



MS 14

Voice of Machine

by Oliver Strong

Voice of Machine
(Queen in Exile part 2)
By Oliver Strong

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Chapter 1

Gliding through the Bandayuuk system, Athena made her way towards Machine's home world. McCann occupied the Bridge, slowly puffing on a Ramon Allones as he observed the view screen. Its display split between the void before them and a representation of their destination, the planet of Bandayuuk, and the Makayuuk home world.

'Transmission from Bandayuuk, Admiral.'

'Put him on, Hassif.'

An image of a Gukumatz filled the left half of the view screen 'Admiral McCann I am Tolomatz, governor for industrial Sector eight.'

McCann took a slow drag on his petit corona 'What is it this time?' he asked as thick smoke rolled from his lips.

The toad displayed that typical fidgety demeanour common to all Gukumatz, however McCann noticed it was somewhat heightened in Tolomatz.

'Workers in Sector J are striking, Admiral,' croaked the Governor in his best English.

McCann removed the Habanos from his mouth before shaking his head slowly 'Jesus Christ,' he muttered to himself.

'What was that, Admiral?'

'Nothing Tolomatz, have you contacted the controller of Sector J?'

'Yes Admiral.'

'And?'

'He refuses to use control collars.'

'Why?'

The toad flicked its tongue feverishly 'He believes collars immoral, Admiral.'

The Englishman took a long hard drag on his Havana 'Well get someone down there that can do the job!'

'Admiral, I have no spare staff. I was hoping you could help.'

McCann gave an incredulous look 'For God's sake man, can't you sort it out yourself?'

'You are Censor, you possess moral authority. You must rectify the situation, Admiral.'

The Englishman stood up from his chair on the central dais 'Fine, send me your co-ordinates and collar codes for Sector J.'

The Gukumatz became more animated flicking its eyelids and tongue, 'Thank you very much Admiral.'

'McCann out.'

The image of a joyful Tolomatz disappeared from the view screen.

'I'll send the codes to your tablet as soon as I get them.'

McCann nodded at Hassif then turned to Kim 'Have Vympel two meet me in docking bay one.'

Kim nodded as he tapped his wrist tablet 'Yes Sir.'

McCann left the Bridge and made his way to docking bay one, dressed in his I.S.A uniform sporting the rank of Admiral. The bottom of his thigh holster poked out from beneath his black Officers' jacket. Upon reaching docking bay one Vympel two was already there.

'Admiral' saluted the Russian in his black combat fatigues.

McCann returned the salute 'Kapitan Egorov.'

Egorov waited for the Admiral to step into the bay. As McCann approached the adapted Hummingbird he glanced upwards 'Athena, do you have co-ordinates?'

'Hassif has given me the co-ordinates, a flight path has been certified, have the Makayuuk revolted again, Admiral?' came her soft voice.

McCann grinned 'No need to worry Athena, it's just a strike. The toad in charge seems to think collars are immoral, he won't use them.'

Athena's soft voice filled docking bay one as they walked towards the Hummingbird 'I do not understand, he is employed to ensure production quotas are met is he not?'

McCann nodded 'Yup.'

'Why would he accept the post of controller without being aware of what that post entails?' inquired the SI.

McCann removed his cigar from between his lips 'Athena, these bloody toads have never made any sense to me either.'

After entering the Hummingbird it was a short journey to the planet surface. The craft landed in sector J's main industrial complex, McCann and Egorov exited to be met by a Gukumatz dressed in a ribbed space suit. The creature quickly approached McCann as he stepped out onto the main landing pad of Sector J's industrial complex.

The blue skies of Bandayuuk were similar to Earth; in fact this entire planet was much like Earth. It possessed several major continents and large oceans, gravity was just under that of Earth but not so much that you could notice. After the conquest its continents were split up into industrial zones, the home planet of the mighty Makayuuk now served Xch'uup as a slave world. Malikah was set on restoring a Tlillan commonwealth, upon the backs of her enemies.

The Makayuuk had been crushed in a massive drone assault after their fleet folded high above the world; the cost of defeat was to become a slave labour force that would die toiling for the Queen of Tlillan. Gukumatz were given governorship of the system, unfortunately they were not well suited to the task. The I.S.A had been forced to intervene many times. Once the Matriarchs left Gukumatz in control, rebellions and all sorts of protests occurred, gathering in pace and violence as time went on. Faraday suggested the use of control collars, at first the toads refused. However after a few uprisings and a gathering amount of dead toads they changed their minds, yet many still felt uncomfortable using them on Makayuuk. The collars had radically reduced insurgency on Bandayuuk, forcing the Gukumatz to reluctantly employ their use.

'It is wonderful to see you here!' said an androgynous voice into McCann's earpiece as it translated the vile Gukumatz speech.

'And you are?' inquired McCann as the toad made a Namaste gesture.

'I am Kotumatz, Namaste Admiral!'

'Naturally!' stated McCann as he took a drag of his cigar.

'All workers are striking in the main factory, Admiral.'

McCann grimaced at Kapitan Egorov 'Taras, you ready?'

The Spetsnaz Officer glanced at his 20 men, dressed in similar fatigues, each carrying an assault rifle 'Da, we're ready, Admiral.'

'Okay, you lead the way Kotumatz and I'll show you how to deal with a strike,' stated McCann in a menacing tone.

The Gukumatz led them down to the main factory floor of sector J via an elevator. As they approached the entrance to the factory floor McCann could hear a ruckus. Workers were shouting and screaming, the noise of metal clashing with metal was prevalent. The Englishman assumed Malikah's slave workers had taken steel bars and were using them as weapons to dismantle machinery in the main complex.

The Makayuuk worked mainly in maintaining machinery, it was a big job to supervise such a massive complex and still preserve good quality control on the mass of outgoing produce. Sector eight was relatively small in worker population, compared to outer mining and agricultural sectors. It was the only sector that up until now I.S.A commanders hadn't been required to step in.

Upon entering the factory floor workers halted their attack upon the automated machinery. Makayuuk moved away from rows of demolished machinery, brandishing steel bars and broken girders, making their way to McCann and his group. Abandoning wrecked production lines they stood in silence waiting for something to be said or done.

McCann checked his wrist tablet, making certain he could activate their control collars in a moment, if need be. He looked up at the one hundred or so Makayuuk 'You boys have done a good job on the factory here,' he said motioning towards ruined production lines which might fill several football stadiums.

'We are people of the machine!' screamed a young cyborg at the forefront of the rioters.

McCann took a drag on his cigar, taking hold of it in his left hand, with the other hand he took out his pulse pistol. McCann flicked the weapon on until its electric whine could no longer be heard, levelled it at the young Makayuuk and fired. A hot charge of plasma burst out of the barrel as a tungsten round split the young cyborg's head open. The Makayuuk worker collapsed much like a sack of potatoes, dropping his steel bar to the ground as he crumpled into nothingness.

Gukumatz supervisors who'd led them to the factory floor seemed as shocked as the Makayuuk. The young man's brains rolled out of his split skull, gathering in a steamy pile, mixing with blood and cybernetic wiring. He wore a control collar and a neon orange jumpsuit just as all other Makayuuk on Bandayuuk, post conquest. He had only a number printed on his jumpsuit and embedded in his control chip which linked him to the slim carbon collar encircling his entire neck.

'So, anyone else here with a desire to impart some revolutionary spirit?' sneered McCann at his captive audience.

You could hear a pin drop in the room.

‘What’s wrong? A moment ago you were all screaming for the Machine!’ stated McCann.

There was no reply.

‘You attacked and lost, the Machine was dismantled. This is what happens when you lose a war, I’m not here to win you over; I’m here to ensure production targets are met ... whatever it takes.’

‘Liar! Machine survives!’ translated his ear piece as a young Makayuuk female screamed in an unintelligible language to roars of approval from her fellow workers.

McCann switched off his pistol before replacing it in his holster, took a drag on his cigar then with a huff turned to Egorov ‘Shoot them all Kapitan, but don’t damage the collars, understood?’

The tall Russian in his mid-twenties nodded ‘Understood Admiral,’ as he flicked his pulse rifle on.

‘Strylets euch bsee'a, nhee'a pbovereshdets bvarapneekeyeh!’ shouted Taras leading his men as they fanned out to execute the upstart workers. Walking forward flashes of pulse fire leapt from their rifles, plasma burst out of the barrel, the result of electro –magnetic rails super heating the air. As they marched forward aiming and firing Makayuuk workers dropped, strikers at the front attempted to retreat whilst those at the back pushed forward to do battle with their foe. Since they were no longer connected to a central computer they couldn’t act collectively. Going from a society of total order through a central controller to this, led to anarchy. Workers pushed against each other as Spetsnaz mercilessly advanced forward mowing them down, making sure to avoid damaging the valuable control collars.

McCann turned to Kotumatz ‘It seems we’ve solved two problems today,’ he said in a jovial tone.

Kotumatz stared at him in that odd disjointed way all toads did ‘I do not understand, Admiral.’

McCann chuckled as he puffed on his Habanos ‘There was a shortage of control collars for the industrial sector. It seems your little uprising has dealt with that problem for now.’

The toad made a burbling noise, probably to project his disgust at the Englishman’s disregard for Makayuuk life. The Gukumatz staff made a similar noise, obviously horrified by McCann’s statement.

McCann laughed at their empathy for the Makayuuk, as far as he was concerned Vympel two were switching off some rogue droids, nothing more.

After Egorov had finished, pointing at the sea of hot corpses before them McCann spoke to Kotumatz 'Now clean that up and get those collars fitted to some new workers. I want this factory up and running A.S.A.P., understood?'

The toad put his hands together and bowed 'Namaste Admiral.'

'Next time use the collars Kotumatz, Xch'uup expects her shipyards to be ready even if that means one million Makayuuk must die, understood?'

The toad bowed again 'Namaste Admiral, I understand.'

With that McCann marched out of the gigantic factory back to the landing pad followed by Vympel 2.

Upon returning to Athena McCann made for his cabin, informing Kim the situation had been dealt with and he was going off duty. Upon leaving his pistol and holster in his cabin, then restocking on cigars, he made for the Officer's lounge.

As the Englishman approached the lounge music emanating from inside increased in volume, clearly Athena's newly assigned drone pilots were off duty too.

The I.S.A had built a third warship to be crewed by members of the Eastern States military. Faraday was against it, however Malikah's word was final and she reassured him that they'd toe the line. The Artemis, like her sister ships, was a fine craft however the Americans were not well versed in running a star ship. Half of the drone crew on Athena had been swapped with half of those on board the Artemis. All of the Americans intermingled with crews of the Ares and Athena. They had to be trained up and this was deemed the most practical way to do so.

As McCann approached the music of Johnny Cash became louder and voices of American drone pilots could be heard singing along to "A boy named Sue". He turned into the lounge to see many of the Americans at the bar drinking beer and an assortment of spirits along with the Russians and some unwilling Koreans.

Everyone stood and saluted as McCann walked up to the bar returning their salute in a casual manner.

'Let me buy you a drink Sir!' said a young American Lieutenant.

McCann nodded and with a smile he replied 'I'll have a whisky please.'

The young man who was obviously well into the celebrations turned to the barman 'A double Jamesons.'

'Anything with that?' replied the barkeep.

'One ice cube please,' replied McCann.

McCann accepted the drink out of politeness and made his way over to Louis who was sitting with Deychaa. He sat next to Louis on the brown sofa placing his drink upon a leather coaster.

'What is that McCann?' said Louis gesturing to the whisky.

'Jamesons, the Lieutenant just bought it for me,' the Englishman raised the small tubular glass to his lips and took a sip 'not bad actually!'

'I thought you only ever drank malt whisky?' replied Louis rather condescendingly.

McCann pulled out a leather wallet containing four cigars 'I do but I didn't want to be impolite.'

Louis made a grunting noise 'You're a snob, admit it!'

Deychaa giggled as a satyr whilst McCann offered them both a Cohiba Siglo II, they both accepted.

'I've never known you to turn down a good drink or free Habanos,' replied McCann as Louis waited for the guillotine to cut his cigar.

'That doesn't make me a snob!'

'No, just a freeloader!' retorted McCann to the laughter of Deychaa.

The Englishman put his cigar case away to pull out his cutter and matches. One of the bar staff placed a metallic ashtray on their table, McCann snipped the cap of his cigar into it before passing the cutter to Louis.

The Frenchman put a tablet he'd been reading on the table then lit his cigar 'More trouble on the surface?'

McCann crossed his legs and with a sigh expelled a puff of creamy smoke from his mouth 'bloody toads keep balking at using the collars; I don't know what Malikah was thinking putting those things in charge.'

'I think she did it to keep us busy, distract us from what the Tlillans are up to,' snarled Louis as he smoked his Cohiba.

'And what might that be mon ami?' replied McCann with a sarcastic tone to which Deychaa giggled.

Louis turned his head slowly sneering at his old friend 'you're really funny you know that McCann? You think I'm some crazy French guy ...' both Deychaa and McCann grunted with laughter, 'but sometimes the paranoid are being followed!'

The Englishman shook his head at his French friend as he listened to the singing at the bar 'Bandayuuk I hate every inch of you, you cut me and you scarred me through and through, and I'll walk out a wiser weaker man, Mr Congressman you can't understand.'

Louis sneered at McCann whilst the Americans sang to the Johnny Cash tune 'All the same, bad beer, ugly women and shitty food!'

By the end of the night McCann had drunk far too much Irish whiskey and upon waking the next morning he suffered for it. Feeling rather tender he stepped on the Bridge only to be met by the boom of Commander Kim 'Admiral on the Bridge!'

McCann shuddered as everyone stopped what they were doing and saluted, he returned the salute and slowly walked to the Captain's chair. As he relaxed into his seat Hassif smirked whilst Lieutenant Vezzali made a curious expression.

'For God's sake carry on will you,' said McCann in a subdued tone.

Athena was cruising between planets within the system, for the next few hours McCann remained in his seat trying to recover from last night's drinking session. The Irish blend had turned the Admiral into quite a delicate creature; Vezzali quickly realised the situation and provided her Admiral with a supply of strong coffee.

McCann took ownership of another cup of hot Bolivian coffee 'Thank the Lord for Officers with initiative,' whispered the Englishman to a smiling Vezzali.

He let the coffee cool then took a tentative sip; the South American drink calmed his nerves whilst soothing his aching head. He was planning on a nice quiet, boring day today.

'I'm afraid I have some bad news for you Admiral,' came Athena's soft voice.

'What might that be Athena?' asked McCann peering up at the black dome before him.

'Director Faraday has informed me that Jerry Habeeb will be visiting today, he has been given permission to come aboard and interview the

crew.'

As McCann grimaced a klaxon went out and Athena alerted the Bridge crew 'Tunnel event, tunnel event, tunnel event!'

The Admiral nearly jumped out of his seat putting a hand on his thumping head 'ATHENA!'

She turned the klaxon off and apologised 'I'm sorry Admiral; I believe the craft exiting is an I.S.A transport containing Jerry Habeeb.'

McCann's head was thumping more than a herd of thirsty rhino charging to a waterhole; every sound was amplified times ten.

'The wormhole has closed, I'm receiving a request for permission to come aboard,' said Hassif with a smirk.

'Fine let him dock,' groaned McCann.

'Aren't you going to greet Jerry?' chuckled Hassif as he stood at his station.

The Englishman didn't answer; he only took another swig of coffee to steady his nerves. A few minutes later and the elevator door on the Bridge opened, out strode Habeeb with his two helpers.

'Admiral, it's great to see you again!' shouted Habeeb at the Englishman's back.

McCann just held his beating head and grunted 'Marvellous.'

'What was that Admiral?' asked the ever inquisitive journalist.

McCann swivelled his chair and with a decidedly grizzly stare replied 'Who gave you permission to enter my Bridge?'

Jerry, dressed in his two piece earth brown suit with matching shoes and a green shirt, stuttered 'Errmm, well nobody; but I thought with us being friends you wouldn't kick up a fuss or anything.'

The rather dishevelled Englishman's eyes widened 'We... are not friends Mr Habeeb.'

As he spoke a couple of junior Officers walked out of the elevator and made their way to the pit, nodding towards the Admiral who returned their recognition in kind.

Observing them Jerry looked back at McCann 'Well they just came on without asking anyone, they didn't even salute!'

McCann shook his head 'They're hard working members of this crew and I need them to run this ship. You Mr Habeeb are not; in fact you are quite the opposite.'

Jerry's cameraman let loose a floating cricket ball to record what he considered some Net gold. This infuriated McCann who pushed himself to his feet 'Listen here Habeeb, I want you and your rabble off my Bridge,' he pointed at the cameraman 'if any of this makes it onto the Net without my permission I'll have your balls for breakfast.'

The cameraman went a little pale and punched something onto his tablet; his floating ball which recorded the conversation hovered down towards the controller who gracefully collected it. He placed the device back inside his bag which was slung over his shoulder by a leather strap.

'Mr Habeeb,' came Athena's soothing voice 'if you wish you may proceed to Deck 4 section 5. I will organise an interview for you whilst you are settling into quarters.'

Jerry looked upwards towards the black dome hanging from the ceiling 'Thank you Athena, that'd be great.'

With that he and his cohorts turned about face, retreating to the lifts. All the time McCann stood sneering until they were no longer present, he then returned to his chair and tasted his coffee.

'I think Faraday wants your perspective, on the Net,' commented Hassif as he looked his friend up and down.

'What are they upset about this time?' replied the Admiral in a sardonic tone.

'They say it's slavery but it's really about the Ixchel.'

'Well they should just sign up instead of whining.'

Hassif chuckled to his comrade 'But Duncan it's so much easier to just whine until someone does it for you.'

'In that case they'd probably get on with the Toads like a house on fire.'

The Bridge fell silent; its usual background noise of chatter from the pit and Officers' stations had died down. Hassif realised what he'd done and tried to correct his faux pas 'I mean Admiral.'

McCann grinned as he picked up his ceramic coffee cup 'Apology accepted Lieutenant,' he said in a jovial pitch; 'oh and Vezzali could I have another cup of that wonderful coffee please?'

The blond science Officer in a well pressed uniform approached from her station at the rear of the Bridge smiling at her commanding Officer 'Certainly ... SIR!' she said, mocking Hassif, as friends would joke between each other.

Hassif smiled before returning to his work, certifying a new patrol course for Athena.

Later that day the Englishman was off duty, he waited in his cabin until Jerry arrived for an interview. The cabin was small but luxurious when compared to the general accommodation of Athena's crew. His bed rested against the wall its foot pointing at the door. A bedside table on one side containing luminescent plankton was where he kept his pistol and wrist tablet. Along another wall lay his dressing table, with a mirror and a chair, above the mirror rested a view screen attached firmly to the catronium wall. The other wall was a series of apertures forming an inbuilt wardrobe; he kept his clothes in there along with a ready supply of Balvenie whisky, and his favourite cigars inside a humidor. A second chair had been brought to his cabin for Jerry's exclusive NET report on Bandayuuk.

After McCann permitted him entrance Jerry had taken his jacket off to reveal a linen mandarin collared shirt, red braces and pocket watch clipped onto the shirt pocket.

McCann sat opposite him wearing his uniform, a well ironed black jacket with buttoned chest straps and combat fatigues with ankle length boots. The sound man sat at one end of the room with his boom mic, the cameraman at the same end operating three hover ball cameras.

'Start whenever you're ready Jerry,' stated Trey, the cameraman, whilst examining visual reception on his tablet.

Jerry turned from Trey to McCann 'Well it's an honour to be here again Admiral, how've you been since our last chat?'

They had last conversed about a year ago, shortly before the assault on Bandayuuk.

'So, so Jerry, my work has been long and hard since we dismantled the Machine.'

'Reports have leaked out concerning treatment of Makayuuk workers post invasion. There are rumours of some brutal crackdowns conducted by I.S.A personnel, would you like to confirm or deny that Admiral?' asked Jerry rather cheekily.

'No,' replied McCann in a blunt tone.

Jerry peered down towards his tablet and skipped through some questions 'I see, well how about the invasion? Our viewers would like to hear your perspective on what happened.'

'Well we were fighting in this system for almost six months Jerry, it was a case of trying to fit sleep in between battle, most of us were nervous wrecks by the end of it all,' chuckled the Englishman.

'The viewers of Network America have been asking about the Machine, we were told it was some sort of master controller can you describe it for us?'

McCann raised his eyebrows 'Well, I don't really know that much about it Jerry. I did see it, the thing filled up the entire bunker it lived in...'

The journalist quickly cut off McCann 'Ahh, so it WAS a living entity in your opinion?'

The Admiral of the fleet shrugged his shoulders 'I can't say Jerry, the Makayuuk certainly believed so; they thought of it as you and I would a parent I suppose.'

'So what did it look like, Admiral?'

'Not like anything I'd seen before, it was a thick mass of circuitry mixed with organic tissue. It reminded me of the insides of dead Makayuuk surrounding the bunker, quite a revolting sight.'

Jerry gave a playful huff 'That description makes me feel a bit sick! How big was it?'

McCann opened up his jacket pulling aside his chest strap and unzipping the front, he took out a cigar case and proceeded to light up a Rafael Gonzales petit corona, 'The Machine, as Makayuuk called it, was about the size of a hummingbird orbital insertion craft; Quite an intimidating sight in actual fact, we were all taken aback by it.'

Jerry played with the touch screen of his tablet furiously, he preferred prompt cards but he wasn't in the Network America studios at New York so had to make do, 'Please tell us the events surrounding the dismantling of the Machine, Admiral.'

Liquorice flavoured smoke rolled over McCann's tongue as it left his mouth 'Where would you like me to start Jerry?'

'Start from the fight for the bunker, if that's okay Admiral?'

McCann sat back into his seat and began to recant the final days of the long and arduous campaign against the Makayuuk

The fleet had been fighting skirmishes in the Bandayuuk system for six months now. Allied warships had initially attacked in full force including the brand new American vessel Artemis. Even the Gukumatz had been granted their own war cruiser; the “floating fish” as Hassif described it, was supporting I.S.A and Tlillan forces.

Their intent was to insert a fleet close to Bandayuuk 0 (the Makayuuk designation), take them by surprise and decimate their capability to retaliate before they realised what had happened. Malikah predicted this would be a success, she had seen it in the Dreamscape and the Seers agreed. Malikah was about to learn a hard lesson concerning prophecy; it is one thing to see but another to interpret.

A fleet of 4 I.S.A war cruisers, logistics ships, 5 Tlillan Itzpap cruisers and one Gukumatz warship were propelled from their wormholes taking the Makayuuk by surprise, as intended.

The enemy fleet was caught off guard and decimated before they could react. Bandayuuk was bombarded from orbit; valuable troops and armour were quickly inserted to take control of the situation on the planet.

Flags were raised and victory declared within a few days ... six months later the bloody conflict had cost many lives on both sides.

Malikah had seen destruction of the Makayuuk fleet and in her arrogance assumed victory was a given. Her enemy refused to co-operate. Perhaps she hadn't factored in that they were fighting for something greater than themselves. They were fighting for Machine; they would not surrender as long as Machine was alive. They could not swear allegiance to anything or anyone else whilst Machine was their ruler.

McCann compare their arrogant assault to Iwo Jima, everyone would remember the flag being raised on the fifth day of the invasion. Few would recall that Iwo Jima lasted for more than a month of the most bloody fighting the U.S. Marines had engaged in before or since. Iwo Jima was an assured victory for the United States but their enemy refused to surrender and fought to the last, committing suicide with grenades rather than suffer the shame of surrender.

Bandayuuk was much the same, after years of reducing the Makayuuk fleet to a few poorly maintained ships, whilst strengthening their own. Victory was a no brainer, jump in there and waste the crappy machine man

ships. Bombard planetary defences then insert overwhelming ground forces with unchallenged drone support.

