



Visions of Peace

A Rangers Novel

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by : Matthew Sprange

PROLOGUE

October 12th 2232, Omelos

The EAS Potemkin thundered out of the expanding jump point vortex, the cross-dimensional energies shimmering pale blue on its hull. Across the dark of space behind the massive dreadnought, hundreds more jump points winked and flickered as the ships of a gigantic multi-race fleet emerged from hyperspace, setting course for the main planet of the invaded system. Today, the Dilgar War would come to an end.

Nearly three billion miles away on board a shuttle in high orbit above her homeworld of Omelos, Warmaster Jha'Dur seethed as she watched the incoming contacts glow orange on her tactical display. She cursed the lesser creatures that invaded her system, that even now raced toward her planet, each eager to be the first to bombard her cities and her armies. For four years, she had dreamed of a great war, a mass attack that would sweep the inferior races of the galaxy aside and allow the Dilgar to reign supreme. How could it have come to this, her ships routed from alien space and now unable to protect her world against this fleet? Her hard feline-like features tensed as she systematically blamed the weakness of others in the Dilgar military and the fickleness of fate.

The war had been hard fought, and there had been little that could halt the Dilgar fleets as they overran the systems that formed the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. Her people had fought with a tenacity born of the knowledge that their own world was doomed, its unstable star about to give its last gasp. One by one, the weak fleets of the League, never expecting to fight a serious war, gave way to the Dilgar strike forces, even as their planets' defences were overwhelmed by superior firepower and technology. Jha'Dur could not help but smile at some of the memories of those invasions, all masterminded by her. The scientific advances her experiments on the populations of those worlds had achieved were immeasurable in their scope and depth.

The sensor telemetry from scout ships on the furthest edges of the system confirmed her expectations. The massed fleet was spearheaded by ships of the Earth Alliance, an alien race the Dilgar had never declared war on and whose space had never been invaded. What possibly drove such creatures to become involved, she could not fathom. True, they might fear the Dilgar would not stop at conquering worlds of the League - and the humans may have been right - but that would have taken years. They seemed almost eager to jump into this war. What deal had been made? What could the League have possibly offered the Earth Alliance in exchange for the massive resources committed?

Jha'Dur recognised the signature of the lead ship, an Earth vessel that had led fleets against her forces several times in the past few months. Now it led a far grander fleet of Drazi, Abbai, Hyach, Markab and many other races, all with orders to kill her and smash her world. They would get the chance at only one of those objectives.

She imagined Warmaster Ta'Loka, the oldest member of the Dilgar Council, now responsible for Naval Command of their homeworld. He would now be attempting to counter the attack, reeling out defence orders in his usual monotone. However, Jha'Dur knew it was useless. As much as it angered her to admit it, she knew Omelos was lost when their long-ranged hyperspace probes detected the

fleet massing within the Abbai Matriarchy.

Jha'Dur had made her own plans and quickly set them into motion. She would survive this attack, that was a given. What was just as important was that a strike would be aimed at the heart of her enemies, something large enough to bring them down and reduce their own world to the ashes hers would inevitably become. Perhaps the Earth Alliance saw themselves as messiahs, leading the beleaguered races of the League to a better future. Well, if she had to bear witness to the destruction of her homeworld, then so too would the humans.

She thumbed the communications channel on her display to a pre-set secure link directed at the three ships hanging motionless in orbit just ahead of her shuttle. 'Captain Nil'Bak, are the Stratis devices fully loaded?'

'Confirmed, Warmaster. Loaded and online. We are ready to depart on your order.'

'The order is given. Do not fail me, Captain.'

'Confirmed, Warmaster.'

The massive hulls of the three ships, advanced Ochlavita destroyers that she helped design specifications for some years ago, blocked out Omelos' blue sun as it rose above the planet's horizon. As one, they fired their ion engines, faint streaks of light trailing behind them as they accelerated for the edge of the system. Jha'Dur had arranged for a cordon of ships to funnel the invading fleet away from the destroyers, ensuring no Earth or League ship could attempt an intercept before they entered hyperspace. Captain Nil'Bak faced a long and complicated journey, the furthest ever attempted by a Dilgar ship, but his fierce loyalty to Jha'Dur had been proven many times the war. The crew beneath him had all been selected carefully for this mission and approved by Jha'Dur herself. They knew better than to fail.

For just a few seconds, Jha'Dur savoured the scene that would play out on the humans' homeworld when her new weapons were activated. A world she had never seen and a moment she would never witness. Nevertheless, Jha'Dur could almost see it. Her area of science was primarily biological, but with so many League worlds under her heel, the Warmaster had taken the opportunity to... expand her interests. No longer limited to developing new machines that controlled the thoughts of her victims or releasing planet-wide plagues to gauge their effects on different races, Jha'Dur had begun to expand her fields of study to entire ecospheres and their delicate balance. So easily shattered, she mused. The three Stratis weapons now on their way to Earth were capable, if properly positioned, of working together to reshape the entire surface of a planet into something desolate, violent and bleak. As a happy coincidence, they would also wipe out all lifeforms larger than the most primitive of microbes. Maybe even they would not survive. Wryly, Jha'Dur considered herself cheated that she would never have the chance to monitor the effects of her new weapons and analyse just what could survive them - and for how long. These details were largely irrelevant, as their purpose was to strike back at those who had brought her own dreams crashing down. The loss of all that scientific data was the true shame. However, the Dilgar would inevitably lose the war and then be destroyed when their star finally lost all stability and went nova. The humans, in return, would mourn the loss of their own homeworld and the deaths of billions. Perfect symmetry.

Jha'Dur herself would go on. She consciously touched a pouch at her belt, feeling the reassuring bulk of a medical case. The serum it contained, a product of her own scientific genius, would ensure she could return to the galaxy at large later to fulfil her designs. Much later.

The tactical display winked an alert as the two fleets began to engage. Huge wings of small fighters fired first, but the big guns of the capital ships soon opened up, gouging holes in their opponents. Even within these first few seconds, Jha'Dur could see the Dilgar fleet was surrounded and outgunned. She also knew the Navy would not surrender under any circumstances.

Sparing no further thought for the rest of her race or their future, Jha'Dur switched views on her display to retrieve navigation routes. A long journey lay ahead, but she was confident her small shuttle would evade the enemy fleet and eventually carry her to a new hiding place. Tapping in the convoluted hyperspace route designed to throw off would-be pursuers, Jha'Dur pressed the symbol of her final destination.

Minbar.

November 6th 2232, Sol

Breathing a sigh of no little relief, Captain Nil'Bak barked for status reports from his three crewmen on the cramped bridge of the Ochlavita. It took seconds to confirm that all three destroyers had survived the long voyage and were in position to begin their run to Earth. Jumping into realspace just above the plane of this system's asteroid belt, the three Dilgar vessels had completed a voyage of epic proportions through hyperspace and certainly broke many space travel records. Not that it mattered - Nil'Bak knew this was a mission he would not return from but, given skill and a little luck, it might just shift the course of history. After serving Warmaster Jha'Dur faithfully for the past years, no better reward could be hoped for.

Within the destroyers, the Dilgar crews responded to their orders with a discipline born of well-practised drills. Positions were manned, bolters and pulsars charged and then, finally, the Stratis devices loaded into the hastily modified mass drivers that hung beneath the dark green hulls of the ships.

'Captain, we are detecting a system wide alert with responses from multiple locations. Locking in their positions...'

'It's the humans' Early Warning Network. Similar to our own, I have been told. Order the squadron into battle formation and increase to maximum thrust. We must not be delayed.' Captain Nil'Bak was aware that though his destroyers might be fast enough to slip past most of the defences of the Earth Alliance, if the squadron became bogged down in combat, more ships would quickly vector onto their position until they were overwhelmed.

Minutes trickled past until his tactical officer registered a solid reading from his display. 'Contact. Three cruiser-size ships bearing down on us from bearing 348 by 22. From their ion signatures, Hyperion-class.'

‘Hyperion?’ Nil’Bak asked for confirmation. The bulk of EarthForce’s warships had been presumed to have led the attack on Omelos, leaving only a skeleton defence fleet around Earth. Nil’Bak had faced a Hyperion before and had not savoured the experience. Relatively new additions to the Earth fleets, they could match his destroyers for speed and easily overwhelm them in firepower.

‘Confirmed. They are now launching fighters.’

‘Change heading to 12 by 72. Bring us within range of the asteroid field, we might be able to scatter their sensor readings.’ The relative weakness of sensor technology within the Earth Alliance had been quickly noted by the Dilgar in their initial engagements, and many captains had devised various methods of using this to their advantage in battle.

‘Contact. Multiple readings dead ahead, looks like five wings of fighters - Starfuries!’

This gave Nil’Bak cause for pause. Did EarthForce have a carrier in the vicinity, perhaps lying in wait within the asteroid belt? If so, did this mean they had detected his squadron while they were still in hyperspace?

Individually, Earth Starfury fighters were little to worry about, the Dilgar destroyers massing greater by several orders of magnitude. However, gathered in coordinated wings, they could cause real damage if allowed to set up solid attack runs. Nil’Bak had no intention of giving them the chance.

‘Open fire when in range, maximum spread.’

‘Confirmed. Hyperions have changed vectors and are now closing in.’

This was going to be close, Nil’Bak knew. His aim was to punch through the gathering Starfury wings with bolters and disruptors blazing. Those the destroyers did not annihilate would hopefully be shattered and left in disarray, unable to launch an effective counterattack. Meanwhile, he could allow the Hyperions and their fighters to engage in a running battle that would last all the way to Earth. Less than a minute passed before the dim red lighting in the bridge of the Ochlavita flickered, power surging to the main weaponry. A mixture of spheres and fast-cycling pulses of energy flashed through space, reaching out to the swarming Starfuries. Nil’Bak leaned forward to see his tactical officer’s displays for himself. Several Starfury contacts had winked out of existence, but this salvo had by no means taken the human pilots by surprise. The Starfuries immediately spread out their formation before reacquiring the Dilgar ships.

Fire continued to pour out of the Ochlavita destroyers, but as the fighters closed range, the Dilgar’s weaponry began to lose track of the fast moving targets. Nil’Bak was thrown into his hard-backed seat as energy bolts from the Starfuries thudded into the armour of his destroyer.

As the Starfuries passed their targets, the pilots used small manoeuvring jets mounted on the wingtips to spin the fighters around their axis, allowing them to keep firing as they flew down the flanks of the Dilgar ships without breaking off for another pass. As the destroyers sailed past, the Starfuries continued their axial spin until they faced the direction they had originally been travelling. Activating powerful afterburning engines, the Starfuries first cancelled out what was now their backward motion

and then began to accelerate after the fleeing destroyers. Their hail of withering fire did not cease throughout this manoeuvre, and multiple explosions across the hulls of the Dilgar ships began to blossom into ever-larger concentrations of fire and burning metal. They again closed upon their enemy, constantly twisting to avoid the rearward return fire of the destroyers and the chunks of debris that flew off their crumbling targets.

The three Dilgar destroyers adopted a looser formation and dove low over the slowly spinning rocks of the asteroid belt, heading for a dense section where they might break the lock-ons of the pursuing fighters and gain precious distance. The continuous attacks from the Starfuries began to falter as their pilots were forced to break off briefly in order to avoid an asteroid that spun dangerously close, but concentrated fire from one flight was rewarded by a huge explosion as the engine section of one destroyer blew apart under the pounding. The ship slewed to one side from the force of the blast, desperately firing manoeuvring thrusters in an effort to remain level.

Given a chance to close range, the three EarthForce Hyperion cruisers announced their presence in the fight by opening upon the stricken destroyer with their massive plasma cannon. Large globes of pure energy flashed through space, utterly consuming the Dilgar ship. Raw plasma burned through the destroyer, instantaneously incinerating the Dilgar within and burning through to the ship's fuel cells which promptly exploded with a force that tore the vessel apart and rattled the cockpits of nearby Starfuries.

The three Hyperions, never breaking formation, surged forward as they closed on a second destroyer forced to slow down by the constant attacks on its rearward engine section by the chasing Starfuries. Another salvo of plasma fire peeled away the armour of the Dilgar ship, exposing vital systems and crew to both the savage energies of the attack and the cold vacuum of space. Debris rained from the ship, leaving a metal trail behind, before flights of Starfuries lined up for a final attack run on the drifting hulk. Once again, fuel cells were struck, destroying the ship in a billowing explosion powerful enough to shatter several small asteroids.

The last Ochlavita destroyer had obviously learned the lessons of its allies' demise, and it ploughed deep into the asteroid belt, allowing smaller rocks to bounce harmlessly off its armoured hull while the Starfuries flying after it were forced to divert their course to avoid the potentially devastating impacts of even tiny asteroids. The Hyperions kept pace but refused to enter the asteroids, their captains instead choosing to track the Dilgar ship and open fire whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Small bolts of plasma streamed down from the Hyperions, impacting the destroyer's hull, flaying armour plating but causing little serious damage. No reply was forthcoming from the Dilgar, and it seemed as if either the Starfuries had managed to offline its weapons or its crew were kept busy manoeuvring past the larger rocks among the asteroids. Most of the Earth fighters had now left the asteroids themselves, forming up behind the Hyperions to prepare a coordinated strike should the Dilgar emerge from the cover of the rocks, though a few diligent and skilled pilots remained in direct pursuit in order to keep the pressure on.

The Ochlavita attempted a hard turn to quickly change vectors and surprise its pursuers as it left the denser field of asteroids, but the destroyer seemed sluggish and unwilling to respond to commands.

The EarthForce ships did not miss their chance, changing course as one before unleashing the full weight of their plasma cannon. Once again, pure energy tore past armour plates as if they were tissue paper. The destroyer jinked harshly in a pitching motion it may never have been designed to perform, but the desperate move caused much of the Hyperion's fire to overshoot. Starfuries now swept down and poured their own fire into the failing ship, now unafraid of possible return fire. Out of control, the Ochlavita descended once more among the asteroids.

Captain Nil'Bak heaved himself back into his seat, choking on the smoke filling the bridge. Cables and structural supports hung from the ceiling where they had been blasted clear of their anchor points and his crew lay on the floor, the life blasted from them by the explosion that had wrecked the bridge. Nil'Bak hammered at his consoles but nothing responded to his commands. Despite the constant rocking from attacks by the Earth fighters, he was finally able to summon a close-ranged sensor display to life. He stared at the information being updated on its screen. Though he had no viewport on the bridge of this warship, he could imagine the massive asteroid looming in front of the gunship, its gigantic size only hinted at by the tiny icon that steadily registered as getting closer and closer.

Nil'Bak's fists clenched as he fervently wished he had but one weapon with which to respond to the attacks of his enemy. The ranging information on the asteroid reached zero on his display and then he wished for nothing more.

CHAPTER ONE

May 1st 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

Buried deep within the ISA Headquarters in the Minbari capital, Tuzanor, the Anla'Shok Intelligence Gathering Centre was a perpetual hive of activity. With offices clustered around a central chamber, often jokingly referred to as the 'war room' by human staff, it still retained the brand new feeling of a recent construction despite having seen heavy use in the past six months. With the timelessness inherent in all Minbari buildings, from humble abodes to their greatest millennia-old temples, it would likely maintain that atmosphere for centuries to come.

The eclectic mix of races now spreading through the Anla'Shok had yet to reach the innermost sanctums of the organisation, including the Centre, and the bustling staff consisted mainly of Minbari with a scattering of human specialists. While the public image of the Rangers was an heroic individual pledging to place his body in harm's way for the sake of the entire galaxy, a lone agent of peace dedicated to eradicating evil, a giant support mechanism aided those Rangers in the field. Some might say it was a less glamorous duty, but few working within the Alliance's headquarters felt that way, and all understood how decisions made here could affect the lives of thousands, even millions, throughout the galaxy. Anyone who did not understand this would not last very long under the watchful eyes of the senior Anla'Shok.

Unconsciously rubbing the back of his bony headplate, Tuthenn's eyes flickered over the data streaming across the three displays in front of him. Ranger-Analysts were invariably Minbari, and though the duty was both feared and shunned by those in training with the Anla'Shok, Tuthenn wore the title with honour. Even among Minbari there were few who could register, analyse and retain information with the speed necessary to consolidate intelligence from across the galaxy. Only he and the fourteen other Minbari located in the Centre could fully appreciate the amount of information requiring analysis that flowed in from the entire Interstellar Alliance daily. Computers aided the Ranger-Analysts, indeed, they were essential for the work but a sentient mind was still required to bring meaningful interpretation to the endeavour.

Due to the cunning and toil of President Sheridan, the Interstellar Alliance nearly spanned the known galaxy, with very few races choosing not to sign up to receive the mutual benefits offered. True, there were always governments, particularly within the former League of Non-Aligned Worlds, that played fast and loose with the rules of the ISA, but

Sheridan's dream of intergalactic peace was actually taking form.

When a government signed up to join the ISA, they received access to lucrative technology and trade treaties, as well as a guarantee that should they be attacked, every government within the ISA was duty-bound to assist them. Of course, this also meant that if they should desire to war with their neighbours, the ISA and its peacekeeping Rangers would ensure that every other government would learn of their treachery. From the outset, it was hammered into new entrants that diplomacy was always the best policy. Most behaved themselves, more or less, and infractions were minor. Long-standing border disputes aside, peace reigned and the spilling of blood was kept to a minimum.

As a senior among the Ranger-Analysts, Tuthenn was able to pick his own areas of specialisation, and he included the borders of the Minbari Federation among them. When he had first started, he had made this choice in the hope that, one day, intelligence might flow from the old Vorlon Empire towards the Rim, but so far no ship had successfully returned from expeditions into the abandoned territory. The old defences seemed to be working most efficiently, and Tuthenn feared he would have long turned to dust before the secrets of the Old Ones were finally revealed.

During his years of service, Tuthenn had gradually become an expert on the interpretation of intelligence emerging from that other great civilisation bordering the Minbari the Centauri Republic. Ostracised from the rest of the galaxy because of their aggressive war against neighbouring races in the early days of the ISA, the Centauri were a cowed and broken people, conveniently forgotten by history for the time being while they were forced to pay heavy reparations to those whose ships had been attacked.

Tuthenn knew better. In fact, he knew better than most, as he spent many of his days analysing every piece of information that could be squeezed from the Republic, gathered from White Stars patrolling its borders, smugglers willing to talk for a few extra credits and the few travellers that made a habit of visiting Centauri worlds. Tuthenn knew how Emperor Mollari ruled his citizens, he knew the resources the Republic still had access to on its own worlds, and he definitely knew just how large the Centauri fleets remained. He was all too aware of the massive potential that still lay within the Republic that had once spanned this entire region of the galaxy, subjugating many worlds within its empire. When the Centauri once called their Republic the Lion of the Galaxy, they had been speaking a lot of truth.

Data continued to stream in front of Tuthenn's eyes, and his fingers deftly manipulated controls that allowed him to zero in on pertinent information before summoning ancillary data pertaining to anything unusual on his side screens. He had developed the knack of constructing a web of information on his screens that, when scanned, formed patterns within his mind. These patterns would then lead him to conclusions or new information as he continued to bury himself in the process.

Tuthenn was following a trail of Quantum-40 mined on one of the Centauri's border worlds, tracing its progress through the Republic in order to determine where it was used, what strategic implications this might hold and, just as important when dealing with Centauri politics, who benefited. He flagged an item that caught his eye and transferred it to a side screen, automatically invoking a search-and-scan process even as he returned his attention to the main display. His eyes flicked back to the side screen, focusing on the first item retrieved, and his fingers held steady over the controls. Vocator Merak was being reported as having died in a manner befitting his ancestors. Tuthenn gave a brief shake of his head and reflected that this euphemism was becoming all too frequent in the current Republic. Dying as an ancestor tended to mean assassination, usually by poison - a return to the old ways of the Centauri. As more information was retrieved and displayed, Tuthenn continued to analyse.

The head of House Kaado, Vocator Merak had been a somewhat stabilising influence in the Centaurum, the Republic's governing body, keeping many hotter-headed leaders of Houses restrained from more radical ideas. Tuthenn recalled that Merak had been forced to discipline nobles in his own House on occasion, and they certainly had much to gain by his death. One of them would now be head

of House Kaado. The House itself rooted its power in several mining interests, most of them along the Centauri/ Minbari border but this was not unusual, as a House did not elevate itself to the heights Kaado had achieved without substantial finances. However, this in turn meant that the actions of House Kaado could have an effect on the entire Republic, at least to some degree, and it would only take a leader of a certain ambition to expand his House's financial interests. With money came power, and if someone had risked the assassination of a House leader, they would have planned their next moves carefully. So, what was he witnessing here, Tuthenn wondered? Mere personal ambition? A bold challenge for the throne of the Emperor?

Tuthenn quickly found himself at an informational deadend. Without knowing the identity of the new head of House Kaado, it was impossible to predict the ramifications of this assassination. He created a quick report for his superiors requesting specific intelligence and then went back to his data streams.

May 1st 2263, Imperial City, Centauri Prime

Idly playing with the trimmed velvet seat lining the passenger compartment of his skimmer, Veneta Kaado relaxed, enjoying this one quiet moment of solitude. With the skimmer's driver audio-silenced and his communications system temporarily disabled, Veneta mentally prepared himself for the forthcoming address. True to form, his mind soon drifted, and he watched Imperial City flashing past below the skimmer. The clouds of smoke left after the destructive attack by the Narn and Drazi fleets of the Interstellar Alliance had blotted out the sun for weeks, but clear skies now held sway over Centauri Prime. The devastation, however, remained. As far as Veneta could see lay shattered buildings, roads blocked with sprawling masonry and massive craters where the lasers and missiles of the aggressor fleets had rained down with indiscriminate violence.

Veneta's mood turned darker as he reminded himself of his focus. That fool of an Emperor had done so very little after the attack to bring his people back on their rightful path, accepting the reparations demanded of the Centauri from the Interstellar Alliance without question even as their capital lay in ruin. Certainly, here and there throughout Imperial City, Emperor Mollari had ordered the rebuilding of a museum or a hostelry to house the multitude of homeless that eked out a living amidst their broken and roofless homes. It was criminal neglect. A better leader would have organised construction gangs, brought in more slaves and introduced a massive public works programme designed to rebuild Imperial City into a vision for the future, far mightier than ever it had been. That was what the Centauri needed right now: vision. A sense of what they could and should be, as well as a leader who did more than pay lip service to his people as he skulked in the Royal Palace.

Veneta was never calm in the hours before a speech but always found himself peaceful once he finally took stage, a trait he had possessed for as long as he could recall. He had always found himself constantly distracted by the whirlwind of aspirations, possibilities, plotting and politicking that streamed through his mind. He knew others among the Centauri nobility called this duty but, in truth, Veneta had been preparing himself for a life spent in the pursuit of his personal ambition since adolescence. Perhaps even before then. He could not recall the last time he had relaxed or taken a vacation for the sole purpose of rest. Every moment, it seemed, had been spent furthering his position in at least some way.

It was beginning to pay off. This skimmer, the best money could buy in this time of hardship and recession (for others), used to be his uncle's. Now it belonged to Veneta, along with everything else his uncle had once owned, passed on as tradition demanded to the heir of House Kaado. Veneta had long passed the stage of self-congratulation, which consisted in the main of one drunken gathering with his most trusted conspirators. It had been a masterful move, to be sure, not just for an assassination that was unlikely to be traced back to him but, more importantly, the manoeuvring of his own position from relative obscurity in the House to one where it became obvious that he should be its head. That had taken skill, a lot of favours and more work than Veneta thought possible to achieve in mere months. It could not be denied though, if his personal ambitions were to bear the fruit he felt he deserved, those efforts would pale before the toil that lay ahead. Personal wealth was never Veneta's sole aim. Wealth was relatively easy to attain, and he had never doubted that it would be his. No, he wanted something far more intoxicating - power. The kind of power that could not be granted by mere financial reserves, no matter how vast. Veneta wanted absolute power over the life and death of his people, and he wanted adulation. He wanted to lead. Now that he was head of House Kaado, he possessed the vehicle needed to begin achieving his aims.

All this at the tender age of 28. Even the seer present at his birth had not foreseen a rise so meteoric. More fool her. Having no use for wastage, Veneta had ensured she had met her death at the same time as his uncle.

An alarm chimed in the rear cabin and Veneta roused himself from the luxurious couch, irritated that he had distracted himself from his speech. No matter, he had learned it by rote a day ago. The skimmer was touching down in front of a small theatre owned by House Kaado in Imperial City, one of the few to almost completely escape the destruction that claimed its peers. The skimmer's door whined open smoothly, and a royal guardsman stood rigidly at attention, eyes fixed ahead, determined not to notice any social infraction in Veneta's behaviour, be he drunk, high or mad. All three had been true of the heads of House Kaado in past history, but Veneta prided himself on being far more disciplined than his ancestors. Still, the guardsman was a good touch, and he congratulated himself. In theory they served the Emperor alone, but ways and means existed for those in the Centaurum who wielded enough power to claim a few royal privileges. Besides, having a royal guardsman follow him into the theatre created the right impression, like many of the arrangements he made before this engagement.

Sweeping from the skimmer and up the stairs of the theatre, Veneta entered the small building past bowing servants and climbed the stairs to an audience chamber he ordered for this meeting. He made a mental note to reprimand the skimmer's driver for having brought him here too promptly, as only a few nobles of small standing were seated, waiting patiently for both him and more powerful members of Centauri society. Most of them seemed to be of House Kaado.

Nodding briefly to those in the front rank of seats to acknowledge their presence (it never hurt so long as it was not made a habit of), Veneta had not taken three more steps before he was intercepted by a gaggle of assorted relatives and hangers-on who, he knew, had all requested favours that he had not had time to fulfil. Getting support among the Centauri nobility was a relatively simple process in concept, and much could be achieved with the right mixture of threat and promise. It was just so time consuming. He noted out of the corner of his eye that Minister Kallafa of House Verlime had just

arrived and was taking a moment to select an area of seating that would suggest good position and standing. Verlime would have to try hard, Veneta mused cattily, as his entire House was in decline. Still, even the smallest of Houses had something a canny politicker could use, be it finances, connections, resources or even just raw weight of numbers. Sometimes it all came down to the numbers to create political momentum. In the case of House Verlime, however, Veneta was hoping for a link to House Mollari, the ruling House of the Republic. He held no illusions of bringing the Emperor into his schemes, at least not just yet, but a solid connection to House Mollari could bring an influx of money and power that Veneta could use very well. There was also another service he had in mind for Minister Kallafa.

Permitting himself a slight smile, Veneta ignored the prattling of the animated minor noble in front of him, no doubt fishing for some favour, as he viewed others gradually filing into the audience chamber. A good turn out, perhaps the best yet. The venue's intimate nature suggested more participants than were actually present. With the leverage the new position as head of House Kaado granted, Veneta was clearly attracting greater interest and support. Those who had once shunned him had now begun to listen to his opinions, and he was building up a steady supply of favours. His star was rising.

The noble before him tripped over words, trying to simultaneously congratulate Veneta while sliding in a request for reduced tariffs on his leased cargo ship. Veneta could not even remember his name. He brushed the noble aside and strode to the elevated podium, feeling a flush of power as he raised a hand, and the mumbling of the crowd ceased almost instantly. Not all that long ago he would have been forced to start by talking over the constant politicking of his peers. Rank hath its privileges indeed.

'My fellow nobles,' he began, voice low to suggest a mutual conspiratorial interest. While no master of psycholinguistics, Veneta paid close attention to those in his service who were. 'Our glorious Republic, the Lion of the Galaxy, faces its darkest hour.' He noted several nods of agreement throughout the small crowd. Good, there were enough like-minded nobles here.

'We are in an intolerable position,' he continued, slowly raising his voice. 'Where we once stretched forth our hand across the stars, we are now a broken and destitute people. The humans, the Minbari, yes, even the Narn are crippling us under the so-called authority of the Interstellar Alliance. Blockaded and separate from the rest of the galaxy, denied the opportunity for competitive trade and burdened by unjust reparations, we have been robbed of our sovereign right of self-determination.' No nods now, just rapt attention.

'For every step we take forward, the Interstellar Alliance throws us two steps back. We have no opportunity to develop economically, culturally or scientifically. The ISA runs frequent spy flights through our border systems, violating our territory at will. The reparations, which our weak-willed Emperor meekly accepted, are ruining any chance of recovery.' Veneta was now skirting treason, but he knew he was in good company. Besides, these were hardly the days of Emperor Cartagia. Perhaps more was the pity.

'This cannot go on. How can we permit it? We are Centauri, and our destiny has always been written in the stars. How can we allow animals like the Narn jurisdiction over us? We still have the resources of our many worlds.

We still have our fleets. All we need is the light to lead us from this time of darkness.

‘Who will lead us though? How can we strike at those who have cheated us and built the walls that now surround our Republic? That, my friends, is what we are here to discuss. Together, we will unite to shine a beacon that will lead every Centauri to reclaim our rightful place in the galaxy - and we will break our enemies. This is what our people hunger for. It is our duty to feed this hunger and safeguard the future of our entire race and way of life.’

May 3rd 2263, Asteroid Belt, Sol

‘Goddammit, you can’t be serious. Again?’ Tim Aston was not getting the best of things, and he badly needed a break. Cramped in the tiny cockpit of his one-man survey shuttle for over a week now, he had already noted the ancillary power generators were losing efficiency daily, his asteroid motion charts were woefully out of date, and his communications system had a disturbing habit of fading out whenever close to a stellar object massing more than his own vessel. All of which would require him to pony up some serious credits to remedy. Now Mayfield was declaring his ‘sure hunch’ was nothing more than a trace reading.

‘Yeah, sorry mate, it’s just another iron rock. Not worth the time or effort. Damn, I should stop listening to those transport captains - what do they know about prospecting?’ Mayfield’s voice was distorted slightly by static, causing Aston to manoeuvre out of the shadow of a nearby asteroid, an action that was fast becoming an automatic habit. He sometimes likened it to turning an antique radio to aid reception.

‘You sure you got the right coordinates here? We looking at the right rock?’

‘Sure as I can be. Look, we’ve been out here a week with no luck. Let’s get back to Ganymede, refuel, pick up the latest rumours and try again. We can’t strike out twice in a row, eh?’

Only twice, thought Aston?

‘Go ahead. I’m going to do a few random sweeps. You never know.’

‘Ahh, are you certain? You shouldn’t be out here alone. Shouldn’t be fooling around among these rocks.’

‘I can handle it. Besides, you know the state this heap of junk is in. If I put into port now, it may never take off again. I need the creds. No two ways about it.’

‘Alright. You holler if you run into trouble though. See you back on Ganymede. Over and out.’ Mayfield seemed resigned, and Aston knew he was reluctant to be away from Ganymede for too long, a desire as much to do with a pretty postal clerk on the mining outpost as much as not coping with zero-G for extended periods of time. Aston’s own romantic interests had dissolved quietly some time ago, apparently because of a combination of his general mood and the time he spent in the three bars on the outpost. He was rapidly forming the opinion that all longterm relationships with women were too demanding for someone with his lifestyle.

He leaned forward to stare out his starboard viewport, watching Mayfield's shuttle fire its manoeuvring thrusters as it set a course towards Jupiter and its moons. Accelerating gently, it soon disappeared from sight, but his sensor display kept updating the shuttle's position. That system, at least, worked without fault. Sweeping aside a food wrapper stuck to the edge of the main console, Aston considered a spring clean of his cockpit that, by now, had several wrappers, papers and other assorted objects hanging in the zero-gravity. His workspace might seem a lot less cramped if he did. Would probably be safer too.

He promised himself a professional valet when he returned to Ganymede. Hell, why not? If he had the credits to fix his other problems, he would have no trouble forking out for that. If he did not strike a find on this trip, then the matter quickly became academic. He plotted a course that would sweep through several likely (for that, read 'just maybe, possibly') candidates among this rocky hell and hit the autopilot.

For the next six hours, Aston slouched in his seat, one leg hooked over the main console. The autopilot took care of the manoeuvring and collision avoidance, leaving him free to monitor sensor and mineral sweep displays, watching for the tell-tale signs of a rich strain of ore that could be mined. Or a fast-moving asteroid the autopilot would not be able to react to in time. Those were rare but, he reflected, might solve his problems if he could not react quick enough either.

A green alert light began flashing on his console, accompanied by a faint but shrill tone. Irritated by the noise, Aston cancelled the alert and then strained tired eyes to read the incoming data analysis.

‘What the hell is...’

He was trying hard to understand what his computers told him. They just did not make sense. A high concentration of rare materials had been detected on a nearby asteroid, along with an accompanying energy source, faint but definitely present. More interesting was that several of the materials were listed as unknown. Slowly he began to realise that could only mean they were alien in origin. Sitting bolt upright, he focussed his attention on the incoming scans and instructed the autopilot to move closer.

Aston was soon close enough to see the asteroid out his main viewport. At first, it seemed like any other large rock here slowing spinning on its axis, but he soon spied a large impact crater that was obviously not created by another rock. Dark ejecta spanned its centre, and he spotted the blackened, hard-edged shapes that indicated wreckage.

It began to dawn on him that not only had he found the remains of a crashed spacecraft, but that it was an alien vessel at that. There had to be something of worth around but he could not fathom what had happened here. Was it just an alien trader who had jumped into system at the transfer point off Io and got lost en route to Earth? Could it be Minbari, a remnant from their genocidal war against humanity? That would be a rare find. Of course, there had also been plenty of League ships involved in the fleet Sheridan had led against President Clark a couple of years ago.

Filtering out background noise to locate the energy signature, Aston found it again near the edge of the crater. Switching to manual control, he carefully manoeuvred his shuttle to match the asteroid's

spiralling motion and then descended slowly. He brought his exterior cameras online and focussed them downwards. It was not long before Aston smiled in delight at the oddly shaped capsule he found within the crosshairs of the signature reading, apparently still intact. Continuing the shuttle's descent to the asteroid's surface, he watched his altitude reading tick away the distance until he was just a couple of metres above the capsule. Extending the shuttle's loading claws, he skilfully snatched the alien object on his first try and retracted it into his hold.

Performing a further sweep to ensure nothing else immediately worthwhile was present in the crash zone, he moved the shuttle away from the asteroid. He noted the rock's position and motion in his personal log but registered nothing official in his flight record. Though he could claim salvage rights on the crash site, he knew that would do him little good once the other desperate shuttle pilots on Ganymede heard about this discovery. By keeping quiet he risked the unlikely chance of someone else finding the site and staking a claim. On the other hand, he could always return for a thorough search beneath the crater in the hopes of finding more valuable items. With the credits he hoped to get for alien technology, he might be able to afford equipment that would make such scans easy. This might even mark a turning point in Aston's career, from prospector to salvager!

As his shuttle manoeuvred out of the asteroid belt and began the long journey back to Ganymede, Aston unbuckled himself from his seat and floated to the hatchway at the rear of the cockpit. Passing through, he continued to float down the shuttle's main and only corridor to a hatch in the floor that led to the cargo bay. Lowering himself downwards, Aston ducked his head under the low ceiling as he pushed off again and floated towards the capsule.

That the alien object was dark green and of a very smooth metal, was as much as he could tell. There were no obvious controls or entry points, though dark markings down one side might well have been writing of some description. Aston shook his head as he slowly realised he could not even begin to understand what the scrawls meant. Several smooth but short humps were dotted around the capsule like blisters, and one end was slightly flattened and elongated, suggesting an arrowhead shape to him. Aston knew he was out of his depth in trying to determine what this object was, not to mention what it might actually be used for.

He dared not try brokering a deal on Ganymede itself, as he would get a mere fraction of what it was worth. Whatever the capsule was, it had to be worth a fortune - it just had to. Aston had paid his dues of bad luck lately, and now it was his turn for a break.

If Ganymede was not the place for business, Aston had a vague thought of where else he could go. Mayfield had family scattered throughout the Earth Alliance. Perhaps he could help Aston get in touch with the kind of person needed to fence this alien cargo.

CHAPTER TWO

May 14th 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

Walking purposefully down the corridors of the Tuzanor spaceport, Michael Shaw felt ten feet tall. He had been wearing the Minbari-woven robes of the Anla'Shok for some time now, but today he truly felt right in them for the first time. The morning had seen his graduation, and he now bore the title 'Ranger' with some considerable pride. Not ego, he reminded himself. After the year-long training regime, one encompassing the very limits of his physical, mental and spiritual capabilities, he had more than earned the right to wear the robes. People on the outside, civilians, might idolise the Rangers as he once did, but only those who had been through the same training could truly understand what it meant to be one of the Anla'Shok. He just hoped that his dark hair, recently cropped almost to the skull, did not make him look like a raw, untrained recruit.

This new appearance followed the eradication of his facial hair that Shaw had maintained throughout Ranger training. It seemed like a whim this morning, but as he thought about it, Shaw had come to believe it was an outward expression of the spiritual change he had undergone upon graduation. Then again, maybe the insistence of Minbari tutors to consider the spiritual aspect of all actions had ingrained itself into his psyche, and he was in fact simply tired of spending more time grooming than simple hygiene demanded. He certainly hoped that, by this time, vanity was behind him.

Karen had mocked his new look that morning, saying he gave the impression of a Ranger just about to enter training, not one who had graduated. She left less than an hour after that last meeting, bound for old League space, though she had not known exactly where.

Intimate relationships between trainees in the Ranger programme were not encouraged and, in fact, tutors seemed to do everything they could to dissuade them. The Anla'Shok were not a monastic order by any means, but the training process was very intensive, operating on all levels of body and mind. The effect of Anla'Shok training on his personality and outlook had stunned Shaw - who would never have thought a year ago he would be able to speak Minbari, allegedly one of the hardest languages in the galaxy to master? However, the insular training for the Anla'Shok tended to turn amorous feelings towards other trainees. Karen was not the only human female in his group, but she was the one he had come to admire the most, at a very early stage. Quick-minded, she always had a comical turn of phrase whenever the training began to wear on the hopefuls, motivating the others without becoming the group clown. Her chin-length dark hair framed her face beautifully, though it was always tied up during training hours, and her high, well-defined cheekbones lent an air that Shaw considered classical.

However passionate they became in the quieter moments, and there were few enough of those, Shaw knew it was not love. But it had been welcome. They had promised to keep in touch, though with a galaxy this large and a Ranger likely to see most of it in his life, it was possible they had said goodbye for good.

Minbari paced this corridor, going about their solemn duties whatever their caste, but few fellow aliens were present. Even now, when Minbar had become the centre of Sheridan's

Interstellar Alliance, the spaceport was less eclectic than those on other worlds. The Minbari might be one of the leading governments of the ISA and, by their standards, have become more open in their dealing with alien races, but they still enjoyed a healthy separation from the rest of the galaxy. Shaw knew of the bond between human and Minbari that led to the two sharing the duties of the Anla'Shok during the Shadow War, but it had taken a move of unbelievable proportions, once Minbari culture was understood, to open the ranks of the Rangers to other races. The change was necessary if the Rangers were to act as peacekeepers throughout the galaxy, and in Shaw's own class there had been two Brakiri and an Abbai, though Minbari and humans still formed the bulk of entrants. Even after more than a year of this new open policy, the older tutors struggled to cope with the needs of species other than their own.

Finding the terminal station, Shaw turned from the main corridor and walked briskly to the waiting area. Between two stained glass windows commemorating the battle of Coriana 6, the main window looking out onto the terminal's landing area towered above him. On other occasions, Shaw had marvelled at Minbari architecture and their willingness to build structures for creatures a thousand feet tall, but on this very special day his attention was wholly consumed by the craft that lay motionless on the landing pad. Even stationary, it looked fast and poised for action.

As a trainee, Shaw had endured long lessons designed to familiarise him with the control systems and capabilities of the White Star. Today was different. He would enter this ship, White Star 31, as no mere trainee but a fully fledged

Ranger. He would be second-in-command and well on his way to a White Star of his own. He had dreamed of that day for some time. His heart raced to think of it, roaming the galaxy in command of one of the most advanced vessels in existence, righting wrongs and bringing peace wherever he travelled. That, above all else, was surely what it meant to be a Ranger. Karen would have understood.

Shaw knew that other Rangers, particularly Minbari, would spend this time in quiet meditation until they were summoned aboard the ship. He shrugged to himself. There would be time for meditation later. Instead, Shaw continued to gaze at the ship, idly fiddling with the retracted Denn'Bok fighting pike at his belt. His eyes swept across the graceful lines of the White Star, from its sharp spearheaded nose containing the powerful neutron laser, back across its curved hull. He continued past the double wings that held molecular pulsars capable of shredding the heaviest armour, then on to the tapered aft section containing the gravitic drive systems that gave the vessel its unprecedented manoeuvrability and speed, as well as comfortable artificial gravity for the crew without the rotating sections that Earth ships still tended to use. Everything about the White Star spoke of potential. Potential speed, potential destruction, potential power. As a Ranger, Shaw would be tested to the limit when commanding a ship such as this, concentrating that power into the most critical points where it would do the most good. This ship could alter the course of history - and had done so already, several times.

Shaw had no idea how long he had been staring at the ship before a chime sounded and a female Minbari voice announced that he was expected on White Star 31 immediately. Taking a deep breath, Shaw turned and headed toward the landing area. The time to prove his tutors' faith in him had arrived. Time to prove he was worthy of the Anla'Shok.

The boarding ramp at the front of the White Star beckoned him into the belly of the ship and a female Minbari, wearing the grey robes of the Religious Caste, waited patiently for him at its foot. Returning the slow bow of respect, Shaw followed the Minbari up the ramp and through the corridors of the ship, climbing higher as they made their way to the bridge. The White Star was not a large ship by most military standards, but the designers had considered crew comfort an important factor. A heavy degree of automation eliminated the need for extra crew, allowing more room for those who did serve on board. A White Star could be piloted by a single well-trained individual even in combat situations, though the ship would never be at its best. The overall benefit was that White Stars could remain on station in the remotest areas of the galaxy for months at a time without crew fatigue setting in. With gravitic drive systems, artificial gravity for the crew further extended the time that could be spent on board without constant returns to a base station. Shaw had heard stories of older warships in the Earth Alliance that lacked even rotating crew sections to provide gravity, and entire missions were once flown in zero-G with crew either strapped to their stations or floating freely from one section to another. The entire Dilgar War had been fought in this way. It had to have been hell serving on those ships, Shaw thought. Funny how history can give such perspectives. Personally speaking, he was glad to be living in the here and now.

The bridge was just as Shaw remembered from his field examinations and countless hours spent in the simulation suites in the ISA Headquarters, though most of his training had taken place in a Rangers' camp on a remote world in the Mofaka system within the Drazi Freehold. Two helmsmen sat at the forward-most point of the bridge, just below the main viewport. Behind them in the centre was the Captain's chair, flanked by the weapons control and interior systems stations. To the rear and sides of this central area were scattered other stations: sensors, analysis, navigation and communications. All were arranged in slightly off-centre and offline positions that seemed at first strange to human eyes, but which became oddly pleasing in an aesthetic sense over time, as did much that was built by Minbari. Most positions on these ships were crewed by Minbari of the Religious Caste, a state of affairs that had arisen from politics within the Federation during the Shadow War, with a single senior Ranger in command as Captain. White Star 31 was no exception, and Shaw's Captain, Ranger Sabine Badeau, turned from where she stood in front of the viewport to receive him.

