

Xtrafresh

Prologue

After five hundred years of mass-availability of healthcare, Earth has become more and more overpopulated. The big funding for the Mars colony in the year 2218 was way too late, as it took over one hundred years to accommodate a mere million people there. In the year 2400, Earth's population consisted of over two hundred billion people. This was all that poor mother earth could bear. Conditions were awful. Food was scarce, nature non-existent, civilisation had all but collapsed. The whole world was one big city of factories and huge residential towers. Traffic was a jungle of people hitting and slamming each other on their magnetic scooters. Thousands were killed each day, but nobody cared. Now that the earth's population had reached its maximum, governments saw the earth deteriorate faster and faster. Another three hundred years and things would go terribly wrong. Maybe even sooner. Voices were raised that a geostationary ring should be built, that could house up to ninety billion people. Plans were being drawn, and funds were raised. But the future would prove to hold a better solution...

It's the 8th of July 2451 that a message spreads over every network worldwide. It spreads just like most viruses, abusing peoples mailing lists and such, but everybody who opened it, found out that it was something different:

"I have returned to finish my task, and you reading this means my work here is finally fulfilled. In the following document you will find detailed instructions on how to reach out. Mankind can finally take its place among the others."

This rather cryptic message was followed by a 900-page document that describes how to build a "solidspace" generator, and the mechanics through which it works*.

Nobody really understood the massive calculations that the writer had made, but the generator was relatively easy to build in a well-equipped garage at surprisingly low costs. The government tried to forbid people to build it, but of course the desperate population ignored that, and started building spaceships by the millions. A year later, 20% of all the earth's population had left earth to build up new homes and civilisations somewhere in the universe. Lots of people perished in outer space, but since the only news that ever came back was good news, more and more people wanted to leave. At the start of the 26th century, earth had only twenty billion inhabitants left.

A lot of “universal” governments were set up, but it was the trade agency CFT**, founded in 2506 that gradually got more and more power, and when it finally set up a main office on Earth in 2587 they were considered the new law on all planets they covered (a lot of planets had isolated themselves from the rest of humankind, so the CFT only covered about 55% of the occupied planets in the universe). Their internal affairs investigation team took up the role of the new police force, and the government was complete. Since the first leaders were smart enough to understand that the only way people would accept traders as their rulers was out of their own benefits, they were easy on people, and the universe prospered and grew and grew.

In the year 2503 a little boy was born on earth. Growing up in times of terrible shortage of people strong enough to do any labour (since all the others had left), he developed a strange hate for old age. It was out of this hate that his obsession for stopping the aging process was born. He started recruiting people for his cause, and soon his movement exploded. With almost a million followers, he moved to the planet Argus, where they isolated themselves and started conducting experiments. The First Wizard, as he liked to call himself, grew older and older. Finally, in the year 2623 a rat survived their treatment, a combination of genetic manipulation and implantation of a few extra organs. Despite the risks the First Wizard insisted on being the first human to be immortal. At the age of 124, he was treated. Amazingly the operation was successful. He would be 124 years old for the rest of eternity... he had lost to his enemy, old age. Devastated, he left Argus with only a few close friends to isolate himself. Rumour has it that he is still flying around the universe in his ship “marathon”.

On Argus a man called Dyson quickly took control and changed the nature of the discovery: he created an army. One million people were treated, and trained. They weren’t trained in combat though, but in politics. The best of them were sent to some of the isolated planets in the universe, with one objective: Gain control over the planet. Since they were theoretically immortal, they had time on their side. The first ones were sent out about 700 years after the First Wizard had left. A thousand years later, 4376 A.D., the now firmly established CFT found out about it and raised the alarm... too late. They were totally unprepared for Dyson’s siege of Earth two years later. With the universe at his feet, he returned to his birthplace almost two millennia after he left, and seated the core of his power there. For over seven millennia, mankind suffered under his crushing fist. He tracked down most planets in Isolation and simply added them to his empire. Everybody who dared to oppose, was executed, and replaced by one of his immortals, who were called ‘Lords’ now. Like the First Wizard, Dyson had an obsession. He kept referring to the last sentence in the message that sent Mankind into space: “...Mankind can finally take its place among the others.” Dyson believed he was the saviour of mankind, born only to prepare the race for a violent clash with these “others”.

But like all great empires, his wouldn't last forever. One day, (11524 AD) the Immortal Palace was wiped away in one of the biggest, and the most mysterious explosions the earth had ever seen, killing over a million people, all Dyson's scientists, and Dyson himself. No clues remained, but the common belief is that it was the doing of a few of Dyson's closest followers with a double agenda. Possibly the gorgeous Leela of Cantrigus, one of Dyson's chaperones and daughter of the executed Sartaign of Kelda, avenged her father this way.

One way or another, the explosion was a fact, as was the incredible vacuum that Dyson left...

Countless rulers on remote planets, placed there by Dyson himself, now found themselves alone. Some of them went back in the isolation that was so popular in the days before Dyson. Others tried to claim his place, uniting in groups of five to a thousand Lords, all fighting each other for control of more and more planets. It is in this chaos that we stumble across a common commander of a common fighter unit in a common fleet of a common alliance... or so it seems...

*: Solidspace is a very difficult theory, based on a very simple concept. By now, the universe has been deduced to two elements by scientists: space/time and matter/energy. The solidspace theory places matter/energy as an eleventh dimension in a ten-dimension universe. A generator with a computer strong enough to make the calculations in eleven dimensions can steer a ship along the higher dimensions, in which the lower dimensions are coiled up. Unravelling those dimensions has the same effect as travelling through the lower dimensions, only with incomparable speeds. Data can be sent through the 5th dimension of space, but matter will come out "re-arranged" on the other side. This restricts humans and their ships to use the 4th dimension. Travelling from one end of the galaxy to the other will only take seventy standard hours this way. In the vast emptiness of extra-galactic space travel can be sped up, allowing arrival in the nearest galaxy just five days later. The 5th dimension data-link allows normal conversations from planet to planet, with a waiting time of maximum ten seconds inside one galaxy, and messaging back and forth from one galaxy to another in just three minutes.

** : Coalition of Free Traders. They are originally a group of adventurers that fly with a self-built cargo vessel from one planet to another. They quickly evolved into a strong trading alliance, bonding more and more planets to the products they delivered.

Chapter 1: Mosquito's and Battleships

Half-sleeping, Jack pretended to ignore the buzzing sound around his head. Damn those Vlearian Mosquito's! They had been in his cockpit for 5 days now, and he still didn't see it. Are these things

cloaked or something?

The alarm clock went off. Jack cursed his superiors for allowing him only 2 hours of sleep each 48 hours. The REM-enhancing injection everyone got never worked very well on Jack. Some reacted very good to it and only slept for a half hour each 4 days, but Jack never seemed able to do that. And he NEVER felt refreshed afterwards. All he felt was fear. The weight of it pressed down on his chest like a genova-class battleship with full armament. Speaking of the battleships...

Jack got out of his small sleeping container, and crawled to his cockpit. Strapping himself down in the chair he looked around. He looked out the windows every few hours to see the growing armada of gunships that he was a part of. Every time he got up he stared in amazement to all these huge ships, as far as the eye could see. The Lord did talk about the "biggest fleet ever to be assembled", but Jack (and all his friends) thought it was just propaganda talk. He quickly learned to have more respect for the word of his Lord. After only 3 hours of travel the first allies joined the armada. And after that small and big fleets kept joining them every half hour at least.

The Armada quickly became too big for the human mind to imagine. It was as big as the eye could see, in every direction. When he asked his battle attendant in the Cruiser 'Lionheart', he was told these ships came from befriended Lords. Jack thought about the implied complications. How many of these Lords are there? How much fleet can they assemble? Could it be possible that somewhere else, another Alliance of Lords is assembling an even bigger fleet? Jack was told there are 11 more days to go to the meeting place, where other fleets (!) would already lie waiting. From there on it would be going straight to the classified target. How many ships are there in this armada? How many ships are there already waiting? And - more disturbing - how many ships were there on the other side? How many lives would be lost? Jack shivered every time his thoughts made that circle.

But not this time.

Looking out the window, he saw nothing. No fleet. No ships. No huge battlecruiser to cast its shadow on his modest little fighter. For a moment, Jack panicked. Looking the other way, he saw he was merely placed on the outskirts of the armada. His radar (old fashioned yes, but Jack liked staring at the 3d holographic it made) was acting weird. One side was completely covered in green, One side completely empty. His device reached for about 3000 miles! The end of the fleet was nowhere to be seen. The familiar shivers came back.

To get his mind of things, he sent a message to his best friend Zell in a nearby fighter. Radio contact was supposed to be kept to a minimum, but Zell was a quantum mechanics student, and

subspace transmissions were easy for him. He always said that he could cloak the signal, and then a whole 15 minutes of gibberish would follow, of which Jack understood absolutely nothing. But he trusted Zell, so if he said it was ok...

Adjusting the LoRaC to only reach up to Zell's ship, Jack spoke: "Hey Zell, what's up?"

"Woohoo, you woke up!" the radio shouted back. Zell was one of these people that reacted incredibly well to the REM-injection. Jack had never caught him asleep yet. Rumour had it that he could last almost 200 hours with no sleep.

"Nice view eh?" Zell asked.

"Scared me to death to be honest" confessed Jack.

"Hehe, I knew you would like it. We have new orders."

"Ow?"

"We're supposed to make a small interception on the way there. Intell has spotted some spies 2 parsecs away. Just some small junky fleet. And they gave it to us."

"Since when did we get demoted to Garbage men?"

"Haha, glad to see you are still the ever-grumpy Jack. We got this assignment because i asked for it. I thought we could use the exercise."

"Ah. And there was no way you could have consulted me?"

"You were asleep. And i will eat scunchol maggots before I ever wake you up," said Zell. "Besides, you would have said no anyway."

Jack capitulated; "I give up. When is mission briefing?"

"2 hours from now. You'd better get your butt in gear man."

"Ok, I will see you in 2 then."

Jack couldn't resist smiling. His friend always got this enthusiastic when a fight was about to come. He had been fighting together with him for about 2 years, and had seen 43 big battles, and numerous small assignments such as the one they would take on in a few hours. After the 30 year older Jack, Zell was the best fighter in the unit. Together they were unstoppable.

Clearing his head, Jack started strapping himself in the combat-gear. Doing that, he realized Zell was right. His unit had been on guard duty for two days now, and a small cleanup mission now and

then would keep his men motivated.

Chapter 2: Coming out of the Sun

They were only halfway through the briefing, But Jack was already bored out of his skull.

27 Fighterpilots, a pretty nerdy intell guy, nervously chewing a piece of gum, and the unit's chief Byrne were sitting in a small room aboard the LionHeart. The flickering holographic images in the middle of the table failed to catch Jack's full attention. The sight of the armada outside didn't help either. Under the table, Treesa gave him a kick. He snapped back to the holo.

"... appears to be a fleet of only fighters and bomber class ships, but their formation is odd. They are all floating around in a sphere-like formation, as if they were protecting what is in the middle. The problem is that we cannot pick up any signal from the centre. Furthermore there are 8 bomber class ships floating on the corners of a huge cube that can be drawn around it, which could be considered their 'outer defence ring'. The mission will be to identify and destroy whatever is inside that sphere. You will need to penetrate...."

That was all that Jack needed to hear. His thoughts roamed towards the upcoming big battle. not this one - Jack knew they were going to smoke these bandits within 30 to 45 seconds, as always. This unit was famous for their almost suicidal fast-in-fast-out attacks - probably why they got the job - and this one would be no different. No, the battle that would require an armada like the one on the right worried Jack. How could this ever bring any good? He had another worry on his mind: sleep. He felt like he should ask the medics to look at the effects of the REM-pills on his mind, and adjust the dosage a bit. A detailed overlay of several possible attack routes caught his attention back to the briefing. He noticed people were looking at him, so he pretended to be thinking about the question he missed.

"Well?" Asked the nervous intell nerd. "What do you think about those Jack?"

Jack gave the holo a good look, and said: "what is the brightest star seen from their position?"

The officer looked confused, but Zell started digging in his palm computer right away.

