



The
Incident
at
Kruger 60

By
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A miner on a journey to search for Ununpentium, also known as UUP takes on a young girl in space as a partner, and they discover something neither of them believe. It could be alien life, and looks that way. Or is it? Alex and Laura have to find the answer before a incident occurs in the history of space that could have severe consequences for mankind itself. Along the way they meet the worst kind of people, and some of the best as well. But the question is who can you really trust when everyone is trying to advance their own interests.

Follow Alex and Laura from Kruger 60 to Kroatzys' Station, Tau Ceti, Morda Prima, and finally to Trajians 7 while they try to find out what is really going on in space...

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First story changes from initial writing 02.06.2012

Second changes, and updates, 28.10.2012

Reformatted 3.11.2012

Added NCX index, minor corrections 10.11.2012

The Journey to Kruger 60

[Copyright and Publication](#)
[Index](#)

[Part One](#)

[The Journey to Kruger 60](#)
[Arrival at Kruger 60](#)
[The First Excursion](#)
[The Flight to Ross 248](#)
[Kroatzy's Station, Ross 248](#)
[Jochim](#)
[The Trip Back to Kruger 60](#)
[The Disappearance](#)
[The Trip Back to Kroatzys' Station](#)
[On the Run](#)
[Discoveries](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Commission Mobilization](#)
[Jochim's Decisions](#)
[The Trip to Morda Prima](#)
[Morda Prima](#)
[Proof](#)
[The Chase](#)
[Discoveries and the Big Problem](#)

[Part Three](#)

[The Search for Information](#)
[Contact Jochim](#)
[Pay Dirt](#)
[Race to Report](#)
[The Trip to Trajians 7](#)
[The Evidence](#)
[On the Run Battle](#)
[Back to Kroatzys'](#)
[Release the Information](#)
[Contact](#)
[Conclusion](#)

[About the Author](#)

Part One

The Journey to Kruger 60

I woke up in the bunk above the cockpit, with the soft hum of electronics in my ears. There was the regular ping of the debris warning system, the sound of the fans on the computers whirring, and the sound of hard drives spinning in the eternal darkness. The ship was on auto pilot, headed for a small, dead planet circling Kruger 60B, a red dwarf fourteen light years from earth. I climbed down off the bunk, into the cramped control room of the little craft.

There were just two seats at the controls, and two more slightly behind them, at each side, where technicians, or scientists, had they been aboard, could work. In the back of the craft were a small kitchen and a smaller bench table for eating and communal activities. It was dark inside, with only a ghostly blue illumination from the panel lights. There were two further bunks on each side of the bench table, above it. The girl I had met on Bernard's star was asleep in the left bunk.

At that point I didn't really know all that much about her. She was young, about half my age. Smart, but something odd about her. Like she wasn't always caught up in the day to day troubles of the world, and it didn't matter to her. Lost, clearly. But maybe not as lost as others, who think they know their way in life.

She was thin, really thin. Long curly hair, sort of a cross between brunette and dark red head. Probably it was dirty. Thin face, small bookish pointy nose. Glasses. Small framed body. And dirty clothes, and a gaunt look. I went to the galley and made some coffee. I sat on the bench, by the narrow table and thought for a moment.

I wasn't in the habit of rescuing people. Especially young women. I'd had enough experience with that in the past. But when I met her in the bar on New Demos, something about her said trust me. Weird, because I wasn't really one to do that at the time. I guess I liked traveling around alone. The last ten years of mining had been good to me. Simpler, I think than the years before that. I think I had been looking for that.

I had been there for two weeks, unloading my cargo from the last trip, making some minor repairs, and generally relaxing. I had met her one evening at the bar, studying a strange language. We had struck up a conversation. She was out of place there. Like a University student at a rough harbor bar. And I think what was weirdest about it was at the same time it seemed to suit her perfectly. We hit it off immediately, something about her honesty sat well with me. We talked for several hours. In the end, and I'll never quite know why I did it, I asked her where she lived and what she was doing, and she told me bumming around space. She came back to my ship, and crashed in the bunk above. She had no place to go. She was a street kid, who somehow got herself boosted to one of the colonies on one of the planetary moons.

Her family had raised her on earth, her dad had died at fourteen, and her mother abandoned her a year later. She had been cruising the solar system since. She liked to read, and claimed she was carrying around about 2000 books on her portable computer. She knew a couple of earth languages and was trying to learn something from some old book on dead languages, some early Gothic. For someone who had virtually nothing and little obvious in the way of prospects she had a remarkably positive attitude. We ended up hanging out a lot that last week, and suddenly decided at the end of it I really liked her vibe. And she wanted to earn some money, and on this trip an extra pair of hands could really be useful. That was probably what persuaded me to take her with me when I left. Some things in life never change, you suddenly meet people who enter your life, and then become a huge part of it, when you least expect it. Fate seems to exist everywhere in the universe, not just on earth.

The glowing fractured mass outside the craft's windows over the cockpit showed that we were still cruising on the wave, the time wrinkle in space time that allowed us to travel faster than the speed of light. The two small windows showed an eerie reddish purple glow, and something that looked like continually shattering glass outside the ship. That was normal, that's what space travel looked like.

I drank my coffee. The lights blinked and glowed on the control panel. We had about four weeks ahead of us, and had just pulled out of New Demos last evening. We were going to this little planet I knew around Kruger 60 B, for some mining. There was a load of Ununpentium there for the taking, and the price was right, about 5000 credits per kilogram of the stuff. A couple of hundred kilograms would set me up well for the next two years or so.

I finished the coffee and got up, and half climbed and floated to the cockpit seat for the pilot. I settled into the big leather seat, and put the headphones on.

I rolled the dial thru the subspace frequencies. Nothing unusual. Some news reports from earth and the colonies. Some music. A football game. I took the headphones off. The ship hummed quietly. A few lights blinked here and there. Four weeks. Time for some reading, or just sleeping. Interstellar travel was usually extremely boring. And that was good, because if it got exciting it usually meant something was very very wrong.

I put the subspace radio on the speakers, not too loud, and started to pan thru the freqs again. I was looking for the tones; sounds that were not made by earth people, but were, clearly of intelligent origin. No one knew what the tones meant, or where they came from. There wasn't any such thing as direction finding with sub space radio. Usually they weren't too hard to find, and today was no exception. Suddenly they came into focus. They sound like some kind of flute or pipe instrument, continuously changing, in a rather pleasant, if random way. I like the tones. Interesting to listen to, and to speculate what, exactly, did they mean, and where did they come from. They made an interesting musical background to the light show out the windows.

She had an interest in them too. A lot of people did, but she had a couple of notebooks of ideas about them. Some interesting ideas, well thought out. Probably another reason I had decided to take her with me. I was looking forward to hearing more about what she thought about them. She was apparently, very good at languages, had Russian, Chinese, Spanish and English down well, and a lot of knowledge about others. Like a said, a real bookworm.

I drifted off, back to sleep. There wasn't anything pressing going on for four weeks. Space travel is really dull. For hundreds of years people fantasized about it and about the adventures they would have. What they didn't think about was the boredom. And the dangers. Out here you really were all alone. If anything went wrong, chances were good you were done for. And you would never be seen or heard from again. People disappear rather frequently, traveling around space, and the area within fifty light years of earth. So far no longer range probes had been launched. The space commission determined what areas of the universe were open for travel and what wasn't. So far about twenty three solar systems were open to humans. None of them had any alien life forms. The commission had discovered five worlds in the region that had life, but it was primitive compared to earth, about fifty million years behind earth's development. We were still looking for intelligent life in the universe, but the search was slow and careful. The commission was charged by the human federation with careful, slow deliberate exploration; in the hopes of avoiding some kind of massive problem when (and if) first contact came. It was assumed that any new race would probably be far more advanced than humanity and humanity had decided it was in its own best interests to make sure they didn't get wiped out in the process.

I like mysteries. Unsolved ones. That's why I listen to the tones. I've run a number of numerical regressions on them, looking for patterns, that's what makes them interesting. There aren't any patterns in the tones at all, at least none anyone has found yet. They are totally random. Or at least they appear to be. So far. Really, at this point no one knows. Lots of theories, no one actually knows a thing.

I was headed to a small barren planet off the star Kruger 60B. There is nothing there really except for one thing. Ununpentium. Lots of it. And its worth its weight in, well, ununpentium. That's what drives these ships. It's an element that when processed and placed in the drive system allows us to go from one place to the next. Basically it's a material that when excited with the right electromotive forces creates a gravity wave that warps space. So you can travel light years in a month. Kruger 60B (actually Kruger 60 A and B, its a binary star system) is sixteen light years from earth. Four weeks and change our time, ship time, and we will be there. The other nice thing is that the way space and time are warped, you don't get the effects of relativity, so when we get back in a few months, people won't be 500 years older. Eh... Space drives are less exciting than they seem. They work, that's what counts. No mysteries there.

The holy grail of space exploration is, of course, finding intelligent life. It's also potentially probably the most dangerous thing out there, simply because of the

unknowns. We all like to think that when we make contact, they will turn out to be friendlies and help us solve the myriad of problems that still exist in the solar system. Of course no one is naïve enough to believe that is the only possible outcome. Thus the caution in exploration. The space commission has twelve large deep space exploration ships. Each one holds a crew and scientific staff of about 450 people. All the best minds that can be assembled. They work outside the limits of the open deep space area. Far outside. There is a simple system: we have a buffer zone, that is restricted, about three times as big as the open zone. The deep space cruisers work beyond that area, very slowly and very carefully. No one except space commission soldiers and support staff is allowed into the restricted zone. Under severe penalty. No one really wants to go there anyway, the further you get away from the open zone the harder it is to get back if anything goes wrong. Well basically there is no way to get back. Rescue missions are expensive, far too expensive to send out for a missing mining ship. Or a lost freighter. Or some cowboy adventurer.

So far we have small colonies on two of Jupiter's moons, our moon, Mars and a number of exoplanets. There are about 1,600,000 people who live off the earth. That took sixty years: and a lot of mistakes along the way. Living in an environment without a proper atmosphere isn't an easy thing to do. Most of the colonies are deep underground, with only the necessary support services on the surface. It's safer to build underground and build blast doors that you can close up than to build on the surface. Yea it costs money, but one blown airlock and you have a lot of dead people in a few seconds. We learned the hard way.

“Eh... Alexi?”

She was waking up.

“Yes, Laura?”

“How long have I slept?”

“Long time... Maybe... Sixteen hours...”

She got out of the bunk and tossed her hair.

“Coffee?” she said.

“Sure, I can use another cup.”

The panel lights glowed blue and yellow. The tones continued to play softly in the cabin. She brought the coffee and slumped down into the pilots chair next to mine.

The ship was on auto pilot. It would be for the next two and a half weeks. Basically there was nothing to do but kill time.

“So tell me some more about history... You were talking about how we got to this... This situation...”

That was weird. She could just switch on and switch off, when she got up and went to bed. It only took her like two minutes to pull herself together in the morning mentally. But somehow it fit her personality. I sipped the coffee and slumped back in the chair.

“Hmm. OK... Well as I told you, there were a number of really big wars in the 21st century. Bad ones. All over natural resources. In the end, there wasn't really a better

solution than to shift over to nuclear power. After two billion people were killed, the empire was formed out of the old countries of China, the US, Russia and the EU. Basically the scientists took over. Because they had to. The rest of the power structure had already collapsed because it simply wasn't meeting the peoples needs. It took almost sixty years before people realized first, that big corporations were not going to solve or even help them with their problems, and that governments were bought out by the big corporations. Second, a generation of people, basically idiots, had to work thru their ideology and stupidity before people would listen to reason. In many ways the first half of the 21st century was something of a new dark ages. People renounced science, logical thinking, rationality, everything."

"That all changed when Romulus Trenhook started the scientific empire movement. At first no one took him seriously. Then they realized he was serious, and a threat. Then he won."

"Sounds like something that old guy Gandhi would say." She said.

"True enough." I looked back at the control panel and closed my eyes.

"The scientific empire movement led to solving the food crisis, and to space exploration. It rerouted peoples native aggression towards settling in the universe. The rest of the story you prolly know."

She was quiet for a while. Then she spoke:

"Well, we still got a long way to go. I'm sure you got lots of other stories..."

"That I do."

"And you seem to really know history. Me, I've always been a literature and fiction fan."

"Unusual combination for a spacefarer."

"Well, maybe. But I also want to write, and you have to explore the world if you want to be a good writer."

"True enough."

Then we drifted off talking about the 21st century, and what caused all the trouble. And later just drift off. Traveling thru space has a timeless, hypnotic quality. Once your ship is underway, it's almost as if time comes to a stop. It changes the rhythm of life.

The monitor screens danced yellow and blue. I sat silently for a moment. And pondered. The tones sang out as ever. It would be a long journey to Kruger 60B. We talked more about the history of the last hundred years, and how we got to this point in the world. How did a bunch of scientists take over the management of the planet. Pretty unlikely when you consider that scientists and the like don't usually gravitate towards politics. And we talked a little about my life, my previous life traveling through the solar system. I grew up on a freighter. So spacefaring is in the blood. And did a lot of other things in space. And we listened to the tones. And we spent a lot of time lost in ourselves. Sometimes is really hard to live in a small cramped space with others on a ship. With her it was remarkably easy. So the weeks had gone by pleasantly. She did a lot of reading, and we didn't seem to have any problems in the

cabin together. A lot of the time she was, in fact, sort of unnoticeable. And then she would just pop up with something and it was like we had been talking for hours about it. But it worked. The weeks went by quickly enough. Pretty soon we had something of a routine. Wake, talk, read for a few hours, talk, listen to the tones, talk, and then crash. Time of day doesn't really mean anything in space, so people just follow their body rhythms. I was a little surprised how comfortable I was to have someone around the ship again. It had been a couple of years. At least.

Arrival at Kruger 60.

The thirty three days were over. It was reentry day. I prepped the computer programs so we could assume manual control after the reentry. Laura strapped into the co-pilots seat. Not that she could fly the thing if I had a problem but it was safe as any place. The computer took us through shutdown of the Alcumberie drive. The space outside the ship distorted itself, went thru a rainbow of color changes and then appeared normal, black, with thousands of twinkling stars. We had arrived. A small dot in the distance was our goal, Planet Kruger 60B-3. The third rock from the sun as it were. And one of the best sources of Ununpentium in the open regions. But a very long way from home, so not many miners came out this direction. You needed a solid ship, good spacefaring skills and a pretty solid ability to accept risk.

“OK, that's it, we are out of the bubble. Time to kick in the main engines and bring us in.”

“How long will that take?” Asked Laura.

“About two days to reach the planet. Then less than half an hour to get to the surface. We'll put down on the edge of the day line, I know some good sites there for mining. Also its isolated, and we shouldn't be bothered by intruders...”

“Like pirates?”

“Yea, or worse.”

“Sounds reasonable.” She looked out the forward cabin window. Our goal was a planet directly ahead. “So, two more days then of not much to do? Correct?”

“Hopefully. There aren't any asteroid belts in the area, but the computers will track and monitor incoming objects. We might have to make a course deviation or two. Other than that no, it's going to be another two days like the last four and half weeks.”

“OK”. She picked up the light tablet, and went back to the book she had been reading for the last week. Shelton's History of the 21st Century, a classic work, if you wanted to understand how we got to where we are today.

I released the safety straps and headed to the galley for coffee. A few minutes later I returned to the captain's chair. I tuned in the the tones.

“So, what do you think those things are anyway?” She asked me, putting the light tablet down.

“Hmm, good question. I'd say they are probably some kind of main communications channel. Maybe. Or who knows, maybe they are listening to music, or movies or who knows what.”

“Yea, why is it no one can figure out anything about them?”

“Another good question, sadly I have no good answer. Whatever they are about, it's a completely different way of organizing your thought process. So far we haven't had any luck really figuring out what they mean. Actually I want you to show me what you were doing in those notes about matching sounds to colors. That was pretty interesting. Maybe later on after we eat you can show me that stuff in more detail.”

“Sure thing.” She smiled, and I noticed how red her hair was. Sometimes she really looked like Goldilocks with glasses. It amused me, really, simply not what you would expect traveling thru space.

She went back to reading her book, and I dozed off. In fact I dozed on and off for quite a while. The time went by slowly, and after two weeks of storytelling and talking we were both ready for a break. Like I mentioned, space travel is basically boring. When it's good, that is. When it's bad it's far too exciting, usually in the wrong way. The interesting thing was I still felt comfortable around her. It can get really claustrophobic having another human this close for this long in space, but we seemed pretty compatible for this. That was a definite plus.

As usual she cooked the meals, something she seemed to really enjoy doing, and we both did a lot of reading. Finally the warning beacon came on. We were entering the planets orbit. The ship fired its directional thrusters, to reverse our direction, and then the main engines to stabilize our position. We were now in orbit.

“OK, little one, ready to go down for a visit?”

She sat up and looked out the main window. In front of us was the planet, simply number 3 in the Kruger 60B star system. Grey and rocky, with tinges of red all over the surface. Terribly uninviting. Not a sign of water anywhere on the rock. Just a big gray mass hanging in space. “Yes, let's do it.”

I locked in the new program, and we started our decent. The ride down was always a bit rocky, going thru the atmosphere. Not a really good atmosphere here, just methane gas, and some trace elements, but enough to cause us to pass thru a black out zone. The windows glowed orange and red for a couple of minutes and then we were in the thin atmosphere. I had the auto pilot set for a canyon on the edge of the night-day line. I'd been there before, and knew it offered a real treasure trove of the UUP I wanted. The ship adjusted itself on its flight path, and you could hear the dull roar of the pulse jets. Gradually the canyon came into view and our ship headed for the left side. At this point I took manual control, and guided her in. I Found a large boulder, about the size of a large building and put down behind it. From outside the canyon it would impossible to see us here. In fact unless you were right above us it was unlikely you would be able to pick up any signal of our presence at all. Especially, after I shut down all the comm equipment, and went into hide out mode. There

simply wouldn't be much telemetry to let anyone know we were there. I liked it that way, you didn't run into people out here that often anyway, but usually it was just as well not to run into anyone at all, this far out.

I switched the engines off, and started shutting down the comm gear. Then I put the ship into low power mode. Just the basics, life support, some electricity for general use, that's it.

“So, I'd say we get a few hours sleep, then we can start with the mining.”

“OK.” She answered. She put the light tablet up and climbed off to the bunk she was using.

I followed her and climbed in the one below.

The First Excursion.

We woke up about six hours later. The cabin was dim, and quiet. I got out of the bunk, and gave Laura a nudge.

“Huh?” Was all she said.

“Wake up, time to go explore. How about it, you ready?”

“Yea.” The color was coming back to her cheeks and face. “Sure, give me a few minutes and I'll be ready.” She sat up, as much as she could in the confined space, and rubbed her eyes. I went to the galley and got some coffee, and went back to the commanders chair.

I pulled up our location on the screen, and did an overlay of the local geography, with the silicum crystal deposits highlighted. That was the place to look for UUP. We both loaded the maps into our computer tablets, and strapped them on our arms. It didn't take us long to get ready, and we climbed into the little airlock. No reason to decompress the whole cabin, and then restart.

The green light came on, and I opened the outer door to the outside. It slid back silently. No noises in space. You can see the compressed air move the door, see the gas, can't hear a thing. We stepped outside.

The harsh glare of the unfiltered sunlight greeted our eyes. It took a minute to adjust. The landscape was rocky, and barren. Dark dark gray, almost black. I looked at the map and told her, thru the radio, to follow me. We headed away from the ship, to the small ridge just 100 meters in front of us. The suits were comfortable, but still a bit restricting. We carefully made our way across the rock strewn landscape. I led and she followed close behind. Our ship was well sheltered, behind a little rise. I like being unobtrusive. Usually a very good idea in isolated parts.

We made our way to the rocky ridge line in front of us. It was about ten meters high. Not really big, but good enough to provide us with some shelter from the valley outside. And some visual protection.

I reached the ridge first. Laura right behind. We climbed up the ridge carefully.

It was steep. About a twenty degree slope. One had to be very careful on such things, a fall could damage the suit.

It didn't take long to find our UUP. Orange veins ran everywhere at the top of the ridge. It was going to be a profitable trip. We started collecting some of the loose stuff. I had wanted to scout around a bit before we brought the buggy out. In about half an hour we had loaded up pretty well, maybe fifty kilograms each. Due to the low gravity we would be able to carry it all back to the ship. We made our way back.

Back in the airlock, we waited for the atmosphere to charge. About two minutes later, the green light came on, and we took off our helmets.

“Good load?” She asked.

“Good enough. Two or three days of this and we will be ready to leave. If it's as easy as today, maybe two days. We need to get the buggy out.” I took the bags, one at a time, to the hold. You can access the hold from both inside and outside the ship.

“I'm hungry.” She said, “How about you?”

“Yea good idea, food would be good, then we can decide what to do next.”

Laura made some sandwiches, and we sat down to eat. We decided to take the buggy out afterwards, and load it up full, and bring it back. I figured about eight buggy runs and we would have a really good load. four would be highly profitable, eight would be a small fortune. The buggy could carry about 500 kilos of material. After lunch we cleaned up quickly and got back into the suits, and headed outside. It took about ten minutes to get the buggy out. That meant we could drive it up to the ridge and load everything onto the buggy and haul it back. Big time saver. The afternoon progressed much as the morning, we loaded up with a good solid load of UUP and headed back to the ship. twenty minutes later we were unloading the bags into the hold. This time from the out side. It was getting late, the day here was only sixteen hours long and at night it would be bitter cold out even with the suits on. Much better to be inside. We finished loading up the hold and reentered the airlock.

Once the atmosphere charged and we opened the door and took our helmets off, we sat at the table silently for a few minutes.

“Wow I'm more tired than I expected.” She said.

“Yea, working in those suits takes it out of you. Even with the gravity being less, the whole situation makes it harder than doing it on an earth-like planet. It's also more stressful overall being this far out. That has an effect on the whole thing.”

“Sure, I can see what you mean. Man, I'm beat, I'm going to lay down.”

“Good idea.” I crawled into the lower bunk, she into the upper. We put the lights out and fell asleep immediately.

The next day we got up about half an hour before sunrise. Time enough for coffee and breakfast. As before we headed out to the ridge. The morning went without anything remarkable happening, and by noon local time we had made two runs back to the ship. We ate a quick lunch, not taking our suits off, and headed back out, and managed two more loads by sunset, tho we just made it in side with minutes to spare. The temperature at night drops to about one degree above absolute zero in the inky

blackness, and one does not want to caught out side in that, suit or no suit. We collapsed into bed again, as the night before.

The next day we got up again and proceeded out side. We took the buggy. On the short ride there, we passed a cleft in the ridge. Laura was looking in that direction, and suddenly said:

“We're not alone. There was a ship over there.”

We drove up to the ridge, and got out. “OK, stay low. We are going to creep up there and see whats happening over the ridge. If I say run you head for the ship, in the buggy. I can run in my suit if need be. Do NOT lock me out. I got a fail safe mechanism for that. We are going to take a very careful look and then head back to the ship.”

We crept up on the overhang. Laura was right. Something was out there. Something neither of us had ever seen before. We huddled behind a boulder and studied the ship. It was unlike anything either of us had seen in the human universe. About forty meters long. It had a really weird, smooth surface. Unlike any kind of space going vessel I had seen before. This was not any known earth vessel. This was something totally different. We ducked back behind the ridge.

“You see anything moving outside the ship?” I asked.

“No, did you?” She replied.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. And that thing doesn't appear to have any doors, windows, engines nothing. I dunno, but I've never seen anything like it before.”

“Neither have I. Well, never heard of anything like it even.”

I looked thru the cleft between two rocks. It was just sitting there. It didn't look alive or dead. It didn't look... Real. It was oblong shaped, dead smooth on the outside, and without any features. Everything was beautifully curved. It was a greenish blue color, but it sort of shimmered in the sunlight, and shifted colors as you looked at it.

“Well, I don't know what it is. But we are going to get back to the ship and get in side. Then we are going to power up the lower power features, like the computer and run a scan on the tape in my helmet and see if we can get any matches. Then we are going to do nothing except lay low, and see what happens.”

“Sounds OK to me. Let's get out of here.”

We backtracked down the ridge, and got in the buggy, and drove, the longer way back so as not to expose us to the ship out there. I parked the buggy under the ship, and we had it stowed in ten minutes. We climbed back in the ship, thru the airlock and then into the cabin. I powered up the low power computer system, and the passive radio receiver, and radiation scanners. Nothing showed anywhere on the screens. I scanned back thru the data from last night and notice a small increase in radiation about the middle of the night local time. “That would probably be their engine signature.” I pointed to the screen for Laura to see. “So, that means at least we can tell something about what is happening, if their engines are on.”

“So what do we do now?” She asked.

I was silent a minute. “Very good question. I think, we stay put for the moment. At the very least we do not want to blast out of here in daylight. That would just make things easier for them. So for now we sit tight. We leave all the passive sensors on, so that if anything develops we can hear or see it. Cameras on, radio receiver on, multi frequency scanning mode, radiation sensors, heat scanner, all of that stuff. That should give us some kind of warning if someone approaches the ship. If it's not one of ours, and I don't think it is, then that means it comes from an alien culture. And we have no idea what technology they have, what kinds of scanning systems, weapons, intentions etc. so laying low would be a good idea at this point. If we are lucky, they might just take off and leave. That would give us a chance to get out of here, and head for someplace nearer to home. That would be my plan at this point. I have an emergency start up program loaded up, we can get the ship off the ground in less than a minute and into the air, and blast right into hyperspace as soon as we get outside the gravity of this thing, that means about two minutes flight time. But I don't want to try that if I don't have to. Something tells me they could do a lot of damage to us in two minutes.”

“So, you really think they are some kind of aliens?”

“Unless you got a better theory, yea, I do. Its the only thing that fits the facts. I'm running a scan on the images from my helmet now, look.” We looked at the computer screen. Endless images were being compared with no matches. Finally the computer came back, no match found. “Well, what ever it is, it isn't in the database. So what ever it is, alien human or otherwise, we have no idea what that thing can do. Who knows, maybe they can read our minds right now as we speak. It's really hard to say. We don't know what other species are like in the universe.” I went silent. What more was there to say.

“Hmm. Well, how about some coffee. And I guess we sit here in the cockpit and wait, don't we?”

“Indeed, that sounds like a plan.”

She went to the galley and made some coffee and brought it back. I trained the cameras on the area around the break in the ridge, but nothing was happening there. It was completely quiet. I trained another camera on the cleft in the rocks and you could just barely make out a tiny bit of color that was the ship out there. It was at least 500 meters away, from the ridge, which put it about 600 meters from our ship.

I pulled the zoom all the way out and focused on the alien ship. It just sat there, with the skin shimmering between a dark hunters green and a ultramarine blue. Laura put the coffee down and sat in the co pilots chair.

“So now we sit and wait?”

“Yup, we sit... And we wait.”

And we did. We sat there the rest of the day. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. Finally the sun went down. Again, no developments. We were dozing off in the chairs, about midnight local time, when the radio locked on to something. A strange array of static. It was clearly coming from the alien ship. We were both instantly alert.

“Is that..?” Laura said.

“Yes, it's what you think it is, its some kind of broadcast from the ship. It is on some really low band, but not subspace. Like long range interplanetary communication... Or maybe with another ship...”

“What do we do?”

“We wait some more, and see what develops.” Presently the transmission ended. About two minutes later, a similar, but fainter transmissions returned. It was about equally as long, two minutes, like the first one. But clearly a different pattern. Then all was silent again.

“So any thoughts?” She asked.

“No good ones. Could be twenty different things, maybe a hundred. Who knows. No way to tell. Running the signal thru the computer now, but I don't expect to find any matches.” The computer simply ran through the data base, looking for matches. Nothing was even close.

“Wait and see. Maybe they will take off. That would be my guess. I don't think they know we are here. No one has come to investigate and that signal wasn't aimed at us, it was aimed into space, into the closed zone. So I don't expect any reason for them to come out here at this point. Maybe they had a mechanical failure and needed to set down for repairs. Maybe they are a scout ship of some sort. Who knows. It's impossible to say at this point. But I don't think now is the time for us to go down in history as being the first people to make face to face contact with aliens.”

