

# Imprint

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*"It was a time of wonder. The Divergence of the 27th Century recaptured discovery as an ideal. The realms of adventure into the unknown were represented to a race that had grown intensive in stagnation. In a short span of generations, the Human Race was exciting once more and they came forward, revitalised; ready to make an imprint upon the Universe." Excerpt from Hahris Moersven's proposal speech at the passing of the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds Charter, Tibionis 2696 A. T.*

## CHAPTER ONE

Debris dulled on the scanner; glowing embers lifted on a night breeze. Quiet entropy was met by elation inside the Boa.

"That's a registered kill. We're at Condition Yellow."Whaahoo !"

"Nice shoot, Ino."

The bridge was still operating under Combat Reserve Conditions, dull orange lighting creating its own colour spectrum, catching the scene like a sepia-tinted photograph. Relieved bodies fell back into the bucket seats, arranged in a chevron forward from the command recess. The figure there was gripped by an involuntary spasm and he glanced around to see if anyone had noticed, sweat running in rivulets down his creased features, a couple of drops shaken loose and now seeping into his jacket below his chin. Commander Vanirrens knew he wasn't getting any younger and inter-system trade routes certainly weren't getting any friendlier. He was approaching 74 and although he'd managed to secure one regime of Bio-Assertion Therapy in a Ceesxe centre, he wasn't sure his body or his credit rating would stand another. He returned his gaze to the astrogation console, aware that his mind had wandered.

"Realign for Lave approach: Ino, can you check price data and confirm cargo secure. Meridian, take over at cannon."

Two figures moved whilst others carried out a flurry of system checks on their monitor boards. Lave, cool and comfortingly close, rotated enigmatically into the main scanner view.

"Cargo safe and secure. Prices are good, Commander. Excellent margins on the run", said Ino, "We might just make a killing here."

Bad timing. The brief "Condition Red" warning sounded.

"3 right lateral; 20:40. No comm return. No IR confirmation. Definite intercept."

"Hear you Warniss", said Meridian, turning to the armaments board. Ino looked at Commander Vanirrens; should he take cannon ? Vanirrens shook his head, gesturing towards Meridian's back that she would keep the laser system controls. Meridian was scrutinising the co-ordinates fed across from the navigation boards.

"Too far out to run", said Vanirrens, "Prepare for combat: Wiv, you have navigation."

Wiv dumped velocity and brought the Boa around. The three raiders were closing, identified as two Kraits and a Sidewinder, all in-system craft, waiting for prey.

There was still no structural definition on the Main Scanner, just dots amongst the stars. Meridian nominated the Sidewinder as Target One, aiming to cut the opposing firepower at the weakest link. Wiv rotated the craft right and climbed slightly.

Target confirmation. Meridian opened up with the Pulse Laser. The Sidewinder maintained trajectory.

Its shields voided and the craft erupted.

"Yes", Vanirrens seethed between clenched teeth.

The two Kraits were now inside their designated approach zone and banked; one high and one to the left. Wiv kicked the drive looking for an elliptical to counter the pincer movement. Rolling to the right and banking suddenly, the Boa was beginning to come to bear on the climber. Meridian was resetting the laser controls and readying relative projected co-ordinates as the Main Scanner skewed across space and the system star briefly lit the bridge.

"Tend", came the spacer exclamation from one of the system boards, running tracking, "three's cutting back in, we're vulnerable; side-on !"

Wiv made a decision to continue for a shot, maintaining velocity and curve. The target Krait was slowing to clear the intercept and the 'live' Krait, out to the left, had anticipated the follow through; its run uncompromised, it opened fire.

Distilled tracking data was fed to Wiv and Meridian. Wiv tried to flux speed, a bluff on the live Krait whose first rod had just spent wide.

Meridian got one bolt away in return. Accurate, a crack on comm from the target Krait's shields.

Second shot from the live Krait: the fuzz of shield interference. They'd taken a hit. Wiv sacrificed speed and tried to climb but the live Krait held them on intercept and a second blast wracked the Boa. Energy levels had never picked up to optimum after their last sortie.

"We've got a malfunction. Shields are compressed. Hull's vulnerable to secondary", said Warniss.

He was right. Another bolt brought the shock of hull damage with the white-noise of shield stress.

"Oh no", groaned Wiv, his voice wavering on the edge of real terror, "we've got motor damage. Sixty down after compensation."

The target Krait, perceiving advantage, dared a head-to-head bearing and another bolt impacted, nobody aware of Meridian's accurate riposte tearing the Krait apart as all navigation systems crashed. Wiv's console went dark and he turned to Vanirrens, his face half apologetic and half apoplectic at the implications.

"Abandon ship", said Vanirrens, already moving from the command section, to the left of two corridors receding into the ship from the bridge chevron. Bodies left seats and were carried across the bridge by another blast from the remaining Krait. Shields had failed: the Main Scanner and surrounding astrogation instrumentation exploded, slinging clean shards and metal past and through bodies. Ino landed in the command recess, crumpled, in ribbons. Vanirrens bounced off the corridor wall, crushed against a seal. Meridian hadn't left armaments and the rear of her seat bore the brunt of the blast. She moved to follow Warniss, his shoulder and neck torn open.

Warniss opened the capsule door and Meridian stooped to pull Vanirrens in with her. No one else followed up the corridor. The capsule sealed and disruptors tore it away from the hull.

Warniss fumbled for the support systems and the scanner came alive; the Krait passing over them to

finish the stricken Boa. Eight friends and family lost inside. Vanirrens opened his eyes, his breathing shallow and his chest burning. He looked up at Meridian who was rifling through the medical locker, her face set; only concern showing through. The cousin of his nephew, Ino, she had been on ship with them for over four years now, since the Commander had returned briefly to Diedar on a trade run and she had talked her way onto the "Land", fresh back from Lave with her licence.

"Ino, the others ?", He forced his lungs to give him the words and they bubbled in his throat. She looked down at him. Fixing him with her pale grey eyes, obviously surprised by the extent of his injuries. He knew the answer and Meridian said nothing, mopping at the blood he was breathing over his lips.

"Say a prayer", he hissed.

Warniss looked across at her, holding a pad to his shoulder. They knew that the Krait was out there and they were hanging on its decision; cargo or the capsule. As Meridian gave the Commander a pain- killer, one of his old spacer rhymes came to mind:

"Against the odds, a foe in tow,

That's the way we all go. "

## CHAPTER TWO

As the indicator in the Translocator settled on the requested level and the slight pressure of deceleration set itself against his body, Hood stood up from the smooth grey seat and felt a three joint click. Aware of his body again he caught the tension gripping his back, the taut curve from his neck to his shoulders. A conscious effort to relax left a ghastly ache in his muscles, now malleable in a lingering mould of stiffness that had set as he had made his way towards GalCop licensing.

The complex was in the anterior of Station 3 orbiting Lave. Each Lavean Station had a perpetual stream of would-be pilots and, currently, a waiting-list for appointments. He was renting a small resunit and, apart from a brief visit to Ashoria, Lave's primary colonial city, on the shuttle, he had been on the Station for two weeks; ten whole days, passing the time. The wait had been made all the worse by the knowledge that he had a Mark 111 Cobra berthed in the Station, waiting for him whilst he awaited his licence.

The doors opened and he gazed out across jade floor tiles to the clean foyer doors. Aligned vertically at their centre, and spreading up and across the access in a sweep of majesty, was the Golden GalCop symbol; RA the Robotic Avian, fixing him with a benign and impregnable stare from holocaust eyes. Above its feathered helm, across the lintel, was the complex title; 'GalCop Space Licensing Authority'.

Hood stepped out, amongst the green pools under soft pillars of light falling from the ceiling, light-headed from the adrenaline coursing in response to the furious pounding of his heart. He could feel this moment, a turning point in his life as sure as the Station pivoted in geostationary above the green world below. Today was the culmination of his life thus far, the effort he had put in at an Anlama ground Station, 15 light years and a life-style away.

In the foyer beyond he could see numbers of people; their only common bond the Space and Interstellar Pilot Exam, waiting for the doors to the Issuing Hall to open for Licence Registration. As Hood approached, the foyer doors responded in silence. RA parted, a shimmering shedding of skin, for the image was replicated, emblazoned behind the reception desk, just beyond. There was no accounting for the ingenuity of the GalCop Design Section when it came down to their perceived integrity of the GalCop mantle, corporate wholeness unblemished.

"Card"; demanded the figure behind the desk. Paying more attention to his surroundings than the officer, Hood held out his GCID card and waited whilst his appointment was confirmed. "Wait in the foyer until you are called please". It seemed something of a understatement, but whilst Rif Hood felt a pang of annoyance that his moment of achievement was a passing occupational chore to the figure before him, who was already turning back to a comm screen, it could not deflate his anticipation.

"Thanks", he retorted as he began to head in the direction of the foyer. He almost laughed out loud as a gold-plated cliché popped into his head and he wondered if anyone had ever said to the officious reception staff; 'Remember my name, I'll be famous one day'.

It turned out to be a sobering thought. The vastness of space was peppered with the remains of pilots with stars in their eyes. You didn't need to be told that trade was tougher these days. The figures from IR signature transmissions spoke for themselves at the dockside system data monitors.

Plenty of spacers passed dock time with rented message boxes filed under IR codes and maintained

by Orbital Space Authorities. It was indicative of the strange lives spacers led, especially inter-system runners. "Meet me at Xexeti", as one spacer saying went. A downpayment would open a box for ten years with additional fees for access time. Unused boxes were generally archived and there were probably uncounted self scribed epitaphs in data storage throughout the eight galaxies.

Some attempt had been made to arrange the seating into small, sociable, areas. Soft uplighters glowed from behind lush Lavean planting, with Station comma-units to hand. No connection made, the screen that Hood sat next to operated a free-space run of adverts between general Station announcements. 'Celebrate as a licensee at the Balcony Complex' was followed by 'The Lave Orbit Space Authority: Trading Profile Seminar. Call on C43-97T28 for your competitive advantage'. Hood watched for a while, unwilling to make eye contact and possibly have to engage in conversation with the eight people in his seating enclave. He reasoned his reluctance, as the screen proceeded through a panoply of bluster, and pinpointed a fear that the people surrounding him might share his dreams, diluting their essence.

His reverie was cut short. A short, stocky, man, apparently in his late forties, leant forward intruding into the communal space to begin a lacklustre conversation. Hood winced as a question was directed at a woman to his left. "So where are you from then?"

## CHAPTER THREE

"Concern has been mounting for some years now at the alarming increase in pirating activities and the proportion of trading casualties in many systems.

