

NOVIS! By Keith Weatherby II

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Chapter One:

The sea of reds and golds and blues shimmered in the starlight as the StarLiner Ulysses hove into view. An invisible forcefield came on the StarLiner's bow and large armor plating retracted on the starliner's observation deck. Many people stood staring at the Cross nebula. Families, couples, friends, everyone was up on the deck. It was a beautiful sight. Lance Morgan and his new wife Dana were standing at the railing. Lance was behind her with his arms wrapped around her. Lance was a bit taller and somewhat muscular, and Dana, was petite and beautiful.

"I wish we could just stay here forever," she said.

"Well we still have another week, and we do have the rest of our lives together."

They stood there until the starliner passed the nebula and then the armor plating covered the observation deck once more. They strolled off the deck hand-in-hand. They walked down a gray carpeted hallway to an elevator, and then pressed their deck number. Dana turned to Lance a bit seriously.

"Lance, have you thought any about what we discussed last night?"

He paused to himself as in thought.

"I don't know, law enforcement has been my life. You know I'm careful. I just wish you wouldn't worry so much."

"But I'm supposed to be your life now. Plus you're good with your hands. You could open up a bot repair shop. And we'll live in some off-world little flea speck of a planet and have a quiet life, just you and me."

"I'll probably be bored to death."

"I won't let you get bored to death," she said rather devilishly and walked closer to him.

He let go of one hand and rubbed the back of his neck as if trying to think of something to say. As he looked back at her, seeing expectation in her eyes he suddenly smiled and pulled her close.

"Will it make you happy?"

"Happier than you will ever know."

"And you won't let me get bored?"

"I have a few tricks up my sleeves and you will definitely not get bored," she laughed.

"Then as soon as we get back, I will tender my resignation."

They put their arms around each other and kissed.

As the elevator reached their deck the doors opened and they were still kissing. A little boy and his older sister were standing waiting to get into the elevator.

"Get a room," the boy remarked snidely as they walked past.

Dana practically bounced out the room dragging Lance behind her... They finally made it to their cabin and Dana started kissing him again, she began pulling off his shirt, and they stumbled into their room. The door slid shut automatically behind them.

The next morning they showered and got dressed. You couldn't really tell it was morning because the starliner was in space, and there was nothing telling them when night and day was. However the clocks said 9 and the lighting was changed to make you feel you were walking around the decks on a bright and sunny morning. They went down to one of the restaurants for breakfast. They

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were halfway finished when one of the waiters came up.

“Sir, you have a holo-call. You may take it in one of the booths to your left, line 524”

“Thank you.”

Dana gave him a warning look.

“Don't worry I'm not going to change my mind now.” He smiled then got up.

As soon as he left, Dana casually opened her purse took out a compact. She opened the contact and pretended to check her makeup. Lifting up a panel on the bottom she pressed a small red button. A voice seemed to come from the compact. “So you've decided to accept the job? You know there's no turning back once this is set in motion.”

“Just as long as I get paid. And I want to be paid on time. There are a lot of interested parties who want what I have to offer, and you know I don't come cheap.”

“I just want you to make sure you're sure. You were only recommended by a friend of a friend. I don't normally trust so blindly, but I'm strapped for time. I need to make this happen, and I need you to help.”

“You just do your part, and pay me my money and we'll get along fine.”

She snapped the compact shut, and drew a few stares as it clapped loudly.

Lance walked into a booth, slid his room card into one of the slots on a panel on the side of the booth, and then said “Line 524”. An image flickered to life and there stood a squat man chewing on a cigar. The image was a perfect representation of this man, only marred by a slight haziness and translucency through some parts of his body that registered it as a hologram as if projected onto light.

“Morgan, I'm sorry to have to do this to you, but I need you here asap. This is the big one. Ajax is on an unfinished orbital mall of the moon of Ecliptus 12. He's doing a deal. Possibly the biggest one ever. He's going to attempt to buy a detonation plate of all things. And you know that could only mean a D80. I'm not sure what he's going to do with it, but I don't want to find out.”

“It's my honeymoon, chief. Can't you get any of the other guys to help. Besides I'm thinking of ... resigning.”

“Resigning, you? Ha, that's a laugh. You're one of the best, and I need everyone. This is the one we've been waiting for. We might have something to put him away for good now.”

“Chief... she's not going to like this. I'm not even sure I like this. I told her I was through as soon as the honeymoon was over.”

“Well we need all our resources. I've pulled units from 16 different systems. We need you as you seem to have more intel than anyone else.”

“Will this be the last? Will you let me resign after that?”

“Yeah sure, though I don't see you doing that for very long.”

“You're positive this is the last time?”

“Hey look if it weren't important I wouldn't be asking you would I?”

“I'll go break the news to Dana.”

“Good man, Baxter out.”

The Image faded away to nothing as the light projectors dimmed. How was he going to explain this to her. He would just have to put his foot down, this will be the last time. Plus she has to know that this was an important mission. To put Ajax one of the most feared men in the galaxy, away for who knows how long.

Lance returned to the table. Dana smiled at him sweetly but his face was without expression.

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She turned her smile into a frown.

“It was the SPD wasn't it? They need you for something important. Did you tell them about us, about what we're planning? Did you even try to convince them you weren't going?” She sounded a little like she was pleading.

“Honey, this is the big one. The one I have been after all my career. We're finally going to put Ajax away for good. Don't you see? Millions of lives could be at risk every single minute he's out there. He has his hand in everything, smuggling, illegal arms, priceless artifacts. If it's illegal you can be sure Ajax has some part of it.”

“Lance, when I married you I realized I was getting a cop for a husband, but I thought I could change that. Each time you went out on a mission I nearly died from worry. I don't want to go through that anymore.” Tears were starting to well up in her eyes.

“This is the last one, I promise. It's not as though it's going to keep pulling me in every time. This is what I trained for. Getting Ajax behind bars is the one case I've been working on my whole career. Once we apprehended him I will be done, we'll go off-world and be quiet and boring the rest of our days.”

“Lance...” but the thought died as she started crying. She stormed off towards their room.

Lance stood there for a few minutes and then went after her. They packed up their things, and headed for the nearest launch bay to charter a shuttle back to their home planet. All the ride home they said nothing to each other. Dana looked like she had just been widowed. Lance couldn't make sense of her insistence that he quit right now that very moment. It broke him up inside to know that he caused her hurt like that. Right now though he couldn't get into it. They had to just get home and he had to get ready to leave.

Meanwhile just off of Ecliptus 12's moon, a small transport started getting close to the orbital mall. The structure was only partially completed, they weren't going to finish it for months yet. The part that was completed had a fully working landing platform as well as a docking station. The transport was black with interlocking metal panels, that made it look like a somewhat futuristic casket. It came by and attached to the docking station. Inside there was evidence of recent construction. Plaster covering the walls, tools lying on the floor and control panels and computers open with exposed wires. Some of the large cabinets that were completed had a myriad of lights all blinking, in different patterns, like thousands of tiny fireflies dancing on the surface of some still black pond. It was dark, but not too dark. A man walked out in all garbed in black, he was handsome except for a chunk of the bridge of his nose was gone, as if he had never been born normally. Another figure lurched behind him, he was several feet taller than the man, he had two feet and 4 arms, although the arms were rather long. His skin was blue-green and instead of hair he had small thin tentacles that seemed to move of their own accord. Several armed guards in body armor strode out beside them. On the other side a humanoid figure walked out his body was half covered in metal, as if he was half bot, and half man. Not exactly cyborg.

“You said she was the best, now where is she?” the half metal man demanded in a sort of hoarse whisper.

“Patience Cert. She is the best and she will be here when she is ready.”

“Why did you even want me to come along, you can handle yourself, plus you got this big brute to cover you.”

“Cert, I need your cold hard logic to determine if we're getting the best deal here, and I need your cold hard metal to ensure things go as planned. You know Morgan is always on my trail, but this

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time, I think I've gotten everything under control. I just don't want any slip ups.”

“Well she better get here soon, Ajax, or else I'm gone and you'll have to deal with her yourself.”

Ajax seemed unconcerned, but he was a bit. He had everything riding on this. He needed a detplate to complete construction of a d80, and then to hand it over to the Intergalactic Businessmen's Association. Only he wasn't about to give it to them. The “businessmen” were a consortium of cutthroats and thieves disguised as legitimate corporate officers. They ran the Phalanx quadrant, and everything beyond that. He needed complete control of their whole operation. But first he needed an Implosion Bomb capable of destroying small asteroids, large ships, or even doing a lot of damage to a planet. He leaned over to Trolla.

“It seems Mr. Morgan has shown up more often then I want to know. I want you to keep alert, if he has somehow found me again, I want you to liquidate him.”

Trolla grunted and nodded. He knew the price for failure however it didn't seem to phase him. Somehow he knew that Morgan would be here to foul things up yet again. Still they would try to get the deal done before anyone could be there to break it up.

Lance arrived at headquarters all suited up with his incapacitator and flack jacket. He arrived at a large room with other SPD officers. Most of men and women of the SPD were eager and impatient to get on with the briefing. Half turned to look at Lance when they strolled in and sat up in their seats eager to hear what was going down.

“Finally you're here, Morgan.”, Baxter said, “I was afraid I was going to have to start without you.”

“Besides we need our poster boy here.”, said Dan, one of Lance's closest friends.

“Why? So you can throw darts at it?” Lance quipped in reply.

Dan smirked at him. He was actually Lance's superior, but Lance didn't mind. He wanted to be out in space where the action was, not pushing paper and wearing ties. Plus he recommend Dan for the position. In any case Dan was suited up as well, since as Baxter had told him, he needed everyone he could find. He was even calling for off-world help.

“As some of you know, there's a big deal going down on an orbital platform off the moon of Ecliptus 12. Our number one most wanted Ajax is doing a deal in the space mall that hasn't been finished yet. He has a man with him that goes by the name Cert, and beyond that we don't know anything about him. He also has his Kriegan hitbeast Trolla. That's right Krieg with a capital K. Also he has several squads of armed muscle. He's serious, and he's dangerous. We believe he's developing a D80 implosion bomb.”

Several officers gasped. Implosion bombs were nasty. Although they weren't your stereotypical planet killers, they could take a sizable chunk out of one. They were banned in several star systems because frequent usage led to instabilities in the rotations of various planets that orbited stars in those systems. You could take out a whole solar system if you knew where to place those thingies.

“We hear he's enlisted the help of a notorious weapons smuggler, and if she can't find what you're looking for, she'll bring you someone who can. That's right boys, I said 'SHE'. Women are dangerous enough as it is, without dealing with black market weapons.”

Several female officers tried to stifle their chortling. Dan leaned in toward Lance to whisper.

“Do you know anything about Katt? There were some odd things in her file that made me think of Dana for some reason.”

Baxter was talking about someone named Tenrow, a notorious engineer of weapons of mass

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destruction. Morgan and Dan were catching snatches of briefing while chatting.

“How could you suggest such a thing?”, Lance sounded hurt. “She's a systems analyst for a major robotics company. She's as far away from this as she possibly could be. She even tried to talk me into retiring, which I do plan to do after this is all over, no more chasing alien scum down alleys on backwater planets. When I came here she was practically in tears, and wouldn't speak to me the whole way back.”

“and Katt is bringing Tenrow to meet Ajax.”, Lance picked up while still leaning to hear what Dan was whispering.

“Lance, we've been friends for how long? 8 years? In that time have I ever said anything against her, or untruthful to you? I'm not speaking lightly, and I wouldn't do anything to hurt your feelings, you know that. We've saved each other's butt how many times? It's just something isn't sitting right, but I don't know what it is. Just watch yourself okay?”

“I'm married to her now, I think I know her pretty well.”

Baxter was just finishing up the briefing when Lance heard his name mentioned.

“We're to arrest everyone involved. Including Katt, Finch, and most importantly Ajax. Cert and Trolla are sort of wild cards. If you can safely apprehend them, then do so, otherwise don't particularly risk your lives, when it's Ajax that we want. I've selected Lance Morgan to be the Strike Commander. He will take Squad A, through the center of the platform. Dan Briggs will command Squad B...” Baxter continued briefing the officers on their positions and places.

The officers started shuffling out. Baxter caught up to Morgan.

“I need to talk to you alone.”

“Good luck”, said Dan as he shuffled out. The door slid shut behind him.

“No doubt Briggs told you about his suspicions. I want to tell you to be extra careful. How did Dana take the news about cutting off your honeymoon to catch one of the galaxy's most wanted?”

“Not you too, Chief. She is as I expect every other woman would be in her situation. She was angry hurt, and not just because of the honeymoon. She wanted me to retire, like right now!”

“Hmm... Okay. Sorry to ruin your good time with work. Taking down the galaxy's most wanted criminal, who's responsible countless murders, extortion, money laundering, prostitution, hooking little kids on drugs from other planets, should really take a back seat to your comfort. You're lucky I even let you have any time off at all.”

“For a moment there I thought you cared. If you weren't my boss, I'd say you're a real piece of work.”

“Life's tough, kid. Deal with it.”

Baxter at times had a habit of calling him kid even though Lance was in his late 30's. Lance had served under him since the day he legally became an adult. Baxter still thought of him as his protege. He was a bit rough at times, but he really did care about Morgan, almost as a little brother more than a son, as their difference in ages wasn't so high that it warranted the other. Lance thought a bit. Both Dan and Baxter had mentioned the same thing about his wife. Neither would lie, and neither would try to hurt him, but it bothered him that they would implicate the love of his life. That just didn't sit right with him. This was complete nonsense. How could they even think. She was the most kind and caring woman he'd ever known. She wouldn't hurt a fly, and she's as far away from the criminal underground as one could be. He had known her for more than 6 years, and been involved with her half of that time. This just couldn't be right, they had to be wrong.

“Listen kid, I don't want this bungled. You make sure every squad commander waits for your signal, and every officer waits for their squad commander. I'm trusting in you. I don't want a bunch of

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trigger happy nuts blasting up the place before we can arrest Ajax. This is your moment!”

A small ship landed on the platform. A petite beautiful woman in black leather jumped out of the small ship. She was carrying a small briefcase. She walked in and stood in front of the three criminals.

“Gentlemen...”, she said.

She opened the small briefcase, and inside was what appeared to be a darkened glass plate with a four electrodes, two on each side. Ajax reached for it. She snapped the case almost on his fingers.

“My money?”

Ajax had one of his nondescript guards bring him another case, slightly larger. He opened it up to reveal hundreds of plastic chips either gold, silver, or copper in color.

“Tester”, she requested.

Another guard brought a small device which had a place for the glass plate, and two clamps which would go over the electrodes. She put the plate into the tester and press a button. Instantly it lighted up with a display like a clock, it read 00:10. She pushed another button, and slowly it counted down the seconds. 10 – 9 – 8 – 7 – 6 – 5 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 1. 'Detonation' it read out and made a beep.

“Satisfactory?”

She put the plate back into her briefcase and exchanged it with the guard. She started to walk away when Ajax asked her, “Aren't you even going to count it?”

She turned around. “Do I need to?”

“Well I could just let you go, and let you find out that we only paid half. Or we could re-negotiate. You see, I still have use for you. In order for you to get the other half of your money, you're going to have to discuss it with me.”

She looked at him incredulously. Then she opened the briefcase, and pulled out a small device from her pocket. After waving it over the money, the readout read 10000.

“The deal was 20000 and I would get you the detonation plate. Nothing else. You'd be very unwise to cross me.”

“I'm not crossing you, not really. I'm just retaining your services just a little bit longer. It's up to you whether you want to get the rest of our money.”

She calmly closed the briefcase. A small smile crossed her lips that was reminiscent of a Cheshire cat. She set the case on the ground and in an instant she leaped on top of him. She pinned down his shoulders and raised her fist as though she was about to punch his neck. Then small blades extended out of the sleeve of the fisted hand. She pressed them to his neck.

“If I were you, I would get the money, NOW!” She looked at the guards as well as Cert and Trolla. “Anyone lay a hand on me and he gets these through his neck.”

“Cert?”, he gasped.

Cert had not made any move, his human side appeared to be calm. He nodded to Ajax.

“Alright. Bring her the rest of her money”, he yelled. The guard brought another briefcase. She got off of Ajax, and passed the counter over the new case.

“Now there's 50k in here? The deal was for 20k. What are you trying to pull.?”

“Nothing, as I said, I wanted to renegotiate our deal. I was merely trying to see what you would do. Of course if you had just left, I would have had Trolla kill you, but since you show some spirit and I am indeed still in need of your services, I let you live.”

“You let me live?”, Katt glared at him. “I've handled these two before. All right, what do you want then?”

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“I'm making several more weapons deals, and I need someone who knows weapons. That would be you.”

“I'm listening.”

Lance headed out to the huge launch bay as hundreds of armored men and women with their incapacitators shuffled into the large transports, soon they would be launched into space, all converging on a little unfinished orbital mall. This was it. The big one. Although Lance was not one to willingly step into a confrontation, he was actually looking forward to this. Even at risk to his life, it was just too important to mess up. Ajax had been a thorn in his side ever since he could remember. He had tried to kill Lance once, and that once was enough. Ever since Lance was on his heels like a trained attack dog, but somehow just never managed to catch up to him. This time their intel had been good. He was their best officer and would have been in Dan's place had he not recommended him.

The doors on each transport were closed, and the pilots lifted off. Twenty or so, transports lifted up into the air. Everyone in each transport was silent. Of course even if they wanted to talk they couldn't as the engines were too loud, and nothing could be heard above a shout anyway. But everyone was silent thinking of this moment. Some in triumph finally they would get to see the man taken down himself. Others were really nervous, they didn't want to be killed. Some just took it like any other day. Same junk, different day. All, however, were dedicated, and none would lose their heads. They were all professionally trained. Some could still go half-cocked and ruin something, which is why Baxter warned him specifically to keep the officers in line.

Suddenly they were in space, and the noise lessened a bit, as half of the noise was just air resistance and rattling. Now it was a relatively smooth ride. The stars streaked passed the few windows the transports had. If this wasn't such an important mission they could just admire the beauty of space, it's multitude of stars. The colorful planets that rotated around infinite suns. Lance really loved space. It was quiet and peaceful. He especially liked ordinary patrols. It gave him time to gather his thoughts. On most planets it would be rush, rush, rush. In space it was just him floating in endless nothing. Of course on the flip-side Morgan really liked to get into the action. He didn't want to sit at a desk, typing or speaking into a computer. He loved the quiet peacefulness of space, but he also liked the action of the streets. He didn't care much for city life, but when it came to busting bad guys, he was in it up to his elbows. He reflected on his life, what choices he made. His life with Dana. How everything he had ever done had prepared him for this day. He was going to get Ajax if it killed him.

A warning light woke him out of his reverie. They were approaching Ecliptus 12. In a few hours they would be passing it's moon Ecklon. Lance tapped the side of his helmet.

“Give me comms.” He said through his helmet to the pilot. The pilot switched the comms on. Lance now had communication with everyone on the frequency. That meant all squads in every transport.

“Okay people, this is the day we've been waiting for. Ajax will finally be put away for good, and you will be secure in the knowledge that you helped countless worlds from his operations. You're not doing this just for law enforcement, you're doing it for the universe. When this is all over I will be there to personally shake each and every one of your hands in help bringing down this villain. Okay so here's the skinny. Nobody is to fire until instructed by their squad commander. Remember the chain of command, I command the squad leaders, they command you. You don't do anything without their okay. You won't hear anything from me once operation commences. The squad commanders are instructed to talk to me on an encrypted frequency. No one is to use their comms except the commanders. You've all had your orders, each commander will be in contact with you, with hand

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signs. We decided not to use personal holo-emitters because they can be easily detected. Just stay in visual contact of your squad leader and everything should go without a fight. That what we want to do, we want to arrest them, not get into a firefight. Most likely we will get into a firefight, but we want to make sure it's because we have no other alternative. We want to keep casualties to a minimum. Good luck. SC out.”

Deep in the dark reaches of space, a lone asteroid came into view. It appeared as though it had flown off an asteroid belt and was just aimlessly wandering space. But this was no mere drifter. Indeed if a ship was scanning for heatwave signatures or ion trails it would have surely spotted this little seemingly unimportant piece of space rock. But it was far out of reach of the normal star lanes. And if a small ship had happen to aimlessly wander in that region of space, the asteroid would have detected it and possibly dispatched it. A battle cruiser came in and landed in a crater, only this was no ordinary crater. The bottom of the crater seemed to tremble once the ship had touched down. And then slowly it lowered into the darkness under the ground. A ramp slid out of the bottom of the cruiser and down walked a tall elegant woman. She had dark hair, and seemed to be dressed in silks. She wore dark glasses as if she was avoiding the light. She walked out of the bay into a few corridors, turned a few corners, and walked into a small meeting room as the door slid behind her. Some humanoid men, and a few aliens turned to her as she walked the room. She made a complete circle until finally she rested at a chair on the far end. Suddenly a light flashed from the chair on the opposite end, and a hologram appeared of a cloaked and hooded figure. The hologram seemed substantial with the exception of a little bit of light and translucency that marked it as a hologram.

“Finally you're here, Phanta. We may have a lead.” said the hooded figure.

“You've found him?” she asked.

“Sharpe, illuminate her.”

Sharpe was a fat man with a three-piece suit and greasy hair. “Our contacts inform us that Cert is working for Ajax. Apparently he was found floating in deep space barely alive. I guess his robot half somehow sustained him. One of Ajax's smuggling outfits managed to haul him in, and he felt so indebted to Ajax that he decided to work for him. I guess he didn't have any memory of where he was from though. Some kind of short term amnesia, but no one has said whether this is from his human half or if his robot half had been disabled.”

“So now we have a mutual interest here, and this is why I hired you. How good are you at spying?” said the hologram.

“As good as I am paid.” she replied.

“Good, and you will be well paid. There's a certain artifact of rare value Ajax has information about. I need you to follow him and find out where he goes after he gives us the D80 we've asked for. Then when you know the location, I want you to eliminate him.”

“I'm not an assassin, I do almost anything for the right price, except that. Any sentient being is worth living.” She surreptitiously rubbed her her wrists as if she had just gotten out of bindings and was massaging them after hurting.

“I said eliminate, I care not how you do it. Just make sure he's not around to make trouble for me anymore.”

“I'll see what I can do.”

“I do not want you to infiltrate his organization, however. I don't want him to even know you're there. Is this agreeable?”

“I guess. I may be able to even cut you a deal, considering I don't have to sleep with him.”

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“Sharpe, we will probably need to give Ajax access to the Persius corridor because obviously it's key to the location of the artifact. He wouldn't get a hold of a D80 Implosion Device if he didn't really need access.”

“I'll notify my guys, he should have a relatively safe trip. One thing of particular note though, Apparently the SPD is attempting to arrest Ajax. They've pulled units from 16 different star systems. Lance Morgan is leading them in.”

“I think we need to make sure he doesn't get arrested then.”

“There's a way, I'll get on it.” said Sharpe.

“Very good. I will call another meeting when Ajax brings us the implosion device. Okay do the rest of you have any old business?” The meeting continued as each of the business men gave their report.

Phanta left early returned to her ship. It looked like a piece of space junk. It was a battle cruiser on the outside, on the inside she had automated everything. She was the only one on the whole ship. She did however make room for one more. At least she would have Cert and be complete. At last she would have closure. She preferred not to consort with the likes of the Intergalactic Businessmen's Association but it was a necessary evil. Cert was more important to her than anything, more important than life. Their hologrammed leader made a mistake. He had already told her where Cert was. As the cruiser lifted off the asteroid it sped away into the darkness. Soon she would be complete. So soon.

The pilot opened his comm to Lance. “Sir we're approaching Ecklon, and I've opened comms.”

“Okay folks, this is it. When the doors open I want people to shuffle out single file and head toward the orbital station.”

The doors started to open, people moved out and then turned on their rocket packs. They flew to their designated areas and landed.

Lance tapped his helmet again. “Commanders I want you to start fanning out in your designated patterns and secure each area, and then start approaching the rotunda. Remember keep radio silence with everyone but me and only if you're secured. If you have to signal, use hand signals. The word is 'locked'.”

The officers walked in checking out the area thoroughly. As each squad commander gave the word, they marched toward the rotunda.

Cert turned his head toward the doors. “I think.... I hear something.”

“How many?” Ajax asked calmly.

“All of them, I think...”. He couldn't seem to count them all as all the heat signatures were bunched together. His robotic senses were working overtime.

“We gotta move! Katt, you are coming with ME!” He yanked her by the arm.

Swiftly the clawed arm came up inches from his face when Cert's robotic arm grabbed the claws and then crushed them without so much as batting a human eyelash.

“Guards grab the cash and the detplate and let's move!”

While the rest of the officers started down the corridors to the rotunda, Lance instructed his squad to move into the rotunda too, and he dashed down a side corridor. He stopped in front of a door which slid open and he walk straight into Ajax and Katt. Only Lance recognized her. Oh no! It was Dana! Both Dan and Baxter had been right. He was stunned. He dropped to the floor tears in his eyes

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his face contorted with pain, but only an emotional pain.

“How? Why?” He pleaded.

Dana started to tear up too and then brushed them away, and suddenly became cold. Suddenly officers were flooding the rotunda. A weapon discharged and all hell broke loose. Ajax gasped and started heading toward another door. Lance couldn't believe it. She was the infamous weapons specialist Katt. Finally his sadness turned to anger. He would love no more. That was it for him and then he snapped. He stood up and started running toward Ajax and Katt. He dropped his incapacitator. Now there was rage in his eyes. He pulled out an actual weapon that could kill, his Bolt-39.

Ajax was now running down the corridor dragging Katt with him. Just before the door he threw her down, and smiled evilly. He pulled out his own weapon and aimed it Dana! Just as he pulled the trigger Lance dove in front of it. Searing hot pain surged through his body. His arm was useless, with a large hole in it. It did not bleed, but he could no longer lift it, it now had no shoulder blade, and yet the whole was complete and his arm and shoulder intact. The plasmoid projectiles cauterized as they passed through. Leaving nothing but a blackened hole. Ajax ran toward the docking station and noticed some movement as Lance was getting up off of Dana.

As Trolla and Cert were running to join him, Ajax called over his shoulder. “Trolla, he's not dead yet – finish him off!”

Trolla stopped running when he reached Lance. He looked down at his wife and realized she was dead. She had a hole clean through her head. Trolla raised his weapon. Lance's anger melted, as he picked up her dead carcass. He looked up at Trolla tears filling his eyes then back down at his dead wife. Trolla heard Ajax calling from somewhere within the station. He then promptly returned his weapon to its holster strapped to his back and ran off toward the voice. Cert ran by but looked down with compassion on his human side. Lance was oblivious to all else. He cradled her in his arms and sobbed.

Chapter Two:

The sleek craft approached the third planet in a binary star system. Taj was a deep red color, composed mostly of hard rock and clay. There had been evidence of a thriving ecosystem here, but now it was desolate and barren. No one knew the real story behind Taj's destruction, it was just gone. It seemed to have had a few primitive races, but nothing of intelligence survived that long. The Paleon cruiser started descending to the planet. On the surface the sun was hot, and the ground was hard and red. There was a small camp with a bunch of technical survey equipment and a bunch of archaeologists. They were camped on the side of a rocky mountain, with a few caves here and there. But there seemed to be some equipment setup near one particular cave mouth. As soon as the sleek Paleon ship landed, its ramp descended and out came Ajax. Only Cert seemed to be with him this time. Sometime earlier Ajax sent Trolla out on a mission before they arrived at this barren and rocky landscape.

A man walked out of the cave that seemed to have some importance wearing some clothing that would protect him from the hot sun. He met Ajax halfway and started to walk back with him.

“Have you found it yet, Trager?” he asked.

“We found some strange markings similar to the planet Octa, and then started to blast some rock. The workers should be clearing away the last of it now.”

“You're lucky you didn't damage the key when you attempting to blast it.”

“It would have taken weeks to extract the key, if I had not blasted it. And you wanted it right

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then.”

“No, I wanted it done right, I've searched too long for this map to be mishandled now.”

“You know you will never find a cheaper price anywhere, and my men KNOW what they're doing.” A blast suddenly rocked them as they were entering the cave. Some dust and rock fell down after the blast.

“You idiot! I don't want the whole cave to collapse!”

“Sorry boss, it wasn't my men. That came from the natives. Tajejanites don't like us blowing up their sacred lands, so every once in a while they try to scare us. Don't worry they don't dare come down here. Not only is it sacred but it's also forbidden to them. The worst they could do is scare us a bit.”

“Hmm yes, I had forgotten. I say if the map was not intended to be found, then why did they make it?”

“Yes boss.”

They approached several tunnels lighted with electritorches and corded them to keep people as safe as they could be in a tunnel that had the possibility of collapsing. If those blasts hadn't collapsed the cave, then it could get used to a little misstepping every now again. Still it did stop people from stumbling. After passing several workers, several more tunnels, and more people studying strange glyphs they at last came to a dead end. Several men were planting small explosive charges and then stood back.

“Turn your head.”, as he and Ajax and the rest did when one of the workers flipped the switch. There was a small boom and dust flooded the chamber. When it cleared exposed were three concentric rings each with the same kind of strange glyphs seen throughout the tunnels. Ajax took a small object out of his pocket and handed it to Trager. Trager then took the object and slipped it into a small slot on the outside ring, and turned it to the left. Then he turned the middle one to the right and finally the inner ring to the left, which lined up three glyphs. A rumble started low at first and then gradually got louder. The room started to shake, and dust and rock rained on them. Suddenly the part of the rock with the 3 rings swung open and revealed a compartment. Inside was part of a plate which looked like it was made of obsidian or dark glass. It didn't look like anything special. Ajax grabbed the key out of the door before taking out the plate.

“At last, I've finally found the first piece.”

All Dan could see from the frosted glass is two shadows, both gesticulating wildly. It must have been a shouting match for him to be able to hear muffled sounds coming through. Julio, was standing next to him and remarked, “Finding out your wife is a criminal and then for her to die in his arms like that must be tough.”

“I'm worried about him. He could get suspended or worse.”, Dan replied.

“Still there's something fishy about that. I mean, I've met Dana, and I never suspected either. There's got to be something odd there. Maybe she was forced into it or something. And Lance would never blindly fall for a woman. He trusted her. You know better than I.”

“Yeah. Julio, you might be right. I might try to do some digging.”

The door to the chief's office burst open.

“I'm not taking any more of your lip Morgan. You're hereby SUSPENDED!” , Baxter yelled.

“I don't know why I even tried to talk to you, you're the most insufferable, inhuman, son of a-”.

“Lance! Don't make it worse than it already is.” Cut in Dan.

“Get outta my way!” , yelled Lance and shoved Dan aside.

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“Suspended? Comon boss you can't do that.” said Julio.

“I just did, and he's the one that got all mouthy. He need to cool off a bit, he's way too close to this case now.”

Lance stopped off at his own desk and put down his badge and his incapacitator. Then he stomped out of the room, and headed toward the shuttle bay. He got into his personal transport and lifted off. The ship shot off like a cannon and he sailed into the atmosphere and out into space. He really seemed to be fuming.

“What's a matter baby?” said a sultry female voice.

Lance flushed a bit and then replied. “Umm it's nothing Cindy, set a course for the nearest galactic den of iniquity. Maybe some place I can get some Karjinian Ale.”

“Whatever you say honey, are you sure every thing's alright?”

“Yes everything is fine.”

Cindy wasn't a she, but rather she was a computer, or more specifically an AI. CND – Computational Navigational Device or Cindy for short. Lance picked up this ship cheap, however the seller refused to tell him why it was so cheap. The ship was fast, streamlined, with a lot of power. It wasn't until after she started talking that he realized. The ship's navigational computer seemed to form an attachment to him. In fact to any man. But he didn't seem to mind. She could really stroke his EGO. Plus the ship was really a good ship. Early on, he had attempted to reroute her circuitry only to be badly shocked for his efforts. He decided he would have to live with it. It wasn't really so bad after all, as she always complimented on how big and strong he was or how handsome he was. There was a bit of a fit when he first met Dana, however. CND was the jealous type, but eventually came to accept Dana. Truth of it was, Dana rarely set foot inside the ship. She couldn't stand the computer.

The ship traveled along smoothly and Lance decided to snooze until a warning sounded.

“Lance, honey, wake up. We're here.”

Lance sat up a bit groggily. The ship flew into a small space station. Several smaller transports were docked. He got up and walked toward the ramp.

“Cindy, please open the hatch.” He said politely. Cindy was a bit sensitive, he had to be a gentleman around her more-so than even around a real woman. She would do anything she could for him as long as he was nice to her.

“Anything you say, Sugar. And please Lance-dear, don't bring any strange women home. I always worry about you.”

“Cindy you're a doll, but I've come here to do one thing and one thing only. And that is to get warped like nobody's business.”

The hatch opened and he walked into a corridor. The followed the signs to the bar. When he walked in the Bar was filled with a motley group of humans, humanoids, and space aliens. This wasn't a particularly seedy bar. It was just a normal bar, but any place you could get drinks, is the place he wanted to be. A couple of yellow-skinned aliens were in business suits at the end of the bar. There was a fat guy in plain clothes who was obviously warped. The other denizens of the bar seemed to take no notice of him. He went up to the bartender, who happened to be some sort of sentient squid-like creature, and asked him for a bottle of Vokk-77 – the best Karjinian Ale he had. He was going to get especially warped tonight.

He suddenly felt a tentacle wrap around his torso, and a whisper in his ear saying “Buy a girl a drink?”

He whirled around and was face to face with a beautiful blond. His surprise turned into a smile.

“Mercedes!/? What are you doing here? I thought you weren't waiting tables anymore! Did

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you manage to find a man yet?"

"Well there was one man, a space cop who was too in love with his work."

"You know I was seeing Dana at the time. Besides I'm sure guys are lining up to get a date with you!."

"Well there was one guy, he works on bots. He's kind of geeky, but he didn't seem to mind the tentacle."

"That's great to...wait did you say was?" he asked.

"Well one day he just upped and disappeared. I guess it was bound to happen sooner or later. None of the guys I've dated have ever seen past this." She held out the tentacle and made a disgusted sound.

"I would have if I weren't... attached". He tried to hold back the tears.

"I heard what happened. I'm sorry. If there's anything I can do for you, let me know."

She left the room and he went back to drinking his ale. About 10 minutes later, she came back this time with a bot following her.

"Lance? This is Al. I figured you might want a drinking buddy, even if he doesn't drink. I find that talking to someone usually helps me in times of crisis. I don't get off for a while, but maybe you could talk to him until then, or until you're so warped you can't see straight."

Lance looked at the bot and feigned interest. "Hi"

"Hello sir."

"I'll just leave you two. I'll be back to check on you in an hour." She walked back out.

Lance just sat there drinking his ale for a moment. Al didn't seem to do anything. He wasn't sure he should speak to him if Lance really didn't want to speak.

"Al. I'd appreciate not talking about my problems."

"Yes sir. What would you like to talk about, sir?"

"Who is this guy Mercedes was seeing? And how did you come into her possession?"

"His name is Elroy, and he built bots for a living. In fact I'm his gift to her. I am a P.A.L. Series 101 – programmable automated laborer. But she calls me Al for short. I am actually an outdated model. And they have the new Series 1000. I was pretty much tossed on the refuse pile. Elroy managed to get me out before they melted me for scrap metal, then he modified my circuits. I'm as good as any of those 'new' models. Except I don't really look or sound human."

"P.A.L.'s don't need to look or sound human, they just need to do their jobs."

"I whole-heartedly agree with you sir. Mercedes has been very nice to me. So naturally I would like to please her."

"Sounds like a human trait."

"I am in no way human, nor do I wish to become human. But be that as it may, she has treated me well, and I appreciate that fact, that I can serve someone more fully because of that."

"Something seems a bit strange to me. He was really being nice to her, and gave you to her, and yet he just disappeared. What do you make of that?"

"I don't know sir. He seemed to genuinely love her. He's a very humble soul and would never just walk out on her. I think something has happened to him. But I don't wish to leave her alone."

"I see what you mean. Well here's to Mercedes!" He downed the last of the bottle.

"Well I need to get out of here, nice talking to ya Al. Tell Mercedes it helped."

"My pleasure sir. Please fly safely."

Lance got up and started for the corridor to the docking stations. Suddenly he dropped to the floor as if unconscious. Lance didn't remember anything after that.

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The room wasn't very spacious, but it was enough to work. There were all kinds of lab equipment on the table. Machines for analyzing and testing. Vials, beakers, test tubes were in various stages of use. Chemicals were bubbling. Computers were processing data. A little man, in his late 30's was assembling a device. He pressed a few buttons and it beeped and lit up little patterns of lights. Then he switched it off and closed the case. All he needed now was a plate. He walked out to the door of the little room.

"Hello? I'm done now?", he said in a raised voice as if asking a question.

No answer came from the hallway.

"Hello? Guard?", he asked a bit louder.

Still no answer. He walked out the door and down the hallway. There were no guards. Could they have possibly left and forgot him? That wasn't very likely, still he had to try to escape. He didn't want to do this in the first place. It wasn't in his nature. He did not like building weapons of any kind. He did, however, know the technology used in building these kinds of things. He wanted to use his expertise to help mankind. That's why he worked for FlexCon building implosion drives. Bending space isn't a trivial thing, and this kind of power could potentially lead to weapons that could wreak terrible destruction on the galaxy. But he wanted to help people with his expertise. Transportation over long distances in short periods of time, he felt, was a good use of his talents. There he would be working with the latest technology, and not as instruments of war. He realized that sometimes war is necessary to help a planet or civilization smaller than yourself, or to stop mass genocide, but he wasn't under any circumstances going to use his talents for the destruction of others, even if it was necessary. How ironic that he should be made to build a D80 implosion device for Ajax, one of the galaxy's worst offenders.

He went down a corridor, that split into two. He took one of them, and it in turn split into two more. He was getting lost rather fast. Now he wished he had stayed there. No wonder they didn't post any guards, this was like a hedge-maze. He was walking what seemed to him like hours. Suddenly he found himself entering into a sort of foyer with several doors ahead of him. He chose one randomly and started down it. Soon it turned a ninety-degree angle and as he rounded the corner he ran straight into something huge and hulking. As his eyes followed the torso up to the head, he realized he had walked straight into a huge four-armed two-legged creature with blue-greenish skin and tentacles for hair on his ugly beast like face. Trolla grunted at him. He suddenly realized he was with two guards, apparently they had come to fetch him.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked one of the guards.

"I, uhh... I was just... I finished and was... Well I was coming to find you. I'm done, and all I need is the plate." He finished finally.

Trolla handed him the plate and growled at him.

"I wasn't trying to escape. Really!"

They started marching back down through the labyrinth of corridors and hallways eventually arriving at the little room. Then the little man took the plate and placed it onto some electrodes, and snapped some caps over them. The plate seemed to come to life and some numbers displayed. A blinking T minus 1200.

"All is in order I expect. Now you will let me go." said the man.

"Not so fast. We need to keep you around just in case. So just make yourself comfortable a while until the boss sends for you.", the guard told him.

"As I expected." he sighed.

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The guard then spoke to Trolla. "Take this to the boss and tell him we're starting on the second bomb. We also want to make sure there are no surprises and him being here makes certain of that. Carry this life monitor with you so we know if you accidentally expire."

Trolla grunted and took the device from the man and then pressed a button. A blinking line scrolled across the device and beeped with his heartbeats. It seemed to beat very fast, of course for the Kreig this was normal. Their heart pumped their blood faster, this is partly what made them more aggressive. This made them great assassins or warriors. Hardly anyone could match them in a good fight. They seemed permanently grumpy.

Trolla picked up the D80 device and left the room. Little did Trolla know that the man had put a tracker in the device, and now was sending a homing signal to whoever was in the area. Maybe someone could vector in on it in time. He didn't really like giving up the device with such terrible destructive power, but he didn't seem to have a choice. He might have made a defective device, however, instead he knew they could almost instantly tell if was a fake and instead decided to let it send out a signal. He also sneaked in a self-destruct mechanism. Only if he wasn't there to activate it on site, then the bomb could be used as made.

Lance woke up as clear as day. It was if he suddenly had energy, was clear headed, and hadn't so much passed out as woke up from a really restful sleep. He sat up on his couch. It moved slightly with inertia. The couch had no legs, but instead hovered above the ground... It was however tethered so that it wouldn't move as much. Most people bought that type of furniture so it would be easy to clean underneath. Since he was up until a few weeks ago, a bachelor, he needed every advantage he could get.

"I assume you are alright sir?"

"Huh?", Lance was unsure of the voice.

"Karinian ale tends to have positive side effects once you wake up."

"Oh yeah, I'm fine. What are you doing here, uhh, AI?"

"Mercedes told me to take you home sir. In fact she is giving me to you."

"Why would she do that, and now she's alone again?"

"Well, sir, I don't know exactly how to say it."

"She wants me to see if I can find this Elroy character."

"How did you know sir?"

"Just a feeling, but I'm on an important case. I don't have time to search for him."

"May I speak bluntly sir?"

"Umm, I guess so."

"You're going to try to uncover the facts surrounding your wife's death, possibly for revenge."

"What business is it of yours?", He snapped.

"It's none of my business, but if you will hear me out, I will allay your suspicions."

"I'm listening."

"It seems to me that since she's already ... passed on ... that you have all the time you want. Furthermore, I feel that I can be of some assistance to you, as I'm primarily a computer. I propose an exchange."

"Go on."

"If you will help me search for Elroy, I will help you in your search for the truth."

"Uhhh I don't know. I usually work alone when I can. I can't be babysitting a bot too."

"Sir I don't eat anything, I've got portable power generators that work off of kinetic energy,

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solar energy, and a number of other sources. I don't even need to plug in. I don't need to sleep so I'll take very little room standing up while you sleep. Plus I can talk to your computer.”

“Hmm... Actually, that might work out. She needs someone to talk to besides me.”

“She, sir?”

“Uhh you'll see what I mean when you meet her. Okay deal then. We'll be searching for both together until we can sort this out. You're sure Mercedes is ok?”

“Yes sir. She is smart and knows how to take care of herself. That's one of the good things about tentacles sir, she doesn't need much to defend herself.”

“You're right I suppose. Okay then, where do we start. I need to contact Dan Briggs. He was my friend and fellow patrolman, and later he was my boss. Al, can you communicate with satellites on an encrypted frequency, outside the normal channels.”

“What you're proposing may be illegal, sir, however as I perceive you are honestly searching for the truth, I will do what I can.”

“I need you to get in contact with Dan Briggs at the SPD without detection. Can you do this, and do you have a holo-emitter on your persons?”

“Yes sir, it will take me a few moments, please stand by.”

Dan was in his office with the door closed and the windows frosted. He got a beep on his holo-phone. It was a small device that sat on the top of his desk, with a speaker, and a miniature holo-projector in the middle. A small hologram appeared in the form of a robot.