"...I ... I don't understand what you mean..." stumbled the poor guy from intell.

"If we fall in from coords 21-765-349-A5 we'll have Dernius XIV in our backs, and 26-426-462-D1 will give us Entarra VIII." Zell interrupted.

"Which is brightest?" asked Jack.

"Entarra, by far. But I'm not sure we can make it in time, our go would have to be in 17 minutes."

Jack looked around the table, asking: "Everybody got those coords?"

His crew nodded, they were all trained to remember any coords they picked up during briefings or battles.

One last question needed to be asked before they could go: "Does anyone have any more questions for Stan here?" asked Jack. Nobody did, so he stood up and said: "Let's get to work then."

Stan, the intell guy felt pushed aside, and started to object, but Byrne hushed him with a short "they got it from here, let them do their job."

So there they were, exactly 9 1/2 minutes later, with Entarra VIII in their backs, waiting in ambush for the enemy formation to pass by. 27 anxious combatpilots, all pumped up and ready to go. All machinery and devices turned off to avoid being scanned. The only thing that distracted the mind was what appeared to be a small star, two parsecs to the east.

"Unsettling isn't it?". Zell. How did he always read your mind like that?

"Yes, a fleet that can be seen with the naked eye, two parsecs away. And there will be more at the meeting place."

Only a painful silence came from the other side, so Jack asked: "What's on your mind, Zell?"

"I have a weird feeling about this mission. I wonder what could be so important that it has an escort like this. I don't think this is an ordinary spy."

"Yeah, I'm pretty curious as well. Anyway, we have orders to blow it up, so we won't be able to look at it for a long time."

"Ow, and another thing" Zell said, "what do you think of this Treesa?"

"She's our third for this mission."

"Yes i know that, but do you think she will be able to fly such a leading role in the mission?"

"What are you talking about?"

"My god! You didn't pay any attention during the briefing didn't you?"

Jack wisely kept silent during the next painful seconds...

"Ok, ok, I'll fill you in" sighed Zell, "she is the one carrying the nuke, in case we need to do some brutal damage."

"Oh my god, an ancient nuke? A nuclear bomb?"

"Yes, apparently our Lord has allied with people who have little consideration for the Code...*" Zell speculated.

"That's disturbing... so our personal objective would be...?"

"...to protect the device, yes." Zell shook his head. "I never expected that one day I'd have to defend one of those things..."

"Well, at least you are not the one operating it." said Jack.

"Let's talk later, we have 46 seconds till our launchtime." Said Zell nervously

"Yeah, good luck mate."

"Ok, let's rock and roll buddy!"

Jack smiled. He knew this battle was already won. When Zell got all pumped up like that, he could take on the entire battlecruiser Hope of Orion if he had to. He and Treesa were safe. He made a last prayer for the other teams, and then focused on the upcoming 45 seconds of chaos...

*: the Code is a rather short manifesto that most Lords signed. It forbids them to attack certain planets, and also forbids the use of nuclear weaponry, and a few other things. The manifesto says that nukes are forbidden to spare innocent lives, but the real reason is more shocking: radiation might damage the two extra organs that the Lords have.

Chapter 3: Mayhem Minute

Time always seemed to pass so slowly in that last minute...

Jack stared at the timer, which indicated another endless 57 seconds... 56... 55...

Jack peeked out the window. He was looking around for one of the ships on the ships from the outer defence ring. He knew they would be painted pitch black, so they were hard to see.

He picked up his LoRaC*, setting it to a radius for the whole unit to hear, and started going over the mission one last time. "Team one, leader: Richard, report."

"Check 16" was the short confirmative answer from the man in fighter number 16.

"Your task will be to take out four of the eight bombers in the outer defence ring, four groups of two please."

"Got it" Richard never wasted any time with mindless talk. The people in his team usually joked that he swore an oath not to say more than three words at the same time ever.

"Good, Team 2, Jaric, come in."

"I'm here."

"Jaric, you'll be taking the family photo's. Go in, penetrate, snap and leave. There is no need to take out all the fighters, team 3 will follow you with the artillery."

"All set Jack, happy hunting!" Was Jaric's witty reply.

"Team 3 has the..."

"Jack! Oh my god! These ships are way bigger than they told us!" Zell suddenly screamed over the LoRaC

"What? Where are they?"

"Use your Radar, that should show you, remember?"

Jack felt stupid when he heard that. He always checked his radar before a mission. Why not this time? "Thanks for waking me up again, Zell."

Thirty Seconds to launch! the central computer screeched

Jack switched on his 3d radar, which seemed to take for hours. When he finally got a picture, he was shocked. "This can't be right..."

"What's there?" asked Richard.

"Damn! These ships are frigate class at least! But I don't recognise any of the signatures..."

"What!?! you mean that these are not Core ships?"

"Well to be honoust, these things don't look like ships."

"What do you mean?"

Jack set his radarvieww to the smallest scale.

"Well, they don't seem to be ships at all, rather a collection of apparatus mounted on a frame."

"What, no hard outer shield?"

Twenty Seconds to launch!

"No, but that is not the only weird thing about them. They seem to be facing inward..." mumbled Jack.

"Inward? As in: guns pointed at the thing in the middle? That seems rather odd for a defence ring, doesn't it?"

"Hmm, yes. There's more strange stuff going on though. I'm getting nothing in the middle. There simply is nothing there..."

"I know Jack, I'm using all scanners I have, and I'm not getting much."

Jack looked out the window, and tried to get more clues from the small black-in-black dot that was the ship, about 100 km away**. Of course this was no use, so he shifted his eyes back to his radar. He decided to change plans slightly. If the attack would not be over by the time these things got their guns (or whatever they might be, Jack wasn't curious) online, the whole unit would probably be toast. He turned back to his LoRaC unit.

Ten Seconds to launch!

Jack cursed the irony of the situation. "Oh great, every time that last minute lasts forever, but now that I need time, it is over before I blink my eyes!" he mumbled to nobody in particular. He grabbed the LoRaC, and made an announcement:

"Plans changed. Richard, your squad will investigate one of these things, and give a go or no-go for Jaric. WoO*** goes down from 45 to 30 seconds. One sign of life from those frigs and we all hightail it out of here. The rest stays as planned." Jack paused for breath.

"We (squad 3) will penetrate and destroy the target after 2 has taken its pictures. When you see the boom, everybody leaves." That's it, everyone. Good luck, and may the Lord seal your fate."

Jack closed the connection. He was just in time...

Three Seconds to launch!

2...

1...

***GO! ***

*: LoRaC: Low Radius Communicator. This device sends waves that stop after travelling a certain distance, so that only receivers in a certain radius from the source could pick it up. Simple wave interference makes for the basics of the system, but practical (small, light) transmitters could only be manufactured after the invention of solidspace devices.

**Distances are all illusionary, as the entire unit was still floating in solidspace. In reality, they were much further away from the enemy, but all waves (radar, light) seem to ignore distance in the presence of solidspace fields. it is this characteristic that the LoRaC is based on

***: Window of Operation

Chapter 4: Treesa's Twist

*** GO!! ***

Squad one and two blasted off at maximum power. In 6 seconds Richard and his 7 companions would be in close range of the frig he chose, and give the go or no-go. Jaric and 12 followers approached at lower speed, to give scanners and image-processors more time to analyse the object.

Jack counted to 4, and then hit the throttle too. 4 seconds were all the time Jaric and Kira would need to scan and give the go/no-go for Jack.

At exactly 6 seconds after launch, the LoRaC gave a clear "GO" for Jaric.

Jack knew he would have 8 seconds before Jaric would arrive, so he asked Richard: "Status?"

"Nothing. No biomass, low energy. Engage?"

"Negative Richard." Jack was happy with the way things were, who knows what would happen if they started shooting at these ships.

Inspecting the radar, he saw the inner defense ring react. Looked like they had some worthy opponents for a change...

"Deploy a sentinel and join Three. We'll need backup."

Jack was more right than he wanted...

Jaric's team slammed themselves into the claw formation that the defenders had formed.

Jaric claimed the LoRaC to issue commands. "Dyne, Cigg, distract!"

Two units of three dispersed to distract some fire from the fingers away from Jaric and Kira. The enemy responded by closing the claw into a ball after the main group had past them, to stay out of range. At the other end the ball opened up with clockwork precision, enabling all the enemies to keep shooting at Jaric and his three remaining units. 22 Enemies all had more than a second of clear shots at them. To the left of Jaric, King's ship blew up. In front of him, the centre of the claw opened up as the five enemies in question fled for the heavy pulses that Jaric's team unleashed on them. Two of them got away with minor damage, two blew up, and the last one seemed uncontrollable. It stayed right in Jaric's path. He avoided it in the last second, flying past it at no more than ten metres.

Kira was not so lucky. She had taken a blow from one of the defending forces, and lost control over her fighter for one second. She hit the lonely enemy fighter dead-on.

The shock of the explosion and the sudden loss of two pilots had shocked Jaric. To make sure all his men were focused, he grabbed the LoRaC again.

"Ok men, we are through. Cover my back while I go for some footage of whatever it is that's there..."

Dyne and Cigg now found themselves facing the enemies backs. Only two seconds behind them was Richard. They didn't wait for it. The enemy had formed a perfect claw again, this time facing the other side. Attacking them in the back, the 6 friends wondered why this formation was formed. They soon found out.

The enemy went after Jaric in full force, simply ignoring the fire in their backs. Dyne and Cigg shot them one after the other, desperately trying to get them to turn around. Jaric's remaining backup of four fighters was now facing an overwhelming wave of mayhem, berserking towards them. About 14 of them were left. 4 versus 14 is a slaughter in most scenarios, but the defending pilots were not interested in the four fighters in front of them. Jaric was all they cared for. Each taking one arm, the escort managed to score three more kills. At the same time, two more were blown away by Dyne.

The LoRaC shouted. "Alert!"

"Status?" replied Jack.

"Main weapon seems to be charging. Power readings off the scale."

"Ok, mission abort. Jaric, report on the object."

"There is no object. Nothing on all possible scans."

"All bogeys destroyed." That was Richard. His team had used the five seconds of talk to destroy the 9 remaining fighters.

"Nothing left here for us then. We leave." No one disagreed with Jack, so they all took off.

Two seconds later the eight vessels at the far corners revealed their function. Beams of pure energy blasted from their main "weapons". Z'Ahm warned the unit.

"They are shooting slowlight! Get out of there!"

"Z'Ahm, why are you still there?" asked Jack.

Unlike most waves, these beams progressed extremely slowly. There were about 10 seconds left before they would meet where the fighter escort used to be. More than enough time for Jack and his friends to gain a safe distance.

Suddenly, Treesa made a 180 and started a mad dash towards the centre. She shouted over the LoRaC: "Flashover! I want a bioscanner, ASAP!"

Flashover is the word that any pilot could shout to gain immediate command. Basically, saying the word immediately strips Jack of all his powers, and places full command and responsibility with the person who called the flashover. Jack had been frowned upon, laughed at, ridiculed, branded as an idiot, and even reported to military court for this. None of his critics had any idea how many lives it had saved, and how many missions had depended on this tactic for success.

Zell was the first to react, as always. His lightning reflexes made sure he was only half a second behind Treesa, following her to the central point, apparently flying towards certain death. "I have bio, 0.50 seconds behind you." He reported.

"Scan the centre. Two backup at 3. The rest, get out of there. You too Z'Ahm!"

Seven fighters had already turned around to follow Treesa. Kink and Jack were the first two, so they stayed, the rest fell back to full retreat. All, except Kurt, who made another dazzling 90 degree turn. Jack knew immediately what he was doing. He planned on using his heavy weaponry on one of the delicate high-tech ships, to buy Treesa some more time. Treesa saw it too.

"Stop being a hero and leave the area Kurt!" she yelled. Not that Kurt would listen to her.

"You won't make it. You need time." Was the

Kurt always had a tendency to play the hero. Jack silently cursed himself for putting him behind the buttons of that mighty weapon. On the other hand, Kurt was right. They were not going to make it, and they needed help if they would be able to do whatever it was what they were doing...

Zell seemed to understand Treesa's intentions better than Jack: "20 degrees left at 6 clicks Treesa!"