Sabine Badeau was short and well proportioned with the physical toning common to smaller women. Her lengthy dark hair was tied up and descended well below her shoulders. Shaw was struck by her face, which even with her current neutral expression, seemed to imply both open friendship and mischief. Not that he was fooled in the least, for Shaw had studied her record as soon as he learned of his assignment earlier in the day. She was a veteran of the Shadow War and had taken part in the great battle at Coriana 6, the system that had seen the exodus of the Old Ones from the galaxy. This was a woman who was extremely capable, and she had his immediate respect.

'Mr. Shaw, welcome aboard,' she said in a quiet but steady voice that carried across the entire bridge. 'I trust you will find everything you need once you have a chance to settle in.'

'Thank you, Captain. I am honoured to have been assigned to a ship like White Star 31.'

'The Intrepide. You will find most human captains give their White Stars ad hoc names. The Minbari numbering system is efficient but lacks soul. You are familiar with your orders?'

‘I believe so, Captain,’ he replied. ‘I am to assist you in all missions undertaken by White Star 31 - the Intrepid - following your direction at all times.’

Badeau looked thoughtfully at Shaw for a brief second, appearing to consider something before speaking. ‘I will be setting a variety of tasks for you throughout our missions and will monitor your behaviour accordingly. All actions of merit and incompetence will be noted in my report to the Anla’Shok.’

She caught a brief look of worry on his face. ‘You thought you had graduated and were now a full Ranger, eh?’ she asked, a small smile on her face. ‘Well, that is mostly true. Your training has earned you the right to call yourself a Ranger, and the crew of this ship will treat you as such. However, my report will determine how you serve the Anla’Shok in the future - if at all. Now, if you have gotten this far, can I assume it is your desire to work in the field and gain a command of your own?’

Shaw nodded mutely.

‘Then that will depend on how you perform under my instruction over the next few months. You can still fail, Mr Shaw. Understand that. You might not necessarily be ejected from the Anla’Shok, but the rest of your days may be spent performing valuable administration duties here in Tuzanor. I get the feeling that you would regard such a fate as failure.’ When he did not reply, Badeau smiled and said, ‘So would I.’

She let a pause linger between them, which prompted Shaw to speak. ‘So, Captain, what is our first mission?’

‘Well, let us first dispense with the formalities. Officially, you and I are equal in rank, if not in fact. So, from now on I will be Sabine and you will be Michael. As for the mission, we have something you will no doubt consider a treat, a possibility of real excitement.’ She turned to one of the Minbari at a station toward the rear of the bridge. ‘Tallier, call up the system map.’

A shimmering hologram descended from the ceiling in front of the viewport, shaking briefly as the images coalesced into form. A system map showed several worlds orbiting an orange star.

‘This is Quadrant 37, ostensibly a Centauri system, but one which is in the process of being handed to the Narn - lock, stock and barrel - as part of the reparations the Republic must pay to the Regime. We are to take the Intrepide to this system and monitor the handover. We are quite sure the Centauri will not do anything stupid, but officially we are there to ensure everything proceeds in good faith, that all equipment is accounted for and no booby traps are left for Narn civilians to trigger.’

Badeau turned back toward Shaw and beckoned his Religious Caste guide forward. ‘Bethall will show you to your locker. As you should already know, you do not get your own quarters on a White Star, just space to keep any personal belongings. The sleeping area is communal and very Minbari in style, if you take my meaning.’

Shaw was familiar with the beds the Minbari favoured, angled at forty-five degrees in the belief that to lie prone was to tempt death to come to the sleeper. Many humans integrating themselves into

Minbari society had tremendous problems getting used to these sleeping arrangements, but Shaw never had any difficulty. After a typical day of intense Ranger training, he could never understand those who did.

‘Bethall will also give you a quick tour of the Intrepide while we prepare for take-off and leave Minbar. While on duty, and you will always be on duty while you are not sleeping or eating, you’ll man the weapons. Let’s see if your sharp-shooting in a real battle is as impressive as your graduation scores suggest. Any questions?’

‘Uh, no, Captain. Sabine.’

‘Very well. Bethall, you know what to do. I’ll see you back on the bridge after your familiarisation tour. Feel free to ask Bethall anything. I want you clued up and ready for duty on your return.’

May 14th 2263, EarthDome, Sol

‘Well, that brings us to the Centauri question once again, Senator.’ President Susanna Luchenko had been sitting in this meeting scheduled for an hour for at least three times that long. The broad windows flanking the conference room looked out on a placid Lake Geneva, set amidst scenery that made her home city of Moscow, for all its majestic architecture, pale in comparison. The advantages to working within EarthDome, the centre of government for the entire Earth Alliance, went beyond the trappings of power. But chairing a meeting of galactic policy was not one of them.

Senator Wahid, a portly man elected from the Indonesian block, sighed and sat back in his chair. ‘Perhaps, but I have to disagree with Senator Cognomi,’ he said, indicating with a brief hand movement the greying but ever-alert European senator opposite him. ‘It may take years for galactic trade to become stable once more. We have faced wars both here and abroad, and though the ISA promises peace there are just too many interests at stake for stability to continue. I cannot see that we have any choice but to adopt protective trade policies for our industries here on Earth and the colonies.’

Luchenko pressed an earlier point. ‘It does not matter whether we consider the position of Earth nations alone or our relative position within the rest of the galaxy, the principles of capitalist economics remain the same. A protective trade policy has often led directly to recession in the past. Senator Wahid, we have four hundred years of our own history to demonstrate this.’

‘At least,’ agreed the European senator. ‘The Earth Alliance has never seen such a boom in its economy as when we freely opened trade between ourselves and the Centauri Republic. Now that we are blockading the Centauri, under the authority of the ISA, this trade is impossible. All our current economic troubles stem from the cessation of trade between our two peoples. We must lobby the ISA to at least begin opening trade routes between the Centauri and the rest of the galaxy.’

Senator Wahid shook his head. ‘We gain too much from the ISA. Our fleet has always been one of the most powerful in the galaxy, and the new technologies we are receiving from the Minbari are cementing that position. As for trade, the ISA has opened more doors than it closed, especially among the former League worlds - and in the past we thought we had already exploited the most lucrative

opportunities there.’

‘That is true as far as it goes, Senator,’ Luchenko replied,

‘but the entire League cannot match the trading power of the Centauri. They cannot even come close. Of all the other governments in the galaxy, the Centauri are most similar to us economically. They also possess a certain pragmatism in such matters that our diplomats have always found easy to work with. Without constant trade between our two peoples, Earth will never regain the position it once had in the galaxy. Indeed, we may find ourselves sliding backwards to become no more prominent than any within the former League. Would you like to see the Earth Alliance become just another non-aligned government, Senator?’

The room fell silent at that question, and more than one senator shuddered at the thought. These were men and women who were used to wielding a certain level of power on the galactic stage, and that the Earth Alliance could be anything other than a major player among alien races was an unacceptable proposition.

‘There is another matter to consider, however,’ continued Luchenko. ‘Again, we can look to our own history for guidance. Our economy has taken a blow from cessation of trade with the Centauri. The danger to and from the Republic could be much worse. Cut off from the rest of the galaxy, the Republic could turn in upon itself and fester.

Can anyone here imagine Hitler on a galactic scale? We should not risk Londo Mollari turning into that, driven on by his people who are themselves desperate to regain their former position among the other governments. However, this is precisely what the ISA is risking with their very own version of the Versailles Treaty. By bowing to the demands of the Drazi and, in particular, the Narn, it may seem they are serving justice in these reparations. But are the Narn, like France in the early 20th century, now motivated not by the need for justice but the desire for punishment? Are they not serving their own vengeance rather than what is in the best interests of the entire galaxy?

Luchenko paused to let the weight of what she said sink in. ‘I see great danger ahead of us. The Centauri still have a large military, one that could possibly outmatch that of every member of the ISA. They have the resources of over two-dozen colonised systems and a level of technology that, whether we like it or not, probably still exceeds our own.

They once dominated a huge swathe of the known galaxy within the greatest empire ever seen, and they know how to both conquer and rule. Just what is it we are risking by siding with the current ISA position without comment?

She turned and nodded to the politician representing the Indonesian block. ‘Senator Wahid, I acknowledge your points, but I do not believe we can stand by while our allies create a monster so close to our own borders. If we can trade with the Centauri, we not only solve our own problems but theirs as well. By making them rich, we can ensure they are able to keep making reparations for their war without breaking their economy. By forcing them to become reliant on this trade, we can bring them around to our way of thinking, to our methods of government. We might even, eventually, be able to bring them back into the fold of the ISA and then maybe, just maybe, President Sheridan will finally

realise his dream of galactic peace. I, for one, will not be disappointed in that future.'

CHAPTER THREE

May 23rd 2263, Babylon 5, Epsilon Eridani

Little had changed on Babylon 5 since the newly formed ISA left the neutral station to take possession of its new headquarters in Tuzanor on Minbar. Faces were different, but people tend to remain the same. Captain Lochley had proved to be a competent commander and military governor, thwarting the organised criminals who viewed the arrival of a new commander with interest, seeking potential weak spots that might aid their business. There, at least, nothing had changed since the transition from Sheridan to Lochley.

Nor had the predicted drop in traffic to the station taken place. Given its history, no one was surprised when critics of the station began, once again, to predict its downfall. They said the same thing every year. First it was believed the construction of the station would never be completed, giving way to accident or sabotage like the first three. Or maybe it would simply disappear on commission, as had Babylon 4. Then the threat of the Great War of '59 was said to make the station redundant in purpose. Other crises followed: the attempted assault on the station by President's Clark's forces in '60, its secession from the Earth Alliance, the Shadow War, the Earth Civil War in '61, Byron. Through it all, Babylon 5 endured. These days, the ISA was gone, taking everything it stood for with it, leaving the station without purpose, it was said. The truth was, despite Babylon 5 now lacking the higher-minded notions for which it had been originally built, it was still a hub for commerce, a gathering point for races across the galaxy and the only true neutral port in existence. Despite the Earth Alliance's control and the other races's vested interests, Babylon 5 was still regarded as impartial and unaligned. Even with the ISA monitoring events across the galaxy, the station's importance as a meeting place for governments, corporations and less reputable individuals never flagged.

The Zocalo, one of the main trading centres of the station and certainly the most famous, provided all the evidence supporters of Babylon 5 needed. It thrived.

Big business and the major deals tended to be struck in the quieter cafes along the perimeter of the marketplace, but the smaller traders and merchants could always find a way to turn a credit in the Zocalo, even if they had to pay higher tariffs to legally trade on the station instead of their homeworlds. Most visitors to the station, which still numbered in the millions every year, passed through the Zocalo, and a clever trader could always persuade a tourist or relaxing businessman to part with their credits for the right souvenir. Babylon 5 security monitored this area almost as closely as it did customs, for nefarious dealings would likely start here. Petty thieves and pickpockets struck from time to time, but under the watchful eye of Security Chief Zack Allen, few criminals lasted long before being thrown into the brig and then deported. Rumours circulated that the notorious Thieves' Guild had taken up residence in the station's Brown Sector, but if they were here, the organised thieves were laying low.

Tim Aston was uncomfortable. Though the voyage from the transfer point off Io to Babylon 5 could not be considered long by any stretch thanks to the ever present jump gates, his shuttle was not designed for anything but interplanetary travel, and at times Aston thought he might spiral down into a

gravity well within hyperspace and never be heard from again. He did not relish the thought of the return journey.

He also considered himself at odds with the general environment of the Zocalo and, with growing unease, sipped the hot liquid the trader claimed was some kind of Brakiri tea. The crowds milling around the Zocalo bothered him. It crossed his mind that he had spent too much of his life alone in the depths of space on board his shuttle, with no human contact other than a voice on the other end of a comm link. He thought of Mayfield as one of his better friends, but he doubted they had spent much time in each other's company over the years. At times he struggled to recall exactly what the man looked like.

Now he was stuck here on Babylon 5. He had never been this far from Earth's own solar system, and he found much of what he saw simply strange. Sure, he had seen aliens on Ganymede, Mars and Earth - hell, if the more right-wing news networks were to be believed, those aliens owned more real estate on Earth than humans did. Right from his entry through customs, Babylon 5 had taken his breath away. He couldn't believe so many different alien species inhabited the galaxy. After all, the galaxy seemed so small on the galactic maps. The major systems could fit onto one page in a travel guide, and hyperspace certainly belied the vast distances between them. During his bewildered walk from customs to the Zocalo, he lost count of the different aliens. Narn, Minbari, a few he recognised from the old League and many, many more he had never seen, heard or believed in. The Zocalo itself seemed to be a magnet for them, and while humans were in the majority, a sea of skin, scales, fur and feathers confronted him at every turn. He had to admit it. Life was simpler when prospecting floating rocks in space. He was out of his depth here.

Aston dreaded the thought of some alien beast walking up to him, barking in a strange but insistent tongue. He had no idea of the correct etiquette or response. He tried his best to look as if he belonged but could not stop fidgeting with his right foot.

'Mr. Aston?' The voice made him jump, and he quickly set down his tea.

'Ah, yes. Mr. Shiritori?' Aston evaluated the fair-headed man of medium build who seemed to be of European descent, despite his name. He certainly seemed more comfortable here than Aston. They shook hands and the newcomer took a seat opposite Aston, waving away the Brakiri waiter who had materialised to take his order.

Shiritori had been recommended to Aston on Ganymede by someone who promised to set up a meeting, though it had to take place out of the Earth system. After all, men like Shiritori could not be expected to roam the galaxy meeting bitter-sweat prospectors. Actually, Aston suspected Shiritori was not known to his friend on Ganymede at all but had rather been a friend of a friend of a friend. Combined with Aston's unwillingness to disclose the details of his discovery, he was frankly amazed that this man had kept the appointment. Perhaps this was the next stage of his changing luck.

After a few brief seconds of silence, Shiritori prompted him. 'Well, Mr. Aston? I was told you have something I might find interesting.'

'Well, I hope so,' said Aston. He reached into his jacket to retrieve a datapad, hoping it had not fallen

through the hole in the inside pocket, forcing him to root around in the lining. He activated the flat instrument, found the right file and slid it across the table for Shiritori's inspection. The man scrutinised the screen, and Aston found himself staring hard, trying to gauge any change in expression that might betray his interest. After punching a few buttons to query the datapad, Shiritori breathed out a little too heavily for Aston's comfort. After another long pause, Shiritori set down the datapad and shook his head.

‘Sorry. It's worthless.’

Aston slumped back, his shoulders low. ‘Damn,’ he muttered. ‘Do you know what it is? Is there someone else who might be interested?’ He caught Shiritori's stare. ‘I really need to make this work. Without some attention my shuttle might not even make it back to Earth, and I am all tapped out from the docking fees here.’

Shiritori pursed his lips. ‘It's Narn. No idea how it ended up in the asteroid belt. Probably some trader who suffered a navigational malfunction and flew into a rock. Can happen.’ Aston had suffered enough mishaps in his own shuttle to know the truth of this. Through his dejection, he forced himself to listen to Shiritori. ‘It's a fuel cell, nothing more. Most of the charge has dissipated. I doubt even a collector would be interested.’

He watched Aston's head lower and, with a thoughtful expression, picked up the datapad again. ‘You really cannot get back to Earth without selling this?’

Aston looked up again. ‘No. I really thought I had something. Thought my luck had changed.’

‘Well...’ Shiritori considered. ‘Did you bring it through customs or is it still on your shuttle?’

‘I left it in my hold.’

‘Okay. Maybe, just maybe, I might know of someone who could renovate this fuel cell. They are in Abbai space and will be hard to track down. I can't give you much for this, but if you really are desperate I might be able to give you enough to get back to Io, perhaps even get some of those repairs you need done.’

Aston perked up immediately. ‘Really?’

Raising a hand, Shiritori said, ‘Now I don't do this for everyone, but I have been where you are. I was once stuck on this station for six months before I could raise enough money to leave. Had to live in Downbelow and everything. Wouldn't wish that on anyone. I can't have others knowing about this soft spot though, or everyone will want a favour. If you promise to keep our arrangement quiet, I think I can see my clear to giving you, say, four thousand for it?’

Four thousand? Now that was real money. Not as much as Aston had hoped for but more than he had expected. With four thousand credits, he could do at least most of the updates and repairs needed on his shuttle. Maybe even pick up a new sensor array that would make Mayfield envious.

‘I give you my word. No one will know. I told no one up to now and can keep quiet after this.’ He did

not notice the man's extra attention on him as he said this. Shiritori smiled sympathetically and, after keying an instruction to the datapad, slid it across the table, keeping his thumb on one half of the registration interface.

‘Give me a thumb print and the money will be deposited into your account immediately.’

Aston could not do that fast enough.

‘Good to do business with you, Mr. Aston. I hope you get to back to Earth space safely. I’ll send some people to your shuttle to pick the fuel cell up within the hour.’

Shiritori stood with a hand outstretched, and Aston clumsily copied his actions as they shook on the deal. He sat back down as Shiritori walked away and rapidly disappeared among the crowd of the Zocalo. Waving the Brakiri waiter back over, he ordered a beer to go. After all, he could afford it now.

Hastening back to his rented quarters in Red Sector, Shiritori immediately crossed the living space of the none-too-spacious room and sat down in front of his universal computer link. He first sent an audio-only message to his ship's crew in the docking port of the station to arrange the pickup of the device he had just bought. He had clocked Aston before they had exchanged more than a few words. One of countless millions in the galaxy trying to scratch a living in space and failing spectacularly. Now the man had thought he hit the big time. In a way, it was a shame he had run into a fence like Shiritori. Still, Aston's poor luck and judgement might well be Shiritori's fortune. Literally. He had been right in suggesting that Aston might have ended up in Downbelow, but it had not been charity that moved him to make an offer. Not by a long shot. Shiritori had never spent more than a few hours in Downbelow, and then only to track down a debtor or someone who could not travel freely around the station for ‘legal’ reasons. Still, the story had seemed right. He called up the interstellar comm links on his screen and, engaging his personal encryption system, sent a text-only message to his contact in the Centauri Republic.

Have something interesting. Strange but extremely strong energy emissions. Presumed to be Dilgar design. Two million credits.

June 4th 2263, Quadrant 37

Using a Centauri naming system that had not been repeated since the Republic sprawled across the known galaxy, Quadrant 37 endured a short but violent history. No sentient species had developed on any of the system's six planets, and only one of the stellar bodies held both an atmosphere and enough mineral resources to make colonisation worthwhile. Its chief value, however, was as a strategic conduit between the Narn Regime and Centauri Republic. Whoever controlled Quadrant 37 had a tangible advantage over the other in the event of war.

Quadrant 37 was first officially claimed by the Centauri as they began to spread across the galaxy to create their great empire. The Centauri all but ignored it as a worthless system, and they never settled or attempted colonisation. As their empire faltered and began to contract from pressures of other emerging races, the Narn became ascendant, throwing off the shackles of their Centauri oppressors

and stretching forth their own hand across the stars. The shrinking of the Centauri Republic hastened as the Narn made war against them, and it took many systems to bleed their raw fury. The Narn finally stopped at Quadrant 37, claiming it as theirs and constructing an outpost - along with what they called a civilian colony. This colony was little more than a listening post, and the Centauri took every opportunity to vigorously complain about its existence. Their empire was crumbling, their voices little more than the impotent cry of a great civilisation long past its time. The Centauri would certainly not risk going to war over a world with so little to offer no matter what the Narn used it for.

The balance changed in 2258 when the Centauri finally began to find the will to strike at the Narn. Quadrant 37 was the first system the Centauri struck, harnessing a powerful and ancient alien race known as the Shadows, wiping out the Narn colony within minutes. After the death of Emperor Turhan and a further attack against another planetary system in Quadrant 14, Centauri forces flowed into Regime space to enslave their age-old enemy once more. Even when the Narn forced invaders from their homeworld for the second time in history, the Centauri were able to retain possession of the strategically important but otherwise fairly worthless Quadrant 37. Wait long enough, however, and everything changes. On this day, Quadrant 37 was being returned to the Narn as part of the reparations the Centauri were being forced to pay the governments of the ISA. It had been an easy system to let go, as it represented billions of credits of reparations that the Centauri government no longer had to pay.

Shaw considered the system's brief history as he gazed at its second and 'main' planet, steadily growing larger as the Intrepide sped through space towards its rendezvous with Narn and Centauri politicians on its surface. He started slightly as Badeau's voice floated up from close behind.

'Strange, isn't it?' she asked. 'A planet so dead and yet so valued by some. Is it, I wonder, worth the blood that has been spilt here?'

He turned to face his Captain. 'Well, the Narn certainly think so. I heard they gave up billions of credits for this place.'

Badeau looked directly into his eyes. 'But why? Why do you think it is so precious to them?'

'Well, not for the resources...'

'Certainly not. Barely worth the effort when you have as many systems under your control as the Regime does.'

'Its strategic position then.'

Badeau gave a small sigh - a little sadly, Shaw thought. 'Yes,' she said. 'Even now, the Narn are considering the day when they will fight the Centauri once more. I have heard it said that both the Narn and Centauri are lost people, that the galaxy should just blink and let them pass. I have no doubt it would be easier for everyone concerned, and yet how can we take that seriously?'

'There is some argument to suggest that the Narn have rights to this place. Both sides have agreed to swap Quadrant 37 for a portion of the reparations due to the Regime. This may help keep the peace

between them.'

'Will it?' Badeau raised an eyebrow and then shook her head. 'We are here as peacekeepers, but I fear we are doing nothing more than giving the Narn a position of advantage for the future. They will either use it or the Centauri will fight against it. I believe that when the Centauri pulled out of the ISA, we lost our last, best hope for peace between them and the Narn.'

'Captain - Sabine. You seem... at a loss. You think this is, what, a fool's errand?'

'I don't know. We all do what we can and, as Rangers, we are here to make sure the transfer takes place smoothly and the present peace is continued. I do not know what evil we serve in the future. Give me the squabbles among the old League, the hunger for technology of the Earth Alliance or any one of the galaxy's other perpetual problems. I genuinely believe the ISA is a force of good and that it can resolve them all. Except for this. Except for the enmity, no, the raw hatred the Narn and Centauri have for one another. It has gone beyond a racial thing. It has become bred into them, at a genetic level possibly. I don't know how to even begin solving it. I do know that if a galaxy-spanning war ever begins again, it will start on this border. Perhaps even in this system.'

The two Rangers stood in silence, lost in their own thoughts as they watched the brown and lifeless planet move ever closer. The Minbari crew worked calmly at their stations, decelerating the Intrepide and manoeuvring it into low orbit. When one of the helmsmen reported that the lone Centauri outpost had been located, Badeau gave the order to begin the landing cycle and returned to her Captain's chair.

Retreating to his station, Shaw performed routine checks until one of the Minbari behind him reported that two contacts had been detected, also in orbit. Both the Narn and Centauri had sent warships to monitor the transfer of ownership and, true to their eternal rivalry, neither had bothered sending a frigate when a much larger ship would serve just as well. The Centauri Primus-class battlecruiser and Narn G'Quan-class heavy cruiser hung in space above the descending White Star, motionless but facing each other with, it seemed, barely contained malice. Shaw could tell from his console that neither had powered up their weaponry, but he felt it an ominous sign that both governments had felt the need to send warships of this size. Few vessels in either fleet were larger or more powerful and yet, when all was said and done, this was a simple diplomatic exchange.

The Intrepide rocked gently, buffeted by the atmosphere of the desolate world officially called Quadrant 37/2 by the Centauri. The crew on board felt little disturbance as the White Star's gravitic drive worked to smooth out all bumps and shimmies. The helmsmen worked skilfully to slow the Intrepide to a crawl as it approached the outpost's landing bay, circling once before deploying the landing gear and making a soft touchdown between two shuttles.

Badeau stood from her seat and turned to face Shaw. 'Well, we are here. Let's see what good we can do.' Giving her normal standing orders to the Minbari crew, she left the bridge with Shaw following close behind. As they walked down the boarding ramp, they spied a Narn and Centauri waiting for them by the outpost's landing bay entrance.

'Remember, we are officially here to ensure the Centauri do nothing to harm the Narn cause during

this transfer,’ Badeau whispered. ‘However, don’t trust either of them completely. There is too much at stake for the Narn, the Centauri and us.’

The Centauri stepped forward first to extend his arms. ‘Welcome, my dear Rangers. I offer you the Hands of Friendship. I am Principal Turquon, representative of the Centauri Republic.’

A Principal, thought Shaw. A low-ranking official intended as a calculated insult to the Narn? That might not bode well, but if the Centauri could limit themselves to a minor slight, this mission might still go according to plan.

‘Thank you, Turquon. I accept the Hands of Friendship,’ Badeau said as she clasped the Centauri at the forearms. ‘I am Sabine Badeau of the Anla’Shok, and this is my assistant, Michael Shaw.’ She turned to the Narn and saluted in his race’s fashion, two fists drawn against the chest while performing a slight bow of respect.

The Narn returned the salute and bow. ‘I bring the greetings and gratitude of the Narn Regime for overseeing the lawful transfer of Quadrant 37. I am Na’Quil, Third Circle. May we offer you refreshments after your long voyage?’

‘Thank you, no. We ate just before we jumped in-system, and there is much work to be done,’ replied Badeau.

‘Of course. Please, follow me and I’ll give you a tour of the facilities.’

As the large reinforced door to the outpost swung slowly open, Shaw noticed the Centauri staring quite openly at the Intrepide. As Turquon turned to follow the party into the outpost, he caught Shaw’s eye and smiled.

‘That is a nice ship. I have never seen one up close. I don’t suppose a reciprocal tour would be possible?’

Shaw was a little startled by the Centauri’s directness and cast a look at Badeau, but she was already inside the outpost. ‘I, ah, don’t think that will be possible, Principal.’

Turquon shrugged. ‘Such is my luck. Sent light years away to sign away an entire system, and I don’t even get a close look at one of the most beautiful ships flying.’ He smiled once more. ‘Don’t worry, Mr. Shaw. We Centauri are not here to take advantage of anyone, despite our decision to leave the ISA. I am not going to cause you any trouble.’

After the Shadows’ assault on Quadrant 37, nothing had been left of the original Narn outpost but rubble. Having little to gain by picking over twisted metal and broken Narn bodies, the Centauri simply built their own outpost when they recovered the system. With a full war raging at the time, few resources were diverted into making the place little more than a relay station for communications between the invading fleet and Centauri Prime. A nod had been paid to the Centauri’s love of creature comforts but, at its heart, the outpost was little more than several spartan living quarters, a maintenance bay and a power station bolted to an operations centre. Even hydroponics were lacking

here, and it soon became obvious to the Rangers that all consumables had been regularly shipped to Quadrant 37 from more prosperous worlds. For a system that held little importance beyond the strategic level, and with the Republic apparently reluctant to start a war any time soon, the Centaurum must have seen this as an expensive luxury. Perhaps here was a clue as to why the Republic had been so quick to relinquish control of Quadrant 37.

The Rangers' orders were to ensure the peaceful transfer of the system from Centauri to Narn hands, but this mission carried the implicit instruction to prevent any disturbance in the future too. This secondary goal merely called for a studious attention to detail while they were in the system, until the treaty of transfer was signed. The first would be a little more problematic, Shaw guessed, if the Primus and G'Quan high in orbit were to open fire upon one another. The White Star was the most powerful ship of its size in the galaxy, but a single vessel could do little if the two frontline warships engaged each other.

Fortunately, that seemed unlikely. Badeau was pleasantly surprised that the Narn and Centauri delegates refrained from snide and pointed comments aimed at the other, though there was clearly no love lost between them. While she performed an extensive sweep of the outpost for potential booby traps, Badeau ordered Shaw to check personnel manifests to verify that all Centauri present were actually leaving. Suicide troops were more the style of the Narn back when the Centauri occupied their world, but nothing could be left to chance between these two governments. Anything could be used as an excuse for war later.

Shaw's duty was no more glamorous than Badeau's, and he thought more than once that all those months training with the Denn'Bok might have been wasted if this is what Rangers in the field spent most of their time doing. Still, it was his first mission, and he had no intention of disappointing the Captain. No matter what duties she placed before him, no matter how dangerous, odious or just plain boring, he resolved to approach them all with the same zeal that had seen him through training. The personnel check first took him to the operations centre, where he downloaded the outpost's records onto a datapad. Cross-referencing the records with those given to the Rangers by the Anla'Shok analysts on Tuzanor raised no alarms, though he was aware that the ISA's intelligence on Centauri personnel could not be regarded as complete. He then arranged for all remaining Centauri in the outpost to funnel through the access corridor to their shuttle, identifying each one in turn, then crossing them off his datapad.

Halfway through the task, Shaw grew uneasy. As he checked off the last few Centauri workers, he knew his suspicions were justified. With all Centauri in the outpost now on their shuttle awaiting the Ranger's permission to depart, six names remained unchecked on his datapad. At first he doubted himself, thinking he must have missed something, made a rookie's mistake. However, a review of the process revealed no error on his part. According to the records provided by the analysts, six Centauri were missing. Perhaps the information provided by the analysts was incorrect? He headed back into the outpost to find Badeau and Turquon.

Intending to look first among the living quarters, where he had last seen his captain and the delegates, he caught the sound of laughter coming from the operations centre and changed course. He found the trio engaged in light conversation, Badeau evidently having finished her sweep of the outpost. She and Turquon were smiling at some shared joke. Na'Quil looked a little... smug would be the word

Shaw would choose. Then again, his government was gaining a world they had bled hard for in the past with no more effort than the signing of a treaty. Badeau looked up as he entered.

‘Everything check out?’

‘Er, well almost. Principal Turquon, I have just one query.’

‘Of course,’ purred the Centauri. ‘Anything to help our friends among the Rangers.’

‘I’ve checked and double-checked the personnel here against the records, and it seems there are six missing. Namely Danallis, Maladi, Caius, Kolonar, Nandra and Varga. Your records indicate they were all scientists.’

‘Let me see that,’ said Badeau, suddenly serious. She studied the datapad as Turquon spoke.

‘Yes, I remember. A tragic incident.’ Turquon had adopted a sorrowful tone. ‘We were looking at the possibility of terraforming one or more worlds in Quadrant 37 in the hope of establishing a more permanent colony. Those were the scientists directed to begin research here, but their ship met with a hyperspace accident, and they were lost en route.’

‘So why wasn’t this recorded?’ asked Badeau.

‘An oversight on the part the outpost’s clerks, I would imagine. They must have recorded the ship’s destruction in the very least. Let me see.’ Turquon moved to a console and begun punching buttons on a display. ‘Yes. Here it is. Ah, sorry, let me translate it to English.’ He typed in another command and moved aside for the Rangers to see.

Shaw scanned the text in front of him and, indeed, the names of the scientists had been recorded as those lost on board a transport bound for Quadrant 37, the Valance. A malfunction of the jump engines had destroyed the ship as it attempted to enter realspace. A rare accident these days, but it did happen. Perhaps all the more likely if stories of the Republic’s ailing economy were to be believed, he surmised. He glanced at Badeau, and she gave him a quick nod.

‘Everything seems in order gentlemen. Unless there is anything either of you wish to bring to our attention?’ she asked.

As one, the Narn and Centauri delegates shook their heads. Badeau produced her own datapad and called up the treaty that would formerly hand over Quadrant 37 to the Narn Regime, then placed it on a nearby work surface. Turquon and Na’Quil placed their own next to hers.

Badeau spoke first. ‘I witness the transfer of Quadrant 37 from the sovereignty of the Centauri Republic to the Narn Regime. I hereby declare all resolutions of the treaty have been observed by all parties involved.’ With this, she pressed her thumb on the registration interface of first her datapad, then the Narn’s and finally the Centauri’s.

Turquon was next, but his words were simple. ‘All resolutions have been observed, Quadrant 37 now belongs to the Regime.’ He pressed his thumb to all three datapads.

Finally, Na'Quil spoke. 'I bear witness to Quadrant 37 being returned to its rightful and lawful owners. All treaty resolutions have been observed.' Shaw glanced at Turquon as the Narn added his thumbprint to the treaty, but the Centauri did not seem to even notice Na'Quil's less-than-diplomatic words. In fact, Shaw thought he looked resigned.

'Gentlemen, I thank you for your part in making this transfer of sovereignty quick and peaceful,' Badeau said formerly. 'Na'Quil, your people can begin landing as soon as Principal Turquon's shuttle has docked with his ship. I hope you enjoy your duties here.' She gave the Narn his salute and, once again, it was returned. 'Principal Turquon?'

'After you, my lady, please,' he said gallantly, sweeping an arm to indicate she should lead the way out of the outpost.

Na'Quil did not follow them out, and Shaw heard the operations centre's main computer systems being reinitiated as they walked down the main access corridor. At the landing bay, both Badeau and Shaw exchanged the Arms of Friendship with Turquon.

'It was a pleasure to meet the two of you,' the Centauri said. 'I never met a Ranger before today and heard many things about you, both strange and terrifying. Working with you today gives me hope that one day the Republic might once again consider joining your Alliance.'

'The door is always open, Principal,' replied Badeau. 'Perhaps you ought to talk to the others in the Centaurum.'

'I fear they would pay little attention to me, my dear. Do you think they would send anyone important to a world the Great Maker himself has forsaken?' Turquon smiled. 'No, I am afraid the Republic and your Alliance must clash a little while longer yet. Politically, certainly - hopefully not militarily. I am sincere in my hope for closer relations, but it won't happen in our life times. I would bet a lot on that.'

He nodded to Badeau and then turned to walk to his shuttle.

'Come on,' said Badeau. 'It would be an insult to the Narn if we gave close escort to that shuttle, but we can at least keep within striking distance.'

'Trouble?' asked Shaw.

'I don't think so, but it would be stupid to let something happen now. And I think we need more Centauri like that in the Republic.'

They hastened aboard the Intrepide and took off quickly, shadowing the Centauri shuttle at a distance until it cleared the atmosphere and made its approach to the Primus battlecruiser. Within moments, it had docked with the huge warship, which soon made a slow turn before firing up its immense engines and heading away from the planet's gravity well, where it could make the jump to hyperspace safely. Soon after, the White Star's crew began to detect several shuttles leaving the G'Quan, all carrying personnel to re-staff the outpost. No doubt more than one of them also carried advanced intelligence

gathering equipment that would soon be penetrating deep into Centauri space. Their mission complete, Badeau ordered the Intrepide to break orbit and open a jump point itself.

The White Star was not long in hyperspace before Badeau called Shaw forward. ‘So, how do you think that went? And how well do you think you did?’ she asked.

‘Well, the mission was a success,’ he said and paused to gauge Badeau’s reaction. When she continued to just look at him, he felt forced to continue. ‘We were charged with ensuring a peaceful handover, and that is what we achieved. Neither party seemed aggressive towards the other, and the treaty was signed. The Centauri left and the Narn took over.’ He paused again as he considered the day’s events. Still...

‘Yes?’ she prompted.

‘Well, I didn’t say anything else while we were down there, as you just glossed over it. I figured you had your reasons. But those missing Centauri are bugging me. It’s a loose end.’

‘Ah, yes, you have it precisely,’ she encouraged. ‘Now, what do you think is happening?’

Shaw thought hard. With just the information they had seen today, few solid conclusions could be formed. He had been trained to speculate, however, though it had also been hammered into him not to rely solely on those speculations. Imagination was not a trait that was knocked out of Rangers during their training, but it was something to be tempered. Did Sabine have information he lacked? Possibly, but he knew he wasn’t expected to act on that, merely put the pieces he did have together.

‘Well,’ he began. ‘Sending scientists to terraform the system makes no sense. That takes years, decades even, and they must have known months ago that Quadrant 37 was being handed back to the Narn. These things do not get agreed overnight. So that was a lie. The scientists were intended for something else. The ship destroying itself as it activated its jump engines is a possibility, given how much we have heard about the state of Centauri shipping since the reparations started. On the other hand, if an assassination was planned, sabotaged jump engines would not be the first time it had been attempted in the Republic. Na’Quil did not push the matter, so either he believed the Centauri, which is unlikely, or he assumed it was something relatively harmless. Or, he thought it was a purely internal matter for the Centauri - feuding Houses or something.’

Badeau nodded slowly as she leaned back in her seat and propped her chin with a hand. ‘Good. You found the essential truth - that Turquon, however pleasant he seemed, was lying. Your speculations are more or less on course as well. You missed one item of information which would push you in one direction but then, you weren’t primed to look for it.’

Shaw frowned. ‘What did I miss?’ he asked, beginning to curse himself for being inattentive. As a Ranger, he had been trained to pick up any pattern during analysis. Coming consistently near the top in Denn’Bok training was no excuse for not concentrating on more cerebral lessons. Of course, for the Minbari, they were both much the same.

‘All six came from House Kaado. Two were using an alias of House Ardo, which is what threw you

off. However, I am confident that when checking begins on Tuzanor, we'll find those aliases confirmed.'

'I am not sure I was supposed to have known that,' he said, a hint of bitterness in his tone.

'As I said, you had not been primed to spot it. In my briefing before we left Minbar, I was told that intelligence was being sought on House Kaado from all Rangers operating near the Centauri border. It was a minor thing, and you'll find we get dozens of such requests with every mission. This time it might have paid off. Anyway, now you know that, what are your conclusions?'

Shaw felt he was on firmer ground now. 'It has nothing to do with the Narn. It is a feud between Houses. Intelligence must be watching the rivalries between the Great Houses of the Republic. These scientists were assassinated by enemies of their House.'

I'll go you one better. It still makes little sense for scientists to be sent to an outpost to start a project when the entire system is being handed over to another government. Consider this - suppose those scientists are not dead?'

Pursuing his lips, Shaw was silent for a few seconds.

'Wow' was all he said at first. Finally finding his voice, he said, Kidnapped, maybe. Probably not as hostages but for what they know.' He stopped, considering another possibility. 'Or House Kaado themselves made the scientists disappear. Which means whatever they are doing, the House wants kept secret from the rest of the Republic.'

'Personally, I don't like either possibility,' said Badeau. 'Oh, I don't know which it could be, if it is either. I have no details on House Kaado. I was simply handed the request for more information. Still, it means that as well as completing our mission, we may have picked up something the Ranger-Analysts can use. If so, we can consider that a bonus, though we may never know the final result.'

She sat up straight and crossed her legs. 'Despite the 'great' galactic ramifications, it was a simple mission. You did well enough, but let's see if we can get you doing something a little more complex next. Get some rest for now. I'll transmit our mission briefing to Tuzanor and see where we are to head next.'

Walking to the White Star's sleeping quarters, deep in the belly of the ship, Shaw was suddenly surprised at how tired he was. The Captain was right: the mission had not been especially complicated, but he had been on edge all day, not wanting to make the slightest mistake. He had managed to perform his tasks without any errors. Without stopping to grab something to eat, he simply lay back on one of the angled Minbari-style sleeping couches and closed his eyes. Within minutes he was asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

June 17th 2263, House Kaado, Centauri Prime

If viewed casually by the average Centauri noble, Veneta Kaado's manor would seem the same as it always had done. Certainly, a few more royal guardsmen were in evidence, patrolling its gardens and outbuildings, but then the new head of House Kaado was given to vulgar displays of power and influence. Some might say his flaunting of both was even more distasteful recently and that Veneta Kaado might be advised to take more care in what he displayed to the outside world. After all, Centauri society would only tolerate so much self-indulgence. The same nobles given to these musings, however, would just as likely put the flourish of guardsmen down to an overenthusiastic display of celebration for Veneta's good fortune. Or perhaps they might surmise he truly needed them. After all, he gained his position as head of House Kaado through circumstances which, if not overtly suspicious, certainly gave rise to many rumours. They might assume Veneta's hold on his House was weak and he feared other rising nobles with the will and ambition to steal his position. So, Veneta Kaado could be considered strong and able to display frivolous indications of his power, or maybe he was weak and desperately trying to ward a strike against his position. Which would it likely be?

Such were the vagaries of Centauri politics.

Nestled between rolling hills outside of the capital, Veneta's manor was another of his uncle's possessions, perhaps the one he coveted the most. Close enough to Imperial City to make journeys there convenient and yet far enough away to have escaped the bombardment of the Narn-led attack on Centauri Prime half a year before, the manor reflected Veneta's new power. Some estates were wiped off the map by the tremendous energies that were unleashed on the Centauri population, unintended targets and collateral damage in the attack. The deaths of those influential Centauri nobles caught in the strike caused a scramble for power in the Centaurum, and many benefited from the misfortune of others.

The extra royal guardsmen were a condition laid upon Veneta by his visitors today, and he suspected the demands were as much a test of his political power as a security measure. Here, in his personal home, he conducted his most critical meetings. Veneta could call upon support and influence others into his way of thinking here and be reasonably sure that word would not immediately get back to the Emperor.

But today was different. His meeting today was not with followers or sycophants, no matter how much he might inwardly enjoy the presence of both. Instead, he was meeting with his peers, other heads of Houses and high-ranking members of the Centaurum who shared his views on the Republic's future - and were willing to do something to change their own fates. All had vested interests, of course. In Centauri politics, that went without question. The difference here was that each had been personally affected by either the Republic's isolation from the galaxy or the reparations Emperor Mollari had agreed to. What had begun as a few whispers in the shadowy corners of banquets and official gatherings had grown into a full-blown conspiracy.

In terms of raw power, Veneta Kaado was a relatively small player in august company. He expertly

played to the vanities of each member present and, more importantly, was willing to take the risks others were keen to avoid. If their meeting today were discovered, for example, the others would no doubt make some suitable excuse as to how they had been duped. Because the gathering took place on his property, however, he would be labelled as the head conspirator and pay the price. Veneta had no illusions that the others were doing anything but minimising the risk to their own necks, but his bold moves allowed him to conspire with them as an equal, and some here might even defer to him. Conspiracies had their own set of politics, and Veneta quickly learned them all. Taking these risks would confer real power on him in the larger world of the Centaurum, even if not everyone he dealt with understood quite why.

Getting the three other members of Centauri nobility currently sitting in his boardroom to meet without guards or flunkies present was difficult but necessary if the conspiracy was to continue. Veneta gazed out of the large tinted window that overlooked his extensive gardens, watching the low sun play across the leaves of Taafa trees and Starlaces fluttering in the gentle breeze. These and other exotic plants flanked a sculpted lake that extended out of view. Veneta allowed himself to dream of the Republic reaching forth across the galaxy once more. Then, perhaps, things would regain a sense of normality, and the money and power would flow freely once more.

Veneta looked up as Minister Kallafa of House Verlime began talking again. Despite House Verlime's relatively poor standing in the Centaurum, he was allowed into the conspiracy to perform an act that even Veneta had been forced to defer on. Every conspiracy had a weak point, and Verlime was it for this one. It had not been spoken aloud, but every other member present knew that should anything go wrong, it would be House Verlime that acted the scapegoat. If everything went according to plan, Verlime would have a chance to reverse some of his recent misfortunes and set his star rising once more. That, and being forced to listen to his opinions, seemed a small enough price to pay.

'Under Kaado's directions,' Verlime nodded at Veneta, 'I have arranged for transports to be in the Coutor system every other week, ready to transport the, ah, device whenever it is ready. Anyone checking the manifests will see only the new supply treaty signed by our Houses.'

Kallafa Verlime was a skinny and rakish man, his greying hair arranged into the large, wide crest that nobles seeking to grasp power adopted, the style being reminiscent of the current Emperor's. Naturally, it was common in the royal court as well. For all their faults, the rest of the nobles present, Veneta included, wore the more restrained crest that simply extended upwards and not out. They were confident in themselves and certain of their power.