“Are you Mr. Dan Briggs?” the hologram asked.

“Yes, who are you?”

“Sir I represent a Mr. Morgan.”

“Lance? Are you there?”

The little bit of room in holo-range rotated as Lance came into view. A miniature Lance.

“Yeah, I need some help. I need to find Ajax's trail again, and also need a lead on someone using the name Elroy.”

“You know how much trouble I'd get into if anyone found out about this? I can't even talk to you.”

“Comon Dan, we're buddies. Besides that fight with the chief was only a rouse. He's as anxious to get Ajax as I am. You'd never let me down!”

“Okay so what do you need exactly?”

“A lead on someone named Elroy, Al (the bot) can give you his description. And I also need a lead on anyone that has had dealings with Ajax that involves Barion Implosion Technology.”

Al sent him a three dimensional image of Elroy and Dan attempted to match it in the SPD databases. It took a little time, but didn't seem to turn anything of significance.

“No Elroy, are you sure it's a real name?”

“Sorry, sir, it's just what he called himself. If you don't have any visual matches, it might mean he somehow erased his own tracks. I would suggest you check the dates and times of any visuals you have to see if there are any mismatches. I don't think he would slip up if he indeed removed traces of his existence, however, depending on the circumstances he may have left a clue. If he was under duress he may have even purposely slipped up.”

“As far as Implosion Tech with Ajax, I believe Frank Chandler handled a case where there he busted a big operation of implosion tech theft. There were supposedly links to Ajax but he never had anything to convict him on. It was all circumstantial.”

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“Can you get me his current address?”

“Yeah, sure, here you go.”

“Thanks, Dan, I owe you a million!”

“You owe a lot more than that if I lose my job!”

“You won't I promise!” Lance assured him.

Lance and Al went on board Lance's ship.

“Al, I want you to meet Cindy. Cindy this is Al, a series 101.”

“Hey there, handsome.” said CND.

“Obviously you don't mean me, uhh, Cindy. I'm just a bot, and we just look like we do.”

“Well you look handsome to me. Lance wants to deny it but I sort of have a crush on him, and I'm looking for a good man.”

“Umm. You are a computer, why would you need a man?”

“You sure don't know much about women do you?”

“Obviously I don't. Sir is she, I mean it, for real?”

“Told you you'd have to meet her. I picked up this ship for a song, except with this little... shall we say... attribute. Cindy, babe, set us a course for the Droj sector. There's a little spaceport there where I want to say hello to an old friend.”

“Whatever you say sweet thing.” CND replied.

“I'm going to go take a nap, you and Al can get acquainted. Wake me up when we're there.”

“I'll be glad to get acquainted with him. Sweet dreams, honey.”

A large freighter was opening its shuttle bay doors when Ajax's black transport flew in. Ajax and Cert walked out and met with the captain. Captain Ort was an Insectoid. He was mostly humanoid, but with a large head, big oval eyes, and mandibles. His hands were fairly humanoid, except a bit longer and seemed bony under long black gloves. He could actually speak human language even though his mandibles belied that fact. Ort had been in Ajax service for a long time, running Stardust, a highly addictive substance that looked like sugar granules only with a slightly yellowish tint. Ajax still had to come and inspect the merchandise as it came in, as he had bought a lot of it. Even though he was searching for the artifact, he was still running every illegal activity from Ecliptus to the Starlux cluster. He had daily things to attend to. Meetings with the heads of his various organizations. Money laundering, extortion, smuggling, drug running, arms dealing, anything and everything. He didn't readily have access to a D80 imploder though because it was tough to transport. Most systems had very strict rules when it came to Implosion devices that weren't made for bending space. Even those that did legitimate business were monitored closely so it wouldn't be misused. This is why Ajax went to someone to build it from scratch. Someone that new implosion well enough to do this. Someone that worked at Flexcon.

“I'm honored to have you aboard my ship Ajax. But what brings you here. I hope I haven't done any disservice to you.” said Ort.

“No, nothing like that Captain. I've come to inspect as I do from time to time. Only this time I've also come for another reason. Very soon Trolla will be here to hand you a package, which you must hold in secret until I call for it.”

“As you say, but why me?”

“Because I trust that you will believe me when I say you do not want to open this package. Failure to follow this simple instruction will net you a very specific punishment. It involves lenses and

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concentrated light, and well you know.”

“I see sir. Well I will not let you down. I've become very profitable by you, and I would hate to lose your favor.”

“Very good Captain. Now, would you invite me for a drink?”

Trolla's ship approached the large freighter and landed in the shuttle bay. His ship was shaped like a giant fish. It's underside was all one piece, as was it's top side. The head of the ship opened to form a ramp, so it indeed looked like some sort of creature opening it's mouth. Trolla walked down as there was nobody there to greet him. Trolla liked it that way. He liked menacing people. If he walked in on them and surprised them all the better. Trolla brought the D80 with him, contained in a squat tube-like container. He walked toward the Captain's quarters, and instead of signaling him, just barged right in on Captain Ort, Ajax and Cert.

“Ahh, Trolla, my fine fellow, you're here at last. Set the package here on the table. Are they working on the other package?”

Trolla nodded and then grunted in agreement.

“Good, good. Now I want you to take care of Frank Chandler. Show him his debt is paid, ah, in full.”

Trolla grunted again and left the room.

“Captain, you must take this and store it in your safe, and you must not open it for any reason. Any tampering with the seal will forfeit your life.”

He handed the canister to Ort who pressed a few buttons on the table. The center of the table lifted and he placed the canister in the center, and then closed it.

“No one will find it here, and if they do, they know they'll have me to answer to.” Said Ort coolly.

“Very good, now to finish that drink.”

Ajax and Cert left, and then got into Ajax's transport.

“Why are you keeping the device on his ship?” asked Cert.

“Our friends at the IBA are very wily, and I need to have them at a disadvantage. They will attempt to kill me once they have the bomb. So I need to play this carefully, this is why this is going into safe keeping. I will decide once I have all the pieces of the artifact.”

The spaceport was a seedy affair. It seemed rundown. The patrons were all foul smelling and foul looking. There were brothels down every corridor. And a few lounges. The lounges were a bit nicer, but the patrons weren't. Lance and Al sat down at a booth, when a scantily clad waitress asked for their order. Lance asked for a light Saber, and Al asked for oil. The main act was just coming on. A man who looked like he used to be respectful came out in a suit that was too big for him, and attempted to do a little slight of hand. Card tricks, levitation, and a few more. Some people clapped, but most did not. After the show was over, Lance and Al got up and walked toward the back stage. They walked as a door slid open and then closed behind them, into a small room. It had a holo-mirror so a person could see themselves in three dimensions. The man was sitting in a chair having a smoke.

“Frank?” Lance asked.

“Lance? Lance Morgan? While I'll be a son of a gunner. How've you been man?”

“Been doing alright, but what about you, doing magic tricks at a rundown spaceport?”

“It's a living, besides, I'd rather not be out in the real world again. This is where I like to be, an out of the way place where no one bothers me.”

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“You know gambling is not the end of the world, you could have leaned on me, and I would have helped you out of the addiction.”

“Yeah well, once you go over the line, there's no turning back. But that's water under the bridge. Anyways what can I do you for?”

“Well here's the story, as much as it pains me. You remember Dana Larkin?”

“The lovely robotics engineer? Yeah I remember her. You tied the knot?”

“Well I did. You see, I was on my honeymoon when I was called in to apprehend Ajax.”

“How could I forget. That scum made me what I am today.”

“When I arrived I saw Dana there, only she was operating as Katt the weapons specialist. I don't know why she was there or what she was doing. Next thing I know she has a hole in her head, and I'm cradling her in my arms and crying like a baby.”

“Wow, that's tough, sorry man.”

“Well, something snapped. There was something very odd about that whole thing. I need to find out what Dana was doing there and why. I can't just believe she would work for someone at the top of the criminal food chain. It just doesn't seem right. My taste in women has never been wrong. Sure the relationships haven't worked out, but usually I can judge these things. It was like love blinded me or something.”

“I haven't known you for being deceived, so what do you want me for.”

“You ever deal with any cases that include stolen Implosion tech?”

“Hmm implosion huh?”

“Yeah, Ajax was, we believe, dealing with items to make a D80 implosion device. When I went to arrest him he had just bought a detplate.”

Just then a commotion was heard outside. The door flew open and a waitress stumbled in her neck was all purple as if someone had just strangled her. Frank rushed to her side and put her head in his arms.

“Frankie. Please hold me... it's getting dark.” And then she died. Frank wiped tears from his eyes.

“Why did it have to be Lorraine?”

Lance got up and ran out the door to find Trolla flinging people everywhere and walking on all six appendages like some twisted arachnid monkey. He suddenly looked surprised the growled at Lance. Then shoved him out of the way with his powerful hands. He walked into Frank's dressing room and picked him up by the neck with one powerful arm and raised him off the ground. He didn't even stand up straight. He started choking Frank. Just then Al clamped on to Trolla's arm with his own hand. Being a bot he had the power to crush something even as big as Trolla's arm. Since his hand couldn't get around the upper arm, he slid it down to the wrist and crushed it. Trolla dropped Frank and screamed in pain. He knocked Al away with his free hand, looked down at Frank and satisfied he was dead, he ran out. Lance got up and fired a few shots, but Trolla was already gone. Lance ran back in the room, and people outside were setting tables back up and carrying bodies out. He picked up Frank's head in his arms emulating what he had done with Lorraine, the dead waitress's head.

“Lance!” Frank gasped.

“Yeah Frank, what do you want?”

“I was a good cop wasn't I?”

“Yeah you were one of the best! You were an honest cop, just never had the chance to prove it.”

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"I finally... have my... chance. Lance... you... wanted to know... Ajax... case... Tenrow."

"What? Who's Tenrow? Is that an alias or a last name? Frank?"

"Tenrow... alias for..." and then he gasped his last breath and died.

Frank was one of Lance's buddies back from the academy days. Lance, Dan, and Frank were known as the 'Three Bandoleers' As they usually worked together and were very effective at fighting crime with all depending on each other like brothers. They didn't really know the extent of Frank's gambling addiction, until he was indicted for using money collected as evidence for his gambling debts. After that Frank just disappeared. No one really knew what happened to him. He just stopped contacting them. Now that Trolla had just killed him, Lance knew he must have been in something deep. Maybe in debt to Ajax himself but at least he left a name. Tenrow was an alias. For whom Lance couldn't remember.

"Al, I guess we'll need to get in contact with Dan again. Let's wait until we're back on board the ship, I want to be away from this place as quick as possible."

"I whole-heartedly agree sir."

The walked back to the ship.

"Al, dear, is everything alright? I was worried when I scanned some disturbance in the bar."

"Umm... everything is just fine Cindy. It was Lance who was in more danger than I. He was tossed about like a rag doll."

"Oh dear! Let me scan you honey!"

"I'm alright Trolla just knocked me over. But Al here was the real hero. He grabbed Trolla's wrist and crushed it before he took off."

"You did?! Oh that's so brave of you!"

Al gave Lance a worried look.

"I just did what I was programmed to do."

"Al, put us in contact with Dan again. I need to find out about Tenrow."

Chapter Three:

Ajax's transport hurtled through space. The area seemed empty except for a nagging feeling. A feeling as though he were being watched. He shook it off. Cert seemed not to notice, and did not say anything. He need another piece to the glass plate he found on Taj. The second piece in question was being transported from Ecliptus 9's third moon Ecttar, to the planet itself. It was going to be put in a museum for study, but not if Ajax had anything to do with it. The plan was laid out quite neatly. He had a squadron of his private fighters heading toward the convoy on which the artifact was hidden. They would attack the escort fighters Ecliptus 9 had sent with the convoy. Then he had a team of his men coming from the Calray system, and another team coming from the Ageus. They would box in the convoy and take out their front and rear guards. Once that was complete, another squadron would form up with him, and they would take the main ship. Then they would fire and disable the transport freighter where the plate was located, and board the ship. Once they did this they would get the artifact.

The first assault squadron reported in, and that they were near the fighter escort. As they approached they targeted the Eclipsan fighters. A few shots were fired and then the fighter escort scattered. Ajax's men pursued the Eclipsan's with a vengeance. There were 20 fighters in the escort and only 6 of Ajax's men. Three fighters flew away from the convoy in a hopes to get Ajax's men to follow. 2 of Ajax's fighters followed after the three and quickly dispatched them. Then they returned,

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as 5 more were destroyed by the remaining 4. Now there were just 12 left. Two Eclipsan ships tried to fly under a corvette's guns in order to cover themselves and possibly destroy the few following them. The 2 that had taken the strays had just flown back. As the 2 Eclipsan's flew under the guns destroying 2 of Ajax's best ships. Now there were 4 left. 5 Eclipsan's followed 3 of the 4 enemy ships. After firing on two of them disabling the enemy's ships, the fourth flew in and shot all of them from behind. Now the battle was 7 to 2. With several Eclipsan ships disabled but not destroyed. Finally the 2 that were left got behind the 7 in a line and picked them off one by one.

The battle wasn't over yet however, the two teams descended on the ships guarding the front and the rear... destroying them was a bit easier as they only had a bunch of large guns that moved slowly. Finally they were destroyed and all that was left was the freighter. It fought bravely and destroyed several enemy ships. Ajax finally caught up to the freighter and he and his men cut across the side of the ship cutting through its engines and finally disabling it. He attached his ship to the freighter and proceeded to enter it. As he finally got the captain, the captain stood there, not showing fear but knowing he had already lost.

“So good of you to 'protect' the artifact for me.”

“I-I-I don't know what you're talking about!” The captain exclaimed.

“Don't play coy with me, your cargo, where is it?”

“We're just carrying food supplies from the moon back to our planet. We're a simple trading vessel.”

Ajax got impatient, and pulled off one of his black leather gloves. His hand seemed to look ordinary, however, he grabbed the Captain's neck with it. Suddenly an electric charge came out. Clearly infusing the man with electricity.

As the man was spasming he managed to gasp “The hold... is... through those... doors....”

“Trading vessels DO NOT carry escorts!” he managed calmly.

The electricity seemed to intensify as it fried the poor Captain inside and out leaving nothing but dust. The first mate, horrified, said nothing. Ajax went to the door in the back pointed by the captain, and then down some stairs. He finally came to a wooden crate, and had his men open the lid. Inside was nothing but a piece of alien pottery. Ajax smashed the pottery on the floor. He walked back up with his men.

After putting his fingers to his ears he commanded.

“Gentlemen, we've been betrayed. And I will have recompense.” The statement was simple fact. Ajax is never betrayed, or if he has been, the perpetrator is not usually alive long enough to tell about it. They left and reboarded. The rest of the squadron destroyed the freighter before they left.

As soon as they were gone, an Eclipsan fighter's engines roared to life, and he set an opposite course, that would take it away from Ajax's ships and away from Ecliptus 9. Behind the cockpit chair lay a small box with a glass plate in it.

The Atilla was a prison-ship with room for ten thousand inmates. It was roughly the size and shape of a city, if you were viewing the skyline at a distance with its reflection mirrored in a lake. It was all rectangular columns and spires. It moved slowly for its only reason was to keep inmates there. This was the last stage before execution. The criminals here were the worst, doing things unimaginable by most people, all except Lance Morgan. He could imagine them. He had seen them. Murders, rape, terrible destruction by terrible weapons. If they escaped their life sentences here, they would find themselves on the run. The Galactic Penal System declared all runaways worthy of a reward. Only dead, not alive. Once you attempted escape there that was as good as an execution. Every bounty

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hunter within 20 sectors would descend on you like gray on gunship metal. So Lance knew that when Tenrow was sentenced here he would either stay or end up dead within a few days. He was willing to bet Tenrow hadn't attempted to escape.

"This is Lance Morgan, badge code 2247 requesting clearance for docking."

"This is Warden AA23 your code is being confirmed, please stand by."

"Al, I almost forgot, my badge may have been suspended when I was. I think you'll need to interface with Cindy, and give a little talk to the Atilla's computers."

"Sir? Me interface with Cindy? That would be highly improper. Why we don't even know each other very well."

"That's never stopped a man before, sugar." CND proclaimed.

"I'm sorry, Cindy, but I am not a man, I'm a humanoid robot."

"And I'm just a sultry female voice attached to a very advanced navigational computer, honey. There has been interfacing for less. And if we're to be together for a while, might as well make the best of it."

"I'm sorry but your badge code seems to be suspended. Prepare for tractoring," said the Warden. The Atilla's system was not to negotiate, if everything didn't check out, they were to be tracted, boarded, and interrogated.

"Uhh guys... you're both computers, and I need you guys to work together so we can possibly stop the galaxy from being destroyed, so if you would hurry it up please?"

"Oh, sorry sir. You are right, I will interface," said Al.

"Whatever you say, babe. Hot circuits can interface anytime he wants."

"Would you stop that, please, Cindy," said Al plugging in a chord into the console. "With a little slight of hand, and presto!"

"Lance Morgan, we've just had a malfunction, but apparently your bad number is still good. I guess we won't be tractoring at all. Please forgive me."

"I wasn't concerned. I'm on an important mission. I need to see Tenrow."

"He's been a model citizen". A small chuckle sounded over the comm. "What do you need to see HIM for?"

"Apparently he's been doing some sideling outside the Atilla, which I know is not true, because he was put away by a late partner of mine, Frank Chandler."

"I see, well end the proper codes to show you've gotten permission through channels. Hope that another little accident doesn't happen for these codes."

Lance nodded to Al who proceeded to send the needed information. Of course it was all forged, and he was officially suspended from duty, but right now he desperately needed the information. Something didn't add up. Frank gets killed for the name of a guy he convicted years ago, who's safely ensconced in a prison ship? There had better be a good explanation of this. Lance's ship landed in the bay, and he was met with Warden AA23. The Warden told him to follow and they went through several rooms, finally to the warden's office. Connected to it was a small hallway with several interrogation rooms. Lance was led into one of the small rooms with a table. They had holo-surveillance set up in the Warden's office. A man was brought in bound by cuffs with no visible tether. He also wore the same kind of cuffs on his ankles, however they were not fastened together as the hand cuffs were so he could walk. The guards sat the man down, and the Warden pressed a button on his wristwatch which invisibly fastened the ankle cuffs together. As the man looked at him his face lit up in a smug sort of recognition.

"Ahh, Morgan. I didn't expect to see YOU here. Whatever you want, you can just forget about

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it. I don't forgive easily.”

“Don't tell me you're still holding a grudge from what happened on Glax?”

“I can handle the fact that you were a cop, and that you betrayed our friendship. What I can't stand is what you did to Luna.”

Luna was his fault, he had to admit it to himself. If he had not gotten her involved in his operation, she would still be alive. But still, when you're a cop who's down on his luck, you need every chance you can get. Lance did finally reconcile the fact that there are always casualties in a war. This was a war, in a sense. By keeping law and order, you give lowlifes the chance to declare war on you everyday. Lance wouldn't feel bad about that anymore, it was unfortunate, but necessary.

“NO!”, Lance shouted somewhat surprised at himself, “You're the one that did this to Luna. I mean, what did you think. You think she would find out about your criminal operations, that put peoples lives in danger, and she would tell you it's okay to hurt people, and that she still loved you even though you're nothing more than a glorified murderer. Sure you can call it some fancy word and believe that what you were doing is okay. Assassination doesn't sound like murder, does it? But it is, it's murder to the highest degree. Making murder a legitimate profession. And that's what you do for a living. I needed every chance I could get, every bit of ground. So I used Luna, but I also gave her that choice. She chose the right way. If anyone's at fault it's yours for not telling her what you were.”

“That still doesn't make me want to help you, in fact it makes me hate you even more. Now you have a snowball's chance.”

“I'm not interested in making you want to do anything. I'm going to ask you a few questions. You're going to answer them. I will leave, and everything will be as it has been. You refuse to answer my questions, I will find another avenue to make you answer me. Now, question number one. What do you know about Ajax's plans to build an explosive device?”

Tenrow just looked at him, blankly.

“Question number two. What do you know about the guy who's been impersonating you?”

Again he didn't answer.

“Question number three. What do you know about a freelancer that calls herself 'KATT'?”

He was still quiet. After a few seconds Lance leaped over the table and began punching Tenrow. Tenrow just fell backward in his chair. Several guards rushed in and grabbed Lance, pulling him out of the room.

“Just what were you doing?”, asked the Warden angrily.

“His home planet raises their young just a bit differently than most of the known human universe. If you're nice and self-effacing it means you're weak. You can't accommodate these guys. It's actually a sign of respect to stand up to them. I don't really want to show respect to him, but I need info only he can give.”

“How come this isn't in his file?”

“It was probably intentionally left out. He doesn't want anyone to stand up to him. His society has a sort of misplaced honor system. If everyone knew about it, he would probably be at a disadvantage. Do some bio-scans and you'll find a few notable differences between him and other humanoid life. Only ask some of your own biologists to explain it to you, I'm kind of in a hurry.”

“Okay then, what's your next move.”

“Torture.”

“You will have to get clearance for that.”

“No problem, Al, put in a call to Dan Briggs.”

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“The emergency meeting will now come to order.”, said the hooded, cloaked, hologram.

“Everybody is here, you want an account of our progress?” asked Sharpe.

“No, that's not why I called this meeting. You see, Phanta has betrayed us. I had her followed. I had misjudged her loyalty, and thereby making the mistake of telling her where Cert was. Apparently she has decided to take it upon herself to make a trade with Ajax. A trade with a certain artifact.”

“You mean she has the artifact?”, a bug-headed alien said. He was dressed in a three piece business suit, the sort that mostly humans wore.

“No, Mr. Skrit. It's merely the means to which we will get the artifact. Now since she doesn't wish to work for us anymore, I feel it's time we terminate her contract. Permanently.”

A Gambitzi spoke up. “I hope you will allow us to participate. We have, shall we say, members who would be glad to honor our agreement as part of this association. And I trust you will find most efficient. We would rather die then dishonor an agreement. Even those of us in the, shall we say, legally ambiguous sale of goods and services.”

The planet Gambit was populated with cat-like creatures. Not unlike tigers or lions, only they were fully sentient fully intelligent beings. They prided themselves on their honor. Of course there are always bad apples in any orchard, but even those practicing in illegal acts had an honor of some kind. It was said there was no honor among thieves, however the Gambitzi were the antithesis of that statement. You would never find a more honest and trustworthy group in the galaxy. However this particular Gambitzi was only loyal and honest with the association and others that worked for him.

“Yes, Mr. Curr, that is just what I had in mind. But you need to be quick, Phanta is already en route to meet Ajax and we need to intercept her before that.”

Curr pressed a button on the console before him. A miniature hologram appeared it looked like another Gambitzi. The cat-like hologram said something in purrs and growls and rolling of r's, and meows. Sounds only a cat would make, however this was a full complete language. Curr responded and outlined the procedure in his own language. The two cats bantered back and forth with their cat-like language until finally Curr turned back to the cloaked and hooded hologram at the end of the table.

“All we need is the coordinates, and Phanta's heading.”, said Curr.

“Mr. Sharpe, send the information.”

Sharpe pushed another button and a display on his console showed the uploading of data. When it was done the cat-like hologram said one more thing and immediately the hologram winked out. They concluded the emergency meeting. The cloaked figure didn't need to know the progress of the rest of his operations, but needed attend to the matter of Phanta. The Gambitzi ships were already escorting Curr from Gambit. From the distance they had the look of a feline form, as most of Gambit's ships do, these had distinct markings, however, that made them a bit different than most ships from Gambit. They had Currs personal sigil and some colors to signify his pride. He did, after all, keep up appearances that he was a legitimate businessman. Dealing with yarn. Gambitizian yarn was the finest in the known galaxy. Where real cats actually played with yarn, to the Gambitzi it was serious business. They had found uses for yarn that no one had dreamed of. All their buildings used yarn as a base as it was supposed to be the strongest, similar in strength to the strength of spider webbing to a spider. When mixed with any material it made the material near indestructible. One of the fighters left on the matter of Phanta's betrayal. If this Gambitzi didn't kill her, they would kill themselves in honor to the one who had given them the mission.

The scream seemed to pierce the room they were in. Lance was unmoved, but the Warden was visually disturbed. Tenrow was in the interrogation room with several sensors stuck to his forehead.

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“Does the setting have to be so high?”, he asked.

“This is just the start, now watch this.” He pressed a button. “Okay Tenrow, are you read to answer me? Why is someone going around pretending to be you? There's not anyone I know who would be foolish enough to do that. What with you supposedly being in here.” Lance asked over the comm.

“Come on. You can do better than that. I can stand ten times more pain, and you know it.”

Lance let up on the comm button and instead moved a slider to level 2.

“Let's see if he spills anything on level two.”

Again an ear piercing scream. Lance still was unmoved, but the Warden was looking even more worried.

“Now?” Lance asked, pressing the comm button again.

“Tell you what, why don't you go jump out of an airlock, and then I can return to confinement in peace. Even solitary would be better than tell you anything.”, Tenrow started sweating. Apparently the sensors were a little more than that. They were a direct link to the pain centers of his brain.

Lance turned it up to level 3. This time the shriek was so loud Lance flinched a bit. Not for feeling pity for Tenrow but simply because the sound was so loud. This time veins were popping out of his neck, chest, and arms. His face was getting ready, and he was breathing heavily.

“You're going to kill him!”, the Warden exclaimed.

“No”, Lance said, “The real trick is to make him talk before we burn out the pain center of the brain. Once that's gone, he won't feel pain any longer, and that will make him extra dangerous. Not to mention he would be unlikely to answer anymore of our questions.”

“Okay, let's try this again?”

“He was building a bomb, that's all I know.”

“Wrong answer.”

Level four. This time Tenrow visibly bent up the chair arms he was gripping so tightly. He was purple and sweating profusely. When at last normal color came back and he was breathing a bit more easily. Lance tried to ask him again.

“Ajax said he had a plan to make sure I nobody would ever come after me again. He would use my name, and pick someone to build the bomb for him. Then all he would have to do is use the bomb for it's intended purpose, and release the poor soul out in the galaxy...”

“..And since you were here and had somehow mysteriously escaped, you would be fair game for bounty hunters. He would be dead, and all you would have to do is escape and you would be home free.” Lance finished off for him.

“You're very bright Morgan. Now leave me alone.”

“Not yet. One thing I don't understand is why he would need to tell you that he's using your name.”

“He wanted a contact of mine, one that could get him someone who was familiar with implosion devices.”

“Katt. Okay so what's the name of this mystery implosion technology master.”

“For that... you'll have to bring on the pain.”, he laughed.

Lance upped the setting to five. The man at first was shrieking in pain like the other times, only then it turned from a growl to a sneer to a laugh.

“You do have the guts after all, Morgan. I heard Katt was really your wife, what was her name... Dana? You know she has other talents, then just dealing with black market weapons. She was also very good in bed. After Ajax was through with her, I had my turn. Probably almost everyone in

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Ajax's organization did. She wasn't very particular to be honest.”

Lance slammed his fist on the table, and the immediately pushed the slider all the way up to 10. Suddenly Tenrow was spasming, all purple, all of his veins were sticking out. He started convulsing terribly and foaming at the mouth, when as quickly as it had started he collapsed.

“No! No! NO!”, Lance was screaming. Lance put his fist through the wall.

“Now you've killed him, and I'm going to have a serious talk with your superiors about your behavior.” said the Warden.

Lance gave him a dark glare. He went into the other room and picked Tenrow off the floor, still limp, and set him back in the chair. He stood there for a few moments. When Tenrow's eyes opened slowly. Lance called for a towel and gave it to Tenrow to wipe his face. Tenrow now had a big smile on it. Lance turned toward the Warden.

“I just burned out his pain receptors. Now he won't tell us anything because he doesn't have to. Since we can't really threaten him physically. With the scientist out there using Tenrow's name releasing him doesn't really help our cause. It's over, I lost.”

“Oh but you haven't.”, said Tenrow calmly now. “You've given me what I've always wanted, so in turn, I'm going to tell you, everything I know.”

“You are?” Lance asked incredulously.

“He is?”, asked the Warden?

“Yes and by the way, I only know Katt by reputation. I was just trying to get you mad enough to crank the machine up. I don't know if she sleeps around or not, all I know is that she was very good at what she did. Granted, I can't tell you who she got to build the bomb, but I can at least give you a location of where he might be. Ajax's base of operations is on a small planetoid near Sector G of the Starlux Cluster. Apparently Ajax needs access to the Persius corridor, which goes through the Starlux Cluster asteroid field that separates the Intergalactic Businessmen's Association from Ajax's dominion. He's looking for some ancient artifact that he thinks will give him great power. To me it's just a lot of nonsense. But if you want the impostor, he's going to be there. It's uncharted, but it's the only mass larger than that of a moon and most definitely larger than the asteroids out there in the Cluster.”

Ajax was sitting across from a little man the one who had fashioned the D80 implosion bomb. They were sitting in what appeared to be Ajax's office. He had a desk at which they were sitting. There was a holo-projector in the corner. A screen took up the far wall, on which was a map of the star systems, with each location that was important to Ajax blinking. There was semi-warm ambient light all around the room. Apparently the light seemed to be reflecting off of the ceiling and wall tiles, but when you looked at them they appeared to be bathed in the same ambient light with no light source. They stared at the object in the middle of his desk. It was an exact replica of the bomb Trola had taken from him.

“This will do nicely, Tenrow.”, He said.

“I'm not Tenrow, and you know that. You know my name is Arden Finch, I work at FlexCon Industries and I am an implosion drive technician NOT a bomb maker.”

“Oh I'm just having a bit of fun, Mr. Finch. Really, you need to have more of a sense of humor about these things.”

“Destroying planets, and killing billions of innocent people is not funny at all.” retored Finch.

“You will be happy to know that it will be used to get rid of the more disreputable sort of people, I don't kill innocent people. Plus there is no profit in killing them, when they could be a potential customer.”

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“You don't call killing millions of kids with your drugs, or supplying arms to highly superior forces who essentially kill those poor and already suffering people of their planets, or people dieing from some disease all because they went to one of your prostitutes not killing innocent people?”

“My drugs don't kill people, as long as they don't overdose. Those highly superior forces you talk about are simply one side of a war, and I choose the one who can pay, I can't help it if the otherside cannot afford to buy weapons, and those that resort to going to prostitutes and get diseases deserve what they get. I'm just a businessman.”

“You're a liar, and a thief, and a murderer, and any other number of things I can't say in public.”

“Well soon it won't matter at all. You see once Trolla comes back you won't be alive to protest, so you can say or do what you want, but from now on we are finished! Gaurds take him away!”

Something blinking appeared on his wall screen. He pressed a button.

“What is that?”

“Unidentified Battle Cruiser sir, heading for us. It only seems to have one life form aboard.”

Phanta had been given all the information she needed as her cruiser flew towards the uncharted planetoid. She was going to ask for Cert in trade for the plate piece. First she would have Cert come aboard her ship, and then as she was leaving she would jettison the plate piece out into space with a tracker on it, and he could pick it up at his leisure. She would not be denied Cert again. She had searched for too long, and too hard to give up now. She would rather die first, however she wasn't about to let that happen. As she approached she attempted to communicate with whoever was on the planet.

“This is Phanta of the Battle Cruiser 'Shiner' requesting clearance to land. I need to speak with Ajax, as I have something important to give him.”

“This is a restricted zone. Turn back or be prepared to be destroyed.”

“I have something very important that Ajax will want to see, if you destroy me, you destroy it.”

“This is Ajax”, came over the comm.

“There's a certain, shall we say, artifact in my possession. You have something I want, and I have something you need. Perhaps we can trade.”

“You do know that you double-crossed me, and no one ever gets away with it. If you land down here you risk your life.”

“Well here's the problem, you see, I have this artifact which is very important to you, a piece of a plate. A very rare archaeological artifact which if I'm not mistaken will lead you to another rare archaeological artifact, but only if you have all the pieces. I have taken measures to destroy this piece if any harm is to befall me. So I think it's in your best interest not to kill me but to hear me out.”

“It appears you have me at a disadvantage. Very well, you may land at coordinates 3, 6, 7. Just realize you may still be forfeiting your life on the off chance that I can provide you with what you want.”

“I will be there shortly.”

So far so good. She was so close to being complete she was starting to worry. If she could safely get Cert back she would be on her way hopefully to whatever her new life would be, with him. She flew closer to the planetoid and a couple of ships came in to escort her down. They entered the atmosphere which was sort of a reddish hue and then on down to the planet. The planet was barren. Nothing but a ball of rock with a thin atmosphere. They flew down into a cave opening and then landed on a medal platform. There were a few ships, and some people running back and forth fueling ships, taxiing stuff out. Large containers which held what looks like some yellow dust. Others were

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inspecting metal crates full of all kinds of weapons. Some were pushing carts filled with credits. As she got out a couple of guards came and escorted her out.

A feline like fighter flew close to the planetoid, it had its stealth mode on, and couldn't really be tracked. Cat's were stealthy creatures anyways. The fighter entered the atmosphere without being detected. It landed off some ways in the desert. Of course it all looked like desert, but this Gambitzi could use other more feral methods. It took no time to find a cave he could enter without being seen. He followed his nose, and his eyes could see well in the dark. So he crept along several passages until he could tell where people were. More specifically a certain smell, human and machine. There wouldn't be too many of those here. He crept along slowly. Finally he came to a maze of corridors and began making his way through. Occasionally he would hear foot steps with a greater range than human ears and would hide in a shadow or jump to the ceiling using his claws to grab on. His name was Claw and he was named after his fantastic ability to sink his claws into anything, metal, stone, it didn't matter, Claw could walk anywhere and get through any armor. It was useless to try to fight him hand to hand. He would simply cleave your skull like a hot knife through butter. He was also a good shot, and in fact didn't use his claws when he didn't have to. Clawing someone to death is much too messy, it's better to shoot them. If he had to though, his claws could tear through anything. At last he came to a room where he heard voices.

“Why don't I just kill you and take the piece?”, asked Ajax.

“Very simply. I have the self-destruct on my vessel activated, and it's only got about a 10-minute timer. The artifact is there. Also if anyone steps on my ship before I deactivate it, it will explode immediately. So it's in your best interest to give me what I want, and let me go on my way.”

“What will stop me from killing you after you have brought me the piece?”

“Once I'm safely aboard my ship with my query, you will let me leave. I will then jettison the piece in a pod with a tracker, then you may safely retrieve it, and I may safely leave. Oh and just in case you decide to follow me I'll have my lasers aimed at the pod, and will destroy it before you even get near it.”

“Then I guess you've thought of everything, my dear.”

“I have. Very peculiar. Your method of speech reminds me of someone. Oh yes the head of the IBA. You sound a lot like him.”

“Interesting, do you know who he is?”

“No, he usually comes in the form of a hologram and usually hooded so I can't see his face.”

“I assure you it's not me. I am in fact, dealing with them for rights to come and trade in their sector. But enough of that, now you will tell me what you want in exchange.”

“I want Cert. You see he's my other half, without him I am not complete.”

“Please, please my dear, no sense in being over-dramatic, I'm not interested in the dalliances of star-crossed lovers. What do you REALLY want.”

Annoyed, she took off her sunglasses, and pushed her dark hair behind her ear. She then unbuttoned her shirt partway to reveal her right shoulder. All of it metal, robotic. She was the same as Cert. Obviously she knew who she was, and Cert still did not know who he was. His eyes lit up. Maybe she could work for him. If having one stopped them from getting the worst end of deals, maybe two could make sure on one took advantage of him ever again. Ajax eyes widened slightly.

“Tell you what. You go wait in the lounge, and have a drink or two, and I will consider your proposal.”

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“Keep in mind you only have ten minutes.”

“Oh I will, my dear, I will.” He motioned for the guards and they led Phanta out.

Lance's cruiser was flying swiftly through space, the stars were streaking by the few windows the ship had.

“Are you sure you re-configured the scanners correctly, there's a lot of magrock in the area and I don't want to waste anymore time out here than I have to.”

“Al did a lovely job. He was very gentle.”, opted CND.

“Yes sir, as I've told you already, it was not difficult. I was built for this kind of work, sir. And I thank you for the compliment Cindy.”

A beep flashed on his console.

“Oh wait, there it is. No wonder nobody has been able to find his hideout yet. A natural hiding place, out among the asteroids. Cindy, I realize you're not a battleship, but please check to make sure all the proton cannons and ion lasers are functioning properly. I don't want to screw up. Those cost a pretty penny, money I didn't really have, and the energy should be just enough to break up this party should it decide to get wild.”

“Checking... honey.”, she had actually hesitated in calling him honey. Lance wondered what that was about, but now was no time to ponder why his ships navigational computer wasn't stroking his ego.

“Everything functioning, baby...”. That put his mind back at ease.

Lance's ship was now in the atmosphere. More blips registered on his console.

“Now that the party's started, I guess I need to bring the PUNCH.” Just then several fighters tried to score hits, but missed, and he fired several of his lasers at them. He destroy a few of them and proceeded down below. The others were still chasing him and now more came up to meet him. He moved evasively toward the cave where they were coming out. He shot a few more down and a few scored some hits on the backside.

“Now that's just RUDE!”, exclaimed CND. And she fired some lasers off the back of her ship destroying them. “How about a rear end that slaps back” she said.

Lance brought the ship in for a landing. Everyone seemed to be scrambling leaving all their products out in the bay. Lance pressed a few buttons a the cannons ripped through the place.

“Al, come with me now! Cindy, I know you can take care of yourself, but I'll try to be back as soon as I can.”

“Gotcha, cowboy!”

Al and Lance left the ship and headed toward a hallway.

“Al, how many life forms can you pick up?”

“Hmm, a few I think. With all this magrock around, it's hard to pick out individual signals.”

“Let's see one is moving down this hallway, and someone else is following them. There's a room off to the side of the hallway, it has two life form readings. Further on down there's a single solitary life form. I am also detecting traces of chemicals used in the manufacture of implosion devices in that same room.”

“That must be our man, let's go.”

They made their way down the maze of hallways, with Lance following Al. Eventually they came to the small lab. A little man was sitting on a stool with his head in his hands.

“Tenrow?”, asked Lance.

“I told you my name is...” and then he stopped as he saw them. “Who are you?”

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“My name is Lance Morgan, this is my friend Al. We're here to get you.”

“At last finally someone's come to rescue me. My name is really Arden Finch. I work for FlexCon Industries, and I was abducted here against my will. They threatened to release me as the real Tenrow and to let all the bounty hunters know where I was. Now you might be asking why I wouldn't sacrifice my life for potential millions of people. I figured they would kill me anyway, and that they would also find someone else. Instead I built a tracker and a self-destruct mechanism, and concealed it so they couldn't detect it. In order for me to activate the mechanism, I need to be with it. I didn't have a way to write any of this down, they took anything that could help me out of here, so it's all in my head. I can however teach you how to initiate the self-destruct in the case of my demise. Does that answer your questions?”

“Uhh... yeah. Let's get you out of here and into protective custody.”

The building was starting to shake visibly and dust and rock was coming off the ceilings. They tried to maneuver their way back into the landing bay. Just then Trolla stood in their path.

Meanwhile, Cert was moving through the hallways assisted by something that was drawing him, when he finally figured out that it was the lounge, he went in and confronted Phanta.

“Well who are you?”, he asked.

“You don't remember?”, she asked. He shook his head, and then she closed her eyes. Suddenly he was getting an upstream of data into his robotic half. She was broadcasting everything that had happened. Then it dawned on him and his flesh half remembered.

“Phanta, you're here! But how!”. He ran over to her and kissed her.

“I never stopped searching, but now I'm involved with some nefarious characters, and we need to find a way out.”

“Hmm yes, Ajax has been less than forth coming. I had worked for him simply because I did not know what else to do. Come we must get out of here before the whole place collapses on us.”

They both ran out into the hallway.

Al stepped in front of Lance. Trolla growled at them both and stopped advancing on them, just then a large piece of rock fell down in between them, and Trolla ran off the opposite direction.

“Al, find us a different path.”

“I think this way”. They pushed back the way they came and kept going up until it forked off and they took it and headed down. Cert and Phanta came out a door.

“Who are you?” Lance asked.

“My name is Phanta, and this is my husband Cert. Literally my other half.”

“So you're Cert. I'll probably have to take you into custody as you were working for Ajax.”

“That's because I didn't know any better. My memory was wiped, that is in the robotic half of my brain, and Phanta just re-uploaded the information to me.”

“You must be Lance Morgan. You see I was doing some freelancing for the IBA so I can probably help you, if you can help us get to sanctuary.”

“I see, well I guess we need to get out of here first.”

Then Phanta spotted Arden Finch. “Mr. Finch! What are you doing here?”

“Ahh Phanta and Cert my friends.” He hugged them both. “Well it's a bit of a long story, but I was essentially the one that built the bomb for Ajax, but I'll tell you all about it later.”

“I hate to brake up the reunion, but this place is coming down.” remarked Al.

“Al – You just made a human joke!”

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“Sorry sir must be the stress. Let us get out of here.”

The party made their way down to the ships, and a huge chunk of the bay fell off and seperated Lance's ship from Phanta's.

“Looks like you guys are coming with me.” Said Lance.

“Not so fast.” said a voice in almost a cat-like hiss.

They turned around. A Gambitzi confronted them.

“You betrayed the IBA, now you must pay.”

Then he shot at Phanta, just then Cert jumped in the way and took the shot. Phanta kneeled down and started crying.

“Just as well, I will now kill you.” And he did just that, and Phanta fell. As quick as that the cat-like creature bounded away, most likely for his own transport.

“Al, see if you can carry both of them, maybe we can give them a proper burial.”

Al dragged them to the ship and all of them got on board and took off before the cave fully collapsed.

From another cave on the planetoid, another small transport lifted off, a black casket-like ship. Ajax and Trolla were on board.

“At least I have the faux bomb, I will have to come for the plate another time. It can't actually be destroyed as it's made out of compressed magrock, and it would take the fires of a sun to melt that. This is only a minor setback Trolla. We'll have to go to our base on Passa Minor. It is a bit out of the way, but we should still be on schedule. You, my friend, will now have to go and handle Mr. Morgan and Mr. Finch.”

Trolla grunted.

Chapter Four:

The feline fighter headed for Gambit. Gambit was a green and lush world, closer to jungle than most other planets. Plenty of water and plenty of sun made this almost a rain forest planet. Oddly enough the heat and humidity never bothered the Gambitzi. Claw landed his craft in the great city of Tabul. It was a giant city state with ornate decorations on the buildings. The city main was clean and bright, Gambitzi's prided themselves on keeping everything clean and nice looking. Claw's craft however had landed in the slummy area of the city. Here Cat's prowled by night. Sometimes reverting to their barbarous feline ancestry. The ship was on a platform that was descending as Claw got out. He walked in from a cave beneath the city streets, into a major room. It was well furnished and had plenty of room. There were many of Claw's pride here and they nodded to him as he walked in. He walked up the stairs to the control room, and met up with Curr.