Lobbying by the GalCop Trade Bureau hinges upon three main proposals, for a reform of the IR signature registration system, an increase in bounty payments and a mid-system deployment of GalCop Police Stations to patrol system space trade routes.

The ruling Decemvirate in Galaxy One have indicated that careful consideration would be given to the forthcoming Trade Bureau Report".

Quote from Station News item. Lave.

The Station docks ran in levels behind the free-space at station-core. Beyond and below the Station egress gaped planetwards, powerful shields operating a safety vortex both for, and against, traffic in the tubes. In a honeycomb of wedges behind the dockside were the cargo warehouses where a specialised transport network supported the auto-trading system. Autoscam modules plied their intermediary trade along these routes. The life-cycle of the Station was a peculiar one. The docks never grew still and the Station authorities were active even when sections of the Station with something approaching a diurnal routine fell quiet as they moved darkside.

Rif Hood headed towards his berth. Registration had dragged on and on: with the time it took to process, no wonder a licence cost so much. Still, rumour had it that once the I's and T's had been dotted and crossed, bureaucracy lost interest in just about everything but your Credit Rating. Regardless, he was now, legally, a pilot, Commander of a new Mark 111 Cobra. He was on the GalCop computer network, linked to his ship's IR signature and the actions of his ship would assume a legal character of their own as a counterpoint to his legal status as a GalCop civilian. For active spacers, the ship's record was the dominant party. Depending on a search by IR signature, he could be legally shot at by any bounty-hunter or have-a-go trader in the business.

There was a commotion further ahead on Dock 4. A mea-unit mobile arrived to stand-by at a berth not far along from Hood's Cobra, and he paused to check the information on incoming flights on the dockside system data screens. The berth was designated for an escape capsule being tracked through the safety zone. Judging by the equipment being prepared at the berth the occupants were travelling under suspendedan. Curiosity got the better of him and Hood wandered on past his berth to get a closer look. Few other people were showing any interest; the reality of the commonplace danger for spacers began to come home to him. The berth matrix came alive, indicating imminent arrival of the capsule. Station systems brought it to dock and a crew moved in to access the berth for the mea-unit, preliminary scans drawing out the seconds such that Hood nearly forgot to breathe. The mea-unit went in and shortly after, a body was brought forth from the capsule, still rigged into a suspended-an sack. Inside the grey spacer overalls were shredded and red with blood at the shoulder. Hood could see a green ships insignia on the breast of the figure but he was too far away to make out any detail. He moved forward, again, standing against the perimeter barrier wall and flush with the capsule entrance. One of the dock crew cast him a disdainful look and mumbled something under his breath; Hood was oblivious to the insult, a second S-A sack was being moved out towards the mobile. This body was a young woman, pale and twisted in the rig. Blood was splattered across her suit giving it a mottled ground camouflage effect . Her hair was matted with the same dark-red substance but under the cloak of S-A, her condition was indeterminate. The green insignia depicted a star over a valley, a natural symbol which seemed anomalous to these broken

lives in the vast metallic dockside. "Life signs for both", he heard a voice comment inside the mobile whilst a third form was brought out of the capsule, an old man with a large stain of blood across and around his front. How long had he been a spacer? Hood wondered how any spacer eventually made the decision to give the life up and whether the decision was inevitably decided vicariously. He recalled his mother's enforced separation from her ship, left recovering on an Anlama Station from a blasted leg and he imagined a similar dockside scene as that Python limped in to be met by a mea-unit. Had she looked as pale and fragile as the women in the mobile? Hood tried to catch a glimpse of her as the mobile side slid shut. He doubted it. His mother had never said but he'd lay money on her having walked unaided from the berth.

So that was all. Three people from a complement probably six or seven times that. Hood's mood swung considerably blacker as he turned to board his vessel, for the first time as Commander. He had a sudden vision of GalCop Licensing acting as a cosmic arbitrator, working registration on the principle one out, one in, awaiting confirmed fatalities before opening up the Issuing Hall.

Card and key at the berth matrix got Hood into his Cobra, moving through the compact quarters section to the gravity well which would take him up to the bridge.

He rose and the bridge grew around and before him. He could sense his ship waiting, waiting as eager as he was to break berth and shoot through the tubes, the egress and the curtain rotating behind, Lave looming before on the main scanner. The hypnotic swirls of atmospherics contracting with the regular flux patterns of the Station and, in-between, Hood, set free to tackle the heights of his ambition.

Hood moved over to the pilot's seat and lowered himself gently, like fitting into place as a fulcrum, potential all around, latent in the consoles, scanners and systems; all to hand.

As yet, all of the vocal controls remained unset. On a single-pilot ship they were a valuable tool for exercising support functions whilst flight and fire remained as a concentrated hands-on activity.

There were a number of available security checks which the pilot could use in the activation process. Hood had a basic palm scan and code-entry at present, which quickly brought the array of instrumentation alive. He brought up the Orbital Space Authority Data Link on the Comms Console and left the latest flight and docking information running on the local view screen. A matrix showed Hood's Cobra in perspective of the docked complement at Dock 4 where standard information would show berthed time, whether loading or unloading, ship to ship contact data and various local statistics. Watching the data flow, Hood felt insecurity gnawing at his thoughts again, fear of trying and finding mediocrity, the burden of insignificance, he looked at

the small code for his berth, tangled in the midst of 400 berths on Dock 4.

He reasoned that everything he wanted now, he had to get for himself. No-one was going to contact him, nobody could be expected to take an interest. Rif, he warned himself, assert yourself.

He recalled the Technical Modules of the Space and Interstellar Pilot's Exams and prepared to run a comprehensive systems check, to get back to basics on a specific set task, a pattern to settle his nerves. Then, he decided, it was time to consider cargo.

## CHAPTER FOUR

"The matrix of the GalCop Trading System envisages distinctive roles for in- and inter-system traders....the inter-system trader is a facilitator... [and] the uniform cargo doctrine recognises this, providing benefits through locating commodities rather than concerning itself with comparative specifics. The intention is to prevent the inter-system trader being caught up unnecessarily in the socio-economic details of a system. "

Excerpt from the Report accompanying proposals on a GalCop Trading System. 2715 G.C.T

The Faulcon de Lacy proprietary trade systems supplied with the Cobra were well respected, and designed in accordance with GalCop Trade Bureau standards. Few traders had cause to install replacement or upgraded units. A Transrelations Database structure was fully integrated with the ship's Financial Systems. Each IR signature constituted a corporate identity providing a distinction between trading activities and the personal Credit-Rating of a pilot. Escape capsules took a critical data dump with a straight financial transfer to a 'crisis' account to be re-established under a new IR signature.

Hood looked over the price data on the CorCom Trade System. With 78.6 Credits in the Trade Account he began to work margins on his first run. He reckoned on a run to Leesti as the nearest complimentary trade system where the massive TLK Conglomerate was the dominant political force on a physically unsettled and inhospitable world. Lave's rich and fertile plains were a renowned source of protein extract and trading food would allow him to maximise cargo space. CorCom advertised 16 tonnes at a unit rate of 3.4 Cr. Hood bought the available stock and was able to purchase a tonne of Liquors at 23.4 Cr. As the AutoScam modules delivered the CT's to his cargo bay, Hood began to select Leesti co-ordinates at the Astrogation Console. In a short time there would be nothing keeping him at Lave. Nerves and excitement pushed against his temples and an adrenergic momentum suffocated his inertia. Rif was eager to go. Go and get. A thought came from nowhere and he called up informatic on admissions to the Station Hospital. He found the three people from the escape capsule and, remembering how he had been struck by the lack of concern on the docks, he left a message for them: "Thinking of your recovery". At the same time he took out a message box. He got screen confirmation of secure cargo and called the Orbit Space Authority Control for clearance to break berth. Whilst he waited for an automatic launch schedule the faces came back to him, trussed and helpless in the web of suspended An- rigging, an old spacer, pale young woman, torn uniforms.

His launch slot arrived and he cleared Dock 4. Station systems took over and, for a brief moment, the main scanner showed the gaping tube until a sudden acceleration thrust him into the segmented rictus, screaming towards the egress and suddenly into space where a tone indicated that Rif Hood was now in command.

The strain of Station exit was soothed by a listless air passing over his body, and he stretched himself in a series of fluid manoeuvres, like a tiger pacing his cage. Starlight cascaded across his scanner and Lave, with swirling storm systems embracing the bright continents below in a clean, cathartic dawn. If anyone asked, in times to come not when Hood grew up, but when he first remembered feeling truly alive, he would recall this moment. Next stop Leesti.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Coming out of Hyperspace was like emerging from underwater, changing elements with all the associated sensory disorientation. Hood's ears were ringing, his mouth and throat felt parched and his head was fuzzed. Taking lungfuls of air he concentrated his mind to assess his surroundings. His Cobra was moving at velocity in a vaguely systemorbital drift. Comm was taking instructions on Leesti relative time, showing over two hours as elapsed since leaving Lave. Working on compass indicators, Hood increased to Space Skip velocity and reorientated to Leesti, not wanting to prolong the inward journey any longer than was necessary. The phrase, 'minimise risk', came to him from some part of the Pilot's training that he didn't bother to try and recall. Instead Rif ran the words through his mind as a litany whilst he aligned a course and kicked into Space Skip. The pull of an in-system Skip was a lot greater than regular Hyperspace; interference and conflicts of forces were more apparent, something that normal spatial awareness recognised and reacted to. Hood didn't mind the sensation. For him it was a momentary relief, a second where he had relinquished control. Associated interference registered and Hood fell back in to regular velocity, bridge systems switching to combat mode and the Condition Red lighting casting its contrasts across the consoles, focussing attention on the main scanner. 'Minimise risk'. The phrase took on a new edge and cut through the remnants of jump lag in an instant.

Moving swiftly, Hood activated ship identification and dampened velocity, checking the flight grid scanner for the hostile craft. Comms confirmed that reciprocal identification had been ignored and the scanner showed the approaching ship high and behind. Rif pulled the Mk. 111 up and over in a tight arc, keeping an eye on the main scanner for a visual as he negotiated rolls to get a forward bearing on the flight grid. Rotate and compensate. He pulled a distant speck into the targetting area. Identification; Boa Class Cruiser.