'Has the egress route from the Republic been determined?' asked Minister Territt, a noble who clearly enjoyed the vices his position granted and was certainly the most overweight Centauri that Veneta had ever seen.

'Yes, Minister,' said Verlime, a little too smoothly, as if he were trying too hard to ingratiate himself into his present company. 'We have human smugglers prepared to take the cargo from my transport into the Narn Regime, and then route it through several different systems and ports to Babylon 5. With new shipping documents, it will be relatively easy for our people to send it into the Earth Alliance.' He seemed suitably pleased with his work though, in truth, his part began and ended in Republic space. Veneta's own smuggling contacts had allowed the Narn to be used in this way, and Minister

Territt's people stood ready on Babylon 5.

'I am still a little uncomfortable sending something so valuable so close to our greatest enemy.' Minister Tannama spoke up, a noble who favoured the heavy gold-braided clothing fashionable a century or more ago when the Republic had been at its greatest. It was a fashion few others chose to adopt. This was also not the first concern that the minister had raised for their plans.

'Our strategy has never been without risks,' Territt reminded him. 'The Narn have the technology least likely to detect the cargo as it passes through their worlds. And it need not remain there long on its journey.'

'It is also necessary if we are to implicate the Narn should anything go wrong,' Veneta said. 'We have little choice. Would you prefer to send it through the Minbari Federation or on a long hyperspace voyage to the League, where we may never see it again? Discovery by either route would surely be inevitable and make it harder for us to force everyone's hand in the right direction.'

'How goes the work of your scientists, Kaado?' Territt asked.

Veneta took a breath before answering. 'In theory, we could go now. We know how the device is activated and have already adapted it to fit a fuse dependant on both time and galactic coordinates. What we don't know is how effective the device actually is, as our intelligence on the Dilgar and what they were capable of was never extensive. We believe this device was one of several, each capable of linking to the others to magnify their effects. Together, they might have been capable of destroying an entire world. On its own... we don't know. There is a lot of power in that device, and my people believe it is designed to attack a planet's crust. The area of effect is probably measurable in hundreds of miles. Maybe more. Given where we intend to place it, however, I would vouch for it being enough. Given more time, I would like to continue the development of duplicates.'

Minister Territt shook his head. 'That is a luxury. If this device fails to get through to the target, we cannot guarantee that others will. Given your assurances for its effects, I believe we already have what we need. You mentioned before that duplicates would likely require materials only found on the Dilgar's homeworld?'

'It looks that way. As you pointed out then, we have no reasonable way to get to Omelos safely, and there is no certainty that those materials can still be found there after their star went nova.'

'Agreed. You'll take care of your scientists and anyone else who came into contact with the device?'

'Consider it done.'

'What about escalation?' This was probably the first pertinent question Veneta had heard Verlime ask since he had first met the noble.

'I will use a favour owed to me by someone I have in the military,' replied Territt. 'We'll have a state of mobilisation throughout our border worlds. It will look as though the order came from the Emperor himself.'

‘That’s the bit I always enjoyed,’ said Veneta. ‘Once an attack is made, the Emperor must go along with it. If he denies it, he looks weak and unable to control the Republic.’

‘Indeed,’ answered Territt. ‘However, I long ago ceased relying on Mollari to do the right thing. Therefore, my contact will have a full squadron of battlecruisers under his direct control and, for the right price, is willing to start direct hostilities. At the very least, Earth starts sending fleets to our borders, preparing to retaliate. If our own ships are close enough, combat is inevitable.’

‘Agreed,’ Veneta nodded.

‘I actually prefer that scenario,’ said Territt. ‘It gets our fleet into play early. Our people must become used to not just war again but victory. If we can mobilise our fleet and claim early successes, there will be a landslide of opinion in the Centaurum that even our idiot Emperor won’t be able to ignore. That, I think, is where we can withdraw safely to the shadows and let events take their course. The revenue of dozens of newly conquered worlds, let alone the increased contracts from our own military, should strengthen our Houses for the next century. We need never reveal our part in things.’

Veneta smiled at this. ‘Unless it should become politically useful, of course.’

‘Of course.’

A thought crossed Veneta’s mind. ‘Has Durla been successfully isolated from all of this?’

Durla was a minor noble who recently leaped over the heads of many of his peers when the Emperor appointed him as Minister of Internal Security. An odd appointment, many thought, and there were whispers of some hold the Minister had over the Emperor. He had yet to make his presence felt within the Centaurum, but many considered him a man to be watched, as he obviously possessed unseen political strength.

Minister Territt nodded. ‘Durla is an unknown quantity in our plans, but he has only been in play for a few months. By using our own people and calling in only the most solid of favours, I cannot see how he can interfere with what we are doing. In any case, events will soon be elevated beyond his position when the military becomes involved. We only need be concerned if things go wrong,’ he finished with a wry smile that only Veneta shared.

The conspirators were silent for a few long seconds before Tannama coughed. ‘I would like to raise one matter again.’

Territt raised his head slightly to acknowledge him. Great Maker, don’t do it, thought Veneta. He was half expecting the objection but believed that not even Tannama was as naive as this.

‘Our ultimate goal is to reverse the fortunes of the Republic and, with it, our own. I don’t believe we should go to war to achieve this. We risk much, and war is a costly business.’

‘No, Tannama,’ said Territt. ‘You fail to grasp the realities of the position of the Republic in the galaxy. We still have the largest active military force outside the Narn Regime, and our fleet is far superior. You also fail to understand internal economics. War is indeed costly for the Republic, but

we will be the ones who benefit from that spending. That is the point. Someone always gets rich from war, and it is our turn now.'

'But with our knowledge, we could be at the forefront of any trade negotiations we wished. Perhaps if we began lobbying the ISA to open trade again. Even if that did not work, there are many within the League who might be sympathetic to our position - they would certainly have plenty to gain.'

'No!' Territt slapped his hand down on the arm of his chair, silencing the now humbled Minister. 'We talked about this before and we agreed - you agreed - to our current course of action.'

'I did not think things would get this far,' mumbled Tannama. 'I am sorry, gentlemen. I do not think I can countenance the loss of life we are discussing, on either side. I believe there are better ways and, in good conscience, I cannot continue with this.'

A palpable silence hung over the group, and Tannama fidgeted nervously.

'That is understandable, Minister,' said Territt. 'No one is here against their will. However, I must insist that you leave now and no longer be party to our plans. I also advise you not to discuss this with anyone.'

'Of course!' Tannama seemed relieved. 'You have my word.'

He stood up and bowed to the three other nobles. Veneta smiled at Tannama as he turned and walked to the door. It opened automatically and the two royal guardsmen outside stood rigidly to attention. Veneta caught the eye of one and gave an almost imperceptible nod. The guard closed the door behind Tannama before the quiet of the room was shattered by two impossibly loud PPG blasts. Veneta heard Tannama's body hit the floor, followed by the scraping sounds of him being dragged down the hallway.

Verlime had jumped up in shock, his eyes nearly bulging out of his skull, an almost comical effect when combined with his huge hair crest. Territt and Veneta remained seated, their eyes fixed upon one another as they both smiled. They had known Tannama was weak, but his presence had been required during the preliminary phases of their plan, as he brought many people in high places necessary to them. Gradually, they usurped his position by making offers to those same people, persuading them to work for the conspirators rather than Tannama. Verlime was beginning to gibber slightly at his comrade's sudden exit from life, but he was incidental, useful only for his ability to ship the Dilgar device across the galaxy - and to act as a scapegoat, should they need one. The stage now belonged to Veneta and Territt, and both recognised something familiar in the other. Veneta did not have any great personal feelings toward Territt, but he knew the man was a political soulmate, someone he could work very closely with, just as he knew that, one day, Territt would have to be removed if he was to realise his ambitions. No doubt Territt thought the same of him. That was a power play to take place later, however. For now they both had too much work and too much to gain.

June 17th 2263, Coutor

There was a harsh glory to the second planet in the Coutor system, just two jumps from Babylon 5 and

yet considered to be a frontier world in the Republic. An ancient race had once ruled this world, millennia ago, but they were gone and their legacy was a terraforming attempt gone awry. Instead of a verdant, trackless wilderness, arid deserts covered the world, the permanent dry heat creating huge expanses of desiccated forests. Coutor briefly enjoyed some importance in the Republic when archaeological expeditions unearthed ruins holding technological secrets of the older race, which the Centauri greedily plundered. Such treasures were thoroughly pillaged, and the world was now only plundered for a mineral wealth considered hardly exceptional. House Kaado retained mining rights, but Veneta was more interested in the distance Coutor stood from the better-travelled regions of the Republic.

When the conspirators purchased their Dilgar artefact from a fence on Babylon 5, House Kaado took possession of it, transporting the device to a wild region of broken rock in the northern hemisphere. Officially, this tiny outpost was a central base for prospecting in the area, seemingly a desperate attempt by House Kaado to wring a little more profit from the almost worthless planet. No one in the Centaurum would pay it any heed.

Pressed for time, scientists of House Kaado worked hard to uncover the secrets of the Dilgar, but their progress was only marginally successful. Like so many others in the galaxy, Veneta Kaado was not wholly interested in how things worked but was eminently willing to use them.

The order for the device to be shipped off planet to a waiting transport in orbit did not surprise the scientists. Their profession was often taken for granted in the Republic, and a society that accepted the products of science but rejected its methods rarely held its practitioners in much regard. Resolved to this course of action, the six scientists and their assistants began to gather their belongings to prepare for transport, hopefully to the better climes of Centauri Prime. Leaving Coutor was reward enough in itself.

Their surprise was somewhat complete when a team of royal guardsmen arrived by shuttle and, upon entering the outpost, began to fire at anything that moved. Most of the scientists and workers did not even have time to scream. A few tried to run but were quickly cut down as they fled, terrified, through the small complex. One managed to gain entry into the air ducts and power conduits that ran behind the walls and above the ceilings, a design common to most Centauri structures of temporary design. He lasted nearly an hour before the guardsmen finally traced his progress and shot him as he left a duct near the guardsmen's grounded shuttle.

June 17th 2263, Transport Malachi Victus, Hyperspace

Only the Captain and first officer of the transport Malachi Victus, flying under the registration of House Verlime, witnessed the arrival of the Dilgar artefact in their cargo hold as they orbited Coutor. They did not know what they were carrying and, truth be told, they did not want to know. Knowledge was indeed power in the Republic, but most Centauri quickly learned to play to their own level. Both knew that the package from House Kaado was far above their heads. They did, however, have orders to follow and knew how to carry them out very well.

The artefact, sealed within a container designed to diffuse scans, was placed in a larger version to form two layers of protection. This was then placed in a yet larger container packed with mechanical

parts of Narn design for agricultural vehicles. Satisfied that the cargo would withstand all but the most stringent of customs checks, the standard electronic tracking tags on the side of the container were then falsified to suggest the contents originated from the Narn Homeworld, though it would never get within ten light-years of that system.

Riding hyperspace waves off-beacon, the Malachi Victus would then take a well-plotted though still dangerous short cut across the Republic to Nefua, where a deep-space transfer of the cargo would place it in the hold of a smuggling ship run by a human crew. No questions were to be asked, and the smugglers were going to be paid well enough that they would uphold their agreement not to break the seals of the cargo they had received. In all, twenty-eight similar containers were to be taken on board their ship, all destined for the Earth Alliance and yet all registered to take different routes at different times. Most were to reach Babylon 5 at some point in their circuitous voyages, but some would enter Earth Alliance space via the Coriana system, others through the Vree Conglomerate.

The container carrying the Dilgar artefact, its fuse already primed to start a countdown once it detected that it had reached a specific point on the surface of Earth, was to be passed to another smuggling outfit along with a huge amount of credits paid by House Kaado, though it would take an incredible amount of perseverance to uncover the credit trail. This second smuggling ship had been chosen for reasons of respectability on Babylon 5. The ship looked like one of a hundred tramp freighters that regularly plied their trade between the Earth Alliance, Narn Regime and other governments in the same region of space.

All this would be achieved flawlessly, and by the time the container reached the Babylon 5 diplomatic station, it would be virtually impossible to backtrack its progress from the Centauri Republic. As far as anyone was concerned, it would be just another shipment from the Regime that proved Narn labour would always be cheaper than Earth labour. The container would be as legitimate as any being used for trade among ISA members.

June 21st 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

Though his shift had ended more than an hour ago, Tuthenn continued his sweeping analysis of information flowing from the Centauri Republic. His experience in the position of Ranger-Analyst often led him to make leaps of logic in the interpretation of data, and he could tell he was close now. Theoretically, shift periods for Ranger-Analysts were strictly monitored, as a tired and weary operative was of no use to anyone in the ISA, but Tuthenn's superiors also became experienced in their own field of management, and they learned long ago to trust Tuthenn's judgement of how long should be spent monitoring incoming intelligence and how long should be spent at rest. As far as Tuthenn was concerned, he would get no rest anyway while the patterns of data swirled around his head, refusing to coalesce into a clear pattern. He knew the stories of Rangers in the field defending themselves against superior enemies, and he often imagined his work was not so different, in its own way. Tuthenn was locked in mortal combat with the information on his screens, and they would fight until he broke it down into a logical order or dropped from exhaustion.

Focussing on any report to emerge from the Centauri Republic concerning House Kaado, Tuthenn already discovered the identity of its new leader and went on to identify an unusual pattern of travel on both Centauri Prime and other worlds. This, in itself, was not a surprise, as a newly instated

leader of a Centauri noble House would have much to consolidate and new directives to enforce. However, Tuthenn's instincts were aroused, and he believed something a little deeper was in Veneta Kaado's mind.

A new House leader sought to form new alliances and strengthen old ones, as Tuthenn had observed in the past, but unless Kaado was literally meeting and greeting potential allies in person only, the Ranger-Analyst had been unable to find a trace of increased politicking. That was unusual in a Centauri whose star was rising. A report from White Star 31 regarding missing Kaado scientists supposedly en route to Quadrant 37 piqued Tuthenn's interest, and he agreed with the field Ranger's belief that their presence on a world soon to be handed over to the Narn made no sense. Or, rather, it defied analysis - Tuthenn was well aware it made perfect sense to someone. He just lacked all the pieces of the puzzle.

Seeking more information to complete the riddle, Tuthenn instituted an ongoing search into the activities of House Kaado's various interests across the republic. None were particularly large, given some of the operations other Houses had in their pockets, but they were reasonable enough. Kaado built its foundations, in the main, on mining operations which were solid, though never spectacular; a healthy interest in the arts on Centauri Prime (no House ever lost money in that area), financing ventures of smaller Houses, and a small but growing concern fulfilling military contracts, mainly supplies of raw materials and basic components. Tuthenn knew that simply looking for 'odd' behaviour seldom resulted in solid intelligence, so he narrowed his searches to relationships between Kaado's financial interests and new agreements with other Houses, hoping to reveal something about the House's plans for expansion which could reveal much about its new leader's intentions and personality.

His automated search soon found old information from the Coutor system, near the Minbari/Centauri border. He thought he already collated all relevant information about House Kaado's mining facilities in this system, knowing they were cast-offs from larger Houses who exploited the main planet long ago for its wealth of alien technology and then grown disinterested in the region. It was a common pattern in the Republic, with smaller Houses forced to grab the scraps left by those more powerful.

House Verlime had become a factor in whatever Kaado was attempting to do, an unusual choice as Tuthenn had assumed Verlime was passing into obscurity. Sweeps of the system recently revealed that a Verlime transport ship arrived in the Coutor system once every few days, never staying long enough to deliver or collect any serious amount of cargo. Furthermore, all transports promptly left Coutor to travel a well-used jump route to Beta 3 and from there a circuitous route before reaching Centauri Prime. A regular trade route, probably, and one consistent with his information on Verlime's trading habits. When the last transport, just four days before, left Coutor on a hyperspace vector that would lead it away from the usual jump routes for a direct path to Nefua, it rang alarms in his mind. Ship captains and Centauri Houses alike did not change their flight plans on a whim. It was far too expensive.

He knew that intelligence from Nefua was unlikely to arrive in any good time, as the further into Republic space a system lay, the harder it was for the ISA to make accurate sweeps. The Narn could possibly be drafted in, as Nefua lay closer to their region of space but, not known for their subtlety, Tuthenn understood his superiors would make such a request only if an absolute priority. Therefore,

he could only ask for a closer investigation on Coutor, a task which Rangers in the field would be well trained to perform. He guessed that White Star 31 would be en route in hyperspace close to the system, and he preferred to have the same Rangers assigned as those who first discovered the anomalies surrounding House Kaado. However, it was not his call to make, and he simply submitted a standard intelligence request before retiring from his post.

CHAPTER FIVE

June 22nd 2263, White Star Intrepide, Hyperspace

The flash of Tilanna's bare white legs beneath her robe made Shaw glance instinctively upwards before more... spiritual reflexes kicked in. He chuckled to himself and shook his head. For all his Anla'Shok training, for all the rituals of self-discipline, for all the time his tutors had forced him to think more and more like a Minbari, he felt a little proud that a strong trait of red-blooded humanity remained.

Keen on Shaw learning the inner workings of a White Star, Badeau assigned him to the company of Tilanna, a young female Minbari who led the maintenance crew of the Intrepide. All the maintenance crew were Religious Caste, but while Shaw had spent a great deal of time alongside this section of Minbari society in his training, he had never before found himself in this truly unique position. Conducting regular preventative maintenance on the ship's molecular disruptors, Tilanna decreed they would replace the plasma conduits that formed the main power feed to the weapon system. Hence the two working in a narrow service tube that extended upward at a sharp angle. Balanced on rungs built into the surface of the tube, Tilanna worked on the conduits while Shaw remained just below her, passing tools and parts as required.

Tilanna called his name and handed down a spent flexible magnetic pipe. As she did not look down while doing this, her focus already on the next problem, Shaw allowed himself the luxury of a longer stare as he grabbed the pipe.

Well, if Minbari women were good enough for the President of the ISA, why not?

Sabine's voice over the ship's intercom broke into his meandering thoughts. 'Michael, get up here. New orders.'

'On my way,' he called out. He rapped on the side of the service tube to get Tilanna's attention. She scrambled down, then looked at him with the unflappable serenity that members of the Religious Caste seemed to be able to summon at will.

'Captain's orders, I have to go.'

'Of course, Mr. Shaw,' said Tilanna. 'I can summon someone else to aid me here. However, I will postpone the next phase of preventative maintenance, allowing you to examine the deeper mysteries of the neutron laser when you return to my supervision.'

Shaw shaped his fingers into a triangle before his chest and bowed, a gesture that was instantly returned by Tilanna. 'Thank you,' he said. Despite any physical attraction he might feel towards this slightly built Minbari, he was genuinely interested in learning more about the White Star's main weapon system, said to be more powerful than those fitted to Minbari Sharlin warcruisers, though shorter ranged. 'I look forward to that.'

On the bridge, the holographic display shimmered with a planet Shaw did not immediately recognise,

as orbital information scrolled alongside it. Sabine turned in her chair as he entered.

‘Ah, Michael, witness our next mission. We just received orders from Minbar. This is Coutor—know anything about it?’

A not-so-subtle test of his galactic knowledge, but Shaw rose to it. ‘Err, well, it’s a Centauri world, near Minbari space. I remember stories of an ancient alien race disappearing, leaving their technology behind. Which the Centauri promptly scavenged. Oh, and I remember a report on nomads living in the southern hemisphere, something about abandoned slaves.’

‘Good enough,’ Badeau nodded. ‘We are not interested in slaves today though. Our old friends in House Kaado have a few operations here, and Intelligence wants us to do a sweep of the planet to detect any new activity since our last reconnaissance of the system. If we see anything unusual, we are to get as much information as possible, landing planet-side if need be. We are to avoid contact with Centauri military forces. Then it is on to Babylon 5 to escort the new Ipsha ambassador to Minbar.’

‘All in a day’s work.’

‘Just so. We will be jumping in-system within three hours. Use that time to plot the optimum entry point and course to the second planet. Assume a full defensive spread of Centauri mines and a battlegroup within an hour’s reach of the planet.’

Shaw turned from the display to stare at her. ‘I didn’t know Coutor was heavily defended. I thought the Centauri had all but forgotten this world.’

‘They have,’ she said, smiling. ‘This is a test.’

‘Aye, Captain.’ Feeling slightly foolish, Shaw relieved the Minbari at his station and began integrating known data on Coutor with likely scenarios for an aggressive defence. Accounting for the gravity wells that existed in the system and the current orbital positions of the planets, Shaw soon worked up three likely entry points and ingress routes before spending the next two hours refining his plans to come up with the single optimum flight plan.

When he felt ready, Shaw presented his plans to Badeau, who insisted he forward it to the holographic screen. After answering a few pertinent questions without consulting his data, the Minbari helmsmen were ordered to make a few corrections and the flight plan programmed into the Intrepide’s computers. Badeau made no outward comment, but Shaw felt she was at least satisfied with his work.

A blue jump point blinked open in the Coutor system, and the Intrepide flew straight toward the second planet. While the White Stars lacked the full stealth suite of most Minbari warships, it was still difficult to detect, and Shaw’s flight plan did much to maximise their cover. This would only work up to a point though, and every crew member on the Intrepide knew that the Centauri would detect them sooner or later.

The sleek White Star crossed the gulf of space between the jump point and the second planet orbiting

Coutor's star in minutes. On the bridge, every crew member was alert as the planet grew in the viewport. A desolate place of reds and browns, patches of dark organic matter stained vast areas of the surface. As they closed, they witnessed volcanic eruptions concentrated around the equatorial region visible to the naked eye.

Badeau called to the Minbari working at the stations behind her. 'Work quickly. We only want one pass. Scan for all structures in the northern hemisphere and compare it to our records. Highlight anything new and send it to the main display immediately. Michael, with me. Within seconds of any sites being displayed, we must determine if the Intrepide is to land or not. Any hesitation and we'll be out of low orbit and have to make another pass.'

The holographic display shimmered down in front of the main viewport once more but remained blank for several minutes as the White Star began to decelerate and enter low orbit around the planet. Shaw was aware of a great deal of activity behind him and did not envy the Minbari who had to detect, record and process the scan in time to meet Sabine's orders.

Then a list of inhabited sites began scrolling up the right-hand side of the display, all those that matched the previous reconnaissance flight into the system. They were colour-coded to denote whether they had expanded or contracted, but none had changed to a degree significant enough to gain their immediate interest. As the list began to reach the top of the display, new information started to appear on the left side, recording data from the scanners marking a new development. Shaw began to read the salient information aloud.

'Outpost, 48 miles from magnetic pole, small, standard pre-fab design, pulse generator, no subterranean network detected, life signs... nil.' Shaw frowned. 'Captain, if this is a new site, why is nobody there?'

'And 700 miles from the nearest settlement as well. I think we have it,' said Badeau. 'Scanners, any other sites on our horizon?' Upon hearing a negative, she ordered the helmsmen, 'Take us in.'

Not wanting to give any passive Centauri scan a chance to home in on their position, the helmsmen spared no thought to comfort as they changed course and plummeted towards the surface like a meteor. The White Star's gravitic drive managed to flatten the worst of the atmospheric buffeting, but Shaw retreated to his station in order to have something solid to hold on to. Even Badeau held the arms of her chair tightly during the descent.

As the White Star neared the small outpost, the helmsmen bled off speed by pulling the nose of the ship upwards in a high-g manoeuvre that would have pulverised the crew of an Earth ship. Still shedding speed, they swung the Intrepide around, allowing other crew to scan the outpost and verify no obvious dangers before beginning the landing cycle. Though the hull of the White Star would have seared naked flesh as it dissipated the heat generated by atmospheric friction, the ship still settled on its landing gear with a grace few other vessels in the galaxy could match. Waving her hand to indicate Shaw should follow, Badeau leapt from her chair to make her way to the boarding ramp.

Though the atmosphere was unpleasantly breathable to Centauri, it contained traces of sulphur heavy enough to incapacitate a human within minutes, forcing the two Rangers to wear face-hugging filter

masks. They walked cautiously, alert for any automated defence systems or guards hidden from their scans.

Shaw noticed a great deal of similarities between this outpost and the one on Quadrant 37, constructed from similar pre-fabricated sections. This one, however, was much smaller. Given the Centauri's love of comfortable dwellings, he could not imagine any more than a dozen working here at any one time. They approached an entry port, and Badeau nodded to Shaw. He fished his datapad from within his robes and, sliding a maintenance port open, connected it to the outpost's exterior security systems via a universal interface. He quickly deduced that if anything important occurred here recently, the Centauri relied on the outpost's remote location rather than expensive security hardware to maintain secrecy. Within seconds, he cracked the code and sent a command to unlock the hatch. It slid open with a hiss, permitting entry. The two Rangers found themselves in a tiny airlock.

'Good,' said Badeau, a little muffled. 'If everything is still working, we can pressurise this airlock and get rid of these damned masks.'

Shaw had no problem with his mask, reflecting that he endured far worse in recent training sessions, but he quickly hooked his datapad to the airlock's systems and began the pressurising cycle. Checking the atmosphere beyond the second hatch as cool air swirled around him, he nodded at Badeau and removed his mask. Within a minute, they had the inner door open and stepped into the outpost proper.

The outpost's systems were turned off or disabled, but emergency lighting gave an eerie feel to the place that was matched by the silence. The only sounds were the footsteps of the Rangers themselves. The spotlessly clean main access corridor terminated just thirty metres ahead. Shaw took a step forward, but Badeau caught his arm.

'Take another look, ' she warned. 'What do you see?'

Shaw felt a growing sense of unease, which Badeau's words had done nothing to quell, and he studied the corridor once more. The grated floor allowed easy access to the distributed power and information networks that threaded the outpost, the ceiling bland and featureless aside from the emergency lighting fixtures interspersed between their more powerful but darkened neighbours. Nothing seemed out of place. Then his eyes focussed on a small patch of soot at the end of the corridor.

'PPG blast!' he exclaimed. 'And another, there,' pointing to a few metres away on the floor.

'Stay alert,' Badeau ordered. 'We'll sweep this place room by room. I don't want to be here any longer than necessary.'

As Badeau took her datapad and connected a small sensor array to its top bracket, Shaw unclipped his Denn'Bok fighting pike but did not extend it. The heavy metal shaft felt comforting in his hand and did much to alleviate his nervousness. With a single shake of his hand, the four-inch cylinder would instantly expand into a five-foot staff - and he ranked highly in Denn'Bok lessons.

Sweeping the access corridor with the sensor array, Badeau noted they had missed another PPG blast

on the inner airlock hatch when they entered. There were four exits from the corridor, two on each side, which they searched one at a time. Shaw entered first, senses alert while Sabine followed with a thorough scan. The first exit led to sleeping and living quarters, the second to kitchen and waste facilities. On the other side of the corridor, they found the power station and a small laboratory. They quickly noted that nothing valuable remained in the outpost. Throughout each tiny room, the Rangers found signs of combat, PPG blasts matched with the occasional spray of blood across a wall or fixture.

‘Must have been a hell of a fight,’ Shaw remarked as they left the kitchens to cross the access corridor once more.

Badeau shook her head. ‘This was no fight. It was a massacre.’ She paused to adjust the sensitivity of her datapad’s array. ‘The PPG blasts are mostly focussed away from the main entrance. Someone entered this place and opened fire. I am guessing the blast on the airlock either came from a defender who managed to get a single shot off or, more likely, someone trying to escape who got shot in the back as they ran.’

In his mind’s eye, Shaw tried to picture the scene as an unknown invader entered the outpost with murderous intent, slaughtering unarmed civilians. The Centauri had a bad reputation in the galaxy at the present time, but he was wise enough to know not all of them matched the stereotype. As they entered the laboratory, Badeau increased the intensity of her scans, guessing this was the chamber that governed the overall purpose of the outpost. For his part, Shaw began to consider the perpetrators of the massacre.

‘The Narn?’ he ventured. The Regime had always been enemies of the Centauri. The Narn had, after all, been among the last attack force to devastate huge regions of Centauri Prime.

‘I don’t think so,’ Badeau said, her mind obviously elsewhere as she studied her readings. ‘This is odd...’

‘Found something?’

‘Not sure. The datapad is reading ‘unidentified’. Some kind of residual emission in this room. It is marked as harmless - though that is relative, of course. Not sure I trust a computer telling me something is harmless when it cannot identify it. Still, I’m not a scientist.’

‘No clues then?’ he asked.

‘Well, there may be plenty, but damned if I can tell what they are. With the equipment stripped out, no doubt by the attackers, all I am left with is this energy signature. I am getting readings from the walls, ceiling and floor, and only in this room. We can only presume it’s some sort of leakage or byproduct from whatever they were working on. The analysts on Tuzanor will make more of it than I can.’ She adjusted her array, took a few more readings and then said, ‘Come on, I think we have all we need. Let’s get out of here.’

‘So what do you think hap-’ Shaw’s question was cut off by the simultaneous chimes of their

comlinks. He reached down to his belt and activated it. 'Shaw, report.'

'Contact, low orbit, approaching fast,' came the reply from the Minbari on sensor duty.

'Come on,' said Badeau, buckling on her filter mask. They pounded down the corridor and hit the release for the airlock. Not having time to override the system's standard safety protocols, the Rangers spent an impatient half-minute waiting for the air system to cycle. Badeau interrogated the Intrepide's crew for more information on the contact but, struggling to get a clear reading of a fast-moving object so close to the horizon, they had yet to ascertain its signature. As soon as the airlock's outer hatch hissed open, Badeau and Shaw sprinted across dusty wasteland toward the White Star, its gravitic drive whining into full power

Badeau shouted through the ship's internal communications system the order to take off as they ran up the boarding ramp, and it began to close even before Shaw left its gridded surface. By the time they entered the bridge, the Intrepide had already left the planet's surface, and the viewport was full of empty orange sky as they rocketed toward space. Their course was taking them directly away from the contact, and as Badeau took her Captain's chair, a Minbari crewman reported that the signature had been identified.

'Show me,' ordered Badeau, and the holographic display shimmered in front of them once more, this time showing a Centauri warship skimming the atmosphere of the planet as it sped toward their position, its purple and gold livery glinting in the light of the system's star as it moved out of eclipse. Shaw instantly recognised its distinctive crossshaped silhouette and wide fins.

'Vorchan!'

'This is not good,' said Badeau. 'Vorchan's operate in squadrons, never alone. Scanners ahead, I don't want to walk into a trap.'

'Contact, two, Vorchan-class!' came the immediate response. The holographic display changed to a three-dimensional tactical view. The Rangers could see their current position above the planet with the first Vorchan closing range behind them. Two more were just clearing the horizon of the planet in front of them.

'Yup, there it is,' Sabine nodded, and Shaw noted how calm her voice was, a trait he knew White Star captains were required to possess. Panic spread quickly on a ship if the captain appeared jumpy.

'High energy turn,' she ordered the helmsmen. 'Reverse course, make an oblique pass on the single Vorchan. All power to engines!' She turned her head to Shaw. 'Heat up the weapons. If he so much as twitches, take him out. His plasma accelerator we can likely dodge, but those bastards carry a very heavy particle battery that could cause us some serious problems.'

Shaw called up a tactical display on his own station, prepping the molecular disruptors in the Intrepide's wings and the devastating neutron laser in its nose. All displayed green and ready. He paid a brief thought to Tilanna and her maintenance work on the weapons earlier and knew he was in good hands. Now all he had to do was shoot straight if the Centauri warship proved hostile.

‘Standby,’ said Badeau. ‘We can’t fight all three so we mustn’t get bogged down by this one. They are nearly as fast as us so let’s not get into a running battle. Shaw - you have discretion to fire only if they provoke us. You’ll only get one salvo at this rate of closure, so make it a good one.’

The range counter on the tactical display rapidly counted down as the White Star and Vorchan skimmed the atmosphere toward one another. Through the translucent display in front of the viewport, Shaw caught a speck of a white light low to the horizon, rapidly growing in size and definition. He returned his attention to his own station, aligning the weapons on the target, leading slightly with the molecular disruptors. All around him, the Minbari crew went about their duties with a calm and quiet efficiency. Aside from various alerts emitted by the ship’s computer, the bridge was nearly silent - until shattered by the Minbari monitoring the Intrepide’s sensors.

‘Energy spike!’

Already reacting before Badeau gave the order to fire, Shaw activated the neutron laser and a thick beam of pulsing green light streamed from the nose of the Intrepide, across space, to make contact with the Vorchan. Making a mockery of the Centauri warship’s armour, the beam sliced cleanly through the Vorchan’s top fin and continued downwards to cut through its port weapon batteries. The ship immediately began to list amid a blinding array of secondary explosions that pummelled it further. Shaw then unleashed multiple blasts from his molecular pulsars. The fast-moving white bolts of energy smashed into the main hull of the Vorchan, but the salvo was cut short as the helmsmen jerked the White Star upwards. The Vorchan’s powerful plasma accelerator, mounted on the hull in front of the trademark fins, tracked the Intrepide and opened fire once in range.

Combining the dodge with an axial spin to throw off the Vorchan’s aspect trackers, the Minbari helmsmen jinked the White Star as globs of thick yellow energy poured past the ship. One, by luck as much as anything else, found its mark just behind the bridge of the Intrepide, and the force of this blast rolled the ship onto its back and sent some crew on the bridge sprawling.

Fortunately, the adaptive armour held, and the Intrepide blasted past the crippled Vorchan as the helmsmen regained control.

Unable to reverse course quickly enough to chase the White Star, the first Vorchan was effectively out of the fight, but the other two, using the gravity well of the planet to slingshot themselves into position, continued to chase the Ranger ship. Seconds later, a Minbari reported that the Vorchans were out of range.

Badeau breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Scan the area ahead. I don’t want to get caught like that again. Damage report?’

‘The armour dissipated most of the energy of the blast,’ volunteered a Minbari crewman. ‘Self-repair systems already engaged.’

‘Good,’ answered Badeau. ‘Initiate jump engines once we are clear of the gravity well. Set course for Babylon 5 and open a channel to headquarters when we are in hyperspace. I believe we have a potential diplomatic crisis to report. Oh, and Michael?’

‘Yes, Captain?’

‘Good shooting.’

July 3rd 2263, Babylon 5, Epsilon Eridani

Human smugglers cautiously took delivery of the innocuous container carrying the deadly Dilgar artefact as planned, the abundance of credits received ensuring their curiosity would not get the best of them. Inside the container, Centauri-made electronics clicked automatically, calculating and verifying each jump into hyperspace as the pre-planned route was followed. By the time it officially passed through a Narn checkpoint in Quadrant 14, forged documentation proved its origin on the Regime’s Homeworld - one of several similar containers bound for the European continent on Earth. In the past three years, the Narn made great inroads with certain industries in the Earth Alliance, typically in sectors that required hard-wearing machinery whose owners looked for durability above all else. Few races could compete with Narn durability in any field, as the Centauri had found to their gnat

From Quadrant 14, a simple and very well-travelled route to led to Epsilon Eridani, a system in neutral space between the Narn Regime, Earth Alliance, Centauri Republic and Minbari Federation - most notable for being the site of Babylon 5, the infamous station credited with having changed the destiny of the entire galaxy. While historians might later say people not places influenced the future, few could deny that even though the ISA had now moved its headquarters to Minbar, its cradle was Babylon 5.

Nothing suspicious was noted as the container passed through Babylon 5’s customs along with other, similar containers from the same free trader. The Earth Alliance knew the station’s security around its docking bays was a little more lax than desirable due to an overworking of the dockers, a problem that had plagued Babylon 5 since it first went online in 2257. A reduction in hours staved off any more strikes but little was done to enhance efficiency in security scans. Veneta Kaado’s conspiracy could have been far less thorough in its misdirection and the container would still have rattled through Babylon 5 unmolested.

Spending no more than a few hours on Babylon 5, the container was soon loaded on a fast transport that would take a large haul straight past Sector 49 and, stopping briefly at Proxima 3 for refuelling, continue to Sol, humanity’s birthplace. Most merchant traffic in Earth’s system funnelled through the transfer point off Io, though a small but increasing percentage flowed through the newly independent Mars colony. Customs sweeps and general security on Io was regarded as being second only to that of Earth itself, but by this time the container had amassed a veritable galactic atlas in its tracking records, and the customs officer scanning its manifest codes saw nothing to arouse suspicion of anything other than legitimate cargo from the Narn Homeworld. Signing off on the container, he watched it and several others transferred from his care into a short-ranged transit shuttle. The shuttle’s captain had just one destination on his flight plan for his entire load of cargo-EarthDome, Geneva.

CHAPTER SIX

July 3rd 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

Tuthenn received the anomalous scans taken from the outpost on Coutar by the crew of White Star 31 as a matter of course. The information came from a source he instigated, and he was permitted to share in its fruits on the chance it might lead to a breakthrough in intelligence. He reviewed the data dutifully, but he was no scientist and nothing aroused his suspicions. Leaving it to Rangers and civilians better skilled in the area, Tuthenn continued his investigations. If nothing else, the machinations of the Centauri Republic kept him gainfully employed.

When he received the full analytical report of the scans, verified and confirmed by the ISA's own system of checks and balances, he gave it his full attention. Memorising the salient facts, he integrated them into his own intelligence analysis to make something meaningful of the information.

The first striking fact was that the origin of the energy signature was Dilgar. The emissions were the suspected byproduct of certain minerals only found on Omelos, the Dilgar's homeworld, and so far believed to be impossible to reproduce elsewhere in the galaxy. As it was, these minerals were only theoretical, as no one had taken samples before its star went nova. Little exploration took place in the years since, as commercial ventures had little interest in a world so far from the hub of the galaxy that had been blasted by its sun. No known Dilgar weapon had employed them, and so the only information the ISA's scientists had were the scanning records from ships present during the last assault on the Dilgar at the end of the war.

This made everything too circumstantial for Tuthenn's liking. To provide a complete analysis, he needed firm data, not supposition. Only the sheer strength of the energy signature detected by the Rangers of White Star 31 made the report credible. The best chemists and physicists from the Minbari Worker Caste had tackled this problem and concluded that only a massive quantity of materials could generate enough energy to leave these residual traces, given the likely time frame between the Centauri's work and the arrival of the Rangers.

Their report spoke of energy that could hurl the largest warship through space at unheard of speeds - or of a weapon capable of demolishing entire nations. Given the Centauri's interest in this type of energy and their obvious attempts to hide it from both the ISA and, likely, their own government, Tuthenn received orders of the highest priority to locate the source of this signature and discover what the Centauri intended to do with it.

The Centauri had possibly learned to shield this energy source from detection, but Tuthenn nevertheless initiated a search of records that would reference scans made throughout the galaxy in the past month. This would require a massive amount of computer resources, but his priority orders gave Tuthenn the authorisation he needed to start an automated process that would check scan records made during reconnaissance sweeps, boarding reviews, customs inspections, trade negotiations, technology transfers and many others. He concentrated the search on records made in the Centauri Republic and neighbouring worlds, but even this encompassed more than two-dozen inhabited systems, and the search might have to be widened if nothing conclusive was found. Precious hours

would be wasted as representatives of the ISA negotiated with governments such as the Narn, Lumati and Golians for free access to their security records, and their cooperation was not assured. Already, too many variables existed in a potentially catastrophic situation. This was not Tuthenn's first high-priority assignment, and the importance and urgency of his mission focussed and narrowed his mind every time.

While waiting for the results of his interstellar search, Tuthenn concentrated on reviewing his information about the Centauri Republic and House Kaado, and he began to synthesise potential scenarios. Since the reconnaissance run on Coutar, Tuthenn learned more about House Kaado, but many questions remained unanswered. Veneta Kaado was entertaining and meeting with many influential nobles, particularly on Centauri Prime, the centre of political activity in the Republic. However, Tuthenn had yet to project exactly what Kaado's aims were. Taking into account recent developments, Tuthenn tried to approach the problem another way.

He had no way to predict how House Kaado could have obtained Dilgar technology or materials but, for the immediate future, that was less relevant.

What would the Centauri do with it was the question of the hour. Engineer a new type of reactor that could meet the power requirements of an entire world? Produce a new type of drive that would enable the Centauri fleet to strike at any system they wished? Design a new type of weapon? The latter two were clearly worst-case scenarios, and so Tuthenn decided to concentrate his initial analysis there. Whittling them down to a single choice was an easy matter. The movements of the Centauri fleet were, by and large, well known to the ISA, and any extensive refits would have been detected. Tuthenn also understood the nature of sentient life: almost every race, on discovering a new type of energy, concentrated development on its destructive qualities before any other application.

With the resources of the entire Republic, the Centauri might be able to reproduce the Dilgar technology - they were certainly one of the few races in the galaxy capable of such a task. However, everything Veneta Kaado did implied covert activity. Of course, this might be nothing more than an attempt to give the Republic as a whole a certain level of deniability but, following the worst-case analysis, it made a degree of sense. Engineering a new weapon and then manufacturing it in quantities sufficient to arm a fleet took time. A single prototype could be brought to bear on an enemy much more quickly.

Who would it be aimed at? Tuthenn had an instinctive answer but, as always, he subjected himself to analysis of hard information rather than pursue what he had heard human members of the Anla'Shok call a 'hunch'.

Veneta Kaado had been meeting with nobles from a wide range of backgrounds. Some were simply skilled politickers, others had weak Houses he no doubt wanted to take advantage of, and still more had trade or other financial benefits to grant. By no means a majority, but at least a significant portion, shared the common trait of being outspoken against Emperor Mollari and his handling of the ISA isolation of the Republic, which had cut deeply into the Centauri economy. Every Centauri bore resentment, Tuthenn knew, and these individuals not only railed against their Emperor but also displayed an intense hatred of the alien races that forced them into their present position. Some races they blamed more than others.

This led Tuthenn to consider four possible targets for a weapon. In reverse order of likelihood as he judged it, this would mean the Drazi Freehold, the Earth Alliance, the Narn Regime and, finally, the Minbari Federation.

The Drazi had fought alongside the Narn when they bombarded Centauri Prime and were instrumental in encouraging the Narn to proceed with the assault. As far as the Earth Alliance was concerned, the most prominent figure in the ISA was its President, John Sheridan, a human from Earth. If the Centauri wanted to strike at the man, they could do far worse than hit at his homeworld. The Narn Regime was always a target for Centauri hatred and oppression, and the assault on Centauri Prime now gave them more reason than ever. However, the organising body of all these races was now the ISA. He sat in the headquarters of the Alliance, in the capital Tuzanor, which was also the personal home of John Sheridan and Delenn, the founders of the ISA. There was truly no better target, and Tuthenn gave the possibility of an attack on Tuzanor within the next month an 84% probability. Calmly, he sent this brief analysis to his superiors. Forewarned, they would increase the alert status of Rangers within the Minbari Federation and vastly reduce the possibility of a successful attack.

This was all conjecture, of course, and Tuthenn greatly disliked sending any report based on anything but complete and solid facts. However, if an attack were likely, time would also be a factor. With the preliminary analysis complete, he could now review incoming data in greater depth to either strengthen his original hypothesis or dispute it and form a replacement.

He spent several hours studying existing data surrounding House Kaado for more clues to their intent. A chime indicating new information interrupted Tuthenn's meditations - his long-reaching search had managed to return a positive. Fingers rapidly sliding over the controls of his three screens, Tuthenn was eager to see if his original analysis could be confirmed.

The same energy signature had been detected in a customs checkpoint in, of all places, the Narn system of Quadrant 14. This surprised Tuthenn a little, as it meant the Narn had been unusually speedy in answering the ISA's requests for information, but he also knew they were eager for certain technology concessions from the Alliance. The unique signature was indeed noted by a Narn customs officer but, as the container emitting it had legitimate transfer records from his own Homeworld and they were not registering as dangerous, he passed it with no other comment.