“I did as you asked. However that human from the SPD came in and nearly brought the cave down on us. I couldn't confirm if Phanta was dead or not. I shot her with my pistola. And you know how they work on humans. Also there was another of her kind, I shot him as well, I figured that they did not need to live to make trouble for the master.”

“Very well Claw. I need to make my report to the IBA, you need to go make your report and submit it to the high council.”

Crime went very high on this planet, even though most of the people were honorable, the syndicate was in all levels of the government. The High Council was made up of members of the Syndicate that was actually in the ruling body called the Law Council. The High Council was to be

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made aware of any actions taken by any member no matter how small. Claw didn't mind the paperwork, but he did mind just offing people just because one was betrayed. If one of the Gambitzi were betrayed they would merely not associate with the person or persons any longer. They did not feel one needed to pay retribution, unless they specifically attacked your pride. He merely did this because they were part bot, and if there was any chance to survive they would. If they had been human he might have done it a little bit differently.

Claw went to the council chambers and submitted his report in due course. It was setup not unlike a court hearing, where Gambitzi sat in chairs situated behind a railing, as each person was called up they would stand up make their report known to the council and go on their way. Claw waited for a little while and was called up. Then he reported the assassinations. Curr would take a reprimand for this, but nothing to demote him or exile him. In fact it was just a minor citation. They were the high council of the Syndicate. They did not really care what you did, just as long as you obeyed their orders. Curr's orders were to serve the IBA in whatever capacity they needed him in. You payed tribute on what you earned to the IBA in return for some protection. It was all very organized. But the people they were, just ordering someone to be killed to satisfy for a minor betrayal, wasn't looked highly upon. But Curr also knew not to cross the IBA, so he did it without reservation, and Claw wouldn't get trouble from it as he was just carrying out his orders.

Since he wasn't to be expected for the rest of the afternoon, he left a different way. A sort of old set of corridors that weren't used much. He exited the back side of the building, and walked down the street. Then he walked until he reached a warehouse and slipped in. His personal shuttle was waiting. He got in, then turned on stealth mode and took off. He headed to the other side of the planet. A smaller city called Tabyon. He set it down on a shuttle platform. Then went into the building the platform was on. He walked down several flights of stairs preferring not to take any of the lifts. He then walked down a hallway to a small room and entered. The room was bright white, and very clean. At the end there was a holo-projector and a sort of curtain which could be closed to provide a kind of private booth. He pulled the curtain across, and pressed a few buttons on the console. Immediately the head of a Gambitzi greeted him.

“What news have you brought Claw?” the hologram said.

“I had to kill two humans to show my loyalty to Curr. I'm really starting to dislike him, although I've still not been able to find any evidence that he's been directly attacking our pride. I realize we have to have real proof of any threats to our pride before we arrest him and there by break up the Syndicate. He is really close to a council position. I just dislike the cat. He has no honor except what money can bring him. The more I know, the less I like.”

“Do not worry, Claw. You're doing well. The Chamber knows it is hard for any Gambitzi to infiltrate a criminal organization, and harder still to learn the truth about his prime leader.”

“My only solace is that the two humans which I shot are half bot, so it's possible they yet live. I've still not been able to find out who the leader of the IBA is. He never shows up in person. I almost think he doesn't exist, except I would not like to test that thought.”

“My sources tell me the criminal Ajax is dealing with the IBA, maybe you could use that little bit of information.”

“Yes, one of those humans worked for Ajax. There is the one human that works for the SPD, what is he called? Lance Morgan? He keeps trying to arrest Ajax. Maybe I could somehow contact him and get his help?”

“Claw, you're very astute, that was my thought as well. Go and have the blessing of the Chamber. Just remember we want to know everything that happens. Even if you do something that is

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against the pride, we will take the reason under consideration. But I do not feel you would do something against the pride even though it was the last measure you would have to take.”

“Thank you Chamber Leader, I will attempt to contact Morgan. Claw out!”

The hologram flickered out. Claw must now make contact with Morgan. But how. Maybe through a little devious planning.

“Well, Doc, can you do anything for them?”

“I'm not sure. It's true I helped them to continue to live by adopting a bot body to fit them, but I don't have my equipment here so I'm not sure what I could do. By the way, you can call me Elroy if you wish. I'm not accustomed to the moniker 'Doc' at any rate.”

“Elroy? You would happen to know a very lovely mutant that goes by the name Mercedes would you?”

“Arden Elroy Finch. Mercedes – that's my girlfriend. If only I could call her that.”

“Al why didn't you tell me this was Elroy?”, asked Lance.

“In all the excitement, I didn't think to tell you Sir. I'm very sorry.”

“Don't be sorry, Al. You're acting more and more human every day.”

“Please don't say that, Sir, because I heartily disagree.”

“What about you, Doc – er Elroy?”

“I just assumed you had a bot of your own. I didn't have time to make certain this was my Al you were using. Just how did he come to be in your service, as I gave it to Mercedes as a gift.”

“And then she gave me to him. Besides she knew he was looking for the guy who killed his wife and had compassion on him. I'm here to help in anyway possible, and you can fix or build another of me whenever you wish.”

“Just so. I would like to get back to her as soon as possible. So I can explain my disappearance.”

“Not so fast, Elroy. You were working for Ajax when I found you. Now I need you to help me find him and that bomb. Also didn't you say you built some sort of self-destruct in it?”

“Yes, if I'm on site. The only problem is we don't know where the bomb is now. Ajax took it from me before I prepared the dummy bomb.”

“I think one of our dead companions may be able to give us the answer. The male one worked for Ajax too. See if you can revive him.”

“I'll try, but I can't guarantee anything. You see the bot half keeps the flesh half alive. All the memories and some cognitive functions are in the brain. The CPU in the bot half can actually fill in some gaps in knowledge.”

“Well it's all sign language to me. I have a small medical facility in the back of the ship, it can be set up to work as a lab in a pinch.”

“Al show him the lab.”

The lab was small, but had room enough for a table for one to lie on and a few pieces of equipment. Elroy started working at once. First taking off the face plate. Then checking some circuitry. Talking to Al about the best way to reroute his power and so forth. Soon he was done and replacing everything he had taken apart. He went over to the flesh side of the table and started to lightly slap Cert's cheek. Then Cert slowly opened his eyes. He looked around the room, his robotic eye tracking with his real eye. Then attempted to speak.

“Why am I here? I remember... Phanta... she was going to rescue me?”

“Quite so, young man, do you remember me?”

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“Finch, Arden. Elroy, yeah I remember you, but how?”

“There'll be time to explain everything later. You were shot, and I had to revive you. I will revive Phanta soon, but I need some information. You were working for Ajax?”

“Yes. You see, after we were separated and I was dumped out of the airlock, he had come pick me up. By that time my system had shutdown due to some damage I had received. He managed to pick me up and decided he could use my talents. So I agreed. However when Phanta showed up she managed to fill in the holes. If I remember correctly, Ajax's base on the planetoid was destroyed, this correct?”

Finch nodded.

“Although I'm not sure exactly where he would go, I heard he has another base near the Passa system, although I couldn't tell you where it was specifically. You'll have to investigate it. Please, Elroy, save my Phanta. She's the only one I got in the galaxy. You know because you had revived us in the first place.”

“I will do my best, but it will depend on the amount of damage she sustained.”

“That's all I ask, and thank you. I think I will talk to the captain of this ship.”

Ajax and Trolla were speeding toward Ajax's old headquarters in the Passa system. The Passa system was unusual in that it was a three-star system. Because of this, most of the planets in the system didn't revolve around them instead each of the planets had odd orbits. The intense gravitational forces that altered the orbits of each of these planets drastically made it additionally difficult to navigate. While his base of operations was fairly easy to find, most people found it difficult to get there and thus mostly left it alone. They didn't have a System Police Department out there because there wasn't much to police, and if you weren't really good you would eventually get off course. This is partly why Ajax had decided to move base. In actuality he had several such bases, but most of the time they remained unused. They were mostly setup for emergency. However this particular base was the last one he had before he moved closer to the Starlux Cluster. Ajax was currently riding the gravitational current of the nearest planet, and was more or less locked into it. He used the time to set a few things in motion.

Ajax opened a comm channel, audio only.

“As per your instructions, no visual, encrypted audio, low bandwidth. I realize you want to be careful, but this borders on paranoid.”

“For someone who is stopped at every turn by Lance Morgan, you could do with a little paranoia yourself.”, said a seductive female voice.

“I have a job for you. I left an item on board the freighter Orta, I would like you to retrieve the item, and deliver to SPD headquarters. I'm sending you the protocols now to deal with the Captain. Please make sure the package is unwrapped carefully.”

“As you wish.”

“Ajax out.” The audio cut out abruptly. Ajax turned to face Trolla.

“Trolla, I'm very disappointed in you. You failed me back at the orbital mall, and you failed me a second time when you didn't get rid of Mr. Morgan or Mr. Finch. So when we get to base, I'm going to let you finish, what you failed to start. You will seek out Arden Finch and Lance Morgan and you will get rid of them, and this time, if you fail me, you won't live long enough to see my anger.”

Trolla grunted and nodded again. His brow furrowed slightly, so slightly that if you blinked you might have missed it. The Kreig almost never showed emotion. If you had caught the expression you would have known that this was a sign of high stress and worry. He wasn't actually afraid of dying as such. He had a son, and agreed to work for Ajax because Ajax promised he could find out who

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killed his son. If he were to die unexpectedly he would never get the chance to find out who it was. He wasn't about to let that happen.

The ship arrived at a planet where half of it was extreme cold, and the other half extreme hot. No one really know what caused the phenomenon as the orbit was away from all three stars. It had something to do with the atmosphere, but beyond that nobody could say. Most scientists couldn't even reach the planet much less study it. Ajax's old base was set in the mountains on the cold half. It was all covered in snow. The ship landed on a large patch of ice like a frozen lake. Only when Ajax pushed a button it lowered into the ground. It was actually a platform. The ice made crunching sounds as the platform broke away from the surface. He hadn't been here in a long time so the ice around the edge remained unbroken until now. As they descended the ice seemed to melt, and soon was dripping water, and finally as it hit the ground it was steam. The whole system had heat, and it was nice and cozy. The energy was taken from some equipment he built on the hot side that would transfer heat energy into any other energy he needed.

They went down a wide corridor that looked more like a sewer pipe than a functional walk way. They walked until they reached several huge garage-like doors. Ajax pressed a few buttons on a control panel, and the doors raised. Inside was a huge bay which had several ships of different types.

“Take a fighter this time Trolla.”

Trolla grunted and headed toward a fighter. He got in and took off. Ajax then headed back out to the corridor and took a lift to another floor. He entered a small hallway and into an office. It looked comfortable to say the least. There was a cushy couch. An ornately carved desk of some dark red wood. A computer console embedded into the desk to make it look as though it were completely one piece. He pressed a few buttons and it beeped to life. The screen flashed various diagnostic screens, and finally was ready for input. He pressed another button, and a hologram appeared over the desk. It was one of his men.

“I'm on Sarta, I need you to bring the men over here. My base is all but buried now, and so I had to come back to the old one for a while. We need this place up and running so that my various enterprises aren't disrupted.”

“Acknowledged sir.” The hologram flickered out.

Ajax went to a wall screen and pressed a button. Then entered a few things in the keypad near it and then the screen showed several star maps. He settled on one, and then zoomed in on the planet of Duskey.

“Okay, here's where I'll find the third piece. I think some negotiations are in order.”

He went back to his desk and punched in a few numbers. Another hologram appeared. It was the back of someone's head, and as it spun around, it smirked.

“Hello there, Big Brother. Never thought you'd ever call here again.”

“Not to worry little brother. I just needed some time. I've forgiven you for what you did to me. I say let bygones be bygones.”

“You never forget anything, Ajax. What do you want THIS time.”

“Silas, you know I still love my little brother. Father was never angry at your betrayal. In fact he was proud of you, the way you started your own operations. You have a neat little business.”

Ajax's father had been running his syndicate until he died. Of course he was going to give the business to his oldest son. After all, Silas was reckless, rebellious, and not ruthless enough for this business. Or so he had thought. Silas turned in his father and absconded with several of his family holdings. Ajax was right, their father wasn't angry, and he was rather proud. He realized that Silas would have ran the business better, more profitable. What Silas took set him up for his first deals, and

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now he was a big free lancer. Not sticking to any particular quadrant or star system. What he lacked in size he made up for with loyalty. All of his customers were extremely loyal. He could get almost anyone in the galaxy to do anything he wanted. Because of this Ajax ended up asking him for favors from time to time.

“Still my Big Brother wants something from me. So what is it this time?”

“I need deal with Sarta. It has an item which I can only get if you help me.”

“What's in this for me then? You know the Sartans won't appreciate you taking pieces of their national monuments.”

“I haven't even told you what the item is yet.”

“Let me guess. Object of great power, map, glass piece about yay high and yay wide?”

“Except, I have two of the pieces. Well one at any rate, the other is in a safe place where I can get it later.”

“You do? You finally found the pieces. Hmm... again, what's in it for me?”

“How about running the Phalanx quadrant?”

“I'll think on it.” The hologram flickered out.

“Passa huh. I think we need to get some help. Al, call Dan.” said Lance.

“Sir you may take it in your office.” replied Al.

Lance went to a room off the side of the cockpit. There was a hologram of Dan.

“Dan, I think you need to get the Chief.”

“But, I thought we were being covert?”

“Well it was sort of a rouse. Ask the Chief to explain it to you later. Just get him in here, and make sure no one can eavesdrop.”

A minute later the Chief came in. The windows to Dans office frosted, and the audio secure light was on.

“Morgan, I told you not to contact me. You were suspended remember?”

“I still am. It should work to our advantage, I think. I have our little bomb maker here. Cert, some woman named Phanta which is essentially Cert's other half. And my bot who I call Al.”

“Good, we...”, Lance talked right over him.

“The real Tenrow happens to still be on the Atilla. Mr. Finch here (the impostor) was instructed to create two bombs, a real one and a fake one. Only problem is we don't know where the real one is, and we need to get to Ajax to get it.”

“Mo...”, but Lance continued cutting him off.

“The only way to get to Ajax is to get to his number one. Which you know as Trolla. And, chief I don't think his whole heart is in his work.”

“I don...”, Lance cut him off again.

“He's had a couple of chances to end my life, and did not. First was at the orbital mall, I was paralyzed with sorrow as Ajax had just shot Dana. He could have had me then, but hesitated and left.”

“But...”, Baxter cut himself off this time as Lance started to speak again.

“Then he was facing us at Ajax's base after I basically pulled it apart, when a beam fell between us he just left. He could have simply moved it, as you know his strength. I think he didn't want to kill me. Which sounds absurd as you know how the Kreig are. So my plan is to lure him so we can capture him and then question him. Maybe we can get some answer out of him.”

There was a long pause as Baxter was wondering if there was anymore to Lance's tale.

“Have any ideas of how we can do this?” Lance asked.

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“We can...” is as far as Baxter got.

“You can put out an APB on me and my ship. Trolla will already be searching, and he can find me, then I can apprehend him. Great idea boss, thanks!”

“You took the words right out of my mouth kid. I think you need a public place, something where Trolla won't try any funny business. Some place he will try to take you quietly.”

“There's a Trader's station not more than a few hours from here. I can avoid most of the patrols for at least that long.”

“Sounds good, just don't draw attention to yourself, you're still legally suspended, and now you're on our wanted lists.”

“Don't worry chief, I've got it all under control.”

“That's what I'm worried about.”

Lance came back out to the cockpit.

“Okay here's what we're dealing with. We need to get to Ajax. The only way to do that, is through Trolla. Apparently there's a reason Trolla hasn't tried to kill me yet. So now we're going to find that out. I'm going to assume Ajax still wants me dead, so we're going to lure him. My Chief at the SPD is going to send out an APB on me. This will hopefully lure Trolla and if I'm right he won't try to kill me here either. But he WILL come after me. We'll dock at the Trader's station in this system and hopefully he'll follow me there, at which point, we will try to apprehend him. I'm going to need everyone's help, except for you Elroy. I need to keep you safe. However Cert and Phanta as well as Al will need to help me if we're to catch Trolla. He's big, He's blue-green, and he's ugly! And he can pretty much crush a man's throat with one of his four huge fists. I won't lie to you, this is going to be dangerous. But you're on my ship, you've been cavorting with my enemies, to end my life, I figure this is nothing compared to what you'd be doing if we hadn't found you.”

“I suppose we do owe you for reviving us if nothing else.” said Cert.

“I was mostly trying to get my Cert back. If you look at my record, I've actually stayed relatively clean. And now that I have him, I'm not in a hurry to return to the IBA.” Phanta added.

“Good, okay Al, we need two net launchers, and I'm assuming you can handle toggle recovery?”

“Of course Sir, anyone of my appendages can be turned into a high-powered electro-magnet. Should be good enough, not to mention that I can tow Trolla behind me.”

“Alright then, let's make a plan.”

Trolla was in the fighter when he heard about the APB on standard SPD frequencies. Then he waited. An APB just alerted all the patrols that Lance was wanted. Not where he was. So wait he did, but it was not long before his ship was spotted heading toward the Trader's Station in the nearby sector. He sped up, this time he would get to Lance, only what was he going to do when he got there. He obviously wasn't about to kill him. He would however at least capture him, maybe bring him back to Ajax. That might give him more time. Eventually the ship arrived at the station and docked. Morgan's transport was there too. He went inside.

The station was more like a mall than a some lone trader's station out in space. There was a large farmers market from over a dozen systems. There were shops that lined the sides of the station outside the farmer's market. There was three levels. The second level was filled with restaurants and holo-theaters. The upper deck had a few service oriented businesses. Such as a dentist, lawyers, etc. Off of one end of the top deck was a garaged warehouse. It was closed during business hours. The station was teeming with people and aliens of all shapes and sizes. Trolla fit right in, he was not out of

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place at all. He looked around and then spotted Lance. Lance was looking right at him. Was the man crazy? Was he waiting here all this time? Lance was walking toward him, and then he spotted two figures out of his periphery. They were carrying some sort of weapon, as they started all started in on him, he decided to turn and run... he ran back towards the entrance. But just then he spotted Al blocking his way. He remembered Al and his painful grip, and instinctively turned to the side... he began to run towards the stairway on the left side of the station. He started running full out, as the other 4 were chasing him. He went up to level two and tried to cross toward the other staircase to go down... Lance fired a weapon at him and hit his side. Trolla fell forward on his 4 arms and now galloped. Lance ran wide along side him and shot him again, this time Trolla moved where they herded him and he galloped up the stairs. Finally the started chasing him toward the end of the business plaza and to the warehouse. Trolla hurled himself into the garage door busting clean through it.

The warehouse was huge. Several large loading machines were there, non-operative. Trolla spotted a whole in the floor at the far end and started to bound for that. Al, Cert, Phanta, and Lance ran as hard as they could.

“Fire your launchers! NOW!”, Lance yelled.

Cert fired his and scored the side of Trolla who was still galloping. The net slowed him down because of the metal toggles and the fact that the net was made of some metal twisted into fiber. He was getting close to the edge.

“Hurry, PHANTA!”

“It's jammed”, she screamed as the thing started to launch out and caught in the barrel.

Troll made one last effort to hurl himself forward and jumped into the air, when suddenly another net completed covering Trolla while he was in midair. As if in slow motion the ends of the nets hung down twisted to where all the toggles were in the same position and suddenly jerked back. They moved quickly dragging Trolla along the floor finally resting at Al's feet. Al had held the metal toggles in one hand and another net-launcher in the other.

System police finally caught up with Lance's ship and offered him an escort into the SPD station. Trolla was taken into an interrogation room. He would be a tough nut to crack. The Kreig had a high tolerance for pain, so they had to use other methods of persuasion. Insults actually worked some of the time, as they were quick to anger. Trolla didn't look angry however. They might need another solution. Threats maybe? They could pull out the tentacles one by one. Although it looked like hair, it surely wasn't. Each tentacle was a living creature. They actually kept the brain working. Pulling one out wouldn't really hurt all that much physically but mentally was devastating. Pull the right one and his motor skills would be non-existent. Pull another and you couldn't speak, and so on. They might have to employ that. They tried everything they could, but still he would only grunt in disgust.

“Let me talk to him. He's spared my life a few times, it could be he wants to talk with me.” said Lance.

“Alright. Although officially you've been detained for questioning.”

Lance walked in and just stood there watching him. After several long minutes Trolla spoke.

“Your wife is alive.” He said in a deep, throaty voice.

Chapter Five:

It was a strange sight. There were literally hundreds of ships all with one single destination.

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The IBA Headquarters on the asteroid. If there had been any SPD patrols out that way, they would have seen something was up. As it was the asteroid was in a mostly vacant area of space. The cloaked figure called another meeting, this time including all the planetary and star system heads. Not just the sector heads that were in his normal meetings. This was a big event. The landing bays were full. There were hundreds of people, men, women, and aliens all heading toward a big conference room.

Charrisse was an assassin. This has to be stated of course, because she looked nothing like one. She was somewhat plump, not exactly fat, and not exactly big boned. She had shoulder length blond hair half of which was graying or silvery. She was more handsome than pretty, in fact she took on an almost motherly appearance. Her dress was a plain dark blue, but at closer inspection they were divided like trousers. She had a belt with a holster on each side and two Bolt mini-cannons, one in each holster. This was her preferred method of assassination. She didn't care for subtlety. She simply blew them away, and left the authorities to deal with the mess. She almost never got caught though, and this was why she was considered important enough to show up at this meeting. She wasn't the head of any corporations that the IBA had members of. She wasn't in charge of a large force. In fact she almost didn't seem important at all. No one had recognized her except one. The one that presented himself as a hologram. That was all that mattered. She had been hired to do a job and she was here only to learn what the job was and to carry it out.

At one end of the conference room, was a dais, and on it was a long table with thirteen chairs. Actually there were only 12 chairs, the middle was a holo-projector so the cloaked figure appeared to be sitting in the midst of them. There were heads of some 50 organizations all under the IBA. Running legitimate businesses on the one hand, and every vice known to man on the other. All in within the Phalanx Quadrant. His usual were there on the table, Sharpe, his number one. Curr was there, as well as Skrit. Even Captain Ort was there, this was partly how the IBA got it's information. Ort was tired of the way Ajax was treating him. He would be completely loyal, and in fact was to Ajax, until constantly being under suspicion. The IBA would never threaten him if he messed up, in fact as long as he did what was told, he was pretty much left alone. This is what made him decide to join up with the IBA. There was some honor among thieves here. They would obviously be punished if disobeying direct orders, but the head of the IBA understood the value of loyalty and of an employee's worth. If you could not trust them, you could not trust anyone. You had to trust someone, particularly in their line of business.

“Ladies, Gentlemen, and Alien races.” said the hologram.

It took a few minutes for the members to quiet down.

“First I would like to congratulate you all on the fine job you've done over the past weeks. Getting everything in place in addition to your regular businesses as well as your more dubious tasks.”

People chuckled at the word 'dubious'.

“The mysterious artifact my rival Ajax is searching for has almost been found. However his ineptitude has slowed down our progress. He's still got one more pieces to get to assemble the map. I am growing impatient. So I have decided to step up our time table. It's time, friends, to institute The Novis Plan.”

Suddenly there was a burst of chatter from among the crowd. Some excited, some apprehensive. The greedy can be just as anxious as the philanthropic. As soon as it died down the hologram spoke again.

“I've called all of you together so you can be activated in your various fields and titles. As you know the Novis plan consists of mysterious accidents and ailments to members of high society. Planetary and Star System governments, System Law Enforcement, even the Galactic Committee for

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Member Worlds. Yes even the government of our entire known galaxy. To which you will quietly assume their positions. Eventually we will be running the Galaxy and everyone gets a stake. I am not greedy, I'm simply the instrument that will make all our dreams a reality. This is why we have assassins in our midst.”

Again there was a chatter, and people looking at each other wondering if they were an assassin or not. Charrisse didn't like this much. Subtlety was not one of her strong points. She was hired because she was vicious and effective. So she waited it out without comment. She didn't even look at the other members.

“Are there any questions?”

“What about us freelancers?” a voice from the crowd yelled.

“To facilitate the removal of the old, and replacement with the new, I need the freelancers to transport some goods, and people and you will be paid rewarded handsomely. Any more questions? No? Good. Everyone line up behind your sector leaders to get individual instructions. Freelancers should line up in front of me, as your work is probably most important of all.”

Charrisse had to wait a long time before finally getting to speak with the hologram. He told her to wait until everyone cleared out. As they all had their individual assignments they shuffled out one by one, and finally all the ships left. If you were looking at it, it almost looked stranger then when they all came to the place. Hundreds of ships leaving a lone asteroid in the middle of space. Sharpe escorted Charrisse into a small room, which conveniently had another holo-projector.

Silas's ship was a virtual moving space station. It could easily fit a city inside it. He liked it that way. He didn't want to be tied down to a particular planet or star system. He was doing alright for himself. His 'little' empire, as Ajax called it, was actually quite large. He basically handled things in the Kaytaurus quadrant. Ajax's little transport was on it's way to dock with Silas's 'SkySat' which is what he called his ship. The SkySat was totally self sufficient, housed huge bays for ships, cargo, and quarters for all the men and women working for him. His rules stated nobody could fraternize on the ship. Any place else they could carry on romances, marry, whatever, just not on board the SkySat

Ajax's transport came within comm range. Silas gave him clearance and he landed in one of the docking bays. Silas came out to greet him with an entourage. On either side of him he had to Lamorians. These creatures were humanoid, but albino, and somewhat furry. They weren't very smart, but extremely strong. A Lamorian might be able to best a Kreigan, but would still be a close contest as to who was stronger. They could understand simple commands and were usually docile creatures unless their master told them to be hostile. Next behind him came a short man, wearing light body armor and orange-lensed glasses. He had brown hair and a beard and mustache. He also had a comm strip stuck on the side of his face. These were disposable, but transferred audio directly from your mouth and to your ear. There were also a dozen or so honor guards.

“Welcome Big Brother!” Silas said with mock civility.

“I see you've done better than I expected.” Ajax remarked.

“What you expected your little brother to be in a sorry state, without resources, and that I would have to come crying back to you about how I ruined myself by running out on you and Father. As you can see, I easily have ten times the operation that Father had. And judging by that tin can you just came in, I might be doing a sight better than you.”

“I didn't come to fight, Little Brother. I need your help, and in return I will grant you a portion of my operation.”

“Come now, if I wanted a piece of your operation, I could just take it. No, if you are going to

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pay me for any services rendered, we'll have to come up with some other arrangement.” There was an arrogant tone in his voice.

“Can we at least have a drink first, Little Brother?” Ajax asked.

“Of course, of course, where are my manners, follow me.”

The went down several corridors past some rooms, and finally into a private lounge, with a window looking out into space. There was a bar, with a bartender, and a few tables. Silas asked his entourage to leave, and it then it was just Ajax and him. He signaled the bartender who brought up a small bottle full of purple liquid and two small glasses.

“Is that...Curran Brandy? The real stuff, so potent you have to build up a tolerance to it?” asked Ajax anxiously.

“Indeed. Nothing to good for family. You won't mind if I don't dilute it will you? If I remember correctly, you had downed a small cap full on your first drink.”

“Yes, and I was sick for a week!” Ajax laughed. “Father never mentioned it.”

“He never needed to. Those were happy times. Back when Mother was still alive, and we knew nothing of vice. Nothing of this material greed.”

“If you knew nothing about it you wouldn't have this wondrous enterprise. You would have become a desk jockey on some field or other.”

“Ahh now it's wondrous is it? Enough reminiscing. Let's get down to business.”

“Okay, what do you want then.”

“A favor. One favor for services rendered. Any favor I want, without question. Anytime I wish to ask it.”

“How will I know if I can grant you the favor, if I don't know what it is?”

“Well that's the thing. I have services that you want. Services you need. Services you cannot find anywhere else, or you wouldn't be coming to me.”

“Is there nothing else I can give you, nothing to sway you. Women? Cases of Karjinian Ale? Safe passage through some dangerous system. Anything?”

“Just a single little favor. Take it or leave it.”

Ajax considered for a moment then nodded.

“Rit!” Silas commanded. The man with the orange glasses and body armor came in and nodded. “Give me the contract, so Ajax here can sign.”

Apparently he had a contract already drawn up. It was a small clipboard with a keypad at the bottom. He slid the board over to Ajax who punched in a few numbers, and his signature appeared in the box. Silas did the same thing. He then pulled a copy from inside the clipboard and gave it to Ajax.

“Very well then, let's drink, to a fruitful partnership.”

“Come again?” Lance said in surprise. He almost missed the message from the shock at hearing Trola speak for the first time.

“Your wife is not dead. What you held in your arms on the space station was a simulant. Ajax needed to retain Katt's services. He also needed her ties to be severed. That way no one would come looking for her. Only that seems to be what made you look for her.”

“Okay so now what, you do a little plea bargaining and then you expect me to what, let you off for good behavior? So now I learn that not only is Dana a traitor, she's also deceived me yet again, and I'm supposed to be happy about it.”

“I do not expect any thing Morgan. But now that you have me, I do have a little information to bargain with.”

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“You're going to tell me where Ajax is, what his plans are, and what Dana had...HAS to do with it. You're going to tell me now, before I throw you onto some barren asteroid, or heaven forbid, on a prison ship.”

“I will not say anything more. You may torture me as you wish, but I have been trained in the arts of the Krie-Gar and you will find me most uncooperative.”

Lance ran out of the interrogation room. Baxter and Dan were in the observation room.

“Did you get that?” asked Lance sounding agitated.

“Yeah we got it. Question is, Chief, do we bargain with him?” said Dan.

“No, we don't bargain criminals. We don't want them to pull us down to their level.”

Lance slammed his hands down on the table. “I'm going to debriefing!” he said in a huff.

After getting to the debriefing room he met up with Al, Phanta, Cert, and Elroy.

“Have you all been debriefed?” They all nodded.

“Apparently my wife is alive. But Trolla won't say anything else because he wants something in return.”

“Has he stated what it is he wants, sir?” Al asked.

“No. The chief won't give in to his demands, regardless.”

A lone dark figure garbed in black leather came up to the SPD main entrance. It was carrying a small square case. Watching that no one was going in or out, the figure placed four small unrecognizable items on each corner of the main door. Each had a red blinking light. The figure pulled out a small remote pressed a few buttons, then the red blinking lights turned to solid greens. The figure pulled the items off, tucked it back into its coat and went inside. When anyone saw the figure they figured that since the figure hadn't tripped the alarms that they were allowed to be in there, so no one questioned what the figure did. The figure went down a hallway, and then to a staircase, and walked down a couple of flights of stairs until it was in the basement.

There was various kinds of equipment here, stuff for ventilation and heating, computers where the SPD's files were, at least for this precinct. The figure inspected all the equipment and then put the case down and opened it. She pulled out a black round globe, sitting on a black base like the bottom of a three sided pyramid. A column out of the center of the sphere stood up about an inch from the rest of it. A plate was attached to the base, and then the figure pressed a button. A '5:00' flashed on the plate and it was now starting to count down.

The figure made its way up the stairs, and out the door. The figure then melted into the night. While Lance was pacing back and forth, he kept asking Baxter to ask him what his demands were for the information. Baxter kept saying that if they caved in, eventually he'd find a way to escape and he'd be back out on the streets. He was an assassin after all. Suddenly an alarm sounded. Red lights flashed and displays showed LOCKDOWN in big red letters. The door to the debriefing room started to shut.

“What's that?” asked Elroy.

“We usually lock down all areas if there's something detected like an explosive device. Didn't you say you made two? Like a real one and a fake one?”

“Why yes, Ajax wanted the fake for an exchange of some sort, and he put the real one away.”

“Comon!” He yelled as he pulled Elroy's small frame behind him.

They ran down the hallways as doors began closing and locking. He headed toward the lift, and then realized it was ceasing service, so instead he ran toward the stairs. The door was about to close when he slid his hand in between it and the door jamb. The door continued to try to close and Lance pushed hard. He and Elroy scrambled through.

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They ran down the stairs until finally in the basement, when they started looking for anything that looked like a foreign device. Suddenly Lance spotted it at the end of the room.

“The detplate... rip it off... Don't let it activate!!”

Lance ran and ripped the thing off. The only problem was right behind it was another counter, it was rigged to go off anyways! The counter finally ticked the last '00:05', '00:04', '00:03', '00:02', '00:01', 'Detonation!' Lance dove on top of Elroy knocking him to the ground. The little cylinder lowered into the sphere until it was whole and then abruptly a small puff of smoke came out where the cylinder had entered.

After a minute Lance got up, and picked Elroy up.

“There's no explosion?”

Elroy looked at the bomb.

“That's too bad.” He said half to himself.

“There's no explosion, we're alive, and you say that's too bad? WHY DID YOU WANT ME TO STOP IT, IF THERE'S NO EXPLOSION!?!?” Lance yelled.

“Do you know how hard and expensive it is, to find a proper thermal transducer? There's only two companies that make it. In my line of work, it's important.”

Lance was livid.

“I'm sorry I didn't say anything until now, I had almost forgotten about it. I wasn't about to let Ajax let loose the destructive power of a D80 implosion bomb. I did however have to make it look real, and that means I had to make it real. Only I just neglected a few vital connections. I mean the equipment and materials alone are worth more than my life.”

Lance suddenly deflated... then he looked again, then he started laughing. Soon Elroy was laughing with him. They realized that they had kept their lives intact.

“Elroy, I'm sorry. I'm just on edge now. It doesn't look like anyone is going to be going anytime soon now, we're still in lock down for at least another hour. We might as well relax.”

Captain Ort and his Freighter followed the directions given by the IBA to the small planetoid that Ajax used to use for his home base. He flew to the location of the cave only to find out that it was buried under a mountain of rubble. Best he heard, an officer of the SPD flew in and basically destroyed the whole base from the inside. Subsequently an explosion occurred in one of the ships docked in there at the time. The ship contained part of a map to a great alien artifact of unknown origin, that would supposedly give the bearer great power. Other than that no one really knew what it led to. One thing was for certain, it was one of the pieces of the map that led to... something. Ort didn't really care, he was simply commanded to get someone to dig it out.

There was a surprise, however. Ajax had instructed him to get it out, but the IBA trusted him to turn it over to them. Ort was fed up with Ajax's bullying, and so intended to give it to the IBA. That is, if he ever found it, or could find someone with equipment to excavate it. All that was there now was a bunch of rubble. In fact apparently the explosion was so powerful that the remnants of the station were several hundred feet below. His race was the Insectoids. They were similar to ants in several ways so they knew building and excavating. He managed to get some of his people to work at once.

Silas and Ajax and a few of Ajax's unarmed guards accompanied them to the surface of Sarta. The Sartans were peaceful for the most part, this is why they got along so well with the other races. They had scaly blue skin and yellow eyes. They were extremely protective of their people. Before you could deal with them you had to present a gift to them and then you were to make a formal request.

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This could take days but Ajax didn't have days.

For someone that was supposedly as criminal as Silas, he seemed to put utmost stock in their rituals and customs. He was going to ask them formally for the plate. He had already dealt with them before so could address them directly at least. The whole ruling body of the planet was there in great ceremony. Everyone seemed so innocent and friendly. Silas began an oration, and then Ajax signaled his guards. Suddenly bolts of lightening appeared from their hands as if out of thin air, and struck down the ruling body. Everyone else scattered.

“Ajax, you did NOT need to do that. They would have been willing to give it to us, if you had only let me deal with them. They were peaceful, and in fact they never bothered me here.”

“Compassion is weakness and I needed this to be over with quickly Little Brother. I need the plate and I need it now. Besides I do owe you a favor.”

Silas seemed truly saddened by the fact that Ajax had mowed down a most peaceful sentient race. Here Silas was, a drug runner, black market arms dealer, and anything else you could imagine, and yet he was almost at tears. As if he wanted the innocent to stay innocent and he was locked in his life and yet could not change it. Then his expression changed to business. No emotion. They went to the national museum and simply took the plate piece.

Don't worry Big Brother, he thought, I have a favor to ask of you, and I will expect to be paid in full.

When the lockdown was lifted Elroy and Lance returned to Baxter.

“I want all of them detained, I need to question them thoroughly. We need to know who put that bomb in here.”

“It wasn't functional though. Besides they were all here where you could keep an eye on them. I say let them go. We're not really interested in them anyways. We want Ajax, and Trolla can give us to him, if you'd only bend.”

“Never.” said Baxter simply. “We need to keep them in custody now more than ever. Until we can get to the bottom of this.”

Lance sighed. He returned Elroy with everyone else in the debriefing room.

“Well it looks like he's not going to let me speak to Trolla, nor is he going to let you leave. I want you guys to be ready to move.”

“But wh...” he cut them off with a finger to his lips.

“Eventually they will have to let you go.” He said a bit louder than usual. He started to signal to Al, and Al being a bot easily adapted. He basically signed to be ready to go in five minutes and for Al to scramble the sensors while he told them this. When Lance left the room, Al scrambled the sensors briefly and let the rest in on the plan.

Lance went to the interrogation room. “Dan let me in please, I'm just going to try to see if he is still refusing to talk.”

“The chief won't like this.”

“The chief don't have to know.”

The doors slid open.

“Are you ready to bargain with me?”

“As a rule, the SPD doesn't negotiate with criminals. So the answer is no.” He nodded his head yes.

At first Trolla didn't understand.

“You say left, they want to go right?”. He turned around. While they could see the front of him

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in holographic form if they moved around the hologram, they couldn't see what he was doing in front. He hoped they would be in back of the hologram. He made a series of gestures and hoped he caught on to what the plan was. Suddenly Trolla nodded at him.

“You better tell me where Ajax is before i rip all your tentacles out!” He yelled. He then attempted to punch Trolla. Troll jumped up on the table and tackled him. Lance slipped Trolla his access card and as soon as the guards opened up the door he bounded out of the room. He went towards the front door. Next thing he did was head out after Trolla, and as he was passing by he set of an evacuation alarm. Soon everyone was trying to pour out of the building.

Al had sensed it and when the alarm rang out all four companions ran out. It was pure pandemonium. Trolla galloped away as Lance tried to catch up with him. Realizing that he couldn't catch up he stopped until the others reached him.

“Well it looks like Trolla has flown the coop. I may be fired for this.”

They walked for a while and said nothing. Then a lone figure came bounding back, it was Trolla. He stopped before them.

“I needed a good run. The Kreig don't like being couped up for hours on end. It makes us... well ineffective. Now you said you were ready to bargain.”

“Okay well I guess we're deep in it now. What do you want in exchange for the information?”

“I had a son. His name is Raga. He was killed much like your wife. I would like you to find out what really happened to him. I do not expect you to forgive me or to get out of my sentence should one be passed. For I have indeed committed those sins worthy of punishment. I will not run from that. Ajax claimed he would find out what happened to my son if I worked for him. That's why I as in his employ.”

“Well I guess I'm a cop and I can investigate it. But I'm going to have to do it later. It's important to get Ajax before he gets whatever this artifact is. The only way to do that is if you tell me where he is.”

“I will tell you, but I will also tell you something else. Since you agreed to go help me find out what happened to my son, I am now working for you. You may be interested to know Ajax does not have all the pieces of the map, that leads to this artifact. Apparently she, he pointed to Phanta, had stolen the second piece and was offering to exchange it for him, looking at Cert. But when you came in you destroyed the base, and now it's buried under dirt and rubble.”

“There was an explosion, it should have destroyed that plate.” said Phanta.

“This is not possible. It's made of a material we haven't yet been able to break. We do not even know it's origin. It is probably still sitting down there somewhere.”

“Hmm, this would be an advantage. Al can your scanners be made to pick up various things under rock and be able to distinguish items, maybe different types of metal?”

“Actually sir, it will be quite easy to find the plate. Just lead me to it.”

“Phanta and I can help, our robot halves are extremely strong, we could move the more heavier rubble.”

“I would like to return to Mercedes, if at all possible.”

“Doc do you have any experience in ancient artifacts and alien technology?”

“Well, yes, but, I don't wish to participate anymore.”, said Elroy.

“Come on, we need you. I'll even let you visit Mercedes before we go. We can have a drink at the space bar, and you can tell me all about how you met.”

“Well, I'm not sure. Mercedes may want me to stay, that is if she still loves me.”

“Of course she does. You and me are probably the only guys that can see past the tentacle.”

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She's a real sweet kid, but I was taken so that sort of put me out of the running.”

“Alright, I will agree, it's only the whole galaxy at stake.”

Ort's people were clearing out rubble fairly fast. They had just excavated one of the bays. It turned out to be a medical bay. They had to bring out a huge lift because of some of the rubble. In time they excavated several ships. Still not the right ship though. And then suddenly they found it, only it was bigger than any of them expected. It was a huge molten mass of metal. Possibly made of several other ships in the explosion. They brought out a large crane, and attempted to haul the big hunk of metal. But then several cables snapped bringing the whole crane down onto the slab of metal. This was going to be hard.

“Captain.” said one of his men in Insectoid chitter.

“Report.” Ort replied

“This is bigger than anything we have here to haul it with. We're going to need to bring in air support, and it's going to have to be hauled into space until we can find a suitable way of getting into the metal.”

“I was afraid of this. We will have to move it to one of our furnaces on Xoss. Well let's call some of our transport ships, we'll need an energy tractor to move it out into space.”

The underling saluted and went and communicated to his operators. Ort called some of his ship on his portable comm. In an hour they had a couple of large ships, with tractor beams. They started to haul the mass up, and dust and debris rained down. Eventually they hauled it into space. They set a course for Xoss their home world. They would need to put it in the furnaces to melt it off layer by layer until they got what they wanted.

Lance and the crew finally went back to the space bar where Mercedes was waiting tables. Lance put his hands over her eyes.

“Guess who?”

“I told you Mister, I'm not that kind of girl, and if you don't stop bothering me i'll..” Her tentacle whipped around her body and lifted Lance off the ground.

“Whoa Mercedes is just me Lance!” he gasped.

She set him down immediately and retracted her tentacle.

“Oh I'm sorry, it's just there's been a lot of creeps around lately, you know?”

“They just can't resist the prettiest woman in the galaxy.” a meek voice said. When Lance stepped aside Mercedes was all over him covering him with kisses.

“Oh Elroy. I thought you had left me.” she started crying.

“Why? For the tentacle? There's a lot worse out there, believe you me. Besides I kind of like it sometimes.” He said kind of shyly.

“My Elroy. The only man who ever loved me.”

“Well, don't forget me.” said Lance.

She kissed Lance on the cheek.

Then Lance frowned. “I'm sorry Mercedes but I'm going to have to take him away again, for a bit. I need his help on a few things, and he's been invaluable. As is Al.”

“I don't want to lose him again. You can't do this.”