"Are you sure?" asked Treesa. "That's where we blew up the last fi... good job Zell!!"

At her current speed, Treesa would take 7 seconds to reach that point. Too much, as the slowlight beams would be meeting in 5...

During his mad run, Kurt heard Z'Ahm over the LoRaC: "Kurt, I don't see you man, I thought you were going for ... oh my god, NOOO!"

He switched the LoRaC off. What he was about to do would require all the concentration and precision he had in him. One by one, he started to turn all of the flight assistants off, until all other then weapons and the cabin light were down. A few last course and speed adjustments...

Last of all he switched off his propulsion, armed the missile, and waited what would happen...

Jack had heard Z'Ahm's outcry, and saw on the radar what Kurt was about to do. There was no time left to say much, so all he said was: "Thanks Kurt...". One second later Kurt's fighter fell into the leading edge of one of the slowlight beams. The sight that followed was as horrible as it was beautiful. The blue light seemed to come to a complete stop, eating away at the poor little fighter in a blaze of brightblue light. When it seemed as if the heatsinks in the fighter's skin were about to give up, the explosion came. But again, the beam only seemed to consume the energy, rather than be disturbed by it. The tip of the beam blew up to monstrous proportions, and then imploded again, after which it continued its original path with deadly precision.

Jack had lost a great pilot and one of his best friends, but he realized that the whole process had taken about three-and-a-half seconds. That was all that they would need.

Treesa reached the spot indicated by Zell, and flew past it sideways. When she straightened her craft again to boost off at maximum burn, Jack saw a small hatch closing on the side. With a sickening turn upwards Zell followed Treesa. When Jack made his turn he had just half a second left before the 8th beam would meet the rest 2 kilometres behind him...

When the final beam struck, Jack saw what he would see in all his nightmares from that day on. A hole was ripped in the empty space, giving a clear view to what was behind it: a battlestation. Thousands upon thousands of fighters swarmed towards the three fugitives.

Just as Jack realized that they were doomed, something strange happened. The first fighter that seemed to have reached the magical jump point, exploded. A few milliseconds later, the second blew up too. Zell reasoned over the LoRaC: "Kurt's extra weight and energy must have made the gate unstable! Man what a fireworks!"

And indeed, the explosions were fantastic. Even at this distance, Jack was shuddering of adrenaline as about three thousand fighters threw themselves to death in under four seconds. Suddenly, the image of the explosions faded away, and space itself seemed to buckle and twist as the Gate fell. One last blast of blue light and orange flickering was the result. The shockwave was unreal. It completely obliterated the eight frigates that were still hanging in formation. Jack, Zell and Treesa reached their deepjump speed just in time, leaving the scene of destruction and death right before the shockwave would have wiped them out too. Nothing but empty space was left where the awful battle had taken place...

Chapter 5: Byrne

Jack felt uneasy as he walked through the 3rd level hallway in the command cruiser LionHeart. He was on his way to report to captain Byrne, his direct supervisor. He had the habit of reporting directly after he got out of his fighter. The debriefing of the unit was done on the way back to the fleet, which usually lasted no longer than a few minutes.

Jack didn't feel at home on this cruiser. He had no sympathy for most people aboard, he thought most of them were arrogant incapable folk sitting behind too big desks all day. Captain Byrne was an exception to that disliking. Jack never really knew if it was because of his lively and homely looks, or the informal way he treated his crew. Fact remained Jack liked the man. Byrne was a small guy, a bit on the fat side, and of middle age, about 70 years.* As a nice example of what kind of man Byrne was, he had requested (and gotten) a wooden door for his office. It was the only wood in the entire state-of-the-art command cruiser.

Jack always liked reporting to Byrne, the man wanted Jack to spare him no detail and didn't insist on overly correct use of language. But this time it was different. Jack brought bad news, for the first time in over two years. Two of their best pilots died. Jaric was heavily wounded. They had taken a prisoner, ignoring a direct order to destroy whatever was in the centre. He was lucky that Z'Ahm had his scanners logging and studying the warp frigate (as he had come to call them) all the time. It had been a mistake of Jack to let team 1 with their cameras fly right past it. No, Jack wasn't all too happy about the outcome of this battle, and he was quite sure that Byrne wouldn't like it either.

Nervous, Jack knocked, instead of identifying himself to the scanner to the left of the door. Byrne would know who it was. And he did.

"Ah, here we have the most underestimated man in the fleet! Gentlemen, I have the pleasure to introduce you to Jack." heard Jack from behind the door. What was this? More people in the room? And apparently important people, or Byrne would never use a word such as 'gentlemen', or talk in such a bombastic manner. Reluctantly, Jack opened the door.

"Good day Jack, how are you?" said Byrne. He continued without waiting for an answer. "I have the honour to introduce you to three of the thirteen Members of the League's High Council."

Byrne said their name when Jack shook hands. So he did know some protocol after all. "Master Sline Odax from the Naxon Empire." A very tall and slim man, well past 150 years of age, with almost elfish long white hair and the weirdly long-stretched eyes that was so characteristic of the Naxon. Unlike their appearance often suggests, the Naxon are a strong, overactive race. They are known for bad temper, but people who know them better explain it as "a directer way of communicating".

"Mister Axel Mordechai representing the Tanuka Estates." Mordechai was a handsome, but very plain-looking businessman. He was the ideal representative for an empire that was known for its fabulous trading skills. The man was wearing a suit that looked annoyingly perfect, just like Mordechai himself.

"And Sir William Goldblum, representing our own." Jack was really honoured to shake the hand of this living legend. At an age of 234 years, he was the oldest member of the council, and he was said to be the wisest of them all. All his years were showing on his face, his eyes still burning with a clever sparkle behind the big brushy white-in-white eyebrows. He had extremely long white hair, and a beard to match. He was the only one of the three to wear the official garment of the High Council: a heavy, purple with gold long robe. He looked everything like the man of which you were very glad he was on your side.

He wanted to sit down, but looking across the room, Jack spotted another man, sitting in a chair in a corner of the room, almost invisible. Byrne nervously touched his nose before announcing this last guest:

"Master Silk, from I-3." Jack took a good long look at Silk, and while shaking his hand, he decided that this man was successful in being absolutely normal. There was nothing odd about the man, except that he apparently had the authority to sit down with all these high officers in the room. Being part of I-3 gives you a high rank, but certainly doesn't allow you to take the three councillors for granted as he seemed to do. And why was Byrne so nervous about him? You must be a real dangerous man to get the chubby attack coordinator off-balance. Jack decided not to ask any of his questions. The ones that needed to be asked would get an answer in the next hour anyway. And the ones that they didn't want to answer would only put him in an awkward situation. He walked to the empty seat besides Byrne (facing the three Councillors), and sat down silently. He seemed to have passed the first test, because Goldblum proceeded to answer his first question.

"You are probably wondering what all of us are doing here, right?" It was Sir Goldblum.

"Yes, sir." That was really all that Jack dared to say.

"Well, I-3 (Goldblum sent a look over to Silk) has notified us of contact with another fleet. When we gave the order to intercept, we found out that somebody jumped to conclusions and ordered a destroy mission already. We are all here to get to the bottom of this, and try to save whatever can be saved."

Now Jack was really confused. The orders came from somebody without the proper authority? As he regained his balance he also realised his luck: he didn't destroy, he captured.

"That is very disturbing news sir," Jack said, eyes facing down at Goldblum's feet; "but I thought info like this is always on a need-to-know basis?"

"It is, Jack, it is. I want you to understand the importance of your report. And please call me William. I understand that every man who steps inside Byrne's office is a friend."

"But sir, I..." objected Jack.

"No but's, if's or maybe's. I will have none of it. William is the name."

Jack was amazed. He was allowed to call the legendary Goldblum... William? He sent a look to Byrne, with renewed respect.

"Very well then, S... William." Jack had trouble finding his balance.

"So let's all relax, have some Linda**, and hear what Jack has to report, shall we gentlemen?" Byrne's proposal found great enthusiasm, especially with Mister Mordechai, who was an expert and an enthousiast when it came to Linda.

"I will open a bottle of VI Antulo from two hundred years back I have been saving for a special occasion." Byrne boasted.

Hearing this, Mordechai's eyes doubled in size. "Is that a Black Ridge?" he almost shouted.

Byrne checked the label before he confirmed the question.

Mordechai was rejoiced. "Praise the Lords!" And then: "Do you know the last price I heard for a bottle like that floated about a million sol?"***

Jack had difficulty breathing for a second, but Byrne quickly recovered.

"Well then, I suppose it is a good choice then, since we have such an expert amongst us." He took six glasses, and poured everyone a drink. Impressed with Byrne's flair, everybody sat down, and all eyes turned to Jack.

"Well" Odax said, looking at Jack; "let's hear it all."

And so Jack reported about the whole battle, front to back, leaving no detail untouched. Time didn't seem to be a problem to any of these men, so he took all that he needed. Every once in awhile, one of the wise men asked a short question, but most of the time Jack could talk undisturbed. As he was sitting there, smelling like a pro, still wearing his pilot's gear, holding one of the finest Linda's in the universe, with three (four?) of the most powerful men in the universe hanging at his lips, he had difficulties to see this as reality. Byrne was looking at Jack with an almost proud expression on his face. Mordechai seemed to have problems dividing his attention between the Linda and Jack's report. Goldblum and Odax were listening carefully. Silk was still sitting in the corner, rapidly making notes on some kind of processing unit. Jack was really getting a bit nervous about the man.

"After the blast we made a last fly-by to check the area for survivors like we always do. There was absolutely nothing left in a 300 km radius of the blastpoint."

Odax interrupted: "And what about parts? i would much like to see some of the tchnical novelties of those warp frigates."

Jack didn't know how to say this without making Odax sound stupid, but he tried anyway. "Well, when I said 'blown up' i should have said 'obiterated'. What i mean is that the biggest object on the radius was a jettisoned missile round that Dyne dumped after we returned. The blast was absolutely far worse then anything i've ever seen or even heard of before."

"He is right you know" Said Silk with an unexpected interruption; "we recorded the blast from our MSU*. We are still analyzing the data, but the experts are all yelling 'doomsday weapon' and saying that blasts like this can blow up entire planets."

"Unsettling thought..." said Byrne. "Was there more Jack?"

"That is all. If the gentlemen would like to ask some questions, I'd be happy to answer them."

Silk looked amused at that sentence, and Jack realised that he had gotten a bit too arrogant. He cursed himself, but it was too late to correct. Oddly enough, the councillors didn't seem to mind.

"Yes, I certainly have some questions, Jack." Said Goldblum. The others nodded, and Jack realised this was going to be a long de-brief.

Goldblum proceeded. "I think I'll go first, if you don't mind." Of course the others didn't, so Goldblum launched his first question. "Do you have an ID on what Treesa captured out there?"

"To be honoust, I don't even know if the man is alive or not. I ordered Treesa to take him to the Adamantine right away for investigation. You should check up with them to find out more about him."

Goldblums eyes lit up when he heared this, because the Adamantine was a ship from his fleet. Jack knew he had just scored some points. Silk didn't seem happy with the situation at all, but he remained silent.

"Could he have been a fighter pilot?" Wanted Goldblum to know.

"Unlikely William," Jack couldn't believe he was saying this, but continued: "the fighters acted like unmanned drones. No humans can be trained to fly as synchronised as they did." After Jack said this he noticed Silk raise an eyebrow at Byrne, who nodded very slightly. Again, Jack saw himself forced to adjustthe impression he got from Silk.

Silk was the one asking the next question: "Who was the man briefing you?"

"A man from I-3. I found it strange to be briefed by such a high-ranked officer."

"What was his name?" Goldblum wanted to know.

Jack honestly didn't remember, but Silk saved him by saying: "We from intell never give out names if they are unnecessary."

"Then how did you know he was high-ranked?" asked Silk.

Jack wondered. Why did he ever think that? "He wore no insignies at all, just like all of you are doing, and ... well ... he really bathed in luxury." Silk and Byrne exchanged another look, like they knew the man Jack was talking about very well. The serious look they both had didn't mean a lot of good.

"Thank you, Jack." Goldblum looked aside, to indicate that it was Mordechai's turn to ask.