Tuthenn expected a customs checkpoint to react this way when dealing with strange but non-dangerous readings on a container with legal paperwork. What troubled Tuthenn now was that if the container had come from the Narn Homeworld (and he knew it had not), it would likely have followed the normal trade route to Quadrant 14, which would mean that the container had passed through the Dross system. He read the container's manifest stating that it had cleared a customs checkpoint on Dross, but the standard scan did not feature the unique energy signature he expected. This meant it was probably forged. The last item on the incoming record stated the container had been loaded onto a human-run free trader called the Gilded Lilly. Unfortunately, a quick scan of the ISA's comprehensive ship records indicated no such vessel existed. That, in turn, led Tuthenn to believe the container he was attempting to track had been taken on board a smugglers' ship.

Tuthenn revised his original analysis to indicate the Narn Regime was now the likely target, probably their Homeworld. However, he was keenly aware that Quadrant 14 was just one jump away from

Babylon 5. He now considered the diplomatic station to be a possible target as well, for President Sheridan had served there for three years as its captain and military governor, and the station acted as the headquarters of the ISA for a year before the bureaucracy to Tuzanor. To complicate matters

Babylon 5 was also a single jump away from Earth space and not much further away from the Minbari Federation. Infuriatingly, the Earth Alliance had yet to provide a full return of the sensor scans and sweeps he had asked for, limiting his ability to predict the next sequence of events.

With no other choice, Tuthenn filed his latest analysis, knowing that he was putting the ISA on the highest alert across light-years of space.

July 3rd 2263, White Star Intrepide, Hyperspace

‘Incoming signal from Tuzanor,’ reported the Minbari crewman on the communications station.

Sabine Badeau ordered it to be shown on the main display. She raised her eyebrows as the holographic display shimmered down from the ceiling of the bridge and the bearded image of President John Sheridan loomed in front of her.

‘Mr. President, what can we do for you?’

‘Miss Badeau, we have a potential situation.’ Sheridan’s calm demeanour belied what he was about to tell the Intrepide’s captain, but Sabine knew the President rarely spoke directly to Rangers in the field unless there was a serious problem.

‘We have reason to believe that a rogue faction within the Centauri Republic is planning a terrorist attack on one of the members of the ISA, likely the Narn, Minbari or Earth. Babylon 5 is also a potential target.’ In the background of the display, a Minbari aide whispered something to the President, and he nodded before continuing. ‘We are hoping to eliminate Babylon 5 as a possibility before you reach the station. If it is clear, I need you to divert from your current mission and proceed with all speed to Earth.’

‘Yes, Mr. President. What are our orders when we arrive?’

‘Your work on Coutar yielded an energy signature we’re now chasing across the galaxy. We’re attempting to track a device of Dilgar origin, possibly a bomb of some kind, but the bureaucracy I learned to loathe when I was in EarthForce has returned with a vengeance, and they are stalling with the sensor logs we need to confirm where this thing is going. We may have to let them do their own searching, but that could cost valuable time.

Sheridan paused for a moment, then continued. ‘Our best analysts indicate the device is targeted at the Narn, but we cannot dismiss Earth as a possibility, due to my links with the place. By the time you reach Earth, we’ll have your clearance to see President Luchenko. Liase with her and help track this device, reporting to me with any new developments. With any luck, you’ll find this is a false alarm, but we could be dealing with a very powerful weapon and we can’t afford to take chances. I’m sending a file containing everything we know about the device. Any questions?’

‘What authority do we have in this matter, sir?’

‘Standard Ranger protocols only, Miss Badeau. You will be working under Earth’s jurisdiction and, ultimately, you will have to do what they say. However, I don’t want that device detonating in Earth space, you understand me?’

‘Yes, sir, I believe I do. Anything else?’

Sheridan sighed. ‘Just godspeed. And pray our intelligence is wrong. I don’t like where this is going.’

‘Agreed, Mr. President. White Star 31 out.’ The display automatically shimmered back into the ceiling. ‘Plot a new course for the Sol system, full speed.’

Shaw, standing just behind Badeau’s right shoulder at the weapons station, cleared his throat and asked, ‘Why divert now, Captain? Why not continue directly to Babylon 5?’

She turned in her seat to face him. ‘Speed. If we need to resume our original mission, the White Star is fast enough to get to Babylon 5 without losing the Ipsha ambassador too much time. If this thing is real, then every extra minute may count.’ She gave a half-smile. ‘If you have never seen a White Star at full speed, you are going to be surprised at just how quickly we can get to Earth from here.’

‘Do you think it will be a false alarm?’ he asked.

She snorted. ‘I have learned to accept the galaxy at its worst. Prepare for the balloon to go up and be pleasantly surprised when it doesn’t - a reasonable philosophy in the Anla’Shok.’

They fell into silence for a few minutes, and Badeau stared ahead at the swirling red clouds of hyperspace that coalesced and dissipated in the twinkling of an eye. Distance was very hard to gauge by eye in this otherworldly realm, but even so she could tell the Intrepide was moving very quickly, virtually eating the light-years in realspace. A thought occurred to her, and she turned back to Shaw.

‘Your records say you were born on Mars, is that right?’

He looked up from his station and nodded. ‘That’s right. You an Earther?’

‘After this long in the Anla’Shok, you tend to think of Minbar as home, if you consider it at all. The truth is, I have spent more time on board the Intrepide than anywhere else in recent years.’ She ran a hand down the arm of her chair. ‘Still, you could not ask for a more capable home.’

‘When were you last on Earth?’ he tentatively asked.

Sabine went silent for a few seconds and then replied, quietly. ‘Years ago. Before the Shadow War.’ She caught his look of surprise. ‘They didn’t give you time off for good work back then - far too much to do. After the Shadow War, we were battling Clark’s forces.

Then the ISA got underway.’

‘You were at Coriana 6, weren’t you?’

‘Yes. With the Intrepide, no less.’

Shaw’s curiosity was piqued. He had heard the Rangers were far different back then to the multi-racial Anla’Shok of today and, besides, he had never grown tired of the stories the Religious Caste tutors had told of their service in the Shadow War once the day’s training was over. To fight against the Ancients themselves. It seemed incredible to him.

‘What was it like? The battle?’ he pressed but was met with several seconds of silence. He saw Badeau stare ahead at the viewport, her face suddenly emotionless.

‘Painful,’ Badeau said simply. From the corner of his eye, Shaw saw one of the Minbari look straight at him and give an almost imperceptible shake of the head. Taking the hint, Shaw kept quiet. For the rest of his shift, he busied himself with running a variety of simulations on his station based on their encounter in the Coutar system with the Centauri Vorchans.

July 4th 2263, EarthDome, Sol

Out of view of the President of the ISA on her screen, Susanna Luchenko’s fist tightened in growing frustration. She quickly considered the position of her predecessors, earlier Presidents and other leaders who had to manage the concerns of but a single nation. Intergalactic politics should be banned. At times, the thought of a few individuals affecting the lives of billions spread across light-years of space seemed ludicrous.

‘President Sheridan,’ she stated firmly and formally. ‘As a sovereign power within the ISA, we are well within our rights to decide not only what data should or should not be made available to our allies, but also to demand you supply us with any information that affects the security of the Earth Alliance. You said yourself before your inauguration: the ISA is a peacekeeper not a peacemaker. The responsibility of our security falls to our government.’

‘Susanna, you and I have worked together for more than a year.’ Sheridan was not pleading, but Luchenko could tell he was beginning to grow desperate for a result. ‘You know I have never lied to you and have kept all the promises we made. We believe there is a very real threat, and Earth is a potential target.’

‘Your supposition that the Narn are the primary target seems more likely to me. We were not part of the assault on Centauri Prime, and we were the foremost voice condemning it after the fact.’ She did not mention that Earth’s condemnation had come some time after the Narn and Drazi bombardment and was motivated just as much out of a need to maintain trade relations with the Republic once it became clear the Centauri were going to be isolated. The subsequent withdrawal of the Republic from the ISA after this protest had done much to bring humans face to face with the fact that the Earth Alliance was no longer the power it had been before the formation of the ISA.

‘Anyway,’ she continued. ‘You are asking the impossible. To collect sensor logs from all over the Earth Alliance? It would take weeks. At best.’

‘Susanna,’ said Sheridan a little sternly. ‘The Narn managed it within hours. You and I both know that Earth has far more sophisticated systems.’

‘I can’t speak for the Narn. I insist you provide us with the information you have so we can begin our own analysis of the threat. I remind you that our treaty with the ISA supports our right to this. You are infringing our sovereign rights by withholding this information.’

‘No we aren’t and you know it.’ Sheridan sighed. ‘The threat is credible enough that we will supply you with the energy signature you need to look for and our current attempts to track it from Centauri space. However, you know the capabilities we have here on Tuzanor. We can process that information much faster than you can. Every second may count here, Susanna.’

‘I believe you are overstating the matter now, President Sheridan. However, we will be grateful for any information you give us concerning our security from exterior threats.’

‘One more thing.’ This time Sheridan had a look that Luchenko did not mistake for anything but determination. Knowing his achievements and single-mindedness, she braced herself. ‘We have dispatched a White Star to Earth.’

Before she could begin to protest, he raised a hand. ‘The Rangers on board have a good record and have been told to place themselves purely under your jurisdiction. They are being sent to act as liaisons between Earth and the ISA, though you are free to use their skills as you see fit in connection with this threat.’

It was Luchenko’s turn to sigh. ‘Okay, Mr. President. I’ll grant them clearance to EarthDome.’ She allowed a slight pause and then took a new tack. ‘We also need to discuss the re-opening of trade relations with the Centauri Republic.’

Sheridan’s look was slightly incredulous, but he recovered quickly. ‘Not now Susanna, please. If this threat materialises, we will need to ensure it is indeed a rogue faction within the Republic that initiated it. Even if that proves true, I doubt the Narn, Drazi and many others within the ISA will be willing to give the Centauri much leeway.’

‘Mr. President, has it occurred to you that this threat may be a direct result of the Republic’s isolation?’ she said, leaning closer to the screen.

Dropping his head for a moment, Sheridan suddenly seemed resigned. ‘Of course it has,’ he admitted. ‘But at the same time, we need to abide by the majority vote of the ISA. I would also remind you that terrorist action is not the proper response to their isolation from the ISA. You know our policy on that.’

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘But you also know where that policy has taken Earth in the past. Right up to the nuking of San Diego.’ Leaning back in her high-backed seat, Luchenko supported her head on one hand. ‘You and I both know the realities of the situation and why we can never give in to terrorists. But what responsibilities do you have when you may have created those terrorists yourself? What if terrorist action is the only route left open to them - as large as the Republic’s military remains, I

doubt it could survive a full-scale war with the combined members of the ISA. What kind of future are you building here, John?’

For once, he looked a little uncomfortable. ‘We all do what we can, Madam President. For now, our priority is stopping this attack from happening. We’ll deal with the fallout after that.’ He smiled sadly. ‘We always do.’

July 5th 2263, White Star Intrepide, Hyperspace ‘Need any help?’ Shaw asked.

‘I do not believe there is enough room for two in here,’ Tilanna’s voice echoed. ‘I have almost finished.’

Once again, Shaw found himself staring at Tilanna’s rear end. This time, however, it brought little pleasure. His mind was intermittently drifting elsewhere. The young Religious Caste Minbari had her head and shoulders inside an inspection panel as she worked to detach an operations panel so they could both work on it in the open passageway. Wriggling out, an action which would have certainly grabbed Shaw’s attention a couple of days ago, she produced the foot-square purple-tinted panel and sat back, cross-legged, so he could see what she was doing. They had spent the morning doing maintenance work on the neutron laser as Tilanna had promised, but Shaw was not enjoying it as much as he had supposed.

Manipulating an oval-shaped Minbari diagnostic tracker, Tilanna glanced up at him. ‘You have been unusually quiet today. That was the first question you have asked me, and I thought you would be more interested in the task at hand. Might I enquire to the problem?’

He looked into her eyes and saw nothing but compassion. Shaw considered Tilanna a technician, but he momentarily forgot she had the religious upbringing her caste demanded. Her current position was simply a use of her skills, not what she was. In Minbari society, that was a vital difference that marked them apart from most humans.

‘Well...’ he started. ‘It’s not really a problem. Just something that’s been bugging me.’ Not yet starting her diagnostic process, she prompted him with a look. ‘It’s just something that passed between the Captain and I. We were talking on the bridge, and I started to ask about Coriana 6...’

‘Ah.’ Tilanna interrupted. ‘I presume you did not push the matter?’

‘No. One of the bridge crew gave me a look that told me to shut up.’

‘Probably wise,’ she said. ‘The Captain is the most able human Ranger I have served with.’

Still that division between human and Minbari, thought Shaw. How long before that is fully eradicated from the

Rangers?

‘She rarely rushes to conclusions, cares for her crew and is usually willing to listen to other opinions.’ She shrugged, a habit Shaw had never seen in a Minbari and which made him wonder

whether she had picked it up from him or Sabine. ‘You cannot ask for more in a White Star captain,’ Tilanna continued. ‘But it is best not to enquire too closely about her past.’

They sat in silence for a few seconds before Shaw asked the obvious question. ‘Why?’

‘Her husband was one of the Anla’Shok. They joined together, and he was captain of White Star 14. I have heard they were quite a formidable pair when in the same squadron.’

‘I would never have guessed she was married!’

‘She isn’t now. Her husband was killed at Coriana 6. His White Star was destroyed by a Shadow ship,’ Tilanna said simply.

‘Ah.’ That makes a degree of sense, he thought.

‘That was not the end for the Captain, unfortunately. Your President Clark discovered she belonged to the Anla’Shok, or Sheridan’s army, as he saw it. Her family were arrested and disappeared. They are still presumed dead.’

‘That’s... harsh.’ Shaw found the word inadequate, but it was as close as he could find. ‘How do you know all this?’

Tilanna smiled, a sight Shaw found quite enchanting, despite himself. ‘Human Rangers are not the only ones to ‘gossip’, as I believe you call it. The information network of the Religious Caste within a closed environment such as a ship is quite efficient.’

Shaw gave a short laugh.

‘With regards to our Captain,’ said Tilanna. ‘I believe she is able to focus all her pain towards the enemies of the Alliance. She has an incredible faith for what her duties demand. I have not seen her fight in battle myself, but I imagine that it would be quite an impressive sight.’ She shrugged again. ‘She might even give some of our Warrior Caste a run for their credits.’

‘Surely not,’ he smiled.

Tilanna clicked her tongue. ‘Now you are just distracting us from our task. Attend.’ She gestured towards the panel on her lap. ‘This interfaces with the ship’s self-repair systems, tying them into the neutron laser and allowing it to sustain firing even while operating at less than twenty-percent efficiency.’

Forcing his attention to technical matters, Shaw listened to Tilanna’s light voice as she delicately described the inner workings of a weapon capable of shattering the hull of a frontline warship.

CHAPTER SEVEN

July 6th 2263, EarthDome, Sol

Sitting beneath the Seal of the Office of Earth President, Susanna Luchenko spent the morning as she often did; receiving visitors, reading reports from her staff, discussing and formulating policy with her best experts and generally ensuring the Earth Alliance would be in the same shape tomorrow as it was today. This office, situated in one of the highest towers within EarthDome, oversaw Lake Geneva, and the placid waters below the rolling mountains could instil a feeling of tranquillity, even after more than a year in office. Though she could, in theory, perform all her duties in EarthForce One while visiting colony worlds, Luchenko rarely felt at ease working during long-distance space flights. There was just something about the artificial gravity, or the recycled air, or something that did not agree with her psyche. Far better to stay on Earth and leave space travel to those who enjoyed it. A quiet alarm sounded, indicating a visitor waiting in her secretary's office next door, and Luchenko raised a hand to announce she was ready.

Sweeping past the aide who had opened the door for him, an EarthForce Major strode up to her desk and stood quietly until she acknowledged his presence. Tall with a dark moustache, he seemed to be the very archetype of a senior EarthForce officer, ready to appear on any recruitment poster. Cancelling the report on her screen, she looked up.

‘Yes, Major?’

‘Madam President, a White Star has just jumped in system and is on course for Earth,’ he said.

‘It has been given clearance?’

‘Yes. Traffic control is routing it here. We are expecting it to land within half an hour.’

‘Make sure the Ranger on board is shown to me promptly. Let's see just what ‘aid’ President Sheridan has in mind for us. You understand, Major?’

‘Yes, Madam President.’

‘How is the search for Dilgar weapon progressing?’ Luchenko enquired.

‘The Joint Chiefs agree with your assessment that the Narn are a more likely target. However, the energy signature provided by the ISA has been fed into our systems, and our top counter-terrorism team is monitoring the process. If it is anywhere within the Earth Alliance, we'll find it.’

‘Keep me informed,’ she said, dismissing him with a nod of the head.

‘Thank you, Madam President.’ The Major turned and left as smartly as he had arrived.

Susanna Luchenko was vaguely aware that her aide remained in the office, but that was a distraction she had learned to ignore while she had still been a senator. Get into this level of politics and you are

never alone - one of the prices you had to pay to serve your fellow man. She reviewed a report from the Joint Chiefs advising her of possible military cooperation with the Narn when the Centauri terrorist attack struck at their Homeworld. A cruiser fleet here, a carrier task force there, and the Earth Alliance would join the other ISA members in loudly condemning the Republic's complicity in the actions of its citizens. Whether or not that was strictly true.

Emperor Mollari had visited Earth after the civil war and was instrumental in the creation of the ISA. Along with G'Kar and Delenn, he had proposed Earth's membership to the ISA, and Luchenko remembered the man well, for he made quite an impression. She could not believe he would strike at any enemy in this way. Indeed, despite his inauguration speech in which he had roused the despondent spirit of his people, recently attacked by Narn and Drazi fleets, Luchenko believed Mollari did not view ISA members as a real threat to his Republic. On the other hand, she could easily see that not all Centauri nobles would feel the same way as their Emperor and, given that many of them wielded a great deal of power within the Centaurum, Sheridan's assessment of a rogue House or conspiracy within the Republic seemed logical. She hoped the Narn would not suffer too heavily in this attack, and that any response they made would be measured. The existence of the ISA, at least, could help with that, restraining the Narn from what would be their first, violent impulse.

She signed off on the report, giving the order that would divert more than two-dozen ships and thousands of personnel from their usual patrol routes to form battle fleets on the edge of the Earth Alliance and, should EarthForce get the permission it expected, within Narn space as well. Luchenko predicted some rogue faction within the Republic would be identified by the Rangers soon enough, and the ISA would lay out rules of engagement permitting limited strikes against any assets they held while leaving the rest of the Republic more or less intact. It would be done in such a way that the attacking fleets would be gone before the Centauri could respond, thereby avoiding direct confrontation, and the risk of war, with their military forces.

Clean and easy is how it always appeared here in her office. However, Luchenko had seen the wreckage of the fleet that had liberated Earth from her predecessor, hulks and wrecks spinning slowly in orbit as they trailed a cloud of human debris. Knowing Earth needed time to rebuild and consolidate itself, Luchenko had avoided military conflict at every opportunity, a process made easier by her agreement to join the ISA. Given a choice, she would avoid the forthcoming retribution against the Centauri altogether, but valuable political capital could be made in demonstrating solidarity with the Narn. EarthForce personnel in the ships she sent were probably not in any real danger during what would effectively be hit and run attacks, if it even came to that.

The alarm announcing another visitor bleated its subdued tone once more, but both the President and her aide were surprised as an EarthForce colonel burst into the office, his bald head glistening from running from the Situation Room. Luchenko looked up in amazement - not out of irritation but surprise at a high-ranking EarthForce officer breaking protocol like this. A slow feeling of dread percolated within her stomach as it dawned on her that no officer would act in this way unless something was very, very wrong.

'We found it,' he said, gasping.

Shocked, it took her a second to respond. 'Where?'

‘Here.’

‘On Earth?’

‘No, Madam President,’ he said, a little steadier now. ‘It’s here. In EarthDome.’

July 6th 2263, White Star Intrepide, Sol

Far beyond the orbit of Earth’s moon, a jump point shimmered blue and the vortex briefly coalesced to allow the purple spearhead form of the Intrepide to enter realspace. With a brief course correction, it aimed straight for Earth, speeding towards its programmed destination. On board, the bridge crew were aware of the increased ‘chatter’ throughout the system’s communications networks and the elevated level of security that interrogated the transponders of the White Star.

‘It’s here,’ said Badeau. ‘They’ve found it. Get me President Luchenko, quickly!’

The Minbari crew quickly sent out coded requests to EarthDome, negotiating a dozen communications protocols but even so, it took several minutes to receive a reply. Badeau spent the time agonising over the possible targets, and even Shaw felt concern for those in danger - even if they were the same Earthers who had opposed the independence of his own world for so long.

Eventually, the Intrepide’s main display was activated and, flowing from the ceiling once again, it produced the image of President Luchenko. Badeau immediately noticed her harrowed expression, then realised she was on her feet bent over her own display rather than seated, as would have been normal.

‘White Star 31,’ Luchenko said, her voice fast and hard.

‘Madam President,’ said Badeau with a tip of her head. ‘You have found the Centauri weapon?’

‘Yes, it is here in EarthDome, shipped in as part of a supply run from Io. We have a bomb disposal team working on it now.’

‘Have you ordered the evacuation?’

‘Already started,’ said Luchenko. ‘Though it will not be complete in time. Our people have never seen a device like this before, but they have already hacked into the first stage of the Centauri fuse. It will detonate in less than twenty minutes.’

Badeau quickly made a mental calculation. ‘We can be there in ten. Give us clearance to land. Do you know the potential damage yet?’

‘No,’ Luchenko shook her head. ‘We have a shuttle on standby though. Stay clear. We’ll talk again when this is over, one way or another.’

‘Madam President,’ Badeau said before Luchenko could end the link. ‘I don’t imagine you will leave until the very last moment, and there is no shuttle or ship in EarthForce as fast as a White Star. I

insist, for your own safety, that you allow us to evacuate you and your staff.'

Luchenko glanced beyond Badeau, apparently listening to someone out of view in her office, and then nodded. 'Very well. We will prepare for your arrival.'

The communication ended and Badeau spoke quietly to her helmsmen. 'All power to engines. Get us there fast.'

July 6th 2263, EarthDome, Sol

Firing manoeuvring thrusters, the Intrepide touched down lightly on the tarmac of the landing pad, one of several dotting the towering structures of EarthDome. It shared space with three shuttles, each with all hatches open, ready to accept the stream of personnel that funnelled from the senatorial offices. Badeau and Shaw ran down the boarding ramp of the Intrepide and pounded into the tower, their Anla'Shok robes streaming behind them. Inside they heard a cry through the slowly panicking crowd and turned to see an EarthForce officer waving to get their attention. Following the man, they hastened through corridors and a transport tube before arriving at the Office of the President of the Earth Alliance.

Taking in the plush meeting area and wide window with a single glance, Badeau walked straight up to the desk of the President. Luchenko was surrounded by EarthForce brass, an even mix of both fleet and ground force uniforms evident. She looked up to acknowledge the Rangers.

'You got here in time. Good,' Luchenko said.

'Sabine, Michael,' Badeau said, indicating both herself and Shaw. 'Any progress?'

A fleet officer - an admiral, Badeau noted - turned to face her. 'The Centauri fuse is the only realistic route we have into the device, given time constraints. We can tell it started a countdown as soon as it reached EarthDome, but it is hardwired into what we can only presume is the device's detonation circuits. Our team is trying to separate the fuse from the device to render it inert, but they have been unsuccessful so far. If they cannot defuse the trigger, the device will activate as the fuse is removed. We don't know the effects of the device but concur with the ISA's assessment of its magnitude.'

'How long until detonation?' asked Shaw.

The Admiral glanced at a datapad in his hand. 'Four minutes, forty seconds.'

'Madam President,' said Badeau forcefully, expecting resistance. 'We must leave now.'

'There is no more time, Madam President,' said another EarthForce officer, a four-star general.

Luchenko scrolled through a report in her screen. 'How many have we evacuated so far?' she asked.

'Nearly 60%. Madam President, we knew we would not get everyone out in time,' the general said. 'I must insist we leave now.'

‘How many senators have evacuated?’ she persisted.

‘We believe they have all left. Madam President, I am sorry.’ The general nodded to two EarthForce soldiers who were standing to one side. With determined purpose, they pushed through the crowd and, firmly grabbing the President, began marching her from behind the desk.

Luchenko gave a strangled cry of anger but quickly relaxed and accepted the inevitable. Her Presidential Guard had performed this drill enough to make her realize she had no option. Sensing her acquiescence, the soldiers released their grip of her arms but stayed close. Seeing the President was ready to leave, Badeau and Shaw led the way to the landing pad, where all but one shuttle had departed. EarthForce soldiers surrounded the remaining vessel, forcing the milling crowd to form orderly queues before being permitted to board. By the time the Rangers, President and EarthForce officers reached the Intrepide, a sense of very real urgency sank into even Luchenko, and they all boarded the White Star at a flat run.

Inside, Minbari crew quickly directed the EarthForce personnel to temporary quarters, but they allowed Luchenko to follow the Rangers to the bridge. As she ran to her captain’s chair, Badeau shouted the order to leave.

‘Get us out of here!’

The violent motion of the Intrepide, attitude thrusters straining to vault its mass skywards, was dampened down by the gravitic drive, but Shaw still had to take a step back to steady himself. The Minbari helmsmen held the White

Star on a flatter trajectory than normal, trading altitude for simply putting as much distance between the ship and EarthDome without having to fight gravity.

‘Time to detonation?’ called Badeau.

A Minbari dutifully summoned the holographic display, charting their progress across a three-dimensional map of the surrounding terrain. A counter on the right hand side of the screen registered 33 seconds and began ticking at what seemed an impossibly fast rate.

President Luchenko, standing at Shaw’s shoulder, whispered what the bridge crew were thinking. ‘We’re not going to make it, are we?’

Hopelessly outclassed, the EarthForce bomb disposal team worked hard on the Centauri fuse until the last second. The three members had volunteered to stay until the end, knowing that EarthDome could never be fully evacuated in time. The regular staff had left as soon as the threat had been revealed, and the docking bay was eerily quiet. In his last moments, the leader of the team, Captain Perry, had time for one last cliché.

‘Been a pleasure working with you guys.’

The fuse counted down to zero. Within a microsecond, the Dilgar weapon detonated.

In the blink of an eye, reactions took place within the capsule as it drew upon the Earth's own magnetic field to generate the power it hungrily sought. If the other two capsules had been placed in their precise positions elsewhere on the globe, the weapons would create a grid of energy running through crust, mantle and core. Lacking this boost, the weapon turned in upon itself and a blinding white light expanded from the capsule, vaporising all matter within fifty metres. Captain Perry and his men, along with a sizeable part of the loading bay, simply ceased to exist. For several seconds, a ball of unstable energy roared with deafening effect as, outside, lightning thrashed down into EarthDome, generated by the magnitude of power swirling inside. As the sphere finally lost all stability, it detonated, reaction following reaction to create a shock wave that flattened every building within EarthDome and smashing the life out of every living creature it touched. This was followed an instant later by a slow-moving wave of fire that roiled and grew, pouring out across the country, a hungry beast that consumed everything in its path.

Any building that still stood was scorched to its core as the intense heat of the flames rolled over it. Lake Geneva posed no barrier to the fire and most of its water was vaporised though this, at least, would later be replenished naturally. Satellite images of the disaster later revealed the expanding shock wave travelling for over sixty miles with lethal effect, though the seismic vibrations were felt the world over. The expanding fire wave appeared to move at a snail's pace in comparison, as if it could be outrun, though no one in the immediate area would survive its devastating effects. The reactions that drove it expired quickly; perhaps the Dilgar weapon required its counterparts for greater effect or maybe it had been dormant for too long. The flames finally abated after travelling twenty miles to the east, consuming Montreux, La Comballaz and a dozen other towns. To the other compass points, the effects of the weapon were hemmed in by the Alps, reaching only a few miles and not crossing the mountain range. An area of natural beauty that had remained unsullied for centuries lay in ash.

Shaw opened his eyes and looked up at the underside of his station. Beyond that, he saw a sky darkened by rapidly thinning clouds. That's not right, he thought. A heavy weight lay across his abdomen, but a pain in the small of his back made him consider remaining immobile for the moment.

He closed his eyes again to focus and remember. The countdown on the screen. The President's comment on the inevitability of their situation. Then a resounding smack on the hull of the Intrepide as a shock wave struck it with ruinous force. He remembered one of the Minbari crew shouting something about losing one of the wings. The White Star had lurched at that point, and suddenly they were all looking at a looming mountain range growing ever larger in the viewport. Sabine rattled off commands and suggestions to the crew until the last moment and they, to their credit, had obeyed. Everything had been tried. Shaw, with little to offer, had braced himself and the President. He remembered rock flashing past the viewport at incredible speed and then nothing else. He hurt all over.

Raising his head, Shaw looked down at the weight trapping him.

'Ah,' he said, realising what it was. 'Madam President? Are you alright?'

She moaned, giving the indication that she was at least alive. Shaw studied what was left of the bridge. Towards the viewport, hunks of metal plating and crushed parts of the ship's superstructure

twisted around one another. He held little hope for the two helmsmen stationed there. Above him was sky, and it continued towards the back of the bridge. Shaw dimly realised the bridge was no longer part of the Intrepide's hull. At some point during the crash, the two had parted company.

Movement to his right caused him to stir, and he saw a blackened and scarred Badeau struggling to sit upright, clutching her side as she did so.

'Michael,' she said, wincing in pain. 'You still with us?'

'Never left,' he paused, as he suddenly found the need to swallow. 'The President is alive too.'

'Can you move?' Badeau asked as she lay back to a prone position. Luchenko's stirrings indicated consciousness too.

Shaw moved his extremities one by one to see if anything had stopped working or been torn off. It hurt, but he decided he was more or less intact. Helping Luchenko, Shaw sat up, groaning as he did. It was some effort, but strength started to return.

After checking the President for breaks and then resting her to one side, Shaw began to fish around in his robes for the small first aid pack all Rangers carried. Pulling out a small syringe from the brown case, he began administering it to Luchenko, hoping to remove any pain, before repeating the procedure for Badeau. He saw immediately that the Ranger was far worse off than the President.

'How are you?' he asked.

Badeau suppressed a groan as she shifted position. 'I don't think it's good. That helps,' she said, nodding at the syringe in his hand.

'Did anyone else make it?' asked Shaw finally.

'I don't know,' said Badeau grimly, after a pause. 'I think most bridge crew were sucked out of that,' she said, weakly gesturing to the open ceiling. 'Or are buried under that,' indicating the crushed forward section. 'Either way, I don't give much hope, even for Minbari.'

Standing a little shakily, Shaw leaned against what remained of his station. Looking towards the rear of the bridge, he saw mountains and little else. He was also aware of his captain's injuries.

'You should look for survivors,' he heard her say behind him.

'I can't. Your injuries-' he started.

'There will be others in the crew worse off than me. I have the President here to help me. We have to get a commlink to EarthForce working - they'll send a shuttle.' She paused for a moment before steeling herself to continue. When it arrives, I don't want to report that we are the only survivors.'

Shaw was not sure whether it was loyalty to his captain, a growing bond between the two of them or an outdated chivalrous desire to not leave a wounded woman, but he found himself disagreeing with

her and began to shake his head.

‘Be back in thirty minutes,’ she said flatly, mustering enough strength and determination in her voice so Shaw would not mistake her authority and the direct command.

After a further split second of indecision, Shaw nodded and began to pick his way painfully from the bridge. He began to reach for his first aid kit again, intending to use the same stimulant and pain suppressant combination on himself that he had administered to Badeau and the President. As soon as he put his hand on the pouch, he thought better of it. He could soon encounter someone who needed it far more than he.

Outside, the air seemed burnt, the stench of ozone thick in his nostrils. He scanned the area but his sight was blocked by mountains on all sides. The thin vegetation at the foot of the towering rock faces was either burning or already blackened. What he had taken for clouds earlier was actually thick smoke. It seemed the sky itself had caught fire. What remained of EarthDome and the great lake, he could not tell. The bridge of the Intrepide had indeed separated from the main hull, and its ruin had come to rest a quarter of the way up the mountain.

Looking down, he saw scattered wreckage of the White Star, though nothing large enough to be the main hull. Shaw guessed that lay beyond one of the mountains around him, though whether it would be behind the bridge or in front, he could not guess. Seeing a large fragment of purple armour plating a few hundred yards from him, perhaps from the drive systems, Shaw began a painful climb down toward it. He was grateful they had not ended up higher in the mountain ranges, where treacherous terrain and thin oxygen would have added to his difficulties. It did not take long, however, for him to realise that many of the crew might be stranded in just such a place. So long as they were not badly injured, he knew the Minbari would be tough enough to survive for at least a little while, but he did not have such hopes for the EarthForce officers who had evacuated with them.

It took Shaw several minutes to reach his target, but he was rewarded with sounds of movement from behind the wreckage that towered above him. It was from the rear section of the Intrepide, he could tell now, where it had broken away from the core of the gravitic drive. Trying not to think of injured crew lying too close to the ship’s fusion reactor, he limped round the wreckage, peering inside. He immediately saw a line of Minbari bodies in a shattered corridor, all arranged in a neat row. He did not know whether they were unconscious or dead but his heart lightened as someone had obviously placed them thus.

A groan of supreme effort sounded just beyond the prone Minbari, and Shaw called out. A pause hung between him and the unknown crew member, then a hesitant voice returned to him.

‘Mr Shaw?’

A surge of relief swept through him as he recognised the light tone, and he redoubled his efforts to clamber through the twisted supports framing the corridor.

‘Tilanna!’

He found the small Minbari just beyond what had once been a junction that split service panels around the drive system. Looking at her, he thought she looked a real mess. She favoured her left arm and the robes around her legs were soaked through with blood. Her face, normally so delicate and precise in its features, had a deep cut running across the back of her head and blood dripped from her bone crest. Still, she had been trying to force open a wedged door with brute force. In spite of the situation, Shaw could not help but admire her Minbari fortitude and resilience. A human in her condition would have been out for the count, if surviving at all.

‘Help me,’ she said simply, then went back to straining on the door. ‘I heard movement inside.’

Shaw cast his eye about, seeing the door was open by an inch or so - either jammed that way or moved through Tilanna’s incredible efforts. He spied a loose pipe jutting from the floor and wrenched it free. Stepping up to Tilanna, he wedged it in as a lever, and the two of them strained together. Gradually, an inch at a time, it yielded to their efforts. Finally a pair of hands from the other side gripped the edge of the door and aided them. The work easier now, the door was soon forced open, and they looked inside to see a darkened chamber crushed to a third of its original size. On the floor were three Minbari. The first looked up as the others began to move slowly.

‘I thank you,’ he said to both Shaw and Tilanna. ‘I could not have moved that by myself.’

They both crouched down to inspect his injuries. ‘Are you hurt?’ Shaw asked.

‘Nothing major, I think. I believe, at least, I will live.’ He winced as he stood. ‘Help me with the others. I think they will live but a little light would help the diagnosis.’

Between them, Shaw and the two more able-bodied Minbari struggled to drag the wounded third to where Tilanna placed the others. She told Shaw some had perished while others might not recover without assistance, as she finally sat down to rest and let him tend her injuries.

He saw her left arm was bruised and a wide, nasty slash across her shin was quickly bound up. No lasting damage would result. He was far more concerned with her head wound but consoled himself that it might not be critical as she was still conscious. Shaw knew the Religious Caste were far more adept at some of the pain management meditations he had learned as one of the Anla’Shok, but even so, he was impressed by Tilanna’s strength of will. His task finished, he suddenly remembered his rendezvous with Badeau back in the bridge section.

‘We have to go - a shuttle should be coming for us. Sabine is setting up a commlink,’ he said to the two Minbari.

The male Minbari smiled at the news that his captain was still alive but refused to go with Shaw and Tilanna. ‘I have to stay here. They will need me,’ he said, indicating the prone Minbari.

Shaw shook his head. ‘You are in no state to survive the cold for long.’

‘They will survive a great deal shorter than that if I am not around. Besides, I’ll make a fire. It will keep us warm and serve as a beacon.’

‘What will you use for a flame?’ Shaw asked, looking around the immediate wreckage.

When he did not get an immediate answer, Shaw turned back to see both Minbari looking at him with serious faces.

‘Michael,’ Tilanna said slowly. ‘We Minbari had the capacity to make fire long before you humans did. He’ll manage.’

Shaw dropped his gaze and smiled. ‘Sorry.’

‘Now go, both of you,’ the Minbari said. ‘The captain will need you.’

Shaw put a hand on his shoulder and said, ‘I’ll get a shuttle sent down to you.’

‘I know you will. I have my duties here. Go and attend to yours.’

Nodding once, Shaw stood up and began the march back up the mountain with Tilanna.

As they approached the wrecked bridge section, Shaw saw Luchenko leaning over Badeau. The Ranger was lying very still now, and Luchenko looked up as Shaw and Tilanna approached.

‘Your friend managed to get through, eventually. A shuttle is on its way. I think she needs help very soon...’ said Luchenko.

Shaw and Tilanna both crouched by their captain, Luchenko stepping back to give them room. Badeau faded in and out of consciousness, probably from the strain of getting a communications link working and contacting EarthForce. Looking over his superior’s broken body, Shaw wondered what he should do next. He still had his duty to perform and a mission to accomplish - but without Sabine’s guidance and support? Surely the Anla’Shok would have to be informed of her injuries so a senior replacement could be sent to support the President and the Earth Alliance in this time of dire need. But what if no replacement was conveniently nearby? Shaw did not have the faintest clue how to advise a President. She had many years of political experience and was probably twice his age. What contribution could he possibly make?

Luchenko broke through his thoughts. ‘How did you get on?’ she asked.

This, at least, was something he could answer. ‘Didn’t find the main hull, if it is still in one piece. But there are injured Minbari down there,’ he said, pointing back to the wreckage.

‘Shuttles will be scouring the area soon. They’ll be okay.’ She turned to face Tilanna. ‘I carried a beacon outside to direct the shuttle. Make sure it keeps transmitting until they arrive. We cannot spare a second’s delay. I need to get to a secure location as quickly as possible.’

It slowly dawned on Shaw what that meant. ‘We can gather the survivors in the shuttle that’s coming now,’ he ventured. Luchenko shook her head and was about to respond when Shaw felt a hand on his leg. He looked down to see Badeau grasping him, an unwavering expression on her face, and he crouched to hear her words.

‘We have to get the President to a safe location. That’s our priority.’ The effort of this clearly pained her and she closed her eyes, relaxing her grip on him.

‘Sabine!’

Badeau slowly opened her eyes to look straight at Shaw, and he saw the determined set of her jaw.

‘What do you think is happening, right now?’ she asked, looking to press her point. When he did not answer immediately, she grabbed him again and forced him to look at her once more. ‘Think!’

Taking a breath, Shaw considered the situation. ‘Well, there will be those in EarthForce who want to retaliate. They’ll want to attack the Centauri. But they won’t do that without orders.’

‘Until I contacted EarthForce, they were presuming the President was dead, along with the Joint Chiefs. The news she is still alive has not reached every part of EarthForce yet. The senators, those who survived, have been scattered during the evacuation and so, right now, no one knows who is in charge. It will only take one lone admiral or even captain to get the idea that retaliation must take place quickly - and we then have a war on our hands.’

He nodded but Badeau did not let him go. ‘Do you understand?’ she said through her pain.

‘Yes,’ he finally said, though he thought of the brave Minbari just a little distance away who might have to survive a night in these mountains. ‘Where are we taking the President?’

‘A shuttle is being sent down from the Alexander, a destroyer in orbit. From there, I imagine she will want to go to a command post, either here on Earth or perhaps Mars. I’m betting Mars. They may fear further attacks.’

‘We need to report back as well,’ he said.

‘Now you are thinking. Yes, damn straight we have to report to Sheridan. Or, rather, you do.’ The whine of a craft’s engines caused her to glance up as a shuttle bearing EarthForce markings began a landing cycle just a few yards away from them. ‘Listen to me, Michael,’ Badeau said, ensuring his attention was focussed only on her. ‘I don’t know how long I can stay conscious, and I think I am going to be out of things for a while. Everything rides on what happens next; I cannot overstate that enough. You are now the conduit between Luchenko and Sheridan. You are also going to have to take a lot of tough decisions on your own. Remember what you have been taught. Be true to the Anla’Shok.’

As she closed her eyes once more, Shaw noticed that Badeau’s breathing was becoming ragged. He had to strain to hear her next words over the noise of the settling shuttle. ‘I think this is going to get worse before it gets better.’

Shaw did not have the chance to ask Badeau what she meant, as his captain lapsed into unconsciousness. The area began swarming with people in EarthForce uniforms, first taking President Luchenko aboard the shuttle, then bringing a stretcher for Badeau. He followed Tilanna to the small craft, turning to look once more at the strewn wreckage of the Intrepide below them before ducking

inside.

CHAPTER EIGHT

July 6th 2263, The EAS Alexander, Sol

Lacking the advanced gravitic systems of the White Star, the EarthForce shuttle was uncomfortable, even for those who were not injured. Shaw and Tilanna endured the short voyage well enough as the shuttle closed distance with its mother ship, the Alexander, but he was thankful that Badeau had slipped into unconsciousness earlier. Though they remained alert, both he and Tilanna were engaged in their own silent meditative techniques, taught to them by the Minbari, as paramedics on board the shuttle tended them. Though forced to inaction, Shaw tried to marshal his mental reserves, preparing himself for the next challenge however out of depth he personally felt. Despite holding the title a short time, Shaw was Anla'Shok, and he was determined not to fail.

President Luchenko had no such training and she chomped at the bit, impatient at wasting more time before she could resume her role as leader of a free Earth. Frustrated, she ordered the shuttle's pilot to hook a communications link into the EarthForce emergency bands and, from the flood of chatter, she began to piece together what had happened in Geneva and the extent of the damage. At first glance, it looked to be total.

The Alexander, an Omega-class destroyer and one of the largest and most powerful vessels in the EarthForce fleet, loomed in the shuttle's forward viewport where all the passengers could see it. The long, square shape of the Omega, common to many vessels built by Earth, had earned the entire fleet the nickname 'flying bricks.' However, whereas many EarthForce ships still had zero-gravity throughout their superstructures, the Omega had a rotating crew section where variable artificial gravity was permanently available. As well as granting military crews a measure of dignity, it allowed ships such as the Alexander to stay on patrol for extended periods of time without incurring unnecessary crew fatigue.

The pilot exchanged call signs and approach vectors with the Alexander's fighter controllers and then lined the shuttle up with the massive warship. Flying around the front superstructure of the Alexander in a long sweeping manoeuvre, the shuttle began the slow approach to the red-lit docking bay in the nose of the ship. Flashing guide lights mounted on pylons extending from the sheer face of the prow gave visual aid to the pilot as he gently coaxed the shuttle forward to the open port.

Unbuckling herself before the shuttle had finished its docking sequence, President Luchenko impatiently waited for the co-pilot to lead them through the forward zero-gravity section of the Alexander. She only gained a measure of self-control when they reached the bridge and were able to put their feet down solidly on the deck. The transition was disorientating for the President, Tilanna and Shaw, as none of them had spent any time on an Omega, but they quickly recovered.