“Agreed. Bad idea under the circumstances.” She was crystal clear on that.

We went back to listening, but nothing happened. Then after about three hours, an hour before dawn, the radiation detector came on. I cut over to the camera on the cleft, and the ship now was glowing a reddish orange color. Suddenly it lifted off, at an amazing rate of speed. It was gone before I could get the camera on it.

“Wow. I guess you were right,they took off.”

“Yea. Well now we are going to wait some more. I want to give them a good head start before we try to get out of here. We will wait a while and then take off. Maybe we wait til the planet is 180 degrees from the direction they took off in and blast out of here. At least they headed out into the closed zone, so we are going to be traveling in the opposite direction. That is a good thing.”

“Yea, I think so too. What are we going to do from here?”

I pondered a moment. “Good question. We have four and a half weeks to talk about that back to earth, or maybe ten days to an outpost. We can decide on that in a bit, there is an outpost on Ross 248 we could head for that is on the way to earth. The question is what do we say, and who do we say it to. Right now I think we keep this to ourselves. We also are going to have to think about the political fallout from this... This would really blow the balance of power up in the parliament, and who knows what kind of enemies we might make. Let's stop and ponder this for a while. I know someone who might be able to help us. Real scientific guy, also connected politically a bit, and smart enough to know when to keep his mouth shut. I went to school with him, he grew up on a freighter too, but ended up becoming a scientist. I think we could go see him and get some ideas. Right now I'm really unsure about what to do.

The ramifications of finding intelligent life out here are enormous. But I do know this, we need to get out of here, at the right time, and in a low key manor. The other thought I have is, we ought to go back out and load up a few more loads, we might need the fuel and or the money it brings.”

“Think we can do four before they can see us leaving?”

“Dunno, three definitely. four would be a pretty full ship, that would be 3000 kilos. Given the fact I want to blast out of the atmosphere pretty fast, that would probably be a good amount to shoot for. That would be two years worth of credits for living pretty damn well. For a nine week trip its a small fortune. Yea, let's get out there and load up.”

We did as before, got dressed and headed out. In the end we put together five runs of almost 500 kg each, which meant this was going to be a profitable trip, whatever happened. We packed the buggy away, got in, got the suits off, and settled into the command chairs. I pulled up the start up program and started plotting. “We should get out of here in the next fifteen minutes if we want them to be on the other side of the planet. I can program a course out of here that takes us about a light year from the planet before we turn homeward. My friend Jochim is on the station at Ross 248 That's about ten day trip. We are going to head there and then contact him. Also we will get a good good price for our UUP there. You get 30% remember, so that's a nice hefty sum for you.

She smiled. “Cool, I like doing this and I like working with you. I feel comfortable here.”

“Yea I'm surprised too, but I like having your company. I didn't know you were so curious about things, or that you had read so much. You don't exactly strike one as that type when someone first meets you” and I smiled.

“Ha, yea. I know people don't think that of me. Well that's all to my advantage sometimes. But I'm ok with this. And I don't really have anything else to do right now, so if its ok... I think I'm going to stick around for a while. I want to meet this friend of yours, and I want to know what it was we saw out there.”

“That can be arranged” I locked in the program, and looked at her. “So, you ready to get out of here?”

“Yes, totally.”

“OK hang on, this is going to be a bumpy ride.”

I hit the start key, and the ship roared to life. In one minute the engines kicked in and we followed the pre-programed course off the planet, and out of the system, that kept the planet between us and the last known direction of the alien ship. After about fifteen minutes we both visibly relaxed.

“So Alex, what about dinner?” And she went to the galley without waiting for an answer.

The Flight to Ross 248.

The trip was uneventful, as far as any alien ships went. In hyperspace it wasn't likely we would stumble across one, and if we did, we wouldn't know what to do anyway, it a little ship like this. We did spend a lot of time talking however. And the main subject was, of course what we saw.

After dinner, after our blast off, we looked at each other.

“So Alex. What are we going to do?”

“Go see my friend Jochim. Keep our mouths shut until we talk to him. Sell the cargo, and load up on supplies and fuel. And out fit this ship so we can survive long term in deep space. Just in case...”

“In case what?” She said, rather dramatically.

“Just in case. I can pack this thing with a years supply of food and fuel, and still make money on mining. Not as much, but having more options on board now looks like a good idea. Don't you think?” And I looked at her.

She paused. “Yes, it makes sense.” She paused again. “So what happens if we tell the space authority?” She knew this was a loaded question.

“That is exactly what I'm thinking about, and wondering about. I'm really not sure. This is the kind of thing they would do anything to keep a lid on until they had more facts, and determined what we are facing. I doubt we would be allowed to continue with what we are doing. In fact I doubt we would be talking to anybody, even each other.” She could picture what I meant. The space authority would want to keep this quiet at all costs, and the safest way would be to place us in protective custody somewhere. With zero chance of contact with the outside world, or escape.

“So then, we can't tell them can we.” She said simply.

“No, it doesn't look like we can.”

“So, what about your friend. Are you sure we can trust him? And if so, how so?”

“Very good questions. I'm asking that myself. I've known Jochim since we were seven years old at a boarding school together. I know a few of his secrets, and he a few of mine. I think...” I paused, “I think we can talk to him. I don't see him going right to the authorities. He would at least tell us to get out of town, and disappear if that is the best thing to do. I can't see him turning us in, cause he knows if he tells me to keep my knowledge to myself, I will. Of course, then there is you as well. That's a different matter, I suppose.” I looked at her. We had known each other a couple of months not longer. She had always been honest with me. I liked her, good personality. Curious, smart. It was clear why she didn't fit in with others, too bookish. “I think Jochim will want to talk to you, a bit to get to know you. Then again he is a pretty good judge of character, so he may take your word as mine. I think it all depends on how he perceives you when you all meet.”

“I can see that. Look I know we don't know each other all that well, and I've only known you for about ten weeks. But I'll tell the the truth Alex.” She paused. “I'm

scared. I don't have anyplace to go. As far as people I can trust, well right now you are pretty much it. I have a few friends in the world, but they are like me. Loners, traveling around the space system. We don't see each other very often, keep in touch by space net. I'm not really looking to set out on my own right now." She stopped. "Unless you want me to..." And trailed off.

"No, relax, I don't want you to set out on your own. In fact I think that would be more dangerous for both of us." I paused as she gave me a quizzical look. "If you and I are alone, and one of us gets nicked for what we saw, they will definitely find the other. So separating isn't really to our advantage." I looked at her again. "Also if we are separated, they could cook up some kind of story about the other one, anything really, to get you to talk or me to talk." I leaned back. "No, that isn't really going to help things and could even make it all more difficult."

"OK." She was visibly relieved. "That's good to know. I've gotten used to this ship and like it."

I smiled back "Yea, well, I'm rather fond of it myself." I kicked off my boots and climbed into the bunk. "So. What do you think that thing was? Ideas? Anything?"

"Hmm. More advanced than our civilization, definitely. Some kind of drive that operates, maybe, by force field? An alcumberie drive that requires no moving parts? I think its possible from what I've read, but the energy involved in setting it up would be greater than what we currently use in spaceships, maybe by what ten times? Maybe 100? Or who knows, maybe they know something we don't." She left that hanging.

"Yea, all possible. I was thinking some kind of force-field drive, maybe even a force-field ship. The way that thing shimmered, that didn't look like any metal we have."

"Maybe it was some kind of liquid metal?"

"Hmm, interesting idea. And a force field keeps it all together?"

"Maybe so, or something else."

"Like what?"

"No idea, but then we don't know anything about the technology that built that ship, do we?"

"No we don't."

She climbed up into the upper bunk.

"Well, we can sleep and think on it, can't we..?"

"Good idea."

We continued our discussion about the ship over the next few days. The idea of some kind of force-field around some kind of liquid metal sounded interesting. I would mean the ship could change form depending on its needs, etc. That would mean a technology thousands of years ahead of us though. Laura correctly pointed out they were using a low band norm space radio to transmit on. That would indicate someone who was barely on the edge of our own technology in long distance

communication. That struck both of us as a strange paradox. We had a long talk about that issue the next day.

“Alex, how in the universe could a civilization develop that kind of force-field technology, and still be using primitive, AM radio communications?”

We had eaten lunch and were sitting in the pilots chairs. “I have no idea. It doesn’t seem very likely does it?”

We were silent a while.

“Could we have hallucinated it?”

“Yea, theoretically, sure. But how come we both have the same hallucinations. And how do you explain the sensor records. That’s a pretty powerful hallucination. Unlikely at best.”

“Good points. I hadn’t really thought it thru, it just popped into my mind.”

“No worries. I wondered the same for a while. Even toyed with the idea that perhaps some kind of mass hallucination was induced by something on the planet. Except that doesn’t explain the data we collected. You can’t hallucinate something so powerfully a machine can see it, at least not that we know of.”

“No that’s true.”

“As to their backwards comm and advanced power that is also unexplainable. It doesn’t make any sense, as if you have the physics to do the drive, you should be able to figure out much better comm technically. I do have one idea tho.”

She looked at me. “What?”

“What if you wanted not to be found easily. We don’t use am radio for much of anything anymore, we have more advanced systems. But we do all carry a transmitter, as it does work in non light situations. Short wave am. Mainstay of back up radio. There are even operating nav beacons still, on earth that send those signals. What if they were either making some kind of emergency broadcast, or...”

“Yes...”

“What if they didn’t want those signals to be found. Most people even in our world wouldn’t turn their radios there unless they had a good reason to. Good place to hide something, eh?”

She sat silent for a minute. “Yea it could be. Could be very good.”

“See what I mean. It might be logical, actually.”

“Yea, but I don’t like the sound of aliens sneaking around the edges of our known universe. That doesn’t sound good.”

“No, maybe not. Or maybe it does. Its pretty obvious that first contact is probably always a pretty dangerous experience. So maybe they are just being precautionous. It would be just as bad to jump to the sinister alien conclusion because of that. Mind you I’m not saying it means we should trust them at all, just offering a logical explanation.

“Yea I know. It’s still scary. I don’t know what to think now. That thing was way more advanced than our ships. If they wanted to take over us, I think with that technology they could.”

“Why would they want to take over us?”

“Dunno, isn’t that the way of things?”

“Not always. What would they have to gain by conquering us or even eliminating us. Obviously the mineral wealth in the universe is pretty enormous. We haven’t explored 10% of the planets we do know of, and less than 1% of the asteroids, rogue planets etc, in our known space region. As it stands now, resources are pretty much unlimited for at least 10,000 years. The problem is getting out there and getting it. But once you find it its all there. It’s easy to get a lot of the time, and it has no effect on our world. I don’t see how conquering us would help them. Do you?”

She thought about it a while.

“No, I can’t see a reason for it, but then they could have reasons for it we have no idea about.”

“True, I’ll give you that. Yea, I believe caution is a good thing. But at the same time, we can’t let caution become fear.”

“True, theoretically.” She paused. “What about in this situation?”

“Yea, I know this isn’t theoretical. Well, if there is contact coming then its coming. That is going to happen sooner or later anyways, we all know that. And we all know that the first contact isn’t going to be an easy situation. A lot could go wrong.”

“We have all heard the dire predictions.” Her voice was matter of fact.

“Don’t know, got to think about it some more.”

We talked about the technology. It didn’t make any sense that they would use am radio, unless they were hiding from something. But what. Or whom. Who knows. We didn’t know if they were living a few light years away, or thousands. My guess was thousands, based on the drive technology. She wasn’t so sure. “They could be living nearby, and just keeping a low profile around us. They would probably also know that first contact can be dangerous, and so might be staying away from us.”

I had to agree, we didn’t have enough information.

Another conversation went about like this:

“So if they are smart enough to build that stuff, they must be smart enough to know we are out here Alex. In fact I don’t understand how they didn’t detect our ship.”

“Well, we were at minimal power. And behind that berm. And we are a small ship...”

“Do you really think they wouldn’t detect us?”

“It depends. Maybe yes, they have advanced scanning equipment, that we don’t have. But that doesn’t explain why they didn’t check us out. Do you think it would be a logical decision to ignore another ship?”

“I dunno. I just cannot believe they couldn’t detect us somehow. Not with a ship like that. The thing was probably liquid metal.”

“Maybe yes, maybe no. We don’t know that.” I paused. “Like I said, don’t make assumptions. Maybe they did detect us, but as long as we weren’t a threat to them, they didn’t feel a need to threaten us.”

“Maybe. I would think you would make some kind of contact tho.”

“Or maybe not. Contact, first contact must always be difficult at best. It would be better to make some kind of announcement and then do it. No surprises.”

“Yea I see your point. Something weird is going on...”

“Agreed.”

After a few days, we started talking about Jochim and my plan to talk to him.

“So do you really think telling him is a good idea?”

“Well, I don’t know what else to do.”

“Alex, do you really think he is going to protect you, and not protect the people he works for?”

I was silent for a while.

“Well I see what you are getting at. However, do you have a better suggestion? Should we just not tell anyone? Keep our mouths shut? How would that help anything? Or send an anonymous transmission to someone in space control?”

She thought for a bit.

“Honestly, I have no idea what to do.”

We were both silent for a while.

“Well I’m open to suggestions.” I said.

“Maybe we should investigate further, first...”

“Sounds pretty risky to me. We aren’t experts in linguistics for one thing. How would we communicate with them if we made contact. Also how do we know they are peaceful? Or that they couldn’t detect us if we were watching them? Sounds pretty risky to me.” I paused. “Also we don’t know what they have for weapons, what their intentions are, nothing. We can’t assume they are going to be friendly to us.”

“Yes I see your points. All good. But why should we trust your friend and the space command? As you pointed out in our flight out to Kruger 60, it’s hardly a democracy, and it’s pretty clear that the powers that be are primarily interested in retaining control of power and politics that rules our society. Sure they might investigate it. But that doesn’t mean that we get to wander around space knowing what we know.”

“Yea but what do we really know? We saw an unknown ship on a distant distant planet around a minor star system. Or at least we think we saw it. What is that then? Really not much. There are others, with other stories circulating around space ports and the like, stories about all kinds of weirdness in space. What would make us any different?”

“And there are people who disappear on a regular basis who have strange stories to tell.”

We were both silent a while. The lights on the control console blinked on and off.

“OK, so here is an idea. We blank out the data on the tapes that identifies us as the ship that saw this, this UFO, for lack of a better word. We can either send it to Jochim from the space port, or we can take it to him personally. Then we leave, right after we send it. First we load up with supplies, before we do anything. Sell the UUP and collect our credits. Take payment in hard credits. Or maybe better yet, just sell enough UUP that we can buy what we need for a year or so, and then keep the rest of the UUP. That is as good as currency anyway. We can sell that anywhere.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

We went around in circles discussing the various permutations of our plan, and the possibilities of how the ship we had seen would function. In the end all we had were some theories. And in the end it didn't matter. We reached the vicinity of Ross 248, and came out of stellar drive. I had a feeling things were going to get interesting. They were.

Kroatzy's Station, Ross 248.

Re-entry was completely normal. Once again it took two days to cruise on impulse power to the planet, Kroatzy 2. One never dropped out of light drive too near the target, too much chance of hitting something. Once you are in the alcumberie drive bubble, unless you pilot yourself into a star or something you have nothing to worry about, the spaceship basically just bounces away from anything solid. Small asteroids, comets, chunks of ice, all of that is pushed way by the bubble you travel in, or pushes the ship away. The gravity wave created by the drive offers a pretty high degree of protection for the people in the ship. However you leave light drive traveling at something close to 10% of the speed of light, and you have to decelerate, and when you pull out of it there is always a risk that something might slam into the ship. Basically there are known re-entry points, that are clear of debris, and you shoot for those points. Traveling blind, in unmapped, unknown territory is a lot more dangerous. You can pull out of light drive, and wammo, smash into something solid, and you are going before you even knew what hit you. Another reason that people only travel in the open areas of space, and stay out of the closed zone. Oh yea, you can always buy maps and things that purport to give you clear directions in the closed zone, but you never know the quality of what you are getting. The further out you go, the more problematic everything gets. The big space cruisers, used for exploration, have enormous shielding systems, that can protect such a ship on reentry, but such things cost enormous amounts of money, and energy. The load of UUP we were carrying would last you about a month in such a ship, and that's if you are lucky, just flying around. Generating a force-field strong enough to protect you on reentry in such a ship would burn off half our load of UUP in a half an hour or so.

After the reentry, and shut down of the light drive, we prepped the ship for docking at Kroatzy's station. Its a space station orbiting the second planet around Ross 248. holds about 2000 people. There are a number of mining operations on the surface of Ross 248b, and a small colony there, of about 50,000 people. All underground. The place is a frozen rock. It took close to thirty years to build the structures underground there. Deep underground, more than 500 meters down. The mining operations go much deeper than that. It's a rich source of titanium, and a lot of the Ti that comes

from there is used in spaceship production. There are two large refineries on the surface, mostly automated, but with some human workers. They take the raw Ti and refine it, and mill it. There is also a construction base there, for building hulls. Usually you build up the hull there, and then tow the thing to someplace like Alpha Centari, Proxima Centari, or Tau Ceti for outfitting. Sometimes they tow the ships back to earth for outfitting. On the other side of the open region you can go to Sirius or even Epsilon Indi, but those places usually outfit ships coming from the other side of the open region. Ross 248 has unbelievably pure Ti, and also everything else you need to put a hull together. The drives are usually manufactured on earth, and then shipped out to the various space ports for final assembly.

“Alexi, we are getting comm from the station, they want ID and certificates.”

“Sure send them all of it.”

She entered the commands in the computer, and shortly we got clearance for docking. It would still be almost two days before we were there, but here people check ship ID carefully. It's a long way from earth, and one never knows exactly what might be popping up into the region. Pirates are an issue. There is a large group of renegade ships that lives on the edge of open space, and actually some in the closed zone, and there is always a possibility of some kind of attack. Kroatzy's station is well armed, and has four space destroyers stationed there at all times. They are very powerful warships, and can take out the little converted freighters used by most of the Pirate groups. Destroyers carry about seventy people on board, and an array of high powered weapons. Most pirating operations use old freighters, sometimes newer ones, with improvised weapon systems. They can easily take down a small freighter, but are not a match for Space commission warships. The federation has fifty destroyers and frigates in the system. Most are generally stationed around human settlements, and keep the riff raff far away. There are some frigates that patrol open space, and a few more in the closed zone, hunting pirates, but that's a bit like looking for needles in a haystack.

The cruise in was totally uneventful. Eventually we came in visual of the planet, and the station. It's a massive structure, in high orbit over Ross 248B. First contact with the station was by computer. Then we came into radio range. Usually today radio isn't used until you are damn near on top of the people you want to talk to, it's easier to digitize everything and send it that way.

“Freighter ISF2319, this is Kroatzy's station. Welcome back to the world. We are sending you docking instructions, port 47a. Please load into your nav system. Your certificates say you are carrying UUP, do you have anything else to declare?”

“No, just about 3000 kilos of UUP.”

The man's voice came back on after a short pause. “Sounds like a good payload. How long are you going to be staying?”

“Not long. Buying supplies, selling some of the load, and then heading out again. Maybe three or four days, at most. We are planning on heading to Epsilon Indi, and taking a vacation.”

“OK. Space comm will be along to inspect you, should be routine. Don't leave the ship until after they have cleared you for docking.”

“Roger that. Looking forward to some down time.”

The docking was all automatic. At this point in space development it was easy enough to let computers do all the grunt work. The ship approached the station slowly, and it filled the window in front of us. Basically it looks like a much larger version of most of the space stations you see in ancient movies. It has four levels, connected by large tubes. Each level is circular, and the whole thing spins around a central core, generating about a half G of gravity. People live in the outer rings, and the inner rings are used for storage and freight, and supplies. Since there is no gravity in the inner core, it makes it pretty easy to move stuff around. In the center is an enormous fuel and water storage system.

The docking was uneventful. We waited for the inspectors from space commission to open the airlocks, and once we had a green light we opened ours. Four men in SC uniforms greeted us. They inspect freighters to make sure you aren't carrying anything illegal. We took them aboard, and in about twenty minutes they were finished. Not exactly a friendly bunch, but then they never know what they are going to find when inspecting a ship. Ships traveling alone usually have no problem, but if say, four freighters show up at once, they are very careful. It's easy for pirates to pretend to be a freighter and then storm a station, grab what they can and run. All part of the bureaucracy here. Once they finished with checking out the ship, we were free to go about the station.

Kroatzy's has a couple of social places aboard, basically big bars, an entertainment center, a hotel of sorts. Basically it's like a big truck stop, from 200 years ago. Also you can buy supplies for credits, there is a bank, and a small hospital. Then, of course, there are living quarters for the personnel that work there.

We exited the ship, and made our way down the corridor to the outer ring. There is a locking system at the end of the corridor, that allows you to basically lock your ship, without closing the airlock. We took the pass cards from the computer, and headed down to the main corridor.

It was strange to be around people again. We had been in our freighter for almost fifty days, just the two of us, and it was always a little weird to suddenly be around people again. Our plan was to stay together, at all times, sell some of the UUP, and buy supplies. Then get a hotel room, and relax for a day. If we just blew into the place, sold our goods, and left it would look a little odd. Jochim was on the surface, but I needed to contact him first and let him know we were coming. He was working in the space commission office, for the directorate of operations and science. We were going to stay here for 48 hours while we dealt with selling the UUP, and getting some supplies, and then head down to the surface. Then we would give him our report, and then head out immediately. In fact we were going to invite him aboard the ship, give him the report there, and then fly out. That way we had some maneuvering room.

First we went to the trading board, and sold half the load, 1500 kilograms. Fifteen Million Credits. Not bad. We took payment and went to the various traders markets.

Booked a years worth of supplies on the ship, including 4000 Kgs of water. Generally I didn't load the ship up full, as it affected maneuvering at lower than light speed, but in this case I wasn't taking any chances. It was going to be a full full load. Add to that 3000 Kgs food enough for over three years maybe more if one is careful, and it was going to be a heavy load. That would leave about 2500 Kgs for other payloads. The ship, (officially ISF2319, but which I had named Star Chaser years ago) could actually carry more, but then it limited the systems you might be able to land on, and burned fuel like an old diesel highway truck. But then if we were on the run, we would be a long way out, and unlikely that we would be meeting up with star commission ships. In fact we would be looking for a really lonely corner of the galaxy, someplace we could hide for a good long time. There were plenty of places like that. Finding water and oxygen supply weren't all that difficult either. Anywhere there was water, there was oxygen, and anywhere there was oxygen one can use the water distiller and native hydrogen to make water. Food is another matter. That's a lot harder to come by. But there are rogue traders one can always buy from, and places one can locate something to eat in the open region. And I kept pretty decent notes on where supposed locations of planets were in the closed system if it came to that. As far as entering a star system, if one is smart, one can always cruise in from, say two weeks out, and check the situation before you go closer. It's hard to get caught by Star commission ships, if you are trying to avoid contact. Getting back to earth though, that would be a different matter. So far we have only found four planets with breathable atmospheres, one each around Tau Ceti, Procyon, and a binary planetary system around Wolf 1061 (Gleise 628). The first two were pretty well settled, the last not at all, mainly due to the incidence of poisonous plants and creatures there. But that's another story. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

After we did our shopping, and made arrangements to have everything delivered to the ship, the next day, we booked ourselves into the hotel on board. Single room, double bunks. Hotel is a bit, shall we say, ambitious, as its more like a cubicle. In space, space is at a premium. Pretty much like living on the old submarines of 200 some years ago. But it had two nice bunks, full bath, full screen computer, even a small coffee table, sofa, and sitting chair. We dropped our packs, and turned on the computer. Today, computer, radio, television, videophone, etc, its all in one device. We turned on the interstellar news channel. Really not much was going on the known world. Since the Scientific Empire Movement had forced its way into control of things almost eighty years ago, a general sense of stability prevailed, in the areas open to human exploration. Life was a lot easier that way. 120 years of continuous war, first on planet earth, and then spreading throughout the solar system, had left society pretty ambivalent about conflict. A large part of the SEM movement was a turn away from self seeking aggression, and towards science and the arts. The collective memory of that 120 years of war still permeated humanities consciousness, and no one really had much interest in conflict anymore. People drawn to that usually ended up in careers exploring the closed zones, pirating, or in some kind of sports. There was a latent resistance movement against the SEM, but generally it was pretty

small and inactive: participation could get you sent to a penal colony for ten years or so on one of the exploration missions in the closed zone, and that was a pretty dangerous proposition. Really the world was better off without all that aggression. We still have a market economy, but its really a sort of social democratic system, with a heavy emphasis on the social part. Poverty, at least in 21st century terms has been eliminated. Even the poorest people today have decent lives, medical care, vacations, educational opportunities. People have finally accepted the fact that about five to ten percent of any society is just generally not very productive, and it's better to take care of them than to leave them in the gutter. Leads to a lot more peaceful set of outcomes. Everyone else is pretty much free to do what they want, as long as they don't try to take over the world, corner the market on various commodities, and use the world for their own devices. Everyone sees a psychologist, or what you would call a psychologist on a regular basis, and sociopaths are carefully monitored. Of course by doing this we eliminated most of the people who ran the big corporations in the 21st and 22nd centuries, and got rid of a lot of self anointed religious leaders, and the problems associated with them. That pretty much eliminated about 85% of the worlds problems. Funny how that worked out. Hardcore cases are generally shipped off to exploratory groups in the closed sectors. And they are not the kind of people I would like to deal with, If I can avoid it.

Laura plopped herself on the sofa, and I made my self comfortable on the big chair, and put my feet up on the table. It was the usual series of reports. News from the grand council, about mundane political matters in the world. Sports reports. The latest scientific discoveries. The latest news on pricing for various commodities. Decisions on details related to the next five and ten year plans for the the SEM. A couple of news reports about missing freighters. Some trouble on one of the exploratory colonies in the closed zone, the usual problems that you get when you send a bunch of sociopaths off to a place, and they have troubles there.

“Alexi are you really interested in this?”

“Nope, but it never hurts to stay informed. Sometimes there is stuff you need to know about.”

“True, but right now it looks pretty boring out there.”

“Agreed. Suggestions?”

“Old movies?”

“Sure. Never watched very many. What do you suggest?”

“Hmm... How about... Um... You like action adventure? Comedy? Drama?”

“Like I said, never really watched too many. I like fiction, and complex stories though...”

“Hmm. How about... Gone with the Wind?”

“Sure. What's it about?”

“American civil war, 1861 to 1865. Love story, but also pretty historical, for its time.”

“Sure, I'll try it.”

So we hit the remote, and ordered up the movie. All of that stuff is free now, long out of copyright, digitized, and available anywhere. You can carry around most of mans' knowledge on a couple of memory plates these days. Quantum memory broke the bank on memory. Now storage is the cheapest product in the universe. Oh sure, if you want tons of scientific data, the latest holographic plays etc, it takes a little more, but not much really. I've got most of this stuff in the ships memory banks.

We sat back and watched the film. After a while Laura got up and went to the cooler.

“Hey they got wine in here you want a glass?”

“Sure, what did we get with the room?”

“Something from France. No idea. It's red tho. Some kind of bard-ox thing.”

“Bordeaux. That's boord—oo”

“Is it any good?”

“Yea should be, as long as it isn't too cheap.”

“Right now I don't care. I'll try it.”

“OK, me too. But we are not getting ripped at this point. Bad idea.”

“Yea I know, but a glass or two won't hurt.”

“Sure.”

She poured the wine, and brought it back to the coffee table. I looked out the window.

It was not very big. You could see the planet down below, a big reddish gray rock, half lit by the sun, and half in darkness. It looked... Alien, and foreboding. The colony down there was deep underground, with only a few systems on the surface. You could see faint blue ice caps on both poles. The planet, which locals called Blackrock, wasn't an easy place to live. But it was profitable for those who lived and worked there. And once every five years you got a free six month vacation on earth. All expenses paid (with a upper limit of course, but pretty generous) anywhere you wanted to go. Or for that matter, everywhere. The gravity level was very close to earths', about 105%, so health problems, over the long term, were few. Generally you didn't come here to work on the surface unless you were in a steady relationship. There were single people, but not so many. Loneliness is a problem in space. For most people.