"You say that Z'Ahm's scanners were continuously logging. Who will receive that data?"

"That is not up to me, sir." Replied Jack. "Standard procedure is that I give mission data to Byrne, who passes it on to I-3, and they distribute it further." Again, Silk saved Jack from a tough situation, with a few quick words: "I will see to it that all thirteen embassies get their own copy."

That didn't satisfy Mordechai. "I would rather see the original version directly out of Z'Ahm's blackbox."

Jack felt stuck in the middle of a powerstruggle here. He decided that he was on the same side as Byrne above all else. Byrne was exchanging hand signals under the table with Silk. Well, if Silk was an ally of Byrne, Jack would be his ally too. Pretending to be thinking about the question, Jack glanced at Silk from his eyecorners. Silk saw this and nodded, so Jack answered Mordechai: "If you give me a valid D-TAG, I will personally send the data as soon as I can get a hold of Z'Ahm."

That was more to Mordechai's liking. Jack knew he would have to send the data to I-3 before uploading it to Mordechai. This would mean stressing for every second, and Jack was already fighting his after-adrenaline-dip. He didn't let his fatigue show on his face though, because Mordechai wasn't finished with him yet.

"You say these fighters fought like drones?"

"Yes." Said Jack simply. Mordechai should have gotten the message that Goldblum accepted Jack's word as a fact in this. Jack was slightly annoyed for having to answer the same thing twice. Then he realized who he was talking to, and cursed himself for getting too arrogant a second time. He took some water, in hopes of getting rid of some of Linda's effects.

Mordechai finally asked what he really wanted to know. "Were these drones branded in any way? A logo, a mark, anything?"

"I haven't had the chance to analyze all the images we took yet, but if I find anything, you will find that info along with the rest of my D-TAG report." said Byrne. Apparently, Mordechai got to more people's nerves than just Jack. Silk showed no emotion at all.

"Good." spoke Mordechai, and he looked to his left, giving the shell to Odax so to speak. Odax took a good long taxing look at Jack, sat back in his chair, easily took a slow sip of his Linda, leaned forward again, opened his mout, closed it again, and said: "Do you have time for a private conversation in the next few days?"

This time it was Goldblum who gave Jack the signal: a narrowing of the eyes, and a contemplating nod to indicate that he should do it, but with reluctance. Jack gave away the best show he could.

He faked to be in deep thought, looking at Byrne for an answer, who played along by saying: "You have a new assignment in an hour or eight, but after that I have nothing for you."

Jack turned to Odax: "Will 48 hours be fast enough?"

Nobody in the room fell for it, except for Odax, who thought he just recruited one of Goldblum's finer pilots. "I will see if I am available too then."

Poor man, thought Jack. He was not made or trained for the level of intrigue that these others operated on. He would be slowly stripped from power, influence and people, untill his Lord would have him replaced. Jack finally got an idea of the magnitude of the intrigue, hostility and false intent in the room. Getting dizzy, he focused on Byrne, who he would stay loyal to at all cost. Knowing this gave him the strength to keep concentrating.

Odax sat back, and both Byrne and Silk indicated that they had no questions. Jack had timed well, his Linda was empty when he stood up to leave the room. His basic knowledge of Linda-etiquette told him to greet the guests, then walk to the sidetable, take a glass of water, propose a toast to the host, and down the water. "To Byrne, and his endless hospitality!" he shouted. Following the custom protocol, he marched straight to the door, as leaving without looking around symbolises that although intoxicated by the Linda, you stand by your previous actions. No douts, no regrets.

But Goldblum turned around on last time before jack reached the door. "Oh and Jack?"

Jack decided to push his luck. "Yes, William?"

"From now on, I'd like you to call me 'sir' again. I wouldn't want the 'William' thing to become a tradition."

"I understand, sir."

As he closed the door, he walked around a corner first, before leaning against a wall with his back, standing still to let it all sink in. He couldn't believe what he had just done. He had been talking to extremely powerful and demanding people. He had even deceived one of them. He had fuelled their intrigue for at least a few weeks, maybe longer. Even though he knew that he was just a pawn in this game, he had felt the power and the influence surge through his body. Continueing his way to the temporary quarters that his crew was given, he realized more and more that where he was done for the day, these five men in Byrne's office had a very very long day ahead of them. With

renewed respect for Byrne, he realised how happy he was with his position, and that he wouldn't want to lose it for the world. He promised himself to get out of their way as soon as he could, forever leaving politics behind.

*: In this day and age, people live to be about 200 to 250 years old. Most retire at 150 though, because the body is unable to deliver any real labour after that. The record for the oldest man (apart from the Lords that have all lived for about 9000 years) is 372 years, set by a man on Gainoa XII, a planet with earth-like environment, but slightly less gravity, and more oxygen in the air.

*2: Non-alcoholic, yet equally intoxicating and soothing as wine. The advantage was that the effect was quickly reversible by drinking a simple glass of water. The name is said to be the name of the girlfriend of the inventor, and has a tradition of being written with a capital L, more a joke born out of great enthusiasm than anything else.

*3 : The Sol is the universal currency unit, invented by the Tanuka. It was set at the value of one standardhour of uneducated labour on the planet Arak, Tanuka's main transport planet.

*4: MSU: Molbile Sensory Unit. Basically, it's a Destroyer-class hull, filled up with high-tech equipment, tracking movement, activities, and presence of enemy and own ships in a wide region.

*5: D-TAG stands for Data Transmission Adress Gate. It's a set of frequencies, locations, passwords and access keys, needed to send a message. The D-TAG system for data transfer was cooked up by Colonial scientists. The added safety that the system offers lies in the safety codes needed to send a message, instead of focusing the security on opening those messages. The concept sounds ineffective, but I-3 claims to have noted a decrease of 80% in intercepted and hacked messages. Because of the lengthy process it takes to actually send such a message, it is only used for very classified intra-fleet communications.

Chapter 6: The Void

Kurt had no idea what effect his action might have on the beam, but he knew that he had to buy Treesa and Jack a second or two. He could only hope he was doing the right thing, because he would never know. With trembling fingers he turned off his LoRaC, but Z'Ahm's scream seemed to stay in the air a long time after the speaker was silent. He turned off all equipment that he was told never to turn off, not even certain why he did it. He made a final minute adjustment in his course, armed and disengaged the torpedo, and then turned the last active subsystem of his Raptor fighter off: the engine.

Total silence dominated Kurt's universe for one of those seconds that seem like a century. He rested his body in his chair, relaxing all muscles to deal with the upcoming impact. Through his closed eyelids, he could see the intense blue glare of the slowlight beam intensify... he almost couldn't restrain himself from turning his head away. He counted down... 2... 1...

Nothing happened... did he miss the beam? Impossible! Unless the beam had accelerated in those last two seconds... But when he opened his eyes to try to make a second run, he was instantly blinded. He had no idea light could be this intense. It seemed to pour in through every hole in his head, burning, scorching every thought other than pain. After he managed to cover his eyes up with his arms, he slowly realised he somehow got stuck in the middle of the beam. His panic made room for acceptance. He had no cards left to play, and knew for a fact that he would die in a few seconds. It was out of his hands now. All he could do was hope that his action at least had slowed the beam down enough to give Treasa time to do whatever she was doing. He noticed he had been holding his breath for the last ten seconds, and exhaled, trying to lock out the painful light that still ripped his head apart.

Suddenly a huge shock ran through his craft, ripping off several parts of his poor Raptor. Engine, weapons systems, nav dome, he could see all of the Raptor's vital parts fly around him. He realised that he was very lucky, cabin pressure remained stable, and it seemed like the blast had thrown his capsule out of the raging ball of light. The light seemed to slightly lose its intensity, and the pain slowly went down to an almost acceptable level. Kurt still tried to focus on nothing else but exhaling, keeping his body relaxed in the tight straps of his seat.

What he didn't realize was that he was behind the Ball of lightning, following it at roughly 20 metres. He had not seen the worst of this yet...

About three seconds after the torpedo went off, the beams smashed into each other, tearing up all old meanings of space and time into a ball of twisting flashes of energy. Kurt's little Raptor (or what was left of it) fell right into the still growing and unstable wormhole.

Some 6 million lightyears away, a strike fleet awaited the green light for launch. Lieutenant Geril Kubrow overlooked the two hundred fighter drones from his control room, and coordinated them to the designated place. Seeing the counter slowly drop to zero was always the toughest part. Every fibre in his body was ready to go, but this little annoying clock was holding him back. Ten seconds... Geril fired his gear up, the drones came to life, ready to follow any orders from his fingertips. Five, Four... the massive generator behind him started tearing away at space and time... Three... Two...

Nothing could have prepared Kurt for what happened next. His whole being was stretched, folded and crumbled to fit through the way too small and unstable wormhole. If the light was pain, this darkness was agony. His head exploded with unspeakable sensation, and suddenly, his mind was free. Pain was no longer pain, it was just a fact. Floating around in the holes of nature's laws, he could see nothing. True nothingness. Not just empty space, or a blind wall, but true Nothing. It reminded him of the blind child on Rana VI, that explained what blind people see:

"Try to look through the back of your head. What do you actually see behind you? Not black, as most people would characterise nothing. Less than that. Absolutely nothing."

Kurt heard the words, saw the nothing, and realised that this nothing he was staring at, was nothing less than Death. It also occurred to him that he was getting closer to the Nothing, exploring it, feeling it. But why were his thoughts still there? Did he actually have a chance at survival?

Two... One... Abort! ABORT!! Geril almost had a heart attack, with even the tiniest little muscle he had screaming: "Go! Go! Go!", and the speaker by his ear saying the exact opposite. For a moment he was petrified, but then he lifted his fingers off the control panel. Instead he leaned over to the speaker, and pushed the big yellow button besides it.

"What's wrong with the wormhole, command?"

"It seems to be destabilised on the other side." Was the answer. "Anyway, it's too small for you. Prepare to salvage the CryoPod, and scan for any resistance that comes through."

"Sir, if my drones don't even fit through, what kind of resistance do you expect?"

"Just be on your guard, I'll ask the questions."

"Yes sir," said Geril, and then with the connection down: "Stupid idiot!"

Thinking about survival was enough. Back towards the agonising state his body was in, back to the extreme bursts of light and darkness, although in this dimension there seemed to be no difference between the two. He went back in with the will to survive, but he wasn't prepared for this. He reached a point where the pain was no longer humanly possible to comprehend, he felt a blockade. He could not get back into his body because of it. He tried to turn around, away from the pain, away from the light, but there was only Death there. Another kind of pain stopped him: his conscience. His deeply rooted sense that it was not over yet. He could not leave. Not without a fight. Kurt knew his task: he had to break through that barrier of pain, break the laws that the Creator himself had written. He had to defy nature itself. He turned around, once again towards the light, and rid his thoughts of all fear, of all thought, of all instincts. Except for one thing. He was going back. He didn't even feel the pain this time, he only noticed it. Bit by bit, he was breaking down the wall keeping him from being alive. The going got tougher and tougher, but he felt he had come as far as the final barrier. He could almost remember how his feet used to tingle, how his hands used to

shake, how his heart used to beat. He took a deep breath, to break down that final frontier, only afterwards realising that breathing WAS that frontier. In one single blow, the full intensity of his mangled body's pain came back. Knowing that he had made it to the other side, he embraced it, and fainted...

Geril stared at his sensors, still mad at himself for annoying the commander while there was bad news around. That had always proved a successful way to get transferred to guard duty on Hiralis XVIII's icy north pole.

He almost overlooked the small extra blip between all his drones...

Chapter 7: Talking to an Old Man

Now that he had eaten, and finally had the shower he wanted so badly, Jack was able to point his attention to the future again. Feeling refreshed and strong, he walked to Silk's office, to talk about the prisoner they took. Hardly remembering what the intelligence officer looked like, he wondered what had been making Jack so nervous about the man. Jack decided it was of little importance, and that he would just stay neutral towards this guy. He would not let himself be played like that. To illustrate his determination, he entered hardly half a second after knocking, not giving Silk any chance to take a pose, like he had been doing on their last meeting. The man sitting behind his desk seemed to be like any other bureaucratic little weasel he had ever seen, and not the smart, intelligent and dangerous man that Jack met in Byrne's office. He felt a little triumph as Silk quickly adjusted and took the pose of the powerful intell officer.