Captain James, a tall, dark-skinned man with severe features but a calm and friendly voice, strode up to the group as soon as they entered the ship's bridge.

'Madam President, are you alright?' he asked with genuine concern.

'I'm alive but a lot of good people died today,' she answered briskly. 'You must take me to Mars. I

need to get to the EarthForce Support Centre there. Best speed, Captain.'

'Of course.' He turned to face his crew. 'You heard the President. Maximum burn to leave Earth orbit. Then open a jump point for Mars.'

'Jump point, aye,' came the automatic response.

He turned back to Luchenko. 'One more thing, Captain,' she said. 'I need access to Gold Channel communications. I presume they are still up?'

'A little scrambled but that should diminish as we move away from Earth,' he said. 'Here, Madam President. You can use my office.' The Captain ushered her to an alcove towards the rear of the bridge which housed all the systems the captain of an Omega needed. Settling herself down, the President began to tap into the high priority Gold Channel communications network.

Still standing by the entrance of the bridge, Tilanna leaned over to Shaw and whispered, 'What do we do?'

Shaw was not completely certain of the answer himself. 'We wait,' he said quietly after a moment's thought. 'We desperately need to contact President Sheridan, but I think it would be well if we do so when he can give us orders in private. We also need to watch, very carefully, what Earth does next. Keep your eyes and ears open.'

Shaw nodded as the captain walked back to them. 'Rangers,' he said, addressing both. 'Is there anything I can do for you?'

'Just get us to Mars, Captain,' Shaw said. 'Fast. The fate of billions rests on this.'

If Captain James thought Shaw was overstating things, he did not show it. For his part, Shaw found himself impressed with the way the whole crew of the Alexander were coping with the virtual decapitation of not only their military command, but the entire Earth government. Though he could sense a deep shock within the crew, they attended their duties with a renewed diligence.

Under full thrust, the Alexander left the shadow of Earth's gravity well and opened a stable jump point that would get them to Mars in minutes instead of hours. They all felt the lurch as the ship approached the inter-dimensional vortex, accelerating to match the velocities of shock waves and currents in hyperspace.

As the light-minutes of realspace flashed past, Tilanna leaned towards Shaw and quietly spoke. 'Do you recognise the name of this ship?'

'I know of it. It was named after an ancient Earth leader who conquered much of his known world.'

'No, that is not what I meant,' said Tilanna. 'This is the Alexander. The same ship that fought against Clark's forces at Epsilon Eridani, when Babylon 5 seceded from the Earth Alliance. The commander at the time was a Major Ryan but it was under the overall leadership of Sheridan.' She smiled. 'As Earth ships go, it is quite famous among the Religious Caste.'

Shaw raised his brow as he considered this. ‘A good omen, perhaps?’ he said.

‘If it is, it will be the first one today.’

July 6th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

Officially, Mars had gained its independence from the Earth Alliance after the civil war provoked by the actions of President Clark. Unofficially, the bureaucracy of EarthGov had done everything it could to hinder the progress of Mars’ citizens in finding their own way in the galaxy. Many senators found the independence of a colony within their own home system something of an embarrassment, and still more believed that Mars would return to the fold within a year or two. Both groups failed to comprehend that the more barriers they put up against the Martians, the harder Martians would fight for their right to self-determination. Too much blood had been spilt in the past during the riots and rebellions for it to be any other way.

President Luchenko, if she were candid, would admit to being in the latter group. With so few natural resources of its own, she failed to appreciate the trade links the provisional Mars government would create via their membership to the Interstellar Alliance. Truth be told, Mars had done proportionally better within the ISA than Earth itself had. She had turned a blind eye to the refusals Mars citizens met when they tried to use their own passports, she delayed the withdrawal of EarthForce personnel from the red sands and did absolutely nothing to further the trade links between Earth and its former colony. Far more important issues existed with her existing colony worlds. Today, however, she was secretly glad for her past reticence, as it meant there was still a fully functioning EarthForce command centre within Mars Dome One, complete with a communications network that could span the galaxy if necessary.

The Support Centre was a small and unobtrusive, though well defended, building on the outskirts of Mars Dome One. Its meek presence, however, belied the extensive network that lay beneath it, turning the facility into a virtual bunker. In the past, the thoroughway outside had been the scene of violence and bloodshed, as much of the Martian aggression against Earth had been concentrated here when tempers flared.

Inside the communications hub of the centre, many EarthForce staff were going about their duties on autopilot, shocked at the news of the sneak attack, disbelieving that they could be going to war again so soon. Little more than a year had passed since the civil war. Shaw watched them talk in subdued tones and it reminded him of the sudden death of President Santiago some years before, on board EarthForce One around Io. Even on Mars, people had been stunned into silence at the tragedy of losing a popular leader.

Tilanna stood, alert, as Shaw sat down at a communications relay behind her. He had instructed her to make sure no one was eavesdropping. No doubt someone, somewhere, would be monitoring his communications with the ISA, but Shaw hoped the Ranger security protocols he used would at least slow them down. Badeau had been taken to the emergency centre of the largest hospital in Mars Dome One. That comforted him, as he knew it contained some of the best doctors on Mars, and its medical advances could rival the finest hospitals on Earth. Her condition was deemed critical from the one communication Shaw received from the staff there, and though they had promised to give him regular

updates, he had doubts about receiving them promptly while in the high security command centre. Though concerned about his captain, Shaw also knew she would want him focussed on the situation at hand. Given its magnitude, he felt lost and desperately wished Badeau could be there, as he was certain she would know what to do. For all his Anla'Shok training at the hands of the best human and Minbari tutors, he simply did not feel prepared for this moment. Tilanna's presence, however, was some comfort and infinitely better than being alone.

As it turned out, Shaw's worries about eavesdroppers were made moot by Luchenko's elevated voice rising from the main computer desk on the other side of the hub. Her commands, questions, and general shouting would drown out anything he said or heard. The communications staff had managed to put the President in contact with a few senators who had either escaped the destruction of EarthDome or who were not present. She also had direct links to fleets across Earth space.

'I am not ordering a war, Senator,' she said. 'Yes, I know I need the approval of the Senate... Damn it man, who do you think you are talking to?' There was another pause as she listened to the private channel. 'It doesn't matter. I am hereby giving the order to

EarthForce for full mobilisation. All colonies, all fleets... Senator, don't try me on this.

EarthDome has been destroyed, and I damn well got blasted out of the sky myself. If this is a prelude to further action, our people need to be ready.'

He knew Luchenko was a moderate, but Shaw also knew the Earth Alliance had been dealt a grievous blow this day. Listening to the President, he knew she would not escalate things without further provocation, but she was still a target and was now on his homeworld. Might she inadvertently draw attention to Mars? Would she care about the Martians if another attack were made here rather than on Earth?

'Senator, if you bring that proposal up, you can be sure I will veto it,' Luchenko said after another pause. 'I am not committing our forces to invasion. However, we need a show of strength against the Centauri before they get any more ideas or become emboldened by this attack. Move those fleets to their borders - I have already spoken to the Kha'ri on Narn. They have offered us free access to their space along the Centauri border. They are enthusiastic to commit forces, but I have forestalled them for now. However, it is good to know we have friends.'

She listened again, taking a breath in an attempt to calm herself. 'It is important to remember that we are by no means crippled,' she said. 'They have struck at the heart of our government, but we still have EarthForce and we still have an effective governing body. Tell your people to remain calm. Those responsible for this tragic situation will be brought to justice. That is a promise.'

July 7th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

The hours ticked by slowly as the Earth Alliance stumbled around for someone to accuse and for a definite target to strike. Shaw and Tilanna were granted cramped quarters attached to the Support Centre, but they were at least grateful for an unlocked communications link which had been transferred to them - as much to give EarthForce officers and the President privacy as them, Shaw

presumed. The ISA Headquarters on Minbar promised instructions from Sheridan himself, but there was still no word. Shaw guessed the ISA had at least as many problems as Earth, and anyone walking into an EarthForce installation would have been able to sniff the possibility of war on the air. Humanity was looking for someone to blame, and he could not completely remove himself from the impulse, as he had been a de facto target. It had been a dreadful attack.

Trying to avoid being swept up by the mania, Shaw contented himself with watching ISN broadcasts, but they focussed on the attack and little else. The time counter on the bottom of the screen showed it to be dawn in London, but Earth Standard Time meant little on the colony worlds, which each had their own rotational clock. Tilanna had tried to persuade him to get some sleep, but while he could relax physically, he remained too keyed up after yesterday's events. Besides, he would soon be going into action again, either as warrior or peacemaker, depending on what the politicians decided next. He lay on a soft recliner and shuffled his feet back and forth to maintain circulation while he watched yet another summary of the attack, hoping for but not expecting any new information from the ISN correspondents.

The dark-haired newscaster was typical of those chosen by ISN after the civil war. Shaw could not recall the name flashed a few minutes ago, but her educated accent and a guileless demeanour promised viewers the whole truth. Even so, a little of the shock now spreading around Earth, if not all the colony worlds, registered in her tone. A screen-within-screen held steady at her right shoulder, showing the scenes of devastation from the air above Geneva. The great lake had shrunk drastically, leaving a crisped brown bed stretching between the mountains. No vegetation remained in the area, and the camera lingered on the ruins of EarthDome, now a smashed and twisted pile of rubble and metal.

‘We have confirmed sightings from our correspondents across the colony worlds of EarthForce personnel on a heightened state of alert,’ the newscaster said in her calm and measured voice, ‘as well as fleets leaving ports for destinations unknown, though we have unconfirmed reports of EarthForce ships taking position along the Centauri Republic border. President Luchenko, currently on Mars, made just one public address since the attack on EarthDome, announcing she is working with the ISA to bring a measured response to the perpetrators of this terrorist action. So far, no evidence has been produced as to the identity of the attackers, but the assignment of fleets to Centauri space, if true, must point to information we have not yet received. In a statement received just two hours ago, Emperor Londo Mollari had this to say.’

The screen-within-screen changed to show the stern but somehow tired looking face of the Centauri Emperor, which then grew to fill the entire screen. As the transition completed, the recording began to run, and he addressed the people of Earth.

‘The Centauri Republic condemns, by the strongest means possible, the cowardly attack on our friends of Earth. I, personally, weep at the unprecedented death toll and offer my sympathies to all who lost friends, colleagues and relatives. We Centauri, of all peoples in this galaxy, know the terrible cost an attack like this demands.’ Mollari's face then turned harder. ‘However, despite scurrilous rumours emerging from certain governments within the Interstellar Alliance, I must state, categorically, that the Centauri Republic played no part in this dreadful tragedy. We have no interest in the affairs of other worlds and seek merely to pursue our own destiny within our own borders.’

The screen flicked back to show the newscaster, continuing her summary.

‘President of the Interstellar Alliance and hero of the civil war, John Sheridan, broadcast this appeal for calm to all ISA worlds shortly after.’

Once again, the screen-within-screen above the newscaster’s shoulder changed to picture President Sheridan before his image grew to fill the whole screen in ISN’s slick manner.

‘I strongly urge all members of the ISA to abide by the treaties they have signed,’ he said. ‘Unilateral action against a government outside of our alliance is forbidden and must be agreed upon first by a majority of members. At this time, we have no firm evidence as to the identity of those who committed this atrocity, but the Rangers are working hard to uncover new information. You can be sure they will succeed and, as we have done in the past, the ISA will stand behind the wishes of its members. Until then, I must insist that no government undertake military action or other acts that may later be construed as hostile.’

Sheridan’s image disappeared and the newscaster was back.

‘In summary again, EarthDome was destroyed at 09:50 EST yesterday by what has been called by President Luchenko a terrorist action. The bomb, apparently of alien construction, devastated a huge area around Geneva. The death toll currently stands at over 68,000, but this is expected to rise drastically over the coming days as relief teams comb the region. Messages of support and pledges of assistance have been received from Mars colony, the Narn Regime, Minbar and many governments from the former League of Non-Aligned Worlds. Though many government staff were killed in the attack, EarthGov assures us it is still a functioning body. Coming up, an analysis of the Centauri Republic’s military and possible response scenarios from our EarthForce liaison, Ted Chang.’

‘Mr. Shaw, you have a call,’ Tilanna said to him, penetrating the lethargy that inactivity brought to his system. ‘From Tuzanor.’ She gestured to his screen, and he switched the console from ISN to the communications network.

‘Orders?’ he asked.

‘From Sheridan himself, I was told.’

They watched the digits scroll past on the screen for a few seconds before a weary looking Sheridan appeared. Shaw guessed he had been without sleep for longer than they had, given the timing of the attack.

‘Michael, Tilanna, good,’ he started. ‘I apologise for not getting back to you earlier but I hoped to present you with some solid information. Unfortunately, we still have nothing we can conclusively use.’

‘We still don’t know it was the Centauri?’ asked Shaw.

‘Oh, we are pretty sure the attack was by Centauri,’ Sheridan answered candidly. ‘What we cannot prove is exactly which Centauri. I cannot imagine for a moment this was an official action by the

Republic - say what you like about the Emperor, and I can say a lot, but Mollari is not a terrorist. I know him too well. We suspect a rogue element, perhaps not even within their Centaurum, but a conspiracy looking to achieve God knows what. I am uploading information from our investigation, including a resume of House Kaado which our intelligence has implicated.'

The data crystal locked into the interface next to Shaw's screen began to flash its white light as information flowed across the gulf of space between Minbar and Mars.

'I am giving you both a critical mission, consisting of two parts. First, play diplomat to President Luchenko. She is a good woman but she is also a consummate politician. Earth is hurting right now and its people have a habit of demanding action, any action, when wounded. As a politician, her instincts may be to respond to their pressure. I am also certain some in EarthForce are pressing for a military response as well.'

'We are to act as the ISA's representative here?' Shaw asked.

'You are to stop a war at all costs,' said Sheridan. 'We already know Luchenko is receiving offers of military support from the Narn and other worlds. They all have vested interests in open warfare with the Centauri and may try to take advantage of this. I do not want a situation whereby I am forced to place White Stars between the Centauri and a combined fleet of ISA members. That battle would mean the end of the ISA and everything we have striven for over the past year. Do you understand?'

'We do, Mr. President,' said Shaw. 'We'll advise Luchenko. I just hope I can get her to listen to us. Was there something else?'

'Yes. Take the information I have just transferred to you and begin your own investigation there in Earth space. We only have access to half of what we need here, and you may be able to uncover something at your end. Try to backtrack the bomb and see where the path leads. The Earth Alliance did their own check using information we gave them - that is how they discovered the device before it detonated. Try to find something, anything, that leads blame away from the Republic and toward the real terrorists.'

'And if the trail does lead to the Republic itself?' Shaw queried.

Sheridan sighed. 'Then war may be inevitable. Report whatever you find to me. We'll try to keep everything together here. Any questions?'

'Mr. President,' Tilanna said hesitantly. Sheridan acknowledged her. 'I am not Anla'Shok and know of the Earth Alliance only as it relates to us. I believe I am not the right person to act as Mr. Shaw's assistant in this.'

Though it seemed obvious to hear her say it, Shaw was surprised to discover Tilanna had been harbouring reservations about her own abilities, just as he had. In the past, she was utterly serene, as though there was little that could not be achieved. In fact, he associated this trait with all Minbari. To hear one have doubts shook him a little, making them seem more, well, human.

Sheridan smiled, a little sadly, at her. ‘You have just been promoted to a temporary position within the Rangers,

Tilanna. Michael needs all the help you can give him over the next few days. And, knowing the Religious Caste, your temple training has given you all the tools you need to face anything in this galaxy. I have some experience in that. Is there anything else?’

‘No, Mr. President.’

‘Then I wish you both good luck. You have served the Rangers well so far, but we must ask you to continue striving. The peace of the galaxy rests on all of us now.’

‘You can count on us,’ Shaw promised before the link was broken. He and Tilanna looked at one another for a brief moment.

‘A chance to be heroes,’ said Tilanna with a half-smile.

‘Business as usual,’ said Shaw with a confidence he did not entirely feel. ‘Come on, we have a lot of work ahead of us.’

July 7th 2263, House Kaado, Centauri Prime

The manor was still and silent, the night shrouding its magnificent gardens. Even the royal guardsmen on patrol kept out of sight, silently watching for intruders, however unlikely they might be. Tastefully positioned spotlights, their combined effect sculpted by one of the leading artists of Centauri Prime, highlighted the exquisite architecture of the main building, turning it into a bright display and a nocturnal landmark for miles in every direction. This far from Imperial City, it remained a solitary and unchallenged beacon in the darkness.

Inside its long tiled corridors and plush chambers, few stirred. The servants and slaves still awake went about their duties like clockwork, ever mindful of the penalties of disappointing the master of the house. Some were on hand to respond to any whim or demand that Veneta Kaado or his guest might make, whatever the hour, but most were simply engaged in the normal running of a household of this size, a never-ending task.

Veneta and his sole remaining conspirator, Territt, were beneath the manor, in a small complex Kaado had commissioned from a military expert in security. It could, in theory, be turned into a bunker, leaving any would-be attacker no choice but to literally dig the inhabitants out. Inside, Veneta had ensured all conveniences due a noble were on hand in copious quantities. He had also constructed a command centre of sorts, which he could use to monitor any aspect of House Kaado’s interests, usually in real-time. Here, the bunker diverged from its military ancestry, replete with expensive tapestries, priceless masters from a dozen worlds and soft furnishings that would not tax him should long hours be required here. Kaado did not expect to ever lock down the bunker and survive for any great length of time, isolated from his enemies. However, the look of envy on Territt’s face as he showed the conspirator this luxurious stronghold thrilled Kaado.

He had absolutely no doubt that Territt's own household would sport a similar, probably larger, bunker in the coming months, but the important thing was that he had been first. A trend would certainly start among the Great Houses and he would achieve a certain amount of respect as its instigator. Money meant a lot in Centauri politics, but it could gain a noble so much more when allied to a healthy imagination and a will to get things done.

Their third conspirator, Verlime, was not present. He had scurried back to his own manor within Imperial City when Veneta and Territt had confronted him with scandalising records and images confirming his liaisons with a slave girl belonging to another House. All engineered by Veneta, of course, as he had ensured months ago that Verlime would meet a young Centauri woman who matched his subconscious ideal of a female. To within 96.4%, Veneta's experts had assured him. This, combined with his overt complicity in the attack on Earth, would keep Verlime's silence for now. There was always the possibility that Kaado and Territt would need a scapegoat if their plans went awry and if not, well, Verlime would not live to see the next year.

Kaado and Territt watched broadcasts on the giant screen that took up most of the wall in front of them. They leapt from channel to channel, viewing the reports from a dozen worlds as news of the attack began to filter in, toasting each other with Veneta's most prized stash of Brivari. If now was not the time to break open a bottle or two of his most expensive vintages, he did not know when it possibly could be. Right now, an ISN broadcast from the Earth Alliance was playing. The two nobles took a perverse pleasure in watching the people of Earth try to come to terms with the disaster they had created, and though they monitored other channels from other races, time and again they came back to ISN.

Together, they mocked their Emperor's statement, jeered Sheridan's plea for calm, and goaded the screen as Luchenko promised a measured response. For this brief time, both forgot about the politics of Centauri Prime and the probable future that would see them at odds as they played for the same political territory. They simply basked in the knowledge of a job well done. For those few short hours, they were true comrades. All good things had to come to an end though.

'This is not going fast enough for my liking,' said Territt. 'I'm going to give the order for escalation.'

Veneta's head was spinning slightly from the amount of Brivari he had consumed. 'Ah, back to business then,' he lamented.

Smiling, Territt reached for a commlink lying on the floor beside the large sofa where he sprawled. 'It won't take long. With any luck, we may see it live on ISN. Earth has a habit of sending reporters into battle.' Activating a coded and scrambled channel, he placed a pre-arranged call to a close ally long ago manoeuvred into owing him a great favour. Time to collect.

'Vocator?' he asked. When he received the expected response, he simply said one word.

'Proceed.'

CHAPTER NINE

July 7th 2263, The Urza Jaddo, Beta III

From the main viewport of the bridge of the Urza Jaddo, Vocator Barini could look down the entire length of his battlecruiser. Hands behind his back, he listened to the bridge crew behind him complete their status checks with the other sections of the Jaddo and its companion ships. Lights from a hundred smaller viewports glittered beneath him across the purple and grey armoured hull, the ship's thick hide housing a veritable town floating in space. At its prow were two heavy lasers capable of slicing through enemy vessels and a dozen turrets studded the topside of the ship. In his mind's eye he could see the two other identical battlecruisers just behind the Jaddo. Satisfied that he had been given the right tools for his mission, he paced slowly toward the rear of the bridge, mounting the three small steps that raised his command seat on a plinth above the crew.

Easing his large frame into the comfortable sagid-hide chair, Barini waited until his first officer reported that his crew and ship were both ready for action.

‘Have the Protera and Voxa signalled us?’ he asked.

‘Yes, Vocator,’ came the reply. ‘Both report all systems green and ready for battle.’

‘Excellent. Are the Sentris still tracking the target?’

‘Yes, Vocator. The target is stationary at the same coordinates.’

Barini could sense the anticipation in his crew. They did not know the reasons for the squadron of battlecruisers being here or why they were attacking the Earth fleet. In fact, he had not been told the full reasons himself. Still, Minister Territt had been most generous in the past, elevating him within the Centauri military and personally seeing him offered command not only of the Urza Jaddo but this entire squadron. However, the crew's anticipation and the excitement on the bridge were palpable. For too long the Centauri had been pushed around by every other race, its people under ruinous taxes to pay for reparations they did not deserve to pay. A chance to strike back at their enemies now presented itself. The real whys and wherefores were unimportant. They were actually doing something about their situation and Barini was not entirely immune to this emotion.

He stood up and cleared his throat to make sure he had the attention of the entire bridge.

‘My friends, the great Centauri Republic has been through a long night.’ Barini recited the speech given to him by the Minister precisely, knowing his words were being transmitted throughout the Jaddo and the other battlecruisers. Of its veracity he had little idea, but he knew some truth was surely buried within. He learned early in his career not to question the orders of his superiors too closely and was happy to accept the Minister's words, especially considering what his cooperation would earn him later.

‘The humans, too, have suffered a great tragedy, of that you have no doubt already heard. However, they have blamed we Centauri for this dreadful event. Once more we are subjected to the lies and

prejudice of other races jealous of our superiority and they will try anything to bring us down.’

There were more than a few nods among the bridge crew, many of whom, Barini knew, had lost family and friends during the Narn and Drazi attack on Centauri Prime. ‘The Earth task force we are about to go into battle against has recently withdrawn from Republic space,’ he continued. ‘They have already attacked our colony at Ragesh and destroyed several civilian liners that had docked there.’ There was now a collective gasp of astonishment from the crew and it was well they were surprised, thought Barini. Attacking civilian shipping was an act of barbarity, one the Centauri had been accused of by the Interstellar Alliance. For one of the Alliance’s member governments to now do the same was hypocrisy of the highest order.

‘They have retreated back into Narn space, no doubt to assess the effects of their raid and plan their next target. We must not give them the chance! When we launch our attack, I want each of you to be aware of the Centauri, high and low, man and child, who have already paid for the humans’ arrogance with their lives. Show them no mercy; give them no time to respond! We will press the attack and wipe them from space so they may never attack our people again. My friends, can you find it within yourselves to take the fight to our enemies and avenge our people?’

Barini’s words were met with a loud cheer, and he nodded in approval. With a quick wave of his hand, he motioned his first officer to return everyone to their duties and then collapsed into his chair once more. Bringing a handkerchief from a pocket in his great coat, Barini mopped his brow and took a deep breath. The speech took much effort, and he reflected that being a Vocator on a battlecruiser was probably one of his wiser career choices. Leading a royal guard attack unit on the ground, Coutari waving high in the air as he urged them forward, might appear very heroic, but it really did not suit his physique or passion for over-indulgence. Besides, Barini had become aware that while swordsmen and their officers might cover themselves in glory at the Royal Court, officers on battlecruisers were the ones who made history and shaped the Republic. He had no doubts about his role in the universe.

Once the bridge calmed down, Barini gave the orders that would set the squadron on its way. ‘Signal to the other ships, forward half speed.’

‘Yes, Vocator.’

‘Are the communications disruptors fully functional?’

‘Ready and waiting, Vocator. On your word we’ll flood the spectrum.’

‘Excellent. Confirm with the other ships their standing orders and remind them that once we initiate communications disruption, we will have no further contact with them. Then stand by to make the jump to hyperspace, on my mark. The humans will not know what hit them.’

July 7th 2263, The EAS Corax, Deep Space, Narn Regime

With a size and mass large enough to blot out the stars, the EAS Corax was a leviathan of space, one of the few Poseidon-class supercarriers and the largest vessel ever constructed by the Earth Alliance.

At nearly a mile and a half long, it had required constant wrangling in the Earth senate to push forward the funding necessary for such an ambitious project, but any human with an ounce of interest in spacecraft and space travel admitted it was worth the money and the wait. With a total crew complement of over ten thousand, the Corax was designed to be the crux of any fleet. Acting as a command centre, an entire war could theoretically be run from its bridge, and nearly one hundred Starfury and Thunderbolt fighters nestled within its cavernous hangers, the entire flock capable of being launched within minutes.

Truly, the Poseidon ships were a miracle of human ingenuity. The Corax's task force relied on the presence of the Hyperion cruisers Lexington, Ares, Eros and Persephone for its strength, though an aging Nova dreadnought, the Dowding, was attached to the formation for the duration of their current mission. These six warships lay in deep space, light-years from any star system, as they awaited orders. Flights of Starfuries flew periodic circuits of the task force on standard patrol routes, while several Hermes troop transports, tiny compared to the larger warships, hung with their larger cousins. Across the entire fleet tension was mounting, and all officers had been instructed to keep their crews busy lest anxiety lead to internal conflict.

Sitting in his office at the rear of the Corax's bridge, Admiral Wilson sympathised with the men and women of his fleet. Those lucky enough to serve in the mid-section of the Corax were enjoying the advantage of a rotating hull, much like that of an Omega destroyer, but those in the drive section or hanger bays, and on every other ship of the fleet for that matter, were stuck in zero-gravity, likely buckled into their work stations or tied down in their cots if off duty. Wilson had served on such ships in the past and knew they were less than comfortable, especially when the vessel was simply floating in deep space, waiting for orders from Earth.

Everyone knew they would be seeing action, if not outright war, very soon. He tried to keep his crew occupied, but even an Admiral only had so much experience to draw upon when imagining creative activities for keeping troops busy. At least the Starfury pilots were happy, he surmised, as they were permitted more flight time on standard patrols than they would have ever received in orbit around an Earth colony. It wasn't combat, but Wilson knew that mattered little to a pilot.

The Corax and its task force had been deployed here, in deep space within the Narn Regime and within striking distance of several Centauri targets, since the attack on EarthDome. Though a few hours motionless in deep space was easy enough to endure on a ship with artificial gravity, Wilson knew the captains of the other vessels would eventually have discipline problems. He signed off on a number of reports detailing flight rosters for the squadrons of the Corax and then stood to begin another inspection of the bridge, intending to pass on a few comments of praise, which would go a long way to keeping his crew happy until the senators back on Earth got things running again and decided on a course of action.

A whining alert sounded from the console of the comms station, an irritating tone the officer shut down while consulting his displays.

'Sir,' he called to the Admiral. 'We are getting interference across the electromagnetic bands, broad frequencies. Very powerful. It just sprang up.'

Wilson crossed the bridge with some speed, concerned but not entirely ungrateful for the break in monotony. 'Where is it coming from?'

'Seems non-localised, sir. If I thought it was possible...' 'Yes?'

'I think it's coming from hyperspace. Maybe a confluence of shockwaves or something. But that could not break into realspace, and no one has EW that can do that.'

Wilson could not help but take a short intake of breath as his chest tightened. 'We have heard the Centauri were developing something like this,' he muttered, as much to himself as his comms officer. 'Contact the other ships. See if they can get a lock on its source.'

A brief pause followed as the officer switched through several communications protocols. 'Sir, we can't get through. The interference is blocking all comms,' he reported. 'All we have is the auxiliary hardwired system-internal comms only.'

Standing up straight from the display, Wilson frowned. The Centauri...

'Red alert!' he barked to the bridge. 'Scramble all squadrons and activate defence grid! Prepare for attack!'

To their credit, the crew of the bridge paused only for a split second as the full meaning of his orders sank in. They leapt to their stations and issued orders for the rest of the ship.

'Do we have Gold Channel to Earth?' Wilson demanded. 'No sir, all externals are affected.'

'Damn it. Bring the engines on line and order the squadrons to adopt a standard defensive screen,' Wilson said. 'Remind them they won't have contact with us once they leave the hangers. I only hope the other ships see what we are doing and figure this out.'

Ahead of the rotating section of the Corax, nearly one hundred hanger doors opened across the length of its flat hull and within seconds, Starfury and Thunderbolt fighters emerged, immediately firing their manoeuvring jets to take position close to the carrier. To see a Poseidon supercarrier perform a full alert scramble was the dream of many EarthForce cadets. Scores of fighters fell out of the immense ship, then sped away to their predesignated positions. Normally, the fighter controllers on board the Corax would be close to overload as they monitored the flights, keeping an eye on those of their peers - a tough proposition when so many craft were in such close proximity. With communications down, however, they found themselves useless, unable to do anything except monitor the progress of their pilots and pray that the long hours training for this manoeuvre paid dividends now.

Little more than half of the fighters had been deployed when another alert rang across the bridge of the Corax.

'Admiral, jump points!'

'Where?'

‘Right on top of us - aft!’

Wilson cursed and rushed to the tactical station. The officer there, a young woman he had recently promoted to Lieutenant, mutely indicated the three jump points behind the task force, worryingly close.

‘Come about!’ Wilson ordered. Turning back to the tactical officer, he asked ‘Positive silhouette?’

‘Entering realspace now, sir,’ she reported. ‘Three battlecruisers, Primus class.’

‘Hell.’ With decent preparation, Wilson might have fancied his chances against the Centauri ships, but taken by surprise like this, they could do significant damage before a proper response was ready.

‘Have any of the other ships taken action?’ he asked.

‘The Eros matched our course change, and I think its weapons are now online, but the others are only just starting to react. The Centauri are launching fighters.’

‘Hold fire until we see their what their intentions are. This may just be Centauri bravado. But charge up the pulse cannon, just in case.’ Wilson did not believe his own words in the least but he would not be responsible for starting a war with the Centauri. He did not know what had happened in the galaxy since taking position here, but he wondered if events had not already accelerated towards armageddon.

Sweeping majestically from their jump points, the three Primus battlecruisers disgorged their light Senti fighters, and the small crescent-shaped craft sped forward to engage the massing Starfuries. Even as the tactical officer on the bridge of the Corax announced an energy spike from the Centauri ships, their massive battle lasers erupted with thick beams of red light that reached across the short gulf of space to slice into the Lexington, Persephone and Dowding. A hard evasive manoeuvre from the Persephone caused the beam targeted at it to cut into the forward hull, slicing the main pulse cannon turret free but otherwise leaving the ship mostly unharmed. The aging Dowding took the blast full on. Though debris and armour plating were blasted across space and atmosphere vented from several compartments, the dreadnought held firm and began to turn its broadside to the attackers, where its massed weapon batteries could be brought to bear.

The Lexington erupted fire into space as the penetrating laser beam sliced into its superstructure just below the bridge. It carried on towards the stern at a downward angle, blasting through armour, decking and support beams. The cruiser was torn in two by the attack as secondary explosions from detonating power relays began to spew fire across the damaged sections of the hull. Within seconds, feedback to the Lexington’s main reactor overloaded the remaining control systems, and the ship exploded in a brilliant white light that sent chunks of metal spinning across space to impact the hulls of the other task force ships.

As they moved closer, the massed particle arrays on the Centauri ships found their range and hammered predesignated targets, pounding the nearest ships of the task force, the Eros and Dowding. Unlike the huge battle lasers, the Earth ships had defences against these energy weapons, and the

interceptor defence grids of both sprang into life, aiming at the incoming fire to dissipate its energy before it could strike their hulls. Within seconds, the interceptors of both were running at maximum capacity, and some Centauri fire made an impact on their armour.

On board the Corax, the crew was stunned at having lost the Lexington so quickly, but Admiral Wilson immediately focussed their minds on the task at hand. The supercarrier was not a frontline warship, having been designed to direct battles from afar. However, as he could not command his fleet effectively, Wilson knew he must send the Corax to fight the Centauri directly. Without the heavy armour and weaponry of a warship, he also knew he would have to trust to the ship's massive bulk to survive attack and worry about repairs later.

'Is the Eros still with us?' he asked.

'Yes, sir, maintaining formation. The Persephone is also coming about, and the Dowding has already taken station.'

'Good.' Wilson had commanded a Nova dreadnought before and knew the thinking of the Dowding's captain. Built for delivering devastating broadsides while weathering attacks, the

Dowding would simply hang in space, raking the Centauri ships with its turrets. Now it was in position, and things would begin to even up.

'Set course for the battlecruiser in the middle of their formation,' Wilson commanded. 'The Eros should realise what we are doing and set course to match. If we combine our fire, we might be able to put it out of action quickly. With luck, the others will guess our intentions after we engage and join in.'

With agonising slowness, the ponderous Corax turned to face one of the Centauri ships, its engines straining to shift the massive vessel. The Eros followed closely and then took position just off its starboard bow, slightly ahead to provide the attackers with another target.

As the Centauri battlecruisers closed range, the space between the two ships erupted in a hail of energy as weapons on both sides fired and recycled as soon as they had acquired solid locks. The Dowding unleashed a fearsome hail of fire from combined laser and pulse turrets that scoured the hull of a Primus, flaying armour and disabling several weapons batteries. The Centauri's return fire was disrupted by the Dowding's interceptor arrays, and what little got through simply pattered off the metres thick armour of the old ship, a testament to its solid design.

Between the huge capital ships, a multitude of vicious dogfights between Starfury and Sentri sprang up, little pockets of fire flashing across space as fighters were destroyed. The Starfury pilots were confident in their training and the capabilities of their fighters but, lacking communication with their controllers or squadron leaders, their response was sluggish and poorly formed. The prebriefed Centauri pilots, though outnumbered and pushing their tiny craft to their limits, began to inflict significant losses on the Earth fighters.

Having turned to face the Centauri, the Eros and Corax joined the fight, pulse cannon chattering as

they mashed the lead battlecruiser. Fires raged from several areas of its wide, flat hull but it kept moving forward, switching targets to engage the carrier and cruiser thundering towards it. A squadron of Thunderbolts had followed the Corax, and they ignited their afterburners, speeding forward to launch missiles against the battlecruiser, adding their weight to the match.

The Centauri particle weapons lacked the raw punch of the Earth ship's pulse cannon, and they were susceptible to interception but made up for this in accuracy, and every ship in the task force was showing signs of heavy battle. The Centauri's battle lasers recycled once more, draining their advanced capacitors as they gushed energy into generators and focussing lenses. Red light tore across space to spear into the Eros and Persephone. The Persephone was lucky once more, taking a glancing hit to the rear engine section that immediately arrested its acceleration. The Eros was lanced by the lasers of two of the battlecruisers, their combined fire punching through the ship's prow to skewer the hull right down its length. When the lasers finally exhausted their energy, the Eros hung in space, listing slightly to starboard. Its hull was a shattered wreck, fires burning from broken armour plates all down its length. What few crew survived were trapped in sealed sections, praying that the Centauri looked to another target or showed mercy.

The bridge of the Corax rocked constantly from the recoil of its pulse cannon and enemy fire impacting its hull. Wilson sprang from station to station, monitoring the positions of the fleets, the status of the Corax's weapons and incoming damage reports. In truth, he felt a little helpless. Still unable to break through the Centauri jamming, he could not direct his fleet - and once his own crew had been given a target, they were competent enough to go about their duties without constant management.

The designers of the Poseidon ships had not seen fit to mount thick armour plating on the carrier, and Wilson was now beginning to regret their decision. He was just thankful that most of the Centauri fire had so far struck the mostly empty hanger bays. While that might pose a problem later when the fighters had to return to base, it did not significantly affect the fighting performance of his ship.

‘Hangers 12 through 37 now on fire, Admiral.’

‘Send damage control teams but keep most stationed near engineering, the turrets and the rotating section,’ Wilson responded. ‘We can stand to lose a few hangers now but if we lose anything else...’

‘Sir, I am getting life signs on the Eros’

‘No, we can't do anything for them now.’ Wilson felt pity for the people of his task force but the stricken cruiser would have to wait. ‘If we send shuttles out to retrieve the survivors, they'll just get cut to pieces by those damned Centauri fighters.’

He consulted the tactical station once again and saw the Corax had manoeuvred into the middle of the Centauri ships. Though it placed the Corax in the middle of their concentrated fire, it also meant that, at last, the Corax could use all of its own weaponry. It was also out of the line of sight of those dreaded battle lasers, and if the Corax could soak up more of the secondary weapons fire, it might relieve the pressure on his other ships.

‘We are in position,’ he announced. ‘Weapons batteries, open fire, time on target.’

‘Time on target, aye.’

An exterior camera view on the tactical display showed the pulse cannon tearing into the three Centauri ships, one salvo catching a battlecruiser on the thinly armoured underside of its hull. Centauri interceptor technology lagged far behind that of Earth’s, and Wilson’s time on target order ensured that the Corax’s batteries fired simultaneously, giving the defense systems little time to respond. A stream of energy punched through the forward section of one battlecruiser, and Wilson felt relief as a single bright explosion announced the detonation of generators driving its lasers. An entire section of the battlecruiser’s hull spiralled away into space. At least one of the enemy ships was rendered toothless, and the bridge crew gave a ragged cheer when they realised their efforts were paying off.

‘Rotate!’ called Wilson. ‘Concentrate fire on the other two, let’s see if we can do the same thing again - we might just be able to force a surrender if they lose their big guns.’

A shattering crash resounded through the bridge and Wilson was thrown over the tactical display to hit the metal wall with a dull thud. Acrid smoke filled the bridge and the atmospheric processors began to whine audibly as they strained to clear the air. Wilson shook his head as his vision swam, trying to shake off the ringing in his ears. He dimly realised he was prone against the wall, several feet from the floor. His vision clearing, he looked across the bridge to see many of his officers floating helplessly in the air, struggling to reach their station or a handy support from which to push off. His tactical officer had managed to hold her station and was scanning the incoming damage assessment.

‘We’ve gone Z-gravity!’ she shouted. ‘The rotating section has locked!’

They were lucky the bridge had not been hit directly, Wilson knew. The more immediate problem was that while the Corax could carry on fighting under these conditions, vital minutes would be lost as the crew recovered and readjusted to zero-gravity conditions. The shuddering of the bridge from the weapons fire became more persistent, and Wilson guessed the Centauri had realigned their targeting systems to avoid the hangers.

‘Back to your stations! Tactical, make sure the batteries keep firing - we can’t lose momentum now.’

The Ares had joined its sister ship, the Persephone, which was now drifting through space helplessly but still intent on engaging the Centauri, pulse cannon and plasma fire raining onto whichever battlecruiser presented itself as the nearest target. Forming up alongside the stricken ship, the Ares now added its weight of fire and manoeuvred to open up with its own heavy laser. Based on older Centauri models, it was not as powerful and the cruiser did not enjoy the same power reserves as the larger enemy ships, but it was still a potent weapon. The red beam lanced out to strike a battlecruiser, cutting through its port fins and slicing off a sizeable section of hull. Fires raged across the whole left side of the Primus, but its weapons batteries did not slow in their firing. Massed particle beams from its turrets pounded the Ares and Persephone as the three ships continued to trade fire, the space between them a lethal criss-crossing of bright energy. The hulls of all three were soon pitted and

scored with black craters, though a knockout blow had yet to be landed by either side.

Continuous volley fire from the Dowding rolled over the battlecruiser with the smashed laser as it turned to join the third in targeting the Corax, simply ignoring the dreadnought's pounding - though broken turrets and debris trailed behind it. Across the length of the Corax, energy bolts streamed down to flay armour plates and ignite fires. From stem to stern, the Corax burned, though pulse cannon and interceptors doggedly continued to return fire, throwing every ounce of energy its reactors could generate into fighting the Centauri. The third battlecruiser then matched the turn of its comrade and fired its battle lasers.

Within the bridge of the Corax, the crew had settled back into their stations, strapping themselves in with nylon belts used before only in drills. The knuckles of Wilson's hands were turning white as he gripped support beams and stations to steady himself. Monitoring the tactical station, he could see how his ship was suffering under the smashing power of Centauri weapons fire. Much of the ship's internal communications were now down, and the weapons batteries were firing more or less independently, reducing their effectiveness. His eyes met briefly with the tactical officer's and he could see that, despite her young years, she too realised how badly the ship was fairing. Placing a hand on her shoulder, he searched for some platitude when he felt her tense.

'Energy spike!' she shouted.

Wilson looked down at her display to see two of the battlecruisers bearing down on the Corax, one making ready to fire its primary weapons.

The red battle lasers struck the rotating section of the Corax with punishing effect, cutting right through armour and decking with consummate ease. The metre-wide beams carried on through living quarters, mess hall and on through to the bridge, where they vaporised every crew member in a microsecond, boiling their atoms before they were sucked out into the void of space. The rear of the rotating section broke away from the rest of the ship, taking the engine section and reactor with it. The firing of the Corax's pulse cannon ceased almost immediately as the massive ship, the pride of the EarthForce fleet, became a floating hulk.

The Ares and Persephone struggled to repel the fire coming from the battlecruiser they faced, a warship massing more than the two of them put together. One by one, the weapons batteries of the Persephone went offline as incoming fire either blasted turrets clear of their hardpoints or power relays detonated under power fluctuations from the main reactor, now running to dangerously unstable levels. The crew on board fought valiantly, struggling to manage the constant pounding and keep their weapons firing at all costs. Against a larger ship, they could not hope to win.

While the Centauri ship concentrated its particle arrays against the Persephone, it traded laser fire with the Ares, completely outclassing the smaller cruiser. Cycling its laser faster than the Ares could, the Primus speared the Earth ship with red light, smashing into its reactor and penetrating the shielding that kept its energies in check. A blossoming ball of fire from the Ares' rear section grew quickly to engulf the ship before a massive explosion tore it apart, sending huge parts of its superstructure spinning across space. So close to the explosion, the Persephone absorbed the shock wave, buckling its hull. The remaining power relays, jury-rigged by a desperate crew, finally gave

out and the ship stopped firing, every light on board growing dim before dying completely.

As it had been designed to do, the Dowding held its line, keeping its broadside facing the nearest Centauri ship at all times. Though lacking the heavy lasers of more modern ships, the Dowding nevertheless possessed a huge number of weapons batteries and it unleashed pulses of energy as fast as its weapons could recycle, taking incoming fire on the chin. Now outnumbered and with jump engines offline, its crew went about their duties with a grim efficiency, intent on avenging their fallen before joining them.

The target Primus visibly shuddered under the impact of the Dowding's combined weaponry, paying the price for ignoring the dreadnought. Fins were sliced off the Primus, turrets blasted apart and sections of the superstructure sagged visibly under the relentless hammering.