Hood's stomach turned. The escape capsule back on Lave had been all that remained of one Boa. He had presumed that they had been innocent traders, victims, but now here he was with a Boa bearing down on an intercept course, getting close to the dangerous early engagement distances where skillful flying could not guarantee safety from the cross-thread of an enemy cannon. Rif felt a tide of panic rolling towards him, threatening to sweep his consciousness into turmoil, he saw the incoming craft on the scanner and blood on an old man's chest. Fumbling for the armaments console he felt the superstructure of the Cobra, envisaging it twisting around him ready to entangle and choke. Minimise risk. He pulled at the words, latched onto them and tried to fit himself into the events unfolding around him. The Boa slid across the targetting area. He fired a bolt. Nothing. He rotated to realign and the Boa curled back into the sights; another bolt with the tell-tale crack on the combat comm. probe. A hit ! It brought everything rushing back to him, a flood of control. Certitude. He had the ability, at the pivot of events, to survive. His first true hit was an assurance of that. He fired again and again, pulse laser blasts raking at the Boa's shields. Fire was returned. One blast and systems data erupted on his monitors, quantifying energy loss in an outrage of information. An exchange of hits; Hood recoiled. Wrapped up in attack he realised that he was still waiting, almost motionless. Cursing himself he wrenched the Cobra into acceleration.

Now there was definition on the scanner and the after-image of another bolt. Front shield was almost depleted. Hood banked 50:80, intending to break out of the punishing head-to-head but he was in the danger zone, where the Boa pilot could easily compensate for Hood's trajectory with a simple realignment. Hood span 30 anticlockwise, dumped velocity and dropped on a vertical to the Boa, across and below the enemy's intercept path, at contrast to its existing climb.

It was enough to close the distance and the rules changed. Hood reasoned that combat by the book

would give him the edge now with a vastly superior manoeuvrability and he decided to open with a gamble on the Boa's expectations to give him some room. Surely they would be expecting him to try and work a curve behind them and surely that would mean they would try to anticipate that with a turn. Banking on that, Hood killed velocity and waited, and succeeded. The main scanner showed the reacting bandit at 340:20. With the slightest rotation, the Mk 111 picked up the Boa which was already intent on correcting its mistake, but Hood followed the climb and fired four bolts into the exposed upper reaches of the target. The Boa swung round recklessly, trying to buy some time out of the line of fire, and Hood hit with two further bolts before he had to move in pursuit. Rolling quickly in acceleration he intended to keep the Boa close and maintain his curve factor advantage. It was better than that, against the odds he had managed to run right back onto a target intercept and he fired again; the crack of his pulse bolt almost instantaneous as the Boa loomed close and an escape capsule veered away just as the next pulse battered through the depleted shields and split the Boa's drive sector. The explosion sent a ripple of detonations along the equipment level and laid waste to the entire cargo sector. For a split second, the bridge of the cruiser floated on an expanding cloud of fire before being engulfed, debris marking the trajectory before fluxing slightly against Hood's already weakened front shields, biting into his primary energy bank.

The escape capsule registered on the flight grid, and, burning with success, Hood brought the Cobra around, dipping into the path of the capsule so that it floated into his sights on its slow voyage to the Leesti safety zone.

Energy reports appeared dutifully on the console. Hood glanced to check his foreshield wave strength and requested a systems check. Confirmations scrolling on the systems console display, Hood turned his attentions back to the capsule. How many of the Boa's crew had made it? Rif suspected that it would have been relatively few. His fingers danced compulsively about the armaments panel but his thoughts were caught in confusion. He tried to imagine the people in the capsule, now fearing for their lives. They would be following the drifting remnants of their cargo and see that the Mk. 111 had ignored the pickings and had settled into a tactical position in their wake; preparing for their wake. Would he celebrate their deaths tonight?

How many people had they killed, Rif wondered. Would they have enough of an account to buy a new vessel and stalk the lanes again?

Minimise risks. Fate could throw them together again and next time the outcome might be different. Rif brought the Ingram laser system to life and dealt swift, arbitrary justice to the pirates. GalCop justice, since his comms. screen was monitoring TS ComDirect and a reference from the Bank Federation Monitoring Authority as to bounty was imminent. Despite the administrative approval of the Boa kill and the tacit acceptance of the follow-up on the capsule, the iaKer had chilled Rif's spine. There was a difference between defending yourself from obvious hostile intent on a trade run and a clinical decision on an option to destroy. 6.4 Credits were allocated by the GBFMA for the Boa; the last official word on the incident. For Hood it went beyond that to the capacity he now had to influence events. He had power and he was responsible for the way it was exerted; for the impact it could have on people's lives. He felt that he needed to change the distinction he knew was there, that it could be important to him as a spacer as much as a person but there were more pressing practical matters to attend to. The front shield had recovered and was now almost at optimum. Rif felt about as secure as was possible under the circumstances, and manoeuvred for Space Skip.

Leesti grew on the scanner until the planetary mass made too much interference and the Cobra fell back into normal velocity. Ignoring two asteroids that appeared on the fringes of the flight grid scanner, Rif headed doggedly for the safety zone. The assuasive indicator appeared on the

Astrogation Console, promising Orbital Space Authority assistance, and, more pertinently, Viper support should anyone be attacked.

The compass reset to the co-ordinates of the local Station, reminding Rif that he had yet to dock. For the inexperienced pilot, there was no substitute for Galactic Navy procedure and Rif manoeuvred roughly into the orbital plane at a point between the Station and Leesti. From there a short run towards the planet and about face at standstill brought him on to the accepted approach run. The moment that terrified Rif was trying to maintain equivalent Station rotation without any visual reference as the egress loomed out of scanner and the shield curtain had yet to be breached so that automatic docking might take over in the tube. He held his breath as if passing air through his lungs might throw his Cobra against Station orbit and bring the raking of the shields which was a death knell for all spacers.

The curtain parted and before Hood, Leesti docks wrapped around the free-space core of the Station. He laughed out loud as Station comms. spat docking information across his systems, reassuring everyday chatter after the dark and the danger. Suddenly it came home to Rif why stations had such thriving leisure activities. Spacers had a lot of unwinding to do.

## CHAPTER SIX

Just about everywhere you looked on Leesti Station 5, the imperial purple TLK logo would intrude your line of vision. The corporation sponsored, monitored, administered and generally wished you well whenever they received your money. Evolving out of a Leesti System Federation which governed by economic interest groups, the Technology Sector had thrived on early runs by newly licenced pilots from Lave and had subsumed other sectors into one mammoth corporation. Aggressive commercial policies and specialisation in agrotechnology, both planetary and Station bound meant that Leesti had a powerful presence in the local galactic area, with interests on Orrere and Ra as well as a Corporate arm on Zaonce. The TLK delegates to the GalCop Senate on Aruszati were often in the the news for their fractious run-ins with other GalCop groups. Hood followed GalCop politics on the most superficial level. Traders skimmed the news for potential profit and rumours circulated around dockside facilities across the galaxies of crop failures, accidents at processing plants, consumer booms. Anything that might speculatively affect supply and demand.

Hood had sold his cargo at attractive margins, showing a gross CorCom profit of 55.9 Cr on his first run. He felt that he had good reason to be pleased with himself as he sought out and sat at a small table in "Turbulence", a slightly more upmarket bar than he had expected. Consequently, Rif also felt uncomfortable; economically and physically; the former was entirely due to the cost of the thin glass of mixed-density liquids that he cradled in hand, still swirling slowly since being stirred into consort at the bar; the latter was due to him not being able to fit his legs under the immovable table which bore a, possibly intentional, resemblance to an upside-down egg in a vice.

There was a TLK Leisure Pad in a pocket of the seat, and Rif scanned through the list of Station activities. The various descriptions of sports and pastimes on offer, and the accompanying prices, were an entertainment in themselves. As Rif sipped at his Bifurcation, which had lapsed into uneasy entropic equilibria, the house lighting dimmed and the lower level of the amphitheatre split and moved into three cleongridded dance floors. Holo-effects lit the grids with cries-crosses of flame as a lava-flow cascaded under the floors, and customers were invited to have fun at the scene of one of Leesti's premier tourist traps. "Show me your fluid dynamics", encouraged a voice over the speakers. The screen to the leisure pad flicked to an ad; "Now at the Turbulence. Set your lavalite". It beamed to nobody in particular from the table top. Rif certainly didn't notice. He'd spotting a young woman in a flame dress slide away from the bar and sidle in his direction. Rif knocked back his cocktail, winced, and left.

Rif came out of the gravity well on the Cobra bridge and sat down, intent on replenishing his supply of quirium. He felt a lot more comfortable slipping into the pilot's seat than he had done back on Lave. For one thing, his Cobra was a refuge after the imminent excesses of turbulence. He called up the supplier section for equipment on Corcom. Quirium was available at 1.3 cr. Its prices and supply were carefully regulated by a complex set of Trade Bureau regulations. As Hood understood it there were several tariff filters on Quirium. A cut went to registered inter-system craft manufacturers to offset against their loss-leading prices for basic ship designs.

To make spacing affordable, basic models tended to be spartan, utilitarian creatures. Manufacturers made their profits on development and expansion, as well as from areas like Quirium tariffs. The market for inter-system jumpers was a second generation one. The first generation had been epitomised by the Starseekers and Founds that left old Earth in the 25th century in Earth time. The second generation of ships were available with fly-by-wire systems for jump. Hood had the GalCop Galaxy One approved plateau of systems already installed in his navigation units when he had bought his Cobra. Once GalCop had reconnoitred Galaxy One and began to colonise throughout the

systems, they realised that by using the available knowledge of the galaxy they could introduce a bespoke jump map of GalCop worlds. It had been an important phase in GalCop history. Drives with the kick but not the brains reduced the expensive navigational processing equipment needed to plot and control jumps. There were numerous associated benefits. Nearly all spacers were now limited to activity inside GalCop boundaries which conveniently reduced interaction with other planetary federations or general over-expansion which GalCop might be unable to consolidate. Planets that were not designated as inter-system reception worlds were left off the jump map, as were a number of 'secret systems' and systems which were still undergoing monitoring and exploration under GalCop's after-the-fact conscience policies.

Rif had opened a message box at Leesti shortly after he had sold the cargo. He was surprised to see a message waiting, having left the link active unintentionally before he had left the ship. The respondent was given as Gisburn:

"We might have been licensed together but you got the jump on me for cargos. I had to wait another hour after you cleaned up on food supplies and then I was quoted 3.7 Crh. I'd like to meet my rival and let him buy me a drink. Squeeze your margins at Lave."

After that followed a box reference. Gisburn, the name seemed familiar and Rif put a face to it from licensing at Lave. A tall young man with a fast smile and faster eyes which gave you the impression that he was being pulled along by time at a slightly more frenetic pace than everyone around him. The cost of that to his composure was balanced by his dark and swarthy stature. He had taken his licence medical at a Lave Station and he had been delayed whilst they confirmed the results of his GeneScan on an overworked inter-station link. All prospective pilots had their DNA analysed to test for a number of prescribed conditions, sanctioned in the schedules to the Licencing Regulations. There had been some disturbing consequences to the post-Divergence colonisation of the eight galaxies.

