp space and enter the system.” Jim looked at Star-Born-Fury curiously, “Is there a short form of your name? Something a bit less formal?”

Star-Born-Fury cocked his head to the side, looking like a curious bear, “Member of my clan could be honored by being allowed to call me Fury if I so chose. But you are not of my clan.”

Jim nodded, “Quite true.” He looked up as the screen cleared and showed the system, some wreckage is still visible near the warp limit. “Full stealth mode please,” he commanded.

If seen from the outside, the ship would have seemed to waver, like a heat shimmer, and disappear into the background. The ship moved forward slowly, passive scanners reaching out to seek out any danger.

Roberts sat in his chair in the main Council chamber of the Shadow Captains. He stared at the assembled captains, not saying a word letting them stew.

Finally, the hulking Captain Bellamy broke the silence, “Dammit Roberts, we have better things to do than to sit here playing childish staring games.”

Roberts stared at him until he sat down, muttering. After another long moment of staring each captain in the eyes, those that would meet his gaze, he drew his pistol, reversed it and used the grip as a gavel.

“This meeting of the Council of Shadow Captains is hereby called to order,” he intoned. “Our order of business is a betrayal.” At those words, the captains erupted into angry shouting. Roberts let the shouting continue for a minute before rapping the table again with his pistol.

“Sit down!” he yelled over the voices. He continued in a calmer voice as the captains settled down. “I have here a recording of an interrogation. One which you all might find interesting.” He slipped the chip into the reader. The captains sat silently through the recording of Veronika’s interrogation of the pirate. At the conclusion, nine heads swiveled to look at Ferdinand. Almost in unison, eleven hands came up and pointed thumbs down. Roberts smiled and quickly flipped his pistol, firing a shot that hit Ferdinand between the eyes.

As the body fell back, those nearest to it exclaimed in shock as it began to change. The arms and legs grew longer and spindlier. The body grew thin and gaunt, gaining height. The face melted into an almost featureless mask broken by a narrow mouth slit and two black, bulging eyes. Dark green viscous blood ran down the head to the floor. The captains gathered around the body, talking excitedly amongst themselves, trying to determine what the creature was.

After a minute, Roberts said, “I think that is a representative of the species that destroyed the Confed scout and the Kal’Shak fleet. The question is captains, how many more of them are around?”

The captains looked at each other startled and then suspiciously. Roberts drew a knife and ran the blade across his palm, drawing blood. He held up his hand, the blood dripping down his wrist.

“By this blood, I swear blood vengeance against these Syrilith for the wrongs they have done to the clan. Let no man who claims membership in the Obsidian Blade forego this oath!”

As one the other captains shouted and drew their own knives repeating Roberts’ actions.

“I want every man and woman in every clan to swear this blood oath,” Roberts demanded. “Anyone who seeks to avoid it...” He trailed off for a moment, and then looked up with a vicious grin, “Cut them and make sure it’s not green on the inside.”

Miles sat on the bench in the park, watching the sunrise. He struggled to organize his thoughts into a coherent whole that made sense. Shape shifting aliens, honorable pirates, and clandestine meetings all ran through his head. With a sigh, he rested his head in his hands and closed his eyes.

“You look a lot like him you know.” Miles started at the soft female voice and looked up to see Cass watching him. “May I?” she asked as she gestured at the bench.

He nodded and leaned back, “What can I do for you, Miss Black?”

She continued to watch him for a moment longer before replying, “You know that I’m a deep cover agent for the TCBI. I know you are a senior field agent yourself. We know Veronika is also a deep cover TCBI agent.” She cocked her head and looked at him briefly, “You are sleeping with her.” It was a statement, not a question and all he could do was nod slightly.

“I thought so,” she said. “As far as we know, the three of us are the only uncompromised agents left. Call Veronika, we’ll set up a meeting in a secure location so we can decide how we are going to proceed.”

He nodded, “That is a good idea. I’ll get it set up. I suppose we are going to meet on your ship?”

She rose, “Of course.” And she strode off into the morning.

“No longer are we *skapsu*. We shall not return to being *skapsu*.” Jim eyed the tall lizard-like fur covered alien on his bridge, wondering if the mutterings were meant for him or not. He finally decided that they were not meant for him and returned his attention to the displays and readouts on the bridge.

“Maintain course and heading,” he commanded. “I want to see whatever is out there before they see us.”

It was the third day of their hidden, cautious survey of the system. Whatever was once here, no longer is.

Jim sighed heavily and ordered the *Lancer* to rendezvous with the fleet. The small ship powered to full power and headed for the Limit, before disappearing in a coruscating flash of light.

Veronika entered the small cabin on the *Gladius*, Cass's ship. She closed the door behind her and looked at Cass and Miles. "So, the Confed is in the thrall of an alien race. The Kal'Shak were in thrall to said race. And there are three of us, plus thirty or so pirate ships. That about sum things up?"

Cass nodded. "What about the other states? The Tauran Republic or the Ursae Republic? Can we go to them?"

Miles shook his head. "If the Bears were viable, Veronika would be there instead of here. So, either they are compromised or just unwilling to get into it with the Confed."

"The Bugs?" asked Cass, "We could approach them."

Veronika shook her head this time. "They are traders. None of the ships they have sent here have had any sort of serious arms. I don't think they would be of use."

Miles sighed. "So, the Taurans? I'm not sure how much they'd like to get into another shooting war with Confed ships so soon after the last dustup."

Cass looked around. "I think we'll need to mobilize all of the Clans, and I don't think we can do that."

Westley looked around the table at the other Captains. "These Syrilith have dared to invade us. They have set their sights on the toughest, meanest bunch of scalawags who'll teach them the error of their ways!"

There was a slight rumble of agreement as he paused. "They may think since we are pirates that we won't fight back. They may think that since we are clans, we won't fight united! Well, they didn't think. Now they have forged the weapon that will bring them down."

This time, the rumble was louder. Westley drew his dagger and thrust it into the table-top. “While my knife is drawn, there can be no quarter.” The captains stood and drew their own daggers and repeated the gesture and oath.

John le Morte looked around as the captains took their seats again. “Who will lead these united Clans?” he asked. Eleven heads turned to face one.

Bellamy cleared his throat and spoke, “Looks like it’s your job, Roberts.”

Chapter 12

Roberts looked around the table at his captains. “There are twenty-five Clans in the Blade. Each can field a dozen or so ships. This isn’t counting the independents or the smaller Clans. Irish, I want you and the *Worley* to coordinate with le Morte in organizing this fleet.”

“Irish” O’Malley looked a bit startled. “What about Cass? Ain’t she going to be a bit annoyed you put me in charge?”

Robert grinned at him. “Nope. I’ve got her working on something else. The *Gladius* and Cass have a special assignment.” Robert let the chuckles die down and continued. “John le Morte will be my second.

The captains pulled in closer as Roberts continued, eyes and ears focused on him.

