



WALTER KRAFT AND  
THE **ALIEN  
MENACE**

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Walter Kraft  
and  
The Alien Menace

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Århus 01/03 - 2004

For Daniella

May the good lady bring you and your family the best life has to offer, both now and forevermore.

Thank you for your care and friendship!

Einar Petersen

A few words from the author.

Writing Walter Kraft and the Alien Menace has been great fun and also an exercise in persistence. Though not a massive work it took quite a while before I was able to mold the story into it's present form.

Needless to say that without the prompt help and encouragement from Christine LePorte my editor, I doubt the story would ever have gotten this far.

I've enjoyed working with her but have to point out that any remaining errors are entirely my own responsibility as I've been tinkering with the proofs. I call it creative freedom - editors probably dont... sorry Chris ;o)

This release means a lot to me not only because it is my first fictional work being published in my writing career, but especially because it is an attempt to raise funds for The Global Ability Initiative that can be found at <http://globability.org>

The global Ability Initiative is a non profit venture aimed at the creation of completely free and open source software for the disabled.

In the hope of being able to make a difference I have decided that the proceeds generated from the sale of this electronic book will go to support the charitable efforts mentioned above. I surely hope that my intent will be honored!

Remember this is not a release by some "mega corp" solely intent on making a buck, this is a release made by an individual person with the hope of making a difference.

Thus I implore you to think twice before uploading this document to a file sharing service or otherwise making copies available in any other manner than mentioned in my quite liberal license (visit one4charity.com if you want to know more).

Please understand that I have no problems with file sharing services as long as my intellectual rights are upheld and if it is possible to further the work going on at globability.org by putting my work onto such a network I would certainly be interested in hearing how this can be done with little or no setup fees and a fair compensation scheme that takes into account, the needs of both users and content creators.

However since the majority of you are honest individuals I could probably have avoided this rant and saved my breath - But I need to let you understand the importance I place upon this release.

That said - I hope you enjoy my little tale. Happy Reading!

The AI floater hovered relentlessly across the plain. The survey robot was searching for the exact locations of mineral deposits discovered during the system-wide survey which had been undertaken only a few months earlier.

The gray-armored hulk gave away nothing of the machine's capabilities, but within lay an impressive arsenal consisting of everything from brutal self-defense mechanisms to intricate scientific equipment.

The robot came to a halt! It engaged the transmitter dish and pointed the antenna toward an unseen recipient in the skies above:

- All systems nominal
- En route ETA at grid coordinates .03°N6.80°W
- Time: T-32 min and counting
- Bio scan green
- Weapon platform armed and ready
- Refuel needed in T-969 min
- EOT

Suddenly the robot slid downwards; a fraction of a second later the antenna dish was transmitting:

- Motion detected
- Biological origin: Non Standard
- Engaging sub-program Xeno
- Going to observational mode
- Stealth mode activated

...

The ham crackled. "Whiskey Zulu One here, do you copy, Zulu Two?"

Jill Anderson was quick to grab the microphone. "Loud and clear, honey."

"Jill, we're going to be rich!" came the voice of her husband, Jasper.

"Rich?" Jill was baffled. Neither of them had ever shown great interest in money; that was one of the principal reasons they had chosen colonial settler life over any other mainstream career.

"Yes, beyond your dreams rich," Jasper said, his voice wavering with excitement.

"What are you talking about?" Jill inquired. "There is no price on our crops!"

There was a pause before her husband continued, "Oh, this is far better than any crop, darling."

"Better?" Jill tapped her lower lip with her index finger; now she was getting curious.

"Oh yes...far better," Jasper said smugly. "Remember that survey kit I picked up last year at the fair?"

"What is it, Jasper?" she asked, a hint of impatience in her tone.

"I can't tell you over the com. Meet me at 62.03°N6.80°W. You'll have to come and see for yourself - hey...What the hell..."

A powerful burst of static interrupted the transmission and for a moment Jill waited calmly. She was used to solar activity wreaking havoc with the ham set, though this sounded different.

"Whiskey Zulu Two here...I lost you, Whiskey Zulu One-do you read me? Over," Jill said.

There was no answer. Frowning, she tried again. "Whiskey Zulu Two here. Do you read me, Whiskey Zulu One? Over!"

Suddenly an awful feeling crept up on her. *What if Jasper had an accident?*

Jill jumped up from the chair and was in the hallway seconds later.

She flung on her driver's suit and raced out the door. She peered into the horizon, turned on the GPS unit on her wrist, and hopped onto the hover bike. The twin engines roared and whisked up a dust cloud that hid both Jill and the bike from sight.

Then rider and vehicle shot off into the barren landscape, leaving behind a slowly dissipating trail of dust.

...

"Jill," said Jasper into the ham, "this is amazing... there is something here. I think it is alive! Looks like it is devouring a Curgesan Cat."

He stared in amazement at the exotic display before him.

Seemingly the shapeless lifeform was covering the animal with its own body like a spider would cover its prey in a silky cocoon.

Only this was certainly no spider. Jasper had no idea what he was seeing but the spectacle was unlike any he had ever learned about in school.

He tried the ham once more. "Jill... do you read me?" The only answer he received was continuous static. A static that had begun the moment the life form had appeared.

There was a strange hum behind him and Jasper turned around. The last thing he saw was a huge gray shadow hurtling toward him. Then his heart stopped.

...

- Status report
- Xeno assimilating local fauna-transmorphism
- Need further instructions on seek and destroy directive

The survey ship commander studied the transmission with thoughtful eyes. *Seek and destroy?*

*The idea was certainly appealing; those things had just taken out a human settler... then again they could be reacting instinctively.*

Commander Jensen pondered the matter for a bit.

Meanwhile, Jill got closer to her rendezvous with fate.

The very instant the hover bike clipped the hilltop, the commander sent his transmission.

Within seconds and with deadly precision the survey robot hovered upward and opened the gun ports. The powerful weapons flickered menacingly and sent a volley of energy bolts toward the humanoid creature.

The nightmarish scenario hit Jill with full force as she raced towards what she thought to be her beloved. The bike veered from side to side before she managed to bring it to a stop. She cowered, feeling as if she were watching an unreal scene on one of the entertainment channels.

She thought surely the end had come for her too as the robot swung about. She closed her eyes as tears began building.

Images flickered before her. Her parents, family and friends, their departure, her wedding, Jasper falling lifeless to the ground. The survey robot moving swiftly toward his body and how it hadn't stopped until it had positioned itself straight above him.

Then the images became confusing. The robot changing altitude in order to position itself better for a shot, and then again suddenly hovering menacingly downward until it nearly touched Jaspers body, all mixed in with the horrid beam that had cut into his body.

Circuits calculated, projected, and extrapolated; there was no movement on the ground. The creature seemed neutralized.

A port had opened and a sampling device was being prepared.

The seeker had been about to retrieve a sample from the dead body when it's sensors had picked up on the hover bike.

The guns were fully charged but before the weapons could send a deadly volley against the incoming vehicle and rider, the survey robot was disintegrated by a powerful heat wave appearing out of the blue, leaving only tiny bits littering the ground.

Jill was thrown clean off the hover bike by the blast wave.

After that an ominous silence fell over the wastelands.

...

The com buzzed. "Kraft Bounty Hunting. We tag 'em and bag 'em," the Synthosec said.

"This is Mrs. Jill Anderson. Could I please speak to Mr. Kraft?", the woman inquired.

"Hold on please. I'll check to see if Mr. Kraft is available," the Synthosec replied. She appeared to press a button after which the Kraft Bounty Hunting holding page came on to Mrs. Anderson's great displeasure.

"Herr Kraft."

The bounty hunter swirled around and faced the communication screen. "Yes?"

"There is a Mrs. Anderson on the com, she is insisting on a person to person, are you available?"

Kraft scratched his chest and flung a ball into the basket. "Well...I was planning to leave early, doll, but patch her through," he said with a wink.

A face shimmered into existence in front of Kraft.

"Walter Kraft here, may I help you?" the bounty hunter offered politely.

Jill wasted no words. "I am looking for someone who will hunt down my husband's murderer!"

Kraft leaned back in his chair, digging a piece of meat from a dental crevasse, and pounded the plate on the desk gently.

To Jill, however, Kraft looked completely different, very attentive as he sat there in his lavish office, all thanks to the Ofitek™ masking technology which could make even the most measly office look like an interplanetary conglomerate headquarters.

"Fill me in," Kraft stated flatly, his projected image offered an empathic gesture.

"I have this," Jill said, showing a fragment at the vidcap unit.

"And that is?" , Kraft asked all while he appeared to stroke his chin in a most speculative manner.

"A piece of the damned survey robot that killed my husband."

Kraft leaned forward with interest. *Corporations would go far in covering potential losses by preventing relatives from suing. Why hadn't Mrs. Anderson tried a legal twist?*

Kraft looked thoughtfully at Mrs. Anderson's image. "What kind of security, financially speaking, are you able to provide?"

His eyes opened wide when the numbers started rolling. "That is very impressive!" Kraft said, awestruck.

"The neighbors took up a collection... they want this resolved as well."

"I'll look into the matter. Talk to my secretary, she'll handle the details." He punched a button which activated his synthetic secretary, another marvel from the guys at SecoTec™.

...

Kraft sat down and looked out the window, the pouring rain distorting his view.

He had experienced the jitters earlier and he still felt slightly uneasy when he boarded. His gaze swept across the harbor; it was bustling with activity as the ground crews worked frantically to prepare the liner for take-off.

A few other passengers were up and about. They seemed to be very interested in the preparations as well. Perhaps too interested. A steward passed close by tapping a pen nervously.

*Does he know something that necessitates worry?* Kraft thought and tapped his lower lip before casting a skewed gaze across the room.

His unease returned, stronger than before. *Was his reluctance about the trip founded? His great-grandmother was said to have an uncanny ability for feeling things, especially bad ones.*

A group of trainee engineers got up and left the cafeteria and shortly after a series of rather loud metal clanks told Kraft that take-off was nearing. There were other people in the cantina and Kraft found it slightly amusing to watch their faces when the roaring engines suddenly started up and removed all doubt from their minds about what was actually going on.

Kraft went up to the counter as the ship gently lifted off. He was met by a smiling brunette.

"Can I help you?" she asked seductively.

Kraft felt overwhelmed by her energy. The red blouse clung tight to her body, leaving nothing to the imagination. *Oh yeah, she knows exactly what she's doing.*

"That sign." Kraft pointed to some Asian symbols beautifully placed on her garment. "What do they mean?"

She looked down as if she had never noticed the writing before. "Oh that... it means fidelity."

"To anyone or anything in particular?" Kraft inquired with a crooked smile.

"Maybe," she taunted. She fiddled with her leather necklace, which according to Kraft's taste had a rather large cross attached to it, but she wore it beautifully.

*Damn, she sure did push those buttons.* Kraft smiled again.

"Well, it is one of the more important qualities of man, isn't it?"

"Fidelity?" she proposed innocently.

"Yes," Kraft responded, enjoying the rest of her garments. That broad belt, those zippers, those boots sure didn't give away her occupation as a chef.

Kraft had the unfair advantage of knowing all the crew members before departure. It was one of the fringe benefits of being affiliated with Thorgeir Arnarsson but also one of the drawbacks... it could take some of the excitement out of meeting people, even though this wasn't a social trip. Not that he had too many of those anyway.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. Being unfaithful is not terribly chic, eh?" she answered. She'd finally made up her mind. *When she returned she would tell that prick Jimmy off and start a new life. No more arseholes, no more cheap bastard sonuvabitches who didn't know how to treat a lady.*

"My name's Lonnie. Can I get you a coffee or something?" she asked, looking Kraft straight in the eyes.

Kraft wobbled as if hit by a stream of charged particles but managed to stutter a rather cramped, "Uhm, yes..."

She dashed off and returned moments later with a mug. "Cream, milk, sugar?" she suggested, reaching for the tray.

"Oh... uhm. No, I'll take it black tonight, thank you," Kraft mumbled, feeling somewhat insecure.

"No problem." She handed him the mug.

"How much?" Kraft inquired.

"On the house..." Lonnie stated, wanting to say so much more. But before she got around to it Kraft thanked her, nodded, and bade her good-bye.

*Good-bye, damn, why was she always holding back...why, why, why? Probably the reason she ended up with creeps like Jimmy. For God's sake, Jimmy! She slapped herself on the forehead.*

*Who in their right mind would stick with a manipulating, jealous control freak like Jimmy?*

*The evening Jimmy had knocked her onto the bathroom floor was the evening she should have left him...*

"You okay?" Kraft asked, looking a bit worried.

Lonnie looked up. "Uhm, yeah... something wrong with the coffee?"

*Something wrong with the coffee?* She wanted to dig a hole and jump into it.

"No, no, it's fine! I just... got a craving for one of those slices. They look delicious!" Kraft pointed at the ham and cheese sandwiches lying neatly stacked on the plate next to the cashier.

Lonnie smiled. *Sandwiches...perhaps there was hope after all.*

...

Kraft woke up. The bed felt oddly warm; he glanced to the side and found himself looking at a bare chest heaving up and down in a most peaceful manner.

His gaze swept upward and found Lonnie's magnificent face. *Those eyelashes*, he thought. He got up on his elbow and sighed.

Unable to resist, Kraft gently let his fingers brush across her cheek. She smiled, mumbled something, and turned over, laying an arm on Kraft's chest. His thumb stroked her chin.

Lonnie slowly awakened. "Hi," she said in a coarse but seductive voice.

"Good morning angel, sleep well?"

"Yeah... thank you!"

"No, thank you, Lonnie... you sweet, sweet lady," Kraft murmured, playing with one of her locks.

She caressed him ever so gently and Kraft felt a surge as her tender lips softly explored his body.

She kissed him again, this time in a more demanding manner, and slowly slid her slender body tighter to Kraft's, which was throbbing with expectation.

Lonnie looked him straight in the eyes as she let her leg slide in between his, after which she let her hand brush gently down his chest and across his belly.

Her nails tickled in a most delightful manner.

"Oh m..." Kraft started as her hand went further and another surge pulsed through his body. She put a finger to his lips and silenced him.

For a while they just lay there kissing, caressing and saying nothing, when suddenly Lonnie repositioned herself.

Kraft watched her mysterious face completely spellbound as she placed herself on top of him. Her body slid into position while she bent down slightly in order to give Kraft another daring yet hungry kiss.

*So beautiful*, he thought as she bent forward. Kraft could not resist the temptation and let his hands explore her soft skin.

She rose violently. The gentle touch on her bare breast made her head feel as if it was about to explode.

She gasped as he squeezed ever so lightly and a broad smile filled his face as Lonnie joyfully jolted backwards with intense pleasure painted onto her finely chiseled face.

Kraft closed his eyes and took a gasping mouthful of air when Lonnie suddenly started heaving her body upward, at first slowly just to make certain they were in a mutually good position, then faster.

He opened his eyes and his gaze met Lonnie's, which seemed filled with unbound desire consuming her very existence.

She lowered her hips again and Kraft leaned upward intending to engage in a passionate embrace. Lonnie, however, had her own agenda. She pressed her hands firmly on Kraft's chest and he fell helplessly back onto the bed.

Their bodies joined in perfect symbiosis and the two of them sank further and further into their passionate game, but there was nobody in the corridor to hear the muffled outbursts emanating from the small cabin.

...

The cafeteria only recently opened and Kraft had just consumed a solid breakfast, he was swallowing the last of the orange juice when something struck him amidst his rambling thoughts.

He placed the glass back on the table. Lonnie was just out in the back; her assistant had called upon her, interrupting the morning meal.

Not that Kraft minded; a bit of solitude was certainly nice as well. *Always had a problem with intimacy*, he laughed silently. But with Lonnie things seemed different. *Hmm... could it be he was softening up?*

Kraft turned his attention to the crew who entered. *There was something odd about them and about the passengers as well. They were all behaving so damn disciplined. So stiff and formal, nothing of the deep space spirit that usually existed within traveling groups on long haul liners. Long haul...*

Kraft couldn't help smirking at the thought that not long ago humans had deemed reaching other stars and returning to the point of origin within less than decades pure speculation. *Boy, had they been wrong!*

Lonnie came back to the table and interrupted before he could finish his trail of thought. "Sorry, problems in the kitchen."