I'd paused the movie while she was pouring the wine. We turned it back on.

“Funny, how people dressed then.”

“Yea, well fashion always changes.”

We watched the movie for a while.

“Why were they so gung ho to go to war? Didn't they realize many of them would die?”

“No, they all thought it would be someone else who would die.”

“Stupid people”

“Yea, to a degree. But remember, times were very different then. People were much more religious. Different world. Also they thought war was glorious.”

“ewwwww”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“How could they think that?”

“Easy. Weapons weren’t as deadly. People were more romantic about everything. Probably because life was easier, in some respects, than traveling around space.”

“People really had slaves then?”

“Yup”

“eeeeewwwwwwwww”

“Yea, not a pretty thing. Useful economic solution for the rich, pretty bad for everyone else.”

We went back to the movie. Finally the intermission came.

“Alex, it's interesting, but I'm ready for a break. How about a dinner somewhere? Hey I got a bunch of money for the first time in life. How about if I buy?”

That sounded like a good idea. “Sure why not, we can go try the one of the three restaurants. Let's do it.”

We pulled ourselves together and left the room. The door slid silently shut behind us. We walked out into the hall, and down to the lobby. Again, more people than either of us had seen in almost forty five days. It's funny you spend all this time alone, and suddenly people seem a bit strange not bad, just strange.

We turned out of the hotel, which was located on the outer ring, and into one of the main corridors. We walked around it, it's sort of like walking on a Ferris wheel. That’s what makes the gravity here. Rotating station. More people in the corridors. Presently we came to the restaurant section of the station. There were three choices. A low budget place, with stuff from all over earth, a sort of food court, small, but with the technology well equipped. Two other places where you could sit down, one a cafeteria, and a small formal restaurant, with actual waiters and waitresses. Highly expensive, but a real treat this far from home. It held about fifty people, at twenty tables. We decided on the fancy place. Why not, might be the last good meal for a long time. Food was flown out every month, deep frozen, and cooked here on the spot. Vegetables came from the hydroponic gardens far below the surface of Blackrock. Not bad for almost seven light years from earth. A waiter took us to a table, dressed in a traditional black suit. This was going to cost a small fortune, but who cared, we had a pretty big one after the haul on Kruger 60. We sat, looked at the menus and ordered. She had Argentinian steak, with asparagus, green beans, and baked potato, with sour cream and a salad. I had surf and turf, a lobster with a small steak, another baked potato, and salad. We ordered a bottle of wine to go with it, another red.

We didn't have to wait long before the salads came. We started in on the food.

“Alex. I got a question.”

“OK Laura, shoot.”

“How come you are traveling around out here alone? You seem like a really good guy. How come you don’t have a regular companion? Or should I leave off the subject?”

I paused for a moment.

“No you don’t have to leave off it. Of course what ever you as me about, then I think I can ask you about the same topics, if I choose, OK?”

“Sure.”

I ate some more of my salad.

“Well, long story really. I had a wife once. She got killed in an accident. That was ten years ago. Since then I've basically been on my own.” I took another bite.

“Oh. OK, bad subject then.”

Again I paused for a moment and resumed. “No, it's not a bad subject. I just haven’t talked about it much over the years. I guess I'm not always sure what to say about it. But no, its not a bad subject. How about you. Why are you alone?”

Now it was her turn to pause.

“Well, I had one boyfriend once. But it only lasted about two years. It ended badly. Since then I lose myself in reading. And trying to survive.” She ate some more and took a rather large sip of wine. “I guess you could say I got burned by someone I trusted, and since then, given what has happened in my life, well, I never had time for it, or wasn’t willing to risk it again.” She drank some more wine. “Really, you are the first person I have met in about five years that I feel like I can trust. I haven't exactly had it very easy. And drifting around space, well you don’t always meet the nicest people.”

“True.”

We finished our salads.

“Are you happy with this life?” She asked me.

There was a quiet moment.

“Yea, basically. Sure it could be better, but it could be worse. I like space travel. It's not something most people get to do on a regular basis. Sure it's a little lonely now and then, but on the other hand, well, are people on earth always happy? And do they get to see what I get to see? No, not really.” The waiter arrived with the main courses. Once we were settled in I went on.

“You know, people have been dreaming about this kind of life for hundreds of years. Well, I get to live it. There are risks involved. Sure. But, well, that’s what you get in this life. Yea overall, I'm happy.”

We ate the rest of the meal in silence. One of the things that was growing on me was that Laura wasn’t one to waste words. If she wanted to talk she would, but she was equally as comfortable not talking. That suited me. It suited me well. Or maybe we were just hungry for something that didn’t come out of a freeze dried package, or was hermetically sealed in foil. Presently we finished the main courses.

“So Alexi, what do you want for dessert?”

“Hmm that’s easy. A double helping of caramel flan and and a slice of tiramisu.”

She laughed. "OK, so you have a sweet tooth... A really big one." And then I saw her really smile, for the first time.

"Well I don't get those things out there. Yea sometimes... Sometimes I like a nice dessert. And now would be one of them."

"Sounds great to me. I'll have one of these big strawberry sundaes. Hell, and maybe some tiramisu as well. It might be a while before we get to have such a nice meal again."

I smiled, and jumped in. "Yup, very true. One of the things spacefaring teaches you is to enjoy the moment." The waiter returned. We ordered.

"OK, so I think back to the movie after this, its pretty good, even if it's really old timey. And then I'm going to take a real bath. Can we get bubble bath here?"

"Yea sure, probably just ask at the desk. These space port hotels usually have a pretty good stock of all the little stuff."

"This is a lot nicer than sleeping in the hostels. Or crashing in an unused storage area." She was silent a minute. "I guess you can figure out I haven't exactly been living very high on the hog recently."

"Yea, I sorta guessed that. When did you get to space anyway?"

"My Ex. He as a construction worker on the space station around Somera." Somera was a planet around the Proxima Centari system. "Came up with him. We met on earth while he was on holidays. I was eighteen. That lasted, like I said, about two years. When I met him he seemed like a really nice guy." Desserts showed up from the kitchen. We dug in. Yes, you can get all kinds of sweets in packages for long storage, but this was special. After she had inhaled about half the sundae, which was huge by the way, she went on.

"Well, I found out as time went on he had a drinking problem. And there were other things about him. He wasn't as nice as I thought. I was on my own before I met him, and I decided I would be better off alone. So one day when he was working on the station I simply packed up and split. Caught the first freighter off the station. It was headed to Tau Ceti. So I spent two years there. Worked odd jobs on the colony there." She inhaled some more of the sundae. "I like being off planet. It's exciting, and I like seeing the places I read about as a kid. The sundae was about gone. "Anyway I stayed out here. Seeing the world and all that."

I finished my flan and started in on the tiramisu.

"I think its in some peoples blood, myself."

"Well, I think it's in mine." We smiled at each other at the same time and laughed.

We finished dinner, and true to her word she paid the bill. I made a mental note to pick up the next one... Where ever that might be. We walked back the hotel room and let ourselves in. she poured some more wine and we plopped down on the couch and chair, as before. I started the movie back up.

We watched the rest of the movie, and then turned on a news channel. Nothing important was happening.

"Alex, what do you think will happen when we tell them?"

I was silent a while then answered.

“I'm not really sure. Could be any reaction from we will take a report and look into it to... Who knows?”

She got up and stretched. “OK, well I'm ready to turn in. I'm going take a bath and then crash.” She walked over to the bath area. I clicked thru the various news channels. Nothing really exciting was happening in the world. I thought about what she had asked. What would happen? I didn't think they would lock us up, not really, but then I knew some things about the past she didn't. My past. And Jochim's. I flicked thru the channels and then flicked to a tone channel. The tones played as usual. A soft ever shifting, ever changing melody of seventeen tones. I closed my eyes, and tried to think. I lay back, and put the world out of my head. But no good ideas came to me. I might have dozed off for a few minutes, as presently she came out of the bath, dressed in a long heavy robe. She got in the bed on the right, and opened up her tablet. She really was into reading. I looked at the computer, and decided it was late. I climbed into the bed on the left, and turned out the light.

Jochim

We woke about twelve hours later. There wasn't any rush, the delivery service wasn't going to be finished delivering our goods to the docking bay until later that day. We got up had some coffee, and decided check out the exchange on the station. We headed out door of the room, locked it behind us, and walked out into the main corridor. More people were around than before. It must have been end of work time on the station. Laura bought some books. Well she bought a package deal, like the 500 most popular novels for 2000 credits, all published in the last 25 years. We bought a few other odds and ends, and headed back to the docking bay. We unlocked everything and got on the ship. Supplies were still being delivered. Most of the food was here, still waiting on water. And some upgrades. And some ammo for the two small guns on the ship. could engineer some plasma balls from the UUP on board, but had bought some technical stuff to make it easier. It wasn't much but it was something. And a plasma ball, while crude, could do devastating damage to any space ship.

Once on board we started stowing the new supplies. It took a couple of hours, to get it all packed away properly, and to sign all the paperwork. But it wasn't all that hard, and we got it done easily enough. Once we had loaded up we requested clearance to leave and visit the planets surface. We got our clearance, after explaining that Jochim was an old friend of mine, and made ready to depart. We separated the support systems connections and then the main docking connection, and gave a little push with the guidance rockets, and drifted away from the station.

“OK, first, I'll call him and tell him we are coming.”

She nodded.

I pulled up a directory on the screen and found his number pretty quickly. I entered it in the computer, and waited. The videophone rang four times before someone picked up.

“Hi, this is Alex Fire. I'm looking for Jochim Regenstein.”

It was a woman's voice that answered.

“One minute, I'll get him for you.”

The line was silent a few minutes and then the picture of Jochim emerged on the screen.

“Hey Alex, long time no see, what brings you out this way?”

It was good to see his smile again.

“Long story really, we were working out on Kruger 60, and thought we would drop by for a short visit, if you got the time for it.”

“Absolutely, your out near Kroatzy's Station I would guess.”

“Yea. We can be there in about two hours maybe a little less. If you don't mind unexpected guests.”

“No problems, come on down. I'll send you landing coordinates and you can calc a flight plan. Looking forward to seeing you old buddy!”

“Me too, Jochim, me too”

“OK let me go get some stuff taken care of. Talk to you in a couple of hours.”

“Roger that, peace out.”

“Peace out.”

Laura looked at me. “Sounds like you two guys are pretty close.”

“Yea we have been. Known each other almost all our lives. Did a lot together when we were younger.” I looked at her. “We were in space command together once.”

She was silent for a minute.

“Oh. I didn't have any idea you were in star command. What did you do there?”

Now I was silent a minute.

“I was a captain of a korvette. The Rattlesnake. Eight years. Worked in the special operation command for the closed zones. Gave it up after my service time was up. Since then I've been doing mining. Jochim was another korvette commander, of the Badger. We went to the academy together, served in the same operating squadron. Yea we go back a long way.”

“Oh ok, I see. So you really do know this guy pretty well.”

“Yea.”

The coordinates were coming over for the landing. I entered them into the nav program, and ten seconds later we had a course. I put the ship on auto pilot. The ship immediately fired the guidance rockets, and we started a slow decent onto the planet. It would take almost sixty minutes to get to his place, we had to cruise around the planet once, and we were in a pretty high orbit. We strapped in for the decent.

The ride down was quiet. Neither of us felt like talking. There was a very light methane atmosphere, and the ship glowed around the windows as we went thru. Not really bumpy, just a few hints that we were entering another atmosphere. We came thru and into the misty light greenish haze that hung over the planet. The ship guided

itself into the main space port on black rock, Kandinsky city. We landed at a general docking port. The doors opened and we slowly set down into the landing bay.

“Hmm Doesn’t look like a quick escape can be made from here...”

“No worries. Like I said I got a few tricks up my sleeve.”

We waited for the docking bay to pressurize, and then exited the ship. We walked to the greeting room, and a customs guy was there to meet us. We signed a few papers, and he was gone. Since we had already registered at Kroatzy's Station, this was routine at this point.

We entered the city. Its all underground except for a few storage facilities on the surface, and ship building yard. There are about 10,000 people here. Largest settlement out this way, for several star systems, and the last one in the open zone on this side of the zone. We entered one of the main corridors, and found an info computer. I entered Jochim's address, and got a quick printout of where to go. We followed the map, down several large corridors, and then some smaller ones. The big ones were big, you could put twenty people across in them. The smaller ones were more like for ten people across. It took us about twenty minutes to make our way to his quarters. We found the address, and rang the bell.

Jochim opened the door.

“HEY mon! Good to see you again!”

He gave me a hug, and we slapped each other on the back.

“And who is this then?” He asked.

“This is Laura. A friend of mine. Met her a few months ago on Bernard's star, she was looking for work, and I decided to take on a junior partner. Tired of cruising around alone.”

“You... Tired of being alone?” He gave me a quizzical look, and then threw one at her. “Well... Wonders will never cease. Come in you two, make yourselves at home.”

We entered the cabin. Jochim had a little living room, about twenty meters square, with a couple of sofas, we sat on one, he on the other.

The small talk didn’t last very long. It must have been obvious that there was something more important to talk about.

“So Alex. What brings you out here to visit me? You're not usually much of a stay in touch kind of guy.”

“No you are right about that. We were off on a mining trip, and we saw something. To be blunt about it, we saw a ship. One that wasn’t human built. Or at least one that was unlike any ship in the data records. We have a little bit of video and the records of some of their transmissions, at least what I think are their transmissions. You weren’t that far away, and it seemed that you were the best choice to inform about this.”

He was silent a minute, and then looked at me. “That’s a pretty serious claim, Alex. Yes, I'd like to see the film and listen to your recordings.”

I reached into my pocket and gave him a memory card, I'd brought from the ship. He took it without saying a word, and put it in the reader on the table. The big screen

lit up, and now displayed the video from my helmet camera. Jochim played the tape through twice, only looking over at us at the end of the second run thru.

He looked at me, and his smile was gone. "Yes, I'm glad you brought this here. This is pretty amazing Alex. I've seen video from other so called contact stories. What do you think of it? You were there."

I shifted on the sofa, and so did Laura. "Honestly I think its some kind of alien ship. We don't have anything like that. That's clear, unless S.C. has some kind of black ops project that is at least 100 years ahead of our time. Or unless someone somewhere has invented something well beyond what we know of as a space vehicle today. What ever it is, it doesn't seem human to me."

"What do you think about them not making any effort to contact you? You were what, less than 200 meters from them? Something like that, based on the range info of the cameras focus mechanism. Where was your ship? How did you manage to avoid contact?" He was silent a second. "Or did you?"

"No, we didn't make any contact." He looked relieved. "Our ship was in a hollow, about 500 meters behind the ridge. On low power. The way I always leave it when I leave the ship on some rock far from civilization. We were behind the ridge. Maybe they weren't looking for us, maybe they didn't expect to find anyone there. Or maybe they were occupied with other matters. They probably looked at the area, which is pretty rough, didn't see anything threatening on their landing scan, or what ever it is they do when they land, and put down. After that they probably only monitored the immediate region for incoming devices. That would be my guess anyway."

He got up and went to the kitchenette and got three glasses and a bottle of wine. On his return he put the glasses on the table, and opened the bottle and poured everyone a small glass. "Well this is pretty sensational. I'm glad you didn't take it to the normal authorities." From the look in his eyes I could see he meant it. "I think," he started slowly, "That we are going to have to investigate this." He picked up his glass and we did the same. "And I think I'd like to have you two along on the expedition, since you have the most experience with this phenomenon." Laura looked at me, and you could see the doubt in her eyes. Jochim caught her look. "No, young lady, I'm not talking as our... What shall we say... Guests of SC. I know Alex pretty well, I can think of better capacities for him in this. Alex, you have ten years background in special operations for the commission. My suggestion would be you and Laura take your ship, and accompany the expedition out there. I'll get you your commission back, as a reserve major, you are eligible for that anyway, as you would still be in the reserves as long as your flight physicals are good. That gives you some authority in this situation. And I'd like to have a man like you along, Alex. You're both experienced and educated enough that I'd like to think we could avoid the worst of all possible outcomes if this is indeed a real first contact situation." We all took a drink, and he continued. He turned to Laura. "And I'd propose that SC issues you a mission specialist certificate, that puts you in the scene, as a civilian, and gives you some status as well. Obviously you two were smart enough to come back from this..."

This occurrence alive, so that makes you something of an expert as well, given the circumstances. You got any ideas on those burst transmissions you picked up?”

“Not really. We ran them through the computer, but it looks like its all digitally encoded. Laura you ran some tests on that stuff, was there anything there that looked understandable?”

We both turned and looked at Laura. “No, although when I ran some Keligman-Strauss algorithms on that tape, it appeared to break the randomness into something that did have some patterns in it, here I can show you.” She picked up the keyboard on the table, selected the first file, and opened it, and activated the transform function. After the computer ran the transform, she played the tape. It was clear there were groups of something, you could here faint alterations in the tones, that was still random, but had something of a pattern to it. It might have just been a coincidence, or it might have been something more, but we didn’t really have the software on board to do a deeper analysis. “That was the only thing I found on the tapes.”

“Hmm. Interesting. You have a background in electronic communications?” Asked Jochim.

“No, not really. I like to read, and I like languages. I spend a lot of my free time studying languages, and I also have read a lot about the tones. I read a couple of books on the study of the tones, and from that I knew something about how you would go about trying to figure out what a interstellar electronic communication said.”

Now it was Jochim's turn to look a little surprised. He smiled. “OK, well then I'll have them place you as a language expert on the mission specialist cert. If you know enough to do that, you know enough to provide some credible help in that area. I'll have some additional comm software loaded on board. We have a new program we developed for listening for code communication in deep space, something we are using to try and clean up the pirating problem in the Niva 4 quadrant, in the closed zone.” He turned and looked at me. “So Alex, what do you think, will you go along for me. I can use a pair of eyes like yours on something like this. And yours too, Laura.”

I paused. There was a lot to consider. Yes I could see his point, having us along might be useful. Also, I wanted to see for myself, what evidence, if any, there was for our experience.

“Yea, OK. We'll go back.”

“Glad to hear it. It will take a bit of time to get a ship underway, probably at least 24 hours, maybe 48. I can have your ship refitted with some more weaponry and sensor devices, just in case you need them.” He looked at me. And smiled. “And like I said, I'll get you a mission duration commission. That gives you some standing in the fleet. As a free officer. So you aren’t taking orders from the captain, rather acting as a guide, and advisor. Also that solves some problems with the local governance. This is going to take a bit of time to inform people and get things moving.”

Laura spoke up. "Um, excuse me, but what exactly do you do here, Jochim, I mean, I know you work for star commission, but, um, well, I'd just like to know."

"Oh, Alex didn't tell you, eh?" He looked at me. "Well, I'm on the governance board for the outpost here. Scientific affairs in the sector. But like Alex, I have a military background. I'm a reserve colonel. We were in special operations together, I went back to university and got my doctorate, Alex dropped out and became a prospector. He was always reading books about the old west back in school, so I guess he really wanted to go to the San Francisco gold rush." And he cracked a smile. "Alex, if you need anything let me know. We can have your ship fitted with some extra plasma torpedo launchers, and a couple of thermo nuclear torpedoes. That's some pretty powerful weaponry, and I'll have them add some of the more recent scientific monitoring apparatus. Laura, you were smart enough to figure out the algorithms, and get a pattern, I'd like you to work with one of our techs for the next 24 hours or so, and learn how some of this stuff works. We can load instruction guides, but I think you could put some of this stuff to use. Will you accept?"

She thought about it a minute, and looked at me. I nodded slightly. "OK yes, I'll do it." She looked at me again, and I gave her a little hint of a smile. She relaxed a bit "Actually I like this kind of stuff, and I don't get much chance to learn about it, except in what I read. Sure I'm in for some education."

"Good!" Replied Jochim quickly. "Then let's get started. I'll have you introduced to one of our sci techs and he go thru it with you. Alex let's get your ship ready, and I have to go talk to the board here. He was already at the keyboard, sending out requests for an emergency meeting. Within ten minutes the board members had replied and the meeting was arraigned for two hours later.

Jochim contacted an aide, and he came and took Laura to the scientific labs. It felt a little weird as this was the first time in ten weeks we had been separated. Jochim also contacted the military commander, and they talked shortly on the videophone. Commodore Roderker was the local commander here, and he had an idea that his services were going to be needed. After a short discussion it was decided to prep a frigate for a scientific military mission. They discussed my ship, the Star Chaser, and Jochim indicated my status as a reservist and that I would be accompanying the mission. Weapons were ordered, and they signed off.

"Well, Alex, looks like you are in for another adventure. You'd better get back to your ship and get it ready. I have this meeting, I'll call you afterwards."

"Sounds like a plan, Jochim, I'm looking forward to hearing from you."

We shook hands and I left for my ship.

Back on the Star Chaser, I microwaved a coffee, and then took a seat at the table. The doors were all open, and I was waiting for the delivery of the new weapons systems and the scientific gear. It would be a while, no matter what, at least until after the meeting. I considered all that had transpired. Jochim was a good judge of people, and had picked up fast on the fact Laura was pretty smart. His suggestion to go back along was, on consideration, clever. He knew I would want to know the outcome, and

he knew he needed someone with a very level head involved in this. Also he had never wanted me to leave the commission, so he was killing two birds with one stone, even if it was only temporary. Given the situation, I didn't see a good reason to say no.

The time passed slowly. 2 Hours and 40 minutes after I had returned to the ship, I got a call. I turned up the video screen in the galley, and it was Jochim.

"It's a go. We are going to send you and a frigate. Upgrades are on the way, should be there in the next hour. We are going to have a operational meeting at 8 pm local time. That's in about seven hours. I'd like both of you to be there, pass the word on to Laura."

"Sounds good. I'll be there."

"Good. Well this is going to be a busy morning, I need to run but I'll see you this evening. If you need anything or think of anything contact me, you can call me if you think of anything we should outfit either your ship or the frigate with. By the way, you are going out with the Volga, full complement, plus scientific crew. The captain is Lt Commander Reitenherr. Good guy, a little on the cautious side. Should be a good choice for this one. I have to run, much to do, call me if you need me."

"OK, peace out."

"Peace out."

I turned off the monitor, and sat there for a minute. This was going to be interesting, was the only thought that came to my head.

Weapons systems started arriving about an hour later. They outfitted the ship with eight thermonuclear torpedoes, and two large plasma torpedo launchers. Serious heavy weapons. That took about three hours, to get everything mounted and operational. Then the scientific gear started showing up. Several computer modules, and some external sensor arrays. Hi sensitivity electronic monitoring gear. The computer was uploaded with the appropriate software. Then about 6 pm local time, Laura showed up back at the landing bay, with a sci tech in tow, a middle aged woman. They were going thru the capabilities of the monitoring gear. We said hi, and Laura took her to the ship, where they went over the operation of the equipment, and then the sci tech ran thru some methods for data analysis. It wasn't long before we got a notice on the monitors that the meeting was going to start in twenty minutes. We got our stuff together, and we all headed down the corridor to the meeting room. Laura introduced me to the tech, Ms Guthrie Meyer. She would be one of the techs on the frigate, and would be working with us on comm. Presently we entered the meeting room. There were about sixty five people there, obviously the crew of the frigate, and scientific staff, as well as Jochim, the military commander, and some other people, who were probably in the scientific departments.

The meeting was professional, almost routine. Jochim introduced us, played the tapes, and announced that the local commission had decided to investigate. There would be our two ships, the Volga and the star chaser on this, with back up of the rest

of the local fleet on standby. If anything was discovered, another party of two ships, one military, one scientific would be sent out to Kruger 60. the rest would be on full alert here, in just case... They were needed for something else. As of 1 pm this afternoon, the quadrant around Kruger 60 was closed, temporarily, due to possible pirate activities. The announcement had been made on subspace radio, and there were two ships in the area that were on their way out. A freighter, probably also a prospector, and a small scientific vessel studying an asteroid cluster about a light year from Kruger 60. The scientific vessel, as it turned out, had picked up faint signals similar to what we had seen, but thought them meaningless, some radio signature of a supernova or something somewhere. They were very faint, and short. No information had been obtained from them at this point, but if they were of alien origin, that would probably take some time. It was decided that we would travel in two different courses, and rendezvous outside the star system. Scan it, and move in closer. We would use passive scans, not active, unless we determined the need for an active scan. As per policy it was highly discouraged. We would land, and the scientific team would see if they could get some samples, etc. Once we had thoroughly investigated the site, we would leave the planet, and contact Kroatzys'. A second frigate would join us, and we would head out in the direction of the last known trajectory of the mystery ship. ten days travel, look around, and then return. Then the commission would decide how to proceed.

Jochim introduced me to captain Reitenherr. Typical star commission officer. Very business like, clearly cautious. We went over the route plans, and comm procedures, we would use direct laser comm in normal space, so as to isolate our transmissions, and would keep them to a minimum. His scientific group included a linguist, and she was already working on the tapes we had made.

The meeting broke up, and Jochim asked me if I would join him for dinner with Captain Reitenherr. Laura wanted to continue to learn about the software that Reitenherr's linguist was using, so she went and introduced herself and they were quickly lost in conversation. Two bookworms, I thought. I said yes and we headed off to a restaurant in the commercial section of the colony.

We entered the restaurant and Jochim got us a table. A quiet one at the back of the place. We sat, and a waitress came and we ordered. No one was really thinking about food. As soon as she left, we started talking.

“Alex this is Krazmin Reitenherr. Fifteen years service, worked in special ops for seven years, but on the other side of the open sector. You might have heard of him once.”

“Yea I've heard the name. You led the raid on the rebellion at Tannhauser didn't you?”

“Well, the lead party. I took a ship in, landed and led the initial assault.”

“Impressive. Alex Fire. I guess that's major Alex Fire again.”

“Pleased to meet you, yea, I've heard of you too, pirate chaser in the Mondon quadrant. Caught some pretty rough characters. And you had some trouble with the rebellion at Sternschen 9 didn't you?”

“Yea. I was there. Ran the black op to infiltrate the base and gather intelligence.” We were silent, and looked each other over.

“OK gentlemen, a few words of advice.” Jochim had interrupted us. “First of all be cautious. If you have a chance to make contact, remember, don't, unless you are really sure you have no other options. Observe first.” He went silent as the salads came. After the waitress left he went on. “I think you should both know the meeting was a bit explosive this morning. There were a lot of opinions on how to proceed. We need to be cautious on this one. If something is out there, well, we need to be careful.” He ate some more salad. “Having said that I know we don't know what is going to happen. Use your best judgment, and try not to shoot if you don't have to.” He finished his salad.

Krazmin spoke first. “Agreed. Caution is the word of the day. Do you think central will send more ships out here? Or are they going to wait for our report?”

“Central has been informed of the developments. They are meeting this evening, probably over as we speak. Yes, they are going to send a special flotilla out here, probably a dozen ships or so, and also strengthen some of the other stations in the area. I'm sure they will take this seriously.”

“If this is a real contact, you know this is could spin out of control pretty quickly...” I added.

Jochim was silent a second and looked at me. “Yes, we know. The possibilities are endless. It could be as we have always planned it by the book, slow and careful or it could go totally in another direction. We will have to cross those bridges when we come to them.” He looked at Krazmin. “The best thing I can tell both of you is caution and carefulness, should be the operating words of the day.

“No worries Jochim, we are going to take this one nice and easy, don't you agree, Alex?” He looked at me, like he wasn't quite sure what to expect for an answer. But it was clear that what his feelings on the matter were.

“Definitely, it's agreed. This is too big to leap into the blind, if we can possibly avoid it.” Dinner arrived. We paused as before, and then continued. “No I don't want to leap without looking,” I started, “And I don't want to do any shooting if we can possibly avoid it. That could lead to a lot of long term unpleasantness.” Krazmin was clearly relieved. On the one hand, it was the holy grail of space exploration to be the person or persons who discovered intelligent life in the universe, on the other everyone knew the risks. They had been discussed since the 1960s, for almost 300 years, so it was unlikely, given our range of experience in the expanse so far, that anyone had any illusions about what first contact would be like.

“Good, it's settled then.” Said Krazmin. He smiled. “Besides, we will probably only find some indication of their landing, and that isn't going to be a real first contact situation. I would say less than a five percent chance of actual contact.”