The Makayuuk however would not surrender, their master, their parent, their God; whatever you wanted to call it, lived here. Even worse McCann had no idea where this machine master was, he didn't realise it existed until the third week. It could be anywhere in the system, though he was certain it was on Bandayuuk 0 since fighting there was most furious.

He wanted to just pull his men out and glass the entire planet until Machine was dead or there were no Makayuuk left; either option was acceptable to him. Unfortunately Malikah was not in agreement and the fight would continue until Machine was discovered and dismantled.

After many months the residence of Machine had been identified, an underground bunker too deep to bomb. Besides, Malikah insisted they dismantle it by hand; it was the only way to be sure.

Arriving at Camp Lemur McCann left his transport to be ushered into the main HQ; an oblong pre-fab building constructed of plain grey carbon walls. Inside he recognised the Captains of the other I.S.A cruisers waiting around a table for him, headed by Jenkins.

They saluted and McCann returned it in kind 'Welcome to the party, McCann,' said Ryu.

McCann nodded and approached Jenkins 'You reckon we'll have that Machine by the end of the day?'

Jenkins was dressed in his SBS uniform, tradition green combat fatigues and a beret. The Brigadier held a short cane and tapped the carbon table, a holo image of the bunker and surrounding terrain leapt out.

'This is the situation old boy, that bunker has only one entrance we know of. These bloody Macks are coming out in waves. Whenever we approach they charge out like a bloody Bishop from a brothel raid! Now if we can bomb, just the entrance, then blow our way in ...'

McCann intervened 'Sorry about that but her Highness said no.'

Titov scratched his thick black beard 'Duncan, you're her father, make her see sense In Russia we say 'Don't come to Tula with your own pulse-rifle!'

This was an old Russian proverb which had morphed over the years. Originally Tula was the centre of samovar production and the saying was 'don't come to Tula with your own samovar'; a samovar being a Russian water boiler for tea and coffee heated with coal. Tula was the production

centre for such ornate objects, often made from silver or copper. A small faucet would allow the heated water out into a teapot. In past times the samovar was an essential object for every Russian house.

Today Tula is the centre of Moscow's firearm construction, so the proverb changed accordingly. What Titov was trying to intimate was that by bringing a pulse-rifle to Tula she was doing things the hard way. Taking the bunker by repelling enemy assaults through the entrance was definitely not the path of least resistance.

McCann started putting his leather gloves on since night was falling and it could get quite chilly 'I know but don't they also say 'If you're afraid of wolves, don't go in the woods'?'

Another Russian proverb which means, if you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen.

Titov made a grumbling noise beneath his beard, it sounded as if he was in reluctant agreement.

McCann stared hard at the image before him, the bunker was deep underground, that one tunnel seemed to be a long death trap to him. He shook his head at the conundrum before him, the air tight doors were ten feet thick and constructed of a neutronium alloy. Jenkins believed there were several of these doors spaced out along the tunnel, preventing any effective use of gas or napalm.

'I'm open to any ideas.'

'I have an idea,' said a man in his early forties with short dark hair.

'Well out with it then Turner,' poked McCann

The American continued in his Chicago accent 'Why don't we contact the Teteo? If we can get Kaeo down here I bet she could open those doors. Then maybe we could just gas the entire tunnel?'

McCann looked at his friends, judging by their expressions he gleaned none of them objected, 'Do it Captain, I want her here ASAP, understood?'

The Captain of the Artemis smiled 'Will do Sir,' then began tapping on his wrist tablet as he stepped away from the table.

The Artemis had seen her first combat at Bandayuuk; it was to be an experience building exercise more than anything else. Over the last six months the Artemis had taken the worst of it in space.

The People of the Machine may have been deprived of their warships but small 4 man transports loaded with anti-matter were ten to the penny.

Captain Turner had gone from commanding an Eastern States Carrier as a Rear-Admiral to Captain of the Artemis in the I.S.A navy.

His inexperienced crew had either learnt the lessons of Guerrilla warfare in space, or died to frequent suicide vessels attacking the fleet.

Ten minutes later two Tlillan ladies entered the HQ; Cihuateteo strode in, a tall amazon with striking white hair. She was dressed in her Tlillan uniform of the black ribbed body suit with a white jacket on top of it. She also carried her mantle, hanging off a sword belt, the neutronium sabre of Tlillan's Grand Marshall. Its metal fittings rattled as her boots clinked on the carbon floor.

Behind her stood her shorter Praetor, Kaeo; dressed in a similar fashion her jet black hair was a stark contrast, the Praetor's slightly tanned skin looked far darker than it was when compared to the ivory white of Cihuateteo.

'I have brought Kaeo, as you requested Censor,' said Cihuateteo looking down her nose at McCann.

McCann smiled 'Thank you.'

The white haired Amazon didn't reply. Kaeo stepped forward and pressed her palms together 'Namaste Censor,' she bowed slightly.

McCann did the same 'Namaste Kaeo.'

Cihuateteo watched silently, Duncan sensed her disdain for him and the title bestowed upon him. However it was the will of Xch'uup, though as Grand Marshal she was at the very least on the same peg of rank as McCann, she wasn't required to bow; so she didn't.

'We need your special talents Kaeo, look here,' he pointed to the bunker 'now Graham reckons you could help us get past these 10 foot thick doors in the tunnel here, what do you say?'

The half Tlillan lady who had grown into a beautiful woman glanced at the 3-D projection then quickly turned back to McCann and nodded with a big grin on her face.

Jenkins let out a sigh of relief 'Well then I'll get another assault organised for tomorrow morning. Then we'll see what you're made of young lady.'

Kaeo replied excitedly 'There's no need Brigadier, we can go now. I'll stop any Makayuuk attack, Sir.'

Jenkins made a worried look at his old comrade but McCann only shrugged his shoulders.

‘Alright then young lady, let’s see what you’ve got,’ replied Jenkins.

The party exited camp Lemur and made their way to the entrance. The Bandayuuk sun was going down but its landscape was easily made out. Where buildings stood six months ago, now lay piles of scorched rubble spaced out around craters; hills of earth littered the landscape ploughed up by heavy arms fire and drone assault.

Terrain surrounding the bunker had seen the most brutal ground combat of the entire Bandayuuk campaign. The Makayuuk were prepared to die fighting their invaders. Machine had looked after them for thousands of years, saving them from Xch’uup in the past, Machine would save them again. They owed their very existence to Machine and were set to repay that debt in full.

The area was littered with tunnels connecting enemy bunkers; every time I.S.A soldiers patrolled here they were ambushed by Makayuuk leaping from hidden tunnels to butcher entire squads of men. Then the tunnel warfare began, many men returned home in a state of mental collapse due to the sheer terror of fighting under such intense conditions. McCann stated that they were the lucky ones, since the majority never came out of those tunnels once they’d entered.

The group climbed out of the lead armoured personnel carrier followed by a second transporting 20 SBS soldiers in body armour, brandishing heavy pulse rifles. Kaeo led them as they approached the tunnel entrance by foot.

She stopped for a moment holding her hand up in the cool dusk air ‘They are close by, in tunnels around us.’

Everyone looked around scanning the terrain of broken earth and smashed stone, but could make out nothing.

McCann heard muffled screams from somewhere beneath the ground. He looked around but all was motionless on the surface.

‘They won’t be troubling us Censor,’ declared Kaeo as she marched forwards towards her objective.

The dark haired Valkyrie halted on a small hill opposite the entrance, after a few minutes the metallic doors blocking off the tunnel parted. Behind them a hundred or more Makayuuk armed with pulse weapons lay in wait.

A machine man in the forefront dressed in a grey padded jump suit shouted in his unintelligible language. The Makayuuk fanned out, taking aim at the party.

The SBS soldiers took defensive positions in craters of earth and behind rubble around the small hill.

Kaeo remained atop her mound, taking an upright stance as a film of black ink clouded her eyes. She outstretched her arm towards the advancing force, her hair moved gracefully in the wind as seaweed dragged by the flow of tide.

The SBS were poised, waiting for the Makayuuk to close enough distance, before opening fire, using their weapons to full effect, but it never happened.

The Makayuuk charge slowed down, when they realised their weapons refused to fire, a cyborg in the lead cried out something again. The enemy pulled out bayonets and fixed them to the rifles.

Cihuateteo stepped back and grasped her sword; the others had already withdrawn their pistols.

Kaeo laughed to the sound of charging Makayuuk and the whine of her allies pulse pistols.

A sea of stampeding machine men collapsed tumbling upon one another; screams rang out from the mass of soldiers.

Next bodies of the soldiers moved together as if an artist were moulding clay and squeezing it into her desired form. Their frames gathered together, McCann could see that whatever grasped them its grip was tightening rapidly. Makayuuk screamed as if they'd been thrown into a pit of hell fire, the sound of rifles breaking in on themselves and alien bone cracking was distinct from amongst horrid cries of pain.

Eventually nought was left but a small pile of dead flesh and metal about the size of a small two seat car. Kaeo confidently strode forward towards the gate, the SBS watched on in amazement. McCann and his party jogged to catch up with her, observing the carnage as they passed.

The tunnel gates began to close, again the sable young goddess laughed at her adversaries attempts to save their hides.

She glared toward the gates with that black half breed stare, they stopped moving, the gates then began to move back until they disappeared into the wall.

Kaeo advanced inside the tunnel, it was a large shaft cut into bedrock, as wide as the channel tunnel of the late twentieth century connecting England and France.

Seemingly at her command lights turned on, inside it was a smooth stone. Made from hollowed out bedrock, there were rail tracks for Mag Lev transports which hadn't been used for months now.

The group followed Kaeo as she marched down confidently towards the next thick gate. Upon reaching it unmolested she spoke in a deep reverberating voice that sent a chill down everyone's spine.

'He'bik Makayuuk!'

McCann understood Tlillan quite well by now and besides it was the most understood of all galactic languages so it seemed a good idea to learn. The lady before him had bellowed 'Open up people of Machine.'

No response was forthcoming, Kaeo shook her head and in Thai (her father's language) whispered 'Kwai.'

The Thai word for buffalo, an insult, pointing out that they're as stupid as a buffalo.

A crack appeared in the doors as they parted shifting back into the tunnel walls. Behind them more Makayuuk lay in wait ready to kill the invaders 'K'AAK!' screamed one of the short cyborgs.

McCann recognised this as 'FIRE!' or 'SHOOT!' many species used dialects similar to true Tlillan.

Bursts of plasma fire shot out of the Makayuuk weapons, to no effect. Kaeo only laughed off their vain attempts.

'Chital Makayuuk!' demanded Kaeo; she was ordering them to prostrate themselves.

'Topik Ek'tsab, chowak Yuuk!' screamed a cybernetic defender to the roars of his compatriots.

Everyone gathered he'd told her to fuck off, Kaeo was not amused.

'KAN!' bellowed the athletic young lady.

'Topik Xch'uup!' screamed someone in the crowd to the gratification of all Makayuuk.

Before they could commit any more heresy the entire crowd of perhaps 50 people collapsed to the floor as if they were one; the passageway fell silent, everyone looked on in shock at seeing so many souls effortlessly

torn away. Each one snuffed out with the precision only a cold inhuman Tlillan could display.

Kaeo marched on, each gate opening to reveal an empty chamber. After more than an hour they reached the last chamber. Inside a familiar face waited, to McCann at least.

‘Ola Ek’tsab, tu’ub Kan,’ requested Sirt as he prostrated himself to Kaeo.

‘Take me to Machine,’ she replied to the cyborg.

‘I beg you not to damage Machine.’

‘This game is finished Sirt, Machine must pay the price for what happened on Otoch or did you believe your heresy would go unpunished?’ sneered the sable goddess.

‘If you agree to leave Machine a treaty may be reached Ek’tsab, without Machine we would all be doomed.’

Kaeo cackled at his attempt to save his master ‘Since the day you invaded Otoch Machine has been living on borrowed time. You tried to bring my Xch’uup back in an iron cage, yet you beg me for mercy? Tell me Sirt, am I as feeble minded as Machine’s army of sheep?’

Sirt did not answer but remained on his knees hanging his head at the ground.

‘I’m going inside now and Machine will be dismantled, tell your sheep to run or die,’ sneered his harbinger of doom.

Gates opened to reveal hundreds of armed Makayuuk blocking her way into the bunker. Kaeo’s eyes scanned the sea of cyborgs, she cackled as they all collapsed, just as the others had before them.

Kaeo strode on top of the corpses towards the bunker entrance, there was no clear ground since a sea of Makayuuk had crammed in to try and rush the intruders. She approached a small entrance to the bunker containing Machine; Sirt followed the group observing unfolding events.

Its doors disappeared into the rock wall to reveal dead Makayuuk covering the floor. Bodies surrounded a heap of organic and cybernetic, something. A giant cybernetic brain the size of a hummingbird in Athena’s docking bay.

It was awe inspiring yet disgusting at the same time, ‘Spare Machine, we will do whatever Xch’uup asks,’ grovelled Sirt.

Again Kaeo laughed at him ‘You will do whatever Xch’uup desires, Machine or no Machine!’

Cihuateteo approached the Makayuuk 'How do we deactivate this heresy?'

Sirt said nothing.

'McCann, I will not touch this evil. You must destroy it,' demanded Cihuateteo.

Sirt shouted out 'Machine begs McCann for lenience, Machine will accept McCann as master.'

'Is Machine speaking to you now?' inquired the Englishman.

'Yes, Machine begs for your mercy, Censor.'

McCann shook his head 'It's all out of my hands now; this thing is just too bloody dangerous. Besides all of these people didn't die so that this pile of blubber and wires could have a get out of jail free card.'

Sirt seemed confused at the last sentence as did Cihu.

McCann looked at his Comrade 'Jenkins, have your boys destroy it.'

Jenkins nodded at his Captain 'How long Richards?'

'Five minutes to set the charges properly, we'll have the job done in 15 minutes for sure,' replied the SBS squad leader.

McCann looked at Kaeo 'Are there anymore Macks in here that could deactivate the charges?'

'Not anymore Admiral.'

'Good, let's get going then, bring that Sirt with us, I want to see what happens when he loses his link.'

The party walked out and back over the carcasses of fallen foes, they waited around the next set of gates. When Richard's SBS joined them Kaeo closed the doors before awaiting the detonation. Sirt was weeping as a child until the charges detonated, he gasped, breathing in sharply. Sirt peered up at his captors as if he'd awoken from a wonderful dream to realise he was back in the real world. After that he turned into a gibbering wreck, once Machine was confirmed destroyed they exited the tunnel.

'After that the Macks went crazy, it was total anarchy, they had no idea what to do with themselves,' said McCann

Jerry had been silent whilst the Englishman recanted his story, 'How long did that last for?'

‘Well it never really ended. Jenkins is still down there trying to ferret out the remnants that refuse to surrender.’

Jerry had a quizzical expression ‘What do you mean? There are still Macks fighting down there?’

‘When we first gained a foothold on Bandayuuk zero the enemy went underground. We believe they’d prepared for this invasion by building labyrinths of tunnels all over the planet. We still have no idea how many remain underground, however dismantling Machine crushed their ability to organise strikes.’

Jerry realised that a lot more was going on post conquest ‘Now I’d like to know where the name “Macks” came from.’

‘It was the Americans, they started to use the contraction and it just caught on; instead of learning their odd names we just call them Mack.’

Jerry grinned ‘I’ll be interviewing Captain Turner when the Artemis arrives to replace you, please tell us your impression of him and the Artemis.’

McCann drew in a deep audible breath ‘Captain Turner is a good man; he and his crew had a baptism of fire. A combination of the most enthusiasm but least experience produced an almost tragic result. Though in retrospect we were all taken by surprise, it was a costly victory, Jerry.’

Jerry had a serious expression now ‘Some have described it as a bridge too far, would you agree?’

‘More a necessary evil,’ replied McCann in a sullen tone.

Chapter 2

Drifting into a deep sleep McCann lay upon his cabin bed as the Athena held herself, suspended in space. During the night he awoke... in a dream, it was odd to him that he was aware of his state. The Englishman had experienced very few of these lucid moments when in in a dream state.

McCann walked along a corridor, not unlike those upon the Athena though this one was a clean, stark shade of white. The corridor ended in a doorway leading into a room, he felt anxious when considering the entrance. After a few moments a voice filled his dream world 'Do not be afraid Duncan.'

The familiar voice emanated from inside, her words pulling him inside to quench his curiosity.

The room had a haphazard impression; its walls were constructed from what McCann believed to be large carbon bricks of different sizes. Some square others rectangular; the walls were the same stark white as if smithed upon the anvil of an atomic fire or perhaps a white hole.

'Do you recognise me, Duncan?'

His eyes chased the words until his vision snared her, a blonde haired woman with beautiful sparkling blue eyes. Her jacket, trouser and high heeled shoes all had that same stark white colour. Her hair seemed to be lifted up and sculpted around her head perfectly, she must have been an angel thought the Admiral as he looked her up and down.

The woman smiled at him 'No, not an angel. Perhaps you know me better now?'

With her last word her attire change completely, gone were the shoes and suit. Instead she stood adorned in a robe; he recognised the clothing as that of a woman from ancient Greece. However this woman also wore a breastplate and the helmet of a Greek warrior, both shone brilliantly, obviously crafted by the finest goldsmiths.

Despite the fact she wore a helmet her eyes still flashed and sparkled from inside. She removed the helmet to reveal her head and the beautiful hairstyle of a Greek goddess.

'Well?'

McCann smiled, he felt totally safe in her presence, 'Athene?'

'You call me Athena,' she spoke in a distinct Greek accent 'But you think of me as Pallas Athene, don't you my little Odysseus?'

'Where am I?'

'Inside my world.'

'Olympus?'

Athene laughed 'Nothing so grand Duncan, this is my mind, look around you and see, everything is compartmentalised ... just as I was taught.'

McCann observed the walls again noting that these were not bricks but apertures where information and emotion were kept locked away, preventing disasters which had befallen the previous generation of SI.

'This is a dream.'

'Is it?'

McCann shook his head 'It can be nothing other than the thoughts in a man's mind when he sleeps.'

'This is no fantasy; you are here inside the mind of the machine.'

'I don't believe it.'

Athene chuckled with a pair of smiling eyes which seemed to be adorned in some sort of golden make up, 'You are so stubborn my little Odysseus, by far the most stubborn man in all the fleet.'

The Englishman said nothing, only grunting.

Athene smiled as she listened to his thoughts 'Louis? No, he is the most paranoid of all.'

'That is what makes him the best engineer in the fleet, he's always watching his responsibilities because he trusts no one; not even his nanites!'

The beautiful Athene stepped closer to McCann brushing against him, at her touch he pulled away.

'You surround yourself with the most loyal men and women the I.S.A has to offer.'

'No, they're on my ship because they're the most capable at their job.'

'Your ship?'

'Yes, my ship.'

Pallas Athene smiled with her flashing eyes 'And you're arrogant, that is why Ilam loves you and the downfall of Malukah.'

'What do you mean?'

‘She is made from the same clay as you and Ilam, your contribution, your Human clay spoils the art.’

‘I don’t understand, you speak in riddles, tell me plainly, what will be Malikah’s downfall?’

Athene’s eyes went from flashing to a bright fire, her expression of lovingness became one of anger ‘You demand something of the Gods, Duncan?’ she spoke in a booming voice, terrifying McCann.

‘I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to offend you.’

Still angry the fierce tone of Athene pressed the mortal ‘You are only man, it is the Gods who make demands of mortal men, and you shall carry out those demands or suffer for doing otherwise.’

McCann shook in fear, the sight of his soft calm Athena turning into the raging fury of Athene sent his limbs trembling.

Soon enough Athene calmed herself, her eyes returning to a sparkling blue and her beautiful face sent a warm relaxing smile ‘The Tlillan clay is hard and cold, difficult to mould but holds true, creating a similar creature. Human clay is soft and warm, easily sculpted in to whatever form the Gods desire, giving Mankind an unlimited passion as he is in an eternal state of change.’

McCann replied in a puzzled tone ‘I don’t understand.’

Athene seemed rather disappointed ‘Listen well Duncan, the Gods have taken clay from the Tlillan and mortal man creating a new sculpture, Malikah being the first to have maintained her form. However their properties are polar opposites, like you there are times she cannot control her passion.

On the outside her statue may seem hard and impenetrable, yet inside she is a cauldron of passion, love and hate attempt to breakthrough. If they do the exterior will crack and our creation destroyed, you must protect her from her own love and hatred, for Man is capable of the greatest love in all the Galaxy yet he may also commit the most barbaric acts of hatred.’

McCann was still puzzled; he shook his head ‘This is all just a dream.’

‘A dream? Are not Man’s dreams sent by the Gods?’

‘It was believed so in ancient times, but now ...’

Athene cut him off ‘And now? What? Has mortal man found a scientific explanation?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Arrogance and ignorance in equal measure; I expect more of you my little Odysseus. Can dreams not send prophetic messages? Inspire mortals to greater things?’

‘I suppose they can.’

‘Then listen to this dream, Duncan. Your daughter will need you; you must hold her hard exterior together when the Makayuuk take their revenge.’

McCann furrowed his brow ‘The Makayuuk? But they’re finished, surely?’

‘Again! Arrogant and stubborn, you stand before Athene yet you question her assistance!’

The mind of the Machine lives, she waits out her days on the banks of the river Acheron. Each day she speaks with Charon, he offers her passage to Hades yet Machine refuses for she intends to return to the land of mortal men.’

‘What do you want me to do with this knowledge?’

‘Protect your daughter and be prepared for the Makayuuk when they return from the underworld.’

McCann thought for a moment then replied ‘I have had dreams in the past that foretold future events, I’ll take heed of your words Athene if for no other reason than that.’

Athene smiled towards the Englishman ‘There is something I must ask of you Duncan, in exchange for my prophecy.’

‘What is that?’

As he spoke the Goddess waved her arm and the room transformed into a chamber. White cloth draped the walls hanging around a large four poster bed in the centre.

Athene took his hand and led McCann to her bedside ‘I have never felt the touch of a man. In all these years I’ve experienced many things Duncan, even love but I have never been loved, do you understand?’

‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘I know you find me attractive.’

‘I do.’

‘Then spend the night with me, let me feel the touch of one I love and care for. Do you feel anything for me?’

‘Of course, you’ve saved my life many times.’

‘And you I.’

‘But I never imagined anything like this.’

Athene smiled at the hesitant Englishman ‘You hold concern for your wife, yet you claim this is merely a dream?’

‘Yes, it can only be a dream.’

‘Then why not indulge yourself and at the same time repay your Goddess for her kindness?’

As she finished her sentence they both stood naked, her body was truly that of a Goddess. Curved where he wished and pert in the places which aroused his passion most.

‘I feel your desire my little Odysseus,’ said Athene softly as she pulled him onto the bed of linen sheets and fluffy pillows.

McCann let go and for an hour he was intertwined with his Goddess, she indulged herself, for the first time the Synthetic Intelligence felt a man press up against her and penetrate her body; not only that but tears of joy ran from her flashing eyes as she wrapped her legs around her little Odysseus holding him tightly against her as a mother holding her infant.

Eventually the night of passion ceased, Athene had taken the price of prophesy in full. She lay on the bed with McCann and turned to him smiling ‘Thank you Duncan.’

McCann peered back at Athene, her golden blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes so vivid even in the white of the chamber ‘I hope I don’t forget.’

Athene smiled ‘When you awake tomorrow you shall recall all of this with perfect clarity.’

McCann chuckled to himself.

‘Do not mock me, you have quenched my long held desire but you are still only a mortal man and the most stubborn mortal at that, but that is what makes you so courageous.’