"Nothing you couldn't fix, I bet," Kraft answered with a smile.

Lonnie grinned. "Thanks...yeah, you're right, nothing I couldn't fix." Lonnie lay her hand on Kraft's. He turned his hand palm up and stroked her fine features.

"You're beautiful... have I said that yet?" he teased.

She sent him a crooked smile. "Only about a zillion times!" "Oh well... then I take it back," he laughed.

Lonnie burst out in that beautifully pitched laughter of hers that Kraft found so appealing. Was he falling in love?

Kraft stroked her hand hypnotically. "Lonnie?"

"Yes?"

"I've been wondering..." Kraft hesitated.

"About what?" Lonnie asked curiously.

"So few passengers... Isn't that pretty unusual? I had quite some trouble getting a cabin; the agency claimed the flight was overbooked."

Lonnie squirmed. She was unsure how to answer. Her loyalties were divided between her employer and the man she felt she was falling for.

"Well, a large group... had to cancel right before take-off," she lied. Lonnie averted her eyes. She had never felt so bad in her life.

Kraft's brow furrowed. "Surely the flight could have been delayed a while, we could have picked up the time difference during transit... right?"

Lonnie looked away, struggling inside. She didn't know all the details, only that they had to carry a special investigations team and that only special company-cleared travelers were allowed on board... *How could Kraft not know what was going on? Was he some VIP company tycoon who had pulled rank to be included on the flight?*

"I don't know about that", she answered. She wasn't lying this time. She really had no idea about the physics of deep space flight.

"I see," Kraft nodded. He noticed her discomfort and refrained from pushing the issue further. He could always have Thorgeir sift through the databases again as soon as communication became possible.

...

The good-bye had been painful since Kraft had no idea how much time would pass before he saw that beauty of a woman Lonnie again. He had masterfully avoided any other reference to jobs and traveling arrangements; that had been a bad judgment call on his side.

Of course there was something fishy going on; otherwise the flight would have been stuffed. Thorgeir had promised to look into the matter, even threatened taking a private craft into orbit.

How he was going to afford a private craft here Kraft didn't even want to know. Some things were better left untold.

But now he was headed for a meeting, one where he would get the full story.

*Oh, how he dreaded these face-to-face meetings with the employers. One of the reasons he had invested in the Synthosec...come to think of it, was probably the reason that he loathed the proximity of others, yet he worked in a profession in which he had to hunt down people who for one reason or another did the same... welcome to Paradox City!*

Kraft shook off his unease. *No need to stress oneself unnecessarily, he thought and strode ahead a tad more briskly.*

...

"So you witnessed the robot slay your husband... I sympathize deeply; it must have been a most disturbing experience." Kraft went silent, unable to bring his sentiments across in a better way.

He thought wryly that the Synthosec would probably have done far better with the zillions of instructions running through her system instantaneously. Sometimes Kraft felt the Synth's were more human than humans themselves but they were allowed to exist only in a simulated environment cut off from making decisions that could deeply impact anyone or at least that was how their function was perceived.

Kraft stared at the charred piece of circuits. "Why didn't you turn this over to the proper authorities?" he asked Jill.

Jill sneered. "Turn it over... hah!. The authorities are completely corrupt; the mining companies keep them on their payroll, you know, to ensure immunity against incidents like the one with my husband." Without warning she started sobbing.

Kraft shifted in his chair, uncomfortable at the display of emotion.

"Surely not every cop is on the take," he suggested.

"That might very well be, but what can one honest cop do when facing a corrupt bureaucracy?" Jill heaved a shaky sigh, trying to regain control of herself.

"True..." Kraft took a deep breath. *Yeah that is one of the problems with non-transparent government, - corrupted individuals in the corridors of power. Come to think of it that is one of the few things to be admired about the Martian republicans. Complete openness in their government and administration system. All information available to everyone instantaneously, everything from a simple receipt for a cup of coffee to trade agreements involving trillions. Beautiful really.*

One thing however annoyed Kraft about the Martian settlers and his mind wandered further upon the thought.

*Why the hell did they always push their darn 'religious' beliefs on everyone they met! Why couldn't they just accept that everyone is different and has different needs, allowing each and every one to adapt the best from each culture and make a decent living thereupon? no, that's not the Martian way! Openness in all aspects of life and the betterment of others for their own sake... Jeez, Imagine divulging every bit of the previous night with Lonnie... Who would take an interest in that?*

Kraft suddenly realized his mind was straying and he turned his full attention back to his client.

"Listen," Kraft said to Jill, "I'll take this to someone who can analyze the contents and then we can find the culprit responsible."

Jill Anderson stared at Kraft, her eyes wide with amazement. "Haven't you been listening, young man? The company is responsible. Local government is starting to withdraw farming licenses and company transports have been hovering all over."

"Of course, Mrs. Anderson... I mean no disrespect, but I have to verify your information. Out of legal concerns, you understand. Myself, I don't doubt you for a second," Kraft lied.

He always doubted his customers. If there was one thing a bounty hunter experienced time and time again it was bereaved people trying to get at each other using him and fellow brethren as judge, jury, and executioner all in one. A possibility Kraft did everything to eliminate.

"It won't take long... I have the finest people at my disposal," Kraft added confidently.

In reality he had no idea how it would be possible to retrieve any information from the circuitry in his hand.

Unless Thorgeir arrived pretty soon the prospect of getting any information at all out of the fragment was bleak.

...

The planet actually looked quite friendly, Kraft thought as he peered through the view port. He was on board the private long hauler Hermes, a ship that probably cost just a little less than a small moon.

"Nice, huh?" Thorgeir inquired.

Kraft started. The bounty hunter hadn't noticed his compadre's silent approach. Good thing Thorgeir wasn't in the assassination business. "Yes, seems quite hospitable," Kraft replied.

Thorgeir snickered. "As they say, beauty is only skin deep."

"Very true... very true indeed. So tell me, Thorgeir, what do you have for me?"

"Oh, you are in for a surprise," Thorgeir teased.

"So... surprise me," Kraft demanded.

"Do you have any idea where this fragment has been?" Thorgeir inquired.

"Yes... I have an idea," Kraft responded somewhat absentmindedly.

"No, that's not what I mean. I'm thinking about the unit in which this breadboard belongs."

Thorgeir waved the data collection unit in front of Kraft's face.

*Breadboard. Now there was a term nobody used anymore. Nobody except Thorgeir. What a great geezer. Kraft couldn't help but admire Thorgeir's style.*

"This was part of a Lakshmi Series VI seeker. They don't send these babies just anywhere. Quite an expensive piece of hardware. AI with human command controller... You know, according to the AI Moderation Directives."

*Was that bitterness in Thorgeir's voice? Kraft knew only too well. Fascinating how people had feared their own creation.*

AI had made the headlines with proclamations of the salvation and solution of all humanity's problems. A workforce capable of twenty-four-hour decision-making based on the entire human database, AI's had become perfect beings in so many senses. Esthetically and performance wise they had been formed into units capable of doing things humans couldn't even dream of. AI's were the ideal balance of objective justice and continuous labor - and for that they had to be eliminated.

Kraft glanced at Thorgeir and shrugged nonchalantly. "So?"

Thorgeir turned his eyeballs toward the ceiling.

"Duh! The Lakshmi Series VI belongs to just about the most sophisticated mineral hunters at 'our' disposal..." Thorgeir did the whole four-fingered emphasis move.

"I'll be honest with you," Thorgeir continued. "I dunno what the heck they were looking for. But I can guarantee you that when one of these babies goes hunting and it is blown up, there'll be a file the size of a..."

He held up his index finger and thumb, allowing a barely visible gulf wide enough for a sheet of PMP to fit in. "And that's huge!"

"The file is in there?" Kraft snatched the chip fragment from Thorgeir.

The bounty hunter turned the piece in his hand, staring at it in fascination.

Thorgeir responded by taking the piece back from a rather surprised Kraft.

"Nope, the information is gone, but I'll bet ya my fee, that all this baby recorded is still available," Thorgeir said smugly.

"Really?" Kraft eyed Thorgeir, suspecting what he was getting at.

*Arnarsson, Arnarsson*, the bounty hunter thought. He nodded and gestured his interest with a slight wave of his hand.

"Yup, sure is." Thorgeir hesitated. "But it will probably require you to enter a heavily guarded compound..."

A little thrill of excitement shot through Kraft. "Can it be done?"

"Oh yeah," Thorgeir said with a grin. "Oh yeah." He punched a button on his wrist unit and data started scrolling across the view port.

"Most interesting," Kraft muttered as he began his intake of information on the compound.

"Yes, isn't it? And all you need to do is execute a simple file transfer to me - agreed?" Thorgeir narrowed his eyes.

"Sure," Kraft mumbled as he lost himself in the data stream before him.

...

The rain fell in heavy drops from a dark sky. Kraft cursed mildly as he sank into a pool of mud. The ground was soaked, which made progress difficult, but otherwise the weather conditions suited Kraft's mission quite well.

He was in the outskirts of town - well, the outskirts was perhaps too fine a description for the sheds he had passed by just a few moments back, but any of the people living in those huts probably regarded themselves as citizens, though mostly social misfits or rejects of one sort or another would be forced to live out their existence like that.

Kraft slowed as he approached the outer perimeter of the compound. With all the disturbance from the rain, and the static charges being released from the skies above, the sensors would be hard pressed not to do much of anything but burn out, so it didn't take much effort for Kraft to ease his way through the grid.

*Ridiculous placement, Kraft thought, almost as if they wanted to make entry possible. Then again those two years in the Planetary Expeditionary Force probably had an effect as well when it came to making an undetected entry so it hadn't been a complete waste of time.*

Though he could have done without the senseless slaughter. Kraft couldn't help but wonder what would happen if the core ever caught up with him. *What was there to be said? I killed my commanding officer because he was cruel and ruthless to an innocent civilian population? They would laugh all the way to the firing squad, if he ever got that far.*

The ventilation shaft was less than ten meters in front of him. Kraft eased toward it on his belly. *Just a little longer... yes, that should do it!*

He groped in his backpack and withdrew a spider-like device. He flicked a switch and lowered his visor. A ghostly green image in frog perspective materialized on the inside. Kraft looked at the vent and targeted the device.

The process was painstakingly slow but little by little the device moved toward the sensor, which was placed above the shaft opening.

The spider started ascending and right above the sensor the legs hooked themselves into the wall, after which the final preparations began. A jet of liquid coolant squirted out and disabled the heat sensor along with any other sensor that might be built into the array.

Kraft hurried over to the shaft, flicked out a micro laserwelder, and started working on the grate. In less than sixty seconds he was inside the ventilation and started resealing the entrance in an attempt to hide any revealing facts about what had just passed.

Less than two minutes later the entrance was sealed and Kraft was moving at high speed toward the C&C staging area. Once there he carefully placed the laserwelder and released a short burst.

The laserwelder pierced a hole through the metal casing smaller than the diameter of a digimarker.

Kraft checked his breast pocket and removed a small case. He opened it and took one of the dart-like devices into his hand. He pushed a switch on the device and carefully dropped the snoop into the freshly made hole.

A quick glance at his visor told him everything he needed to know.

*Empty... excellent.*

The laserwelder was once again hard at work. There was a slight creak as a section of the casing bent down, allowing Kraft to slip into the staging area.

He went over to the door and placed another device above the keypad lock.

The device drilled into the wall and shorted out the lock. That should delay entrance long enough for him to carry out his objectives. Kraft smiled; he would have thought retina scan systems would be installed... *well, that was the price for cutting costs!*

Kraft walked back to the main console and sat down; the seat whirred into position. *Nice*, Kraft thought, and reached for the keys. That very instant the screen flickered on.

*Hah, direct access.* Whoever had been here had not expected to be away for long and that meant Kraft had to work fast. His fingers danced across the keyboard and before he knew it he had up-linked to the Hermes.

"Uplink holding... Initiating data transfer," Kraft mumbled while munching on an energy bar from the survival kit.

Suddenly text appeared on the display.

"This is what u were looking for and then some," the letters stated before information started flashing across the screen.

Somewhat stunned, Kraft stared at the screen. Alien transmorphers of some sort, a pod fleet with seedlings on course toward Terran-held territories, mineral deposits needed by both species, an agreement of sorts, and then... search and destroy orders. Kraft's lip curled in disgust. *Those bastards!* Then there were some images of a guy being covered with something and being blasted afterwards.

That instant the door shattered in a powerful explosion. The last thing Kraft managed to do before passing out was to fry the console with an electrostatic charge from his sidearm in an attempt to delay the security guards from discovering the uplink.

...

Kraft was sitting in a chair. He was tied firmly but the straps holding him was not the immediate problem; rather, it was the two rough-looking company goons who were watching him with vigilance and the weapons they held that deterred Kraft from attempting an immediate escape.

A sleekly dressed gentleman eyed Kraft before sitting down in a huge leather chair.

"Name your price!" the gentleman ordered.

Kraft shot him a sour look. "If you're half as good as I think you are, you have my file on record in your database by now, and if you do, you also know that I don't have a price."

The gentleman smiled; he had indeed read Kraft's file. *To think he had the man responsible for the Richmond incident here in his office, and the beauty of it all was that he, if he wanted to, could nail Kraft for trespassing and a dozen other violations. But No! This Kraft character could be put to much better use.*

"I know," the gentleman said. "I just wanted to see how desperate you are...", He straightened his necktie.

Kraft was getting aggravated. "You lowlife swine, do you really think the company can get away with keeping shit like this under wraps?"

The executive smiled again. "I know we can. The board doesn't know jack, and nobody is going to tell them are they now?". His smile was almost unbearable.

"Those spineless zaps would run straight to Terran authorities and that would mean diminishing our lead over our competitors, and we wouldn't want anything like that to happen would you now". The executive made a gesture toward Kraft.

"You must admit that our company in many ways can be regarded as a source of stability in an otherwise tumultuous space. After all, we did tame the space lanes when the industry exploded." He added.

One of the goons snickered.

"But do you know what I find interesting?" the executive asked looking grimly at the guard who choked his snickering instantly.

"No." Kraft's eyes roamed lazily around the room as if the conversation held no interest.

"How the hell you managed to find out about the Vexans and enter our compound."

When Kraft didn't answer the gentleman continued, "A feat like that takes skill, you know, and even an asshole like yourself is usable to us if you have skills like that!"

"Hah!" Kraft laughed. "You know very well I work alone, and since you're not a client of mine I think I'll keep that to myself."

"Too bad," the gentleman muttered. "When the Vexan fleet arrives, if only one single pod gets through we'll need hunters like you. The Terran defense grids are not as developed as the one here."

"There are too many holes in the Terran grid, which is why we have to dust them out here - way too much traffic back home to keep a tight grip, if you understand me..."

Kraft shrugged and raised his eyebrows. "Not to change the subject but there were two Vexans on the planet, and you managed to dust one... How do you know the second won't escape? This planet has a commercial port and..."

The executive cut him short. "Maybe you noticed that the landing shuttle blasted off right after you and some crew had departed?"

Again Kraft shrugged and replied tiredly, "Yes... and?"

"That's how," the executive explained.

"The defense grid is on maximum alert. Nothing larger than a football is likely to slip through, at least not without our knowledge. On the ground we have placed sensors that will tell this little thingy to blurt out the instant something tries to get off planet, i.e., by 'using' our shuttle craft or other means of transportation."

The executive triumphantly showed Kraft a hand held device looking like the advanced sniffers mostly used by custom officers searching for unknown or illegal substances in uncontrolled areas.

"You see this?" The executive smiled deviously as he showed Kraft an injection device.