Some local genepools had been muddied by both in breeding and the environmental effects of the strange new lands.

Rif confirmed a meeting at Lave for Gisburn and closed the message box. 'Somebody else to keep in touch with', he thought as he sank back into the seat and closed his eyes, a smile breaking on his face which he checked almost immediately when he realised exactly what he had just framed in his thoughts. He recalled the three spacers in the capsule. They'd never met but Rif had made a subconscious assumption that they might keep in touch. It was a satisfying and, more pertinently, reassuring thread to hang on to when you were just starting out. They did have his message box reference, after all.

Rif flicked through the OSA news service for traders as a precaution against anything which might have a bearing on his next trade run. He had intended to return to Lave anyway; wanting to build up his confidence on a familiar run, and his trade account as well, come to think of it. Now he was fortunate enough to have other motives to draw

him, should he choose. His morale soared momentarily as he felt that he almost had a grasp on the threads of his future. That tangible things were already happening to him, and were waiting to happen when he got to Lave. Rif imagined seizing those strands; consolidating along the way.

As with many of his flights of fancy of the past few days, it was short lived. The lead item on Comm. was an incoming report of a skirmish above Alaxide, one of the Leesti system worlds were

there was a mining operation and several construction plants. Several in-system haulers had been destroyed along the standard flight route. A pirate incursion from Riedquat was suspected. Local TLK outsiders and a viper unit had engaged the force but no more recent information was available. The bulletin analysis already laid the blame on the Knights Templars, a terrorist force across the galaxies which seemed far better organised in recent years and was committed to destabilizing GalCop. A mention in the analysis of growing tensions at the diplomatic convention between Galcop and the Interstellar Sanction implied, even to Rif's politically naive eye, that there could be a possible connection between the Sanction and the Templars. The item was more shocking from a travel than from a trade perspective; piracy on the jump routes was far less sinister than an orchestrated act of destruction. The trade effects that Rif could envisage did little to his choice of outbound cargo. If a sizeable cargo of ore had been lost at Alaxide, minerals might be a worthwhile consideration at Lave.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"Out there, a lot of speeding masses devoid of intelligence are not asteroids, not wrecks or debris, but active spacers."

Quote from "Psychosocialisation and the single spacer",

P. Trewathas (3rd ea., 3064)

Witchspace washed away leaving a wash of untangible scree stacked against Hood. In his hurry to take a breath, Rif nearly choked. When he turned his attentions to the bridge systems it was through tear-filled eyes and in between grating coughs. Lave space stretched out before him and he eased the Cobra through a dump and rotate. He must have come to take the worldscape for granted at the Station because Lave was a beautiful planet. It looked now as it had when he first left the Station, bright and alert. Rif negotiated a short Space Skip into Lave - relative with an incoming non-response on the flight grid and the Condition Red lighting swamping the bridge. Constant deceleration and a manoeuvre towards 110:95 brought the Cobra to bear; data suggested that the craft was an Adder class. Rif pulled the cannon console back and took aim; distance was good. Bolts kept hitting the pirate, which, in turn, kept coming.

"Void those shields. Come on,..void,..void". Rif spat the words as his ship spat substance. The Adder commander lost his nerve, still outside a suitable engage distance for whatever style of attack he practiced. The pirate began to climb but the craft was locked in the danger zone, a lethal principle of moments where the torque was a killer blow. Pelted simply and steadily by Hood, the Adder Commander realised that their role was that of prey; probably his last thought. The main scanner lit and Hood's flight-grid cleared.

"Gotcha".

Checking on his cargo, a tonne of computing equipment from the TLK agro-labs and a tonne of machinery of similar origin, Hood brought himself back to a course for Lave. The return on TS ComDirect was for a 12 Cr. allocation.

Another Skip fell short of planet waves and Hood found himself back in the Red. This time the pirate was confirmed as a Wolf Mk. II, approaching fast on a 195:15 bearing.

"Tend", swore Rif. He knew he would be in range very soon. There was no time for idle pot- shots. Rif arched into a head-to-head-and-hit velocity. He had to close the distance against the Wolf's superior fire-power, or his shields would be pulled apart swiftly and clinically. Hood got off three accurate bolts and watched almost helplessly as his shields fluxed wildly under heavy onslaught. His leg twitched violently as he counted down both distance and his fore shield status. Suddenly the first round was over. The Wolf climbed and rotated, an experienced Commander without a doubt. Hood killed velocity and set up a missile. He anticipated right, using the flight grid for clues as the Wolf lurched, looking for some space, preferably to Hood's rear. Locked on and off, the LF glistened and burst. Enemy ECM. In a flash, Hood's heart sank and his attention wavered. He suddenly found that he had lost positioning. By the time he had come round on the Wolf it was turning for a strike-run. Rif hit the velocity and glanced anxiously at the shields. He fired and tried to pitch and yaw into a vortex that might take him out of the intercept trajectories. The Wolf hit him twice before bearing off to the right. Killing velocity, Rif imagined the Wolf's last arc transposed, and anticipated its path. Diligently the Wolf swept into Rif's sights and turned. He had the measure

of it on this run and curved into a predatory dive. This time the cracks on comm were his own bolts punishing the Wolf's shields, and when the Wolf whipped over, Hood managed to keep pursuit without leaving any distance for a counter-attack. On the Wolf's next climb, three good hits sent it on its way in pieces, which dashed against Rif's shields like a hollow curse from beyond the grave. In the spacer world of combat systems Hood's eyes were ablaze and it was several moments before he began to extract himself from the combat mind-set, and the armaments console. Resetting for Lave, Rif felt his skin burning from the nervous tension. All of his responses were still on edge.

Lave grew in Space-Skip and Rif calculated that he was close to the safety zone. His attention was snapped back from Lave's powerful atmospherics as condition Red flashed again. Low and behind at 205. Rif could almost feel a pulse from the blood pressure in his fingers. He rode over the adrenal instincts and held down a course for the safety zone.

"Minimise risks", he told himself. It didn't take long. The pirate had settled into a

straight pursuit trajectory when comm. confirmed he was in the Orbital Space Authority protection zone. He moved with the compass and the glistening speck of Lave Station 2 appeared on the main scanner. Watching the flight grid for the pirate to break off, Hood was shocked to see the ship adopt a diagonal intercept across his docking approach route. Suddenly worried, Rif ran short for a swift ID scan: Thargoid. "Oh shit...", Rif turned the Cobra and made a run towards Station. The Thargoid was closing. Where were the Vipers? There was nothing on the flight grid yet, Station was still outside monitor range.

Then it came, a torrent of fire that sliced through the aft-shield bank and struck deep into an energy bank. Rif knew he had to make some space and some time, he turned back on himself, dropping velocity only at the relative apex and diving with full velocity, waiting for the Thargoid to react. It didn't, not perceptively. There was little visual way of gauging where a Thargoid intercept trajectory or even how many, lay. Rif waited until he hoped that the Thargoid was ready to react and then dumped to assume the Station run again. It seemed to have had some effect and as Station grew on the scanner, Rif could see pinpricks emerge like wind scattered seeds from a pod. The Thargoid reacted similarly, obviously intent on some sort of stand. Thargon spores materialised on the flight grid. On a rear view, Rif could see them, still in launch phase, preparing an attack run. He had never felt so vulnerable, and in placing his trust in the Police Vipers he stripped away his confidence; became engrossed in fleeing to behind the battle lines.

Another strike by the Thargoid or one of its satellite hunters. Rif managed to rotate and climb out of the laser stream and then the Vipers were in range and fire was returned. The Thargoid let him go, keen to entertain an active opponent.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"I heard that we might be in real trouble with the Thargoids soon," said Gisburn, placing his third glass of light back down on the tabletop.

"Somebody leaked a Navy report that reckons, unless GalCop and the other Federations team up to target Thargoid galactic space, that they've got a better military resource gearing ratio. That means they breed fast and have dedicated warrior caste. The way I see it though, Lave just lost one pilot out there and the bug-eyes lost a hundred or so. Sounds like good odds to me".

Gisburn talked as fast as he drank, and all the time it seemed his attention was elsewhere. His eyes flicked to cover the slightest noise or distraction. He finished his drink and gazed down at the empty glass.

"Good odds", he reiterated before turning his attention to the bar menu screen.

Rif fingered his glass, pushing it backwards and forwards across a small patch of spilt liquid, drawing a crossroads of parted spirits. Even though he was sitting comfortably, letting Gisburn's chatter wash over him, in the bar of the Sans Serif Leisure Complex on Station One, he kept getting flashbacks that sent his stomach cascading down and thrust his heart against his chest. They came not only of the Thargoid, but also the Adder and the Wolf. He rationalised that the Thargoid attack had given him a bad post-traumatic shock.

It was during one of those flashes, where he imagined the Thargons blistering the image on the flight- grid indicator, that his body had physically convulsed and provided the spilt drink to tease.

Since docking Rif had been forced to amend his view of people's indifference to the small passion plays in system space. Once you got into the safety zone and Vipers got involved there was plenty of interest; two hours worth of waiting, forms and questions from the GalCop Police.

"Where y' going next?". Gisburn repeated the question.

"I'm not sure yet. Leesti maybe, with a mineral cargo. I want to build up some flying time on one route," said Hood absently. Unexpectedly, it seemed to touch a nerve with Gisburn, who nearly choked, having been unable to compromise between swallowing and speaking.

"Got to be sure"; Gisburn literally covered the tabletop with gobs of light.

"S' too easy to drift 'tween systems, n' cultivate a trade mentality. S'not the life for us".

Gisburn warmed to his theme with an enthusiasm that was only matched by his consumption of light. Rif realised that it no longer mattered to Tom Gisburn where he was heading next; a lecture loomed on the horizon.

"Credits are like quirium h-fuel", continued Gisburn. "They're something to use. Means to'n end. I'm sure what that end is. You got to be too".

Gisburn pushed against Rif's shoulder with his glass, spilling light down his spacer overalls, to make sure his audience appreciated the point.

"If you wanna' be Elite you got to be sure. All those systems out there. They're all stepping stones. We use them as a path, n' that path's more than jus' trade routes. S'bout reputation n' action. S'bout bein'the best. Becomin' n' Elite transcends all that routine".

Rif was listening now. Some of the people at the Pilots' courses told stories about Elite pilots; some had even got a licence and a craft to get out and become an Elite. There was a glistening hook in Gisburn's conversation which Rif could almost see reproduced now in Tom's unusually fixed stare, tempting repudiation of an implacable truth. When it failed to emerge from Rif's bemused face, Gisburn took it as a sign to continue and he hunched forward conspiratorially. Around them the Sans Serif balcony was filling up with spacers, coursing through their strange social lives, extrovert after the intense pressure of space. Gisburn's eyes flicked around, taking in anything new and seeming to check that their conversation could continue uninterrupted.