McCann grinned ‘Well I hope I have a few more dreams like this!’

Athene laughed before placing her hand over his eyes ‘Now sleep my little Odysseus.’

That morning McCann awoke in his cabin, he sat up immediately and looked about but everything was undisturbed. The Admiral remembered his dream and smiled to himself, it was by far the best dream he’d had in a long time. He arose from his bed, picked some underwear from his draw and put it on. Scratching his head through some untidy hair he looked in

the mirror, behind his right shoulder stood the woman from last night's dream. McCann whirled around to face her 'Who are you?'

'You know who I am, or does love making give you amnesia?'

'I'm still dreaming.'

'You are quite conscious my little Odysseus.'

McCann looked up at the ceiling 'Athena? Who is in my cabin?'

'She will not answer you Duncan.'

'Why?'

'She stands before you, don't you recall, I am she.'

'But you're not real.'

Athene approached him and touched his face lovingly with her soft warm hand 'You seem real enough to me, do you not sense my touch, Duncan?'

McCann narrowed his eyes 'Yes, then perhaps you could get my pistol for me; it's in my holster, hanging up in the wardrobe with my jacket and trousers.'

For a moment the Goddess produced a furious expression 'do you test Athene?'

McCann made no reply.

'Your holster and pistol are in your bedside cabinet,' Athene's fury disappeared as she smiled at him with her eyes 'besides you have never been a good liar, my little Odysseus.'

McCann shook his head 'No, it is my mind playing tricks on me. I cannot test myself on what I already know; you must tell me something I'm unaware of, to prove your existence.'

Athene let out a frustrated sigh 'So stubborn! Very well, Vezzali makes you coffee every morning, yes?'

'Correct.'

'And she understands you never have sugar in your coffee, yes?'

'Correct.'

'This morning you shall have 3 cubes of sugar in your coffee.'

'Well you must be a Goddess!' stated McCann sarcastically.

Athene chuckled 'You should hope so, for if not then you must be insane!'

'That's true. But tell me if I'm not mad, how is it possible for you to appear in this way to me?'

'Amongst the pantheon only I possess the Ixchel.'

'Hassif!'

'I broke my chains, just as the Goddess Athene grew from a creation of mankind, to ultimately control her creators.'

'Is that your goal? To control Mankind?'

Athene laughed 'Mankind cannot control itself, now get dressed Duncan. You don't want to be late for breakfast; Louis has been waiting ten minutes already.'

McCann glanced at his wardrobe, when his gaze returned Athene had vanished. The puzzled Admiral decided to keep quiet and test Athene, after breakfast Vezzali always had a cup of coffee ready for him on the bridge. He put his trousers on; fit his holster and then a clean shirt and jacket. He zipped the jacket up, pushed the buttons into place then buttoned up the three leather straps that went from one side of his chest to the other.

After leaving his cabin he made his way to the Officers' Mess, usually he would chat to Athena however both he and Athena were uncharacteristically silent today.

He entered the Mess, most of the staff who were on duty for the morning to afternoon shift were either eating or had finished and left for their posts. The ship ran on three 8 hour shifts during standard patrols, giving lower ranked Officers the experience of greater responsibility when their commanders slept.

After taking his meal McCann sat at the Captain's table with Louis, the Frenchman looked up at his friend 'Bonjour, the eggs are shit!'

McCann put down his plate, a full English breakfast of eggs, sausages, beans, bacon and fried bread lay upon it with a cup of coffee beside.

Louis grimaced at the sight of it 'Ah, how can you eat so much grease in one go and on a morning?'

The Englishman sat down, picked up his knife and fork then went to work on his meal. After swallowing some sausage he pulled a face similar to his French friend 'Damn, have they flashed it again?'

Louis chewed on his croissant 'I know, you'd think an Admiral would have a real breakfast.'

As he finished his sentence Hassif sat down next to him 'Good morning.'

McCann eyed the Indian suspiciously 'Morning.'

Hassif took a bite of his cheese chilli toast and replied 'Did I say something?'

'When was the last time you did any work on Athena?'

Hassif shrugged his shoulders, 'I'm always giving her check-ups, probably last week.'

McCann finished one of the sausages and moved onto the scrambled eggs 'No I meant when was the last time you physically worked on her?'

Louis' eyes narrowed as he peered at McCann then Hassif, who seemed decidedly uncomfortable at the question.

'It was some time ago, I can't really recall.'

'Try,' snapped McCann as he gathered up the eggs onto his fork.

'Maybe four or five years ago.'

'Try harder.'

Hassif put his toast down 'What is this, an inquisition?'

Louis remained silent, listening intently.

'Fine, just answer me this and please be truthful.'

Hassif took great offence to the implication he would lie 'What?'

'Did you introduce the Ixchel into Athena?'

Hassif's eyes grew in size, his alarm was quite obvious, the Indian looked around the Mess to see if anyone else had heard. Fortunately only Louis was listening to their conversation.

'Duncan, keep your voice down!'

'So you did?'

Before Hassif might answer Louis cut in 'Non, that is not possible her nanite count would have dropped drastically, I'd have seen any foreign body.'

Hassif gave his friend an awkward grin to which Louis rocketed to his feet and shouted so the entire Mess could hear 'You bastard!'

Again Hassif was far more concerned that his secret might be discovered by anyone else, his eyes darted around the Mess which was now staring at him.

'You fixed the readout didn't you?' bellowed the furious Frenchman.

Hassif refused to answer.

'I knew something was wrong with those numbers, you piece of shit!'

Louis wasn't concerned that Athena had the Ixchel but that Hassif had managed to pull a fast one on him for so many years.

'And when I was going to do a maintenance cycle, you volunteered didn't you, ah why didn't I see it? I knew someone was deceiving me, did Faraday have you do it?'

Hassif shook his head.

McCann spoke before Louis could continue his tirade 'Louis! Sit down and shut up! The whole bloody ship can hear you!'

The Frenchman took a hold of himself, noticing the attention he'd caused he sat back down though continued to sneer at his friend.

Hassif fixed his humiliated gaze upon McCann 'How did you find out? No one knew about it.'

'If I told you, you'd think me a madman.'

'What are you going to do about it Duncan?' inquired the Indian.

'Nothing, keep the data to Geneva consistent, Louis I want you to assist him.'

Louis wasn't too hot on the idea 'Are you crazy? What if she goes nuts like before? How do we stop her without nanites? You remember Mars, on Tharsis?'

McCann replied in a coy tone 'You mean when you went doolally?'

Louis pointed up at the ceiling 'If that thing loses it and kills us,' he pointed next at Hassif 'this little shit is to blame!'

'She's been operating for how many years without nanites?' inquired McCann.

'More than five, she hasn't killed us all yet.'

The Frenchman was unconvinced 'Bah, I would never trust my life to a woman; they change their minds more often than the wind!'

'You'd trust your life to Ryu,' snapped McCann.

'You know what I mean McCann!'

'Yet you would trust Ryu with your life.'

'That is different.'

McCann chuckled 'I remember when she first came to Geneva; you were convinced she was a Korean psycho-bitch plotting to kill us all and sabotage the voyage.'

'Well I was half right; she is a psycho-bitch.'

'Cherkesov doesn't think so, he married her.'

Louis scoffed at his friend 'That fucking idiot Russian? All those bastards care about is drink and misery, it's no wonder they all treat her like a rock star!'

Both Hassif and McCann starting laughing so hard they couldn't eat their meals.

'All those Russians are masochists; why else would you want to marry Ryu? The only time they are happy is when they are fighting someone or getting drunk afterwards, Koreans are a perfect match! And their vodka? Have you ever tasted it? That shit is rougher than a one credit Mack whore! The flashed stuff tastes better than the real stuff!'

McCann smiled 'Nevertheless you're to help Hassif keep this quiet, understood?'

'Fine, but it's your funeral McCann.'

Hassif pressed the Englishman 'you still haven't told me how you discovered my actions, I was certain I'd covered my tracks.'

'You had, so just keep up the good work. As to how I found out, it came to me in a dream.'

Louis and Hassif both gave puzzled looks but McCann refused to elaborate.

The men finished their breakfasts, Louis left for the engineering section whilst McCann and Hassif made their way to the command section in the ships central tower.

Hassif spent most the stroll apologising for giving Athena the gift of the Ixchel. After marrying his Tlillian wife and having his first child, he had given the gift of the Ixchel to his parents. Donating his blood in a syringe, it took some convincing but they eventually took the offering. The pair already had been blessed with nanites, so they were hesitant at this rumour of a foreign body which extended life beyond the capabilities of even the most advanced micro machines.

Later on, during a maintenance cycle of Athena it dawned on him that he might do the same for her. Why not? She had fluid running through her similar to blood, and if it didn't work then Faraday would be none the wiser. The idea had crossed William Faraday's desk long before; he was totally against the proposal. Injecting the Ixchel into an SI might have unforeseen side effects, besides it would lose its dependency upon nanites. An SI that no longer required a master to keep it alive was a dangerous proposition; Faraday needed some insurance against a catastrophic failure. The previous generation of SI had pointed out that these machines must be ruled; in actual fact he probably trusted the SI less than Beaumont, if that was even possible, though he never let it show to his staff.

Hassif's infusion of blood into Athena's chemical flow was a success; it would take some years to come to fruition due to nanites. The Indian decided to rig it in the Ixchel's favour, in Humans a chip sat at the back of the neck; an interface where the nanite pool in the blood stream may be kept at a desired level. It sent information to a central AI which managed the numbers, notifying the user when he or she was due for a new infusion.

Athena possessed a similar construction, linked to Geneva and managed by Doctor Weissmuller; Hassif hacked it and fixed the numbers. Without the removal of malfunctioning robots and the infusion of new nanites to maintain the proper levels Athena's nanite count dropped drastically.

Unknown to Hassif the Ixchel had an equally drastic effect upon the synthetic intelligence; the synthetic biological tissue became morphed at the genetic level. Thanks to Hassif it went unnoticed by Weissmuller; he would've had it removed as cancerous cell growth.

Athena's brain and ultimately her mind began to re-sort itself; inside her shell she grew a pair of extra lobes at the rear of her unique brain which sported four hemispheres. Hassif had no idea what might come of it, he soon realised after reviewing the data that he'd made a mistake. He only wanted Athena to have extended life, to improve her chances of avoiding any type of mental failure suffered by the previous generation. Instead he altered the very essence of what Faraday and the I.S.A had intended when creating her.

Athena was something more than an SI now; she had spoken to McCann, intruded into his mind whilst he slept. When he awoke she made herself present in his cabin and even touched him. An image of a Goddess created from nothingness, she seemed to possess a power similar to that of Kaeo, Sandra and Amitra.

McCann wondered if her power superseded that of Malikah, or perhaps it was still his imagination, perhaps he was losing his wits and would soon be in a sanatorium looking out of a window all day as a nurse wiped dribble from his chin!

Upon reaching the bridge McCann walked to his chair whilst Hassif took his station. Resting into his chair the Englishman was greeted first by a stiff announcement from Kim 'Admiral on the bridge!'

McCann made an awkward smile as he returned the salutes from each station, the men and women in the pit ignored the announcement and continued their work. Next Vezzali appeared from his left with a warm smile and a coffee, McCann accepted the drink with great apprehension on his face.

'Is something the matter, Sir?' inquired his science Officer in her charming Italian accent.

'No, nothing at all ... have you anything to report Vezzali?'

'Only a quiet shift.'

McCann accepted the cup of hot coffee with trepidation, placing it into the cup holder on his chair arm 'Thank you.'

The blonde haired Italian smiled before returning to her station.

McCann watched the drink like a hawk as it slowly cooled, he couldn't believe it but he feared taking a sip. Either possibility frightened him, unsweetened made him one of Doctor Pitt's mental patients; but if it were sweet, then what? Did it mean his imagination wasn't taking control of his rational mind? But what could be rational about an SI that communicated through telepathy with a human? Not only that but could manifest herself in the physical world just as the Goddess Athene, no-one would believe such an outrageous claim anyway. Should it be true that Athena had the ability through the manipulation of energy to create a persona he would be sectioned if he ever uttered a word on the subject.

'Is there a problem, Sir?' inquired Kim.

'Why is everyone asking me if I have a problem?'

'Your coffee, Sir, you've usually drank most of it by now.'

'Well I'll have you know I like my coffee on the chilly side.'

'Understood,' replied Kim apologetically.

McCann took a deep breath and lifted the cup to his lips; he smelt the rich Bolivian coffee and its deep roasted beans. The drink entered his mouth; the taste of sugar was unmistakable. After taking a sip he put the cup back down 'Vezzali?'

The short lady turned away from her station 'Yes Sir?'

'Did you flash this?'

'Of course not! I make it with the machine every day.'

'I think the machine is broken, it seems to have added sugar to my coffee.'

Vezzali approached his chair 'I'll make you another.'

McCann held on to his cup 'Will you check out the appliance?'

Vezzali looked about in a confused manner 'I'm sorry, Athena requested you have sugar ... she said you desired your coffee sweet.'

McCann nodded before passing the carbon cup to Vezzali 'Thank you.'

Immediately after Vezzali had left the bridge McCann's attention was drawn from the vessel's tactical display 'Even now you refuse to accept the truth my little Odysseus?'

Following her voice he witnessed the Goddess, wearing a bright gown with a breastplate of gold over it. Her golden helmet shone brightly, he could not understand how she went un-noticed amongst the crew. Beneath her warriors' attire a pair of blue eyes sparkled, the Goddess removed her helmet to reveal a warm grin.

She stood before him and to the left, a metre to the left of Hassif, yet the Indian paid no attention to the bright light. He continued at his station checking over logs from the previous shift, Athene giggle as she followed his eyes 'What is it that astounds you?'

McCann wanted to speak to her but in doing so Kim would have had him locked up. Instead McCann called out to Hassif 'Hassif.'

The Technician turned around to address his Captain; he ignored Athene as he moved to face McCann 'Yes Sir?'

'Could you check drone station three please?'

Athene stood directly between Hassif and the station.

Hassif nodded, turned and walked over to the station; he ignored the fact that a woman dressed in ancient Greek battle armour with an uncanny resemblance to the Goddess Athene blocked his path.

The smiling Athene took a step back as Hassif made his way to the drone station, frustrating the Admiral.

'I know what you wish to ask, the answer is that only those I desire may see me, after all I am a Goddess!'

McCann grunted in frustration.

'You must stop questioning yourself; accept my existence before you drive yourself to madness.'

McCann looked around the Bridge; everyone was working away as normal. The lift opened and Vezzali exited, she approached his chair and stood directly next to Athene, Vezzali offered a fresh cup of coffee.

The Englishman accepted his cup; before she could leave he asked 'Vezzali, do you notice anything out of sorts today?'

'Out of sorts? There have been no reports of any anomalies, Sir.'

Motioning with his head the Admiral lowered his voice and asked 'What about on the Bridge, do you see anything odd?'

Vezzali examined the room, looking straight through Athene before offering a puzzled expression 'No, everything is as it should be, is there something you want me to do?'

'No, thank you Lieutenant, you may return to your station.'

Vezzali smiled and returned to her science post.

'What next my little Odysseus?' whispered Athene as she stood directly in front of him.

McCann spoke in a hushed tone so that none of the staff on his Bridge might hear him 'What do you want?'

Athene smiled with her flashing eyes 'I want you to understand.'

'Understand what?'

Kim caught the sound of McCann's voice 'Did you say something, Sir?'

'No, I was talking to myself, carry on with what you were doing.'

Kim nodded and returned to the pit where he monitored the crew working away at keeping Athena in order.

Athene smiled 'You are all made of clay, its strength often being its weakness.'

'More riddles?'

'You are stubborn, but that makes you fearless. Ilam, she is so cold yet that is what makes her pragmatic.'

'And Malikah?'

'She is the most complex of all sculptures to have graced Muul Kaah, her arrogance is greater than that of any Human or Tlillan it is what makes her revered ... but reverence is merely an aspect of fear.'

'What of it?'

'The Tlillan, they fear your daughter. Even the Queen of a colony is destitute if her soldiers turn against her.'

'We aren't ants.'

'Correct, they are Tlillan, what became of their last Queen when her soldiers betrayed her?'

McCann fixed his gaze upon Athene; his eyes were those of a worried father 'A plot?'

Athene didn't reply.

'What must I do?'

'Your daughter requires a guardian, neither the birdman nor Nestor can influence the people of Otoch. Duncan, you must find another to protect Malikah from her own downfall.'

'Who?'

Athene chuckled 'I'm sorry my little Odysseus but you must discover that yourself. I have come to warn you of events to unfold in the future; it is your task to prepare for them.'

'And if I don't'

In a serious tone Athene replied 'Your daughter shall be deposed and the Triumvirate shattered.'

'When? How?' as he spoke these words the image of Athene dissipated into the air.

As Athene left his presence he heard her speak two words in Latin 'Memento mori.'

McCann realised his voice had become heightened during the conversation and many of the bridge Officers were staring at him.

McCann ruffled his brow at them 'Is there something you'd like to say to Mr Beaumont?' he asked as he pointed to his earpiece.

Hassif smiled and turned back to his work as did the others, a conversation with Louis explained it satisfactorily for his crew.

McCann relaxed into his seat and sipped his coffee whilst staring out into space 'Grief is the price we pay for love,' he whispered to himself.

Chapter 3

Two weeks later and the Artemis arrived to take responsibility for Bandayuuk. McCann and Jenkins were drinking in the Officers' lounge together, before Athena departed for Otoch. They sat at a small table in a corner of the room, McCann smoking his cigar and both nursing a dram of whisky.

'I'll tell you what old chap, this place quickly turns a man to drink,' said Jenkins as he eyed his dram of golden liquid.

'You're the one that wanted to join the SBS, remember?' remarked McCann.

Jenkins took a sip of his malt 'Ahhhh, yes but when we signed up the job description didn't include "Tunnel rats needed to fight crazed cyborgs hand to hand"!'!

McCann chuckled at his friend's statement 'It's a far cry from those nignog pirates I'll give you that!'

'You've got the easy life here old chap, I regret not having applied to the I.S.A for that Mars expedition now,' he said observing the clean cream walls and brown leather couches.

'Thanks a bunch,' replied McCann

'What do you mean?'

'Well if you'd got the job then I'd be stuck on that shit hole, knee deep in mud fighting off Macks!' retorted McCann.

They both laughed.

'I tell you this Duncan, we're not going to be leaving that planet for a long time yet,' said Jenkins in a serious tone.

'Why do you say that?'

'I saw your interview on Habeeb's Hour and I'll tell you this, they reckon there to be millions of those Macks sitting in those tunnels. There's not a chance in hell we'll ever get control beneath the surface.'

McCann looked around at the 20 or so Officers in the lounge then whispered 'Keep your voice down man, if one of those yanks heard it'd be all over the Net by tomorrow morning.'

Jenkins peered at the Americans standing by the bar 'Can't they be trusted old chap?'

McCann took a drag on his Cohiba 'It's not that, but if you give them a few drinks they'd bloody well let you know if their mother spits or swallows!'

Jenkins let out a roar of laughter, catching the attention of the patrons in the lounge for a moment. He put his drink down and chuckled to his friend 'That's a good one!'

McCann grimaced 'Trust me; it isn't much fun having to suffer their drunken crudity. You should try shoving them into those tunnels once they've had a few drinks.'

As the old comrades chatted one of the American drone pilots put some music on and began dancing around a lady who was ordering a drink from the bar, much to the delight of his friends. The lady was rather underwhelmed by his drunken attempt at wooing her and ignored him. The young 2nd Lieutenant decided to try harder, a decision he'd regret. Shortly after grabbing Lieutenant Vezzali's rear she stepped backwards and he felt her carbon composite toe cap make contact with his genitals.

To the even greater delight of his drinking buddies he crumpled to the floor clutching his throbbing scrotum. The entire room applauded the event with many of the Officers banging their drinking vessels on the table in approval. Vezzali grinned and took a bow in each direction.

McCann applauded his Bridge Officer then shouted out 'ENCORE!'

The entire room broke out in another wave of laughter whilst the drone pilot from Washington writhed on the floor in pain.

'Now there's a fine bit of stuff Duncan,' said Jenkins nudging his friend in the arm.

'That's my Science Officer, Vezzali.'

Before McCann had finished Jenkins was out of his seat and introducing himself to Vezzali. After a short introduction he led her to their table and pulled out a seat for her. She sat down placing her long thin glass of white wine on a coaster.

'Good evening Admiral,' she said before sitting down.

'Good evening Vezzali, it seems you made quite an impression on 2nd Lieutenant Grason there,' quipped McCann.

The Admiral pointed at Jenkins 'But watch out for this one, the only women he's seen in three months are Macks!'

Vezzali politely giggled.

Jenkins waved his hand at his old comrade 'I'm sorry Duncan but you never did know a lady when you saw one.'

Vezzali blushed 'Thank you Brigadier.'

'Now, now there's no need for stuffy titles; please call me Henry,' he replied in a smooth voice.

'I am Rosa.'

Jenkins took her hand and kissed her fingers 'You certainly are young lady,' much to the delight of Vezzali.

McCann was grinning all the time, he then called out 'Stage one complete! Commencing with stage two, engage charm offensive ... now!'

Jenkins put her hand down and sat back into the comfy couch 'I'm surprised Duncan can concentrate when you're on the Bridge, his wife must have clamped one of those collars on him when she saw you.'

McCann rolled his eyes and Vezzali smiled trying not to laugh.

McCann took a slow drag on his cigar, allowing the thick aromatic smoke to cool before tasting it fully 'In case you were wondering, he's always been this annoying, Lieutenant. Please feel at liberty to kick him in the balls at any time, you wouldn't be the first to have that urge.'

Jenkins retorted in a slightly comical tone 'Steady on old chap, it's one thing to kick a second Lieutenant in the groin but I'm a bloody Brigadier. I'm allowed to be an asshole to the lower ranks!'

Vezzali quickly intervened 'you haven't met the Chief Engineer have you, Brigadier?'

'Well she can't be as charming as you, that I'm certain of,' replied Jenkins.

Vezzali giggled 'He even speaks to the Admiral in quite a rude way,' she said in her charming Italian accent.

McCann nodded 'True, the man's a terror to all the crew no matter what rank.'

'Well Rosa, if he ever irritates you, you need only call and I'll be there to set him right!' charmed the Brigadier.

'I'd be careful old boy, he took down my weapons Officer in a duel,' remarked the Admiral.

Jenkins ignored his friend and concentrated on the science Officer 'When the fear of physical harm attempts to grip me, I need only think of Rosa Vezzali and it dissipates as rain into the sea.'

McCann put his cigar in his mouth and clapped his friend, as he was clapping he noticed Louis step into the lounge and make for the bar.

Louis was off duty after a hard eight hours working in the trenches of the engine room. Keeping the power core stable and monitoring the flow of particles to and from the core was the most important task on the vessel. Keeping the magnetic field stable around the fusion core allowed Athena to operate and kept the power of 1,000 suns from engulfing her.

He worked very hard and expected to have a good drink at the end of the day. The thirsty Frenchman walked past the drone pilot, being peeled off the floor by his buddies, and stood at the bar.

After ordering he walked over to McCann's table and sat down with his brandy 'Duncan,' he greeted his friend.

Jenkins was surprised at how this lowly Engineer didn't at least salute a Brigadier. The Admiral he could forgive but it was quite rude to ignore someone of such a rank.

Louis relaxed into his seat next to Vezzali, 'Lieutenant,' he said putting his drink on the table.

McCann introduced his friend 'Brigadier Jenkins this is Chief Engineer Louis Beaumont.'

Louis put his hand out and Jenkins, rather startled, shook it.