More pulse cannon fire thudded into its hull, and the multitude of lights emanating from the viewports along the hull suddenly flickered and died. Fires licking outwards along streams of venting atmosphere grew brighter and an explosion blasted a large piece of hull plating clear of the ship. More explosions soon followed and the Primus rocked as a chain reaction of fire leapt from section to section, sweeping through the ship to sear any Centauri inside. A bright light shone briefly from the viewports and open sections of hull as a massive interior explosion, barely contained by the superstructure, finally silenced the ship. Within the Dowding, the captain announced the death of an enemy ship to his crew and was met with joyous relief. The weapons teams redoubled their efforts as they sought the next target.

July 7th 2263, The Urza Jaddo, Deep Space, Narn Regime

The loss of the Protera had caused Barini some irritation but it did not worry him unduly. As losses went, it was more than acceptable, especially in return for the honour of destroying the huge Earth flagship. He shook his head in some wonder at the thinking of the Earth Alliance. Why go to the time and trouble of building a ship that large if it was not armed for frontline combat? The Centauri had little use for dedicated carriers in their fleet, and their naval tactics simply did not revolve around support vessels. In a Centauri fleet, every ship had to pull its weight.

Today, Centauri tactical thinking was vindicated. The vaunted Earth Starfuries were unable to consolidate their superior numbers and the Sentris picked them off squadron by squadron. Even now, they were chasing the stragglers attempting to regroup around the remaining Earth ship.

Barini recognised it as an older model and was surprised it had lasted this long. It stood up well to their attacks, but now it faced two battlecruisers. These were the kind of odds Barini favoured. It was a shame, in a way, he thought. Of all the ships he had faced today, this one seemed most Centauri in its design. Of course, it lacked the technological sophistication of Centauri ships, and he imagined the crew inside worked in primitive zero-gravity conditions, but the thinking behind it he could admire.

No matter. 'Is the Voxa forming up with us?' he asked his first officer.

'Yes, Vocator. I believe she is just waiting for our lead.'

‘Excellent.’ Barini could see the Earth dreadnought in the main viewport, dead ahead. Its weapons continued to cycle, pushing out bolts of energy in their direction, but they were out of its effective range and what little reached the Jaddo was intercepted by the defensive screen or else pattered harmlessly off its hull.

‘Charge the lasers,’ Barini said, waiting for a nod from his first officer. ‘Fire!’

The twin lances of red from the Jaddo were soon joined by those of the Voxa as they skewered the Dowding amidships. They drilled four holes straight through the dreadnought, then worked fore and aft as their gunners expertly altered the focussing lenses to caress the Dowding. Though the Dowding was well-armoured and could take a significant amount of punishment from regular weapons, it had no defence against modern battle lasers. Regulating their power output, the Primus’ crew maintained the laser beams on their target. Armour buckled and broke free on the Dowding, revealing the superstructure beneath, which were eagerly consumed. Fires sprang up under this assault, and the dreadnought slowly began to break apart, its hull cut into several sections.

Barini relaxed for the first time since battle began. He thought of himself as a well-trained officer of the military and a good example to his crew, but he always felt tense during battle, no matter how one-sided. Service of this nature was a sure route to wealth and power, especially with a patron such as Minister Territt, but it always carried the risk of disaster and death - two things a noble could never recover from.

His first officer stood at attention below the command plinth until Barini acknowledged him.

‘Yes?’

‘Vocator, we have detected life signs within some of the wreckage.’

‘You know what to do,’ Barini replied.

‘Yes, Vocator. We have also found a few life signs on the Protera.’

Barini shrugged. ‘We have no time for rescue attempts. Deal with that wreck as well.’

If the first officer or any of the bridge crew blanched at the idea of murdering their fellow Centauri, they were wise enough not to show it. Each was in a privileged position on board a ship as powerful as the battlecruiser and, more to the point, they would be well compensated for their actions today. The core of Centauri society rested on the best striving to get ahead of those they bettered, and politics was as much a part of the military life as was combat.

The two battlecruisers charged their weaponry once more, spending the next hour blasting apart the broken ships into ever-smaller pieces. Lasers were not used this time, as the Centauri crews worked to use the impact of their weapons to lend momentum to the debris, sending it reeling across space, far from the scene of the battle. Barini knew that, at some point, Earth would send ships to investigate the disappearance of the task force. Within hours, any recognisable part of any ship would be far beyond any sensor range, destined to keep its secret as it travelled through deep space for a million

years. If discovered after that, Barini really did not care. He had no time to mask the energy signatures left by the discharge of weaponry. The aim, as Minister Territt had been at pains to point out, was to ensure that any investigation did not lead back to Barini's own squadron - it was inevitable that the Centauri as a whole were blamed, but there was no sense in Barini being called to account.

Barini readily agreed with that sentiment. As his ships finished their post-battle task and prepared to jump back to Centauri space, Barini considered the favour the Minister now owed him.

He considered that the Minister might double-cross him after this mission, but he quickly dismissed the thought. He would make the perfect scapegoat if anything went wrong, of course, but he had fulfilled his orders to the letter. Barini harboured a strong sense of his own innate worth. As powerful as the Minister was, having a squadron of battlecruisers effectively in his own pocket was something that he prized, and Barini was the key to that. No, he was sure the Minister understood the value of a powerful military force at his beck and call.

In return, Barini could ask for a higher position within the military, a political appointment to the Royal Court or even a boost in the standing of his House - which could potentially lead to a place within the Centaurum, given time. However, all that could wait. Barini did not have sufficient power among the nobles nor his House among the other families to take advantage of the gifts the Minister could bring in that arena. No, on reflection he would ensure his ships were repaired and that the Protera was replaced. After that, he would simply take money. With money came power and freedom of choice. If, later in his life, he decided to enter the political arena, he would be well funded. If not, well, a good retirement awaited, possibly in a small manor among the forests south of Imperial City. No sense in being greedy, after all. Come what may, Barini's actions today would provide him with a safe and secure future.

CHAPTER TEN

July 8th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

Sequestered in a tight booth on one side of the communications hub, Shaw and Tilanna had been literally falling over one another in an attempt to backtrack the Earth Alliance's investigations into the attack on their government. Shaw encountered bureaucratic resistance with his initial enquiries. Here, at least, he found himself on firmer ground as he had dealt with monolithic Earth institutions, in one form or another, all his life on Mars, and he managed to negotiate access to the files he sought with little extra effort.

Shaw found his spirits raised slightly. He now had a course of action to follow, though he still could not imagine where his investigation would lead or how to convince the President and brass of the Earth Alliance of his findings. He decided his lifted spirits were probably a direct result of his affinity to his homeworld of Mars. Maybe something in the recycled air seemed familiar or the gravity tugged at just the right level. Though Shaw had been taught and conditioned by the Anla'Shok to accept the places he travelled and consider his own body his only real home, there was something comforting about Mars. He knew many Earthers hated the place, visiting only on sufferance because of duty or business, but for him it just felt... right.

While Shaw had been navigating the treacherous waters of Earth bureaucracy, Tilanna was interpreting the information on the data crystal transmitted by the Ranger-Analysts of Tuzanor. Sitting just to Shaw's left in the close confines of the booth, her proximity was at times distracting, and on more than one occasion he smiled to himself. Frankly, he had more important things to worry about, but if her presence could offer some relief from the administrators he spoke to, then it was also reassuring to have her close by. In the very least, he was not alone.

'Mr. Shaw, given the depth of information provided, it seems clear that House Kaado is implicated in the plot,' she said after a period of silence.

Shaw smiled. 'Tilanna, if we are going to be working together like this, you really need to start calling me Michael. Or Mike.'

'That would not be... appropriate. It would not show the respect due one of the Anla'Shok.'

He winced slightly, having encountered the stubbornness for protocol common in the Religious Caste before. It could be an immovable obstacle, and many humans had trouble understanding just how this sect of Minbari thought. Count him among them, certainly.

'Well...' he said. 'President Sheridan gave you a temporary assignment to the Anla'Shok. That makes us equals, right?'

She considered this. 'I lack your training and have not been through the trials required by the Anla'Shok.'

'True,' he answered. 'But you have your own temple training that I know nothing about - you have

skills I could not even begin to master. It seems President Sheridan knows this and that is why he made the appointment.'

'However unofficial it may be,' Tilanna said, looking pointedly at him.

'Given the situation, I hardly think that matters.'

'You are probably right... Michael.'

'Better,' said Shaw, with a wry smile. 'What was that about House Kaado?'

'It seems that House attracted some interest from the intelligence centre long before this attack on Earth.'

Shaw paused for a few seconds, turning ideas over in his head. That does us no good. We can prove very little, other than the facility we visited was used, at some point, to store the device. It is not a smoking gun we are looking for - we only need to visit the ruins of EarthDome to find that. What we need is motive - and a good reason to indicate that the Centauri Republic as a whole was not responsible.'

He turned to face her, his leg brushing hers.

'Luchenko already has the same information we do. If we go to her with this, we have nothing else to back it up. The Earthers are in shock; their pride has been wounded. They are looking for someone to blame, and Luchenko will be under pressure to do something, anything - and that will likely be military action.'

Tilanna shook her head, a little sadly, he thought. 'It seems incomprehensible to me that an entire people can be moved to aggression without ample evidence.'

'Well, you could say that was exactly what happened when your people went to war against us,' Shaw said quickly, then immediately regretted it.

Tilanna paused for a few seconds and then whispered quietly. 'That was different.'

'Maybe. We have to keep searching. We won't find an answer in the information sent to us from Tuzanor-if anything substantial was there, someone far cleverer than us would have found it.' This, at least, drew a slight smile from Tilanna. 'It may help us though, if we can uncover something else, something we are missing right now.'

'I agree,' she said simply and turned back to her station.

They both looked up as a quick rap on the wall of their booth announced the presence of an EarthForce ensign.

'I was sent to fetch you, err, Rangers,' he said. 'Something has happened.'

Hurrying out of the booth to the centre of the communications hub, Shaw and Tilanna were immediately struck by the increased activity of the EarthForce personnel present. If anything, more blue uniforms rushed around. Luchenko was in the middle of a cluster of high-ranking officers, leaning over a display as she repeatedly asked for clarifications from an unseen voice.

A colonel stepped out from the scrum to intercept Shaw. ‘Rangers, we have just had news - sketchy at the moment as we are just getting information in.’

‘Trouble?’ Shaw asked, already fairly sure he knew the answer.

‘The carrier group Corax is missing, presumed destroyed. They were in deep space, waiting for orders, when we lost contact. An Oracle scout was dispatched to their location and reports signs of a battle, though no substantial wreckage has been found. The President is talking with the Oracle’s captain now.’

‘You think it was the Centauri,’ Shaw said.

‘Who else?’ said the colonel. ‘I am afraid this changes everything. As the duly appointed representative of the ISA, I must ask you what support you will give us.’

For a second, this question stumped Shaw, and his first reaction was to run to a communications terminal to reach Sheridan. Dismissing the impulse, he pushed past the colonel and into the middle of the EarthForce officers surrounding Luchenko.

‘Sorry, Colonel, I must speak to the President.’

Shaw immediately sensed that his Anla’Shok robes gave him at least a measure of authority among even admirals and generals. His bearing and demeanour surely did not. The Rangers were still something of a mystery on Earth, even the human members, and this lent an air which few directly questioned. After all, he was the representative of the Interstellar Alliance.

He listened to Luchenko’s closing words with the scout captain.

‘Agreed, Captain. Widen your search and report back. But if you see any trouble... That’s right. Get yourself out of there; we will need you later. Don’t take risks. Luchenko out.’

If the President had slept since the disaster at EarthDome, she showed no signs of it. Shaw noted the bags under Luchenko’s eyes and the wrinkles of strain across her brow, but she retained a look of such raw determination, even fury, that he imagined she could go on for many hours more on pure adrenaline.

‘We have just bits and pieces at the moment - literally,’ she said. ‘Captain Leverstock reports that while there is no wreckage, micro debris is strewn across a wide area. More to the point, residual energy scans all point to a heavy discharge of Centauri-grade weaponry, as well as our own. Clearly a battle was fought there.’

‘That’s it then,’ said a tall admiral to Shaw’s left, her lilting voice an odd contrast to her words. He

had heard her called Keynes earlier. ‘We are under attack from the Republic. Madam President, you already have our recommendations.’

‘I do. Admiral-‘

‘Madam President, if I may,’ said Shaw, interjecting. He was acutely conscious of every high-ranking officer nearby staring at him.

Luchenko raised her head to acknowledge him, though he could sense her impatience.

‘I must insist on restraint,’ he began. ‘By the laws of the Interstellar Alliance, you cannot take unilateral action against the Centauri.’

‘Actually, I have to disagree,’ said Admiral Keynes, looking down her long nose at Shaw. The authority of the Rangers was not universal among EarthForce officers after all, he reflected. ‘The Centauri are no longer part of the ISA, by their own choice. They have initiated hostilities against us, and we have every right to take pre-emptive action to defend ourselves.’

Shaw pointedly turned from Keynes to concentrate on Luchenko. ‘Madam President, please, you are not at war yet. We don’t know exactly what happened to the carrier group. If the Centauri were serious about starting a fight, would you not see attacks across their entire border, perhaps even into Earth space itself?’

From over his shoulder came Keynes’ voice once more. He had to confess, its tone was beginning to irritate him. ‘They may have just not found our other deep space task forces yet.’

Ignoring the admiral, he pressed on. ‘Madam President, we have some good leads. We do not believe the Centauri Republic as a whole is responsible for these attacks. With just a little more time-‘

‘I am sorry,’ said Luchenko. ‘I have the safety of the entire Earth Alliance to consider, not to mention the men and women manning ships near Republic space. I might have believed a rogue House was responsible for the attack on EarthDome, but a military force strong enough to destroy a carrier group? That is just not believable. That was an action undertaken by the Centauri military, not a group of disgruntled nobles. Admiral!’

The admiral strode forward, positioning herself between Shaw and the President. He swore she actually clicked her heels while standing to attention.

‘Order the fleets into Centauri space,’ said Luchenko. ‘Make sure they understand the protocols we discussed. If this is not a prelude to an all-out war, we don’t want to start one inadvertently. Have them jump into the listed systems and show the Centauri we will not tolerate any attacks. In deference to our friends in the ISA, we will not initiate hostilities - under no circumstance should any ship open fire before it is fired upon. We just want to show our presence and prepare for the blockades if needed.’

‘If the Centauri attack our fleets?’ asked Admiral Keynes.

‘Then we will respond with deadly force.’

July 8th 2263, House Kaado, Centauri Prime

Veneta Kaado looked ruefully at the empty Brivari bottle in his hand before dropping it to the side of the setee. He lost track how many hours he and Territt had been in his bunker and, in truth, he was beginning to get bored. Hours had past since the attack on Earth. In fact, he was pretty sure it had happened the day before. Minister Territt had stopped drinking a while before and stayed intent on watching the news channels displayed on the huge screen before them. Veneta had been woolgathering, enjoying the effects of the Brivari as he indulged in self-congratulation. Territt’s attention on the screen annoyed him, and he considered it something close to bad manners to halt the celebration so suddenly. Even if only two Centauri were present, they had a duty to celebrate their successes. It was just the way things were done.

He groped for a second bottle on the floor, knowing he had already emptied it but feeling compelled to check once more. More bottles waited in his cellar, Veneta knew, but he would not summon a servant here, in the bunker. He sniffed. He, at least, intended to follow tradition even if Territt was boorish. The suffering endured by a lack of more Brivari was, of course, another duty he had to shoulder. Adherence to duty maketh the noble, after all.

‘It’s been too long,’ said Territt, bringing Veneta out of his reverie. ‘We should have heard something by now.’

Veneta struggled to focus. Ah yes, their conspiracy. He no longer knew how long it was since Territt made his call to the attack squadron but guessed this was causing the Minister’s concern. Squinting at the screen, he gradually deduced one problem.

‘You have it on an Abbai channel.’

Territt’s examined the screen, a little perplexed. ‘So it is,’ he decided. ‘Still, makes little difference, eh? So many aliens out there!’

Veneta laughed. ‘True words, Minister. We ought to do something about that.’

‘One major plot at a time, my friend,’ Territt said as he searched for the screen control, rooting around the setee beneath him to locate it. ‘Let’s get back a to the Earthers...’

‘Did you know the Abbai were pacifists?’ Veneta mused.

‘Ridiculous, isn’t it? The Dilgar should have wiped them out when they had the chance.’

‘Ah, the Dilgar. A most impressive people.’

Territt shrugged. ‘If you think so. They couldn’t stay the distance though. No sense of destiny. Only one race in the galaxy truly deserves the greatness it was born with.’

Nodding, Veneta was about to respond when Territt hushed him. Looking at the screen, Veneta saw

the Minister had located the ISN feed once more. Clearly the presenter on the screen was agitated about something, and Veneta tapped his foot impatiently while Territt reversed the feedback several minutes to catch the beginning of the report. The slightly greying male presenter started formally in the studied way human newsreaders were trained to speak, but his lethargy gradually gave way to excitement at the incoming news.

‘We have received confirmation of today’s earlier rumours that the Centauri have struck at one of our task forces. EarthForce has released the names of the ships destroyed - the carrier Corax, cruisers Ares, Eros, Lexington and Persephone, and the dreadnought Dowding. No survivors have been found, and it appears none are expected to be recovered. Officials within EarthForce have confirmed that Centauri ships were responsible for the sudden attack, and that it occurred in Narn space.

‘At this time, we have no word of whether the attack is linked to the destruction of EarthDome yesterday, or whether war has officially been declared by either side. We have ISN Military Correspondent Dan Withers online to tell us a bit about EarthForce procedure in this situation and what we can expect to see next. Dan, is this an inevitable prelude to war?’

The screen flickered as the image of a much younger man filled the screen, but Territt fingered the control once again to one of the many Centauri news channels.

‘I wanted to see that,’ protested Veneta. ‘Why are you looking at this court gossip?’

Territt smiled. ‘My friend, what laughably passes for news reports in our Republic has some uses. Observe.’

Growing dark, the screen displayed a star field that slowly panned around to reveal a blue-green world. Two of the largest warships Veneta had ever seen hung in orbit above its verdant surface, both dwarfing the dozen Primus battlecruisers that held steady formation with them. He had seen technical diagrams of these vessels before but had paid them little interest. Line drawings and specification charts did them no justice, and his breath was taken away with some real scale to relate them to. That his people were capable of building such ships made him feel intensely proud. The voiceover relayed events as the two ships fired their massive engines, slowly leaving orbit under the escort of the battlecruisers.

‘As unexpected as the arrival of both the Turhan and the Cartagia at our supply colony on Gorash was, more surprising was their recent departure, as seen here. Never before have two Octurions flown together in the same fleet and certainly not with so many battlecruisers. Unnamed sources in the Royal Court have told us that the Turhan and Cartagia will be voyaging throughout our border worlds, demonstrating our resolve to resist the insidious accusations of the Interstellar Alliance and, in particular, Earth. The Emperor himself is said to believe that the Republic will be blamed for every mishap the ISA suffers and that we must show willingness to defend ourselves so the terrible attack on Centauri Prime can never be repeated.’

Muting the screen, Territt turned to Veneta. ‘You know what that means?’

‘Mobilisation,’ Veneta said, nodding. ‘It’s working.’

‘Indeed. Now for the final piece of the puzzle,’ said Territt as he once again accessed the ISN feed. Entering its menu system, he selected the most recent address from the Emperor.

Turning back to the screen, Veneta rolled his eyes as the imposing image of Emperor Mollari appeared. ‘My friends of Earth,’ the Emperor said. ‘We Centauri have suffered alongside you for your recent tragedies. First the cowardly attack on your centre of government and now the loss of several ships as they travelled peacefully through Narn space. We condemn the conduct of your enemies, for we know the pain a dreadful attack like this causes.

‘However, I must once again refute the rumours coming from within your own government that the Centauri Republic has any hand or purpose in these reprehensible actions. We Centauri are a peace-loving people and have no desire for war. We simply seek to rebuild our homeworld from the ruins left by the unwarranted attack by the Drazi and Narn.’

Territt gave a callous laugh, ‘He doesn’t know what is going on.’

‘Of course not,’ said Veneta. ‘We made sure he wouldn’t.’

‘True.’ A minute passed by before Territt spoke again. ‘Veneta? Send for some more Brivari. I feel like celebrating.’

July 8th 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

‘Then help me understand, Londo. Just what is going on in the Republic?’

Tuthenn stood dutifully out of the communication link’s field of view as the President of the Interstellar Alliance desperately tried to pick his way through the half-truths and evasions of the Centauri Emperor. The Ranger-Analyst had his own auxiliary screen, and he scrutinised it to glean any additional information he could on the state of the Emperor’s mind.

‘President Sheridan, I have already told you. The Republic has no interest in starting a war with anyone, let alone Earth. The very idea is preposterous.’

Sheridan sighed. ‘Londo, you and I have known each other for years, and we have clashed before. But the stakes have never been so high. We might have been able to manage the attack on EarthDome, worked with you to find the perpetrators. Now things have escalated with this attack on an EarthForce fleet.’

‘And as I explained to you earlier, there is no possibility that Centauri ships were involved in that tragedy. All squadrons are accounted for.’

‘I’ll bet,’ Sheridan said. ‘I have just seen a report on the movements of your fleets. Londo, you have mobilised your entire military!’

‘So would you, President Sheridan, in my position. Earth has placed warships along our borders, and we have reason to believe the Narn will join them. Who knows what other fleets of your highly vaunted Alliance will join them?’ Londo sat back in his throne, imperiously staring down at Sheridan.

‘We will not tolerate any threat on our sovereignty. If Earth ships enter Centauri space, there will be war. You can be sure of that. Tell President Luchenko. There will be war.’

Sheridan hammered a fist down next to his display. ‘Londo, that is exactly what I am trying to avoid! Damn it, man. We have been down this road before, and you know where that led.’

‘And that is what I will avoid, Sheridan. I have a duty to my people. We have suffered enough in recent years and have agreed to every demand your Alliance has made of us, simply so we can attend to our own problems in peace. It appears there are many in the galaxy that are all too ready to blame us for what goes wrong, who will not be satisfied until we are no more. I will not tolerate these constant attacks on our character.’

‘Character?’ Sheridan was faintly incredulous. ‘Londo, I know you realise what is at stake here. I have spoken directly with the captain of the ship dispatched to find what happened to the Corax and its task force. I know the man. I am satisfied with his assessment that, wherever they came from, the attackers were Centauri.’

‘They did not come from the Republic. All ships are accounted for. Have you considered looking into what the Narn are doing? You know they still possess many of our weapons.’

‘No way, Londo. You tried that line before. It did not work then, and it will not work now. The attack on EarthDome came from your Republic and the ships that destroyed the Corax were most certainly from your Republic. Londo, I have to ask; do you even know what your own military is doing?’

For a moment, the Emperor regarded Sheridan with something the President guessed was either loathing or contempt, and he suppressed a shudder. He had never seen such malevolence in the old Ambassador before.

‘President Sheridan, you know my position. We will not tolerate an invasion. You tell Luchenko if she dares violate our territory, the wrath of the Centauri will follow her fleets back to Earth and finish what the Minbari started!’

The display went dead as the Emperor cut the link.

‘Damn him!’ Sheridan swore violently.

Tuthenn stepped forward but paused to allow Sheridan’s frustration to run its course before he spoke. ‘The Emperor’s speech was guarded, for all the passion he displayed. He gave nothing away.’

Sheridan looked up at the Minbari. ‘Then we are back where we started. I swear, Tuthenn, Londo has changed. I have known him for years now, but I do not recognise the man I just spoke to.’

After another respectful pause, Tuthenn said ‘There is... something. I do not think he was alone. We can analyse the transmission, but I do not believe we will discover anyone else in the throne room with him as he spoke with you. Still... I cannot shake the feeling someone or something was present and that his words were guarded - not from you but that other.’

Sheridan looked quizzically at Tuthenn as he considered this. ‘It is not like you analysts to work on hunches.’

‘Oh, hunches, or intuition, as we like to call it, are certainly factors in our work. However, they must always be tempered with facts. Intuition is the raw material which, with facts, forge the conclusion. I believe this is a dead end though.’

‘How so?’ asked Sheridan.

‘If we find no trace of anyone else in that transmission, no trace heartbeat or breathing, then we will have nothing with which to pursue this line of investigation. And I believe that any force powerful or canny enough to force the Emperor of the Centauri Republic to be careful with his words will evade our attempts to uncover it through so simple a method.’

While Sheridan seemed to think this over, Tuthenn interrupted him. ‘My apologies, President Sheridan. This is the nature of what we do. As Ranger-Analysts we are taught to consider all possibilities, to follow every logical path to its conclusion. I should not have mentioned this without something more to go on.’

‘No, no, that is fine. So, where does that leave us?’

‘I must return to the intelligence centre and continue my analysis. I think you know as well as I that evidence of the Republic’s innocence can avert war.’

‘I agree,’ Sheridan sighed. ‘Tuthenn, you know that if either attack is traced back to the Republic, war is inevitable.’

Tuthenn nodded silently and took his leave as Sheridan picked up a report on Drazi immigration throughout the Narn Regime. Unable to focus on the words, he dropped the papers.

‘This means the end of the ISA.’

July 8th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

Having run into deadends with EarthForce administration, Shaw finally managed to obtain the scout ship’s analysis of the attack on the Corax from one of the officers in the communications hub, something he considered an act of mercy after being passed from desk to desk via the link in his booth. The atmosphere in the Support Centre was tense. Everyone seemed to expect war to break out at any second.

Reviewing the information, he quickly reached the same conclusions as EarthForce. Everything pointed to the Centauri launching an attack without provocation. It must have been one hell of a battle.

Soon after, Luchenko called for a meeting with her EarthForce officials to discuss options. Shaw had not been invited, but no one turned him away as he seated himself among the brass. He sensed Luchenko’s desperation as she spoke, and the discussion clearly focussed on finding a way out of the crisis. Earth suffered much over the past decade and could not afford another war without dire

repercussions on its galactic economy.

For five minutes Luchenko debated just this with two of her generals, and tempers were less than totally controlled.

‘General Lefcourt, I know what you are saying. We have already talked about force deployment across the Centauri border, and I read your report some time ago. What we need to focus on now are the alternatives.’

‘Madam President,’ said the target of her appeal, a man in his late fifties with a gravelly voice that was used to giving orders, not debating. ‘I am no politician but the people are demanding action. It has been nearly forty-eight hours since the attack on EarthDome and we have done nothing.’

‘This is not like the terrorist attacks of old, General. I think the people know that we operate on a larger stage than just one world now. Even our most advanced ships take time to cross the known galaxy.’

‘With respect, Madam President, I don’t think they do. They want to see strong leadership and positive results, quickly. I understand you hesitate to send our men and women into battle - that is to be respected in any President, and you would not have had my support for so long if you casually threw them into battle without due thought. But we have been over this. We have clear evidence that the Centauri are behind both attacks. This demands an appropriate response.’

Shaw took the opportunity to interrupt. ‘Madam President, I counsel caution - not just as the representative of the ISA, but as a human. If the Emperor is to be believed, any action we take against the Centauri at this point will provoke them into a full-scale war which neither government can support.’

Keynes, the admiral that had plagued Shaw earlier, chose that time to weigh in with her view. ‘And if we do nothing, we invite further attack - not just from the Centauri but any government with something to gain from our weakness.’

Shaw spun round to face her. ‘You are advocating a war that will kill thousands without knowing all the facts!’

‘The facts seem clear to me,’ she said. ‘What matters is how we appear to the rest of the galaxy. If someone pushes us, we have to push back, or stand to lose everything we gain. Good Lord, how much more evidence do we need - there is clear and incontrovertible proof that the Centauri have attacked us. General Lefcourt is right; we have already waited too long.’

‘The Centauri are a divided people!’ Shaw said a little too loudly as he lost patience. ‘We have never disputed that Centauri are responsible. What we contend is that the Republic as a whole is not the root cause. They have nothing to gain!’

‘You may be right in that,’ said Luchenko, raising a hand to pacify both Shaw and the admiral. ‘But I have long thought they might not need a reason to take such a course of action. It is my belief that the

Narn and Drazi, and even we to an extent, have pushed the Centauri too far. We have bottled them up in their corner of the galaxy, and it might be inevitable that they would break under the pressure of isolation and those reparations.’ She paused before continuing, weighing her words. ‘Why attack Earth? There is a certain logic to it. They cannot strike the whole ISA at once, and though they have history with the Narn, the ISA is the new enemy. The head of the ISA, of course, comes from Earth. What better target? Or, look at it this way - if they want to strike at Sheridan, they can choose to hit either us or the Minbari. The Centauri may be illogical, but they are not stupid.’

‘Surely that means we should contain them sooner rather than later?’ asked the admiral.

Luchenko sighed. ‘We cannot afford another war, for so many different reasons. We need some way to avoid it.’

‘Madam President,’ General Lefcourt said gently. ‘I think you need to realise that a de facto state of war already exists between us and the Centauri.’

Luchenko looked at each of her advisors before her gaze settled on Shaw. He wished to give her some alternatives but, as their eyes met, he could see what the President was thinking. With a sinking feeling, he watched as her eyes dulled slightly, her decision made.

‘General. Proceed. Blockade the border worlds of the Centauri.’

Shaw closed his eyes. ‘That will give the Centauri no choice but to attack your fleets,’ he muttered.

‘That is the intention,’ answered Keynes. ‘We will strike quickly, subduing any resistance their outposts attempt. Then, we will use each colony world as a base of operations, allowing us to effectively fortify each system against attack. When the Centauri fleets come, we will be in a position of advantage. A series of battles across the entire front will see their defeat, and then we will be in a strong position to negotiate further reparations with the Centauri. If we so choose.’

Lefcourt spoke up once more to bring another point to the discussion. ‘What of the offers of support from the Narn and Drazi? We also have word that the Brakiri, Hyach and Gaim are willing to send ships if we engage with the Centauri fleets. Others will likely follow.’

‘I thought about that,’ said Luchenko. ‘I’ll personally thank them and suggest they negotiate with the Narn to enter Regime space. We may need their support later, and we cannot look a gift horse in the mouth. However, we cannot have them join us in the initial invasion. In the interests of stability, we cannot turn this into a galactic-wide war, however eager they are.’

The meeting broke up soon after that, and Shaw rushed back to his booth to join Tilanna. He placed a hand on her shoulder to pull her attention away from her display.

‘Get me Sheridan,’ he said. ‘It’s starting.’

They exchanged concerned looks as she began the communication protocols. Minutes later, Sheridan’s face appeared on the display, replacing the facts and figures Tilanna had been ploughing through.

‘Michael, Tilanna. What have you got?’ Sheridan looked as stressed as Luchenko had in the meeting.

‘Mr. President,’ Shaw said. ‘EarthForce is moving. They are going to blockade several Centauri worlds along the border and force their fleets to engage. Other governments are pledging their support.’

Sheridan looked away from the screen briefly, annoyance and frustration clearly visible on his face. ‘That was to be expected,’ he said. ‘Many within the ISA would like nothing better than to see the Centauri wiped off the face of the galactic map.’

‘Mr. President. We have turned up nothing here. Nothing Luchenko or her people will accept.’

‘Michael, you must keep trying. We have nothing but supposition and circumstance despite the best efforts of the intelligence centre. We desperately need something showing House Kaado acted independently, rather than the Republic or the Emperor. Without that...’ Sheridan trailed off briefly before continuing. ‘I am going to send the White Star fleet into the targeted systems and place them between the Earth and Centauri fleets.’

‘Sir, that means’-‘

‘I know, Michael, I know. This is going to end badly.’ He paused, looked as if he was going to say something, then changed his mind. ‘Keep me informed of any developments within EarthForce. I imagine that when the fireworks start, you will be politely asked to leave. Do so. If it comes down to that, you will not be able to do anything else.’

‘Understood, Mr. President. Good luck.’

The display went blank, and Shaw stared at it for several long seconds before Tilanna called up her previous work.

‘We cannot give up, Michael,’ she said after he continued to stare at the screen.

‘I don’t know, Tilanna. I don’t think I am the right person to be here. I cannot help thinking that if Sabine was here in my place...’

Tilanna shook her head firmly. ‘You are exactly where you need to be,’ she said.

‘You think so?’

‘I know so. The universe works in such a way that we are all placed exactly where we need to be. These places and times are rarely easy to live through, but you can take comfort from the fact that you are not supposed to be anywhere else.’

He smiled. ‘Your people have a unique way of looking at things.’

‘Just so.’

‘Okay, if I am meant to be here and the universe obviously has something in store for me, what do we have so far?’

‘Likely little else,’ she said. ‘Still, attend. We know the device used to destroy EarthDome was of Dilgar origin, due to your work on Coutor.’

‘That was more Sabine than me,’ he said.

‘Regardless. We have trailed the device through customs checkpoints throughout the Narn Regime, Babylon 5 and then into the Earth Alliance, right up to EarthDome. What you found on Coutor is the link that places the origin of the device in the Republic.’

‘I’m with you so far.’

‘We also know that Centauri ships attacked the carrier group.’

‘Yes - if we believe the reports given to us by EarthForce, of course.’

‘I see no reason for duplicity there. At least, not yet,’ she said cryptically.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked, puzzled.

‘I’ll come back to that. However, the report was too detailed to forge easily and has been verified by Tuzanor. Let us accept it as genuine for now.’

‘Okay.’

‘We do not know where the Dilgar device came from. That is a complete unknown. We might be tempted to decide that, at this point, it does not matter. The attack happened, and we have a link back to the people who initiated it.’

‘House Kaado,’ he said.

‘Correct. From all this, we know Centauri are involved. All that is missing now is the extent of the plot. Does it involve House Kaado alone, a group of conspirators, the Centaurum, or does it go all the way up to the Emperor? If it is one of the last two, that means war.’

‘We have war now.’

‘Well, not yet,’ said Tilanna. ‘Not until Earth and Centauri fleets actually meet in battle as commanded by their respective rulers or ruling bodies. However, this is the question that must be answered before any action can be taken in good conscience.’

‘I think we are fresh out of that.’

A pause lingered between them as Tilanna looked straight into his eyes. Slowly her intent dawned on Shaw.

‘You have something, don’t you?’ he asked, with a growing smile.

‘Please do not get your hopes high,’ Tilanna said. ‘It is... an anomaly, perhaps nothing more.’

‘Tilanna, at this point, I’ll take anything.’

‘The records of Babylon 5 customs points are quite chaotic and took some time to work through. However, I was able to verify that the energy signature generated by the Dilgar device did pass through the station on its way to Earth.’

‘As you said before, we already knew that. What more is there?’

Tilanna activated a new programme on her display, and she called up a new set of data. ‘Why is this section of the customs reports classified? In fact, if you have a moment, why classify any part of any customs report?’

Shaw frowned. ‘Umm. I don’t know. Cover a covert operation or something?’

‘Maybe. Certainly to cover something.’

‘I am sorry, Tilanna, but why do you think this is important?’

‘Look at the dates on these files. The classified section covers only a short time of May 23rd, by your calendar, and only exterior sweeps by service bots of ships that have not docked with the station. That perhaps means nothing by itself. But look when the section was classified.’

He peered at the display, now jumbled with figures. ‘Yesterday.’

‘And do you recognise the classification protocols that protect it?’

He shook his head. ‘No. I’m no cryptographer.’

‘Neither am I. But from what I have been able to tell, it relates to Earth’s Joint Chiefs of Staff.’

Shaw shook his head. ‘No. The Joint Chiefs are all either dead or in critical condition after the Intrepide went down.’

Tilanna turned round to face him. ‘Exactly.’

He suddenly came to a screeching halt as the direction of Tilanna’s thinking became clear. ‘Then who classified it? And why?’

‘Those are two very important questions, Michael.’

Taking a step back, he sat down at his own station, thinking hard. The possibilities began to swim in his mind. None seemed very wholesome, and he had a great deal of trouble believing that anyone in the Earth Alliance would purposefully want war with the Centauri.

‘Can you break those protocols?’ he asked.

Tilanna took a deep breath. ‘I would really like to consult with our colleagues in the intelligence centre, but if we send out a communication like that, it will get intercepted. We will be thrown off this base, arrested or worse. Either way, we will be of no help to anyone.’

‘We are on our own then,’ he smiled sadly.

‘As before. However, I do have some small training in this area.’

Shaw’s smile became broader at her typical modesty. He long ago learned that when Minbari understated their capabilities, they were usually more than capable.

‘Give it your best shot,’ he said.

‘I may trip an alert with my stumbling around,’ Tilanna warned.

‘We have literally nothing left to lose.’

CHAPTER ELEVEN

July 9th 2263, Beta III, Centauri Republic

For centuries, the star system Beta III rested on the outskirts of the Centauri Republic, its people relatively untouched by Centaurum politics so long as they fulfilled their annual quotas of Quantum-40. This suited them just fine, as the Centauri of the colony on Beta III were known to be individualistic and content with a simpler way of life. Quantum-40, a material vital for the construction of new jump gates across the Republic, gave them the means to support themselves, which in turn allowed them to govern their own people with little interference from Centauri Prime.

Their tranquillity was shattered when the first EarthForce fleet blockaded their world from the rest of the Republic. With such a valuable commodity as Quantum-40 present, the inevitable Centauri response would begin at Beta III, though other colony worlds along the Republic's borders were being invaded simultaneously.

A dozen blue jump points lit up space less than a million miles from the sole inhabited world of the system and far from any active defence. Certain he could deploy his fleet safely, Admiral Andrew Ward gave the order for his ships to jump into realspace and begin their approach to the colony.

Ward's own ship, the command destroyer Heracles, appeared first, the slowly spinning section of its hull seeming to turn purposefully as the crew inside monitored the condition of the rest of the fleet and scanned the Centauri defences around the target world. Confident his fleet could handle anything the Centauri threw at it, Ward stood in the centre of the bridge and listened to his officers account for each ship. Three Hyperion-class cruisers and four frontline Omega destroyers gave him the heavy punch he needed, while several new Chronos attack frigates, the latest design from Earth's spacedocks, would protect his flanks. Two Oracle scout cruisers were the eyes of the fleet, and every ship would benefit from the support of the Fraternity, an Avenger-class heavy carrier with nearly fifty Starfuries nestled in its hangers. Officers waited their whole careers to command a fleet this impressive.

'Destroyers and cruisers, form up on us,' Ward said, the confidence in his voice carrying to the other ships in the fleet as they fired their main engines and began the approach. 'Protect the Fraternity. Frigates to our flanks and keep the Claros and Didyma far back.' The last command was to ensure no enemy could directly engage his scouts, for he would have need of them later.

'Sir, the Centauri just activated their mines,' a junior officer reported from the sensor suite.

Ward nodded, expecting the news. 'Standard Centauri response. All ships, deploy fighters. Sweep those mines clear.'

From the open maws of the Omega destroyers and yawning hanger bays of the Fraternity, scores of Starfury and Thunderbolt fighters screamed into space with a rapidity born of constant drilling. Ward was not overly concerned with the mines, small floating satellites with tiny but powerful particle

arrays. Using automated systems, they could coordinate their firepower to target incoming ships, but they posed little threat to a fleet this size, and it was unlikely they could penetrate the armour of his largest warships. Still, Ward preferred not to tempt fate, as a lucky hit could cause any number of delays. Far better to follow standard procedure for dealing with standard defences.

Once free of their motherships, the fighters formed into squadrons and fired afterburners to converge on the mines across a wide front, forcing the defences to split their fire, not allowing them to concentrate on any one fighter. Designed to hammer small and medium-sized warships, the targeting system of the particle array mounted on each mine failed time and again to lock on to the tiny and fast-moving fighters, and several drained their power reserves fruitlessly as they discharged into empty space.

From the point of view of the EarthForce pilots, however, the situation was a little less clear. Their entire forward view suddenly filled with bright bolts of energy as the mines fired randomly. Small packets of lethal light peppered space around them, and many pilots jinked instinctively, keen to avoid damage that would leave them sitting ducks for the Centauri defences.

The Thunderbolt pilots commenced their attack runs first, their longer-ranged wing-mounted missiles acquiring the front line of mines. Independently targeted, each Thunderbolt unleashed four missiles that blazed a trail of fire across the darkness. Explosions added more light to the battle, causing the visors of many pilots to automatically dim for a brief second. Almost immediately, the weight of fire from the mines diminished as the missiles took their toll. Their opposition crippled, the Thunderbolts and Starfuries swept forward to engage the mines directly with short-ranged pulse weapons.

Following their training, each pilot constantly switched targets, pointing his fighter at one mine, firing a brief salvo, then violently changing course to come about on another, repeating the process a dozen times. This tactic allowed them a relatively straight run at a mine, but by turning away after only a second or so, they were able to fool the tracking systems of their automated enemy. Though the pulse weapons of the fighters were too weak to destroy a mine outright, the combined attacks of scores of Starfuries and Thunderbolts, each focussing on a target for a short time, soon blasted through armour to explode the volatile crystalline core within.

A few unlucky pilots were killed as their fighters exploded in a hail of particle fire, caught by a tracking system just as they completed their attack run or hit by a stream intended for another target altogether.

The skirmish lasted only minutes, and while Ward regretted losing pilots so early in the expedition, it was inevitable. When that much charged energy was let loose in such a small area of space, people died. Once the last mine finally fell silent, he gave the order to break off.

‘Fighters, disperse into your patrol patterns. Start bringing squadrons back to base in twenty minutes, maintaining standard fleet patrol roster at all times.’

‘Contact.’ The officer of the sensor suite relayed his readings with a calmness that encouraged Ward. He knew his people were well trained, but battle was always the baptism of fire that demonstrated their true character.

‘Report.’

‘Sir, reading... twenty-four bogeys leaving planetary orbit, dead ahead. Looks like fighters, sir.’

‘Are they on attack vector?’ Ward asked.

‘No, sir. Looks like they are running,’ the officer answered with a smile.

‘Very wise. Keep track of them but broaden your scans. Any ships in the vicinity?’

‘Negative, sir.’

‘Claros, Didyma, are you with us?’ Ward asked, his query automatically routed by the ensign at the communications station to the two Oracle scout cruisers behind the Heracles.

‘Yes, sir.’ ‘Online,’ came the immediate responses.

‘Get your eyes and ears running. I don’t want to be caught by surprise.’

There was a brief pause before the captain of the Claros answered. ‘Contact. Relaying wide-band scans to you now.’

Ward turned to his bridge crew as they worked to analyse the incoming data stream.

‘Sir, contacts are Vorchan-class, six of them. About two hundred klicks away, though the signal keeps getting scrambled.’

Ward nodded. ‘Claros, you may have an opposite number out there. Start looking.’

‘Confirmed,’ said the voice over the communications link.

There was little that could throw off the sensor sweeps of an Oracle-class scout, as its electronics suite was constantly being updated by EarthForce R&D to keep pace with the other races of the galaxy. The Centauri, however, were known to possess electronic warfare capabilities that were at least the equal of Earth’s. The presence of a scout in a fleet not only gave it far-seeing eyes but also allowed it to shroud friendly ships with interference or display ghost readings on enemy scanners. On their own, scout ships were rarely a match for frontline warships, and Ward was not overly concerned about the presence of the Vorchans, as each massed less than any of his ships with the exception of the frigates.

‘Contact,’ the voice of the Claros’ captain echoed across the Heracles’ bridge again. ‘Admiral, we have him. Fifty clicks behind the Vorchans. All blips are moving directly away from us. Obviously they don’t like what they see.’

‘Roger that, Claros,’ Ward replied as he turned his attention back to his own bridge officers. ‘Deploy the frigates, back them up with six ‘Fury squadrons. Chase those interlopers out of our sky.’