Jochim looked at him. “Probably true, but one really doesn’t know what we will find out there. It could be anything, or nothing at all.” He ate some more steak. “At any rate, I am hoping we at least find some useful clues. You may still find some trace of matter disruption, and if so you can locate their last trajectory. That, if we find it, will probably be the most useful thing of all.”

I interrupted him. “So you are going to send out a search patrol, if we find it?”

“Maybe not right away, but inevitably we will send out someone to investigate. A warp trail is just that, a warp trail, and would be a solid indication you saw something made by intelligent life. Even if it isn’t alien we would still like to know who and what built that ship, and what its capabilities are. Something such as you described, with that kind of maneuverability, would represent a potential threat to spacefarers, if it fell into the wrong hands. The last thing we need are a bunch of pirates armed with equipment like that.”

“True” I replied. “Krazmin, what are your thoughts on our arrival. How do we get down there, in the safest manner?”

Krazmin scratched his chin, through a thick red beard. He was going a little bald on the top, and that and his round frame give him a cheery, friendly look. “Well, I’d say we scan the planet, and other planets first. Look for any recent signs of a warp journey, also broadcasts etc. We have your tapes to listen to for examples, and the science vessel coming in from the asteroid belt there sent us their data. We have a good idea of what to look for. Then if its all clear, we fly in, one on each side of the planet. You have a much smaller ship, so you come in from the far dark side: Low on the atmosphere edge, so as to hide from their scanners. We scan passively at that point, we’ll be close enough we don’t need active sensors. If all goes well, we land, investigate the site, collect anything useful we can find, and take off. We can go 10 days, maybe two weeks out on their old trajectory, and see what we see out there. We observe, and report back. First sign of trouble we warp the hell out of there. We don’t know what their intentions are, and a retreat is safer, under these circumstances, than to do otherwise.”

“And what if they try to make contact with us, and don’t act in a hostile manner?” I asked.

He paused. “good question. That, I think, we would have to play it by ear. We are not really a contact party, we don’t have the crew or experts for that. I would say we broadcast a simple star calendar and mark a date, and location, far out in the closed zone, were we can try and put humans in touch with whatever we contact. Personally I would like to assume that anyone that had the technology you are describing, and that is shown in your video, is benevolent. But realistically I can’t make that assumption. Who knows what their intentions are.”

“I agree. We should be cautious. No question about it. And backing off early is probably much safer than any other course of action. Of course I don’t really expect we will find anything like that. Probably just some evidence of landing and that’s it. Then the scientific teams will have to follow up, probably with a couple of cruisers posted along.”

“That would be my thought. This is basically a reconnaissance mission. Nothing more, or less.”

“Yes, agreed.”

Jochim joined in again. “I’m glad you all are on the same sheet of music as far as this is concerned.” He paused. And his look turned serious. “OK, what if you run into something and its not peaceful... Thoughts?”

We looked at each other.

“Good question, all depends on how... Unpeaceful they are...” I said.

“Yes good point. If we have a chance, I’d say we shoot a round of plasma torpedoes at them. Hopefully that will slow them down, without killing a lot of people. Then we warp out of the area, away from the direction of earth and the open zone. At that point we would have to mobilize everything we have, as we don’t know what they have for forces. Only logical solution. The key would be, if we can create a delay and warp out of the area, before... Before someone gets hurt. I would suggest that Alex fire a couple of quick shots, hopefully he can distract them, and then warp into the unknown, in any direction away from earth and the open zone. Then I can pound a few shots into them, and do the same. Our shields are a 100 times better than Alexis’, so its obvious he isn’t going to be able to hang out long for a fight. But as a small, maneuverable craft, he might be able to distract them for a bit, and we can use that as a chance for a get-away. But it’s all really theoretical, because if it happens, well, we will have to play it by ear. The best I can say is, get his ship out first, its too small to really fight, and then we get out of there afterwards. We can do a burst data exchange on the lasers to send data back and forth, if we need to, but I’d prefer not to have any more comm than needed, as long as we are not in contact with anyone, and as long as the situation doesn’t require it. Keeping things quiet would be better on a mission like this.”

We finished dinner. Jochim ordered coffee and some dessert, and we talked some more about the theoreticals, but in the end it was, as Krazmin said, theoretical. There was little we could do to plan for a situation that we couldn’t predict in advance, and, as everyone had mentioned, this was more of a recon mission than a first contact event. We finished up, and headed out. I said my good byes to Jochim, and Krazmin and I agreed to talk again before we pulled out, sometime tomorrow afternoon. I headed back to the ship.

I got back to the ship late. Laura was there, reading one of the manuals for the software on the sensor devices.

“Hey, how was your dinner” She asked.

“Good. Reitenherr is a good choice for this. Smart, cautious, a thinker. Not the type to over react. How was your day?”

“Fun actually. This is some pretty amazing stuff. The tech gave me a bunch of material to read on cryptography. I’m going to read it all on the trip back out there.” She got up and went to the galley, and got some tea. “I also have some ideas to play with the tapes we made. Yea, it was a fun day.”

I lay down on the bunk. It had also been a long day for me. “Remind me in the morning to ask Jochim for more fuel. We can always use some more fuel, and under the circumstances who knows how much we might need. Plus, it won't hurt to use his, not ours.”

“OK, good plan.”

“OK Laura, I'm crashing, talk tomorrow.”

“Nite, Alex. By the way, I want to know about this time you spent in the commission...”

“OK little one, but not tonite. We got time ahead of us...”

“No problem Alex... Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow little one.”

I pulled the curtain over the bunk and promptly went to sleep.

The Trip Back to Kruger 60

The next morning came soon enough. We made some breakfast, and I called Jochim about fuel. Jochim agreed to load us up, to full capacity. That would give us a really good long range, about enough for two years at full drive, if we needed it. We helped the techs load the fuel, and then buttoned up the ship. Laura was using the comm to discuss what she had read about signal decryption with the tech. That would be useful in any event, knowing something about signal decryption is always useful in space. Krazmin dropped us a call about 10 local time, and said he would be ready for take off at 2. We agreed to get underway at that time, and we would fly parallel but separate courses out to the planet.

We got underway right at 2 pm. It would take us another ten days to return to Kruger 60, and at least a week, maybe longer for the journey to the planet from the edge of the solar system. We had plotted a course back that would take us to the orbital area of one of the furthest planets out, scan the system, and slowly work our way in towards planet number three. We would arrive on the far side of the sun, relative to most of the planets, which would give us a lot of distance, to escape if something went wrong. Hopefully it wouldn't.

So once again we had ten days to do nothing. The old saying is, hurry up and wait. Or for soldiers, hours of intense boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror. Well, its a pretty good estimation of such situations. And it hasn't really changed in probably forty thousand years. Technology changes. The experience does not. You can quote me on that.

Laura busied herself with her language analysis study. She was really into this. Apparently the sci tech on the Volga and her hit it off pretty well, and it must have motivated her to give it her best. That didn't bother me. I was too busy thinking about all the what ifs, and wherefores and everything else. It's really easy to say this is just

a recon mission on a space station. It's a totally different matter when you are 3 light years from help, and all on your own. And that's assuming that the so called help could actually do something, if anything went wrong. The truth is, that in a first contact situation all bets are off. There is no way to know what will happen, and no way to really prevent the worst from happening, if it's going to happen. Not just for us, for all of humanity. So, yea, I needed a some thinking time.

So the first day I sat there and pondered all the possibilities I could think of. No contact, friendly contact, mass destruction of the human race. Actually that would be easy, if it happened because mass destruction meant we couldn't do a damn thing about it. Actually a pretty easy outcome if it came to pass. Hopefully it wouldn't. But one never knows. That's the problem. The grey areas. No one can predict the future, as much as they would like to be able to. Impossible. All you can do is make plans, for various situations, and hope for the best, and improvise when the time comes. Well, that is what we would have to do.

Laura was quiet. Very quiet. Like she wasn't even really there. She was buried in some tech manual about decoding transmissions, using various algorithms. I saw no reason to disturb her, given my own thoughts.

The afternoon, or what ever you call it in space, wore on. Eventually Laura broke the silence.

“So who is making dinner tonite. You or me?”

“Good question. Me I think. I think I need to get up and do something rather than just sit here and think.”

“Funny, I was thinking the same thing. So, what is bothering you, Alex?”

“Oh just all the unknowns ahead. Too many variables, and I can't really figure them all out.”

“Well then maybe you should stop worrying about all of them. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen. We can't change that. All we can do is do our best not to do something stupid. Besides what are the chances they will come back, three weeks after they left? They might be able to travel anywhere in the galaxy. That's like what, a billion star systems. Probability would say the chances of us running into them again are about zero, don't you think?”

“Realistically yes. The human side of me is still thinking about it though”

I looked at her, and wondered why it wasn't bothering her the way it was bothering me. Probably because she hadn't done this kind of thing before. There is an old earth saying, ignorance is bliss. In this kind of case it definitely applies. I closed my eyes, and tried to let my brain empty out. Avoiding close contact was probably the best idea, far and away. I doubted it would come to that, reasonably, and put it out of my mind and fell asleep.

When I woke, Laura was back reading the manuals the tech had given her. She sat in the co pilots chair, with her reading tablet in hand, and was lost in her reading. I looked over at her but she was totally lost in thought. I looked down at the control panel. The usual series of messages was coming thru the comm. It was going to be a

long 10 days back. I pulled my jacket and cape tighter around myself, and went back to sleep.

The next few days passed much the same. Laura was buried in her books, I was thinking about the possibilities. She was running regressions and pattern analysis on the data from our last contact. She hadn't made any breakthroughs, but she thought she was making some progress, and had isolated some discrete blocks, that might be words or something. I kept an eye on her work, and she was definitely making some progress, or at least it seemed so to me. I'm not really a language expert, and while I can speak a few different dialects of space, I'm far from proficient. It was pretty clear Laura had a talent for this kind of thing. And her focus was impressive.

As agreed, at the half way point, we would contact each others ships, just to verify our situations, and to let Laura and the Volga's tech share developments on their attempt to get something out of the alien comm signals we had picked up.

We were coming up on the half way point. We had decided on using a coded burst transmission, quickest shortest transmission method, max two transmissions. Each.

The countdown clock counted off the seconds to the burst. Krazmin sent first, and we took the transmission. Opening the files, there wasn't much news. The journey out was totally uneventful, so far. There had been some progress on the tapes, and the techs had sent there results for us to look at. I answered the same, and suggested we remain silent, as there wasn't anything to discuss. Krazmin didn't send another transmission, so he agreed. No reason to talk to each other if there was nothing to talk about.

We opened the files. Laura had a long message from Meyer, the tech, and the senior linguist, Ms Okayama. Apparently they had made some progress on the analysis. The message from Krazmin was short and simple, no news, nothing to report. The two ships in the quadrant had left the area, and it should be completely empty of anything buy our two ships, and whatever else was out there.

After about 30 minutes Laura looked up from her reading and at me. "Well, it looks like they might have some numbers figured out. Hard to say, but at least they may have got the basics of something numerical."

"Not surprising. That would be what I would have expected them to get to first. So it must not have been heavily encoded then?"

"Apparently not. Maybe. Its hard to say, its a preliminary analysis. But Meyers definitely found something that looks like a base sixteen number system. Certainly within the realm of possibility that it is a hit." She continued on. "And she might have some of the basic grammar structure resolved. It's still pretty theoretical though."

"It's some progress. Every little bit will help."

"True."

She was quickly buried in the report, and its content. The number patterns were pretty unmistakable. The rest of it was still gibberish. Laura buried herself in the details, and I dozed in the commanders chair.

The next four days were much the same. Laura was running tests on the comm tapes, looking for patterns. I was thinking about what options we would have if something happened out there.

We were on the edge of the Kruger 60 star system, finally. Far on the outer edge. As per the plan, we maintained radio silence as started the reentry to normal space. Once again the light in the windows changed from multi colored strands of light into inky blackness. We had arrived. Back at Kruger 60. We reentered far from planet 3, in the emptiness of space. Krazmin came out of warp as well, about half a million kilometers away, at an equal distance to the planet. From here you couldn't even see it, hardly, just a small speck of light where the sun touched its face.

We brought ships to a complete halt, and started the passive scans. Nothing. No warp trails. No radio signals of any kind. No heat signatures in the area. Dead quiet. A very good thing.

We let the scans run onwards, and kept on with the radio silence. If neither of us detected anything in the next two hours, then we would start our approach. Laura was focused on the computer readouts, and reading her manual on code breaking. I sat and watched the computer output. All quiet.

The two hours passed without any contact. As per our plan, we started our approach to the planet. I cut in the sub-light engines, and the ship started to hum. We accelerated towards our goal, Krazmin in his ship and us in ours. We took two wide paths, not near each other, hopefully to give us some time to warp out of the area, if anything went wrong.

We both headed for the planet, at one quarter power. That would allow us to quickly reverse and warp out of here, if something appeared on the scanners. Nothing did. We finally accelerated to full sub warp, and make our way to the target.

We were finally within arms reach of the planet. It slowly, ever so slowly, grew bigger in the windscreen, and on our scanners. Everything appeared quiet on the scanners, no transmissions of any sort, warp signatures, nothing. We glided through space, behind the dark side of the planet, headed for the zone between night and day. Back to our landing site. I fired the decent engines, and we came into the box canyon from above, once again. I set the ship down in the same general area, but more under an overhanging rock wall this time. It was a little like being at the opening of a cave.

We were down in the same ravine we landed in last time, but I had nudged the ship under a rock outcrop. It didn't cover the whole ship, but a good two thirds of it. It would take someone really checking the data to find us. I shut down everything except life support and computers.

The Volga set down about two kilometers away, on the edge of the plain where the ship we had seen had landed. She wasn't as sheltered as our position, but it gave her some cover. I ran a series of local scans on the area, and it was dead silent.

It took over an hour for the Volga to ready itself for an external ship excursion. We established comm with the lasers, giving us better security. Krazmin wanted to run

the excursion out first just from the Volga, but then have us join him after the area was secured. We could both take samples and carry them back to Kroatzys'. Finally Krazmins' party left the ship. Krazmin had landed on the other side of the ridge, off to our right, on the edge of a long low ridge line that clearly turned into a low line of mountains in the distance. Three vehicles left the frigate, and headed for the the spot where Laura and I had first seen the ship. The trip took less than thirty minutes, and was totally uneventful. Krazmins' landing team secured the area, and took some scans, which showed nothing.

“Alex, Krazmin here, area is secure, why don't you come join us.”

“Roger that Krazmin, be there in fifteen minutes.”

Laura and I suited up, and entered the airlock. Once we decompressed, we left the ship and opened the vehicle bay in the rear. We got the buggy out and took our seats. It took less than ten minutes to reach Krazmin. We pulled up about fifty meters from the landing sight and stopped, where one of his men was. We left the buggy and walked out to the site.

There wasn't much to see, some indentations in the earth where the ship had landed, and some burn marks where the engines had fired on decent. But it was clear something had landed here. Krazmin took us around and showed us the basic layout of the site. three landing pods, and the burn marks. Nothing else.

After an hour we loaded up with some sand samples from the burn marks, and the landing indentations. Krazmin and we said a short good bye, and headed back to our respective ships. The buggy drive was short and we loaded the samples and the buggy back into the bay. We entered the airlock, and two minutes later we were back on board. We peeled off the suits, and I made some coffee. I poured two cups, and we sat at the galley table.

“OK Alex, we saw something real out there, that we know, agreed?”

“Yes, agreed.”

“What was it?”

“Given lack of any other evidence, we apply Occam's Razor. It was an alien ship. And we are in the biggest mystery of humanity to this point in our history.”

“So what do we do?”

“At this point, we cant do much else here. We go back to the station and report. Maybe they establish an outpost here, and wait and see what happens. Or not. There would be good arguments for both positions. Probably they establish a carefully concealed outpost and then monitor the area for disturbances. At some point they try to establish contact. That will be dangerous. Especially since we don't have any idea what we are dealing with. Other than that, well, your guess is as good as mine.”

“OK. Yea.”

We finished the coffee, and after awhile we both decided to crash. Maybe sleep would bring some insight.

The Disappearance

Several hours later the warning beeper went off. I looked over at Laura, who had fallen asleep in one of the command chairs. She rubbed her eyes, and looked at the monitor. On the monitor it appeared that three ships were coming in fast. Really fast, faster than anything humans had at that point. Laura looked at me. She suddenly looked pale.

“Alex... There are three ships coming in. Impossibly fast. Alex... What are they?”

“I have no idea. Power down everything. Minimal life support, then get a suit on and get back here as fast as you can go.”

She hit the power down display and turned off everything on her side of the controls, and I did the same on mine, going to passive sensors, minimal electric and cooling the ship to 0°. She was already getting the suit on. In fact she had it on in less than two minutes. As soon as she got back, I got up and ran back and put a suit on as well.

“LAURA, you put on the full thermals, yes?”

“Yea, I did.”

I finished pulling my stuff on.

“Good, cut to minus 50° and get your helmet on.” I pulled the suit tight and pulled on a helmet. We could now go down to -250° comfortably. Maybe another 50° below that, uncomfortably. I crawled back into the pilots seat, and set the temperature for -200°, and the ship slowly started getting colder. Gradually, but noticeably. Heating was an issue. The surface should read about the same as ambient outside temperatures, but they might have some kind of device that could see through the skin, who knows. At any rate it didn't seem like the time to take chances.

The ships left warp drive close to the planet. Many times closer than a human ship would have dared. They simply materialized into normal space, none of the colored light show that normally accompanied such an event.

“I'm really glad we got here first, and you know where to hide a ship here.” And she looked at me. She was scared.

“Yea. Me too. Lucky us.”

“Yea, lucky us. Do you think we can put up a scope?”

“Hard to say. It's not much of a way up, those ridges barely rise above the top of the ship. Might even be able to see something just raising a scope under the rock shelf. We looked at each other, and I started entering the commands. A scope poked up on the left side of the ship, under the overhang. I raised it five meters, and adjusted the video to appear on our screens. We could see the Volga pretty clearly on the monitors, about 1 km away, on the far side of the ridge, nestled next to another rock overhang. Problem was, the Volga was at least ten times our size, no where near as maneuverable in tight spaces, and much harder to hide. The three unknown ships headed low over the planet. They were on a course over our position, and were

moving slowly, across the surface. Probably looking for something. We turned the scope out towards the horizon. The ships were clearly leaving an energy trail across the planet.

We watched the feed from the scanner. Nothing outside. The ships, the dots on the monitor were nearing the area quickly. We sat quietly, and waited. They appeared to be nearing the area where they might be visible to us or the Volga, although we couldn't see them with the naked eye, too far above the planet. If we were outside we could have seen their exhaust trail, assuming they left one. The quickly moved over our position. The Volga was clearing scanning the area, the radar waves showed on the monitors. They weren't in a position to go dark anyway, they were out on the plain, and fully exposed. The three ships hovered over our general position, and we waited.

Then the Volga disappeared right off the surface of the planet. No explosion. No colored lights. Nothing at all. It just vanished into thin air.

“Where did it go?”

“I was going to ask you that, Alex. Where is it?”

“I don't know.” I panned the scope left and right. Nothing. No Volga.

“Alex, it just disappeared. That isn't possible... Is it?”

“It just did. Possible or not, it just did.”

We were still in shock from the disappearance of the Volga, when the next surprise occurred. Just as suddenly as they had appeared, the three ships disappeared as well. There was no warning, a short series of transmissions, and then they were gone. Warped directly out of the planets gravitational field, and atmosphere. We were without words.

“They're gone.”

“It looks like it.” I answered.

“What was that about. They weren't here more than ten minutes. Maybe less. They fly in, find the Volga, destroy it, and leave? What is going on?”

“I have no idea. But we need to get out of here, and we need to do it at the right time. We have to tell Jochim and space command, and they will have to decide what happens next. We just made some kind of contact with something that isn't like anything I know of in the known universe, and it's a threat to us. At least it appears that way. And the commission is going to react.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Wait until its clear to leave, and then scam for Kroatzys Station, the nearest star outpost. Report, and then see what happens next. Oh and load up as much fuel and supplies as this thing will carry. We need to load up to the limit.”

“So how long do we wait before we leave the area?” She asked.

“A while I think. At least twelve hours. I want to get out of here, but I don't want to warp out of here right after them. They could have some kind of radar and transmitter around here, and if we have a bit of a head start, well, it can't hurt. They have faster ships, true, but with enough course changes in hyperspace it would still be

hard to find us. Also that would give us enough time to get a transmission off to somewhere and at least warn people of what's coming. Even if... Even if they did catch up with us."

She looked at me. And she suddenly looked older. "Yea, it sounds like a reasonable plan. So... What do we do for twelve hours?"

"As little as possible I think. Rest. We are going to have to lay low until we leave, as little as possible."

"How long are we going to sit in these suits, in this cold?"

"Dunno. Good question. Since we are going to sit here for a while, I guess we turn the heat back on. Or keep the helmets on and go on full life support." Before she said anything I made some adjustments in the programs, and the heat came back on. It would take thirty minutes at least to come back up to a comfortable temperature.

"And so here we sit."

"That we do little one."

We dozed off in the recliners, and woke up an hour later. We took off the suits but decided to keep them in arms reach, and just loosen the thermal undergarments. We left the temp a little chilly by normal standards to compensate. We didn't talk. There wasn't anything right now to talk about. She busied herself in the language material she had last got from the Volga, and I sat and went through scans and logs of the events of earlier in the day. And we both dozed off. Funny how stress makes you sleepy. Instant reaction to highly life threatening events, you feel tired, if it's not right in your face. Then you get the big Adrenalin rush. Afterwards you just want to sleep.

Finally twelve hours had passed. We brought the rest of the ship's systems back on line, slowly, carefully, and I loaded a course into the nav software, one that would be tough to follow and slow them down considerably.

"So Laura, are you ready? I think it's time we got out of here."

"Yea I'm ready, let me strap in."

She strapped herself in and I cut in the nav program. We blasted straight off the surface, accelerating hard as we pulled away. Within two minutes we were in space, and as soon as we broke free of the thin atmosphere and gravitational pull, the nav software took the ship to warp drive. We looked at each other.

"I don't think I like space as much anymore." She said.

"I don't know what to think."

The Trip Back to Kroatzys' Station

We had a lot to think about. The control panel twinkled in the cabin. We were traveling at warp, which made us feel a little less obvious. We hadn't said a word to each other since we left the planet. I don't think either of us knew exactly what to say.

Finally she broke the silence.

“So Alex, what are we going to do now?”

“Good question. I'm open to input and suggestions.”

“I was hoping you would have a good answer... You are supposed to be experienced at this kind of thing.”

“I have no experience in dealing with alien cultures, sorry about that.”

We looked at each other, in the darkened cabin.

“Neither do I. What are we going to do?”

“First get away from here. We need to get a hold of Jochim, and send him all our data from... From whatever happened.” I paused a moment. “Then, then I'm not really sure. Maybe we could stick around, but my inclination would be to head to the other side of the open zone. As far from here as possible. I got a feeling this will spin out of control pretty quickly, and I'm not sure we should be anywhere near here if it does.”

“Yea, I can see your point.” She paused a moment. “How much do you know about the closed zone... Or anything beyond it?”

“A bit. I have some star charts, locations of outposts, etc. Some planet descriptions. Stuff like that. I would guess if all hell breaks loose we can run for a while. Couple of years at least. I hope it doesn't come to that, but...”

“Are you scared Alex?”

I looked at her. “Yea, I'm scared. You would have to be insane not to be.” I turned away. “And the thing is that we really don't even know what happened or what we are dealing with. That's the problem. There are no reference points.”

“How does a ship just disappear like that? One minute it was there, and the next second, it just vanished. There wasn't even any explosion or anything. Nothing, just...”

“Just gone.” I finished her sentence. “I don't know. I don't even really have a theory. I guess they vaporized them, or put them in a different dimension somewhere. Those are the only ideas I got right now.”

“Yea. I had the same thoughts. I can't think of any other possible explanations. I'm not really scientific, but there would have to be some kind of explosion or something, even if its dust and debris. There wasn't any thing. The matter couldn't have just been destroyed by anything except... What?”

“Dunno. Some kind of anti-matter maybe? But how would you get it from the launching spaceship to the target? You'd need a mass basically identical to the one you were going to destroy. Their ships were smaller than our frigate. Half the size. It's just not physically possible.”

“What about opening up a dimension to something, or something like that?”

“Maybe. How you do it would be beyond me. Again you would need a huge energy source. They couldn't have anything like that on ships that size. Simply impossible, given our level of understanding. I have no idea, Laura. None at all. I know this. This is going to be a major problem for humanity. Regardless of what is going on here, the commission is going to feel threatened. They are going to call out everything they have.”

We were both silent. Then we looked at each other.

“This is the nightmare contact scenario, isn’t it?” She said.

“Not yet. But yea, it could very well be. We don’t know what’s really going on, and we are about to have to risk everything on the decisions we make, and none of the options looks very optimistic. Bad situation. Yes it is.”

“Yea, it looks about as bad as it could at this point.”

“Nope.”

“How so?”

“Cause we aren’t dead, and we are headed away from the place as fast as we can go. At least we have some kind of chance.”

“Maybe... Who knows. Maybe they are following us. Have you thought of that?”

I looked at her.

“Yes, I considered that. They could follow us, if they wanted, I suppose. Except the warp trails were clear on passive scanning and they warped out of here at about 100 times what we could, so they should be a hundred times further away from us. That, frankly, I find a bit curious.”

“OK... Again... How so?”

“Well. Think about it. They obviously have some pretty intense power sources, and technology that is far ahead of ours. And they out numbered us 3 to 2, if they saw us, 3 to 1 if not. They destroy the big ship, or make it disappear, and then blast out of there like there is no tomorrow. That’s weird, don’t you think? Obviously they have the ability to stop anything in front of them. So why did they run the other way? Doesn’t that strike you as very odd?”

She was silent, but it was obvious she had just realized what I was getting at.

“Why would creatures that powerful run? There has to be a good reason? Why would we scare them so bad they ran like that.” She looked at me. “That’s more than half the mystery. If we knew why they did that, we would be a lot closer to knowing what their intentions are, don’t you think?”

“Yes, Laura, I agree. I don’t think it would completely solve the mystery, but it would tell us a lot about what they are all about.”

“OK. They have to be scared of something. Why else would they run?”

“Yea, it seems logical, but remember it could be something totally different.”

“It could, but it fits Occam razor. The simplest explanation is the best. They ran, because they have something to fear. What is it they have to fear, with technology like that?”

“Good question. Very good question. I have no idea. But for now I’ll work off that premise. They ran because they have something to fear. What could we represent as a threat to them? We are obviously hundreds, maybe thousands of years behind them technologically. So they cannot fear our technology.”

“Could be be infectious to them in some way? Do we carry something that could cause a plague?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. There are other things to fear besides us in space, don’t you think?”

“Yea. Yea I'm sure there are. So maybe they are scared of something more than us? Why would they destroy one of our ships then?”

“Good question. Maybe they don't want someone else to know we are here.”

“Could be. Why would that be though? Very odd. Maybe they don't want anyone to be able to report that they were here. Maybe someone is a threat to them, and not a threat to us?”

“That sounds like a long shot, Alex.” She paused. “But who knows. We don't know anything about them, except that they have technology that is hundreds of years a head of us. So what are we going to do next.?”

“We report to Jochim. We need to put together a package of all our on ship data, everything since we left port, and everything you and I saw. Then we send it off and wait for instructions. I don't think Jochim will be sending us back out there. not at least with out half a dozen star cruisers and a load of anti matter weapons.”

“Alex”

“Yes Laura?”

“I don't think I want either of us going back out there. We cant fight that... Can we?” “I don't know Laura. I really don't know.”

The next few days passed in relative silence. We made several abrupt course changes, at random intervals, in random directions, and then headed at full speed back to Kroatzys Station. For an eight day long journey, we mostly kept our thoughts to ourselves. We had sent off the files and our observations not long after we did the third course change, just to be safe. It didn't take long, a few hours, before we had a reply. It was short and to the point.