“Elroy you talk to her.”

The gang went to a table and sat around while Elroy and Mercedes discussed things. Eventually both came back.

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“Well if it's for the good of the galaxy, I guess I can't compete with that. I'll take what I can get.” she sighed.

“Don't worry, I'll take good care of him. Bring us some drinks, and you can join us too.”

They sat and chatted for a while, and then left.

Trolla took them to the planetoid only to find the remains of a huge dig site. And a hole in the ground almost the size of the whole landing bay.

“Well what now?” he asked to his companions.

“Well, it was on my ship and I had a tracker. I should be able to turn on the tracker, only I don't know the frequency. It was on my ship before things happened.”

“Hmm, Al do you think you could broadcast on a wide band, and perhaps activate the tracker by sheer number of frequencies?”

“I believe it would be possible, sir, but we need some idea of where it's headed.”

“Let's check the grounds, maybe they left a clue.”

After scanning they concluded that it was an Insectoid operation.

“I believe that Captain Ort, and his freighter Fluchta, roughly translated, the Fly Catcher was working for Ajax. My guess it would be his operation, perhaps to give the second piece to Ajax.”

Trolla spoke up. “Captain Ort's home planet is called Xoss, I can get you there as well. We should hurry though, as that means Ajax is probably fairly close to getting that peace.”

The all left the planetoid and headed towards Xoss. It took a while but suddenly Al picked up the trackers signature.

“I had to use the whole possible spectrum, and I wasn't sure it would work because the signal would weaken, but I believe I've activated it, there on your screens.”

“Cindy, lay in a course for that signal.”

“Aye, Aye, Sailor.” replied CND.

Travel was slow, with that much mass, it was hard to move it faster through space. Ort kept a decent escort on the hunk of metal. Then Morgan's transport came near.

“Sir, unidentified craft approaching”

“On screen.”

Lance's ship was visible on the screen. Ort recognized it at once.

“Launch fighters, that is Lance Morgan, and I want him dead.”

The ships let out and pursued. Morgan's ship destroyed a couple of enemy Insectoids. The another wave caught up. Several shots hit the sides of the ship. CND shrieked like a real woman.

“Evasive action, Cindy.”

“I'm trying babe, it's just fairly tough.”

Soon there were way more than Morgan's ship could handle.

“Sir, I believe if we knock out their command center the fighters will not be able to communicate.”

“So we basically have to kill Mr. Ort in order to defeat them.”

“Yes sir, it's the only way.”

A couple more blasts rocked the ship and CND increased thrusters as far as they would go. Soon they were on top of Ort's freighter. He fired several rounds at his ship. Only to find out, that it did nothing.

“Uhh sir, you need to actually destroy it, and I'm not sure we have the firepower to do that.”

“Well just keep beating up on it he said cheerfully.”

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They kept firing, coming around. A shot hit the ship in the rear.

“Ooh!” muttered CND angrily. “One more hit, sweetie, and there's no more us.”

“Let's cut the tractor between the haulers and that big mass of metal.” Optioned Phanta.

“Cindy” said Lance.

“I'm on it, love.” CND said as she sped towards the mass. They fired on one and then on the other. Suddenly the mass was moving away from the ships. This caught their attention quick, and as they were diverted. Lance nearly ran into Ort's ship and shot a few good shots and went through as it exploded. Ort was dead, and now the fighters didn't know what to do, it was if part of their brain shut off. A few fighters crashed into each other, several moved away. Lance moved the ship and destroyed the haulers too. The only problem they had now, was how to move this piece of junk.

Chapter Six:

The small arrowhead shaped vessel, was essentially flying itself. Using the currents and eddies of gravitational fields around planets in odd orbits, the ship was being pulled along toward a final destination. The instructions were clear, Katt was to meet Ajax at his current base. The base used to be his old headquarters but it was getting quite tricky to ride the gravitational forces to the right destination. It had been years, but now the orbits of the planets that inhabited the Passa system were in the correct position to admit passage. Just barely. A beep, and Katt's Arrow reminded her that she was nearing the hot side of the planet. She had to adjust course very carefully or risk being thrown away from the planet.

The Arrow started in at a low angle until the nose was touching the outer atmosphere of the planet. She increased the speed to such an extent that normally it should have sling-shotted her around the planet and away again in the other direction, instead the gravitational pull pulled her in as she went around the planet like a tether-ball wrapping around a pole. Finally she entered the atmosphere on the cold side and decreased speed, finally flying over the icy surface at a comfortable cruising speed. She noted a smooth looking lake of ice and set her ship down. The ground beneath her cracked open, and her ship went down.

Ajax met her and conducted her into a small room.

“I've done what you asked. Now I want to end our contract. I'm not going to be around when you present a phony D80 implosion bomb to the IBA.”

“My dear you are, in fact, going to present the 'phony' D80 implosion bomb to the IBA.”

She grabbed Ajax by the next and had her claw out ready to impale.

“Money!” he said hurriedly. Two cases were presented to her, double her last.

She retracted the blades. “All in advance this time or else I won't hesitate.” she said calmly.

“Of course.” She picked up the cases.

“Where's the package.” Two guards came up with another little case like the one she carried to the SPD.

“This is it. After this you won't see me again. You won't even know that I delivered the item until you check with the IBA. Is this understood?”

Ajax nodded. She stalked off to her ship. She then took off and headed out.

“Okay, I want some input here. We have a big hunk of space metal, out there, which we think has this supposed map piece. Which by the way we have no idea of how to get it out even if the map piece was whole. We also have Ajax, we know, that's out in the Passa system. We also have the

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Intergalactic Businessmen's Association that is dealing with Ajax. So question is, where do we go from here? Any suggestions? Anyone at all.”

“I know where Ajax is, however, we're only one ship, and Ajax has his whole operation up and running by now. Plus you did kidnap me from jurisdictional custody, and it's unlikely your leader will trust you right now.” mentioned Trolla.

“I think if we go after Ajax, we could catch him by surprise. We can also radio the SPD to lend backup support. Mr. Baxter will have no recourse but to lend assistance. If we could call someone to tow this back to SPD headquarters, we can then find a way to extra the piece. There's no one out here who would come looking for a piece of space junk. Remember Ajax did use this as his base because it was out of the way.” said Al.

“I believe the IBA is a danger to us all. When I was working for them I heard mention of the Novis plan. I'm not sure what this is referring to, but the head of the association mentioned bringing in all of the personnel big and small into it. Some sort of major offensive, which, if we keep ignoring will most likely become a big problem.” Phanta chimed in.

“I agree with Phanta, now knowing all that she knows, it would be prudent to find out what it's about. Lance, we know you have a personal as well as professional stake in apprehending Ajax. But the truth of the matter is, he's a small fish in a big ocean of crime and corruption.” said Cert. Cert and Phanta exchanged information when she came to rescue him, so now they acted as one.

Elroy was silent for a time and then answered, “I don't know what I'm doing here. I have nothing to do with any of it, I'm not sure how I could help. I made two dummy bombs and beyond that I was told nothing. In fact I was kidnapped and then brought to Ajax's base. So I'm really unsure what I could do. If it weren't for the fact we are in the middle of space and you all have some business to do, I would probably demand you drop me off.”

“Elroy, I need you for some important work later on. Otherwise I might have either left you at headquarters, or with Mercedes. Especially regarding the nature of implosion drives.”, replied Lance. “I did a little checking up on you, Mr. Finch. It seems you dabble a bit in amateur archeology. Winning the Benson prize for your work in prehistoric cosmic life?”

“Well, yes, but I put all of that behind me years ago when a certain research assistant went off to profit from my research putting his name on OUR report.”

“The point is, if this map or artifact Ajax is searching for is important, you would probably be able to give us a clue to it's origins?”

“Perhaps, but I would have to have full access to a fully equipped lab, and no one to bother me while I'm discovering the origins.”

“We may not have that luxury, but I will see what I can do. Al put in a call to the SPD, tell them we need some large tow ship to move this hunk of metal.”

Al did so without interrupting the rest of the conversation.

“Okay then, well that doesn't really tell me much still. But I have a feeling that we're not the only one's searching for Ajax's artifact. We need to discover some way to get...”

Suddenly a red light flashed on the console.

“Lance, dear, there's an extremely large ship bearing down on us, I can't really tell if it's hostile or not.”

“Get us out of here Cindy.”

CND powered up her engines, and started to accelerate, but something was wrong.

“Lance honey... I'm not going anywhere, it looks like we're caught in a tractor beam.”

It was the hugest thing anyone has ever seen. It's shape was a bit odd to them, and had several

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landing bays. Its form was black, curvaceous, and smooth. The lights only stood out because they moved independent of real stars. It didn't move very fast, in fact it looked so large, that it possibly couldn't move very fast.

"Divert all the power to the engines, and push with all your worth."

"Lance, baby, I am pushing for all I'm worth, and it's still doing no good."

The ship pulled them closer and closer or it seemed it was coming closer to them, Lance couldn't tell. Soon the big smooth head seem to open its large hungry mouth. Without any light it almost looked like a living creature. Then as it came upon them, it swallowed them whole.

The arrow was hurtling towards a lone asteroid sitting in space. It began to loom large on her main screen. The IBA was monitoring her, and called to get a confirmation on course of action. The asteroid's defenses could have obliterated her without busting a circuit. But it continued to monitor. This made Katt a little nervous as she expected an offensive as soon as they spotted her. The let her get closer and closer until, without warning, several fighters shot out from the underside of the asteroid and started gunning for her.

"I need to speak to the board." She said worriedly.

She out-maneuvered two ships, and faced one coming head on. She shot at it, and it veered off. Several other ships came at her. She fired off two missiles that destroyed a couple. Then one ship shot at her destroying one of her lasers. It then started to accelerate towards her. Katt veered off at the last second. The ship that was taking her head on was now following her. As well as another. Soon another came from the asteroids, and she disabled it with her remaining laser.

"I have business with the board. I've been sent by Ajax."

Suddenly the other ships broke away. "You're cleared for bay 4, let us escort you in or else you will be destroyed."

She powered down her weapons, and the other ships formed on her wing. They flew into one of the bays. And landed. She got out, and several men in uniform escorted her into a conference room. It had a table with 14 seats. Six seats on one side, six on the other, and one at each end. No one else was in the room as she waited. She waited for what seemed like hours, and as she was about to get up and walk out. A large man with slick hair and a three-piece suit entered the room. He didn't speak to her, but sat at one of the chairs near the far end.

After several minutes, he spoke. "Katt, I presume."

She nodded.

"The IBA doesn't think very highly of someone who sends an underling to complete a business deal. Ajax was supposed to meet us directly. We wonder why he sent you."

"I...I... don't know" she got out at last. "I just wanted to be paid and to leave, but Ajax insisted I come and bring the package to you directly. I believe he is just busy."

"This is highly irregular, but since you held your own out there against our security, I figure we should at least hear you out."

"Where is the head, I was told I would meet with him."

"He comes and goes when he pleases. I am Mr. Sharpe. I usually take care of most of the important matters."

"I have the D... that is, the package on my ship, if you would allow me to go get it?"

"No need. We have taken the liberty of appropriating it ourselves."

Katt's voice seemed calmer when she said "I need to speak to the head, now."

"That's quite impossible Katt. He is away on business and cannot be disturbed."

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“Now you listen here, fat boy! I've come here with important information regarding Ajax and the package. You will summon him, or communicate with him, and I will speak to him directly.”

“Guards” he said, and instantly several guards were in the doorway. “Take her away until we can decide what to do with her.”

It only took an instant and Katt leaped over the table, her claw already out and sliced off one ear. Then she crouched while on Sharpe's lap, heels digging into his legs, with her claw at his neck.

“Apparently, you didn't hear me with that ear, but maybe this one is still good” she said pointed at the ear that was undamaged. “I NEED to speak with the head NOW.”

There was a tense moment of silence. The a laugh. A cloaked figure materialized behind her.

“My dear Katt, so good of you to join us.”

She craned her neck to see a cloaked figure in a hologram.

“You must forgive Mr. Sharpe. He's very shrewd when it comes to business, but very low on manners. Please sit down in one of the empty chairs and leave poor Sharpe alone.”

She retracted the claw so quickly small blood marks appeared on Sharpe's largely untouched neck. Then let her hand down. She finally got off of Sharpe and took up the chair opposite of Sharpe.

“Mr. Sharpe, would you go have that looked at. We can't have you bleeding all over the place, can we?”

“N-No sir.” His distorted face returned to a semblance of calmness. He picked up his ear, with his other hand over the bloody spot and left the room.

“Now, my Dear, what do you have that's so important, that you had to cut off the ear of my second in command?”

“It's about that package. It's fake.”

“We know already. I suppose you intended to turn this information to your advantage.”

“Y-Yes. I was hoping to join your organization. I have a lot more to offer though. I'm a dealer and expert in black and gray market weaponry. If you need something for a small war, I'm your girl.”

“I realized you had to come some day. I understand Ajax has made deals and then changed them on you.”

“You know quite a bit don't you?” she asked rather annoyed.

“I also knew of your coming, but I had to test you. I knew sooner or later you would want higher pay, better benefits, more respect. Am I getting warm?”

“Yes. You didn't have to damage my ship though. She's the fastest thing in several star systems.”

“It was only your weapons, our technicians can patch it up for you.”

“I'll handle it myself. So do you want my expertise, or do I go elsewhere.”

“Well we will keep you here a few days. I want to make sure you're not pretending to be someone you're not.”

While there were lights in the ship. The view screen didn't show anything. It was pitch black outside the ship. On each different view there were no lights whatsoever. A muffled voice came over the radio.

“Lance Morgan?” the voice asked.

“Yes, who are you and what are you doing with us?”

“I must speak to Lance Morgan.” the voice replied.

“You are speaking with him, now what do you want?”

“Alone. You must exit your ship, so I may speak with you.”

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"I'm not going anywhere unless you tell me who you are."

"Must speak with Morgan, only."

"Well you're just out of luck then." He cut off communications.

They sat there a long time, then they heard the voice again. Apparently it had resumed communications much to Morgan's dismay.

"We know of the artifact, of the map piece, and that chunk of metallic mass sitting out there in space. We may be able to extract the piece for you, if you will leave your ship."

"Umm, let me confer with my crew." He cut off comms again.

"What do you think guys?" he asked.

CND actually spoke this time. "I scanned them, they don't seem to be taking any hostile action. There are several life forms, but they're just sitting there."

"Well it appears that they aren't going to let us go anytime soon. Lance you may want to at least go talk to them." said Al.

"Al, I believe this is the first time you haven't called me sir. You are becoming human."

"I take offense to that." he replied. "Sir" he offered belatedly.

"I can fix that." said Elroy.

"No, Elroy, he's just learning is all. Although if I were a superior officer, and he were in my army, I'd be busting rank on him so fast his cpu would melt. Al's advice is well met. What about the rest of you."

Everyone agreed with Al. So Lance raised comms again.

"Okay, I guess I'll be coming out now. I will have my bolt out and clip charged, so any funny business and I'll let whoever is in front have it first."

"Agreed." said the voice.

Morgan walked down the gang plank into pure blackness. Soon he felt a sack go over his head and his hands bound tightly behind his back. He was marched around for some time and then thrown into a room. The floor was hard and felt smooth and cool to the touch. He sat there for some moments when a furry paw of a hand picked him up, loosened his bonds, and took off the covering.

He looked around and spotted an intricately carved desk on a finely woven rug. Sitting at the desk was a cat like creature. He looked at lance coolly with his green cat's eyes. He then gestured for Lance to sit in a chair on the opposite side of the desk. Lance hesitated then sat down.

"Mr. Morgan. I am from Gambit, and my name is Claw."

Dan Briggs was filling out some paperwork. The evacuation was a false alarm, with, Lance, Trolla, and everyone else with Lance gone. He sat grinding his teeth as he finished up the last report. He got up put on his coat, and then went over to Baxter's office.

"I'm going home for the day, chief. Is there anything you want me to do before I go?"

"No, nothing you need to do. Go home and rest." Baxter had a sad look on his face.

"It's Lance, isn't it, sir? We give him every opportunity to bring in Ajax and he just totally disregards orders."

"It's just the kid's way. He always comes back with results. I just hope his antics don't get us in trouble."

"Whatever you say, chief. He's supposed to be my friend, and yet doesn't even confide in me in stuff like this."

"What are you talking about Dan? You know you'd come running to me whenever you got information like that. So why would he tell you? You just can't keep secrets kid."

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“Well, I just want to know that he'd care enough to confide in me anyway.”

“He does, kid. He would never let you down.”

“I know. Well see ya tomorrow chief.”

“Later kid.”

Dan walked out, and toward the garage. He got into his ground runner, and flipped on to hover. Before he left, however, he pushed a few buttons on his console. A handsome woman with a motherly appearance, projected from the dash.

“Lance perpetrated an escape for himself and Ajax's assassin. I believe they wanted to catch up to Ajax, and Trolla knows where he is. Here is the tracking frequency I placed on his ship.”

“You have done well. Wait for further instructions.”

Several small ships approached the asteroid. Security launched their ships to intercept. The small unknown ships started firing all manner of weapons toward the asteroid. The security ships started to fire at them, and then the small ships took evasive action. As the battle raged several of the small unknown ships took critical hits and bits and pieces flew from the resulting explosions. Eventually all the unknown ships were destroyed. Several pieces of debris that started drifting toward the asteroid seemed to move itself toward several hangers. When they were in, a few of the pieces opened up to reveal small compartments, just enough for a man to lie in. The men got up with their armor and stalked toward the conference room. The room was empty, then suddenly a hologram flickered to life and there sat a hooded, cloaked figure.

“Welcome gentlemen. Ajax, you most of all.”

Just then several hundred guards came up and surrounded the small group of men. At last the IBA had caught Ajax.

Everyone was waiting in anticipation for what their captors had in mind, half fearful, half hopeful. Lance had been gone an extraordinarily amount of time. No one spoke, as everyone was alone in his or her thoughts. Even Al seemed to be in a silent reverie, although he could have just shut down for the time being. Trolla was thinking of his son being after being a pawn in someone else's game. He didn't actually have any proof. His son had disappeared after a while, and Ajax told him he was killed. He even gave him a tentacle to prove it. Phanta and Cert were in thought together. They could communicate telepathically. A little gift from their robot halves. It wasn't really telepathic, it was a sort of encrypted radio communication between the robot halves, that transferred directly in their human minds. They were discussing whether or not to continue helping Lance. Now that they were together, they could go to some unknown star system, and settle down in some planet they never heard of. They could also just travel the galaxy for whatever adventures lay ahead of them. Elroy was thinking of Mercedes, the only woman who was actually interested in him. It seems people are the same in all galaxies. He was a geek, or nerd, or whatever you'd like to name him. He was extremely smart and most beautiful women were attracted to more of the bad boy types with limited brain capacity. Of course it did help that Mercedes was technically a mutant. Her only negative attribute, was a tentacle that came out of her midsection. Above and below, however, she was all woman.

Lance finally pounded on the outside of the ship. He sauntered in when the ramp was lowered. He was carrying a small loosely wrapped package. He unfolded it and put it onto a table before everyone. Phanta looked at it in amazement. She had seen what destruction the explosion of her ship did to the ships in the hanger. The plate had nary a scratch on it.

“Here it is. Elroy, look it over and tell me if you can figure out anything about it.”

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“Highly unusual. This comes from the Novis star cluster. I can tell by the markings here on the edge.” He pointed to some little symbols etched on the smooth edge of the plate.

“I believe this is an uncharted star system” He said pointing to little dots that seemed to be lit up from behind. Yet it wasn't transparent. They were just naturally phosphorescent.

“I've heard stories of a certain black box created by an ancient civilization. One has but to open it, to release it's power. Power is bestowed onto anyone that opens the box. This, however, is just a myth.”

“Doc, this doesn't look like a myth to me.”

“It does present an interesting problem. Obviously this is authentic, however, I don't believe all of that about some great power coming out of a box. It is entirely possible it's referring to some sort of mega-weapon. Some supreme destructive power, we have only to imagine. That is the more likely story. In any case I can't say much more without looking at the other map pieces. “

“Well Ajax wanted this so badly, I think we should probably keep it.”

“Lance, what did you offer in exchange for this?” asked Al.

“Huh?”

“You were gone a long time, and well, I figure our mysterious captors didn't offer this object for free. They want something, that only you can give them. So what is it?” Al had all but dropped the sir now.

“Well since you're here with me, I guess I should tell you a little something. I am sworn to secrecy as to who our captors are. They wish for me to undertake a mission for them. One of utmost important to their people, and could prove useful to us. I can't really reveal the nature of the mission, however. Al I want you and Cindy to take these people back to SPD headquarters. Tell them I forced them to go with me. Or if you can think up something better do so. Trola, I'm going to trust you to your word that you won't escape the authorities. I've promised to find information about your son's death and I will fulfill it.”

“There's something I haven't told you. I do not actually know if my son is dead. He had disappeared and Ajax had told me he was dead. He even had a tentacle to show me. But seeing as Ajax has been deceitful as of late, I think I do not trust that. I do not hope that you will find favorable information. Until you do, I will assume he was killed.”

“I want you to promise me you won't come after me on this mission. I must be alone for me to be effective. I also want you not to fear that I won't make good on my promise. If I don't contact you in a couple of months, or sooner, I want you to assume I'm dead. At the least, you're no worse off than you are right now. Except you'll probably still be in custody. I'm sure if you have to, you can affect an escape, but I'm going to ask you to give me time.”

“I will wait. Though I fear news will not be good for me.”

“Good. Okay Cindy, I need to head for the Lambda belt. I'll need to stop off at a star port there and then make my preparations from there. Then you need to take everyone back to the SPD.”

“Anything you say, handsome. Besides I don't mind Al helming me.”

Al's eye lights changed from yellow to a pinkish tint. If you didn't know any better you might almost think he was blushing. The ship changed course and headed toward the Lambda belt.

Charrisse's ship finally made it to Ajax's old base. Space near the planetoid seemed littered with remains of ships as if there had been a space battle. She landed on the surface and walked over to where Ajax's base used to sit. There was nothing there but a big black hole, and some remains of some of the building. She left again and then did some scans on a few of the pieces of debris that happened

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to float nearby. She picked up an ion trail, very faint, but enough to follow.

Ajax was restrained by invisible bonds to a large metal chair. He was sitting in a bright white room. Nothing of importance in the room except a table which had some electronic gear. The room had the look of an asylum for the clinically insane. Ajax couldn't move his legs nor his hands. In fact he couldn't move his body, except his mouth to talk. He was sweating, and his face was red like he had been going through excruciating pain. He was also breathing quite heavily.

"We need to know where those plates are." Said a man clad in white.

Ajax said nothing, when the man in white gestured at another man, who was wearing fairly nondescript clothing. The man turned a dial up, then electricity arced over Ajax's hands and legs, and around his neck. Ajax screamed, an otherworldly scream of pain. You wouldn't know he had an extremely high threshold for pain. Because now he was sobbing like a baby.

"All right, all right, I'll talk." he gasped between sobs.

"Well?" asked the man leaning close.

"Go throw yourself on a plasma grenade." he said rebelliously.

The man in the nondescript clothing turned the dial higher and pressed a button. If the scream was otherworldly before, now it was piercing.

The whole ship rocked from a force directly from the nine o'clock position. CND couldn't get the ship turned around in time and took another hit on the forward shields. Lance's ship now faced off at her attacker. The ship didn't look like anything formidable. It was a simple freighter as unassuming as its captain, but it did pack a punch. Several large plasma cannons were 'strapped' to the side of the freighter, and they could wreak sufficient havoc. CND sustained another forward hit.

"Lance, babe, my front shields are destroyed, one more hit and it will punch right into my hull."

"Turn around, Cindy!" Lance yelled.

Another blast rocked the back end. "That one went right up my aft. My shields are failing there too!"

"Al, would you please do a scan of our enemy ship?" Lance asked in an agitated manner.

"Sorry, sir, I'm on it." Al ran over to the console. "Sir, a nondescript Obellion freighter, except those guns strapped to her sides. One life form, humanoid. Sir, should I try to hail them?"

"Uhh yes please, you can see the hurry we're in, you can exclude the formalities."

"Right sir. They're replying, on screen."

A motherly face beamed at them from the viewscreen.

"So nice of you to call. Lance Morgan, I presume?"

"Yes, who are you, and why are you firing on us?"

"Who I am is not important. But my employer seeks your life. If you could be so kind as to give it to me, I don't think your friends will have to suffer."

"Okay then, who is your employee?"

"Well I guess since you're dead anyways, I might as well tell you. The IBA wants you dead. I think it has something to do with you interfering with Ajax so many times that they wants to eliminate any hindrance to their own plans. Don't ask me what Ajax has to do with their plans, I'm just a mere contractor."

"I guess I interfered with that detplate deal. So there's more to this mystery than meets the eye. In any case, I'm sorry but you'll be disappointed, as I'm not going to give you my life, nor the lives of my friends here."

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“Hello Trolla, it's been a while.”

Trolla grunted.

“I can only assume you're with them because they offered to help you find information on your son. I hate to break it to you, but Morgan effected an exchange your son for Tenrow.”

“I don't believe you.” Trolla said calmly, but his face was in a permanent scowl.

“Believe what you want. But Tenrow is now on a prison ship, and your son is permanently missing.”

“I didn't exchange anyone for Tenrow. He was captured while trying to appropriate a detplate. That is why Ajax was dealing with Dana... I mean Katt. She was a last minute addition.”

“Do not worry, I do not believe the lies of this charlatan. She appears unassuming, but really she's a viper and not to be trusted. Yes there is even honor among assassins, and Charrisse is not one of the honorable.”

“Well that didn't work now what?” Lance asked.

“Now you ALL die.”

One more hit to the aft, and the ship started smoking.

“Lance... honey... I can...not...function.” The ship stopped responding. It was moving rather swiftly opposite the direction of the blast.

“Umm Al, are scanners working?”

“Way ahead of you boss, there's a small planet nearby, it looks capable of supporting life, and in fact looks quite hospitable.”

“Okay, I'm switching to manual.” He flipped a few switches. “Uhh, it's not responding. Al try to patch in to see if you can give me navigational controls.”

“It's quite difficult, there doesn't seem to be a sufficient alternate circuit path.”

“If you will permit me, Lance, me and Phanta will attempt to interface our robot halves. We will attempt to create a closed circuit, with Al routing navigational controls through us and to your console.”

“Well do it, now, or we'll miss our trajectory completely, and this Assassin will blow us out of the sky.”

They ripped off a panel covering a junction box, with wires and connections, and then took several wires and plugged them into their robot-half heads. Both of them went still as they were attempting to build the circuit pathways.

“Sir, I think it's working, you should have control.... NOW”

Lance yanked on the controls and suddenly it changed course. It was a bit tough for Lance as the ship didn't want to respond immediately. The ship took another plasma blast in the side as it banked toward the planet. Then after ducking a few more shots, both ships were in the planet's gravitational pull. Charrisse seemed to have her own troubles trying to stabilize her ship's entry. Lance's ship broke out of the clouds and was heading toward a forested area.

“Sir, if we don't make it alive, it's been a pleasure to serve with you.”

“Al, let's not go down that road, we're not dead yet. And regardless of what you say, you make a very nice human being.”

Al didn't comment this time.

“Elroy, I'm sorry we didn't leave you back with Mercedes. If we live through this, I'm taking you right back to her.”

“It's quite alright, Lance. I'm happy that I actually got to know her. And you. You're a nice person to work with. Still I do wish she would not experience the sorrow when I don't turn up.”

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Phanta spoke then. "Now that I am complete, I do not fear death any longer. I will spend eternity with my beloved."

"We may even be alive, considering what has happened to us in the past. If we are we'll be sure to report your disappearance."

"I am not standing for this. I will not die, I'm going to make sure whoever had a hand in the disappearance of my son will pay with HIS life. Morgan, if you die that will end my duty to you. If not, I will still offer my help."

"Thanks Trolla, for that ...uhh... vote of confidence."

The ground came rushing up to them, as the ship came in at angle all billowing smoke behind it, it began striking the tops of trees, and taking branches off. Then with a loud boom hit hit the side of a small hill, killing all the trees in the vicinity. The blast blew all the trees from the center outward, backward, as sand, rocks, and other debris plumed high in the sky, finally settling over everything like a fine mist. The crater the ship had created was smoking. Meanwhile some distance away another ship made a crash landing with a boom that could be heard miles around.

Ajax had not given any quarter. He resisted torture like a pro, and it was obvious something more extreme had to be employed. A hooded, cloaked figure entered into the observation room.

"Sorry sir, he just won't give up the information. He's been instructed in resisting torture quite well."

"I know, as I have received the same instruction. I guess I will have to go in there myself."

"As you wish sir."

The cloaked figure was led into the interrogation room. He waved Mr. Black, and Mr. White away and they left the room.

"I still... won't... talk." Ajax gasped.

"You're going to give me the location of the two plates, or you will die. If you volunteer the information before what I'm about to do, I will let you live and work for me. If not, you will die very soon and I will be able to search for the plates. I have every means at my disposal to do so, I just didn't want to take so long."

"You need something from me, you won't kill me because of that. So do your worst."

"As you wish. But I warn you, once you see my face, you will have to die."

The cloaked figure pulled back his hood. Just then the nature of the questioning fell, full weight, on Ajax's mind. He stared at the man that stood before him in horror.

Chapter Seven:

When Julio got to headquarters early the next day, he noticed there were several men and women there he had never seen before. They wore dark suits and were measuring things. Moving stuff off of desks, going through filing cabinets. There were also some reconfiguring work stations and instructing people to go to the conference room. Baxter's office was open and one of the men gave him some personal effects in a box.

"What's going on, Chief?"

"Bureau for Inter-Galactic Affairs. Says we've muddled up an investigation of theirs. Something to do with Ajax, but they won't give me any idea of what the problem is."

"You're not getting fired I hope?"

"Naw kid. I'm being moved, I guess one of their pencil pushers need my office. Comon kid,

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let's head toward the conference room.”

Julio and Baxter joined the others at the SPD in the conference room. There were 7 or so chairs on an oblong table. Several men and women in suits were seated. Everyone else including senior staff at the SPD were standing. Dan was already there standing waiting for the rest of the people to shuffle in. At the head of the table was a woman in a dark blue suit. Alice Lawson had light hair with streaks of gray that were tied up in a tight bun. She also had a few wrinkles here and there, but otherwise would have been a very pretty woman if she didn't have such a grim countenance. To her right was a gentleman who was considerably younger, he didn't seem to have any expression. He just sat there waiting for everyone to come in. Baxter still had his stuff in his arms as the woman stood up and spoke.

“Gentlemen, we're from the Bureau for Inter-Galactic Affairs. We've been following your search for the criminal Ajax, and have found nothing but, ineptitude and bumbling. You have hampered our investigation of the Inter-galactic Businessmen's Association by not capturing Ajax. It has been decided that we're to come down here and take over the investigation as it seems to coincide with ours.”

She was looking directly at Baxter.

“You can't do this, this is my case, this is my house, and you have no jurisdiction here, Lady! The SPD serves this star-system only, not a bunch of pencil pushers with 3 piece suits that doesn't know anything about the real world.” shouted Baxter.

“The SPD servers this star-system which is governed by the United Star System Confederacy. Your world is one of the member worlds in the USSC, so that means we DO have jurisdiction here, and any other system that is part of the USSC.”

“I'll take this all the way to the Regent, if I have to. We're part of an important investigation, in attempting to apprehend one of the most notorious criminals in the Galaxy.”

“No need, I've already spoken with the Regent, but if you wish I can call him up and we can speak to him personally, in front of all these people.”

After a moment Baxter closed his mouth.

“As I was saying we are investigating the IBA. As Ajax was dealing with the IBA before his disappearance, and you were investigating him, we've decided to take over until the investigation is complete. Please give my people all the cooperation possible, to make it a smooth and easy transition. That is all, you're dismissed. Except you, Baxter, Briggs, please stay, we have so much to discuss.”

All was darkness, there were no sounds, no color. It was as if the world didn't exist. Then there was a flicker of light, just a slight flicker. And the sound of someone speaking. Lance couldn't make out who was speaking or what it was saying. Like a rushing tidal wave his body felt a rush of pain. He coughed and saw the dust blow away. Then the voice and light was getting closer. Suddenly he saw a metallic hand pulling away dirt and debris, then his arm was exposed, and then more hands started digging. The metallic hand grabbed his and another fleshly hand grabbed his other hand and pulled him up to a sitting position. The sound seemed like it was in a tunnel, and then started to get clearer.

“All you alright sir?” he heard Al ask.

He coughed some more.

“Yeah... I think so, but my body feels like it's broke in a hundred places.” he gasped.

“I've done some scans, miraculously you've only a few cuts and abrasions, and a few bruises.”

“That must have been some landing, where'd all this dirt and debris come from?”

“We hit the ground at the speed of a falling meteor. We essentially made a crater.”

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“Is everyone else all right?”

“Elroy has a broken leg and a broken arm. Phanta and Cert's fleshly halves are damaged pretty badly, but they're still alive. Trolla seems to be the only one untouched, although he's a bit grouchy. I'm afraid, sir, that there is one casualty though.” He said in a sad tone. “Cindy is no longer functioning, and I can't seem to find a way to restore her.”

“It's... It's alright Al. She's an AI. We may be able to pull her cpu from the system. Besides, I would miss her fawning over me as if I were the only man in the universe.”

“I would miss her too. She's quite... unique.”

“Let's get out of here.”

“Sir, that's difficult, it seems we're trapped down here. Unless we can move several feet of dirt, you might die down here.”

“You wouldn't happen to have a drill built on your person would you, Al?”

“Sorry sir, I was not programmed for that sort of work. And thus have no need for machinery of that kind.”

“Well can you at least scan for the surface.”

“Yes sir we did appear to crash right side up. Although I still think we can't dig our way through.”

“Help me up and bring me to the others.”

Al helped Lance out and he crawled through some wreckage to the area in front of the view screen. Everyone was sitting in the only part that didn't seem to be rect.

“Okay at least everyone's alive. Does anyone have a suggestions of how we can get ourselves out of here?”

“I suggest we dig.” grumbled Trolla.

Lance looked around in the dim light of Al's utility electritorch. Each person nodded in turn.

“So, I guess we dig. Al give us the best position that we could use to get to the surface.”

“I believe that the best position to the surface is over there.”

He pointed to a section of the hull that joined a wall of dirt. They all proceeded to start digging their way out with their hands, or bits of metal, or anything they could find that could be used to dig. Elroy couldn't do anything but sit and watch, his broken bones not permitting any kind of real movement. They might have trouble helping him out through the tunnel when they got finished. They were digging for hours, but seemed to make little progress.

“At this rate we'll be out by, oh next year.”

“Elroy is there possibly a way we could make Al's hands turn into some sort of digging tools. I mean think of a dog trying to hide a bone.”

“Hmm... There might be a way. I'll need some sort of tools. We'll need to jury-rig his hands so that they may rotate freely. And I'll need some sort of rotators, one for each hand.”

“He could use my shoulder rotator on my bot arm for one hand.” said Cert.

“And mind for the other. It wouldn't do to not have a matched set.” added Phanta.

“Alright, so for tools I need a few other things.”

He outlined the rest and removed the bot arms on Phanta and Cert. He then used the shoulder rotators and installed them into Al's wrist joints. It was a hack job at best, but time would tell if it would work well enough.

“Okay Al, all you have to do is bend over, legs spread apart, and let those hands fly.”

He moved into position and started to rotate the hands, soon it was getting up to speed that the hands were a blur. Like some mad belted wheel. Dirt and debris began flying everywhere. The others

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tried to cover their faces. Soon the tunnel was a lot bigger, but they still needed to move a big pile of dirt out of the way of the tunnel mouth. So the others got to work moving rubble. At one point they had to yell at Al to stop as the tunnel opening was getting covered. Then they moved it out of the way again. They kept doing this, until at last, there was almost no room for anymore dirt to go. Finally Al reached the outside and light poured through.

“As much fun as I had digging us out, I would like the use of my hands back?”

“Of course. I'm also sure Phanta and Cert would love the use of their arms as well.” replied Elroy.

They restored Al's hands back to normal, and replaced Phanta and Cert's arms. Now Al looked dolefully at the wrecked ship, only parts were sticking out of the ground, and not many of those.

“Lance, if you would, sir, can we get Cindy's cpu out?”

“Well the brains were toward the back of the ship, that's where I kept the computers. Didn't you have the schematics when you interfaced the last time?”

“That's right. I almost forgot. Hmm. Bot's should not forget. I mean we're on all the time.”

“I built you to be a learning bot. Your cpu must have picked it up while interacting with humans. You didn't really forget anyhow, you can recall at any time. But your brain patterns must be altering themselves to conform more to human actions. Hmm quite interesting.” said Elroy.

“Think nothing of it, Al, it's okay. As long as you're still here helping us. In any case, find out where Cindy's cpu is and then do a scan to see if you can spot it among the wreckage.”

“Luckily we went in nose down. I believe I've found where Cindy is.”

They went to the back of the crater and spotted the backside of the ship. Everyone began digging out from the back of the ship forward until they spotted the area which housed the computers. Fortunately the area was exposed enough for them to start searching the large cabinets. Lance couldn't really tell where CND was as now each cabinet looked the same to him. Finally they came to a cabinet that said C.N.D.

“Uhh that must be it.” said Lance sarcastically.

“Where, sir, I don't see...”. Al walked around to where Lance was and saw the letters too.

“Oh. This certainly helps.”

They opened the cabinet. There were several circuit boards and plug in cards, until finally they spotted the object of their search. It was a socket with a crystal cube. They used holographic technology in their computers as well as their holograms. This cube had enough room to store several lifetimes if needed. In any case this was Cindy or C-N-D, the computational navigational device. Truth to tell Lance had grown attached to CND. Also her AI could grow and seem almost human, this is why they wanted to keep her. No matter what computer she was attached to, she would still have her personality.

“Thank you, Lance. I've grown quite fond of her. I mean even for just a bot.”

“Al, you might be the bridge between human emotion and bot. You never know. You might really be in love with her.”

“Seems hard to believe but it is possible.”

“Most interesting. You seem to be taking on aspects of human emotion that your brain wasn't originally made for. Although you do have enough space that your subprograms could grow to a rate that allows you to emulate a human. I'll tell you what. If we get out of this I'll build you a suitable body for Cindy, so you may interact with her in a more human like way.” said Elroy.

“The possibilities.” Al literally lit up.

“Well we need keep our mind now on what we're doing. We'll also have to fashion something

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to carry Elroy with. Since he can't walk.”

“I do not wish to be a burden. If we could splint my leg and arm, and build a make-shift crutch, then although it would be slower, I could amble along most satisfactorily.”

With that everyone went to find stuff to fix up Elroy with. Lance found some pieces of wood, being that they were in a forested area, and shaved down the sticks and then used strips of cloth from his shirt to tie the splints together. Al managed to find some pieces of the ship and fashioned them into a crude looking crutches. But they did the job. And then after Elroy had practice it a little bit, they were off, albeit at a slow pace.

“Why would I tell you where the plates are if you're going to kill me anyway. I don't like you at all, so I have no reason to help you.”

“You see, Big Brother, I am not like you. I don't kill indiscriminately nor do I get angry when someone makes an honest mistake. Loyalty has it's rewards. Real loyalty. I do not threaten my potential business partners. I do not make unreasonable demands. When I kill I only kill if every other possible means of rehabilitation are exhausted. I will kill you if you DON'T tell me. However I will let you live if you do. Maybe you can work for me in some small capacity. I mean look at what I have, not only do I have my own “little enterprise” I have the IBA, the largest 'legitimate' operation in the galaxy.” Silas emphasized the word legitimate for it was anything but. A legal front for every criminal syndicate on the opposite side of the Starlux cluster.

“I don't care, you're still not getting any information out of me. Kill me if you like, but you won't have the satisfaction of having me tell you where they are.”

“All right, I have one more method of persuasion before passing the point of no return.”

Silas put his hood back up, and walked out of the room. Ajax waited for what seemed like hours when Mr. White came back in with a syringe. He injected the contents into Ajax's arm and waited. Finally Mr. White spoke for the first time.

“You see, we don't use this very often because sometimes the patient's mind is a little more lucid and thus able to fight it off. Most of the time our patients give in with the slightest hint of the possible pain to come. Some actually aren't that bothered by it so we administer a little pain, and even they tell us all. This serum is often slow to work. Not all that effective. However once someone has been through the amount of pain you have, their mind is easier to break.”

“Father, is that you?” Ajax said as he looked past Mr. White into space.

“Looks like it's working faster than anticipated.

“Ajax, I'm disappointed in you. I knew you'd come to ruin. Silas was better than you ever were, and I should have given the business to him instead.” Ajax thought he was seeing his father speaking. A hallucination of the drug.

“Father, I did what you asked, I kept it running. It was Silas who turned you in.” said Ajax to his hallucination.

“Silas had the guts to do what was necessary. You know I turned in my father too. Only I stole his business from him. Silas even was able to build up this might empire on his own.”

“Father, I did everything that was expected of me. I kept the businesses running. They were quite profitable too.”

“And then your foolish side projects. These plates, are they? What are they, some ultimate power in the universe. I believe that when I see it.”

“It's true Father, the plates are real, the artifact is real. I'm so close to getting it, I have 2 pieces and the third piece is on it's way.”

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“Well where are these pieces, why don't you show them to me?”

“I can't Father, they're not here. They're...” Ajax started fighting mentally.

“No, you're dead, I can't tell you anything.”

“You can't, huh? Just like I thought.” the hallucination shook his head.

“Those plates don't even exist. You'll never amount to anything.” The hallucination started to walk away.

“No wait Father, I'll tell you. I just want you to believe in me.”

The hallucination stopped and turned around.

“Father, they're on our old base in the Passa system.”

“I don't believe you. Sorry, son, you've disappointed me for the last time.”

The hallucination walked away into nothingness.

“Father, don't leave me! I have the guts. I can take over the business. Don't Leave!!!”

Silas was in the observation room. Mr. Black was with him.

“Sir, I believe we have our answer.”

“Very clever. I never would have thought about going to the old base. Ajax must have setup there when I left. Mr. Black, it looks like your serum worked like a charm.”

“Well Mr. White did all the 'interrogation' – He loosened the jar lid, as-it-were.”

“Great work, now we must go over there. I will go myself to ensure we find and bring the plates back here.”

“Your department has consistently showed it's ineptitude, time and time again. You've had Ajax in your grasp several times, and failed to bring him in. Particularly Lance Morgan has almost had him and yet was given the slip time and time again. I say Morgan is a loose cannon and can't be trusted. In fact did he not initiate a false alarm and evacuated all the people in this building, and then let all the suspects go?”