He held no hope in successfully engaging the Centauri ships, as they had a good lead already and were notoriously fast compared to typical Earth Alliance vessels. However, a Centauri response was expected in this system, and he could live without a rogue scout at the edges of his engagement envelope interfering with his scanners as a larger fleet approached. If the enemy decided to stand and fight, hoping to take out his frigates piecemeal while the rest of his fleet was too far away to lend support, he knew the new Chronos design would give the Centauri pause. Though small, the frigate had armour as thick as that on his own destroyer, and its railgun turrets would tear through the Vorchans. So long as they could gain a lock through its electronic fog, the frigates would make literal mincemeat out of any Centauri scout, though he doubted its captain would be so foolish as to let them get that close.

Summoning a tactical display on a nearby console, Ward watched his frigates and fighters peel off towards the contacts on the far side of the screen. Within a minute, the Centauri acted as he had predicted, increasing their speed to leave the Earth ships trailing far behind.

‘Sir, energy spike,’ called one of his officers. ‘They are opening a jump point. Vortex is stable. Looks like they are holding it open long enough for all their ships.’

‘We are going to see them again later when the next lot of Centauri show up. Don’t worry, we’ll get another chance at them!’ Ward’s bravado raised a quiet laugh across the bridge. ‘Recall the frigates. Any update on the fighters?’

‘Didyma reports they are heading into deep space, sir!’ Now it was Ward’s turn to smile at the scout captain’s elaboration.

‘Tell them to keep the fighters pegged. There are not many of them, but we don’t want to be surprised by a couple of squadrons of Sentris when the fighting really begins,’ he replied.

Ward nodded and sighed quietly. So far, so good. Everything had gone to plan, and the system was effectively theirs. Now they would just wait for the hammer fall.

‘Instruct the Claros and Didyma to jump to hyperspace and begin their long-ranged probes,’ said Ward. ‘I want to know the second they detect an incoming fleet. Remind both captains they are to return with all haste when they find the Centauri but to only jump back to realspace when they judge it is safe to do so. We will need their services in battle, but I don’t want to lose either of them to a Centauri squadron just because they were rushing to get back.’

‘Confirmed, Admiral.’

Firing their lateral thrusters, the two Oracle scout cruisers turned from the rest of the fleet as they opened yellow spinning jump points that would carry them to hyperspace.

Huge ion engines igniting, they waited for the hyperspace currents within to settle for a brief second before surging forward on a tide of white fire, quickly disappearing into the dark centre of the jump point. With a flash of brilliant light, the vortex shrunk into nothingness as it disappeared. The two scout cruisers began their trek through hyperspace as they searched for any sign of approaching

Centauri.

Ward spent the next few minutes deploying the remainder of his fleet around the inhabited world below them, taking full advantage of the gravity well. Spreading the ships out in high orbit, he ensured no enemy could approach using the shadow of the planet to mask an attack, while his own ships had the option of either breaking out of the gravitational pull of the world, weak this far away, or firing their engines and plummeting downwards, diving into low orbit where they could use the gravity to slingshot themselves at great speed around the planet to surprise an enemy on the other side.

All his preparations completed, Ward knew his captains were familiar with their standing orders should the Centauri appear.

Now all they could do was wait.

July 9h 2263, Hyperspace, Centauri Republic

Like two great behemoths, the battleships Turhan and Cartagia moved slowly across the rippling red plasma clouds of hyperspace. Following a beacon track to their rendezvous, they moved inexorably forward, hyperspace shock waves scattering off their hulls even as the creeping fingers of moving gravity wells slid feebly from their huge mass. Ships of this great size posed certain problems for their helmsmen while around a busy world with constant orbital traffic, but here in hyperspace they became a dream to handle. Hazardous eddies and currents that would send smaller ships spinning away into the abyss did nothing to disrupt the smooth passage of an Octurion battleship. By comparison, the escorting Primus battlecruisers, still large warships in their own right, were forced to make constant course corrections as they navigated the strange other dimension of hyperspace.

Only a few Octurions existed, as each required a massive amount of resources to complete, draining the economy of entire colony worlds. One was built for every Emperor who took to the throne of the Centauri Republic as a mark of his absolute power and authority, whether or not he actually wielded it, though traditionally few survived in office long enough to actually use the ship as a royal transport. In a galaxy where every military force possessed destroyers, frigates and cruisers, the Octurion was a true battleship in every sense of the word. Few vessels could repel its sheer weight of fire.

Command of an Octurion was by royal appointment only, and it almost always fell to a popular noble of the Centaurum who bucked for the honour of the highest post in active combat service. Aboard the Turhan, Minister

Provenza stood imperiously, unmoving, as he watched his crew go about their duties. The bridge structure rose from the rear hull of the battleship like a massive office block, with the bridge itself occupying the entire top level. Metres of thick Corrilium armour were layered above their heads for protection, an expensive extravagance for a warship but a mere fitting on a vessel such as this. The bridge was a lavish affair, fit for the Emperor it had once been intended to carry on state visits to colony worlds. At its rear a tall throne was mounted, though none but the Emperor himself was permitted to approach it without royal decree. Offices to its side permitted closed sessions with ambassadors and military officials or a moment of solitude for the monarch. The walls and consoles were decked in acres of rich cream-coloured hide, while soft and expensive carpets lined the floor.

Though such luxury was a far cry from the military ships of other races, few visitors could fail to sense the latent power while standing on the bridge of the Turhan or its sister ship, the Cartagia. The massed ranks of display consoles and control stations, all manned by some of the finest officers in the Centauri fleet, were obviously state of the art, while the front viewport looked down at the main hull of the ship, extending well over a mile out into space. Huge turrets, dozens of metres across, studded the purple hull, hinting at the purpose for which the Octurion had been designed. Though officially classed as a royal transport, the Octurion could defend itself against entire fleets.

Waiting patiently, Minister Provenza ticked off the minutes as they sailed through hyperspace to the fleet's rendezvous point. The Emperor himself gave the order not to just turn away invading fleets, but utterly crush them. No doubt was to be left in any part of the galaxy that invading the Republic resulted in the severest response. Never again would the Centauri suffer the humiliation of seeing their homeworld bombed into ruin.

To the Minister's memory, no time in Centauri history saw this much military might gathered in one place. Two Octurions and six escorting battlecruisers made a fearsome display, but they had been deemed insufficient for the mission's objectives of total annihilation. After leaving the staging post at Gorash, they were to join with a secondary fleet of support ships, ranging from cruisers to gunships. Waiting in hyperspace they would then keep station, listening for any sign of an Earth fleet entering nearby territory.

'Minister?' An aide reporting from the control station interrupted Provenza's thoughts of final and total victory. He raised his chin in acknowledgement.

'We have a report from our scout at Beta III. An Earth fleet has appeared and blockaded the system. What are your orders?'

'Signal the supporting fleet,' he answered. 'They are to head to Beta III immediately. Time their arrival to coincide with ours. We will make the jump into realspace at the far edge of the system. Give the humans time to see what they are up against.'

'As you wish, Minister.' The aide bowed and backed away.

Provenza smiled to himself. He had been appointed command of the Turhan six months ago but had yet to see its guns fired in anger. With a guaranteed victory like this, he would get his wish and be lauded by the Emperor himself. Nothing less than a position in the Royal Court would be his prize.

July 9th 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

'Accept and decode,' said Sheridan. He waited with some anxiety for the incoming communication and tapped his fingers on his desk while the security protocols were identified and translated. Seconds later the figure of a man with a boyish face greeted him, though the Anla'Shok robes promised a hidden strength beyond any lack of years.

'Ranger Sosa,' Sheridan said. 'What do you have for us?'

‘It has been confirmed, Mr. President,’ said the Ranger. ‘The Centauri have sent several fleets to the border worlds invaded by the Earth Alliance. However, the largest and fastest moving is headed towards Beta III, as expected. The Earth fleet there is led by an Admiral Ward.’

Sheridan frowned. ‘I don’t know him. What is his strength?’

‘A reinforced task force. He has access to supporting fleets if need be, though they are at least an hour or two away.’

‘And the Centauri?’

‘They are aiming to wipe out the Earth fleet. The reports of the Turhan and Cartagia being launched are confirmed - they are leading the Centauri fleet. We have counted more than thirty other vessels in the area, all converging on Beta III from hyperspace.’

‘I see.’ Sheridan thought furiously. He retained certain sympathies to his old colleagues in EarthForce and was reluctant to go down a path that would see so many killed in battle. On the other hand, he had greater responsibilities to the Interstellar Alliance and the billions of sentients that lived under its protection. He knew what action had to be taken but hesitated. Committing the White Star fleet was a risky move, as it was unlikely to sway the Centauri when they had a force that powerful.

‘Listen to me very carefully,’ he said. ‘This is important. I am putting you at the head of the entire White Star fleet, every craft that can reach your position in time. By our calculations, you will have sixteen ships behind you. Take them to Beta III, put yourself between the Centauri and Earth fleets and do everything you can to stop the shooting. You know what is at stake.’

‘Yes, sir. Mr. President, what are our orders if battle starts? The Earth fleet is not likely to survive unless we intervene.’

Sheridan took a deep breath. ‘I know. And as soon as the Earth ambassador here realises what is going on, he is going to raise merry hell in the Council-and there will be more than a few governments agreeing him, if the rumours of fleets moving through Narn space towards the Republic turn out to be true. It feels like President Luchenko is trying to play off Alliance members to her own ends.’ He hesitated, not liking the dark place of politics and machinations that he was headed towards. ‘Sosa, I cannot take unilateral action against the Centauri without damaging everything this Alliance stands for. I am going to be consulting Council members to reach a combined resolution on this so, until you hear from me with definite orders, you are to act on your own initiative. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, sir, I believe I do.’

‘Good. However, we must do everything we can to stop a full-scale war. The Centauri cannot win against a united Interstellar Alliance force, but they do have rights to their own sovereignty, whether they are members or not. And an invasion of Republic space is going to cost our fleets more than they might think, despite the bragging of the Narn and Drazi.’

‘We’ll do our part, sir. If there is a way to stop the Earth Alliance and Centauri from blasting each

other across Beta III, we'll find it.'

'I hope you do, Sosa. Sheridan out.'

As the screen went dark, Sheridan became aware of another presence entering the room, comforting in its familiarity.

'This is where it ends,' he said bleakly.

'There is still time,' a soft and serene female voice said. 'Come, we have work to do in the Council.'

July 9th 2263, The EAS Heracles, Beta III

'Admiral, incoming transmission from the Claros,' reported an ensign across the low background hum and chatter of the Heracles' bridge. 'Centauri ships, on their way here.'

Ward snapped around on his heels. 'How long?'

'ETA less than forty minutes. They have registered thirty-six hyperspace silhouettes, mostly cruiser masses.'

'Thirty-six?' Ward could not help asking, wanting to make sure he had heard his officer correctly.

'Yes, sir. They have had trouble identifying two. One moment, sir, awaiting the data stream.' The ensign leaned closer to his station as he began to interpret the information transmitted by the scout ship. 'Sir! They are massive!'

'Do you have identification?' Ward asked, puzzled and concerned.

'Not definite, sir. They are massing several times larger than their battlecruisers.' The ensign looked up at his commanding officer. 'Sir, could they be Octurion?'

Ward appeared thoughtful before answering. 'Let's not get ahead of ourselves, ensign.'

'No, sir.'

'Is Captain Musaki still in position?' Ward asked. The level of forces that the Centauri appeared to be committing worried him. Even without the possibility of two of their largest battleships, they had amassed a response that outnumbered his forces three to one. While most of their ships would be lighter than any of his frontline vessels, he knew that they would be bringing enough heavies to provide a significant advantage. They had possibly spooked their hyperspace silhouettes, as they had reacted with astonishing speed, but that was not a risk worth taking. Several battle groups and squadrons had been held back in hyperspace to reinforce the EarthForce ships jumping into Centauri territory as needed, and Ward needed as many ships as could be mustered before the enemy fleet arrived.

'Yes, sir. ETA sixty-seven minutes if we give him the go now.'

‘Do so. Also contact the battle groups Ajax, Achilles and Nelson. Tell them to make full burn to get here.’ He guessed the other ships would not arrive before conflict started, but if he could hold out against an initial assault, he would be able to summon enough ships to wipe out any enemy. ‘Do you have a precise fix on the Centauri’s course yet?’

The ensign did not answer straight away as he consulted his screen and made calculations. ‘Difficult, sir. It looks like they are on a slight tangent to our position. They won’t be dropping in on top of us.’

Thank heavens for small mercies, Ward thought. The Centauri in charge of the incoming fleet obviously did not know the full extent of the Earth fleet and was not taking chances. Then again, with a fleet as large as his, perhaps chances were not necessary.

‘Recall the Claros and Didyma,’ Ward ordered. ‘They have done their job. Instruct their captains to maintain distance from any direct confrontation. They will know what to do when the fireworks start.’

The bridge clock ticked away the long minutes as they awaited the arrival of the Centauri. Ward felt envious of his crew who each had their own duties to keep them occupied. Whether they were controlling the patrol patterns of Starfuries in orbit, monitoring the power relays and capacitors of the Heracles or doing any one of the million tasks required to keep a warship of this size flying, they were all active. For Ward’s part, much of his job had already been done, organising the fleet, ensuring the readiness of each section of the ship and making preparations for battle. An officer occasionally approached him with a status check or query but, for the main, he was left to his own racing and nervous thoughts.

He recalled someone saying that military service was hours of boredom punctuated with moments of sheer terror and, having served EarthForce for most of his adult life, it was a sentiment he could appreciate. However, the worst part was the waiting, he always found. The moments where all plans had been laid and all eventualities covered. When the enemy approached and all that could be done was wait. It left a cold, hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The Claros and Didyma jumped in system several minutes ahead of the Centauri, reporting that the incoming fleet looked to be heading towards the edge of the system. It was an unusual move, Ward considered, but it matched what he had heard of the Centauri’s ruthless efficiency. They were obviously planning to deploy far from any possibility of interference, gauge their opposition and then sweep through the system, annihilating anything they came across. Start at one side and then continue forwards until there was nothing left to fight. No initiative required on the part of your sub-ordinates and time-consuming, but the Centauri were in their own territory and could afford to spend time making sure they had successfully repulsed Earth’s invasion.

‘Contact!’ called his tactical officer. ‘Jump points forming beyond the sixth planet.’

Ward had given no orders for his fleet to break orbit until the Centauri appeared. He was mindful of the possibility that the Centauri could change course in hyperspace at the last instant, jumping in close to his ships to start a brawl that would put him on the defensive immediately. He might have contemplated this tactic himself in their place, and it was foolish to treat an enemy as stupid - ‘always consider them at least as smart as you are’ was the mantra in EarthForce. Nevertheless, the Centauri

leading the fleet seemed content to fight a battle with no surprises. At least, not initially.

‘What do we have?’ he asked.

‘A real mix, sir. Gunships to battleships. They are already at full thrust towards us. ETA on their forward screen, ninety-two minutes. The big guns, seventeen minutes behind them. Running analysis sweeps of attackers... wow!’

The breach of bridge protocol made Ward look up in surprise.

‘Sorry, sir,’ said the tactical officer. ‘We just scanned the two Octurions...’

‘Punch it through to my office,’ said Ward, walking to the rear of the bridge to review his enemy privately. Sitting down in front of his main console, he selected the feed from the tactical station and reviewed the first comprehensive data an Earth vessel had received on the Centauri’s largest warships.

It made for impressive reading. Reactor output was measured at six times greater than his command destroyers already uprated systems, and he had no doubt it would increase once battle started. A full defensive grid, capacity for two full squadrons of fighters, and an extensive communications suite. The armour was thick enough to shrug off all but the heaviest weapons Ward had at his disposal, and it looked as if it could readily trade fire with several ships simultaneously. As well as the Centauri’s renowned battle lasers, the hull was studded with particle array batteries and six huge turrets sat on the top deck, each containing several matter cannon, smaller versions of the mass drivers the Centauri had used to bombard the Narn homeworld years before.

He now faced two of these incredible vessels and knew immediately that his present fleet would take substantial losses even without the support of three dozen other warships. He looked across the bridge.

‘Comms, get me the status on the Hermione.’

The Hermione was a Warlock class advanced destroyer, one of the new breed of warships Earth had constructed using the technological advances developed or stolen from alien races. Barely two years old, no finer ship existed in EarthForce, though only five had been built so far.

‘Sorry, sir. Hermione reports being already committed, covering Admiral Breckinridge’s flank past Quadrant 37.’

Ward now had to acknowledge that he had a problem. Even with the reinforcements, there was no guarantee they could win this battle, much less so with losses that would be called ‘acceptable’ by bean counters back on Earth.

‘Signal the fleet,’ he said. ‘Break orbit. Destroyers and cruisers, form up on us. Frigates, protect the scouts. Launch fighters and engage their forward screen at the first opportunity. See if we can begin whittling them down early. Put us on an oblique course, make their big ships work to engage us.’

Satisfied that his orders were being carried out correctly, he looked down at the data streams of the Octurion battleships once more, now sporting the Centauri designations Turhan and Cartagia.

‘How do I fight such beasts?’ he murmured to himself.

July 9th 2263, The Turhan, Beta III

The mood on the bridge of the Turhan was altogether different. For some time the Centauri had endured humiliating defeats and setbacks. Forced to withdraw from their own territories, constantly out-manoeuvred in the game of intergalactic politics and then, of course, seeing their homeworld, the jewel of the Republic, bombarded by their enemies. This battle would set them back on the road to glory that was their rightful place. Moreover, they had an enemy ahead of them on which to vent their years of pent-up frustrations and disappointments.

Maintaining a vaguely disinterested facade, as protocol demanded, Minister Provenza was as eager as any of the crew. As head of the fleet, he stood to gain the most when they returned in triumph to Centauri Prime.

He already noted the Earth fleet comprised many of the best ships the humans had to offer, but not one of them could match the Turhan or Cartagia alone. He regarded their fleet as small. Tiny. Puny. They would sweep across Beta III with majestic pride, crushing each target within range. Even through the thick carpet of the bridge, he could feel the Turhan hum with power as it engaged its massive drives and began the slow trek across space toward battle.

Provenza sent his fighters and lighter ships forward to trap the Earth fleet and pin it down, hoping to block any attempt at escape, mildly gratified that the humans seemed willing to engage as they broke orbit from the colony world. Subconsciously, he began tapping a foot in anticipation until three more Earth ships jumped in system close to the rest of their fleet. He smiled as he imagined the human admiral frantically calling for reinforcements when he saw the Centauri jump into realspace to reclaim their territory. It didn’t matter. Call every ship you have, Provenza thought to himself. Today the Centauri demonstrate their true resolve and nothing will save you from our righteous fury.

Across space, the lead elements of each fleet met. Provenza finally moved from his place on the bridge to look over the shoulders of his crew, monitoring the battle and making mental notes for promotions and recriminations later.

The main bulk of the Centauri fleet was some distance from initial weapons range, but across a wide front, small explosions and energy discharges marked the clash with the Earth fighter squadrons. The Centauri’s own fighters, a mix of light Sentris and even lighter Raziks, were spearheaded by several gunships and patrol boats. Technically classified as capital ships, these small vessels were light and fast with weaponry intended to punch through fighter screens and similar small ships. Throughout space, a series of dogfights broke out, running battles that expanded, dispersed and combined to create a brawl of exploding ships and bolts of lethal energy.

The Starfury pilots made good account of themselves against the more nimble and numerous Centauri fighters but were forced to give way when the gunships entered battle, their massed particle arrays

lancing out to smash entire flights with each salvo. A few squadrons, covered by their comrades, sallied out from the growing furball to make attack runs on the gunships, paying for their heroic efforts with their lives as concentrated fire made it impossible to approach the larger vessels while maintaining a target lock. The Earth line held for a time, then began to buckle as more and more Starfuries withdrew, either through mounting damage or due to superior numbers of the enemy, forcing a retreat that fast became a rout. Several squadron leaders managed to keep their pilots in check, and the initial rush to escape became tempered as they engaged afterburners, hoping to draw the enemy into the big guns of the main Earth fleet.

Many Centauri fighters obliged and were cut down in minutes as the turrets of the Earth cruisers and destroyers worked overtime to fill space with a criss-crossing of pulse cannon fire impossible to fly through. The gunships refused to follow though, having received standing orders from Minister Provenza to hold until the battleships opened fire, as much from his own interest to claim early victories as their safety.

Provenza nodded, satisfied at the opening stages of battle. Everything was proceeding as expected, and he was not concerned about the loss of fighters. They did not win battles and, more to the point, it was unlikely that any noble of good standing would be found among the dead, as fighter pilots tended to be drawn from the ranks of nobles who did not have enough money or political clout to get a commission on a warship. Feeling the soft hide covering the console in front of him, Provenza recognized the proper way to fight a war, not being cramped inside a tiny fighter and subjected to the rigours of high-gravity manoeuvres. He looked up as an aide tried to get his attention.

‘Yes?’

‘Minister, we have jump points ahead. More ships have arrived!’

At first, Provenza was confused at his aide’s words. He was not expecting any more Centauri ships to arrive and was momentarily irritated with the idea that someone, somewhere within the Centauri military had thought he was not capable of winning this battle alone. ‘Whose ships?’ he said.

‘Minister, they are White Stars.’

Provenza stood upright with a start, the surprise evident in his raised brows. Well now, he thought. This is going to get interesting.

July 9th 2263, White Star 8, Beta III

Rocketing into the contested space of Beta III, seventeen White Stars darted forward from their jump points, immediately speeding for a point equidistant between the Earth and Centauri fleets. On the bridge of White Star 8, Sosa quickly listened to hurried reports of the situation outside.

‘Skirmishing has commenced with their lead elements,’ said the Minbari at the weapons station to his right. ‘Sensors detect debris directly ahead of us, trailing away to the Earth fleet. Some fighter-to-fighter battles are still going on, but it looks like we missed the initial clash.’

‘Then there is still time,’ said Sosa. ‘Their governments can both pass off a few scraps between fighters. It is the big ships we have to stop. What are their relative positions?’

The main holographic display shimmered in front of him, plotting the course of his White Stars and marking the Earth fleet to his right and the Centauri to his left.

‘At present velocities, they will be in weapons range of each other within ten minutes. Then again, they are only five minutes away from weapons range of us...’ said the

Minbari.

‘Oh, that’s comforting,’ said Sosa, as much to lighten his own mood as any of his crew.

‘Do you wish a broadband communication to the fleets?’ asked another Minbari.

‘No. We are going to have to manage each very differently. Get me the Earth admiral first.’

Within seconds, the holographic display changed hue and then presented the face of Admiral Ward to Sosa.

‘White Star fleet,’ acknowledged Ward. ‘It is good to see you. Are you here to lend us support?’

‘Sorry, Admiral,’ replied Sosa. ‘I am here to stop outright war from breaking out. I must insist you break off and leave this system. You are violating the sovereign territory of the Centauri Republic without sanction from the Interstellar Alliance.’

‘We are responding to a legitimate threat to the security of the Earth Alliance, in accordance with the rules of the ISA.’

‘You cannot do this unilaterally, Admiral,’ Sosa persisted. ‘Not without the majority vote of the Council. This is an illegal action, and Earth risks expulsion from the ISA if you persist on this course. Let the Rangers monitor the border between Earth and the Republic - that is what we are here for.’

‘You know that the Council will ratify Earth’s actions here today. I ask again, will you stand beside us against the Centauri? We have reinforcements on the way, but your White Stars will save the lives of many humans today if you commit.’

Out of view of Admiral Ward, Sosa stamped a foot on the deck of the White Star in frustration. He had hoped that the Earth fleet would be convinced to at least delay action. He was not confident that the Centauri alone would be persuaded, but he knew he had to try.

‘Admiral, please stand by.’ The display went dark, and Sosa signalled the Minister leading the Centauri fleet. It took a full minute for them to respond, which he was sure was a slight of some description. The holographic display presently showed a stern-faced Centauri with a huge hair crest. Dressed in a dark blue greatcoat, he stared down at Sosa, arms crossed in defiance.

‘White Star fleet, you are violating Centauri territory,’ he said with a conviction born of years

surrounded by sycophants and yes men. ‘Withdraw or be destroyed.’

Well, that is a good start, thought Sosa. ‘Minister, I bring the respectful greetings of President Sheridan. He regrets the matter has gone this far and seeks a solution that protects the sovereign territory of the great Centauri Republic without bloodshed.’

The Centauri minister blinked at Sosa’s words, encouraging the Ranger to continue. He knew from past experience that humility and flattery could go a long way when dealing with the Centauri.

‘I respectfully ask that you cease hostilities with the Earth fleet in this system and allow me to come aboard to discuss this further. I will be alone and unarmed.’

When the minister smirked at Sosa’s words, the Ranger knew he had failed.

‘White Star, it is my intention to close with the Earth fleet and blast them from our sky. If you intervene, we will open fire on your ships. Persuade your fellow humans to leave our territory, if that is your wish, but we consider any non-Centauri ship in our territory an enemy. We will allow you to leave unmolested, if you do so now.’

With that, the display went blank as the Minister cut the link.

Sosa closed his eyes and sighed.

‘It is as if they both desire battle,’ said one of his Minbari crew.

‘Patch me through to the Admiral again,’ said Sosa. If diplomacy and flattery would not work with either fleet, perhaps a threat would at least buy time.

‘Admiral, I insist you withdraw from Beta III at once and leave Centauri space,’ he said when Ward’s image appeared once more before him.

‘You know we cannot do that.’

‘Admiral, see reason. You are outnumbered and outgunned. This is a fool’s errand you are on and it will gain Earth nothing.’

‘I disagree. We already have reinforcements on the way and are more than capable of holding off the Centauri attack until they arrive. I will ask you again, however, to join us against the Centauri. Your ships are powerful enough to tip the balance and will save many lives.’

Sosa shook his head. ‘Neither the ISA nor the Anla’Shok differentiates between Centauri and human life, Admiral. If you continue to engage the Centauri, you do so without the permission or direction of the ISA and risk retaliation from the Rangers in the interests of continued galactic peace.’

Admiral Ward looked surprised. ‘Are you saying you will defend the Centauri and attack us?’

‘Admiral, the Centauri are the injured party here. You have violated their territory, attacked their

colony and now refuse to leave.’

Ward fell silent for a few seconds then looked back at Sosa. ‘I have my orders,’ he said and, once again, the display went blank.

Silence fell across the bridge of the White Star until an Minbari spoke over Sosa’s shoulder. ‘What are your orders?’

‘Get me Sheridan, now,’ he said. ‘Get him dragged out of the Council if you need to - we have less than six minutes before all hell breaks loose here.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

July 9th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

Shutting down the communications link to Tuzanor, Shaw leaned back from his station, sighing. Tilanna worked hard on the other console, with an occasional sharp but quiet intake of breath that Shaw attributed to momentary frustration. He looked at her petite form, her slender neck rising above grey robes beneath the hard bone crest that bracketed the rear of her entire skull.

‘The White Star fleet has been sent to Beta III,’ he said. ‘It seems EarthForce and the Centauri are going to kick off hostilities there, though they are expecting repeats all along the border.’

When Tilanna did not answer, he tapped her on the shoulder. ‘Please tell me you have gotten somewhere. Once those White Stars reach Beta III it could all be over.’

‘Mmm, yes,’ she said at first, continuing after a pause. ‘I have managed to get through the security protocols on those customs records. I don’t think I triggered any alarms doing so.’

‘You broke them?’ Shaw asked in surprise. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

Tilanna turned to face him, blinking in surprise of her own. ‘I had no time to analyse the information within - thus I had nothing to tell you.’

Shaw stared at her then grinned, rubbing his brow. He could not deny it made some logical sense. If you were a Minbari, perhaps.

‘Okay, forget that,’ he said, standing up to look over her shoulder at the console. ‘What have you found? Anything we can use?’

‘Perhaps. Look here,’ she indicated a set of files at the fore of the screen. ‘The covering and classification of this record was not skilfully done. It seems as if someone has simply grabbed the data they were looking for and were not concerned if they also took anything else nearby. This made the anomaly easier to spot but, consequently, there has been more information to work through now that we have it.’

‘And?’ Shaw asked, waiting to hear what the diligent Minbari had uncovered.

‘The energy signature of the Dilgar device is what allowed us to track it all the way from the Centauri Republic to Earth. However, it seems as if someone were covering their tracks. We have to ask ourselves, how did it get into the Centauri Republic in the first place?’

‘That makes sense,’ said Shaw. ‘We already know the Centauri fitted their own fuse to the device. And, however you look at it, if it is a Dilgar weapon, it had to originate from outside the Republic. But we don’t know how long they had it in their possession.’

‘We do now,’ said Tilanna. ‘A routine exterior sweep by a maintenance bot at Babylon 5 picked up

the signature, on a free trader called the Freedom Flight that had a flight route logged for Quadrant 15. However, it did not take me long to ascertain that it never arrived.'

'Did you find where exactly the ship went?'

'No,' she said. 'At least not straight away. But let us make a leap of faith - look at the star charts. If the ship went off the regular jump routes, what Centauri system is very close to Quadrant 15?'

Shaw peered at the star chart Tilanna called up and saw immediately what she was getting at. 'Coutor!' he exclaimed.

'An interesting supposition, is it not?' she asked rhetorically. 'The scan was performed by accident. The maintenance bot was no doubt engaged in some mundane status checking of flight patterns in the vicinity of the Babylon 5 station. That does not matter. However, it picks up on the Dilgar device, logs what it finds - and then those logs are classified, ensuring they cannot be used to accurately track what happened prior to the attack on EarthDome. It goes unnoticed for this long because everyone is concentrating on the immediate events, not what happened a little earlier.'

'Until a diligent Minbari starts looking into things.'

Tilanna smiled slightly, the first hint of self-satisfaction Shaw saw in the Minbari. 'Our analysts would have picked it up sooner than I,' she said. 'But I was the only one with direct access to Earth's own records. The only one with an interest in not blaming the Republic as a whole, that is.'

'So where is this ship now - what did you call it, the Freedom Flight?'

'It is registered to a man called Hans Shiritori, and I managed to track its progress as soon as it returned to Babylon 5, from Coutor we are presuming. You will find this interesting. After a brief stop at the station, it headed further into the Earth Alliance, landing at Mars Dome Two just three days ago. It departed... no, it will depart in two days. It is still here.'

'Mars Dome Two,' Shaw mused.

'I know you come from Mars. Do you know Dome Two?' 'I should do. I was born there.'

'The perfect guide then,' said Tilanna. 'Mr. Shiritori is marked as currently residing in the habitation block on the North side of the Dome, apartment IIc.'

'The transport to Dome Two is a forty-minute ride. Come on,' he said, glad of the chance for direct action. 'We don't have much time.'

'Mike, wait,' she said, grabbing his arm to arrest his attention. 'There is one more thing you should see.'

'What?'

Tilanna tapped a control on her console and pointed at the screen. 'This. Who classified the report in

the first place. This person, for whatever reason, be it an intentional cover up or a bid to avoid some embarrassment, deliberately hid information that might exonerate the Republic. And thus, perhaps, start a war.'

Shaw stared at the screen grimly, remembering an Anla'Shok saying about enemies within as well as without.

'Come on,' he said quietly. 'We need solid facts, now more than ever.'

July 9th 2263, Mars Dome Two, Sol

Sharing the transport tube to Mars Dome Two with other passengers, Shaw and Tilanna avoided discussing the conspiracy at hand, lapsing instead into their own silent thoughts. Shaw found himself thinking of Badeau as the red Martian landscape flickered past the window at hypersonic speeds. While he could take comfort at her care in Mars Dome One's best medical facility, the last report he saw of her condition was still labelled as critical. Though he had known her briefly, it still pained him that a Ranger so capable could be brought down.

She had neither failed nor made a mistake. They were all in the Intrepide when the shock wave sent it spiralling out of control into the mountains around Geneva. Why had Badeau seen the worst of it and not him? Sheer bad luck. Nothing else. Of course, there were many humans and Minbari who had perished in the crash, but Badeau was the one who should be here now, in his place. Shaw felt that, up to now, he was muddling through events, doing what seemed right rather than what he knew was right. A subtle distinction perhaps, but he could not shake the feeling that Badeau would have found the right connections and gotten to Mars Dome Two much quicker than he had. The one consolation was that, away from President Luchenko and her high-ranking EarthForce officers, away from the miles and miles of records that Tilanna had been gifted enough to sift through, here was a task he could be competent at. Breaking the head of some low-life and perhaps his even lower-life cronies to get information vital to the security of the galaxy? That was his idea of being a Ranger.

The passengers were jolted to the side as the transport decelerated sharply in its vacuum tube. Shaw looked through the windows again, trying to pick up on some familiar landmark. Though it had been just over a year since he left Mars to join the Anla'Shok, he was surprised at the lack of 'homecoming' he felt now and, in truth, one sand-blasted and ultraviolet-fried plain on Mars was much the same as another. Perhaps he had come further than he had initially thought.

Helping Tilanna to her feet, Shaw disembarked and, moving her swiftly through the checkpoint to the main transit avenue beyond, held up his hand to flag down one of the innumerable taxi cars that prowled the area. Stepping inside, they gave the driver the address of the North Habitation Block and sat back as they sped through the streets of Mars Dome Two.

Tilanna looked outside at the people and buildings of Mars as they accelerated down the avenue. Joining her gaze, Shaw looked at the massive metal and glass dome that arced high above them, sealing this small city in its own self-contained environment, safe from the ravages of Mars. Aside from that, and the constant red sheen the light from outside the Dome spread everywhere, it could almost be a city on Earth or any other well-developed colony world. Green gardens sprang up on any

spare piece of ground that was not dominated by multi-storey shopping centres, offices and homes, as much a human attempt to bend the planet Mars to their own vision of paradise as an aid to the giant atmospheric processors that Shaw knew worked hard day and night beneath the streets of the Dome.

The journey lasted only minutes and, after paying the driver of the taxi with the credit chit issued to all Rangers, they approached the towering pale-blue habitation block. Designed to pack as many souls as possible into a tight space, the block was typical of several others in the Dome and was a common home for passing travellers who needed a permanent address on Mars or those who simply could not afford to live in one of the so-called suburbs, places marked by the lack of proximity neighbours had with one another. The North Habitation Block had, at least, a better reputation than some of the others, and so its population was dominated by off-worlders who found it convenient to keep a home on Mars.

‘Are we just going to knock on his door?’ asked Tilanna as they mounted the steps to the block’s main entrance.

‘More or less,’ Shaw said. ‘It’s not as if he will be expecting us.’

‘You seem more confident now, Mike.’

Shaw smiled as he opened one of the glass doors for her. ‘This is my department.’

Taking the lift to the second floor, they found themselves at the corner of a carpeted L-shaped corridor with the doors of many apartments leading from it. The place was spartan but clean. Shaw indicated the corridor they should follow, and they were soon outside apartment 11c.

‘So you just knock?’ Tilanna asked, her voice subdued.

‘In my own special way,’ he said, gesturing for her to stand clear. He began tapping away at the key code next to the doorframe, its security giving way to his Anla’Shok infiltration training within seconds. Unhooking his Denn’Bok pike from his belt, Shaw looked up and down the corridor before giving it a shake, extending the weapon to its full five-foot length. One more tap on the key code sprang the lock, and he forced the door open with a swift kick, bounding inside with a roll that sprang him upright, pike at the ready for trouble.

The living area was empty, and he quickly looked across into the kitchen before sliding the bathroom door open. Nothing.

‘All clear,’ he whispered. ‘Shut the door behind you. No sense calling attention to ourselves.’

Tilanna did as asked, gliding in to look at her surroundings curiously. She located the apartment’s computer console mounted in the wall of the living area and started to move toward it.

‘Don’t,’ Shaw warned. ‘Not unless we have to. If this guy is a pro, he might have rigged it to tell him if it was accessed - even if switched on.’

‘So what are we looking for?’

‘Not sure. We’ll know it when we see it. Anything that points to what Shiritori is up to, where he might be or even if he is still on planet.’

‘The records of the Earth Alliance say he is still on Mars,’ Tilanna pointed out.

‘Yes, but Mars is a big place. And since it left the Alliance, records have become a little sketchy at times.’

The smallest room of the apartment, the bathroom was ruled out as a place containing any information regarding what their target was up to, so they concentrated on the combined living area and kitchen. Minutes were spent rifling through a small bookshelf of century-old paper books, the contents of Shiritori’s larder and a collection of data crystals that mostly contained a selection of recent blockbuster features.

‘His taste is questionable,’ reported Tilanna after going through the latter.

Shaw smiled. ‘I used to watch that stuff all the time. Funny how you don’t miss it.’ He sighed. ‘I have nothing. You?’

‘No. I believe the only useful information we may get is from his computer.’

‘I wanted to avoid that,’ said Shaw. Then something on a desk beneath the console caught his eye and he began to laugh. Tilanna looked up in puzzlement.

‘You can keep all the Anla’Shok training, the advanced infiltration techniques and even your Temple teaching restricted file access,’ he grinned. Walking over to the desk, he picked up the object that had caught his attention. ‘Me?’ he asked. ‘I’ll just stick with a copy of the Universe Today!’

Tilanna shook her head, not following him. A paper edition of the Earth Alliance’s main newspaper was a common enough feature in any human home, even on Mars.

‘I am not understanding.’

‘It’s the Universe Today!’ he exclaimed. Seeing her confusion, he went on to explain. ‘This is today’s issue. That confirms he is still here. Not just on Mars but here, probably in Dome Two. Our searched just narrowed considerably.’

‘So... we wait for him?’ Tilanna asked.

‘We could,’ said Shaw thoughtfully. ‘But we could end up spending hours here, and I don’t believe we have the time. Come on, I have an idea.’

Sealing the door of the apartment behind him, Shaw led Tilanna out of the habitation block and onto the streets of Mars Dome Two. Here, at least, was something that no one but he could do. Perhaps the universe did conspire to put people where they were supposed to be, he mused. Something he would meditate on later.

For ten minutes, they moved along the sidewalks of Mars Dome Two, steadily making their way to a familiar district, and one Shaw hoped had not changed too much in the past year. After noticing several long glances in Tilanna's direction, he suggested she raise the hood of her robes. A monkish individual shrouded in a long and hooded robe would not exactly pass by unseen, but he knew it would create far less attention than a Minbari on Mars. Even in these days of interstellar cooperation, most residents of Mars would not have seen a Minbari if it were not on one of their news or film channels.

They had walked to the outskirts of the main spaceport of the Dome, a sprawling affair that encompassed far more than just the landing area and the passenger terminal. A whole medley of businesses, shops and hotels sprang up to catch the immediate trade of visitors just entering the Dome, true to the way the people of Mars approached things, but these places tended to get less shiny and pristine the further one moved away from the spaceport. Here, entire avenues were filled with nightclubs, bars and other less wholesome establishments, a garish area of neon and perpetually drunken revellers, some of whom made these places the whole point of entire vacations. Shaw winced as he remembered some of the days he had woken up in a metaphorical gutter somewhere in this district.

'You think we will find him... here?' asked Tilanna, a little concern in her voice.

'Maybe, maybe not. But I should still have friends here.' He looked at her again. 'Keep your hood up though.'

Shaw soon found what he was looking for, and he walked across the avenue, leading Tilanna to a small bar whose neon sign proclaimed it as the Little Green Man. Like most other bars of the area, the interior lighting remained at a level suggesting early evening, a common ploy to give drinkers the feeling that their night had just begun, no matter the current time. Rapidly acclimating his eyes to the gloom, Shaw walked to the bar without any hesitation. Just another traveller looking for a drink to fuel him before tackling one of the more expensive clubs.

As he waited for the bartender's attention, he became aware of the eyes of many patrons upon him, and though he first put it down to his unusually dressed companion, he inwardly groaned and mentally kicked himself. As strange as Tilanna might look, he was far more identifiable in his Anla'Shok robes, which anyone would easily recognise after seeing ISN documentaries filmed on the Rangers. So much for blending in like any other Martian.

The bartender, a balding, middle-aged man Shaw knew as the proprietor, looked the Ranger up and down with some surprise. 'Good day,' he said cautiously, assuming Shaw was not after a simple drink.

'Hi!' Shaw said with a smile. 'I'm after Douglas. Usually hangs around here, though it may be a little early.'

'Ranger business, is it?' the bartender asked.

Shaw's smile dropped a little, expecting resistance. 'Something like that.'

‘Well, I am afraid you are out of luck, friend. Douglas died, more than a year ago.’

‘Oh? I am sorry to hear that,’ Shaw said, a note of genuine concern in his voice. He had got to know Douglas through a friend of a friend, and they had hardly been tight. However, Shaw had spent more than one night with Douglas and other companions, steadily drinking one another into oblivion, and he was sorry to hear of the man’s demise.

‘Got himself killed in the civil war,’ said the bartender, quite matter-of-factly. ‘Got worked up about what they were doing on Earth and signed himself up with one of those resistance groups. Couldn’t be talked out of it, though many of us here tried.’

‘Ah.’

‘What were you after him for? Come to arrest him?’

‘No. No, nothing like that. Rangers don’t arrest people,’ said Shaw. ‘He and I knew each other a while back. I just thought he could help me with something.’

‘Ranger business,’ stated the bartender.

‘Well, yes.’

‘Lots of things said about you Ranger-types. Hear them everyday. Everyone seems to have their own thoughts on what you are really up to.’ He looked Shaw up and down once more, as if weighing just what to think of the Ranger. If he thought Tilanna’s presence seemed strange, he did not show it. ‘Seems to me that Sheridan was the one who made sure Mars got its independence, even if Luchenko wasn’t keen. I guess if Sheridan says you guys are okay by him, I can see my way clear to helping where I can. You know, doing my bit for the galaxy and all that.’

‘That is appreciated. We are looking for a man called Shiritori.’

Even though Shaw had lowered his voice and leaned forward a little, the bartender gave him a sharp look of alarm and nodded his head to the empty end of the bar. Going through the motions of serving Shaw some random cocktail, he raised an eyebrow as he spoke quietly.

‘What business have you Rangers got with a man like that?’ he asked. ‘Not being nosy mind, I just thought you concentrated more on, you know, the big stuff. Wars and the like.’

‘We need to talk to him - his name came up in our investigations. What do you know of him?’ Shaw asked.

‘Nasty type. A trader by name, he began as a thief. Grown up now though, and he finally figured more credits were made buying and selling stolen goods than risking his neck trying to steal them. That kind of trader, if you take my meaning.’

Shaw nodded. ‘That fits.’

‘He has a set of warehouses in the spaceport, just a mile or so from here. He stays away from the hot stuff like Dust, which means the law here more or less ignores him. They have bigger fish to fry. But everyone round here knows where to go for knocked off goods at half the usual price. Trouble is, I keep hearing he is getting into larger things - espionage for corporations, acting as a middle man for contract killings, that kind of thing.’

‘The police are not interested in stopping that?’

‘Things are still in a flux here. The government is still provisional, and no one is sure where their jurisdiction starts and stops. Just the kind of place where people like Shiritori thrive, especially if they have a legitimate trading business to hide behind. He has built himself up with the small-time stuff and now fancies a chance at the big score, I reckon.’ The bartender finished playing with cocktail bottles and placed a glass in front of Shaw, filled to the brim with a noxious smelling orange liquid. Shaw wrinkled his nose as he pretended to drink, thankful that he had not been given it in his youth, where it would have been knocked straight back and damn the consequences.

‘Any of this useful to you?’ the bartender asked.