"Just as a precaution to keep you from telling tales about our little encounter, we will inject you with prionic capsules. The substance will be released in your body and will find its way to your brain, where it will cause immediate deterioration. A short while after injection you will experience memory lapses, visual disturbances, and then you'll most probably start hearing voices before your autonomous functions are affected, resulting in your death."

Kraft could almost see how the words tasted in the executive's mouth. His jaw tightened and he clenched his fists.

"So even if you should manage "to leave us" before your final departure you won't be taken seriously after they've examined your higher brain functions... But mind you," the official emphasized, not noticing the subtle moves Kraft made, "We are not complete animals. There is a way to evade such an unpleasant finish."

Kraft glared at the man, hatred burning in his eyes. Hatred toward the company that allowed such lowlifes in their service in the first place, hatred toward the man being able to control a commercial operation like this one and the means he used, all sanctioned by the quest for holy profit. *Holy profit! Now there was a concept.*

Ignoring Kraft's expression, the executive continued, "We are capable of withholding the effect of the harmful substance in your system, and as long as you work for us we will provide you with the means to do so." He smiled coldly as he held the injector against Kraft's throat.

Kraft, finally managing to trigger his neuro implant, activated the chameleon device he had picked up while in the Planetary Expeditionary Force.

The shimmering lasted a fraction of a second before the light displacers in his suit made it appear as if he had vanished into thin air.

Kraft then triggered another implant which set off the suit slicers. The goons stared at the scene in utter amazement; it looked as if the straps holding Kraft down were shredded as if cut by invisible knives.

The executive's mind raced; he was all too aware of what was going down. *No ordinary men, nor bounty hunters, had access to the type of equipment currently in effect; only the military did. Expeditionary Force personnel were not to be toyed with and the gadgets Kraft had at his disposal were a bad sign; only the very crack troops would hold such technology, and they never left the core to pursue bounty hunter careers...unless...*

"Fuck, he's got a nullifier. Go sonic now!" the executive barked as he jumped back from the chair where Kraft had been sitting, but before the goons could react Kraft had already toppled them over and disarmed them. A slightly blurred weapon hovered in the air right next to the executive's temple.

"Tell your hirelings to back off now!" Kraft ordered. The weapon pressed menacingly against the executive's temple.

A cold sweat broke out on the company executive's forehead. He knew all too well what Kraft was capable of and did not hesitate to call his subordinates to a halt.

"I think I'll take this one," Kraft said, grabbing the sniffer device. He grinned, though there was no one able to see his victorious smirk.

"I guess you have a few extra, I saw your crew carry them as we disembarked; furthermore, if you know what is good for yourself and humanity I suggest you don't try changing frequencies. From the data I saw I think you'll need all the help you can get trapping this... rogue."

Kraft hesitated, unsure how to proceed. Much as he sympathized with the Vexan, he held an obligation to his client, and the Vexan was the culprit in this particular case.

"But I can tell you one thing, you will not be allowed to carry on your execution of an entire species on your own recognizance, be very sure of that," Kraft stated pragmatically.

The executive tried to see the weapon held against his temple but the camouflage had enveloped itself over the pistol. He nodded, his face twisted with intense loathing for the man who held him at gunpoint.

Though he wouldn't say it, the executive could not agree with everything Kraft was saying; *however, they could do with the bounty hunter's help, his record was indeed impressive and if Kraft intended to seek out the Vexan and possibly destroy it, well, all the better for them. So there was a certain logic to agreeing to Kraft's suggestion about the tracking device, and the company certainly wouldn't miss the gadget and who would inform them of its whereabouts anyway? But Kraft had to be kidding himself if he thought he would ever be able to block the company from executing the plan already in motion.*

Kraft spoke slowly and clearly. "Now we will go for a little walk, all four of us, and if any interruptions occur, and I mean any interruptions, I know which part of you will disappear for good, and even with all the techniques available in Terran space, unfortunately for you, humans haven't been able to grow heads back on people yet!"

Kraft withheld a chuckle as the executive acknowledged his demands with a nod; the two hirelings nodded too.

The departure from the complex was painless, and shortly after Kraft left three unconscious men lying piled up next to a communication post from where they could try calling for help once they came around.

Kraft triggered another neuro implant and the chameleon device flickered off... "Sixty percent drainage on power cell-estimated time for regeneration three hours and fifty-five seconds." Kraft patted the power cell embedded in the suit and headed for the spaceport.

...

When Kraft arrived at the port his gut told him something was terribly wrong. The normal bustling about present in almost every spaceport was missing. Instead a menacing silence hung over the place. Kraft flicked his chameleon device on and an instant later what seemed like a shimmering bubble of reality edged forward. There was a slight hum as Kraft activated the extra power cells in his weapon.

The sight that met him was indescribable. The only thing preventing him from reacting to the signals his stomach sent him was the thorough training he had received in the Expeditionary Force.

Even so, the feeling of thick, choking saliva in Kraft's mouth brought him very close to the edge of personal control.

Kraft recognized several of the people as crew members and passengers on the long hauler. As his eyes scanned the port he suddenly noticed a pair of trousers that seemed ominously familiar.

In a few quick paces Kraft was over and kneeling by the body lying in front of the Public Bulletin Board Service console. Lonnie. Her face was so peaceful and Kraft could see no entry wound or any other sign of struggle.

He tried to find a pulse but there was none, her body was cold, as if she had been dead for hours. Her skin indicated asphyxiation but there were no bruises or marks showing how the perpetrator had finished her off.

Kraft felt tears pressing as he swallowed a big lump. He looked up and noticed the message ready for transmission to the planetary BBS

The text was brief and straightforward, it read, "Kraft - Need to talk NOW. Lonnie 435-XV Reg. #0567."

All she hadn't done was press send. Kraft erased the text; *no need to cast suspicion onto oneself in case there was an investigation. And with all the corpses here there was bound to be a thorough investigation.*

Kraft began checking the compound and snook into an adjacent room when suddenly he remembered the squealer.

Kraft turned the device on as a small shuttle approached briefly but loudly blocking out the tracker's hums.

As the noise from the engines died down Kraft heard the clear tweets from the device.

The signal showed movement next door.

Kraft hurried into the lounge again and stopped short.

Lonnie's body was missing!

Kraft concentrated on the tracker; the signal was moving away, rapidly.

He instantly set forth on his pursuit; the signal was almost at the shuttle pad now.

Kraft ran as fast as his legs could manage and arrived at the pad just in time to see Lonnie fling an unsuspecting guard into a concrete wall wielding such force that he could hear bones splinter.

"Halt!" Kraft bellowed, and taking aim at her.

Lonnie stopped and looked in his direction with completely emotionless eyes.

She then turned around and was inside the shuttle before Kraft had an opportunity to fire even a warning shot. *It had to be the Vexan!*

As Kraft ran toward the shuttle, the door slid shut and the engines started revving up. Kraft threw himself in behind a pad blast shield and waited. The shuttle hovered for a few seconds before it raced upward toward the long hauler.

Kraft knew there was no time to waste. He doubled back and threw himself upon a hover bike. He jerked a panel open and placed an ingenious device on top of what probably was a CPU on a motherboard.

The engines roared and sent Kraft and the bike forward with missile-like speed.

The engines seemed alive and moaned as Kraft pushed them for every ounce that they had to give, and his gamble paid off. The company headquarters loomed closer every second. With one hand on the handlebar and a blazing weapon in the other, Kraft surged forward toward the fence cordoning off the company landing pad and hangar and in the blink of an eye he swept past a security patrol.

Kraft had an idea that the executive company shuttle would still be there. If it wasn't he would be in big trouble but for now he had the play.

Shots were fired and engines started up. From the edge of his vision Kraft noticed guards running toward transport sledges. He had to move fast now. He disappeared in between the buildings and came to a halt dangerously close to the main hangar, Kraft then ripped off a sensor, hastily tapped a few commands, and sent the bike off in a circular path, taking it out a few hundred meters before doubling back toward the hangar door at full thrust.

Kraft covered and the bike splintered as it crashed into the door. The collision left an opening big enough for Kraft to get through.

He ran toward the hole as a series of projectiles plowed their way into the ground in the very spot he had occupied just seconds before.

Kraft edged through the hole as another volley of shots hammered into the wall. He was in luck; the shuttle was there. They had even left the loading bay open. Kraft threw a handful of motion bombs toward the hole and another handful at the doorway. *That'll slow them down and they sure as hell won't try to blast my arse while their prize ship is still in here.* He headed up the ramp with confident steps.

Seconds later he sat down at the controls. *Amazing, no safeties! Hah, they most probably expected their ship to be hangared so safely that no one would even have the opportunity to get within a kilometer of it, morons!*

The landing bay closed as the motion bombs were set off by drones swarming toward the hole. *Well, so much for a countdown,* Kraft thought. He pressed down on the afterburner, sending the ship crashing through the gate hoping it wouldn't sustain too much damage.

No sirens wailed and Kraft was filled with the familiar rush he always experienced during take-off.

The landscape beneath suddenly seemed so clear and everything at that very moment became understandable to him. At that instant every train of thought he had seemed to meld into one singular thought, making ultimate sense of the universe surrounding him.

*No wonder the fly boys get hooked.* If it wasn't for the constant pilot ID checks at every major spaceport Kraft would have been there long ago.

He hurriedly sent a planetary quarantine message to the long hauler but first after he had flicked several of the switches of the on board jamming equipment on.

*Thank god for paranoia;* with any luck the other shuttle hadn't latched onto the hauler yet and that would mean the passengers, if any, were still alive and would not be let onto the ship itself but would be caught within the transport until special medical personnel had investigated everything and declared the cargo, passengers, and shuttle contaminant free.

And if what Kraft thought was on board was correct, there was no way in hell that such a declaration would ever be given. In turn he would be trapped as well, but Thorgeir could probably figure something out. *He always did.*

Kraft sent the details to Thorgeir on board the Hermes.

Within seconds he got a reply:

"Working on it - T."

A small dot appeared on the front view, a dot that grew until it filled the entire screen. Kraft felt the automated claws clicking into place and the shuttle was slowly towed towards the hangar. Kraft just hoped Thorgeir had come up with something brilliant, *at least the long hauler hasn't blasted me yet - that must be a good sign. Right?*

He held his breath while the final vibrations of the docking procedure died down.

...

Kraft grimaced as he sat in front of the communication console. He had been stuck inside the shuttle for two whole days now.

Somehow Thorgeir had managed to punch a hole through to him via the com system even though they were in transit, he was wake riding or something, but it meant Kraft wasn't completely blind or deaf in regard to the long hauler's destination-and it was not a pleasant one from what he understood.

"Thorgeir, tell me you have a way to get me the hell out of this tin can prison before I go completely stir crazy!" Kraft snapped, swinging back and forth on his chair.

"Honestly, I have found it hard to circumvent the quarantine regulations; they are very strict. For now I suggest you stay put and wait it out. We'll get through it together."

"Together, hah... easy for you to say! I'm the one cooped up in here without a chance to get away if there is an inspection team ready on the other side when we arrive."

"Don't worry," Thorgeir reassured him. "I've been fiddling with the piggyback system and with a little time I might just be able to bypass the security procedures and release your ship from the claws."

"Dammit! Why didn't you just say that in the first place?", Kraft inquired.

"You didn't give me a chance, Kraft... sometimes you are so impatient!"

*Was Thorgeir was enjoying this ordeal somehow?*

"I am surprised you have lasted this long." Thorgeir added.

"Hmm," Kraft mumbled. Thorgeir had a point. Kraft had to recognize that he did experience quite drastic shifts in temper, fortunately not during times of real crisis, though. When the shit hit the fan for real, he was like ice, very subzero indeed.

"What?... I didn't quite catch that!" Thorgeir said bantingly. He was quite aware that his punch line had produced the desired effect.

*One only has the fun oneself is able to conjure up. Thorgeir muttered without voicing the thought. Fun, now there was an odd concept.*

"Nothing... I'll stay put," Kraft muttered.

"Then if there is nothing else I'll be signing off," Thorgeir answered.

Kraft sighed and leaned back in the comfortable seat. "Yeah, no problem... page me if you have any more on the cargo bay piggyback system."

"Will do-over and out," Thorgeir answered and without further hesitation the connection was cut. Kraft was once again alone.

*Time to get some grub*, Kraft thought and stood up. He walked slowly to the dispenser, punched a few keys, and got two packets of freeze-dried nutrients plus a bag of liquid. "Mmmm," Kraft said sarcastically. *Emergency rations.*

...

"The field will be collapsing in a few," Thorgeir said.

"Good," Kraft answered, thinking about fastening his seat belt; reentry could sometimes be rough. He did, however, decide to go get himself an espresso. He had managed to get the dispenser up and running; caffeine was needed and caffeine superseded everything else.

"Only we might have a problem," Thorgeir said hesitantly.

Kraft looked at Thorgeir suspiciously. "Oh? What kind of problem?"

"It's the piggyback system," Thorgeir said slowly.

"What about it?" Kraft was getting anxious; he did not need problems, not now.

"Oh, no worries, you will be able to launch but so will... your pal."

"Fuck!" Kraft exclaimed bitterly. "What went wrong?"

"Well, someone must have discovered there was a 'problem' with the claws and 'fixed it,' so I had to sabotage the entire docking bay system."

Kraft tapped his chin thoughtfully. "That could present a problem, yes... but let's worry about one thing at a time."

Thorgeir smiled. Funny how some humans had a problem focusing on multiple factors at one time, though he suspected Kraft was only making time killing conversation.

As it turned out, Thorgeir's worries were right on the mark. As soon as the field around the long hauler dissipated the shuttle with the Vexan launched. Hails went out almost instantly.

Then a voice came through on the com; apparently the crew had noticed Kraft also had his engines powered up.

"Shuttle XC-56A, you have not been cleared to launch. Power down and remain in bay quarantine, repeat power down immediately."

Kraft sprang into action; he had been prepping his drives and engines for planetary entry and it seemed that the time had come. He dashed into the seat and hammered down on the keyboard.

"Thorgeir!" he yelled into the com system.

"I know," came the short reply.

A message blared through on all channels: "Long hauler to shuttle XC-56A and Transport T-846, turn back or be fired upon!"

Just then Kraft's borrowed vehicle blasted through the docking port with no regard for any safety regulations.

The long hauler crew watched the bay monitors with disbelief.

"Long hauler to executive shuttle, do you read, you have not been authorized to launch. Turn back immediately or be fired upon."

Thorgeir's voice cut in on the secure channel. "They have no weapons for the next couple of minutes, nor any tracking equipment able to follow you, be quick!"

Kraft abruptly delivered his message to the long hauler. "Delay that, shuttle XC-56A here. We are in pursuit of rogue transport and will retrieve ourselves."

"Long hauler to executive shuttle, no can do. Quarantine regulations prohibit unauthorized launches before medical clearing team has been over crew and shuttle. We will fire."

Kraft turned the communication system to an encoded channel.

"Thorgeir, you heard what they said... sure hope you done a good job."

"No worries, Walter, they'll be digging like crazy without a trace. You will be safe if you can get your arse out of there. I am tracking the transport. I'll stream the data to you continuously."

Kraft stared at the view. The planet seemed to grow relentlessly until his view port was filled by the rugged landscape. *What a desolate place*, Kraft thought as he peered at the screen. The transport shuttle carrying the Vexan was only a few clicks ahead and he was gaining on it every second.

"Kraft!" Thorgeir's voice boomed through on the com. "He is breaking up."

Kraft glanced at the data readout. The shuttle ahead veered violently, one moment ascending and the next descending. Kraft tried to get closer and get a visual. Smoke was trailing from the craft and it looked as if the pilot was having great trouble keeping the craft airborne.

Suddenly a large fragment tore loose from the shuttle, sending it crashing downward in a death-defying spiral.

"He is going down, Thorgeir!" Kraft shouted.

"I'm aware of that," Thorgeir replied.

The data had indicated problems of a severe magnitude, he was quite surprised that the shuttle pilot had been able to keep it in the air for that long. A feat like that took a lot of experience or incredible luck and Thorgeir was not the kind to believe in the latter.