“Of course he did. He always has a good reason for doing what he does, and he's never actually disobeyed an order. He just simply gets around it, and usually still within the rules. He's a head cracker, but he gets the job done. I don't see any of your pencil-necked lackeys doing any apprehending lately. Why didn't YOU take Ajax if your men could have done any better?”

“We've been investigating someone that is more important than your little petty mobster. He's planning on taking out whole governments, in something he calls the Novis plan. There's simply too many variables and we can't get to everyone. We don't even know who all is involved. But I'm telling you it goes all the way up to the USSC. The only reason I'm telling you this is because of your relation to Regent Bradley. It seemed you saved his father in the War, and now his son feels he owes you something. I'll keep you in the loop just as long as you stay out from under my feet.”

“YOU keep out of MY way. No stone-cold bi...”

“Uhh Chief, I think that's not the best use of our time right now.” Dan cut him off.

“Briggs, you're right, I don't have time to lower myself to her level, I gotta precinct to run!”

With that, Baxter stormed out, with Dan trailing behind him trying to make apologies. Alice looked after him with a bit of contempt in her eyes. This is not what she had been promised. They were supposed to cooperate fully, and yet they had a rebellious attitude. She might have to change her approach. Lincoln, the man that was sitting to her right in the conference room stood up.

“Is it wise to be tussling with a bulldog?” he asked.

“I don't care, right now we have a job to do. Dozens of member worlds depend on it.”

“Okay so maybe you should be a little more tactful.”

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"I'll try. Send in Mr. Julio Martinez. I have a little job for him."

"Before I go get him, I wanted to ask you if you've decided to accept my offer, for dinner?"

"Please not now. There's a reason we broke up. I didn't change my mind then, and I haven't changed it now."

"Then why am I still here?"

"I need you... professionally. You know that. So why keep bothering me about it. Send in Mr. Martinez now."

"But..."

"NOW!"

"Alright, but you know you still want me, otherwise you would have found a way to transfer me out."

He walked out a little cocksure. A few minutes later he came back with Julio.

"Ma'am, you wanted to see me?"

"You're the top detective here now, are you not?"

"Yes Ma'am. Well Lance Morgan is the top, but aside from him there's no one as hard working as me."

"We need to bring Morgan in. And I want you to do it."

"Me Ma'am? I'm sorry Ma'am but I'm going to have to decline. See Lance is the best guy we've got. If we take him out of play, then you might as well forget your investigation altogether. Not to mention he's one of my best friends. I couldn't under clear conscience bring him back to be held prisoner, or even just for questioning. I'm sorry Ma'am, but you're going to have to find someone else."

"If I find someone else, you'll find yourself out of a job."

"I work for Charles Baxter and when he's not available I work for Dan Briggs. I do NOT work for you, your monkey here, or the USSC."

"This precinct is now under the jurisdiction of the USSC, Military, Governmental, and Law Enforcement Agency code of hierarchy of operations, Section 8A paragraph B, which states, and I quote 'Member worlds military and law enforcement shall be subject to USSC standard operating procedure which includes assignment of resources, when and only when a crisis arises which affects each member world of which the USSC consists.' Now do you follow my orders, or do I go get someone else?"

"The code also states in paragraph C, subsection 2, that all department heads are to be instructed and consulted before any action to chain of command is affected. So before you decide to get all, 'I'll pull rank on you', I suggest you bring the Chief back in here and at least have the courtesy to let him know."

Alice looked indignant. She had tried to use the code to affect her judgment, but now she had been called on it, she had to withdraw.

"Lincoln, go fetch Mr. Baxter."

"But..."

"Lincoln!"

"Alright." Lincoln left for a few moments and brought Baxter back into the conference room.

"What's this all about?" asked Baxter when he was led back in.

"According to the 'book', I'm suppose to inform you of any staff appointments or changes. I'm sending Julio here on a mission to bring back Morgan."

"Sir, you can't let her do that, I mean. Lance is like the best guy here, and our friend. I've got to believe he had a good reason for doing what he did." said Julio emphatically.

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“I have to remind you here that we are in control now, and you have but to follow.” said Alice.

“Director Lawson, I mean that is your name, Ms. Lawson? Why not have one of your lackeys do it, since you're so concerned about running everything.”

“Firstly, I've done everything to the letter of the law. Secondly, I am in charge here for the time being, and Thirdly you two may find yourselves out of a job. Or would you like me to call Deputy Director Dean?”

Baxter looked livid, and was ready to explode at any minute now.

Then he said through gritted teeth “That won't be necessary, Director Lawson.”

“Kid?”, he said to Julio, “I want you to follow Director Lawson's instructions to the letter. Do you understand. To.. The.. Letter..”

Julio must have picked up the subtle hint when after several moments he finally replied “Yes sir.”

Both men walked out and started heading toward their new stations. When they were out of hearing range Baxter started talking out of the side of his mouth.

“Kid. If I get this straight you're supposed to bring Morgan back, right?”

“Yes sir. But how will he, you know, do whatever he's doing, if he's back here?” responded Julio.

“She didn't really specify the method or the time to get him back. Did she?”

Julio thought for a moment as the statement went past his head. Then he suddenly caught on.

“Oh, right sir. Bring him back, gotcha.”

Baxter dropped his voice even though they were well out of earshot and eyesight.

“I want to know everything you find on Morgan. I want to see if there's anyway we can get help to him.”

Julio just nodded.

Charrisse's freighter managed to skip on a long patch of dirt and finally skidded to a stop. The landing struts were folded under, but otherwise the ship was generally unharmed. She got out of her ship and was hissing to herself. She checked both of her weapons and made sure they were locked and loaded. She opened a side compartment and pulled out a small electronic scanner. Then she set about scanning for her query. Picking up some life form readings she headed in a direction of some trees on a hillside. She couldn't see very far, so didn't spot the crater or the flattened out trees by eye. Instead she kept following the life signs. Eventually she came onto a smoking crater with Lance's ship half wedged inside and flattened trees in a ring all around the crater.

“Aha!” she said to herself.

She continued following the life signs. Once up on top of the hill she could only see a ways down into the trees, no sign of her query. They had to be there, they're running and hiding within the trees. They would pay for the damage to her ship, and the use of her time. Now she would want to kill all of them. She would go after Lance first though, since that's what she was being paid for. She trudged down through the next trees. Finally she saw someone, but apparently not Lance. She decided to save her ammo and her position by not firing on that person. In fact there were two, she recognized one as Phanta and the other as the one Phanta was searching for. She decided to make a side line and trudge up the side of another hill. She spotted another two. A small scientist she didn't recognize and a bot. Obviously these two wouldn't help either. This had to mean Lance and someone else were on another trail.

She made a backtrack in a wide arc to avoid detection, when she spotted Lance and a Kreigan.

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Then when she got closer she noticed the particular gait. Trolla. What is that guy doing here with them. Doesn't he know he's a wanted fugitive? In any case killing Trolla might be a pleasure, but a pleasure afforded after killing Lance. She ran behind some trees, and kept going around bushes, under logs, crawling on the ground. At last she was at a walking pace behind them. She walked closer and closer until finally. SNAP! A twig broke under her foot. Trolla spun around and shouted to Lance.

“RUN!”

Lance had only time to obey the command, so he started at a gallop, jumping across bushes, sliding over large boulders, anything to get some speed. Charrisse muttered to herself again and started shooting both weapons. The took out huge chunks of trees. Some of them falling over. These weren't called cannons for nothing. Debris flew out sideways as she tried to hit Lance, but somehow she couldn't really get a good bead on him. He was running too fast and the ground was too hilly and full of trees. She got angry enough and tried to fire a shot at Trolla, but he deftly jumped over the blast.

Finally Lance escaped into a bunch of boulders forming a kind of hillock. Charrisse followed him up there, and came to see that the boulders formed little alleys and tunnels. Creeping around rocks was a bit hard. Lance was breathing hard, but he tried to stop breathing and hid in a rock crevice. She was getting closer as he could hear her footsteps. Soon he saw her gun barrel edging around the corner and he slipped around the side and finally to the back. He walked cautiously around to the other side only to step directly into the gun barrel. Just as she was pulling the trigger, Trolla screamed. It was a terrible primal scream as he dropped on her from above. He grabbed her head and began to pull. Lance didn't look as he heard her cry and a ripping sound. He knew what had been done. Carefully he stepped out of the rocks.

“Trolla, thanks for saving my life.” Lance said.

“You are my only chance for finding what truly happened to my son. Please make sure you don't fail me.”

“I won't but you're going to have trust me. When we make it back to civilization I need to go on a mission alone. The ship that captured us, well, I have to do something for them, but I can't reveal what, nor can I reveal their identities. That was the deal. They give me the plate, I do this mission for them.”

“It might mean you will have to wait for your information. Can you do that?”

“As long as it's not years, I can wait. I will however evade the authorities until our deal is concluded. This is not an exchange. I have decided to turn myself in, but only when I have the information I seek.”

“Fair enough. Besides I'm now in your debt. Also I have a feeling that I wouldn't be able to truly hide from you, if you really wanted to find me.”

“That is correct. But I will acquiesce to your request to give you the time for this mission.”

“Okay let's go find the others.”

Once everyone had found each other Lance had already decided on a course of action.

“Okay, I say we search for Charrisse's ship, and plug Cindy into her. Then we can go and do what we must. Elroy can I talk to you a moment privately?”

They walked off to the side as the others waited.

“I wanted to ask you. I have some very important information which must not be revealed right now, and I'm wondering if there's a way I can confide in Al, without any possibility of someone opening him up to get out this sensitive data.”

“I believe he can encrypt his files, and if you give him the command he won't reveal it for any reason. Also he has the ability to destroy the data should he be captured.”

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“Great perfect – What about you? Can he hide data even you can't extract?”

“Well I always have ways, I fixed him and customized him, so I know every inch of him. However you can have my word I will neither talk to nor touch AI once you've given him the information. Besides it would take time to devise algorithms to decrypt his encryption.”

“Okay thanks Doc. I want to talk to AI now.”

Elroy brought AI over to Lance and then joined the others.

“AI I need to impart some information to you, that you must swear will not fall into the wrong hands, should you become 'acquired’”

“That is very simple give me the command, and I will encrypt the data, and set the data to destruct should anyone attempt to tamper with me. I have backup circuits that can be used to initiate the destruct program. However if I do this, I may be in danger of erasing my neural network.”

“Well, I'm going to offer you the choice of accepting or refusing, with no consequences for the later. So will you do this for me?”

“You have treated me well, and you rescued Cindy, for which I'm eternally grateful. So yes I accept as a friend.”

“Okay start recording. When we were abducted by a mysterious ship, it happened to be a Gambitzi ship. They had to get my help this way. You see, one Gambitzi named Claw is an agent working for his law council. They know that one of their people is in the IBA. Now even though they know he's a criminal they can't act against him until there's proof that Curr is harming their pride, which is basically their family. He needs my help to do so. You see, Claw believes that Gambitzi's are being sold as slaves. And that Curr is directly responsible. He also picked me because, A, I'm investigating this case involving Ajax and the IBA and B, because he knows about Trolla, and perhaps the information on his son has to do with the slave-running. Now I need to go undercover as a slave and find the information that leads all the way back to Curr, then Claw can arrest him. Okay I think that's about it all, please encrypt and safeguard.”

“Done. Okay why did you want to tell me this?”

“If anything happens to me, you get Elroy back to Mercedes. And you get back to the SPD to tell them what happened.”

“But how will I know if you disappear?”

“Claw has been instructed to contact you and only you if something should happen to me. He has some of his agents who get information now and again. They'll get you the info.”

“Okay sir.”

They rejoined the others.

“Okay, Let's go and see if we can find Charrisse's ship.”

“Hobbes, I want you to pull up everything we have on Ajax. Like where he's been. Who are his connections, I want to know everything about this guy. Before I can find Lance I need to see what he's been chasing.”

“Yes sir. According to this he's head of a crime family. Well actually there was the father, the mother had died, and three brothers. He ran a large illegal smuggling operation out of the Passa system. Ajax was near the Starlux cluster. His brother named Silas actually has a mobile space station. Which he moves around all the time so we can never find him. He runs most of the illegal operations on the opposite side of the cluster. That's about it. I mean they're both into everything. Ajax was searching for an ancient artifact.”

“You said three brothers?” Julio replied.

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“Uhh... I must have read it wrong. There's nothing about three brothers in here, just the two.”

“No you read it right, there are three brothers. It's like this data has been removed. We need to get access to the archives, maybe there's a backup.”

“It will take me a few hours, but I think I can manage it.”

Chapter Eight:

“Question is, where's the third piece. He should have had three pieces. Now we've got to go find it. We need to head to Ajax's base, the one near the cluster. I believe he was getting someone to retrieve that third map piece. In the meantime I need to work on phase 2 of the Novis plan. Mr. Sharpe go get one of your men to head to the small planetoid near the Starlux cluster. We want to see if we can find that piece.”

“Yes sir. Should I use Leeto? If anyone can track that, he can.”

“That's a good idea, do it. I need aerial maps of the Jondееve system's planets, all of them, we need schematics of the major buildings and structures to all those planets. Also any star port's, space bars, any planetary defenses, and I need them right now.”

“Yes sir.” said Sharpe.

“And someone raise Charrisse, I need an update on her progress.”

Silas walked out towards the communications room. A controller was trying to contact Charrisse. There was no response.

“Sir, I can't pick her up, even on long range scans.” said the controller.

“Try contacting Dan Briggs at the SPD. I needed to chat with him anyways. Use a coded frequency.”

A hologram of Dan's head appeared on the monitor.

“I'm honored you would contact me sir, but isn't this dangerous. If someone caught me?”

“No one knows what I look like. They'll just think you're talking to an acquaintance or a friend.”

“Right. So what do you wish to discuss?” asked Dan.

“A certain mutual acquaintance has turned up missing. One in whom you were in contact with?”

“Umm, yes sir. I haven't been in contact with this person since I sent them out for the package.”

“Hmm yes indeed, I cannot contact her either. Please be so kind as to tell me where she was headed?”

“One of Ajax's old bases I believe, however I did give her the tracking frequency of the homing device I slipped onto his ship. So if he's strayed from where we believed he was going you can track them with this same frequency. I'm sending it to you now.”

“Very good, Mr. Briggs. You are on schedule for your immediate, ah, promotion?”

“I was, but there's a new wrinkle. The Bureau for Inter Galactic Affairs has just taken over the Precinct and is now running an investigation.”

“Interesting, this may be a lucky break for us. Do you think you could do the same for the Director, I believe her name is Lawson? Alice Lawson? I may double-promote you.”

“Well it would take me a little time to set up. I know Baxter, he's been my Chief for several years. I would have to observe and modify my plans to include her.”

“I don't care how long it takes, I have patience. I don't want to mess it up now by rushing things. Just one thing I require. Make sure there's enough time in between the two incidences as to not

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make yourself look suspicious. You don't want to be accused of treason, and I don't want to have my plans fouled up.”

Just then Dan seemed to be looking at something off to the side.

“Just make sure you remember the refreshment's this time. Splitball just isn't the same without the beer and Mawkdogs. If you remember we had to miss the half time show, in order to do a beer run. I don't like to miss the half time show.”

“I won't forget. I'll remember.”

With that, Dan signed off. Obviously someone came near his station. He did as Silas asked, and pretended he was talking to a friend.

“Have Sharpe prepare my personal transport. We need to head towards the cluster.”

“Yes sir.” the controller said.

“Lance, baby, this feels a little awkward to me, is everything alright.”

“Everything is fine Cindy. You've got a new body. My ship crashed, and we were forced to, uhh appropriate a new one.”

“Why do we have to take this slow, bloated piece of...” Trolla got cut off before he could continue.

“Lance, dear, is he saying I'm fat?”

“What? Huh, no. You're much thinner and prettier now, Cindy.” Lance elbowed Trolla hard enough to even make him grunt.

Lance hissed to Trolla as quietly as he could.

“You're gonna hurt her feelings.”

“But she's just a comp...” Trolla didn't get to finish.

“If you don't say something nice, I'm going rip off YOUR head.” Lance hissed again.

“Uhh right. You're uhh... good.”

“Well if you say it's okay, Lancie, I trust you.” replied Cindy.

Phanta smiled coyly at Trolla.

“The last time I did a bone headed thing like that, she played with the life support.” Lance muttered under his breath.

“Umm... Sorry. I will try to be more tactful in the future.”

“Trolla, women are the same no matter if they're humanoid, alien, bot, or computer AI.”

“Okay Cindy, we need to scan for a space port or something, preferably with transport out of there to several different other destinations.”

“I believe my sensors pick up one about several light-hours away.”

“This will be fine.”

They spent the next few hours discussing their options. When they finally arrived at the space port, they had already made their plans. They were going to sell Charrisse's, mostly, intact ship, and buy two smaller ships whichever they could afford. Lance was to go find a transport to the Slod system, to do his mission. Trolla, Phanta, and Cert were to take one of the ships to Ajax's base. They weren't really sure how they would get past security, but they were to grab the other two plates. Al and Elroy were to take another ship and return to the SPD to tell them what happened and to hand over the plate piece. They would, afterwards, all rendezvous at the space bar that Mercedes worked at to determine the next step from there. They arrived at the space port and began to say their goodbyes.

“I will be there to meet with you, should you come back alive.” said Trolla bluntly.

“Thanks for not just turning us in. We're indebted to you. We will return with the information

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you seek, or die trying.” said Phanta. Cert nodded in agreement.

“You're not getting off so easy, you're still helping me. And, if, after all is said and done, and Phanta and Cert have disappeared, so be it.”

“Well thank you Mr. Morgan for helping me get back to my Mercedes. If I don't see you again, I too would like to let you know how much you mean to me and Mercedes. Hopefully you'll return at the rendezvous point, and I will help you decipher the origin to those plates. In the meantime I will study this one.” said Elroy.

Al finally stepped up.

“Sir... I... don't know what to say. I am a bot, and should say something, but there's nothing to say. It's been both an honor and pleasure to have served for you and with you.”

“Al. Don't start going all human on me now. And why are you using sir? You stopped using it a couple of times. Friends don't call each other sir. From here on out, just call me Lance.” He smiled.

Al grabbed Lance's hand in a handshake.

“Be careful sir... I mean... Lance.”

“You too, Al.”

They all walked away in their opposite directions. Lance watched them go, a little sad. Here on out he was to go on this little mission, get some info, and then come back alive to try to apprehend Ajax. They had been allies and friends. Even Trolla, although he was still an assassin, and a criminal. He showed that there is honor in the Kreigan race.

Hobbes gestured for Julio to come over to his station.

“I can't get clearance for this. This is classified. Dan isn't even cleared for this. Only the Chief could probably authorize me.” he said in a hushed tone.

“This doesn't make sense. We never keep classified info on convicts. It's usually completely open.”

“Well that's the thing, sir. Technically the info we have on Ajax is completely open. Only close scrutiny would have caught on to this. And it's been in here for over 10 years. Sir I didn't want to mention this, but the archives that contain Ajax's information are S6, and I'm only a S5, I had to circumvent the system to get it to even tell me it was classified.”

“I'll go get the Chief. Don't speak about this to anyone, until we talk to him.”

Julio went to where the Chief was stationed.

“Chief, I've got something to show you.”

“Can it wait, kid? I've got to make a long report on our progress on the Ajax case. Like every single decision I've made, that I can't even remember. The records speak for themselves and they still want it straight from the horse's mouth.”

“Archive info on a convict that has S6 classification?”

“You're not supposed to know that.”

“Sir, before I can find out where Lance is, I need to know where Ajax is. I realize you'd rather not have me find Lance at all, but I do have to keep up appearances. Not to mention the fact that even if I find Lance, I may mishandle it. Sir you know you can trust me.”

“If you're caught, there's more than just your butt on the line. They'll know I'm the only one with an S6.”

“I know, just come and look.”

Baxter got up and walked over to Hobbes.

“Hobbes, you know they'll be monitoring you. They might be aware already.”

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“Not to worry Chief. If they ever found out, they would think one of them had accessed it.”

“Alright, then, let's see what the SPD has been keeping even from me.”

“Baxter, Charles, requesting Clearance, clearance code 1A2B3, S6 declassification of File 2135466.”

The screen that was flashing classified in red letters, now, showed a green 'declassified' and then turned off and revealed the requested information. Their mouths dropped open. Dan noticed they were all three staring at the monitor in amazement. When Julio saw Dan looking at them he closed his mouth. Dan thought it looked a little suspicious so he walked over.

“What's up guys?”

“I was more or less, persuaded to track down Lance. I went to pull up everything we had on Ajax to possibly gives us some clues and I came across a discrepancy. So I had Hobbes here look it up. Apparently there is some classified information in the archives. Only the Chief here, has S6 clearance so that's why he's over here. I came across some interesting information.”

“And you don't want to alert, Director Lawson or Lincoln. Don't worry I won't say anything, I don't like them anymore than you do.”

Dan walked around to the monitor and looked pensive.

“This definitely explains a lot of things.” he said.

“Okay can you put everything back the way it was. I don't want anyone to know we've been in here.”

“No problem Chief.” said Hobbes.

Just then Lincoln noticed them clustered around Hobbes station and walked over.

“Is there anything we should know gentlemen?”

“Sir, I was just trying to access information on Ajax for Julio. I transferred a few months ago from another precinct and I couldn't figure out the filing system. As you should know by now, the precincts are getting their systems upgraded, and my old one hasn't gotten the new software, so I'm still learning.” said Hobbes trying to cover his back.

“I wasn't aware the SPD was upgrading anything.” he was starting to look smug.

“Sir, as you know, the SPD is under it's own purview, so it's unlikely they would speak to the Bureau about anything as mundane as a software upgrade. In fact if I got my facts straight, the Bureau hasn't even deigned to speak to the SPD for quite some years now.”

He didn't look smug anymore.

“Sorry, I wasn't implying you were hiding anything. Usually they do tell us these things if it affects our investigation.”

“Sir, it was probably just an oversight. I'm the only recent transfer. Besides everyone here knows their stuff, I'm sure they would be happy to help you out, if you had any questions.”

Hobbes stood up and looked around and spotted a woman typing at her station.

“Sophie, would you bring Mr. Lincoln up to date on our new software, I'm a recent transfer and haven't completely acclimated to the new system.” He gave her a surreptitious look.

She regarded him for a moment, and then nodded.

“Mr. Lincoln, if you would come over here, I could better help you.”

Lincoln gave Hobbes and then Julio, Baxter, and Dan a long look and then sauntered off.

“That was close” remarked Baxter in a low voice.

“Kid that was pure genius, we haven't been upgraded since that information was put into the system.”

“Thank you sir, and don't worry, they'll never know that it was accessed.”

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“Keep this to yourselves, we don't want to bring anything to Director Lawson until we have something worth bringing. Is that understood?”

They all verbally agreed.

Silas' personal transport was a functional piece of craft. All angles and lines. It didn't exactly look ugly, but it didn't look particularly pretty either. He needed to go to the Passa system to reach Ajax's old, his, old hideout. There were probably many ways out, but only one way in, no matter who you were. From the three-star solar system came planets on no fixed orbital path, they seemed to move where they wanted, dragged by odd gravitational currents and eddies. You had simply to ride these cosmic currents and eventually if you could time the switching correctly you'd arrive, more or less, at your destination. When he came in view of the planet that held the old base, he also noticed another ship approaching. He didn't recognize it. But he did see the destination. Only the ship was there ahead of him. Quickly approaching the planet.

“Increase your speed pilot, we must not let that ship reach the planet.”

He punched a few buttons.

“Sir this is as fast as she will go.”

The other little ship noticed it was speeding up so it increased it's speed. Soon it started catching up to the little ship. The ship tried to swing around some moons. Silas followed. The ship gave up trying to outrun it and instead headed straight toward the planet. It hit the atmosphere first. It was too far away to start firing at it, which might would ignite some of the gas in the atmosphere. The ship headed toward the cold side of the planet and then landed on a platform, which went down into the planet's crust. Silas followed and soon was also descending into the planet.

The little ship was a round bullet shaped thing with a small window in front. It was cruising along when it spotted a ship that Phanta recognized as Silas's personal transport. It was gaining speed, so the little ship tried weaving around moons until it got into the atmosphere, then finally disappeared into the base. When they landed Trolla, Phanta, and Cert got out.

“Do you know where he keeps the map pieces?” asked Phanta.

“Unfortunately, no. He kept that secret from even me, as I'm just a hired hand. I'm betting Silas does know, however. Can one of you scan this place. Maybe you, Phanta, as you seemed to have been carrying one, maybe your sensors can identify it.” remarked Trolla.

“I'll try” she said. She began to concentrate, then she pointed down the hallway.

“This way!”

They followed her, as she ran down a few corridors to his office. She pointed to something behind a painting. They pulled the painting off and noticed that there was a single button. Once pressed, two doors slid away from the center, and a piece of the floor also dislodged and moved back. Within the newly discovered alcove there was a laser barrier extending over the whole alcove. Behind the barrier was a monitor with a chin rest under it. To either side were two pads with imprints of hands. On the floor was a place to put ones feet. There was a keypad on the wall next to the laser barrier.

“Okay”, said Trolla, “Umm, great!”

“Lincoln, put everyone that was here with Lance Morgan on an APB and request that all SPD or Bureau agents bring them in dead or alive. I want them all reigned it, so we won't have trouble with our investigation.”

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“Yes Ma'am”

Julio hit a button outside the door. The door opened to Alice's office.

“Ma'am, before I can properly track down Morgan I need access to all your data on the IBA. As Ajax was dealing with them, I need to know so I can at least have an idea of the possible places Morgan would be at.”

“I'm sorry. The info is on a need to know basis. Your task is with Morgan, not with the IBA.”

“But...”

“That is all!” yelled Alice.

Julio went back to his station. He then went and seen Baxter again who was trying to fill out some more his report.

“What now kid?”

“Before I can do my job, I need access to everything the Bureau knows about the IBA. I need all the possible places Lance can be, but Director Lawson is being impossible. I figure you may have some pull Chief. Could you try to talk to her?”

“Yeah sure kid, I don't want to do this stupid report anyways.”

He got up and went into his old office.

“Miss Lawson we need to be on the same page here. If you expect my boys to cooperate with you, I expect you to cooperate with us. Isn't that why you're really here. You're not here because we botched up, we're here because YOU did. I know all about what happened on Sollen Five. How you had almost captured the head of the IBA, and you let him slip through your fingers, when one hotshot fired without being ordered to.”

“How did you learn about that information?”

“Let's just say I have an inside source. Oh yeah, and maybe you don't want to bet on whether or not I know the name of the hotshot, who was kicked out of the Bureau for failure to follow orders, should I go on?”

Her face paled slightly but didn't change.

“You win. I will give Mr. Martinez the information he requests. But if you ever threaten me again, I'll have you reprimanded so fast you'll find yourself wishing you were back at the academy.” She gritted her teeth.

When Baxter left Lincoln turned to Alice.

“You never yelled at me like that, even when I pestered you for our first date.”

“It's just that he gets under my skin!” she said showing her temper.

“Ooh! I could just strangle that man!” she said.

Lance had gotten a transport to a planet on the Outer Limit called Fresia Nom. The transport that got him and three hundred other passengers to the surface, landed at the largest space port this side of the cluster. Have grabbed a speeder to a suburb of the space port, and then stopped at a local tavern. He entered in and spied out the place. The tavern had mostly humanoids in it. A few aliens, but not many. It was quiet as people emptied their beers after a long, hard day. He walked up to the bar.

“Triple-shot of fire juice.” Lance said.

“Sorry we don't serve illicit...” Then the bartender caught sight of Lance.

“LANCE! He shouted. You old box lightener, you!”

“Hey Bruce, long time no see.” smiled Lance.

“You're telling me. Let's see last time you were working for the Fresian cartel, smuggling

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goods.”

“That is before you set me straight. Besides the cartel simply presses you into it. You either meet a grisly end or end up being their stooge until they're done with you.” replied Bruce.

It was true. The cartels would either kill you or use you. You couldn't escape them, and you couldn't tell the police. The problem was anyone could be in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's just what happened to Bruce. Bruce was a real trouble maker as a kid. Then Lance decided to go to the academy to be on Star Patrol, and Bruce, well, he just kept falling in with the wrong crowd. Eventually because of the people he hung around with he managed to get in the way of the Cartel. Most of Bruce's friends were part of the cartel, so they would get him girls, booze, or anything he wanted. Then one day the Cartel came to collect, and thus he started his life in crime. It was only when Lance intervened that he was able to get out of it. New life, new identity. His legitimate work was tending bar here at the Fire Wasp Tavern.

“Okay, okay, old friend. Doing well?”

“As well as ever. I got a steady job, my own transport. A girl that likes being around me. Not the kind that stays around for the money. We've hit good times and bad times and she's still with me. I'm probably going to propose to her soon.”

“What about you? You still a hotshot detective?”

“Yeah, well that's sort of what I'm here for.”

“I figured as much. You don't really ever come to visit. Anyways, anything to help a friend out of a jam. What do you need?”

“I'm on a mission of sorts. You've heard about the IBA right?”

“Yeah, I keep my ears open.” replied Bruce.

“I'm on a mission to investigate one of their operations. Slave Trade, know anything about it?”

Bruce's face got real serious. He nodded lance over to the side and started walking away from the bar.

“Joey, can you handle this for a few minutes?”

“Yeah sure.” Joey went over to the bar.

Lance and Bruce went out the side door into a small office.

“This isn't going to be me into any trouble is it? I mean my life is going great, I don't want to go back to the old life.”

“No definitely not. No one will be able to lead this back to you. In fact once I'm off, you won't see me again.”

“In my dealings I knew of people who did this sort of thing. I never liked the practice. Luckily there are plenty of job opportunities in the cartel. I mostly keep in contact with my eyes and ears. Although mainly to keep out of trouble.”

“I need to infiltrate the slave traders that are involved with the IBA.”

“As a trader or a slave.”

“I was thinking as a slave. It will be harder, but I sort of want to be on friendly terms with them.”

“You won't be able to smuggle in any guns.”

“I'll just have to use my wits then.”

“Typically they go to off world planets and pick up some unsuspecting tribe of aliens. Sometimes, though, they manage to space-jack a few vessels, if they think your ship is worth enough. You could also attempt to get shanghaied at a local space bar. That might be your best bet. Can you act a little bit rummy, look ragged, and smell terrible?”

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“I think I can manage something.”

“Well I think I have an old protocol about announcing a likely candidate. I'm not sure it will still work, but I think it will. I will do it anonymously though. After that you're on your own.”

“That's all I need. Thanks man. You're saving the entire galaxy when you do this. Oh yeah one other thing, I should have probably mentioned first. I'm looking for a Kreigan, and the slave traders involved in any Gambitzi slaves.”

“Well typically the Krieg aren't one's to be kidnapped, must less serve as slaves. But there's a rumor there is one, and he seems to risen to something less than a trader, but more than a slave. Not sure what that's about. As far as Gambitzi's go, their honor bounds them to work. So there are a few around that are slaves. But don't expect to rescue them. They won't go.”

“This is very important, thanks again. Here's a few thousand credits, it's not much but it's just my way of saying thank you.”

“After what you did for me on Thoh, you don't owe me anything. I would be dead if you hadn't pulled my butt out of the fire.”

“Well considering it a wedding gift. You can have a nice honeymoon, on me.”

“Well when you put it that way.”

They clasped each others arms and patted each other on the back.

“Well we probably won't see each other again. Take care of yourself Bruce.”

“You too Lance.”

The little ship Elroy and Al had bought and installed CND into was a small but graceful swan of ship in a shipyard full of bulldogs. Apparently it was repossessed from a drug raid. It was in pristine condition, and only hold a handful of passengers. It wasn't very fast, however, but it was made for comfort. CND felt right at home in the new body.

“Sir, I've been monitoring police frequencies and have noticed that we have an APB. We're going to be arrested as soon as we're spotted.”

“Luckily, we're in this beautiful vessel.”

“Thank you Elroy, dear!”

“I believe we should go back to my Mercedes and decide what to do there.”

The ship headed toward the space bar and then docked. Al and Elroy came out quickly and saw Mercedes wiping up tables. It was after dinner and thus was slow. Before Elroy got a good look at the tables Mercedes jumped on him, pressing him close to her bosom, knocking his glasses askew.

“Elroy!” she exclaimed and started kissing his bewildered face.

“My dear... please” He couldn't get the words out.

“Mercedes, we need to...”

She kept smothering him. It was a good kind of smothering, he had to admit. But right now this was neither the time nor the place. He then did something completely unexpected to her. He grabbed her arms and forced them to her sides, then pressed her close against him and kissed her HARD. When he had stopped she just stood in the same position and started to swoon. He then caught her in his arms again.

“Mercedes, my love, we need a place to rest and hide out for a bit, and to talk. There have been some developments.”

“My shift ends in a few minutes. I'll just finish up and ask to leave a bit early.”

She ran in the back and talked to Earl. And then was back out. She grabbed her coat and then left with Al, and Elroy. They took the Swan and left the Space bar.

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“Cindy, I want you to meet Mercedes.” Al said to the ship.

“And Mercedes meet Cindy a very lovely female AI. I think Al has taken a liking to her. She used to be the AI for Lance's ship, but with a few changes she's now in this beauty.”

“Thank you Elroy, pleased to meet you Mercedes.”

“Likewise.” said Mercedes.

They flew to small space port surrounding a few moons, and to Elroy's house and workshop. His house was shockingly clean, as if he barely lived in it, but the workshop was filled with all kinds of electronic gizmos and parts of unfinished projects. They sat in the living room and had a few drinks.

“Well, the head of the IBA, and Ajax the inter galactic gangster were searching for this strange artifact, but before they could get to it they needed a map. This is part of the map.” He gave it to Mercedes to examine it.

“I don't know anything about alien archaeological artifacts, but it looks pretty old to me.”

“Trust me it is. But now that I'm back at my workshop I can better analyze it. Only now we're wanted fugitives and Lance wanted us to give the plate piece to the SPD.”

“It's worse than that” said Mercedes looking a bit sad.

“Apparently the Bureau for Inter Galactic Affairs has commandeered the forty fourth precinct. They're probably responsible for your arrest warrants.”

“I see. This is a dilemma. Hmm. Al would you oppose turning yourself in, if I gave you the plate piece? The SPD needs the piece in safe custody. But it would mean your capture.” said Elroy.

“Of course I don't oppose it. It's for the greater good. Besides you can make all the scans and holo-images you want of the plate before I do that, then you can analyze it based on that. Maybe you can discover it's origins or even reconstruct the map?”

“Reconstruction will be difficult, considering the map is in three large pieces. If it were a bunch of small pieces and chips it would be an easier job. But yes, it will be good for analysis. Alright, than you Al. It will take some time. In the meantime, Al, fill in my beautiful flower, with our exploits.”

Over the next several hours Elroy was back in his workshop, taking scans, doing all kinds of spectrum readings, all manner of holo-imaging. Al told Mercedes all that happened. From the kidnapping to the assassin to the crash landing. She was riveted. Then Elroy emerged with the plate and handed it to Al.

“Okay Al, now you can take it to the SPD. Most likely Cindy will be confiscated as well. But at least you can radio back and forth to pass the time.”

“Oh yes sir. That would be a most pleasant way to pass the time. Take care Sir and Ma'am. I will probably not talk to you until this whole business is over with. Thank you for all you've done.”

“No thank you, Al. You kept my Mercedes company while I was missing, and you've helped me out a number of times. You've more than earned your freedom.”

“Well sir, we'll talk about that when we're done with all this business.”

With that Al left.

“Babe, do you think we could do something for Al. I realize he's just a bot, but he seems to have his own personality, I think we should do something for him.”

“Well he does keep forming new, neural pathways. Who's to say he isn't alive. What did you have in mind, my dear?” asked Elroy.

She whispered something in his ears, and then his eyes widened.

“I'll get on it right away. Would you be a dear and make me some coffee, I may be at this all night.”

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The man in rags asked for another drink. The bartender wouldn't give him anything, because he didn't have any money.

“Whaaadaa mean, myee muneee shno good?” He slurred, it was obvious he was drunk. He was dirty and he was smelly.

“Jush becauss I lack en-nee proshpecks, duzzen mean I'm not, good fer it.”

A bouncer was going to throw the man out. When two scruffy looking humans gestured for the bouncer to wait.

“We'll buy him a drink, and then toss him out for ya.”

“The drinks on me, just please take this... vermin... out” he said rather arrogantly.

The bartender poured the man a drink. One of the scruffy looking men slipped something into his drink before handing it to him.

“Thankshh, yer a-a reel pal!”

Then he turned the bottom up, and finally fell unconscious as soon as he finished the shot.

“He's up to his limit.” Said the other scruffy looking fellow.

The dragged the dirty, smelly, man outside, and then dumped him into their speeder, in the trunk. They finally flew out to a launching platform, and took off in a small ship.

Silas walked in the door. Trolla, Phanta, and Cert were staring at the vault wondering how to open it.

“This is most interesting. Trolla, I haven't seen you in years. Still doing Ajax's dirty work? No don't tell me, he's right now a basket case and won't be giving any more commands.”

Trolla gave him his most disturbing grunt, but Silas seemed to ignore it.

“Let's see Phanta, you betrayed me. Of course I'm not one to just kill with no reason, I'll keep you first and see if you'll provide any use to me.”

Phanta looked as indignant as Trolla.

“Oh yes and then there's Cert, Phanta's other half. Does she complete you Cert. Of course she does.”

Cert didn't know what to expect so he just stood there calmly.

“Well, well, well. I think we're all here for the same thing. You expected to steal the plate pieces. Too late, I'm already here. Besides you couldn't break the security even if you wanted to. Guards, seize them!”

The guards came in and bound up their hands. Silas went to work opening the vault. He pressed a few buttons on the keypad to let down the laser barrier. He took off his shoes and stepped into the alcove, then put his chin on the chin rest. The thing scanned his face, then his hands and feet lit up. Then he stepped away.

“I was afraid of this. Alright, bring my Big Brother in.”

They dragged in a man who didn't seem to be coherent. They took off his shoes places his feet in the pads, and his hands in the hand scanner, and his chin on the rest. Ajax didn't resist but they held him up to it anyways. Suddenly a green light came on and the vault opened. They dragged Ajax away. Phanta and Cert were noticeably shaken. Trolla even betrayed a bit of dismay the way he raised an eyebrow.

Silas walked in and came out with two plate pieces.

“And now I have everything I want.”

“Chief, I would prefer it if you would give her this information instead of me.”

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“Why would I do that, I have this stupid report to finish.”

“You can seem to make her do what you need. She scares me Chief.” said Julio.

“She's the dragon lady, Chief.” Hobbes put in.

“You know I could suspend you for subordination.”

“Comon, Chief, I'm just asking you for a favor. Please?”

“Alright, you sissy. I'll go in and speak for you. You just better be working on locating Morgan.”

“Right, Chief.”

Baxter walked into his old office again.

“What do you want now, Charles?”

“The boys have some information they want you to know.”

“Why don't they just come in themselves.”

“Because you're the dragon lady.”

“You over inflated tire.”

“That's just what the boys are calling you. You're cold as ice. I wouldn't deal with you, if I didn't have to. But I do, so you'll need to settle with me.”

“Alright, what is this important information?”

“Apparently, Ajax and Silas were brothers. The younger brother turned evidence against his Father, ran off and started his own empire. Ajax continue to run the businesses. We could never catch Silas because he keeps a mobile base. He never touches down on a planet.”

“What's this to do with our investigation of the IBA.” she said coldly.

“Well apparently the head of the IBA always keeps in a cloak and hood and is projected via hologram. We've cross-referenced a lot of this information, but our best guess is that Silas is the head of the IBA. He can project via his mobile platform, and he can move from place to place. What better way to make sure no one traces it back to him.”

“This is conjecture. I work on cold hard facts. Now leave me.”

“But we've...”

“Leave me!” she yelled again.

“You know, I should just do everything without telling you. I don't need you and your stupid Bureau nonsense. I've done this job longer than anyone I know. That is, if you have a good tip, even if it's more of a hunch than fact, you go with it. Nothing is as good as your gut. But you're too snooty to see that. Let's see how much cooperation you get now!” He slammed the door on his way out.

Alice's eyes teared up.

Al and CND were apprehended as soon as they were detected. They had brought the plate in and now were being held. CND out in the ship yards, and Al in a specially made cell.

Chapter Nine:

“Rit, I want you to take a couple of guards and head to Ajax's other base, you know the one near the cluster.”

“Yes sir.”

“See what has happened to the third map piece. I must have it.”

Rit, the man with the orange-lensed glasses and light body armor, left to go set out as Silas had commanded him. Rit had been Silas' number one for years now. He had worked for the IBA, and then

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within it managed to create a little side-business with smuggling, not managing to share the profits with the IBA. Silas wasn't angry however, in fact he was quite amazed how efficient his operation was. Silas was sure that he couldn't get Rit to stop even if he had forbidden it, or asked for tribute like the other businesses the IBA was fronting. In fact Silas wasn't even sure when he hired him, he had stopped his little smuggling side business. If he was still running it, it could be considered a bonus. Immediately Silas hired him to run things for him when he was gone or busy. Part secretary, part bodyguard, all business, and some times a part-time assassin. In fact it was said he didn't get involved in any kind of romance because it would divide his time from his work. If Rit was married to something, it would be his work.

Silas punched up a few holo-maps. He was deciding between locations. The USSC had bases dotted all over the galaxy. He needed to hit a vital point. Not necessarily the head. In actuality even if the main base was destroyed the other bases could act as the head. They had been built that way. What he needed is to hit some place where the dispersion of resources were cut off. Supply lines, if you will.

A humanoid man came up to Silas.

“Sir, first reports, grid 1A, 3C and 4B have been neutralized.”

“What about Ecliptus 12, that's in 1B?”

“They are holding open elections, however we do have several men in place to ensure the next President.”

“Double the men if you have to, make sure Ecliptus 12 has been thoroughly taken care of. I don't care about the cost or manpower. Pull them off of other projects if you have to.”

“Yes sir.” The man left.

Silas pressed his face just below his ear and talked into the air.

“Bring Katt in. I have a special assignment for her.”

Dana was brought in, she looked thoroughly agitated.

“Ever since I got here, I have just been sitting and waiting. You know how I don't like being caged. You've read my profile. In fact you knew about me before Ajax did. So am I going to finally get to do something to prove my loyalty.”

“No need to prove your loyalty, but I do have a task for you.”

He waited a bit to let her temper simmer.

“Well!?” she asked angrily.

“I've got several potential targets, and I need something decent for them. Are you up for walkies?”

Julio seemed to have everything he need. Several locations he could check out. He decided he should first head over to Ajax's destroyed base on the planetoid near the Starlux Cluster. Julio was going to try to go to every place that Lance had been to. Julio had a special request however, and decided instead of going to the Chief, he should handle this one himself.