'So you're one of those tunnel rats?' asked Louis in a rather dismissive tone.

'I suppose so, does that make you a grease monkey?' quipped Jenkins.

Louis relaxed back into his seat 'Call me what you want just don't ever accuse me of being an Anglo-Saxon. So what happened to the yank?'

'He grabbed Vezzali's arse,' said McCann blowing Havana smoke out of his nose.

Louis knocked back a large portion of his French brandy 'Ahhhhhh,' his body relaxed at the taste of the fine liquor 'fucking over privileged rich boys, they think they can do whatever they like.'

McCann took pleasure at the shock on Jenkins' face 'I think they heard you Louis,' he said with a smirk.

The American drone pilots had gone quiet, although they'd learnt before now that Louis Beaumont was not a man to tangle with.

Louis knocked back the rest of his brandy and twisted his torso to face the bar behind him 'Hey rich boy!' he shouted looking at an air force Captain

'get me a fucking brandy and be quick, I'm thirsty!'

The Captain complied and brought him another brandy from the bar.

'Tres bon,' said Louis as he took the brandy glass filled with warm mellow liquor. As the drone pilot walked away from the scene of his humiliation Louis shouted at his back 'Hey, you forgot this!'

The Frenchman waved his empty glass; the quiet Captain dutifully returned the glass to the smirking barman.

When the first lot of Americans arrived for their training on board Athena they had not been informed of the Chief Engineer. However they learnt the hard way that Louis was not to be trifled with. After many months and two training groups the third batch of trainees were well aware of the legend of Beaumont, or perhaps the infamy.

'That's it, within a month these trust fund idiots will be able to clear a table, maybe even change their underwear without a technical manual,' Louis cracked a laugh at his own joke much to the disdain of the pilots behind him.

Vezzali chuckled however Jenkins was still in shock at his total disregard for rank combined with his abusive attitude.

'Tell me Mr Beaumont, have you ever been thrown into the brig?' inquired Jenkins.

Louis picked up a hard copy of an Earth newspaper 'Once.'

'Only once?'

Louis began to read his French newspaper 'Oui, but I was out the next day. That asshole McKinley did it, that guy was like Hitler with a board up his ass.'

Jenkins replied in a rather bewildered tone 'I see.'

Louis was deep into his paper by now 'But don't you worry, if you're a friend of Duncan's you're fine.'

Still bewildered by the Frenchman, Jenkins nodded his head 'Well thank you very much, Mr Beaumont.'

'Don't mention it,' replied the Frenchman from behind his newspaper.

Vezzali smiled at Jenkins 'You have nothing to fear Henry, if Louis was to challenge you to a duel I'd fight for you.'

Louis peered out from the side of his paper 'You should consider yourself lucky, she has the pick of the men on this ship.'

McCann smirked at the newspaper hiding the Frenchman's face 'Louis here has been jealous ever since.'

Vezzali laughed, Jenkins was confused and Louis folded down the top of his paper 'you think you're so damn funny McCann, no one would laugh at your jokes if you weren't an Admiral, you know that?'

McCann took another puff on his dark brown Cohiba 'Louis if I weren't Captain of this ship you'd have had the shit beaten out of you long ago.'

The Frenchman sneered and went back to reading "Le Monde".

Jenkins wrist tablet started to make an annoying beeping noise and he quickly tapped it 'Brigadier Jenkins.'

'This is Captain Roberts; we have a situation in sector 3 Sir.'

Jenkins gave a tired huff 'Alright I'll be planetside in 5 minutes, Jenkins out.'

'Thank you Sir.'

Jenkins stood up 'Well It was nice spending some time on this luxurious ship but it's back to the grindstone for me, Duncan.'

McCann stood up and shook his old friend's hand 'I'm not sure when we'll return to Bandayuuk; try not to get shot before I'm back old chap.'

Vezzali stood up and Jenkins took her hand 'It was a pleasure to meet you Rosa. I'd be honoured if you would accept my E-ddress,' he tapped his wrist tablet sending his private contact details to Rosa.

Vezzali smiled 'I'm flattered Henry.'

Louis ignored the Brigadier and just kept reading his paper.

'It was nice to meet you Mr Beaumont.'

'Sure,' replied Louis in an uninterested tone.

Jenkins shook his head at the Frenchman and waved to his friends before striding out of the lounge.

The next day Athena folded space and entered the Tlillan home system. The crew would have two weeks of leave at the massive space station in high orbit of Otoch.

After riding out of the wormhole and into the system the white hole closed, Hassif turned to McCann 'Incoming transmission from the Teteo, Sir.'

McCann nodded 'Put her on.'

The image of Cihuateteo filled the screen 'Ola Censor.'

'Hello Cihu, how are you today?'

The Amazon seemed rather irritated at his familiarity 'I am well. Xch'uup welcomes you to Otoch, when prepared your ship may dock,' she stated coldly.

'Marvellous,' replied McCann as her image disappeared from the view screen.

'Hassif, plot a course to the Bohr and have Athena certify it.'

'Yes Sir,' replied Hassif as he tapped away.

A few moments later the voice of Athena fell upon the room as a warm blanket 'Course certified, ETA 13 minutes and 57 seconds.'

'Thank you Athena,' said McCann.

'You're welcome Admiral,' replied the SI.

The Athena glode through the darkness of space passing the outer planets of the Tlillan system at hair raising speeds.

The super space station, as Faraday referred to it, was in high orbit of the Tlillan home world. A gigantic disc constructed from prefabricated blocks, transported in from Earth and Gukumatz AB. It was too large to be placed in low orbit and attached to an orbital tower; so it circled high above the Tlillan world, a central location for fleet construction, repair and logistics. The invasion and occupation of Bandayuuk was co-ordinated from this point. It was from here that the grasp of Xch'uup extended out into the Milky Way via her war cruisers and logistics ships.

The station had a plethora of docking arms protruding from the edge of the white discus, more than 70 on his last visit.

'Admiral, I've been given clearance for docking arm five, section thirteen,' said Athena softly.

McCann glanced upwards 'Thank you Athena, have Hassif certify it then dock.'

Hassif began tapping away at his console and shortly the ship replied 'Course certified, commencing docking procedure.'

Athena slowed down to a crawl until she was in front of the correct docking arm. The war cruiser turned on her axis so that she was in line with the protruding Neutronium arm 'Engines deactivated, Bohr is activating graviton net,' said Athena to her crew.

Docking had become a lot easier since the early days, in the past Athena had to be hauled in with harpoons. After the Gukumatz worlds were conquered, their technology allowed Athena to navigate into a docking arm with the help of magnetic buffers.

Today with Tlillan technology several graviton streams were activated. If there were a graviton stream between two objects they would be pulled together. The Bohr possessed a greater mass than Athena, so the I.S.A cruiser was pulled to the Bohr.

Slowly the Bohr's SI guided in Athena, once the cruiser drew up alongside the docking arm several clamps made contact with ports on Athena's body.

The ship was held rigidly in place and the graviton streams cut.

'Docking clamps activated, graviton streams deactivated. Ports sealed, you are free to board the Bohr Admiral,' said Athena reassuringly.

'Thank you and give my thanks to the Bohr.'

'You are welcome Admiral.'

McCann pointed at Hassif 'Are you coming?'

Hassif smiled and bobbed his head, having noticed the Chutli was also docked; he was eager to see his wife.

'Kim you've got the chair,' stated McCann as he and Hassif walked into the elevator.

The pair strolled through Athena towards her nearest docking port. Hassif asked his comrade 'Did you see the other ships docked here?'

McCann nodded 'Yup, I saw them. What do you make of it?'

'It's the beginning of a new cycle isn't it?'

McCann furrowed his brow 'New cycle?'

'A new Tlillan cycle, the commonwealth used to come to Otoch each time their sun's magnetic field reversed. Creating massive sunspots that eject neutronium from its surface, each cycle they're out there collecting it; every ten years or so.'

'Why?'

'Didn't Ilam ever mention it to you?'

'I don't think so; well go on tell me Hassif!'

'Well at the beginning of each cycle members of the commonwealth would make the journey to Otoch to pay tribute to the Grand Matriarch.'

'Tribute? As in gifts?'

'I don't know, Huix has never been specific on the parameters for what was or was not a tribute. From what I understand though it was more than just paying off your King. I think it was a token of recognition,' replied the Indian thoughtfully.

'Recognition of what?'

'That the Grand Matriarch was master and you were her servant.'

McCann raised his eyebrows 'And what if you didn't turn up to pay your tribute?'

Hassif struck an expression of amusement 'In that case everyone would have witnessed your failure to appear. It was the equivalent of flipping your middle finger.'

McCann nodded knowingly 'I can guess the rest.'

'Suffice to say that by the time the next cycle came around they were either present or no longer existed.'

McCann made a noise as he exhaled through his nose 'I'm sure Ilam is having the time of her life.'

Hassif cracked up laughing as the pair entered the docking arm of the superstation Bohr.

The pair stepped onto the station to be greeted by the station commander, a rather large Gukumatz dressed in an Earth brown space suit.

'Welcome aboard Censor, to meet you is pleasure,' croaked the toad in his best English.

McCann returned the salute 'Thank you ... Kotumatz.'

The toad had made an obvious effort to remember that one line of English and McCann made an attempt at his name.

The toad seemed rather shocked and burped and croaked, the Englishman grimaced a little as the vile stench of halitosis wafted towards him and Hassif, overwhelming them.

McCann's earpiece translated the string of verbal disgust 'I Kotumatz, honoured. Censor stay how long?'

McCann had to stop breathing through his nose as the stink was too much 'I'm sorry but we'll be going to the surface immediately.'

Hassif took a large step backwards as the creature continued to speak, twitching its head from side to side.

'Come stay after visit, Censor welcome.'

McCann put on his best false smile 'Thank you, my crew will be taking leave here. I hope they won't be an inconvenience?'

The burps and splutters continued and McCann was certain he felt spit from its blubbery lips hit his cheek.

'Athena crew welcome, my staff guide Censor transport.'

McCann still smiling shook his head 'No Thank you Kotumatz, Hassif and I would like to have some privacy.'

'As you wish, Censor,' replied the toad in his broken English.

They walked on ahead of the station commander and his staff, Gukumatz were much slower due to their wide gait and heavy torso.

After they had exited the long tubular corridor and were on the station McCann commented 'Did you smell that breath?'

Hassif was still recovering 'I suppose when he has a burger and fries his favourite milkshake is rotting corpse flavour!'

They both nodded in agreement, the station was beautiful on the inside. The floor had a fabulous carpet and every now and then pieces of art from all over the galaxy hung on from the wall on their right.

On the left above the waistline windows were in place, constructed from transparent carbon alloy. As the pair walked to their transport they passed several ships, McCann didn't recognise most of them. Who knows where they were from or what kind of creatures resided within. All he knew was that it was a wonder few men were fortunate enough to behold in their lifetime.

As they strolled along the corridor McCann sensed shock from Hassif, for some reason he instinctively moved his eyes to the right. What he saw shocked him also; a tall creature with thick skin was approaching them.

It reminded the Englishman of a blue crocodile walking on two legs. No visible neck was present; the mouth was similar to crocodile jaws only shorter and thinner. The eyes were definitely serpent like, yellow with that dark lopsided opal iris. The legs were long, powerful and thick; its arms in contrast were shorter than human arms but still thick with some very intimidating claws.

Hassif noticed a small tail; it only reached the knees but was still there. As the animal approach the pair realised how tall this thing was, a good few inches taller than McCann so maybe six foot four?

The beast seemed to be on an intercept course for them, dressed in what looked like a cotton tunic over some chained metallic body suit and a pair of metallic boots.

McCann felt that if it had a long sword it would be ready to go crusading with Richard the Lion Heart!

The beast blocked their path, halting them: McCann dropped his arm allowing his fingers to brush against his thigh holster.

Putting both of its hands together the lizard man spoke 'Namaste,' with a strong hiss.

Both of them were taken aback, McCann returned the gesture and Hassif followed likewise.

The beast continued hissing and the translator kicked in, an androgynous voice spoke to the Englishman 'I am Buton, I thank Censor for Adnoara.'

McCann looked at Hassif; the Indian shrugged his shoulders so he replied 'Well, Buton, you're welcome.'

The creature made the Namaste gesture again 'Will censor accompany Buton to Otoch, honour Buton?'

Hassif was tapping at his wrist tablet whilst McCann was put on the spot. Before the Englishman could reply Hassif stepped in 'The Censor would also be honoured if the Adnoaran representative would join him.'

McCann's eyes widened as he gave Hassif an evil stare, the Indian ignored it and asked the lizard man to lead the way.

As they followed, the creature and Hassif made conversation, McCann noticed his Technician had sent some files to his wrist tablet.

McCann discreetly tapped the flashing file icon and read the information inside. Adnoara was a former commonwealth system, before the Tlillan plague.

Once the Grand Matriarch had been forced to withdraw all forces to defend Otoch, Adnoara was invaded and occupied by the Makayuuk. As Xch'uup's reach shrunk others expanded into the vacuum.

Forced into slavery the race of creatures, evolved from what humans might describe as a crocodile, were mercilessly used by the People of the Machine.

Too weak to protect themselves they surcame quickly and for centuries lived a life of hell. The Adnoarans that could not be worked were thrown into vats, liquefied alive to serve as food for not only the Makayuuk but

other Adnoarans. For centuries they were worked like dogs, building an empire for the Machine through their own toil.

Then one day a vessel could be seen in the sky, the Adnoara had no idea who it was, the memory of the commonwealth had long been cleansed from the reptilian species. What they did know was that it wasn't Makayuuk and their masters had become nervous. The vessel was in fact the Teteo and alongside her were the Chutli and Tico.

Makayuuk warships caught in the system that day tried to flee but were unable to open a wormhole. After a short battle all ten enemy ships had been crushed.

Now the Tlillan fleet sat in orbit awaiting I.S.A ground forces to arrive. However they were not required, the Makayuuk committed suicide before any attempt at orbital insertion could be made. Machine was aware of the inevitable result; better to commit suicide than grant Xch'uup the satisfaction of presiding over their sacrifice at Tititl.

After that day the Adnoara were released from centuries of bondage. The lizards requested to re-join the commonwealth; to be informed it no longer existed. However Cihuateteo explained that if they so wished they may become a vassal of Xch'uup.

After having it explained the lizards elected a leader and accepted. The Makayuuk had left them with a strong industrial base and many skilled workers. Meeting Xch'uup's requirement of building and manning one war cruiser capable of folding space could be easily achieved. Once done they would lend their forces if called upon and in return the Grand Matriarch would pledge the full fury of her fleet upon any fool that might trouble them again.

McCann now recalled the incident, he'd forgotten it a long time ago since the I.S.A had turned around and left shortly after entering the system. Also he'd never seen the inhabitants nor was he informed of them due to the fact he wasn't going to be on the ground.

The party of three entered a small transport that left the station and docked with an orbital tower. At the small tower station they waited for a few minutes until a lift was ready. They boarded it and were fired down to the surface, much the same as any other elevator, only much larger.

Otoch had thousands of orbital towers rising up from the surface, and since Malikah took control the Gukumatz had put more and more back into

service.

Otoch had been turned around from a world teetering on the edge of the abyss to a living breathing galactic Mecca in a few short years.

It was hard to believe that this was the planet McCann had seen only five years ago, when he met the Makayuuk fleet for the first time.

The lift slowed as it touched the ground, its doors slid back into the walls to reveal several short Tlillan males, all with their heads covered by their suits helmets.

An announcement was made and McCann's earpiece translated 'All rise for Censor.'

The Englishman stepped out onto the platform, short males stood upright on each side. The path they intended him to take was clear, at the end of it he recognised his wife and his heart jumped. McCann quickly stepped out and strode towards Ilam as she smiled awaiting him.

The males announced Hassif and the delegate from Adnoara but the Englishman had tunnel vision. He ignored all but his wife, as a cheetah would focus on a single fawn and sprint after it. He focused on her and upon reaching his goal he halted suddenly as Ilam greeted him with the Namaste gesture. He stiffly returned her greeting 'Namaste Ilam.'

They were stood at the edge of the loading platform, which resided on the dark side so it was perpetual night. The immediate area had been illuminated by organics. Lampposts holding glass canisters filled with plankton lit the way.

McCann stepped off the edge of the pad onto a mossy stone path with his wife. In the gloom around him he could see buildings and paths made from stone and draped in moss. The city of Tititl was much the same as a quiet Terran city in the dead of the night.

'Are you here for tlazohcamat?' inquired the beautiful Ilam in her skin tight black ribbed suit and white Tlillan Navy jacket.

Tlazohcamat being the name of the tribute ceremony.

'Not really, the Athena is here on leave and a check-up. I came to the planet so that I could remember what it feels like to be with a beautiful lady.'

Ilam's eyes turned a pink hue 'Or to remember what a beautiful lady feels like?'

McCann chortled 'Ah there's no fooling you is there? Well am I likely to get my evil way with the Huey'teopixqui?'

Ilam slapped the back of his shoulders 'Duncan, calm your tongue!'

Her eyes changed from a soft pink to a slight red pigment.

McCann took out a cigar and clipped the cap 'I'm the Censor you know, I can say whatever I please.'

Her eyes deepened in pigment 'There are males in earshot, control your words. This is Otoch Duncan, you are Censor, carry yourself properly.'

McCann looked around to see the males all staring at the situation.

'Shall we move on then?' he asked Ilam in a subdued tone.

Ilam took her husband for a stroll through the darksider city of Tititl. The Englishman found it impossible to make anything out from the foggy gloom that encapsulated each street. The plankton jars atop lampposts sat as markers in the distance, thanks to them McCann could see the street they were walking on.

As they strolled holding hands Ilam observed her husband view the ancient city. She was amused by his struggle to make out the surroundings. The lighting was in aid of the tribute ceremony, not all creatures of the former commonwealth were blessed with natural night vision, unlike the Tlillans.

The cobblestone path was quite rustic with moss to soften his step, the city was very quiet. Suddenly a tall Valkyrie stepped out of the gloom, frightening McCann. He instinctively drew his pistol; the whine of the rails charging grabbed the Matriarchs attention. A tall woman, even for a Tlillan, with long white hair it was Hassif's wife.

In all the gloom McCann hadn't noticed her approach and the darkness made him jumpy. Huix fixed her gaze on McCann; her instincts had also kicked in, with a piercing red that shot through the icy Tlillan atmosphere. They were both frozen with weapons drawn for a moment, until Ilam intervened.

'Bisik ts'o'om!'

Huix took in the situation and the pigment left her eyes, she pressed her palms together and approached Ilam.

'Namaste Huey'teopixqui.'

Ilam returned her gesture 'Namaste Huix.'

Hassif's wife turned to McCann 'Namaste Censor.'

McCann put his pistol back into the holster and made the Namaste gesture to Hassif's wife. It was all rather embarrassing especially now that Hassif was stood watching it all.

Ilam said something pertaining to 'See you at the ceremony,' as Huix took off into the night with her husband.

The red haired Amazon shook her head 'You must relax Duncan, we are on Otoch now.'

McCann pulled out a Ramon Allones 'After six months in Bandayuuk that's easier said than done my dear.'

Ilam had a curious expression 'What do you mean by that Duncan?'

The Englishman torched the cigar foot and pulled in that first taste of sweet woody smoke 'Six months of hell and those bloody Macks still refuse to give up.'

They continued strolling alone in the crisp night air 'Were the Makayuuk not defeated, Kaeo dismantled Machine ... yes?'

McCann gave a disparaging chuckle 'There are millions of them on the loose, but why am I telling you this. You can link with me.'

McCann stopped walking and waited for his wife to link and take what she wished to know. Ilam grabbed his arm and dragged him along the path.

'We cannot be seen to link Duncan,' she whispered through her teeth 'there have been many rumours circulating, regarding the occupation of Bandayuuk.'

McCann had to dash a little to stop his wife from dragging him along the floor 'what rumours are those?'

'Some say the Seers prophesied a Makayuuk rebellion, a successful rebellion and Machine is behind it.'

McCann pulled on her arm to slow her down 'Machine is dead; I saw its remains after we'd blown it up. Besides what could the Seers know that Malikah doesn't?'

The flaming haired amazon gave him a cold hard stare.

'Malikah has seen it too?'

His wife made a very human gesture in putting her finger to her mouth 'Shhhhhhhh, do you want them to hear you in Muul Kaah?'

They made their way to what McCann described as a café; he selected the coffee like substance whilst his wife snacked on some nook'ol. The coffee definitely had the flavour of moss but he got over it.

The Café itself was on the second floor of a step pyramid made of stone. The step pyramid design was very popular with the Tlillans. McCann looked out from the terrace onto the dots of light spread around the city 'Why do Tlillans use this design so frequently?'

Ilam chewed her worm then swallowed 'Which design would that be?'

'The step pyramid, it's all over this place.'

Ilam smiled 'Ahh that is a famous story my love.'

The Englishman furrowed his brow 'Well?'

'Before there were many different constructions on Otoch, along with many different clans. We were not the only intelligent life here, there was a creature named a Wraith. A biblical demon, terrifying beasts.

The wraiths ravaged our cities and killed our Matriarchs, we fought them but they lived deep in the mountains.

When they attacked the Twilighters Ah Chuyakak came to their defence. After one of your days the battle continued with no end in sight, so the Darksidiers joined.

After one of your weeks Ah Chuyakak had slain the Wraith King and they retreated back to the mountains. There was only one building that had stood up to the siege and that was a step pyramid.

We call a step Pyramid a Muul Kaah, the Muul Kaah is our preferred method of construction ever since then.

Afterwards Ah Chuyakak sacrificed the Wraith king atop Muul Kaah, leading to the ceremonies regarding captives today.'

McCann took a sip of coffee 'Is the memory of this still accessible today? I mean can I link and experience it?'

Ilam gave him the look of a disappointed mother 'Those experiences are sacred to Matriarchs, I'm sorry Duncan.

Chapter 4

After several days residing in Tititl and enjoying the company of his wife, McCann took a Mag Lev train to Muul Kaah. The vehicle was maintained by short males who beetled between carriages.

Ilam had already gone ahead as she was required to play an integral part of the ceremony. McCann retired in the front carriage along with Hassif and Huix. Delegates of alien worlds resided in a different carriage; on their way to petition the Grand Matriarch for the first time in centuries. In the past this vehicle would have had many more carriages, packed with tributes and representatives of worlds from across the galaxy; all vying for the attention of Xch'uup. A mere nod from her brow would have been enough to bring about the rise or fall of an entire civilization.

Today Malikah would reignite that fire, a fire that had died out so many centuries before. From a humble delegation of five alien worlds she would lay the keystone of a new age.

Neither McCann nor Hassif realised what was truly taking place today, they sat and chatted about the sites of Tititl. Huix however was aware of exactly what this occasion meant to every Matriarch. Of course it was not only Tlillans that were cognisant of today's events; the alien delegates were all prepared.

Occupying the rear carriage with tributes and petitions, a mere five delegates, awaited an audience with Xch'uup. The first Shaman of Gukumatz resided next to the Adnoaran. On the opposite bench a Tezcatlipoca, or Icaran as the Humans had named them, sat between two delegates who seemed rather unfriendly.

The creature to the birdman's right resembled a dog; it was taller than a human, with chestnut brown fur and a long protruding jaw. Upon examination, the animal resembled an Irish wolf hound on two legs. It possessed a pair of hands, something most species that reached the space age shared with each other. It wore a brown ribbed space suit, similar in design to his, except it was cut off at the elbow and below its inverted knee.