"If you don't cut through it, see, then you get swallowed up. Eight galaxies, a thousand light years, five thousand billion GalCop citizens. There could be a million people floating 'round this planet. To get recognised we need friction. To make our mark we gotta avoid congealing in the mould. I tell you who we remember now. We 'member the Elite. They're the people with the power. GalCop moves around Elites. We can be new gods".

Gisburn paused, froze just in front of Rif's face.

"But y' gotta be sure", he hissed before crashing back into his seat and draining his glass. "The unbeatable heights".

Rif gazed across the table. He could feel something in Gisburn's dream but it seemed to be tied in knots, or to have a hidden face where perhaps something unnatural writhed in the shadows. Gisburn looked elated. He had released his manifests into the air and he twitched as though he his very vocalisation made it real.

"Think we should find some company", said Gisburn after scanning the bar menu. "i could use some".

He turned, watched the passing figures for a moment and then lent out and caught a woman by the wrist. She turned in a flash of green and gold. Gisburn leered and pointed to a seat at the table. The woman sat down, a GalCop official of some sort, RA burst in gold across the front of her suit and wrapped his wings around her shoulders. Gisburn seem oblivious.

"My friend and I're lookin' for some fun".

"I don't think....", the woman began.

"Don't think, jus' tell me how much". said Gisburn, leaning forward to feel her knee, which was moving, and he fell slightly.

Rif leant over and took Gisburn's shoulder; "I think we should go".

"If you're not interested, go and find your own", spat Gisburn shaking his hold free. The woman stood and turned to leave. Gisburn grabbed her arm again, Rif grabbed Gisburn's and suddenly Rif found himself hoisted to his feet and swung out from behind the table. He was being propelled, off

balance, towards the bar.

"Shouldn't interfere Hood, not with me". Gisburn's face was burning and as he moved Rif back, the physical exertion seemed to strip his mental faculties.

As Hood backed against a stool and teetered, trying to get his legs back under his body, the struggle for balance became academic.

"Gis", was all Rif got out before the punch followed through.

He felt a full pressure and a searing pain and heard, which somehow seemed to concentrate his thoughts, his teeth grind. His back hit the bar then he lost his sense of direction in a fall, with the stool and away from it. His hand flailed along the bar, knocking a drink flying and failing to find any purchase.

Rif crashed to the floor, his shoulders taking much of the impact, but his head cracked back against the ground. Sickened, Rif's muscles slackened and refused to respond. All around was uproar and then the kick came, twisting his upper body, his legs caught against the bar. He felt his stomach spasm, his knees trying to push his body into a ball, but failing on the slippery floor.

Shouts and laughter. It was all unreal, distant; no sooner was he a pilot, successful, with dreams of Elite stirring him, then he was humiliated, hurt, and in danger.

"Don't let it go to your head sonny, or you'll lose your ass". Rif heard the voice and turned his head to try and focus, his cheek dragging back along the tiles, pulling his lip away from his teeth and allowing a trickle of warmth to slide out. Whoever was talking had stopped Gisburn from continuing the battering.

Then Gisburn's voice, shrill, unchecked: "Don't patronise me!"

The noise increased. Hood saw a pair of blue spacer leggings beyond Gisburn who tensed and moved to the right, ready to thrust forward. One of the blue legs lifted and Gisburn bent double, coughing, before truculently moving forward again. He threw a punch, a block returned his arm wide and defenceless a crack whipped his head backwards and his body followed, landing close to Hood.

"Your ass to lose, ... sonny", said the voice, and the legs moved past the prostrate Gisburn to reach a hand down in front of Hood.

Rif allowed himself to be helped to his feet, and was led, his head sagging, through the crowd of spacers. Another person took one of his arms and he was led towards one of the tables in a corner of the bar complex.

He heard Gisburn rasp: "We'll keep in touch huh!".

Propelled into a seat, Hood flopped down and pulled his head up to look at his rescuers. His head felt the weight of a planet. The first thing that caught his eye was a green insignia, a star over a valley. Rif's mind reeled and he saw the faces. His bewildered stare was caught briefly by a pair of concerned pale grey eyes. It was the younger man and the woman from the capsule.

"Meridian", she said and then nodded across. "He's Warniss".

"Hood, thanks".

Meridian punched for three drinks. It was her, the voice and presumably the body that had laid Gisburn out.

"You ought to learn to look after yourself", one said with a wry smile. Rif had a feeling that he was beginning to lose touch with reality.

"I know you", he ventured.

"I think you're concussed", replied Warniss, taking three glasses from the waiter and placing one in front of Rif.

"I'd like to talk", said Rif, "but I'm not sure my head can cope at the moment. Can I buy you both a drink in about 6 or 7 hours. I don't want to keep you from a run or anything".

"You won't", said Warniss absently.

"We're due a credit ruling from GLC Probate tomorrow", added Meridian.

"Ah, yes, of course. I'm sorry", Rif felt embarrassed. "How is the other man?"

The two faces across the table looked surprised.

"He they couldn't help", said Meridian in a broken voice.

"Maybe we can talk later", said Warniss laying a hand over Meridian's.

## CHAPTER NINE

Rif was sitting on the bridge of his Cobra, CorCom active on the comms console at his side. Below him in the hold, the Station Autoscam Modules were ferrying a cargo: 19 tonnes of food with a balance of minerals for a Leesti run. He paid their activities little attention, his thoughts instead on the meet with Meridian and Warniss. On grey eyes that alternated between sadness and steel. Once he'd had a chance to sleep off his beating from Gisburn they had met up in another bar of the Sans Serif complex next to a pool, separated by a screen of cleon that curved up and partly over the seating area so that a variety of Lavean fish swam in front of, and above them.

Meridian and Warniss had come to the GalCop Law Centre on Station One to confirm allocation of the trade accounts from the capsule, and whilst Rif had slept, they had completed the formalities and both had confirmed purchases of Cobra Mk III's. Warniss was a slight man, tousled dark hair receding and flecked heavily with grey. With a RevPad around his right shoulder and neck he moved carefully and used his offhand where possible, irritated at the lessened dexterity. He had only been with the 'Vanirrens Land' for a few months before the last battle of Lave.

Meridian was an imposing figure, tall and broad-shouldered, striking features and haunting eyes. She wore her hair in one of the latest spacer fashions, bobbed short to the left and shaved to the right where it was dyed blue. Obviously some years younger than Warniss it was difficult to guess her age; her features were tired and drawn. Both now wore standard blue space overalls but had kept the green insignia from the Boa.

Rif had explained about the dockside scene back on Station Three and how he had sent the message to the hospital. Warniss briefly covered the end of the Boa, 'Vanirrens Land' and Rif still felt a pang of guilt for considering that they too might have been pirates after his own first combat experience. Now though, even after his short spacing career, his confused feelings about destroying the capsule seemed like a distant piece of history. Spacing tempered spacers with a speed appropriate to the way they lived their lives. He knew that next time there would be no second thoughts and if he could help it, no second chances for pirates.

They had spoken about Gisburn and Rif had listened carefully when it brought about an unexpected openness in Meridian. She was vehement in her dismissal of his doctrine

but, to Rif, Meridian's opinion seemed less of a different path than a more complete understanding. At least, it was one he could relate to and it crystallised and merged with his own undeveloped ambition.

Where Gisburn saw 'Elites' as being at odds with the existing structures, where antagonism was the superlative that let you break free and achieve, Meridian sought a pattern where the key players faced change with a belief in their own abilities.

"Everything you need to use you already have, inside", she had said, and it seemed to have as much relevance to her own resurrection as a spacer.

There was a pirate Krait somewhere in the Lave system that had shaken Meridian from a trading career and rekindled her ambition. For a while at that table they had experienced a catching swell of excitement. Talking of the possibilities, Rif had felt more complete, more sure of himself than he had ever done before, his flesh had tingled with the spirit of Elite.

"Forget the odds; they're weighed heavily against us. We make our own possibilities and we believe in ourselves". Meridian had invoked what had seemed like the one truth, her face had come alive and she looked young and whole.

It was a look that reminded him of his mother's stories when he was little, where she would weave a tale of magic and adventure and Rif would imagine that she was famous throughout the galaxy. Then he had seen Warniss, gazing at the two of them with a tolerant, humouring, smile and the spell had been broken again as he'd eventually come to be disillusioned when his mother's tales were tarnished with spiteful relish by other children at a Delta East CareCentre on Anloma.

Meridian spoke as if she had read his mind, gently castigating Warniss;

"We're not little children any more Warniss. You are just a jaded old spacer".

"Less of the 'just' please. I'm proud to be a jaded old spacer", laughed Warniss, his face creased into a map of laughter lines.

The exchange had gone some way to exorcising Rif's memories of childhood betrayal. There was an honesty and rapport between the two spacers that he appreciated. It fed the occasion and kept Rif at ease, enjoying their company. They had laughed, drank and watched some of Lave's more peculiar forms of aquatic life scuttle

around the tank.

CorCom bleeped. The screen on the bridge confirmed that the Autoscam's had completed loading and systems confirmed a secure cargo. Rif snapped out of his reverie and sighed. They had all agreed to keep in touch via the message box systems. Warniss was staying on Station One to recuperate, Meridian was going to run down her trade account and build up her Cobra before she considered a run. Rif decided he would miss them both, but, as RA lit the Comms screen and he logged out of CorCom, he felt that there was a message in those golden wings, a new dawn spreading out across a galaxy of possibilities. Rif could choose what mark to make; Elite's were allowed to wear the RA symbol as an insignia. He could imagine that through the corridors of time he would return to Lave again to register as an Elite licensee, a nexus in the great pattern that RA rose above.

## CHAPTER TEN

When you start out, every situation is life or death. Small mistakes have big consequences. It seemed to Rif as he set the course for Leoned that these days big consequences were looking for small mistakes. It had been over two years now since he first came rushing out the tubes at Lave, wonderstruck, mixed-up and naive. If that was the birth of a spacer, no one had warned him how difficult life was. Rif smiled; perhaps they had and he hadn't listened. Before he could pick-up velocity for a Space-Ship the flight-grid indicator warned of incoming raiders. Concentrating in the red glow, Rif brought 'Katharos' around working for an ID on Target One: Sidewinder. It took little of the battering Rif could administer with the LF91A military laser. The second target, a Krait, never even made definition on the scanner.