“Return here. Fleet on alert. All hell is breaking loose. Good luck.”

“That looks ominous.” Said Laura.

“Yea, it does.”

Our journey continued uneventfully, for the next couple of days. Laura was working on the material she got from the linguist on the Volga. So far she had now breakthroughs. But it kept her busy, and that was something. I went over the tapes again, of both contact events. I ran numerous filters on them, looking for any additional info the scanners had picked up, but there was nothing that appeared to be new. The rest of the journey back was uneventful. And felt like the quiet before a big storm. In the end it was.

We finally reached the planet and station, and reentered normal space. We made contact with the Kroatzys Station space port, and were instructed to immediately proceed to landing on the surface at the main station. We followed the nav plan that space control uploaded to our nav system, and 30 minutes later we were back on the ground, where Jochim was waiting to meet us. The situation was clearly very tense. The station was already at full alert. Patrol vessels were everywhere in the area, armed and ready to shoot anything out of the sky that didn't respond to communications protocols. Full alert meant the big interstellar nukes were armed and

ready to launch. Given the developments, there wasn't going to be any attempt to make any contact with any incoming ships from any unknown intelligence. They were simply going to be blown out of the sky. Unless the aliens had some kind of technology that would disable a nuke, and the way these bombs are designed, once you shoot them off, they are going to explode once they reach their detonation point. The fusing process is chemical, not electronic, so unless you have some way to alter a chemical reaction at a distance you cannot stop them once you launch them. They have never been used in combat, only in tests. Clearly, the situation was serious. Very serious.

Jochim received us in his office. Clearly he had aged from the stress over the last few days. And he clearly hadn't slept much.

His assistant showed us to the office and we entered.

“Alex, glad to see you. Though not under these circumstances. How are you doing?”

“As well as can be expected. So you got our transmissions. I can see that accelerated developments here a bit...”

Jochim gave a little sarcastic laugh. “Yea you could say that. Really all over the known region of space. Everyone everywhere is at full alert level. Yesterday they blew up an unknown ship entering the Tau Ceti quadrant. It was probably a smuggler, but at this point we will never really know. There were no transmissions, and they took them out with a nuke. The ship realized what was happening when they picked up the radar signature on their monitors, but it was too late, those rockets travel much faster than anything humans fly in. I'm expecting more such reports. At this point the closed zones are just that, closed, and there isn't going to be any easy movement between there and the open regions. Everyone is being stopped and searched. This is going to bring trade to a virtual halt, and cause massive economic problems throughout the open zone. Basically things couldn't be much worse right now. Or maybe they could.”

We were all silent a moment. Then he continued

“Frankly I'm not even sure the nukes offer us any real defense. If these aliens can vaporize a star ship without any signs of energy usage, or anything, I would assume they can do the same to a nuke. That means that we have no practical defense from these beings.” He paused and then continued. “They are feverishly working on a type of neutron weapon, that releases everything in focused ray of emitted neutrons, that should destroy or kill any carbon or silicon based life form that could exist, regardless of any physical shielding. That and dirty bombs that can poison a region of space for 10,000 years so that no one can use it. That's not much of a real defense against what ever this is out there.” He collapsed back into his chair. “So that's where we stand, basically.” He took a drink of tea. “I may have a mission for you two, but I'm still waiting for details about some things I cannot discuss yet. I want you to prepare your ship for a long voyage. I'm going to equip you with two more nukes in addition to what you've got, and if they get the designs for this neutron weapon done soon

enough, I'm going to put one of those things on your ship, if it can be fitted. So what have you got to report?" He looked at us, not really expecting anything new.

"Nothing really besides the data I already sent you. Really you know as much as we do, as what we saw out there, as I sent both the scanner data, and cabin data. Actually this is pretty much what I expected. A lot of fear, full prep for an all out war, and no idea what to do next. Bad situation, eh?"

"Yea, bad one. I can tell you this. Brush up on everything you know about the closed zone, especially in the region of Tau Ceti and Trajians 7, and be prepared to move at anytime. Stay aboard your ship, I want you to be able to pull out of here as fast as humanly possible. Once you are loaded up with supplies, it would be best if you disengaged from the station and waited far enough out that you can warp out of here at a seconds notice. I would program someplace in the area of Tau Ceti into your nav computer, but somewhere well outside the usual landing zone." He handed me a piece of paper off of his desk, which was cluttered with paperwork and reports. "This is a safe reentry point about a two light days outside Tau Ceti. I have some other data for other such points, will up load to your computer. My recommendation would be to be ready, at a seconds notice to warp out of here, go somewhere deep in dead space, exit the warp field, give yourself some impulse distance and then reengage to make the rest of the journey. Maybe even two or three possible jumps. And program the computer not to follow a straight line. Don't make it easy for them to track you. Whoever they are. No one uses the point I gave you today, it was cleared decades ago when we got to space, and then as technology improved, abandoned. It's probably your best bet of getting in the area unnoticed. You can run some scans and see what's happening there. If Tau Ceti is off line, or gone, well, head into the closed zone and from there you will have to make your own decisions. Laura, have you made any discoveries with the transmissions?"

"No nothing significant. It looks like they are encoded somehow, distribution algorithms can't spot any clear linguistic patterns, but they are not random transmissions. Clearly something intelligent produced them. Sorry I don't have anything better to offer you."

"No worries. I really didn't expect much. If those transmissions are encoded, it will probably be impossible to crack them. And if we do get anything out of them it's going to take months, probably years to figure out what they are saying. Its pretty unrealistic to think that without some kind of Rosetta Stone to clue us in on how they use language. Without that we have little chance of decrypting anything."

I jumped in "Jochim, I had an observation about this. They left in a real hurry, that means they are scared of something. That's some kind of clue, even though we don't yet know what to make of it. Something scares them. It can't be our technology, they are hundreds or maybe thousands or tens of thousands of years ahead of us. So maybe if we can identify what that is it might give us some useful info on how to deal with them."

“Good thinking. Yea, I see your point. I was thinking along similar lines myself. It's odd they would vaporize a ship and then pull out so suddenly. If they did vaporize it. Maybe they are running from something, and that is what is scaring them.”

“Yea, that thought had crossed my mind. But what are they running from?”

Laura piped in. “Maybe they are some kind of pirate too, and someone is trying to hunt them down, and they are trying to destroy all evidence of where and what they have done.”

We were all silent a moment. Then Jochim spoke. “It's certainly possible, but there are probably a 1000 other possibilities too. And the question arises, do these aliens, still have such problems given 100s or 1000s or 10s of thousands of years more of societal development?” he sighed. “Sure it could be so. Human nature hasn't changed that much since roman times. We still have the same issues today that they had as far as dealing with bad guys, and we still have bad people amongst us. It's a valid idea Laura, but until we get some more info, significant information that can shed some light on this I don't know that we can focus on that as anything more than one of many many possibilities. I have a study group of four scientists working on likely scenarios of what may have actually happened out there right now. That will probably be one of their possibilities. The question is, even if its true, then how does that affect things. No idea at this point.” He pushed the chair back from his desk and got up. “I'm sorry to throw you all out of here, but I have a hundred other things I need to deal with. Go get your ship ready to fly, and get yourselves on board. I would prefer you are ready for immediate take off in case anything happens, so don't hang around the station. If you want a decent meal, have one of the restaurants send one up to the docking station. OK?”

“Sure thing Jochim. We will be ready to pull out with less than a minutes' notice. At all times. I assume we aren't going to be here very long anyway from what you are telling me.”

“No I don't think you will. Like I said I got a mission for you, but I can't fill you in on all of it yet. Just stand by and be ready.” He went to the door, and gave us both a pat on the back as we left.

“Well Alex, what now?”

“Easy Laura, we go load up the ship with supplies and get ready to pull out like greased lightning if we need to.”

“That's what I thought you would say. I'm going to order us a couple of meals to take with us. Assuming they can deliver them before we go on the run.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Get some sweets. It might be a while before we get any again.”

She cracked a little smile. “Will do Alex, will do.”

We went back the ship. The station was humming with activity, and people were stressed out. Some of the supplies Jochim had ordered were already there waiting for loading, more food and water. The delivery of UUP hadn't happened yet, but I figured it would be along shortly. First I went on board and loaded the data into the nav

computer so that we could blast out of there as fast as possible if something happened. Then we used one of the trollies I kept on the ship to load the food and water, another six month supply. At that point there was nothing more to do but wait.

Laura went back to working on the tapes. I sat there and considered the situation. Basically there was nothing anyone could do, if these aliens wanted to destroy us, that was clear. But the weird thing was this running away thing that they did after the Volga disappeared. I didn't want to say was destroyed, as at this point it was proven one way or another what happened to the Volga. Something didn't fit here with that action.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. We watched some news, and while it was public knowledge that something was up, as the entire open sector was on full alert, the full extent of the news hadn't been released to the general public. Rumors abounded. What was known was that the spaceship Volga had vanished suddenly without a trace from a small planet orbiting Kruger 60. According to the reports, it was part of an exploration party looking doing general science research on that planet. According to the reports the disappearance was monitored by a research vessel in orbit. The disappearance was considered unnatural, and as a precaution, the quadrant around Kroatzys Station had been placed on high alert. The pundits were of course speculating on possibilities. Everything from some kind of gravity wave moving through the galaxy to aliens to some kind of fracture in time.

We got our delivery of UUP and undocked from the station, and pulled off a few thousand kilometers from the station. Laura had gotten us two weeks of meals from the nice restaurant we had eaten at here on our first visit. We had one of the for dinner, steak and veggies with a nice salad. And tiramisu for dessert, double servings. The irony, here the world as we know it is on the edge of who knows what and we are eating double helpings of dessert. After dinner we got a high priority message from Jochim. They had some new information on the transmissions.

“Hi Alex, how's it going there?”

“Quiet really, how about you?”

“Not quiet. We got some info back on those transmissions. It looks like they have might have come up with a way to decrypt the transmissions. I'm going to send you the new data, and a report explaining what they did. We aren't sure if its really unencrypted or not, but now the linguistic frequency analysis programs are coming back with patterns that look, basically, like the same kind of data applied to human communication. They are in the range anyway. So we may have a clear transmission for you all to work with. We only have, at this point about ten minutes of data, which is hardly enough to do a thorough analysis on, but who knows. Maybe at some point you will get more data and this can be of some use to you. The algorithm used to code the transmissions is based on fluctuations of gravity in the area of the broadcasts. It's pretty simple to reverse engineer once you figure it out. I'll upload all the data to you and you all can take it from there. Laura, I have some other data that the Volga sent back before its disappearance, from the linguists on board. I'm going to send you that as well.

“Cool, looking forward to getting it.”

“OK you all just hang out there and be ready to move. I have some other info coming in shortly, and at that point I think I got something for you all to go look into. In the meantime try and get some rest.”

“OK. Talk soon.”

“Roger that, out.”

We both climbed into the bunks early and went to bed. We left the alarm on full volume, if there was a warning alert from the station regarding any seriously dangerous developments. The ship would automatically warp out of the area if the alarm was activated. Strange thing I noted, that we could very well go to bed in one part of the galaxy and wake up a few million kilometers away before we even knew what was happening.

On the Run

About twelve hours later we got a beep from the station that they were looking for us. No alarm though. That was nice. I got out of the bunk and went to the monitor, and Jochim was there. Laura woke up too, and climbed down and sat in the co pilots seat.

“Alex, I've got an assignment for you.”

“OK. I assume it has to do with our current situation?”

“Yes it does. There were a couple of unconfirmed reports that traders out in the closed zones near Tau Ceti told stories of contact with an alien race by the pirates out of Trajians 7. The stories were, that there was some kind of contact between the outlaws there, and a band of outlaws from some other race. They made a deal to work together to help each other. I want you to fly out there, to Tau Ceti, and pick up the trail, find out what you can, and track down any leads. If it takes you to Trajians 7, so be it. If there is anything behind these rumors we need to know it and we need to know it fast. Your ship is ready to fly, yes?”

“It is. I take it you want me to leave immediately, before the council comes back with any orders?”

“Correct. The faster you get out of here the better. You and Laura. Send me reports, one way, deep space. Here are the codes.” He clicked on a hand held communicator and it transmitted the data to mine. Now get on the move. I sent you the case files on these reports as well.”

“We are out of here. ten minutes and we will be underway. I'll keep you informed.”

“Good luck Alex.”

“Thanks, you too.”

I turned to Laura. “OK you ready to make tracks?”

“Yea, though I'm not real sure about going into the closed zone. How do we get back out safely?”

“Well, for one thing we don't ignore any broadcasts from SC. That is for sure.”

“That it is.”

She was silent. Then she spoke in a low voice.

“Trajians 7?... That place really exists? And is it as bad as the stories say it is?”

“Trajians 7. Yes it exists, and it's worse than the stories, most likely. It's a really lawless outpost. Run by a guy who calls himself lord of the dark empire.”

“Oh great. Sounds like he has an overinflated ego along with a lot of other problems.” She giggled. And then got serious again.

“Yea, he is a full blown psychopath. Real nut case. The federation has been hunting him for years, Trajians 7 is way way out, actually outside the closed zone. Its a long flight out there, and well defended. The only route out leads past an out post that acts as a forward attack base. Plus, Trajians 7 is actually a network of small outposts on a several twin planets, around two star systems that circle each other once every 700 years. It's a weird kind of long distance binary star system. Lots of asteroids, debris etc. You can hide in a million places in an environment like that, and he and his people do. It's a very dangerous area of space. Worst one out there to my way of thinking. Morda Prima is a holiday resort in comparison.”

“Great. Sounds like we are in for a nice vacation ahead.”

“Well. We have some advantages. The ship is totally stuffed with supplies and fuel. We have extra weapons, some of the best in known space. And we aren't traveling in a federation ship. So that makes us look like another set of prospectors who are a little on the dark side of things. We keep a low profile, and we should be OK.”

“That sounds very reassuring, Alex, thanks for those kind words.” She smirked.

“Yea I know. Well, unless you got a better idea, I think this is the plan.”

“No, no I don't.” She looked at me. “So maybe what we saw was some kind of alien pirate ship? That could cause a intergalactic cultural catastrophe. Not a good way to make first contact, at all.”

“No it isn't. So we have to get on this as fast as we can go.” I looked over the info Jochim had sent us in his data file. He had included a pass document that would allow us to get supplies at any SC outpost, or non outpost, up to fifty thousand credits. Enough for about five years of fuel and supplies. Assuming of course that it would be honored, and that there were functioning SC outposts for the next five years. It was electronically signed by admiral Denitz, a four star. That at least was an advantage, there were few people that were going to argue with a document like that. At least in normal times.

The ship cut through space as fast as we could go. eight weeks and we would be there. It was going to be another long boring spaceflight. Or at least it was going to be a long spaceflight. There was several hundred pages of case investigation material to go through from the data files Jochim had sent. I wanted to review all of it, until I

knew it by heart. And Laura had her tapes to work on. She was totally fixed on the monitor, and had the headphones on. I pulled up the first report and started reading.

Discoveries.

Laura busied herself with the language software, and the transmissions. And I focused on the reports. We busied ourselves with making the ship shipshape, and working on our various projects, Laura on the language tapes, me studying the files Jochim had given me. The story line was straight forward enough. About two years ago, the bandits at Trajians 7 had made contact with another vessel, from an alien race. Some stories put the number as high as four or five vessels. Communication was established, and they made a pact to work together for their mutual benefit. There were some technology exchanges, as well as raw materials and goods. Presumably also a great deal of knowledge about the technologies involved and the areas of space as yet unexplored. There had been at least a dozen similar stories reported to the commission by agents working on Morda Prima. The stories would turn up every month or so, usually in the pubs on the outpost. Until the developments at Kruger 60 in the last weeks, they were written off as the usual spacefaring fish stories, but of course any such story would have to be reported back to the commission, just for the record. First contact was considered a human race survival question, and any such tale would be noticed.

There were a few interesting details. Supposedly, the aliens were somewhat humanoid in form, with two arms and legs. Taller, and thinner, and blueish green. They were from a race from about 100 light years out, and had a power technology that was about 10 times as fast as our best ships. Weapons systems were at about a similar level of development. They were some kind of rogue group from their culture, which was far more collective than human culture. They had some kind of basic telepathy development, but you could hold it back if you wanted to. At least that was the story. It made it easy to transfer though, you could just get a direct impression of something from their minds. That was one story, anyway. Some how, the aliens and the pirates had decided to cooperate, and the pirates out at Trajians 7 had obtained a few small vessels from them, in exchange for ununpentium, that could easily do six or seven times the speed that any normal vessel could. They were small, but extremely fast. Also they had a kind of liquid metal skin that made it impossible to do any scanning of the insides of their ships, with our gear.

According to these reports, they were damn smart collectively, but very indecisive when alone. Somehow contact with others of their kind stimulated their thinking, or they had some kind of collective group thought. The only place anyone had actually met any of these creatures was out near Trajians 7; all the reports were at least second hand from pirates and smugglers that were flying back and forth from there to Morda

Finsternis Prima. There was something of a regular smuggling route across the known part of the galaxy between the closed zone on the one side, at Tau Ceti, and the closed zone on the other side of the open zone where Trajians 7 was located. I took a break from the files. Outside you could see space bending as we passed through it. Long streaks of starlight passed by the window screen in front of us, glowing in blue and white, brown, yellow, and red. The ship was silent. You could hear the slight whirr of the engine as it pumped energy into the force-field that protected the ship and pushed us across the galaxy. Eight weeks. I got out of the chair and went to the galley, and made some coffee. And took a seat at the table. The ship was dark mostly, only the lights of the cockpit and the low lights above the small kitchen were lit up. Laura was still deeply engaged in her work. I don't even think she noticed me get up for the coffee.

I looked around the ship. About 25 square meters of living space for two people for 8 weeks. I finished the coffee and poured another cup, and made one for Laura, and went back to the pilot's seat. I put her coffee in the cup holder. She looked over and gave me a little smile and took off the headphones.

“Well, I think I might be making a little progress. I got some pieces of these transmissions to the point I can recognize what might be words. There isn't a lot to go on, but, well here, listen to what I have done.” She brought up the transmission loop she was working on and played it through the loudspeakers. It sounded very strange, very sing songy. Almost like the sounds whales make. Or dolphins. But different. The language sounded like some kind of very maudlin melody. First she played it through from beginning to end. Then she started breaking it into bits. “See, here is a pattern that repeats seven times in the tapes we have. I can isolate it in four different transmissions. I have at least thirty other patterns I've isolated that all match, according to the software, and I'm on track to get at least another thirty more I think shortly. The problem is there are less than 150 of these patterns here, as close as I can identify. That simply isn't going to be enough to build any kind of dictionary. We need several hours of this stuff in order to make any break through.”

“Yea, I can see that. Problem is, where are we going to get more data?” I turned and looked at her. “And getting more data appears to be a pretty risky business.” Maybe at some point Jochim can send you something I don't know. Next time I send him a message, I'll ask him. And you should send him your work. Someone can probably use that back in civilization somewhere. It was really silent after she played the tapes. “You know, Jochim sent us all the data that the Volga was transmitting back to Kroatzys at the time of her disappearance. There were burst transmissions every minute up until the end. Maybe you should go through their radio scans and see if they picked up much. Maybe there are some missing recordings there. They probably couldn't identify everything that they picked up. Perhaps you will find another transmission in that stuff.

“Not a bad idea.” She sighed. “But not right now I'm tired. That was a lot of work. How long since we made the jump?”

“Only about 8 hours. We still got a long long way to go.” I turned on the subspace radio. The usual stuff, news, some music, football etc. and of course much speculation about what was happening in the quadrant around Kruger 60, which was now off limits to all but official travel. Fortunately there weren’t any big outposts there. Some evacuations were in progress. The rest of the open area was on alert, in case anything happened. But at this point what had happened was still speculation, and the commission wasn’t saying anything conclusive, certainly not that there was a first contact possibility. It would come up occasionally in discussions, but no one in the civilian world was seriously considering it yet. I wondered how long that would last. The military activity was out of proportion to a scientific event. At some point it was going to come out, if only speculatively.

Laura got up and stretched. “I’m starving. How about deep frozen fruti de mare on fusili pasta with salads? Courtesy of Land’s End fine dining.” And laughed.

“Sure why not. Are we going to go through all the good stuff the first week out? I’m not against it, just wondering.”

“Don’t know. Right now it seems like a small joy in a world of insecurity.” She looked at me. “We saw what we saw. Twice. Those people on the radio have no idea what’s out there, we do. In 8 weeks the open zone as we know it could be gone. Who knows.” She turned and went to work in the galley.

“Yea I know.” I sighed again. “Hopefully that won’t happen, and sitting here and worrying about it won’t either. As long as the subspace radio sounds normal, we know things are basically OK. So no point in sweating it. Don’t project the wreckage of the future, my father used to say. Good words.”

“Yea good words. But right now I’d feel better if we knew what we were up against.” She brought back the food and we ate in the cockpit. “Tomorrow I’ll start digging into the stuff the Volga sent back. Maybe something will turn up. Alex, do you know if there are any other such unidentified transmissions around? Maybe we made contact, or have some recordings somewhere, and just don’t realize it.”

“That’s a possibility. Maybe somewhere, but searching for it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Basically you would have to go through every unidentified transmission humans had picked up for... Years. Maybe decades. I don’t know if there is even a catalog of such stuff. Probably somewhere, yea but not even sure where to look. Another thing to ask Jochim about.”

“So are we going right into the closed zone or are we going to stop at Tau Ceti first? Any ideas?”

“I think we are going right into the closed zone. We will pull out at the point Jochim gave us, and then re-plot our route into the closed zone. There is a small gas cloud near the jump point that is shaped like a half pipe. We can fly down that into the closed zone, and that will bring us in to deep empty space, a light year or so from Morda Prima. Then we can warp to Morda Prima, and put into the port there. Once we are there we can start investigating on the ground. These stories seem to be emanating from one watering hole in particular, some place called Phil’s last stop before the stars. What a name. Well what ever. We will try there. Fortunately it’s in

the Morda Prima station. There should be enough people there that if we play it carefully we won't arouse suspicion. I hope.”

“How dangerous is Morda Prima?” She was down to the end of the pasta.

“Well its outside of star command. They have some kind of security there , but its mainly to keep unwanted types out. I’ve been there, twice, years ago, on undercover missions. It's pretty rough, but as long as we stick together it should be OK. But that’s important. We are going to have to stick close together. There are some really rough types there. Do you have any experience with firearms?”

She stopped eating and looked at me. “Not really. I've never owned one. I shot a 22 a few times when I was young back on earth. I don't have any real experience with any of that stuff. Are we going to have to shoot our way out of things?”

“I hope not but you never know. We should set up a simulator, and give you some practice. I can probably rig something up here in the ship. I've got a couple of hand guns, and some laser rifles. We are definitely going in armed. That isn’t a place you go without weapons. Everyone carries something there. Even the prostitutes. Death is pretty common, usually over gambling, bad debts, broken contracts and women. When we go in, I'd strongly suggest you look as non desirable as possible. Women are not very common there, and that is the cause of a lot of trouble there.”

“Great. Men... What a pain in the ass you all can be” And then she giggled.

“Yea I know. Well its like Jochim said, some traits in human nature haven’t changed much in thousands of years. Remember we are only about 60 years into real space exploration, outside of the solar system. What can I tell you?”

“Nothing, I'm rather used to it actually. And so far I've done OK taking care of myself. But then not in places where everyone is carrying weapons, and has a bad attitude, and lawlessness is the rule of the day.”

“Yea, its going to be different than just bumming around normal space stations. Those places are relatively under control. There, forget it. It's considered completely normal to solve personal problems at the end of a gun or a laser rifle out there. And no one cares or is going to stop it.”

“Great the wild west. Jochim said you wanted to live in the wild west.”

“Not really. I just don’t like too much authority breathing down my neck. I don’t trust it frankly. I saw the space commission do to many things I considered borderline.”

She had finished eating, and so had I, she got up and took the refuse to the galley, and put it in the trash compactor, and pressed the button. In a second it was vaporized.

“Well we have 8 weeks to get ready. I guess I should read up on Morda Prima as well.”

“That would be a good idea. Also everything on Trajians 7 in the computer, and this psychopath that runs the place. The dark lord of space. God you would think he could come up with a more original name don't you?”

“Maybe. Probably doesn’t care. After all he is a psychopath, and those people don’t really care about anything but themselves. Probably read too much bad science fiction as a kid.”

“Yea too much Perry Rhodan or something.”

“Who is Perry Rhodan?”

“A science fiction character from German literature. Was very popular for about 100 years from the mid 1960s until well into the 21st century.

“OK, never heard of it”

“Your basic pulp sci fi. It was fun to read, published in a number of languages. But not anything to write home about like HG Wells or Jules Verne or Philip Dick or Gardan Minostras. You could buy a little magazine each week and read what happened next.”

“Ah a serial. Cool. Was it fun to read?”

“Actually yes. I used to read a lot of it as a kid. Probably why I’m out here wandering around doing this now, if you want to know the truth.”

She smiled. “Well that’s cool. I read all kinds of adventure stories, and look where I am. Right here along side of you.”

We looked at each other. Her face was unemotional as always, but her eye had a twinkle in them. And then she looked away, and put her headphones on and went back to working on the tapes. I got out of the chair and climbed into the bunk, and turned on the reading light. And quickly fell asleep.

The next week passed much the same. We both did a lot of reading. Me on everything in the computer about Morda Finsternis Prima, rereading the files on the stories from there, and Trajians 7. She worked on the sound files, and went over the comm signals from the last transmissions of the Volga. The data was pretty extensive, several terabytes worth. It would take several weeks to go thru all of it and see what their scanners had picked up.

At this point we were both sort of in our own little worlds. Life is like that when you are locked up in a tin can with very little space and nothing but time on your hands. Traveling in space is a lot like being on a submarine. You are isolated, and stuck there, and sometimes the less you interact with others the easier it is. Whole days went by when we barely spoke to each other. Then after nine earth days out she suddenly started talking again.

“Alex, I found something. I’m sure of it. These data files from the Volga have some background noise, that after cleaning it up, appears to be transmissions much like those we already have. There are only a few more minutes of them, but they have got to be the same. I ran them through the decryption software, and the frequency distribution of the out put matches that from what we already have. They are not same as the stuff we picked up, and there are a few extra minutes that we didn’t have before.”

“OK that’s good. But I don’t suppose that’s enough to actually decode any words or anything?”

“No probably not. But I have something. I think I can identify some numbers. Coordinates maybe. Here look.”

She showed me what she was working on. She played the files on the loud speaker, and showed me the frequency distribution tables. Then she showed me how that data lined up with the movements of the ships. Yea, it looked like she had pulled up some numbers. The ships were clearly talking to one another, and were using something that looked like number designations, 1, 2, and 3.

“OK so first I got that. Then I reran the software looking for all occurrences of those sounds in all the tapes. I think I got some of it.”

She showed me the next screen of data. There were sounds and numbers from 1 to 10.

“What do you think?”

“I think you are on to something. I hope. I don't know though. We need a couple of hundred hours of this data and we would probably have something. What are we going to do with a few numbers?” I looked over at her, in her eyes. “Yes it's good work, but I fear we are going to need a lot more than that to put together anything that would allow us real comm with these aliens. Although we can definitely use the numbers to do math equations probably and that might establish some kind of communication. That is if anyone wants to communicate.”

“Yea, that would be the question.”

“Keep working on it, let's see what happens.”

The next seven weeks passed much the same. After a while we found ourselves in a routine where one of us would sleep while the other one was awake. She was deeply into the sound files, and at this point had basically memorized all of them. I was just bored, after reading up on all the information I had on the rumors, and the places we were going. It was a massive relief when we finally reached the reentry point. We brought the ship out of warp and arrived in the middle of nowhere. We pulled out of warp, and turned on the main comm scanners. We would be getting news a week old, but that was better than what came over subspace. As soon as we did the warning beacon started ping. There was an incoming message for us from Jochim, a video message. I pulled it up on the screen.