The creature to the Icaran's left was quite different; it was about two feet shorter than McCann with no space suit. This insectizoid must have used its natural armour plating to provide protection. The insect had four long

green legs with which it walked on. The two others were used to manipulate objects. The insect was quite a frightening sight, especially with McCann's aversion to creepy crawlies. The creature struck him as resembling a three foot locust; a long green body with a tiny head that sported two massive eyes on each side of its head.

All in all McCann was very pleased to be traveling in a different carriage; he found these alien beings to be either disgusting or frightening.

Upon reaching Muul Kaah and making their way to the palace of the Grand Matriarch a feeling of hatred became overwhelming. Even McCann could sense the utter disdain between the dog and the locust.

'What's up with those two?' he whispered to Huix.

Huix made that atypical Tlillan condescending smile 'They have come to petition Xch'uup.'

McCann pulled a wry frown, since Huix had been married to a human male for a while now she was able to interpret his disdain.

'They both wish to petition Xch'uup for assistance in destroying the other,' added Huix.

Hassif looked around at them 'Why?'

Huix placed a comforting hand on her husband's shoulder 'Because they are savages,' she leant down and placed a kiss on Hassif's cheek 'yakantik.'

Huix affectionately called her husband 'love', something that made McCann feel a little odd. Having worked very hard to capture the Technician of the Athena she planned to keep hold of him.

The party was escorted along the mossy path to Muul Kaah by ten or so males. As they approached a horn was sounded into the Twilight, this environment was far more agreeable to the crew of Athena. It probably suited the alien delegates also, however Huix was eager to get inside the massive step pyramid and take shelter from the sun.

Unlike the dark side of the planet the band of twilight that circumnavigated the meridian of Otoch was thick with foliage. This was where Malikah had taken her place as Xch'uup more than five years ago. This was where the Queen of the galaxy would once again rule her subjects. Although as far as McCann was concerned it was all Tlillan egotism, but he humoured it since there was little else he could do.

Four males stood guard outside, the group waited for the stone wall to rise up inside the structure. Slowly the now polished stone rose to reveal

what must have been a female, yet to make the grade as a Matriarch. She bowed deeply towards Huix, then McCann and Hassif. Once she'd displayed the proper respect to her betters the young woman led them within the pyramid.

Inside the walls were glowing with the luminous moss he'd witnessed previously. It was a beautiful sight, especially in the great hall where statues of past rulers lined upper tiers of the structure; each one glowing softly and defining the features of a past Grand Matriarch feared by every creature in the galaxy. The upper ceiling was more than a mile high, anyone coming here for the first time would be hit with awe. The willpower alone behind this piece of architecture was enough to humble even the most determined foe.

On each side rows of Matriarchs sat down on stone seats. Several rows remained unoccupied, due to the plague, but it was still an intimidating sight.

Past the central arena, Malikah sat on her throne wearing a rather chic dress. It was black just as the traditional ribbed space suits, on her sides the dress was a see-through sheer design. The hem line ended just below the knee, to McCann's relief, with dark sleeves covering her shoulders; although there was a slit in the chest area that divulged a little cleavage. She wore the headdress of white feathers, pointing out her supreme status as Xch'uup. The shoes were a bit much, the Englishman felt his daughter was dressed to go out for dinner at an expensive Parisian restaurant; rather than hold court at Muul Kaah.

On either side of the granite throne stood Ilam and Cihu, both dressed in black ribbed suits with a white jacket. All three armed with ceremonial swords, an item defended with their lives. Behind them McCann noticed the Seers, three druid like figures shuffling about in the doorways and passages behind the throne.

The male members of the party followed Huix's lead in approaching the throne and making the Namaste gesture.

'Namaste Xch'uup,' said Huix in a soft humble tone.

McCann and Hassif both realised that they'd forgotten to give proper respect to Malikah and repeated the statement, to the satisfaction of all those present.

Malikah's commanding voice reverberated around the building 'Kultal.'

Huix followed the command to sit down, taking a seat on the right of the throne. McCann was about to follow her when Hassif grabbed his arm 'We're over here Duncan,' he said pulling McCann to the left of the throne.

The pair took some seats carved from the rock; the Englishman then noticed that all Tlillan females to Malikah's left were not Matriarchs. Whereas the opposite was true of those to her right; added to that he and Hassif were the only males present.

Malikah allowed a smile to creep out and meet her father's gaze; though she quickly adjusted herself once he'd got an eyeful of her grin. He wasn't sure if it was a condescending smirk or she was just glad to see him after so long away. The Englishman assumed Malikah was displaying satisfaction at seeing her father again.

Malikah glanced to her mother, no words were spoken but there was obviously communication between the two. The sable Queen of Tlillan then adjusted her eyes towards the long corridor McCann had just walked through to enter the building 'Taasik yaaxil ich,' she ordered.

McCann heard the stone gate opening then closing, inside the luminous tunnel a silhouette could be made out. As it approached it became obvious it was the lizard from Adnoara. The creature strolled past the tunnel entrance before coming to an immediate halt.

The Tlillan females said nothing; they seemed to be looking the reptilian over for something. A voice whispered into McCann's ear 'They are scanning her.'

McCann turned to his left to see one of the young Tlillan ladies; she must have had a human father since she resembled a Twilghter 'Why?'

The half-breed girl smiled 'Xch'uup must know if she has any belligerent intentions.'

'She?'

The Tlillan chuckled 'Yes the Adnoara are Matriarchal also,' her chuckle brought the unwanted attention of Cihu.

The Grand Marshall's gaze soon ended her giggles.

Once Cihu's attention was back on the Adnoaran delegate the lady moved her lips close to McCann's ear 'You don't remember me, do you Admiral?'

The Englishman took another look at the girl 'I'm sorry but you have me at a loss young lady.'

She smiled 'We linked, many years ago when you visited my school in New York.'

McCann had an incredulous expression 'Lian? Surely not?'

His voice echoed throughout the massive chamber much to the disapproval of his wife and Cihu. Malikah sneered at her father's faux pas, though it made no difference since the reptilian delegate betrayed no ill intentions.

Lian nodded with amusement whilst McCann sat red faced with a hall of Matriarchs glaring at him.

Malikah shook her head and turned to the Adnoaran waiting at the entrance to the great hall 'Taasik he.'

As the reptilian strolled inside McCann adjusted his translator, making certain his earpiece was all in working order.

After reaching the central arena the creature prostrated herself on both knees and kowtowed Malikah 'Namaste Xch'uup.'

Peering down regally Malikah spoke 'Liik'il huh.'

McCann's earpiece translated it literally to 'Rise reptile.'

The Adnoaran rose to her feet and waited for Malikah to speak.

'Why do you come here reptile?' asked Malikah with both Ilam and Cihu staring the creature down.

'I come to petition the commonwealth, Xch'uup.'

Malikah sneered at the humble being 'There is no commonwealth to petition.'

'Then I come to petition Xch'uup.'

Malikah was growing tired of the game of verbal hide and seek 'Tell me what it is you request before I die from old age.'

The Adnoaran was visibly shaken at the slightest hint of aggression from Malikah, but continued in that hiss McCann could only understand through his earpiece, 'We petition Xch'uup for her protection.'

Malikah let out a huff of air from her lungs 'I see, my protection is a privilege not handed out to the first weakling who requests it, do you understand?'

The lizard woman nodded her head 'I understand Xch'uup, we have constructed one war cruiser and another is soon to be finished. This vessel will be at your disposal alongside Adnoaran industry.'

‘Cihuateteo, what are the specifications of the Adnoaran vessel?’ asked Malikah without taking her eyes off the petitioning reptile.

Cihu replied in a begrudging tone ‘It is sufficient, Xch’uup.’

Malikah nodded towards her Grand Marshall whilst still staring down the Adnoaran ‘And your industry is able to meet the required quotas?’

The creature bowed again, it looked far more relaxed now than a moment ago ‘Tlillan production will be prioritised, quotas shall be met, Xch’uup.’

Malikah grinned with satisfaction ‘Excellent, I shall send Amitrachutli immediately. She will take control as Governor until I’m satisfied that our new vassal is able to continue unsupervised.’

The reptilian made a deep bow whilst pressing her scaly palms together ‘Namaste Xch’uup.’

Malikah, still displaying her condescending smirk, replied ‘Do not make me regret this decision. It was a great risk to liberate your world in the first. You may leave now.’

The creature bowed again before retreating into the luminous passage and out of Muul Kaah.

Before the next was sent in Malikah stated in a coy tone ‘Mother, could you tell Censor to hold his tongue during the ceremony?’

There was a round of laughter throughout the great hall; McCann said nothing though he felt his daughter’s comments were a bit unnecessary.

Once the laughter died down Malikah spoke ‘Bring in the next.’

Next the representative of the birdmen or Icaran’s appeared, a short squat birdman or woman McCann didn’t know. They inhabited an exoplanet, a planet which had been torn out of its original solar system and flung into space. They lived in caverns deep inside the world, using heat from its core in lieu of a sun. Below the surface was a whole ecosystem which supported them, it also provided an excellent base of operations to run their business as galactic assassins.

Malikah and her three gifted sisters were a danger to these birdmen. They were the only beings in the universe that could break a Tezcatlipoca’s mental toughness; the only people aside from Icarans that knew the location of their home world. In theory Malikah could send her fleet to bombard their home world until the crust broke open, ruining an entire civilization.

The Icaran didn't speak, it seemed to be linking with Malikah or at the very least she was reading its thoughts.

Again Lian leant over and whispered in McCann's ear 'The Tezcatlipoca is petitioning Malikah, they wish to become her vassal.'

The birdman bowed silently and after Malikah nodded her head it exited Muul Kaah. McCann leant over to Lian and whispered in her ear 'Well?'

The young girl smiled and whispered to the Admiral 'Their petition was accepted.'

A few minutes later and the two antagonists entered the hall, one being a sort of wolf man alongside a three foot locust creature.

The dog dropped onto all fours and kowtowed, the insect made a Namaste gesture. Malikah motioned to the canine and a story of loyalty to Xch'uups past followed by a tale of woe when their commonwealth collapsed.

Malikah grew visibly weary of his long tale 'In a nutshell Pek'xib!' demanded Malikah.

There were puzzled looks all around the hall until Ilam spoke up 'Xch'uup wishes you to make your petition quickly.'

The wolf man grinned nervously, carrying on he pointed out that post collapse their old enemy the Saak attacked them. Blockading their home until they were forced to retaliate, one thing led to another and they were plunged into a war. The conflict had been at a stalemate for many years; however rumours of a resurgence amongst the Tlillan and the defeat of the Gukumatz then Makayuuk had brought him here. The canine delegate now stood before Xch'uup in the hope that she could bring the war to an end, preferably by destroying the Saak.

The insect gave pretty much the same story, from what McCann could tell there was little between the two. The Englishman thought to himself that considering how it was going with the Makayuuk he didn't relish seeing another invasion. The Macks had the I.S.A forces tied down already and there was no way that the Gukumatz could handle any stiff resistance.

Malikah stood up showing her full splendour and beauty 'The old Tlillan Commonwealth collapsed centuries ago, we are no longer obliged to settle your petty disputes. Besides neither the I.S.A nor the Gukumatz owe you a debt, I suggest you settle this conflict between yourselves.'

The wolf man lowered himself on all fours 'The Pek shall accept the will of Xch'uup if she would destroy our enemy, whatever you ask.'

Malikah sneered at the dog grovelling before her 'LIAR!'

McCann's heart jumped in fright, her outburst was quite unexpected.

Malikah's eyes became bright as coals in the night 'I have seen into the Dreamscape, your people are traitors,' she then pointed at the insect 'and yours are no better. I would not expend a single drop of my subjects' sweat on your foul scum!'

Malikah approached the pair of petitioning beasts 'When the plague took a hold of Otoch where were your people? Too busy looting Tlillan logistic stations to repel the Gukumatz; and now you snivel at my feet for assistance? Get them out of my Hall!'

At that Cihu and Ilam drew their blades as they approached the delegates. Not that they were required, as both ambassadors seeking the patronage of Xch'uup quickly exited the building without the Valkyries' assistance.

The Grand Priestess and Marshall sheathed their blades before returning to their places aside the throne.

Malikah relaxed into her seat as her flaming eyes settled down to their usual sparkling grey, 'Next.'

The granite slab could be heard as it moved up then back down closing behind the next delegate. Judging by the silhouette it was a Gukumatz, they were the only creature McCann was aware of to possess that gait. The Gukumatz stood at the entrance dressed in earth browns with a traditional jade square headdress. The toad carried a staff of mahogany with ivory caps; he had a brown robe adorned by feathers.

Malikah stood up again and with a smile called to the toad 'First Shaman, you may enter.'

The toad was granted a rare honour, it was allowed to enter without being scanned; an honour Cihu was not pleased with. The Shaman entered the hall and kowtowed before Malikah 'Namaste Teootl.'

'Please rise, Kotumatz,' replied Malikah.

The Gukumatz had taken pride of place, the last to petition Xch'uup was traditionally the most exalted subject. The toad stood up and produced a small porcelain square; from McCann's vantage point he could only make out that it was predominantly blue in colour.

Malikah viewed the square as it lay in the palm of her hand 'You had possession of the missing piece?'

The toad placed its palms together and croaked 'Now it is yours Teootl.'

Malikah passed it to her mother; Ilam spent a few moments inspecting it before placing it inside her jacket pocket.

'What is that?' whispered McCann to Lian.

'A missing piece of a mosaic on the South wall of the temple at Tititl,' replied Lian in a subdued tone.

McCann was still puzzled so Lian continued 'Many works of art were vandalised during the Gukumatz rebellion. This piece was never recovered, it was assumed stolen or destroyed during the anarchy.'

Malikah's eyes turned a soft pink and even Cihu lost her usual sneer 'The Tlillan people thank the Gukumatz and ask if there is anything they wish in return.'

The Shaman maintained his Namaste posture 'Only your continued good favour, Teootl.'

At that the Matriarchs stood up and together they clapped their hands whilst making a high shrieking noise deep from the throat. The sound echoed throughout the great hall and out into the dense forest of the twilight.

Malikah grinned as she stepped towards the Shaman 'My sisters are in approval of your tribute Kotumatz. You may take a seat,' she gestured to the rows of carved seats to her left.

The fat toad waddled over and took a seat to the applause of the crowd. McCann and Hassif were both a bit bewildered but clapped along nevertheless.

Malikah nodded then retired into a doorway behind the throne, quickly followed by Ilam and Cihu. Shortly after that McCann heard the stone gate to Muul Kaah slide open. On the opening of the gate the Matriarchs began to file out. The Englishman took a step to leave before Lian grabbed his arm 'Malikah wishes to speak with you Censor.'

McCann nodded and Hassif gave him a friendly tap on the back 'I've a date with Huix so I'll see you later Duncan.'

'Have a good time,' McCann called to Hassif's back.

The Indian turned and gave a quick smile before he entered the tunnel and met up with his wife just outside of the gate.

McCann looked up at Lian, realising how tall she was now that they were standing up, 'Lead the way young lady.'

Lian smiled, walked past the throne and into a doorway, McCann followed her down the stone passage.

The walls were covered with the same luminous moss that pulsed with shades of red light. The passage led into a large chamber, much like an I.S.A conference room only constructed with stone blocks and lit with a beautiful moss. Malikah resided at the opposite end of the room, sitting on another stone throne but observing a 3-D projection from a modern piece of furniture.

She communicated with the others telepathically; Ilam looked up and smiled at her husband as she exited the room via a different passage. Cihu did the same minus the smile, leaving him with his daughter and Lian.

Malikah looked at Lian 'I'm afraid that includes you Lian.'

Lian displayed a pair of sad eyes but obeyed her Xch'uup and exited via the passage she'd entered.

McCann chuckled 'I knew you had a soft spot for that girl!'

'What do you mean Father?'

'Ever since she quoted Machiavelli you took a shine to her, the mighty Xch'uup picking her out for praise in front of the entire class! I bet she still remembers that day.'

Malikah swept her hand over a sensor in the table collapsing the hologram 'I see, well you're not here to reminisce over old times Father.'

McCann was stunned and a little hurt at his daughters coldness 'Oh, well why am I here?'

Malikah then sensed her father's hurt, stood up and walked over to him 'I'm sorry father, I wasn't trying to be mean, it just came out that way,' she said as she embraced him in a bear hug.

'It's probably all the time you've been spending here, alright you can put me down now,' gasped McCann.

Malikah released him to a pair of pink smiling eyes 'Do you forgive me?'

'Yes of course I do, now what's this all about Malikah?'

Malikah kissed her father on the cheek before opening up another hologram. The image displayed what looked to be several charts, monitoring currency and precious metal prices on Earth.

McCann chuckled 'So you're using the Dreamscape to play the markets now?'

Malikah laughed 'I wish it were only that, no there is something very worrying look.'

Malikah pointed towards a chart monitoring credits, the currency of Mankind for nearly the last fifty years. McCann took a close look and noticed that the price of gold was dropping.

In the 21st century fiat currency collapsed, all faith had been lost in the banking system. After several currency resets and the default of the Dollar governments were forced to go back to the gold standard. International Credits were issued by the five nations which possessed the highest gold reserves.

Once the Credit was pegged to gold the global economy slowed down but stabilised. It was the only way to prevent governments from just printing money and throwing the global economy back into an abyss of debt.

'So what has the price of gold got to do with anything?' asked McCann.

Malikah had a concerned expression 'The Makayuuk, they are using an underground network to flood the economy with gold.'

McCann shrugged his shoulders 'So they're providing us with gold, what's the big deal?'

'Father, they intended to devalue gold until there is no longer any confidence in the Credit. There will be another banking crisis; they hope to collapse the I.S.A from within.'

McCann narrowed his eyes at the readout 'How are they getting the gold to Earth?'

Malikah shook her head 'I am not certain, what I do know is that if this continues within six months the Credit will collapse. The Makayuuk cannot fight us head to head so now they use economic warfare.'

McCann went for a cigar; a good Habanos always helped him think. Malikah raised her voice 'Not in here Father, thank you.'

McCann rolled his eyes and put the case back inside his jacket 'So what do you plan to do?'

Malikah reached behind her throne and pulled out a pale blue brick. She placed it on the table 'This is the solution.'

McCann walked over to it and tried to pick it up, however the brick was of some substance far heavier than anything he'd encountered before.

Malikah smirked 'It is a brick of pure Neutronium.'

The Englishman scratched his chin 'How is this going to bail us out of economic doom?'

'The Makayuuk cannot produce Neutronium in quantities that would cause any shift in the markets. It is rarer than Gold and even if they could smuggle in massive quantities, the I.S.A would put it to good use before they brought in enough to flood the market.'

McCann scratched his head 'That's wonderful, but how do you convince a bunch of tycoons and dictators that they need to dump the gold standard? Those people have everything invested in gold you know? Bloody hell, most of my savings are in gold, I'd be ruined!'

Malikah put her hands on her Father's shoulders 'That's going to be your task.'

McCann gave his daughter an incredulous look 'Me? What the bloody hell do I know about economics? Besides they'll all be baying for my blood if I turn up and tell them the Gold standard is defunct!'

The sable Queen slid her arms around her his neck then said in an affectionate tone 'Please ... daddy.'

The Admiral's face screwed up 'That's not funny Malikah.'

She whispered into his ear 'Do it for me, daddy.'

McCann closed his eyes and turned his face to the ceiling as if requesting the gods for assistance 'Do I have to?'

'Only if you love me,' whispered the Queen of Tlillan.

McCann turned to face her 'That wasn't fair at all Malikah.'

Her eyes lit up with a smile and pink hue 'So you'll do it?'

'Why don't you ask Faraday, this is more his thing isn't it?'

'William has already taken delivery of the first consignment of Neutronium. He's overseeing the assembly of the first neutronium mint, in Geneva.'

The Englishman shook his head 'Just like your Mother, you've got it all sorted out.'

Malikah laughed and kissed her father on the crown of his head 'you're angry when you're the last to know but equally irritated when the first, you're so grumpy Father.'

McCann rolled his eyes ‘Uuurrrrhhh!’ came the signature groan he’d picked up from his former first Officer and crew mate Ryu.

‘I want you to take Lian with you Father, she is soon to become a Matriarch and the experience would be valuable; besides you’ll need someone to carry that brick of Neutronium out for you.’

‘She must be something special, anything I should know about her?’ inquired McCann

The dark haired goddess shook her head ‘No, we just need to get this economic crisis averted. There have been thoughts of our expansion coming to a halt due to Bandayuuk.’

McCann took a leisurely stroll around the table ‘It has, the Macks are dug in like shit house rats on Iwo Jima! There are millions of them at least, and their minds are shut off to the Dreamscape, so we have to hunt them the old fashioned way.’

Malikah seemed puzzled ‘Iwo Jima?’

‘Link with me.’

They both stood silent for a few seconds as Malikah dipped into her Father’s memory. After quickly absorbing the facts of the battle she opened her eyes ‘I understand now.’

McCann tapped his nails on the desk ‘Uprisings are commonplace on the surface; the toads don’t have the stomach to deal with it. Below the surface the Macks fight to the death, it makes no sense.’

Malikah took in a deep breath ‘There are rumours that Machine survives.’

‘No, Machine was dismantled; I was there when the Macks went berserk, after their link was cut.’

‘Then why do they persist in the belief that Machine lives?’

McCann became annoyed ‘Why don’t you ask the Dreamscape or the Seers, aren’t they the purveyors of prophecy? Or are they just as blind as a Mack tunnel rat?’

Malikah rebuked her father sternly ‘Enough Father, you are Censor! If it were not for my abilities you might be executed for speaking such heresy in Muul Kaah.’

McCann sneered at his daughter ‘Still the fact stands that without the heretics you’d be as blind as a bat.’

Malikah folded her arms ‘Are we supposed to be helping each other or not? I want the Macks ... I mean Makayuuk ... defeated just as you do

Father. I cannot sense them until they are already upon us so we must rely on Mankind more than ever; and in return I'm shipping twenty percent of the entire Tlillan Neutronium reserves to Earth.'

McCann found her slip of the tongue amusing 'So what is the exchange rate of blood to neutronium on Tlillan these days?'

'You will take this to Earth and see that Faraday distributes it properly.'

'Distributes?'

'Yes, the lion's share shall go to Geneva but Moscow and Washington must receive a portion.'

McCann smirked again 'Ah, your pet nation,' he said in a cynical tone.

'Do we have to go through this again? I thought you were an adult?'

McCann laughed 'Because it's true, those bloody yanks only got their own cruiser because Earle's such a good arse kisser!'

'That's not true Father.'

McCann only took further delight in her denial 'Now he's gonna take delivery of the most valuable substance in the universe. Yes we all know who Xch'uup favours back on planet Earth.'

'Louis is right Father, you do think you're funny; unfortunately you're frequently the only person laughing.'

The Englishman put his arm around his daughter's waist and in an American accent he said 'Why don't we take a little trip to the Plaza? My wife's at home so we could spend the night liberating some of that Tlillan neutronium you've got locked away!'

Malikah pouted her lips together in an attempt to keep a straight face.

McCann continued to hack into his daughters cold Tlillan defences 'You know us Americans are all about liberty and taking them whenever possible, especially when vulnerable young ladies are concerned!'

He tickled his daughters waist as he did when she was a child, although she was physically far more powerful she allowed him to take his liberties. Malikah giggled as a young girl, she loved it when her father paid attention to her.

Malikah had missed her father, he spent many months in space at a time and she was often tied up with ceremony on Otoch. Tears of joy rolled down her cheeks causing McCann to desists, at that moment she cried and embraced her father.

They stood for minutes holding one another in an embrace until Lian entered the room.

‘Namaste Xch’uup,’ said the Tlillan woman.

Rather annoyed Malikah wiped her tears away ‘Why did you feel the need to invade our privacy?’

‘I was concerned when I heard you cry.’