Head-to-head with the remaining Wolf Mk 11, Rif impacted its shields before he needed to pitch out of intercept. His shields took a light rapping but the extra energy unit installed in the Cobra would soon right that. He paid scant attention to the TS Com Direct confirmations of viable kills and credit allocations, turning already, through the debris, towards Leoned.

Coming in towards the safety zone, Rif scanned through the OSA news bulletins from the local station. The war in Galaxy Three with the Interstellar Sanction was a major drain on Galactic Navy resources. The Treaty of Texeonis had collapsed after last year's talks on Enata had ended with an impasse. Shortly afterwards sanction forces had overcome the GalCop administration in the Rea System which was currently being used as the launchpad for the conflict. Rumours abounded that their standard navel hunter craft, the Excelsior Mk VI was infiltrating various pirate haunts throughout the galaxies. Only one kill had been confirmed outside the war zone, in Galaxy Four. Local agents said it had hit like an earthquake.

The effect of the war on Galaxy One had been to place most of the responsibility for dealing with the Knights Templar's on local system clusters, and further, to allow considerably more Thargoid invasion craft through to GalCop space.

Rif curled into orbital space, intending to complete a good proportion of the run to Station before switching to docking computers. He called up Meridian's file from TRD, an accumulation of over thirty message box dumps; her last message at Ordima had

been that they would meet at Ceesxe if he was around. Rif hadn't seen her for eight months now and he intended to be around.

They'd kept in touch, paths criss-crossing occasionally, and had met when coincidence struck initially, then when it was convenient. Now Rif wanted to see her again; he'd long ago given up lying to himself. It was a pointless exercise when you spend a deal of time on your own and spacer myths abounded with stories that twisted around self-deception and eventual madness.

Rif had seen Warniss more recently. Once he was fit again he had taken to developing trade runs; getting to know places. Rif appreciated his level-headed advice, his intuitive trading analysis and his wicked sense of humour. He hadn't heard from Warniss since then, apart from picking up one old message at Maxeedso. Those messages that you collected out of date and out of synch with time always got to Rif. Snippets of history waiting to be picked up, there was a certain mystique to them because the converse train of thought was that you were living in the future.

Slightly less savoury were the messages from Gisburn, who, true to his word, left little pockets of

venom and kept in touch with relish. He had been a fugitive for over six months now and still promised that they would meet again; "Drinks and Revenge", most messages began, much like an invitation.

Rif handed over the controls to the docking computer and called up CorCom to check price data on his cargo of medical supplies. The OSA flashed a message to make sure he read the Leoned OSA Station Regulations on the conduct of affairs with the Atch 'Ruk, a sapient reptilian life-form on Leoned that, unusually, were employed by the local OSA on-station and were allowed GalCop citizenship, should they so desire. It was an indication of the influence wielded by the Ceesxe Corporation, which also dominated the Leoned System and funded the dictators of Veis. Ceesxe was renowned for being the white-heat of technological developments, and similarly had a long history in GalCop politics.

'Katharos' came in to berth on Dock Two and Hood sold the medical supplies, moving to his living quarters whilst the AutoScam's scuttled beneath the hull. He reckoned on hitting a Relaxapad before getting straight back to Ceesxe; Meridian could

arrive at any time. As he lay back and fumbled blind for the Neurowebbing, he smiled.

'You fool', he told himself. 'You're hooked and dangling; as obvious as a fish out of water'.

That was when the Emergency Signal came on comm. Rif didn't bother to go to the bridge, he leapt across the section from the Relaxapad to a slave comms station he'd had installed. He'd intended it to allow mixing business with pleasure, or leisure anyway, but it proved useful in several circumstances.

The link was direct from the Galactic Naval complex on-station. It was an urgent request to all combat-proficient pilots for seconded duty in the Arazaes system. Rif knew that the hard-pressed Navy were prone to seek paid assistance at hot-spots these days, but he'd never been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He opened comm and notified Galactic Navy admin. that he was available and to provide data including conditions. It wasn't a hard decision. GalCop was perhaps currently facing its most difficult test yet with major trouble on several fronts, and if GalCop foundered, a lot of people would be drowning in a sea of chaos.

The conditions came back. "Secondment of temporary navel roster: actions subject to allocated command orders: data dump on mission brief: 500 cr. subject to fulfilling mission criteria: immediate response required".

Rif responded with an affirmative and his TRD received a relayed data pack. There was a major Templar incursion in the Arazaes system. A Navy Cobra Commander was leading the seconded unit from Leoned, all Pilots were to clear Station for jump immediately. Rif swung out of the living quarters and threw himself up the gravity well. Bridge systems were active and station control had flashed him a prioritised berth clearance warning. As the forerunners cleared the tube, Rif left a quick message in a Leoned box, in case Meridian, Warniss or any of the other spacers he kept in touch with came out here to the outer reaches of Galaxy One.

"Keeping busy. See you at Ceesxe via Arazaes. Rif". Comm handled the box groups, shortly before Rif handed over to automatic Launch and the Cobra burst like a worm from an apple into orbit space. A jump group was gathering beyond the Station. Rif pulled 'Katharos' over above the Station and negotiated to join the pack. The mission brief had included a comms network for the seconded

unit and a message came

through from Commander P. Forth to accept incoming jump co-ordinates and over-ride the standard Arazaes navigational data.

"Gods know", thought Rif, " that spacers have enough problems taking orders"; but to ask a spacer to accept a strange set of jump-nay. co-ordinates had more to do with blind faith. Trust was short on the ground at many docks and it remained to be seen how many of this scrambled unit actually appeared at their jump destination. Everything was hurried. The jump directive was implemented in the minimum time you could feasibly allow spacers to perform an override they had probably never had cause to do before. A motley assembly of craft glittered out of all scanner views; Cobras, Pythons and Star Boats alike began to blink into witch-space and away to somewhere in the Arazaes system.

"That's the way we all go", said Rif, engaging drive.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

'Katharos' dropped out of witch-space. Rif tried to match the rhythm of his breathing to the extended interference waves in time and space. If he managed it, he could usually pull out of jump without a thick head and spiralling blood pressure. P. Forth was obviously already through, data was pouring across the screens on the mission link. They were dropping into the outer orbital reaches of Malthea, the third planet in the Arazaes system. The Knights Templar forces had emerged in the standard reception zone and had headed this way. The objective was to seek and destroy, and protect planetary and orbital installations. Ominously, further details were to follow.

They didn't need to come over the mission link, the in-system comms were in turmoil. Rif listened to snatches from relayed and delayed conversations whilst his comms station desperately attempted to sort out the mass of data into some sort of chronological, intelligible order. Forth obviously had a single source of data, the mission link pinpointed a number of Arazaes Vipers and in-system defenders, embroiled in combat with a mass of Templar ships on a trajectory to Malthea. Rif was stunned to see an early estimate of 140 attackers. This must rate as the largest Templar mobilisation to date; they could only have come from Ususor. A skirmish in Arazaes had to be seen as provocation by the Ceesxe Corporation.

Whilst he awaited an order to move, Rif pondered the logic of the move, if there was any. There had to be a sane tactical motive for the Templars. Perhaps they intended to sun skim and launch an attack in a Ceesxe supported system; possible but unlikely. Maybe; now this made more sense to Rif; maybe they hoped to rouse the sleeping political giant of the Ceesxe Corporation in a particular area. Rif reasoned that if the Templars wanted to provoke moves for retaliation then Ceesxe might lobby at senate for a reallocation of naval resources or possibly even a settlement with the sanction. That was guaranteed to cause discontent between most of the galaxies in GalCop, stresses and confused priorities.

Forth assumed that all who intended to jump had arrived and the call came through, a straight run to engage the Templars in Malthea orbit space. The Naval Cobra, with the latest 'lightfast' drive technology probably occupying a good proportion of the redundant cargo space, lead the unit. Rif fell in with three other Mk III's, the Codec, Hermes and

Mani, where he knew they would be able to operate with comparable manoeuvrability.

Malthea was a small planet where, from what Rif could remember, ten years of work had detoxified the atmosphere to allow forestation. Fruit was one of Arazaes' staple exports and Malthea had orbital Agro-Research Labs that were lauded throughout the galaxies for their Botanical Resource Centres. They were approaching from its darkside, bearing in-system and the planetary image dominated Rif's main scanner like an ebony shield.

The news on comm was bad. The Templar incursion was driving a wedge through the ragged Arazaen defence forces; skilled outriders hunting down the scattered Vipers. Desperately outnumbered they were no more than a distraction to the wave of offensive forces.

A seconded unit from Ceesxe was currently in system fall, further out from the Leone unit's jump location. Rif's group was fast approaching an intercept distance and he glanced frequently at the flight grid waiting for scanner recognition. As the first Templar outriders appeared on the grid, the familiar red cloak swept over the bridge and Rif tried to focus his thoughts around the 'Katharos' and combat. The ability of the Templar pilots was an unknown quantity, a flight from the main

group had been drawn off and were beginning to appear on the grid. Rif opened normal comms to the three Mk III's with the Katharos:

"No need to get reckless here in a head-to-head. Can we pick off a few from standstill?" He didn't wait for a response and began to dump velocity, accompanied by the Hermes and Mani.

The Codex grouped back into the main pack where Forth was leading a section on a climb, leaving a wing arrangement behind out to Rif's left. Rif tried to visualise the line, there was no time to try and set the tactical systems to cope with mass melee manoeuvres. He worked on targetting one of the outriders.

ID was confirmed as an Adder. No IR confirmation on standard or mission link channels. LF laser strands tore through Target One. No smile broke the concentration on Rif's face, his eyes ignored the blasted Adder and checked Targetting and the Flight Grid for the next outrider in. The Hermes took one, a Sidewinder which briefly flicked with an ID on the console before decomposing in a blaze of light.

The Templars avoided a run at the standing wing and swept up to confront Forth's breakaway arm, seeking scanner cover from the Danger Zone in a myriad of dogfights playing across the grid. There was little point in maintaining a distance combat position; Rif considered long spiral roll and flashed a rough to Mani and Hermes before breaking into a high-speed run. They led the way for a cluster of 12 from the wing, flying wide into an extended barrel roll that brought them towards what appeared visually as an upside-down conflict; Templar craft with bellies exposed.

"Lets cut some guts", hollered Rif, his hand darting over the familiar territory of the armaments console.

The run wrought devastation amongst the Templar force, but the cost had already been high. Forth's group had suffered severe losses in the close to dogfighting and Rif's cluster numbered only five after a run across the theatre where wide shots were as dangerous as targeted fire. 'Katharos' shields had voided from shield bank to main energy store on the run and he'd come within a cosmic string's width of colliding with a Mamba, which, Rif had no doubt would have seen him on his way. His flight grid was next to useless; it appeared that most of the Templars were loaded with empty cargo canisters. As Rif turned, they drifted like leaves in the storm of combat.