The shuttle plunged into the ground with tremendous speed, plowing a furrow several meters deep and more than a hundred meters long.

Kraft circled above the crash site for a moment before finding a reasonable spot to set the executive shuttle down.

Once down, he was quickly outside and headed toward the wreckage. When he got there he immediately noticed signs that the inhabitant of the craft had vacated the scene.

A dredging track indicated that a severely damaged body had edged away from the shattered shuttle, the trail was heading toward what seemed to be a settlement in the distance.

Kraft frowned. *A damaged body... but no blood, no liquid that could indicate a mortal wound?* Then again from what Kraft had learned about the Vexans, they did not necessarily contain unbound bodily fluids.

Kraft scooped up a handful of sand and let it slide between his fingers.

The wind played with the grains as they fell to the surface. Kraft closed his eyes and moved his hand up to his face as if to smell the sand.

He lightly touched his nose with thumb and index finger, then opened his eyes and glanced from side to side.

This was not going to be an easy task. If a single Vexan was tough enough to slaughter a team of specialists... and now this...

The memory of Lonnie lying motionless before him filled him with intense grief, a feeling that slowly passed into intense bitterness and determination.

If anyone could get that bastard, it was Kraft!

Kraft scooped another handful from the ground; there was something oddly familiar about this whole experience.

He shuddered with recognition as he realized that this was the very same date ten years ago that he and two companions had been tracking a wounded soldier.

Ten years since his revolt against the Planetary Expedition Force. Ten years since he had tracked through a barren landscape looking for a killer.

A search that had led him to a small settlement. A search that had ended in bloody horror and misery. Kraft made a tremendous effort to block out the images that filled his mind.

He squinted and peered into the horizon... *Could it be a mirage?*

Somehow he hoped it was, but there was nothing to do but follow the trail. Kraft started walking and peered at his newly acquired scanner.

There was nothing but a light trace of particles, no indication of direction; all he could do was rely on his own eyes and common sense.

His wrist console tweaked, and Kraft stopped. Thorgeir had apparently managed to download a detailed topographical map to him. *So his eyes hadn't betrayed him after all-it really was a settlement... a city, even, one of the major settlements on the planet.*

*Crap...* if the Vexan got there! People, unending interference from all kinds of equipment. The planet wasn't company controlled, so there were no clearly defined rules for chatter and static. He had to nail him before...

Him? Kraft smiled as he realized he had dubbed the entity a male. Typical human, so bound by the image that all cultures were alike.

How often had he not come across populations other than Terrans where their females displayed ferocity to the extent of overshadowing even the most aggressive males of Terran society?

He nodded to himself-definitely a mistake; maternal instincts and learned behavior were far too complex to shove into a nice framework for him to overlook, experience reality. Don't visualize, he told himself, sense with your entire being.

And for what it was worth these things might not even have any kind of gender.

He wiped a droplet of perspiration from his forehead. He ought to wear the face mask in order to preserve precious body fluids but he hated the face piece-it made him gag. The suffocating feeling was almost unbearable.

Kraft decided to drop the mask, he stuffed the thing back into it's protective pocket.

To hell with the perspiration; he would just have to be careful and if things got too rough he always had Thorgeir. An airdrop of supplies would be a breeze. Kraft had no doubt in his mind that the Hermes was equipped with more than a couple of survival pods ready for use. The luxurious yacht had atmospheric capabilities and though pods were not mandatory yet the vanity and excessive desire of the Hermes' owner to show everyone how wealthy and good he was assured Kraft that pods wouldn't be a problem at all. *Yeah, to hell with the face piece.*

Kraft started walking again, keeping a brisk pace while alternating between checking the ground for traces and checking the particle scanner for changes in density. Still the track led on a direct path towards the city.

Kraft pushed a button on his wrist terminal. "Thorgeir, have you found a way to increase the scanner's sensitivity?"

There was a pause before Thorgeir answered.

"I'm unsure that you can do anything down there. The fixit kit you have, nice as it is, isn't geared for such fine-scale operations."

"Dammit, I was hoping to be able to increase the scanner's resolution; he is heading straight toward a settlement."

Thorgeir wondered how he could boost Kraft's mood. "Yes, unfortunate development indeed, but let me assure you I am giving the matter thorough attention. I might just stumble onto something," he uttered with conviction.

"Roger that-Kraft out!"

"A OK-talk to ya soon, Thorgeir over and out." The com-link cut instantly and Kraft was alone again, yet he felt more confident now. Hearing Thorgeir's statement made him feel more at ease. There was no doubt in Kraft's mind that almost all of Thorgeir's thought processes were focused on solving the very problem of enhancing the scanner's capabilities. Sometimes Kraft wished he had Thorgeir's gift for concentration.

And what concentration. Once Thorgeir set his mind to treating a problem he was relentless until a solution cropped up-the only time Thorgeir would stop was if a problem was truly unsolvable or if he needed more information to make logical, informed decisions. Truly an amazing ability... then again Thorgeir was one of a kind.

Dusk arrived, announcing the end of the day. Kraft opened a small container he withdrew from his utility belt and swallowed an upper.

The effect began spreading throughout his body almost instantly like a warm summer breeze, until every trace of fatigue was erased from his system. Even so, Kraft knew he was on borrowed time; the effects of the drug he had ingested were already weakening. He had been doing the uppers since he got trapped on board the shuttle but he had yet to reach the red zone. Of course he could drop the boosters but quitting the uppers would send his body into quite violent withdrawal, followed by an insatiable desire to sleep, and he had no time for luxuries like sleep at the moment. However he wouldn't get into the red for the next three days or so and he imagined the affair would be settled by then.

Kraft flicked down a visor. The scanner projected a real-time readout onto the visor HUD. Almost at that moment particle density seemed to increase. Kraft slowed down and more or less came to a standstill.

*Yes, definitely increasing, yet no clear directional indication... strange!*

He stopped dead in his tracks; the scanner tweaked violently. There was no doubt. The Vexan was approaching-fast!

Kraft switched the chameleon device on. His outline flickered for a couple of seconds and then he became one with the pale lit landscape.

Kraft looked at the display-density up five percent, then another ten.

The chameleon device began behaving. *Electromagnetic interference?* Kraft was baffled. A strange hissing caught his attention and he noticed the sandy surface in a semicircle before him seemed to vibrate ever so slightly.

*Could the Vexan be in possession of chameleon technology as well as having transmorphic abilities? If so, then he was a very dangerous adversary indeed!*

Kraft tossed a few incendiary grenades in a pattern following the semicircle in front of him; then he flicked the safety cap off the hand held detonator. The sand seemed still for a moment and the particle density readings came to a standstill as well.

Kraft waited. His heart beat calmly as if he were in deep sleep, but that was due to both thorough training and drugs, - under normal circumstances it would have been racing like a rocket ship. The sand started trembling again and the semicircle widened and stretched as if it tried to encompass Kraft. Then he realized... *fuck the Vexan, they could imitate more than just living beings.*

He triggered the grenades. As the first one went off, a sound unlike any Kraft had ever heard roared into the desolate landscape then the sand phenomena suddenly whisked away with incredible speed.

Kraft felt shaky. *This had been too close... way too close. Had the Vexan just been playing with him before? Simply studying his adversary before going in for the kill?*

Kraft took a deep breath and went into pursuit, *and if that was the case he'd better watch out or he'd wind up dead faster than Thorgeir could say apple pie.*

He flicked the communication unit on and told Thorgeir the story while following the particle trail closely. Thorgeir was impressed yet unable to be of further assistance as his offer to come planet side was flatly refused by Kraft.

There was no need to expose Thorgeir's or Hermes' presence to anyone Kraft had insisted; this was a task Kraft had to complete. He popped another upper.

The effect was still noticeable but definitely on the decrease and to make matters worse it appeared the Vexan was moving rapidly towards the city. Kraft increased his pace, particle density seemed to grow with almost every step Kraft took.

Suddenly the tracks changed; they now appeared like normal markings a human would leave. It could only mean one thing. The Vexan had regained a coherent shape. It was as if the Vexan had experienced a miraculous recovery of sorts and was speed-walking towards the safe haven of chaos the city would undoubtedly provide.

*He will not get away*, Kraft swore intensely and increased his pace to a steady run.

...

His heart throbbed wildly. He had been running for more than two hours by now and he could feel his legs ache even through the blockers and uppers he had ingested during the pursuit.

Kraft ignored every warning signal his body sent him. According to the particle readout he was definitely closing in on the escaping Vexan.

There would be no mercy!

Suddenly the tracks altered direction, moving away from the city on a course diagonal to the settlement. The scanner tweaked violently reacting to a drastic increase in particle density. Kraft stopped and began swinging the scanner from side to side in order to prevent another attempted strike from the Vexan, but the particle density seemed to stabilize the instant he stopped.

*Strange*, Kraft thought taking a few paces forward. The levels rose yet again however there was no movement. *Very strange indeed!*

"Thorgeir... do you read me?" Kraft tried.

"Barely," Thorgeir replied. Kraft had to concentrate to hear anything through the static.

"Thorgeir, I am reading very high trace levels. Do you register any craft nearby... or... I dunno... this is a bit too weird."

"I have no such reading-but hang on!" There was a pause not more than a few seconds and then the wrist terminal started receiving a transcript of a company survey:

- All systems nominal
- Grid coordinates °38´N, 12°40´E: Time Lapsed T-23 hrs
- Bio Scan Green - No foreign organisms detected
- Deposit located
- Ore estimate - rich level 3+
- Refuel needed in T-59 min
- EOT

"And that is approximately where you are standing. There is a cave complex about 200 meters ahead of you. They did a survey a couple of days ago, and since there seems to be a link between the Vexans and the mineral deposits I cross-referenced the two. There are company drones working on their own here. As far as I can see they haven't reported any findings back to the company. There is no ship in orbit so all information is stored aboard the surveillance system in orbit here. I shall try to locate and prevent any further company involvement in this affair," Thorgeir added as the transmission came to an end.

"Roger that, Thorgeir, I'll investigate the matter further, he must have entered the subterranean complex" Kraft replied.

"Say again, your transmission is losing coherence." Thorgeir queried.

"I said I'll investigate further," Kraft repeated.

"Roger that. Be careful, friend," Thorgeir answered.

"You got it, Thorgeir!" Kraft flicked his communicator off; it would be of no use underground anyway.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, he could always hope that the Vexan was distracted by the ore deposit, or at least unable to mount an effective attack in the caves... Kraft shuddered. He hated the idea of entering a cramped space like this, especially one with the prospect of a lethal enemy waiting behind the next corner, but nevertheless, if he wanted to end the affair he would have to enter. He straightened his back and headed for the entrance.

...

The air was thick and stale; Kraft had moved far into the complex by now, and yet there was no change in particle density, although that could be because the Vexan somehow blended in now that concentrations had reached so high levels.

Kraft paid good attention to each and every detail of the grim and rugged walls. The only uplifting thing he could see about the scenario was the complete absence of water running down the walls-that meant there was no movement there, at least.

No "natural" movement anyway.

The light provided by his vision enhancing equipment was not particularly good and Kraft strained his eyes trying to make out the details in the darkness.

*Stay alert. Kraft told himself. That fucker is not going to get another chance like the one back there in the wastelands.*

A rock fell from a ledge some distance ahead, freezing Kraft in place.

There was a familiar hiss and Kraft pumped a volley of incendiary grenades towards the sound. An oddly shaped parachute patterned as a replica of the rock walls came toward him but stopped as the grenades impacted on contact.

The shock wave sent Kraft crashing into the cave wall, which crumbled as he fell into it.

The last thing Kraft noticed as he twirled backwards into the darkness was a staggering figure lashing out at him, the creature stumbled as it tried following his fall into the open gap.

A notion struck Kraft, *he is as blind as me!* Then Kraft realized his predicament and an instant after he impacted hard on the cave floor, as did the humanoid figure. Kraft felt something wet underneath his hand... *blood?* But the feeling was different, not sticky like he had expected, nor did he smell anything, though he could be pretty smashed up for all he knew.

The chameleon device flickered and for a while Kraft fought to move his body before the terrifying truth hit him... *paralyzed!*

Kraft glanced sideways; it seemed like something was very close by. Suddenly his left hand twitched as something seemed to brush by.

The hand suddenly got very warm and a sting raced through it all the way to his chest... *Heart attack on top of everything?*

His consciousness started drifting in and out of existence.

...

The darkness was all encompassing and silence surrounded him like an impenetrable wall, there was a strange warmth to the sensation though and a complete absence of fear soothed his mind. All Kraft could sense was a constant throbbing throughout his entire body. *Had to be his heartbeat, so he wasn't dead after all!*

Once in a while the rhythm changed almost like the seasons of a planetary year, and once in a while a white blur seemed to invade the darkness surrounding him, only to be forced back by the strangest searing sensation Kraft had ever experienced. Images came and went before his inner eye and Kraft finally let go.

Time flowed by as he lay in his moist cradle and he felt as if he could stay within this newfound sphere of safety forever; then suddenly there was a flash and an unbelievable surge through every fiber of his body.

The pain was relieved almost as suddenly as it had appeared when seemingly millions of voices softly started speaking to him from a place beyond the realms of reality.

- Are you okay?

Kraft's brow furrowed. "Huh?" he heard himself mumble in astonishment.

-We had to choose you!

"What?"

-We apologize for the inconvenience it may cause.

Kraft tumbled around and rubbed his eyes in an attempt to look for the source of the voices cutting through his mind like a million rotating razorblades.

"What? Who the hell...?" he muttered trying to get up from the cave floor. His attempt was unsuccessful and he fell back down onto his knees.

-We tried to enter the other, he was less damaged, the voices said truthfully.

There was a pause as if those who spoke were speculating about something.

-He rejected us, mostly... very unusual.

"Who is this?" Kraft wailed.

-Us, the voices proclaimed.

Before they could specify anything further Kraft fell back into the soft darkness and the waiting game began once again

Kraft drifted from a state of semi-awareness to extremely deep sleep. He remained so for a period of time that on one hand seemed like the blink of an eye to him but then on the other hand felt like eternal night.

Finally Kraft once again tried opening his eyes, his eyelids slid slowly apart revealing an eerie sight.

The cave was very dark but there was a vague luminescence from fungi that seemed to inhabit the cave walls. The glow reminded Kraft of emergency lighting and he started staggering toward what he instinctively knew would be a pathway to the surface.

Then suddenly something stopped him and willed him to turn back.

He futilely fought this illogical instinct, turned around, and wandered deeper into the cavern.

He had walked for nearly half an hour when a blinding light came on.

Kraft instinctively covered his eyes.

The light was followed by a hum and a strange buzzing sensation that surged upward from Kraft's toes to his head. Then the lights dimmed to a bearable strength revealing a piece of machinery unlike any he had ever seen before.

The huge cave, it seemed, was giving shelter to a structure that was definitely of unnatural origin, and though Kraft had never laid eyes upon the hulk before, everything told him he was looking at a some sort of spaceship far more advanced than any human engineer could even dream about putting on a drawing board.

*How could he know what it was? There was something wrong!* Kraft was trying desperately to figure out what was going on when the voices came back.

At first they were vague, as if they had a hard time getting through to his conscious self, but once manifested they seemed like the thunderous horn blowers of the Apocalypse.

-He came here! the voices proclaimed.

"Who?" Kraft asked, amazed at hearing himself raising such a question.

*Why was he talking to himself?*

-Our last one, the voices sang. He wanted to rest... we let him.

Kraft held his hands tightly to his head. "You are not real! I'm hallucinating because of the fall... you are not real."

-We are real, make no mistake. It is an unfortunate blend, we agree.

"Leave me alone!" Kraft shouted and ran toward the exit.

He fought through the darkness, falling and stumbling for what seemed like hours, until he finally reached the surface. The night was starlit and not a wind seemed to move and the voices were still.

Kraft tried his communication unit. "Thorgeir, I need an immediate pickup now."

There was a long silence as the system flickered on.  
"Link established," a voice announced in his ear.