Captain Barkes strode through the hallway of Fleet Command towards Admiral Vallot’s office. He strode in through the door and into the inner office, ignoring the enlisted secretary that jumped to his feet.

“Admiral, I have something you need to see immediately,” he said while brandishing a data chip.

Vallot looked up and nodded while Jim slid the chip into a security reader. The two men faced the screen and

watched intently. After a moment, Francois exclaimed, “What in the hell?” Jim nodded. “I had that same reaction.”

Admiral Vallot paused the playback and sat back in his chair. He stared at the image frozen on the screen. “Where is this footage from?” he asked. Jim looked chagrined for a moment. “This is recovered footage from the *Katana*. It was part of the standard security download, but this portion was wiped. Some analyst noticed the gap and did some in-depth analysis. This is what she recovered.”

“Where is this analyst now?” The admiral looked at Jim. “Information like this is a death sentence.”

Jim replied, “She’s in protective custody. I’m using a platoon of Rangers for the security and protection detail. After viewing this footage, the entire platoon was subjected to an in-depth medical scan. They are all human.”

Francois nodded. “Good. Keep this under wraps for now.” Jim acknowledged the order and left his admiral.

Francois waited until the door shut completely. He reached under his desk and pressed a slightly recessed button. Listening to the slight electronic whine as the security locks engaged gave him slight comfort. He turned to his terminal and engaged the communications functions. As he laboriously entered a comm code, he hoped that the intended recipients could receive the message he was about to send.

As he completed the code and attached the recording, he couldn’t help but look at the image again. An image of a man shifting into a decidedly alien shape. An alien that belonged to a race no one had ever encountered before.

Miles watched the footage with Cass and Veronika silently. After it finished, he reached out to restart it. “Isn’t four times enough Miles,” Cass asked.

Miles shrugged and replied, “Most likely.” He continued to stare at the image of the dead alien on the floor of the council chamber. “So, this is a Syrilith? Has Star-Born-Fury seen this footage yet?” He finally looked away from the image on the screen to look at the two ladies with him.

“As far as I know he hasn’t. The *Lancer* has not yet returned. He’d be able to definitively tell us if this is one of his Subjugators or not.” Cass looked around the room.

Veronika cleared her throat, “Any more infiltrators uncovered?”

Cass nodded. “Three more today. That brings the total up to seventeen. And from every Clan. So, they were not concentrating on any one clan.”

“What about the *Love O’ Money*?” Miles asked.

Cass’s demeanor changed immediately upon hearing the name. “Nothing new. They just up and left, no word as to what they were planning,” she ground out of clenched teeth.

Veronika turned to the terminal and looked up the ship in the Clan registry. She read the ship’s entry silently. “Gilded Sunburst. Was that not the Clan that Ferdinand the Hatless led?” she asked Cass.

Cass nodded. “The entire clan is being scrutinized to nearly the cellular level. I doubt they’ll be a major player anytime this century again.”

Miles looked at Cass. “Have the Captains decided on a replacement for Hatless?”

“They promoted Igor Six-Pence of Clan Halcyon to the Table this morning,” she replied.

“So that makes the Council consist of Void Seekers, Nebula Raiders, Star Reavers, Wormhole Pirates, Wolf-head Clan, Paladins of Plunder, Sterndiebe, Crimson Star Clan, Venom Runners, Illustrious Liberators, Silent Death, Star Dagger, and now Clan Halcyon.” Cass ticked off the clans on her fingers as she named them. “Of those Illustrious Liberators, Silent Death, and the Star Reavers are the most loyal to Roberts. The Nebula Raiders and Wormhole Pirates are the next closest. The remainder is reliable, but not necessarily loyal.”

“So, we can muster around thirty-five loyal ships and another twenty to twenty-five semi-loyal, and approximately ninety ships of questionable loyalty,” Miles summarized.

Cass frowned, “Those are just the ships of the Council. There are another six major clans without representation on the Council, another dozen minor clans, and God knows how many independent ships are out there. Of course, they cannot match the tonnage of the major clans or even the minor clans, but they are numerous.”

Miles started to reply when his comm chirped, followed by Cass’s and Veronika’s. The three looked at each other before looking at their comms. Miles eyebrows quirked as he registered the origination code. He wondered how the commander of the Confederation Navy acquired his comm code, since it was the third or fourth since his abrupt departure from CBI.

His ruminations were interrupted by both Cass and Veronika exclaiming. He looked up and eyed them questioningly. “What’s the matter?”

Gunfire erupted from down the corridor. Bodies fell to the floor as others dove into cover. Return fire sprayed down the corridor, and more bodies fell to the floor. “Claymore-One-Alpha to all Claymores, prepare to advance.” The officer flipped channels and broadcast, “Claymore-One-Alpha to Sword elements. Claymore will advance, Broadsword provides covering fire. On my mark. Mark!”

Concentrated gunfire erupted from the soldiers designated as Broadsword. The remaining soldiers, Claymores, began to advance under cover of fire taking up advanced positions.

Lieutenant Peter Maynard checked his scanner and cursed softly as the red icons of the opposition registered finally. The red outnumbered his blue friendly icons by at least two to one. At least his Rangers held the Armory and Morgue. The opposition had only their personal arms and anything they could smuggle onboard.

“Claymore-Six to Claymore-One. I’ve got eyes on Engineering. Seems to be a half-dozen bogies guarding the approaches. I’ve got Claymore-Three and Five here with me. Do we take them out?”

Peter listened to Corporal Bronsky’s report and let it digest momentarily before replying, “I’m sending Claymore Seven and Eight to you. Engage when they arrive.” He motioned to the two Rangers and gave them their orders before turning back to the firefight.

“Curse these monkeys to the deepest hells!” First Fang Achitama ducked as another burst of weapons fire impacted the corridor wall above his head. Achitama growled out orders to his unit. “Destroy these impertinent monkeys, and we shall feast in Kinrabor!”

His troopers redoubled their fire, forcing their opponents to seek cover. With both sides deeply entrenched in cover, the firefight seemed destined to drag on for an interminable time. Achitama growled in frustration and pulled a small grenade from his harness. Flinging it down the hallway, he ducked deeper into his cover. The explosive concussion rocked him to his heels. He was up and firing before his ears had stopped ringing.

Maynard ducked reflexively as the explosion from a grenade went off somewhere ahead of him. “Whoever these fuckers are, they are not worried about taking the ship in one piece,” he thought to himself. “Claymore-One-Alpha to Claymore-Six. Have Seven and Eight reached you yet?”

“Claymore Six. Jones and Kenshin just arrived. We’re about to hit Engineering.”

“Claymore-One. Hold a minute Bronk. These people just started using grenades up here. Here’s what I want you to do. After you take out the guards...”

“Warning! Power core overload detected! Abandon Ship! Repeat! Power core overload detected! Abandon Ship!”

Peter ignored the automated warning as it repeated itself, as he was expecting it. “Claymore-One to all Sword elements. Prepare to advance!”