Looking around in Silk's office, he was puzzled. It was a tiny room, somewhere in the bowels of the cruiser, with very primitive furniture. Silk was sitting behind his desk, working on some kind of interactive holographic data unit. He quickly turned it off.

"Welcome Jack, thank you for coming on such short notice."

"I have been wanting to talk about our prisoner too, so..."

"Yes, well let's get right to the point then. He does not want to speak to us."

Jack was off balance now. "He is already out of hibernation?"

"Yes, as soon as he came in contact with our ship's atmosphere, he started breathing again."

"But now he is being stubborn."

“Nice way to put it,” laughed Silk. “but yes, he refuses to speak to anybody but the person who captured him.”

“Ah, and now you want me to go talk to him?”

“Yes, obviously.”

“Why not Treesa? She is the one that captured him, and she is also the one who saved him by rushing back in to pick him up.”

Silk leaned back in his chair, slowly stroking his long chin while he thought about that for a second.

“No Jack, even with the loose form of command you use, you are still the one who is directly responsible for everything that happens out there. You take the blame when the shit hits the fan, you also take the credit when things go well.”

“And in which category would this mission be, sir?” Asked Jack with just a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Everything that was little about this man seemed to vanish, as he sent a piercing look at Jack.

“Don't mock me, Jack.” In that one second, Silk seemed to grow four extra feet, transforming into a dangerous and bloodthirsty giant ready to attack anything that moved. When Jack humbly apologised, visibly disturbed and scared by the sudden transformation, Silk relaxed again, becoming the friendly intell officer he chose to be.

“So will you talk to this man?” Even with the warning he had just received, Jack hesitated. He had a natural distrust of intell people, and Silk was definitely no exception. What was he trying to do? Jack didn't want to get entangled in anything that would lead his path away from being “Jack, fighter pilot”. On the other hand, he was intrigued by what they had encountered last mission, and if he had to fight these unknown enemies again, he had to gather some info on them. And maybe this prisoner, whoever he was, would be able to tell him more. His decision was set.

“Ok, I will do it, but I need to prepare myself first. I want to talk to him in combat gear, so he understands who he is talking to.”

“I wanted to suggest the same thing. Take your Raptor and fly to the Adamantine. You have ten minutes, I will meet you on B-deck, room 23j. he will be there as well.”

Jack simply nodded and walked away.

In his quarters he met Zell.

“Hey Zell. I think I will need some of your high tech toys.”

Zell showed a quasi-insulted face. “Only if you stop calling them toys.”

"Yeah yeah, I promise." laughed Jack.

"What do you need?"

"Something to completely block a conversation of two people from any form of scanning. The device will need to be undetectable, and I need it in three minutes."

"Is that all? You disappoint me Jack, you never find the imagination to think of something impossible anymore."

"I'm not fooling around, Zell. I am going to have a discussion with our prisoner, and I don't want Intel to listen to it."

"Wow, that is serious." Zell's eyes shimmered. "Can I listen on the communicator?"

"Someday you are going to have to give that thing a name." Said Jack.

"Communicator will do just fine. Well, can I listen?"

"As much as I should say no, I want to have a recording of the conversation. If you can come up with a way to give me a few minutes alone with the man, I will let you listen."

After thinking a few seconds, Zell said: "Great. I have this low-frequency scanner hooked up to the ..."

"Zell, please spare me the details. How long will it take you to construct it?"

"Yes, yes, i have it right here, i just need to relay the internal..."

Jack really didn't share his friend's passion for electrical gadgets. "Zell, please... how long?"

"A few minutes, I just need to configure the data on..."

"Zell..."

"Ow, yeah, err... I will get to work immediately."

"Thank you." said Jack, but Zell was too busy to hear it, collecting all kinds of gizmos and tools from all over his messy room. Shaking his head Jack started to put his smelly pilot gear back on.

Arriving at room 23j of B-deck, jack was relieved to see Byrne there as well.

Jack saluted: "Sirs."

Byrne and Silk nodded back in silence.

Taking the initiative Jack said: "I assume you have recording equipment installed?"

"Yes, naturally." Said Silk.

"I want them turned off." Said Jack. "The man will not talk to you, so he will not talk to me either if he knows you are listening."

"But I need..."

"I will give you a full report of my conversation, but not a recording."

"That's unacceptable."

"Are you questioning my loyalties?"

"No, but I object to letting a man that should not have access to this data in the first place get a chance to keep it all for himself."

"I am all you have, Silk. Take it or leave it."

"Gentlemen, let's stay focused here." Byrne interrupted. "I agree with Jack. You should just let him talk to the man, and trust Jack to do it right."

Silk sent a taxing look at Jack, and then capitulated. He took a device out of his pocket, and gave it to Byrne. "This remote controls a series of twelve sensors in the room, and logs all the data from them as well. Switch it off using that blue button."

Reaching even deeper in his pockets, Silk handed Jack a piece of old fashion paper. "Here is a list of things I'd like to know, if he might get talkative."

Jack studied the list, and then gave it back. "These are all standard questions. I am not stupid, you know." How could this man ever have made him nervous?

With just a short nod to Byrne, Jack entered the room where their 'guest' was silently awaiting things to come. The room was just a standard grey interrogation room, completely empty apart from the table and the two chairs.

Seating himself on the other end of a table, Jack studied the man in front of him. The man was old. His long, snowy white hair was so thin you could see the skin on his head, which was so pale it was almost grey. The man was short of stature, and looked like he had not had a meal in years (which might not even be far from the truth, realized Jack). His skin showed the signs of the centuries. Scars of fighting and torture were everywhere. The man left his shoulders hanging down, as if his enormous life made him very tired. His hands, laying on the table, were fascinating. His long, bony fingers looked powerless, and yet something in the scars and patterns made sure that the natural reaction was to stay an arm's length away just in case. The old man was wearing a very neutral

suit that Byrne's people gave him. Comfortable clothing, yet the simple civilian clothing didn't seem to fit the old man.

Jack had only a second to look at all that, before his attention was locked on the man's eyes. Powerless and tired as his body was, these eyes seemed to burn with the grief of centuries, the wisdom of millennia, and the power of aeons, tearing your mind open layer by layer to see what's underneath. They were the eyes of a... Could it be? Did Jack and his crew imprison a Lord? Jack shivered, then tore his eyes away from the burning stare of the man on the other side of the table.

A certain rest fell over him as he turned the switch on Zell's device. He now had four minutes until the batteries ran out.

He put the thing on the middle of the table, and said: "Now we talk alone. We have four minutes."

"I will not need them, Jack." Spoke the old man in an almost whispering voice.

Jack simply waited. The man knew what the questions were.

After a few intense moments, in which the man seemed to wonder if Jack was worthy of the answers, he started talking. First slowly, but then with increasing speed, until it was almost too fast for Jack to understand.

"I do not know who I am. My earliest memory is from about a year ago. I woke up in a very old cellar, on a planet named Nam C'herkk. I do not know who the people are that held me prisoner back there, or why i was their prisoner. I never saw one of them alive. My food was brought in automated, and my door never opened. Judging from the amount of meals i got, i was there for one standard month without any events. When the door finally opened, a tall woman with a Wolf emblem on her chest stood there. She Said i was the Lord, and that she had come here to rescue me. I later learned what that meant in one of my many conversations with her. I was thankful, not only for my freedom, but also for the human contact. She led me through a series of hallways and stairs, all of them filled with the bodies of dead gnome-like people, and an occasional victim with the Wolf-emblem. There had been heavy fighting for every inch, and with a shock i realized it was a rescue operation... all these people had given their lives for me.

Once outside, I was shocked by the enormity of the rescue operation. Everywhere I looked I saw bodies and shot-down fighter drones. The skies were still filled with fire and craft shooting each other out of the sky, and they were raining down on the field I had to cross to my waiting escape pod. A huge bomber-type ship in the black-and-yellow of the wolf people crashed down on the pod we were running towards. The blow was dazzling, but without a scratch on my vehicle, I became confident in its strength. Once inside, we rushed off, almost alone, with only a small escort of Wolfclan ships. My saviour, who introduced herself to me as Leope Nimrod, explained that she was part of the so-called Clan of the Wolf, a band of outcasts that delivered small military operations for exceptionally high payment. When i asked what i was worth, she only made a vague remark about a new home base for her entire clan. Whether that meant a spacestation, a moon, a planet, or an entire galaxy, i do not know. She said she was taking me to a rendezvous with her contractor, and

that she had nothing more to do with me from that point on.”

The old man was talking at incredible speed now, and the information did not reach Jack as words anymore, but rather as images. He saw all the events the man described with frightening precision. Instead of hearing the story second-handed, he was actually taken on a trip to the hellish battlefield. What was going on here?

"Leope and I became quite good friends over time. Besides the fact that i was her prisoner, she was very polite, and even quite pleasant company. I found out about her other side Two weeks later. After two weeks of endless evasive manoeuvres, We were attacked. Without warning, a whole swarm of fighterdrones stormed out of a jumpgate*, and destroyed the escort of seventeen cruisers and sixty destroyers I had in the blink of an eye. The accuracy and the speed of the enemy gunners was flawless, despite the thousands of individual drones. Nimrod capitulated, and requested their demands. The attackers insisted that I went aboard an escape capsule, and flew into the cargo room of the only bigger ship in their fleet. Nimrod even had the courtesy to ask me if I agreed. I thanked her, and gave myself up to the mysterious fleet. Once I entered their cargo bay, they closed it, filled it with oxygen, and opened the capsule by remote control. I was powerlessly floating around in the zero gravity environment, so I was helpless when they prepared me for my hibernation, which would allow me to survive in open space. After awhile, it felt like I was getting paralysed. I wasn't even able to move my eyelids. When they were ready, i was thrown into outer space, and dragged along by a basic tractor beam from the eight frigates you encountered today. For ten gruelling months I floated through deep space, all alone. In this time, they opened a jumpgate seven times, but nothing ever changed. All I ever got to see was stars and the swarms that escorted me. A few days ago, most escorting ships left, only to leave a tiny amount of fighters to guard me, plus the eight jumpgate frigates. I think they wanted to sneak past your fleet to reach the jumppoint that was there. You know the rest. Your unit moved in, killed the small escort, and captured me before destabilising the gate."

Jack's thoughts were released again. And as he feel back in his chair, he was confused. What had just happened? Telepathy? Impossible! And yet this man...

After exchanging a long understanding look, Jack simply thanked the man, picked up Zells device, and left the room. Looking on his watch, he saw that only thirty seconds had passed.

Silk was furious. Storming up and down in Byrne's office, he had screamed at Jack for seven minutes, before Byrne was finally able to cool him down. Let Jack explain himself before you have him executed, please... correction, make that before we have him executed. What the hell were you thinking Jack?"

"The question should be what he was thinking."

"Excuse me?" said Jack's two superiors, both annoyed.

Enjoying the moment, Jack waited for one extra second before answering. He realised that he had just pushed the very limits of patience, but he knew that the story he had to tell would make them forget about it anyway. "Telepathy, sir." He said. "I wouldn't have believed it myself if it didn't really just happen." And he told the whole tale, apart from the identity of the Lord's rescuers. Jack didn't know why he lied to his superiors, but something told him to keep something for himself. Silk and Byrne listened without interrupting once. Even more so then in Jack's case, the story seemed to answer all their questions. He realised what a brilliantly fine-tuned story this was, meant to specifically satisfy these two men. He wondered how much of it was untrue. Only one question remained unanswered:

"Did he say anything that could give us a hint about who these mercenaries are?" Asked Silk.

"You are not seriously thinking about taking investigative power away from the Triad* , are you?" Byrne protested.

"And why not? All our sources have bled dry, and most of our questions about the Triad have been answered. There is not much else to do, and now a perfect mystery comes up, and you want to ignore it?"

"Have you noticed that we are fighting a war lately? We will investigate trivial matters later."

Silk had a new outburst, his eyes flaming with frustration. "Trivial! We capture a kidnapped Lord, and Mr. War here calls it trivial!"