“Ma'am. There are several locations I would like to check out, starting with Ajax's base, the one that was destroyed, on the planetoid near the cluster.”

“I told you to find Lance, not come to me for permission every time you needed someone to wipe your nose.” She said acerbically.

“I am trying to be cooperative Ma'am, but you just don't seem to like me. In any case, I've come here to ask for something a bit special.”

“Although, I'm sure to say no, please by all means, request.” she said with a hint of sarcasm.

“I believe since the bot was with Lance when he disappeared, that he would be best served

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coming with me. I can at least determine quicker what happened, and perhaps apprehend Morgan that much sooner.”

She sighed, she was tired of being interrupted. Especially since it usually brought Baxter in. The man could be so bullheaded and she usually acceded to his wishes anyways.

“Fine, fine, just don't bother me again until you have Morgan.”

Julio couldn't believe his luck.

“Thank you ma'am. You want me to send in Baxter, so you can yell at him anyways?” He teased.

She chuckled under her breath.

“That will be all thank you.”

Julio walked out the door. He walked to the special holding cell where Al sat. He was plugged into a restraining tether, although it allowed him freedom to move, he couldn't leave even if the cell door was open. Julio had the jailer open the door, and then Julio himself unplugged the tether.

“Greetings, sir, my name is Al, how can I be of assistance.”

“Hello, Al. My name is Julio Martinez. I've been assigned to apprehend Morgan, so I've decided to take you along.”

“While I have no reason to leave or challenge your authority, I would like to say in all truthfulness, that I have no idea where Lance is right now.”

“It's okay, Al. I just need someone that was with him so I can possibly track him down. It will be much more helpful.”

“I still don't see what I can do sir, but as you wish. You might want to take the ship that I used to come here. Although the ship is new, the AI is one that has been in Lance's old ship before it was destroyed.”

“Luckily for you this is one time I already have all the clearance I need to take ships out of the impound. Alright we'll take this ship with this AI. Anything to help me catch up to Morgan.”

“Thank you sir!” said Al enthusiastically.

Julio found it odd that a bot would want to use a certain ship so badly but said nothing.

Lance found himself in a dark room. He had cuffs around his ankles, his wrists, and one around his neck. Through that was a plastic strip that connected through a loop in the cuffs, his neck cuff, wrists and feet. The wrists were connected to each other, as were the feet, with a loop through each pair where the plastic strip looped through. He couldn't sit up straight but had to be hunched over. Adjusting to the lack of light he noticed other forms, mostly one type of alien from one kind of planet. They didn't look like they knew what was going on. There were a few alien and humanoid species he recognized, but other than that, it was mostly these odd aliens. Blue in color, skinny with pair shaped body, long legs and arms with bulbous joints. Their faces looked humanoid enough but were sad and silent.

“Hey anyone understand me?” Lance asked.

“Is this a slave ship?”

A voice answered in the darkness.

“This ain't no pleasure cruise!” it retorted.

“Where are they taking us?”

“Some backwater world to do manual labor.”

“Do you know if many Gambitizies were taken, also do you know of any particular Kreigan that went by the name of Raga?”

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“Every once in a while the Gambitzi slave runners, hand us a few of them. As for Raga, he is dead.”

“Trolla won't be happy to hear that.” Lance muttered under his breath.

“Where did you hear that name out lander?”

“I talked to him just before coming here.”

“You mean you were caught on purpose?”

“I'm on a mission. I need some information. One is on Trolla's son. The other is on Gambitzi's of the Kultak pride.”

A low throaty growl emanated from the dark.

“I am no longer his son. I no longer exist as I was.”

Lance could hardly believe his luck.

“Raga?”

“I go by the name Sunder. Raga is dead. Trolla did not care to look to avenge his death and now he's gone.”

“That's not true, he's been looking for Raga ever since your uhh... disappearance or death, I couldn't get a clear notion of that.”

“It was my death. Although, it was not me.”

“You mean, a simulant?”

“Correct. Father never even tried to avenge me.”

“He was searching for information on your whereabouts. He even resorted to working for the criminal Ajax, because Ajax told him he had information about your disappearance.”

“My disappearance? You keep saying this. You mean Father did not know I was dead?”

“Well he didn't kill me because he saw the way my wife was killed. Which he later revealed was similar to your death. I think he heard you got killed but there was something amiss in his information. He didn't really know if you were dead or not. He was searching for you when Ajax offered to give him information in exchange for working for him.”

“This changes things a bit. You are here for him?”

“Well, actually I was approached by a Gambitzi who needed information on enslavement of people in his Pride. He is the one that told me you're somehow affiliated with the slave trade, although he didn't have much information. I did agree to help your father find you or information about you. So when I received this bit of news, I decided that I should go ahead and accept the mission. Kill two birds with one stone. But why are you here, on this ship? If you're already a slave?”

“I'm not a slave human. I've heard about slave traders kidnapping Kreigans. This is a great dishonor to the Kreig as we are hard to kill or capture. So I wish to save the honor of those few. It may be a dishonorable thing to do to get caught, and seems to be dishonorable to rescue them. But our honor code states that the honor of one can cover the dishonor of many.”

“I think I understand. Your one act of honor on behalf of those others means you find them honorable, and thus regains theirs?”

“That's a simple way to put it, but correct. I had to ingratiate myself to these hach-tars, in order to get certain privileges. Now I get more freedom than most mere slaves, and less than the traders themselves. I try to make sure most Kreigans that fall into this trap get out again.”

“So I take it you don't want to leave?”

“I cannot leave. My father will understand.”

“I need something more substantial than your word.”

A shuffling was heard in the darkness. Raga came close and slipped a pendant onto Lance's

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neck. Raga was a younger leaner version of his father. Not so much bulk but more muscular.

“This will prove your word. Keep it safe. I will try to find a way to get you out through my network.”

“First I need to actually get some cold hard evidence of the Gambitzi slaves, something I can trace back to one who's working for the IBA.”

“I've heard of these villains. I will help you find your information as well. Might I have your name?”

“Lance Morgan.”

“Ahh yes, you are very famous. Partly why slave traders run in the Outer Limits. You have put several away I am told.”

“Yeah well. Fame is fleeting, and I have a job to do.”

“You are most honorable Lance Morgan. I take it my Father will be on a prison ship because of you.”

Lance hesitated a moment and decided truth was the best policy when dealing with the Kreig.

“Yes. He has stated he does not wish to escape authority. That is once he was caught.”

“My father knows this. He's not dishonorable. Criminal definitely but honorable for all that.”

“For you to catch him his no easy feat. I congratulate you.”

“Uhh, thanks, I think.”

“Okay, what am I going to do with you, Trolla. I need some information which no doubtedly you have. Your tentacles will provide a most excellent motivator. You see, I realize you won't feel any pain. I also realize that you would resist most any torture I throw at you. However, there have been great advances in neuroscience, particularly in alien... species. You'll find yourself most cooperative when i'm done.”

Trolla was restrained against a wall, he had electrodes placed on various parts of his body. Trolla started struggling in his restraints. He did not wish to betray where the last piece was now. He didn't like Silas, he didn't like Ajax, and he started to hate the business he had started in. He wasn't actually afraid, and he knew it wouldn't be painful. But it would practically program him to do whatever Silas wanted, and this is what he didn't like. Mr. Black handed a syringe to Mr. White, it had a thick black liquid in it. He jammed it into Trolla's shoulder hard. Trolla started to fly into a rage, then his eyes turned bloodshot and his skin paled slightly. He then collapsed in his restraints.

A moment later he opened his eyes. He was unable to move any part of his body.

“When you finally let me go, I will KILL you.”

“Come now Trolla, it's time you become a little more cooperative.”

He nodded to Mr White who pulled a tentacle from Trolla head. There was no blood but there was a hole in his head where the tentacle was seated, directly to his brain.

“First up, the speech centers. This is so I won't hear your course suggestions. It's quite interesting, however, each tentacle acts as sort of an interface. You have different tentacles for different areas of brain. Motor activity, speech, pleasure centers. Oh even a pain center, which we might get to later if I feel like having some fun. See if I take out say, motor skills, and then put the speech tentacle in, what do I get?”

He had Mr. White do just that and soon he was uttering in gibberish uncontrollably.

“So what I need to do is find a way to make you tell me everything. Let's see. Long term memory and speech, let's see what we have. Mr. Black we need the computer to ask our question for us. Please begin. Trolla what happened to the other plate piece?”

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Mr. Black began manipulating the computer and then a shiver passed through Trolla's body as if he had been shocked.

“A mysterious ship kidnapped us, and gave Lance a mission, some work to do of which I do not know. In return the mysterious aliens gave us the plate piece. It was to be taken to the SPD. After we split up, I do not know what happened to the plate.”

“You see Trolla, you can be cooperative when you want to be. And now, how about some pleasure for pain.”

Mr. White switched the tentacles around, and then placed some goggles over his eyes. Then Mr. Black showed him some images that would normally seem pleasurable to him. His scream could be heard all the way down the halls and corridors of Silas's base ship.

“Julio, honey. There seems to be an unidentified ship coming up from the surface.” said CND.

“AI can we scan for life forms?”

“Yes sir, several humanoids. I can't make out much more than that.”

“Cindy let's hail them.”

“Sure thing, sugar.”

“Unidentified ship, please state your name and purpose here.”

“No response.” said AI.

“Unidentified ship, this is a restricted zone. Please state your name and purpose here.”

Just then it powered up weapons.

“Does this thing have shields and a means to protect itself?” yelled Julio.

“Shields yes, and I just put them up. We only have lasers, this ship wasn't really meant for battle.”

“Now you tell me. We'll have to take evasive action.”

The ship started coming towards them really fast. Julio only had time to swerve out of the way. Then the ship went into light speed and disappeared.

“I don't suppose this thing is fast?”

“Actually it's quite fast, handsome.” said CND.

“Then track them.”

In a moment they were zooming past stars and planets. Before long they were catching up to this rogue ship.

“Our only hope is to disable the engines. If we place it just right, it's just like putting a stick in the spoke of a wheel.”

They were behind the ship now, matching speed for speed. They had to drop shields momentarily to fire the lasers. It didn't seem to do anything.

“They must be absorbing the energy. Is there a way we can overload their shields?”

“The only way to do that is to divert the power and combine beams and use everything we got, everything including life support.”

“What about oxygen, do we have any breathers here?”

“Yes sir in the console, it has about thirty minutes of air.”

“Okay do it.”

Julio put on the breather. Then siphoning all the power they could muster, the two beams spent more energy than they could normally. They focused the beams on one portion of the shields hopefully enough to cut through their shield. Soon the shield became visible and red. Soon it turned white and finally exploded in a flower of sparks and smoke. The ship was not destroyed, however, but instead it

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simply stopped accelerating and spun. CND went right past it, and then she slowed down and headed back toward the damaged ship.

“AI do a scan, are they still alive?”

“I believe so sir, but they're unconscious. It must have overloaded their circuits and exploded as I'm reading signs of the ship's internal damage.”

“Well get them aboard, we need to question them.” said Julio.

It took some time to get Rit and the few others aboard. The swan wasn't built for ship to ship transportation. They had to jury-rig the hatch and AI had to create a seal with the other ship before they could drag the people aboard. When they were done, they left the damaged ship out in space.

At the SPD things were crazy. Holo-calls every second. Voice calls. Reports of people dying, getting sick or just plain disappearing. This was bigger than normal. This doesn't normally happen all at once. Governments were getting replaced. Heads of state, militias, king's and queens. Any kind of government and law enforcement agency were going crazy. At first it seemed normal, people got sick went to the hospital, then soon it was getting to be so bad that the hospitals thought it strange and started contacting the SPD. Then some important people just disappeared, when they were supposed to be working and right out in the open. Next minute there, next minute gone.

“Coffee, where's the stupid coffee?” yelled Baxter.

“I'll get it, I'm on my way to get one myself.”

Dan walked over to the coffee dispenser, pressed a few buttons. He slipped out a tablet from his pocket and then grimaced. He had only planned to take Baxter out of commission. He wasn't expecting the Bureau to come in and take over every thing. He would have to contact the IBA to see why they hadn't planned on that. He decided to break the tablet in half, and slip half into Baxter's coffee. He put the other half back in his coat pocket. He then walked back to the Chief who was barking orders. Write that down, go take Redd and Murphy check out the call on Santo, go down to the hospital to investigate. Take these two aliens down to homicide. Then he grabbed the coffee from Briggs hand and gulped it down.

“Thanks, kid, now go to the holo-atlas and continue marking where the incidents are occurring. It's looking pretty funny right now.”

“Right on it, boss!” said Dan.

He left and went to a room with a huge holographic globe where several people were standing all about it. He started getting reports from some woman he didn't recognize, and started pulling up planets and star systems and then would mark them by putting his finger on the spot it indicated. Green zones had been addressed already, yellow zones means the important person or persons were sick, and the red ones are where they had died. No high place was left unchecked.

Dan heard a different kind of commotion in the main room. He ran in to find Baxter clutching his chest. He looked at Baxter who was in pain. Then he started to point to Dan. He tried to get out some words.

“MEDIC!!” Dan yelled at the top of his lungs.

Soon an army of medics came and slid a gurney under the lying Chief and then activated some lifters which soon had the gurney and the Chief's body floating. They took him out to a medical transport. Dan looked around and nobody seemed to notice him. He started giving commands and orders because now it was up to him to start leading everyone. Hopefully half a tablet would be enough and hopefully he wouldn't be suspected. Now he got someone to stand in for him while he went down to the basement where the computers were. He had to erase his record out of the recorders

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and cover up his tracks.

He started typing on one of the consoles. He selected a few entries, viewed them on a small emitter on the console and then proceeded to remove them. He then changed the dates of current entries to match the time spread. He then did the same for the holo-recorder in the computer room, which was essentially in the basement. Finally he needed to also, get access to the keylogger, which logged everyone's keyboard presses. He spoke into the microphone. "Briggs, Dan, Authorization 2b23a " Then the computer signaled access granted, and he proceeded to clear the logs.

"Sir, what are you doing here?" said a young officer.

He had just finished up.

"Just moving access codes to my name, now that I'm the acting Chief."

"Right Chief." The young officer left.

Dan went back upstairs and proceeded to continue working shuffling people through. Having arrests made and doing the general SPD business. He suddenly spotted something. Oh no, someone had taken the coffee cup away. He got someone else to cover for him again, and went down to forensics. They were examining the coffee cup.

"Hello Dan." said Gina. She was wearing a white lab coat, and had a small vial.

"Come to see the results of the test?"

"The test?"

"Yes, we're testing the coffee for signs of poisoning."

"Oh yeah. I want to know what jerk did that so I can interrogate him myself."

"It will be just a moment." said Gina.

Gina Hurst was a perfect ten. Long blond hair, piercing blue eyes, ruby red lips. Her voice had a sultry quality to it. The only problem was, she was a geek. A chemical nerd. She could tell you what was in a sandwich you ate, down to the last preservative just by smelling a piece. She was always hard at work. She didn't seem to have any fun. She was nice enough, but she didn't seem to want to date. In any case, Dan had more important things than ogling a forensic scientist. She would never go for him anyways, he wasn't technically a 'good' guy now. He had gone too far over the line.

The vial was sitting over a burner. Gina poured in some powder. She then went to another table. Dan didn't know much about chemicals. His only hope was to sabotage the experiment. Dan picked up the coffee cup and poured out whatever was left. And then Gina came walking back. Dan slid in front of her to stop her. He said the first thing that came into his mind.

"Have dinner with me tonight?"

"Dan, you know I can't. I have a lot of work to do, and so do you."

"Come on, you work very hard. It's time to take some time out for yourself to relax, and have fun."

"I can't leave the lab. Besides I haven't been on a date in years, and I don't have a thing to wear."

Dan grabbed her by the shoulders. Pulled her closer, and opened her lab coat a little bit.

"Come as you are." He motioned to her regular clothes.

"I swear I won't even notice how, hot you look." He flashed her a smile. Then turned her around with her back to vial.

"You know I've been watching you for a while. I think you're very lovely, and would have a good time. I realize this could be misconstrued as sexual harassment. But I feel it's in your own best interest, if I did this."

He kissed her long and hard, and she didn't seem to resist. Behind her back he grabbed

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whatever he could find and dumped it into the vial. Then stepped away. She smiled herself, which made her particularly fetching, then turned around to the test. Her smile turned into a frown.

“Oh no. The sample has been contaminated.”

Then she looked at the empty coffee cup.

“And there's no coffee left. I guess all that's left now is to wait to see how the Chief turns out, and possibly to get some scans on him to see what was in his body.”

“That's too bad. I need to go check the holo-recorders and the logs. Maybe they can tell us something. Would you still join with me for dinner?”

“Umm, yes, I guess I am a bit tense. I haven't had a night out in a long time.”

“Good”, Dan smiled, “It's a date”

He turned on his heel and walked out

Lance and the rest of the slaves were drug out into the light. They were on a planet with tall buildings, so high you could not really see the bottom. From their vantage point however they could see the horizon and notice the whole planet wasn't skyscrapers. Their ship was docked on the seemingly highest point in the city. It was more of a barge than a ship. They were all herded like cattle out of the ship down the gangplank, and to another ship. Lance noted Raga was standing aside instructing the alien slaves where to go. When one of them started dragging their legs, one of the slavers hit the alien with a shock stick from behind that made the alien whelp in pain and speed up.

Soon they were packed in this other ship like sardines, heading for who knows where. Lance assumed it would be somewhere on the planet, and then later asked Raga if that was so, of which Raga confirmed. Many would be sold to the highest bidder to the rich denizens of this world. They would most likely be servants for large plantations of whatever resources this planet possessed. The rest would be working some mines for some precious mineral that Lance wasn't sure what it was used for. Apparently the slavers thought it profitable so they had these slaves from some poor, uncivilized planet, doing the work. If you were too old, or weak, you would be sent some place else. Raga wasn't really clear on that, but he made it clear that's some place Lance would not want to go, nor would he want his enemies to go. Lance left it at that.

Lance was not put up for auction. Apparently humanoid slaves are too smart to be servants. Besides he needed to somehow find evidence of Claw's pride being enslaved and then somehow trace it back to Curr. They arrived at the mines, which from Lance's vantage point was a huge operation, thousands of aliens and humanoids were doing various things like digging, shoveling, and moving dirt. To Lance's dismay they were all using hand tools. Picks, axes, and shovels. They didn't even use any laser picks or anything that would help them speed up the process. Of course the slavers were all misers. Physical tools were cheap, and so was the labor. The slavers that had brought the remaining slaves there, went to some surly looking humans and spoke to them in a foreign language. They bantered back and forth until finally the surly looking humans gave the slavers some pieces of metallic ore. Apparently precious metals were used for money here. The slavers left with a few weak and infirmed aliens.

Raga talked to the surly looking humans and pointed to Lance. The humans nodded at Raga and then Raga took Lance rather roughly out of the line and marched him down into the quarry.

“I'm sorry, Morgan, I will have to treat you like the other slaves while they are watching.”

“It's okay, I've had worse done to me, and I won't take it personally.”

“I will throw you in with the group that contains Gambitzi slaves. Although they don't take kindly to humans. You will have to find a way to earn their trust.”

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“Okay, I think I can handle that.”

“You realize they are cat-like and they have sharp claws, if you get into an altercation with them you could very well have your meat cleaved from your bones.”

“Umm... Okay... I think I can handle that.”

“You are either very brave, or very foolish. I find honor in both. Bravery when none is needed is honorable because you do not cower away from duty. Foolishness can be honorable when it's for an honorable deed. Even if you think you can take them on, you're still doing this for others and not for yourself.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Raga threw him down at the feet of another surly looking man. He had a whip and wanted to use it. Raga spoke in the language of the man and then the man grabbed Lance, gave him some tools and then threw him over to the wall where he was going to work. Lance dug in and started to work. He needed to get the feel for the place before he decided to ask questions. After several hours he started eying a few Gambitizens. They were getting the hint and started growling. When the guard has his back turned, Lance walked over and tapped on the cat-like shoulder.

“Only a dog would work for a slaver.” Lance said.

“Watch what you say, human. My claws are sharp and I would hate to have them do anything to you.”

“Your claws are about as dangerous as a mouse.”

“I'm warning you human, do not challenge me.”

“Are you still a kitten that has to play with yarn, still feeding from it's mother.”

“That does it human, prepare to have your flesh removed.”

“I told you never to call me here.”

“Not to worry Mr. Briggs. People are so busy trying to handle certain crises they won't pay attention to you. Anyways tell them I'm your Uncle Joe.”

“Right, Uncle Joe. Now what do you want?”

“Rumor has it, that the SPD is in possession of the final plate piece.” said Silas.

“Yes, and let me guess you want it.”

“But of course. You will have to tear yourself away and will have to find a way to smuggle it out.”

“I'm acting Chief right now, so I don't think I'll have a problem getting a hold of it.”

“Excellent. What about our other little... issue?”

“I haven't had time to handle Miss Lawson yet. In fact I didn't have enough, shall we say, equipment, for two people. I had to split it in half. With the Chief out of commission.”

“I don't want excuses, I want results.”

“Well I will have to deliver the plate first, and then be back before attending to Director Lawson, to avert suspicion. I had one close call already, and I don't want another.”

“Just tell me when you have it done. Uncle Joe, out.”

Dan stood up and looked around. People were bustling, still trying to fight the fires of the day. He went down to evidence, and signed in. In the evidence locker he saw a locked box with a keypad on top. He punched the keypad a few times.

“Acting Chief Dan Briggs, Authorization 2b23a command open.”

The box sprung open and inside was the plate. It was partially broken, and it was one of three pieces. Dan picked up the piece and then closed the box and left. He then signed the piece out of

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evidence. In the 'For' box he wrote down 'taking it to a specialist to examine'. That was all he needed, no heavy explanations. No one suspected him. There might be an accounting when it didn't come back, however. Dan was back in the main room, with all its flurry of activity, he thought he could just go out the door. He was trying to be nonchalant.

When Alice came out of her office and said, "Dan I need to see you at once."

He froze in his tracks. He turned around and dropped to plate into his big side pocket. It went in well enough but stuck out a little. He walked over to Alice's office.

"Ma'am?" Dan asked curiously.

"Close the door behind you, we need to have a serious chat."

That's when he noticed Gina there at another chair. Suddenly he felt very relieved. He probably would get reprimanded for sexual harassment, but that didn't bother him.

"We noticed the little interchange you two had."

She showed them the holo-recording.

"I didn't say anything Dan."

"Since she didn't charge you with harassment, I still have to step in and say we don't go for that kind of behavior here. It's not professional. Not to mention if she had charged you, you would be suspended right now."

"Sorry Director Lawson, I guess I was just overcome. Gina hasn't been out of that lab for several years. She's an attractive woman and she needs a little something to spice up her life. All work and no play?"

"Be that as it may, you should have done it after hours."

"It won't happen again."

"It better not, or else I will have to report you. I think you will be best served writing out a few reports. I need to know what has been going on down to the last detail. We have to find out what the IBA's next move is. This hustle has been nothing but a smoke screen."

Dan's heart sank. Now he would have to wait to get the plate out. At least he wasn't suspended.

"Are we still on?" asked Gina expectantly as they walked out.

"Definitely, although we'll have to make it a bit later, as these reports are going to kill me."

"Well I'm excited, but I can hold out a few more hours. I've got a few more experiments to do anyways."

Chapter Ten:

The arrow glided down to the surface of a dark planet. It was forever midnight here. It landed in the back alley of a freshly rained street. There were puddles reflecting the moons. There were a few strange animal cries. You could hear the bustle in the city. The street itself was full of pockmarks, cracks and potholes. There were a few alien species huddled over a few fires here and there. Katt jumped out and hit a remote control button and the ship seemed to disappear. Kat was all in black leather, she was carrying a briefcase. She entered a warehouse through a side door. It had been unused for sometime. There were unknown stains on the ground and the walls. Rusty pipes hanging from the ceiling. Katt approached the center of the warehouse and waited.

A few minutes later a two nicely dressed men and a starkly ugly woman walked up to her. The woman was dressed in a man's suit with her short cropped hair slicked back.

"You have the items?" Katt asked.

"You have the money?"

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Katt opened a briefcase. Instead of credits though it had several gems of various colors, cuts and sizes. Then they changed to a new cut, a new size and a new color. They seemed to shift at will. Morphstones were very rare and were only found inside asteroids. They were the most valuable stones in the galaxy. Once an electrical charge were applied to them, they would change size, shape and color based on the electrical current running through them. They were useful for hundreds of little projects. Sometimes the stones too small to be of any practical use, found their way in jewelry.

The items were unopened crates, there were several sitting on a hovering palette.

“Will you have trouble transporting it to your ship?”

“No I have everything well in hand.”

“Well I've heard of you Katt. But you were not at all what I expected.” said the woman.

“Surprise can be an advantage in my business. It makes me unassuming to people.”

“Your tolerance for pain is legendary I hear. I would love to test that out.”

Katt was starting to pale.

“Brute, would you mind holding her down.”

At first one of the handsome men came over, but by now she could tell he was also very big. He walked behind her and grabbed her by the arms. Then twisted his legs around hers so she couldn't move. The woman moved her hand and metal claws popped out of her sleeve. She then held the claws directly over Katt's eyes and started moving them closer and closer.

“You see my dear, I'm the real Katt, and I don't appreciate people impersonating me. But instead of killing you, I'm going to mark up that pretty face of yours, so that you will always be honored that you fought the infamous Katt and lived to tell about it.”

“What were you doing down there on that planetoid.”

Rit just sat there defiantly. Julio punched him in the face.

“You will talk, or so help me you will wish you had.”

“The same thing you were.”

“How would you know that?”

“You were after the plate piece. That's the only reason someone other than me would be out here.”

“So Ajax wouldn't come here, why? I thought he needed the third plate.”

“He did. But Ajax is no longer in the game.”

“Why do you go back to that precinct of yours, maybe you can explain how you lost the plate piece.”

“Who do you work for?”

“Throw yourself in a black hole.”

“You made one little mistake.”

“What's that, pig?”

“You just let me know you had information which I can proceed to get out of you. You don't seem to realize, I was trained in interrogation methods.”

“I was trained to resist those methods.”

“And I was trained how to get rid of resistance.”

“You're going to tell me who you work for sooner or later. Al, lock him up in one of the rooms.”

“Alright sir.”

Al marched Rit and his men down to the rooms. There was no actual brig, so they had to be

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locked up. Luckily this ship was really built for luxury in mind and thus had a few staterooms.

“Cindy, beautiful, we need to head down to that planet. I need to pick up on Morgan's trail.”

“Wow, you learn quick, handsome. Right away.”

There was a crowd around now. Lance had already taken several scratches across his bare back. He punched the Gambitzi in the face. The other fighter just took the blow as if it hadn't phased him. Then the Gambitzi threw him across the room into some freshly cut rock. The dust went everywhere. Lance was sweating like a Gamoreaon hog. He stood up a bit unsteady, then went right back in and kicked the cat in the stomach, which sent the cat sprawling in the crowd of people that had gathered. Dirty, sweaty faces in low light. The cat got up and ran over to Lance grabbed him by the throat with a paw and proceeded to scratch out his eyes. Lance grabbed a hold of the scratching paw with his free hand. Then when it seemed his tongue would bulge out Lance gathered up the rest of his strength and kicked the cat in the crotch as hard as he can.

“Meow.” went the cat in a high voice.

The Gambitzi's face started to contort. And he stood there then shook his head a few times, dropping Lance on the ground. He blinked his eyes and then without warning laughed the biggest, warmest, loudest laugh known to man. It echoed through all the tunnels. The laugh kept continuing, and soon after Lance caught his breath he started laughing too. Then everyone was laughing. The cat picked up Lance and dusted him off.

“Well fought, my friend. Well fought.”

“Uhh... thanks?”

“We should return to our work. We can talk while we work on this east wall.”

They began hammering at the rock and putting the raw ore into bins.

“Why are you here, it's obvious you don't belong. I do not think you came here on accident.”

“You're right. Do you know who Claw is?”

“Claw, that insignificant kitten. He should be boiled in his mother's milk.”

“So you know him. Yes, he's the reason I'm here.”

“So then you're of the Kultak pride?”

“Indeed, my name is Cryss.”

“You may not believe me but I was sent here by Claw. Apparently he's working for the Law Council, and is trying to find information that Curr is hurting the pride. Curr works for the IBA.”

“I believe you human. No one would be here because he wants to. You must be on a special mission. By the way, what are you called?”

“Lance Morgan, but just call me Lance.”

“Very well Lance. I might have known that Curr is running this. He always seemed a little bit dishonorable. I just could never pin it down.”

They were throwing more chunks of ore.

“I need to somehow get into the slaver's offices and see if there isn't some sort of paper, pad, or holo-recording to indicate that the Gambitzi slaves are here because of Curr.”

“This may be difficult at best, Lance. Somehow Claw's name is on everything. However, maybe there's a chance that you can prove that Claw was signing those under Curr's orders. You have a long task ahead of you, my friend. You will first have to smuggle out documents containing Claw's name, then you will have to go to the Law Council with Claw to clear his name. He may still even be the dishonorable one.”

“Could you authenticate anything?”

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“Hmm I think I could tell if it was Claw who signed for it. Other than that you will be on your own.”

“You want to come with me when I leave.”

“Oh no need, my friend. If you are who you say you are, then my people will rescue me once you prove it was Curr who has hurt the pride.”

“I will still need help in getting to the slavers offices.”

“That I think we can arrange.”

Dan finished the reports in his inbox. Then he made a private holo-call.

“Is there a place we could meet, Uncle Joe?” asked Dan.

“Remember Ajax's hideout? Meet me there, have the plate ready.”

He had just ended the call when Gina came by in her work clothes.

“I was able to get a small sample of the tainted coffee.” she said.

“And?”

“And I didn't put it together until now. The kiss, the date, all of it. You're the one who poisoned the Chief, aren't you?”

Dan finished a few things, shut down his terminal. He looked up at her sinisterly.

“You were never interested in me, you wanted to stop me from finding out what was in the coffee.”

How long was she standing there while he was talking to 'Uncle Joe'.

“I heard mention of a plate? I'm going to report you to Director Lawson.”

Dan got up grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into the office. He pulled off her lab coat rather quickly and then they took off. By this time the Precinct was fairly quiet. They were still busy with things, but calls had stopped coming in. Right now it was just in process mode. Some people got to go home, some stayed. They got into Dan's ship and took off.

“So, ah, where are we going?”

Dan looked at her for a moment.

“Going? I've got an errand to run, so if you don't mind it will take us a little out of our way.”

“I guess I don't have a choice, do I?”

“I guess not.” he smiled.

“Just sit back and relax.”

Silas went to the communications room, then told one of his comm operators to put in a call to Rit's ship.

“Sir, there's no response.”

“I should be able to track him up half a solar system or more. Check again, make sure the equipment's alright.”

The operator tried again.

“Sorry sir, it's just not there, like it has been damaged. Should we send someone out there?”

“No, don't worry about it, I was going out there anyways.”

Silas left with a few guards in his personal transport and headed toward the familiar uncharted planetoid. Finally his ship came upon the wreckage of Rit's ship.

“Scan for life signs.”

“None sir, they must have gotten out somehow.”

“Continue on down to the planet.”

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Julio looked around on the ground. He pressed his finger below his ear.

“Insectoids, huh, Al?”

“Yes sir.” Al replied over the comm.

“If you don't mind my asking sir, but why are we here? We already have the plate in our possession, and we've told you everything we knew about the incident, up until the time we parted ways with Lance.”

“Even though I'm not as close to Lance as say Dan or Baxter is, or even you, I still hold him as a friend. I'm not really interested in bringing him back only to hamper him in his investigation. So let's just say I'm following my orders circumspectly.”

“I see sir, even so, why are you down on the planet.”

“Well, I'm just hoping I can poke around in the ground here, and maybe find a few clues that our good ol' buddy Ajax might have left here. Any plans or anything like that. Might be useful”

“I see sir, okay carry o... wait sir, Cindy's picking up something. It appears to be an unidentified ship.”

“Does that bird have a cloaking shield?”

“Yes sir, I believe it does, however it is not very robust. If there is a deep scan made we might be spotted. It only protects against light scans and visibility.”

“Put it up, and keep me updated.”

A ship landed not that far away from the Swan. Out came a cloaked figure. He just stood there and waited. Then another ship came down on the opposite side of Julio about the same distance as the cloaked figure's ship. They started walking. Al suddenly recognized the other ship. It was Dan Briggs. What was Dan doing here.

“Sir, they are converging on your position, I would recommend you find a place to hide.”

“Okay. See if you can get an identification on the cloaked figure.”

Julio ducked into some of the wreckage, just far enough he could still see the two figures. Sure enough they came into view. He couldn't hear with they were saying.

“Al, is it possible you could eavesdrop on their conversation, and then pipe it through to me?”

“It will be tough sir, but I will try.”

The sound was crackling at first until finally he could hear clearly.

“Do you have the plate?” asked the cloaked figure.

“Take down the hood so I can see your face.” said Dan.

Silas pulled down the hood. Then suddenly Julio's eyes went side.

“Yes I have the plate. I thought we could negotiate for a little bonus, seeing as I wasn't contracted for this.”

“I see what you mean. You will find unlike Ajax or others of his ilk I do not feel put out when someone wishes to negotiate a deal. I find killing nasty to deal with, and rather pay off in money to silence someone. However, we will barter for the price. I don't mind paying for something I really need, but some people are just too greedy.”

They haggled for a bit until finally settling on a price. Dan gave Silas the plate and Silas gave him something Julio couldn't make out. Then he finally realized that Silas now had all the plate pieces. So Dan had some other work to do. Now if he could only capture them both. The swan didn't have any weapons though.

“Al, call the SPD, they've gotta hear about this.”

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“Sir if I make a call that broadcasts that far, they might detect us.”

“I don't care, we'll deal...” then stopped short when he saw a woman trying to run away from Dan's ship.

“Al, who is that woman, I can't identify her from here.”

His question was answered when Dan chased Gina down and pulled out his gun and then held her at gunpoint.

“Who is she, and what is she doing here?” asked Silas impatiently.

“I had to bring her along, she knows too much, and now I must find a way to dispose of her.”

“Are you sure we can't just pay her off?”

“Not a chance. You can go back to your ship, I will deal with her, and you'll never see her again.”

“I better not. You need to finish your end of the deal.”

“Don't worry, I have a treat for Director Lawson, of course we'll have to deal with Lincoln afterwards, but that's not my worry.”

“Just get it done soon. We need need to commence with phase two.”

Silas walked back toward his ship and took off.

“Okay Al, send the message now, Silas is gone.”

“Silas sir?”

“Yeah he's Ajax's brother, and I believe he is running the IBA. I'm not sure what phase two means, but I don't like the sound of it. I'm going to see if I can get both Dan and Gina.”

“Be careful sir.”

“You just watch my back. But don't uncloak until I give you the word.”

Julio approached Dan and Gina from behind. He could hear her starting to sob. He hated hearing a woman sob, especially if it was a lowlife male that did it to her. Dan was going to pay. He had be interested in Gina for some time but never got the guts enough to ask her out. Now it looked like he would never get the chance. Julio didn't have his gun on him so he played it by ear. He saw Dan pull out his gun and point it at her head.

“Sorry it had to end like this. I did find you very attractive.”

Julio looked around desperately and found a big rock. Just as Dan was about to pull the trigger, Julio pushed the rock down on Dan's head knocking him down. The only problem was that he didn't do it right and Dan groaned as he tried to get up. The gun was just out of Dan's reach. Julio was also bowled over as the rock was a bit heavy. He spotted Dan's gun and dove for it, but Dan managed to grab his ankle and pull him down. He started pulling Julio towards him. Julio tried to kick Dan in the head but Dan caught his other ankle. He tried to scramble over Julio. They were now over a small pit from the destruction of the old base. Julio put his knee in Dan's chest, and Dan started sliding into the pit. Julio started to get up again and Dan grabbed him again. He was almost to the gun. Finally he got free of Dan and got to the gun and then stood up. Dan also got up and lunged at him. Both began rolling in the dirt trying to grab the gun. They were now both gripping at the gun raised above their heads. They started pulling it around, suddenly the gun went off and Dan fell backward. He screamed loudly while clutching his face.

“Al, I need you here right away.”

“Yes sir.”

It only took Al a few moments.

“Take this piece of garbage back to the ship, restrain him like the others.”

“Yes sir.”

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Julio went over to Gina.

“Are you alright?” he gasped.

Gina leaped in his arms, just holding on to him. They held on together for several minutes before returning to the Swan. Gina told Julio everything that befell her up until Julio showed up.

“So, I guess that means you won't be dating me anytime soon?” he asked her finally.

“Let's just get to know each other first okay? I mean you can come visit me down in the lab. I mean on your free time, maybe?”

“That will be great. I've been trying to get up enough courage to ask you out on a date for years but just have never been able to make myself do it.”

“It never occurred to you to just talk to me?”

“No, I mean, well you're extremely beautiful, and I'm just a beat cop. And you do this amazing stuff with chemical analyses and figure out who poisoned whom with what. It's all very fascinating. I'm just not much of a brain. I mean I'm smart enough for stuff, it's just I don't have a head for numbers, equations, and formulas.”

Gina and Julio talked a lot Gina's work, and even a little bit about Julio's work. They seemed to hit it off pretty well.

The real Katt flew back as Dana's feet pushed into her. Dana got up and extended her own claw. The real Katt got up and tried to slash at Dana, but Dana swerved out of the way. Then Dana punched Katt hard below her breasts. Katt stumbled backwards but soon was jumping on top of Dana. Katt tried to stab at her throat with her claw. Dana saw the full ugliness of the real Katt's face, especially in this snarl. Dana tried to stab at Katt with her own claw but Katt grabbed it, and now they were both in a life or death struggle with the metal knife-like claws just inches from each other's neck. They began to roll around on the floor using their elbows to make sure their opponent's claws didn't end up going through their necks. Soon Dana was on top again, and Katt got her legs up under Dana and pushed as hard as she could. Dana lost her grip and fell over backwards still holding onto Katt's neck. Katt, while still holding onto Dana's neck with one hand rolled over and pinned Katt's shoulder to the ground with her claw, causing Dana to scream in pain. Katt moved over to the other side with her claw still in Dana's shoulder and started to punch Dana in the face. Unfortunately for the real Katt, Dana's free arm was the one with her claw. She swiped at Katt's face who howled in pain. Katt still had her claw embedded firmly in Dana's shoulder. The real Katt got tired of this so she pulled out a gun, and pointed it at Dana. Dana realizing she would die soon if she didn't do something drastic, retracted her claw and then pushed herself up with her free hand. The pain was excruciating and Dana gritted her teeth with a low moan escaping through them. Now Katt and Dana were face to face, one contorted in pain, the other in anger. Dana head butted Katt which knocked Katt back a little then Dana pulled her shoulder free. This was the advantage she needed she jumped up and flipped behind Katt, then grabbed her arm and twisted it up behind her. Katt could do nothing. She marched Katt back to the other two men that had accompanied Katt here. Dana told the men to bind her up and de-claw her. They bound Katt and then marched her toward their ship. After restraining her they climbed back down and walked toward Dana.

“Dana, you sure can take care of yourself. I told Rob here you didn't need us.”

“I was just worried, is all. Everyone needs a little help every once in a while, even us, Jake.”

“There wasn't any need, but I am glad we were here to watch.”

“Hey guys!” Dana said excitedly.

She ran up and hugged them both.

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“I don't mind a little support from my too favorite brothers. But I did wonder how you found me.”

“The Bureau knew Silas was dealing with Katt, and we just happened to be in the right place at the right time when the real Katt showed up. We knew you would be the only one foolish enough to pose as her.” said Jake.

“It was a good thing, that Katt didn't know who we were, or she wouldn't have hired us. We wouldn't have known about this meeting if the person that was really selling the “items” hadn't been killed by the real Katt. The Bureau was trailing the seller in hopes that it would lead them to the head of the IBA. You were still under cover so we couldn't contact you directly and we had no news.” said Rob.

“Then the real Katt shows up, kills the seller and then starts looking for hired muscle. Namely us. We would have stepped in and stopped Katt if there had been any real danger, but I can see you know how to use your 'Katt's claw' most efficiently.”

“I'm glad you're here anyways. I still need to stay under cover. You need to take Katt back to the Bureau, and I need to continue as if everything went smoothly. You also need some important information. The head of the IBA is none other than Ajax's brother Silas. Ajax went off the scope a while back, I have a feeling Silas has dealt with him. They always had some sort of rivalry having to do with Silas leaving the foal so-to-speak.”

“You mean we're going to be giving Silas, who is the head of the IBA one of the largest criminal organizations known in the galaxy, several tons of explosives?”

“Yes. I haven't found out his full plans yet. We need some time, and this is the only way to do it. At least now we know what we're up against. He needs to think his plans are going according to schedule.”

Jake gave Dana a comm strip.

“Here take this, this is a direct line to us. When you've found the information you seek, contact us and we'll be there to bail you out. This doesn't use any Bureau frequencies and it is encoded so only me and Rob will be in contact with you. Now in exchange for us keeping your whereabouts from the Bureau instead of just pulling you directly, you will, if you get into any trouble, call us.”

“But...” Dana tried to plead.

“No buts, you know we can have you pulled out immediately if we want to. You've gotta give us your word. We know you can take care of yourself normally, but in this business normal is unusual.”

“Alright. You know I can never refuse my big brothers. You have my word that if it gets too hot I'll call on you to pull my bacon out of the fire.”

She kissed each on the cheek.

“Now get out of here, Katt has some more business to attend to.” said Dana.

They each gave her a hug and then left toward their own ship. Dana took the floating palette and hauled it to her ship. She then loaded the crates into her ship and finally took off. Then another ship uncloaked and took off after her. She didn't really see it as it took another direction.

Raga was holding a chain that connected to Lance's handcuffs and looped through his neck cuff's ring. As they were walking down a better lit corridor of rock guards would eye them a bit suspiciously but say nothing. Raga had sort of an honored status here. They didn't realize he was really running some sort of underground railroad for Kreigan slaves. Eventually they turned into a room made of cut rock. The floor and walls, however were bare rock. Cut here as a makeshift office.

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There was wooden scaffolding setup to stop any falling debris. There was a single light, a desk and a filing cabinet in the back. This is what Lance needed. A crude door was made to allow privacy to the office's occupant. Raga made sure there was no one in the tunnel and pulled the door to.

“Be quick Lance Morgan. The officer in charge is due to be back any minute.”

Raga unbound the shackles and let go of the chain. Lance walked over to the desk to rummage about. He didn't find anything. Next he went to the filing cabinet. It was locked. He tried to mess with it but it wouldn't budge. He looked around the desk and found nothing of use.

“Raga, I can't get into this, would you...?”

Raga punched it hard and the thing crumpled then fell open.

“Raga, you seemed to understand their language, can I get you to translate these?”