The weapons fire increased as his troops started to advance. The invaders, whoever they were started to fall back towards the boat bays.

“Claymore-Six to Claymore-One. Jones is down. Ken-shin and I are headed your way.”

“Negative Six. Head to the boat bays. We’re herding them there.” Peter snapped off a couple of rounds at a slowly retreating opponent, winging him.

Over the next few minutes, to the non-ending warnings of imminent core failure, the Confederation Rangers forced their opponents to the boat bays. Bronk and Ken-shin had arrived first and set their trap exquisitely. The last opponent dropped under a hail of bullets. Maynard nodded to Bronsky who cut the recording mid-word.

“Now who the fuck are these people?” Maynard asked no one in particular.

“Sir!” Maynard turned as one of his troopers called out, then he recoiled in disgust as the body at the trooper’s feet slowly changed into something. Something not human.

“Check the rest of them. See if any of the others are doing this same thing.”

As his troops scattered to check the dead bodies, Lieutenant Peter Maynard, Confederation Rangers stared at the utterly alien body still dressed in the uniform of a Terran Confederation Navy captain.

“Recall the ship immediately Jim,” Admiral Vallot commanded. “They are to head straight to Mars. I want you and a hand-picked platoon of Rangers to meet them.”

Jim Barkes nodded and left the office, putting commands into his comp as he went.

“Send in my next appointment Simon,” the admiral said into the intercom.

The door opened, and Vallot looked up, then stood. “Thank you for meeting with me Prime Minister. Before we continue, if I may be indulged?”

Zemin Yun nodded, and Francois stepped out from behind his desk. He held out a small med unit to the Prime Minister. Zemin Yun looked a bit confused as he took the unit, and then slightly alarmed as the unit pricked his finger.

Seeing the look on the other’s face, Francois said, “Not to worry sir, just a small blood sample.” He sighed softly as the unit made a cheerful bleep and went dormant. “After we are done here sir, you’ll understand why that was necessary.”

“As you know sir humanity has encountered two alien species. The Kal’Shak and the Trit’ikk’it. At least that is what all the history texts say. History as we know it is wrong. You see...”

Chapter 13

Veronika turned her unit so Miles could see the screen, and the shape shifting alien depicted on it. He glanced at Cass, and she nodded, she too had the same file. Miles finally looked at his communit again. He read the note, “*Miles, I don't know if this will reach you or if you are dead already. But you need to know about this. This is footage from the Katana in the 2nd Fleet. At Stronghold. It may be related to your initial chip.*” The note was signed “Honore et fide usque ad mortem. – Frank” The signature was the motto of the Confederation Rangers. And Frank, Francois Vallot, now Admiral Francois Vallot was his former squad mate. The message included an attached video. He watched it briefly and noted that it was the same as the one Cass and Veronika had received.

“Roberts needs to see this too,” Veronika said.

Miles and Cass agreed. “I’ll take it to him,” Cass said.

Star-Born-Fury prowled among the streets of Bolthole. His inner anger seethed in him. “*Calmly. This anger is not an appropriate display for a Den’Zardo master. Not even amongst these skapsu.*” He ceased his aimless wandering and headed to the enclave he’d been granted a spacious suite in.

Upon reaching his quarters, he opened the comm and growled out a request to the voice that answered him. “It will be arranged,” was the curt answer he received.

An hour passed as he sought to reclaim his calm center. The buzzer to his door rang out, and he sighed as he stood. “Enter!” he growled out. The door slid open, and Roberts stood in the doorway.

He walked in and looked around the room slightly curiously. “You know you can decorate how you wish,” he said.

“I know. It is as decorated as I wish.”

Roberts nodded, “So what is it you needed?” He watched as Star-Born-Fury paced around the room. “My fleet is gone. Destroyed by the Subjugators. By all that is right, I should have died with my fleet. I did not. There is no place for me among the Kal’Shak. There is only death and dishonor for me. But I cannot accomplish this on my own. For that, I need help.” He stopped his pacing and turned to face Roberts. “I wish to take place among you and your outcast pirates.”

Roberts looked a bit nonplussed at the request. After a moment of consideration, he nodded. “I think we can work something out. Welcome to the Clans Star-Born-Fury.”

Captain Barkes watched the ship slowly approach the docking slip. He nodded to the captain in charge of the Ranger detachment that accompanied him. The captain murmured into his helmet mic. The Rangers moved out to flank the slip’s port. The airlock slowly opened, and a squad entered the ship. After a couple of minutes, the Ranger captain nodded to Jim. “All clear sir. We can enter

now.” The two captains walked up to the airlock and entered the *Katana*. “Where are they?” Jim asked the worn looking lieutenant that greeted them. “This way sirs. We stashed them in Cargo 2. It has cooling capabilities.” The three officers walked down the ship’s corridor silently, flanked by a half-squad of Rangers. They stopped by a large pressure door labeled “Cargo Two.” Jim nodded to the lieutenant. He turned and keyed in a code on the keypad. The door slowly slid open, the lights flickering coming to life as the small group entered. The Ranger captain, Isaac Haynes exclaimed in surprise as he caught his first look at the aliens. “What the hell are those things?” he exclaimed.

“That, captain, is a good question.” Jim turned to the lieutenant, “Did you scan the remainder of the crew Lieutenant Maynard?”

Peter nodded. “Just as the admiral specified. Full medical scans, regardless of when their last medical was. Everyone left is as human as we can tell.”

Jim returned his gaze to the stacks of dead aliens. “You did well holding the ship from them, Commander. Effective immediately you and the rest of your Rangers will be transferred to Mars, under Captain Haynes.”

Peter looked a bit surprised at his promotion, “Yes sir.” He turned to Captain Haynes, “We’ll be ready to debark in about an hour, sir.”

“Sounds good Commander. We’ve got billets assigned to your troops already. Welcome to Operation Bug Hunt.”

Captain Barkes walked into the conference room on the *Katana*. The remaining crew sat and stood around the room looking at each other warily.

“Attention on deck!” a harried-looking commander called out as she spied Jim.

“At ease folks. Sit. Sit. This is completely informal. Formal debriefs will occur later, on the station.” He looked at the commander. “You are the ranking officer, Commander Denise Williams?”

The commander nodded, “I am sir.”

Jim looked around the room. The *Katana*, as a Sword-class cruiser had a complement of 250 naval crew, and seventy-five Rangers or Terran Marines. The room contained approximately eighty people. Combined with the remaining fifty Rangers, it left a hollow feeling in Jim’s stomach. “You are all to be commended. After debriefing, you will receive your further assignments. Commander Williams, dismiss your crew, and accompany me if you will.”

“Crew dismissed!”

Jim sat across from the table, looking at Commander Williams. “So, on the third, at approximately 0430, the invaders attempted to take control. What happened to Captain Bailey?”