"No, he hasn't." said Jack suddenly.

"What?" asked Silk.

"No, he hasn't given me any clues regarding the identity of the mercenaries."

"Right. I guess I'll go and ask him then." And before any of the two men could say a thing, Silk stormed out of the room to interrogate the Lord.

When Byrne and Jack crossed eyes, they thought the same thing: Silk was going to come back even more frustrated than he went there. Switching the topic, Jack asked:

"What was that all about?"

"What? Oh, that." Byrne shook his shoulders as if to say that two officers fighting it out in front of their subordinates was nothing of importance. "He seems to do everything he can to find other things to investigate than the Triad. Sometimes I even wonder if I should question his loyalties."

"Nobody likes Intell people I guess." Said Jack, indicating that he felt the same way too sometimes.

"I already received a message from one of Odax' men." Said Byrne, happy to change the subject. "He seems determined to recruit you, would you have any idea why?"

Jack smiled. "Before setting up my Unit in Goldblum's service, I applied for the same with Odax. I heard that his generals liked the idea, but Odax had personally forbidden it. I guess he is having second thoughts now that that Lord is in Goldblum's hospital ship, instead of in his own."

"Yes, I suppose that would give him some second thoughts indeed." Laughed Byrne.

"Do you want me to fly a simple mission for him and screw it up?"

"No Jack, don't get involved in this. I will simply screen you, saying that your loyalties have been set."

"Thanks, Byrne."

Byrne didn't get any chance to answer to that, because Silk stormed into the room with a bewildered look on his face, the first expression that Jack considered to be genuine since he met Silk. When he had collected enough breath to talk, Silk was able to utter a few small words:

"He is gone."

*: On the word jumpgate Jack experienced the whole knowledge that this man had on the subject. Jumpgates were "shortcuts" through space-time. You can open them anywhere in space, but opening one on most locations will only transport you a couple of miles, not worth the enormous investment in energy. There are some "hotspots" however, where space-time is extremely disturbed. This means that one jump can transport you several thousands of lightyears in an instant. Understandably, the art of navigating on a journey through space using Jumpgates is very much depending on finding the right hotspots, or Helixes, as the Leope liked to call them.

**:

The Triad was the group of Lords that the Circle was fighting. Although the Triad consisted of about sixty Lords and their empires, there were three distinct leaders, making every single decision. None of the others had anything to say.

Chapter 8: ZAhm

Now that Jack had completed his reporting duties, he had the time to sit down and have a good long talk with Z'Ahm he had wanted ever since his memorable display of courage in the disastrous

battle. They were sitting at one of the magnificent big windows that the LionHeart featured. It had been almost thirty-two hours, since Jack left Z'Ahm alone with the heavily wounded Jaric. Z'Ahm didn't have any sleep, he had been crafting and operating the whole time. In those long hours, he had driven the onboard Technical Services of the LionHeart totally crazy by weird and seemingly irrational requests for parts and bits. After producing Jaric's new limbs, he started attaching them on a molecular level even the expert doctors hadn't ever seen. In the beginning, the doctors disliked everything Z'Ahm said or did, but after seeing his true mastery they followed him almost religiously. He had been forced to threaten them before they would leave Z'Ahm alone.

Jack ordered Z'Ahm an energy boosting drink called Haru, or Deadman's Miracle in more common language. Jack was appalled only by the thought of drinking it, but Z'Ahm seemed to react well to the immense amounts of energy that this brew thrusts into a man's system. Jack settled in with an ordinary Linda.

After a long silence, with both men enjoying their drinks, and the chance to finally do nothing again, Jack broke the silence. "Any idea why I wanted to talk to you?"

Mentally preparing his body for the shock of another gulp of his drink, Z'Ahm shrugged and mumbled something like "I guess my actions in the battle have something to do with it."

Jack suddenly realised something: did Z'Ahm think he was getting a lecture? He quickly removed the doubts on that subject. "I wanted to thank you for your bravery back there, but there is more."

That greatly stimulated Z'Ahm's interest for the conversation. "Oh, I thought you were going to place me back a few ranks, to teach me not to..."

"Z'Ahm, don't be stupid. That wild and chaotic talent is exactly what I want people to have and follow in my unit. We are a small elite force, we each have our own style. We don't fly by the rules, we merely fly together. That is why we have such low losses. Anyway, I wanted to know more about you. You have always been very silent about your reasons to fly for us."

Z'Ahm took another huge gulp from his Haru, and asked: "Ok, what do you want to hear?"

"Everything. Give me your life's story if you need. I want to understand you, and I want to know where you came from. I have been wondering what your story was ever since you joined. Not many of us joined out of free will you know."

That obviously disturbed Z'Ahm. He hid his shock by taking another gulp of Haru, which almost electrified his body. When he finally regained his balance, Z'Ahm lifted his head, looked in Jack's eyes, and sank back into his chair. Looking out of the big window, Z'Ahm shook his head. "I can't, Jack. I really can't..."

Jack was disappointed. "Nothing? Nothing at all?"

"When I am ready, I will tell you. At the time, I cannot speak to anyone about it, not even you."

Jack understood. The highly structured society that this short man came from threw him out for some reason. That was probably the same reason he would have to fulfil some sort of quest or wait for a ceremonial period before he could speak. "That's ok. Take your time, but be sure to tell me someday. You are carrying something hideous around, and I will not let it destroy you."

"Thank you, Jack. I appreciate it, but you simply wouldn't understand."

"Don't you think you should try and see?" Asked Jack.

"I will think about it. I'm not at my best right now."

"Yes, you need some sleep." Said Jack. He thought it would be best to just change the topic, as the relaxed silence of a minute ago felt awkward now. "Oh, and I would like to have a word with Jaric soon, is he approachable?"

Z'Ahm nodded.

"So how is he?" asked Jack.

"He's doing fine, and he is really proud of his new legs." said Z'Ahm, not without any pride.

"You gave him two new legs?" Jack was surprised. There was nothing wrong with the left leg, only the right had been injured.

"Yes of course. He would be very unbalanced if he had only one of my legs."

"Unbalanced?"

"Imagine having one normal arm and one with the power of a forklift on the other side. Would you be able to stir your tea in the morning?" asked Z'Ahm.

"Oh, I see," Said Jack "so when will he come out of his anaesthetics?"

"He woke up three hours ago."

"And how long will he need to adjust?"

"Well that depends strongly on the person. Getting used to a three thousand percent increase in muscle strength takes a lot of mental flexibility. But in his case I'd say twelve to twenty-four hours of intensive training should do it."

Jack was surprised. "So fast?"

"Well, Jaric is a smart guy, and I saw how he flew his fighter." Shrugged Z'Ahm. "He flies it like it is an extension of himself. I believe he will have no problem adapting to his legs."

"That's good news," said Jack "now we can get out of this ship sooner."

Z'Ahm leaned closer to Jack. "Frankly, this ship is giving me the creeps. I don't know what it is, but something is definitely not right."

"Yeah, I feel uncomfortable too, here. Maybe it is just the size of the thing that is getting at me. I am used to my fighter, and the freedom and speed of that."

"Maybe you are right, maybe not. Still I would like to get off of this thing ASAP."

Jack couldn't help smiling. "Ok, I will prepare the unit for launch and wakefield travel* again, we have been reserving the diplomatic quarters for too long already."

"Sounds cool, I cannot wait to strap up and do some training again."

"Later. Just go to sleep now."

Z'Ahm did just that.

"Disturbing fellow, isn't he?"

Jack didn't even need to turn around to know who that was. "Yes, but not by far as disturbing as you sneaking up on me, Treesa."

Treesa laughed. "Will you accept my life story instead of Z'Ahm's?"

Jack sent a quasi-scanning look to Treesa, and said: "Yes, I guess that'll do." He answered Treesa's devastating look with a huge smile running from ear to ear.

"There is not that much too it. I was an activist once on the planet Radon. It had recently been given to a small but extremist group of Lords. They are the true masters of guerrilla warfare. As one of their weapons, they detonate nuclear devices on all planets they have to leave, making them inhabitable for almost 1000 years. I was protesting against that form of scorched earth. The protest group I had set up was small, but all were strong and independent people. We were forced to go underground very soon, and after that I just saw my friends bodies appear one by one. When I heard about the invasion force coming towards the planet..."

Jack interrupted. "You heard about that in advance?"

"Yes, I told you I was underground. I did some work for a few of your spies in exchange for explosives. Anyway, as soon as I heard, I grabbed a fighter, and rushed to join your fleet. I was placed in one of the forward battalions, where the heavy losses are. My style of flying got me in your unit eventually, but that was 3 invasions later."

"Yes, I remember. The support mission to cover Lord Hargrove's soldiers."

"Indeed. I almost forgot. We smoked those bandits, it was great fun. Anyway, now you know. I don't know exactly who were hunting me, or why it was so important to them to keep the nuclear program running. I just want to put that episode of my life behind me, and keep flying with you guys."

"Wow Treesa... they all died?"

"Every single one of them. Burzmali, Lo-gun, Hawk, Shakk, Neo. I am the last survivor." Jack noticed her voice was trembling with suppressed rage and pain. Treesa did a good job in hiding her feelings though, and quickly regained control.

Jack was overwhelmed with so much candour. "I don't know what to say..."

"It's ok Jack. Somehow I know that I will get a chance to get to the bottom of this. And until that day, I fly my fighter."

"One more question: why did you accept the task to carry the nuke last mission?"

"Because I knew that I wouldn't fire it. I could never be that sure from the others. Byrne advised the suits at MG** to give the task to me. He is smart, Jack, and he knows a lot."

"Yes, I know. I feel really confident that I have a man like him doing all our paperwork."

"Well then, shall we go visit Jaric?" Asked Treesa.

"Actually, if you don't mind, I would like to speak with him alone."

"That's ok, I understand." Said Treesa. Walking past him, she gently ran her arm across his chest, while giving him an intense look. Jack was off balance, and before he could think of a way to react, Treesa was gone. Confused, Jack walked over to Jaric's room.

Just when he was about to open the door, he felt a note in his pocket. Did Treesa put it there? Why didn't she just tell me what she had to say?

As Jack read the note he felt the ground being swept away from under his feet. He barely noticed that by now, the door had opened, and everyone in the room could see his despair. All he could think of was the eight words Treesa had jotted down, burning in his mind:

I am still in danger. They are here

*: Small ships do not have the size or the energy capacity that is needed to hold their own intergalactic drives. Instead, they are equipped with smaller wakefield devices. The science is not complete, but it seems possible to 'stretch' the disturbance of space-time that a capital ship creates when his drives are operational. The wakefield enhancers fitted to the Raptors are doing just that, making it possible to follow the capital ships, while only operating on normal drives. As mentioned before, the science is not complete, but it seems to work better for smaller ships. It is theoretically possible to fit a battleship in this stretched wakefield, but doing this would require almost a tenfold of the energy required to create it's own space-time breach. Perhaps a tell-tale sign of the complexity of the involved mechanisms is a quote by one of the famous independent Mardragg scientists working on the problem: "God, I wish Einstein was here."

**: Mission Guidance. This is the operational command body for most small battles.

Chapter 9: Paranoid Council

Jack was stunned for a second. His whole world spun around him. He stood there in the room, afraid of having to face it's reality: there could be people in there who were more then they were telling. He stood there, thinking of what to do, and how to act. He stood there, afraid of returning to the real world, that was obviously demanding his attention. Still in shock, he just did what he could do.

"Ok people, I want some privacy again, everybody out!" The last time the doctors had met him, he had done exactly the same, sending them all away in one of his most agitated moods ever. Although the reason was different this time, the doctors saw no difference. Remembering last time, when he literally threw one of them out, they all started to move with a deep sigh.

The same guy that objected last time had something to say again.

"That is a really annoying habit of yours, Jack."

"Yeah, well we all have our little mistakes. Yours is that you talk when you shouldn't." Jack shifted his attention to his young friend. "Not you Zell, I want to talk to you."

Now that he was alone in the room with two of his most trusted men, Jack was finally able to get a grip on reality again. With one of his best poker faces ever, he handed the note to Zell, and indicated that he should give it to Jaric as well, who was faking to be asleep. Zell poked Jaric in the side.