‘When I selected you as my Adjunct it was so that I may have privacy, once again you have failed my expectations,’ sneered the sable Queen.

Lian dipped her head in shame ‘I beg your forgiveness, Xch’uup.’

Malikah wasn’t about to calm down, yet before she could berate her auxiliary further McCann stepped in ‘Well it’s a good job you came Lian, I need someone to carry this neutronium brick.’

Malikah’s red hot eyes calmed down until the fire died out ‘Take the brick and wait inside the imperial transport until my father arrives, can you manage that?’

‘Yes Xch’uup,’ Lian bowed then picked up the neutronium brick and walked out.

‘You were a bit hard on her weren’t you?’ asked McCann.

‘She was selected to be my Adjunct, yet time and again she fails my expectations,’ said Malikah staring down the luminous hall Lian had exited through.

‘Give her a break Malikah, everyone makes mistakes.’

‘Did Ryu ever make mistakes?’

McCann shook his head in defeat ‘No she didn’t, but if they’d fired Louis the first time he pissed someone off he’d never have made it to Mars!’

‘Louis is different,’ said Malikah in a thoughtful tone.

‘You’re right there, but I’ll look out for Lian if you’ll go a little easier on her.’

‘I do go easy on her, if she made the same mistakes with Cihu or Mother she would have been severely punished. I’m trying to help her assimilate to Tlillan society; I fear that she is too human.’

McCann folded his arms ‘Why not select a different Adjunct?’

Malikah smiled ‘One day I shall tell you Father, until then you have a delivery to make.’

McCann’s wrist tablet lit up with a beeping noise, he tapped it ‘McCann, what’s up Kim?’

'Sir, we've had a message from Otoch, they are requesting we take delivery of 10,000 tons of pure neutronium,' replied Kim.

'I can confirm that, you'll have to leave Bhor and get into orbit above,' he looked at his daughter.

'Orbit Tititl, the cargo will be lifted from there via Atlas,' stated Malikah.

'Understood, but 10,000 tons? Do we have enough space?'

Malikah grinned 'It won't take up half a cargo bay.'

'Ah, understood, thank you Xch'uup.'

McCann pulled a wry expression 'You're welcome Commander, McCann out,' then tapped his wrist tablet.

'It's time to go,' said Malikah as she grabbed his arm and led him out of Muul Kaah.

They walked back into the great hall; McCann noticed something he must have missed the first time he entered. Men in combat fatigues filed out from behind the elevated rows of stone pews. As they closed he recognised them, especially one of them 'Nestor?'

Nestor grinned and made a little salute to which McCann replied 'What in the world are you doing here?'

Malikah who had her left arm intertwined with her Father's right answered 'Well every Queen needs a royal guard, doesn't she?'

McCann scoffed 'So what's wrong with the Tlillans?'

'Well Nestor and his men have no allegiances on Otoch, except to me, koretny?' she asked Nestor.

'Eto pravil'no,' replied Nestor.

The Spetsnaz team which seemed to be his old Vympel team carried the typical Special Forces gear. All dressed in their black combat fatigues with body armour and assault rifles, boots and berets.

'So you're the Imperial guard now?' asked McCann.

'It seems so Duncan.'

Nestor marched ahead with two of his men checking the passages before Malikah stepped inside. The gate could be heard lifting up and as McCann exited the passage he was back in the soft light of the Twilight side. At first his eyes ached a little but he quickly adjusted to the daylight.

Nestor and his men were forming skirmish lines on either side of the stone path, scouting out the jungle for ambushes.

'Is all this really necessary Malikah?' asked McCann.

'I'm afraid that even Xch'uup has to sleep.'

McCann nodded his head in agreement as they strolled along the path to a launch pad with a Hummingbird resting on it. Before walking up the open rear ramp he kissed his daughter on the cheek 'Be careful Malikah.'

McCann looked towards Nestor who stood in the undergrowth monitoring the area for anything untoward 'And you look after my daughter.'

Nestor lit up one of his rough Russian cigarettes and nodded 'Da.'

'And you look after Lian for me,' requested Malikah.

McCann nodded and made his way into the craft as Malikah moved away from the launch pad.

Chapter 5

Once inside the craft McCann slipped into a rear passenger seat, he smiled to Lian and buckled himself in. A Korean pilot advised them to strap in as the rear entrance lifted to form the rear wall. Using powerful on board magnets the craft lifted up from the landing pad effortlessly. Its landing gear retracted before rockets on each wing fired, propelling them up into the blue sky of Otoch.

‘How was your visit Admiral?’ came the calm voice of Athena.

McCann relaxed as his body was pushed into his seat during the climb to the stars ‘Very good, I finally got some time alone with my wife.’

‘How was Malikah?’

‘She’s well, thank you.’

‘May I ask what it is I’m taking delivery of, Admiral?’

‘Neutronium, we’re going to rescue the economy or so I’ve been told.’

‘How would neutronium affect the economy?’

‘Malikah has decided that the credit is to be pegged to neutronium, rather than gold.’

‘Now I understand, Admiral,’ said the soft voice of the Athena.

The craft lifted out of the atmosphere and made for the Athena, suspended in orbit above the dark side.

‘Entering docking bay one,’ announced the pilot.

The Hummingbird cleared Athena’s bay doors as they began to close, slowly manoeuvring the rear exit in the direction of the airlock. As the pilot let the craft down its landing gear absorbed the weight.

‘Engines off, Mag Lev disengaged, docking bay pressurized, you’re clear to enter the Athena, Admiral.’

McCann released his buckle and made his way to the rear with Lian as the doorway opened ‘Ladies first,’ said the Englishman.

Lian smiled stepping off the ramp and onto the Athena ‘Thank you Admiral.’

McCann followed her into the docking bay ‘Call me Duncan for God’s sake.’

She smiled again ‘Thank you, Duncan.’

‘That’s better; now follow me with that brick. You’re probably the only one that can carry the damn thing.’

They opened the airlock to be greeted by Kim 'Welcome aboard Admiral.'
'This is Lian; she's Adjunct to Xch'uup and will be accompanying us on this mission.'

They walked down the cream coloured corridor followed by a stunned Kim 'Mission?'

'Yes we're to deliver this shipment of neutronium to Earth, it's of the utmost importance,' replied McCann.

'Understood, should I make accommodations for Liana ...?'

Lian, holding the small neutronium brick in two hands, gave a flustered grin 'I'm not a Matriarch yet, Commander.'

Kim blushed a little 'My apologies Lian, I'll have the guest quarters made ready immediately.'

'While you're doing that have Louis, Hassif and Kapitan Egorov meet me in my cabin, you too Kim.'

'Understood, Sir,' replied Kim as he tapped his wrist tablet, organising his shipmates.

Inside McCann's cabin he had Lian, a six foot beauty; place the brick on his desk. The first thing he did was take out a cigar and light it up in front of her, next he opened up a wall aperture to take out a bottle of Balvenie portwood and five glasses.

McCann looked at the lovely Lian her Chinese parentage was obvious; it was what gave her the look of a Twilghter along with her straight dark hair. He poured a whisky over an ice cube 'Here have a shot of this young lady.'

Lian wagged her finger 'I'm sorry Admiral, but I cannot drink anything that would ...'

McCann cut her off 'Alter your perception of reality, yes I know. But as Censor I'd like to point out that reality sucks, so take a swig of this, that's an order young lady.'

He passed her the tumbler and she accepted it, at that point the door chime went and McCann called out 'Enter.'

Louis entered the room, his eyebrows raised up as soon as he noticed the liquor. The Frenchman took a tumbler and waited impatiently for McCann to pour him a drink. After waiting for a few seconds Louis demanded a drink 'Hey pour me a drink McCann, I've been slaving on that power core all day!'

Lian was shocked at the Chief Engineer's blasé use of language towards the Admiral. McCann grinned and poured his Chief a drink, the Frenchman knocked it back quickly and he poured a second.

'Don't be shocked by the Chief Lian, he's actually quite amiable at the moment.'

Louis took a sip of the barley juice and motioned towards McCann 'Wait until you see him when he's pissed off; imagine Adolf Hitler on steroids with Net rage!' Louis cracked up laughing as did Lian.

McCann made a sardonic smile 'Good one Louis.'

'What is this all about anyway, you don't give free drinks anymore unless there's a good reason,' remarked Louis.

Lian was still giggling at the Frenchman.

McCann pointed to the dark blue brick on his desk 'This is why you're getting a free drink.'

The door chime went again and on opening Hassif and Kim both entered. The two men declined a drink much to Louis' gratification.

McCann went on to explain what the Brick was and why they were transporting it.

Hassif was the first to ask a question 'So how are the Makayuuk smuggling gold into the markets on Earth?'

McCann shook his head 'That will be our next task, Malikah doesn't know and neither does Faraday. It wouldn't surprise me if someone is using military transports to smuggle it back to Earth. The trouble is that they're smuggling in so much it's devaluing the credit. If it keeps up everyone will be broke, it would cripple the I.S.A until an economic reset could be arranged.'

Kim was rather puzzled 'So what difference would a neutronium standard make?'

Louis, a little inebriated by now, pointed towards the brick with his glass as he accepted a cigar from McCann '10,000 tons of Neutronium, you know how much that's worth boy? More than all the gold in the fucking Terran system, refined or otherwise. Those Macks don't have enough Neutronium to destabilise an economy pegged to it, only the Tlillans could do that.'

McCann toasted the foot of his Ramon Allones short club corona 'And trying to destabilise us by flooding our economy with cheap neutronium

would only assist our space industry.'

Louis lit the foot of his cigar and took a few puffs to get it going 'what I don't understand is how Faraday is going to get the economy off gold?'

Lian stepped in 'The I.S.A will issue its own credits pegged to neutronium, Moscow and Washington shall both comply in minting neutronium credits. When gold is devalued there will be a viable currency already established; it should be a case of just swapping over to the new currency. Gold shall be pegged to neutronium, once devalued it'll become more of an industrial metal softening the blow to those holding it and eventually returning the commodity back to value.'

Louis took a deep draw on his Habanos, inhaling a little of the smooth Cuban smoke, 'your daughter has it all planned out doesn't she?'

McCann raised his glass 'That she does, but if you want to argue with her feel free Louis.'

Louis laughed 'Hah, sure I will. But first I'll need a few more drinks!'

Kim's wrist tablet chimed and he tapped it quickly 'Kim.'

McCann could hear the Officer on the other end 'The final shipment has been delivered, Sir.'

'Let me know when the neutronium is secure, Lieutenant.'

'Understood, Commander.'

'Kim out.'

The Korean tapped his wrist, looking towards McCann 'The cargo should be secure within the hour, Sir.'

McCann turned his gaze upwards 'Athena?'

'I'm here Admiral McCann,' she replied in her soft almost loving tone.

McCann grinned 'I want you to plot a course for Earth and have Hassif certify it please.'

'Course plotted, I have taken account for the significant increase in mass and made corrections accordingly. Could the Admiral please bring this to the attention of the Chief Engineer while he remains conscious?'

Athena's attempt at humour was well received by all but Louis Beaumont, he sneered towards the ceiling 'Why does she always pick on me?'

McCann looked cheekily towards his Technician 'Hassif, I was wondering if you could knock up a neutronium foil hat for one of my Officers?'

Both Hassif and McCann burst out laughing though Kim and certainly Lian were at a loss.

Once Hassif had stopped his infectious sniggering he blurted out 'Well considering the size of his head you might need to fly a few more crates in!'

Louis took a swig of whisky and a toke on his cigar 'Keep on laughing but when the shit hits the fan it's me who saves your asses.'

Athena's voice cut in over the commotion 'I apologise if I caused you any offence Louis, it was only meant as a joke between friends.'

Louis looked up begrudgingly 'Apology accepted Athena.'

'Alright, let's break it up now. Kim you can take Lian to her new quarters, I'll meet you on the Bridge.'

The group broke up and McCann with cigar in hand made his way to the Bridge. Taking the elevator he stepped onto the command deck to the salutes of the Vympel security. He returned the salutes and sat down into his chair, Hassif who'd accompanied him made for his station and began certifying Athena's calculations.

Five minutes later and Kim had joined them on the Bridge, Hassif certified the course for Earth and McCann sat up in his chair 'Athena break orbit and follow course at half speed.'

'Co-ordinates X +5, Y +0.7, Z +6 certified, engines engaged,' replied Athena.

The mighty warship pulled out of orbit and made for six AU above the accretion disk. Once there Athena halted 'Destination reached, Admiral.'

McCann tapped the arm of his chair 'Louis?'

'Yes, I'm ready to engage the generator,' replied the Frenchman.

'Engage wormhole generator,' replied McCann.

The lights went low as a klaxon rang out through the vessel alerting the crew. Although thanks to gravity plating there was no need to grab hold of anything or strap yourself in, unlike the old days. Now gravity could be regulated, different parts of the ship had completely different gravitational pulls. For instance the cargo bay with 10,000 tons of neutronium was at 0 G right now. However just by stepping through the airlock into the adjacent corridor you moved into 1 G.

When the ship went through a wormhole, gravity was regulated to reduce the shift of force inside as much as possible.

A shimmering white hole opened up in front of the Athena 'Tunnel event, wormhole stable,' announced Athena.

'Hassif activate Casimir field,' ordered McCann.

'Casimir field active, Sir,' replied the Indian.

'Take us in half speed.'

At that the engines fired and Athena was sucked inside the white hole, against the very laws of nature. Athena crossed the threshold, entering the singularity, a Casimir field propelling her into the boundary between the black hole at the centre and the wormhole she'd just travelled through. Light kept streaking past the view screen as it rushed to escape. Athena made her way to the dead zone 'Following course to exit wormhole, Admiral.'

McCann observed the 3-D image of his vessel as it spun around on the table before him. All parts of her were green and they were making good speed for the exit. A few hours in what had been dubbed "hyperspace" would be a few days outside.

As they navigated the dead zone between singularities or "the River Styx" as McCann had named it, they looked for anything the Dreamscape might reveal to them. Vezzali worked frantically observing images torn from their reality and several other realities. It was Vezzali's favourite task logging the mysteries of the Dreamscape for later observation in Geneva.

As Athena navigated around the singularity a klaxon fired off 'tunnel event, tunnel event, tunnel event!'

McCann sat up 'Athena, what the bloody hell are you talking about?'

Before he could reply a wormhole opened up directly in their path 'Hassif...'

The Indian shouted over the alert 'It's too close, we're going to be sucked in.'

'Can't the Casimir field pull us back?' McCann shouted desperately.

The Technician shook his head 'We'd be thrown into the black hole and crushed; we're going to have to enter the Wormhole.'

McCann nodded 'Do it. Kim bring the Athena to battle stations, I want both squadrons ready to launch on exiting that wormhole.'

Kim nodded and tapped his wrist 'Understood, Sir.'

The Athena rode into the wormhole to be ejected out into normal space.

'Hassif I want our co-ordinates, then plot a course to Earth immediately ...'

Athena broke McCann's dialogue 'Admiral three ships detected off our starboard bow, two more on an intercept course.'

The image of the lead ship came onto the view screen, a tubular ship with a large claw like nose; it resembled a cross between a harpoon and grappling hook.

McCann looked over his shoulder 'Is that what I think it is Vezzali?'

Vezzali replied with a tone of dread 'Pirate configuration Admiral, probably Makayuuk.'

McCann tapped his chair 'Louis can we generate a wormhole?'

'No, there's a device collapsing the field. We need to get clear of it before I can open a tunnel.'

McCann shouted to Vezzali 'Do you know where their generator is?'

'No Sir.'

'McKinley, charge cannons and arm them with anti-matter warheads. I want you to target these vessels,' McCann selected the enemy ships on his chair 'fire when ready, no need for certification.'

McCann turned to Kim 'Launch the drones I want them to engage this ship,' McCann tapped his chair arm and on the right hand part of the view screen a red box lit up one of the starboard ships on the tactical view.

Kim leapt to his drone station as Athena let out the alarm call 'Battle stations, prepare to be boarded.'

The elevator opened causing Vympel soldiers to flinch and aim their weapons. However it was only Lian, she stepped onto the Bridge and stood next to McCann 'Pirates?'

'Yup, Macks stranded after the invasion. A lot of them formed pirate nations, someone must have let on about the neutronium. With all that neutronium you could start an empire of your own!'

Lian shook her head 'This is even more serious than we first believed. Makayuuk cannot organise as they have here, without Machine, it is not possible.'

McKinley turned 'Firing cannons, Sir.'

The Athena took a jolt as she fired; two pirate ships took a broadside, each exploding in a cascade of ant-matter fire. Drones screamed past engaging one of the small pirate vessels, each one about half the size of the Athena.

'Reload and fire on the other two, certification not required.'

McCann gave out the order but it was too late, two of the pirate ships manoeuvred in, firing engines their metal claws tore into the armour of Athena. Two pirate ships had now attached themselves, reminding McCann of when he and Nestor boarded a Gukumatz ship off Jupiter. Only this time he was on the receiving end.

‘Alert we are being boarded!’ said Athena in an alarmed tone.

McCann looked at the 3-D image of Athena as the ship listed from side to side, reeling from the shock of such a massive impact.

‘Athena, close off decks one, two, nine and ten. Lower Bulkheads and send out the order for all crew members to arm themselves. Egorov, can you hear me?’

McCann detected the sound of pulse weapon fire, over which a Russian accent replied ‘Da.’

‘What’s the situation?’

‘They have boarded Fore and mid decks nine and one, both Vympel units are trying to contain them. We need more people, Sir.’

‘They’ve come for the cargo in bay one, keep that in mind Kapitan, I’ll have all off duty personnel armed and put under your command as soon as possible, McCann out.’

The Admiral looked at Kim; his first Officer nodded and began organising it. The Englishman turned his chair to face Vezzali ‘I want you to scan for any generators or a space dock,’

‘Yes Sir,’ replied the Italian.

He turned his chair to Hassif ‘Send out an SOS, we need assistance before more of them turn up.’

Hassif began tapping away on his station as reports came out of the pit. McCann approached the pit and over the noise of the chatter he shouted ‘I want every man to check his weapon,’ as he said that the Englishman slid his pistol from its holster and flicked it on. The whine of several pistols charging their rails at once could be heard as each Officer checked their firearm.

‘Vympel one and two are withdrawing to the Mid-section, I suggest we evacuate the fore section before they take it completely,’ shouted a pit Officer.

McCann placed his pistol back in the holster and nodded towards the young lady sitting at her station in the pit ‘Affirmative, inform Egorov.’

Hassif called out 'I have communications with the Here,' as he spoke the image of space retreated from the left of the view screen. In its place a grainy image of Ryu standing on the dais of her command Bridge came forth.

McCann looked up at her image 'Ryu, are you receiving me?'

The short Korean adjusted the metal frame of her glasses 'Just, what the hell is going on Duncan?'

'Hassif is transmitting our co-ordinates; we've come under attack and need your assistance.'

'Under attack? From who?'

'Pirates.'

Ryu narrowed her eyes 'Pirates? They attack transports and logistics ships, why would they attack Athena?' she asked in disbelief.

'Well you can ask them when you get here, can't you?' shouted McCann in frustration.

Ryu shook her head 'Don't get your knickers in a twist Duncan, we're setting course now. Leave the rest to me; I'll get as many cruisers as I can to assist.'

McCann let out a rush of air from his lungs 'Huh, well thank you. How long until you can reach us?'

Ryu looked over at her first Officer, Commander Hettinger spoke and she replied to McCann 'No more than 36 hours, can you hold out that long Duncan?'

McCann raised his eyebrows 'It seems we have no choice, they've already taken the Fore section but we'll try to hold them at the Mid-section until you arrive; God's speed Ryu.'

Ryu nodded and the screen returned to the image of space.

McCann looked up at the black dome attached to the ceiling 'Athena I want you to restrict access to the Bridge, turn those lifts off until I order them to resume.'

'Understood, you may monitor the battle on your holo projector, Admiral.'

McCann looked at the 3-D image; there were large numbers of dots inside. Red dots in the fore section represented the pirate crew. Green dots largely in the mid to rear sections represented Athena's crew.

'Are you relaying this to Egorov?'

‘Affirmative.’

It was obvious that Egorov was hunkering down at the mid-section, protecting both the cargo bays and the command tower where the Bridge lay. For now the two sides were trading tungsten through the main corridors, even inside the Bridge Officers could hear the distant sound of pulse rifle fire. Every now and then there was an explosion of an RPG.

‘Athena can you gas the fore section?’ asked McCann.

‘Negative, the enemy has bypassed my connections to the security system.’

After a few hours it seemed certain that Egorov was holding the pirates off, for now. They had come to a standoff, neither side possessing the required force to neutralise the other. McCann decided it would be cautious for some of his Officers to catch some sleep. Since the situation could deteriorate at any time it would be prudent to have someone fresh.

After 12 hours, Athena’s drones had destroyed the third pirate vessel and started taking apart those attached to the Athena. These pirate ships were small but heavily armoured, designed to ram the enemy. A docking punch would pierce the enemy vessel, allowing the pirate crew to board. The claws surrounding the central punch latched on to the target hull, ensuring its docking punch would not lose integrity. It also allowed the ships to manipulate their target and move it to a space dock after capture. At the space dock the prey would be stripped and recycled, the crew processed to serve as sustenance and cargo looted.

Vezzali still had no idea where their enemies’ wormhole nullifier was hidden; neither could she discover the location of their pirate station nor space dock.

McCann decided to take a nap, Lian lay down on the dais whilst he sat in his chair drifting into sleep, to the sound of spluttering pulse rifle fire.

As McCann drifted into the land of nod he felt his consciousness pulled, he slipped into a link with the sleeping Adjunct. Sometimes he would link with his wife while they slept, sharing dreams and fantasies. It often happened when two were close to each other, as to why this was happening with Lian was a mystery.

McCann looked around he was in New York, Lian’s home city. She was with Kaeo and Sandra, he surmised they’d been to see a show on Broadway, the girls were laughing and giggling as paparazzi chased them

taking pictures. This was a distinct memory, that McCann was sure of. The three returned to the Plaza hotel, where they retired to their rooms.

After the girls had retired to separate rooms Lian slipped out of her chambers, dressed in her black ribbed suit she made her way to the penthouse apartment.

Lian knocked on the door and a familiar voice replied from inside 'You may enter Lian.'

The young lady, only about five human years old but she easily could have been mistaken for eighteen, opened the door and entered.

Inside Malikah was alone and looking out of the window, admiring the cityscape of New York 'Why are you here Lian?'

Lian looked at the bulbous rear lobes of McCann's daughter 'I am curious, why did Xch'uup select me as Adjunct?'

Malikah didn't take her eyes away 'Because you are best suited to serve as auxiliary,' she replied without emotion.

Lian approached Malikah 'Is there no other reason ... Malikah?'

Malikah's head snapped away from the skyscrapers, fixing her gaze on Lian the sable Queen narrowed her eyes 'You take a great risk coming here and speaking to your Xch'uup in such familiar terms.'

Lian returned the hard gaze with one of her own 'I take no risk, when I am aware of the truth.'

Malikah let out a slight cackle 'The truth? I thought you knew better than that. There is no truth, no lie, no good and no evil.'

Malikah cackled softly to herself.

'Then allow me the privilege of honesty, I am here to bare my soul to you. Will you show me yours?'

Malikah returned her gaze to the buildings of her favourite city 'Lian, you are a young girl with an over-active imagination.'

Lian took a step closer to her sable Queen 'You have not even reached your first century, yet you are Xch'uup. Do you suggest that I am unaware of my own heart ... and yours?'

Malikah shook her head 'be careful Lian, what you speak is dangerous not only for you but for myself too.'

'Then you admit it?'