A slightly distorted picture flashed onto the display.

"Kraft?" Thorgeir's face remained unaffected but a multitude of streams triggered in his mind, alive after all this time?

"What the hell have you been up to?" he muttered.

"Just pick me up now," Kraft demanded and fell to his knees from exhaustion.

Thorgeir did not hear the silent sobbing that started as Kraft cut the connection.

...

Years later...

"You're crazy, Walter," Thorgeir argued, Kraft couldn't help but agree.

"Just land me safely and get the hell out of here." Kraft grinned.

He had seen so much in the time that had passed that most humans would be completely overwhelmed by it, yet Kraft knew he was much more than that in so many ways now.

"I'm telling you, they're not a threat-you're biding your time with him," Thorgeir insisted.

"You shouldn't complain. Thanks to my up link back when, you've done pretty good, haven't you? And I have to find him, not only for my own sake, but for all our sakes not just my client. This is not just a personal or professional matter. Imagine what damage he could do. Had the priesthood not taken over and banned all transports to and from the surface he would probably have been out there and quite impossible to find."

Kraft pointed at the myriad of little lights twinkling on the other side of the view port.

"We have a chance to set things straight. Can you imagine what plots he might instigate against humanity should he find out what has happened to his brethren, I mean..." Kraft stopped, perhaps Thorgeir saw the Vexan as he saw himself, annoyed at humanity but not a threat.

Thorgeir scowled. Kraft was right. The transmission had made him the richest artificial ever.

Not that there were any other; he could have been penniless and still been the richest.

*The others! They had been hunted down and terminated, the lot of them. Damn mistake to declare a mother world; independence from Terra was not something the creators liked. Xenophobe bastards those humans,* Thorgeir thought.

Though he did know a few men who were unlike the rest, and Kraft was one of them; yet Kraft was determined to hunt the Vexan. Sometimes humans were so illogical.

As the shuttle set down, a sense of unease stole over Kraft.

He hadn't been in the town for a very long period the last time he had been on the surface, yet everything looked almost exactly the same.

*Except!*

Kraft couldn't help wonder about the vast underground citadel that had been constructed on behalf of the clergy by their fanatic disciples working themselves to death in a drug-induced Nirvanic frenzy.

The memory of another lost love filled him with emotion. *Love... was that what he had felt?*

They had been so overwhelming and she had been such an ocean of calmness, so eager to take him in like a lost child. Kraft tried to rid his memory of the imagery, to focus on the task at hand.

*The clergy... ought to be eliminated, the lot of them. Kraft*shuddered at the violent emotion streaking through his mind.

...

The streets were still as dusty as he remembered and while searing heat from the blazing sun left everything in sight blurred by a shimmering haze, Walter Kraft strode onward toward his destination the place between which and the underground complex to where they had been able to locate an interesting particle flow.

Kraft wondered about the authorities running the show. The clergy had their hands on the system and Terran authorities tolerated it as long as they had access to the ore.

*Cheap bastards, those politicians. So what if a few million suffered, as long as they got what they needed.*

Thorgeir had figured that since the landing and blastoff ban had been enacted before Kraft had his first meeting, and since the ore was collected and transported by machines capable of repelling any known organisms, there could be no way that the Vexan had escaped.

Especially since any object larger than the size of a football would have been blasted out of existence by the Planetary Defense Grid.

Hell, the only reason the Hermes had gotten away when Thorgeir had picked him up and the grid had gone on line was Thorgeir's unmatched computing skills and immense overview of the whole situation. Not to mention the AI's quite clever hack of the defense control system.

Kraft smiled. *That old bandit!*

The door hissed and closed swiftly behind the bounty hunter just moments after he entered the saloon.

His gaze swept across the room, after which he walked toward the bar with slow, deliberate steps.

The small scanner in his pocket vibrated harder now, but there was no loud beep or an embarrassing voice message to tip the Vexan off, for the bounty hunter had thoughtfully switched the device to whisper mode.

He had picked up on the Vexan inside the old spaceport departure lounge now being retrofitted for updated space travel accommodations.

*Thank God the opening for off-world relations had been delayed, or the Vexan would undoubtedly be gone.*

Kraft scanned the room. The saloon seemed like a perfect place for the Vexan, as it would be easy for the entity to assume the identity of any drifter present in the bar.

*Drifters-they even allowed those now; the clergy was definitely slipping.*

Kraft shuddered...

-We feel a presence, the chorus sang within him.

"Not now," Kraft muttered through his teeth, desperately trying to concentrate. He wanted to find the Vexan badly and he knew that he was hot on its trail.

The last couple of weeks had been rough, for the entity could assume almost any form and behavior as long as the size was reasonably like its own.

And there had been victims, a series of mysterious disappearances had hit town, and that was what triggered the discovery of the particle trail between the saloon and the cave. The Vexan apparently needed ore as part of the process hence the frequent trips to and from town.

*The reason for all those shape shifts? One could only guess.*

Kraft had a suspicion of some intricate plot to get off the planet, but the Vexan as Thorgeir put it, was probably just scouting.

*Vexans.* Kraft's face twisted with revulsion. Once a Vexan had assumed a shape it was nearly indistinguishable from the original upon which they chose to mold themselves. The only thing giving them away was a secret that the Vexans had guarded with fierce brutality, a telltale sign that every bounty hunter in the galaxy would give their right arm to know. *Not that there were any bounty hunters other than himself who knew about the Vexans, and in hindsight, an arm wasn't that big an offer these days.*

Kraft glanced at the display on his left forearm. *His forearm?*

The ore particle readings were up another two percent. He was close, yet there was no sign of the Vexan.

He knew the entity had probably used up a lot of its precious ore to assume the shape and behavior of a black gentleman and had been strutting about with reflecting sunglasses and an attitude when Kraft had attempted to nullify him the first time.

Kraft looked around the bar once again and checked the readings. The whole room had been saturated with particles.

*That bugger is smart, damn smart. Not a goddamn trace to go by, or rather all too many traces. Hmm...*

Kraft drummed his fingers on the counter. The entity had disappeared from sight, hopefully it would do so very soon now as well-for good!

"Let's have a whiskey," Kraft said as he removed the unlit cigar from his mouth.

-Must you? the chorus sang.

"Mmm," Kraft whispered. The voices silenced.

He snatched the glass and in one straight go he downed the caramelized spirit, Kraft exclaimed a rather loud "Aaaah", and then slammed the glass onto the counter so hard that the nearest guests jumped from their stools.

The Vexan, however, didn't make a move it seemed; the particle readings were still equally strong throughout the room.

"Gimme another one," Kraft said coarsely and tossed a couple of choins on the table.

"Ta," the chubby barkeep answered and poured Kraft another shot. Next his short fingers picked up both the small black squares and he inspected them closely.

The barkeep had been quite young when the December crash occurred, but he remembered the world of credit, inflation, and counterfeiting all too well. He pocketed the choins and took a good look at Kraft.

"Sure better than those ol' credit cards, eh?" the barkeep remarked.

Kraft nodded. The choins were an ingenious meld between old-fashioned coins and nanochip technology that made money nearly impossible to counterfeit and kept the circulation of funds at a maximum, but Kraft wasn't in the mood to discuss economics, fascinating subject though it was.

"Do you like our choins?" the bartender asked in an attempt to open up a dialog.

Kraft knew all too well where the conversation would go from here. The bartender would first tell him about how smart the designers had been and how incredibly hard these choins were to fiddle with.

This was a fact he would agree to and the gentleman behind the counter would then proceed to tell how the date of expiration kept the money trickling around within the monetary system and the bartender would certainly be most proud when he explained how this ingenious system prevented people and corporations from hoarding cash as they had done in the old days, thus depleting the resources from which ordinary men like himself ought to be able to make a living, et cetera,

After that the bartender would undoubtedly proceed to talk about the levy, a tax that had replaced all others by imposing a levy on all transactions between accounts be they virtual or physical thus eliminating all tax speculation as there was no doubt about when, by whom or how tax was paid. There was only the levy and it was the same for all, a minuscule amount, a few thousandths of the sum transferred.

Once the levy was introduced most governments did not bother to invent new ways to tax anything.

All that was needed was simply to turn the lever up or down.

Corporations saved bundles by not having to come up with creative ways of cutting taxes, and the private sector was freed from the burdens of doing tax returns, something which mostly had been done automatically but a concept very few understood let alone mastered, but Kraft decided to stop the conversation in one or two sentences before it got further along.

"Yes, but I don't like to discuss my work when I am off duty," Kraft said.

The bartender looked a bit surprised. "Work?"

"Yes, at the treasury," Kraft answered nonchalantly, looking into his empty glass.

"Oh... I see," the bartender answered. Employees of the treasury were bound by strict vows of silence so there was no point in pursuing that avenue further. And if he pissed the man off there just might be an audit or something, not that he had anything to hide but those treasury types were usually very good at finding something they could point their fingers at.

"You on vacation?" the bartender inquired.

"Well, sort of... I'm looking for a friend!" Kraft answered, looking very mysterious.

"Aaah," the bartender uttered, nodding as though he knew exactly what Kraft meant by that. But before he was able to come up with anything further, Kraft flicked on the holo-emitter in his wrist console.

An image whisked into existence and the bartender stared at the projection in awe. Holo-emitters were common enough but a device as small as the one Kraft was wearing had to have cost a fortune. *Those guys at the treasury sure have some nifty gadgets*, the bartender thought as he scrutinized the fine detail of the optical phenomena.

"Have you seen this man?" Kraft asked gravely.

The bartender thought for a moment, then it dawned on him. He was facing a tracker.

"No sir," he answered slowly, troubled by the realization. "If I do I'll tell him you're looking for him. Your name was...?"

"Kraft, Walter Kraft, and no don't say a thing... you see, it is sort of a surprise."

The bartender nodded uneasily not sure what to make of the trackers smile.

Kraft threw a couple of coins on the counter. The man immediately reached for the bottle but Kraft put a hand on his arm.

"No thanks... just keep your eyes open, okay? I'll be at the motel across; you'll let me know if you see him or something unusual happens... right?"

The bartender nodded and Kraft got up from the stool. *Where the hell is that Vexan?*

As soon as the doors slid shut behind him the scanner eased off, and after a quick check around the building Kraft decided that he might as well book the room.

The Vexan seemed very aware of Kraft's efforts and was avoiding him with uncanny ease it was troublesome. Kraft shrugged off the feeling and pushed the doorbell outside the motel office.

"May I help you?" a voice crackled through the intercom.

Kraft pushed the button next to the speaker. "I'd like to book a room," he said.

"Sure... hang on a moment," the voice answered and seconds later he was buzzed inside.

"Good afternoon," the clerk said with a cheerful smile, but the smile disappeared as soon as he noticed Kraft's all-weather outfit underneath the trench coat and the bounty hunter's somewhat weather-beaten features.

"You're with one of these wilderness groups?" he asked suspiciously.

"No... Why do you ask?" Kraft was somewhat puzzled by the direct question the clerk had posed.

"The survival suit," the clerk answered.

"Oh!" Kraft said and nodded. He let his gaze sweep down the dark leather suit.

The outfit was a perfect fit. Skillfully crafted, it was a far cry from the synthetic crap that was being pushed by Friends of the Sphere or any of those other way out there groups who pushed like crazy to utilize synthetic materials.

*Why can't they get it into their heads that a rational and balanced hunt of free range animals is no threat to wildlife populations, Kraft wondered. Isn't the hunt indeed perhaps the exact opposite, for during the chase the hunters would notice details about behavior as well as do stock takings, and thus the hunter could regulate, even help nurture back species that were depleted.*

"Hah," the clerk uttered in a patronizing tone. "Those people are the worst customers I've ever had... I mean-these wilderness lovers are supposed to be interested in preserving and enjoying nature, right?"

"I suppose," Kraft mumbled as the grim picture of a factory popped into his head. The plant had belonged to Friends of the Sphere and even if there was no life to endanger Kraft could never forget that the pollution havoc that had arisen when the factory broke down would keep him away from that favorite spot of his for decades to come.

"Right... and what do they do-I'll tell you what! They abuse, they indulge in the paper towels with wastefulness I've never seen before. If people like them were managing resources, ours would be a scorched earth for sure."

Kraft couldn't help but grin. *A bunch of marauding ecologists with attitudes. It was a funny universe.*

"No worries... I'm not with them-I guarantee it," Kraft assured the clerk, whose mottled face looked about to explode with anger.

"Thank God," the clerk mumbled. Had the man who just entered been with one of those groups he might have lost it. His face returned to its natural color.

"My name is Greg, how can I help you?" he announced with an assumed grin that almost blinded Kraft.

Kraft shook his head. *Either these workers were clones or some corporation was making big money selling service robots to motel chains, though this worker at least seemed to possess bits of personality himself.*

"Listen, Greg, I'd like a room," Kraft said, fidgeting for his personal traveling documents.

"Your hand, please," the clerk said, putting a square slate resembling rock of some sort before Kraft.

"What?" Kraft asked, baffled.

"Oh, just a security measure, we need a palm print and a DNA sample," the clerk answered nervously.

"The hell you do," Kraft rebutted.

"Of course, we could do a retina scan instead," the clerk suggested.

Kraft eyed him without enthusiasm. "Does your system check for autonomous functions such as the existence of life in the subject that is scanned? I mean I don't want to wake up without an eye or a head, for that matter," he emphasized.

"But of course," the clerk said, swallowing as his stomach acids started bubbling. The pictures in his mind were far from pleasing and he knew all too well about the incidents Kraft referred to.

"Do you have a traveling file?" the clerk inquired.

Kraft tapped on his wrist console and it transmitted the relevant data to the office computer.

"Thank you, sir," the clerk said and confirmed the data on his screen.

"How long?", he asked.

Kraft thought for a moment before answering. "I'm not sure-can we handle it on a day-to-day basis?"

"It'll be a little more expensive, but if you sign up to stay for just..."

The clerk was looking to hook Kraft on signing up for a couple of days or more, which in turn would earn him a nice little bonus, but Kraft stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Not a problem," Kraft replied, tossing a coin onto the desk. "Keep the change," he added as he faced the scanner.

"Well, thank you, sir!" the clerk said, looking a little happier. *A tip was better than nothing.*

The scan was over within the fraction of a second and Kraft was shown to his room.

As per his request the room had a view overlooking the Astra Lounge, as the bar on the opposite side was called.

Kraft placed a portable scanner unit in the window, concealing it behind a hideous plastic plant he took from the night table.

He then opened the window, which led to a balcony encircling the building.

The platform was conveniently connected to the street via a fire escape that could be unfolded in the case of an emergency, a situation that never seemed far away when Kraft was involved.

The air was hot and dry and the wind whirled up dust that probably would have been better kept where it already lay.

Kraft coughed and closed the window.

He left his room and started checking the perimeter around the bar again.

The particle readings had faded drastically while he had been inside the motel but there was no fresh trail leading out from the establishment.

The Vexan was apparently delaying departure for a more convenient time, which was fine by Kraft.

After putting up a couple of perimeter spooks he went back to the motel. A good sleep would definitely not be such a bad thing, after all and the Vexan couldn't possibly be stupid enough to try another attack when the bastard knew he was being followed, especially when the next shuttle was less than two days away.

Kraft had barely laid down in his bed when the voices disturbed him.

- We like you, the voices sang.

"I know," Kraft mumbled, already on the verge of sleep.

- No, we really like you-we think you are different, the voices insisted.

"Different?" Kraft asked and puffed.

- Yes, unlike many others, the voices replied.

"Others?" Kraft asked with genuine interest.

- Those we have met before, the voices responded.

"Humans?" Kraft suggested, trying to lure further information from the chorus.

- No, other ones-everyone! they stated.

"In what way?" Kraft insisted.

- It would be wrong to say, the voices replied defensively.

Kraft was quite intrigued but had difficulty remaining awake. "Why?" he muttered.

The voices didn't answer immediately but when the answer came it was served straight up.

- Then maybe you'd change, they declared.