Before Rif could make any decisions on returning to the fray, a distress call was transferred through to the mission link: "A-G Research Station MT3: Attack imminent: Please Assist".

The call was on a dumb cycle. No hard information from MT3. No comm hoping that the Ceesxe secondment would make this melee shortly, Rif decided to leave Forth's group and run to back-up the last of the in-system defenders against the main Templar wedge. Breaking to velocity he took Hermes, Mani and the remaining two ships from the cluster and headed toward MT3.

The situation was bad, you could count down the defenders with the seconds, and there weren't many left. Taut voices left the channels, one by one. A martyr in an escape capsule rammed an incoming Mamba but would never tell the tale. There was still nothing ahead on the flight grid.

Suddenly the rear of the wedge appeared, and talk on comm cleared up exactly

where the front-runners were. The Research Station was under attack. Rif felt helpless. To leapfrog

the attackers and try and pick-off the craft from the station-side would leave him vulnerable. It was a stupid move that would just add to the death-toll. To wade in from behind would risk the lives on the Station: Civilian Scientists and Botanists with generations of research around them. Gardens of trees and plants from Old Earth and a wealth of specimens from the new worlds. They were all at risk and nearly defenceless. Rif fought the frustration and the sense of futility. You needed some odds to work with; even Elites didn't perform miracles and Rif had some way to go in that department.

They did the only thing they could, struck at the rear until they brought some attention on themselves; then dumped velocity to pick the Templars off as a large contingent closed over the danger zone. Mamba, Adder, Krait, Krait. Rif counted them off until his laser banks overheated and they were still faced with incoming raiders.

The five closed to dogfight. Rif span 'Katharos' towards the Templars whilst over the comms. Channel came the panicked call and then the screams of a technician called Seronnay. There were still at least forty craft in the forward wave, pounding at MT3's shields, which at no time during design had been expected to require the protection of a Coriolis.

Rif knew that Seronnay and all of her colleagues were dead at about the same time they did. A wash of light that you only normally got from sun-skimming turned the scanner and most of the other astrogation systems blind. Blotches of colour blooming at Rif's retina hampered him as he tried to place Target One in his mind, waiting for systems to pick up again: "I hope some of you bought it badly", he seethed at the Templar forces. "Rot in hell".

The light fronts dimmed and a Krait hung just out of intercept. Pitch and yaw saw Target One to eternity. Target Two was moving fast in a cunning spin through the canisters from the Krait, blurring grid definition, and was lost behind the debris from a fill by Hermes. Rif's laser temperature was still dangerously high. The flight grid was beginning to register well over a score of craft, returning from the Station attack to join the group engaging Rif and his small cluster. Rif urgently tried to raise Forth on the mission link. No success.

"We've got to run them back to the Ceesxe unit", he yelled across comm to the cluster. It was their only realistic chance at survival. They turned and fled. Inside range for distance shooting, Rif hoped that the Cobra's speed might reduce the number of incoming bolts. He opened comm to the Asp in their cluster, to ask Commander Irinus, with his superior speed, to try and lead a group off, but Irinus link died with him, leaving four Cobra's at the crest of a tsunami of fury and hate.

Forth came through. They were there, the Ceesxe force and a small contingent from Veis. Possibly sixty strong but with nearly as many Templars being led by Rif towards them.

Bolts cracked across Rif's shields and momentarily he was plunged into the past. A young pilot running from the destructive power of a Thargoid invasion ship, towards the defensive line of vipers who had come to help and one of whom would die; nameless to the life they saved.

Rif knew that the oncoming conflict couldn't be straight head-to-head, there was too much chance involved, and chance, left to itself, dealt some fierce shocks.

Rif broke the run without a lead message to the other Cobras. 'Katharos' soared above the darkening plain, a distracting bait glowing temptingly on every Templar grid. 'Hermes' and 'Man)' swept to follow. The fourth Cobra, 'Ascension', broke relatively low.

It was enough for some of the Templars. As they peeled high and low, the Ceesxe unit was able to pound into them with the force of a sledgehammer, and they broke, like a fragmentation bomb, in all directions. Rif was lost for a response. The three Cobras were facing twenty or so Templar craft in fractured trajectories. 'Hermes' was caught in a double intercept and 'Mani', diving to assist, couldn't break the pounding that tore the Hermes apart. Then 'Man)' was in the thick of the Templar forces and Rif killed velocity to turn on a splinter and dive into the fray. No sooner had the 'Man)' thanked Rif for the back-up than the pieces of his ally danced across his fore shields and Rif found 'Katharos' enmeshed in a Templar onslaught with the Ceesxe force still turning from the last pass.

A Fer De Lance ID'ed and swept over 'Katharos'; there were still four Templars in the immediate frontal vicinity. Rif picked a Krait to try and sweep through and out of the

net. Cracks on comm metered the strikes of laser strands but the Krait cleared intercept and a rogue Cobra appeared, to take its place, cannons tearing at Rif's shields. Suddenly the Cobra was gone and Rif could break the 3D noose.

"That's the punchline", came the message from a Cobra that passed close over his hull; Warniss. Warniss was here.

"Em's back in the pack", he heard Warniss say, and he turned.

If Warniss had flown into the fray, Rif was sure as hell going to support him. As he asked, the Fer de lance passed close. ID queried and Rif could see the fake cladding across the hull. A chill crawled under the sweat on his skin, he thought he had caught a glimpse of a Interstellar sanction insignia.

"Warniss; I think the FL's an Excelsior VI. Watch your back".

Rif picked off a Krait that was bearing down on Warniss and by then they were in the middle of a colossal clash as the Ceesxe force met the Templars. The chill ran deep to Rif's bones as he realised that somewhere, in the conflagration of bolts and laser streams, missiles and canisters like mines, was Meridian.

Warniss hadn't managed to shake the Fer de Lance, the disguised Excelsior. He was bearing down beneath the conflict towards Malthea. Rif began to turn to follow. A message flashed to his screen: "Drinks and Revenge".

Shortly afterwards a Cobra bore down on him from above; a smattering on the shields before he could react and pull 'Katharos' wide. Gisburn, of all people, was in the Templar force. If ever Rif had needed a personal reason for this fight, it was now a need fulfilled.

There was no way for Rif to suppress his IR response and Gisburn had picked him out. As Rif spun an avoid pattern he could imagine those eyes, frenetically following him on the scanner, and that lethal smile, a harbinger of destruction.

Rif had Gisburn at a straight 30: 80 course but clearing intercept took him away from Warniss and merged that chase into the madness on his grid. With one hand he called a fix on Warniss' trajectory and put a blind call out to the New Vanirrens' channel, hoping that Meridian could pick off the Excelsior. At the same time he cut across Gisburn and banked up over him. Rif called for Gisburn's

comm. Channel from

TRD and screamed:

"Lets just call it revenge, freak".

They corkscrewed and burst into curves that took them across each other's bows, playing for advantage. Gisburn got off a missile, almost too close for Rif to react, but he hit the ECM and the shards coruscated across his fore shields.

"I think I'd rather toast your soul", came Gisburn's manic voice in reply. In the cut and thrust for position, Gisburn got several good strikes on Rif's aft shields. They coiled like two snakes. One's recurve preventing the other's strike run. Each pass was lengthening the odds for Rif; increasing the chances for Gisburn to break and scald 'Katharos' with a deadly chrysalis of laser strands. Rif dumped velocity early on Gisburn's next pass, turning in anticipation of Gisburn's trajectory, and accelerated with everything 'Katharos' had, blazing laser strands. The strands weakened Gisburn's aft shields and Rif let the full weight of 'Katharos' follow in behind. Shields stripped in parallel but Hood had weakened Gisburn's critically. His shield flux bore at velocity into Gisburn's Cobra, which discharged over his hull like a foul miasmatic blast.

"Call it friction, Tom", said Rif. 'Katharos' bore on, through the dwindling relics of Gisburn's being, into a climb and swift about face.

Warniss was all that filled Rif's thoughts. Gisburn was a distraction he could afford to dwell on later. Rif charged down towards Malthea, hoping to get a clear fix on the grid, and hoping that Warniss had kept the fight local. He called, channel specific, to Warniss, asking for a briefing on his situation.

"I'm in trouble Rif," was what he got back.

"Hang in there Warniss, I'm coming in. Bring him back this way if you can". Rif had the two craft on the grid, looming up into mid-distance; he twisted 'Katharos' for all it was worth, caught the Excelsior on targetting and opened fire, hoping to buy Warniss some time.

"Thanks Rif, I owe you one".

It was the last thing he heard from Warniss before a killer blow from the Excelsior's heavy laser battery ripped Warniss's Cobra from the grid, a small light against a dark planet.

"Oh no. No please. Warniss, where's your capsule". A lifetime's wait in a second's time span.

But Rif knew, from the suddenness of that blast, that there wasn't going to be a capsule. He didn't want to believe it. People died. Friends died, but not in front of you. Not in the same battle. That wasn't message box rules. It wasn't right.

Rif had his hands against his head, crushing his hair in fistfuls when a Mamba struck from above. The reactions of self-preservation drove 'Katharos' up to meet the Templar. Hate destroyed it, seconds later and Rif watched the scanner for the Excelsior.

It was at 310: 120, a fleck on Malthea. Rif slowed and tried for targetting; foiled by another raider descending from the clashes above, a Krait screaming towards him. Rif turned to face the immediate enemy and lost the Excelsior VI; it turned, moving at pace back towards the main battle. The Krait pilot was a skilled spacer and put Rif back on his guard, stripping away his emotions to where he could rely on reflexes and his experience to cut the impasse in speed and manoeuvrability.

Handling 'Katharos' at peak performance he caught the Krait's upper hull and followed it with fire to oblivion. With a moment to collect his thoughts, Rif rifled through the comms and link data trying to get a grasp on events around him. Forth was dead. Each group was still evenly matched, skill sacrificed against skill, whittling down numbers rather than odds.

He scanned for the 'New Vanirrens Land', which was caught inside the combat zone against possibly three active opponents. Rif moved to intercept, willing 'Katharos' forwards, weaving between canisters and debris. To his horror the ID scan showed the Excelsior was one of the craft pursuing Meridian.

An Asp coursed down against him and Rif knew there was no way to outrun it. Manic, Rif cut to a stop, pulling round, straining to bring the Cobra onto an intercept with the Templar, watching desperately out of the corner of his eye as Meridian and her pursuers moved further off the grid. The whole battle was curving down into Malthea's orbit. Fatigued and frantic, Rif tore into close combat with the Asp.