“Alex, this is Jochim. Before you pull into the closed zone, stop at Tau Ceti. You need to make contact with one of our agents there, a guy by the name of Paulo Vinsa. He just came out of the closed zone and can update you on things at Morda Prima. There is supposedly a supply of very highly enriched UUP coming out of there, at a high price, and that it comes from some kind of alien world. Also I have data for you from our linguists. They have made some progress on the transmissions. We have some numbers we think, and we think they are talking about coordinates or something. And they dug through everything we have on record from unknown space signals. They hit a jackpot. One of our research vessels 24 years ago was traveling in the closed zone, half way between Trajians 7 and Kruger 60. They found almost 30 hours of transmissions that were originally thought to be some kind of odd space interference, or pulsars or something. They weren't. They are transmissions that

appear to be in the same code as before. Different encryption code of course but similar in methodology. You'll want to pick that stuff up and give it to Laura. Additionally we have some prototypes of this neutron beam weapon, and I've gotten permission to have one of these installed on your ship. They are expecting you at Johnson center. When you get there contact me. There are developments. Rumor has leaked out that we made first contact and everyone across the open zone is, shall we say, panicked. Expect some weirdness there. You shouldn't have any problems. But be alert. Some people are acting very strangely, much as scientist predicted, not everyone is being rational about all of this. So be careful. Jochim out."

"Well Laura, it looks like we are making a detour. Johnson center. Tau Ceti. And it looks like you were right. I will be very interested to see how their work compares with yours. Get everything ready to up load, and write a quick report"

"No worries, they can have my log book, that's as good as anything. Cool maybe we can get a decent meal before we head off to tombstone... If we have time."

She looked at me, and for the first time I thought she looked... How do I put it... Like she was trying to communicate something to me emotionally with her body language. I smiled.

"Yea some real food would be good after being bottled up in here for that long. Lets go see whats happening at Johnson center."

We set the new coordinates, fired the warp drive and headed to the reentry point around the base there Johnson center is a planetary base on the second planet around Tau Ceti, which is Andrea, after the first commander who visited it. It wasn't more than a couple of hours until we pulled out at the reentry point, and made contact with Johnson center. There were six destroyers waiting at the reentry point, and it was clear they meant business to anyone who didn't identify themselves.

We got immediate permission to land. And started the next part of the adventure.

Part Two

Commission Mobilization

We waited, along with everyone else, at the spaceport on the planet, to see what would happen next. The landing had been uneventful. Laura and I were standing in the spaceport center, while I looked up the contact information for Paulo on my portable computer. The news screens in the spaceport center were abuzz with the news of the movements of star command ships, and the disappearance of the Volga. Ships were already on route to Kroatzys' Station, but we were still waiting for the public announcement of what policy was going to be pursued in regards to the disappearance of the Volga. Word had already leaked out from Kroatzys', and it was impossible to keep it a secret that the commission had lost a frigate, under mysterious circumstances on a distant planet on the edge of the open zone. The news had spread fast, especially since all the larger ships in the fleet were on alert, and the big cruisers, the ones currently in the open system, were underway to Kroatzys' Station.

I pulled up the comm program and contacted Paulo, Jochim's contact man at Johnson center. He answered in about ten seconds.

“Allo, Paulo Vinsa here, can I help you?”

“Yes this is Alex Schaufelauf. Jochim told me to call you when I got here. I'm working for him, he said you can fill me in on whats the situation on Morda Prima.”

“Ah so! Yes I have been expecting your call. We can meet immediately. I'm sure you are planning on moving quickly on this project. Meet me at the travelers cafe in the spaceport center. I'll be there in twenty minutes. Is that good for you?”

“Great. I have a partner with me. So there will be two of us. How will I know you?”

“I'm Portuguese. About 170 centimeters tall, stocky build. Black hair, forty years old. I have a mustache. You cant miss me. You?”

“187 centimeters tall, salt and pepper hair, thin, blue eyes. Short hair. I'll be with a woman, early twenties, reddish brown hair and thin build, she is about 160 cm tall.”

“Fair enough, see you soon.” And the line went dead.

“OK Laura, you ready to go find out more about this place?”

“Sure, the more I know the better.”

We hurried off to the bar.

It didn't take anytime to find Paulo. The place was half empty, and he had picked out a table in the back, as I expected. He was easy to spot, only guy alone even close

to that description. We introduced ourselves and sat down. A waitress came by and we ordered some coffees.

“So whats up, or are you not at liberty to say?” He asked. He eyed Laura for a second. It was clear we struck him as an odd combo at first, but he didn't say anything.

“We are investigating these stories about a supply of high quality UUP coming from the closed zone. And the rumors of where the stuff came from. Beyond that I really can't tell you anymore right now.”

“OK, fair enough.” He smiled. It was clear that if he spent significant time in the closed zone that he was some kind of undercover SC man, and knew not to ask too many questions. “Well, there is definitely a supply of very, VERY pure UUP coming out of closed zone. Rumor has it, its coming from Trajians 7, and that it comes from, shall we say, a non human source. You need to go to a bar on Morda Prima called Phil's, and ask around about UUP. At some point someone will contact you. It's not a well kept secret there, but then little is.” He gave a little laugh.

“I'm curious about these rumors about the source. What do you know about that?”

He shifted in his chair, and looked me up and down once. “Well you don't want to ask too many questions about where its coming from, but the local scuttlebutt on Morda Prima is that its coming from Trajians 7, on the other side of the open zone.” He paused. “Now this is were it gets interesting. The rumor is that it comes from a source that is way way out, and that the pirates at T-7 have got a otherworldly source. In other words, they have established some kind of contact with an extraterrestrial race, and that is where the supply comes from. Rather incredible, eh?” And he looked straight at me in my eyes. Then he looked at Laura's.

“OK. What have you heard about this alien contact?”

“Well it's all rumors. Lots of them. Most of them sound like the usual spacefarer drinking bullshit, but there is a common thread. Somehow an extraterrestrial race made contact with the people out there. Basically they are some kind of pirate too, in their own society, and a decision was made to work together for mutual benefit. There are rumors that this guy who calls himself the lord of the darkness managed to get a few small ships out of them, but no one has ever seen anything. The traders that do the T7 - Morda Prima run are a pretty rough lot. They don't talk much, but sometimes you hear stuff from the whores out there, and it winds it's way back into the general populace. Up until about a year ago there was little contact between the Morda Prima outlaws, who are basically a bunch of rugged individualists who run their lives outside the open zone, and the criminals at T7. Then some freighters started showing up with small quantities of this really pure UUP and selling it, supposedly, to trusted members of the Morda Prima insider crowd. It's not easy to get, I haven't actually gotten a hold of a sample for testing, but I have heard a couple of space miner types talking about it. They use it to push further into the closed zone, and according to them its so pure that they can outrun SC ships with the stuff in their engines. There aren't many people who have actually seen it, but there are a lot of rumors about it. That's about all I have on the UUP stuff.”

“How about these aliens. Any more on them? And what is the basic situation out there at Morda Prima. I was there about fifteen years ago, it was pretty rough back then. How is it now?”

“Well it's still a rough settlement. It's definitely bigger than when you were there, probably at least triple the size. There are now probably close to 2000 people out there, in various locations around the central complex. Most of its deep underground, and they do not of course, invite much contact with the outside world. There best safety is to have as little contact with SC as possible, and not to piss off the SC, so that they don't get a visiting party of half a dozen frigates and a landing party. It's as violent as ever, though there have been some attempts by the local council, or committee as they call themselves to calm things down a bit. You can still kill people there pretty much without interference, but now you are expected to pay a tax for it. Go figure, civilization comes even to outlaw outposts. Don't cross anyone there who is a resident. They have gotten real serious about that, they are laying down some ground rules for that. And don't mess with people on the committee. They are pretty easy to spot, basically they control all the important jobs out there. Like any group of business men, they have found that some degree of stability is a good thing for them. Also they don't harbor criminals from the open zone if they are too dangerous.”

“Can I get in there as some kind of escaped smuggler, looking for fuel and supplies, with a plan to head deeper into the closed zone?”

“Yea, that should work. Tell 'em you are sick of the real world and are heading out to beyond the end. It's a new colony, about five years old, another sixteen weeks beyond Morda Prima. About 500 people there, and much like Morda Prima in the old days. Total wild west town.” He sipped his coffee. “I've been out that way a couple of times, it's pretty primitive, but at some point as the open zone expands, it will probably be the Morda Prima. For the next generation.” He finished his cup and signaled the waitress for another. “You aren't going that far out are you?” And he gave me a long look.

“No, I'm not planning on it. We are more interested in this UUP source. I can see how that would be useful, cut the flight time in half out there. That would be significant.”

“Yes it is. Sixteen weeks is along long time in a small freighter, and it makes commerce out there tough, cut it in half and life is at least twice as profitable.”

“What about these aliens. Any descriptions of them? Any thing about their ships or technology? What about their behavior, social system, etc?”

“Ha, well there are all kinds of rumors. The main thread seems to be they have some kind of advanced drive system, and some kind of collective thinking process. Get 'em alone, and they are pretty easy to deal with, docile, malleable in fact. As a group they are pretty damn smart. They have some kind of low grade telepathy. At least when dealing with humans, that's the gist of the more reliable rumors. Of course you hear all kinds of stuff, three heads, six legs, etc. mostly garbage. But you know how it is, I think.” He gave me a sly smile, and shifted on the bench. “It's the same as ever.” He paused. “Something happened didn't it?” He paused again before I could

respond. "Look you don't have to tell me, but I can figure it out. I think I can tell you this. The rumors are grounded in something. What I don't know. But it can't just be people's imaginations. And there is definitely a supply of highly pure UUP that is going around, that is coming from someplace not on the map. That means something is going on. I'm well aware of the fact that most of the SC ships are leaving the area and heading off to Kroatzys, and that this wouldn't happen unless something big is up." He finished his coffee, and waved the waitress down for a beer. "I have a good idea what is happening. All I can say is be careful, trust almost no one, and keep your head down. If this is what I think it is, its going to be dangerous, but not because the situation itself is dangerous, but rather how people perceive it."

I shifted in my chair. "I think you have a pretty good idea what is going on. I'm curious, who exactly do you work for, or can I ask?"

He smiled. "Well, since you are so direct, and since I have a good feeling about you, I'll tell you. Fifth directorate."

Laura gave us both a puzzled look.

"Young lady, I don't know you, but I'll explain. We're spies. Real spies. We find out stuff no one else can. We don't exist." The beer came and he took a big swig. "Alex, if that's his real name, can explain." He looked at me knowingly. "You all will have plenty of time to talk about it on your flight out there. Personally I'd guess that there is finally a reliable report of first contact. So be it. It was bound to happen sooner or later, and I've been investigating these rumors for over two years. So it's not hard for me to put it together." He took another big swig of his beer. "Just be careful, and try not to over react. If these aliens that appear to have made contact with our social misfits are what they are, then they are not representative of their race. The key here is avoiding some kind of intergalactic world war that wipes out and entire species. Don't you think?" And he smiled again, and finished his pint.

"All good points Paulo. All good points. And yes, there has been an incident. We are investigating it." I waved the waitress down and ordered three beers. "Paulo, I'm not really sure what to tell you. But your hunches are along the right lines. It would probably be doing everyone in the human race, not to mention whatever race this new race is, to keep your ears open and let Jochim know if any new information turns up. And for that matter, us too." I took a business card out of my pocket and gave it to him. "If you hear anything useful, send me a message. We might not get it for a while, but right now I'd like to have all the information I can get about what's happening. Your right. If this thing escalates, out of control, there could be severe consequences. Which, I think, no one, human or otherwise, would really want."

Paulo took the card, and carefully placed it in his wallet. "No problem Alex, let me see what I can turn up. After all that's my job." The beers came, and Paulo made a toast. "Cheers. Here's to positive thinking and actions."

"Cheers!" Chimed in Laura.

"Cheers!" We drank our beers and made a little small talk and left the bar.

"Well Alex, what next?"

“Pretty simple. We are headed to Morda Prima. And we are going to investigate this, what else do we do?”

“Oh I don't know, maybe run to the furthest side of the galaxy and hope for the best?” And she laughed. I did too.

“And, what makes you think it would be any safer there?” I gave her a sideways glance.

“Oh nothing really, just a basic response to a bad situation.”

“Eh, best response, at this point at least, is to continue on with the mission. Trust me if it gets too bad we can always haul ass out of the world of humanity later.” I laughed a little. “Not that that means that would be any easier. Cause it wouldn't. Probably harder than either of us can imagine.”

“Yea, I know. Like I said, I was just being human.”

“Being human is a good idea. Come on let's get back to the ship.”

We made our way back to the Star Chaser. It didn't take ten minutes to get there, and Jochim had left us a message to call him when we got back.

Jochim's Decisions

We both took our seats in the pilots chairs, and pulled up the message from Jochim. No information, just call when you are there. I punched in the code, and waited. Jochim's face came on the screen.

“So how are you all doing after the trip?”

“Not bad, about normal for spending too long in a sardine can. We talked to Paulo, had some useful tips for us. It looks more and more like some rogue element of a alien culture make contact with one of the rogue elements of our society, and now the whole thing is going to be a mess.”

“Yea I have had a chance to catch up on some of his reports. The Admiral sent me his status updates for the last two years. Maybe Laura was right. We will see. So when are you leaving for Morda Prima?”

“Almost immediately, unless you have other instructions.”

“No, I want you to go out there and find out what you can. The sooner the better. I think I should tell you that while we have the admiral in our corner, things be come murkier up the chain of command. There are people up there that don't want you investigating this, and that, it appears, don't want this investigated at all. So you need to be careful out there. And don't trust anyone too much. I got a feeling there might be things going on here that are deeper than any of us know.”

“Yea, I already figured that out. It was pretty obvious.”

“When you get back, send me a deep encrypted report. I don't have any word yet on this super weapon, or whether or not I can have it fitted to your ship. The prototype isn't functional yet. I am going to do my best. Check your mail before you

head off to what ever the next stop is. I am assuming the trail is going to lead to Trajians 7, and I'd like to have you as well armed as possible before you go out there.”

“Yea, I would like that too. I'd also like any and all intelligence you have on the place, anything I can get. Getting in there is going to be hard. I don't want to get blown out of the sky on arrival if I can avoid it.”

“Agreed. You'll be gone at least two weeks to Morda Prima. I'll pull together everything I can for you on Trajians 7. If, for some reason, I cannot talk to you directly, which I don't expect but who knows, I'll leave you a data file with everything I can find in it. Make sure you pull it up before you make any trip out there. It's a very dangerous place. It makes Morda Prima look like a holiday resort.”

“Yea, I know. That is what worries me.”

“Me too Alex, me too. It's a long way out and we don't have much information on the place, or the people who run it. As far as I know we haven't ever gotten a real spy out there, on the ground, to see whats going on. This psychopath who runs the place is a real nut case. Star command should have nuked the place years ago, but it was never a high priority in their minds. Now I think that was a big mistake.”

“Well you can't second guess past decisions.”

“No you can't. Just be careful, and keep your wits about you. I have other things to dealt with. Half the fleet is on the way out here. As of now we haven't had any other incidents, but this whole thing has moved to priority number one in Star Commands eyes. It's going to get more complicated before it gets uncomplicated. Tell Laura I said hello, and good luck to you all.”

“I'll pass it on Jochim, talk soon.”

“Talk soon Alex.”

The comm line went dead.

The Trip to Morda Prima

We left Johnson center without any delay. It was a short trip to Morda Prima, only a six days flight time. We set up the nav computer and blasted out of the Tau Ceti system. We quickly fell into the usual routine, and the days passed quickly. We flew down a long cone of nebula dust. It's not really visible with the naked eye. But at warp speed you can really see it. It glowed purple and orange out the window of the ship. Very colorful.

It was the third day when she suddenly looked over at me and started talking.

“So Alex. I have a question?”

“Sure shoot.”

“Uhm, I'm not really sure how to start. Uhm, we've been flying around the system now for a few months. I guess this means we are friends. I guess I'm trying to ask, where do we stand with each other?”

Now it was my turn to squirm a little in the seat.

“Yes, we are friends.” I answered.

“Yes but... What does that mean, Alex?”

“Good question Laura. Truth is, I guess I'm not really sure what that means at this point. How about you?”

She sighed. “If you mean do I know what I think? Honestly, I'm not sure right now. I know I like you and I trust you. That's strange for me. Its been a long time since I felt that way.”

“Me too really. Strange feeling isn't it?”

We looked at each other. You could hear the hum of the engines in the ship. The windows glowed an eerie purplish green color.

“Yea. It is.” She went back to her notes, and pulled the headphones on, to work on the language tapes.

I fell asleep in the commanders chair. When I awoke several hours later she was still working on the tapes, and making notes. It was quiet aboard the star chaser. I got up and went to the galley and made myself a cup of coffee. Then I went and sat back in the commanders chair, and pulled up all the latest information on active pirates in the Morda Prima area. Generally it was pretty quiet. A man by the name of Mistroto Larson had the rep as the most daring of the local smugglers. He was suspected of running untaxed UUP, trade goods and drugs throughout the region. Something of a heroic figure to some people, known for a sense of fair play, but slippery as a fish.

I put my tablet down, and rubbed my eyes.

Laura was working intently on the sound files. There was no trace of any emotion about anything. What did I think of her? I didn't really know the answer to that myself. It was like suddenly she just appeared in my life, and it felt comfortable. That felt strange, yes, but not uncomfortable. I wasn't really sure what to think. After my wife died, I pretty much buried most of my emotions for the first five years. Now I didn't really think about it anymore. I had gotten used to living alone in space, and it had seemed to suit me. Until Laura dropped into my life. Now it seemed normal to share the ship with her. Her question was a good one. One that I didn't yet have an answer to. Oh fond of her, definitely, that I was. How fond of her was I? Very good question.

I had the rest of the trip to ponder that.

An hour later she took off the headphones and took a big breath. She looked tired, but satisfied.

“So Alex, what about this spy stuff. What were you involved in the the star commission? And what does Paulo do?”

She looked at me expectantly, awaiting an answer.

“Hmm. Well let's start with Paulo. He works for Star Commission's Fifth directorate. It's the spy organization. They keep tabs on things that could be a problem for the Commission. Everything for internal uprisings, dissidents, rebellions etc, to what's happening in the closed sections of the universe. Really its a pretty small group. But they generally have pretty good intelligence about whats going on where. They keep a very low profile, and specialize in gathering information, nothing more. They don't do assassinations, for instance. Or things like that. It's bad for the intelligence business.

“I see. I take it there is another department that handles that kind of thing.” She said, slightly sarcastically.

“Yes well actually there is. Face it, every government in history has had some kind of secret service, intelligence organization, etc. The Star Commission is no different.” I paused. “So Paulo's job is to keep an eye on things out in the closed zone. Probably poses as a smuggler, and probably does a fair bit of it to make the story stick. That's pretty typical operating procedure.

“OK, Fine. What did you do in Star Command?”

“Like I said, I worked in special operations. We acted on the info guys like him collect.”

“Acted on the info eh? So.. you were the assassin?” She said quietly.

“No, not actually, I ran a special operations combat team. More like an assault team. Sometimes it got pretty rough, but you have to look at what you are dealing with. Smugglers and criminals aren't always the nicest people.”

“Why did you stop?”

I looked at her.

“I got tired of it. And I started to question what we were doing. Yes most of the people we brought in or fought against were pretty bad. But I started to see the logic in some of the thinking behind the stories. I started to have doubts about what we were doing, and so I left. Really there wasn't any other choice. You cannot do that kind of work if you have any doubts about what you are doing. That leads to mistakes, and that leads to people getting killed needlessly. So I gave it up.”

“Was there any particular incident that pushed your decision one way or another?” she looked at me, and waited.

“Yes. Yes there was. I found something out there I had questions about. I never got any good answers, and decided that that life wasn't for me anymore.”

“What did you find?” She asked.

“I found... Evidence... Conclusive evidence of an alien race. A crash on a planet. I was in the closed zone chasing smugglers as usual. Way out. By Kalies Drift, a little planet named CG671c. We investigated it and then the report disappeared into the bowels of some filing cabinet. The electronic files were all erased, as far as I know. I know I couldn't get access to them after we closed the case. It raised doubts in my mind about the SC.” I stopped, realizing I had just told her more than anyone I had told before. “I told my wife I found something but then she was killed shortly after that. I never discussed it with anyone again.” I looked at her.

“I see. Yes it makes sense now, why they have you working on this, doesn't it.”

“Yes it does.”

She looked away for a minute. The she spoke.

“So do you think this means we are in some kind of danger from SC?” She asked.

“Good question.” She looked at me. “The truth is, I don't know the answer. I've never had any problems with SC. Just the thing with the files disappearing, and the fact the whole thing was clearly buried. Since then nothing has led me to believe anyone in SC was really interested in any of it. The crash was old, probably hundreds of years old. Maybe more.”

“But it reminds you of this situation for some reason?” Her perceptivity of things was a lot higher than you first realized.

“Yes, the ship we found used what looked like a similar construction technique. Liquid metal skin. Held together by some kind of energy field, most likely. And the ship looked somewhat similar to what we saw out there. It wasn't the same, that's for sure, ours was a wreck, and bigger. Probably at least 500 years old, maybe 5000, who knows. Hard to tell, I'm not really a trained archeologist. So yea, I wonder about it.”

I realized I was thinking out loud at this point, and stopped.

“They know that too you know.”

And with that she got up and went to the galley.

We didn't talk about either subject again on the flight out there. She was busy working on the sound files and learning to shoot at the makeshift practice range I set up on the back side of the galley. I had rigged up a small simulator with a portable monitor and some creativity. I figured we both needed to know how to shoot if it came down to it, and any practice was better than no practice. True I couldn't set up a real range, etc, but with a simulator at least she would have the idea down. Anything is better than nothing in such a situation. I busied myself with the ship, and the files Jochim had sent me. The quietness of it suited me. Clearly she was still thinking, about what our friendship meant at this point. I didn't need to think too much about it. It was obvious to me that if we survived this adventure we were probably going to be close for a long time, or hate each other. Assuming we both survived it of course.

Morda Prima

We made the reentry just a few hundred kilometers from Morda Prima. Immediately we got a radio intercept.

“Unknown vessel, identify yourself. This is Morda Prima.”

“This is the Space Chaser, private freighter. We are have UUP for sale, and would like to relax for a while in a non-Space Commission port, if you follow my drift. Request permission to land.”

“We don't have any record of a freighter named Space Chaser on our records. Can you provide further identification?”

“Yes, I used to command a ship called the the Dark Racer a couple of years back. Got into some trouble with SC types, spent some time as a guest of theirs at the prison at New Demos. Got out about three months ago, and got a new ship. My name is Alex Grogan. You might have heard of me.”

“Wait while I check our computers.”

We waited, not for long.

“Ah, Alex Grogan. You were arrested for smuggling UUP stolen from an SC base near Wolf 1061. No problem, you can land at docking port 29. Welcome to Morda Prima. I'm sure you can sell some of your UUP here, and find some... Relaxation.”

You could hear the radio operator chuckle. “How many in your party?”

“Just two, me and my woman. Nora Grey.”

“A woman eh? Always welcome.”

“My woman, as I mentioned.”

“But of course. Welcome to the closed zone, Mr Grogan.”

The transmission cut off, and coordinates were radioed to the ship. We programmed the nav computer and prepared to land.

“Hmm. Definitely not SC radio protocol.” Said Laura.

“Um, no definitely not. But then we aren't in Kansas anymore are we?”

“Where is Kansas?”

“It was a line from an old movie, the wizard of Oz. I guess you never saw that one either.”

“No I don't think so.” She was pulling on her heavy jacket, and boots. She put the small pistol in one boot and the combat knife I gave her in the other. Then she put the pistol belt with the .357 on, and slung the laser rifle over her shoulder. “So does this look piratey enough?” She smiled, but there was a dark sense of humor beneath her words. She looked... dangerous. Dangerous was good, to my way of thinking.

“Yea, it will do. I would stay close at all times. If you need to go piss or something let me know. Don't drink anything unless we buy it. It could be spiked with something. Women here are one of three types. Either they are pirates, and kick ass worse than most men, they are prostitutes who take no gaff from anyone, or they belong to someone. I'd portray yourself as type one. If anyone asks we have been together for years. Make it clear right up front you don't trust anyone. Except me. That should keep people off you back.”

She pulled a little hat over her head, and tucked her hair up inside it. She with the heavy jacket, boots, and rifle she didn't look very female at all. “And what if someone pisses me off. Do I shoot them?” The look in her eye was cold. I would not have wanted to piss her off, her eyes looked empty of life all of a sudden.

“Only if you think you have to. Lets try to avoid any shoot outs as much as possible. The less attention we draw the better.”

“How much of that UUP are you going to sell?”

“Hopefully none of it. Let's see what develops. When we leave the docking bay we lock everything down, and use the iris scans for keying. No one gets in for any reason, period. If something goes wrong and I get killed, get out of here. Get on the ship, and head for someplace other than Tau Ceti, and make contact with Jochim. That's the best I can tell you. This is a rough place. Trust me.”

“OK. Let's do it.” She said.

And with that we slowly descended to the surface.

The ship wound its way down into the atmosphere of the planet, following the pre-programmed course in the nav computer. We entered the outer atmosphere, and the windows glowed bright yellow, then blue, and then white. Morda Finsternis Prima was a small station on a rocky planetoid around a small brown dwarf binary star system. It was rarely dark here, but it was never really light either. We looked out the main windscreen as we descended. The place was barren, and dark; a black and brown and dark reddish planet. It had a breathable atmosphere, but just barely; low oxygen content, and lots of impurities in the atmosphere. We followed the pre-programmed decent course and soon the we could see the outline of an outpost. The nav computer tracked us into the landing dock. As we got closer you could see just how rocky and inhospitable the place really was. Jagged points of rock reached several hundred meters in the air, and there was nothing but a reddish dust to be seen over everything. Most of Morda Prima was built into the rock, with only a few buildings and facilities on the surface. There were some green houses to the south of the landing area: They grew their own food here, but it was tough with the low level light conditions and required additional lighting in the green houses. You could see them glowing with the artificial light, glowing in the eternal twilight. The ship took a steep decent and then pulled up at the last minute and settled down onto the landing pad. You could here the little nav jets whistling as we descended to a soft landing. It was a short walk to the entrance. We got up, gathered our gear, opened the airlock and stepped out into the cold.

It was at least fifty below outside. In the summer here it got up to a little above freezing but this was winter and the winters here were brutal. Temps down to -120° Celsius. So cold the atmosphere could freeze your lungs. Today was a nice winter day. No major storms, no electrical disturbances, etc. We relocked the ship and quickly walked to the airlock. There was a big yellow button on the left side, I pressed it and we stepped into the airlock. As soon as we were in the outer door closed and the main door opened. There were four people there to greet us, the docking supervisor, and three large guys with guns. The docking supervisor seemed pretty gregarious. The three men with guns did not.

“G'day mate, I'm Anton Marcus. Nice to have you here, Mr Grogan. As you know we are a pay as you go kind of operation, it's a hundred credits a day for guests to land here. How long are you staying?” He was a big guy, with a big smile that said he wasn't the kind of person you wanted to trust with anything valuable to you. But as one of the residents here, and as someone in the power structure, probably OK to deal

with for short term activities. He wore big heavy fur boots, and a long cape, made out of some kind of heavy cloth. The guards with him were dressed in heavy brown coats, tall boots, some kind of fur cap, and didn't smile at all.

“Not sure yet. How about I pay for a week now, and if we decide to stay longer I'll come and see you before the week is up.”

“Ah, a man who understands our system. No worries. My office is in the center of the docking area, I'm easy to find. Stop by anytime. You and your friend are always welcome.” He gave Laura a long look, with a sly smile, and made a slight bow.

“Many thanks. As you said, she is my friend. We operate as a pair.”

“I'm sure you do Mr Grogan. Enjoy your stay here. I'm sure you will find things quite comfortable. I checked our records, it looks like its been quite some time since you have been here. We have some new facilities, even a hotel.”

“A hotel eh. Interesting, but no thanks, we'll be staying on the ship. Always works for me.”