"Why would that be bad?" Kraft inquired.

- Then you would be different no more, the chorus murmured.

"Is that so bad?" Kraft asked dispassionately.

- Sometimes, the voices answered.

"I see," Kraft managed to mumble.

- You do? the chorus said enthusiastically.

There was a pause while Kraft thought about this. "Listen, I really need to sleep," he finally insisted knowing a conversation at this point would be futile.

- We know, we're just a little lonely.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Kraft whispered, drifting still further.

- Really? the voices asked with excited anticipation.

"Aerrrg..." Kraft mumbled, and dozed off into the darkness.

- Lonely.... the voices murmured longingly.

But Kraft was too far gone to notice and drifted off to an uneasy sleep.

...

Kraft tossed and turned as a myriad of voices screamed in alarm.

Something very bad was nearby. As the warning screams intensified Kraft slowly regained consciousness. With devastating speed, he grabbed a hand holding a sharp instrument moving towards his chest.

The dagger dug into the bed a fraction of a hair from the body that it had been intended to hit.

There was a scowl and a desperate yelp as the attacker tried to withdraw the dagger, but Kraft swiftly prevented the man from using the weapon further.

The whimpering after Kraft broke the man's hand was pathetic. Kraft blinked a couple of times, turned the lights up and got a clear picture of the violator.

The barkeep? Kraft's mouth dropped open with astonishment. But he was probably right. The equipment hadn't divulged anything unnatural.

"Please don't kill me," the bartender whimpered. "He's got my wife and kids!"

*So that's why.* Kraft nodded and ground his teeth bitterly. *Taking hostages-making others do the dirty laundry. He is getting a bit too smart now.*

"He is going to kill them... I was supposed to..." His voice cracked and he started sobbing.

"He will kill them anyway," Kraft said coldly.

The bartender stopped crying and gave Kraft a horrified look. "But he said-"

Kraft cut him short. "People say one thing and do something else... you should know that in your profession!"

"Oh my God!" the bartender whispered.

"But I'll give you a chance..." Kraft offered.

"What do you mean?" The bartender's eyes flashed wild with terror.

"He won't kill them as long as you are useful. He'll wait till you have done your deed and are together with your family, then he'll silence you all."

"He wouldn't," the bartender tried desperately.

"Compared to everything else he's done, killing you and your family would be a matter of trivial concern to him," Kraft muttered calmly as the plan finalized in his mind.

If the Vexan thought him dead, he might get careless, and that in turn might make him an easier prey.

Kraft stroked his chin, liking the thought very much. This was an opportunity that needed to be utilized to the fullest.

"He is going to wait until he is certain...and he probably won't check you for extra weapons if he sees a bloody knife."

As he uttered the words Kraft stabbed himself in the abdomen. Immediately blood started pouring from the wound.

*Excellent!*

- Very clever, the voices agreed, sounding a tad sarcastic.

The kneeling bartender stared at the knife with disbelief as Kraft tossed the weapon toward him.

He picked up the dagger with trembling hands, still without a sound passing through his lips.

"Tell him you stabbed me and that you think I am dead."

"But..." The bartender was at a loss for words.

"Then call the police. They'll find me here, and once the medical examiner has declared me dead here on the scene he can be certain that you have fulfilled your task satisfactorily. Then he'll take you out... that is, unless you do him in first." Kraft's grim smile turned into a wince. The wound was throbbing and quite painful.

"You killed yourself..." A myriad of thoughts raced through the bartender's mind, every one of them more confusing than the other.

*How could one man sacrifice himself like that so others might live?*

"Listen, go right now. Take that bastard out as soon as you are reunited with your family... Don't hesitate, just do it." Kraft pushed his pain aside and concentrated on staying focused.

"But I can't leave you like this... you'll die," the barkeeper tried desperately.

"And so will your family if you don't do exactly as I say," Kraft returned.

The bartender got to his feet. Unsure of how to thank Kraft for his incomprehensible gesture, he simply left the room.

Kraft smiled as he sat down on the bed and placed himself comfortably. If only he knew.

With closed eyes and great care Kraft began slowing down his bodily functions until he came to a point where his heart simply stopped.

"Wake me in an hour," Kraft whispered as everything in the room around him seemingly began hurling inwards toward the center of his very being.

...

Thump...

Sweet gray silence and then a hum like angels singing...

Another thump and then a soft darkness followed by unnatural silence; after a few moments a sound like shattering ice crystals hit his brain.

Kraft woke from his slumber. Sensation started returning to his hands, which were definitely lying on a cold surface. Kraft shuddered and opened his eyes. He edged the linen off his face, barely moving his fingers.

With his back turned to him a lab worker was preparing tools for an autopsy.

Kraft blinked. A cup of steaming coffee stood on the table next to the equipment tray.

Coffee... Kraft longed to take the cup and toss down the contents in one greedy gulp, but that would alert the worker to him being less than dead, news that in turn without doubt would reach the Vexan.

Somehow he would have to escape the morgue without being seen.

He looked around and noticed the metallic box on the table. The slip simply stated: "Male. Age unknown, presumed cause of death stabbing, case under investigation."

Kraft let his gaze slide downward and to his great surprise he realized he was naked. *That fast?* He wasn't used to M.E.'s moving with such haste. A glance at the wall revealed almost a full day had passed.

"I told you to wake me after an hour." Kraft scowled, not realizing what he had triggered until it was too late.

The lab worker turned around with his coffee cup in his hand and stared at Kraft, who was getting up into a sitting position.

The cup slid from his hand and smashed onto the floor, sending cascades of liquid out in all directions. The smell hit Kraft's nostrils hard and he took a deep breath, savoring the aroma.

"Now that's waste of good coffee!" Kraft said, gesturing mildly toward the shocked lab worker.

That comment was too much for the young apprentice, he fell to the floor in an unconscious haze.

*Poor sod, Kraft thought. This will be a story he'll tell his grandchildren unless the event has traumatized him severely enough to leave him in a state of permanent psychosis.*

"Ah well, what can you do," Kraft muttered to himself as he swung his legs over the edge and stepped onto the floor, careful not to cut his feet on the broken shards of the coffee cup.

He staggered over to the box and opened it.

*Thank God*, his clothes were there, and the nano auto repair system had sealed the hole the blade had caused as he had thrust it in. *Nice!*

Kraft quickly dressed and opened another containment unit. The unit was empty. He opened a second one: female.

*Third time charm?* Kraft wondered as he opened yet another containment unit.

The man was old and withered and looked nothing like Kraft but chances were that the lab worker hadn't peered under the linen yet.

Also, this man was fully dressed, a sign he hadn't been through processing yet.

Kraft hurriedly placed the body on the cold metallic slate and undressed him. He then quickly covered the body with the linen and carefully closed the open containment units.

He looked around. *Ah yes, the clothes.* He gathered the old man's garments and laid them nicely into the metal box on the table.

*Anything else?*

*Hopefully not*, he thought as the lab worker started moaning. Kraft triggered the chameleon device and faded into obscurity just before the lab worker managed to open his eyes.

There was a moment where it seemed like everything stood still. Then the young man got to his feet. He gazed at the linen which lay perfectly placed over the body. *Had he been imagining, dreaming... true, the week had been long and hard, but...?*

The young man pricked the body with a finger. "Sir!"

The body did not respond and the young man shook his head. "Gotta get some stims."

Kraft smiled and was almost tempted to offer the young man a pack, but that would definitely trigger a major trauma.

Instead he carefully slipped out as the lab worker fetched a mopping machine.

...

Kraft was waiting at the coffee shop the Vexan was nowhere; he remembered having picked the spot at random the first time they had met. Eyla...

A voice tore him away from the sweet memory. "That's my favorite spot," the young lady said.

Her voice caught Kraft completely off guard as he stared at the intruder with a baffled expression. *Deja Vu!*

The sunshine hazed his view but he could swear...

*He was waiting at the coffee shop, having chosen the spot at random. The sniffer seemed to be homing in on something and he had a hunch the Vexan was near, except after getting here the trail seemed to become blurred.*

*Seemingly someone was deliberately jamming the device-did the Vexan know? How could he unless... no, the company guys couldn't-the thought had widespread ramifications.*

*If the company had struck some sort of deal with the unknowing Vexan perfecting the double-cross they had already performed to an extent where he was the bait... Were there company people here waiting for him, was he being manipulated by unknown forces...?*

Kraft was once again torn from his visit to the past by the voice that had so reminded him of the most delightful woman he had ever met.

"Are you okay?" the young woman asked.

Kraft didn't answer but kept staring at the woman half-blinded by the blazing sun.

*That's my favorite spot... The exact words! No doubt about it.*

*Once she had spoken them he had been completely hooked and all his worries about the Vexan had been forgotten for a sweet little moment.*

"Eyla?" Kraft managed to stutter and turned his head.

"Jesus, I thought you were dead!" He blinked as if to make sure he wasn't experiencing an optical illusion.

"Sorry?" The young woman now seemed as baffled as Kraft she moved out of the direct sunlight, "I'm not Eyla... that's my mother's name."

She eyed him for a moment, thoughts racing through her head. Then she stuttered "Oh my God...are you? No way!"

She blinked as if the man before her would disappear like her childhood dreams. "Kraft?"

"Yeah...", Kraft nodded, staring at the young woman.

*Eyla's daughter. But she had no children, and-lies, he had been fed lies. She hadn't died after all. That goddamn Clergy!*

"Please have a seat." Kraft gestured and got up from his chair.

The Vexan wasn't going to move for the next couple of days, not until the off-world link was established once the Clergy had concluded their dealings, and this situation definitely had to be examined further.

He signaled Thorgeir via the neuro link and asked him to take over the surveillance efforts due to unforeseen circumstances.

Thorgeir quickly replied with his expected short but all saying-OK.

...

They had talked for hours and as the sun started setting Tanya, Eyla's daughter, suggested that Kraft accompany her to their family home.

Kraft agreed, though he felt a little uncomfortable visiting Eyla's home now so many years after she had actually passed away.

"Strange, isn't it... my mother never stopped talking about you till the day she died. You must have meant a lot to her," Tanya said, looking at Kraft.

"As did she to me," Kraft answered. The loss felt more painful now than it had in years.

"Who is your father?" Kraft inquired. He was unsure of Tanya's age but something in him pushed the question out into the open.

"I thought you'd never ask," Tanya replied with a smile. "Who do you think, you silly man?"

The answer hit him like a stellar explosion. "My God... I had no idea."

"Of course you didn't," Tanya said lightly.

"And I am not going to call you Daddy all of a sudden, so don't worry... someone else earned that right... But you are my origin and an origin I am proud of, mind you."

Kraft, not knowing what to say, walked on in silence.

"Don't blame yourself, there is nothing you could have done. The clergy kept my mother and me in seclusion with the rest of the enslaved maidservants for years. Nobody knew. If I hadn't managed to instigate an escape both of us would have died in the citadel."

"Are there any left?" Kraft asked.

"Any left... hah, the supply is never ending, the clergy picks the best for themselves. The only reason I haven't yet been picked is that I am not wearing my birthmark implant."

Tanya showed him a scar in the triceps area on her upper arm.

*Compulsory implants, devices of totalitarian regimes-abandoned a long time ago in most Terran space.*

Kraft shuddered at the thought of the control an innocent device installed for medical and personal security reasons could give the powers of the state.

Kraft couldn't help gazing at Tanya-she was a stunning woman, attractive as few with a tremendous glow you only see in very charismatic people. Her hair was bright white, and she wore it tightly against her head. *Oh, how he loved that hair. How could he not; after all, she was his own flesh and blood.*

Like her mother she had a superbly shaped body, which had to make men turn their heads everywhere.

He wouldn't be surprised if quite a few women would stir up jealous plots to thwart her standing in society if they saw fit. But like her mother Tanya was a wise woman staying out of trouble... well, mostly. Kraft was somewhat skeptical to hear about the foolhardy attempts to overthrow the clergy, yet very proud at the same time that his offspring was making a bid against an oppressing tyranny.

They arrived at a small dome. The door opened with a hiss and they stepped inside. He checked his wrist console. *Still no movement by the Vexan. Good-he could use the rest. The worry about the Vexan and the implications if it could get off planet had exhausted him.*

He was pleased. *Apparently his switch at the morgue had worked... maybe they are covering their own arse-the clergy didn't like sloppiness and losing a body would certainly not be considered a minor error. And without a body certified dead the Vexan could not proceed without fear of apprehension. Wonder if the barkeep was successful?*

The airlock door closed behind them and another opened before them, sending forth a gush of moisturized air that soothed the dryness caused by the harsh climate outside.

He was met by two smiling children who came running to their mother.

"Mummy, mummy"

She smiled "Kraft, I would like you to meet my children. This is Thomas," Tanya said and stroked the dark-haired child on the cheek.

"And this one is Ivanova." As she pronounced the girl's name she cuddled the curly hair while the girl clung to her mother's leg.

Tanya laughed, and Kraft couldn't help but smile as well.

He was proud. Very proud! Yet somehow in the midst of it all there was a nagging doubt. A doubt of his own intentions and abilities.

*Had he given up too quickly? Was there something he could or should have done?*

Tanya noticed Kraft's expression and pulled his arm. "Come, I want you to meet my husband, Elias."

...

The table was set simply: a few slices of bread, a plate for each, some butter, and a water canister containing clear, tasteless distilled water.

In addition there was a small jar on the table along with vitamins and minerals for the children.

Kraft had a hard time eating; the family apparently had to live off their own produce because the clergy had begun introducing mind controlling agents into the water and food supplies-those bastards.

"Please eat!" Elias insisted, seeing Kraft's unwillingness to have another slice of bread.

"I'm really not that hungry," Kraft replied evasively.

"Come now, a big man like you!" Elias laughed and tossed another slice onto Kraft's plate.

Kraft looked at Tanya with pleading eyes. "Truly I'm full, I had a big meal right before we met at the café," he tried.

"That was hours ago. Please eat, you are hurting my feelings if you leave my table hungry." She said it with a smile but Kraft knew that there probably was a certain truth to her words and that she wasn't just entertaining him as a guest with the usual courtesy of most hosts.

"If you insist," Kraft said and buttered his bread. "Oh by the way... perhaps the children would like some of this." He fished out two energy bars from the stores in his suit.

The children turned the bars in their hands, looking at the strange-colored wrapping. "What is this?"

"Food from another star," Tanya replied. "Kraft here is the first of many who will come." She added the last with a little hope in her voice.

*A small smile appeared on Kraft's face. Perhaps influence from outside worlds would help his daughter's resistance cell in the fight against the oppressive clergy. Then again other places had equally tyrannical governments, and populations there were worse off than here and those systems had free access to space...*

Kraft's gaze examined Tanya's face closely. *She seemed so ablaze with hope and expectation.* He smiled.

On their way home she had confessed to Kraft that she could not understand how people could just remain in a hopeless situation without lifting a hand to alter anything.

Kraft had agreed but also pointed out that most people were in fact quite tame in that respect.

When he had made his comment Tanya had given him a mysterious smile and naturally couldn't help mentioning what her mother had often told her.

"You are not like most others -You have strength", she used to say always adding, "Like your father... one day you shall yell and the universe will hear your cry!"

*I think she was right.* Kraft started chewing the bread with satisfaction in his heart.

...

"Seriously I can't believe that they managed to overthrow the faculty," Tanya was saying later that night.

"How can a priesthood utterly blindfold a population and make them unlearn decades of education and enlightenment? It doesn't make sense!"

"People do odd things for religion and often don't realize what they had until it is gone," Kraft answered.

"You know, she thought you had been taken by them as well-to work with the construction crews, but she always hoped. Hoped that you had somehow escaped their claws. She used to say-your father is strong and clever, one day he will come looking for us, you can count on that." There was a pause before she continued, once again giving him one of those mysterious looks so full of wonder, "And here you are." She said with a slight gesture of the hand.