“Captain Bailey was one of them, sir. He came onto the bridge, mid-third shift. Lieutenant Garret had the con. The captain walked in and shot him and Ensign Parrish at Tactical. The rest of the bridge crew did nothing.” She rested her face in her hands. Jim was silent, letting her regain her composure. After a moment, she looked up again. “The

captain evidently set some security lockouts on the controls at that point.” Jim quirked an eyebrow, “Why do you say that?”

“The whole of the bridge crew left. They wouldn’t do that. Shouldn’t do that. From what happened next, some of the Rangers were also these... things. The enlisted barracks were slaughtered as they slept. Lieutenant Maynard managed to hold the Morgue and Armory, which is what most likely kept the ship in navy hands. Terran Navy that is.”

Jim nodded. “Your crew will be taken care of Commander. Medical is ready to take good care of you.”

Commander Williams nodded and rested her head on the table again. Jim quietly left the room, leaving her to her demons.

“So, as you see Admiral, their penetration seems to be fairly wide-spread. There are no viable estimates on how many of these aliens are among us. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least one highly placed infiltrator exists, St. Claire. Penetration seems higher at lower levels.” Jim turned back to Admiral Vallot as he concluded, “We’ve got nearly a battalion of Rangers cleared. They are on Mars now.”

The admiral nodded. “Do we have any other ships besides the *Katana*?” he asked.

Jim shook his head. “No, we don’t have any plausible way to bring ships in to vet the crews. And letting the ships do it themselves opens the possibility that they could falsify the results.”

Francois nodded, “Begin medical scans of all ships coming in for any reason. But don’t do any recalls.”

Miles walked through the city on Bolthole with Veronika. The city looked like any other frontier world city he’d seen before. If he didn’t know any better, he would never have known the planet was controlled by pirates.

“Cass says that 90% of the Clan ships have been cleared. Infiltration rates are about five to eight percent. We should be done in another week. The independents have to submit to a full medical scan prior to being allowed to land at Bolthole.”

“That doesn’t cover any of the other planets the Clans control, does it?” Miles asked.

“Roberts issued orders for the same for Veles IV, and le Morte did the same for New Callisto. Other than that, most likely not.”

Miles frowned, “That leaves a lot of open area for further infiltration. That’s ten or so planets with varying populations open.”

Veronika nodded. “Jackson Madeira should be doing the same soon, Louis Scabb and Peg-Leg Peterson will likely follow suit, at least if they want to stay in Roberts’ good graces.”

She opened her mouth to add more when Miles communit chirped a priority signal.

Miles looked annoyed for a moment before answering it. “Coventry.”

He listened for a moment and with a startled oath turned to Veronika, “Confed Rangers had a dustup with the Syrilith.”

She gave him an incredulous look. “How did we get this information?”

“I’m not sure, but Cass wants us back soonest to read us in.”

Gaston St. Claire read the dispatches with a growing sense of dismay mixed with anger. “*How dare these monkeys raise arms up against us, their true Masters?*” First that debacle with the CBI agent, which still went unresolved, and now a cruiser that was *supposed* to be under full control was lost. He ground his teeth and glowered at the screen. He needed to deal with these upstarts soon, if not sooner. He began to type in orders, in a language no human on Earth had ever seen.

Roberts sat in his conference room looking at his allies. “Bolthole, Veles IV, New Callisto, Sebe VII, and Astarte are performing full medical scans of incoming ships. Any ships refusing scans are prohibited from landing and in a couple cases have been fired upon.”

John le Morte cleared his throat softly. “What about the other Clans? Will they follow suit?”

Roberts grimaced, “Eventually. But until then limit our dealings with them. At least we have direct control of two of the three shipyards.”

Miles looked surprised as the conference went on, “*The Obsidian Blade is a hell of a lot more organized than anyone at ONI or CBI ever figured.*” He looked at Veronika, but she was intent on what Roberts was saying.

“We’ve got approximately ninety ships cleared and under direct command. Four Treasure-class carriers will

form the core of the fleet. The remainder of the fleet consists of nearly forty Blackbeard-class cruisers, and the rest is a mix of Cutlass-class frigates and Dagger-class scouts.”

Miles made a soft noise. Roberts shot him an amused glance, “Surprised cousin?”

“A bit. ONI and CBI have no idea about any of this.”

“Neither does URIS,” Veronika added.

Roberts grin got bigger. “Good. If they don’t then hopefully these green blooded bastards, don’t either.”

Miles asked, “What are the capabilities of these ships?”

Roberts gazed at the other pirates in the room, most of whom looked back at him with no expression.

“Fine. I’ll tell them.” He turned to his terminal and brought up schematics. “The Treasure class carrier. 20,000 tons of fury and death. Fighter complement of 60 single-man fighters armed with gauss cannons.” He shot Miles another glance. “With a range and kinetic output of about 10% over the latest TCN models.” He ignored the strangled noises coming from Miles. “The carrier itself mounts the same gauss cannons for PD work. There are also a dozen missile racks carrying missiles equivalent to the TCN Javelin. But the core weapon is a spinal mounted 180 cm plasma cannon.”

Miles looked at Roberts, “You have got to be shitting me. Those things are on par with the latest TCN capital ships.”

“And better than Republican ships,” Veronika added.

Roberts smiled, “I know. The Blackbeards are comparable to the TCN Swords. Probably within one to two percent of capability. The Cutlass frigates and the Daggers are what most people outside of the Clans know about.”

Miles, still looking poleaxed asked, “Why the heavy metal? You certainly don’t need capital ships to be a pirate.”

Roberts looked at Miles, “Haven’t you figured it out yet cousin? The clans have known about the Syrilith for twenty years. At least, we’ve known about their ship/base in 31 Aquilae for the past twenty years. That is why we have such a heavy weight of metal.”

He turned to the single alien in the room, “Star-Born-Fury, what do you think of our chances here?”

The Kal’Shak looked at each of the humans in the room, “I give you a thirty percent chance of success.”

Roberts looked a bit crestfallen at the burly alien’s prognosis. “That low?”

Star-Born-Fury nodded. “My fleet consisted of six battleships of 25,000 tons each. With approximately 20% more capability than your Treasures. These battleships were accompanied by sixty cruisers and over one hundred smaller ships, frigates, and corvettes. All were destroyed.”

Roberts turned to John and Jackson. “We need the other clans then. Call in every marker you can to get more ships.” He turned back to the room, “I think we are done here for now.”

He noted that Star-Born-Fury lingered behind as the rest left the room. “What can I do for you Star-Born-Fury,” he asked.

“You may call me Fury, as you are the leader of my new clan.” He shrugged and continued, “I have commanded Dominion ships for nearly thirty of your years, and I’ve been a Den’Zardo master for another thirty years before

that. I bring you all this experience to use. But if I may suggest, give me a ship. I will not fail you.”

Roberts sat back and thought for a moment. “Okay, I’ll give you a ship. I’ll cut orders for you to take over the *Danziker*.”

Star-Born-Fury nodded and left the room.

Miles cornered Cass in an empty corridor. “You’re supposed to be CBI. Why wasn’t any of this reported?” He glowered at her.