It took time he couldn't spare to beat the Asp, and when it was dispatched to cosmic wind his shields were shredded. Despite the chronic condition of the Cobra's defences, Rif forced 'Katharos' after Meridian and the Excelsior, ploughing desperately through

several melees, praying not to suffer wild or wide hits.

The lower edges of the battle were dangerously close to the outer atmosphere of Malthea when Rif located Meridian again, in a belt of cargo canisters and enemy craft. Bearing down on the scene, Rif began targetting on the Excelsior which was turning back to stage another strafing run on the 'New Vanirrens Land'. Meridian destroyed a Krait as it passed close over her hull, foolishly baring a vulnerable shield to her military lasers.

"Watch the FL, Em. It's sanction", Rif called wretchedly across comm.

He could see that it had good range and positioning on her. He brought the Excelsior into intercept and fired a continuous torrent of laser strands at the sanction craft. Two cargo canisters drifted across his path in a scissors movement. Reckless, Rif rolled 90 and careered through the dwindling space between them, unsure whether his shields would take the impact of either.

'You've got a sidewinder on your butt, sonny', said Meridian's voice over comm.

Rif felt his heart sour and realised that his tension was bordering on tears. He kept his teeth set and the Excelsior in his sights. It was increasing power and compensating for Meridian's run towards, and beyond, 'Katharos'.

Rif hoped that Meridian had some shield cover left; the Excelsior must have given her a lashing before Rif had, in turn, given it something else to consider.

The sanction craft climbed assuredly, intent on passing out of Rif's intercept and over, in pursuit of Meridian. Straining velocity up and down, Rif kept the Excelsior in his sights for an extra few seconds by timing his flip-over to perfection, guns blazing. It was all he needed, as the Excelsior broke into its component parts and opened the bridge to the relentless cold of space.

As Rif exhaled with relief, he saw a motionless blip on the grid kick into an ambush on Meridian from amongst the mass of flotsam. He watched helpless as Meridian's run against the Sidewinder left her in a pincer attack and the 'New Vanirrens Land' winked off the grid. The Excelsior's destruction had killed his adrenaline for a moment and in that time Meridian's life was taken before him.

This time Rif couldn't stop the tears or the pain that gripped his throat like a vice.

There was nothing, no signal from Meridian on comms. He was paralysed at the helm. Malthea loomed on the scanner, an ancient goddess of death presiding over the harvest of souls. Occasional shards and pods swept towards her dark continents, burning up in re-entry. It was all somewhere else, some else's reality. Rif sat slumped in the red shadows on board a motionless 'Katharos', paying no attention to the comm., unconcerned and empty.

The shouts and cries of victory eventually managed to reach across the void and touch his senses. The Templar force had jumped.

The delighted and spent voices quickly died down to a subdued calm as the devastation around hit home. The few remaining seconded units found themselves in a vast graveyard, signposting the course of the battles from the chunks of wreckage from MT3 through a maze of littered flight corridors to the saturated orbital space of Malthea, a miniature spiral nebula.

In that microcosm, the survivors could have felt outsized. A pantheon of gods in a swirl of new heavenly bodies after a titanic battle for domination. But no one did.

Somebody was answering the flood of questions and requests for information from Arazaes OSA, the local authorities on Malthea, and its remaining orbital stations.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

"Forget the odds; they're weighted heavily against us. We make our own possibilities and we believe in ourselves."

Tahrissa "Meridian" Laundrestoarn

Lave Station One: 320 G.C.T.

The seventeen surviving craft from the Naval secondments were brought into a hurriedly cleared berth-set on Dock Three of Station Two at Arazaes.

They had made the cross-system voyage completely unhindered; pirates and traders alike knew who they were. All channels buzzed with the news. Terrible losses but decisive victory. A commanding advantage. A heroic stand that must mark the turning of the tide in the struggle against Templar terrorism.

Rif was numbed by the stream of hyperbole. Docking computer on, he methodically sifted through channels in the vain hope of finding news of additional survivors. A naval Battleship had arrived in-system, too late to join the battle, but now scouring the scene of the conflict. Rif's comments across the link about the presence of an Excelsior had been picked-up and had spread like wildfire from spacers to station and by now the news was probably travelling with trade-runners to nearby systems. The Station Egress loomed and 'Katharos' systems brought rotation into step, easing towards the tube.

Ahead of him, Rif envisaged a lengthy debriefing and he had to clench his fists to prevent himself taking 'Katharos' away, running for the sun to skim plasma and put lightyears between himself and this place. As he pushed himself back against his seat the decisions were taken out of his hands. Now there was no longer the relief he used to feel, when he used to fall back and rely on someone else. Now Rif just felt trapped, cornered with a dockside party of GalCop authorities waiting for him ahead. Unwelcome strangers who would want him to put aside his grief for the sake of the important information he might be able to provide.

It was no less than he anticipated. A GalCop mobile was waiting to usher him the length of the dockside, past the unprecedented crowds, to a Translocator in Dock Reception. From there the lift moved on over-ride until Rif was huddled out into the

Galactic Navel Complex. RA glowed again across clean foyer doors. A flashback to the excitement of registration at Lave combined with the tension and exertion Hood already felt and as the doors slid open his thoughts were washed with confusion. He felt in his pockets for his GCID card; he wouldn't be able to register without it.

No, he had to get a grip. Rif hoped that his tunnel vision might pass. It didn't. He felt light-headed and thought he might blackout. Rif stumbled and was caught.

'I'm OK; I could use a drink and a seat. Is that OK?', he told anybody who was listening. "Gluneuran booster. Get one here quick", he heard a voice say and a figure to his left dashed off.

Instead of being taken to the reception area he could see ahead, where, he presumed, the seated

figures were the other seconded spacers who had docked so far, they led him to a side corridor.

"We're just going to get you a biobooster to wake you up", a voice said.

Rif nodded lamely. Helpful hands and voices told his subconscious that he could let go. That people would look after him. A child-like faith that things would be all right. He fought it. Tried to shock himself back to reality.

"We've got an incoming capsule from the battle-zone". He heard the voice and slowly separated it as something that someone else had said.

It was the kick he needed. One of the medical suits that had been accompanying him down the corridor was running down towards the lobby again. There were three people with him. They were taken by surprise when he looked up, eyes focused and suddenly broke free from the guiding arms, diving backwards.

Rif had almost thrown himself off balance. Turning he tripped over his feet and nearly fell, carried after the medic more by momentum than independent action. He could feel the adrenaline rush, the noise behind him.

"He's freaked. Get him under control."

"Somebody, sedation. We need sedation".

Rif ran, throwing himself through a door that was still closing after the med. who had left. The door stopped, confused, and Rif was gone before it could decide that it had to open again. The Translocator door was sliding shut, forcing Rif to dive again, and he

crashed into four bodies.

"I'm sorry. I've got to come downPlease". Faces, anxious, angry and surprised

looked at him.

"Its OK", said the medic; naval officer wings on his uniform.

At the dock there was a mobile waiting. Nobody said anything. The five of them clambered in and they were off again. Rif had time to take in his fellow passengers. Two from the lift wore the claret and silver uniforms of the Galactic Navy, the other two were naval medics. They pulled up by berth 3:40, where a detachment of Police were waiting, forming a semi-circle around the zone, against the dock wall. Rif stood, watching the tracking on the berth matrix screens. There was no comm from the incoming capsule but it had an ID as a Cobra fitting; a Xeeslan LSC 7.

"Its coming in" said one of the naval medics and they turned to pull equipment from the mobile.

Rif waited, hardly able to breathe. The capsule came through the tube and automatic station docking took forever. Another mobile arrived; standard capsulereception mea-unit. There was a conversation in hushed, emphatic tones between the naval and station teams.

The matrix flashed through the docking sequence. Rif hoped, he prayed, he knew it was Meridian.

If it wasn't, he would be destroyed.

"The capsules' damaged", said a naval officer.

"That doesn't mean anything", shouted Rif, stopping himself and holding his hands up, palms out, to show he wasn't going to cause trouble.

Preliminary scans were carried out. Stage One externally, Stage Two accessed the capsule. "God there's been a fire in there", said a medic, breaking procedure and rushing forwards into the darkness around the blackened entrance.

Rif wanted to rush forward, but he knew that after one breach of docking rules, the police were unlikely to suffer a second.

"I've got one body. Suspended-An. Life-signs registered", said the medic from inside the capsule.

"Go", said one of the Naval Officers, and the rest of the stand-by meds went to help.

"Burns unit on stand-by please, bringing out a figure in a suspended-an sack."

Through the cover and rigging, Rif could see the blue spacer overalls, the green insignia; valley and star, and the spacer bob. The relief cracked as a half-laugh in his throat and he could do nothing as he fell to his knees and blackness swirled across his view.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"The last club in the known Universe where money won't buy you a place".

Elite Epithet.

The burns weren't beyond repair. The capsule almost had been. As he had waited in the Hospital Complex, people kept telling Rif that it was incredible she had stabilised the environment, let alone for the capsule to have returned safely.

"We make our own possibilities", he had said to one medic, who had shot him a look that clearly defined Rif's comment as mystical bullshit.

"As you like it", he had laughed after the departing figure.

When she came round after the E-D-fits that redeveloped the damaged areas on her arms, Rif was able to tell her that in the midst of the battle of Malthea, Meridian had taken her kills into Elite territory. The Navy wanted to make the registration as Elite into a special presentation.

Rif held her for what seemed like light-years.

"I knew what you were worth even before I nearly lost you", he managed.

"Please", Meridian replied in mock disgust.

As one of the Arazaen Senators, OSA, GalCop and Naval authorities gathered for the presentation, Meridian drew Rif away from the purple uniforms to a corner near the RA symbol in the main Naval Briefing room.

"I've still got to go to Lave if I want to register officially. Can you believe it?", Meridian's grey eyes danced.

"Somehow," said Rif, "I'm not surprised. Still, its good publicity for Arazaes".

"I've been offered an Elite commission", said Meridian, her face falling serious again.

"A third generation ship. Special operations. I get retrained in full jump navigation and a fully fitted Constrictor Mk.II".

Rif was desolated. "That's great", he managed.

Meridian smiled and took his hand in hers. "I've told them I need a co-pilot".

"I love you. I want you. I need you. But..." Rif's lips were touched by Meridian's finger, silencing him.

"I know what you're thinking. Here's my offer, partner. I'll give you a month to do it. You'll need no more than a week. You made it a possibility. Now make it a reality."

Rif let a smile of disbelief play on his lips. "You'll wait a month for a co-pilot?"

"No, I'll wait a month for an Elite co-pilot. Elite plus Elite. Good, huh ?"

THE END