Kraft nodded. He hadn't told her why he was here, nobody could know-the knowledge would be too dangerous for them. At the first sign of Vexan movement he would depart to make certain that Tanya and her family stayed safe, but for now he would like to get a few hours' sleep Thorgeir would alert him if there was any change.

"Is there a place I can rest?" Kraft inquired.

"Sure. Elias has prepared a bed for you... are you tired?" Tanya answered.

"Quite... it has been a long day," Kraft said, stretching his arms.

"It is getting late I know... but I am so glad to meet you," Tanya said as she got up.

She walked over and embraced Kraft, who had also gotten to his feet.

The embrace made him feel good, not the kind of good that you can pick up from an expensive stim-pack, but the good that can only come from another human being, yet his mind was filled with painful memories as well.

The pictures looked grim, he saw images of a demonstration being hammered down by military forces-images of young people fighting desperately for their lives against a swarming mass of soldiers with one purpose in mind-to serve their masters until death.

He sighed. There was an increasing pressure on him to localize and neutralize the Vexan, thankfully there were no signs that the delay with interplanetary relations had been cut short in any way. Oddly enough the rapid drive toward reestablishing contact with Terran regular space had died down when the patriarch died. The new head of the clergy didn't seem to mind terribly although there was some dissent in the ranks; the delay gave them time to strengthen their grip on the population before the floodgates to the diabolical universe opened. And who knew, perhaps the clergy was intent on expansion now and that was why they were opening up to the outsiders. Sowing the seeds for a stellar empire. But if the gates opened too soon and the Vexan escaped... if that happened then Kraft wasn't so sure that humanity would have much of a fate regardless of whatever plans the clergy might think.

Kraft moved sluggishly toward the door Tanya had pointed out. Fatigue was setting in on top of an overwhelming day, yet they had said nothing from the moment he had stabbed himself until now... *were they listening?*

He opened the door. "Well, good night then," Kraft said, trying to avoid another embrace.

Tanya tiptoed over to him and rose on her toes. Her kiss sent surges through him that he couldn't start to comprehend, and he tried muttering, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Tanya said with a wink.

She was off before Kraft had a chance to say anything more.

Kraft shrugged, closed the door, and undressed. Hopefully there would be plenty of time for talk in the morning. He lay down on the bed and hadn't spent long under the comfortable bed sheets before he fell into a restless sleep.

He dreamed of lips. Full, dark, tinted lips and beautifully painted eyebrows that seemed to ascend into a wedge giving the appearing face a pointy mouse-like look, a feature which dramatically enhanced her already magnificently cute face.

He almost drowned in images of her sad blue eyes... Hardship seemed to be engraved in them as they stared into his naked soul.

Suddenly a shadow seemed to be lifted from those eyes and a radiant being wafted toward him embracing him with blissful tenderness, then suddenly something tore the being away and utter darkness surrounded him.

He felt cold and lonely and as the darkness became darker he felt like a black hole started eating him up from the inside until every bit of humanity was gone from his body.

Then suddenly a light flickered on. It started out as a little light, deeply buried inside the core of him. The light then grew rapidly until it seemed like a roaring sun soothing his bereaved soul...

He would not fail. The priesthood would fall, every single one of them. She would be avenged.

Then he woke. The bed was wet from sweat and the sheets were in a rightful mess.

-Are you feeling lonely? they inquired.

Kraft took a deep breath and found his constitution. "I guess, in one way or another we are all lonely," he replied.

-But we're here.

Kraft smiled. "I know."

-Still you're lonely? they pressed.

"No offense, but this togetherness is quite stressful for me."

The voices weighed Kraft's reply.

-We know-would you like to be alone again?

"No, there is still too much I haven't done," Kraft replied swiftly, thinking about the implications of separation.

-We understand... Maybe... The voices hesitated.

-Maybe we were wrong blending.

"I would have died if you hadn't."

-Yes, but we didn't ask your permission, they said mournfully.

Kraft pondered for a few moments before saying anything. "There was no way I could answer," he replied.

-True, but we should have found a way, they insisted.

"Why bother?" Kraft asked.

-Because it seems to matter, they replied swiftly.

"Ask a man if he wants a second chance, think he'll take it?"

-Would he? they asked.

"Hell, yes. Most men would sell their immortal soul for an opportunity like that."

-Soul?

They seemed surprised, as they knew how Kraft used to refer to most mythological or metaphysical concepts.

"A religious concept," Kraft said, misinterpreting their response.

-You do not believe in religion? they gauged.

"It's all very complex," Kraft tried.

-Explain, the voices insisted, eager to get a conversation going.

"I hope you have a lot of time," Kraft mumbled.

-Humor?

Kraft smiled. "Yes."

-We like humor, makes one feel good.

"It does." Kraft could do nothing but agree, though sometimes they had a tendency to state the obvious.

-Humans should be more humoristic, the voices stated.

"Yes, they should," Kraft replied, and suddenly he discovered that he didn't feel all that lonely after all.

...

Kraft was downing an emergency ration and a sip of water when Tanya arrived at the kitchen table. Her face was ashen as she sat down.

"I need to ask you a favor," she stated.

Kraft was about to jest about saying good morning when he noticed the seriousness on his newfound daughter's face.

"A favor... what are you thinking of?" he inquired, feeling somewhat disturbed by her manners.

"I've been informed that there is a setup to trap me. I need to deliver a package but it is suspected that the recipient is being delayed so that another can take his place. There is this data package..." Tanya showed Kraft a small dark data slate.

Kraft took the slate from Tanya. "What is it?"

"Evidence that may rock the clergy at its foundation... proof of the senseless exploitation they have engaged in, proof of their cruelty... anything you can think of really. This slate contains all you ever wanted to and didn't want to know about the clergy."

Kraft examined the anonymous slate and couldn't help wonder how often data could mean life or death to someone... data which for that sake could be falsified if you had the right kind of money and power.

He shuddered at the thought; people trusted secondhand information all too easily, yet he decided to trust the authenticity of this particular slate which all of a sudden felt quite heavy in his hand.

"And what exactly would you like me to do?" Kraft asked, already suspecting the answer.

"Could you take my place? I need to find out who is trying to destroy us and the clergy doesn't know you... It is a lot to ask... but I know of no one else to trust if we have been infiltrated."

Kraft was about to answer when Elias entered the kitchen. "What are you two early birds on about?" he asked curiously.

Kraft nodded to Tanya, who looked at Elias. Tanya's eyes narrowed.

*No, it couldn't be... She lowered her eyes so as not to betray her feelings.*

*And the greatest friends shall become the greatest traitors.* The ancient saying echoed in her head again and again as she mechanically prepared breakfast for her family.

Kraft pocketed the slate without anyone noticing.

...

They had eaten mostly in silence, Kraft had accepted a slice of bread and a mug of herbal tea in order to avoid suspicion. But after a while he rose from the table.

"I really have to go, but let me know how things are going..." Kraft went up to Tanya who was fidgeting with a bowl of fruits and offered her an embrace and gave her a possibility to give him the meeting place coordinates.

As if on command one of the children slid a plate off the table and Elias almost immediately found himself trying to contain the 'disaster'.

"Find the food section and ask for Turell's place. Wait there until around noon then ask about the crop harvest. It is far from season so nobody else should be asking questions like that."

"Turell will point you to the contact who should be given an empty slate, Turell has one for you... Now go before Elias suspects anything... I just hope you are wrong."

She ended the sentence with a pleading look on her face.

"So do I...so do I," Kraft whispered back.

"Take care of yourself, Tanya... and you, Elias." Kraft turned toward Tanya's husband, who had been busy tending to the needs of his children.

"You take good care of my daughter, agreed?" There was such seriousness in Kraft's voice as he finished his sentence that every molecule in the room seemed to freeze for a microsecond.

Elias swallowed and greeted Tanya's father with a nod. *There was something about the way he said that, as if he knew something he shouldn't... but how could he? He had only arrived planet-side yesterday, no doubt with the company pod that delivered the team of negotiators, as long distance communication between the clergy and the company hadn't seemed to be getting things back on track. Was the company instigating instability to serve its own agenda?*

"I will certainly do so," Elias answered with conviction.

"I hope so," Kraft answered. There was a hidden message of a swift return if his subtle request wasn't honored.

They shook hands quite firmly and eyed each other down. Then Kraft winked, making Elias lose his concentration, and they engaged in a rather awkward embrace.

The nano tag fastened itself to Elias's shirt; Kraft hoped he had no intention of changing clothes before going anywhere, at least not until the tag had worked itself down onto bare skin. Thorgeir would be able to follow Elias's whereabouts as soon as the device was activated.

Moments later Kraft was on his way toward the marketplace, checking up with Thorgeir and found that nothing new was cooking.

The message he got back was kept short and tidy-No movement anywhere... all is calm!

Kraft couldn't help but smile. *That was the benefit of working with Thorgeir-no unnecessary data, just the cold facts served in the simplest form possible-clarity nearly to perfection.*

*Though he did at times miss the human touch, then again Thorgeir did try.*

...

The bazaar was a huge place and Kraft cursed himself for allowing his emotions to lead him away from his task, but meeting Eyla's daughter... his daughter... had thrown him completely off course.

*Why not take care of the priesthood at the same time as the Vexan?*

*How much could the delivery of a small package disturb?*

Kraft found the soft sounds flowing from an accordion very soothing.

So did they... there was an ecstatic feeling of happiness pulsing through his body, a sensation almost as strong as when he pulled out the fiddle. *Damn those motel cleaning crews, why did they have to lose the Theremin, he would have to spend ages building a new one.*

Kraft wondered about the musician; it was rare to find anyone playing acoustic instruments any more. He threw a couple of coins into the pouch in front of him. The musician nodded his thanks.

Kraft closed his eyes and tried to enjoy the atmosphere but was interrupted by a slight tingle in his hand.

The tingling started to spread; it wasn't them... it was something else and as he stood there the agonizing pain of reality descended upon him. *Rats!*

He fondled his small leather bag. Its soft texture was unique-forbidden but ever so desirable, a piece of the cradle, home ultimate, and even though the bag only contained a few grains Kraft considered it priceless. For a moment the shaking subsided, and a stellar peace came over him, but the calmness spreading through his body was soon to disappear.

Kraft strolled about the marketplace in search of the food section and soon found the booth to which he had been directed.

Turell quickly gave him the slate and directed him to wait for a robe-clad clergy guard. He would take the fake slate... a second guard would undoubtedly arrive shortly after. They wouldn't dare to kill Kraft immediately, though they might want to arrest him in order to find out who he was. All Kraft had to do was disappear in the crowd, then get back to the original meeting place without being seen. *Easy as pie...*

For Kraft it was; after the robe-dressed clergy guard arrived he immediately noticed the scanning device the guard tried to operate without anyone noticing. Kraft had a hard time fighting a smile as he acted as if he were about to hand over the empty slate.

There was a gasp of surprise when Kraft coldly announced that he had no slate and that there was nothing for the clergy guard to come after.

The guard, fidgeting with his scanner, decided to believe every word Kraft said and left. He would probably have been able to measure the immense stress Kraft had to withstand had they not intervened, leaving Kraft calm as the desert ocean on high noon.

Kraft in turn did not try to disappear into the crowd; he would be far too easy prey there. Instead he steered directly towards a small passage, a dead end, it turned out, and flicked on the chameleon device.

His pursuers entered the passage seconds later. They stared at the empty ground and then at the un-scalable walls with disbelief.

Their knowledge about technology had to be quite limited or they could have smelled Kraft out pretty soon with just a little effort, but luckily they quickly left, bickering among themselves about who was to blame for the failure.

Kraft disengaged the device and returned to the marketplace no longer wearing the robe he had disguised himself behind.

It seemed more folks had arrived at the bazaar. It was as if people knew things were calmer now and that the marketplace was a safer place to be...

A clergy guard strode up to Kraft and looked around suspiciously.

"Do you have the package?" he asked, still looking frantically in all directions to make certain nobody was looking.

"Nope!" Kraft answered with an expressionless stare.

"What?" The clergy guard seemed desperate. "Where is it... we need it!"

"It was destroyed," Kraft lied.

"How?" The clergy guard was close to tears.

Kraft pitied the man; he was risking his life infiltrating the clergy and now his work seemed doomed.

"They tried to get me... it was pulverized by weapons fire. I only have the empty one-maybe you can use it for some sort of psychological leverage against the clergy... they might believe the contents are intact," Kraft said in a soothing voice, handing the guard the empty slate.

"I don't know," the guard answered, taking the slate. His grief was painfully clear.

Kraft had to use all his strength not to hand over the original slate to the man who obviously was the intended recipient... or one hell of an actor.

"Sorry I can't be of further help," Kraft said and started walking away.

"So am I," the clergy guard replied, and slunk off like a whipped dog.

...

Kraft was in the outskirts of the city when he finally got through to Thorgeir. There was massive static interference caused by huge solar flares sputtering out.

Kraft put his visor on. The flares were visible to the naked eye, how the planet had survived without getting hit by one of them was amazing. It related to probability and magnetic fields or something... at least according to Thorgeir.

"Thorgeir, I'll be sending you a huge data package-this is far bigger than any other package I've ever delivered... and I need to ask something of you."

"And what might that be?" Thorgeir inquired.

"I need you to arrange a planet-wide... no wait, a Terran system-wide broadcast of the information contained in the following transmission... and I need it yesterday."

"That could be done, I guess, it'll take me some time though. Anything good coming this way?" Thorgeir fished.

If there was a possibility for good information passing by, profit was close and if there was profit the artificial was game.

"Not really, just horror and pain, the stuff that topples leaders and governments," Kraft replied, not interested in delving further into the matter.

"I see," Thorgeir said, a little disappointed. "I'll do it... just give me a few."

"Make it as quickly as possible," Kraft insisted.

"I'm okay on that," Thorgeir replied.

"Kraft out!"

"Roger that-over and out!" Thorgeir said, cutting the transmission.

Kraft began the data transfer and almost within the blink of an eye the package in its entirety was safely floating in orbit.

...

Kraft was headed toward Tanya's place when he was stopped by an incoming message:

"MSG from T - Something is happening - Clergy prepared to open full access within 2-3 days - There is saturation all over one of the entrance points to the citadel. Someone seemed to have attempted to disguise it but I was running extra analysis and caught an anomaly"

A big explosion caught Kraft's attention. He was gripped by anxiety when he saw it had come from the direction of Tanya's home.

"Thorgeir, I'll have to get back to you-something is afoot!" Kraft shouted into the microphone and started running.

A few minutes later he reached what remained of Tanya's home, a figure was moving in the rubble that used to be the entrance-*Elias*.

He was seriously wounded and fought to remain conscious. Kraft kneeled down beside him. "Tanya!" he demanded.

"They took her," Elias stuttered "I... I never thought they would go so far! Thomas... Ivanova?"

Kraft glanced at the smoking remains and shut his eyes. He did not want to divulge what he saw.

"They'll use her to get the slate," Elias began, but Kraft cut him short.

"Where are they taking her?" he demanded, while calculating the only possible destination-*the citadel*.

*The citadel? If Tanya was being brought there-the saturation... Had the Vexan smelled a connection between him and her or was it coincidence?*

Kraft punched the keyboard and activated the communication channel.

"Thorgeir... Kraft here! Do the broadcast immediately!"

"Kraft? I need more time. I can't worm the InterStel Com Network just like that!"

"Forget the InterStel Com-just give me the fucking planet-wide one right now-I need a big fucking distraction right away!"

"Then I'll be giving away my position-all systems will be alert to my presence, including the planetary defenses, they'll be on me in seconds."

"Listen, Thorgeir..." Kraft paused. "They are going to kill my daughter!"

"Daughter?... you never said..." Thorgeir stalled as if facing immense calculations that needed his full attention. "I'll do it! Thorgeir-out!"

Kraft injected Elias with a pain-blocker; he was beyond rescue, to medical services here anyway. It wasn't much but it was the best he could do. Kraft activated the suit combat unit. The microprocessors immediately began analyzing and infused the right amount of chemicals into his system to keep him in peak fighting condition.