She glared back with equal intensity, “And exactly when was I supposed to deliver any reports? You might have seen the lack of a local CBI field office here.”

Miles stepped back. “I guess you are right, but I hate being blind-sided by shit like this.”

Cass nodded. “I know how you feel. It tore at me not being able to report any of this. And with what I’ve done over the last few years, I’m sure if I do come in out of the cold, I’m facing capital charges and a cell if I am lucky. A bullet to the temple if I’m not.”

Commander Peter Maynard stood by the docking hatch of the recently arrived ship. Behind him was a battalion of Confederation Rangers. He keyed in an override code on the hatch, which slid open. He motioned for a squad to advance.

The squad entered the silent ship. Their sensors probing ahead of them for any signs of life. As they cautiously crept forward, Maynard watched his scanner intently. The squad had reached their first objective, Engineering. Peter

cursed quietly then motioned the rest of his men forward as the sound of gunfire erupted from within the ship.

“All Sword elements, this is Claymore-Six-Actual. Proceed with plan Alpha-Tango-Seven. Repeat, Alpha-Tango-Seven.” He switched commlinks and continued. “Broadsword units, get to Engineering, support Alpha squad.” Another switch of comm channels. “Rapier, secure the Morgue.” Another switch and another command. “Claymore, we’re headed to the Bridge.”

He started forward, his unit deployed around him. As they neared the bridge, he signaled for a stop. He motioned to one of his men, who unclipped a small sphere from his belt. The soldier crept forward to the corner and tossed the sphere down the hallway. Peter keyed a command into his tac-comp to connect it to the recon sphere. A moment later, he had a scan of the area ahead. He studied the read-out intently, then activated him comms. “Scan shows ten targets ahead in the Bridge bunkers. Try not to break the Navy’s ship too much when you dig them out.” His men chuckled a bit. Maynard continued, “Alright people. We are Confed Rangers. We are not letting any green gooey aliens keep any of our Navy’s ships! Hit them!”

Admiral Vallot looked over the compiled report. It detailed the cleared ships and units. He had a mere eleven ships cleared. The largest being the battleship *Vengeance*. He had three heavy cruisers, the *Katana*, *Sabre*, and *Cutlass*; two carriers, the *Harasser* and *Aggravator*; two light cruisers, *Mexico City* and *Lisbon*; and three unarmed fast couriers. He had two battalions of Rangers, but without ships to

get them to the hot spots, they were relegated to security duties. He hit the intercom and said, "Jim, come in here."

As soon as Jim entered the office, Francois said, "Task the *Oghma* to hand deliver this report. The chip is biolocked to one person, so security is taken care of. Once the *Oghma* has delivered the chip, they are to remain at the service of the recipient so long as he needs."

Jim nodded, "Where am I sending them?"

"Bolthole."

Roberts was in his ship cabin when the alarms started to sound. He hurriedly shrugged himself into his jacket and ran to the bridge. "Report!"

"Sir! A small ship just splashed into the system. Scanning. Estimated tonnage is 600 tons, seems to be in line with a TCN fast courier."

Roberts glared at the holotank as the unidentified ship started in-system. "Hail them. Use a tight beam frequency. I'm sure a TCN ship doesn't want to be outed to the entire system."

"Unidentified ship! This is the *X*. Respond on this frequency with identification and purpose."

Roberts tuned out his communications officer as he waited for the reply. Several interminable minutes later he was rewarded.

"...*S Oghma*. We are here to make a confidential delivery. Repeat, TCNS *Oghma*. We are here to make a confidential delivery. Repeat..."

Roberts shut the speaker off. "Guide them to us. Dock them on the port side. I'll meet them with a side party. And ask Fury to join me."

Roberts and Fury stood at the lock, with a party of heavily armed boarders. The boarders stood more alertly as the lock began to cycle.

The lock opened, and a very young and nervous looking ensign in a TCN uniform stood there with a sealed diplomatic packet.

“Jesus, are they robbing the cradle now?” Roberts muttered under his breath. A couple of the boarders chuckled at the comment.

“Ensign Javier Garcia, Ident MA-9310-8139-5571.”

At this, the entire group of boarders burst into laughter. Roberts flashed a brief smile. “Son, I think that is what you do when you are captured. And since you came here willingly, you can talk more. Now. I am the pirate Dread Roberts. How may I be of assistance?”

At the mention of Roberts’ name, the ensign blanched. With trembling hands, he held out the packet. “This is for someone named Coventry.”

Roberts accepted the packet and nodded. “I will make sure he gets this. Now, what are your plans?”

The ensign stuttered, “We... we’re to remain here on station at Mr. Coventry’s disposal.”

Roberts arched an eyebrow, “Indeed. Fury, it seems Mr. Coventry has a ship now.”

The Kal’Shak looked at Roberts for a long minute before nodding briefly.

“Very well Ensign Javier Garcia, Ident MA-9310-8139-5571, you are authorized to remain here on station at Mr. Coventry’s disposal.”

The ensign nodded and nearly ran back into his ship, the laughter of the boarders following him.

Miles looked at the packet warily. He sat in a conference room with Veronika, Cass, Roberts, and Fury.

“How did they know I was here?” he asked.

Roberts grated out, “I’d love to know they knew where to find this place.”

“Maybe if you opened the packet Miles, you would get the answer to both of your questions,” Cass said.

Miles shrugged and pulled the packet to him and opened it warily, half expecting it to do something malign. He opened the packet carefully and looked at the security chip that now lay on the table.

“It looks like a standard naval security chip,” he said as he picked it up. He turned to the room’s terminal and slid the chip in. The screen flashed up with security warnings, and he pulled it out. “Unless you have a TCN security terminal here, I’ll need to visit the courier.”

Roberts, Miles, and Fury all turned as both ladies cleared their throats nearly simultaneously.

Roberts arched an eyebrow, “Seriously? A naval security terminal?”

Cass nodded, and Veronika added, “I’ve also got a Republican one.”

Roberts and Miles looked on in bemusement. “Very well, shall we go make use of the terminals these fine ladies have offered us, Miles?” Roberts inquired.

“I do believe we shall,” Miles responded.

The group left the conference room and headed to the *Gladius*. Once on board, Cass directed the group to her day

room. “The outer shell may not look like a security terminal, but the inside is pure TCN.”

Miles slipped the chip into the reader and pressed his thumb on the scanner than popped up when the security protocols engaged.

The group began to read as files popped up on the screen.

Pachiata glared around his well-concealed command center. For five hundred years his race had worked to control these *humans*, and it was all falling apart. He was unsure what had exposed the *Conqueror* to the humans, but something had, and he was forced to move it from the place it had remained hidden for half a millennium.

He strode back and forth. Glaring at his subordinates. After being ousted from the Kal'Shak empire, he had set his sights on the humans, a race barely entering space when he found them. So easy to conquer.