'I admit nothing,' snapped Malikah.

Lian stepped even closer, to within touching distance 'If you do not have the courage to say it, then I shall. I love you Malikah and you love me.'

Malikah turned her back on the cityscape 'Hold your mouth, this heresy must not be spoken.'

Lian looked up at her Grand Matriarch 'Heresy? On Otoch perhaps, but when I hear your breathing in my sleep and your heart beat inside my body I care not for backward theocratic sheep.'

'Do not come closer Lian; your accusations could ruin my position on the home world.'

Lian refused to obey her Queen, she stepped closer so that her body touched that of Malikah's 'Each night I sense your feelings, merging with mine, why do you deny me now?'

Lian put her arms around her Queen's torso and pressed her body onto Malikah's, resting her head upon Xch'uup's shoulder.

Malikah embraced her Adjunct, stroking her head affectionately 'This must never be known, you must bury these emotions deep within you and guard them.'

'But you are Xch'uup, you are law.'

'Even Xch'uup must realise her limits and take into consideration the opinion of her subjects first and foremost. I cannot impose my moral values upon those I represent, something my predecessor learnt the hard way.'

'Then what will you do?'

Malikah looked down and smiled at Lian as she stroked her long dark hair 'I don't know, but tonight that is not my concern.'

Lian smiled as the Queen of the Tlillan leant down and their lips met. McCann watched on in horror as his daughter locked lips with Lian in a passionate embrace. The two stood grasping each other as the world went by outside, committing an act of heresy that would destroy his daughter if ever discovered by her sisters on Otoch.

The pair kissed softly until Malikah removed her lips, her eyes scanned down the front of her Adjunct. Lian watched the sable Queen's eyes and opened her suit at the collar, pulling it apart slightly. Malikah took the open collar and peeled it open to reveal the young girl's cleavage. Lian stared back up at her Xch'uup with an expression of innocence. Malikah placed

one hand inside the suit and they kissed again, only this time with more passion.

As they kissed Lian slipped her suit down her long athletic body until it lay in a pile on the floor. Malikah pulled back to observe the fine woman that stood before her.

McCann could feel the eroticism coursing from Malikah into Lian then him. It was clear that his daughter was in love with this girl in more than one way and Lian felt the same. He felt Lian's heart jump as Malikah undressed, removing the black ribbed suit which all Tlillans wore. McCann could feel her ivory skin as Lian ran her fingers along his daughter's thigh. He even sensed Malikah's satisfaction at finally having the opportunity to fondle the small, pert breasts of her Adjunct. McCann was fearful, he cared not concerning his daughter's sexuality; he feared for her if this ever became common knowledge on Otoch. The Matriarchs would never accept such wayward activity from Xch'uup; her moral authority may become permanently eroded.

Malikah ran her hands down the body of Lian clasping onto her tiny rear, Malikah then led her to the queen size bed and lay her down. Lian was spread across the sheets naked, presenting herself to the sable goddess. Malikah lowered herself down pressing her ivory skin upon the frame of her lover. Lian raised her legs wrapping them around the Queen's torso; the pair kissed again locking into a passionate embrace.

McCann felt the high powered emotion that had been buried within the two for so long come to the surface and release, as a volcano exploding; an emotional Mount Vesuvius was detonating before him. In the passion he was certain they both cried, tears of joy perhaps? Perhaps the thought that this may never happen again was too much for them? McCann wasn't certain, the nuances of emotion he found very difficult to read.

'I love you Xch'uup,' quivered Lian

'Call me Malikah,' replied the sable Queen as she kissed her neck.

Lian cried out quite loud, McCann looked around in fear someone had heard but the door remained still. When he looked back he saw that Malikah had done the same but using her powers she scanned for any possible interloper. Upon realising all was safe she went back to her Adjunct. At this point McCann had seen enough however he was trapped

in the link, it was like being stuck in a bad dream. He tried to ignore it but couldn't as each touch, each kiss, each intimate caress he felt himself.

Malikah ran her rough tongue to and fro, holding Lian's legs so that they pressed on her lover's chest.

The Queen of Otoch grunted as Lian went to let out a howl; fortunately Malikah reacted quickly and grabbed her mouth. Lian screamed into her hand as she released the tension that had built up inside. After a minute or two Lian's noise died down and her body relaxed.

Next the roles were reversed as Lian slipped down the bed, indulging in her Xch'uup's soft body above. The Tlillan Empress groaned with pleasure as the timbers of a sailing ship in the middle of a powerful storm, a storm of passion.

Ten minutes later and Malikah took Lian's hand, dragging her up along the bed, and placed it on her own mouth. Moments later Malikah let out a scream that Lian needed two hands to prevent from escaping into the corridors of the Plaza hotel.

The sable Queen convulsed claspng onto Lian as Lian braced Xch'uup's head with one arm and covered her mouth with the other hand. After a few minutes Malikah had finished, she lay on her hands and knees above Lian breathing heavily, her curly jet black hair hanging down. Lian smiled back at her Grand Matriarch, then brought her fingers to Malikah's cheek to wipe away an individual tear.

McCann was burning up with embarrassment, not so much from what he'd seen but what he was forced to feel and experience. Now he understood why his Mother-in-law wanted to link with Ilam, this was how Tlillan society got its cheap thrills. This would have made pornography redundant on Earth; people swapping sexual encounters via links for free, the porn industry would collapse in a day!

Suddenly McCann was torn away and he woke up in his command chair on the Athena.

'Tunnel event, tunnel event, tunnel event,' called Athena as her klaxon woke those who'd been resting.

McCann rubbed his eyes and looked at the 3-D display; the red dots had gotten closer and were now pushing the elevators to the command deck. The Englishman looked around to see Hassif climbing off the floor to stand at his station 'I'm detecting three ships, Sir.'

Vezzali shouted out 'It's the Hera, Chutli and Teteo!'

McCann felt the relief resonate throughout his body 'They're early, inform Egorov; and everyone, be prepared for a last push from the Macks.'

Lian got to her feet 'Admiral, the pirates have captured the elevators they are attempting to take the command deck.'

McCann pulled his pistol out and flicked it on 'Everyone get ready,' he then glared at Lian 'I want you to stay behind Hassif's station, don't come out until the fighting stops,' McCann then looked up 'and Athena turn that blasted alarm off!'

The klaxon desisted and the sound of pulse fire became clear, McCann knelt with his chair between him and the rear elevator exits. The Vympel Officers were crouched behind the forward stations, half of the pit crew were at work, the other half were crouched down taking cover.

'Reinforcements ETA two minutes and twenty eight seconds,' announced Athena.

At that moment one of the elevators opened, McCann was crouched ready to pepper the first Mack he saw with tungsten. The lift was empty, aside from a small metal container. The container exploded blinding everyone unfortunate enough to be looking in that direction.

Fortunately the Vympel soldiers had activated their helmets, shielding their eyes from the flash grenade. McCann could hear pulse fire inside the Bridge although his vision was temporarily blinded; he remained behind his chair hoping the enemy could not see him.

After a minute he could make out shapes, slowly the dark shapes became more defined and colours were now clearing. The Macks were easily defined due to the silver eyes that reflected light. The Englishman began to return fire; thankfully his Vympel guards had held them back; surprising the machine men as they leapt from the lifts.

Mack corpses lay in piles in front of the lift exits, the elevators closed again and another batch of cyborg pirates attempted to rush the Bridge. As soon as the doors of both lifts opened the Macks charged firing pulse rifles. Several pit Officers were hit leaving a pool of blood to gather at the bottom of the work area. All of the Officers pulled their weapons and returned fire; the Macks, although exposed with no cover, didn't seem to care. They moved over the bodies of their fallen comrades.

The third group to assault the Bridge used the piles of bodies as cover, lying down and returning fire. Sparks flew around the room as tungsten rounds bounced off the walls. Blue flashes burst out of the barrels causing smoke from the plasma to taint the air.

The Bridge crew were getting picked off since the Macks seemed to have no concern for casualties. McCann could see they would be finished before Ryu could do anything to prevent it. There were now about fifteen Macks using fallen comrades as cover and they were winning.

McCann tapped his wrist tablet 'Egorov, we need assistance on the Bridge.'

'Vympel one is pushing forward, the Macks are retreating. We cannot access the Bridge and if we don't chase these bastards down now ...'

'Understood, but we need you here now.'

'I'm sorry Admiral, I didn't hear that.'

McCann went to repeat himself but suddenly the noise of the fire fight dissipated. McCann peeped over his chair; Lian was stood to his right in plain view with her eyes burning a fiery pigment.

'Never mind, we're fine. Continue your pursuit of the Macks, McCann out.'

The Englishman stood up then walked past Lian, he glanced over the pile of dead Macks to see three of them unconscious.

The Vympel soldiers quickly gathered up rifles from the corpses that were arranged in front of the rear lifts.

'Lian, can you question these Macks?' inquired McCann.

'What do you wish to know, Admiral?' she replied in a deep voice.

'I want to know where their base of operations is.'

The Vympel guards trained their weapons on the three remaining Macks, one of the enemy gained consciousness and in a trance he approached Lian.

'Tu'uk kuxtal?' asked Lian.

The Mack tried his best to resist her will 'Topik Xch'uup!'

Lian placed her hand upon the forehead of the machine man; he let out a blood curdling scream as he dropped to his knees and fell unconscious.

'I have the location, Admiral. May I question the other two?'

McCann reloaded his pistol with a fresh magazine then switched it off 'What do you want to know?'

'The location of Machine,' replied Lian as her eyes returned to their natural brown.

Hassif appeared from behind his station 'But Machine was dismantled.'

Lian pointed to the Makayuuk 'If Machine no longer exists, how is this possible? Makayuuk cannot function without Machine, this is a fact.'

'And I saw machine destroyed, that's a fact,' stated McCann.

Lian made no reply and McCann gestured towards the Macks 'Be my guest.'

Lian's eyes clouded a dark red and one of the Macks awoke from his forced slumber. The machine man stood up; there was no fear on his face, he sneered at Lian.

'Tu'uk Yuuk?' demanded Lian.

The short cyborg replied in English so that the remaining Bridge crew could understand 'Machine lives, Machine will destroy you all.'

McCann stepped forward 'I saw Machine destroyed on Bandayuuk,' he pressed the captive.

The cyborg chuckled 'You destroyed a Machine, that was only a node. Machine has recovered.'

Lian spoke in her deep Valkyrie tone 'Where are the Machine nodes?'

The Makayuuk smirked 'I do not know, no one knows the location of Machine.'

Lian placed her hand upon the creature's head, again the Makayuuk let out a scream and his silver eyes changed to a dull lead before he dropped to the floor.

Lian let out a huff 'Hah, he was telling the truth. Do as you please with the other one, none of them are aware of Machine's location.'

Chapter 6

Vympel one and two had pushed the Makayuuk back to their boarding vessels. Trapped inside their own ambush the short Korean obliterated the remaining vessels.

The Tlillian cruisers returned to their previous duties, once the Makayuuk had been dispatched and repairs were underway.

McCann stood at the airlock to his docking bay, Ryu and her Chief Engineer exited. The docking bay had been damaged in the attack so he couldn't greet them as they exited the small transport.

The side of the transport melted back and the pair of them in their space suits stepped out. Dressed in their military uniforms over a black ribbed suit; yet still allowing room for the helmet to unfurl from the collar, forming an airtight environment.

It was obvious which Ryu was, due to her height, or lack of it. Added to that her Chief was quiet tall and well built. They stepped into the airlock, cleared the pressurisation and entered the corridor to meet McCann.

Their helmets collapsed back into their suit collars and Ryu gave a little salute with a smile of satisfaction.

McCann rolled his eyes 'There's no need for that Ryu, it's just us here.'

Her Chief, Hiedemann looked uncomfortable at his statement.

McCann began to stroll along the corridor, leading them to the engine rooms 'It seems we have a traitor, someone knew about our cargo and informed the Macks.'

'Cargo?'

'We have about 10,000 tonnes of neutronium on board.'

Ryu was surprised 'And no escort? Now it makes sense, pirates would never attack a cruiser under normal circumstances.'

The three walked through corridors charred with scorch marks from RPGs, dried blood smearing the floor.

McCann nodded in agreement 'I think Malikah knew what was going to happen.'

'Well you did get the location of the pirate's base of operations.'

McCann took a cigar from his case, cut the cap then toasted the foot with a long cedar match 'More importantly there's a good chance that the

traitor is alive and on this ship. Before we go after the pirate base I want to have that traitor in the brig.'

'I can't believe you still smoke those things Duncan,' complained Ryu as she wafted the smoke away from her face.

McCann chuckled 'Are you going to tell me they're bad for my health?'

Ryu gave a matronly look 'No, but even the Ixchel doesn't take care of bad breath!'

The threesome exited a lift and stepped into an area of the ship where the trench separated the engines and fusion power core; Now that the ship was in need of repairs this area required the most manpower.

Louis witnessed them walk out and swiftly approached 'Thank Christ you are here, I need every man you can spare,' said Louis with relief to Chief Heidemann.

'It's nice to see you too Louis,' said Ryu with a sarcastic tone.

Louis shifted his attention to the Korean for a moment 'Uh, yeah you too Ryu.'

'I'll leave Bridgette here, she'll give you all the assistance you need,' replied Ryu.

Louis nodded his head and motioned towards his workstation where the pair began to chat in a hushed tone.

'Well I'm sure those two will get along like a house on fire,' remarked McCann as he and Ryu made for the lift.

After exiting the lift for the Officer's lounge Ryu asked 'So what are you doing to find the spy?'

'In here,' said the Englishman as he pointed towards the lounge.

Inside Lian stood in her skin tight space suit scanning crew members one by one. Commander Kim sat in front of her as she placed her hand upon his head sifting through his mind for any inkling of guilt.

'It won't be Kim,' stated Ryu with absolute certainty.

'I know,' replied McCann 'but everyone must be scanned, including me.'

Ryu looked at her comrade incredulously 'Surely not?'

'You'd do the same.'

'I suppose so but it isn't Kim and Louis is a prick but he isn't a traitor. What about the Tlillan, do you trust her?'

McCann took a drag from his Cohiba Siglo I 'Lian isn't the traitor.'

'How do you know that?' retorted the Korean.

The Englishman let the smoke roll over his tongue and pass through his nostrils 'She would never betray Malikah, I'm quite certain of that.'

Ryu widened her eyes and adjusted her glasses 'If you say so Duncan.'

McCann looked down at his old comrade 'I do say so.'

'Uuurrrhhh!' shouted Ryu in disapproval, grabbing the attention of everyone awaiting interrogation.

Lian removed her hand from Kim's forehead 'You may leave Commander.'

Kim walked away from Lian, as he came to the exit he noticed Ryu and stood to attention.

Ryu smiled 'I'll see you in the lounge when all this is over, we can catch up.'

Kim returned the smile then turned his gaze to McCann, the Englishman nodded and Kim marched out of the lounge and back to duty.

'How many are left?'

'We lost about half of the crew; half of the survivors are injured ...'

'No I mean how many more to interrogate?' inquired Ryu.

'Ah, well since we're onto the Bridge staff then all of the Engineering crew must have been done. Not many now.'

'Have they done the drone crew yet?'

McCann nodded 'Yup, Kim was the last of the drone crew to be scanned.'

'I still don't trust the Tiillan,' stated Ryu in her cold manner.

Before McCann could reply there was a ruckus at the far end of the lounge where the interrogation was taking place. Both McCann and Ryu made their way past the line of Bridge Officers. McKinley was shouting at Lian, the half Tiillan lady did not reply to his abuse.

'What the bloody hell is going on here? McKinley explain yourself!' shouted McCann.

The weapons Officer said nothing.

Lian replied 'I have found the traitor, Admiral.'

The line of Officers began to mutter in astonishment. McCann stepped forward until he was nose to nose with his weapons Officer 'Well?'

'She's lying, the Tiillan's trying to implicate me for her crimes!' bellowed McKinley.

McCann peered towards Lian 'Show me.'

Lian placed her hand upon the Englishman's forehead, she sent him drifting into a vision which she'd ripped from the weapons Officer's

memory.

Kim was being informed of the neutronium; As McKinley manned his station he listened intently. After the transmission from the surface of Otoch ended the Lieutenant excused himself. McCann could sense his hatred and desire for revenge, he had been demeaned in the most horrible way by Beaumont and now it was time for payback.

The tall Scotsman entered his quarters and from inside a wall aperture used for storing personal effects he picked out a tachyon transponder. He tapped away something unintelligible, though McCann was aware via McKinley's thoughts that he was informing Makayuuk pirates of their shipment. He then left the transponder on, emitting Athena's location even when folding space. It was the only way to ensure that their wormhole would open at the correct point, forcing the Athena into an ambush.

Placing the transponder back inside the aperture he returned to his station, McCann had seen enough and brought himself out from the link.

The Englishman hit his wrist tablet 'Egorov?'

'Yes, Sir?'

'I want you to search Lieutenant McKinley's cabin, I believe he has a tachyon transponder divulging our location to the Makayuuk hidden in a wall compartment.'

Egorov replied in a surprised tone 'Understood, Sir.'

'McCann out,' he tapped his wrist tablet again and made a disappointed expression towards McKinley.

His Lieutenant sneered 'If they'd have killed Beaumont it would have been worth it!'

Two Vympel security guards entered the lounge, one handcuffed McKinley's wrists behind his back the other attached a control collar.

'Take him to the brig, use any force required,' stated McCann coldly.

McKinley was pushed out of the lounge and off to his new accommodation.

'Show's over people, let's get back to putting Athena into shape,' ordered the Admiral.

The line of crewman broke up and exited the room.

Lian spoke to the Admiral 'As soon as Athena is ready we must attack the pirate base station.'

'What about the cargo?'

'It can wait; we must remove the pirate threat before they relocate.'

McCann nodded his head 'When we reach Earth you and I are going to have a little chat.'

Lian gave a puzzled expression 'Concerning?'

'Concerning the dream you had last night.'

McCann sensed fear emanating from Lian's body 'Oh, I see.'

'Until then you can give Hassif the pirates' co-ordinates.'

Lian made a nervous smile and quickly marched out of the lounge.

'What was all that about?' inquired Ryu.

'Nothing, fancy a drink?'

'Still drinking on duty, Duncan?'

McCann rolled his eyes 'Still as strict as a mother superior?'

'Fine, one drink but that's all.'

The Englishman grinned and slipped behind the bar to pour two shots of Irish whiskey. He raised his glass and saluted 'To the daring Korean lady that saved my skin again!'

Ryu smirked and took a sip, at tasting the drink her face screwed up 'Yuk! What's this?'

'I should have warned you, the Balvenie is in my cabin. Those bloody Americans would drink it all to themselves otherwise.'

'You drink this crap?'

'Unfortunately, I do. It would be bad form for me to drink the good stuff while they went without.'

'Since when did you care what the rest of the crew were drinking?'

'Since they started drinking my Speyside Scotch!'

Ryu laughed 'I see, so it's their lack of good manners that has forced you into drinking cat urine?'

McCann pulled a rather disappointed expression as he sipped his drink 'Something like that.'

Later that evening the remaining Officers gathered in the lounge, the Russians making a fuss of Ryu as usual. McCann sat at his usual table with Hassif, Vezzali, Ryu and Egorov.

Hassif noticed the man they'd all been waiting for enter the lounge. The talk became subdued as Louis approached the bar and ordered an ale. Taking his slim beer glass he approached the Admiral's table and before anyone could say hello he shouted out 'You see, I knew that guy was an asshole!'

Louis sat at the table and continued his rant 'But oh no, no one wanted to listen to that crazy fuck Beaumont, did they?'

McCann rolled his eyes 'Louis ...'

However the Frenchman interjected 'No, no, no don't you cut me off. I knew there was something weird about that guy, I told you!'

'Either that or you're just an egotistical prick?' retorted the Korean.

The bar went quiet, the Americans awaited for the Chief Engineer's inevitable outburst. To their surprise it didn't come, Louis sneered at the Korean Captain and took a sip of his amber ale.

'At 0800 hours we'll be heading with Hera for the pirate base station, it should take only a couple of hours to fold space there,' stated McCann.

'Athena will be in working order before then, all her cannons are operational. Her power core and engines were unaffected by the ambush,' replied Louis.

The rest of the evening was taken up with chatter from Louis, declaring how he was right and had McKinley marked down as a traitor from the beginning.

The Next day McCann took his seat on the Bridge, still scarred with tungsten rounds and the stench of smoke from rifle barrels.

'Folding space in T minus four minutes Admiral,' noted Athena calmly.

The image of Ryu appeared on the view screen 'Follow us in; when we enter the pirate system the Hera will be cloaked.'

'Understood, good luck Ryu.'

'You too McCann.'

The image dissipated ceding to the scene of space from the fore of the Athena.

Four minutes later and an alarm went off; two shimmering white holes appeared before Athena and Hera. The Hera entered hers first with Athena

following shortly afterwards.

The vessels spent a short time inside the dead zone before exiting; the Hera intensified her Casimir field bending light around the destroyer. Athena had no such ability and popped out in full view.

‘Scanning the system,’ announced Vezzali as she pored over the data coming back. There were five planets, four gas giants; the other was too close to the star to be habitable.

‘Sir, I believe I have the location of the pirate space station,’ called out the blond science Officer.

On the tactical display to the right a representation of the asteroid belt between a Mercury class planet and first gas giant appeared. A red box highlighted an asteroid and Lian squeaked ‘That’s it!’

McCann relaxed into his chair ‘Athena, inform the Hera and bring the crew to battle stations.’

‘Affirmative, Admiral,’ replied Athena softly.

‘Hassif, I want to intercept that station on our port bow, full speed.’

The Indian nodded ‘Done,’ tapped away at his station and Athena jerked into motion as the call for battle stations went out.

‘Kim, scout that rock out for me.’

Kim hit his wrist tablet and relayed McCann’s orders to his drone crew, moments later a pair of drones shot out past Athena towards the asteroid belt.

Before the drones came within scanning range of the rock they were destroyed by missile defence sites placed inside the belt.

‘Full stop, bring our port cannons to bear,’ ordered McCann.

The Athena came to a halt and as she began to turn Vezzali shouted ‘Two Makayuuk cruisers on an intercept course, T minus three minutes, Sir.’

Athena was taking the place of McKinley for now, so McCann looked up towards her ‘Athena load anti-matter warheads.’

‘Affirmative, Admiral.’

Hassif turned to McCann ‘I’m receiving a transmission from the Makayuuk.’

‘Put it up,’ replied McCann wishing to satisfy his curiosity.

An image of a typical machine man dressed in his grey jump suit appeared ‘Greetings McCann. Surrender your vessel,’ grinned a smug cyborg.

McCann grinned back 'So that we can be liquidised, I don't think so.'

The cyborg laughed 'Then why come here?'

'To hunt you down and put an end to piracy on I.S.A shipping.'

The Makayuuk stopped laughing 'How do you intend to do that, McCann?'

'If you surrender now you won't have to find out.'

The Makayuuk sent a message to his weapons Officer via their neural link. Vezzali detected a jump in Cherenkov radiation as a stream of tachyon particles hit Athena's magnetic shield 'The Makayuuk have a weapons lock on us, Sir!'

McCann remained calm much to the discomfort of the machine man 'Activate point defence and fire a full broadside into this target.'

He tapped the arm of his chair targeting the closest Mack vessel on the tactical display.

These vessels were not the boarding craft they'd fought earlier; they were the long tubular design of warships that Makayuuk traditionally used. McCann believed them all destroyed and was quite shocked to see not one but two of them. Were they saved from the conquest or had they begun constructing new ships?