“Of course it does. Well have a nice time. Remember, areas marked with red panels are off limits. Enter and, well, we shoot you. Guests are permitted at the bars, eating facilities, bordellos, stores, gun shops, the hotel, and negotiation rooms. Local facilities are off limits unless you are accompanied by a resident. We do offer wide range of supplies, all of which can be delivered to your ship for a small fee.” He waved the three men off, and they left immediately. Then he looked back at me right in the eyes. “Live and let live is my motto. I'm sure you know how things are around a place like this. We would prefer no... Extraordinary incidents, there are fees involved if it comes to that. Follow me, and I'll show you to the public spaces.”

He turned and walked down the hall to the central pod. It was a short walk maybe five minutes. He said nothing along the way, and neither did we. We reached the central pod, and there was a wide staircase to a second level, that led into a hill on the side of the docking area. The entrance to Morda Prima, cut into solid rock, that had been mined out 30 or more years before. Originally, before the organization of the star commission, there wasn't any defined open or closed zone. That didnt come until the SC secured control over all the planets and bases humanity had constructed. Originally this was a UUP mining operation, but was judged too far out and too thin resource wise to make it part of the open zone. It fell in to some disuse, although it was never competely abandoned. Over the years it mutated into an outpost for smugglars, adventurers and free thinking types traveling space. It had been expanded over the last generation, and was now a colony, 90 percent underground.

“You have been here before, yes?”

“Yes I remember the way, no problem.”

“Good, remember stay out of red zones. Other than that enjoy our facilities. Have a nice day Mr Grogan.” And turned into his office without waiting for a reply.

We looked at each other said nothing.

“Come along Laura, let's get something to eat.”

“Agreed.” She said, and we headed into the colony, and up the stairs from our docking bay. There was a sealed door that could be opened to bring in larger

quantities of supplies and the like. The floor was generally reserved for small vehicles. There was a gantry above it, about 1 meter wide where pedestrians walked. The inside of the entrance was clearly a natural cavern, that had been hollowed out and improved upon. The cavern led away from the docking bay at an angle, off to the right. We followed the passage and came to a larger center room. In the middle of the room was a freight elevator that a large stair case wrapped around it. It was a steel, open frame staircase, and it lead up wards about five meters. The cavern was about twenty five meters in diameter, and roughly circular, with more passages leading off in different directions. There were a few people around, about half a dozen of the guard types, and a couple of freighter pilots. The harbor masters office was in the center of the cavern, next to the freight elevator. The lighting was raw, but adequate. When we got to the top, we came to a passageway, about five meters wide and three meters high, that led deeper into the hillside. There were blast doors that could be quickly closed at the entrance, heavy blast doors, that would keep out almost anything except a nuclear blast.

We entered the passage. It was dim, lit only by some low wattage lighting. The first fifty meters was completely empty except for the solid rock walls of the passage. Then it opened into a natural cavern, about seventy five meters in diameter, with a low roof. Cavern contained structures in it that made use of every available space, in the center of the area were clearly some buildings, if you could call them that, that were at least three, maybe in four stories high. You couldn't really see all the way across, as the simple functional spaces were laid out here; it looked like a little maze of sorts. There were small shops, food stands, and window girls, whores who rented little stalls where the windows were lined in purple lighting. A long line of these places met us as we left the hall from the space port. Each had one or two girls in them. Some of them wore lingerie, some of them nothing at all. They immediately started eyeing us.

“Hey big guy, wanna have some fun? Twenty credits, one hour, you and your partner. How about it big guy?”

We ignored them and moved on.

Laura leaned over to me. “Yea, you were right. This place is a lot rougher than anyplace I've seen before.”

“Like I said, it is what it is. Let's go check out this place called Phil's. Then we can go back to the ship and figure out or next move.”

“OK, sounds like a plan.”

We walked down the path past more of the same. It wasn't crowded, but it there were people about. Paulo had said about two thousand people, and based on what I saw on decent there must be at least fifty ships here from various places, probably another four hundred people based on a rough estimate of their average size and crew. They were all clearly people who lived on the edges of society. Some of them looked rough, really rough. We avoided their eye contact with anyone, and moved down the alley.

There were lots of women for sale, and some of what were clearly better quality bordellos. Also little shops here and there, and food stands selling veggie sausages, potatoes, dried meats, and, if you had money, more expensive delicacies like fried noodle dishes, meat pies, sausages (very expensive) and the like. We passed two small bars. According to Paulo the place we were looking for was in the back of the main area, at the end of the cavern. We continued towards the back, passing along a long corridor, now with offices for various traders, and places to do whatever deal you were interested in doing, very privately. Or at least that was what they wanted you to believe. I wondered how many of those meeting spaces were tapped and had some kind of video system built in.

Phil's place was easy enough to find, just where Paulo described it. We passed another bordello, and what looked like some office space, and it was right in front of us. "Phil's Last Rest Stop" said the sign out front. It had a vaguely European theme out front, with cheap fake half timber on the facade. There was a large real oak door at the front. We went in.

It was dark in the place, with a long bar at an angle on the left, rough tables in front of us, and clearly some private rooms off to the right. We picked an empty table at the back of the place and sat down. A waitress came over, and took our order. She was dressed pretty conservatively, considering the location, I would have expected more of a working girl look, as most of these women at closed zone places supplemented their income in varying ways. A long dark blue jumpsuit, something that looked vaguely like some mining company issued work outfit, but nicer. I was a little surprised, thinkgs were clearly a bit more advanced than the last time I was out this direction, but that was years ago. Maybe the women didn't need the extra money here, or maybe customs were just different. We got a couple of beers. And waited.

We didn't have to wait for long. After a few minutes a guy slid up to the table, and asked if he could sit down. I nodded non committally, and he sat across from us. I could tell Laura was uncomfortable with this guy, she moved differently than usual. He was dressed in something furry, but nothing that had fur from earth. Probably some kind of skin from one of the creatures on Tau Ceti, probably also an illegal pelt. He had on thick leather pants, dark brown, and boots. It was a practical outfit, if you ever had to go outside here.

"You all looking for the best fuel in this half of the galaxy?" He asked without any introductions.

"Well, maybe. What do you have to offer?" I looked him over. He looked like your typical closed zone type. Ruggedly independent, reasonably smart and generally dangerous.

"Something unusual. Here, look at this crystal." And he pulled out a nice little crystal of UUP. It was perfectly formed, and had no sign of impurities in it, it looked like cut glass. I looked at it more closely. You couldn't see a flaw in the crystal anywhere. It was an amazing find. The purer the crystal, the better the power output from it. Generally UUP is processed by melting under strong electromagnetic fields,

and then regrown as synthetic crystals. Usually good stuff is about sixty maybe seventy percent pure. Really its more than that, but flaws in the crystalline structure lower its value. This stuff looked like it was at least ninety nine percent pure, there wasn't a flaw to be seen in it anywhere. I was impressed.

“Not bad eh? It's a thousand credits a kilo. Discounts on more than 10,000 kilos. You should take that back and do a scan on it. Trust me its really good.” He knew he had my attention, once I looked at his sample. It was about ten kilograms of UUP. Enough for a serious joy ride.

“Yea it looks damn pure. Even better than Star Command fuel. Who produces this stuff?” I asked him, and waited for the reply, hoping we would get some useful information out of him.

“That's a good question. Comes from the other side of the open zone, out of Trajians 7. No one knows the whole story, but rumor is its coming from a supply connection that isn't human. Or maybe it's just coming from the purest deposit of UUP anyone has stumbled upon in the universe so far. Take your pick. The quality is excellent though. Everybody out here is flying on this stuff now. If they can afford it.” He looked very satisfied as he finished that statement.

“You must get quite a performable boost at this level of purity.” I suggested to him, mostly I wanted to see what he would reply.

“You do. Some people have reported as much as a four hundred percent performance increase.”

“That's impossible. The stuff would have to be better than ninety nine percent pure. No one can refine UUP that well, and we haven't ever found any deposits like that in the galaxy.”

I looked at the sample again. It was amazingly clear, and the crystal was perfect in its structure.

“Well maybe it isn't from these parts of the galaxy. The important thing is I can get you a thousand kilograms of it. What do you think?”

“OK so let me think about it. What did you say your name was?”

“Harold, just call me Harold. Phil the bar guy knows me, and where to reach me if you want to talk. Look, I can get you five hundred kilos of this stuff for half a million credits. It's as good as a thousand kilos of the normal stuff. Take that sample back to your ship and do a scan on it. It's as pure as the driven snow, one hundred percent pure UUP. It has more power, and you can figure on a one hundred percent increase in speed in your ship when you use this as the fuel. Take it out for a test run.”

“About ten kilos here. Yea I can do some tests on it. You're around here all the time?” I was ready to take it back to the ship, test it and try it out, and I'm sure he knew that.

“Sure, like I said, Harold is my name, just Harold. You can ask Phil about me, I'm a resident here. He can get me anytime you want to talk to me. Go take it out for a test run and see what you think. Then come back here and let me hook you up. Trust me this is the best stuff in the galaxy. There is no better. It comes from alien processing technology and there is a massive performance boost when you get the

purity over eighty percent. Human factories in the open zone cant even approach seventy percent pure normally, with out denigrating the crystal structure. And that's part of the secret. If the crystal structure is perfect you also get an added performance boost. You don't have to trust me, just go check it out.”

“OK we will do that. Let me and my partner discuss this and we will get back to you. Thanks Harold, we will be in touch.” Laura and I looked at each other and got up to leave. We thanked him and bade him goodbye for the time being.

“No problem Alex, hope you enjoy the ride.”

Proof

We left the bar and headed back to the ship, winding our way back through the alley ways of shops, girls, and what appeared to be office spaces. Laura had the sample of UUP in her rucksack. It didn't take us ten minutes to reach the docking port and the ship. We hurried down the metal stair case, through the small door to the outside and scurried back in the ship. We closed the airlock, and went to the galley table, where we could examine what we had bought. We opened the rucksack, took out the box, and opened it. Inside was a large, unusually uniform crystal of UUP, that was close to pure, by the looks of it. We got out the portable scanner, and started running tests on the sample.

“My god Alex, this stuff is at least ninety nine percent pure. Our refineries can't even get to this level of purity. This can't be a human made product.”

“Probably not, but it could be something someone is mining on an unknown planet. We have to do a molecular scan on it, but yea, I think we have something here that we, that is we humans, didn't engineer.”

She ran a scan on it. “The structure is pure crystalline UUP. Perfect, as far as I can tell. Unbelievable. This thing, in the engine, would at least double the power. Maybe more.” She paused. “that was a little weird dont you think, that he found us that quickly? Isnt that suspicious? Are you sure we arent involved in some kind of set up?”

“Well, our arrival would have been noticed by anyone who is selling anything useful. There was nothing secret about that. And, im sure someone informed someone about us, probably the dock master has something going with him, informed Harold of who we were, what we looked like etc. the Dock master probably gets a kickback or percentage of the sales. So it's in his interest to see to it that the stuff sells. Money makes the world go around, dont you know. Also Alex Grogan was a known name in these parts a decade ago. Good friend of mine, in fifth derectorate. Quit and they built him a new identity so he wouldnt be discovered in his new life. So that establishes our credibility.” I paused a second and picked up the crystal and studied it. Flawless, to the human eye. I had never seen anything quite like it in my travels. This made the

stuff I was mining on Kruger 60 look just plain bad. I put the crystal back down on the table.

“Hell, we ought to go back and buy a couple of thousand credits worth. We might need it later. We could outrun anything in the open zone with this stuff, at least for a short period of time. That might be very useful at some point on this soiree through space.”

“Do you think its safe buying anything from this guy? I don't think he is very trustworthy.” She looked at me, and it was clear she didn't trust him at all. Not that I could blame her.

“No I agree, but fifty kilos of this stuff could really help us out in a fix. Yea I think we should think about it.”

“And you agree this isn't a product from our world?”

“Yea, definitely. This stuff isn't anything like what we get. This makes the stuff on Kruger 60 look tame by comparison. The performance of a UUP crystal increases massively if the purity and crystal structure is really good. You don't see the big performance increase until you hit the really high purity ranges, and then it increases very quickly and fast.” I was lost in studying the crystal again. The possibilities for space travel were seriously significant. You could easily double the radius of the open zone with this stuff, maybe bigger, and that would open dozens, maybe even hundreds, of new star systems up to exploration and development. If you had a large enough supply it would change the relationship of man to space, and speed up exploration by maybe 2 or 3 generations. I pondered the crystal, and she spoke.

She looked at me. “You are going to go back for more aren't you?”

I turned and looked at her. “Yea I think we are. Fifty kilos of this stuff would be a real ace in the hole in an emergency. A thousand would do us a lot of good if we have to make a long run somewhere fast. It would keep us ahead of any SC ships, unless they got something we don't know about.”

“True. And that could come in handy if something goes wrong.” She looked at me. “Should we take it out for a test run? Can we do that? What will the landing port people think?”

“Yea that's no problem. We can take it out for a spin. The problem is we buy the stuff and everyone knows we got it. We'll probably have to pay some bribes to keep it reasonably quiet, and that's just rumors in the bars. Obviously, as outsiders anyone that's an insider that needs to know what we bought will.”

“Well, it means we can run as fast as them as well.”

“It does. OK. Let's take it out for a test run and see how this stuff works.”

We contacted the port authorities and gave them notice we were going on a little test run to try out some new parts. We filed for a four hour off world window. We got our clearance, took off and were shortly in orbit. Then we de-orbited the planet, and flew out to a jump point. Laura got up and went back to the service area behind the galley, where cargo was stored, and where you could manually load crystals in the engine nacelles, using a automated system. She loaded the sample into the engine, and returned to the cockpit. I typed in the commands for a short 15 minute test run,

and we went to warp. The effects of the pure fuel were obvious immediately our speed was increased by almost two hundred percent, and the ride was smooth as a whistle. We took the ship out for fifteen minutes one direction and then and then warped back to a re-entry point. Our speed increase on the monitors was almost two hundred and ninety percent. We shut down the warp engine, and made the landing at Morda Prima again, after contacting the port controllers. We hadn't said anything during the flight, we just watched the monitors. After we landed, we sat and looked at each other.

“My god that stuff is for real. Can you believe it?” Her eyes betrayed her astonishment. Mine probably did too. This was something extraordinary, and clearly not anything produced in the known world.

“Yes I can believe it. And we need to get some.”

“OK so how do we do this?”

“Pretty straight forward, hopefully, we go back and find Harold and buy a thousand kilograms. We sell what we got in trade, after we off load it. Then we get out of here I think. That stuff isn't normal, and we know its coming from Trajians 7, according to the information we have. I think it's time we pay a visit to Trajians 7.

I got up and started getting my things together for another trip into the colony.

“So get your stuff. We are going back down to Phil's to find this Harold guy.”

“OK. Do you think we both should go?”

“Yes actually I do. I think we present a slightly stronger position of power that way.”

“I figured you were thinking like that. OK. Ten minutes.”

Laura put on the gear again, including the weapons. We both put on our capes against the weather, as it was now dark on the planets surface, and even a few minutes outside were pretty unbearable, and headed out of the ship, through the airlocks, down the passageways and back to the colony. We passed the garish lights of the inner market once again, and this time it seemed that things were in full swing, must be closer to their evening here. We went down the long passage back to the bar at the back of the cavern. We were back at Phil's, and walked in.

The place was busier than two hours ago. A lot busier. As I said, it must have been their evening time here, things were definitely more active than earlier. There were a lot people in the bar, traders, smugglers, what I assumed were locals who had various jobs around the station, and a lot more women, and these women were clearly either the working type or pretty rough themselves. I didn't see Harold anywhere. We went to a table in the back and took our places, and when the waitress came we ordered a couple of non alcoholic beers. She came back with them in a few minutes and we waited.

We sat, and drank half our beers, and didn't talk.

“How long should we wait do you think?”

“Oh not long, I'm going to do what he said, ask this guy Phil about him. I just want to take a little time doing it.”

“Oh OK, Stupid me.”

“Nah you just don't have a lot of background in this kind of thing yet.”

“Very true. And I'm not sure that I want to.”

“Well OK. I'll be back in a couple of minutes. Don't talk to strangers.”

“I don't think you need to worry about that. Not today anyway”

“Cool, didn't think so, just a reminder.”

I got up and walked over to the bar, and asked for Phil. A young guy, big, but friendly came over. He was dressed in a plaid shirt, and jeans, and cowboy boots. Everyone here seemed to wear boots. “Hello, what can I do for you then good sir?” He had an english accent, and sounded downright jolly, and seemed out of place as the owner of a rough tavern in the middle of nowhere.

“Actually I'm looking for a guy named Harold. He was here about an hour ago. Any ideas where I can find him?” I asked, in a low voice.

“Easy, I'll give him a ring and he will be by in ten minutes or so.”

“Ah, nice, thanks.” I smiled and nodded my head towards him.

“No problem mate, anytime.” he turned and went to the counter behind the bar. Phil picked up his phone and called Harold. It was a short conversation, and clearly Harold was on his way back. I thanked Phil again and went back to sit with Laura.

“He should be here in ten minutes. At least that's the story.”

“How is this going to happen?”

“Not really sure yet. We are going to make it up as we go along.”

“Yea OK, I thought so.” She gave me a look. I ignored it.

We both took another swig from our beers, and waited. It wasn't long before Harold came in the front door. He spotted us quickly and came over and sat down.

“So nice to see you all again, how did you like the ride?” And he grinned at us.

“The ride was, impressive. OK, you got a deal. I'll take one thousand kilograms, at one million credits. That was the offer correct?”

“Correct, you have a deal.” He smiled and reached over for a handshake. I did the same and he seemed confident about the whole thing. I wasn't as confident as he seemed to feel.

“Do you have any use for normal UUP, I'm going to have to drop some here in order to load up with your stuff.” I told him. I didn't expect him to want to buy the stuff, but hopefully he knew a place where I could unload some of our store and sell it for something less than highway robbery. But right now I was less worried about the money, which was coming from Star command anyways, than the transaction.

“Not me, but you can always talk to Phil, he can get rid of that for you no problems. Probably he'll buy it off of you directly and resell it himself. Makes a tidy second income that way.” Harold appeared to have believed he had solved the problem.

“I see.” I stopped and looked at him. “So, when can you deliver? I can pay cash credits on delivery. I'm in bay 29.”

“No problem, give me about an hour or so, maybe ninety minutes. I can get a crawler, load it up and stop by your docking bay. Payment on delivery is fine.”

“OK sounds like a plan.”

“Good. Like I said you need to talk to Phil, the bar keep. He will know someone that wants thousand kilograms of UUP, standard grade. Go talk to him, he can set you up. Good man. Probably the most honest one on this whole planet.” Harold winked at me and got up. He leaned over before he spoke. “I’ll deliver it to your ship personally in two hours. That should give you time to make a deal with Phil and unload the thousand kilograms you have, and make room for the new stuff. See you then” And he turned and walked out of the bar.

“Well, I guess you talk to Phil now eh?”

“I guess so Laura. Let’s go meet this guy for real, and find out what he is about.”

We walked over to the bar. Behind it stood a big guy, but fairly young, late twenties maybe. With blond hair and a pleasant face. He was standing at the end of the bar, washing glasses and talking to a guy with long hair and glasses, a guy who seemed rather out of place in a pirate hangout, he looked more like a college professor.

“Hi, My names Alex Grogan, I’m looking for Phil. Believe that would be you, Harold told me I should talk to you.”

“Yes that would be me, what can I do for you.” He looked me in the eye, not in a threatening way, more of a genuine desire to be of service.”

“I have some UUP I’d like to sell off, rather quickly. A thousand Kilograms. Like I said, Harold told me to talk to you.”

“AH Harold, that loveable old swashbuckler. Good man, he is. Yes well now, a thousand Kilos, eh. That should be doable. I have a small storage shed out at the landing docks. Actually depending on the price you are looking for I could buy it right off you and take delivery. I can see Harold must have made another sale.”

“Indeed. I would think the quality of the stuff he has would have pretty much destroyed the market for normal UUP.” I was interested in his answer.

“Oh not really, his stuff is super expensive. There is still a going market for normal quality UUP. Its expensive stuff and not many traders out here can buy in larger quantities. Many of these guys just buy what they need for a run, and then a little extra. I’m sure I can sell your stuff off.

Just then a tall blond guy, who didn’t look very pleasant, came up and pushed his way in front of Laura. He face was scared, and burned, obviously he had been in a fight or an accident somewhere. He was wearing a leather set of overalls, and looked like a local, something about his body language said he lived here. He had on a lazer pistol at his side.

“Hey there young lady, how are you doing today?” He kind of leered at her, it was clear that smiling wasn’t his strong point. His eyes sparkled, but not in a way that said there was anything nice about him as a person. It didn’t take long to decide I didn’t like him.

“Just fine. What do you want?” Laura was as short and curt as she could make it. It was pretty clear Laura found him as disturbing as I did.

“Hey easy now, I just wanted to chat a bit. You got a problem with that?”he leaned forward as he spoke, and used his body to make his point clear.

“Well I don't want to chat. Go away.” Said Laura.

“OK OK, already. Man, not very friendly.”

I turned and looked at him. Hard to judge if this guy was really a threat or not, his face was hard to read. He looked weather worn, and had piercing blue eyes. He moved unusually slowly.

“No problems. But we're a couple. In these parts that could be a problem if the people in the couple aren't interested in making friends. Which.... I don't think we are...”

His look hardened as soon as I spoke those words, and I realized this guy could be dangerous. You could see all the muscles in his body stiffen up as I spoke. I wondered what we were getting into.

“Hey I didn't ask you, seems to me the lady has a right to make her own decisions!” And he glared at me.

“Seems to me I do have that right, and I made my decision, I'm not interested in talking to you. Later.” Laura gave him the evil eye and then turned away from him before he had a chance to respond. She ducked back to my right. I hoped I wasn't going to be a human sand bag for a bullet or something.

“OK OK!”

He seemed to snarl a little and then stalked back to the other side of the bar, where he had some kind of a buddy, short guy, but very stocky.

“That doesn't look good, Laura.”

“No it doesn't.” Said Phil. He had watched the whole thing, hard to miss when we were all standing right in front of him. “Perhaps I can help you out, follow me please.”

He didn't wait for our response, but quick as a cat Phil led us into the back, what appeared to be some kind of prep room for the bar. I was surprised how fast he moved for being a big guy. He moved so fast, that I didn't have time to even look back and see if the obnoxious blond guy and his buddy were even watching us. We slipped past a swinging set of doors, into the back of the Place. There was a little kitchen there, and an office, and we slipped into the office as quickly as we could. He pulled out a phone and called. “Dirk, it's Phil. I'm going to escort these two out the back, can you watch the bar for ten minutes while I'm gone? Trying to avoid any unpleasant public disagreements. Good.” And he hung up the phone.

“OK we just have a little time. Yes, those two can really be a handful, yes, they can.” He shook his head sadly. “But fortunately I got you out of there in time. Well here is the plan. My storage facility is locker 1276. Here is the code. Simply fill it up, it has a mass detector in it. I'll give you 300,000 credits for 1000 kilograms of UUP, sixty percent pure, and adjust by market rates up or down once the analysis is finished. As soon as I see the mass density report, I'll send you the money, shouldn't be more than a couple of minutes after you close the door on the locker.” he smiled at us. “You can go out the back here, there is a passage to the right that leads out behind the bar, on the other side of the place. Slip out there, check to make sure that idiot and his buddy aren't waiting out there for you, and then hurry back to your ship. If

someone bothers you in the docking bays, you can shoot them and the local authorities won't bother you, everyone here knows your ship is your castle.” He caught the look on Laura's face, and smiled again. “No worries, its unlikely they will come after you, not too many people know about this exit. Now head out of here, and I'll be looking for your signal you have dropped off the UUP for me.” He almost pushed us out the back of the office into a narrow passage, that was rock lined. We headed down the passage, and when we came to the end, about ten meters down, I took a quick look out on to the alley. Basically we were in a little passage, that came out right behind the wall of one of the buildings, it didn't even look like a real passageway from the alley. It looked clear, so we slipped out. I put an arm around her and she put her head down. We hurried up the alleyway, avoiding people and avoiding eye contact with anyone and made our way back to the ship, as fast as we could go.

Delivery

We got back to the ship in under 10 minutes, closed the door to the docking bay and locked it, and climbed inside and locked up.

“We don't open the docking bay back up til Harold gets here, OK”

She looked at me. “Who me, I'm not opening that door for anyone. God that guy was creepy.”

“Yea, welcome to outer space. It takes all kinds here.”

“You don't say.”

“Come on, let's get a cart and fill it with UUP. We have at least 90 minutes we can take care of the load with Phil now, and then wait for the stuff from Harold.”

“What if Harold doesn't come?” she asked?

“Then we made a bad deal. I think it would be a good idea to be ready to leave here as soon as we can once we have the stuff. Or if something goes wrong, we can blast out of here asap.”

“That sounds like a good plan. Frankly after meeting that guy, I'd prefer to leave sooner rather than later.”

“What's the matter, can't deal with a good old fashioned red blooded male?” And I gave her an evil look.

“That wasn't my idea of an old fashioned red blooded male, Alex, I would hope you realized that by now.” and she gave me a dirty look.

We got out a loading cart, and started loading it with UUP. It took about 40 minutes to load it up, and I told Laura to come with me as we moved the stuff to Phil's storage shed. We put our things back on, and left the ship, and opened the docking bay to roll the UUP over to Phil's storage area. The door opened, and there was no one there. That was a good thing. we looked at each other, and nodded and rolled the stuff down the passage. It took us about 10 minutes to find our way to his storage area, unit 29, in the same pod. We rolled the cart into the storage shed and sealed the door, and

hurried back down the passage to our ship. Halfway back my comm device showed a new message. Phil had checked the stuff and transferred 320,000 credits to my account. That was a relief, at least that part of the deal was done. We hurried along the passage, and saw no one, and make it back to the ship in less than 5 minutes.

We closed the docking bay door again, and hurried back aboard the ship, it was now wicked cold out, the temperature had dropped at least 15 more degrees and it was now painful to stand outside for any length of time. We took off the warm weather gear, and then sat at the table in the galley.

“That was almost too easy, I think.” She looked at me, and I could see she was scared. I hadn't seen that look in her face before. It surprised me.

“Be glad it was easy. Things could still get dicey anytime, trust me. My guess is, that as far as your secret admirer Frankenstein goes, as soon as we were out of sight we were basically out of mind.”

She made an ugly face at me. “I don't want secret admirers like that, and I hope you are right. I don't want to come back here if I don't have to.”

“Neither do I. It's not as bad as it was ten years ago, but I have no desire to spend any more time here than we have to.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Ah that's the easy part. We sit and wait. He shouldn't long, if he holds to his time line, maybe thirty or forty minutes. When Harold gets here we should be dressed and armed. That's a good idea, I think.”

“Agreed Alex. Agreed.”

And so we waited.

Harold arrived on time, as he had promised. He had a cart with him, covered with a cloth. There were the three guys with weapons again and the harbor master. The harbor master wasn't smiling this time. We opened the airlock and stepped out into the cold bitter air.

Before Harold could say anything, the harbor master spoke.

“Hmm. I'm not really sure about this Mr Grogan, this is an unusual grade of ore you are buying here. I'm not sure we are supposed to be letting this go to just anyone out of the station. Perhaps we should discuss this.” His manner was clearly not as comfortable as before. I figured it was probably an act, but I didn't want to find out that something serious had just gone wrong. Laura had no real firearms training outside of the simulator we had setup, and I was out-numbered four to one. Anton, the harbor master, was wearing a large pistol on his belt.

“Um OK. What seems to be the problem?” I tried to sound optimistic and open minded.

“Well you are buying UUP listed as extremely pure. We have a regulation about that, UUP over 80% purity is subject to sale pending approval of the colony. To wit, the committee. It seems, “Harold” here has quite a quantity of this stuff. I've told him we need to have committee approval before he sells anymore. I guess I'll have to mention that to him again.”

“Hmm. Difficult situation. Perhaps if I made a donation to the colony, that would perhaps, show my good faith in this transaction?” I put on my best neutral negotiating face.

He stopped and looked at me, as if trying to read my intentions.

“Perhaps yes, perhaps no. Let me consider this a bit.”

He turned away and walked over to the three men, and they talked quietly for a short time. There was some head nodding and an occasional glance in our direction, followed by more discussions. Then they saluted him and left briskly.