And now! Now they were attempting to throw off the yoke that he had rightfully placed upon them. He needed to do something to show the upstarts their place in the natural order, namely being subservient to their rightful masters. He loathed to step into the light, it was not the Syrilith way, and exposure would cause more trouble for him.

He growled and slammed a fist onto the desk. Something had to be done.

The messenger hurried down the ornate hallway. He burst into the chamber at the end with unseemly haste and lack of decorum.

“Venerable Elder,” he gasped out. “We have news of Star-Born-Fury’s fleet!”

Wisdom-Born-Of-Battle looked at the messenger. “Calm yourself. It is not befitting for one with Den’Zardo to be so unseemly.”

The messenger took a deep breath and straightened. “Yes, Venerable Elder. We have news of the fleet sent to destroy the Subjugators.”

Wisdom-Born-Of-Battle quirked an eyebrow and said, “Why is Star-Born-Fury not here to relate this news himself?”

The messenger trembled slightly at the tone of the Elder’s voice. “Ah... His fleet has been lost Venerable Elder.”

Wisdom-Born-Of-Fury sat back slightly in his chair. “It seems we must gather a larger fleet then. Summon the Masters. We have work to do.”

The messenger nodded and with a sharp salute, raced from the hall.

Roberts looked at the assembled captains. The men and women in this room constituted most of the major clans. He cleared his throat and began to speak, “As you know, there have been a few changes on Bolthole. Heavy ships, fighters, training in fleet operations. Things pirates don’t normally indulge in.” He paused as the brief chuckle ran through the room. “Today we see the culmination of the last twenty years. Today we free humanity from the yoke of alien oppression!” A growling murmur arose from the assembled captains.

Roberts held up a hand, “Hold a minute, and everything will be explained to you.” He nodded to Cass who pressed a button on her unit. The large screen behind them sprang to life, showing Ferdinand’s change, scenes from the *Katana* and recovered records from Star-Born-Fury’s armada. At the end of the presentation, there was silence.

Finally, one man stood. “Roberts. How do we know this is not all staged or gimmicked up?” Roberts looked at the captain, “Jack Cutty. Have I ever lied to the Clans?” He raised his hand. “No, no answer is needed. I have lied, stolen, killed, and plundered. My allegiance is to humanity and the Clans. If the Confederation is under control, what makes you think the Taurus Republic, or the Novaya Ruskayans, or us are not next? Shall we wait here until ships that look like ours show up, crewed by people that look like us, but are not? Should we hide in our bolt hole and cower like motherless dogs? Or should we show the galaxy that the Obsidian Blade is a force to be reckoned with? That we will not stand idly by as humanity is reduced to a second-class citizenry? Or worse?”

He paced back and forth on the stage, glowering at the assembled captains. “I say no! We may be wanted men. Wanted by every ‘legitimate’ government in the galaxy.” He raised his fingers to make a quote gesture as he spoke. “Wanted by every government except one. Ours. And when we are through, we will go down in history as the greatest saviors of mankind. Or we will go down and be forgotten. Because we failed. I say we go down in history as the men and women who stepped up and did what needed to be done to save humanity when no one else would, or could.”

He stopped his pacing and looked Cutty in the eyes, “Would I lie or gimmick up something that has these implications?”

Cutty dropped his eyes after a moment and retook his seat. “The remnants of the Gilded Sunburst are with you, Roberts. We have our own vengeance to extract from these beings.”

Roberts nodded. “And I will give you that vengeance.”

Chapter 14

Miles looked at Lieutenant Joseph Melendez skeptically. “What exactly am I supposed to do with you?” The lieutenant shrugged. “I don’t know sir. These pirates are massing for some heavy fleet action. And we are an unarmed fast courier.”

Miles sighed. “I know. I can promise you I won’t throw you into any sort of battle without some way to defend yourself.”

Melendez looked relieved at Miles’ words, then started. “So, if we had protection, we’d be in battle?”

Miles grinned. “Does that make you concerned?”

Lieutenant Melendez swallowed nervously before answering. “Yes, it does. None of the crew here have ever been on a fighting ship.” He looked around a bit like he expected to be thrown into a battle that moment.

Miles clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry! I’ve got plenty of years in the CBI and as a Ranger. I’m sure flying a ship is no different.” He chuckled at Melendez’ glassy-eyed stare and relented. “Don’t worry Lieutenant, I won’t fly your ship. But I will get you some weapons and defenses for her.”

He waved to the lieutenant who was still standing looking rather shell-shocked. As he rounded the corner, he

grabbed his communit and punched in a code. “Cass, Roberts said he controls two shipyards here. I want the *Oghma* to have some defenses, and maybe a bit of offensive punch. What can we do?”

Grand Admiral Vallot nodded to Captain Barks as he sat. “Well Jim, how is our situation looking today?”

Jim Barks cleared his throat and began to speak, “As of 0900 this morning, we have eight battleships, three carriers with full complements of 50 F-72 Scorpion fighters, sixteen heavy cruisers, half of which are the Sword class, the other half being the older Truman class. Plus, we’ve got upwards of thirty light cruisers and half again as many frigates and destroyers, and two *Normandy* class assault troop transports.”

“Do you think it will be sufficient?” Vallot looked worried.

Captain Barks shrugged, “I honestly don’t know. We’ve got about half of a standard fleet out there, and no idea what sort of capabilities that thing has. Has there been any news from our wayward CBI agent?”

Francois looked up, “As of this morning, no. He still has the *Oghma*, but one unarmed courier won’t do much.”

“He could use it to run,” Jim began.

Francois cut him off. “If Miles were the running type, he’d have been out of here a long time ago. He’s up to something. And he’ll keep his balls out of the fire. Regardless, I want to have the Operation Bug Hunt ships ready to deploy at a moment’s notice. As soon as anything breaks free intel wise, I want those ships on the way.”

Jim nodded and left to prepare orders.

Roberts entered the cantina and paused a moment as his eyes adjusted to the darkness within. He proceeded into the cantina, looking around. His gaze settled on Star-Born-Fury, sitting at a corner table. He approached and nodded at an empty chair. Star-Born-Fury nodded in return. After ordering a drink, Roberts looked at his Kal'Shak table companion. "Tell me about yourself. What motivates you, Fury?"

The hulking alien's gaze searched Roberts' face for a moment, then he lowered his eyes. "What do you know of the Kal'Shak?"

Roberts shrugged. "Not much really. Your race seems to want what the others have. You come in guns blazing and try to take planets and stations from the people that colonized and built them. And you don't seem interested in talking."

Star-Born-Fury looked at Roberts and sighed. "Your summation could be interpreted as correct. But to know the motivation behind it, you must know the history of the Kal'Shak." He paused and looked up, not seeing the ceiling, but something far beyond it. "Approximately 8,000 of your years ago, the Kal'Shak were just beginning to explore their local space. We had made landings on two of our three moons, with a permanent base established on the largest. What we did not know, is that our permanent base had been infiltrated and taken over. Within a century, our race was completely subjugated. Our masters ceased to shift into our form and strode among us unafraid. A nascent rebellion had always been brewing, it was not until three thousand of your years ago that rebellion came out

into the open. It was led by members of my caste, the Den'Zardo Sect." He paused again and looked Roberts in the eyes. "This is why members of my sect are held in high regard by my species. We are the honor of the Kal'Shak. We are the defenders of the Kal'Shak."