‘I think so,’ said Shaw. ‘Can you give me directions to his warehouse?’

The warehouses surrounding the spaceport were a perpetual hive of activity, Shaw knew from experience, having earned a few credits lifting and stacking while he was still at school. In Mars Dome Two, it was either that or serving in one of the many bars, and Shaw had preferred back then to keep his working life separate from his leisure. Small one-man loaders sped around beneath huge wheeled haulers, either stacking them with goods destined for far star systems or unloading necessities and luxuries for the citizens of Mars. Business had boomed since independence and alien trade was flooding into the colony, enriching its economy and enabling Mars to stand as an independent entity, despite constant vexations from Earth.

The small complex of warehouses where the bartender directed Shaw was typical of its neighbours. Hastily constructed grey pre-fabricated structures formed the basis of the storage areas, with a tiny office centre literally bolted onto the side of one of the warehouses. No security was evident on the perimeter of the complex, allowing Shaw and Tilanna to enter unchallenged. He presumed enough traders and other customers frequented Shiritori’s warehouses that even their out-of-place appearance did not arouse suspicions. If any of the workers struggling with the endless supply of transport crates even bothered to give them a second look, they would presume the two robed figures were eccentrics after goods technically proscribed on Mars, rich dilettantes looking for another fix to relieve their lives of endless boredom. More likely, they just did not care, working long hours for few credits.

This apathy enabled Shaw and Tilanna to walk straight through the complex and, without breaking his stride, Shaw vaulted up the metal frame stairs that led up to offices. Gesturing at Tilanna to remain a few paces back, Shaw unbuckled his Denn’Bok and, holding it close to his body to conceal the action, activated the pike to bring it to its full length with a metallic hiss. Reaching for the handle of the office’s door, he slipped in quickly, ready for anything.

Inside the reception area, a Brakiri sat quietly. His ridged face squinted slightly, then his eyes opened

in alarm as he saw the Anla'Shok robes and brandished fighting pike. Behind the counter, a burly dark-haired man quickly reached down, coming up with a small PPG pistol.

Reflexes trained to react unconsciously, Shaw gripped his pike by one end and swung, connecting with the man's hand before he could squeeze off a shot. The man yelped and looked at his broken hand as the PPG skittered across the floor.

'None of that,' said Shaw. 'I am here for Shiritori.'

The man spat and ran through a door behind him. The Brakiri, witnessing what had happened, began to gibber in fear and raised his hands, eyes pleading with Shaw not to hurt him.

'I suggest you leave,' Shaw said. 'Quickly. You have no good business here.'

The Brakiri bolted for the door, nearly knocking over Tilanna as she entered.

'Making friends already, I see,' she said.

'Stay alert, they're armed,' Shaw said as he crossed to the far door. Opening it a crack, he saw a dozen office workers look around in concern, obviously confused at the receptionist running through their work area, cursing as he went. Seeing no immediate danger, Shaw entered.

'Where is Shiritori?' he demanded of a young girl who shrank behind her desk. Keeping everyone else in his peripheral vision, Shaw noticed all were shocked at his entrance. He deemed none an immediate threat, allowing him to concentrate on questioning the girl.

The girl stammered in front of him, unable to speak, but a glance at the door opposite the one Shaw entered by confirmed his suspicions.

'Okay, everyone leave,' he said. 'Work's over today.'

Having no illusions as to the kind of company their boss kept, the office workers dutifully gathered their possessions and rushed out, none meeting Shaw's gaze as they left. Satisfied any innocents were removed from danger, Shaw crossed to the door the girl had indicated and, again, opened it a crack.

He immediately sprang back as a PPG shot ricocheted off the doorframe. Glancing back to ensure Tilanna was not in the line of fire, Shaw mentally prepared himself before shoving the door open and diving inside. PPG fire sang above his head as he rolled, dissipating harmlessly with no more than a black smudge against the synthetic walls of the office. Instinctively, he swung out with his pike, connecting with the head of an assailant who hit the floor with a loud thump. He noted the dark-haired man he encountered previously was taking cover behind a desk, another PPG cradled in his good hand tracking the Ranger's movements. Another super-heated blast of plasma tore past Shaw as he twisted away from the shot, singeing the robes beneath his left arm.

With a single fluid motion, Shaw crossed the distance between them and heaved the desk upwards with one hand. As the man began to stagger backwards, Shaw placed a booted foot on the underside of the desk, driving it backwards into the attacker's chest. Completing the manoeuvre, Shaw leapt up

and placed his full weight on the upturned desk, pinning the man. A sharp and well-practised tap of the pike to the man's head made sure he would remain unconscious for at least an hour with no permanent harm.

A noise behind him triggered Shaw's instincts once more and he rolled to the side as another PPG blast pierced the air above. Noting only that a third man had appeared at the entrance of what seemed to be a smaller office, Shaw swept his arm and released his pike so it flew straight and true into the stomach of his assailant. The well-dressed man fell to his knees, releasing his PPG as he struggled to find his breath. Seeing no other threat, Shaw crossed the office to retrieve his pike, then grabbed the man by the collar of his suit and peered into the small office to ensure no other surprises lurked there.

'Impressive,' said Tilanna as she entered the room.

Shaw did not look back as he answered. 'Well, I've had some training.'

A click of a PPG being primed caused him to whirl round. He saw another thug behind Tilanna, pointing his weapon at the back of her head. Shaw belatedly realised that allowing the office workers to leave so hastily might well have drawn some unwanted attention.

'Okay, drop the stick,' said the man, gesturing with his pistol. 'It's over now.'

Feeling foolish for having gotten this far before failing, Shaw looked at Tilanna and noticed she had something of a sparkle in her eyes. He was mystified at what she was trying to tell him but could not do anything but slowly drop his pike and raise his hands. As he did so, Tilanna whipped round with a speed Shaw could only later describe as feline. Her right hand formed into a hard, flat palm, she circled with graceful but terrible force, striking the man in the side of his neck. Her momentum carried through his body, hurling him several feet to one side, though Shaw guessed he was senseless before he struck the floor.

Shaw stared at Tilanna with incredulity. She returned his look with an innocent smile.

'You perhaps thought that prayers were all we were taught in Temple?' she asked.

'Apparently not,' said Shaw, finally remembering to pick up his pike. He looked down at the gasping man at his feet. 'You Shiritori?' he asked.

To his credit, the man refused to answer, but a quick glance up at the sound of his name confirmed the question for Shaw.

'There are some things I need you to tell me,' said Shaw, almost conversationally as he hoisted the man to his feet.

'I'll tell you spit!' said Shiritori.

'We really don't have time for this.' Shaw glanced uneasily at Tilanna. 'I must do something,' he said softly. 'I would be happier if you did not see.'

Tilanna nodded. 'Mora'dum. I understand.

Go. I will make sure you are undisturbed.'

Hurrying Shiritori through the door he had come in by, Shaw threw the man on the floor. Closing the door behind him, only seconds passed before the screams began.

July 9th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

With the information they worked so hard to uncover, Shaw and Tilanna returned to Mars Dome One by the same transport tube they had used to leave. This time, the journey was an anxious one for Shaw, as he now had all the pieces of the puzzle in his grasp but dared not risk using an unsecured channel from Mars Dome Two to contact Sheridan with his report.

A mixture of emotions swirled within him. Elation at surviving his first firefight, however minor it may have been in the grand cosmic scale of things. He realised the truth now of what his Warrior Caste tutors had always tried to hammer into him. No amount of training and preparation can instil just what it is like to fight for your life.

There was darkness too, mixing itself insidiously into his excitement. Mora'dum, the Application of Terror, was an ancient Minbari discipline, one that focussed on turning a subject's fears in upon themselves. No physical torture was involved, for the Minbari tended to reject such brutal methods as being a stain upon their souls that would carry into the next generation. It was no less cruel though, for the technique allowed a trained Ranger to subject a victim to their worst nightmares with a remarkable efficiency born of a thousand years of development and practice. However, the user of Mora'dum could rarely walk away from a 'session' completely untainted. Some of that darkness and terror passed into his own psyche, where it would have to be managed through careful meditation and reflection. His Minbari tutors warned him of those in the past who grew to relish the use of Mora'dum just a little too much - and of what was done to stop them.

The mental cleansing necessary beyond Mora'dum would have to wait and, true to form, the Minbari had given him a variety of techniques to bottle emotions for a limited time as well. Gradually, Shaw saw what it truly meant to be a Ranger, to sacrifice oneself for the mission at hand, paying little heed to the personal consequences. Only after victory had been attained could the self be treated, healed and cared for. All Rangers were required to make this sacrifice, and it crossed his mind that, in this, he was no longer so very different to Badeau, who was even now making her sacrifice in some intensive care unit.

The security checkpoint in the Earth Alliance Support Centre cleared them quickly, which gave Shaw some hope. He expected their trip to Mars Dome Two to draw some suspicion by more than a few officers within the communications hub, but he averted his eyes from the stares of anyone who saw them go back to their small booth. Too much rested on success to risk any intervention, and he felt more than a little unprotected when he realised that Luchenko was no longer present, apparently dealing with her crisis workload in another section of the centre.

Shaw immediately went to work on the communication link to Tuzanor, engaging the Ranger security

protocols as he flagged its attention for President Sheridan. By now, he assumed all his communications were being routinely monitored, but the protocols used by the Anla'Shok were a mutating code whose cipher was jealously guarded and regularly updated. Shaw hoped they would buy him enough time to get his message to Sheridan and receive instructions. Still, he felt someone watching every move he and Tilanna made, and he fought the impulse to turn around and scan the communications hub for likely suspects.

Minutes later, Sheridan's strained face appeared on the display. 'Rangers,' he said. 'The White Star fleet is about to jump into Beta III. What do you have?'

'Sir, we have it,' said Shaw. He quickly relayed the progress of his investigation, from the process of filtering the Earth Alliance's own files to the apprehension and confession of Shiritori.

'Is that enough?' Shaw asked.

'It's enough for reasonable doubt,' said Sheridan, the relief evident in his voice. 'Now we just have to convince Earth and the Centauri of its veracity. If I know Mollari, he will accept what you have found, so long as Earth withdraws with good graces from Republic space. The White Stars will broadcast your information to both fleets in Beta III. If nothing else, that should get them to hold fire for a while. What you must do is convince Luchenko. Everything rides on this, Shaw, since only she can pull back the Earth fleets. Tell her we have convincing evidence that must be confirmed before she can go to war. Tell her that if further investigations prove false, the Interstellar Alliance will stand by any action she decides.'

'I will, Mr. President,' said Shaw. 'What of the conspiracy we have uncovered in EarthForce?'

'Watch your back,' said Sheridan. 'We have no jurisdiction there. It is for Luchenko alone to adjudicate. Talk to her now - let's try to halt a war.'

Sheridan signed off and Shaw stood up, about to tell Tilanna to follow him. Instead, he found himself staring into the hawkish face of Admiral Keynes. Her tone was laced with dire threat.

'Been busy, haven't you?' she asked.

'Admiral,' he sighed, noting the olive-green uniforms of the two EarthForce soldiers standing behind her. 'I really don't have time for this.'

'Some incidents have come to my attention regarding your use of EarthForce computer operations during your investigation here,' she said, without missing a beat. 'You will be taken into custody, pending further investigation of your actions.'

'What?' Shaw was incredulous. He expected trouble, but this approach put him on the back foot.

'Take him away,' said Keynes, motioning to the two soldiers. They stepped forward to grasp Shaw, but he stepped back and placed a finger on the chest of one.

'By the terms of the Treaty of the Interstellar Alliance, I have full diplomatic immunity, and

incarceration of my person brings penalties to Earth up to, and including, expulsion from the Alliance.’ That checked their approach. Shaw had absolutely no idea where those words came from, but he suddenly felt glad to have paid attention during all the long Anla’Shok political lessons he endured as part of his training.

The noise level of the communication hub beyond the booth suddenly picked up noticeably, and they all turned to see President Luchenko enter, surrounded by her usual flock of aides and officers. Keynes whirled round to the soldiers.

‘Get them out of here, now - that’s an order!’ she hissed.

Shaw decided on a more direct approach. ‘Madam President!’ he called, with a volume unusual enough that all eyes in the hub turned towards him. Suddenly feeling too conspicuous, Admiral Keynes spoke hurriedly.

‘Madam President, we have just uncovered a potential plot on the part of the ISA to hinder Earth’s war with the Centauri, providing them with critical information of fleet dispositions. I believe these Rangers are directly responsible for the loss of the Corax and its task force. I want them apprehended.’ Keynes directed the last part to the soldiers once more, and Shaw could see them wavering, their eyes on Luchenko, waiting to see what their President would order.

With the attention of the entire hub, Shaw decided to plough forward. ‘Madam President, I believe we have uncovered the information we sought, exonerating the Republic from the attacks on Earth and its ships.’

‘More ISA lies,’ said Keynes, beginning to regain control of herself. ‘Madam President, we have sensitive operations here. We can interrogate these Rangers later to verify the veracity of their claims.’

General Lefcourt stepped up to Luchenko’s side, a puzzled expression on his face. ‘Keynes, what is going on here?’

‘General, I have information you must hear,’ Shaw stepped in but was cut off by Keynes.

‘They are too dangerous to keep here!’

‘Admiral Keynes, stand down!’ said Luchenko, her voice cutting through the hub and silencing everyone instantly. ‘These are duly appointed representatives of the Interstellar

Alliance, with full ambassadorial status. Of course we will hear what they have to say. And whatever they may or may not have done, we cannot arrest them.’

Shaw breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Thank you, Madam President.’

July 9th 2263, Beta III, Centauri Republic

Drumming his fingers on the control console of his seat, Sosa waited impatiently for a communication

from Tuzanor. The holographic display was kept in tactical mode, and the bridge crew watched as the two fleets closed. A full-scale war was unfolding in front of them that would involve many members of the Interstellar Alliance, and Sosa felt powerless to stop it.

‘Captain, incoming transmission from Tuzanor,’ said a Minbari.

‘Put it through,’ Sosa said anxiously.

Sheridan’s face immediately replaced the tactical display, and Sosa sat up straight.

‘Mr. President,’ he said. ‘Please tell me there is good news.’

‘We have what we need, Sosa,’ said Sheridan. ‘Whether they will pay attention is anyone’s guess. A prepared statement is being relayed to you now. Broadcast it on all frequencies - make sure every ship can receive it. Messages have already been sent to Earth and Centauri Prime.’

Sheridan’s image disappeared, and a crewman reported that the statement had been received and was ready for relay to the opposing fleets.

‘Do it!’ said Sosa, desperate to see the results.

On board the command destroyer Heracles, Ward listened intently to Sheridan’s message, rubbing his chin as the President of the Interstellar Alliance concluded his statement.

‘In the interests of peace and mutual prosperity, we urge both governments to reconsider their positions so a full investigation can be conducted by both yourselves and the Interstellar Alliance,’ he had said. ‘To the fleets at Beta III, which are moments away from engaging one another, we ask that you check your fire. Let diplomacy take its course. If we can trust each other for just a few days, we can avert a pointless war that will consume the lives of thousands, even millions, on both sides. Please, think before you act. History will judge you on what you choose to do right I now.’

‘What do we do, sir?’ asked his tactical officer.

‘What are the Centauri doing?’ Ward asked. ‘Have they checked their approach?’

‘Negative, sir. They are still coming.’

He thought furiously. ‘Maintain formation. Signal to all ships, do not fire unless fired upon. And get me EarthForce command. They would have received this by now.’

Within the bridge of the Turhan, a very different scene of events was taking place. As Sheridan’s voice faded, Provenza barked a laugh and was joined by the sniggering of several loyal bridge officers who tactically placed their mirth alongside their Minister’s.

‘You see?’ Provenza demanded of them. ‘We even have the mighty Interstellar Alliance running

scared! My friends, we have the most powerful battle fleet the galaxy has ever seen and they know it!’

‘We are not delaying the attack then, Minister?’ asked his aide.

‘Of course not!’ Provenza said, snorting. ‘It is a delaying tactic, nothing more, something to buy a little time for their allies on Earth. Proceed as instructed. Let history remember our great victory here today, and let the Great Maker worry about the diplomacy of weak races!’

His pugnacious attitude carried well across the bridge, and the crew went about their duties with renewed vigour. The aide’s next words instilled a dark, sinking feeling in his hearts though.

‘Minister, communicate from Centauri Prime.’

‘I have no time for premature congratulations from the Centaurum or those seeking favours,’ he said, hoping to delay what he could already feel was.

‘Minister, it is the Emperor,’ said the aide. Now all eyes on the bridge turned to Provenza.

He paused for a few seconds, one hand rubbing his temple as he fought to mentally stave off what he knew his Emperor would tell him. ‘Put it through to my station,’ he said quietly.

Walking away from the crew to his own seat near the back of the bridge, he sat down heavily and composed himself before giving the signal to relay the Emperor to his private console. Mollari’s heavy face looked sternly at him, already appearing as if no argument would be brooked.

‘Minister Provenza, you are to hold position and cease any hostilities against the Earth fleet immediately,’ the Emperor said. ‘You are to allow them to leave Beta III unmolested, and you will not move until every one of their ships has gone. You are then to make your way to our colony on Beta III and begin work reconstructing their defences. Am I clear, Minister?’

A hundred thoughts, questions and rebuttals went through Provenza’s mind as he saw his great victory flutter from his grasp. He knew a dozen arguments could be put to the Emperor: that to strike now would send a message to every government in the galaxy and keep the Republic’s borders safe for a century, that to destroy such a large portion of Earth’s military in one stroke could shift the entire balance of power in the region.

Instead, he just answered weakly. ‘I understand, Majesty.’

‘Minister Provenza, if I hear of any conflict between your ships and those of Earth, I will hold you personally-and painfully-responsible. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Majesty.’

July 9th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

Motioning Shaw to a seat opposite her, Luchenko sat down, her attention focussed on the Ranger. Shaw felt the weight of a dozen stares but, having come this far, pushed it out of his mind. He beckoned Tilanna to join him as he sat down and began to relate what they found.

‘Madam President, we have documented everything, and I assure you it will stand up to scrutiny,’ Shaw said. ‘But we have very little time, so I must ask you to trust me.’

From the corner of his eye, he saw Admiral Keynes back slowly away from the group and turn to leave the hub. He waited until she left before starting again. ‘But first, please give me your assurances that Admiral Keynes will not be permitted to leave this centre.’

‘You want me to take her into custody?’ asked Luchenko with amazement.

‘Not until you hear what I have to say. What happens then is in your jurisdiction.’

‘I’ll see to it,’ said Lefcourt, tapping instructions into a datapad that would see the admiral detained.

‘I am not sure I like where this is heading, Ranger,’ said Luchenko.

‘Madam President, we uncovered a report from Babylon 5 that had been classified-by Admiral Keynes, using her newly gained authorisation as a Joint Chief following the destruction of the Intrepide-sorry, the White Star we left EarthDome in.’ Shaw noticed the eyebrows of Lefcourt rise, though whether that was in surprise or disbelief, he could not tell.

‘That report showed the Dilgar device had been through Babylon 5 on its way to the Centauri Republic.’

‘It is common sense to think the weapon started outside of the Republic,’ said Luchenko. ‘And Babylon 5 is the perfect place to make such a trade.’

‘True. However, from this report, we were able to track the fence who handled the sale of the device, a Mr. Shiritori. He bought it from an Earth prospector and then sold it on to the Centauri. However, it was not a sale to the Republic or the Centaurum but a single House. He confirmed that he flew the device himself straight to Coutor, a possession of House Kaado, where it was modified into the weapon that destroyed EarthDome.’

Luchenko and the officers surrounding them regarded Shaw impassively, and he worried that, in the light of day, his evidence did not seem so convincing after all.

‘Madam President, we have the data files, we have a full confession from Shiritori - in fact, we still have Shiritori, as I arranged for him to be detained by law officials in Mars Dome Two. If you look into this further, you can locate his ship and check its flight logs, perhaps instigate a joint investigation with the Centauri into House Kaado.’

‘And what if you are wrong?’ asked Lefcourt.

‘Then President Sheridan has instructed me to tell you that, so long as you withdraw your forces from Republic space for the duration of an investigation, he will back any play you make against the Centauri, with the full support of the ISA.’

Luchenko considered this, giving Shaw the chance to push a little further and remind the President of

trouble in her own house.

‘What I have not been able to determine is why Keynes would be involved in covering this evidence, the one report that could possibly point the blame away from the Republic,’ he said.

He noticed General Lefcourt and Luchenko exchange looks.

‘Keynes was always a proponent of war with the Centauri, ever since this started,’ she said eventually.

‘I was just thinking that,’ said Lefcourt. ‘She has some questions to answer, that is for sure. I hesitate to say it, but this would not be the first time a high-ranking officer has pushed a military solution for their own ends.’

‘But why?’ asked Shaw.

‘The budget for EarthForce has been slashed since the civil war,’ said Lefcourt. ‘The Earth Alliance has other needs right now that must take precedence. Simply put, we cannot take part in another war so soon without seriously impacting on the lives of our citizens across all colonies. But an enforced peacetime of this nature rarely results in a healthy career for an officer used to war.’

‘If I have been played...’ Luchenko said angrily, then thought better of finishing the thought. ‘Get me Admiral Ward. We must put an end to this now.’

July 9h 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

All but collapsing in a plastic seat he had dragged from his booth, Shaw watched the machine of the Earth Alliance swing into action, this time to halt a war rather than initiate one. He listened as Luchenko spoke with the admiral leading the fleet at Beta III, ordering him to withdraw his forces immediately and return to Earth space. The admiral was just as relieved as anyone else, which did not surprise Shaw once he heard what the Centauri had deployed against him.

Over the course of the next few hours, he watched as the Earth Alliance, working in concert with the Centauri Republic, began a staggered but measured stand down and demobilisation across their borders. Earth fleets already within Republic space were permitted to leave without prejudice while the Centauri, for their part, mirrored those movements by returning their warships to bases deeper within the Republic, leaving only standard patrols in their place. The Centauri even admitted to the existence of more fleets poised to strike Earth Alliance colonies and then dutifully disbanded them, perhaps to warn President Luchenko and all other ISA governments watching the proceedings what it truly meant to make war on the Republic. Strike at us and we will obliterate you.

Perhaps that was fair enough, thought Shaw wearily. One very brief exchange between Luchenko and the Centauri Emperor forged an agreement to postpone any hostilities until further investigations could be conducted on both sides of the border. That had sounded ominous enough, but everyone listening knew that, for all intents and purposes, diplomacy would now take over where force of arms had proved, in the very least, an unwise course of action.

Emperor Mollari promised dire consequences for the noble House that propelled recent events, and speculation already started in the hub as to the exact form of punishment. Most bets were on something fairly medieval, as the Centauri needed to demonstrate to the galaxy as a whole they were not behind the attacks on Earth, and their society had a long tradition of very cruel punishments when laws were transgressed to this extent. To act without the authority of the Emperor was treason, and few races who took that lightly. In a monarchy, there was literally nothing worse.

Earth appeared to have its own complicity in the matter, of course, but Shaw believed nothing more than one overzealous officer in a position she should never have been promoted to was the culprit

President Luchenko crossed the hub and sat down opposite him, forcing Shaw to take a deep breath and keep his eyes focussed on her.

‘Mr. Shaw,’ she said. ‘We owe you and your Minbari friend a great deal. If you had not worked so hard to uncover the vital information we were missing, we would now be at war with the Centauri. You have the grateful thanks of a President.’

Shaw straightened his weary slouch. ‘Madam President, I am just glad we could be of service. What has happened to Keynes?’

‘She is being questioned now,’ said Luchenko. ‘We’ll get to the bottom of it soon enough. The important thing then, of course, is to make sure it can never happen again.’

‘The Rangers will always be on hand to help you.’

‘I know that, Mr. Shaw. Now, is there anything we can do for you?’

‘Thank you, Madam President but, frankly, I just want to get some sleep,’ he said candidly.

Luchenko smiled. ‘Mr. Shaw, I know exactly how you feel.’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

July 11th 2263, House Kaado, Centauri Prime

The alarm dutifully chimed its alert over and over, a soft, mellow tone that hinted at a dignified urgency. Veneta spent some time selecting precisely the right pitch, just as he carefully selected the carpets, fittings and electronics that bedecked his luxurious bunker. Expecting to entertain many visitors here over the next few months, Veneta understood the importance of taste as the novelty of his construction swept through the noble houses, each guest slowly contributing to his rising star in however small a manner. All a matter of appearances, you see.

At this moment in time, however, the chime resounded with a dull repetition inside his head, which he was already nursing. Surely not too much Brivari. He was more disciplined than that.

‘Off,’ he mumbled, his consciousness rising back to sentience. Surely whatever his servants wanted could wait. Didn’t they know who was in charge?

The alarm continued to sound, and Veneta realized that having his face mashed into the plush carpet could, feasibly, disrupt the sound waves from his mouth to the alarm’s receiver. A gargantuan effort enabled him to roll onto his back, an action causing his feet to drop to the floor from the sofa they had been propped upon. Somehow he had fallen from his perch and not woken during the descent. Hardly dignified.

‘Off!’

This time the alarm was silenced, and Veneta allowed himself a few brief moments of calm as he lay on his back, trying to summon the energy to open his eyes. He recalled Territt leaving at some point during the previous night’s revelries to attend to some business he had not deigned to discuss. Then... he was damned if he could remember.

Taking a deep breath, Veneta rolled to his side and then propped himself up with an elbow, head hanging low as his senses spun briefly before settling. He chanced opening his eyes, squinting around through the subdued lighting of his bunker. Everything seemed pretty much in place, and he heaved himself onto the settee, sprawling into its comfort. For the next twenty minutes, Veneta did nothing more than lay there, his head tilted back, open mouth drawing in air noisily. For him, time ceased to have any real meaning during his daze. Slowly, Veneta began to return to the land of the living, the synapses of his brain gradually firing in unison as conscious and reasoned thought crept into his mind. What was wrong with him, he dimly wondered? If he did not know better, he would have said this was the after-effect of some drug. Or poison.

Still feeling a little delicate, he opened his eyes and frowned. Something demanded his attention. His great conspiracy? No, he thought, that was being pretty well managed. In fact, if everything went according to plan in the small hours, all that remained was political manoeuvring that would seal his position. More favours to give out, more to call in. Business as usual, though far more to gamble with now.

Veneta looked at the main display, across the bunker to his right. The screen had automatically shut itself off, its systems determining that no one awake was present to watch it. However, the blue alarm light flashed beneath it on the blackwood-crafted console, insisting he give it attention. He stared at it hard, trying to decide whether walking over and activating the console by hand or forming coherent words that the system would comprehend would hurt less. He stood, swaying for a second, and then stumbled across the room to the console. Hitting a control, he queried the system as to just why it felt the need to trouble him right now. He could imagine some serious discipline being laid onto the house staff later for allowing his recovery to be interrupted. Standing orders within the household were in place for this sort of thing. Consulting a sub-screen, he saw an incoming message, its source... his blood ran cold.

The Royal Palace.

Why was the palace contacting him now? His first thought was the conspiracy but he dismissed it out of hand. He was too clever and Territt too shrewd to give him up - they shared too much mutual risk. Anyone else with a connection had either been marginalised, silenced or else knew nothing of any real worth. No, he had been too smart to get caught. So what then?

Believing he truly had nothing to be concerned about and determined to brazen out any accusations from a mere royal flunky, he hit the panel to receive the message. The huge image of Emperor Mollari leered at him from the main display, the effect of the massive screen serving to dwarf Veneta in his Majesty's presence.

‘Veneta Kaado,’ said the Emperor with a booming conviction that came from sitting in a position of absolute authority. ‘A detachment of my guard has been dispatched to your manor to place you under arrest. You will be brought to the Royal Palace where you will answer to charges of treason against your Emperor and against the Republic. The royal guard currently under your orders will no longer accept your commands.’

With that, the screen went blank, leaving Veneta to deduce that the message had not been live but recorded, no doubt after a frustrated Emperor had given up trying to contact him directly some time ago. He was stunned, but Veneta's mind gradually began to turn, seeking the solution that would spare him the accusations of treason. He did not even consider the penalties for being found guilty, knowing that the mere accusation would be enough to fatally injure his political future if left unchecked. As possibilities came to his mind and were then dismissed, he began to think furiously of other options. He had come too far to simply give up now.

The first logical thought was that if he were not arrested, he could not be taken to the Royal Palace. He could find friends who would hide him, though he was not sure who would stick their neck out this far for a fugitive of imperial justice. From a place of safety he could plan his return, perhaps even turn the tables upon the Emperor, disgracing the royal household and forcing them into accepting whatever terms he decided. On the other hand, the Emperor had sent that message some time ago...

He tapped at the console, summoning feeds from the various cameras sited throughout his estate. Sure enough, skimmers had touched down all across his land, disgorging several squads of royal guard, their golden breastplates and helmets glinting in the morning sun as they filed towards the manor.

Veneta yelled and activated the manor's internal communications system. His voice blared out to his servants and slaves in every room of the massive building. 'This is Veneta Kaado,' he said, trying to summon a measure of authority. 'The manor is under attack! They will appear to be royal guard but... they are actually impostors! I order all of you, resist the attackers, don't let them inside!'

He fervently hoped he had not sounded too desperate, but a quick check of the manor's internal camera system revealed his staff doing nothing but standing where they were, confusion spreading quickly. Frustrated at the lack of moral fibre being demonstrated by those who should accept his commands without question, Veneta howled, bringing a fist down on the console. His screens showed him the royal guard had already entered the manor and were now going through every room in an effort to root him out. In the very least he could make things difficult, perhaps even buy enough time to formulate a new plan.

Activating a function he thought he would never have to use for anything other than a demonstration to visiting nobles, Veneta shut down his bunker, locking its entrance and engaging several lethal defences around its perimeter. There, he thought. Even if they try to tunnel down to me, they will regret it.

Veneta paced the circumference of his bunker with some speed, thinking just as fast. Now locked in, the walls of the bunker already seemed too close, and he began to regret having skimped so much on floor space. Tunnelling a greater area would have cost exponentially more but, on reflection, it would have created an even greater impression for anyone entering for the first time.

A thought struck him, and he raced back to the console, placing a communication to Minister Territt. Surely, if they had come for Veneta then Territt would have already been captured. If not, maybe he would have a solution. Yes, that was it! They still needed one another, and if they could bring war and a new, brighter future to the entire Republic, then surely they could navigate a little wrangling within the Royal Court. His joy was short lived as he realised all communications from the bunker were being jammed. Even the hard lines had been cut, severing any contact with the outside world. He fruitlessly tried to access his various cameras again but the blank screen confirmed his solitude.

A voice boomed out in the bunker, disrupting Veneta's thoughts.

'This is Proctor Piccolli of the royal guard. Veneta Kaado, we are here to place you under arrest and convey you to the Royal Palace for the judgement of his Majesty the Emperor. Release the locks on your bunker or we will gain entry by force.'

That was quick, Veneta thought. They had already subdued the manor, though given the courage demonstrated by his staff that was no great achievement, and gained access to the internal communications of the bunker. He sat down heavily on the settee. This was happening too fast, but they still had the physical barriers of the bunker to break through. He just needed time to think.

A soft electronic bleep sounded from across the bunker, near its reinforced entrance. Quickly followed by a mechanical click and clunk, Veneta looked over in disbelief as the thick door swung gently open. Several royal guardsmen entered and fanned out across the bunker, their PPG rifles held at the ready to cover his every move. Veneta just sat there, mouth open. Unresisting as two grabbed

him under the arms, he allowed himself to be manhandled out of the bunker and through the manor. Just one thought ran through his mind as he was dragged across the gardens in front of his frightened staff, before being thrown into a waiting skimmer. The main architect of the bunker had given up his secrets, allowing the royal guard to enter at will. He should have taken Territt's advice earlier.

He should have had the man killed.

July 10th 2263, The Royal Palace, Centauri Prime

Though it was clear that Veneta offered no resistance, the royal guard manacled him anyway, to humiliate him when he was marched into the palace. He just hung his head during the journey to Imperial City, feeling very sorry for himself.

Veneta could not decide where he had gone wrong. Had Territt given him up in return for Royal Leniency? It was doubtful that the Emperor would permit that for treason on this scale. His throbbing head reminded him that the devious Territt may well have tried such a play if he sensed things were going wrong.

As the skimmer flew over the broken buildings and shattered streets of Imperial City, Veneta could not help but think the Emperor himself shared some blame in the affair. If Mollari had not allowed the Republic to falter, if he had not given way to the demands of their enemies, if the economy had been focussed on rebuilding their society instead of paying the ruinous reparations, then maybe patriots like himself would not have to chance everything just to set their people back on the right path. Risking all for, more or less, selfless reasons - was that not the very definition of a hero?

Veneta conceded a man braver than he would have ended his own life in the bunker. Now he would lose everything, his name joining that dark list of traitors to the throne. That was how history would remember him now, a far cry from what he had hoped and dreamed.

All too soon, the skimmer touched down at the primary landing pad of the Royal Palace, and the guardsmen made a great show of parading him into the courtyard where minor nobles and assorted hangers-on pointed and whispered. Veneta looked up at the great palace, a building that had stood, in one form or another, for centuries. Just what kind of ruler, he wondered, would board up the windows of his own palace so he could not see the people he ruled?

He knew that, in a very short time, he would be dead. No one taken before the Emperor to answer for treason survives the trip. However, Veneta convinced himself not only of the inevitability of his position but also the righteousness of it. Certainly, he intended to profit personally from his grand design, but he also planned to become a major force of good in the Republic, teaching their enemies just what it meant to cross them and thereby ensuring the peace and prosperity of every Centauri. The Emperor never achieved so much, he was sure.

Led into the palace and then marched through its winding corridors to the throne room, Veneta's gait became stronger. He walked with greater conviction, returning the stares of the palace staff, guardsmen and nobles who populated the building, defying them to remember him as anything less than a proud and great man who followed his beliefs to the end, challenging the Emperor himself for

supremacy. There was a good tale in that, he felt, a certain nobility that would overturn the accusations of treason later in history. Maybe his journal, uncovered from his manor, would surface in future years to explain his actions, or perhaps his friends and allies would keep his memory alive. He did not give much hope for them continuing his work after his fall, for he felt it unlikely the conspiracy would carry on without his genius and leadership.

Veneta carried these thoughts with him into the throne room, the moral certitude of a man condemned to die for his beliefs and actions. He would stand proud in front of the Emperor and his Royal Court, giving a speech of defiance that would humble his Majesty and stay in the minds of the assembled nobles for years to come.

The gold-laden double doors of the throne room swung open before Veneta, and he immediately stopped in his tracks, forcing the guardsmen behind to push him roughly forward, robbing him of a dignified entrance. The throne room was not filled with the throng of gossiping nobles from the Royal

Court that Veneta had expected. Instead, the lighting was subdued, daylight filtering in from just one unboarded window. Emperor Mollari sat on his throne, straight-backed and unmoving, staring across at Veneta with a mixture of contempt and imperial grandeur. At his right hand stood Durla, his Minister of Internal Security, while on the floor at his feet lay the headless body of Minister Territt. Veneta could only tell it was the corpse of his co-conspirator because the head had been placed on a beautifully crafted ceramic plate next to it. If the Minister had indeed betrayed him, the Emperor had evidently been less than generous in gratitude. His eyes flickered from Durla to the sightless eyes of Territt and then back to the Emperor. So much for the grand speech.

‘Veneta Kaado,’ said the Emperor. ‘You are charged with treasonous acts against my person and the Republic. The attacks you instigated against the people of Earth have destabilised the galactic status quo and pushed us perilously close to war. Do you have anything to say?’

‘Your Majesty...’ was all Veneta could manage.

Mollari coughed before reaching for a silk handkerchief. After a moment, he continued. Believe it or not, Kaado, there was a time when I might have been more lenient towards your actions. I might have done something similar myself. But that was long ago.’

‘Majesty, I did it for the Republic.’

‘You did it for yourself!’ roared Mollari, instantly silencing Veneta. ‘Still,’ he said more softly. ‘I do realise what your hopes and dreams were beyond personal gain. We all do what we do for a combination of self-interest and duty to the Republic. We are at our best when the two coincide. And we are also at our worst. That is what you fail to realise.’

Veneta saw Mollari stare out of the one unboarded window for a long moment before his attention returned. In that look, Veneta was not sure what he saw in his Emperor. Sadness? Regret? A deep inner fire that would see the Republic through its difficult passage? Perhaps it was an acceptance of fate that meant that even Mollari could not solve the problems of the Centauri Republic, that he was merely biding his time until another, stronger Emperor would ascend to the throne. Whatever it was

made Veneta hold his tongue.

‘You also did not comprehend what our people are going through at this time,’ said Mollari. ‘What it is they must go through if we are to survive as a united people. Your actions might have served us well in the past, and they may well have a place in the future. But now was never the time. We are set on a course that will take years to unfold and, for good or ill, we must see it through. Whatever I and others like me may think of what you have done, Kaado, you must be one more sacrifice our people make in the course of their own redemption.’

Noting that Veneta seemed confused by his words, Mollari sighed. ‘Very well, think of it this way then. You committed the cardinal sin of every traitor brought before every Emperor in the long history of the Republic.’

‘Majesty?’

‘You got caught.’

Mollari waved a hand at Durla.

‘Take him away.’

EPILOGUE

September 24th 2263, White Star Indefatigable , Sh'Lassan Empire

Shaw opened his eyes and took a deep breath, fully rested. In the days after the averted war, he had some trouble sleeping as the magnitude of the events sank in. There was also the aftermath of Mora'dum to contend with and, for his part, he regretted what did to the fence Shiritori. He resolved none of this in his own mind until he returned to the peace of Tuzanor and the temples whose mere presence enforced a kind of serenity. There were scientists on Earth, he knew, with terms for the effects on his psyche that the past couple of months inflicted, but the Anla'Shok had their own methods, developed over a thousand years, for dealing with Rangers returning from harrowing missions. It had not taken long to repair the damage and set him on his way once more.

Before that, Shaw had endured a debriefing by EarthForce officials, mercifully cut short by a direct intervention from President Luchenko herself. It appeared as if she had been true to her word about the grateful thanks of a President. Admiral Keynes fared less well, citing a weakening military and a contracting Earth presence in the galaxy as justification for her actions. By all accounts, she truly believed she acted in Earth's best interests. Keynes had not been involved in any massive conspiracy with the rogue house in the Centauri Republic - she simply saw an opportunity to bring matters to a head and, newly instated as a temporary Joint Chief, took advantage of it. She was imprisoned for her part in the conflict, but Shaw did not believe she would remain there long, as too many high-ranking EarthForce officers agreed with her, thinking she simply did the wrong thing for the right reasons. It did not matter to Shaw. He still disliked the woman.

Back on Tuzanor, Shaw had found his strength of purpose again. As senior Rangers predicted, the new Shaw - the Shaw emerging from the trials he faced - was tougher, wiser and more adept. He was a better Ranger. In himself, Shaw discovered a new certainty that he could handle any mission assigned to him. He might not always know all the answers - who did? - but he knew at least where to look for them.

A great deal of handshaking and back-patting from fellow Rangers and more experienced peers went a long way to building a solid self-confidence. The informal meeting with both Sheridan and Delenn did nothing to dampen this, though the hours-long debriefing sessions with the

Ranger-Analysts seemed designed to do just that. Shaw respected their expertise though and finally he had a chance to meet one named Tuthenn who, he was told, had sparked their initial investigations into the Centauri House Kaado. Simply by reviewing streams and streams of data. Shaw marvelled at this incredible task, but he was surprised when Tuthenn not only seemed a most personable Minbari but actually respected Shaw's own capabilities in return. Shaw was fairly certain that Tuthenn was a far more valuable component of the Anla'Shok than he, but they developed an easy friendship that he hoped to pick up again on the next trip to Tuzanor.

The greater joy had been seeing Badeau return to Tuzanor. She had winced when he hugged her in a bear's grip. Though she must have reviewed his file on the long trip back from Mars, Badeau insisted on hearing the whole story of his escapades on Mars after the loss of the Intrepide. She was on her

feet again, but had yet to be cleared for field service. So, Badeau had taken on staff duties in Tuzanor, work just as important as that done in the field, she had said. A new White Star had been pegged for her captaincy as soon as she was declared fit for active duty, one of the new modified WSC-2's, Shaw had heard. He had no worries about her future.

More important, to Shaw at least, was Badeau's private words to him. She admitted a concern for the future of the entire galaxy when her injuries forced her to make way for Shaw, but she could already sense the change within him. She did not describe it as a process of maturation, more one of... 'seasoning' was the word she finally chose. He had survived a proper baptism by fire, Badeau acknowledged, of the kind that few Rangers face no matter how long their service. In ordinary circumstances, he might have been reassigned to another Ranger to continue his induction into field service, but Badeau had pledged to do everything she could to see he received his own command.

Her words and actions meant more to Shaw than the gratitude of Presidents, be they of Earth or the Interstellar Alliance.

With some reluctance Badeau said she would give up Tilanna, should Shaw be successful in his application for command. She was sad to lose a good engineer but acknowledged the bond that had grown between Shaw and the Minbari. She also felt it was unfair to hold Tilanna back until she could return to active duty.

Even after this time, Tilanna remained a puzzle to Shaw. At times, they were as close as he could imagine being with another person. At others, she seemed distant and, well, alien. Her own duties had occupied her while on Tuzanor. As a member of the Religious Caste, she was required to attend to duties in her temple for a certain period of time each year, and she took the opportunity to do so while waiting for another assignment to a White Star. Shaw had already admitted to himself that he was attracted to the Minbari, but he had no idea whether she was just interested in pursuing a friendship. He found himself ready to accept her decision either way and, moreover, he was prepared to wait for it. As things stood, they had a deep bond that would not easily be broken. As far as he was concerned, he and Tilanna had all the time in the world.

Most of all, Shaw reached an understanding of what it meant to be a Ranger, one of the Anla'Shok. When he had first joined, he pursued the romance of an idea, of the solitary Ranger, standing alone on the bridge, refusing anyone to pass. Protectors of an entire galaxy, they fought for peace, justice and security, shielding those who could not fight for themselves.

The truth of the Anla'Shok encompassed all of that, certainly, but there was a deeper aspect he was just beginning to see. It was a sense of self, of the deepest commitment and, above all, sacrifice. All through his training, Shaw studied the Minbari texts, learned their language and meditated on their ideals. Much of that was still a mystery, but he now understood why a Ranger was not trained as a pure fighting machine. It was inevitable that a Ranger would go into battle, but it was never intended to be the core of his being. Being Anla'Shok was as much a search for spiritual perfection as physical capability. The two went hand in hand and should never be separated. To do so would leave a technologically adept thug little better than the forces of evil he had been trained to fight against. That was the difference.

Or so he believed at this moment. Shaw was well aware that though he had accomplished much, he still fulfilled so little of his own potential. As a Ranger, the pursuit of salvation for his own soul meant just as much as the pursuit of galactic peace. Two battles were being fought, the one within and the one without.

The gentle bell of the White Star's primary alarm sounded throughout the ship, and his musings ended as the voice of the weapons officer called for his attention.

'Captain, we have jumped into Sh'Lassan space,' said Tilanna. 'Raiders sighted on attack vector to transport convoy Delta.'

Another day, another fight for justice.

'Heat up the weapons,' he said, knowing his voice would be automatically relayed to the bridge of his new vessel, the Indefatigable. 'I'm on my way.'