"He's on to you man, just open your eyes." After saying that he turned his eyes to the paper, and his ever-present smile disappeared. With a questioning look on Jack, he passed the note on to Jaric. When Jaric had had the time to sit up straight and read the note, Jack started to explain.

"Treesa wrote it. She was an anti-nuclear activist on Radon, and..."

"We invaded Radon, right?" Asked Jaric.

"Yes, that's where the Circle picked her up. Anyway, she was forced to go underground a long time ago, because a shady anti-terrorism organisation of the Core* was hunting her down. And now she fumbles this note in my pocket, carefully out of sight from the other public in the main lounge."

"The Core! Are we on their hitlist? I haven't heard much about them, but none of it made me sleep better." said Zell.

Jack laughed. "Zell, you never sleep."

"The Core... I really hoped that Radon would be the last time we had to deal with them. Invading that planet was a hell. There were traps everywhere, as I recall it."

"Well, here they are, and they have people close to us apparently."

Zell turned pale slowly. "We are doomed."

"No, we are not," said Jaric "they are not as close as you might think, or they would have taken action by now."

"Perhaps they are waiting for something to happen." Said Jack.

"Who cares? We are fighterpilots. What on Earth can we do against a Union of Lords, especially one like the Core?"

"More than you might think, Zell." This time Jaric really caught the attention of his two friends, so he continued. "Well, to start with we need to talk to Byrne. I think that he should be there if we make big decisions about the Unit."

"Yes, you are right." Jack hesitated. "Do you think we should invite Treesa too?"

"Maybe later, I think we should have a rational discussion about this before we make emotional decisions." Said Jaric after some deep thinking."

"Ok, I'll go get Byrne then. Zell, get a few of those in-ear LoRaC's and give one to Treesa, Cid, Kink and Z'Ahm. Tell them to be ready for the next mission in two hours."

Zell lifted an eyebrow. "Kink too? He's a freak."

Halfway on his way to the door, Jack turned his head and said: "Yes I know, but he is a smart freak. In times of crisis I want smart people to talk to. Besides, he's basically the only man who could never be a spy. He was here way before we ever went to one of the Core's planets."

"Ok, ok, I'll give him one."

Jack and Zell were so occupied with their smalltalk that they didn't notice Jaric getting out of bed. He sat on the edge for a few seconds, checking the movements of his legs. After getting a feel for them, he stood on his legs, swaying back and forth to find his balance, and then he took a few steps. He stopped, looked up, and said: "Where do you think you're going?", expecting Jack and Zell to display some amazement.

Jack knew that he should be amazed, but he was prepared for this. Instead, he and Zell (who had the exact same reaction) looked at each other, shrugged, put on the most bored faces possible under the circumstances, and walked out of the room. Jaric was devastated. "Guys! ... Ehh, I ehh... should really come with you to Byrne's office, because it is much safer..."

"Yes, I agree completely," said Jack, "I'll see you there."

What Jaric couldn't see, was the two friends' faces, tightly pressing their lips together in a futile attempt to keep an enormous laughter inside. They failed after just five steps, and then laughed so loud that they had to find support on each other's shoulders to not fall to the floor.

As if the poor doctors waiting in the hallway were not confused enough, Jaric decided to get even. He took two steps, taking him outside the doorway, jumped back to the wall, and then used the doorpost to make a horizontal jump all the way over Jack and Zell's heads to the other side of the hallway some fifteen meters away. He 'landed' on the wall, and then bounced back, jumping to a point exactly 2 feet in front of where the two friends had been congratulating themselves about their great joke. This time, they actually were amazed. After a few deadly silent seconds, it was Jaric's turn to shrug as if it was nothing unusual. "I practiced." When the two mesmerised friends clearly were not going to think of anything witty to say, he did it for them: "Ok, I guess I'll see you there then." Jaric didn't bother to use the ground when he left. Jumping in the same style he had done earlier, he was quickly around the corner, leaving a hallway full of people behind, who all had something to tell their grandchildren, as well as leaving a few permanent marks in the wall, where his feet had buckled the titanium.

Four men, sitting down in an office. All of them waiting for someone to talk. But they had nothing to say. They all knew what this meant, and what had to be done. Everyone was surprised that it was Zell to break the silence.

"So Byrne, It is clear that we need to bring this under the direct attention of the Lords of the Circle. Is there a procedure for something like this, or do we have to improvise?" When they all looked at their young friend without answering, a bit overwhelmed by Zell's unexpected leadership, Zell almost seemed insulted. "What? Am I not allowed to ask the right questions?"

As always, Byrne knew what to do. "There are procedures, guidelines and regulations for everything, Zell. The question is, do we want to follow them?"

"Ok, let's start at the beginning. What would we need to do if we followed them? We can go from there and leave all the parts we don't like out." This time, Byrne was able to avoid the same look, but Jack and Jaric failed. But Zell was unstoppable now. "Well?" He insisted.

Byrne cleared his throat. "This is really the kind of situation that the Vacant** is for. I think that is about the only useful protocol that we have at this time. We will have to make the rest up as we go."

"What exactly is that 'rest' you talk about?" Wondered Zell.

Jack interferred. "Well for instance, the Unit died today. If I cannot trust every single pilot out there, I cannot fly at all."

Jaric pulled a sorrowed face. "Yes, I'm afraid you are right." He frowned. "First we have to decide what we want. Will we continue the Unit, or not?"

"Well that depends on what there will be left of it after this. I personally think that we should reduce to seven pilots."

"You know there is a big chance that you will be banned after your talk with the Council. They are impressed with your actions on last mission and the report you filed about that interview with the captive man. But they are also terribly strict when it comes to leaving loose ends. Of the last two hundred Vacants that have been taken, only twelve people were allowed to take their old place back into the ranks. More then a hundred of them have been banished from the Circle's empire forever."

"What about the others?" Asked Zell.

Through Byrne's serious look, Zell deducted that these poor souls never had to worry about what world to live on again. He shook his head. "That's one mighty risk you are taking there Jack."

"We have no other options Zell." Said Jack with a worried tone in his voice.

Byrne continued. "That is the worst case scenario. At worst they will probably put a few of intell's teams on the job, and assign give your Unit a few impossible missions, hoping you will all get killed, solving their problem. I hope those seven people you have in mind are up to the task."

Jack nodded. "It's easy to guess which seven they are Byrne."

Byrne started to count the names. "Jack is One. His leadership is as essential to us all as our Raptors themselves. Zell is probably one of the ten best fighters of the universe on a good day, so he is Two. Jaric is Three, his wisdom and calmness are a basis for others to fall back on in times of peril. Treesa is Four. Her deductions in the last mission proved again that sometimes all a problem needs is a woman's mind. Z'Ahm is Five. His incredible dedication and determination to pay back what he owes the Unit, plus his unique medical skills make him worthy. Six is Kink. He is strange, but incredibly creative. No doubt he will prove his worth someday. Cid is Seven. His background of industrial espionage and knowledge of big machinery of any sorts makes him unique in may ways." He leaned back in his chair. "Good heavens Jack, where did we find these people?"

Jack laughed. "Yes, it's quite a crew, isn't it? So that's it?" He suddenly dropped his laugh. "Too bad, Kurt isn't here, we could really use his big guns expertise."

“Wasn’t he instructing that kid from Delcoi III? You know, the silent child with the grown up eyes? He spooks me, but if he learned fast enough, he might be able to replace Kurt in a way...” Zell didn’t sound as convinced as he would have wanted.

“You are right Zell. Jaric, can you try to find out if he is good enough? If so, give him a LoRaC too. I think that will be all.” He looked across the room. The other three men produced a serious nod. “Good.” He turned to Byrne. “When is the next possible Vacant?”

Byrne looked at the time and opened a few files in his holo-emitter. “In four hours there is one, and in 12 hours the next. The Lords have dinner each eight hours.”

“Perfect. Zell, Jaric, go and assemble the others, and start preparing for departure. Keep it all inside the Seven. I will get an hour of rest now, and then move out claim the Vacant. You can get some rest while I’m there. Byrne, I’m hoping you would accompany me and help me with the speech.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Agreed Jaric.

The four men went their way, doing what was needed with uncharacteristic depressed faces.

*: The Core is exactly as Treesa described. It’s a group of Lords that formed in the very beginning of the wartorn Age of Lords. They are known as the most closed and unreachable group in the universe. It is said that all of them were a team even before they became Lords, and that they never spoke to anybody that was not born and raised under their reign. Terror, intrigue, and guerrilla warfare are their trademarks. Despite their cold and distant attitude they get a great deal of respect among other lords, and through the ages they have had a big political influence on the major powerblocks that ruled the universe, without ever choosing sides.

** : In the early days of the Circle, a young thief from the streets had stumbled upon a conspiracy against the life of Lord Vigo when breaking into a nobleman’s house. Instead of reporting it to any of the officers from Vigo’s guard, he insisted on talking to the Lord himself. Before the guards could stop him, he slipped into the Lord’s dining room. The boy threw himself to the ground, pleading to be heard. Vigo ordered the guard, who was already dragging the boy out to let him go, and offered him the vacant seat of an absent Lord instead. There, dining with the Lords, the immensely nervous young thief told his tale, pointing at the same guard who was dragging him out as the one who would deliver the final blow. Vigo awarded the boy by sending him to prison for five years for thievery and then offering him a place in his intelligence service. From that day on, Vigo insisted that anyone willing to accept any punishment should be able to take that Vacant seat.

Chapter 10: The Gate of Despair

To say that Jack was nervous would be a horrible understatement. He was standing at the entrance of the dining hall of the Lords, better known as the Gates of Despair. The Lords each had their own entrance, so this particular doors were only used when people chose to sit in the Vacant.. To kill some time, Jack studied the double doors, which were inscribed with intertwining symbols. These doors were a work of true mastery. The symbols on it intertwined in such a way that you could almost see them, but never really catch them. Every time you thought you saw something you knew, your eyes would just be torn away to something else. It's not that the symbols actually moved, but the enormous complexity of the interlocked symbols crippled your attention span. Jack saw snakes, dragons, bears, crosses, swords, mummies, and all things connected to mythology, but he never actually saw them. Instead, his thoughts were somehow guided towards seeing these things. All of these were displayed through symbols, interlocking in such a way that they projected the image of myth and legend in the viewer's head, rather than needing the viewer to solve the puzzle. It was amazing. While Jack stared at it, time seemed to fade, and his mind was free to wander around.

He thought of his companions on the LionHeart. Zell, Treesa, Byrne, Jaric, Z'Ahm, Kink, Cid and Ki, Kurt's young student. They were preparing their Raptor in secrecy. All of them risked being banned from the Circular Empire for life. All of them trusted Jack to do what was needed. Jack felt as if they were standing right there behind him. staring at the door with him.

Jack thought back of his short conversation with Byrne on the way to the mothership of the fleet. For safety reasons, and despite his continuing complaints, Jack wasn't allowed to come there in his own Raptor. Instead they sailed on the smallish personnel freighter NoVa XVI, specially fitted to scan it's passengers from head to toe on a near-molecular level. Looking out the window at the gigantic First Comet, Byrne got sentimental:

"No matter how many times I look at it, I always get the creeps. I just can't grasp how gigantic that thing is."

Jack wasn't that impressed, for two reasons. This was indeed the biggest, but not the first gigas class mothership* he had seen. But more importantly, he had other things to worry about.

"I have to face the council in three hours, and all you can say is 'Look how big their ship is!' ".

"Jack, are you loosing your cool?"

"Yeah, sorry, it's just that there is only the small matter that they will sentence me to death if they decide that my case was not worth their time."

"Unlikely. Infiltration by the Core is something that the Lords would really like to hear about. They are a very paranoid bunch, you know."

“Yeah, well I’m still nervous. And there’s no way I’m getting ‘my cool’ back before this is all over, so please stop talking about it.”

Byrne knew what was best for him, so he shut up and started looking at the First Comet again.

Jack was wrong though. As he looked at these gates, awaiting his trial, he felt relaxed, in control, and strong. Yes, he definitely found his ‘cool’ back. To avoid boredom, he started rehearsing the thirteen names of the lords again. Byrne had supplied him with a list complete with his own witty comments.