Roberts sat silently for a minute. "That is a harsh history. It doesn't explain why you always attack first though," he said.

Star-Born-Fury looked slightly surprised. "Of course, it does. We cannot take the chance that anyone we contact is not controlled by the Subjugators. Seeing a face on a screen, or hearing a voice over a comm link can hide the mind of a Subjugator."

Roberts sat back in his chair. "I guess that does make sense, from a certain point of view. Regardless, we should be ready to attack your Subjugator in the next week or so. I hope you are ready."

Star-Born-Fury bared his teeth in a ferocious grin. "I was born ready. These foul beings will not escape my wrath."

Captain Jim Barks was sitting at his desk in his office reading reports when his comm chimed. "Captain Barks," he said as he answered the unit.

"Sir, this is Specialist Curry in SigInt. We've intercepted a message that triggered high-level flags and directions to redirect to you."

Jim frowned a moment then said, "Send it to my secure terminal."

A minute later his terminal chirped as it received the message. He swung his chair over to the terminal and acti-

vated it. He read the message and then sat back in surprise. He jabbed a button and then turned to the printer and grabbed the printout as soon as it emerged. He was on his way to the Admiral's office before his chair slowly spun to a stop.

Francois read the message a second time. "Are we certain on this?"

"A certain as we can be in this whole mess," Jim replied. "Where the hell did Coventry get a fleet this size?"

The Admiral said, "It has to be from Bolthole. Though this weight of metal is lightyears beyond what we expected them to have. It will cause a fundamental reassessment of their capabilities."

The first ship dropped out of Warpspace with a barely noticeable ripple of gravity. It was followed by multiple splashes as numerous ships dropped into N-Space. Several ships, if they had been under physical observation seemed to ripple and disappear. The rest of the fleet sat motionless as if waiting.

"Cap'n! There is a large warp trace coming in. Seems to be on a heading from Sol."

Roberts nodded silently. "Signal the fleet. Wait until the intentions of the incoming fleet are evident."

The communications tech nodded and turned to her console. "Message sent."

Miles leaned in closer to Roberts. "That should be the Confed fleet. They should be on our side."

"I know, but we can't take any chances," Roberts replied quietly.

“Warpsplash Captain!” the scanner tech called out. “Looks to be approximately ninety ships. Broadcasting TCN IFF signals.”

Roberts looked at Miles, then said, “Come to alert Alpha.” Klaxons began to sound throughout the ship as people readied themselves for war. Seen from the outside, the ships became encased in a brief gleam of electromagnetic interference as their shields snapped into place.

The other fleet formed up fully and shields snapped up. The communications tech said, “Captain Roberts, incoming message from the fleet.”

“Obsidian Blade fleet, this is Grand Admiral Vallot commanding the Terran Confederation Fleet. We are here for the same reason I believe. Requesting secure communications link.”

Roberts nodded to the tech. “Set it up and route it to the ready room.”

“Admiral Vallot, I am Dread Roberts, Captain of the *X*.” Roberts glanced briefly around him. “You may know some of these others.”

Admiral Vallot looked around the room through his display. “Miles, good to see you alive and healthy. The rest I recognize only from dossiers.”

Miles nodded to the admiral’s image, “Frank. I hope you are still yourself. This is Veronika Smirnova, late of the URIS, and a deep cover CBI agent.”

The admiral smiled briefly at Miles’ comment. “I am, and so is everyone in this fleet. We are ready to destroy this enemy and free our Confederation.”

The group on the *X* nodded, and Roberts said, “We’ll transmit coordinates to you. I don’t expect a common bat-

tle plan, so we'll take the left flank, and you take the right. Hopefully, we'll be able to destroy this Syrilith ship."

Admiral Vallot nodded. "That sounds like a workable plan. We'll warp out as soon as we get the coordinates."

Erik Luken

Chapter 15

The massive sphere hung silently in the barren system, seemingly dead. No lights shone on its exterior, the only light being the faint reflections from the distant primary. The dead system became alive with ships in an instant as nearly 200 ships appeared in space. Shields snapped into place, and scouts raced out from the two prongs of the fleets. Scores of fighters erupted from their carriers and streaked towards the silent sphere. Ships streamed towards the sphere, missiles pouring from them. For a moment, it seemed as if the sphere was unaware. Then it too disgorged fighters and missiles. Mass cannons and other kinetic weapons spewed their projectiles, creating sheets of flak that destroyed many of the incoming missiles. The few that got through the point defense impacted on shields.

Roberts cursed softly as the easy kill was removed from their choices. Fighters began to die as they clashed, brief flashes of expanding light and gas marking the deaths on both sides. Missiles continued to pour from both sides, mostly being destroyed as they neared their targets. His cursing increased in tempo as ships began to die. "Increase speed. Close in on that bastard," he commanded.

"As soon as we enter beam range, open fire with everything," he commanded. Ships swirled around in space, des-

perately trying to avoid incoming fire from the sphere and its fighters. Soon, the ships were in energy beam range. Things seemed to come to a brief halt, then the pirate ships unleashed the fury of their weapons. The Confederation fleet was also twisting through gyrations and closing. It, too, erupted with energy weapons as they closed the range. The shields of the sphere flickered and dropped. The beams began to impact on the armor of the sphere when its beams began to strike out and seemingly destroy a ship each time they hit one. Ships began to die at a faster rate. Roberts sat in his command chair, his face impassive as his fleet died around him. A brief glance at the master plot showed the Confederation fleet suffering equally. A cheer erupted on the bridge as a gout of atmosphere gushed from a wound on the sphere. It was brief-lived as the wound did not seem to lessen the ability of the sphere.

Pachiata cursed loudly as alarms shrilled throughout his ship. “Kill these accursed monkeys!” He stomped around his bridge, deep within the sphere. He glared at the attacking ships. “This should not be happening. There is no way the monkeys could clear this many ships.” He clutched at a console, staring at the readings. He pointed to some ships. “Whose are these ships? They are not Confederation.” He glared around at his bridge crew. “The monkeys could not build a fleet without us knowing. And their relations would not allow for allied aid.” He looked up as a signal sounded, signifying that his vessel had finally reached full power. He cursed again as his ship shook. “Damage report!”

“Major damage in quadrant Gamma 3. Combat capability reduced 30%.”

Pachiata raged around his bridge, “Will someone kill these monkeys!”

Admiral Vallot looked around his bridge through the smoke. Sirens clamored in the background as his ship shuddered and heaved as enemy weapons struck it. “Increase power to the shields and regenerators!” he commanded. He looked at the master plot intently. It showed his initial fleet reduced to twenty damaged ships. A second plot showed the Obsidian Blade fleet fairing no better. “Close and fire at maximum rate.”