“I think we should discuss this alone. Yes, it would be looked favorably upon by the committee. Though I should inform you that those three guards are going to require some convincing.” His look made it clear that was going to cost something in addition to what the committee wanted. What ever that was, it was probably just his tax for letting us out of the port.

“Yes I figured that. I also figured it was easier to pay them than to not pay them, in the long run.” I was watching his eyes, as it was the best way to gauge his reaction. He stopped and looked at me for a second, and there was a faint hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth. He looked into my eyes.

“A wise decision, I think.” He paused. “Are you planning to make this a regular stop on your travels, Mr Grogan?”

“Perhaps, I really don't know yet. I have what shall we say, various opportunities in various places. But yes, I assume I might be coming through here more regularly. It's always worth keeping the options open don't you think?”

“Indeed it is.” He looked at Laura for a minute. She looked at him and he gave her a slight nod. “OK, fifty thousand credits for the committee, and fifteen thousand for the guards. That I think, should keep everyone happy.”

I sighed. But inside I was relieved. That was just a bit over 13% of what we had paid for the fuel. Really, only a small handling charge. “Hmm. Well, yes, like I said, always good to keep options open.” I pulled out my PDA and entered the codes, transferring him sixty five thousand credits. His PDA beeped. He pulled it out and looked at it.

“It seems that you are a man with good cash reserves and credit. It's a pleasure doing business with you.” He smiled, and looked me right in the eyes. They were almost glistening. “I'll be looking forward to seeing you on your next visit Mr Grogan. Oh and please don't discuss where you got that UUP. It would be best for everyone if that stayed on the quiet side, I'm sure you understand.” He didn't wait for my reply, and continued on. “Until then.” And he made a slight bow and left. We looked at each other.

“Let's get out of here.” She said.

“I agree.” We turned and got in the ship, and headed for the pilot's chairs.

The Chase

We locked in the nav codes to head back to the open zone, allowing for a wide circle away from the open zone at first, in order to shake off anyone following us, requested clearance to leave, and, as soon as we got it, we blasted off of Morda Prima, and not one minute after we got off the surface, the trouble began.

“Ship ISF2319 pull into orbit immediately. We wish to inspect you for contraband. Our weapons are primed and aimed at your vessel. Respond immediately.”

“What the hell is that?” Laura said.

“Good question, stall em!” I started plotting coordinates in the nav computer for a quick exit into warp drive.

“This is the star chaser who are you, and what to you want?” She said.

“Who we are is our business and we want YOU! Stop now or be destroyed.” The voice was cold and empty on the other end of the radio. They weren't going to wait long for a reply. And they didn't.

A laser cannon fired directly in our path, a warning shot. Then on the monitor there was another ship, directly ahead of us. The next shot, where ever it came from, was clearly going to be a direct one. I spun the ship using the attitude adjusters and then fired the main engines, full power, blasting away from the oncoming ship and the one following us, at a ninety degree angle from their axis. The immediately followed and started doing evasive maneuvers, rolling left right, up down, etc.

“Arm two torpedos and get ready to fire them at the two lead ships. Do it Laura!”

We rocketed away from the oncoming ship to our port, the one that had been originally following us, and they pulled into a hard sweeping turn to follow us. Then, at a distance, three other ships spread out wide behind us. They had just appeared on the monitors, and although at a good distance, almost 10 kms, it was clear they were heading for us. Even though the distance was long, they all fired at once. I spun the ship in what you might have called a down direction, and avoided the laser fire, again.

“FIVE ships??? What did we do Alex???”

“Who knows. Maybe it's a set up, maybe just bad luck. Whatever, we are getting out of here NOW.”

Laura armed two torpedoes, set for proximity detonation to an energy source, the size of a small ship. The two ships we had first encountered were now behind us, and closing the distance. I still needed a minute to punch in the data for the nav computer. And nother burst of laser fire arced across the sky outside, silently glowing as the pulsing energy dissappered ahead of us into empty space.

“Alex?!?!?!?”

“DO IT NOW!”

She pulled up the computer program, and made the necessary entries. I looked over at her and she was pale. “OK, ready to fire.”

“Good!”

I pulled up the pursuing ships on the monitor screen. Two were directly behind us.
“Now I think...”

I rolled the ship over to the port side, and she fired a torpedo. As soon as she had fired it, I hit the accelerator, and the ship rocketed off in a great spiral across space. Less than twenty seconds later the torpedo detonated. The larger ship disappeared in a silent ball of flame. The second ship continued after us. It fired a plasma beam at us, and missed as we rolled over and over again.

“I got the second ship targeted, Alex.”

“Fire the damn thing, don't wait.”

The sound of the torpedo dis-attaching from the ship was the next sound I heard. Its rockets lit up, and it screamed head on into the smaller ship. They saw it coming and tried to do a one eighty, but there wasn't enough time to pull it off. In fifteen seconds the torpedo found its target and detonated. Once again there was nothing to see except a silent fireball. I steadied the ship, pulling it out of the roll, and locked in the coordinates for the jump point where we would pick up the trail to Trajians 7.

“Alex, it looks like there are at least three more ships leaving the surface and heading this way. And the other three, the ones already out there, they are still there, but they are holding back it seems.”

“Not a problem, we are outta here!”

I hit the warp program starter, and we blasted into another world.

“Not now they aren't. None of them are our problem anymore. Unless they got the same fuel we got.”

“Alex, what was that all about?” the fear on her face was clear enough now. I figured it was the first time anyone had tried to destroy a ship she was on. Maybe we should talk about that later.

“No idea, your guess is as good as mine. Pretty damn brazen, trying to rob us as we were leaving the planet. I think they must have known something.”

“We aren't going to have to go back there are we?”

“I hope not. I don't think the outcome would be very good.”

I looked at Laura. She looked pale, and shaken. It happened so fast that there wasn't any time to think about it, and given our situation I didn't want to drag out a long fight. At this point, everyone on Morda Prima Knew that someone was flying around space with a load of nukes. That will be the talk of the place for months to come, and might make everyone a little more cautious about their activities.” I stopped for a moment and then continued. “It is also a good reason not to go back for a while. The committee down there is going to be able to figure out which ship launched the nukes, and since nukes are strictly controlled, that means we are either SC people are some really bad ass space dudes. Either way we are probably in for trouble if we go back there again, at least with this ship, and if Anton our favorite harbor master recognizes us, I think we will be paying a lot more in landing fees next time. At the least.”

“Who do you think they were?”

“Honestly, I don't know. They didn't appear to be from the consul at Morda Prima.

Their transmission style was different. Also they didn't identify themselves as being from Morda Prima, and they saw us take off from the surface. So its pretty unlilkely they were local ships. I don't know. Maybe just some opportunists that made a very bad decision on which ship to rob. Or maybe someone else.” I stopped and pondered an idea for a few seconds.

“Like?”

“Well, I would think that this character Haller from Trajians 7 probably has some spies out here at Morda Prima. Probably other places as well. Everyone needs intelligence information, and someone like Haller, who is running a serious interstellar criminal operation is going to have spies in places, he has to in order to survive. If he is selling that stuff, he has got to have people out both doing the selling and making sure everything goes according to plan. Maybe it was some of his people.”

“Do you think they know we are coming?”

“I don't think so, but he could probably assume that, given the right set of facts. Who knows what info they, or he, or them or whatever, might have picked up from kroatzys, or someplace else in the system. Or maybe he has spies somewhere in the commision. It happens.” She looked at me, deeply concerned. I went on. “It's no secret that there is something massive up at Kroatzys, and the rumors that there has been some kind of first contact are pretty clearly making the rounds. That, would definitely interest a guy like Haller, as it affects his ability to carry on his business at this point.” I paused a minute. “Or whatever else he is planning. Who knows, maybe he has grander plans than simply cornering the market on UUP. Guys like him are the classic, I wanna be the tyrant types. So maybe he has bigger plans than just making a fortune sumggling this stuff. A lot of people would like to see the Star commision collapse, as it would create major opportunities for a lot of people.” I rubbed my head for a second. “Question is, did these guys get off some kind of message to anyone before or during the attack? What kind of message? I would love to know. That would answer about 90% of our questions. Since we saw three ships leaving the planet, and since at least three ships were directly involved in the attack, I would assume someone knows we are flying around out here with a load of nuclear torpedos and some really juiced UUP for fuel. That is unfortunate.”

“True. But we also know they are not going to follow us at this point. You know they couldn't follow us, they didn't have the speed.”

“Or they didn't want to, we don't know that.”

“OK, I see your point. But why would they give up so quickly?”

“They weren't expecting us to have commission nukes, I'm sure.”

“OK also true. But we can hope for the best. Maybe they were just regular pirates. Occam's Razor yes?” She looked at me hopefully.

I looked back at her, with less assurance.

“Maybe. Well we will have to be extra careful flying into Trajians 7 from here on out.”

“well, I hope so. This is turning out to be more adventuresome than I had planned

on.”

“Well, anything is liable to happen. This is turning out to be the biggest event in recent Star Commission history. And I have a feeling it's going to get more complicated before its all over.”

We were headed to the jump point outside Tau Ceti. With the new fuel we were looking at less than two days travel time. And we were assured it was going to be hard for anyone to follow us unless they had the same quality fuel, and knew exactly which direction we were headed. For the moment we appeared to be safe. Just to make sure of it, every couple of hours I de-warped and then picked a new course, and reentered warp time space. After sixteen hours it was pretty clear we weren't being followed. I finally locked in the coordinates for Tau Ceti, Johnson Center. I wanted the scientists at space commission to get a sample of this UUP stuff, and to reload up on torpedoes.

The two days passed quietly. Laura spent more time using the target simulator and less time working on the language tapes. Our recent adventure had taught her the usefulness of being ready for bad situations. I was happy to sit in the commanders chair and listen to the tones. Shoot outs were never my favorite activity. In a small ship like these, combat tended to be fast sudden and deadly. Unlike the big Star commission ships, that were armored and had the ability to seal off compartments, the little freighters had none of that, and so one hit and you were dead. The only chance for survival was to think faster than your opponent.

Discoveries and the Big Problem

The next day, before we dewarped outside of Tau Ceti, we talked about the situation.

“OK we know they are selling something back there that they aren't mining. And we have been told its coming from the other side of the closed zone. I think its time we go to Trajians 7 and see whats out there.”

“I knew you were going to say that.” It was pretty clear that that wasn't her idea of a good way to spend the next few weeks.

“I don't see any point in staying here longer, do you?” I asked her.

“No not really, unless we can meet up with someone that can give us more than just second and third hand stories. Problem is, that anyone with first hand knowledge of this probably isn't going to tell us anything useful. In fact they probably aren't going to tell us anything, just kill us.”

“That was pretty much my thought. If we have some kind of conspiracy between our bad guys and some highly advanced bad guys from another species they are probably planning something that they don't want any of the good guys, from either species to figure out. Yea, it's time to get out of here and move on to Trajians 7, and see what we can find out there. We will de warp here, drop off a sample of the stuff to

the commission, and then contact Jorgen. We can order up a load of food for the trip, at least we will have something good to eat along the way. I figure we can be on our way to Trajians 7 in maybe 6 hours or so". We sat and looked at each other in the pilots chairs.

Laura put her hand softly on mine.

"OK. Let's go."

"Of course there is the bigger problem."

"Whats that?" She looked perplexed for a minute.

"We are probably going to have to get inside the colony at Trajians 7 to find out what is really going on and that isn't going to be easy."

"Do you have a plan yet?"

"No I don't. We need to get a hold of Jochim and see what he has got on Trajians 7 before we go out there. I've done the basic reading that he sent me, but we need to know if they have plans of the settlement. I would assume they might have something, but not everything. I'm not really sure, I don't know if we have any fifth directorate people out that far, or if they can get in to such a place."

"Somehow I think getting in should be pretty easy, it's the getting out I worry about.

"Me too, Laura, me too."

"Do you think there is a back way in? That sounds pretty risky don't you think?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. we need some maps, some kind of ground plan for the colony out there. Maybe there is a way we can land somewhere and get in through a back entrance." I slumped back in the commanders seat. "Maybe we can do it just by monitoring their transmissions, but I doubt it. I think we are going to have to put eyes on the ground. We also need to get every detail possible on this Haller guy, who runs the place. I want to know as much about him as possible before we get out there."

We both sat there silently for a minute.

"How is it we ended up getting this job? Or should I say how did you end up getting this job, and how did I get pulled into it?"

I smiled at her. "Well life is a strange thing, Laura. Sometimes it doesn't turn out exactly the way you expect it to."

She smiled back. "True. It doesn't. And right now, in spite of my apprehension, I think I'd rather see this thing through to the end."

"I think you'll get your chance."

She leaned back in the chair.

"So off to Tau Ceti. Resupply, and get some new intelligence, hopefully, that will help us infiltrate Trajians 7. then.. Off to Trajians 7?"

"Not directly. We are going to approach the place on one of the smuggling routes I think. Better chance of getting in than if we just blast in there there are some jump points I know of that smugglers use, that are, shall we say, off the beaten track. We are going to sit outside one of those and then tail someone into the general area."

"I see."

“Well unless Jochim has other information, that would give us a better idea of how to get in there, that would be by first choice of ways to do things.”

“What do you think, will he have anything?”

“Maybe. There is probably something somewhere, the question is, can he get it? A lot of that depends on how critical this is to the Star Commission, and if they want us being the ones to go in there and check it out first. Which, I'm afraid to say is logical. We are a minor loss if something happens to us, but anything we dig up is a major gain.

“So we are pawns then, aren't we?”

“Of a sort, yes.”

The Search for Information

We reached the area of Tau Ceti not long after our talk, just a few hours really. My general plan was to head over to the other side of the closed zone, somewhere near DX Canari. That was the edge of the open zone, and led into the closed zone. It would be another fairly long flight out to Trajians 7 from there, and we would be taking our time heading out that way, so as to try and keep a low profile. We were looking at at least another month of space flying. Before we did that, we de-warped into a re-entry point around Tau Ceti, to collect any information Jochim had left us, and to check in with him.

We tried calling Jochim, but there was no answer. So we were going to have to wait a bit before we went to warp on our way out to Trajians 7. I left a message for Jochim to call us. We sat in the cockpit, and we waited. Laura was reading something about political history from the beginning of the federation. I sat and listened to the tones. There was nothing to do but wait.

I must have nodded off for a while, when the screen lit up with Jochim's incoming call. I rubbed my eyes and hit the accept key. Jochim came on the screen.

“Sorry I was out of the office, meetings. How's it going out there? What did you find out at Morda Prima?”

“We pretty much confirmed all the rumors. I got a thousand kilos of the purest UUP you ever seen in your life. And It appears to be coming from Trajians 7. We are about to head out that way now. Which brings me to a question.”

“Sure what is it?”

“What have you got on the layout of the colony there? I think we are going to have to get inside and see what's going on, at the very least we are going to have to get a lot closer than is safe, to find out just what the people out there, and these aliens, have cooked up. I need to know as much as I can about the place if we are going to get in there and get out again in one piece.”

“Let me see what I can get for you. I'll have to request clearance from this from the admiral, its the only way I can get anything that detailed. I can try, let me see what I can get.”

“OK. So I guess that means we are on hold again, at least for a couple of hours.”

“Yea. It does. I agree I would prefer to have you go out there with as much information as we can give you. Maybe twelve hours to get something back. You can pop over to Tau Ceti and get a decent meal if you want, I can contact you there.

“OK. That was already our plan. We are going to leave you a sample of this UUP we got, and the scientists you have there can have a look at it.”

“Excellent, I was going to ask about that. Getting our hands on a sample of this stuff would be a major help.”

“Well it seems pretty easy to acquire it out there on Morda Prima. The problem is that as soon as you buy any of it you get attacked the minute you leave the space port. Well, at least we did. We blew away two small ships leaving the system. Sorry about that, but they were shooting at us and it wasn't a good situation for discussions I'm afraid”

“Unfortunate, but probably necessary. I have to run, I'll call you as soon as I know anything. Enjoy a few hours in civilization, it's going to be the last of it you see for a couple of months, most likely.”

“OK, will do, peace out.”

“Peace out.”

Contact Jochim

We pulled off of the reentry point, and took a short warp drive over to Tau Ceti, and, after getting clearance, we landed the ship at the spaceport. The whole trip didn't take more than thirty minutes and we were on the ground again, at Tau Ceti. A couple of plain clothes guys from the Star Commission met us at the landing dock, and took five kilos of the UUP as a sample for analysis. They were gone almost as soon as we got there, and that left us, for the time being, on our own. We headed off to the center of the outpost, for a meal, and to consider what our next moves would be.

We wandered down to the central terminal, past the holographic screens showing the news and latest updates about life on Tau Ceti. It had been just over a week since we were last here, but it seemed much longer. The news reports from Kroatzys were shorter now, simply stuff about an ongoing operation to see what happened to the Volga. There was the usual speculation about what happened by the talking heads on the shows, but nothing really significant. We wandered off in a separate corridor, full of commercial businesses and the like.

We found a nice restaurant, and got a table for two. They had a fish special, pretty unusual for a spaceport. Something local, from the planet, called Makewa. The waitress told us it was excellent and we ordered two, with salads, and a bottle of white wine. Laura poured us two full glasses.

“Well, here is to surviving Morda Prima. And to surviving Trajians 7.”

“Amen to that.”

“I still can't believe we just blew up two freighters with nuclear torpedoes. What do you think the people at Morda Prima are thinking now?”

“Definitely not to mess with a character named Alex Grogan or his partner, Laura. Or if you do, you had better bring heavy artillery and use it first.”

She laughed and sipped her wine.

“What would happen if we went back there?”

“I really don't know Laura. Officially I think we could probably land, maybe even spend a little time there, but it really depends on who sent those ships out. If they were just pirates trying to steal our fuel, well then, we would probably be free to go back without any problems, if the ships were from the people who control that place, I doubt we would be leaving again.

“And the problem is there is no good way to find out who they belonged to, unless we go back out there and take our chances.”

“Exactly.”

We were both silent for a while. We sipped the wine, and the salads came. Then she spoke.

“Alex, I feel kind of weird about this. I never killed anyone before.” She was looking down into her salad. The impact of what she had done was starting to hit her.

“It's been a long time for me Laura. It doesn't feel any better than I remember it feeling.” I picked at my salad. “You have to let it go. It was us or them. Simple as that.”

“I know.” she ate a bit more of her salad. “it just feels weird that's all.”

“I know too Laura.” the waitress brought our main courses, and we asked her to leave the salads.

We finished the meal in silence, and went back to the ship.

There was no news from Jochim. We still had probably the better part of ten hours to wait, maybe longer. We were both tired so we crawled into the bunks for some rest.

About 6 hours later the comm system went off. I climbed down off the bunk and slid into the commanders chair and accepted the message. Behind me I could here Laura's breathing, as she slept. It was Jochim, as I expected.

“Hi Alex, got some info for you. How are you all doing?”

“Not bad, got a nice meal, and took a long nap, I needed it after all the excitement of the last week.”

“Cool. Well, I got you what we have on trajians 7, as far as I know everything we have. There are some maps of the colony, although they weren't made by us, we bought them from informants. So their accuracy is suspect. Also a lot of info about comm freqs, travel patterns in the maze of asteriods and planets out there, etc. there is a profile on this character haller, but no one from our organization has met him at this point. He's a rough character, clearly a psychopath, highly manipuative and charismatic. Dangerous combination, if he as access to UUP like you have described and who knows what kind of weapons systems. Thats what really worries me, and the people above me. This guy, with this stuff, could be a serious problem.

“Yea, I had pretty much figured that. Not a good situation, but at least we are on it early, hopefully. So far one of our outposts hasn't been attacked by a fleet of ships out of Trajians 7. That is hopeful... I hope”

“I hope so too, but im concerned, and so are the people above me. There is a serious movement to go in there with everything we got and decimate the entire system, but the fact we have no intellegence from there means that it is a potentially risky operation. I think you know what we would like you to do.”

“Yea, find out everything I can and report back, correct?”

“Correct. And as quickly as possible. But don't take any unnecessary risks. What ever you find out, its worthless if you don't come back with it. So be careful about the whole thing.

“You don't have to worry about that Jochim, I want to get out of this alive more than you want me too.”

“I thought so. So yes head out there and see what you can discover. And report back as soon as you can. Do you need a refill on torpedos?”

“Yes we could use that, I would prefer to have a full load of weapons for this one. And with that fuel, well you can load me up to about 150% of normal mass capacity. So that means we could take another dozen or so torpedos assuming your guys can find a way to mount them on my ship.”

“I'm sure we can do that. I'll make the arraignments immediately, you should have a party of support techs there in an hour or so. Is there anything else you need?”

“beyond all the info you have about the area around Trajians 7, and a good dose of luck, no, I can't think of anything else.”

“OK, let me get on with the techs. I am sending you the files I have on Trajians 7 now. Contact me before you warp out of Tau Ceti if you think of anything else you need.”

“OK will do, peace out.”

“Peace out.”

The files Jochim sent started coming over the comm channel immediately. It was more data than I had expected, and it took almost ten minutes to download. Once we had everything downloaded we made the ship ready for a long flight. The Space commision techs showed up within the hour, as promised, and in another hour had mounted a forteen more torpedos on the hull of the ship. That gave us a pretty stunning load of firepower, if we needed it, a total of eighteen 50 kiloton yield nuclear torpedos. Enough firepower to wipe out a medium sized fleet of ships, if you shot fast and accurately. The techs were all done in two hours, and left the docking bay. Laura called up the restaurant, and ordered 30 meals deep frozen to go, basically one of everything off the menu. Complete with deserts. I started going through the files Jochim had sent us. There was a good deal of information on common routes into and out of the area, and a reasonably good map of the asteroid / planetary collection of objects in the area. There were some maps of various planet surfaces,

and notations about locations of ground stations and ship launching facilities. The files were more detailed than I had expected, but their accuracy was still subject to debate, so it was questionable how good this information actually was. I studied the files for about half an hour and then decided we would try to sneak in through one of the common jump points that freighters seemed to be using in and out of the area. We loaded the coordinates of the jump point that most of these freighters were using as an entry point to the Trajians 7 area.

“Laura, I think we are going to jump to that point there, where these smugglers seem to be using as their main jump point, and we will try and shadow someone into the area. We will de-warp before them, and try to come out on some little asteroid somewhere. Then we will put our ears out and listen for a while.

“We need to be on the run directly to the main station on Koltolos if possible.” she said.

“True, but we aren't probably going to get lucky enough to find a ship headed directly for it. We will probably have to de warp, and then sneak inwards, warping a little here and there as needed to get in close. We are going to have to go slowly and monitor the area for any transmissions or warp trails. Slower is better in this situation, at least as long as they don't know we are there. If that changes, well then we are going to have to move fast.”

“OK. That should work. I guess. You are the expert at this, I think, compared to me. Assaulting strongholds of pirates armed with alien technology is a little outside of my range of experience.” she shot me a quick smile, and I gave her a quick smile back.

“The big thing is I don't want to be spotted heading into the area. I'd rather go slowly and take our time, than go fast and make a mistake that reveals us to them. Getting out in a hurry I got less worries about. But our armament won't really do us a lot of good on the inbound trip, we need to be stealthy there, above all else. Getting out, yes we can shoot our way out if no other alternative presents itself. But getting in, well that we need to be a lot more careful about.”

“That sounds rational. No I can't see how shooting our way in is going to help anything.”

“No it won't. So we are going to have to be sneaky.”

“Somehow I think you're just the pilot for the job.”

“I hope so, otherwise we could be in big trouble.”

I punched in the instructions and we cruised off at warp, double our normal speed. We had about a two week journey, to the next jump point. Basically all the way from one side of the open zone to the other.

The trip was quiet, very quiet. Laura made it a 3 times a day activity to spend at least an hour practicing shooting, and she was getting very good at it. The rest of the time she worked on the language tapes. She was making some progress. She had the basic grammar of the language down, and had figured out a couple of hundred words. Unfortunately, due to the fact we didn't have a large collection of material to work

with there was only a limited amount of progress she could make. Even with the most sophisticated linguistic analysis tools, the data base simply wasn't large enough to make a decent dictionary. We could make about maybe 20 percent of the messages at this point, but it wasn't really enough to be useful, there were still too many guesses to be made to make any real sense of it. And she only had the basic grammar structure figured out, and it was clear that that could be radically different depending on the complexity of the sentence. Still she was making good progress. I was impressed. I went through every page of material Jochim had sent us. The star maps appeared to be fairly accurate, those could be verified with known observational data. The inferences about locations of jump points in the system, and possible outposts, bases and what have you was considerably more doubtful. The material had been collected over years of intelligence gathering by fifth directorate people, but none of it appeared to be very first hand. There had been a scouting expedition to the edges of the area on two occasions, but they hadn't tried to penetrate into the center of the system. It was a long long ways out, and terribly isolated. Really the only good way to investigate the place was to send a large long range expedition, and that would have led to confrontation, which the Star Commission usually prefers to avoid. That's particularly true with rogue settlements far out on the fringes of the known region, most of these places fail by themselves, and that is the best discouragement for others following in their footsteps. You have to be pretty desperate to set up a life that far out, without any support from the Federation, no real trade, etc.

Haller was a real piece of work. No one knew what he did in his early life, but he had been a brutal and vicious pirate for a number of years, on the fringes of the known region in space, before he moved off to Trajians 7. It was probably his success that drove him out there, he had attacked and seized the cargo of almost thirty ships, and murdered most of the crews in the process at least hundred people dead, only a few survivors, and they were very lucky. Fifteen years ago catching him was a major priority for the Star command. Then he disappeared for five years. No one had heard the slightest rumor of him, when it became clear someone was operating a smuggling operation out of Trajians 7. It took another five years before anyone put his name on it. Finally it leaked out that the guy running the operation at Trajians 7, who was first known, almost jokingly, as the dark lord (His own invention according to the files) was actually Haller. The psych profile on him was classic, totally devoid of empathy for others, highly narcissistic, charismatic, and to an extent, vain. But not vain enough to let it cloud his judgement when it came to killing off potential enemies and witnesses.

The reports indicated that Haller had established some kind of base that was deep underground. There was a large mining operation there, supplying transiting freighters. Haller had his main outpost on a planetoid called Kolotos, around a triple brown dwarf system. Well it had been a triple brown dwarf system, the stars were basically dead now. Basic conditions there would be brutal; dark and within half a degree of absolute zero, all the time. Because of that, and its distance from the open zone, the Star Commission hadn't responded, to this point, to the threat from there.

Clearly that would no longer be the policy in the future, and I could imagine them sending thirty or forty ships out there, all loaded for combat, and annihilating the place. But Star commission wasn't going to do that until they knew what they were up against, as it wouldnt look good to lose a fleet to a pirate with something up his sleeve from another race of beings.

The first week we kept to ourselves mostly. Sometimes the easiest way to endure space travel is to do it quietly. I studied the files and she worked on her shooting and langauge tapes. At the end of the week, she asked me about the files, and I told her to read up on everything in there. The next couple of days she did just that.

“Alex, so whats the plan exactly when we get there? Are we going to try to get in this guys base? Or just sit outside and passively monitor what we can? I'm not sure I want to try getting into this place on Kolotos, it doesn't look very hospitable.”

“No, it doesn't, but as you can see there are, at least theoretically a number of back entrences in to the cavern complex where this colony exists. Its a honeycomb of caverns and mazes, probably hundreds of them, and they can't be watching all those enterences and exits.”

“What about with some kind or remote technology. Alex? They don't need a guard at every door, if they know we are coming and they know the layout and we don't....”

“That is true, and more likely. However according to this information, the diggings out there are almost 30 years old, maybe older. Basically we are going to have to go out, look around, and improvise.”

She was silent a minute. “OK, so basically we are walking into the great dark unknown.”

“Yes, we are.”

The rest of the trip to the jump point was very quiet.

Acknowledgments:

Many thanks to Phil Peterson for scientific consulting, Phil is my go to guy for any sci fi science, so that it at least sounds like its in the realm of possibility. And to Stephan and the crew at Nordstadtbraut for inspiration and the wireless connection. And many thanks to Rik Savering for decades of creative inspiration, advice, and the photograph the cover is based on. Looking forward to knowing you for many more years bro.

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