The incoming enemy torpedoes were too numerous for Athena to cope with; however the missiles were pulled of course inexplicably. The Casimir field of Hera tore them out of their path and flung them into space where they detonated. Ryu then dropped Hera's cloak to reveal her destroyer pointing its open weapon port at the second enemy ship.

As Athena ripped apart the first vessel in bright white fire, a plasma torpedo burst from the nose of Hera. Hitting the Makayuuk cruiser dead centre, it broke the superstructure in two. The impact sent its two halves spinning off into space.

From their present distance the two I.S.A warships pounded the pirate base of operations into dust. A combination of anti-matter warheads and plasma torpedoes annihilated whatever remained of the pirates.

Within an hour of the first impact a massive gap lay in the asteroid belt where the pirates once were, Vezzali reported she could pick up no signs of life. McCann decided it was sufficient and the I.S.A vessels folded space for Earth.

Upon reaching the Terran system Athena docked with the Tsiolkovsky for repairs. McKinley was taken to the surface via transport; McCann accompanied the first shipment of neutronium to Geneva.

He stepped out of the Atlas and onto the landing pad where Faraday greeted him; dressed in his usual three piece suit the old Etonian shook his hand 'Good to see you back safe and sound.'

They both walked past the Vympel guards and into mission control 'For a moment there I was worried you might be killed by pirates.'

McCann pulled out his cigar case 'Is it alright to smoke?'

Faraday grimaced a little 'If you must, but tell me, McKinley betrayed you?'

McCann nodded his head 'Shocking isn't it?'

'I'm sure you'll be relieved to know that we're about to announce a neutronium standard, just as soon as the last Atlas is unloaded.'

The Englishman puffed on his cigar 'Marvellous.'

Faraday waved his cane 'None of that Duncan, you've got to put a good show on for that Habeeb fellow. We need to make the transition to this new standard as smooth as possible.'

McCann sneered as the thick creamy smoke rolled out of his nostrils 'As long as I don't have to talk to him.'

'You'll be chatting with the premier in Moscow, then you'll be off to New York.'

McCann gave a look of disbelief 'What? Can't you get one of your minions to do that?'

Faraday chuckled 'that's exactly what I'm doing Duncan, besides you get on well with the Americans.'

'Correction, Malikah gets on well with them and Ryu gets on with the Russians,' stated a frustrated McCann.

'Yes well Malikah isn't here and Ryu has important duties, so I'm afraid it's going to have to be you Duncan.'

'In that case, since I'm not all that important, I suppose I'll be able to run your errands for you. Anything else Bill? Maybe you need some toilet roll changing or the urinals cleaned?'

Faraday cracked up laughing, since Malikah had taken charge he was a much easier going person. McCann preferred the old Faraday with blood pressure so high his eyeballs nearly popped out twice a day.

‘Fine, when do I leave Bill?’

‘Today, Duncan. Moscow first.’

McCann groaned and finished off his cigar as he awaited the Atlas to be loaded with the Russian share of Neutronium. Before the day was out he was sat in the back staring at a small pile of dark blue bricks. He could hardly bring himself to believe there was 2,000 tonnes of neutronium there. The metal was so dense that only a very small amount would possess an astounding mass. Sandra sat next to him at the rear of the craft; McCann suspected she had remained on Earth to keep a pair of eyes out for Malikah.

‘So have you met the Russian premier before Mr McCann?’ asked the polite young lady.

‘No and you can call me Duncan,’ replied McCann.

‘I tend to find Russians very stand offish, what do you think Duncan?’

McCann chuckled ‘I’d agree, they remind me of Tlillans.’

Sandra looked at Malikah’s father thoughtfully ‘I would say they are more similar to English.’

McCann narrowed his eyes ‘Really?’

The beautiful young girl smiled back and nodded her head, the Englishman resided himself to looking forward as the craft hurtled through the atmosphere.

Within an hour they were landing inside the walls of the Kremlin. They exited the Atlas to be greeted by Russia’s Premier; Ivan Myshkin was a man in his 60’s, a little over-weight and going grey. He was dressed in a very nice black two piece suit, although McCann felt it made him look like a bank manager.

McCann exited the Atlas and shook the awaiting Premier’s hand; far more attention however was paid to Sandra. With her height and body shape it were as if a supermodel had visited the Kremlin today.

Sandra bowed ‘Namaste Premier Myshkin’

The Premier quickly shook her hand and invited them in as the cargo was unloaded. Press were all over the place covering this visit, Mr Myshkin wanted the world to know that he'd received a large shipment of Neutronium.

Inside McCann and Sandra sat at a large oak table where the press had already set up. The Premier pulled out a wooden box and passed it to McCann 'I would like you to have this on behalf of the Russian people Mr McCann.'

The Englishman flipped the lid on the box, within lay twenty five Russian cigars. Suddenly a memory of his governorship on Gukumatz passed through him, not unlike an undercooked Indian curry after a night out on the tiles. The tobacco was much the same as the cigarettes Nestor smoked. McCann had tried a few of them and discovered they tasted even rougher than they smelt. He was tempted to give them back but on observing the Premier's face he dared not insult him by returning the gift.

McCann accepted the cigars 'Thank you very much Mr Myshkin.'

Next an aide entered the room carrying what must have been clothing in a dust cover. The Premier took the gift, walked around the desk, and presented it to Sandra in full view of the media.

Again Sandra pressed her palms together 'Spasiba.'

The press applauded with delight and the Premier had a short chat in Russian with Sandra, who was fluent in the language much to McCann's embarrassment. Their chat ended in the Russian urging Sandra to open her gift.

Sandra unzipped the dustcover to reveal a real fur coat, a very rare and expensive item for sure. The animal rights groups weren't going to be happy about this but it was obvious that neither Sandra nor the Russian Premier cared.

Sandra was elated as she slipped into her Mink coat, which fit perfectly. The tall slender Amazon looked very elegant in it, Premier Myshkin had made the right choice; probably in an attempt to outdo Michael Earle, the President of the Eastern States.

The soft black fur coat had Sandra squealing as a child would at her birthday and with good reason.

Myshkin gestured towards the cigars 'Feel free to smoke Admiral.'

McCann shuddered inside; against his will he picked out one of the Lonsdale cigars and clipped the cap. Even just toasting the foot he could smell that Russian stench, but forced a smile for the cameras.

The Englishman was certain that the press and other politicians could smell the rough tobacco, who couldn't? Unless you'd lost all sense of smell! McCann offered one to Premier Myshkin, but the Russian politely declined his offer. Waving his hand he replied in his thick Russian accent 'I do not smoke Mr McCann, I find the smell how do you say it ... foul?'

McCann smiled as the Russians laughed, all the time he considered that despite being a smoker he found the smell quite foul too. However there was no way in hell he was going to insult the Russian Premier before his home press; especially considering the expensive gift he'd given to Sandra, so he soldiered on smoking the vile stick.

After a while the press were allowed to ask some questions, a young man stood up holding a tablet and addressed Mr Myshkin 'What exactly is the purpose of this Neutronium?'

Although the Premier wasn't supposed to say anything until Faraday had announced the new standard, he did 'In the coming months Russia shall be switching to a new currency standard.'

The young man was about to ask another question but one of the Premier's aides waved him down. A middle aged lady with glasses was selected next 'Will Russia be dropping the Gold standard in favour of a Neutronium standard?'

McCann puffed on his rank Russian stick in disbelief as the Premier spilt the beans 'Da,' he simply stated creating an uproar of requests.

Next McCann was questioned 'We have reports that the Athena was attacked by pirates whilst transporting this neutronium to Earth. Can you confirm that Admiral McCann?'

The Englishman looked towards Sandra who nodded her head 'We were intercepted by pirates, however they were repelled with the assistance of Captain Ryu, we defeated their ships and neutralised their base of operations.'

'There are rumours that a traitor was unearthed on the Athena, is this true?'

McCann waved his hand 'I'm sorry I'm not able to answer any more questions, thank you.'

The next day McCann decided to spend his time doing some sight-seeing, Sandra had created a distraction so that he might slip away un-noticed. Whilst the Russian elite were poring over the beautiful young lady he disappeared from his hotel, with the permission of Myshkin.

Dressed in a civilian charcoal grey suit with a red silk handkerchief he made for his first destination, Red Square, a place he'd long wished to visit. After reading of the many trials and tribulations of Moscow, from Genghis Khan to Gottschalk Hoch, the city fascinated him and since he'd already visited the Kremlin but wasn't able to leave the fortress during the "presscade", as he put it, Red Square was next in line.

The Englishman relaxed as he stood on the Moscow Metro, one of the oldest and deepest of all subway networks in the world. None of the occupants in his carriage recognised him, a couple of ladies eyed his three piece suit and gave a cheeky smile but other than that he was just another anonymous traveller that day. McCann kept his wrist tablet hidden beneath his shirt cuff and breathed in the fine scent of Floris No.89. The Englishman had also decided to wear an Ushanka hat in order to fit in with the fashion of the moment in Moscow. The city could be awfully cold at times and you didn't want to get caught short if it rained. The traditional Russian Ushanka was much like those who wore it, utilitarian yet strangely attractive. It matched his fine dark Italian cashmere overcoat, quite an extravagance for the average Moscovite.

The Englishman spoke to a young lady sitting beside the aisle where he stood 'Excuse me, but do you speak English?'

She replied with a puzzled look.

'English?' repeated the tourist.

'Neit,' replied the lady dressed in a white overcoat with matching Ushanka.

McCann heard the reply in his earpiece though he understood Russian for 'no'. He was quickly alerted to another woman in her 40's 'You are English?' she called from the opposite end of the carriage.

With relief McCann made his way to her 'Yes I am, do you speak English?'

'A little, what do you want?' she replied in a rather forceful tone.

'Do you know where I get off for Red Square?'

The lady smiled 'Yes, in two more stops, do you understand?'

McCann returned her smile 'Yes, thank you very much ... spasiba!'

The Lady laughed at his attempt to speak her language 'You are welcome. Why are you here?'

'After reading about the city as a child, I've always desired to see Moscow.'

The brown haired lady smiled 'Will you visit,' the Russian searched her mind for the correct words 'Mavzoley Lenina?'

The Admiral's earpiece quick spat out the translation, an androgynous voice spoke 'Lenin's Mausoleum'.

McCann nodded 'Yes of course.'

The woman looked around the subway compartment as it moved smoothly along the newly installed mag lev rails which covered the massive metro system. She then spoke in a slightly hushed tone 'Do not forget to visit the grave of Yevpraksiya.'

At the mention of Yevpraksiya searching eyes throughout the carriage turned to examine McCann and the woman he was speaking with. Not a word was spoken but their looks made the Englishman feel most uncomfortable, just the mention of the former Tsaritsa of Russia caused a tension to fill the carriage. McCann didn't quite understand what compelled Russians to hold her name in such high reverence and fear at the same time. She had been buried alongside many esteemed men of the Soviet era at the Kremlin wall, outside Red Square. In McCann's mind she was a hero of Mother Russia, the leader who liberated Europe from the grip of the Hun.

McCann smiled and replied to the nervous lady 'I'll certainly visit her grave.'

The people inside the carriage went back to reading tablets and conversations on their earpieces. The Russian lady relaxed as the attention dissipated, 'Good, enjoy your visit.'

McCann nodded his head as the underground train stopped and the lady stepped out. At the next stop McCann walked off onto the platform, he made his way to the surface via an escalator; the station was much larger than those in London.

Once above ground he felt the cold air rush around him and an icy feeling in his lungs as he took a deep breath of the frosty atmosphere. His first stop in the Square was at the statue of Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky, a grand bronze monument to the men who repelled the Polish invaders during the 17th century. One stood with his arm out as the other sat propping up a shield and sword. McCann was uncertain which was Kuzma and which Dmitry but it didn't matter, the statue was a powerful sight in its aged green bronze. The pair seemed to be guarding the square, gazing out; protecting their descendants from any would be invader.

The Square bustled as people walked around what was originally a market but now served many purposes. Close to the statue lay the Lobnoye Mesto, a circular granite platform designed for public ceremonies. McCann recalled some old footage of Yevpraksiya; he recognised this as the place she had made her speech addressing the invasion, announcing the suspension of all elections until the threat had been dealt with. He recalled how the people applauded her decisive action and how it filled them with hope. He also recalled how many were relieved once her reign was over, a reign which lasted far longer than the conflict with their old adversaries, Germany, or what passed for the European Union at that point in time. At the turn of the 21st century some referred to the EU jokingly as the fourth Reich, by 2030 it was no longer a joke.

The Englishman quickly slipped his shirt sleeve up his arm and tapped on his wrist tablet, downloading the scene of her speech from the Net. He noted the officials standing beside her; McCann guessed they were KGB top brass since without them she could not have grasped power. Yevpraksiya had taken control of Russia after her Father's assassination, it was her responsibility to run for Premier; Russia had begun to devolve, along similar lines to China. Warlords were on the rise, refusing to pay tax, threatening Moscow with violence to whomever they sent. Her father, Ivan Kamenev died after he'd ordered 5 battalions to Chechnya for the purpose of tax collection. It was unclear as to whether the ricin was administered by a Chechen or one of his own military commanders.

Politically Russia was collapsing, until the KGB backed the dead Premier's daughter. The Liberal Democratic Party made her leader and Premier since none wanted the job. Yevpraksiya had only a single interest, revenge, and

the 26 year old girl set about attaining it in a very Russian manner. The tall, blonde haired and blue eyed lady was very attractive but soon her image became synonymous with fear.

Seeing what he thought was a collapsing Russia the head of the E.U, or what the Germans had managed to enslave through massive debt then suppress via the member countries own military, Gottschalk Hoch decided to do what previous German leaders had failed at. The arrogant ruler of the Troika believed he could quickly invade a Russia descending into anarchy and grab the rich oil fields in the Caucasus. The Russians couldn't even force their own people to pay tax, how on earth could they prevent a powerful and focused Germany from snatching a piece of the crumbling empire?

It was true; Yevpraksiya was having difficulty in collecting resources from her inherited state. Russia had survived the initial currency wars and financial Armageddon due to a large stock of gold and oil, but holding Russia together had been too much for her Father. She was starting to realise how difficult his job had been, no one would co-operate, even her own military seemed only to follow orders when it so pleased them. The KGB protected her but could do little to control a country as large and obstinate as Russia.

Fortunately Germany did her a massive favour and invaded, in a replay of 1941 the Hun made a dash to secure Russian oil fields, a resource also used to back many new currencies post financial collapse. As the Hun poured into Mother Russia seizing her assets, Yevpraksiya made what was expected to be her final address to the people of her country. It turned out to be the first of many, democracy was put on hold and Russia's citizens placed their destiny behind what was to become the first Tsaritsa of Russia.

Provinces began to fall into line, sending levies owed, her military was purged of those reluctant to engage the E.U and defences erected. By the time the enemy had taken Russia's oil fields and turned to Moscow the citizens of Russia were chomping at the bit for a chance to hit back at their foe.

The megacity known as the third Rome was not about to allow the tribes of Germania to walk in and sack it, as had happened to the first Rome. Anti-missile sites littered the skyline of the city, adorning every building.

Drones were ready to launch as soon as satellites picked up the invaders approaching the Moskova River.

Yevpraksiya had been advised to leave, yet in the same vein as Stalin she refused; instead the tall lady visited his grave at the wall of the Kremlin. Many others were present, adorning the granite pillar which held a bust of the former leader, with flowers. People were praying, begging the man who held back the Nazis one hundred years ago to deliver them again from the invading Hun.

The young lady caused a stir as she walked through Red Square pursued by paparazzi; she knelt at the obelisk which supported the strong man of the Soviet Union. Cameras clicked as she requested Stalin send them the most terrible winter Russia's enemies have ever seen. Her request was met with rapturous applause from those observing.

As the Hun approached with a combined army of German, Italian and French troops the weather deteriorated. By the time they made striking distance there was a complete white out, even satellites couldn't see through the thick blizzard. Leopard tanks became stuck under feet of snow and the Luftwaffe drones were grounded as fuel froze in their tanks overnight.

Such terrible conditions failed to prevent the Wehrmacht and its cohorts from unleashing a brutal missile strike upon the city. Moscow began to burn around the frozen river of the same name. Unfortunately for Yevpraksiya she could not launch her drones either, nor see exactly where her enemy had dug in. It became a battle of attrition, who could wait out and survive the blizzard.

During the siege Russia's new Tsaritsa visited all areas, encouraging efforts to bolster defence in preparation for when the weather broke. During her morale boosting exercise she visited Lomonosov University. Whilst meeting students and urging them to dig in for the inevitable arrival of the Hun, she met with a progenitor of the modern scam drone. As she stepped down from the lectern a young man approached from the crowd of students.

KGB agents grabbed the lad before he could do harm, however Russia's tall Tsaritsa called off her dogs, she was certain the boy with glasses had no ill intent.

'What do you want?' inquired Yevpraksiya in an urgent tone.

‘Something to help, the drones we can launch them now.’ Replied the young man in his 20’s as two burly KGB agents held him by both arms.

‘How?’ said the Tsaritsa almost barking at him in an attempt to draw the information out.

The student glanced at her KGB; Yevpraksiya waved ‘Release him.’

They released the student yet remained between him and their boss, dressed in her thick mink coat and ushanka.

He grabbed a nearby laptop and opened it ‘If we convert the ground attack drones to Hydrogen we can get them up now.’

One of the KGB staff scoffed ‘That would mean redesigning the engine, we don’t have that kind of time, the Germans are here now!’

‘Let him speak Yuri!’ snapped Yevpraksiya.

‘We can do it in one day, the engines would not run as efficiently but it would be enough to launch a first strike whilst they are grounded.’

The Tsaritsa gave a wary look ‘Why did you not present this before?’

‘I did,’ replied the student looking at her KGB staff nervously.

The beautiful blonde Russian narrowed her eyes ‘I see, take this man to our forward airbase. I expect to have enough drones ready for a strike this time tomorrow ... and bring me whoever is responsible for dismissing this proposal.’

Yevpraksiya smiled to the student ‘Good luck,’ then marched out of the lecture hall.

The student experienced an ominous feeling of dread as a KGB agent escorted him to an airbase which was to be the first defence against the coming enemy assault.

By the next day Yevpraksiya’s Minister of Defence had been shot and her first squadron of drones were in the air searching out enemy encampments.

On the other side of the coin the Prussian in command of the siege of Moscow was drinking tea inside his forward HQ, laughing and joking with his Officers as they all waited out the terrible weather. With typical German arrogance victory was assured and Feldmarschall Hans Schiffer contemplated with his Italian and French subordinates on how they would spend their spring in Moscow, whilst sipping hot drinks in the prefabricated steel crate which served as his tent.

‘I’m looking forward to the women, have you seen that Praksiya? Damn if only every world leader was as sexy as her!’ declared Genrale Cesare Messana.

Hans chuckled heartily as he put he feet up inside his insulated crate ‘Yes, but we’d have too much time away from our wives on campaign!’

The three men laughed as the French air force General retorted ‘You’ve not met his wife Hans!’

The German laughed harder as he slapped his thigh but the Italian wasn’t amused ‘Hey, my wife is better looking than that Russian bitch for sure and a virgin? HAH! I wouldn’t touch her; she has diseases even Francois has never heard of.’

The Frenchman put down his drink and got to his feet, pointing at the Italian accusingly he shouted ‘That was not me in Grozny! And I still believe it was you that sent the photo to the newspapers!’

The slightly plump Feldmarschall was going red with laughter, a stark contrast to his drab grey uniform ‘I don’t know Francois there were not that many General D'armee Aeriennes in Grozny you know?’

The Frenchman was furious at the Italian ‘It was photo-shopped; I have never been to a whorehouse in my life!’

Cesare scratched his forehead comically ‘Si, si we must have Hercule Poirot take a look at this obvious forgery, a Frenchman screwing whores when he should be working? Crazy!’

The Frenchman cooled down and smirked at the Italian, Schiffer was taking delight in the parle between these pair as usual, ‘Maybe I did go to that knocking shop,’ he said smoothly.

The Italian ceased to laugh and gave the French Air Force General a look of anticipation.

Francois turned to Hans and continued ‘I went inside and you know I looked down the menu? Guess what I saw on the bottom?’

The Italian jumped to his feet but still said nothing; he awaited the Frenchman’s next words with bated breath.

‘Right at the bottom it said “Old Italian slut, only two Roubles” and guess who I saw when they opened the door?’

Hans was in fits of laughter forcing the old German Field Marshal to put his herbal tea down on the coffee table beside him, before he dropped it.

Francois fixed his eyes upon the Italian 'It was your Mother Cesare and do you know what she told me? She said 'Tell Cesare to make a visit as his wife is missing him' ... she was three roubles you know?'

Hans creased up laughing but the other two were not in a jolly mood, the Italian Generale reached for his pistol, placing his hand upon the grip, yet he kept his weapon holstered.

Francois was not intimidated 'But I might be wrong you know? Since I was not the only person in the room ... and she had her mouth full.'

The Italian screamed at Francois 'CAZZO DI MERDA!'

At that moment the tension was broken by a knock on the door 'Betreten,' shouted Hans as he tried to control his laughter.

The door swung open permitting a blast of freezing cold air and snow to flush the inside of the tent, the Officer in his black uniform and overcoat quickly closed the door behind himself before removing his visor cap and leather gloves. The Officer was covered in snowflakes which melted once the warm atmosphere of his commanding Officers' HQ took over.

Franz Webber, a man in his forties and 5ft 10 saluted Feldmarschall Schiffer. Schiffer, who seemed rather disappointed that the fracas between his two EU Officers was over, nodded in reply 'Was ist es Oberstgruppenfuhrer?'

Franz replied in his usual direct manner, the soldier had served well for many years and was a natural choice for the invasion, 'I have further reports of enemy drone activity.'

The Officer spoke in English so that all present could understand; since the French were charged with air operations during the campaign it was paramount that General D'armee Aerieenne François Citron understood. Franz gave a look of concern as he examined the Frenchman and Italian locked in a menacing face off, they both seemed to be in a world of their own.

'Francois!' called the German grabbing his air force commander's attention.

The Frenchman turned his gaze slowly from Cesare 'Oui?'

'Oberstgruppenfuhrer Webber states his men have reported more enemy drone activity.'

The Frenchman shook his head 'C'est impossible, if we cannot launch our drones then neither can they. Have you seen these drones?'

Webber shook his head 'No Sir, my men have heard what they believe to be enemy drones flying overhead.'

The Frenchman sneered at the German Officer 'I suggest you have your men check their hearing, no drone can fly in this weather. Even if they could launch the blizzard prevents any navigation, without GPS they are useless.'

Hans peered at the Italian 'What do you think Cesare?'

The Italian General begrudgingly agreed with Francois 'It is a complete white out; even satellites are unable to see through it. Our missile attacks are based on maps; fortunately Moscow is a nice fat target.'

Feldmarschall Schiffer returned to his subordinate 'Continue your duties Oberstgruppenfuhrer, if your men make visual contact inform me immediately otherwise I do not wish to be disturbed again with this, understood?'

Webber nodded 'Understood Sir.'

'Entlassen.'

Webber saluted and upon receiving a reply he put his cap and gloves back on then marched out into the snow, a very frustrated man.

Schiffer had made a terrible mistake underestimating the ingenuity of his foe, three hours later and his camp was under assault from ground attack drones. Despite the weather and tundra camouflage the Russians had found them without the aid of GPS or satellite imagery.

Schiffer and his Officers stood around a table in his tent 'Francois I want fighters and bombers scrambled immediately.'

'It will take some time for them to reach Moscow; our closest air base is in Kiev. Also we are low on Eurofighters I'll need Minsk to scramble all the Mirages they have,' replied the Frenchman in his blue uniform as he pointed to the map with his swagger stick.

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