“Yes Morgan, but we must hurry!”

“They're sorted by alien race, and here is the Gambitzi file.”

He pulled out a tablet. Although the title was foreign the work order was not. There in plain sight was Claw's name.

“Well that accounts for Claw, but what about Curr, where's the link.”

He thumbed through each of the files but could not find one reference to Claw.

“Raga, open these other drawers.”

Raga punched them as well and they fell open. He looked at the middle and then the bottom. Then in the bottom he noticed a device. It had a base with a small robotic arm attached with a stylus. There was a slot on the base into which Lance put one of the tablets, then the small robotic arm began to write out claw's name.

“That's it! They're using a signer for Claw's name. Shoot any program can analyze and reproduce your signature perfectly. Can you find a place to hide these?”

Raga looked out into the tunnel, he could tell someone was approaching, as his eyes and ears were much better than a human's.

“Too late Morgan, I will hide it here and come back to get it later.”

He punched a whole in the wall, even though made of rock, Raga just busted it like it was plaster. He did this several times, put the items in the cubbyhole and then replaced it with the rubble that was displaced.

Now Lance could hear the footsteps.

“Raga, it's been a pleasure, if I ever get out alive I'll let your father know how honorable you've become. Now, I don't want my jaw broken like that rock, but hit me.”

“Morgan?”

“Just do it. You may be our only hope of clearing Claw's name and implicating Curr, at least he won't be doing any more slaving. Though you may have to leave here for a while to get the evidence back.”

“Well if it's for someone else's honor, I will do it. Of course I will probably come back here after, because Kreigans still need their honor covered.”

“You're a good, ah, man. Raga”

A slaver came in and then Lance's lights went out.

“Sever communications... Now.” Silas said and turned off the comm.

With that one command several ships in numerous systems uncloaked and came from behind asteroids, planetoids, dark sides of moons, anywhere they were hidden. Everything from the Starlux Cluster to Ecliptus 12 to the Outer Limits that had communications stations were destroyed. Satellites

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and huge dish arrays were destroyed by a single order. Dana, still posing as Katt, had returned with the crates. These were different kinds of explosives and armaments. Then Silas had his men distribute these weapons to the different groups, those who were representing the planets and systems of the good businesses of the IBA. They had been set in strategic locations to cut off all communications. Not to mention stopping all beacons along the Persisus Corridor. Now they were cut off from both ends of the galaxy. This was finally phase two, only Silas knew what phase 3 was.

Katt had to find out what that was and fast. No one knew Silas' endgame. Some suspected the artifact was it. But the artifact was merely something he was interested in having, but not necessary to his plans. However if he did gets his hands on it, it could spell doom for the entire galaxy. Katt wasn't about to let either happen. Now she was in a prime location to do some snooping. If only Silas let his eye off of her. Once she had a moment she would find out something, or die in the attempt. If only Lance were here. She could tell him everything. Why the need for secrecy. Why she had faked her own death. Why she was working for the criminals he was supposed to be hunting down. If this was to be her last mission, indeed the last days of her life, she would at least want Lance to know the truth, before she was gone to tell him.

Then suddenly she got a break.

“Sir, Curr is on the line, and he has a present for you.” said the operator. He came all the way from the comm room to tell him.

“A present?”

“Yes sir, that's what he told me. I don't know it either.”

“Alright, I will be there in a minute.”

The operator left the room.

“Well Katt my dear, you can mind the fort, while I'm gone for a few minutes, can't you?”

“Of course. I'll be here when you get back.” said Dana.

When he was gone she started trying to search his office, but couldn't get anything open. Just those things to do with phase 2 were out in the open. Then she remembered hearing that Silas had captured a Kreigan and two half-bot humans. Any enemy of Silas could be a friend of hers. Now where were they. She left the office and went down the hall and then to the brig. She looked in every room and then found the two half-bot humans. They were anchored to the wall on their human sides by ordinary cuffs. And the robot sides seem to be paralyzed.

“Do you want to get out of here?” she asked Phanta.

“Yes, of course, but who are you?”

“My name is Dana. I'm here undercover working for the Bureau of Inter Galactic Affairs. I'm trying to figure out what phase 3 of Silas's plan is. Would you help me?”

“I may, it depends on what you need me to do.”

“So you were not really working for Ajax after all?”

“No I wasn't, I had been put in deep cover to get to the head of the IBA. I later found out that Silas is the head. Now there's no time.”

She opened the cells.

“Well come on!” she said.

“We can't, our human halves are fastened to the wall, and our bot halves, have restraining tethers.”

“Umm here” she said as she blasted the cuffs from the walls.

She then ripped out the restraining tethers. So Phanta and Cert were up and running.

“Where's Trola?”

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“He was separated from us, when we were caught.”

“Most likely he's in the interrogation lab. I guess we better pick him up first. I need all the help I can get.”

They ran down and no one was in the lab. So they approached Trolla who was in an incapacitated state. His tentacles were mostly out of his head, and he was drooling.

“Can either of you put those back?”

“I believe I have a database I picked up, that would do that. Accessing... ahh yes.” Said Cert. Quicker than lightening he replaced the tentacles back in their proper places. Suddenly Trolla's eyes lit up.

“What happened?”

“You were probably interrogated, for what I don't know. We need to get you out of here.”

He looked at Dana.

“Katt, so you're not the real Katt after all.”

“How did you know?”

“I met the real Katt, but I said nothing when you brandished that claw.” said Trolla.

“How could you be afraid of that?”

“I wasn't afraid, only wary. I was unsure what you were doing, so had no reason to alert Ajax. Besides I was only working for him to find info about my son. Lance is, I believe, going for that information now.”

“Well I'm Dana, and I work for the IBA.”

“Oh yes, Lance's wife. It makes sense now. Ajax had a simulant killed. Very clever.”

They left back down the corridor. There were a few guards, but the gang hid behind the wall. When the guard turned the other way, they ran down, and back into Silas' office.

“Okay I need your help opening these cabinets drawers, anything that will give us a clue to Phase 3.”

They proceeded to open everything. Trolla would bash the file cabinets open. Phanta and Cert simply pulled apart the drawers. There was a painting on the wall. Trolla noted how it looked and then pulled it open to reveal a small alcove, complete with chin rest in front of monitor, and hand plate.

Cert started forward.

“I think I got this one, love.” said Phanta.

She stepped up put her hand on the plate and chin on the rest. Then her bot brain started hacking the security system while it was running it's check. First two times it flashed red for no access. Then on the third try it opened. Inside she found a small tablet, on the screen came up plans to destroy USSC headquarters. Then some blueprints for a freighter called the 'Manna'. She mentally downloaded the information and sent duplicate info to Cert.

“Okay let's go.”

Katt grabbed the stuff from the safe. They started to walk out when Silas bumped into them walking in.

“What is this?” he said curiously.

“Uhh, It's umm.”

“Dana Larkin, do you think I did not know who you were? Come now, I was not born yesterday. I knew you would try something like this. That info in your hands is worthless. I was merely trying to throw you off my trail, and it looked like it has worked. Now you and your friends will have to die. But first I have matters to attend to. Guards! Take them to the brig.”

Some guards came in and restrained them. And took them back down to the cells.

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“This time make sure they are WELL secured.”

Then he turned to Dana.

“My dear, I also have a surprise for you. You see, we have Mr. Lance Morgan. He's alive, but not for very long. I will bring him to visit you.”

Lance here? Oh no, hopefully he didn't come searching for her. That was the whole reason she got mad at him for wanting to go after Ajax in the first place.

Chapter Eleven:

It was the next day and Precinct 44 was pandemonium. Everything just stopped. Everyone was trying to find a way to get communications running to the other precincts. There were no broadcasts, or holo-calls going out. No one knew what had happened. Julio had just arrived. He called up to the main office to get a bunch of officers to come and take Rit, and his men, and Dan down to lockup.

“Dan Briggs is under arrest for poisoning Charles Baxter, kidnapping Gina Hurst, and giving evidence to a criminal. I want you to take him into interrogation room A, and the guy with the orange glasses and body armor is Rit, who works directly for Silas. I want him in interrogation room B.”

He turned to Gina.

“Can I walk you back to the lab?”

“Please. I'm kind of nervous right now, it will be nice to have someone in there with me I can trust.” replied Gina.

They walked down to the lab.

“Gina, I wanted to ask you a favor. I don't know how Dan treated you. But when he was holding that gun to your head, I got so angry, I just wanted to...”, he paused, “well kill him. I don't like to see any guy doing that to any woman. Dan is in interrogation room A. And well I kind of want to be the one to do it. But if I do it, I won't be kind. I'm just wondering if you had any objections to me being the one that questions him.”

“I don't like violence... but... sometimes it's necessary. I want you to get every last bit of information out of him possible. I don't care how you do it.”

“Okay. I just wanted your permission on it. I didn't want you to think less of me if I do some horrible but necessary. Can I come in and check on you later?”

“Please do. Although I won't be doing much, if I can't send the scans to our off site labs.”

Julio left and headed back to Alice Lawson's office. He took a breath than began orating.

“Director Lawson, I realize I was supposed to go find Morgan, but I figured it was more important to bring these criminals in. Dan had kidnapped Gina, and I just happened to be at the right place at the right time. I couldn't, however, get Silas too. It just didn't work out that way. Dan poisoned the Chief, and got the plate piece out of the evidence room and gave it to Silas. And Ma'am, Silas is the head of the IBA. I saw him with my own two eyes. You can wait for communications to be restored before you confirm this, or you can start making plans to intercept. They're planning something big, I'm sure of it. I would also like to request the option of questioning both Dan and Rit since I brought them in. Dan especially.”

“Are you quite finished?” she asked eagerly.

“Yes Ma'am. I just wanted to get it out before you had some other assignment for me.”

“Well your assignment is still Lance Morgan, however, if you feel that both of these men have any information to impart, you are allowed.”

“Thank you, ma'am.” With that Julio left the room.

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Lance was brought in. His clothes were torn, and he was bruised and bloody. He was put into Dana's cell and when thrown in collapsed on the ground. Dana rushed to Lance's side. Cradling his head in her arms.

"Why? Why did you work for Ajax? Why are you here? Why did you die on me?" He asked breathlessly.

She started kissing him.

"I'm so sorry Lance. I begged you not to go on that mission. We could have finished our honeymoon. It would have been ok. I was going to turn down the mission."

"Mission? What mission?"

"I don't know how to tell you this, Lance honey, but I work for the Bureau of Inter Galactic Affairs. I was on an under cover assignment as Katt a black market weapons specialist. I worked for Ajax because he was dealing with the IBA. We needed to know who the head of the IBA was, since he kept running it from some unknown location, broadcasting his image via hologram, and wearing a cloak and hood."

"Why couldn't you find a way to tell me. I'm a cop, I can keep secrets. You would have just had to have an order come from the USSC. They oversee the SPD anyways."

"I was ordered not to. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't. It killed me inside to have to pretend I was dead and couldn't tell you about it."

"Those tears were real, Dana. I thought you were dead. Then when you showed up and was working for Ajax I thought you had betrayed us all. I can't ever undo those feelings either."

"I still love you. I'm going to quit the Bureau, and we're going to go off to some unknown backwater planet, like we planned! We're going to raise cows or something, where the most exciting thing is birth of a new calf."

"I don't know how I feel now, except beat up. Those guys worked me over for no reason other than enjoying it."

"I'm sorry." she kept repeating and kissing him and holding him.

He had to admit it was kind of nice to have her back. A living breathing female that loved him. But he still had mixed feelings as well. The feeling of loss when she died, and the feeling of betrayal when she was working for the enemy. He did actually search for her killers in the first place, so there was still love there, but he needed to heal first. He sat himself up against the wall.

"Please go sit on the cot while I think for a bit. We need to get out of here."

"I found some plans for phase 3. Silas plans to blow up USSC headquarters. He also has the map to the artifact. Though I'm not sure who gave him the last plate piece."

Raga went back to the office where he had stored the items in the wall. It was empty so he removed the rock he had replaced and pulled out the signet and the tablet. He then took a sack that had some ore in it, and placed the items at the bottom of the sack, then replaced the ore on top of it. He walked down the tunnel. He came upon another Kreig.

"Doss, I think it's time for me to take my leave. I want you to take over the operation."

"Why do you leave now, when there's more of our people coming in."

"Because I promised to help a friend recover the honor of another. I will, of course, be back, but I cannot say when. You are the best for the job and you know it as well as I. Please do not dishonor me by refusing."

"Of course I will not refuse, Raga. You are a true brother. Our work here is never finished."

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Maybe once you are out there you can raise an alarm about this. Maybe we can stop these slavers from operating. There's no law out here, that's why they can thrive, but where there's no law to stop them, there's also no law to stop us either."

"I will consider this Doss. Be well and honorable brother." said Raga.

"Be well an honorable" Doss replied clasping his arm.

Raga slipped out and headed down several tunnels and then finally to ore processing. He stopped by another Kreigan.

"It's time you slipped me out Zadan. Doss will be taking the operation."

"I was wondering when you would leave us. Fare well brother. Slip into this car." said Zadan pointing to the mine car he was dumping ore in.

Raga got in with the sack, and Zahdahn dumped ore into the bin on top of him. Because of the nature of the Kreig, they did not feel as much pain as humans. Heavy ore being dropped on top of him didn't seem to bother him much. He did however have to stay there for several hours while they worked. Whenever a guard came to ask of Raga, they would say that he was doing some other errand for someone else, and usually that would suffice.

Eventually the bin with Raga in it was pushed out. It finally passed through several checkpoints, when one particularly squinty and shady looking slaver looked him over and said something to Zahdahn in their own language. Zahdahn gestured to the bin and the slaver started poking his bayonet in the ore. He moved the ore pieces around. Once Raga's body showed through, only the slaver couldn't see it because the darkness tended to make it look like a lump of rocks.

Finally the bin was led outside. Zahdahn moved the bin over to a chute but not too far over the edge then poured the ore out. There was just enough room for Raga to get away from the chute before falling in. He walked along the edge and then to a conveyor. And then jumped on it. This processed ore was going to go into some other bins which would eventually be put onto ships. He walked along the conveyor and then jumped in one of the full bins, which was then moved to a hover-truck, and then into a ship. Once on the ship he was away.

The ship flew to a space port where it docked to transfer the bins to somewhere else. Here Raga would get out. As the bin he was in was moving out he peaked under the canvas to where he was going. The bin was moving automatically on another conveyor and he jumped out. He then went into the space port proper from an access hallway.

Back at SPD headquarters Julio was questioning Rit.

"We know you're working for Silas, and I know he's running the IBA, I just need a confession out of you. If you deal, we'll be fair."

"You couldn't get me to do anything out there, and you won't in here."

"But here I have all the equipment I need, and I can do things to you, you've never even dreamed of. And it's all legal? Either you play, or you pay."

"There's nothing you can do or say that will persuade me."

"Okay give him a level one."

Rit shook violently as electricity was going through his body. He sat there breathing heavily.

"If you keep doing this I'll eventually pass out. Then you won't get anything from me."

"Is that so? Okay up it to level five."

That was so violent that he frothed at the mouth, his veins popped out, and his face got red as he screamed. Then it was gone and he was breathing heavily but he did not pass out.

"Nice try."

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Julio left the room and went into Dan's interrogation room. Dan was looking a bit scared. Julio was looking none too friendly. Julio punched him in the face, making his nose bleed.

“What do you want from me?” yelled Dan.

Julio said nothing and kicked him in the side.

“I'll tell you everything.”

“Turn it up to level 6.” said Julio.

“No please... I'll tell you anything you want!” yelled Dan.

“TURN IT UP TO 6 NOW!”

Suddenly the whole room shook with the scream. Even Rit could hear it. Dan turned limp but moved his head and his eyes a bit.

Finally he got out the words. “Silas, paid me some money. I was to poison the Chiefs coffee and take his place. It was part of phase one. Where they would replace the military, government, and law enforcement with their own men. That is the IBA. Silas ran the IBA. I got tired of Lance getting all the action while I was stuck behind a desk. How every time he would get a commendation, and I would get nothing, for my endless slaving over the reports. Silas offered me a position in his organization, so I took it. So what. The plate was just something he wanted. I don't know what for and I didn't care, I needed the extra money. Gina was just a fling, I couldn't have her tagging along. She's unimportant.”

Julio grabbed Dan by the neck and lifted him up against the wall.

“She is important to me.”

Julio choked until Dan passed out and dropped him. Julio left the room. He re-entered Rit's interrogation room.

“Dan has told us all he knows. Now it's your turn. My Chief could be dead. Lance Morgan our best cop is missing. And you won't tell us anything. I need a confession from you, and I need to know where Silas's ship is, or else I'll use a special form of interrogation. One you would not like very much, once that isn't so much painful as completely unpleasant.”

“Do your worst.”

“Bring it in.” Julio said.

A man brought in a vial and a syringe and filled it with the fluid in the vial.

“I won't break under truth serums, and I will resist the pain as much as possible.” said Rit smugly.

“This isn't like that. You see, in trying to cure the common cold, or a flu, we stumbled across something. You can make the flu or cold go through the patient much much quicker thereby being almost as good as curing it. We also were able to learn how to create different strains of various flus. Ones that aren't actually lethal but make you wish they were. Now, we can inject you with this powerful flu, and have it pass through your system in less than 60 seconds. Now getting sick is unpleasant at best, but this... this will make you wish you had died. So I'm going to ask you one more time confirm you work for Silas, that he's the head of the IBA, and his location or else you will experience the worst thing you have ever experienced in your life.”

“There's no such thing as those so called hyper flus. You're bluffing.”

“Only one way to find out. Hold him.” he said to the man that brought the vial in.

The man grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him into his seat, he then took one arm behind his back. Julio grabbed his other arm, and injected him. For a few minutes nothing happened. Then all of the sudden, the man had a fever, and was sweating profusely, then he went cold, then he was sweating again. Rit grasped at his throat while it suddenly become intensely sore. Then he started

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coughing uncontrollably so much so he felt he would literally cough up a lung. Then he felt so sick he vomited. Finally his nose started running profusely. And he started tearing up. He coughed a little bit more and it was done.

Julio couldn't tell if he was crying or simply tearing from the experience. He let Rit catch his breath and offered him a tissue.

"That was just a single stage version. There are more unpleasant levels, and more than one stage. If you don't wish to go through that again or worse, I would suggest you tell us all you know."

"Alright, alright, signed confession. I worked for Silas as his number one. Silas started the IBA. He was going to use Ajax to provide a D80 for him in order to implement part of this plan. I don't know what his endgame is because he hasn't told me. He realizes it's best to safeguard information as much as possible."

For the next several hours he outlined everything that he knew, up until Phase two. He then provided plans to where Silas's ship was going to be at any given time. He also provided detailed schematics of Silas's ship and of the asteroid where the IBA did most of his work from. If they ever got communications working again, they would have an all out war with Silas and his operation.

"Now that I've given you all of this, I want a favor in return."

"Not that you deserve any, but I'm willing to listen." said Julio.

"I want full protection. And not just shuffled off onto a prison ship, because they can get me there easier than somewhere on this side. If I have to be a snitch, I'll do it. If I have to mop the floors here at the SPD just for protection, I'll do it. I'll serve any sentence passed on to me, but I need protection."

"I will take it into consideration. Some people might not think you deserve to live."

"That's why I need protection."

"I'll see what I can do."

Julio left the room. Dan was still unconscious. Julio didn't really look all that sad. Then Alice stepped in.

"Arrest Julio for the murder of Dan Briggs." she said.

"What? He's merely unconscious." Julio said in surprise.

Some medics came in and checked him over.

"He's dead." one of the medics said.

They carried him away on a cot.

"Put him in the brig and then get ready to transfer him to the prison ship Atilla."

"You can't do this to me. He was going to kill Gina. He has betrayed us all."

They dragged Julio away kicking and screaming.

Raga knew he had to get in contact with the Gambitzi. Apparently when Morgan had found the evidence it pointed to one named Claw. But it was using a signer, which meant that Claw never signed those orders himself. He needed to get in contact with the IBA. Curr was the liaison to the Gambitzi. So now the only question was, where was the IBA, and how do you get there. He decided to hire a transport to Gambit itself. He would come in contact with the IBA through that. He had a little money he had saved up for himself for just such an emergency and hired the next transport to Gambit. Once there he would have to figure something else out.

The ride was pretty uneventful and then finally he arrived on Gambit. He went to the Kreigan consulate. Where he told them that he needed to contact Curr. He decided the best way was to do it through legal channels. They instructed him to a building where he could present his case to the Law

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Council. He went to present his case, as they let all who had a query come and present their case, no matter what planet or system they were from. If they had business, and it was honorable they would hear it. Raga knew he shouldn't implicate Claw directly but instead should seek out Curr to resolve the matter privately. He still had to address the council, however, as he was an outworlder.

“High council, My name is Raga and I am a Kreigan as you can all plainly see. I have a matter about covering one's honor. However I must request a private audience with whom I seek so I can settle the matter with him. You know the Kreig respect honor as do I. I wish to speak to Curr of the Kultak pride about this matter.”

“Curr?” replied the councilman. All the Gambitizi in the room gasped.

“Does he not still have honor here?” asked Raga.

“He does. But he has had accusations of him doing things against his pride. So I find it odd a Kreigan would wish to talk to him.”

“Honor begs me not to divulge the reason. Put I put in the honorable request anyway for I do not wish to disgrace Gambit.”

“The ritual has been followed, we will confer.”

It took an hour or so while they talked it over. Raga couldn't really tell why it took them so long to decide, but apparently they decided to allow it. They turned back to address him.

“You have the blessing of the law council to go and speak with Curr about a matter of honor. You will wait here at the Law building to speak to him. He may be several days in coming as by tradition we must tell the involved party in advance who wishes to see him.”

“I thank the Law Council for their generosity, I will await the meeting.”

For the next week Raga had to wait. It was not unpleasant though. Many Gambitizi's were interested in Kreigan life, and in return they told him about Gambitizi life. Some from the Kreigan consulate came and visited and gave him familiar foods and drink. In some ways it was like waiting in a hotel. Gambit prided themselves on their service. Then the wait was finally over. A female cat-like person summoned Raga to follow her. She had a nice orange coat. A female more than feline like grace. Raga felt about her more like a pet, even though they were an intelligent species. They had the features of cats walking on two legs instead of four.

Eventually he was led into a room where the infamous Curr was waiting for them. He had a hard look. He turned around to face Raga.

“You seek an audience with me?”

“Yes, I'm informed that someone in your pride is acting dishonorably. However I do not wish to outright accuse him, so I'm asking, in honor, for you to take me to him. I hear you have dealings with the IBA.”

“They have been accused of criminal activity and yet you wish to see them?”

“I have only heard they are a legitimate conglomeration of companies that do business in the galaxy. I know not of any criminal activity.”

Curr was a bit suspicious but said nothing.

“Might I know the name of this person, with whom you have accusation against?”

“Again in the interest of honor I wish it to remain secret until I can see him openly. I know you run an honorable business in the IBA. I do not wish to attack that honor by accusing he who works for you openly. In fact I mean to meet with everyone who directly works with you, so I may speak to each of them to keep his identity a secret. I wish no dishonor on you or your pride, but simply to right a wrong. If you see fit to grant me this meeting.”

Curr was getting a little nervous but again, since the forms had been observed he let it go.

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“I will think on it. Please accept my hospitality here in my wing of the Council building.”

“I accept.” Raga said humbly.

Raga was moved to this part of the building, mostly where Curr could keep an eye on him before deciding to let him meet the IBA and his cohorts. After another few days Curr came to Raga's quarters.

“I will allow you to meet with the IBA and our faction. Individually, and I will not interfere. But be careful not to dishonor those you end up meeting.”

“I will do my best not to dishonor anyone.”

This was a delicate matter, any wrong move, and he wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Raga couldn't come out in the open and accuse Curr of wrongdoing. It would seem dishonorable to outright accuse someone of hurting their pride. Plus you needed evidence, and only a Gambitzi could present it. All he had was a tablet with Claw's name on it, and a signer. He didn't even know if the signer actually signed Claw's name, but assumed it, since it was locked up in the file cabinet. He would just have to play this out carefully.

They flew to IBA headquarters on the asteroid. Raga got ready to meet the different Gambitzi that worked for Curr.

Silas was in his office on his mobile space station. He had papers rolled out on his desk, and a couple of small holo-projectors showing various locations of the USSC space stations. The USSC could function without headquarters running, it was setup so they would never be down for more than a few hours and that only if all of the stations were removed at the same time. This is why Silas had to hit all of them. He had them all laid out. He would hit them in one decisive strike. Only then could he affect his true plan. Phase two was created solely to give him time to implement Phase three. Striking at the USSC.

Silas went to his private holo-projector and called a meeting at the IBA. By now most everyone had heard that Silas ran the IBA, so he needed to be cloaked no longer. When each of the twelve seats were filled he began the meeting.

“This is it. The moment we've all been waiting for. Phase three.”

He then outlined his plan to include all major USSC space stations in their destruction. He had the explosives equipped on ships already, that would take most of the IBA's members to their designated zones. They were to demolish the space stations with their inhabitants still there. Finally he would strike back at the USSC for interfering in his work. Finally he had Lance Morgan who had been a constant thorn in his side. Finally they would all pay. They set out at once to carry out the plan. The twelve members of the IBA however still coordinated from the asteroid.

Back at the SPD communication was still out of commission. They couldn't lead a strike against Silas or the IBA without help, so they needed to restore communications as soon as possible. Alice Lawson called everyone to the conference room for instructions. Julio and Dan were noticeably absent. Al was there even though he had no reason to be. He had seen this through to this point, and Morgan was lost. He had to do anything he could to help his friend. It was odd for a bot to consider a human as a friend, but he found he did. Lance was in trouble so he was going to help as much as possible.

“I called you all here because I wanted to update you all on our situation. As we all learned today, Silas is running the IBA. He's about to institute phase three of his plan, but we don't know what that is. What we do know, is that phase two was created solely so he could implement phase three

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without much resistance. That's why it's vital we get communication up and running as soon as possible. We don't know if Silas still has ships waiting for anyone who tries to restore the communication satellites. We are just going to have to account for that eventuality. Each department head will hand out your individual assignments. We do however need volunteers to manually replace the satellites with small transceivers that must be placed on the satellites. Do we have anyone who will undertake this?"

No one spoke for a bit then Al volunteered.

"Ma'am, I realize I'm just a bot, however I now consider Lance Morgan my friend. I would like to be able to help in any way possible. I will volunteer to lead a group that will restore the communications satellites."

"Normally Al, we wouldn't let a bot take on it's own mission, however you have proven yourself by faithfully serving Morgan and us, and I would consider it an honor. You must choose your teammates quickly."

"Begging your pardon, Ma'am but I believe Julio should be allowed to accompany me. I do not believe he killed Dan. He doesn't have it in him to kill. Even for violence against a woman. True he would hurt as much as possible, but I believe Julio would not go that far."

"That is not to discuss here, we will discuss it later."

Al asked for some more recommendations, and then divided people he chose into small groups to send to some particular star system or trade route or planet. When the meeting was over, Al approached Alice.

"Director Lawson, Julio would be a great ally, he's as good as Morgan."

"I know, Al. He choked Dan though, and Dan is still unconscious. If Dan doesn't come out of hit, I'll have no choice, but to charge him with murder."

"I see. Well I will wait a little bit longer before starting out on my mission, just in case you change your mind."

Raga began questioning each of the Gambitzians on their affiliation with the IBA with their prides and so on. Eventually he came to Claw. Claw had followed Raga for quite some time and now was more than willing to speak to hm.

"So you are Claw. A mutual friend has told me about you. You need some particular items of interest, I take it."

Claw picking up on the hint. "Yes, I do. It's been a long time."

Raga started to hand over the bag to Claw. Then without warning Curr came in with his guards and grabbed a hold of both Raga and Claw.

"I should have known." said Claw.

"You were followed, you have no honor."

"You are the one with no honor, your signer is all over the work orders." Raga hoped the guards wouldn't pick up what he was saying.

"Curr, would you let a foreigner accuse me of hurting my pride?"

"Claw, I would not but the evidence speaks for itself."

This wasn't working, Claw needed some other avenue.

"Why did you simply not invoke the right of the Kul and have me change jobs, if you believe I am a traitor to our pride."

"Well since you're about ready to be executed for attacking the pride, I might as well tell you. It is much easier to accuse someone than try to remove them. Missing persons make for investigations.

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Any misstep could mean foul play. If I plant the evidence of the slave trade on you, instead of myself then you may be executed without the law interfering.”

“But I was not the one that sold members of our pride as slaves.”

“True. But I had to. You see there were others like you, wanting to speak up. Slavery is the easiest way and I get paid as well.”

“So you didn't sell some of our people as slaves.”

“Yes I did. My only mistake was not killing you earlier. But sometimes things don't always go as planned.”

That was enough.

“Confession from his own mouth. Law council, I hereby charge Curr, with the crime of selling our people into slavery, and for using that to silence them. Many have died because of this.”

A radio crackled to life somewhere on Claw's person.

“Good work Claw. We now have the evidence we need, and a confession to go with it.”

“WHAT!?” Curr screamed.

“You tricked me!”

“I simply gave you enough yarn to hang yourself with, my friend.” said Claw.

Suddenly the guards stopped and grabbed a hold of Curr.

“It is my sincere regret to label you as officially dishonored. You may serve your sentence the same way you sent many Gambitzi's to serve theirs.”

Curr growled and then used his powerful hind feet to scratch one of the other guards. He then jump up and slashed at the guard with his claws. The cat-like guard laid their unable to move. He then ran over to Claw and grabbed him, and then put his claws against Claw's neck.

“You will see me safely away, or Claw will never live to tell about my capture.”

Raga backed down. Claw and Curr went out a side corridor and then into a ship and left. Raga then took out a small locator and began to follow it. The homing signal went all over the place, around corridors, in hallways, and through automatic doors. Finally reaching one of the landing bays. Raga followed the signal there only to find the ship just taking off.

“Do not worry friend, help will be on it's way shortly.” said Raga to himself.

Raga took one of the ships in the bay. He now had to save an honorable Gambitizi from a dishonorable one. Raga took off and followed the rogue ship. Eventually catching up to it. He fired a few missiles. They simply swerved out of the way. Raga's ship took some laser blasts across the hull, just barely missing the window. Raga decided to try a proton torpedo. The energy required to launch the torpedo exhausted most of the ships resources, so he was sitting there for several minutes. He noticed that the ship took the hit, but then didn't look damaged. Taking a scan he noticed it had removed the shields. So he tried to fire on it with his lasers. The ship still too agile, swerved out of the way. Then he had a small bit of luck. Ahead of him were several comets in a cluster. The enemy ship had to swerve to stop from hitting the comets. Raga maneuvered deftly between them still trying to fire on the enemy ship. Finally he fired and scored a direct hit. This sent the enemy ship spinning into the tail of a comet, and suddenly it smashed into a small piece of space ice. The ship was disabled, and it looked like there was no life aboard.

On several different space stations, men who had worked with the IBA before this time placed explosives at strategic positions to explode when the time came. They would place bombs that looked like the D80 but were it's less effective cousins, F80's. Soon all was in readiness as all the explosives had been placed. Silas sitting in his office then pressed a button, and all the detplates lit up and read 5

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minutes 0 seconds. The whole IBA had less than five minutes to diffuse thirty or so bombs before the USSC would be permanently disabled. The clocks did not countdown however. They were waiting for something. Silas would reveal that later.

Julio was in the brig. Lawson was pacing up and down deciding on whether or not to let Julio go. Then she made her decision.

“Julio. I don't condone what you did, however, Dan Briggs is indeed alive, and that means you are indeed off the hook. However he is still unconscious. If you wish to continue working for us, you will tone down that temper.”

“Ma'am I don't normally have a temper, but when I think of Dan doing something to Gina it makes me hate him so much, I wish he were dead. That is why I stopped choking him when I did.”

“I realize why you did that. I hate all men that do that as well, but we're the law, we're not like them. We're supposed to protect and serve, not destroy and conquer.”

“Yes Ma'am, it won't happen again.”

“You better see that it doesn't. If Baxter revives, I will let him decide your punishment. For now I need you. Al has requested you help him re-establish the communications arrays. So get to work.”

“Yes Ma'am.”

Alice turned to walk away.

“And Ma'am?”

“Yes” she said turning halfway.

“Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For not immediately throwing the book at me.”

“Well there's still time.” said Alice as she left.

Chapter Twelve:

All the communications came back on. However no one could still transmit, only receive. Then the image of a cloaked figure came on screens, and holo-projectors all across the galaxy.

“Greetings citizens.” The hologram said.

“You're not doubt wondering why your communications were out. And why they suddenly came back on. Fear not, all will be revealed. You are now under control of the IBA. In a few minutes the USSC will be destroyed and my plans will be fully realized. For years the USSC has been after me. Hounding me, stopping me at every turn. Well now it's time I turn the tables on them. You see I've placed explosive devices on every space station and headquarters the USSC has. I plan to destroy the USSC to never threaten me again. But again who am I, who dares challenge the confederate star systems.”

He pulled down his hood.

“It's me Silas. That's right. I've been masterminding the IBA from day one. Now I've all but disposed of my opposition. You see I have a little secret. There is a black sheep in my family. No don't say anything yet. You see, I come from a long line of gangsters, to use a crude term. My grandfather, my father, my brother, and my other brother. That's right, two brothers. One of them you've heard about, Ajax. He's now a basket case. My other brother, the black sheep I've been telling you about, Lance Morgan. That's right, my full name is Silas Morgan. You see Lance is a goody two-

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shoes. He's been a thorn in my side ever since we were kids. Now I will destroy him along with the USSC. I will give a reprieve though. If you deliver the heads of the USSC and the SPD within five minutes, I might decide to give your bomb squads more time to diffuse my bombs. If you don't, I will start the five minute timer. So you have ten minutes total. Use them well."

With that, Silas cut the transmission. Everyone was stunned. Morgan was the brother of these two infamous cosmic criminals. They only had ten minutes, to find and disable all the bombs and then to attack Silas.

"Commence five minute pre-timer" said Silas over his intercom.

He had a watch on with the pre-timer. The pre-timer started at zero and counted up until a predetermined time, in this case five minutes. Then when it hit the five minute mark it would count back down to zero and set off the explosives. Silas took his private transport and left his mobile base.

Raga scanned the debris for signs of life. There didn't seem to be any. He figured he would wait a few minutes and then leave if no life signs showed up on his scans. Then he saw the broadcast. Now it made sense. Lance had been after his brothers for years, but couldn't catch him because they were just as good as he was. They each knew how each other thought, and this irked Lance to no end. He sat there, about ready to go, but something was holding him back. There must be life signs he thought. So he sat and waited. Soon after several minutes two faint signals appeared in his scans. Life! Not only that but Curr would be brought to justice, and Claw would go home a hero. Not to mention incriminate those in the organization. Maybe the criminal high council would be disbanded for good.

Raga towed them in, and then went aboard the enemy ship, and pulled the two cats into the ship he was using. Both were breathing heavily and had signs of singed fur. Raga trussed up Curr, and brought smelling salts for Claw. When Claw woke up at last, he felt like he had been hit by a hammer.

"What happened?"

"I had to disable the ship you were traveling in, in order to save you. Luckily you are both alive."

"The evidence, where's the evidence?" Claw said groggily.

"I brought them aboard. Is this enough for your conviction?"

"The confession was enough, but we needed the evidence to get him to confess. I thank you for your help friend."

"Do not thank me, thanks Lance Morgan. He did this for your honor. This is why I agreed to help. You see, I was caught by slavers, and eventually got them to trust me. I then used my power to help my people escape. You see we use our own honor to cover the dishonor of others. I do not think this is much different than your people."

"Well sometimes too much honor can help the wrong people, like Curr here. In any case thank you anyways."

"Now is the problem of repaying our debt to Morgan. He is being held captive by Silas. We need to find out where Silas makes his base."

"Do you think we have any equipment on this ship to track the source of that broadcast? He has taken over every communications satellite we have up, we should be able to trace the signal back to the source."

"He may have ghosted himself and made it look like he was broadcasting in all locations."

"He ran the IBA, so he may have used the same protocols. Protocols that I know well as I used to work for the IBA, well that is, I was an under cover for the Law Council on my planet."

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“Where to start?”

“We'll start with any satellite, I think we can trace from there.”

With that they took off in the direction of the nearest satellite.

“Interesting.” said Al over the comm.

“What is it?”

“After they destroyed all the communications structures, they put these little transceivers floating in place of the satellites. The same place. Let me bring it in.”

Al showed Julio the device.

“Can you reconfigure it to let all the communication go through?”

“I can do this one, and others but it will take a very long time to do them all manually. What we need is to do it remotely.”

“How can we do that?”

“I can probably find out what frequency they're broadcasting on, and override their decryption, we should then be able to broadcast a new program to them.”

“Well what are you talking to me for, let's get started!”

“Okay give me a few minutes.”

The top of Al's index finger pulled back to reveal a small screwdriver embedded in it. He opened up the little box exposing the circuitry. Then he moved some wires around soldered the connections and put it back together. Now it was emanating a low beep.

“All done.” Al said plainly.

He left the ship and then placed the transceiver back in the spot it was floating before.

“Okay, I set the transceiver to transfer this program to any beacon in range. You should now be able to communicate.”

“This is Officer Julio Martinez of the SPD badge number 3324 requesting acknowledgment from anyone that receives this.”

Nothing sounded.

“I repeat this is Officer Julio Martinez of the SPD badge number 3324, is anyone out there, over?”

After a few more minutes the radio crackled with life.

“This is Raga, son of Trolla, son of Dugg, we hear your signal human. I also have Claw of the Kultak pride on Gambit here with me. May we be of assistance?”

“Sir, that was part of Morgan's mission. I was to keep the information secret until the time that he said it was ok, or until a Gambitzi visited me.”

“I guess we let them aboard?”

“Yes sir.”

Julio let the aboard and then they spoke briefly about what they were trying to do.

“We believe Lance is being held by Silas, but do not know how to find his mobile base. It's has a cloaking device and moves from place to place. It's nearly impossible to get a fix. We were going to attempt to trace the broadcast back to it's source.”

“I believe I can help gentlemen. No doubt he's going to try ghosting himself. We need to narrow down the possible choices. We know he has to be in range of the IBA, so that puts us in a radius of 700 light meters. So we start here.” Al pointed to a holomap.

Soon all four of them left on the Swan headed for that point that Al suggested. If they were going to affect a rescue of Lance. They had better do it quick.

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Lance was fully rested. He sat up. He had been sleeping with his head on Dana's lap for hours now. He was even looking better. Now he was ready try an escape. They didn't have much to work with. Laser bars a palette to sleep on without any springs or anything they could take out and use. No mirror, nothing to break. He had to find a way to break the beams without alerting the guards. Lance started looking around the walls, any exposed pipes or wires. There didn't seem to be much. There was a small access panel that he pulled off with his hands for some effort. He saw a bunch of wires and started pulling them and reconnecting them in odd configurations. Dana kept looking at him strangely.

“What are you trying to do?”

He ignored her and continued trying different combinations, It only seemed to make the palette shake and drop and go in and out of the wall. Then he went back to the lasers. He ripped off part of his already torn sleeve and put them into the laser bars, which immediately disintegrated. He stood on top of the palette now and tried to feel along the ceiling.

“What are you trying to do?” she asked in a raised voice.

“Trying to find a way out of here. If only I could find something to shut those lasers down, I think we could get out of here.”

He was still looking at the ceiling when Dana fished out something from within in shirt.

“Would this help?” she asked.

He looked at her.

“It's my compact.”

“Where did that come from?” He asked trying to hide a smirk.

“A girl has gotta have some secrets. This also has a communicator in it.”

“Why didn't you use it before to ask for help?”

“It wasn't transmitting or receiving and I don't know why.”

“Try to call for help now.”

She did so but there was no answer. She then flipped open a small panel on the bottom, and noticed a few lights.

“Well it's working, there's just no one in range.”

“Well what if we take it apart and see if we can't use it against the bars?”

“Well we won't be able to communicate if you take it apart and can't put it back together.”

“Don't worry, I can put anything back together” he smiled.

He proceeded to take it apart laying each of the pieces on the floor. He picked up the exposed circuit board, and started fiddling with it. He began moving things around on the board.

“I think I got it.” He said.

Then there was a loud explosion and he noticed that the bars were off and that there was smoke from the edges of the opening.

“How did you...?”

“I used the mirror silly. I figured they would burn themselves out if I just used the mirror to reflect the beam back onto itself and it just fried. Apparently the whole door was tied into that one beam. They were free. Then suddenly the alarms went off. Apparently burning out cell lasers trips an alarm. They started to open the other cells to get everyone else out.

The huge armored freighter was slowly trudging through space. Ever since the communications breakup they assumed they were still on orders to rendezvous with space dock. The freighter was more

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of a battle wagon than a freighter. It was armed to the teeth, lasers, proton torpedoes, missiles, even gun turrets on the top and bottom. It was slow to move, but could hold its own in a fight if left unprotected. The freighter had USSC markings on it. It carried an escort of three large frigates and two corvettes fully armed. It also carried a full squadron of twenty-four USSC Corsair-V light fighters. It was certain that this ship was carrying something important. They were to head to the star docks to test a new secret kind of stealth fighter.

The commander of the escort stood on the bridge of one of the frigates looking at the view screens. Suddenly a ship uncloaked, it was Silas's transport, and with it were several small fighters. The commander was curious about what kind of ship would dare to attack and armored transport like this. Then something else uncloaked. Essentially it was a huge cannon. There wasn't much room for engines and the shells were huge, so there had to be a lot of support from the structure, robotic arms to move the shells into position.

Apparently Silas had gotten his hands on an Armageddon cannon. There were only a few made, and few left around as they had a tendency to blow up. The cannon being too big for the structure holding it. Silas didn't care. He usually did not kill unless he had to, but he felt this was the necessary risk. Everyone he commanded on the cannon would be dead once this thing fired. Silas had to get at that fighter, and he needed a sizable force to seize it. Unfortunately his men and ships were being used elsewhere, so he had to use this.

“Fire” he said over the comm.

And fire it did. It fired a huge burst of energy and consumed the little bit that powered the thing. But one burst is all it needed. It ripped through the freighter like it was tin foil. Silas was just lucky it hadn't damaged the ship inside. The ship was very sleek, black and didn't appear to have any openings. The collateral damage was to the surrounding frigates and corvettes. It was enough to disable them. The small fighter Silas had with him sprung into action. Taking out the Corsair's at a rate of two to one. Silas's group had an elite fighting force.

Silas ship few close to the opened freighter. There was one corvette that still had working guns. It turned about to aim its guns at Silas's ship. Then Silas docked with the sleek ship and disappeared inside as the corvette's guns ripped his personal transport in half. Then the new sleek craft maneuvered sideways neatly out of the hole.