Margratha, commonly referred to as “the Ice Queen”. Doesn’t say much, beautiful as hell, and as mean as they get. She is also known for the annoying habit of being right all the time.

Stanley. A big, fat, loud man nicknamed “the Viking”, mostly because of his long curly red beard.

Sage. A wise man, carrying the aura of one of the Wizards of old. Logically, there are a lot of rumours about him being one of the original clan of the First Wizard, but nobody ever proved one of these theories. He receives great respect among the council, for being able to make the hardest of decisions without prejudice. There are people who insist that Sage is responsible for the Inner Circle’s current powerful position in the universe.

Peanut. Being only 4 foot tall, he suffers great underestimation time and time again. He proved people wrong wherever his warfleets went. Peanut is arguably the best tactical commander in the galaxy.

Moon. Mysterious is not enough of a word for him. Nobody really knows where his clan originated, or where his fleets seem to be coming from. All his men are highly trained, and his armies of ‘Ninjas’ are feared throughout the galaxy. To add to dramatic effect, he always wears a weird mask that runs down to his chest and shoulders, but covers only portions of his face.

Dingo. This strange man is only known by his name as a performer. He knows how to manipulate a crowd like no other man alive.

HardBall. This somewhat melodramatic Lord has been the cause of several of the larger conflicts in the past seven millennia, since he was admitted inside the Inner Circle. He is the ‘youngest’ member of the Circle in that respect, and he seems eager to prove his worth every single day.

Lydia and Sylvia. The most famous twins in existence, and also the object of most fantasies ever. Neither of them has ever discouraged this. It’s a fairly common joke to connect this with the more than huge population on each of their planets. The truth behind this is less tantalizing: the sisters have specialized in healthcare, and their hospitals are known to be able to cure anybody that has more than three atoms left in his body.

Limb. Limb is probably the ugliest man alive. Hunchbacked, three artificial limbs, totally scorched face, one eyeball missing, short, fat, rashes everywhere, and a stare in his one good eye that would

have given the Devil himself nightmares. He likes to tell people the story that he was the last man to ever become a Lord. He claims that he is no more than a freak experiment of bored labworkers. This often ruthless and sarcastic man is the Circle's counterintelligence expert.

Rex. The pretty boy of the council. People wonder how he ever got in, and on what grounds he was selected. He is arrogant, often conducts operations away from the rest, and bosses everybody around. Few people know that he changed sides to the Circle in a long past war, and thereby tipped the scales. Rumor has it that the other Lords are getting tired of him.

James Geoffrey Worthington is the man to beat on technological innovations. He is doing research on both ships and communication methods for the Circle. Somehow, his technological edge on the rest of the universe has paid off, and he is commonly known as the single most powerful Lord in the Universe. His Empire stretches from the outer rim almost to the more heavily populated core of the Cluster. It is said that out of every twenty planets in the universe, he owns one.

Wherever he goes, his foes just run and hope he doesn't come after them.

Vigo, the leader of the pack. A charismatic man, who knows the value of good counselling and is by his own words a "good-for-nothing egotripper". He claims that there are thousands of Lords in the Galaxy that could do his job, which is basically to sit back, let his crew sort it out, and then claim all the glory for it. He is not far aside from the truth, but he is wrong when he says that thousands can do his job. It is harder then one might think to trust others enough to let them do things in your name. It is even harder to put the right people in the right positions, and keep everybody focused on the same goal all the time.

Jack felt strangely confident of himself. And that was for the best, because just as he thought that, the doors started to swing open. As he was told, he just walked into the room without any form of ceremonials.

*: The mythical Gigas Motherships were basically moon-sized battle platforms, fitted with so many engines that they were able to travel in complete defiance of their weight and size. No more than ten of these ships were known to exist, as it took tremendous resources and effort to construct such a monster. Only the biggest empires could afford to build one.

Chapter 11: Eye to Eye

Peeking through the doorway, all that Jack could see was a surprisingly sober octagonal room. Of course Jack had heard the rumours about the walls, that were made of the rare and flawless dangii-wood, captured from a planet that has been destroyed for so long that nobody remembers the

name. To form the walls of this room, a piece of the hollow trunk had just been cut off. The tree must have had a diameter of over twenty meters, realised Jack with a sudden shock. The insane perfection of the room suddenly grasped him. These walls alone represented more wealth than he could ever comprehend. The copper-coloured walls gave him the creeps, so he focused on the shiny black floor. In the centre of the room, the logo of the Circle was embedded in brown marble, with the individual marks of each lord around it. The only furniture in the room was a massive ebony oval dinner table. Fourteen wine-red moulders* were placed around the table, all equal in size. The ceiling emitted a pleasant and warm orange-yellow light, which gave the room a calming character. The room that had seemed sober on a first glance became an astonishing display of wealth upon closer inspection. Jack had entered through the only door in the room. Five sides of the octagonal room were undecorated. One was the door. The other two, directly opposite to each other there were two paintings. No doubt priceless originals from the legendary Earth. On Jack's left he saw a rather attractive lady, hands folded in front of her. Despite the fact that she seemed a very decent lady, the slightest of smiles played around her lips. She seemed to know something. It was a rather pleasant painting to look at. The painting on Jack's right was quite the opposite of that. Painted in a greasy, abstract way, a man stood on a bridge in complete despair. The man screamed. Somehow, the painter had managed to put all the agony and pain a man could possibly feel in this one painting. When looking at this painting for more than two seconds, one could almost hear the scream.

For a second Jack hesitated. As there were no Lords in the room yet, and no servants either, he didn't know where to sit. Thinking about it, he realised that this would be the first in a long series of subtle tests. He decided to sit on the right head of the table, with the screaming man behind him. When he would finally bring his message of infiltration of the core, he could use all the help he could get to convince the Circle. This painting would be a considerable ally, while the smiling lady would only strengthen the idea that he was just a cocky brat who thought that the Lords would solve his personal problems if he just asked them nice enough. He sat down, awaiting the things to come.

He didn't have to wait long. Vigo and Limb entered about a minute after Jack, unannounced, and unsuspected. They came through the same door as Jack had a minute earlier, but on the other side a different hallway had shown. Jack simply assumed that the room would have turned an eighth, and then lost all interest in the matter. It was of no importance. He jumped up from his seat to welcome the two Lords in their own house. He had been told to act as one of them, so he would. Vigo looked at Jack, not surprised or curious, but taxing. Apparently making a decision, he tall Vigo simply nodded towards Jack, and then spoke; "Please have a seat, Jack. I'm sure this will be a very pleasant evening for us all."

Before the grumpy Limb could mumble that he wasn't so sure, Jack did exactly that. "I do hope so Vigo, however my business here is of the serious type."

Vigo lifted one eyebrow, as if he was surprised, and then sat down at the other end of the table, with the smiling lady behind him. Limb simply reacted by mumbling something else, and also took his seat, two seats away from Vigo. Jack liked him already. Hiding his smile behind an iron mask of

self-control and concentration, he sat down as well.

Less than a minute later, Rex, HardBall and Peanut came in. They were in fierce discussion about what they should do about some rebel faction somewhere in the galaxy. Jack suddenly realized that most of his missions were born out of discussions like this, and thus he had first hand experience in this field. He simply cut into the discussion, out of his comfy chair. "Hit their weather satellites."

Rex and HardBall's faces were a mixture of surprise and contempt, but Peanut was interested. He looked at Jack the way a librarian would look down at a really smart kid (albeit upwards, because of his small stature), and said: "Please explain what we would gain by doing that."

Jack leaned back in his chair, maybe just a tiny bit too confident. "You speak of Mountain-rebels. The weather up there is extreme, cold, and dangerous if not for these satellites. By destroying them, you will simply give these people something else to worry about then their government. As soon as they don't care anymore, replace the guy that is ruling your planet, and once the new man succeeded in rescuing their wives and children, he will be their hero, and you have a happy planet again, with a thankful population, and minimal loss of lives. And all you have to do is throw the switch to crash two or three satellites, and replace one man."

Sage, who also entered by now, applauded calmly. "Beautiful thinking, and all that from a mere Raptorpilot. But what if I tell you that that "guy" ruling the planet is Rex's direct descendant, and his family has been ruling that planet since the days of the First Wizard?"

Jack felt the tension in the room rise. This was his first true test. He would certainly anger Rex by suggesting his breed should be shoved aside. On the other hand, this could be a good opportunity for him to prove his judgement to the others, especially Sage and Vigo. He shrugged "If you turn away from change, it will stab you in the back. Moreover, if his people are rebelling against him, this man is neither a good leader, nor a good oppressor."

That definitely got the desired effect. Rex's eyes narrowed, but just a tiny bit, and then he spoke with a sour face; "It's Margratha's job to confront us with the truth all the time, not yours."

Jack noticed that Vigo had been watching Rex closely, and that Rex did not speak freely. There were more issues on the agenda then just Jack's trouble, and it seemed that Jack had just set the course of events of an entire planet for the next few millennia. Finally realising the true horrifying extent of the power of these people, he suddenly felt less at ease then a second ago.

Margratha entered, and asked: "Talking about me behind my back again, Rex?"

"Rex here was just using your name to display his poor skills in the art of sarcasm, that's all." Said Limb, with one of his hideous smiles. This was all a bit too much for Rex, who sat down with a hurt face, and kept silent. Jack had lost one vote there, he was sure about that.

Margratha ignored all the tension in the room, and seated herself in dignity.

Lydia and Sylvia entered, accompanied and entertained by Dingo. All three of them were clearly in a cheerful mood, and the sisters seemed radiant. Jack's heart suddenly lost it's sense of rhythm,

and his concentration was almost broken. These women were incredible! But Jack's control was equally astronomic, so he didn't gasp or stare. He simply greeted the two and two seconds later Jack had passed another test. He regained his cool, and leaned back in his seat again. He couldn't remember sitting up, which rose some doubt in his mind what his face had shown in those two awful seconds. He had no more time to think about it, because Stanley and Lord Worthington appeared. Both of them looking very depressed, and in deep thought. Jack wondered what it was that could depress the most powerful man in the universe, but he dared not ask. Instead, he stood up, and politely nodded to Lord Worthington, and greeted Stanley the Viking in a more lively way. Both answered his greetings silently, and sat down.

One empty seat remained, and the whole group babbled a bit waiting for Moon. Sage talked to Worthington and Stanley, Margratha and Rex talked to Limb and Peanut about the rebels, and HardBall and Dingo were battling for the attention of the twins. Jack and Vigo observing it all, taxing the group and each other. Suddenly, Moon was sitting two seats away from Jack, easily watching the whole situation. Jack didn't see him coming in, even though he had kept one eye on the door at all times. Did he sneak in under the cover of the radiant twins? Did he hide behind the broad shoulders of the Viking? Was he hiding under the table the whole time? Was it even a he? Jack's mind was raising question after question about this man (woman?), almost not accepting that he actually existed. Then he realised that this was the exact way that Moon could sneak in without him noticing. Instead of making himself invisible for the eye, Moon managed to be unacceptable for the brain.

With everybody seated, it was time. A parade of fourteen waiters brought in a terrific appetiser of puff pastry filled with a form of non-sweet redfruit, duck's liver and a thick but smooth Lindasauce. When Jack took his first bite, he immediately had to fight back an urge to attack the rest of it. But Jack was here for other things then the food.

Realizing that there was probably no protocol to do this in an elegant way, Jack decided to go with the old saying that the offence is the best defence. He stood up, waited for all the faces to turn his way, and then said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have been infiltrated by the Core."

*: A moulder is about the best seat in the universe. (It's a common joke among the soldiers that the only seat that would beat the moulder is any seat in between of Lydia and Sylvia)

Moulders don't look like seats at all, they are simply cubic blocks of about 5 feet tall. As soon as one sits on it (or rather, sinks into it), the moulder will automatically shape itself to the body it is bearing. A moulder will constantly aid you in doing what you want to do, by getting softer and lower when you lean back, and higher and more supportive when you are eating or conferencing. Moulders can be made to do anything in your imagination, and there are persistent stories of rich

people that spent their whole life in such a seat, simply because they were unable to tear themselves away from it.

Chapter 12: - To be Continued

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