He looked at the tactical readout of the enemy ship. It had multiple gaping wounds in its bulk, but the readout showed its capabilities only reduced by forty percent. He grimaced as another ship disappeared from the plot. His fighters rearmed from any berth they could, but they were down to a mere ten percent of his original number. Another ship disappeared from the plot, causing him to curse softly.

“Admiral! Incoming warp trace!” a tech called out.

He looked up at the plot and asked, “Who’s fleet would this be?” He waited for the plot to stabilize. Long seconds later, as another of his ships died, the tactical plot updated with the new fleet. “Sir, they are Kal’Shak!”

Francois muttered under his breath, “Great, just what we need. Scavenging bastards are probably going to clean up any survivors.”

“Incoming message Admiral!”

“On the main screen, please.”

The screen lit up, and the admiral looked surprised at what he saw. “I am Heart-of-Steel. I am commander of this

Kal'Shak fleet. We are here to assist you.” The screen blanked as the transmission cut off before Francois could say anything. “Well, this certainly throws a spanner in the works.”

The Kal'Shak fleet headed between the two fleets, full speed. Fighters and missiles erupted from the fleet as they closed. New explosions occurred on the sphere, causing it to seemingly lurch to the side. The sphere began to fire upon the Kal'Shak, and their ships began to die.

Aboard the bridge of the pirate ship *Danziker*, Star-Born-Fury looked at the plot. He growled softly as the identities of the new ships registered. The combined human ships were down to a mere dozen ships. The Kal'Shak fleet was being rapidly decimated. He glared at the readout of the sphere. “Helm! Aim for the damage I am highlighting on your plot. All hands! Prepare to abandon ship!” Heads on the bridge turned to him in surprise. He looked at them impassively, “I cannot ask you to join me on this final pass. This is my responsibility.”

The helmsman turned in his chair and looked at Star-Born-Fury. “Beggin’ yer pardon Captain, but we are the crew of the *Danziker*, and she’s not dead yet. Besides, you’ll need someone to drive for you.”

Fury looked at him and nodded. “Very well.”

Roberts’ ship was heavily damaged, but still firing from a few launchers. He looked at the plot in surprise as one of the ships lunged forward. “Comms, get me a link to the *Danziker*.”

“Link open Captain.”

“Fury, what are you doing?” Roberts demanded.

“My duty. It is what is required of me,” Fury responded. “All crew have been instructed to abandon ship, though some of your pirates are insubordinate and refuse to leave.”

Roberts chuckled softly, “That does seem to be a trait among pirates.”

Fury saluted and cut the link. Roberts sighed softly, “May you find your peace warrior.”

The *Danziker* flew towards the wound in the sphere’s armor, shrugging off missiles and energy weapons. She lurched slightly as her shields collapsed, but then she was in the opening. Moments later the sphere seemed to expand, and then it exploded.

Erik Luken

Chapter 16

“Reports from the Outer Rim sector seem to be incredible. A Confederation fleet, allied with Kal’Shak and an unknown fleet. Nearly one hundred ships left Sol in the care of Grand Admiral Vallot. A mere half-dozen returned, all heavily damaged. The response from the Navy? Silence. Bob, what do you make of this?”

The well-coiffed man turned slightly to look at the announcer, “Well Jenny, I think something big went down. Something big, smelly, and illegal. Yes, Admiral Vallot is the CNO. But does he have the right to casually throw away ships like this? And for what? No one is speaking. Add this to the disruptions with the CBI and the disappearance of Gaston St. Claire this last week, and what do we have? Something that will take a Senate inquiry to reveal is my guess.”

Jennifer MacGregor turned back to the camera, “A Senate inquiry, Mr. Kensington, what do you think about this?”

The dark-haired man looked into the camera and said, “Miss MacGregor, the reports I have seen give this action full justification. We are...”

Bob interrupted, “Full justification? These were the young men of our Confederation! The reports I am privy to

show that the fleet that left consisted of eight battleships, each with a price tag of two hundred million credits. What justification can there be for the loss of 1.4 billion credits? Not to mention the loss of lives?”

“If you will let me finish Mr. Polensky, I will explain. Yes, the loss of so many ships is regrettable. But completely justified. The Confederation was fighting off an invader!”

Bob snorted, “Invaders! Bah! Next, you will tell me that you believe in these reports of shape-shifting aliens. It’s like some bad holovid movie that is shown late at night to scare children.” He waved his hands and intoned, “Invaders from spaaace!”

Roberts stood stiffly in the office. With him were Cass, Miles, Veronika, and Heart-of-Steel. A door slid open, and Admiral Vallot entered with the aid of a crutch. Miles grimaced slightly as he stood a bit straighter. None of the humans were without wounds. Cass and Miles sported slings and Veronika had a bandage on her head.

“It seems we have defeated the invasion and freed our Confederation. Mr. Hawthorne, you and your surviving crews, are pardoned for any past crimes. Of course, any new crimes will be met with the appropriate consequences.” He paused for a moment, “I do assume you plan on staying with the Obsidian Blade?”

Roberts nodded. “I am. I gave my word to the Clan.” He shrugged. “Pirate activity will probably be decreased for the near future I expect.”

Admiral Vallot grinned slightly, “I expect so. Miles, Cass, Veronika. You can return to CBI. Miles, there is an opening as the NACED chief.”

Miles nodded, “All due respect Frank, I think I am going to take a leave of absence.”

Admiral Vallot nodded, “I understand. What about you Cass?”

She looked uncomfortable. “Sir, I think it best if I remain with the Blade. I’ve done too much to really be comfortable in a more...” She hesitated, then continued, “civilized setting.”

He turned to Veronika, “And you?”

She glanced briefly at Miles, “I think I need a leave of absence also, Admiral.”

He smiled, “I understand. Miles has my commcode for when you decide to come back.” He turned to the final person standing in the office. “Heart-of-Steel. The Terran Confederation thanks you for your timely assistance.”

The Kal’Shak nodded, “We are unceasing in our endeavors to eliminate the Subjugators. I understand you have cleansed them from your government and military.”

The admiral nodded, “We have. There was some bit of outrage with the wholesale testing, but that was quieted when the news of the battle became public. We have also awarded Star-Born-Fury the Confederation Medal of Honor for his actions.”

Heart-of-Steel nodded briefly, “His honor has been restored. He died as he lived, a Den’Zardo master and warrior.”

Miles stood looking out over the Greater New Boston sky-

line from the balcony of his apartment. He felt a presence at his side and turned his head. Veronika took his hand in hers and held it tightly as she looked out at the skyline. “Do you think we got them all Miles?”

He shrugged, “I suppose not, but the new restrictions in place should identify them soon.”

She nodded, “I hope so.”

Unbeknownst to them, they were observed by a pair of black eyes as they turned to go inside the apartment.

End