“Let's see what she can do.”

He pressed a button and several large energy blasts came out of seemingly somewhere out of the front of the ship. It destroyed the corvette neatly. The remaining USSC fighters tried to fire on him but his shields only absorbed the energy. Then the whole ship seemed to be bathed in energy that slid off the front of it, like water, and completely obliterated any traces of anything in its path. This was the thing Silas was waiting for. His whole plans were for this fighter. And now that he had it he was invincible.

He made a call from the ship to his floating base.

“You are to resist until the very end, I must have time to get away.”

The same exact voice came back to him in reply.

“It will be done as you said.”

Raga, Claw, Julio and Al were moving in the swan to where they traced the signal of the broadcast. They were in open space and saw nothing.

“This is where the signal ends.” said Al.

“I believe Silas uses a moving platform, unfortunately I do not know where that is. That's how

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he remained hidden all this time.”

“Cindy, love, would you make some calculations for us?”

“Sure thing, babe.”

Raga and Claw looked at Julio who shrugged.

“Claw, do you know how fast this mobile station moves?” asked Al.

“Not very fast except when it bends space.”

Claw told CND an estimate of the speed, and to his knowledge when and where the ship pops up.

“Well guys”, said CND, “I think it show up just about... there!”

Out of empty space materialized a huge space station of a ship. When Claw said mobile space station he wasn't kidding. This thing was HUGE.

“Wow, Cindy, you're very, very good.” said Julio.

“Thanks, you're such a doll.” CND replied.

“Okay guys we're going to go into this thing right.”

“Right” said Claw.

“Correct” said Raga.

“Indeed” said Al.

“Except one problem we don't have any real weapons. I mean we would need a whole armory.”

“Or a pass code?” said Claw.

“That's right you were here before, weren't you?”

“Actually I was at the IBA which is some sort of asteroid. However if I give the pass code to Al, maybe he can use it to hack into the mobile platform.”

“Well it's tough, I've never cracked a really tough encryption key, but I could give it a shot.”

“How very un-bot-like for you Al” said Julio.

“Well we're out of options, so I will try. Cindy patch me through to their system. I will need to interface with you I think.”

“Al, not in front of people.”

“Come on now dear, it's not like you haven't interfaced with people watching before. Besides this is professional. We need to save Lance, and potentially the galaxy.”

“Alright. Plug in. Guys umm cover your eyes for a moment.”

Raga, Claw, and Julio looked at each other again.

“Please?” CND pleaded.

They each shrugged and closed their eyes. Al plugged himself into her console.

“Okay you can open them now.”

Claw gave Al the code and the frequency and he started to compute. CND started moving toward the space station. Soon some fighters came by.

“Identify yourself rogue ship, or else I will be forced to destroy you.”

They moved closer.

“Identify.”

Closer still, and the fighter shot one across their bow but it did not really hurt them.

“Al?” they all said at once.

“Working on it, there's something difficult here.”

They were so close they could tell the fighters were powering up their weapons.

“GOT IT!”

Suddenly the fighters veered away.

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“You're cleared to dock. What was the problem anyways, you know we could have blasted you.”

“Sorry guys, I was having troubles with my computer.” said Al in a strange accent.

“Well have that looked at as soon as you're docked. Silas hates wasting resources.”

“Will do.”

They glided the ship into the docking bay and landed. Then they got out.

“Be careful babe” said CND.

“I will dear.” replied Al.

The guys didn't even bother to give a look this time. They deferred to Al who led them through corridors and rooms.

“I think they're in this room. It looks like a brig, but I can't tell by just a schematic and my senses. I would have to interface with their computer and Cindy wouldn't like that very much.”

“That alarm doesn't sound too friendly.” said Julio. Officers were running all over the place.

The turned a corner and ran into Lance, Trolla, Dana, Phanta, and Cert. When Raga saw Trolla everyone got quiet. The both had grim faces. The Raga walked up to his father and slugged him real hard in the shoulder. Trolla grunted and then grabbed his shoulders and head butted his son. The others didn't know what to make of it.

“Father.”

“Son. I have been searching forever for you. I am a criminal and have no honor.”

“You're wrong father, you have great honor. And I know when all of this is done you will take whatever punishment is meted to you, as the honorable way.”

“You're wise. I hear you have been covering the honor of others. I heartily approve.”

“Al! Julio!” Lance laughed. He shook both of their hands.

“How've you been?”

“I'm just fine sir. Cindy is on our new ship, I don't know if you got to see it. She's not battle friendly but she does very well as transportation. Plus Cindy likes her new body.” said Al.

“I'm doing alright Lance. But I have something terrible to tell you. It's about Dan. He's turned traitor. He gave the last plate piece back to Silas and endangered Gina you know down in forensics. I also figure I should be the one to tell you that I nearly killed Dan for what he did to Gina. He's still unconscious though.”

Lance looked a little sad, and angry.

“But Dan, how could he?”

“He also poisoned the Chief.”

“That doesn't sound like the Dan I know.”

“It's true. I will show you the recordings when we get back. I just didn't want you to find out from someone else.”

“Well no time for sorrow, we need to get out of here.”

They sirens got louder. A guard showed up at the brig and saw them there standing. He got out his gun then looking at Trolla, Raga, and Claw promptly decided to make a call on the wall panel behind him.

“The prisoners are escaping, they have several in their party now, I need several squads.”

Trolla grunted at the man who ran down the hall falling over himself. Raga gave a snort. To Kreigans this was as big as laughing out loud. Trolla snorted in reply. The started running down the hallway, and soon came to an intersection. Several squads were converging on them. They tried to get out their guns but fumbled them, some dropped, some guns were caught in their holsters. Trolla picked

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up one guard and threw him into the others that send them falling down like bowling pins. Raga grabbed four from the face with each hand, hoisted them up off their feet and threw them into the remaining officers. Phanta, Cert, and Al knocked several soldiers on the floor. The humans just stayed out of the fight as they made their way to the docking bay.

The walked out, and then a ship came in front of them. Black, smooth, and sleek, with no visible openings. Dana recognized it.

“THAT'S WHAT SILAS WAS AFTER!”

The ship powered up and the gang dove out of the way. The thing put a whole in the back of the bay, showing pipes and girders and wires. A bit of debris fell from the edges of the new hole.

“Let's move. This thing is indestructible, can move anywhere in space in an instant, and can fire while cloaked. Now let's go people!” Dana shouted.

They all ran toward the Swan. The stealth fighter was turning to bear down on them. It started powering up. Everyone dove into the Swan.

“Cindy, get this thing moving, or you won't be around anymore.” Yelled Lance.

“Well hello to you too handsome.” she said indignantly.

“You see that shiny new fighter out there?”

“Yes” replied CND.

“It's about to vaporize this new body of yours.”

“Gotcha.”

The Swan fired up and moved out the way before the shot hit them. She took off as fast as she could and then left the mobile platform. She then fired up her Flexdrive and bended space.

While all this happened the SPD had received another transmission.

“Five minutes are up, and now you have less than five minutes to disarm all of those bombs.”

Once Al had restored communications, the Bureau coordinated efforts with the different departments and divisions. SPD units of all the member systems of the USSC were involved. There were hundreds of technicians all ready to disarm each bomb, on the USSC stations. The clock counted down.

Hobbes jumped up.

“Director Lawson, Director Lawson” He ran into her office.

“I just got... it... they're on the line.”

“Who” she asked?

“All of them! They say they have news!”

“Patch them through to my office here.”

“This is Morgan. Director, I hear you've been wanting to talk to me?”

“You're under arrest.”

“For what? Finding what's behind this plot, and the fact that Silas is the head of the IBA and that he masterminded his whole scheme for stealing a certain top secret stealth fighter.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” she said.

“Let me talk to her.” Dana said to Lance.

“Director Alice Lawson. My name is Dana Larkin, excuse me,” she said looking at Lance.

“Dana Larkin-Morgan, under USSC Intelligence Directorate. This is priority alpha classified information. What my husband is trying to tell you is true. I was sent as an under-cover operative to work for Ajax, so I could get close to Silas and learn his plans. My instructions were to use whatever

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means I thought possible to get the information. So I utilized these individuals to help me secure the information. Lance Morgan, Julio Martinez, Trolla, Raga, Claw of the Kultak Pride, Phanta and Cert were all working for me. You can contact the Regent if you want confirmation on this.”

“Oh I will, you can count on that. I want you all back here right away.”

“We'll be happy to, but we are under no circumstances to be arrested or kept against our will. We will cooperate in any way possible, but you will not override my authority. Is that clear?!”

“Okay. Just one moment.”

Alice pushed the hold button.

“Hobbes, I want you to confirm this. Use my private line to the USSC.”

Hobbes pressed a button on her desk and typed a few things in the keypad.

“Ma'am, it appears to be correct. I guess you're going to have to accept that.”

“Let me look at that” she said as she pushed Hobbes out of the way.

She turned hold off. “I-I'm sorry I doubted you, I will be happy to assist you in any way possible.”

She scowled at Hobbes.

The clock was ticking and it was down to three minutes. Bomb squads moved in. They approached each explosive carefully. Attempting to disarm it. They were so well crafted that no one could diffuse them, and still the clock ticked on. It was now two minutes. Some of the explosives were attached to the structure in a way that couldn't be removed without removing the structure. It was no guarantee that they could get all the bombs out. They removed as many as they could and set them onto empty garbage scows. Now the clock was at 1 minute. They were all trying their best to remove or disarm explosives. Then the clock was at ten seconds, then nine, then, it counted down and finally it hit 1 and zero. Then Detonate flashed on the screen and all that happened was a puff of smoke shot out of each explosive. The bomb squads and back up officers flinched. Then everyone started laughing, and then cheering. They were alive. This was all a rouse!

“Miss Lawson! The explosives were all a diversion! None of them exploded!” The whole precinct cheered!

Lance, Dana, Julio, Al, Raga, Trolla and Claw, Phanta, and Cert returned to the SPD. They all went to the conference room. When everyone was in there Alice started talking.

“Everything in this room is classified Alpha Top Secret. This information doesn't leave this room. Even though Silas didn't blow up all of those USSC stations, he's still a dangerous man. It looks like he was after the USSC's top secret stealth fighter. This makes him very dangerous. It's made of a composite that is currently impenetrable by current weapons. It fires an energy discharge from it's hull that's incredibly damaging. Possibly as dangerous as an Armageddon cannon, but with none of the side effects. With the information brought back by our Intelligence Directorate agent and confessions of the criminal Rit we can now send strike teams to the IBA headquarters, and find Silas's mobile platform. Hopefully to destroy them. We still want to recover the stealth fighter, and we want to capture Silas alive. Lance will head up the strike team that will attack the mobile platform. Those of you that are assigned to Morgan's team will cover him as he attempts to board the mobile platform. Once in side Morgan will attempt to find and arrest Silas and then will attempt to commandeer the stealth fighter. Julio will lead the team that will attack the IBA asteroid, his only instructions to destroy the IBA headquarters. You all have your assignments on your desk, go to your strike leader if you have any questions. Good luck people.”

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People were making preparations to leave. Julio went down to forensics to talk to Gina.

“You think when all of this is over, we could go on a date? We could even chaperoned by anyone you like?”

“Well, this may be your last mission, and I may never see you alive again. So I'm going to throw all caution to the wind and say yes!”

She kissed him lightly on the lips.

“Let's just consider that a sample.” she said winking.

“Don't worry, I won't rush things. I'll come back for that date now.” Julio remarked and then turned away.

“Julio?” she asked.

He turned back around and she ran and put her arms around him.

“Take care of yourself!”

He then walked away and couldn't see the tears in her eyes.

Trolla and Raga were talking things over. Raga found new respect when he found out his father had looked for him, and how he acted honorably considering his crimes.

“Father, you will die with honor if it's your fate. But I wish to see you alive so you may fulfill your duty to pay for your crimes. Be safe, and take quarter from no one.”

“Son you too are most honorable, and I will fulfill duty. I believe I will not see you again after the battle. But know I will always remember until my death.”

They gave each other an endearing punch on the shoulder, and left. Raga went with Claw.

Al was at the Swan overseeing her armaments.

“Cindy, no longer will you be defenseless. These are the top weapons and shields available. Nothing is too good for my girl.”

“Thanks Al, you're sweet. You know I do wish I had a body like yours, well you know female, so I could be with you all the time.”

“I know, maybe when this is all over I can get Elroy to build you a real bot body.”

“That would be great!”

Lance walked up overhearing part of the conversation.

“Al? You and Cindy?”

“Uhh, yes sir. If it's a problem...?”

“It's not a problem... for a human!”

“But sir, I'm not... well I act human, even though I know I'm not. I don't know sir, what makes life sentient? Is it just the way we respond to others? I don't know. I do know that I'm a different person now that I know you and Cindy.”

“Well you just called yourself a person, and that's good enough for me. Al I want to give you your freedom before anything happens. I consider you as good a friend as any of the humans I've known. From here on out you can do whatever you want, whenever you want. If you want to stay behind, you may, if you want to get in a fighter then I'll see to it. What do you say?”

Lance held out his hand.

“Friends” said Al as he shook it.

“I will of course go with you, as that is my choice. As my own person.”

Dana caught up to them.

“Are we ready to go?” she asked.

“Just as soon as Trolla and Cert get here.”

“I am here, Morgan. One thing you must do is to protect me as I am sworn to protect you by

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honor. Only if I'm alive will I be able to serve my sentence. And I would be dishonored if I was not allowed to do that.”

“Don't worry about that Trolla, you've proven yourself more than honorable.”

Phanta and Cert were at Julio's ship.

“I don't want to split up, but I feel we must. They need our expert abilities, and we can transfer information. We may be physically separated, but emotionally, and mentally we will always be linked.” said Cert.

“I waited so long to find you. I do not wish to be separated in any way. Can't I just come with you, or you with me?”

“They need us, don't worry you'll find me again. I won't die.”

“Make sure you return to me, my love. I cannot bear it when we are separated.” They embraced warmly.

Cert then kissed her with his human half, although it wasn't complete, they shared something that no one else could share. A feeling of connection, electricity, that most people can't experience. Then they parted. This was much worse than the other time. Cert could feel her sadness and could tell her crying.

The blackness of space spread out before him like a blanket, except for the little green spot ahead of him. Soon the green spot grew bigger and bigger until finally the planet filled the whole view screen. He observed the how the stars aligned precisely to the map when light was shown through. The map wasn't in any way ambiguous. It showed a clear line of what star to move to in a dotted line until the destination filled the view. He set the stealth craft down on the green planet. When he got out he noticed it was windy and dusty. And everything was green. Every rock, every bit of sand. The sky, even his stealth fighter was a dark green. It was as if he were looking through emerald spectacles. Now the only problem was, where from this position was the artifact?

He held up a copy of the map but couldn't see any other indication of where the artifact would be. He turned around in a circle completely and couldn't figure it out. Then he started turning it on each of the four sides. Finally he saw it. Peaks off in the distance aligning to the holes or the star points that led him here. He decided to walk, and it was a long walk. Finally he got to the base of the mountains then he looked around. He didn't see anything that would indicate where to go next. Then he turned the map another way and the point aligned to the openings in the rocks. He followed the opening as far as it would go. Now he was in a narrow rock cleft. He didn't see anything at first, then he noticed a slot. It looked more natural than a man made slot. He pulled out the three pieces of the actual map from his coat. He merely used the copy so he could manipulate it. Holding it together he slipped it in.

At first nothing happened and then the ground started rumbling. Dust and rocks rained down. And then where the map slipped in a hole opened up. It wasn't very deep, but in the hole sat a small black box. He pulled the box out. He tried to open it but it wouldn't open. He shook it several times and tried to open it again with no luck. Then he decided to just take it with him and try to open it later, once he was off the planet. He walked back to the ship and took off. He had the artifact, this box, but could not open it. He would figure out how to do that when he returned to his mobile station.

Chapter Thirteen:

Julio's strike team consisted of six squadrons of light fighters, Corsairs, four squadrons of

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medium class Cavaliers, and two squadrons of heavy class Cutlass's. Each squadron consisted of 24 fighters. Nearly three hundred fighters, and they would need every one of them to fight against the organized crime of the galaxy. Several destroyers, battle cruisers, and corvettes were sent to back them up. Mostly they were to set up cover fire so that none of the IBA's fighters would get away. It was meant to box them in.

At the last minute, Claw asked for his own medium classed fighter, so he could personally take care of Curr and anyone who worked for him. The honor of his pride was at stake and he needed to confront them one on one to make it a fair fight. Only Curr and his minions would never fight fair. That's the one thing that separated Claw from Curr. Claw would die protecting his pride. Curr would not.

Lance's strike team consisted of twenty squadrons of medium classed fighters. Those who's speed was slower than a light fighter, faster than a heavy fighter. Less armament than a heavy fighter but more than a light fighter. He only had two battle cruisers escorting him. He carried more fighters with him than Julio's team, but not as many heavy war frigates. Only having two battle cruisers worked on the enemy's subconscious. After a certain amount of fighters filled in space, you couldn't count them anymore. That gave them the advantage that the enemy didn't know how many fighters they had. With only two heavy ships that bolstered the confidence of the enemy further because they would figure on a superior fighting force. The enemy would under estimate them and lose plenty of fighters along the way.

When the enemy forces were whittled down far enough Lance would board the mobile platform. Attempt to find and apprehend Silas, and take back the stealth fighter. Since the fighter belonged to the USSC, Dana volunteered to take the vehicle. She and Lance would enter together in the Swan. Al and Trolla would follow. Once Dana got the stealth fighter and Lance had Silas, Lance would leave the Swan to Al and Trolla. Dana would take Lance with Silas in the stealth fighter and fly it home to a USSC star base. At least if it all went according to plan.

Silas was in his war room on the mobile platform. He addressed his commanders and the IBA via holographic projection.

“The USSC is going to throw everything they have at us, but this is the only time we will get of destroying law and order in the galaxy. Think of it. We can then control every illicit business out in the open, without fear of reprisal. This is our time. If you win you will have the riches of any star system you desire. A reputation with others of our chosen profession that is second to none. People will fear and respect you. You will be able to control people with the power you will receive once we win.”

Silas was laying it on thick. He knew that he must gain support of all his men, and that they wouldn't chicken out at the last minute.

“Now then, my commanders here will deploy with five squadrons of fighters each. Ravens with heavy weapons. Each will protect a side of the mobile platform here. My platform doesn't carry any heavy battle cruisers, but the fighters will be enough. On the other hand the Asteroid has plenty of heavy ships. And thirty squadrons of light, medium, and heavy fighters. Just remember the riches and you will be victorious.”

He ended the speech there. Everyone started running to their ships. Most of the fighters that worked for Silas were cocky and too sure of themselves. They would eventually find themselves dead and Silas new it. He didn't care however because he was sure he could beat the USSC. Plus he had the stealth fighter, which he would be sure to use, not just let it sit in the hanger.

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Ussc and SPD fighters ran to their ships. Some of them knew they would die. Some didn't have very much confidence either, but knew if they didn't make a stand here now it would mean lawlessness for the galaxy. Innocent people dying. People getting disease. People falling more into debt than they ever had before. Crime would be rampant, and no one would be around to protect the innocent. Some took solace in the fact that their sacrifice would help protect the lives and freedoms of others. A mass of fighters left their bases. Most of the SPD followed Julio's strike team. The USSC fighters followed Lance and his team.

Finally Lance came upon the mobile battle station as it reappeared. The ships stuck to a holding pattern and wouldn't engage until Lance gave the word. Julio's forces came upon the asteroid in the blank area of space where it was located. Hundreds of enemy ships came out to meet them. Nobody would engage as if daring the other to take the first shot. Then more ships came out. Many more squadrons came out to face Julio than they had originally anticipated. The also had several corvettes and battle cruisers. Julio was outnumbered, still no one fired a shot.

“Lance...” Julio said over the comm.

“Yeah?”

“There are a lot more fighters and heavy ship than we had first anticipated. We're outnumbered I don't know how many to one.”

“Just do what you can. Try to separate groups, and let others come in to snipe them.”

“No one is moving now, it's like they're all waiting for something. I mean we're supposed to go after them, but what if you know you're outnumbered and they won't fire?”

“They know you won't fire unless fired upon, but someone always gets an itchy trigger finger, just tell your men to relax and not worry about it. Let the enemy sweat out the first few minutes.”

“Whatever you say, man. I've never commanded a strike team before.”

“We've never stood up to as big of a criminal organization as this before either. It will work out. Keep safe Julio.”

“You too man.”

Julio's strike team was still waiting when suddenly there were three Armageddon Cannons moved out into the front of the enemy fighters. Oh great, Julio thought, just what we need. At least they'll destroy themselves once they fire. Then the cannons started powering up.

“Everyone get out of the way of those cannons. Once they fire they'll destroy themselves in doing it.”

Julio's ships were now trying to part out of the way of the cannons until they formed two columns. When the cannons fired the ships were still moving out of formation and several got destroyed. Then the cannons powered up again. They were supposed to be destroyed once they were fired!

“They must have fixed that little flaw. Everyone take evasive action!” he yelled.

“Go after the cannon operators that's the first priority, or we won't have any fighters left to mount any other attacks”

Soon Julio's fighters began engaging the cannon operators, which gave cue to the IBA's fighters to come in and start destroying ships. The big ships were exchanging fire with the large IBA frigates.

“Groups A and B follow me, we need to take out their launch bays!”

Julio and the few squads with him went towards the asteroid, to stop them from launching

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anymore fighters. Fighters were still coming out as the battle started getting up steam. Julio fired on the bay. Only to be chased by two fighters coming out. There was an explosion as one of Julio's fighters destroyed one of the chasing fighters.

"Thanks, but I'd appreciate it if you could remove the other as well!"

"Sure thing boss" said one of the pilots. Finally the other one was destroyed as well.

"Okay we need to concentrate our fire on the cannons, we'll deal with the fighters once the heavy artillery is gone."

Several hundred ships converged on each of the cannons. It wasn't hard to destroy the operators of the cannons but enemy ships kept drawing fighters away. When some were drawn away, some more would take its place. Soon there was some progress.

"One is down!" a pilot yelled.

The cannon was smoking from the operators side. Then Julio's fighters converged on the second one as more enemy fighters poured out of the asteroid. Then it went down. Then they converged on the third one, and it went down, but not before firing off a shot which tore through one of Julio's large ships. One of the corvettes.

Meanwhile Lance's team engaged the mobile platform almost immediately. It might disappear again, so he had to strike fast. Initially they attacked the base itself, staying away from the fighters. Several fighters were destroyed in the process, but they slowed down the launch of enemy fighters.

"Okay we need to destroy one side at a time. Concentrate on the front here before going to the side."

All the ships converged and it was a blur of laser fire, explosions, and smoke. Soon both sides were whittled down to two-thirds their original number. Finally the last one was destroyed. Then ships from the sides came in to join the battle in front.

"Go for their commanders, you should be able to tell that their ships are different than the normal fighters."

Lance did just that, he spotted a commander and decided to chase him. The ship whipped around going all over the place just to shake lance. The suddenly the Swan got it from behind.

"The nerve!" yelled CND as she swung the ship around and fired at the fighter destroying it.

"That was very inappropriate behavior!" CND declared.

Lance had to just smile. She was pretty much all woman sans flesh and blood. Then he took the ship into the thick of it again, getting several enemy ships. The fighters dropped numbers on both sides, and soon the sides were thinning out. Then they started to turn back to their flanks. People were starting to cheer over their comms.

"Don't get too confident."

But the fighters wouldn't listen. Then out of the bay came the stealth fighter.

"See? What did I say? Stay out of its path, it has an energy weapon that means business, and we don't have anything that can penetrate its hull. We can only wait."

The stealth fighter started to charge its weapon, then let forth a full blast destroying more of Lance's men. Lance tried to draw it away by firing on it, but the stealth fighter never seemed to notice. Then it started popping out and then back in. It was there one minute then in another place another minute. It began attacking Lance's fighters in this manner. They could only hope to veer off.

"It's gotta stop and refuel sometime doesn't it?" He asked Dana rhetorically.

"I'm going to see if I can try to draw its fire."

He opened comms.

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“I don't want anyone to try to follow me. You are the last line of defense so I'm going to try and draw it's fire, at least then you can deal with those other fighters.”

He shut off comms and then fired a missile at the stealth fighter. The missile pushed on the fighter a little but did not damage it. It didn't even mar it's smooth black finish. After Lance had expended most of his missiles, the ship finally turned to start firing on him. Lance flew away from the other fighters to give them a chance to destroy more enemy fighters. Lance's fighters were down to about one-third their original size.

Julio was getting beat. The big ships were mostly destroyed, and he was down to a handful of fighters. They had destroyed at least half the enemy forces, and the landing bays were damaged beyond launch capability. At least on a massive scale. Several ships chased Julio and his ship around the asteroid, then he broke left and they came into a group of Julios ships and were destroyed. But just as soon enemy fighters came and destroyed them.

“It's been a pleasure serving with you guys. All I can say is keep up the good fight. We're fighting for the freedom of the galaxy, and you're the only line of defense. I'd like to name off a few honorable pilots who gave their lives so we can remember them always. Please have your recorders on for this list.”

Julio continued by naming off several hundred names. He had been keeping tally of all his downed pilots. He did not one of their names to be forgotten for their sacrifice.

“If we're going to go out, we're going to go out in st...”. A beeping cut him off.

“What's that?” he asked as he cut comms for a second.

Raga showed him his transmitter.

“Support.”

Suddenly empty space filled with thousands of ships. Half were Kreigan in their familiar fish-like shapes, and half were Gambitzi with feline curves. They had support of both the Kreigan and Gambitzi home worlds!

“Where'd they come from?!?” asked Julio excitedly.

“Claw and I made calls to our respective home planets for support. We weren't sure they would agree. But once we told them honor was involved they decided in the councils. The IBA has dishonored both of our races with enslavement, that's a thing one ought not to do.”

“I'll remember that next time, you don't want to be enemies with the Kreig or the Gambitzi.” said Julio emphatically.

“Indeed. May I use the comm to talk to the support forces?” agreed Raga.

“By all means.”

Raga pressed a few buttons.

“We thank you for coming. Please assist us in destroying these remaining ships. Please do not destroy the asteroid, Claw has a debt to settle with Curr, so we must give him time.”

The Kreigan and Gambitzi commanders gave their consent.

Claw was flying in his SPD issue fighter and headed into the damaged launch bay, clearance was too low and the ship hit some debris which caused it to crash throwing Claw violently on his console. He woke up a few seconds later and he was bleeding. He popped the canopy and managed to get out and then headed toward the conference room. When he got there, no one was there except Curr.

“So you finally got tired of playing with yarn, have you?” said Curr insolently. Playing with yarn meant you were still a cub, but Claw was no cub. He was fully adult and out for blood.

“You've dishonored our pride for the last time.” Claw said plainly and then lunged at Curr with

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his claws extended.

Claw knocked Curr out of his chair and the two were rolling around on the floor, punching each other sometimes and clawing at the others. Curr managed to get on top and started batting Claw's head like a mouse. Claw got his hind feet under him and pushed off knocking Curr to the floor. Claw then turned over and got up.

“We couldn't arrest you because you didn't hurt the pride. Well it looks like you were a little too greedy. Once you started enslaving our people you had made your last mistake. I spent months working for you just to get some evidence. Now finally we have it. Too bad you won't be around for the trial.”

Claw was intent on killing Curr. Claw would not be charged for it. Anyone that hurts the pride is subject to immediate execution.

“You don't have the strength to kill me.”

Then he leaped up and knocked Claw down slashing at his throat with his claws. Claw was bleeding now, he would die soon, but not until he took care of Curr. With a last bit of strength Claw pushed Curr off of him. Then got down on all fours as is natural for a cat and lunged for Currs throat. Claw was on him, his teeth deep in Curr's neck. Curr sneered and then his eyes went wide and he died. Claw got up on two legs and then walked away as Currs blood poured out on the floor. Claw struggled back to his ship. He picked up the comm and talked into it.

“This is Claw of the Kultak pride. If anyone is out there please find me. I am dying and I wish to die honorably than in this death trap.”

Julio's ship landed in the bay just short of the low clearance. He walked through rubble over to a destroyed SPD fighter.

“Claw?”

“Right... Here...” he gasped.

Julio ran to him and held him up as best he could. Raga rushed to his other side.

“It's all right Claw, old friend, we will carry you to your people.”

“No, Raga, it is my wish that my dead body be given as a gift to your people to be buried in the style of your choosing. So all may know that the Gambitzi died for the Kreig. I would also like a gift of one of your dead to bury in a style of our choosing. This is the way we secure friends in death.”

“So be it friend.”

They ambled slowly toward Julio's ship.

“Lance” the comm crackled.

“Go ahead, Julio.”

“We've taken the asteroid. We will send support to you as soon as we can. We have some new friends as well.”

“Great work! I still have to apprehend Silas. Will get back to you when I've successfully accomplished my mission. Morgan out.”

The stealth fighter had to go back in to Silas's space station to recharge. Lance used him as a cover and flew the Swan in toward the mobile platform. He encountered a few enemy ships but dispatched them easily and then flew into the landing bay. Everyone got out.

“Take care, honey” said CND to AI.

“Don't worry I'll be back before you can say integrated circuit!”

“Okay here's how it works me and AI will go after Silas. Dana will take Cert and they will attempt to commandeer the stealth fighter. Be careful everyone, this isn't over yet!”

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Dana and Cert went toward the place they saw the stealth fighter go into. Part of the bays were damaged in the initial assault, so they had to pick their way through. They came upon some guards who decided to engage them. Dana took on a male about her size. The male tried to pull out his gun but Dana kicked it out of his hand. She then did a round house kick and knocked him down. He got back up and tried to grab her neck. She put her arms in the way the head butted him. Both fell back because it hurt! Cert was fighting a rather large guard, but it seemed more evenly matched when Cert's bot half was doing the work. He kicked the guy in the crotch and that sent the guy sprawling over in pain. Then an explosion rocked the bay and some beams fell on their enemies. Dana and Cert had to find another way to the stealth fighter.

Lance and Al walked down some hallways, they remembered when they were here last. Al did a scan to reveal a human life form in Silas's office, so they headed there and then soon confronted him. With the box in front of him.

"I've been expecting you Lance Morgan."

Lance looked at the box.

"Yes, that's the artifact alright. Unfortunately for me I can't open the thing."

"You're coming with us."

"Oh I doubt that very much."

"Rit?"

Rit stepped out from the doorway.

"How did you? Wait a minute, simulant?"

"No. Actually what you have locked up is Rit's twin brother. The real Rit has been here the whole time. It's a shame really, Rit's brother was useful at times, but no matter."

Rit took out a device and pointed it at Al. Al suddenly shut down and stopped moving.

"And now to shut you off, for good."

Silas took out a gun and Lance leaped over the table and wrestled Silas to the ground. He then punched him out. Silas laid unconsciously on the floor. Rit came over and turned Al back on again.

"This will count towards my sentence, I hope."

"Don't worry Rit, it will. The thing I want to know is, how did Silas fall for that twin brother bit?"

"Oh I actually do have a twin brother, but I haven't seen him for a while now. Silas knows him so I just convinced him you had caught him. Let's go. If you don't resist here either that may count in your favor as well."

Lance picked up the box, and Al picked up Silas and slung him over his shoulder. They picked their way back to the Swan.

Dana and Cert had found the ship. They looked inside and found no one.

"Okay I guess we see if we can take this puppy out."

It had sufficiently recharged and they climbed in and closed the canopy.

"Lance, we've secured the stealth fighter, we're heading out."

"Okay, be careful. Hey I have an idea, why not use the energy weapon against some of Silas's own ships, that should put them off balance."

"Will do"

They took off. And Lance started to climb in, then Al, and suddenly there was an energy blast and Trolla looked at himself he was bleeding. Silas had woken up and had a concealed weapon. Lance punched him again and grabbed the weapon.

"Trolla. I'm sorry." said Lance.

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“No time for that, Lance Morgan. Don't tell my son I died dishonorably. Say anything but that.”

Lance had a hard time holding up such a big creature.

“But, you will. This is not any more dishonorable than dying in battle. You died to save all of us. That is the highest honor of all.”

For the first time ever Trolla smiled. Then he died. Al put Silas in the Swan and then helped Lance put Trolla in. Lance had tears in his eyes. They launched into a fire storm as enemy fighters were fighting USSC fighters. Lance didn't seem to notice. Trolla had become his friend. The stealth fighter was now firing energy pulses at enemy ships. When Lance had finally come to himself he looked and noticed there were a lot more fighter than before.

“Look, Sir, Kreigan and Gambitzi!”

“Wow, I didn't know they had that many ships. And they're just single planets.”

Lance pressed a few buttons.

“Julio, are you there?”

“Here boss. What's up?”

“Is Raga with you?”

“I am here Lance Morgan.”

“I just wanted to tell you Trolla is dead.”

“Was it an honorable death, Morgan?”

“The most honorable, Raga.”

“Then it is well. We do not feel sorrow like you do. I would only feel sorrow if someone had taken his honor from him.”

“Then be satisfied.”

“The Gambitzi have a custom of exchanging one of their dead with those who they wish to be friends with. To be buried in the manner of each respectively. Claw has given us Curr's body, and I wish for you to give my father's body to Claw.”

“Done. Now let's go home”

They flew back to SPD headquarters with Silas and the ship in tow and landed on a raised platform. When they got out, Elroy and Mercedes were waiting for them.

“You guys didn't have to meet us here, we could have come and visited you.”

“Well actually, we're here for Al, we've got a little present for him.” said Mercedes.

“Oh, I'd like to see this.”

Elroy pushed a hand cart with a large box resting against it. It was an effort for Elroy as he was small but they pushed close to Al as he walked out.

“Mercedes, and Elroy, my friends, what's all this?” asked Al.

“It's a present for you and Cindy, well it's sort of more for Cindy than you.”

Elroy opened the box and removed the cart and the rest of the box. Standing there was a beautiful, if buxom, woman. Well actually she wasn't a woman. She was more like a mannequin. She didn't do anything.

“Cindy, may I present you with your new body?” said Mercedes.

“For me?” asked CND.

“Yes, all we have to do is...” said Elroy as he stepped inside the ship and then returned with the AI cube.

“Plug this in here.” He opened a small panel in the back of the mannequin's head under the

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brunette hair she had hanging down her back.

“And there we go. Cindy?” said Elroy

“The mannequin suddenly came to life and looked around. A new body? It's almost human!” she said moving around. She then stumbled.

“Uh oh, you need to get used to walking I think.” said Mercedes catching her and stopping her from falling.

Cindy had tears in her eyes.

“What's this? Am I crying? Elroy you think of everything!” she kissed him on his head.

“Well I, ah, I'm glad you're happy.” said Elroy blushing.

Cindy righted herself and then walked over to Al and hugged him.

“We can finally be together like a real couple!” she exclaimed.

“I think I like this.” Said Al. Everyone laughed.

“Well Doc, you think you can fix me up with a little more, umm, realistic body? I'm still more or less a bot.”

“Uhh we'll see Al.”

Everyone laughed again this time harder. Lance still had the box in his hand. He attempted to open it. To his surprise, it just opened. Inside was some strange sort of metal that when Al tried to scan he could not identify. There were strange alien symbols on it and a button. Just then Silas who had awoken while everyone's attention was focused elsewhere, jumped on Lance and grabbed the box. He started to run to the edge and Lance chased him.

“Lance no!” screamed Dana running after him.

Lance started to catch up with Silas but the man was still much too fast. Silas finally got to the edge of the platform and stopped. He tried to press the button but it wouldn't go down. Lance was moving so fast that he knocked Silas to the floor. The box slid just inches from the edge. Silas tried to get it but Lance pulled on him. Lance tried to get to the Box as well. Silas kicked at Lance and then reached for the box. Silas could almost touch it as Lance was trying to pull him away. Lance used all of his strength to pull Silas from the brink. Silas pushed the box a little further away from him. Now Lance was trying to get the box too. Silas finally got a hand around it and pulled it toward him. Then he kicked Lance in the gut so hard Lance howled in pain. Silas stood up then Lance got up and tried to grab the box. Then both had their hands on the box, as they struggled back and forth to free it from each other. They were both dancing around the edge.

“Lance look out!” Dana screamed.

Then with one more jerk both went over falling toward the floor. It was as if everything were going in slow motion. Lance had the box and then he pressed the button as the floor was coming up to meet them. Dana saw Lance disappear as Silas fell to his death. She could hardly believe it. He was gone. Had this been what he had gone through when she faked her own death. She didn't like it at all. He was gone now, possibly forever. She started crying profusely.

Everyone gathered around her and looked down. They tried to comfort her. But she couldn't stop crying. While all this was happening nobody noticed a solitary figure escaping down the stairs. They just stood and held her while she cried for what seemed like hours. Eventually they went down to meet Alice.

“Director Lawson.” said Julio.

“We've lost Lance Morgan.”

“He's dead?”

“Well actually we're not sure. He and Silas were struggling over that artifact, it had a button

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and Lance pressed it before he hit the ground. He just disappeared.”

“Disappeared? Like into thin air?”

“Yes Ma'am. We've had heavy casualties, but we recovered the stealth fighter and Silas is dead. He didn't disappear and instead hit the ground. You might want to do an autopsy.”

“We'll see to that. We will be pulling out at the end of the week. Julio. Dan is alive, and in stable condition. Baxter is still in critical condition, so it seems you will be acting Chief until Baxter recovers. I guess I won't be writing you up after all. I understand the fact that you didn't want Dan to hurt Gina. But just be glad he's still alive, because I don't think I could let it stick otherwise.”

“Yes Ma'am.”

“I know how much you liked Morgan, and he did bring results, so I can't argue with that. So I would like to apologize for the rude behavior.”

“Don't mention it Ma'am.”

Julio ran down to the lab and caught Gina in his arms and kissed her.

“See, told you I wouldn't die.”

“How about a date?” she asked.

“A date, how forward of you. I accept.” he said.

The next day they held an SPD funeral for Morgan with full honors. Everyone was dressed in their best and they gave him a twenty-one gun salute. Even Al and Cindy were there. Cindy was actually weeping. Al went up to say a few words.

“Lance was a great man. He left us too soon. He was the only one to actually think of me as a person, even when I denied it myself. Because of him, I consider myself a real person and not merely a bot. He was dedicated to the department, and dedicated to his wife Dana. Even when he believed her dead and then felt she had betrayed him by becoming a criminal. Deep down in his heart he still loved her. Morgan's sense of justice, was like none other. He would not stop until his duty had been done. I only wish I had known him before.” Then Al stepped down.

Raga came up and spoke a little.

“I had only known Morgan a short time, but already I knew there was great honor in him. He sacrificed himself to save the honor of another even though he didn't have to. He brought me information on my father who I had thought was dishonorable, but turned out to be the opposite. Morgan will be missed by me as well.”

Phanta and Cert came up, and Phanta spoke.

“He didn't immediately turn us in, because he saw that we were victims of circumstance. But even in this act he did not betray his own sense of justice. He thought he was doing what was right. And we will always be indebted to him for that. For not judging us before he had our side of the story.”

Dana, Cindy, and Mercedes were openly sobbing now. Friends and family were holding them. Mercedes stopped her crying between sniffing so she could say her words.

“Lance will mean more to me than anyone will ever know. He never rejected me even though I was a mutant. The only thing that stopped us from being together was his love for Dana. That's the one thing I was envious of her for. He never stopped loving her. But he also brought Elroy back to me from a dangerous situation. The man I love now is here today because of Lance.”

Elroy walked forward.

“I too, only knew him a short while. He saved me from the criminal Ajax. Saved my life more times than I could every repay. You will be missed, friend.”

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Finally Dana walked up to the platform.

“I warned him not to go on this mission. I was going to run away with him. Away from my work. I didn't want him to get involved. But he was involved anyways. Working for law enforcement puts you in danger every day, but you never really think about it until something happens to the ones you love. I just found out I was pregnant, but now he will never get to see his son...” she broke out in tears all over again... Everyone of Lance's friends just stood around her and hugged her until she wanted to leave.

Raga went to Gambit to present Trolla for burial by their customs. They entombed him in a small stepped pyramid with symbols carved around the outside representing the events of what happened, including the battle. It was a place of honor. They held a feast to the Kreig for which solidified the friendship of the two different species. Then Claw came with a small delegation of Gambitzi to the Kreigan home world. Kreigan funeral rites included burning the body on a pile of wood and then wrapping the charred corpse and putting it out to sea. The funeral pyre would serve as a reminder. Even though Curr was dishonorable the funeral was honorable by Kreigan standards. Both races felt that this had covered his dishonor much as Raga had covered others by helping them escape slavery. Although they did eat, the Gambitzi weren't treated to a feast but instead a wrestling match by the Kreig. It was said the Kreig were the best wrestlers in the galaxy, especially since they had four arms. The two planets would be allies for days to come.

It was a few days before things got back to normal at the SPD. Julio was getting used to yelling at people and giving orders. Hobbes was promoted and now was Julio's first. Phanta and Cert dropped by after they were debriefed.

“Chief Martinez, we would like to talk to you about something.” Said Phanta.

“We realize we have a bit of a record now because of this incident.” Said Cert.

“And we would like to offer our services in any capacity we can.” finished Phanta.

“Well I could use a couple of clerks.”

“Clerks?” said Cert.

“We were thinking more along the lines of our investigative abilities. You know our bot halves can do fast computations and we're virtually indestructible.”

“Well like you said, you do have records, and if you want to clear said record, you will be come Clerks.” said Julio.

He put his hands on both of their shoulders.

“Well you still have some time. Just think about it.”

They walked out as Hobbes walked into the office.

“Sir, you have a holo-call on line one.”

“Okay, I will take it privately.”

Hobbes left the room and the door closed, then Julio frosted the glass. Then he turned on his holo-projector.

“Sir this is Dean, from the coroner's office.”

“Yeah so what's the news?”

“Sir I don't know how to say this without just coming out and saying it.”

“Well get on with it, what's going on?”

“It's Silas, sir. You see this isn't the real Silas. This is a simulant.”

“Oh no, I need to check on something. Er, carry on Dean.” He turned of the projector.

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He pressed a button.

“Impound, this is Deckland speaking.”

“Is the stealth fighter still there?”

“Sir?” Deckland asked.

“We got back the stolen stealth fighter, and it was supposed to be transferred to a USSC star base. Is it still here?”

“We never received the fighter sir. I had assumed the USSC had taken it.”

“Thank you.” he turned the intercom off.

He made another holo-call on an encrypted channel.

“This is Julio Martinez of the SPD. Precinct 44. In a joint operation with you we had recovered a stolen USSC stealth craft. We were supposed to hand it over to you. Only I we don't seem to have it. Did you manage to pick up said craft?”

“We've not received it yet.” replied a USSC liason.

“I think we have a problem then!”

THE END