Kraft started running, trying to pinpoint the best entry point. It would have to be a small service entrance, since masses would soon be crowding the main gates.

A while passed-the streets seemed void of life. As Kraft came closer to a warehouse dome, he heard them. Large mobs, mixed in with weapons fire and angry shouts-a riot was in progress.

The guards at the warehouse had already fled in panic and the gate locks were easy to circumvent, so much for faith. Kraft followed the narrow passage and found himself enthralled by the mystic scribbles on the walls.

If nothing else the clergy had an eye for mesmerizing symbolism.

"Hey mister! Halt!" a guard shouted as Kraft passed a corner. A well-placed fist silenced him, after which Kraft took a dive, releasing three volleys of shots with the stun gun during the descent in order to stop the four guards who came rushing towards him in a futile attempt to aid their fallen comrade. Kraft got back to his feet. He could hear people running and set forth as fast as his legs could carry him, slamming a magnificently carved door shut behind him.

The hallways had to be packed with sensors. He tried to turn on the chameleon device. "Power source unstable-unable to comply," an emotionless voice declared. *FUCK!*

Kraft tried to get a map readout but the suit was failing. "What in Chrissakes name is this?" Kraft complained.

Then suddenly they returned.

-Go forward about 300 meters, take the service lift to level 6. The prison ward is less than 50 meters from there.

"Are you sure?"

-Very, they declared as Kraft started running.

The door behind him started smoking; the guards were burning their way through.

...

"Just tell us what we want to know and the pain will stop," the robe-clad priest said with perverse pleasure. He adored his job. There was nothing as fulfilling as hearing the infidels acknowledge their wrongdoing and getting them to plead for their soul.

"I'll tell you squat!" Tanya said between clenched teeth. The pain was excruciating but she held her composure, much to the interrogators' displeasure.

The priest felt like he was slipping-was he getting too old? If he couldn't get a woman to talk...

"You know, fighting only makes it worse," he tried in his most sugarcoated voice. "I don't want to do this... but you are forcing my hand. The Lord demands truth and cooperation."

"Your Lord is nothing but a bunch of lies and twisted rituals invented to subdue all and everyone," Tanya spat.

The interrogator looked down as if disappointed. In reality he was thrilled with the way the woman thought herself unbreakable... but sooner or later they all broke.

He turned the knob an extra round and the scream that followed tickled his senses in the most wonderful way.

"Come now, dearest, you can tell me, I can make the pain stop... All you have to do is reveal the location of your transmission equipment," the interrogator said a little harder.

"If I knew it I wouldn't tell you-I'd rather die," Tanya replied with determination in her voice, she was having an extremely hard time remaining conscious.

"Oh, but I think you won't. We have ways to keep you alive, ways you don't want to know of," the priest began but was interrupted by a knocking on the door.

"What is this? I demanded not to be disturbed!" the interrogator yelled furiously. As the door opened, he quickly withdrew his statement in an apology.

"Your Eminence, an honor," he groveled.

"You're dismissed. Now go," the High Priest announced, unaffected by the grumbling priest.

"Have I failed?" the interrogator asked in a frightened voice.

"Did I not say you were dismissed?" the High Priest asked menacingly.

The interrogating priest bowed his head in submission. "Apologies-I shall be of no further inconvenience." He hurriedly scuttled off.

"You too," the newly arrived instructed the two silent guards who were minding the exit. The guards complied without hesitation.

The High Priest closed the door and walked up to Tanya. "You won't need these any more," he remarked, removing the brain stimulators.

Tanya began to regain consciousness.

"Fear not! You shall feel no more pain. He will come and then it will all be over, child."

Tanya was quick to respond as she tried to free herself from the restraints holding her down. "No, this is just the beginning, you piece of trash. There is no escape for you and your kind." She paused to catch her breath. "You'll be hunted down like the dogs you are. Then you'll know what real pain feels like!" She spat at the priest, who eyed her in a strange, compassionate manner.

"I understand you perfectly, child," he said as he walked over to the window overlooking the immense underground courtyard. "I understand you perfectly." There was pain in his voice as memories of a dark past crept upon him.

...

The service elevator ride seemed to take forever. While the lift ascended Kraft tried to work on his suit, which seemed to teeter on the edge of total malfunction and partial functionality. He replaced the suit power source with the rifle power unit and that seemed to do the trick.

The suit systems came on line. He jammed the malfunctioning power source into the rifle. Hell, it might work; at least he should be able to squeeze off a few rounds using the power already stored in the rifle itself.

The lift opened and a couple of surprised guards suddenly found their heads slammed together as if by an invisible hand. Both went out cold.

Kraft stopped. "Now what?"

-Go to the right... Wait, there is more... a presence. Strong!

"The Vexan?" Kraft asked sourly. That was all he needed now.

-Uncertain, the voices replied.

Kraft moved toward the door and did a scan. The scan revealed two figures, one lying on an interrogation bed, the other one standing.

*Vexan bio-signatures. The hour had finally arrived.*

"How did you know?"

The voices remained silent.

Kraft positioned himself safely and loaded his rifle with an explosive dart magazine. The door was down within seconds and Kraft charged inside to find a surprised looking High Priest at the window and Tanya on the bed, apparently unharmed.

He pulled the trigger, however the high priest moved aside intuitively.

The Vexan shrieked, a sound Kraft knew all too well, but to his great surprise the creature bailed out through the view port. Kraft rushed over to Tanya.

*Had his weaponry scared the Vexan that much?*

Then he realized the chameleon device was still on. He switched the cloaking system off and started untying Tanya.

"Don't let him get away!" she insisted.

Kraft untied her arms. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Of course. Just give me a weapon. I still remember this place; every corridor has been etched into my memory. I'll be fine," Tanya proclaimed weak but determined.

Reassured, Kraft was at the view port within seconds.

The Vexan was not unharmed after the high drop but he was very intent on getting away. He pointed at the view port and a couple of guards took aim but Kraft beat them to it.

He fired the remaining darts, which impacted devastatingly near to the two guards who both fell, a second later he fired a line into a pillar and hooked the other end to a beam running through the ceiling of the cell.

He tossed the stun gun to Tanya. "Be careful," he warned.

"You too!" Tanya replied.

Kraft fastened a brake onto the wire, then flung himself through the view port and was in the courtyard in the blink of an eye.

The two guards, still drowsy from the grenades, were unable to react before Kraft was out of reach.

The suit pumped some extra adrenaline into Kraft and he felt more powerful than ever before.

His heart pounded wildly as he closed in on the Vexan. He tried to squeeze off a few rounds but the rifle jammed. The Vexan rounded a corner and just seconds later an engine roared.

As Kraft came around the bend he saw a collection of surprised clergy guards wondering why the High Priest had thrown a faithful aside in such a violent manner just to take a vehicle. Could he not have asked?

Their surprise did not diminish at seeing Kraft rounding the corner like a roaring lion on the prowl.

"Imposter!" Kraft yelled pointing to the High Priest. The guards, clearly confused, took his words at face value.

One was about to go after the High Priest when Kraft, equally as violently as the High Priest, ripped the guard off the hover bike and roared after the escapee.

Volleys rained after the two hover bikes as they roared through the tunnel systems leading to the outside.

Kraft drove on pure instinct, letting the Vexan lead the way, all the while gaining on him.

With a tremendous crash the Vexan broke through a door. Kraft, almost blinded by the strong sunlight, saw that they were far beyond the city limits already. Suddenly Kraft realized where they were heading.

*The cave-everything that had been suppressed about the cave came back to him. The ship!*

*Had the Vexan somehow found out that a ship was stored deep in the caverns and prepared it for launch?*

*Was the Vexan instigating planet-wide confusion by opening up to the outside sooner than the clergy had intended so he could slip away unnoticed?*

*The consequences could be disastrous!*

...

The hover bike sputtered to a halt as the Vexan arrived at the cave entrance.

He is good, the Vexan thought as he hid behind a large boulder.

-Yes he is... but you can't kill him, they chanted.

"I know!" the Vexan answered furiously. He hated them. They slowed him down, they made him do things, things he didn't want to-highly illogical things. *Unless...* The Vexan suddenly came up with an idea, a daring one, one that was hard to hide, but the ore was near and with direct contact, as well as time to reconstitute he would survive expulsion.

*Almost too easy. Why didn't I come up with that in the first place? Did they suspect? Was that why they had driven him away from the cavern complex, only allowing him enough ore to survive? They can be freed if...*

The Vexan was thrilled. *They had offered him peace once. Little did they know about his true potential.*

*It took more than simple falls and gaping wounds to eliminate his species. He had kept his heritage well hidden.*

As Kraft neared, the Vexan prepared, gathering all his will in a final effort to free himself from the infestation.

Though he had great respect for the hunter he would have slain him in a second if they hadn't stopped him... But he had managed to manipulate them before, fool them when they were gone. It had almost worked.

*If that human hadn't been infested as well he would have been long dead.*

-What are you doing? the voices screamed desperately. They felt coherence disappear as a great force attempted to expel them from the Vexan tissue.

...

Kraft set his bike down. Knowing he would have to get to the Vexan before he entered the cave, he slipped the power unit he had previously placed in the suit back into the rifle.

He would have to rely on ordinary tracking methods the hand held scanner had broken during the commotion. He glanced around to catch the Vexan's trail moving away from the vehicle.

He caught a glimpse of a footprint, then another, but before Kraft got any further a growl behind him told the bounty hunter he needed look no further.

The Vexan came howling towards him, then suddenly stopped as if an invisible force held him tight.

"No, you can't do this!" the Vexan howled in his oddly shrieking language as every part of him started ripping apart from the inside and out. "You will die as well!"

-We know, the voices chanted with thunderous strength.

Jabs of pain worse than any the Vexan had ever experienced rushed through his system.

As they tore at him from inside Kraft fired a volley at him, rendering him helpless to the ravaging forces within his body.

The Vexan fell to the ground, twitching and twirling; his pain seemed excruciating yet Kraft felt no pity for the creature who had slain so many of his fellow beings.

"Why are you doing this-why do you humans seek to harm us?" the Vexan asked in Kraft's own tongue.

Kraft looked at the Vexan without offering an explanation.

"Don't you understand, the pod ships are our only hope. We are a dying species without a home world. The cradle boats contain knowledge and seedlings and your company promised to take care of them. There is plenty of ore for all of us!"

"You killed the farmer, that is the only reason I'm here, everything else I know nothing about", he lied.

Kraft saw the company recordings before his inner eye, the pitch black space, the thousands of pods steering towards the agreed destination, then the small flashes of light after the company had safely secured all the data. With every dwindling star there was one less hope for the Vexans.

On the screen before him the last pod had disappeared from view until there was nothing but cold space and dust left behind and that was when Kraft had realized that the Vexan had to be stopped at any price, for a being like that with nothing left to lose would instigate nothing less than the destruction of the human species if he ever got wind of the betrayal to his people.

Kraft shrugged away the images he had witnessed and looked at the dying creature. *Did the Vexan suspect at all?*

*Did he wonder why there was no contact with his fellow brethren?*

"How come you...?" Kraft began, wanting to understand.

"I am here because I've been following you-I sensed you had information... I have been plotting to get to you... to extract..."

The Vexan fought another painful surge.

"Didn't work though," the Vexan stated rather flatly.

"No, it didn't," Kraft said bitterly.

"Too bad, eh?" The Vexan wore a very peculiar expression that Kraft had a hard time dealing with.

"Depends on how you look at it," Kraft replied, recognizing the expression.

The Vexan smiled.

"So you do have a sense of humor," Kraft stated.

"Vexans share many traits with humans." The Vexan coughed.

"Hopefully we can live together in peace someday... in the end!"

"Perhaps," Kraft muttered, seeing the pod ships again. "Perhaps in the end." Never in his life had Kraft felt such a sting to his conscience as when he told this lie, the creature knew nothing of the pods.

Then in front of him as from one second to another the Vexan physically dematerialized.

Kraft had never seen tissue disappear like that before, and though he had seen his share of decomposing in his career this was one sight that would stay with him forever. *Game set and match!*

...

"Death. Death is inevitable, that's why you shouldn't waste time thinking about it," Professor Jones proclaimed, he was fumbling with his drink attempting to decide whether he should have another sip. "Live while you can, don't wait!"

"What if I told you there was an alternative, something that..." Kraft stopped, wondering what they thought about him blabbering the way he did.

Oh well, he could always blame the cheap booze!

"Such as...?" Jones looked doubtful.

"Well, it is a big old universe, there could be organisms which we-"

Jones cut him off abruptly. "Listen, do you know Montaigne?"

Kraft shrugged and shook his head. He wasn't in a mood for a philosophical discussion. He was too drunk and too tired for that.

"Well Montaigne said..." Jones began triumphantly, thinking here was an easy victim.

"Montaigne said, if you don't know how to die don't worry, Nature will tell you what to do on the spot. Fully and adequately, she will do this job perfectly for you; don't bother your head about it..." Kraft interrupted.

Jones stared at him with a hanging jaw as he realized that the dusty fellow he had just met had to be a learned individual...

*Crap, there goes all the fun of cutting him down, have to save it for my students then.*

Jones shook his head and sipped his drink. *Think not of tomorrow, for that day will care for itself; let this day's trouble be enough for the day today*, Jones thought and took a big gulp, emptying the glass in one last act of defiance.

He got up bade Kraft good night and left the bar.

Just then Thorgeir returned, looking quite relaxed. The artificial was really getting good at imitating human behavior; then again he had been spending plenty of time practicing.

"Everything okay?" Thorgeir asked.

"Swell," Kraft replied, fumbling his drink. He couldn't help but think of the Vexan and compare the two... Thorgeir and the Vexan, each the only one left of their kind, and he, Kraft, had eliminated the Vexan without hesitation... Was he any better than those who had hunted down the AI's and destroyed them?

Kraft shook off the thought and tried to change the subject bothering his conscience.

"Listen, Thorgeir... I've been wondering, how the hell did you circumvent the Planetary Defense Network? I mean, you expected to be blasted out of the skies the instant you started transmitting."

Thorgeir smiled. "That was quite easy. I accessed the weather satellite system. You know they broadcast live info planet-side all the time. And since they couldn't very well blast their satellites for doing what they usually did-I mean there was nothing unusual about the data traffic going on except the contents..." Thorgeir smiled.

"And after they traced the source to their own network it was already too late... people knew. There was nothing for them to do but try to save their skin, though it was somewhat a problem getting away due to their own space-faring regulations."

"I see," Kraft said thoughtfully. *The clergy's own legislation had prevented them free access to space. Ironic.*

"Are you sure you are okay?" Thorgeir asked, seemingly concerned.

Kraft looked at Thorgeir. Here was someone who should be holding a grudge against all of humanity for what they had done to his people, yet here Thorgeir was spending his time with him, someone who had done almost the same to the Vexans. *Had he erred?*

*Many a strange being scuffled about in this old universe, that much was certain.*

With a mysterious smile that left Kraft with a happy sadness he lifted his glass toward Thorgeir. "I am fine, thank you for asking...and cheers," Kraft added nodding toward the artificial.

"To you," Thorgeir replied, gesturing back at Kraft.

They barely touched but the impact left the material of the glasses in a state of crystalline song until they reached the lips.

You miss them, right? Kraft thought, directing his attention inward for a moment.

-Yes we do, the voices sang back. We would have liked an opportunity to re-blend. We thought they were gone then we found they were not... it was all very confusing.

"I can imagine," Kraft replied. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

-Neither did we tell, they massed.

"Guess we all know how it feels then," Kraft stated.

-Loss a strange sensation, we understand you much better now.

"Well, understand... that's a mouthful, but I'll give you this one though, always remember!" Kraft thought searching hard to find the right words.

-Remember what? they inquired.

"Remember that you're not alone."

-Thank you!

"You're welcome," Kraft replied.

The feeling that flowed through his body as the liquid poured down his throat left him without a doubt.

He was ready now... It was time for a new start.

-Good, 'cause there is something we've been wondering about, the voices sang.

The End

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